

The All Guardsmen Party

Shoggy Seldom

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Chapter 1

Darwinian Character Creation

Our DM can be a little evil.

Last weekend our group got together for a marathon session to start a new campaign in a new system. Upon arrival we were all given copies of the Only War sourcebooks and told to build a regiment, then build grunt level characters, then make a few backup characters. Now our DM runs what we refer to as "High Mortality Games" (in our several year long DnD game so many PCs died that our GM actually appears on the "Hitler Scale" of death measurement) and we were all familiar with the nature of a guardsman's life, so each of us made a bunch of backups and didn't get too attached to any of our characters as we wrote them. No special snowflakes here.

Our regiment was mustered, our characters met and trained, and we were deployed to fight some Orks. We learned the system in a few skirmishes and commiserated when some of our characters rolled poorly or screwed up and bit the dust. Then we were marched out to the trenches, given our piece of the line, and the battle started.

We had expected some sort of priority mission. We had expected to be the heroes who went in behind the enemy, or were dispatched to save a key position, or led the valiant charge. Instead we were put in a bloody trench and told to Hold The Line.

The Orks came and we killed them.

The Orks came again and we killed them.

The Orks came again and we killed them, but now we were low on ammo.





The Orks came again and some of us died.

The Orks came again and brought a tank and the rest of us died, except for me, I ran.

The first session ended there, with our first set of characters dead in the trenches. We agreed it was a proper introduction to the life of a 40k guardsman, and got ready for the next day's session where we expected to finally be sent on our mission.

The second session started with us watching my character's execution by the Commissar. Then we were put back in the same bloody trench and told to Hold The Line. We did better this time, we actually held out long enough for fresh ammo and reinforcements to come up, but in the end we died. Then we brought up new characters and did it again in another part of the trenches. Then again. Then again.



We were rolling up new characters between turns now, either to bring in as reinforcements or for when we had to start up as a new unit. Very rarely we would survive long enough to be rotated to the rear or take a non-fatal injury and get evaced, usually we all died. Finally after three in game days and dozens of character deaths we were told to Charge.

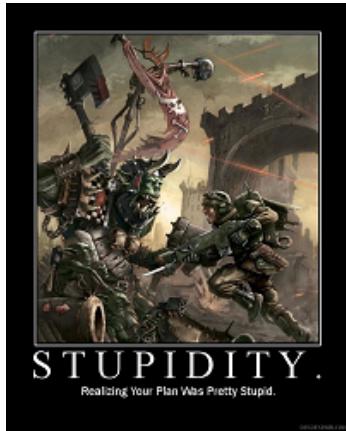
We bitched hard when we heard this, it was a death sentence. Our characters had done well this time, we were all still alive and ammo levels were good. We knew our squad could have held out much longer in our nice safe trenches. Our DM asked us if we wanted to lodge our complaints In Character, so we shut up and Charged.

We died like animals.

We fought on the left flank of the charge, then on the right, then got to play our first armored characters in the center. When the charge failed we played as a basilisk crew covering the retreat. Then our regiment was rotated off the front.

Our regiment had lost a third of its strength in that first engagement. Out of dozens of characters only ten had survived, and five of those were artillerymen who never saw the enemy. We were shown the battle map, we were shown where our squads held or failed, we were shown how our charge weakened the enemy for the fresh (and much more valuable) reserve troops to come up and break them. We were given a summary of the next

few months of light skirmishes and mustering, then we were sent into battle against Traitor Guard.



We were taking a city this time and once again our regiment acted as the cannon fodder. We secured and pushed, and secured and pushed, and died and died and died. We decided we'd take the Orks back any day, at least with them it was obvious who the enemy was and their snipers and heavy weapons teams were NOTHING compared to what we were fighting here. We were higher level this time and better at the game, but still we died in droves leaving only a few characters alive when our regiment was stood down while a veteran regiment took the lead.



Once again we got to see the nice little map of our progress, and we all got a warm fuzzy feeling when he showed us how our stubborn defense of one building had crippled an enemy advance, but we were exhausted. Our DM pressed us to play fast and make new characters faster. We would roll up Lil Jimmy who lied about his age to enlist, then have him bleeding out in a pile of rubble within a handful of minutes. It drained us. We were actually glad to take the evening off from playing to just watch movies and hang out.

The final day of our marathon started with more Orks, but this time we won. That's not to say we didn't die like frogs in a blender, but we damn well won. We pushed them out of their barricades and hounded them across the plains when they routed. I played a gunner in a salamander during the chase and mowed down greenskins like ugly blades of grass. We partied like champs in the tiny redneck town we liberated, then settled in for a few

months of boring garrison duty before we got redeployed. Then we fought some Tyranids.



It was only a splinter fleet so we actually had a chance, but it was hell. Our regiment was defending an evac point on some grassy agri-world and it was trench work again. We burned off the grass to clear lines of fire, dug ourselves into the rich soil, set up the heavy weapons, and watched the edge of the burn area like hawks. Trigger-happy hawks as it turned out, we wound up failing

a spot-check and killing the first few retreating PDF to come through the grass.

When the Tyranids came it was ridiculous. We mowed down wave after wave of Gaunts, but unlike Orks Tyranids don't lose morale and break, they just keep coming as fast as you can kill them. We stopped using actual dice for a while, just so we could roll combat faster.



The bastards in command had decided to do a "Collapsing Defence", which meant we fought until the front trench was collapsing, then they shelled the bejeezus out of us while we retreated. We lost something like 20 PCs to our own gorram shells, but it really did work pretty well, at least until we ran out of ground to give. All the civvies were out, it was just a few regiments of guard crammed into a spaceport completely surrounded by the swarm. We were killing them off as fast as possible and hoping that either reinforcements or evac would come down before ammo ran out.

Things started to get bad when the higher forms of Tyranid started appearing. Gaunts and gargoyles are bad enough, but it was when the warriors showed up that we started taking serious casualties. The evac shuttles had started to ferry men up and we had some actual air support, unfortunately our regiment was going to be the rear guard. The end was in sight and morale was holding up well, right up until we encountered a Lictor brood, then things started to fall apart.

I hate Lictors, I bloody hate them. We played three backline squads in a row and each one was torn to bloody shreds by those sneaky bastards, all without us landing a kill. We started to rout, but our Commissar and his

guards went into the breach, killed one of them, and shouted the regiment back into position.

Our evac finally came and what was left of our regiment started the final retreat. There were a few valiant last stands, but most of us managed to get to the shuttles. Our final squad had just boarded and was taking off when the air interdiction broke down and Tyranid air units started attacking the shuttles.



We were equal parts pissed and terrified as our DM described shuttle after shuttle being destroyed. The Regimental Commander's bird was nailed early, so were the bigger shuttles with the vehicles. He didn't say who was in most of the other shuttles, just rolled his dice and removed them from the board as they fell. It was heartbreaking.

Finally there was only one shuttle left. Even though the Tyranid fliers swarmed it, none of their shots seemed to hit and it started to climb out of the atmosphere. Then it was away, the fliers broke off and that one shuttle was headed for its fleet transport, free and clear.

Inside the shuttle our last set of characters was trying to figure out what the hell was going on. There were about fifty guardsmen crammed into a twenty man shuttle and no one was telling us anything. We had all heard the Tyranid fliers attacking and everyone felt it when we hit space. The guardsmen close to the cockpit relayed what they could overhear from the pilot's radio, so everyone knew that the other shuttles had been attacked but no one was sure exactly what happened. In any case we were all happy to be alive and were looking forward to getting off the crowded shuttle, then the shuttle stopped. The guardsmen near the cockpit told us we were being redirected to a different transport and the pilots did not look happy.



When the shuttle docked everyone piled out and we found ourselves in a completely empty loading bay. An order came via the speaker system to form up by rank for inspection, at this point our GM gave us a list of the guardsmen who were on the shuttle. Every single character who had survived a battle had been on the shuttle along with a few other grunts. All 37 of our beloved guardsmen had lived! (With the exception of the artillery crew we played, but screw those guys, teamkilling jerks)



We formed up, and after a bit of waiting the doors opened then a few squads of storm troopers marched in and instructed us to drop our weapons. There was a bit of argument on this point, until the captain of the stormtroopers pulled out an Inquisitorial Rosette and told us we were currently "guests" of the Ordos Xenos.

After we were done pissing ourselves and disarming, an acolyte and a team of medicae entered. We were informed that our regiment had been disbanded, we were officially dead, and we would all be subject to a scan for Genestealer infection.

At this point our DM ended the session. We were each handed copies of the Dark Heresy core book, a list of our surviving guardsmen with all the filler grunts crossed off, and were told to pick our characters for the next game.

Yea, so that's how our DM does backstories.

Chapter 2

Guardsmen and Pilgrims

So last time the surviving remnants of a regiment of Imperial Guard found themselves the guests of Ordos Xenos. Several guardsmen were found to be harbouring Genestealer infections and were purged, but the remainder were given the opportunity to continue to serve the Imperium as soldiers of the Inquisition. So no shit there we were, 37 guardsmen who had just graduated the Darwin School of Veterancy, on an Inquisition ship, getting told that our lives would now consist of hanging out with just about the scariest people in the Imperium and doing whatever they told us to.

Serving in the Inquisition is not a very normal job, as in there's no way of knowing how things are going to work or what you'll have to do. Inquisitors have tons of leeway in how they do things, so each one runs their team in their own unique way. You might get an Inquisitor who likes to travel around following rumors and hanging out with Heroes of the Imperium, and it's your job to act as 'the cavalry' when they get into trouble. You might get an Inquisitor who is really into research, and wind up spending all your time guarding an incredibly disturbing science facility. You might get an Inquisitor who hangs out playing psychic nursemaid to a band of spies, and end up being used as a meat suit by your boss when he feels a personal touch is needed. Or you might get the Inquisitorial equivalent of a Pokemon Trainer.

Pokemon Trainer isn't the best way to put it, Pokemon Professor might be better. Our Inquisitor collected teams from across the sector and handed them out to Interrogators who needed to get their feet wet leading a team.



This was actually a pretty important role, not every Inquisitor has time or men to spare when an apprentice Interrogator is ready to move on, so they would get sent to our boss. He would set them up with a team and mission and keep an eye on how they did. He had a real name, but we all called him Professor Oak.

Oak had a fair number of recruitment teams that wandered around looking for fresh meat, one of which was hanging around our battle checking for Genestealers and drafting guardsmen who wouldn't be missed. We got packed up and sent along to Oak's mobile base of operations and got put through a crash course in being an Inquisition Goon Squad. Then we got split into squads of five or six, partnered up with some combat-light teams, and handed out to dewy eyed Interrogators like the 40k equivalent of a bulbasaur.

We were playing as the Guardsmen, everyone else was handled by the DM. Each team was filled out to ten by other classes leaning towards the non-combat side. So more Adepts, Psykers, and Tech-Priests than the other classes. There was some of everything in each group as well as the Interrogator, who could be pretty much anything.

We worked with our DM to split our survivors up into groups, then he tacked on the sheets for our NPC associates, gave us a very vague overview of what each group's assignment was, and asked us which one we wanted to play as. The groups we didn't play as would all go on their own missions and the survivors would meet us when we got back to base. We chose the squad that was being sent as part of a two team force to check out some suspected cultist activity in a pilgrim fleet. Our roster consisted of five Guardsmen, two adepts, a tech-priest, a cleric, a Sister of Battle, and our Interrogator was a former Cleric.

So imagine you're a guardsman that's just been recruited, fought a brutal campaign that wore down your regiment, watched the remainder of that regiment get taken out by Tyranids, then found yourself in the hands of the Inquisition. Then the Inquisition purges a few of your buddies, gives you an offer you can't refuse, ships you through the warp, and dumps you into a



really creepy bootcamp. Finally they split you and your remaining buddies up into squads, introduce your squad to some weird lookin guy who seems far too excited to see you, and tell you to do everything he says. Now you're hanging out in a bunch of passenger cabins on a navy ship going Emperor knows where with a few of your buddies, an Interrogator, three nerds (one of which is more metal than meat), a priest, and a psychotic blond bombshell wearing armor that's probably worth more than all of your squad's gear combined. We were just a little weirded out.

Our merry band consisted of a cynic, a nervous med student, a lazy bastard, a shameless thief, and a paranoid by the names of Sarge, Doc, Heavy, Nubby, and Twitch. Technically the others were part of our band as well, but quite frankly we wanted nothing to do with any of them (with the possible exception of the Sister, and only in the hypothetical sense).

Our Interrogator and the others spent the entire journey going through the files that Oak had sent along, planning how they would hunt down the suspected cultists, sorting out who had contacts where, and brushing up on the exact flavor of the Imperial Cult that dominated the pilgrim fleet. We paid just enough attention to establish that we would be on ships the whole time and that we were not expected to actually do anything strenuous unless everything got screwed up. Then we played cards and slept a lot. Some people might say that two months is a long time to play cards and take naps, but those people have never served in the guard. And it wasn't ALL sack time, Sarge made sure we kept up on our PT and combat drill; gotta stay in shape. By the end of the trip we were well rested and ready to stretch our legs, whereas our teammates were wound up like springs and developing new conspiracy theories every few minutes.

We finally arrived at the Pilgrim Fleet which, as we understood it, was a bunch of ships full of hardcore zealots on their way to a world they considered holier than normal to pray, sight see, and generally replace the population that an Ork Waagh had recently removed. They had some sort of deal with the Ecclesiarchy to provide extra transports and fleet escorts, so it was basically just an Imperial colonization fleet, except everyone was just a teeny-tiny bit crazier than usual. They were hanging out in orbit around a Hive World refueling, refitting, and gathering more pilgrims.



The Nerds and Nuts (as we called them outside of their hearing) were pretty sure that a chaos cult had infiltrated during either this stop or a previous one and was planning something very evil. Probably something to do with Geller Fields, or Daemons, or Plagues, or Heresy. We operated on the assumption that they would tell us when they figured it out. Anyhow our ship joined the fleet escort and a bunch of voxing and liaising started.



Our job was generally pretty simple; we were there to stand guard, look menacing, and always be ready to kick some ass. If The Boss went somewhere official we'd slap an =][= badge on and flank him like good little goons. If The Boss went somewhere unofficial we'd leave the badge off and slouch a little, truly we were masters of disguise. Whenever the Nerds and Nuts took shuttle trips to look up leads or meet contacts, at least one of us would tag along to watch their back or be on hand in case of emergency. Except when the Sister visited other Sororitas, we weren't invited on those trips for some reason.

When we weren't on duty we each had our own little pastimes. Sarge would worry about what insanity our superiors were planning while Doc would read his beginners guide to medicine and Heavy slept. Nubby would wander around looking for small objects no one would miss (he did this while on duty too) and Twitch would obsessively craft tripwire traps and drink recaff. Twitch and Nubby didn't exactly endear themselves to the locals, but supply and perimeter defence are important parts of being a guard, so we didn't mind.

Things were going pretty well for us, no one was shooting at us, the rations were good, it didn't rain on us when we stood guard, and no one outside of our Team yelled at us to do stuff. Occasionally we'd have to make a show of force or beat the shit out of someone who tried to mug one of our nerds, but generally things were pretty quiet. The most excitement we had in those first few weeks was when our cleric got in a 'religious debate' and Sarge had to pistolwhip the other debater until he put down the flamer.

Eventually they must have figured something out because we all rebased to a single pilgrim ship and made ourselves the guests of the captain. While everyone else was running around saying things like 'The game is afoot' and 'We almost have them' and 'I can practically smell them' Sarge had us gear up and get ready for everything to go ploin-shaped. The cavalcade of screw-ups started with one of our nerds finding a Chaos Tome in a collection of holy relics and immediately deciding that it was his inquisitorial duty to find out exactly what flavor of Soul Destroying Evil it was. By reading it.

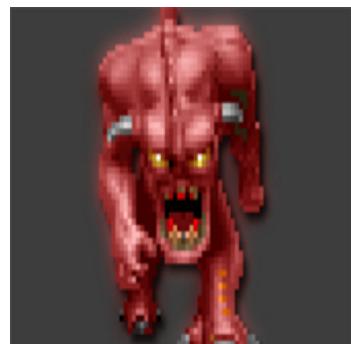
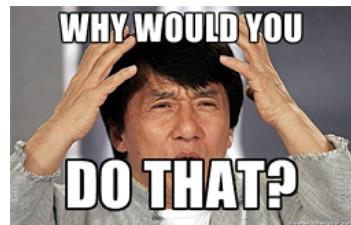
Unfortunately Nubby was currently on babysitting duty and was not experienced enough to know that the correct response to someone doing this to hit them until they stop being stupid. Instead he called for backup (which is a pretty good response in any case) while he kept the priest who owned the relic collection covered. By the time backup arrived the adept was giggling and speaking backwards.

Backup consisted of Heavy and Twitch as well as, unfortunately, the other adept and the cogboy. The two sane-ish nerds decided the correct response here was to try and take the book away from the gibbering adept and started chasing him around the room. Since neither the adepts nor the tech-priest were very athletic the chase looked a lot more like a bunch of nerdy kids trying to play tag than Inquisition agents pursuing a heretical artifact. None of us felt comfortable taking the initiative here, so we all just covered the doors to make sure no one entered or exited and stood there watching the demented game of keep-away. Then the gibbering adept finished the spell he had apparently been reciting and a minor daemon manifested.

This galvanized us nicely and all three of us started pouring las fire into the thing before it could do anything. Unfortunately the priest we'd been covering took the chance to run for it, then the gibbering adept followed him out the open door, then both our nerds gave chase, and now all four were running through a room full of pilgrims. The Priest was screaming about heretics and daemons, the adept was screaming about the Glory of Chaos, and the nerds were still trying to wrestle the book away. The pilgrims mobbed the insane adept and tore him and the book apart in seconds, then started chasing the nerds with similar intent.

The cogboy apparently took charge and decided that not being torn to pieces was the better part of valor. Then he concluded that the safest place to hide from a mob of maddened imperial zealots was with the tech-priests who kept the ship running. The nerds ran all the way to the ships engine rooms with a steadily growing mob at their heels baying for blood. The tech-priests let them in and closed the door behind them, but the mob refused to disperse and settled in to siege them out.

Meanwhile the heroic guardsmen shot the minor daemon until it stopped



moving, then stomped on it until it stopped being solid. That done we went to check on the runners and saw the mob chase them out. This was above our paygrade, so we decided to kick the problem upstairs and forted up while we waited for further orders. Eventually our Cleric and Sister arrived with Sarge and Doc in tow and The Boss voxed us all. We gave our report, the nerds were voxed and gave theirs, then The Boss gave us our orders. Us guardsmen were to secure the relics and demonic remains, the Nuts were sent to talk to the pilgrims' leadership to get the mob dispersed, and The Boss would talk to the Captain and get some support sent down. This sounded like a pretty good plan, but by this point we'd started to suspect that we were the only competent people on the team. What happened next proved us right.

Our Interrogator marched up to the Captain of an Imperial vessel, a man who could trace his family's command of the ship back to the founding of the sector, and started giving him orders. This did not go over well. While our Interrogator was an agent of the Inquisition and had the rosette to prove it, he was NOT an Inquisitor and the Captain of an Imperial vessel is generally considered to be second only to the Emperor by their crew.

The image shows a scene from a video game or movie. A character in a dark suit stands at the bottom of a set of stairs, looking up. The stairs are illuminated by blue light, and there are yellow structural elements on either side. The background is dark and indistinct.

The Captain then sent us a brief message instructing us to "sort out any problems with the Cargo" without bothering him or his crew. While we were digesting this new development the Cleric and the Sister got jumped by the cultists we'd been looking for.

Luckily the Sister and Cleric were heavily armed, incredibly paranoid, and far more level headed in an emergency than the nerds were. They fought a retreat to the Sororitas enclave that kept watch over this ship-load of pilgrims and dug in. Unfortunately the only sisters in this enclave were Hospitallers and some other non combat orders, so while they could handle a bolter they weren't suited to breaking out against the besieging cultists. To put it simply, they were stuck until help came, just like our adept and cogboy. It was down to us to pull everyone's asses out of the fire and take care of business before things got any worse.

So no shit there we were, a bunch of ordinary guardsmen on a spaceship full of crazy pilgrims and cultists. Our boss was in the brig until the Captain was no longer pissed at him, our Nerds were trapped behind a mob that wanted to burn them as heretics, our Nuts were pinned down by a bunch of actual heretics, and it was OUR job to fix everything.

Sarge took command of the situation and started going through the Imperial Guard NCO Disaster Response Checklist.

Step 1: Secure the perimeter

Step 2: Determine chain of command

Step 3: Call for backup if needed

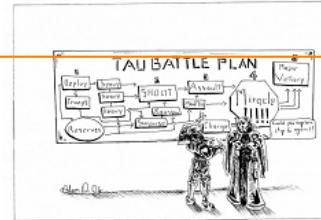
Step 4: Establish contact with friendlies

Step 5: Combine forces with friendlies and repeat

Step 1 was already done, we had that perimeter locked down like nobodies business, there just wasn't anything we actually cared about inside of it. Step 2 was a bit trickier, because we were still in vox contact with the Nerds and Nuts and we didn't trust them to tie their shoes much less lead an op. We solved that problem by saying something about vox interference and reducing the pickup range on our combeads until we could selectively ignore them. Step 3 was accomplished by asking the cogboy to get his ad-mech buddies to send out the contact code for the other Interrogator team that was looking at the fleet. Step 4 was already done as well, we knew exactly where the friendlies were, there was just a bunch of armed cultists and an angry mob between us and them. All that was left was to cracking on Step 5.

We decided that all things considered the Cleric and Sister could use our help more, and would provide more help in return, so we went for them first. Also they were holed up with a bunch of hot nurses as opposed to creepy machine men. Unfortunately we still had our orders not to let anyone touch the daemon goo or look for evil books. We either had to split up (which was stupid) or wait for reinforcements (which wouldn't be coming for a while) or use our initiative. So we tossed an incendiary grenade into the room and locked the doors and went to go rescue some hot nurses.

Unsurprisingly the cultists had set up an outer perimeter to keep out any reinforcements, so after we established where they were we fell back and started looking for other options. Nubby put forward the idea that the pilgrims seemed inclined to mob heretics, and these were



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definitely heretics, and why charge a fortified position when you can get someone else to do it for you. So Sarge found the nearest chapel and made a heroic speech about how the hot nuns needed our help and would probably be really grateful. Suddenly we had our very own mob of zealots.

The attack went more or less perfectly. The mob charged in from two directions and after the cultists started mowing them down we came in from a third. We cut into their flank like the pros we were; suppressing, advancing, and flushing like only a squad of guardsmen can. When we started to hit the cultists covering the Sororitas enclave the Sister and the Cleric saw their chance and pushed forward to meet us, crushing the last of the resistance.



Unfortunately the second we rescued them the Sister and Cleric started giving orders. Command of the zealots was taken from us and the entire mob was redirected towards the section of ship where the cultists came from. Per force we tagged along, but none of us were exactly keen to be taking orders again, especially since the Sister's plan seemed to consist of "Get 'Em". So while the Sister and the Cleric led the mob straight into a well prepared enemy position, we appointed ourselves as the Hospitallers' guards. Our squad hung around at the rear of the charge and helped the saner sisters pick up the wounded while we watched for flankers and waited for the shit to hit the fan.

We fully expected the mob's suicidal rush to fail, a lightly armed force trying to press through a choke point into a fortified enemy position wasn't going to work no matter how high their morale was. We weren't prepared for just how hard it failed though. The cultists had not only set up a very nice killzone at the single entry-point to their cargo bay, they had also set up all sorts of runes and circles in the killzone. The wave-of-bodies attack resulted in a whole lot of people dying right on top of these runes, which immediately started glowing and doing warpy stuff. By the time the mob lost heart and started to retreat the cargo bay was practically filled with lesser daemons. We took the reverse in the flow of bodies as our cue to move forward and lay down some covering fire.

Luckily the daemons were equal-opportunity warp monsters, they spent as much time attacking each-other and the cultists as chasing down the last of our pilgrim mob and its two erstwhile leaders. Between the daemons' lack of coordination and our covering fire the two nutters managed to hobble most of the way back to our position. Most of us wanted to leave them there, but Doc sprinted out and dragged them the rest of the way to our lines and back

to the Hospitallers. Between the two of them they had about three functional limbs and Doc spent the next few hours with the sisters patching them up.

At this point Sarge re-assumed command and decided that containment and waiting for reinforcements was the best of the available options. So we fell back around the corner, set up a barricade and Heavy's stubber, then settled in for the long haul. After a while the daemons ran out of cultists to eat and started to poke their noses around the corner and were promptly shot in the face. This was old hat for us really, we could defend a barricade in our sleep (literally in Heavy's case), and after a few initial rushes the daemons didn't really seem that keen on leaving their cargo bay. We all fell into our usual roles and routines from the guard; Twitch stared at the edge of the killzone and fired whenever he thought something might be moving while Heavy went to sleep sitting up with his eyes open and finger on the trigger. Behind the barricade Sarge went around yelling at people and worrying, Nubby went off to 'acquire' supplies, and Doc made eyes at one of the Hospitallers while they were both elbow deep in the Cleric's guts.

After a few hours of light trench duty, which was actually quite nice all things considered, our backup arrived. The second Interrogator's team (who had been doing Emperor-knows-what all this time) showed up at our barricade and Sarge explained the situation. Once again command was handed off, but luckily the new Interrogator decided to leave Sarge in charge of the barricade while he went to talk with the Captain and convince him not to just void our section of the ship. Our little troop had been reinforced to ten guardsmen, two psykers, and another damned Cleric, so Sarge decided it was time to be proactive.

Sarge wasn't happy to have another Cleric around and none of us wanted anything to do with the two psykers, so the Cleric was put in charge of keeping them as far away from us as possible. That taken care of, a plan of attack was quickly formed and a pair of grenade launchers were scrounged up from the other teams' arsenal and Nubby's 'collection'. We started a walking barrage up the hallway then slowly advanced our entire barricade until it was at the edge of cargo bay.

This wasn't exactly the fastest way to clear out the daemon infestation



but it was definitely the safest, not a single one of them managed to get within biting range of us. Once we were to the edge of the bay we just sat there and shot nades into it until we ran out, which took quite a while since Nubby could 'acquire' a surprisingly large amount of stuff. Eventually the launchers ran dry and it was time to clear the cargo bay the old fashion way, but the nades had done their job wonderfully. There wasn't really any cover left in the bay at all, so as long as we advanced slowly and carefully it was pretty easy to mow down the few remaining daemons before they got close. All in all it went pretty well, except for the big glowing shield thing at the back of the bay.



The shield was big and glowy and evil looking. We could sort of make out the remaining cultists inside of it doing cultisty-things, but we had no desire to get close to it. Quite aside from its appearance, there were quite a few corpses near it that looked like they had been turned inside-out. We scientifically examined the shield for a while, which is to say we shot it with every type of weapon we had sitting around, but nothing even dented it. Eventually we gave up and Sarge voxed the replacement Interrogator and the two adepts with him for advice. We got a long winded explanation that included a lot of terms like "ritual entropic shield" and "drawing power directly from the warp" and "energy based daemonic lifeform" and "attempt to psychically resonate with, then overwhelm the field" which boiled down "Go get the psykers to poke at it". This was not the solution we were hoping for.

We had all heard stories about psykers and had encountered a few chaos witches during one of our deployments, so none of us had any desire to be near our two psykers when they attempted to crack open the shield. With the exception of Sarge, the Cleric, and the other squad's leader we all fell back as far as we could and got ready for a shitstorm. It didn't take long, within a few seconds of the psykers walking towards the shield and getting all glowy everything went wrong. The first psyker started screaming and was suddenly surrounded by a torrential downpour of blood, then the second psyker started growing wings and horns. We all promptly opened fire on the possessed psyker and quickly reduced him to a thoroughly charred corpse while Sarge decked the first psyker and dragged him back to our barricade. Since one psyker was unconscious and the other was a pile of smoking ashes, we decided that it was probably time to figure out our own solution to the problem.

Our 'experiments' had established that las fire and grenades didn't do much to the shield, but since we were guardsmen we felt sure that enough faith and firepower could solve anything. We set up positions around the shield and started continuously plinking las fire into it, because when you have a fusion reactor to recharge your cells from you might as well lay down some indiscriminate suppressive fire. While we held the fort Nubby and the Cleric were sent to 'acquire' as many explosives, holy artifacts, and priests as possible. While they were out scrounging Twitch made a very good argument for setting up a blast shield. We voxed the cogboy and his buddies (who were STILL under siege), asked them to send down some servitors with big ol' metal shipping crates, then we built a big ass wall around the shield.

When the supply run was finished and the blast shield was in place we more or less just dumped several wheelbarrows filled with holy symbols into the walled area along with several barrels of prometheum. We got a lot more of the stuff than we expected, it turns out that "we're going to use it to blow up some heretics" is a pretty persuasive argument. After that we got the priests to bless all the explosives we could scrounge, we weren't sure it would help but it certainly wouldn't hurt and it let them feel useful. We tossed the holy munitions into the blast area as well and had Twitch set up the detonators. Then we got as far back as we could, started a ten second timer on the explosives and ran like hell.

None of us were really sure if the 'holy shrapnel' helped at all, but when we came back there was nothing left of the cultists and their shield except a glowing puddle of molten metal and a series of dents in the walls that no amount of buffing would ever remove. At this point Sarge declared victory and we all went to get a snack, a nap, and a cup of recaff. After that was done with we decided it was about time to retrieve the rest of our team and get the hell off the ship before anyone else tried to get us all killed.

We secured The Boss from the ship's brig by turning the clean-up investigation over to the second Interrogator and promising to never bringing our boss back to the ship, ever. While he was escorted to the shuttle we chatted with some of the priests who helped us make our



giant Holy Hand Grenade and got them to smooth things over well enough for us to get our adept and cogboy back. Finally we got our Sister and Cleric deposited in our shuttle's infirmary, where they would stay until we handed them off to Oak's doctors for a complete set of augmetics, then we went out and got drunk.

We enjoyed a night of drinking with our friends from the other team as well as a few of more helpful pilgrim priests and our surviving nerds. The high point of this was us all giving Doc shit for being hung up on one of the Hospitallers then hauling his drunk ass down to their enclave and getting him to declare his undying love for her and her "dexterous hands and perfect stitching". We dragged him away before he could devolve into soppy poetry, piled into our shuttle and called it a night. By the time we all woke back up we were docked with another navy transport and on our way back to the ISS Pokemon Center.



The trip back was almost exactly the same as the trip out, except we hung out with the cogboy a little more and Doc was kept busy. The tech-priest had been damn handy working with the ship's ad-mech and handling our communications, so we were promoted him to the rank of 'cogbro' and he was welcome in our quarters. Doc had a pretty stressful trip, it was his job to keep the Sister and Cleric alive until they could be handed off to Oak's medical teams, but he'd never had proper medical training, just a crash course in field aid and meatball surgery. The ship's surgeons could have helped, but the Interrogator re-

fused to ask the captain for their help for some reason, so Doc cracked open his medical books and did the best he could. They lived. Mostly.

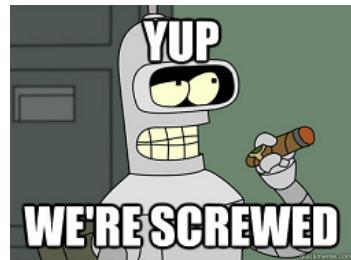
When we finally got back to the Inquisitor's ship we immediately went out and found the other survivors from our regiment. We all swapped tales of incompetent superiors, insane teammates, horrific enemies, and intense boredom until word came down that our Interrogator was being praised for his success and would be elevated to full Inquisitor. Everyone had a good laugh about this and we joked about where he'd find himself imprisoned next, right up until we got word that he was looking for us with the intent to add our squad to his new retinue.

We spent the next week or so hiding with the cogbro in the bowels of the ship while all of our buddies made up wild and conflicting stories about our untimely death, reassignment to a penal legion, imprisonment by the Ordos Hereticus, induction into the Astartes, and so on. Eventually he left along

with the surviving Adept, as well as the Sister and Cleric, both of whom had more metal in them than the average tech-priest by this point. We all breathed a sigh of relief and returned to our regiment's little camp.

After a few weeks of R&R, or as close as you can get on an Inquisition battleship, a runner came down and told us we were being assigned to a new team under Interrogator such-and-such, and we were to report to our shuttle immediately. With a weary sigh we packed up our bags (or over-loaded wheelbarrow in Nubby's case) and headed out to our transport. When we got to the shuttle the pilot helpfully informed us that "the Interrogator, his two assistants, and his three psykers" were already aboard. Twitch and Nubby both tried to run for it, but the shuttle's hatch was already closed.

Twitch and Nubby were retrieved and we all moved into the main seating area of the shuttle. We were greeted by our new Interrogator and introduced to our new teammates, one of whom was giggling and chewing on a seat cushion. As we stared in horror the Interrogator gave us a quick briefing, explaining that we had been assigned to go find out why a world hadn't been supplying psykers to the Black Ships. We did not have a good feeling about this.



Chapter 3

Dude Where's My Psyker?

This is the ongoing tale of a bunch of guardsmen who got drafted into the Inquisition after their regiment was reduced to a mere 37 men by a combination of Orks, Heretics, more Orks, Tyranids, and of course, their own leadership. Currently, they're working for an Inquisitor that is the 40k equivalent of Professor Oak; he provides teams and missions to Interrogators who need to get some leadership experience before becoming full Inquisitors. The lot of these guardsmen is rather thankless, they're matched up with five other less combat focused team members, assigned to an Interrogator, and sent out to fight the enemies of the Imperium.

Our story starts with Nubby and Twitch vainly trying to open up the locked exit to the shuttle after being told that their new squad contained three psykers in addition to an assassin, tech-priest, and the Interrogator himself. Sarge is screaming internally as he remembers that the last psykers he worked with accidentally summoned a blood storm and turned into a daemonhost the second they tried to do anything. Doc is captivated by the sight of a fat little man-child chewing on a seat's headrest. Heavy has decided that this is all above his paygrade and is making himself comfortable by lying across a row of seats. The Interrogator explains that the team is on its way to find out why a planet has not been supplying psykers to the Black Ships. One of the psykers asks Sarge to stop screaming, it's making it hard to think.

Current Psychic Phenomena Count: 0 Current Perils of the Warp Count: 0

So no shit there we were, stuck on a small ship with three psykers, on



[screams internally]

fix

our way to perform a top to bottom search of an entire planet, all for the sole purpose of finding MORE psykers. We did not have high hopes for this mission. Hell, some of us had serious concerns about whether we'd even still be sane when we got there.



The journey itself wasn't so bad. Instead of being guests on a navy vessel our Interrogator actually had his own small ship. Sure, almost all the space was taken up by our Interrogator's huge ass cogitator array, but at least we didn't have any navy ratings trying to take our weapons away, or bitching at us for setting trip-wire traps in the corridors. The problem was the people we had to make the journey with.

We didn't like any of the psykers. One was a smarmy tool, who spent far too much time talking and making himself look pretty; then there was the weasly creep, who constantly scanned everyone's thoughts and ratted to the boss; and finally, there was this psychotic man-child who would occasionally throw telekinetic temper-tantrums. We called them Face, Snitch, and Nutjob respectively. Compared to these guys, the snooty social assassin chick and the incredibly antisocial tech-priest weren't that bad. The Interrogator was infinitely worse.

Our Interrogator was adept-path and apparently some sort of data wizard. It took an entire ship just to carry all of his cogitators and he loved those machines like they were his children; unfortunately the bastard wasn't a complete shut-in. Instead of staying in the dark with his cogitators, he constantly held meetings and forced us all to attend. Not a day would go by without him calling us together to update everyone on what little clues he'd found, or check up on how we were preparing for the mission, or lecture us on proper inquisitorial behavior. It was horrible.

On our previous mission we happily ignored everyone else on our team while they happily did likewise. This time, we had an Interrogator who had never used a gun in anger giving us unwanted advice about combat drill, kit loadout, regulatory compliance, and freaking etiquette. This was all done in a tone of smug benevolence; he understood that we were just dim-witted manual laborers and couldn't be blamed for not being as smart as he was, that's why it was his duty to do all the hard thinking for us. The cherry on top of this was Snitch, who would report what we were THINKING to the boss. Every time those lectures filled us with murderous rage the little weasel would go and tell on us, then we'd get a second lecture on proper attitude towards authority. God Emperor we hated him.

Eventually we arrived at the planet which had earned the Inquisition's attention by providing the Black Ships with nothing but pathetically weak psykers completely unsuited for any use whatsoever. There were probably dogs out there with more psychic talent than the strongest psyker sent to the ships, but when the Black Ships had scanned the planet there were no unsanctioned psykers running around, so they took the pathetic tithe and left. Now we were here to find out where all the psykers that should have been on a planet of this size had gone. The gist of all the little briefings we suffered through was that a disappearance on this scale meant that we were either dealing with corruption in the government, a massive cult, some kind of psyker-eating daemon, or Eldar. This meant that unless proven otherwise, we had to assume that EVERYONE was in on it, so until the Interrogator got some sort of evidence we wouldn't have any outside support.

The posh assassin chick and Face did all the social legwork. They would circumspectly shake people down for information while we loomed in the background, or preferably down the street at a cheap diner. Apparently they were very good at it, since everyone aside from us thought they were absolutely delightful to be around. At the end of each day they would transcribe everything they found and beam it up for the Interrogator to process.

The other information gathering team involved the tech-priest and Snitch hanging around in the equivalent of an unmarked van. They spent all day driving around hacking wireless networks, scanning peoples thoughts, and dumping all the information back to the boss in orbit. We got to drive the van and fetch snacks.

We didn't all get to leave the ship, one or two of us were always stuck at base since it was apparently our job to babysit the Nutjob psyker. It really was babysitting too, 'cause we'd have to clean up the messes he made, get food for him, calm him down when he threw a fit, and entertain him when he got bored and started pulling rivets out of the walls with his brain. Poor Doc got that job more than anyone else, he just wasn't very good at saying no. Aside from that though, it was an improvement over the trip out there. We were occasionally able to get away from our teammates and whoever was backing up the social team got to visit some pretty high-class parties. It



was always a nice opportunity to snag some good food and, in Nubby's case, pocket the silverware.



After a while, the Interrogator called us together and informed us of his brilliant deductions and masterful analyses. These involved money trails, newfound political power, falsified ship manifests, and other stuff we didn't really care about. It all boiled down to, "Someone in the government is selling the psykers off planet". Once our Interrogator was done explaining his genius, he had everyone but himself rebase to a few floors of apartments, located in one of the larger cities on the planet. After the team was settled in, he sent us out to take some long, hard looks at a bunch of the nearby banks.

We enjoyed being away from him and his constant meetings, and quickly turned the building into a proper guard barracks. Which is to say that Twitch wired the place up with dozens of traps, Nubby started fencing stolen goods out of the garage, and the rest of us built a set of barricades between us and the outside world, as well as between us and the rest of our damned team. It felt good to be home.



Before long, word came down that the Interrogator had identified the operation's banker and the whole ground team was sent off to get some answers out of him. So while Heavy hung out in the van with the socially unacceptable members of the team and ignored the ugly little man prodding his brain and demanding candy, the rest of us infiltrated the bank. That is to say we put on suits, which succeeded in making us look exactly like guardsmen in suits, and marched behind Face and the assassin into one of the planet's largest banks.

There was a little bit of trouble getting through security, which was entirely our fault. All of us had kept our las-rifles underneath our suits, and Twitch was still carrying a few det packs. We weren't very good at disguises. Luckily, between Face doing some psyker stuff and the tech-priest's hackvan messing with the security systems, we got in fine.

After we were past security, Face and the assassin greased a few palms and screwed with a few minds. Before long, we all sat down to a nice discussion

and tea-time with the banker. Well, they sat, us guardsmen stood around and looked ominous. Various falsified credentials were shown, psychic tricks were used, and a discrete uplink was attached to a cogitator, then everyone left happy and healthy. We decided to exit via the back way so as not to trouble security again, and also because Nubby had wheeled out the tea-trolley when we left.

The boss and the rest were pretty excited about what was found on the banker's cogitator. The next few days were spent in relative peace while the Interrogator worked with the rest of the team to map out a web of corruption and bribery. This lasted right up until Snitch called us one evening and said a large group of hitmen was moving through the empty floor below us.

We were locked and loaded within seconds and started laying fire into the hitmen from multiple sides before they even hit the edge of the perimeter. We had good cover, good firing lines, knowledge of local terrain, superior weaponry, much better training, and the element of surprise. It was a slaughter. The last three of them were pinned down by Heavy and Twitch while the rest of us flanked them when everything went dark, and horrific screaming started. When the lights returned all the hitmen, dead or alive, had been reduced to chunky salsa and we could all hear Nutcase giggling upstairs.

This killed the mood, everyone eyed the psyker nervously as we packed up our shit and got the hell out of there before the authorities showed up. We elected to exit via the garages in a cargo truck while the rest of the team used the shuttle on the roof. None of us wanted to be anywhere near the Psykers after that show, also Nubby and Twitch didn't want to leave anything behind. *Psychic Phenomena Count: 1 Perils of the Warp Count: 0*

fix

We rebased to another almost identical set of apartments and went about guardifying it again, except this time Twitch was given free reign on the entire buffer floor instead of just the entrances and windows. While this meant that entering our base via the main entrance took about fifteen minutes and carried a very real risk of grisly death, we knew that people were actively trying to kill us. Also, we didn't want to depend on anyone who turned bodies into chunky salsa and giggled about it for our perimeter security. The rest of the team started using air transport exclusively after the assassin nearly lost a hand when she didn't follow Twitch's entry instructions correctly.

After a few days at our new base doing scan trips and otherwise laying low, Snitch found a young nascent psyker powerful enough to be worthwhile.



So our team of elite inquisitorial agents started staking out a toddler. Our unmarked vans followed the kid day and night, from his hab, to the daycare, to the playground, and everywhere else you might take a toddler.

Imagine five heavily armed men all clustered around a screen watching a kid being pushed on a swing while behind them an undeniably creepy bugger relays what everyone in the playground is currently thinking and a psychotic man-child picks his nose and mutters to himself. Eventually our weird stakeout paid off: a bunch of suits showed up and grabbed the kid and his mother.

So no shit there we were, five guardsmen and two psykers in the middle of a playground chasing a bunch of g-men carrying a struggling woman

and a small child. The woman and child were screaming, the g-men were calling for backup, our psykers were yelling about one of the g-men being a blunter, and while we all had our guns out none of us wanted to open fire in the middle of a playground. We were gaining on them (being a sprinter is a survival trait in any guardsman), but right as we reached them one of them slapped a button on their chest and another one of them started to float into the air as the surrounding area was covered with frost. We all immediately slammed into an invisible wall and were scattered across the ground, while Snitch stopped and started muttering himself and gesturing.

None of us wanted to be in the middle of a psyker fight, so we flanked the invisible shield, left Heavy to cover the enemy Psyker, and resumed the chase. The g-men had gone to ground in a playscape and opened fire on us with small arms, but were having trouble because the child was apparently emitting random bursts of static electricity. We decided that survival was more important than civilian casualties and returned fire from whatever cover we could find, and since we

were damned good at our jobs thing went pretty poorly for the g-men. We nailed most of them in the first few volleys which convinced the last few to keep their heads down while we flanked them. Behind us Heavy was laying stubber fire into the enemy psyker's shield and Snitch was pressing him hard, then with a little pop the enemy psyker disappeared.

While Heavy and Snitch watched the spot where the Psyker had been we rushed the remaining g-men. Our Interrogator was helpfully reminding us over the vox that he wanted prisoners, so we charged in to beat the shit out



of the last few survivors. Unfortunately at this point their backup arrived in the form of an unmarked government flier, which immediately began to lay down some serious suppressive fire. This was higher stakes than we were ready for, so we bugged the hell out while the remaining g-men piled in with the kid and his mother. The flier wasn't done with us though: as soon as its doors were closed, it lifted off and got ready to do a strafing run.

We hit the dirt and dodged the first pass like true guardsmen, while behind us the enemy psyker had reappeared with another pop and the fight resumed. This time the fight was over in seconds, the Nutjob had finally caught his fat ass up with us and with a little schlorp the enemy psyker turned inside-out. That done with, both the psykers and Heavy turned their attention to the flier, which decided that it was time to cut its losses and got the hell out of there. As we got back up out of cover the Interrogator called us to tell us that the assassin and Face had successfully tagged the flier with a tracer and the tech-priest would shortly be picking us up to assault whatever facility it landed at.

Psychic Phenomena Count: 3 Perils of the Warp Count: 1 fix

Apparently some minor detail about the g-men or the flier finally gave the Interrogator the evidence he needed to safely call in official support. After he was done bitching at us for not capturing anyone, or stopping the flier, or whatever else we did wrong, our Interrogator told us a squad or two of Arbites would be assisting us. Nubby was understandably nervous about being around what were nominally law enforcement officers, and none of us were happy when the Interrogator explained that he was only bringing in the Arbites because he thought we were incompetent, but overall this news was well received by us guardsmen. More bodies between us and incoming fire is always welcome, doubly so if they had heavy armor and good fire discipline.

The facility we landed at was large, grim, and obviously a shuttleport; therefore our job in this raid was to capture any available information about where the shuttles would be going. So while two squads of Arbites had fun clearing the place room by room with judicious use of shotguns and shockmauls, we kept a secure perimeter around the rest of our team as they uplinked cogitators and mind-scanned people. Aside from a few runners and



idiots too dumb to surrender, we didn't have any excitement until one of the Arbites squads found the psyker holding area.

As the Arbites closed in, one of the g-men apparently decided that the situation was unsalvageable and released the psykers. Under the cover of a dozen psychically gifted children freaking the hell out, they punched through the Arbite squad and headed right towards us, or more likely the flier we were examining. We opened fire as the heavily armed g-men entered the hangar and had them pinned in the hallway until Sarge and Heavy's cover got blown apart by a fireball. Once again we found ourselves caught in a psyker duel; it was three on three, and this time, Nutjob wasn't curbstomping them.

The fight seemed evenly matched, our psykers stood there and grimaced a lot and occasionally manifested horrible smells or small earthquakes, their psykers sat in cover and did likewise. We didn't have line of sight on any of them and when we tried to toss in a grenade, it got slapped back at us halfway through its arc. We weren't exactly sure what to do, but after the fourth creepy occurrence we decided it was time to use our initiative to end this shit before someone summoned a daemon.

Sarge appropriated a nearby forklift, drove it outside the hangar, and then we slapped a bunch of det packs on it. We turned it toward the outside wall of the hallway the psykers were holed up in, put a brick on the pedal, and blew the entire hallway into rubble before anyone noticed what was going on.

It surprised the hell out of us when the dust cleared and two of the psykers were still there, hiding under a shield, but it didn't last long after that. With a hellish bang, one of the psykers shot into the air and splattered against the shield and the last psyker immediately turned inside out. We could hear the Nutjob giggling back in the hangar.

fix

;Psychic Phenomena Count: 8 ;Perils of the Warp Count: 2

That was the last of the resistance. We poked through the military hardware that was left behind while the rest of our team did inquisitorial stuff to the surviving g-men and their cogitators. After they were finished, we packed up our loot and headed back to base to rest and re-arm while the Interrogator played with all the data we got for him. We were assured that before long he'd know where the psykers had been sent from the processing facility, and were told to get ready to launch another assault as soon as he had a target.



Being guardsmen we knew that the best way to prepare for an assault is to eat a good meal and catch as much sleep as possible, so as soon as our kits were prepped we all hit the sack while the rest of the team watched the perimeter. This meant that we were all deep asleep, with the exception of Twitch who merely dozed with his las-gun pointed at the door and the safety off, when a second assassination team got through our outer perimeter.

The enemy must have seen the remains of their last team and decided that the psykers were the primary threat, because this team had at least one untouchable with it. Unfortunately for them, untouchables don't do anything to stop booby traps.

The whole team had slowly cleared a small path across the floor that Twitch had trapped and reached the big expensive security door that led to our makeshift barracks. They formed up behind their best infiltrator and got ready to storm the place as soon as he hacked the door controls. Then the door opened, and they had exactly .25 seconds to express surprise that anyone would tape several short-fuse grenades to the inside of a top-of-the-line security door.

This woke us all up and, Twitch being Twitch, he'd put an entire clip and two frags into the open doorway before anyone else was upright. He probably didn't hit anyone since the six grenades taped to the inside of the security door had vaporized everyone near it, but he sure as hell convinced their rearguard to start falling back. Not that it did them any good: before the rest of us were on our feet Twitch hit the remote detonator for the every single mine he'd placed below us. The entire buffer floor was blown to shrapnel, taking the rest of the assassination team with it and setting off alarms up and down the entire block. Luckily, the building was non-flammable and sturdily built, so aside from a very rude awakening no one we really cared about was hurt.

Sarge decided that nap-time was over, so we kitted up and waited for the word from our Interrogator. Before long it came, he'd pinpointed a Rogue Trader that was receiving the psykers and carrying them to off-world slave



markets. A joint naval and Arbite force would meet us in orbit, and we would board the trader before they made their escape. Our primary objective was to capture the senior crewmembers and find their contact within the local government. Secondary objectives included: retrieving any psykers currently on the ship, capturing the navigational and financial logs, and “Not blowing the ship up like you blew up our base; are all guardsmen this incompetent?”

So no shit there we were, on a naval boarding shuttle, on our way to capture a Rogue Trader and his retinue from a ship filled with captive psykers. We were not exactly enthusiastic about our odds of survival. Rogue Traders have a reputation for being, or at least employing, very scary people. Plus, an entire ship of untrained ones was a terrifying thought, ours were bad enough alone. Still, we were guardsmen, facing certain death for unappreciative superiors is what being a guardsman is all about.



None of us really enjoyed the shuttle trip, the pilot was clearly terrified and the evasive maneuvers made us all nauseous. We half expected to be blown out of space before we got to the ship, but we landed on the hull without incident and cut our way into the interior. While we did this, several other navy and Arbite shuttles were doing likewise. This was not a subtle attack, so it was hardly surprising that before we got ten feet in the ship’s alarms started to go off. We knew our business though, and mowed down all opposition before they got a shot off on us.

The assault was going well for all of the teams. We’d seized the engines and main batteries, the main hangars were on the verge of surrender, and the tech-priest was pretty sure he’d located the bridge. Seizing the initiative he remotely hacked all the entrances to lock open so they couldn’t be shut against us. Unfortunately those turned out to actually be the doors to the psykers’ isolation cells, the second he opened them everything went to hell. Literally.

Ghostly images filled the air, the frescos on the walls started weeping blood, unearthly screaming came from every direction, and a stench that put even Nubby’s lack of hygiene to shame emanated from the air vents. Our psykers moved forward to try and sort things out before the entire ship got sucked into the warp or something, but we wanted nothing to do with a section of spaceship filled with supernatural darkness and constantly fluctuating gravity. We still had a mission though, and since the psychic activity was blocking vox communication Sarge took operational command.

We needed to get to the bridge, which the rather embarrassed tech-priest assured us was definitely just a little farther past the psyker holding area. Once there we needed to find the Rogue Trader, subdue him, and hit him until he rattled on his buddies. The problem was that even though there were other passages to the bridge that didn't go through the psyker cells, the psychic spillover had turned that entire section of ship into a No Man's Land. Just walking in there would be suicide, but Sarge figured that there was a safe way to cross the hellscape if we only could find the right people.

Sarge was pretty sure that any ship carrying a bunch of unhappy psykers would have at least one untouchable on board, just in case something like this happened. All we needed to do was find out where they were, and convince them to take a walk with us.

So we had our tech-priest do a quick scan to find out if any areas nearby weren't experiencing paranormal activity, then went to go knock on some doors. Sure enough, we found two untouchables hanging out in a cabin speculating on what all the fuss was about. One of them tried to make a fight of it and got shot for his trouble, but the other understood that in times like this, all men need to come together and serve the Emperor. So we cocooned him in duct tape, threw him over Heavy's shoulder, and set off for the bridge.

The walk was really quite pleasant as long as you ignored the dents, stains, puddles, and complete absence of any living creature. We waltzed right up to the bridge without any opposition, and found it locked down tighter than a Sororitas Convent when the guard was in town on leave. While the locked doors might have posed a problem for some of the other boarding groups, Nubby had helpfully attained several of the cutting tools that the shuttle crew had used to open up the outer hull.

So with the tech-priest's help we found a section of wall which was much thinner than the blast door and started cutting our way in. Sadly, even with a breaching charge to help with the final step, a lascutter is not quick or subtle. All we found in the bridge after we flashbanged the shit out of it and stormed in was a bunch of empty seats and a locked door labeled "Escape Pods"

We used the ship's vox to contact the Boss and explain the situation. After he was done bitching at us, especially the poor tech-priest, he decided



that given our lack of success he would track the Trader's escape pod instead of just blowing it out of the sky. We were to go get our damned psykers back and get ready to raid wherever the Trader finally went to ground.

So with our duct taped untouchable in tow, we went back into the psychic no man's land and started sorting shit out. The DTU really trivialized everything, it was just a matter of walking up to the psykers, having Doc tranq them, then tossing them on the pallet Heavy was pushing. Occasionally we'd run into a minor daemon, or crazed crew member, or obvious daemonhost, but between the DTU and a liberal dose of lasfire nothing posed a real threat. We eventually collected all the surviving psykers (a few of them were inside out, freaking Nutjob) and found our three psykers a little worse for wear, but ready to go after the Rogue Trader as soon as we knew where he was going.



Psychic Phenomena Count: 23 *Perils of the Warp Count: 5*

fix

The pallet full of sedated psykers was turned over to the Arbites along with the DTU. We were sad to see him go, he was like a big sticky teddybear that kept us all safe and happy, but he had to stay with psykers so we handed him over to the Arbites and headed for the shuttle. The Interrogator voxed us with directions to pick up the assassin, who had spent the whole mission getting her nails done or something, and report to an Arbitre precinct near some big government mansion. Our Interrogator had used his INCREDIBLE skills and BRILLIANT mind to track the Rogue Trader here, and oh so cleverly pinned Secretary Such and Such as the mastermind of this whole mess. Our job was to quietly go in and capture the Secretary and the Rogue trader so they could be used by the Inquisition to sort all this out without causing a massive scandal or minor war.

So while the Arbites put up a very discrete perimeter and the tech-priest worked with some local engineers to quietly shut down the mansion's communications, the rest of our team planned our infiltration. By this point Sarge was done with everyone's shit and vetoed several complex ruses suggested by the assassin and Face. Eventually they just gave up and the team was disguised as a group of heavily armed guardsmen and some dangerously unstable psykers.



These weren't exactly the best disguises, but we felt pretty sure that everyone could act their part. Grumbling about obstinate guardsmen and stupid plans, the rest of the team dressed themselves up as officers and good ol' fashioned sanctioned psykers. For our part we tacked on the insignia of a local regiment and caught some sleep while the rest got their costumes in order.

When everyone was dressed up we walked right through the mansion's security pretending to be a local general dropping off some extra protection for his good friend the Secretary. The poor sod was out of his mind with panic, he was calling in every favor he had to fortify his mansion and we fit right in with all the others. Our credentials weren't even checked, as soon as we claimed to be reinforcements we were waved past security and let inside. He even invited the 'General' up to his office to personally thank him for his generosity.

We walked right into the Secretary's office and presented ourselves to him while the Rogue Trader stood behind him and stared at us boggle eyed. Nothing good can last forever though, and after a few seconds of speechlessness the Rogue Trader called the Secretary a bloody idiot and opened fire.

The Rogue Trader was a little late though, by the time he drew his weapon the assassin had grabbed the Secretary and we had already killed several bodyguards. We signalled the Arbites to move in, grabbed some cover, and started a two way firefight between the Trader and security reinforcements. We had him well pinned and had started to flank him when the far door burst open and the Trader's retinue entered the fight, two of them were already glowing. Once again we found ourselves stuck in the middle of a damned psyker duel. Meanwhile, the Arbites moved in to detain everyone, and without direct orders from the Secretary none of the security forces felt inclined to argue with the Arbitre's APCs.

Back inside, Heavy was mowing down reinforcements with his stubber,



Twitch was nailing anyone who left cover, and the rest of us were steadily advancing on the Trader and his psykers. Surprisingly, the two enemy psykers were holding off all three of ours, and aside from a few phenomena neither side appeared to actually be doing anything. Eventually our slow advance got us a good shot on the Trader and his retinue, pushing the psykers to try something desperate.



Face collapsed, but one of the Trader's psykers burst into flame, taking a pair of retainers with him. In response, Nutjob and Snitch doubled down on the last psyker, until suddenly Nutjob fell to the ground screaming and one of the last retainers did likewise.

Suddenly the retainer got to his feet and tackled the last enemy psyker to the ground and started beating the shit out of him while giggling. While we all watched this, Nutjob got to his feet, drew his sidearm and shot Heavy in the back of the head.

A second shot was fired at Twitch, but a quick dodge saved him. Unfortunately, the second he stopped covering the Trader, a round hit him in the back. While this happened, Sarge and Nubby downed the last retainer and the Trader disappeared with a loud crack. Immediately afterward, the enemy psyker stopped moving, Doc ran towards Twitch and Heavy, and both the possessed retainer and Nutjob collapsed again.



While Doc started patching up Twitch, Snitch collapsed in exhaustion, and Nubby headshot the psyker and the retainer that had been attacking him. Sarge scanned the room for the Trader, and with a tired giggle Nutjob began to sit up. Immediately the injured Twitch drew his sidearm and emptied an entire clip into the little bastard. No one commented on this.

Sarge and Nubby slowly approached the door to the bathroom attached to the office. Right as they reached it a voice from inside announced "I would like to surrender to the Inquisition, and put myself and my ship at their disposal in this current investigation." Both Sarge and Nubby ignored this and started prepping a breaching charge. Before they finished, they heard the assassin, who had been hiding with the Secretary behind a filing cabinet, comm the Interrogator and tell him that the target had been captured and the Trader was surrendering. The Interrogator ordered Sarge to "Accept the

gentleman's surrender and escort him to the shuttle." With a weary sigh, Sarge removed the charge and relayed the message.

After a few seconds the Rogue Trader opened the door and smugly declared, "I knew we could work together, this was such a tragic misunderstanding—" whereupon Nubby yelled "Ee's got a gun!" and Sarge blew his head off.

The Interrogator was not happy.

That was the end of our part of the investigation. Doc got Twitch stable and patched everyone else up, while Sarge collected Heavy's body and Nubby looted the corpses.

It was sort of awkward sitting there waiting for the all-clear from the Arbites. The Secretary was moaning and crying in a very annoying way, and the rest of the team kept shooting us death glares while they struggled to restrain him. We offered to help, but they refused us for some reason. The mood was not improved by Nubby making some truly horrific noises as he tried to pry something out of the Trader's corpse. In the end he had to borrow Doc's bonesaw.

Eventually the Arbites finished clearing the mansion and a team escorted us back to their precinct. A flier came and picked up the Secretary along with the assassin, Snitch, and Face, and hauled them off to some secure facility somewhere. We weren't told anything, we were definitely on the Interrogator's shit-list.

Final Psychic Phenomena Count: 28 Final Perils of the Warp Count:

7

We hung out with the Arbites for a few hours and they were nice enough to give us some food and help sew Twitch up while we waited. After a while shuttle came for us, as well as, to our surprise, the tech-priest. It took us to the Interrogator's ship. The ride up was pretty somber: Heavy was dead, both his and Nutjob's corpses were in the hold, and we knew the Interrogator was furious with us. Not even Nubby's jokes about the selling price of secondhand gold teeth or his reenactment of the Rogue Trader's death could cheer us up.

When we got back to the ship we were treated to a long lecture about



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how our incompetence had ruined the Interrogator's carefully laid plans. We were told how Sarge's disobedience had removed a vitally useful source of information, how our poor decision making had killed a valuable teammate, and how the tech-priest's mistake on the ship had jeopardized the entire mission. He also made several remarks about our general behavior, attitude, hygiene, and education, then finally pointed out that if only we had acted as professionally as the rest of the team Heavy would still be alive. If the bastard didn't have remote control of the ship's security servitors, Sarge would have probably killed him.

In the end we were ordered to pack up and return to the shuttle, we would be returning to Oak's ship on a naval transport while the investigation was finished with the aid of the Arbites and local Ad-Mech. A secure data-slate containing a summary of the investigation so far as well as a detailed critique of our performance was sent along with us. It came with a dire warning that Oak would be expecting the slate and any attempt to accidentally lose it would go poorly. So we packed up our gear and Heavy and boarded our shuttle. However, as a final afterthought, we propped Nutjob's corpse upright in the bathroom where it would hopefully scare the shit out of that damned Interrogator.

The trip back was a lot better than the trip out. None of the navy boys bothered us and we bonded with the tech-priest over our mutual hatred of that bastard Interrogator. So aside from Sarge's usual drills, we mostly just lounged around and came up with ideas for how to change the report after the tech-priest finished hacking the "secure" data-slate.



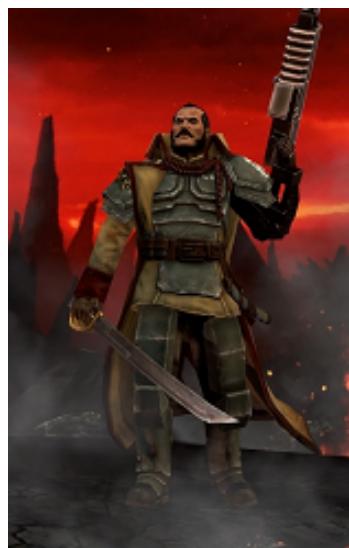
Very few pieces of technology can resist a tech-priest with a month of travel time on his hands, before the trip was even half done he had it cracked open and ready for a little judicious editing. There was a strong sentiment to wipe the whole thing and replace it with a picture of a butt and a note that said "blah blah blah I'm a gigantic tool blah blah blah," but cooler heads prevailed. We simply removed all negative references to ourselves from the report, and rewrote the disciplinary note to simply say that we were no longer needed and were being released back to Oak. As an afterthought, we went through the entire report and dialed the Interrogator's self-praise up to eleven. We hoped it would help him come off as a complete tool to anyone who read the report.

Eventually we arrived back at Professor Oak's giant spacefaring inquisitorial school, which was currently orbiting some random agri-world. We dropped off the data-slate, got debriefed, and went to go find our fellow guardsmen. Sure enough, there were a few of them holding down the little section of the ship that we had claimed back when we arrived. We got together, shared some stories, and planned a suitable funeral for Heavy. We called up the tech-priest and found our other cogbro still hanging out in engineering, so we invited them both down to the planet with us. Then we got Heavy out of storage, "requisitioned" a shuttle, and headed down to the agri-world to give him a proper sendoff.

In the morning the cogbros helpfully hauled all of our hungover asses back onto the shuttle and got us back aboard before anyone noticed we had left. That done with, we settled in for a few well deserved weeks of R&R. On some days, a squad would come back with tales of success or failure and occasionally missing a few men. Other days, a runner would come down and a squad would head out or a new one would be pieced together. Eventually, the squad's R&R time ran out, so we packed our bags and waited for the runner to come for us.

The runner didn't come though. Instead, one day as we lounged in our makeshift barracks, a tall man ducked into the room. He wore dress greens and positively reeked of Officer. In a chipper voice he greeted us and invited our squad and "that strapping young fellow with the sword" to join him on a little expedition. He said he was going into a combat zone and thought that we'd enjoy a chance to get back into action and solve "a few little military problems that are right up our alley, wot wot!"

So with a weary sigh, we gathered up the one man in the regiment dumb enough to prefer a sword over a good old fashioned las-gun and followed our new Interrogator to the shuttle.



Chapter 4

What's In The Box?

This is the ongoing tale of a bunch of guardsmen who got drafted into the Inquisition after their regiment was reduced to a mere 37 men by a combination of Orks, Heretics, more Orks, Tyranids and, of course, their own leadership. Currently they work for an Inquisitor that is the 40k equivalent of Professor Oak, he provides teams and missions to Interrogators who need to get some leadership experience before becoming full Inquisitors. The lot of these guardsmen is rather thankless, they are matched up with five other less combat focused team members, assigned to an Interrogator, and sent out to fight the enemies of the Imperium.

The squad recently lost their heavy weapons specialist to psyker related bullshit. His replacement is Cutter, the only surviving melee specialist from the regiment.

Cutter is strong, fast, and a little too enthusiastic for comfort. He signed up as part of the Regiment's logistical support as a scribe, but the second he got his hands on a Chainsword he found his true calling. A life spent scribing followed by a career in swording has left Cutter a little socially inept, but a tendency to scream and hack off limbs excuses most social faux pas. His previous squad died rather messily when a bunch of bloodletters got into melee range, only Cutter was equipped to handle a close quarters battle. Cutter unsettles the other guardsmen, being bloodthirsty and aggressive is one thing, but willingly leaving cover to close to melee range is just plain crazy.

Our story starts with the squad taking their seats in the shuttle as their



new Interrogator introduces the rest of their team and a briefs them on their mission. They are being sent to "take a peek at the new poppers some of the lads have found", "make sure everything is tickety-boo with the big hats and the boffins", and "give greeny what for if things get dull".

A pair of adepts and a pair of tech-priests are trying to figure out what their mission actually is without insulting their new boss. An older man is serving tea and helping to decipher some of the Interrogator's more arcane expressions, Doc is taking notes. Cutter is ignoring everything in favor of raiding the snack bar and Nubby is picking at the decorative inlay on the table, trying to see if it's actually gold. Twitch is watching Sarge and getting very nervous. Sarge has realised he is currently in the presence of the greatest known threat to a guardsman's life in the galaxy, an enthusiastic officer.

So no shit there we were, on our way to an active warzone to investigate some guardsmen's shiny new guns. Guns which were apparently so good that soldiers were refusing orders from the Commissariat to destroy them and demands from the Adeptus Mechanicus to fork them over. For the sake of these guns guardsmen were actually defying two organizations that scared the bejeezus out of any sane soldier, including us. We were quite possibly going to try to TAKE these guns away from an unspecified number of guardsmen. While they were using them. In the middle of a battle. With orks. Our Interrogator insisted it would be "jolly good fun".

The Interrogator was such a stereotypical upper-crust officer that it bordered on parody.

He was prim, proper, cheerily bloodthirsty, and almost impossible to understand. Given the slightest motivation he would regale anyone around him with old war stories, or musings on the art of war, or lectures on proper gentlemanly behavior. He wasn't one of the sneering, bureaucratic officers though, he firmly believed he was "just one of the lads" and liked to "get stuck in with the rest of the boys". To top this all off he actually embraced the moniker Rupert, the insulting guardsman term for a nobby officer, and insisted we call him by it. We would have called him that



anyways, he was a complete bloody Rupert, but it just wasn't the same if he liked the name.

He'd spent decades in the Guard leading heroic charges by day, hosting formal dinners during the evening, and retiring to the best accommodations around for the night (fighting in the dark would be "simply barbaric", and was well beneath him). At some point in all this he acquired an incredibly skilled batman who became absolutely key to the smooth running of his life. Providing tea before it was asked for, scheduling meetings that no one knew was needed, and identifying and disposing of several discrete threats to his charge's life.



One day an Inquisitor took note of the batman's literally supernatural talent for butlery and there was a bit of a scandal. One thing led to another and both of them wound up joining the the Inquisitor's retinue. Now years later they were still together and working to bring a better class of manners to the Inquisition. We called the batman Alfred.

We traveled on a Navy vessel in surprising comfort, apparently the Captain's family knew the Rupert's or something. In fact it seemed that everyone over a certain rank had some sort of familial connection to our Interrogator. The adepts spent the trip learning military law, the tech-priests studied the technical reports on the new guns, and we tried our best to do our usual drill and sleep routine.



Our Interrogator wouldn't have any of that though, the bugger insisted on wandering down to our barracks every few hours. Not a day would go by without him telling us the story of some incredibly valiant charge, stalwart defense, or duel to the death with the enemy's leader. Sarge noticed that these stories never seemed to mention how many guardsmen died along the way.

The Rupert also frequently dragged the adepts and tech-priests down to our quarters and insisted they brief us on the results of their research. At first we dismissed this as some sort of misguided attempt to build camaraderie in the team, but he kept doing it. He even started asking for our opinions and actually listening to them, so long as they didn't go against his own. This sort of behavior worried us, it just wasn't normal. Something was seriously wrong when the backup muscle gets this much attention and intel.



and be inquisitive. US, the guardsmen, the mudfeet; a group of under-educated, over-armed gorillas with a penchant for laziness, petty theft, paranoia, and completely reasonable cowardice. We were expected to go out there and talk with Imperial Guard Generals, Mechanus Magi, and bloody Commissars, and look for heresy. Which we would presumably find by asking these scary people very nicely if they were heretics.

Sarge went spare. As a unit our previous experience in this sort of thing consisted of shooting anything we were told to, or was trying to kill us, or just looked weird; we were not qualified to figure this shit out for ourselves. Sarge and Doc might have been reasonably intelligent within their fields of expertise, but Nubby was a cretin and a thief, Cutter was borderline psychotic, and Twitch had spent the last few days wiring trip mines into all the cabin's air vents; just in case the Navy tried to kill us all in our sleep. Of course every time the subject was broached with the boss-man all it got a was a laugh, an admonition to be more confident, and a story about how good ol' guardsman know-how had solved problems no one else could figure out.

When we finally reached our destination and marched out of our shuttle we were probably the most nervous looking men to ever wear such sinister uniforms. If the Rupert hadn't led the way we would have probably been arrested for impersonating officers.



The Emperor forsaken ball of dirt we landed on was currently in the grips of a major war with the Orks. The planet was being reclaimed from the greenskins, and after the navy had their fun it fell to the guard to remove the Orks from the 'economically vital' regions of planet. Hundreds of regiments were simultaneously clearing every hive in on the planet with mixed amounts of success.

One front in particular was doing far better than expected, largely due to the sudden appearance of new more effective weapons in several of its regiments. Imperial forces were rapidly pushing

greenskin forces out of the outer hive, and at this rate the hive would be taken months ahead of schedule. Of course the immediate response to such resounding success was the generals on the other fronts calling the Commissariat and Ad-Mech down on the poor suckers. Bloody stupid brass.

We walked into a threeway argument between the Commissariat, the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the Generals in charge of the front. The Commissars saw guardsmen winning fights without anyone being executed for cowardice, and decided that this was obviously some form of heresy. The Ad-Mech saw weapons that were far too shiny for guardsmen to use, and decided that all these guns and their source should be given over to them. The front's Generals saw a chance to be big damned heroes, and wanted the Commissariat and Ad-mech to go bother someone else.

Over the next few days we followed our Interrogator around as he talked to seniors officers. Our days consisted of meetings, teas, briefings, and formal dinners. The Rupert seemed to know everybody who was anybody, he constantly chatted with important people while we hung out with their subordinates.



We finally got a clear set of details on the problem at hand. Autoguns, chainswords, and body armor that were far superior to standard issue gear was being traded via the guard's black market. Guardsmen were quickly trading out their kit for the new gear, and using it to wreck the Orks' shit. The amount of gear that was appearing was as impressive as its quality, but despite the sheer volume of weapons appearing on the market, no one was sure where they came from. After all, the Imperial Guard's black market has experience dealing with hostile investigations and both the soldiers and their officers were being less than helpful.

Being a bunch of guardsmen ourselves we weren't inclined to take useful weapons away from soldiers who needed them. In our opinion the Commissariat and Ad-Mech were a bunch of dickheads, so we'd only do what they wanted if the weapons or their source proved to be evil. So the big questions we needed to answer were: What was so special about the guns, did they do anything to the troopers who used them, and where the hell did they come from?

Answering these questions was apparently our job, the Rupert seemed to have no intention of doing anything aside from having tea with the rest of the brass. Occasionally he'd offer a piece of incomprehensible advice, or send us to talk to someone specific, or politely yell at someone who was being difficult, but mostly it was just tea. Alfred was generally more helpful, his advice and warnings helped immensely and kept us from making a complete

hash of things.



had expected a complete and utter disaster, so only a few major screwups was considered a wild success in our book.



had found.

Of course Doc wasn't really a doctor, he was a medic. He wasn't really in the business of curing people, just making them more comfortable while they die. So he thoroughly embarrassed himself during the briefings by asking stupid questions about how to spell things, why a procedure was done, and what the 'green wobbly bit' was. In the end though, he managed to determine that none of the soldiers had shown any sign of physical change aside from being a little stronger than average.

Cutter and Sarge went to talk to the Munitorum, since Cutter was a former Munitorum scribe and Sarge didn't trust Cutter not to kill anyone if left alone. Cutter's scribe training came through and both of them got access to the records the Munitorum kept on the new weapons, as well as a chance to examine one of the chainswords which had fallen into their hands. Throwing caution to the winds Cutter took the sword and started swinging it around like an idiot.

Cutter declared the sword to be pretty damned awesome and immediately claimed it as his own. When the Munitorum objected he insulted their filing system and challenged them to a duel to the death for ownership of the shiny new sword. Sarge considered this to be perfectly normal behavior for Cutter,

In addition to the dinners, teas, and soirees over the next few days each of us went to a few briefings held by each of the three major players. We'd pair up with one of the adepts if we needed legal or investigative advice, or a cogboy if there was going to be any sort of techno-babble. Otherwise we'd bring a squadmate for moral support or to act as a lookout if we were doing something sketchy. All in all our investigations turned out far better than we had expected. Of course we

The Commissariat and the Mechanicus had detained a few troopers who had been using the weapons and obtained a few corpses of soldiers that had died using them. The detainees were being kept around for questioning, but the corpses had been immediately cut apart in the name of science. As the only member of our team with medical training Doc was sent to talk with the medical staff and magos biologis about what they

dumped the problem on one of the adepts, and got Cutter the hell out of there before he killed anyone.

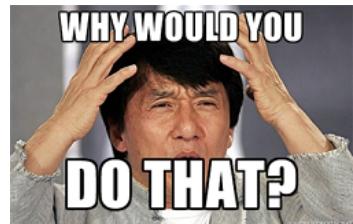
The real problems were Twitch and Nubby, before the end of the investigation both of them were banned from investigating anything ever again.

Twitch wasn't the most stable person at the best of times, but he was far worse around Orks. It was an Ork Kommando raid which had initially triggered his paranoia, so being this near an entire army of them made Twitch incredibly, well, twitchy. He was initially sent to interview a few soldiers who had used the mysterious guns. Unfortunately each session devolved into him questioning everyone in sight about the last Ork sighting, the quality of the perimeter defenses, and whether anyone else had seen that barrel over there move.



Twitch's only contribution to our investigation was repeatedly insisting that this was all the Orks' fault. We eventually gave up on him and let him secure the base after a particularly memorable formal dinner. In a short period of time he accused several officers of 'acting orky', decked a clerk who tapped his shoulder, and accused the troopers who restrained him of being cleverly disguised Orks.

In some ways Nubby was even worse. While Twitch wildly accused people and random objects of being Orks in disguise, Nubby was actually mistaken for a gretchin on three separate occasions. The first two were embarrassing for everyone involved, but guards are meant to be suspicious and no one was actually hurt. The third time was much worse.



Nubby was supposed to be attending a demonstration of one of the mysterious guns along with one of the tech-priests. The demonstration was held in an ad-mech warehouse; Nubby being Nubby he immediately dumped the job onto the tech-priest and wandered off to see what was in stock. He was found by a pair of servo skulls as he pillaged fancy looking data slates out of several inadequately secured storage lockers.

A short firefight ensued, which attracted a nearby enginseer, who in turn misidentified Nubby as a gretchin looter and called for reinforcements. By the time word got to Sarge several more servo skulls were destroyed, Nubby was hiding behind a crate of plasma weapons, and a guard patrol was arguing with the enginseer about whether a gretchin could actually detonate a plasma

weapon. Sarge sorted everything out and a suspiciously bulky looking Nubby was escorted out of the building in exchange for a promise that he never return.



Between the interviews and the demos we got a pretty good look at the weapons and their effects. The tech-priests said there wasn't anything sinister about their function, they were just very well made and never seemed to jam or misfire. There were a lot of fancy words about alloys and mechanisms and shit too, but that really didn't concern us. All we knew was that the autoguns hit about as hard as a bolter, the recoil was just hard enough to let you know the gun worked, and both their report and action sounded awesome.

Cutter expressed similar sentiments about his new chainsword along with dire threats against anyone who tried to take it away from him. He did the same thing if you tried to take away his food though, so we were pretty sure it wasn't anything sinister.

The incredible awesomeness of these weapons was suspicious, but Doc was positive that they weren't mutating anyone. Just to be sure we had the adepts and Alfred, who we were pretty sure was psychic, see if they could detect anything spooky about the gear. None of them detected any warp stuff around the weapons or armor, though Alfred said they were definitely a little weird.

We had almost all the information we needed now. We knew that the weapons were suspiciously awesome and the soldiers used them because they were awesome. We knew that none of the troopers were turning into daemons or mutating and that the weapons weren't doing anything warpy, and Twitch knew that everyone was secretly an Ork. The only information that was still missing was the source of the gear, and as it turned out that last piece of intel was in Nubby's pants.

During his little escapade in the Mechanicus warehouse Nubby had crammed his packs, pockets, sleeves, and pants with expensive looking knick-knacks, parts, tools, and data slates. It was standard procedure to hold Nubby upside down and shake him after one of his adventures; mostly to see if he had gotten his hands on anything important, but also because we had a running bet on how much he'd take. One of several data-slates he had shoved down his pants contained information about a crazier than usual magos who had built a portable weapons factory.

The factory had provided millions of weapons and tons of ammo to the local PDF, but had stopped working a few years after the magos died to

techno-bonitus or something. Eventually the weapons were replaced with more standard gear, but the factory was studied by generations of tech-priests hoping to get it working again. Right up until an Ork Waaagh rolled over the planet.

We brought this info to the Rupert, who immediately recalled tales of an unusually well armed group of greenskins that had been wiped out recently, as well as the name of the regiment which led the final attack. This just so happened to be the same regiment which was spearheading the current attack. A few transports were requisitioned and our little force headed out into the thick of things to have a chat with the regiment. Of course within minutes of our departure, convoys from the Commissariat and the Adeptus Mechanicus rolled out as well.

The regiment in question was currently so far forward that you had to cross through Ork controlled territory to reach them. The only reason they weren't considered to be cut-off and surrounded was the fact that they were kicking so much ass that their boots had started to smell like Ork butt. None of us were keen on crossing the gap between the main lines and the regiment, except for the Rupert, who was happily standing out of the top hatch and waving his sword around. We were paragons of bravery when compared to the adepts and tech-priests though, they didn't see the attraction of driving through a burned out city filled with Orks.

The second we left imperial lines our vehicles started taking small arms fire. Our Interrogator cheerily blasted away with the pintle mounted gun while we kept our heads down and the non-combatants pissed themselves in terror. All in all the drive was pretty pleasant though, nothing heavy enough to pierce the armor was fired at us, the drivers dodged all the land mines, and none of the Orks were good enough shots to hit the Rupert. Unfortunately it came to an end at a crude barricade a few blocks short of the regiment's position.

Now a sane man would have just driven back a bit and tried a different street, but not our Rupert. With a 'Tally Ho' he hopped out of the top hatch and charged the barricade. We all stared at him for a few seconds as he calmly climbed the barricade, completely ignoring the shots landing all



around him. We were considering the merits of just leaving him out there when Cutter revved his sword and charged after him with Alfred close on his heels.



No one could call what followed a heroic charge, it had more in common with a comedy sketch than a valiant assault on enemy lines.

Your typical heroic charge doesn't have two adepts screaming like little girls, or a pair of tech-priests bitching about illogical behavior, or a bunch of guardsmen trying to keep the nerds down below the covering fire from our drivers. Also, most charges are supposed to be against something more fearsome than a bunch of Gretchin with handguns, but we weren't complaining. Of course none of that bothered the

Rupert, he and Cutter gleefully ran to the top of the barricade and started wreaking havoc with swords and pistols while Alfred did his best to keep them from getting shot in the back.

Eventually the rest of us caught up with the idiots, the Gretchin routed, the drivers headed back to the main lines, and the Rupert led us on an 'invigorating stroll through the city'. We followed the sound of autogun fire to the regiment's perimeter where we found the way blocked by a bunch of full sized Orks who were busy tossing Gretchin out of cover and watching them pop. Cutter found this utterly hilarious.



Thinking quickly Sarge had Alfred distract our Interrogator with a flask of tea while we formed a plan. Twitch would lead with some grenades, Sarge would flank left, Nubby and Doc would lay down covering fire, and Cutter would... run straight in screaming before any of us got into position.

Cutter's sudden charge caught us all off guard, it is a widely known fact that no guardsman has any business being closer to an Ork than the maximum range of their lasgun. Orks are bigger, stronger, and tougher than almost any soldier and they usually have a bunch of buddies nearby, despite all this the bloody psychopath was rushing straight into melee range of a whole squad of boyz.

We did our best to lay down covering fire and watched in surprise as, instead of dying messily, Cutter began taking the greenskins apart.

His new sword wrecked their choppas and his berserk fury surprised the hell out of the Orks. Limbs were flying, blood was everywhere, Gretchin were screaming, and not a single Ork noticed that we were mowing them down while they were busy, but it wasn't enough. The Orks began to overwhelm Cutter and we were sure that our melee specialist was going to be Squig food. Then, with a scream that perfectly matched Cutter's, another group of guardsmen rushed into the Orks from behind.

The fight was over in seconds and we all moved forward to greet the troopers who had saved Cutter. As we approached we noticed that each of them had a shiny new autogun, chainsword, and set of body armor; we had found the regiment.

The walk to regiment's HQ was a little awkward. The troopers who escorted us were the biggest, ugliest, smelliest soldiers we had seen outside of the Ogryn auxiliaries and their accents were the worst we'd ever heard. Now, every world has its own variation of low gothic and several older regiments even have their own battle languages, so it wasn't unheard of for guardsmen from different regiments to have trouble talking to each other, but this was just ridiculous. It sounded like low gothic with half the letters missing, a lot of shouting, a bit of hitting, and a ridiculous amount of slang. We couldn't understand half of what they said and they didn't even try to understand us, it was lucky that Cutter had picked up their language somewhere and was able to act as a translator.

With Cutter's help we managed to convey that the Interrogator wanted to talk to their commander, that two 'friendly' convoys would be arriving shortly, and that we wanted to know where their guns came from. To our surprise this was accepted without fuss, there weren't any pointed questions, or evasions, or violent reactions. The Rupert, Cutter, and Alfred went off to talk to the regimental commander while the rest of us were taken to see what the troopers called The Box.

The Box was a huge pile of pipes, gears, screens, and other techy stuff; all crammed into a cube the size of a normal hab, which sat on a large flatbed in a warehouse. It had a big hopper on one end and a few conveyor belts coming out the other, as we watched a huge mess of scrap metal was dumped into the hopper by some of the troopers. A little while later a few of the new weapons rolled out on the belts and were collected by the troopers. The tech-priests were freaking out and yelling at each other in binary, we took this as a positive identification of The Box as the magos' gun factory.

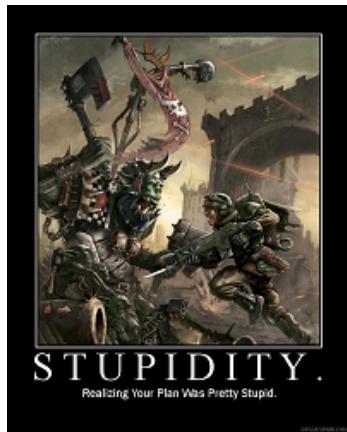




We sat around and watched The Box for a bit while the adepts and tech-priests did their thing. Sarge and Doc speculated about the value of The Box and whether the odd behavior of the troopers was something sinister or not. To a man they were bigger and meaner looking than most guardsmen, the regiment was much farther forward than any sane guardsman would push, and they all seemed to be happy. Guardsmen are not supposed to be happy. Sarge was betting on some sort of daemon living in the box, Doc thought there might be

some sort of heretical archeotech in there, Nubby didn't care, and Twitch had his own theory.

Twitch's paranoia had apparently gotten the better of him. He was interrupting every conversation to tell us that the troopers were Orks, and that the box was full of Orks, and that the Orks outside were double Orks. Eventually we sent him to go secure us a base, the nerds said they couldn't concentrate with all his shouting.



When the Interrogator returned from his little meeting and we brought him up to speed on The Box. Sarge and Doc shared their concerns about it being daemonic and corrupting the regiment, but the Rupert wouldn't hear a word of it. He maintained that the regiment was "positively spiffing; a splendid example of indomitable guardsman spirit" and that the regimental commander was "a jolly good fellow with just the right attitude for life in the guard, manners might need some polish though". The nerds and Alfred were no help, they all maintained that there was no warp corruption around The Box, though Alfred did admit it felt odd. As a last ditch effort Sarge convinced the Rupert to take a tour of the

lines and watch the troopers in action.

So once again we split the party. Sarge, Cutter, Alfred, and the Interrogator went off to see how the troopers acted in combat while the rest of the team kept an eye on The Box.

The regiment was constantly fighting Orks so it was easy to find some action to watch. A section of the perimeter was currently taking fire from a group of Orks, and as they watched a full out assault was launched. Sarge was taking careful note of the troopers' discipline (poor), accuracy (abysmal), and

attitude (excited), when he noticed that Cutter and the Rupert were missing. Both of them were rushing to reinforce the troopers' firing position before the Orks closed to melee. With a curse he and Alfred ran to catch up.

Sarge didn't have to worry though, before either of the idiots got to the barricade the troopers jumped out of cover and counter-charged. Autoguns in one hand and chainswords in the other, the troopers ran screaming into the onrushing Orks and everything devolved into a melee. Sarge and the Rupert stood on the barricade and watched in disbelief as more and more Orks and troopers ran to join the fight, both sides abandoning their positions for a chance to join the brawl. They were barely able to keep Cutter from running in too, if they hadn't all worked to restrain him he would have happily taken his new chainsword into the melee.

This was enough to convince the Interrogator that things were screwed up and The Box needed to go. Cutter was dragged away from the growing fight as they went to rejoin the team and see if blowing the source of the weapons to pieces fixed anything. Cutter calmed down as soon as he was away from the fight, but Sarge was pretty sure that the melee specialist was currently crazier than usual and started looking for a way to get the chainsword off of him without losing any fingers. When they reached the warehouse they found it crawling with troopers.

With Cutter's help they talked their way inside where they found blood, bullet holes, several more troopers guarding The Box, and Twitch barricaded in the room he had been fortifying.

While Sarge and Cutter had been out spectating the rest of us had been chilling in the warehouse. Suddenly all of our coms went dead and one of the tech-priests helpfully informed us that we were being jammed. Not having anything better to do Doc and Nubby got directions towards the source of the jamming and left Twitch in charge of the nerds and The Box. Twitch did not feel this was important enough to merit leaving the room he was currently wiring with mines.

The source of the jamming turned out to be three chimeras with Commissariat markings that had just arrived. A single Commissar and a few squads of storm troopers were milling around trying to talk to the troopers and failing spectacularly. The second he saw the two guardsmen the Commissar and his goons marched over and ordered them to lead him to the source of the weapons.





arrived the Commissar took one look at the box and made a terminal mistake; in nice loud voice he ordered his men to remove all the troopers from the room and rig The Box with explosives.



This was a little unfair, we were in the Inquisition, we were supposed to be the guys that went around with storm troopers ordering people to do stuff they didn't want to do. Doc raised this point, but the Commissar was not inclined to take orders from a bunch of "jumped up guardsmen". When Doc tried to press the issue he got clubbed to the ground by one of the goons and Nubby decided that not having a concussion was the better part of valor.

Doc was left on the ground as Nubby led the Commissar and his men to The Box. Once they

The second one of the goons tried to evict a trooper shit went south. The goon got decked, the Commissar shot the trooper, a few dozen more troopers rushed in, and things devolved into a general melee. Nubby and the nerds took their chance and ran for Twitch's safe room, but the traps weren't quite finished and opening the door would've probably killed them all. So Nubby and the rest hid behind some rubble and watched as the Commissar and his goons were hacked to pieces by the enraged troopers.

The fight went on for a good while after the last of the Commissar's goons were dead, but eventually the troopers got tired and things quieted down. The corpses that littered the floor weren't just left there though, the troopers started gathering them up and dumping them into The Box where they were consumed with wet crunching sounds. This was a bit much for one of the adepts and before Nubby could restrain him the stupid bugger started screaming and praying. The troopers took notice of this and wandered over to the team's hiding spot.

Nubby immediately surrendered to the troopers and they were all led away by a big one with a whip. None of the troopers even checked the door that lead to Twitch's bolt-hole.

After all of this was relayed to Sarge and the Rupert it was decided that there would be no more splitting up. Twitch was pried out of his pile of explosives and trip wires and the whole group set out to find the rest of they set off to save the rest of the team. What followed was much more of

scavenger hunt than a rescue mission.

The adepts were found first. They were both waist deep in a latrine pit with shovels while a bunch of troopers laughed and threw things at them. Cutter negotiated their release by kicking the largest trooper present in the crotch.

The tech-priests were in a nearby building helping a larger than usual trooper with a few augmetics weld entire chainswords onto auto-gun bayonet mounts. Cutter's negotiation tactic failed, it turned out the trooper's augmetics were a little more extensive than they had at first appeared. Luckily he was too busy laughing at Cutter's pain to notice when one of the tech-priests came up behind him and tased him.

Doc was found in the medical tent where a trooper in a smock was chasing him around with a circular saw and screaming about "fixing dat pesky brain". We skipped straight to the tasing this time, then went off to find Nubby.

To our surprise Nubby was in the command tent serving drinks and snacks to the regiment's officers and dodging the occasional kick. The officers were all huge men, by far the biggest we'd seen so far, but the Commander dwarfed them all. It took three sets of body armor kludged together to fit him, he was covered with weapons, and he had the Commissar's hat on his head.

We weren't keen to try tasing him and having Cutter kick him in the junk was out of the question. So as tactfully as possible the Rupert greeted the Commander and offered to exchange a flask of his brandy for Nubby's release. To our relief he accepted. Reunited once more, we all headed for The Box to sort things out before one of the troopers snapped and we all got killed.

We immediately ran into problems when the troopers guarding the warehouse wouldn't let us in. A few arguments and blatant lies were tried, but the guards absolutely refused to stand aside. The Rupert started making plans for a glorious assault in which we would easily kill all the troopers, destroy The Box, then ride a tank of unspecified origin to safety. Sarge decided to go make his own plan.

It was Nubby's newfound status as regimental bitch that saved us from the Rupert's plan. While our Interrogator brainstormed with the nerds about where a unit of horse cavalry could be found for the victory parade, the rest of us did a little experimenting. We quickly discovered that as long as he was



carrying a pile of junk taller than he was the guards would just ignore the greasy little soldier, only paying enough attention to throw a kick his way or lazily try to trip him. Seizing the initiative we stuck a pair of detpacks to a few pieces of scrap metal and sent our most cowardly squadmate to go destroy The Box and save the day.



Arms loaded with cargo Nubby waddled towards the warehouse entrance. We all held our breath as one of the guards looked right at him, but all the trooper did was aim a lazy kick at Nubby's rear as he sidled past. We were all on pins and needles, ready to leap into action the second Nubby called for help, but the call never came. Instead after a few minutes Nubby sprinted back out as casually as he could manage.

Right as he passed the guards one of them held out his foot and Nubby ate dirt. All the guards laughed as Nubby face planted and landed right

on the detonator he was holding.

We all hit the dirt as an explosion shook the warehouse. Immediately afterwards we heard several smaller, wetter sounding explosions. As we rose out of cover to check on Nubby and the warehouse we were greeted by the sight of several headless guards slumping onto the ground. Sarge saluted the stunned Rupert, informed him that perimeter was clear, and requested further orders.

Not being men to look a gift horse in the mouth, or at least not this particular gift horse, we grabbed Nubby and followed our Interrogator into the warehouse to make sure The Box was completely destroyed. Inside we found several more headless troopers and one side of The Box blown open like a bag of popcorn. Weapons raised we slowly flanked around to get a look at what was inside, ready to face some daemonic monstrosity. It was full of Orks.

Twitch was so damn smug.

Well they weren't EXACTLY Orks, they looked more like Ork servitors, Servitorks. Regardless of what precisely they were, the second one saw us they let out a mighty 'Waaagh' and charged. We were ready for them though and the fact that most of them were still attached to The Box by tubes and cables slowed their pace significantly.

We poured las-fire into the Servitorks as they piled out of The Box. Fire discipline was maintained, targets were called out, and every soldier stood his ground; unless you counted the adepts or tech-priests that is, they ran like little girls. We were bloody pros, it seemed like every shot we fired either killed or crippled, and the last Servitor collapsed a few feet short of a very disappointed Cutter.

We slowly advanced on the smoking hole in The Box, keeping an eye out for more surprises and, on Twitch's insistence, headshotting every single fallen Ork. When we reached the edge of the hole we all stopped. The Box was now filled with billowing smoke and random sparks, none of us guardsmen were eager to find out why.

While we all stood around and debated the merits of walking into a smoking, xenos-powered, weapon dispenser, one of the tech-priests apparently found his balls. He marched past us, head held high, and declared his intent to "return this relic to the bosom Omnissiah". A few seconds later there was a loud 'Zzap' and a smoking pile of metal sailed back out of the hole.

The Rupert let out an anguished shout and swore revenge, truly that cogboy had been a man among men and his like would never be seen again. He started a very moving speech about bravery, camaraderie, and charging into a box full of sparking smoke that was obviously hiding an Ork psyker. While he did this we all popped frags and chucked them into The Box.

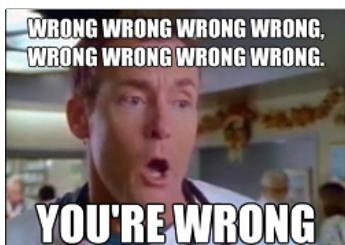
We repeated this until we were out of frags, then waited until the smoke faded and revealed a partially slagged interior with a few smoldering Ork bits. The remaining tech-priest was none too happy with us and the Rupert seemed pretty put out that no one had wanted to charge into the smoke, but we didn't give a shit. As far as we were concerned this was a job well done and the last thing to do was slap enough det packs onto the



damned thing to make sure no one could ever fix it.

When we explained our plan to the rest of the team the remaining tech-priest called us a bunch of uneducated meatbags and stormed off. We ignored this and went to retrieve the munitions that Twitch had been wiring into his bolt-hole. This was not exactly a fast process and Twitch spent the entire time gloating, so everyone but Sarge went to go check the perimeter. Outside the warehouse the camp was absolute chaos; only the troopers near the warehouse had lost their heads, the rest of them just seemed to be very confused about just what the hell was going on.

The Rupert grabbed one of the panicking troopers and demanded a status report. In an entirely non-orky accent the soldier explained that the entire regiment had just realized that they were over extended, short on ammo, and had no defensive positions worth manning. The entire regiment was preparing to bug the hell out and get back to the main imperial lines, if we wanted to get out before the covering barrage hit we better get moving too. It felt damned good to hear that.



We were all congratulating ourselves, grabbing well-earned smokes, and watching Twitch work when the tech-priest returned. He made a very passionate sounding plea for returning The Box to the ad-mech for study. His completely monotone voice was overflowing with emotion and it melted our icy guardsman hearts, how could we stand in the way of science and deprive the Mechanicus of what was practically a holy relic? With tears in his eyes Sarge told the tech-priest that he could take home all the scraps he could carry after we blew the damned thing to shrapnel. For some reason this didn't go over well.

There was a lot of shouting, some unkind things were said, and eventually the Rupert came over to see what all the fuss was about. We explained the situation and the tech-priest made his case for taking the mind altering, xenos powered box of horrors home with him and presumably marrying it since he loved the damned thing so much. Luckily our Interrogator came down on the side of reason. He very politely told the cogboy that this idea was incredibly stupid, and by extension so was the cogboy for even thinking it. This was the final straw for the tech-priest, he screeched something in binary and metal claws ripped through one of the warehouse's doors. Apparently the Mechanicus convoy had finally arrived.

The senior magos of the local ad-mech detachment, the one who had been arguing with us about proper ownership of the weapons during the investi-

gation, tore through the doors and he was a lot bigger than we remembered. When we had initially dealt with the magos he had looked like a normal tech-priest, he'd apparently decided to go get a few combat augmetics for his trip to the front. Being guardsmen we all firmly believed that there was no such thing as overkill, but this was damned close; there were probably smaller dreadnaughts out there. He stomped in with a few servitors backing him up and calmly asked the Rupert to reconsider.

A sane man might have seen the folly of arguing with a three meter tall pile of guns and mechadendrites, but not our Interrogator. In his mind there was no way he could be wrong; anyone who disagreed was either unbelievably stupid or doing it just to spite him, therefore it was his job to either educate them or win them over with his gentlemanly charm. While we all stood back and tried to look non-threatening the poor bastard did his damnedest to explain the way the universe was supposed to work to an increasingly annoyed magos. When this failed he tried to appeal to the humanity of a creature that was more closely related to a Leman Russ than the average human being. When that inevitably failed the Rupert gave in to his frustration, drew his sword, and challenged the metal monstrosity to a duel.

The magos responded by tasing him.

Tasing probably isn't the right term. For one thing most tasers aren't tesla coils mounted on the end of a metal tentacle, also tasing doesn't usually involve a ten foot bolt of lightning that melts swords or chars arms to the bone. It sure as hell incapacitated the Rupert though.

That was enough to convince us that we wanted no part of this shit. While Alfred and Doc saw to our slightly over-cooked Interrogator Sarge formally surrendered The Box to the magos and had Twitch hand over the detonator to the explosives he had covered the box with. We bid farewell to the magos and the little shit-stain of a tech-priest then made our way to the exit. As we left we watched the two cogboys, practically oiling their pants in delight, walked up to The Box then reverentially entered it through the hole we had blasted.

Then Twitch hit the trigger on his backup detonator.



Seriously, who doesn't set up redundant detonators when they're doing demolition work? It's not like you want to walk up and try to fix it if your detonator fails. Some people are just so stupid.

We made our way to the Chimeras the Commissar had used to get here and requisitioned a few drivers from the regiment. The trip back was much less eventful than the trip out, half a regiment had just been through the area and no Gretchin is dumb enough to take pot-shots at a Chimera. Sarge used the vehicle's vox to call HQ and get them to walk the covering barrage over the regiment's former position after the retreat was finished. Sure we had reduced the two tech-priests and their box to greasy stains on the ground, but there was no harm in making sure.

We rode back to HQ with the comforting sound of IG artillery in our ears.

Sarge delivered the team's report to the Generals and the other big wigs since the Rupert was doped to the eyeballs on painkillers. We gave the regiment and the remaining weapons a clean bill of health, after The Box and its weirdboy had been dealt with the weapons had stopped being supernaturally awesome and the troopers had stopped acting like Orks. All that remained was some perfectly normal gear and some unusually buff soldiers.

We pinned the death of the Commissar and his storm troopers on the Orks, it was more or less true anyway. The Commissariat wasn't exactly happy with this explanation, but they blamed us instead of the troopers and we were already on our way off planet, so we didn't worry too much. The Mechanicus was also pretty pissed about the destruction of The Box, unfortunately their boss had mysteriously gone missing during the retreat and they didn't have the authority to really do anything about it. We suggested that both groups lodge a formal complaint with Oak.

With the help of Alfred we requisitioned a berth on a navy ship going our way then got the hell off that planet before the Commissariat or Mechanicus tried to kill us.

The ride back to Professor Oak's Spacefaring Inquisitorial Doom School was relaxing. Doc got to learn about augmetic shoulder sockets and even



helped a navy surgeon install one on the Rupert. Nubby and Cutter played around with the weapons and gear they had looted. Sarge helped Alfred write the final report and enjoyed the fact that the adepts were too scared to talk to him now. Twitch gloated like a dog that caught a squirrel.

Every conversation with him started with "Remember how I said it was Orks and you all called me crazy?". There's nothing quite as annoying as a paranoid who's been proved right.

Eventually we got back to Oak's ship, delivered our report and wandered back down to our little section, it was good to be home. A few days later, well before we could get into the proper spirit of R&R, a runner came for us with orders to report to Oak's office. We all thought back to when we told the ad-mech and Commissariat to file a complaint and desperately hoped that Oak wasn't about to turn us all over as a gesture of goodwill.

Sarge's fears were unfounded though, after the rest of the team arrived Oak praised us all for our exceptional performance. He congratulated the Interrogator especially for identifying the root cause of the problem, removing a piece of heretical technology, and handling the political situation without launching a massive and wasteful purge (Sarge had to kick Twitch when "identifying the root cause" was mentioned). After he finished praising us and lamenting the treachery of the tech-priest, Oak presented a rosette to the Rupert and welcomed him as a full member of the Ordos. To our considerable surprise the Rupert turned the promotion down.

With tears in his eyes and a choke in his voice the Rupert explained that while Oak was happy with our team's performance, he was not satisfied with his own personal performance on the mission. He gave a heartfelt speech about the importance of looking out for your men, listening to their advice (Twitch got another kick here), and not taking foolish personal risks like challenging giant metal men to duels. We only understood three words in ten, but it was very touching nonetheless.

He ended the speech with a request that Oak let him take the exam again after he got a new augmetic arm. A rather bemused Oak agreed and dismissed us all. As we left the Rupert thanked us for our valiant service and promised to request us for his team once he had recovered. We weren't sure how we felt about that, he wasn't perfect but were definitely worse



interrogators out there.



Once that drama was over with we all went and enjoyed our downtime as only guardsman on leave can. There's an old guard saying that goes "Life is short, party hard".

Our R&R ended far too soon, we all still had money and functioning brain cells when the runner came for us. Sarge got us all into the suits Alfred had gotten us and looking far too spiffy we marched ourselves onto the waiting shuttle.

The most beautiful woman we had ever seen greeted us and told us to stand easy. Then, with a smile that would have made the Emperor himself blush, she asked us what we knew about genestealers.

Sarge barely managed to catch Nubby and Twitch as they bolted for the shuttle hatch.

Chapter 5

Nubby's Girlfriend

The squad is currently staring goggle-eyed at their Interrogator, who just so happens to be the most beautiful woman they have ever seen. They have just boarded the shuttle to their next mission, which they are being informed, involves purging multiple genestealer cults from an imperial world.

Doc is stuttering out a few poorly worded questions and trying not to stare at the Interrogator's chest while Cutter has already wandered off and is playing with his chainsword. Twitch and Nubby both tried to run for the exit at the world 'genestealer' and only Sarge's iron grip is holding them back. Behind the Interrogator there are five professional looking men who are eyeing the guardsmen with dubious expressions.

So no shit there we were, heading out to fight the foes of the Imperium under to command of the hottest woman within several cubic light years. Sure we were on our way to fight with a bunch of xenos monstrosities and mutant cultists, but our Interrogator was the envy of inquisition agents all across the sector. Any red blooded trooper would have given his right hand to trade places with us, except he'd need it for the long lonely nights after she'd ruined every other woman for him.

None of us had imagined there was ever an Interrogator like her, she was practically perfect. She had a dancer's grace, a charmer's smile, and a singer's voice; everything about her was beautiful and perfect. To top it all



off she had experience running every part of an inquisition operation, was a minor psyker, and was absolutely deadly with her force sword. It was a wonder that she wasn't already an Inquisitor, we all assumed that her boss had just wanted to keep her around as long as possible.

The rest of the team consisted of hard bitten multi-discipline adepts that could only really be called agents. They each had a bit of a specialty, such as technology or stealth or social infiltration, but they were all highly trained operatives that could fill almost any role in a mission. On top of that, every single one of them was wrapped around our Interrogator's little finger, they'd go into the eye of terror itself if she ordered it. They hung on her words at briefings and were constantly researching and practicing in hope of earning her praise.

So it was sort of surprising that most of us didn't really like her.

Doc and Twitch were terrified of her. Doc got tongue tied around most women, he could barely even talk when the Interrogator was around. He would drop what he was holding, stare at anything else in the room, then either freeze completely or mutter something and try to escape. Meanwhile Twitch had decided that anything that beautiful was specifically designed to destroy men. He firmly believed that she was some sort of daemon, or witch, or xenos, or mechanical construct; his theory varied from day to day. Their relationship was not helped by her repeated insistence that he not wire everyone's quarters with mines.

Sarge and Cutter were vaguely distrustful of her. Sarge had a completely justified distrust of authority: none of the squad's previous Interrogators had impressed him with their strategic ability and his guard superiors had been even worse. On top of this, while she was easier on the eyes than any of his former bosses, Sarge automatically assumed that any superior officer that didn't have at least one obvious battle wound probably spent most of their time getting guardsmen shot instead. For his part, Cutter didn't understand what all the fuss was about. Sure the Interrogator's force weapon was pretty cool, but there was only room in his heart for his chainsword-chan.

Nubby immediately fell in love though. He followed the Interrogator around like a foul mouthed, unhygienic, kleptomaniacal puppy.

Honestly we weren't sure who we felt more sorry for. Nubby's constant attempts to impress her were absolutely pathetic, but on the other hand she had to endure Nubby's near constant presence. He would follow her around



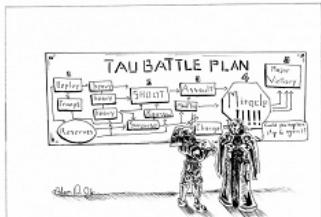
doing errands, offering her little gifts, and constantly telling her about the heroic exploits of Captain Nubby and his merry men. At first she encouraged this behavior, since Nubby was the only man in our squad that would give her anything more than a resigned salute. Everyone has their limits though and Nubby's chatter, blatant thievery, and SMELL could wear down anyone's patience. He even started standing guard outside her quarters while she slept, which was more than anyone should have to bear. Sarge put a stop to that as a sort of peace offering.

Once again, we claimed a section of cabins as our own and let Twitch fortify them. Thanks to our abysmal first impression, not to mention effect Nubby had on the rest of the team, we mostly got away with our routine of napping, PT, and ignoring everyone else. The others seemed to think of us as disposable muscle, and they definitely weren't about to traverse a literal mine-field or argue with a heavily armed paranoid just to talk to us. Of course we had to leave our territory to go to a few briefings with the rest of the team, but since we weren't part of the Interrogator Fan Club we weren't invited to stick around in their part of the ship. The only exception to our isolation was that every once in a while the Interrogator would come down and make an attempt at bonding with us. She stopped trying after Twitch threw holy water at her though.



The end result of all this mutual disgust, aside from making any casual conversation with Nubby unbearable, was that Nubby more or less became the liaison between our squad and the rest of the team. This meant that almost all the information about our mission went through a pathological liar who spent most of the time making eyes at the Interrogator instead of listening.

The information that filtered through to us wasn't exactly encouraging. A major genestealer cult had been broken up several years ago by some badass Inquisitor, but several splinters had already broken off and headed for other worlds. Recently several of those splinters had been tracked down to a medium sized imperial world smack in the middle of the sub sector. Oak had apparently decided that this was an excellent chance for some of the Inquisitor wannabes to prove themselves, so three teams were sent out to try and purge these infestations WITHOUT massacring entire Imperial cities. A few regiments of guard would be stopping by in a few months, so if the teams failed to solve things by then a more general purge would be performed by the boys in green.



Our three team force was given the rough location of no less than six genestealer infestations and told to go down and pinpoint each cult, take out its leadership, and then send in the locals to mop up the rest. Everyone would enter the system discreetly, so as not to spook the cults, and each Interrogator was given a trainee rosette to beat the local authorities over the head with. Each team was assigned two infestations and told to help the others when they finished or if the other teams called for help. Finally, if shit went south they were to try and convince the PDF to do a general purge.

Our Interrogator and the Agents spent the trip going through what info we had about the planet and the cults. The general theory was to find the public face of the cults, perform some sort of daring kidnapping operation, rip the location of the rest of the cult from their minds or databases, then plan a surgical strike with loyal elements of the PDF. We all eagerly awaited the second plan that would be formed after the attempt to capture a psychotic, mutant, xenos cultist surrounded by guards went ploin shaped.



We touched down in a fair sized city and immediately set up base in a pretty ritzy house, apparently the Inquisition wasn't skimping on this mission. The agents all started going out on their little fact finding missions: infiltrating political groups, examining real estate records, hacking databases, and in the Interrogator's case, attending extravagant parties. We were not invited on any of these missions on the grounds that we were so unstealthy that just being in the same general area would blow their cover. The lack of invitation didn't stop Nubby from attending the parties though, one can only imagine the disgust on the Interrogator's face when he kept showing up mid party in clothes he'd mugged off a servant or drunk nob.

Since we didn't have anything better to do we mostly lounged around, ate bad fast food, kept the vehicles in order, and generally transformed a beautiful town house into an Imperial Guard firebase. We had been in transit for several weeks and now we had been told to stay at base while the rest of the team did the investigating. While any guardsman appreciates down time, Sarge wasn't a fan of troopers sitting around with nothing to do, so he stepped up the schedule of our drills and we all helped Twitch fortify

the place. This eventually got us in trouble with the Interrogator, since apparently surrounding a house with razorwire counts as breaking cover, even if you cover it up with decorative shrubbery.

Our relationship with the rest of the team was definitely getting a bit strained. Cutter got yelled at for doing sword drills in the middle of the night: apparently some of the agents had trouble sleeping while someone was revving a chainsword and screaming obscenities at a training servitor. They were also unappreciative of Sarge holding 5am PT in the back yard, and Doc's insistence that everyone submit to a thorough physical. The real problems were Twitch and Nubby though.

Of course Twitch was doing his usual thing, but unlike our previous teams the agents had no appreciation for a properly secured perimeter. After an Agent ignored the posted directions and had to be rescued from a depressed land mine there was a big fight between Twitch and the Interrogator. His perfectly valid points about perimeter security, posted instructions, and the relative safety of mechanical dual action mines compared to motion activated ones were dismissed; in the end he had to remove all booby traps outside the squad's quarters, even the non-lethal ones.

To top everything off Nubby had ground the entire team's nerves down to the bone. His constant petty theft, chatter, and poor hygiene were bad enough, but he was practically stalking the Interrogator at this point. His very presence offended the Agents, and his behavior drove them all into a simmering rage. Only his fictitious rank of Captain and supposed command of our squad kept them from killing him or banning him from their briefings.

All in all it was a relief for everyone when they finally identified the front for the local cult and their primary moles in the local government.

The plan our Interrogator came up with was a beautifully choreographed series of misdirections and lightning strikes. There were cunning disguises, perfectly placed bribes, subtle pieces of blackmail, nearly impossible feats of stealth and speed, and in the middle of it all would be our Interrogator acting as the maestro. Every agent would work in perfect sync to draw the targets in, subdue them, and then return them with their memories modified and the cult none the wiser. Our squad would stay in the van and do absolutely nothing to screw things up.

An extravagant party was organized by the Interrogator and every one of the targets received an invitation they couldn't possibly refuse. A venue was chosen, disguises were perfected, traps were set, and a little out of the way room was filled with several sinister pieces of equipment and a very nervous



Doc. Doc was the only one allowed to even enter the building during the operation, and that was only because no one else was qualified to handle anesthesia. Mind you Doc wasn't really qualified either, his past experience with sedation primarily consisted of sticking unhappy people with the guard-issue one use morphine amps.

The plan called for a lot of really complex stuff that more or less boiled down to grab a target, take them to the little room, drug them, do psyker stuff to them, dump them back in the party with a gap in their memory, then repeat. Cynics that we were, we fully expected this to fail horribly. Our squad sat in the van armed to the teeth, listening to the comms, and just waiting for the screaming to start.

It was a bit of a let down when things went off without a hitch.

The social agents socialed, the stealthy agents stealthed, the psyker agent psyked. One after another the targets were brought to Doc's little room where he kept them sedated while our Interrogator and her assistant rooted around in their

deformed brains. The closest thing to a problem was when Doc found out that a genestealer hybrid is rather resistant to most tranquilizers, but immediately quintupling the dosage solved that problem. In a remarkably short amount of time we had all the information we needed on the local cult, and the victims had no idea that anything had happened. We were absolutely floored.

Seriously, the mission had taken less than an hour from the word go. Most of the night was taken up with going through the motions of the party while our squad sat in the van like a bunch of naughty children. It was the most successful Inquisitorial op we'd seen and Nubby gave us no end of shit about doubting his girlfriend. He was so goddamn insufferable that we eventually kicked him out of the van and told him to go stalk the Interrogator or something for the rest of the night.

The data gained from the party was used to create a detailed list of targets for surgical strikes by the local authorities. The list was packaged with several strategic 'suggestions' and dire warnings about the consequences of failure, then sealed by the Interrogator and handed off to a few powerful local officials who were believed to be trustworthy. We got to come along and watch as these packages were delivered, the snooty bastards nearly shit themselves when they were shown the Interrogator's Rosette.



The Interrogator sealed the packages and instructed the locals to only open them if ordered to do so by someone with an Inquisitorial Rosette. That done, we all packed up, sent a coded message to the other teams informing them of our success, and headed for the next cult location.

A less stalwart bunch of guardsmen would have started to doubt their cynical view of the world, but we had earned every bit of that cynicism with blood, sweat, and tears. Like hell were we going to give it up for something as trifling as a single successful mission. We comforted ourselves with the thought that nothing that perfect could happen twice. We told ourselves that the next op was practically guaranteed to have a colossal fuckup in it, even if we had to supply it ourselves.

Boy were we right.

We moved to another of the major cities on the planet and once again we set up shop in an incredibly posh house. We went about guardifying it while the rest of the team did their intel gathering things, but we were much more restrained this time. The success of the previous mission had been humbling. The team had put up with our shit and performed like professionals; the least we could do was be civil. That's not to say that we were any more fond of the Interrogator or any less sure of the impending disaster, we just didn't see the point of deliberately pissing the rest of the team off while they worked.

Even though we were acting more restrained our paranoia had been ratcheted up several levels by the success, it was just a morose sort of paranoia. Something was inevitably going to go wrong, but no one would ever listen to us or let us take perfectly reasonable security measures. So we just stewed in our makeshift barracks and prepared for all the complex plans to fall apart and dump everything into our laps. Our mood was not improved by Nubby periodically coming in and rambling about his lady love.

Before long the intel was gathered, the targets were identified, and another magnificent party was scheduled by the Interrogator. Once again the Interrogator and her agents put together an incredibly complex plan which would pull one target after another into the little interrogation room manned



by Doc. There were little differences here and there, but it really was the same plan as last time. Right down to us grumpy guardsmen sitting in the van where couldn't get into trouble.



We paid careful attention to the briefing this time, quietly tracking all the ways things could go wrong. When it was over we retreated to our quarters and started making our own contingencies. We had plans for stopping escaping targets, we had plans for intercepting cultists hunting our team, we had plans for holding off reinforcements. Hell, we even had plans for if the Interrogator and the psyker agent both simultaneously turned into

daemonhosts. Sure all these plans were more or less “apply las fire and explosives until it stops being a problem,” but we did have them.

The team was amped up and ready for another perfect op. Well at least Nubby, the agents, and the Interrogator were, but after several days of morosely speculating about what would go wrong our squad had the general attitude of condemned prisoners. We weren’t sure what would be worse; if even a tenth of our paranoid worries came true we were all going to die horribly, but if everything went perfectly again we’d probably have to kill ourselves or join the Interrogator Fan Club with Nubby. Most of us considered death to be the better option.



On the night of the party our squad piled into the van with so much military hardware that we clinked when we walked. We had lasguns and melee weapons, ammo and medpacks, several different types of grenades, and more detpacks than even Twitch thought we needed. When a guardsman feels a sense of doom in the air, munitions are his security blanket.

Doc was sent off to his little room with a batch of super heavy tranquilizers he had prepped after the slight difficulty last time. He was going to be alone in there so we gave him a backup guard issue combead and, in direct violation of the Interrogator’s orders, Twitch snuck him a few of his toys. That is to say, Doc was given enough directional mines to blow anyone coming through the front door to chunky salsa while simultaneously opening an escape route out the back.

We sat in the van, jittering and waiting for either the impending disaster or the most embarrassing moment of our lives. This op would make us, break us, or quite possibly kill us; all we could do was listen to the comms and wait to see which. You should have seen the look on Sarge’s face when the elevator

the stealthy agent was on suddenly reversed direction and smashed him into the top of the shaft.

Grinning like schoolboys, we started piling out of the van even before the agent's scream was cut short by the inevitable *splat*. As we sprinted for the building we all felt a deep sense of satisfaction as two of the agents reported they were being followed, and Sarge almost started laughing when the Interrogator's order to abort was interrupted by a gurgling scream and comms going down. Twitch actually did start laughing when Doc reported hostiles approaching his position and his intention to blow the mines then rendezvous with us in the ballroom.

We hit the front doors right as Doc's mines went off. As the explosion shook the building we kicked in the door, buttstroked the rent-a-cops standing guard, and headed for firing positions. Nubby and Twitch sprinted up into the balconies to lay down covering fire while Sarge and Cutter started forcing a path through the crowd. It was complete pandemonium in the ballroom: the crowd was panicking, gunfire was coming from several directions, and the hostiles were almost identical to the rest of the party goers.

One agent was already down, another was pinned behind some pillars, and as we got into position we saw the Interrogator retreat out a side door with three cultists in pursuit. Nubby and Twitch made quick work of the cultists they could see and started sweeping the crowd for hostiles and the original targets. Sarge and Cutter finally made it through the crowd to the surviving agent where they found several cultists pretending to be guests and waiting for a clear shot. Cutter hit them in the rear and started making cultist hamburger while Twitch and Nubby shot anyone who didn't run from the madman with a sword. Sarge took this chance to run in and grab the pinned agent before more hostiles showed up.

The ground team was pulling back towards the front doors when the rescued agent spotted one of the targets in the dwindling crowd and broke away from the group.

Swearing under their breaths Sarge and Cutter ran after the agent as he closed on a spectacularly fat man. The panic in the room covered the sound of the agent's approach and he managed to land a decent hit with his stunner, but the fat man wasn't completely incapacitated. With startling speed he popped back onto his feet, locked eyes with the agent, and started to draw a weapon. Before he could kill the paralyzed agent Cutter hit him



like a truck and started repeatedly clubbing him over the head with the flat of his chainsword.



Once the fat man stopped moving Sarge pulled Cutter off and the whole group headed for the exit dragging the fat man behind them. Twitch saw the cultists' follow-up assassins enter the room before anyone else and immediately nailed two of them, prompting the rest to dive into cover. Thinking fast Sarge took cover behind the wobbling folds of the incapacitated target, and dragged Cutter and the agent down with him. They hunkered down behind the makeshift barricade and hoped to the Emperor that two hundred kilos of blubber would stop small arms fire.

It turned out that enough fat is just as good as a bunch of sandbags, and luckily the cultist's didn't have anything heavier than handguns. Twitch and Nubby picked off most of the cultists, and the last few decided to stick in cover and wait for reinforcements. Sarge was considered releasing Cutter to launch a flanking attack on them when Doc poked his head through the door behind the cultists.



Doc ducked back out of the room and we all did our best to keep attention off of him for a few seconds. Before long he stepped out of the door, calmly walked up to a pair of cultists and tranqued them while behind him the last missing agent walked in and headshotted the final cultist. The room was empty except for us now, so Twitch and Nubby dropped down from the balcony and everyone gathered together to plan the next move.

The fat man was thoroughly dead; it turns out that no amount of body mass will let you live through being used as meat shield against half a dozen handguns. To our surprise the two cultists that Doc had so thoughtfully tranqued were dead too. Apparently they weren't as genestealery as the previous targets had been and the quintuple strength tranq had instantly killed them. In fact a quick examination didn't turn up anything genestealery about them. We had a vague feeling that this was important, but since it wouldn't help us survive the current shitstorm we filed it away for later. Since we were the ones with working comms Sarge took operational command. The two surviving agents were told to fall in behind us, and we made our way out of the building.

Theoretically we should have tried to find the rest of the team first, but we knew one agent was dead and judging by the comm traffic the others were too. Nubby and the surviving agents argued for finding the Interrogator, but Sarge decided she was a big girl who could handle herself, so we all headed for base instead. We carefully made our way to the front door, and got ready for the completely exposed sprint to the van. Right as Sarge was about to give the order to run, the van exploded in a fireball that took out every other vehicle in the lot.

We all looked at Twitch, who shrugged and muttered about making sure no one tampered with it.

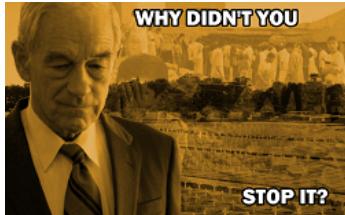
So no shit there we were, standing outside a building full of corpses (most of which WE were responsible for) with no vehicle, no form of Inquisitorial identification, and the rapidly approaching sound of sirens. Judging by the arm that landed next to Doc a bunch of cultists had tried to mess with our van and ran afoul of Twitch's perimeter defenses, but no one shot the agents when we sent them to check on the wreckage so we assumed that none of the hostiles were left. We could have hotwired a nearby vehicle and lead the cops on a daring chase, or we could have had the social agent try to bluff them, or we could have silently gone into custody and awaited rescue by the Interrogator, or we could have even tried to fight our way through an entire city's worth of cops. Instead we decided to just walk home.



The agents weren't exactly happy about this decision; none of us were disguised they said, it was a twenty kilometer walk they said, we were in plain sight they said, and we were all obviously carrying weapons they said. We ignored them though, and as we walked Sarge calmly explained that no sane copper was going to ask a bunch of guardsmen why they were carrying their weapons with them on leave, especially not when there was something much more important to deal with. He did acknowledge the point about it being twenty klicks back to base though, so after a few blocks we found a train station and rode home with some very scared looking administratum workers. Those of us with proper Guard-issue common sense caught some much needed rest while we travelled, the agents just sat there and worried about their precious Interrogator.

The sun was almost up when we got back to base, and the agents were dead on their feet. Doc opened the front door and nearly lost a hand when the Interrogator fired several bolt rounds through it, but after a bit of careful negotiation we convinced her to let us in. She seemed surprised that we

survived. It was a bit insulting really.



After the Interrogator put the bolt pistol down, we all filed in and Sarge gave the squad's report. Doc and the agents filled in the bits he wasn't there for, and we painted a pretty clear picture of the cultists' attack, our swift response, and the rescue of the agents. Sarge also made sure to mention the attempt to capture the fat man and the lack of genestealer characteristics on the cultists, but the Interrogator wasn't exactly impressed with this information. Instead she asked

some very pointed questions about why the interrogation room had been filled with explosives, why we had deployed without orders, and whose idea it was to rig the van with proximity mines. For the most part we stood there and ignored these questions in traditional guardsman fashion, but Twitch made a few unkind comments about the Interrogator's retreat which she graciously decided to ignore.

Eventually the Interrogator got tired of yelling at us and told the whole team to pack their gear up and get into the flier in the garage. She had decided that this part of the mission was beyond salvage and ordered an immediate purge by the PDF. We had less than an hour to get our shit together and get the hell out of there before the killing started.

None of us were happy about the purge order. A whole lot of civvies were going to be killed and the PDF grunts were going to be pretty messed up by the end of the purge, but in the end, it was the Interrogator's call to make. We didn't have any clever suggestions and she clearly wasn't interested in listening to our half-baked plans, so we kept our mouths shut. Hell, even if we had a real idea for fixing the situation we couldn't have stopped the purge without the Interrogator's Rosette.

So feeling like our heroic rescue had been for nothing, we collected everything we could carry, got into the team's flier, and awaited further orders.

We hadn't even finished stowing our gear when the Interrogator and the two agents sprinted into the flier in full combat gear. The agents jumped into the pilot seats, and we immediately took off while the Interrogator told us that one of the other teams had requested aid.

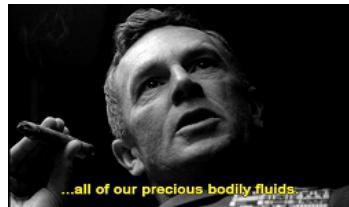
The Interrogator explained that the other team was on its way to deal with a nest of cultists and expected heavy resistance, so our team would make comm contact and act as reinforcements as soon as we arrived. We cracked open our supplies and started gearing up for a big fight as we flew. This time it would be a straightforward battle, and we would be ready. Far below us las and artillery fire started to spread across the city.

The squad was in a grim mood. Thousands, if not millions, of Imperial citizens were dying below us, and it was all because our team had botched a single op. We looked back on the sense of smug satisfaction we felt when the Interrogator's plan had fallen apart and felt a little ashamed. This wasn't just about proving ourselves right and keeping our asses safe, there were millions of lives on the line here. The entire squad vowed that this would not happen again, and each of us swore that we would do our damnedest to aid the other teams and complete the mission objectives, except for Twitch that is. Instead, the nutter swore that he would put a stop to the Interrogator's nefarious plans to harvest his precious bodily fluids. Doc hit Twitch and told him to stop plotting to kill our superior officer unless Sarge told him to.

We were all locked, loaded, and ready for action when we entered the other team's territory and the Interrogator made comm contact. She reported that the second team was pinned down in a building by several well armed cultists and hostile reinforcements were probably on the way. We would land on a nearby roof, get into position, then take out the attackers and any other cultists while the team inside finished their mission. The agents would stay in the flier and give air support if needed.

As soon as the flier touched down we fanned out across the edge of the roof and started setting up for one hell of a sneak attack. The targets below us were obviously professionals: they were spread across several pieces of cover, had military grade weaponry, and were maintaining fire discipline. Since these guys were head and shoulders above the cultists we had fought earlier, Sarge ordered us to hold fire and pick our targets for a massive opening salvo. Before any of us could finish setting up our shots though, the Interrogator ran to the edge of the roof and started pouring bolt fire onto the cultists below.

They responded instantly; every one of them turning towards the roof and laying down suppressive fire. We all immediately hit the deck, leaving the Interrogator as the only clear target. She threw up a force shield, but she wasn't a powerful offensive psyker and after a few seconds she collapsed with a scream. When Nubby saw this he burst out of cover and started hosing las



fire back at the cultists with no regard for his personal safety. Doc barely managed to pull him to the ground before their return fire killed him.

Sarge took stock of the situation, decided it was salvageable, and assumed operational command. Figuring he needed some form of identification for when he reached the other team, he grabbed the moaning Interrogator's bolt pistol with its obvious =][= marking, then ordered Twitch to take her back to the flier.



Twitch grumbled and pulled the limp Interrogator over his shoulder then started to slowly haul her towards the flier, complaining loudly that she wasn't even trying to walk. Sarge decided that the squad's current positions were fucked, so he gave the order to pop smokes and flashes then get into new ones. While we shifted positions, Sarge started flipping through frequencies on his combead in an attempt to contact the other team and coordinate an attack. We were

still waiting for the smoke to clear and the fight to resume, when Cutter spotted the cultists' reinforcements coming in on their own flier.

We'd been ready for something like this though; both Sarge and Nubby had brought heavy ordinance along. Nubby got his launcher ready, and as soon as the flier came into range he nailed it with a Flakk missile. The shot wasn't perfect, and the pilot managed to make a crash landing at the edge of the smokescreen, but Sarge raised his nade launcher and dropped several rounds onto it before anyone could get out. That done with, he went back to scanning the comm channels and finally made contact with the other team. Sarge asked for a sitrep and we all got patched in just in time to hear "Our situation is FUBAR. We're pinned down by several heavily armed cultists, and someone just fragged our Interrogator's flier."

Whoops.

That was a little embarrassing, but these sort of things happen in combat and we were still in the middle of a fight.

Sarge told them that we had eyes on the cultists and would deal with things while the other team sat tight. As the smoke cleared he started dropping nades onto every piece of heavy cover he could see while the rest of us waited for him to flush out the targets. A few seconds later the other team voxed back and told us to "Bloody hurry, cause they're dropping nades right on our heads here."

Double whoops.

This screw-up was too big to be ENTIRELY our fault. In fact there was no way that a screw-up this big could be accidental. After all, the

Interrogator had been in comm contact with the other team the whole time and had been the first one to open fire...

We all turned our heads towards Twitch and the Interrogator and watched in horror as she sprang upright with Twitch's laspistol in her hand. Twitch reacted with lightning speed and threw himself backwards, but before he hit the ground she drew a bead on his head. She met his eyes, and then, with the most beautiful smile in the entire galaxy, she pulled the trigger.

This was Twitch's laspistol though; its owner was a man who once put directional charges on the backplate of his armor just to make sure no one snuck up behind him. There was an ominous hum when the trigger was depressed, the smile faded, and a second later the pistol's power cell went off like a small grenade. Taking the bitch's hand with it.

It really shouldn't have surprised any of us that Twitch had booby-trapped his weapons. He'd regularly told us to never, ever touch any of his stuff without asking first. It surprised us anyway though, and we all stared at the explosion like a bunch of dumb recruits. This meant that every one of us was dazzled by the explosion which blew Twitch and the Interrogator in opposite directions. As most of us tried to blink the spots out of our vision, Cutter charged for the downed Interrogator while swearing at the top of his lungs.

Cutter was damned fast, but he had a lot of distance to cover and the Interrogator was back on her feet in seconds. She sprinted for the flier and one of the agents poked his head out of the door to see what the hell was going on. What he saw was a badly wounded Interrogator running for safety while Twitch blindly sprayed las-fire and Cutter bore down on her revving his chainsword and screaming for blood, so in retrospect his decision to draw his sidearm and give her some covering fire was pretty reasonable. Reasonable or not it still screwed us though; Cutter had to start dodging shots and only caught up right as the Interrogator was boarding the flier.

Cutter made a good attempt at removing the Interrogator's pretty head, but he was forced to dodge at the last second by the agent. The Interrogator's counter stroke nearly impaled Cutter, but he fell back and only took a minor stab wound from her force sword. This gave the agent enough time to slam



the door shut, and the flier started to take off as Cutter futilely hacked at the door with his chainsword.



The moment the Interrogator broke for the flier Sarge started trying to raise the agents on the comm, but to his absolute disgust he found that the Interrogator had locked the whole squad out of the team's network. So with no way to get our side of the story across we just stood there and watched the flier take off. Our paralysis lasted until we realized that it was coming around for a strafing run.

It didn't surprise any of us that the agents had sided with their precious little Interrogator. Later on we might try to bring them around, but right then they were sheltering our enemy and trying to kill us. We all scattered and managed to avoid the first salvo from the flier's nose gun.

Thinking fast, Doc grabbed the missile launcher from a stunned Nubby and loaded our backup Flakk round. Doc wasn't exactly a pro at using the heavy weapon, but it was a pretty near miss and he definitely got a chunk of the flier. Sarge supplemented this with some airburst grenades from his launcher, and between the two of them we convinced the flier that we weren't worth the trouble. It turned tail and limped away into the distance as we all stood there and tried to figure out what the hell just happened.

We were brought back to reality by the sound of fighting from the street below. The cultists in the building were laying heavy fire onto the poor buggers that we'd done our level best to teamkill. Doc went to see to the slightly crispy Twitch and slightly stabbed Cutter, while Sarge and Nubby pumped the rest of the squad's grenade and missile launcher rounds into the building. This went a long ways towards convincing the other team that our previous attacks had all been a misunderstanding.

The barrage of explosives pretty much leveled the building, and none of the surviving cultists decided to stay and fight. Neither our squad or the team below was in position to give chase, so we all withdrew and tried our best to sort everything out over the comm.

We explained the situation as best we could, and, mostly thanks to the former guardswoman on their team, we eventually convinced them that this was all our Interrogator's fault. The problem was that we didn't really have any idea what to do about it. We were just a bunch of grunts, and the other team was down to a guardswoman, a psyker, an arbite, and a pair of badly wounded clerics. Apparently the Interrogator and all of their team's nerds

had been on the flier that Sarge and Nubby had blown to pieces. We blamed that one on the agents in the flier when they asked who had shot it down.

None of us had any great ideas about how to track down the Interrogator, so we decided to fall back to the other team's safehouse and see if we could raise the third team's Interrogator. We hotwired a pair of vans, and as we headed for their base Doc did his best to fix up the two wounded clerics. Neither of them was going to be back in the fight anytime soon though.

On the brighter side, Twitch had lost his eyebrows and needed a new pair of pants, but was otherwise fine. And Cutter hadn't even noticed the shallow stab wound he took, as he was far more concerned about the teeth his chainsword had lost when he tried to cut open the flier. The rest of the squad was completely unharmed, but Nubby was deeply depressed over the Interrogator's treachery. We tried to be understanding, but it was hard. Especially when he started spinning theories about what could have FORCED her into betraying us all.

When we got to the safehouse we all went about reloading and rearming ourselves while Sarge and the Guardswoman tried to contact the third team. Luckily there was a backup flier parked at the safehouse, so we started moving everything we might need into it in case the third Interrogator wanted us to join him. After only a few minutes of this we started to hear the distinctive sounds of heavy artillery and las fire in the distance.

We quickly realized that our Interrogator had called in another purge for Emperor knows what reason. Being inside an inexorably shrinking military cordon is bad, so we decided it was time to get the hell out of dodge. We loaded up the wounded and the last of the supplies we could carry, then the Arbiter got us into the air while Sarge and the Guardswoman tried to use the flier's vox to reach the local authorities.

We were wildly unsuccessful in our attempts to convince the PDF to stop the purge. Their orders had been given by someone with a genuine Inquisitorial Rosette, and Emperor help the man who defies the Inquisition. Sarge failed miserably when he tried to explain that WE were the Inquisition, as without a Rosette to prove it no one would believe him. We considered going back to look for the second team's Rosette, but since their Interrogator had



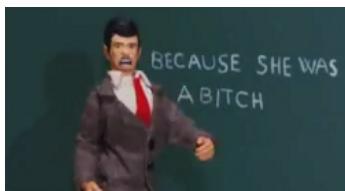
been wearing it when we blew him to pieces that idea was quickly abandoned. Eventually the PDF must have reported our attempts to stop the purge to the Interrogator, because they suddenly got very interested in where we were voxing them from. We quickly deactivated our vox, in case they could trace it, and watched the fireworks below us while we made our way towards the third team's last known position.

We spent a lot of time talking during the flight, none of this shit made any sense to us and we had no idea what to do about it. Initially we asked Twitch what the Interrogator's plan was since he'd been sure she was planning to kill us the entire time, but he quickly devolved into theories about "precious bodily fluids." Nubby wasn't any help either; he kept insisting that this was all some sort of misunderstanding and the Interrogator was a sweet girl who would never hurt a fly. We weren't going to get anything useful out of them, so we put our heads together with the rest of the team and tried to figure shit out.

Looking back it was sort of weird that the cultists at the party hadn't been genestealery or cared about shooting the fat man, so we decided that they must have been the Interrogator's friends and the plan had been to wipe out the whole team. If that was her main goal though she could have killed us all in far simpler ways, so we figured that it was supposed to look like an accident. We didn't really see the point though. If

she just wanted to order purges it provided a nice justification, but she hadn't ordered a general purge on the first cult. Maybe she wanted to perpetrate a mass murder and still pass her Inquisitor Test or something.

Anyway, it was definitely her plan to get us into a fight with the other team and presumably have us wipe each other out. We didn't really see a reason for that either, but maybe she just wanted to kill the other team and figured she'd take out two birds with one stone. It made a stupid sort of sense if she was low on cultist manpower and afraid of people trying to stop her purges. Her reason for the purges was still a mystery though; all we knew was that that she wasn't working with the genestealers, since they weren't going to live through the purges either. In the end we decided that she was just an utter bitch and tried to catch what sleep we could before the flight ended.



We woke to the sound of more artillery fire. We were over the city where the last team was supposed to be working, and we all recognized the shitstorm below us. The damned bitch had ordered another purge. We were pretty sure she couldn't have ordered this one without either enlisting or killing the third Interrogator, but it didn't hurt to check. We turned the vox back on called the third team, and to our surprise we actually got them on the first try.

Sarge immediately explained that our Interrogator had gone nuts, tried to get us to kill the other team, and was running around ordering mass purges for generic evil reasons.

Unfortunately the Bitch had their Interrogator under her thumb, so the only response we got was an order to surrender to the Inquisition and seek mercy for our sins. That was bullshit so we turned the vox back off and started to debate the merits of catching a ride back to Oak's ship, hanging out on some tropical island until this all blew over, or even getting a job on a rogue trader. Our boss was an evil bitch who got off on ordering mass purges, the nearest other official was totally whipped by said evil bitch, several major cities were being needlessly genocided, and no one on this damned planet would listen to us unless we had one of their Rosettes. Everything was a horrible bloody mess and it shouldn't have been our job to sort it out.



Our plans for desertion came to a sudden halt when the psyker from the second team started freaking out. We hadn't known this psyker for very long, but he didn't seem like the type to randomly start screaming; so while Doc saw to him we all started looking out the windows and checking the sensors for anything warpy going on. The problem quickly became apparent: a pair of massive glowing lines shot in different directions across the ground under us. A second later this was followed by dozens of smaller lines which formed eldritch symbols all across the city below.

We weren't exactly geniuses, but it didn't take a bloody savant to see that this was some serious warp shit or that the two glowing lines were extending towards the other two cities that the Interrogator had ordered purged. Even though none of us were sure about what was going on here, everyone was pretty sure this was all her fault.

The situation was going to shit at incredible speed. The only thing we could think to do was to try and get our hands on one of the two remaining Rosettes and use it to tell everyone to stop being retarded. So we stayed on course for the third team's base and hoped that both Interrogators would

still be there.



While we flew everyone geared up for a fight; we weren't going to ask nicely and appeal to reason then be really surprised when they all sided with the hot chick over a bunch of scruffy guardsmen. We were going to hit them hard and let the Emperor sort them out. After this shit was over we could argue with any survivors while Doc tried to reattach their limbs.

We sold the remnants of the second team on our plan. The Guardswoman and the whimpering psyker would come with us while the arbite han-

dled the flier and kept an eye on with the two wounded clerics still chilling in the back. The plan was pretty simple: bust in, head for the two Interrogators, kill or subdue anyone in the way, and hopefully grab one of those damned Rosettes intact. It was going to be a tight and brutal fight; several well trained hostiles, a lot of walls of varying thickness, an enemy who knew the terrain better than us, severe consequences for failure, and to top it off it looked like the safe house was located halfway up a damned tower. Not only would it be a rough fight, we also had to figure out a way to get inside without running into an ambush. Good thing we had a flier.

Now, this flier didn't have any weapons, so we couldn't really use it for air support. It did have a nice amount of armor though, and the third team's safehouse had some nice big windows...

A few minutes later we finally forced open the flier's doors and started digging our way out of the pile of safety glass, wall fragments, and destroyed furniture we had created with our landing.

All things considered, it was incredibly lucky that we were the first ones out of the wreckage.

As we stumbled out of the crippled flier we saw several hostiles struggling to get free, and we took the chance to hit them with some of Doc's, now normal strength, tranqs. We congratulated ourselves on successfully breaching the perimeter without even killing any other Inquisitorial agents. Probably. Truly we were the pinnacle of professionalism.

After we finished patting ourselves on the back over our dynamic entry we formed up and started making our way deeper into the safehouse. We knew how to clear a building and had plenty of flash grenades, so we moved from room to room at a steady pace, flashing, sweeping, and securing. The first few rooms were all empty, but before long we ran into a pair of adepts who practically shit themselves when we flashed them. We clubbed them down, secured their hands and feet, and then asked them a few questions

about where exactly everyone was.

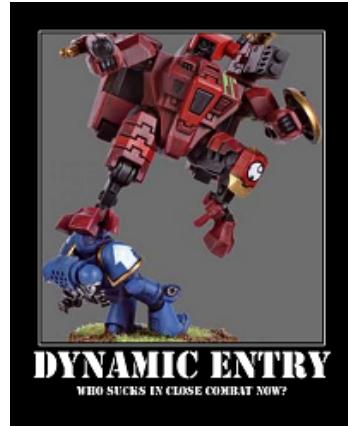
The adepts were actually very helpful. They made a few feeble attempts to defy us, but after Sarge hauled them both to a window and pointed out the glowing shit both adepts came around to our way of thinking. They also found Cutter's explanation of how the Three Strikes rule works with a chainsword very persuasive. They pointed us towards a set of rooms that belonged to the third team's Interrogator and confirmed that our former Interrogator was in there with him. We taped them to the wall and made our way towards the Interrogators; there was going to be a reckoning.

There are two good ways to clear a hostile building. You either want to hit hard and fast with several teams working together to take out the enemy before they concentrate their forces, or you want to move in stealthily and take out small groups of enemies while avoiding major ones. Unfortunately the small size of our team and our arrival via a crashing flier meant that these good options weren't really possible. We were stuck with the sorta-almost-ok option of just moving carefully and praying to the Emperor that we'd spot the inevitable ambush before it was sprung. We didn't.

We methodically worked our way towards the room where the Interrogators were supposed to be; we had it down to a science. Every room went the same: check the door, get into position, flash, storm, realize the room was empty, and move on to the next door. The lack of opposition was unsettling, and we were all on pins and needles when we got to a door that was sturdier than any of the others we'd seen. If the adepts had been telling the truth, both the Interrogators were inside.

We got into position and readied our weapons while Twitch checked the door for traps and quietly unlocked it. Sarge got a firm grip on the handle, cooked a flash, cracked the door open, and tossed it through. Before he even started to close the door the grenade bounced off something in mid air and sailed right back through. Sarge managed to get out an "OH SHI—" before the flash went off about eight inches in front of his face.

Sarge's shout triggered the bone deep reflexes that all guardsmen develop, and the rest of us managed to turn away. Everyone was still dazzled and



deafened, but at least we weren't completely blind. Also, our turn meant that we just happened to be looking in the right direction when the two agents dropped in through the ceiling. They landed on our flanks in perfect crossfire positions, and even though we were all deafened we could FEEL heavy boots pounding towards the door. Thank the Emperor that one of the agents came down next to Twitch and Cutter.

The agent who came down next to Twitch and Cutter was the social one we had gone through such trouble to rescue back at the party, and as he landed he raised a pair of autopistols. He had about a quarter second to look surprised before a full auto burst hit him in the chest and a chainsword hit him in the neck. That taught him to be ungrateful to his rescuers.



The second agent landed next to the guardswoman and psyker, neither of whom had reaction times as good as Twitch and Cutter. Before the guardswoman managed to raise her lasgun the agent landed a brutal kick on her head, raised his autogun, and opened fire on the psyker and Nubby. The poor bastard didn't have a chance to do anything, but his death gave Nubby the split second he needed. With weasley speed Nubby got behind the collapsing psyker and held him up like a shield while he sprayed the agent with wild las-fire. The Emperor was with Nubby: several of the unaimed shots hit the agent and Doc's followup salvo finished the job.

The entire fight had taken just a few seconds and the smoke from the flash was still fading as the second agent crumpled to the ground. The psyker was dead, the guardswoman was groggily cursing the dead agent, a barely conscious Sarge was lying on the floor, but the rest of us were okay. We had about two seconds to take stock of the situation before the door burst off its hinges and landed squarely on Sarge.

The door was followed by a pair of heavily armored arbites carrying shields and shock mauls. Shields raised, they stood right on top of door and looked really confused when they saw an entire squad of guardsmen facing them with weapons raised. There was a brief pause while the arbites realized that the agents were already dead, and we all stared at the feebly cursing lump being crushed under a heavy door and three hundred kilos of arbites. Then Cutter ran in with a scream and the fight was on.

Cutter did most of the work this time; there's just no good way to use a suppression shield to stop both las-fire and a maniac with a chainsword. The arbite on the left made a decent attempt at it though: he held off several strikes from Cutter and shots from Twitch and Doc while his buddy kept Nubby and the guardswoman from shooting him in the back. He couldn't keep it up though. A thrust from Cutter's sword nearly made it through, and the arbite parried the strike right into his buddy's back.

The wounded arbite staggered forward and removed over a hundred kilos of meat and armor from Sarge's back. With a roar of rage Sarge pushed himself upward and managed to unbalance the arbite that was still on top of him. We all seized the opportunity and several volleys of las-fire got past the arbites' shields, ending the fight.

While the rest of us restrained the badly wounded arbites and hauled them out of the way Sarge slowly pushed himself off the floor. With a pained groan he got his feet under him and lifted the reinforced door, complaining about its weight and cursing arbites in general as he did so. Right as Sarge managed to get upright, his curses were interrupted. A pair of bolt rounds came through the doorway and slammed into the remains of the door and his back.

The door took the brunt of the damage, but Sarge was thrown forwards and slammed into the wall head-first. This was the final straw, and Sarge slipped into unconsciousness as Doc hastily grabbed him and dragged him out of the line of fire. From inside the room we heard the third team's Interrogator yell at us to surrender in the name of the Holy Inquisition. A quick peek revealed that both he and the Bitch were holed up behind a makeshift barricade and had bolt pistols trained on the door.

So no shit, there we were, standing outside a room containing a pair of hostile and well armed Interrogators manning a prepared position, and with no noncom to tell us what to do. Up to now we had always looked to Sarge when the going



CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:



got tough, but he was out for the count. Twitch and Nubby immediately started arguing with each other, Cutter sat on one of the wounded arbites and worked on dislodging a piece of armor from his chainsword, Doc got Sarge comfortable in a corner, and the guardswoman stared at us like we were a bunch of retards.

Eventually Doc got tired of the guardswoman giving him the stink eye and decided that it was his duty as the only sane member of the squad to take charge. He put down his medkit, hefted his lasgun, crept as close to the doorway as was safe, and politely asked the third team's Interrogator if he'd consider surrendering the Bitch to us.

This resulted in a brief astonished silence and several bolt rounds sailing through the open doorway.

Doc was not deterred though. As the rest of the squad watched in disbelief he repeatedly tried to convince the two Interrogators to stand down. It really was something to see: Doc standing against the wall and calmly laying out our grievances and arguing Inquisitorial regulations. Especially considering that they would periodically fire bolt rounds at him. The crazy part was that he actually seemed to be making progress: the more he argued the more thoughtful the third team's Interrogator sounded and the more furious the Bitch sounded. The tipping point was when the guardswoman chimed in, confirmed Doc's story, and asked the Interrogator to look out the window at the glowing warpy stuff.

We heard him get up, walk to the window, and exclaim about it being a "three-fold sacrificial ritual." A second later we heard the distinctive sound of the Bitch's force sword, a meaty thunk, and the most sulfurous swearing to ever come out of such a beautiful mouth. The good news was that there was just one hostile Interrogator now.

Diplomacy wasn't going to work this time, though Nubby made a few attempts which only resulted in more swearing and bolt-fire. We wanted to just rush her, but our former Interrogator was a damned good markswoman and none of us were keen to try trading shots with her. We started trying other things: like grenades and blasting holes in the walls. Unfortunately we quickly discovered that the walls were too sturdy to blast through without collapsing the building, and she bounced every grenade back with her damned telekinesis. The best we could do was pop a smoke on our position and hope



it wafted towards her.

We were running out of options that wouldn't result in one of us getting shot when Doc remembered the arbites' shields. Two of us could charge in under smoke cover then try to flank her while the rest of the squad gave suppressing fire from the door. Hopefully the shields would hold long enough to get close to her and allow the rest of the team a chance to move forward. Cutter was an obvious choice for rushing in, but it surprised the hell out of us when Nubby volunteered to carry the other shield.

This behavior was very suspicious coming from Nubby. We reminded him that the Interrogator was a heretical super-bitch, but he just wouldn't listen. He insisted that she was a nice girl who just got stuck "runnin' wif a bad crowd." We pointed out that she tried to kill us all, he said that most of our superior officer had too. We pointed out that she had killed the other Interrogator, he said that we'd been planning to do that too so we shouldn't judge her for it. Finally Doc pointed out she had stabbed Cutter and would stab Nubby too if she got the chance. Nubby maintained that "lotsa people 'ave stabbed Cutter, I'm not worried, I fink she likes me deep down."

We gave up at this point and just gave him the damned shield. With any luck Cutter would get to her first and chop her head off before Nubby had a chance to be retarded.

We got ready, popped the smoke, and Nubby and Cutter ran towards opposite sides of the room. Cutter was faster by far, but right as he got close the Interrogator landed a grenade at his feet while staggering him with bolt rounds. Cutter leapt backwards in time but the blast still sent him and his shield flying across the room, Nubby took advantage of the distraction though. We all heard a clang as he clubbed the bolt pistol out of her hands, and another as he knocked her to the ground.

The rest of us started moving forwards, but stopped in sheer shock when we heard the Interrogator surrender to Nubby. She admitted that she had been forced to work against the Imperium by evil heretics who would kill her if she disobeyed. She just wanted to be safe.

We cleared the smoke and watched in amazement as he reached down



and helped her up, quietly telling her that he'd make sure it all worked out as he did so. He'd protect her from the "bad people," no one would ever hurt her again. Then in a fluid movement she drew her force sword, swung it in a circle, and bolted for large security door at the far end of the room as Nubby fell to the ground screaming.



Twitch and the guardswoman opened fire on her as she ran, but her damned shield held out just long enough for her to pass through the door and lock it behind her. Doc ran over to Nubby and found him lying a full meter from his legs; it was a bad wound but the cut had been across the thighs not the belly. Thinking fast, Doc put a tourniquet on both legs and started a blood transfusion. While he worked he lectured Nubby about the importance of critical thinking and listening to other peoples' advice.

Twitch, the guardswoman, and a moderately wounded Cutter walked over to the security door to see if they could get through it. To their surprise it wasn't an escape passage, it was a panic room. A little fiddling got the comm-screen working, and they were treated to the sight of a furious Interrogator sitting in the middle of a small rune covered room with a bloody sword in hand. A bit more poking let them find the transmit switch and Twitch formally placed the Interrogator under arrest and ordered her to turn over her Rosette and any bodily fluids she had stolen. She burst into hysterical laughter at this.

To everyone's surprise the Interrogator actually started monologuing once she had finished laughing. Her defeat by a band of dubiously competent guardsmen had apparently unhinged her. Her brethren had spent years preparing this ritual, the blood of innocents slain by their very protectors would fuel a warp-storm which would tear this entire blah blah blah, I'm a heretical-super-bitch, blah blah. When she started ranting about the glory of Chaos Twitch, Cutter, and the guardswoman quickly became bored and walked away from the intercom; leaving the infuriated Interrogator shouting about being able to watch us all die to the horrors of the warp before they claimed her.

While the guardswoman went to help Doc and Cutter guarded the security door, Twitch wandered over to the headless Interrogator. He poked the dead man with his lasgun, in the official Guard method for determining the ickyness of a corpse, then grudgingly started going through the man's pockets when the guardswoman shouted at him to stop being a pansy. Twitch found the Rosette pinned to the Interrogator's high collar. Well, most of it: the top quarter of the little device was feebly sparking in the puddle of blood

spreading from the severed head. Twitch got out his roll of duct-tape and went to work, but the end result didn't look very Inquisitorial. Also the data-jack was full of... fluids.

On the other side of the room Doc was finishing the field dressings and still giving Nubby shit. The subject had finally come around to how important it had been to get an Inquisitorial Rosette, and how Nubby had fucked it all up. Amazingly this got a response out of the semi-conscious Nubby.

↳ “Eh Doc, ‘choo remember how Sarge said I should stop goin’ fru peoples pockets? Well when I was helpin’ er up, I started finken about ‘ow dat fancy bracelet of ‘ers was so ‘portant. I figured dat if she was all being bossed round by chaos an’ such, she prob’ly shouldn’ be ‘lowd to keep it. So I nicked it while she was busy cuttin’ me legs off”

And just like that we won. The little shit’s kleptomania had saved us all. After years of telling Nubby to stop stealing people’s stuff, he grabbed the one thing that really mattered.

He was still an idiot though.

Doc grabbed the Rosette off of Nubby, tossed it to the guardswoman, and told her to comm to the PDF as fast as possible. We had completely destroyed the third team’s comm systems, but the flier’s vox was still intact. The arbiter and guardswoman started arguing with PDF officers and government officials from the wrecked cockpit. While they were trying to get the brass to see reason and stop feeding the giant sacrificial circle, seriously it was all glowing and shit, the rest of us decided what to do about the Interrogator.

She had really started freaking out when she realized the Rosette was missing, but the sight of Cutter chilling outside her door with his chainsword ready had convinced her to stay inside. We either needed to kill her or capture her; and as attractive as the first option was, it would be much easier to smooth things over with Oak if we were able to turn her over. The debate ended when Sarge pried himself up, staggered in, and ordered Twitch to weld the panic room shut.

With Sarge bossing us around we started getting shit done again.

Twitch blast welded the panic room shut, Doc went to help convince the PDF to stop being retarded, and Cutter started dragging all the wounded together for triage. Sarge and Nubby just sort of hung out and basked in the sound of the Interrogator’s outrage.



fix greentext



As the purges were called off the giant glowy runes faded away and the Interrogator's curses attained a whole new level of venom. That venom faded after Twitch found the panic room's air intake and sealed it shut. We all sat around and watched as she slowly ran out of fresh air and passed out, then we waited a bit longer. When Doc finally decided that she was either comatose or too hypoxic to cause trouble we cut open the doors, dragged her out, tranqued her, and left her in Doc's capable hands.

Sarge became the de facto Interrogator at this point. The second team had been reduced to two functional members, and what remained of the third team was being restrained by a few dozen rolls of duct tape until the situation could be explained to them. A flier was requisitioned and Sarge took the guardswoman and arbite to go sort everything out with the local authorities while everyone else stayed in the wrecked tower.

The situation was explained in broad terms. A cordon was to be put around all three cities and the surgical strikes in the sealed orders were carried out, but no more mass purges would be done until a fully certified Inquisitor ordered it. Sarge told all the brass and bigwigs to just sit tight and wait for the guard regiment to arrive with their senior Inquisitor; they'd be able to sort out the chaos rune bullshit and decide whether the genestealer cults warranted a full purge.

We used the Rosette to requisition a ride from the navy. We made sure everything was sort of stable before we left, but as far as we were concerned our mission now consisted of getting the Interrogator back to Oak as soon as possible.

The guardswoman who had helped us through the last battle decided to stay with the arbite, the two wounded clerics, and the rest of the third team. The local authorities needed the help of some people who knew how genestealers worked while they waited for the Inquisitor to show up.

After Sarge had requisitioned our ride home and convinced the navy we were serious people he handed the Rosette over to her; hopefully she would keep things from going all to shit before help arrived. As a sort of afterthought we formally invited her to hang with our regiment if she ever got back to base.

That done with we packed up our gear, wounded dumbass, and sedated Interrogator; then we got the hell off the planet.



Sedating a person for a long period of time doesn't really work. They tend to spontaneously die or just not wake up. This isn't an issue if you have a stasis pod, but that's not something you can get on most Imperial frigates so we had to improvise a little bit.

Letting the Interrogator sit in a cell was an invitation to disaster: it wouldn't be a day before she convinced some swabby to let her out, so we went the cold hearted medical route. Doc brushed up on his reading, got the senior ship's surgeon to lend him a hand, in this case hand means doing most of the procedure for him, and installed a shunt in the Interrogator's spine. This more or less paralyzed her from the nose down, and combined with a psychic damper it kept her from causing trouble.



She was kept in our private medbay next to Nubby. The force sword had done something nasty to Nubby's legs, it was going to take augmetic surgery to get them back, but he was remarkably cheerful about the whole thing. He spent most of the journey talking to the Interrogator and telling her stories of our adventures. Keeping her spirits up and all that. He thoroughly enjoyed having someone to talk to who didn't tell him to shut up or stop lying.

Doc taught the Interrogator how to communicate via blinking as a sort of experiment during the trip, but all she ever said was "kill me." Nubby thought this was needlessly grim and redoubled his efforts to cheer her up.

When we finally got back to Oak's spacefaring Inquisitorial school, Sarge handed over a report of the squad's adventures and refused to budge until a senior Interrogator confirmed that the report had been read and collected the Interrogator. Nubby was sad to see her go, and hoped that she would come visit after the Inquisition helped her with the "bad men."



We were all released to our quarters on Oak's ship; except for Nubby who got sent to the medical wing to start getting fitted for a pair of augmetic legs. We were finally able to relax in the company of our fellow guardsmen, but we weren't able to get into the proper spirit of R&R (see: Drunk) since we knew that Oak would call us up for a debriefing the moment we started drinking. He didn't keep us waiting long though: before the week was over we were summoned to his office to give a full report.

Sarge and Doc did their best to explain everything while Twitch and Cutter kept their damned mouths shut, and to our surprise Oak believed

every word. He questioned a few things and asked for clarification several times, but he believed every bloody word we said. At the end of the debriefing he told us the Interrogator was being turned over to the Ordos Malleus for interrogation, and we were never to speak of her again. This suited us fine and we all started congratulating ourselves on a job well done, then he offered Sarge the rank of Interrogator and a chance to advance to full Inquisitor.

The entire squad went to bat for Sarge when we heard this.



Cutter expressed his lack of faith in Sarge's combat ability. Twitch pointed out his lack of proper Inquisitorial suspicion. Doc raised the question of Sarge's overall physical fitness and mental fortitude, and from his comm link in the medbay Nubby raised the question of Sarge's lack of ethics and history of petty theft. None of us could condone the elevation of such a pitiful specimen to the rank of Interrogator.

It would dishonor the entire Inquisition. In the face of all these perfectly valid arguments Sarge regretfully declined Oak's offer; he just wasn't good enough to be an Interrogator, so he'd have to settle for being a simple sergeant.

A very bemused Oak acquiesced to Sarge's rejection, if the man's best friends didn't think he was interrogator material that was the end of it. So he finished the debriefing and sent us on our way. We went and drank until we puked, and then puked until we passed out. Except for Nubby, he was stuck in medbay eating and drinking nothing but nutritionally balanced meals, poor little bugger.

Our R&R binge lasted for quite a while, but eventually it came to an end. We geared up for our next mission, but unfortunately Nubby was still struggling with his augmetic legs. Learning to walk on artificial legs is a long and arduous process which not everyone can master, but Nubby had faith and assured us that he'd keep at it while we went on our next mission. Luckily, there was an open post in the quartermaster's department on the ship. It would be the perfect job for him while he got his feet under him as it were.

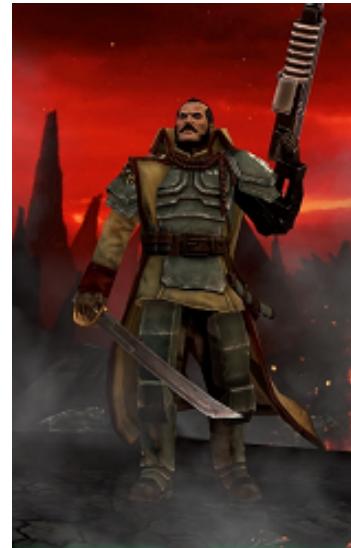
We left the medbay after that discussion with heavy hearts. None of us had exactly *liked* Nubby, but we couldn't imagine deploying without him. Where the hell would we get our ammo from? He always just seemed to have fresh packs for us.

As we got back to our barracks we were greeted by a familiar voice. Sitting in the middle of the room was the Rupert, complete with a shiny augmetic arm and Alfred at his back. He was chatting with Crisp, one of the few

surviving flamer experts in the regiment, and seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

In a jolly voice he invited us over and told us he wanted our help on a “Little trip down to the colonies to sort out a spot of theological trouble.” According to him it was, “Positively benighted down there not a single illuminated thinker on the whole planet, no one to point them towards the light of the Emperor. You might call it a case of Dark Heresy, wot wot?”

We gathered up our kits and followed him out. After all, we knew there were worse Interrogators out there...



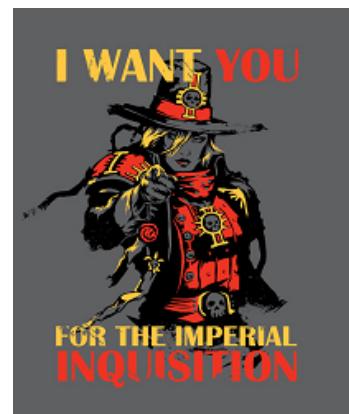
Chapter 6

Heretic Purgung

This is the ongoing tale of a bunch of guardsmen who got drafted into the Inquisition after their regiment was reduced to a mere 37 men by a combination of Orks, Heretics, more Orks, Tyranids and, of course, their own leadership. Currently they work for an Inquisitor that is the 40k equivalent of Professor Oak, he provides teams and missions to Interrogators who need to get some leadership experience before becoming full Inquisitors. The lot of these guardsmen is rather thankless, they are matched up with five other less combat focused team members, assigned to an Interrogator, and sent out to fight the enemies of the Imperium.

The squad has just boarded the shuttle to their next mission behind the familiar forms of the Interrogator better known as 'the Rupert', and his manservant Alfred. As they enter the shuttle's conference room the Interrogator introduces the guardsmen to the rest of the team and begins regaling everyone with the story of his previous mission with the squad. An elderly woman, a small weasley man, a cleric, and a tall man in a duster are listening to the Rupert's tale with a mixture of confusion and disbelief.

Sarge is listening to the Rupert and occasionally wincing and muttering corrections when enthusiasm gets the better of memory. Twitch has backed himself into a corner and is glaring at his new teammates while he fiddles with a proximity mine. Doc is helping Alfred serve tea and trying to keep Cutter out of the way as the melee specialist wolfs down snacks. The squad's new member, the flame trooper Crisp, is laughing heartily at the Interrogator's



story while thumping an uncomfortable looking cleric on the back. As they do all this the squad vaguely wonders what the Rupert had meant by 'theological trouble'.



So no shit there we were, on our way to a planet that had separated from the Imperium for a few centuries to ask the locals why they had turned away from light of the God Emperor. This was not something we were even remotely qualified for, so we were all a little confused about why we had been sent. Technically rooting out Heresy is what the Inquisition is all about, but this was an entire planet that had forgotten the Imperial Creed, not some cult of daemon worshipers hiding in the sewers. We all knew this

was the sort of shit the Ecclesiarchy was made for, none of us were happy with the idea that we might be edging in on their turf.

After the Rupert finished his little story and had his tea, Sarge decided it was time to find out just what sort of shitstorm we were heading into. In his typical rambling fashion our Interrogator told us the tale of Ork invasions, Imperial retreats, scorched earth tactics, and plucky survivors. We dismissed most of it as bullshit, but the core of the matter seemed to be that a few hundred years ago a major Waaagh had cut through the sector forcing a general retreat. As part of this retreat the Imperium had strategically abandoned a planet and nuked it on the way out to keep the Orks off it. Now that we were finally pushing back the Orks and the radiation was fading, that planet was going to be integrated back into the Imperium. The first step of this process involved inducting as many of the survivors as possible into the Guard. These people were practically deathworlders after all and the Guard can always use more deathworlders.

The only problem was that these yokels didn't Praise the Emperor and you can't have men like that in the Guard. So the Ecclesiarchy was called in and was doing its best to spread the faith and stamp out the more heretical local religions. Something they ran into spooked them though, so now we were coming in to see just how heretical these people were.

To no ones surprise our Interrogator was an old family friend of our ship's captain, so instead of being treated as an uppity form of cargo we were welcomed as honored guests and given real quarters. It was nice travelling with the Rupert, a guardsman can sleep anywhere but there's something to be said for a bed with actual sheets. We settled into our quarters, got the perimeter defenses up, and got to know the rest of the team.

Nubby's replacement in the squad was Crisp, a big jolly flamer expert who the rest of us found vaguely unsettling. Just to be clear, we all liked Crisp; he had been the best damned cook in the regiment, was always laughing and joking, and could put a stream of burning promethium through the firing slits of an oncoming tank like it was nothing. He hadn't taken the regiment's death well though, he had been everyone's friend and all the deaths hit him hard.

He started losing weight and stopped laughing after he joined the Inquisition and from what we heard his squad's missions had been especially horrific. Every time we saw him between deployments he had looked worse and worse. None of us had expected him to last much longer, but something had changed on his last mission. He was eating and joking again and loved trading stories with the Rupert, it was just that his jokes didn't always make sense and his smile was a bit too wide. We'd all seen guardsmen bend under pressure, and both Twitch and Cutter had practically snapped, but Crisp's fixed smile and slightly twisted humor worried the rest of us.

The rest of the team was less disturbing than Crisp. The Rupert and Alfred were the same as we remembered then, except for the masterwork augmetic that had replaced the Rupert's charred stump of an arm. Our Interrogator had hand-picked several experts for this mission in addition to us guardsmen. For working with the locals there was an Arbite who had experience keeping the peace on feral and frontier worlds as well as a greasy man who had served as a translator and negotiator on a Rogue Trader. The religious investigation would be aided by a cleric who had worked as a missionary for several years and a tiny old woman of an adept who knew just about everything; we liked her, she didn't take shit off anybody and delighted in making Doc and Alfred uncomfortable.

We didn't even bother trying to keep ourselves walled off from the rest of the team, after our last mission with the Rupert we knew that he wouldn't let us get away with it. We suffered through lectures on the Imperial creed and acceptable deviations from the cleric and adept, basic language lessons from the greaseball and adept, and lessons on frontier law from the arbite and, of course, the adept. It was like being back in school, right down to the little old lady hitting us when we didn't pay attention.



The whole experience was rather degrading, aside from Doc none of us were cut out for higher learning, we were guardsmen not bloody diplomats. We couldn't duck out of it though, so we spent our trip like a bunch of officer cadets; busting our asses in PT and being force-fed trivia by frustrated teachers all day, listening to the ramblings of an old warhorse in the evening, and sleeping like the dead all night. The trip slowly continued and we suffered, but at least we knew that we'd be ready for anything the mission threw at us, compared to this torture purging a bunch of heretics would be a walk in the park.

We made planetfall at the fortified camp that the surveyors were using as their main shuttleport. The place was within spitting distance of one of the irradiated cities and it was disconcerting to see the towers standing completely motionless and silent in the distance. The various leaders of the expedition came out to greet us and for a change everyone seemed happy to see Inquisition, it was weird.

We spent the next few days wining and dining with Munitorum, Ecclesiarchy, Administratum, and Mechanicus officials of varying degrees of unpleasantness. We managed not to thoroughly embarrass ourselves, but for some reason none of the survey's leaders was willing to tell us the exact reason that we had been summoned. We got a lot of vague and contradictory information, but everyone seemed to have a political agenda here and wanted to make sure we'd act in their interest before they told us anything useful. We couldn't even find the Pontifex who had asked for our help, apparently he'd gone off to negotiate with some local priests and hadn't come back yet. We didn't have time for this shit so we decided to stop pussyfooting around and find someone who didn't have their head stuck up their ass.

While the Rupert and Alfred kept the obnoxious big wigs busy while we split into pairs found the various assistants and secretaries that did the actual work, then shook them down for information. Doc and the Adept talked to the Mechanicus while the Arbitre and the Greaseball asked the Administratum some questions. The cogboys and pencil pushers didn't have anything useful for us; just a lot of junk about radiation levels, incoming colonists, recovering biospheres, and irradiated manufactorums. The rest of the team had better luck getting useful intel, except for Twitch who was left in base because he was still banned from investigating anything ever again.



Sarge and Cutter managed to find a very helpful lad working in the Munitorum who knew all about the locals. Apparently they were the hardest bastards this side of catachan, had a very clear memory of who nuked them into the stone-age, and had been spending the last few hundred years rebuilding their civilization and fighting with the remnants of the Orkish invasion. They had built several small cities, mostly over the underground bunkers that had sheltered their forefathers, which they defended with a mixture of primitive weaponry and scavenged Imperial tech. The locals weren't overtly hostile towards the Imperium, since most of them saw re-assimilation as a great improvement over their current living conditions, but they had abandoned the Imperial faith and developed about fifty different religions of their own.



Crisp in the Cleric, who were paired up for obvious reasons, had to search the entire Ecclesiarchy camp before they found someone useful, a Sister Dilaogous who had been keeping track of everything. According to her the Ecclesiarchy had been spreading the Imperial Creed with a fair degree of success before shit went south. In a single night nearly all of the active missionaries had been attacked by assassins or angry mobs, but Ministorum missionaries are tough bastards and several of them killed their attackers and made their escape. In response to these attacks a few squads of Sisters of Battle were deployed to sort things out, a little examination of the deceased assassins led them to one of the smaller religions near an irradiated city. The sisters went in, some serious shit went down, and about half the sisters came back out. They declared the place purged then put it under quarantine and called for us.

None of this was exactly good news, but at least we knew the gist of what was going on and where to go next. A flier was requisitioned and we all headed out to talk to the sisters.

We geared up for a fight as we flew, whatever the sisters had run into had chewed them up pretty badly and we weren't going to take their word it was dead. We landed right at the edge of one of the nuked cities, we were close enough that all of us had to wear rebreathers and Doc warned us not to stay too long if we ever wanted to have children. The sisters had set up a perimeter around a large ruined building and set up a field barracks, as we approached a senior sister came out and the Rupert flashed his rosette.

The sister superior took us towards the ruined building and filled us in as we walked. She had been sent here with three squads to purge the temple, they had rolled over the guards and busted down the door in seconds. They

had expected to find cultists and fanatics inside, they hadn't expected a horde of mutants backed up by psykers. You gotta give the sisters credit for sheer bloody perseverance, they stood their ground and killed them all, taking fifty percent casualties in the process but completing the objective. Poor, dumb, zealots, that sort of shit is what the Emperor gave us indirect fire support for.

The reason we were called was apparent the second we entered the building. Sitting on the wall behind the altar, glowing like a big glowy thing, was a Mark of Tzeentch. Underneath it were the much smaller marks of Nurgle, Khorne, and Slaanesh and above it was the symbol of Chaos Undivided. Sarge started swearing under his breath.



Our training had been fairly clear on what to do in this sort of situation, we asked the Adept and the Cleric to take a look while the rest of us averted our eyes. When they were done Crisp moved forward and drenched the whole thing in burning promethium while Twitch prepped a det-pack. The sister superior hit Crisp in the side with a flying tackle a second before a tentacle whipped out of the burning mark and speared the spot where he'd been standing. As we watched a dozen more tentacles squirmed out and the sister screamed at us to run or fight. We chose both.

We all backpedaled madly while pouring a steady stream of lasfire into the writhing mass, but the tentacles were emerging faster than we could shoot them. The Interrogator's and the Sister's bolters were having the best effect so it was no surprise that several of the larger tentacles slashed out at them. The Rupert drew his sword and parried the ones aimed at him, but the sister was knocked to the ground and a clawed tentacle seized her by the leg. Cutter saw his chance and started hacking at the limb dragging her away while Crisp seized her by the arms and pulled her to safety.

The tentacles were all focused on Cutter and the Rupert now, who were both carving off any limb that came near them. They were actually starting to push forward and it was a fair bet they could take the thing on and win, but we didn't feel like taking the risk so we all popped frags. The grenade barrage severed the tentacles at the base and gave both Cutter and the Rupert time to fall back to the rest of us. We all slowly backed to the doorway as the tentacles regrew and vainly tried to reach us. When we all had exited the mass withdrew into the mark which resumed glowing.



None of us had any desire to go back into the temple, but the chaos marks couldn't really be left there. The Rupert told Sarge to take the squad and figure out a way to get rid of them while the rest of the team took the wounded sister superior to her barracks. As they walked into the large tent that undoubtedly contained several hot chicks changing out of their hot, sweaty armor, we stood around and argued about how to deal with a tentacle daemon. There's no bloody justice.

Several of us were in favor of calling in an orbital strike, what's the point of being in the Inquisition if you can't go completely overkill? Sarge disagreed though, so we all took a walk around to the back side of the temple. Sarge proposed that we slap detpacks onto the back of the wall with the marks, but Twitch raised concerns about getting speared through the brickwork while the charges we planted. These were valid points, so while Twitch prepped several detpacks with adhesive Sarge had the rest of us root around in the rubble for any pipes or beams we could get our hands on, then we taped them together.

Imagine, if you will, a forty foot pole made of taped together scrap metal. Now imagine there's a detpack stuck to one end of it and five sweating guardsmen holding up the other end, who knows what the sisters watching the perimeter thought of us. It worked though, mostly. We stuck five detpacks to the back wall of the temple, right behind where the mark was, and only dropped two of them on the ground. We all fell back to a safe distance, took



cover and hit the detonator.

When we peeked out of cover the wall was gone, along with the marks and half the temple. With our heads held high we headed to the barracks to inform the Interrogator, hoping against hope that there might still be some hot undressed chicks inside. Unfortunately there weren't any half-naked sisters in the barracks when we got there, but we did get to see Doc have a heart attack.



Well it wasn't really a heart attack, it was damned close though. The first thing we saw when we entered was the sister superior lying on a table as a sister hospitaller treated her bloody leg. The second Doc laid eyes on the Hospitaller he started hyperventilating and tried to hide behind Sarge, unfortunately guard-issue rebreathers aren't exactly quiet devices. All conversation in the tent was halted by what sounded like a metal grate being attacked with a pushbroom.

Everyone, including the wounded sister superior, turned to face Doc who started to turn an alarming shade of crimson and claw at his mask. Crisp and the old Adept broke into gales laughter as the Hospitaller ran over to see what was wrong

with Doc, only Sarge's assurance that everything was fine saved the poor boy from terminal embarrassment. The rest of us removed our masks then Sarge, grinning like a schoolboy, gave a report to the Rupert that was occasionally interrupted by inexplicable coughing fits, these usually happened when he looked at Doc.

Matters were not helped by both the Adept and Crisp making dirty jokes about 'playing doctor' in the background.



Eventually Sarge finished explaining our solution to the daemon problem and introduced the rest of the team to the Hospitaller we had met on our first mission. When the novelty of teasing Doc had worn off and he'd regained his composure the embarrassed medic went over to help patch up the sister superior's leg. While he did this the rest of us argued about just what the hell was going on on this planet.

We knew the planet was filled with mundane heresy and had expected to have to deal with some minor daemon cults, but this had been a full blown Tzeentchian temple right down to the arcane

symbols, horrific mutants, and tentacle monsters. On top of that the other chaos symbols seemed to suggest that each of the gods had a cult on this world and they were all working together in some way. It was a wonder that the planet hadn't been sucked into the warp or something.

The elderly Adept suggested tracking the other cults down and purging them, our squad was in favor of sitting tight and calling for reinforcements, and the Cleric wanted to exterminate the planet on general principle. Eventually the Rupert settled the matter in the Adept's favor causing the Cleric to storm out of the tent while the Adept cackled and made obscene gestures at his back. We weren't exactly in favor of this plan, but we had expected it; the Rupert wasn't the sort of man to back down from a challenge.

Of course finding the cults wouldn't be easy. These were heretics hiding from the Imperium, it's not like they advertised and gave out pamphlets. It would take tireless searching, careful examination of evidence, and brilliant deduction to find the hidden temples; it was a near impossible task. We had to try though, so we all went with the arbiter to search the remains of the temple for clues while the rest of the team questioned the sisters.

Within five minutes Crisp found a pamphlet advertising the 'Pit of Carnal Pleasures and Daemonic Delights' sitting on a table in the temple.

The pamphlet and its intriguing contents was handed over to the Adept and Cleric for inspection. They confirmed that this was almost certainly the Slaaneshi cult we were looking for, so we collected our gear and got ready to pay the place a visit. The sisters were also getting ready to leave as well, they'd shown us the marks and the temple was pretty much wrecked so the perimeter was no longer necessary. They were going to go assist the Pontifex in his negotiations with one of the local religious orders, but they gave us their contact code so we could vox them if we needed backup. The Adept congratulated Doc on getting the pretty girl's number.

The pamphlet pointed us towards a bunker underneath one of the larger towns that had been built by the survivors. By the wastelanders' standards this



was a rich settlement, it was a major local trade hub and had a fair sized standing army to keep things civil. There'd been some Imperial contact and trade with the local nobility, so we probably wouldn't be shot on sight, but we didn't think they'd be keen on us purging the bunker. The Rupert was all for marching in, declaring our authority, and having the local nobs aid us in our mission. The rest of us thought this sounded like a good way to get ourselves killed.

We argued the point with him and eventually came to a compromise; the Rupert and a few others would fly in and be diplomatic while the rest of the team would come in disguised and check out the possible cult. The plan called for the Rupert to make friends and slowly work the town's leaders up to the idea of helping us over a few days, if we ran into anything chaotic we'd call for him and he'd convince the locals to help us. None of the squad had any faith in his ability to convince the wastelanders to side with us, so we had absolutely no intention of calling him for anything short of a Bloodthirster.



We stopped at a small tradepost and exchanged a few of our surplus weapons for sets of local clothing and armor. The Arbite and the Greaseball helped get us into disguise and prepped us on local slang and customs, then we split up a few hours walk outside town. The diplomatic team consisted of the Rupert and Alfred as well as the Greaseball and the Cleric, they had a full spectrum of diplomatic skills at their disposal and the two teammates who most annoyed us were out of our hair.

As the rest of us started the long hike to the town behind the Arbite we speculated on what sort of trouble the diplomatic team would get into. Twitch thought they were all going to be sacrificed to the dark gods, Crisp painted some rather scandalous scenarios involving the Greaseball that made us rather uncomfortable just hearing about, and the rest of us had our money on the Rupert challenging someone to a duel. The Adept had a few interesting theories of her own, but the Arbite ignored us and muttered to himself about 'standards' and 'professionalism'.

The Arbite talked us through the town's gates as mercenary escorts for the Adept, between our scrap armor and well used weaponry we certainly looked the part. There was a bit of an argument over bringing Crisp's flamer inside the settlement, a quick bribe and a close look at Cutter's chainsword sorted that out though. Once inside it was damned easy to find the 'Pit of Carnal Pleasures and Daemonic Delights', apparently it was the major attraction around here. Unfortunately it was a lot harder to get into than to

find, several armed guards were stationed around the large vault door that served as the entrance to the bunker and they refused to let us in with our weapons.

We rented a room for the night and tried to figure out a way into the Pit without abandoning our weapons or bringing the entire settlement down on us. None of us were stealthy enough to sneak in, we couldn't find any alternate entrances, and the guards were notoriously unbribable; the only thing we could think of was trying to hide our weapons inside our clothing, but after our previous meeting with the guards they were sure to search us. We agonized over this for several hours before the Adept came to our rescue, she was sure she could carry handguns for each of us past the guards along with any small gadgets we needed.

The next evening we returned to the Pit, not as individual customers, but as escorts for the Adept. The guards did a double-take at this, their usual clientele probably didn't include tiny old women and nothing could have prepared them for how the Adept acted. We knew the Adept was feisty and we had all heard her tease Doc, but the things that came out of her mouth had us standing slackjawed. We were all searched for weapons and cleared without incident (we had searched Twitch ourselves earlier just to be sure), leaving just the Adept in her robes. She loudly cackled and demanded that the guards search her 'thoroughly' and started fumbling with the clasp as we all watched in horror. The guards practically shoved her inside and actually closed the vault door behind us. We heard gagging sounds from outside the hatch.

Inside the bunker there was just a large freight elevator flanked by an open stairway leading down into the depths. As we rode down Crisp complimented the Adept on getting us past the slaaneshi cultists.

Oh those weren't slaaneshi cultists. They weren't? No just some dumb muscle. I'm honestly a little disappointed, I had this whole plan worked out for getting past them. What plan was that? Well first I was going to seduce them all...

fix greentext

Crisp fell over laughing while the rest of us tried not to vomit.

The Adept fished our weapons and emergency gadgets out of her robes and we all tried not to notice how warm they were as we stashed them inside our own clothing. The freight elevator rumbled to a stop in a large dimly lit room, we cautiously exited and took stock of the situation. There was almost no light, only one door, and the walls and ceiling above us seemed



to have some sort of fresco painted on them. Keeping our hands near our concealed weapons, we slowly headed for the only door we could see. As we reached the center of the room a pair of figures came through the door and dozens of lights illuminated the pictures around us.



We had had some concerns about whether this was a slaaneshi cult when the Adept told us the guards weren't cultists, but what we saw painted in that room put those doubts to rest. Scenes of debauchery and sadism adorned every surface, each one more vile and heretical than the last. We all stopped and stared, completely ignoring the two figures approaching us.

Sarge stood bolt upright and held completely still while Twitch crouched on the floor muttering to himself and Doc stared at his feet and blushed like a schoolgirl. Both Crisp and the Adept examined the images like art critics and Cutter just didn't get it. The arbite was lying on the floor praying, the pussy.

We were shaken out of our trance by two of voices speaking to us in perfect harmony. A pair of naked women were walking towards us, smiling and asking what we truly desired in our hearts. Down on the floor we heard the Arbite start crying. Both of them were supernaturally beautiful and sounded like angels, a single word from either of them could convince a man to kill his entire family.

But we'd all been through song and dance before. The second they came within arms reach Cutter buried his knife in one woman's neck and a volley of silenced pistol fire slammed into the other. These two didn't have shit on our last Interrogator, the bitch.

This quick burst of violence was followed by a short whispered debate about what to do next. We had a few handguns, a couple knives, a handful of detpacks, and a whole bunker full of cultists to deal with. This is where your typical Inquisition strike force would have ventured into the temple and purged the entire place using nothing but some silenced handguns and their wits. We did not decide to do this, we preferred life.

The elevator wouldn't budge, but the Adept refused to take the stairs, so we all got into firing positions around Twitch while he fiddled with the control console. We were all on edge, any second the rest of the temple would notice the two missing cultists and come for us. Our nerves were not helped by Crisp pointing out a picture of a man being pierced by what appeared to be an obscene power weapon or the Adept pointing out a few women who looked like Doc's 'ladyfriend'.

The horde of deranged cultists never came though, Twitch bypassed the lock on the elevator relatively quickly and we all piled on. As we rode up we took the few detpacks we had brought and stuck them to the shaft's walls; the general theory was to call in an orbital strike when we got clear, but it wouldn't do to have anyone follow us. We reached the vault doors without any alarms going off and used the built in comm system to nicely ask the guards to let us out.

As we came out of the doors the guards all caught site of the Adept and took a step back, we left the building without incident. As soon as we were clear we commed the diplomatic team and sprinted for the rented rooms where we had stashed our weapons. We grabbed our gear, headed for the parked flier, and got aboard right as Twitch's detpacks went off.

We could hear small arms fire plinking off the belly of the flier as we lifted into the air and got the hell away from there.

The Rupert was a little cross about the whole thing. He'd been working hard at winning the locals over and had expected a report on our progress and a request for a local strike team, not a message to drop everything and evacuate. According to him the local baron and his cronies were "Fine, upstanding gentlemen eager to mend fences with the Imperium and perfectly willing to lend us some lads who could keep their gobs shut". Alfred silently shook his head in the background and did his best to indicate that the 'gentlemen' would have had us all killed, looted, and possibly eaten.

Regardless of how well the Rupert had actually been doing at winning the locals over, setting off a few detpacks in their primary tourist attraction had definitely pissed them off. The Interrogator complained bitterly about all of his diplomatic work being wasted and how hard it would be to get this town back on good terms with the Imperium, our request for an orbital strike on the bunker didn't improve his mood. We got quite the lecture about a soldier's responsibility to face danger and protect civilians; if it weren't for the steady hail of small arms fire that bounced off the belly of our flier as we took off he would have probably ordered us all back down there.



With Alfred's help Sarge managed to finally calm the Rupert down and convince him to call in the strike. As we flew back to the surveyor's camp we saw a series of flashes in the distance and a confirmation was voxed in from one of the frigates patrolling the system. It was a shame they we didn't have any plans for the bunker, just an estimate on the depth and direction from the entrance shaft, they wound up burning down twice as far as we estimated and walked their lance battery in a pretty wide area to be sure the bunker was wrecked. The barrage also wiped out half the town, the Rupert was a bit sore about that.

When we landed back at base the Interrogator went off to work on damage control. As he left he was muttering to himself about the political impact of calling in lance strikes on the survivors of a planet wide orbital bombardment. We felt a little bad about that, but hey, we were still alive and mostly sane. We all went to grab some food and sleep, then got together to figure out what the hell to do next.



Cutter didn't do this lame detective stuff and Doc knew when he was out of his depth, they both wanted to call in some help. Crisp put forward the rather disturbing plan of lightly bombarding all the mapped settlements and seeing if any fought back with daemons or sorcery. He laughed afterwards, so it was probably a joke, probably. Twitch thought the entire planet was one massive cult and we needed to call in the Inquisition, when we pointed out that WE were the Inquisition he suggested that we call the "double Inquisition. The Inquisition that inquisits the Inquisition." We put that down as another vote for calling in reinforcements. Sarge wouldn't have any of that though, he was certain the Rupert wouldn't call for help unless things got absolutely dire, so he wouldn't embarrass the whole team by asking until we had exhausted all available options.

The only major source of clues we could think of has just been turned to a pit of slag and glass, this just left talking to people and searching through records. Neither of these were our strong suit, so we just dumped that job on the rest of the team. They quickly established that while most of the surveyors didn't know anything useful, the Ecclesiarchy scribes and that one sister dialogus had records on all the local religions. While the Adept and the rest poured through the piles of tedious documentation, we did minimal social legwork needed to keep the Rupert happy and tried to stay out of everyone's way. Unfortunately bored guardsmen have a way of getting into trouble.

Twitch kept to himself and did his usual thing while Sarge tried to keep

everyone out of trouble and in shape. Crisp and Cutter spent their time cooking for the camp and hitting innocent training dummies with a sword respectively. Doc spent more and more time using the base's long range secure vox to talk to the Hospitaller while she helped the sisters with whatever they were doing, it was probably a grievous misuse of his inquisitorial authority. Then one night he asked us if we wanted to go down and lend the sisters a hand, apparently there was some minor trouble at one of the larger settlements and having some big strong men around would make things so much better. We all snickered at this lame excuse and packed our bags.

It was remarkably easy to get the Rupert to let us off the hook, we weren't really doing anything productive at base and "liaising with the Ecclesiarchy" sounded like something we should be doing. He sent us off with his blessing on a transport that was taking supplies out to the sisters, we didn't even bother informing the rest of the team, Doc would have died of embarrassment if we had told the Adept.

We were all ready to do our duty as fellow soldiers and wingmen, we would valiantly throw ourselves on whatever psychotic battle nuns were in the area while Doc went in for the kill. A few hours later we were all in full biohazard suits acting as nurses in a feral world plague ward. Thanks Doc.

In retrospect we really should have looked more closely at the crates we had been sitting on during the flight, every one of them was filled with medical supplies or building materials. The moment the transport landed the Hospitaller and a few of her friends started bossing us around. They used that medical corpsman tone of voice that every guardsmen is trained to obey, we went from highly trained Inquisition agents to obedient grunts in seconds. Before any of us could figure out what was going on we'd built a field hospital, been crammed into biohazard suits, and were being ordered around by a bunch of scary doctor women.

The field hospital was actually pretty large, it wasn't just us and the medical sisters, there were several ecclesiarchy doctors and workers running around too. We weren't really expected to help with the medical procedures, thank the Emperor, instead we were moving bodies and equipment around



and 'calming down' some of the less happy patients. We could see why they wanted a few guardsmen around, some of the locals were very unhappy about their treatment for some reason, we all got a few bruises keeping them still and Twitch nearly lost a finger to a biter.

The day crawled on and we toiled and fought with angry patients while Doc worked shoulder to shoulder with the Hospitaller. We all gave him dirty looks every chance we could get, but he didn't seem to notice. Eventually there was a lull in the flow of patients and all of us except for Doc stepped out for minute. What we saw surprised the hell out of us, the field where discharged patients were being laid was filled with empty spots, the pile of corpses behind the hospital had grown unbelievably large, and the sisters of battle were having trouble holding back a very angry mob.

It occurred to us that there were probably more important things we should be doing than helping Doc get some.



We ran back inside, grabbed Doc and the Hospitaller and asked them just what the hell was going on here. The Hospitaller explained that during their mission here she had encountered several people showing signs of highly virulent, but curable, diseases. She had immediately called in all available personnel to contain the sickness and save as many people as possible. The sheer number of locals infected was staggering though, as was the variety of diseases afflicting them, it was amazing that there were any still alive.

Doc claimed to have encountered over fifty different diseases throughout the day, the patient he was currently working on had no less than ten of them, including 'rock lung', 'green death', and 'grox pox' all of which should have been instantly fatal. The Hospitaller helpfully pointed out that 'grox pox' was actually a disease that afflicted grox not humans, but confirmed that there was no way the patient should be alive much less sitting up and cheerfully scratching his boils.

While Crisp laughed about the 'grox pox' a heavily blushing Doc administered the drug cocktail that would suppress the patient's numerous diseases, we all watched in horror as the man fell over twitching and screaming. Doc muttered something about not being such a baby, called for a stretcher, and moved on to the next patient. Sarge pondered the fact the squad's medical officer had not only diagnosed a human with a livestock disease, but also didn't see anything strange about his cure leaving the patient in much worse shape. He vaguely wondered if all the interrogators and other inquisitorial agents who had dismissed the squad as a bunch of bumbling idiots didn't have a point.

Sarge's reverie lasted about a second, then he smacked Doc upside the head and bawled him out for not connecting any of this with the fact that there was Nurgle cult somewhere on the planet.

The reaming was interrupted by the sound of bolter-fire from outside, we all grabbed our weapons and rushed out to see what was going down. Either the mob or the sisters doing crowd control had snapped, the sister superior and her squads were all pouring bolter fire into an onrushing tide of angry locals. It should have been over quickly, the first few ranks of angry civvies should have been mowed down and everyone else should have remembered urgent appointments elsewhere.

They didn't stop coming though, every one of them the sisters shot was simply trampled down as the mob pressed forward baying for blood.

If they had been guardsmen with lasguns things might have gone poorly for the sisters, but a bolter packs a bit more punch and power armor tends to shrug off little things like thrown bricks or small arms fire. They held position and mowed down wave after wave of what we were beginning to suspect were nurglite cultists. We watched them for a while, purely to make sure they didn't need our help, not because we found a bunch of hot chicks holding the line to be incredibly sexy or anything, then our attention was grabbed by screams coming from the direction of the discharged patients.

Several of the patients were rising to their feet and staggering towards the hospital or the sisters. As we watched one of the ecclesiarchy workers tried to get a patient to lie back down, the patient responded by tackling to the ground and tearing at the poor man's biohazard suit with oozing hands. We promptly shot the cultist off of him and Sarge loudly ordered everyone who wanted to live to lie down and hold still. Something like two of them did, the rest kept coming, so we started shooting them all. Doc and the Hospitaller were not very happy about how we were solving the problem.

The cultists were surprisingly durable, nothing short of a headshot or dismemberment seemed to keep them down, so we took our time and went for kill shots while Cutter and Crisp kept them from getting too close. These poor suckers didn't have anything on tyranids or orks, we finished them off without them laying a hand on us, but a few of the ecclesiarchy buys had been caught in the middle of them. We got most of them out alive though, except the one Twitch accidentally shot, but no one besides us saw that so it didn't really count.

Once the internal threat was handled we turned our attention towards securing the perimeter and calling for backup. The cultists outside were still



trying to get past the sisters, but the fact that their dead completely choked the main entrance kept them to a trickle. Twitch brought the sisters some more ammo and went to work on the rest of the perimeter while Cutter and Crisp handled the corpses inside the compound. It was sort of disturbing watching them pile up the bodies and roast them in a massive bonfire, especially since Crisp kept cracking up over something.

Doc and the Hospitaller were put in charge the few patients who hadn't tried to kill us. Doc seemed a little depressed over the whole thing, which was understandable, as first dates go it really left a lot to be desired. Once Sarge was sure everyone was doing something productive he got on the vox and contacted the rest of the team. The Rupert was not happy when we asked about the possibility of getting another orbital strike.

We settled in for the night while the Rupert got the rest of the team together and had a final formal dinner with the surveyors. It wasn't that bad really, sure we were sitting in the middle of a miniature zombie apocalypse, but we all had biohazard gear, help was coming, and the perimeter was secured like nobody's business. We weren't able to completely slack off though, we had to keep up a rotation with the sisters since the cultists were still periodically rushing the entrance and nurglings were starting the claw their way out of the pile of corpses that choked the entrance.

Despite them being horrific abominations of the warp, we sort of liked the nurglings. They weren't very dangerous compared to any of the other daemons out there, they made amusing popping sounds when you killed them, and they were the final proof that this was a chaos cult and not some colossal screw-up on our part. We would have sat there killing those disgusting little things all night, but the sisters didn't like them though so we eventually sent Crisp forward to torch the heaps of diseased corpses. As the disgusting smoke rolled over us we all thanked the Emperor, and the Hospitaller, for our biohazard gear.

The flames finally convinced the cultists to give it a rest and things stayed relatively quiet until morning when we heard several fliers in the distance. The transports landed near the hospital and disgorged several crates of sup-



plies and a bunch of troopers in biohazard gear while a few light fliers scouted the settlement. Finally the spiffy flier our team had been using landed near the main entrance. The Rupert stepped out, congratulated us on holding the line, and asked for a status report.

We all felt fairly smug as Sarge delivered the report, no one had expected us to find one of the cults on this trip, but we responded quickly and professionally when the cultists showed up. The Rupert seemed pretty happy with our report, he happily announced that the only thing that was left to do here was to identify the source of all this disease and purge it. We all winced at the thought of walking through a settlement filled with cultists and minor daemons, but orders were orders so we started gearing up for a walk across town.

Luckily we never had to go for that walk, after a few minutes one of the scout fliers reported a large group of cultists heading towards the hospital. It wasn't an attack this time, a large shield was carried into the square outside our compound and from behind it a phlegmy voice demanded to talk to our leader. Our knee-jerk reaction was to just blow the shit out of them, unfortunately the Rupert was there and ordered us to hold our fire while he walked up to the front of the lines.

With the Greaseball's help our Interrogator actually began talking to the chaos cultists and started trying to negotiate a face to face conversation. To the surprise of everyone present he succeeded, an old withered cultist came out from cover followed by a giant of a man with sword and what was unmistakably a plaguebearer daemon. We knew how this was going to end, or at least we hoped we did, so while the Rupert started debating with the heretic we got ready for a fight.

The Rupert was holding everyone's attention nicely, no one even noticed as we turned our team's flier around so its side-door was facing the negotiations. While Sarge stayed in the flier the rest of us casually cleared everyone out of the way, got Cutter and Alfred in position to grab the Interrogator, and waited for our cue.

Before long the cultist leader had the plaguebearer pull a disease riddled corpse from behind the shield. He yelled something about Pontifex's god not protecting him while his faith in Nurgle had made him strong. He seemed to think that killing the local religious head was a pretty persuasive argument for conversion. The Rupert immediately called the man a vile heretic, drew



his power sword, and started to rush forward. He didn't get three feet before Cutter and Alfred hit him from the side and dragged his dumb ass out of the line of fire.



As soon as he was clear Sarge slammed open the flier's door and opened up with the side mounted heavy bolter. The rest of us supplemented this with frags and las fire while the sisters advanced with their bolters. Plaguebearers are supposed to be tough, but it takes more than a little toughness to survive a heavy bolter backed up by grenades, within seconds it was reduced to a greasy stain on the ground along with the cultist leader. The big mother with the sword was a different story, he had sprinted forward when the Rupert drew and was dodging and weaving as he closed to melee range.

Cutter revved his chainsword and got ready, then was incredibly disappointed when a bolt round took out the charging cultist's knee. We stood around and watched as the maimed swordsman screamed about his tribe killing us all and adding our skulls to the skull throne. Crisp asked just which tribe he was talking about, the dumbass told us, then Sarge shot him and we discussed our next steps.



The Rupert was very understanding about his rough treatment by Alfred and Cutter and was quite happy when we reported location of the khornate cult. The large force of cultists the fliers had reported fell back after we killed their leader, but we couldn't just leave them running around. We needed to neutralize this cult before we could hunt down the khornates.

We were debating exactly how much purging was necessary when the Adept chimed in. She suggested that since we'd removed the cult's leadership and what was probably their only daemon, a full Inquisition team wasn't really necessary. She volunteered to stay behind with the sisters and support troopers to oversee the mop up if the Rupert would give her authority to order limited orbital strikes. This seemed perfectly acceptable to all of us, it let us move out immediately and a little old lady didn't really have any place chasing khornate cults. The Rupert made a few calls, had a brief meeting with the sisters, then we started loading up our flier for the trip.

As we packed the flier and got out of our incredibly foul biohazard gear

we said goodbye to the sisters and the Hospitaller. We all snickered as Doc tried to figure out a way to hug her without contaminating himself.

He didn't and was annoyingly mopey about it for most of the flight.

Our destination was a jungled area that was known for two things: being home to some of the biggest badasses on the planet and for being absolutely filled with feral orks. Twitch was not happy and repeatedly lobbied for simply burning the entire jungle from orbit. The Rupert wouldn't have it though, with the exception of the tribe we were heading for the natives here were perfect recruits for the regiments.

We didn't know the exact location of the tribe we needed to purge, the surveyors had just mapped a larger tribal settlement near the edge of the jungle and filled in the rest with 'Here Be Orks', lazy bastards. Without a clear idea of where to go, flying around the jungle would be pointless, so we landed near the single mapped settlement and asked around for a guide.

We had expected terrified muttering and evasiveness from the locals when we asked about the tribe of khornates, but to our surprise everyone seemed to think that they were pretty cool guys. Apparently they were just about the best fighters around and would hire out to the other tribes in exchange for food and such. We guessed that being near a large concentration of feral orks sort of biases one towards big angry guys that are willing to beat an ork to death with their own severed arm. It was pretty easy to get a guide after we explained that we were looking to hire a few of the khornates, and before long we were headed into the jungle behind a young tribal that the Rupert referred to as Umbubu. That was not actually his name, the Rupert just called him that.

If any of us put together a list of things we wanted to be doing 'marching through an ork infested jungle towards a tribe of chaos cultists' would not be high on it. In fact it would down at the bottom, right between 'try to ride an angry grox while naked' and 'volunteer to assist a magos biologis with his experiments'. We didn't have any choice in the matter though, the Rupert wanted to go so we had to follow.

We coped with our displeasure in traditional guardsmen fashion, which is to say we complained bitterly about everything and did our best to make sure everyone else was as unhappy as we were. This may have been wildly unprofessional behavior, we felt pretty justified though. We could have been riding around in our nice comfortable flier, but nooooooo, that would 'spook



the quarry' and 'draw the wretched greenskins' and 'It was more sporting this way' and 'Umbubu would be too scared to guide us'. His name wasn't even Umbubu, it was Chris and that boy grew up next to a jungle full of feral orks, he wouldn't have batted an eye at something as tame as flying after what he'd seen. No one listens to a guardsmen, everyone thinks they know better than us.



days. To top it off he was dead certain that someone was following us and after a few days the Arbite and Umbubu started agreeing with him.



Really the hike through the jungle wasn't that bad, the Arbite and Umbubu were good at scouting and breaking trail. We skirted around the dens of several mutated animals, dodged an ork raiding party, and made sure not to touch any pretty looking flowers. Things were just about ideal considering what we were doing, but we still grumbled and Twitch was in a constant state of near panic. Twitch did not like orks, or cluttered lines of sight, or loud noises, or sleeping in a position that hadn't been fortified over the last few

The spears were immediately followed by a

band of feral orks screaming and waving crude axes as they charged. The first few were blown into chunks by the grenades Twitch had tossed on reflex as he grabbed cover and the next batch was taken out by a barrage of las fire, but the last few managed to close to melee range before we could get line of sight. Cutter and the Rupert spang into action, power and chain swords whipping across the rushing orks. The moment they appeared the entire hunting party focused on them and we took what shots we could get.

The fight was short and surprisingly one sided. Cutter was an absolute beast in melee and between his powersword and augmetic arm the Rupert could smash through the orks' crude weapons. Both of them fought back to back and any ork that hesitated to get near the whirlwind of death was shot in the back by the rest of us.

After the last ork ran for it and was taken out by a neat shot from the Arbite, Umbubu dropped down from the trees and we gathered together to take stock. None of us had been injured, but the Greaseball was dead and both the Arbite and Umbubu were sure more orks would be coming to check out the noise. We were getting ready to double time it towards the tribe when a pair of large men with swords stepped out of the jungle.

Only a quick grab from Sarge kept Twitch from hosing the men with las-fire. We all watched with weapons ready as Umbubu greeted the two tribals and introduced us. The men were remarkably restrained for khornates, neither seemed inclined to rush us screaming for blood, instead with Umbubu's help they told us to 'come now, children bring your skulls'. As we followed them several young tribals came out of the growth and started hacking at the dead orks and the Greaseball's corpse.



None of us felt very comfortable with the situation, but they were taking us where we wanted to go so we rolled with it. As we walked the jungle thinned and we started to see headless orks strapped to the trees, as far as border signs went it was pretty effective. When we finally reached the village the first thing we all noticed was giant pile of skulls, it was bloody massive. At a rough guess there had to be something like five million skulls in that pile, it was amazing that there were any orks left on the planet much less in this jungle. We weren't sure how many years they'd been adding to it, but even if it was started the day the planet was nuked it was still damned impressive.

A more educated observer like the Cleric or the Arbite might have made several notes about the tribal's cultural dress and building styles and what-not, all we noticed was the pile of skulls and that everyone seemed to be seven feet tall and carried a massive sword. Our two guides led us a larger hut, instructed us to enter, and left. Inside the hut was an old man who looked nothing like a khornate cultist, with Umbubu's help he asked us if we were here to pay tribute, trade, or ascend. That last option caught our attention.

We held a quick whispered debate and decided that there probably wasn't any harm in asking what he meant by 'ascending'. The old man clarified by asking if we had come from the lesser gods to test our strength and journey to the temple of unity.

Jackpot.

Really there was no way would say anything but "yes" to that, it was like walking into the armory and being asked if we were there to pick up the new

assault bikes. Our answer caused a fair bit excitement and runners were sent out in every direction, Umbubu seemed to be about to try and clear up the confusion and explain that we were just looking to hire some mercenaries, but Alfred whacked him around the ear and told him to keep his mouth shut.



What looked like the entire tribe gathered together and formed a ring in the center of the village. The old leader asked us who would fight for us to prove our worth, both Cutter and the Rupert immediately stepped forward. There was another whispered debate as we tried to convince the Interrogator to leave this to the close quarters combat specialist, but before we could bring him around the leader accepted and ordered both of them to remove their guns and enter the circle.

As they entered several tribals hauled a pair of massive cages into the ring and planet a massive sword in front of each of them. The men inside the cages were huge, not just tall and strong like the other tribals, but covered with so much bulky muscle that they looked more like orks than humans. Both of them were vibrating with a berserk fury that we could practically feel, we were no longer sure that agreeing to this was a good idea.

Cutter and the Rupert seemed confident though, each man moved in front of a cage, raised their sword, and waited. The old leader made a short speech that Umbubu didn't bother translating, the crowd started chanting, the Cleric reached for his flamer and had to be restrained by Doc and Crisp, Sarge had a quick word with Alfred, and with a clang the bolts holding the cages closed were pulled out.



The two berserkers surged forward, grabbed their swords, and swung at Cutter and the Rupert. One could say that it was an epic battle filled with masterful dodges and parries, wounds that left the combatants bloody but even more determined to win, and culminated in a brilliant counterstroke by the underdog. One COULD say that, but they'd be lying, it was more like a retarded bullfight.

Cutter dodged the first swing and a follow-up grab, set his chainsword to puree, and just ground it into the berserkers side as he strafed behind the giant. The berserker tried to turn and face him, but Cutter was much faster and just kept behind him while the sword dug deeper and deeper. We almost felt sorry for the khornate, his muscles were so

thick that his arms couldn't even reach behind his back. His wildly swinging sword did keep Cutter pinned in close, but you don't need room to swing a chainsword after you get it going. It was more like watching someone cutting down an especially screamy tree than a fight.

On the other side of the ring the Rupert had apparently adopted pacifism. There was no blood, there were no cunning ripostes, the man just stood there and parried or dodged every attack. It was annoying for both the berserker and us in the audience, the man never took an opening, he just stood there. The Rupert seemed perfectly willing to drag the fight out until Cutter was finished or the enemy died of exhaustion. We could all see the berserker getting more and more frustrated, as the fight wore on he switched to massive charges in an attempt to overwhelm the smaller man. Of course the Rupert neatly sidestepped these and to everyone's disgust actually let the berserker get back up after a particularly wild charge.

Just as the audience was getting ready to lynch our dandy Interrogator the berserker seemed to trip over his own feet mid-charge and stumbled face first into the flailing sword of Cutter's opponent.

The fight ended pretty quickly after that. Cutter finished bisecting his enemy and the Interrogator finally gave in to our shouted instructions and decapitated the twitching remains of his berserker. He had a sour look on his face, like someone had taken his favorite toy away or insulted his choice of wines. As we all walked forwards into the ring we could hear him muttering about it being poor sportsmanship to end a duel so early. Sarge quietly thanked Alfred for saving our Interrogator from his own sense of fair play.



When Cutter's berserker had finally stopped thrashing around we all stood before the elder. An especially large man with the mark of khorne carved into his chest came and stood before us and a rather surly Umbubu half-assedly translated a speech from the elder. It was mostly about the glory of chaos and the big mother's place in our group as the guide to the 'temple of unity' and champion of the blood god, but there was also a bit about leaving immediately and only taking those who would be 'ascending' on the journey.

We paid Umbubu, who was still a little sore at Alfred and the Rupert, and sent the closest thing we had to a translator back home. Crisp slipped the kid a few ration-bars and his spare snub pistol, the whole squad had liked the little guy. As he left he waved to us and yelled several insults at the Rupert who couldn't understand a word and took as a heartfelt goodbye.

The we made a note of village's coordinates and followed the big khornate out of the village while all the tribals cheered at us and chanted about blood and skulls.

We felt a little awkward when we called in the village's location and scheduled an orbital strike for later that week. The cleric told us that such feelings were caused by the taint of chaos clawing at our minds and prayed for our souls, we ignored him.



We spent a few more days hiking through the jungle behind the khornate towards the 'Temple of Unity'. He was actually a pretty nice companion if you ignored the whole 'sworn warrior of the daemonic god of war and bloodshed' thing. He would break trail all day long, didn't complain that none of us really spoke his language, and was happy to kill every mutant beast we ran in to. He didn't even seem to mind when the Cleric tried to kill him, just watched as we all wrestled the flamer away from the nutcase then went back to eating. Crisp really seemed to enjoy talking with him, he had finally found someone who truly appreciated his macabre stories or at least the gesture and tone of them, they'd both stay up late talking and laughing with no idea what the other was saying. Hell of a guy that khornate.

We kept in touch with the Adept and the survey base using our long range vox. From the sound of it the adept and the sisters were just about done with the nurgle cult, it was just a matter of hunting down the ones who had fled the settlement. That vox unit was a bitch to carry, but it was worth it to keep up to date on what was going on and make sure that a record of our discoveries survived. We were hoping that once we found the temple we could call in another orbital strike and call it a day, but as we approached it the vox started running into interference and eventually became completely useless. We still had to carry the heavy thing though.

The day after the vox unit cut out we reached the 'Temple of Unity'. The khornate seemed almost reverential as he entered the clearing and to be fair the temple was pretty damned impressive. Damned being the operative word, the place hurt to look at. It was mostly stonework that looked ancient as hell, but more recently it had been covered with all sorts of spikes and the eye-watering sigils of each of the four chaos gods. It looked like we'd found the final cult.

While we took in the sight of the chaos temple the khornate planted his sword in the ground and went to his knees in what looked like prayer. While

the khornate's eyes were closed the Cleric quietly drew his hand cannon, took careful aim, and blew the big guy's head off. This caught us all off-guard and Twitch had his gun halfway out before we figured out what had happened. The Rupert was rather acerbic and we all expected Crisp to fly into a rage, but the portly flame trooper just laughed and shook his head at the whole situation.

No one was very happy with the Cleric after that. Sure it needed to be done eventually, but he had been rather unilateral about it, none of us had even been consulted. To make matters worse the edge of the clearing was now covered by a darkly glowing barrier that Alfred told us not to touch, without the khornate we had no way to get out. So with no exit and no functioning vox to call reinforcements with our only real option was to just go in and kill everyone. The Cleric heartily approved of this plan and we all told him to shove it.



Our survival gear was stashed in some handy ruins and we all loaded up for a serious fight, there'd be no pussyfooting around with disguises and concealed weapons this time. The heavy flamer and the grenade launcher were brought out, dozens of hand grenades were divvied between us all, and Twitch strapped on his entire supply of explosives. We all prayed to the Emperor that we'd have time to recon the temple and set traps before the fighting started, because if a stray shot hit Twitch now we'd all be blown to very small pieces.

The Rupert was in charge of the operation of course, but for once common sense seemed to be triumphing over his love for epic battles and heroic charges. As the only remotely sneaky member of our group the Arbite was sent forward to scout the area while the rest of us stayed in cover. As he snuck around the temple a basic plan was formulated by the Rupert and delivered along with an inspiring speech about dying for the Emperor.

Once the main entrance and as many side entrances as possible were located we would all move up to a position with a clear line of site. After that Twitch, Crisp, and Cutter would move to each of the side entrances and plant mines while the rest of us provided cover. When that was done we'd blow open the front door, heroically charge into the temple, and 'give Johnny Chaos a taste of Imperial Justice'. We were a little iffy on that last part, but mining the doors seemed like a good idea so we went with it.

The plan actually held together for a surprisingly long time. The Arbite finished his sweep and got into a sniping position on a high set of ruins while we moved forward and Twitch's party split off. Mines were planted, remote

detpacks were placed, and there was no sign of the enemy as they moved from door to door. Twice the main party had to rebase to keep overwatch on Twitch and as we moved to our third position we finally spotted movement.

We could all see someone moving below us, the question here was whether to let him pass by and hope he didn't notice anything or to try and silently take him out. While we quietly debated this the Rupert sprang to his feet, yelled 'What Ho foul heretic!' and sent a hail of bolt rounds at the figure.



The Cleric leapt up next to the Rupert and opened fire as well while Sarge, Doc, and Alfred shared a put-upon look. The figure moved with surprising speed towards our position, dodging from cover to cover and drawing a bolt pistol and sword as he ran. It was even odds whether he'd make it up to us before our Interrogator or Cleric scored a hit, but luckily the Arbite had a clear

shot and a nice leg wound knocked the target down long enough for us to finish the job.

Down on the ground Twitch nearly killed his entire group when the bolt fire surprised him in the middle of mining a doorway. He managed to recover though and used his comm to cuss the entire team out until he was interrupted.

Throughout the ruins vox systems blared to life and an incredibly deep voice rumbled out in flawless low gothic. It welcomed us to its 'humble temple' and ordered 'all aspirants' to 'deal with the servants of the corpse god and bring any survivors to me'. We all heard shouts and chants rising from the various entrances around us, we did not have a good feeling about this.

So no shit there we were, sitting on top of a chaos temple in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by the sound of daemonic-powered warriors baying for our blood. We had a nice elevated position and line of site on half the temple, but several of the unmined doors were on the other side of the pyramid we were standing on and Twitch's party was completely exposed. There wasn't time to panic, the enemy was coming fast and we had to get ready for a multi-directional attack.

Twitch finished setting his last mines and bolted for a jumble of ruins with Crisp and Cutter on his heels. Doc and the Cleric ran around to cover



the far side of the pyramid while Sarge settled into position with Alfred and the Rupert. The Arbite was ordered to relay enemy positions and only open fire if he saw a hostile we couldn't deal with.

The first aspirant came out a doorway on Doc's side of the pyramid, he and the Cleric immediately opened fire and managed to kill the target before he got ten feet. Seconds later we heard the sound of two sets of mines going off and the Arbite reported cautious movement in several other mined doorways. Twitch wasn't going to give them time to disarm his mines or fall back, he hit his remote detonator and the entire temple shook as half its exits were sealed. We were pretty sure that the explosions or falling rubble killed a bunch of hostiles, but there wasn't time to celebrate since aspirants were pouring out of the remaining side doors as well as the main entrance.

What followed was a complete charlie foxtrot. These weren't anything like the chaos cultists we'd fought before, each of them was well armed and well disciplined; they were a lot like the traitor guard we had fought back in the regiment, but bigger, stronger, faster, and full of daemonic tricks. Some were supernaturally fast and dodged between shots as they dashed towards us while others just ignored their wounds. Two of them marched up the side of the pyramid, shrugging off las-fire and hosing Sarge's position with bolter rounds, it took a pair of headshots each from the Arbite to stop them.

Doc and the Cleric were the first ones that were forced out of position. Doc was doing a pretty good job of covering the doorways and the Cleric's hand flamer was keeping flankers away, then one of the aspirants started glowing. The lightning bolt blew apart their cover and only a quick dive saved Doc from following suit. He and the Cleric fell back towards Sarge's position, as they retreated a pair of aspirants with chainswords came in after them. Doc landed several good shots as he ran, but none of them were enough to stop the swordsmen and right as they reached the top of the pyramid the Cleric turned and made his stand.

The closer of the two aspirants was immediately toasted and the Cleric turned towards the second, but a man with a flamer on top of a pyramid is a damned obvious target. A round caught the Cleric in the leg and his next burst went wild, only grazing the oncoming swordsman. By the time



TOWARDS THE END, DENETHOR BECAME INCREASINGLY INDECISIVE.

Doc had turned around it was over, the Cleric was dead and three hundred pounds of flaming chaos cultist was charging straight at the wiry medic. Doc dodged to the side in the nick of time and the burning aspirant rocketed off the pyramid and started a bone shattering journey down to the bottom. A second later Doc overbalanced and followed him a little more slowly.

Down on the ground Twitch's team was holding their little ruined structure against all comers. Cutter and Crisp kept the entrances secured while Twitch took shots at anyone climbing the pyramid and tossed the occasional grenade. The enemy made a few attempts to push inside the small structure but each time they were met by a wall of burning promethium or were hit with a chainsword the second they entered the door.



Between his las-fire and rain of grenades Twitch made it almost impossible for the aspirants to pass his little firebase. He was a constant thorn in their side, right up until one of them fielded a grenade and tossed it back.

The grenade almost made it through the window Twitch was crouched under, it was a bit high though. The nade went off right where the roof met the wall and with a groan the whole structure started to collapse. All three guardsman ran for the exits, but only Crisp made it clear, Cutter and Twitch were both pinned by falling stonework mere feet from the exit.

Up on the pyramid Sarge was doing the most damage by far with his grenade launcher. From his elevated position he could drop rounds on any aspirant who stayed at ground level, only the few who managed to start climbing the pyramid were safe from him. Alfred and the Rupert were doing a good job of keeping the enemy pinned for Sarge to finish and between the Arbite and Twitch anyone who managed to get onto the pyramid was quickly sniped off.



Every once in a while Alfred would point out an aspirant that was glowing or had a staff and everyone would redirect fire before something warpy happened. Things were looking pretty good, Sarge could see that the enemy was bogged down and running out of reinforcements, then Doc came tumbling down the pyramid and landed at Alfred's feet. As the Rupert and Alfred got ready for incoming flankers there

was a grinding crash and the ruins Twitch was in collapsed, leaving only Crisp combat-capable on the ground.

Thinking fast Sarge switched targets and rapid fired the last of his grenades at the few remaining hostiles near the collapsed ruins then ordered the Arbitre to cover Crisp. As he reached for his lasgun the first two aspirants came around the pyramid were dropped by Alfred and the Rupert, no one was ready for the third.

To his credit Sarge got off a shot before the charging cultist landed on him, it just didn't hit anything.

A few thoughts flitted across Sarge's mind. He wondered why nothing ever worked out as planned. He wondered why things kept crushing his chest and if he'd need augmetic ribs after this mission and the previous one. Finally he wondered if he should do something about the chainsword swinging towards his head.

Sarge brought his lasgun up just in time to block the chainsword. A guardsman's lasgun is a multi-purpose weapon that performs well in several types of combat, this wasn't one of them; the aspirant's blade started ripping through the lasgun with a horrible grinding noise. As the whirring teeth neared Sarge's face he summoned every bit of strength he had left, planted his feet in the heretic's stomach and crotch, and heaved. For the second time that day an aspirant tumbled down the pyramid, this one didn't just bounce to the bottom though. As the startled heretic flew over the edge and began his descent the last two surviving hostiles that had been pinned on the ground started running up the steps.

In an ideal galaxy the falling aspirant would have crashed into the other two and all three would have landed in a pile at the bottom of the pyramid, then exploded. Unfortunately this isn't an ideal galaxy and only one of them was taken out, but while there was no explosion the activated chainswords both aspirants were holding had about the same effect. The surviving heretic continued his charge upwards and reached Sarge's position at the same time as the sorcerer came over the top of the pyramid.

It was Alfred who saved everyone, when the sorcerer stepped out and began glowing the butler screamed a warning and put what little power he had into a shield. The sorcerer's lightning bolt smashed into the shield and Alfred collapsed to the ground unconscious. The Rupert's reaction was perfect, he didn't try to dodge the oncoming bolt, the man had perfect faith



in Alfred's shield. As calmly as if he were on the firing range the dandy Interrogator took aim and blew the sorcerer's head off. Behind him the last aspirant cleared the ledge and took aim with his bolter.

Sarge was down to his holdout pistol and combat knife, but he was ready for this. Before the heretic got his shot off Sarge put six inches of good old fashioned Imperial steel into his eye and emptied his stub pistol into the man's gut.

And just like that the fight was over.

The Arbite commed and told us all hostiles had been eliminated and one by one the squad reported in. Doc had a broken arm and a concussion and Alfred was completely out of it. Cutter was unharmed, but was trapped in the collapsed ruins and Twitch was buried up to his waist in rubble and might have a broken leg. Crisp was relatively unscathed and was trying to dig Twitch out and no one had even shot at the Arbite, the lucky bastard.

While the Rupert held the merely unconscious Alfred and loudly mourned his passing, Sarge appropriated Doc's lasgun and took stock. We were down to four combat effective men, the grenade launcher was out of rounds, and there were two wounded and two trapped men that would need looking after. The fight was won though and no one important had died. All that was left to do was go inside the temple and purge whatever was in it, Sarge eyed the big main temple doors unhappily.

As he watched there was an ominous grinding sound and the doors swung open. A giant figure strode out.

It was nine feet tall and wearing green and blue power armor. With spikes on it.

Those of us who could still move dropped back into cover and held still, this was not a fight we wanted to have. We were wounded, spread out, and only had anti-infantry weapons; we probably couldn't even dent the big bastard's armor much less kill him. In our book the ideal weapons for fighting a space marine were a rangefinder, vox unit, and nearby artillery battery and if that wasn't available a Leman Russ might do in a pinch. We were not going to try and fight this traitor marine with nothing but lasguns unless we had to.

The marine moved forwards, occasionally kicking a dead aspirant out of the way as he walked to the base of the pyramid. Once there he stopped



and we all held our breath, then in a booming voice that we all recognized from the vox, he commanded us to stand and face him like men instead of cowering like children. We all decided to get in touch with our inner child and did our best to merge with the ground.

He laughed when none of us responded to his challenge and assured us that he only wanted to talk. We had apparently done well to kill all of his aspirants and he was going to offer us a chance to take their place. The Arbite chose this moment to shoot him in the back.

Faster than any of us could track the marine spun around, hefted his bolter and fired. We all winced as we heard a wet smacking sound and the Arbite's comm cut off, poor dumb bastard.

The marine calmly turned back towards the pyramid and resumed his pitch, which was honestly starting to sound pretty good. He was offering immortality, superhuman strength, a good medical plan, a tremendous upgrade in weaponry, and a chance to not get shot by a traitor marine. It would have been a great deal if it weren't for the whole swearing your soul to chaos thing...

The Rupert was getting more and more agitated as the marine talked. The man wasn't a complete idiot, but he was proud and didn't have an ounce of pragmatism in him. After the third or fourth time the traitor told us the 'Emperor is nothing but a rotting corpse' and recommended that we 'swear allegiance to a real god' something inside our Interrogator snapped. For the second time that day he rose out of cover and opened fire while we scrambled to stop him.

The Rupert's shots were well aimed, but the marine was blindingly fast. He sidestepped most of the bolter rounds and the only one to hit merely dented a pauldron. Once again the marine raised his bolter and returned fire.

Sarge barely managed to catch the Rupert's leg in time. He gave it a mighty yank and the Rupert crashed to the ground missing an arm instead of a head. It was the remaining flesh arm too, the man curses a blue streak while Sarge tied it off and dragged him back towards Doc. Down below the



marine laughed and asked if he needed to come up there and lend a hand. When Sarge turned him down he laughed some more and asked what we thought of his offer. Sarge expressed interest in his pitch and a desire to subscribe to the marine's newsletter, then asked for a few minutes to mull things over.



made the crack about the newsletter. He removed his combead when Sarge told him to be serious or be quiet.

Eventually the marine ran out of patience, he gave us one last chance to join him before he started killing us. Sarge told him to shove it, but Crisp stepped forward.



walked he laughed and talked to the marine.

He talked about the death he had seen and laughed. He talked about the death he had dealt and laughed.

He talked about the faithful men who had died and laughed. He talked about his prayers that hadn't been answered and laughed. He talked about immortality and the glory of living forever and laughed. Finally he talked about madness and laughed like we had never heard before.

The marine laughed too and assured him that in the service of the dark gods madness has purpose. He welcomed Crisp as a future brother and asked us all to follow our squadmate's example.

Every one of us screamed at Crisp as he walked towards the marine. When he finally stopped in front of the traitor astartes we all fell silent. There was

Down in the ruins Crisp was watching the the marine and relaying everything to Twitch and Cutter. Twitch was wildly brainstorming ways to get his remaining det packs onto the marine and Cutter was complaining that this was all bullshit and someone needed to dig him out. Crisp just sat there and quietly laughed at the situation, it was all completely ridiculous. He laughed when the Arbite died, then he laughed when the Rupert lost his arm, and he nearly collapsed when Sarge

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The rest of us were floored, both Sarge and Doc scrambled up to get a view as the portly flame trooper holstered his weapon and walked towards the traitor marine. We all started shouting, Doc pleaded for his soul, Sarge barked orders and threats in his most commanding voice, Cutter asked what was going on, and Twitch called him 'Traitor McTraitor Pants' and swore that he had known all along. Crisp ignored us all, as he

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a brief second when there was no sound other than Crisp's laughing, then Twitch hit his detonator.

Every single one of Twitch's remaining det-packs was stuck to the back of Crisp's flamer tank and the tank itself was at least half full. The explosion shook the entire temple and Sarge could feel the heat of the flames from his position near the top of the pyramid. There weren't even bodies left, just little fragments of ceramite and a few puddles of burning promethium.



We were all silent and just watched the flames for a few minutes, then the Rupert asked what happened and we all snapped back to reality. Doc needed his whole kit to treat the Rupert not to mention his own wounds. Twitch and Cutter both needed to be dug out and Sarge was adamant that we find a way to contact someone and tell them just what sort of crazy shit was going on.

Sarge went and grabbed Doc's bags from the stash then went to work with his entrenching tool on the masonry trapping Twitch and Cutter. Eventually everyone was collected and stable and it was time to decide what to do.

There really weren't a lot of options, we had to go into the temple. Our vox unit still wasn't getting through so we needed to see if there was a better one inside, Doc wanted to see if they had a real medbay, and we definitely couldn't find a way through the glowy wall up here. We all just hoped that there was nothing else still running around inside, we were tired of this shit.

All of us formed up behind Twitch and Albert and went through the big front doors.

We had expected there to be blood, corpses, spikes, and daemonic runes everywhere. The runes were there, but after the first few dozen feet of stonework the place was surprising clean and ordinary looking. It wasn't even dark, there were tasteful little skull shaped lights every few feet, just like in HQ. Nothing attacked us as we walked through what we began to think of as 'the facility' instead of 'the temple', apparently everyone who had lived and worked here had died in the battle.



We found various training rooms, sleeping quarters, an armoury full of identical bolters and chainswords, and even a perfectly normal mess hall, we didn't touch any of the food though. None of us found anything really interesting until we got to the medbay, when we entered Doc froze and made

a sort of high pitched wheezing sound. Even the rest of us could see that this place was incredibly well equipped, there were all sorts of shiny machines and tubes and shit. After Doc got over the sheer quality of the medbay he commandeered Cutter as a nurse and went to work on his arm as well as the Rupert's bloody stump. We left him to it while we checked the nearby rooms.

The next room over gave us a little pause, there were several tanks with what were probably aspirants floating in them hooked up to all sorts of tubes. After a short debate we decided that perimeter security trumped preserving evidence and shot them all, but we made sure to hit as little of the fancy machinery as possible, Doc was rather insistent about that. The room after that held something that stopped us all in our tracks, Twitch ran back to the Rupert and asked what the Inquisition's standpoint on salvage was. He was rather disappointed when he was told he couldn't keep the fully loaded Thunderhawk we found in the vehicle bay, or any of its hellstrike missiles.

The rest of us were similarly disappointed when we realized the Arbite had been the only one who knew how to fly.

Eventually we got to a room with green snake looking thingy on the door. This was the first one that was actually locked, but we got in after a little tinkering and finally found where the big vox unit was kept. There was a lot of other stuff in there, but aside from a few armor tools and weapons we had no desire to touch none of it was very interesting to us.

It took a while to get the vox system working, but it seemed to punch through the interference no problem. We dialed the sisters up and gave a brief rundown of the situation to the Adept, then we went and got the Rupert out of the medbay because she didn't believe us.

After that it was a lot of talking and waiting. Messages were sent to the closest Inquisition base, orders were relayed to the survey base and the ships in orbit, and the remaining sisters were requisitioned to help keep the place secure until a full Inquisitor arrived. There was a certain temptation to just blow up the facility, but it wasn't currently doing anything chaotic and someone smarter than us really needed to take a look at this place.

The sisters and the Adept arrived by air, they just flew right over the glowy wall which we STILL couldn't figure out how to deactivate. We all set up camp as far away from the temple as possible and covered it with as much holy stuff as the Sisters could bring. The Adept said the chaos runes



wouldn't have any serious effects, but we didn't want to take any chances.

We kept busy for the next few weeks while we waited for the investigation team. Doc spent a lot of time with the Hospitaller who was full of sympathy for his broken arm and helped him with everything. Cutter found out how to activate the training remotes in the facility and spent most of the time hitting things with his sword. Sarge made Twitch help him clear up the bodies and the fragments of chaos space marine that littered the area and the Rupert went over the whole facility with the Adept.

Eventually the team we requested arrived. We were surprised to see not one but three inquisitors step off the shuttle followed by a space marine in black armor. The next few days were a blur of interviews which we all found incredibly uncomfortable, especially when the astartes kept asking how we killed the traitor marine. That guy made us all very uneasy and Twitch started muttering about chaos marine infiltrators, Sarge hit him and told him to shut up before he got us all purged.

There was a lot of talk which we overheard but didn't pay much attention to. There was a bunch of stuff about alphas, and legions, and recruiting worlds, and genes, and seeds, none of it really concerned us. We just hung out until they decided they were done with us then got the hell out of there on the first navy ship going back Oak's way.

To our surprise we weren't the only passengers on the ship. The entire batch of sisters had apparently seen too much and was being called into Inquisitorial service. The Sister Superior and her squads would be joining one of the Inquisitor's retinues, but he had no real need for a Hospitaller and sent her off to be one Oak for reassignment. Doc was incredibly happy about this.

We'd been dreading how mopey he was going to get when it was time to go, but this was almost worse. The man was a complete sap and none of us could stand talking to him during the trip home, we couldn't even tease him properly he'd just sort of dreamily nod at anything we said. Eventually we just rearranged the cabins so they were next to each other and left them to it. At least one of us was getting some.

The trip back went quickly, Sarge spent most of it in the medbay with the Rupert and the Adept getting the report in order for Oak. This one was a doozy and it sounded like a story you'd hear in a bar, but the other Inquisitor's reports backed it up so hopefully Oak would believe us. We all speculated about whether he'd try to promote Sarge again or if we'd all get an increase in pay or something, not every team can take down a freakin



chaos marine.



When we reached Oak's ship Doc bid a tearful goodbye to the Hospitaller as she went off to the damned short bootcamp Oak put all his recruits through. The one that was just at the other end of ship. It wasn't like she was being sent to the Eye of Terror or something, the little sap.

After that was done with we all went down to our section of the ship and filled in the rest of the boys about Crisp. There were a lot of sad faces at the end of that story, but everyone agreed it was a pretty cool way to go. One of the other

troopers said the Crisp had signed up with one of the death cults during the last mission, which really did explain a lot. We all drank to his memory and hoped he was laughing with the big E.

The call down to Oak's office finally came and we all got to stand there and look decorative while he talked with the Rupert about the mission. This time there was no way he could turn down a promotion to full inquisitor, even if he did need another medical leave to go get a second augmetic arm. The man glowed with pride as Oak praised him for not only removing the cults that kept the planet from being an excellent recruitment world, but also for finding and destroying a chaos operation that was using it for the same purpose. We all winced when he used terms like 'level-headed' and 'keeping your men alive', but overall the man deserved his praise.

When the interview was over and the Rupert finished swearing to come back for us after he got his new arm Oak asked us all to stick around for a few minutes. He kept it simple, he was very happy with our performance as a team and wanted to know if there were any requests we'd like to make for our future deployments. Twitch was about to say something along the lines 'NO PSYKERS OR CLERICS EVER AGAIN' but Sarge hushed him and pondered the question. Finally he asked if the squad as a whole could be issued some more

robust weaponry, the lasguns just hadn't been cutting it lately. Then as an afterthought he asked if Oak could see to assigning a certain new recruit to permanent shipboard duty instead of sending her out on missions. Oak agreed and sent us on our way, Doc was practically skipping as we left

We all headed out for some R&R. We talked with the boys, drank in the bar, and generally had a good time. Doc repeatedly made the several hour



journey to the training section of the ship and we all gave him shit for it. A definite highpoint was receiving a crateful of hot-shot lasguns with a note that said 'Courtesy of Assistant Quartermaster Nubby'.

Eventually our time ran out and we started waiting for our next mission. We speculated about what sort of insane interrogator or crazy assignment we'd get this time. We had tons of theories but none of them were close to what we actually got.

Instead of a runner telling us to report to a shuttle or a personal visit from our new Interrogator we got orders to report to Oak's office. When we entered there was no one else there beside Oak and a single tech-priest.

There wasn't any long mission brief or bullshit about promoting Sarge again, Oak simply said that we had proven to be trustworthy men and he was sending us to assist in the procurement of a new ship for his recruitment fleets. We would be acting under his authority and were expected to behave professionally. That said he introduced the tech-priest as the agent who would be handling the actual inspection and procurement then sent us on our way.

We followed the silent tech-priest down to a fancier than usual shuttle and stepped inside. We were met by a bunch of other cogboys who chattered away at the senior tech-priest while we stood there. Eventually someone noticed us and a monotone voice directed us towards a side room where we'd meet the 'representative from supply'. Sarge opened the door and jumped backwards with a shout.

There are some things that shouldn't be seen from less than a foot away, and Nubby's face was one of them.



Chapter 7

Discount Spaceship

The squad is getting a tour of the impressively large shuttle they've just boarded from none other than their former squadmate Nubby. Last they'd seen him, he'd been reassigned to quartermaster duties after his legs were removed by a treacherous Interrogator. Now he's happily stomping around on a pair of augmetic legs while proudly explaining how he's the mission's "supply officer".

This announcement is being met with considerable skepticism by Sarge, who is the only member of the squad actually listening.

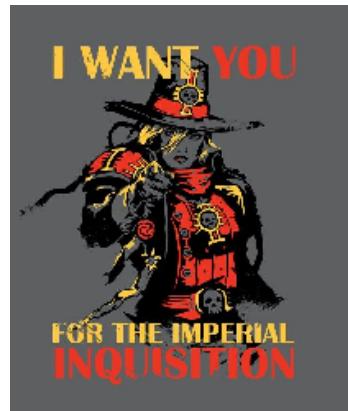
Doc is paying far more attention to Nubby's shiny new metal legs and is interrupting the rambling tour with questions about how they'd been attached. When Nubby doesn't provide any helpful answers Doc asks Sarge to hold the little trooper up so he can take a look.

Meanwhile Twitch's curiosity and paranoia are driving him to find out just what is inside all the large metal containers being loaded onto the shuttle. Cutter, who found the lack of sword-related topics in the tour incredibly boring, is helping the demolitions trooper by prying open one of the boxes. When the lid finally pops off, both guardsmen jump back and start swearing.

Doc and Sarge, who is still holding Nubby up by the shoulders, come over to see what the matter is. When Sarge sees what's inside the container as well as the identical markings on all the other containers, he starts shaking the suspended guardsman angry terrier.

"NUBBY! Just why the hell are we taking a few thousand servitors with us?"

¶The All Guardsmen Party Buys A Spaceship





So no shit there we were, on a shuttle filled with tech-priests and an army of servitors, on our way to assist in the purchase of an entire warp-capable starship for our Inquisitor. Not a normal space transport, not a shuttle, not a flier, but an entire damned warpship; the smallest of which were typically over a kilometer long and worth more than a dozen regiments of Guard. And to top it all off, Nubby Nubbs was standing there, proud as anything, telling the rest of us that HE was in charge of the operation. It was completely unbelievable.

To clarify, it wasn't unbelievable in the sense that we couldn't fathom how the universe could be so strange and cruel, we literally didn't believe

a word Nubby had said. No one with a scrap of intelligence would send him out to buy the recaff, much less a bloody warpship. Sure, we'd all trust Nubby at our back in a firefight any day, but the man was a petty thief, a compulsive liar, and had actually been mistaken for a gretchin on more than one occasion. Sarge told the trooper to stuff a sock in it, and we all went to get a more realistic briefing from the tech-priests that were coming with us.

There seemed to be a lot of cogboys on the big cargo shuttle with us; every room or hallway was filled with creepy metal men squawking at each other in binary. We found the one that Oak had implied was the head tech-priest in a conference room surrounded by a bunch of subordinates. He was obviously holding some sort of conference or briefing, but we couldn't understand any of their robotic chatter. Sarge just stood there awkwardly, and then started loudly clearing his throat until a few cogboys were waved away to deal with us.

That became an annoying trend over our journey; the head tech-priest and his senior flunkies would never talk to us directly. We were sure they could understand gothic, but they just never seemed to speak in anything but their damned machine language. Every time we needed to talk to one of them a junior cogboy would be called up to act as a translator or lead us away so we didn't disturb the senior techies. This did not endear them to us, and we didn't go out of our way to treat them any better. We did get pretty familiar with the junior tech-priests though.

Well not exactly familiar, there were a bunch of them and it was damned hard to pick out which pile of metal tentacles was Brother Ticinius and which was Brother Cacistus. Woe betide the poor guardsmen who mistook Logis Guminnio for Constructor Periphanes. Such a mistake was incredibly

insulting and a clear indication of our inferior intellect. Matters were not helped by their damned tendency to switch out their augmetics; just when you got used to Arch-Brother-Lexi-Mechanic Cogitus Boyus being the tall bastard with the heavy duty servo-arm, he'd swap it out for some sort of sparky tentacle job and replace his legs with treads or something. We would have gone crazy if it weren't for the two lowest ranking tech-priests in the bunch, tech-acolytes Jim and Hannah.

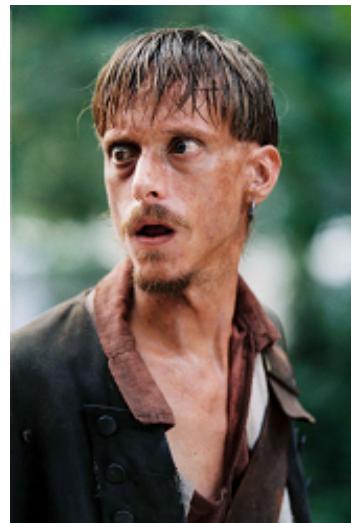
The two acolytes were the most junior tech-priests on the mission and were obviously the Mechanicus equivalent of the Regimental Gofer. Every time you saw them they'd be carrying something, moving as fast as possible without running, or covered head to toe with grease and other less pleasant fluids.

We liked Jim and Hannah: they were practically kids, had most of their original parts, and you could pronounce their names while drunk. Best of all, they had a weary put-upon attitude which warmed the khaki colored blobs which passed for our souls. We quickly made them honorary Guardsmen and began taking all of our questions to them.

Once we met Jim and Hannah, we were finally able to get the real details of our mission. The gist of it was that the tech-priests and our squad were all being sent to discreetly purchase a second hand warpship. Presumably so it could be used to carry around Oak's recruitment teams without causing a fuss.

To our collective relief the acolytes confirmed that Nubby was not in charge of the operation. He was merely there to act as the public face for the purchase and general observer. His superiors in supply had already chosen the ship, negotiated a price range, gotten the funds into place, hired a navigator and astropath, and handed Nubby a very explicit set of orders.

The head Magos and the other tech-priests would handle everything else, and be more or less in command from the second the ship was deeded over and the original crew was evicted. They'd do the inspection, prep the ship for travel, and perform any repairs. Finally, once the priests deemed the



ship ready for travel, they'd use their servitor army to fly the whole damned thing back to some secret Inquisition shipyard for a refit.

This all made sense to us, but it was still a wonder that Nubby had been chosen for any part of this mission. He insisted that his superiors had recognized his "'Quisition skills an' personal 'sperience wif ships like dis," not to mention his "cleva' negotiashun tactics" and "cunnin' merkantile mind." This was bullshit and we all knew it. To a man the rest of us believed that he'd been sent because no one would ever look at him and think "Inquisitorial Agent."

The rest of us were there to act as backup for Nubby. Officially this was because every procurer in the field was supposed to have a bunch of trustworthy and discreet agents to assist them. At first we wondered just why we had been chosen over other available agents, but after we figured out why Nubby had been sent it was plain as day why we were sent. Obviously our squad had been chosen because we all looked like the sort of incompetent ex-guard goons that a complete cretin would employ as bodyguards. Thanks Oak.

Now we'd traveled a fair bit during our careers in the Inquisition, but this trip was something else. This time we didn't have our own quiet section of ship. Instead we were surrounded by dozens of cogboys running around preparing an army of servitors for crewing a warpship. Everywhere you went there'd be tech-priests chattering at each other, chanting and lighting incense, welding random pieces of metal, or doing incredibly unsettling things to their servitors.

The ship itself was some sort of Mechanicus transport, and the quarters available made us all think wistfully of the berths the Rupert had gotten for us. Apparently when you become a full tech-priest you stop desiring beds fancier than a wide metal shelf or food that actually has flavor.

Also Mechanicus toilets can best be described as "Terrifying."

We all tried to stay out of the way and keep to ourselves, but it just didn't work. We always seemed to be underfoot or under tread or under antigrav skimmer. There simply wasn't room for anyone that wasn't part of whatever mad plan the techies were all following. Cargo haulers would bull through us during morning PT, random tech-priests would shout at us if we touched or sat on anything, and our quarters were randomly repurposed for storage, sometimes while we were still in them. No man should wake up in a dark



room surrounded by thirty deactivated servitors.

None of us were happy, but Twitch had the worst of it; he just couldn't function well without a secured perimeter. We were about ready to outright fortify a cargobay and try to hold it against the cogboys, when Doc got his idea. He suggested that the only way to survive the trip was to become "part of the pattern."

We spent the rest of the voyage following Jim and Hannah around like lost puppies. We slept when and where they slept, we ate when they ate, and we did our best to help with whatever unpleasant task they were working on. We probably weren't very helpful, but it kept us alive and relatively sane.

It was an immense relief when we finally reached our destination. We piled onto a shuttle and rode to a local orbital station where a few scribes were waiting to brief us on the purchase. We blew them all off and slept for about twenty hours in the blissful quiet of our cogboy-free rental rooms.

The briefings and preliminary negotiations took about a week, and aside from Nubby none of us really had to do anything. We more or less hung out in hallways while various scribes became incredibly frustrated with Nubby. There were no assassination attempts, no cultists infiltrators, no ork kommando raids, and certainly no genestealers attacks. Just a bunch of boring guard duty while Nubby drove various expensive lawyers and financial experts into a state of incoherent rage. One of them did actually try to kill him, but since Nubby had just stolen the man's wallet it was perfectly understandable.

We did pay a little attention to what was going on; guard duty was boring and they weren't really hiding the documents or diagrams. Most of it was legal gibberish, ancient trade logs, and figures about engine strength and storage capacity. None of which we even tried to understand, but there were some nice pictures. From what we saw the ship was a small one, only two kilometers long, and was rather plain looking. Just the sort of ship for traveling around unnoticed.

The negotiations continued and some of the tech-priests were sent over to inspect the ship. They took a while, but confirmed that the ship "met all requirements." That done with, all that was left was the final meeting between Nubby and the current owner of the vessel.

Some fancy rooms were rented out for The Deal, and Nubby was crammed into a frilly suit complete with powdered wig. It was probably supposed to make him look like a dashing Imperial nobleman, but it really just made him



look like a gretchin in a dress. It was hard not to laugh as we followed him to the meeting, and when we saw the man selling the ship it became nearly impossible.



If Nubby was a gretchin in a dress, then the seller was a giant squig in a suit. The man was practically spherical, comically clumsy, and honked like a goose when he talked. He radiated an aura of incompetence and was followed by a cadre of thugs who all had the same suffused expressions we did.

The worst part was that the man obviously thought of himself as a Rogue Trader, and tried to dress the part. He must have gone through some catalogue and ordered one of everything. He had the gaudy coat with epaulets, the large hat with a feather in it, the cane that obviously contained a sword, and just to top it off, there was a cybernetic parrot perched on his shoulder. The problem was that while most Rogue Traders ooze confidence and danger, this one just oozed. We'd seen, fought, and redecorated a bathroom with the head of a real Rogue Trader before; this guy was more like a kid playing dress-up.

We just barely managed to keep our faces straight while Nubby and the wannabe greeted each other. Both of them were handed the relevant documents by their scribes and headed into a private room to complete the deal. The second the door had closed behind them, the fat man's guards cracked up and we did likewise. It was just too much to bear. Both sets of scribes just shared a miserable look and settled down to wait.

The meeting took a surprisingly long time, and we all started to get nervous. Every part of the deal had been hammered out beforehand, and this just supposed to be a matter of signing off. Emperor only knew what Nubby was getting up to in there.

Neither of them hit their panic buttons though, so we sat tight and eventually both men came out alive and relatively well. Nubby had a disturbingly smug look and the seller seemed rather flustered, but both of them insisted that everything was sorted out. The scribes did a final review of the signed documents, got into a brief whispered argument with Nubby and the fat man, and then loudly confirmed that everything was in order. The seller's scribes said that all of their men would be off the ship within thirty hours, and the whole party made a rather hasty exit.

That done with, we headed back to our quarters and passed the word on to the tech-priests. The cogboys confirmed that they were ready to board the ship and take over as soon as the former crew was out of the way. From there

on out it was entirely their mission; we were just passengers and observers. All our squad had to do was keep out of the way until we arrived at the shipyard and someone came to collect us.

The tech-priests told us to stay in our quarters until they had their servitors in place, so we finished our business with the scribes, settled in for a few days of relaxation on the station, and asked Nubby about what had happened during the meeting. According to him the former captain had been a terrible negotiator and was easily haggled down. The little bugger was smug as hell about the whole thing and expected a big thank you from Oak for saving him a few billion thrones. None of us really believed him, Nubby was always full of that sort of shit, but the scribes were happy so it wasn't really our problem. In retrospect not grilling Nubby and finding out exactly what sort of deal he got, or how he managed to get it, was a tremendous mistake.

A few days of idleness later a shuttle was sent for us, and we were taken to the newest addition to Oak's fleet, the Free Trader Occurrence Border.

As we approached the ship everyone clustered around the windows to get a good look at our purchase. A lot of things about the Occurrence Border grabbed the eye. There were the massive tanks for hauling fluids, the impressive arrays of docking hatches along the cargo bays, the odd variations in the color and design of the hull, but mostly there was the fact that the ship was about half as long as the diagrams said it should be.

It was amazing really. The Occurrence Border mostly followed the standard Imperial ship design; large engines in the tail, control tower rising above the rear of the ship, long and slightly skinny body. Except the bow was completely gone. The ship just ended half way through the body in a giant patchwork of scrap metal. It looked like someone had grabbed the ship, cut it with a giant cleaver, and then smashed the ragged edge flat. As one we all turned to look at Nubby; who muttered something about "good value for cost" and tried to sidle away.

It took a lot of shaking and yelling to get all the details out of Nubby. Apparently, well, the front fell off.

The entire front of the vessel, a two kilometer warp-capable ship, which



we had just purchased for a staggering amount of money, on behalf of the bloody Inquisition, Fell. Off.

He said it doesn't happen often, just a sort of occasional time to time thing, overall its a very safe ship. In fact in the whole lifetime of the ship it only happened once, or twice, well maybe three times, definitely no more than four, but the important thing was that it wouldn't ever happen again. The previous captain had fixed the problem for good by installing the "special made custom prow" after the last incident.

We all eyed the mushroom-shaped pile of slagged scrap on front of the ship and contemplated just what Oak would do to us. It would probably involve an excruciator and an airlock.



The rest of flight was split between yelling at Nubby and staring at the ship with a sort of morbid curiosity. The closer we got the more the imperfections became apparent: there were scars and burns, holes and gouges, and the most bizarre set of repairs and additions imaginable. The entire ship must have been stripped off and replaced with spare parts one piece at a time until nothing of the original was left visible. It was a wonder that the thing flew at all. Doc suggested that we might not get yelled at by Oak for any of this, because there was no way we'd survive the warp voyage home in this hulk.

Eventually the shuttle docked, and we walked into one of the Occurrence Border's more intact cargo bays. Hannah the cog-girl was waiting there to guide us to our quarters. She led us through a maze of tunnels and gave us a rundown of situation on the way. Most of the servitors were in place, the navigator and astropath were on board, and the last few repairs and calibrations would be made during the trip. After a while Sarge cautiously asked her what the tech-priests thought about the state of the ship; her response surprised us.

She cheerily informed us that the entire vessel was an abomination in the eyes of the Omnisssiah and "perfectly met all requirements".

That second part was a little confusing, but according to her the whole point was to acquire a thoroughly disreputable vessel that was still capable of running. The cogboys didn't care if half the hull was missing, if the cargo bays leaked atmosphere, or if most of the ship was pieced together from old

wrecks. As long as it could travel through the warp they were happy. After all, they were just here to take it to the shipyard; the priests there were the ones who would be refitting it for Inquisitorial use.

Nubby perked up at this, but Sarge reminded him that, even if the tech-priests were happy, the people who were paying for the ship and its refit probably wouldn't be.

As we walked, all of us noticed dozens of papers fixed to panels, doors, controls, and such. At first we thought they were the usual purity seals or Mechanicus prayers, but then Twitch stopped and actually read a few. Each one said something like "This control panel governs the flow of plasma through bays D3-S15, no one remembers why we have plasma going through there, but if you shut them off engines 3 and 7 stop working," "The gravity in this corridor is tilted 37 degrees to the left," and "Do not ever touch this button".

That last one showed up a lot.

When we asked Hannah about the notes, she lowered her voice and advised us to take them very seriously. They must have been left by the former crew and were incredibly helpful, but we were never to mention them to any of the more senior tech-priests. The cogboys were trying to ignore them since they didn't need advice from anyone outside the priesthood, but unfortunately the notes were far more accurate than their own scans. The senior priests were taking it as a personal insult every time they had to refer to one of the notes to fix a problem. We all chuckled at that and promised to read any notes we came across.

Eventually we arrived in a cluster of rooms that Jim the acolyte was clearing out with the help of a bunch of servitors. He suggested that these would make good quarters, pointed us towards a storage closet with some relatively edible rations in it, handed us a data slate with a crude map of the ship, and recommended that we stay out of the way of the servitors and tech-priests. Once we were settled the two acolytes scampered off to their next task.

Sarge booted up the data slate, and, about ten seconds after Jim and Hannah had disappeared into the giant maze of metal that was our ship, we realized that none of us knew how to read a three dimensional map. The ensuing argument over whose job it had been to check the map earlier and what we were going to do now, was interrupted by the ship's speakers blaring to life. There was a painful burst of binary followed by a monotone voice telling all hands to prepare for warp transit; then the universe went "glorp"



and tasted like the color purple for a second.



The one good thing you could say about the situation was that no one was trying to kill us, at least not on purpose anyway. On the other hand, we were cruising through the warp in a twisted heap of scrap held together with tape and spit, and none of us even knew where in the ship we were or how to read our map.

Now being lost is a long standing Guard tradition, but this was ridiculous. It's hard enough to navigate in two dimensions with an accurate map and a directional finder. Three with an unreadable map and no way to tell which way you're facing is just unfair. Without the ration bars we might have actually starved to death in our own ship, or at least been reduced to hunting the servitors for food.

After our quarters were secured we started trying to track down one of the tech-priests. We wanted to know where everyone else was, what was going on, and how the hell to read our map. Our comms didn't work for shit inside all of this metal, and we didn't have access to the ship's communication system, so our search had to be done the old fashioned way: on foot with hand-drawn maps and trail markers.

We didn't feel like passengers on a ship. It was more like we were a recon force plotting hostile terrain, and boy was the terrain hostile. There were gravity shifts, depressurized sections of ship, exposed power conduits, rooms filled with hot plasma, and dozens of other hazards; only those helpful little notes kept us alive. Still, even though everything they said was helpful, the notes themselves were a bit disconcerting. They tended to be a little too precise, and Twitch swore that more of them were appearing in areas we'd already been through.

Doc was leading the patrol that found the first tech-priest. Unfortunately he refused to speak to us and ducked through a hatch which locked behind him; the second priest we found wasn't give the chance. Doc and Nubby covered the exits while Cutter tackled the cogboy. Holding someone at gunpoint and asking them for technical support and directions probably isn't the officially sanctioned way of doing this sort of thing, at least not when they're on your side, but damned if it didn't work well. The conversation was a little awkward though, the tech-priest turned out to be one of the ones who had briefed us during the trip out and was perfectly willing to talk to us. We did apologize.

Once we learned how to use the map we realized it was mostly empty space, but it did cover most of the important parts of the ship. It mapped out some of the bigger loading bays, the quarters the techies were using, the

locations of several critical systems, and the giant spinal shipping corridor and freight lifts that most of the servitors used. The best part was that the terrified tech-priest showed us how to fill in the blank spots and add notes, which meant that we no longer had to depend on Doc's hand drawn maps to get back to our base. Not that Doc was a bad artist mind you, he just had a little trouble figuring out how to draw a corridor that angled up and left while its gravity shifted to the right wall.

With the map in hand, our recon patrol released the tech-priest to go grease servitors or whatever and went off to find the two helpful techies. The rough plan was to get a hand with the comms situation from the acolytes, but unfortunately they weren't in the quarters indicated on the map. Doc was dithering about whether to keep searching or wait for them to return, when Nubby suggested getting them to come to us. Based on our past experiences, Nubby argued, if we just annoyed enough of the senior tech-priests or started breaking things one of the acolytes would be sent to deal with us. Doc watched in horror as Nubby and Cutter went to work, but he didn't actually do anything to stop them.

Three gutted cogitator terminals, two corridors flooded with coolant, another filled with less pleasant substances, and a dismembered maintenance servitor later, Sarge's combead came to life. An exhausted sounding tech-acolyte Jim asked him to come pick up his team before someone killed them.

We still couldn't use the ship's comms, the acolytes said it was restricted to the priests for some techy reason, but our combeads were being boosted by the larger system. Combined with the functioning map and Jim and Hannah's personal contact codes we had everything we needed to survive the rest of the trip, so we all went back to base to get a night's sleep. Well if not a night's then at least a solid ten hours worth: the ship's light system seemed to be on several different clocks, and the ones in our quarters dimmed on a three hour cycle. Twitch eventually shot them out, and we just used our own lamps.

Now just to be clear, no one in the squad was a sissy and none of us had ever had trouble with warp travel before. We'd all faced down some



incredibly weird and scary shit during our time in the Guard, not to mention what we'd seen as Inquisitorial goons. Our nerves might not have been made of steel, but they were definitely iron or possibly some good quality bronze. That said, the nightmares we had that night were bloody terrifying. They were the sort of nightmares that take your every fear and failing and rub them in your face while you struggle to wake up and tell yourself it's all a dream. We all woke up covered in sweat when one of Twitch's perimeter alarms went off.

We didn't even check what set off the alarm, all of us just sat there and thanked the Emperor for Twitch's paranoia. After a few minutes Doc got up and pulled a yellow note off the inside of our door. It said "In case of bad dreams check Gellar Field integrity."

The note had not been there when we went to sleep.

While the note's sudden appearance was mysterious as hell, none of them had steered us wrong so far and this one was pointing us towards what might be a very serious problem. On the list of incredibly horrible things that can go wrong during warp transit "Gellar Field Failure" is pretty much at the top. The Gellar Field Generator is literally the "anti-getting devoured by daemonic horrors" device; it is rather important that it keeps performing that function at all times while travelling through the warp.

The squad kitted up while Sarge commed Jim and asked nicely if he'd heard about anything about problems with the Gellar Field. We all watched as Sarge's face started turning white, then red, then purple. We bailed out of the room just ahead of the explosion of rage and even through the sealed hatch we heard Sarge taking out a lot of frustration on poor Jim. The high points included: *i*"**WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHICH ONE?**"

i"**WHY ARE THERE SIX?**"

i"**WHO IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WOULD INSTALL A DAMAGED GELLAR FIELD GENERATOR?**"

i"**WHO IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WOULD INSTALL SIX DAMAGED GELLAR FIELD GENERATORS?**"

i"**NO, THERE IS NOT A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DAMAGED AND REFURBISHED!**"

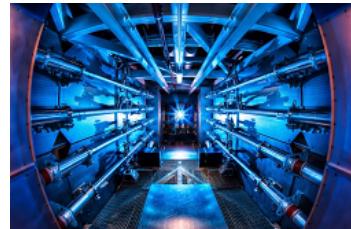


“WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT WAS IN THE TECHNICAL BRIEFING? WHAT BRIEFING FOR WHO?”

“WHERE’S NUBBY? I’LL KILL STRANGLE MURDER THAT LITTLE BASTARD GOOD DEAL! I’LL SHOW HIM A GOOD DEAL!”

At that point Sarge burst through the hatch and Nubby decided it was a good time to go check what had set off the outer perimeter alarm while the rest of us restrained the irate noncom.

Eventually we got Sarge calmed down enough to speak coherently and he explained the whole messed up situation to us. Apparently the ship’s Gellar Field had been scrapped and replaced by several smaller models that had been scavenged from Emperor-knows-where. There were three along the length of the ship, one near the bridge, and two covering the top and bottom decks. We were currently near the one in the bow and from the look of things it was on the fritz. Jim said he’d take a look at it and suggested that we move our quarters farther back into the coverage of one of the other generators.



That sounded like a good idea, but we decided to take it a step further. We weren’t just going to find some random rooms in the next section of ship, we were going to hike our asses down to that Gellar Field Generator, set up camp, and bloody well sleep on it. There was not going to be any screwing around with this nightmare business. Sacktime is practically sacred and anything that disturbs it must be immediately dealt with; a guardsman who can’t fall asleep the second the perimeter is secure is not a true guardsman.

We packed up our quarters; rations, field gear, traps, munitions, everything we had was coming with us. As Twitch pulled down his perimeter defenses he found the triggered alarm tucked away in the side of a corridor with a note that said “Please do not obstruct the corridors”.

That was a little disconcerting, but was something we could worry about later.

The hike aft went pretty quickly after we navigated up to the big spinal corridor, it really was the most comfortable way to get around the ship even if it was filled with servitors. Before long we were in a giant room filled with arcane machinery and glowing shit that had a note that said “Mid-ship Gellar Field Generator, Do Not Ever Touch. Ever. This Means YOU!” on the door.

You’d think it would be uncomfortable sleeping inside a room filled with sparking machinery and delicate devices that you Must Not Touch, but it really wasn’t. The noise was considerably less than an artillery barrage, and

unlike Twitch's little perimeter traps everything we needed to avoid touching was either very obvious or labeled. We were all quite happy with our new base and slept like babies that night.

The next few days were relatively peaceful. We all felt that enough stuff had gone wrong for the shoe to qualify as dropped. All that was left to do was make ourselves as comfortable as possible for the rest of the trip. Each of us kept busy in our own ways, whether it was exploring the ship and working on the map, helping Jim and Hannah, or compulsively fortifying the perimeter. We made it almost a week before the next crisis.

One "morning" as Sarge was going through his daily drills with Cutter, Nubby poked his head in and asked if Twitch was allowed to keep his unused explosives in the generator room. A few minutes later both of them were examining an impressive pile of ordinance that was sitting out of the way behind some glowing pillars, and a few minutes after that everyone was called in for a good ol' fashioned safety lecture and public reaming.

The lecture came to a sudden stop when Twitch looked at the pile and informed us that the explosives weren't his and were definitely armed. Someone was trying to blow up our base, and for once it wasn't us. This was deeply disturbing.

As Twitch went about disarming the explosives he gave the rest of us a pretty detailed critique. The bombs had been there for a fairly long time, were set up for remote detonation, and had been installed by someone who was nowhere near as good as Twitch. A little thinking led us to believe that the explosives had been placed by someone fairly familiar with the ship, but not with blowing things up. Also there were probably a few more bombs around, otherwise why bother with the remote detonator? While Twitch finished removing the explosives Sarge called the acolytes and explained the situation.

Jim and Hannah were pretty impressed by the discovery and the call was quickly kicked upstairs. Then their superiors kicked us upstairs again and again, until finally we were talking to the ever unresponsive head tech-priest; the Cogtaine, as it were, of the horrible death-trap we were all flying on. For the fifth or sixth time Sarge explained that SOME-



ONE HAD MINED KEY COMPONENTS OF THE SHIP WE WERE ALL ON AND IT MIGHT BE A GOOD IDEA TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. The Cogtain did not dignify us with a response and instead rattled off a bunch of binary at the other tech-priests on the line.

There was a lot of the stupid cogboy screeching, and it sounded like they were taking the situation fairly seriously. None of them told us anything though. Eventually we got tired of them talking over our heads and Sarge suggested that perhaps the resident demolitions expert should look into the matter. Maybe Twitch and his good buddies, you know the guys who found the bombs in the first place, should check out the other Gellar Field Generators and Engines and such. This actually got a response. A horribly distorted voice told us to stand down and stay away from his machines, and then we were disconnected from the channel. That's gratitude for you.

About ten minutes later a massive series of explosions shook the ship.

Bloody tech-priests.

Now we knew a fair bit about explosions, every veteran guardsman does, and we were pretty damned sure that five bombs the size of the one we just defused had gone off. To us that suggested that the explosives had all been linked to go off when someone screwed up while defusing one of them, so chances were that the ship was down a few cogboys and major systems. We weren't really concerned about that first point, but the second was worrying. Depending on which systems had gone down we were in for a whole spectrum of unpleasantness ranging from sudden fiery death, to less sudden chilly death, to lingering insane death. Sarge decided that it was probably a good idea to figure out which one we were headed for.



While the rest of us got our weapons ready Sarge tried to comm the two acolytes. The contact code for Jim still wasn't letting us through, whatever the Cogtain had done to kick us out seemed fairly permanent, but after a few tries he was able to get a hold of Hannah. The poor cog-girl was not cut out for this stuff and sounded like she was on the brink of tears, luckily Sarge knew how to deal with shell-shocked rookies and with Doc's help managed to calm her down enough to get a status report. The news was not good.

The Gellar Field Generators that covered the gaps in the top and bottom decks were completely destroyed, and both the fore and aft ones were damaged. Only the Generator we were sitting on and the one up near the bridge were undamaged, and between them and the two slightly damaged ones there was just enough coverage to keep the whole ship from turning

into a miniature daemon world. It was still a very bad idea to stay in the warp any longer than necessary. When Sarge asked Hannah how soon we were dropping out of the warp to do repairs the poor girl dissolved into tears and broke the real bad news: the Warp-Drive was offline.

The Warp-Drive was the insanely complex device that moved the ship from boring, empty, die-of-asphyxiation-or-starvation space to horrible, daemon filled, die-insane-and-choking-on-your-own-intestines warp-space. Of course the whole point of this is that there are much higher speed limits in the warp or something, what's a little daemonic incursion if it lets you get there faster right?

Well that is a little unfair: the difference between a two hundred year and two week journey is pretty significant, but we were understandably bitter about the whole thing. The problem was that if your Warp-Drive breaks down while you're IN the warp you don't just pop back into reality, noooo you're stuck there until someone fixes it. IF they can fix it that is, otherwise you might as well skip right to the insanity, cannibalism, and daemon worshipping and save a little time.

Things were bad, but they could have been worse. We weren't dead yet, we had a moderately functional Gellar Field, the Plasma Engines were still running fine, and we were damn well going beleive that the Warp-Drive was repairable unless the Emperor himself showed up and told us it

wasn't. We got our shit together, armed the lethal perimeter defenses, and put up a few signs to warn anyone that trying to get near the Gellar Field Generator without our help was just a very painful method of suicide. We were going to hike our asses down to the Warp-Drive and take a look at it in person, because as far as we could tell no one else here was competent enough to do it.

Of course none of us had any idea how to fix a Warp-Drive or even what one looked like, but we weren't going to let some minor thing like that stop us.

That's not to say that we didn't understand the limits of our knowledge or skills. None of us were going to try and fix the machinery ourselves unless we had to, we'd simply start grabbing tech-priests and throwing them at the



problem until they fixed it. Now we were perfectly aware that the Cogtaint and the rest of the techies were probably trying to fix the problem, but they really hadn't impressed us with how they handled the explosives. We felt that a little oversight from the few people on board who hadn't had the "common sense" part of their brain replaced with a little box of screws might help things along.

Our first instinct was to grab one of the acolytes; unfortunately Hannah had been near a blast and was trapped in a room up in the bow of the ship, and we still couldn't contact Jim. We didn't really have time to go retrieve either of them, so we figured that we might as well just shanghai the first tech-priest we came across. Prior to everything hitting the fan Doc had spotted a cogboy bossing around a bunch of servitors a few bays back towards the rear of the ship, and he remembered that the tech-priest had been doing something vaguely repair-like to a large conduit. This sounded like a good candidate for fixing the Warp-Drive, so we lined up behind Doc and went off to see if the techie was still there.

We made it to the bay where Doc has seen the tech-priest pretty quickly, we'd mapped the whole area earlier and nothing nearby was damaged. Unfortunately all we found inside was a horrible smell and partially opened conduit that was helpfully labeled "Dead Felid Inside, Do Not Open," but the far door was open and so was one in the next room. The cogboy had obviously been in a rush to get somewhere, he'd even cut through some of the thinner bulkheads, and since he seemed to be going towards the area where the Warp-Drive was located we decided to follow his trail.

We made good time following the path the tech-priest had blazed, but the farther we travelled the more uneasy all of us felt. Twitch swore that someone was following us, Doc thought he heard other squad members whispering, and the rest of us were just generally uncomfortable. It became apparent that we were leaving coverage of the undamaged Gellar Field; from here on out shit was going to get spooky.

Reality was actually pretty stable where we were, but the minor fluctuations definitely weren't fun. Mostly it was little sounds or flashes of movement at the edge of our vision, and occasionally one of us would feel a flash of rage or paranoia. It was easy to get distracted, but Sarge kept us focused and nothing really bad happened until we caught



I don't know what I expected.



up with the tech-priest and his servitors.

Cutter was on point, and as he entered a doorway a servitor lunged at him with a welding torch. Luckily, he had his chainsword ready and easily parried the blow then returned the favor. At that point several more servitors lurched forward, and in a rare burst of sanity our melee specialist leapt backwards out of the doorway. The second he cleared the line of fire, the rest of us began pouring las-fire into the approaching servitors.

These weren't combat servitors, thank the Emperor, but they were still damned hard to kill. Even with the hotshot lasguns Nubby had gotten for us, it took a headshot or several joint shots to put each one down. Worse, they definitely didn't have any morale to break, the horde just kept advancing with glowing eyes and sparking tools. We mowed down them without any getting through the door, though near the end one of them cut through the wall and barely missed Twitch.

Once we were sure that they were all dead, which was remarkably easy since all of their eyes stopped glowing with daemonic light when you finished them, we advanced into the room. We figured that the puddle with all the chunky bits in it was probably the tech-priest we were following. So much for having him repair the Warp-Drive.

It wasn't a total loss though, the cogboy had booted up a communications console before he died and we'd definitely learned a few things about the state of the ship during our little chase. Mostly that servitors could be possessed or something and a weak Gellar Field meant slowly going insane, but that was still something. From here on out we were going to operate on the assumption that all servitors would try to kill us unless proven otherwise. Twitch suggested we follow the same rule for tech-priests, but was vetoed since we'd probably need a few of them alive to get things fixed.

The console the former tech-priest had warmed up for us was waiting for input, so Sarge decided to call the Cogtaint and tell him we were heading towards the the Warp-Drive to lend assistance. In retrospect this was a horrible idea. None of us had really expected him to be helpful, but we were sort of hoping he'd understand that a squad of well-trained soldiers would be an excellent escort for one of the nearby tech-priests, and maybe point us towards them. Instead we just got a burst of binary and a distorted screech telling us not to desecrate his machines and to let the servitors fix the problem. Sarge tried to explain the servitors appeared to be possessed and were not likely to be fixing anything, but all that got was a second screech



that sounded an awful lot like “Ignorant Meatbags” and then the console locked us out. Bloody tech-priests.

Before this we’d been operating on the usual assumption that the local leadership was moderately incompetent, but after that little tantrum we decided to upgrade them to pants-on-head retarded. This meant that as far as we were concerned Sarge had operational command, and we weren’t even going to try talking to the senior techies anymore. The only way we’d start listening to them again was if they showed up with a lot more firepower than we could muster. That decided, we headed towards the Warp-Drive.

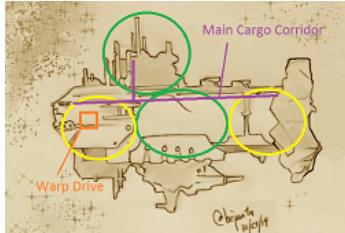
Aside from the little warpy annoyances the rest of the trip wasn’t too bad. Mostly it was just a matter of navigating the maze of corridors, reading the helpful notes, and dodging the occasional group of servitors. They all seemed to be headed towards the top of the ship, which was a little odd, but it made them easy to avoid. Unfortunately we didn’t run in to any other tech-priests during the walk, so when we finally got the the Warp-Drive there wasn’t much we could do.



The drive was obviously in bad shape: about a third of the room had been destroyed by the explosion and there were some pretty big pieces of shrapnel sticking out of the big glowy pillar thing. We couldn’t help but notice the lack of servitors fixing things, which pretty much proved our theory about the Cogtaint’s competence or lack thereof. On the bright side there weren’t any servitors around to try and kill us, so it was easy to set up a perimeter around the Drive-room.

Of course we still needed to find someone to fix the damned drive, so Sarge ordered Twitch to hold the fort while the rest of the squad went off to search for a tech-priest. We got pretty lucky with that; the fifth room we checked had two of them in it. Well not really two, more like one and a bit, well bits, yeah... lots of little bits. The important thing though was the living tech-priest was Jim!

The acolyte was trying to put his boss back together like a very leaky jigsaw puzzle and didn’t seem to be all there. Sarge and Doc knew how to deal with this sort of thing though, and before long they had Jim up and moving if still a little shaken up. As we led him back to the Warp-Drive he kept insisting that his orders were to clean the incense burners down near engine three; apparently the Cogtaint would be furious if he didn’t finish before the next maintenance cycle. We tried to explain fixing the Warp-Drive probably took priority, but he was very insistent.



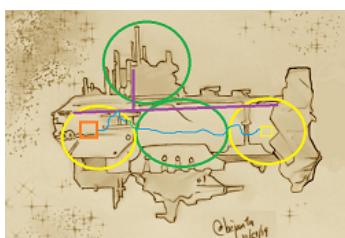
When logic didn't work Nubby took a stab. He wheedled, cajoled, and outright lied to the distraught cogboy. See we were actually working on the direct orders of the Cogtain, and he said it was very important that we fix the Warp-Drive and every tech-priest was supposed to help us. In fact he had specifically said Jim should fix it because he was very impressed with all the techy things that Jim had been doing. Also, no, he shouldn't call the Cogtain to make sure. The

Cogtain said he was very busy doing things with machines and servitors and stuff. To everyone's surprise Jim accepted this complete load of horseshit and started poking at the damaged drive.

Of course Jim was just a low level acolyte and knew very little about Warp-Drives, but there were quite a few of the helpful little notes around. He was able to pinpoint several broken components that he knew how to fix, but unfortunately some of those fixes would require rare and expensive parts. Parts that were so rarely replaced that no spares had been included in the ship's inventory.

Now this sounds really bad at first, but after you spend some time in the Guard you learn the difference between what's officially in the inventory and what's available if you're willing to get out a crowbar. Nubby got a full list of parts from the boy then went through each one and quizzed the acolyte about what other ship's systems might use them. Some were pretty much unique to the Warp-Drive, but it turned out that most of the really important ones were also used in Gellar Field Generators.

We got out our map, plotted a route, gave Jim a pistol, and went to make a supply run.



The first step of our shopping trip was deciding which Gellar Field Generator to plunder. The best candidates for scavenging the parts we needed in one go were the intact generators in the middle of the ship up near the bridge. Unfortunately, those parts were rather critical and ripping them out would probably break either generator. Since those two undamaged generators were probably all that was keeping the ship in reality, we opted to try our luck with one of the damaged ones instead. The one in the rear of the ship was right out, we needed the engines and Warp-Drive to stay daemon-free, so really the only option was the generator all the way at the bow of the ship. It was going to be a long

walk.

In an effort to speed up our journey, we decided to divert to the big spinal freight corridor that ran the length of the ship. As we made our way upwards, we reached the ragged edge of the Gellar Field's coverage, and every one of us began to feel reality's grip weakening. Cutter's sword started talking to him, Doc's teeth began to itch, Nubby could feel his old legs, and when Sarge and Twitch opened a door they saw a headless corpse and a charred skeleton playing poker. Neither of them seemed unfriendly, but we still elected to go around that room. When we reached an entrance to the big corridor Twitch and Jim opened up a small viewport and scouted the place. They closed it very fast.

According to them the corridor was packed with glowy-eyed servitors and they were all working on something. Twitch also spotted a few minor daemons which seemed to be randomly split between fighting the servitors, helping them, and staying out of their way. None of us knew what to make of that, but it was pretty clear that the main corridor was now possessed servitor territory. We resigned ourselves to a long, slow hike and headed back down into the ship.

Mostly the trip was boring. The novelty of the ship's horrible design had worn off long ago and we got used to the minor warp phenomena pretty quickly. Seen one room with faulty gravity or walls that wept blood, seen 'em all. It was nice when we got into the coverage of the fully functional Gellar Field; we actually stopped and took a lunch break at our old base in the generator room. While we ate, Twitch checked his traps and reported that no one had messed with them, and Jim walked us through identifying the parts he'd need from the sacrificial generator.



Once we were through the fully covered region things started to get dangerous again. We ran across a few bands of servitors that seemed to be searching the ship for something as well as the occasional minor daemon. None of us saw any profit in slugging it out, so we all did our best to stay quiet and avoid the hostiles. Thanks to Twitch and Nubby's scouting abilities, we mostly succeeded, and the single pack of servitors and handful of daemons we couldn't go around were easy kills.

As we got closer to the Gellar Field Generator, we heard fighting and picked up the pace. The source of the noise turned out to be a group of servitors trying to get into the generator room, which someone inside was vigorously defending. We figured that some of the tech-priests were holed up

in there and hit the servitors in the rear.

It was a clean fight, and once Cutter had finished off the last one we cautiously made our way into the room. Surprisingly, it was not filled with tech-priests; instead it contained a mob of pale old men. They were armed with what looked like modified power-tools, and each of them had a few yellow notepads sticking out of their pockets.



While it was a bit of a surprise to run into a bunch of stowaways, we'd sort of expected something like this. When the notes kept appearing we knew it was either some incredibly helpful person or some sort of warp trickery or machine spirit weirdness. All of us had been fervently hoping for the helpful person explanation, for obvious reasons. We hadn't been prepared for just how old they were though; these guys looked like they were all over a hundred.

The beardiest of the stowaways greeted us all by name, which was a little creepy, introduced himself as Ol' Bill, and thanked us for the help. He was apparently the leader of a group of crewmembers who hadn't been willing to leave the ship. They'd outlived three captains already, and they'd be damned if they wouldn't outlive a fourth. Sarge processed this, then decided to skip all the bullshit about mysteries, notes, secret passages, and all that in favor of actually getting shit done. He explained the situation with the Warp-Drive, our plan to rip the Generator they'd all been defending apart, and then asked the old men what it would take to get their support.

The geezers weren't keen on scrapping the Generator, but when Jim explained the damage to the Warp-Drive they agreed that it was necessary. The problem was that the old crewmembers weren't the only stowaways on the ship. They had a bunch of friends and even some family living in Hydroponics Bay 7C, and when the Gellar Field collapsed those folks would be ass deep in daemons. The old men would throw in with us if we went and evacuated everyone to a safer part of the ship, and also, just while we were in the area, got rid of the small army of servitors laying siege to the hydroponics bay.

All in all this was a pretty good deal; Jim was going to need some time and help getting the parts ready to be pulled and we didn't have anything better to do. Before we went anywhere though we had a few things to take care of. While Twitch pulled out a few of his toys and beefed the Generator-room's defences, the rest of us went to find Hannah, who was supposedly in one of the nearby damaged rooms.

We found the poor cog-girl trapped behind some rubble, and with the help of a las-cutter we pried off one of the servitors we got her out of there. Hannah wasn't very happy, in fact she was practically hysterical, but she was relatively unscathed. None of us were well equipped to handle a panicking cog-girl, so Doc gave her a few band-aids and we unceremoniously dumped her on Jim and the old guys. Our heroic rescue mission successful, we gathered up Twitch and went to get the rest of the stowaways out of their hydroponics bay.

The directions that Bill gave us were great, and we quickly reached the bay's access corridor. He hadn't been exaggerating about the small army of servitors though; in fact it was more of a medium army now, and there were a few daemons in there too. They seemed keen on something inside the bay, but weren't making much headway against the big ass doors. That was a good thing, because we definitely couldn't handle all those servitors with our current loadout. We needed to make a plan.

We debated the problem for a while. Twitch was in favor of setting a large explosive trap, Doc thought there might be another way into the bay, Sarge explained to Nubby that we couldn't just tell the old guys that they were dead when we got there, and Cutter was talking to his sword again. Eventually we decided to go with Doc's suggestion and started scouting the surrounding area.

That's how we found Hydronics Bay 9D. The bay that the stowaways lived in had some big warnings painted on the door: stuff like "Do Not Enter, Use Console To Request Rations," "Hazardous Materials," and "Incredibly Dangerous, Never Open".

9D's door just had three meter high letters that said "BEWARE OF KNARLOC."

Of course we didn't believe that for a second. There was absolutely no reason for there to be a Knarloc on an Imperial vessel. It was obviously just a ruse to keep people out. This meant it was probably another entrance to the stowaways bay; with any luck we could cut through there and get everyone out without the servitors noticing.

About thirty seconds after we jimmied open the big cargo doors we slammed them shut again, because HOLY SHIT THAT KNARLOC LOOKED PISSED.

We decided to take a little breather after that scare and reconsidered our options. The bad news was that we definitely weren't sneaking through



that hydroponics bay, but on the other hand we had an amazing distraction available to us. All we had to do was get it out of the bay and down one level then it would keep the servitors busy while we snuck in. A little tinkering with the door controls and the nearby lift, a few dead servitors, and we were ready to rock.



It worked like a charm: the Knarloc barreled out of the bay the second the doors were open and ran right to the pile of servitor corpses sitting on the elevator. We activated the lift and watched with delight as the entire army of servitors turned to face the new threat. As much as we wanted to stay around and watch the fight, we had stuff to do; the second the last servitors left the room we dashed over to the bay's comm panel and nicely asked them to open up.

I'm not sure what we expected to find in there, but it definitely wasn't a flourishing tribal village in the middle of a small jungle.

Seriously, it was an entire village. Grass huts and everything.



There must have been over two hundred of them in there; just hanging out and living a relatively simple agricultural life in the middle of a bloody spaceship. We'd seen weirder things, hell we'd just started a fight between a spacefaring dinosaur and a bunch of possessed mechanical corpses, but this was definitely one of those special memories that would stay with us.

It was remarkably easy to get them evacuated, this wasn't the first time they'd migrated to a new home, and Ol' Bill had called ahead to make sure they knew the score. They gathered up most of their village into packs and cargo trolleys, and then we all got the hell out of there. As we walked, the sounds of battle echoed in the distance along with the occasional roar. We congratulated ourselves on our brilliant planning, and assured each other that there was no way this was going to come back and bite us in the ass.

We led the migration back to the Generator-room without serious incident. The tribals seemed pretty tough, and between us and their warriors we easily managed to kill the few daemons and servitors we ran into. Once we arrived Bill detailed a few of his men to lead them to a safer area, then invited us in to look at the preparations for pulling out the parts.

We'd expected everything to be more or less ready, they had all the tools

and knowledge of the ship after all. It should have just been a matter of us saying it was time to go, then they'd pull everything out and that'd be that. Instead they gave us a bewildering briefing about what to cut, what to grab, how to carry it, and where to go. Then they left.

They didn't offer to help or check if we agreed with their plan. Hell, they didn't even ask if we understood everything. They just bossed us around, wished us luck, then left.

In the words of that ancient guardsman hero Ollanius Pius, "Why the hell is everything always our job?"

We didn't spend too long wallowing in self-pity though; you get used to this sort of thing when you're a guardsman.

Sarge and Doc put their heads together and formed a plan, Nubby and Cutter went over the instructions we'd been given, and Twitch cleared up his traps. Jim had marked out what needed to be cut, what needed to be grabbed, and what order to do it in. All we had to do was run to safety and we were damned good at that. It would all be relatively simple except for the fact that the Gellar Field would be collapsing around us.

Doc and Sarge put a lot of thought into who would be carrying what. Nubby was the fastest one of us thanks to his augmetic legs, so he'd grab the last parts. Sarge and Cutter were the strongest and would handle the heavy carts. Finally, Twitch and Doc would keep their weapons free to cover the rest of us. Each of us memorized our role in the plan, reviewed the map and directions Bill gave us, and got ready to run like the daemons of the warp were pursuing us, because they probably would be.

Sarge called Jim and Bill, made sure everyone was clear, and counted down. We worked fast, ripping out part after part as cables sparked and alarms blared all around us. The second the final piece was out we barreled out of the now smoke-filled room and ran like hell. We got about fifty meters before we felt the Gellar Field start to fail and reality went runny around the edges.

The whispers, flashes of movement, and sudden emotions hit us first. Doc and Twitch fired at several shadows, only one of which had an actual daemon in it, Sarge started screaming at Nubby and vowed to beat the little trooper to death with his own augmetic legs, and Cutter began apologising to his sword for not using her enough. We managed to keep together and keep moving though; even if Nubby had to take the lead since Sarge was pretty much chasing him now.





The gravity fluctuations and bleeding walls came next, along with a few more minor arcane horrors that just sort of blinked at us as we barreled past. Twice we got slammed off of our feet when down changed to left or right, but we'd taken those extra few seconds to tie down the parts and didn't lose anything. We did get damned messy; luckily warp-blood washes out

just fine.

Our first serious daemon encounter came at about the halfway mark. Nubby came back-pedalling out a room screaming about eyes and tentacles, and we just barely managed to stop and shut the door in time. We tried to divert around, but both of the side passages seemed to open into the same place: a room which appeared to be several kilometers across and filled with fire. There wasn't time for this shit, so we popped open the hatch, chucked in four grenades and one of Twitch's detpacks, and slammed it again. The second the bang went off, we opened it back up and just sprinted across the room while doing our best to ignore the writhing tentacles.

We got a few rooms past that without incident then found ourselves in some sort of infinite loop of corridors. After the third time we passed a door, labeled "Temporary Sewage Storage, Wear a Suit," we realized what was happening and stopped to figure things out. Behind us a door banged open and a mass of tentacles started pouring out.



Cutter leapt into action and started hacking off limbs while the rest of us started wildly opening doors. The first one had what looked like the Hospitaller and that bitch of an Interrogator tied up and screaming for help inside. Sarge slammed it back shut before anyone else could move. The second and third were filled with more tentacles and fire respectively, but we got them closed before anything bad happened. The next one had that headless corpse and charred skeleton playing poker again.

Now that we saw it a second time, the corpse wasn't quite headless, he just had a bad case of exit-wound-face. When we opened the door he casually waved at us then rested what was left of his head on the table while his partner turned to face us. The well-done skeleton laughed and told us we probably wanted the the door across the hall that was labeled "Light Cargo ONLY".

From his resting spot on the table, the nearly-headless corpse gurgled something which prompted the skeleton to laugh again and warn us not to open the “poo door”.

Doc awkwardly thanked him and slammed the hatch shut. After a brief debate we took the jolly skeleton’s advice, he seemed pretty trustworthy, and piled through the marked door. A second later we piled back out, grabbed Cutter, and dragged him after us.

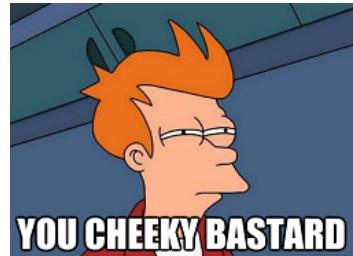
There weren’t any side passages in the next two rooms, and when we barreled through the last door we found ourselves back in familiar territory near the edge of the safe zone. As we ran, reality finally started to get its shit back together and the going got significantly easier. We started picking up speed, only stopping to pop a few more minor daemons and divert around a pit that opened up into that huge fiery room again. Then, right as we started running down the last hallway, a large sword slammed through a door and Cutter immediately abandoned his cart in favor of having a sword fight with a daemon.

You could say that it was an act of heroic bravery or selfless sacrifice, but you’d be wrong. It was an act of complete and utter retardation, and only Sarge grabbing him by the legs while everyone else gave covering fire saved his stupid life.

The daemon followed of course, but hotshots pack a punch and we kept him back long enough for Twitch to drop a few mines. The second they were down we ran like little girls and just barely got around a corner before that daemon went bang. We didn’t go back to check if it was dead; as long as it wasn’t following us we were happy.

Cutter had gotten a pretty mean chest wound before Sarge yanked him away and wasn’t looking too hot as we dumped him onto one of the carts. Once the squad was fully inside the safe zone we stopped in a handy room and Doc got to work on him. While he did the stitching and stuff, Sarge called the acolytes and had them send someone to take the loot the rest of the way.

Once Cutter was sorted out we all hiked down to the Warp-Drive. The trip was a lot quieter this time around: the techies or the old crewmen must have beefed up the rear Gellar Field, and we saw a few of the tribal warriors standing guard at junctions. When we reached the drive-room the place was a hive of activity. Jim and Hannah were running around fixing things, the stowaways were acting as assistants and advisors, and Ol’ Bill was yelling directions at everyone.



The second he saw us, Ol' Bill waved us over and filled us in. Repairs were going well, the perimeter was holding up fine, and it wouldn't be long until we could shift back to real-space. We all breathed a sigh of relief, but before anyone could celebrate Hannah poked her head out of a gutted machine and reported that some piece warpy tech was busted. Everyone went quiet at this.

Ol' Bill thought hard for a few seconds then brightened up and told everyone not to worry: there was a spare aboard. The old bugger turned to us, gave a toothless smile, and said he needed a few brave lads to fetch a part from the Psyker Holding Cells downstairs. As one we turned to Nubby, who started to sidle out of the room.



You see, with the exception of Cutter, all of us had a bit of experience with psykers and ships with Psyker Holding Cells. We'd been part of a team which had busted up a corrupt government group that was gathering up all of a planet's nascent psykers, usually as children, and was selling them off-world. That mission had ended with us being sent home with a scathing report which we then doctored to make us look better. Last we'd heard, the jackass who was running the investigation was still looking for the rest of the ships which had been used to transport the kidnapped psykers.

Up to this point, we'd put Nubby's position as the ship's procurer down to bureaucratic incompetence or a completely understandable desire to get him out from underfoot. From there it was easy to blame the horrible quality of the ship on Nubby's unique weasley incompetence, as well as some of the ordinary variety from his bosses. All that went out the window the second we heard the phrase "Psyker Holding Cells" though, and we jumped to some new conclusions.

As we walked Sarge grilled the despicable little trooper and the truth finally came out. He'd spotted this ship in some report or other and instead of turning it in and having it seized the cretin had decided to try and impress his boss. Nubby had flagged the ship as a prospective purchase, and then went and swore up and down to his superior that he could get it at a much lower price than anyone else. Emperor only knows why his boss agreed. Possibly, the poor man had just wanted Nubby to go away for a few months.

Right up to that final meeting with the fat captain the purchasing process had gone normally. Then Nubby, in his infinite brilliance, had told the man that he knew the ship's dirty secret and threatened to expose him if he didn't bring down the price.

It wasn't hard to see why bombs had been planted on the ship or who had planted them. Damn Nubby and his bloody stupid schemes.

The worst part was how he tried to defend himself, pointing out that he "didn't lie to nobody 'bout nofink," and "spifcily said we weren't 'Quisitiors, an' there weren't no 'ard feelins an' it was jus' bisness," and "got a really good deal even wif all da dents an' stuff".

We were all just about ready to kill him, and Sarge probably would have if we didn't have other concerns at the moment. Instead we privately vowed that Nubby would never again be allowed any sort of authority and, if we survived this, everything would be blamed on him.

Our trip started to get hairy as we descended deeper into the ship; the cells were way at the edge of the current Gellar Field coverage. Aside from the usual weirdness and the fair number of minor daemons, which we killed if we couldn't avoid them, we ran into a few more of those spooky doors that opened into weird places. We got that huge fire room five times, the tentacle daemon twice, and found one room inhabited by some sort of sewage monster. That last one might have been real though, the note on the door did say "Xenos Waste Processing Device, Do Not Enter."

The last warpy door we ran into had the rather crispy skeleton playing poker again, but now the head-shot man was slumped in an armchair in the corner and a bunch of other players had taken his place. We spotted a bunch of ghostly looking soldiers with regimental insignias we couldn't quite make out, and some vague spectres who looked eerily familiar. There was also a big guy with a sword drowning someone wearing robes in the punchbowl.

As we tried to quietly shut the door, the skeleton spotted us and congratulated us on staying alive. The nearly-headless one jerked up in its chair and gurgled something then slumped back down. The burnt skeleton practically fell over laughing at this, but he caught his breath right before we slammed the door. As the hatch closed, he advised us to check the cells before we took our part. A second after we'd slowly backed away from the door, it popped back open, and we heard the skeleton shout that the big guy said no hard feelings and not to open the last cell. On that cryptic note, the door slammed shut again.

We spent a few seconds digesting the skeleton's advice, and how oddly familiar the room's occupants had been. Twitch suggested opening it back up for another look, but Sarge vetoed this and led us down the last corridor to the psyker cells.





The Psyker Holding Cells were much, much fancier than anything else we'd seen on the Occurrence Border. It was a fairly small place, with only a dozen actual cells, but they'd obviously been custom built and installed instead of scavenged; it had probably been some part of the contract for hauling the psykers. The part we needed was sticking out of some arcane machine in the middle of the main room, right where Ol' Bill said it would be. We cut open the casing, loosened the part, and left it in place while we checked what was inside the cells: the skeleton and his macabre buddies hadn't steered us wrong yet

We all got into covering positions around one of the doors. Doc opened it, peeked inside, and started swearing when he saw its occupant. The kid didn't look more than eight years old, though who knew how long he'd been lying in that stasis field, and there was a little card at the foot of his bed which had a greek letter and a list of specialties. This one was apparently a pyromancer and a telekine.

We checked the rest of the cells, except for the one we'd been warned about, and found about half of them occupied. We had five psykers between the ages of five and ten sitting in stasis, and chances were the only thing keeping them from being possessed by big-ass daemons was the part we were about to take.

The smart option at this point would have been to just kill them. We couldn't take their stasis beds with us, and we were in the middle of a freaking incursion here. This was just about the worst place and time to have a bunch of untrained psykers running around. In the end though none of us were big enough bastards to do it. One by one we pulled them out of their beds then, since we weren't complete idiots, we tranqued them and stuffed them into our backpacks. They didn't weigh much more than a full field kit.

For the second time that day we planned our path, yanked out a piece of delicate machinery, and ran like hell.

We didn't have to contend with nearly as much warp bullshit this time, but the second we pulled out that part the one unopened door was dented outwards and we heardemonic howling from every direction. We ran as fast as we could and kept our weapons ready.

The first few were the minor daemons we'd been seeing everywhere and it only took a single shot to put them down. The problem was that every one cost us a second, and SOMETHING was slamming up the corridors behind us. It did NOT sound friendly, but we were doing a pretty good job of keeping ahead of it at first. It wasn't until we ran into the larger daemons

that whatever was chasing us began to gain ground.

That damned tentacle daemon was the first one we ran into. It burst through a door as we were running past and made a grab for Doc's kid. He dodged just in time, and Cutter managed to hold the thing off long enough for the rest of us to get past. For once we didn't need to pull the nutcase away from the fight: the second we were clear he started falling back. Twitch tossed a few hot nades into the mess of tentacles which kept it back long enough for us to slam a door shut and continue our run. A short time later we heard some especially loud daemonic shrieks, a few clangs, and the sound of a shut door being torn open.



After that it was clear running for a while. There were a few of the small fry, another door with the two disguised daemonettes which we slammed shut, Nubby was nearly set on fire when his kid manifested a few small fireballs in his sleep, but it was basically easy going. We were getting tired though, and whatever was behind us was gaining. We started shutting every door we went through, and Twitch began dropping mines, but as far as we could tell that only made it madder.

Eventually it became clear that the strengthening Gellar Field wasn't going to stop our pursuer, so as we ran we got ready for a fight. The moment we ran into one of the small groups of tribal warriors we practically threw the kids on them and slammed the door we'd come through. We piled the last of Twitch's detpacks plus every grenade we had around the door, then got into firing positions. Half a minute later the hatch burst open and a daemonhost flew though.



We thought it looked like a little kid with big black wings made of smoke, but none of us got a long look before the explosives went off. The second the shockwave was past, every one of us began pouring full-auto fire down the smoke-filled corridor. After about half a minute of continuous firing, our view began to clear and we all heard a voice in our heads vowing vengeance as soon as it found a more suitable host. At Sarge's order we stayed in position for another few minutes in case it was a trick, but the daemonhost didn't reappear. Eventually we declared victory and headed up the Warp-Drive to see how things were going.

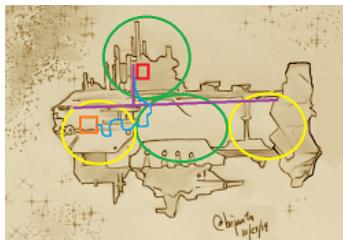
Some tribal women were caring for the kids when we got there. Doc ran over and made sure no one tried to wake them up while the rest of us

resupplied and talked to Ol' Bill and the acolytes. They were overjoyed to see the part we'd got for them and immediately started welding it into place. While they worked Bill explained that everything was pretty much ready and all that was left to do was call up to the bridge and get whoever was piloting this thing to take us out of warp. All of us groaned at that.

We knew this meant talking to the Cogtain and weren't looking forward to the conversation. Hopefully he'd just accept that we'd saved his bacon and hit the damned button instead of yelling about stuff. Hannah went over and tinkered with the room's comm console, and Sarge got ready to do the talking.

We'd been expecting a little shouting or something. Instead all we got deranged voice screeching about "weak flesh" and "Avatar of the Omnissiah".

Then the console caught fire.



The consensus was that the Cogtain had completely lost it, so someone had to go upstairs and hit the buttons on the bridge. Of course everyone looked at us as they said that, it just wasn't surprising anymore.

At least we managed to convince them that we needed a short break before we ran into another fight. All of us grabbed a snack and tried to catch a few minutes of sleep. While we rested, one of Bill's men went and fetched the really heavy ordnance that we had left in our quarters. We figured that we'd need every bit of firepower we could get for this trip because the only way to access the command deck was through the main lifts located in the big spinal corridor. The one full of possessed servitors. At least we'd be crossing it where there was good Gellar Field coverage.

When our heavy weapons arrived, we staggered to our feet and got ready for one last hike. Twitch had all of his explosives, Sarge had his grenade launcher, Nubby had a few single shot rockets, and Doc and Cutter had as much ammo as they could carry. There was no way we'd cross that corridor without being noticed, so we might as well be ready to kill whatever we ran into.

We made sure we had a clean comm connection to the acolytes and clanked our way up towards the big spinal corridor. We planned our route so we'd spend the minimal amount of time in there before we got to the lifts and prayed to the Emperor that most of the servitors would be busy somewhere else. Unfortunately it didn't work out that way: as we reached the edge of the safe zone a pair of tribal scouts reported that the servitors were building something almost right on top of the lifts.

What we saw when we peeked into the big hallway was pretty damned terrifying. The servitors were piling all sorts of materials, including themselves, into some sort of giant structure. A ring of what looked like every surviving tech-priest was standing around the structure giving commands to the servitors and chanting in binary. Up above all this activity there was a hovering platform and standing right in the middle of it, screaming like a cross between a shorted vox unit and a mechanical sprinkler, was the Cogtain. Also everything was glowing, which was probably bad.



We didn't wait to see what was going to happen or bother trying to find a way to sneak around. We just hefted our weapons and started pouring as much fire as possible into both the growing structure and the tech-priests. Metal and meat flew everywhere, our first volley tore apart dozens of servitors and cogboys, but to our surprise they didn't react at all. They just ignored us while they kept chanting and building. We didn't stop to ponder this; if they were going to hold still and be easy targets, then we were going to take advantage of it.

Unfortunately this happy state didn't last for long. Before we could kill more than half the tech-priests the chanting rose a crescendo, and the surviving cogboys climbed onto the structure with the last of the servitors. The Cogtain stepped off his platform onto the top of the thing and with a slow smooth movement the whole damned pile stood up.

It was like some sort of servitor titan, and boy was it pissed.

We poured the rest of our launcher rounds and missiles into the damned thing without much effect. A few servitors dropped off, but the others sort of flowed into the holes and the thing just kept coming. As it approached, the Cogtain kept up his screaming and added the occasional gothic insult. We decided it was time to get the hell out of there and turned towards the door we came through.



Right as we got to it there was an especially loud screech from behind us, and the door slammed shut. Then the door on the other side of the corridor slammed shut. Finally, with a tremendous crashing sound, every door down the length of the corridor shut itself. We took a look at the doors, then at the servi-titan, briefly pondered the situation, and started running down the corridor like scared little girls. Behind us the monstrosity lengthened its gait and started picking up speed.

As we ran we dodged past a few remaining servitors and minor daemons who wandered towards the titan. We didn't stop to worry about them, but when we looked back the monstrosity was stopping to pick them up and slap them into its body. That was probably a bad thing, but at least it was slowing the monster down.

We started to gain a lead on the servi-titan and began considering options. We were down to shooting it a lot and hoping it had a weakpoint, piling all of our explosives together and hoping it was enough, or blasting open a door. Sarge decided to go with the big pile-o-mines, but just as we were getting ready to stop and set it up we saw something ahead of us.

Something about as large as the servi-titan was coming down the corridor. On closer inspection it appeared to be some sort of large bipedal lizard. With wings. Black smoky wings. Also horns and very glowy eyes.



So no shit there we were, trapped in a hallway with a horrible servitor titan coming at us from one side and a possessed Knarloc coming from the other. There were probably worse positions to be in, but damned if we could think of any at the moment.

Suddenly blasting open a door looked like the best available option. We all unhelpfully yelled at Twitch as he picked out a small door and set the minimum number of charges needed to open it up. Both the daemonic horrors were closing on us as we took cover and hit the detonator. It was all we could do to stay in cover until the explosives went off. The second the door was open we piled through and got as far away from it as possible.

Behind us there was a loud crash, and a good portion of the bulkhead around the door bent inward. A second later there was a meatier sounding crash and a tremendous amount of screeching and roaring. We all watched the doorway as huge feet stomped back and forth and the noise continued. From the look of things the two monsters had gotten into a bit of a fight, and for the time being we'd been forgotten.

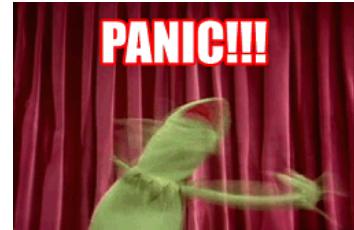
We had absolutely no desire to interrupt that fight; it was the only distraction we were likely to get and hopefully one of them would kill the other. We ran along side rooms and passages as quickly as we could and got as far towards the lifts as possible before we blew open another door. As soon as it was open we started running down the corridor as fast as our legs could carry us. Every once in a while we'd look back to make sure the giants were still fighting and hadn't noticed us.

Amazingly our luck held out and we reached the elevators without incident. We piled onto the single large platform that would take us up to the

bridge, hit the button, and breathed a sigh of relief as the fight dropped out of sight.

In an offhand way Twitch wondered if the fight would end with them combining into a daemonic-servi-knarlo-titan. No one laughed.

As we rode up, Sarge commed Jim and the rest to make sure everything was still okay and fill them in on the situation. The acolytes took the news about the Cogtain a little hard, but otherwise everything down there was just fine. All we had to do was hit a few buttons and we'd be out of the warp. Down below us there was a titanic crash and a scream that shook the walls. Nubby pushed the up button a few more times, and Twitch started getting the rest of his explosives ready.



When we reached the top of the elevator, Twitch fixed his detpacks to platform's joints, and we all headed through a pair of impressive looking doors. The bridge was large, filled with blinking lights, had a massive but slightly cracked window that was currently covered, and was practically papered with little yellow notes. As we stood and pondered the massive array of buttons there was another scream, and the elevator started to descend.

That focused our attention nicely, and we started hunting through the arrays of controls for the Warp-Drive switch. Bill had said it was large, blue, labeled "Fire Missile Bay 26F," and had a note that said "Never Ever Ever Touch".

That last part was completely useless, almost every note on the bridge said that, and we wondered how the Cogtain had steered this thing. Maybe he just jammed his tentacles into it or something.

It took a fair bit of painful trial and error to find the right switch. Every time one of us found one that looked good we hit it and hoped for the best. Before we got the right one we managed to find the controls for three cargo bays, a positioning engine, and the gravity for the top third of the ship. That last one nearly killed us, but Doc managed to hold onto it and get it back to normal before anyone got badly hurt.

When we finally found the right switch we flipped it down and waited for something to happen. There was a charging sound, an incredibly loud *CLANG*, and Jim helpfully informed us that a major daemonic presence was keeping us from dewarping.

It didn't take long to guess what was going on, and we all ran to the elevator shaft and looked down. Twitch started giggling as the daemonic-servi-knarlo-titan slowly rose towards us.



The thing looked pretty mean. Well actually it looked pretty much the same as it had before, except with a Knarloc head for an arm and an undersized set of smoky wings. Still, that was way more than we wanted to fight. Sarge gave Twitch a poke, and the trooper hit all of his detonators.

The platform disintegrated along with the bottom half of the monstrosity, but as we all watched in horror the thing sank its claws and teeth into the side of the shaft and began to climb. This was not a good thing: we had no desire to fight this horror in close combat. We got out our lasguns and grenades, and every one of us poured as much fire as possible into the thing's hands.

The monstrosity made it about three quarters of the way up to us before, all at once, its normaller hand disintegrated. The thing managed to hang on with its dino-arm for a moment then plummeted down into the depths.

A few seconds later there was an impressive squishing sound, then the universe went “prolg” and tasted faintly of the color yellow. We all turned and watched as the large shutters on the bridge’s front window started to open. The Occurrence Border had achieved reality.

As we congratulated each other on a job well done and wandered back towards the bridge there was an ominous swooping sound behind us. All of us turned to face the shaft and watched the Cogtain rose out of it; complete with smoky black wings and curly metal horns. No one moved, not us and not the daemonic tech-priest, everyone just stood there and calculated the odds.

Then Cutter revved his chainsword, the Cogtain let out a horrible screeching laugh and hefted his gear-staff, and both of them lunged forwards.



Each of us sprang into action like the pros we were. A torrent of las-fire plowed into the daemonhost, and Cutter neatly intercepted his charge. He met the Cogtain’s staff with his chainsword, forced the stroke aside, and then dodged away so we could get another volley in.

We repeated this trick three times before the daemonhost let out a scream of frustration and leveled his staff at Doc. A bolt of black lightning hit the medic in the chest and threw him into a wall, but before the Cogtain could follow up his attack Cutter brought his sword down and removed one of the bastard’s metal arms. Unfortunately he didn’t manage to dodge the Cogtain’s counterstroke and was thrown nearly to the edge of the shaft.

With Cutter out of the line of fire, the rest of us poured as much las-fire

as we could into the daemonhost and actually started to force the foul thing back. He countered with a few more lightning bolts, but two missed their mark and the last one only fried one of Nubby's legs. We managed pushed the Cogtaint all the way to the edge of the shaft where he crouched and put up some sort of shield. Behind him Cutter silently got to his feet and raised his sword

Cutter didn't manage the decapitation he was aiming for, but he got one of the smoky wings and knocked the Cogtaint off balance. A few shots from the rest of the squad pushed him a little farther, and the daemonhost slowly began to topple into the shaft. At the very last second his remaining hand reached out, grabbed Cutter's ankle, and pulled it out from under him.

Cutter just barely managed to grab the edge of the shaft with both hands and kick off the Cogtaint's grip. The daemonhost started to erratically fall down the shaft, flapping his remaining wing and screaming curses in a horrible mix of daemonic and binary. Cutter didn't spare any attention for the falling Cogtaint, he was fixated on something much more important. Next to him, just barely out of his reach, his chainsword was teetering on the lip of the shaft. He watched in horror as, ever-so-slowly, it tipped over.

Sarge saw what was coming next and almost managed to get there in time, "almost" being the key word. The damned fool let go of the edge and swung himself towards his beloved chainsword. The noncom watched as Cutter made the catch then dove like a falcon onto the flailing daemonhost. He wrapped his legs around the Cogtaint, raised his rescued sword, and started hacking at the metal bastard while screaming at the top of his lungs.

Sarge and Twitch stood there and watched Cutter fall toward his heroic death, but Nubby, bless his blackened little heart, sprinted as fast as his damaged leg could carry him back towards the bridge.

About five seconds before Cutter and what was left of the Daemonhost hit the ground Nubby found the gravity control and threw it in the opposite direction. Sarge, Doc, and Twitch all slammed into the ceiling; collecting a concussion, four broken ribs, and a dislocated shoulder between them. Meanwhile a rather bewildered Cutter flew back up the shaft on a very injured daemonhost.

It took Nubby a few tries to get the gravity just right, but eventually



he zeroed it out, and Cutter managed to flail his way to safety. As soon as he was clear Nubby cranked up the gravity as high as it would go, and the Cogtain flew down the shaft at incredible speed. Later we checked the bottom of the elevator shaft. He punched through four decks and half of an awkwardly placed wall before he stopped.

We set up camp in the bridge. Doc had a nasty burn but would be okay, there were a lot of minor broken bones, and Cutter had an impressive series of cuts all over his chest, the Cogtain hadn't gone down easy. We were all still alive though, and based on what Jim and Bill told us the ship was in relatively stable condition. As long as you ignored the massive warp taint in the bow and the upper and lower decks that is.

We called that a victory and stood the hell down.

It took them a day and a half to rig up a replacement elevator, but we didn't notice. We were busy sleeping.

Getting the ship back in, well, ship-shape was a lot of work, but easier than it might of been. For instance, we might have lost the Navigator and Astropath who steered our ship in the warp and enabled interstellar communications respectively.

We found the the Navigator alive and well, he'd apparently been following the standard Navigator operating procedure for a warp incursion. Said procedure was to just lock yourself in your sanctum and ignore all the daemonic silliness while you concentrate on steering the ship through the warp. A remarkably sane response all things considered, and about the same as the

one the Astropath had been following. Except in the Astropath's case he wasn't keeping the ship from crashing into a reality reef: he was just hiding under his bed and crying. We left the Navigator to his business and pulled the Astropath out then made him send a report along to Oak.

Telling your boss that you are going to be late for work because ninety-nine percent of your Mechanicus contingent had been possessed by daemons and subsequently purged is very awkward. Sarge tried to mitigate the unpleasantness of the situation by blaming everything on the Cogtain, it's not like the guy was in any condition to argue. That worked to a certain degree, but we still wound up being very thankful for the slow and unreliable nature of Astropathic communication: it saved us explaining the situation in detail as well as the scathing lecture Oak doubtlessly would've given in return.

Anyway, those two psykers were the only irreplaceable components on the ship: Ol' Bill loudly claimed that given enough time and duct-tape he could



fix everything else. Jim and Hannah were dubious at first, but the next few weeks proved the elderly engineer right.

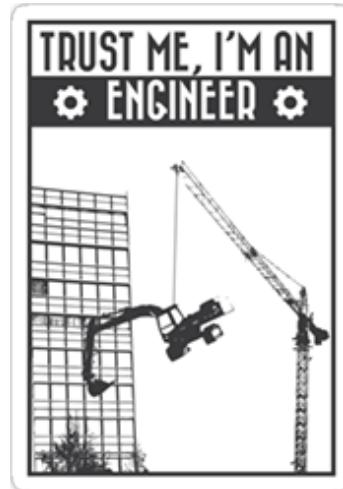
The next few weeks were educational. Also infuriating, exhausting, and occasionally scary, but mostly educational.

First, we learned how pragmatic engineers deal with sections of ship that have been warp-tainted or only get sporadic gellar-field coverage: you ignore them. Well not exactly ignore, you still have to go through the effort to wall off the area and make sure nothing is living in there. Ol' Bill claimed that as long as there was nothing to possess and no way for warp-entities to get into the rest of the ship it worked fine; at least until you could come in later and cut out the whole tainted section.

All of us were a little dubious, but Ol' Bill said he'd done the procedure several times before. In fact all those incidents where the "front fell off" had been the application of this method of damage control on a large scale. He even suggested that if the shipyard was squeamish about the cost of doing a cut-and-refit he knew a handy trick involving carefully lowering the void shields near a star. We pondered the melted look of the Occurrence Border's prow and decided the man probably wasn't bullshitting us.

After that we learned just how many krootoid creatures had been living in the hydroponics bay with that Knarloc. Apparently the previous captain had decided that having a Kroot mercenary aboard would make him seem more Rogue Traderish. Of course when the xenos had the gall to demand payment, it'd been ditched on a planet. The Kroot's pets were harder to clear out though, and the bay had eventually been sealed in the hope that they'd eventually starve. They hadn't, in fact they'd multiplied, and after we'd opened the bay they'd flooded into every corner of the ship. The job of hunting every beaked-beastie out of a section before it was sealed fell to us and some of the tribals. It was rather disconcerting how many had started to mutate by the time we found them.

Finally, we learned that, despite its size, it only really took about fifty crewmen to fly the Occurrence Border, if you didn't have to worry about cargo hauling or complex life support systems that is. We managed to scrape up enough hands, but it was a close thing and all of us were kept incredibly busy. At least we weren't stuck with caring for those psyker kids though, that job fell to some of the tribal women and the useless Astropath. Doc



checked in on them occasionally and said they were doing fine. The rest of us took his word for it, and stayed as far away as possible.



When the repairs were finished, our journey to the shipyard resumed. Out of necessity we kept the warp jumps short and the Navigator stuck to only the stablest and best-mapped warp-currents as opposed to the fastest ones. It took a good deal longer than what had originally been scheduled to get to our destination, but we did get there in the end.

Once the Occurrence Border was finally in its dock, a shuttle came and took us into the shipyard. While it was an incredible relief to get off that deathtrap and onto a nice, solid station, the whole thing was rather ruined by the fact that one of Oak's personal retinue was waiting there for us.

The report didn't go over as badly as we'd feared: Oak's assistant was more incredulous than furious. Every part of our story, from the ship's purchase to the Cogtain's possession, was met with a sort of baffled exasperation from the man. It wasn't until we brought him to the ship and showed him the ungodly mess at the bottom of the elevator that he started believing us.

Despite our earlier promise to pin everything on Nubby, we did our best to put a positive spin on his part in things. Of course in this case "positive spin" meant twisting the truth into decorative little knots to paint his behavior as mere incompetence. Y'know, as opposed to a deliberate subversion of Inquisitorial justice in an attempt to score a cheap ship and look good for his boss. In the end Nubby was fired from his job in supply, which was good, and reassigned back to active duty as part of the squad, which was also good. So all that worked out pretty well.

Once we'd convinced Oak's assistant that everything wasn't our fault, we were able to spare some concern for our fellow survivors. Luckily, the man didn't turn out to be the sort of Inquisitorial agent who liked ordering mass-executions after every little incident.

Jim and Hannah were given a lot of praise for fixing so many things and not going all crazy like every other damned tech-priest on the ship. Oak's assistant talked to some senior tech-priests at the shipyard, and the acolytes were given some papers which said they'd officially finished their apprenticeship and were being seconded to the Inquisition for their first independent assignments. We welcomed them to the team and wished them luck with their first Interrogator.

All of us had been pretty sure the tech-acolytes would come out fine, but we'd been a bit more worried about what would happen to Ol' Bill, his band

of un-retired crewmen, and the hydroponics tribe. We needn't have though: they were all just accepted as part of the ship. Both Oak's assistant and the yard's tech-priests said that most ships had permanent inhabitants, and as long as they didn't get in the way they'd just become part of the next crew. In our opinion it was rather cruel to leave them on that horrible ship after all they'd done, but Ol' Bill and the rest seemed happy with the result. We didn't kick up a fuss and wished them all luck.

Finally the half-dozen psychic kids we'd rescued were bundled off to whatever place the Inquisition sends powerful young psykers. Oak's assistant seemed to think that they were the one bright spot in all this mess, and said their "acquisition" would do a lot to smooth things over with the boss. We took that as a sign that the creepy little buggers weren't just going to be shot and didn't speculate on whether being raised by the Inquisition was any better.

As for the Occurrence Border itself, the folks working on it said it was definitely repairable. Sure, it was going to take a year of intensive work to get it livable again, but it would fulfill its intended purpose as a disguised Inquisition transport wonderfully. Honestly we didn't give a damn what happened to the horrible deathtrap. As long as we never had set foot on it ever again we'd call anything a victory.

Once all the loose ends were tied up, we were packed onto a ship with Oak's assistant and rode back in relative peace. No one told us to do things, no one interrupted our sleep, and the only tech-priests around were Jim and Hannah. It was quite relaxing, and we were in good spirits when we reached Oak's ship.

Nubby was called down to his end of the ship for an official firing before he was sent back to us. Twitch and Cutter hauled the acolytes down to our regiment's section of ship and showed them off like proud parents. Doc wandered off to a certain medical section of the ship and wasn't seen for several days. When he finally got back the poor boy looked utterly exhausted, but he seemed happy.

Sarge was called down to Oak's office. Not the whole squad, just him. Everyone speculated about what was going on in there; maybe Oak was



really pissed at us this time, or maybe he was going to force Sarge to accept a promotion. In the end our fearless leader marched back out with a glazed expression and went straight to the bar. A few drinks later we got him talking: Oak wasn't mad at us, and while he had hinted at the promotion he hadn't carried through. The reason Sarge was called up, and why he was drinking, was because he'd already received the squad's next assignment.

In a few months time a whole new batch of trainees would arrive. It was going to be our job to teach them, whether they were guardsmen, psykers, or scribes, how to be proper Inquisitorial agents.

That was a damned tall order and no mistake... Hell, we didn't know how to be proper Inquisitorial agents ourselves.

All of us sat down with Sarge and started drinking too. This next one was going to be weird.

Chapter 8

Bad Educators

The squad is sitting along one side of a table across from a group of dangerous looking men and women. Both sides are trying to stare each other down over the impressive array of official looking documents piled on the table.

At a word from Sarge, the squad's melee specialist, Cutter, puts down his chainsword and carefully pulls three documents from the pile. Across the table a woman in a black bodysuit does likewise and Sarge winces as he sees which ones she's holding.

There's a brief whispered argument on both sides of the table, then Doc, glaring daggers at Sarge, picks a large folder and starts going through it. A large metallic man on the other side immediately grabs a few documents prompting Twitch, the squad's demolitions expert, to explode out of his chair and lunge across the table. He's stopped by a hand on his collar and a warning shouted by a hooded man sitting off in a corner. Sarge pulls out a few files, shoves them into Twitch's hands, then orders the trooper out of the room.

Both sides sit and glare at each other until the hooded figure observing the meeting clears his throat in a menacing way. Sarge gives Nubby, the squad's quartermaster, a meaningful look. Muttering under his breath and moving with exaggerated slowness, Nubby pulls some exotic looking weapons from a storage case and lays them on the table. At a nudge from Sarge he also brings up two small crates, then sits back and nervously watches as a tall, thin man leans across the table and inspects them. After the thin man sits back down and has a short conversation with his team, Sarge gets to his



feet. In a voice trembling a little with nerves, the noncom prepares to make what might be the most important deal of his life.

“We’ll offer these weapons, two crates of amasec, and will handle the combat training for the scribes, in exchange for your team taking ALL of the psykers.”

»The All Guardsmen Party: Good Soldiers, Bad Educators

So no shit, there we were, on a ship headed out to some nameless Inquisition facility, to teach a bunch of fresh recruits how to be proper Inquisitorial goons. In our humble opinions this was stupid as hell: we were definitely goons, but it was hard to find anyone less proper than us.

When you hear the term “Agents of the Inquisition” you’d usually imagine a bunch of people in billowing cloaks, armed with masterwork power weapons, and acting all dark and mysterious. Maybe they’re not all beautiful or darkly handsome, but the ones that aren’t are definitely covered with impressive scars and fancy looking

augmetics. You’d expect them to swoop in, interrogate and possibly torture anyone who looks shifty, maybe make a few other people disappear, then do something eldritch and fly away into the night. You would not expect a bunch of guardsmen wearing sweaty fatigues and constantly looking either bored, frustrated, or confused.

The point is that we didn’t look like proper agents, we didn’t act like proper agents, and we definitely didn’t have any idea how to teach a bunch of recruits to be proper agents.

Sure all of our missions had been relatively successful, but aside from a few tactical situations we hadn’t actually done anything complex. We didn’t interrogate people, we didn’t assemble theories or hypotheses, and we didn’t leverage secret arcane knowledge. We just followed around our superior officer and did what we were told, if investigations were called for we typically just asked someone who looked smart to do it for us.

All we really ever did was stand around until someone screwed up, then applied explosives and las-fire to the problem until it was fixed. While this seemed to work for us, it definitely wasn’t the way things were supposed to be done, and Oak probably wouldn’t thank us for teaching the rookies to act like that.

This was the worst idea since, well, putting Nubby in charge of buying a ship.



Okay, maybe it wasn't THAT bad.

We weren't handling all of these rookies' education, just the final polishing. They'd already been through a few months of lessons on the basics of Inquisiting; some of Oak's adepts had already taught them all that boring "what is chaos", "where do tyranids come from", and "why heresy is bad" stuff. They'd also supposedly been given a rundown of what their general role was and a few basic lessons on stuff like interrogation and disguises. We were expected to finish that training though; as experienced field agents we'd have to be able to tell them what it was actually like to be on a mission and how to do their jobs correctly. Unfortunately, we didn't even know what those jobs really were, much less how to do them.

Luckily, a second team of instructors had shipped out with us. They were all sleek and professional looking, and had experience in all those aspects of Inquisiting that we barely even understood. Ideally we'd have just handed off all the training to them, but there were too many students and too little time. Both of our teams would just have to split the load up as evenly as possible.

We were also accompanied by one of Oak's personal Interrogators, a quiet fellow who liked to sit in corners and work on dataslates. The man didn't actually seem very interested in our mission: he just gave us a basic briefing, handed over the files on the recruits, and then sat and worked on his slate while we hashed things out with the other team. Apparently the Interrogator's job consisted of constantly organizing new groups of trainees, and he'd already started getting the next group together; which meant he really didn't have any energy to spare on us. He was going to make sure we had a facility to train in and the right group of trainees, but as soon as we were in place he'd be flying off to set up the next batch, and the next, and the next. Once our classes got started, we wouldn't see him until he showed up for the final review and shipped us all back to Oak.

Aside from the initial briefing, our Interrogator probably said less than a hundred words to our team over the course of the trip. Some people would have been offended by this treatment, but we liked him; he seemed a lot less likely to get us all killed than any of our previous bosses.

Instead of bothering our Interrogator, we mostly interacted with the other team. They seemed like fairly solid folks, for a bunch of fancy agent types that is, but they were obviously a little unhappy about our presence on the mission. While they tried to be polite, it was easy to tell that they thought we were a bunch of dim grunts and didn't believe any of our stories about



our previous missions. Orders were orders though: if Oak said that we were half the training team then they'd make sure we did half the work.

We would've settled for a quarter, or maybe an eighth.



Trainee records needed to be reviewed, locations needed to be chosen, resources needed to be requested, duties needed to be assigned, and lessons needed to be planned. As the only responsible members of the squad, Sarge and Doc handled most of this. Nubby was occasionally called in to lend a hand with the requisition paperwork, but Twitch and Cutter were left to their usual pastimes of paranoid booby trapping and obsessive sword drills

Now, Sarge and Doc did their best to get us the cushiest jobs, but they were outnumbered and the other team wasn't born yesterday. The crafty buggers weren't about to let us stick them with all the crazies, criminals, and incompetents while we sat around drinking beers with a bunch of well trained PDF troopers and Arbites. In the end we all sat down to a negotiation and got the best deal we could.

At least we managed not to get stuck with the damned psykers.



Our squad would be in charge of four batches of trainees. There was a unit of PDF that had helped take down a minor daemon, and some violent priests who had burned out a few cults and were probably just being sent to us to get them out of the way. Then there was a group of criminals who were dumb enough to rob an Inquisition warehouse, but smart enough to talk their way out of an execution, and finally there were the

scribes. Those damned scribes.

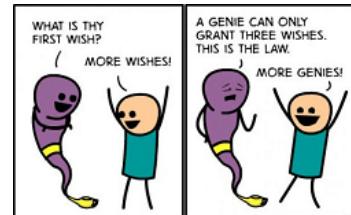
Not all scribes are useless little sissies. Hell, Cutter was a scribe. If he hadn't been handed a chainsword during a pitched fight and subsequently discovered how much more fun being a raging berserker was, he'd probably still be pushing pencils and sorting files. In an extreme situation the meekest men and women can rise up and become heroes, surprising their enemies with berserk fury or vicious cleverness. Unfortunately when that heretic cult kidnapped a bunch of Administratum scribes and forced them to help translate a daemonic text, all the brave ones who fought their captors or sabotaged their translations were immediately killed.

The scribes we got were the cowards, the weasels, the dimwits, and the

bloody sheep; not a single one of them was even remotely qualified for any sort combat. Oak always needed more nerds for field duty though, and these scribes had enough mental fortitude to translate a chaos tome without going nuts. If we could make fighting men out of any of them he'd call it a win, even if the rest died in the process.

Both our squad and the other team could see what a shitshow training these bookworms to fight was going to be; no one wanted to trust them with a butter-knife, much less a firearm. It was obviously going to be bad, but all they needed was basic combat training and our squad could definitely provide that. So while the agents would handle all the assassins, infiltrators, cogboys, and psykers; we'd have the nerds, nuts, grunts, and scum.

We touched down after a few weeks of idleness or frantic lesson planning, depending on whether you asked Twitch, Nubby, and Cutter or Sarge and Doc. The Interrogator directed both our squad and the other team to separate fliers, and said that the trainees and all our requested materiel would be waiting for us. As a sort of afterthought he reminded us that he'd be back in a few months for the final review, and then got back in the shuttle and left. It was reassuring to see that the other team was just as surprised and confused as us by his sudden departure.



Everyone stood there and milled around until the shuttle took off and a pair of men walked over from the parked fliers. They asked if there was anything else we needed to do here and reminded us that the trainees were waiting. As we split off to our flier, Sarge promised to keep in touch with the other team, who according to our guide, would be operating out of a separate facility half a continent away. This came as a surprise since none of us had paid that much attention to the location briefing. We'd expected to all be in the same facility and able to work together. Honestly it was all a bit distressing: our boss had just ditched us and the people we'd planned on asking for help and advice would be nowhere near us. We were going to be pretty much alone with the trainees. Sarge and Doc began to really worry about the quality of their plans, and the rest of us felt just a little guilty about slacking off.

Once we boarded the flier, our guide introduced himself as one of the Interrogator's organizers. There were four of them at the facility: a doctor to watch the trainees' health, a pair of tech-priests to keep the place running, and him. He was the facility administrator and would be getting everything ready for us. He'd handle all the paperwork, interface with the local author-

ities for us, and do his best to fulfill any supply requests we made. Twitch immediately asked for several tons of explosives, but Sarge interrupted the Administrator before he could finish asking what type.



Sarge gave the Administrator a quick rundown of who in the squad was considered mentally fit, and what constituted a reasonable request. To his credit the man didn't seem to be worried or confused by any of it, he'd probably worked with teams weirder than us. Hell, there was probably an all psyker team out there somewhere.

The planet we were flying over was reasonably pleasant looking. It seemed moderately developed world with no obvious specialization: there were a few large cities, a few small hives, a major manufactorum or two, and a fair bit of farming. A nice place with a breathable atmosphere and, at least where our base was located, a comfortable climate.

According to the Admin there weren't any horrible political crises, religious schisms, genestealer cults, or major wars currently on the planet. He said there were occasional issues with feral orks, which made Twitch very unhappy, and of course there were always criminals and minor cults, but this was still the nicest planet we'd seen since enlisting.

The first thing we saw when we landed and the flier's doors opened was a pair of big servitors bearing down on us. Twitch immediately opened fire and Cutter drew his sword and began to charge; luckily the rest of the squad intervened before any real harm was done. After Doc had explained our previous experience with servitors to a rather annoyed tech-priest, the Admin introduced to the rest of the base staff and we got settled in.

Doc went off with a scary looking doctor lady to look at medical records or something. Sarge got a base tour from the Admin and scheduled a morning review of the trainees. Twitch went off with the less annoyed of the two tech-priests to inspect the perimeter while Cutter and Nubby were left with the bags. After making sure both the cargo servitors and the tech-priest weren't possessed, they loaded up our gear and went to get the squad's quarters in order.

That night we got together, reviewed our lessons, and collectively panicked.

In the morning we marched onto the central training field looking imposing and professional in our Evil Goon Uniforms. Well, trying to at least. Sarge looked fine, but Doc looked like he was about to throw up, Twitch had

spent all night messing with the perimeter defenses, no one had told Cutter to clean his uniform so it had a fair bit of blood on it, and Nubby looked like Nubby. We weren't sure whether it was a good or bad thing that the trainees didn't look any better.

Aside from the PDF, none of them were in matching uniforms; this offended our guardsmen sensibilities even before we even registered what the owners looked like. Their spastic collection of clothing included: priestly robes with hand sewn [=][=] symbols, poorly fitted bodygloves, ground-dragging trenchcoats, several sets of old and battered scribes' robes, and to top it off, two of them had the poor taste to dress up like Cadet Commissioners. They looked like idiots, they milled around on the field like idiots, and what they held in their hands proved they were idiots. Every, single, one of them was armed.

Not just armed, but heavily armed. Someone must have opened up a giant crate of autoguns, handcannons, and swords then told everyone to take whatever looked cool. One of the criminals looked like he was carrying over a dozen pistols, an old scribe was struggling to hold up a heavy stubber ,and some idiot had let all of the priests have hand flamers. As we stared at the mob of trainees, we realized that no one here had heard of trigger discipline and, judging by the flickering pilot lights on those flamers, they hadn't heard of safeties either. Twitch and Nubby tried to casually move behind Sarge and Cutter.

Upon seeing such a shameful display, Sarge's NCO instincts kicked in and he started bawling out the recruits. Unfortunately, before he could get up to speed there was a loud bang followed by a scream. The shouting had surprised one of the scribes and he'd shot himself in the foot.

While Doc hauled the idiot off the field we had a quick discussion then Sarge readdressed the trainees in a much quieter voice. After a brief introduction he ordered everyone to go store their weapons, unloaded and with their safeties on, then come back in an hour wearing proper exercise attire. As the mob dispersed Nubby grabbed one of the PDF troopers and asked him and his squadmates to oversee the weapon storage: two self inflicted gunshot wounds in a day would be a bit much.

Eventually everyone filed back onto the field, mostly disarmed and more appropriately dressed this time. It was tempting to start yelling at them about proper formation and posture, but we understood that those weren't something an Inquisition agent needed, so we skipped over the drill sergeant



routine. Sarge reintroduced us, explained what aspects of their training we'd be handling, and then went about splitting everyone into groups based on role and fitness.



The general plan was to split each day up between PT, weapons drill, lectures, and team exercises. In theory, everybody would be working together smoothly after a few weeks; then we could look into more complex exercises or getting in some outside experts to talk about stuff like cogitators and disguises. That plan fell apart before the first week was over.

Every day started with physical training, but instead of Sarge leading everyone through their morning jerks together, they had to be split up. Sarge took the few healthy recruits and put them through the usual routine, Twitch did his best with the moderately unfit, and Doc handled the ones that looked like they were going to have a heart attack. This division slowed everything down a lot, and the problem was compounded by the difficulty of getting everyone out onto the field at a reasonable time for PT, which is to say before dawn. In the Guard, we would have just flipped them out of bed and dragged them to the field, but some of those scribes looked like they were at death's door and we wanted to get as many as possible through the program.

As the days went on PT began to start later and later in the morning, and trainees started sneaking out of Sarge and Twitch's classes. Aside from the PDF and a few scribes who seemed keen on their change of lifestyle, all the little buggers seemed bent on avoiding as much work as possible. If we didn't keep an eye on them and send them back, then they would all wind up lazing around with Doc's band of old fogies, asthmatics, and land-whales. Of course, avoiding hard work was a perfectly understandable goal, in fact most

of us swore by it; but that sort of thinking was supposed to be reserved for proper guardsmen, not trainees.

We spent a lot of time forcing the lazy bastards to work, and it didn't endear us to them.

If anything, the weapons drills were going worse. Nubby and Cutter were working their asses off, but every damned recruit had a different weapon, and most of them had no clue how to use them. While standard Guard weapon drills can teach almost anyone to use a lasgun, they aren't very good for



explaining how to use a side-fed autogun, a bolt action anti-armor rifle, or a bloody crossbow. Nubby spent more time figuring out how to use each trainee's random-ass weapon than teaching them how to actually shoot.

Cutter wasn't doing much better with the close quarters combat training. He couldn't even blame the trainees random weapons, since after one of the scribes lost a finger during his first lesson, he'd confiscated everything and handed out wooden sticks. The problem was that everyone was either over excited or afraid of getting hit, also Cutter was just a really bad teacher and most of the scribes were terrified of him. He was terrible at pulling his blows, looked like he was genuinely trying to murder whoever he was practicing with, and really couldn't explain how to properly use a weapon without demonstrating. At full speed. On a live target.



The few trainees that weren't scared shitless thought of Cutter as a complete simpleton, and generally ignored everything he said or wandered off at the first opportunity. Except the priests that is. Those damned priests took a shine to him, and seemed to think that his berserk fighting style was the best shit ever. Before we knew it we had a whole group of idiots who thought the best way to fight was by recklessly charging the nearest enemy. This had the side effect of making the scribes afraid of the priests.

We never got to the whole lecturing or group exercise part of the plan during the first week: the PT and drills just took too much time. There were over a dozen injuries that week, ranging from sprains to burns to gunshot wounds. Things were not going well, and the trainees' morale was getting low.

The scribes were generally terrified and exhausted, and obviously thought of us as a bunch of dumb grunts that were only there to torment them. Most of them seemed sure that this was either some bureaucratic screwup or a pointless formality before they got cushy desk jobs. As time went on they got more and more snippy, and none of us could think of any way to deal with the problem without falling back on the Guard method, i.e. beating the shit out of anyone who complained. Unfortunately, Sarge and Doc vetoed this solution on the grounds that the Inquisition probably considered these scribes to be more valuable than the average Guard-trainee, and would frown on any breakage.

On top of this, the scum and priests were developing some worrying



habits. The criminals were a relatively minor issue: they'd quickly figured out that we were usually too busy keeping the scribes in line to watch them, and were generally slacking off. They were staying out of the way, but their general contempt for us wasn't doing our reputation any favors, and they persisted in antagonizing all the other recruits. At Doc's suggestion, Nubby was put in charge of winning over his criminal brethren, and explaining the fine line between malingering and malicious lingering.

Meanwhile, the priests were developing that special flavor of crazy (mad zealotry with a dash of pyromania) that we recognized from every damned Inquisitorial cleric we'd worked with. They were far too eager for a chance to use their flamers on a live target for our liking, and the relationship between them and their less-than-holy fellows was getting rather strained. It was obviously only a matter of time before one of the priests snapped and tried to "purify" someone, but we weren't exactly sure how to deal with the problem before it happened. Our attempts to convince them to "stop being crazy" and detailed explanations of what would happen if they lit anyone on fire without our direct orders were just met with blank stares and mutters that sounded like "damned is the sympathizer".

Finally, and to our considerable surprise, the PDF were causing problems too. Most of them were solid troopers, and we'd have been happy to have them at our back any day of the week, but there were two damned Cadet Commissars mixed in with them, and they were NOT happy about taking orders from lowly guardsmen.

Those two Commissar wannabees screwed things up to no end. These weren't the fun, happy, drink-and-play-cards-with-the-men Commissars, these were the ones with the whips. We knew their type, they had probably been itching for their final promotion so they could start performing field executions without asking permission first. Both of them probably soiled their pants in glee when they got a job offer from the Inquisition.

Anyway, they were all set to start climbing the ladder towards becoming the scariest bastards in the Imperium, and then a bunch of lowly guardsmen came along and started bossing them around. They were not happy campers and neither were we.

Our problem was that, as guardsmen, we were bloody well programmed to fear and obey any Commissar we met, which made it damned hard to give them orders. Hell, it was all we could do not to salute them. Both of them performed well on the field and range, but they ignored most of our



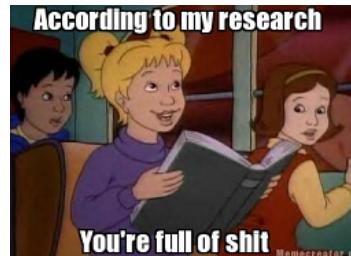
half-hearted orders and bossed around all the other recruits, especially the PDF troopers. Those poor buggers had apparently known the Commissars for a while and were absolutely terrified of them.

The end result was that our authority began to really suffer, and the trainees' morale dropped even further. We made a few attempts to convince the Commissars to behave, but even appeals to the importance of proper discipline and troop morale, which was the whole purpose of Commissars in the first place, failed. They just knew, with absolute certainty, that they were better than us in every way and should have been in charge. Doc suggested transferring them to the other team, Nubby and Twitch were in favor of just shooting them, and Cutter actually liked them since they were good sparring partners. Sarge decided to give it a little longer and see if we couldn't straighten them out.

Eventually we got the fitness regimen and weapon drills running smoothly enough for us to devote some time to lectures and team exercises. Neither of these went well.

Lectures don't work well when the students don't respect their teacher, or believe anything they say for that matter. When we talked about our previous missions they'd nitpick everything we said, analyzing every stupid decision we made, or pointing out all the things that couldn't possibly have happened. Twitch got in a heated argument about whether a box full of Orks could possess a regiment of guardsmen, and Cutter decked one of the scribes after he kept pointing out that a Knarloc couldn't survive in a spaceship. The priests would interrupt our stories with accusations of heresy, and those damned Commissars started riding our asses about not following standard procedures, especially the part where we didn't purge the orky regiment. The only ones who didn't cause problems were the scum and PDF troopers, but they seemed more interested in enjoying the stories than learning anything. Instead of serving as a demonstration of effective strategies, our evening storytimes turned into a sort of horrible, aggravating torture.

The practical demonstrations went a bit better, but not much. While it was hard to argue about the truthfulness of a lecture on the planting and defusal of mines, the students tended to question why it would be their job to worry about that sort of thing when there'd be tech-priests around, or guardsmen for that matter. It was damned hard to get the little buggers to understand the importance of being a well rounded agent instead of a specialist, especially when they could point out that we were pretty damned



specialized ourselves. They kept complaining that they were here to learn to be Inquisitorial investigators not guardsmen. Well, except the PDF troopers; they were fine with the idea of being guardsmen, bless their little olive-drab hearts.



The team exercises were a complete fiasco. We worked damned hard with the Admin and his tech-priests to set up realistic combat scenarios, but the trainees seemed hell bent on ruining them. It wasn't just that they kept on failing spectacularly, they also tended to interrupt things with pointless complaints about the exercise's quality. It's utterly infuriating to hear one of your recruits bitching about the "special effects" instead of properly covering their teammate.

Eventually we started leading the exercises ourselves, just to keep everyone moving. That stopped most of the complaining, but it's much harder to fix stupid, so almost every run still ended in failure. The big problem was the Scribes, who had a tendency to trip over their feet and collapse from exhaustion. They weren't much better when upright either: somehow they managed to shoot their teammates, and occasionally themselves, more often than their targets. It was amazing, if we'd used live rounds over half of the trainees them would have died; as it was the priests managed to torch an entire test area and badly burned a few of their fellows. It was enough to make a guardsman cry, but those test scenarios were nowhere near as bad as the competitive exercises.

Imagine a large group of children playing scrumball: the big ones knocking over the little ones, the mean ones ganging up on the meek ones, and the bossy ones ordering the other kids around. Now arm everyone.

There weren't any deaths, but that was all you could really say for it. There were petty arguments over objectives, teams would frequently dissolve into in-fighting, there was no tactical coordination, and no matter who won each exercise, the scribes on both teams lost. Aside from the usual injuries there were two shankings, a few cases of "excessive whipping" and one of the clerics bit an ear off. Doc and the base surgeon managed to reattach it, but that scribe wasn't ever going to look at priests the same way after that.

We were about ready to cave in and ask the other training team for help, when the Admin told us he'd spotted a nice milk run for our trainees. All of us were ecstatic, we figured a nice simple combat mission was just what was needed to straighten everyone out.

In a way we were right, the mission did result in a lot of straightening; just not in the way we thought.

The Admin had a nice arrangement with the local government. A few of his contacts kept him apprised of any missions that could be used for training, and if the instructors accepted, the local forces would stand back and let the trainees have a crack at the problem. This was a pretty agreeable arrangement for all parties involved.

Now, we didn't have any illusions about the quality of our trainees. They were utter shit, but this was the milkiest of milk runs. A feral ork raid had crawled out of a section of the swamps where they bred, sacked a few farms, and then ran back to their hovels with the loot. A fair sized counter-offensive was being formed by the locals to purge the nest, possibly with the help of the other team's trainees, but we knew that was far out of our pathetic batch's league. Instead, we had our eyes on one of the sacked farms, where a few straggling gretchin and squigs were still wandering around. Our trainees could fly in and have a nice simple game of Hunt The Gretchin, while we watched and made sure everyone stayed safe.

It was just about the easiest mission you could ask for. Hell, a grocery run in a lower-hive hab block was more dangerous. These were feral gretchin and completely ordinary squigs: they were weak, stupid, cowardly, and armed with nothing but knives and pointy sticks. Our trainees would be armed with high-quality ranged weapons and they could just slowly sweep the area, gunning down the little buggers before they even got close. We put together a clean and simple plan of attack, made sure everyone understood their role, and even checked their weapons for them.

There was no way that anything could go wrong. The op was practically foolproof: we would have trusted it to a bunch of kids with slingshots.

It was amazing how hard they screwed it up.

The locals had a cordon set up around the farm to keep the orkoids contained, and had given us a command tent to sit in while the trainees deployed. This meant we were a few hundred meters away when the screaming started, but from what we could piece together when the smoke settled it went something like this.

Squad three was advancing across the southern field when their gunner, the scribe who'd picked the heavy stubber, spotted a gretchin fighting with a squig in a nearby ditch. We heard him call in the sighting, and then both he and a squadmate opened fire. A few seconds later, they stopped firing and announced their intention to advance and "confirm the kill". The heavy



weapons scribe walked over to the gretchin and squig, but instead of just headshotting them both and moving on, he prodded them with the barrel of his stubber.



The squig jumped up and bit his ankle, causing the scribe to fall face first into the ditch. This in turn prompted the wounded gretchin to latch onto his head and start scratching and biting like only an angry gretchin can. The scribe leapt to his feet, flailing his arms and screaming over the open channel until his squadmate removed the gretchin. Unfortunately, said removal was performed using a hand-cannon, and while the gretchin was very thoroughly removed, so was most of the scribe's head. Then, while the teamkiller panicked and tried to perform first aid on a headless corpse, a second, unnoticed gretchin seized the abandoned heavy stubber.

In the end there were seven deaths, four serious injuries, and three arrests.



Of the seven deaths, only three were directly caused by the greenskins. The first was the teamkiller who was gunned down by the gretchin with the stubber. Another pair of gretchin accounted for a cleric who had a little too much faith in the Emperor's protection and too little sense to run when his gun ran dry. The final one was a scribe who dove for cover in a mulch pit which was already occupied by a half-dozen squigs. As for the others: good ol' fashioned friendly fire took down the poor PDF trooper who killed the gretchin with the stubber, as well as the scribe whose death started the whole mess. The last two deaths were Commissar related.

Most of the stubber-armed gretchin's fire had been directed at squad five. The xenos' poorly-aimed shots probably hadn't come anywhere near actually hitting them, but the tracers flying overhead were enough to spook the two scribes in the squad. The two nerds ran for it, ignoring the orders and accusations of cowardice coming from the Cadet Commissar in charge of their squad. Enraged by this blatant cowardice and disregard for his authority, the Commissar drew his sidearm and placed three rounds through one of the scribes' backs and drew a bead on the other. Before he could get the shot off though, a stray round, which neither the criminal or PDF trooper in his squad saw the source of, took him in the head. Someone stabbed his

corpse a few times as well, but we put that down to a gretchin who must have somehow gotten hold of a ‘Type 7: Princeps’ Special’ switchblade.

As far as injuries went, the worst one was a cleric who got badly burned when he used his flamer inside an enclosed space; an enclosed space that just so happened to be made of wood and filled with hay. Aside from that, two trainees were badly hit by stray shots, and a scribe broke both his legs when he tried to take cover in what proved to be a very deep and very dry well. There were a few dozen lesser injuries spread across the whole group, but those were the only really nasty ones.

All in all we lost eleven men, nearly a quarter of our trainees, but that wasn’t the end of it.

We’d provided all the trainees with comm-beads, figuring that good communications would help prevent screwups. None of us had thought to limit what frequencies they could transmit on.

One of the panicking scribes had decided the situation was FUBAR and called for backup. This by itself wasn’t a bad thing; hell, we were the ones who taught them to do it. Calling for help when shit got tough was a nice, sane reaction and we all endorsed it, but NOT over the emergency channel that everyone within fifty klicks was linked to.

As our squad mopped up the few surviving greenskins and Doc started triaging the wounded, the cavalry arrived. Several platoons of local PDF, a pair of chimeras, and a half-dozen fliers descended on the farm; all of them intent on rescuing our trainees from some sort of surprise attack by the Orks. We just barely managed to prevent another round of friendly-fire.

The reinforcements did help Doc treat the wounded and might have saved a few lives, but it was just about the most embarrassing moment in our careers. Sarge was vibrating between incandescent rage and horrible shame as he talked to officer after officer, thanking them for the help and assuring them the situation was under control. Doc kept himself busy with the wounded and avoided talking to anyone while Twitch and Cutter collected all the surviving trainees. Nubby just vanished; he tended to do that when people started asking awkward questions.

The cherry on top of everything was when another group of fliers landed and the other training team stepped out with their spiffy looking recruits in tow. They looked over the dead and wounded, asked a few of our trainees what had happened, then walked over to where Sarge was negotiating the



release of three trainees who had attempted to appropriate a chimera and desert.

Words were had.



None of us were strangers to the odd reaming; it's just part of being a guardsman. In a way, people yelling at you is almost comforting, it's a reminder that the world hasn't changed and you're still right where you always were: at the bottom of the pile getting shit on by everyone else while you hold their asses up. Any of us could stoic our way through a dressing-down without blinking. This one crossed the line though.

It was one thing to be chewed out by your superiors, in private, for mistakes made by your and your men. It's quite another to be berated by a group of your colleagues, in front of your subordinates and allies, for every damned screw-up since the Emperor decided that Horus would make a good warmaster. They even had the trainees chime in, whining about unfair treatment and poor lesson quality. That surviving Cadet Commissar was especially vocal, throwing out accusations of incompetence, cowardice, and heresy.

Sarge got the worst of it, being the nominal superior and first member of the squad they could find. The rest of us watched as he went from embarrassed to ashamed, to angry, back to ashamed, then straight past angry, furious, and murderous to a sort of zen state. The man was beyond anger, beyond shame and beyond fear; he was cold and calculating and was taking note of every single thing they said. The lecture petered to an end when the psyker on the other team started looking nervous and pulling at her teammates, suggesting that they still had a mission to do and they really ought to be going, right now.

As the other team got back into the gunships and flew away, Twitch asked if he should hit his detonators before they got out of range. Sarge just shook his head.

We gathered everyone up and headed back to base. There was no talking during the flight or when we landed. No reprimands, no lectures, no punishments. Just directions to get some sleep.

That night we reevaluated our lesson plans. This would not happen again.

PT started an hour before dawn. Anyone who didn't get up was dumped out of bed, tied by the leg to a servitor, and dragged out onto the field. There were no separate groups this time, everyone was doing the same drills we'd done as snot-nosed recruits. If you complained you got a licking from Sarge or Cutter and if you collapsed you got a stim shot from Doc or were left

where you fell. If we thought you were malingering, Nubby would go over and give you a few good kicks (and ever since he got those augmetic legs, Nubby could really put the boot in).

Once the sun was good and up we led, or dragged, them all to the firing ranges where Twitch had laid out all of their weapons. Next to the rows of fancy firearms and melee weapons were several large crates which the Admin had busted his ass to get overnight. Sarge walked down the line of sweating trainees and asked each one to go get their weapons. When they went to pick up their autogun or flamer or crossbow, it was yanked out of their hands and they were given a battered lasgun and dull bayonet instead.



This triggered a few complaints from the stupider recruits. They raised several points about the low quality of the weapons and their inexperience with them, and then tried to demand their old guns back. Sarge calmly explained that they were getting the lasguns because "Shut up and soldier, soldier". Then he hit anyone who kept complaining.

They got the message pretty quickly and we outfitted everyone with a standard guardsman's kit with optional toothless chainsword. Well, almost everyone: the remaining Cadet Commissar refused. He kept a death-grip on his weapons, and launched into a tirade about dignity and such, which ended with him being clubbed over the head by Cutter and dragged away by one of the servitors. That night we stripped him, wrapped him in duct tape and shipped him to the other training base with a note saying he had requested a transfer. He was not missed.

The next few days were nothing but PT and weapon drill. There were no team exercises, no demonstrations, and no lectures. Nothing but sweat, yelling, and as much food and sleep as they could get. No one was exempt; it didn't matter if you were old or weak or overweight. The only way to get a break was to be too sick or injured to stand, and the second Doc or the base surgeon okayed it, you were back on the field.

None of us knew how to be or train proper Inquisitorial Agents, but we damn well knew how to soldier. We were going to make every one of them into a guardsman, or kill them trying.



Once everyone began to adapt to the new regimen, we split them into squads and made the PDF troopers squad leaders. With both the Commis-

sars gone the troopers really started to shine; every one of them proved to be a good leader and they were put in charge of keeping their squaddies in line and leading the drills. After all, they'd been through boot before and knew exactly how it should work.

With most of the basic training being handled by the troopers, we started doing demos and lectures again. This time we didn't even try to fit our lessons to the trainees' roles. Instead, we just focused on teaching what every guardsman should know and didn't put up with any arguments. It didn't matter whether or not it was something that an Inquisitorial Agent needed to know; we said it was important and they were going to learn it, whether they wanted to or not.



Twitch taught demolitions and defusal. He made sure every trainee knew how to plant explosives, set traps, put up alarms, and at least appreciated how tricky defusal was. He would rig realistic-looking and sounding explosives under their beds, and periodically send servitors to check their perimeter security in the middle of the night. None of the trainees liked him, but they learned fast.

Doc and Sarge made sure everyone knew standard Imperial Guard Combat doctrine, or at least the useful parts. Chances were they'd never need to know the correct way to call in an artillery strike or when to dig a foxhole, but it'd saved our lives in the past, so they were going to learn it. The field medicine lessons were a little more useful, and there were even some nice demos when the trainees hurt themselves. Doc practically glowed with pride the first time he got to demonstrate how to treat a lasgun wound on a whimpering priest.

Cutter mostly stuck to close quarters combat training, though he did throw in a few confusing lessons on the proper filing of Munitorum paperwork. There were still problems with the scribes being afraid of him, but the PDF troopers were usually able to assist, generally by abusing the terrified scribe until they decided it was easier to face Cutter.

Nubby's lectures were dedicated to scrounging, weapon maintenance, and how much criminality you could get away with. The shadier trainees found these lessons surprisingly educational and started warming up to the little bugger. The rest of us didn't ask where they went on their field trips.

We all came together to teach our single most important class: Not Dying In the Inquisition. Now that we'd established a proper respectful atmosphere, our stories were much better received. We started slowly and laboriously going over every single battle we'd fought and every death we'd witnessed.

We pointed out how explosives solved almost every problem, how psykers tended to ruin everything for everyone and often our problems were caused by our superiors. We crammed their heads with little pieces of common sense, each one backed up by horrible death or surprising victory, and made sure they could repeat each and every one back to us.

It might not have been the traditional Inquisition curriculum, but we hoped that none of our scribes would wind up reading random daemonic tomes and that our clerics wouldn't die leading suicidal charges.

Of course, everything wasn't magically better. Some of the trainees couldn't take the strain and others tried to desert. We didn't waste any time on frail ones: they were handed over to the Administrator in the hope that he'd find a place for them somewhere else. The deserters were retrieved and fitted with good ol' fashioned penal legion collars for a few days while we explained how preferable death was to angering the bloody Inquisition. After that was fully explained, we removed the collars and offered them another chance to run. There were no takers.



Finally, there were also a few recruits who were just so abysmally bad with their weapons that we just gave up on them. There's only so much you can do for someone who hits themselves more consistently than their target. Anyway, between the incompetents, the wounded, and the unfit, we lost another eight trainees before we started doing exercises again; but the ones who could hack it performed much better than they had before.

We ran them through the usual Guard training drills, complete with pig guts and razorwire. Everyone hated it and even the PDF troopers complained about the stupidity of learning trench warfare as an Inquisitorial agent, but they still went through the exercises and that's all we cared about. We kept making the drills worse and worse, with Twitch adding dozens of little surprises, Doc and the base cogboys transforming servitors into horrible monstrosities, and Nubby bellowing horribly retarded orders at them while they drilled. They bitched, they moaned, and they began to really hate our guts, but that hatred was the final ingredient needed to really bring them together.

When we started the competitive exercises again they actually worked like teams. The scribes were still the weak link in most squads, but their squadmates and leaders began to actually work to support them instead of ignoring or mocking them. They were doing damned well, but we didn't let them get overconfident: if a team was kicking too much ass, we'd enter the

exercise ourselves and show them how it was really done.



After a few months of grueling training, things were definitely starting to shape up and we began to think about other projects. None of us, except maybe Cutter, had forgotten the way the other team had lectured us in front of everyone. It might have been justified and we couldn't deny that it had been what really kicked us into gear, but they'd crossed several lines and we felt a little revenge was called for. Nothing too bad mind you; after all, the training had to continue. Just enough to put them in their place and maybe boost our trainees' morale a little.

Now anyone can hatch a revenge plot, but it takes a special type of person to come up with one that perfectly balances nefariousness, aggravation, embarrassment, and quasi-legality. Specifically, you need someone with a complete lack of scruples, a penchant for antagonizing behavior, and what might be called a Criminal Mind; which is to say someone like Nubby Nubbs. Of course we didn't just let him plan it all himself, we'd learned THAT lesson, but he had a few very interesting ideas which served as the basis for our plot.

The Admin was asked to keep an eye out for a few things that might fit the bill, and before long we got lucky. A handful of carefully worded messages were sent, some palms were greased, and a few interesting rumors were started. Soon, both Inquisitorial training teams were informed that some mass disappearances were happening in the slums of one of the planet's major cities.

This was the perfect opportunity for the trainees to test their investigative skills! We suspended our drills, called in some fliers, and got the trainees disguised as harmless civilians, which is to say that we told them to leave their helmets behind and throw coats over their flak armor. Once their cunning disguises were in place, Sarge gathered everyone up and informed them of the situation. He explained what we'd heard and who we'd heard it from, and then asked them to remember the first rule of being a guardsman.

Of course, there are a few first rules of being a guardsman and there was a little confusion about which one Sarge meant. It wasn't: "The gun is always loaded", "Stay the fuck in cover", or "If at first you don't succeed, call in an air-strike" and it DEFINITELY wasn't: "It's not stealing if they're not from your unit and they didn't really need it". Nubby got a hard look from Sarge after that one.

With a weary sigh, Sarge explained that the First Rule of Being a Guardsman in the Inquisition is: "If the job looks hard, make sure you actually have

to do it first". None of the trainees seemed impressed with this piece of wisdom; at least, not until the rest of us volunteered some reasons why these disappearances might not be their problem. Then, because subtlety is completely overrated, we also suggested a few things that could be done with their time in the city if this turned out to be someone else's problem. That got them thinking, and as everyone boarded the fliers, we heard the squad leaders talking. They were already brainstorming who they could dump this mess on, and what to do with their R&R afterwards. Bless their weasley little hearts.

There was no point messing around with subtle entrances, we just landed at the largest police barricade, blatantly flashed our credentials, and turned things over to the trainees. We watched, tears in our eyes, as they practically marched onto the scene, looking exactly like a bunch of guardsmen trying unsuccessfully to look like civvies. They were growing up so fast.

The squads split up and stomped around the cordoned area with a complete lack of subtlety, loudly asking questions about whether there were any evil cults, daemons, or mutants around. If you knew where to look, you could see the other team's cleverly disguised or concealed trainees staring with their mouths open. Within minutes, one of their instructors appeared out of the shadows, and asked us just what in the Emperor's name we thought we were doing here.

While Sarge was the one the agent approached, the whole squad stepped back and let Nubby be the spokesman; it was just funnier that way.

The conversation was needlessly long and incredibly aggravating for the agent. It was hard as hell to keep a straight face as Nubby ignored accusations of incompetence and blatantly lied about our trainees' expertise in tracking, interrogation, and "gen'ral investimagashun". Eventually, the exasperated agent gave up on logic and tried bartering, prompting Sarge to step in and cut a deal. Our trainees were pretty much done here, so we'd go off and investimagate somewhere else in exchange for the other team agreeing to hold nightly meetings with us to discuss findings and progress. After all, if they were so much better than us, our trainees needed to see how it was done and maybe, just maybe, our boys would find something they didn't.

That done, we marshaled the trainees up and left the area. Once everyone was back to the fliers, we handed operational control over to the squad leaders and adopted the role of observers. One of us tagged along with each group as they followed their leads, answering any questions they had, and occasionally



making rather unsubtle suggestions.



That night everyone met up in a nice warehouse near the local PDF base. To our delight, one of the squads had attained it by simply asking nicely, and had split their day securing the perimeter and sneaking in naps. As the meeting time approached, a few of the other team's trainers and trainees found their way in and provided com links to the members in the field. When everything was set up, Sarge shouted our troops into order, and suggested that both teams should take turns presenting the facts they'd gathered. The other training team's leader agreed.

The agent explained that his trainees at the scene had found signs of struggle and a few emblems that matched no known cult, Imperial or otherwise.

He talked a lot about footprints, dropped items, and other stuff that none of us listened to. When he wound down Sarge thanked him and asked Doc's squad to present their findings.



The squad leader stepped forward and made his report in a nice clear parade ground voice. His team had gone to the local Arbites precinct and asked if they had seen any heretics, daemons, xenos, or mutants recently and if they knew any reason that groups of people would be disappearing. They had, of course, not seen anything, and had suggested looking for slavers or PDF recruiters as a cause of the disappearances. Sarge thanked the trainee, and turned the floor back over to the agent. Neither he nor his trainees seemed very impressed with the short report, but they didn't make any comments and continued with their findings.

The other team's trainees had tracked down a few witnesses and examined their minds and blah, blah, blah, no psychic activity, but definite signs of cults, blah, blah. Once he was done, Sarge's team reported that none of the local temples had seen any xenos, daemons, or mutants, but the Church of the Divine Man and His Living Saints was pretty emphatic about the Third Convocation of the Emperor's Blessing being a bunch of heretics. They had also suggested that the disappearances were a sign of imminent rapture, or that the Mechanicus was making an extra large batch of servitors.

By then, the agent was getting a little frustrated and had obviously noticed how little attention most of our trainees paid to his teams' findings,

though we were at least making sure none of them fell asleep. One of his trainees gave an exceedingly boring report about surveillance records and people wearing matching robes, which is, of course, a classic sign of cultists. Some of our trainees snickered at this.

Twitch's team had chatted with the local PDF before securing the warehouse we were in and verified that they hadn't seen anything weird. The PDF had also implied that maybe all of the disappearing people had just suddenly decided to move to a different city and it probably wasn't anything sinister. At this point the agent and his trainees began to raise objections about the quality of our investigation. They seemed to think that all we were doing was asking random people if anything was wrong then just accepting whatever they said. None of us saw anything wrong with this though, so we just ignored their objections until they got on with their own reports.

Another batch of the other team's trainees had done some snooping in the sewers and a few underworld establishments with mixed success, but those that weren't waylaid by gangers had, of course, found more evidence of cultist activity. A short argument was triggered by a nameless wise-ass in the audience pointing out that the agent and his trainees could probably find evidence of cultist activity in their breakfast cereal.

The mood was not improved by Nubby's team's helpfully confirming a sighting of one of the other trainees being worked over with a pipe-wrench in an alley. They had thought about intervening but didn't want to blow the man's cover, so instead they asked the wrench-wielder for directions to a notorious local bar and left the trainee to his super-secret mission. After that, they visited several local underworld leaders, verified that they hadn't seen anything fishy or perpetrated any mass kidnappings, and politely asked them not to actually kill anyone until the investigation was over. The criminals had suggested the disappearances might have been caused by a press-ganging band from a navy or merchant vessel. On the way out, they had spotted the battered trainee lying in a trash pile, and had generously paid a few children to drag him to a public medicae.

The agent was starting to turn a funny shade of red now and the report from Cutter's team was the final straw. They had gone to the local Administratum headquarters, but couldn't get an appointment until tomorrow, and had decided to just call it a day.





All of us were accused of horrible incompetence, astounding laziness, and quite a few other things. We bore these accusations like the stoic guardsmen we were, but some of the trainees felt the need to respond by accusing the agent and his trainees of ridiculous paranoia. Sarge quieted them down and reminded them that paranoia wasn't always a bad thing and pointed out how often Twitch's had saved our lives. Being compared to Twitch did nothing to improve the agent's mood and he stormed out with his trainees in tow.

As he left, Doc ran out after him and apologised for our behavior and lack of useful findings. This might have mollified the agent, but Doc followed it with an assurance that everything would be sorted out when we got our appointment with the Administratum. Once they were gone, everyone broke into laughter.

Our trainees weren't stupid and they'd realized that we were playing with a stacked deck long ago. It had become a game: the stupider they thought we were and the more time they spent chasing imaginary cultists, the funnier it would be when we proved them wrong. We went to sleep proud of our trainees; they were adopting the proper cynical guard outlook surprisingly fast.

In the morning, we all went down to the Administratum for the meeting. Most of the trainees were left outside, but Cutter's squad went in and we sat and watched as they went through the questions. The head scribe assured the squad that there were no heretics, daemons, or xenos around and only a small number of minor mutants according to the last census. As far as the disappearances went, they didn't know anything about slavers, and neither the PDF nor Mechanicus had filed for a recruitment sweep. However, a Rogue Trader with a permit to press-gang had been cleared to operate in that area, and now that the scribe looked at it, there'd been a bit of bureaucratic mix-up. Apparently, a key piece of paperwork had been misfiled during press-ganging application process, and the local authorities hadn't been properly informed.

So it was all just a misunderstanding, imagine that! Someone just needed to go get the press-ganging crew to fill out the paperwork again, as well as deliver a new batch of identification badges to them, since they'd somehow been issued some sort of decorative novelty pins covered with squiggly lines instead of the proper ones. To the apologetic head scribe's delight, and without any prompting from us, our trainees immediately volunteered to go get the papers signed and deliver the proper badges. After all, it was their

duty to get this mess sorted out as soon as possible.

A few hours later, we were all drinking and laughing in the rather nice hotel which the leader of the press-ganggers was staying at. The man was very apologetic once we'd explained all the trouble that had been caused by the little mix-up. He promised to make sure his paperwork was properly filed in the future and invited us to have a few drinks in the hotel restaurant on him. A message was sent to the other team telling them we'd solved the whole mystery and recommending they head home, and then we let the trainees off the leash and had a nice chat with the press-ganger while we waited.

It took a while before someone on the other team came over to see what the hell our message was about, but none of us minded. When the sneaky looking trainee poked his head into the restaurant, he saw all of our students having a pretty wild party while our squad sat like kings at feast. Cutter grabbed the little bugger the second we saw him, dragged him up to our table, and prompted the rather tipsy press-ganger to explain the situation while Nubby filled in the drink-induced blanks. The look on that trainee's face was priceless, and we all snickered into our beers as he scurried away to call his bosses.

A short while later, the whole other training team was standing in front of us, in the middle of a party that was off several types of hooks, glaring at us like we'd kicked their mothers and slept with their pets. Or vice versa; there was just a little bit of drinking going on.

The other team didn't believe us at first. Hell, we wouldn't have believed us: it all looked too cut and dried, but there was more than enough proof. We had the official documents and permits, the logs from the shuttle that'd taken the civies away to their new and exciting lives aboard the Trader's vessel, the note from the head scribe explaining the accident, and the press-ganger himself beerily waving and confirming that it was all him. There were no cults, no secret societies, and no complex cover-ups; well, at least there weren't any involved in the disappearances. It was all just bureaucratic mix-up, a simple mistake. Just. Like. We. Said. It. Was.

It was glorious watching their faces as it sank in, seeing them go from



disbelief to anger to utter disgust. We didn't gloat too much; there's such a thing as winning gracefully, but some of the inebriated trainees were a little less restrained. They might have made some very unpleasant enemies if the party's designated thinkers hadn't hauled them away in time.

Once everything had sunk in and we considered the score suitably evened, we invited the other team to stay and party with us, but they made lame excuses about needing to go see to their own trainees. As they left, their leader, the suave agent fellow, swore that they had actually found a cult, even if it wasn't linked to the disappearances. Sarge told them to have fun and asked them to give us a call if they needed some fire support when they located the heretics or whatever: now that our point was made, we were done pretending to be even slightly interested in investigations.

Our guests dealt with, we got down to the very serious business of teaching our trainees how to hold a proper victory celebration. Super-professional Inquisitorial educators, that's us.

After everyone had slept it off, we cleared up the last loose ends and headed back to base. There was still a lot of training to do.



In our opinion, we'd made proper trainee guardsmen out of the lot and it was time to start polishing. We began to work heavy weapons and explosive drills into the schedule along with a few more specialized classes for the scribes and priests. We had the base staff act as guest lecturers, talking about more or less anything that was nerdy and Inquisition related. None of them were teachers really, or veteran field agents, but they knew a few things and passed them on to our nerdier recruits while we taught the others how to use missile launchers and heavy stubbers.

We tried to fill the remaining gaps by dumping piles of semi-restricted books and vids on the trainees. Lots of journals written by Inquisitors, after action reports, and other stuff like that. Honestly, we just had the Admin grab some of everything and let the trainees work it out for themselves. We certainly weren't going to read all that shit; except for Doc that is. He tried to get us to read this book about longing for balls by some famous old crippled Inquisitor, but it was way too long and sounded like the diary of a perverted shut-in, so none of us could be bothered. He was a bit sore about that, but he got some sort of book club going with the trainees so it all worked out.

Everything was shaping up nicely as we got near the scheduled end of our training. Sure, we were down to thirty recruits from our original fifty,

but we were reasonably happy with what we had: every one of them was a soldier now. Maybe a nerdier, scummier, or holier soldier than usual, but still a soldier first and foremost. Admittedly Oak hadn't asked for a bunch of mudfeet, but if he wanted something else, he shouldn't have put us in charge.

We were feeling pretty good about how everything had turned out. Then we got the call from the other team.

While we'd been doing our final polishing, the second team had been chasing the cultists they had spotted during the mission. Despite the shit we had given them about paranoia, they were a veteran Inquisitorial team, and if they still thought there was a real cult around here there probably was. We weren't going to go look for it ourselves of course, we probably wouldn't be very helpful and they certainly didn't want us there, but the Admin had kept us updated on their progress.

The second team rebased, infiltrated, called in some local support, re-based again, and so on. It was interesting to watch them bouncing around the planet hot on the trail of something, and we made sure our recruits saw their progress: it was probably educational. Whatever they were chasing was serious: a few of their trainees died and someone or something messed up their psyker chick real bad. That didn't stop them though, and eventually they found what appeared to be the cult's primary evil lair.

We'd received a few little summaries about what they were dealing with. The cult was some sort of end of the world thing: worshiping ancient death gods, prophesizing their return, and other such silliness. As far as practical details went: everyone in the cult appeared to be suicidally devoted to it, and their base showed signs of some sort of weird archeo or xeno tech, but at least their doctrine was decidedly anti-daemon and psyker. While that last part was unquestionably good news, we found it a little unusual as well, since all the cultists we'd encountered were all about the warp-stuff. Also, something had mentally mangled the psyker chick, which didn't track well with their supposed lack of warpy powers.

The cultists' base didn't look too huge or well armed, but it was a very weird cult so the other team wanted the purge done by someone more experienced with spooky stuff than the locals. Ideally they'd put out a call for reinforcements from Oak or some other Inquisitor, and then sit tight and observe the cult while waiting for backup to arrive. Unfortunately, something or other had lead them to believe that time was critical, so they were going to have to settle for us guardsmen and our dubiously-educated trainees.





It was actually pretty exciting to get the call. Normally we liked to avoid things like angry cultists trying to kill us or being sent to storm a fortified position, but this was a perfect chance for our trainees to prove themselves. We were going to rip through those cultists like a chainsword through butter, or flesh, bone, and most types of metal for that matter.

Fliers came to get us, and we loaded up with a bit of everything. We figured that since no one was sure what was in the base, it wouldn't hurt to be over-prepared. Between the standard gear, the specialist munitions our trainees knew how to use, and our own personal arsenal, we were ready for anything up to a titan. Of course Twitch pointed out that the base was just large enough to hold a titan, but we really couldn't fit any more ordinance into the fliers.

The recruits were briefed, weapons were checked, and we headed out. As we flew, Sarge worried in his usual grumpy way and double checked the brief, Cutter made sure his chainsword was all greased up, and Doc wrote a soppy letter, just in case. Twitch was arguing with Nubby about how many detpacks it would take to cripple a titan while the little man tried to out-cheat a few trainees at cards. The recruits fidgeted in their seats and chatted with each other, displaying the usual first-deployment mix of nerves and excitement. We proudly noted that their excitement definitely outweighed their nervousness; they'd trained for this and were pretty confident in their skills.

We were about twenty minutes from our destination, flying low and slow, when something flashed out of the sky. It was directly ahead of us and came straight down, trailing fire at well over terminal velocity. It looked like a macrocannon shot, it sounded like a macrocannon shot, but it wasn't part of a barrage and Twitch claimed the shock-wave that hit us wasn't nearly big enough. We weren't sure what it was, and it had struck right in the middle of the cult's base.

The other team voxed and said they were moving in without us, just in case it turned out to be some sort of weird world ending shit. Sarge told the pilots to forget stealth and floor it.

So no shit there we were, flying towards a cultist base that had just been cratered by a UFO, listening to the other team advance and hoping against hope that this wasn't about to turn into a rescue mission.

We made it almost all the way there before the screaming started.

A crude plan was formed as we landed. The other team had activated their locator-beacon and we were going to head right for it. Twitch would

take a squad and secure the perimeter and fliers, Cutter would be on point with another squad, Doc's squad would cover our rear, and Sarge would lead the rest of the squads from the middle with Nubby acting as aide. Nubby complained about the arrangement and was reminded that, after the whole ship-purchasing fiasco, he was banned from command until the Emperor stepped down from his throne and told Sarge otherwise.

The frequencies the other team had been using were a complete mess, filled with a few screams and lots of static. Something in here was screwing with comm signals, and their fancy low profile models weren't punching through well. Ours were doing a bit better, but only the vox-casters were getting through clearly. One of the recruits with a caster was put in charge of cycling through their frequencies and telling everyone to fall back to our positions.

The cult's base was a sort of giant low bunker. It had one large entrance, a few side doors which we left to Twitch, and a huge-ass hole in the roof that was probably not in the original design. The hole was slightly on fire and appeared to be glowing green, so we decided to go in through the front door.

There was a trainee from the other team lying in a few pieces just outside the main entrance and the first cultist we saw was in similar shape. The second, third, and fourth cultists we ran into were all alive though. They were also nuttier than squirrel shit and armed with an automatic shotguns.

Luckily Cutter's boys were pretty quick, only one was injured before a few grenades solved the cultist problem. After that scare we slowed down a little, there was no point in getting killed before we managed to rescue anyone.

The recruits put their breach and clear training to good use, room after room was flashed and secured as our force headed deeper into the bunker. We ran into a few more cultists and a lot more corpses on our way, and while we didn't have any trouble with the hostiles, the bodies were a bit worrying. Some of the corpses had normal gunshot wounds, others had been sliced up by something very sharp, like a mono or force sword, and a few didn't have a mark on them. Something here had been killing both friendlies and cultists, and was being damned weird about it. Nubby put his money on a daemonhost and began telling everyone about how he'd killed the last one we faced until the rest of us told him to shut up.



Things started to get bad after we found the main stair shaft for the bunker. Sarge left a squad to secure it, figuring that it was about the most important access point around. A few minutes after our main force left them, the squad lead voxed us and reported a man missing. Shortly after that, we heard las-fire and his second reported one man dead and two missing, including the squad lead.

A halt was called. Sarge told the cut-off squad to pull together and hold position, and then sent Doc and Nubby with a patrol to recover the squad before they were all picked off. Doc's rescue-team didn't run into anything as they backtracked, and when they arrived the squad was still intact, if badly shaken. A quick sweep turned up the two missing recruits dead in corners without a mark on them and the squad lead hacked to pieces.

It was obvious that whatever had been hunting the other team and the cultists was stalking us now. Sarge mandated minimum groups of three, called Doc and the recruits back to the main force, and resumed the advance.

The recruits on our flanks began to report possible enemy contact, usually flashes of movement or odd sounds on their comms. During a brief firefight with a nest of cultists holed up in some sort of storage room one of our men dodged into a closet and didn't come back out; he was dead by the time his squadmates noticed his absence and went to check on him. Two more trainees died this way, and a pair of recruits chased a fleeing enemy around a corner, only to find the cultist eviscerated and still twitching. They swore something had flashed away into a dark corner as they approached, but didn't find anything when they checked.



Everyone was getting jumpy, and a trigger happy recruit nearly shot the first friendly we ran into. A few surviving trainees from the other team, usually in groups of two or three, followed our vox casters' signal and made contact as we advanced. For the most part they were in good condition, if disorganized. Their command structure had fallen apart when their comms went down, and they'd been wandering around killing cultists until we'd shown up. Sarge put them on the flanks to act as scouts since they were stealthier than our boys, not to mention a little more expendable.

None of the rescued trainees had any useful info for us until we found a solo one with a nasty face wound. She was panicking hard and waving a power sword around in the middle of a brightly lit room, and it took both a tranq and a stimm from Doc to get her talking properly. Most of what the terrified trainee had to say was gibberish, but she was fairly insistent

about glowing eyes watching from the shadows and blades coming through the walls.

The panicked trainee's info fit with what we'd observed, and some of our former scribes said they recalled reports of daemons and daemonhosts phasing through solid objects or emerging from shadows. Most of us found this explanation for the attacks to be extremely worrying, but Nubby chose to look on the bright side, and began gloating about how he was always right and how much money everyone owed him. Sarge adjusted his standing orders to include staying away from walls and unlit areas, and then told Nubby to shut up and do something useful, such as figuring out a way to trap or kill whatever was stalking us.

Nubby being Nubby, he immediately voxed Twitch, and dumped the problem on the demolitions trooper, while he assumed an "advisory role". That's not to say that Nubby didn't do any of the work: someone had to accurately relay what materials were available, remind Twitch that nuking the temple from orbit wasn't an option, and either take credit or assign blame depending on how the plan worked out. Anyway, between them they came up with a rather cruel, but surprisingly effective, solution.

At their request we began capturing a few cultists instead of killing them all. Nubby, with far too much enthusiasm, would tie them up, tape a short fuse grenade into their hands and pull the pin. Of course a few immediately let go of the lever and blew themselves all over the room we left them in, but most held tight. As the advance continued we heard the occasional explosion behind us, prompting Nubby to cackle and Doc to complain that this was probably not something we should be teaching the trainees. The traps worked though: two of the explosions resulted in odd high pitched screaming sounds and we stopped seeing the flashes of movement.

While Nubby was fooling around at the rear, Cutter's squad was starting to run ragged after so much time at the front. They'd taken the most casualties from the cultists and Cutter himself had taken a few minor wounds himself, so Sarge rotated them off the front and led the final push towards the other team's beacon. As our force got closer, everyone began to hear the sounds of a firefight, and shortly after that we encountered the largest group of cultists yet.

The cultists were trying to force their way into a large room and failing miserably. We took up positions, counted down, and at Sarge's signal our boys hit them in the rear with a few grenades and a whole lot of las-fire.



For once, the attack went just about perfectly, and we mopped the cultists up with only a few minor injuries on the part of our trainees. Once the last injured cultist had been executed, we rallied together and carefully made contact with the what was left of the second team.

As we entered the room and automatically scanned it for threats, our attention was immediately grabbed by a massive hole in the far wall which opened into the bottom of the crater. We couldn't help but notice that the everyone in the room had positioned themselves to cover it, as opposed to the door which the cultists had been attacking through. That did not bode well.



Not counting the handful we'd recovered on our way, the second team was down to just a dozen men and women led by the agent and cogboy instructors. Only the combat-focused trainees were left: there were a few former arbites, a pair of psykers, a handful of their more well-armed generic agent types, and that damned cadet commissar we'd "transferred" to them. They looked absolutely exhausted, and most of them were wounded to some degree, but they all perked up as we entered the room. Except for the commissar that is, he just glared at us.

The boss-agent gave us a quick rundown as we got our boys into position alongside his trainees. Apparently, when the UFO had cratered, his team had gone in fast and hard. A few of them stuck together to check out what had landed, but most had split off solo or in small groups to cover more ground or something stupid like that. They'd been kicking ass right up until they'd reached this room and poked their noses into the crater.

The agent explained that the second one of his trainees had entered the crash site, everyone's comms had gone down, the solo trainees started getting picked off, and his main force had been attacked by the ship's defenders. Sarge was in the middle of asking what he meant by "ship", when one of the men watching the crater shouted a warning.

Black and green metallic critters began boiling out of the crater-hole and everyone started shooting. The attackers were small, quick, and there was a whole lot of them. If it weren't for the choke point between the room and the crater, we would've been in serious trouble: those things would've been a nightmare to face in an unrestricted area or close quarters. As it was, we were able to hold the tide of metallic attackers back with volleys of fire and a few grenades; at least until something covered with claws came out of the

damned floor and shredded two recruits.

The situation started to go bad very quickly. The thing that had risen out of the floor was some sort of big metal spider-worm with scythes for arms; it positively screamed “close quarters combat specialist” and it was behind our main firing line.

Now a proper guardsman can handle just about anything, but we prefer to fight our enemies from the maximum effective range of our current weapon or, better yet, the maximum effective range of the nearest artillery battery. The spider-worm was far too close for comfort, and it tore three trainees apart before it ran into one who could put up a real fight in melee. Even after its killing spree had been interrupted though, the thing’s mere presence played hell with our defense of the crater entrance: the fire keeping back the tide of metal bugs began to fade as recruits scrambled to safety or switched targets to focus on the new threat.

We managed to hold, but only just barely. Sarge barked the recruits back into position as our squad worked to personally deal with the spider-worm. Cutter led the attack with the commissar and agent-instructor backing him up in melee, while the rest of us fanned out and hit the thing with our heavier las-guns. It was not an easy fight. The enemy was tough, fast, and attacks had a disturbing tendency to pass through it; half the battle was just trying to line up attacks so they didn’t hit an ally on the other side if the thing phased out. To be honest Cutter didn’t really bother with that, he just depended on everyone else getting out of the way.

Whatever the spider-worm’s claws were made of, it was a nightmare to defend against. The metallic creature’s attacks sliced through armor like wet paper and just phased through any attempts at parrying. Only some incredible dodges kept Cutter and our close-quarters fighters alive long enough for us to figure out how to reliably hit the damned thing. It turned out that the trick was to wait for the exact moment it struck, and then hit it with everything we had while it was temporarily solid. Unfortunately, this strategy required someone to very nearly take a hit for us to launch our attack, but Cutter was more than willing. A few well timed volleys and a couple near death experiences later, the spider-worm collapsed in a sparking heap.

Sarge and Nubby took stock of the situation while Cutter ignored both Doc and the cogboy’s protests and wildly chopped at the remains of the spider-worm. A few trainees from both groups had died during the attack, mostly to the spider-worm, but a few of the smaller metal bugs had gotten



through and done some unpleasant things before they were smashed. Ammo was getting low and we had a fair number of wounded, including Cutter, who finally collapsed after reducing what the cogboy called a “technological marvel” to a pile of scrap metal.



A quick council of war was held and the other team finished filling us in. They believed that the hostiles were a type of xenos called Necrons, and that the thing in the crater was one of their ships. Despite our general lack of proper Inquisitorial education, the name rang a faint bell; something about techno-magical powers, looking like skeletons, and refusing to die. That didn't seem quite right to us, since none of the enemies we'd fought had looked anything like skeletons and the spider-worm seemed pretty damned dead now that Cutter

Cutter was finished with it, but the agent and cogboy seemed fairly certain, so we just went with it.

Anyway, the ship in the crater was in surprisingly good condition, especially considering how it had arrived, which excited our better-educated counterparts to no end. They said it was both an amazing opportunity for Inquisitional research and a dire threat to the planet. Apparently, Necrons were famous for their use of teleportation technology, which was rumored to have the range and power to bring in an entire army of ground-troops from across the galaxy. Obtaining working samples of said tech for study was absurdly difficult, to say the least.

So the agent and the cogboy were all excited about a chance to loot the ship, but we were a little more concerned about the whole “providing a gateway for an invading xenos army” aspect of things. Our well-honed survival instincts were telling us to call the locals and have them bomb the entire temple until the ship was either blown to pieces or buried under a few thousand tons of rubble, and then bomb it some more, just to be sure.

The other team objected to this perfectly reasonable solution on the grounds that the Inquisition would consider an INTACT sample of Necron teleportation tech to be far more valuable than a mere planet. Unfortunately, they were able to back that incredibly stupid argument up with a less-stupid one about how the Necrons might start teleporting in before the locals got their shit together. Lacking any reasonable counter-arguments to that, we reluctantly agreed to head in and see if we couldn't deactivate the ship's teleporter-thingy. Twitch was commed, and we started getting ready for one hell of a breaching operation.

While Twitch's squad came down with all the ordinance they could carry, Doc headed up with Cutter and the rest of the wounded. None of them were in shape for more fighting and a few of our trainees would die if Doc didn't stick with them; besides, Sarge wanted someone competent on the surface who could tell everyone what was happening and request backup. While the agent and cogboy were busy talking to Twitch, Sarge pulled Doc aside for one last order. Once the medic was on the surface, a quick call was to be made to a certain Rogue Trader who we were on good terms with and hadn't left the system quite yet. Honestly, we didn't have anything specific planned at that point; all we did was ask the Trader to shift his orbit over our part of the planet. His ship just happened to have the biggest guns within a day's travel of the planet, and it felt reassuring to have them ready to annihilate the crashed ship if it started teleporting a xenos army in.

Once everyone had relocated and rearmed, we stepped out to the edge of the crater and began examining the ship. Our inspection was limited by the fact that we couldn't actually enter the crater without triggering another attack from the scarab-things defending it, so all we could really determine was the ship looked weird as hell. It was all crescent shaped, covered with glowy green lines, and appeared to be made of an unfamiliar-looking metal which the cogboy called "necroderpis" or something. Weirdness aside though, it was obviously a combat capable void-ship and had serious armor.

Twitch could tell at a glance that no amount of detpacks would get us into the xenos ship, but instead of frustrating him, this discovery actually made him happy. In fact it made him too happy, and he actually started to giggle as he dug through his pile of explosives. The case he finally pulled out of the mound made the rest of us flinch.

Now, just to be clear, we all liked Twitch and there was no better demolitions trooper in the Imperium. We trusted him to set any explosive device and never worried about his traps misfiring, but the way he doted over that meltabomb was unsettling. Emperor knows how Nubby and the Admin found that thing; we'd only asked for a few of the anti-armor bombs to show to the trainees. In addition to the nice normal ones that had been delivered, there'd been an extra box that was twice as large as others, and inside there'd been this absolute BEAST of a meltabomb. It was NOT



guard issue: if you could un-file the serial numbers and other markings it'd probably say something like "Property of the Adeptus Astartes, Intended for Anti-Titan Use Only". Twitch called it Big Bertha and slept with it under his bed.

He'd had to raise his bed on blocks for it to fit.

Bertha was obviously intended for use by someone far stronger than a normal human, and everyone held their breath as Twitch wobbled under the bomb's weight. While he fiddled with the timer and magnetic clamps, the rest of us pondered how to get it onto the ship without blowing ourselves up. The other team had marked a line across the crater entrance and according to them anyone crossing it would trigger another scarab attack. They'd done a little testing and it seemed that it was only people that set them off; rocks, las bolts, bullets, and even grenades were fine so long they didn't detonate against the ship. Since

we weren't keen on fighting scarabs while carrying an oversized meltabomb, this all meant that we needed to figure out a way to get Bertha onto the ship's hull without anyone entering the crater.

Since the typical ranged meltabomb deployment method of just throwing the thing as hard as possible wasn't an option, the agent suggested that the last two surviving psykers could levitate the bomb across the gap. Sarge vetoed this on the grounds that it was an incredibly stupid idea, and was thankfully able to supply a far more reasonable solution. Nubby and a few recruits were sent to collect pipes and scrap metal, while Sarge regaled everyone with the tale of how we'd dealt with a similar problem involving a tentacle daemon.

By the time Twitch had the bomb ready, a long, ugly, and surprisingly-sturdy pole had been constructed, and a fulcrum was set up on the edge of the line. Bertha was attached to the pole with her clamps facing forward, and with the help of several trainees, we slowly pushed the rod along the fulcrum. It was touch and go in a few spots, especially when a seam got stuck on the brace and nearly tipped it over, but we got it across and clamped to the hull without triggering an attack or blowing ourselves to little pieces. Once the breaching charge was in place, our trainees set up their heavy weapons, we finalized our attack plans, and everyone shielded their eyes as Twitch hit the detonator.

Bertha was a meltabomb, so "her" detonation wasn't the usual flash, bang, and shockwave of high explosives. Instead, there was a sort of hissing-



crackling sound along with intense heat, blinding light, and a whole lot of smoke, which began to roil as scarabs swarmed through it. We responded by opening fire with our heavy weapons, and just holding the triggers down until the smoke cleared and the scarabs stopped coming.

The scarabs abandoned their attack without making it through the kill-zone, and no more spider-worms (which the cogboy testily informed us were called Wraiths) appeared to back them up. We reloaded, formed up, and carefully made our way across the crater and through the still-glowing hole in the xenos ship's hull.

The agent and commissar led the way, and the first thing they did after entering the ship was fall sideways out of the hole as the ship's gravity field took over. We handled it a little more gracefully (after our stint on the Occurrence Border, gravity shifts didn't really bother us anymore), and we managed to get all the trainees through without any injuries. The room we were in was large enough to hold our entire force and packed with all sorts of green glowy machinery. The cogboy was ecstatic, but didn't see anything that looked like the teleporter, so we gathered everyone together and made our way to a large door that looked like it led towards the middle of the ship.

At our signal, our trainees began going through the now-familiar breach and clear drill. Charges were placed, flashes were prepped, and everyone got ready for a fight, but the enemy failed to oblige us, at least initially. Our boys stormed in, looking professional as all hell by the way, and found a room that seemed just as big and empty as the last one. Nerves jangling, we advanced across the room, and were about halfway to the next door when the enemy hit us.

Green beams lanced out of the shadows and cut down a pair of trainees while the rest of us grabbed cover. The hostiles that slowly stepped out of the shadows were the metal skeleton things that we'd been expecting when we'd heard the word Necron. After their initial advance, the xenos stood stock still, ignoring our fire and shooting green lightning from weapons that resembled spiky plasma guns. Their shots sliced across the room in long arcs, burning through armor, flesh, and bone like it wasn't even there. Luckily, the bulkheads and machinery that filled the room proved more resistant to the green beams, offering us a distinct advantage since the skeletal xenos didn't appear to understand the basic concept of cover.

After the initial surprise attack we poured fire into the Necron warriors.



There were only four of them and over thirty of us, but they were surprisingly sturdy and by the time we'd worn them down reinforcements were coming in.



Two more Necrons stepped out of the far door along with a swarm of scarabs. They just stood there and traded fire with us like the others had, except with the scarabs repairing them almost as fast as we did damage. It was damned disconcerting watching their wounds sort of flow closed and some of the recruits began to panic fire. Without the heavy weapons Twitch's squad had brought down it would have been bad; it took a pair of our single-shot krak missiles to kill them.

As soon as the last two hostiles were dead Sarge ordered another advance, which ground to a halt a mere ten meters into the next room, when another pair Necrons entered through the far door and opened fire. The room was long and thin, with good cover along the sides, but no safe way to move forward. Our Guard instincts told us to dig in and trade fire from our superior cover, but the cogboy claimed he could sense more Necros teleporting in somewhere ahead of us, which meant that attrition tactics might not work in the long term. The question was whether we were killing them faster than their reinforcements were arriving, and even if we were outpacing them, whether we'd reach the teleporter before we ran out of men or ammo.

While Sarge and the other team's were arguing over whether to risk more aggressive tactics or not, Nubby was back at the entrance to the room, sitting in the best piece of cover available. His attention was evenly split between taking pot-shots at the Necrons blocking forward progress, and visually inspecting the pair of dead xenos near him for anything worth pocketing. The little trooper nearly shit himself when both the Necons began to slowly pull themselves together and climb to their feet. Operating in a blind panic, Nubby sprayed one Necron with las-fire, kicked the other between the legs hard enough to knock it across the room, and ran forward screaming like a little girl. Only sheer luck kept him from getting hit as he ran through everyone's line of fire.

Sarge looked back when he heard Nubby's screams and swore. Back in the recently vacated room more of the Necrons were reanimating.

So no shit, there we were, on a crashed xenos spaceship, fighting skeletons made of living metal, and the ones behind us were getting back up. This was a very bad thing.

If enemy reinforcements were going to keep porting in and the ones we killed weren't going to stay that way, there was only one real option; we

had to push forward and destroy the teleporter before we were overwhelmed. Sarge gave the order to advance by squads and we all prayed to the Emperor that the xenos weren't good at switching targets.

The trainees were not happy with that order: running headlong into incoming fire did NOT sound fun and the Necrons were damned scary looking. On the other hand, more metal skeletons were coming up from the rear, so there wasn't anywhere else to go. They complained, they swore, and then they manned up and advanced; just like proper guardsmen.

It's important to understand that advancing by squads is not the same as a reckless charge. It is a precise, difficult maneuver and it was a damned good thing that we'd drilled on it, because there were a lot of ways it could have gone horribly wrong. Sarge stood there and barked commands, exactly as he'd done during training, ordering one squad to throw grenades, another to lay down fire and a third to advance to a new position. Then, as soon as the third squad was in cover, the process would repeat; there wasn't any stopping to rest or retrieve wounded, everyone had to keep moving and fighting or the whole thing would fall apart.

Some trainees died, others were badly wounded, but to a man they followed their orders and we steadily gained ground. It took a lot of training and discipline to pull off that sort of maneuver, and if anyone from the other team had been watching it probably would have impressed the shit out of them. They'd have stood there going "By the Emperor, look how co-ordinated and professional all those former scribes and clerics are! We were totally wrong about those guardsmen being a bunch of lazy incompetents, and should probably apologize".

Or at least they would've if they and their trainees hadn't been busy holding off the re-animating Necrons behind us while we advanced.

The grenade barrages before each push were our best weapon against the Necrons, since that necroderpis stuff they were made of just shrugged off most las and stubber fire. The hostiles were reinforcing in pairs with a few bugs repairing them, each barrage would handle the closest pair and most of our fire would focus on softening up the next two before the process repeated. Sarge kept everyone organized and moving, Twitch took potshots with his remaining krak missiles whenever he had a chance, and Nubby dedicated himself to making sure any downed Necrons nearby stayed that way.





The boys were starting to run out of grenades as we reached the end of the long room, but when the door opened to let a pair of hostiles though, we could see a big glowy platform thing on the far side. The platform looked sufficiently teleporter-like to us, and all we really needed was line of sight, so Sarge called a halt. Our trainees set up their heavy stubbers, we readied our few remaining krak launchers, and when the door opened again, we sighted all our weapons on the platform while a final barrage of grenades handled the advancing Necrons. As the door slammed back shut, we all held our breath, focused on holding our aim steady, and hoped like hell that we'd be able to get a clean shot on the teleporter the next time it opened.

When the door finally slid back open, we all fired our launchers. Sarge's shot went high, sailing over the platform and blowing apart a section of wall. Nubby's shot was wasted on one of the advancing Necrons, but that cleared a path for Twitch and the stubbers. Our last krak missile and a stream of AP rounds sailed through the door as it slammed closed again, and while we didn't see them impact the teleporter, we sure as hell felt it.

There was a loud crackling bang, the entire ship shook, and then things got weird. First everything went all tingly and green colored, next Nubby spotted some of the Necron corpses sort of fading, then the walls went all wobbly, and finally there was an almighty *CLANG* and everything went back to normal.

Everyone just sort of stood there looking stupid for a few seconds. We all expected something more to happen, like another attack or the ship exploding or a wormhole sucking us into the warp, but nothing did. All the hostiles had vanished, and we were just sitting there, in what seemed to be an empty ship. Eventually Sarge gathered everyone up and took stock.

The rearguard hadn't had an easy time of it: the agent was missing an arm and unconscious, the cogboy was dead, and only the commissar was holding them together. We were down to under twenty effective, with a handful of wounded who might live if we didn't run into anything else. On the bright side, it seemed like the fight was over; we'd heroically saved the day and captured a piece of highly valuable xeno-tech. At least it looked that way, Sarge decided to err on the side of caution and



do a last sweep before we threw any parades.

The door to the teleporter room was pried open and we carefully entered. It didn't have any hostiles inside and appeared to also be the ship's the bridge. Half the room was taken up by the wrecked teleporter and there was what looked like an empty command chair with a few deactivated control panels, but what really caught the eye was this important looking pedestal. It was covered with runes that were still glowing green and had a small metal cube suspended above it in some sort of anti-grav field. Sarge told everyone, especially Nubby, not to touch it.

While the rest of us poked around the bridge, Twitch made some field repairs to our least damaged vox pack. It didn't take long; say what you will about those green beam weapons, they don't do much collateral damage. The first thing Doc asked when we reached him was if WE had called for any shuttles.

The call was interrupted by the door on the far side of the bridge slamming open.

Not one, but two silver and gold giants strode into the room. They had huge ass bolters and far too many spikes on their armor.

So no shit, there we were, standing on the bridge of an alien vessel, staring slack-jawed at a pair of Chaos Space Marines, both of whom seemed just as surprised as we were to find anyone else here. Everyone held very, very still and waited for someone to make the first move. We had them heavily outnumbered and they had us heavily outclassed. If this turned into a fight, it was going to be a bloodbath.

The staring contest stretched a little longer, and our nerve began to crack. Sarge carefully stepped forward and, nonchalantly as possible, asked the marines if we could help them with anything. This just got more blank stares and an awkward cough from Nubby, until a third figure entered the room. The two marines stepped aside to reveal what was obviously a Heretek, who, after a fit of buzzing and giggling, told us that yes we could indeed help them.

Now, most any tech-priest looks sinister, but the difference between an ugly cogboy and a full blown heretek is damned noticeable. Aside from all the metal tentacles, eerie lights, dripping thingies, and pointy bits, this one practically radiated insanity. The second you saw him it was obvious that this guy wasn't just fucking nuts; he was also bolts, screws, rivets, and those



metal clampy dealies you use on the prefab field buildings.

In a voice that seemed to be stuck looping between five different settings, and in between bouts of hysterical giggling, the Heretek demanded “the device”. No real clarification was needed: he wasn’t just staring at the cube on the pedestal, his eyes had actually extended out of his head on little mechadendrites. Sarge, mind racing, stalled for time by asking the crazy metal man what the cube was and why we should hand it over. This triggered an exasperated groan from both marines as the Heretek launched into a rambling monologue.

The question had mostly been a stalling tactic while Sarge tried to figure out a way to get us out of this alive, but mixed in with all the insane chatter there were a few very important things. Firstly the device was a “device for devicing devices”, secondly it belonged to the Heretek because he’d “inerted the inertia and un-phased the phaser”, and finally he would make us into “meat puppets” if we didn’t give it to him, now. We translated all this as ”I am crazy, evil, easily distracted, and far more concerned with that box than you.”

Sarge considered the situation. The good news was that the Heretek wanted the box so bad he might be willing to cut a deal, the bad news was that he had to have a ship of some sort in orbit and would inevitably try to kill us the moment

his box was safe. Sarge’s assets consisted of a bunch of exhausted trainees, a paranoid, a cretin, and a still active vox link to Doc. He did not want to fight a pair of traitor marines, not to mention a Heretek or a bloody warp-ship; he wanted to live through the next few minutes and screw the other guys over before they screwed him over. Thinking fast he shoved Nubby forward and told him to make a deal, then waved Twitch over and tried to nonchalantly stand in front of the pedestal.

The negotiations would have been funny if the situation weren’t so serious. One party was a cretinous little sneak telling outrageous lies and trying to figure out how to make a profit on this, while the other was completely insane and had no concept of what normal people wanted. The two marines began to look incredibly annoyed, at least insofar as a giant pile of ceramite and spikes can look anything other than murderous. We got the distinct impression that, if things dragged on much longer, they’d stop waiting for the Heretek’s word to attack.



Eventually Nubby stomped back to the rather distracted Sarge and Twitch and reported success. The Heretek had agreed to let us live in exchange for the box and he'd even thrown in the Necron ship on account of it being a "boring thing that attracts even boringer things". That was about the best deal we could expect to get and Nubby had bought just enough time to finish the preparations, so Sarge accepted and stepped away from the pedestal, poker face firmly in place.

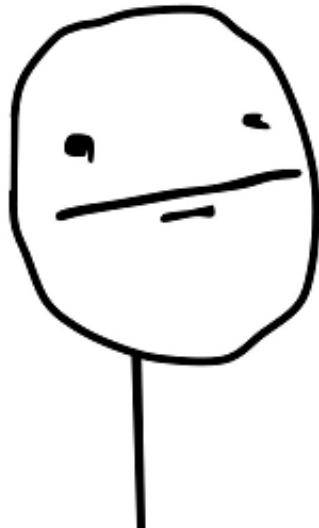
In a loud, clear voice that just happened to be directed towards the vox unit, Sarge announced that we'd be withdrawing to the room behind us. We'd be back there sitting still, while the Heretek and two chaos marines with bolters went up to their shuttle, the one on the roof, that would take them to their ship, the one that was in orbit. We would stay down here and do absolutely nothing to **SABOTAGE THEIR SHUTTLE or INTERCEPT THEIR SHIP.**

Sarge's acting skills may have left something to be desired, but the Heretek didn't seem to notice and the marines didn't seem to care. He also somehow managed to fool the commissar since the idiot accused us all of heresy and might have caused serious trouble if Nubby hadn't come up behind him and kicked him very firmly between the legs. The second kick was probably uncalled for, and the third definitely was, but no one said anything: we were all busy slowly backing out of the room while watching the marines.

Our retreat had taken us almost all the way to the door when the Heretek told us to stop. Hearts racing, we all froze and watched as his mechadendrites shot out and ripped the cleverly concealed explosives off the box and pedestal. The crazy cogboy made a comment about not needing any more explosives, thanked us for the thought, and tossed the detpacks to Twitch, who nearly fumbled them in his surprise.

We all kept backing up and tried not to let our disappointment show. This was apparently not a problem we could solve with detpacks. At least not immediately.

Once the door was closed and we were sure no angry traitor marines were coming after us, we all turned and ran for the exit. Except for the commissar that is: he was being dragged between two other trainees. As we ran, Twitch got the vox-unit patched into our comms, and Sarge asked Doc if he'd gotten all that. The heretics had to be stopped before they got their shuttle into



the air and then their ship needed to be taken out before it just nuked us from orbit.



Back on the surface, Doc was looking at a very big and sturdy looking shuttle, in rather petulant voice he told Sarge that “Damn it man, I’m a doctor, not a demolitions expert!” Twitch unhelpfully reminded everyone that he was a demolitions expert, but had been forced to trade places and hike all the way down here. Sarge told him to be quiet unless he had something useful to say.

Doc was in a bind. The rest of us were coming up through the bunker as quickly as possible, but the heretics would probably reach their shuttle first. He had to figure out a way to cripple their shuttle or delay the enemy long enough for the

rest of us to arrive. He didn’t have much to work with: the Heretek’s shuttle had destroyed our fliers as it landed, and the only anti-armor munitions that hadn’t been in them had been used in breaching the Necron ship. All Doc had was a handful of wounded troopers, a few lasguns and chainswords, a semi-conscious Cutter, and a crate of medical supplies.

A BIG crate of medical supplies.

A big crate of MILITARY-GRADE medical supplies.

Thinking fast and abandoning all medical ethics, Doc started digging into the crate and planning one hell of an ambush.

While Doc was working on the shuttle problem, Sarge was trying to have a vox conversation while running. He’d managed to contact the Rogue Trader who’d helped us set up the whole kidnapping thing, but he was running into problems. The Trader had maneuvered his ship to our general side of the planet, but while he’d have been happy to lend us some orbital fire-support in exchange for a bit of Inquisitorial good-will, getting in a fight with another warp-ship was an entirely different matter. To put it bluntly, he wasn’t going to risk his ship, even on an ambush,

for a mere bunch of Inquisitorial henchmen. He needed some sort of motivation.

Sarge didn’t have time, or breath, to spare arguing with the Trader. We needed the man’s help: there were no other ships close enough, or well-armed enough, to stop the Heretek’s vessel, so Sarge cut a deal. It wasn’t a smart



deal, in fact there was a very real chance that Inquisition would have him killed for even considering making it, but it was the only way he could see out of the current situation. Sarge offered the only really valuable thing he had: one slightly used Necron ship.

You better believe that caught the Trader's attention.

Sarge gave what evidence he could that the ship was actually there and greed did the rest. The Trader said he'd handle whatever vessel the Heretek was using or damn well die trying; the prize was worth it.

That done with, we laid on the speed. It was a clear run up through the bunker, since all the cultists were either dead or fleeing, and we all ran flat out. There was no real plan, it was just going to be a matter of getting to the roof and hitting them in the rear while Doc held their attention. No finesse, no trickery, just the biggest sucker punch we could manage.

We either made amazing time or the Heretek had taken a while getting the box off the pedestal, because we got there right as Doc's ambush hit them.

Let me tell you, that was really something to see. Hell, we were so busy watching that we almost forgot to fire our weapons.

Some of you might know what Slaught and Frenzon are, but if you don't, imagine the fastest, meanest, angriest bastard you've ever seen. Now give him an immunity to pain, rabies, and slight brain damage. That's what a dose does to a normal person. What a double dose cut with stimms did to Cutter and his boys was just ridiculous.

Doc had got them positioned, timed their injections, and let them loose at just about the perfect moment. A bunch of half-dead mudfeet turned into enraged murder-machines about three meters from the Heretek and his marines, right as they were getting off the hover-thingies that they rode up out of the crater on. The fight was too fast to follow, we just did had to aim for the enemy and hope our shots didn't hit any of Cutter's boys.

I'd like to say it was a heroic and complex battle, but really we just poured fire into the two traitor marines until the sheer mass of it overwhelmed them. Sure, they had superhuman strength, hundreds of years of battle experience, and whatever daemonic powers their dark masters had granted them, but as we say in the Guard "Quantity has a quality all its own". Las and stub rounds, only a minor threat individually, pounded into them in a continuous



torrent that even they couldn't ignore. Simultaneously, the chem-powered chainsword strikes of our berserkers tore deep rents in their power-armor and kept them from bringing their bolters to bear on the rest of us. It wasn't all one-sided of course, multiple trainees fell to sprays of unaimed bolt rounds, and even without proper melee weapons, the traitor-marines were capable of dealing horrible damage to the berserkers attacking them. Unfortunately for them, "horrible" isn't the same as "incapacitating" for someone hopped up on combat-chems: even as our berserkers bled out, they pressed their attack, and forced the two space marines to give ground which they didn't actually have. First one marine, then the other, was pressed backwards and over the edge of the crater. They pancaked on the crashed ship with a sort of crunchy splatting sound.

The Heretek didn't go down as easily as his bodyguards though. He had some sort of shield which blocked all of our fire, and quickly dismembered everyone who got into melee range until just the king berserker himself was left. The rest of us desperately poured fire into the Heretek's shield in an attempt to burn through it, while Cutter duked it out one-on-one with the crazy cogboy.

Cutter was being kept on his feet by a cocktail of drugs that would probably kill him the moment they ran out; his time was measured in seconds. Seconds were all he needed though.

He didn't bother with dodging, parrying, or any sissy stuff like that: all he cared about was doing as much damage as possible. Mechadendrites ripped off chunks of flesh, a sparking weapon nailed him in the legs, and some sort of injector just barely missed his heart, but Cutter ignored these trivialities. He lodged his faithful chainsword firmly in the Heretek's chest and wrenched it upwards with berserk strength.



The deranged cogboy screamed and flailed as he was bisected, writhing so violently that pieces started flying off, one of which landed within Nubby's reach and was promptly pocketed. As the chain-blade reached the base of the Heretek's neck, his screaming finally coalesced into one word repeated in a dozen voices: "Burn".

There was a second of unnatural silence, followed by a rising humming sound, and then the Heretek exploded into a fireball that engulfed both him and his attacker. Cutter laughed as he burned.

All in all, there were worse ways to go.

There wasn't time to stand around in shock or mourn Cutter's death. A few seconds after the Heretek's self-immolation, a massive energy beam

hit the nearby shuttle, and we realized the crazy bastard had called for an orbital bombardment.

We grabbed what wounded we could and ran back into the cult's bunker; it was the only option we could see. We sprinted through hallways and down stairs with titanic explosions filling our ears and uncomfortable dampness filling our pants. One by one the unfit and the badly wounded fell behind, as did the bow-legged commissar, and those who fell behind, were left behind.

Nubby led the way on his augmetic legs while we all followed and hoped his cowardly instincts would lead us to safety. We ran through the wreckage of our battles and, just barely ahead of a titanic wave of heat, we scrambled into the Necron ship. None of us stopped there though, we kept going until we reached the bridge and then held our breath as the entire ship began to shake.

The shaking went on for a while, but there was no sudden burst of heat and light. Eventually, it all went quiet. Our heart rates slowed as we realized that, somehow, we'd survived the bombardment. Doc started crying.

We sat in that ship for what felt like days. The hole we'd melted in the hull was clogged with debris, so there was nothing to do but wait and hope someone came looking for us.

There were fifteen of us all together: us four guardsmen, the wounded agent we'd left in the ship, eight of our trainees, and two more from the other team. As usual, Sarge took command of the whole show and got everyone up and moving. Doc was hauled to his feet and told that living wounded took priority over dead heroes. Sarge promised that he'd be allowed to sit around feeling guilty about Cutter and all the trainees he'd drugged once we'd been rescued. Twitch and Nubby had already started collecting what food and water had been in people's packs, so they were put in charge of rationing after a stern reminder that everyone got a portion, not just us and the trainees they liked. Supply-wise we had a few weapons, a little bit of food and water, a medkit, and one Necron box thing that Nubby had snagged. Not much useful stuff, but at least the creepy-ass green glow the ship emitted meant we weren't



going to run out of light.

Our time down there wasn't as bad as you'd think. Everyone was so tired that we slept through most of it, and our short periods of wakefulness were occupied with the usual Guard pastimes of poker, pointless tasks thought up by your Sergeant to keep you out of trouble, and idle vandalism. The most exciting moment of the whole experience was when Nubby and Twitch emptied the thermite out of a few anti-armor rounds, and used it to write their names on a few of the bulkheads.

Long before food and water became a problem, our boredom was interrupted by a titanic groaning sound and some disconcerting fluctuations in the ship's gravity. We all wandered down to the debris-clogged hole we'd entered through, and watched as the rock and rebar began to shift, and then float away. As the last of the debris rose away from the opening, there was a sudden lurch, and the entire crater-wall began sliding past the breach. A few seconds later we were nearly blinded as the Necron ship rose into full sunlight.

The ship's ascent slowed to a stop as it reached the top of the crater, revealing a blasted hellscape where the cult's facility had been. All things considered, we thought it looked absolutely beautiful, and stood there basking in the sunlight and thanking the Emperor for our rescue, until a broad-shouldered man in a tricorn hat and a gaudy coat climbed up onto the edge of the hole and told us to get the hell off his ship. Apparently, he was a busy man with things to do and xeno-tech experts to see.

The Trader was nice enough to call us a ride before he tractored up the Necron ship and headed out-system at his vessel's top speed. He seemed to think that we might change our minds now that we were no longer being bombarded and wanted to be far away before any Inquisition fleets showed up.



A few PDF fliers picked us all up and dropped us off at our training base, where the Administrator and Surgeon were waiting on the pad. Doc handed the one-armed agent and the injured trainees over to Surgeon while the rest of explained the whole bloody mess to the Admin and asked him to get started on a report for the Interrogator. Then we went and got drunk. Very, very drunk.

Training was over after that; the few recruits that had survived were officially Inquisitorial agents as far as we were concerned. We all just sort of lounged around, reminisced about Cutter, and speculated about what the

Interrogator and Oak would say when they saw how many trainees we had left. The agent and his trainees stayed with us, since aside from the psyker chick who had been badly hurt during the investigation, he was all that was left of his team. He wasn't that bad of a guy really, once you got to know him. A bit of a downer though.

Eventually the Interrogator arrived and we gave our report: Eight recruits trained and ready for service, plus a handful of washouts and two from the other team. Also, as a side note, we destroyed an evil cult, found and secured a Necron ship, got into a fight with a Heretek, traded said Necron ship to a Rogue Trader, and now all we have is this Necron box thing and everyone is dead. That got the aloof bastard to pay attention.

It took a lot of explaining, mostly by Sarge and the agent. The whole story was gone through, from start to finish, sparing no detail. The Interrogator didn't judge or lecture, he simply made sure he had all the facts straight then put them all into a neat report. In the end he decided this was above his paygrade, took our recruits, and sent us all back to Oak with the little Necron box. The agent and his psyker companion were told to stay on the planet until they'd fully recovered from their injuries.

The trip home was about as normal as warp travel gets. Nothing particularly interesting happened, unless you count Twitch nearly killing a naval rating who was cleaning the air ducts. Or Doc getting accused of stealing from the ship's medbay while observing the head Medicae's surgical procedures. Or Sarge catching Nubby selling several crates of medical narcotics that he'd "found somewhere" to the crew. Anyway, we survived the trip, and since the Interrogator's report had been sent ahead of us, an escort was waiting for us when we docked with Oak's ship. Our entire group was marched to the Inquisitor's office and our story was gone over yet again.

To our surprise Oak was not angry, not even when we mentioned giving the Rogue Trader the Necron ship. He shrugged that off as something to be dealt with later, if the Necrons didn't deal with it themselves, and focused his attention on the little box Nubby had retrieved instead. It seemed inordinately important to him: he asked us a lot of questions about what the Heretek had said about it and was a little annoyed when we couldn't give him anything besides insane babble. In the end he took the box, told us we all did exceptionally well, and instructed us not to talk to anyone about it, even inside the Inquisition, without his direct permission. Then we went and got drunk again.





Cutter's funeral was a pretty big deal, and we got everyone we could to come to it. In addition to the other guardsmen from the old regiment, there were a few cogboys, including Jim and Hannah, the hospitaller and a few other sisters, the old adept lady and finally, to our considerable surprise, the Rupert and Alfred.

It was a hell of a party. Both stories and beer flowed freely, but the real crowning moment was when the Rupert brought out his death offering. Emperor knows where he, or more likely Alfred, got it, but it was one of those orky chainswords; a perfect match for Cutter's. It floored us all, even Sarge was crying as we put it in the plasma chamber with everything else. It was a damned fine send-off; we did him proud.

Days later, after the beer had run dry and the hangovers had cleared, we got another visit from the Rupert and Alfred. He told us, in his own unique way, that he'd asked Oak to transfer us to his retinue, but the Inquisitor had declined. Apparently, Oak thought he might need our services in the future, but as a favor to his former student, he'd consider sending our next Interrogator to work with the Rupert.

It took a while for the situation to sink in, but it did eventually. Sarge thanked the Rupert and said he'd be happy to serve alongside him again and hoped the Interrogator we'd officially be under wasn't a complete tit.

He turned out to be a complete tit.

Chapter 9

Man of Mystery

This is the ongoing tale of a bunch of guardsmen who got drafted into the Inquisition after their regiment was reduced to a mere 37 men by a combination of Orks, Heretics, more Orks, Tyranids and, of course, their own leadership. Currently they work for an Inquisitor that is the 40k equivalent of Professor Oak, he provides teams and missions to Interrogators who need to get some leadership experience before becoming full Inquisitors.

Most previous chapters can be found here: <http://suptg.thisisnotatrueending.com/archive.html?searchall=all+guardsmen>

Sarge's head hurts. He is lying in a pile of rubble, one of his eyes isn't working, he can't feel his left arm, and the only thing he can hear over the ringing in his ears is muffled coughing coming from some debris on the other side of the dimly lit room. While he watches, a hand claws its way out of the wreckage and seizes the edge of a table, seconds later it is followed by the scrawny arm, scrawnier chest, and helmeted head of Nubby. Sarge tries to croak a warning as the trooper overbalances and falls against the wall, but he's too late, the entire room is filled with blinding light and screams.

Cursing loudly and moving with incredible speed, Sarge lifts the table off his arm, staggers to his feet, and switches the lights back off. All around the room figures are sitting up and swearing at Nubby between pained groans. A half empty bottle sails out of a small furniture fortress and just barely misses the trooper. In a croaking voice Sarge asks if anyone remembers where they are, why an eyepatch and tricorn hat have been glued to his head, and who the trooper duct-taped to the ceiling is.





Twitch is frantically searching his fort for several personal items that seem to be missing, outside there's an ominous click as Sarge finds one of them. In the middle of the frantic scramble to defuse the mine a tall man wearing a bathrobe and holding a cup of reccaff walks in.

The man takes in the wrecked room and its mostly sleeping occupants then casually picks his way towards the troopers. He steps around the spot where Sarge is trying not to move and makes his way to Twitch's fortress, where he retrieves a suit-jacket and a few pieces of feminine clothing that were used in the construction. As the man heads back out he reminds everyone that their shuttle leaves in two hours.

Up on the ceiling the squad's new technical expert, Tink, wakes up and immediately slams his head into the metal plating.

↳The All Guardsmen Party And The Interplanetary Man of Mystery



So no shit, there we were, five hungover guardsmen in a shuttle conference room, getting briefed on a desertion problem so massive that a literal army of Commissars couldn't stop it. At least that's what we thought the briefing was about, it had been written by an Inquisitor with an accent so thick that he was nearly impossible to understand and he'd felt the need to include that accent in his writing. This problem

was compounded by the fact that the bathrobe-wearing man reading it obviously didn't really give a damn and would often skip whole sections or pause to inject snarky comments.

The man in the bathrobe was our new Interrogator. We'd been hanging out in our section of Oak's ship when this guy burst in, dodged Twitch's reaction shot, and threw a briefcase into Sarge's lap. Then, without so much as pausing to introduce himself, he told us we had an hour to get the party started before the girls arrived and left again. The briefcase was full of money and marked 'Evidence'.

We didn't over-think the situation, Nubby grabbed a few other guardsmen and went to get supplies, Sarge formed an impromptu cleaning detail, and the rest of the squad went to see who else was up for a good time. Things were already getting pretty lively when the mystery man returned over a dozen sororitas and half of the all-female assassination team from Deck G in tow. Just saying that we were surprised really doesn't do the situation justice, if it

weren't for the large supply of liquid courage most of the guardsmen present would have fled in terror.

It was one hell of a party, shame none of us could really remember it afterwards.

Right as things had been really getting started the mystery man came over to where we were sitting and pulled Tink, the rather infamous regimental techie, out of the crowd. He briefly introduced himself as Bane Johns, said he was our new Interrogator, and told us to go enjoy ourselves. When Sarge asked about the mission the Interrogator just said he'd brief us and introduce the rest of the team later, they were busy doing 'boring stuff'. After that he wandered off and got a high stakes poker game started with the leftover money from the briefcase, leaving us with the rather confused techie.

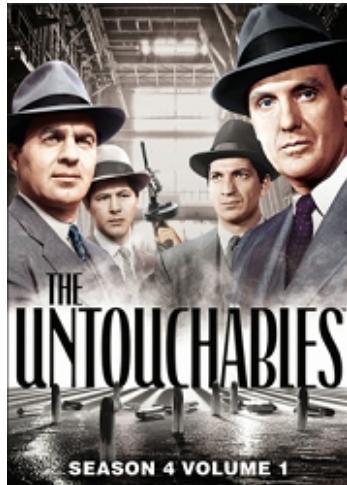
After that things were a bit of a blur, but a few incidents stood out. Nubby spectacularly lost the poker game and got a black eye after making a rather impudent remark to Doc's hospitaller lady-friend. Tink was thoroughly rejected by Hannah the cog-girl, then got into a heated argument with Twitch over whether an autogun could turn someone into an Ork. That ended with Doc taking away most of Twitch's weapons and Tink somehow wound up taped to the ceiling. Doc disappeared after the incident and didn't show up until the morning, when he wandered in smelling of flowery anti-septic and helped cut Tink down. No one could remember what Sarge did during the party, why he was dressed like a Rogue Trader, or whose idea the glue and permanent marker was.

We all remembered the Interrogator though, he was everywhere during the party. He drank more than anyone could really believe, won the poker game, and left with a sister hanging on each arm after laying out two guardsmen during a rather spectacular brawl. Then come morning he was up and moving without showing a single sign of discomfort. It was almost enough to make you hate him.

The half-assed briefing came to a crashing halt when the rest of our team came in and demanded to know who we were and why we were on their shuttle. In retrospect it's easy to see why they didn't recognize us as the team's muscle, none of us looked very professional. Twitch and Nubby were obviously hungover, Doc was asleep across a row of chairs, Tink was still half covered with tape, and it was going to take some serious solvents to get



the hat and eyepatch off Sarge. As for the Interrogator, most folks don't imagine a man lounging around in a bathrobe when they hear the phase "senior Inquisitorial agent".



With one exception the rest of the team consisted of the fifth worst type of people you find in the Inquisition, bureaucrats. Coming in right between insane zealots and raging paranoids, they were the sort of extremely serious and tedious individuals that don't derive any actual satisfaction from their life or see why you should either. They'd all been some sort of special Arbites team or something, but two of them were just adepts with shock-mauls and the other two were the most tedious arbitrators in existence. To a man they were unpleasant to be around, it was easy to see why the Interrogator hadn't invited them to the party, and their fifth was even worse.

He was the absolute worst type of Inquisitorial teammate, a psyker. Not a nice sane psyker either, he was a mutterer and radiated a sort of depressing aura. His mere presence was so mind-numbing that it was had to be either the result or cause of his teammates' personalities.

The Interrogator got them all calmed before anyone drew a firearm or the psyker exploded, then made a few introductions and ditched us. He tossed the briefing documents to one of the adepts and just wandered off, obviously he had better things to do than sit around planning the mission. After an hour or so of tedious discussion we all decided he had the right idea and followed suit, no one seemed to notice when we left.



That set the tone for the rest of the trip. None of us had any desire to spend more time around the gray brigade than absolutely necessary and that included the Interrogator. He didn't exclude them from briefings or anything like that, instead he just dumped the whole pile of data provided by the Inquisitors on the bureaucrats and told them to 'handle it'. They didn't object to his treatment and we certainly didn't want to get stuck with all the tedious mission planning, but this behavior stuck is as slightly odd. As far as we could tell the Interrogator wasn't doing anything to prepare for the near impossible task in front of us, instead he seemed focused on enjoying himself as much

as possible during the voyage.

The man seemed to have some sort of superpower, somehow he could get a party started any time, any place, at a moment's notice. Every time we saw him he was either telling an amusing story, running a poker game, or had a beautiful woman on his arm. It was damned impressive, especially given that we were on a navy vessel, not a cruise ship. The only problem was that we couldn't keep up.

At first we tagged along behind Bane, he was the best source of entertainment on the ship, but the man was perfectly capable of drinking until three every single night. After a week we gave up and just stood back and watched, it was mind boggling and in Doc's professional opinion the man wasn't human.

We couldn't hold it against the Interrogator though, he was just a natural born party animal and did his best to make sure we enjoyed ourselves when we joined him, but it was vaguely worrying that he was the one in charge of the mission.

While the Interrogator partied and the boring people did boring things, we settled into our own routine and brought Tink properly into the squad.

Tink got his name because 'Fix' would have been confusing on the battlefield and he had the poor taste to complain that Tink was a sissy name when someone called him by it. Back in the regiment he had been one of grease monkeys who hung around the motor pool and armory. He wasn't an enginseer and got rather snippy if someone called him one, he was just a helper who had picked up far more knowledge than the average tech-priest would want him to have. This made him a lot more useful if you wanted to get something fixed without also receiving a lecture on machine spirits and maintenance rituals.

Tink was a solid trooper who pulled his weight despite being rather scrawny and hopeless when it came to close range combat. He could fix just about any technical problem a guardsman could have and was the only plasma-trooper we knew that still had all his original fingers and no skin grafts. That said Tink wasn't exactly popular with the rest of the regiment; the problem was that, not too fine a point on it, he was weird. The man had some serious issues with tech-priests, couldn't keep his mouth shut, was nearly as bad as Nubby when it came to respecting personal property, and while he liked to say he had an 'affinity' for technology, the rest of us just called it a fetish.

Prior to joining us he'd been part of a team that was, as far as we knew,



still alive and pulling guard duty at some research facility. When Doc and Sarge tried to get more info about why he wasn't still with them, all they got was some dark muttering about "hidebound reactionary dinosaurs standing in the way of true science" and "sexual harassment". No one felt the need to press further.



Aside from the Interrogator's parties and the occasional meeting with the arbites, we kept to ourselves during the trip. Which isn't to say that we just lazed around, from the sound of things we were heading into a combat zone and that's not a safe place for someone who's not prepared for a fight. None of us were keen on wasting time reviewing data and making intricate plans with the bureaucrats, instead we focussed on getting our kit and ourselves into top condition.

Sarge led drills, Nubby procured a few extra supplies, and Tink gave almost all of our gear a complete workover. Twitch wouldn't let anyone touch his stuff and, after Tink got a look at the modifications Twitch had made, he didn't want to even be in the same room as the demolitions trooper's gear. Finally Doc who was rather enthusiastic about his teaching skills after last mission, decided to get together a few group exercises with the rest of the team.

At first everyone assured him that they were perfectly competent and had better things to do, but after enough wheedling everyone agreed just to shut him up. The whole team formed up in a half full cargobay and Doc handed out las weapons with training packs. It was going to be a few simple scrimmages with mixed teams to familiarize everyone and build morale.

It did not build morale.

It wasn't a complete shambles, like some other exercises we'd seen, but the arbite team didn't want to be there and the psyker's aura made us all pissy. Little fuckups kept happening, there were some injuries, and whenever the Interrogator joined in his team would win.

Mostly everyone blamed the training lasguns, they were utter shit and jammed on every other shot. There was also the fact that none of us could really get serious in a fight like this, we wanted to fight dirty and use explosives and the arbites didn't want to fight at all. Nothing was going right.

We all just moped around and got more and more frustrated until Sarge snapped at the psyker, who'd failed to hit anyone all day, and told him to "Do something useful damnit". A minute later a small localized ship-quake shook the bay and knocked crates onto both Tink and one of the Arbites.

Then for an encore the psyker manifested a layer of ice in the floor, which he then slipped on, causing him to fly face first into the wall and knock himself out cold.

The Interrogator called a halt there and suggested that we not try this again. He then wandered off to see if anything was happening down on level six while we dug Tink and the Arbitre out and Doc checked the psyker for a cracked skull.

Perhaps unfairly, the psyker got most of the blame for that shit-show and from then on we called him Fumbles. This did not seem to make him any more depressed than usual.

We didn't spend much time hanging around in orbit once we reached the planet. A shuttle brought us down to a very fancy lounge where we were greeted by the similarly posh Inquisitor who had requested our team's assistance, we'd worked with the man before and knew him by the moniker Rupert. Before his promotion he'd commanded two of our missions which, despite being relatively successful, had both ended with him losing an arm to what might be called excessive enthusiasm. We were happy to see him, between his political connections, combat prowess, and jovial demeanor he was the best direct superior we'd been given. Hard to understand though, he usually needed his supernaturally competent batman Alfred to act as translator and general nursemaid.

To our complete lack of surprise our new Interrogator hit it off wonderfully with the Inquisitor, both Bane and the Rupert spent the evening drinking and telling tales of ridiculous heroism. While they swapped stories Alfred quietly led the more serious members of our team off for a real briefing which Tink, due to his poor understanding of the standard Imperial Guard protocol of Not It, was also forced to attend; the rest of us joined our Interrogator for an enjoyable evening of good stories and better brandy.

Of course before we could really get started the techie came back and dragged the rest of us into the briefing, and not because he wanted us to suffer with him or needed help taking notes and tracking our squad's responsibilities. As we made our way to the briefing Tink quietly asked the rest of us if Alfred had a history of cruel practical jokes and if, just hypothetically, Oak would accept 'We're Not Suicidal Idiots' as a reason for abandoning a mission.

Dice Roll 3d10+4: 9, 9, 9 + 4 = 31





None of us had really gotten into the whole mission planning thing with the rest of the team, we figured they'd tell us anything we really needed to know when the time came. Doc and Sarge had taken a few peeks at the reports the adepts were putting together, but most of the info we had was from the original mission brief. We knew that we were fighting the Orks for this planet for some unspecified reason, we knew that things weren't going well, and we knew that something about the amount of soldiers deserting here had drawn the Inquisition's attention. What hadn't known was that the Rupert was the fourth Inquisitor sent here to sort things out and that two of Oak's Interrogator teams had died here as well.

Just to reiterate, this mission had already killed DOZENS of experienced inquisitorial agents and THREE full blown Inquisitors. One dead Inquisitor might have been understandable, but three was just ludicrous; the second two, at least, must have known that someone was gunning for them and they'd still been wasted without anything to show for it. Three of the nastiest buggers this side of Terra had come here, with their entire retinues and all their Inquisitorial authority, and died horribly; now it was our turn.

Of course we found it odd that the Rupert, who had all the self preservation instinct of a lemming, was still alive. Alfred explained that he had personally foiled over a dozen assassination attempts and that anything overt

was being blocked by the Inquisitor's numerous political connections with the local brass. There were three regiments camped around the mansion and a pair of frigates were undergoing 'repairs' in synchronous orbit directly overhead. Apparently the other Inquisitors had either operated discretely and died discretely, or had demanded protection and been surprised by how quickly unpopularity can get you killed in a warzone.

Sometimes it pays to be every senior officer's cousin, schoolmate, comrade, or drinking buddy.

While this was all quite interesting, especially Alfred's descriptions of the messy ways the other teams had died, we were all left with a big question: Why the hell were we here? If the Rupert had managed to survive and make progress where all the other Inquisitors had died, what did he need our team for? None of us were happy with the batman's answer.

The Inquisitor had decided that the local guard command structure was so incredibly corrupt that he just had to sort it out personally. This meant that he wouldn't be able to devote his full attention to investigating the desertions, so he needed some trusty subordinates to do it for him. Specifically he wanted "old-sweats with conkers for dodgy business and plenty of vim, some stalwart lads who can keep mum and don't get the collywobbles when the fur flies", which apparently meant us and whatever Interrogator and teammates Oak decided to send along. How anyone could apply the phase "keep mum" to our Interrogator, "stalwart" to Nubby or Twitch, or "vim" to our incredibly drab teammates was a mystery, but there we were.

So while the Rupert did whatever the hell he was going to do about the corruption in the brass, we were going to be sent out to do a job that had already killed several far more competent teams. As Alfred outlined the largest morale and desertion problem any of us had heard of, we listened to the sound of the socialite Interrogator and the old warhorse drinking and swapping tall tales in the next room and pondered our chances of survival. None of us were very optimistic.

The Rupert provided rooms for our team in the mansion he'd commandeered, but we didn't get much time to enjoy them. Under any of our previous interrogators there would have been some intel gathering and basic plan forming, which is to say someone else would do that while we kept our heads



down, but Bane didn't seem keen on sitting around. He burst into our rooms, wearing his damned bathrobe and neatly avoiding all of Twitch's traps, at an ungodly hour and told us to gear up for a trip to the battlefield. Sarge tried to ask the Interrogator just what the hell we'd be doing up at front, but the man just vaguely said that everything would work out, then wandered off before any of us could navigate the minefield in front of the door.

Less than an hour later we were all sitting in a flier, watching Tink as he frantically went through the manual and poked at the controls. The Interrogator sat in his seat and cheerfully deflected or ignored the frantic questions from the rest of the team about where we were going and why we were going there. For our part, we'd accepted that he wasn't going to tell us anything and just grabbed our usual kits and strapped in for the ride, except for Twitch, he had what might be called his 'Ork Loadout' on. None one sat near him and the two seats he'd piled with explosives and weapons.

After a few minutes the was a shout of success from the cockpit and the flier's engines began to warm up. A second later there was another shout, from the co-pilot Alfred had found for us, followed by a loud crackling sound as the nose gun went off and burned a neat hole in the side of the mansion.

There was a short, mostly whispered argument between the two pilots and Tink came out from the cockpit, got our destination coordinates from the laughing Interrogator, then settled into the co-pilot's former seat.

As we flew Tink passed Sarge a datalsate with a tac-map of our destination, we were headed to spot supposedly just a few klicks behind our lines near one of the larger ongoing battles. Supposedly was the key word, Alfred or one the Rupert's adepts had shaded the whole area in and labeled it "lines partially collapsed, incredibly porous, possible desertion hotspot, expect enemy patrols and only enter in force".

Struggling to keep the incredulity out of his voice, Sarge asked Bane why we were heading into a contested zone with only eleven men and what he hoped to accomplish. The Interrogator ignored the first question and told Sarge that we were going to find some deserters and, he snickered to himself here, interrogate them. Everyone just sort of sat



there and stared at him.

The only reason Sarge didn't both start bawling him out for the sheer stupidity of this idea was that the Arbiter and the two Adepts beat him to it. There was a long and very polite argument about how tactically sound an expedition into contested territory for no reason other than the capture of a few deserters was, especially considering that the local commissariat had put together several penal legions of them already. Unfortunately all the arguments and criticism just ran off the Interrogator like water, he sat there and repeatedly assured everyone that we could handle any problems and that whatever random schmuck we found would have all the information we'd need.

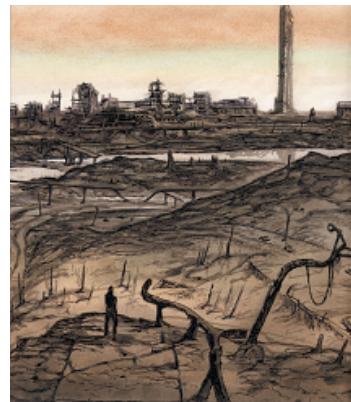
Sarge abandoned the discussion to go plan the landing with Tink while Doc and Nubby started pulling some extra munitions out of Twitch's piles. At the back of the ship the psyker morosely told everyone that he'd foreseen our horrible deaths, Twitch proceeded to get into an argument with him about whether we'd all die to deserters, Orks, or Orks disguised as deserters.

So no shit there we were heading into a combat zone, with no support, to find a bunch of heavily armed former-guardsmen then ask them why they were deserting and where they were heading. It really says something that it was only the third worst plan we'd been part of.

The flight got a lot more interesting as we neared the front, the ground-war on this planet was one of the bigger ones we'd seen. The sheer number of troops we could see below us was staggering, you could actually identify hotzones from the glow of mass lasgun fire. We all clustered around the windows, but after a few minutes it stopped being amazing and was just depressing.

A near endless tide of guardsmen was marching into the fight, supported by millions of tanks and fliers, and all it was achieving was a stalemate. It was easy to see why desertion was a problem, the fight was bloody pointless and it was obvious that most of the soldiers sent to that front weren't going to be coming back.

The spot where we landed wasn't an active battle, it was a fairly wide valley that used to hold a fair sized town or something. It had been turned into a charred wasteland by artillery, the only movement we could see were soldiers standing watch up on the edges and the flash of artillery in the distance. It looked like the barrage was coming down right where the line was supposed to be, none of us speculated on whether they'd been allowed



to pull back before the suppressive barrage was started.

Tink set us down in a dell a klick or two outside the town, or rather the loaner pilot set us down while Tink carefully watched what buttons he pressed. The Interrogator cheerfully reminded us that, officially, everyone left here was a deserter, so all we had to was find someone ask them some questions, then head back to base for dinner and drinks. We shared a pained look with the other half of the team as he bounded out the rear hatch, then followed him into the no-man's land.



It goes without saying that the wasteland wasn't a happy place. None of us wanted to be there; even without the presence of desperate deserters or Ork scouts, anywhere that's had that many shells dropped on it is amazingly unsafe to wander around. Tink tried to convince Sarge that, despite the complaints from the copilot, it was his duty to stay in the flier. He might have pulled it off if both Nubby and Twitch hadn't joined in when they saw Sarge was actually considering it.

As the Interrogator led us in the general direction of town in the center of the valley we kept our heads down and eyes open, the Interrogator did neither. The man's only concession to stealth was to occasionally sprint between wrecked buildings or walls then stand up and return to walking out in the open when he got bored. After the second time we just barely stopped him from stepping on an unexploded shell Sarge put Twitch in charge of walking in front of him and the rest of us spread out into a scouting permitter. The arbite team just walked along behind the Interrogator, mimicking his moves and quietly complaining to each other about the situation. It was amazing that we got the edge of the town without anyone being seen or blown up.

Not long after we entered the town proper we saw signs of life, a few small buildings were still standing and campfire smoke was coming out of one of them. We pulled back to discuss the plan of attack with the Interrogator, but as soon as we pointed out the building he stopped listening and ran towards it while the rest of us raced to catch up. We got there too late to stop him and just in time to watch as he flung the door open then stood there, with his cloak billowing around him and rosette on display, and loudly asked if anyone inside was a traitorous deserter.

There were a few seconds of shocked silence then a rain of las-fire poured out the door, barely missing the Interrogator and clipping one of the adepts. Sarge and Twitch both immediately popped nades and put them through

the building's windows and Nubby laid down some suppressive fire on the doorway, giving Doc the cover he needed. While the rest of us got the fight started and pulled the wounded adept to safety Tink stepped back, pulled down his goggles, and raised his plasma gun.

If you've never seen a plasma gun in action imagine a cross between a lasgun and a slug thrower. Instead of projecting a brief beam of powerful light, it gathers together an incredibly hot ball of energy then lobs it out like a stubber, but unlike a stub round that blob of plasma will burn through just about anything that gets in its way. Also it's bright blue, makes an incredibly ominous whine as it charges, and occasionally vents superheated gasses onto the user. All in all lasguns are a lot easier and safer to use, but when you want to destroy armor or punch through a wall, accept no substitutes.



Tink put several rounds through the walls on either side of the door, killing the poor bastards taking cover against them and opening firing ports for Sarge and Twitch to use. After that the fight was pretty one-sided, we had better positions, weapons, and training, but the real kicker was when the Interrogator came through the back door with the rest of the team. For all of his lack of tactical sense, the man was an impressive fighter, he swept in and wiped out the last four deserters before they managed to turn to face him, neither the arbiter nor the psyker got a shot off before it was over. It was an impressive end to the battle, unfortunately the whole thing was spoiled a little by the wounded adept's screaming and the fact that none of us had remembered to leave someone alive for interrogation.

As soon as Doc was finished bandaging the adept we got away from the corpse-filled building before someone came to check out the noise. As we moved Bane treated everyone to a play-by-play of the fight, with sound effects, and Sarge privately decided that it would be best to keep the Interrogator away from the next group of deserters we found.



When Twitch spotted movement in another wrecked building we pulled together and formed a fairly simple plan. Doc, who was sticking with the wounded adept anyway, was put in charge of keeping the rest of the team out of our way. He led them in the opposite direction from the deserters to investigate some random pile debris, which might be hiding a secret deserter

hideout or something, while the rest of us just casually walked away. After a little scouting and some discussion we decided that it'd probably be easier for us to pretend to be fellow deserters and ask for info than try and capture one of them.

That is to say, it was easier for Twitch and Nubby to pretend to be fellow deserters, Sarge and Tink decided to stay back and watch. Tink's plasma gun and other toys made him stand out a little too much for comfort and Sarge practically had SENIOR NCO tattooed on his forehead, neither of them was likely to find friends inside, but Twitch and Nubby were practically poster children for desertion. If a director was putting together one of those commissariat films on the evils of cowardice and asked for an obvious cretin as well as someone who'd clearly snapped a long time ago, he'd have sent both troopers back for looking too stereotypical. They didn't have any trouble at all walking into the camp.

Within a minute of entering Nubby was trading lho sticks for rumors and had Twitch started collecting info on local Ork patrols. Of course these guys didn't know anything really useful to us, why would they? They were just a bunch of poor suckers who'd gotten screwed over just about everyone on either side of the war; none of them had any secret nefarious plan, they just didn't want to die.

Mostly they just told us that the troopers above the valley were shooting anyone who tried to leave, which was pretty much what we expected from the commissariat, they did have one piece of interesting info though. One of them said that some former officer was pulling deserters together for a push out of the valley, they didn't want any part of it but we were free to try if we had a deathwish. Unfortunately, before Nubby could get directions from them the screaming started.

It came from the area where Doc was distracting the Interrogator and sounded awful warpy, the second it faded it was replaced with the sound of gunfire. The deserters all immediately ran for it and we decided to pull back to help instead of trying to stick with them. We commed Doc as we ran in an attempt to figure out what the hell was going on, but the medic wasn't making much sense, all we were able to establish was that someone was an idiot and Orks were involved.

When we finally made visual contact with the team they were holed up in some rubble and exchanging fire with a bunch of deserters in another pile. The four of us started to flank around, but before we got halfway we were interrupted by a loud "WAAAGH" and the arrival of a squad of greenskins



on the opposite side of the fight.

It's time like this that knowing your enemy and having a decent comms network can really pay off. We all grabbed cover and Sarge barked a ceasefire order to the rest of the team which, to our complete lack of surprise, was obeyed by everyone but Bane. Luckily a piece of debris blocked the greenskins' view of the Interrogator, which meant that the deserters were the only visible enemies. Following their usual insane logic the Orks all charged the hostile pile of rubble, completely ignoring us as we got into position to take out the winner. The fight ended without any other incidents, but once again none of the deserters survived.

While Sarge reported the small amount of information Nubby and Twitch attained, Doc filled us in on what happened. As he worked to patch up the second adept, the medic explained that the ruined building he'd picked for a distraction had just happened to contain another group of deserters. They'd been talking about something and the Interrogator wanted to listen in, so he'd led the whole team closer. Right as they'd got close SOMEONE, Doc threw a wad of bloody bandage at Fumbles here, decided to try listening to the deserters' thoughts instead of their voices and screwed the pooch. Hence the warpy scream, Doc's near deafness when we commed, and the ensuing fight. He said it was sheer bloody luck that Interrogator managed to dodge all the fire and hadn't wound up like Adept, furthermore it was practically a miracle that only one group of Orks had followed the noise.

All in all Doc was not a very happy trooper, despite getting a great chance to prove his medical ability, and said we'd gotten off incredibly light so far. He was of the opinion that it was time to cut our losses and the two bleeding Adepts seemed to agree, or at least they moaned in a sort of agreeable way.

Sarge had a very weird discussion with the interrogator while Doc complained to the rest of us. He didn't seem to mind that we'd gone off to do our own investigation and seemed inordinately happy with the scrap of info about someone organizing the local deserters. When Sarge and the arbites pointed out that none of us had the slightest idea where in the large, ruined, ork-filled valley this was happening, the man only laughed and assured them that the deserters we'd just fought had probably known where it was. Sarge adopted the very patient voice you use when talking to slow children or armed madmen and explained that those deserters were very dead now, it was unlikely they'd be giving us directions. Five minutes later Sarge and



Nubby were digging through the corpses looking for any "secret notes" or "maps to the hideout". Ten minutes later he was swearing sulphurously as he delivered the map to Bane.



Unbelievably it really was a map to where the deserters were mustering, with detailed directions and everything. We didn't even need to have the Adepts translate the version of gothic it was written in, the Interrogator just happened to have studied it back in the schola. None of us were very happy about this turn of events, for one thing it meant we weren't going to be leaving the valley yet, and for another it was complete and utter bullshit. Sure, occasionally you find some random thing that just happens to be exactly what you need, but it's pure luck, you don't get to depend on it happening as part of your plan. It was unfair that the universe was playing along with him and when it finally stopped it was probably going to get us killed along with him.



There was a lot of grumbling as we followed the map deeper into the town. The entire group's mood, except the Interrogator's, entered a sort of downward spiral starting at anger and transitioning through disgust to a sort of weary depression. While Sarge had a lot of unkind things to say about the Interrogator and most of us engaged in a sort of round-robin bitchfest with the arbites, Doc and his patients were the worst. He continuously whined about having to care for the two adepts who, in turn, complained about having bleeding holes in their bodies. We probably would have all killed ourselves before we got to the enemy if it weren't for Twitch and Tink.

Twitch, bless his paranoid little heart, accused one of the arbites of stealing his happiness and draining his very soul away. Tink grabbed that chain of logic and ran with it, a few minutes later we were all feeling better as Fumbles stayed a minimum of twenty meters behind everyone else. It was decided by fair and democratic vote that the two arbites would take turns keeping him company until Doc could get his hands on some anti-depressants for the creepy little bugger.

The Interrogator ignored this whole charade, he was too busy walking in plain sight with the map help out in front of him. We figured that best

case scenario his luck would hold and he'd lead us to the deserters without incident, worst case he'd get killed by a dud shell or a bunch of Orks. It was a win-win situation and Nubby even started taking bets on the outcome, at least until Sarge got annoyed and threatened to put him on Fumbles duty.

Unfortunately it turned out that we'd been far too optimistic.

Doc was the one who first recognized the landmarks from the map, but it was Twitch who spotted the stubber nest. By the time we saw it the Interrogator was already half way across the kilzone. The entire team piled up at the edge and watched as Bane walked up to a wrecked lamp-post then paused to check his map. Sarge frantically flipped his com to the Interrogator's channel and told him to freeze, instead he turned to face us and loudly asked why everyone had stopped. Everyone held their breath and waited for the stubber to open up on him.

Eventually we ran out of breath. Somehow the two deserters in the nest completely failed to notice that a man, in a flapping cloak that screamed "Inquisition" no less, was standing behind a post half as wide as him and talking on his combead. In a choked voice Sarge explained the situation, prompting Bane to lean out and stare at the nest for a few seconds then start talking in a loud stage whisper. This was more than we could handle, Sarge peeked around the corner and verified that the hostiles looked like real soldiers and neither one was blindfolded, then jerked back as the stubber swung to bear on him. We all heard one of the deserters tell the other that he might have seen something.

Sarge, Doc, and the Arbites started to argue over their coms with the Interrogator, who was whispering so loudly that we could all hear him from across the street, while the rest of us got into a fairly heated discussion about just what the hell was going on here. Tink was of the opinion that something warpy was happening, though Fumbles denied this and claimed that everything was normal. This prompted Nubby to start blaming the depressed psyker for "screwin wit da laws of fisiks", while Twitch, of course, blamed everything on the Orks. The argument came to a crashing halt when Tink's voice rose almost to same level as the Interrogator's and the stubber opened up on our cover.





It wasn't a long or well aimed burst, just a spray across our general area. In our professional opinions these guys were obviously more interested in convincing us to leave than actually scoring a kill, but a freak ricochet managed to nail one adept in the leg. While Doc opened his med-kit for the third time that day and Nubby yelled abuse at the two deserters, Twitch directed our attention to Bane. He was briskly walking into the alley the nest was guarding while the enemy

was distracted.

We figured he was going to take out the stubber nest so we could follow him in, instead he commed us all. In a voice that just oozed smugness he ordered us to meet him in the main courtyard, then said he was "going dark" and turned off his combead. Hopefully he heard what Tink yelled at him, the deserters certainly did, a second ricochet lodged itself squarely in Twitch's helmet.

Everyone except Sarge and the Arbites was in favor of ditching the Interrogator and heading back to the flier, unfortunately orders were orders and we had a job to do. After all of us calmed down we pulled back to a more secure wrecked building and got a plan together. Shooting our way in was out of the question so we needed a way to sneak in, the problem was that none of us were very sneaky and only half of us stood a chance of impersonating deserters. We didn't have spare uniforms for the arbites and neither adepts was up for anything strenuous; Fumbles volunteered to make us all invisible, but Doc immediately vetoed that idea and sent back to his corner on the far side of the building. In the end we decided just to leave them all together to act as a secure base while we went in ourselves.

Tink's toys and plasma weapon were crammed into a rucksack, Doc was pushed into a puddle of mud, and Sarge hoped really hard that no one on perimeter duty had a grudge against NCOs. Nubby and Twitch in the lead, we went to back-up the idiot.

We circled around to another entrance in hope of finding some less weird guards than the selectively blind ones that'd shot at us. The main entrance to the deserters' compound had at least two gunners covering it and a few troopers lounging around in front of it. A protesting Nubby was kicked out ahead of us to act as emissary and sidled up to the troopers with his hand held comically high in the air. None of us heard what he told the guards, but they quickly lowered their weapons and let Nubby join them at their post. Lho sticks were exchanged, a bottle materialized from somewhere, and after a few more minutes than were probably necessary he called us over.

Nubby made a round of introductions, starting with Sarge, who got a long appraising look from the man in charge, and ending with Doc. When the desters saw we had a medic they perked up and started asking pointed questions about the state of his medkit, i.e. how many ampules of painkillers he had and how many he really needed. Doc shot Nubby a glare and ponied up about a third of his supply, this immediately made us several new friends and one of the troopers happily agreed to show us around.

The tour consisted of a meandering walk through the collapsed buildings that made up the compound, and ended in an open central area populated by a few dozen deserters. He dumped us on an oddly cheerful man, who welcomed us to the "First Free Army" and informed us that we were extremely lucky. It turned out we'd arrived just in time to hear an important announcement from the general, after it was over he'd see about getting us fit in, but for now we should just listen.

A pair of men who could've been Sarge's brothers came out of a nearby building and started barking everyone into formation. As we shuffled around Twitch spotted a single soldier wearing a Valhallan coat and hat, a preposterously large mustache, and a dozen things which obviously marked him as an Inquisition agent.

Sure the greatcoat covered most of him and the moustache looked amazing, but anyone who looked closely was going to bust him. He'd actually holstered his mastercrafted silenced autopistols outside of the coat and you could even see his rosette peaking out of the front of the coat, it was like he wasn't even trying.

We quickly moved in around him and blocked everyone's view while Sarge did his best to fix Bane's disguise. Nothing could be done about the shiny carapace greaves and boots, but the autos were stashed in his pockets and replaced with a spare laspistol, the rosette was tucked inside his shirt, and we managed to shove him into parade rest before one of the sergeants came over to yell at us. Our squad was split up onto either side of the Interrogator and we all did our best not to draw attention. As the last deserters formed up, a big man wearing a general's insignia tacked onto a major's uniform came out



and addressed the troops.

As moving speeches go it rated a solid seven; hitting several key topic like the importance of camaraderie and the mating habits of commissars, but losing a few points for talking too much about protecting civilians. Also for being a traitorous heap of lies designed to sap the fighting spirit of brave guardsmen and lure them into vile heresy. After everyone had been suitably pumped up he moved onto some real topics, like the rumors that some Rogue Traders were trading trips off planet for favours or a gig of service in their private armies.

Apparently these rumors were not only completely true, but the General had managed to contact one of them and worked out a rendezvous, at this point he flourished a calligraphy filled note and there was a great deal of cheering. Furthermore, he'd made contact with a sympathetic regiment which would turn a blind eye to our escape from this hellhole, but before he'd go into details he needed to make sure no one here was a commissariat spy.

While the General explained that he'd heard reports that an unmarked flier had landed in the area and listed all the horrible things that the commissariat would do if it found us, his two henchmen started traversing the line of deserters. They carefully went over each man, occasionally asking them questions or inspecting their equipment. We all nervously checked ourselves over and eyed the Interrogator, who'd apparently gotten tired of standing straight and was now in a pose best described as 'lounging'. As the inspectors worked closer he took out a lho stick, jammed it under the fake moustache, and drew out his trainee rosette. We watched in horror as he flipped off the top and lit his lho stick with it.



Just to be clear here, the man had a LIGHTER installed in his INQUISITORIAL BADGE OF OFFICE. Emperor knows why he had it done or how he got someone to agree to fiddle with the thing, but he used it right there in the middle of the deserter base, then dropped it back down his coat. It sat there and peeked out the front like a poorly camouflaged trainee on guard duty. Both Doc and Sarge frantically whispered at him to put it away, but Bane just stared at them blankly and before the point got across the two henchmen reached us.

Twitch passed review without comment and they actually stepped back

a bit when they reached Nubby, his unique odor could affect people like that, Tink didn't get off so easy though. Whether it was his bulging pack, fancier than usual armor, or near permanent expression of petulance mixed with superiority, something about him bothered the inspectors. One of them stepped behind the techie and flipped open his pack, exposing his stash of gadgets and the bulky plasma-gun. The other goon smiled a shit-eating grin and loudly asked the General what sort gear a "slimy little commissariat weasel" would carry.

Tink's panicked denials and the supporting testimony from Nubby and Twitch might have gotten him off the hook if he had kept a level head, but when they took his pack away he exploded in impotent nerd-rage. While he showed a lot of passion and his word choice was quite inventive, Tink was a lousy melee fighter and his pathetic attack didn't impress the henchmen. They quickly subdued him and he was dragged off for questioning by a pair of deserters.

While everyone watched Tink's beatdown each of us evaluated our options. We could all see that there wasn't any way we'd survive a straight fight in the middle of this place, our only real chance was to keep up the disguise until we could do something sneaky. The problem was that there didn't seem to be any way the Interrogator would pass inspection and there was no way of knowing what he'd do when they spotted him. If they just captured him like Tink we'd be able to try and spring them both together, but they could just immediately execute him or he might start a fight and drag us in. Each of us was so busy agonizing over this that we almost missed it when Bane made his move.

The Interrogator just casually walked from his position in line just past Tink, to a spot between Nubby and Twitch. Apparently everyone was too busy watching our mouthy techie getting the shit beat out of him to notice, when the inspection resumed both goons moved onto Sarge and Doc without blinking. It was really quite amazing, the man hadn't done anything sneaky, he'd just chosen the exact moment when everyone was distracted. We all did our best to keep the surprise off our faces as the inspection was wrapped up without further incident.

Secure in the knowledge that no spies were present, the General outlined a complex plan for escaping to the rendezvous with the trader. There were a lot of regiment names, passphrases, waypoints, and other stuff we really didn't care about, then the parade was over. As the other newbie deserters



walked off to do whatever it was they did around here we quickly pulled together to hash out a rescue plan. Unfortunately the Interrogator didn't have any time for that, he made a beeline for where the General and his goons were talking with a few of the recruits.

Sarge and Twitch went off to rescue Tink, leaving Doc and Nubby behind in the square. Their job was to grab the Interrogator and convince him not to do anything suicidal until Sarge returned, in Doc's opinion this was not an ideal plan, but there hadn't been time to think of anything better. Both troopers hustled after the Interrogator and got there just as he reached the group of chatting deserters. They watched in horror as Bane, hand outstretched and fake mustache bristling, Interrogator walked right up to the General and greeted him in a horrible Valhallan accent.



What followed was string of stereotypical and cliched comments that would've mortally offended any actual Valhallan. Both Nubby and Doc had served with the iceworld regiments before and it was physically painful to hear the interrogator calling everyone comrade, joking about how hot the climate was, and complaining lack of alcohol in the camp. It was lucky that a deserter's hideout is the last place you'd find a real valhallan and incredibly lucky that no one here knew that or, apparently, had ever met one. The General welcomed "Ivan Ivanov" with a smile, laughed at his jokes, and promised he'd go far in the First Free Army.

Doc and Nubby had about a second to feel relieved, then the General spotted them. His smile turned into a suspicious glare and he asked Doc just which regiment he was from.



Doc was a clever boy, a good fighter, and a decent medic, but he was a terrible bullshitter. He froze up for a solid five seconds then started stuttering, asking if the General meant him and if he really wanted his whole life story. When the General didn't stop glaring the panicking medic took refuge in the truth, and started to rattle off the regimental details of the Gener 99th Medium Infantry, a regiment which had died years ago. Nubby tried to come to the poor boy's rescue, but the General responded in the way that most officers did when confronted with Nubby Nubbs, which is to say he ignored the little trooper in hope that he'd go away if no one gave him any attention.

Eventually the steam of babble was cut off and the General started asking some very pointed questions. Doc scrambled to field these, but was distracted by the Interrogator. Bane had wandered behind the General, and was carefully scrutinizing the note that he'd been waving around when talking about contacting a Rogue Trader. After giving it a good once-over, the Interrogator held up his wrist-chrono and fiddled with it until a screen and lens popped out the sides. A mesh of green light was projected on the note as he carefully scanned the whole thing, both sides. Doc could barely keep his eyes off the scene of blatant spying as he fumbled through the questions, if anyone even glanced towards the Interrogator they'd all be killed.

No one did look though, everyone was busy staring at Doc who had already sweated out half his-body mass and was going for three-quarters. He just barely managed to answer all the questions aimed at him without blurting out something about working for the Inquisition, but it was obviously just a matter of time before he either tripped up or fainted. Right as things reached their most dire the Interrogator finished, walked up to Doc, and threw an arm around his shoulders. In that horrible accent he chastised the General for being too suspicious of "bosom companion Comrade Doctor-Boy" then told a series of horribly cliched jokes.

Just like that everyone was all smiles again. The General stated that any friend of Ivan's was a friend of his then shook Doc's damp hand and went to talk to some other recruits. Doc practically collapsed in relief and Nubby grumpily swore at them both from the puddle he'd been shoved into by one of the goons when he wouldn't shut up. The three of them headed in the direction Tink had been taken and Doc pulled out his combead. Before he could call anyone the air was filled with Twitch's screaming and, on reflex, both soldiers hit the dirt, dragging the Interrogator down with them.

Twitch was having a pretty good time, sure he was in the middle of a hostile base inside an orc-infested battlefield, but Sarge had given him one of those good orders. He'd been told to "make a distraction, a big one". About half of his supply had been secreted around the base, no one had even commented as he'd walked around holding the explosives, and the only troopers that had seen him planting them had backed away when he asked them if they wanted to help. He figured it'd take just long enough for everyone to figure out the situation for them to get safely out of the base. With a big smile on his face, Twitch sat and waited for Sarge's signal.



When his comm clicked the demolitions trooper took a big breath, screamed "INCOMING ARTILLERY", and hit his first detonator. The shout was reflex-echoed by several deserters and the entire base started shaking with well timed and placed explosions. A few seconds after the first barrage Sarge's voice came from his combead, instructing everyone to head for the side exit Bane had used. Twitch smiled and touched his dented helmet as the second barrage removed a certain stubber nest. It was a very good day.



The squad came back together as they all made for the same exit. Tink was walking on his own, but Sarge was carrying all his gear. Doc slapped him with a stimm, just to be on the safe side, and eyed Sarge who was half covered in blood. The Interrogator asked how he'd sprung the techie and Sarge just stared back, glanced at the chain bayonet he was still holding, and gruffly said that he'd explained the Chain of Command to Tink's new friends. Both Nubby and the Interrogator broke into rather tactless laughter, until

we all saw Twitch coming in at a dead sprint.

None of us stopped to ask why Twitch was running, it's not a question you ask demolitions experts, you just do your best to keep up with them. As we cleared the city a final barrage collapsed our exit, crushing a few deserters who'd been hard on Twitch's heels. Sarge commed the other half of the team and told them to get ready to bail, then we all just focussed on running.

We were almost to the arbites when the deserters launched their pursuit. A dozen ex-guardsmen took turns chasing us and taking potshots at our backs and behind them a salamander burst through a wall then turned to face us. The General himself was standing out of the top hatch and blasting at us with a pintle-bolter while yelling at his troops to run faster.

We got a few shots off as they closed and the Arbites laid down some decent covering fire, but keeping to cover was slowing us down and the salamander steadily gained on us. Both the mines Twitch dropped behind us were easily dodged by the salamander's driver and as we reached the arbites it became apparent that we'd have to at least disable the vehicle if we wanted to escape on foot.

We got into cover as the enemy closed and tried to pick off some of the deserters. We didn't have much luck since most of them were smart enough

to use their own cover, but Bane managed to nail three of them with his autopistols, the man was an amazing shot if nothing else. No one managed to hit the General and as the salamander got closer we all scrambled for heavier cover and got ready to surround the vehicle.

If we'd had more time or space one of Twitch's mines would've been perfect, but the overcharged plasma bust Tink put into the vehicle's side armor was a close second. He managed to get the engine on his first shot completely immobilizing it and making it much easier for us to snipe at its firing ports. The General saw the situation was desperate and started to wildly swing his bolter around, hosed fire at us while we all tried to land a shot on him.

Doc and Sarge both missed their shots and the rest of the squad stayed in cover instead of taking the chance. The Interrogator and one of the Arbites didn't bother with cover, preferring to nimbly dodge through the bolter rounds and get shot in the face respectively. Behind the salamander Fumbles peeked out of a doorway and raised his hands towards the General, we all ducked down and prayed. There was a titanic BANG and the world went white for a few seconds, only Sarge saw as the Interrogator leapt up onto the Salamander, put a gun against the stunned man's head, and mutter a pithy one liner before blowing it off.

Once everyone could see again we finished off the last deserters in the salamander without incident, unless you call Tink overheating his plasma gun and dropping it on his foot an incident. The important thing is that no-one else died and the other deserters legged it after salamander was dealt with.

The end count was two dead (one of the adepts died while we were away), two wounded, and one very unconscious psyker. The Interrogator said we weren't allowed to just leave him, so Sarge carried him while the arbite carried the adept. The two dead were given a proper military cremation courtesy of Tink's plasma gun, which he managed to overheat and drop on his foot a second time during the quick service.

That done with we all headed back for the flier, which the copilot confirmed was still completely secure. As we walked the Interrogator congratulated everyone on killing a dangerous rebel and helping him secure a piece



of critical information. He happily told everyone how the information we'd found identified both treacherous Rogue Traders and traitors within the local guard command, it was sure to be a key part of our investigation. While it really was a good haul, especially for how stupid the whole mission concept had been, most of us just ignored him and Tink actively glared at him while muttering about how unfair the universe was.

When we got back to the flier and anger towards the Interrogator was redirected towards the copilot, who had failed to mention the two other fliers or the woman holding a gun to his head.

Since none of them shot at us, we decided the situation was some sort of political and deferred to the Interrogator. Bane ignored the men stepping out of the other fliers, knocked on the woman's door, and actually held up a hand to help her down when she opened it. To our amazement she actually took it and laughed a little as she stepped down, all two plus meters of her.

To put it simply the woman was huge, in several ways, and while she might have been beautiful we were all too focused on the fact that she was bigger than Sarge and had more scars than all of us put together. She was carrying an asartes sized bolter, had an eyepatch shaped like a heart, and was wearing what had to be a custom made set of carapace armor. The interrogator was a head shorter than her and had the sort of grin you see on professional mountaineers or big-game hunters.

None of us could hear what the two said to each other, though it was apparent that our boy was doing well. We heard a few laughs that sounded like a leman russ gunning its engine and if any of us had put our hand where he did we'd have lost them and the arm too. After a while Bane called us over, introduced the woman as Ivana Krushyu, and told us that she represented a very influential man who wanted to meet us. We all got in the flier, Tink didn't argue when Ivana took his seat in the cockpit, and headed off to meet the man who was very politely taking us prisoner.

Since none of us had anything better to do we all followed Fumbles' example and took a nap during the flight. This meant it was a bit of a shock when we woke up in some villa with a few dozen guns in our faces. We were relieved of our weapons by some of the hardbitten men around us, who might as well have been wearing shirts that said "Deserter Mercenaries", and this time Tink kept his mouth shut when his plasma gun was taken away.



Fumbles was still out of it, so Sarge carried him as we were herded to rather nice waiting room. Ivana and the Interrogator ditched us there, presumably to talk to the boss without us guardsman dirtying the place up. They took half the guards with them and this evened the odds to the point where some of us started to get ideas.

The men who'd disarmed us hadn't been nearly thorough enough. Doc only had his medkit and Tink had nothing, but Sarge still had his boot-knife, Nubby had a stubgun, and Twitch had his backup-backup grenades as well as laspistol. Even if the rest of the team and the copilot had nothing we had enough firepower to take the guards and after that we'd have their shiny combat shotties. On top of that we could see the flier sitting on its pad just a short sprint away, there was a real chance that we could escape and even ditch the Interrogator in the bargain. It was very tempting, but none of us wanted to leap into action and risk getting killed yet. Except for Twitch no one was absolutely sure that these guys were planning to kill us, after all they could have just done that back in the valley.

Then we overheard one of the guards asking another if the boss was planning to kill us personally like the other Inquisition goons.

Doc acted as the distraction, he spilled half of his medkit and a few of the less scrupulous guards noticed several ampules of very expensive drugs rolling past their feet. During the brief scramble Sarge buried his knife in one guard's throat, Nubby plugged another in the gut, and Twitch scored a headshot, leaving just four guards. It was strategy, not luck, that all the guards were closer to the arbite and adept than the rest of us and while neither had a weapon they were both able to tie up a guard and melee for a second. Unfortunately that left two guards free.

The first shot barely missed Doc as he scrambled for cover and the second caught the arbite in the side where it was mostly stopped by his armor. Those two shots were all they got, because Tink grabbed one of the falling shotguns before it hit the floor and everyone else was already switching targets. Within seconds all the guards were dead in exchange for a single nasty wound on the arbite and a broken arm on the adept. It was a good trade all in all, but we could



hear reinforcements coming.

Twitch's two nades kept the incoming guards back while grabbed our shotguns and made an exit. There hadn't been any guards near the flier when the fight started, which mean that the copilot was free to sprint to it while the rest of us followed more slowly. The first hostiles came in from the wrong side and got fried by a quick burst from the flier's nose gun, but the second set came from behind it and engaged us in a running firefight.

There was no cover to speak of on the path to the flier, it was going to be a bloodbath unless we were exceedingly lucky. Just this once we were.



None of us had paid much thought to Fumbles. We certainly didn't want to carry an unconscious body with us as we ran, so we had left him to the arbiter and adept to worry about. He was awake now though, and for the first time since we met him he didn't fuck up. The psyker waved his hands and one of the incoming guards turned around then hosed his squadmates with point blank, automatic shotgun fire. It was pretty gruesome.

Some of the guards got shots off at us before they died, taking a chunk out of both Nubby and Sarge, but not doing any serious damage. The same couldn't be said for the fire that came in from our pursuers though, their first volley blew the adept to pieces and forced us all to duck and return fire instead of continuing our sprint. The going got much slower after that, becoming a fighting retreat instead of an all out run, we were still making progress though and could hear the flier's engines spinning up.

Unfortunately we weren't the only ones who noticed the flier getting ready. When we were about fifteen meters from it, a rocket lanced out of the entrance. We watched in horror as the rocket went right through the windshield, then the copilot, and went off in a fireball that killed our only real chance of escape.

That was pretty crushing to tell the truth, but we decided to fight on anyway. What else was there to do? We found some decent cover around the landing pad and dug in like proper guardsmen.

Between our shotguns and another well placed body-puppet spell we killed another dozen guards and convinced the rest that we were above their pay-grade for the time being. There was a nice lull which Doc used to patch everyone up, without painkillers may I add, and Nubby used to scrounge ammo from some of the closer corpses. After that we just sat around and got ready for them to bring in the heavies and kill us.

There wasn't another attack though, instead we heard a familiar voice telling us to stand down. The Interrogator came out of the main entrance with Ivana at his back, holding her bolter and with a rocket launcher slung over her shoulder. Bane alternated between congratulating us on our bravery and yelling at us for acting without orders, then segued into a lecture on how everything was being worked out and we all might come out of this alive if we put down our weapons and acted intelligently.

The vote was four to two in favor of just shooting him until Sarge put his foot down and told us to surrender.

The time the weapon search was very thorough and an untouchable was brought up and handcuffed to Fumbles. Once we were all subdued a man in a ridiculously gaudy overcoat came out to gloat at us a little. Well really it wasn't just gloating, there was a fair bit of praise mixed in. He seemed genuinely impressed with the mess we made and went so far as to offer us jobs in his personal guard.

This was actually a pretty attractive offer, especially after the Arbite claimed he'd rather die than betray his duty, then did. There's a moral in there somewhere about pointless bravado.

The Trader put his bolt pistol back in its holster then ordered his men to take us away to think things over. As we were bundled off Tink and Doc noticed that, for once, the Interrogator wasn't talking or flirting. Instead he looked rather ill and actually stumbled over his own feet and fell when the trader slapped him on the back. Doc put it down to having one of his teammates executed in front of him, but Tink formed a suspicion which he shared with Twitch during the walk to the cells.

We were all, except for Fumbles, given one cell to share. It was really quite nice of them not to split us up and the cel wouldn't have been too bad if it had more than two bunks. As it was we made ourselves as comfortable as possible and mulled over the situation. That is to say, Sarge and Doc mulled over the situation, Nubby just went to sleep while Twitch and Tink excitedly whispered about something.





After a few hours Bane showed up with Ivana at his side. The valkyrie wasn't in her armour this time, instead she was in a dress that reminded Sarge of the storage tarps you put over tanks. It was hard not to notice the way she kept looking at the Interrogator, who had his arm wrapped around her waist.

For his part Bane was obviously drunk. This never seemed to impede him much, instead it just make him annoying happy. He cheerfully informed us that the Trader had agreed just to imprison us here for a few months while he finished his business on the world, after that we'd be free to go about our business. Furthermore Bane promised to come visit us regularly and maybe get us a bigger cell after a few days. Our massed glares just sort of bounced off his drunken cheerfulness.

His message delivered, Bane bade us good night and, as a sort of afterthought, handed us the amasec bottle he'd been carrying. Ivana chimed in at this point and told that this was an incredibly generous offer that was only being given to us thanks to our handsome and charming boss. This triggered a round of flirting that was outright sickening. Equal parts cheesy and repulsive, it just kept going and going while we looked on in disgust. He just spouted line after horrible line, which she ate up then returned with overtones of horrible crushing. Honestly we weren't sure who was worse, they both were acting brain-damaged and the horror show only ended when Doc and Twitch started gagging.

Bane shot us a glare for interrupting and led his lady away, as he left Tink ran to the edge of the cells and watched carefully. The techie started cackling with glee when he spotted the Interrogator stagger for a few steps after passing one of the other cells. Tink's fascination with our drunken Interrogator was only the second most interesting thing in the cell though, as Nubby grabbed the bottle of amasec its label slid off.

There was writing on the inside.

The note explained that Bane had "seduced a high level subordinate to our cause" who had confirmed the presence of high ranking traitors in the Imperial Guard. Furthermore the traitors would be arriving tomorrow and we'd be taken out for exercise as they arrived. Our gear would all be provided and the guards present would be working with us. As long as we were ready we'd be able to take out the traitors and escape all at once.

It'd be an understatement to say we were surprised. Assuming it was all true the bastard had actually come through for us, the plan sounded relatively solid and if we pulled it off it'd turn a pretty abysmal failure into a major victory. The problem was that none of us could see how he'd done

it, except for Tink that is.

Tink and Twitch's excitement boiled over when we read the note and they let us in on their secret. According to them our Interrogator was a powerful psyker or possibly a vampire ork. Of course this was rejected by Nubby on the grounds that Bane hadn't exploded, summoned any daemons, or gone some variety of crazy during the mission. Tink claimed that most psykers didn't do these things, but had a great deal of difficulty convincing anyone. Especially when Fumbles was brought up as an example.

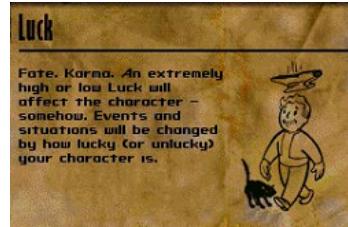
His theory went that the Interrogator was some sort of nascet, which we took to mean sneaky, psyker who used his powers to make himself incredibly lucky. Furthermore, Tink claimed he did this by stealing other people's luck, which was why things kept going to shit for us, but not him. This was a compelling theory and was backed up nicely by the way he acted around the untouchable and how Fumbles had always screwed up so massively around him. At this point Twitch reiterated his theory of vampire ork as opposed to sneaky psyker, but didn't manage to convince anyone.

Before we went to sleep a plan was hatched and that night we had some very strange dreams.

Every single one of us dreamed of a massive nose and mustache which bellowed "Alfred is this blasted thing on?" It was followed by a weary voice informing him that the 'thing' was fifth company's psyker and he didn't need to shout.

After a little more arguing the Rupert finally backed up to where we could fully see him, but he still yelled. We noticed that the Inquisitor had traded his dress uniform for a set of power armor and had definitely seen battle recently. Behind him Alfred was busily relaying orders to several subordinates we couldn't make out and there was the sound of fighting nearby. Sarge tentatively asked what was going on and the Rupert clapped his hands in delight.

What followed was a rather bewildering briefing on the current state of the war. Apparently the Rupert had claimed command as Inquisitor General and was in the process of bloodily purging anyone who argued while simultaneously fighting off a major Ork attack. He seemed quite happy about the whole thing, a nice change of pace he said, the only 'spot in the mustard'



was that man on the top of his list, Lord General Ourumov, had 'done a runner'. He'd apparently left his post to visit some Rogue Trader and the strike team had missed him, by any chance did we know where he'd run off to?

Sarge was proud to report the we were inside the Trader's planetside base and were, in fact, already planning our ambush on the traitors. This pleased the Rupert immensely, but Sarge ran into trouble when he asked for the Trader's name or location so he could send reinforcements. Everyone did their best to remember and completely failed, only managing to offer some details about the landing pad area and the name of one subordinate. It only got worse when Nubby admitted that we were all actually prisoners, the Rupert wasn't fazed, but we could see Alfred wince in the background.

At least we were able to say that our Interrogator was not only walking around free, but actively 'suborning' the enemy.



In the end the Rupert vowed to do his best to pinpoint us using this "damned warp mumbo-jumbo", then went off to see who was shooting holes in his wall with a sniper rifle. Leaving us in a sort of awkward collective dream which became progressively weirder until Doc managed to wake up give everyone a good kick. None of us were able to look at Tink without feeling uncomfortable for a while after that and we all felt sorry for Twitch. No one should have to spend their entire night being continuously ambushed by Kommandos, especially not ones wearing maid uniforms and sporting mechadendrites.

In the morning a shift of guards came for us and, as promised, they didn't actually lock our cuffs. Similarly, when we picked up Fumbles we all felt the weight of his aura as the replacement Untouchable activated a limiter. A whispered word from Doc stopped the psyker from starting a bloodbath the second his powers were returned and we all followed the guards through the villa. While Sarge quietly went over the arrangements with the guard captain and Doc brought Fumbles up to speed, the rest of us sized up the untouchable. We had plans for him.

Our "exercise area" was a large courtyard with a fountain at one end and a landing pad at the other. There were a few guards standing near doorways and some more on the roof, our escort warned us that these guards were not friendly. Bane and the valkyrie were waiting near the fountain, next to a row of flower boxes which poorly concealed all of our gear. The Interrogator was in costume again, he'd replaced his coat with one that matched the guards and gotten a hat too. Once again his rosette was visible just sticking out of

the front of the coat, none of us commented on this.

We lined up within easy grabbing range of our weapons while the Interrogator explained the final details of his brilliant plan. The traitors and their "foul xenos master" would be arriving shortly via shuttle and we'd be presented to them as a token of goodwill and proof of the Trader's competence. We'd be lined up right in front of our weapons and as they came to inspect us and gloat he and Ivana would move behind them. When he gave the signal we'd seize our weapons and kill their personal guards while our escort attacked the guards around us. After the guards were all dead we'd take the traitors prisoner, all pile into the shuttle, and escape while a distraction kept off any pursuit.



It sounded like a solid-sounding plan and except for a few additions of our own, we intended to follow it. The Interrogator walked over to the landing pad, a few of Ivana's guards split off to get into position, and we made what preparations we could without tipping off either set of guards. Before long a standard issue guard shuttle landed in the courtyard and a half dozen men in uniform got out, they were followed by a tall, thin figure in a cloak. The Interrogator and Ivana greeted them, then led them our way.

As they closed we tried to pick out Lord General Ourumov, he was the one target we were really committed to getting. The problem was that none of their insignia looked right; there were two bodyguards, a major, a colonel, and two generals, but no Lord-anythings. We figured he was either in disguise or was hiding under the cloak and scrambled to think of a way to make sure. In the end we went for the unsubtle approach.

When one of the generals stepped forward to gloat over us Sarge looked him in the eye and vowed that "You'll never get away with this Ourumov." This did not get the reaction we expected.

Instead of surprise or denial, all we got was confusion. The general stopped, looked at Sarge, then back to his group, then back to Sarge. He shrugged and was about to start speaking when Nubby spoke up and accused the other general of being Ourumov. When that didn't get a reaction Tink said the man in the cloak was obviously Ourumov and told him to take it off. The cloaked figure turned to the other general and asked the "Gue'vesa'o" what an Ourumov was. There was a brief discussion where it was explained that Ourumov was the name of the Lord General that commanded the eastern front on the south continent. Last they heard he was holed up on the far side of the moon, planning his revenge on the Inquisitor General.



So yeah, wrong bunch of traitors. Awkward...

Anyway, even if none of them was Ourumov, someone had recognized the name. Twitch was watching the Interrogator and Ivana for vampire ork shenanigans and noticed the valkyrie flinch like someone had tased her. He made several logical leaps, all of which were incorrect, but led him to the right response anyway. He screamed "PLAN B, PLAN B" and tackled the untouchable.

Plan B was like Plan A, except we were fighting everyone instead of just the Trader's men and the traitors. Sarge grabbed one of the supposedly friendly guards and threw him at one of the bodyguards while Nubby kicked the other in the groin with the full force of his augmetic legs. Doc and Tink used the split second of breathing room to dig out our weapons and Fumbles grabbed Twitch a roll of ductape.

Bane immediately drew his pistols and killed a bodyguard and the captain before he was forced to dodge a haymaker from Ivana. The haymaker completely missed the Interrogator and knocked out the traitor general that had been coming up behind him. Then cloaked figure and the surviving two officers started screaming about it being a trap, the bodyguard and guard Sarge had thrown shot each other, and the courtyard exploded into chaos.

Honestly we didn't have any idea what was going on. Guards were killing other guards, reinforcements were coming in and trying to figure out who was the enemy, the traitors had scattered, and a very ominous sounding alarm was going off. The centerpiece of all this was a martial arts match between Bane and Ivana, which consisted entirely of him dodging her blows while asking her to "search her heart".



For our part we started throwing smokes in every direction as fast as we could dig them out and shot at anyone who seemed to be paying attention to us. Our goal was simple, we wanted to get onto that shuttle and get the hell out of there before we were all killed; the traitors and guards and traitor guards could kill each other to their hearts' content after we were gone. Sarge led us in a scrambling run from cover to cover as we wrestled with packs half full of dirt and flowers and the very unhappy untouchable.

Now that we knew to look for it, the Interrogator's screwed up probability

field was obvious. Shots went wild, Doc and Nubby both jammed their guns, Twitch hit himself in the face with a rebounding smoke grenade, and Tink didn't even try to use his plasma gun. The techie and Fumbles kept their heads down and dragged the Untouchable behind us as we ran.

As bad as we were getting messed with by the Interrogator's field, the valkyrie and guards closer to Bane were getting it worse. Men would stumble into shots aimed at his back, guns would explode in their users hands, and one man threw the pin at him instead of the grenade, poor bastard. Ivana soaked a ton of punishment before a shotgun blast knocked her down to her knees, the Interrogator gave her a little bow and sprinted after us.

We made it to the shuttle without any major injuries, piled in, and gave the pilot a choice between an exciting new career in the Inquisition and a grisly death. Bane jumped in a second ahead of the slamming doors and we rose into the air as the villa began to explode below us. Several cars and fliers made it away before the whole thing went up and the infuriated voice hailed us over the vox. The Rogue Trader swore undying vengeance and promised Bane that he'd "get him next time", Sarge left the Interrogator to exchange witty banter and watched to make sure no one was following us.

When was finished tormenting the Trader Bane smiled his stupid grin and congratulated everyone on a job well done. We might all be rough around the edges and nowhere near as experienced as him, but we'd pulled through. In fact he'd be proud to have us as permanent members of his team, a few years learning from him would turn into real secret agents. Sarge smiled a grin even wider than the Interrogator's, signaled Twitch to turn off the Untouchable's limiter, and beat seven kinds of shit out of the smarmy bastard.

Tink's piloting skills were vastly improved by the Untouchable's aura of normality, he quickly familiarized himself with the shuttle's controls and the pilot was taped to a seat in the passenger area. While he flew and Sarge worked out his anger issues, Doc voxed the Rupert and updated him on the situation. The Inquisitor General looked like he'd been having a great time and was only moderately disappointed when we told him that Ourumov hadn't been there. He perked right back up when we told him about the traitors we had seen and gave him that tidbit about Ourumov hiding behind the moon.





probably escape and the whole mission would be a wash. We raided what supplies we could from the shuttle, got into position near the moon and waited for our backup.

While we waited there was some discussion about what to do with the Interrogator, there was no way we were going to let him lead the assault. Nubby and Twitch were in favor of misplacing him, as in misplacing him out the airlock, but Sarge wasn't quite ready to kill a superior officer that hadn't actively tried to kill him. Doc suggestion of tranqing the Interrogator was gaining traction when Tink spoke up.

Perhaps, the techie suggested, we could use his abilities to help us. He was great in a fight if you weren't in the "danger zone" as he put it. So half an hour before our squad led the assault on the Lord General Ourumov Secret Moon Base, the Interrogator was shoved into the escape pod and fired at it like a boarding torpedo.

We left the tape on. Sarge said he'd probably be fine.



So no shit, there we were, watching our Interrogator rocketing into the distance and preparing to assault the Secret Moon Base of a traitorous Lord General. That's not something you get to say often.

We swapped into one of the assault shuttles and borrowed some void gear for the assault, no sense dying of asphyxiation before we even got to the enemy. The plan was simple, kill or capture anyone who wasn't part of the strike force, the boys the Rupert sent us were pretty pumped to hear that we didn't have any crazy-complex strategies for them to follow. It was good that they were happy, because the assault began to look a lot more dangerous as we came around the moon.

Lord General Ourumov's Secret Moon Base was not actually very secret, mostly because someone had parked a bright red Kroozer over it. Twitch alternated between ecstatically telling us that Orks really had been behind everyone and worrying about whether there were any Kommandos in the

base.

As far as we could tell it wasn't attacking the base, just sort of hanging there. We were pretty sure that no one was dumb enough to try and hire a Freeboota as a transport, but it certainly looked like that was what was happening here. We put in a quick call to the Navy, then chilled our heels until a hail of macrocannon shots came in at an appreciable fraction of light speed. While the Orks re-evaluated their decision to hold still in what was mostly Imperial controlled space, we launched our assault.

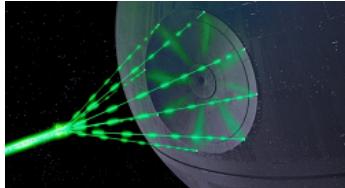
Our bird was in the second wave, none of us had real experience in void battles, so it was better to wait for the fight to get inside before we participated. As battles go it was a pretty good one; we had more men, better troopers, and the element of surprise, it would have been a quick slaughter without the freebootas. The assault teams cut in from every direction, splitting up the defenders and wrecking the chain of command. They pinpointed the HQ within minutes and we moved in for the kill.

This was the sort of fight we liked, the enemy was in front of us, our flanks were secure, and we were the only ones with a decent heavy weapon. There wasn't any screwing around with hallways and their limited cover, we just blasted through wall after wall, flashing the occupants then hitting the biggest hostile with an overcharged plasma shot. Tink didn't get many more kills than the rest of us, but almost every ork we bagged was all him and he only burned himself once. The real clincher was Fumbles though.

The psyker was doing wonderfully, a little praise and whatever Nubby had given him while Sarge and Doc weren't looking had really improved his morale. It's amazing how much it helps to have someone who can pinpoint hostiles on the other side of the wall for you and doubly amazing how much damage a simple invisible grenade can do. Fumbles didn't screw up a single time during the whole push and even managed to shoot someone with his lascannon, the little guy felt like a superhero and everyone within twenty or so meters felt like one too.

Of course battles didn't all go our way. Doc got to patch up all of us at some point or another and we saw at least a dozen assault troopers go down as we cut through the middle of their fights. Honestly we could have probably handled twice the number of hostiles we actually encountered, but none of us were complaining, we knew that our luck wouldn't hold out forever.





Our push forward slowed and stalled as we neared the end, not because there was too much resistance, but because there wasn't any. The halls were empty except for corpses with autogun wounds. Sarge called a halt as we waited for our duct-taped untoachable to be brought forward by some troopers, we weren't going anywhere near the Interrogator without him.

Once the untoachable arrived we got him crammed into Sarge's pack like a toddler and made sure we could turn off his limiter in an instant. Our secret weapon ready, we carefully made our way forward until we heard voices and an ominous hum. Twitch edged around a doorway, flinched backwards, then waved us up. What we saw in there was at least the third weirdest thing any of us had encountered.

The Interrogator was tied to table and what looked like a ship's point-defense laser was suspended above him. A massive Ork with a gold plated cybork arm and a tricorn hat was slowly stomping in a circle around the table and a pair of gretchin were operating the laser's controls. As we watched a beam about the size of an arm crackled out and started rotating up the table towards Bane. The gouge it cut in the floor looked to be about ten meters deep.

While this was all rather odd, the outright weird part was what Bane and the Freeboota were doing. As the beam crawled towards the Interrogator's spread legs he didn't scream or plead, instead he calmly talked with the Ork.

“You thot yous was more cunnin dan us, but Gol-Fingy’s the cunninist Ork dere is, and I’M GOL-FINGY. Now dis here beamy deff lazer is powful enuf to project a spot on da moon. But not dis moon, like if dere were anuver one behind it dere’d be a spot on it.”

”Foul Xenos, do you expect me to talk?”

“Wot? Na you daft git, I spect you to die!”

”...It's not moving very fast.”

“Shaddup.”

”While we’re waiting why don’t you tell me about your evil plans? It’s not like I’m going to escape to tell anyone.”

“Uhhhh don really got one of dose. Was gonna take da posh umies money den push ‘im out the airlock, but since my Kroozer’s run off I’m really jus plannin to cut some nosy ’ummie in ’alf wif my deff laser.”

”Oh... I don’t suppose you’d be willing to



let me go? Or have a beautiful and emotionally vulnerable henchwoman?"

"Can't you grots make dis fing go any fasta?"

At this point the beam was getting pretty close and we felt it was time to do something. We weren't quite ready just to let the Interrogator die, not when the mission was almost over and we knew we could subdue him at a moments notice. Tink linked up a shot on what looked like the most critical component of the laser, the rest of us got ready to open fire, and Fumbles sat in the corner since we wouldn't let him use his powers this close to the Interrogator.

Twitch fired, the gretchins both exploded, and the laser went haywire. Before it cut off completely the beam somehow split apart and simultaneously cut every single one of the Interrogator's restraints, this did not surprise any of us. The first volley of las fire hit the Freeboota square in the chest, the second was stopped by his augmetic arm, and the third was delayed as we scattered away from a well thrown stikkbomb. Sarge and Doc took the right, peppering him with unaimed las-fire while frantically dodging a rain of slugs. On the other side Twitch, Nubby, and Tink all took careful aim at the back of the Ork's head.

Twitch's gun jammed, Nubby managed to hit the floor AND the ceiling, and Tink's plasma gun overheated. All three troopers stared at each other in panic, then scattered as another stikkbomb landed between them. As they ran they were treated to the sight of Bane rising up behind the Ork with a comically small switchblade. The way he jammed it into the Freeboota's ear wasn't funny though.

The massive Ork started flailing around, frantically trying to dislodge the Interrogator. Everyone took a second to appreciate the sight, then opened up on full auto, only pausing to reload or clear jams. As a side note, none of us bothered to try and miss Bane, we figured he'd take care of that himself.

The Freeboota finally dislodged the Interrogator and threw him into a bank of cogitators, but he was obviously on his last legs. A final few volleys reduced him to a bleeding pile of meat, and a detpack made sure he wasn't getting back up. Twitch used three detonators for that and we still had to set it off by shooting it with a lasgun from the hallway. That done, there was a round of high-fives and celebratory smokes, which were interrupted by the sound of approaching boots.



We all dove into cover, but Bane just stood there and faced down the dozen storm troopers than thundered through the far door. Behind them came a man in a Lord General's uniform and Ivana in a suit of power armor. There was a brief, surprised staring match then Lord General Ourumov started monologuing.

It wasn't the best monologue, we'd heard one or two really good ones, and this was only sort of middling. Sarge signalled everyone to start lining up their shots, quietly calling targets over the comm while the idiots bantered.

It was an agonizing wait, Nubby and Tink both nearly cracked before it was over, but it paid off. Bane dismissed something the traitor said, turned to face Ivana and asked her if she would listen to her boss... or her heart? Doc threw up a little in his mouth.

The valkyrie went from zero to sixty in about half a second, the two storm troopers nearest to her were reduced to chunky salsa. Bane did some sort of ridiculous backflip behind a table, hefted the freeboota's shoota and somehow managed to use it to hose fire across the troopers. While they did the showy stuff, we placed four solid headshots and knocked out the door controls behind the traitor.

The fight ended with Ourumov being suspended from one of Ivana's fists while she used the other lift the Interrogator high enough for a sloppy make-out. Sarge voxed the Rupert to report our success while Tink and Doc pried the terrified Lord General down and tranqued him. Nubby and Twitch retrieved Fumbles and verified that no hostiles were left in the area. At this point Sarge called the mission a success, and started to reach behind his back to turn off the Untouchable's limiter. A second later he was covered with a spray of bone and meat as Bane casually blew the taped-up prisoner's head off.

Couldn't let a traitor like that live, could he?

We were all on pins and needles, it was like being trapped in a very small room with a sleeping ursid. Doc carefully pulled the Lord General back, Tink swapped his plasma gun for a las-pistol, Twitch pushed Fumbles back, and Nubby made sure he had a clear path to the door. Sarge quietly asked the Interrogator what he was going to do now. Bane looked at each of us in turn, then to Ivana, then back to Sarge. An expression that closely



resembled thought crossed his face. Then it vanished to be replaced with his vapid smile, "Now" he bellowed "we PARTY!".

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief and Sarge facepalmed.

The shit you put up with in this job...

Anyway we followed him out, it was easier than fighting it. We got back on a shuttle and flew back down to the Rupert's mansion where the Interrogator instigated a night of wild hedonism the likes of which none of us had ever seen. And we didn't see it now either, we locked ourselves in our rooms and tried to figure out just what the hell we were going to do now.

Tink and Twitch voted for finding another untouchable and ending this shit now. The man was obviously a complete psychotic, with no sense of right, wrong, or reality. Sarge and Doc weren't so sure though, if he saw us coming shit would go down real fast, and was still technically murdering a superior officer. The Inquisition frowned on that sort of thing. Nubby advised patience, we'd managed to hide from a shitty Interrogator before, we could do it again.

Fumbles suggested we ask the people standing in the hallway about a second before they knocked.

Three men entered our room, we recognized the one on the right. He was the Interrogator who'd been our nominal superior while we were playing teacher, now he was all done up in combat gear. The man on the left was an untouchable, but not a normal one, he had an aura like Fumbles in a suicidal depression, and that was with his limiter on. The middle man was tall, covered with scars and augmetics, and had a servo skull hovering over his shoulder.

They made themselves comfortable, greeted us all by name, then congratulated us on surviving our mission. We kept our mouths shut and waited for the shoe to drop. Eventually they got tired of playing the big scary Inquisitors and only getting monosyllabic responses, the middle one stood back up and fished around in his shirt for something. He drew out a rosette which identified him as a member of the Ordos Hereticus and asked what our opinion was of Interrogator Bane Johns.



Sarge sat up a bit straighter and asked why he was so interested in the opinion of a bunch of grunts. The Inquisitor smiled back and said we were the first team to survive a mission with him, so were the best men to judge whether he was a dangerous untrained psyker who might become a serious threat to the Imperium. Every single one of us grinned like a kid in a candy store.

Unfortunately the moment was slightly spoiled by Twitch saying that we thought Bane was a vampire ork.

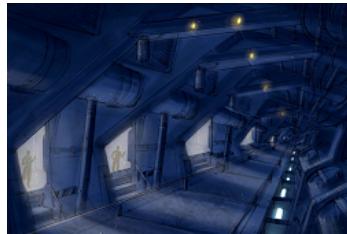
They let us watch when they stormed into party, deactivated the limiter, and dragged the drunken Interrogator out behind them. It was glorious, especially when he kept trying to do martial-arts moves and hit himself. It must suck to live a life where everything you do just magically works, then have it taken away. Nubby suggested that we should send him a card or something, perhaps a tasteful goodbye message like "Enjoy your life in a psi-shield inquisitorial dungeon, don't forget to write". We really shouldn't have laughed at that, it only encouraged him.

When they took Bane Ivana had tried to put up a fight, but Oak's personal Interrogator drew some sort of small sleek pistol and the valkyrie was asleep before she got half a meter. We heard him tell his men to pack her up, he knew someone who might want to offer her job. We decided that was as fair a chance as any of us had gotten, and went to bed.

We stuck around the planet for a few days after the Inquisitor left, partially to see if the Rupert needed help, but mostly because we had to wait for a ship that was going our way. The dapper man was a little concerned over what had happened to our Interrogator, but accepted our assurance that it was all for the best. He would've loved to spend some time swapping tales with us, unfortunately he was rather busy running the war. The Rupert said he'd intended to hand off command to some of the less corrupt generals after the purges, but everyone seemed to think he was doing an wonderful job and wanted him to stay until the war ended.

Hopefully that wouldn't take too many years, morale had improved greatly after the purge, and deserters no longer seemed to be disappearing off planet in surprisingly large numbers. He put that down to the execution of Ourumov and all of his contacts, but we remembered the other group of traitors and weren't so sure.

A few weeks later we disembarked onto Oak's ship to find a runner waiting for us. Doc had thought ahead, he and Sarge had put together a full report



during our travel time, so instead of a grueling oral examination we just handed over the dataslate and went our way.

The welcome back party was much more our speed, less loud music and mindless extravagance, more old friends. Nubby captivated everyone with the completely true tale of our adventure and his heroic exploits, Doc disappeared with his lady friend, Twitch introduced Fumbles to some new friends, and Tink managed to talk to Hannah the cog-girl without getting slapped. Sarge watched it all and felt proud, then ducked out early after a runner passed him a note.

The argument in Oak's office was heard by no one and no device recorded it. If someone had been there to hear it though, they might have heard the phases "killed over thirty teams" and "you used us like guinea pigs" repeated a few times. They might also have heard an older, quieter voice explaining that only one type of person is allowed to dictate team composition on his ship.

A few hours later Interrogator Greg Sargent left Oak's office and returned to the party holding a dataslate. He sat, played with it for a while, then walked over to where Nubby and Twitch were sitting and swapping stories with old friends. He took a seat, grabbed a drink, and in rhetorical way asked:

Where the hell is Tau Space?



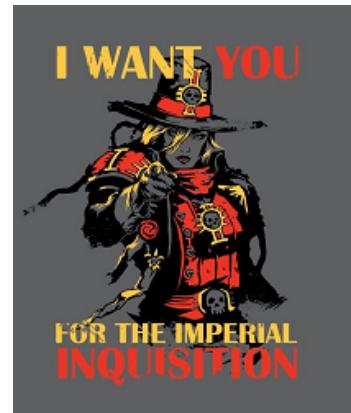
Chapter 10

The Greater Good

Interrogator Greg Sargent was not having a good day, in fact, given that he was currently waist deep in a septic pipe, it's safe to say that he was having an incredibly shitty day. He'd spent his entire morning in meetings with the other Interrogators, his afternoon had been one long argument with the Inquisition's most tedious personnel officer, and then he'd been called away to deal with this mess. Now, instead of eating a well earned dinner, he was trying to pick his way through a rat's nest of trip wires while arguing philosophy and speculating how many showers he was going to need- all because his squad's demolitions expert had stopped taking his meds again.

Twitch wasn't having a good day either, he could hear the Orks moving through the pipes around him, but didn't have anything heavy enough to blast through to them. If Doc and Tink hadn't stolen his supplies when he'd told them about the Kommando raid Twitch could've easily wiped out the greenskins, instead he'd been reduced to trying to snipe them through the walls with his laspistol. To make matters worse, the traitorous bastard coming up the pipe was destroying the few perimeter defenses he'd been able to rig. Twitch stopped perforating the walls for a moment to shout down the pipe, reminding Sarge that he'd always said never to trust anyone over the rank of Sergeant.

Doc, Tink, and Nubby were having a great day. Tink had jacked a screen into the maintenance cameras and everyone was enjoying the show. They took turns critiquing Sarge's arguments about the nature of rank and Twitch's rebuttals. After the second time Sarge tripped into the muck Tink



asked if this wasn't a bit much, especially coming from Doc. The medic held up his travel orders and pointed to the name of the vessel that'd be taking them to Tau space. With a grim smile Doc asked Tink if he'd ever heard the story about the time Nubby bought a warpship.

¶The All Guardsmen Party and the Greater Good

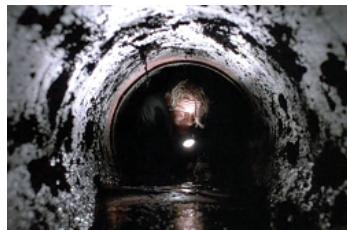
Eventually Sarge got Twitch out of there, it was a good show while it lasted though. The whole experience actually seemed to cheer him up, nothing like a slog through a river of shit and booby-traps to get a soldier back to their roots.

The weeks before that had been rough on Sarge, he wasn't cut out for meetings or other bureaucratic bullshit. We'd all noticed that he kept disappearing and was getting grumpier than usual, but put it down to him getting married or contracting some horrible disease. It wasn't until we were all given sets of honest-to-god deployment orders that we found out that the man had let himself get promoted. That was a nasty shock, it was like finding out the regimental chaplain had sworn his soul to chaos.

Well actually no one but Twitch really took it that hard; there was a little moping and a lot of bitching, but eventually we came to terms with the situation. It's not like we didn't already follow his orders, the only difference now was that he was going to be busy running the whole team instead of focusing on keeping us alive. In a skewed way he was doing it for us, it was the only way we'd stop getting handed incompetent superiors to babysit. Still, Sarge had hid it from us and the first mission he'd landed us was ridiculous; the score had to be evened before things could return to normal, hence Twitch's little adventure.

Once Sarge and Twitch were hosed down everyone pulled together to help Sarge prep for the mission. Which is to say Doc helped and everyone else stayed out of trouble or annoyed people that were giving Sarge grief. It's amazing what people will agree to to get Nubby or Twitch to leave their office.

This time the mission wasn't a random investigation into something Oak's boys had dug up, it was a continuation of our previous one. The boss-man was very interested in the group of traitors we'd stumbled over and half-murdered in our escape from the Rogue Trader. He was of the opinion that they were responsible for most of the desertion problem and thought they'd been transporting the deserters off planet for some nefarious purpose. It was our job to track them down, figure out what was going on, then kill everyone for good measure. The problem was that the traitors and the trader had all



buggered off after Bane blew up their base.

Our only real lead was the cloaked figure that had been bossing the traitors around. Oak's analysts had decided it was a Tau, a type of xenos that was fond of tech-heresy and corrupting the minds of honest imperial citizens. Since no one had seen the traitors or a massive army of deserters anywhere nearby the boffins thought that everyone must have fled to the region of space where the Tau lived, so the first step in finding them was going to be travelling halfway across the bloody galaxy to Tau space.

Of course the logistics of getting our squad all the way to Tau space were rather complex. It was too far to hitch a ride on navy vessels and if Oak was going to go through the trouble to send us down there he might as well send a few other teams to do inquisitive stuff. So instead of hiring a merchant vessel the Inquisitor decided to send one of his own ships, which was the real reason we weren't happy about the mission. Our squad was in for a several month trip on Oak's most recent acquisition, a freshly refurbished merchant ship known as the Occurrence Border.

This did not thrill us.

Despite the fact that we'd be travelling on a ship that had more in common with a warp-tainted space hulk than a proper vessel there were upsides to this arrangement: between the large number of teams being sent and the support staff that'd be staying on the ship, there were a lot of familiar names on the roster. Most of the survivors from the regiment were spread between the other teams, several of the cogboys and adepts we'd worked with were coming along, and Sarge got to help pick the ship's medical staff so a certain hospitaller was brought. The downside of this was that Doc began bouncing between being annoyingly cheerful and annoyingly worried. It depended on whether he was focusing on the fact that his girlfriend was coming along or the fact that his girlfriend might be eaten by daemons with the rest of us.

Doc's annoying tendencies aside, the final preparations went smoothly and everyone began transferring over to the Occurrence Border. We first met the rest of our team on the shuttle, Sarge had picked them all out beforehand,



but Oak didn't like people talking about their orders before they left his ship.

It had been obvious this mission was going to involve a lot more thinking and talking than any of us liked to do, so Sarge and Doc had mostly picked nerds to come with us. On the thinky side we had a xenos expert and a cogitator boffin. For the talky stuff we had an aging diplomat and a sneaky bugger who was supposed to be good at impersonating people. The final spot was filled by Fumbles, because the other Interrogators kept telling Sarge he should have a psyker and he was the least offensive one around.

Introductions were made, briefings were handed out, and most of the trip was spent explaining the odder aspects of the team to the newcomers. To their credit, they didn't start looking uneasy until the explanation reached Twitch's habits and why it was important to be nice to Fumbles.

There was a small welcoming party waiting for us when Sarge led us off the shuttle. A harassed-looking senior officer welcomed us aboard, then dumped our party onto a nervous looking midshipman and some crewmen. The poor middie apparently had a routine he was supposed to go through with new arrivals, unfortunately the first step was to have everyone's gear shipped ahead to their quarters by cargo servitors. Given our previous experiences with servitors on that ship, this didn't go over well with any of us. Twitch

was of the opinion that we should kill the servitors immediately, just to be on the safe side.

Doc got Twitch to calm down and put his lasgun away while Sarge explained that, for personal reasons, we'd be carrying our own gear. The terrified midshipman didn't press the issue and skipped ahead to the orientation tour. While none of us really needed the tour, it was pretty fun, especially since our tour guide didn't know we'd been on the ship before.

The Occurrence Border was definitely in better condition than the last time we'd seen it, which really isn't saying much. The refit hadn't done anything about its maze-like corridors or bizarre layout, but all the blood and battle damage had been cleared up, the gravity almost always went in the same direction, and none of the doors led to rooms full of daemonic fire. The biggest change we noticed was that the thousands of little notes had either been removed or replaced with official looking plaques that said the same thing, and there were maps at almost every junction. All-in-all the ship was in pretty good shape, though we did notice that certain sections on the maps were labeled "warp contaminated, do not enter" and every map had the comm code for the ship's Confessor printed under it.



The high point of the whole tour was when a few of our pointed questions pushed the midshipman over the edge. He exploded into a passionate little tirade about how much effort had gone into refurbishing the ship and how poor its original condition was. Then he went on at great length about how badly the supply agent who'd purchased the ship had screwed up. Apparently the man had not only purchased a nearly derelict ship, he'd also managed to nearly lose it in the warp while transporting it to the shipyard. Given how much life and money had been lost in the deal, the incompetent had been lucky to only be re-assigned to one of Oak's "Suicide Squads". The kid couldn't figure out why Nubby looked so embarrassed and the rest of us kept cracking up.

Eventually we bullied the midshipman into taking us to engineering, where we traded him out for a more familiar guide. Jim the former tech-acolyte had been transferred to the ship a month ahead of us and was looking spiffy in his new Enginseer robes; it wasn't a surprise, Sarge had requested him and Hannah during the mission-prep.

Everyone was happy to see Jim again, except for Tink who ignored the cogboy and wandered off to start poking at something expensive looking that was on a work-bench. Jim started bringing us up to speed on the ship's situation, pausing every few seconds to ask Tink to stop touching things. Before long a brief and ugly argument exploded between them, it ended with Sarge sending our techie to sit in the corner and try not to commit tech-heresy.

Tink didn't respond well to the order, he grumpily demanded to know where Hannah was and asked if we could trade the "unscientific little zealot" for her. Everyone ignored him and Jim finished supplying us with all the information that the midshipman hadn't known or been willing to give us.

The half of our team that hadn't heard the story of our previous trip on the Occurrence Border had a little trouble following the discussion. They mostly just stood around and looked alternately confused and worried. Twitch and Nubby's explanations didn't help.

The main hydroponics bays were now midship and the tribals were their official caretakers. The psyker kids weren't with them anymore, they'd been claimed by Oak and were being raised into proper little team-killers. Also the bays were 99

Ol' Bill had been given a Juvenat treatment and was head of engineering. His surviving men had been given the treatment too and were bossing around



a bunch of rather grumpy cogboys. Bill would have been there to greet us, but shuttle-bay 13C was stuck upside down and he was the only one who knew where its gravity controls were.



No more servitors had gone crazy since our adventure, but the crater the Cogtain had left at the bottom of the elevator to the bridge still glowed with daemonic light and screamed in binary at anyone who came near it. All attempts to patch it had failed, since it melted back to its original shape after a few hours. They'd just walled off the area and built a shrine to the emperor around it. It was probably completely safe.

All six "refurbished" Gellar field generators had been removed. They'd been replaced with a single brand-new big one and another big backup. Also: no, our official quarters were not near them and yes he and Hannah had cleared out a storage room across the hall from the main entrance. No one would complain if we set up camp there.

Finally, Jim supplied us with a far more accurate map of the ship than we'd originally been given. It had handy things labeled on it, like where the emergency food and weapon caches were and the location of everyone's quarters, including the medical team's. Doc took ownership of the map.

We bid Jim a fond farewell and headed for our conveniently empty store-room.

While we guardified our quarters a runner came for Sarge and directed him towards a pre-mission meeting. Since the rest of us had much more important things to do than slowly die of boredom, he wound up taking the three nerds and the infiltrator along. They hadn't been much help building barricades anyway.

The meeting consisted of half a dozen other full Interrogators and their minions, some of the ship's senior officers, a mechanicus magos, and the Captain. According to Sarge the Captain of the ship was either ex-navy or ex-administratum and didn't appear to be too happy with his assignment. He started things off by explaining that while he was not an Inquisitor or even an Interrogator, he was in charge of the ship and the only orders he'd be following were Oak's. It was his job to transport and supply everyone, regardless of whether their personal mission was recruitment, training, investigation, or archeotech hunting. Therefore his primary objective was to keep the Occurrence Border's cover, and hull, intact while making enough profit off trading to keep the ship running and everyone supplied. So unless everyone agreed that a certain mission needed to come first, he'd be choosing

the ship's route and providing what resources he saw fit.

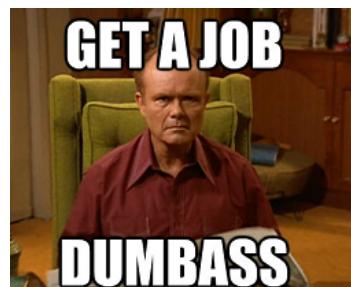
Being a military man, Sarge didn't see anything wrong with this, everyone else immediately started bickering of how important their missions were though. At first it was amusing to watch, especially since half the debaters refused to tell anyone else what their mission actually was, but after the second hour Sarge was ready to start shooting people. After sitting around and commiserating with the Captain and his officers for a while he just handed over a copy of our briefing and ditched the meeting. It wasn't like we even knew where in Tau space the deserters actually were yet.

The interrogators must have eventually reached a compromise, because a few hours after Sarge returned the vox system told everyone to prepare for warp and the Gellar Field Generator kicked on, nearly frying Twitch as he inspected it for bombs. We all grabbed our weapons, ignored the worried looks our teammates gave us, and prepared for the worst. It was sort of disappointing when nothing happened.

Over the first few days of the trip we built a nice miniature fire-base in our gellar-field adjacent room, but couldn't convince any of our teammates to move in. Even Fumbles bailed on us, he said the generator made his head hurt, and the rest of the crazy bastards seemed to think that rooms with real beds and bathrooms were better than being in the absolute least-warpy part of the ship. We didn't press the issue, it was their funeral.

Anyway after the base was up we didn't really know what to do with our time and the trip to Tau space was a damned long one. Sarge, being a rather cynical individual, imagined how the rest of us would keep ourselves entertained over a several month voyage and went to talk with the Captain. Before any of us could really start to enjoy our leisure time, much less cause serious trouble, a shipwide announcement was made.

The gist of it was that "Heresy grows from idleness" and "Layabouts will not be tolerated". If anyone on the ship didn't have something to do



to prepare for their mission they had three options: find a job on the ship, report to Sarge's new physical fitness class, or take a long walk out a short airlock. There was a short debate between us on which option was the least horrible, that is until Nubby verified that we wouldn't be given a voidsuit or let back inside the airlock after our "walk."

Doc wound up in the medbay where, to everyone else's amusement, he was put to work under his Hospitaller girlfriend. This arrangement led to numerous tasteless jokes. Anyway, despite what everyone imagined, Doc spent most of his time on his feet, dealing with the impressive number of injuries that the Occurrence Border caused on a daily basis.



Tink signed up for engineering where he managed to horribly insult or disgust, depending on gender, almost every tech-priest on the ship. After the fifth accusation of tech-heresy, not to mention the third harassment report, Sarge asked Ol' Bill for a favor. Tink was assigned as the aged engineer's personal assistant and was kept in line via regular percussive maintenance with a spanner.

Since mining the entire vessel was out of the question, Twitch took it upon himself to patrol the ship for kommandos and the like. Nubby, figuring this for a snipe-hunt and a great way to avoid strenuous exercise, joined him and dragged Fumbles along for moral support. He hadn't counted on the fact that significant portions of the ship were still warp-tainted and tended to manifest all sorts of warp-phenomena whenever the navigator hit a bump. The three of them got far more of the "Occurrence Border experience" than the rest of us, frequently finding themselves working with the ship's armsmen, clerics, and engineers to beat back minor daemons and seal holes in reality.

The trio's adventures were as numerous as they were unbelievable. Every night Nubby would regale us with tales of derring-do and personally claimed no less than three bloodthirster kills before the trip ended. Fumbles happily basked in the dubious glory of these stories and Twitch was, well, Twitch. One night, while drinking, he quietly told us that when the turbulence was bad random doors opening to rooms of fire were still a thing, also the mysterious poker room now had a fighting ring occupied by a chainsword wielding skeleton. The skeleton had waved at him.

After we settled into our roles the long trip went by without any incidents. Well, at least without any major incidents. Actually, let's just say that no one died horribly. Almost no one. Well, no one who's name we actually

remembered. The important thing is that everyone on OUR team was alive and functionally sane when we reached the edge of Tau space.

The adepts and the infiltrator had spent the whole trip going through the he data that Oak gave us and what came in via astropath. As far as we could tell the only thing they'd established with all that work was that the deserters had left the Imperium from the top-leftish direction on the map. This didn't overly impress us, but it was enough information for the Captain to plan his route and as we got closer to the border some useful data began to come in.

Apparently this section of space was lousy with Ordos Xenos agents keeping an eye on the Tau. Every time we stopped to refuel or do a little trading the adepts would send out queries and they slowly narrowed down our destination to a cluster of what the nerds called "buffer systems."

According to the diplomat and xenos expert the border between the Imperium and the Tau empire were a little fuzzy out here. The big, important systems all had clear owners, but there were a large number of more marginal worlds that were more or less independent. The adepts explained how they served an important purpose involving trade and tension and other stuff, but Doc was the only one who even tried to follow it all. As far as we were concerned we were headed towards a bunch of worlds that were half human and half xenos because they were too shit for either side to care about.

After a few stops to drop off other teams and pick up cargo the Captain steered us towards the cluster and Sarge was forced to pick a world to start the mission on. In the end he ignored all the data and estimates provided by the adepts and just chose the only one with a permanent agent on it.

The Occurrence Border came out of warp at our destination with the usual groans, clangs, and small explosions and we made our final preparations for the mission. Nubby grudgingly supplied the rest of the team with weapons, Tink grabbed all the gadgets he could carry from the engineering department's stores, Twitch repacked most of his traps, and Doc annoyed everyone with his melodramatic goodbyes. After Sarge handed command of his PT class over to the ship's bosun he corralled everyone into the shuttle-bay for a final briefing.

To our surprise the Captain actually came down to see us off. He and



Sarge had gotten along rather well and the Captain personally handed over the ship's contact codes and the briefcase of local currency that would act as our budget. Sarge saluted the man and promised to meet him for drinks when the Occurrence Border came back through the cluster in three months, then led us onto the shuttle that would take us to the planet.

As we flew down the xenos expert and diplomat tried their best to remind us how things worked on this world. They managed to fit an entire crash course on the socio-political situation, the cultural and economic status of the cluster, and the history of the Tau Empire into a two hour shuttle trip. None of us really listened though, we knew that "border world" meant a barely colonized wilderness, possibly with a few xenos that no one had gotten around to killing yet.

The spaceport we landed in wasn't the biggest we'd seen, but it was definitely the cleanest. Several teams of men came out and started unloading our shuttle, and one of them discretely led us through into a service tunnel. A bit of walking and a short drive later we found ourselves standing on a street-corner in the oddest looking city any of us had ever seen. As a mixed crowd of humans and xenos parted around us Nubby quietly asked the adepts if they'd mind giving that lecture again.



Just saying that place was weird doesn't even begin to cover it. It might have been easier to handle if it was just a xenos city, but the way humans and familiar pieces of imperial architecture were mixed in was just uncanny. The crowds of people heading to work looked normal at first, then you realised half of them were fricken blue. You'd see a shrine to the Emperor, with all the nice, normal arches and skulls and everything, then right next to it would be a giant mushroom-looking building and no-one even seemed to notice. On top of that all the humans looked subtly wrong, it wasn't their clothes or hairstyles, it was they way they walked and talked. While we all stared and tried to figure out what was going on, Fumbles put his finger on it: everyone around us was... happy, or at least not as wearily miserable as normal workers should be. It was damned unsettling.

Twitch and Tink both went into a sort of overload caused by the sheer number of xenos surrounding us and the amazing array of tech being used in the city respectively. Both had to be restrained while Sarge and the adepts negotiated a vehicle rental, and the struggle attracted quite a bit of attention. Luckily none of us were in uniform or obviously armed, so Doc and

the infiltrator were able to convince all the curious onlookers that everything was fine and no-one was about to start a shooting spree.

When Sarge returned with the vehicle (a normal ground truck, thank the Emperor, Tink would've exploded if it had been one of the hovering xenos ones), we piled in and drove towards our local contact's address as fast as possible. We got about half a klick before we heard a siren and our truck suddenly slowed down and pulled over while Tink struggled with the wheel and swore at it. Nubby just barely stopped Twitch from snap-shooting the Tau police officer who wanted to know what the hurry was and where the hell we'd learned to drive.

So no shit, there we were, a highly trained and heavily armed Inquisitorial goon squad, chasing a bunch of traitorous deserters on an alien world, and we'd just been pulled over for speeding. Not our best moment.

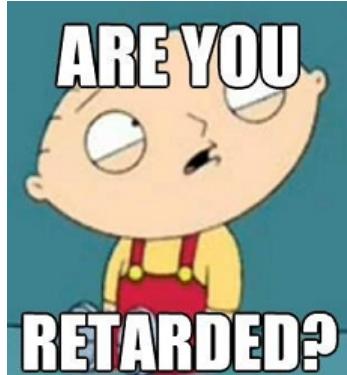
Mortified doesn't even begin to cover it. Almost everyone just sort of sat there and stared ahead, thinking about how our cover was going to be blown and how the entire local government would come down on us, all because of a damned speeding ticket. The only sounds were Tink's muttered curses as he tried to figure out what had forced the truck to stop, Doc's prayers, and our social infiltrator fast-talking the officer.

Thank the Emperor for that sneaky bastard and his bull-shitting skills. Through impressive series of lies, excuses, distractions, and a little bribery he managed to hide the fact that we didn't have any sort of identification and even managed to talk some directions out of the cop too. Despite how well things worked out though, it was a sobering and educational experience which really drove in how far we were from home. On an Imperial world the local police tended to ignore anything less than an outright murder by a man in a Guard uniform. Hell, no one even blinked at one of us carrying a lasgun around. It seemed they were a lot less accommodating around here.

As the officer walked away Sarge began to worry. Given that we'd nearly gotten into a life and death struggle with the authorities while leaving the shuttleport, his first mission as Interrogator seemed doomed to failure before the end of the month. His mood was not improved when Tink ripped out the pesky little thingy that had forced us to pull over, causing the police officer turned around and walk back. While the infiltrator hastily tried to explain why we'd just ripped out our vehicle's government-mandated Identification



and Emergency Control Device, Sarge decided we'd be lucky to make it to the end of the week.



Eventually we managed to sort things out and reached the address we'd been given for our local contact. It turned out to be a large, official-looking building in Imperial style, but built out of the weird tan stuff the Tau liked to use. In a fit of sanity we all decided that trooping in the front door of a government building and knocking on the Secret Inquisitorial Agent's door would be a stupid thing to do, so our xenos and cogitator experts were sent to figure out how to use one of the public comm terminals to call him. Tink complained that he wasn't sent too, but didn't get any sympathy. A few minutes later the adepts came back and directed us around to an unmarked passage which took us deep into the building.

The passage ended at an impressive security door which opened into a surprisingly posh office and sealed seamlessly into the wall behind us. A large, slightly overweight man sat at a desk with a nameplate which declared him to be "General Weebu, Head of Interplanetary Security." There was a brief moment of panic as all of us took in the title and realized we'd just walked, nearly unarmed, into the planet's intelligence headquarters, then the man stood up and extended his hand to Sarge. In a booming voice he introduced himself as Lars Weebu, Inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos, Retired.

Several questions flashed across our minds as we processed what we'd just seen and heard, such as if Inquisitors could really retire and how he'd wound up here. Unfortunately the first person to open their mouth was Nubby, who loudly asked why the Inquisitor was wearing a dress. A sort of congealed silence followed that remark, then Tink pointed out that it was more of a robe and lots of men wore robes. Nubby riposted by pointing out that "it's got flowers on, it's not a robe if it's got flowers on" and Tink conceded the point, but suggested they shouldn't judge him for his choice of clothing, the xenos had probably done something to his brain.

Nubby was the lucky one, he only got slapped upside the head by Doc, Tink got hit by Sarge. That was probably the third most embarrassing experience in Sarge's life, coming in above the speeding ticket, but below the apology he'd had to make for our trainees back when we were instructors for Oak. Face glowing, Sarge stepped over Tink's groaning body and did his best to explain that, while all of his team members were excellent soldiers, some had suffered mental damage in their battles. The ex-Inquisitor stood there

and looked stuffed for a few more seconds then muttered something about falling standards. He turned to face Nubby, who paled and tried to smile, then spent an inordinately long time explaining the cultural significance of Tau formal robes.

Now when I say inordinately long, I really mean it. The man just kept talking and talking, it wasn't until Sarge pointed out that "we" didn't want to take up his entire day that he wound down enough for us to get in our questions. Of course those questions immediately set him off again, we had to endure this whole rambling lecture about how after a century of fighting them he'd discovered how unique and vibrant Tau culture and society were.

According to Weebu it was his duty, for the good of the galaxy as a whole, to preserve what aspects of it he could and incorporate them into the Imperium before their self destructive government doomed them all by provoking us. He'd worked to get this position so he could steer these free border worlds towards a brighter future; if only everyone could see than an alliance was possible and the benefit of sharing technology we could- blah, blah, blah, I'm a xenos loving weirdo. Sarge eventually had to stop him again when he started telling us about how many times the metal in an Honour Blade was folded.

To say we were dubious about the ex-Inquisitor's sanity and loyalty is one hell of an understatement, especially since he never exactly said how he became an ex-Inquisitor, but he really was the only lead we had out here. When he could get a word in edgewise Sarge explained we were here to hunt down a large number of Guard deserters, their rogue trader transport, and the cloaked xenos who'd led them, then had the adepts fill in all the details they'd gathered. Weebu took this all in then directed us to sit and wait while he played with a xeno-cogitator thingy that popped out of his desk and made both Tink and the boffin drool.

As Weebu typed and read he gave us a quick rundown of the overall situation in the cluster. Almost every planet, or large station, was independently governed and worked with the rest of the cluster in a sort of defensive



alliance. Some individual planets worked closely with the Tau government, others were more pro-Imperial, but as a whole the cluster wanted to stay a neutral buffer-state. They had a good thing going: everyone was making money off all the unofficial trade that went between the empires and no one's planet was being used as the arena for the latest Tau vs. Imperium pissing match.

Lately though, things were looking a little dicey. Someone with serious firepower was raiding stations and even a few planets in the cluster, completely destroying them and leaving no witnesses. Everyone was arming up and getting ready for a fight, but no one knew what the threat actually was and if their forces could take it. Some of the more pro-Imperial or pro-Tau planets were loudly saying that it'd better to lose their independence than be horribly murdered, while the rest waited to see if they could handle it themselves. So basically things weren't completely screwed up here, but a major incident could set off a serious shitstorm, or as Weebu put it: "Disturb the tranquility of my garden of tolerance." Weirdo.

The whole point of the ex-Inquisitor's lecture was that it was not good time for a bunch of desperate, well-armed, military trained men to be wandering around the cluster looking for a little fun. And they definitely were wandering around the cluster, according to the reports he was looking at right then, every planet was seeing an influx. Unfortunately there weren't enough to account for the numbers we gave him, so it was probably just spillover from where the majority were heading. Therefore he would, both as a favor to us and for the good of his "garden," put his agents on tracking down those missing men.



Weebu suggested that we find ourselves a safe-house and brush up on the local culture and laws while he had an entire planet's spy agency do the legwork for us. Once his boys found the deserters he'd pass the info on and we could handle the messy parts while his agency kept its hands clean. This suited us nicely, but Sarge felt he should make at least a token effort and asked if there were any parts of the investigation we could help with.

After a little thought the ex-Inquisitor reiterated his suggestion and added the local technology to the list. He cited a report that had just come in saying that several suspicious men had been pulled over for reckless driving, attempted to bribe the police officer, ripped out their vehicle's transpon-

der, and attempted to bribe the officer again. These men were apparently so clueless that they hadn't even shielded their highly-illegal weapons from scanning or noticed the drones the officer had sent to tail their vehicle while he reported the incident. If it weren't for a highly placed official vouching for these men, they'd probably have been arrested by the SWAT team waiting and watching their truck right this second.

Sarge quietly agreed to Weebu's suggestion, then led us out the passage, cursing xenos, Tink, the Inquisition, deserters, Tink, smartasses, and Tink every step of the way.

The first order of business, after we verified that a SWAT team wasn't about to attack us, was to get a place to stay. Sarge dumped the problem on the adepts then grumpily ordered everyone else to sit in the truck and not touch anything. The three nerds did a lot of cogitator and comm work, then gave us a list of options and their prices. Doc wisely asked whether there were security deposits on these places and how likely random civilians were to walk into "the perimeter." With those thoughts in mind, Sarge vetoed every hab on the list, leaving us with a disused warehouse that, from the smell of it, had last been used to store live grox. That's the glamorous lifestyle of an Inquisitorial agent for you...



The next week, or whatever the hell you call seven 34 hour days, was spent doing exactly what the ex-Inquisitor had told us to. The cogitator boffin patched himself into the planet's network and pulled down a ludicrous amount of information. It was then crammed into our poor, overloaded brains by the other two adepts while Sarge walked back and forth behind us all, hitting anyone who wasn't paying enough attention. It was a fairly horrible experience, but it definitely worked. By the end we knew how the planetary governments worked, the basic functions of the local tech, and far, far too much about Tau formal robes. We all blamed Nubby for that last subject.

When word hadn't come from Weebu by the end of the week Sarge told us to keep ourselves busy by applying the knowledge that'd been crammed into us. He and Doc brushed up on the local lingo with the infiltrator and the adepts did some cogitator work, just in case Weebu wasn't actually going to get us the info we needed. Tink and Twitch worked on ways to evade the pesky weapons scanners and drones the locals used for security and Nubby took Fumbles to the park.



The psyker had been having trouble with the alien minds around him, he could look into them, but couldn't really understand what he saw. At Nubby's suggestion he got some practical experience by sitting in the local park and invasively probing random xenos as they passed by. In retrospect this might have been highly unethical and dangerous, but no daemons were spawned during this practice and only two xenos suffered serious psychological damage, so we called it a success. Also Nubby came back with a fair bit of cash after these trips. We didn't ask how.

The start of our third week on the planet marked the end of Sarge's patience and a call was put into the ex-Inquisitor. None of us heard what the two men said to each other, but after quite a long discussion Sarge came back and told us that we'd receive the information soon and there was even a way we could speed the process up: Weebu had two sources of information that he hadn't tapped yet for one reason or another, if we checked them out it'd save him some time and effort.

One lead was a moderately large bounty hunting organization operating out of a nearby city, the other was merchant shipping conglomerate. The bounty hunters had supposedly been grabbing a few of the deserters that had wound up on this planet and the merchants might have records of seeing the rogue trader's ship. We decided to visit the bounty hunters first, it was a shorter drive, and they were more our sort of people.



In retrospect Weebu had probably intended us to infiltrate the bounty hunters or tap their comms or something else sneaky, not kick down their door and demand to know "where the deserters at". That was his fault for not being specific though.

Well, we didn't actually kick any doors down and our grammar was a bit better than that, but that was the general theme of our investigation.

Why bother prancing around to find out what they knew without them noticing? These were bounty hunters, they were one step above criminals and the only things they respected were money and violence, might as well talk to them in their own language. The only nod we made to subtlety was wearing the scan-proof trenchcoats Tink had spent so much time and money making. It was a very small nod too, more of a shrug actually, because the coats were mostly a way to conceal the fact that we were all armed to the teeth as opposed to hiding us. We figured that this planet's weapons laws

were all well and good for public safety, but they really shouldn't apply to us.

We got a list of the hunters' main hangouts and watering holes, put the adepts in charge of watching the comm network for incoming trouble, then went out to be inquisitive. The plan was simple, the infiltrator would go in first with Fumbles and Twitch to scope the place. The second they pinpointed the boss or called for backup Sarge, Doc, and Nubby would come in and explain to everyone that the difference between a nice bar and a corpse-filled ruin was whether we left with the information we wanted. Tink would stay in the truck and be ready to drive us away if things got too hot.

Everyone whose opinion mattered thought this was an excellent plan, and we all congratulated Sarge on being the most tactically skilled Interrogator any of us had met.

The first stop on our little information hunt was a rather shabby Tau building which was obviously the xenos equivalent of a shitty bar. Our advance party walked in and immediately picked out a big mother in xeno-armor and the slit-head he was arguing with as the guys in charge. Sarge got his game face on, stalked through the bar to the big guy, and demanded to know where the deserters were going. The big guy looked Sarge up and down, sneered, and told him to get lost, completely missing the fact that Nubby had circled behind him. Nubby's kick caught the bounty hunter in the groin and bent him double, Sarge's uppercut straightened him back out, and Doc's grab caught the Tau before he could leg it.

The entire bar went quiet as the burly noncom turned to glower at the struggling xenos and repeated his question. The Tau shot a glance at the unconscious man on the bar, obviously decided the odds weren't in his favor, and babbled something none of us could quite understand. Sarge had to stand there and glower for a bit longer while the xeno-adept listening in translated for him, causing the alien to start shaking and babble a few more things, which in turn made the glowering last longer. Eventually the adept just told us the xenos knew nothing about deserters and suggest we let him go before he had the Tau equivalent of a heart attack.

Sarge picked the Tau up by the front of his armor, hefted him into the air with one hand, and tossed him over the bar. Doc quietly told the groaning xenos to stay down while Sarge announced that he'd be going through the entire bar until someone gave him an answer. Everyone thought this over, then a weasely looking man bolted for the exit while a few others drew shock-



mauls.

Twitch pegged the runner with a chair and the rising bounty hunters found themselves looking down the barrels of half a dozen laspistols. Nubby grinned evilly and asked everyone to line up single file and have their answers ready.



Ten minutes later we left the bar, secure in the knowledge that bounty hunters could listen to reason and that no-one there had known anything useful. Well no-one maybe the runner or the big guy had known something, but they hadn't woken up by the time we finished and we didn't feel like waiting: we still had a lot of other bounty hunters left to inquisit.

The second bar went a lot like the first, except this time Sarge just led with a sucker-punch on the meanest looking guy there instead of bothering to ask first. Once again there were a few slow learners, but a little violence got the point across before we had to kill anyone. Hell, we actually patched up the idiot who tried to stab Sarge in the back after we got the knife out of his hand and the table Sarge had nailed it to. All in all it was a very smooth operation and we even scored a few names.

Word of our little tour was apparently traveling ahead of us, because at the third and fourth stops they actually had someone waiting at the door with a list of everything they knew. It wasn't much more than the names we already had and directions towards where they might be found, but Fumbles said no one was lying so we bought everyone a round on the way out. It was sort of gratifying to have everyone bowing and scraping, being the big fish and not having to fight for everything is pretty nice.

Shame the last group of bounty hunters weren't on the same page as the rest, but what can you expect from a bunch of feral xenos?

The last stop was the one everyone had been giving us directions towards, apparently it was where the big boys hung out. We pulled up to an odd Tau building which looked like a cross between a gambling den and a kennel and once again we found people waiting for us at the door. These guys weren't quivering in their boots like the rest had been, they were a pair of scarred brawler types and each was carrying a weird staff with hooked blades on the ends. They didn't try to keep us out, as we approached one of them came forward and said the boss was waiting to see us.

We accepted their invitation and entered the building through a hallway that had what we recognized as a weapons scanner in the middle. It was flanked by two Tau guards and a pair of ugly dog things with beaks, they

looked a bit like the critters that infested the Occurrence Border's hydroponics bays. At Sarge's signal everyone slowly pulled out their laspistols and removed their power packs. The pistols were set in a bin near the scanner and the packs went into the outer pockets on our trenchcoats, then we all filed through the scanner. The scanner made a few quiet beeps and the hounds growled at us, but the guards waved us through. Fumbles casually tapped his combead twice and Sarge smiled to himself.

The room at the end of the hallway was dark, smoky, and smelled alien. A bunch of bounty hunters, mostly slit-heads, were lounging around some low tables with a few more of the hound things. It looked to be a total of fifteen potential hostiles plus three xenos we could barely make out in the far corner. All the humanoids had one of those spiky staves at hand, but Twitch and Fumbles said that they didn't see any guns. Not the best odds, but we'd survived far worse.

Sarge grimly led us to the xenos and found himself glowering upwards as they rose to their feet. All three were green, half a meter taller than Sarge, and looked exactly like the picture we'd seen in training labeled Kroot Carnivore.

So no shit, there we were, in the middle of a bounty hunter den, having a staring contest with three Kroot Carnivores, I think it surprised the hell out of them when none of us even flinched. They were probably used to people running for the exit when they all loomed over them like that, or at least taking a step backwards. Honestly though, these guys didn't impress us. We'd worked for, killed, and in one case eaten scarier things than a bunch of taller-than-average xenos. Hell, they didn't even make the top twenty... smelled horrible though.

Sarge matched their glares and asked if they were the ones capturing deserters. One of the Kroot let out a cackling laugh, and in terrible Low Gothic said they were and asked what we were going to do about it. It'd be cool to say Sarge and the xeno then exchanged some witty banter, trading threats and clues and all that. Unfortunately Sarge's Tau was about as bad as bad as the xenos' gothic, so most questions had to be repeated three or four times in both languages and eventually they just called over one of the human bounty hunters to act as a translator. Everyone kept glowering and



talking in their most threatening voices though, nobody was going to let something as trivial as a massive language and cultural barrier get in the way of their intimidation attempt.



Once the translator was in place things started flowing a little more smoothly: everyone was able to question and threaten each other to their heart's content. Sarge asked who was paying the deserters' bounty, the Kroot on his right said it was someone on the neighboring pro-Tau world and asked if we'd like to meet him. Sarge asked why the bounty hunters would do that for us, prompting some more cackling laughter from Kroot and an assurance that their buyer was always in the market for more guardsmen, they'd even split the bounty with us if we came quietly.

While Sarge processed the threat Doc cut in, denying that we were guardsmen and explaining that we were fellow bounty hunters. After another bout of laughter the biggest xenos walked over to

him and inhaled deeply. If we weren't guardsmen, he asked, why did we smell like lasguns, explosives, MREs, and paranoia. Doc fumbled for an answer and the Kroot went on to suggest that maybe he was mistaken about what those smells meant, maybe they meant we were a dance troupe, or a bunch of ecclesiarchs, or a the Inquisition.

In retrospect it was a joke, about on par with asking "who do you think you are, the bloody Inquisition?", but with the language barrier and everything else we didn't really get it. Everyone kept their poker faces though, except for Doc that is. Between the sinister laugh the Kroot have and the two and a half meter carnivorous alien towering over him, the medic interpreted this as an accusation and panicked.

This wasn't some raw recruit's panic though, he didn't scream "OH EM-PEROR THEY'RE GOING TO KILL US" and run for the exit. Doc calmly, while holding eye contact with the Kroot, put his hands through the bottomless side pockets in his trenchcoat, gripped the hot-shot lasgun slung across his chest, and blew the xenos in half.

Doc's, er, outburst caught everyone but Twitch by just as much surprise as the bounty hunters, luckily they hadn't been expecting a fight or even thought we were armed. Three cheers for the primitive xenos notion of gun control, it made everything so much safer for those of us who ignored it.

Our little interview came to an end and the room practically exploded around us. Doc walked his fire over the second Kroot while Twitch, who'd

been expecting this from the moment he entered the room, perforated the third. That wasn't quite enough to put them down, but they only managed a staggering pair of swipes that Sarge and Nubby both dodged before the second volley finished them. As the rest of the bounty hunters rose to their feet and seized their weapons all of us ruined the scan-proof coats Tink had made for us by hip-firing through them.

The only reason it wasn't a complete slaughter was that a few of the smarter ones ran instead of trying to rush us. We gunned down the bird-dog things first, then shifted fire towards the stupider bounty hunters as they closed. Between four heavy lasguns, a pair of pistols, and Fumbles body-puppeting one of the few humans. none of them managed to lay a hand on us. Doc did catch a thrown beer bottle to the face though, but it missed his eyes and Nubby assured him his girlfriend wouldn't mind a few small facial scars.

While we all brought guns to a knife fight Tink got the truck's engine running and the cogitator adept commed us. He warned us that the police had dispatched a pair of cars to check out the noise and recommended getting the hell out of there. We were almost to the truck when the a police skimmer landed across the road from it and two officers, a tau and a human, stepped out of it and launched a pair of drones into the air.

Tink evaluated his chances of outrunning their flying car with his rental ground-truck, then poked his plasma gun out through the driver window and aimed it at the rear of their car. Now at this point we'd all been through a few lectures on Tau technology and understood the general concept of drones, but everyone was still a bit fuzzy on the specifics. For instance Tink couldn't immediately spot the difference between a camera drone sent to check out a crime scene, and a sniper drone sent to provide overwatch for two isolated officers. About a second after the overcharged plasma bolt left his gun, that difference was made clear to him as his world turned into a haze of blue light and burning heat.

The sniper drone must have either been set to automatically try to disarm and suppress hostiles or wasn't smart enough to aim for the gunner instead of their weapon. Instead of blowing Tink's head off, it had put a burst right through his plasma gun as he charged it for a second shot. Now, most plasma guns are sturdy things, they're designed to keep working for centuries after all, so instead of exploding in a giant fireball and killing Tink, it just started venting superheated gas through the two new cooling ports it had acquired.





From Tink's point of view this was hardly an improvement: the angle of the shot meant that one plasma geyser was spraying directly upwards into his face and the other was aimed at his lap.

To make matters worse he was sitting in an enclosed space with those two geysers and couldn't employ the usual plasma gunner tactic of just dropping the thing. Not if he ever wanted to have kids anyway. So in a panic to get away from the burning pain the techie did the only thing he

could think of, he threw the plasma gun as hard as he could out the window.

On the other side of the street the two police officers were trying to get back to their feet after their car exploded behind them. Their ringing ears heard a shot, a scream, a growing roaring noise, a second shot, and a thunk. Then the plasma gun, venting in four directions now, landed between them.

We exited the building to see two screaming police officers trying to scramble away from... something.



Imagine a leaking balloon or punctured gas canister, picture the random way it spins and skips around. Now imagine that instead of harmless gas it's spraying blue fire. Everyone stopped and watch for a second, just trying to figure out what they hell was going on. Then Tink screamed at us to watch for the drones.

The drones must have been equally confused by the bouncing plasma gun, because both of them were just hovering over the scene, making them easy targets. We shot them down, started piling into the truck, then out again, then in again, then out again. Eventually we managed to pull the half-blind Tink out of the driver seat, replace him with the infiltrator, retrieve the now sputtering plasma gun from the between the moaning officers, and drive away before any more police showed up.

As we drove the cogitator adept commed and told us he'd spotted a bulletin for our truck's transponder code, but not its description thank the Emperor. So as we drove away at exactly the speed limit and Doc saw to Tink's burns, the techie had to walk Twitch through yanking out our transponder and replacing it with the one Nubby had gotten for us during one of his little walks in the park. Once the switch was made we pulled up next to another truck, tossed the transponder into their bed, then drove in the opposite direction at the next intersection. A few minutes later the adept confirmed that we'd shaken pursuit and we were clear to return to base.

Sarge breathed a sigh of relief and began filling the base team in on everything that happened and asked what they knew about the planet the Kroot had threatened to send us to. While he talked Tink sat on the floor and grumpily poked at his busted plasma gun. Fumbles tried to cheer him up and only got a spanner chucked at his head for the trouble.

The moment we arrived at our warehouse Weebu commed us and requested that we stop by his office, preferably before we did any more damage to his city, planet, or police force. Given the timing it was obvious he had someone watching us, so there was no point trying to pretend we were busy, or dead, or not on the planet. We got everyone into our backup vehicle, just in case the truck was still hot, and went to get yelled at by a fat old man in a dress.



The ex-Inquisitor wasn't doing the whole peace, serenity, and interracial tolerance tolerance thing today. The second we entered he was on his feet and barking like the enraged bulldog of an inquisitor he must have been before all the soft xenos culture went to his head. Sarge took the lead and weathered the tirade with his usual stoicism, until Weebu shifted from insulting our idea of subtlety to blaming us for the murder of seven people. Sarge firmly denied doing any such thing, playing the serious Interrogator to the hilt, but the effect was spoiled by Twitch and Nubby both adding that "they started it" and "it's not murder if it's xenos anyway, it's like pest control or sumfin." Boy, and we'd thought he was pissed before that.

The tirade went on for a while, other high points included him accusing Tink of attacking two police officers, which Tink firmly denied. Phrases like "YOU BLEW UP THEIR CAR AND HOSED THEM WITH PLASMA" were countered with "it was an accident", "I didn't know they kept the fuel there", and "it's their fault for having the flying saucepan shoot my plasma gun." The real clincher was when Weebu listed off the various injuries the officers had suffered and Tink replied that HE'D lost his favorite gun, his eyebrows, AND his best pair of pants. That choked up the ex-Inquisitor and started a downward slide from rage to depression.

When he was finally calm, or morose, enough to stop shouting, our adepts stepped in and explained the information we'd gathered.

The change in Weebu's attitude when we told him where the bounty hunters were taking guardsmen wasn't huge, but it was noticeable. He started typing at his cogitator and, in between complaints about how no one under the age of a hundred and fifty understands what patience or subtlety are, asked us to repeat the information. He then asked for recorded evidence and

testimony from Fumbles that the Kroot hadn't been lying. There was a lot of typing and muttering after that and the ex-Inquisitor seemed to forget about us for a while.



Eventually he called a man, asked him to send a report, told him his report was wrong, then told him to get his ass into the office. A pale analyst type came in and nearly had a heart attack when he saw the ten of us in there with his boss. He nearly had a second heart attack when Weebu introduced us as "a bunch of psychotic man-children from the Inquisition", but rallied quickly when he was asked several socio-political questions about a planet with a name that sounded like a venereal disease.

Honestly, none of us really tried that hard to follow the discussion. It seemed pretty important and all that, but we didn't know any of the background and couldn't pronounce half the names

involved. We all just stood there, hoping the adepts were listening and keeping our mouths shut. It sounded like it was a real big deal that the planet in question had recruited bounty hunters and actually wanted deserters to come to their world though.

The discussion ended with all the participants triumphantly agreeing on some point and the analyst being sent to get ten of something. Weebu turned to Sarge, assumed the sort of fruity voice he used when he was talking about xenos culture stuff, and thanked us for visiting his planet. He appreciated our effort in the investigation, requested that we share any information we uncovered, and hoped we'd visit his humble office next time we were in the system.

Sarge just stared blankly for a second, the conversation had left him behind about half a klick back. He hesitantly agreed that "Yes, the planet was very nice and this office was well decorated," then continued standing at attention. Weebu signed, dropped the smile and fruity voice, then told us to "Get the hell off my planet. Thanks for the intel, good luck with your mission, don't forget to write, but GET. OFF. MY. PLANET." The analyst came back in at this point and handed over a briefcase then the ranting ex-Interrogator listed all the things he'd be giving us: a full copy of their data on the deserters, a dossier on the planet, falsified IDs for all of us, and even tickets on the first commercial transport heading to that planet, all so we could leave as soon as possible. In two hours in fact. Tick Tock, don't let the door hit you on the ass.

Sarge saluted the man as he stopped for breath, thanked him for his cooperation, and led us out through the back door. All in all it went a lot better than we'd expected and the free tickets were an especially nice touch, they'd apparently get us to Syphilis, or Sylphis or however you were supposed to pronounce it, in less than a week. Honestly it was the most stylish way any of us had ever been kicked out of a place, we even spotted some government agents redirecting traffic to make sure we got to the shuttleport with time to spare. Nubby suggested we try for the same thing on the next planet, if we kept this up we'd be able to pocket half of our operating budget without anyone noticing.

The shuttle ride up was nice and relaxing, with big comfortable seats and no obnoxious questions about what was in our bags. We boarded the ship without anyone even asking why Doc looked like he'd been in a bar fight or Tink's face was covered with burn-salve, and were allowed to carry our own bags to a series of cabins reserved for our private use. Weebu sure knew how to get someone off a planet without incident.

It's a commonly known fact, at least if you've suffered through classes on Tau technology, that Tau ships are not as good as Imperial ones. This is partially because they are pathetic xenos and everything they produce is inferior to the honest labors of humans, but mostly because they stay the hell out of the warp when they travel and wind up going much slower than an imperial vessel. Of course it's a much less well known fact that this makes travelling in one much, much more pleasant. Let me tell you, out of the commissar's hearing, that any trooper with the sense he was born with would gladly take a longer than usual void trip over having their soul devoured by daemons.

There were no bad dreams, no bleeding statues, no wordless whispers, and no minor daemonic horrors clawing at the sealed bulkhead to cargobay G19. On top of that the ship was clean and well lit, nothing spontaneously exploded or shot lighting at us in the hallways, and if the gravity was a little light, at least it all pointed the same direction. It was the best void trip we'd ever been on, at least for the first two days.

We'd been entertaining ourselves in the usual ways and generally avoiding



the ship's crew and other passengers. Tink tried to fix his plasma gun, Doc tried to fix Tink, Twitch locked himself in one of the bathrooms and refused to come out, and Sarge helped the adepts go through the data we'd been provided. Nubby kept making trips to the rest of the ship though, usually taking Fumbles with him, and when a nervous crewmember asked Sarge to please keep them both confined to their rooms, he started asking the infiltrator to visit the rest of the ship. We found out why on the fourth day, when, after everyone spent the third day feeling alternately pissy, depressed, and nauseous, Doc took a good look at Fumbles.

On the list of phrases you never want to hear, "Why is our psyker going through withdrawal?" is pretty high up there.

Fumbles was a pretty good telepathic psyker, but he had a sort of problem. Actually he had a few problems, but the biggest one was that he had couldn't really turn his powers off. The psyker tended to broadcast, at a very low level, whatever emotions he was currently feeling to everyone within a twenty meter radius. This made him a blast at parties, but could cause some problems at other times, especially if you were stuck for long periods in that radius.

When we'd first met the poor guy he had a sort of depressive feedback loop going, but he'd been doing much better since he'd partnered up with us, we put it down to positive reinforcement and our squad's fun loving demeanor. In retrospect though, the psyker had really started cheering up after he began hanging out with Nubby all

the time.

Fumbles apologized for making everyone miserable, but said that Nubby had promised to get him more 'antidepressants' soon. Judging by the way everyone's head ached and entire body itched now, Doc was reasonably certain that whatever he'd been taking was a little stronger than an antidepressant. When Nubby was pried out of Twitch's bathroom, where he'd fled when Doc first started looking at Fumbles, Sarge hauled him out into the hallway and had words with him.

The poison of choice turned out to be Gladstones, a moderately strong upper and banned from use by serving guardsmen under section 114b of the Astra Militarum's Laws and Ordinances. Possession was five lashes and a month in the brig, distribution was thirty and ten for the first offence, summary execution for the second. It wasn't exactly the worst thing he



could've been giving the little guy, but they still had some pretty nasty lows, especially considering some of their withdrawal effects could last for months.

Unfortunately there was not a thriving black market on the Tau merchant vessel. Doc did his best with what he had, but saying the rest of that trip was unpleasant doesn't really do it justice.

After a few more days spent going through withdrawal-by-proxy, we arrived at the planet that we'd agreed to just call pro-Tau world. As we got off the shuttle planetside we realized that Weebu's assistance only applied to getting us off of his planet, not onto this one: several official inspector types were waiting by the exit and were very interested in what was inside everyone's bags.

There were similar weapons laws on this world as the last one, but this time we didn't have someone in the local government covering for us. Sarge desperately tried to think of a way to get around the checkpoint before the rest of the passengers got off and left us standing there alone and obvious. Unfortunately, between the time pressure and a pounding headache that was definitely not his fault, the best Sarge could think of was to ask our strung-out psyker to make the guards "forget about us or something." Fumbles gave it a shot, but lived up to his name: both us and the checkpoint guards spent the next few minutes trying to remember what we were doing there, why we all felt vaguely embarrassed, and who the miserable looking man sitting on the floor in the middle of us was.

Eventually everyone remembered what was going on and the guards asked us what the holdup was. Sarge picked up his bags with a sigh and quietly asked us if we'd rather lose all of our weapons or get in a shooting war with the local government. The vote was three to two in favor of surrendering our weapons when the adepts, who hadn't even been asked for an opinion, suggested we let them sort things out. We grudgingly let them take the lead, none of us could see any way that talking or cogitator expertise could get us around a planet's weapons laws, but at least it'd let us put off losing our toys or being shot at for a while longer.

Needless to say, we were incredibly surprised when the guards waved us through the checkpoint without an inspection a few minutes later.

The brainy, talky side of the team was rather smug about getting us through with our gear intact, but they didn't rub our noses in it too hard. The old diplomat never did explain how he'd talked the inspectors around, when we asked he just vaguely claimed it was one of the "tools of his trade"



and refused to bore us with an explanation. We accepted this non-answer and Sarge asked, on behalf of all us guardsmen and himself as the team lead, what we could do to thank them for saving our bacon. They suggested that it might be nice to have an actual safehouse, with plumbing and heating and everything, on this planet. You know, instead of camping out inside a disused warehouse filled with mines and razorwire again. It was a bit much to ask from us, especially Twitch, but never let it be said that guardsmen don't understand the concept of gratitude.

Despite our previous experience, this place was harder to get used to than the last. The planet was the most vocal Tau supporter in the cluster, only the odd political situation that forced the whole cluster to hang together kept it from joining the empire outright. As it was though, the locals annoyed their neighbors by constantly telling everyone that the Imperium would doom them all and becoming part of the Tau empire was their only hope.

These guys were obviously trying way too hard to be a Sept, it was probably embarrassing for regular Tau to visit here. The signs were in Tau, almost all the buildings were Tau architecture, and you couldn't walk five meters in city we holed up in without seeing posters and billboards about the Greater Good. The real kicker though, was that there seemed to be a lot less of the actual xenos themselves here, it was all these weird humans with glazed expressions and stupid hairstyles.

Surprisingly though it wasn't that hard for us to fit in with the locals. You see, the entire place, from the shuttleport, to the streets, to the bloody corner store, was filled with ex-guardsmen.

Seriously, either Weebu hadn't actually been looking for the deserters over those two weeks, or the guys who got sent here were complete idiots. All you had to do was look out the bloody window and there they were, wearing xenos clothing and with the same stupid smiles and haircuts as the rest of the locals, but it was just so incredibly obvious they were guardsmen. Hell, even if you didn't know what a guardsman looked like, there were posters every few meters inviting "political refugees" to earn citizenship by signing up with the Guey Vase Washo of Syphilis. Or something like that, none of us could pronounce the bloody moonspeak to save our lives. We just called it the pro-Tau PDF.

So the local PDF was pretty aggressive about recruitment, especially if you were a guard deserter. There were the posters and vid-ads to start with, then there were the pamphlets everywhere, and the worst part was these



random people who would walk up to us and ask if we'd enlisted yet. Despite all that, it really wasn't as bad as being on an Imperial world during a serious recruitment drive: for one thing no one snatched us off the street, drugged us, and threw us into a shuttle for one-way trip to the nearest munitorium world. It was still annoying as hell though, it was almost impossible to get the random people to leave you alone if they thought you were a "refugee". We wound up putting a lot more effort into disguising ourselves on that planet than anywhere else we'd ever been.

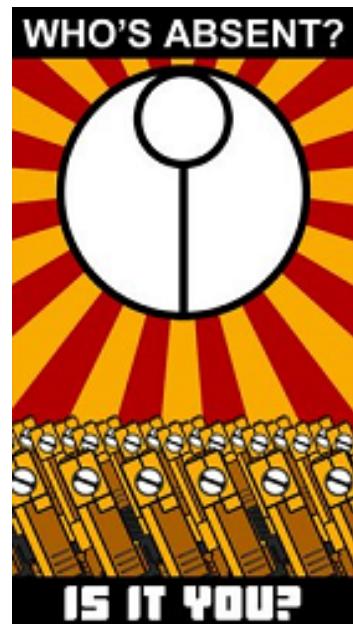
Anyway, we were pretty certain that most of the deserters had wound up on this planet, but it was hard to see why. It had been a very long trip to get out here and even if this planet was currently doing a recruitment drive to fight off whatever was raiding the cluster, it was unlikely that they'd been doing it back when all the guardsmen had originally deserted.

We'd started with the "what" and "when", and now we had the "where", but the "why" and "who" still evaded us.

Sarge spent a lot of time with the adepts chewing over the data we'd been given by Weebu and the stuff our cogitator adept started pulling off the local comm network. It was slow going and we all knew there was a quicker option, but none of us really wanted to try joining the PDF. Inserting ourselves into an entire army of well-armed hostiles didn't seem like a good idea.

While Sarge did actual work and Doc tried to deal with the ongoing effects of Fumbles' withdrawal, Twitch did his usual thing and Tink kept trying to fix his plasma gun. The techie had met his match though, he just didn't have the tools or knowledge to repair the gaping holes the sniper drone had put in it. Watching his expression as he asked Sarge for permission and money to visit a local weapons expert was pretty entertaining: you could tell it actually caused him physical pain to admit he needed help. The best part was that he even tried to make us promise not to tell the cogboys back on the ship, we lied to make him feel better.

The only consolation for Tink was that therewasn't a single ordained tech-priest on the planet, he only had to ask for assistance from one of the



shorter, fatter variety of local xenos.

The problem was that while earth caste Tau were wizards with plasma, they also tended to worry about tedious things like weapons laws. It took a lot of work to find a disreputable armory, eating up a lot of the cogitator adept's valuable time as well as Nubby's valueless variety, but find one they did and not too far away to boot. Sarge gave Tink his cash, and the techie bundled his highly-illegal weapon into a scanproof bag then went out with Nubby and the infiltrator to have some serious tech-heresy committed on his plasma gun.



The rest of us weren't exactly waiting with bated breath, but when the away team returned everyone came out of their various corners to see how they'd done. Tink breathlessly informed us that he had bad news and good news, the bad news was that it'd take at least a week to fix his gun, but the good news was that the repair was being done for free. Well not exactly free per-se, but as a sort of bonus thrown in with his other

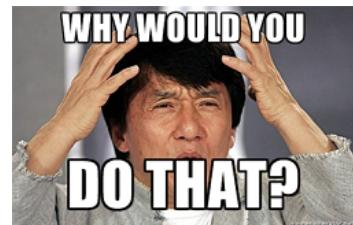
purchase. When the rest of us refused to ask leading questions about his "other purchase" the techie triumphantly opened a shielded crate and pulled out a shiny new Tau drone and control system.

Tink was rather disappointed when none of us gushed enthusiasm over his new toy and got defensive when Doc asked how much it had cost. Sarge took a long look at the complex device, thought about how tight fingered the Tau were when it came to their fancy technology, and growled at Tink to answer the damned question. The techie hesitantly admitted that he hadn't really looked that hard at the price tag, "I mean it had so many features, why get hung up on something small like price," but assured us that it had fit perfectly into the budget Sarge had given him. Doc winced as he recalled how Sarge had just handed over their briefcase full of xenos money and told Tink to take what he needed, then led the retreat.

As reamings went, the one Tink got for spending three quarters of our mission's budget was pretty nasty. Nubby and the infiltrator weren't spared it either, Sarge said that between the three of them they should have had at least one functioning brain. Eventually he wound down and plaintively asked if there was any chance of getting a refund, voluntarily or otherwise, but all three idiots said the black-market armory had a fairly strict no returns policy and some really heavy security. In the end Sarge just put them in charge of making the cash back.

Looking back, that decision was where things started to really go off the rails.

Nubby was fairly good at making money, but the competent local police force made it hard. He and the infiltrator did what they could, but weren't making much headway and Tink was flat out useless. He kept running off to check on his plasma gun and talk to the earth caste weapon-smith, who he'd decided was female. The rest of us couldn't tell one xenos gender from the other, assuming they only had two that is, and found this even more revolting than his usual behavior around female tech-priests. It kept him out of trouble though and she/he/it gave Tink several lessons on using his fancy new scouting drone.



So anyway, Nubby and the infiltrator were having trouble refilling our budget and in the end they asked for help from the rest of us. Well, to be more specific they asked for help from Doc, who was currently acting as Fumbles' Sargeally-Appointed-Guardian. Nubby claimed he and the psyker had a good scam set up on the last planet, it involved passwords, numbers, and the xenos banking system and didn't require any violence at all. All he needed to get it running again for Doc to release Fumbles from his medical clutches, despite the fact that the little guy was still suffering fairly badly from withdrawal.

Doc considered the situation carefully, weighing his patient's current condition against the team's need for funds and how nice it would be to get out of the psyker's aura for a while. In the end he extracted a promise from Nubby not to give Fumbles any more Gladstones, then sent the little guy off with the rest of them when they left the safe house the next morning. If he'd listened carefully he might have heard Nubby telling Fumbles that Doc wouldn't mind if they got a little pick-me-up as long as it wasn't Gladstones, and they could even make a little profit while they were at it.

Yeah, so that's how four members of our crack Inquisitorial investigation team got arrested for trafficking prohibited substances and sent to Ethical Re-education Camp.

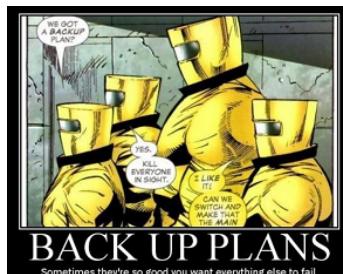
It took a while for the rest of us to figure out what had happened. The first hint was when the Tau weaponsmith called us, Emperor knows why the idiot gave that xenos our comm codes, and asked why Tink hadn't shown up to pick up his plasma gun. Sarge thought she actually sounded concerned and made a note to have a chat with the techie about the birds, bees, and Inquisition's stance on fraternization with xenos, then promised to comm Tink and see what was keeping him.

Tink's comm was active, but he wasn't the one who answered it. One of the locals who was too stupid to understand Gothic babbled at Sarge until

he handed the comm over to the xeno-expert adept. The adept exploded in a flood of Tau, ignoring Sarge's questioning looks and waving the other adepts over to listen in.



rested for and Twitch suggested that Fumbles' addiction was actually part of a complex xenos conspiracy to split us up and pick us off like this. Sarge told both the troopers to stuff it and called an emergency planning session.



in together, probably because it'd get us out of their hair sooner, and Doc was in favor of figuring out a way to infiltrate without getting brainwashed ourselves. Twitch was the only one who wanted to mount a rescue operation, but his whole plan was to just blow up as many PDF buildings as possible, pull our guys out of the rubble, then declare the whole mission a success. Sarge made that Plan B.

In the end Sarge sided with Doc and we set up an observation post near

There was a lot of talking, a bit of shouting, and a general air of extreme panic; Sarge knew what it looked like when people were doing their job and provided some very real assistance by keeping Doc and Twitch from asking what all the noise was about. When the call finally ended, in our favor from the sound of it, and the adepts stopped hyperventilating, they informed us that Tink's combead was currently being held by the pro-Tau PDF. It would be returned to him with the rest of his gear after he finished basic re-education and became a full member of the PDF. Sarge facepalmed.

A little cogitator work established that the rest of their comms were in the same location and turned up the arrest report. Doc swore loudly and venomously when he noticed what they'd been ar-

The available options were limited, either we busted them out before the xenos messed with their brains or rolled with this like it was our plan to infiltrate the PDF all along. If we went with the former we needed to figure out a way to pull it off without blowing our cover to hell and bringing an entire army down on our heads. If we went with the latter we needed to decide whether to all go in together or figure out a way to get in and make contact after the idiots went through their brainwashing. The adepts suggested going

the PDF's main base in the city. The basic theory was that we'd keep an eye open for ways to infiltrate and otherwise just wait for the latest batch of recruits to finish their brainwashing and get dumped there. Once we spotted some new faces in the base we could look harder for our boys and see if they were in any condition to help us get in.

In this case Observation Post was mil-speak for a caff-shop with a good view of the base's entrance. We spent two weeks taking turns sipping bad recaff and pretending to work on data slates while we watched incoming traffic. Luckily we didn't have to pay too much attention, the cogitator adept had taken ownership of Tink's drone and sent it up to the top of a neighboring building.

Honestly the drone saved us a lot of effort, it did most of the tedious watching and told us when interesting stuff was about to happen, all we had to do was be there to double check things. We didn't even have to worry about it being spotted, the thing had this wonderful little stealth field built in, you couldn't see it at all if it didn't move. We considered forgiving Tink for paying so much for it, then remembered why we were in our current situation and how unbearably awkward it had been collecting his gun and explaining his disappearance to the Tau weaponsmith.

After two weeks of watching and some careful hacking from the cogitator adept we had a few ideas for getting into the base. The plans ranged from simple, to complex, and their success chances varied based on whether our teammates on the inside would be able, or willing, to help us get in, so we prepped for them all and waited to see how things would turn out. When a load of fresh recruits finally arrived and we spotted the sawed off form of Nubby jumping out of a truck we got ready to move, and tried our best to make contact.

Unfortunately it was damned hard to get a message into the base and it seemed like fresh recruits weren't allowed to leave. We were on the edge of trying the horribly bad idea of calling their sure-to-be-monitored combeads and talking in code or something, when a senior looking PDF trooper walked right up to us in the caf-shop.

Twitch nearly shot our infiltrator, sometimes it was easy to forget that we had a teammate who was supposed to be a master of disguise.

According to our infiltrator the locals weren't anything special when it came to brainwashing. All four of them had come through the process intact,



mostly, and even had had their gear returned. They had duties to perform in the base and were under a little observation for senior PDF members, but should be able to get us in without much trouble as long as we acted like guardsmen. He didn't think this would be hard for us.

The next day the infiltrator returned to us with some of the tau-ish flak armor and tan fatigues that the locals wore, as well as some military IDs that only needed a little doctoring. He didn't even need to provide authentic PDF weapons, apparently until you were issued a fancy Tau gun you were allowed to keep whatever you were originally trained with or switch for a nice local-made lasgun. The only thing that couldn't be carried right in the front door was our few heavy weapons Twitch's stuff, no matter how open minded you were it was hard to ignore twenty five kilos of high explosives. Luckily, the infiltrator claimed he could get at least one scan-shielded bag in if we needed it.



We sent Sarge's nade launcher, Tink's stupid plasma gun, and as many explosives as could still be fit in the bag ahead, then finalized or plans with the adepts. They'd be staying in the safehouse and monitoring us of course, but the problem was that the PDF had some sort of fancy Tau jamming field over their base. It blocked any unauthorized communications, so while the adepts could watch and plan, they couldn't talk to us or provide real assistance if shit went south. Our theory was that they'd just sit, collect data, and keep working on figuring out why the deserters were here while we were inside. If they found something important they'd and send Tink's drone to find us, if we saw one of our targets we'd send the infiltrator out to find them.

Our plan, as it was, finalized we suited up and just walked right in the front gate of the PDF base.

So no shit there we were, undercover in the middle of a bunch of xenos-loving traitors, and the main thing we noticed was that the place was almost exactly the same as a normal guard camp. Sure it was a little cleaner and there was a bunch of Tau tech lying around, but if you ignored the fact that all the officers were short, blue, and had drones hovering around them, it all felt completely normal. Everyone was doing the usual chores or drills, the gear was practically identical, and the food wasn't even better. It was a wonder that these people had even bothered to desert, they were still in the bloody army weren't they?

The first thing we did after entering was collect our teammates and verify that they were in as good condition as the infiltrator had said. Tink and

Nubby were absolutely fine, in fact they'd fallen right back into their usual roles when in base. Which is to say Tink was in the armory disassembling a Tau gun that he shouldn't have had access to and Nubby was sitting on an impressive cache of stolen or bartered goods in a disused supply shed. Nubby claimed that if he could find a buyer with actual cash he was halfway to refilling our budget.

Neither of them were trying particularly hard to act brainwashed, whoever was the brains of this operation wasn't working counter-intelligence. After they established that you were a guard deserter they stopped looking for anything else and welcomed you in with open arms, after that it was just a matter of parroting all the Greater Good stuff. You didn't even need to parrot it well or speak the language properly, if you screwed it up they just assumed you were an idiot.

Speaking of idiots, neither of the guardsmen had bothered keeping track of Fumbles, claiming that he wasn't in any shape to cause trouble. This didn't sound very encouraging, but Sarge refrained from slugging them and we all went to find our psyker before he did something warpy.

We found Fumbles sitting in a circle of PDF troopers and singing, if you'll believe it. He was wearing the same dopey expression as the rest of them and a sort of idiotic happiness radiated off of him. He happily introduced us to his new friends and asked if we wanted to lead the next song. Sarge eyed the large group of smiling armed men, then politely declined and asked if he could borrow Fumbles for a while. No one put up a fuss as we dragged the psyker away and we all kept smiling and nodding until we got around a corner, where Sarge started quietly dressing down Tink and Nubby.

Doc took a good look at Fumbles and declared him to be low on sleep, low on protein, and high on something that was probably a Tau drug tailored to help with withdrawal symptoms. He claimed that a little talking, some basic care, and a slow reduction of the detox drug, the bottle of which he took immediate possession of, would sort the psyker out in a few days. For now though, it was probably best if he stayed in Nubby's storeroom when he wouldn't be missed.

Our team finally collected we sat around our dopey psyker and tried to plan our next step. Our end goals were still the same: find out why so much trouble had been put into getting the deserters out here to join the PDF, find out who the Tau that had led them was, kill him and every senior defecting officer as well as the rogue trader if he was still around. In the short term



all we could think to do was fit into the routine in the base and use every bit of free time we got to ask discrete questions. We probably wouldn't get anything from most of the troopers or the Tau officers, but if we got access to the command building at the far end of the base we might find someone who knew something.



Over the next week we mostly learned how easy basic training was after you'd already done it once and how awesome everyone thought the Greater Good was, but there were a few useful things mixed in. We managed to spot the Traitor General we'd seen on our last mission leaving the command building one night, learned that there were occasional meetings with a big-league Tau politician in said command building, and found out that the Tau Fire Caste who led this PDF army was a loan from the Empire and a personal friend of the politician. In fact they were so friendly that a team of Fire Warriors under his command was permanently assigned to protect the politician. We suspected that the diplomat was the cloaked xenos who'd led the desertion plot, but weren't quite certain.

We also had a decent lead on the rogue trader. Mostly the camp was all smiles and songs, but occasionally the fresh recruits that were dropped off didn't fit in. They weren't put through a second brainwashing or quietly

executed, like they would've been back in the guard, instead they were put on a shuttle that left once a week and took them to a "mercenary outfit" outside the cluster. It sounded fishy as all hell, but some careful scanning by Fumbles proved the the officers really believed it. So if there really was a mercenary company we figured it was probably owned by the rogue trader that'd been part of the desertion plot. It's a well known fact that you can't get much more mercenary than a rogue trader.



So if the mercenary was really the rogue trader, there were only three things that we still needed to figure out. First, was the location of the remaining traitorous guard officer, he was just a major, but he still needed to die. Second, we needed proof that the Tau diplomat was the cloaked xenos so we could be sure we'd gotten the whole set. Finally, we still had no idea what the hell this was all about.

As far as everyone we talked to knew the army's only purpose was to protect the planet from whoever was raiding the cluster. This sounded fairly reasonable, especially considering that even more raids had been reported over the months of our mission and gotten all the civies worked up, but we knew it was at least partially bullshit. The desertions had started happening way before the raids, so there was obviously something else going on, even if we were too stupid to figure out what it was. Luckily we'd brought some smarter people along just for this sort of thing.



We sent out the infiltrator with all of our data and the adepts did a little digging. Mostly they looked into the Tau politician, since he was both the public face of the whole operation and the suspected mastermind behind the desertions. According to them he was an off-worlder who'd come from the Tau empire and was one of the guys yelling the loudest for the cluster to join or ally with them. As far as us guardsmen could tell this made him an asshole, but didn't prove he was our guy or explain what was going on, the diplomatic adept insisted it all made sense though.

In the end he had to dumb it down a little before we really followed the situation, and by "dumb it down" I mean he sent us a vid of him acting out with freakin sock puppets. There was a blue sock that was supposed to be the Tau politician and a tan one that acting as the rest of the cluster's political leaders.

He seemed to be enjoying the fact that we couldn't easily leave the PDF base and throttle him.

Hi I am the Tau politician guy who might also be the secret mastermind behind the deserters



Hi politician guy, I'm all the other politicians in the cluster. We are scared because raiders have been attacking our planets.

I think we should join all voluntarily join the Tau empire for their protection

We don't know, we like being independent and worry that the either empire will change our way of life and start a war

Well we have to do something to protect ourselves, there's no point avoiding a war if we all die to raiders.

Hmmm, if our armies aren't holding of the raiders and we have to join an empire, the Imperium is bigger and scarier.

I don't think they would protect you, the Imperium doesn't care about anyone but humans and I hear the raiders are all humans, maybe they even work for the Imperium!

That's worrying, but we still don't want to join the Tau empire

Well I can't force you to join the Tau empire, but what if you accepted their assistance arming and training your armies? You'd be able to protect yourselves and there wouldn't be any big Tau Empire military bases to provoke the Imperium into war

That doesn't sound much better than our own armies, and it would give the Tau empire a lot of influence over us

No it IS much, much better. With superior Tau weaponry and training your armies can easily handle the raiders. See, look at my

army here.

That army looks impressive, but we still aren't sure it would do anything to stop the raiders.

„Watch, if the raiders show up near us, we'll kick them back off the planet and chase them out of the system.

Hmm if that works we might listen to you about forming a partial alliance with the Tau Empire. Goodbye now.

„HAHAHA, My master plan will make them all into slaves of the evil Tau empire.

So getting our critical mission data via sock puppets was demeaning as hell, but it got the point across better than the giant documents they'd originally sent. When the show was finished we sat down together in Nubby's store room and chewed the situation over, trying to figure out what all the political info meant for us and what our next step should be.

Sarge wound up deciding to go with Twitch's current interpretation of events, which for once seemed fairly reasonable. His theory was that if the politician was the one who'd orchestrated the desertion and dragged them all the way out here, he was probably behind the raids too. What's the point of having an army if it doesn't have anyone to fight? This theory neatly placed all the blame on one person, so if push came to shove we could just kill him and call it a day.

Of course, this all sort of hinged on us the politician being the cloaked xenos, and Oak was probably not going to accept "we were pretty sure" as proof of mission completion. Furthermore, when we shared our general plan with the adepts they insisted that we prove that the politician was behind the raiders instead of just killing him. They said that, given how many people had died in the raids, it would be a huge blow against the Tau empire if we could prove they, or at least their supporters, were behind everything. This sounded like the sort of thing that the Inquisition was supposed to do, so Sarge reluctantly agreed and we started planning ways to spy on the meetings in the command building instead of just blowing it up. Twitch was disappointed.

Sneaking into the command building turned out to be much easier than it'd originally looked like. Sure, there were Tau guards on the doors and most of the staffers were slit-heads too, but the place was cleaned and maintained



by the recruits. At first we'd thought that it would be necessary to get ourselves on the duty roster to get inside and started figuring out how to arrange than, but then we found out the guards weren't checking IDs and apparently couldn't really tell one human from another. Hell, it seemed like their only real purpose was to keep anyone from entering the building armed and they did that using a simple door scanner. A quick check even revealed that it was the same type of scanner we'd already fooled multiple times with scan-shielded bags and clothing.

So yea, it was pretty apparent that whoever was running security on this operation wasn't the brains of the outfit, or they were terminally trusting, or both. Anyway, we didn't look a gift-horse in the mouth, and quickly put together a straightforward plan for getting what we needed and getting out.



We would figure out when the politician was coming for a meeting, bug the conference room, record him saying some really incriminating stuff, go in after the meeting and retrieve the device, then hand the recording over to the adepts and see if it was what they wanted. If that went smoothly then we'd be clear to wait for his next visit then grab him or the Traitor General when they went to the bathroom and have Fumbles rip the locations of the rogue trader and last traitor officer from their minds. After that we could just blow the entire building up and escape in the confusion.

It was a nice, simple plan, and we'd have everything in place for our backup strategy of just blowing the building up. The only way it could go wrong was if we'd missed something major or one of us completely screwed up. Unfortunately we did both.

The thing we missed was the fact that the politician's bodyguards took their job far more seriously than the other guards. When they entered the conference room they didn't just do a quick visual sweep, they took out scanning tools and checked the place for power sources and data connections. Tink's little home-made bug showed right up and the scanning guard went over to check it out.

Meanwhile our entire team, sans adepts of course, was in the supply room on the other side of the wall listening in. Tink swore, told us we were busted and recommended we bail before they did a search of the building. Nubby and Twitch were already halfway to the door when Sarge vetoed this and told Fumbles to take a shot at fixing things. The psyker lined up his target using the visual feed and his own ability to sense emotion then psychically commanded the bodyguard to forget what he was doing and go back to his

post.

He'd performed that particular mental trick twice already during our infiltration, but this time, right at the critical moment, Fumbles fumbled. Our entire room and conference room's adjacent wall were instantly covered by a sheet of frost. That didn't phase the bodyguard Fumbles had been aiming for, but there a few other people in the room. While the other bodyguard drew his weapon and covered the wall the Fire Caste who led the PDF warned everyone there was a psyker nearby and told them to get out. Then, I shit you not, the Traitor General yelled "It's Bane Johns, I told you he'd never stop chasing us", grabbed the politician, and sprinted out the door. It would've been hilarious if we weren't all so screwed.

None of us even tried to stand and fight, we knew a FUBAR mission when we saw one. If they had any brains their next steps would be to seal the base and start an exhaustive search for us, and if they remembered Bane Johns they probably remembered what we looked like, so trying to blend in like we had been wouldn't work. We either needed to make it out of the base before they locked down the exits, or find a damned good hiding place in the base. First thing first though, we needed to get out of the building before we wound up trapped in it.

Nubby and Twitch led us in an all-out sprint for the least guarded building exit, we were probably halfway to the door before the bodyguards or PDF commander even thought to enact some sort of lockdown. Of course seven men running through the hallways at a dead sprint attracted some unwanted attention, and we really couldn't afford to have anyone speeding up the search right now. The infiltrator plugged a dumb recruit who got in our way with his silenced pistol, Sarge's clothesline broke the neck of a second, and two Tau staffers died with surprised expressions on their faces and combat knives buried up to the hilts in their foreheads. Twitch and Nubby didn't even stop to pull their knives back out, there wasn't time.

We hit the door about twenty seconds before the alarm sounded. The single Tau guard watching it started to draw his weapon, then Fumbles did something irreversible to him and he forgot we were there and most of his

Dice Roll 3d10+4: 9, 9, 9 + 4 = 31



childhood to boot. We all felt a pang of guilt from the psyker, quick and dirty psyking isn't pretty stuff, but at least that was the last casualty.

We could see the base's gates closing ahead of us, so at Sarge's signal we slowed down, fanned out, and tried to look nonchalant as we walked towards Nubby's storeroom.



There wasn't time for a long debate about what to do next, the options were: find a way out, hide, or fight to the death. Twitch suggested that enough explosions would distract the gate guards, but Tink shot that down when he pointed out that the perimeter drones would never leave their post. Nubby volunteered a few hiding places, but even he wasn't confident they'd hold up to a serious search. Tink and the infiltrator started putting together a half baked plan to impersonate an officer and steal an APC from the motor pool, then were interrupted when Doc sprang to his feet and told everyone to shut up.

Doc told the rest of us that wasn't much time to explain, the only way his idea would work was if we moved fast. We grabbed what gear we could easily carry and followed the medic as he led us towards the middle of the base. As we half-ran Doc quietly explained that there was one exit that was never well sealed, because it was supposed to be "open to everyone, free of judgement or reproof." The weekly shuttle that took the few troopers that refused to embrace to Greater Good to their new life as mercenaries had landed that morning and it was still on the pad.

There weren't expensive drones watching the shuttle, or even Tau guards, just a pair of recruits who were supposed to ask anyone if they were really sure they wanted to leave. Doc figured that if we got on the shuttle before the serious search started and the guards vouched that no one had come past them, then it'd be allowed to leave on it's normally scheduled run. All we needed for this to work was a bit of luck, a little sloppiness from our pursuers, and for Fumbles to pull off two more pieces of psyking. At the back of our group the Fumbles realized this entire plan rested on him and made a small choking sound.

We got Fumbles calmed down and took up position a little way away from the shuttle ramp. Each of us told the nervous psyker we believed in him, then Doc gave the signal and everyone held their breath. One guard's expression immediately went vague, but as Fumbles turned towards the second a sort of dark foreboding, it felt as if everything was about to come crashing down around us.

It didn't though, the second guard's expression went vague too, then

we shook off the uneasy feeling and casually walked up the ramp. Fumbles practically collapsed in relief when we turned the first corner. Everyone took turns quietly congratulating the little guy as Nubby led us to a convenient spot for hiding unofficial cargo on this model of shuttle.

Our wait in that dark little compartment was long and nerve wracking, but it wasn't interrupted. A few hours after we boarded the shuttle started making its pre-takeoff noises and we all started breathing a little easier. Nubby pointed out that it seemed Fate was with us today and got told to shut up by everyone else.

Since we seemed to be out of the woods Sarge started thinking about the mission again. Despite the way we'd been forced to scrub the current op, the mission as a whole wasn't beyond salvage and, all in all, we were getting some good intel from this screwup. In our minds the Traitor General yelling about Bane chasing "us" confirmed that the Tau politician was the cloaked xenos. Furthermore, we were on our way to confirm that the mercenary was company was actually the rogue trader and would probably behind the raids as well. As for the rest of our objectives, hopefully all the time it'd take us to get back from wherever this shuttle was headed would let the situation groundside cool down enough for us to make another attempt.

Of course there was the whole "traveling between planets without our own spaceship or funds" thing, but that was just details. We could work it out on the fly.

As we lifted off Doc asked a question that hadn't occurred to anyone else: what the hell were the adepts going to think when we just disappeared?

He worried that the adepts might do something stupid to try and rescue us if they thought we'd been captured, they really needed to be told what had happened. Sarge winced at the thought and pointed out we couldn't comm them, the PDF jammed everything but their own, well monitored, frequencies and our short range comms wouldn't work from space. While everyone speculated on how much it was going to suck for the adepts and whether it was worth it to try and sneak onto the shuttle's bridge and us their vox, Tink ripped out his combead and jacked it into the pocket dataslate he carried. A few seconds later he scared the shit out of everyone by yelling and jumping.

Once Twitch and Fumbles had been calmed down Sarge grilled Tink on what all the excitement was about. The techie triumphantly told us he'd managed to get a plaintext message out on the public channel between the



time we left the PDF's jamming radius and got out of the local comm net's range. Doc congratulated him asked what he'd said in the message, only to get a lot of vague answers. Nubby yanked the dataslate out of Tink's hands and read it off to us.

Mission went sort o fb ad, were fine, going 2 space 2 hide adn investgate b back in asap to try agian. tell earthcast grl im ok, keep doin stuff -TINK



It was probably better than nothing.

The shuttle docked after a few hours of travel and we snuck out of our hidey hole. A quick peek around revealed that everyone, even the pilot, had left the ship and no one was guarding the exit. We hurried through the hatch and found ourselves standing in a fairly dingy shuttle bay that looked like it was part of an Imperial style ship: It had the prayer seals and skulls and everything. Tink made a quick check to see if we could steal the shuttle, but the bay doors were locked. Sarge

decided it was probably time to do a little exploring and nearly headbutted a crewman as he peeked out into the passageway.

The crewman didn't shout an alarm or act more surprised than you usually do when you nearly get a concussion, that probably saved his life. Instead he asked if we were the last ones from the shuttle and pointed us towards the bay where all the other "dirtsuckers" were staying. Before we followed his directions Nubby traded the man some smokes for a rundown on the ship and more info about our fellow passengers. Apparently it was just a tramp freighter that plied the well mapped warp lanes in the cluster and there were about forty other ex-PDF on board. He really did say "about", no one on the ship really paid much attention to their passengers as long as they stayed in their area. That suited us perfectly and we happily went to join our fellows.

It was remarkably easy for us to blend in with the ex-PDF, no one asked us questions or even paid us much attention. We commandeered a pair of the partially furnished shipping containers that were acting as passenger quarters and made ourselves comfortable. A few hours later we felt the ship's engines kick on and that night we jumped into the warp, all without anyone saying more than ten words to any of us. We'd missed this sort of apathy in the PDF base, it was nice when no one gave a shit about what you did.

Traveling to the "mercenary outfit" took four days. We spent them maintaining our gear and forming vague plans for the next stage of the mission. Our neighbors mostly spent them drinking to drown out the whispers of warp travel, casually bitching about how the Tau were a bunch of sissies,

and speculating on how much money and sex they'd get as a mercenary. It was a very homey environment.

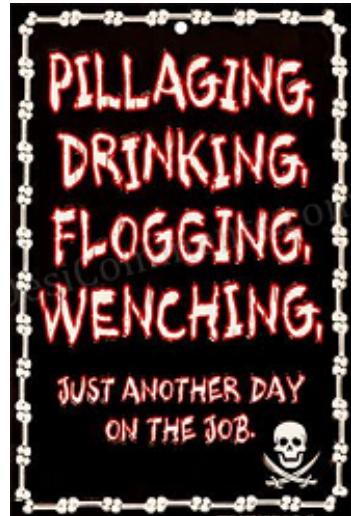
When we finally exited the warp a crewman came down and directed everyone towards a shuttle bay. The few ex-PDF who appeared to be having second thoughts or were too drunk to walk there themselves were dragged along by cargo servitors. One short shuttle ride later we were in a bigger and much more grandiose bay being welcomed to a new life filled with money, violence, drugs, xenos killing, sex, and more money. The mercenary really did make a good recruitment pitch, especially the part where he parrotted the PDF's line about being free to leave at any time while gesturing at an airlock.

By the end of the speech everyone seemed to understand the situation and snappily fell into line behind a few grizzled veteran types. Most of the rest of the day was spent in orientations of one sort or another and the usual army recruitment stuff. Uniforms and bunks were issued, schedules were handed out, and one or two random men were mercilessly screamed at for minor and possibly imaginary infractions. Sarge watched all this with an approval that was only slightly marred by the fact that the yeller was a vile traitor to the Imperium instead of an honest guardsman.

To no one's surprise, the uniforms worn by the mercenaries were perfect matches for the one's we'd seen on the guards in a certain villa. Between that and the night's festivities we had all the proof we personally needed. Seriously, it was announced as a "Celebratory post-raid feast. Don't forget to bring your best loot to show off." Some rogue traders really don't go in for subtlety...

There was a speech before the feast, it was given by the rogue trader and involved a lot of words like pillage and plunder. While everyone else was busy listening Sarge asked the infiltrator, who was the only one of us the trader hadn't seen before, to try getting close to the senior officers and finding out where we were headed next. The man practically vanished as soon as Sarge gave the order; later we saw a familiar looking server at the trader's high table, but we really weren't sure it was him.

So while the infiltrator did the actual work we enjoyed the party, there wasn't really much else to do. We ate, swapped some old war stories with the mercs, and successfully hid the fact that we weren't drinking. Much. Sarge



kept an eye on all of us, making sure we stayed under control, and covering for Doc when the mercenaries' tales of horrible violence on defenceless xenos made him sick.



the ship's Seneschal and the traitor officer would be going down "make sure everything is in order with our employer." Sarge thought that sounded like the ideal time to get off the ship.

Slowly, in the wee hours of the morning, a plan came together. Mostly it was simple and straightforward, but Doc suggestion for dealing with the rogue trader was downright evil. None of us could look him in the eye after he made it, the boy clearly had been corrupted by his time with the rest of us.



We had just over two days to get everything together for our plan, but we managed most of it that first night. It wasn't until about noon that someone started imposing order on the mercenaries, so we had free run of their section of the ship, allowing us to get almost all the supplies we needed. Over the next two days we used a combination of bribery, intimidation, and good old fashioned lying to avoid most of the chores the other mercenaries were doing and wander around

the ship undetected.

Sarge split us into two teams for most of the work. He, Nubby, and Doc concentrated on getting everything set up for our shuttle ride with the Seneschal while Tink and Twitch were escorted on their mission by Fumbles and Infiltrator.

Our time on the Occurrence Border really paid off for us during those days: we found in much easier to navigate this ship than any of the other mercenaries did. The maintenance passages and little locked doors that the crew used to get around quickly were an open book to us, we popped up

in places that none of the crew even suspected a dirtsucker could get to. We made a complete mockery of their security and accomplished all of our objectives without ever being noticed, much less stopped.

Our preparations were finished well ahead of schedule and at Sarge's urging we all got a full night's sleep, or as close as you can get to on a ship travelling in the warp, before the big day.

The Seneschal, being a Seneschal and therefore the very definition of a crafty bugger, probably knew his crew and the mercenaries engaged in a little smuggling. He probably wrote it off as a perk of their job and turned a blind eye, so long as they didn't cause him any trouble that is. What he didn't know though, was that this time the little smuggling bay on his shuttle wasn't being used to transport a few crates of proscribes substances and weapons. This time it was transporting seven crates, each of which held a very uncomfortable inquisitorial agent.



The smugglers didn't know what was in the crates either, but they'd been given clear instructions not to open them and stood to make a lot of money on this deal. Upon landing they were to take these crates to a certain supply shed, use a code they'd been given to get in, and exchange them for several of the crates full of PDF hardware that filled the room. The boys were professionals and did their job smoothly and speedily. Once they were clear Fumbles gave us a signal and we all emerged in Nubby's storeroom, which was a little emptier than it should have been, but it wasn't like we'd even owned that stuff anyway.

The first, well actually second, phase of our plan completed, we started prepping for the hard part. The first hiccup came when we sent the infiltrator to contact the adepts and retrieve Tink's drone. He got through fine, but the news he delivered wasn't exactly good. Well most of the stuff from the adepts wasn't bad, they'd gotten Tink's message and kept everything under control, but there was a message from Weebu as well. Apparently several ambassadors from other planets in the cluster were here to observe the PDF and the ex-Inquisitor had tagged along with his delegation.

To cut a long critique and rant short, Weebu thought we were right on the money, but strongly urged us not to just kill the Tau politician after we got our data. He promised a major political victory for the Imperium if we managed to get the blue bastard on trial, so he wanted us to either capture the politician or do something to prevent him from skipping off the planet. This complicated our simple post-evidence-collection plan of just tossing a

dozen frags into the room and escaping in the confusion, but Sarge ruled that we needed to at least try.



The infiltrator was sent out one last time to tell Weebu to have a holding area ready and warn the adepts of the change in our plans, then we got our gear in order and officially started Operation Record And Grab The Tau Diplomat Then Run Away. Admittedly it wasn't the best op designation, but it was Fumbles' idea and we felt he needed all the positive reinforcement he could get for this one.

We got into the command building again without any trouble. There were more guards than last time and they were checking IDs now, but their scanners weren't any better and they didn't have anything that could stop Fumbles. The infiltrator pinpointed the large conference room the meeting between the politician and the Seneschal would happen in and worked with Fumbles to distract the door guard while Tink snuck in, planted his drone up near the ceiling, and engaged its stealth field. Sarge quietly promised himself that if this worked he'd actually forgive the techie for buying the thing.

Once our recorder was in place and transmitting we split up again to make our final preparations. Twitch and the infiltrator casually walked around the building and placed a several charges in discrete locations. Doc prepped a vial of sedative and Fumbles grabbed us some snacks from the cafeteria. Finally Nubby was given a pair of charges to plant on the front gate and sent to commandeer an escape vehicle.

The Tau diplomat arrived right on schedule and his bodyguards began scanning the room. Tink put the drone into non-transmitting mode and we all held our breath. Luckily both the drone's stealth system and the scan-proof tarp we were all hiding behind held up to their scrutiny. We congratulated ourselves on our wild success and settled in to wait for Fumbles, who was sort of passively listening through the wall, to tell us when to go. About ten seconds later the Seneschal entered the room and had his untouchable deactivate his limiter. Suddenly we all felt a lot less smug.

A very, very quiet debate was held in that closet while the meeting started. We'd been originally planning to use Fumbles to make sure we had enough evidence before breach and to pinpoint all the hostiles for a quick take-down.



Now we were going to have to go in blind and wouldn't have his assistance until the untouchable was dead. Of course the debate didn't really change our plan, we were still going to bust open the wall, kill almost everyone, then run out to where Nubby had the getaway car ready. Those first two steps were just going to be a lot more dicey.

After a few dozen tense minutes Sarge estimated that enough time had passed and gave the word to get ready. Everyone picked up their weapons and got into position. Doc readied his vial, Twitch put his breaching charge in place, and Tink got ready to send the drone's recall command.

Sarge held up a beefy hand and counted down. The last finger descended, Twitch hit his detonator, and a six foot section of reinforced wall turned into a wave of shrapnel, completely shredding the Seneschal and the former guard major who'd been commanding the mercenaries.

One down, three to go.

Before the gooey remains of the two men hit the floor three flashbangs had entered the room. The split second after they detonated Sarge and Twitch followed them in and opened fire on the guards in either corner. A second after that Doc and the infiltrator sprinted into the room and gunned down the guard standing next to the dazed Tau diplomat. Finally Tink entered the room, barely ducking below the drone as it whizzed out, and blew the head off the traitor general.

Two down, two to go.

There were now five of us and four hostiles in the room, but we didn't know that. Sarge executed the wounded untouchable lying near his feet and turned to where Doc and the infiltrator were grabbing the stunned politician. He caught a flash of movement, heard a yell from Fumbles, then barely managed to duck below a stream of plasma bolts. Doc and the infiltrator weren't so lucky.

Doc's got hit in the stomach and went down with a choked shout. Next to him the infiltrator lost his head with an ugly splatting sound.

Twitch and Tink immediately turned to the new threat and raised their weapons, but all either of them could see was a faint shimmer in the air. Acting in desperation, both troopers fired to suppress, then had to dive for cover as the invisible targets ignored their fire. We had two men down, one of them dead and the other gut-shot, and the rest of us were pinned by heavy fire from a freakin INVISIBLE enemy. The situation was not good.

It was at that point, right when we were kissing our asses goodbye, that



Fumbles saved the day. The little psyker ran in, took a deep breath and let out a deafening shriek which was echoed by two shouts of pain from the far end of the room. The torrent of plasma fire stopped and those of us who could still move sprang into action.



Sarge grabbed the syringe from Doc's hand and tossed it to Twitch who slammed it into the diplomat's chest. Sarge then tucked Doc under one arm while Twitch picked up the frail diplomat in fireman's carry and Tink hosed the far end of the room with a wild stream of plasma. Behind us, Fumbles took another deep breath then under the cover of the second psychic shriek we all sprinted out the room.

As we ran, Tink grabbed the drone's controller and ordered it to follow him and Twitch mashed several of his detonators. Sarge stopped for a second at the breach, then tossed his entire bandolier of grenades into the room behind us. Minus one pin of course.

The entire building shook around us as two different series of explosions ripped through it. One series was an orderly chain of booms that sounded like an incredibly loud row of dominoes falling. It was caused by a neatly organized series of breaching charges which opened a clear path from our location to where Nubby was waiting for us. The other was just fifteen grenades of four different types going off like a string of firecrackers, it nearly knocked us on our faces and hopefully killed the two invisible hostiles.

Tink led our run out of the building, charging his plasma gun as he ran and neatly incinerating a guard who came to check out the noise. Sarge was behind him, holding his lasgun in one hand and spraying it at anything that moved around us. Next came Twitch, who was straining under the Tau's weight and shedding land mines at a rate of about one per four meters in an attempt to lighten his load and stop pursuit. An exhausted Fumbles brought up the rear and did his best to disrupt any pursuers by throwing random hallucinations at anyone who saw us.

Put simply, we left a trail of bodies and confusion from the conference room to the parking lot where Nubby waited for us in our getaway vehicle. Which turned out not to be a hover car, APC, or flier, but rather a poorly maintained food delivery van.

As we sprinted across the lot and piled into the shitty van it became apparent that our escape was not going to go as planned. Not because of Nubby's poor choice of vehicle, but because the PDF troopers we could see around the base weren't acting like they should have been. This was very worrying on account of how the escape part of our plan had always been sort

of shaky: it mostly hinged on us getting the hell out of there and going to ground before any real pursuit was organized.

This may seem horribly optimistic, but remember that by this point we were supposed to have just killed the PDF's top human general, political leader, and the Tau Fire Caste who commanded them. Between the deaths of those senior officers and the trail of destruction our exit would leave, the chain of command should have been an unholy mess. Unfortunately for us, it wasn't.

The problem was that the Fire Caste commander hadn't been at the meeting. We weren't sure whether he'd left early or never attended or what, but he hadn't died in that conference room like he should have. So right now, instead of lying dead in a puddle of his own blood while his force dissolved into chaos and let us escape, he was barking orders over the general channel. This was a very bad thing.

So while our getaway vehicle slowly accelerated towards the base's exit Sarge's mind raced for a way to disrupt the PDF before we were caught in the middle of a literal army of hostiles. As he listened to the orders and questions flying over the PDF's comm net a solution came to him and he seized Tink's drone. A second later Sarge realized he had no idea how to use the drone and seized Tink instead.

Tink's orders were simple, find something, anything incriminating in the drone's recording and jack it into the PDF's general channel. This wasn't the time to worry about keeping the evidence secret until the trial, we'd trade political bullshit for not getting killed any day.

Tink was in a state of overloaded panic as he tried to do several things at once. He needed to rip out the van's transponder and autopilot before it was used to stop us, reload his plasma gun before the next fight, and now he had to figure out how to make the drone play back its recording, then find an incrimination section, then figure out how to jack the audio feed into his combead.

The techie froze for a second, started to babble a question about which he should do first, then Twitch yanked the plasma gun away and used the last of its charge to fry the transponder. Ignoring the fact that the plasma bolt came within a millimeter of destroying the van's engine, it simplified the situation beautifully. Tink immediately started punching at the drone's controls while Twitch reloaded



his plasma gun, and within half a minute the drone was broadcasting over the PDF's channels. It took a little longer to find a good section of dialogue, but after a few false starts he managed it and we all heard the Tau Commander's voice go panicked as he ordered everyone to turn off their combeads.

Sarge didn't have time to feel satisfied, he was busy applying his limited knowledge of field medicine. The Tau style flak armor Doc had been wearing hadn't done jack to stop the plasma bolt, the gut wound went all the way through, but it had missed anything immediately fatal and partially cauterized itself. Sarge hit the medic with an ampule painkiller and another of stimm, that brought him back into focus. From there Doc was able to walk Sarge through applying a dressing and blood pack as well as treating a few minor wounds the other guardsmen had taken without noticing.

The Tau diplomat lay in a heap in the floor and occasionally moaned or snored. No one bothered to secure him until a hard turn nearly shot him out the half-closed door. That would've been embarrassing.



Up in the front seat Nubby was driving for his life while Fumbles rode shotgun, well lasgun actually, but whatever. He'd nearly crashed twice already and no one was telling him anything except that his getaway vehicle sucked. As far as Nubby could tell the situation was slightly worse than expected, only six men had come back after all, but they had their hostage and the PDF appeared not to be paying attention to the van anymore.

He rounded a final corner and started barreling towards the main gate, which by some miracle hadn't been closed yet: it looked like he wouldn't even have to detonate the charges he'd placed on it. As the van sailed through the open gate Nubby grinned and hit the detonators anyway, just as a goodbye present.

Nubby told the rest of us that it looked like we were in the clear. Everyone sighed in relief and there were a few high-fives, then Tink ruined the mood. He swore loudly and told the us that the PDF general comm channel was closed. He started flipping his broadcast to other channels, then went pale and screamed at Nubby to go faster as he heard the traffic on one of them. Apparently the engineers in the motor pool had the Commander's battlesuit and devilfish ready.

Nubby nearly put his augmetic foot through the floor as he stamped on the accelerator.

At Nubby's frantic request for a destination, preferably one with lots of friendly people with anti-armor weapons, Sarge commed the adepts as soon as we'd cleared the base's jammers. The nerds were panicked to say the

least, they'd been watching the chaos unfolding at the base through hacked vid feeds. Sarge filled them in on our cargo, location, and what we'd just heard would be following us. He requested that they contact Weebu and find us hiding place or get us some damned reinforcements. The adepts didn't even bother to tell us how much firepower or how deep a hole we were going to need, they must have heard the forced calm in Sarge's voice. He told them to keep the channel open for tactical updates, then let them get to work.

Nubby somehow managed not to hit any of the other vehicles as we put as many kilometers and buildings between us and the base. The slagged hole in the dashboard made some faint beeps as the transponder tried to report our traffic violations and lock down our vehicle before we killed anyone. It was a valid concern really, we left about a dozen accidents in our wake. Finally, after several nerve wracking minutes of reckless driving, the adepts commed us back and began relaying directions from Weebu. They were cut off by a shout from Tink as the devilfish APC hopped a low building behind us and started gaining ground on our shitty van.

The APC didn't open fire on us, possibly because of our hostage or all the civies around, instead they just steadily closed the distance and released a few drones. While everyone, even Nubby, was staring back at the approaching devilfish Fumbles' face jerked upwards and the psyker shouted a warning.

So no shit, there we were, trying to outrun a top of the line APC in our shitty van, when three and a half tonnes of pissed-off xenos battlesuit dropped out of the sky like a fucking meteor, and landed five meters in front of us.

Nubby screamed and swerved the van as hard as he could, actually managing to raise the vehicle onto two wheels. I swear by the Emperor, one of our tires actually went OVER the battlesuit's head as we pulled off the sort of turn you typically see lightnings make. Everyone who wasn't buckled into their seats in the back of the van was tossed around like a cat in a tumble-dryer, it was a bloody miracle that none of our weapons or Twitch's mines went off.

As the van dropped back onto two wheels Tink poked his plasma gun out



the back door and took aim. For its part the battlesuit was just standing there and staring at us, looking as confused as a giant pile of boxes can. Tink's shot nailed it right in the leg, reminding the pilot that stationary armor is dead armor, and the battlesuit jumped back into the air. A few seconds later he came down ahead of us again, but Nubby was swerving like a drunkard now and the battlesuit didn't even come close to stopping us. Sarge and Fumbles both poked their guns out the passenger window and gave him another volley as we screeched by.

What followed was like a demented game of whack-a-mole, except the hammer couldn't land exactly on the mole and the mole kept shooting the hammer every time it missed. We were slowly wearing the bastard down with our volleys, but every time we dodged we lost a little more speed. The second that bastard decided his hostage would survive the ensuing crash, he was sure to shoot out our tires or driver.

Inside the van things were absolute chaos.



Nubby was constantly screaming as he tried to dodge, accelerate, and follow the adepts' directions at the same time. Fumbles was trying to relay the battlesuit's movements while the rest of us tried to get shots off through the doors, windows, and occasionally the walls. The tau diplomat just hung in his seat and kept sleeping, occasionally his head would slam against the wall with hollow coconut sound when the van swerved hard.

After a particularly near miss Sarge checked the map again and decided we weren't going to make it to our destination. It wasn't much farther, but it wouldn't be long before either the devilfish caught up with us or the battlesuit decided we were going slow enough. The only thing to do was try to change the game before we lost this one.

At Sarge's orders everyone stopped taking potshots and got into position to aim out the front window. Tink was in the best spot between Nubby and Fumbles, behind him was Twitch with the single-shot krak launcher we'd been hoarding for so long, and Doc and Sarge did their best to aim around the seats. Once everyone was in position Sarge gave the word and Nubby found a nice straightaway, stopped swerving, and floored it. The battlesuit took the bait and landed in front of us again, but this time we didn't try to go around.

Two las-bolts, a krak missile, and a big-ol ball of plasma rocketed out the front of the van. It was an obvious attack and the nimble battlesuit should have easily dodged it, but for a split second the pilot couldn't remember how to.

The only thing that saved the xenos' life was the automated point defense bullshit in his armor, the krak missile went off about half way between us and him, but everything else hit him, including the shitty van.

Being in a high speed collision is not an enjoyable experience, especially if you're not buckled into anything. We came out of that crash with about seven broken ribs, a broken arm, a plasma-gun-butt induced concussion, and a battlesuit wrapped around the hood of our van. None of that was important though, what was important was that the van was still running and Nubby could still drive, even if he could barely see over the deployed airbag.



Those of us who could still hold our weapons and see straight poured las-fire into the stuck battlesuit's head-camera thing. It was thoroughly slagged by the time a hard swerve flung the battlesuit off our hood and into oncoming traffic. We all ran to the back door and shot it a few times as we sped away for good measure, then noticed how close the devilfish was and slammed the doors before someone tried their hand at sniping.

Without the battlesuit heading us off it was a straightforward race between us and the devilfish now. They were faster than us and could jump over most obstacles, but they also had to try and predict our wild turns and we weren't shy about taking potshots at them or their drones. In the end we were about fifty meters ahead of them when we made it to our destination, which turned out to be the front entrance of fancy office-park looking place with a big flag over it.

Nubby plowed through the still opening gate, then screeched to a stop as he realized that the road dead-ended in front of the largest building. As we picked ourselves up the adepts commed us and said that we should be safe on the embassy's soil, all we had to do was stay put and let the politicians handle it now. Hearing this, Nubby popped out of his seat, leaned out the driver door, and started loudly mocking the APC as it sat at the wrecked gate. This turned out to be a bad idea, one of the drones overhead took a potshot that he barely dodged and the devilfish began to slowly enter the compound while fire warriors hopped out the back.

We ducked back into our van and got ready for the shooting to start, but apparently the Tau weren't quite ready to start the bloodbath. They fanned out into firing positions and appeared to be having a heated comm argument with someone. The adepts told us to stay put again while they handled this, the Tau should back down if nothing pushed them over the edge. Sarge decided it would be a very bad idea to bet our lives on this and

quietly instructed us to get ready.



For a little while it looked like the adepts were right. A large number of soldiers, human, Tau, and even a few Kroot, came out and faced down the PDF Tau. The hostiles were definitely having second thoughts, even with armor on their side, and we could hear Weebu's voice as he browbeat their leader via the comms. Then the half-slaged battlesuit, with the PDF commander peeking out through the open chest-hatch, came rocketing in.

We didn't wait for things to spiral out of control, Sarge gave the order and five guardsmen worth of smoke and flash grenades were tossed in every direction. Under the cover of that barrage we did what any red-blooded hero of the Imperium would do in that situation, we ran like little girls. While screaming.

The nades gave us some cover, Fumbles' partial cloak of invisibility gave us more, and finally we had the Tau diplomat as a hostage in the middle of us. We still took a hell of a lot of fire though. The embassy exploded into a point blank firefight around us, the air filled with plasma bolts as two heavily armed forces with no cover opened up on full auto. We couldn't tell who was winning or losing, all we cared about was running faster.



Doc went down first, taking a hit in his leg. Without missing a beat Sarge grabbed him by the collar of his armor and dragged him along. Next to fall was Nubby who got spun around by a shot to his shoulder, Tink grabbed one leg and Fumbles grabbed the other, and dragged the little trooper along as he screamed and cursed. The final stumble was Twitch, who didn't see the embassy's front door in the smoke and ran right into it, luckily the politician absorbed most of the impact, and after two tries the concussed trooper

made it through the door.

Then we were all in and clear. We were all bleeding, we were all hurting, but by the Emperor we were still alive. Everyone started laughing and thumping each other on the backs, then there was a large explosion outside and we all sprinted farther into the building. Weebu found us fortied up in a walk-in freezer, we didn't let him in until he went and fetched us our adepts and a medic. Between the broken arm, shot leg, and gut wound, ours was sorta busted.

When Weebu finally talked us out of the freezer we didn't bother with

formalities. Sarge just handed him the drone and the diplomat, told the adepts that they were in charge for the next twelve hours, then we all collapsed onto the first pieces of comfortable furniture we could find. Weebu did not yell at us for bleeding on his carefully arranged decor, be we could tell he wanted to.

Twelve hours later we all woke up to find that we were big damned heroes.

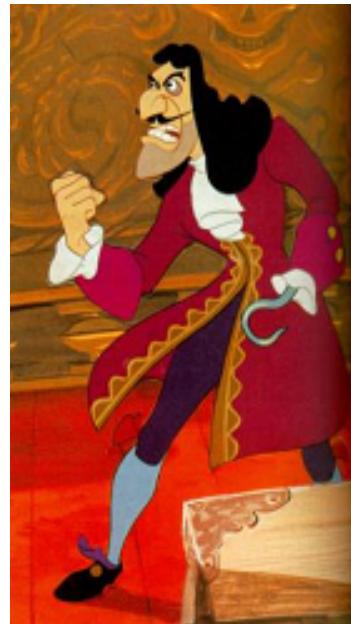
It's not like we were against being heroes, but we hadn't expected to be TAU heroes. Weebu and the adepts had been busy while we slept, they'd been blackmailing, spinning, smearing, exposing, and all sorts of other political bullshit all day long. They'd set up a chain of events that would eventually end in an absolutely gruesome trial that no one in the cluster was likely to forget. It wasn't going to convince everyone to purge their xenos populations and join the Imperium, but it would push the entire political situation into a vaguely pro-Imperial equilibrium, which was unofficially what the Imperium wanted out here.

The other guaranteed end result was the death sentence of the Tau politician. Sadly we wouldn't be around to see that, Three down and just one to go though, even if it would take a few years.

Speaking of the "one to go", the Rogue Trader started heading out system when things went south. It seemed like he didn't want to stick around if there wasn't a profit to be made having his mercenaries die messily. None of the locals gave serious chase, his ship was faster than theirs and big enough to inflict heavy losses if they forced a fight. As he fled he sent a message to us, well actually to his nemesis Bane Johns, swearing vengeance. He vowed that since he still had his raiders, he'd carve a swathe of destruction across the nearby Imperial systems in our name. So yea, he mad.

His message sent the Rogue Trader warped out of the system, leaving us with the rather put-out adepts and Weebu. They seemed pretty broken up over how many people were going to die and how it was at least partially our fault. We found it hilarious though, which really weirded out the nerds. We didn't let them in on what was so funny, instead we asked Weebu to find us an astropath.

A few hours later we were all sitting with this astropath when the message we were expecting came in. It was a general distress call, asking for assistance



from any Imperial ships in the area. Apparently the Rogue Trader's ship had suffered catastrophic damage to its Warp Drive. Tink and Twitch high fived each other while Doc smiled sadly from his wheelchair. Sarge told him it was okay and asked if he wanted to leave for the next part, but he insisted on staying.



We sat with that astropath and listened as the messages shifted from requests for assistance re-pairing their warp drive to panicked reports that their Gellar Field was failing. We listened as the requests turned to pleas, then to curses, then to howling daemonic voices. Our astropath had to stop there for fear of daemonic corruption. Weebu and the Adepts just stared us, then slowly left to get back to their politicking.

Four for four. Mission accomplished. Emperor forgive us for what we did to the thousands of souls aboard that vessel, but Mission. Fucking. Accomplished.

Anyway, like I said, big damned TAU heroes. The empire knew its diplomacy and whether or not they'd been officially behind the politician, when they got reports of his capture they went into full damage control mode. Most of it was disavowing the politician and anyone who ever had walked within a half klick radius of him, but they'd also spent an amazing amount of effort praising and publicly thanking US. Not thanking the Inquisition or Weebu's spy agency, but us personally: a bunch of ex-guardsmen who risked their life and defied the odds to blah, blah, blah.



We got painted as these sort of heroic deserters fighting for truth, justice, and our own personal version of the Greater Good. It was complete and utter horseshit and our first inclination was to go out there and explain what we thought of their Greater Good, but Weebu and the Adepts said not to. We wound up sitting there and grinding our teeth as parades were held, statues were built,

and talk shows played vids of us and analyzed our motivations. There was even going to be a vid series about us, a fictional and animated one mind you, but an actual vid series none-the-less. Weebu said he'd act as our agent and send along our royalties to Oak.

When the warp interference from the death of the trader's ship died down we sent a message to the Occurrence Border asking for pickup, then kicked up

our heels to wait. Sarge, Fumbles, and Twitch kept busy helping Weebu with the mop-up and report. Tink hung out with the earth-caste weaponsmith a lot, but didn't suffer any xenos corruption aside from picking up a fondness for the local animated vids. Doc and Nubby got to experience Tau medicine, they said it was quite pleasant and Doc took notes while they worked on him. Unfortunately, while Nubby's injury was repaired easily, Doc's leg and gut wound would take some serious time to heal. He was in for a long stay in the Occurrence Border's medical bay. He didn't seem that broken up about it.

When our ride finally arrived we bid Weebu goodbye and promised to never come back to these worlds again. That made him happy. The Captain himself was waiting for us in the shuttle bay, he said he wanted to chat with Sarge. The rest of us were waved away to go have fun or whatever and the two men went off to quiet corner to say serious words about serious things.

The Captain told Sarge that three of the other teams had gone missing. He'd actually gone and checked when they failed to report, but the planets or stations they'd been working on were wiped out. Sarge shared our story of the rogue trader and his raiders, explaining how they'd been razing planets as part of a big political ploy, but the Captain said it didn't fit. See raiders left bodies, either theirs or their victims, but there were always bodies.

Maybe a few of the worlds around here had been hit by the rogue trader, but someone was wiping colonies completely clean of life and entire stations were disappearing. He'd mapped out systems that had been reported to have been wiped out or stopped responding to astropathic messages, and a sort of pattern had emerged. A long, snaking line of destruction had been cut through the border worlds and the Tau empire and now it was turning towards Imperial space. To the Captain it looked like it was chasing something.

He quietly told Sarge that Oak had bumped this up to everyone's top priority. There were very few things that could cause this sort of destruction and all of them were the sort of things the Inquisition had been formed to deal with. Sarge digested this disturbing news for a while then thanked the Captain, rounded the rest of us up, and got very, very drunk.



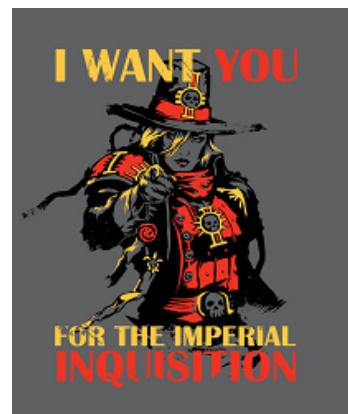
Chapter 11

Xenotech

Junior Enginseer Jim had spent the last few days discussing the problem with Junior Enginseer Hannah. Neither of them had managed to think up any clever solutions and there was no one else to turn to. Asking the senior tech-priests for advice was right out, since they were half the problem anyway, and Ol' Bill just didn't understand the issue. In the end it was decided that their only option was to approach the problem directly. Which is to say Jim would approach the problem directly, Hannah refused to go anywhere near that section of the ship.

During his next nightly "Seventy Five Minute Organic Recuperation Period" Jim visited the storage room across from the Gellar Field Generator. Remembering it was Tuesday and after 1800, he bypassed the first two doors and made his way to the third where the mechanical keypad he'd expected had been replaced by a dataslate and a piece of yellow paper. Jim tried to ignore the claymore mine mounted underneath the slate as he read the note, it was labeled "Prove You Are Not a Servitor (or Ork)." A second smaller note said "cAsE sEnSiTiVe."

It took two tries to get the illegible series of hand-written letters entered into the slate, luckily the mine had only armed and the slate had instructed him not to move after the first mistake. Jim thought it was rather unfair to expect someone to be able to tell the difference between a lowercase and capital S. When the door finally opened the Enginseer made his way down a zig-zagging corridor of sandbags. As he walked he idly wondered where they'd managed to find sand on a voidship, then decided he was happier not



knowing.

When Jim came around the last bend he found three of the men he'd come to see piling up pieces of burnt meat and metal into a wheelbarrow. He ignored what looked like the remains of an unfortunate maintenance servitor and hesitantly asked if the Interrogator was present, or maybe even Doc.



The shortest and most amiable of the three troopers, Nubby, explained that Sarge was working with the adepts and Doc was staying in the medbay on account of his legs not working. Several complex and undeniably obscene gestures accompanied this, either conveying Nubby's opinion of the adepts or what he thought Doc's actual reason for staying in the medbay was. Jim wasn't sure which.

Twitch interrupted the show to ask Jim if he was here about the servitor, because that was entirely not-Twitch's fault. He'd clearly explained that no-one was to attempt to clean or do maintenance on this room without an escort. Also, sharing access codes, even if it was with a servitor, was a severe violation of proper security protocol. Actually, change that to ESPECIALLY if it was with a servitor, those damned things couldn't be trusted; Jim should know, he'd been there and seen what the psychotic murder machines had done the second they got a chance.

Jim shuddered at the memories Twitch's rant dredged up, then turned to the third guardsman. While the other two had been talking Tink had been having a quiet, one-sided argument with the small xeno-tech dataslate he was holding. Occasionally he'd switch from swearing at the controller to cooing at the hovering disk in front of him as it tried, with mixed success, to pick up pieces of servitor with its small servo-arm. Jim summoned every scrap of courage he could muster and walked up to the goggle-wearing guardsman.

"Tink, this tech-heresy needs to stop. If you don't destroy that unholy xenos contraption I will-I will-I, um, uhhhh, pleasedon'tkillme."

Tink pressed the the humming plasma gun, which Jim swore he hadn't been holding second ago, a little harder into the enginseer's chest. In the most threatening voice he could muster, Tink asked:

"What did you just call my waifu?"

↳The All Guardsmen Party and the Xeno-Tech Heresy

Nubby came to Jim's rescue before long. He carefully pushed the plasma gun to the side and reminded Tink that Sarge had banned the "W Word". Furthermore, this was Jim, the bro-est of cogbros! He was definitely on the do-not-blow-in-half with a plasma gun list, and hadn't meant to insult

Tink's favorite toy. There was undoubtedly a reason behind his request and if everyone would just settle down this could all be sorted out without Sarge yelling at anyone.

Tink grumbled about it not being a toy. SHE was a DX-9F Exploratory Drone, configured for stealth operations and tech interfacing, and HER name was "Hannah Two-Point-Oh". Jim went blank as he processed this, then started sputtering in a mix of shock and revulsion. Nubby groaned and waved a hand at Twitch, who obliged by pegging the ranting trooper in the back of the head with a chunk of servitor. Both parties were hauled off and seated in front of one of the several whiteboards that had gone missing from the official briefing rooms.



Jim boggled at the list on the board as the Nubby forced a surly Tink to read off the last six items on it.

- SARGE'S XENO-TECH RULES**
- 1. Keep your stupid mouths shut.**
- 2. If you want to use a weapon it MUST be disguised as a las-gun or something. THIS INCLUDES YOUR PLASMA HYBRID MONSTROSITY.**
- 3. The drone is SECRET. It does not leave the barracks unless it's in its box or you can make it look like a servo-skull.**
- 4. Sarge will be the judge of whether the drone ACTUALLY looks like a servo-skull.**
- 5. The drone is NOT a she.**
- 6. The drone does NOT have a gender at all.**
- 7. The drone is NOT named Hannah or Fio'whatsit.**
- 8. The drone is NOT named after ANYONE, regardless of if we've met them.**
- 9. The drone is named Spot. It is a good name and is actually sort of witty. All complaints must be hand-written and submitted in person to Interrogator Sarge.**
- 10. Anyone who violates these rules or actually submits a complaint will be made to suffer in ways they cannot possibly imagine.**

After the base rules were re-established and Tink had accepted that no-one was going to be allowed to shoot anyone, unless it was Twitch and there was an Ork attack, Nubby asked Jim what the problem was. If he was here about our recent acquisitions, it should be obvious that we had the situation in hand. Everyone was aware of the Mechanicus' little rules about xeno-tech and would be keeping a low profile, so no worries. None of us were ready for the explosion that the phrase "little rules" triggered.



The young engineer leapt out of his seat and started pacing back and forth, frantically explaining that this wasn't a matter of laws or protocol, this was dogma. See cogboys tend to be a little more religious when it comes to technology than most guardsmen. Which isn't surprising, they're called TECH-PRIESTS after all, but the exact nature of their religion is a little complex.

Some of them loved all tech, especially the old and complex stuff, and would go around worshiping random things they dug out of space hulks. Others were all for getting and keeping their technology working as well as possible or maybe even pulling apart things to see how they work. Some cogboys though, were completely focused on stamping out any piece of tech, no matter how amazing, that didn't originate from Mars. According to Jim, about half the senior tech-priests on the ship fell into that last category.



Jim claimed these were the sort of guys who wouldn't just destroy a device they suspected of being xenos-made, they'd also convert anyone who'd ever used it into servitors, then push the servitors into a plasma reactor. Nubby suggested that this was a bit of an exaggeration, the Inquisition always got a fair bit of leniency on this stuff.

Didn't that Interrogator with the big hat have a sword that whispered at anyone nearby about drinking their blood? What about sister what's-her-face who had a Sternguard Pattern Bolter that she'd looted from a dead marine? And no one commented on the fact that the guy running recruitment had actually purchased a medium-sized tropical island with the funds he'd been embezzling over the last few decades. Surely a little xeno-tech could be swept under the same rug those guys were using. Jim just shook his head and pointed out that all those were things that the Inquisition typically had jurisdiction over; believe it or not, hardcore orthodox tech-priests were a lot less forgiving.

Jim suggested that as a baseline we imagine a three hundred year old Redemptionist preacher. Now combine that general cranky outlook with the fact that the orthodox tech-priests on the ship had been forced to accept that most of its critical engineering staff were not members of the machine cult. These guys were itching to put someone in their place; if anyone caught their attention with a clear case of tech-heresy, their lifespan would be measured

in minutes. So Jim was asking, begging really, for us to give up or suicidal fascination with xeno-tech.

Everyone went quiet for a while as they processed this. Tink frowned at his drone controller, Twitch pondered how many servitors those priests commanded, and Nubby weighed the value of his life against that of a crate of Tau pulse weapons. All of us looked at each other and came to a silent agreement. Nubby thanked Jim for his warning, it'd really opened our eyes to the situation. He promised that we would... be very careful not to show their new toys to any tech-priests. Except for Jim. And Hannah. Oh and those other guys we couldn't remember the names of, but had been pretty cool for cogboys.

Jim sank into his seat and looked like he was about to start crying.

While Twitch and Tink went back to cleaning, Nubby did his best to console the young enginseer. Eventually his weasley arguments about how unlikely the senior tech-priests were to find out, if no one ratted to them that is, calmed Jim down. From there it wasn't hard to convince him to help with the "disguise the xeno-tech" project. Given how much damage a minor war located across the hall from the Gellar Field Generator would cause, Nubby argued, it could even be budgeted under preventive ship maintenance.

The enginseer grudgingly sat down at the workbench Tink had been using for the project and started tinkering. He didn't even pause to question the origins of the pile of slightly-used lasguns or the large crate of assorted human and animal skulls that had been provided for camouflage material. He'd made some real progress and was even managing a nearly-civil technical discussion with Tink when Sarge came back.

Sarge, who'd spent at least twenty hours over the last few days trying to fill the gaps in his team left by Doc's injury and the Infiltrator's death, took Jim's presence as a sign from the Emperor. Before the night was over, the paperwork was in order and the enginseer was officially seconded to us for the duration of the upcoming mission.

Jim was not exactly happy about this.

That upcoming mission was a bit of a mystery. Our little op on the Tau border worlds had gone relatively well: We'd foiled a rather convoluted plot to get neutral worlds in bed with the Tau empire and killed the raiders that'd been terrorizing the area. At least we'd thought that the Rogue Trader we'd doomed to an incredibly gruesome death was behind all the missing colonies and stations, turned out his band of pirates didn't quite fit the bill though.





It's not like they hadn't had it coming, no one but Doc felt guilty about trapping those mercenary bastards in the warp with no Gellar Field, but according to our reports whoever was wiping out the locals didn't leave bodies. Not theirs, and not their victims either. That was pretty ominous, especially coupled with the fact that a few of the other Inquisitorial teams on our little expedition had been on those worlds. None of them had sent out any messages, they'd just vanished with the civies. Yeah, ominous.

All those guys had been the same as us: small teams of underfunded, underinformed, and under-everything-else Inquisitorial agents sent out to look for trouble or do something for Oak. We were definitely the last people to suggest that they should have been able to stop some sort of colony-eradicating doom-thingy... But we'd have expected them to at least get SOMETHING out. Even if it was just an astropath message saying "Shit. Tyranids." or "I FEEL THE WARP OVERTAKING ME. IT IS A GOOD PAIN." They didn't though, which meant that whatever had gotten them was even weirder than usual.

All we had to go on was the information the Occurrence Border's captain had scrounged for us when the teams had missed their pickups. He had a rough map of which systems had been wiped out for sure and a few notes from the one colony he'd personally inspected. That's how we knew he was worried, the Captain didn't like going down to planets. He said they were untidy.

The disappearances charted a sort of winding path through the region, starting on the fringe of Tau space and twisting in the general direction of the Imperium. That was the whole reason we were involved in this mess. None of us gave a shit if a bunch of xenos got killed or really cared much about the fringe worlds, but if the pattern continued some valuable Imperial worlds were going to get wiped out. So Oak had mandated that everyone out here was to drop what they were doing and figure out what the hell was going on. The Occurrence Border had picked up all the teams it could reach in time and was doing its best to follow the trail before it got cold.

Sarge spent a lot of time working with the adepts and the other teams to figure out what we were in for before we ran right into it. Sarge had sat down with the Captain, who he got along with rather better than the other Interrogators and gone over the whole thing from top to bottom. Unfortu-



nately, all they were able to figure out was that the path mostly followed decent warp routes, which told us whoever was driving was probably using a Warp-Drive. Or they just felt like going that way.

The Captain's brief visit to the purged colony had turned up some more useful info. He'd described the place as being mostly intact, but with no creatures, living or dead. There was some battle damage, but the place hadn't just been nuked from orbit and he said it didn't look like the fight had lasted long. Sarge tried to pick his brain for details about the battle damage, hoping to pin down what sort of weaponry had been used, the Captain wasn't much help though. All he was able to tell us was that no one had used Macro Cannons, Lances, Torpedos, or Nova Cannons. Oh, and someone had dropped several million tonnes of powdered silicate and organic matter on the place, that struck him as interesting. A few probing questions revealed that this mysterious substance was, in fact, just the ground. Bloody spacers.

It was eventually decided that the only way we'd get anything useful was by visiting one of these worlds and looking around ourselves, preferably after the mysterious people-disappearing thing had left. Until then all anyone could do was wildly speculate, so we did what any red-blooded guardsmen would do in that situation: we started a betting pool.

At first it was the usual small wagers between us, everyone sticking to their pet theories and so on, but Nubby smelled profit and the thing quickly grew to ludicrous size. Within a few days both the other teams, the entire engineering department, and half of the ship's officers were in on it. There'd even been a runner from the Navigator's sanctum carrying bets from him and the Astropath, neither of whom had even been told about the pool. That'd sparked a lengthy debate about whether those guys could see the future and if that should invalidate their bets. In the end Nubby held that if they could, then they'd have been able to avoid being assigned to the Occurrence Border, so he took their money like everyone else's.

There wound up being only three popular bets since various factors wound up disqualifying most of the candidates. No one was willing to put money on it being some human force, on account of how Oak would've known if there was a rogue Inquisition fleet out here, and Chaos warbands or cults were never this tidy. On the xenos side the Tau didn't fit, Necrons tended to stick to their tomb worlds, Tyranids either left planets barren or full of Tyranids, and even Twitch couldn't figure out how it could be Orks. That



just left warpy stuff, Eldar, or some really obscure type of xenos.

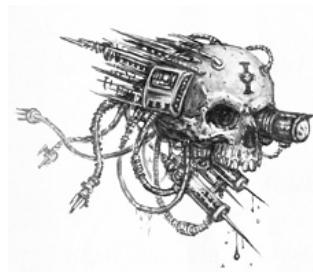


Sarge and Doc had their money on some sort of crazy warp shit, either a greater Daemon or some sort of massive phenomena. They didn't have any real reason behind the theory, but since it was the scariest thing anyone could think of it had a lock on the pessimist vote. Outside of the pool, all the adepts who knew about that warpy stuff were going through their records trying to figure out what could be done if they were right.

Meanwhile, after Twitch gave up on the Orks he'd gone down to the adepts and gotten a list of all the types of xenos that lived out on the fringe.

He didn't sleep for three days after that and eventually had to be tranqued by Doc. Well by his girlfriend, Doc wasn't in any condition to chase down Twitch on account of the whole wheelchair thing. Anyway, after he was pried out of his hole, Twitch made a fairly strong case for some obscure xenos horrors being behind everything. Even Tink and our team's adepts threw in with him, either because they believed him or just thought it was good odds to play the field.

The final popular bet was the OCD Eldar Raiders theory. Nubby and Fumbles had started that one by hotly denying that it was even a possibility. The denial had come right after they'd received the Navigator's bet, and even if most folks couldn't figure out why the Eldar would be disappearing colonies, they knew what a rigged game looked like. Nubby hadn't gotten any sympathy from the rest of us when he'd complained about how even the odds were getting.



Between the pool, Tink and Jim's project, and Sarge's scramble to prep for the mission, Doc was the only one with much free time. Of course that was primarily because he was stuck in a wheelchair until his leg and gut-wound finished healing. He spent most of that time in the med-bay acting as a handi-capable nurse for his girlfriend, and despite Nubby's constant barrage of tasteless jokes, seemed to be coping with his temporary crippling fairly well. We mostly left him to it, since we risked death by either sap overdose or angry hospitaller every time we visited. Twitch nearly lost an ear to a thrown scalpel when we kidnapped the poor boy for a night of recreational drinking.

While Doc wasn't too bothered about his injury, it was a constant source of worry for the rest of us. Not because we thought he wouldn't get better, but because the Captain had spotted a world in the right direction that had gone dark and was taking us there for a little reconnoitering. Our ETA was a few days, and Doc's recovery was going to be a matter of weeks or months, so it was looking like we'd be going into the field without a medic. Sarge and Jim tried to convince us that the medi-skull they'd requisitioned was just as good, but we weren't buying it. Those things are unsettling just to look at, they're a million times worse when you've just been shot and one's coming at you with a buzzsaw.

Everyone was feeling a little nervous when we finally came out of the warp and confirmed that the nearby planet was emptier than a Munitorum agent's heart. Those of us who weren't creeped out by the prospect of nosing around on a freshly depopulated world were wondering if we were about to lose three weeks pay in the pool.

While everyone worried and prepped their gear Sarge attended one final meeting with the Captain and the other two Interrogators. Now these guys weren't bad sorts, at least by officer standards, but neither of them really played well with others. One was a blond battleaxe of an ex-cleric and the other was a serious agent fellow with a creepy sword that no one commented on.



Battleaxe had been drumming up recruits and Sword-guy had been trouble-stabbing some problem for Oak before the new orders came through, neither of them was very happy about being reassigned mid mission. Despite their unhappiness they'd treated Sarge well enough and their adepts had worked with ours on the data processing, but no one was willing to accept anyone but themselves as the missions leader. That included Sarge, who'd immediately recognized two people who wouldn't blink at sacrificing a few guardsmen.

Since no one was feeling overly cooperative, the basic plan was for each team to send a separate party to the dead planet and look for clues. If anyone found anything interesting they'd call for the adepts, and if they found hostiles they'd call for reinforcements from the ship or the other teams. It wasn't the most efficient plan, but without some clear and present danger it was the best we were going to get. The final meeting between the three interrogators and the Captain was to determine who would go where on the planet and how much support the Occurrence Border would provide.

The planet was sort of shitty and probably had a population of only five or six million before it got wiped out. Battleaxe called dibs on what passed

for the local center of government and Sword-guy wanted to take his team to the largest commercial shuttleport. Sarge carefully considered the remaining options, then ignored the pointed suggestions that he inspect the planet's only military base in favor of the smallest shuttleport on the planet. Sarge carefully deflected their questions about his choice with vague comments about hunches and feelings, he managed to hold out until the Captain got annoyed and forced the discussion move along.

It was agreed that the Occurrence Border would hang in stationary orbit and handle communications while each team was given their own shuttle. The emergency support options consisted of the remaining two shuttles loaded with all the armsmen the Captain thought he could reasonably spare and the ship's lances. Everyone was reminded that the last time those lances were used at that range they'd missed by seventeen kilometers and had to be walked, while still firing at full power and jiggling a lot, to their target. The Captain recommended not asking for any precision strikes then called an end to the meeting.

Sarge gathered us up in the shuttlebay for a final briefing before we went down. The ground team consisted of everyone except the adepts, who would be hanging out in the Comm room and analyzing whatever we sent to them, and Doc who was only in there to wish us luck before he went to get the medbay ready for whoever got shot this time. Hannah and Ol' Bill were there too, mostly to remind us that Jim was considered essential to the smooth-ish running of the ship. It would go poorly for us if he came back in anything less than factory-fresh condition.

Our briefing started with Sarge acknowledging that randomly walking around a deserted planet "looking for clues" was about the stupidest way of gathering information invented. This stole Tink and Nubby's thunder and shut them up for long enough for Sarge to explain our real mission, which was to hang out within support range of the other two teams. If something was going to try and kill nosy people, it'd probably start with them and we'd be in a good position to swoop in and save the day or make a clean escape. All we had to do was stay near the shuttle and keep out of trouble while the people who actually knew what a clue looked like did the hard work. It was a very good plan.



The cherry on top was the location Sarge'd picked for us. He'd chosen it for three reasons, firstly he'd figured that running around a military facility that was probably filled with partially activated defences and undetonated ordinance was incredibly stupid and no other locations really had anything tailored to our skills. Secondly it was pretty much between the other teams, which would make supporting them easier. Finally, the planet's climate was cold and wet and that tropical island shuttleport was the only credible location that wasn't currently being rained, snowed, or sleeted on. So yeah, we were going there because it looked like it would be a pleasant day at the beach. Doc and his girlfriend looked vaguely jealous as we boarded the shuttle.

We'd been offered a pilot for our shuttle, but two of us were qualified to fly the thing and we preferred having someone we really trusted in charge of our only transport. Also, Nubby pointed out that they might rat us out to the other teams. Tink and Jim had brief, heated debate about who was pilot and co-pilot, which ended poorly for both of them when their slap-fight over the joystick knocked over Sarge's recaff.

Aside from the brief excitement provided by Sarge chewing out the techies, the ride down was fairly boring, even the view out the window was dull. The top half of the planet was white with snow, the bottom half was mostly water or clouds, and even Nubby couldn't find any obscene looking continents. Twitch tried to liven things up by speculating on what type of xenos horrors had abducted everyone and what unspeakable things were being done to them, but stopped when Fumbles looked like he was going to start crying.



Our first look at the shuttleport confirmed Sarge's genius: the place was obviously built as some sort of vacation resort for rich merchants. A quick flyover turned up a complete lack of people, vehicles, or xenos monstrosities and an environment scan revealed nothing more dangerous than a chance of sunburn, so we set down right on there on the beach. There was a final comm check and reiteration of the ground rules, then everyone went off to enjoy themselves.

Now, you may be getting the impression that we weren't taking our mission as seriously as it warranted, and anyone from the other teams would've certainly said so. There's a difference between not being serious and not being effective though, and we fully intended to complete the objectives we'd set for ourselves.

Since in our eyes our main job was to be ready to save the other teams'

bacon, everyone stayed within sprinting distance of the shuttle and Jim kept its engines warmed up. In deference to the fact that this was potentially hostile territory everyone outside the shuttle stuck in groups and Twitch worked with Jim to set up a rudimentary perimeter around the LZ. Finally, Spot the wonder-drone was feeding everything it saw to our adepts and we were definitely keeping our eyes open as we strolled around the beach and inspected all the bungalows. Admittedly Nubby was the one doing most of the inspecting, but it's not like anyone expected us to find anything anyway.

Sarge picked through a few beach-chairs until he found one that didn't have a big vaguely human-shaped hole in it, and made himself comfortable. He lounged in the sun and listened to the other teams' comm traffic, from the sound of it Battleaxe had already spotted the silhouettes and didn't to be pointed towards them. The burly noncom laid back and idly watched as Twitch built some truly impressive sand castles.

Jim elected to stay on the shuttle, claiming that sand was bad for his metal bits, but sent out a few servo-skulls and chatted with Tink over the comm. The techie had yanked off the two grox skulls his drone had been encased in, and was nauseating the adepts trying to watch the vid-feed by racing it against Jim's skulls. When they started arguing over whether ramming was allowed and if busting through walls should count as a penalty Sarge made them switch to hide-and-seek.

While everyone else stayed near the shuttle, Nubby grabbed Fumbles and went to do an exhaustive search of the nearby buildings. At first it was for small and valuable items that might need a new home, but after a while Nubby realized that he was being unprofessional. A few minutes later he and Fumbles had acquired a wheelbarrow and switched to searching for large and valuable items that might need a new home. Fumbles happily pushed the barrow and learned several important lessons about the difference between looting and recycling.

Everything was going splendidly and Sarge was considering taking a nap when Twitch screamed "MOVEMENT" and dove into a freshly dug sand-trench.

Despite the amount of shit the rest of us gave Twitch over his paranoia, we all trusted his spotting skills with our lives. Within seconds Sarge and Tink landed in the trench next to him and overhead the drone engaged its stealth field. On the far side of the shuttle Nubby and Fumbles dropped their loot and got ready to either flank or sprint to safety. The only person who didn't respond immediately was Jim, who poked his head out the shuttle's



door to see what the fuss was about.

Sarge screamed at the cogboy to get back into cover and drove the point home by chucking a nearby entrenching tool at the open hatch. The shovel barely missed Jim's head and he scrambled back with a little yelp while the rest of us tried to spot whatever Twitch had seen. When nothing happened over the next few minutes Sarge started ordering Tink, Jim, and Fumbles to scan the area. Before he managed to finish the order a buzzing voice cut in and told us to "Remain in your current position and cease communication. Your vessel will be yielded to our service."

Everyone pegged the voice as a tech-priest of some variety. Anyone else with an augmetic voicebox would've at least tried to make it sound normal, this guy sounded like a cross between a garbage disposal and an opera singer. Everyone was still processing this development when Tink's knee jerk response kicked in and he screamed "JAM IT UP YOUR METAL ASS TECNHOFACIST" into his combead.

Instead of an explosion of angry binary or an immediate attack, the awkward silence was broken by a second voice exploding into laughter. It wasn't exactly happy laughter: it had a definite hysterical edge to it and went on for far longer than Tink's comment warranted. As we sat and waited for it to peter out Sarge cut his comm and asked Twitch if he recognized the voice. Both of them agreed that the speaker was female and someone they'd met before, but couldn't pin it down. Sarge was on the edge of interrupting and asking for some identification when the tech-priest commanded the woman to "Cease her frivolity." This did not go over well.

You know how some people argue like an old married couple and it's sort of cute to watch? Well this wasn't anything like that. They argued like, well, two people who'd been stuck on a desert island together for far too long. Or one person and one damaged blender. It wasn't just awkward to listen to, it was actually a little scary. Weeks or months of pent-up venom poured out in a nearly-incomprehensible tirade from the woman and the priest countered with commands for silence and bursts of binary. It only got harder to listen to when the cogboy cut his comm and she left hers on.



Now that she was talking most of us recognized the woman's voice and at Sarge's order we followed the sound of the argument. After a few blocks of walking we found a familiar guardswoman, face gone crimson, screaming at a senior-looking tech-priest. They were standing in the middle of a half-looted convenience store with half a dozen servitors forming a menacing looking ring around the woman. Nubby and Twitch grabbed Tink before he could say anything stupid and Sarge awkwardly cleared his throat.

To everyone's surprise, especially Sarge's, the argument came to a sudden halt. Our fearless leader was nearly knocked off his feet as the guardswoman screamed his name and tackled him. Nubby took a picture.

While being tackled by a heavily armed and moderately attractive woman is surprising in its own right, what really caught us off guard was the fact that she was crying. See, we knew this guardswoman, both as a fellow passenger from the Occurrence Border, and as one of the few survivors of a rather unsuccessful mission to purge some genestealers. She was originally from some nobby regiment and had one of those thirty syllable names, but we all called her Aimy.



Now, if any of us had been asked to describe Aimy we'd have used words like Solid, Professional, and Dangerous. Never hysterical or weepy or inclined-to-hug-random-noncoms. I mean, it was a commonly held belief that she'd saluted her own mother every night before bed. Which sort

of made sense when you remembered that her mother was a Lord General. Anyway the point is that her breakdown was terrifying more than anything.

Sarge disentangled himself and, as politely as possible, asked Aimy why the hell she was here. Last any of us heard her team had been farther towards Tau space and had been one of the ones to go MIA. Nubby chimed in and pointed out that everyone had thought she was dead. Twitch suggested that maybe she was, and asked Fumbles to check if she was a ghost. This triggered another round of hysterical giggling and got Twitch a hug of his own, which terrified the demolitions trooper.

The reunion was brought to a halt when the tech-priest rolled over to us with his servitor posse. In typical high-ranking cogboy fashion he commanded everyone to shut up and take him to the shuttle. Our presence was not ideal, but could be made to serve the Omnisiah. This triggered another shift from hysterical to furious in Aimy.

This time we were in a better position to understand what was being said. The main thread of the argument seemed to be that the Magos had gotten everyone killed, refused to call for a pickup, and gotten them stranded on an empty world for his bloody metal god. Aimy was done serving the Omnissiah.

For his part the cogboy, who Sarge finally recognized as the xeno-tech hunting Magos who'd been part of our expedition, turned his vocoder up to maximum volume and tried to counter each individual point. Why he was doing it was a mystery, because everything he said just made Aimy angrier and convinced us that the guy was a complete tool. The bullshit about how his mission couldn't be jeopardized by bringing in unbelievers or how he was not responsible for the behavior of organics was bad enough, but the crowning moment of tool-dom was when he pointed at three familiar looking servitors and claimed that Aimy's companions "still retained the majority of bodily functions." That neatly answered the question of where the arbite and clerics she'd been teamed up with had gotten to.

Over the next few minutes things degraded even further as Tink started needling the tech-priest as well. Sarge was about ready to step in and end the shouting match one way or another when Twitch sidled up next to him. In the quietest and calmest voice he could manage, Twitch told Sarge that these guys weren't the movement he'd spotted and he was fairly sure we were being watched. He asked if we could, very casually, start falling back to a more defensible position. Sarge looked around at the floor to ceiling windows on three of the walls around us and agreed that that might be a good idea.

Employing the entirety of his acting talent, Sarge announced that some fresh air might calm everyone down. Nubby took the hint and grabbed Aimy while Sarge tried to chivy the Magos out of the shop, when that didn't work he just got behind the tech-priest and started pushing until he got the point. Twitch, trying to keep his head from swivelling like a nervous pigeon's, set his eyes on a sturdy looking garage and led the way

Twitch casually gave a hand signal as he walked. Tink correctly interpreted this as an order to send out his stealthed drone and Fumbles got the point after Nubby kicked him in the shin. The psyker swayed a little and tripped over a curb, but when we hauled him to his feet he shook his



head and muttered about everything looking clear.

At the back of the group the shouting match continued, even though Aimy's heart obviously wasn't in it anymore. She'd picked up on what was happening and everyone could tell she was trying to hide the fact that she was terrified. The only people that were oblivious to the change in the atmosphere were the tech-priests. The Magos had really started picking up steam now that Aimy was distracted; he was loudly badmouthing just about everyone and made it very hard to concentrate on looking casual.

We'd reached the edge of the garage when Tink made a sort of high pitched wheezing sound and went pale. Everyone took the hint and started power-walking towards the opening. Well, almost everyone. At the back of the group the Magos and his servitors had come to a halt and the tech-priest was in full monologue mode. He stood there, stock still and surrounded by his herd of servitors, and loudly declared his genius, devotion, and general craziness to the rest of the world. As he entered the safety of the garage Sarge glanced back at the Magos then at Tink, who shook his head violently.

Sarge sighed, grabbed a smoke grenade, and chucked it at the Magos' feet at the exact same moment the sniper fired.

The shot was perfectly aimed: a nearly invisible las-beam of came in at the Magos' eye level. It would've been a clean kill if he hadn't had a refractor shield. There was a blinding flash where the beam met the shield and the tech-priest started screaming orders at his servitors.

Now that the charade was over Sarge asked for a sitrep as everyone got their weapons ready.

Tink claimed there were two hostiles wearing some sort of stealth suits and carrying rifles, neither of them had line of sight inside the garage. Their stealth was damned good, so there were probably more he hadn't spotted, but they either couldn't hit us or were all focusing on the Magos.

Speaking of the Magos, he'd apparently decided not to come join us in our cover and had hunkered down in the smoke with his servitors. The six meat-puppets had formed a sort of wall around him and were firing an indiscriminate barrage into the surrounding area. It didn't look like they had any real idea of where the snipers were and as we watched two of the servitors went down to incredibly well-placed shots. Our desire to go out there and help him dropped sharply.

All of us were familiar with sniper and counter-sniper tactics. Tink was told to continue sweeping for hostiles and Fumbles was ordered to do likewise. The theory was that once we had their location we could lay down suppressing



fire or start flanking. Until we knew where all the snipers were, even if none of them had shot at us yet, we were effectively pinned. Unfortunately, something about these hostiles had Fumbles stumped he could barely even locate the ones Tink had spotted. The little guy gritted his teeth and pump more psyk into his detection field, but we all felt a wave of despair from him as he only succeeded in covering himself in painful sheet of static-electricity.

Outside another servitor dropped to a head-shot and the Magos started yelling at us to help him.

It was officially time to either shit or get off the pot, at the current rate the Magos was going to be dead before we had all the snipers localized. The more pragmatic members of the squad pointed out that this wasn't such a bad thing and suggested that we just run for the shuttle while he drew fire, but Sarge vetoed this perfectly valid plan. At his order everyone popped smoke and split out in two teams.

Sarge, Aimy, and Twitch pushed out and started laying suppressive fire and grenades onto the two rough locations Tink had given them. Tink, Nubby, and Fumbles went out the back to try and flank the sniper between us and the shuttle. Meanwhile, Jim ordered his three skulls to help the drone search the area, warmed up the shuttle's perimeter defences, and relayed the situation to the ship.

Everything started out so well. The two snipers immediately stopped firing, Tink managed to spot a third and put a plasma-bolt through the bastard's cover, and our flankers were almost in position. It was really looking like we were going to be able to neutralize the hostile or at least get to the Magos and start a nice, orderly retreat. Then two things happened and everything went to shit.

At first we thought the snipers had popped smokes of their own and were falling back. The buildings they were holed up in went sort of hazy and vague, but the fog didn't drift and a second later the snipers resumed firing from inside the cloud. Another servitor went down and Twitch's grenade detonated in mid-arc. Fumbles screamed "PSYKER" at the exact same moment the lascannon fired.

Lascannon really isn't the right world, but damned if we could think of a better one. A lascannon typically fires a large, powerful beam, and brief beam. This thing was barely larger than a multi-laser and walked in a brief arc across the battlefield. It just sliced through everything it touched: walls, lampposts, the car Sarge was hiding behind, servitors, and tech-priests.

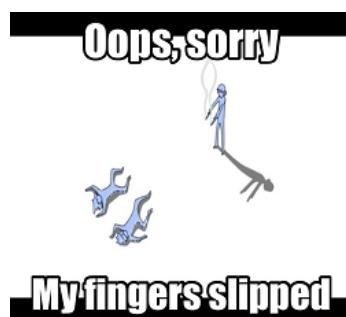




it's metal legs. At the last second a pair of hair-thin beams stabbed into the spider and it fell to the ground. Sarge breathed a sigh of relief which turned into a choked scream when something tightened across his throat.

Twitch hauled Sarge out from under the decapitated car by the collar. It was an impressive feat given their relative sizes and the unhelpful way the big man was flailing around. The servitors were scragged, those last sniper shots seemed to have finished off the cogboy, and there was no telling what the psyker or lascannon would do next. In his professional opinion it was time to live to fight another day.

Twitch hit Sarge with his emergency stimm while Aimy popped her last smoke. Under its cover they half-carried Sarge back to the relative safety of the garage. Once inside, Aimy kept her longlas trained on the smoke-filled entrance while Twitch tried to fill everyone in on the situation. Before he got two words out the lascannon cut through the entire building at shoulder height.



The flanking team was having better luck all things considered. Jim's skulls were hounding the sniper Tink had flushed out and Fumbles had a rough bead on the enemy psyker. Tink sent his drone to get the exact position and charged up his plasma-gun while Nubby and Fumbles poured las-fire and psychic shrieks into the clouds concealing the two active snipers. Their accuracy was abysmal, but the angle of their attack and sheer volume of fire was enough to force the hostiles to rebase. None of them realized how bad the situation had gotten until they heard Twitch's warning

get cut off by the second lascannon strike.

In an uncharacteristic act of bravery Nubby led the charge back towards the garage, taking Fumbles with him and leaving Tink on overwatch. Jim

diverted his medi-skull to follow them, then sent the rest of his minions to find the lascannon before it could fire again. They found the building teetering alarmingly, but still upright and with Sarge standing in the middle, barking at the other two troopers to get back on their feet.

Back in the garage Sarge was dealing with a minor mutiny. He was of the opinion that Magos was still alive and a pickup needed to be made, Twitch and Aimy disagreed. Nubby got to the door just in time to hear the noncom shout that the Magos was still moving and could be saved if they hurried. Aimy countered this argument by hefting her long-las and putting a hot-shot through the head of the twitching tech-priest. Further debate was delayed by the roof caving in. There's nothing like a few tons of collapsing stone to motivate a hasty retreat. Nubby, as usual, led our sprint back to Twitch's position with a stumped up Sarge hard on his heels and the rest of the group trailing behind. None of us even registered Jim's question over the comms.

As we regrouped Tink's drone finally found his target, a large blob of overcharged plasma sailed across the plaza and into a tasteful little restaurant. Instead of just burning through the building it splashed against something in the back with a crackling explosion. Tink cheered, then swore, then yelled something about tackle and burst into laughter. Twitch barely managed to pull him down in time: the sniper's shot cut a neat little notch out of the techie's helmet.

None of us wanted to start this shit again. Fumbles threw up a half-assed cloak, and we all started falling back towards the shuttle in pairs. Now that we knew what to look for we could see three indistinct blurs poking in and out of cover, we did our best to return fire as we ran, but the buggers had nerves of steel. For every ten shots we put down range they returned one incredibly well aimed one. Only the combination of our cover, Fumbles' cloak, and a huge amount of suppressive fire kept us alive.

That's not to say we got out of there unscathed, those hair-thin las-bolts nailed everyone at least once. If you stuck a toe outside of cover they'd shoot it, and if you didn't they'd try and punch a shot right through. The only one of us who managed to score a hit on them was Aimy, and the second time she tried to line up a shot her long-las exploded in her hands as they put a shot down the barrel. Stopping and waiting for Jim's medi-skull, which had gone Emperor-knows-where during the retreat, was out of the question, so Sarge wound up popping another stimm and carrying her for the last sprint to the shuttle.

We all felt tremendous relief when the shuttle's multilasers finally forced



the snipers to back off.



As we reached the top of the shuttle's loading ramp Twitch asked if anyone knew what had happened to the lascannon. Right on cue a section of bulkhead started glowing then the damned beam punched through with a spray of molten metal. Jim didn't bother waiting for an order, the engines roared to life and our big, ungainly shuttle started to wallow upwards. As the rear ramp began to close the lascannon fired again and neatly burned through its hydraulics. Everyone resisted the urge to go poke their heads out the broken door and see what was shooting those beams at us.

At this point Tink, who'd been rather focused on not getting shot like the rest of us, realized that someone was missing. He yanked the drone controller off his harness and started screaming at Jim to slow down. Jim correctly interpreted this as a terrible idea and ignored it. Everyone who wasn't collapsing from blood loss or stimm aftereffects watched as the techie frantically slammed at the drone's controls and screamed curses. The show was briefly interrupted when the lascannon burned through the floor about a meter in front of Tink's feet, but resumed after a few evasive maneuvers slammed us around like pinballs.

It didn't take a savant to see that Tink was losing his race. Spot the wonder-drone was great at stealth and recon, but it just wasn't built for this sort of speed. Nubby clomped over and put a hand on techie's shoulder. He suggested that maybe Tink should park the drone somewhere, we'd probably be able to come back and get it in a few years.

Tink whirled around and had his drone controller raised like a club when the lascannon fired again. The shuttle pitched forward as the tail of the vessel exploded in a fireball.



The difference in attitude between Tink and the rest of us when the lascannon took out our tail engine was profound. While everyone else screamed, clutched at the safety handles, or prayed to the Emperor, he let out a whoop of joy and ran to the jammed ramp. A few sniper beams sailed past him and were ignored in favor of a small tan shape which, now that our speed had been cut in half, was steadily growing larger.

Tink cooed at the damned thing like a puppy, which was admittedly better than a girlfriend, but still. As it closed the last dozen meters he spread his arms wide and tried to catch it, only to get knocked off his feet

as a smaller and faster object sailed through. The drone followed a second later and slammed into Twitch, who'd been holding on for dear life in a far corner.

Tink sat up and groped at the object that had knocked him on his ass. He raised two blood-covered hands, registered that he was holding a severed head attached to a medi-skull, and started screaming. Jim appeared in the hatch leading to the cockpit asked if the magos had made it aboard.

The cogboy barely managed to wrench the gorey thing away from Tink before it was chucked back out the tail hatch. Jim held the Magos' head up like some sort of trophy and turned to face Sarge with a rather proud expression on his face. Unfortunately our barely conscious leader wasn't able to offer any suitable praise, all he managed was bleary "Who's flying the shuttle?"

Jim swore and ran back into the cockpit, barely managing to dodge the next lascannon beam. Thankfully that was the last shot, everyone breathed a sigh of relief and slumped into their seats. Well more of a gasp of relief, we were all pretty out of breath and our ears were hurting for some reason. Tink eyed all the holes in the cargo-bay and kicked the rest of us to our feet.

We wound up packing seven people and, for some damned reason, the drone into the two-man cockpit. It wasn't comfortable, but at least there was air.

Between all the sweating, bleeding people, the Magos' severed head, and Nubby's uniquely indescribable odor that cockpit was getting pretty manky by the time we reached the Occurrence Border. As soon as the bay was pressurized we piled out and collapsed on the first available surface. The ship's air, which always smelled faintly of burnt cabbage, had never tasted so sweet.

The Hospitaller and her minions were waiting for us in the docking bay along with a disconcertingly high number of tech-priests. Thinking fast, if not hard, Tink jammed the techno-heretical drone up the front of his shirt, which made him look pregnant and caused a fair bit of amusement among the orderlies. None of the cogboys seemed to notice, and after they'd taken possession of the Magos' head, for Data Extraction they'd said, all of them left without incident. Sarge tried to follow them, but only got a few meters before the Hospitaller neatly tripped him onto a gurney. The incredibly fluffy pillow defeated any further attempts



to refuse treatment.

While the burns Aimy had received when her long-las exploded got the most attention, all of us wound up getting hauled to the medbay by Doc's valkyrian girlfriend. Well, except for Jim, who tagged along with the other tech-priests to keep an eye on his... sample? trophy? rescuee? Whatever you called the head your medi-skull had sawed off the still-warm body of its patient. Seriously, that right there is why no one trusts those things.

Anyway, everyone except Sarge was stuck in the medbay for a while. Despite their size, those sniper beams had been just as nasty as any las-gun's, and it was surprising how many holes we had in us. Sarge was set loose after a basic patch-job and yet another stimulant, thankfully not a combat one this time, to go and talk with the adepts and other Interrogators. Doc made him promise to come back for a complete round of treatment the second the situation was resolved.

Speaking of Doc, he was rather happy to see us all again. Nubby filled him in on the basics of what had happened, with Twitch and Fumbles correcting the occasional exaggeration. Doc was as surprised as the rest of us had been when we

got to the part about running into Aimy and the Magos, he wheeled over to where she was being treated by the Hospitaller just to verify we weren't bullshitting him. In his semi-professional medical opinion she was in for a rough few days as they speed-grew the skin on her face and arms, but she should recover without much scarring or needing any augmetics. He claimed his girlfriend had a lot of experience treating burns, something about working with trainee dominions.

While the rest of us chatted with Doc, Tink had pulled the screen around his bed and loudly threatened to shoot anyone who looked inside. Occasionally the nurses would look up at the loud clanging sounds and the Do Not Disturb sign then start giggling. When the humor of the situation wore off and the noise was starting to get really annoying, we steeled our nerves and went to see just what he was doing in there.

We found Tink with the drone between his legs, but thankfully his pants were on. He was trying to pop out an impressive dent in the front of Spot's chassis. When asked how it'd happened he reminded us of the enemy psyker he'd taken out. It'd used some sort of shield to deflect his plasma bolt and looked like it was about to launch its own attack. So he'd had Spot ram the bastard, it's hard to cast spells when fifty kilos of angry drone is bashing



your head in.

Turns out the psyker had one hell of a helmet though, hence the dent. Still, it'd convinced the warpy bastard that it was time to fall back, so he was calling it a win. Doc, who'd been eyeing the large lens next to the dent, cut into the story at this point and asked if that meant he had a clear picture of the attackers. Tink shrugged and admitted that he probably did, but so did the adepts who'd been watching the feed. They'd get around to telling us tell us who it was eventually and he was the only one who could fix this dent, so his priorities were clear.

The rest of us were a little more curious so Nubby yanked the spanner out of Tink's hands and refused to give it back until he pulled up the vid of the ramming. After a little fast-forwarding he found it and everyone crowded around the data-slate. We were treated to a view of a small room with a blurry figure standing in the middle of it and gesturing. As we watched the blur was replaced by a large circular shield and the screen went blindingly bright. When the flash faded there was a tall robed figure with a sword and egg-shaped helmet standing there panting. He raised his sword, gathered some sort of lighting around it, and then the drone hit him right in the back of his stupid hat.

Other Inquisitorial agents might have sat there and carefully examined the psyker's robes or weapon for clues. We just kept having Tink rewind it so we could see the headbutt again. When he got the sound turned on it made this great sort of hollow clang every time the drone hit him. There was much debate over which was the best part, the initial impact or the part where his head went through the drywall and got stuck. Either way it was the best show we'd seen in a long time

We wound up putting the vid on repeat on all the screens in the medbay. It was very therapeutic to see the bastard flailing his fancy sword around in an attempt to fend off the drone and cut his head free at the same time. At Twitch's urging Tink even etched a little egg-helmeted face on the side of Spot's chassis to commemorate the event. Everyone was in remarkably good spirits considering we were stuck in



the medbay for the foreseeable future. Well, except for Aimy who was still tranqued up for the worst part of her burn treatment. Fumbles tried to send her a mental image of the whole thing as she slept, but Doc made him stop after a nearby diagnostic cogitator caught fire.

While the rest of us were laughing ourselves sick over the Inquisitions Funniest Home Videos, Sarge was attending a very serious meeting with some very serious people. You could tell they were serious because none of them even smiled when the adepts played the drone-ramming clip for them; they just muttered to each other about which craftworld the Eldar Warlock had come from and what possible hand they could have in everything. Sarge primarily contributed to this discussion by resting his head on the table and agreeing with anything our team's adepts said.

In Sarge's opinion the other two Interrogators were putting way too much effort into trying to understand the Eldar's motives. They'd gone through the vids from Tink's drone and Jim's skulls frame by frame and determined that there'd been a Warlock, three rangers, and some sort of heavy weapon team operating a bright-lance. There was a little debate on the last point, since all of Jim's drones had been shot before they could get a good picture. Neither of the other teams had run into any hostiles, and they hadn't spotted anything when they'd done a flyby of the island, so it looked like that was it for their ground assets.



Sword-guy halfheartedly suggested that the Eldar could be behind the disappearances, they were xenos with access to warp powers and archeotech after all. He didn't press the issue when Sarge grumpily asked why they hadn't used their creepy-silhouette-leaving people-disappearer instead of shooting at us with fancy lasguns.

Battleaxe claimed that the small size of their force suggested they were an assassination team. Given their attack pattern, location, and the fact that no one else of importance was nearby, their target must have been the Magos. From his spot at the end of the table Sarge grumbled that he'd told everyone the xenos had been trying to kill the tech-priest an hour ago. Battleaxe ignored him and pointed out that the real question was whether this was connected to the disappearances and if it was because Magos had known something.

Rather annoyed at having been ignored, Sarge sarcastically suggested that they ask the Magos that question. To his considerable surprise everyone

took this seriously, with Sword-guy even asking his psyker if he was capable of leading a seance. The debate over whether the ritual was more likely to result in useful information or a daemon manifestation was still raging when the tech-priests arrived.

Just saying they arrived doesn't do it justice. Every single cogboy over the rank of Enginseer on the Occurrence Border walked, rolled, floated, or slithered into the meeting room. The ratio of metal to meat in there hit fifty-fifty in the first few seconds and climbing towards eighty-twenty when Jim brought up the rear of the procession. Sarge took notice of how nervous the younger cogboy looked as, at an order from a senior tech-priest, he sealed the door behind him.

It occurred to the burly noncom that if a bunch of Guardsmen had done something like this, it would've been because some officer was about to become a friendly fire statistic. Sarge edged his chair away from the table and towards the most defensible corner he could find and casually put one hand in his pocket. No one except Jim paid him any attention. The Enginseer leaned out from behind his seniors and awkwardly tried to indicate that this was not the time to pull out a grenade. Or possibly that his neck hurt and he wanted to lie down for a while, Jim was bad at Guard hand signals.

After a bit of unpleasant silence the coggiest of the cogboys finally decided that the tension had built to acceptable levels. In a loud, authoritative, and entirely synthetic voice he proclaimed that a seance would not be necessary, they'd extracted all relevant data from the Magos' eidetic memory chip. He just sort of stopped there with no explanation of what the data actually was, leaving the non-metallic portion of the room awkwardly waiting. The second Battleaxe began to ask, the head tech-priest cut her off with a shout of "That information is sacred. It contains Mechanicus secrets. Sharing it with the those who do not venerate the Omnissiah in his true form would be heretical." The cogboys behind him echoed the words Sacred, Secrets, and Heretical like shitty backup singers.

Sarge let out a weary sigh and rubbed his aching temples. It was going to be a long meeting. When Sarge finally staggered back into the medbay he looked bloody exhausted. He pretty much collapsed in the first available bed and at his request we stopped the continuous loop of the Warlock getting his head stuck in the wall. Doc gave him some overdue medical treatment he filled us in on the situation.

To start with, he gave us the official word that we'd been shot full of holes



by an Eldar hit-squad. Nubby fistpumped and loudly started calculating what his and Fumbles' share of the pool was. Sarge immediately crushed this happy speculation with the news that the Eldar weren't the cause of the attacks, and had only been there for the Magos unless Aimy could tell us otherwise. No one would be collecting on the pool anytime soon and, unless there was a second group of Eldar, Nubby's odds weren't looking good.

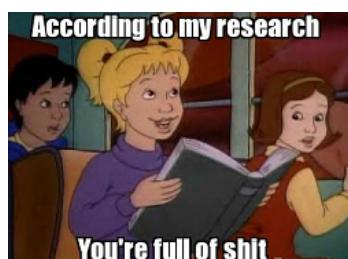
While Nubby whined to himself the discussion shifted to the Magos, his decapitation, and the tech-priests. According to Sarge all of them, even Jim, had a gear up their ass about something they'd gotten out of the Magos' head. It'd been like pulling teeth to get anything out of them, they kept falling back on the whole "We technically only have to answer to the Inquisitor so get an order from him" argument. In end all they were willing to part with was that the Magos had been chasing a piece of archeotech and had tracked it into the xeno territory. He'd intercepted some reports that confirmed that nature

of the archeotech and the heresies the xenos had committed on it. He'd then sent a report to the PROPER AUTHORITIES and was still tracking the archeotech when he was killed by the vile Eldar. Finally, the nature of the tech was not for us to know, but it would not cause the sort of disappearances we'd seen; we should turn our investigations elsewhere.

The priests had refused to say anything more. The PROPER AUTHORITIES had been notified and the matter should be left to them. Further probing into the Mechanicus' holy secrets would be unwise.

It had taken a heroic effort by the other two Interrogators and our old diplomat adept to convince the tech-priests that their warning was understood. The entire army of cogboys had left secure in the knowledge that no one would be poking into their business, and that everyone would be focussing on the completely unconnected matter of the disappearances. The second they were gone one of the psykers had done something that made the room sound all weird and the diplomat had asked for a show of hands.

"Who here," he'd asked, "thinks we're looking for a piece of insanely dangerous archeotech, that's either wiping all intelligent life off worlds or is being pursued by someone who is willing to do so to keep it secret." The



Ayes had it by a landslide; Sarge said it was nice to be reminded that not everyone in the Inquisition was stupid or insane.

In the end the working theory was that someone was hauling this thing from Tau space to the Imperium via warpship. Whether it was to sell, study, worship, or use as a weapon on Imperial worlds was up to debate, but it was obvious that the Mechanicus and the Eldar were both chasing it. It was impressive that whoever was carrying it was managing to stay ahead of both of them, the fact that they were evading pursuit probably explained the semi-random course across the border worlds though.

The question was what to do about it. There was no way we'd back off and let the Admech handle things, Imperial worlds getting wiped out like the one we'd just visited wasn't acceptable. The only options were to try and catch the carrier in a stern chase, try to predict their next destination and set an ambush, or go get some real reinforcements and try to lock down the entire sub-sector. Debates were had, charts were consulted, the Captain was called down, and three possible destinations were laid out.

The Captain was in favor getting reinforcements and wanted us to chart a course to the largest Imperial world along the border. Battleaxe and Sword-guy thought too much damage would be done before a response was mustered. She wanted us to try and jump ahead to a refueling way station that looked like it might be in the right direction; he wanted to head towards a nearby Imperial world with a rather untrusted governor that might be either be a target or buyer. Sarge, who was barely awake enough to follow what was going on, wound up being the tie-breaker.



When all three of his adepts had just shrugged, Sarge had fallen back on his noncom instincts. He'd stood straight, squared his shoulders, and stabbed his finger at the middle option on the chart. Sarge'd loudly declared that it was the only real choice, then retreated back up to the medbay before anyone realized he'd just randomly picked one. None of us saw any problem with this decision making process.

In the morning, or whatever you call it when the ship's lights jump from ten percent to max power and the Captain blares reveille over the comm system, Sarge got around to debriefing Aimy. She told a fairly unpleasant tale of wandering around the ass-end of the sector as the Magos did his thing.

Aimy and her team had been treated like mushrooms, that is to say kept in the dark and fed horseshit. They'd never learned anything about their mission aside from the fact that archotech was involved, and had mostly

spent their time getting shot at by over a dozen different groups ranging from gangers to planetary police forces. It wasn't some sort of giant conspiracy though, the Magos just didn't give a shit; If there was something in the way he'd throw bodies at it all day long if it meant getting through quicker. He wasn't too particular about where those bodies came from either, if his team couldn't handle a problem he'd improvise. Aimy claimed she'd never look at servitors the same way again.

The next to last straw for Aimy had been an ambush by what she now recognized as Eldar. That'd killed off the last of her teammates and forced a retreat onto a merchant vessel. The Magos had then proceeded to intimidate and bully the merchants into taking him on a tour of the empty worlds. To no one but the Magos' surprise, that relationship had ended with the merchants ditching them at the first opportunity, hence the island.



She'd been stuck there alone with him, well him and the servitor converted bodies of her teammates, for a month. The real kicker was the bastard had a sort of interstellar communicator the whole time. He'd used put in a call to the nearest Forge World but had refused to contact anyone else after the merchant incident. So yeah, all that went a long ways to explaining the hysterics and head-shooting incident.

The end of story though, was Aimy had no really new intel. Between obvious clues, well obvious to our adepts, and that incredibly unsubtle warning from the cogboys, we knew just as much as she did. Speaking of that warning, it'd been awfully convenient that the tech-priests had decided to give it to us instead of just staying quiet. We all suspected that Jim and Hannah had had some hand in the matter, but neither of them were talking to us currently.

As the least-shot member of the squad Nubby, and by extension Fumbles, had been sent to chat with two junior tech-priests after they didn't visit us in the medbay. When Nubby returned he claimed that every time he'd tracked one of them down they'd gotten these really nervous expressions and ran for it. He'd given up after Jim had locked him and Fumbles in a section of maintenance corridor. Also, if Ol' Bill came by asking why one of his techs had a massive headache and why there were reports of warp-ghosts on deck eight, that had nothing to do with him or Fumbles getting tired of waiting for the doors to open again.

The destination Sarge had chosen, which turned out to be the way station, was a solid week of warp travel away. After about the second day everyone

was tired of sitting around the medbay with Doc and his ladyfriend, so we moved back to our nice Gellar Field Generator adjacent quarters. Doc complained a little that our treatments, especially Aimy's, weren't finished, but we figured that coming down and making a few housecalls would be good for him. He'd been getting soft being in that chair all day, some exercise would do him good.

Sarge spent most of the next week putting together reports and contingency plans with the adepts and Interrogators, but he spared some thought for Jim and Hannah. He'd interpreted the junior tech-priests' behavior as a sign that their bosses were acting crazier than usual over this whole thing, and made a note to keep an eye on them. Intimidating impressionable young tech-priests was OUR shtick. Since sending Nubby, Twitch, or Tink to watch them was likely to do more harm than good, some words were had with Ol' Bill and the Captain. The duty roster was shuffled and several unintrusive armsmen and engineers were assigned to the same shifts as our cogbros. It might have been a bit of a paranoid over-precaution, but that's sort of what being a guardsmen in the Inquisition is all about.

Nubby and his partner in petty-crime wandered around the ship a lot during our transit. Anyone with enough brains to pour water out of a boot could tell they were planning to sabotage the betting pool in some way before their inevitable loss, but it wasn't worth doing anything about. As long as Nubby didn't egg Fumbles into changing someone mind for them again, it was about as harmless a pastime as they were likely to find. Aimy, who was doing pretty well despite having bags of medical gel stuff taped to half her face and one hand, had initially moved back into the quarters where her team had stayed. Unfortunately, those rooms brought back some unpleasant memories and she was pretty sure the tech-priests were following her. She said that every time she'd turned there was a servo-skull or servitor working nearby. Twitch sympathised with her and offered a solution. He proudly explained that our little base was 99

She accepted of course, how could anyone refuse an offer like that? About an hour after Aimy moved in her suspicions about the servitors were proved correct when the door claymore gibbed a cleaning servitor. Twitch immediately replaced the mine and got another kill within ten minutes, though that one might have just been there to clean up the first. Either way, they



stopped coming after that and Aimy settled into Doc's section of room. She became about as much of a shut-in as Twitch, splitting her time between sleeping off her medical treatment and playing with the toy Tink gave her.



Tink and Twitch's lives over the week generally revolved around our new barracks-mate. Tink, who seemed a little lonely now the Jim wasn't there to argue with him, had fixed Spot's chassis and replaced it's servo-grox-skull disguise before the end of the second day. After that he went back to work on the xenos pulse rifle camouflage project and seized on Aimy as a guinea pig. She was in the market for a new weapon after all, and it was so much easier to cram a pulse rifle into a long-las' chassis than a regular lasgun's. They spent quite a while blowing holes in various objects and badmouthing tech-priests.

Twitch was just glad to have an actual reason to distrust the servitors and turned the barracks' defences up from 11 to about 13. Sarge called for

a slight de-escalation when he started putting small remote charges on every servitor he encountered, just in case they turned en masse. Apparently Jim and Hannah were the ones who had to find and defuse them.

On the seventh day Sarge and the other Interrogators put everyone on an hour alert and prepped the shuttles for immediate launch. The jury was still out on what we were likely to find when we came out of the warp, but if the target was docked at the way station we wanted to neutralize it before it moved again. Also before it attracted a bunch of angry xenos, daemons, or cogboys.

The Occurrence Border came out of the warp at the coordinates where Way Station Alumentum Octavus was supposed to be and found the station to be missing. In its place there was a pitched space battle being fought between an Imperial vessel and an unidentifiable xenos ship.

A quick inspection of the system turned up the missing station farther back in its orbit of the local star than it should have been. In fact, a quick scan revealed that it wasn't in an orbit at all. It was moving in a nice straight line, right down the gravity well. The captain estimated it had passed the point of no-return about four hours ago, and would start burning in around thirty. He refused to speculate on what sort of weapon or magic could just cancel an entire station's orbital velocity.

As for the ships, our initial instinct to go help the Imperial vessel was quelled when by the Captain. He reminded everyone that the only way the Occurrence Border would win a naval engagement was if the other ship spontaneously exploded before it fired its first broadside. If it exploded afterwards the fight would probably be a draw.

Furthermore, the ship was looking less and less like it needed our help the longer we looked at it. It was definitely a lot bigger than its opponent and was throwing out a staggering amount of firepower. Sure it seemed to be missing the smaller ship with every shot, but nothing the xenos was throwing out made it past their void shields. Also it was squawking stuff like *1010011010 FOR CHAOS 1010011010* across all vox channels and the Astropath refused to tell anyone what he was hearing. The tech-priest on duty on the bridge had immediately declared them to be Hereteks then had left his post to go talk to the other cogboys. No one bothered to stop him.

It was really looking like our best option was to just jump right back out of the system and head somewhere less creepy, that's certainly what the Captain recommended anyway. Except there was the tempting little matter of the station. It was the only thing in the system those ships could possibly be fighting over, and neither was in a position to stop us from taking a quick look...

It was a stupid, stupid idea and it's a miracle we survived.

The Captain had stubbornly refused to get any closer to either the station or the fighting ships than necessary. The Occurrence Border was positioned at nearly the maximum distance from the station its shuttles could travel and sat there with its engines and warp-drive spun up. In the Captains words, "If anyone even looks at me funny, I'm leaving all you stupid bastards to die."

With those encouraging words ringing in our ears everyone boarded their shuttles and went to see what was so special about the Way Station Alumen-



tum Octavus. It says something about how distracted everyone was that we were cruising for about a quarter of an hour before we realized Jim was the one flying and Hannah was the co-pilot. The reunion was sort of spoiled by the little note taped to the cockpit door saying "The shuttle is monitored, talk and move as little as possible, wait for us to give the word."

After long and awkward wait Jim finally came back and announced that he'd looped something or other and we could talk. Hannah refused to leave the cockpit, even though we promised Tink wouldn't do anything weird. Aimy opened the conversation with a polite "What the hell is going on here you metal bastard?" but relented when Sarge vouched for Jim as the broest of cogbros.

The explanation that followed was quick, obviously well rehearsed, and fairly terrifying. The gist of it was that the ship's tech-priests weren't just ansty, they were on the edge of mutiny.

Jim hadn't seen the actual data they'd pulled out of the Magos, but whatever this piece of archeotech was, it had practically driven his seniors to a schism. Some of the cogboys wanted the tech destroyed, others wanted it locked away, and a few wanted to study it. The only thing preventing an immediate free-for-all was the fact that the thing wasn't here, and that the Magos had reported it to someone named Juris. The senior tech-priests had eventually agreed to wait for Juris to decide and abide by his decision. Unless, that is, it looked like the archeotech might fall into someone else's hands. Like say, the Inquisition's.

Less holy men, such as us or Jim, might see the ship's senior tech-priests as arrogant, socially stunted, and quite possibly insane, but they were NOT stupid. They knew we'd keep chasing the archeotech and would allow us to continue, for now, but were monitoring all the teams' shuttles and comms. If any of us found information relating to the archeotech or its location we'd be given a single chance to turn it over. If we refused, Jim and the tech-priests piloting the other shuttles had orders to cut our comms and return

to the ship. Leaving all three teams to cook on the falling station. In his words, "The Magos Juris must decide this matter, anything else would result in a schism. When the Mechanicus schisms, titans walk and worlds burn. My superiors will see you all dead before they allow that."



After everyone had digested this speech for a while Nubby put on his weaseliest smile and asked Jim if he'd really do that to his old pals. The flat look he got back from the engineer was incredibly worrying, especially coupled with how Jim turned around and went back into the cockpit without saying anything else.

So anyway that's why, when we finally reached the station, our team decided to stay in the shuttle while the others went on ahead. They could probably handle anything in there without us.

Sarge loudly announced to the other teams that he intended to do visual inspection of the station, y'know for space... stuff. The other Interrogators agreed it was a good idea, but none of us thought of it as anything more than an excuse not to get marooned on a rapidly falling chunk of metal by crazy cogboys. So it was quite a surprise when we cleared a corner and saw the Heretek shuttle already docked to the station.



We managed to call in the sighting just in time to keep the other teams from blundering into a bunch of heavily armed servitors and a tentically tech-priest. According to Battleaxe and Sword-guy the heretek seemed to be searching for something, stopping and doing creepy stuff to every cogitator or comm terminal he encountered. They decided that following the search party and seeing what it turned up was the best use of their time, and switched their teams to stealth mode. We wished them luck and continued our inspection.

Now this is where some less imaginative people would've blown up the docked shuttle, but we were suspicious bastards. Sure enough a little more searching turned up nearly a dozen more shuttles, all of them heavily armed but dormant for now. In our professional opinions twelve to three wasn't good odds, even without factoring in how much better armed they were than us; so Sarge decided to let sleeping shuttles lie and called in a warning to the ground teams, advising them not to engage. Battleaxe interrupted and asked him to repeat the message, it was hard to hear over all the shooting.

Luckily Sarge's facepalm turned out to be premature. Neither ground team was actually involved in the battle, they were just watching as some third party shot seven types of hell out of the patrol. The question of who the Hereteks were fighting was answered by the sight of a familiar lascannon beam stabbing out of the station hull a short distance away. Aimy summed up everyone's opinion of this development with an incredible streak of swearing.

Different people are curious about different things. Sword-guy was wondering what sort of convoluted plot the Eldar were running. Battleaxe was

curious about what the Heretek was looking for in the cogitators. Our team didn't worry about that sort of complex bullshit; we just wanted to know how the Eldar had gotten onto the station, because we sure as hell didn't see any other shuttles out here.



Thanks to the adepts we all knew the pointy-eared bastards liked to use fancy hidden teleporting web dealies to get around, but that's not the sort of thing you find tucked into the corner of a human way station. Either their teleporters had range from where their ship was duking it out with the hereteks', which Jim claimed was incredibly unlikely, or someone was trying to be sneaky. Guardsmen don't like it when other people are sneaky, it typically ends with us getting shot in the back, so we decided to take a harder look at the station.

Since we didn't want to alert anyone to our presence out here, our moderately untrustworthy pilots did what they called a Passive Scan. We understood this to be the equivalent of looking real hard at something, but not going so far as to throw a rock at it to check for mines. Unfortunately, while it didn't blow our cover, it also didn't turn up anything. Sarge was debating ordering some figurative rock-throwing, when Tink announced that it was time to use some real scanners built by real scientists.

Jim hastily leaned out and tapped his "You are being monitored" sign before Tink finished pulling off Spot's skulls. There was an awkward sort of pantomimed argument, in which Jim managed to convey that he couldn't turn the cameras off again and Tink managed to convey that Jim was a colossal metal asshole. In the end Tink wound up putting on his void helmet and stepping out the lock with his drone before pulling off its disguise.

Since no one had anything better to do, we all clustered around the little airlock window and tried to watch over Tink's shoulder. It wasn't very interesting, all we could see was him poking at his xenos dataslate and muttering to himself. The real action was happening down below us, where the drone engaged its stealth field and started taking some very close looks at the station and shuttles. Whether it was due to Tink having a bit of experience looking for Eldar with his drone, or pure dumb luck, or because



Tau drone tech was really just that good, he found a shuttle that was not like the others in just under five minutes. This did not please the Jim, who had to endure Tink making faces at him through the cockpit window as he relayed the drone's data.

What appeared to be a fairly standard, if gruesomely decorated, Imperial-style shuttle to our eyes, looked like a bat winged xenos craft to Spot the Wonder Drone. It had sharp, forward swept wings with odd chunks missing and these weird mandible-looking wings under the cockpit, but that wasn't what really caught our attention. What really caught our attention was the two massive lascannons slung under it, this thing didn't just have our shuttle's little wing turrets outclassed, it had us completely out-schooled. Tink very carefully parked his drone above the xenos shuttle, and a quick debate over what to do about it was held.

It says something about how shaken we were by Jim's little warning that we went with Nubby's idea.

So no shit, there we were, hovering over a camouflaged xenos attack shuttle carrying more fire-power than any three of our birds, and instead of running away or trying to destroy it before it realized we were there, we were trying to figure out how to steal it. The long warp voyage out to this backwater sector must have rotted our brains.

Quite aside from how stupidly dangerous an idea this was, it had absolutely nothing to do with why we'd come out here in the first place. In the station below us the other two teams had just engaged the Heretek forces in an effort to take a captive and figure out why they were here. In space above us two incredibly dangerous ships were locked in a brutal dog-fight while our own, completely combat-incapable, ship nervously watched from the sidelines. Somewhere across the immaterium an unknown archeotech device was cutting a swathe of destruction towards Imperial space. And yet, our primary concern was nicking this fancy looking xenos shuttle. Possibly while its owners were busy shooting up our companions. Truly we were the pinnacle of Inquisitorial professionalism.

It really wasn't our fault though; the tech-priests were obviously to blame. If they hadn't been plotting to maroon us in space, we wouldn't have felt nearly so motivated to acquire an alternate means of transportation. When you combine that sort of threat with the opportunity offered by an incredibly valuable unattended vehicle, heretical xenotech though it may be, it's entirely unreasonable to expect a poor guardsman to resist temptation.



Secure in the knowledge that our behavior was completely and totally justifiable, we prepped for our breaching tools and formed up in our shuttle's airlock.



Twitch provided some cutting charges, which were carefully placed using the drone's little servo arm. When everything was in place Jim, who'd eventually stopped trying to convince us to do something saner, flew us as close as he could without alarming any hostile shuttles. A trio of his little skulls were deployed and leashed like sled dogs, then he departed and us drifting in space above the holographically disguised shuttle. All things considered, it was a very good thing that

Twitch was up to date on his meds and Fumbles wasn't feeling particularly nervous.

The skulls hauled us across the gap as, just outside of our line of sight, the charges went off and the shuttle's bay depressurized. As the last breath of air leaked out our five man, one woman team zipped in. We crossed into the grav field and landed inside the shuttle with weapons ready, just like the trained professionals we supposedly were. Well, at least five of us did. Whether it was due to her injured hand or because she wasn't used to performing these sorts of shenanigans, Aimy missed her mark and wound of caroming off the hull. Everyone turned to watch as she spun off into space, swearing a blue streak as the skulls raced out to catch her. All of us were so distracted that we were nearly pushed out after her when a gust of wind suddenly hit us in the back.

Our squad turned around expecting to see, then shoot, some effeminate xenos. Instead, a pair of big scarecrow-lookin things with fish-shaped heads were standing there staring at us. At least we thought they were staring at us, the damned things didn't have eyes. Their weapons were certainly pointed our way though, which was what really mattered.

Fighting in a vacuum is odd: nothing sounds right. You can feel and sort of hear your weapons firing through your arms, but the shots don't make a sound. It's amazing how much you rely on little audio cues in a battle, it was hard as hell to tell how many shots we were firing and even harder to tell if they were hitting. Oddly, it was almost as if we'd lost exactly ten percent of our ballistics skills due to the unfamiliar terrain. We coped though, and poured a torrent of las and plasma fire into the two hostiles.

Surprisingly, the fish-headed xenos didn't seem too bothered by our barrage. They just soaked our fire and slowly tracked their weapons onto us, then everything went funny. Not ha-ha funny, rather "Whoa I can taste the

color purple with my ears” funny. As the feeling washed over us we scattered, and a pair of large orbs appeared.

One orb formed right between Twitch and Sarge, while the other appeared above the now-prone form of Nubby. For a split second we could see something beyond understanding, but not horror, in the spheres. Then, with a pop that we could somehow hear through the vacuum, the orbs disappeared and took two perfectly circular chunks of bulkhead with them. We all just stood there and stared for a second, then Fumbles started screaming.

None of us had liked what we'd seen when the xenos had fired their weapons, whatever those things did looked a lot worse than just getting shot, but Fumbles had a stronger reaction than the rest of us. The little psyker's screaming ratcheted up to a shriek then kept going until it started bouncing around inside our heads.

Now there are several relatively normal things that are a bad idea to do in a void suit. Vomiting traditionally heads this list, followed by crying, sneezing, and a few other things depending on whether your model has waste disposal systems. Anyway, if someone ever revises the list, using a psychic shriek should probably be added somewhere near the top.

Now, not being a psyker, I can't properly say whether it was a matter of the shout building up inside his helmet until something gave, or if it just punched through his faceplate on the way out towards its target. Either way though, we all felt a wave of panic roll over us as the shriek was cut off by what sounded like a burst of wind. A helmet's worth of air and a hail of plastic slammed into the two xenos monstrosities along with the psychic attack, where their combined force did exactly jack shit.

Fumbles landed on his ass, frantically clawing at his ruined helmet and radiating pants-wetting terror to the entire squad. Unlike our past experienced with the psyker's aura, this wasn't distracting, annoying, or disturbing: this was incapacitating. By all rights we should have died there, stumbling around in an attempt to escape a source-less fear, but two things saved us.



The first thing was Twitch, who shrugged off the aura of fear like it was nothing. He sprinted across the room to Fumbles, pulling off his explosives-filled pack on the way. He jammed the bag over the psyker's head and pulled its drawstrings, causing the bag to inflate like an incredibly dangerous balloon. The aura of terror reduced in intensity as Fumbles' inability to draw a breath was replaced by claustrophobic darkness and the fact that someone was partially strangling him.

The second thing was that the fish-headed xenos were some sort of retarded. One of them fired a shot at Twitch as the trooper sprinted across the bay and missed by a scarily small margin. The other casually walked up the open hole in the bay and just sort of vacantly stared out of it. It didn't stop to shoot anyone on the way, or even try to step on Nubby who was lying half a meter from where it stopped. It was definitely one of the more bizarre things we'd seen on a battlefield, or it would've been if we'd been in any condition to see anything.

As the aura faded and we acclimated to the unusual feeling of someone else's terror raging through our minds, everyone got to their feet. We were greeted by the sight of one xenos reading his insanity-orb cannon for another shot, and the other spacing out at the edge of the hole we'd entered through. This is where your normal group of heroic badasses would've opened fire in an effort to kill the xenos before they could fire again.

We didn't even try that.

See, our attacks, plasma and hot-shot lasgun alike, hadn't so much as phased these assholes; it was time to try something new. Sarge shouted his orders and threw himself at the xenos' cannon, grabbing onto it like a big, disgruntled monkey hanging from a branch. To Sarge's dismay, the fish-head turned out to be more than strong enough to hold up both him and the weapon. Luckily, the way Sarge was flailing around completely spoiled the xenos aim, and the next hell orb appeared in the middle of the bay's floor.

While Sarge kept his target off our backs, the rest of us turned to the one near the hole. Tink and Twitch stepped backwards, lowered their heads, and charged straight at the xenos' back. Down on the floor Nubby hastily crawled towards the hostile, then flipped onto his back. At this point the fish-head seemed to remember that it was in the middle of a battle and started to turn to face us, he wasn't fast enough though. Two charging guardsmen hit the xenos in the side at the same moment as a pair of augmetic legs launched upwards.

As body-checks went, they weren't the best: both soldiers were on the



wiry side and the best word to describe the xenos' size and weight is Hulking. Combined with the lifting force of Nubby's legs though, it was just enough. In a sort of slow-motion ballet the fish-head tumbled forwards, right out of the hole we'd blasted into the bay's wall.

Aimy was being hauled back towards the shuttle by Jim's skulls and Spot, who she was riding like some sort of demented horse. As she neared the hole something big and rather confused looking launched out of it, causing her to swear and nearly fall off her mount. After she regained her composure she watched as the... thing tumbled into the void, slowly spinning as it drifted away. When it didn't do anything she dismissed it as "not her problem" and raised her new rifle as the shuttle's interior finally came into view



Back inside the bay, the xenos had gotten tired of Sarge dangling off its weapon. It grabbed one of the struggling noncom's arms in a dinner-plate sized hand, and inexorably pried him of its weapon. Sarge found himself suspended in the air, or vacuum as it were, facing away from the angry xenos. He flailed as hard as he could in an attempt to break its grip and failed miserably. Sarge then grabbed his slung lasgun and tried to fire it over his shoulder, it was wrenched from his hand before he got more than a single burst off. Finally in desperation, he reached for his grenades, which were pretty high on the list of stupid weapons to use in a vacuum. Perhaps luckily, he wasn't able to grab one before his free arm was grabbed by the xenos' other hand. It raised him in the air then slowly, inexorably began to spread its arms, and by extension Sarge's, apart.

The first thing Aimy saw as she rose over the edge of the hole was Fumbles, sitting there and clawing at the backpack full of high-explosives tied over his head. This was odd, but not an immediate problem. The second thing, or things, were three of her squadmates running around like idiots and screaming about not being able to get a clear shot. The third thing was her new boss being pulled apart like a wishbone by a three meter tall xenos. Aimy sighted her rifle, waited a beat for Sarge's legs to swing out of the way, then put a burst of plasma right through the monstrosity's shoulder.

In a perfect universe the fish-head's arm would've fallen off, then Sarge would've beat it around the head and neck with its own severed limb. Unfortunately in our reality the arm just went limp while the hand still retained its vice-like grip on Sarge. Also both of Sarge's shoulders were dislocated and he was too busy screaming to beat anyone around the anything. We tried not to let our disappointment show as Sarge merely flopped to the side and

left us a clear shot at the xenos.



Three hot-shot lasguns, a plasma gun, and a pulse rifle poured precision fire into the xenos' thin middle-section. The combined weight of fire did what our earlier barrages couldn't, and with a soundless snap, the bastard collapsed in two separate pieces. Sarge swore loudly as he landed and informed everyone that the xenos' grip was not getting any looser.

Since the fish-head seemed rather hard to kill, most things lose their spunk after being cut in half y'know, everyone stepped forward and concentrated their fire on its shoulders. That finally did the trick and we pulled Sarge free, it took a while to pry the severed arms off of his wrists

though, talk about a death-grip

We all stood there, contemplating our success and wondering what to do about Sarge's shoulders, when Fumbles finally caught our attention. His comm wasn't functional and we couldn't hear him, but he managed to send a rough psychic image out. He was wondering if the fight was over and we could go somewhere with air now. The bag was nice and all, but he was pretty sure at least one of the mines in there was armed.

Twitch winced then he and Tink got to work on the door that the two fish-heads had come through. They had to push the xenos' severed torso out of the way to get access; it didn't do anything when Tink kicked it, but it somehow managed to glare reproachfully despite not having eyes, or any real face for that matter.



While the more technical side of the team got the door open Jim's medi-skull floated in and took a look at Sarge. It sort of poked around in a confused manner, probably trying to figure out how to get at Sarge's shoulders. After a while its little machine-spirit must have reached a decision, because it deployed a syringe and tried to jab Sarge with it. The puncture-proof voidsuit turned out to be stronger than the skull expected: after a bit of straining it broke the needle and whacked into Sarge's shoulder, triggering an impressive amount

of cursing. The medi-skull got even more agitated at this failure and deployed its little circular saw, the one we'd last seen it use to decapitate the Magos.

None of us really knew if it had decided to harvest Sarge's head, or just

wanted to cut through his void suit, while he was in a vacuum so it could deliver its painkiller shot. Either way, Nubby and Aimy fended the skull off with the butts of their weapons until the door was finally opened. Jim was very apologetic about the whole thing, but we still didn't let the skull follow us into the pressurized section of the shuttle.

Once the door was closed and Twitch had carefully removed the bag full of explosives from Fumbles head, we looked around our new shuttle. The room where we'd fought the fish-heads had just been a moderately roomy troop compartment, nothing interesting in there; this room was definitely some sort of command center. It wasn't filled with vox units, cogitators, and random uninsulated wires like an Imperial command center, but the holo-thingy displaying a map of the station in the middle of the room was a dead giveaway.

Despite its tasteful decor and abundant supply of air, the command room made us uneasy. It had a short hallway leading to the shuttle's cockpit, but none of us saw any hatches connected to the station. In fact the only exit we'd seen was the one on the rear, and it hadn't been connected to anything. The question of how the xenos had gotten aboard the station, and which direction they'd be coming from if they tried to take their shuttle back, hung in the air like a wet fart in a tank: hard to ignore and holding the potential to become a serious problem.

From the elegant, but rather uncomfortable, chair he'd found near the map, Sarge reminded everyone about how the xenos were supposed to use teleporting webs to get around. A brief search of the shuttle didn't turn up anything that looked like a teleportarium or was particularly web-shaped, the closest we got was a xenos rune that looked sort of like a spider. Twitch put a mine on it, just to be safe, then put a mine on everything else, just to be safer. None of us stopped him, it was really the only defensive option we could think of.

While Twitch saw to the perimeter, Tink got to work on figuring out how to fly our new piece of loot, Aimy checked in with the other teams, and Nubby called Doc for some medical advice. Sarge later complained bitterly about how many tries it'd taken to relocate his shoulders, but neither Nubby nor Fumbles had any medical training and there was a lot of distortion on the comm channel. Anyway the way he kept yelling was very distracting and the second one only took two tries, so all his whining wasn't really justified. After the little medical procedure was finished a quick council of war was



held. Aimy reported that the other teams were just killing a lot of servitors, not making any real progress towards finding useful intel. Jim followed that up with a report that the tech-priests hadn't given any new orders, but claimed they were very interested in our shuttle.

Based on all that, Sarge's vague plan was for us to call off the station part of the mission before anyone did something crazy and fly the Eldar shuttle back to the Occurrence Border. From there the adepts, and possibly the cogboys, could search it for clues or whatever. The only real problem with this plan was that compared to Imperial, or Tau systems for that matter, Eldar tech was almost impossible to understand. Tink was working hard, and kept claiming that he'd nearly figured it out, but so far he'd only managed to turn the lights on and off.



While Tink tinkered and occasionally asked for advice from Jim and Ol' Bill, the rest of us kept busy. Aimy watched the perimeter with

Twitch, Sarge poked at the holo-map, and Nubby and Fumbles were assigned prisoner duty, prisoner in this case meaning the severed xenos toso. They taped the thing to the wall and, at Twitches request, drew a face on its blank head so it didn't look so creepy. At Nubby's urging, Fumbles was adding some embellishments to their artwork, when a section of wall slid outwards and a tall, lithe, and familiar-looking xenos appeared out of thin air.

The Eldar Warlock scanned the room then began to say something. He was immediately interrupted by Twitch shouting that a hostile had breached the perimeter and raising his lasgun. The xenos tried to resume speaking, only to be interrupted again as Twitch asked for permission to fire. Sarge, who'd nodded off, jerked awake just in time to hear the frustrated Eldar snap:

¡Foolish mon-keigh, you can't shoot me I'm a h-

Then Twitch got tired of waiting and opened up on full auto. There are times when an Inquisitorial agent, military commander, or Imperial diplomat will negotiate with one of the hated xenos and discover that they really aren't all that bad. Then they wind up working together to fight some common foe, and a sort of polite, but distant, working-relationship based on mutual respect is formed. This was not one of those times.

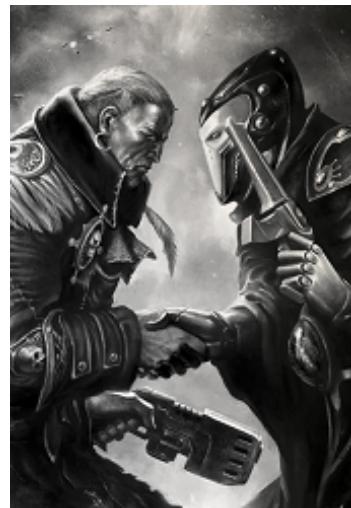
It took the Warlock about five tries to finish saying "hologram", Twitch kept shooting him every time he started talking. When the demolitions

trooper finally ran out of ammo the incredibly frustrated Eldar exploded into a lecture on how holograms work and why it was pointless to shoot them. He was interrupted halfway through as Nubby shot him, turned towards Sarge, and reported that "The Xenos 'pears ta be some sort of 'ogram, I don fink we can shoot 'im". The Eldar swore in its fancy language and asked Sarge to control his "ape creature," whereupon Twitch finished reloading and shot him again while Nubby loudly told Sarge that the xenos was getting pissy. Things only went downhill from there.

The warlock was an arrogant bastard. He tried to order us around, but none of us had even the slightest intention of "returning to our wretched vessel" or "leaving matters beyond our comprehension to our betters." The diplomatic breakdown was total: on our side of the table Aimy had a serious axe to grind, Nubby was just Nubby, Sarge's shoulders hurt like a bitch, and everyone else just didn't give a shit. As for the Warlock, he loudly declared us to be idiot children playing with deadly weapons, both personally and as a race.

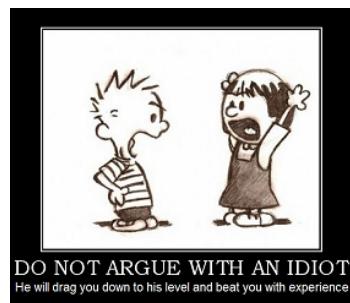
The Eldar had probably intended to either use his moral superiority to get us to leave his ship, or cut some sort of deal with us. The problem was that he kept getting bogged down in pointless arguments, petty insults, and fits of frustrated anger. Everyone, even Fumbles, was doing something that might as well have been scientifically designed to outrage the prissy xenos.

To start with, Tink didn't even try to hide the fact that he was stealing the Eldar's shuttle, and occasionally asked him what a specific button did. Aimy only spoke when she'd thought of something particularly scathing to say and while Twitch eventually stopped shooting the hologram, he'd occasionally interrupt the Warlock to insert his own rather unique theories into the conversation. Fumbles, who was admittedly acting on Nubby's orders, doodled on the captive fish-headed xenos. This caused a surprising amount of anger in the Warlock, despite how good the mustache and monocle he drew looked. All that was relatively minor compared to Nubby and Sarge though.



Nubby, for reasons beyond all logic, had appointed himself as the Warlock's translator. He shouted down or shot the holographic xenos at the end of almost every sentence, then relayed his personal interpretation to Sarge. Our fearless leader took an evil delight in how much this annoyed the Eldar, and started only responding to Nubby's translations. It was childish, antagonistic, incredibly unprofessional, and all according to a plan so devious that none of us even realized we were part of it. Well, at least Sarge claimed it was his plan afterwards, and no one was in any position to argue with the results.

In his most cunning of minds, Sarge figured that the Warlock had us incredibly outclassed when it came to diplomacy. The only person on our team that stood even a chance a of holding their own was the old diplomat adept back on the ship, but with the cogboys monitoring the comms, bringing him in was out of the question. Therefore, the only way we could possibly come out ahead in a negotiation with an Eldar, who probably had hundreds of years of experience talking circles around Inquisitors and the like, was to drag him down to our level.



Now, the brilliance of Sarge's plan didn't end there. In addition to keeping the Eldar off balance, the behavior of the more... eccentric members of our squad acted as a time-buying distraction for both Tink and the other teams. Every second the Warlock spent screaming at us in incoherent rage, was a second where he wasn't leading an attack on our shuttle or sniping anyone in the station. Admittedly, neither group was actually accomplishing anything useful with that time, Tink had found thirteen different controls for the shuttle's lights and last we'd heard the other teams they were still killing endless waves of servitors, but they did have it.

The incredibly uncivil discussion eventually rolled around to how stupid humanity's fascination with archeotech was. Our race's suicidal persistence in trying to keep the current piece from its owners was going to wind up gutting the entire sector's ability to fight off the next wave of tyranids. On top of that, if we somehow managed to keep it we'd inevitably wind up destroying ourselves with it. Any sane race would've let the Necrons have it, or at least dropped it on some Ork or Tyranid world that no one would miss.

Sarge perked up at this piece of actual useful information. Then, when Nubby suggested his cunning new idea to drop the archeotech on some Ork or Tyranid world that no one would miss, Sarge agreed that it was a good one. The Eldar paused mid-rant to boggle.

The incredulous Warlock asked if we were serious. Sensing that the time was right, Sarge told Nubby to shut up, and promised that he was super serious. We didn't want to use the archeotech, we didn't want to study the archeotech, and we certainly didn't want to fight Necrons, Emperor help us, for the archeotech. As far as any of us were concerned, the metal bastards could have the thing.



The Eldar sputtered, then asked about fifteen different questions, most of which he answered himself. We were obviously too stupid to lie and we must have already known what the archeotech was, otherwise how'd we know to come to this system? Furthermore, despite our appearance and behavior, we were obviously the ones in charge of the mission. After all, our team was the one in his shuttle as opposed to fighting servitors on the station. No one correct these assumptions.

The only real question the Eldar had for us was why we wanted the archeotech destroyed. According to him, the five other Inquisitors and Magi he'd encountered, then killed, had all lusted after the device like it was mankind's salvation. Sarge nonchalantly suggested that we were just smarter than them. The Warlock shot a pointed look at Nubby, who had a finger jammed up to the second joint in one of his nostrils, then back to Sarge. Our fearless leader shrugged and adjusted that to "less ambitious than them."

Before anyone else could say anything to push the Warlock back from confused to furious, Sarge made his move. He pointed out how we only wanted to prevent any more planets being wiped out. We agreed with the Eldar, the archeotech either needed to be destroyed, turned over to the Necrons, or sent out of Imperial space. So he should just tell us where it was going next and we'd handle the rest. There'd be no working together bullshit: we'd leave as soon as we had our directions, and he'd never have to talk to us again.



The Warlock started to say something, then stopped, then started again, then stopped again. Finally he let out very frustrated sigh and gave us directions to an Imperial world whose Governor had just purchased the archeotech. The Eldar then told us to get off his shuttle before he ordered his ship to disengage and let the hereteks have the system, data records and all. Sarge took a second to ponder this last part of the deal, and asked Tink how things were going.

From up in the cockpit Tink announced, for the twentieth time, that he'd figured out the controls and would be able to fly us away before anyone could stop us. He triumphantly pressed a few buttons, flipped a switch, and manually connected two wires. Once again, the shuttle completely failed to move and the lights flicked off then back on. Sarge told the Warlock he could have his shuttle back.



Twitch packed up his toys, Fumbles was given a less dangerous pack to use as a helmet, Tink was forcefully pulled out of the cockpit, and Nubby was told to empty his pockets. While everyone else packed up Sarge and Aimy debated the whole tech-priest problem, it was eventually decided that there was no way to really hide the archeotech's location from them. Luckily, Aimy was able to suggest a way to keep the cogboys on our side for the time being.

Jim was called to pick us up, and over the monitored channel Sarge reported the location of the archeotech. He also warned everyone that a sizable Heretek fleet was being gathered to seize it before the mechanicus could confiscate it, so maybe we should try to get there and secure it first. It wasn't very subtle, but hey, neither were we, and the cogboys must've bought it, because everyone's shuttles picked them up without any arguing or ultimatums. Everyone was feeling pretty happy about how the mission had went as we left the Eldar shuttle. In a fit of goodwill Tink even pushed the fish-head's limbs into a neat pile and left a note saying which way second one had been drifting when we'd last seen it.

As Jim and Hannah flew us back to the Occurrence Border, we looked back at the station we'd never gotten around to boarding. It was looking rather ragged, its interior probably hadn't been designed to survive pitched fights involving anti-armor energy weaponry, and the star behind it had gotten noticeably larger. We congratulated ourselves on not being stupid enough to board that deathtrap, and watched the station shrink behind us. Right as it was getting too small to see anymore, there was a neat little firework display. We couldn't be sure, but the explosions seemed to match the locations of all the heretek shuttles. That probably explained what the Eldar had been up to.

Our good moods lasted until Jim landed us in the Occurrence Border's main shuttlebay. We were the last team back and the bay was a madhouse full of rushing people and horrible screams. Doc and his girlfriend were running around with their medical team, from the look of it they had quite a few customers and Sarge detailed a few of us to lend a hand. Surprisingly,

most of the screams weren't coming from Doc's patients. What had at first looked, and sounded, like a field surgery station turned out to be something weirder.

Half a dozen of the senior cogboys were clustered together in a far corner of the bay. As we watched a captive heretek was brought off of a shuttle by some servitors and dragged into the group of tech-priests. There were some very unsettling power-tool noises and a lot more screams, and Sarge asked Jim and Hannah what was going on. The two Enginseers whispered to each other for a while then said the tech-priests were checking the captives for... serial numbers. Apparently they could be used to determine which Cabal the hereteks had come from. From there the tech-priests would research past records of the sort of technology the hereteks had access to, giving us a major advantage when it came time to fight their fleet.



Sarge pondered the fact that there wasn't actually any heretek fleet. He then weighed that against how the screams seemed to indicate that the cogboys didn't believe in little things like sedation, or killing people before dissecting them. In the end he decided that this was not his problem and he really needed a drink, or at least some painkillers for his shoulders. Better yet a drink and some painkillers and someone to take his void-suit off without him having to move his arms. In the end he had to settle for just the painkillers, everything else had to wait until after he'd talked with the Captain, adepts, other Interrogators, and whoever the tech-priests sent to vaguely threaten everyone.

Sarge returned to our quarters hours later, looking like shit and still wearing his void-suit. Our first few tries to remove his suit resulted in a lot of yelling and Nubby getting punted across the room. In the end Tink wound up just cutting him out while Aimy held a bottle of liquor with a straw in it for him.

The gist of the situation was that the Eldar ship had disengaged and vanished after the heretek shuttles had been destroyed. The heretek ship hadn't tried to chase us or catch up with the falling station, instead it had warped out shortly after the fight ended. The Captain couldn't be sure, but it didn't look like it was heading the same direction as us, and the scanners had been clear since we entered the warp

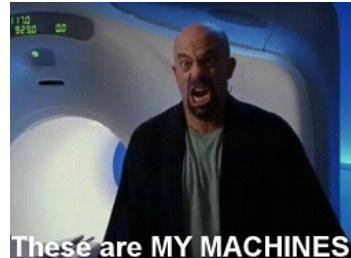


ourselves.

We were headed towards the coordinates the Eldar had given us, which had turned out to be the planet with the shifty governor Sword-guy had wanted us to go to. Sarge said the other Interrogator had been rather bitter over the whole thing, mostly on account of how he'd been shot in the gut twice during the station fight. Battleaxe wasn't in great shape either, they'd shed a lot of blood fighting off the servitors and capturing two hereteks for interrogation. Tensions were rather high due to the way the tech-priests had seized those hard-won prisoners and vivisected them. The cogboys were not very apologetic for this, but at least they'd shared their info on this particular group hereteks with the rest of us. The adepts were chewing through it and would be putting together some combat plans and stuff like that during the trip.

The other info Sarge had relayed from the Warlock hadn't gone over well. To start with, everyone but the tech-priests had given Sarge grief for not getting the actual details of the archeotech from the Eldar. He'd very politely told them where they could shove their complaints, then moved on to the matter of who was probably purging planets.

The revelation that it was Necrons chasing the archeotech, or at least that the Eldar said it was the Necrons, had quieted everyone down. While it had been the smart bet in the pool ever since we'd learned this was all about a piece of archeotech, having it confirmed was fairly unpleasant. None of the other teams had fought them before, but between their training and the stories everyone had heard, they didn't need us to tell them that the Necrons were bad news.



The Captain had reiterated his suggestion that we go somewhere safe and request an entire fleet's worth of backup. Most of us thought that sounded like a great idea, unfortunately Sarge and the other Interrogators thought otherwise. They believed that if we got there fast enough we could do something to prevent Necrons from wiping out the planet and keep the heretek fleet, which Sarge now regretted making up, from getting the archeotech.

Of course the exact details of what we'd do were still a bit fuzzy. The Interrogators' only good ideas were to either destroy the archeotech, or put it somewhere where the Necrons could take it without killing everyone. The tech-priests had informed everyone that both those options would result in their grisly deaths. The most they'd allow would be for us to set up a perimeter around the archeotech and plant a bomb which the ship's head

tech-priest would build and hold the only detonator for. All the Interrogators, even Sarge, had wound up agreeing to this. The Captain had called them idiots and, since Sarge wasn't in any condition to hit us at the moment, we all agreed.

The one saving grace of the Interrogators' plan was that, being on the border and all, the planet we were heading towards had a fair sized PDF and SDF. Between that and the detailed intel we could provide, there was a slim chance we could hold off the Necrons until reinforcements arrived or the tech-priests stopped being assholes. Emphasis on slim.

Once again we were stuck travelling through the warp and hoping like hell we'd arrive before everything went ploin shaped. At least this time we had a better idea of what was currently happening at our destination: the planet had a branch of the Telepathica and our astropath was able to keep tabs on their situation. The adepts and other teams spent a lot of time sending messages back and forth, looking for clues about where the archeotech was and all that. We didn't trouble ourselves with any of that, someone would tell if they found something important, for the time being we had other stuff to do.



Aside from the usual planning bullshit that Sarge had to put up with, we were able to dedicate our full efforts to some very important projects. Okay, well one important project, a less-important minor one, and a bit of "entrapaneering". The less-important one was replacing Sarge's lasgun. When the xenos, which the adepts had told us was called a Wraithguard not a fish-head, had disarmed him it'd bent his lasgun like a banana. Since fruit-shaped weapons tend not to work well and Aimy's pulse-rifle had performed so awesomely, Tink put all his effort into converting a Tau carbine for Sarge's use. Everyone else was moderately jealous.

The other side project was, of course, Nubby's continual quest not to lose quite a lot of money in the betting pool. Fumbles revealed to the rest of us that during our last bit of travel time they'd tracked down the only three people who'd bet on the Necrons, then... persuaded them to retract those bets. All that was left to do was convince the ship's quartermaster, who was the one actually holding the money and tracking the bets, to allow the withdrawal. Once that was done there'd be no winning bets, and the money would surely default back to everyone. We left Nubby to his little plot, which seemed to revolve around getting some incriminating pictures of the quartermaster. We'd be getting our money back too after all. So,

aside from that little stuff, all of our effort was put into the big important project: Operation Screw Everyone Else Over Before They Screw Us. Now, this may sound like the default state we operated in, but this was a much more concerted effort than our usual paranoia and misanthropy. Our focus was almost entirely on two parties: the tech-priests and the Warlock. Now, it's obvious why we felt the need to plot against the cogboys with them acting nuttier than squirrel shit and all, but that Eldar part might need some explanation.



See, it is in the very nature of Eldar to dick honest, hard-working guardsmen over. They probably tell each other stories of great Eldar heroes who use their magical xenos powers for absolutely nothing but being a colossal dick. Based on this single concrete fact about his basic nature, we knew that the Warlock would A: Show up at the planet, B: Try and to use us to destroy the archeotech, C: Proceed to dick us over as hard as he possibly could the second we were no longer useful.

The may be a lot to infer from a single piece of racism, but it was backed up by our personal experience with the Warlock. When we'd been talking with him over the holo-whatsit, we'd gotten the distinct impression that he didn't like us for some reason; that was a sure sign of a dickish personality.

Anyway, the project was mostly prep-work and the first step was securing allies. Jim and Hannah had been decent to us, but that whole thing about possibly following orders to leave us to die was bad and needed fixing. To that end, both Jim and Hannah were invited down to our quarters, then locked in and treated to a class on Ethics by our resident expert: Nubby.

Don't laugh, this wasn't a class on any of those sissy "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" Ethics. This was a class on Guardsmen Ethics, which tend to only go as far as "Do unto others," and Nubby knew those by heart. He and Doc, as what you might call the friendliest and most persuasive members of our little group, were assisted by the ever-loyal Fumbles in teaching Camaraderie 101 to Jim and Hannah.

The two junior tech-priests were educated in:

- ↳ Why it is Important to Stick With Your Mates**
- ↳ When and When Not to Follow the Rules and Regs**
- ↳ Why You Should Never Trust Anyone Over the Rank of Sergeant**
- They also got a special bonus course on: **↳ Why Killing Your Close Personal Friends Because a Crazy Priest Told You to is a Very Bad Thing**

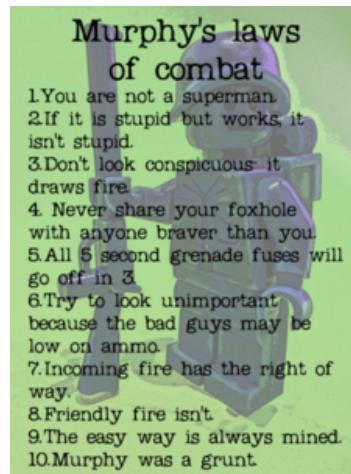
By the end both engineers were thinking like proper Guardsmen and gave us all the vital information we needed for the rest of our project. Specifically, how the tech-priests would probably monitor us, what sort of bomb they'd be giving us to plant, and where it and its detonator were being built. From there it was Twitch and Tink's show.

Twitch was far, far too excited about his part of the plan. Not because he got to blow up people who annoyed him, Sarge had vetoed mining the priests' quarters on account of how we wanted to still have a ship after the mission, but because he got to play with the biggest bomb he'd ever seen. Now, when I say biggest I don't mean it's size, I mean its yield. The first time Twitch made his way through the vents to where the priests were putting the bomb together, he'd wound up needing a new pair of pants. They were giving us a backpack nuke.

It's been said, mostly by guardsmen, that the final step of becoming a full tech-priest involves having the common sense part of your brain pulled out and replaced with a little box of screws. In our opinion, the fact that they were giving us a nuclear weapon pretty much proved that.

Of course they thought that they'd be the ones controlling it. They probably snickered to each other about how frustrated and scared we'd be, not being able to set off the bomb after planting it and not knowing if they'd remotely detonate it while we were in the blast radius. Still though it was a titanically bad idea, I mean even ignoring how much trouble we were able to cause with conventional explosives, we had a demolitions expert and what could loosely be called a technical expert on our squad. The second we were out of their line of sight we were going to crack that puppy open and rewire the detonator.

So Tink and Twitch spent their time spying on the bomb's construction and planning how they'd rewire it and jam the cogboys' bugs. Meanwhile, the job of putting together a plan to screw over the Eldar fell to Aimy and



Doc, largely because they were willing to do what the rest of us were not: sit through tedious lectures on xeno-psychology from the adepts.

Unfortunately, we didn't know exactly what the Warlock had was going to do, only that dickishness would inevitably be involved. This meant that Doc and Aimy could only come up with sort of general plans, but they still did a very good job of it. A bunch of contingencies were prepared for, a few simple strategies were mapped out and practiced by our entire team, and Aimy came up with a rather nasty idea for forcing the Warlock to behave if we ever saw him in person. Doc quietly told the rest of us that he was glad not to be evil master-mind this time around, and recommended we never antagonize the markswoman.



When we finally came out of warp at the border world we felt ready for anything. Unfortunately it turned out that the other teams and adepts weren't nearly as awesome as us. Not only had they failed to pin down the location of the archeotech for us, they'd also been unable to confirm that it was even in the system. Sure, a quarter of them had died fighting on the station, and half the survivors were still being tended to by Doc and his girl, AND they'd only been able to do their research via discrete astropathic questioning and a few out of date field reports. Still though, we'd expected better of them. I mean a little professionalism and work ethic isn't much to ask is it? It was going to be so damned embarrassing if turned out that the Eldar had been lying to us.

We sat on the ship for a few days, twiddling our thumbs and getting more and more worried while the other teams went down and made some discreet inquiries. Sarge and the adepts helped them out, but the rest of us pretty much stayed in orbit and waited for the word go. Luckily, from our perspective, they met with enough resistance from the local government and ad-mech priesthood to practically prove the archeotech was there somewhere.

Probably the only reason that no one tried to kill our investigators was the constant stream of ships pouring into the system at our request for reinforcements. Most of them were little navigator-less armed merchantmen, but there were a few escort-class vessels, and the Captain said our odds in a naval battle were definitely looking up. Still though, from what we overheard, the locals were some seriously uncooperative people. No one would admit to anything, even when the Interrogators started flashing their junior-rosettes around. That changed abruptly when every astropath and navigator in the system reported a fleet approaching through the warp.

While the incoming fleet was great for our investigation, it was also rather confusing. The only thing anyone knew for certain about how Necrons got their ships around was that they didn't use the warp. Of course everyone else said it was the Heretek fleet, but we knew better and spent a lot of time pondering what was actually coming.

Honestly it got very annoying telling everyone it wouldn't be a Heretek fleet then not being able to say why. Sarge finally snapped during the final big meeting, and just told everyone he'd made the fleet up to keep the tech-priests in line. There was a lot of arguing and shouting after that, but luckily no mass servitor uprisings.

Of course about five minutes after he said that, a large group of what were unmistakably Heretek vessels came out of the warp and demanded the surrender of all technology within the system. Everyone was too busy for much recrimination, but the Captain did spare a few seconds to congratulate Sarge on being psychic.

With the arrival of the Heretek fleet everything started happening at once. Sword-guy, who was still too injured to help much in combat, transferred over to the largest friendly ship in system and started organizing the took overall command of fleet we'd been cobbling together. Armed with the intel provided by our ship's priests about the Hereteks' probable armament and strategy, he was confident that he could keep the hostile fleet away from the planet for at least a day or two. Down on the planet Battleaxe, who'd been leading the investigation, was approached by several local nobles who'd had a change of heart.

The planet's nobles sold out their governor and put their forces at Battleaxe's command. The basic story they gave us was that the Planetary Governor had purchased the piece of archeotech and a team of scientists from a Rogue Trader. The device itself wasn't being used for anything, and they didn't actually know what it was, but the technology being reverse engineered from it was supposed to turn their little SDF fleet into the most powerful space force this side of Battlefleet Ultima. They were patriots see, it had all been for the good of their world, and by extension the Imperium.

The Governor had told them all that within five years they'd be completely secure against any Tau aggression or Tyranid splinter fleets. In ten



their shipyards would be the envy of every forge-world. In twenty they'd personally control all space-shipping from there to the Damocles Gulf. And by the end of the century, the Administratum would need to make a whole new sector just to contain the worlds they'd use their fleet to colonize and take back from the Tau. Quite the statement, but every tech-priest and veteran voidsman they'd sent to look at thing had confirmed it.

So they'd all signed on, even knowing that some xenos force was chasing the archeotech and would need to be fought off. They were confident in size of their defence forces, they said. All those other worlds that'd been wiped out were little undefended backwaters, they said. It was worth the gamble, they said. But now that they saw the size of the Heretek fleet and the Inquisition was at their door, they were singing a different tune.

Up in our shuttle we were listening in to the whole spiel as we dropped towards the manufactorum they'd fingered. Everyone but Jim and Hannah, who were locked in the cockpit and keeping to themselves, speculated on just what sort of super-weapon they'd found. If it really was such a big game changer it'd be a shame to just blow it to little radioactive pieces.

We were still going to do it of course. Aside from the whole thing where it was heretical piece of archeotech with the potential to drive the mechanicus to schism, you can't carry a nuke all the way down to a planet and NOT set it off. It's just

now allowed.

Anyway, as we went to go blow up the archeotech, Battleaxe was organizing a coup. She and her half-strength team would handle capturing the Planetary Governor and securing a temporary government with the help of most of the Nobs' regiments. She wasn't hogging all the support troops though, a sizeable force had been stationed near the manufactorum where the archeotech was located, and she sent them to lend us a hand. Well, actually it was more a case of us lending them a hand, they had a lot less travel time than us and we saw nothing wrong with them handling most of the grunt work.

So our little eight man force came down outside the manufactorum after several hundred PDF yahoos had spent about an hour shooting the place all to hell. That may not have been quite as professional as leading some sort of high-precision strike force, but the important thing is that the place was clear and none of us had gotten shot in the process. Whole lotta PDF had though, the place was a mess. That's what happens when you're dumb



enough to try to rush fortified positions. Poor dumb Guard wannabees.

Per our orders the PDF had stayed out of the semi-secret basement where the archeotech was located. They'd just swept the upper building, which had been defended by a few of the Governor's men and as well as a surprisingly large number of servitors. The servitors worried us at first, since the Hereteks weren't supposed to be anywhere near close enough to shuttle or teleport a force down. Thankfully, when Jim and Hannah came over to take a look they said the servitors didn't have any recognizable Heretek markings. That was a load off our minds, and we followed some PDF General over to the basement entrance.



Surprisingly, Jim and Hannah both tagged along instead of returning to their shuttle. Sarge weighed the pros and cons of having two cogboys around when we went to blow up some piece of really cool tech, then decided to trust them. The Engineers fell in behind Twitch, who was lugging a rather heavy backpack containing a large metal cylinder with an unnecessary amount of ornamentation on its surface.

The bomb did not have any exterior controls, readouts, or anything aside from what Jim told us were etchings of holy scenes and prayers written in binary. It looked like a drum for storing holy water more than anything, it was about the right size and weight. We'd had to scrounge a grav plate and clamp it to the bottom for anyone but Sarge to be able to carry the thing.

Presumably the whole reason for the bomb's odd design was that there were no exposed controls for us to muck around with and no way to see inside. It should've stopped anyone who wasn't entirely suicidal from trying to go in and rewire its detonator, but Twitch had the thing cut open within ten minutes of our shuttle's departure. Now the nuke's top was held on with duct-tape, its remote control was hooked up to a novelty noise-maker, and the only way to set it off was using the detonator Sarge was carrying.

After a rather unpleasant walk through the corpse-filled building we reached the entrance to the underground lab where the archeotech was stored. We stood around the intimidating entrance for a while, wondering just what sort of defenses were waiting down there, and if it would do any harm to send a few squads of PDF down first. Our little debate was interrupted by a call from the Captain, who warned us that the fleet engagement had started and that, inexplicably, all astropathic communication was being blocked. Jim blanched at hearing that second part, and told the rest of us that the hereteks didn't have a way to do that, the Necrons were here.



Confirmation arrived in the form of a few dozen green lighting storms outside the windows. They weren't violent enough to be an orbital bombardment and faded quickly, but they left behind some very ominous glowing clouds. Tink went over to a window and ratcheted up the zoom on his goggles, then went pale and recommended that we go blow up the archeotech RIGHT NOW. There wasn't time to fool around with sending scouts down there, and anyway the PDF would need all the men they had to fight off the millions of metal insects that'd just teleported into the atmosphere. We didn't need telling twice and practically sprinted into the basement, only stopping to advise the PDF general to conserve ammo

and save his last round for himself.

Twitch and Fumbles went first to check for traps or ambushes. Sarge tried to take the nuke from Twitch before he took point, but the demolitions trooper flatly refused. He claimed the bomb was his now, and he'd be damned if anyone would take it from him. Anyway he said it wasn't getting in his way and it actually helped him concentrate; just carrying it made him feel all warm and fuzzy inside, he said. The rest of us thought that that sounded like it was leaking radiation, but didn't push the issue.



Aside from a few traps which Twitch easily disarmed, the stairs down weren't defended by anyone. Either they'd all fought and died on the surface, or they'd fallen back the the big room at the bottom of the stairs. We all bet on the latter and formed up to breach the final door.

The charge went off, flashes were tossed, and we all rushed in with weapons raised. Then we all sheepishly walked down the empty hallway to what was ACTUALLY the final door, and did all that again.

This time a hail of las fire poured at us as we scrambled to find cover in a very large room. Luckily, in addition to being very large, the room was littered with all sorts of conduits, machinery, and inexplicably chest-high walls. Through a combination of luck and skill we all managed to find something solid to hide behind and started trading fire with what looked to be five tech-priests.

Originally we'd had some vague plan that Tink would find where in the room the archeotech was and Twitch would plant the bomb while the rest

of us held off the defenders, but that didn't turn out to be necessary. For one thing, it was easy to see where the archeotech was, a MASSIVE opaque shield took up the rear half of the room. For another, the tech-priests didn't need to be held off, they were pathetic. These guys weren't anything like the sort of mechanical combat-monstrosities we'd expected, they were just relatively normal tech-priests with las-pistols. They holed up behind some ineffective cover and we picked them off one by one while Jim and Hannah made a half-hearted attempt to negotiate their surrender.

There was just one of the tech-priests left, and we were arguing over whether to try and take him alive so he could deactivate the shield. Then we all heard a metal stomping sound and something that looked like a cross between a dreadnought, a necron, and a metal squid came around the edge of the shield.

That description really doesn't do the metal monstrosity justice.

Start by imagining a dreadnought made of that weird metal that the Tau use for everything, y'know the tan stuff. Now replace its arms with a pair of those green-tube necron weapons, the kind that shoot the lighting that evaporates whatever it hits. Finally, imagine that instead of it having an armored front-plate protecting a dead hero of the Imperium, it has this writhing ball of mechadendrites and somewhere in the middle is a crazy tech-priest screaming in binary. We were so incredibly screwed it was almost funny.

We'd been expecting something worse than a few schmucks with las-pistols, but for once our cynicism and paranoia had been insufficient. We all just stared for a second as the thing stomped towards us, almost absentmindedly Aimy headshot the last wimpy techpriest. Then the green tubes started charging up and Sarge screamed at everyone to pop smoke and scatter. Cover wasn't going to do shit against those necron-beams.

As the room filled with smoke, the beams started lancing out and leaving big empty gouges in the floor. Operating pretty much independently, everyone started readying what anti-armor equipment they had. Sarge started the show by peeking through the edge of the smoke, noticing he was behind the dreadnought, and activating the special range-finder dealie on his totally-not-a-Tau-pulse-carbine. To everyone but Tink's surprise it worked perfectly, he and Aimy suddenly had the location of the dreadnaught displayed



on their goggles and scope respectively.

Two balls of plasma, one big and fat, the other small and fast, flew out of the smoke. They both hit the dreadnought in the mass of mechadendrites that passed for its torso, but only managed to burn a few of the tentacles off. The dreadnought aimed down the gaps in the smoke the shots had left, and returned fire.

Tink was away before his shot even hit, but Aimy wasn't as quick and her world went green.



None of us were in position to see what happened, but Aimy screamed like a stuck grox and flooded the comm channel with an incredible stream of curses. We took that as a sign that she'd live, and concentrated on the fight.

Not having fancy targeting toys, Nubby and Tink had to find gaps in the smoke to make their attacks through. Nubby hung back and put some well aimed las-shots into the dreadnought, causing it to stomp towards him, while Twitch darted forward with a detpack. Sarge groaned when he

saw Twitch sprint out of the smoke with the Nuke still strapped to his back, then nearly had a heart attack when one of the dreadnought's weapons swivelled towards the demolitions trooper. Thinking quickly, he activated his auxiliary grenade launcher and fired a Tau flash grenade between Twitch and the dreadnought.

The dreadnought's beam missed Twitch's nuclear backpack by centimeters, and the blinded trooper slammed helmet-first into one of its legs. Now stunned as well as blind, Twitch staggered around for a second, then suddenly disappeared as Fumbles stuck his head out of the smoke. The dreadnought stomped around for a second trying to find Twitch, but quickly gave up and returned to chasing Nubby as another hail of las-shots hit it. Sarge confirmed that Twitch was still alive, then ran off into the smoke to emulate Nubby's hit-and-run harassment.

While everyone else was running and shooting, Tink sat still and waited for his plasma gun to recharge. As he waited, he noticed Sarge wasn't marking the target anymore and sent Spot out to keep an eye on things. Thanks to the drone's vid feed, he was the first of us to notice that the dreadnought was slowing down a little. Initially he put it down to some sort of battle damage, but then he spotted the familiar-looking skulls flying above the smoke. As he watched one of them darted down and attached itself next to two others on the dreadnought's back, causing it to slow down a little more.

Jim and Hannah's skulls saved all of our lives as we pulled ourselves back together. None of us were sure exactly what they were doing, and the Engineers seemed too busy to explain, but the dreadnought got slower and more inaccurate with each passing second. Everyone stayed back and peppered it with las and plasma, forcing it to constantly stomp around hunting for us.

It was looking like we'd be able to wear the thing down, especially once Aimy had got back into the fight, then the tech-priest caught on. He let out an incredibly-pissed sounding scream and his mechaendrites started ripping the skulls off his back. He'd caught on to our only real trick, but he was distracted, it was time to do or die. Twitch shared some detpacks with Sarge, Fumbles cloaked them both, and they ran in.

It probably would have worked, but it wound up not having to. When the sprinters were half-way to the dreadnought its mechaendrites started bursting apart with little flashes of light. A few seconds later the flashes were followed by a very familiar las-cannon beam and one of those hell-orbs. Finally a blast of raw psychic energy came out of the smoke and slammed right into the middle of the dreadnought's tentacle-face. That was apparently the thing's limit: it let out a sound like a blender with a rock in it, powered down, and toppled backwards.

The warlock swept out of the smoke with two of his wraithguards in tow. The one with the weird hell-gun set about methodically sucking pieces of the dreadnought into the warp while the other didn't quite aim its las-cannon at us. The Warlock walked up to Sarge, congratulated him on holding out for so long then apologized for not arriving sooner, he'd had important matters to take of.

Sarge didn't deck the smug bastard, but it was a near thing.

Given that the Warlock was there in person and had a pair of wraithguards with him, we were much more polite this time. Sarge made an attempt at diplomatic small talk while the rest of us formed up and took stock.

Mostly we were just bruised, exhausted, and low on ammo, Aimy was the only one of us who'd taken an actual hit. When Jim and Hannah helped her through the smoke conversation stopped for a second as everyone stared. Her hair, and helmet, had been given you might call a reverse-mohawk, the necron-



beam had been a millimeter from taking the top of her head off. Everyone quickly found something else to look at, specifically the other figures coming through the smoke.

The Warlock's rangers were practically dragging two short figures. One we all recognized as a Tau Earth-Caste, but the other looked like a monkey that someone had been testing augmetics on. The Tau was frantic, and when he saw us he started babbling at us in gothic. He'd been kidnapped, which was illegal, then enslaved, which was doubly illegal, then forced to work with all sorts of mentally unstable people, and now he was kidnapped again and he just wanted to go home. Sarge digested this for a second, then shot a confused look at the Warlock. He said the Tau was the last of the archeotech science team, and ordered him to deactivate the shield.

We all followed the Tau scientist to a cogitator station, listening to a steady list of complaints way. The monkey remained silent, but tried to bite the Ranger holding it a few times. Once at the station the Tau pressed a few buttons and asked Sarge to flip a heavy looking lever. The shield vanished with a loud crack and revealed the archeotech that'd caused all this trouble.

Jim and Hannah fell to their knees in awe while everyone else stared. Then Nubby swore loudly, Twitch started laughing, and Sarge facepalmed. Tink peeked out from the back of the group and turned to Aimy.

Huh, looks like a necron ship. Wonder how the hell they got that.



We checked, just to be sure. There was a slim possibility that someone else had gotten their hands on a damaged Necron vessel. It didn't HAVE to be the one we gave to a Rogue Trader in exchange for some fire-support. The whole entire bloody mess, from the empty worlds to the damned Heretek fleet above us, didn't HAVE to be the result of us cutting a quick deal to save our skins. This didn't HAVE to be OUR fault.

It was of course.

We could see the spot where we'd melt-a-ed our way in and the words "NUBBY WUZ HERE" glared damningly at us from inside the ship's open door. This was probably going to go down in some Inquisitorial history book as the most colossal screw-up ever performed by a bunch of low-level grunts. I mean cults and traitors typically have to work for years to achieve this sort of mess, we managed to achieve in just a few minutes of panicked bargaining. Oak, or maybe even the Lord Inquisitor himself, was going to nail our ears to the wall and peel our skin off with a dull spoon over this. Assuming we survived the current mess that is.

Aimy, Tink, and the rest of the team caught on to what was going on in a few seconds, they'd heard that story more than a few times. The Eldar didn't get it though, and just stared at us as we all alternated between swears, moans, and hysterical laughter. Eventually the Warlock got frustrated trying to piece things together and demanded an explanation from Sarge. Our fearless leader was obviously not thinking clearly, because in a fit of retardation he told the xenos the truth. Hooo boy was he pissed.

The lecture we got was a nice preview of the one we'd inevitably get when we made our end-of-mission report. The word incompetent was used at least thirty times, and it was amazing how many synonyms for idiot the Warlock could think up. It was quite embarrassing, but the sheer grating annoyance of being lectured by the smug xenos bastard eventually brought us back to reality.

The lecture ended with a wail of "Do you know how much time and life you've wasted with your stupidity?" Which Sarge sourly countered with "Oh shut up, we're guardsmen. Wasting time and life is practically our job description." While the Warlock searched for more words to express his outrage Sarge ordered the rest of us to secure the ship and asked the Warlock what his plan for sorting all this out was.



Sarge and the Eldar argued over whether the Hereteks and Necrons would leave the system if we just blew the ship up. While they did this the rest of us took the Tau prisoner inspected the ship. It had changed a lot since we'd last seen it: the place was practically filled with things that looked like a hybrid of Tau and Imperial tech. Jim and Hannah snapped out of the religious daze they'd been in and, after a bit of outrage about how heretical everything was, started asking the terrified scientist questions.

Playing tour guide seemed to calm the Tau down immensely. He led the tech-priests around the ship with Tink tagging along and asking annoying questions. They were given a completely incomprehensible summary of how the scientist had merged Tau, Imperial, and Jokaero tech into something that could interface with Necron systems. Supposedly that let them reverse engineer pieces of the tech and make their own versions or something, it was pretty much impossible to follow.

While the nerds babbled about how this was the greatest scientific advancement in centuries Twitch and Nubby went to find a place to plant the Nuke and blow it all up. There's probably something deep and philosophical you could say about that, but we were guardsmen. We had a really big bomb, and damned if we weren't going to use it.

Twitch slid the actual go-boom part of the bomb out of its decorative cylinder and crammed it into an out of the way crevice. He was literally vibrating with excitement as he taped the thing into place and armed it.

Outside Aimy and Fumbles watched Sarge's back as he brainstormed with the Eldar and, over the secure comm Tink and Jim had rigged, the adepts. It was a rather tense situation, especially when the senior tech-priests started repeatedly trying to call Sarge's main comm. Luckily everything stayed subcritical and a plan was formed.

The ship had to be destroyed of course, as did the facility and any notes. The problem was that neither the Necrons nor the Hereteks were likely to leave the system until they'd checked the planet over themselves. Since that checking would doubtless involve the death by scarab swarm or daemonic-machine of everyone on the

planet, that wasn't an ideal solution.

For a while they toyed with the idea of taking the ship, which the scientists had gotten flying again, and running. The theory was that the necrons and hereteks would follow it and leave the planet alone, but the Eldar pointed out the vessel wasn't warp-capable and the Necrons would catch anything that was. Really, the only way to save the planet was to somehow stall the attackers until reinforcements arrived, or get them in a fight with each other. To this end, Sarge suggested just giving the ship to the Hereteks with the experimental Tau tech on it mined, but the nuke left out. This was vetoed by the Warlock as well as Jim and Hannah.

Finally after a little debate an even more suicidal plan was agreed on. The ship would be flown between the Heretek fleet and the region of space where the Eldar said the Necrons were hiding. When both fleets closed on the prize, the ship's teleportation-jammers would be dropped and the necrons would be forced to kill all the hereteks in case they ported something off the ship. If, somehow, the hereteks looked like they'd win the nuke would be detonated. The only questions left were who would detonate the nuke, who would crew the ship, and what would happen to the crew when the teleportation-jammer went down.

The Warlock promised that if we crewed the ship with the Tau scientist, his vessel would follow us at maximum teleportation range. The jammer would go down, we'd arm the mines, and then we'd port out and he'd carry us to safety on the only ship in system fast and stealthy enough to survive the ensuing melee. For trust reasons the nuke's detonator would be left in



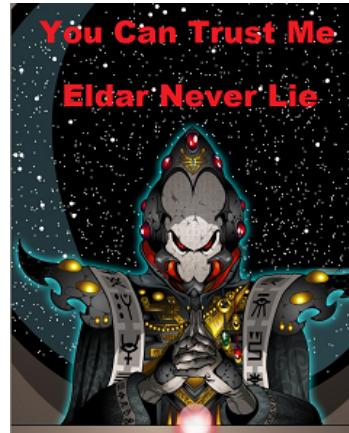
our hands, but also put on a timer in case something went wrong. Sarge eventually agreed.

Everyone sprang into action. The nerdier members of the team went back aboard with the Tau scientist to prep the ship for its last flight. The Warlock ordered his men to rig their own charges in the lab then, the second the Tau scientist was out of sight and without the slightest hesitation, decapitated the captive augmetic-monkey. Aimey put in a courtesy call to the PDF upstairs, who were surprisingly still alive, telling them to bug out if they could. Finally Sarge called the Captain and other Interrogators to fill them in on the plan. The tech-priests must have been listening in too, because the little noise-maker we had their remote nuke detonator hooked up to went off halfway through the conversation. Sarge called the cogboys assholes and promised everyone else it would work out. He then got a final sitrep from the rest of us and walked over to where the Eldar was cleaning his sword.

Sarge gave the xenos his best parade ground salute, then thanked him for agreeing to teleport us out of the ship. The burly noncom held out his hand and, after an awkward pause, the Warlock sheathed his sword and took it. Looking Sarge right in the eyes and saying it was the least he could do, the xenos shook his hand. Inside that stupid helmet he was probably grinning ear-to-ear about how clever he was and how the annoying guardsmen would finally be getting what they had coming.

Imagine how the xenos bastard's expression must have changed when Sarge's grip tightened and dragged him forward.

The final stage of Operation Screw Everyone Else Over Before They Screw Us was beautiful. Sarge and the Warlock both staggered backwards as Nubby darted forwards and Tink pulled a lever. Before any of the other xenos could do a thing, the ship's shield sprang back up and cut them off from their leader. The Warlock's sword-hand was locked in Sarge's grip, but his eyes started glowing and sparks appeared around his offhand. This was interrupted by a sticky-sounding thunk as Nubby slapped a det-pack onto his chest, right over shiny-looking gem that sat in the middle of his armor. The xenos went stock-still, hypnotized



by either the blinking light on the charge or the way Nubby was waving a dead-man's detonator over his head and cackling.

Sarge released the Warlock's hand, stepped backwards and formally welcome him to the ship's crew. He managed to get through the whole speech without cracking a smile, but behind him Aimy and Nubby were grinning wide enough to swallow an entire sewer's worth of shit. He wrapped the speech up with a little warning about what would happen if anything cut the comm connection to the pack's detonator, then advised the xenos to come aboard and start arranging our exit strategy. The Eldar glared at everyone for a while, then stalked into the ship while swearing and promising vengeance under his breath. Sarge clapped him on the back with a hearty "That's the spirit son" and followed him in.



So no shit, there we were, on a Necron ship being piloted by a terrified Tau scientist, flying out to start a fight between a Heretek fleet and a Necron extermination force, with our only chance of survival resting on an Eldar Warlock who we'd taken hostage by gluing a detpack to his spirit gem. Gotta say this for life in the Inquisition: it may be absolutely insane, but it makes for some great stories.

Our flight up to orbit was less interesting than you'd think, we didn't have any windows to see the massive swarm of necron scarabs we were flying through. Mostly we ran around placing all of Twitch's detpacks and helping the Tau keep all the jury-rigged systems running. The little guy was terrified to the point of gibbering by the situation, and Fumbles was put on duty behind him, pumping a constant stream of positive mental energy or whatever. Sarge took the detonator from Nubby and hung out with Aimy and the Warlock and ironed out the last little pieces of the plan, like when the Imperial fleet would disengage and how the teleporting would actually work.

The Eldar seemed to have accepted that all he had to do to get out of the situation in one piece was not be a dick. This was probably very hard for him, dickishness being in the nature of Eldar and all, but aside from being a little surly he was coping. In fact spirits were high all around after Fumbles calmed the Tau down, the only people who seemed to be unsure about the plan were Jim, Hannah, and Tink.

The techies were all rather torn by the way we were about to destroy a technomagical marvel and the fact that the Eldar flatly refused to allow the Tau to live. The Warlock held that the fact that we felt sorry for him was immaterial. He would have to stay and keep flying evasively while we

ported out, a mine would be placed on his seat to ensure he didn't fall into enemy hands. Sarge pointedly ignored the mutinous looks and whispering this statement generated.

It took an amazingly short amount of time to reach the edge of the fleet engagement, Necron ships are ludicrously fast. As we edged around the Imperial fleet some final preparations were made. There was going to a brief period of time between when the ship's teleport-jammer went down and when the Eldar vessel would be able to get us out of there, because science or something. That meant we'd have to fort up together on the fancy pad-thingy and hold off whatever ported in then activate the mines and Nuke's timer right as we ported out. So barricades were constructed and lines of fire were cleared while Sarge went over the ship's big vox station and opened up a general channel.

Sarge loudly, jovially even, announced that the archeotech was right here and the hereteks could bloody well have it if they could catch him. He panned the vid feed around a little, then to really sell things, walked over to the Tau scientist and asked him to say hi to the crazy metal men. Both groups of them. The Tau let out sort of a high-pitched wheezing sound and tried to slap the recorder away. Sarge laughed and reminded everyone that this was the last surviving scientist that'd been studying the ship, this was a once in a life-time opportunity folks. Then he cut the feed, but left the transmitter on so everyone could find us.

We were all watching on the ship's holo-thing and it was surreal how the Heretek fleet shifted. Every single vessel turned as one, ignoring the Imperial ships and burning towards us at maximum speed. Simultaneously a section of empty space on our opposite side filled with little moon shaped shaped ships and a larger one that looked sort of like a fork. They were farther away, but started closing the gap with incredible speed. All of us who'd been laughing at Sarge's little speech went silent and watched as they closed on us like two sets of teeth.

Keeping the balance between the two incoming fleets was tricky, but the Tau scientist and his assistants managed it. As they closed it got harder and harder to dodge incoming fire and the shield started soaking shots and we all watched the timer until both the Hereteks were in teleportation range carefully.

Everyone had their own little nervous reactions as the enemy closed, ranging from Aimy repeatedly checking her weapon to Jim and Hannah praying.



Sarge took special note of the way Tink was hugging his drone like a teddy-bear and how Twitch kept fiddling with the empty Nuke-case which he was keeping for "sentimental reasons".



The Warlock signalled it was time to fall back to the teleporter and personally placed the mine on the back of the Tau's seat. As he did it he leaned in and told the poor sucker to be careful to stay in his seat so the Eldar ship's teleporter could lock onto him. Seriously, Eldar are dicks.

Everyone slowly filed out after the Eldar to where the actual teleportation would be happening. Tink, Twitch, and Fumbles brought up the rear, the techie was crying and Fumbles was radiating waves of misery as well. Sarge carefully ignored them, but the Warlock spared a second to tell them that they were pathetic and to ask Fumbles to control his aura, it was making it hard for him to focus his own powers. Fumbles flipped him off.

When the timer hit zero, Twitch activated his timed detonators and Jim did something. The entire ship immediately filled with crackling electricity and a wave of pressure that nearly deafened us. What ported in was horrific. The dreadnought thing we'd fought down in the lab had nothing on these guys, they were like the skitarii that accompany the titan legions crossed with daemons. There was metal, and flesh, and guns, and claws, and way more tentacles than anyone should ever have to see in one place. We all froze for a second, then before we could fire the second wave arrived.

The Necrons' teleporters seemed a little smoother than the Hereteks'. There wasn't any lighting or pressure, just a flash of green light, then the ship was completely packed with metal skeletons, giant-clawed metal worm things, and a few thousand scarabs. We all heard a tinny screaming from the Tau, then the explosives started going off. Everywhere except for our little three-meter pad exploded into violence.

There aren't words to properly describe what we saw around us in that ship as we waited for the teleporter to activate. We all held our fire and just stared into the maelstrom around us, trying to pick out what was an actual threat and what wasn't. At first it looked like everything was just going to ignore us, we were too minor to pay any attention to. Then a single skeleton, taller and fancier looking than the others, stepped right through our barricades and raised glowing green staff over its head.

Three lasguns, three plasma weapons, two psychic attacks, and a pair of servo skulls slammed into its face. The boss-cron rocked back and a literal wave of scarabs rushed over him, absorbing our followup barrages. Its staff

swept downwards and was just barely deflected by the Warlock's fancy sword.

The Eldar managed to deflect too more surprisingly fast blows from the Necron's power staff while the rest of us poured as much fire as we could into it. Then the world went white and everything around the edges of the platform disappeared.

That'd been the first teleportation any of us were part of, and honestly it wasn't nearly as bad as everyone made it out to be. There was no muss, no fuss, and no screaming daemonic voices accompanied by lightning bolts. Just one second here, next second there. That was probably because it was a xenos teleporter though.

Anyway, the first thing we noticed upon arrival was that the maelstrom of violence had been replaced by an equally unsettling army of Eldar. The boss-cron looked around for a second, obviously didn't like the odds, then vanished in another flash of green, leaving behind a few dozen scarabs. We very carefully shot these, making sure not to raise our weapons high enough to threaten any of our nice, new hosts.

The Warlock breathed a sigh of relief and barked some orders in pointy-ear speak. He then turned back and asked us to hand over the detonator and remain on the pad until we reached teleportation range of an Imperial vessel. Sarge kept his grip on the detonator and suggested that our arrival had damaged the teleporter, possibly in such a way that it would port us all into the void instead of a vessel. All-in-all he'd prefer to hand over the detonator after a shuttle ride to the Occurrence Border. The Eldar muttered something that sounded like "lucky guess", waved the soldiers away and started leading us through the fancy-but-confusing corridors of his ship.

We rode back on a very familiar looking shuttle, and spent the majority of the voyage trying to stare down the wraithguards and rangers we'd ditched in the lab. Thankfully Sarge was able to keep things to a low simmer, keeping Nubby from saying anything at all, and covering for Tink and Fumbles who were in some sort of depressive feedback loop.

There was a scary moment when we got back into comm range of the Occurrence Border. Jim and Hannah both seized up started twitching, caus-



ing Tink to break out of his funk and grab his tools. You couldn't quite call what followed combat-surgery, but it was close. Tink ripped something small and metal out of Jim's neck, and then they both went to work on Hannah and extracted something similar. When Sarge asked what the hell happened, Tink said the senior tech-priests were rather angry and left it at that.



After that little show Sarge put in a call to our adepts and filled them in on our imminent arrival. The bay we touched down in was some sort of racially-insensitive standoff, with the ship's senior tech-priests and their servitors staring down the Captain and a small army of his armsmen. The Warlock took a look around, laughed, and told us to have fun. Sarge flipped him off and handed over the detonator, prompting the Warlock to laugh some more.

After the guests had left, our little family squabble really got rolling. The tech-priests were livid and wanted us dead and the Captain was equally furious that anyone dared to question his authority on HIS ship. The only thing that kept it from exploding into a bloodbath was the arrival of a sensor tech, reporting that the Nuke had gone off and taken a small Heretek cruiser out along with the ship. Twitch giggled at that.

That wasn't the end of the good news, apparently the hereteks had decided that they'd settle for an unmodified Necron ship, and were going at the Necron fleet hammer and tongs. From the look of it, it'd be days before either side had attention so spare for us. The Captain called that as near a total victory as was possible, then browbeat the tech-priests about how the archeotech hadn't fallen into heretical hands and there'd be time to wait for Juris.

None of us knew who Juris was, but Jim said it was a good thing and we accepted being confined to quarters until he arrived.



The first thing we noticed after being escorted to our quarters was the large amount of dead servitors. Then the fairly severe structural damage to the hallway. Finally the note from Ol' Bill saying that we were going to have to clean and repair it ourselves, no one in the engineering department was willing to even walk down this corridor much less touch anything. They'd even cut a new entry point to the Gellar Field Generator from a side corridor.

Twitch surveyed the carnage with pride, especially the part where the doors to our quarters were still sealed despite the

damage. He supervised the careful opening of one of the doors by while our senior tech-priest and servitor escort stayed at the end of hallway and glared at everyone. Once it was open we all piled in, Fumbles and the Enginseers included, then sealed the door behind us. After a quick sweep to check for any sort of bugs, the techies confirmed the room was clean and Twitch dropped the nuke-case he'd still been carrying. To Sarge's complete lack of surprise, when the lid was popped off a nearly asphyxiated Tau scientist flopped onto the floor, followed by Tink's drone controller.

After the little guy had a minute to breath and get his bearings he was incredibly grateful. In what Sarge thought was an incredibly annoying voice, he thanked us for the rescue then asked what he could do to repay us and when we'd return him to the Tau Empire. Everyone kept quiet on that last part, but Tink butted forward. He announced that for a start, the scientist could help him build a new drone, Spot had DIED for him after all. Then the techie started crying again, which set Fumbles off in turn. Nubby led the psyker away to look at pictures of happy puppies or something while everyone else went to find something less awkward to do, like talk to Jim and Hannah about their complex crisis of faith.

Well honestly talking to Jim and Hannah about religion wasn't that awkward. They were a little confused about the stuff they'd seen on the Tau-ified Necron ship and now thought senior tech-priests were complete assholes, but that just put them on the same page as the rest of us. Mostly we just sat there and nodded whenever they stopped talking, then let them sit and think when they ran out of stuff to say.

As for the rest of us, we were actually feeling pretty good. We'd completed our mission and no one except Aimy had gotten shot. Sure she looked rather odd and was currently up to her eyeballs on painkillers, but the Hospitaller probably knew how to regrow hair and would hopefully go to work on her before she came down. Also as an added bonus if we managed to keep the Tau scientist alive until we got back to Oak, he'd probably be so happy that he'd forget about where that Necron ship had come from. Of course there was still the whole thing where the Necron and Heretek fleets might stop fighting turn on us at any second, but there was nothing we could do about that so we didn't bother worrying about it.

Over the next few days we got regular visits from Doc and the Hospitaller as well as the adepts and the Captain. As a basic precaution the Tau was crammed in one of Twitch's hidey-holes during these visits, he complained



about the treatment until we explained what the Mechanicus did to mouthy Tau scientists.

Anyway, everything was going fairly well, both in space and down on the planet.



self out.

Up in space Sword-guy was mostly keeping everyone from doing anything stupid while the xenos and Hereteks mauled each other. Astropathic communication was still down but the reinforcements that were trickling in brought news of some sort of major fleet force being gathered near the sector capital. If neither hostile fleet disengaged soon, it was looking like reinforcements would arrive in time.

Finally, the Captain said tech-priests were still sitting tight and waiting for Juris, who was on the way but had no ETA. Since it seemed like he'd be deciding our fate, we asked Jim and Hannah exactly who Juris was. Unfortunately they went full tech-priest on us and only said that he was holy and not something we should ask questions about. We left it at that, things were crowded enough in our quarters without starting any fights.

On the third day of our little incarceration news came that the Necron fleet had disengaged. They hadn't been defeated by any measure, they had just decided the battle wasn't worth fighting or something. They'd pulled back to the edge of the system, then just vanished, leaving the badly mauled Heretek fleet standing there like idiots.

The Teks didn't immediately attack us though, instead they opted to spend a while licking their wounds and trying to find where the Necrons had gone, at least that's what it had looked like. After a day of waiting a substantial number of Heretek reinforcements came out of the warp and the whole mess of them closed on the planet.



From what the Captain told us later the battle started about as expected, with the Hereteks slowly pushing our makeshift fleet back with sheer weight of fire. After half a day of holding actions our guys had taken a beating and morale nearly broke when a major incoming warp signature was detected coming in behind the Heretek fleet. Thankfully though, instead of more Tek reinforcements, it turned out to be a friendly fleet and not a little dinky one. It was an honest-to-the-Emperor, or Omnissiah, Explorator fleet and, I shit you not, there was an Ark Mechanicus leading it.

It wasn't even a slaughter, that implies there were pieces left over. It was a complete bloody annihilation.

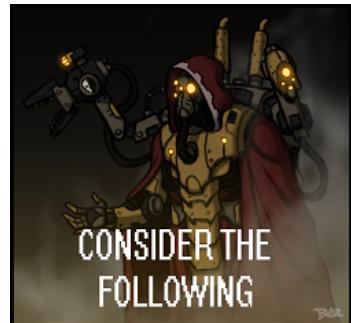
Or at least that's what the Captain told us, we couldn't see it ourselves because some bat-shit cogboys wouldn't let us out of our quarters.

So it wasn't hard to put two and two together and see that this holy Juris guy was probably the reason there was a Mechanicus fleet here now. Sure enough, word came down that the system was now under his... jurisdiction. Everyone was to sit tight while he investigated reports of tech-heresy and took corrective measures. This sounded ominous, but since the person who said it had a bloody Ark at his command, we all sat tight.

After two more days of stewing, stuff started happening. Some fancy looking tech-priests we didn't recognize came and asked for Jim and Hannah. Tink and Twitch were in favor of shooting them, or at least telling them to bugger off, but the Enginseers said it was okay: these guys were from the Ordos Juris. We were all sort of torn as Jim and Hannah were led off, they were our mates and we were worried for them, but on the other hand the cheeky buggers had let us think that "Juris" was just some guys name for something like two weeks.

Anyway, our cogboy and cog-girl were returned without any signs of damage and the tech-heresy investigation continued without touching on us again. The priests never came down to ask us any questions and they never searched our quarters for Tau scientists or disguised pulse-weapons. It was rather worrying at first, since good luck like this tends to be followed by some even-larger dose of bad, but Jim and Hannah said it made sense. They started to explain that it was some sort of treaty between the Ordos and the Inquisition, then stopped when they realized no one but the Tau scientist and Fumbles was actually listening.

Speaking of the Tau scientist, we were beginning to regret rescuing him.



Quite aside from the risk of being correctively measured by the Ordos Juris, he was incredibly annoying.



Fio, as everyone but Tink called him, was an infuriating combination of neurotic, naive, hyper-active, pedantic, and curious. The fact that no one had strangled him as a child was pretty much proof that Tau civilian worlds really are as non-violent as they claim.

Back when we'd been encouraging him to talk, Fio spun us a rather odd tale of the whole mess from his perspective. He'd been a technician on a Tau border world and specialized at integrating other races tech. He'd mostly worked in a government lab, but occasionally he'd go out to inspect some passing ship's systems. A Rogue Trader had come in, volunteered for inspection, and taken him to see a tech-priest who had seemed a little strange. Shortly after he'd looked at the fascinating ship the priest was working on everything had

gone dark. When Fio woke up his fire-warrior guards were gone and he'd been given a new job.

Aside from the kidnapping, the slavery, and the fact that his boss was quite insane even before he'd had the Jokaero "augment" his brain, the job was quite interesting. They'd stayed in their part of the vessel and done what research they could while the Trader searched for a proper new lab for them. Eventually the Trader had found this planet, brokered a favorable arrangement, then went on his way. After that it'd been much easier to get the parts and tool he needed, but the guards were much more unpleasant. Fio had been getting rather worried that he'd never be returned to the Tau Empire before we'd shown up and rescued him. We all just skirted around that subject.

Anyway, the Tau scientist was brilliant and annoying, so it was no surprise that he got on well with Tink. What was surprising was that Jim and Hannah took to him as well, when they weren't all tinkering on Spot 2.0, the four of them would sit around watching Tau vids that Tink had gotten from somewhere. The rest of us avoided their area like the plague.

Our sorta-imprisonment finally ended just before any of us got frustrated enough to kill each other. Doc, finally out of the wheelchair, led the relief force with the Captain, other Interrogators, and adepts at his back. They informed us of our freedom and invited us up to the main conference room for a final debriefing. We were hesitant to leave at first, but Jim sent a skull

and confirmed that the combat servitors that had been watching our doors for the last dozen days were actually gone.

When we got to the briefing room it was occupied by a single ordinary looking tech-priest and some guy who looked like a diplomat. Jim and Hannah practically fell over themselves bowing and scraping when they saw the priest, so we figured he was the head Magos Juris or whatever you called it. The Magos responded by screeching something in binary, prompting the two Engineers to look embarrassed then sit down and shut up. That was the only thing the Magos ever said, everything else came from his diplomat helper.

To start with, there was a presentation of legal documents stating that the entire system was more or less Mechanicus property until they were sure no Necron or Heretek fleets would be returning. Battleaxe and Sword-guy were invited to stay on as official Inquisitorial observers to the transition of government. Neither Interrogator acted surprised and both accepted, so it was probably fixed beforehand.

The Magos' assistant continued to the matter of tech-heresy. The system was littered with little fragments of Necron and Heretek ships, but there was no indication that any pieces of the modified ship had survived. It was the Ordos Juris' official standpoint that this was a good thing. From the few scraps of research they'd examined and Jim and Hannah's testimony, they were of the opinion that the hybrid of xenotech on the Necron vessel was deeply heretical and destroying it was the correct response. Our squad was congratulated for its thoroughness, as were Jim and Hannah for resisting the xenotech's allure where so many others had failed. The two Engineers literally glowed at this, the rest of us tried to maintain our poker faces.

Finally the discussion came around to our ship's tech-priesthood. In the Magos' opinion their actions were not treasonous or heretical, but they had not been ideal. Since our ship's non-ordained Engineering staff seemed unusually capable, the entire priesthood was being transferred off ship for...



re-education. Jim and Hannah would remain as the ship's senior priests and a tithe of fresh acolytes would be transferred in from other ships in the system to fill out the roster until we finished our return voyage. This time they didn't glow: Hannah froze and Jim looked like he was about to faint. Tink slapped Jim on the back and said he'd be happy to help out, Sarge told him to shut it.

With that final little announcement the Magos Juris left with the other Interrogators in tow and the Captain went to see to his ship. This left just our team and the stunned Enginseers with the translator guy. To our surprise he came over and introduced himself as a Magos as well, despite his apparent lack of metal bits.

As he got closer and we all started getting uneasy. It go to the point where something sprang loose in Twitch's head and Sarge had to grab his laspistol before he shot the guy. Now that we saw him up close he was definitely a tech-priest, there's normal looking, then there's aggressively normal looking. The guy looked like someone had sculpted every inch of his body to exactly average human specifications, it was amazingly creepy.

Anyway, the creepy diplo-Magos went to where Jim and Hannah were still silently freaking out and assured them they'd do fine, the Inquisition was the perfect place for them. Both of them should embrace it and take the chance to watch, learn, and grow; because they'd need every scrap of experience. See, when their service to the Inquisition ended, they weren't going to sit in some manufactorum for the rest of their days. Jim and Hannah had been marked for something greater, they'd be joining the Ordos Juris. This news did absolutely nothing to reduce the two Enginseers' panic levels, and the diplo-Magus let out a very unsettling laugh as he turned to the rest of us.

He handed Sarge a data-slate and informed us that their ship had more... efficient methods of communication than astropaths. The diplo-Magos had informed our Inquisitor of the situation and its findings, Oak had sent this in reply. Of course the Ordos Juris would never read the Inquisition's private communications, but he suspected our Inquisitor had an interesting little task for us perform on our return trip. Sarge pocketed the slate without comment and tried to stare down someone who apparently never blinked.



In an effort to save Sarge, Doc stepped in and asked the Magos if his Ordos would be taking over the pursuit of the Rogue Trader who'd sold the necron ship. The tech-priest switched his unsettling gaze to Doc for a while, then said that, in this matter, the Ordos Juris only had interest in those who committed or ordered the commission of tech-heresy. Everyone who'd worked on the heretical project was already dead, primarily by our hands, and the entirety of the planet's nobility was being examined for... degree of guilt. Currently they were not concerned with Rogue Traders being Rogue Traders, though whoever initially provided them with necron vessel would be of interest. Or would be if the Inquisition hadn't already claimed jurisdiction over the matter that is. Doc decided that he did not want to talk to the scary Magos anymore.

Everyone clammed up and avoided eye contact in hope that the Juris would get the hint and leave.

Smiling that creepy smile, the diplo-Magos told us unless we were incredibly unlucky, we'd never encounter him or the Ordos Juris again, but they'd be watching us with great interest. On that unsettling note, he wished us good luck and good... hunting, then left. Twitch muttered something about the Mechanicus being full of weirdos; the rest of us, including Jim and Hannah, agreed.

Nubby suggested that this was probably a good time to go get a drink, possibly in the mess-hall where the betting pool was scheduled to finally be concluded in about twenty minutes. No one questioned how he managed to know this despite being locked in the same quarters as the rest of us.

The mess was, of course, packed. Nearly everyone had been in on the pool, and even if they hadn't won, they wanted to see who did or if their stake would be refunded.

Fumbles, the Adepts, and the tech-priests took one look at the press of bodies and decided it wasn't worth it, but us doughty guardsmen couldn't be deterred so easily and made heavy use of our feet and elbows to carve a path. Nubby and, surprisingly, Aimy were the most viscous about it, and managed to get all the way to the table the Quartermaster was standing



on. Surprisingly he was backed up by the Captain and some heavily armed armsmen.



Upon seeing us the Quartermaster visibly flinched, and hefted his lockbox and ledger like some sort of shield. The Captain prodded him, then bellowed for silence.

It took the Quartermaster a few tries to get started, but eventually he listed off the agreed upon rules of the pool. He then began going down the number and size of the bets on each category, until he finally reached the winning one. In a quavering voice he announced that most of the people who had bet on the Xenos Species known as Necrons had been allowed to withdraw their bets due to extenuating circumstances. Nubby grinned hugely, then registered the word "most".

It turned out that the only bet remaining in the category was a wager of twenty thrones by Amelia Delorisista Amanita Trigestrata Zeldana Malifee von Humpeding.

Aimy screamed in triumph, Nubby frothed in rage and had to be restrained by Sarge and Twitch. The rest of the room either exploded into laughter or started muttering about things being rigged, then the Captain bellowed for silence again and the Quartermaster resumed speaking. Unfortunately, he said, since the winning bet was placed by a latecomer and therefore was made with an unfair amount of knowledge, the ship's senior officers had decreed that the payout would be limited to a factor of a hundred to one. The remainder would be forfeited into a special budget to be distributed for the good of the entire vessel, as decided by its most honorable and wise Captain.

While Aimy cursed a blue streak and Nubby took a turn raucously laughing, the rest of the room dissolved into even more angry muttering. Finally Captain stepped into center stage and announced that, For the Good of the Vessel, the first use of this budget would be to supply this mess with unlimited rations of Sacra for the remainder of the evening. This was met with much more enthusiasm.

As the party erupted around us and Aimy and Nubby screamed at each other and the poor Quartermaster, Sarge finally got around to reading Oak's message. Unsurprisingly it was a new assignment to be performed before returning. He read the orders, swore, then flagged down the Captain, who swore even harder. Both men decided they needed somewhere more quiet to think things over and headed up to the bridge.

As they left, Doc, flagged them down and asked what was going on. He was shown the first line of Oak's orders, which read:

**The Emperor's Scythes Space Marine Chapter
undertake the capture of a living Tyranid Zoanthrope for study.
You are to assist them in this mission in any way possible, and
handle the transport of the creature to my laboratories.**



Chapter 12

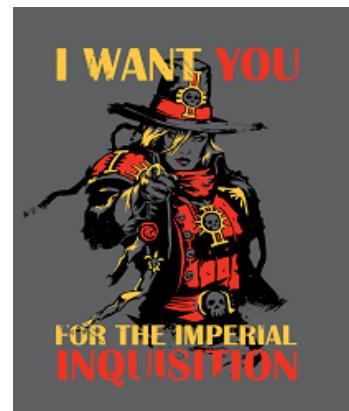
Tyranid Acquisition

Interrogator Greg Sargent stood with his group of experts and contemplated the door. It was larger and fancier than any of the others in the hallway, and it was also the only door that had been welded shut. The words "Psyker Holding Cells" could just barely be seen under the swathes of prayer seals that covered the door. Sarge shuddered at the memories those words dredged up and silently cursed whoever had decided to leave the damned section in during the ship's refit.

At a wave from Sarge, Chief Engineer Ol' Bill and Senior Enginseer Jim moved forwards. They ignored the official little yellow plaque which promised a slow and painful death for anyone who opened the door, and began cutting. At the back of the group, Senior Enginseer Hannah and the ship's Confessor explained why the door had been sealed to a worried looking Xenologist Adept. When the Xenologist started backing away and suggesting that he really didn't need to personally inspect the Cells, Sarge cut in and assured him that the daemon which had haunted the place was very thoroughly dead.

Once the door was cut open, the Confessor led the way inside with a censer in one hand and a flamer filled with holy promethium in the other. Sarge thought the priest seemed disappointed when nothing jumped out and tried to eat his soul. The Confessor gave the all-clear and the whole group trooped in and started assessing the Cells.

The main room was circular, filled with several pieces of arcane machinery, and was connected via very-thick doors to a dozen child-sized holding cells. Eleven of those cells were open and looked exactly the same as when Sarge



had last seen them, the twelfth didn't. Instead of the ominously locked door he'd remembered, it was a jagged crater partially filled with debris from its half-collapsed ceiling. The delicate machinery immediately around the crater had been turned to scrap by door-shrapnel, and a few clawed foot-prints could be seen in the wreckage.

One by one, the technical experts reported their findings to the Xenologist Adept.

Ol' Bill reported that the Warp-Presence Shroud was missing a certain key component and would be barely functional. The Xenologist asked if "missing" meant it might be found somewhere, and Sarge explained that in this case it meant that the piece was welded into the warp-drive. Ol' Bill recommended leaving that part where it was.

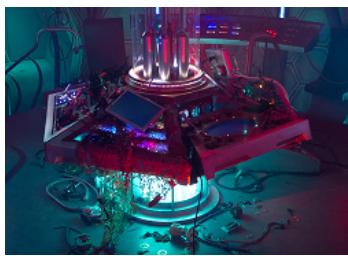
Jim followed that up with the news that the Cells' Psi-Suppressor had been badly damaged, but he was reasonably confident that by cannibalizing parts and reducing coverage it could be gotten back up to eighty percent power. Jim refused to guess whether that was Delta, Epsilon, or a lower level psi-suppression, citing his own lack of any idea how the damned thing worked. The Xenologist winced at hearing this.

Finally Hannah reported that all eleven intact stasis units were in working order. The problem was that, unless the specimen was going to be child-sized, there'd be no way to fit it in one. Putting it half-inside a stasis field would result in a half-specimen, trying to overlap the fields would result in a rather large explosion, and there was no Mechanicus-approved method for kludging multiple stasis units into a larger one. When the Xenologist claimed that there was no way anything would work without a stasis-field, Hannah grudgingly admitted that Tink and his "assistant" might have some not-entirely-orthodox way of doing it. Sarge groaned at that, but didn't actually say anything.

Everyone went quiet as the Adept digested the lackluster reports. In the silence Sarge noticed a faint sound coming from the debris-clogged cell. A laspistol practically materialized in his hands, and he motioned everyone except the well-armed Confessor back.

As the two men carefully pushed aside pieces of wreckage, the sound grew clearer. It was a sort of far-off chattering, screaming sound, mixed with what sounded like the thump of heavy crates being moved around, and a familiar nasal voice talking to itself.

Everyone in the room groaned, except for Sarge, who thrust his head as far as he could into the wrecked cell and bellowed "GODDAMNIT NUBBY."



There was an inarticulate scream and the sound of several objects falling over. When the clattering died away a plaintive "Bloody 'ell Sarge, chu doin down 'ere?" drifted out from somewhere in the rear of the cell.

Sarge began ripping out pieces of wreckage in an effort to find where the trooper was hiding. As he worked the enraged noncom embarked on what was sure to be an epic chewing-out. "What am I doing? WHAT AM I DOING? What are YOU doing you little idiot? And why in the Emperor's name are you doing it in the Psyker Holding Cells?"

Nubby's tone grew panicked as he registered Sarge's fury. "I aint doin nufin! An' you made me promise na ta go nowhere near yer stupid cells. I'm jus' mindin me own business down at da bottom of da liffs."

This gave Sarge pause, and in the silence the faint chattering screaming he'd been hearing under Nubby's voice finally registered. Sarge groaned as the realization hit him. The Confessor, who didn't know Nubby quite as well, asked if he was in the Chapel to the Emperor located in the deck below the lift to the bridge. Nubby's hesitant reply of "sorta" was cut off by Sarge.

"Nubby are you using the containment area inside the Chapel, the one we built around the unholy screaming crater the Cogtaint left when he died, to store contraband?"

"... no?"

"Really Nubby?"

"Well, not really contraband per se, jus' like, odds an' ends."

"GODDAMN IT NUBBY!"

"It's not like anyone was usin it!"

While Sarge and the Confessor both sputtered in a mix of horror and frustration, Jim raised the question of how the conversation was actually happening. Sarge couldn't see anything through the gaps in the debris besides the cell's rear wall. He grudgingly ordered Nubby to search the containment room for any sort of communicator or portal.

Nubby followed their voices, and reported the glowing crater left by the dead Cogtaint as the source. He hesitantly asked if glowing metal could be a portal, and if he



should try poking it with something.

Sarge's answer was drowned out by a screeching flood of daemonic and binary screaming. The noise rose a crescendo as the far wall of the cell started glowing and a jagged length of metal poked through. The blade flailed around like a snake stuck in a hole, and slowly hauled something that looked like a cross between a lasgun's barrel and a daemonic skull out behind it. Sarge leapt aside as the Confessor ran forwards and hosed the back of the cell with sanctified promethium.

When the noise finally died down, Nubby's voice returned and asked if anyone had seen where his lasgun had gone after the metal ate it. Sarge told him it was probably time to get a new gun from Tink, and ordered the trooper to return to his quarters immediately. Without any of his "odds an' ends."

As the faint sound of Nubby's metal footsteps and curses faded away, Sarge turned to where the Xenologist was trying to hide behind Ol' Bill. "Right... we'll worry about that later, back to why we're actually down here. You've heard the reports, do you think we can do it?"

"Okay, just to be clear."

"Yes."

"We have a Psyker Containment Area with almost no warp-presence shrouding, an indeterminate amount of psi-suppression, and a stasis field that'll be kludged together from smaller units by that mad xenos you've got hiding in your quarters."

"Uh-huh."

"And you're asking if we can use this Area, which is already so tainted that it's manifesting major phenomena, to hold a live Tyranid Zoanthrope for a months-long warp voyage?"

"That's right."

"That is quite literally the worst idea I've ever heard."

↳ The All Guardsmen Party: Tyranid Acquisition Experts

So no shit, there we were, heading out beyond the fringes of Imperial Space to capture a xenos psyker, which we would then have to haul, kicking and screaming, half-way across the galaxy. There were probably shittier missions out there, but that wasn't much comfort. Saying "It could always be worse" loses its charm when things actually DO keep getting worse.

The only thing that kept us from labeling it as a suicide mission was the fact that a force from the Emperor's Scythes Space Marine chapter would be leading the actual capture effort. In fact it was technically their mission, we



were just supposed to assist them in the capture, then handle the transport. The fact that we'd be working with, and fighting alongside, a team of Space Marines didn't actually make us much happier though.

I mean sure, the Marines are the greatest warriors in all the Imperium, near-immortal demigods of war and all that, but we'd been in our share of battles. Every one of us had seen what inevitably happens when the Astartes get called in: the quickest way for a Guardsman to meet the Emperor is to be anywhere within a ten-kilometer radius of one of His angels.

Sadly, the assignment had come directly from Inquisitor Oak, so there was nothing we could do to avoid it. No matter how insane the mission, how bad our equipment, and how certain our deaths, there was nothing short of desertion that would get us out of our orders. So we went to work preparing our equipment and took solace in the most sacred right of all soldiers: complaining.

To start with, Tink complained about how unfair it was to stick him and Fio, our semi-captive Tau scientist, with so much to do in so little time. The two of them worked furiously on the problem of combining the smaller stasis units into a larger one, while simultaneously trying to cram more pulse weapons into lasgun disguises and build Spot 2.0. Their efforts were seriously hampered by the fact that Tau science isn't anywhere near as advanced when it comes to stasis fields, or anything related to psykers for that matter, as it is on the subject of plasma or drones. Then, on top of that, there was the whole heretical xenotech on an Imperial vessel issue.

The xenotech problem wasn't as serious as it used to be: replacing all of our annoying old cogboys with slightly-less-annoying young cogboys had resulted in far more liberal outlook among the ship's tech-priesthood. Sarge still insisted on a moderate amount of discretion though, which caused significant slowdowns, especially when combined with Jim's newfound stodginess as head-cogboy.

Mister I'm-a-big-boy-now Head Engineer Jim flat-out insisted that none of the junior tech-priests were allowed to even work in the same room as Fio, much less lend a mechadendrite. We sort of understood that it was all for the safety of the acolytes, who might get in deep trouble if they displayed bad habits in their future postings, but it slowed things down considerably.



Tink wound up drafting Sarge and most of the adepts as assistants; none of them were very helpful mind you, but the fact that they were suffering with him cheered Tink up immensely. Jim, Hannah, and Ol' Bill did their fair share of complaining too. The projects they were working on weren't much easier than Tink's, and they also were trying to keep the ship running and train their new recruits. In the long run the fresh batch of cogboys was probably going to work out wonderfully, but in the short term it was complete mayhem. Hannah had it especially bad, since she was the one in charge of the newbies while the others ran their projects. She was driven to the edge of hysterics by a constant barrage of questions and problems, ranging from trivial to potentially fatal, from the Acolytes. The poor cog-girl hid from them in our barracks more than once.



While the technical folks whined about over-work, Doc, Fumbles, and the Xenologist Adept complained to anyone who would listen about being used as human guinea pigs. Really, all of them understood there were no other options for testers, and the Containment Area had to be tested. They just hated the fact that said testing consisted of the Xenologist coaxing Fumbles into trying to manifest the sort of powers a Zoanthrope might use, while Doc stood around and waited to fix whatever went wrong. And when you combine Fumbles trying to use powers outside his comfort zone, a high-stress environment, and the quality

the Containment Area, you better believe things went wrong. At least Doc did get a lot of practice fixing up injured cogboys, so there was some silver lining. The only members of the team who weren't involved in preparing the Containment Area were Nubby, Twitch, and Aimy. Of course they didn't let that stand in the way of bitterly complaining, in fact they used their free time to complain harder. The three of them wandered around the ship on their patrol of the tainted areas, looking for warp phenomena and daemon incursions, while whining to each other about their sorry lot.

Nubby had a whole slew of grievances, mostly with Sarge. The chewing out he'd received for appropriating the screamy-crater room as a warehouse was minor compared to the one he'd gotten when he went BACK in there. Originally he'd only intended to clear out his stash, but then Tink and Fio had requested he run a few experiments. For Science they'd said. Nubby felt it was entirely unfair that he'd received all the blame for the incident with the crater and the rat.

Anyway, the mutated rodent hadn't actually hurt anyone: it'd just chased

a tech-acolyte around for a while, and then spontaneously combusted. So Nubby grumbled continuously about how unreasonable Sarge had gotten since his promotion, and the fact that he wasn't even allowed to hang out with Fumbles during tests on account of being "disruptive to the work environment."



Twitch had been driven to a significantly higher-than-usual level of paranoia by the news that he'd be sharing the ship with a Tyranid. This was compounded by the ban on indiscriminate booby-traps that Sarge had enacted after several of the acolytes had gotten themselves injured. The cherry on top, and primary focus of Twitch's complaints, was the fact that Doc had refused to move back into the barracks after his legs had finished healing. Doc claimed his preference for sharing quarters with his hospitalier girlfriend wasn't a slander on the quality of Twitch's defences, but the demolitions trooper didn't buy it. He interpreted this decision in the same way he did most things, as a complex conspiracy to make him unhappy.

Finally bringing up the rear of the little parade of misanthropy, was Aimy, who had perhaps the pettiest gripe of all of us: her hair was messed up. Doc's girlfriend had done a wonderful job of repairing the second set of facial burns our markswoman had received, and she'd used some special hospitaller trick to repair Aimy's scalp. Unfortunately, Aimy was completely fixated on the fact that the treatment had left a hand-wide stripe of pure white running through her, now buzz-cut, hair. None of us really knew why she cared so much, Aimy hadn't been particularly vain in the past, it was odd that this specific thing loomed so large. Perhaps it was



because Nubby had the poor taste to say it made her look like a skunk.

The three troopers shared their displeasure with just about everything they ran into, whether it was a minor warp beastie, mutant krootoid, or newbie tech-priest. Aimy particularly took grim delight in asking every Acolyte she saw if they thought her hair looked funny, then doing mean things to anyone who gave the wrong answer. There wasn't a right one. By the time we were nearing our rendezvous their antics, as well as the rest of the team's general attitude, had reached such a level that the Captain actually took notice.



It took a bit of work for Sarge to placate the Captain, even though the man was ex-Navy and should have automatically understood the situation. Sarge didn't have any trouble getting across that most of our squad had an especially strong dislike for fighting tyranids, and pyskers for that matter. The problem was that morale is a far different thing on a ship than it is in a trench, so the Captain didn't see why that excused our behavior.

Sarge eventually managed to explain that while veteran Guardsmen can handle just about anything on the battlefield, they have relatively few coping mechanisms for dealing with slowly impending doom. He asked if the Captain would prefer to have us staggering around blind drunk or taking a more "proactive" approach to staying alive. The Captain agreed that a bit of complaining and misbehavior was better than Twitch manufacturing reason why we couldn't complete the mission.

In the end Sarge promised that we'd be ready for action when the time came, and quietly hoped like hell that he was telling the truth. Luckily, it turned out he was: on the final day of our warp travel everything started coming together.

The first break was when Tink and Fio successfully managed to put the largest servitor on the ship into stasis. Actually it was originally the second largest servitor, but the overlapping fields had gotten out of sync on the previous test and messily rearranged that hierarchy. Anyway, the test was such a resounding success that they hauled the whole thing down to the Cells and crammed Fumbles into it before anyone could stop them.

Aside from how long it took them to safely get our Psyker back out of there, the live test went perfectly. Fumble's aura completely vanished when the field was activated and everyone working in the Cells cheered. Even Jim seemed happy, despite the way he was chivvying his Acolytes out of the room

and explaining that they were definitely not seeing a Tau or a techno-heretical stasis device. The news that we'd be transporting a stasis-ed Tyranid psyker, as opposed to one that was actively trying to kill us, perked everyone up. All of us set aside our little distracting grievances as our warp voyage ended; well, except for Aimy and Twitch that is. The demolitions trooper's behavior wasn't surprising, but the fact that Aimy had to be restrained from beating Nubby to death with the bottle of hair-dye he acquired for her was worrying. Fortunately neither of their Obsessions prevented them from prepping for battle, and everyone was ready to kick some ass when we finally reached our destination.

When I say we were ready for action, I mean it: we were literally standing in the shuttle bay when the Occurrence Border came out of warp. The Space Marines weren't going to catch us sitting around and asking for five more minutes before the mission, no siree. So it was sort of awkward when there wasn't anyone at the rendezvous.

We stood in the bay for an hour before we gave up in disgust. While the rest of us wandered off, muttering blasphemous remarks about the Emperor's Angels of Death and their idea of punctuality as we did so, Sarge headed up to the bridge to see what the hell was going on.

We'd really expected to find the Marines there ahead of us, it's not like we had a very fast ship. We'd even entertained the faint hope that they'd already have the Zoanthrope tied up and ready for us. Either way it'd be a matter of in-and-out before the Nids even realized we were there, at least that's what we hoped. It was rather unsettling to find ourselves sitting absolutely alone at the far edge of a hostile system. It didn't stay unsettling for long though: when we took a look around and saw just how hostile the system was, we bumped the situation up to outright terrifying. Now, we'd all read Oak's orders. It was obvious that the system would be a battleground: not even Marines are suicidal enough to try this sort of thing in a wholly Tyranid controlled system. None of us had been optimistic enough to bet on finding a system that was being cleansed by a massive Imperial fleet, but we'd hoped that our destination would be some Imperial frontier world that just wasn't on our maps. Preferably one that had just been reinforced by a few regiments of Guard, and was fighting off a VERY small splinter fleet.

Of course if we couldn't get a world with more Guardsmen than Nids, we'd have happily settled for any Imperial presence, regardless of how many bugs there were. Hell, we would have been happy with one of those weird



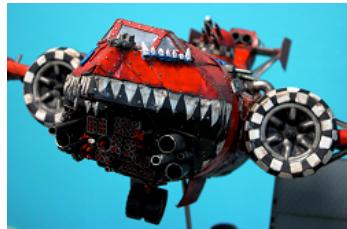
independent systems you get out here, or even a Tau world, so long as they were busy with the Nids. All we'd really wanted was a system where the fight was sort of even, and one side wouldn't be shooting at us. Instead, what we saw when the Occurrence Border's scanners came online, was four planets, four hiveships, and thousands, if not millions, of far-smaller ships. A closer inspection revealed that the little vessels were inorganic and that they were attacking the hiveships with mixed success. Sarge left the bridge shortly after the first detailed scans came in.

Sarge came down and gave us the bad news, it was something we needed to know after all, but he took the precaution of stopping at the medbay on the way down. Even with the heavy tranq and the Hospitaller's help, Twitch nearly managed to escape into the ship's pipework before Sarge finished telling us about the little ships. They hadn't been Imperial or Tau fighters, or even Eldar for that matter. Every single one of the smaller craft had been a ramshackle contraption held together by a combination of spit, red paint, and a complete refusal to understand, or even acknowledge, the laws of physics.

Orks? Why'd it have to be Orks? The Occurrence Border spent the next few days being as still and quiet as it possibly could. Meanwhile, everyone inside it ran around in frenzy of preparation that put our earlier efforts to shame. None if it was directed towards improving the Zoanthrope Containment Area any more though, instead it was all focused on keeping us alive long enough to capture the bloody thing. Armsmen drilled on repelling boarders, the ship's lances were brought up to as close to functional as they'd ever been, and Tink finished getting everyone equipped with pulse weapons while Fio put the final touches on Spot 2.0. The rest of us trained with our new weapons, and kept Twitch from doing anything crazier than usual.

On the third day we were all called up to the bridge by the Captain. Well, actually only Sarge and the adepts were called, but the rest of us were tired of all the horrible waiting. A very brief message telling us to hold position and wait for secure comm contact was replayed for us. The Captain told us he hadn't seen any other vessels enter the system and didn't even have a hard source for the comm message, just a vague direction. That was

rather disturbing, but no one except Twitch could figure out a way it could be a trap. The Captain and Sarge decided to wait and see what happened



next.

After half an hour another message came in. An incredibly deep voice that practically screamed "Space Marine" identified itself as Sergeant Gravis of the Emperor's Scythes, and instructed us to lower our shields so he could dock. As the Captain did so, Sarge squared his shoulders and picked up the Vox's handset, only to have the officer manning it tell him that we still didn't have a target for a secure channel. The man asked Sarge if he should just broadcast generally, and Sarge agreed. He got about halfway through introducing himself before the Marine voxed back, and told him to cease broadcasting before he alerted the whole system. Sarge sheepishly hung up the vox, and vented some frustration by asking the communications officer what he meant by "still didn't have a target." It was quickly revealed that sensors still hadn't detected the Marines' ship, despite it being close enough to worry about docking.

The sensor techs claimed that the incoming ship must be shuttle-sized and have some good stealth systems, but they were sure to spot it when it requested final docking instructions. Tink not-very-quietly suggested that, instead of Marines' ship being really stealthy, the techs' systems were just complete shit. He then volunteered to have them upgraded to "modern standards" after the mission. The ensuing argument was brought to a halt by the Marine voxing again, and telling us to reactivate our shields and close the shuttle-bay doors.

While most of us laughed at the sensor techs for not spotting a ship before it landed on us, Doc raised the question of where the Marines had landed; we hadn't actually opened any bays yet. Unsurprisingly, given that they were the ones who'd patrolled the ship the most, Nubby and Twitch figured it out first; both troopers screamed at Sarge to stop the Marine. Sarge and the Captain both caught on to what had happened at the same moment that the techs pinpointed the Marines' ship in the foremost bay on the top of the Occurrence Border. The one in the badly warp-tainted area near the prow, which was left open and airless at all times, and was NEVER to be used.

The two normally stoic men frantically ran towards the communication officer and screamed at him to open a channel. In the background a confused sounding comm came in from the Marine, asking why everything was so green and why there was a crewman without a void-suit in the airless bay.

Sarge won the sprint, and had the vox halfway to his mouth when the Marine's confused questions changed to reports of incoming hostiles. Despite



everything that happened afterwards, Sarge's reaction was about as perfect as was possible. In his best noncomm voice, he bellowed at the Marine to disengage and pull his shuttle out of the bay.



I'm not sure if you're familiar with how big and loud a Space Marine's voice is, but overriding one via pure volume and vitriol is a feat worthy of legend. Every time the Marine tried to argue, or ask for clarification, Sarge just shouted over him in that parade-ground voice he'd spent his life perfecting.

It was working and everything might have turned out fine, if there hadn't been a second Marine that is. The other Astartes, who'd been spared the full brunt of Sarge's wrath, cut in and asked his battle-brother if he'd tarnish the Chapter's honor by running like a squad of guardsmen without a commissar. The first Marine rallied, and announced his intention to enter the bay and deal with the hostiles that were evading his shuttle's weapons.

Sarge switched tactics and frantically tried to explain that there weren't any enemies and opening the airlock would let the warp-fungus in, but dissolved into furious cursing when he heard the shuttle's lock cycle. With a final growl of "This isn't a battle you idiot, it's sanitation. You're going to get yourself killed fighting fungus" he handed the vox unit over to Doc and the adepts.

Doc and everyone else with more charisma than a dead felid slowly explained the situation to the marine that hadn't just contaminated himself. The rest of us just stood there and listened to the sound of a Space Marine trying to kill xenos that miraculously seemed to dodge every shot. Nubby and Aimy started placing bets on how long it would be before the warp-fungus, as we called it, ate through the Marine's power-armor, and whether the Marine would even be able to notice. No one gave him good odds: we all knew just how nasty the warp-fungus could get. Hell, it'd been some of us who first discovered the stuff. Standard operating procedure on the Occurrence Border was to just seal off any warp-tainted sections with nothing important inside. The lack of anything living to mess with kept the number of manifestations to a minimum, and anything that did appear usually faded before it could claw through the sealed bulkheads. Occasionally though, something nastier than usual would appear and need dealing with. Nubby, Twitch, Fumbles, and recently Aimy, spent a lot of time watching for signs of this sort of stuff, and often got stuck with the job of fixing it.

Anyway, the warp-fungus was one of those nastier than usual things, but fixing it had been a bit of a problem. Fumbles had sort of "heard" it in the tainted shuttle bay months ago, back before we'd reached the Tau border worlds in fact. He'd made such a fuss about the psychic noise it was emitting, that Nubby and Twitch had agreed to risk a recon mission into the bay between warp-jumps. They'd run in, and pinpointed a large container labelled "Potato Substitute: 15 Tonnes" as the source of the noise. Because they were relatively savvy to how this sort of things worked, they'd declined to actually open the container, and just solved the problem in the same way they'd solved most of the others. Which is to say they covered it with detpacks.

At the time they'd declared victory when the explosion went off and the psychic noise stopped, but in retrospect that had only served to spread the fungus all over the bay. While the noise hadn't returned, patrolling armsmen began reporting strange sounds then disappearing, and then other armsmen reported hearing or seeing the missing ones. Over a dozen had vanished into the bay before Nubby and the rest took a second look. They'd found it covered with the fungus, which was in the process of dissolving everything less sturdy than the bay's blast-proof outer doors and walls. Also, it was filled with the missing armsmen, who were beckoning them inwards. Nubby, Fumbles, and Twitch had immediately shut the door and ran for it. As they'd fled, a horde of Orks, Gensemstealers, and a few other varieties of xenos appeared at the end of the hall and blocked their escape. Fortunately Fumbles was along and realized that the new enemies were some sort of psychic illusion. The psyker was able to dispel the illusion without anything more serious than a temporary reversal of gravity happening, and the debatably-heroic trio escaped.

There'd been a few attempts to kill off the warp-fungus after that. Unfortunately between its caustic nature, the hallucinations, and the fact that it was hellishly hard to kill, all that was accomplished was getting a few more armsmen and a whole lot of servitors melted. Eventually someone suggested just voiding the bay, then leaving it open until the stuff died. That didn't actually work, but it did cause the stuff to go dormant unless something ventured into the bay. Since we didn't actually use the bay for anything, the Captain had decided that the problem was no longer pressing



and we'd gotten back on our way.

As a precaution Ol' Bill had reinforced the seal on all the bay's doors and vents, and the only one allowed to go near it had been one of the senior tech-priests. The cogboy had some ideas about chemical sprayers deployed by servoskulls, and Jim said he'd made some real progress, but then the whole tech-heresy thing had come up...

ANYWAY, that's what the Space Marines had just landed in. A bay full of psychically active, highly caustic, and incredibly hard to remove warp-fungus. Honestly though, it was still only the third worst thing on the Occurrence Border they could have landed in... our ship was definitely a little overdue for a tuneup. Through an absolutely heroic amount of persuasion, Doc and the adepts managed to convince the Marines to abandon the bay. The second Marine, who identified himself as Sergeant Rebus, turned out to be very susceptible to logical arguments, and even helped talk Sergeant Gravis around before the fungus was able to melt through his boots. We still didn't forgive him for screwing up Sarge's initial attempt though, because even if Gravis was going to be fine, he'd cycled his shuttle's airlock twice in the warp-fungus bay. There was no way that bird wasn't contaminated as hell.



We watched as not one, but two shuttles rose out of the bay. Neither of them looked anything like the Thunderhawks we'd expected when they told us we'd be working with Space Marines. Aside from being incredibly sleek, both of them were completely black, and only visible because of our ship acting as a backdrop. One of them was definitely having a little trouble flying in a straight line though, and showed up as a faint ghost on the sensor techs' scopes. The other re-

mained stubbornly invisible to all scanners as it settled in space in front of the bridge.

The decontamination process was not fast: the sprayer skulls had to be found and refilled, the contaminated shuttle had to be completely voided, and a holding area had to be set up. On top of that, the whole time this was going on, Sergeant Gravis and his shuttle's crew were, as Tink put it, tripping balls. Given how heavily armed they were, the situation was very uncomfortable, but luckily no one was killed and only one sprayer skull was destroyed.

After hours of tedious cleaning, not to mention angry shouting about who's fault this all was, our team met with the Space Marines in the Occurrence Border's fanciest conference room. Our planning session was short,

direct, and absolutely terrifying. Sergeants Gravis and Rebus of the Emperor's Scythes Space Marines Chapter were not what you'd call socialites. In fact they were even more aloof than the few Marines we'd met previously. They stomped into the conference room still wearing their power armor, and didn't even bother to remove their helmets. It was unnerving as hell talking to them, and even Sarge couldn't hold onto his "Inquisitorial Dignity" in the face of those stares.

Rebus did most of the talking, and started by explaining that there were two main objectives and would be two separate teams. The first team would consist of him and his four scouts. The second would consist of Sergeant Gravis and his two scouts, one of which would be piloting the shuttle, plus Interrogator Sargent and his five Inquisitorial Guardsmen.

Sarge hesitantly asked if we'd need any support staff in the field. This triggered looks of terror from Jim, Hannah, and all of the adepts, but Rebus said that they wouldn't be necessary. From the far end of the table, Fumbles held up his hand and asked if he was coming. The Marine considered this, then asked if he was capable of using his powers while simultaneously fending off the Hive Mind's continuous psychic assault. Fumbles quietly put his hand back down.

After waiting a few seconds to see if anyone else would interrupt, Rebus started explaining what the two teams would be doing. Our team would go to the third planet in the system, then find and capture a Zoanthrope; his team would destroy the hive ship orbiting it. Everyone in the room just sat there and stared at the marines as Rebus started explaining the transportation situation and timeline. Tink managed to overcome his shock before anyone else, and loudly asked the marines if they were insane-slash-retarded.

Amy and Nubby snickered, and Doc hastily clapped a hand over Tink's mouth. Sarge took a deep breath, and asked Sergeant Rebus to explain why, and more importantly HOW, the marines were going to destroy an entire tyranid Hive Ship.

Rebus met Sarge's stare, and said his Chapter's primary interest in the system was ensuring that the Tyranids did not overwhelm the Orks and form a new splinter fleet. Capturing a live zoanthrope for the Inquisition was merely a side-mission, a small favor to be completed when convenient. As for how, his team would board the Hive Ship and destroy it from within; further details were

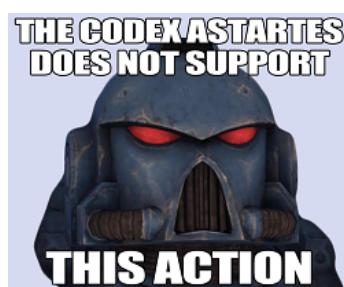


not for those outside the chapter. All we needed to know was that the Ship would die after we captured the Zoanthrope, but before their psi-suppressants could wear off and allow the Hive Mind to destroy the beast.

As everyone digested this, Twitch broke his remarkably long silence. The demolitions trooper volunteered that the Marines probably had a vortex bomb, since an explosive would merely scatter still-living pieces of ship across the planet, and a poison or virus would require a lot of sampling plus a nearby laboratory. Both Marines glared at Twitch, who ignored them and went back to fiddling with the mine he was holding.

After some more awkward silence, Sergeant Rebus went back to explaining the mission details. Both teams would deploy in his stealth shuttle, since the warp-fungus had gotten into the control systems of Gravis'. First we'd insert his team on the hive ship, and then go down to the planet and capture the Zoanthrope. The Occurrence Border would follow us in on low power and stop at the edge of the Hive Ship's Shadow, where it could easily warp out in an emergency. If our mission went quickly we'd return to it and drop off our prize before the shuttle extracted Rebus' team, otherwise we'd pick them up on the way back. It slowly dawned on us that the Marines' plan called for us to sit, as helpless passengers, in a shuttle that would not only be carrying a notoriously unstable warp-weapon, but would also be closing to boarding range with a Hive Ship. Even without the swarm of Ork Fightas attacking the ship, and the fact that we might be making a second visit while that warp-weapon was actually armed, it sounded incredibly dangerous. With them, not to mention the whole capturing a xenos psyker thing, it sounded downright suicidal.

While the rest of us silently panicked, Doc hesitantly asked if it wouldn't make more sense to use both of the Marines' shuttles. Gravis, whose armor was sporting some truly impressive acid burns, glared at Doc and swore loud enough that we could hear him despite the fact that he didn't have his helmet's speakers on. He bitterly suggested that we should have thought of that before neglecting the maintenance of our ship's shuttle bays, and then fell back into his sullen silence.



Doc soldiered on despite this rebuttal, and asked whether the mission could be delayed until our tech-priests fixed the fungused shuttle. Jim and Hannah made some panicked gestures, which seemed to imply that they had no idea how the stealth-shuttle even worked, much less how to fix it. Rebus ignored them, gave Doc a simple "No", and announced that the briefing was over. We'd be leaving as soon as his Scouts

finished transferring equipment to the shuttle and Gravis' field repairs were completed. One of Gravis' scouts would deliver our mission-critical gear and explain the capture procedure to us in the meantime.

With that the two Marines stomped out. One by one the Engineers, adepts, and Fumbles followed them, leaving only us guardsmen sitting there, feeling like we'd lost all control of the situation. Now, we'd felt out of our depth before. Hell that'd been our default state of mind since the Inquisition drafted us. This was worse than usual though: the Marines had left us feeling like children. It wasn't embarrassment over the shuttle thing, that was at least as much their fault as ours, it was just that we felt incredibly outclassed by the three meter tall killing machines.

It was odd that the two Marines were so daunting, since as Twitch pointed out, we'd actually killed three Chaos Marines during our missions. Doc suggested that the issue was that they were on our side. The ones we'd killed were vile traitors deserving of nothing but scorn and death, but these two were physical manifestations of the Emperor's divine wrath. Or to put it more simply, we couldn't compensate for our discomfort by trying to kill them.

Twitch was half-way through suggesting that shooting the Marines just a little would make us feel better, when Gravis' Scout came in. That was a very awkward moment, but the Scout eventually accepted that it was just a little joke. None of us would even consider doing such a thing, and we certainly didn't dedicate large amounts of our time to planning complex betrayals of our allies. Well unless they were Eldar. Or tech-priests. Or deserters, cultists, hereteks, annoying Interrogators, commissars, rogue traders, rival Inquisitorial teams, or people who might be Orks in disguise.

But since Marines and their Scouts were none of these things, there was obviously nothing to worry about. Unless they really WERE Orks. They were much bigger and musclier than normal people after all...

Sarge put a stop to Twitch's newest paranoid fantasy before it got started, and asked the Scout what was in the crates on the pallet he was pushing. The Scout eyed us all dubiously, and said it was our Grav-Chutes.

All of us digested the horrible implications of those two words and went quiet. Except for Nubby that is, who was a little slower on the uptake.
↳ Grav-whats?

Chutes

↳ What-shoots?





Grav-Chutes!

You're guardsmen, you must know what Grav-Chutes are! You know: small, backpack-size anti-gravitic devices that allow Imperial troops to float safely to the ground on a column of anti-gravitic force from any height in a world's gravity well, including sub-orbital heights.

¿Omhnn you mean screamy-fally-deaf-packs. Yea we're familiar wif dose. Whatchu doin with em? Cause I know a guy who knows a guy...

They're for you to deploy from the shuttle with. You just said you're familiar with them, surely I don't need to draw you a picture.

¿What? Are you mental? When I say "familiar" I mean we've pulled a buncha dem off deaders. None of us 'ave ever used one; you can tell, 'cause we're not pancake-shaped.

That's unfortunate, you have two hours to learn how to operate one. I'll assist in your training, is there a nearby cargo bay or lift shaft we can use?

¿Sahhhge, the baby Space Marine is tryin ta kill us Sahge. Why's everyone always trying ta kills us Sahge?

The best term for our training with the Grav-Chutes was Crash Course. The Scout Marine made sure our chutes were on, walked us to the edge of the shaft, then pushed us off. He claimed it was how he'd been trained, and the man evidently saw no reason why non-superhumans should learn any differently. Sarge didn't let anyone argue, there wasn't time.

None of us enjoyed the experience of being thrown into a lift shaft with nothing but an under-powered anti-grav unit and a pair of tiny thrusters between us and pancakey-death. It's hard to say who did the worst: it was pretty much a three-way tie. Doc had so little control that he got stuck on a light fixture, and had to be rescued by the Scout Marine. The humiliation of being suspended by his pants half-way up the shaft was slightly overshadowed by the way that the Scout had just cut them off, and then insisted he keep practicing instead of getting a new pair.

While the Scout was busy with Doc's rescue, Tink decided that he could



convert his chute to a full jump-pack using some of the techniques he'd picked up working on his drone. It turned out he was wrong; so much so in fact, that he had to be issued the only spare chute. Of course, Tink immediately declared that he knew what he'd done wrong, and started to retry the modifications using his replacement chute. Sarge had to take his tools away.

Finally, Aimy misinterpreted a suggestion to wear a helmet as a comment on her hair. She tried to deck the Scout, and found out a Space Marine's jaw is a lot tougher than any non-augmetic hand. Doc, still pantsless, checked her hand and said it wasn't broken, so Aimy grumpily resumed her training. For his part, the Scout Marine took the irrational attack in stride, but that was obviously the point where we lost the last of our credibility in his eyes. Despite all the difficulties and our teacher's disgust with us, we all managed to get down the shaft safely a few times before the training ended. We gathered up our gear, got Doc some new pants, and made our way to the bay where the un-fungused stealth shuttle was being prepped. Once there the Scout Marine brought out an impressively large sniper rifle and explained how the Zoanthrope's capture would work. We noticed that unlike the previous lesson, this briefing consisted of nothing but short words and included a lot of hand gestures as well as a few pictures. None of us commented, but Aimy and Tink were obviously taking note of every little implied insult.

The gist of the plan was that the stealth shuttle would sweep over the battlefield until we saw a Zoanthrope. The shuttle would fly over the target, and then everyone but the pilot would deploy via Grav-Chute. From there, speed was the name of the game: the estimated mission length was ten minutes if our insertion was undetected, and three if it was. If we took any longer, Tyranid reinforcements would bury us.

Our squad would secure a perimeter, and hold it against any tyranids that came to support the Zoanthrope, while Sergeant Gravis wore down the xenos' pyschic-shield-bubble-thing. Once the shield was breached, the Scout would shoot the Zoanthrope with a specially tailored sedative and psi-suppressant, and then we'd all fall back to the nearest possible landing area for extraction.

It was the complete opposite of all the horribly complex ops we'd suffered through since joining the Inquisition: it was ultimate simple, straightforward plan. If it wasn't for the fact that we'd be outnumbered thousands to one, we'd have loved it. As it was though, there's no word for how much we hated



that plan.

Honestly all of us, even Sarge, would have bailed if the two Space Marines hadn't shown up. None of us had the nerve to refuse the Astartes, so we boarded the shuttle and headed off to our certain deaths. The shuttle trip into the system was amazingly unpleasant. It wasn't that the stealth shuttle was crowded: there were only thirteen of us in it, or fifteen if you counted the seats taken by Spot and the Vortex Bomb, and the seats themselves weren't that bad either. Sure they were a little on the big side, but Space Marines definitely spare a bit more budget for comfort when building a ship than the Guard does. So the ship was fine, the problem was the atmosphere being generated by our fellow passengers. They were too quiet.

See, if it were a Guard shuttle everyone would've been complaining, joking, or smoking. Even the dryest Inquisition teams we'd been assigned to would've at least been doing some gear checks, or reminding us stupid guardsmen what our job was. The marines and their scouts just sat there and silently prayed or meditated or something. No talking, no moving, and hardly any breathing for hours upon bloody hours. You'd think we could just ignore it, but any time one of us made the slightest bit of noise the entire creepy lot would glare at us like, well, like noisy children in a chapel.



The silence wore on our nerves. There was nothing to do but think about the upcoming mission or stare at the ominous bulk of the Vortex Bomb, which was making the sort of unhearable noises we associated with a weak gellar field. We were all reaching our limit, and it was race to see if Twitch or Aimy would snap first, when Sarge decided that politeness was overrated. He commandeered one of Twitch's camo-tarps and hung it across the shuttle interior, walling away all the creepy super-humans except for Gravis' Scout. The big guy tried to glare us down by himself as we all started being as noisy as we damn well pleased, but we had him outnumbered, and Sarge threatened to put a second tarp over him if he kept it up.

The remainder of our approach to the Tyranid hive ship was spent the usual ways. Tink tinkered with Spot 2.0, removing the overweight-skull-probe disguise and trying to get a few of the systems he and Fio hadn't finished kludging together functional. Doc wrote his usual soppy "if I die on this mission" letter to his girlfriend, while Aimy and Nubby read over his shoulder and made unhelpful suggestions. Twitch muttered to himself as he imagined hundreds of scenarios involving Tyranids and Orks. As his

mind ran in it's crookeder-than-usual circles, he continuously moved gear and explosives between his bag and the massive pile of spares he'd brought. Sarge watched as we frittered away our time, and saw that it was good.

We all suffered a moment of heart failure as Sergeant Rebus tore down the tarp, followed by another when the homemade cluster-mine Twitch had been holding hit the floor. The Space Marine stood there and waited while we picked springs and, thank-the-Emperor unarmed, explosives out from under our seats. When the last bomblet had been collected, Rebus informed us that the shuttle was nearing the hive ship and would be switching to full stealth mode. We were to secure ourselves and our gear, put on our rebreathers, and stay out of his team's way while they deployed.

We did as ordered, and a few minutes later the shuttle ride went from boring to terrifying. The cabin switched to emergency lights, the air vents stopped blowing, and the gravity deactivated. We floated in our seats for a few seconds, then the first "evasive maneuver" hit us. Let me tell you, no one thinks about those grav tied to a shuttle's engines seriously until they're turned off. Instead of the usual little jolts of spillover, they were as long, continuous pulls in seemingly random directions. We felt completely helpless as we bounced and swung in our crash harnesses, then Tink decided it might be better if we could see what was coming and anticipate the maneuvers. It was not.

Who knows what the Marines and Scouts thought when Spot 2.0 drifted past them and entered the cockpit, they didn't actually say anything about it, and were already glaring at us for how loudly we were complaining about the turbulence. Anyway, they seemed just as interested as us when Tink projected the drone's vid feed on the front bulkhead.

We all stared at the image of the massive Tyranid bioship looming in front of us, and then at the smaller shapes swarming around it. It was hard to say if there were more Ork Fightas or Tyranid fliers, and either way there was a constant stream of reinforcements rising from the planet and spewing from the Hive Ship. It was complete chaos: the space around the hive-ship was filled with rokkits, shells, bio-plasma, pyro-acid, and millions of tonnes of wildly spinning debris; and for some reason, we were flying right



into it.

Bloody Space Marines.

All of us just sat there and stared, and then we saw the cause of one of those evasive maneuvers. A speck suddenly grew into a Fighta, and then zipped past by such a thin margin that we could see the Ork piloting it. A split second later it was followed by a stream of bio-plasma and a Tyranid interceptor. Doc swallowed, Twitch whimpered, and Aimy swore.

Variations of that scene repeated dozens of times as we closed with the Hive Ship. It's hard to say which was more amazing: the way the Scout Marine pilot twisted away from every impact with bare meters to spare, or the fact that none of the hostiles saw our shuttle, even while nearly colliding with it. Our slow approach to the Hive Ship through that space battle was a terrifying and humbling reminder that, if Guardsmen's nerves are steel, Space Marines' are Adamantium.

Not that we actually had what you might call Nerves of Steel, all of us were scared shitless. And when the pilot took cover from a pyro-acid barrage behind a Landa that was visibly filled with Kommandos, Twitch went from scared to full on Freaking Out, Man.

When Twitch started gibbering Sarge barked orders at Tink and Doc to turn off the projection and prep a tranq, but none of us had anywhere near the same speed as the panicked demolitions trooper. In a startlingly short amount of time, Twitch had cut his way out of his crash harness, and relocated to a "more defensible position," leaving a trail of detpacks floating the air behind him. Said defensible position turned out to be the small amount of space between the Vortex Bomb and the seat that held it.

Sarge immediately undid his own restraints and launched himself across the shuttle, only to wind up pinned against a pair of unhappy Scout Marines as the pilot evaded something or other.

A rain of detpacks landed on everyone on that side of the shuttle, Guardsman and Marine alike, and Sergeant Gravis decided that enough was enough. The Space Marine's boots adhered to the floor with a deep clang as he left his seat.

Most of us watched in amazement as the Space Marine slowly stomped across what the shuttle's acceleration meant was actually a wall. Twitch though, was too busy with his paranoid panic attack to notice, until a massive hand snapped out pulled the detonator from his grip, that is.



Sergeant Gravis had probably thought that removing the detonator would neatly, er, defuse the situation. He was completely wrong of course, but the theft did focus Twitch's attention on him instead of imaginary Kommandos. Unfortunately, that attention took the form of a thrown object, which adhered to the Space Marine's hand when he tried to bat it away.

We could practically hear the gears in Sergeant Gravis' head whirring as he registered the detpack stuck to his palm and the two detonators which had practically materialized in Twitch's hands. The giant in the acid-pocked armor stared into the wild eyes of the demolitions trooper who was currently lying across a Vortex Bomb and accusing him of being One Of Them, and decided that intimidation and force were not viable options. So, in the gentlest voice a half-tonne hybrid of man and tank can manage, he tried reason.

Gravis started by asking Twitch to calm down, that worked about as well as you'd expect. The Space Marine then tried explaining that there were no enemies in the shuttle, everyone here was Twitch's ally. Twitch responded by chucking another detpack at him and screaming "THAT'S WHAT THEY ALL SAY, THEN THE MASK COMES OFF!" This seemed to confuse Gravis, so Doc helpfully explained that he'd just been accused of being an Ork in disguise. Gravis pointed out that Twitch was obviously insane, which won him yet another detpack and a scream of "THEY ALL SAY THAT TOO!"

At that point Gravis must have been losing confidence in his strategy, because he turned as asked the rest of us what to do. Nubby, Aimy, and Tink all simultaneously made unhelpful suggestions, and Sarge was busy clinging onto Sergeant Rebus' seat as yet another evasive maneuver tried to fling him across the shuttle. Doc told the Marine he was doing fine: this sort of argument was pretty much the standard operating procedure if no one managed to tranq Twitch before he got the explosives out. He suggested that Gravis continue by taking off his helmet and proving he wasn't an Ork. Twitch agreed that the Ork should show us his real face. So he did.

Tink's shout of "WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR-" was cut off by Doc's hand. Aimy cackled, until Nubby pointed out that the Marine still had most of his hair. Sarge asked what was going on, and Twitch admitted that Gravis wasn't an Ork. Probably.





In the incredibly awkward silence that followed, Sergeant Gravis put his helmet back on, his Scout Marine glared at us, and Twitch asked if someone would help him off the Vortex Bomb. He was stuck.

Gravis collected both Twitch and Sarge, who was still clinging to the meditating Sergeant Rebus for dear life, and deposited them both in their seats. As the Marine stomped around, he talked to us, giving us a morale boosting lecture

he claimed was given to him as an acolyte on his first boarding mission. We were instructed not to worry about what we couldn't control, and to focus on remember glorious victories of the Chapter, or in our case, the Cadian Regiments. Nubby asked what was so special about those nutters.

This caused a pause in the motivational speech. It was eventually established that our regiment wasn't from Cadia, Catachan, Krieg, Elysia, Maccabeus, Mordian, Tallarn, Vostroya, or any other world famous for it's contribution to the Guard. Furthermore our regiment had never accomplished anything other than serving as cannon fodder for more important Imperial Forces. No glorious victories for us.

At an indignant objection from our markswoman, this was adjusted to: "No glorious victories for anyone except Aimy and her Nobby Regiment of Nobby Nobs."

Sergeant Gravis stared at us, then asked what in the Emperor's name we were doing in the Inquisition. Sarge sighed, picked at a stray detpack which had adhered to his sleeve, and admitted that not a day went by that he didn't ask himself that same question.

The rest of the approach to the Hive ship passed without incident. At least as far as us passengers were concerned that is, the pilot definitely had to dodge a whole lot of something over the last few minutes though. Thank the Emperor Tink never turned the vid feed back on.



At a word from the pilot Sergeant Rebus and his four Scout Marines sprang out of their seats and positioned themselves around the Vortex Bomb. A few moments later there was a squishy impact, and the stealth shuttle's rear door opened to reveal a pulsating wall of flesh-stuff. The Scouts painted it with something, Rebus stabbed it with his power sword, and a gap was pried open.

To our disgust, the five-Marine boarding party then smeared themselves with the juices running from the gap. Once they, and the Vortex Bomb, were good and covered, they pulled on some Cameleoline Cloaks that looked far better than any that had ever been issued to us lowly Guardsmen, and climbed through. Sergeant Gravis planted a probe-looking device in the gap behind them, and then sealed it with some big staple-things and some chemical spray.

When the gap was closed, we heard Gravis and Rebus do a comm check and schedule the pickup. Then the shuttle's door silently closed and we started drifting away. From docking to undocking, the whole boarding operation took just under five minutes. It the most impressive display of efficient professionalism we'd ever seen, but I'm not sure any of drew a breath during the whole thing. We all prayed to Emperor that we wouldn't have to be on the shuttle during their pickup.

There's a moral about getting what you wish for in there somewhere.

We descended to the planet alongside the hail of spores spewing from the Hive Ship. It went a lot faster, and required fewer evasive maneuvers, than our approach had, which was good for our frayed nerves. Now that Sergeant Rebus and his team of suicidal supermen had departed, Gravis and his scouts became a little more chatty.

The Scout piloting the shuttle brought the gravity up enough to keep us in our seats, and told Gravis that he was starting scans. Gravis brought out an oversized dataslate, and began staring at it with the other Scout. They didn't seem to think that we really needed to take part in the discussion, but when Tink sent his drone to hover over their shoulders, Gravis decided it was easier just to let us participate.

Gravis and his two scouts were searching the battlefield below us for signs of Zoanthropes; specifically they were looking for big-ol bolts of warp-lighting which could be traced back to the xenos psyker firing them. That sounds fairly simple, but given how far up we still were and how much of a mess the battlefield was, we decided that it was pointless to try and help. While the marines strained their eyes, the rest of us concentrated the sort of things us lowly guardsmen find important, namely weather, terrain, and hostile positions. These turned out to be: acid rain, wasteland with giant spiky rocks, and everywhere. In short, it wasn't a place we wanted to get anywhere near, much less drop onto via grav-chute.

Nubby and Tink started the argument by complaining about the suicidal nature of the mission and suggesting that we just lie on the report, which



prompted the Scout Marine to tell us all to grow a backbone and a proper sense of duty. Aimy told him where he could stick his backbone and sense of duty, and things went downhill from there. Sadly there wasn't time to get a real good fight going: we only managed a bit of name-calling and a few anatomically-improbable threats before Gravis finally spotted some warp-lighting.



Sarge, Doc, and Twitch stared at the dataslate with the Marine. The section of battlefield he was looking at was a complete free-for-all between the Orks and Nids, and a particularly dense cluster of jagged rocks was emitting bursts of lighting. Gravis said that the frequency of the bolts indicated it was a lone psyker, and went on to point out that the position was not strongly defended against an airborne insertion. He suggested that we move on the target immediately, before it was killed or the battle shifted, but Doc and Sarge didn't like that they couldn't see inside the pile of rock the psyker was hiding in, and Twitch was Twitch.

Sarge asked Gravis how sure he was that A: there wasn't a whole hive's worth of nids in there and, at Twitch's insistence, B: that the lightning-shooting xenos wasn't actually an Ork. Gravis just glared at us and said he was 73Our fearless leader tried to stare down the Space Marine for about five seconds, then decided that this sort of decision, not to mention arguing with Astartes, was above his paygrade.

Sarge rounded on the rest of us, and started bellowing orders to prep for deployment. Tink got Spot stealthed up and verified that our scopes were synced, Nubby and Aimy flung a final few insults at the Scout Marine, Doc tried to remember which button was which on his Grav-Chute, and Twitch angrily grabbed a last armful of explosives while muttering about no one taking Orks seriously. When everyone was ready, we formed up behind Sergeant Gravis and his Scout. A few minutes later, the shuttle hatch slammed open.

The Space Marine stepped out into the air and dropped out of sight. Sarge followed him to the edge, looked down, and froze as he saw just how far down and covered-with-pointy-things-and-xenos the ground was. Then the Scout Marine pushed him.

Now, just to be clear, while there are entire regiments of Guardsmen dedicated to doing grav-drops, the rest of us think they're insane. Even your average Catachan will call an Elysian, or any other type of drop-trooper, an adrenaline-hungry madman. And mind you, that's coming from someone who would gleefully try to kill a Warboss with nothing but a combat knife. I mean, who in their right mind flies all the way to the battlefield in a

perfectly functional shuttle, then jumps out of it while it's still half a klick off the ground?

Anyway, dropping through the air towards a pile of rocks that resembled nothing so much as a giant daemonic hedgehog was not on the list of things we'd joined the Guard to do. The fact that there was a hostile psyker inside said rocks, not to mention the bloody melee of Orks and Tyranids around them, did not make it any more attractive. If it wasn't for the fact that Sergeant Gravis was already on the ground and clearing our landing area, we all would have stayed in that shuttle.

Also the Scout Marine kept pushing us.

Despite how unpleasant we found the drop, the painfully direct training we'd received meant we all made it down in one piece. One piece doesn't mean cleanly though: only Sarge and Nubby made what could be good landings, and that's only if you count landing on an unsuspecting Ork and Hormagaunt as good. Doc and Aimy wound up colliding with each other in the air, and made an awkward dual landing on one of the jagged spires. Aimy managed to stick the landing and started picking off targets, but Doc wound up sliding off and bouncing to the ground like a terrified pinball. Tink outright stopped his descent by having Spot come up under him. He happily shot into the melee from his perch, until a fleshborer to the leg reminded that hanging in the air, where there is no cover and everyone can see you, is a terrible idea. Luckily, he landed next to Doc.

Twitch did not hit anything, but he swerved around a lot for some reason.

Sergeant Gravis had cleared us a beachhead, and those of us who hadn't gotten shot or cracked a rib on the way down widened it. That was our first chance to use the pulse weapons Tink and Fio had disguised for us on soft targets, and it was glorious. No heresy intended, but Tau carbines blow lasguns out of the water: they hit harder than a hot-shot, and reload easier too. We were dropping Nids and Orks left and right, and it was gratifying to see Sergeant Gravis stop and stare at us when he ran out of enemies.

The Space Marine didn't stop for long, or ask about our sexier-than-standard-issue weapons. Once he was sure we had the perimeter on lockdown, he switched to his Power Sword, and made his way towards the cluster of fallen spires that was occasionally illuminated by blasts of lightning. The



Scout, who was perched similarly to Aimy and had stolen at least three of "her" kills, started following his boss by jumping from spire to spire.

The official plan called for us to leave them to it, we were just supposed to secure a landing area for the shuttle and keep reinforcements out. We were doing far better than expected though, and Sarge started feeling all "I'm this Big Inquisition Guy who actually helps instead of just following orders," so he followed Gravis to lend a hand with the Zoanthrope, and Twitch tagged along for his own reasons. The rest of us were more than happy to stay put and keep shooting any Orks or Tyranids that wandered our way.

Looking back, holding that perimeter was far too easy. There was never a concentrated attack on our position, just the occasional xenos who retreated in our direction or was checking out what all the plasma fire was coming from. We'd thought that the xenos were just keeping each other busy: the Tyranids weren't pouring in to reinforce their psychic artillery unit because the Orks were in the way. We didn't realize that something had gone wrong until Sergeant Gravis flew out the side of the rock pile.

Well, not "flew" exactly, more like "was thrown". Something like a tonne and a half of Power-Armored Space Marine sailed through the air like a thing that is very bad at sailing, crashed through four of the smaller rock pillars, and barely activated its Grav-Chute in time to dodge a fatal collision with the larger fifth.



Doc tried to ask Sarge what the hell had just happened, but our fearless leader was busy screaming, swearing, and firing his pulse-carbine on full auto. When Doc tried again Twitch cut in, and in a slightly hysterical tone, told us that Sarge was busy right now. He suggested that anyone who wanted to live should get some cover between themselves and the rock pile; we didn't need telling twice.

Since we were keeping our heads as far down as was anatomically possible, and it turned out that Sarge was half-blind and Twitch wound up getting a nasty concussion, no one really saw what happened next. Luckily Spot recorded the whole thing.

A few seconds after Twitch's warning, he and Sarge came out of the rock pile at a dead sprint. They dove behind the first pillars they could find, and a split second later entire cluster of collapsed pillars exploded. Three green, glowing projectiles were propelled out of the hole Sarge and Twitch had exited, and splattered apart against the rock Aimy was perched on. One of them, or a random piece of debris, must have clipped Twitch's pillar too, because a sizable chunk broke off the top and nailed him on the helmet. He

managed a dazed "Told you so" before collapsing.

In the aftermath, Doc ran over to check on Twitch and Sarge. The rest of us kept our eyes on the perimeter, except for Aimy. She descended from her gore-covered perch with a cry of "Oh god, it's everywhere. I think some got down my shirt. Tell me this isn't mashed Tyranids." Sarge blearily sat up, and told her not to worry: it was only mashed Orks. That did not improve Aimy's mood.

Sarge commed Gravis, verified that both the Marines had survived the blast, and made sure the shuttle was on its way to pick us back up. While we waited, and shot the occasional Ork or Nid that took an interest in us, Sarge explained what had happened inside the rock pile.

Sarge had followed Gravis down a sort of tunnel that headed towards where the warp-lighting was coming from. The Space Marine had been sprinting ahead, and had obviously intended to rush the psyker with his Power Sword before it could notice and fry him with lightning. Sarge caught up just in time to see Gravis exit the tunnel and pull off the "close to melee range" part of the plan, but the xenos psyker hadn't been the frail ranged-support unit they'd expected. Instead, Sergeant Gravis wound up face to face with a big ol' psychic, not to mention psychotic and psychopathic, Ork.

To the Space Marine's credit, he hadn't hesitated at all. He'd waded right in and started chopping and stabbing while Sarge gave covering fire. Unfortunately, the Weirdboy had a bunch of bodyguards, and they bought him enough time to do some warpy stuff. Sarge said the moral of the story was: if a warp-energy infused Ork charges you with supernatural speed and a big glowy stick, it is a far better idea to dodge his swing than to try to block it with your Power Sword.

So when the Space Marine got knocked out of the park, Sarge'd decided it was time to leg it. He'd made liberal use of his flash grenades, and nearly ran into Twitch on his way out. Twitch had apparently been picking out the detonators for the detpacks he'd, without bothering to tell anyone, dropped all over the rock pile on his way down. Anyway, Sarge'd held the Weirdboy and his surviving minders off long enough for Twitch to sort out which button he wanted to press, and they got out of the pile a few seconds ahead of the explosion. The Orks hadn't, which was why Aimy was picking pieces of them off her armor.

Sergeant Gravis and his Scout rejoined us just as Sarge finished his story. Nubby, ever the diplomat, asked if their bug hunt had gone as well as our

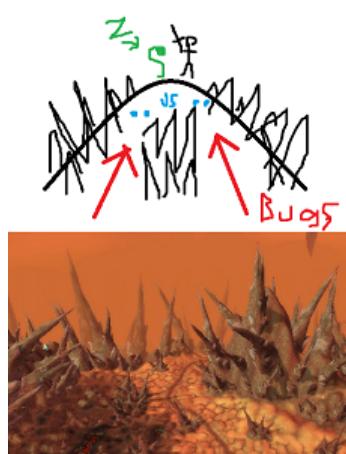


perimeter-securing had. Aimy and Tink snickered, but Sarge shut the three of them up: the two Marines didn't look like they were the mood for any bullshit.



Between the acid damage and the new set of dents and scratches, Gravis' armor was beginning to look rather ragged, and the Scout looked even worse. He'd apparently been trying to find a hole in the top of the pile to snipe through, and didn't have the same hard-wired response to a warning from Twitch that us guardsmen did. His stealth cloak was completely ruined, plus there were at least two sizable holes in his carapace armour. He was still alive though, and rather rudely turned down Doc's offer to patch him up, so we figured he was fine and had learned an important lesson about warnings from demolitions troopers.

The stealth shuttle dropped out of the clouds above us, and we got back into the air without further incident. All of us more or less collapsed into the oversized seats. Despite the fact that we'd only been on the ground for about fifteen minutes, and only two of us had been noticeably injured, we were exhausted. Our rest didn't last long though. Despite the perfectly reasonable suggestions some of us made concerning calling the mission off and pinning the blame on mister "73



By the time we'd finished reloading, they'd found a slightly-less-rock-covered hilltop that was emitting lighting. This time we had a clear view, and the lighting was obviously coming from a snakey-looking xenos which perfectly matched the images of Zoanthropes we'd seen. Gravis and his Scout did not find it amusing when Sarge asked for Twitch's opinion anyway. Luckily for everyone's nerves, Twitch was too concussed to be smug, and simply agreed that the bug looked like a bug.

As our shuttle neared the hill we realized that this drop was going to be nastier than the last. This time, instead of a free-for-all, the hill was clearly in Tyranid hands/claws/whatever, and it looked fairly critical to the local battle with the greenskins. The Nids definitely weren't going to let us wipe out their artillery without a fight: they'd reinforce it as heavily as they could manage.

Perimeter duty would not be another cakewalk, and if it took too long to subdue the psyker, we'd be up to our asses in bugs.

Sarge quickly split us into pairs, assigned us to the three main approaches to the hill, and convinced Twitch to share his mines with us. We'd clear the area, push out, then plant the mines and fall back towards the top if things got hairy. Before anything more complex could be put together, we reached the DZ.

Sergeant Gravis was the first one down again. He leaned out the rear hatch, sighted the Zoanthrope, and pretty much dropped right on top of the psyker. The rest of us followed as quickly and professionally as we could manage, none of us even had been pushed out of the shuttle by the Scout this time.

Every single one of us landed with our weapons firing. There were seven or eight Termagants keeping the Zoanthrope company, and only one of them was still alive when we hit the ground. Sarge finished that one off, and we all fanned out towards our assigned areas.

We moved fast, motivated by a desire to get our chokepoints set up before reinforcements arrived, and to get something solid between us and Gravis' fight with the Zoanthrope. Honestly we hadn't taken the Space Marine too seriously up to that point. I mean we respected him and found him daunting as hell, but his combat performance in the last drop hadn't been up to the stories you hear about Space Marines. His fight with the Tyranid Psyker though, that was something to tell your grandkids about.

In the few seconds we saw him fighting before we got under cover, Sergeant Gravis baited out and dodged three massive lightning bolts, scored twice as many hits on the Xenos' shield bubble, and generally moved with more speed and grace than should have been possible. Abstractly we'd known that the Emperor's Scythes Chapter were the best experts available when it came to fighting Tyranids, but watching Gravis play that Zoanthrope like a fiddle really drove it home. We all would have stopped to spectate, if the Zoanthropes misses weren't blowing the rocks near us into red-hot shrapnel that is.

Anyway, we all got the hell off that hilltop and into position. Spot stayed up high, and gave us a good view of the incoming reinforcements as we set our mines and found the best lines of fire. We all finished our preparations just



in time, and started mowing down the first wave of Tyranids as they climbed the hill. That first wave was nothing but the Gaunts, both varieties, that had been near the hill. Thanks to the wonderful nature of chokepoints, not to mention good firing positions and techno-heretically awesome weapons, we were able to kill them all before they managed to shoot or claw us. That's not to say that we actually killed ALL of the Tyranids, Nids don't tend to run out of bodies to throw at a problem, but we did convince them to rethink their strategy. Once the choke points were too, well, choked with their bodies for any more to get past, the Gaunts broke off to wait for heavier reinforcements.



Now, we'd been in this sort of fight with Nids before. Back when we were actually in the Guard we'd fought a memorable, and debatably successful, defensive battle against the bugs. So, we knew what would almost certainly come next: Warriors, possibly with Ravener or Gargoyle support. On our respective sides of the hill, Aimy, Nubby, and Tink all moved to elevated positions and helped Spot watch for the higher lifeforms. Meanwhile, those of us still on the ground made sure the mines and our next positions were ready,

and Sarge checked in with Gravis and his Scout. The Marines were still working on wearing down the Zoanthrope's shields without killing it, and asked us not to distract them again. We all made some rather unkind comments at that last part, but refrained from transmitting any of them.

Spot the Wonder Drone tagged the second wave on its way in, and as we'd guessed, there were some Warriors directing the charge from behind the initial meatshield. The Guard has a Standard Combat Doctrine for pretty much every situation. While most of these are not very individual-Guardsman-friendly, the one for that sort of attack is a good'un, so for once we did things by the book. Admittedly said book is rather short, but that just means it's easy to remember. The three of us that had moved into sniper positions held our fire, and prepared to "Shoot the Big One First."

On Doc and Tink's flank, an overcharged, Tau-laser-thingy-guided plasma bolt turned their Warrior into chunky salsa. Over on Aimy and Twitch's, a precision headshot from our actually-quite-talented markswoman took out theirs. With the synapse creatures dead, the Gaunts lost cohesion and both pairs of guardsmen easily mowed them down. Unfortunately the sniper on the third flank was Nubby, who didn't have Tink's anti-armor weapon or Aimy's accuracy.

A very angry, if rather burnt and bloody, Tyranid Warrior immediately returned fire with one of those big bee-gun things, pinning Nubby down on

his sniper perch. Sarge tried to hold off the incoming wave himself, making heavy use of his grenades and the chokepoint, but it quickly became apparent that it wasn't going to work. Sarge commed the rest of us and, over Nubby's shrill screaming, asked if anyone could give him support before he had to blow his mines and relocate.

The rest of us were still rather busy with our mop-ups, and reinforcing Sarge meant crossing the Zoanthrope infested hilltop, so we all declined. It seemed like Sarge was going to have to give up his flank's safety margin, and he was getting ready blow his mines and pull Nubby out, when the Scout Marine told him to hold a little longer. Sarge managed it. He wound up having to use his boots to keep an especially persistent Gaunt off while he reloaded, and his armour and beefiness barely saved him from a few fleshborer hits, but he managed it. Right as things were getting downright dire, the Warrior and several nearby Gaunts went down to an amazing display of precision shooting.

Nubby finally got his ass out of cover, and helped Sarge turn the tide back around as the Scout returned to the Zoanthrope fight. Things were looking pretty good, even if we could see the third wave mustering near the bottom of the hill. Good changed to Great when we heard Gravis say the Zoanthrope's shield was almost down.

And then everything went to shit.

Looking back, it's not that hard to spot the exact moment when the shitting of the everything occurred. Actually it wasn't that hard to spot at the time either, within twenty seconds of it happening we knew what had gone wrong and why, but it took a bit longer for all the horrible results of that one screwup to manifest.

Anyway, what started that whole horrible shit-show was a simple communications failure at a rather hectic moment. The third wave of Tyranids was coming in, and we were busy shooting them and getting ready to blow our mines and fall back. Up on top of the hill, Sergeant Gravis had the Zoanthrope on the ropes and was ordering his Scout to get ready to tranq it. The Scout Marine had just returned from helping Sarge, and was perched on one of the pointy pillars on top of the hill.



As the Scout got the tranq ready and lined up what must have been a rather tricky shot, he spotted something and commed us. His EXACT words were: "Interrogator, Incoming Tyranid Assault Flier, North Side."

Now let's do an experiment. First, go out and find fifty thousand Guardsmen. Actually, go out and get a hundred, it's not like Guardsmen hard to find. Hell, we're literally the largest organized fighting force in the galaxy. Which, come to think of it, means that the definition of a standard response to ANYTHING, is what WE do, not what a few bloody crazies stomping around in power armor and getting eaten by bugs...

ANYWAY, ask any of these Guardsmen what they'll do when someone warns them hostile air units are incoming. Nothing else, no details or orders, just Hostile Air Incoming. You know what they'll say? It'll be the same regardless of regiment, specialization, rank, or anything.

Every. Single. One of Them. Will tell you the same thing: THEY WILL GET THE HELL INTO COVER.

Apparently the Emperor's Scythe's Chapter of The Space Marines aren't on the same page as the rest of us though. Or at least that Scout Marine wasn't.

I mean if he'd just been a little more clear... If he'd added just a few more bloody words, like: "TAKE IT OUT" or "COVER ME", or even if he'd just shortened it to: "INCOMING ASSAULT" we would've understood...

But no, he told us there was a Flier Incoming, and stood there with his ass hanging out, wrongly believing that we'd shoot it down while he lined up his shot on the Zoanthrope.

Nubby was the first one to notice the impending disaster. Well actually he just saw the Scout standing there, and told Sarge that the "stupid bastid's gonna get 'is arse shot off." Sarge stared for a second, then peeked out of cover and saw what sort of flier was incoming. Everything started to click together, the incoming Tyranid wasn't some dedicated air biofom designed to strafe or bomb ground targets. It was biggest, meanest melee monstrosity in the swarm, or at least the biggest one that was still capable of flight.

It was a Flyrant. A Winged Hive Tyrant. The Tyranid equivalent of a Lord General crossed with a Main Battle Tank and with some wings strapped on for good measure. It was big, pissed, and coming right at the only member of our team that was standing out in the open.

Unfortunately Sarge was just a little too late. By the time he'd started shouting his warning, nearly five tonnes of flying Tyranid hit the Scout Ma-



rine in the back.

You know how in cartoons a bus or train hits someone and they'll just sort of vanish? It was exactly like that, right down to how the poor bastard's sniper rifle was left pinwheeling in the air for a second.

In the aftermath three things became apparent: the Scout had not gotten his shot off, the psychically exhausted Zoanthrope was doing a runner, and Gravis had bigger problems than chasing it. The Space Marine told us that the Zoanthrope was fleeing towards Sarge, asked us to catch it, and then started shouting about some place called Sotha. A second later the Tyrant let out scream that shook the entire hilltop.

The situation was bad, but it was also, thank the Emperor, relatively simple. We had a perimeter to maintain, a Hive Tyrant to survive, and a Zoanthrope to catch. Sarge started bellowing out orders and the rest of us scrambled to follow them.

Since we still had all of our mines in place, the perimeter was actually the least pressing issue. Sarge's first order was to fall back towards the top of the hill, and let the explosives hold off the smaller Tyranids for a while. Sarge then told us he was going after the Zoanthrope, and sent Nubby to get the Scout's tranq-loaded sniper rifle.

For the rest of us, Sarge's final orders were a little more... freeform. Tink was to get his drone on the Hive Tyrant, and the rest of us were told to "HANDLE IT." Seriously, that was his entire master plan.

¡By the Emperor! There's a bloody HIVE TYRANT inside our perimeter, it's killed one Space Marine and, as soon as it finishes off the other, it'll kill us all. What should we do sir?

i"HANDLE IT"

He never managed to live that one down.

The ridiculousness of that order aside, it's not like we actually needed one. Each of us knew that the only way we'd live through this was if the Tyrant was dead, forced to retreat, or kept distracted long enough for us to call and board the shuttle. All three of these possible solutions could be accomplished in the same way: by shooting the big bug and running away if it chased us. Some variations and improv could be thrown in as things progressed, but Shoot and Run was really the core strategy. Even the Space Marine was doing it, though it was more Stab and Run in his case.

The first of us to actually see the Hive Tyrant up close were Aimy and Twitch. As they ran up towards the hilltop, Sergeant Gravis started coming down in these big graceful leaps made possible by his Grav-Chute. Valiant



Heroes of the Imperium that both of them were, they immediately scrambled to find hiding places. As the massive Tyranid charged down after Gravis, both of them held their fire, not to mention their breaths, and observed what they could.



The Flyrant was, of course, a winged bipedal bug that stood six meters tall and was made of distilled murder and hate, but it also had a few important distinguishing points. It had four arms, well three-ish after Gravis had gotten its attention. The top one-and-a-half ended in the usual Tyranid talons, the bottom pair held a massive bonesword and one of those freaky sentient whip things. Each of those weapons was capable of messily killing any poor guardsman that got in close, but none of them had real range. That was a very good thing for us, not so much for Gravis though.

Speaking of Sergeant Gravis, he was coming down the hill fast, but the Flyrant was gaining and he didn't have much room left to run before he hit Twitch and Aimy's minefield. Right as it looked like he was going to try jumping over it and then wading through the incoming wave of Nids, he suddenly reversed direction.

All three of the Flyrant's attacks missed the Space Marine as, with more speed and agility than anyone wearing the equivalent of a light-tank should have, he dodged between the beast's legs. It was impressive as hell, especially the part where he got in a whack with his Power Sword on his way through. Both Aimy and Twitch watched appreciatively; until they realized the Flyrant wasn't going to be able to stop.

The four-point-nine tonne Tyranid flailed its wings in a mad attempt to get airborne, completely failed to do so, and plowed through over a dozen AP mines. Twitch and Aimy barely made it into new cover in time. Of course it takes more than a few AP mines to kill a Hive Tyrant. Aside from shredding its wings, all they really seemed to do was piss it off. The Tyrant let out another of its piercing shrieks as it reversed direction, and started pelting back up the hill after Gravis. Twitch and Aimy watched it go, then realized they had a bit of a problem, namely that there was no longer much of a minefield between them and the wave of smaller Tyranids.

The debate over what to do consisted of Aimy and Twitch pointing in opposite directions, yelling "HANDLE IT" at each other, then splitting up. Twitch ran around dropping the last of his mines and spraying fire at the incoming Gaunts. Aimy sprinted up the hill after Gravis and the Flyrant, hip-firing her pulse rifle at the massive target until it crested the hill and she

lost line of sight.

When Aimy reached the top of the hill, she found Sergeant Gravis carefully circling around the enraged Flyrant while Doc and Tink shot it. Like the other two Guardsmen, she sighted on the Tau marker-thingy Spot was projecting on the Tyranid and poured out as much fire as she could. It was beginning to look like the three of them would be able to wear the creature down, then Gravis botched one of his dodges.

The Space Marine had to choose between trying to block the Flyrant's bonesword or dying a horrible death, and reluctantly chose the former. For the second time that day, he flew through the air with all the grace and aerodynamics of a thrown brick.

Sergeant Gravis ricocheted off one of the stone spires encircling the hilltop, briefly tumbled upwards, then crashed into the dirt directly behind Doc and Tink. He was a tough bastard though: within a second of his landing started moving again. Both the Space Marine and his armor groaned as he struggled to get back on his feet.

The Flyrant let out yet another roar, sighted on the recovering Space Marine, and charged. Now, in your normal Commissariat Approved Uplifting Story of Heroism, this is where the two Stalwart Guardsmen would've stood their ground and laid down their lives to buy the wounded Space Marine time to recover. Then, right after the Guardsmen had finished valiantly sacrificing themselves, he would've magically gotten better and killed the vile Xenos. Oh, and then all the Orks and Tyranids on the planet would've died, and if the whole place would've turned into a garden world that paid all its tithes on time, and there'd be statues of the heroic dead Guardsmen everywhere...

The warp take those stories, and whoever keeps writing them, and the whole Commissariat for that matter. Ever notice how it's always some Guardsman and never the Commissar who dies horribly in the Emperor's name? Anyway, Doc and Tink took one look at the charging Flyrant, and ran for it.

Okay, I realize that sounds bad, but it's not like they ran down the hill and left Gravis to die. They kept firing and ran perpendicularly along the top of the hill in, and I quote the official report here, "An attempt to draw the Hive Tyrant's attention away from its target."



Anyway, it's not like they would've accomplished anything by standing there, and there was no way either of them could've carried a fully armored Space Marine to safety. My point is that what happened next was NOT Doc's, Tink's, or anyone else's fault, and I'll have you know that the tribunal of senior Ordos Xenos Inquisitors who reviewed Spot's footage agreed with that assessment. Well, two thirds of the Tribunal anyway.

So while three of us poured a hell of a lot of plasma into the Flyrant, it closed to melee range with Sergeant Gravis. He parried the beast's whipping, sidestepped a strike from its single remaining talon, then did that trick where he dodged through its legs again. Whereupon the Flyrant turned, brought its bonesword around at mid-chest-level, and cut Sergeant Gravis in half. Twitch finished laying his replacement minefield and arrived on the hilltop right then, as did Sarge and Nubby, who were luggering the tranq Zoanthrope between them. Their part of what could be generously called "the Plan" hadn't involved anything as terrifying as the Flyrant, but it hadn't been a cakewalk either.

Sarge had managed to sight the fleeing Zoanthrope as it came down the hill towards him. It turned out that even when too exhausted to keep itself hovering, the psyker bugs are capable of wriggling along the ground at a surprisingly high speed. While Nubby hunted down the Scout's dropped rifle and its tranq round, Sarge chased the Zoanthrope back and forth between the rocks, dodging the occasional weak lighting bolt and stray fleshborer round as he did so. Eventually he corned the beastie between two spires right as

Nubby arrived with the comically oversized Astartes Pattern Sniper Rifle.

Since it quickly became apparent that Nubby was completely incapable of aiming the oversized rifle, and the Zoanthrope was still squirming around a lot, Sarge decided to take the shot himself. The second he was distracted the bug tried to escape again, and Sarge wound up tackling the thing and trying to pin it to the ground. It was like wrestling a cross between a greased pig, a giant snake, and an uninsulated power conduit.

In the end he collected a few scratches, a nasty bite wound, and a whole lot of electrical burns before Nubby just dragged the rifle over and jammed it into the Zoanthrope's under-belly. Then they hauled the surprisingly long and heavy xenos up to the hilltop, pausing to chuck a few grenades at the incoming wave of Nid reinforcements on the way, and got there just in time to see Gravis' bisection.

There was a brief silence, which was punctuated by two meaty thuds and



Nubby's nasal voice.

i'oly shit... fink ees gonna be okay?

Then the Flyrant roared again and all six of us open fire. Spot was projecting its Tau laser-thingy on the middle of the Flyrant's torso, and we all just sighted our weapons on it and held the triggers down. Looking back it's hard to say whether it was sheer weight of fire, or if the big bastard was just running out energy, but it's charge towards us was much slower than its earlier ones had been.

Every single one of us got an entire magazine's worth of shots out before the flyrant was a third of the way to Sarge and Nubby. It never made it to two thirds, there was a sort of squelchy pop as its torso armor gave way, and the beast stumbled. It sort of huddled there, trying to protect its wounded chest, and sending out a screech that was echoed by the smaller Tyranids climbing the hill. From the sound of it, they were finally getting passed our minefields, and would be arriving in seconds.

None of us went to hold off the incoming reinforcements though. The Flyrant was the very definition of "The big one", and we were going to shoot it first. Spot redirected it's markerlight to the xenos' head.

Not that we actually needed the fancy tau flashlight though: even if the Flyrant's head was a relatively small target, it was a stationary one now. Every shot we fired hit, and within seconds our massed plasma fire either punched through the Tyranid's head armour, or cooked the thing's brains to boiling point. Its head exploded like a particularly disgusting grenade, and a psychic pressure that none of us had even noticed was released. All around the hilltop the incoming Tyranids broke and fled as quickly as they could, and the Zoanthrope twitched a little where Sarge and Nubby had dropped it.

Let me tell you, we'd escaped near certain death before, but the relief we all felt on that barren hilltop was greatest in our lives. Every one of us just stood there and basked in the sheer joy of still being alive.

Then Tink spoiled it by asking if Gravis had called the shuttle before he died. Tink's question was followed by the sound of a few thousand Orks Waaagh-ing, and it occurred to us that we'd probably just killed the creature that'd been holding the Tyranid defense of these hills together. I doubt anyone in the history of the Imperium has ever gone from ecstatic relief to blind panic as quickly as we did.





Sarge started wildly flipping through comm channels, Twitch ran around deploying the last of his explosives, Aimy screamed at Tink for not remembering sooner, and Tink called Aimy a skunk-haired super-bitch. The odd men out were Doc, who had gone right past panic to depression, and Nubby, who defaulted to some very basic instincts when overwhelmed. While everyone else was busy screaming, shouting, mining, and crying, Nubby went to get himself a shiny, not-quite-new Power Sword.

The cretinous little vulture found the Sword still in Gravis' hand, which didn't deter him even slightly. He firmly planted a boot on the Marine's arm and started prying at the power-armored fist. As Nubby levered off the smallest of the Marine's fingers, two practically reflexive actions occurred. First Gravis shook Nubby's grip off and tightened his fingers on his Power Sword. Second, Nubby automatically responded by drawing his combat knife and preparing to give the Emperor's Peace, thereby settling any silly little ownership disputes.

It was immensely lucky for all of us that Gravis' ceramite helmet was still sealed, since it made trying to slit his throat long and noisy process. Doc noticed Nubby going at the Space Marine's armored neck like an incompetent lumberjack, realized what it implied, and bodychecked Nubby off the not-quite-dead Sergeant Gravis. Our brilliant medic then stood there, with his medkit open, panicking and trying to figure out how to treat the mother of all chest wounds. The commotion caught Sarge's attention in turn, and he abandoned his fruitless attempts to contact the shuttle by randomly trying comm channels. Sarge's first question wasn't if Doc was sure Gravis was still alive, or how that was even possible, it was whether the Space Marine was capable of calling for evac. Doc gibbered, and pointed out that Gravis' lungs had been cut in half and he could actually see INSIDE them. Sarge took that as a no, but noticed Nubby's knife stuck between Gravis' helmet and gorget. Without waiting for a medical opinion, he seized the knife and twisted it with all his beefy-noncom strength.

Later it was explained to Sarge, but not Nubby, that the latches on Mark VII Power Armor helmets don't actually lock, and he could've just flipped them open. At the time though, Sarge was too busy to waste time thinking, and just tore apart several million thrones worth of data-relays and void-seals. When the helmet finally came off, with a tear and a snap rather than a little pop, Sarge ran over to where Aimy was beating seven kinds of shit out of Tink. He ended their friendly little argument over who "the real bitch" was

by grabbing the back of Aimy's Ork-stained armor, and unceremoniously chucking her in Twitch's direction. Sarge then dragged Tink to his feet, thrust Gravis' helmet into the techie's hands, and screamed at him to make the vox work.

Tink stared at the helmet for a second, realized he had absolutely no idea how it worked, and wisely decided to try the obvious thing first. Which is to say, he put the helmet on his head and hesitantly asked if the thing was on. He was nearly deafened by the shuttle pilot's screaming request to know what the hell was going on and what had happened to Sergeant Gravis. Tink decided that Sarge could answer that question, handed the helmet over with a smug little line about being able to fix anything, and went to see if Doc had anything for a broken nose.



He immediately regretted that decision. So Sarge was wearing the helmet and explaining things to the Shuttle pilot, Twitch was being Twitch, and since it looked like we actually wouldn't all be left stranded in the middle of an army of Orks, both Nubby and Aimy decided it was time to take a breather. They sat on the tranqued Zoanthrope, shared a pack of Lho sticks, and enjoyed the sight of Doc freaking the hell out and shaking Tink like a terrier with a rat.

¡OH GOD WHAT DO I DO?

I dunno, fix him or something, STOP SHAKING ME

¡HOW TINK? How do you fix BEING CUT IN HALF? He shouldn't even be alive, I don't know what's going on here, I don't know how Space Marines work! What if touching him makes it stop working? WHAT DO I DO?

Umm umm umm.... do that Space Marine thing!

¡WHAT THING?

Harvest his geneseed!

¡His what now?

His geneseed! It's like this seed thing that Space Marines have, if you pull it out before a Marine dies you can plant it in a servitor and he grows back from it.

¡Really?

Yeah, they had this whole thing in the last season where Brother-Captain Markus the Cooperator fell in battle, and the fire-warrior rescue team had to-



¿Wait, you mean in your Tau vids? You're basing this off heretical cartoons?

THEY'RE NOT CARTOONS, THEY'RE NOT HERETICAL, AND DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING BETTER?

¿Shit shit shit shit... okay what's this "geneseed" look like and where does he keep it?

Ummm they had to censor the part where they cut it out, but I think it was like a second heart thing, and it was all green and stuff.

¿Heart thing, so like in his chest?

Yea, right in the middle.

¿Okay, in the chest... Upper chest or lower chest?

Umm

¿UPPER CHEST OR LOWER CHEST? If I'm going to be digging around inside him looking for something green, I at least need to know which end to dig around in!

I don't know, why doncha go check on the Scout?



The Scout Marine was pinned to the hilltop's ground a few dozen meters away from where he'd been perching when the Flyrant hit him. I'm using "pinned" quite literally here, he was face down with a Tyranid talon the size of a beefy telephone pole through his back. The talon ended in a very neat cut that matched the stump the Flyrant had, which probably explained how Gravis had gotten its attention.

Unlike Gravis, there wasn't much confusion over whether the Scout was dead: he'd started to go runny. It's not like all of him was melting, just a sort of expanding area around where he'd been speared. Said area included both the upper and lower chest though. In the name of medical science, Doc poked at the mushy corpse with a probe, then jumped backwards with a girly shout when it started to hiss and melt too.

¿Emperor... I swear he wasn't doing that earlier. Is this like a Space Marine thing? Do they melt when they die?

Ewww, don't think so, would make it hard to re-use the armor. Bethcha it's a Nid thing, does yer Big Book-o-Pseudoscientific Medical Bullshit have a section on Tyrant bioweapons?

Umm, umm, umm, Tyranid, tyrant, umm, umm, bonesword, scything talon, TOXIN SACS!

Huh, neat, what's it say?

If in fully stocked field hospital... laboratorium... quarantine... here! Battlefield instructions! "Smear area with counterseptic, administer oral De-Tox, scan and apply indicated Toxin Wands, give Plasma, pray to the Emperor." I CAN DO ALL OF THOSE!

Wait, like plasma from a gun or a bag? And what about the geneseed though?

Screw your geneseed, if we can keep him from melting until the shuttle arrives we can ask the pilot. Now take these and go to his bottom half

These are pills Doc, how do I give a pair of legs pills?

HOW DO YOU THINK?

Oh god, I am NOT qualified for this...

Well neither am I, now DO IT.

Doc's panicked medical treatments were of rather dubious usefulness, especially the part where he fed a De-tox tab to the nearly-dead Space Marine. That stuff is nearly enough to kill you on its own, and it made the big guy flail around and spurt some nasty stuff out the end of his torso, which at least it proved he was alive despite the whole not-really-breathing thing. Also, Doc put more fluid back in, and sealed off most of the leaky, exposed torso area, so it was probably a net gain for Gravis.



We all watched him running around and yelling at Tink, who was stuck with the literal ass-end of the job, while the sound of the oncoming Orks grew steadily louder. It came as an immense relief when the shuttle dropped out of the clouds, and you better believe we were lined up and ready to board before it'd hit the ground. The pilot wasn't exactly on the same page as the rest of us though: he didn't stay in his seat and keep the engines spun up, instead he was standing at the rear hatch when it opened.

None of us had actually seen the Pilot on our flight in, and that first meeting was rather unpleasant. He was a Scout Marine and looked nearly identical to the other guy, except for not being impaled and dissolving. He was also considerably worse at the whole Stoicism thing. The Pilot stood in our way and demanded to know what had happened to Sergeant Gravis and Rubram, which was sort of awkward since none of us had actually bothered

to learn the dead Scout Marine's name. Anyway, the Pilot did not take his sergeant's bisection well, and nearly went berserk when he saw his buddy's rifle sticking out of Nubby's pack.

The outermost mines were going off at this point, and none of us wanted to die on landing pad, so Sarge acted rather cruelly. He yanked the "le-gi'-a-men' ba'lefie' salvage" out of Nubby's pack, thrust it in the Pilot's arms, said the Scout had wanted him to have it, and then pointed out that his boss was GOING TO DIE IF WE DON'T TAKE OFF RIGHT NOW.



We didn't have any problem securing the Zoanthrope for takeoff, the snakey xenos was still completely out of it and fit right into one of the oversized seats, Gravis was a bit of a problem though. Doc wound up strapping him UPSIDE DOWN in one of the seats, supposedly because it let him tighten the crash harness and would keep everything from falling out if the bandage gave way. None of us knew enough to argue, so we went with the same gross-end-up theory for his lower half, which was put into the seat next to him. During the strapping-in process Gravis'

sword, bolter, and other little weapons and gadgets disappeared into Nubby's backpack. Thankfully the Pilot was too busy taking off and dodging small-arms fire from the incoming Orks to see any of this.

After we were out of the Orks' range, our ascent out of the atmosphere went comfortably enough. Sarge sat in the relative peacefulness and inspected us troops. In addition to his ample supply of lacerations and electrical burns, we'd collected a concussion, a fairly nasty leg wound, a broken nose, some cracked ribs, nearly a dozen minor fleshborer hits, and an Ork-juice marinade. We were all still alive though, and we had Oak's Zoanthrope too, so all-in-all, we called it a win.

Sure, our Space Marines had taken one hell of a beating, but we'd completed our objective and horrible sacrifices in the name of victory are what Space Marines are all about. I mean we'd been attacked by a bloody Hive Tyrant, and two Marines for a Tyrant is a pretty good trade. Anyway, it was beginning to look like Gravis might just survive long enough to get him to a real medicae. So yea, totally a win.

We were in the middle of congratulating ourselves and speculating on if Gravis would be put in a Dreadnaught when three things happened. First the Zoanthrope started twitching, then Gravis' armor started beeping and his lower half began to smoke, and finally the helmet in Sarge's lap started

talking. So no shit there we were, sneaking across a warzone with a slowly awakening Tyranid psyker and a quickly dying Space Marine, when Sergeant Rebus called for his evac. If you actually needed proof that the entire purpose of the universe is to shit on poor hardworking Guardsmen, it'd be damned hard to find something better than that timing right there.

I mean, just to remind you, this wasn't some simple pickup from a combat zone he needed. No no no no, he needed us to sneak back into boarding range of a Tyranid Hive ship, which was still being assaulted by a few million Ork Fightas, to pick him up before the high-yield Vortex Bomb he'd just planted, went off.

You could say that we weren't the ones doing the actual sneaking, and that we'd been safely through it before, without the armed Vortex Bomb of course. But this time it would be a race against the Zoanthrope waking up and Sergeant Gravis melting. Every man has their limit, and this was well beyond ours. Before the Pilot could respond, Sarge put on Gravis' helmet, and calmly, clearly told the Space Marine to Wait His Damned Turn.

All of us, except for Doc who was rather busy, cheered. Sergeant Rebus and the Pilot were less enthusiastic.

The argument that followed included accusations of cowardice, the Pilot coming out of the cockpit with a Bolter and threatening to kill either us or the Zoanthrope, and Sarge telling one of the Emperor's Angels of Death to "Shut up and soldier, Soldier." In the end, a combination of devotion to the mission and desire to save HIS sergeant won the Pilot to our side. Sergeant Rebus was instructed to delay the bomb's detonation and hold out until we were dropped off and a return trip could be made. The conversation ended with Rebus bitterly complaining that dying waiting for evac was an end worthy of a Guardsman. Sarge responded by telling him that Holding The Line wasn't that hard: after all, us Guardsmen did it all the time. Now it might sound like we callously doomed a team of valiant Space Marines to their deaths, but we really weren't delaying their extraction THAT long: the Marines had prepared for this type of situation when they'd adjusted their mission plan to account for only having one shuttle. The Occurrence Border had followed our stealthy little vessel into the system as quietly as it could, and was now close enough that it'd be a matter of minutes, not hours, to reach it. Of course, being that close meant there was a significant risk of detection, and the Occurrence Border did not have any real way to hold off



and attack by the Orks or the Nids. Back at the briefing Rebus had claimed it was an acceptable risk though, which goes to show you what a bloody tactical genius he was.



Okay, maybe that's a little unfair. Having the ship closer turned out to be very good for him, and it's not like he could've foreseen that we'd capture the Zoanthrope, but forget to bring along the second dose of that special psyk-tranquilizer stuff. Though if he's spared the blame, then that means Gravis and his Scout deserve a little for not taking the excessively simple precaution of leaving a few spare doses in the shuttle.

I mean we were going into extremely hostile territory, why was the Scout carrying ALL the tranqs, and why hadn't either of them told us a second dose would be needed? Is Tyranid wrangling some super-secret Emperor's-Scythes-only technique? Or did they think that there was no way that we'd survive and continue the mission if they didn't? Well, actually that one is completely understandable, arrogant as all hell, but understandable.

I'm getting ahead of myself though: the Zoanthrope was a problem later. At the time our big concern was that half of Gravis was dying and the other half was violently decomposing. Once again the task was divided between Doc and Tink. This time Doc was much calmer, and his response was surprisingly reasonable and professional. He fussed around the upside-down Space Marine torso with his medical scanner and Tox Wands, and shouted questions about Astartes biology and Power Armor automated medicae systems at the Pilot. There was some rather confusing talk about Illicit Kidneys, Biomedical Cogitators, and Cellular Regenerator reservoirs, which the rest of us ignored, because Tink's part of the job was a complete shitshow.

Whatever was on the Flyrant's sword, when it got going, it REALLY got going: Gravis' lower half went from fine to melting from the wound down, in mere seconds. It's hard to say whether Tink's response was best or worst one available, but it was certainly the most disgusting. In an effort to slow down the process, he unbuckled the power-armored legs, and flipped them upside down. The smoldering bandage immediately gave way and dumped a horrible combination of meat-juice, xenos toxins, and extremely powerful acid onto the seat. The smell was beyond vile, and all of us had to put on our rebreathers just to stay conscious, which was lucky considering how many airborne toxins were found in that shuttle when we landed.

So after the spillage started dissolving the seat, the rest of us became very interested in helping Tink. Of course none of us knew jack about bio-

chemistry, so we were only able to offer what might be called Mechanical Solutions to the acid problem, and most of those suggestions were absolutely terrible. In the end we settled on the traditional Occurrence Border technique of shoving it out the airlock, and hoping it needed oxygen and heat to keep doing whatever.

So that's why, when we finally docked with the Occurrence Border, our shuttle's hull was decorated by a pair of legs being gripped by Spot the Wonder Drone. It says something that none of the people waiting in the bay even commented on that. The Occurrence Border had been warned of the time-sensitive nature of our cargo, and the welcoming party was well prepared. Doc's Hosi-taller girlfriend and her minions were ready with a bunch of scary-looking medical gear, and sort of big goo-filled container. Gravis' legs and, to Tink's horror, Spot were immediately pried off the hull, crammed into said giant pickle-jar, and hauled off before we'd even made it out of the shuttle.

Doc was the first one down the ramp. With Tink's help he deposited Gravis on a waiting gurney, then turned to his girlfriend and went for a hug and a quick kiss, he didn't get either. Instead she screamed at him to keep his rebreather on, hosed him with a chemical sprayer, and then ordered him to go through a full decontamination and meet her in the medbay. Doc stood there and dripped for a second, and then dejectedly jogged after his departing girlfriend. Those of us who weren't struggling to get the Zoanthrope out of the shuttle chuckled at this, at least until a pair of sprayer-armed minions started hosing us as well.

We'd all been thoroughly soaked by the time we got Zoanthrope out of its seat and loaded onto the cargo trolley Hannah had waiting for us. The sprayers then moved on to hosing the shuttle's interior, but before they could get much done the rear hatch slammed shut and the engines kicked back on. In clear violation of all safety procedures, the Pilot rocketed out of the bay before we'd cleared the area. As he left, the Pilot commed us and promised vengeance if Gravis didn't survive, and from the helmet Sarge was still carrying we overheard him giving his ETA to Sergeant Rebus. We silently wished him luck, then turned to the serious business of getting our Zoanthrope stored in the Psyker Containment Cells. The Zoanthrope hadn't



been any trouble during the unloading process. That was because it had come almost fully awake while we were still ten minutes out, and we'd had to do something about it.



Initially we'd hoped that this far away from other Tyranids and the Hive Ship, it'd revert to being a dumb beast. Acting on this theory, when the Zoanthrope started clawing at its straps and manifesting small bolts of electricity, Sarge attempted to establish superiority by punching it in the snout. That did not work.

Plan B, was to hit it with one of the Guard-issue tranq and painkiller syrettes from Doc's kit, it's not like he was using them anyway. When that didn't work we went with Plan C, which was to keep applying Plans A and B until they DID work. After a fair amount of punching and enough tranqs to kill three men, the uppity xenos psyker finally went back to sleep. Disturbingly though, the shuttle was still filled with little snaps of static, and we all felt a sort of ominous pressure in the air. We tried to call the Xenologist Adept back on the ship and get his opinion on that, but our comms had a surprising amount of trouble, so we settled on asking him to meet us in the bay.

The Adept was waiting next to Hannah, and as we loaded the Zoanthrope onto the pallet, he took note of the minor phenomena as well as the empty syrettes that we'd left sticking in the xenos. After processing this for a second, he began yelling at us to go faster, which was immensely unhelpful, since we were all outrunning him until he got on the pallet himself. The part where he called ahead to warn the Psyker Cells and ask Fumbles to meet us halfway was more useful though, so we forgave him. Picture, if you will, a cargo pallet racing down the corridors of a spaceship. It is occupied by a large, unconscious xenos that looks like a cross between a snake and a fetus, a slightly overweight man in robes, and a guardsman with an injured leg. The guardsman is holding a wrench that is connected to a random tangle of wires which has been hung over the xenos. As the pallet races along, he is using the wrench to ground increasingly large burst of inexplicably green electricity against the floor and walls.

Behind the pallet are a terrified looking tech-priestess, and a burly guardsman who looks like he'd recently crawled through a burning razor blade factory. Both of them are pushing the pallet as fast as they can through the maze-like series of corridors that make up the ship. Every twist and turn requires a frantic effort to change the heavy pallet's direction, and occasionally one of the pushers will misjudge, slam into a wall or doorframe, and then have to scramble to catch back up.

A fair distance ahead of the pallet are two guardsmen, one is wiry and wreathed with explosives, the other is short and lugging a backpack packed near to bursting. They're screaming at people to get out of the corridors, applying indiscriminate force when necessary, and opening the various doors and hatches the pallet needs to go through. A little bit behind them is a guardswoman who could be defined as regal-looking if she wasn't completely filth-encrusted. She is pausing at corners and relaying upcoming direction changes to the pallet's pushers.



So, this parade of panic made its way through nearly half a kilometer of ship corridors, trailing confusion and technical failures behind it. But it didn't really get bad until right at the halfway point, when Fumbles suddenly stepped out of a side hatch and into the path of the onrushing pallet. A second later he was facedown on top of the Zoanthrope, clutching his badly bruised shins, and screaming at the top of his lungs. Not being a psyker, I can't really say what Fumbles did during that mad scramble: from our perspective he just sort of laid there and gibbered, and later on he claimed not to remember any of it. He was probably doing something really important, like keeping the Zoanthrope from doing stuff while it was unconscious or hiding us from the hive mind. Chances are that without him doing his thing, we would've died horribly before we got to the holding cells. We didn't really appreciate that at the time though: all we noticed was how immensely inconvenient Fumbles made the rest of our journey.

After Fumbles arrived, in addition to the electricity thrown off by the sleeping Zoanthrope, we had to deal with freak indoor snowstorms, a few instances of spontaneous gravity reversal, and all sorts of creepy noises and visions. On two occasions the effects were so bad that Sarge considered dumping the accident-prone psyker off the pallet and leaving him behind, but the Xenologist adept insisted that he stay. Luckily, Hannah's augmetics didn't take that long to start working again after they spontaneously locked up, and the minor daemon only made in three steps before a combination of pulse-fire and what might be called a Power Wrench turned it into chunky salsa.

Despite all the complications, we made incredibly good time on our mad sprint, covering something like a kilometer in just under six minutes. That

Dice Roll 3d10+4: 9, 9, 9 + 4 = 31



wasn't quite fast enough though. We'd reached the final stretch, and could see Jim holding the door open, when the ominous sort of psychic pressure we'd been feeling suddenly ratcheted up. As the pressure mounted, Fumbles gibbered something like "It sees, it knows, IT HUNTERS," and then the entire corridor filled with a torrential downpour of blood.

Everything slowed to a crawl as the first drop of blood hit Sarge's face. Memories of two psykers in a cargobay flitted through his mind, and he slowly began to reach towards Fumbles.

Then everything exploded. There were actually two explosions.

The first was a sort of psychic concussion. For a second the rain of blood paused in midair, then there was a crack of energy, and a wave of force radiated outwards from Fumbles. It was strongest at its epicenter: and all three of the pallet's human passengers were thrown off. Tink and the Adept both slammed into the corridor's walls while Fumbles flew upward, inexplicably stuck to the ceiling for a second, then flopped to the floor with an unpleasant splash.

Behind the pallet, Sarge saw the wave coming and rather gallantly pushed Hannah behind him. This did not have the intended result: the wave hit Sarge and over a hundred kilos of psychically-propelled noncom slammed into Hannah. This in turn resulted in both of them tumbling backwards and landing in a heap, unfortunately with Sarge

on top, nearly crushing the poor cog-girl. He probably would have died of embarrassment if it weren't for the fact that all five human projectiles were left unconscious by the blast.

The final effect of the psychic concussion was to blow out all the lights in the corridor. Twitch, Nubby, and Aimy activated their shoulder-mounted lights, and watched through the rain of blood as the pallet sloshed to a halt. The three of them held position and kept their weapons trained on the Zoanthrope, until Jim shouted Hannah's name and began to run past them. Nubby casually stuck out a foot and tripped the panicked cogboy, then followed Aimy and Twitch as they began to move towards the pallet.

Their cautious advance had nearly reached the pallet when the Zoanthrope suddenly jerked into the air. It hung there for a second, like some sort of horrible giant puppet being held up by tangled strings. Then a second explosion shook the entire ship, the world went green, and Aimy started screaming. It was a bit of a surprise to find ourselves alive after that.



Nubby and Twitch stood there in the ankle deep blood, shielding their eyes against the bright green light and watching Aimy, who was screaming and wildly firing her pulse rifle at the Zoanthrope's glowing energy shield. Guardsmen that they were, both of them quickly raised their own weapons and started firing as well, but after a few seconds they noticed that something was weird: the Zoanthrope wasn't fighting back. There were no lightning bolts or soul-rending screeches, and on closer inspection it didn't even appear to be awake. Of course, it wasn't until Fio came out of where he'd been hiding in the cells, helped Jim to his feet, and asked whether the plan was still to capture the Zoanthrope alive, that they considered NOT shooting the xenos.



Everyone except Aimy, who was too busy hysterically shooting at the Zoanthrope to talk, put their heads together to figure out what to do. While the Zoanthrope may not have been attacking, the psychic pressure had gone from ominous to outright painful, so the debate was a very short one. The second a halfway reasonable suggestion was put forward they all leapt into action, though Twitch and Nubby both bitterly complained that it was the non-human who made the plan.

Well, plan is a grandiose term. They wanted to get the Zoanthrope into the cells, but no one wanted to touch the sparking green shield, so Fio had made the stereotypically Tau suggestion of using drones. He and Jim had sent a small swarm of servo-skulls and kludged-together Tau drones behind the Zoanthrope, and had them start ramming its shield in an attempt to herd it towards the door. Nubby and Twitch contributed by getting Aimy to stop shooting and making sure no one was drowning in the warp-blood. The plan was decent, but had a major problem: it was too slow. The skulls and drones didn't have that much pushing power to begin with, and the electrical nature of the Zoanthrope's shield was frying them one by one. It was a race against the psychic pressure mounting to lethal levels, and we were losing. None of us had any other ideas though, and things probably would've gone poorly if Aimy hadn't finally snapped out of her PTSD-inspired violent freakout.

When Aimy returned to coherence, she took one look at the how slow it was going, cussed everyone else out for being useless sissies, and seized the forgotten cargo pallet. She ran towards the Zoanthrope, building up as much speed as the blood allowed, and at the last second levered the pallet onto two wheels and used it as a sort of poorly-balanced battering ram. It worked surprisingly well.



With Nubby and Twitch's help, another two blows got the Zoanthrope to the door of the Psyker Containment cells, where the problem of how to fit a three meter energy bubble through a two meter wide door presented itself. This was solved by the arrival of Sarge and Tink, who'd finally finished their naps and decided it was time to actually be useful.

While Jim and Fio, who weren't quite as stubborn as us Guardsmen, argued over whether it was possible to widen the door without damaging something or other, we backed to the end of the corridor. We picked the pallet up like a more traditional battering ram, Sarge positioned himself at the end, and then we charged.

Jim and Fio's debate was brought to a halt as a wildly sparking xenos psyker shot between them, bounced off a few pieces of delicate machinery, and neatly slid into the waiting stasis unit. The techies slapped various ON buttons, and then the terrible psychic pressure vanished. Out in the corridor, those of us who hadn't broken anything in the charge cheered, but our enthusiasm dwindled as every comm terminal in the Cells began ringing. Jim checked the caller ID on one of the terminals, saw that it was the Captain, and decided that this was OUR problem.

Well, he said it was our problem, but everyone knew it was really Sarge's. Chain of command goes both ways and all that. So we hauled our too-exhausted-to-be-fearless leader off the ground, relocated his shoulder, and pushed him towards the nearest comm terminal. He stared at the thing reproachfully for several seconds, swore a bit to make himself feel better, then finally bit the bullet and grabbed the handset.

All of us listened in as Sarge answered the call, both because we were curious, and because the Captain was yelling so loud that it was impossible for us not to. The man in charge of flying us through the void, who sounded both furious and terrified, had a few questions for us. Specifically: What in the Emperor's name we'd done, why his Navigator was hysterical, why his Astropath was DEAD, and WHY TWO HIVE SHIPS WERE HEADING TOWARDS US.

Let me tell you, nothing ruins the taste of victory quite as thoroughly as hearing about how much collateral damage there was...

Anyway, Sarge dealt with the Captain by holding the handset out at arm's



length and waiting for the man to run out of breath. When his chance came Sarge told the Captain we had the cargo secure, then promised to come up to the bridge. While he did that, the rest of us wearily speculated on just how screwed we were, and collected our teammates from the blood-filled corridor.

Fumbles was alive, but completely out of it, and there was something off about his eyes, y'know aside from being all rolled back. It was quickly decided that he needed a trip to the medbay, as did Hannah and the Adept. Despite being in better shape than Fumbles, both of them were obviously in a fair amount of pain from their various dents and bruises. The less callous members of the squad felt a little guilty about that: sometimes it's easy to forget that even the weediest Guardsman is a great deal tougher than most folks.

So as I said, Sarge finished his call with a promise to come up to the bridge, which led to a near mutiny from the rest of us. It says something about our level of exhaustion that we found the prospect of yet another damned hike more distressing than the incoming Hive Ships. Since he was far too tired himself to force us all to come with him, and because there was some other stuff that needed doing anyway, everyone but Aimy (who turned out to be terrible at rock-paper-scissors) was excused from that trek.

Nubby and Twitch were tasked with taking Fumbles, the Adept, and Hannah to the medbay on the massively-dented cargo pallet. Tink wanted to join the medbay group, both to get patched up and to retrieve Spot, but Jim and Fio needed his help with something technical sounding, so he had to stay. Hannah wound up promising to save his drone from whatever horrible medical things were being done to it, and to send it down with whoever was going to clean up the giant warp-blood puddle. Sarge and Aimy arrived on the bridge, where they were surprised to discover that they were NOT the only ones covered with blood. The communications officer's front side had a nice coating of red, with a few white and grey chunks mixed in. It turned out that when the Captain said the Astropath was dead, he meant REALLY dead.

Anyway, the Captain was up on his podium doing Captainy things. When he saw Sarge and Aimy, he paused from yelling at people, and spared all of ten seconds to tell Sarge that there were now three Hive Ships incoming. He had absolutely no intention of letting them get into firing range, and we'd be leaving just as soon as the Warp Drive finished warming up. After that,



Sarge would explain just what us dirtsuckers had done to the ship.



As the Captain went back to yelling at subordinates, Sarge digested the new information. After a few seconds, Aimy realized he was stuck, and performed the single duty she'd been brought along for. Which is to say, she jabbed Sarge in the ribs, and reminded him to ask about the Space Marines. While Sarge stepped up onto the podium with the Captain, Aimy, her important work completed, commandeered a comfy-looking chair from a terrified ensign. She fended off all attempts to remove her with a combination of obscenity, death threats, and some totally-justified violence.

The discussion on the podium quickly became an argument, albeit a quiet one. Sarge was not happy to hear that the Space Marines were not aboard, or that the Captain had no intention of waiting for them. The Captain was not happy with Sarge's complete lack of understanding when it came to the realities of naval warfare. Sarge made nearly a dozen suggestions as to how time could be bought. The Captain, using the same sort of condescending tone we used when talking about basic squad tactics to adepts and such, explained why every single one was either unwise, idiotic, or downright impossible. In the end, Sarge was forced to accept that unless the Space Marines made it back on their own, or at least started answering their vox, they were going to be left behind. He dejectedly left the Captain to his business, and wandered over to the brain-spattered communications officer. Out of a morbid sense of duty, and despite the fact that all of this information had already been broadcast to the Space Marines, Sarge had the officer direct the vox array towards the Hive Ship that Rebus had boarded, and then began explaining the situation. This rather bleak message got no response, which indicated that Marines were still too close to the Hive Ship to break vox silence, or as Aimy unhelpfully suggested, that they were already dead.

After a few minutes Sarge's transmissions dissolved into awkward apologies for abandoning the Space Marines to their deaths. Eventually it grew so pathetic that Aimy forced Sarge to hang up the Vox and stop embarrassing himself. A second ensign was evicted from his chair, and both of them sat and watched the bridge's tactical display as the countdown to Warp slowly continued. It was an incredibly depressing scene, but Sarge felt he needed to stay until the end, and Aimy was similarly bound to keep Sarge company.

Sarge moped, Aimy flicked pieces of Ork at the two techpriests on the bridge, the Captain captained, and the rest of the bridge officers ran around doing stuff like "redirecting the void shields." Then at warp-minus-sixty,

everyone flinched as the psychic equivalent of millions of nails running down a massive chalkboard swept over them. Luckily, the bridge's windows had already been covered in preparation for entering the Warp, so no one was driven insane by the sight of a massive hole in reality forming and sucking an entire Tyranid Hive ship, not to mention a few thousand Ork Fightas, into the Warp.

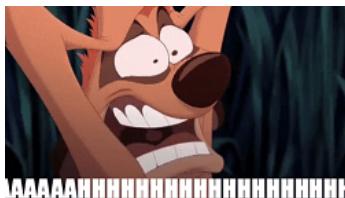
In the confusion of prayers and curses the followed, Sarge noticed the Vox station chiming. Sarge nearly strangled the communications officer as he yanked the praying man up off the floor and back into his seat. After a few seconds of button pressing from the officer and unhelpful yelling from Sarge, the vox station spat out a piece of paper. Sarge snatched the paper, and scanned the three lines of text on it. The only one that made sense was "Do not let us be forgotten - Sergeant Rebus", but that was enough for Sarge: he ran to the Captain and thrust the paper into his hands.

Sarge was halfway through triumphantly telling the Captain that the Marines were alive, and probably just need a small amount of time to dock, when the Captain shrugged and handed the paper back. Aimy had to restrain Sarge as the Captain told all hands to brace, and began the final countdown to Warp.

Ten seconds later, the most violent warp transit either Sarge or Aimy had experienced knocked them both to the ground. Over in the medbay, Twitch and Nubby had to hold Fumbles down as he suffered a massive seizure, and Doc had to poor fortune to vomit while wearing a surgical mask. Down in the Psyker Holding Cells, Tink was knocked on his ass as a few overstressed pieces of equipment underwent Rapid Unplanned Disassembly. As Jim hauled him back up, Fio poked his head out and asked if that had been the Warp jump, because the psychic pressure of the Hive Mind wasn't decreasing. The ensuing argument over whether Fio actually knew how to read the Exterior Psychic Activity Display was interrupted by a bolt of green lightning. Back on the bridge, the Captain explained that the first two lines of the Space Marine's message had consisted of an Astro-



pathic Contact Code and an Orbital Vector. The code would probably reach some Emperor's Scythes Battle Barge, and with the vector they'd be able to jump in and pick up their stranded battle-brothers. It'd probably take a few months, but Marines were supposed to be very patient about that sort of thing. Sarge accepted this without argument, mostly because he was too tired to get back up.



Unfortunately, Sarge wasn't allowed to just go to sleep on the floor of the bridge. It wasn't that the Captain or any of the other bridge officers objected, after the explanation he'd become preoccupied with some unexpected Hive-Ship-shaped blip on the scanners, instead the problem was a very annoying voice on his combead. Tink, who was talking with the speed of someone that'd just been dosed with Stimm, had a few questions was going on.

Sarge was forced to get up off the comfortable floor, and explain that: the big spike of Warp energy had been the Vortex Bomb, no one had known the jump would be that bad, and the Hive Mind's continued presence probably had something to do with the remains of the vortex-ed Hive Ship floating next to us in the warp. There was a bit of chatter in the background that sounded like "Told you so", but Tink was too hyped up to actually listen to the answers. Half way through Sarge's explanation, Tink started a high-speed tirade about how delicate and complex every piece of equipment in the Cells was, how much that equipment had been damaged during the Zoanthrope's imprisonment, and how important it was that he be told about things BEFORE they happened.

Tink's irate rambling was finally brought to a halt by the sound of a lightning bolt and some incredibly girly screaming in the background, followed by Jim ripping the combead off Tink's head and screaming "THE ZOANTHROPE IS AWAKE" into it. According to Aimy, Sarge didn't start crying when he realized the mission wasn't over yet, but it was a close thing. His despair didn't last long though: within a few seconds he was barking a sitrep out of Tink and had Aimy relaying orders to the rest of us.

In summary: the stasis unit was on the fritz, the warp-presence shroud and exterior psi-shielding were being steadily torn apart by the Hive Mind's continued assaults, the psi-suppressor was currently on fire, and the Zoanthrope was awake. The end result was that the captive xenos was shooting half-strength lightning bolts every time the stasis field flickered, and everything was seconds away from spontaneously exploding.

The situation was bad, but not quite as bad as Jim had made it sound. Tink was sure that he could fix everything, all he need was Ol' Bill, Hannah, every available tech-priest, a whole lotta parts, and "some idiots to stand in front of the lightning bolts" to be sent down to the Psyker Holding Cells. Also Doc, or someone better at medicine than Doc, because Tink couldn't feel his leg anymore, and Jim's fleshy bits were a little crispy. Oh, and recaff, lots and lots of recaff.



It took a lot of yelling and a bit of theft, not to mention at least two outright abductions, to put together the relief force, but we managed it. What followed was an absolutely heroic repair effort by the techies, plus a fair bit "general assistance" from the rest of us. Which is to say that in addition to playing gofer, we took turns holding a grounded boarding shield in front of the Zoanthrope, and shooting the small daemonic forms that occasionally rose out of the blood-pool in the hallway.

Finally, after several hours of frantic labour, and what we were later informed was a similarly frantic retreat from the mangled, but still-living remains of the Hive Ship, the Occurrence Border dropped back out of the Warp, and the situation in the Cells stabilized. We declared victory, and went the fuck to sleep. Now, I say we declared victory, but that was more in the tactical sense than the strategic. We'd reached a sort of temporary calm spot, but all of us knew it wasn't going to last. We'd capture the Zoanthrope and repaired its prison to a sort of minimally functional level, but we still had to haul it across an entire segmentum. That meant months of Warp travel which, given the notorious unworthiness of our ship, was quite dangerous enough WITHOUT the imprisoned xenos psyker. None of us were optimistic enough to think that we'd make it through the whole thing without incident, and I won't go into what the more pessimistic members of the squad predicted.

Once we'd all gotten some much needed sleep and medical treatment, a long and incredibly tedious post-mission meeting was held. All of us attended, but after the initial part where we regaled everyone with our heroic exploits, people started finding excuses to leave. These ranged from legitimate concerns about projects and patients, to Nubby's dubious mumbling about having left his felid in the oven, to Aimy just walking out, but eventually everyone but Sarge and Jim escaped. In the end it was just them, the Captain, the adepts, and a few of the ship's officers, planning out the whole mad voyage, while the rest of us slouched around the medbay.

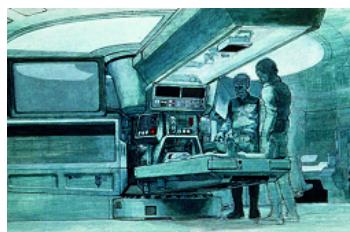


Our continuous presence in the medbay wasn't really appreciated. The Hospitaller didn't really mind us, but her minions made several pointed comments about how nice it would be if some of us, specifically Nubby and Twitch, went back to our quarters. We ignored them though, it's not like we didn't appreciate our quarters, we just wanted to stick together, and both Doc and Fumbles were more or less stuck in the medbay. Luckily, Doc wasn't stuck in the medbay because he'd been badly hurt, his girlfriend might've done horrible medical things to us if he'd been nearly-crippled again. In fact, Doc was doing better than the rest of us were, primarily because he'd missed out on that shitshow in the Cells; Sergeant Gravis was in pretty bad shape though, and most of Doc's time was taken up with his treatment.

While the bisected Space Marine's condition had improved slightly when he'd been moved to the much better stocked, and staffed, medbay, that'd only been temporary. There was some sort of complex chemical war going on between the Tyranid toxins and Gravis' weird Space Marine biology. Doc's girlfriend had hooked up a medical cogitator to some sort of socket on Gravis' power armour, and Doc was constantly either injecting or extracting fluids from the comatose Astartes

based on what it said. It was remarkably unpleasant to watch, and the rest of us found it amazing how persistent Doc was about the whole thing. Honestly, the rest of us, including the Hospitaller mind you, were in favor of just letting the Space Marine die after the second day of horrible medical torture, but Doc seemed committed to keeping Gravis alive as long as possible. We left him to it, both because it was far too gross to keep watching, and because Fumbles needed our company more than Doc.

Fumbles was in the medbay for what you might call Personal Reasons. He'd come out of his psychic battle with the Zoanthrope or Hive Mind or whatever... different. Mentally, he was okay. I mean, he was still a bit neurotic and starved for praise as ever, and he still uncontrollably broadcast his emotions to everyone nearby, but aside from that and not remembering anything from the fight, he was fine. The problem was his eyes. At first they just looked odd, and he was mostly blind, but over the few days we rested in normal space they sort of grew and... changed. Now, none of us wanted to use the M-word, even if he WAS a psyker to begin with, but that was the



sort of stuff you're supposed to tell the Commissar about.

I mean his eyes got to the size of a bloody FIST. Well, maybe not Sarge's fist, but definitely as big as one of Doc's girly hands. Anyway, that wasn't all, his pupils got all weird too: at their smallest they were as wide around as your finger, plus they sort of shined a bit, and they didn't always stay circular. It was creepy as all hell, let me tell you, especially because his eyelids DIDN'T grow, so he couldn't even properly close his eyes.

Creepiness aside though, the eye thing was amazingly unpleasant for Fumbles. For one thing, they didn't fit in his head properly and there was all sorts of painful pressure building up. Then there was how sensitive they were: anything but the dimmest light blinded the poor guy, and he couldn't even see that well in the dark since the skull-pressure thing kept him from focusing. He wound up hiding away in one of the private treatment rooms, with all the lights off and the windows shut, radiating misery. It was all we could do to take turns trying to make him feel better, and matters were not helped by the way the Hospitaller initially reacted to the situation.

I mean Doc's girlfriend didn't go all PURGE THE UNCLEAN, but after it became obvious what sort of shit was going on, she began studiously ignoring Fumbles. That was especially rough on the little guy, y'know being a telepath and all. Luckily, Doc stepped in, and he got some help from our old diplomat adept too. They sat down with her, and a few hours later she came into Fumbles' room muttering to herself about it being "just another wound suffered in the Emperor's service." Nubby and Twitch were initially distrustful of the change of heart, but she let the more hygenic of the pair stay to observe, and some medically approved skull-cracking and eyelid-stretching later, Fumbles was feeling much better. Anyway, we all hung out in the medbay while Sarge had his incredibly long meeting, and had a quiet sort of post-mission celebration. This primarily consisted of hanging out in Fumbles' darkened room, a little drinking, and the sort of idle bullshitting that all Guardsmen revel in.

Twitch sat next to Fumbles and gave him a blow-by-blow of our mission, with a lot of commentary about what was "really going on" added in. Fumbles mostly just nodded and played with the pair of welding goggles Nubby had acquired for him from somewhere. They were going to need some resizing before he could wear them, but after that he'd be able to leave the room, and wouldn't look any weirder than the rest of us.





Doc, who was on break from Gravis-watching, and Aimy speculated on what Sergeant Rebus and his scouts were doing to pass the time. Doc's ideas were all about hibernation and other boring medical stuff, and Aimy mocked him for his lack of imagination. Her suggestions were definitely more... imaginative, bordering on the heretical even, and Doc hastily changed to subject. Unfortunately he did this by congratulating her on going a whole mission without a facial burn, and on the regrowth of her hair. He managed to duck the bottle she threw at him though.

Nubby and Tink started talking about the various ways we'd come out ahead on the mission. By their reckoning we were up by a few Grav-Chutes, a Power Sword, a Bolter, and a whole

collection of Space Marine toys, not to mention the moderately damaged Stealth Shuttle that was still waiting for us to get around to repairing it. Tink was beginning to speculate on whether Gravis really needed the bottom half of his power armor, and what he could make out of it if he had the time, when Sarge finally returned from his planning session. After automatically flipping the lights on, blinding Fumbles, then hastily turning them back off, Sarge grabbed a seat and told Tink to stop contemplating tech-heresy. All of us watched him as he grabbed a bottle, leaned back, and eyed Tink a little more. In an idle sort of way, Sarge asked us a purely hypothetical question: If Jim had been in the meeting with him, Ol' Bill and Hannah were busy keeping the ship running, and Tink was here, then who was down in the Cells keeping everything running and watching the Zoanthrope?

The only answer he could think of was Fio, which couldn't possibly be right. It'd be colossally idiotic to leave one of our Xenos prisoners, alone and unsupervised, in charge of keeping the other Xenos prisoner from escaping and killing us all. Surely there must be some other explanation, one which he was just too dumb to think of, right? Tink pondered that for a second, then scrambled for the door. Sarge wearily laughed and told him to sit back down.

Once Tink was seated, Sarge looked at each of us and gave us the low-down. As we knew, the Psyker Holding Cells were falling apart, the Zoanthrope was doing bad things every time the stasis field flickered, Sergeant



Gravis was at death's door, and our ship's Astropath had suffered a severe case of exploding-head. We had no choice but to get back into the warp, but we were going to head for the nearest civilized Imperial world first. From there we could order some replacement parts, get a new astropath, call for the Marines' pickup, and hand Gravis over to someone with serious medical facilities.

It was going to be a rough, and we'd have to stand constant guard against warp-shenanigans, but luckily it would only take a week. Just one week of frantic jury-rigging, dealing with whatever the Zoanthrope and the warp could throw at us, and keeping Gravis from melting, then it would all be over.

Honestly, looking back, I have no idea why any of believed it was going to be that easy...

Chapter 13

Interlude: Dewarp

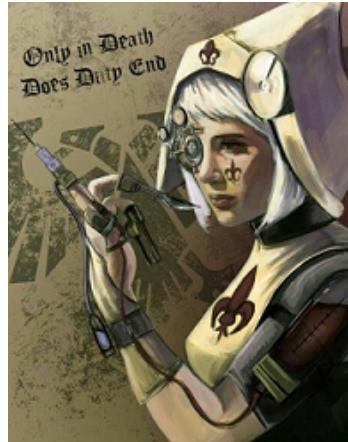
Doc was in his element. Well, actually he was in the Occurrence Border's medbay and up to his elbows in the guts of a very unhappy armsman, but same difference. All around him people were shouting, screaming, and generally running around in a blind panic, but he was the calm little center of the universe. Doc hummed to himself as he dug around, and then let out a shout of triumph as he finally found the foreign object. It looked to be a large metal rivet, and still tingled with traces of the burst of warp-energy which had propelled it. He neatly tossed it into the prayer-seal covered bin marked "Tainted," and began closing everything back up.



As Doc moved on to his next patient he allowed himself a moment of pride. Despite his complete lack of official medical education, he liked to think that he was a master when it came to Meatball Surgery. He shot a glance across the room towards where the chief medical officer, Sister Valerie of the Ordos Hospitaller, was dealing with the non-trivial patients. Their eyes met for a second and Doc smiled as he looked back down to inspect his new patient's severed arm. Then a painfully-shrill screech rose from the waste bins, the lights and gravity both cut out, and a medical cogitator in the back of the medbay began frantically beeping.

Doc automatically turned his shoulder tac-light on, snatched the now-floating severed arm out of the air and instructed his patient to "keep a hand" on it, and drew his sidearm. The minor daemon that clawed out of the medical waste bin, already weakened by the prayer seals, was dispatched with single volley from Doc's las-pistol. That minor annoyance dealt with, he disengaged his mag-boots and launched himself towards the back of the

medbay.



Sergeant Gravis of the Emperor's Scythes Space Marines, or more specifically the upper-half of Sergeant Gravis, twitched as the Tyranid bio-weapon in his veins made another spirited attempt to kill him. The medical cogitator hooked to him requested several types of antidote, which Doc quickly administered.

"We're down to our last vial of Hydroxocobalamin, and he's having nightmares again" reported Doc.

Sister Valerie didn't look up from her patient as she responded. "The warp's a bad place to be comatose, especially this far from the light of the Emperor, and the way that unholy xenos abomination is tearing apart the ship doesn't help. He's not the only one who'll die if we don't return to

normal space soon either."

"I swear honey—"

"Ma'am"

"-Ma'am, Sarge said we'll be reaching the waystation today, then we can request all the aid and supplies we need. Just a little longer and it'll all be over."

As Doc finished stabilizing the Space Marine and made his way back to the table he'd been working at, the medbay's lights reactivated. A second later, there was a clattering crash as the various small items that'd been floating through the air dropped back to the floor, and a meaty thump as Doc's neglected patient was slapped by his own severed arm.

Sister Valerie watched for a second as Doc hastily apologized to the maimed crewman and scrambled under the table for the dropped limb. In a voice too quiet for even her nurses to hear, she muttered, "Emperor... why'd he have to be an optimist?"

↳ The All Guardsmen Party Interlude: Dewarp

Amelia Delorisista Amanita Trigestrata Zeldana Malifee von Humpeding was on the hunt. The creature that had been haunting the aft tainted areas and attacking unwary crewmen and servitors had eluded them for days, but now she had it.

Aimy readied her pulse-rifle as her bait slowly advanced into the disused cargobay and her spotter scanned the area. It was a perfect example of the classic monster-hunting technique, or it would've been if the bait stopped whining.

"I don' see why I aways gos'ta be da bait" whinged Nubby. "I fink it's discra-, err dissema-, err distra-, err unfair. I fink it's unfair."

Aimy didn't respond, but her goggle-clad spotter suggested that it wasn't discrimination: Nubby just needed to stop picking rock every time.

Nubby's complaints rose in volume as he began arguing with Fumbles over the rules of a game older than the Imperium of Man. "It's not right 'ow paper beats rock. Wrappin around it... where's da sense in dat? Still a rock aint? Jus' all wif n stuff."

Things got even louder when Twitch commed in and began explaining the the game was actually a metaphor for the relationship between the Ecclesiarchy, Administratum, and Mechanicus. Eventually, the argument was cut short as Aimy lost her patience. A few inventive, and highly-personal, death-threats later, the team fell back into silence and Nubby "got on with it".

"Oh woe is me, I am poor an' fenceless 'uman wot 'as lost 'is way in dis 'ere big an' spooky cargobay. I sure 'ope dere's not some sor' of ten-ack-ulled warp-mon-strosi'y lurkin down 'ere an' waitin ta eat me."

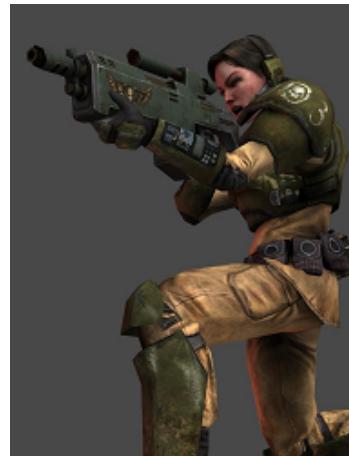
Fumbles peered into a dark corner of the bay as Nubby monologued. He could sense a malevolent presence that just barely qualified as a mind moving closer, and pointed it out to Aimy. The Markswoman sighted her rifle on the corner, and waited for the creature to make its move. "Still not sure what it is Fumbles?" The psyker sheepishly shook his head.

"Well, at least it can't be that smart if it's falling for this" Aimy gestured towards the soliloquizing bait. "Though I gotta say his performance is better than usual. The wig and dress are a nice touch."

Fumbles nodded in agreement, "He says they help him get into character."

"It really says something that I don't find this conversation even remotely weird..." Fumbles just shrugged, and there as a brief silence as Aimy shifted mental gears. "You know, my life was really quite boring before I joined the Inquisition. Mother never let me up on the lines when there was something really interesting to shoot."

Aimy felt a pang of longing that definitely didn't originate from her,



"Sounds nice. Wish I'd had parents." muttered the psyker.

Aimy glanced up from her scope, "You can be really fucking depressing you know."

"Sorry."

"Whatever. You got any idea why this thing isn't coming out? Does it know we're here?"

Fumbles pondered the question before answering, "No, I think it's waiting."

"Waiting for wh-"

Aimy was interrupted by a sudden pain in her head, a panicked scream from Fumbles, and the sudden absence of both light and gravity. In the completely dark cargobay, Nubby's well-honed survival instincts kicked into overdrive as first one, then two, then a dozen chittering screeches rose around him. Before Aimy had even reoriented herself, the be-dressed little trooper, screaming shrilly and propelled by the recoil of his Pulse Carbine, shot past her and slammed into Fumbles.

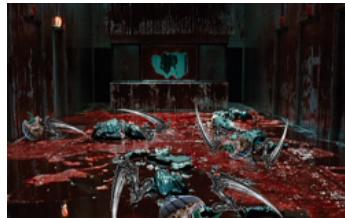
Nubby, dragging the semi-conscious Fumbles with him, started bouncing his way down the corridor with all the speed provided by his his augmetic legs, leaving Aimy struggling to catch up. As she flew, Aimy shined her rifle's tac-light back towards the cargobay and saw the forms crawling along the floor, walls, and ceiling. She started firing her rifle, just for the little bit of extra speed, and screamed "PLAN B!" into her combead.

At the far end of the corridor, Twitch smiled. When the ship's lights reactivated a few minutes later, they revealed a shrapnel-pocked corridor filled with a disgusting cloud of limbs and juices. Twitch re-opened the door the four of them had sheltered behind and surveyed the carnage. As Aimy drifted over to join him at the doorway, Twitch felt something shift and flung himself behind the markswoman. A second later, the gory mess hanging in the corridor dropped out of the air with a horrible splash.

Aimy sputtered and swore, Nubby laughed, and Twitch peeked around his human shield. Sure that the coast was clear, the demolitions trooper crept forward. He poked at the horrible slurry, carefully pulled a large chunk out of the mess, and then started giggling. Nubby took a break from checking Fumbles' health using the tried and true Guard technique of gently kicking him in the ribs while muttering "yous okay?" to ask Twitch what was so funny.

Twitch turned a manic smile on Nubby. "These weren't daemons!"

"I swear, if you try to tell us those were Orks, I will cram your delusional



little head up your ass,” growled Aimy.

Twitch bristled at this. “I don’t ALWAYS say it’s Orks.”

“Yeah you do,” inserted Nubby.

“Well, I’m not saying it’s Orks this time.”

Aimy picked an especially large chunk off her armor. “Good, because if you’ve just covered me with Ork-guts again, I’ll have to kill you.”

“Deaf frets aside, I fought Fumbles ’stablished dat dese were daemons. Ain’ dat right buddy?” Nubby’s metal foot prodded Fumbles again, eliciting a pained groan. “E says yes.”

Twitch responded by yanking Nubby away from the suffering psyker, and shoving the limb he’d acquired into the trooper’s face. Nubby went crosseyed as he stared at the razor-sharp limb, then swore. Aimy came over and swore too.

After a brief silence, Twitch spoke, “We gotta call Sarge.”

“E’s not gonna like dis...” muttered Nubby, “NOT IT!”

“NOT IT!” echoed Twitch.

BLARF added Fumbles.

Aimy glared at them, and keyed Sarge’s channel.

Deep inside the spacefaring pile of scrap known as the Occurrence Border, there is a circular room filled with arcane machinery. In the middle of this room is a bubble of blue light which contains a large xenos that resembles a cross between a snake and a nightmarish fetus. The xenos is a type of potent Tyranid Psyker known as a Zoanthrope, which was captured in a daring Space Marine assisted raid, and is now being transported to an Inquisitorial laboratory for study.



The imprisoned Zoanthrope is being held completely still by a stasis field, but its sheer psychic presence distorts the world around it, and acts as a beacon to the denizens of the warp. The kludged-together Psyker Containment Area is straining to shroud the xenos’ presence from the daemons surrounding the ship, and limit the power of the creature’s mind. Every single sub-system is on the ragged edge of failing, some are sparking, others are smoking, and the Stasis Unit itself is emitting an ominous hum that steadily rises in pitch.

Two men, one in a filthy Guard uniform and the other sporting the robe and augmetics of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and a Tau of the Earth Caste variety are running around in a constant effort to repair the Containment Area’s failing systems. A third man, whose uniform and bearing scream

NCO, is standing directly in front of the Zoanthrope, and holding what appears to be a piece of hull-plating like an oversized shield.

The shieldbearer is Interrogator Greg Sargent, and he is not having a good day.



Sarge tightened his grip on the massive shield as the Stasis Unit's humming reached a painfully high pitch, then went out of the range of human hearing. After a few tense seconds there was deafening *CLANG*, and the blue field around the Zoanthrope disappeared. It was immediately replaced by a corona of green electricity, which gathered in front of the xenos as it turned to face the frantically working Fio. With a scream of effort, Sarge hefted the shield and sprinted across the room, barely managing to intercept the lightning bolt in time.

Without a second of hesitation, the Zoanthrope began gathering another bolt of electricity and twisted around to face the opposite side of the room. Sarge lifted his smoking shield for another sprint, but let it drop back down to the floor as the Stasis Field snapped back into existence. Behind him, the squat Tau scientist complained that Sarge was standing in his light.

At the sound of Sarge grumbling about the "Ungrateful little xenos bastard," Tink looked up from the mess of wires he was digging through.

"Hmm? Oh, nice catch boss, we'd all be dead without you. Truly, you're a master of standing in front of things. Now, since you're just standing there, can you grab me another handful of triplex connectors? Next flicker should be in three minutes, you've got time."

Sarge glared at the techie, but set down his shield and headed off to get the requested parts. On the far side of the room, Chief Enginseer Jim leaned out from behind a glowing blue pylon, and angrily waved a mechadendrite.

"DAMNIT TINK! No more triplex connectors, they anger the machine-spirits, stick to duplex."

Tink scoffed, "Machine spirits my ass, they work FINE! Come on Fio, back me up on this."

The Tau responded without looking up from his work "There's no scientific reason triplex connectors shouldn't work. They're completely compatible with duplex systems, and are, in fact, rated to a much higher capacity."

"See!"

Jim returned to his work with a few mutters about his poor, abused machines, and Sarge delivered the controversial parts. As Sarge hefted his massive shield and got into position, the Stasis Unit began making its ominous humming again and Tink rushed to finish his repairs. With a shout of triumph, he reconnected the final component, slammed the panel shut, and ran over to one of the control panels lining the room.

The mental pressure everyone in the room had been feeling quickly decreased. Sarge let out a sigh of relief, Tink cheered again, and Fio asked if anyone else could smell smoke. A second later the panel Tink had just shut was flung across the room by a small explosion, and the mental pressure returned with painful intensity. From behind his pylon, Jim shouted "I TOLD YOU THEY DON'T LIKE TRIPLEX!"

While the three techies ran around in a panic, Sarge stood still and watched the Stasis Unit. He looked down at his shield, up at the green aura that was gathering around the Zoanthrope despite the temporarily-functional Stasis Field, back down at the shield, and reached a decision. Silently counting to himself, Sarge raised the massive slab of metal over his head.

Sarge didn't wait for the Zoanthrope to make the first move: as the Stasis Field cut out, he flung the heavy shield with all his beefy-noncom strength and dove for cover. There was a *CLANG* followed by a *ZAP*, a *THWAP*, and a massive, crackling *BOOM*.

For a split second the room was lit by a blinding green light, and then everything went dark. Sarge hung in the air at the apex of his jump, and blinked in the pitch darkness. He wondered if he'd finally gotten himself killed, and whether the afterlife truly involved fighting by the Emperor's side, or if Twitch was right about the poker room. Then he crashed into the ceiling and the ringing in his ears faded into Jim screaming at Tink about how he'd caused a ship-wide power outage with his damned triplex connectors.

Since he was apparently still alive, Sarge decided it was a good idea to stay that way and turned on his tac-light. He tried to twist around to face the Zoanthrope, but this turned out to be rather difficult, since the Stasis Unit was now empty. After a brief period of panic, Sarge realized that the lack of green lighting bolts meant that the xenos wasn't currently up for a fight, and began carefully scanning the room.

Remembering the meaty thunk he'd heard after throwing the shield, Sarge aimed his light at the far side of the room. It revealed a horrible form made



of chitin and metal hanging in the entrance of the debris-clogged cell. A closer look revealed it to be the Zoanthrope, except with a partially-melted shield wrapped around its head. Sarge floated over and scientifically poked it with his gun, took its feeble twitching as a good sign, and began hefting the xenos out of the cell and back towards the Stasis Unit.

While Sarge wrangled the Zoanthrope back into place, Tink, Jim, and Fio climbed around the incredibly deep hole that occupied Sarge's former position. From the very bottom, Fio could be heard complaining that whoever had installed the wiring in his section had not been a sept-certified electrician. Jim, who was patching cables slightly higher up, suggested that the person had probably been either drunk, or insane, or both. At the top of the hole, Tink reconnected a group of wires with a few duplex connectors, and nearly wet himself when the tangled mass started sparking and the room's com-terminal chimed.

At the sight of the familiar contact code on the screen, Tink launched himself out of the hole and flew over to the terminal, ran a hand through his filthy hair, straightened his goggles, and oh-so-casually answered the incoming call.

"Heyyyyyy Hannah, what's up baby?"

Sarge heard the enraged screeching from across the room, but couldn't make out any worlds aside from "stupid" and "insane".

Tink continued undeterred, "Why would you assume I had anything to do with this? Is it because you're always thinking about me?"

This time the screeching was accompanied by a short arc of electricity. Cursing and clutching his burned ear, Tink floated away from the terminal, and then crashed to the ground next to the hole as gravity and light returned to the cells. After a feeble attempt to climb to his feet, the techie gave up, leaned over the side of the hole, and groaned "Hey Jim, your sexier counterpart is being all bitchy. You can talk to her."

While Jim climbed out of the hole and began giving a damage report to Hannah, Sarge pushed the Zoanthrope back into the network of grav-plates above the Stasis Unit. Once he was certain the now-metal-faced Xenos wasn't going anywhere, Sarge dragged Tink up off the floor and over to the non-



functional Stasis Unit. A few kicks and death threats convinced the techie that getting the Stasis Field back up was more important than eavesdropping on Jim's conversation, and the two guardsmen got to work.

Right as the last fixes were being made, Sarge's combead came to life with the sound of Doc's slightly-panicked voice. "Hey Sarge, the Captain's been trying to reach you over the ship's comms, he says we're there."

With a rare smile, Sarge relayed the good news to the combead-less Tink, who practically collapsed with relief and leaned towards Sarge's headset "Oh thank the Emperor, Doc tell him we'll be ready in five minutes."

On the far side of the combead, Doc's voice grew a little panicked, "Umm, I don't think you've got five minutes, I think he meant we're THERE there, as in we're dewarping RIGHT NOW." Sarge winced as Tink ripped the combead off his head and began screaming into it.

"WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR WARNING DOC? I WAS PROMISED A FIFTEEN MINUTE WARNING!"

"How should I know?" responded Doc, "I'm just passing the word along. All I know is that the Captain said your room's comm is busy and asked me try and reach you."

"That's totally not my fault." Tink shot a glare towards the room's com terminal where Jim was chattering about catastrophic system damage with Hannah, and then returned his attention to the combead. "And why didn't he just call us like you did?"

Doc's tone shifted from panicked to annoyed. "Maybe because you helped Twitch encrypt all of our combeads day before yesterday."

"That was just to keep the cogboys from spying on us, and he said he'd share the code with everyone who needed it!"

There was a brief pause as Doc digested this, then the medic exploded. "YOU thought HE'D share the code? This is TWITCH we're talking about you idiot, OF COURSE HE DIDN'T SHARE IT WITH ANYONE!"

Tink began putting together a suitably scathing response, but was interrupted as Sarge wrenched the combead back and spun him around to face the psi-suppressors. "Talking time over, fixing time now! MOVE IT TROOPER!"

Once he was sure Tink was back on task, Sarge turned his attention to Jim. Using his refined oratory and leadership skills, he convinced the techpriest that repairing the cells' various delicate systems before the stress



of de-warping blew them into shrapnel took priority over helping Hannah with the ship's power problems. Which is to say: Sarge reached over Jim's shoulder and terminated his call, then picked the hapless Enginseer up by his crimson robes and flung him towards Tink with a shout of "FIX STUFF BEFORE IT EXPLODES!"

As two techies scrambled, and Fio asked what was going on and if anyone could help him out of the hole, Sarge entered the bridge's contact code into the comm terminal. Unfortunately, his plan to yell at the Captain for attempting to get them all killed ran into problems when the ex-navy officer answered the call with a bellow of "WHY IS MY NAVIGATOR UNCONSCIOUS, SARGE?"

Back in the aft of the ship, Aimy's combead nearly deafened her as it finally connected to Sarge's. After a few attempts to make herself heard over her boss' shouting match, she removed the earpiece and turned to her companions. "I think he's busy, apparently we're all about to die."



Nubby, seated on Fumbles' curled up form, paused in rummaging through a medkit that appeared to be filled with nothing but lho sticks and suspiciously-unlabeled bags of pills. "Huh... neat. Anyone wanna smoke?" Behind him Twitch reacted a little more strongly, leaping to his feet with his rifle in one hand and grasping for some something inside his jacket with the other.

"I knew it! Have we been boarded? Who's coordinating the defence? Should I blow the ship's plasma reactor before—" His tirade was cut off as Nubby yanked the detonator out of his hand and began dancing backwards down the hall with it.

Aimy listened a little longer, then called after the pair, "No boarders, but he's arguing with the Captain about whether to stay in the warp and risk the Navigator getting possessed, or dewarp and potentially blow up the Cells."

Nubby paused for a second, "Speakin as someone oo's nowhere near da Cells, I vote for dat one." Twitch seized on Nubby's distraction and made another grab for the detonator, but Nubby managed to spin away and crammed it down between the two wads of dirty socks holding up the front of his dress. This did not deter Twitch even slightly. Aimy gagged a little and Fumbles laughed weakly as Twitch tackled Nubby to the ground and began rooting around for the detonator.

As Twitch finally found his prize and withdrew it (along with a handful of crusty socks), a deep vibration came up through the floor and the vox sys-

tem began blaring the completely-incomprehensible automated de-warping warning. Aimy raised her combead back to her ear, Twitch and Nubby both cheered, Fumbles began whimpering again, and back in the gore-filled hallway something moved.

Tink and Jim worked feverishly. In the background the automated de-warp warning instructed all hands to hold still and pray to the Emperor in thirty-six different variations of Gothic (not to mention Jantine Battle-Cant and what the resident xenologist insisted was Hrud), until Sarge used his carbine to deactivate the nearest speaker. The noise of the de-warp warning was replaced by the pops of overloading psi-suppressors, Fio's demands to be told what was happening, and the sound of Sarge yelling at the Captain to slow down. Inside the inactive Stasis Unit, unnoticed by everyone, the Zoanthrope began twitching.



Doc threw himself across the medbay as Sergeant Gravis went into double-cardiac arrest. While he struggled to fight the increasingly active tyranid bio-weapon, the deep vibration of the ship's Warp Drive grew stronger and stronger.

Aimy, Twitch, and Nubby all flinched as a sensation similar to fiberglass being rubbed on exposed nerves shot through their heads, and automatically turned to face Fumbles. Aimy got as far as "THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU NOW—" before she noticed the way the gore in the corridor had begun to bubble and froth. With remarkable coordination, the three troopers seized Fumbles and started retreating down the now-wildly-shaking corridor. Then, right as they reached the next door and turned back to see what they were running from, the vibrations stopped with a colossal, tooth-rattling *CLANG*.

Twitch swore, Nubby screamed, Fumbles started twitching madly, and Aimy looked around in confusion. She got as far as "What the f—" before all the gore, including the portion soaking her armor, suddenly ran together and reformed into familiar insectoid shapes in a sort of reverse-explosion. All three troopers immediately opened fire.

As the *CLANG* reverberated through the medbay, Doc went pale. Sister Valerie met his gaze from across the room and began to ask "What the f-", but her question was interrupted as the ragged edge of Gravis' torso inexplicably burst into green and black flames. Sister Valerie abandoned her current patient and sprinted towards Gravis as Doc screamed "THIS IS NOT HOW POISON IS SUPPOSED WORK!", and grabbed a fire extinguisher

off the wall.



As the echoes of the *CLANG* died away, Tink leaned out of the cover he had jumped into when the psi-suppressor he'd been working on exploded. "What. The FUCK. Was THAT?" asked the shaken techie. Jim didn't respond, being rather busy rocking back and forth and whimpering to himself, and Fio rather crossly asked how someone stuck in a hole was supposed to know anything about what was going on.

Sarge raised his Carbine with a mutter of "Oh not this shit again," and began scanning the room. Behind him the comm terminal chimed as another person joined the call, and the husky old voice of Ol' Bill temporarily overrode the Captain's demands for information. "Hey guys, know you're busy screamin at each other, but we've got something big and psychic holdin us in the warp.

Either of you seen any major daemons running around? Or is this just your damned bug again Sarge?"

Sarge focused on the twitching Zoanthrope and took a step forward, "I think it might be the..." The xenos psyker snapped its metal-covered face towards him, surrounded itself with a halo of green and black electricity, and a tide of insects began pouring out of every crack in the room. "DEFINITELY THE BUG!" shouted Sarge.



Sarge dropped his carbine onto its sling and sprinted for the Stasis Unit, crushing insects under his boots as he ran. For a second the room around him seemed to stretch and warp, but it stopped as Jim snapped out of his funk and plunged his mechadendrites into one of the psi-suppressors. Several small bolts of green and black electricity grounded on Sarge as he finally neared the Stasis Unit, but he ignored them and triumphantly flipped the big switch to ON. Nothing happened. Sarge frantically flipped the switch up and down, and screamed "I THOUGHT WE FIXED THIS, TINK!"

Tink slammed into the unit next to him, slapped his hand away then set the switch to on, and responded with forced calm "Had to replace the capacitors to fix the flicker, they need to char-AGHHHH." Tink's calm tone evaporated as the began slapping at the insects that had just crawled up his

pants leg. Sarge sprang to help, then noticed the way the insects were flowing towards the open maintenance panel on the Stasis Unit. He immediately began employing his big, stompy boots in an effort to stem the tide, screaming at Tink as he did so. "WHY DIDN'T WE TURN IT BACK ON AFTER WE FIXED IT?"

"BECAUSE WE'RE IDIOTS SARGE!" responded the techie as his frantic dancing finally dislodged the last bug and he joined Sarge in stomping the on-rushing swarm. Even with two sets of boots, it was obviously a losing battle, but being Guardsmen, neither of them commented on this. They continued in their desperate attempt to Hold The Line, as the tide surrounded them and began climbing both their legs and the Stasis Unit.

Across the room, Jim noticed their predicament and, in a fit of genius, scrambled over to Fio's hole. He very calmly asked the Tau to redirect extra power from the damaged suppressors to the Stasis Unit. There was a flash of blue light behind Sarge and Tink, and both of them collapsed as the universe twisted and what felt like a million barbed legs ripped across their minds. For the second time that day Sarge wondered if he'd been killed, but as the empty ringing in his head was replaced by what felt like the universe's worst hangover, he decided that he was probably still alive. He just wished he wasn't.

Moving with the extreme care of someone with a near-terminal headache, Sarge sat up and looked around the Cells. Surprisingly, things looked more-or-less stable. The bugs were gone, though his legs felt like they'd been worked over with a wire brush, and a certain feeling in his gut told him the Occurrence Border had finally exited the warp. It seemed that without the strain of traveling through that hellish realm, the few still-functional psi-suppressors were holding up fine.

Well, as far as he could tell they were fine... at least none of them were on fire, and whatever Tink had done to the Stasis Unit had fixed that damned flicker. Sarge eyed the stationary Zoanthrope and its creepy new metal-covered face, then flipped it off and turned his attention to his team.

Tink was curled up nearby, clutching at his head and alternating between crying and swearing. Jim was already back on his feet and doing techpriest things, and Fio had finally hauled himself out of the hole in the floor. The annoying little xenos looked rather confused about what had happened, but had just enough self preservation instinct to go help Jim instead of bothering Sarge or Tink with questions. Sarge decided that the situation was stable enough for the time being, and carefully lowered himself back down to the



floor, only to be jerked back upright as a something drove a red-hot poker into his head via his ear. He frantically reduced the volume on his combead until the voice coming through it changed from a horrible daemonic screech made of pure agony, to Doc's rather worried tone.

"You alive Sarge?"

"Sorta..."

Sarge flinched as Aimy's considerably louder voice joined the conversation. "What the hell happened down there?"

"Tink broke something." muttered Sarge with a halfhearted glare at the prone techie.

Tink stopped moaning about his head, and dug through his gear pouches for his own combead, whining to himself as he searched. "S'not my fault, stupid machine spirits being little bitches. No bloody scientific reason..."

Sarge returned his attention to his combead and summoned up as much professionalism as he could manage. "Everyone still alive? Report."

"I'm fine, and Gravis is still alive, if a little crispy around the edges." replied Doc.

Aimy spoke next. "We're all okay, but the thing hunting people in the aft tainted area turned out to be a swarm of gaunts."

Sarge winced. "Oh, shit."

Aimy began to continue, but Twitch's voice, which sounded dangerously excited to Sarge's experienced ear, overrode her. "I was ready for that though, and we blew them into chunky salsa, except—" There was a brief scuffle in the background as Aimy explained to Twitch that interrupting was very rude.

After a few seconds, Nubby awkwardly cleared his throat and continued the story. "Cept afta dat, all da bits n stuff stahted runnin togever an' dey got back up."

"Oh... shit..."

Aimy's voice returned. "But then we dewarped and they all sort of evaporated. Just POOF, gone. Blood, guts, and everything. So we figure—" Once again Twitch interrupted, "that the nids have formed an alliance with chaos! An unstoppable tide of Daemonids will sweep across the sector and- OW!"

Sarge sighed and rubbed his face as Tink and Nubby both snickered.

"We figure it was just some sort of warp-thingy. So, umm, I guess everything is fine. I mean Fumbles is unconscious, again, but otherwise everything



is fine." finished Aimy, sounding rather annoyed over how her story had been spoiled.

Sarge ran through the whole disjointed report in his head. After a little pondering he held up his hand and began ticking off his fingers. "Okay, I guess we dewarped just in time to avoid that problem, so that's sorted. And it looks like the anti-psyker stuff is holding up fine now that we're out of the warp. And Gravis is still mostly alive right?"

"Right. Mostly." confirmed Doc.

Sarge looked down at his closed hand in surprise, ran through the list again in his head, then shrugged to himself. "So, uh, I guess we made it. I mean, here we are at waystation whatever. All that's left to do is requisition a few parts, drop Gravis off with the local medicae, get a new astropath, and call the Scythes. Then we spend a few leisurely weeks getting everything fixed up, and take a nice safe route back to wherever Oak's lab is." he paused for a second, not quite believing what he was saying, then continued "So yeah, we win, good job people..."

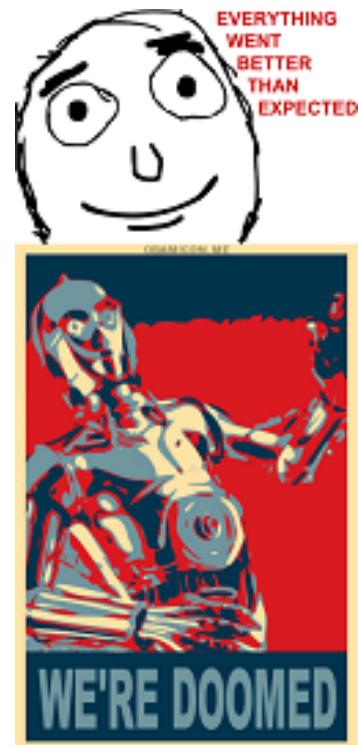
There were a few seconds of shocked disbelief, and then Sarge ripped off his combead as it exploded with cheers. When the volume finally returned to a safe level, he put it back on just in time to catch Doc say "You know, that trip went a lot easier than I expected."

"Oh shut up, you've been hiding in the medbay and sleeping in a nice warm bed every night," responded Tink in his most petulant voice. "I can't remember the last time I got to sleep for more than ten minutes."

Doc continued undeterred, "Okay, yeah, it was a bad week for some of us, I'll admit that, but it wasn't what I'd call 'hellish'. And 'hellish' is sort of the standard for our missions. I mean, when you look at it in comparison to some of our other assignments, this went amazingly well."

The was met with a thoughtful silence, which then slowly congealed as the squad followed the observation out to its logical conclusion. Eventually Twitch broke the uncomfortable silence. "Ohhhh we are sooo screwed. This one's going to be really, really bad."

"What's going to be bad?" asked Aimy, revealing her inexperience.





"Everything."

"What?"

"It's like da third law of conservation of da fingy." translated Nubby, "Ya know 'Fer everyfing what appens, deres like, a completely dis-proportionate re-action'."

Sarge sighed, and translated the translation.
"If your attack is going really well, it's an ambush."

"Wait, wait, are you guys seriously suggesting that nothing can possibly go right? That ANYTHING good that happens to us is just a setup for something especially horrible?"

"Yeah." "Yep!" "That's right." "Uh-huh." "It's been scientifically proven" responded the rest of the squad in unison.

"So what? There's some sort of all-powerful cosmic entity conspiring to make our lives as dangerous and miserable as possible for its own sick amusement?"

Nubby nodded, "Somfin like dat, or just, ya know, da uni-verse itself."

"I think it's the Orks" muttered Twitch.

Aimy ran the last few months through her mind. "That's... that's... surprisingly believable. Well not the Ork part, that's just retarded, but it makes sense." She paused, and applied this theory to the current situation. "Yeah... now that we've finally reached it, I can totally see this waystation being full of... of..." she trailed off.

"Chaos worshipping psychic mutants," suggested Twitch, "waiting to capture hapless visitors and overwrite their minds with copies of their cult leader's. Or Orks. Or Orks disguised as chaos worship—" Twitch was interrupted as Sarge, recognizing an unproductive line of thought, cleared his throat and rather wearily addressed his troops.

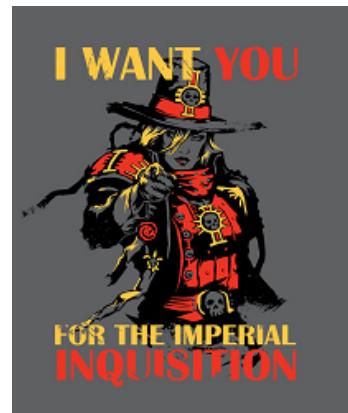
"Paranoia aside, we're just here for a nice, simple supply run. Everyone put together your shopping lists, and grab some rest while the Captain takes care of docking. And let's, PLEASE, just try to get through this without anyone blowing up the station, or being arrested, or assaulting someone, or committing tech-heresy, or... whatever it is you do to screw everything up Doc."

Chapter 14

Tyranid Delivery

Sarge glared out the window at the massive bulk of Way Station Alumentum Primaris. When he'd started the meeting it'd been a speck of light floating next to a marble-sized gas giant, but over the last hour it had grown into something that looked like a sort of jagged spinning top, and now it was a looming pile of gothic architecture studded with hangars, umbilicals, and a few massive docking arms. At this distance it looked a lot like a hive that had been lifted into space, which was rather disturbing since, after a lot of arguing between the Captain, Ol' Bill, and the Dockmaster, the Occurrence Border had twisted to be perpendicular to the station. Sarge half expected to see people dropping out of the windows and falling into space.

After a few more seconds of pointless glowering, Sarge turned back to the face the five men sitting around the briefing room's table and the com-terminal connected to the medbay and engineering. No one was paying him much attention: the three Adepts were clustered around a dataslate displaying information about the Station, the Captain and his harried-looking Quartermaster were arguing about cargo value again, Hannah had wandered off to deal with some crisis half an hour ago, and the Doc's terminal had lost its vid feed after someone spilled bodily fluids on it. There wasn't really much point in prolonging the meeting, everything had already been decided, and this was just a simple shopping trip, not a combat mission. Still though, Sarge felt an obscure urge to lay the entire plan down one last time. Just for the record. Just in case the rampant paranoia that'd seized his team's



imaginings was actually correct, and this was all going to fall apart into the worst mess since the Siege of Terra.

Sarge slapped the table with his palm, winced as the sound shot through his still-aching head, and cleared his throat. "Okay, one last time, from the top."



"A representative of the local government—" began Sarge, only to be interrupted by one of the Adepts.

"It's not actually a government per se." explained the elderly Diplomacy Adept. "It's a Triumvirate of the Administratum, Astra Telepathica, and Shipmasters' Union, which has split all aspects of running the station into separate jurisdictions, and operates each according to their own organization's internal rules. We're meeting with a representative of the Astra Telepathica first, due to the ruling of 245.M39 that incoming information takes priority over—"

Sarge cleared his throat, and made the universal gesture for Get On With It.

"Yes, yes, you don't actually care, I know, but you must understand that they'll find it tremendously insulting if you refer to them as a Government."

Sarge acknowledge the Adept's point with an annoyed little wave. "That's why you're coming along to do most of the talking, while Jim and I wait until it's time to talk shop." The elderly Diplomat let out a little frustrated sigh, and leaned back in his seat. Sarge watched him for a few seconds, then continued his briefing. "As I was saying, we'll meet the representative and he'll take us up to talk about sending a message to the Scythes, getting a replacement Astropath, and requisitioning parts for the Cells and medical aid for Gravis."

There was a brief pause as Sarge mentally reviewed his chore list one last time before continuing. "Now, I'm going to be making it clear that this is all on Inquisitorial authority, so there shouldn't be much resistance, but since we're going to be staying here for a while, I'd rather not make any enemies by being too heavy handed with our demands." The Adepts all nodded in agreement, but the Captain snorted in disgust. Sarge turned to face him and his nervous Quartermaster. "Which is why we will be acquiring fuel and all the mundane replacement parts for the ship the normal way, unless you fall short that is."

The Captain made a sour face. "It's not right for us to have to pay out of

our own budget when we're operating openly like this. The Administratum's entire bloody purpose is to furnish us with whatever supplies we need." he grumbled. Sarge just stared at the ex-navy officer until the man leaned back in his chair and assumed a more businesslike tone. "Assuming FAIR market value," the Captain paused and shot a glare at the Quartermaster, who winced, "we picked up enough cargo during our tour of the border worlds to cover everything we need."

"Good." said Sarge, and turned to the Xenologist Adept. "That just leaves the more exotic parts Tink and Fio say they need for the Cells, which you've assured me will NOT be in stock, **ESPECIALLY** if it's the Inquisition asking."

The Xenologist held the dataslate up between himself and Sarge like a shield. "The only reason that some of the things on this list aren't class five forbidden xeno-tech, is because the Mechanicus has formally denied their existence."

Sarge rubbed his aching head. "Thank you for that reminder, but we really do need those parts. Luckily, Nubby says—" he paused as everyone in the room groaned, then started again. "Nubby says he Knows A Guy. So he, Tink, and Aimy are going to go do some trading of their own."

The Quartermaster hesitantly raised his hand.
"Trading what?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to know," replied Sarge stoically. "So long as he gets the stuff we need, and doesn't start a shooting war with the local underworld or get arrested again, I'll be happy."

"That'll be a first." muttered the Captain, Sarge ignored him.

"Finally, Doc and Sister Valerie will be taking Gravis and any other critical patients to the Station's Medbay." Sarge turned to face the blank com-terminal and raised his voice. "Everything all ready to go Doc?" He was answered by a series of clanging crashes and a few indistinct curses. Sarge tensed at the sounds of mayhem coming through the comm, then relaxed as the crashes ended in a slamming door and a distant, but all-to-familiar, cackling laugh. He shook his head wearily, and leaned on the terminal's call button until the curses resolved themselves into Doc's rather harried voice.

"I'm here, damnit! Everything is fine, Gravis is all ready to go, and the rest of the patients are stable enough to be left here for a few hours."





Sarge began to reply, but was cut off as the Captain interrupted him. "What about my Navigator, and your Psyker for that matter? Seemed like the bug really did a number on them."

"The Navigator woke up half an hour ago and scampered off back to his sanctum. Said he'd prefer to treat his own injuries." Replied Doc, raising his voice a little. Sarge barely made out someone in the background muttering about the "ungrateful damned mutant," but didn't comment on it

as Doc continued. "As for Fumbles, I got his scrapes and bruises patched up, but I'm not sure if he suffered any mental damage from whatever the Zoanthrope did. I'd like to have the locals take a look at him, but Nubby... sprang him."

Sarge sighed. "Right, I'll have a chat with him after this." He closed the comm connection, and dialed in a new contact code. While the terminal chimed, he turned back to the rest of the room. "I think that covers everything, so if there aren't any questions," the Quartermaster began to raise his hand, but the Captain pulled it back down, "then we'll all meet in Bay 38A in..." Sarge faced the terminal as the channel opened, "ETA Bill?"

"Almost got the docking sorted, it'll be about twenty—" there was a horrible crunching sound, and somewhere in the background a pressurization alarm started to wail, "ehh, call it forty minutes."

The All Guardsmen Party: Tyranid Delivery Experts

So no shit, there we were in Bay 38A, getting ready for our supply run, when Sarge walked in wearing the Evil Goon Uniform Alfred had fitted him with so long ago, a floor-length coat covered with skulls and buckles, and one of those stupid "Look at me I'm in the Inquisition" hats. We all froze for a few seconds, then Tink snickered, which was enough to set the rest of us off. We laughed ourselves sick while Sarge stood there and glared at us, I mean what else could we do? It was the most ridiculous thing we'd ever seen: he looked like a complete and utter pillock, and you could tell from his expression that he knew it too, the poor bastard. Hell, even the old Diplomat was laughing, and he'd been the one who'd forced

Sarge to put the costume on.

Eventually Sarge got tired of just standing there while we laughed, and



stalked over to where Nubby was rolling on the floor. After a few kicks and a little shaking had calmed the diminutive trooper down, there was a short discussion in which Nubby explained that Fumbles didn't need medical attention: he just "ad a lil warpy 'angover" which Nubby had taken care of himself. Sarge reminded Nubby what would happen if he'd given the psyker Narcotics again, and the greasy little trooper hastily explained that he'd just given Fumbles a few "tingies" of Guard-strong Recaff (you know, the sort you eat with a spoon, because it can't really be poured) and sent the psyker off to have a lie-down while the stuff kicked in. Upon further inquiry, it was revealed that "tingies" did not mean spoon-fulls or cups, and that Fumbles' resting place was one of the large crates on Nubby's team's cargo-pallet. Sarge guessed it was the crate that was vibrating.

It took a lot of wheedling from Nubby, Tink, and even Aimy, but eventually Sarge accepted that Fumbles was somehow critical to their shopping expedition. And when I say "somehow critical," I mean that not even Nubby knew what he wanted the psyker for: when pressed he just shrugged and muttered about "genral in-surance." Anyway, Sarge accepted, mostly because Aimy was going along to make sure no one did anything overly retarded. When Doc arrived, and finished laughing, Sarge negotiated a temporary truce between him and Nubby in exchange for a promise to bring Fumbles to the Station's medbay as soon as he'd finished doing... whatever.

Speaking of Doc, he and Sister Valerie had an entire little medical convoy set up in the cargobay, waiting for the door to open. The whole array of kludged-together medical machinery keeping Sergeant Gravis alive had been put on wheels and strapped into something that looked like a sort of heretical mobile-torture device. It was bloody massive: between the air-tight freezer case containing the Space Marine's lower-half, the various crates full of his gear and the medical supplies they might need during the short trip, and the generator which kept everything powered, the whole thing weighed more than some tanks. It took three cargo servitors just to push it, and a pair of Valerie's minions to keep everything running while she sat there and handled each new medical emergency the Tyranid bio-weapon threw at her.

After Doc had wandered back over to his girlfriend, Tink pointed out that, really, the medic should've been thanking them for keeping Fumbles away from that huge pile of delicate machinery. Everyone else quietly agreed.





Now a clever observer, or at least one capable of counting to six, might wonder where Twitch was in this frenzy of preparation; especially since his relentless paranoia was half the reason that we were putting combat-mission levels of prep into a simple shopping trip. To put it simply, the demolitions trooper hadn't been invited aboard the station, and was holed up in a closet. This wasn't because he'd been having one of his moments and had threatened to destroy the entire station before whatever horrors it held devoured us all, at least not entirely. It was because we decided that we'd be damned if we were going to leave that

bug unsupervised, and then come back to find out that it'd escaped, or been stolen, or turned into a reality-devouring portal to the warp.

Since Sarge still held that leaving our semi-captive Tau scientist in charge of our other xenos prisoner was a horrendously stupid idea, and Twitch was the only member of the squad that didn't have a critical role in the shopping trip, he'd been put on guard duty. Twitch being Twitch, he'd accepted his mission, but decided that Sarge's orders to just sit in the Cells and watch the Zoanthrope were inadequate: they left the rest of the ship exposed to infiltration.

Initially Twitch had ran around the ship putting trip-mines on every airlock he could find, but that led to a rather heated argument with Hannah. Eventually, with Jim's help as a mediator, a compromise was reached, and Twitch traded his mines for fifty servo-skulls with detpacks strapped to them. Of course, the one problem with this arrangement, aside from the obvious, was that Twitch lacked any way to control the skulls. Luckily, he knew someone who could, and probably had nothing better to do.

So that's why Twitch, covered with detonators, was perched on a stool in a small, dark, cogitator-filled room, looking over the shoulder of our increasingly-nervous Cogitator Adept, as an army of suicide-skulls patrolled the ship.

The Occurrence Border managed to dock with the station a mere three hours after the first attempt, which was a new record according to Ol' Bill, and the bay doors creaked open to revealed a rather angry-looking welcoming party. The pale Scribe and slightly-singed Techpriest at the head of the party looked around the bay for a few seconds, probably boggling at its bizarre layout or all the exposed wiring, then demanded to see the "Captain of this so-called vessel." Sarge stepped forward, his Inquisitorial costume flapping dramatically in the slight breeze caused by the various leaks in the bay's void-

seal, and flanked by the Diplomat and Jim. The Scribe couldn't actually get paler, but he did turn a faint shade of green at seeing Sarge and hastily began apologizing.

The discussion that followed was highly amusing for us, both because the Scribe was terrified out of his mind, and because Sarge just stood there and looked stuffed. After he waved the Diplomat and Jim forward, he spent the whole time doing an impression of an especially grumpy exhibit in a wax museum. The only member of the welcoming party that wasn't unnerved by this was the damaged techpriest, but Jim chirped something in binary at his fellow cogboy, and the priest wandered off without saying a word. Between his terror and the fact that his only ally had just abandoned him, the Scribe was putty in our Diplomacy Adept's hands. All the little fees and fines concerning our docking were waved, the Station Security troopers were dismissed, and after one look at Sergeant Gravis, Doc's medical convoy was rushed off to the Station's main medbay.

Sarge, Jim, and the Diplomat were led out of the bay by the Scribe, bypassing the scanner-filled checkpoint that separated the docking bay from the rest of the station. The rest of us followed a conspicuously-slow Security guard to a side-door, which he sort of accidentally held open while picking up a bag of money that must've fallen out of his pocket.

Our various trips through the Station went smoothly, for the most part, but left us all feeling a little nervous.

Sarge's group was led towards the Telepathica's headquarters by the nervous scribe along the Station's main corridors, and since the Diplomat was handling all the tedious smalltalk, he devoted his attention to scanning his surroundings. He didn't spot any overt threats, but there seemed to be more Security officers around than were necessary, and it was obvious that the crowds around him were agitated about something. The most worrying thing he noticed was that his Inquisitorial costume didn't seem to be inspiring as much terrified silence as one would expect, instead it seemed to be causing



a wave of excited chatter, and he could've sworn someone actually yelled "Woo! Inquisition!", which was worrying to say the least.

Those of us escorting the pallet of totally-not-contraband drew a lot less attention than Sarge. The corridors we'd been directed down by the corrupt security guard were occupied by the usual mix of laborers, drunken voidsmen on leave, and assorted scum that you'll find on any trading station. Between our insignia-less carapace armor, slightly-holey anti-scan cloaks, and the pallet of unlabeled crates, we fit right in.

Nubby led the way, consulting a dataslate with directions to reach the Guy whom he Knew, while Aimy rather-grumpily pushed the pallet, and Tink lounged on Fumbles' box and played with his drone controller. The techie had de-skulled and stealthed Spot 2.0 at the first opportunity, and was happily inspecting the Station's infrastructure using the drone's sophisticated scanners and, occasionally, its cutting tools. Aimy ignored his wanton destruction of Station-property in the name of SCIENCE, but thumped him when he started ramming servo-skulls out of the air for kicks. Fumbles just sat in his box, radiating jittery excitement and hoping there was going to be a bathroom break soon.

Down in the bowels of the station we noticed the same agitated atmosphere as Sarge noticed above, except with less Station Security and more burly mercs walking the street. Not being constrained by a need to appear all Inquisitorial, we pulled ourselves out of traffic and just began asking random people what was up. We quickly determined that either: a daemon-filled space-hulk had entered the system, a hive fleet was about to attack, all the astropaths in the Telepathica had

been possessed by daemons, the Emperor's divine judgement for something or other was imminent, or random drunks and dockworkers were a terrible source of information. The closest thing to useful information we got was from a bored merc, who said that the "Pathica called a meeting of the Big Three" and advised Nubby to bugger off before he got a boot up the ass.

No one thought much of this information when we command it to the rest of the team, except for Twitch, who got far too excited when he heard all the doomsday predictions, and Doc. The medic had arrived at the Station's Medbay without incident, but said he wasn't surprised the the Astra Telepathica had called a meeting, since the Medbay was absolutely packed with astropaths. He'd actually been told by the head medicae that Sergeant Gravis would have to wait his turn, and they'd been shuffled off into a storage bay since no real rooms were free. Sister Valerie was not pleased with



this treatment, but Doc was looking on the bright side, and began looting antidotes and other medical supplies with the sort of enthusiasm one would usually expect from Nubby.

Since a whole pile of injured Astropaths is generally considered to be a bad sign when visiting a space station, Sarge made slightly-grumpier faces at the old Diplomat until he got the hint and started asking the Scribe pointed, but still very diplomatic, questions. Unfortunately, the Scribe just fell back on the Chain of Command, and promised his boss would fill us in.

When Sarge entered the headquarters of the local branch of the Astra Telepathica, the first thing he noticed was the blood. In his professional opinion, the density and pattern were more akin to a what you'd find in a field aid station as opposed to an ambush site. This was not a very useful observation, but he still felt rather proud: it was definitely the sort of thing an Inquisitorial agent was supposed to notice. The Scribe led Sarge and his team through the bloody lobby, down some slightly-less-gory hallways, and finally to a blood-free meeting room occupied by what Sarge initially assumed was a transcription servitor. Sarge barely managed to hide his shock when the pile of augmetics, paper, and data feeds lumbered upright and introduced himself as the Prefect of the local division of the Adeptus Administratum.

The Diplomacy Adept did his thing, introducing Sarge and Jim, and expressing surprise that we were meeting the head of the local Administratum as opposed to someone from the Telepathica. The Prefect wheezily explained that the Choir-Master was currently indisposed, but had called a meeting to discuss the "incident", and would arrive, along with the President of the Shipmasters' Union, as soon he was able. There was a lot of diplo-speak about how glad the Prefectus was that Sarge would be able to participate in the meeting and how in the meantime he'd be able to assist us with anything we needed for our own mission. The whole group, nervous Telepathica Scribe included, filed off into a small attached suite and began going through the list of parts and services we needed. Sarge allowed himself a brief moment of hope that we'd be able to get everything we need before getting bogged down in whatever the locals' problem was, then just leave if it looked too hairy.

Poor, optimistic Sarge.





proffered dataslate.

The Prefect seemed quite happy that everything was going to be above-board for once, saying that after the code was verified by the Telepathica's databases, there'd be no trouble getting the materials or anything else on the list. Sarge cheered up at this, and was considering asking to add the fuel bill to the list, when the Prefect added "except for the Astropathic messages." With that, the discussion finally turned to the "incident".

According the Prefect, roughly half a day ago some sort of psychic attack had hit the station. Every Astropath who had been working in the Choir-Chambers had suffered a severe case of exploding-head, and those who hadn't been on-duty had suffered everything from nosebleeds, to seizures, to complete mental breakdowns. It wasn't just limited to the Astropaths of the Telepathica either, several of the ships in system had lost their astropaths, and other varieties of sanctioned psykers had been affected too, albeit to a lesser degree.

At a wave from the Prefect, the Telepathica Scribe, who'd been doing his best to avoid the attention of the big scary Inquisition people, spoke up. He said that some of the more lucid Astropaths had started piecing together details about the psychic attack. It had originated in the outer system and had probably come from a ship heading to or from the station. The popular theory was that some terminally greedy Rogue Trader was hauling a heretical artifact, or massively powerful psyker, or possibly even a bound daemon into the Imperium to sell to a cult or something, and it'd lashed out at the large concentration of psykers on Station for some reason.

Getting official approval for Sergeant Gravis' medical treatment was easy, and the Prefect seemed confident in the local Medicae's ability to fully treat Tyranid bio-weapon that'd infected him. Likewise, most of the stuff on Jim's part list was accepted without comment. The first hiccup was when we got to some of the really powerful psi-resistant materials: the Prefect claimed they were in stock, but couldn't be released without authorization from the sub-sector capital or the official use of an Inquisitorial seal. He claimed that due to the "incident", it would be a long and difficult process to get authorization, but he saw no other option if we wanted to be discreet. Sarge pondered this for all of three seconds, decided discretion was overrated anyway, pulled out his Interrogator's Rosette, and plugged it into a

It was at this point that Sarge began to feel really uneasy. Not because he suspected that there was a Daemon or heretical Rogue Trader running around the system, but because he suspected there wasn't. With a rising sense of dread, our heroic leader asked the Scribe if any of the surviving astropaths had been able to describe what the attack had felt like. When he heard the words "a million barbed legs ripping across their minds" Sarge's composure cracked. He leaned back, covered his face with his hands, and quietly cursed to himself until the Prefect asked what the problem was. In fit of retardation, Interrogator Greg Sargent answered him truthfully.

The silence that filled the room when Sarge told the two Stationers that it had been OUR cargo that'd killed half the Astropaths in the system was incredibly unpleasant. The weary apology that Jim added after a few minutes just made it worse.

Eventually the horrible silence was broken by the sound of the Prefect's augmetics going *DING* and spitting out a long strip of paper. Sarge caught a glimpse of it and thought it looked liked a sort of receipt or budget report, and the last number had a lot of digits. The Prefect reviewed the paper for a few seconds, then tucked it away, hauled himself upright, and said he'd return after the search had been called off.

As the Prefect left, he handed the dataslate Sarge had plugged his rosette into to the trans-fixed Scribe. He told the flunkey to go run the code, THEN go fetch Choir-Master. Hopefully the knowledge that the whole thing was going to be an Official Inquisitorial incident instead of a cloak and dagger charade would keep the man calm. When the two Stationers had left the suite, the old Diplomacy Adept pulled out a small device which emitted a sort of low buzzing sound, and rounded on Sarge and Jim.

The lecture Sarge and Jim got was scathing and brought back painful childhood memories involving unfinished homework assignments and failed tests. It started with the importance of never admitting fault and maintaining at least the appearance of competence, and then shifted into a general lecture on how to react to a diplomatic crisis. Sarge bore the lecture stoically, automatically standing at attention and adopting the blank expression employed by NCOs across the galaxy. His only movement during the whole



thing was to put his combead on mute when the rest of us figured out what was going on and started snickering. Jim just turned his ears off after the first minute.

After what felt to Sarge like half a millennium, the old Diplomat's lecture concluded with a bitter comment about how, on top of everything else, the Scribe had run into the Choir-Master on his way to verify our identity. Sarge blinked as the Diplomat detailed how the head Astropath was too angry to even form coherent sentences, and had either punched a hole through a wall or severely broken his hand. After a thoughtful pause, Sarge asked the Adept how exactly he knew this, and got a pithy reply about diplomacy being as much about listening as talking.

It took Sarge and Jim a little while to figure out what was going on, mostly because Jim had to be brought back up to speed after he'd turned his hearing back on, but they worked it out eventually. The old Diplomacy Adept admitted that he'd placed bugs on both the Scribe and the Prefect. Also, he'd planted a few discrete data up-links too, so assuming our Cogitor Adept hadn't been driven to complete distraction by Twitch, we probably had access to all unencrypted comm traffic on the station.

It turned out that he was correct: when asked, the Cogitor Adept said he had the network cracked completely open. Additionally, he'd be able to get into the security cameras if someone could PLEASE convince Twitch to just sit down and watch the skulls' feeds instead of badgering him about changing their patrol routes every ten seconds. Sarge, who was somewhat grumpy about not being informed of all the spy stuff beforehand, told Twitch to Sit Down and Shut Up, and demanded to be kept up to date on what the Prefect and Choir-Master were doing.

So Sarge sat there listening to reports. Learning that the Choir-Master had taken the Scribe's dataslate and had gone off to verifying our Inquisitorial credentials personally, and the Prefect was still in the process of standing down the Station's defenders with the aid of the recently arrived President of the Shipmasters' Union. Meanwhile, Doc had finished looting everything of value from the storage bay that Gravis' had been shuffled into, and had taken over the Space Marine's treatment while Sister Valerie went to "have a word" with the Station's head Medicae about how long the wait had been. Doc made her promise not to start a fight, or refer to the wounded Astropaths as "warp-tainted mutants".



Back on the Occurrence Border, Twitch had grumpily followed Sarge's order and was watching as the Cogitator Adept began pulling in vid feeds from the Station. Soon every screen in the room was filled, either by a feed from the Station, or one from the suicide skulls, and for a brief moment Twitch felt like he'd become a god, between the vid feeds from the Station and the ones from his suicide skulls, he could see EVERYTHING.

Twitch could see the corridors around the dock, some of them filled with busy people, others sealed and empty. He could see crewmen hauling goods in and out of the docking bay, and the Captain arguing over price with a harassed-looking Stationer. He could see Fio working diligently in the Psyker Holding Cells and trying to ignore the way the Zoanthrope's metal-plated face seemed to follow him despite the stasis field. He could even see Nubby, Tink, and Aimy as they checked various seedy bars for their black market contact. For the first time in years, Twitch's paranoia faded away as it was replaced by an overwhelming feeling of Control.

It lasted all of fifteen seconds, and then something inside the jumble of warped and twisted mental gears that made up Twitch's mind went *PING*. Twitch reeled as his mind automatically began cataloguing every single suspicious object, which is to say every man, woman, child, animal, servitor, and overlarge barrel on the Station. He wound up sprinting from the room, leaving the confused, but relieved, Cogitator Adept to monitor everything in peace, while he went to go put as many explosives as possible between himself and the horrible mass of potential threats that was the Station's population.

A few minutes later, the rest of us were informed by the Cogitator Adept that Twitch had begun booby trapping every locked door, air vent, and maintenance hatch in the docking bay. We decided that, all in all, it was better just to let him do it, and warn the Stationers to only use the main entrance.

While Twitch, Doc, and Sarge did their respective things, the rest of us finally reached the last stop on our tour of just about every shitty bar in the Station. Thankfully, despite how long it'd taken to figure out which venue was "the place with the curly thing on its sign, y'know the one across from the food place that serves the stuff with the sauce" the search had gone relatively smoothly.

"Smoothly" in this case meaning that: no one asked to inspect our boxes, Nubby was never CAUGHT with his hand in someone's pocket, Tink kept



his mouth shut the whole time and didn't trip any alarms while poking around with his drone, nobody saw Fumbles when we let him out to use the bathroom, or found out that what happened to said bathroom had anything to do with us, and Aimy only lightly-pummeled the bouncer who'd referred to her as "sister", and later admitted that the man probably hadn't meant it as a comment about her hair.



We found the Guy Who Nubby Knew at the back of the bar, sitting on an extra-high stool. Aimy, who was a Markswoman after all, didn't even blink at the realization our black market contact was a Ratling, but Tink did a doubletake. As Nubby sidled up to the minuscule marketeer, Tink eyed the pair and asked, with his usual lack of tact, if there was some sort of height limit on being a thieving bastard. Thankfully, the half-dozen other Ratlings in the bar were too focused on Nubby to notice the comment. Aimy told Tink to stick with the pallet and try to keep his mouth shut, and watched as Nubby "did 'is fing".

Now, Nubby's heritage had been a matter of much speculation back in the Guard. Not in the sense of who his parents were, because even he admitted figuring that out was a lost cause, but as to what horrible combination of Human, Abhuman, Farm Animal, and possibly Gretchin genetics had produced such a "unique" individual. Determining what to put the trooper's species down as had been a trial for several munitorum clerks, and eventually the issue had to be sorted out by the Commissar. He'd decided that, for lack of any better fit, and because the Generian 99th was not officially a mixed-species unit, Nubby was Human. He'd even issued the disgusting little trooper an official card saying so, just to avoid the discussion coming up again.

The point is, that Nubby, much to the relief of the entire race, was NOT a Ratling. Despite (or possibly because of) this, Nubby had always gotten on very well with the little buggers, and this case was no exception. After a bit of amiable chatter, the Marketeer and a few of his half-pint bodyguards led us off to a discreet warehouse to talk business.

At the door all of us, except for Nubby, who they were understandably reluctant to frisk, were subjected to a very thorough security check. Our anti-scan cloaks, knives, las-pistols, holdout weapons, and the home-made shockstick which Tink insisted on calling his "Power Wrench" were temporarily put aside, and we were each asked to supply a little bit of blood. They put the blood into some sort of scanner, which they claimed was check-

ing to see if we were psykers, genestealers, polymorphine users, or anything else which might compromise the deal. We passed of course, and were allowed to keep our combeads, electronics, and even our weapons, since Nubby was a "known factor." Also, because the warehouse was monitored by a dozen remote controlled las-turrets.



Once inside the black market warehouse, which looked exactly like a normal one, except for the large number of armed men in the front office and fact that every single crate was labelled excessively mundane things, we got down to business. At Nubby's signal, we started by opening a few of our crates of "recreational materials" and "military surplus", to convey that we were rather serious, and then handed over our shopping list. The change in the Marketeer's demeanor as he reached the more esoteric items on our list was remarkable. He went from stereotypical jovial Ratling to serious, and slightly nervous, businessman in seconds, and ordered his retinue and the warehouse's workers out. Once the room was clear, what had to be the most vicious bout of haggling in the history of the Imperium started.

Despite possessing the charisma, and odor, of a week-dead grox on a hot day, Nubby's deep familiarity with all aspects of criminality and his ability to wheedle, whine, importune, and blatantly lie had always served



- That's more like it. 10?! Are you trying to insult me?! Me, with a poor dying grandmother?! 10?!

him well when it came to back-alley negotiations. The Ratling wasn't a slouch when it came to haggling either, and responded with an equal amount of cunning viciousness. Aimy and Tink were both taken aback by the ferocity of the argument, which seemed barely short of homicidal, but as it continued without either Nubby or the Marketeer trying to kill each other, the two troopers adjusted to the situation and even tried to lend Nubby a hand in his negotiations when they thought they understood his plan. They failed abysmally, of course.

Between their actually-insulting insults, miscalculated threats, and lack of knowledge as to how the value of goods changed after they'd fallen off the back of a shuttle, Aimy and Tink put such a dent in Nubby's progress that negotiations had to be temporarily paused.

Once Tink and Aimy had been relegated to helping the sole cargo-servitor that had remained in the room fetch boxes, the haggling resumed. Crate after crate of narcotics, dubiously acquired valuables, and those well made and untraceable small-arms the Inquisition issues were exchanged for xenos-made circuits, tools, and materials.

At first it seemed like our supply of illicit goods was going to run short before we had everything on Tink and Fio's list, but as the negotiations continued, the Marketeer became more and more relaxed and generous with his exchanges. A careful observer might have noticed that the change in the Ratling's attitude seemed linked to how much time he spent within twenty meters of the cargo-pallet, and how Nubby, Aimy, and Tink tended to stay away from said pallet.



This was, of course, what Nubby had wanted Fumbles for. They'd pulled this sort of con quite a few times, though usually not with Fumbles was encased in a shipping crate and hopped up on a downright unhealthy amount of stimulants. The psyker wasn't directly messing with the Marketeer's mind, that'd be too obvious to any observers as well as the Marketeer himself when he walked out of range, and honestly we didn't trust Fumbles to do that sort of thing for any length of time without something exploding. Instead the little psyker was just sitting there, concentrating on thinking calm and happy thoughts, and letting his aura do the rest.

With Fumbles' help we made it down to the last item on our shopping list with two crates, not counting Fumbles' and our other backup crate, still

unopened. Unfortunately, that last item was a sticking point: not even under the effects of the feel-good aura, and with a big box of only-slightly-warp-tainted Servitor Control Units up for offer, the Ratling refused to even admit he knew what Wraithbone was, much less part with a big ol' chunk of it.

Nubby eyed Tink, who implied via gesture that we REALLY needed a piece of Wraithbone (despite the fact that he actually had no idea what Fio wanted it for). With a pained mutter about how he'd been intending to save it for his retirement, Nubby cracked open our last non-emergency crate. Aimy swore, Tink let out a jealous sigh, and the Marketeer's jaw dropped halfway to the floor as Nubby drew out a Master-crafted Powersword larger than he was and bearing a crossed-scythe sigil on its crossguard. In the silence that followed, Nubby, teetering under the weight of the sword, asked the Ratling if he was SURE he didn't have any Wraithbone in stock.

Nearly a kilometer away, Sarge's NCO senses tingled, and he was seized by the feeling that something had just happened that he was going to be VERY angry about. He didn't have any time to dwell on this feeling though, because right then the Cogitator Adept commed to say that a huge amount of traffic had just hit the Station's net. He didn't mention what was actually being said though, and when Sarge asked, the Cogitator Adept responded with a bunch of techno-jargon, so Sarge told Jim to handle it and turned to the Diplomacy Adept, who'd gone all fidgety.

When Sarge asked what the problem was, the old Diplomat revealed that the Choir-Master had finally re-entered the range of his bugs, and was absolutely enraged with the Prefect, as well as the Scribe and the President of the Shipmaster's Union. So far all the yelling had been about talking to us without him being present and other unilateral decisions, but the Adept was sure there was some other cause, and promised to keep Sarge up to date.

Back down in the warehouse, the miniature Marketeer had recovered from his shock and was inspecting the quality of the Powersword while Nubby chattered at him from just outside Fumbles' radius. Behind them, Aimy and Tink dug out the small crate labeled "Talc-10kg" the Ratling had directed



them to, and complained at eachother. Aimy was in the middle of telling Tink, who was too busy whining about how much he'd wanted to dissasemble that sword to even pretended to listen, that Sarge was going to blame HER for this, when she noticed the Ratling freeze. After a quick kick to his shin, Tink noticed too, checked the screen of his drone controller, and gave Aimy a thumbs up.



As Aimy and Tink came over to see what the problem was, Nubby finally realized that the Marketeer wasn't listening to his list of things he'd accept as "change" for Gravis' Powersword and the Control Units (y'know, since they were obviously worth WAY more than a spooky chunk of rock). He sidled up to the frozen Marketeer and tapped him on the shoulder. The Ratling spun around, still gripping the sword, and Nubby jumped back with a little scream as the movement triggered a VERY painful memory. This in turn set off the Ratling, who held the sword in front of him like a shield, and hastily began backing up and gibbering about needing to use the bathroom.

We all watched as our black-market contact ran out of the room and slammed the door behind him. Aimy let out a pained sigh, and asked Nubby if there was any chance the Ratling would be coming back, or could at least be convinced to return the Powersword before trying to kill us. Nubby just cackled, and began divvying out our big-boy guns from one of the remaining boxes, while Fumbles burst from the other, began shouting about how we were all going to die, and immediately faceplanted as his still-asleep legs betrayed him.

Aimy caught her rifle and casually headshot the warehouse's cargo servitor, then sighed again and activated her combead.

Sarge's response to the news that Nubby's black-market deal was about to turn into a shootout was nowhere near as sarcastic as Aimy had anticipated. This was because her report was interrupted by Jim and the Cogitator Adept discovering that the source of all the chatter on the Station's net was a MASSIVE bounty that'd just been placed on all crewmembers of the Occurrence Border by the Astra Telepathica. This worrying news was interrupted in turn by the Diplomacy Adept's report that the Choir-Master had just declared our Inquisitorial credentials to be completely falsified, and was in the process of convincing the others Station leaders to sic everything they had on us.

That last piece of bad news came as a surprise, because we knew that Sarge's Rosette was genuine, and there was no way it could have just malfunctioned either: Inquisitorial Rosettes and the Verification Databases are built to last. That meant this wasn't some sort of accident: the Choir Master had obviously come unhinged and was out for vengeance.

I mean it was sort of understandable, he'd just had his brain half-fried by a psychic blast which had also killed a whole bunch of the closest thing he had to a family, and the whole thing was technically our fault... Justifications aside though, after he ran our credentials he must have decided that he didn't like the answer, or he might not have even bothered checking at all, and now he was lying to the other Station leaders about how we were vile heretics impersonating Inquisition Agents. They believed him too, by the time we'd figured out via the bugs what was happening, he had the Prefect and the President completely convinced.

There was obviously no chance of talking the Stationers around, all Sarge and the Diplomat could do was sit there and listen as they argued about the best way to round all of us up and "bring us to justice". The situation was FUBAR, to say the least, and all this news hit Sarge at once.

Now this is where some men might have gone into shock, or exploded in irrational anger, or sunk into despair, but not Sarge. He allowed himself half a second of ironic satisfaction at the way his cynicism had, once again, been justified, then removed that stupid Inquisitorial hat and started belting out orders. Admittedly, those orders were to just do what we would've done anyway, but as someone or other said, "Never give an order that won't be obeyed."

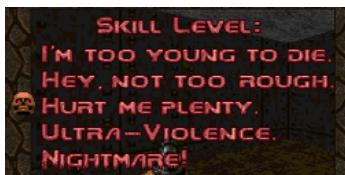
So, as a reminder, we were split up into four groups. Well, five if you count the Captain, but when Sarge commed him to report the situation and coordinate things, the ex-navy Officer just told Sarge to do something anatomically improbable, and said he'd meet us back on the ship. Judging by the amount of gunfire and screaming in the background, he had things under control. Anyway, Doc was stuck in the Station Security-filled medbay in the mid-north part of the Station, Aimy and company were in a warehouse on



the lower levels of the eastern side of the station, Twitch and the Occurrence Border were at the west-most docking bay, and Sarge was almost at the top of the central spire.

Our options were limited, we were split up, ass-deep in increasingly hostile territory, and, in Sarge and Doc's cases, practically unarmed. We did have a ship-full of armsmen, plus a few nearly-functional lance batteries, but the Stationers knew that and were already deploying men in that direction. We were far too outnumbered, outgunned, and (though it pains me to admit it) ethical to start an all-out war. Plus, it's a bad idea to blow holes in a space station while you're still on it. They'd have to sit back and hold down the fort while we did our best impression of a bunch of Catachans on their way back to base after a night on the town.

It was time to fall back on that old Guard classic: Regroup, Retreat, Repeat.



would head for the ship. While they traversed the station, Twitch, along with the suicide skulls and any armsmen he could find, would keep the locals out of the docking bay and the Occurrence Border.

As an afterthought, Sarge asked Twitch to try to keep things as non-lethal as possible: on the off chance that we'd have an opportunity to try and smooth things out, it'd be nice not to have a four-digit body count to deal with. He may have given Aimy a similar order, but some freak comm-interference (which sounded a lot like Nubby and Fumbles blowing on their combeads) scrambled the message.

Everyone except Doc liked the plan, but it did have one problem: it didn't cover how Sarge would get out of the Astra Telepathica headquarters. We pointed this out, and were told to shut up, do our jobs, and let Sarge take care of himself. The rest of us interpreted this as a clear sign that Sarge had no idea what he was going to do, but since we didn't have any suggestions more useful than sarcastic comments about "handle it," we left him to it.

Once the rest of us had started moving, Sarge muted his combead, swore a lot, then took stock of the situation. He was in a small office and bathroom suite with only one exit, which lead to a large conference room. Said room

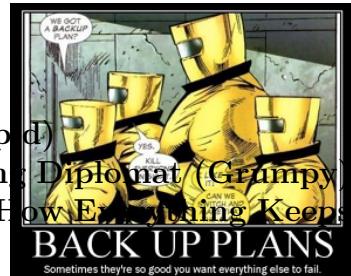
The plan, if you could call it that, called for Doc, who was exposed, surrounded, had no idea where Sister Valerie was, and still had his hands quite full with Gravis, to sit tight and hope that no one remembered which closet he'd been shuffled into. Aimy, Tink, Nubby, and Fumbles, would load up all the loot they could carry (as if they needed telling), make their way to the medbay to collect Doc, and then the whole group

was probably occupied by a few of the Choir Master's bodyguards, who would be watching to make sure he didn't go anywhere while the Station's leaders plotted their attack. His assets consisted of:

- ↳ 1 Laspistol (Standard Inquisition Issue)
- ↳ 4 Laspistol Power Packs (Charged)
- ↳ 1 Combat Knife (Notched)
- ↳ 1 Roll of Duct Tape (Olive Green)
- ↳ 1 Combead (Muted)
- ↳ 1 Inquisitorial Costume, with Hat (Stupid)
- ↳ 1 Three Hundred Year Old, Bug-Planting Diplomat (Grumpy)
- ↳ 1 Jim (Whimpering in a Corner About How Everything Keeps Happening to Him)

This was not, of course, anywhere near enough to take on the small army of armsmen, gun servants, and very-angry psykers inhabiting the Astra Telepathica, not to mention the Station Security forces outside. In fact, by Sarge's reckoning, it probably wasn't even enough to take the six to eight body-guards that the Choir Master had brought with him, but the Diplomacy Adept disagreed. The aging Diplomat drew an ornate laspistol from his robes, and suggested taking the Station's leadership hostage while they were still only a few rooms away. When Sarge just stared at him, he explained that with sufficient "leverage" it'd be easy to re-open negotiations and smooth everything over. After a few more seconds of staring, Sarge decided that nothing the old Diplomat did or said would surprise him anymore, and made "Fight through a bunch of heavily armed men and start a volatile hostage situation" Plan B.

In a desperate attempt to come up with a Plan A, Sarge reactivated his combead and asked the Cogitator Adept to try to find the spire's blueprints, and then began checking if the suite's air vents were large enough to crawl through. Jim, who was huddled in morose little ball, told Sarge not to bother: it would be incredibly stupid to make air vents large enough to fit a person. Sarge tried to defend his idea by pointing out that the Occurrence Border was littered with such vents, but Jim patiently explained that this was only because the Occurrence Border was an incredibly stupid ship.





Sarge relented, but in the silence that followed, the Cogitator Adept pointed out that there were a few maintenance shafts on the Telepathica's blueprints that could be crawled though, if Sarge could open them that is. Jim attempted to shoot this idea down as well, explaining that such shafts would be heavily monitored by the local Mechanicus, who'd report our movements to the Station government. Sarge had grown rather cross with Jim by this point, and angrily told the Engineer to either DO SOMETHING about that, or help think up a better idea.

Jim went quiet at that, then got really thoughtful look, and went over and jacked himself into the suite's comm terminal. He didn't respond when asked what he was doing, so Sarge assumed it was something important, and decided to focus on keeping the suite secure until Jim finished whatever it was.



Way down in the black market warehouse, Aimy and Tink put the finishing touches on the cargo pallet. Said pallet looked nothing like the one that had left the Occurrence Border: for one thing it was much fuller than it used to be, the stack of crates on it was nearly three meters tall, and they were held in place by dozens of straps and tarps. Because this was far more weight than the pallet could handle, or anyone wanted to push around, a few grav-plates had been scrounged from the warehouse by Nubby, and more or less randomly slapped on. Finally, the treaded bottom half the warehouse's cargo servitor had been fastened on as an incredibly grisly external motor. The thing looked horrible, with a coat of red paint and a few stubbers you could pass it off as an Ork Trakk, but it handled surprisingly well.

The only interruption during the whole loading and modification process had been about a minute after the Marketeer had fled, when the las-turrets in the ceiling had suddenly swiveled to track us, and then went still as the EMP grenades Spot 2.0 had placed on them went off. There'd been no other attempts to kill us, partially because Tink had used his heavily-modified plasma gun to weld the warehouse's doors shut, but mostly because of Fumbles. The hyped up psyker spent the whole time jittering back in forth in front of the main entrance, emanating all sorts of mental unpleasantness at

anyone who got near it. He claimed that after the third time the Ratlings had lost their nerve, they'd decided that, since they had all the warehouse's exits covered, they could spare the time to call in a few teams of disposable bigguns to tackle the scary guardsmen for them. The major flaw in their plan was that we had the aforementioned heavily-modified plasma gun, and no intention of leaving via the doors.

After a quick call to the Cogitator adept to pinpoint a hallway below us, Tink set his plasma gun to cut, and added an exit ramp to the black market warehouse. He did a very good job of it too, managing to pick a section that didn't have any water or sewage pipes and was long enough for the ramp to come down a nice, gentle twenty degrees. Honestly Tink did such a good job that the Ratlings should have paid us for adding the exit ramp, it was real professional work, and we made sure to point that out in the note.

We left a note for the Marketeer because, honestly, we felt a little bad about how things had turned out. We really hadn't intended to rip off the anyone. I mean sure, we'd snuck in a psyker, a stealth drone, and enough weapons to kill anyone who argued with us, but that was just reasonable precautions. We'd had every intention of playing things straight with them... or at least only moderately crooked. The point is, we understood that their attempt to betray us was because of the whole Telepathica thing, not something personal, and Nubby really wanted to keep doing buisness with them after this was all cleared up.

So while Tink worked, Nubby put together a little note explaining how there were no hard feelings, and that we were only taking a reasonable "seveny-free percen: trying ta kill us pen-all-tee". It should be noted that this rather precise percentage wasn't some arcane black-market custom, it was just the amount of stuff we were able to fit onto the pallet. Anyway, the penalty took the form a few of the things that Jim had been intending to get from the Administratum, plus a few of our own crates. At Aimy's insistence, these did not include the damned, literally in this case, Servitor Control Units or any of the other stuff Nubby had kept in the Cogtainer-crater room. Those could be someone else's problem.

When Tink was finished, we taped the note to what was left of the cargo-servitor, gathered up Fumbles and got the hell out of there.

Our trip through the station was shockingly swift, stealthy, and professional. At least for certain values of "stealthy" and "professional", but there's no debating the "swift" part, or the "shocking" for that matter. Since our



dismembered-servitor propulsion system was capable of pushing the loot pallet at speeds best described as "unsafe", we piled onto it and sped through the corridors like... Well, like a bunch of drunken guardsmen on leave.

Thanks to the maps provided by the Cogitator Adept, the scouting abilities of Spot the Wonder Drone, and a plasma-gun-enabled disregard for inconveniently placed doors and walls, we took a very direct and underpopulated route to the medbay. That's not to say that we didn't run into anyone on our trip, but thanks to Spot and Fumbles, we generally saw them before they saw us.



We managed to avoid or sneak by a few potential witnesses, as well as some Mercs and Security officers. Others were handled by sucker-punches and the application of Tink's not-actually-a-power-weapon Power Wrench. When that wasn't an option, we had Fumbles cloak us, or edit a few memories, though sometimes this didn't work either, and a more efficient approach was called for. Violence was only our last resort mind you, it's not like we were some sort of high speed murder-barge shooting down the Station's corridors with no regard for collateral damage, innocent lives, or speed limits. At least not most of the time.

Anyway, if you disregard maimings, psychic trauma, property damage, and other little things like that, our expedition was practically bloodless. Which is to say that there were DEFINITELY under 10 deaths, and most of those were Mercs and Bounty Hunters, and everyone knows they don't really count. Oh, and the maintenance worker that got ran over by the loot-pallet really should've known to look both ways before entering such a long and obstruction-free corridor, and had probably been drunk anyway.

Despite the incredible speed of the loot-pallet, we reached the medbay considerably behind Station Security. This was hardly surprising though: they'd had several teams guarding the place since it was currently home to half the Station's surviving Astropaths. Luckily, Doc was a big boy who could look after himself, and he had kept the rest of us up to date on his situation while we travelled.

Doc's initial situation had been about as bad as Sarge's: the Stationers knew he was in the medbay, he had nothing but his sidearm, and there was no way he could get Gravis out without being noticed. Some of us had suggested leaving the torso-fied Space Marine behind and hoping the Stationers treated him, but Doc wouldn't have it. So Doc was stuck in a medbay filled with angry Station Security goons; luckily, it was a BIG medbay, with lots of

hallways, rooms, and people running around doing stuff that was much more important than helping Station Security. Doc was fairly confident it would take a while for them to find him, especially since he'd plastered the storage room's door with biohazard and quarantine stickers.

Really the only problem Doc had with his situation, was that Sister Valerie still hadn't come back. He wasn't too worried, since anyone who attacked a Sister Hospitaller in the middle of a packed medical facility would suddenly find themselves in the middle of lynch mob. It was still a bad situation though: she really needed to be in the loop on the whole "the head of the local Telepathica is nuts, so we're leaving" thing. After cursing at himself for a while and promising that NEXT TIME he'd give her a combead, Doc sent his two assisting nurses, who were practically indistinguishable for the Stationer medical staff, out to find Valerie while he took care of Gravis and the life support machinery himself.

A few minutes later, the first nurse came back with two Station Security guards in tow, Doc was not amused.

The only reason Doc didn't immediately panic and do something stupid, was that Gravis chose that exact moment to try and die again. The nurse ran over to assist, and Doc began barking orders at, for lack of anyone else, the two Security officers. Now Doc may not have been a REAL doctor, but he'd gotten quite good at keeping Sergeant Gravis alive over the last few weeks, and that medical confidence infused his voice with doctorly gravitas. The two Security officers stood there in shock for a second, and then, compelled by the voice of medical authority and the sight of an honest-to-the-Emperor Space Marine (well, half of one) lying on the table, they lowered their weapons and began helping too.

Now in an ideal galaxy, after they helped him save Gravis, Doc would've sent the two Security goons off on some pointless errand, and they would've spent hours running around looking for a cans of headlight fluid or elbow grease before remembering that they were supposed to be arresting him. What actually happened though, was that halfway through the procedure, a whole mob of people burst into the storage room. Only three of the intruders



were Security grunts, the rest consisted of the other nurse, Sister Valerie, the Station's head medicae, and a very-angry looking man who turned out to be the head of the medbay Security detachment.

The room was immediately filled with yelling, as the Security Commander started chewing out his men for swabbing the traitorous heretic's brow instead of arresting him, and the two men tried to defend their actions. At the back of the group one of the newly arrived goons began relaying a report to headquarters, another called for backup from the other search parties. The third goon was stuck trying to placate the head medicae and Sister Valerie, who were angrily demanding to know what all this talk of heretics and arresting was about.

After a half a minute of trying to get information out of the low-level Security officer, Sister Valerie turned to the irate Commander, and tapped him on the shoulder. The Commander, who was still busy shouting at the men who'd been helping Doc, responded with a rather rude remark, then ignored her. This was what we in the Guard call a "Tactical Error". With a little huff of annoyance, Sister Valerie jammed an injector into the Security Commander's neck, and stalked past him with her nurse in tow. Behind

her, the Commander rocked from side to side, then crumpled to the floor. In the silence that followed, Sister Valerie shooed Doc away from Gravis, and said she'd take care of the Space Marine while Doc dealt with "all this silliness".

Doc turned around and found himself facing a very shocked head medicae, and three Security officers who didn't quite have their weapons raised, but were obviously very angry. He briefly evaluated his chances of talking his way out of the situation, decided they were rather low, and raised the turkey-baster sized metal syringe full of fluid he'd just drained from Sergeant Gravis' Oolitic Kidney in the least-threatening way he could manage. Then, in a surprisingly swift motion, Doc jammed the syringe's plunger down, and hosed all three security troopers with Tyranid biotoxin.

The results were not pretty. None of the Security officers had their face-plates lowered, and Doc managed to nail two of them right in the mouth. They were the lucky ones: it only took them a few seconds to die, the third officer got hit in the eyes, and took nearly a minute. Sister Valerie looked up disapprovingly at the screaming, and pointed out that what Doc had just done was both distracting and terribly unhygienic. Doc stammered an apology, both to the Sister and to the three dead Security officers, then turned to



the two officers who'd been assisting him, and were now backed as far away from him and his syringe as possible.

After a few seconds of thought on the ethical and tactical problems raised by the whole hostage thing, Doc told the two terrified Station Security officers to collect their unconscious commander, as well as the catatonic-with-fear head medicae, and get the hell out. Then, at Sister Valerie's insistence, he also shoved the three now-melting corpses out into the hallway. As an afterthought, he collected the dead officers' shot-guns and ammo, set up a firing position using the sliding door and the sturdiest crate he could find, and thanked the Emperor that their storage room was at the end of a corridor.

It should be noted, just for posterity, that Doc did NOT actually stop to check what was in the crate he used for his barricade. That really wasn't his fault though: he was very busy with defending the room, it was an innocent mistake, and the Tribunal DID clear him in the end.

Anyway, as Doc worked, he did his best to bring Sister Valerie up to speed. She did not find the news that the Astropaths had betrayed us surprising, and recommended purging them all in holy fire before we left. Doc made that agreeing, but noncommittal sound which comes naturally to all boyfriends, and skipped ahead to the part where they needed to pack everything back up and hold out until backup arrived. Since by this point the Security reinforcements had arrived and needed to be continually discouraged from advancing down the corridor, Doc was put on barricade duty, while Sister Valerie and her minions handled the packing and keeping Gravis alive.

For the most part, between his entrenched position, the natural killzone, and his large supply of shotgun ammo, Doc didn't have that much trouble holding off Station security. It fact it wasn't even what you could really call "holding off", it was mostly a matter of popping a shot off whenever someone peeked around the corner at the end of the hallway and shooting down the odd servo-skull. The Security officers that had been guarding the medbay weren't die hard soldiers, they were just a police force, and their willingness to die gloriously for their station was rather lacking. Especially after some them tried to rush Doc using a makeshift boarding shield, and got pegged with a home-made tox grenade (really just a glass jar filled with more Tyranid biotoxin). Seeing half a dozen of your more gung-ho comrades die screaming and MELTING can really sap a man's enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, this happy state of affairs didn't quite last long enough. Right as Aimy's team was drawing close to medbay, and had switched from



blitz to stealth mode, the Stationers found their spines and launched another serious attack. Or to be more precise, they found a pair of gun servitors. We all heard Doc start swearing over the comms as the servitors opened up with a pair of heavy stubbers each, and started shambling up the hallway while something like a dozen Security goons followed a few meters behind.



Doc made a good showing by all accounts, but the odds were stacked too high against him, and he was quickly forced to abandon his firing slit. As the servitors drew into close range, he took a gamble and used his last tox grenade. He got a bullet in the arm for his trouble, but at least it was AFTER he threw the grenade. The jar of Tyranid biotoxin hit it's mark, and quickly turned both servitors' fleshy bits into mush. Unfortunately, as the saying goes "If the enemy is in range, so are you", and several of the Security troopers had brought concussion grenades.

The entire barrage of grenades went off directly in front of the door to the storage room. The shockwave bent the door inward, ragdolled Doc across the storage room, and left him pinned under the heavy crate he'd been using as a barricade. He was pretty definitely out of the fight at that point, but luckily, Sister Valerie was there to rescue his sorry ass.

Now this is where things get a little fuzzy, because Doc was concussed, mostly deaf, bleeding both internally and externally, and is the very definition of a biased witness where his girlfriend is concerned. According to him, she calmly instructed her minions to finish packing, pulled a crate off the mobile medical suite, and kneeled down in front of it. Then, head bowed in prayer, she extracted Sergeant Gravis' Astartes Mark Vb Godwyn Pattern Bolter, and started glowing with the Divine Light of the Emperor.

We know this next part was bullshit, because Sister Valerie couldn't carry a tune with a bloody wheelbarrow, and had actually been banned, very politely mind you, from participating in the choir during the Occurrence Border's morning services. But Doc insisted that as she rose to her feet surrounded by a halo of divine light, and started singing a battle-hymn so divinely beautiful that it was painful. Then, a-singin' and a-glowin' like a bloody angel, she walked over to the door, and began mowing down wave after wave of Security goons with Gravis' bolter.

Now, we saw that hallway afterwards, and there definitely weren't enough bodies to constitute even a single wave, but we couldn't deny that she sure as hell shot the place to shit. She must have put at least three magazines

of Astartes-sized bolt rounds down that hallway, though "down" really isn't the right word: the vast majority of the bolt-craters we could see were along the corridor's walls, ceiling, floor, and somehow even the door behind her. She had about as much control over that weapon as a toddler trying to walk a fenrisian wolf.



Lack of actual aiming ability aside though, Sister Valerie's counter attack got the job done. The sight of a tall blond bombshell incoherently screaming a Sororitas Battle Hymn, and firing what amounted to a fully automatic rocket launcher with all the accuracy and discipline of an enraged Ork was more than the Station Security troopers could handle. They ran for it, and when she kept shooting, they ran some more; if the medbay hadn't already been evacuated by the head medicae it would have been a lethal stampede, but as it was, the whole thing was just comical. The retreat ended with the whole cowardly lot sitting in the lobby, yelling at each other, and trying to explain the situation to their superiors and the newly-arrived reinforcements.

By this point those of us who'd been in the warehouse had navigated into an unoccupied maintenance corridor adjacent to the lobby, and were performing recon using Spot 2.0 and Fumbles. Seeing the idiots run out



like there was a bloodthirster on their heels struck as hilarious, and it got even better when they told the reinforcements what had happened: in their terrified little minds Doc had grown into some sort of Nurglite mega-cultist.

We caught phrases like "What sort of hell plague melts BONES?", "turned a sister of battle into a daemonhost", and "came here to resurrect his Plague Marine master". It was good stuff, really lightened our moods, and on a more practical note, the horror stories had completely drained the Security troopers' enthusiasm. They pretty much unanimously decided to just defend the lobby, and wait until one of the Station's SWAT teams arrived. This was good news for Doc, who was in no condition to fend off another attack, but it left the rest of us with the problem of getting him out past thirty-ish Security troopers before their heavies arrived. Luckily, Sarge had sorted out his issues by then and we were not forced to go with Tink's or, Emperor forbid, Nubby's proposed solutions.

Sarge's defense of the Office Suite was not as exciting as Doc's desperate holdout, this was largely because the Stationers knew Sarge was incredibly dangerous from the beginning, and didn't bother sending a few waves of poorly trained Security officers to their deaths. Instead, they called for the Station's best SWAT team, and set about fortifying the entire Telepathica headquarters to prevent any chance of escape or rescue.



This sounded very bad to Sarge and the Diplomacy Adept, and they shared that opinion with Jim, who didn't respond except for fending Sarge off when he attempted to un-jack the tech-priest's mechadendrite from the comm terminal. There was a brief debate over whether he was okay, and if the "try and cut into a maintenance shaft" plan should be performed yet. Since the Cogitator Adept said that Jim was, for lack of a better word, talking with over fifty other tech-priests, Sarge decided to keep waiting, and set about fortifying the two-room suite. Then, once he'd reached the point where the suite was as fortified as physically possible, he commed Twitch for some advice, then fortified it even more.

At about the same time as Doc was wantonly employing Tyranid bioweapons against three unsuspecting Security officers, the SWAT team finally launched their assault. Eight men, armored in matte black, void-sealed carapace armor and wielding the best automatic shotguns the Administratum could requisition, silently entered the main conference room and took up positions covering the door to the suite. One of them carefully opened the door's control panel, found the emergency override, and began counting down.

At zero the door slid open, but did not reveal the group of desperate heretics they'd been expecting. Instead, all that was on the other side of it was the sheer metal surface of the suite's table, and a lumpy object the size of a basketball, which had been wedged against the door, and fell into the main conference room as it opened.

If the SWAT team'd had time to inspect the object, they would've discovered that it consisted of six laspistol powerpacks, every extraneous metal skull, buckle, and stud that Sarge could rip off his Inquisitorial Costume, and few layers of duct tape. They didn't have time to inspect it though, because half a second after it hit the floor, the improvised frag mine went off and killed half of them.

On the far side of the massive pile of furniture, appliances, and bathroom fixtures that kept the table wedged against the door, Sarge felt incredibly relieved that the IED had worked like Twitch said it would. He raised his voice, and over the pained yelling of the two troopers who'd only been injured by the blast, Sarge told the survivors to bugger off. They responded by shooting the barricade a few times in a sort of desultory way, and then grabbed their wounded comrades and followed his advice.

Now, if it had been a Guard commander who'd just had his assault foiled like that, he would've said something like "Hmm, after killing so many of my men they must be low on ammo now, lets try that again", and Sarge would've been in deep shit. Fortunately the people in charge were just civilians, and even better, they were a committee; when the SWAT team's survivors limped back to them, they sat down and had a nice lengthy debate about what to try next. Sarge and the Diplomat listened in as idea after idea was raised and vetoed, usually for boring reasons like immense potential risk to personnel and property, but occasionally there was something more interesting. Apparently the Stationers were having a little trouble with their comms and cogitators, and no one from Mechanicus was returning their calls.

Eventually though, the committee reached a decision, and unfortunately, it was a pretty good one. The Telepathica knew enough about their own headquarters' to get into the ventilation system without a tech-priest's help, and the Shipmasters' Union was able to furnish several canisters of sedative gas. Once Sarge and his heretical companions were incapacitated, they'd send in some men with lascutters and rebreathers, and that would be that.





Sarge immediately taped up every vent he could find, but did not feel especially confident in the ability of a single layer of duct tape to fend off a chemical attack. His nerves began to fray as he overheard the gas being delivered then sent off to be deployed, and Jim still hadn't moved. The only thing that kept him from just forcing the tech-priest to wake up and trying to cut through the wall with his last two power packs, was the old Diplomat's calm assurance that he'd lose consciousness long before Sarge would, and could be used as a sort of final warning.

Luckily, though it didn't seem so at the time, it never came to that. Right as the elderly adept started feeling woozy, Sarge noticed the telltale hum of a lascutter and a spot on the wall of the partially flooded bathroom began to glow. Sarge spared a few seconds to curse the Stationers for not mentioning that the assault was starting within the bugs' pickup range, then got ready to go down fighting. As a sort of afterthought he gave Jim a whack upside the head, partially to try and wake the him up, but mostly because he was rather angry with the enginseer. Jim didn't snap awake though, this was because he was already awake, and was in the process of turning around when Sarge swung.

The end result was Jim sitting on the floor, checking if his nose was broken, and calling Sarge some very unkind words. Sarge responded with a few choice insults on his own, but stopped when Jim pointed out that he was being very ungrateful for someone who'd just been rescued.



When the lascutter finished its work on the bathroom wall, the breach wasn't kicked open by a squad of heavily armed men. Instead, the precisely cut piece of metal drifted backwards then disappeared up the red-lit shaft on the other side, revealing a small swarm of servo-skulls. Sarge eyed the skulls with the special type of suspicion he reserved for anything that could be called "good luck", but Jim assured him they were friendly, and led the way into the shaft. As the enginseer entered, the skulls swarmed around him, and carefully lowered him down the shaft. Sarge noted that none of them had stuck around to lower him, hefted the woozy Adept under an arm, and slowly began descending the ladder at the back of the shaft. Up above him, a few skulls began welding the shaft closed again.

After a very long and slow climb, Sarge found himself in what was obviously a Mechanicus shrine, and flinched as he realized that he was surrounded on every side by tech-priests. The cogboys didn't seem hostile though, so Sarge just stood still and tried not to look like someone who endorsed tech-heresy in his subordinates. After a few seconds of motionlessness, Sarge noticed that none of the tech-priests were actually looking at him, and followed their gazes to where Jim was chirping in binary at what had to be the local Magos.

Jim's talk with the Magos went quickly, which was good, because Sarge was getting very tired of not being told what was going on. When Jim came over, Sarge got as far as "Just what the hell did you—" before the old Diplomat kicked him in the shin and suggested that he just let Jim take the lead.

Using a haughty tone of voice that definitely didn't fit him, Jim began spouting a bunch of stuff about jurisdictions, re-prioritizations, and other such weasel words; it was complete bullshit, but luckily, Sarge was fluent in bullshit. The gist of it was that Jim had told the cogboys that he and Hannah had been given a vitally important mission by the Ordos Juris, and namedropped the two Magi that we'd so memorably encountered. This was, of course, a VERY creative interpretation of being told "go gain experience in the Inquisition, and we'll recruit you into the Ordos Juris if you survive", and Sarge took a small amount of pride in how much a cynical lying bastard Jim had become.

The local tech-priests couldn't directly assist with Jim's mission without knowing what it was, or being given some sort of authorization from higher up, but they could definitely help him return to his ship. Furthermore, if he made sure it didn't threaten the Station, they could make sure that said ship would be able to leave the system without being attacked. This was great news, but Sarge couldn't help but notice that only Jim and Hannah's escape and safety were mentioned, and pointed that out. Jim actually smiled a bit at that, and explained that the cogboys had no interest in us AT ALL unless we did something to significantly damage the Station. They'd wouldn't help us, but they wouldn't help the Stationers either, and they wouldn't do anything to stop us from following Jim on his very-safe trip back to the Occurrence Border through the Stations maintenance corridors.

In the end, Sarge sent the Diplomacy Adept off with Jim, but didn't go with them, because the Doc situation was heating up and Twitch was



handling things just fine by himself. As they headed off, one of the tech-priests grudgingly showed Sarge to the nearest public corridor, then slammed the door behind him.



Sarge was now standing in a sparsely populated public corridor, wearing a ragged Inquisitorial Costume and a Evil Goon Uniform, which drew the eye better than a neon sign. Remembering the whole massive bounty on his head and station-wide arrest order thing, he ducked into the first unlocked door he could find, which luckily turned out to be a public restroom. He immediately stripped down to his skivvies and shoved the gaudy clothing into the nearest bin, then commed

the cogitator Adept and set to work getting a less-conspicuous costume.

While he waited in the moderately filthy public restroom, Sarge listened to reports from the rest of us, and slowly formulated the most cunning of plans. A few minutes later, at about the same time as Doc was getting rescued by his girlfriend, a smalltime merc, who'd accepted a contract to remove an annoying drunk from a public restroom, opened the door and got one hell of a surprise. Sarge was very gentle by his standards, so the merc would probably live, though he probably wouldn't ever look at a toilet the same way again.

Atired in a bad-fitting, not to mention rather damp and smelly, merc uniform, and wielding a shoddily made Stationer shotgun, Sarge stepped out into the public corridor, and started jogging. A short distance away, two dozen mercenaries and bounty hunters entered a small dingy bar and looked around for the man that, according the comm messages they'd all received, had a lucrative contract for them.

Now, it's been said, by just about everyone who's Sarge, that in the entire history of the Imperium there's been no one so inherently a Sergeant as him. He was born for it, destined for it, it was if the Emperor reached down and said "This guy, right here, he's going to be biggest, baddest, most sergeanty guy ever, and nothing can ever change that." He just sort exuded sergeant-ness, and anyone with a drop of military blood in their veins noticed it immediately. Well, as Sarge entered that bar full of mercs, he turned that aura up to eleven.

Sarge came through the bar door looking, despite his slovenly uniform, like he'd just stepped off recruiting poster, and every man in that bar, including the bartender, came to attention. Sarge surveyed them for a few seconds, then announced that he knew where the heretic bounties were hiding, and that Station Security was too chickenshit to handle them. He'd called them

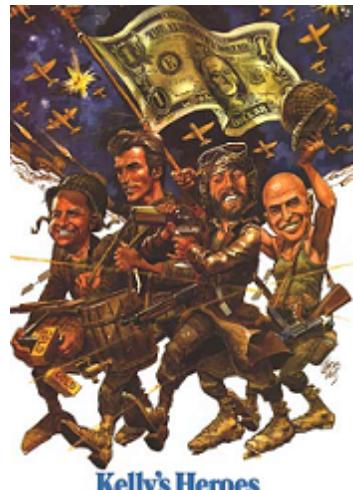
here, because they were toughest, meanest, nastiest men on the station, and if they followed him into this fight, they'd also be the richest. Then Sarge turned on his heel, and marched back out of the bar. The mercs, bounty hunters, and assorted scum in the bar all shared a look, then stampeded after him.

A short while later, Sarge and his small mercenary army shoved their way into the medbay lobby and demanded to speak to the commanding officer. Unfortunately, the security commander, who turned out to be the guy Sister Valerie had tranqued, was a bit less credulous than the mercs had been. He demanded to know who Sarge was (and no "Sarge" is not a name, it was a rank, what's your NAME merc?), what outfit he was from, and why he was there. Sarge, who knew from experience that claiming to be "Sergeant Sargent" would result in a fair bit of wasted time, discreetly checked the name on his ill-fitting jacket, and announced the he was Sergeant Kelly, the men behind him were Kelly's Heroes, and they were there to get rich or die trying.

It took Sarge a bit of arguing to convince the Security Commander to let him launch an attack instead of just waiting for the Station's second-best SWAT team, but he managed. It helped a lot that, despite the fact that the Commander hadn't heard of any outfit called "Kelley's Heroes", the databases at Security HQ had. It turned out that it was an accredited mercenary company, which was in good standing with the Administratum, Telepathica and Shipmaster's Union, and it just happened to specialize in dealing with heretics. Imagine that!

Anyway, Sarge convinced the man to let him lead an assault on Doc's position, which meant that he had a nice excuse to get up on a table, and start giving a loud, impressive, and rather overlong heroic speech. Every man in the lobby turned their attention Sarge as he stomped back and forth, talking about bravery and valor, and all sorts of other heroic bullshit. No one noticed as a young man in a rumpled psyker's jacket sidled through the lobby's front door, around the edge of the audience, and into the hallway which everyone was supposed to be watching. They also completely failed to notice Spot 2.0 zipping in and out of the room, but since Spot was invisible this was far less of an achievement.

As Sarge's speech began to run uncomfortably long and the audience started to fidget, he received confirmation that everything was ready. He



Kelly's Heroes

banged the table with the flagpole that he'd gotten from somewhere or other, and launched into the final, get-everyone-pumped up, part of the speech. Everyone's attention was neatly recaptured, which was good, because while they might have missed the large blurry shape that entered the from hallway, it would've been hard not to notice when it turned into Fumbles and the medical convoy and all the potted plants in the room withered. Luckily, after that little stumble, the convoy faded again, and no one noticed as it moved to the far corner of the lobby, where the wall was glowing slightly.



Sarge's speech ended with a final bellow of "CHARGE" and every man in the room, both the mercs and the security officers, surged towards the hallway that led to the now-empty storage room. Sarge didn't go with them though, as soon as they turned, he covered his eyes and bolted for the lobby's door. Up on the ceiling, Spot pulled a few pieces of string that had been run through the rings of a dozen flash and smoke grenades, and right as Sarge hit the doors, the lobby exploded into light and smoke. In the confusion, which quickly grew deadly as nearly fifty armed men panicked, no one noticed a section of wall collapsing, or the large blurry shape going through it.

Sarge stumbled through the lobby doors, feeling rather proud of how well that had worked out, and nearly collided with eight men in matte black armor. He froze for a second, resisted the urge to raise his shotgun, and told them that a bunch of heretics disguised as mercenaries had just attacked the Security forces. The leader of the SWAT team swore, and led his men through the doors. Sarge waited until the last one had gone through then sprinted

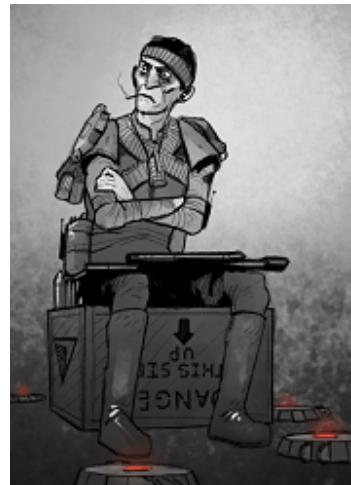
like hell. As he reached the end of the hallway, a side door slid open to reveal Aimy, and somewhere behind him someone yelled "HEY YOU". Something stung Sarge in the side as he ran the last few meters to the door, and Aimy responded by leaning out and neatly putting a bolt of plasma through the offending SWAT trooper's helmet; then both of them were through the door.

Despite the fact the SWAT team following them had a nice clear trail of Sarge's blood to follow, they didn't manage to catch up. This was primarily because Aimy kept shooting the control panel of every automatic door after she closed it, but also because any Guardsman worth his salt is a good runner. Before long they reached the rest of us, Sarge was tossed onto the loot pallet next to Doc, and the whole convoy rolled out.

The trip across the station went surprisingly fast, and without incident. We later found out that this was because the Station's tech-priests were clearing the way for us by redirecting servitors and menials, and making sure every door was open. Apparently Jim had convinced them it was the best way to get us to stop cutting through things with Tink's plasma gun. Unfortunately, they hadn't been able to do anything to convince Twitch to stop being Twitch, and as we got closer to the west dock, the signs of battle damage mounted.

Really though, anyone who knew anything about booby traps could tell that Twitch had been following Sarge's order to keep the body count low. There were a lot bloodstains, and the odd bodypart, but for the most part they were in the hallway leading towards the craters, as opposed to scattered around them. This was a clear sign of traps designed to act as deterrents instead of being set up for maximum casualties. Anyway, despite his restraint when it came to bodycount, Twitch and the ship's armsmen had really chewed the area around the docking bay up. It was a testament to the quality of the Station's construction that the entire section hadn't lost atmospheric integrity.

The mad bomber himself met us at the bottom of a freight elevator, flanked on either side by his last two suicide-skulls, and a pair of armsmen wearing the krootoid-spine necklaces that marked them as some of the tribals from hydroponics. The second we reached the elevator, the two skulls zipped away behind us, and we all felt a shockwave and heard the crash of a warehouse's worth of crates dropping into the corridor. Sarge briefly considered



asking Twitch how many other corridors he'd collapsed, then decided that he really didn't want to know.



As we rode up the elevator Twitch brought us up to speed on how the defense of the Occurrence Border had been going. Apparently, largely thanks to the amount of flank Twitch's mines and skulls had been able to secure and the resulting terror in the attackers, it had gone very well. Casualties had been low, at least on our side, and the Captain had even been able to launch a small offensive to "liberate" some much needed supplies.

The only really bad development was that the Stationers had cut off the refueling pipe fairly early on, and no one had been able to figure out a way to steal any either. There was also the slightly worrying news that a few boarding shuttles had been launched by the Station. The few of these that had landed in the well populated sections of the ship were easily repelled by the armsmen, who had a rather significant home field advantage, but a few had landed in the tainted areas. Most of those shuttles hadn't taken off again, and Twitch predicted an increase in the amount of daemon activity until those poor bastards died and stopped feeding the things, but the two shuttles that had taken back off were almost more worrying. They'd landed in the Warp Fungus bay, so by now the stuff was probably already spreading through at least one of the Station's shuttle bays. Sarge commed Jim and asked him to send everything we had on the Fungus to the local cogboys, and we all hoped really hard that this wasn't going to turn out like the whole Necron thing: two sub-sector-wide disasters in a row would be really hard to explain to Oak.

After the elevator ride it was just a short walk through some blasted-open bulkheads to our docking bay. As we arrived, senior armsmen started bellowing orders, and an orderly retreat started. Twitch watched carefully as the men fell back, and began pulling color coded detonators off of his harness. One-by-one the abandoned defensive positions were demolished, and everyone filed back aboard the Occurrence Border.

Once we'd boarded the ship, we split up again. Doc hobbled off with the medical convoy to get Gravis back into his old bed and either help out with the wounded, or get himself treated. The loot-pallet was taken down to the Psyker Holding Cells, though Nubby, Fumbles, and several boxes fell off along the way, leaving Aimy to help Tink, Fio, and Jim with all the unpacking. Twitch wandered off with his two tribal bodyguards to see about securing the entrances to the tainted areas. Finally Sarge, who wasn't quite wounded enough to be able to justify escape to the medbay, trudged up to

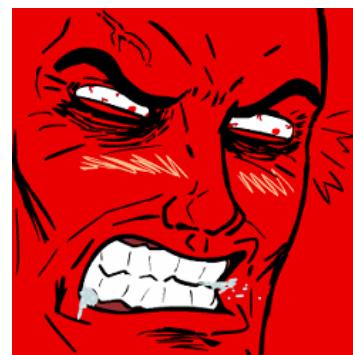
the bridge to see how our escape was going.

Along with it's usual staff of interchangeable officers, the bridge was occupied old Diplomat, Hannah, and the Captain, and the Quartermaster. Sarge was struck by how calm the bridge was. He'd expected it to be as chaotic as it had been after first capturing the damned Zoanthrope, but the most exciting thing happening was an argument between the Captain and his quartermaster about the technical definition of piracy. Sarge noted that the Captain was nearly covered with blood, which couldn't have been his given that he was still standing, and the Quartermaster's augmetic arm had gone missing, and made a note to ask them how their escape from the Station had gone.



When Hannah noticed Sarge's arrival, she cut off her discussion with the Diplomacy Adept, marched over to him, and launched into an angry lecture about how he kept getting Jim into trouble. Sarge bore this with his usual stoicism, at least until the tech-priestess yelled at him for doing his "stupid servitor impression" and kicked him in the shin. As Sarge hopped around and cursed at her, Hannah stalked off the bridge, and the Diplomacy Adept took her place.

After he finished laughing at Sarge's expense, the old Diplomat brought Sarge up date. Hannah had explained the Mechanicus' neutrality to the Captain, which is why the bridge wasn't in a panic. The Occurrence Border was headed out of the system, but since the tech-priests on the Station, as well as every ship in the system, were preventing the use of any anti-ship weapons, there was no need to rush. Sarge though this was a dangerously optimistic viewpoint, but didn't feel like arguing with Captain, and anyway, it meant that Tink and the rest would have more time to repair the Psyker Containment Cells.



Sarge was about to leave the bridge to see about having the buckshot removed from his side and changing into uniform that fit and didn't smell of urine, when the communication officer called him over. The Station was broadcasting a message, unencrypted and addressed to him by name of "The Heretical False-Interrogator Greg Sargent", which turned out to be a vid from the Station's leaders. Or more precisely, it was

a vid from the Choir Master, the other two leaders mostly sat in the background and looked scared, and you couldn't really call it a message either. It turned out to be nearly twenty straight minutes of wide eyed ranting and death threats, which went from frightening, to amusing, to tedious, then briefly back to amusing when the enraged Astropath managed to break a blood vessel in his eye and had to be taken away to calm down.

Unfortunately, the vid resumed after that, and the Choir Master shifted from pointless screaming to promises of vengeance. Among many other things, he vowed that every choir from Ultramar to Terra would hear of our crimes, which struck Sarge as a very petty and stupid form of vengeance. It'd cause immense annoyance the in the short term, but it would ensure that Inquisition found out, and get everything sorted out that much quicker.

Eventually, as the Choir Master ramped back up into ranting again, Sarge got bored. He told the communications officer to just send a copy to the Adepts, and declined when asked if he wanted to send a reply. Then, with a wave at the Captain and a promise to come up and help plan the route when the ship reached safe warp distance, Sarge left.

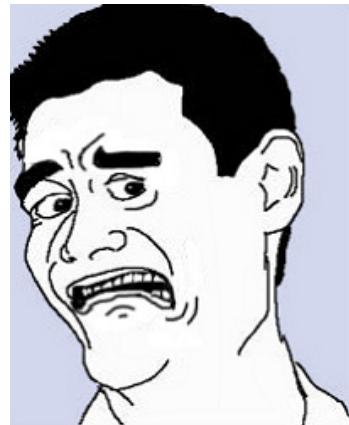


A few hours and a much needed nap later, Sarge headed down to the Psyker Holding Cells, and found them empty; just of people though, the Zoanthrope was exactly he'd left it, thank the Emperor. Sarge flipped the bug off out of habit, and checked the room down the hallway that had become Tink, Fio, and Jim had claimed as their break and nap room. He found the three nerds, accompanied by Hannah, sitting around a screen, watching their usual vile Tau vids.

Sarge eyed Hannah warily, but the cog-girl did not seem inclined to violence at present, so he advanced into the room and prodded Tink. At first the techie refused to answer questions, but after Sarge threatened to break the vid player, he became a bit more helpful. Tink confirmed that everything in the Cells was working fine, they hadn't had the raw materials to just rebuild the cells like they'd wanted, but Nubby had gotten all the crucial repair parts. Everything should hold together fine for at least two weeks of warp travel, which was more than enough time to reach a less-crazy Imperial outpost. Sarge recalled that cause of that craziness, and asked what the odds were of another Astropath killing psychic explodey thingy. He got a lot of technobabble, which he assumed meant "we're not really sure why that happened, but it probably won't happen again".

His curiosity sated, Sarge turned to leave the room, but paused as the something on the vid caught his eye. It was a fat man, wearing what Sarge recognized, thanks to some unwanted training on the subject, as Floral-Printed Tau formal robes. As the animated figure gibbered in Tau-speak, Sarge realized that he was looking at some bizarre caricature of ex-Inquisitor Lars Weebu, and with dawning sense of horror he realized what was going to come next.

There was a blast of shrill music, followed by a few lines of text which Sarge hesitantly translated as "Super Deserter Gue'vesa Action Heroes", and the scene change to a group of six characters wearing Tau flak armor. Sarge's eye scanned the horrible big-eyed characters for the telltales he knew would be there. There was the red cross on one, the bandoleers of explosives on another, and then there was the half-sized character with his psyker-robe wearing sidekick. At the back of the group he spotted a character with chevrons, who looked far grumpier and grayer than seemed appropriate, and finally there was... Well, it had the oversized plasma gun, and the goggles, and the drone, so it had to be... but...



"Umm, Tink, why... why is your character female?"

The techie froze, and slowly looked up at Sarge. Jim snickered.

"Ahh... w-well.. y-y-you see..." stammered Tink.

Fio, seeing that Tink was having trouble, decided to help. "That actually just happened, last week they were fighting the dread wych Ynageza and she cast a spell which-

"FORGET I ASKED."

Chapter 15

Tyranid Transportation

The Occurrence Border took its time leaving the system, a whole day of it in fact. There were three reasons for our lack of speed. Firstly, the tech-priests Jim had duped were seriously hindering any pursuit. Secondly, our bloody escape from the Station and the news that we'd been the source of the "psychic attack" had really discouraged the few small independently-owned ships that didn't rely on the Mechanicus to keep running. Finally, the locals' priorities had shifted drastically after a virulent fungal infection had started spreading through the Station, driving men insane with visions and melting through just about anything.

We actually felt a little bad about the whole Warp Fungus thing, but it really wasn't our fault, and it seemed like they managed to get it contained before the stuff ate more than an eighth of the Station. Anyway, Hannah had been looking into the stuff after the Marines had stumbled into it, and was pretty sure that it would die off, or at least lose its hallucinatory properties, without frequent exposure to the warp. So it would all probably work out in the end, and in the short term it bought us a little more time to prepare for the upcoming weeks of warp travel.

The last of our preparations were finished an hour before we were scheduled to re-enter the warp, and at Sarge's insistence we all wandered down to our Gellar-field adjacent quarters for a pre/post/whatever-mission briefing.

Tink and Aimy were off on one side, enjoying their usual pastime of antagonizing each other. The subject this time was the Tau vids Tink had acquired, specifically the ones that'd been based on our exploits on the buffer



worlds, and were supposedly earning us all sorts of royalties. Aimy was loudly explaining that they were stupid, heretical, and concrete proof of Tink's perversion. Tink was holding that all of this was untrue, and that Aimy was just jealous that she hadn't been included in the vids on account of being stuck on an island with a crazy Magos at the time.

Doc was slumped over the table in the middle of the room. The medic had been on duty for nearly twenty hours before he'd been concussed and half crushed, and when he'd gotten back to the ship he hadn't been allowed to take a break. He wound up spending ANOTHER twenty hours hopped up on stimms, helping get Gravis stowed away and treating all the armsen who'd been injured during the defense of the ship. Doc was completely out of it, and Nubby had taken the opportunity to draw some comical facial hair on him. The little trooper was augmenting his doodles with a pyramid of furniture balanced on and around Doc, and was gleefully egging Tink and Aimy on.

Twitch had taped up what he claimed was the only accurate map of the Occurrence Border's tainted sections along one wall. I say claimed, because none of us could read the damned thing, and looking at it for any length of time made our heads hurt. Twitch was alternately sticking pins in the map, and talking to a servo-skull with a detpack strapped to it. Supposedly the Cogitator Adept was watching the skull's vid feed and answering Twitch's question via combead, but none of us could really be sure.

Finally, Fumbles was sitting in a corner of the room, grimacing at a small Tau drone with a block of white material strapped to it. Fio was sitting on the far side of what was definitely a blast shield, excitedly taking notes.

None of us really paid much attention to Sarge when he finally arrived, since Aimy was chasing Tink around the furniture pile by that point, but that changed when Sarge dropped the large crate he was carrying with a hollow sounding boom. Nubby, recognizing the crate, sidled away an appreciable fraction of the speed of light, and Fumbles, who could TASTE the rage boiling off Sarge, rather-more-literally vanished from sight. Before either of them could make their escape, Sarge barked an order at Twitch, who pressed a big red button on the wall marked "PANIC".

As the exits sealed and a few dozen proximity mines activated, the foul smelling blur that was Nubby changed direction, and vanished through the

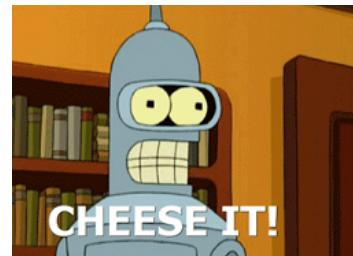


only door left, which led to the bathroom. He locked the door behind him. Sarge ignored the bathroom door and the hard-to-look-at corner where Fumbles was whispering at Fio to shut up about "amazing readings" and hold still. He turned his attention on rest of us, and with a horrible fixed grin, asked for a status report.

Twitch and Aimy hesitantly reported that about half of the boarders trapped in the tainted areas had been killed, captured, or found dead. The rest had either holed up in areas too dangerous to pursue, disappeared into the rat's nest of corridors, or just outright vanished. Patrols and traps had been set to contain the daemonic-feeding frenzy that would occur in those areas when we entered the Warp. Tink followed this up with a report on the generally-good condition of the Cells after the overhaul, and confirmation that everything was ready for entering the Warp. Finally, Doc was poked with a stick until he regained enough consciousness to confirm that Gravis was still alive, and that the looted medical supplies would be enough to keep him that way for a few weeks.

Sarge digested the three reports for a few seconds, and then poked Doc awake again. In an almost gentle voice, he asked the medic if he knew how Gravis' other half was doing, because Sister Valerie said she couldn't find the freezer-crate with the Space Marine's legs anywhere. Doc's tired brain kicked into overdrive, and dredged up an image of a dented and bullet-pocked crate being pulled off of him and tossed to the side. He swore, attempted to leap to his feet, and was buried as the pile of chairs around him collapsed. Tink, exhibiting all the tact and self-preservation instinct of a socially-retarded lemming, burst into laughter.

Sarge's attention immediately shifted to Tink. He opened the crate he'd carried in, took out the manifest taped to its lid, and skipped down to the section labeled Miscellaneous. His false grin completely gone, Sarge asked Tink if he knew where 1x Dataslate (Fecundia-pattern), 1x Astartes Grav Chute and Grapnel Harness, 2x Single-Shot Grav-Flares, and 1x Mark VII Power Armor Helmet could be found. Tink's poker face lasted until the helmet was mentioned and he involuntarily glanced towards where Spot was sitting. He looked back to find that Sarge had somehow teleported across



the room and was now practically nose-to-nose with him. Then the shouting started.



Of course, despite all the shouting and the part where he dragged Nubby out of the bathroom and held him in the air by one leg, Sarge wasn't really that angry. Even though he'd grown rather stodgy since his promotion, he was still a guardsman, and knew all about the importance of recycling. The truth was that after how badly our resupply mission had gone, he just needed to shout at someone, and the way we'd scavenged, disassembled, sold, or just-plain-lost a Space Marine's worth of wargear and legs was as good an excuse as any.

We put up with Sarge's stress-relieving tantrum, and thanked the Emperor that he hadn't found out about what the Powersword had actually been traded for. I mean, Fio claimed that the chunk of wraithbone was extremely valuable and the key to all sorts of psychic engineering, but he didn't actually have any idea how it worked or what he was going to do with it... Sarge finding out that we'd lost the Powersword because our captive xenos wanted to commit some science on a spooky rock would've resulted in some REAL shouting.

So once Sarge had started feeling better, and had mandated that Sister Valerie was now in charge of Gravis' bolter and what was left of his helmet, he brought the rest of us up to date on what he, the Adepts, and the Captain had decided. The gist of it was that we hadn't appropriated enough fuel to reach the system where Oak's lab was, so we were going to make another stop and would offload Gravis, send a message to Oak, and repair whatever damage the Zoanthrope had caused by that point while we were at it. Our response to this news was conflicted at best: we knew that we'd be wanting another pit-stop by that point, but we really didn't want to go through all that shit again, and since the Astropaths were telling everyone that we were Inquisition-impersonation heretics, it seemed inevitable. Sarge assured us that he, or at least the smarter people who worked for him, had figured out a solution though.

The theory was that the Astropaths' lies would catch the attention of the Inquisition pretty quickly, and they'd send out a team to investigate what had happened on the Station. Unless Paths managed to purge all records of our visit, which would probably require killing pretty much everyone in the Administratum from the Prefect on down, it'd be relatively easy for the Inquisition to identify us based on vid records of Sarge and our ship, and

determine that the Astropaths were full of shit. Then, after a judicious amount of purging, they'd send out a follow-up sector-wide message to clear our names.

The nearest Inquisition outpost was five days away from the Station; so call it a week to hear about the problem and travel to the Station, another week to sort things out and send the all-clear, and a third week just to be safe. The Captain had mapped a route that wouldn't be too far off course, and would take us to a nice, developed Imperial system with an Inquisitorial outpost of its own (just in case) in about three weeks. We'd dewarp REALLY far out, so if the Zoanthrope did it's head-explodey thing again it probably wouldn't kill anyone, and then discretely venture into comm range of the planet to make sure everything was okay before attempting to dock.

It was a nice, sensible plan, and all we had to do was keep the Zoanthrope contained and Gravis alive for three weeks of warp travel. Everyone, except Twitch, accepted that it was the best option available, and we all went off to make our last preparations. Two hours later the Gellar field kicked into gear, the Warp Drive tore a bloody hole in the fabric of reality, and what we fervently hoped was our second-to-last warp journey with our stupid psychic bug began.

All-in-all, taking everything into account, and relatively speaking, the trip went well.

Y'know by Occurrence Border standards.

Especially if you ignore all that ominous stuff with the ghost-tyranids.

Doc, per usual, spent most of the trip in the medbay looking after Sergeant Gravis. The bisected Space Marine's condition wasn't good: the Tyranid bio-weapon that had been introduced into his system was unquestionably alive, and was constantly attacking what remained of his organs with a wide variety of poisons. Gravis' Space Marine biology was fighting back, but was seriously hindered by the gross trauma he'd suffered, not to mention the loss of those organs in his lower torso. The only thing keeping Gravis alive was his Power Armor's Automated Medicae System, a large pile of life-support machinery, and regular aid from Doc and Sister Valerie.

Since he didn't have an entire medbay to run, Doc handled Gravis most of the time. Sister Valerie covered for him when he was occasionally needed elsewhere for more combat-oriented medical duties, and after a week of increasing grumpiness on both their parts, her senior subordinate was put in charge of the night shift. Anyway, between Doc's steadily increasing expe-



rience treating the torso-fied Space Marine, and the large amount of medical supplies we'd "requisitioned" from the Waystation Alumentum Primaris, Gravis was kept, if not stable, at least only gently teetering on the brink of death. Initially that is.

While Doc babysat Gravis, Sarge evaluated his performance during the supply run. He was reasonably happy with the way things had gone after everything had fallen apart, but it seemed to him that a real Interrogator would've been able to keep things from spiraling out of control in the first place. He eventually came to the uncomfortable conclusion that his current social skills were rather lacking, and since the Emperor, or at least his holy Inquisition, had dumped him into a role which required them, he was going to have to fix that.

With an incredible amount of reluctance, Sarge visited the Diplomacy Adept's quarters, and asked for a few lessons on the arcane art of talking to people without shouting.

The Diplomacy Adept found teaching Sarge to be rather difficult, mostly because our fearless leader was so set in his ways. In Sarge's book Deception and Disguise were accomplished using stuff like helmets on sticks, camo paint, and smoke grenades; Inquiry and Intimidation shared a definition, and involved little, if any, talking on his part; and the pages that covered Blather and Charm had been removed to make more space for the chapter that covered Command. Regardless of the difficulty involved in reversing a lifetime's worth of sergeant preconceptions though, the two of them did make some progress as we travelled. Admittedly it was very slow progress, and involved an awful lot of yelling, but progress none-the-less.

For their part, Tink and his fellow xenoculturists made some progress of their own during the voyage. The wonder-team of Fio, Jim, and Tink were in charge of Zoanthrope Containment, with occasional assistance from the Xenologist Adept and Hannah (if she was hiding from her problem-prone tech-acolytes in the Cells). They'd refurbished everything in record time before we entered the warp, and afterwards things had gone surprisingly smoothly.

Thanks to all the parts Nubby had acquired, the Psi-Suppressors, Shield-



ing, and Warp Shroud had all been repaired and improved to the point where they were very nearly within the minimum recommended strength for containing a Delta level psyker during warp travel, and the Stasis Field was working perfectly for a change. All that had to be done in the Cells was a bit of daily inspection and maintenance, which was always carried out quickly, because the Zoanthrope had acquired an unsettling presence ever since Sarge's partially-slagged shield had gotten wrapped around its head. It was hard to shake the feeling that, despite the stasis field, the eyes under the metal were watching you.

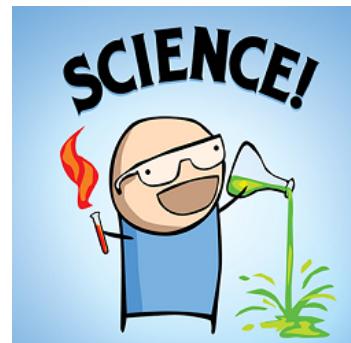
Of course, the reduced maintenance requirements of the cells meant the nerds were able to spend time on other things.

"Other things" in this instance translating to helping with important ship maintenance in Jim's case, and committing all sorts of tech-heresy in Tink and Fio's.

Actually, you couldn't really call what Fio was doing tech-heresy, it was more a case of tech-heathenism, him being a xenos and all. He was quite fixated on the piece of Wraithbone we'd acquired, and spent every scrap of his free time tinkering with it. Some days he'd be wiring it into every device in the Cells, other times he had it mounted on a drone and trailing Fumbles through the ship, and occasionally he could be seen wandering around with the big white block strapped to his head like a demented hat. Tink said it was all very scientific, Jim and Hannah refrained from commenting, and the rest of us were just glad it kept the mouthy little xenos busy.

Tink, deprived of the helmet he was cannibalizing to upgrade Spot and perhaps motivated by a sense of shame at his inappropriate behavior (not likely), dedicated his time to a more practical project: the damaged Emperor's Scythes Stealth Shuttle. During our Zoanthrope-acquiring trip the ship's tech-acolytes had finished de-fungusing it, but after that it'd just been left to sit in a shuttle bay on account of how it was completely non-functional. The fungus had eaten away a lot of armor and stealth materials, and had pretty much destroyed the landing gear, but the real problem was that a bunch of spores had gotten into the shuttle's circuitry. Some of the best piloting, navigation, and stealth-control systems a forgeworld could make had been reduced to hunks of corroded metal and silicon.

Jim and Hannah had declared the shuttle unfixable without the aid of a fully stocked manufactorum and access to the shuttle's blueprints. Tink



however, saw the shuttle as both a challenge and an opportunity, and had snuck a few parts of both Imperial and Xenos origin which had nothing to do with psyker-containment onto the list he'd given Nubby.



When he found out about the project, Sarge briefly considered yelling at Tink for scavenging more of the Emperor's Scythes' stuff, but decided it did technically count as repairing the shuttle, and we were already up to our eyes in xeno-tech heresy anyway. Also, there was a chance we'd get a working stealth shuttle out of it. For their part, Jim and Hannah just ignored all mention of the Shuttle, and added its bay to the list of places their tech-acolytes weren't allowed to go. The rest of us didn't have any input on the subject,

because we were either busy with Gravis or dealing with the increasing level of warp-activity in the Occurrence Border's tainted areas.

The initial high volume of anomalies and incursions had been expected. The things that usually disorporated after finding the tainted sections devoid of anything living had swarmed the trapped boarders and grown strong. Several varieties of warp beasts, minor daemons, reanimated corpses, and what Nubby would tell anyone who'd listen was a Bloodthirster (despite it's lack of height, axe, or wings) had tried to claw their way into the more habitable sections of the ship during the first few days of transit. Thanks to the fact that we'd known the general location of the boarders, the unholy horrors had come through to find numerous traps, swarms of detpack-armed suicide skulls, the hardened priests and armsmen that made up the Ship's Watch, and a few well-armed guardsmen waiting for them.

Even with prepared positions and numerical superiority though, tackling warp creatures can be tricky. Over the three days it took the last of the boarders to expire, the daemons and the anomalies that manifested around them took a small but significant toll on the defenders. Some men were torn apart, others went insane, an unlucky few ran afoul of the Occurrence Border's chronic mechanical problems, and one or two forgot to check what was on the other side of a door before stepping through it.

Of course none of US were on the casualty list. Prior experience with this sort of thing, not to mention better quality weapons and a rather pragmatic approach to questions like "Do you think that thing with the tentacles is still in there?" meant that we made it through without significant injury.

Insignificant injuries and close-calls are a different matter mind you. Something in the third wave of daemons threw Fumbles' powers out of whack and caused a few burns and bruises for everyone present. And then there was

a hairy moment when Twitch barely stopped Aimy from stepping through a door that inexplicably opened into one of his minefields. After that one of Nubby's augmetic feet had to be plasma-cut off and replaced on account of how he tried to kick a nurgling in the nadgers. Oh, and the ONE TIME Doc came down to help with casualties, a priest he was treating tried to eat his face and had to be exorcised (see: clubbed into unconsciousness) using his own book of holy verse.

Anyway, things calmed down after the third day, and once the various bits and pieces had been incinerated, jettisoned, or tossed back into the tainted section, the bulkheads were resealed and everyone got back to their usual routine. Unfortunately things didn't STAY calmed down: over the next few days reports started filtering in of creatures haunting the corridors near the tainted areas. This wasn't unusual in and of itself, since every time the Navigator hit a bump in the warp stuff would leak through all over the ship and there had just been a daemonic incursion in the area to boot, but the witness reports were worrying: they matched the ones we'd received during our previous week of warp travel.

Last time Aimy, Twitch, Nubby, and Fumbles had tracked the problem down to an infestation of what had appeared to be tyranids. It turned out that they weren't proper nids though, since shortly after they'd been killed, the bugs' remains had started reforming in a distinctly warpy fashion, and then they'd just sort of vanished when we finally dewarped. We'd decided that the whole thing had just been some sort of warp phenomena caused by the psychic containment in the Cells failing, and the Zoanthrope sort of passively screwing with reality. This explanation was ruined by the fact that, despite the Cells being all fixed up, the warpy-nids had come back. Or maybe they hadn't, it was all a bit of a mess.

The problem was that, this time, the tyranid-shaped creatures that Nubby drew out with his damsel-in-dis-dress routine were different: they had an appearance and behavior that could best be described as ghostlike. Not ghostlike as in "sneaky", but ghostlike as in "like a ghost". Literally.

Now, the Occurrence Border was practically littered with warp-ghosts,



but human ones. For the most part they just wandered around re-enacting their lives and deaths, with the occasional bout of unsettling whispering or screaming thrown in. They were harmless by and large (and even provided decent entertainment on slow days), but that could change if someone or something managed to get their attention and drag them into sync with what passed for reality.

Anyway, the tyranids we found literally haunting the fringes of the tainted areas displayed all the signs of being warp ghosts, except y'know, tyranid ones. They sort of milled around in the shadows, drifting through walls, making clicking noises at each other, and gnawing at stuff that wasn't there, until we got too close or had Fumbles poke 'em. Then every ghost-nid in the area would swarm in around the agitated one, and become an awful lot more solid until a few bolts of plasma blew them into black and green smoke.

At first the ghost-tyranids were just puzzling: based on the little we knew about the warp and what information our xenology adept could provide, it shouldn't have been possible. Your average nid doesn't have a mind, much less a soul, and those are pretty much requirements for being a ghost, otherwise the warp would be littered with ghost-bricks/trees/rocks/whatever. Everyone agreed that something odd was going on, but no one could figure out exactly what it was. At first we just blamed the Zoanthrope, but Jim and Fio checked and couldn't detect any psychic energy leaking out of the Cells, and Fumbles backed them up.



Other theories were raised, such as the ghost nids being a psychic projection built upon the crew's collective unconscious fear of tyranids, or them being the result of the Hive Mind reaching across the warp to smite us, or everything being caused by the Ancient Heathen Insectoid Idol stored in Cargobay E-71/3 which had driven all who looked upon it insane. These were all shot down for various reasons, such as the fact that, according to 'Ol Bill, the idol's various limbs had been holding up a plasma conduits for thirteen years now without any significant problems. Twitch, of course, held fast to his theory that the Tyranids aboard the Hive Ship which had been sucked into the warp by the Scythe's vortex bomb had made an alliance with the daemons of chaos and an unstoppable tide of Daemonids would rampage across the galaxy. No one but Aimy bothered to argue with him, and in the end the

rest of us decided that the ghost-tyranids were probably still somehow the Zoanthropes fault, despite all evidence to the contrary.

To return to the point though, the ghost-nids were puzzling AT FIRST. This wasn't because something happened which explained everything, it was because they quickly became far too serious a problem to waste time actually thinking about it.

The number of ghost-tyranid sightings quickly rose, as did the number of attacks. We'd tried to nip the problem in the bud, of course: a busy two days had been spent antagonizing ethereal hormagaunts into solidity, and then shooting them. Unfortunately, they didn't stay dead, even when we got the Confessor himself to come down and wave his censor around after we shot them. It'd take a few hours, but eventually a bug that Fumbles claimed was same one would drift back to the spot where we'd killed it, and resume its seemingly-random wandering.



An expedition into the tainted areas to see where they were coming from was proposed, but after some careful thought, we decided that we didn't actually want to die horribly in a twisted nightmare of non-euclidian geometry and bug-shaped warp monstrosities. We might have really considered it if the ghost-tyranids had seemed interested in launching attacks on the rest of the ship, but as far as we could tell they were content to just sort of hang out. Over time, the steadily increasing number of ghost-bugs would result in them wandering deeper into the ship, but otherwise they stayed put unless someone got near them. Lacking any viable solution, or the motivation to take a real risk to find one, the Captain agreed with our decision to just set up a killzone around the tainted areas and contain the apathetic ghost-tyranid menace.

The containment strategy wasn't sustainable in the long run, since the number of bugs was inexorably increasing, and they were able to expand in three dimensions as well as through walls too. But we were pretty sure that if we gave a little ground when the numbers got to high, it'd work long enough for us to reach our next resupply point. Also, if things got really bad, we could always dewarp and sort things out at the expense of a few days of travel time. So since there wasn't any immediate crisis, we settled into a slightly more stressful than usual routine, and got on with our lives.

Aimy assumed command of the entire lower-aft portion of the defense. She didn't actually ask for permission or anything mind you, she just walked down there and started bossing everyone around. The only reason that the Captain and his Master-at-Arms didn't kick up a huge fuss about this bla-

tant disrespect was that Aimy was actually very good at this sort of thing, having been born and raised for infantry command before her career change to Inquisitorial-Gooning. The rest of us noticed that, despite how much she complained about the poor quality of her troops compared to her old regiment, Aimy seemed far happier than she'd been since her disastrous mission with the half-mad Magos. Or if not happier, at least less prone to spontaneous violence.

Since Twitch, not to put too fine a point on it, wasn't really sane enough to command a squad, much less an entire flank of the defense, his assistance to the containment effort was a bit more ad hoc. He scampered around, shoring up defenses and setting up traps without any discernible rhyme or reason, and everyone else just had to adjust their deployments to fit. It was all surprisingly effective, though it retrospect it shouldn't have been, he'd spent more time patrolling the borders of tainted areas than anyone except 'Ol Bill and his senior Engineers, and knew which spots were defensible and which weren't by heart.



Initially, Nubby just sort of mooched around the various fronts "assistin wif da supply effort", but since his partner in petty crime was the only psyker around who wasn't busy steering the ship, this profitable arrangement didn't last. We'd quickly discovered that Fumbles' ability to sense the ghost-nids from quite far away and through walls was invaluable, especially since he could share what he sensed with anyone nearby. He was constantly in demand as a spotter, and Nubby was dragged along to act as backup and moral support.

As has been mentioned, the rest of us had other things to do, and the ghost-nid situation really didn't change that. I mean, if you stop work every time an army of warp-spawned insectoid spirits lays siege to your ship, you'll never get anything done. So we all just sort of muddled along, trying to hold everything together, as the trip continued and things got progressively worse.

In the case of Doc's treatment of Sergeant Gravis, "got progressively worse" is a perfect summary. The Space Marine's condition went steadily downhill, and not in the ways Doc or Valerie had been prepared for. There were seemingly random seizures, spikes in neural activity that indicated horrible nightmares, inexplicable changes in the behavior of the bio-toxin, and even a few spontaneous mechanical failures in the life support machinery. It

got to the point where Gravis-watching was a 24-hour, no-distractions duty, because the second he was left alone something would invariably go wrong. Doc, not being born yesterday, blamed all these problems on the warp in general and the Zoanthrope in particular, but he couldn't figure out the why or how, and had no idea what to do about it.

Lacking any proactive treatment ideas, aside from exiting the warp or killing the Zoanthrope, Doc dedicated increasingly large portions of his time to Gravis-watching, and developed a rather disturbing tendency to talk to the comatose Space Marine. Tasteless jokes about Valerie getting jealous aside, we began to worry about him, but we were getting near the end of the trip by the time things got really worrying, and he seemed to recover a bit after his theory about the Zoanthrope being the cause was confirmed.

Actually, it wasn't just Doc's theory that was proven, our suspicions about there being a link between the ghost-nids and the Zoanthrope were confirmed too.

What happened was that, three days out from our destination, nearly a quarter of the psi-suppressors in the Cells failed at once. This didn't come as a complete surprise mind you: even in stasis, the Zoanthrope's mere psychic presence, not to mention the warp itself, wore down the machinery and shielding that restrained it. Tink, Fio, and Jim had been dedicating more and more of their time to inspections and maintenance, but there was only so much that they could do given the general kludged-together nature of the Cells. So they'd been sort of ready for something like this to happen, and had made sure that someone was always on duty. When the failure happened, Jim had been right there to start fixing things, and both Fio and Tink had arrived within minutes to help. Sarge showed up too, but he didn't actually help in any meaningful way, he just really wanted an excuse to ditch the horrible self-inflicted purgatory of his diplomacy lessons.

Anyway, during the fifteen or so minutes of reduced psi-suppression on the Zoanthrope the following happened:

The spawn rate of ghost-nids drastically increased, a few higher forms started appearing, the entire swarm began acting far more



in touch with reality and became significantly harder to kill.

↳ All sorts of warp phenomena occurred throughout the ship.

↳ The temperature on the main atmospheric regulator got stuck at seven degrees. (This was probably unrelated, but by then we were blaming EVERYTHING on the damned bug)

↳ Fumbles suffered some sort of combination hallucinatory and convulsive episode, and wound up clawing at his face and breaking his goggles.

↳ The Navigator sent us a very angry note about the importance of not distracting him while steering.

↳ Sergeant Gravis caught fire. Again.

So yeah, it was a pretty unpleasant experience, especially since it was actually a minor failure compared to the some of the stuff that had broken during our last trip, and therefore raised all sorts of questions about the Zoanthrope's powers. Not that we had much time for pondering though, because the following three days were absolutely exhausting.

Most of the problems caused by the failure were dealt with immediately: The suppressors were repaired without the Zoanthrope breaking

out of stasis and trying to killing everyone. Doc actually had a fire extinguisher ready, put Gravis out before the eldritch flames did any real damage, and handled everything else that went spontaneously wrong during the brief loss of suppression. Nubby managed to restrain Fumbles before he clawed out his own eyes, got the psyker to safety, and was even able to scrounge up another pair of extra-large welding goggles (which may or may not have had "Bill's DO NOT STEAL" written on them). Lastly, thanks to a general retreat order by Aimy and the Captain, plus Twitch's suspiciously well-placed fallback points, relatively few men died to the temporarily empowered ghost-nids.

Unfortunately, even though the ghost-nids lost focus and weakened again after the psi-suppressors were back online, the increase in their numbers was permanent. Containment became significantly more difficult, especially since, in some places, the defense had been pushed back to rooms that Ol' Bill said were important to the running of the ship. It wasn't a good situation, but then again, it could've been worse: both ammo and food were plentiful, it wasn't snowing or raining aside from the occasional drizzle of supernatural blood, and there weren't any Commissars. On the Official Imperial Guard Scale of Horrible Meatgrinder Defenses it was only about a 3. Of course,



anything that even shows up on that scale isn't something you want to deal with while travelling through the warp...

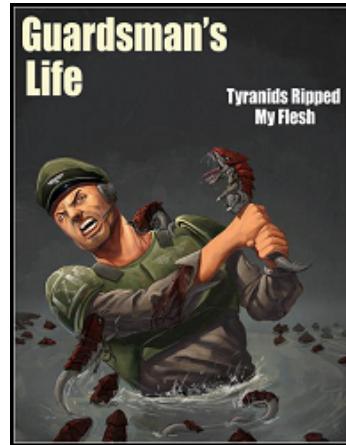
The question of whether to just dewarp in the middle of space and try to sort everything out was raised again, but since we were so close to our destination, Sarge and the Captain decided we could tough it out. The rest of us reluctantly agreed, and put everything we could into holding out three more days.

Reinforcements were mustered from the crew, those wounded who could still fight were put back on the line (including a rather shaken Fumbles), and our fearless leader oh-so-regretfully abandoned the last of his diplomacy classes to personally take over the nastiest piece of the line. Finally, Tink and Fio were told that, regardless of how creepy being around the Zoanthrope was and how important they felt their pet projects were, they now LIVED in the Cells, and horrible things would happen to their vids if another mechanical failure occurred.

It was a hectic, terrifying, and heroism-filled three days, which really reminded all of us of our time in the Guard, though with less indiscriminate shelling and a rather inferior brand of trench-mates. Not that the armesmen of the Occurrence Border weren't good fighters, they just... weren't Guardsmen. Anyway, complaints about troop quality aside, we managed to hold out without any more complete disasters.

There were a few tense moments, such as when Tink got as far as reporting that a cascading suppression failure was imminent before he figured out how to use his plasma gun as a backup battery. We would've congratulated him on his ingenuity, but it took him about half an hour to remember to tell us that things had been stabilized and we weren't about to die. Another bad spot was when Sarge finally abandoned the forward power management, water purification, and toothpaste distribution room, only to have something break in it five minutes after he left. It took a three-hour counter offensive, spearheaded by all of us except Aimy, to get Ol' Bill up there to fix the thingy that'd gotten stuck in the whatsis.

In the end though, we made it. A few hours before our original scheduled dewarp time, but not a second too soon, we arrived at that bastion of Imperial civilization widely known as: "That system with two planets and an Inquisition base that's pretty much on the way. No not that one, the one with the BLUE star."



As the Occurrence Border left the warp, the massive swarm of ghostly tyranids just faded away. It was actually sort of awkward for those of us on the line, and sheer paranoia kept everyone at their posts for nearly an hour before victory was declared and we all went off to get some sleep. The only people left awake were those who'd been augmented past the need for the pathetic meatbag concept of sleep, and the poor bastards in charge. Sarge hiked his way up to the bridge to

verify that we were in the correct system and that no stellar disasters, xenos invasions, or heretical uprisings were occurring in it, and to send a message to the Inquisition base. Unfortunately, that last part proved unexpectedly difficult.

Due to our recent problem with head-exploding waves of psychic energy, we came out of warp way out on the edge of the system. Of course the universe despises all rational planning, so the Zoanthrope stayed completely quiet during the transition, and all our careful precaution accomplished nothing aside from leaving us several days of normal space travel away from our destination. In fact we were so far out that our sensors could barely even pick out the largest ships and stations around the planets, and it'd be days before we got into vox range. This annoyed Sarge, who wanted to get started on the whole process of proving our identity and requesting aid so he could stop worrying.

The Captain sympathized with him, and rather sarcastically asked Sarge if he wanted to try to make a micro-warp to get closer to the planets. Sarge told him to go fornicate with a waterfowl, and then wandered off to try and nap away his paranoia.

The rest of us weren't too concerned about the travel time, since moving through normal space was downright relaxing by our standards. If left to our own devices we probably would've spent the entire time asleep, drunk, or watching heretical cartoons, but Sarge didn't approve of idle troops. After a mere sixteen hours of sleep, he dumped every one of us out of our nice-warm bunks, gathered the entire team plus Ol' Bill and Jim together, and began giving orders.

The impromptu briefing started with Sarge informing us that the Captain had spotted three ships of indeterminate size heading our way, and per tradition, Twitch interrupted to tell everyone that he HAD A BAD FEELING



ABOUT THIS. After a few minutes had been wasted on half-comedic speculation, Sarge shared the Captain's assurance that this was a perfectly normal response to how far out we'd warped in. He claimed that it was, in fact, a good thing, since they'd be able to help us by passing our vox messages on to the Inquisition base earlier than we'd expected. It'd still be over a day before we were in range though, and in the meantime, there were things to do.

Tink and Fio were told that their pet-projects were still on hold until they made sure every system in the Cells was working fine and compiled yet another parts list. Doc, who was annoying chipper after his first real break from Gravis-watching in over a week, was told to ditch the Marine on his girlfriend and get his gear ready. The Adepts were told to whatever adepty things needed doing before we talked to whoever ran the local Inquisition base, except for the Cogitator Adept, who was ordered to use his data-thingys and compu-whatsits to figure out where the ghost-nids had been coming from. He responded with a lot of useless technobabble and complaints about not being a demonologist damnit, but after Sarge glared at him for a while he went off to his closet and got to work. Everyone else was ordered to get ready for a short expedition.

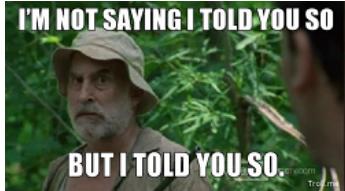
A few hours later, the Cogitator Adept delivered a dataslate containing what Twitch and Ol' Bill assured us was a map marking four locations in the Occurrence Border's various tainted areas. The rest of us took their words for it, and Twitch was put in charge of deciphering it into three-dimensional directions. Sarge chose the location in the lower-aft tainted section as our first target, on account of how it was near the other thing he wanted to sort out with the expedition, and we set out with Ol' Bill and his gaggle of Engineers and tech-acolytes in tow.

Now, we called it an expedition, and went in heavily armed, but outside of the Warp the tainted areas weren't THAT dangerous. Yes, they were still contaminated with warp energy which manifested as all sorts of phenomena, but they were generally minor things, like whispers, winds, flashes of movement, and the non-insectoid variety of ghost. The krootoids and other vermin which wandered into the area and wound up horribly mutated, and occasionally possessed, were only a minor inconvenience, and warp-entities which can survive in normal space without some kind of host are rare. Really, it was just a matter of carefully avoiding mechanical hazards and the occasional persis-



tent anomaly, such as the time loop on on sub-deck U-3, the room stuck at five degrees kelvin, the time loop on sub-deck U-3, the perpetually bouncing ball, and the time loop on sub-deck U-3.

We reached the area that the Cogitator Adept had calculated as the center of the ghost-nid infestation without any incidents more serious than a tech-acolyte getting slightly electrocuted and Nubby getting stuck during an attempt to bypass a leaking plasma conduit via air shaft. Unfortunately, when we got there we didn't find any daemonic portals, eldritch devices, Tyranid hives, or anything else we could cover with detpacks.



All we found at the geographic center of the ghost-nid infestation was a few empty rooms and corridors. We had Fumbles take a look around just in case, but while he claimed the area were slightly more tainted it's surrounds, it seemed to him like it was just the side-effect of being filled with ghost-nids for longer. We debated exploding the entire area, just on the off chance it would accomplish something, but Ol' Bill asked us not

to. So, lacking anything productive to do, we headed down to Cargobay E-71/3, home of a few dozen plasma conduits and an Insanity-Inducing Ancient Heathen Insectoid Idol that had been repurposed as an architectural support.

Operating on the theory that, even if it wasn't related to our bug problem, it probably wasn't good to have a giant eldritch statue just sitting around in a warp-tainted cargobay, we asked Ol' Bill to figure out a way to disentangle the plasma conduits from the Idol. Not so we could study it of course, that would be silly, we just wanted to make sure that the engines wouldn't explode or something when we destroyed the thing. Ol' Bill grumbled a bit about not fixing what isn't broken, but he and his boys threw a tarp over the thing's horrible mind-shattering visage, and began scavenging replacement parts from the surrounding area.

A few hours later the various plasma conduits, pipes, and wires were being supported by a haphazard network of metal bands, clamps, crates of expired food, and three of the room's grav-plates fastened to the ceiling. The tarp-covered Idol was dragged to the center of the room, and a pair of melta-bombs with what looked suspiciously like crossed-scythe insignias on their sides were fastened to it. The horrible chittering screaming went on for quite a while, but it trailed away as we reached the edge of the tainted area, and nothing else really happened. Well, aside from a 11Ol' Bill said he told us so.

By the time we got back from our expedition the distance between us and the three approaching ships had closed to the bare edge of our vox system's

broadcast range. Now that they were closer, our sensors had identified the ships as a Navy frigate and a pair of smaller SDF ships, so Sarge, the Captain, and the Adepts decided not to mess around with subtlety, and announce our identity and intentions off the bat.

Remembering his recent lessons on the importance of stance, dress, and overall first impressions, Sarge scrounged together a replacement for the Inquisitorial costume and evil goon uniform which had been rather gleefully abandoned in men's room garbage bin. After he'd more or less ripped Doc's evil goon uniform in half during his attempt to make it fit, he settled for wearing one of the Captain's spare uniforms and hung his Interrogator's Rosette in clear view. Suitably outfitted, Sarge then spent nearly two hours with the old Diplomacy Adept, recording a two-minute vid which primarily consisted of his name and rank, a request that his message be forwarded to the local Inquisition base, and the digital authorization code from his rosette. This arduous task completed he joined the rest of us for a few games of cards while the message crawled across the system at the annoyingly-slow speed of light.

Four hours and several thrones lost to Nubby and Fumbles later, it occurred to us that we really should've gotten a response by then, and we all trooped up to the bridge to see if something interesting was happening. We arrived just in time to hear one of the sensor techs report that all three approaching ships had increased their acceleration, and four more had left orbit. Twitch informed everyone that he had a REALLY bad feeling about this.

Over the next few hours the vid was re-sent multiple times, a request for confirmation of receipt was added, an audio-only version was sent, and some tech-acolytes were sent out in a shuttle to check that our vox system was actually sending and receiving correctly. All this effort accomplished absolutely jack shit aside from increasing the acceleration of the approaching ships even further, and raising the local paranoia level to amazing heights.

An emergency meeting of everyone who could contribute to a serious conversation on our options was called, and the rest of us invited ourselves along anyway. There was some initial complaining by Jim, the Adepts, and other such stuffy people about how the whole meeting was pointless, since no one actually knew anything useful about the situation, so all that anyone could



do was make wild guesses based on hearsay and unsupported speculation. That sounded fine to us, because it was how we made most of our decisions, and everything typically worked out, so we ignored their whining.



The initial topic of conversation was just what in the Emperor's name was going on, and if there was any chance we could sort it out. All theories stating that the approaching ships were friendly, and there was just some sort of inexplicable reason why they just couldn't talk to us, were immediately thrown out on the grounds that the universe didn't work that way. Twitch's theory that the local naval forces had been taken over by an advance force of Daemonids, or possibly Kommandos, was dismissed for similar reasons. The general consensus we arrived at was that the locals were following the Astropathic kill-order that had been sent out by the insane Choir-Master, which had probably included something like "Disregard any messages they send, especially ones containing Inquisitorial Authorizations Codes". This raised a bunch of new questions though, the primary one being: why the hell hadn't the Inquisition rescinded that order yet.

Since it was unimaginable that the Inquisition hadn't noticed a sector-wide astropathic message to kill someone, much less a whole ship of people who were in their records as Inquisitorial agents, we felt sure that an investigation into the incident on the Station had at least been started. There was of course the remote possibility that whoever they'd sent to investigate had completely botched things and either swallowed the Choir-Master's obvious lies or been offed by the locals, but that seemed unlikely. Despite our personal experiences, the Inquisition on the whole is rather notorious for its incredulity and competence.

Doc suggested that the investigator's ship could've been lost in the warp, or that other warp-travel related shenanigans had occurred, such as our own warp-journey taking only a few hours of real time as opposed to the three weeks we'd experience. The Captain shot down that last explanation, claiming to be absolutely certain for some technical reason that three and a half weeks of real time had passed, but allowed that Doc had a point about the dangers of warp-travel delaying the investigation. The Diplomacy Adept also raised a valid point, which was that, given the time it would take to investigate the Station and our direct route, no Inquisitorial couriers would've reached the system before us. This meant that any "No, these Astropath-

exploding people are not heretics, don't kill them" order from the Inquisition would've been sent out via Astropath, so there was a very real possibility that a few things got... lost in translation, for instance the No, Not, and Don't.

Both of those explanations sounded good enough for us, but they didn't account for why the local Inquisition base wasn't doing anything, and that was a more pressing concern at present.

The whole reason we'd picked this system as our destination was because the presence of an Inquisition base. We'd expected them to be able to help sort things out if, as had apparently happened, word of our innocence hadn't reached the system yet. Okay, it wasn't like they ran the local navy, they were just a small Ordos Hereticus outpost. There were probably a few buildings full of Adepts who kept track of things, a handful of Storm Troopers who hung out waiting for the next emergency, and maybe one or two local Inquisitors, if they weren't off purging heretics in another system at the moment. Size aside though, they should've noticed half the ships in the system moving out at once, taken an interest, and been forwarded our messages...

In the end we put it down to massive incompetence. This wasn't a very good explanation, but the only other one we could think of was that some shadowy cabal of Astropaths was secretly controlling half the sector via careful manipulation of information, which was just silly. Seriously, who ever heard of a bunch of Astropaths secretly controlling anything? They were all nuttier than squirrel-poo, and prone to randomly exploding. The argument about whether the idiot ruining everything was the person currently running the Inquisition base or someone in the local Navy who was stonewalling them for some arbitrary reason, was getting rather spirited when it was brought to an end by the arrival of the Occurrence Border's Navigator.

The tall and cadaverous man stalked in, probably attracted by all the shouting just a few rooms away from his sanctum, and informed us that we were all blunt-minded idiots. No one but Aimy took much offense at this, in our experience the was just the Navigator's way of saying hello, and we



all waited to hear why we were bunch of borderline-retards. It turned out that what was happening was OBVIOUS, and he could've told us it would've happened if we'd thought to ask him (that statement right there is a classic example of why no one likes Navigators). Our ship had just popped out of the warp at an odd location, positively reeked with warp-taint, and had a powerful unrestrained tyranid psychic signature emanating from it; the Occurrence Border was a text-book example of a genestealer-infested ship looking to infiltrate a system.

There was a short argument between the Navigator and Tink about whether the Zoanthrope was unrestrained or not. Tink ultimately lost, because if the bug was properly restrained we wouldn't have been up to our asses in ghost-tyrannids for the last few weeks, but the Navigator did eventually amend his statement to "partially-restrained by bunch of incompetents, heretics, and xenos". Anyway, the rest of us acknowledged that this was as good an explanation as any, since excessive paranoia seemed a bit more likely than plain incompetence where the Inquisition was concerned, and asked of the Navigator had any ideas how to deal with such a situation. He suggested that we get the hell out of the system before we were all killed, and make sure our next stop was a somewhere where we personally knew people in power who could smooth things out for us. This suggestion did not go over well with Doc, Tink, or anyone else really.

In the end, despite all the complaining, Sarge and the Captain decided to follow the Navigator's advice. Doc's statement that Gravis would not survive another serious warp journey with the Zoanthrope was noted, as was Tink's list of things in the Cells that desperately needed replacement parts to continue functioning correctly, but those were future problems, and the incoming ships were very current ones. Once that critical decision was made, the entire mob relocated to the map-room, where most of us just complained and made unhelpful suggestions while Sarge, the Captain, and our Adepts tried to find a suitable destination.

To our surprise we actually knew a fair number of people who would be able to help us, there was Inquisitor Oak of course, as well as a few of our former Interrogators, an overweight cross-dressing xenophile, the Rupert, and a few tech-priests of various ranks. On top of that, the Captain and



Adepts were able to supply a few Navy officers and Inquisition contacts, Aimy grudgingly admitted her mother would help if she asked, and Nubby said he knew a guy who was technically a Planetary Governor.

The problem was that most of these people tended to move around a lot, and the ones who didn't weren't anywhere near our end of the Ultima Segmentum. Even without all the complications of making a long warp-journey with Gravis and the Zoanthrope, we just didn't have enough fuel to reach any of them. Mind you, if we'd had an Astropath, as opposed to headless corpse in the morgue and a sanctum covered with bits of blood, brain, and bone, we might've gotten lucky and been able to track one of the mobile ones down nearby, but in that case we could've just sent a message asking our boss to sort all this stuff out for us.

After we examined the map and determined that no one helpful was within our four-day travel range, the Captain raised some less-savory options. The discussion turned to what was or wasn't piracy, and whether any of the nearby systems were too small to have naval defenses or astropaths, but developed enough to have a supply of fuel.

Sarge began to zone out as he imagined just how unpleasant his post-mission interview with the Inquisitor was going to be, and then he overheard Tink pestering the Navigator. Tink asked if it was possible to "coast" in the warp like fuel-conscious ships did in normal space, and thereby extend our range enough to reach the nearest guaranteed-friendly system (which was unfortunately the one inhabited by Nubby's "guy"). The Navigator made some sneering remarks about a blunt's inability to truly understand the shifting nature of the warp, and admitted that yes, you could trade time for fuel up to a certain point.

As the rest of us checked whether this would allow us to reach anyone who hadn't been described as "like a Planetary Guv'ner, but wifout da actual planet, and maybe a lil bi' more slavery", Sarge thought back to our original travel plans. He asked the Navigator whether we could stretch four days of fuel to reach a destination a week and a half away, specifically the Ordos Xenos Research Facility that had ordered the Zoanthrope. He got a flat "No". That would've been the end of it right there, and things might have



turned out VERY differently, but the Cogitator Adept was listening in, and simultaneously responded with a "Maybe".

That sparked a heated argument, which included a lot of talk about warp currents and something about problems with shortest paths. None of us really followed it, except maybe Tink, but the "No" and "Maybe" slowly turned into "Probably, assuming fuel efficiency is static, the currents are where the map says they are, there are no storms, and we can survive three more weeks of Warp travel".

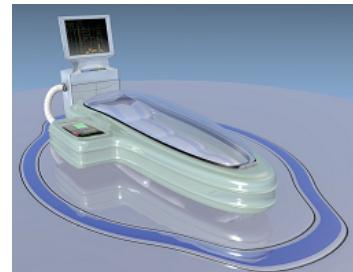


Well, there was a bit more debate after that, but Sarge had made up his mind. He was well and truly done with this shit: there would be no more stops, no more hair-raising escapes with misguided Imperial forces hard on our heels, and no more bloody diplomacy. He could take three more weeks cooped up with the Zoanthrope and fighting off waves of its ghostly minions, as long as at the end, he'd be able to dump both it and the problem of the crazy Astropaths on whichever Inquisitor had ordered the damned bug.

This decision met a certain amount of resistance, primarily from Doc, Tink, and the Captain, who were tremendously worried about Gravis, the Cells, and the very real chance of running out of fuel short of our destination respectively. Unfortunately, despite how undeniably bad Sarge's plan was, no one besides Nubby thought the other options were any better, and anyway, we were Guardsmen and Sarge was in command. Once he'd made his decision, all we could really do was complain and try to figure out how to make his plan work.

The Captain went off with his subordinates and the Navigator to plot our route, and informed us that we had five hours before the approaching ships forced us to warp. Tink and Jim immediately ran down to the Cells and began frantically working with Fio to overhaul all the stuff they'd originally been planning to replace. Sarge, Aimy, and Twitch sat down and began hashing out a defensive plan that would take advantage of the ghost-nids apathy when no one was around to provoke them, and the fact that they didn't ever launch real flanking attacks. Nubby dragged Fumbles off to help him relocate several of his stashes to areas that wouldn't be overrun when the shit-storm resumed. Doc carefully examined Gravis' condition, evaluated his chances of keeping the Marine alive for three more weeks of warp travel, spent a while locked in the bathroom alternately screaming and crying, and then decided that something drastic needed to be done.

Doc made his way down to the Psyker Containment Cells, but thankfully didn't go with his first idea, which had been to just kill the Zoanthrope and hope Oak and his research buddy would be in a good mood when they found out. Instead, he poked his nose into the small, currently-unused side rooms that'd originally been used to hold captive psyker children, and checked if any of the undersized stasis-beds had been left over after Tink and Fio had combined a few into one big enough to hold the Zoanthrope. He had a moment of panic when all the cells, except for the one packed with debris, were empty, but when he asked Fio what had happened, the little xenos explained that they'd pulled them all out during the project and the leftovers were just in a closet somewhere. Doc knew the inevitable fate of expensive pieces of equipment that got left in unmonitored closets, so he skipped the scavenger hunt and just commed Nubby to ask which one of his stashes the stasis beds had wound up in.



Nubby wasn't keen to part with his loot, but eventually came around to Doc's way of thinking when the Medic started explaining all the horrible things that would happen to him if Gravis died. One of the five leftover stasis beds was hauled up to the medbay, where Doc and Valerie spent several minutes trying to figure out how to fit the upper half of a three-meter tall killing machine into a stasis bed sized for children ages 3-12.

It was obvious from the start that Gravis' armor and life support machinery wouldn't fit, but it was quickly established that even without those, he was still far too large. In the end Doc was forced to admit that the only way it would work was if they removed Gravis' arms, shoulders, and a good portion of one of his sides; Sister Valerie did NOT approve of this course of action.

There was a short argument between Doc and his girlfriend over whether being slowly hacked apart with a diamond-edged bonesaw while struggling to fight off an alien biotoxin was guaranteed to be fatal or not. Nubby, who'd tagged along in hopes of getting his loot back, decided to be helpful at this point, and suggested that Gravis didn't need to be cut up before going into the bed, as the stasis field could take care of it for them. He was in the middle of rather gleefully recounting what had happened to a cargo-servitor that'd been caught half in a field during Tink and Fio's experiments on combining stasis units, when Doc realised the obvious solution to the problem.

A few minutes later, Doc was down in the Cells screaming at Tink to stop messing around with the psi-suppressors and get to work combining the five

leftover stasis beds into one large enough to hold Gravis. Tink was pretty sure that his current task was a little more important though, so there was a bit of an argument, and things quickly devolved to the point where Doc was holding techie up by the collar and shaking him. Jim stepped in that point, applied a few thousand volts of enforced calmness to Doc's lower back. He explained to the twitching medic that his request had been noted, but building the stasis unit would take a few days, and would therefore have to be worked into the schedule between critical maintenance on the Cells.

Doc was in no position to argue with Jim, or walk for that matter, so he accepted the cogboy's promise that it would be a top priority, and was dragged back to the medbay by Nubby and Fumbles. He felt slightly better when Sister Valerie called him a genius and promised to kiss him later, when she wasn't covered with bodily fluids.

Two hours later we sent out a final message to everyone in the system, which was pretty much a detailed list of why they were all idiots and/or assholes, and disappeared into the warp before the approaching ships could follow us.

All you could really say for the first few days of that warp journey, was that they went better than the last few of our previous one. For a starter, our worst-case scenario (for conservative values of "worst") hadn't come true: the ghost-nids hadn't just popped back into existence in the same places they'd been when we'd dewarped. Our brief stint in normal space had reset their counter or whatever, and the bugs were only appearing in the tainted areas, though at a rate significantly higher than they had before. Spawn rate aside though, our defensive situation was MUCH better than it had been, and the Cells were in pretty good condition too.

Thanks to the heroic repair efforts of Tink, Jim, and Fio, the psi-suppressors took the strain of entering the warp without failing, and the devices seemed to be functioning better than they had before. There were some concerns about their power output though, since as mentioned, the ghost-nid spawn rate was higher than it had been, and there were also more minor phenomena occurring throughout the ship as well as an increase in the number of IGPs (Inexplicable Gravis Problems). This bothered Tink immensely, since his readings said everything in the Cells was working fine (at least for now), and there wasn't any psychic leakage around the Cells either. Admittedly Fio and Jim's psi-detectors consisted of the Wraithbone block on a stick and



a creepy ornate servo-skull that had to be periodically fed live rats, but they seemed pretty confident in their readings.

Anyway, Tink and the other techies didn't get to ponder the ghost-nids for long. Even though the normal-space repairs had bought them some breathing room, the lack of replacement parts meant every fix they made was a horrible time-consuming kludge, and Doc made sure that every minute of their free time was dedicated to putting together Gravis' stasis field.

Things were more-or-less calm for the first three days of our efficiently-slow warp journey. We kept track of the ghost-nids, but didn't waste any effort engaging them, Tink and Fio managed to make some serious progress, and Doc managed to stay very positive about the situation while struggling with Gravis' mounting medical problems. The first suppression failure happened on the fourth day.

The increase in phenomena and ghost-nid spawning was pretty much a repeat of the last time, but the other aspects of the failure went differently. For one thing, we didn't lose any arms-men on account of how ghost-nids still hadn't expanded to reach our defensive lines when the failure began, they sure as hell had reached them by the end though. This time Fumbles did better too, he managed to retain consciousness through the whole thing, though he was a little loopy afterwards, babbling about something being "all around" and "trying to find itself". Gravis, however, came off a lot worse: Doc and Valerie weren't able to figure out exactly what had happened, but the Space Marine's secondary heart wound up resembling a raisin, and had to be removed. Once again, the techies managed to fix things, but that marked the end of the easy part of the trip.

As the fight against the ghost-nids resumed, we realized that their spawn rate wasn't the only thing that'd gotten worse over time. The bugs were definitely stronger and more aggressive than they had been during the last trip, and they began to exhibit some new and worrying behavior. Three times in the following two days sizable forces of ghost-nids coalesced in areas where they hadn't reached our lines yet, and then slowly wandered into the ship



until they ran into our forces. We managed to beef up the defenses in time on all three occasions, but they were all difficult fights, and this change in attack patterns forced Sarge, Aimy, and the Captain to seriously re-evaluate their plans.



By the sixth day it was becoming apparent that holding out for two more weeks would be close to impossible. The unexpected increase in the ghost-nids' strength and their new penchant for the occasional focussed attack forced our lines back days ahead of schedule, and the initial ship-wide increase in phenomena we'd seen was getting worse. It was actually beginning to feel like the Gellar field was failing, except Ol' Bill was certain it wasn't, and the usual whispers and blood-seepage had been replaced with far-off chittering sounds and tyranid-ichor. It was obvious the Zoanthrope was responsible,

but it was still a mystery how, and we couldn't think of anything to do about it besides killing the bug or dewarping.

Mind you, dewarping wasn't the same sort of emergency option it'd been before. This was because the warp-drive took a whole lot of energy to function, so we didn't actually have enough fuel to get back into the warp of we exited, much less go anywhere or dewarp again afterwards. So if we wanted to bail out of the warp, we were going to need to do it near a system that could provide fuel, and handle all the risks that came with that. Still, the situation with the ghost-nids was getting bad enough that Sarge was really considering calling for a detour, though the only chance coming up to do so was at least another three days of warp-current coasting away.

So the situation was bad, but there was at least one bright spot: thanks to the time freed up by a lucky streak of only minor malfunctions in the Cells, Tink and Fio had nearly completed Gravis' stasis field. In fact they were down to just the last little part, dealing with the power-distribution, and it was proving rather tricky. Since they didn't want to waste time doing it all from scratch, the two of them went down to the Cells to take a hard look at how they'd done it last time. That turned out to be a VERY good decision.

Now, despite the Zoanthrope being the focus of all this trouble, the three techies didn't actually pay that much attention to it most of the time. For one thing, after Tink'd fixed the flickering problem, its stasis field had been working surprisingly well; it was always the devices scattered around the room that needed maintenance. Secondly, the Zoanthrope had gotten incredibly creepy after Sarge's slagged hull-metal shield had gotten wrapped

around its head. It never moved obviously, being in stasis and all, but you always felt it was watching you under the metal, and the longer you looked at it the worse it got.

In retrospect that was probably what some fancy-pants Inquisitory Super Agent Guy would've called a "clue", but we were a little too busy for that shit. We just accepted that the metal-faced xenos psyker that looked like a cross between a fetus, a snake, and a cockroach was creepy, and felt no need to examine said creepiness for a supernatural element.

Anyway, all this meant that, when Tink crawled under the stasis unit to poke around and asked Fio to watch the field for any flickers, it was actually the first time anyone had really looked hard at the Zoanthrope since we'd re-entered the warp. After a minute or so, Fio asked Tink if he'd touched anything, and when the techie replied in the negative, the little Tau scientist explained that there was some sort of interference pattern inside the field. Tink looked at the focusing array above his head, which looked perfectly intact to him, and asked what the pattern had looked like, and whether it might be yet another psychic phenomena. Fio walked a circuit around the stasis unit, turned his head from side to side, and reported:

↳There's actually two focal points, both positioned right behind the Zoanthrope. They're sort of black and smoky, and shaped like little... wings?

So no shit, there we were, in the middle of the warp, too low on fuel to even consider stopping, when we realized our captive ghost-summoning insectoid xenos psyker, was actually a ghost-summoning insectoid xenos DAEMON-HOST.

I mean... what the hell? Seriously. Just how in the name of the Emperor are you supposed to respond to something like that? There's bad situations, and then there's comically bad situations...

Anyway, it actually took us a little while to figure out that the Zoanthrope was possessed. None of the techies knew much about daemons, and of the three of them, only Jim had been on the Occurrence Border during its maiden voyage as an Inquisitorial vessel and he hadn't actually encountered the daemon that had eventually possessed the Cogtaine. So the three of them gawked at the Zoanthropes miniature smoky wings for a while, debated whether it was something that could be ignored, and eventually commed the rest of us to ask if we had any ideas what was going on.





According to the armsmen fighting alongside Sarge, his swears were so vitriolic that they actually turned into little insectoid creatures as they left his mouth, and had to be swatted out of the air as they tried to bite people. Given how warpy his section of the line had gotten by that point, none of us questioned this.

Doc burst into hysterical laughter when he heard. This caused a little bit concern among the medical staff, especially the two nurses who'd seen him melting people with Tyranid biotoxin. Sister Valerie carefully relieved him of his scalpel, dosed him with something relaxing but not incapacitating, and took over Gravis watch while he giggled his way down to the Cells to see the wings for himself.

After a brief period of mindless panic, Nubby denied all responsibility for what had happened, and then had to explain to those of us who hadn't been there what exactly wasn't his fault.

Twitch just screamed "I TOLD YOU IT WAS DAEMONIDS" into his combead until Tink muted him.

Over the course of the next few hours everything that had been happening started making sense.

There was some initial confusion about how it was all possible, since the Xenology Adept kept telling us absolutely could not possess Tyranids. He gave this big lecture on how the Hive Mind worked then trotted out that old line about Nids not having minds or souls (though anyone who's seen a Daemon Engine stomping around a battlefield can tell you neither of those are strictly required). Anyway, the man was obviously full of shit: I mean, we could all see the wings, just sitting there being all smoky and sinister, if a bit on the tiny side. Can't really argue with that.

So, whether it was a matter of a dozen unimaginable coincidences coming together to make the impossible possible, or if the Emperor had just decided to screw with us, we had the first known case of a possessed Tyranid sitting in the Cells. We hoped Oak's research buddy would be happy with it, because we weren't going to go back and get another one.



Where the daemon had come from was a little more clear. Back dur-

ing our first trip on the Occurrence Border, we'd come down to the Psyker Containment Cells and found them occupied by five child psykers in stasis, and a half-pint daemonhost who wasn't. After we looted a crucial part of the machinery restraining the daemonhost (as well as the five non-possessed children), the thing had chased us across the ship. It had looked like a kid with massive wings made of smoke, curly horns, and glowing eyes, at least until we shot its host body to pieces and it ran off to get a new one.

The daemon came back a little later as a knarloc with the same wings and such, and had then gotten tangled up in a fight with a giant daemonic-servitor-titan thing that the tech-priest acting as the ship's Captain had been constructing for whatever insane reason. That had ended with the knarloc being incorporated into the servi-titan and daemon taking over the Cogtaint.

It took some doing, but we eventually destroyed the servi-knarlo-titan, pitched the Cogtaint into the bridge-lift's shaft, and cranked the gravity up as high as it would go. That'd done for the Cogtaint, and between reducing its host to a greasy crater and our subsequent exit from the warp, we'd assumed that was last we'd seen of the smoke-winged daemon as well. The fact that the Cogtaint's crater could never be repaired, even by replacing entire sections of floor and wall, and the way it screamed at people in binary probably should've tipped us off.

So we'd dismissed the glowing, screaming crater as just another Occurrence Border thing (trust me, it doesn't sound stupid after you've been on the ship for a while), and got on with our lives. It didn't come to our attention again until we began refurbishing the Cells in preparation for the Zoanthrope, and had discovered that there was some sort of daemonic portal linking the cell that'd held the daemon's first host to the crater. Once again we dismissed it as just another phenomena, and pretty much forgot about it. In retrospect, even without the daemonic involvement, it should've occurred to us that having some sort of warp-portal INSIDE of all the psi-shielding and warp-presence shrouding was a very bad thing.

Not being daemonologists, we had no idea whether the daemon had been lurking in the cell or crater all this time, or if it had actually returned from the warp via the places it had tainted. Either way, the presence of a restrained and frequently unconscious psychic being, with no Emperor or Hive Mind to protect it, must have looked incredibly tasty to it. The daemon had probably been slowly corrupting the Zoanthrope ever since we caught it (How does that work with a giant bug anyway? Does the daemon tempt it promises of sugar or something?), but we felt fairly certain that the that Sarge knocking the



Zoanthrope out consciousness and into the tainted cell had been the final straw.



After we'd figured out that we were dealing with (as Twitch put it) a Daemonthrope, and one that was sort of connected to this warp-portal which bypassed all of the psi-shielding around the cells to boot, all the stuff with the ghost-nids made sense. Well sort of, we still didn't know what exactly they were, but at least it was clear how they were being called into existence despite the Zoanthrope being contained in the cell. None of us were experts on imprisoning daemonhosts, but we were pretty sure it took a bit more than a few psi-suppressors and a stasis field to do the job properly.

Of course knowing that you're doing something wrong isn't the same as knowing how to do it right. The Inquisition had always operated under the assumption that daemon-lore was a very need-to-know subject, and in the Inquisition's opinion a bunch of dumb grunts most certainly did NOT need to know. Mind you, up until this shit-show we'd agreed with that assessment. None of us had ever imagined that we'd wind up trying to prevent a daemonic possessed psychic bug from summoning tides of ethereal tyranids, or at least not without just killing the damned thing and calling it a day. Anyway, the point is that our team's combined knowledge of daemon-binding (or whatever you call it) consisted of a suspicion that it probably involved a bunch of runic circles, holy icons, and sinister looking chains that weren't actually connected to anything load-bearing. The key words there were "suspicion" and "probably" by the way.

So lacking even the slightest idea how to handle the Daemon directly, we decided to hope like hell that dealing with the source of the problem would somehow fix everything. All of our highly developed problem solving skills were focused on the daemonic-tainted cell, and a complex plan of action was formed.

Which is to say that we set up a blast shield and tossed half a dozen detpacks into it.

Of course the "just blow up the daemonic portal" plan didn't work, but y'know it MIGHT have, and it would've been really silly not to check.

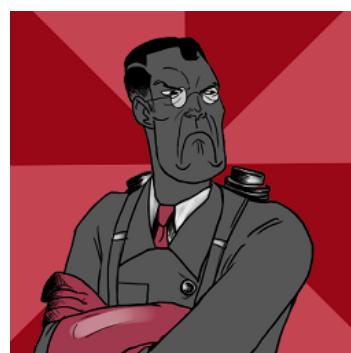
So, after establishing that all we'd managed to do was severely damage the shrine surrounding the Cogtaine's crater and scare the shit out of a bunch of tech-acolytes working on the bridge-lift, we moved on to our next low-effort solution. We took one of our three spare pieces of psi-shielding, crammed it into the doorway to the tainted cell, and then slapped a few dozen prayer seals

on it. When that didn't work we added the two other pieces of shielding, and when THAT didn't work, we finally allowed Fumbles to take a look. That was a nervous ten minutes, let me tell you.

Despite our very well-founded concerns, letting the accident-prone psyker poke at the daemonic warp-portal worked out fine. Mostly because the psi-suppressors kept him from doing anything when he eventually spazzed out. Afterwards, once Fumbles had been woken up, and Twitch had stopped abjuring him and throwing holy water around, the psyker blearily reported that nothing we were doing actually had any effect on the flow of daemonic energy between the tainted cell and the Daemonthrophe. However, he was reasonably sure that increasing the distance between to two would at least reduce the flow a bit. Since moving the warp-portal wasn't an option, the only way to accomplish this was by moving the Daemonthrophe, plus the various pieces of technology which kept it from killing us all.

The task of figuring out how to more or less relocate the entirety of the Cells fell to Tink, who immediately declared it to be impossible. This didn't stop him from calling a council of the nerds, including Ol' Bill and Hannah, to figure out exactly how impossible it was though.

Tink and his little think-tank quickly established that the only system in the Cells that could be easily moved was the psi-suppression. This was primarily because they'd stopped bothering to bolt the suppressors back down between maintenance cycles, so they were all just taped to the floors and walls. On the other hand, the psi-shielding and warp-presence Shroud, which Fumbles said were hiding the Daemonthrophe's location from its ghost-nids, were pretty much built into the structure of the Cells. Just removing them would require days of cutting, during which the ghost-nids would probably swarm the Cells. Finally, the stasis-unit restraining the Daemonthrophe was NOT designed to be moved. Jostling the focusing array could cause problems ranging from flickers to spontaneous bisection of anything inside the stasis field, and power



efficiency hadn't even been considered in its design so running it off a battery was going to be tricky.

The first problem to be solved was the stasis field. Tink and Fio realized that they didn't have to fix everything wrong with the Daemonthrone's stasis unit, since they had a much-better one sitting nearly-finished, just a few rooms away. Their decision to repurpose Gravis' stasis unit almost got the two of them stabbed by an enraged medic, but luckily they were able to propose a solution for keeping Gravis alive as well.

Tink explained, from behind an overturned table, that there was no reason that the nearly-dead Space Marine couldn't just be thrown into the Daemonthrone's stasis unit after the bug had been relocated. Doc had not been happy with leaving his patient, even in stasis, next a daemonic-tainted hole in reality, but eventually agreed and allowed Tink to flee the medbay.

I'M NOT LAZY, I'M
ENERGY EFFICIENT

The psi-shielding and the Shroud were much trickier problems, and a fair bit of time was spent lamenting that the whole mess at the Station had ruined our original plans to requisition enough materials to completely rebuild the Cells. After a few hours of trying to figure out how to pull everything out and set it back up before a tide of ghost-nids killed everyone, the ludicrous proposal of cutting a massive hole through the ship, and moving the Cells (minus the warpy bit) as one big-ol' thingy was put forward. Luckily Ol' Bill saved us all from that retarded plan when he

decided to take a second look at the list of parts that'd need to moved.

Consummate scrounger that he was, Ol' Bill could typically suggest five different alternatives for any missing critical part, and he was better than a savant when it came to keeping track of what had be used where and whether it would be missed. His abilities had let him down a little bit when it came to the highly-specialized systems in the Cells, but they came to our rescue in a big way when he asked whether a psi-shield panel was anything like a psi-focussing panel. After some debate, Tink pointed out that it was all moot, since there weren't any psi-focussing panels in the inventory; Ol' Bill asked whether anyone thought our headless astropath still needed the ones lining his sanctum.

One quick check of the dried-brains-splattered sanctum later, it was established the panels which focussed incoming astropathic messages on the chair in the middle of the sanctum could indeed be repurposed as shields. Fio, who'd become the resident expert on the underlying theory of most of the systems in the Cells, claimed it was just a matter of tweaking the ma-

chnery that aligned the crystal matrices in each panel, and began estimating how long it would take to move them all the bay that'd been picked for the new Cells.

Tink asked why the hell we should bother moving them.

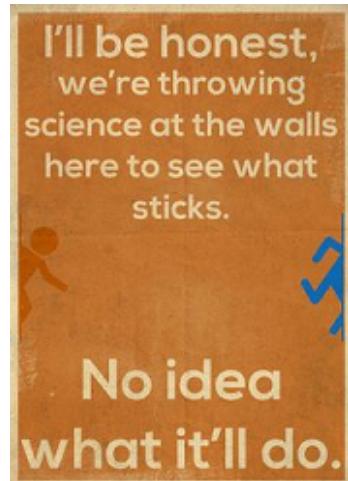
The decision to just repurpose the Occurrence Border's bridge-adjacent Astropathic Sanctum as a Daemonthrope holding area was reached quickly by Tink and his fellow nerds. It took a little more time and a LOT more shouting for Sarge, the Captain, and the Navigator (whose sanctum was next door) to come around, and that time was used to tackle the final problem: the warp-presence Shroud.

The Shroud was a device which hid the warp-presence of anyone inside from those outside. Such devices were typically used to hide vulnerable psykers from hungry daemons during warp-travel, but they were also great for hiding from other psykers. Since the Occurrence Border had been smuggling child-psykers, a practice which the Inquisition SORT OF frowned upon, the Cells had a very good Shroud, though it hadn't done jack to hide the Zoanthrope from the daemon that'd been lurking inside its radius. Anyway, this well-made Shroud consisted of a fair-sized pile of arcane machinery which was unfortunately hooked to some sort of projector matrix embedded in the psi-shields.

Once again it seemed like days of disassembling while fighting off a ghost-nid onslaught would be needed, but Fio had a better idea. The little Tau scientist claimed that the block of wraithbone he'd been playing with for the last few weeks had some interesting anti-warp properties, and he was 72.361It was a mark of everyone's exhaustion that the annoying little xenos' idea was accepted without argument.

So roughly twenty-six sleepless hours after our discovery of the Zoanthrope's wings, we'd designed a new Cell to contain it. Thirty hours of hard work and heroic ghost-tyranid killing after that, the new cell was complete, and all that was left to do was transport the barely-restrained xenos daemonhost through a ship filled with the ravenous insectoid warp-ghosts it'd called into existence.

When Tink said everything was ready, all of us plus Fio, and Gravis' mobile medical monstrosity gathered in the cells. During the prior few days we'd managed to hold off ghost-nids and keep the Space Marine alive de-



spite a steady increase in the Daemonthrone's power over the ship and the irreparable failure of one of the psi-suppressors. During the little free time we'd had, a route had been plotted from the Cells, up through the lower decks to the bridge-lift, and finally to the Sanctum. The corridors were cleared of impediments, all the armsmen that could be spared from the main lines were stationed at checkpoints along the route, and the new stasis unit had been mounted on a motorized cargo pallet. When the last of the preparations were finished, Sarge alerted the Captain, who sent out a ship-wide warning, and we got ready for the most hectic prisoner transfer of our lives.

The first step of transfer was moving the Daemonthrone from its old stasis unit to the new mobile one. There's probably a whole chapter on this sort of thing in whatever the Inquisitorial equivalent of the Uplifting Primer is. You're probably supposed to use all sorts of seals, powerful psykers, and some of that special Tyranid tranquilizer the Scythes had. We made do with a few ropes, a ramp made out of a wall-panel that no one would miss, and a cargo net.



Tink lined up his long-distance manipulation tool (see: poking stick) on the Stasis Unit's Off-Button, then jabbed it and dove for cover. As the stasis field vanished, a pair of deep-red spots appeared on the Daemonthrone's metal-covered face, and its stubby little smoke-wings suddenly expanded to a full meter in length. A horrible soundless screech echoed through the Cells, thousands of insects began pouring out of every crack and crevice, and a corona of black-edged green lighting formed around Daemonthrone. Then the cargo net yanked it off its grav plates, and dragged it face-first down the corrugated metal ramp.

The Daemonthrone flailed around a little, but didn't have enough strength to offset the manly (and womanly) muscle of four guardsmen. We dragged it, screeching and kicking up sparks, into the waiting stasis unit, and Fio turned on the field. The insects around the room vanished in little puffs of black and green smoke, but a faint echo of the psychic screeching lingered, and the spots where the Daemonthrone's expanded wings met the edge of the stasis field smoked in an ominous way. Sarge decided that this shit was too eldritch for his liking yelled at Tink, Fio, and Doc to move their asses.

Doc was in a bit of a panic on account of how insects had been crawling out of Gravis' torso-wound during the Daemonthrone transfer, and the fact that every life-support system hooked up the Marine was screaming for attention. He dithered around trying to figure out what to treat first, until Sarge resolved things by hefting Gravis off his life-support bed. Doc tried

and failed to keep everything connected as the torso-fied Space Marine was hauled across the room, then just gave up and helped Sarge. Gravis started to spasm and spurt all sorts of disgusting fluids as he was pushed into the bubble of null-g in the middle of the stasis unit, prompting Doc to panic and hit the On-Button a little early. He apologised profusely as he bandaged Sarge's slightly-shorter finger, and sprayed disinfectant over everything Gravis had dribbled on.

While Gravis was moved, Tink and Fio ran around directing us and their drones in the process of moving the psi-suppressors. Extensions were spliced into the power cords of each of the hacked-together Tau-Imperial hybrid devices, and a jumbled circle of arcane machinery was formed around the Daemonthrope's stasis-pallet. Then, piece by piece, each of the psi-suppressors was fastened to the pallet, until it bristled with various engines, antennas, crystals, and less-identifiable pieces of tech.

When all the suppressors were fastened down and connected to the large battery array mounted on the front of the pallet, and Gravis was safe-ish in the Daemonthrope's old Stasis Unit (we were pretty sure that his expression of pain and horror wasn't anything to worry about), we readied our weapons and got ready for the hard part. Sarge sent a final warning to the Captain, and counted down. As Sarge reached zero, Spot 2.0 opened the outer door to the Cells, and all across the ship the tyranid warp-ghosts paused in their pursuit of re-positioning armsmen, turned to focus on us, and solidified.

We came out of the Cells at a dead sprint, or at least those of us on foot did. Fio was perched in a semi-clear spot on the Pallet behind the Daemonthrope, gibbering at his drones in Tau-speak and doing his best to keep everything from spontaneously exploding. Tink had a similar spot on battery-pack, and was splitting his attention between steering the Pallet and scouting ahead with Spot. Twitch and Sarge were on point, pulling ahead to cover each corner and doorway. Aimy and Doc were keeping an eye on our flanks from the middle of the group. Finally Nubby was squeezed into a crevice at the back of the Pallet, where he was simultaneously able to cover our rear and avoid doing any running.



To our immense relief, we made it to the end of the corridor without the Daemonthrope doing anything warpy or a swarm of ghost-nids just appearing around us. Tink and Fio had said that leaving the Cells wouldn't suddenly grant the Daemonthrope more power, but the rest of us hadn't been so sure. Anyway, after that first straightaway we began winding through the area around the Cells in a manner that could be described as "drunken". Despite all appearances though, it really was the fastest route available.

Due to the chaotic layout of the Occurrence Border, the size of the Pallet, and the amount of the ship occupied by the ghost-nids, the path we'd mapped to the Sanctum was anything but direct. The first leg involved a winding path around the Cells area, which took us dangerously close to ghost-nid territory before depositing us at one of the few major "tilt-corridors" still under our control.

We ran as fast as we could through connecting corridors, across recently cleared storage bays, and up the occasional micro-lift, ignoring the various minor phenomena, maddening whispers, and occasional uncleared technical hazards. Our progress was surprisingly good, possibly because we were lent extra motivation by what sounded like every ghost-nid on the ship baying for our blood, but it wasn't enough to keep us ahead of the entirety of the swarm: the first pack of ghost-nids clawed its way out of an oversized air vent behind us as we exited a short in-bay lift.

Luckily that first pack hadn't included any ghostly termagants or higher forms: it was just a bunch of hormagaunts and rippers, though they were significantly more solid than any we'd encountered during the previous weeks. Solidity aside, we knew how to deal with a bunch of melee hostiles coming up a cover-less corridor. Nubby began picking off the lead bugs with pulse fire, while Twitch dug through his detonators, and the rest of us kept moving. As the bulk of the pack passed a pair of yellow X-marks on the corridor wall behind us, Twitch found the right detonator, and set off two of the frag-mines he'd lined the corridor with. Doc and Aimy paused for a second to help Nubby mop up the stragglers, and then everyone returned to their positions and our flight continued without the Pallet ever losing any speed. As the last of us left the corridor, Twitch armed the rest of the mines, and a minute later we heard them start going off.

Variations of that little scuffle were repeated a dozen times as we escorted the Daemonthrope towards the checkpoint at the start of the tilt-corridor.



The ghost-nids were harder to kill than any we'd encountered during the previous weeks, they took just as much killing as real tyranids despite the way they poofed into smoke when they finally died. On the bright side, the bugs' new solidity seemed to have robbed them of their ability to move through walls, though they made up for it with a freakish ability to home in on us. Wave after wave of the bugs came up behind our little convoy, as well as through the vents on the walls and ceilings, and eventually from ahead of us as our course turned back towards the ghost-nid territory.

The continuous attacks slowed us down a little, but didn't pose a serious threat: they were just Gaunts and Rippers after all, and we were bloody Imperial Guardsmen. Mowing down endless waves of under-armed xenos with superior firepower is what the Emperor made us for. Between Twitch's mines, the early warnings and target marking from Spot the Wonder Drone, and giant pile of pulse-ammo we'd brought along, we dropped most of the nids the second we saw them.

Of course that's not to say that EVERYTHING went our way: either the Daemonthrope was exhibiting some serious power despite its stasis-ed state, or the Occurrence Border's warpy little machine-spirit had a really twisted sense of humor. On four occasions during our twisty run towards the checkpoint at the bottom of the tilt-corridor we ran into phenomena that seemed specifically designed to either slow us down or assist the ghost-nids in killing us.

Two of the delays were frustrating, but non-lethal in and of themselves. Twice, immediately after Spot had flown through a doorway, it slammed shut, and re-opened on an all-too-familiar giant room filled with fire when we reached it ourselves. The first time it happened Twitch led us on a winding detour which had involved several ghost-nid attacks in tight corners, the second time Tink just plasma-ed us a new door next to the fiery one.

The Daemonthrope, or maybe just our terrible luck, struck again at the midway point of that first leg of our journey, when we all simultaneously ran out of breath and were deafened by a shill and chittering keening sound. It wouldn't have been that much of a problem, except for the fact that it coincided with attacks from our front and rear by waves of gaunts. The sudden slowdown and inability to communicate might've been lethal for our exposed pointmen if the rest of us hadn't been on our toes. Doc and Aimy, operating completely independently, both tossed frags at the pursuing swarm,



and grabbed a hold of the motorized Daemonthrope pallet right as Tink floored it and Nubby took care of the stragglers. They arrived just a little too late to prevent the frontal attack from reaching Sarge and Twitch, but Sarge was a big boy who could handle a few scrapes and scratches, and Twitch had just hidden behind the beefy noncom until relief arrived.

The final serious phenomena occurred only two rooms from the checkpoint, and very nearly got us all killed.

We were crossing a storage bay that apparently held tanks of drinking water, headlight fluid, pressurized liquid chlorine, and toothpaste, when a pack of ghost-nids clawed a hole through a door on Aimy's flank. As she started picking the bugs off, a sort of howling spectral gale manifested in the corridor behind the bugs, and three of them were propelled through the hole like angry insectoid cannonballs. One gaunt was shot out of the air, another pancaked against the toothpaste tank, and the third landed on Aimy.

Aimy's panicked snapshot missed the gaunt, passed a centimeter in front of Fio's face, and exploded one of the crystal-tipped suppression pylons mounted on the Daeomonthrope's pallet. The lights abruptly went out, frost began to form along the walls, and the bay's vox system began screaming at us in a mix of Jantine Battle-Cant and Hrud. All of us except Aimy, who was trying to keep the gaunt from eating her face, and Nubby, who helpfully shot it off her, activated our tac-lights and scanned the room for any sort

of new warpy threat while Fio tried to repair the suppressor and Tink kept the pallet moving. Our rubbernecking was brought to an abrupt halt by three sudden realizations. Firstly, that the ghost-nid on top of Aimy was reforming instead of dissipating into smoke. Secondly, the screaming vox was just a leakage alarm as opposed to some sort of warp phenomena. And finally, that Aimy's shot had terminated in the pressurized chlorine tank.

Aimy practically teleported out from under the reforming gaunt, which Nubby shot a few more times for good measure, and we bailed out of that bay so fast that we literally stamped the nids coming at us from ahead. As we exited Doc attempted to close the bay behind us, only to find a little yellow note apologizing for scrounging the door's control panel. He settled



for tossing a nade at the now-reformed gaunt and the other nids that were moving through the gas with impunity.

We hit the tilt-corridor checkpoint at a dead sprint with the ghost-nids and gas hard on our heels. It took the armsmen defending the barricade-packed fourway junction a few seconds to register our presence, which was understandable given the way the bugs they were holding off had started reforming as we approached. When the sergeant-at-arms leading the group finally realized we were there, he nearly put a round in the Daemonthrope out of sheer reflex, but Sarge caught him in time, and started belting out orders.

Our initial plan had been to take a breather, restock on ammo, and swap out the Pallet's batteries for the ones we'd stashed here, but the reforming nids and the inexorably approaching gas-cloud meant there wasn't time. Each of us grabbed what we could in the ten seconds it took Sarge to order the armsmen to get ready to bail, preferably to somewhere airtight, and Tink coupled the pallet to the cart-thing waiting at the edge of the tilt-corridor. Fio, still busy trying to fix the psi-suppressor Aimy had shot, screamed at the tech-acolyte holding the replacement batteries to just hop on the cart, and followed the terrified cogboy aboard.

An entire thirty seconds after our arrival, the armsmen manning the barricades beat feet. By the forty second mark, a mix of chlorine gas and warp-spawned tyranids had filled the checkpoint. Ten seconds after that, the detpack Twitch had left on the pile of leftover ammo turned the whole place into a gas and gore filled crater. We would've stopped to high-five each other, but we were a little too busy holding on for dear life as we raced down (or up, depending on how you looked at it) the tilt-corridor.

Now, those of you who haven't been aboard a ship as kludged together as the Occurrence Border might be wondering what "tilt-corridors" are. According to Ol' Bill, they were grav-lifts (shafts with angled grav-plates so you can just walk up them like a corridor instead of waiting for a lift) from back before his time when the Occurrence Border still had an organized ship-wide gravitic field. At some point during the transition to the current ad-hoc system, either some sort of titanic accident or the hard work of one of his predecessors had twisted all four shafts into massive ramps



which paradoxically pulled upwards. The end result was that inside the tilt-corridors going up-ship (as we wanted to do) was downhill, and a pretty steep downhill at that.

So picture a three hundred meter long slide with a six-person cargo-cart at the top. Now add six guardsmen, a Tau scientist, and a terrified tech-acolyte, and a Daemonthrope-laden pallet. Finally, put a cargo-bay and a ninety degree gravity shift at the bottom, and give the whole thing a push. It was pretty high on the list of the stupidest ways we'd ever travelled, or at the top if you lumped it in with "traversing the warp in a glorified space-hulk", but at least Spot was there to record the terrifying amount of air we got as we reached the bottom of the corridor and shot out into the bay.

Now when I say "terrifying amount of air" I mean TERRIFYING. The only reason we didn't hit the 10-meter high ceiling of the cargo bay, was because of the cluster of ghostly gaunts we hit first. We exploded into the bay in a shower of chitin and ichor, sailed over a barricaded group of armsmen, passed just under a massive light fixture, came down on another cluster of ghost-nids, and skidded to a juicy halt in front of the armsmen protecting the doors to the aft cargo-lift.

The armsmen stared at us, we stared back, and the elderly engineer fiddling with the doors yelled at everyone to keep it down while he worked.

Being uncomfortably aware of the way the tyranid-goo we'd landed in was reforming, we didn't waste any time sitting around boggling at the fact that we were still alive. The cargo-cart was ditched, and we squoze passed the armsmen to the lift door, where the white-haired engineer informed us that it wasn't quite ready yet. Sarge drew a breath and got ready to scream at the geezer about our impending deaths at the claws of a swarm of reanimating warp-bugs, but deflated when Tink, who knew the engineer, quietly explained that it would only result in a lecture about young people and their myriad failings. Left with

a lot of unspent rage, Sarge began pouring pulse-fire into the surrounding ghost-nids, and yelled at us to get off our asses and do the same.

We all stepped up to help Sarge and the armsmen play whack-a-bug, except for the few of us who had more useful things to do. Tink jumped off his driver's seat on the Pallet, grabbed the replacement batteries from the practically-catatonic tech-acolyte, and began replacing the nearly-expended ones powering the Daemonthrope's stasis unit and the suppressors. Doc attempted to patch the defensive wounds that Aimy had acquired when the



gaunt had landed on her, but got told to go fondle someone who didn't have shooting to do, and switched his attention to a badly wounded armsman. Fio held the small tau-ish device he'd been fiddling with up to the busted suppressor, and declared his genius as the dead bugs around us stopped reforming and began to drift apart.

The armsmen cheered as the ghost-nid advance slowed, and so did we when the engineer whacked the door control a few times with a spanner and it began to grind open. No one noticed when one of the tendrils of smoke rising from where the Daemonthrophe's wings intersected the stasis field twisted towards the vox-system set in the bay's ceiling. At least not until the vox began screeching a high-pitched chittering sound.

Now, an uneducated plebian might have had mistaken the sound coming from the vox for mindless tyranid chittering, but we immediately identified it as binary, and an attempt by the Daemonthrophe to control any nearby servitors, servo-skulls, and cogboys. A Guardsman's senses are just that precise. Well, no, actually no they aren't, but it was sort of obvious after the tech-acolyte smashed the psi-suppressor Fio had just fixed.

As usual, Twitch was the first to respond, even if he was actually operating under the assumption that the Mechanicus had been allied with the Daemonids, and possibly the Orks, all along, and this was just the first stage of their uprising against the divine light of the Emperor. Luckily, we sorted that out for him before we ran into Jim or Hannah again, and even more luckily (for the tech-acolyte at least) Twitch couldn't get line of sight past our panicking Tau scientist. So instead of blowing off the hapless tech-acolyte's head, Twitch opened fire on the engineer's two servo-skulls, taking them down before they could do any damage to the Pallet. The engineer responded by throwing his spanner at Twitch, but it only bounced off his helmet and the man apologized later, so there were no hard feelings.

The rest of us took a little longer than Twitch to react, which meant the tech-acolyte had time to damage another psi-suppressor before Tink brained him with a battery. As the second suppressor failed, a ship-quake shook the bay, and the dead ghost-nids stopped dissipating and began to flow together into large piles.

When the first tyranid warrior emerged from the goo, and began hosing the barricades with death-spitter rounds, we decided that it was really time that we got moving again, and sprinted for the open lift. Actually



it wasn't as unanimous a decision as most of our retreats were, Doc had become rather fixated on the armsman he was treating, and wound up dragging the partially-disemboweled man along with us onto the lift. Also, as we ran by the half-conscious acolyte, Twitch raised the possibility of continued Daemonthropic possession and lift-sabotage, and suggested that blowing the cogboy's head head off was "the only way to be sure". Nubby ended the ethical debate before it started by kicking the tech-acolyte into the floor-hatch the engineer had opened as an escape route for himself and the armsmen. Judging by the crashes and bangs, the maintenance shaft went down three or four levels, but cogboys tend to be fairly sturdy, and he looked fine when we saw him again a few weeks later. Though possibly that had been some other tech-acolyte who was terrified of us and had an impressive collection of ladder-rung shaped dents.

Once aboard the lift, we shut the door on the deteriorating situation in the cargo-bay, and began our slow ascent to the main cargo corridor. Our ride was accompanied by the sound of thousands of ghost-nid clawing at the shaft's doors, and this was made even worse by the mixture of cheery music and daemonic screeches playing over the lift's speakers. Those of us who weren't attempting to save arbitrarily-acquired armsmen, repair the damaged suppressors, or comm the Cogitator Adept for a sitrep, scanned the shaft above us, and tried to anticipate where the first breakthrough would occur. It was a very high stress situation, especially after Sarge learned that the checkpoint at the top of the lift was under heavy attack, which is why several of us reflexively started shooting the walls when the lift suddenly stopped and the lights went out.



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There were a few seconds of wild panic, and then Tink and Fio got the wide-angle illuminators on their drones activated, and we realized a few things. Firstly, the sound of angry tyranids clawing at the shaft had vanished, as had the re-assuring background noise of our combeads and the humming buzz of the overloaded psi-suppressors, but not the annoying lift-music. Secondly, the shaft walls were bleeding, and it was human blood instead of tyranid ichor for a change, also the tormented-looking

faces that occasionally pressed out of the gore then faded again didn't look insectoid either. Finally, and most worryingly to those of us who knew the Occurrence Border's foibles, the level we'd stalled at didn't have a big cargo-bay sized door, just an ordinary looking hatch. Oh and Doc's armsman was dead, but that probably had more to do with the cantaloupe-sized hole in his gut than anything eldritch.

Fio, after verifying that the psi-suppressors were still functioning, just not being overloaded for a change, jumped at the chance to do some repairs, and completely ignored the totally-normal-door. The rest of us gathered around it, and held a completely silent debate, which ended with our fearless leader stepping forward to open it while we got ready to blow apart whatever horrors waited on the other side.

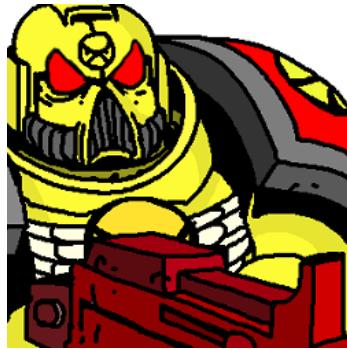
As the door swung open, we all lowered our weapons. Twitch whimpered, Aimy and Doc swore, Tink set Spot to "record", Sarge facepalmed, and Nubby cheerily waved at the smoldering, bearded skeleton at the head of the poker table, who laughed and waved back.

Our arrival didn't go unnoticed by the other players at the poker table. The charred skeleton with a chainsword at his side, turned and waved as well, and the exit-wound-faced man on the far side raised his beer to us before messily dumping it into the approximate area of his mouth. This caught the attention of the last man at the table, a massive angry-looking fellow in Scout armor, who looked surprisingly normal if you ignored the telephone-pole sized tyranid talon lodged in his chest. He turned towards the door, knocking drinks and chips everywhere with his chest-talon, then went wide-eyed as he saw us. The man immediately leapt to his feet and began striding towards the door while ranting about cowards, scavengers, and heretics.

We automatically raised our weapons again, but before the ranting scout marine got much closer, the sword-bearing skeleton and nearly-headless guardsman shared an exasperated look, got up, and grabbed him by the elbows. They didn't actually have enough strength to stop the scout, but then the bearded skeleton came over and pulled down on the talon sticking out of the large man's back, causing him to topple backwards. The scout marine was dragged back to the table, screaming at us the whole way, mostly about his sergeant. Specifically how our incompetence had gotten him cut in half, the way we'd lost, stolen, or sold most of his gear and his legs, and how we'd finally left him, alone and dying, in a daemonicallly tainted hole. This annoyed Doc, who thought he'd done a pretty good job keeping Gravis sort-of



alive all things considered, and said so.



On the list of sane things to do, arguing with a dead Scout Marine is pretty close to the bottom, but that didn't stop Doc; or Nubby and Tink for that matter. All three of them started throwing excuses, explanations, and insults at the impaled Scout, who expanded his list of grievances to include: being too cowardly or stupid to shoot down a flyrant, abandoning a shuttle full of his battle-brothers in a xenos-filled backwater, and getting him stuck in some shitty poker room for all eternity. Nubby responded by calling his Primarch fat.

The bearded skeleton, who'd been snickering at the exchange and Sarge's pained reaction to it, fell over laughing at that remark, and the argument petered out. Once he'd regained his breath, the skeleton apologized for the new guy's complete lack of perspective, and then immediately went on to congratulate us for finally doing something about "Frank". Since he gestured towards our pallet when he said that, we assumed that he meant the Deamonthrope, and didn't ask why it had a name. Sarge adopted his best poker face, thanked the skeleton for his praise, suggested that it time we got moving again, and began to shut the door. The bearded skeleton held up a finger, and suggested we take the lift all the way up to level 39. Tink, ever the pedant, pointed out that the lift only went to level 26.5, which prompted yet another bout of knee slapping laughter from the skeleton.

Acting as if we'd said the most hilariously stupid thing he'd ever heard, the bearded skeleton repeated Tink's statement to his three companions, two of which joined him in laughing. After a few seconds, the faceless guardsman gurgled something, which prompted the spokes-skeleton to make a "get a load of this guy" gesture at him, and ask us if we minded. Without even thinking, Sarge responded with shrug, then flinched backwards as the head-shot corpse suddenly appeared at the doorway, and began to lean out into the lift.

Talking to the familiar denizens of the poker room was one thing, but one of them coming out was quite another. Most of us raised our weapons, and Sarge tried to slam the door, but Twitch grabbed his arm, and gestured at the rest of us to put the guns away and back up. The nearly-headless guardsman gave Twitch an appreciative sounding gurgle, and reached an arm out towards the lift-control panel.

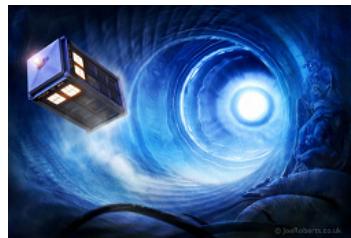
As the corpse's arm passed over the threshold its flesh on it began to rot and bubble, and the lights on the drones and our armor began to flicker. With a cracking pop, the annoying lift music cut out, and was replaced by immensely creepy children's songs, which the blood-faces on the shaft's walls began singing along to. Twitch began rocking back and forth and singing along as well, and for some reason Fio joined in too. Aimy told them both to stop being crazy; prompting Twitch to start giggling and Fio to complain about how he was just trying to fit in, and we really needed to document what was and wasn't considered crazy in our backwards culture.

When its rotting arm reached the control-panel, the head-shot guardsman began leaning his head out to get a look at what he was doing. We all reflexively looked away, and didn't see exactly what happened next, but there was an indescribably foul smell, and a layer of frost formed on everything in the lift except for the Daemonthope's stasis unit. Then the frost and smell abruptly vanished, the singing stopped, and we looked back to see the guardsman lumbering back into the poker room, looking as normal as anyone with a massive crater in their head can.

The charred spokes-skeleton laughed at us, gestured towards the button labeled "39" that had appeared at the top of the control panel, asked if that was better, and told us to have fun. Behind him, the sword-bearing skeleton paused from restraining the Scout and waved, then told us not to fuck up because he had money on us.

The last thing we saw before Sarge closed the door was the two skeletons levering the Scout up, and the head-shot guardsman sitting down at the bar next to a vague ghostly shape that hadn't been there earlier. We noted the absence of Doc's recently-expired armsman, and unanimously agreed to never speak of him again.

When the door was firmly shut, we all stood around waiting to see if anything else was going to happen. After a few seconds, Nubby cheerily announced that "dat wen' awligh", clomped over to the lift-control panel, and pressed the new button before anyone could think to stop him. All of us swore at the little trooper as the lift launched upwards like a booster rocket had been attached to it, and a sensation disturbingly similar to a bad warp-transit rolled over us. It took us about eight



seconds for the lift to reach level 39. This was admittedly a great improvement over its usual speed, but that didn't quite make up for the general unpleasantness of the ascent, and the way we were all launched a meter into the air when it slammed to a stop.

We staggered to our feet, attempted to look around, and realized that we were somehow unable to direct our gaze at anything but the floor and the wall at the front of the lift, which held yet another door that didn't belong in a lift-shaft. Nubby scampered towards the lift-control panel again, only to find himself suspended in the air by his collar. Sarge handed him to Aimy, walked over the panel, and briefly perused the options before giving up and just hitting the "open door" button. It slid open to reveal a short unlit hallway that was just large enough for the Pallet, and another door.

Lacking any better ideas, we entered the hallway, and were totally unsurprised when the door slammed shut behind us. What DID surprise us was the words "OUTER AIRLOCK DOOR (for real this time)" stenciled on its inside. Tink spoke for all of us when he suggested getting through the inner door as fast as possible.



On the far side of the door, we found a bunk-room full of confused crewmen. When asked, they confirmed that we were indeed on level 39, and only a short distance away from the main lift. Sarge reported our position to the Cogitator Adept, who presumably relayed it to everyone else while we resumed our journey to the Astropathic Sanctum.

Our pace was much slower than it had been before. Partially because we didn't have a pre-mapped route anymore, but mostly because there were no ghost-nids up there to attack us. Also, it seemed like Fio had done a great job of repairing the psi-suppressors: they were nearly silent and nothing weird was happening at all. We practically strolled through bays and corridors, congratulating ourselves, and praising the generosity of overcooked skeletons as we walked. This light mood lasted until we reached the entrance to the main lift.

As the door opened to reveal the lift shaft, the tendrils of smoke drifting from the Daemonthropes's wings suddenly snaked around, and shot downwards. Thirteen levels below us, the tendrils pooled against the roof of the shrine that'd been built over the Cogtaine's crater, and then melted through it in a burst of black and green light. A screeching that sounded like a cross

between binary, tyranid, and daemonic echoed up the shaft, and everything very abruptly went to shit.

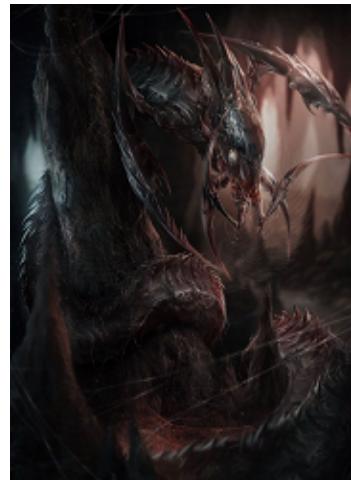
The psi-suppressors began making an overloaded whine, and the two that Fio had just repaired exploded. Fragments of metal and crystal bounced off our carapace armor (and Spot's tau-metal chassis), but Fio and the delicate machinery on the Pallet weren't anywhere near as protected. The little xenos received several nasty gashes on his face and arms, two more suppressors began spewing clouds of smoke, and the stasis unit began emitting a steadily-rising whine that was horribly familiar to us.

Down in the shaft, several things that sounded bigger and warpy-er than any ghost-nid we'd encountered began to howl.

Now, despite occasional bouts of irrationality and insanity, we WERE a bunch of semi-professional badasses, so we didn't just stand around panicking over how screwed we were. Within five seconds of the suppression failure, we had four guns pouring pulse-fire into the indistinct forms crawling up the lift shaft, and Doc and Tink were seeing to Fio and the damaged Pallet.

Doc immediately diagnosed Fio's injuries as non-life-threatening, administered a few bandages and Tau-safe painkillers, and then steered the little xenos over to where Tink was doing his best to keep anything else from exploding. The top priority was the stasis unit, which was making the telltale sound of an imminent flicker. Given that this unit didn't have an array of grav-plates to keep anything inside it from escaping, Tink was operating under the assumption that any flicker over a second long would result in an enraged xenos daemonhost flying into the air and tearing us all to bloody pieces. He and Fio, who was badly shaken but still able to help, set to work stabilizing, splicing, and other technical shit, while Doc ran over to join the rest of us in our delightful game of "shoot the horrible monster before it closes to melee range and kills you".

"Horrible monster" was really the best description we could come up with for what was climbing the shaft around the rising lift platform. By the time Doc had arrived we'd killed at least six of them between us (that's three for Aimy, the showoff, and one each for everyone else), but we still had no idea what the hell the things were. We could see tyranid chitin and claws, but they were mixed in with tentacles and massive bulging eyes, and the whole



mess seemed to be covered with clouds of obscuring smoke. Twitch would up triumphantly declaring them to be his long-predicted Daemonids; none of us bothered to argue with him.



Unlike most our battles with the ghost-nids, our defense of the level 39 lift door (not a battle name for the history books, that) wasn't a cakewalk. Whatever the things climbing up the shaft were, they could take an awful lot of fire, and they moved far faster than anything their size had any right to. We operated as efficiently as possible, calling targets, maintaining fire discipline, and making heavy use of of Spot's marker-thingy, but they steadily gained ground on us, especially where the rising lift platform (a half-shaft wall-crawler, picture a metal rectangle with MASSIVE gears on three sides) blocked our line of sight.

To make matters worse, the Daemonthroe was acting all sorts of uppity. Tink and Fio managed to prevent a stasis flicker, thank the Emperor, but the damned bug was still able to inflict all sorts of inconvenient minor phenomena on us, and we could feel it trying to worm its way into our minds. Presumably it was trying to command us to do its bidding, but unlike the daemons we'd heard about from other Inquisitorial agents, this thing apparently only knew how to speak in binary and tyranid. So it was mostly just incoherent psychic screeching, but it was still very distracting, and left us all with massive headaches, plus a vague hunger for human flesh and motor oil.

So it was pretty obvious to all of us that our situation wasn't sustainable, but luckily it didn't have to be. We really only had to hold out long enough for the lift to reach us, and for us to ride it up to the bridge level, where it was a short sprint to the former Astropathic Sanctum. Not an easy task by any means, but one that was definitely possible. Well, at least we hoped it was possible, because the only other option was setting off the failsafe Twitch had wired to the Daemonthroe's stasis unit, and it would REALLY suck if we wound up just killing the thing after hauling it halfway across the galaxy...

It took an absolutely grueling three minutes for the lift to clank its way up to us, but we managed to hold off the Daemonids (or whatever) until it reached us. We piled aboard and switched to a much-less efficient omnidirectional defense of the edges of the platform, which we immediately realized was not going to be enough to keep them from catching us before we reached the bridge. Not liking the idea of fighting 3-meter tall monsters as they climbed over the edge of the platform and directly into melee range, Sarge

ordered the deployment of our remaining grenades and as many of Twitch's detpacks as he could use without collapsing a wall.

The wave of explosions that rolled down the shaft was like a miniature artillery barrage. It was immensely satisfying to watch bug after bug being knocked off the walls to plummet to the bottom of the shaft. The distant sound of their enraged howls ending in gooey, cracking crashes warmed our hearts, but not as much as what we saw when the smoke cleared: the massed concussive force and the impacts of their falling companions had dislodged almost every one of the climbing Daemonids.

We began picking off the last stragglers, and for a few seconds actually thought we'd bought enough time to reach our destination unmolested. Then the tendrils of smoke drifting down from the Daemonthope twisted into the giant pile of ichor and limbs at the bottom of the shaft, and something freaking massive pulled itself together. It rose out of the goo, turned a horned head towards us, and spread wings that touched the edges of the shaft. The five of us looking over the edge swore, as what looked for all the world like a winged hive tyrant with extra eyes and tentacles launched itself upwards.

We all immediately opened fire on full auto, just indiscriminately hosing the daemonic Flyrant with as much pulse-fire as possible, which accomplished very little aside from making it angry. It was hard to tell whether the thing was shrugging off our fire or regenerating its injuries, but the end result was the same, and Sarge quickly ordered a change of tactics.

Tink ran over and joined us, nailing the Flyrant with big 'ol balls of armor-piercing plasma, while the rest of us focussed our fire on Spot's markerlight. Our target was the thing's wings, specifically the joint where the left one connected to its shoulder, which we figured would be a rather delicate and vulnerable spot in the Flyrant's armor. This proved true, unfortunately the result when we finally burned through was disappointing: the wing did sheer off and drop down the shaft, but the Flyrant didn't follow it down. The Daemonthope's smokey tendrils coalesced around the bloody joint, and then sprang out to form a new wing before the beast had fallen more than a meter. With what was unquestionably a laugh, the Flyrant



resumed its flight.

We were understandably frustrated by this development, but not defeated. We shot the smokey wing a little, just to see if that would work, and when it didn't we shifted our fire to the other wing, mostly out of stubbornness. Once that wing had reformed out of smoke too, and the Flyrant had let out another horrible daemonic laugh, we began directing our fire at the little we could see of its head. Well, most of us did, Nubby and Twitch decided that the Emperor could worry about the structural integrity of the lift shaft, and began unloading the demolitions trooper's pack.

The first detpack pegged the Flyrant on the tip of its pointy head, and knocked it half a meter downwards when it detonated, but didn't do more than blacken and crack then thing's chitinous armor. Before those cracks could heal though, a second pack exploded in the air just behind it, damaging it further and temporarily disrupting the solidity of its wings.



Now, if Twitch hadn't been running low on munitions (it sounds impossible, I know, but several weeks of constant fighting was enough to run down even his stockpiles), this renewed explosive assault might have been enough to stop the Flyrant. Unfortunately, he and Nubby ran out of detpacks far before the giant daemonic bug ran out of whatever kept it alive. That didn't mean Twitch was out of explosives though, just ones that could easily be used against a moving target: when the Flyrant came through the ninth detpack explosion looking as pissed as ever, he instructed Nubby to grab a few parts from Tink or Fio, and began messing with the mixed assortment of mines he had left.

Of course the rest of us weren't just standing around while this went on, we kept putting fire into the Flyrant's head and shoulders, we just had no idea if it was actually accomplishing anything. By our reckoning we'd done far more damage than it'd taken to kill the non-daemonic Flyrant that'd bisected Sergeant Gravis, but even the gaping holes left by Tink's weapon seemed to be filling in almost as fast as we inflicted them.

Nubby quickly acquired the parts Twitch wanted, and then ran around collecting everyone's leftover flash and smoke grenades. Mind you, he didn't bother to ask us for them, the little klepto just sort of drifted by like a rancid breeze and they were gone. Anyway, everything even vaguely explosive was loaded into Twitch's pack, the makeshift detonator was rigged, and the improvised bomb was placed at the edge of the lift, where Tink threw a sizable wrench into the plan by refusing to attach it to Spot.

So right there, with all of us still firing our weapons on full-auto, and with the Flyrant closing in on us, Tink and Twitch started screaming at each other like a pair of five year olds. Twitch said that his bomb HAD to be set off right up against the Flyrant's slightly-less-armored underside, and Tink was equally adamant that Spot 2.0 wouldn't be sent off to the same explosive death as the original Spot. It was one of those philosophical thingies, y'know with an unstoppable madman and an unmovable idiot or something like that, and there was NOT time for this shit.

Realizing that trying to argue with either of them would waste seconds we didn't have, Sarge grabbed the bag-bomb and announced his intention to bounce it off the wall below us, and told Twitch to start a countdown. This was, of course, a terrible idea: bags of explosives with jury-rigged detonators are known for their bouncing capabilities in the same way that Ogryns are known for their rapier wit. But Sarge was already hefting the bag, and he WAS the boss, so we just went with it.

As Twitch counted down, Doc and Aimy each grabbed one of Sarge's legs so he could lean out over the edge, Tink hastily recalled Spot to safe distance, and Nubby helpfully reminded everyone how much it would suck if Sarge missed. Sarge swung the bag back and forth by its straps, gauging its weight, the speed of the incoming Flyrant, and the angle he'd have to hit the wall at, and then as the countdown reached five, decided "to hell with this" and just dropped the thing.

The bomb-bag did not sail through the air, or tumble through space, or anything else poetic-sounding. It just dropped straight down the shaft like a backpack full of explosives, passing bare centimeters in front of the Flyrant's face, and jerked to a halt as one of its straps caught on the daemonic horns the bug had instead of the usual head-spikes.

I like to imagine it stared at the bag cross-eyed for a second, as it swung there, beeping.

Despite the bomb-bag not being positioned in what Twitch had deemed the "sweet spot", the explosion still laminated the Flyrant across three of the shaft's walls. It was a HIGHLY satisfying result, and we would've paused for a second to congratulate ourselves, except for the fact that the entire shaft was making ominous creaking noises, and the thick layer of ichor and chunky bits was writhing and bubbling. Within seconds the whole mess had erupted into those hand-sized bugs that the Daemonthropes liked to summon from time to time, and the last portion of our trip up the lift was spent frantically shooting and stomping the onrushing swarm. It wasn't as serious a threat



as anything else the Daemonthroe had thrown at us, but that final attack was enough to keep us busy until we reached the top of the shaft, and lent us all sorts of motivation to keep moving after we'd reached the bridge.



We sprinted through the Occurrence Border's bridge with a ravenous tide of insects behind us, and hundreds more crawling out of every niche and shadow in the room. The bridge officers and their armsmen, who'd apparently been too busy doing naval things to help us with the daemonic Flyrant, ran around screaming and shooting, while we weaved through them and towards the door to the Astropathic Sanctum.

Perhaps sensing that it was running out of time, the Daemonthroe began emitting a constant stream of inconveniencing phenomena. We skidded across patches of ice, were buffeted by blasts of wind, suffered dozens of painful electrical shocks, and endured the most godawful psychic racket, until we finally reached the door Jim was holding open for us.



The Astropathic Sanctum was a hemispherical room with a massive chair covered with wires and gross-looking stains in the middle. The floor was covered with taped-down wires, markings indicating where suppressor should be installed, and a small pile of furniture and clothes that'd probably belonged to the former Astropath. As we entered the room, Jim slammed the door behind us, Fumbles jumped out of the chair, and Tink brought the pallet to a skidding stop.

The three techies hastily swapped out the cords powering the Stasis unit, and then all of us lifted heavy piece of machinery off the pallet. With a quick heave, the Daemonthroe-holding stasis unit was deposited on the ex-Astropath's chair, where it sat at a very awkward looking, but surprisingly stable angle. As we did the the heavy lifting, Fio ran around to the back side of the chair, where a disorganized pile of Imperial and Tau tech was sitting at the center of a network of cables which spread across the domed ceiling like ivy. The Tau scientist flipped a switch, and let out a panicked scream as nothing happened, then Fumbles plugged the cord one of us had kicked loose back in, and the horrible psychic pressure of the Daemonthroe's mind abruptly vanished.

And that was the end of it, right there. The bugs in the bridge disappeared in puffs of smoke, the majority of the phenomena manifesting through-

out the ship vanished, and all across the ship the ghost-nids lost both their focus and solidity, and stopped re-appearing after death. The Captain, who'd been pushed all the way back into the Gellar Field Generator Room, launched an immediate counter attack, which we decline to participate in on account of how the bridge-lift was probably broken and we were too tired to handle 60 flights of stairs.

We all just sat on the floor of the sanctum, utterly exhausted, watching Tink, Fio, Jim, and Fumbles argue about why the warp-presence-shroud Fio had built around his chunk of wraithbone was acting as a massive, daemon only, psi-suppressor. They seemed very agitated about the whole thing, but the rest of us really didn't care. As far as we were concerned, it just worked, which meant that we won, which meant that it was time for a nap.

We wound up camped in the Daemonthopic Sanctum for a few days, just keeping an eye on the thing, but it stayed put and didn't do anything warpy, even when the non-technomagical psi-suppressors were deactivated for installation. The Daemonthrope was still creepy looking mind you, with the metal-covered face, glowing eyes, and smoky wings, and all that, but it wasn't creepy FEELING anymore. When coupled with the fact that the Cogtain's crater no longer screamed at people (though it still couldn't be repaired), we took that as a clear sign that Fio's wraithbone-thingy had done the trick, and the Daemon was being held in check.

After our paranoia had abated, we descended into the ship to see how bad the damage looked. The final tally was nearly a sixth of the crew dead, and half again as many wounded, which meant that the second Doc showed his face downstairs, he was hauled off to the medbay to lend a hand, and didn't reappear for several days. On the mechanical side the damage was considerably lighter: the ghost-nids hadn't bothered to vandalize anything, so it was mostly a matter of unmaintained systems having problems, and battle damage, most of which had been caused by us. 'Ol Bill was especially cross about this being the second time we'd nearly destroyed the bridge-lift's shaft, and the fact that the aft cargo-lift's platform was just GONE. Anyway, no critical systems were damaged, and our meager fuel reserves were still intact, which meant that there was no mechanical reason not to continue our trip to the Ordos Xenos research facility.

It turned out there weren't any non-mechanical reasons to stop either. The Daemonthrope was secure, and now that Fio's wraithbone thingy was doing most of the work, the suppressors were running just fine. So the big



bug wasn't a problem, and while there were still a few ghost-nids wandering around the tainted areas, without increasing numbers forcing them outwards, they weren't any more of an issue than anything else that haunted those decks.



The Gravis situation was looking up too, much to Doc's relief. When Doc escaped from his girlfriend for a few minutes and ran to check on Gravis, he found that despite the dead Scout's harsh predictions, the bisected Space Marine doing just fine in the Daemonthrope's old stasis unit. In fact, he was doing so well now that he wasn't under constant attack by a spiteful possessed bug, that we were able to take him out of the Stasis Unit long enough for Tink and Fio to get the whole thing mobile, and moved up to the medbay.

So we continued on our way, slowly meandering along what was probably most ass-backwards route ever plotted by an Imperial vessel, and things slowly returned to normal. Doc doctored and Tink tinkered, though mostly on wounded armsmen and the stealth shuttle instead of Gravis or the Sanctum. Jim, Fio, and Hannah kept busy repairing the ship and trying to figure out WHY the wraithbone device worked the way it did, and spent their free time annoying the hell out of the Navigator next-door by watching Tau vids at high volume in the Sanctum.

Aimy, slightly regrettfully, stepped down as de-facto commander of half the ship's armsmen, and returned to mooching around with Twitch, Nubby, and Fumbles. Through some sort of miracle all four of them kept out of trouble (at least anything serious enough to come to Sarge's attention) for the rest of the trip. Finally, Sarge was allowed a few days to plan things with the Captain, then was dragged off by the relentless Diplomacy Adept to resume his classes.

Finally, two weeks later, we came out of the warp in a single planet system. The fuel situation was such that, even with a minimum-distance dewarp, it still took us the better part of a day to coast our way into vox range of the small station orbiting the planet. It really says something about just how low you are when you wind up using your shuttles to push the ship the few million kilometers.

As we got into vox range, Sarge dressed up and transmitted his credentials and the contact information he'd been given as part of his mission briefing, and held his breath, but thankfully this time the response came immediately.

The Occurrence Border was cleared to refuel at the station, though docking was out of the question given that it was smaller than our ship. Sarge was instructed not to wait for the refueling, and deliver his cargo to the research facility (which was the only thing on the desert planet) as soon as he entered shuttle range.

The relief that went through EVERYONE one the ship at hearing all this was massive. Doc actually cried when he heard them confirm that they had a medical facility capable of treating tyranid bio contamination. The rest of us were more restrained, merely cheering and holding a wild party, before blearily dressing ourselves in our best uniforms and moving Gravis and the Daemonthrope into the shuttle.

The loading of the Daemonthrope was uneventful, except for the harrowing trip down the make-shift lift, which involved a lot more swinging back and forth than seemed reasonable. It was crammed into the shuttle along with the usual cluster of psi-suppressors, and a mobile version of the wraithbone-device that Fio had devised. The little Tau would not be coming down to the planet with us, this being and Inquisitorial facility that experimented on xenos and all, but he begged us to bring the wraithbone back after the Daemonthrope was delivered, which is why his device had been mounted on the grox-skull encased Spot.

The shuttle we took down was NOT the stealth shuttle. Tink claimed he'd gotten it to the point where it would fly and hold air, even if most of the stealth bits were completely non-functional, but none of us had liked the way he kept using words like "should" and "probably". Jim flew us down in a standard shuttle with a whole lot of patched bright-lance holes in it, which failed to explode or do anything else interesting on its way from the still-braking Occurrence Border to the Research Facility.

As we made our final approach we transmitted our contact codes again, and were instructed to a lone landing pad which jutted out of a completely barren mountainside and bristled with anti-air turrets. Jim put the shuttle down precisely in the middle of all the turrets, and our entire party (Adepts and Fumbles included, as this was an official event) filed out of the shuttle.

We were greeted by party of five men. The man in the middle was tall, tanned, wore a long coat that looked amazingly uncomfortable in the blister-



ing heat of the landing pad, and had an Ordos Xenos rosette hanging from his neck, so we pegged him as Inquisitor Sciscitat. He was flanked by a cog-boy, a scribe who looked like he was dying of heat exhaustion, and what even we immediately recognized as a pair of Deathwatch Space Marines. Sarge snapped off a parade-ground salute, which earned him a kick in the shin from the Diplomacy Adept, and formally introduced himself as Interrogator Greg Sargent, delivering one live Zoanthrope on behalf of Inquisitor Oak, as requested. He made no mention of the Zoanthrope's little problem, figuring that was a discussion best had when there were no armed Space Marines present.



The Inquisitor accepted Sarge's introduction with a nod, and took a long look at the Daemon-thrope's pallet. The web of cables hooked up to the wraithbone device obscured the wings from a cursory examination, but the man's eyes obviously lingered on the half-melted metal, and the general tau-ishness of pretty much every piece of tech on the pallet. Thankfully he didn't start jumping up and down screaming about heretical xenotech, and we all let out a breath of relief as he turned away from the Pallet to face his two

non-superhuman flunkies. That relief abruptly evaporated as he ordered them to take the Zoanthrope, and "store it in the live-sample holding cells with the rest of the evidence."

Before any of us had managed to absorb the implications of that last word, the Inquisitor turned back to Sarge, and announced that he, his men, and his ship, were all under arrest by the joint orders of the Ordos Hereticus and Ordos Xenos.

Fumbles and Jim both let out little whimpers, and Twitch and Nubby both immediately started to go for their sidearms, but paused as the Space Marines instantly raised their bolters. The rest of us stood there, slack-jawed, until Sarge managed to ask just what in the Emperor's name we were under arrest FOR.

The Inquisitor's face went absolutely blank, and in a voice that seemed almost mechanical, but made Fumbles shake like a leaf, he replied:

What for? Well most recently, disregarding an order to cease all operations and return to headquarters, the murder of two squads of Space Marines, the attack of an Imperial Space Station, and the transport of a live xenos psyker for purposes of heretical experimentation. But the charge at the top of the list will almost certainly be aiding and abetting the Rogue Inquisitor colloquially

known as "Oak".

Well... Shit.

Chapter 16

The [REDACTED] Conspiracy

So no shit, there we were, delivering the live Zoanthrope we'd hauled halfway across the galaxy, when instead of thanking us for our hard work and offering to buy us all a beer, the Inquisitor running the facility placed us under arrest. There ain't no fucking justice.

We all stood there, paralyzed, at the news that our boss, Inquisitor Oak, had been branded a Rogue, a traitor to the Inquisition. The mere fact that we were his subordinates damned us in the eyes of the Inquisition, and to make matters even worse, we were apparently on the hook for just about everything we'd done since the start of our mission, as well as few things that we hadn't. Not that it really mattered what we had or hadn't done, since the motto of the Inquisitorial courts is: "A plea of innocence is guilty of wasting our time."

It slowly dawned on each of us that unless something amazingly unexpected happened, our future would consist of a quick trial and execution, if we were lucky that is. If we were unlucky, it'd be a long trial and a longer execution. Perhaps inevitably, Nubby was the first one to come to grips with the situation, and before the Inquisitor had even finished telling his two Deathwatch Space Marine bodyguards to kill us if we attempted to do anything, the little trooper was volunteering to testify against Oak in exchange for clemency, and also possibly a small cash payment.

The Inquisitor responded to this outburst by briefly turning his unnervingly steady gaze to the cretinous little trooper, who suddenly forgot how to speak mid-sellout. After a few vague "uh"-ing sounds, Nubby sat down,



gripping his head with one hand and making rude gestures at the Inquisitor with the other.



The Inquisitor dropped Nubby from his attention and finished the Marines' orders with an apology for the indignity of the assignment and a promise to call an extra team down to properly arrest us when his ship returned in a few hours. Then, almost as an afterthought, he warned them that "the little one is a psyker, and will need to put in one of the cells". Both the Marines turned their bolters on Nubby and began advancing.

There were a bit of confusion as Nubby, who was still incapable of speaking, attempted to hide behind the rest of us. Sarge, seeing an opportunity, grabbed the undersized trooper by his collar and proffered him to the advancing Marines while Aimy and Doc moved in front of Fumbles. Unfortunately, this brilliant plan was spoiled by the fact that the Inquisitor wasn't a gullible idiot.

When the Marines returned with Nubby suspended by one augmetic leg, the Inquisitor let out little sigh of annoyance (which was the most emotion we'd seen from him yet) and told the marines to stop embarrassing themselves and collect "the one in the psyker-coat". When the marines returned with Doc, who'd hurriedly put on Fumbles' coat, the Inquisitor let out another sigh, and made a gesture. There was a little yelp from the back of our group as an invisible force yanked Fumbles into the air and began levitating him across the landing pad. Without another word to us or the Deathwatch marines, the Inquisitor followed our whimpering psyker into the large elevator where his non-superhuman flunkies were waiting with the Daemonthropes.



The elevator's doors slid shut behind Fumbles and the Inquisitor with an ominous boom, leaving our landing party alone on the pad with the two Deathwatch marines. After a few seconds of awkward silence, Aimy pointed out that the Inquisitor was a colossal asshole. One of the Marines responded with a vaguely-agreeable grunt, earning him an angry look from his partner (all looks are angry in Power Armor).

The pissier of the two marines tossed Doc in our general direction, and then both of them trained their weapons on our little group and settled into comfortable guard stances. All around the pad, the AA guns that defended the facility came to life, and turned to rest on our shuttle well.

We may not have been cuffed, placed in cells, or even properly disarmed

yet, but it all-in-all, it was VERY clear that we wouldn't be going anywhere.

Unless someone did something suicidally stupid that is...

Hopefully, it wouldn't have to be us.

↳The All Guardsmen Party and the [REDACTED] Conspiracy

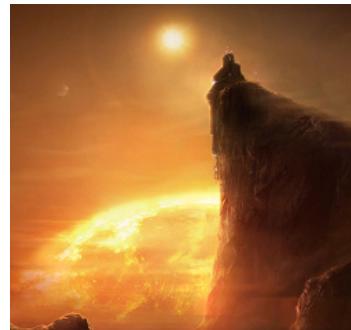
So, to summarize our situation: we were sweating through our fancy, but completely unarmored uniforms, on a landing pad, while two bolter-armed Deathwatch Space Marines kept us covered and watched our every movement like genetically engineered super-hawks.

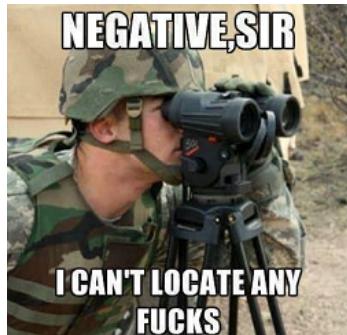
Since Fumbles was off enjoying the hospitality of the creepily-monotone Inquisitor, our landing party consisted of all us guardsmen, the three adepts, and a very-unhappy Jim. Armament wise, none of us except Twitch and Nubby, who had a few party favors crammed into their pockets, were armed with more than our las-pistols. We hadn't just left our pulse-weapons behind mind you, we'd just decided to leave them in the shuttle, where their techno-heretical nature wouldn't cause any problems if the Inquisitor running facility had a rod up his ass. In retrospect we might've underestimated the size of the hypothetical rod.

Our weapon-filled shuttle was parked a dozen meters away from where the Space Marines had corralled us. Aside from our cache of weapons, it was equipped with a multi-laser turret which only Jim knew how to actually use, enough armor to hold off bolter-fire (if the Marines made sure to miss the half-assedly-patched brightlance holes), and MAYBE enough fuel to get us back into orbit. Oh, and it also had Sergeant Gravis' stasis unit, but we didn't really see that as tactically significant.

The facility we were on top of was your standard secret mountain base affair. You know, a landing pad and a bit of rooftop sticking out of a dangerously steep mountainside, with emperor-knows how much stuff hidden underground. Its only real distinguishing features, as far as we were concerned at least, were the local climate, which was blisteringly hot despite the altitude, and the massive ring of anti-air turrets surrounding the landing pad. We weren't quite sure who was controlling said turrets or what their reaction time was like, but none of us felt like doing any experiments to figure that out.

After our feeble plan to hold onto Fumbles had fallen apart and we'd spent a few minutes stewing in our own juices on the landing pad, the true shittyness of situation began to really sink in.





Aimy started cursing under her breath, and steadily increased the volume until she was ranting like a street-corner preacher. Nubby propped his over-sized coat up as a sunshade (no poles were used, the thing was actually filthy enough to stand up on its own, and that was after it'd been washed), and grumpily sat under it, waiting for his voice to return and egging Aimy on as best he could with grunts and gestures. Sarge just stood stock-still, muttering darkly to himself and ignoring everyone else, even when Doc tried to ask him for help subduing Twitch, who'd started pacing in circles and ranting about how "he'd known it all along" and "they were ALL in on it".

Really, Tink and Doc were the ones who took it best. After an initial freakout, the medic took refuge in the familiar, if difficult, task of tranquiling Twitch before he did anything explodey. Tink spent a few minutes smugly pointing out that, while we had been arrested by the Inquisition, it HADN'T been for tech-heresy, and therefore everyone owed him an apology. He eventually realized no-one was listening and decided to sit down and play with his drone-controller instead. There was a tense moment as he drew the controller from his tac-belt, but the Marines eventually accepted Tink's blatant lie about it just being a data-slate, and didn't shoot him.

As for the rest of the party: Jim sank down into a little puddle of misery, chattering to himself in binary and rocking back and forth, and the adepts all gathered into a little huddle. After a few minutes of serious discussion, the old Diplomacy Adept turned to the rest of us, cleared his throat until we grudgingly paid attention, and asked us whether we thought Oak had actually turned traitor.

He seemed surprised by how little we cared.

I mean, it's not like we thought the question of whether or not our boss was a heretical mastermind that'd been destroying the Inquisition from within wasn't important... We just didn't see how it was relevant to our current situation.

Either: *¿A: Oak was a heretic. In which case the Inquisition would imprison, torture, and slowly kill us.*

¿B: Oak wasn't a heretic, but someone had framed him as one. In which case the Inquisition would probably imprison, torture, and slowly kill us, though they might apologise to Oak about it afterwards if everything was ever sorted out.

C: Oak wasn't a heretic, and the monotone Inquisitor was lying about the Inquisition ordering his arrest as a conspiracy. In which case a bunch of politico shadowy cabal of heretics would imprison, torture, and slowly kill us.

I'm sure you can see the common theme here.

As far as we were concerned the question of our Inquisitor's moral status was academic, and was therefore something that could be left to the academics while we focused on more important issues. Specifically, how we were going to avoid being imprisoned, tortured, and slowly killed.

The old Diplomat got a little huffy with us, and said some very hurtful things about our attention spans and our intellectual capabilities as compared to those of a bunch of a drunken Orks. Eventually though, he calmed down and announced his and the other adepts' certainty that Oak was innocent. Sarge, who was in just about the worst mood any of us had seen him in, responded with bitter sarcasm, which the Diplomat returned with interest. The situation had all the makings of a really good argument, and lacking anything better to do we all gathered 'round to watch the fireworks, but then Tink spoiled everything by asking whether we should tell the Inquisitor everything about the "Zoanthrope" before he finished taking it out of the stasis unit.

Well, you better believe that caught everyone's attention, including the two Deathwatch Marines, who could apparently hear everything we were saying. The less-pissy of the two Marines, whose only distinguishing feature was a yellow-edged pauldron with a cartoon heart on it, took a few steps towards us, this paused when he realised his companion wasn't moving. The other space marine, who sported a sort of pointy black cross on a white background, just shook his head, and Heart-Marine sheepishly shuffled back to his guard position as we all huddled around Tink's drone-controller.

Spot the Wonder Drone had been incorporated into the Daemonthrope's



containment unit when we'd made the thing mobile; partially because the drone was as good a central controller for the various systems as anything else we had on hand, but mostly because Fio had REALLY wanted to keep the hunk of wraithbone which suppressed the lion's share of the Daemonthrophe's power. The wraithbone suppressor had been positioned on the very top of the Daemonthrophe's pallet, with all its cables and stuff hanging down over the outside of the stasis unit, where they conveniently hid the Daemonthrophe's smoky wings from anyone who didn't know to look for them. Spot had then been encased in its oversized servo-skull disguise and placed on top of the suppressor, where the drone could easily lift the whole thing off and bring it back with us after the Inquisition had set up whatever they used to contain uppity daemonhosts.

Anyway, thanks to all this, we had a clear readout telling us that the Daemonthrophe's pallet was about a hundred meters below us, and its containment measures were being deactivated by someone who probably didn't know that it held something a just little bit nastier than your average Zoanthrope.

The question was whether we should try to warn them, let them figure things out for themselves, or maybe help things along a little by pushing the big red button on Tink's drone controller. The debate over what to do about the Daemonthrophe was a very awkward one. I mean, you can't just say stuff like "I think we should use this device right here to unleash the daemonhost we brought with us, and then escape in the resulting confusion" in front of a pair of Deathwatch Space Marines. It'd be rude. Also, they'd shoot us. So we had to be careful not to say anything about the daemon, or Spot, or escaping, or anything even remotely related to what was going on really.

Now, if we'd been proper Inquisitorial agents, we'd have used witty metaphors and ironic code-words, possibly leaving the Marines with the impression that we were merely planning a fancy dress party or something. Unfortunately we were just a bunch of guardsmen, and had to make do with grunts, shrugs, expletives, and a wide array of rude gestures. Judging by the looks on Jim and the Adepts' faces we wound up looking like a bunch of Ogryns trying to argue philosophy, but

it honestly worked pretty well. Who knows what the Marines thought, maybe that we'd all suffered strokes or something.

Anyway, skipping over a whole lot of nigh-incomprehensible arguing, we eventually decided that the odds of us surviving the Daemonthrophe breaking loose were even worse than what we'd get in an Inquisitorial trial. Unless,



that is, the bug only broke part-way out and they pinned smuggling a Daemonhost into an Inquisitorial facility on us along with everything else. Put together, it was enough to convince Sarge that our best option was to fess up to the Daemonthrope's true nature, and hope we got bonus points for saving whichever idiot was in the process of releasing it.

That decided, Sarge stood up, walked towards the Marines until they ordered him to stop or be shot full of holes, told them that Zoanthrope we'd delivered had been possessed by a Daemon, and asked them to warn the Inquisitor not to mess with its containment.

Heart-Marine called him a liar and Grumpy-Marine called him a heretic. Sarge made three more attempts to convince the Deathwatch Marines, but the closest he got to success was briefly arguing with Heart-Marine over whether or not a Tyranid could be possessed by a Daemon. That ended with the Marine calling Sarge an idiot for trying to lie about Tyranid biology to a someone who'd fought them for three decades, and Sarge giving up the argument in disgust. After that failure, and operating in pure desperation at this point, our fearless leader decided to see if just offering the raw facts to the Marines would work. He called Tink over to show them the readouts from the Daemonthrope pallet. This resulted in the Space Marines calling the Inquisitor to tell him we had some sort of remote connection to the pallet, and Spot's signal being jammed.

The whole time this was going on, the Diplomacy Adept just stood there, shaking his head and running an increasingly bitter play-by-play critique under his breath. When it finally ended with Sarge and Tink both vowing to just stand there and laugh while daemonic bugs killed the Marines, the old Diplomat walked out to Sarge and congratulated him on having learned absolutely nothing during his month of diplomatic tutoring sessions. Sarge suggested that the Adept go talk to thee Marines himself if he was so smart, and got told he should have thought of that BEFORE cramming his foot so far into his mouth that he'd started shitting toes. After the shocked pause that remark triggered, Doc asked if he could have a turn. Both Sarge and Diplomacy Adept told him they didn't care anymore.

So while Sarge and the old Diplomat glared at each other, and the rest of us began laying plans for taking advantage of the inevitable Daemonthrope escape, Doc walked over to the two Deathwatch Marines and tried to convince



them that we totally weren't heretics.



Between the fact that Doc was just about the opposite of a confident and persuasive speaker, and the Deathwatch Marines being a pair of three meter tall killing machines with glowing red eyes and permanent expressions of angry disapproval, the whole thing was rather comically pathetic. Our medic stammered and nervously giggled his way through an explanation of how we had no idea what was going on with our Inquisitor or what sort of experiments were going on in this facility. We'd just been following what had, at the time, been a perfectly legitimate Inquisitorial order like a bunch of good little guardsmen, and then our Astropath had exploded, and every time we'd tried to get a new one people attacked us, and we'd really had no other option aside from following our original orders, and so on... The

whole time both of the Marines just stared at him, as if eyeing a small, furiously yapping dog and debating whether to laugh at it or punt it over the horizon

Doc finally began to run out of steam when he got to the part with the space station, because there was no denying we'd shot, exploded, and MELTED a bunch of loyal Imperial subjects, which is something that's sort of hard to wave off as "just an accident". Even if it totally was. Also, there was just no way to explain the whole thing with the Warp Fungus without sounding like either a liar or a madman. He stuttered to a stop, stared at the impassive Space Marines for a few seconds, and then in a burst of sudden confidence, announced that at least we DEFINITELY hadn't murdered any Space Marines. In fact, except for the one that'd gotten skewered by the Hive Tyrant, all of them were still alive, and he could prove it since Sergeant Gravis was currently in our shuttle.

Upon hearing Doc's statement Heart-Marine rocked forwards a step, paused for a few seconds to have an inaudible argument with his partner, and then finally told the medic to show him Gravis. A minute later they came back out, collected the still-freaking-out Jim, and then wheeled Gravis' stasis unit out onto the landing pad. As the two Deathwatch marines huddled over the stasis-chamber and inspected what was left of its occupant, we felt a sudden surge of hope that we could convince them to at least keep the Inquisitor from releasing the Daemonthrop. Then Grumpy-Marine spun around, shoved his bolter in Doc's face, and asked why Gravis was imprisoned in a stasis field

and what sort of heretical experiments had been planned for him in this facility. Doc didn't wet himself in terror, but it was a near thing.

Not being a good bullshitter, our medic-turned-diplomat fell back on the only thing he was certain of: the precise details of Gravis' injuries and subsequent treatments. The two Deathwatch Marines seemed rather taken aback by the sudden tide of completely incomprehensible medical jargon, and after a few more seconds of glowering they stepped back into their impassive guard positions. Doc, having no idea whether this meant they were listing or not, kept on babbling while the rest of us watched and grew more and more antsy. Luckily, before any of us ran out of patience and did something to screw everything up again, the third Deathwatch marine arrived.

This Marine was different from the other two. In addition to the colorful shoulder-badge (blue with a comet on it) his black armor was decorated with white bits, and he was carrying what even us uneducated guardsmen could recognize as Apothecary tools. He came out of the base's elevator at a dead sprint, skidded to a stop in front of Gravis' stasis unit, and began bellowing questions at Doc.

As Doc finished his explanation for the second time, the Apothecary turned to the other two Marines and the three of them began arguing. They were using their helmet comms, so we couldn't hear a word of it of course, but it was obviously a very heated argument, and since we had a lot on the line (and were bored) we decided to see if we couldn't listen in. Approximately half a second after Tink managed to get his drone-controller tuned to their comm frequency and had started working at "cracking it", all three Marines turned to face us and Jim sprinted over. The techpriest yanked Tin'ks controller away and suggested that, if we wanted to die, shooting ourselves would be a far more pleasant way to go than getting caught in a half-assed attempt at Aetheric Warfare. Tink eventually got his controller back, but only because Sarge promised not to let him use it anymore.

Anyway, the Space Marines resumed their argument after that little hiccup, and after another few minutes of agonizing wait (seriously, it'd been about twenty minutes since we'd received the warning about the Daemon-thrope's containment being disabled), they apparently reached a decision. The Apothecary announced his intention to temporarily revive Gravis and obtain testimony from him. Doc asked how this was possible, Gravis' lungs being rather nonfunctional (see: cut in half) in addition to the whole being



comatose thing. He was told to stop asking questions and be ready to assist as needed. Doc had few seconds to swell with pride at the thought of assisting an actual Apothecary in treatment, and was then nearly crushed as the Space Marine began unloading a hundred kilos of oversized medical equipment onto him.



Everything was laid out, Doc was sprayed with an astartes-grade disinfectant which didn't quite cause him to run screaming in unbearable pain, and the stasis unit was deactivated.

The first part of Gravis' revival went about how you'd expect a medical operation being carried out by a centuries-old superhuman to go. Afterwards Doc spent something like a MONTH talking about how great a surgeon the Apothecary was, how amazing all the little medical toys he'd used were, and what an honor it had been to be allowed to observe and assist in the operation. Even if all he'd been allowed to do was hold a few things (one of which he very-nearly dropped) and dispose of a few vials of bio-toxin (which, lacking a biohazard disposal bin, he just threw off the landing pad). Anyway, in a startlingly short amount of time Gravis had been injected, implanted, drained, and a dozen other medical things, and then the Apothecary deftly popped the torso-fied Space Marine out of the Power Armor which had kept him alive for so long.

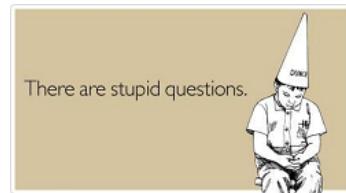


I can't really say what we expected the next step of the process to be, perhaps something involving some sort of super-powered stimulants and "blink twice for yes" or something. In any case, we certainly hadn't expected the Apothecary to pull out a length of cable, jack one end into his helmet, and the other into one of those weird black sockets on Gravis' spine. After that there was a very anti-climatic two or three minutes of watching the Apothecary and Gravis doing nothing, and then the cable was detached, Doc was told to clean up and re-engage the stasis field, and the Apothecary went back to arguing with the other two Deathwatch Marines.

Once again, we stood around like a bunch of pissants, watching a conver-

sation we couldn't hear, but at least it was more interesting to watch this time: if their last argument was heated, then this one was practically molten. The Marines were actually yelling loud enough for us to hear the occasional word through their helmets, there was a lot of gesturing going on, and the Heart-Marine seemed especially furious about something we REALLY hoped wasn't us.

When the Marines' argument finally ended with Heart-Marine storming off towards the base's elevator and the Apothecary returning to pick up his medical gear, Doc decided to see if he was allowed to ask questions now. It turned out that either the Apothecary was a far friendlier Space Marine than any that we'd met, or perhaps Gravis had said something on Doc's behalf. Either way, we were finally given a run-down of the situation.



↳Sergeant Gravis had testified.

↳No, we would not be told how collecting said testimony had worked.

↳Because the mysteries of the Black Carapace were not for us to know.

↳No, not even if it turned out that we were completely innocent, what part of "not for us to know" didn't we understand?

↳No, the secret wasn't that all Space Marines were actually psychic, and our questions-privileges would be revoked if we did not ask about something else.

↳Gravis had said we were a bunch of dangerous incompetents, but probably not heretics, and had backed us up in regards to the dangerousness of Daemonthrophe, if not the Daemon-ness.

↳The Inquisitor had been informed of this, but had been dubious about the reliability of Gravis' testimony.

↳After a bit of... debate, the Inquisitor and the Marines had decided that the Daemonthrophe would be immediately destroyed. Heart-Marine was going down to observe the procedure. Purely for reasons of protocol, of course.

The news that they were just going to kill the literally-damned bug, after we'd spent all that time and effort hauling it across the ass-end of the Imperium, did NOT go over well. I mean, we probably should've been happy, since it was supposed to be used as evidence of our crimes or something, but still... Anyway, Sarge made a spirited attempt to convince the Marines that our Daemonthrophe-Containment-Unit would work just fine if it was left

alone. He was told that the Zoanthrope was an abomination in the eyes of the Emperor, and destruction was the only truly safe option. Twitch, who was coming back into focus after being tranqued, loudly agreed with that sentiment and was told that he was not being very helpful.

It then occurred to Tink that it would be very hard to kill the Daemonthrope without removing it from the Containment Unit. He asked the Apothecary about this, and was told that standard procedure was to shove the whole thing into a plasma-incinerator. Tink asked what would happen to Spot, got asked who "Spot" was, and got as far as "My dr." before Aimy and Nubby both grabbed him. The Apothecary accepted

Aimy's explanation that: "He named the Containment Unit Spot, he's weird like that" without comment.

It was at that point, as Tink was being dragged away from the marines and quietly being told that Fio could build him a new damned drone if we got out of this alive, that a horribly familiar chittery-scratching sensation went through all of our heads. Veteran bug-wranglers that we were, we immediately recognized the psychic screech as a sign of partial containment failure on the Daemonthrope (at least we figured it was partial. You know, on account of how there weren't bugs coming out of the walls). Sarge immediately informed the two confused Space Marines of the situation, and abandoning all pretenses of diplomacy, demanded to know **WHAT THE HELL THEIR BOSS WAS PLAYING AT**. While Sarge yelled unhelpfully at the Marines, Tink pulled out his drone controller and announced that he'd started getting a faint signal through the jamming again. From what he could see, all the regular psi-suppressors were offline, the Wraithbone one had been disabled, so only the stasis field was left keeping the Daemonthrope in check. Feeling pretty sure that he knew what his orders would be if he asked for them, the techie immediately started mashing the button to re-engage the Wraithbone suppressor. Through some sort of miracle the signal made it through, and the psychic pressure of the Daemonthrope's mind began to diminish. For about ten seconds that is, then Spot 2.0 reported a "**FLAGRANT SYSTEM ERROR**" and a second psychic screech knocked all non-superhumans on the pad to their knees.

Over by the Marines, Sarge and Doc hauled themselves back to their feet and practically begged the Astartes to DO SOMETHING; the two Deathwatch Marines ignored them and started arguing again. Since our guards were preoccupied, and it looked like the shit was about to hit the fan either way, the rest of us decided this would be a good time to go collect all the



weapons that had been left in the shuttle. Jim and the Adepts were left standing in the middle of landing pad, viewing the situation with increasing alarm, and were therefore in the best position to observe what happened next.

A third screech doubled everyone over again, and was followed by the "sound" of Fumbles screaming for someone to come help him before "they all go loose". Then the entire pad shook and a geyser of fire and blackish-green lightning shot out of the facility's roof. As we all pulled ourselves upright and followed the standard Guard post-explosion procedure of asking everyone else if they were dead, the Heart-Marine punched his way through the elevator's doors. He began walking towards us, and then turned around as a pair of lightning-wreathed figures rose out of the flaming crater behind him.

The closer figure was a human-looking shape obscured by some sort of blueish energy bubble. Judging by the hat and coat it was wearing, plus the fact that the only other nearby psyker we knew of was currently "screaming" for help somewhere down below us, it was probably the Inquisitor. There was nothing indistinct about the second figure, it was the Daemonthropes in all its horrible unholy splendor.

The three meter tall snakelike bug still had Sarge's hull-metal shield wrapped around its head, but its eyes blazed red through the metal and a pair of horns, as well as a far more daemonic-looking maw, had somehow formed on the surface of the half-slaged shield. The big change though was the wings: inside the stasis field they'd been sort of vestigial-looking, but now they stretched twice as wide as the Daemonthropes was tall, and they looked a lot more solid than we'd ever seen then. Before this, and when they'd been sported by the possessed Knarloc and the Cogtaine, they'd been sort of indistinct and smokey, now they were more like clouds of ink bound into tentacle-like tendrils, and green static crackled through and around them like the field of a poorly-maintained power-weapon. All-in-all it was the most daemonic looking thing we'd ever seen, and mind you that list includes a fair few daemons.

As the two of them rose out of the crater in the facility's roof, the lightning arcing between the Daemonthropes and the Inquisitor's shield steadily intensified. Just as it occurred to us that we should probably do something



to help, the Inquisitor's shield disappeared with a little pop. The man hung there for a second, looking surprised, then let out a terrified scream as the electricity reappeared all along his body. His back began to arch, then bend, then crackle. There was a final shrill scream, and a horribly gooey crunching sound, and a basketball-sized sphere slightly cooked gore and overly-dramatic clothing splatted to the ground.



Jim and two out of three Adepts screamed, Aimy snickered, Tink and Twitch simultaneously yelled "TOLD YOU SO" at no-one in particular, Sarge facepalmed, and Doc looked up at the Apothecary. The medical-marine let out a weary sigh as the Inquisitor's hat drifted down to rest on top of his compressed corpse, and muttered something about needing yet another new Inquisitor. Nubby, his voice returning, pointed out "da big daemonic bug fing 'overing over dere", which was entertaining itself by tearing a hole in the fabric of reality, and asked the Marines what they were going to do about it. Grumpy and Heart-Marine both let out battle cries and charged forward; the Apothecary shook his head and followed them at a more sedate pace.

With a little mutter about them having fun with that, Nubby started to sidle towards the shuttle, only to be yanked into the air by Sarge, who was already bellowing orders and demands for information at the rest of us. Jim reported that the shuttle was still out of fuel, still had twenty AA guns pointed at it, and STILL had its long range comm jammed. Tink checked his controller and said that his drone was coming back online, and the wraithbone suppressor MIGHT be salvageable if he went down to fiddle with it. Sarge digested this, and then declared that, since running away and calling for reinforcements weren't viable options, our only real choice was to kill the bug.

The problem with this idea was that none of us had ANY desire to go toe-to-toe with something that could compress someone into paste with a glance... Luckily, there were three crazy bastards in power armor who would do it for us. All we needed to do was figure out a way to help the Marines without getting ourselves horribly killed in the process. A short debate was held, and by the time the Deathwatch Marines had opened fire, a plan had been formed.

It was decided that Sarge and Aimy would stay on the surface. They'd do their best to assist the Marines, probably by picking with the small tide

of Daemonids that'd started pouring out of the newly-opened warp-rift, and try to avoid drawing too much of the Daemonthrope's attention.

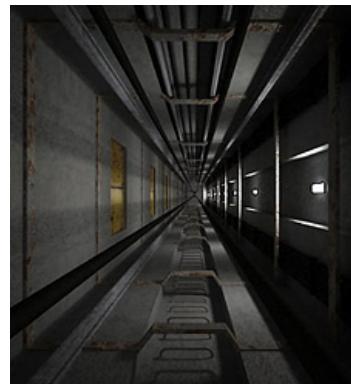
Meanwhile, Tink would go retrieve his drone and the Wraithbone suppressor, and then try to figure out a way to weaponize it, while Nubby would do the same thing with Fumbles. Twitch would support them and lend his skills to the whole weaponizing thing, and Doc would go along to make sure nobody did anything retarded, which technically made him the man in charge. Doc was not thrilled with this assignment.

Finally, Jim and the Adepts were told to go... do something useful. Like getting the AA guns sorted out, or unjamming the long-range comms, or finding some sort of holy artifact stored in a case marked "In case of Daemonic Incursion Break Glass". Anything that got them out of the line of fire really. They accepted their orders without complaint, and scampered off after Doc's team towards the partially-destroyed elevator into the base.

Those of us in "Team Doc" climbed through the hole that Heart-Marine had punched through the elevator's doors. Inside we discovered the reason for the Marine's violent exit: the elevator's car appeared to be stuck about halfway down the shaft and all the lights and control panels were dark. There was a maintenance ladder on the far side of the shaft which, judging by the massive hand and foot shaped dents in its rungs, the marine had used to get back to surface. We noticed that a few of the rungs had either broken or been ripped entirely out of the wall, but the Space Marine weighed a lot more than us, so we figured it was probably safe and began climbing down.

Jim and the Adepts were a little more dubious, but they eventually gave up looking for other options and followed us. After Twitch popped a rung loose (which barely missed Doc) and dropped half a level, they decided that whatever they were going to do could probably be done on the first level and hastily exited the shaft. We asked them to look into fixing the elevator while they were at it.

The signal from Spot and the volume of Fumbles' periodic incoherent psychic shouts peaked three levels below the stuck elevator, and we decided to exit the shaft. Tink suffered a minor heart attack when the first thing he



saw after prying open the doors was a pair of turrets aimed at his nose, luckily they didn't seem to register him as a threat, and the rest of us managed to catch the techie as he reflexively dodged backwards into the shaft.

After a little debate over whether the turrets were "just waiting for us to let our guard down", which ended with Nubby tossing a half-eaten ration bar at one of them to see if they'd return fire, we all climbed through the doors.



We found ourselves in a short hallway that ended with a second pair of turrets and an impressive looking security door. Another debate was started over whether the turrets would attack us if we tried to plasma the door open, but Doc resolved the issue by checking the door's controls and discovering that it wasn't actually locked. In fact none of the doors we ran into on our way into the base were locked and all the turrets were just as immobile as the AA guns on the surface had been, which was both convenient and disconcerting as hell. I mean, we'd just delivered a daemonically possessed Zoanthrope to the place. Who knew what sort of shit was penned up down here

just waiting for a chance to escape...

Well, actually, the recently-squished Inquisitor had probably known, since judging by the ransacked appearance of the facility he'd been spending the last week or so gathering up everything in the place as evidence of heretical experiments or whatever. He was a bit too busy being an asshole (also dead) to share that info with us though. Anyway, none of us, not even Twitch, had time to spare worrying about what was in the base or why its security was offline, because we could hear and FEEL the battle going on back up on the pad. We followed Spot's signal, rushing through hallways and across recently-stripped rooms without incident, until we finally reached a security door with a piece of paper that said "EVIDENCE STORAGE" taped to it. We opened the door, which led to yet another turret-filled hallway, at the exact same instant as some sort of eight-legged, augmetic-covered lizard monster came through the far door.

We looked at the lizard monster, it probably looked at us, something in the room behind it exploded, and then Nubby slammed our door back shut.

A bare second after the door slid closed something slammed into it, leaving a large outward dent in metal. This was followed by the sound of four turrets beeping to life and a sort of general fracas as they and the lizard monster sorted out their differences. Nubby, his finger still held firmly on

the "Close" button, suggested finding another way into the evidence room, or at least waiting to see if the turrets won. Doc, feeling like he should do something leadery, announced that there probably wasn't enough time so we'd have to open the door and deal with the thing. The rest us agreed, but the question of just how to do it was up for debate.

After a short argument, in which it was decided that trying to flash and rush a creature that had a metal plate instead of eyes and could punch head-sized dents in security doors was stupid, we decided to go with our other usual strategy of blowing the ugly thing up. There was a problem with this plan though: it'd been several weeks of combat since our last resupply and Twitch's stockpile of explosives down to just his backup-backup grenade and frag mine, plus the single improvised explosive which Sarge had let him bring on the shuttle. Twitch asked for the rest of us to pony up whatever we had, but Tink and Doc didn't have anything except a few flashes (Doc was given shit for not saving the syringe of face-melting biotoxin that had been recently extracted from Gravis, at least until he threatened to go get another one and make Tink carry it). Nubby, on the other hand, grinned an evil little grin when he was asked, and reached into his perpetually-filthy coat.

Up on the surface, Brother Bellicus of the Black Templars noticed a large group of daemonic hormagaunts moving to flank him, reached for his grenades, and swore when his hand closed on nothing.

At Twitch's mark Nubby popped door open just wide enough for a lumpy object, which consisted of a half-dozen crosswired lasgun power-packs wrapped with tape and nails, and two astartes-sized frag grenades to be tossed through. A few second later the door was reopened as far as the dent in it would allow, and we all squeezed into a hallway which was a bit worse for wear and smelled rather disturbingly like grilled grox. We all resisted the urge to see if the xenos' remains tasted like they smelled, made our way to the far end of the hallway, and discovered that the door had locked itself when the turrets had activated. Since said turrets had been pounded to scrap by the



lizard-thing, Tink just plasma-ed the door's locking mechanism and opened it to reveal a scene of pure mayhem.

To start with, it wasn't an Evidence Room, it was an Evidence WAREHOUSE. The place was absolutely massive and filled with stacks upon stacks of =][= stamped boxes as well as a few hundred large metal cubes that we guessed were some sort of mobile prison cell. The stacks had probably been all neat and orderly up to a few minutes ago, but the explosion that had preceded the Daemonthropes escape had occurred just on the other side of the room's left wall.

The crates and cells had been scattered across the room, many of them cracking open in the process. Servitors, terrified scribes, prisoners, and escaped xenos specimens were running in every direction, several things had caught on fire, and in the center of the room there was the mother of all three-way melees. As far as we could tell the teams were: the remnants of ex-Inquisitor's retinue, a group of servitors and prisoners led by something that looked like a human except with the size and musculature of an Ork Warboss, and what we guessed (based on all the extra limbs and such) was an entire genestealer cult.

Nubby tried to close the door again, but was stopped by Doc.

We stared at the carnage for a while, and then unanimously decided that we wanted NOTHING to do with any of it. Don't get me wrong, we were all brave upstanding soldiers of the Astra Militarum. "The Many, The Expendable, the Guard" and all that... It's just that we had more pressing things to deal with, and honestly we just didn't really care about who was fighting who over what. In our professional opinion they all looked like psychotic assholes, so we were perfectly fine with them killing each other to their hearts' content, at least so long as they didn't drag us into it.



We began sidling around the edge of the room and towards the Daemonthropes' crater (the Sidle being the form of movement which best conveys "I am not part of this, please ignore me and go about your business/argument/murder"). It took a little work to find our way through the scattered evidence boxes while simultaneously trying to keep as much cover as possible between us and the melee, but aside from the occasional stray shot whizzing by or still-warm corpse lying in our path, we managed to avoid most of the locals.

There were only three real interruptions in our progress. The first was when a terrified man we recognized as the scribe that had accompanied the

Inquisitor on the landing pad nearly ran into us. Twitch shot him on reflex, and the rest of us refrained from commenting.

The second interruption was a little more eventful. The giant man-thing in the middle of the room bellowed, a cell crashed into the wall ahead of us, and something tentacular began to worm its way out. Twitch shot this interruption on reflex too, but this time we all joined in. After a few volleys the tentacles retreated into the cell, Twitch tossed his frag grenade in after them, and we continued on our way.

The last interruption occurred as we neared the crater entrance and did not begin with Twitch shooting anyone, but that was only because Nubby grabbed his gun.

As we approached the edge of the crater, three indistinct forms that looked a bit like short cloaked figures came around a pile of crates and practically walked into us. Nubby stopped Twitch and gestured at the rest of us to squeeze against the wall. We did as he said, and watched in surprise as he cheerfully waved at the three figures then directed them towards the exit. There was a greasy croaking sound, a whiff of something absolutely vile, and then the figures just vanished into thin air.

That was a little disconcerting, but Nubby told the rest of us that the it was fine: the cloaked whatsits were "Bendies", and they were wonderful people. For horrible mutant xenos at least. Apparently they hung out in the sewers on some hive worlds and were a great way to get rid of things. You know, like proscribed substances that no one would buy, or pieces of equipment that you just happened to have found lying around on the battlefield, but turned out to have belonged to the Commissar and now had your fingerprints all over them. Also bodies, great for getting rid of bodies. Anyway, wonderful people he said, aside from the smell. The rest of us eyed Nubby, who had never intentionally bathed or changed his underwear in his life and whose breath could tarnish ceramite, and decided not to comment.

Shortly after that slightly disturbing encounter we reached the gaping hole that had been blasted in the room's wall. The room on the other side was a much smaller version of the evidence room, with a brand new daemonthrope-installed skylight. We guessed that it had held fifty or so evidence boxes, one of those mobile cells, and eight-ish Inquisitorial minions. Now it was filled with... parts.



Anyway, the knee-deep gore was just backdrop, what really caught our eyes when we peered through the crater was the only intact thing in the room: the top half of our Daemonthrope Containment Unit. Oh, and the half-naked woman who was crouched on top of it and singing.



After an initial second of shock, scantily-clad women being just about the last thing we'd expected to find in an Inquisitorial research facility, we realised that things were not as they seemed. It's hard to say what tipped us off exactly, it might have been the odd shape of her ears, or the unnatural harmonics of or singing, or maybe it was the words "ELDAR SUBJECT #4" printed on the back of her tattered straitjacket. Regardless, our well-honed Inquisitorial investigation abilities told us that, while the creature prying at the containment unit was female, she was not a woman. She was also not an Ork, no matter what Twitch said.

So no shit, there we were standing in the only entrance of a room containing a half-naked, unarmed Eldar of the female persuasion, who was apparently too focused on singing to the Daemonthrope Containment Unit to even notice our arrival. The question of what to do in this sort of situation is something that bored guardsmen (or idle cogitator adepts) might spend endless amounts of time arguing over. Not us though, we were above that sort of thing....

Yeah, okay, no we weren't. I mean, aside from avoiding work and blowing things up, pointless arguments (especially sordid ones) were just about our favorite pastime. It was just that before we could get started Tink noticed that a tendril of wraithbone was snaking out towards the singing Eldar from the Containment Unit. Before any of us could stop him the techie stepped around the corner, raised his plasma gun, and told the Xenos to stop messing with his stuff and get her own damned Wraithbone.

Nubby snickered, Doc groaned in exasperation, and Twitch pulled Tink out of the way of the bolt of lightning the Eldar flung at him. We all reflexively ducked into cover as two more lightning bolts shot through the hole, and when we peeked around the corner again the entire back half of the small room was filled with an opaque mist.

The next minute or so were spent calling Tink names. This was not the most productive use of our time, but none of us were dumb enough to try running into the mist and dislodging the xenos psyker. Doc was especially miffed, since his whole job had been to stop the rest of us from doing something like this, and Tink kept using that as an excuse for why this

wasn't his fault.

Anyway, after another minute or so of juvenile arguing it became apparent that the Eldar's mist wasn't going to just dissipate on its own and something proactive needed to be done. Unfortunately our options were sort of limited.

Tink proposed a flash and clear, but the rest of us had bad memories of the last time we'd tried that on a prepared psyker, and made it Plan B. Nubby spoke up next, and suggested going to get Fumbles, who was still making noise somewhere at the back of the evidence warehouse. Since this would involve either splitting up or leaving the Eldar to mess with the Containment Unit, and because we weren't too optimistic about Fumbles' ability to go head-to-head with an Eldar psyker, this was made Plan C. Twitch began to suggest something truly harebrained, but was cut off by Doc, who'd decided that he'd had enough and it was time to "Take Charge of the Situation".

In an odd repeat of the last time we'd faced this sort of thing, Doc poked his head around the corner and attempted to engage the Xenos in diplomacy. To our immense surprise, instead of shooting our medic in the head with a lightning bolt, the Eldar stopped singing to listen to him.

Now, Doc wasn't a good smoothtalker, but he did tend to radiate a sort of awkward earnestness, which can really count for something in this sort of situation. The rest of us watched this all with varying degrees of incredulousness as he started off with an apology for Tink's behavior, and then began explaining the overall situation and how the Containment Unit figured into it. The Eldar only responded with more silence, but since that wasn't a lightning bolt, Doc took it as a good sign and moved a little farther into the room as he continued talking.

It was honestly the most impressive attempt at interspecies diplomacy we'd witnessed. I mean sure, we'd seen whole worlds shared between humans and the Tau, but the slit-heads tend to be sort of wishy-washy and there'd probably been a lot of highly trained diplomats involved in all that. This was just one slightly naive soldier trying to convince a xenos (who probably had a massive grudge against the Inquisition, not to mention a racial affinity for dickishness) to give peace a chance. It was



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powerful, moving really, and we all honestly believed that given enough time it totally would have worked.

The thing was though, that while Doc was making his heartfelt plea, Tink was playing around with his drone controller and managed to get control of Spot's recon sensors as well as one of the mundane psi-suppressors. . . . And we were sort of on a tight schedule what with the Daemonthrope doing Emperor knew what up above us and Fumbles still needing a rescue. . . . And, you know, better safe than sorry, right?

The Eldar had a second to be very surprised when her cloud of mist fizzled into nothing, and then a barrage of plasma and pulse rounds knocked her off the Containment Unit.

Doc was NOT happy. Even though we pointed out that our shots had missed anything immediately fatal, so if he really wanted to he could patch the Xenos up and give her the whole friendship speech again.

With that last obstacle out of his way, Tink ran over to the Containment Unit to see what the Eldar had done to it and figure out if the fancy wraithbone suppressor was salvageable. While he got to work, Doc grumpily dragged the bleeding xenos into a position where he could simultaneously treat her and keep an eye on the entrance. Nubby and Twitch loitered for a few seconds to see if they were needed for anything, until an especially loud shout for help from Fumbles reminded them that they had something better to do.

Nubby and Twitch's trip around the edge of the big room was relatively uneventful. It seemed liked everything that was capable of movement had either fled the room or run off to join the big melee, which was now reaching some sort of climax. The two troopers ignored the massive clusterfuck, pausing to let the occasional running gunfight go past or dodge a falling stack of boxes.

The only real excitement was when a cargo servitor holding an obese man crashed across their path, and then began bashing its captive against one of the stacks like an unwanted cat. The fat man was probably a psyker, because as he screamed for help reality went a bit non-euclidian and the floor started growing faces, but that might have had more to do with the large box labeled "EXTRA HERETICAL" that he was being bashed against. Either way, the two troopers ignored the altercation and walked the through the patch of warped reality with the ease of people who'd seen worse phenomena on trips to ship's mess.



Aside from those little inconveniences, finding Fumbles really wasn't that hard. It was just a matter of heading in the general direction of all the psychic shouting, and then homing in on the sense of bowel-loosening fear emanating from the little psyker. So before long Twitch and Nubby reached the corner of the room where Fumbles was hiding and discovered what had him so worked up. They then very carefully stepped backwards into cover to observe the situation.

The scene was a... weird one. Fumbles, or some other scrawny little psyker that periodically flickered in and out of visibility and radiated fear, had been chased up a large pile of boxes by a mob of small, green figures that looked vaguely like Nubby. The Gretchins were taking turns climbing up the pile and then fleeing back down as Fumbles' aura of terror overwhelmed them, but that sort of behavior wasn't anything too unusual given their racial affinity for cowardice, it was their boss that was the weird part.

You know those really secure prisoner transport thingies? Like with all the straps holding someone to a gurney, along with a facemask and maybe some padlocks? Dial that up to 11, replace the gurney with a hand-truck being pushed by three Gretchin standing on each other's shoulders, and replace the prisoner with a raving Ork Weirdboy surrounded by an aura of crackling green light. And when I say raving, I mean it. The weirdboy could speak gothic, seemed to be using his mouth to compensate for being unable to move anything else, and from the sound of it was (even by Ork standards) completely bat-shit insane.

It was hard to keep track of everything he was saying, but in the minute or so Twitch and Nubby were listening, the primary theme seemed to be that he wanted Fumbles' head. Literally. You know, like attached to his shoulder with stitches and stuff. He even had a Gretchin with a surgical mask standing by. From what we could tell his motivation for this had something to do with two heads being better than one, and it being the secret to "DA BRAINY 'UMMIE'S POWA". So yeah, totally nuts, and very frustrated with Fumbles, who kept doing rude things like refusing to come down to be decapitated or claiming that he was only a figment of the Ork's imagination.

Now, as amusing as it would've been to stand there and keep watching the Ork arguing with Fumbles, it just wasn't in the cards. Shortly after Twitch and Nubby arrived, the Weirdboy ran out of patience and announced that



Fumbles had "TILL DA COUNT OF... UH... FOUR! TA COME DOWN, OR IMMA SQUIG YA!"



Up to this point Twitch had just been muttering to himself about how he'd known it all along, and Nubby had mostly been trying to figure out if the box he was hiding behind (marked "PROBABLY NOT HERETICAL") had anything tactically useful and/or valuable inside of it (it didn't), but the this new time limit kicked them into gear. Both troopers raised their weapons and got ready to shoot the Weirdboy as soon as it finished its counting and began drawing on its notoriously unstable powers. Over the next twenty seconds the Ork (with the help of his Gretchin horde) managed to count up to two, then skipped to five,

got confused at eight, went back down to six for another try, and finally decided to skip ahead to thirteen. Nubby and Twitch lowered their weapons again.

Since there was apparently enough time to do something more clever than just spraying and praying, Twitch brought out the mechanical-action mine that was his last remaining explosive. For his part, Nubby began waving at Fumbles while concentrating on the thought of turning Twitch invisible while he planted the mine on the still-counting Weirdboy. Fumbles noticed the waving and caught on pretty quickly: the little psyker faded back into visibility, screwed up his face in concentration, and Twitch faded out. The demolitions trooper moved fast, which is why he was only five meters from the Weirdboy when a violent burst of energy from the warp smashed into Fumbles' mind, sending him reeling. Twitch swore as his invisibility fizzled, hucked the mine towards the Weirdboy like a frisbee, and sprinted back towards Nubby as the little trooper opened fire on full-auto.

Several things happened at once. Twitch's mine bounced off the thick metal band restraining the Weirdboy's head, sailed off in a random direction, was snatched out of the air by an overenthusiastic Gretchin, and promptly exploded. The force of the blast knocked the Weirdboy's dolly over backwards, taking the Ork out of Nubby's line of fire and crushing the three Gretchins that had been pushing it.

Nubby adjusted his aim, but as he did so, the ork psyker bellowed something. Somewhere in the pack of Gretchins one of them exploded in a shower of green sparks and a small cloud of acrid smoke, the rest surged forwards with a high-pitched "WAAAGH", intercepting Nubby's fire and closing the gap surprisingly fast. Nubby held the trigger down until Twitch reached him,

then they both did some quick math, decided that thirty-and-an-enraged-weirdboy-to-two odds weren't in their favor, and cheesed it.

Now, despite what it looked like, this was not a cowardly retreat. It was actually a carefully planned tactical maneuver to distract the enemy from the true objective. Or at least it turned out that way in any case. Veteran retreaters that they were, Twitch and Nubby easily outpaced the xenos and broke contact long enough to come up with a plan and split up.

Twitch stayed on the path they'd been following. He found a nice firing position and started shooting Gretchins as they came around a handy corner, racking up seven kills without any real trouble. Then the Weirdboy (and the Gretchins pushing him) shot around the corner, tilting up on one wheel, and bellowing "ITZ SQUIGGIN TIME", as he came.

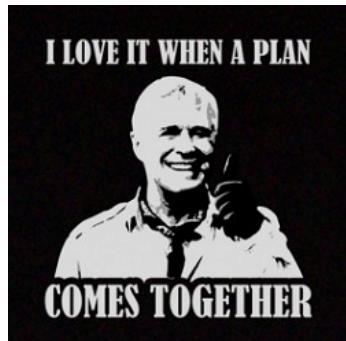
There was a brief struggle of wills, at the end of which Twitch's mind was fairly certain that he was actually a hyper-carnivorous ball of teeth. Luckily, Twitch's body was harder to convince, and shook off the Weirdboy's attack with no more damage than a few lacerations and a pulled muscle or two. The demolitions trooper blinked, realized how close to a fate worse than death he'd just come, and decided it was time to get running again. The small orkish horde let out another "WAAAGH" and followed him.

A few dozen meters away, Nubby sidled out through a gap between two stacks of boxes and found himself back where the chase had started. A quick scan of the area revealed that a few Gretchin had stayed behind, and were in the process of carrying the still-stunned Fumbles down from his perch on the pile. Nubby, not being one to do hard work himself when others seemed were willing to do it for him, pulled out a lho stick and casually waited for the Gretchin to finish before gunning them down. Then, his heroic rescue completed, the little trooper wandered over to Fumbles and checked the psyker's status by prodding him in the ribs a few times. When this elicited nothing more than a faint groan Nubby, muttering to himself about how he always had to do everything, grabbed one of Fumbles legs and began dragging the psyker back towards the Daemonthrone crater.

Meanwhile, Twitch was barely staying ahead of the Weirdboy, who'd



started emitting some sort of brilliant, crackling energy that boosted the speed of it and its minions. It really was something out of the paranoid trooper's nightmares: Gretchin kept popping out of side-alleys before he could turn into them, and every time he hit a straightaway the Weirdboy's hand-truck gained a little ground. The fear just lent Twitch even more speed though, and anyway, he had a plan. Mind you, it lacked the large amount of explosives that would make it a GOOD plan in his eyes, but it was still a plan.



On the outskirts of the minor war occurring in the middle of the evidence warehouse, a group of genestealer cultists finally finished off the Inquisitorial minions that had been keeping them from the cell that contained their master. They clustered around the cell door and began hacking at it with their claws and weapons, but paused at the sound of approaching footsteps and turned to face the new threat.

Twitch came around the corner at a dead sprint, saw the group of mutated cultists, sighted on an alley on the far-right side of their group, closed his eyes, and triggered the under-barrel flash grenade launcher on his pulse-carbine. He barreled into the stunned cultists, knocking two aside with his shoulders and nearly tripping over a third, and somehow managed to push his way through them to the alley he had targeted, where he slammed head-first into a crate. Twitch reeled backwards, barely dodged a falling crate marked "CLASS-5 FORBIDDEN XENOTECH", and staggered into the alley before any of the cultists could follow. Behind him there was a high-pitched "WAAAGH" and the distinctive sound of a warp-propelled hand-truck slamming through bodies like a demented war-chariot.

There was a split second where Twitch worried that he'd under-estimated the Weirdboy's momentum and the xenos would just bowl through the cultists and keep chasing, but then he hear a horrible *schlorp* sound and a bellow of: "YOUZ GETS A SQUIGGIN, AND YOUZ GETS A SQUIGGIN, AND YOUS GETS A SQUIGGIN, EVERYONE GETS A ZOGGIN SQUIGGIN." With that, Twitch declared the plan a success, and began working his way towards the Daemonthrope crater. After a minute or so he ran into Nubby, who complained that he was tired of dragging Fumbles and insisted Twitch take a turn. Fumbles groaned and asked whether he could be carried upright, as the floor was really beginning to chafe.

The three of them arrived back at the crater just in time to see Doc get

stabbed in the face. Up until Nubby and Twitch's return, things had been pretty uneventful in the crater.

Tink had started his work by surveying the remains of the Containment Unit. It was hard to say exactly what the Inquisitor had been doing to it prior to the shit-fanning, but since the bottom half of it was pretty much vaporized, Tink was willing to bet that it had ended with Dae-monthrope doing something to overload the batteries. Luckily though, the top half was pretty much intact, and that was where Spot, the fancy Wraithbone suppressor, and a single mundane psi-suppressor had been mounted, so he got to work on prying those free.

While Tink worked he tried to figure out what to do with the stuff once it was pried out. His original orders had been to: "Go get your Wraithbone thingy and, I don't know, figure out how to turn it into a gun or something.", but he wasn't exactly sure how to do that. In fact, he really had no idea how the extra-powerful suppressor worked, and was pretty sure Fio didn't actually know either, despite the little xenos being the one who'd created the thing. All Tink knew was that the Tau-thingy made the Wraithbone-thingy project some anti-psi thingy, and if you connected tendrils of psi-conducive material to the device you could spread the anti-psi around a bit.

Anyway, his original plan had been to just pull out Spot, fix anything that was obviously wrong with it and the Wraithbone suppressor, and then maybe make a net or something out of the tendrils. The problem was that the tendrils were completely gone, and even worse, the stupid Eldar had done something to stretch the wraithbone out like taffy. What had once been a cinder-block sized brick, was now a vaguely phallic-looking object about a meter long, and while Fio's device was still intact, it no longer fit properly. Lacking any real idea what to do, Tink decided to just go ahead with the pulling and fixing, and just hope that he'd spontaneously think of something clever.

Tink still hadn't thought of anything by the time he'd finished prying everything loose, so he screwed around for a few minutes setting up the mundane psi-suppressor next to Doc so the medic would stop bugging him about it. While he did this, the techie debated pulling out his plasma gun and telling the Eldar to return the wraithbone to its original shape or die. Doc was against the idea for various reasons, and there was a brief argument which ended with Tink asking the highly inappropriate question of why the xenos had reshaped the wraithbone into an, ahem, "giant stone dong". Doc



impatiently told the techie that she was probably making a spear or something, and suggested that he get back to work.



Doc's response triggered something in Tink's imagination and the techie got thoughtful. Then he got even more thoughtful. Then he went over to his drone, lined up all the parts in a new orientation, and started snickering. And that's why, at the end of things, it turned out that our secret anti-Daemonthroe weapon was Spot the Wonder Drone with an amusingly-shaped wraithbone spear strapped to its undercarriage. You know, like a battering ram, or a bayonet, or... well...

a lot of other non-phallic things...

ANYWAY, Tink got to work strapping things on and just bending the shit out of Fio's device until it fit the new shape, and the whole time this was going on, Doc continued watching the door and working on his patient. The medic's time at the bottom of the crater was even less interesting than Tink's, for the most part at least. The Eldar wasn't in great shape: plasma and pulse rounds are nasty enough when you're in full armor, taking a barrage more or less naked is NOT good for one's health. Still though, they were the sort of wounds Doc was good at treating, and he did a fair job of patching her up. Hell, he even cleaned the all the gore and the debris off the area of floor he was operating on, if that's not quality service, I don't know what is.

Doc did good work. Half-cauterized wounds were sprayed with sealant, the two bags of Inquisition-Torturer™ Brand Xenos Blood Substitute (Non-fatal to over 60Extend your torture experience for WEEKS!) were administered, a completely-mangled arm was removed and tossed into a corner somewhere, and a bunch of other boring medical stuff was done.



For the most part the Eldar just laid there unconscious, but after a while she started twitching and emitting a bit of random psychic noise, which was distracting enough that Doc asked Tink to rig up the regular psi-suppressor nearby. That was it as far interruptions from his patient, but there were also three or four occasions where Doc had to drop his bandages and pick up his weapon. Honestly, these interruptions weren't much more interesting than the medical procedures. Most of the time it was a matter of something poking its head around the edge of the hole in

the wall, and then scampering away after Doc sprayed a bit of suppression fire in its direction. The only times when it didn't work like that was when a lucky shot took the head off something that might've been a small kroot hound, and when a heavily armored, but armless, servitor plodded through Doc's fire without seeming to notice, looked around for a few seconds while he reloaded, and then walked away again. So yeah, things were pretty dull for Doc, right up until his patient woke up that is.

You know how in stories the beautiful female patient will wake up, meet her doctor's eyes, then smile and say something about how she must be dreaming? That didn't happen. Doc looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps and set aside his scalpel in favor of his carbine, but relaxed when he saw it was only Nubby and company. When he looked back down the scalpel was in his patient's one remaining hand, and it was darting up towards his eye.

Luckily, Doc was a combat medic, which meant he typically treated guardsmen, armsmen, and other violence-prone individuals, and when that sort of person is hurt and confused, they tend to lash out. Over the course of his career he'd had his arm broken, been jabbed in the thigh with a fistful of tranq ampules, received small caliber bullets to the chest and helmet, and had been socked in the face at least two dozen times. That sort of experience builds up some serious reflexes, so when the wounded Eldar tried to stab Doc in the eye with his own scalpel, the medic was flinching backwards and raising his arm to block before he'd even registered what was happening.

Of course an unarmored arm can only do so much to stop a blade. The scalpel went right through Doc's forearm (between what he still referred to as "the inside arm-bone" and "the outside arm-bone"), then continued upwards into the meat of his face, and finally lodged his cheekbone. Doc swore and reeled backwards with his arm pinned to his face, but that was still a lot better than getting stabbed in the eye.

The Eldar followed her attack up with a grab for Doc's pulse-carbine, but it was still on its strap and Doc's pinned arm was in the way. Doc swore again as the gun caught on his arm and twisted the scalpel in face, and countered by punching the uncooperative xenos in the nose with his free hand. This was enough to knock her backwards, but she kept her grip on the gun as she fell and Doc swore a third time as he landed face-and-scalpel first on the ground.



At this point the Eldar decided that a change of plan was called for. While Doc struggled to roll over and bring his gun to bear, she staggered to her feet, sighted on the psi-suppressor that had been set up nearby, and sprang towards it. She got to within a meter of it before Nubby and Twitch shot her in the back.



Nubby and Twitch kept their guns on the prone Eldar as they entered the smaller evidence room. Behind them Fumbles, who'd been unceremoniously dumped on the ground as they grabbed their weapons, complained that his nose felt like it was broken, he told to put his big boy pants on. At the other end of the room Tink asked if they had everything under control, and then, without waiting for an answer, dropped his gun and went back to working on his drone.

The two troopers advanced past Doc, who'd finally gotten back upright, but still had his arm pinned to his face, and stopped a few meters from the Eldar. By unspoken agreement Twitch kept his weapon raised while Nubby moved forwards, hooked a metal toe under the groaning xenos, and flipped her over. The Eldar flopped upright with a hacking cough and a groan, Nubby cheerfully told her it served her right for moving around so much after surgery. He went on to tell her that she was being very uncooperative, but if she promised to apologize, he was sure Doc would patch her up a second time. The Eldar spat blood at him and stated that she would rather die. Nubby and Twitch looked at each other and shrugged.

;"Well, you 'eard da lady."

The Eldar's eyes went wide and she got as far as "Wai—" before Twitch and Nubby fired.



Over where he was working Tink let out a surprised curse, and began loudly complaining that there were bits of brain all over Spot's new external battery unit. Nubby just snickered, but Twitch yelled some rude things back at the techie and began loudly complaining about how no one was ever grateful. When Doc told him to calm down, the demolitions trooper rounded on him and asked whether he was going to start whining about shooting his new xenos girlfriend. Doc pulled his arm forwards off the scalpel with a squeching sound, and gingerly poked at the surgical implement stuck halfway

into his face. He then let out a pained sigh and pointed out that he already had a girlfriend, and he wasn't inclined to feel too sorry for anyone who stabbed him in the sinuses. Further discussion was called off on account of the deafening sound of two dozen AA guns opening fire above us, and the arrival of the Daemonthrophe at the top of the crater.

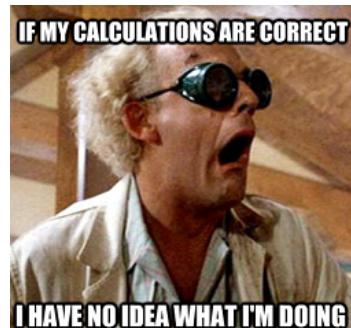
The Daemonthrophe's arrival was accompanied by a painful wave of psychic pressure and a slight breakdown in the fabric of reality. Up at the top of the crater, the walls and ceilings nearest the Daemonthrophe sprouted a film of pinkish-green stuff that might've been a cross between flesh and fungus. Down at our level the pureed remains of the Inquisitor's retinue began to bubble and reform into the mutated forms of rippers and gaunts.

It was abruptly and unanimously decided that it was time to abandon the room and retreat to the larger warehouse. Doc stopped poking at his face, and he, Nubby, and Twitch began firing on the forming daemonids in controlled bursts. Tink gathered up his drone and the few tools he still needed, and then sprinted for the exit while the rest of us gave covering fire. Fumbles met him at the edge of the warehouse, helped him unload, and then began assisting the techie by providing tools as needed and without being asked. Tink didn't actually notice him doing this, but it really was quite helpful.

A few seconds after Tink had exited, the rest of us slowly fell back. As we moved we spared a few glances up towards the Daemonthrophe, and were incredibly relieved to discover that it was staying put at the top of the crater. We guessed that it had just moved there to get away from the AA guns we'd heard, and was perfectly happy hovering there and shooting lightning bolts at whoever was pestering it up on the surface. We wished whoever it was luck, finished our retreat to the warehouse, and set up firing positions around the hole between it and the crater.

Once we were in position it was just your typical desperate holdout against ravenous alien invaders. You know, that thing that practically defines life in the guard? I won't say it was a stroll through the park, but it really wasn't that hard, even with the Daemonthrophe pressing on our minds and the way the dead daemonids kept reforming. Of course, things became slightly more difficult when Fumbles jogged over and said Tink needed all of our laspistol power packs and at least four pulse-carbine packs.

Over at his new workstation Tink had put the finishing touches on Spot. After the arrival of the Daemonthrophe he'd decided that he really didn't



need ALL of the mounting brackets he'd been planning to install, and the weird readings from Fio's suppression device could probably just be ignored. All that was really left to do was rig up a way to get enough power to the suppressor while still leaving Spot enough to fly, but there was a shortage of heavy-duty batteries, so he'd had to rig up something a little more creative. Hence the need for the power packs.

After a little bit of whining and arguing, Fumbles returned with the packs (leaving Doc, Nubby, and Twitch with only five remaining between them). Tink slotted them into place, hoped really hard that he'd done the power conversion math correctly, and hit the "On" button on his controller.

First the lights came on, then the hover unit engaged and the stealth field cycled, and finally there was a flicker of static all along the protruding wraithbone *ahem* prow. Tink held his breath, then let it out in a high-pitched shout of victory as the oppressive force of the Daemonthrophe's mind vanished.



Over at the hole the rest of us were little too busy conserving ammo and holding the bloody line to see what had Tink so excited, but we figured it out when Spot shot between us and cut a small swathe through the approaching swarm with its mere presence. We cheered as well as the drone did a short victory lap and pushed forward to watch as it rose up towards the Daemonthrophe.

Spot the Wonder Drone flashed upwards, sliced through the crackling green shield surround the Daemonthrophe, and slammed into the thing's underbelly. As Spot's psi-suppressor, er, penetrated the creature's hide, it let out a roar of unfathomable pain and fury, its shield vanished, and the daemonid minions around us collapsed into goo. We all cheered again and watched, the inky black tendrils holding the Daemonthrophe aloft twisted, flickered, and then... reappeared.

We stood there, waiting to see what would happen next, and then flinched when the Daemonthrophe let out a roar and fired a bolt of green lightning at someone on the surface. Nubby swore, Twitch groaned, Fumbles started whimpering, and Tink asked if anyone could see what was happening to Spot. Doc remained calm though. The medic looked at the rest of us, and then in a stuffy voice (because he STILL had that damned scalpel in his face) said:

So... unless someone has a better plan, I say we shoot it until we're out of ammo, and then run away if that doesn't work.

None of us did, of course, so we all gathered together, opened fire, and hoped like hell that the Daemonthrope didn't have much juice left in it. As we fired, we couldn't help but notice that only one person up on the surface was firing with us, and they weren't using a pulse weapon.

Up on the surface, Sarge pulled the pin on the astartes-sized krak grenade he'd "borrowed" and hoped like hell this was going to end better than the last time someone had tried it...

The fight on the top of the facility had begun with the three Deathwatch marines charging forwards in an attempt to blitz the Daemonthrope. In the opinion of (possibly former) Interrogator Greg Sargent, this was a very stupid idea.

It wasn't that blitzing a Zoanthrope was a bad idea in and of itself. In fact if you look them up in the Tactica, they're defined as "Psychic Artillery" and the preferred methods for dealing with them are generally the same as other varieties of artillery. Ideally you just call in an airstrike, or some (preferably longer ranged) artillery of your own, but if that's not an option then you're going to want to get in close where their big guns can't easily get at you. Of course the tricky part is not getting blown to little pieces while you close the distance, but the Tactica has some good recommendations there too: If you're a Brave Soldier of the Imperium, then you're supposed to just sprint across the killing field, firing wildly and relying on your faith in the Emperor to protect you. If, on the other hand, you're a cowardly dog not fit to wear the Emperor's uniform, then you'll want to make use of cover and sneak around the flanks while all the Brave Soldiers get themselves killed.

So, given that Space Marines are the very definition of Brave Soldiers of the Imperium, (and were wearing enough power armor to survive that sort of foolishness) their choice of attack was tactically sound. Or it would have been, IF THEY WERE ACTUALLY FIGHTING A ZOANTHROPE.

Seriously, it wasn't some frail, slow-moving creature that relied on distance and minions to protect it from harm. IT. WAS. A. DAEMONHOST. You know, those things that can turn frail little cultists into nigh-indestructible killing machines capable of tearing tanks apart with their bare hands? What the Marines thought they were going to accomplish by getting closer to it



was a mystery, especially since it was currently flying fifteen meters over the top of a deep crater.



Despite the temptation, Sarge and Aimy didn't stand around critiquing the Marines' choice of tactics. This was partially because the situation was too serious to waste time being petty and unhelpful, but mostly they just figured the Daemonthrone would handle it for them. The two of them slowly advanced behind the Marines, placing aimed shots into the growing number of daemon-tyranid hybrids pouring out of the hole in reality the Daemonthrone was tearing, and waiting to see what was going to happen.

Surprisingly though, what happened was... nothing. The three Astartes charged in (well the Apothecary just jogged), spraying fire and fending off the odd daemonid, but the Daemonthrone just manifested a greenish-black shield and ignored them while it poured more and more juice into the widening hole in reality. Between shots, Sarge and Aimy snickered to themselves as the Marines reached the edge of the crater and then milled around trying to figure out how to respond to being dismissed as non-threats.

Of course the Deathwatch Marines didn't waste too much time standing around. The trio of superhuman warriors drew upon all their centuries of tactical knowledge, and came to the conclusion that they should try shooting the big psychic bug HARDER. As Guardsmen, Sarge and Aimy wholeheartedly approved of this decision, and concentrated on keeping the smaller bugs in check while the Space Marines poured a ludicrous number of bolt rounds into the shield.

Seriously, when I say ludicrous, I mean it. All three marines were firing their bolters on full-auto (the Heart-Marine was actually using his one handed while firing a Plasma Pistol with the other!), and they were reloading faster than seemed physically possible. How much ammo the marines had (or where in the Emperor's name they were keeping it all) was a bit of a mystery, but they Sarge and Aimy both swore that the trio managed to put upwards of two-hundred rounds into the Daemonthrone's shield before it popped.

Now this is where the Deathwatch Marines learned the real difference between a Zoanthrope and the unholy creature we'd hauled across the galaxy. When their barrage broke down the Daemonthrone's shield, it didn't fall over dead or try to wriggle away. No, all that a dozen bolt-rounds to the center of mass managed to do was make the thing angry, and daemonhosts can get very, very angry.

The only reason the Astartes weren't vaporized was their superhuman speed and the fact that, despite their initial choice of tactics, they DID have a bit of self-preservation instinct. When the Daemonthrone rounded on them, the three Marines scattered, barely avoiding a psychic tantrum that turned roughly fifty meters of facility roof into a warp-tainted mixture of rubble and molten slag. Sarge and Aimy watched the light show, noting the power of the attacks and the way bits of dead daemonid rose into the air to fill in the Daemonthrone's bolter-wounds, and congratulated themselves on their decision to stick to shooting the little bugs.

Eventually though, the Daemonthrone's tantrum ended and the bug turned back to its now-shrinking portal. It seemed to go pensive for a few seconds, and then with a flap of its wings, the bug entered the portal and its oppressive psychic presence vanished. Sarge and Aimy stayed in their cover waiting to see what horrible thing would happen next, but after a solid minute of nothing, they went back to picking off the daemonids.

A few minutes later the last of the bugs were dead, the Marines had clawed their way out of the rubble at the edge of the destroyed area, and everyone was gathered around the shrinking warp-portal. As the hole finally disappeared with a little pop, Sarge sighed in relief, then froze as Grumpy-Marine said:

„Hmm, more power than I expected, but far less courage. That was almost too easy.

Aimy got as far as "YOU JUST HAD TO FUC—" before the nearby mountaintop exploded in green light.

The green light was followed by the familiar psychic screeching and the appearance of a rift in reality large enough to peek over the top of the mountain. Sarge sighed and facepalmed, while Aimy decided it was time to boost morale via friendly insults, specifically ones targeted at the Grumpy-Marine and "whatever retarded chapter of retards spawned your retarded ass." The black-and-white Space Marine didn't seem to take these completely innocent comments very well, but before anything could come of it both Sarge and Aimy were yanked off their feet.

The Apothecary and Heart-Marine tucked the two guardsmen under their arms like fussy children and began running up the mountain at a pace that could be described as "terrifying". Sarge, possibly because he was far less



of an asshole, was carried facing forwards, which meant that he was able to watch as the mountaintop grew a layer of flesh-fungus and a tide of mutated gaunts poured over it. He briefly considered picking a few of the bugs off while the Apothecary ran, but gave up after an especially large jump jammed his carbine's scope halfway into his eye socket. Aimy just swore at the Heart-Marine and promised terrible vengeance for such undignified treatment.

The ride ended when the first of the Daemonids came into range. Sarge was placed on a boulder with a good view of the bug-covered slope, Aimy was unceremoniously dumped onto the ground, and the three Deathwatch Marines began advancing towards the glowing mountaintop.

Once again, it was a matter of Sarge and Aimy providing covering fire while keeping their heads down, but this time the rough terrain and large number of hostiles meant the Astartes' attack was more of a slog than a blitz. Not that the lack of

speed made it any less impressive, these ARE the Emperor's Angels of Death we're talking about. All three of the Deathwatch Marines collected more kills than Sarge while simultaneously dealing with enemy attacks and climbing a bloody mountain. If it weren't for the fact that Aimy's sniping skills, not to mention her techno-heretical armament, managed to keep her in the lead on points, Sarge might've had to admit that honest Guardsmen couldn't compete with genetically engineered supersoldiers.

Anyway, the advance to the top of the mountain went off with only two or three sketchy moments. The worst of which was when the Grumpy-Marine let himself get flanked by a bunch of mutated gaunts for some reason. I mean seriously, he just stood there like an idiot pawing at his belt, it was like he forgot how many grenades he had or something. Aimy had to pull off an absolutely amazing barrage of double-kills to keep his stupid ass bug-free.



Aside from that, the time when one of the larger Daemonids almost managed to sneak up on Aimy before Sarge noticed it, and the incident with the looser-than-expected boulder, the advance to the mountaintop went smoothly. Of course, you know what Murphy says about attacks that go really well...

Okay, well, technically what happened wasn't an ambush, so maybe the old adage isn't perfect, but the end result was about the same.

The top of the mountain was a smallish plateau with a bunch of sciency antennas on it, plus a growing rift in reality and an irritable Daemonthropes. The three Deathwatch Marines advanced right up to the edge of it, cleared out a last wave of gaunts, and then all three prepped krak grenades and vaulted up over the lip of the plateau. Neither Sarge or Aimy could see what happened next, but at least one of the grenades must have stuck its target, because the Daemonthropes let out a mind-rending screech of pain. Unfortunately, it also let out a blinding blast of green energy which shook the entire mountain, guardsmen included, like an abusive nanny.



Sarge wound up lying on his back, blinking and trying to remember what he'd been doing, and then flinched as something large flew a few meters over his head. He reflexively turned and watched as the object sailed a few dozen more meters, clipped a boulder, cartwheeled up in a short arc, landed with a crunching sound, and finally skidded to a halt. Sarge blinked again and idly wondered why the unidentified crashing object looked so familiar. Then his dazed brain kicked back into gear, put two and two together, got five, decided that was close enough, and signaled his mouth.

¡HOLY SHIT IT'S RAINING SPACE MARINES!

Aimy, who was even more out of it than Sarge, moaned and crawled into cover underneath a nearby boulder. Not because she understood a single word of what Sarge had said, but because taking cover was the Guard-issued response to confusion and incoherent orders. She huddled there for a second, clutching her head and wondering why she'd ever left her regiment, and then registered what Sarge had said at about the same time as the dazed noncom realized it himself. Both of them jumped to their feet and ran downhill towards the crumpled form of the Marine formerly known as Grumpy.

Actually the "former" was premature, when Sarge reached the battered Marine he was still breathing and in possession of over three quarters of his appendages. It was hard to say whether the missing foot was due to the blast, the fall, or the pack of daemonic rippers that had started gnawing at the Astartes while Sarge was staggering around, but it's not like it really mattered. After some initial clearing, Aimy began picking off all nearby bugs, while Sarge propped the wounded Space Marine up against a cover-providing rock and tried to decide what to do next. His thought process was interrupted when the rock exploded.



For the second time in five minutes, Sarge found himself on his ass, wondering what the hell was going on. This time though, the sight of the Daemonthroe drifting down the mountain-side shook him out of it. He staggered upright and analyzed his current situation with the speed of the truly desperate.

It was a complex tactical situation. Sarge was bleeding, slightly burned, and had at least one broken rib. The Space Marine was still unconscious, and was now slightly less than three-quarters-intact. Both of them had been flung a few meters down the scree slope, and were now at the top of a twenty-ish meter cliff. Friendlies-wise, Aimy wasn't anywhere to be seen, and neither were the other Deathwatch Marines. As for hostiles, all the little bugs in the area were dead, but the Daemonthroe appeared to focused on the wounded Marine, and was gathering greenish-black electricity for another attack. Finally, the only option for cover was a smallish pile of rocks a few meters away, which was way too far to drag a tonne of power-armored Space Marine.

It was a tricky situation. In fact it was the sort of tactical problem that a tribunal of senior Inquisitors might spend an entire day and a half arguing over...

Sarge didn't have that sort of time though, so he responded to the complex tactical situation by pushing the Space Marine off the cliff.

Despite the apparent retardation of this plan, it worked. The wounded Space Marine flopped over the edge a bare second before the Daemonthroe's attack hit. Instead of being blown to pieces by a bolt of green lightning, the wounded Space Marine merely suffered a bone-shattering fall and downhill tumble. This was unquestionably a win, unfortunately Sarge wasn't in much condition to appreciate it, because it'd taken him just a little too long to shove the heavy Marine over the edge.

The blast caught Sarge in the back as he scrambled for cover, inflicting a few more shrapnel wounds and superficial burns in addition to knocking him prone. He struggled back to his feet as the Daemonthroe screeched in rage and, deprived of its original target, turned its metal-covered face towards Sarge. The dazed noncom attempted to stagger the rest of the way into cover, realized he'd never make it in time, and raised his carbine instead. He got off only three shots before the Daemonthroe's eyes flared. An invisible force ripped the gun up and out of Sarge's hands, and then began inexorably

pressing in on him from all directions...

It was at this point that Aimy decided it was time to stop sitting around waiting for the Marines to show up, and do something heroic. Over the last minute or two she'd picked herself up from where she'd been thrown, found a nice firing position, and watched the Daemonthrope's attack in a desperate attempt to discover some sort of weakness. Unfortunately, it seemed to lack any giant glowing weak points, and while it had initially sported some nasty-looking wounds on its front, he remains of several daemonids had risen up and filled in the holes in thoroughly disgusting fashion.

So, lacking any ideas for how to kill a continuously regenerating creature that shrugged off bolt-rounds and grenades, she settled for shooting it in the eye and hoping it was easily distracted.

The Daemonthrope screeched and released Sarge as the pulse-round punched through the metal plate welded to its face and put out its left eye. It then turned towards Aimy and then turned and caught a shot in its other eye. As Aimy had suspected neither shot did much to incapacitate the creature, but they sure as hell pissed it off.

The rock that the Markswoman had fired from exploded in a shower of semi-molten shrapnel, but by that point she'd already rebased. Aimy popped up from her new position, landed yet another headshot, and then scrambled backwards over a ridge of scree, where she paused for a second before picking out another good-looking rock. She scrambled downhill, keeping the small ridge between her and the enemy, until she reached the rock, where she readied her rifle for another shot.

It was then, as Aimy rose up for her third attack, that she realized it'd had been really, really stupid to assume the Daemonthrope would keep hovering around a few meters above ground level while it chased her.

Aimy peeked out of cover to find the Daemonthrope a mere thirty meters above and in front of her, and with a corona of green electricity already



gathered around it. The Markswoman reflexively flinched downwards, but it was already too late. There was a flash of green light, a blast of heat, and then... nothing.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of silence and darkness, there came the horribly, horribly familiar pain.

A couple hundred meters away, Sarge paused his search for his dropped carbine, and listened in confusion to what sounded like the bellowing of a stuck Grox. Then after a few seconds the incoherent screaming transitioned into a wail of: "WHY IS IT ALWAYS THE FUCKING FACE". Sarge gave up the search for his weapon, drew his laspistol, and started sprinting.

Fortunately, Sarge didn't get a chance to try attacking a daemonicly possessed Tyranid psyker with nothing but a laspistol and his guard-issue adamantium balls. I mean, I'm totally sure it would've worked out, but the sheer awesomeness of his inevitable victory probably would've caused the universe to implode or something. So all in all, it was a very good thing that he only got three steps before the Deathwatch Marines finally returned from whatever tea party they'd been having.



Bolter fire erupted from somewhere lower down the mountain, and while it wasn't as perfectly-aimed as Aimy's shots had been, it was still enough to convince the big bug it had better things to do than finish off a slightly-overcooked guardswoman. Not having anything to prove to anyone, Sarge hunkered down behind a rock until the Daemonthropes had finished screeching in rage and launched itself towards the source of the fire, and then followed the sound of incoherent cursing (and also the smell of burned hair) to his markswoman.

It turned out that Sarge was actually the second person to reach Aimy: he arrived to find the Apothecary crouched over the still-smoldering markswoman, spraying her head with what could have either been syth-skin or fire-suppressant. Whatever it was though, judging by the way Aimy was squirming and swearing even louder, it stung like a sonofabitch.

Anyway, as Sarge arrived the Apothecary tucked Aimy under his arm (Sarge thought he remembered the Marine having two of those earlier, but wasn't quite sure) and turned to face him. The Marine started to bellow some sort of order, then paused and gave Sarge a look which managed to convey "Are you retarded?" despite being delivered through a helmet.

Where is your weapon, Guardsman?

Sarge blinked, tried to think up a diplomatic response, and then decided

that he was too sore and tired for this shit.

¿Dunno, where is your arm, Marine?

After a VERY awkward silence the Apothecary sighed and began explaining the tactical situation.

In short, Jim had commed the Marines (ours were still jammed) and informed them the AA guns would be coming online soon. Heart-Marine was distracting the Daemonthrophe and drawing it into a good position for all the guns to hit it, while the Apothecary was trying to get him some reinforcements. Unfortunately, the Apothecary had been disarmed (heh) and running on stimms, Grumpy-Marine's diagnostic cogitator was reporting massive trauma and something like fifty broken bones, and Aimy had been temporarily blinded. So Sarge was all there was and he'd LOST HIS BLOODY GUN.

Anyway, there was a bit of yelling, a bit of negotiation, a futile search for wherever Aimy had dropped her weapon, and just maybe a small amount of theft. In the end, Sarge left Aimy and the incredibly battered Grumpy-Marine to the Apothecary, and ran down the mountainside armed with a far-too-large bolter, and an oversized krak-grenade.

As Sarge quickly descended back down to the facility (and desperately tried to avoid faceplanting as he did so) the Heart-Marine was playing hide-and-shoot with the increasingly frustrated Daemonthrophe. Sarge couldn't see much of the Marine, who was wildly dodging through the roof-top structures, but it was impossible to miss the lightning blasts, large-scale psychokinetic tantrums, and the occasional more daemonic attack that he was dodging. All-in-all, it looked like an absolutely suicidal fight to get involved in, especially given how poorly Sarge's own attempt to do that sort of thing had gone (his back was absolutely killing him). Still though, Sarge had to do something to help, so when he finally reached the facility's rooftop, he propped the oversized bolter up on a chest-high pipe like it was a heavy stubber.

Sarge planned out his escape path, took careful aim, fired... and completely missed.

By, like, thirty meters. It was pathetic.

In what would've been the most humiliating experience in his life if anyone else had been around to see it, Sarge proceeded to miss two more carefully aimed shots before giving up. He then switched the bolter over to automatic, and attempted to lay down some "ork-style" suppressive fire. The gun, which had doubtlessly been forged by some master artisan and performed flawlessly in centuries of combat, jammed on the second shot.





Swearing like only a noncom can, Sarge picked up the jammed bolter and threw it at the Daemonthrope. The heavy gun sailed a good ten meters below the Daemonthrope, and then bounced off a pipe and over the edge of the roof. When asked what happened to the bolter afterwards, Sarge told the Apothecary that the Daemonthrope had used its telekinetic powers to snatch it from his grip. (He didn't become aware that the rooftop's vid recorders had caught the whole shameful show, including his blatant lie, until far, far later.)

After spending a second cursing the stupidity of what he'd just done, Sarge drew his laspistol and finally scored a hit on the Daemonthrope. Unfortunately, laspistols aren't known for their ability to pierce daemonic-reinforced chitin, and the creature just ignored the pitiful attack as it continued trying to kill the Heart-Marine. Sarge swore some more, tried to draw a bead on one of the warp-fire filled eyeholes that Aimy had punched in the Daemonthrope's faceplate, and then nearly had a heart attack as twenty-four anti-air guns opened fire from every direction.



Sadly, the hail of flak didn't immediately reduce the Daemonthrope to an airborne pile of daemonic-tainted chunky salsa. The creature took several hits, enough to kill anything that could really be called "alive" in the first place, but before it was overwhelmed it managed to furl its wings into a sort of shield and drop into the mouth of the crater it'd originally exited the facility from.

It didn't drop all the way down the crater though: once out of the AA turrets' line of sight, it spread its wings again and began regenerating its wounds.

Sarge swore at the creature's refusal to just die already, but noticed that it was lot more trouble healing itself than it had previously. He wasn't sure whether it was the lack of nearby Daemonids to cannibalize (the corpses had dissipated after the warp-rift had closed), or if the creature was FINALLY running out of juice, but either way its regeneration was going slower. Unfortunately, it appeared to be countering for this difficulty by getting even more daemony: some of the wounds were filling in with eyeballs and tentacles instead of chiton, and the local area was getting awfully warpy.

As Sarge moved closer to the crater, in the vague hope that the shorter

range would let him use his laspistol or grenade effectively, he crossed through patches of rapidly-growing mutated plants, chittering whispers, frost, and other lesser phenomena. Of course compared to the stuff he'd seen during the warp-voyage with the Daemonthrophe, these phenomena were positively mundane. He soldiered through them without any problems more significant than one of the little biting bugs that the Daemonthrophe loved so much getting partway up his pant leg before he squished it. Still though, it slowed him down a bit, which meant that only the Heart-Marine was there to keep pressure on the bug while it healed up.

Luckily, the Marine as a big boy who could handle himself, and only suffered a few non-fatal injuries during his wait.

So Sarge finally pushed through the last phenomena (a patch of snow and ice that was actually quite refreshing compared to the local scorching temperature) at about the point when Tink finished booting up Spot. He watched with same sense of triumph, then disappointment that the rest of us felt when the Wraithbone-armed drone impaled the Daemonthrophe and the thing STILL DIDN'T DIE.

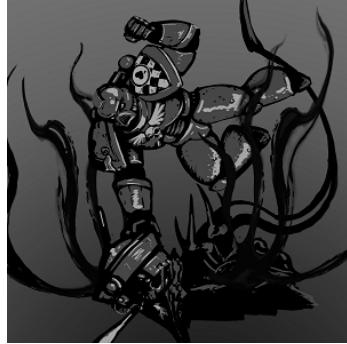
Just like the rest of us he (and the Heart-Marine) decided the only thing to do was keep attacking and hope that Spot was weakening the bug enough for regular weapons to finish the job. Sarge put his laspistol away, spent a good few seconds gauging the distance to the Daemonthrophe and the weight of the Astartes-sized krak grenade, and then threw the explosive at the bug's back while it launched one of its green lightning bolts. The grenade flew in a perfect arc, hit the Daemonthrophe right between the base of its wings, failed to adhere properly, and dropped off...

Fortunately, especially for those of us standing UNDER the Daemonthrophe and the grenade, Sarge had let the krak cook a little. It exploded about half a meter under the creature, and pretty much the entire lower quarter of the thing, plus a good chunk of its back, was instantly removed. It writhed in the air, spraying ichor and screeching, and for a second we all thought that between the blast and the small arms fire, we'd finally done it. Then we noticed the damage to Spot.

Down in the facility, Tink swore as Spot reported severe damage to its hover-unit. He desperately tried to use the drone's little manipulator-arm to grab the something, but wasn't fast enough. The drone sank away from where it had been pressed into the Daemonthrophe's underbelly, until it was



hanging by the, er, spearhead at the end of the Wraithbone psi-suppressor.



Sarge watched in alarm as the Daemon-thrope's wings flared larger. Lacking any more useful ideas, he began firing his laspistol as fast as possible while screaming at the Heart-Marine on the opposite side of the crater to kill the thing before the drone fell off. The Astartes responded to these unhelpful instructions by pausing for a second, and then lowering his bolter. Seeing this, Sarge began to scream something impolite, but paused himself as the Space Marine suddenly exploded into a full sprint towards the Daemon-thrope.

The yellow-shouldered Deathwatch Marine charged forward, simply ignoring a lightning blast which ripped a large chunk out of his side. He reached the edge of the crater where, with an echoing shout of "WE DIE IN GLORY!", he jumped and hit the Daemon-thrope with a literal flying tackle. Then, with one arm and both legs wrapped around the creature, he reached down, ripped Spot loose, and then slammed the Tau drone spike-first into the Daemon-thrope's metal-covered face. Repeatedly.

Now THAT was a sight to give us pause.

I mean, who wakes up in the morning expecting to see a Space Marine beat a daemon-possessed Tyranid psyker over the head with a Tau drone and a Wraithbone marital aid?

Seriously, it was single weirdest thing we'd ever seen, and believe you me, that is REALLY saying something.

All of us stopped firing and just watched as the Deathwatch Marine went at it like a giant, hate-fueled anthropomorphic jackhammer. Each blow resulted in a pained screech and a flickering of the Daemon-thrope's wings which dropped both it and the Space Marine increasingly large distances. The Heart-Marine didn't let a little thing like gravity deter him though. He kept up his attack until finally, when they were both about sixty meters off the ground, an especially violent blow left Spot well and truly stuck, and the Daemon-thrope's wings shrank to little black pinpricks.

We scrambled back as the pair of them slammed into ground, with the Space Marine on the bottom and with enough force to leave a power-armor shaped dent in the



floor. Then after waiting a second to see if anything else would happen, Doc ran forward to check on the Space Marine, while Tink ran forward to check on Spot. The prognosis was grim in both cases, Doc was pretty sure that internal organs weren't supposed to be squeezing out through a wound in one's side, and Spot's jury-rigged battery unit burst into flames when Tink touched it. Even worse, when the battery caught fire, the Daemonthrophe's wings flared to about the size of a chicken's and the gore that filled the room began flowing towards it.

Tink started running around trying to rig up a new power source, while the rest of us began screaming at each other about whether or not we should try to kick/stab/laspistol the Daemonthrophe to death (everyone but Tink was out of ammo) before it regenerated and killed us all. We were so wrapped up in this that it wasn't until Fumbles mentally poked at us that we noticed the two servitors and a slightly oversized servo-skull that had entered the room.

As soon as we'd turned (and Twitch had been stopped from snap-shottting anything), the big Servo-skull began transmitting a rather nasal voice. It welcomed us to the lab, informed us we were over two months late delivering the Zoanthrope, and asked if we'd seen the Inquisitor's rosette anywhere, as he needed it for opening the rest of the stasis units and-

Doc (who STILL had the scalpel in his face) seized on the words "Zoanthrope", "my lab", and "stasis", and interrupted the skull. The medic, speaking quickly and rather incoherently, informed whoever was controlling the skull that if they wanted their damned Zoanthrope, we needed: a psi-suppressor equipped stasis unit, whatever parts Tink asked for, and another stasis unit to hold the Heart-Marine until we found the Apothecary. The skull rocked backwards, probably imitating its owner's shocked expression, and began to respond before Doc cut it off again with a shout of "NOW NOW NOW NOW".

This was enough to convince whoever owned the facility that we were serious: the servo-skull fell silent and zipped away. Less than a minute later one of those prison-cell cubes was carried through the hole in the wall by the giant man-beast we'd seen in the middle of the fight. It was followed by some servitors carrying another cube and a wide selection of parts.

With the help of the servitors and the giant (seriously, up close it seemed like a man-shaped bio-titan), the Daemonthrophe was secured before its wings



grew more than a meter long. The Wraithbone was hooked up to the cell's power supply, and since it was thoroughly embedded in Spot, the whole battered drone was taped to the ceiling just above the cell's stasis field. The Heart-Marine and all the organs Doc could find nearby (some probably weren't his) was put into stasis in time as well, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Then the servo-skull noticed the dead Eldar and started screaming at us, which pretty much set the tone for the next two days.

Well, that's actually getting a little ahead of things. At the time, we just put up with the ranting of the skull's owner (a man identifying himself as "Magos Smith" and the overseer of the facility), because he was the leader of the group of servitors and prisoners that had won the big melee in the warehouse. Having your own army, including a man-beast capable of flipping tanks one-handed, means you're "outspoken and eccentric", as opposed to "annoying and crazy".

Anyway, the Magos got tired of yelling at about the same time Doc finished patching up the rest of us and finally got around to removing the scalpel from his face. The tech-priest announced that he "needed to organize the packing" and would meet us on the surface, and then the oversized servo-skull zipped off as a servitor equipped with an anti-grav pallet drifted into the room. We rode up to the top of the crater in style (a cargo pallet stitched to the augmented husk of a lobotomized criminal is stylish, right?), and met Sarge at the lip. At about the same moment as we disembarked, Jim and the Adepts began climbing through the doors to the elevator shaft.

Jim was the first through the hole; he'd acquired a dozen servo-skulls during his adventure, as well as a few holes that were leaking blood and lubricant (Sarge winced and vowed to avoid Hannah for the next few weeks). Next came the Cogitator Adept, who looked like he'd licked an electrical outlet, and then the Xenologist Adept, or to be more precise, his corpse, was hefted through. Finally the Diplomacy Adept, who was completely fine, climbed out.

Doc immediately ran over to give aid, while Sarge surveyed the ragged group for a few seconds and then asked what had happened. Jim shrugged and just said "turret", and the Cogitator Adept mumbled something about feedback, and the Diplomacy Adept cheerfully announced that he'd shot the Xenologist on account of him being a traitor.

Before Sarge could get his mind around what he'd just heard, Twitch announced that he'd known the dead adept was a traitor all along, and asked



if he'd been working with the Daemonids or the Orks. The old Diplomat told him it was the Orks, suggested he go figure out what data the deceased might have passed to the vile xenos, and then patiently waited for Sarge to ask something less retarded.

After a painfully long wait, Sarge said he'd never seen the Xenologist Adept do anything traitor-y. The Diplomat pointed out that waiting to kill a traitor until AFTER they'd betrayed you would be horribly sloppy. Sarge nodded at this sage advice, asked how the diplomat had known the adept was a traitor, and immediately regretted the decision as the man launched into a long and detailed explanation. About half way through, Tink got bored and asked if the Diplomat was secretly an Inquisitor or something.

This remark cause the old Adept to give up on his explanation with a pained sigh. He spent a few seconds thinking and then declared that he was not an Inquisitor, it was far too athletic a profession for him. He was just a simple adept who'd been part of Oak's retinue since the man was an Interrogator. Of course, he said, this meant he'd been in the Inquisition since before our great-great-great grandfathers had been born, and despite it not being the Administratum, seniority did still count for something.

Essentially, he was Oak's trusted observer and knew how to Inquisit better than all of us put together, so we should shut up and trust him. Sarge announced that he was too tired to argue, and would worry about it later; Tink, Nubby, and even Twitch (who was flowcharting the Ork conspiracy) all agreed. Doc asked if all that meant the Adept was supposed to be keeping us out of trouble, because if so, he'd been doing a terrible job of it. The Diplomat said he was actually pretty happy with our performance, which was pretty disturbing when we thought about it.

Further discussion on the subject of Adepts was called off by the arrival of the Apothecary and his patients. The Grumpy-Marine was looking especially ragged. In addition to a missing foot and forearm, he had enough broken bones and internal injuries to keep even a Space Marine on the bench for a few months. Also, the Apothecary said something about him having spinal damage due to a thirty meter fall directly onto his back. Sarge winced, but otherwise maintained his poker face.

Aimy was in slightly better shape. She was conscious, moderately lucid (she was swearing pretty creatively), could see again, and was moving under



her own power despite a fair number shrapnel wounds and minor burns. Her head though, was a mass of sprayed-on synth-skin with eyeholes cut in it. Doc was pretty sure that a lot of the synth-skin was extraneous though, and wagered that it was "only" the skin from her eyebrows up that was going to need to be replaced.



Anyway, there was a fair bit of wincing when we saw Aimy, and Tink, ever the charmer, pointed out that she REALLY sucked at ducking. Twitch countered that she was actually pretty good at it, and she just had some sort of power that attracted energy attacks to the face. Nubby cheerfully pointed out that at least now she wouldn't have the skunk stripe, on account of how all of her hair would have to be regrown by the Hospitaller this time. Aimy reacted to these comments in the usual way.

While the three assholes tried to avoid getting murdered by an enraged markswoman (and Fumbles ran around trying to calm everyone down), Doc and Sarge brought the two Marines up to speed on how the Daemonthrope fight had ended and the status of the Heart-Marine.



Bringing the Apothecary and his nearly-comatose battle-brother up to speed took a while, mostly because they kept asking for annoying little details and the Diplomat kept showing them a dataslate full of files he'd gotten from somewhere. Then things were delayed even further when the elevator was pried open by the giant man-thing, and the tech-priest we assumed was the Magos (based on how he had the big servo-skull perched on his shoulder) stepped out.

As the Magos and his entourage came over, we all reacted in the usual semi-paranoid way, but Jim took it a step further and stretched his mechadendrites out towards the tech-priest and his skull. This elicited a screeching burst of feedback which made us all flinch, and then the Magos' skull sped over until it was in front of Jim's face and screeched "TRY THAT AGAIN BOY, AND I WILL MELT THAT PATHETIC ORGAN YOU CALL A BRAIN OUT YOUR EARS, AND REPURPOSE YOUR SHELL AS A JANITORIAL SERVITOR." The Enginseer went as pale as he could, turned around, and

ran off to go check on the shuttle; his flock of servo-skulls sped towards the Magos, and then disappeared into the facility.

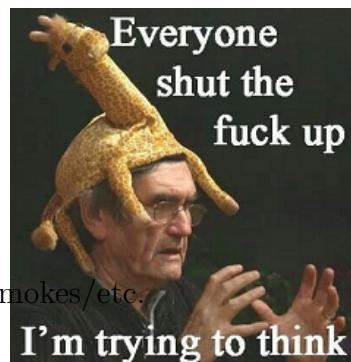
After that little show the Magos strolled up to the Diplomacy Adept, who (to our complete lack of surprise) greeted him warmly by name. The Magos responded by screaming at him about having asked for a Zoanthrope, not a daemon-tainted monstrosity. This ranting continued for several minutes, and also branched out to cover how even if the Zoanthrope had been untainted, all of the Magos' genestealers and cultists had been turned into Squigs. The Diplomat asked if they could be un-squigged, and was informed that it didn't work that way.

The yelling ended (at least for the time being) with the Magos promising to file a complaint with Oak. He then turned to Sarge, and asked where the squished Inquisitor was. A minute later the Magos' skull flew down into the facility with an Inquisitorial rosette hanging from its oversized mechadendrite.

There was an awkward moment after the skull departed where we all stared at the Magos, waiting for him to continue yelling or whatever. The Diplomacy Adept found this hilarious for some reason, and after a few seconds told us not to worry about it and went back to talking to the Apothecary about files, records, political cabals, and other such stuff we had no interest in.

This continued a while, during which most of us wandered off to find some shade/water/smokes/etc. Sarge stayed put though, and after a few minutes he signaled the rest of us to return. We listed as the Apothecary announced that he'd suspected the Inquisitor hadn't been following proper disposal and investigative procedures, but the date we'd provided proved it. He was certain that the small room at the bottom of the crater was some sort of private cache, where especially valuable artifacts and samples were being stored for use by the Inquisitor. This was a grievous breach of responsibility, bordering on the heretical even, given the nature of the evidence being stolen. The Apothecary said he now believed that the mission had always been more about theft than investigation, which was probably why the Inquisitor had been so unhappy when the Deathwatch team had been assigned to "assist" him.

The Diplomat smiled at this and, as if prodding a promising pupil, asked the Space Marine what he was going to do next. The Apothecary thought for a few seconds and then declared that his assignment had been to assist



the Inquisitor in his investigation, not to perform it on his behalf after he'd gotten himself killed. This set off some sort of objection from the half-comatose Grumpy-Marine, but he was pretty incoherent, and the Apothecary just tranqued him and continued.

To sum up what was, in our humble opinion, a bunch of overly-dramatic barracks lawyering: the Deathwatch Marines decided (with the occasional suggestion from the Diplomacy Adept) that they were going to just pack up their shit and go home. They would take command of the Inquisitor's ship (when it got back from futilely trying to send Astropathic messages) and any of his surviving retinue, and haul it all back to some Deathwatch Fortress or other, where THEIR superiors could sort things out.



So basically: "Yeah, you guys are probably in the right here, but we don't want to get involved. We're going to creatively interpret our orders and just leave you here with your questionably-legal research facility, conspiracies and counter-conspiracies, and assorted other bullshit. We'll send a new investigation over to arrest you in a few weeks, try not to accidentally pack up all your shit and leave before they arrive."

It was a very "Screw the Brass" response, and in that moment we all felt a very deep sense of camaraderie with the Marines. We didn't say anything though, because even the most reasonable Space Marine would probably take offense at being congratulated on how "Guard" their decisionmaking had been.

Anyway, the Deathwatch wasn't going to start any fights with us, and as an added bonus, the Apothecary said he'd be taking Gravis off our hands. The Deathwatch would handle the rest of his treatment, and get both him and the Emperor's Scythes that we'd left stranded back to their chapter. Doc and Sarge both practically collapsed in relief. (And so did Nubby when the Marines just accepted the list of "Wargear lost due to enemy action")

Once the Marines had wandered off, the Diplomacy Adept breathed a sigh of relief, and announced that it was probably time for us to know what was really going on. There was a unanimous sarcastic response about how that would be a nice change, which the old man ignored as he explained that he could only give us the basic story. Apparently the question of "whether to burden us with the details" was something best left up to the Inquisitor that Oak was assigning us to for our next mission. We all took note of that part, but kept quiet since the Adept was finally telling us stuff we needed to know.

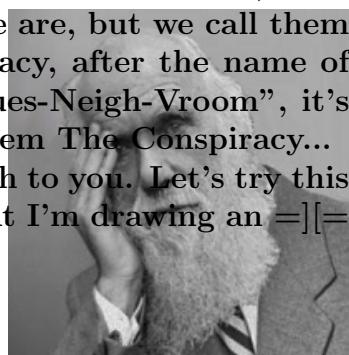
The Adept started talking about all sorts of political stuff, with factions,

and conspiracies, and schools of thought, and other shit, then paused when Tink asked whether "Thorianism" meant that the Inquisitor was really fond of thunder-hammers. The Diplomat dialed the level of detail down a little bit, and tried again. After three more attempts, all of which ended in spectacular confusion, the old Adept took a seat on a pipe and restarted one last time.

¿Look, ever since Oak first became and Inquisitor, he's been struggling against an enemy inside the Inquisition. We don't, or at least I don't, know exactly who these people are, but we call them and their minions the Sus-naevum Conspiracy, after the name of the school they tried to build. No, not "Sues-Neigh-Vroom", it's High Gothic. Please stop trying just call them The Conspiracy...

¿Okay, this obviously isn't getting through to you. Let's try this again with visual aids. You see this sock that I'm drawing an =]= on?

Hi, I am a shadowy group of Inquisitors who have fallen under the influence of chaos, you can call me The Conspiracy



¿Hello, I am Inquisitor Quercus, but you can call me Oak

Hahahaha, we are going to use Inquisitorial resources to create a successor to the Cognitae, which was and "evil super heretic school for bad people".



¿An evil Inquisitorial school you say? I am going to stop you, then take your plan and use it to make a good Inquisitorial School. TAKE THAT!

CURSES! You and your retinue of brave, intelligent, and handsome individuals have foiled our evil plot! We will get you for this Oak, and take the school back for ourselves!

¿Not if I get you first! TAKE THAT, AGAIN!

Ha, that was only one of our useless minions, we're far too evil and sneaky for you to ever catch us for real!

¿No one is "too evil and sneaky" for me to catch! I'll track you down, even if it takes me three hundred years!

At this point Nubby interrupted to ask if Oak was really three hundred, and if that was the case why did he look all young and normal while the Adept look like little old raisin-man. The Adept put the sock puppets down with a sigh, and said that Magos Smith helped with that.

Before anyone else could ask pedantic questions, the servo-skull returned and both the Magos and his giant man-beast started moving again. They both strolled over the elevator and retrieved a mobile stasis-unit that matched the one we'd seen in the cell we'd crammed the Daemonthropes into. As he

brought it over towards us, the Diplomacy Adept announced that we could get the rest of our information from Inquisitor Sciscitat. There was a brief period of confusion until the Adept explained that Sciscitat had been Oak's liaison to the Magos, not the Inquisitor who'd been compressed into a ball of gore.

Anyway, the Adept claimed that Oak had sent a message to the base saying we should be assigned to this Inquisitor after our delivery. Sarge looked at the orders and acknowledged that they looked pretty official, but didn't actually have any clue if it was real or not.

The stasis unit deactivated and the Inquisitor slowly sat up. He scanned the area, and then his eyes came to rest on Sarge. Realization hit them both at the same time.

Oh, not YOU again.

Aimy, Tink, the Adepts, and the Magos all watched in confusion as the rest of us alternately groaned, swore, and cursed ourselves for not remembering that "Sciscitat" had been the name of the second Interrogator we'd ever been assigned to...

