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**Chapter 1: The Last Man Standing**

Note from the author-I apologize for the wall of text; at some point I'll have the time to reformat it. If it helps any, there are actually paragraphs in the later chapters.

We were only recruits, enticed by the glory of combat, the honor and remembrance of war. We had no idea of the horrors of the campaign in which we recruited. We were not told of the sacrifice, of the death, of the endless suffering that we were forced to witness as people who we grew up with died right before our eyes. The broken bodies, just lying there, rotting. We were not told of the twisted writhing remnants of our brothers in arms that appeared where healthy comrades were, just a second earlier. We were unprepared for the reality that is war.

It started out well. I was assigned to the 2305th battalion of the imperial guard. Training was as I expected it to be, dreary, monotonous, boring. I assumed that I knew all the facts, I mean hell; how hard it is to fire a lasgun? After a few years of intense training and physical readiness I was itching to get to the front lines, to start writing my page in history. How little did I know… I was finally assigned to combat, we were all excited, this was our chance to show our worth, to make a difference. As our troop transport shot through the warp there were no doubts, every man's head filled with half-truths and propaganda. As we reached our destination we were boarded by another vessel, one bearing deserters of the war going on below. They shouted to us, told us of our folly; they warned us. However, the diabolical words of the misinformation received from our indoctrination once again steered our actions. We spat on the men, called them shameful and pathetic. They were carried away to some unknown place, for torture and most likely, execution. We never saw that part of the ship though. We were as blind to that half as we were to the truth that was hidden below us.

The orders came, we were all to initiate transport, every one of us dressed in combat vests and armed with our standard weapons. The transport was perfectly coordinated by the commander in the transport above us. Little did I realize that the only fact that the was still alive was because he never actually traveled to the surface. When we got there, the wall blinding us began to shatter. Bodies and corpses were what we found when we arrived. The servitors had been ordered to stop burying the bodies and instead they were heaped in a pile and left to rot. The sat, defiling our camp until some special unit person decided to do the poor souls a favor and turned his flamer on them, liberating us of their death searching eyes. That's when the first of us began to have our doubts. "We were not told of this" they wailed. The commissar was fierce however and soon frightened us back into shape, as was his job. He laughed at our squeamishness. Even he was not prepared for the onslaught that was to come.

About 3 terra months after we landed, the number of Orks we encountered began to dwindle. Instead of charging thousands, we were faced with small squads who seemed unsure, as if the legendary fearlessness of the green devils was inexplicably broken. We rallied at the false victory and surged forward, encouraged by our apparent success. The truth was not revealed to us until we reached the war camp. The Orks had constructed a monstrous outpost, and from it they had surged like an interminable tide. When we approached, it was like someone had turned of the spigot; the never ending wave had stopped. We cheered and yelled and celebrated, thinking that Victory has near. Our hopes were crushed and we blanched before what appeared to us in that camp. Our enemy lay dead, all of them, uncountable corpses and half cadavers lay strewn on the ground, like some morbid green rug. The thing that unnerved us the most was that it was not lasguns that did this. The carcasses were too mutilated, too defaced . In fact barely could be found intact at all. They all seemed to have gashes in their flesh, almost like…well bite marks.

Morale was plummeting and the commissar all but had to threaten to shoot us to get us to make camp in that ungodly place. During the night a heavy fog set in. When the sun set there was a whole battalion of us, plus heavy support and number of sentinels and tanks. That would soon change.

It started with the outer guards. Tales spread like wildfire, people being dragged off into the night; nothing left. As the attacks grew worse and worse, the commanding officer on the ground ordered us to make ready for war again; against who? No one knew. We began seeing shapes in the dark, vast amounts of… things. They were like nothing we had ever seen before, let alone fought. As it neared midnight, the things decided that they were done with stealth and surveillance. Vast hordes swarmed as claws shot out from the darkness, taking us unaware. Screams filled the air as the attackers slaughtered the unprepared guardsmen. When the rest of the force readied, it was already too late to do anything. Shots split the night as one by one, the units fell. The people left with any common sense (Including me) rallied to the commander, ready to fight to the death against the foe.

Little did we know the nature of our adversary.

The morning brought no respite from the rout, just a blood red sky filled with strange winged creatures. We had lost all communication with our "friends" in orbit, I imagine that they left at first sight of the creatures. They knew what we were against, and which way the blade would fall.

The final assault against us was absolute, a commander just out of training would have soiled his flak vest at the very thought of it. Even our officer, who had witnessed many bloody, chaotic battles was unprepared to the sight that met his eyes when the filtered sunlight lit the plains before us.

It was a wave. There was no end to it. Just a solid mass of creatures, large ones blocked out the sky and slashed at our minds with their eldritch powers. Flying ones turned the red sky black with masses of bodies. In the center of our camp a furious digging noise brought even more of the things from below. As our troops died, a last glimmer of hope appeared, a transport; fully functional. We ran like chaos inself was at our heels, and for all we knew, it was. When our commissar tried to stop us we shot him, all of us, no hesitation, no regret. He would have dragged all of us back there until our blood ran from our bodies like a rushing torrent of gore. One of us had some idea of how to fly the thing and we got out of there as fast as our engines would allow us.

From our view point over the battle field we were forced to watch as the last of the men we had served with died in the name of the emperor.

I'll never know why they let us escape, the certainly had the capability of killing us all. They didn't though. I think the bastard has some kind of idea how our news would affect the rest of the empire, they let us escape to demoralize the others. And hell, it worked.

Now as I sit here, under a blood red sun watching the same thing unfold I am reminded of that time, the time when everything seemed so effortless, when the correct thing to do was clear, when the blood of my friends did not stain the depths of my soul.

I have another transport, but I know they wont let me leave, why should they? I already informed high command, they have no use for me any more. I see the wave getting closer. My mouth turns dry. What is left for an old man, a retired army soldier who only saw months in combat. Nothing- that's what. The echo's of that day stir me from my deepest dreams, and their voices plague me in my mind.

I will not let them get me, I know now that this is the only was to go, the lasgun seems friendlier now, like an old comrade. But it's a lie, they all died long ago.

To the Tyranids…

**Chapter 2: The Race of His life**

Don tried to snap out of his depressing daydreams but they still haunted him. My poor comrades, what did they know of life. It was all a cruel flash of sentience for them. They were only children compared to others. I guess they served their purpose. They gathered information about the capabilities of our enemies. He dismissed his recollections and forced his body into movement. The Tyranids were coming and he needed to react. There was no one with him, he was alone on a hill overlooking a field of moving chitin.

He had holed himself up in this small hut to escape the life that the imperial guard had tried to force him into. He had only just survived from the attack and he did not want to die now. He had escaped once, he could do it again. He opened his shed and frowned. His bike, a "borrowed" one from a imperial armory was is disrepair and he could not fix it in time.

He got more and more nervous as he heard the roar of the army approach. Why are they coming for me? Am I the only one left again? When he had settled down, he had landed on the planet and quickly ran from the imperial drop site out into the hills of the planet in order to not get spotted. He assumed that the Imperial Guard outpost was gone; Hell, it didn't take them long to kill us. I need to get out of here. He put on his modified flak vest and gathered his las gun and other took his bag of emergency items and ran like hell into the forest.

Crap, he thought as he heard his small hut explode into splinters under the strength of the swarm. Don scrambled and stumbled through the rock filled hillside that appeared as the forest pattered out. Its all psychological, that sound. It can't hurt you, but the things making it can. Run you fool!He pushed his muscles to the max.

He ran the entire day. Finally he could not run any more. He collapsed to the ground. This is it. I'm going to die. Not only am I go to die, its not going to be a glory, wonderful manifestation of warrior life. Its going to be sudden, horrible, no one will remember you, no one will even care. You are all alone. He got a hold of himself and reached into his bag. He grabbed a muscle stimulant and injected it into his leg. He could feel its chemicals go into action. A smooth cool sensation ran us his feet and into his body.

He got to his feet and started to run again. So much of this enemy IS psychological. Right now I cant even see them, but I KNOW they're there. That's a part of their deadliness. Even if I were to turn around and just start firing, I could shoot until the battery in my las gun overheated and exploded, but it would not make a difference. They just come and come and come until it was over. There's so many of them. That's another part.

Finally he reached the top of the hill. From this summit he commanded a view of the surrounding area. He despaired as he looked behind him. The plains were covered with the creatures. Suddenly, Don's morale shot through the roof. In front of him was another imperial guard station. This one seemed to have been constructed recently. Don never would have set up shop near the imperial guard. Nevertheless, now, in his greatest need he welcomed the sight of the communication outpost.

Even with his past transgressions concerning the guard, he was ready to march right into the base. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the commissar. Those evil people, those subhuman unemotional robots. He rather a entire platoon of guard got wiped out rather than retreat. I cant go in there, not with my history. A deserter? He kill me immediately.

Rather than risk getting killed by the only people who could possibly protect him, he opted to go around the base. Those poor guardsmen, he could not even warn them. Just like my friends, all killed in the name of the emperor, senseless meaningless deaths. He ran past the outpost; soon it was behind him.

**Chapter 3: Hit With The Blastwave**

He heard frenzied yells and lasgun shots as the Tyranids assaulted the guard camp. Why are they following me? Don ran up the last hill and stood at its summit, there was no place to run now. The hills ended and below him were just more plains. Where do I go now? The sound of artillery split his ears. They've got some heavy support, they might last a couple hours to a day, depending on morale. While the Tyranids are busy; what do I do in that time?

The answer was run like hell again and try to put some distance between him and his enemy. He scrambled down the hills again until he could go no farther. He collapsed again. My body was not meant for this, I cant keep this up much longer.

The sunrise brought no new surprises, just another blood red sky streaked with the spores of the innumerable beasts. The invasion was starting to show on the planet. Regular organic growth had withered and died, and it was replaced with the vile creations of the Tyranids.

At first he tried to avoid these horrible mutated things, but as they grew they got harder and harder to work around. He finally stopped and went straight through.

When he was about three fourths of the way down, the shots ceased. Don assumed that meant that he was now under pressure again. In a last act of desperation the guardsmen must have set off their plasma reactors, because at he turned around to see how close the Tyranids were, the hill erupted in pure light. Don was immediately blinded. The blast came a few seconds later. The ground seemed to turn upside down. Don's brain had a few seconds to realize that he was in the air before he hit the ground. Every thing went black.

Private Don Ridman reporting sir. He was back in private training. This lesson will be using live ammunition; it will simulate enemy minefields and assaulting a defensive position held by the enemy. Is every one clear! Now alpha squad you take your boys around the side through the mines, and be careful. Beta you cover… He mind jumped ahead. Damn, even though this is a simulation you need to keep your head in gear private. If these were real mines you would have been… he had stepped to the side, it was just an errant foot fall, but it had almost cost him his life. Shit man… He got hit by a real one…Alright who was the unfortunate fool whose job it was to lay the "minefield" you included a real one YOU… Now Don, I need you to wake up. The medic's head swam before Don. I need you to WAKE UP…

Don opened an eye. He instantaneously regretted it. Pain swam to his brain like a red hot needle. He almost passed out again. He tried to get into a sitting position but found that he didn't have the strength. After being conscious for only a few seconds, he lapsed back into sweet unconsciousness.

Dreams of monsters and abominations manifested in his subconscious as his feeble brain tried to comprehend what had happened to his body. After emperor knows how long, Don re-regained awareness. He vision came back in hazy red waves; he squinted in the sun to try to see.

He became aware of his body after it started to spasm. His brain was doing a "self -check" Brain says to body: "looks like everything is fine, you're damn lucky to have survived that… wait, what's that? Don didn't need auditory hallucinations to tell him the answer; it was a Tyranid, and it was on top of him, pinning his body down.

**Chapter 4: More Questions, No Answers**

Don's mind raced, he panicked and tried to move. His body did not respond, he was paralyzed by fear. Any second now that thing is going to start eating me, I'll watch it eat me while I'm still alive. He pushed that thought back into his head and tried to calm down. His battle training kicked in and soon he was in a state of less anxiety.

He tried to move his hand again; it moved. What is with this thing, why hasn't it eaten me yet? Don stared down at the large body pinning him. It was covered with plates or organic armor, and it had sickly sharp appendages. It was laying sideways across him. Don looked at its head. It was gone. What the hell? Then he remembered the explosion. It must have gotten hit and thrown on top of me as it fell down the hill. Don kicked his leg and the body shifted a little.

After many minutes, don was able to get it off of him. Finally, that thing sure gave me a shock. Now lets get up and…Don's leg collapsed under his weight. Pain shot through his body like a million razor sharp flechettes. He groaned and clenched his teeth to deal with the pain. After writhing on the ground for a time, he was able to get control of his senses. He reached into his bag for his last syringe. After this I need to be more careful. One last wound and blam…its all over. The battle field chemicals soon numbed his pain to near tolerable levels.

He looked around for something to use as a splint. He saw the Tyranid and took out his combat knife. He slashed off one of the Tyranid's scythe-like arms. He saw immediately that it was too sharp, he could not use it. In fact he almost cut himself on it as he picked it up. Damn this thing's sharp, why don't they issue these instead of lasgun bayonets? Oh well,no sense letting this go to waste. he strapped the scythe to his bag. Instead, he used the creature's leg done as a splint and wrapped it up with a torn piece of his shirt. The end result wasn't pretty, but it would hold till he was able to get off the planet. If I'm able to get off the planet.

Now mobile, Don was able to get a view of his surroundings. He sensed that about a day had gone by judging by the growth of the Tyranid-Plants. He glanced back up the hill which he had come down. It was charred black by the explosion; bodies of both imperial guard and Tyranids littered the hill. With them were pieces of twisted metal and glass from the reactor. He scavenged through the bodies and found some rations and some more med kits. He was also able to recharge his battery on his lasgun. He tried to find a better weapon, but there was non in the smoldering wreckage.

He looked out over the plains; short yellow grass and some small trees were all that he saw. His destination seemed to be the mountains in the distance. If I can survive a Tyranid invasion anyplace on this planet, its in the mountains. Why are the Tyranids here anyways? This is…was a small outpost with little organic life. From what I've heard they wouldn't find this planet very attractive.

He reminisced awhile, but soon decided that it was time to leave. Well crap, I cant walk all this way. He gazed out at the innumerable miles between him and the mountains. I've got to find some other means of transportation.

This was easier said then done however, as almost nothing was left in the camp from the melt down and resulting conflagration. Almost nothing… He spied a reinforced metal cover of some kind. It was on the ground and seemed to be intact. I bet it's a bomb shelter of some sort, little good it did them. Now the problem was getting inside. If it was able to survive a pointblank plasma explosion, there's no way my pathetic lasgun will be able to do anything.

Fortunately a sort of lock seemed to have also survived. Damn, what's this thing made out of anyway?Any why is it here? He tried to guess the code. It had room for only letters, so it had to be some word or combination of words. What would a guardsman use as a combination? He fiddled with the contraption, but was unable to get the answer.

Finally, after many guesses he noticed the imperial insignia on the hatch. The emperor protects. Could that really be the combination? He tried it, and the hatch swung open.

He stepped down the metal stairs and switched on his light. The beam illuminated a scene of hideously gruesome and morbid proportions. Blood and… Some other kind of liquid coated the walls like some ones idea of a painting. Don found a few bodies from both sides. The hatch was open before the guardsmen had time to close it. Something moved, he could hear movement. "You could leave right now"one half of him said. "something happened here , and there might be survivors, you should stay" Don was curious so he listened to the half of him that wanted to stay.

He instantly tensed, ready for a deadly encounter with the Tyranid scum. He nervously flitted his light over and quickly changed directions, trying to see his adversary.

The room was bare except for an exit into another hallway. It was also very large, about house sized, and it forced Don to be constantly vigilant in his search, less a beast should attack him from behind. Pillars of metal supported the room, but the ceiling was not very high, creating a feeling of claustrophobia.

The thing attacked. Another beast, like the one that he had encountered before, launched its way through the air towards Don with its razor sharp blades thirsting for his blood. He kicked at its head in mid-jump. It sprawled backwards and hit a support column. It tried to get to its feet/claws but don was ready. He poured lasgun fire into its face before it had time to react. It twitched and then died. Blue ichor spouted from its wound.

He walked into the hallway cautiously panning his light around, to make sure that there were no more unpleasant surprises in store for him. He reached the end of the hallway.

At some point a large metal door had protected this part of the complex from unwelcome eyes. He noticed a broken pass-pad, not unlike the one he had used to get in here. Someone had destroyed the door with that looks like plasma gun shots. There must have been some intense fighting going on here. After the door, the body count increased on both sides, until he had to jump over large piles of them. The smell of death was imbued in the wall way. Don coughed and ran to the end, trying not to look at the hapless men who had died fighting "for the emperor".

There was a lift at the end of the hallway and he noticed that the power for the elevator was next to him. He plugged it back in. Slowly, the lift rose to the point in which he was. He heard a click as it connected to his station. Where the hell does this thing lead? Why would the army want to build such a complex bunker on a planet like this? He dispelled his useless questions as he stepped into the elevator. Some unknown sensor must have read that there was a passenger, for the lift started to descend into the ground; what awaited him at the bottom? He sure didn't know.

**Chapter 5: Rage Of The Lost**

The elevator sank into the earth for a few minutes. How far down does this thing go? Why would they build it? The elevator reached the bottom of the shaft. The doors slid open.

He was in another room similar to the one above, with a low ceiling but large space. A light was shining in the corner, and there seemed to be a desk of some sort also. Don switched off his light. He saw what looked like a body in the corner.

"We won then?" A voice came from the body. Instantly the figure leaped off the ground, "who else is left? I want you to scout back and report to me"

Don was confused for a second until he remembered that he was wearing his imperial guard uniform, the man thought that he was a regular soldier. It then hit him.

This man was the commissar who he had seen when he had passed the camp initially. Suddenly, all the events clicked together. "YOU BASTARD! You left them to die while you ran down here, they died for nothing!"

The commissar seemed taken aback "there are thing which needed to be protected here, I was.." Don never let the man finish his sentence. He hit the man square in the face.

The commissar was obviously not expecting this. "who are you?" he screamed "I'll have your head!"

Don was beyond rational thought at this point, he had lapsed back into his memories. "You didn't take no for an answer, they were all around us and you did nothing. Men like you deserve to die a thousand deaths for your actions." Don twitched. "Its too bad that I can only make you die one…"

The commissar realized that this was no longer a conversation, he reached his hand back to draw his weapon. A lasgun shot sliced through his shoulder. "I'm going to make this slow for you!"

Stop it you fool, you're not a killer, come to your senses! Don twitched again as he fought with himself. The commissar thought that this would be a good time to attack. He drew his plasma gun and fired.

Don jumped out of the way and hit the commissar with another lasgun shot, this time in the hand. The commissar dropped his gun in pain. Don ran up and kicked him in the face, and continued kicking him until he lay still. Stop, even if he deserves it. Don put his hands to his head and winced.

This is psychosis, you need to get a hold of yourself. Don suddenly felt very tired, he found that his legs could no longer support his body. He slumped into a corner.

No retreat, fight to the last man! The horrible beasts were all over him. His commissar was yelling in his ear, "don't even think about it!" Don and his comrades fired their lasguns until the wave of enemies overwhelmed them, they switched to close combat weapons. Blood and gore splattered over the ground as man and creature waged war. There was no retreat, not yet.

The broken squad gained a respite during the night, they huddled around their meager campfire and talked. "this is crazy, we don't have orders, they just left us here to die!" "but he's never going to give up!" The man next to don said, turning to face the commissar, who was asleep. "I can understand if we were ordered to hold the ground, but we've got nothing over the vox, just static, I think the command squad's been taken out."

"You know, I saw this transport ship over by the third squad's tent we could…" Things were going down hill. He saw the commissar go insane. He ranted and raved about how we could win this, all we had to do was pray to the god-emperor and he'd come down in a chariot of flames.

Him and his friends tried to leave that night.

"who's there? Damn, they'd been spotted. The commissar appeared out of the shadows, his beard was longer and he had a crazed look in his eyes.

Retreating? We'll have none of that! He stabbed one man in the chest with his power weapon, he doubled over and died. The other men panicked and swarmed the commissar. They tied him up and threw him on the ground. One of the men had other plans though. "looks like we're in charge now, and you know what I'm going to do?" he drew his lasgun and shot the commissar, execution style in the skull. The man died instantly.

Don's memories lost their tangibility, his vision grew cloudy, his last visions were of the carnage as they left the planet, thousands of men perishing under the renewed attack that cam that morning. They had got out just in time. The other men regretted nothing. Don was not so sure, it had tortured him every night…

He woke with renewed sanity. I'm better then them, I wont kill him, although I got crazy close to doing it already. He woke the commissar by slapping him across the face. That didn't mean that he'd be nice to him either.

"you…I don't know your name and I don't want it. I just want to know what you meant earlier when you said there was something important down here" The man did not reply at first. "do I know you? You don't look like any of the troops at the camp."

"I'm the last one, and I need to know what is going on here." "what makes you think that I'll tell you?" the commissar replied smugly. "because things can turn ugly very quickly if you don't…" Don pointed his lasgun at the commissar's head.

"ok, I'll tell, just don't shoot me; command said something of value was found in the mountains, P18, that's peak 18. There was some sort of weird signal emanating from there, that's all I know! I swear!"

"thank you for the information, I'll be on my way, butcher" Keeper of men's souls. Destroyer of lives, it was hard enough fighting a war without having to always look over your back.

He supposed that some of his hatred of commissars was just his experiences talking, but he found it hard to be civil, even human, when one was around.

"wait, aren't you going to untie me?" Don threw his combat knife at the man's feet along with a packet of food, "I think this will last you a week, it'll give you time to rethink your life."

Well that was a complete waste of time, I learned next to nothing and my only destination remains the same; the mountains. His mind changed topics. If I ever get back to real space, I'm going to need psychiatric help.

He left the man alone in the darkness and took the elevator back up, at the top he unplugged the lift and jammed it so that it couldn't go back down. He left the bunker satisfied.

**Chapter 6: Shots From Afar**

The sunlight hit him hard after being underground for so long. He squinted in the sun. The planet he was on was called Lars Minor. It was a lone planet circulating around the sun IS163 near the edge of the galaxy. It was mostly plains, in fact, the planet appeared yellow from orbit because of this fact. The entire planet has only one real ocean, which paled in comparison to the descriptions of Terra's former oceans. There were almost no native animals, the only ones that Don had found were ones that the imperial guard had brought with them on their ships.

He gazed out again over the vast expanse of plain that he would need to cross and decided that he needed another means of transportation. He rummaged around in the debris until he found a hover bike. This was a scaled down version of a skimmer usually reserved for commanders or elites. Currently, the contraption was not working however. Don got out his tools, which he kept in his bag also, and started to fix it.

The other privates had thought him weird after he started to make things, they said "leave that to the tech priests" They didn't understand that he needed to do these things. He had seen so much and he needed a way to cope, to take his mind of prior events. After the fated incident he had been reassigned for a short time while his comrades had been killed by the imperium to cover up the Tyranid invasion and the panic it would bring.

His reassignment did not last long. Don was frequented with visions of the past and severe and sudden rages. During one of these he commandeered another transport and tried to flee the galaxy. He ended up near Lars Minor and decided to stay.

Although he wasn't a tech priest, he knew his way around imperium technology, a fact that few people liked, especially his commanders. Within a few minutes, the slightly damaged speeder way working like new.

Don attached extra power and more supplies to the sides and got on the bike. He was just in time. A group of horrible Tyranid creatures materialized out of the ground in a furry of blades. Don got the hell out of there.

Unfortunately, the beasts had no intention of letting Don escape. Even though they did not possess the speed of a hover bike, they followed Don relentlessly. It was a race to the mountains.

Don shot over the ground, streams and anything else in his way, if he did not get to safety, the Tyranids would rip him apart. The engine on the hove bike shone red, and the heat indicator blinked its warning. Curses, I'll have to stop and change the fuel rods. Its either that or I explode. He glanced behind him. The beasts seemed to not be following him. He got as close to the mountains as possible before the engine safety shut the mini reactor down. That's what I get for running the thing to damn hard. Now I've got to change the rods as quickly as I'm humanly capable. The procedure was simple, take out the old rods, put in the new. However, plasma rods are very reactive. If I drop even one of these…

He quickly started to change the rods. One, two, three… Four were changed when his pursuers attacked. Don had never seen them coming as they came out of the ground. They appeared a few paces away, and that gave him some time to react.

The hand shot to his modified lasgun , and with the years of training that he endured, point blank shot one of the creature's heads off. Dark viscous liquid hissed and bubbled and the being died. The other three beasts closed in.

It was hopeless, even if he could kill one more before they charged him, there was no way that he could stop them from getting to him or his bike. Another movement caught his attention. Off in the distance a group of new beings were drawing closer. And I can be sure as hell that they're not imperial guard…damn.

Suddenly shots came from nowhere, two of the things dropped from carefully designated head shots. Don launched him self at the other. He fired his lasgun, it clipped the things shoulder and it screamed in pain. However, just as it was going to counter attack Don, more shots resounded and the things legs were blasted off.

Don took this moment of opportunity and sliced at the beasts neck with his combat knife. The head stayed fast, although ichor gushed from the cut. Don stabbed and cut as the thing thrashed and twitched. Finally it was dead. Don felt no twinge of sadness, no deeper understanding like he did when he locked the commissar away, just a overwhelming satisfaction.

It had tried to kill him, he had killed it in return, that was the way things were in this era of eternal war. And he hoped like hell that he'd keep on winning, because the only other option is death.

**Chapter 7: Ascension**

The Tyranids lay around Don, seeping their bodily fluids. That was close. Where did those shots come from? He looked around. He seemed alone. He was in the foothills of the mountains, overlooking the plains. Suddenly another movement caught his eye. He squinted through the sun, trying to see the cause of the movement. Its some sort of… Space Marines. What the hell were space marines doing here? How would they react to him being here. Wait, I need to appear to be a normal guardsman, If they know I'm a deserter, they'll kill me for sure.

Don brushed of his uniform and stowed away his modified lasgun. Luckily his hover bike had a regular lasgun in it. He looked at himself in the mirror of the bike. Emperor above, I look like crap. Days of running had taken its toll on him, he looked like death warmed over. Although I guess this is what a normal guardsman looks like after a Tyranid invasion. Hmm, I'm still not sure this is a good idea. If I thought that the commissars were strict the space marines will put him to shame.

He climbed the hill were he was, the bike could not transverse such a steep grade and he left it where he was. When he reached the spot where he had saw the marines however, they had vanished. Crap, I didn't even think of that. Its better than the alternative, them killing you to keep what you saw a secret. The marines must have been scouts, because he could not see them anywhere. Their cloaks must be hiding them.

What am I supposed to do now? I left all my supplies in the bike. Well that was smart…He walked back to the bike. Just as he finished looting his supplies from the bike, an alarm went off. BLEEP Shit, shit, shit, shit, I forgot to change the last two reactor rods, The bike's overheating!

Racing against the clock, Don quickly threw his bag on the ground and searched for the rods in it. BLEEP "Yes I know" Don said out loud. Where are they? Did I put them in my side pocket? He unzipped his side pocket and there they were. Don rushed over to the bike. BLEEP Before the reactor had time to overheat, don quickly shoved in the rods, pacifying the machine. The alarm stopped, the normal quiet of the interminable plains returned.

This is just another example of how quick life is. If I had reacted a second later I would not be standing here. Since there seems to be no guardian marines hovering above my head, I've got to be more careful. Don looked around and was unnerved by the line of advancing creatures that he now saw on the horizon. They must have heard the sound, that alarm was pretty damn loud. Don remounted his hover bike and packed his bag again. Where do I go now? I seem to be all alone again, I wonder where the Marines went to… In addition, why are they here at all? Faced with questions for which he did not know the answers, Don decided to get further into the cover of the mountains.

Just as he started to travel up the side of the cliff he remembered the limits of speedy and unpredictable friend. I'm either going to have to leave the bike here or… "fix" the altimeter brake.

The altimeter brake was the device of the bike that made it a semi-skimmer rather than a true skimmer. The brake kept the bike at a constant level off the ground. The altimeter measured the distance and surroundings of the bike and sent that information on to the brake which analyzed it and made adjustments to the bike's elevation. The brake was included in the design of the bike to make sure that the engine did not wear out. The higher the bike repulsed off the ground, the more power needed to keep the machine aloft. To combat this problem, the tech priests that designed the bike included this brake to make sure that the reactor did not overheat out of pure over use. If the brake detected a strain on the engine because of rapidly ascending or descending, it slowly stopped the engine.

I have no use of this brake. Its quite worthless as long as you keep a good eye on the heat levels in the reactor. Something that Don had not been doing before.

I've got to do this fast though, the Tyranids want a snack and they're coming after me.

Don slipped off his bag again and went to work removing the altimeter brake. The wires and complicated electrical processes absorbed Don, time passed. He disconnected the altimeter from the brake and cut the wires leading to the engines from the brake. Thus freed, the brake could be removed. He disassembled his radio and did some thinking. If I get rid of the altimeter, I need something to regulate the elevation of the bike. I have just the idea… He replaced the leads with the leads to a potentiometer from his radio and attached the potentiometer to the handlebars. He had no solder so he used the regulation laspistol set to low to melt the metal into place. He refit the bike's plating on the bottom. The entire process was done hastily but Don knew that it would hold for now.

The end result to his tinkering was that he now had complete control over the elevation of the bike, which he controlled with the dial on his handlebars.

He glanced over to the plains below him. The Tyranids were noticeably closer. Lets see if this works.

Don gunned the bike and skimmed along towards the mountains. All the while he kept close watch on the heat level of the engine.

As he flew over the hills he thought about the Tyranids and the Marines. Were the Tyranids here because of the Marines or vice versa? Maybe the two were unrelated… I hope that if the marines are here, that they wouldn't mind another passenger on the transport out of here. I have no desire to be stuck on this planet as the Tyranids rip it apart. In fact…Don shot a glance over his shoulder.

The difference between where he was and where he had been was noticeable. The main host of the Tyranids army and advanced in the time that he had been working. He could see the dark poison-like ground that spread with their vile infestation. Dark clouds appeared in the distance and acid rain fell as the chemicals of the Tyranids infected the once untouched ecosystem. Dark lightning flashed behind him illuminating a dark wave of... Crap, those are all Tyranids?! The dark wave that he had thought to be the flora that they brought with them was actually a never ending swarm of organisms.

He jerked his head back to the scene before him. The walls of the mountains rose like a fortress out of the ground. He moved his had over the dial. Here it goes.

The ground rose steeply as he headed into the mountains. He turned the dial and the bike rose off the ground an additional yard or two. A solid wall of stone appeared in front of him. He turned the dial further, causing the bike to shoot over the wall safely.

Over the next half hour he worked his way up the cyclopean heights that had overlooked the plains. Once or twice, the engine had to be shut down to maintain the correct temperature. Each time, Don had navigated his metal steed to a ledge before turning off the motor.

The motor indicated that is was overheating again. Once again Don found a ledge and set down on it. He was given another breath taking view of the valley below him. From his vantage point the could see off in the distance, the guard camp that he had found. The main features that commanded his attention were the clouds. They drifted below him, dark and menacing. They hid what was below in some parts, but Don knew what was down there; it was Tyranids, it was death.

**Chapter 8: Storms of the Mind**

Don had reached the middle of the mountain after many stops along the way. It was clear that the motor was not meant to be used like it was being used. Don was lucky the thing didn't overheat again. He had stopped on another very large ledge. The ledge followed the mountain around the side and through the ridge, it was a pass. The top of the mountain was a treeless collection of rocks and gravel, the remains of a much larger mountain worn down by wind and rain. However, the ledge still had enough trees to count Don as being in a forest.

The mountain also gave Don a commanding view of the plains, even more so than he previously had. He could see into the heart of the planet. Beyond the plains lay an ocean, the planet had so little inhabitants that it didn't even have a name. Don could see that the pristine blue of the water had turned a sickly brown green under the influence of the Tyranid spoors. The cancer grew from it landing spot near the water over the plains, turning the grass yellow and toxic. The hills and plains were now covered with Tyranid growth, this was the first step to the decay that the Tyranids brought.

Any day now, the organic spires that were the second step of the infestation would manifest and the planet's fate would be sealed. Don did not want to be on the planet when that happened. It started to rain, hard.

The dark clouds, the dark clouds. They blocked out the sun; they made the planet empty of life. But why, besides the symbolism they posed, why were the clouds black? Don tried to get his mind to focus, but it just wandered worse. Those flashes, they're lightning. That's thousands of volts crashing through the atmosphere, they're caused by the clouds. Why are the clouds here? Crashes and explosions in the air sent his mind whirling.

The storm got more intense, wind whipped around Don and lightening arced from peak to peak, illuminating Dons weathered face. At the apex of the cyclone, the sky suddenly tore asunder revealing space, and the mighty distorted hive ships of the Tyranids. He suddenly got furious. "Why is this happening to me? I just wanted to live out my life in peace!" There is no one around, there is no god, who are you talking to? said the rational part of him. Unfortunately the irrational part of him was mad at the world and nothing would stand in its way for long. "I only made one mistake, and that was joining the army…" Why was it a mistake? The ration side was trying a different tactic, it was trying to placate its evil twin by analyzing its disjointed thoughts. "I saw horrible things, I was scarred for life, and still am" So what? What did seeing those things do to us?

"I didn't comprehend them, the events and actions I witnessed" What did that cause? In fact, why did we join the army? "I joined the army fulfill my duty to the imperium" That's bull shit, you and I both know why we did it. The other side of Don was now pacified and rather interested in what the first side had to say. "Why did I do it then? Why did I really join the army? We joined the army because we wanted answers. We wanted reassurance that the imperium was just as noble as we thought it was. What a cruel twist of fate, we got the opposite of what we expected. We expected victory we got defeat, we wanted individual heroism, we got mass mentality, we expected to see life, we saw death, we expected rationality, we got commissars. Not only did the army not reinforce what we thought about the imperium, it stripped away the shielding of lies and propaganda that was surrounding us. The army is not noble, its just big and powerful, space marines don't protect you, they have their own agenda. The emperor is not… "no, don't go there…" He's not some shining beacon of hope, he's just a dead psyker sitting on a life support system. "its true, I expected so much and got nothing, I got nothing…I joined the army to see what the universe was like, and I saw alright; in fact that was the problem, I saw too much…"

Don lapsed into unconsciousness with the fatigue of the travel and the drain of the mental battle he had just undertook. The storm crashed over head as bolts of electricity materialized in the air and gale force winds threatened to wash Don's body over the edge. Fortunately, Don was still wearing his bag, which tethered him to the ground.

After the assault of the storm Don awoke. It was still raining slightly, but the worst of it had passed over. He was himself again.

He groaned as he rose to his feet off the grey colored rocks. He instantly realized that he had not eaten in over two days. He consumed some combat rations. He checked his stash; hea had enough rations to last him to the end of the planet. In fact half of his backpack was filled with rations and water. He did not need to use any water though, it had just rained and the swell had agitated some river or stream nearby. He followed the sound to its source, dragging his bike with him.

The stream cut through the mountains, forming the pass that Don had seen earlier. The crystal clear waters were a deep contrast to the poisoned ocean the Tyranids made. He drank directly from the stream. Whatever's in this water can't be that bad, I'll live. Water was clear and refreshing and it cleared his mind. He thought changed to those of survival. The Tyranids invasion should be reaching its second stage as soon as all resistance has been cleared from the planet, and seeing that this planets only had a handful of outposts, I don't think that will take too long. After that stage, the Tyranid biomass penetrates the planet and deforms it. I can not be on the planet when that happens or else it means certain death and reconstitution into Tyranid creatures. I wonder what a Don Tyranid would look like. It would probably die of depression.

His thirst now satiated, he tried to figure out where he was going to go. the commissar said something about the mountains, something important. Well, here I am, and these look like normal mountains to me. Although, something must be here, or there would be no reason for the space marines to be here either. I think that they are my best bet off this planet, my next goal should be to find them.

**Chapter 9: What Lies Within**

Don wondered around the mountain looking for any sign of the marines. They must have been expecting him to look for them, because they had hidden their tracks to the point that Don could not trace them.

He decided to travel through the mountain pass that he had found before. He set the bike to hover higher than before to make sure that it did not collide with any rocks. The scouts must have retreated to another position, I cant find any trace of them.

the rocky outcropping turned into a wooded enclave. A road like space wound through the pass, probably carved by glaciers in the planet's earlier life. Some of the rocks had turned to gravel, and then to soil which sustained the trees.

Even though he felt a need to hurry he stopped and gazed for a moment at the trees. One of us might identify them as pine trees, but we'd be wrong. The trees were native to the planet. They resembled pine trees only. The entire tree had turned red in some weird process. Don stared at the branches. They must have been over 100 years old, but they were probably older. He could tell their age by their immense size. One tree alone was easily three time the size of Don. They reached into the sky with their fantastic height.

In a couple of days all of these trees will be dead Don thought morbidly. I wonder what turned the trees red? The trees had obviously not started red. One could see that they were normally green because the roots were still their regular color. Everything else was imbued with a red tinge. It can't be the Tyranids, they are new arrivals. Whatever did this has been here for a long time.

Don checked the power level on the bike. The readout placed the heat at 9045 units; well within normal range. Don realized as he approached the pass that he would have to abandon his bike. Even though he had made many adjustments to its flight system, there were too many rocks and obstacles that blocked the path.

Don unloaded his supplies and repacked them. The rest of his journey would now be on foot.

As he was about to enter the mountain he noticed that the trees further down the ridge were green. What is going on here? I want answers, but those marines aren't going to give me any help apparently. And the only help that the Tyranids would give would be assisted suicide. Hmm. There must be a local factor that is influencing the trees. Don was reminded of his situation as he stared one last time over the plains. A mass of Tyranids was approaching. Its time to leave.

Don ventured into the mountains.

The rocks and trees loomed over Don as he traveled further and further into the pass. The odd red trees clouded over the already filtered light making it almost hard to see. A tree had fallen over and Don circumnavigated the log brushing up against the rock in the process. He shivered, the rock was painfully cold. In fact, the entire pass was significantly colder than the surrounding area because of the shade that the mountains gave and the filter that the towering trees provided.

An eerie mist clouded over the pass as he went further in. The pass narrowed significantly to a mere couple of feet. Fallen branches and hanging twigs rotted where they fell, undisturbed by man or beast. The silence was unsettling, and Don found himself checking his back at more then one time.

The ground grew steadily more and more marshy at the condensation in the mountains collected into a large depression in the pass. He was now more than 5 miles into the pass. How long does this thing go on for? Suddenly a beeping split the silence like a power-sword through flesh. What is that? Where is it coming from? Don rapidly spun around looking for anyone or anything. There was nothing but the damned mist. Wait, that almost sounds like its coming from my backpack. He backed up against the rock cliff and opened his bag. He rummaged through several objects before he found the source of the noise.

The noise came from a small rectangular object. It was a environmental health checker, a instrument that almost all guard carried for fear of biological attack. He wrenched out the readout and flicked the screen open. As he did so it started to rain slightly. The screen told him that the radioactivity of the surrounding area was approaching detrimental levels. What the hell is radioactive around here? What's going on? Don bolted for cover as the rain began to pour down with increased vigor, not for fear of getting wet himself, but for the sake of the many carefully calibrated electronic instruments that he carried. They would perform if they were exposed to rain for a prolonged duration)

He found a crevice in the rock cliff, a split triangle shaped gash in the other wise unblemished rock. The stone around it was scarred black. Nevertheless he went inside in order to find shelter. As soon as he entered the opening his environmental health checker started to resound louder. He glanced at the screen and wiped the rain away from the delicate tough pad. The environmental health checker (EHC) told him that the radioactivity has approached an gone into detrimental levels. I should not stay here any longer than I need to if I want to survive. How ironic if I died here… I would not die from Tyranids or exploding plasma reactors but from simple radiation .. How amusing.

Although the regular guard did sometimes issue hazmat suits of different sorts to fight on unsafe planets, Lars Minor was not one of these planets. Don did not have a haz-mat suit either. Not that it mattered it he did. According to the readout, the radiation was plasma fallout. The byproduct of an overload in a reactor. Not surprising if you consider the unreliability of the technology. I'm surprised the entire population of some planets hasn't died of plasma induced cancer from the frequent overloads. What the hell were those tech-priests thinking when they released plasma technology into the imperium.

The crevice seemed to lead deeper and deeper into the mountain, burrowed it seemed, by some sort of explosion. Is this what the commissar was talking about? Is this what is so important? I wonder what lies in here… Is it worth it? I could probably withstand increased levels for a day but no more. Plus the Tyranids will begin to devour organic resources from the planet in a couple of days. I have no time to waste. But if this thing is worth the death of several guardsmen in the commissars eyes it must be important.

Don weighed the pro's and con's of preceding into the gash and made his decision. The sunlight collapsed into a tiny point as he went further into the mountain.

**Chapter 10: Knowledge Is Power**

The tunnel shrank into a smaller version of itself as Don continued into the mountain. The gash seemed to be burned into the mountain, the rock surrounding don was scorched black. After about two minutes the gash open up into a small cave. At the center of the cave was a crashed transport ship. The reason that it was here was apparent, one engine was blown completely, it had spewed superheated plasma left and right on entry to Lars Minor and burned this hole in the rock face when it had hit the ground.

This explains the red trees, plasma is volatile and affects its surroundings. Although my reader did not register near the trees here must have been trace amounts of plasma radiation that turned the trees red. It doesn't look like there's anything to scavenge out of the crash, it looks like it's a hundred years old or more. "that's disappointing" said Don aloud. "anything of importance here has probably been lost… "that's where your wrong" A voice came from behind Don.

Whipped around to face the voice. "Who are you little guardsman?" "I might ask you the same thing marine.." replied Don. The scout walked into the light that Don carried. It suddenly struck Don how big space marines were. This one seemed angry. "why are you here?" it asked in a an accusatory voice. Shit what's my cover story? I'll say I was in the camp before the Tyranids came…What if he asks for identification? I don't have any…I'll have to change the subject.

"I want to thank you for before when you helped me against the Tyranids." "it was nothing" the space marine replied, "it was almost a waste of bullets, they'll be back in force, and coming for us"

What? Where the Tyranids are after the scouts? "The Tyranids are after you?" Asked Don. "Not after me specifically but after… It doesn't matter, you don't need to know."

"The commissar said something about a valuable object being here, what was he talking about?" Asked Don. The space marine looked up, but said nothing. " This matter has passed beyond my control he said, "I'll need to report you to my superiors" Shit Shit Shit! Do I run? I wouldn't even be able to get out of the mountains…

"Come with me" the marine said. Don had no choice but to follow. The marines lead Don out of the crash site and to a nearby encampment. The camp consisted of a small tent which was situated on the only piece of dry ground in the area. Don splashed through the mud as they approached the site. A larger marines appeared out of the tent. Due to the medals and insignias on his power armor, don assumed that this must be of higher rank than the scouts. He also wore full power armor unlike the scouts, who wore smaller less effective versions of the armor that regular marines wore. The officer was covered with dark red ceramite armor with black trim. He seemed to not care about the condition of his armor for it was scarred with many scorch marks and discolorations.

He noticed Don staring at his armor. "We had as much trouble as you trying to get here, its not like you can land a transport in the mountains…That is not important though, what is important now is you. We have watched you from the very start, you can see anything from these heights. I assume that you survived the plasma explosion as you are standing in front of me."

"Did your commanding officer say anything to you? Anything you should not know?" The marine leaned forward towards Don and Don stared at him defiantly. So they still think that I'm a regular guard, I guess that's for the better. If they knew, they'd probably kill me for treason. "Commissar said that there was Something Special in the mountains, and since the pass was the only distinct area of the mountains I traveled to here."

The marine still looked skeptical, "Are you are telling the truth or not?… Time will tell. For now you are under the protection of the blood ravens. You will travel with us and assist us until we are able to reassign you to a unit in this sector. And that's assuming that we all make it off this planet." "We have important business to attend to. You will help out by warning us of the progress of the approaching Tyranids. Take orders from the scouts." "what about the crashed ship over there, what is up with that?" asked Don. He immediately regretted it. "Once again" that marines eyes flashed "that is none of your concern, Knowledge Is Power, and you are not worthy enough to receive it."

Rather put off by the way the conversation had gone, Don reluctantly followed the scouts back the way he had come towards the opening of the pass.

When they got there they were treated with, yet again, another hideously awesome vista depicting wave upon wave of Tyranid. he scouts loaded their weapons and hid in the grass. One of them grabbed Don and pulled him to the ground. "Make no sound he hissed, and while you're here, make yourself useful." The scouts handed him a bolter with a silencer. "We cant afford to attract the Tyranids attention, aim for the larger organisms".

The kick on the bolter was such that if Don had been standing he might not have been able to fire the weapon at all. He glanced at the scouts,; they were wielding sniper rifles of gigantic proportions. Using two hands and the ground to brace his shots, don unleashed hell into the swarm from his lofty height. The scouts did the same.

Bullets flew from above causing a rain of deadly projectiles, if the Tyranids seemed caught of guard however, they did not show it. The silent flechettes battered at the oncoming mass. "This is useless" said the scout sergeant, "Aim only at the larger creatures. Our sniper rifles should be able to take them out." Bullets flew anew at the large creatures and hit home with ever volley. The aim of the marines was impeccable. The Tyranids kept their pace, seemingly unaware of both the marines and the destruction they were causing.

Don aimed at medium sized creatures, as he noticed the shells of a bolter were of little affect on the larger beasts. He squeezed of a clip, they silently sped through the air and resulted in a head shot of epic proportions. The creature's head exploded and covered the others with ichor. The marines were able to take out two of the monstrous beasts.

Unfortunately, although the hidden attacks were effective, the marines and Don soon ran out of clips and were forced to retreat. Before they left however the scouts took some readings. "They should be here in about a day, if they keep their pace". "That gives us little time" replied the sergeant. "The marines should be done by now, they have been working for almost a day.

As the group reached the camp, they noticed that all the equipment and tents that had been here earlier were all packed away. "What is going on?" asked the scout sergeant. "We have what we want, it is time to leave this place forever. The Tyranids will be on us in hours and we need to assure our survival, otherwise our efforts will have been for naught… Troops, move out" he commanded.

**Chapter 11: Ambush**

The space marines moved through the pass with surprising efficiency for a heavily armored squad. Each of the marines knew where he needed to be, and they executed many maneuvers, most of which had to do with scouting for information and making firing retreats. If every man in the imperium has a space marine, we'd have no problem killing off the Tyranids.

After slogging through a mile of mud and semi-lake the pass opened up its sides. Rather than the jagged "v" shape of before, the hill now resembled a "u". the mist hovered higher and higher until it disappeared altogether, leaving a clear view of the land in front of them.

The ground was mostly grey gravel and rock with some small green fronds jutting out of the earth. The sides of the pass were lined with trees, and the sky in front of the group was a normal bluish grey. I can see now that the fog is gone, but I don't hear any birds or any other animals. Are birds even native to this planet? In any case they have all flown away from the approaching Tyranid menace. What I really want to know is: what was in the crevice with the crashed transport. What would justify the appropriation of an entire squad of marines to deal with? Wait… No…2 squads, I'm forgetting the scouts.

Don took the moment to glance around at the group. He guessed that the standard operating size of squads was ten because both the scouts and the regular marines were ten to a squad. The commander was keeping a tight eye on him. The commander obviously did not trust him, and was walking towards him now.

"I want you to scout ahead with the scouts, much like you did before, GO" he commanded. Don did as he was told and formed ranks with the marines. The group walked quietly ahead. One scout pointed out the obvious at once, there was no sounds. There was not wind, there were no animals, there was no running of water or any other movement other then their own.

They reached the end of the pass and were confronted with a view quite like the one from the other side. This side of the mountains overlooked fertile grass and rolling hills. In the distance Don could make out a body of water. One of the marines commented "The lake you see is where we need to get to. Because of the prevailing wind patterns of the area our transport was forced to land there. Another squad is waiting for us with the craft". Don nodded in acknowledgement. Don felt that something was wrong.

"Guys, I think we may be in trouble soon". Don said. The scout with the vox apparently had some sort of navigational instrument with him also. The scout consulted his helmet. "We've got multiple signatures on thermal readout. Double check on radiation…" There was a brief pause. Another scout replied "Emperor protects! I have confirmation, they're all around us" "go to ground!"

The ambush was almost unnoticeable. Several creatures appeared seemingly out of the rocks themselves. The group opened fire. The beasts closed in as bullets whizzed by them and rebounded off reinforced chitin.

One scout had a plasma weapon of some sort; a conflagration of blue light arced over Don's head and eviscerated one o the creatures. The body convulsed as its fluids steamed and the super heated ball of 4th state matter burned the husk into an unrecognizable pile of charred remains. The unearthly screams of the creatures worsened as the screams turned from rage to pain. Heads exploded as supersonic rounds flew from the scouts' weapons with deadly accuracy. Bodies piled up as the scouts fired at the advancing adversaries.

Don, armed with his lasgun (the commander had taken back the bolt gun) fired charges into the oncoming mass. Holes appeared in the chests of the beasts as concentrated light seared through their numbers. Even with this one sided fight it was clear to the group that they would soon be over run. One of the scouts had been conversing with the commander. He received orders. "fall back to the main group, I repeat, fall back!"

The scouts rose from the ground and sprinted away from their unsightly foes. Don ran like hell with the rest of them pausing to take shots and he ran. They soon found the main group. The rest of the marines had taken position and were ready for the Tyranids. Standing in a line, the marines open fire with their bolters. Thousands of rounds sped past Don and the scouts and annihilated their pursuers.

Even with the extra firepower the assault got closer and closer. The creatures bounded over their fallen comrades with ease, and soon the marines were forced to switch to full automatic. The scouts and Don repositioned and fired with the marines. Stains splattered on the rocks around them as more and more of the Tyranids met their deaths; still they came.

It soon became apparent that a sizable group of Tyranids had found some other way through the mountains and had attempted to stop the marines in the pass. The commander saw that the battle would soon turn into close combat. He turn and talked quietly to another marine who seemed to be carrying some kind of pack. The marine nodded and shouldered the pack.

"Marines! This is going to turn bloody in a second. Let us illuminate our enemies!" He drew a large power sword. "Blood Ravens… Charge!" Don thought that assaulting a enemy such as Tyranids amounted to suicide but soon found the battle growing too close for his lasgun to work well. I don't have a close combat weapon… What the hell am I going to do? I can't ask of them for weapons. Only one thing to do…shit this is stupid. Don ran into the brawl.

The two lines, marines and Tyranids collided in a bloody maelstrom of chain swords and scything appendages. Don saw the commander decapitate one enemy and slice into another without hesitation. As another Tyranid approached the commander he spun and unloaded his bolt pistol into the creature sending it flying.

This must be the craziest thing I've ever done, I'm about to attack Tyranids…with my bare hands. Not really I guess, I've still got my lasgun even though its not made for this kind of thing… A leaping creature attacked him. He was ready; he kicked the beast in mid jump. The thing scrambled to its feet (claws) and circled Don. The two charged at each other. Don dodged a deadly scythe and hit the Tyranids with his lasgun. He continued hitting it. The beasts struggles soon got less and less powerful. When Don thought it was dead he unloaded a las charge into its skull, ending the duel.

The battle was favoring the marines, however one marine and two scouts had already fallen to the hive creatures. The commander looked furious. He was immolating Tyranids left and right. With one swing of his mighty power sword multiple enemies fell and did not get up again. The other marines were faring worse, one of them was unconscious and the rest were fighting for their lives. However, Don did not have much time to take in the spectacle because he was attacked again by another Tyranid.

The creature shot out a claw with lightning fast speed and tore the lasgun out of Don's hand. Ok now I'm screwed, my lasgun is in a thousand pieces and this guy doesn't look like he's going to leave me alone any time soon. Don dodged another deadly attack and attempted to kick the creature. The Tyranid was expecting this. It shot one razor sharp claw and ripped at Don's flack vest. Horrified, Don saw that the claw went through the reinforced material like a knife through butter. Don felt a searing pain and saw blood oozing out of the wound.

While this was going on, the endless wave of Tyranids ceased; only a small group was left. Another marine and scout had fallen. A marine shot his chainsword through a Tyranid and turned it on halfway in causing the body to send bits of flesh and blood flying in every direction. Don was once again attacked by his foe and had to focus of the battle at hand.

The marines took care of the rest of the Tyranids with the help of the commander. They stood around Don watching. The hell? Help me you fools! I'm [expletive deleted]ing dying! What are you doing? Don was just able to whip his head away from the swiping claws of the beast. The commander watched Don also. They're testing me…Those [expletive deleted]s! Emperor save me, what am I thinking, there is no emperor… I need to kill this piece of shit fast before it eviscerates me.

The marines formed a circle around Don and the fighting Tyranid. However, they said nothing. Don's mind raced furiously. What weapons do I have? A familiar poking from his backpack reminded him of his former encounter with the Tyranids. That just might work…

He allowed the Tyranid to draw closer and close until it was all Don could do to dodge its blows. Quickly Don shot his hand into his backpack and drew the Tyranid scythe arm. The weapon was still as sharp as ever. He swung the improvised weapon at the Tyranid…

It countered it. What the? I was not expecting that… The Tyranid creature attacked again, but Don was ready. He sliced the creature's arm off in mid attack; the severed arm twitched on the ground before one marine shot it. Fluid spurted from the Tyranid's wounds but it seemed unaffected. It shot out another deadly claw. Don ducked downwards and allowed the Tyranid to over shoot its attack. He responded by sweeping the scythe up in a vertical stoke and cleaved the Tyranid in half. The body exploded in a rush of gore and organs. The body fell to the ground.

The marines broke their circle and the commander approached Don. "Although that was almost inexcusable, using that Tyranid arm, you have proven yourself. You shall know what I know. You are worthy" The rest of the marines looked shocked (as shocked as a space marine can look) but were subdued with one look from their commander. "Space marines, we have won a great victory, let it not be in vain. We must make our way to the transport. This guard will be accompanying us."

**Chapter 12: Omnis Arcanum**

The rest of the trip to the transport was apprehensive but uneventful. The Tyranids were obviously after them, but the marines had too much of a head start. The other squad welcomed them back and the last thing that he saw on Lars Minor was the wave of Tyranids in the distance frantically trying to stop their escape.

Don approached the commander. "I would like to thank you for your help, without you I would be stuck on the planet still." The commander frowned. "there is something strange about you, but I can not seem to comprehend what. So far I have not asked you for any information and I can tell that you are not eager to answer my questions. For the good of all of us here I will not ask you, for if I did and the result was punishable, I would be forced to kill you." "I appreciated the leniency sir" Don replied.

The transport shuttered under the weight it carried are steadily rose into the air. It rotated to look out over the water and suddenly accelerated. Don firmly griped the hand rails on his seat as the shuttle rose through the atmosphere. The transport shot through the air and exited Lars Minor forever.

The marine next to the commander whispered to him. Don could just make out what the two were saying: "is it safely secured?" "yes sir, I looked to it myself". "just make sure it reaches Omnis Arcanum, our mission is not yet over. Gabriel Angelos will want to see it immediately".

As the transport exited the planet's gravity Don caught a glance at what the fate of the planet was. Towering spires of organic flesh extended into the air and the entire other side of the planet appeared black from space. All organic life had been exterminated. The twisted ships of the hive circled over Lars Minor in low orbit. The commander saw Don looking at the ships. " We will warn other planets in this sector, but with our forces spread thin throughout the galaxy I am unsure of how effectively we can prevent this invasion. How can the people of the empire consider themselves safe with threats like these. Is war the only option? Can't there be some other way of assuring our safety without so many having to die?

The transport traveled at sub warp speed away from the planet. The pilot turned around, "we're lucky, we seemed to have escaped without being spotted". "Just keep you eyes to your instruments" replied the commander.

Days past and Don found himself growing tired of the silence. A couple of the scouts were talking among themselves, but other than that there was no conversation. There's nothing to talk about… What use is there talking when one already knows what the other does. Information is the source of conversation and none of these marines wants to bring me into the light about what is going on. Heck, I doubt many of them know…

The days turned into weeks at the transport sped through space. Ok this is getting boring. I assume that this ship does not have a warp drive, otherwise they would have used it by now. He remembered his lessons about the warp and navigation through it. They said that the warp was a dangerous but necessary part of moving around the galaxy. Without warp travel the empire would not be possible. He remembered another thing about warp travel. You need a navigator. None of these marines are able to look into the warp and (semi) safely navigate it. We must be heading towards a larger ship.

After another uneventful week of space travel, a large ship appeared on the screen. As the ship appeared closer and closer it was clear that this was a battle barge; the space-going transports and staging craft for marine invasions. Don was impressed by the sheer size of the craft. It was easily the size of the Tyranid ships maybe even bigger. Smaller versions of the crafted floated around it and each of these was easily a thousand times bigger than the transport.

The transport docked with the behemoth and the crew made ready to clear the vessel. The hatch opened and the group stepped out of the transport and onto the battle barge. "The crew of the Omnis Arcanum welcomes you" An official stated as the commander stepped off the exit ramp.

The captain of the marines turned to Dom. "We have arrived at our destination safely, I will contact the navy to send a transport for your next assignment. Until then you are to remain in your temporary quarters". The commander's tone of voice changed. "I am still unsure of you, even though you proved yourself in combat. I would like now to ask you about your past for I am sure you are hiding something. What do you know?" "sir, with no disrespect, knowledge is power and I intend to guard my knowledge well". The commander looked taken aback. "That was a very clever response, don't mock me again however or you will never see another planet again".

The inside of the hanger was a dull grey metal, unpainted and unadorned. Unlike most space craft that Don had seen in civilian life, this vessel was made purely for purpose. There were no luxuries, everything was industrial grade and built to last. The first thing that Don noticed was the hull of the ship. Form where he was he could see that the hull was immense. It was as wide as the transport was long. Even without its shields, the Omnis Arcanum would be able to withstand several direct hits before being penetrated.

The hanger went on into the distance for what seemed like forever, but he assumed it was about a half a mile. This is the main hanger for one of the flagships of the imperium. I should be honored. Several transports and fighters littered the side of the docking bay.

The bay itself was open to space of one side and only protected by the shields of the ship. This was to allow vessels fast and unhindered access to and from the ship. The bay ceiling was massive and was at least five stories high.

The party looked like insects compared to the massive size of the hanger. However, it was clear that one of these insects carried something important. Several terminators and veteran marines approached the captain. The captain took the bag that the other marine had been carrying. He pulled the cover off and reveled a rounded cube about a foot on all sides. There is some sort of inscription on the side of the container, but I cant make it out. It seems to be written in an archaic Terran language. The terminators and the captain left; the regular marines went to their stations. Don was left alone with the scouts, who looked confused.

Don didn't know, but in the last Tyranid attack, the sergeant of the scout squad had been killed, leaving the squad with no leader. Because the commander hand left the scouts found themselves with no orders. They had no idea where they were supposed to go. Don felt the same way.

After a brief period of awkwardness, a announcement came over the ships intercom that the scouts were to report to deck 10 for debriefing on the mission. Thankfully the commander had also remembered Don and the speaker also announced that the accompanying guardsmen was to report to deck 65 and was to consider himself confined to his quarters.

Don started his way through the ship, avoiding the curious glances of both ship personnel and space marines alike.

**Chapter 13: A Grave Error**

Don slowly walked down the hallway making sure not allow eye contact with anyone. The more people that see me, the greater the chance that I'll be recognized. Many of the people passing Don were not space marines. In fact, after traveling down past deck thirty there had been no space marines. A surprising fact that Don now learned is that even on space marine ships there are more non space marines than there are marines. Ships require constant maintenance and space marines are sure not going to do it themselves. They are too caught up in fighting, training and strategy. There's probably more servitors on this ship than space marines.

The announcement had told him what level his quarters were on but it did not tell him how to get there. Fortunately, there were signs around the ship telling him where to go. He was in the middle of the ship length-wise, directly below the docking bay. The corridors were filled with personnel but were large enough to allow the flow of people. The walkways were dimly lit and Don could not see ahead of him past a few yards. You really have to know where to go around this ship.

He passed through a doorway and the corridor opened up into a colossal room. The room was filled with rows upon rows of machinery and devices. Sparks flew around the room below Don. He was suspended on a metal grate walkway above the commotion and had a clear view of what this room was. It was the engine room, the heart of the ship. Sure enough, there's the plasma reactor ahead of me…wow that's big.

The reactor was encased in what looked like 100 feet of reinforced metal. It extended to the ceiling from the floor and took up almost all four stories of the engine room. At the top were twisting black tubes that fed the coolant needed to maintain a stable reaction. Spreading from the sides of the engine were even greater black tube. Judging from the amount of mechanics and personnel running about them, Don assumed that they were the output for the engine. I am in the heart of the ship, but I'm also in the wrong place. Where is the service lift, there has to be on in the engine room, they don't expect people to walk around this ship, its huge!

Don was right, there was a service lift and Don made his way to it. After selecting the floor he wanted the elevator sped towards its destination at breakneck speeds. Well I guess if you have a ship that over 100 floors, the elevators need to be fast. Don almost collapsed when the elevator stopped from force of momentum. A lit sign told him that he was on deck 65, where he wanted to be.

From the very start, it was clear that these quarters were not designed for space marines. The corridors were smaller and the rooms themselves would never have comfortably fit a space marine. Don assumed that they were for the non-space marine personnel. After wandering around the deck, he found his assigned room. The doors slid open when Don arrived.

The room was sparsely decorated, mostly with propaganda posters and promotional slogans. "Join the imperial navy, We transport our future!" and "space marines, our protectors!" littered the walls. There was a simple bed in one corner. There was also a simple bathroom. Don stretched along the bed and almost at once went to sleep. He didn't remember it, but he had not slept for almost three days. It was not surprising that he went to sleep. He had also not eaten in over a day.

When he awoke he found that he was hungry. He saw his bag on a desk in the other corner. I don't remember taking it with me, but if its here now… The bag had not been searched before he came onto the ship. Whatever the marines were carrying was too important to waste time on things like the bag. Don could tell that it had not been searched because the left over reactor rods and Tyranid arm were still in the bag. I'm going to risk not throwing them out, you never know when you are going to need reactor rods… he took out the food from his bag. The rations were hermetically sealed and were still good, and probably would be even if they were buried and recovered a year later. I wonder if the marines have fought off the Tyranids yet. The Tyranids were too close to inner space. It must have been a great battle.

Don was distracted by a poster on the wall. Unlike the others it was not a propaganda message, it was a map. It showed desks 63,64, and 65 in detail. Don noticed that after deck 65, all the decks below seemed to be storage and maintenance.

After hours Don found himself getting tired again. How do people sleep normally on this ship? There's no night or day.

After all the excitement on the planet Don's body was worn thin. He had lost all but the essential weight. If Don had looked into the mirror in his room he would found that he looked like a skeleton of his former self.

He must have slept for hours but when he awoke, he found that the ambience in the room was exactly the same. They could at least dim the frigging lights sometimes…He wondered why he had woken up. That question was soon answered by a conversation going on somewhere below Don. He crouched near a ventilation vent, where the voices were coming from. " …are you sure that this is what we were looking for? Yes, I am sure there was…Do you realize what this might mean? This will have a resounding affect on… This has a information rating of… No one must know".Interesting, I wonder what the chances are that they are talking about the ting that they found on the planet? I better make sure. I want to figure out what that thing was.

From the voices' strength, Don assumed that the conversation must be going on right below him. He rose from his position and consulted the map, trying to figure out the best route too get to the deck below him. He established his route and left his room. An automated voice reminded him that he was confined to his… He turned the corner and the voice was lost. He navigated the hallways. Was it left right right or was it left left right? Crap I don't remember. He tried both ways.

The elevator was at the end of the hallway. Just as he was about to get in the elevator the doors opened. Don ducked into a nearby room. From the crack in the door, Don saw several people walk down the hallway. A shift must have ended.

After the people had left Don got into the elevator and pressed the button for deck 64. He ran along the disserted corridor and swung open the door beneath his room. He was faced with a supply closet.

What the [expletive deleted]? What's going on? He heard the voices again. They must be another floor below me. He took the lift down another level. He immediately noticed a difference between the last floor and the current one. There were guards around every corner. How am I going to be able to get near the room in order to hear what they are saying? At that moment the guards were corded by someone to leave. Don ran to the door and listened at the door.

" This is the single most important advance we have ever discovered. Do you know what this is? This is a gene seed, and not just any gene seed., this is the gene seed of a primarch." The room went silent. "you are right, no one can know of this". Don recognized the voice of the commander that he had traveled with on the planet.

Inside the room there were several marines. One of them was dressed in ornate power armor. His red armor was polished to the point of effulgence. He was Archarius Viyda, the Captain Commander of the Blood Ravens. With him was Gabriel Angelos, the commander of the 3rd company. There was one other person in the room; the commander that Don knew. " This is both the best and worst thing that could happen to the Blood Ravens. What if we are not who we are? Will we become like the Dark Angels, whose life revolves around filling the fallen?" At this comment Archarius Viyda's eyes blazed. " I do not know how you know of that but you will not speak of it again" Gabriel hung his head.

Archarius ended the conversation "If we are… then we must atone for our transgressions, but not to the point of disobeying orders. We must keep the ideals of the great crusade in mind, we can not pursue our own agenda, our lives are as of nothing to the idea of the empire and its safety. I believe this meeting is over". In horror Don found himself looking into the eyes of the commander through the small window in the door. Don ran like hell. "What was that commander?" Gabriel asked. "I believe someone overheard us." "Curse it all to the warp! We must decide how to precede." "sir" pleaded the commander "even though his actions are unforgivable, he is a efficient warrior, spare his life" "I will consider it, find him now!"

Don ran into the elevator and frantically hit the button for 65th floor. The doors closed just in time. The guards were alerted and they came running down the hallway just acting on orders, not aware that a grave breach of security has just occurred. The doors slammed close as they ran towards Don. The elevator rose upwards. Don dashed from the lift and ran to his room and grabbed his bag. I have nowhere to run to. What should I do? Don's mind churned as he tried to think of a solution to his current situation. He reached a conclusion.

The guards opened Don's room and found him standing in his full uniform with his bag. "I have no place to run, no, I shall not run! Have mercy!" Don pleaded. The guards seemed to ignore his comment and one of them knocked Don out. He collapsed on the floor but regained a speck of consciousness. One picked him up and carried him deep into the ship, into the depths reserved for the Blood Angel's most hated enemies. The one carrying Don threw him into the cell. The door was locked and the key stowed away.

The cell was almost completely with out light. The only ambience came from second sources above the room. It filtered in through the cracks in the ceiling causing a reddish tinge. The light revealed a room barely the size of a closet. There was a table with restraints in the middle. The floor was covered with an inch of water, the water seemed to be tainted with blood; or it could just be the light. Around the walls were some of the deadliest torture equipment that Don had even seen. There were hooks and pokers, devices created to cause even space marines pain, it seemed that all of these were about to be used on Don.

Out of the shadows of the cell eyes appeared. A man stepped out of the shadows. His head was covered with runes and his power armor was covered with ancient scriptures. When he spoke it was with the authority only one of the great marines could use, "I am the High Interrogator of the Blood Ravens, and knowingly or unknowingly you have committed an act of dire consequences. I will find out what you know." Don completely lost conscious.

**Chapter 14: Horrors Animated**

Agony, pure unrefined concentrated agony. No matter what people say about the space marines one thing is true: they know how to inflict pain. Don lapsed in and out of consciousness as they tortured him. The problem was that Don would have told them willingly what he knew, but their rage at their secret getting out was too great. They took their rage out on him. He would be slashed and flayed within an inch of his life and yet they let him live. It wouldn't be long until he begged for death.

The water on the floor of the cell was now swimming in blood from Don' s many wounds. His body appeared broken, and it was in several places. The pain, make the pain stop… At least they can't break my mind. Then the Interrogator came in. What ever powers there are in the universe, god or mortal, stop this man from getting near me…

"It is time for another session" The High Interrogator said calmly, undisturbed as the sight of Don gushing blood. A medic came in and crudely bandaged Don's wounds. Don wanted to speak, he wanted to tell them what he knew but the pain warp take them all, the pain…The interrogator toughed his hand to his head and started chanting slowly. "GAAAHHHH" Don screamed, it felt like a explosion had just detonated in his mind. He thrashed uselessly against the restraints of the cell. His wounds oozed blood and finally he stopped moving as the pain grew too intense to bear. He lost consciousness, only this time someone was in there with him.

A presence had infiltrated his mind, malignant, it snooped around searching his thoughts and memories. Don walking in file with other soldiers. Suddenly there was a movement in the bushes. Orcs pored out of the trees. "it's a trap!" screamed the sergeant… Don was in basic training. Today we're doing a simulation… It was real! Emperor above the mine was real!… They were coming from the darkness, sounds surrounded don, blood curdling screams…A bright flash, heat, blackness. Finally the interrogator found what he was looking for. With a mind jerking pulling sensation the marine brought the memory to front. Don was staring at a downed space craft, a scout appeared next to him. "Everything would have been fine if you had just left it alone from then on, but you had to know did not you?" The interrogator thought to Don.

Something was stirring in Don's mind, the interrogator paid it no heed, he was here to erase Don's memory of the gene seed and nothing else. Don was kneeling at the door "What if we are not who we are?" The interrogator focused on the memory, and started the process to destroy it. Something hit the interrogator.

The marines body twitched as his mind tried to comprehend what had happened. "You self righteous marine [expletive deleted] you're going to kill us just because of what we heard, what we saw?" The marine was taken aback. Don's mind struggled to structure the confrontation into something it could understand.

The marine found himself standing on a mountain top. There was lightning and thunder and above him roared a storm of epic proportions. He looked down from atop the mountain; below him was a mass of red glowing eyes in the darkness. The entire scene was suffocating dark, the mountain only illuminated by ephemeral bolts of electricity blazing from the heavens. Even though the wind of the storm ripped around the marine there seemed to be a surreal black smoke obscuring his vision. A voice spoke from the abyss. "What gives you the right? Who gave you the power?" The interrogator had seen visions in subject's minds before, but nothing like this.

The marine was interested by the change that had occurred and could not explain it. When he tried to retreat back to his own mind he found that there was a presence keeping him from doing so. The marine was also unaware of what was going on outside and around the ship. Because of the situation of the cell it was blocked from most ship wide announcements. The marine had no idea that at this moment the ship had tried to go into warp and had encountered…difficulties.

The shields surrounding the ship flickered as the malignant entities of the warp attempted to seize a hold of it. Smaller essences were able to make their way through the shield and currently, the crew was battling the warp spawned horrors. The overall effect of the chaos was that something happened within Don's mind, something changed, mutated, broke free, and the only thing between it and freedom was the interrogator.

The interrogator stood his ground but was wary of the voice, it sounded less and less like the voice of a human and more the voice of…A being moved in the darkness. Another fleeting surge of power illuminated the cliff. The marine starred at the thing in front of him. If marines could know fear the interrogator would be feeling it right now. In front of him was the more twisted demonic entity that he had ever seen. It towered above him and its eyes shone like hollow lanterns, dark and cold, lifeless and yet sentient. Half of its face was missing, replaced with a mask of burned and rotting flesh that revealed its jawbone and the wicked curved teeth it possessed. The entire being was dripping in blood, much like don was now (his wounds had opened).

A blast of pure hatred knocked the marine to his feet. "Pursuing your own goals while men die for the emperor, you who are supposed to uphold his ideals. You are the ones who have gone astray! Every unknowing guardsman you send to his or her death is worth ten of you pathetic scum. And finally, thanks to the chaos around us. Something is going to be done about it. we assure you, your death will be long and tedious, fitting of your transgressions.

The marine got to his feet, and drew his sword. A mighty hand swung to kill the pest. It met cold power weapon. The creature oozed green slime from its wound. The two beings exchanged blows, but the battle as rather one sided. The interrogator, although a great warrior and a mighty officer knew nothing of this beast or its powers. He had fought chaos before, and won, but never had he been alone, one versus one. It was more of a beat-down than a battle. With one stroke the daemon rose his hand. Another flash lit up the cliff as the marine was struck. The power armor took most of the blast but he was severely injured.

While this was happening Don saw himself on the mountain top gazing at a creature that was not him. It used to be him or something like him. It was a being that his mind had born out of preservation, out of horror at the disaster that the universe was. And like it said, now it was going to do something. Don could not let it, it was still him, just a perverse exaggeration of his most intense emotions. The creature seemed to be looking at something and it was mad.

"I've dealt with you before, I can stop you again!" Don-avatar yelled. The creature turned. "but this time we've got help." Don glanced down, thousands upon thousands of red eyes and cruel beings surged at the bottom of the cliff. "We don't even care about you anymore, we just want to be free… and continue to uphold your ideas about the world." Don-avatar's face went white. "No, those were not my ideas, that's not what I thought! I was just stressed, I never…" "you never what? Did anything? My poor forgetful friend, that's not what the poor commissar thinks… both of them. Two beings stood out from the throng of decaying bodies at the bottom of the cliff. Half dressed in uniform, half rotting corpse their eyes (or lack thereof) shone with a mad and unstoppable force.

" That's not right, my squad-mates killed him, not me!" Don tried to argue. The being laughed. The noise was like.. It is unexplainable. Imagine all the good things about the world, Imagine new life and hope and love, now feel yourself watch these thing wither and die and get reborn into something grotesque, a mockery, a bastardization of the original. That is how Don felt at that moment. "You are mistaken, my friend, you did kill them or at least one. Do you know how long that commissar lived for after you left him in the vault? Did you know that after he had pleaded to the "god-emperor" for a while, and the pain got to fierce to bear, he actually pleaded to us? A commissar, pleaded to the chaos gods to free him. It was a spectacle that will be remembered forever. And it was all because of you. He even tried to eat his own arm off when the hunger got to great. We want to thank you for the best show we've had in a long time!"

Don stared, broken by what the being had just said. Finally he cleared his head. "NO, you're mistaken! You lie!" "How usual, a human finally gets knowledge and it dismisses it as false just because its feeble mind cant comprehend the meaning or richness of the information, I thought you were different. Pitty." At this point the daemon grunted, a sword emerged through its chest.

The marine had had enough of the conversation and had decided to attack the daemon. The daemon turned its head around and smiled. It punched the marine. The interrogator choked on his own organs and lay still. "You know what happens now!" the daemon said "death, though not yours…" The alternate reality caused by the interrogator and sustained by the chaos collapsed at that point. Don found himself back in his cell. The red light was back glowing in its unearthly intensity. Don found that all of his wounds had been healed. The chains restricting him to the cell were gone. The marine lay in a pile on the floor. Don approached the body. The head spun forward by itself. The eyes shone red and the body rose from the floor.

If don had been able to scream he would have, but after so many traumas and horrifying sights, he couldn't, he just stared. "We want to thank you for birthing me from your emotions, your freedom is a just reward for our existence." "I don't want your help, you disgusting…" The daemon paid him no attention. It walked to the cell door and touched it. The door exploded in a blast of eldritch power. "Its funny that we do this to our brothers, these marines are in for a surprise! I will be watching you…" the being said. Its power armor melted off and twisted muscle sheathed in a dark smoke took its place on half of its body. Don whimpered. What choice do I have? Don walked out of the cell. The daemon disappeared.

The crew would remember that day as a regular chaos attempt at breaking the ship. Within a few hours all chaos beings were destroyed. No one noticed or even cared about the missed presence of Don. It was like something made them forget about the whole thing. The interrogator's body was never found. Many just assumed he had been taken by the chaos beasts. Archarius Viyda vowed to avenge his fallen comrade and Gabriel Angelos hardened his heart at the thought of his missing brother-in-arms.

Once again, no one noticed the transport leaving the vessel, nor did the many instruments record its exit. It slipped silently into space and was lost. A crew member remembered looking out of the view deck and observing a cloud in space, a spot of darkness and of no stars. It moved impossibility fast and it too soon disappeared into the reaches of the galaxy. Don was free once again.

**Chapter 15: Reunion**

Space is big, really big. How can it be that chaos can be everywhere in space? Shouldn't it be confined to places that people live? Hmm. Regardless, it seems that I have unleashed a great evil on the universe; out of the depths of my own mind no less! I am free from the marines but I know deep down that I must pay for what I have done. My thoughts gave form to that beast…Don shuddered at the recollection of the thing…So my actions must rectify my thoughts.

The transport was small and constrictive with small displays surrounding Don. Unlike most of the craft that Don had flown in, this one was built for only one person. In fact you might call it an emergency shuttle; a craft to use in case of impending doom on the larger ship. Fortunately, it was constructed for space marines so there was more room than usual in a craft of this design.

Don was lying face up in the pod. A small reinforced window allowed him to look out at space, but there was nothing to see currently. Below the screen was a display showing his current position in space. It also showed outposts and military bases. Don noticed that although there was a military base rather close to him, there was also a civilian trading post that was reachable. I've had enough military experiences for a life time, plus I don't know how long this invisibility will last. As much as I have to admit it, I would not have been able to get off the ship without that chaos thing. How ironic, a chaos daemon saved my life!

Don told the equipment on the shuttle that he was destined for the trading base. Although was no artificial intelligence in any imperium equipment, ships could lock their course and the machine spirit would navigate them there. It was of course preferable if a human/marine was directing the vessel though. Don took the time he had to sleep, another thing that he hadn't been able to do in a while without the punishments of the marines.

Don's dreams were restless. He saw unnamable horrors, twisting, fluctuating, bending reality, bright lights and swirling colors. The colors had some unknown fear in and of themselves. Don would not remember the dreams after he woke, but for now, when he was trapped in his prison of subconscious, the dreams were frighteningly real. As he slept the shuttle made its way across space and towards the trading post.

If Don had been awake as the shuttle docked with the space port he would have seen that the port was rather large. It was shaped like a cylinder with various loading docks and service platforms trailing off into space. At the time Don came however almost all of these loading platforms were empty. There were a handful of ships and one large freighter. Every piece of metal was a dull grey, no paint was allowed. It was one of those needless imperium rules.

As it was, this space port had thrived for years, which is why it was so large, but the presence of the Tyranids in nearby sectors had driven out all the commerce. No one wanted to be near Tyranids; the port suffered accordingly. After the initial rush of people trying to get off planets in the path of the Tyranids, there were almost no people who would dare bring their craft near. The handful of ships were determined space merchants who would deliver their cargo no matter the risk, more risk meant more money, and so far they had been profiting greatly. Dons shuttle was dwarfed as it slid under the monstrous freighter and connected to the station.

The connection was neither smooth nor quiet, and Don was shaken from his sleep by it. My dreams…I never want to have dreams like those again as long as I live…I'm here already? Don glanced at the ships chronometer. I slept for a day! Unfortunately for Don there was a fact that he had neglected to realize until now. Why would a regular imperium citizen be in the possession of a space marine craft? They wouldn't. I need to get off this shuttle as quick and unnoticeable as possible. Don slipped out of the harness keeping him in place and opened the air lock.

He stepped into the space port. The hallway was deathly silent, and at first Don assumed that the Tyranids had already ravaged the port with out his knowing. He walked furtively down the corridor, making sure that his guard regulation boots did not make even a sound on the reinforced metal. He noticed a person walking in another corridor parallel to the one he was in. I think I'm safe, no one saw me enter the port. Just to make sure, he circled around the port and entered the main area from the opposite direction to make sure no one connected the arrival of a new person with the arrival of a mysterious space marine transport.

The main area of the space port was a large half dome at the top of the cylinder that was the port. The entire ceiling had been designed by a local artesian/architect and financed by one of the major trading companies in the galaxy. This particular trading company was currently loosing millions to the Tyranids and had shifted their focus to another sector in the hope of rebuilding their lost wealth. Although the imperial navy was supposed to protect civilian ships, they usually had "more important" things to do; namely helping space marines and transporting troops. Even when a ship came to the aid of a freighter there was a 50% chance that the freighter would be destroyed anyways; not because it wasn't armed (because it was armed, a fact that the government in terra blissfully overlooked) but because of its lack of maneuverability. A civilian transport was a sitting duck for any hostile force to take or destroy.

The port's dome was reinforced with a state of the art material called trans-armor, a type of super durable plastic that was transparent. Imperial guard ships used this material for their view ports. All in all the dome was completely open allowing a unparalleled view of the cosmos. This view was almost completely ignored by regulars to the port. Don was not a regular, he looked up in wonder at the sight.

The top observation deck was about the size of a football field and housed the only 36 hour bar in the sector. Needles to say, the vast majority of the traders were seated around the various tables and drinking their hearts out. Don approached the bar. No one paid him any attention. He ordered a strong brew and sat down near to the other traders, he wanted to hear what they were saying.

"Did you hear man? Another planet to the Tyranids, where are the imperial protectors now?" "Give it a rest Ezekiel, the only thing you'll accomplish with that attitude is trouble with the authorities." the second man glanced at the security guard. The security guard, oblivious to the conversation waved at him. The other man, Jeb shook his head in disgust. " But I see you're still hauling that barge of yours across the galaxy" Ezekiel said. Jeb sighed, "Its what pays the bills for the thing in the first place; that ship was not cheap"

Don shifted his attention to another group of people.

"Strange isn't it? A space marine craft, I wonder why its here, they say it was empty when it landed, I only just heard about it!" the three other men agreed that it was indeed strange. "I bet you one of their space marine ships exploded, they must have launched all pods regardless of whether there was a person inside or not. The pod just made its way to the port by itself"

Don sipped more of his beer, he found himself getting light headed. He sobered instantly when one of the men from before, Jeb, turned his head. Impossible! Is that Jeb Blackstone? He was one of the guard who deserted with me. What are the chances?

Jeb sighted Don, his eyes opened wide, he shook his head and started to get up. Don followed. Jeb obviously did not with to be seen with Don as he bolted into the nearest hallway. Don caught up to him easily, the old guardsman had not been keeping in shape.

"So its really you then? " Don said. "Might say the same thing to you" Jeb replied. "I hoped to never be reminded of that horrible event, but here you are in the flesh. I', not even sure I want to talk to you at this point." Don told him that he did and walked him back to the tables.

He related to Jeb what had happened since they had split up after the guard. Jeb's cautious face shifted into one of disbelief. When Don got to the part about the daemon Jeb silenced him. "Either you're lying or you're in serious need of some help. And since I've never known you to be the lying type…How about you show me some evidence? Were you really on that planet?" The hallway was deserted except for the security guard who was pacing up and down the corridor.

"I'll show you some evidence, but not here. Is there any place…" don asked. "Lets go back to my ship, we can talk freely there".

The pair made their way through the labyrinthine halls to the dock on which Jeb's ship was moored.

The access ramp was gone, however don noticed that this was just a safety precaution, Jeb swiped some sort of identification and the doors opened to the airlock. A ramp extended from its invisible resting spot and connected silently to the ship. Jeb walked over the ramp and inserted something into a keypad. The doors swung open. The pair walked into the ship.

**Chapter 16: A New Beginning and A New End**

Another Note from the author- Fan fiction for some reason let me upload this time. Chapters are back to normal.

The sky was on fire. He was sure of it. Just staring up assured him of that. The horizon was blood red, the sun clouded by the dust of war.

From his lofty perch in the foothills of the mountains surrounding the hive, he could just make out a cloud, or a pillar of black in the distance. No, not a pillar, a wall, solid and impenetrable.

Some tried to deny it, but the truth was the truth. Their planet was doomed.

Sure, you wouldn't find him saying that in front of a commissar, but it was inevitable. The reason was that pillar, wall, he corrected himself.

Each particle of dust was much more than that. It was a spore, sent from a vile fleet in orbit.

Now they rained down like artillery shells, a wave, a force. Nothing could stop them now.

The first sign had been the transmission silence. There had been no communication from the imperium, no orders, just silence. There were times of course when a planet did not receive orders, but never for the unprecedented 3 months of silence that they had just endured.

The second and most obvious had been the nobility, or rather their flight. They had vanished in a week, all of them in the entire hive. Some common troops had joked, some had been relieved, but who got the last laugh now?

By the time anyone had realized what was going on, it was too late to do anything. The nobility, curse them, had taken the last shuttles from the planet.

Sargos I had never been a particularly productive planet. It didn't have a vibrant space port either. Those distinctions went to Sargos II and the space port above them (somewhere) respectively. Sargos I was quiet. Most of the economy was mining and scattered agriculture.

Now it was over. Soon, they would come and there would be no stopping them.

He stared again over the dusty red plains, their color matching the sky. The massive intra Hive road stretched below him.

It connected Dermun, the capital of the planet, to the scattered cities on the habitable Sargarian Plains. The rest of the planet was desert.

So why here? Why? What compelled them to attack this strategically insignificant planet? He thought as he shifted his attention to the massive shield mountains that towered above him.

It was hard to believe that soon…His vox communicator buzzed with life. Static…then a message: "Saide, return to HQ, the captain wants you. Something important having to do with the governor…The last platoon has arrived, there will be no more."

The other hives, acknowledging their doom, had selflessly given support, all their support to the capital. It would be their last stand.

At least, that was what they were telling the disheveled hivites. In actuality, the PDF had been ordered to converge on the capital. The local populace had little choice but to accompany them to their destination.

The people were still streaming into the city even as Saide turned from his vantage point. He noticed that their mass continued far into the distance. As he watched, a small black dot, another hive, shone brilliantly from some magnificent explosion. He fancied that he could just here the noise from it. Just a slight popping, like a…eh, suddenly a great melancholy feeling enveloped him. He felt sorry for those poor bastards who had tried to stay.

He followed the dirt path down the hill, pausing as he saw a squad (the squad) of Chimera's lumber down the road near him. He couldn't help but to feel some pride in the massive armor. They thundered past.

As they did so, a member of one of the transports stuck his head out the hatch and saluted Saide.

Saide smiled a little. The chimeras rolled even further into the distance, against the inexhaustible flow of hivites.

Guardsmen were directing them as they neared the city, but even the colossal capital couldn't hold them all. As much as they wanted to accommodate the immigrants, they needed lanes to be kept open for rapid mobilization.

His feet hit concrete; he was now on level with the enormous hive road.

The road ran through a gash in the mountains, a natural pass brought on by extreme geological upheaval at one time, eons ago.

The same geological instability formed the ore for which the population mined. In fact, the capital started out as a small mining outpost. The location, buried in the mountains, had been chosen for economic reasons relating to the extraction of ore, rather than the defense of a city.

The planet, Sargos I as a whole, was largely ignored by most. The real hub of activity was the space station which existed between Sargos I, the desert planet, and Sargos II, the temperate agriculture world.

The supplies for the station were taken from Sargos II rather than I, which effectively doomed Sargos I to obscurity in an already forgotten sector.

Now however, Sargos II was presumably gone. The last message had been a distorted audio transmission screaming for help and the emperor's protection. The station was most likely gone also, judging by the silence.

Saide quickly realized that he could not walk in to the city; the crowd was too densely packed.

When the next supply truck came, he hastily grabbed hold of a handle and swung aboard. "Hey, what are you…?"Exclaimed the driver, who no doubt thought Saide to be another desperate hivites.

He fell silent when he saw Saide's epaulets, denoting him a lieutenant.

"If you would be so kind as to drop me off at the governor's palace." Saide stated as his personal vox squawked again.

He silenced it without answering. "I'm coming already, cool it." He said to no one in particular. The driver seemed disinclined to talking, and as such, the ride was a relatively quiet one.

They had entered the hive now, buildings closed in around them, only a couple of stories at first, but increasing in height as they reached the center of the hive.

Crisscrossing streets intersected and split, built out of necessity rather than careful planning. The roads were packed.

At some points, the tired old truck had to slow to a crawl because of the sheer amount of people. The driver opened the window and all of sudden the cabin was filled with the yells and voices of the crowd.

"Clear the road" he yelled. He advanced slowly.

Throng of people grudgingly separated and allowed the truck through. He sped ahead seemingly to make up the lost time.

When the truck had finally arrived at the palace 20 minutes later, Saide was sure he was going to be reprimanded.

However, by a stroke of luck, the one commissar on the planet (who happened to be in Dermun) was also delayed by the people milling in the streets.

He stormed in furious just as Saide took his place next to Captain Fatum. The captain was a grizzled and bearded giant who had won his rank in the only military action in the area, the revolts on Sargos II a decade before.

Before that, however, he had been an expert trader, so the rumors told. Truly that desire for efficiency was reflected by his leadership. Even though in the past 50 years, there hadn't been a single act of violence deserving of the PDF on Sargos I, the captain drilled the normal PDF like it was the day before an assault.

How fitting then, that today was the day before an assault. Scouts had informed them that if the aliens maintained their current rate and assuming they were headed for Dermun, they would arrive the following day at noon.

None of this seemed to matter to Commissar Vermis, who was shouting about order and proper adherence to procedure.

He was quieted by Lord Valmark, the planetary Governor.

"We have little time" he cautioned in a stern hard voice.

"I am calling this emergency meeting to clarify and finalize plans for the defense of the city. Before we start, I was to say that I want reports and I want them accurate when the fighting starts!"

Since there was no ranking Guard Officer present, the PDF and the defense of the city fell to Valmark. Actually, it might not, thought Saide. Perhaps Valmark had made a power play when the other nobles left.

Regardless, Valmark had taken up the responsibility along with the power. Saide could tell the man was stressed and most likely had not slept in days. He was an ex-officer himself and had helped finalize many of the strategies. Lord Valmark turned to an Adeptus Machanicus, evidently the engineer of the city.

"What is the status of the shield battery?" he asked in a quiet tone, as if expecting some horrible answer.

"Fully charged, however, even with extensive modifications we calculate that it will only last under full siege for…" He turned and clicked out his bizarre lingo to an aide standing behind him.

"Two days at best," the augmented human responded. " we have about the same amount for the stationary guns, Lord Master"

The lord absorbed this information. "I am also told by the armor sector, who couldn't be here, that we have a total of four main battle tanks, ten transports, a handful of hydra pieces and some assorted other mechanical vehicles. His eyes narrowed.

"Things do not look good. To be honest, a force a hundred times our strength could have difficulty combating this foe." Switching to another topic, "how are we doing on infantry?" he asked Fatum.

"We have four platoons of regular PDF and about ten platoons of reserve. If it gets worse, we have enough weapons to recruit hivites. Keep in mind lord, that many of these soldiers other than the regular PDF have not seen action. They might…"

Lord Valmark motioned to Vermis. "I trust that you will be able to keep ranks? Yes? Well then, on to strategy…"

"The mountains create a natural choke point; let's use that to our advantage. The walls have a gap between them and the mountains. If we have the infantry on the wall like so…" he motioned to a 3-D diagram that hovered in the center of the room. "We should be able to make that area a kill zone. Have infantry up front, I doubt the enemy will be able to get through that easily."

"In the event that the shield goes down" he said, continuing "I want infantry to stay on the walls as long as possible. Keep the tanks up front as shielding. If the wall fails, I need infantry and what's left of armor to fighting retreat back to the hive towers. In case of the worst, they'll be our last fall back point."

Really, they had already agreed on this course of action, they were just making it final now. However, Vermis had something to say.

"Sir, you say that like you'll be there with us, when are you leaving? Truth be told, you should have left with the rest of the nobility."

Valmark scowled, his mighty eyebrows creating a vast chevron on his forehead.

"Leave with the rest of the nobles? Vermis, you almost insult me…No, I will stay here to the last man. I want to stay with my planet."

Vermis was shocked, "but my lord, our job, our reason for defense is to enable you to leave, is it not? What other reason is there?"

"Ah Vermis, so very foolish. If the God Emperor has decided that it is my day to die in his name, I will go willingly, why struggle against fate?"

"On that somber note, I conclude this meeting, unless you have anything to add…" No one did.

The sun rose on that fateful day, just a sliver shining through the toxic contrails of the enemy; Its luminescence landing on the statue of the emperor, in front of the planetary palace. It lasted for only a second, and soon the beam was smothered and the statue returned to darkness.

Alarms rang.

True to their word and calculations, the adepts had estimated the advancement correctly; the Tyranids had arrived.

**Chapter 17: Tactica**

Note from the Author: Everything's back to normal now. Now begins the slaughter at Sargos I, just give it a couple of chapters...

The first wave hit the defenders. A surge of dull chitin and bony exoskeleton smashed into the Hive wall.

Before they could get there though, they had to weather the furious firepower of the fighting First Platoon.

They had been assigned to guard the wall with Second Platoon, but First was the one making the kills.

Heavy guns hadn't appeared yet, so the defenders had not turned on the generator yet. The morning sky was alight with the dull red glow of lasguns.

Saide slammed another cartridge into his standard issue and fired away with extreme prejudice. A particularly nasty looking creature with crimson carapace and oozing yellow slime was running towards them.

Sighting the leader beast, he fired three shots in rapid succession. The first went through the torso, the second eviscerated an arm and the third decapitated the creature, who collapsed and sprayed viscous ichor from its wound. To Saide's disgust, the liquid, as it touched ground, sizzled and hissed; it was apparently acid.

The others, no seeing the new creatures subconsciously turned their guns on them.

One member had set up an auto-cannon on a tripod and rattled away, its heavy rounds splashing through the alien ranks like a power sword through steel. (That is to say, very easily) The numbers were dismaying though.

Even with the battle being seemingly one sided, Saide knew that this was just the beginning. Soon the grey skies would darken, the earth would tremble, and the oceans (if there had been any) would sizzle. They were just delaying the inevitable, he though gloomily to himself as he gunned down another creature.

The swarm increased.

A new horde of scything creatures leaped ahead, almost inviting the withering fire that it received. Lasbolts turned beasts into bodies. Already the brown red sand was stained with the chromatic sizzling blood of the enemy. IT was getting hard to see the ground.

However, the armor up front was doing a splendid job, Saide noticed. He would have to congratulate Grado, the armor commander, before they died.

Grado was shouting orders left, right, and center, but mostly center. Multi lasers and explosive munitions flung corpses like leaves and the systematic rearmament, the clunk and chink of the reload mechanism was like a chorus of bells and a heavenly choir rolled into one.

"Main ordinance, take out those bigger ones when you have the time…Ezekiel, you need to keep those small ones off the tanks!" He yelled to the Chimera leader.

"Sorry sir, there just too many" The man responded. Grado sneered. "No, my friend, there's no enough!" He laughed and opened the hatch to hi own command Chimera.

"What are you doing…Are you trying to get yourself killed?!" yelled a squad mate.

"Mind your own business… namely covering me" Grado turned the heavy stubber to target an overwhelmed tank. Firing in controlled bursts, he picked off the creatures one by one until there were none left.

"Thanks for the save sir." Said the tank crew hastily.

Another surge of carapace flooded the valley, thundering with thousands upon thousands of claw falls.

"Let them come this time" Ordered Grado. Several quires were directed at him in a very short amount of time. He silenced them all. "Just do what I say for once. But what ever…No, this is an order, Protect the infantry on the sides at all costs." Grado shouted.

Up until now, the armor spearhead had successfully deflected the assault, or rather had the assault focus on the armor, as to save the infantry. Grado wanted to keep it this way.

The valley slowly filled with the leaping beasts. "Sir, they'll overwhelm us if we don't…"

"Damn it; don't make me act like a frigging commissar. Just do what I say. I'm your [expletive]ing commanding officer ."

"I just don't understand why…" The tank driver started. "No, emperor above, just watch, just a little longer."

The valley was full. Exoskeleton carpeted the gorge like a yellow-red carpet of shifting images. The scene was lamost mesmerizing.

"Ok, Troops fall behind the armor" Commander Fatum said over the vox.

They complied without argument.

Grado called up his vox master. "Tank you" he replied as the communications officer handed him the powerful set. The officer shook his head at the pun but said nothing.

Grado smiled as if pleased with himself.

The other tank officer, Virgil, his second in command, had had enough. "Sir, I'm going to..." Once again, Grado cut him off. "Ok" said Grado gleefully, "its time "

An evil malicious smile appeared on Grado's face and a dangerous glint appeared in Grado's eyes.

"My esteemed colleague, it would seem as if the enemy has failed to counter our tactic. They have only sent small ones." Grado said, apparently to the engiseer. "I believe the time has come to give our besieger's a surprise like none they have ever received in their shunted bastardized lives."

There was a click on agreement on the other side of the receiver.

Somewhere, a button was pressed by someone. Now, this button was special. Unlike most buttons, this one didn't control radio frequencies, alarms or even control any automated turrets.

What it did control was carefully placed and hidden, interconnected, high explosive mines. There were exactly Two Hundred and Four of them, Grado thought to himself as he visualized the someone hitting that button.

Contact- and the world exploded.

Fire rained down from the wall like a stream of holy lightening, designed to kill the mutant and heretic; however, it worked just as well killing the tyranids

The Valley started to fill.

A radio transition was sent from Second Platoon: what the [expletive] was Grado doing?

Saide quickly grabbed the vox set while sighting another leader beast. He had to admit, up until now it was like shooting fish in a barrel, or it would have been like that If there were any fish on this damned dusty planet.

He yelled into the other end: "don't worry, keep them from advancing, but allow them to fill the valley; it's a trap!"

"Wish someone had informed Second," the lieutenant on the other end murmured."I'll inform the others"

"Yes, do that why don't you…" Said Saide distractedly as he busted the head off another leader beast.

He hung up the vox. The idea had been a simple addition to the basic plan. Lay mines along the valley floor, wait for the enemy to fill the land and then Kablooey!

The engiseer had lovingly blessed each mine himself, and Grado had overseen the entire operation. Saide swore to himself that Grado would have …no, had been destined for demolition expert, but had taken up armor instead.

Saide stopped his thoughts and fired again with more concentration, blasting the chest open of the now decapitated beast. It fell into a pool of its own bodily excretions, but was soon replaced with several more.

Valmark and Captain Fatum surveyed the battle on the 3d imaging model. It was nothing like the advanced real image, Hi definition sets that imperial guard used, in fact it used to be an ore sensor; designed to find mineral deposits.

The engiseer had delightfully refitted it, Valmark reflected. The engiseer had a passion for "improvements", some standard, others not so.

The engiseer used to be, as he liked to tell people, the weapons technician on a titan (Valmark didn't know the type)

After an ork invasion on a planet somewhere, the titan had sustained several heavy hits. Although the walker itself was relatively unharmed, the shields had been down when the shots hit, and the concussion of the blasts had killed some of the crew and wounded the rest.

The former weapons technician, now chief engiseer, had been almost mortally wounded and had experienced severe head trauma. Apparently, even the ingenious tech priests couldn't heal one of their own.

He had been a prominent figure in the Planet community, but after the incident, he began proposing more and more controversial ideas.

This culminated in the design of a new dreadnaught. The marines and priests were outraged. The ex-weapon's technician was essentially banished to Sargos I. They expected that he wouldn't or couldn't cause any trouble there.

Valmark was glad he was here. He was the best of both worlds in Valmark's eyes: A mastermind technician, but also had the innovation and gall to try new things…a quality that was lacking in so many other tech-priests and servants of the Imperium. And look where that thinking had gotten him….

Valmark wouldn't want anyone else here with him. He busied himself with battle charts again. A glowing glyph told him the time. "Ok, Troops fall behind the armor" Fatum said, next to him.

Saide spat commands: "Lechor, you're supposed to be flaming these guys, not taking a smoking break!", "Second Platoon, we've got another group of those bigger guys , concentrate fire on the, but flame the small ones. We only need to hold out for a few more minutes"

The valley was almost full

Saide steadied his arm and switched to full auto.

Several red lines emanated from his gun and ended in the bodies of the swarm. He dispatched more with a quick change in firing. However, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a spearhead of the smaller creatures scything their way up the wall near him. They had some how gotten through the tank cordon!

"Job, what the hell are you doing, repel them!" There was no change. "Emperor's Blood!" he swore.

"FIRST SQUAD, TO ME! PLUG THE GAP!" They rallied to him instantly, their team work honed through years of training in the rebellion of Sargos II. The first squad included several regular troopers and a handful of heavy weapons experts, and Lechor the flame trooper.

Saide passed the corpses of Job and second squad. Worms writhed through blood laden holes bored painfully through their skull. One of the men was still alive; Saide put him out of his pain. The other troops looked away, not out of disgust, but rather out of respect. Saide also turned away from the gruesome sight.

"Lechor, give them hell!" He yelled in a commanding voice.

Brilliant tongues of promethium arced in graceful waves of red hot death, incinerating the beasts. Flesh sloughed off of bone as ribbons of pure incineration ate through the ranks of the swarm. Those near to the targeted, instantly burst into flames, and yelled their wordless alien scream as they were consumed. Grado would have laughed while he was doing this, Saide thought.

However, when the attack was slaughtered, the button was pressed. Without any warning, Saide was standing one minute, and the next, the world was black.

**Chapter 18: Attack and Defense**

Note from the author: Sorry for the delay, hope to keep to schedule next time. Now is when it starts earning that mature rating...Trying different formats to make it more readable.

Saide came to and looked out on apocalypse. Remains of biomass were wreathed in flame. Remnants of the hordes wandered almost absentmindedly; oblivious to the conflagrations that burned their flesh. One by one, they succumbed to the heat and died, joining their kindred in great piles of death.

A noxious odor wafted and met Saide's nose. It was just as repulsive as the catastrophic scene in front of him. It was an earthy smell, so strong that it persisted even through his mask. Burned ground met Saide's eyes as he gazed out; burned ground without Tyranids.

It seemed like the abominations had decided to pause their attack, but he could see them regrouping right outside the gap.

What was left of the massive inter hive road, the pieces of the once mighty testament to human power, lay strewn around the battlefield like a bag of spilled marbles, without order. The pieces reminded Saide of the stream of civilians he had seen the day before.

He turned his gaze to the area directly below him. There were no civilians. It seemed like they all made it; well the ones that left their cities anyways. The others? Only the Emperor knew…

A half overturned chimera caught his eye. The tank struggled with its giant treads to right itself. The others except for superficial damage seemed fine. HE could also see 3rd and 4th platoon regrouping and recovering from the blast. A small group of wounded tried to gain access into the hive. The door didn't open.

"Where are you doorman one?" Saide inquired. Silence.

"Requesting remote access to main gate"

His vox system relayed the instruction. "Receiving" it beeped. "Request granted" it informed him. The gates opened, to the joy of the people on the ground. Saide realized that he had no idea how many of his own men were wounded.

"First Squad, roll call!" The shaken squad appeared from the carnage around him.

"All here and accounted for." Lechor responded, as the unofficial second in command.

"Lechor, contact 2nd and 3rd squad or…" he remembered Job's writhing corpse are the horrible worms that had so quickly infested his head. "Rather, just 3rd squad." Lechor did so. He gave Saide a thumbs up sign. "Creed says they're all ok."

"ok, I need to figure out how many troops we have left, theoretically, this should be someone else's job, but I guess the burden goes to me.

"2nd Platoon, status? " There was a pause. "All here and accounted for, answered Elbin in the formal response. 3rd and 4th also answered present with little to no causalities. Saide turned to the vox man who was standing with Lechor.

"Vore, contact HQ" Vore did so without question.

"Sirs," Saide addressed Captain Fatum and Lord Valmark. "The first assault seems to have been repulsed. Happy to report only a handful of causalities. I'll have real data sent to you immediately. 2nd got hit hard though, the creatures got over the wall before we could stop them.

"Hmm" he heard Fatum say. "I'm sorry about Job, he will be remembered."

"Sir, I f I may speak freely…none of us are going to be remembered."

Valmark and Fatum both didn't respond. Suddenly, Saide overheard Vermis shouting something from 4th Platoon, demand information or something of the like. Fatum went to shut him up. Valmark contacted the heads of all the platoons. "We have information, actually he have incoming."

"Already?" Ebin sputtered.

"Yes, already. Be warned, they are flying."

"Tyranids can fly?"

"I would suppose so. See for yourself, look out through the gap. You can see it better from the tower. That cloud? Not a cloud. It's moving against the wind. I've already informed the master of ordinance and Steván, the engiseer. The hydra batteries are in place.

"They're slated for ten minutes to impact, and that wall doesn't give much cover. However, we can't use the shield yet, we only have a limited charge and we want to keep that charge for the big stuff."

"Did you say ten minutes?" Elbin exclaimed. "Elbin, I mean, 2nd platoon out!"

They broke the connection. The wave could be seen clearly now, an amorphous winged cloud of death that blocked out what was left of the sun.

All around the capital, there were signs of increased agitation. Armor and the platoons retreated back into the hive wall. For the first time in the battle, the few stationary batteries powered up. Massive generators and electrical equipment charged with an almost palpable feeling that tingled in the air.

On hydraulic lifts, lascannon and hydra emplacements came to life and rose from their dormancy, turning to face the approaching foe. The cyclopean shield generator near the main hive powered up also. The earth shook and groaned as the underground dynamo's that fueled the hive came alive.

The city itself became alive. Everyone who might have been able to fight was handed a lasgun like the rest. Commissar Vermis grudgingly accepted them into 4th platoon, with the rest of the novices. He had his job cut out for him.

I I was noon and the sun now shown directly overhead, with what would have been a sweltering blaze, had not the entire atmosphere been clogged by fumes. As it was, the slight reddish tinge was amplified by the biocloud above the capital. It gave the entire area a claustrophobic feeling. It wasn't helped by the certain and imminent death that they all faced, thought Saide.

The first winged beast approached the defense.

In a fantastic feat of timing and angle, a battle tank took out the creature with its main cannon.

Grado stepped out of the clearly modified tank and bowed to the ground. He picked up a mini vox and announced his thoughts to the hive.

"I've always wanted to do that" He started.

"On a more serious note, they are here. We are ready; let the ground soak with their blood. If we die, we shall not die un-avenged. Imperial PDF, Show them our might!"

A cheer spread through and among the men and increased in amplitude until it shook the stone. Saide turned to say something sarcastic to Vore, but found tat he was cheering also. The winged spearhead made contact.

The first thing that Saide realized was that he could not take much of this. Every winged creature when it came near, unleashed a hideous earsplitting scream as it dove. Multiplied by millions, it became deafening.

Saide's ears rung with the beasts yells. As they dove with their screams, they released a globule of what Saide could only assume was acid. The four platoons turned their guns skyward. Hydra batteries hummed and started firing their deadly barrage. Bodies dropped from the sky like flies. Propelled by their momentum, the corpses hit the wall with a raining thunk.

However, the numbers were staggering. One man next to Saide got hit by their acid and fell, clutching his face. Saide rushed to the screaming man's side and recoiled in horror as the man looked up.

The skin was gone from that man's face ad acid ate at his eyes. Blood seeped from the exposed injury until even that burned off, leaving exposed bone, which glared white against his black uniform. Saide turned the man over and fought to keep himself from throwing up.

He aimed his lasgun upward, just in time to see a hydra battery slice through a formation in front of him. He lent his firepower to the effort, his small red beams radiating into the now darkening skies. His eyes opened wide, next to a star that seemed to pierce the haze, there was a winged creature falling from the skies. It was headed straight for him. He had no time to respond.

The corpse plowed into him, knocking him to the ground. Remembering the physiology of the creature, he shoved it off him as soon as was possible. None to late it seemed. The acid ichor from the cadaver had deformed his flack armor.

His vision was blurred from the impact. As he regained full consciousness, he gazed out on the battle. In horror he could see another wave of terrestrial creature emanating from the gap; some of them quite large, impossibly large in fact. Chitin laden bulges of grotesque muscle and bone covered with tough cartilage and finally on the biggest; armored plates, lumbered into the plain in front of the hive.

"HQ, this is.." His vision swam and he found it hard to stand straight, "1st Platoon. We've got biggies. I suggest raising shields." There was some quick conversation in the background.

"Ok acknowledged, shield's going up." The connection ended.

"This is Grado, Shield's going up, take position 3 now."

Troops scrambled to the walls vehicles sat in specially designed firing ports from the wall. And opened fire. Overhead, the aerial force was mostly gone, and those that were left fried like the insects that they were against the shield.

A severed arm fell near Saide. He jumped back until he realized what it was. He looked around all the while, targeting enemies.

The few light siege pieces deployed and the scarce lascannon turrets activated. The towers telescoped a handful of feet into the air to gain a good angle. They held the fire until the enemy was in range though.

The heavens started to cloud over again, in fact, all light seemed to be slain by the invading foe, except for one star. Funny, it looks closer.

Two new recruits were lounging near the westernmost section of the hive wall, right where it connected with the mountains. They sat, covered with a tarp intended for ammo. It was now protecting them from the watchful gaze of commissar Vermis.

"Hell, I didn't sign up…"

"No one knew it was going to be like this. No sense getting all emotional. That bastard Vermis will call you out on it. Plus at least you didn't have gate duty. That was the worst thing in my entire life. Good thing we got away."

"Sven, we're hiding from him, he's already going to bust a gasket over that."

The two men were secretly shocked into immobilization over what they had just seen on the wall and were not thinking straight.

"Hmm…"

"Hey, look at that star, pretty bright isn't it?"

"CRAP!" Sven turned to his friend before he felt what had alerted his comrade, a sudden drop in temperature. Ever trooper, good or bad had one thing drilled into him from day one: Psykers are bad news.

"But…" Sputtered Sven. "Tyranids don't have any Psykers!"

The wall exploded. Sven was killed instantly by the blast. His friend sat dumbfounded as the most hideous thing he had ever seen, drifted through eh hole in the colossus wall.

It was perilously balanced, with it's bulging brain and spindly arms and tail.

"Wha?" Started the man.

With one twitch of its massive synapse, the creature directed a fraction of its power toward the man. He was destroyed in milliseconds, spraying parts around the encampment. The monstrosity continued despite the detonation of gore that it had just caused.

The wall was falling. The psychic horrors were piercing the wall with impunity. Squads were urged to keep the wall, but some were falling back into the hive, regardless. Saide rallied 1st, but the other platoons were disillusioned.

The armor division took out the psychic abominations.

Just as Saide was regaining confidence he happened to look up again, despite the lack of not aerial enemies.

"Emperor's golden throne, what in the warp is that?" He pointed, his eyes widening. "That's no star!"

Moral plummeted. Ranks broke. Commissar Vermis had a heyday. All the while, the massive space station screamed closer, plunging into the atmosphere from its destroyed orbit .

Out side of the mountain pass, it cam to a crashing horrible end (taking out thousands of Tyranids with it). Secondary explosions rippled its super structure until it finally broke apart in a violent cataclysm of flam and destruction, as its reactor went critical and detonated. The sky shone with the intensity of a millions suns in the nuclear explosion, illuminating the battlefield one last time before the night closed in.

Saide stood contrasted against the blinding light, and looked in despair at the orbital platform. There would be no help from them, he thought.

1st Platoon fell back to the city.

**Chapter 19: Salvation**

Author's Note: Sorry for the slow update, hope to have more coming soon. As a side note, you learn what happens when guardsmen roll double ones for their leadership test.

The wall had officially fallen. There was almost no hope for the city now, though Saide.

"Get that auto cannon operational now!" He yelled to Hessert, the heavy weapons man. Already, screams split the night as the tyranids plunged through the gaps in the wall.

Creed and 3rd squad took positions with them on the top of the building. They had chosen this particular one because it had a large flat roof and was designed to be some sort of bank, as the building itself was reinforced. A squad of recruits was holed up at the bottom of the bank, and even though entrenched, was expecting a heavy fight.

Overhead, perilously powerful pulses slammed into the shield from living artillery. Saide thanked the Emperor that it was still up. Just as he did so, a section failed. Saide muttered an expletive under his breath.

"Here they come men, stand firm." He bellowed.

More of the infernal scything creatures bounded forward out of the smoky blackness. Creed looked at Saide.

"First squad fire" he yelled. "Third squad fire" Creed echoed. The recruits just opened fire. The massive power of the assault and the barrage met. The lasguns shot were concentrated manifestations of energy. The beasts were merely flesh and blood. The beasts had no hope except for in numbers.

Wave after wave of the creatures threw themselves at the defenders with little effect. Bodies started to build up. One by one, 1st Platoon's soldiers were forced to reload, but still the abominations kept coming. Off to their left, Saide could see the other platoons fighting retreating back to the planetary Governors' house. There was no sign of the Armored Division.

The fighting got more intense as the bigger leader beasts joined the fight. Unlike their small cousins, these animals seemed to have some sort of intelligence. Instead of blindly rushing the platoon's position,, they shot their weapons (if you can call them that) and stayed out of the large kill zone around the building. They shot something out of their weapons that burned like acid and exploded on impact, sending smaller globules in every direction.

One of these fatal shrapnel bursts almost hit Saide, but he ducked when he heard the shot, and the deadly coercive material hit the wall, just inches from his head. The metal wall bubbled and hissed.

"Hassert, do you mind stopping that?" Saide yelled over the sound of the skirmish. The larger man grumbled something before he turned the turret mounted autocannon on the new foe. The leader beasts were caught before they could regroup.

Bellow 1st Platoon, the fighting was getting messy. The tyranids still couldn't reach the barricade on the bottom, but the line was getting closer and closer, despite the withering fire. However, due to their recent success, the recruits held the line. Then the big ones came.

They were the ones that Saide had seen when he saw the second wave coming. The huge assault organisms smashed like a tank through the building in front of them. Moral was shaken.

"Run for it!" Saide yelled, "fall back to the palace!".

The rest of the wave was now swarming past 1st platoon and through the hole that the larger ones had opened.

"We're all going to die!" Screamed one man.

"Shut up and follow me" creed spat. "1st Platoon, back to the HQ, stay to the roof tops"

"That's no use, they'll just follow up here!" the man said.

"No, I destroyed the staircase. They can't reach us."

The man fell silent.

"Wait, Creed, you did WHAT?" "I…" stammered Creed, surprised by Saide's sudden outburst.

A heart stopping , blood curdling scream stopped both of them. It was one of the recruits. The sound of furious lasfire sounded from below.

"Emperor, they're trapped…" There was silence for a brief second.

"Fall back" Yelled Saide. "They're gone" The 1st Platoon fell back, without much protest, mainly because every one was so scared for their own lives to worry about anyone else's. Saide and First hopped off the bank and ran along the roof tops towards the governor's palace.

Below, the recruits had their last stand. A huge beast smashed their line. Amazingly when they knew they were going to die, the recruits fought just as hard as any veteran.

The creature flung men with massive swipes of its enormous claws. The men nearest it backed up and fired up at the thing even as it charged towards them. The flashes of the lasguns illuminated their determined faces. No emotions, no fear appeared there.

An autocannon hit the creature, which was eating one of the guardsmen. It almost spun the beast around with its high caliber shells. The monstrosity roared in protest. A las-round hit it in the face destroying one of its sensory organs. One guardsman charged it, then two, then three. The entire squad took up their combat blades and charged it.

Bodies went flying like feathers; some lay where they fell, in pools of blood and debris, others slowly got up and insanely ran back towards the dervish of a fight. The guardsman closest to the thing grabbed hold of its claws as the monster swatted at him. He held on, stabbing at its armor.

Those that got behind the creature dodged its sweeping tail and jumped on its back, seeking weak points and stabbing at them with their blades. The ones in the back fired their lasguns into its hide.

This went on, and causalities mounted until one of the guardsmen managed to grab a hold of the beasts head from behind. He held on until the beast roared again. The guardsman threw a grenade into its mouth; actually he threw a whole belt of grenades. They exploded. Its brain and entire head shattered and the useless body fell to the ground.

Every one was too tired to cheer, and wouldn't have been able to either. The second the monster died, the entire area was covered with the interminable scything beasts. Las gun fire resumed until they ran out of shots or were overwhelmed. The last stand of the 2nd recruit would never be know or remembered.

As that was going on, four things happened: The shield finally fell under the barrage of yet unseen creatures, 1st Platoon found that the route to the governor's palace was blocked and found the other platoons in the same predicament, a shadow, unnoticeable in the already gloomy darkness fell to

Sargos I, finally, a space ship entered the atmosphere, contrails burning from its decent. It went unnoticed by both sides.

The tyranids fleet surprisingly ignored it and in the PDF HQ, Fatum and Valmark and their aides had bigger things to worry about. It was written off as another piece of debris from the space station.

"Vermis, Caff, Elbin" He addressed the heads of each platoon, "What's going on?"

"We barricaded the palace too well, our only entrance has been blocked, we might as well…" Elbin complained.

"Quiet" Silenced Vermis, "Lets get to a defendable position."

Virgil was scared for the first time in his life. His tank had gotten separated from the armor division and only the emperor knew what happened to them. His Russ was still in one piece unlike some in the division. The big ones seemed to focus on the tanks.

"See anything?" He almost screamed to the technetium over the sound of the engine.

"Nothing yet, but…Emperor's Golden Throne!"

"What, what is it?" Virgil ran over to the instrument panel in time to see three large incoming dots on the aspex.

"Target the closest one first; lets do this!"

The tank was in a cluster of streets and building, all of which were reinforced. There would be no heroic charges through facades today.

They wheeled around a corner in time to see a monstrous creature barreling towards them. The gunner fired. The shot was a anti-tank round, designed to pierce even reinforced armor. Even the tough carapace had no chance. A hole appeared where the head and neck used to have been.

The tank staff cheered.

"More good news…The third one went away, but…strange, I can't find the second one." The technician said.

A small group of scything creatures bounded into range and was exterminated by the tank's sponsors. Still the second beast eluded them.

"Slow here" Virgil commanded. They were coming to a crossroads. Dismal smoke clouded their vision even though the lamps were surprisingly still working. Overturned carts and what could have been bodies littered the streets. Store fronts came into view.

Out of nowhere the beast appeared.

"Turn and fire!" Virgil commanded as he gunned the engine, and set it to its highest speed.

"Give me time to get a good shot" The gunner yelled.

"The [expletive]ing thing is right in front of you, shoot the [expletive] out of it!"

In the next second, two things happened. First, the gunner obtained what he though was a "good shot" and fired. Second, the abomination sliced at their tank with its destructive claws.

The tank armor rent like tin foil. Virgil had only enough time to see a massive piece of bio-creature smash through the tank. The tank's reactor and ammo supply exploded.

By a twist of fate, Virgil was thrown clear of the explosion by the creature's first attack. Virgil landed on the cold hard ground and blacked out for a few seconds.

When he came to, the creature had finished with the tank. Its armor had been ripped open like a mess tin, and blood smears emanated from its opening. The huge beast had a moderately sized hole in its stomach though. The gunner had finally gotten his shot off. The lumbering behemoth started to approach Virgil, focusing on only him. It lunged forward with clearly murderous intentions. It never made it.

The distinctive blue beam of a lascannon lanced through the creature and continued its charge until it was dead. The monstrosity roared its last and collapsed in a pool of sizzling blood, which Virgil was careful to avoid. He turned to meet his savior.

In the foreground he was blinded by searchlights from a ship. It hovered only a few meters from the ground and every moment or so, it targeted something, its batteries dealing death to the invaders. Virgil went to get up and noticed that he could not do so. He looked down at his leg and winced. A 3 centimeter piece of metal protruded from his shin. He almost blacked out again.

With his last ounce of strength, he pulled himself towards the cruiser, its searchlights a sign of salvation in the darkness. A hatch opened and a person stepped out, illuminated by the lights. In a gruff voice it said "My name is Don, get on the ship if you want to survive."

Virgil dragged himself with the help from the figure onto the ship before darkness over took him.

**Chapter 20: The Exigencies of Duty**

Note from the author: I have more written and even more planned out. I just need to type it all now. Time permitting, expect more updates soon.

The shadow that has fallen to Sargos II was barely observable; however, reactions occurred as it flew past human and tyranids alike. The troops ducked and swore, thinking it another winged vermin, and were confused to find nothing visible when they turned their head to fire. The tyranids were aware of the being but paid it no special attention as a group. Individual creatures lunged at it as it came past and hissed in frustration when no contact was made. The shadow equally ignored the two sides, excepting the physic monstrosities, all of whom it avoided nonchalantly.

It glided with no means of propulsion, and was not influenced by obstacles or any corporal object whatsoever. In seconds it had reached its destination.

If Virgil were conscious, he would have seen the new figure carefully bring him to the ship before setting out to contact others.

With both hands he held what seemed to be a lasgun, albeit with augmentations. He stealthily crept over the burning remains of a building. He loaded his gun and took aim. A second later, a small group of scything creatures bounded down the street. Shots split the air and they fell one by one. However, they made no motions of retaliation.

When they were taken care of, the figure puzzled over their reaction, but only for a few seconds. He had to contact the main force.

He found them holed up in a three story building fighting for their lives. 3rd and 4th platoon were hit the hardest. Another assault monster smashed their lines, and it took the combined force of all the platoons to bring it down.

However, during that time they were vulnerable to the waves of scything creatures that swarmed them. By the time fighting was over, a third of 3rd platoon and almost all of 4th platoon had met an unhappy end. Their bodies lay strewn along the hastily made barricade, behind which the force huddled.

Don made contact with them.

"Who are you ?" Saide asked, immediately recognizing the different uniform Don was wearing.

"There's no time for pleasantries, you all need to come with me; I have a ship."

Saide's eyes lit up. He consulted the heads of the other platoons. Vermis yelled disparaging remarks about Saide's integrity, which Saide calmly ignored. Saide took advantage of the lull in the fighting to yell to the assembled troops

"This man says that he has a ship. Of course this raises many ethic and dutiful questions; however, I believe that if we don't leave with this man we will all perish at the hands of these…Tyranids."

Several people looked overjoyed; others seemed resigned.

"Everyone's course of action is up to the individual. Leave if you want, or stay if you want; no one will be punished for what decision they…Hey!"

Saide yelped as he was pulled violently down off the pile by Vermis.

"What in the glorious emperor's name are you trying to [expletive]ing pull? Do you know what this is?! This is Treason!" Vermis enunciated the last word with clear hatred and contempt, and after he did so he waited as if he expected for that one word to somehow change Saide's mind. Saide did not react.

"I will make your treachery known. I will uphold the law of the imperium!" He reached for his bolt pistol. Quicker than lightening, Don jabbed out and hit Vermis's hand, disarming him. He glared furiously at Don.

"I do not know who you are, but I know what this is. Its Treason; Its Heresy!" His voice layered with hate as he yelled his prior words at the top of his lungs and spat out "heresy" like an undesired piece of gristle. He took the improvised podium.

"My colleague's harangue is deceitful. You all forget your duty; your honor. We are the PDF and damn it, we don't run away! Fatum and Valmark will have your heads for this."

His speech was interrupted by a vox.

"We are informed of the situation Vermis and understand the ramifications. You are all free to leave if you desire."

"But…" Vermis sputtered, "What about you my lord?"

A horrible crash came from the vox. The living artillery had managed to target the palace. Yells and shouts transmitted in a frenzied bedlam of confusion. Vermis snatched the vox away and turned it off with one swift motion.

"The governor's palace is under attack. Go with this man, but Emperor help you if you do. As for myself, I will fight to the end like a member of the imperium should."

With that, he bent down and took back his gun. He reloaded it and walked into the wreckage. The barricade had been broken. People murmured and talked amongst themselves, obviously unsure about what they should do. Some made up their mind and left for the palace. About half remained.

"The ship is two blocks that way." He pointed. "I saw from orbit that another wave of tyranids is coming."

The remnants of the PDF marched solemnly towards the indicated area. 1st platoon hung back as Saide talked to Don and the rest of the commanders.

"It was a decent resistance that we put up, but we are out manned, out gunned and are under supplied. To stay would be tantamount to suicide."

"I agree" Echoed Elban and Caff simultaneously. They took their respective platoons toward the ship.

Saide noticed a man that had stayed behind. Don was trying to convince him to stay.

"…Won't you life have more meaning if you're alive?" Don posed.

"I took an out when I joined the PDF" Creed stated, "I will not rescind on it, even at the cost of my own life."

"Your oath was to protect the imperium, to spread His word. How will you help the emperor when you're dead?" Saide joined in. At the mention of the word emperor, Don flinched as if he had been stung by an insect. Creed shook his head.

"Fine, make your own decision." Don said.

Creed thanked him for understanding and started to walk off.

Saide shook his head himself and sighed deeply. "Any other man… Any other [expletive]ing man…" he muttered and took out a stun gun. Don's eyebrows shot up in surprise, but he did nothing.

Saide covered his eyes with his hand in shame and looked down. He hefted the pistol with one hand and aimed it with perfect accuracy at the retreating figure. He winced as he pulled the trigger. Creed dropped like a sack of bricks.

Saide walked to the body and knelt down next to it.

"Any other man I would have let go, but Creed…Damn it…you're too good of an officer for me to lose you like this, and…you're my lieutenant." After the words had left his mouth he almost choked up, and he fell silent. He had Lechor sling him over one of his massive shoulders and commanded 1st platoon to return to the ship. Don opened his mouth to say something, but Saide shut him up with a look.

The rest of the PDF left, but Saide and Don stood one last second to survey the city a last time. They stood illuminated only by the flickering firelight of the burning buildings around them.

"I guess we should try to convince the rest…" Saide started with a melancholy tone. "I'm afraid that we've ran out of time. The tyranids have ceased their waiting." Already they could hear the sounds of the approaching hordes.

"I know you don't know me, but you've got to leave now" Don urged.

As soon as the words had left his mouth, a force seemed to lift Saide off his feet. He was flung effortlessly against a concrete wall. The world faded for a moment; his vision swam. He tried to look around, but he seemed to be encased in a suit of pain that restricted his movements to a twitch. Suddenly, it seemed as if his energy had been cruelly ripped from him. His vision swam again and then it faded to black.

**Chapter 21: Nightmares**

Author's Note: I didn't know how long this section would be so I separated this one and the last. In hindsight, I should have left them as one section.

When he came to, he was lying on a mound of debris in what was left of a house. Its walls had survived, but there were holes in them, and the roof was gone.

Just beyond the house, in the clearing that the troops had used, was Don. Don was searching for him.

A fire was still lit nearby, making it hard to see Saide, as he was hidden in the shadows.

Saide started to yell back, but suddenly he felt very cold. A shiver tore through him and something blacker than night flitted past him. He stayed quiet.

Don sensed the thing's presence also. A horrible change came over him. His features sharpened, his brows came together in a furious glare and his face darkened. He reached for his lasgun.

The specter became an indistinguishable figure, more air than matter. But with the silhouette of a man, a man that looked similar to Don.

"Why…Hello again… I assume you're glad that you're alive?" The figure said in a voice that chilled Saide to the bones. Its voice was the sound of metal grating on metal, and the sound of a thousand souls crying out before they perished; it was the sound of insanity.

"I owe you nothing!" Don yelled.

"No, No, I never implied that." There was pause. "But I would conclude that you are… apprehensive about having more people to look after."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Poor friend, you couldn't have saved him. On an unrelated note…Space marines can be cruel can they not…Who would have thought the great protectors…could torture someone that well?"

"While I resent what they did, I 'm sure that they had their reasons. Plus it was you who killed them and let me escape. I did no harm to them. "

All the while, Saide was listening in on the conversation. He's wanted by the Astartes? Who is this man?

"It's…ironic that you ask about their reasons, especially because those reasons are behind you." The voice said.

Don whirled around, expecting some horrible monster or hideously tainted dark artifact. Instead, a black package sat on the ground. It took Don a few seconds to realize what he was looking at. He recognized the black package that from the crashed ship, back from his home world.

"But…How?" he sputtered

"Don't you remember?" The voice said with glee," You took it before you left. You have had it all this time.

"I have?" Don asked at first as if unsure. "No!" He then shouted" This is your doing, malicious being, you have done this, for what I can only guess to be your insidious ends."

"heh heh heh" The figure chuckled; it was an empty bone chilling sound. "I can not trick you can I?"

"The station was doomed, all efforts would have been futile, plus the equipment failure was completely random…right? He couldn't have known that the air lock was a bout to open…completely random, like I said"

"It was you!" Don yelled. He took his las gun and aimed it at the figure's head, and fired.

In that one horrible second, time seemed to slow down. The silhouette suddenly was no silhouette, it was a man Saide had never seen, but could only assume it so be the man that the figure had talked about earlier.

For a period of time, they were not on Sargos I anymore either, he were on a ship. Inside a cavernous cargo hold one side of it was open to space with only a field keeping the cold death of the vacuum out. Outside of the ship, Saide could see the huge space station. Impossible, this is utterly impossible

Right next to the airlock the other man writhed in space clutching his throat. However, he smiled like a Cheshire cat, revealing all his teeth as he did so.

His head swelled and grew to incredible proportions, his arms burst into ribbons of flesh and blood, his body shriveled like a fruit left out in the sun. His head grew and grew, and the smile grew with it.

Don yelled in horror and slammed on the field. There was only a head now but it had begun to laugh manically, and even with the field in the way, both men could hear the disturbing sound clear as day. Don clutched his ears. The laughter grew louder and louder until at its apex, everything went back to normal. They were back on Sargos I. Did we even leave? Saide wondered.

The lasgun shot that had been aimed at the figure went through air and hit the wall behind where the figure had been. Neither man cared very much or noticed it.

Side realized very quickly that perhaps he shouldn't have seen that. He decided to wait a few seconds before meeting Don.

He had time to see Don's reaction. He covered his face and tears of rage trickled down, probably reinforced by Don's helplessness. The figure was gone

Saide limped, not completely faking, into the clearing.

"Who were you talking to? We've got to get out of here and take everyone we can with us."

"Who was I talking to?" Don repeated, "No… no one, just myself." Don stated distractedly. He helped Saide by throwing an arm around his shoulder in the classic wounded solider style. The made their way back to the ship.

**Chapter 22: Deus ex Machina**

Note from the author: If you enjoy this story or have comments/concerns please review. I'd update faster if I knew people were actually reading this frequently.

Don slammed the hatch shut and pressed some controls. The ship began to rise, slowly at first then with increasing speed. The engines blasted the ship into orbit.

The ship streamed past the noxious gasses and spires of the hive. The ground sank beneath them until the city was just a dot that grew fainter and fainter, threatening to disappear altogether.

Bright concentrated lights marked the futile defense of the planet. The tyranids had attacked for the last time. Drawn to accomplishing what goals they might have, the final attack was invincible. Lines were overrun, buildings destroyed in an instant, people were slaughtered, an all in a matter of minutes. However, amidst this bloodshed, one group rallied even as those beside them fell. They were led by Vermis.

At the same time, Valmark pulled himself from the wreckage and tried to pierce the dust with his vision. The aids were gone, some killed, and others had fled. Valmark was alone…or was he?

Glancing from the broken room and the collapsed ceiling to the rubble strewn floor, Valmark searched frantically for his friend and comrade, the captain. A groaning alerted him to the captain's presence.

"Fatum, is that you?" He cried out as he shifted the debris of a large pile. The groaning became louder. He cast aside a shattered view-screen and beheld his friend. He was speared through the chest by a protruding beam.

Apparently, the force was such that it was forced through his body and out the other side. Fatum was dying.

Valmark knelt beside the venerable captain as blood seeped from the grievous wound. In his last breaths, the captain murmured something. However his voice was only a whisper, and blood coughed from his lips when he tried to speak louder. A terrible pain seemed to run through his body, and he seemed to hold on to life with only pure force of will. He tried speaking again.

"What is it my friend?" Valmark asked softly.

"In the name of the emperor…" Fatum started, drawing his sword with his last ounce of energy. His last words ruefully ripped from his lips by the inexorable specter of death.

The light dimmed from his eyes and he stopped breathing. Valmark face was torn with grief. He slammed his hand on the metal floor of the building causing a reverberating clang, an action not so much out of anger as helplessness.

He happened to glance at his comrade's sword and all of a sudden, a spirit caught hold of him. In that second, Valmark knew he had to do what Fatum could not finish. Valmark adorned his crimson cape and carefully took the magnificent power sword that Fatum had drawn.

"In the name of the Emperor" Valmark agreed.

He turned and stood, walking away as the final vestiges of life drained from Fatum's body; his eyes glazed over.

Valmark gritted his teeth and clenched the ornate power sword, his cape now billowing behind him in the light from command station lamps. With every step his confidence and valor rose; with every foot fall he pledged his life. With every clunk of his boots on the cold steel, his path seemed clearer and every stride he took brought him closer to the emperor.

A new life seemed to fill him as he strode, and from it, a fury like no other gripped him. He ignored the debris and tyranids alike as he wandered purposefully; his mission was clear. His eyes burned with righteous flame as if with one glance they could smite thousands.

The remaining guard seeing this display of solemnly fell in behind him, marching in synch. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding between them all, something that uplifted each man from the gloom of the city and filled them with purpose. The group grew.

Vehicles and what was left of Grado's forces fell in to the convoy also, advancing with what was quickly becoming a major offensive.

Recruits and survivors fell into place, brought by the same feeling. One by one they joined the guard. One by one did citizens find guns and one by one they fell in line also.

They marched. With one cadence, with one rhythm they strode. Their amplified footsteps resounded off the pavement.

They walked and walked until they reached their objective, and there, at the great temple to the God-Emperor, Valmark raised his sword and unleashed a terrible cry that was echoed by his followers. He knelt before the mighty statue that had somehow survived the assault. The choking clouds opened for a brief second, shining sunlight onto the temple.

In that second, Valmark twisted suddenly reversed directions as if possessed. The sky fell dark again with the renewed forces of the tyranids. Spores, pods, all manner of hideous and dreadful creatures rained from the sky. As they landed they swept like a wave and darted for the closest man.

Valmark leveled his gaze at the swiftly approaching swarm, and with one motion the entire force met the tyranids head on.

Talon met sword, claw met armor and round met hide as the two sides collided.

Valmark stepped through the bedlam with unblinking eyes, simultaneously slaying all foes before him. His blade cut with an ease so noticeable that it could only be attributed to superhuman strength. The numbers grew in opposition but still he walked forward into the horde.

Behind him, his followers fought and killed their way, while vehicles in the rear mercilessly crushed any missed beasts. Even still, men and tyranids alike dropped like leaves. Hundreds upon hundreds of bodies met and did battle and neither side relented until the other was vanquished.

Valmark found his destination. With a leap, he launched himself forward on to his foe with reckless abandon.

The creature was a colossal organism but stood on two cloven hooves. From each of its four arms, sprang a blade like appendage. Its tail whipped around viciously and it roared a challenge at Valmark; one which he was quick to answer.

Its horned head lowered and it also charged. The earth trembled with each footstep, but Valmark held his ground until the last possible second. Then, in a motion that was too quick to follow, Valmark dodged out of the way. As a scything arm sailed past, aimed for the spot where he had been, he swung out with his great sword.

Fatum had been given the sword from the oldest house of Sargos II, who had in turn received it from one of the great houses of terra. It was forged by forgotten technologies during the dark ages of mankind and it had survived without a scratch.

It was a long two handed sword, only usable by one trained in its arts, for it outweighed the common blade by magnitudes. However, Valmark handled it at this time with dexterity. It flashed, more of an extension of his will than a weapon. With a great cleave he hacked off one of the arms.

The oversized arm splattered with ichor and twitched on the ground.

If a tyranids could feel surprise, it would have felt it then. However, tyranids seem to have no emotion or rather display them in ways that are incomprehensible. It flashed its blade arms one after another with terrible power, while it screamed a cry of pain from the wound.

Valmark's eyes hollowed for a brief second, but when they ignited again, they almost glowed with power. They shone white, almost projecting into the murky sky. His pupils vanished until there were just white luminescent irises. He let out a bone rattling sigh.

Then, in the span of milliseconds, he parried all three blows perfectly. Each deadly, he was driven back by the force of the attacks even though no harm came to him.

Nonplussed, the creature lashed out again. The sword leapt and blocked the blow, sparks of psychic and corporeal energy shimmering and distorting from the connection. The man moved with his unsurpassable speed. Caught off guard, the creature lost another arm in a broad sweeping slice that projected acid blood into the air like a macabre fountain.

Perhaps it realized that a change in tactic was necessary. For a brief second it switched it gaze to the streets behind it and whined. Valmark's shimmering power weapon caught its attention again.

I struck suddenly with terrible force. Again, the sheer momentum behind the attack flung him. He landed on his feet and stared at the beast. The monstrosity closed its eyes and suddenly the crackling of psychic energies could be heard. The former Valmark figure, which was now shining too brightly to tell even if it was a man or not, lifted up its palm and stretched out his hand as if to signal "stop".

A massive bolt of immaterium tore its way through the air from the monster. And stopped.

It hung scarcely a meter away from the Valmark figure's arm. It vibrated and shook violently. The figure focused on it.

It exploded.

The monster, exhausted from its effort, groggily raised its weapon-hands.

For an instant time itself actually stopped. Bullets hung in mid air. Men with their mouths open were silent and comically unaware of the change. Beasts froze in mid-leap, talons about to extend into bodies. It all stopped.

For an unimaginable second, the figure turned its full gaze on the abomination and locked eyes with it. The man-avatar narrowed its eyes.

In that unimaginable second, a futile battle of will was fought. A single drop of acid blood seeped from the creature's eye. It was the result of a ruptured cortex. The brain utterly destroyed, the body stood and then slowly crashed to the ground, blood slowly leaking from the mush that used to be the creature's head.

In that one second however, a shadow detached itself from its mooring of reality and slipped into the still twitching body.

The shining force, oblivious of the dying guardsmen and tyranids only saw the shadow. The avatar rose what could have been a sword and attacked.

The familiar behemoth rose, now clouded in darkness. When the two wills hit, disruptions in the fabric of the universe pulsed from the contacts. Air shimmered and distorted as the powers of the void did battle.

Around the two entities, guardsmen and tyranids ran from the disruptions. The guardsmen out of fear, and the tyranids…well, none of the guardsmen could figure out why they were running.

The two powers collided, separated and collided yet again, each time with increased violence. Finally, in the distance, the ship took off.

As suddenly as the fight started, it ceased. Both entities stood facing each other in apparent hatred. However, it appeared that this was not the time to fight. The lifeless bodies fell to the ground as the spirits departed.

The tyranids went wild. Well, more wild than normal…They screamed and ran frantically about in confused circles and attacked each other. In a catastrophic slaughter of thousands, the last of the tyranids forces killed themselves in madness.

The guardsmen had theoretically won, as the city was never completely taken, but there were few men or women alive in the metropolis left to appreciate their pyrrhic victory.

The city crumbled. The sky darkened once again. The terrible siege tyranids departed as did the ground troops. Overhead, despite the flurry of activity of the tyranids fleet, it made no attempt to attack the comparatively small ship as it left orbit. The bio vessels floated for a moment and then disappeared into the darkness of space, presumably to lick their wounds.

The real loser was the planet though. After days of tyranids invasion, the atmosphere had been poisoned by their vile smog. The few survivors would find the air toxic and the water tainted. Sargos I was dead.

**Chapter 23: Sitting In A Tin Can**

Author's note: Update! Reviews would be appreciated, even if you only read one chapter or something. Every bit helps and I want to make this story better if possible.

Don sat in the shadows of the cockpit and leaned back on his chair. Just as he was about to fall asleep from exhaustion, he thought he heard a voice. He turned around but he was alone, the cold metal of the cockpit was devoid of any other life. He settled back down uneasily.

Outside the ship, the bio-fleet triggered unhappy memories. He cringed as the shadows of the behemoths washed over him.

For no explainable reason, they ignored the ship. A shadow from one of the ships quickly made its way from ceiling to floor. Don was transfixed by it; its horror spell-bound him. The shadow came to rest on the black package that had appeared. There would be no sleep for him tonight.

Saide hunched against the wall of the enormous cargo hold which had made up the majority of the ship. Perched upon boxes and every available space was a guardsman. Normally, everyone would have been talking and joking about their escape if it had been another planet besides their own, but instead they sat in silence, each one thinking about what had just happened. Some wounded cried out, but the rigid military structure had, at least for this point in time, melted away. It was up to them to obtain help.

There was suddenly a muffled thump from below them. The metal floor shook and steam wafted up from the many grills. The lights flickered and went out. For a moment fear gripped Saide, and in an uncontrollable motion he clutched his silver aquilla. He had never been especially religious but now, as tyranids bio ships floated over them and as the murky smoke floated from an unseen malfunction drifted up, seemed as good a time as any.

The aquilla flashed and seemed to shine for a moment, blinding Saide. However, when his eyes adjusted to the light, he found that it was Elban holding an emergency flash box.

They didn't say a word but strode purposefully towards the passageway leading to the smoking engine room. Halfway there, they were joined by Don who had been warned by several indicators in the cockpit that something was wrong.

As they walked into the passageway, Saide felt a cold life-less arm grip his shoulder from the darkness of the cargo room , which was full of anxious chatter. Saide spun around to see the engiseer from the planet.

"How did you…" Saide started, but the engiseer cut him off.

"It doesn't matter, I will tell you later" the not-human voice clicked.

The group plunged into the smoke of the engine room.

At first, none of them could see. Even Elban's light made little difference in the chocking smoke. Out of the wafting particles, Saide could see colossus machines, multiple ducts and intake valves, all of which cluttered the room.

As far as Saide could tell, the room was the width of the cargo room but only extended half the length. Even so, they could barely have seen the end even if the smoke had been gone.

The smoke itself seemed to be coming from a mammoth device in the center of the room. All the subsystems seemed to be linked to this device and thousands upon thousands of wires and cables connected it to other machines.

Stevan, the engiseer, was instantly enamored by the monstrous contraption and instantly began to study the device before readjusting dials and reconnecting valves.

The others watched in amazement as the engiseer executed his acts with the skill obtained from a life time of training. He hummed with excitement, his many mechanical augmentations unfolded from hidden compartments in his body.

Saide and the rest of the group were somewhat repulsed by this, but understood that he needed the extra limbs and waving mandrills to complete whatever task he had assigned himself to.

Finally he opened a hatch in the machine and smacked his forehead in a mockingly human way. This act was even more remote as it was one of the tendrils that did the smacking, not his hand. It was an action of one who was used to humans and worked with them but at the same time adopted human mannerisms. However, he was definitely not human.

"There's your problem" He buzzed, his computer voice sounding dull compared to the normal tone of human speech.

"Hmm?" puzzled Don, interested in the machinery.

"Right behind the, rather, through the intake valve here. What do you see?" He stuttered.

Don peered through the slot to the ember glow behind; and laughed.

"You see of course, right. Astonishing that something so simple was overlooked by its owners." He suddenly realized that he probably was insulting Don, but also realized that this ship must have been a recent acquisition if don didn't know its most important workings.

Elban and Saide stood confused. Elban shrugged his shoulders as if to say "Don't look at me". Don muttered something about the imperium being one large idiot savant.

"We're out of fuel."

"You're kidding me, right?" Saide questioned, exacerbated.

"No, I'm not. The prior owner didn't restock the fuel." Don replied.

This revelation was cut short by Caff who burst through the smoke and almost ran into a piece of machinery. He skidded to a stop.

"We've got visual on multiple ships." He said seriously and with a negative tone, "And they're not Tyranid; the hive fleet seems to have left."

Don glanced at Stevan and then at Saide. Saide clapped his hands together.

"So, no fuel, what does this mean?"

"We've got no power; thus no engines or armaments or even basic ship functions." Stevan answered.

"A ship this size would normally carry extra fuel, right?" He raised an eye brow at Don.

"Look, I just obtained this ship and I'd rather not say how" Don responded darkly. "I didn't have time to look around for fuel; I saw the planet and decided to help."

"Ok, then. Lets go see what's going on. Stevan, you stay here and finish doing whatever you can do to fix this machine" Saide commanded, oblivious to the fact that the machine was in fact mysteriously damaged, if only slightly. Stevan didn't even acknowledge the comment but he probably wouldn't have left the engine if someone had tried to drag him by force.

"That settles that, what now?" Elban asked as they fumbled their way back to the cargo room. Saide didn't respond.

The guardsmen were milling around excitedly. Some pointed out the force field reinforced unloading port that made up one fourth of the wall on the left side. Once someone had figured out that systems were down, they opened the port to get a better view of the new ships. Apparently, the shields ran off an emergency generator, as they still flickered into life when the person did so.

Don looked and gasped, then slightly cursed under his breath. Saide considered the new happening but said nothing. Caff was nonplussed.

Elban scratched his head. "They're a little late" Elban joked.

Floating on the other side of the planet was an imperial fleet. Judging from its size and composition, Don guessed that it was an entire main division of space marines. He said so out loud. Elban whistled.

"I will never understand our guardians. They could have won it for us…whatever influences drive them to action are beyond my comprehension." Saide muttered. Don scowled.

"They warped in just as you left for the engine room." Zell, Elban's second in command, said.

"Does anyone know the procedure they go through when they arrive at a new world?" Don said suddenly and curiously, "are they scanning us?". "No, I don't think so, although I honestly never got that far in pilot school." Zell commented.

"What are they doing then?" Don asked, still wary.

"Most likely they are checking the planet for life and hostiles. Plus our power is out; we wouldn't appear on any scans unless they physically looked for us."

The group watched the fleet in the view port, their reflections mirrored on its shifting shield like material.

Beneath them, the engiseer worked away adjusting more knobs. He looked at a dial and then refocused his ocular implants to make sure he was correct. "Dear Omnissiah protect me.."

He dropped what he was doing and lumbered as fast as his mechanical limbs would let him, up the stairs. He ignored that suffocating smoke, he was oblivious to it in fact, his optical sensors saw in over 30 different wavelengths and the compiled them all to one understandable image. The optical sensors wee now large as dinner plates as he tapped on Saide's shoulder.

"We have a huge problem" he droned out. Although urgency was implied, he could not articulate it in his speech patterns.

"What is it?" Siade asked concerned. The group came away from the window to hear the news.

"Whatever secondary power system the shields and other emergency functions ran off of just ran out of power. Before you say anything, let me remind you that this means that we have no life support."

"I wish you hadn't said that so loud" Saide commented darkly, but his hopes returned with one thought. "Wait, we're still on the floor. That means artificial gravity is still working."

"Yes", replied the engiseer, "It seems that there is a secondary generator built in for every essential process, but the important one, the one controlling life support is out of fuel."

"What? Who designed this ship like that?" he wondered. "Never mind" he added Stevan was about to answer his rhetorical question, "What can we do to bring it back online and how long do we have?"

Stevan accessed some statistical data in a hurry. "Apparently, we can just add the fuel to the main reactor and it will automatically feed to all systems. As for time… I believe we have minutes before the air in this ship runs out."

A group of guardsmen had appeared around the officers without Saide noticing. Signs of panic appeared on the men closest to them and rippled out in a wave of blind fear.

"Wait" thundered Saide as he got on top of a stack of crates, "Hold up just a damn minute. We didn't escape the tyranids just to die in space" he turned quickly to Don. Don shrugged. "Makes sense, I don't know what he did for a living, but I'm sure it wasn't honest. He must have gotten attacked by someone. He must have modified the engines himself. However, when I got the ship off the orbital platform, he must not have been able to refuel."

Saide was about to ask who "he" was and where the hell "he" was, but a quick glance at Don told him that that conversation was a touchy subject.

"close, but not quite. See, it seems that the engine was designed to be constantly running, like it is in larger ships. When the fuel ran low and then ran out, it disrupted the fuel reaction in the engine. The coolant seems to have burned off and thus the reaction, with nowhere to go, was contained solely by the fields of the reactor, which are now off. We're lucky the generator didn't melt down. Fortunatly, the damage was minor and I can fix it in hours." He looked at the horrified men's faces, "Umm, I don't need to fix it for it to run, but once we have the time…"

"Great" Saide commented hurriedly, "You might want to get the reactor ready." The engiseer nodded yes and ran as best as he could back to the engine room. Before he went he reminded that even if he got the reactor ready for additional fuel, that they would have to actually find the fuel first.

"Wait! What the hell does this thing run off of anyway?" Saide yelled at him. The engiseer was already too far to hear, but fortunately Don knew a thing or two about generators.

"The engine is a controlled hydrogen fusion process. You know what hydrogen is right"

"No" Saide and the officers admitted.

"You're kidding me..you don't… never mind. Hydrogen is normally a gas, but as fuel, its cooled to a solid state. "

"So we're looking for refrigerated crate?" reiterated Saide. Don replied in the positive.

"I know how to handle this" Side said to himself. "Platoons Form Ranks!" He yelled in a stentorian command.

Without hesitation or vacillation, the muscle memorized action of coming to attention took over subconsciously. Saide was impressed.

"If you want to live, we're looking for a well insulated, presumably large crate. Check the labeling if there is any. And emperor forbid you open up the wrong container…I have no idea what's in half of this stuff…" he dropped off.

The troops stood.

"Go!" Saide shouted informally. There was a flurry of activity as the men ran up and down the aisles formed by the crates, looking for their prize. Again, Siade couldn't help but to feel impressed and a little proud despite the circumstances.

"hrm, even though I knew 1st platoon was disciplined, this is surprising…" Saide commented, not expecting a response.

"You give them too much credit. Fear is the great motivator, and there are few things that a man wouldn't do to live." Don added somberly.

"Common, lets help" Saide replied

Don and Saide strode into the cavernous cargo by as the air became thinker with carbon dioxide. Time was running out.

**Chapter 24: The Secret Task**

Author Note: More update...fun

Aboard the Omnis Arcanium a different crisis was taking place. The navy officer reported to Archarius Viyda and his council personally the results of the sensor sweep.

"Sirs, there are multiple life readings in the capital, the tyranids have seemed to have ravaged this planet. Of the radiation signature you requested, there are only trace amounts. The crew knows nothing of these orders either. I conducted the sweeps personally."

In the stone and metal council chamber Archarius Viyda leaned forward from his throne.

In a booming voice he uttered his disposition: "I am disappointed by the results but they are no fault of your own."

"Sir, if I could be so bold; it would be easier to search if I knew what we were looking for." The navy commander responded.

Several of the company commanders seemed uneasy and looked to Viyda for a response. To their surprise he answered.

"You are too bold, but regardless, we are searching for a lost weapon. This weapon is highly classified and no one must know of our search. The radiation is from this weapon."

"Since it is clearly moving around, I would assume that somebody has the weapon and we are trying to retrieve it. Do you know who has it?" The officer asked, forgetting himself.

"Enough, I answered your question, which may not have been prudent, now go do your duty." Viyda thundered. The officer left ashamed.

As soon as the door locked and the officer was gone, the room erupted into a cacophony of shouts and yells, as the marines tried to voice their opinions.

The pandemonium brought a smirk to Viyda's face. However, the humor soon dissipated. "Quiet" he yelled "if you are so eager, what are your ideas?"

"We should land and destroy the remains of this tyranid invasion!" Said one man, to which many marines agreed.

"Why waste the men and material? This was a backwater mining planet hardly of use to us." Said another.

One marine, whose garb identified him as a librarian countered, "you foget about the other planet and the station. Both were heavy losses. We should avenge ourselves against the clear enemies of the imperium!"

"Form what I can gather" Viyda said "Some think that we should destroy the remains; others think that we should let this planet go, if you will…"

"No sir, I did not…" Tired to respond the one man whose idea it was to leave.

"I don't care what you meant. It is clear that it is our duty to rid this planet and what's left of the other one, of tyranids. This discussion is over; I expected tactical suppositions, not morale ones. We will destroy these tyranids. Return to your posts."

As the marines left, the one who had Championed forgetting the planet was mumbling about wasted supplies. Vidya's eyes flashed and he scowled at the marine. He made a mental note to keep an eye on him.

Once everyone else had left, the librarian entered again.

"Ah, my old friend, is there any otherworldly news that you would like to share with me? Perhaps you can provide better council than those"

"Ah, I am afraid that I do have news, although it is not of the positive variety. Just like the few other recorded attacks, these new tyranids seem to rend open the immaterium following their wake. Imagine a finger dragged through water. The current formed by the finger would be what we are experiencing now, which is complete disturbance."

"Hrm" Viyda commented as he looked over a file on his throne. "This does seem to be similar to the other attacks, although how this fleet traveled from one side of the galaxy to the other is somewhat of a mystery. However, I believe that we should officially warn the imperium of this aspect of our enemy."

"Sir…we cannot" the librarian said uncomfortably. "What? What do you mean?" countered Viyda.

"The disturbance sir, it also blocks signals. We can neither send nor receive any messages while in the turbulence."

Vidya's eyes opened with understanding.

"Then let us jump back to Neptonius 5, I believe that there is a transmitter there that is strong enough to pierce…" he cut off when he saw the librarian's dismal face.

"umm…sir, we cannot safely navigate the warp either"

"What?" Viyda thundered. "You're telling me that the Omnis Arcanum, the finest ship ever designed by the imperium, cannot simply use its warp engines?"

"This blight…no…shadow is a better term, for it clings to their abominable ships like one, cannot be pierced, at least not by our minds. We cannot perceive the [thingy]. Without it, we'd be traveling blind. We could appear anywhere."

Viyda seemed infuriated, but in seconds he had regained his composure. "fine, you are dismissed old friend. Can you send in the two battle brothers that are standing outside the doorway?"

"Certainly sir, but I did not hear you summon them."

"That because I did not do so. I have business to discuss with them. It's about that." He emphasized the last word.

"I understand" The librarian left.

Two marines entered the room, their heavy power armor resounding off the floor. They both wore pitch black armor with red trimming. One was larger, a proverbial giant among men, or in this case, a giant among giants.

His partner stood a full head height lower than him, but his eyes glimmered with the kind of dangerous sparkle that is a sign of someone who knows a little more than you want him to.

Their vestments clanked as they kneeled to Vidya. His eyes quickly scanned them and liked what he saw. There was a second test that he did, that involved more concentration than the first, but he found their minds surprisingly defended, especially the shorter one.

"I have been watching you two and both have displayed extraordinary skill. Anath," He turned tot eh shorter one. "Your actions in the last campaign were exemplary. You managed to recover a valuable Dark Age piece of technology and rescue the local populace from the archenemy."

"Jada, your deeds are no less great. In the past 10 years you have surpassed all others with your strength and courage. The enemy fears your every move. However, despite your reputations, you are about to become part of something that many tax even your great abilities. Your lauded deeds have earned you my evaluation and you have both been deemed worthy."

Jada seemed overjoyed but said nothing. Anath smiled a little but also stayed silent.

"Anath, Jada, once you partake of this mission you can never go back to your squads again. Your accomplishments as part of this mission will be great but unheard of. You will work in the shadows but still see and know all. If you accept this mission, I will give you a weapon, a power more potent than any sword; you will obtain knowledge beyond which you can only dream of."

As soon as he finished speaking, the massive marine leaned forward off his throne and stared at the two disciples before him, awaiting a response. "So…What will it be?"

Jada answered first. "I will do anything which my lord commands. There is no task too daunting or too risky. There is no situation impassable, and no goal unobtainable. I will let none stop me from doing your work." He bowed and knelt to Vidya again.

"And you?" Vidya asked Anath.

"I accept, your graciousness" Anath responded coldly.

Vidya frowned at the succinct reply but said nothing.

"Then come to my private chambers, we have much to discuss that I do not want others to hear."

With no effort at all, the mighty hero rose from his throne and motioned to the others to follow him. Through a door cleverly disguised in the side of the council chamber, the group passed. There was a short winding stairwell, constructed out of a strange blend of rock and metal and it had torches lighting the way, illuminating Vidya's mammoth stature.

They exited into a moderately sized room which opened onto a huge vista of space on one side and an ancient library on the other. The myriad shelves continued per infinitum into the darkness of the ship.

"These are the resources which you now have available. You also have above the highest clearance. You can go anywhere on the ship except for the inner sanctum without my permission."

"Now for your task…"

**Chapter 25: A Decision**

Author's Comment: It would be great if someone reviewed this…seriously

"I found it!" yelled one guardsman. Instantly a circle was formed around the newly discovered crate.

"Only one?" questioned Saide. "You obviously have never heard of the efficiency with which a freighter engine operates. In a dark world you cannot afford to be lugging around extra fuel." Don answered knowledgably.

They approached the crate.

It sat firmly on the floor of the cargo bay, surrounded by other crates. It was instantly recognizable as fuel because of the bright yellow caution bands running along its length. It was reinforced also. The crate was a massive refrigerated unit which kept hydrogen at solid state. Along the side of the crate were glyphs and a input mechanism to control the cooling unit inside.

"Great, now what?" One guardsman asked.

"What do you mean?" said Lechor, "We take it back to the engine! I mean, how heavy could it be?" Somewhere, the chaos god known as Murphy had his own little bout of maniacal laughter. Lechor tried to move it. "[expletive] me, this thing is [expletive]ing heavy!"Lechor said colorfully.

"Come on" Saide yelled, "Let push the damn thing. Everyone, on three! One, Two, Three!"

Don, Lechor, Saide and the rest of the command staff along with twenty or so other guardsmen pushed at the massive crate. The box did not even think about the possibility of moving. "Hrm, we should…" His words were drowned out with a severe fit of coughing. Don tried to catch his breath and found that it was exceedingly hard to breathe. He choked on the stale air.

Stevan emerged from the engine room and reported that all the machinery was operating normal now. His report fell on exhausted and slumped guardsmen, many of whom were unconscious.

"The crate is too heavy to move" one of them gasped.

"You didn't open it did you?" Stevan asked looking at the piles of knocked out guardsmen.

"No, but how do we get it to the…place?" The lack of air was starting to get to his mind.

"The crate has to be hooked up to an intake valve. It can't be opened until then. Also, I found something interesting…"

"No time for that" Gasped Zell. "Turn off the artificial gravity. We're all idiots. Not only will it save energy for the life support systems, it will also allow us to move this…" He lapsed into unconsciousness.

Saide and lechor staggered over to the crate.

"Well fine…that actually very simple" Stevan said. He walked over to a lever on the wall and after a few seconds of coding, he pulled the lever.

Instantly, Saide noticed the difference. Unfortunately, he was now floating into the cavernous ceiling of the cargo bay.

"Gahhh!" Saide yelled. He had never had any experience with zero gravity environments before. At any other time, this would have been hilarious or at least comic, but taken in situation; Saide's helpless flailing was a metaphoric symbol of what all the guardsmen felt; powerless to change their situation.

As more and more men succumbed to the stifling air, Stevan and Lechor, the only two who seemed unaffected by the air, or lack thereof, were laboring to get the crate towards the engine room. Now devoid of any fraction, the crate was significantly easier to move.

Soon, only Lechor and Stevan were left. The box hadn't moved much at all. "argh" Lechor yelled, "What is with this box?" He roared in frustration, sweat running down his worried face as he simultaneously tried to move the box and tried to not fall victim to the zero-g as Saide had done. "It's not moving…WHY IS IT NOT [expletive]ing MOVING?"

Stevan inspected the crate. "There's a magnetic field around this containment crate"

"What does that mean" Lechor asked breathlessly, between furious attacks on the invincible box.

"It means that it is magnetically attracted to the deck, which explains why it is impossible to move. It probably is there to keep it from moving if the artificial gravity fails. Ironic really…"

"Ugh, where is this magnetic thing?" Lechor said, maneuvering himself around the crate using the handhold built into it.

"It's right here I believe…wait what are you doing…what is that?"

Lechor had a crowbar in his hands.

"No, do not do that!"

Lechor brought the bar down with incredible force on the indicated panel. Sparks flew and nano-capacitors exploded along with machinery and electric components.

The crate lay still. Lechor half-expecting it to still not move, poked it with his crowbar. It drifted along the deck. "Hey, how come you're not floating every which way?" Lechor asked, noting that Stevan was not doing anything to keep stable in the zero-g environment.

"I have electromagnets built into my feet, which, when in zero gravity like now, activate using…" Stevan was cut off by Lechor. "Fascinating; let's get this to the engine."

Vidya was staring out the port and observing the planet. Sargos I rotated innocently below, only the dark clouds betrayed its rape. Nearby Sargos II was ablaze. The systems keeping fires under control had long failed and on an agricultural planet, there was a surplus of fuel for any blaze. With nothing to stop the flames, they grew and grew until the conflagration consumed the planet.

All of a sudden an alarm screamed. An announcement roared that someone in Jada's squad had gotten injured in a training exercise. It was expected that he was going to die.

"Sir, I…" Started Jada. "Go" answered Vidya, "I understand. Me and Anath can come up with a plan of action."

Up until the last words, Jada smiled at Vidya with all the admiration of a student; at the last statement however, he glared at Anath who decided to ignore the gaze. Jada scowled and left the room

Vidya smirked as he left. Anath looked him with a puzzling stare. "We don't have time for dramatics. I need to decide what to do to take care of this planet.

"Hrm" Anath puzzled, "Well, let me put forth a new perspective, or rather a new aspect to consider."

"I would appreciate that; after all this pointless talk about "why", I want to know "how". I believe that Jada would like to take a more destructive approach to the problem."

"He would" Anath said under his breath.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Vidya questioned, even though he had clearly heard.

"Nothing, my lord. But as I was saying, I believe that as the guardians and defenders of this imperium, we have a responsibility; a duty, to deal with this solar system. We cannot just ignore it, as some others have championed. We need to address the exigency of the survivors. "

There was a pause.

Vidya thought about what Anath had just said. "A valid concern, I do not believe that many have thought of that."

"Such are the time we now live in my lord; honor means nothing. " Anath said

"Indeed, so what do you propose?" Vidya added.

"Well, this is a moral issue, but we must treat it like…or rather with the same gravity that we would a tactical move."

"Agreed" Vidya commented, "the ramifications are surprisingly deadly."

Anath thought Vidya was being cryptic but tried to respond. "Thousands could die if we don't act now. I propose we use drop ships and begin immediately."

Vidya's lit up and then narrowed, "such courage to engage directly…" Anath shot Vidya a questioning glance. Anath had no idea what to make of that statement.

"What would you do my Lord, if you do not mind me asking?" Anath asked trying to figure out what Vidya had meant with his former comment.

"Well, if we are going to engage, we could use the teleporter system. That would give us an advantage in mobility and accuracy. It would also decrease the chance of our landers being hit."

"You believe that they will resist our efforts?" Anath asked, aware of the peculiarity of the conversation.

It was now Vidya's turn to look at Anath strangely. "Although I laud your energy and faith, I believe you underestimate our enemy!"

"Our enemy? Since when were members of the Imperium our enemies?" Anath said quickly.

"Members of the Imperium?" Vidya repeated. "Something is very wrong here, some miscommunication" Anath started, "what exactly are you referring to?"

"Why the tyranids of course. Many must have survived the assault and are still on the planet. If we ignore them, they are sure to multiply and endanger other systems."  
"Ah, I understand now! I was referring to the survivors as the men who survived the attack. We are their only salvation. In addition, they could inform us of the tactic of our enemy. Much of the tyranids remains unknown.

"Hrmph…he heh heh." A noise spurted from Vidya and resonated in the chamber. Anath was confused until he realized that Lord Vidya was laughing.

"What a misunderstanding…" He stopped suddenly, "but our actions must not be made in humor or jest. Anath, are you suggesting that we land on a world with an unknown strength of hostiles, with no information, no landing site, and no idea of what waits for us, if anything? I think now that I mistook your simple-mindedness as courage."

"I am almost insulted" Anath said boldly. "We have a duty to the people of these planets; we must save the men and women that have survived."

"But at what cost?" countered Vidya, "We do not even know if any men survived at all! We could go down to planet-surface find nothing but hosts of aliens, intent on our destruction!...No, I will not let my troops or our blood to be shed for such a reason. I understand your argument, and in another situation I might follow your advice, but the tyranids are unlike any foe we have ever faced. Therefore, in this situation, your priorities are misaligned. You ask for too much.

Anath felt like he could respond to that, but he also realized that at this point, it would only lead to conflict.

"I understand my Lord; I apologize. You must think me unfit of the assignment you have given me."

"Not quite, however misguided, your intentions were good. There is only one real course of action at this point. I will consult a few other people before I make my decision, ah…right I have already talked to them. Your unintentionally humorous conversation has thrown me off. Then it is already confirmed." Vidya said solemnly.

He summoned in the librarian that had spoken to him before. "I am sorry sir, we have not been able to…"

"I assumed as much." Vidya said. The librarian was about to protest the blunt remark, but Vidya cut him off.

He also summoned in the most senior Mechanicus official on board. This particular person, as Anath found out, was Archmagos Valerii. Anath had just a couple of seconds to study the new figure before he started to talk to Vidya, turning his back to Anath in the process. In his short time of observation Anath saw an ancient man, if he could be called that.

The archmagos was, as Anath had seen, ancient, and true to the Adeptus Mechanicus his long life had seen the replacement of almost all of his human body with the augmentations of metal and circuitry that the Mechanicus were famous for.

Two piercing eyes flashed from his hooded cloak, but that was all Anath could tell from his appearance. When he talked, it took awhile to realize that it was actual words. It seemed that auditory communication was rare for the archmagos.

"By asking me here, I assume you have decided to take the gravest and most serious action possible," He clicked. Vidya nodded. "Then I will carry out your orders." Replied the archmagos.

Vidya turned to face Anath and the small group of people that had appeared in the room without Anath noticing. Anath assumed that they were the commanders of the other companies, although he had had no experience with them. The only one whose face we recognized was Gabriel Angelos, who had been his commander. He was the youngest marine there.

Vidya apparently had a rite that he was required to say in light of whatever he was about to do. He started speaking in a normal voice that still was able to contain an amazing amount of emotion.

"By the light of the Emperor and by the holy weapons which He has entrusted to us and blessed us with; I declare these planets' doom. Their being taken by the enemy has poisoned it once valuable mines and its once fertile fields. Thus, with the most powerful act afforded to me, and with the Emperor's will; I declare Exterminatus on these planets."

There was silence in the room. Not a person spoke; not a person moved. However, Anath broke the stillness by burying his head in his hands. He prayed for the souls of the men on the surfaces of the planets"

Ignoring Anath, Vidya commented, "His will be done"

"His will be done" Anath echoed with an empty voice.

**Chapter 26: The Begining Of The Drift**

Author's comment: Now begins a long part of the book which contains a staggering amount of exposition and character development, but not much action. I apologize for the dry-ness, but in order to get the plot moving I need to have all the characters and who they are apparent to the reader. Perhaps when I go back and edit all of this (hahaha) I'll insert some more interesting sequences…eh

As always, review for the review throne!

Guardsmen got their feet and groggily looked around. Beneath them, the engine slowly clunked away, running splendidly on its new fuel.

Don and the other officers gazed at their planet. A single contrail lingered from a missile. The stood horrified as hundreds more joined it, streaking through space, lighting up with fire as they entered Sargos I and II's atmosphere.

"Throne above" Saide said silently, "They're going to destroy it…"

The missiles impacted

Down below on the surface, cataclysmic explosions mushroomed from impact sites. Cities were leveled in a passing glance, monuments dissipated, soil earth and mountains evaporated in a flash of light. The atmosphere, thick with xenos smog, burned as if a match had been set to it. All oxygen was consumed; noxious chemicals, sulfurs and nitrides flooded the air from the conflagrations. Vortices of gasses swirled violently around the planet as it died.

The handful of survivors that had cleared themselves from the rubble met an apocalypse. Guardsmen that had been left behind had about 30 seconds of reaction time before they were incinerated and about a minute before their remains were utterly destroyed. The screamed in agony as they exploded into flames and had the very flesh rent from their bones. Fortunately, the pain was brief, as they were annihilated only seconds later by the main part of the shockwave which turned their bones into fine dust in a screaming wave of death.

Sargos I's already thin crust fractured under the bombardment from space, hideous lounges of lava poured from chasms. The ships moved and fired again, repeating their bombardment. The entire planet shuttered and split, buckled and shattered.

There was no solid ground left, nor any atmosphere, The ball of earthy matter spun in space glowing like an ember. However, due to a small miscommunication the missiles did not stop.

As Sargos I was reduced to a swirling ball of fire, Sargos II was hit again by a mighty volley of deadly explosions. Being smaller than the mining planet, Sargos II took the explosions worse. The force of the terrible weapons was so powerful that their concentrated power was actually able to move it and set in spiraling into the system's star.

The two Sargos's, being binary planets, were immediately disrupted by this change. Sargos I, now liberated from its orbital path that it had followed for countless millennia, followed the gravitational pull of its brother planet in its death spiral into the star. Although celestial bodies do not move quickly, its fate was clear. It and its brother were doomed.

The guardsmen aboard Don's vessel stared dumbfounded at the occurrences. Some looked away, some stared blankly in amazement or horror. Saide shed a single tear for his home of ten years. Don laid his hand on Saide's shoulder.

"There were still people on those planets, at least thousands on each. This is…too big to comprehend." Saide sputtered. Lechor slumped down, dazed by what he had seen.

Roars of guardsmen cried in the room. Some were screaming, some were taking it surprisingly well, some were not. One (presumably a native to Sargos I) even killed himself with his combat blade. Most were just shocked.

Don was shaken out of his daze by Stevan. The tech persist brought the man to the control room.

"I stabilized the ship, that why you didn't feel any change. I also turned the gravity back on." The priest said.

"So I've noticed"

"However, there's something more; look here." He gestured to a control panel that was lit up an beeping. "Someone is scanning the space near us. Our systems are back online so we'll show up. "

"Let get out of here" Don said, the color draining out of his face.

"But sir, we cannot!" Stevan said, almost complainingly, "The tyranids have left a disturbance in the warp. We cannot just jump into the warp blindly!"

"Yes we can, and we will" Don said with a voice full of the command which he never had.

"That's madness, there is no telling where we would end up. Plus the warp engines are not ready to be used!" The tech priest sputtered, trying to create a reason not to jump to warp.

"What?" raged Don, "What do you mean? You told me that all systems were working."

Stevan threw up his hands and mandrills that, in another situation would have elicited laughter from Don because of his comical appearance in mimicking the mannerisms of a human. However, Don was not laughing now.

"You never told me you wanted to use the warp engines!" Stevan protested. Don slammed his hand down on a seat.

"How the hell do you think we are going to get away? Regular engines? You know what, just never mind. So what you are saying is that we can't use the engines at all."

"Well" Hemmed Stevan, "We could probably use them once, but I do not recommend it. That action would most likely cripple the entire system."

"Do it." Don said automatically.

Stevan, although used to having an amount of freedom, was still a member of the Adeptus Mechanicus and was therefore used to taking orders. Don's power came not from his rank, but from the force with which he commanded. Already confused and run down by the events on and following Sargos I, he complied. With a rumble of its engines and in bitter protest, the ship shot forward into the warp, bringing all its passengers with it.

Siade glanced down the long cargo bay. Guardsmen were milling about, come sitting on cargo, others playing cards. A lively bout of Corabassian wrestling had broken out further away from the temporary HQ in the front. Siade could make out cheers and groans from the thrall of people surrounding the improvised ring.

He caught Elban walking in its direction. "Say, you're going to break that up, right?" Saide asked, knowing full well that he wasn't and didn't intend to do anything of the sort.

"Umm, no." Elban said before he could think. He caught Saide's eye. "Err, what I meant is umm…the troops deserve some time to, you know, recover"

Saide fell silent. It had been a week from the incident. Yes, that's what I'll think of it as…an incident. Saide thought.

"I guess you're right. Just make sure no one gets hurt." Saide added as Elban tried to walk away.

"Saide, this is Corabassian wrestling you're talking about…"

"Fine, make sure that no one gets killed." Saide said. Elban grinned and started to walk away for the second time.

Saide, annoyed somewhat by Elban's attitude called back to him again.

"Elban wait, seriously, we have little to no medical supplies; we can't afford for someone to get hurt."

"I hear you" Elban said rather bluntly.

"What did you say?" Saide said sharply.

Elban snapped to attention, "Sir, yes sir!"

"Another thing Elban, I've been thinking about rearranging the commands, since we've got such an odd collection of…" Elban seemed not to be listening. "Elban!" How did this man make platoon command? He is barely over 20 and seems to have no respect.

"Look, Saide, I guess you're over it, but you do realize that my home just got destroyed, right? No wait, sorry I said it like that…its just…I need some time."

Saide nodded, "Fine, I understand"

He left the other man leave, a smile reappearing on his face as he got closer to the ring.

"Come on Hessert!" he yelled.

Hessert? Hessert never…eh what the hell, this entire place is turned upside down.

Saide thought that he was supposed to feel sorry for the planet that had been his home for the last 10 years, but he felt nothing, just a strong sense of duty to the people that had survived.

I guess I can give them another week or so, it's not like we're short on time…Funny, Don's been avoiding me after we jumped; probably doesn't want to explain his actions…Stupid warp drive; what good is it if it's going to spit us out in the middle of space and then just break? When I get a hold of Don…

Saide's mad thoughts were interrupted when he spied Creed in a crowed; he was getting closer to him.

Crap

As hypocritical as it was, Saide had been avoiding Creed since Saide dragged him aboard. Creed locked eyed with him.

Damn, can't run and save face now…Guess it's into the breach for me…

Creed stepped up to Saide, and for a second it looked like he was going to punch him. At the last second, he seemed to decide against it though.

"Words…"he said through clenched teeth, "Can never describe my hatred for you"

"What, that I saved you?" Saide said. As soon as the words left his mouth Saide knew that he had made a mistake.

"You..." Creed was livid. "I…" he sputtered. Saide tried to take a step back. Creed took this to mean something though, and for the first time in the many long years that Saide had known him, Creed used violence to achieve a problem outside of a war environment. With one hand he slammed Saide into a cargo container.

The move came as such a surprise to Saide that he couldn't even react, not that he could have anyways; Creed's grip was as strong as steel, tempered by the galaxies of hate that he was experiencing.

"I had every single mother [expletive]ing right to die down there; to be with my daughter, my wife. It was my duty to stay with them, to fall in the name of the emperor!" As he screamed this, his hold on Saide's chest constricted tighter and tighter until Saide found it hard to breathe.

Something changed in Creed's mind. He slowly let Saide go as he thought of another fact to hit Saide with.

"And how dare you preach the freedom to choose to the men and then take that chance away from me!" He thundered.

Caff had appeared, quite conscious of the situation, and was diverting guardsmen's attentions from the scene.

"Vermis" He snorted in disgust, "For all his self-righteous bullshit, at least he stuck to his guns. He did what he said he'd do…" There was a pause, albeit small in the verbal assault. "Look at you; you knocked out a man as his back was turned …why? For some idea of a greater good? What kind of shit is that?" He looked to Saide for a response; he expected Saide to defend his actions.

Siade was silent. "I…" he fell silent again, trying to find the words.

"Yes," continued Creed, "Tell me how it was the emperor's will that I break my oath to the PDF and let my family and home die without a fight. Tell me how my actions would have been unpractical, meaningless, and futile." Creed almost screamed; Saide stayed silent.

"Say something, you bastard!"

"…" Mumbled Saide. "What?" Creed asked with less on an edge.

"I said that I was sorry."

Creed was taken aback. This was not the response that he had expected.

"No, creed, you're right. You had every right to stay. It was me…and wrong of me to force you to come. It wasn't my decision to make…I…I was wrong." Saide was able to say.

Creed was dumbfounded. He came prepared for a shouting match, not this confession.

Creed didn't say anything, so Saide continued. "It was hypocritical and wrong. I can't take my decision back though. All that I ask…No, I can't even ask for forgiveness, even that would be selfish. All that I ask for is you help…The men need leaders, and I thought I needed…" But here Saide seemed to lose steam, "never mind" He trailed off.

"I am amazed" Creed said in a voice that Saide could not extract emotion from, "I swear, if you had said anything else…I don't know what I would have done…I…I sure as hell don't accept your apology, but you're willing to be the better man, and by the Emperor's name, I won't be the jam in the firing mechanism. "

"Creed," Saide said, realizing how hard a turnabout this was for him, "Thank you".

Creed gritted his teeth, and Saide could tell that tears of emotion lurked in his eyes. "Enough of this, I've got to go think" Creed wandered, much less driven than when he started.

"What was that about?" Caff asked once the crowd had cleared out and Creed was out of earshot. "I'll tell you later, but for now...I've got some confrontation of my own to carry out." He left Caff wondering and walked purposefully to the cockpit of the ship, where Don undoubtedly was.

**Chapter 27: Phantom in the Dark**

Author's Note: I apologize for the lack of update. Read and review please. hrm, it seems that FanFiction makes things look odd when updated. I assume its due to the lack of double spacing.

Saide made his way through the maze of crates and guardsmen and traveled up to the front of the ship. Here the vast cargo hold narrowed down into one hallway, with crew quarters on both sides. At the end of this long hallway was the bridge.

Saide stepped onto the bridge. Although it could seat ten, the bridge was occupied by only one man.

Don was slumped over his seat, his hand on the seat beside him. Saide saw the odd black package that Don has mysteriously obtained. Saide that he really didn't want to ask Don about it. It must have been some trick of the lighting, because the shadows seemed at that moment to shift and distort near Saide's peripheral vision. He suddenly felt very queasy. Maybe I don't need to talk to him at all. However, fate intervened.

Just as he was about to leave, the package started to slip out of Don's fingers and onto the floor. In seconds don was awake and had secured the package again. He looked at Saide.

Saide was met by the face of a man who has seen countless horrors. Scars were scattered along his face, and below his jet black hair, there was the tired but determined expression that he had worn ever since Sargos.

"Hello there" Don started.

"Hello" Saide replied "I know we've met but I'd like to run through introductions for formality's sake…I'm Saide, now captain of the ex-Sargos System Planetary Defense Force."

"Nice to meet you Saide, I…I'm sorry about your planet. ..umm…well…I'm Don as you know."

"Before I say anything else, I would like to thank you for saving us. Had you not intervened, I'm sure none out us would be alive right now." Saide said.

"I was in the sector for …other reasons. It seemed like the best course of action at the time."Don replied.

"Ah yes…best course of action…speaking of best course of action…Now that we know each other I can ask why the Frack did you jump us blind even when you knew that the drives weren't fully functional, away from an imperial fleet that would have saved us?"

"I can't really tell you the full story, as there are some galacticly important things going on" As he said this his gaze wandered back to the black package still in his hands. "But what you can know is that I'm a deserter." Don winced as he said it, as if he were expecting some outburst or physical action.

"Normally that would disgust me, and I guess that it still does out of habit, but technically all of us are deserters now also." Saide commented.

"Lets just say I did some pretty stupid shings and leave it at that" Don said. "Now, every imperium vessel is a threat. Plus, you saw the destruction; that could only have been caused by someone declaring exterminitus against Sargos I and II. They must have thought the planets tainted by Tyranid scourge, and they were probably right. However, that means that they would think that we were also afflicted in the same manner. If they had seen us, they probably would have killed us also. So, out of self-preservation more than altruism, I decided that the best course of action would be to jump."

"When you say it that way, it almost sounds reasonable." Saide muttered, remembering the strange scene on Sargos as the planet had fallen. Saide was not convinced of Don's sanity."I'm still not convinced; I still think that we should have contacted the fleet."

Don let out an exacerbated sigh. "I declared exterminatus on the fracking planet. Do you know who can do that kind of thing? It can only be done with the direct order of a High Inquisitor or Space Marine Captain. And since Sargos I, no offence, was a backwater planet with little connection with the outside world, there would be no reason for an inquisitor to come"

"But there would be even less reason for a space Marine force to come" Saide protested.

"Well, actually…no, but there is more to that than I can tell you right now. " Don said guarding his words.

"AS a vice Captain, now Captain, I hate being left out of the loop. However, I can guess that it has something to do with that package.

At mention of the package, Don fidgeted and broke eye contact, Saide noticed. Hrm, I'm not going to get anything out of this guy right now. He's frightened about something. Whatever is in that package is important, and I'll find out one way or another. Don breathed a sigh of relief once Saide exited the room.

Don sat alone, with the mysterious black package. Or was he alone?

Don turned around, as he felt a breeze that clearly was not from the air filtration system. It was cold and biting.

Don scanned the room sharply, his eyes glancing up and down the cockpit. A chair suddenly swiveled on its axis, its ungreased hinge producing an uncomfortable sound that demanded attention. Don sat fixated, more out of surprise than fear and at the unnatural occurrence. He squinted at the chair, trying to see if it was just a trick of the eye.

His eyes saw a shadow.

"You!" he yelled and leveled his gaze towards the figure that was now occupying the chair.

"Me indeed," the figure said, "or rather…you" It laughed its bone chilling laugh.

Dear emperor above, never let it laugh again. His hair rose on the back of his neck. He tried to save face by glaring it, hoping that his demeanor would hide his fright.

"So," the figure said matter-a-factly, "do you know what is in this black box here?" It said, rising slowly to whatever feet it possessed.

"I have an idea" retorted Don. It was only a cursory response, done more to again save face than actual truth. He had no idea what was in the container. All that he knew about it was that the Space Marines wanted it, and that is was some sort of secret, the scouts had handed it so delicately. Wait, what is in the package?

As if answering his thoughts, the Daemon asked "Would you like to know what's inside? Let's take a look!"

The package lying on the chair next to him began to unfasten. Don sat, spell bound at the package, his mind raced as he thought of the million things that it could be. He speculated wildly, about the horrors it might contain, and would be unleashed if the box ever opened. All that he knew was that the last thing he wanted to happen was for the package to open.

Moved by the sheer terror of what might be inside, he rushed to close the container. However as he ran to do so, the case opened and the container inside, a small silver black box floated out of the package and opened.

Don gasped, before he realized that he had no idea what he was looking at.

Green ethereal light pulsated out of the box.

Before he could help himself, Don looked inside. The sides were thickly insulated and a soft humming noise could be heard from inside.

""I don't understand; what is it?" Don asked, barely realizing that he was asking question of a demon. "Is this some trick?" AHe motioned to the floating box, which hovered innocently above the chair.

"No, this is no trick, and of course you don't know what it is. However, what would be so important to the Marines? What could compel the vaunted "Blood Ravens" to come half way across the galaxy?'

Don shook his head.

"Can think of no such item; nothing has that irresistible power except for …some sort of relic, I guess"

"A relic?" The demon smirked. "Well, it is old enough to be one." He waved a hand and the floating box fell to the ground.

"It is the original gene-seed for the Blood Ravens, from their fallen patriarch, curse his name."

Don's eyes opened wide. "You mean to tell me…"

"Don't stutter fool; I told you what it was, now be silent."

Something in the demon's tone of voice stabbed at Don like a icy dagger. He clutched his chest. "Gah" He uttered, surprised by the sudden attack.

In the same instant, he was suddenly hit by how similar he and the demon looked; for it was the same figure that he saw in the mirror every morning. However, every aspect was decayed or weathered. The figure wore a darker green uniform, torn by savage blows. Its face was similar, but seemed to have been chiseled from stone by someone who only had a tiny recollection of what a man looked like.

As Don observed the demon, its features darkened.

"Now remember what I am Don. I am you; I am it, I am both, and I am not what I am." As the figure said this, he clenched his fist and with every contraction of his fingers Don felt an iron icy hand close around his heart.

Struck again by the sudden attack, he gasped for breath, sweat running down his neck as his body struggled for breath.

"Remember, I'll be back" It added.

The figure was suddenly gone, just as quickly as it had appeared, leaving Don truly alone in the command deck.

Don slumped into his chair and tried to figure out what to do. An idea hit him that he might find solstice in the confines of his own room.

Careful to not spark anyone's curiosity, he took the geneseed and wrapped it but In its packaging and left the cockpit.

On the ship it was nighttime, the crew not yet accustomed to the lack of actual night; but the lack of men in the deserted corridor confirmed the time. As Don neared his quarters, which he had selected before he had encountered Sargos, the shadows seemed to flicker again; the light, which once gave him hope, started to blink, creating eerie surges of light and dark.

He flung himself into his room and turned all the light on. He sat on his bed, and was even more surprised when he thought he saw a figure rise from where he had thrown the package.

"What is it now?" he yelled at the dark, half rising out of his bed. There was no answer. For some reason the lack of reply was more frightening than when the apparition was right in front of him. A man he could understand, but this…force he could not.

The shadows reached for him. He tried to cry out, but the door to the room closed and locked by itself. In darkness, Don could not breath, let alone yell. He collapsed into an undesired forced sleep, full of nightmares and unholy visions of impossible madness.

**Chapter 28: Blood Sport**

Author's note: I noticed today that the MMORPG Dark Millennium takes place in a Sargos sector also...This surprised me, as I started this story ages ago. The two are not related, and I am considering changing the name now, even though this would require an obnoxious amount of editing.

Saide stepped down the metal grating stairs that led to the engine room. He could hear the sound of a mechanical drill from somewhere, but could not place the source. He followed the sound of the drill, waving his arms uselessly at the dense cloud of smoke that still encompassed the engine room.

After a minute or two of wandering, Saide seemed to closer to the origin of the noise than he had been when he started. He looked around, but he could not pierce the thick viscous clouds with his vision. He could not even tell where he was.

Although he was almost always collected, even in the most bloody of fire fights, Saide felt a wave of irrational fear wash over his heart like a shadow; like a lone cloud blocking the sun on a hot day. He briefly imagined himself slowly dying of dehydration and hunger, crawling along the dark smoke filled passages, his body at last rotting in the incandescent lights until… A hand grabbed his shoulder with tremendous strength.

He tensed, full of unimaginable dread.

Stevan whirled him around. "Careful, my friend, one could get lost down here."

"Anyway, why did you come down here? No offense intended, but ma and Arnon are exceedingly busy."

"Arnon? Who is that?" Saide asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, or rather, I haven't had the time to do so…One of my acolytes survived the confusion and attack. He's helping me with the warp engine."

"Yes, about that; what happened to it when we jumped?"

"Well, as I told that Don character, the engine needed a tune up."

"That's it?" Saide exclaimed, exacerbated.

"Badly! In fact, after I looked the damage, I would say that this thingy has been without coolant for months!"

"How do you know that?" Saide asked, only partly interested.

"There was a note attached to the engine that said: "Watch drive temperature, out of coolant", it was dated from two months ago. Fortunately, it seems to have been refilled recently, but since it had gone so long without, the damage was already done. The drive fried when we used it. I believe some part inside ruptured or melted upon initialization."

"Sort part?" Saide asked incredulously.

"Look, I'm not the Omnissiah; I need time, even with extra help." A muffled explosion resounded from behind him.

"Left!" He yelled. "The fools put it on backwards; you have to turn it left!" An apology came out of the smoke.

"Now," The engiseer continued, "I don't have a lot of time to talk, but there's something you need to know about this ship. The reason everything's going to shit is because its supposed to be run by a crew of 6 at minimum. However, some traders, and that's what I assume what Don is, don't like to take on large crews because it brings down their profit margin."

"Ok, makes sense, what does that mean for us?" Saide asked.

"Hold on; so these traders found a way around the minimum crew. I think it would be better if I showed you." He motioned for Saide to follow him. Saide did so, making sure not to lose track of the billowing red outfit in the devilish smoke.

They wound their way through a maze of equipment and electronics.

"Here" They stopped before what Saide assumed to be the engine.

"That's the engine; we added fuel to it and I see that it is working, what's the point?"

"No, above it"

Resting above the engine was a curious tangle of wires and I/O circuits. Almost everything seemed to be connected to it.

"What is that?" Saide asked.

"Well…umm…"The engiseer hesitated, held from talking by mechanicum taboo. "It seems to be a rudimentary Artificial Intelligence unit." He admitted.

"That's heresy." Saide stated automatically and bluntly.

"I ask you sir, please let me keep it intact, just to study. Don't destroy it, please."

"Destroy it? Hell no! Turn it on!" Saide commanded.

"Sir?" The engiseer asked confused.

"Look, the ship repair will go a thousand percent faster with this thing right?" Saide asked.

"Well, I'm not quite sure, but all evidence points toward that conclusion." The engiseer stated.

"…And one man could run the ship with this thing, right?"

"Yes, you are correct in that assumption"

"So why destroy it? It will aid us in the emperor's will, and thus redeem its existence. It can't be a heresy if it only results in good."

"Sir, I am completely fine with that interpretation of the emperor's will." The engiseer said with what could have been a smile.

As Saide looked at the engiseer's face he noticed something different about the engiseer, but it took him half a second of staring to figure out what it was.

The engiseer has taken off his fake skin that had made him resemble a human. Saide hadn't noticed because Stevan was wearing the ubiquitous red cloak and hood that accompany every member of the Adeptus Mechanicus. However as he looked through the hood, he could see that beneath the skin had lain a mass of circuits and sensors, and further on down the body, a host of arms and appendages that seemed to perplex Saide.

"I took it off to allow me to complete the repairs in the least amount of time." Stevan said. "I can replace it if you wish".

"No, that's fine, what is the estimated time of completion on the warp drive?"

"Without the AI? About a month. With it, it should take a week."

"Sounds good. Thank you Stevan."

"May the blessings of the Omnissiah be with you" the cyborg replied.

"The emperor protects" Saide responded, and walked out of the engine room.

"Hessert the unbreakable!" Elban laughed, as Hessert dispatched another opponent with ease, utilizing a full body throw. The opponent virtually flew through the air before landing beaten, on the cold metal with a thud. He had to be helped up.

There was a ring of guardsman who had dragged more of the ever-present boxes in the cargo hold into a "O" to make a seating stadium of sorts. At the center was a white chalk circle.

Hessert raised his hands in victory and roared. His opponent was carried off the field to recover.

The trickster Voor with his cunning smile was collecting bets. Most seemed to be in Hessert's favor, however, there were always the few who decided to bet against the odds and risk it all. Most did it to forget their hardships and the loss of their planet. Because almost none of them had money, they bet with trinkets and souvenirs from their previous assignments.

If they didn't have trinkets, they bet lasgun batteries. In fact, this was the new currency it seemed aboard the ship. Any munitorium officer would have been shocked by this misuse his weapons, but none had survived the invasion, and the command structure was in shambles anyway.

"Thank you Gentleman…and Ladies" Voor said, addressing the handful of female guardsman in their midst. Since Sargos was a mining planet, there were few women in the working cities and thus, most of the PDF was comprised of men. However, although none of the females has attained command, there were a few of them here and there, and more females than males, by percentage, had chosen to escape the planet.

Elban nudged Voor. "What are the rules to this game again?" In response Voor flashed one of his trademark full face grins, pearly whites and all.

"Two men enter; the victor is the one who either gets the other man to leave the ring, or just beats the crap out of him.

Elban seemed amused at this.

Hessert pile drove another opponent into the ground, careful not to break his neck, he did it on an angle, still the applause was almost deafening. By this time it was clear that he was a professional at this blood-sport. Not a soul could touch the huge man; he knew the game too well.

Caff was watching from the higher stands, under orders to make sure the game didn't result in any casualties, either from immediate death or by injury. Lechor sat dazed from his first round against the giant. Lechor sported a bloody nose and a black eye. He had been one of the closest competitors and had been knocked out of the ring rather than down. There was one medically trained guardsman who was treating the others, and Caff saw with some surprise that the man was Zell.

Off to the side, an intense card game was being played by Kane, a member of former 2nd platoon, Virgil, and Greynor, a 4th Platoon survivor. Several other men were also involved. A young man named Seymor, also from 4th platoon shifted around the men laughing at the game.

Back in the Carabassian wrestling ring, Hessert had taken out another opponent with ease. The crowd roared and Voor yelled as he won another sum of las charges.

"Is there no one who can best him?" Voor yelled, enticing the crowd to try their luck. "Yeah", said the giant, "Send more blood!" No one seemed willing to try their luck. The crowd booed, eager for more violence, but none of them wanted to be the dead-man.

A shadow suddenly fell over the arena as a light above them flickered. In an odd moment of decision, Caff decided to have a go. Usually reserved his inhibitions seemed gone. He wanted to show the big man who was boss; the command structure, the lifeblood of the organization of the guard seemed falling apart, and he wasn't about to let that happen. If his dominance had to be proved through a feat of strength, rather than the intelligence which he also commanded, so be it.

"Hessert, I'll be your opponent" he yelled out., walking off the stands.

"Sargent Caff versus the champion." Voor echoed, monopolizing off the new twist, without a second of pause, "Bets anyone?" He was instantly swamped with lasgun rounds.

Caff stepped into the ring. Nonplussed, Hessert tore off his uniform revealing a massive set of muscles.

Not only a heavy weapons specialist, Hessert was known to sneak in a second job at the mines during periods of no PDF action. The PDF of the Sargos system had of course been called into action during the rebellion on Sargos II and had not been disbanded after the conflict due to political reasons.

Hessert's body showed what years of physical labor does to men, but Caff, no heavy weight himself, set his armor aside and stripped down to his white under shirt and cargo pants.

"Common big guy. Lets do this!" he taunted.

"Sarge, I don't want to hurt you" The big man replied. Caff silently acknowledged that his rank had not been forgotten in this brief period of chaos. Hessert was, of course part of 1st platoon, the most veteran out of all the groups, and Caff wondered in the same respect still lay in the hearts of the other guardsmen.

The two squared off against each other. They circled, trying to get a good point of attack. When neither could find one, Hessert charged forward, relying on his sheer size to crush Caff.

However, Caff was no novice. He spun out of the way and delivered a blow to Hessert's shoulder that even the giant felt. He spun to face Caff, but Caff was already on him and telescoping a punch to Hessert's stomach. Hessert was winded with a surprised "ooh".

Driven back, the big man recovered quickly and again advanced on Caff. The two traded blows, but none connected squarely. The crowd was silent as they watched. Even the garrulous Voor was quiet.

Hessert punched with his left hand hoping to take Caff by surprise with the maneuver, but Caff blocked it still. However, Caff didn't have time to block the second blow from Hessert's right.

The fist caught Caff straight in the face and almost laid him low. He staggered back, his nose miraculously not broken, but still bleeding. Hessert lunged at Caff again, eager to knock him out of the circle. Caff looked down for a split second and saw the white chalk line that he was standing on.

At the last second and in a stunning last move, Caff rushed Hessert and went in low. Seeing the attack, but unable to stop himself in time, his momentum carried him forward right into Caff's attack. Caff flipped the huge man over his shoulder and out of the circle, Hessert's feet actually lifting off the ground at one point. Hessert hit metal with a resounding crash, severely bruised and with a minor bone broken as Zell would soon find out, but otherwise unharmed.

He grumbled but had to stay still from the pain. The crowd went wild with applause, and Caff was dragged away by them. Hessert was helped to his feet by Lechor.

"Tough luck man" Lechor stated.

"Damn straight" grumbled Hessert.

Voor stared surprised at Hessert and then looked around himself in horror as he realized what had just happened.

"Damn it" He cursed as he was swiftly surrounded by guardsmen he had bet against, all clambering for their payment. "Now guys, I'm sure we can settle this like civilized men…" He started, but was lost under a sea of shouts for compensation for his losses. Caff smirked at him; Voor glared back.

"Perhaps you shouldn't be so quick to underestimate me" Caff quipped before leaving the ring.

**Chapter 29: Calling Bluffs**

Greynor stared at Kane, whose face was unreadable. The other men around the table each looked at their cards and betrayed some indication of disgust. None of them had anything. Virgil raised his eyebrows when he looked at his cards, but Greynor couldn't tell whether he was bluffing or not.

Greynor looked at his own cards and almost betrayed a grin. His hand was all fives, one of the highest that one could be dealt.

"I fold" Kane said, and threw down his reasonably good hand. Virgil raised his eyebrows again, this time at the unexpected move by Kane.

"I bet this" Virgil said, and pulled out a small service pistol charge.

"That all?" Another man laughed. He reached down and slammed down an auto cannon cartridge. The crowd oohed and aahh at the move.

Again, Greynor could barely suppress a grin at the man's misfortune. Some folded; however, most sayed in. They put a collection of semi-rare stones, belts, buckles, charges and knives in to bet with; it was all they had.

"You ready for this, boys?" Greynor asked. He reached down and came back up with an anti-tank rocket.

"Shit" Virgil said, "I fold" Greynor scowled. Have I really lost so much at the game? I used to be one of the best card players in the hive, or at least in the underground. Damn, I've bluffed myself into thousands of dollars. If only that madman hadn't tried to kill me; him and his gang, I wouldn't be in the fracking PDF. Although, I'd probably be dead also. I'll never live down the shame of having to seek protection from the PDF though. If my friends hadn't cut and run on my, I would have beaten that man into a pulp.

The other men thought he was bluffing and increased their bets. Kane caught his eye and winked at him; devilishly. There was something disarming about him, but Greynor couldn't put his finger on it. He'd met people like him before, especially unsavory men in the underground, but no one who had perfected this kind of look, where just one glance could send shivers down your spine.

Greynor tried to ignore him. Seymor, who was really just a boy, caught sight Greynor's cards and started to say something. Greynor threw down his hand before the little bastard could spoil things. Amidst groans, he raked in his prize.

Saide had called together what was left of the command structure in a side room. Virgil was invited because although we wasn't formally part of the command, he had held officers status and was them a commodity. They were holed up in the captain's mess room, which was structured a little like a conference table, around which the commanders were sitting.

Saide sat in the captain's chair and from him in a clockwise direction there sat all the sergeants and lieutenants, Elban, Zell, Kane, Caff, Greynor, Creed, Virgil, Arnon; the apprentice engiseer, and an empty seat where Don was supposed to be.

Saide had sent Seymor to get Don, but the young man had not returned. Creed still scowled at him. Saide ignored the hostile gaze.

"So, here we are." Saide started. "3 days into our drifting."

"Yes, our drifting." Caff said. "How goes the repair, Arnon?"

The hooded young engiseer threw up his hands and in a raspy voice said "we're doing the best we can, but we're about 8 men sort of a repair team. It's going to take us a bit more to get the damn thing working, especially because of the complications.

They had learned that the AI was somehow connected to the warp drive, and that it had shut down with the drive. Most likely, the AI was what allowed them to jump through the warp without use of a navigator. However, from what they could tell, the AI would start up again if they could get the damn drive working.

Until they could get the AI working, they had to fix the drive without inadvertently damaging the AI unit. Rather than shortening the time to fix it, the AI was actually making it harder to fix the drive.

"Not much we can so until it is fixed" Pointed out Elban. "On the contrary" Countered Saide, "We've got a plethora of decisions to make"

"A what of decisions?" Greynor asked, indignant of his lack of vocabulary.

"A lot of decisions" Saide explained. "Like what" Elban asked.

"For one, I propose that we continue on together as a group after we have the drive working. Technically, we are all labeled as dead by the imperium standards, we could do anything we wanted to. Greynor remembered that he still had a few off world contacts from the underground. Most wanted him dead.

"Some of us still have families off world," he looked at Virgil. Virgil winced, "Sorry to disappoint, but there's only a handful of people who were stationed on Sargos I who had off-world families, and most of the families were on Sargos II.

"You realize why, right?" "Yeah, I know" Saide answered quickly. He had some idea where this rant was going to go, as Creed had voiced his idea many times before the tyranids had even thought of landing on Sargos.

"Sargos was a dumping ground." He said, ignoring the glares at his direction at their planet. "politically I mean" "Yeah, but…" Saide started.

"Those guys that were too important to kill or deprive of duty were relocated to Sargos, a middle of nowhere planet where they couldn't hurt anything or spread their blasphemous ideas. Saide, your particular style of command was frowned upon, and thus you were sent. Stevan was sent because he's a few wrenches short of a set. "Arnon glared venomously at Creed, or at least as venomously as one can glare with only one normal eye.

"Zell, you were rejected from everywhere else, but your family was too important to exclude you from military service. Kane…" "Watch what you say" Kane commented softly. Creed totally ignored him. No one was going to stop his rant.

"Kane, I honestly don't know why they sent you, but I can guess that they didn't like you. Finally, some people were just unlucky, like Caff and Vermis and the captain.

No one spoke, there was no way to reply to a statement like that, especially because everyone knew that deep down, Creed was probably right.

"How about me?" Virgil sneered. "Huh master Creed, why did they send me then?"

"Probably because you are an insufferable asshole."

"Bastard" Virgil went to stand and looked down at Creed who stayed sitting next to him. "You want to fracking say that again?"

"Come on Virgil, ignore him." Saide said. When he spoke, something passed between the two men. Virgil changed him mind and sat down.

"Ok, so what, so we were all dumped there or were born there, so what?" Saide commented "that make no difference now. I 've got some ideas on what to do; what do you guys want to do?"

No one put forth any ideas. "Right, thought so, as captain now, here's what we're going to do. All platoons need to be consolidated into a few, even one. We lost almost all of 4th platoon and…"

"Don't sweat it," Caff said "They were mostly recruits from Sargos II, and although it is unfortunate that they were killed, their survival would have hindered our progress now. In fact some of them did make it, and from what I've seen, we are going to have to train them for months to get them even close to being combat ready. Does…anyone remember their sergeants name?"

The look around the room changed as, to their horror, the assembly realized that they did not know his name. "He was new," Zell protested. "That's pretty horrible though" Elban commented. "Kinda symbolic, if you think about it." "what? How is it symbolic?" "Nevermind Greynor. Gentlemen, lets get back to topic." Saide urged.

"So, who is going to command this new platoon?" Creed asked, with an undercurrent of menace.

"Platoons" Corrected Saide.

"Whatever, who's going to be in command?"

"Well, I was thinking of actually 2 platoons. I would lead one with Zell and Kane. Caff would lead the other with Greynor and you, Creed."

"Fracking Warp!" Elban yelled. Creed also seemed slightly displeased; perhaps he had wanted to keep platoon command for himself.

"Be fair, I had to…" Saide started. Creed spat something out under his breath, that's not a good sign, Creed never curses. I got to tread on this one lightly.

" I could not give command status to everyone who had it before."

"You two, be reasonable" Virgil said. Turning to Saide he asked, "How many men do we have left?"

Saide consulted a surviving data pod. "If the numbers you gave me are correct, we have less than 100 men. The number here says 82, not including us. Divide that by 10, that's 8 squads or 2 platoons. However, to have large squads, we're running at 20 men per squad, and that means 2 squads per platoon. "

"Why 20 men per squad?" Elban said, latching on to the discrepancy.

"If you must know, I've found that met get to trust each other more and compete as well as self-make or self enforce rules at 20 men, making it easier to command…", there was a pause, "Ok? You've got your assignments, your orders; Go, meeting's over. Creed, I want to talk with you."

Everyone filed out of the room except for Creed, who remained directly opposite Saide. He stood with his face illuminated by the single bulb hanging from the ceiling.

"Listen Saide…" Creed tried to start.

"No, you listen, you bastard." He walked over to Creed. "I'm trying to put together this company again, and you're standing in my way with comments like that. " Saide brought himself up to his full height."I know what I did was wrong, but it's done, I need you to work with me to get this to work. I need your help!"

"Find someone else" Creed spat, the anger still flashing in his eyes.

"No, I've been lenient with you so far, but even my patience has it limits. I'll ask you one more time to assist me out of your own will. Believe in me Creed, what I'm doing is important and I need you on my side." Saide's eyes narrowed, but his stature seemed to grow in that little room; he seemed to exhibit some power from himself.

Creed, taken aback flinched as Saide spoke. He recovered with an impish tint in his eyes.

"What then, if I say no?" Creed dared.

"Then you will help me by force, and our previous friendship will have meant nothing. Be wary Creed, I intend to bring these men to greatness and no you, nor any other man will stand in my way."

With these last words, Saide broke Creed's resistance. He checked himself.

"I suppose the noble thing would to be to apologize, and although it will talk me a long time, I will forgive you."  
"And me, you" Saide quipped.

Creed ignored the last comment, and the two walked out of the room into the hallway, a little less than friends, but a lot more than enemies.

**Chapter 30: Manifestations of Death**

Don slept uneasily. At first, he was troubled by only passing tinges of unhappiness, which, in his dream state he could barely notice, let alone comprehend. However, as his slumber increased in duration, it grew more and more restless. Globs of fear, hate and violence collided with his mind and from these interactions sprung horrible thoughts that blighted existence just by their creation. They were images of fire, brimstone, oceans of blood, skies of flame, and tortured vistas of Armageddon, each one drawing physical pain from their vividness and ungodliness.

These night terrors are the kind some men are frequented with once in a while, especially during passage through the warp. On waking the men curse them and pray all the harder the next day. However, Don found that the regular and counted upon solace of consciousness was beyond his grasp and like some fleeting thing with wings, impishly flew from his grasp every time he attempted to reach out for it. Thus, although afflicted with visions of suffering and death, Don had no way to free himself.

So trapped, his visions of ruin and misfortune grew, from just semi-consciousness feelings into elaborate worlds of pain and suffering; universes of hurt and malcontent.

As this was happening, another fearful change took place. At first Don observed these apocalyptic worlds from on high, as a god looks down on his land. However, as the terror-dreams grew in graphic imagery, his omnipresent view of occurrences shrank until amidst the burning fire of one forested world, Don found himself almost within the confines of a normal corporeal body.

He found that this body was limited in sight and vertical movement, but that he could propel his consciousness rapidly and through physical objects at will. Using this ability, Don was driven by curiosity to see what an odd place his sub conscious had imagined.

Rather than odd, he found that this new world was like many others he had seen, in that it was in its last stages of life.

All around him he could somehow feel the planet dying. Every snap of a fire laden branch, every thundering crash of a might tree was like a death knell.

Once he had become accustomed to his surroundings, he became aware of other things, the sights and sounds of the world which previously had been missing. Foremost of these new things was the existence of an indigenous population.

There were humanoid like creatures, though nimble and quick among the vestiges of their mighty forests. They seemed incapable of higher cognitive functions. They did not speak, although they communicated somehow. The seemed capable of basic emotions like sadness, fear and anger, for as Don found out, the world was filled with their fear.

Even wandering through the destruction itself though, Don could not find the invaders who had brought so much torment and ruin on the primitive people. Not a soldier, troop or beast was to be found; just the ever moving and all consuming fire.

Don drifted sadly through the woods, scarcely interested in the happenings around him, as it seemed like weeks or even months of the same destruction, although he could not tell exactly because the sun was blocked by an ever present layer of smoke caused by the quickly ravaging fire.

As he looked up once more in the hope of seeing a break in the clouds of smog, he happened to walk over a burning pile flowers in the middle of a field. He was suddenly struck with an odd sensation of normality, and it took him slow minutes to realize that he was experiencing hurt.

Half dulled from under exposure, his body which he just noticed had appeared, cried out in pain. Surprised by the sensation after so long without it, he glanced down at his legs which were covered in fire.

He uttered a yell and found that his voice worked, despite previously being silent for so long.

The natives peered through the trees at the sight, although from their reactions, it was impossible to tell what they saw.

He quickly put out the fire and stumbled out of the clearing with his thick boots resounding against the charred rocks and earth. He wandered through the field dazed, barely aware of where he was going. His vision suddenly was blurred and he walked as if he was in a trance.

He stumbled through he trees, only half aware of the native watching him and he was inexorably drawn, to where, he had no idea, but he walked all the same. He stopped suddenly; he was at a clearing. There was a tree in the middle, an ancient forest remnant that must have been millennia old. It loomed over all the trees, yet it shed sunlight from its branches, allowing it to collect on its roots.

He noticed that the natives all drew around him. For some reason, that infuriated him. One that appeared to be their chief stepped forward and stretched out its hand in the universal sign of friendship.

Surprised, Don returned the handshake but to his horror as he made contact with the alien, the other being's hand blistered and pustuled. The chief cried out in pain and terror.

Don looked down dismayed at his inadvertent actions, unsure of what to do.

The natives surrounded their now collapsed leader, their backs to him. Don tried to get one's attention so that he could somehow explain or apologize but as he tried, he brushed his hand on the man's shoulder. Before he was conscious of his actions, the other man like the chief began to cry out in blood curdling screams.

The cries hurt Don's ears, they pierced his brain, and his daze only seemed to amplify the effect. He yelled in rage and reached out to the fallen man to get him to stop. As he did so his fingers swept the arm of another native, and the effect was the same.

There were now three writhing masses on the ground, producing the most ear splitting cacophonous sound Don had ever heard in his life. He had to stop them. He had to destroy the scream, stop it at its source. He flailed out at the aliens with anger. Suddenly the cries switched from pain to death. They cried as only an animal can when it knows that it is about to meet its end, when, with the last of its life it ejects a scream so deep that part of its soul goes with it. Blood seeped and gushed from their mouths, trickled out their eyes and nose and the twitched sporadically on the ground, contorting themselves into impossible arch like shapes. He could hear whatever held them together cracking as it was abused to angles it was never intended to go.

The ground turned to blood; the stones to bones, the roots to arms, the grass to flesh. He was walking now up a pile of bodies towards the center of the clearing. He somehow knew that he had to reach the tree in the center.

The aliens tried feebly to block his path, but he grabbed each one and held it till he joined the others in a morbid end of decay and blood. He drove himself through the human barricade and ran his fingers all over the great tree, its bark cool in his hands.

Like the aliens though, its surface sizzled and pocked on contact. He continued fascinated by the destruction and a sudden burning desire to destroy and watch burn. The great tree burned and turned into a flaming pillar of charred matter as the strange forces at work immolated it. Not satisfied with his progress, he smashed his now heavy hands against the tree's exterior and he was surprised to find the sound like metal on wood.

He struck harder.

The tree finally slumped under his blows and below it opened a huge fathomless hole. He felt himself fall into the hole. Tentacles and madness reached out from it. He fell.

Don woke, drenched with sweat in the cockpit. There was a rapping noise at the door, and it was this that had raised him, he realized. He went to the door and opened it.

Saide stood in the doorway. The cockpit was dark so Saide's features were obscured by light from the hallway. Don didn't know what to say because he couldn't see his face. As he starred though, he became aware of how horrible he must look.

Saide switched on the light and looked at Don.

"You look like shit" He commented. "You realize that it has been two days right?"

"What do you mean" Don asked, still discombobulated from the out of body experience of the dream.

"You've been in here for more than a day. When we called you for the meeting you didn't respond."

"I didn't hear anyone" Don replied, not sure whether he had or not.

"I sent Seymor to get you; he said that the door was locked, but he heard voices. Is there anyone else in here?"

"Locked?" Don asked incredulously, he had opened the door without unlocking it. "No it wasn't locked, not for the time I can remember anyways. And there was no one in here; just me… but" His voice trailed off.

"But what?" Saide asked.

"I haven't been totally open with you on something; let me show you." He turned to the black package on the chair next to him.

Saide made no reaction to indicate that he was familiar with the object that he had seen in the destruction of Sargos.

"What is it?" he feigned.

Don seemed to take the bait, and expected nothing. "Its…well..Ugh" he ran his hands through his hair and over his face and sighed.

"It's a space marine gene seed, preserved in some sort of device."

"What?" asked Saide, this time for real. "Where the hell did you get that?"

Don avoided the question "I know this has huge implications, but you understand now why I couldn't risk contact with those marines. Whatever the reason is, if we are found with this, we will all be killed."

"What?" asked Saide, realizing that he probably sounded silly with his stupid exclamatory remarks. "Why? What harm to we present? The might even thank us for finding their relic!"

"No, you don't understand Astartes. They think nothing of us. Our lives have no meaning to them. They regard us as a titan regards a sentinel. They also…ok, I see now that I'm going to have to give you the full story for this to make any sense.

"Yes, I still don't understand why they would kill us."

"Hrm, ok then. Firstly, we have just come from a tainted planet, one that had exterminatus called against it. This alone gives them cause to kill us but there is something more." At this point Don paused afraid to go on. "There's something more, something I overheard but wish I hadn't"

"Don't leave me in the dark Don; I don't belong there."

"Fine, but you know that if I tell you these secrets then you will be just as wanted as I."

"Go on, I'm able to handle anything you tell me."

Don collapsed in his chair and consulted a few panels before responding."

"But its more than that. If it was just you and me, II would have told you already, but you're the PDF's leader, if you know then they're all doomed. If the space marines came right now they would probably spare your lives if I played my cards right and if you claimed you knew nothing. Everyone would be telling the truth when they said they didn't know, even you, because all you would know is that I had a secret, not what it was.

Saide thought about that for a long time.

"From what you've said, I think we've gone too far already. I doubt they'd spare us if they act how you say they do. Tell me what you know."

Don shrugged. "Alright, the decision is yours to make I guess. So here we go: From what I can tell, the marines that are following me are the Blood Ravens. I was on their chapter barge Omnis Arcanum."

Saide gave Don a look, but from what Saide knew of Don that was actually plausible; the man seemed full of secrets.

"I know it's hard to believe, but that's what happened. So while I was there I accidently overheard some of their senior officers talking."

"What were they talking about?"

"Their history. They seem to know little about it but their gene seed might have been originally from another chapter.

"I can't claim to know anything about marine chapter interaction; what does this mean?"

"No, not just any chapter; a fallen chapter."

"Then this is about heresy!" Gasped Saide.

"I'm afraid so" Don replied

**Chapter 31: History**

" I see muttered Saide. He sat down next to Don and stared at the ceiling as he lay back in the chair, thinking of the implications.

"Hrm, well, no one must know about this." Saide offered finally. "At least none of the regular troops" Saide said before he thought it over fully.

Don was about to interject with something, but Saide stopped him. "You're right, word get around too easily; a shame really."

"Why is that a shame?" Don asked.

"Well, I like to think of mysled as a commander who lets his troops understand their situation." Saide's eyes misted over. "On Sargos II the rebels had taken the capital and had it well defended. Unfortunately for them, Sargos II's planetary capital was nothing like Durmin, you know, from Sargos I. The capital is…was in the middle of a large valley, with no real natural defenses other than those a normal hive would have. What that meant was that we were free to attack from wherever we wanted."

Saide stopped for a moment and sighed before continuing. "Now keep in mind we were not calling the shots on Sargos II, that wouldn't happen until after the war was over. We had four other companies fighting with us. The problem was that that meant that although we all regarded the war as our fight, the off-planet command was pulling all the shots."

Saide stopped again and turned to Don who raised an eyebrow. "Keep going, I'll hear it to the end. It's not like we're pressed for time."

"Ok, so command decided that they wanted a distraction to fool the men who were defending. They needed it to be large enough to attract attention though. So they ended up choosing my platoon to distract…"

"They sent an entire platoon as a distraction?" Don asked incredulously.

"Yes, these people cared little about human life. However, I was just a new officer at the time and still wet behind the ears. I didn't want to upset our off-world benefactors on my second assignment, so I said nothing; at least nothing to command. I felt my cowardice though; I thought I should at least tell my men what they were fighting for; that it was all just a fake."

"Against orders I told them what we were about to do was most likely a suicide mission. Rather than munity or express hatred towards me they actually respected me for that. You know, most of the veterans, Lechor, Creed and Hessert are from that original mission."

"But now, hypocrisy of hypocrisies, I cannot do the same thing in this situation, as much as I would like to. " Saide said, a little crest fallen.

"I don't know what to say Saide. It is as it is. If you want to know, your unit sounds like a beautiful place compared to my commander's"

"You were with the guard?" Siade asked.

Don widened his eyes as he realized that he had let something slip, but then decided on continuing anyways. "Well, for a time, yes. My commanders were like those that you described. They just sent men to their deaths. But you know what? Sometimes it worked! I'm not saying it was a good tactics, and it destroyed lives and morale, but sometimes…it worked. Eh, don't go too hard on your self." Don got up and glanced at his chronometer.

"I haven't slept one peaceful night since that incident. Maybe tonight will be different." Saide looked at him strangely at first, because he was sure that Don had been sleeping before he entered the room, but bid him good night anyway.

The two men exited the room.

Don showed some surprise at Saide leaving, as the command deck was the de facto headquarters on board.

"Don, I have not slept in three days."

"Ah well you deserve some then; I fixed the door to only open to my or your voice patterns" Don said.

"Interesting" muttered Saide, who was suddenly overcome with tiredness.

He urged himself into his new quarters, a cell on the side of the main hallway that connected the cargo hold to the command deck. They used to belong to the former first mate, before even Don's friend obtained the ship, or so Saide surmised, as apparently Don's friend had ran the ship by himself using that alien technology.

Saide lay down on the bed and instantly fell asleep, and he was spared the torturing dreams Don had.

**Chapter 32: The Dangers of Enui**

Even though most of the men hadn't seen combat in ages, they had fallen into the normal routine followed by soldier who were not fighting Caff thought. They found quarters for themselves, some arranged out of the numerous crates, others, mainly officers, got official crew berths. Some drank, some smoked, some prayed, some played sports or cards.

Caff couldn't seem to figure out where everyone got the stuff from, but he assumed that it has on their person when they left. He himself had brought a data slate and a couple of other things. When you had to carry fifty plus pounds of equipment and armor, sometimes substitutions were made. An extra canteen? Iho sticks instead; a secondary weapon? Rather take some cards or religious paraphernalia. Whatever it was they brought, the men were doing things to take their mind off previous events.

In one corner, there was a line leading from two officer berths. One was Zell's and the other was Voor's. Caff saw the two lines and raised his eyebrow in suspicion. Oh Voor, what are you up to this time?

He walked over to the quarters and passed Saide in the hall. Neither man said anything though. Wow, he looks like shit; though couple of days I guess. Saide staggered sleepily to his quarters and shut the door. Caff looked over at the two lines.

He shuffled to the beginning of the first one to see Voor in front of a table filled with items. There seemed to be food, drink, both non and alcoholic, and variety of other small items including Iho-sticks but also some more dangerous stuff.

Carrying around a couple here and there is one thing, but is ridiculous, he must have stole the stuff from the crates. Damn, we told him to leave them alone; we don't know what's in them. The previous owner was obviously eccentric, they could contain anything.

Caff barged in front of the next person in line, to the man's dismay, and the officer held up one of the sticks.

"What's going on here?" caff asked, waving the stick in Voor's face. Voor motioned to the people in line to leave. They all did, but Caff could hear them mutter as they left.

"Well sir, I'm uh selling items for personal gain."

"You set up a shop?" Caff asked, incredulously. "Where the hell did you get all of this stuff from anyway?" Got him now.

Voor squinted at him. "I didn't get it from the crates, if that's what you're implying. I err, carried it all here. "

That can't be right, looks like he's telling the truth.

"Yours?" Caff sputtered. "You expect me to believe that you got all of that…really?

"No seriously, this was all in my pack. I know its umm breach of procedure, but I've been replacing certain items in my pack with…what you see here"

"What certain items? You really do have a veritable store here."

Voor was obviously uncomfortable. "Well, you got to understand, when the order went out to flee to Durmen, I didn't take it as seriously as I should have. So…"

"Get to the point; what items soldier?"

Voor sighed. "tent, spare vox batteries, charges, extra ammo, extra las charges, secondary weapon, combat knife, bayonet, scope, bedroll, medical supplies, both canteens…"

Caff snorted. "So what you're saying is that you replaced all your items with…merchandise."

" Yeah, pretty much." He spied Caff's look. "sir, um, pretty much sir." There was silence for a few eternal moments as Caff continued to stare at Voor"

"Wait, you want me to close down?" Voor gasped, exacerbated. "I didn't fracking carry all this stuff just to be told that…"

"I don't care; this stops now." Caff said, his voice as strong as steel.

"Why? I'm not hurting anyone!" Voor responded, almost whining.

"Ok" Caff said, his voice now deadly silent so that no one would overhear the conversation. "Firstly, we have to have order; we can't let our entire fighting force get drunk and high off your wares. Secondly, it's immoral to sell drugs to addicts. Especially after when you're out it'll make it even harder for them" He cut off Voor before he had time to voice his complaint.

"I saw the way they looked at me. They're addicted as you can get. And finally and most importantly…"

He leaned close to Voor, "because I told you to soldier."

"Pulling rank" Voor muttered, "I've made enough anyway". He swept the items off the crate and back into his backpack. He tried to do it defiantly. Not good enough; whoever trained you did it too well, and I've still got it. Hrmm, but for how long?

"Now that that is settled, what are you doing here in the first place? This was supposed to be for Elban. Why are you here?"

"Well" Voor said with his customary glint in his eye, "let's say I convinced him to relinquish his room for some…help"

"I don't want to know" Caff admitted. "As much as I don't like your disregard for rules, I suppose that between you and Elban. Just don't make a scene about it…Speaking of scenes" He said turning, "What is Zell doing? Same thing as you?"

"Warp if I should know; don't think he's selling anything though." Caff turned to investigate and Voor closed his door grumbling about potential profit lost or something to that effect.

Well, that's one problem, now for the next.

Having dealt with one line, he turned to the other one, assuming it would be something similar; selling or gambling. It was not.

Zell and another person who Caff didn't recognize had set up a miniature triage station. Caff was very surprised to say the least.

Shit, what kind of commander am I? I didn't even think about the poor wounded bastards. I just assumed that if they were wounded…

He looked at Zell who was prying some sort of worm out of a guardsman's foot. Caff felt bile rise in his mouth.

"Ah, Caff, I was wondering when you'd show up. I Hope you approve!" Zell said, bandaging the guardsman's leg.

"Very much so, but where did you get all the supplies? Where is everyone getting this stuff from?" He said a little too loud."And…wait, who is that?" He motioned at the younger man. "…and when in the emperor's name did you become a medic?"

"Ha!" Zell laughed. "Inquisitive as ever I see. I found the supplies in an emergency package in the ship's mess room; that is Menon, the closest thing we have to a medic; and for your last question, you should know by now that I know just about everything! Did you know that I actually trained to be a combat medic? Failed after the first couple of months, but I learned the basics…" He trailed off as he snapped a bone back into place, completely ignoring the guardsman's pain induced gridded teeth.

"Eh" Caff said, repulsed by the gristly procedure." Good job then; anything I can do to help, just ask."

"Don't think you can help, unless you can find an actual medic; Menon hadn't even completed his training, and I don't think there are any on this ship."

"Oh frack" Caff said without thinking.

The unseen strength of the Imperial Guard was its medical staff. When fully supplied, there was nothing short of chaos taint that they couldn't cure. Caff could count the number of times they'd ever been fully supplied though. The point being that behind every platoon, ever battalion was an old saw bones, ready to put the troops back together.

Being without a medic was a tough situation. Hundreds could die to disease alone in a guard's normal condition.

"I'll see what I can do" said Caff, Impressed by Zell's thoughtfulness. But just then a scream pierced the air as the young Menon tore out a piece of shrapnel (presumably caused by friendly fire) from a man's arm.

"Easy!" shouted Zell.

Although accustomed to the gruesome realities of war, Caff couldn't stand hospitals; the smell, the yells, the blood. He thanked Zell and exited the room as fast as he could.

He found himself in the long main hallway of the ship and he followed it down until it entered the large cargo hold.

Guardsmen milled about in temporary rooms made of boxes and crates, laughing and shouting. It was little more than idle activity. The general morale was actually rather low, Caff saw.

Something jogged his memory and he went out in search for Elban.

Elban was rather hard to find; in fact, everything and anything was hard to find in the confusing maze of people, crates and boxes. After asking around for a while, Caff was able to find Elban. Apparently the men had repositioned the crates nearby to form crude quarters. It was in one of these that Caff found Elban.

The entrance to the dorm had a hastily constructed door in the form of a combat overcoat hung from a pole resting on the top of the entrance. A guardsman who spied Caff caught his arm as he was about to brush away the obstruction away.

"Sir, Elban's been pretty disturbed by his…demotion, err for lack of a better term. I mean to disrespect, I'm sure you and Saide had your reasons, but he's not in a very good condition. "

"Thank you soldier, but I need to speak with him."

"Suit yourself." He caught Caff's eye at the informal reply. "Excuse me, suit yourself sir."

That's a bad sign. Integrity's getting weak. We've got to keep these men occupied, preferably with combat drills to keep their edge.

Caff entered the temporary room, his stature filling the entrance. There was a bed roll int eh corner and discarded bottles everywhere. Elban was lying face down on the floor. Throne above. Caff cursed and went to rouse the man. Elban moaned in pain as the first effects of his hang over started to take effect.

"You could never hold your liquor could you?" Caff started off, jokingly. Elban rubbed his eyes and instantly became aware of the raging head ache that he had. "I'm aware, I'm awake" He said groggily. "What is it?"

"That what I should ask you! You were clean to my knowledge, for all the years I've known you, what's going on? You're no drunk!" Caff pointed out sharply.

"Damn it" Elban slurred, half awake, "You know what's up. Saide in his fracking infinite wisdom decided that I wasn't fit for command. What bullshit! I'm, no, I was, squad leader for two years and platoon leader for an additional year. He has no right!" I've never known him to speak ill of his commanding officers either…

"You heard his rationale Elban. Plus, most of those years you didn't see a month of combat. Zell and Greynor have much more experience."

"Ok, Greynor's a thug and you know it. Zell deserves command, that's true, but that's why I made him my number two!"

"What about Kane? You didn't mention him."

Elban went silent. There was a noticeable change in the ambience in the room. Although no lights dimmed and nothing changed in the air, it was clear that something had changed in the conversation. All of a sudden Elban was dead clear in his words.

"Kane's trouble. Maybe that's why Saide promoted him; to keep an eye on him. You know, friends close, enemies…" He trailed off.

"This is honestly the first time I've heard of anything about him. He and his men stick to themselves. All that I know is that he was probably a ganger. Like Greynor. But I'm not going to say that. Plus Greynor's different, more amiable.

"I didn't work much with him. What's…" he looked closely at Elban. "Throne, you've sobered up at the very mention of him!"

Elban leaned close to Caff. "Ok, I'm telling you this because I trust you and maybe you can do something about it. Listen, that guy creeps the shit out of me. I don't know his history, and to be honestly, don't want to. He's a cold hard fracker, as cold and as deadly as they come." Caff listened intently. Neither he nor Elban noticed that the conversation had wildly changed topics.

"During the rebellion, I and he stormed a bunker in the capitol. We expected resistance but there wasn't much. Turns out that their men cut and ran out on their commanders and the commanders were stuck. Well, when he went in there and when the stubborn assholes didn't agree to unconditional surrender, remember they still had the mountains, he just…cool as can be…shot them, without blinking an eye. One at a time, execution like. He let the rest see what he had done before he moved to the next." Elban took a long breath and continued.

"Now I know in the heat of battle people do bad stuff, insane stuff in bloodlust." Elban said, seeing what Caff was going to point out. "No, this was disturbing; he was cold and emotionless as anything. This was no bloodlust. It was murder. And, you know, I said he was emotionless; that is not actually true. He showed one emotion; just as he finished with the last one, just as the poor bastard's brain…exploded from its skull, he took a long look at the bloody corpses and….and"

"What? What did he do?" Caff asked, horrified by this point.

"It doesn't seem like much, but it was so… the man smiled, Kane smiled at what he'd done, like he was real proud. Just enough teeth to show that he meant it. Emperor keep that man from me.

"Why in the emperor's name didn't you tell anyone?" Caff exploded. Elban exploded back, "What? You think I'm going to cross the guy who kills in cold blood and then fracking laughs? I like my life"

And that's why you're not platoon leader. Caff realized. There are some horrible people in the guard and you can't let them rule you. You can't let them command you. That's why Saide…he saw this or at least a bit of it. No way had he known all the details; no one could have seen it. Kane knows how to put up a façade all right.

There was silence in the room and the tone simmered back down to bearable levels, but it took at least ten minutes, each person not wanting to break the silence. Caff did the honors and tried to change the subject. "I uh, came here to say that since command has been lax, a lot of guardsmen think it's ok to do whatever they want."

"Hey, I had no idea that's what Voor was going to set up" Interjected Elban, trying to add some humor to the conversation. It worked to some degree.

"I wasn't talking specifically about that, but yes, that is an example. So here's the solution. The troops like you. You have the whole "rejected by command" card, and the troops sympathize. Plus you are the youngest commander here. I want you to make sure the troops are not doing anything stupid. No hard drugs or anything like that. I understand Iho-sticks, they're fine but some of the stuff Voor had is pushing even my already loose rules on that kind of stuff. "Caff reached out his hand and helped Elban up before continuing.

"Saide and I are going to keep this unit in fighting condition, but we need your help on a personal level. Get it?"

"Yeah, I get it." Elban answered.

Yeah I get it…sir. Caff thought to himself as he left Elban's dorm.

**Chapter 33: Red Dream and The Task Explained**

Caff exited Elban's dorm.

On the wall opposite Elban's dorm there was another congregation of people standing against the wall. What the hell is this? Mob day? Greynor would like that.

He smiled but then cleared his face; emotionless as he drew nearer the group.

He walked up to the mass of people and realized that the congregation was a congregation. Against the wall was a small statuette of the Emperor clad in golden armor. Although the statue was little more than a pocket fetish, it had been perched atop one of the ubiquitous boxes that lay around the cargo area. This allowed the statue to be seen by all. Furthermore, a light above the statue shone directly onto it, illuminating it in a beam.

Caff noticed that most of the people gathered were native Sargosians. Caff was impressed by their faith but didn't share it. He had never been a religious man. He could understand the inclination to turn to religion when everything else was so bleak. Satisfied that mass of people wasn't detrimental, he wandered freely around the ship, finding himself in the forward section.

Caff suddenly realized that although he hadn't slept in days he wasn't tired. He was hungry however. He walked to the kitchen and looked around for some food. Before he was able to raid the pantries he was called for by someone.

He spun around to see a young trooper. Simon? No. Samuel? No. Damn it, what's his name? Seymor! That's it.

"What is it?" Asked Caff. He shouldn't be talking to me about whatever this is about. Chain of command. He should be talking to…wait.

"And who is your commanding officer?"

Seymor looked down. "I was in fourth platoon. We were almost wiped out to a man. Menon and I were the only ones to make it onboard.

Nice going Caff.

"But…um, I thought you would want to see this. Some of the men were looking through the crates and …" he was cut off. "Damn it! Steven specifically said to not search through them. There could be volatile things in them!"

"Oh there are volatile things in them alright. They're filled with weapons!" What?

"Say what now?" Caff exclaimed.

"Yeah, follow me." Seymor ran down the hall dodging men and women in his effort to get to the cargo hold. Caff followed him as fast as he could for fear of losing the boy in the maze of people.

Spilled out on the ground was a cache of assorted weapons and ammo.

"Most of the crates look like this one, so I assume most of the cargo is guns and ammo" said one female guardsman upon Caff's arrival.

"This is interesting. Once we get this ship running, we'll be armed. I'll talk to Saide as soon as I can about this" Caff said. Seymor, glad to help in some way, happily walked away with a group of younger guardsmen, talking loudly as he went, leaving Caff to his examination of the newly found weapons.

Arnon, the apprentice engiseer and Stevan were conversing below as the events transpired above.

An observer wouldn't have heard anything at all and wouldn't have been aware that the two were actually having a spirited argument. The language of the tech priests had evolved past inefficient audio communication. The two were arguing using their electronic language that was transmitted instantaneously from one brain to another, allowing for millions of ideas to be transmitted in the same amount of time it would have taken Caff to say "What are all these wires for?"

The topic of the argument and the topic of all contention since they had arrived onboard was the restructuring of the subsystems of the ship. They had activated the rudimentary artificial intelligence and it was now pulsating behind them.

The said that Stevan took was that they should standardize everything as in a regulation spacecraft, with the exception of the AI because this was the fastest course of action. Arnon argued that they as scientists had a perfectly reasonable right and responsibility to reconfigure the ship to its maximum efficiency, even if it delayed restoration.

The two posed logical examples and counter-examples, compared different schematics and options all in the span of minutes. However, Stevan was implacable; the design would be standard. Not because he was one to follow regulation, but because both of them knew the standard model and because in a crisis, disasters like last tie wouldn't happen, as all standard systems were triple redundant systems.

However, the AI would still be used. It was too much of a boon not to use it. Arnon surrendered the argument to his mentor without any gripe; his mentor's argument was logical; any further argument would waste valuable time.

The tow of them sat down and tried to figure out how they were going to rewire an entire starship utilizing a piece of equipment neither of them could fully understand.

Don was once again tortured by his dreams. Again he dreamt he was on a foreign planet. This time however, there were to trees. For miles and miles stretched cold grey rock and dirt. The sky was grey as were the other facets of the world. It seemed lifeless.

Like before, he found himself in control of his body, but his arms and legs felt…distant, as if they belonged to someone else. Needless to say it was disconcerting.

Regardless, he wandered through the rocks and hills until he came upon an open field. In the field stretched a small town. However, what puzzled him was its size. The town seemed to be made by diminutive creatures, for he was as tall as one of their two story building.

Like before, he gradually became aware of natives approaching him. Although his memory was not clear, he remembered that the last time this had happened, something bad had gone down.

He noticed that they were not primitive although he didn't know why this was significant. The grey people who saw him instantly took up arms against him.

Their weapons seemed to have little effect though, as the rounds ricocheted useless off him. He strode through the town with impunity; the patter of small arms increased.

He suddenly became aware of an itching sensation. He realized that the impact of the arms was causing it. He became incensed by the itch and he soon became mad beyond words. How dare they shoot him? Every spent shell increased his ire until he could not contain it anymore.

Assembled before him was a veritable army of grey creatures that resembled humans. He screamed with madness and swept his arm through their ranks and was satisfied with the results.

Men screamed and were flung through the air like dolls, dying upon impact. He ploughed his way through the wave of men, blood flying like rain, each dismemberment making him more and more angry.

His rage seemed insatiable but he soon found that his newly found ability to create violence repressed it too a degree.

He slaughtered the aliens in the city and fought them to the hills beyond. With every swipe of his arms he eagerly flung figures onto a growing mound of deceased, and every hit increased his passion. A red haze blocked his sight, and he fully gave into the battle lust.

Men flew like pieces of paper, The earth itself stained red from the decimation. It seemed like nothing could stand in his way, and for some reason that seemed only to make him more enraged.

However, he soon found one grey person who seemed a champion. As soon as he saw the figure he laughed out loud and challenged the figure. The waist high person made some sort of reply but it was too feeble and weak to bother him. The fact that the man had even replied made him furious. "How dare you challenge me!" He bellowed, but the champion obviously didn't understand him. In fact he covered his ears when Don talked.

Don attacked with a roar and commenced to beat the life out of the man.

One blow lay him down, so Don swatted him to the side to see if he was still alive. To his amazement and irritation, the champion still barely lived, crawling from the ground.

Con took him in his two hands and turned each in a different direction, twisting the gray man. He continued this with incredible strength until he was rewarded with a satisfying crunch.

Still the man lived barely. Don struck out from his rage. "How dare he live?" He thundered.

He took the figure and beat him against the ground until he stopped moving. Don then, in anger and with vision blurred by some liquid running from his forehead, clutched the figure and squeezed it and squeezed it until the effrontery of this life truly ended.

He threw its corpse onto the pile with his comrades.

In a total moment to realization, the world's color came back to life; the sky was a throbbing orange, the ground a blasted black. However, the most common color by far was red. Blood covered the hill on which Don stood, a single color with no patches.

His vision blurred again and he brought up his hands to try to clear his eyes. He looked at them and saw that they were colored red with blood. In a perverse satisfaction he turned to see the pile of bodies that he had created. However, when he saw them, only one part of the bodies remained. The gristly pile of corpses was now a pile of thousands upon thousands of skulls.

He roared his satisfaction before waking up in a horrible sweaty state from his hellish dream he tried to wipe the sweat from his brow, but when he looked at his hands the ran red with blood. He screamed.

Vidya stared out of the window of his private sanctum. Behind him , Anath skimmed through the ancient tomes of his chapter. They both waited for Jada to return.

An announcement came over the speakers in the ceiling. "My lord" The voice said, "We have traversed beyond the reaches of the warp disturbance."

"Excellent, plot a course for the nearest refueling station."

"That would be the naval platform 119. Is that acceptable to his lordship?"

"Yes, that is so. Inform the station commander of out arrival."

The room fell silent. Anath looked up. "Sir, I believe Jada is here. "

"You are correct; you have good ears to hear him even through the floor."

Jada swept into the room with quick strides, his ceramite boots resounding against the floor. He only stopped once with a quick bow to Vidya.

"I regret to inform you that my esteemed brother Strom is dead. He is with the emperor now."

"I am sorry for squad's loss; Strom was a mighty warrior; I had the privilege of serving with him on Nars'Sa.

"Thank you for your sentiments" Jada responded "but it is not my loss, nor my squad's loss, but the chapter's in loosing such an esteemed warrior."

"You are correct and this is an unfortunate occurrence but you must hear me now. There are more important things to talk about. "Vidya stated in his booming voice.

He motioned to a table with several metal reinforced chairs, meant for a fully armored space marine to be able to sit. The three mighty marines sat. Vidya started the conversation.

"What do you know about our beloved chapter might be a lie." He saw Anath and Jada's shocked expressions. "Let me talk and I will explain."

The two restrained their outrage. "We Blood Ravens know little of our heritage, although we know that our chapter is one of the oldest, second founded or not. In fact we might be, I hope not, but our great chapter could even be old enough to be stained with heresy.

Jada and Anath sat for a while, stunned in a way that they would never know on the field of battle. It was not fear, because space marines know none, rather it was a feeling of shock. Anath took the information and thought on it hard.

"My lord, how can this be? Haven't we strived to spread the light of the emperor, to guard his knowledge? How could we, the very defenders of his word, be decedents from that scourge?" Jada burst out. Vidya shook his head.

"I have thought on this long. Our accomplishments now change nothing of the past. Out chapter might have been loyal remnants of our fallen brothers." Vidya commented, now pacing back and forth.

"Now what do you know of our gene seed?" Vidya asked rhetorically, "It is part of us, it makes us who we are but it also shows our past. Our seeds have been passed from battle-brother to battle-brother but it seems like some of its history has been lost every time it changes hands. Only an ancient, preserved gene seed would tell us of our past. However, we have none."

"I know where this is going" Anath said. "Perhaps you should ask our friend in the navy to be more subtle when he carries out our top secret tasks. I saw him conducting some scans personally. No naval commander conducts scans personally…ever. I also have the read-out from that scan. A presence of omicron radiation? Only geneseed canister would give off that much. You have found our seed Vidya."

Vidya was visibly shaken, his eyes wide. "It is clear that I chose correctly in picking you for this assignment Anath." Jada frowned. "You seem well informed; perhaps too well informed. Have you told anyone about your findings?" Vidya asked, casually reaching for something on his belt.

"Keeping something like this secret must have been challenging…" Anath started.

"I seem to have not expressed the seriousness of this assignment" Vidya said, eyes blazing. He reached across the table faster that Anath could see and held a massive bolt pistol directly at Anath's forehead.

"I will ask again. Did you inform anyone of your findings?"

Anath had the time to observe a beautiful hand crafted inlay on the pistol barrel before he responded.

"My lord, I have told no one of my speculations and findings. I have kept them to myself. "

"Ah, good. I was afraid…" Vidya said as he holstered his bolt pistol.

Jada, who had stayed silent up until now, voiced his outrage. "I must assume from your actions, that Anath is correct. But to draw a weapon on him…" His voice held shock and hurt.

"I agree. Under different circumstances, perhaps a different time, such barbaric methods would not have been used. However, at least you understand my rationale." Vidya defended.

"Now that I have your attention and you understand the importance of your task, let me explain. While in transit to assist in the efforts against the zenos known as the tau, our sensors picked up a unique radiation signature, which, as Anath said, could only be the containment to a geneseed container. I was then required to search through our extensive past" He paused, and swept his arm towards the innumerable bookshelves behind him, "but I can find no indication of any lost brothers on the planet. "

Anath interrupted, only after silently asking Vidya's permission. "Which planet are you referring to my lord?"

"I apologize but due to an error in Administratum records, the planet has no official name and lack of colonists prevents even a colloquial one from emerging. I understood the gravity of recovering the gene seed, especially since the planet was under attack; a fact that we didn't learn until we actually sent the recovery team."

"Once the package was received however, there arose a peculiarity; a security breach. Some guardsman survived the invasion and was to be taken as to keep our secrets safe. Unfortunately, after jumping into warp, he disappeared and he did not leave empty handed."

"It seems that he was able to undo the top level security that we had the geneseed in. Your job is to find this man and kill him. The geneseed must also be taken from him."

"This is a lot to absorb, my lord" Anath said.

"One question" Jada asked; Vidya turned to look at him. "Why did you not simply kill the guardsman? Surely his life is less valued then the preservation of our geneseed!"

"Regarding that, we pondered over that decision, not wanting to have innocent blood on our hands, especially since it was clear, after many hours of interrogation, that he knew nothing. It was decided that the risk was too great and he was to be killed. However, as I said before, we were disturbed by the warp and he vanished."

"Then how would you like us to start?" Jada asked, eager.

"Ah that is the problem. I cannot give you direct orders while maintaining my regular tasks, and without drawing suspicion from the other chapters that I will be working with soon suppressing the tau. Thus, I am giving you complete autonomy. "

"I…I am honored my lord." Anath said.

"Yes, of course, this is a honor of the highest degree but also the highest responsibility. However, I would not have picked you two for the task if I did not believe in your integrity and ability. I have no doubt that you will carry out my orders."

"Your faith in us is not misplaced!" Jada intoned and motioned to Anath to follow him.

Anath stared at Vidya, whose head was now exposed. He was in thought. The conversation was over. It was time for them to leave.

Jada and Anath left Vidya to his thoughts. As their sounds echoed less and less, Vidya slowly opened his mind, achieving the state that only librarians could achieve.

**Chapter 34: The Tyranids**

Author's Note: Tyranids using warp travel? I thought…No! This story uses 4th edition fluff. (pg 14 of old tyranid codex, bottom right)

It was the tenth day of drifting, and repairs were going slow. In the engine room Arnon and Stevan worked feverishly but they were just two against an army of technical problems.

Saide sat on a crate, observing the men. Most milled around but the excitement of the crisis had given away to boredom and for some depression. Saide watched different groups, one doing their usual wrestling, one praying at the improvised alter. The third was lead by Greynor and was playing cards.

Sadie stared into the interminable sea of boxes and sighed. These damn artificial lights multiply the gloom and boredom. God I never thought I would miss the sun.

He jumped of the crate and hit the ground, looking up to see Caff walking towards him.

"Anything to report?" Caff asked, almost hoping that something had gone wrong, just so he would have something to do.

"Not much. A fight broke out between two of former 2nd platoon over some woman but Creed set the two right. Lets see…Arnon said that they're set up control of some of the more mundane systems on the ship as well as the sub-warp engines. That won't help us much though, we're in the middle of nowhere as far as I can tell by the sensors. Oh, they work too now. "

Elban caught some men from 3rd platoon dealing some hard stuff, and luckily he confiscated it before Voor got his hands on it. " Saide grinned. Caff returned his grin; Caff had told him about his adventure last week.

"Man, I got to say, I'd almost rather be fighting something. At least that would have some action instead of just sitting around."

"How about tyranids?" Saide asked.

"NO" Caff responded quickly, "Once is enough for a life time, thank you very much. "

"Well, if you're that interested" Saide said as the two walked to nowhere in particular, "I hear Don's faced the nids a couple of times; walked away alive from each encounter. "

"Speaking of Don, where is he?" Caff asked, looking around. "I haven't seen him in a while…in fact, I don't think he's been here since we started. Know what's up?"

"yeah, he's a little shaken. I had a talk with him the other say. Apparently the former owner of the ship was a friend. They got stuck in the station attack and he was killed in Don's sight. He's been having some bad sleep, although I guess everyone's been sleeping uneasily. Nerves I guess." Saide speculated as he shrugged his shoulders.

"How about you? Holding up ok?" Caff inquired.

"Funny you should ask. Since the third night I've been sleeping like…like….oh I don't know, I've just been sleeping well. "

"You sure missed your calling as a thespian, the words just come to you don't they?" Caff asked sarcastically as the two walked down the long hallway that led to the cockpit. Saide grinned but didn't respond.

As they passed Voor's quarter's, the stealthy guardsman slipped something from sight as the approached.

"hello officers, good morning!" He said with a smile.

"Good morning to you too" Saide responded, "Although I hear drinking this early is bad for your health."

Voor grinned sheepishly. The two walked on.

Saide pressed his hand into an imprint scanner near the door. It opened grudgingly with a grating sound.

"Amazing, the perfect combination of cutting edge Mars and junk heap technology. It's a wonder this thing doesn't fall apart. " Saide joked.

The two entered the empty command deck. Displays lit up as he switched on the lights. Saide sat in the command chair and spun around before stopping in front of Caff who was similarly seated.

"So, what do you think?" Saide asked ambiguously.

"What do you mean? About what?" Caff asked.

"Everything, our position, what's up? The state of things. I'm just trying to make talk; apparently Stevan and Arnon won't be done for another week minimum. "

"Really?" Caff asked, almost groaning.

"It's just them; they're doing a good job in my eyes. Heck, they're working 24-7 . It's kinda creepy actually. "Saide said.

"You wanna know my opinion? Everyone's getting too lax around here. Creed agrees. Whatever we're going to do after we get our engines working, we've still got to have control and discipline to a degree. I think we should get the troops back in shape, maybe better than they were before."

"Hmm, I'll talk to Creed about it but you're right. Idle hands make chaos."

"well, I'm going to get some grub" Saide said after a couple of moments of silence had passed.

"Speaking of which, how are we doing on food and water?" Caff asked.

Saide threw up his hands. "I don't have an exact number but as it turns out, it wasn't only weapons in those crates. We struck a gold mine in terms of supplies. Whoever Don's Friend was, he was transporting pretty much everything you can think of, including food and water."

"Well I guess that's that. We can trust the squads to distribute their own rations…and probably more. See you soon, emperor knows we'll be getting to know each other really well during this thing. "Saide walked to the kitchen. Caff stayed on the operation deck, wondering what he should do with his time.

Don awoke from his nightmare in a cold sweat. The dream was not as graphic as the one he had last week. Even so, he glanced at his hands. They were clean. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Last week a rat had managed to get into his bed and he had killed it in his sleep with his bare hands. He must have washed his hands a thousand times, but although his hands were clean, the memory of the horrible dread stayed.

Every time he closed his eyes he could see piles of corpses running with blood, their eyes staring wide open at him, almost in an accusatory manner.

He tried to think about something else. He got out of bed but found that the floor was icy cold. He checked the temperature in the room. Interestingly it read normal. Don shivered; it was most definitely not normal.

He put on his clothes and reached for the door knob. It was locked.

He stared at the knob, his mind still sleepy. He giggled it. Nope, still locked. He looked at the control panel for the door. It was gone.

His mind struggled to figure out what was going on, racking his head. He slammed on the door, banged and yelled for help. There was no response, and somehow the icy feeling made its way into his head that no one could hear him even if he screamed until his lungs were empty.

He walked around his room. He messed with articles that were in his clothing.

The minutes turned into hours. He tried shouting for help but still no answer. The ship intercom system was working but he didn't know that. Besides, the control panel was missing.

Left with nothing else to do, Don sat on his bed, trying not to fall asleep, lest a repeat of his last nightmare occur. However, this was a fight that he was doomed to lose. After escaping the unnamed planet and Sargos I in quick succession, he hadn't slept in months kept awake with combat drugs. The backlash hit him like a kick to the brain. He was down and out in minutes, prey to the unconscious realm of his mind.

Like a blight on the vast emptiness of space itself, the Tyranid fleet oozed out of warp, its bioelectric organs causing the fabric of reality to bend and ripple to its will. Ship upon ship, of every size and configuration emerged. The last was a massive construct of flesh and biomass. It dwarfed even capitol ships and not even a plasma lance could hope to pierce its armor. However despite its seeming invincible nature, it was actually just a splinter of a larger fleet and it was dying.

Whatever force or intelligence that controlled and organized the mighty fleet was powerful indeed, its psychic powers controlling trillions upon trillions of organisms. However, it could not do the impossible. It could feed its armies and listen to its armada cry out in warning but it could not take any action, other than the one it was conduction currently, to fix the problem.

The damage was on an unmanageable scale, not the impossibly large, for the fleet had destroyed planets and even star systems in its life time; no, the damage was on the impossibly small scale.

In fact, microscopic, smaller than microscopic; it was on the molecular scale. The adaptability of the swarm depended on constant change and maintenance. This sort of genetic manipulation could only be done by one organism; the norn queen.

In this organism lies the cornerstone of the tyranids; their adaptability and their life. This key organism was nowhere to be found in the fleet; not in any of the countless ships or bio-barges.

The pseudo-life (more like instinct) controlling the ship tried to remember the exact time that it had become aware of the norn queen's absence. The fleet had just separated from a larger one and the instinct had memory nodes that told him of a scent; a calling, to appease the ship ravenous hunger. Driven by this hunger, the ship had been…attacked, although no defense was triggered. As it navigated through the warp, there had been…promises of sorts, images, textures of food, life…of prey.

Thinking this voice to be one of its many instincts that governed its more mundane functions, the pseudo- intelligence turned its course away from the protection of its kin. Once again in the warp, the normal emanations of the fleets shadow stopped; they were smothered from some other creature. The calm of the warp was rent by turbulence and disturbance. It was in that storm that the norn queen had been destroyed. An arm of some force had inflicted itself on the mighty bio-ship.

Being a comparatively young ship, and having little interaction with the forces of the other realm, it had ignored the force until it was too late. Now the norn queen was gone and there was nothing to keep the life of the Tyranid fleet from degrading.

In it panic however, the ship had caught a whiff of salvation; an object that the being could not comprehend, almost inconsequentially small, but it drew the ship with an insatiable pull. The object offered the stability that the tyranids needed.

Thus, the ship had located the object and its planet but just as the object was close at hand, it had disappeared, taken by the hands of the metal beings, and it was lost for a time. It was found again, and a full attack had been directed to secure the object on the rocky desert planet but again it had disappeared.

Even worse, the pull, the scent of the object was gone. The object was gone, hidden, destroyed? Still the ship and its tendrils searched space for it. And they would not stop until they found it.

**Chapter 35: A Duel**

Creed, Caff and Saide walked down the center of the cargo bay, calling to attention to the troops as they went past. The troops and their inquisitiveness had been held at bay somehow during the last couple of days, so Saide had assembled them to inform them of their situation. However, that was only the ostensible reason for the meeting. The real reason was that Saide has a pretty good idea of what they were going tp do after they got their engines back. In order for the vague plan to work, however, they needed to transform the PDF into an effective fighting force.

This was both easier and harder than it sounded. It was easier because the PDF had been fighting on Sargos II, repressing the rebellion there. Because of that, both the troops and the commanders were actually already veterans. This made them wildly better than most PDF units due to their previous war experience.

On the other hand, the rebellion was two years ago, and many of the troops were rusty. The fact that they had been able to stage an effective fighting retreat in Durmen, was mostly due to the trooper's own senses of preservation, rather than instinct.

Saide knew that he could count on 1st squad, as they had been together the longest, for all years of the rebellion and during the idle; they had served together in the same mining unit; all except for Saide who had gotten an administrative job.

Saide didn't know if he could count on the other squads. They were a collection of men and women, who may or may not have served during the rebellion. In addition, not all of them had the camaraderie that 1st squad did.

All these things were running through Saide's mind as he walked up to a pile of cargo crates to address the troops. He noticed that Elban was nowhere to be found and although he didn't notice it, Kane was absent also.

He got atop the boxes. "PDF, I've got news of our situation" There were a few cheers, but not many looked hopeful.

"We should be able to regain engines in about a week or so." There were many groans.

"Hey, we've been here for almost a month! What are those cogboys doing down there?" one guardsman shouted.

"I assume you are referring to Stevan and Arnon, our esteemed colleges from the mechanicum. They have been working 72 hour shifts since this whole thing began, working out a spaceship worth of problems, but please, if you think you could do a better job, go for it." Saide responded dryly. He hated racism, even if the race was cyborg.

"Are we allowed to go through the crates?" Another guardsman asked. Saide noticed that Voor looked eager for an answer.

"I talked to Don and consulted some prior captain's logs; all this stuff was things that he bought and was planning on selling, so he wasn't just transporting other people's things. That's important but no one realizes; in order for our plan to work, we have to start from a clean slate. Were we to become known messing with other people's cargo, we could never become traders.

"To make a long story short; yes, you can go through all the crates." That'll keep the trouble makers out of my hair for long, long time. He looked at Voor, who flashed him one of his trademark grins; all teeth. There were a few smiles at his last comment.

"And all drugs will be confiscated" Saide added. Some of the smiles vanished. That many are addicted? This will be harder than I thought. Voor looked ready to protest.

I guess I have to lay down my hand to explain. I had hoped on explaining after we got our engines working.

"Let me tell you why though. Stevan and Arnon were testing some of the minor systems just to make sure they were still functional. They are still offline by the way because power is being redirected to life support back up, food preservation, and the machines that Stevan is using to fix the ship. However, when he tested the ships long range communications array, we were able to pick up a ship dock near here."

"Greynor and I have been talking abou this for quite some time, and he contacted some of this…friends there. He arranged for our body to become official traders, continuing Don's friend's trading business. Any objections to that course of action?"

"Objections? Traders make bank!" Voor yelled out. The crowd laughed. Now for the poison dart inside the tart…whatever a tart is…

"Well then, its settled. Training will resume tomorrow!" Saide said. The crowd went silent.

One man voiced the opinion of the rest of the body. "What? Why do we need to train? I don't mind fighting and all, but I'd rather stay alive and…make bank as Voor said, then die and make bank!" I bet he thinks that trading involves just riding around in a space ship making money…Well for regular trading that's not far off.

"Let me explain. The best way to make money is through things called barriers to entry. This means that harder a job is to do, or get training for, the more money you get paid. Thos of you who know how to use a diamond cutter, you know what I'm talking about, and I'm sure your friends do also. That extra thousand credits sure is fine isn't it?" Some of the group nodded.

"Well I'm going to apply the same idea to us. Sure we could just become traders and make a profit but the real money to be made is in hazardous trading, real high risk stuff that no one else will touch. These nobles and people with money will do anything; pay anything; to have their way, even if it isn't feasible or safe. You know what happens? The price they're willing to pay skyrockets because no one else will take the job."

He looked at the crowd's response. Many of them were not very well educated, probably the reason they joined the PDF in the first place. Saide had a plan, and just as they followed his instructions on the battle field, they would follow his instructions here. Or so he hoped.

"So the assignments we get are likely to be treacherously close to the outer fringes of the Imperium. The chances of us being attacked are very high, and although it seems that Don's friend did a good job of augmenting our ship and arming it…" He swept his hand in the direction of one of the massive laser batteries arranged around the ship. "The chances are, we'll be boarded or we'll be forced to board. We need all the combat training we can get.

"Wait, so we're not changing a lot are we?"

"Not really" Saide admitted.

"But think of the money!" Voor interjected, seeing the crowd's reaction. "How much more are we talking here, Saide?"

"I've run some numbers, probably somewhere around triple pay but…" He was shouted down with cheers; everyone was ecstatic. Looks like that did the trick, although I would rather have a force motivated by…He looked closer at the faces of his men. He realized that they were happy, not because they were promised cash, but because they knew that they were under command of someone they trusted, someone who would hold their best interests in mind.

"Squads dismissed." Saide concluded. To his surprise and enjoyment, almost everyone saluted before they left.

Because of his former armored job, Virgil had little to no experience foot slogging past what they taught in basic training. Saide therefore assigned him quartermaster status, which boiled down to : open the crates (most of which contained weapons) and then make sure that the squads were armed.

To virgil's surprise he found everything an infantry man could ever want. There were guns, ammo, charges, uniforms, and body armor. In some of the larger containers, Virgil even found small artillery pieces and heavy weapons, although there were no vehicles that Virgil had found so far. Although, those large ones in the back, inaccessible now, might be sentinels…They've got the right shape to them, and they would be in the back to distribute the weight of the ship better since the engine seemed to be front side…

He later bumped into Saide and they talked about their armament situation. Saide and he both decided that the only way Don's friend could have gotten all the material in the ship was if he had stolen directly from the Departmento Munitorium.

No matter the way they were obtained, they were soon put to good use. Creed, who seemed to have gotten over his prior resentment of Saide, poured all of his energy into drilling the men to his and their greatest ability. Caff actually took a back seat role in disciplining the troops, acting like their old captain used to, aloof and removed from the front, but earning more respect because of his tactical prowess.

Creed yelled out another command to the new squad which jolted Saide awake. After a few moments of cursing himself for falling asleep, he glanced at his chronometer. He had been asleep for half an hour. He felt a sudden and awful feeling of realization. His last order had been to do laps around the ship until he told them to stop.

"Damn it you useless excuses for guardsmen" Creed yelled while violently pointing at a target constructed of a spare uniform. "What do you see there?" He leaned in close to the poor guardsman who had missed the target drastically.

"I…umm" He stammered.

"You 'umm' what? This man is still alive; if this were an enemy soldier you would be dead right now. Pathetic!"

Creed looked over the results of the other 10 men. "Disgraceful; I'm surprised you didn't become nid food with aim like this. What did you do, just spray your lasgun the entire time and hope to hit something? Regardless, all going…"

"Excuse me sir", said the guardsman in question "But you seem to have overlooked Seymor's target."

"And if I did?" Creed spat as he turned to see the target in question, fully expecting more proof of the squads ineptness. His eyes lit up. There were two direct shots in the target. One in the head and the other in the torso. Both would have been instantly fatal had the target been a real person.

"Now that's what I want to see!" He approached Seymor and put his hand on his shoulder. "If half of you were as good as this boy here, we'd be veteran material." Seymor blushed but his squad mates gave him dark looks, not wanting to be shown up by a mere child.

"Seymor, you're free to go. The rest of you…" He snarled "…get to sit here and shoot until you actually hit something besides the back wall. His command was greeted with grumbles. "What was that?" He yelled.

"Yes, sir" the squad responded quickly. They knew better than to get Creed more angry than he already was; they knew it would be easier to comply than to complain. Creed dismissed Seymor to whatever he did with his spare time and went to report to Saide.

Saide quickly realized how lucky he was to have a squad of veterans. They were obviously rust, but after only a handful of days, they were operating with an efficiency that would have satisfied even the strictest commissar. Behind 1st squad's joking exterior lay one of the best squads in the sector, honed by decades of fighting rebellion.

Since he was satisfied with their performance, he decided that his time would be better spent reviewing the progress of other squads.

He found himself wandering admist the endless boxes and guardsman quarters towards the old wrestling ring. Zell was inside reteaching the basics of hand to hand combat to the clumsy squad before him.

"No no no. No like that at all. Your stance is too ope, your footing is off. Any opponent with half a brain is going to do…" he swept his arm in a perfectly executed flourish, making his opponent drop his weapon…" That" He finished and looked up at Saide. He saluted." Hello Captain; how nice of you to join us! Care to partake in some instructional fencing?"

"Fencing" When did you learn to fence" Saide said, barely realizing that he was talking to Zell, who apparently knew a little of everything.

"Well, during my three week stay at the commissariat of course." The troops seemed impressed by this, even though the only commissar they had known had had a stick so high up his ass that it came out the top of his head.

"Don't be so impressed" Saide cautioned the squad seeing their expressions. "He's been everywhere at least once. But yes, I do think that I should try, just to make sure I'm not rusty. Emperor knows it has been a while. "

Zell handed Saide an extra foil. I don't want to know where this came from. According to Caff, guardsmen in this PDF seemed to carry around rather unorthodox things. Could Zell have actually brought fencing foils? He laughed silently at his own comment.

Saide took the blade and nodded to Zell, who did likewise. They took up opposite side in the ring and faced each other.

This was to be a fencing match, although the troops could learn a few things about combat style, the main focus of hand to hand combat in the army was to dispatch your opponent as quickly as possible. There was no such thing as dirty fighting in the guard, especially when half your opponents wouldn't think twice about spitting you alive over a fire.

Saide heard the attack but never saw it, the blade moved so fast. He ducked and the swing went whistling over his head. Did I make a mistake in agreeing to this?

Zell faced him again, straight faced, betraying no indication of where his next attack would land. Siade decided to take the offensive in Zell's moment of indecision. He swept his blade forward in a thrust. Zell drew back his own weapon connecting with Saide's and sweeping it aside easily. In one fluid movement, Zell changed from defense to attack and swept his sword in a broad cut that arced upwards. Sparks flew as Saide's weapon momentarily met Zell's in a clumsy block.

"Little out of practice I see" Zell commented. Saide stayed silent but shifted his feet to allow him a more offensive stance. He twirled the blade, slashing sideways. Zell blocked the attack. Finally, Saide slashed downward, changing directions yet again. Zell easily batted the blow out of the way and laughed. Suddenly, Saide noticed Zell's foot position change, he was on his toes about to move forward. Saide had just enough time to bring up his guard before he was struck by Zell's own attack.

He was trying to taunt me there, and it almost worked. But let's see how he holds up to the same treatment.

"Not bad but let's see how long you can keep it up!" Saide suddenly attacked on all sides. Only Zell's intuition could block them all.

The two danced back and forth across the ring, each one parrying the other's advances, never slipping, never letting a blow by.

"Say, I was thinking about this, but don't you think we'd be showing them a little more if we actually sword fought? I don't think they are going to need to know how to challenge a noble to an honor duel any time soon." Zell commented. Hrm its like he read my mind. I don't think I can beat him in this civilized style of fighting. Commasariat or not, he is one good fencing champion.

The two took a step back and traded in their weapons.

Zell handed Saide a training sword which was no more than a overused, extremely dull combat blade which had belonged to an actual guardsman at some point or another by the looks of the weapon.

The same dance commenced, albeit with actual power behind the swings a few good kicks and punches in between, and slower hit time. But finally, Saide saw his opportunity. Zell had lunged his blade forward and had taken a step forward in doing so, leaving his lower body exposed. Before Zell could bring his leg back, Saide slammed his foot down on Zell's lead foot.

Zell tried to respond, and almost clipped Saide right between the eyes, but fortunately Saide moved his head in time and swept out with his left hand catching Zell in the stomach, just at the man had tried to take a breath.

Zell crumpled. Saide threw down the combat blade and helped Zell up. Zell held his hand up to the crowd both as a sign that he was ok and so that he could silence them. "Let…ugh, this go to warn you that in almost every situation your opponent might do something…ugh, unexpected." He nodded to Saide and shook his hand. "You are all dismissed. Be back here in three hours for more training."

The two watched the guardsmen leave before starting their conversation.

"how did you do that? When did you learn to swordfight with such skill? Zell started.

"I might ask you the same thing" Saide responded.

"Well, you know, I did learn to fence in the commissariat but that's not where I learned it all. I come from a rather wealthy family, that why I was able to be rejected everywhere before I was sent to Sargos. One of the few activities I was able to learn as a …privileged individual was how to fence. Ironically enough, not for defense but because it was expected of me, being the son of a noble. I have been fencing and sword fighting all my life. But how about you? I know you and Captain used to knock blades but that was astounding; I never hit you once!"

"Lets say that Sargos wasn't my first post in the Imperial Guard. You become good at the blade when you are forced to tear each street by hand from the enemy.

"Ah." Responded Zell, "Well, I'm going with the troops to eat; are you coming also?" Saide thought for a second

"I've got to check up on Creed but yes. I'll join you when I can. The two parted ways.

**Chapter 36: Training**

Creed stood next to a trooper, still at the firing range. "Ivan, I still don't see a lasmark on that dummy; we went over this before, do you know what that means?"

"Latrine duty?" The poor trooper guessed glumly.

"No!" Creed shouted, "It means that you are now DEAD! If that were a real enemy he would have gutted you alive with a return volley by now. When both sides have the potential of killing in one shot, it is imperative that we get the first volley. However, if that first volley doesn't hit…"Creed raised his voice, "Then it is of NO FRAKING USE TO US, just like you are of no use to us now! Keep firing until you hit him" Creed finished, disgusted.

He shook his head and looked over to Seymor who had already returned from dinner. The trooper was standing in the middle of the shooting range practicing his aim. Creed watched intensely. In a blur of second, Seymor charged and fired his lasgun, the ubiquitous beam of red light vanished from Creed's eyes to show him the combat dummy…without a helmet…or a head.

Creed was astonished. So those last shots this morning really weren't just luck. This boy actually has some real talent!

"Come with me" Creed said. Seymor, eager to please his superior, followed him through the maze of crates and boxes to another practice area. It was here that the specialists of the platoon were learning. Mostly that meant just 1st squad veterans teaching everyone everything.

Voor saluted to Creed as he passed, probably because he was doing something shady, not out of respect. Lechor and Hessert were lugging heavy weapons out of a crate with Virgil overseeing the process, data-slate in hand. The other guardsmen were milling around until they could practice with the heavy weapons.

Creed took Seymor around a particularly tall set of crates. Arranged in a line was the armory that they had compiled. Seymor stared in awe at the sheer number and variety of weapons. They transverse the aisles until Creed found what he was looking for. He grabbed the gun off its holster and checked to make sure they had enough ammo for it. They did. Creed told Virgil to mark off the weapon as they left.

"Excuse me sir, what sort of weapon is that?" Seymor asked Creed, as Creed moved a target much further back.

"It's a long-las, mainly used by marksmen. It has much more of a kick but fires an entire charge in a handful of shots meaning that it can pierce even the toughest infantry armor. You've shown promise and I want to see what you can do. If fires the same way as a regular lasgun, but you'll want too kneel at first because of the recoil…right, like that. See if you can hit that target I put up. "

Seymor stared at the target, which seemed miles away. He shrugged and balanced the lasgun. The long –las fired with a subdued crack because the silencer was not on. The shot went wide and scored the metal crated they were using as a backboard. Seymor looked disappointed.

"try again" Urged Creed, "balance it more and hold it up to your shoulder, good"

Again the las barked its shot. Seymor scowled even though he was sure he'd hit it the second time.

"Wait, put it down for a second, I think that you might have nicked it that time." The two walked over to see the damage. The target dummy still stood; Seymor started to scowl even more. Creed stared at the dummy; something was off about it. Then he realized, it was missing an arm.

"Congratulations! I think I might need to move you from your current squad "Creed said eyebrows raised. "That's all I need to see. Consider the long-las yours; learn to work it and talk to virgil when you need more ammo. You are dismissed trooper. "

Creed allowed himself a smile. If that boy doesn't get himself killed, he'll make specialist in no time.

Saide saw creed dismissing a trooper at the firing range and signaled to him. Creed came over with something Saide hadn't seen in a long time; a smile. Emperor knows if we had more of those, we'd be in a better situation. Hell, on Creed no less; someone must have saluted him without being asked…

"Why are you so happy" Saide asked as he drew near.

"Come look at this!" he gestured at what was left of the firing dummy.

"Impressive, looks like a long-las mark."

"Yes, from all the way over there" he pointed to the firing line.

"That is impressive; I always knew you were a good shot, but it looks like you're specialist material!"

"Hah! That shot wasn't fired by me Saide. Seymor fired that"

"Seymor?" Saide asked. Apparently I don't know all the troopers who made it. That's what comes of having such separate platoons; no one knows each other.

"Yeah, a boy about this tall, brown hair."

"You mean the medic?"

"No, that's Menon. They look the same; might actually be related. They were both part of that handful of survivors from 4th platoon. Him and Menon decided not to stay. "

"Good thing too. If he wasn't so young, I bet he would have been promoted by now. " Creed continued.

"Well, don't jump the gun; keep an eye on him and see how he does. If you want to, I've got some guys up in 1st squad who could train him. Keep them out of my hair for a while also.

"That sounds good. Are you going to get some food?" Creed asked.

"Yeah, Caff said he'd meet me. Plus we haven't gotten all the officers together in a while." Saide pointed out.

"Hrm, speaking of procedure; when I got the long-las out for Seymor, I could not help but to notice our armory. I found sheer number of items rather impressive." Creed commented, looking at Saide for a reaction.

"Indeed. Virgil's having to recruit the chefs into helping him unload the stuff. Apparently both 2nd and 3rd platoon chefs both made it and came with us"

"Ah, interesting" Creed frowned, "but as I was saying…how well armed are we exactly? Can we afford to be using so many shots training?"

"Creed" Saide slapped an arm around the sergeant. Creed jolted. "We have enough weapons to arm two companies!"

"Where did it all come from?" Creed asked.

"Well, I've speculated…I'll tell you later. Greynor and his guys are a little too interested in the stuff and where its whereabouts if you ask me. I'll tell you more at dinner."

"Of course" Creed replied and followed the captain down the hallway.

The two were now in the hallways that lead to the cockpit. A line snaked its way down the corridor, presumably for food. Fortunately it moved fast, and the two found themselves in the large room, that, only a couple of days before, they had used as a conference room.

Because the ship was never designed to accommodate eighty plus people, there was not where near enough room for all the men inside the room. Voor and the rest of 1st squad were fighting off the rest of the squads for possession of the few tables and chairs.

They looked up sheepishly when Saide and Creed entered. "I assume you want these tables, sirs. I apologize for the inconvenience." Voor bowed graciously before slipping out of the room. He's up to something again…Does the man ever stop?

Creed and Saide sat down and found that the rest of the command had joined them, excepting Kane and Elban, both of whom were absent again.

But they were not the only people who were missing from the assembly.

"I assume Stevan and Arnon are still in the engine room?" Saide asked.

"Affirmative; I think they've been working since we got here. You've got to give it to them; they know how to work." Virgil commented.

"Looks like Don's not here either. I haven't even seen him since the escape." Virgil noticed.

"Forget the escape, I've never met the man!" Voor said.

"Thone! Where did you come from? Didn't you just leave?" Saide asked, confused.

"Sure, but then I remembered how great the chow was that the 2nd squad chef made. I mean, how could you resist this stuff?"

"Wait a second, Voor, what the frak do you think you're doing?"

"Eating?" Voor responded without changing expression.

"NO! Just because you somehow convinced Elban to give up his room doesn't make you an officer." Saide said.

"Hey, I've got more experience than ninety percent of these soldiers, Elban included. Heck, Vrigil isn't an infantry officer, he shouldn't even be here! No offense Virgil."

Virgil glared at Voor. Creed intervened.

"Voor, this is why we have not given you command despite your experience. Plus, Virgil outranks you now. He is our quartermaster. "

"Wait, that was an official promotion?" Voor sputtered.

"Yes, now clear out soldier!"Creed growled. Voor grabbed his plate and stalked out.

"Now that that's taken care of, how goes the training?" caff asked. Some reported positively, however Creed complained about his men.

"If it wasn't for Seymor, I would have despaired. They are all classic PD, not a single one actually ready for battle."

"I would say the same" echoed Zell "Except for Menon. He received some real medical training at some point. Kid knows almost as much as I do."

"Not likely" Caff scoffed.

"At medical things. No one knows more than me when it comes to good general knowledge."

"Like fencing and ship procedure?" Saide pointed out.

"Exactly" Responded Zell, "Can't get far in life without knowing how to disarm your opponent's sword in at least thirty seven different ways"

"ha ha, but back to business. As you know, Greynor and I got the trading job we were talking about. The only problem is that to distribute goods we need a license. I'd try to forgo one, but apparently, according to Zell here, most of our routes will takes us to space platforms, and those are fiercely guarded by the imperium and by other merchants. Only legal thieves are allowed" Saide explained.

They spent the next hour conversing about the details of their plans while their food got cold. After they had finalized everything Saide gave them one last warning.

"Remember, the reason we're keeping battle ready is that ships like ours get boarded all the time, especially where we are going. Get everyone ready by the time we have our engines back. Dismissed." They dispersed.

**Chapter 37: The End Of The Drift**

While the rest of the troops were congregating, Elban walked slowly through the twisting crate jungle near the back of the ship's cargo hold. Everyone was clustered near the front since it was closer to the utilities. That meant that the back of the ship was relatively untouched and devoid of life.

The lights overhead flickered and the 3-men-tall boxes cast the entire area into shadow. The environment matched Elban's feelings. Ever since his demotion he had been stuck in the stormy seas of depression.

It didn't help that Sargos remained firmly stuck in his mind. He was originally from Sargos II; the agricultural planet, and its trees and soft waving crops tortured his mind as he remembered his home town. All of it was gone; vaporized and incinerating into nothingness, he reminded himself and slipped his hands deeper into his pockets, his frown growing.

He was diverted from his sulking by a curious sound. It was almost… almost a cry, or a scream. Like some small child wailing. Impossible. There are no children on this ship. Menon and Seymor are the youngest but they are not even that young and sound nothing like…The sound ripped through his mind again.

For some reason, he could tell that the sound wasn't even that loud, just pervasive somehow. He looked around for the source amid the flickering lights, but could spy nothing. An involuntary shiver ran through him as the shadows danced. Left with no opportunity, and somehow transfixed by the sound, he followed it, seeking its origin.

His eyes spied a light coming from a crate room like his own. There were tossed aside personal effects lying near the entrance he saw as he approached. He brushed away the tattered black cloth serving as the door and entered. A smell hit his nose as he entered, but he could not tell quite what it was. Whatever it is, its rank.

He edged closer to the light, creeping silently now. He saw a figure silhouetted by the lamp, it seemed to be a small boy grasping his head violently. As Elban crept closer, his boot squealed on the metal.

All at once there was the sound of ringing metal. Elban realized that the light had apparently tricked his eyes. Kane spun around holding something metal which he slipped into his sleeve quickly. A spoon?

"Who? You… what the frak are you doing here?" He asked, rising as he did so, his anger rippling across his scarred face as shadows dripped along his eyes and mouth.

Elban startled. "I uh"…"I thought I heard a… something crying" he stammered. Trying to divert the question by asking his own, he countered, "What were you doing and why are you so far away from everyone else?"

Elban felt a strong disorienting sensation, as if something were being squeezed into a bottle. Kane's face softened but not by much.

"I was just eating dinner" He lied, gesturing to the plate of half eaten food and waving the spoon in Elban's face. "And as for why I am here? None of your fraking business! And for that matter, get the frak out of my quarters!"

Elban, still too confused to reply did just that and got the frak out of Kane's quarters, trying to comprehend what had just happened. He shivered as he left. The life support must be ancient if its failing like this…on and off. Maybe I should tell Stevan about it…No, he has enough to worry about without having to come all the way out here for one malfunctioning life support unit.

Elban walked back into the maze of boxes and crate, and Kane returned to his…whatever it was that Kane did with his spare time.

Elban's sulking and Kane's mysterious activities aside, everyone else worked and drilled as normal. Stevan and Arnon announced that they had made a "major break through with the thrice accursed equipment" The officers realized that they must have gotten the AI back online. Most didn't seem to care very much but Saide congratulated them on their dedication.

Another three days later, Don was found by Saide in dire need of water in his quarters, half asleep. Interestingly enough, when Don had described what had happened, and Arnon examined the door, he found that it had been apparently unlocked from both the inside and outside.

Following his release, Don got to be known by the troops and even better by the officers, who used him and Virgil to bounce ideas off of during meetings. Saide noticed that Don was a bit more withdrawn and haggard, but chalked that up to battle weariness.

And so life fell into formula; the novelty of the situation succumbing to the drudge of the every day schedule. Another week passed with little change, excepting Stevan and Arnon's progress.

Aboard the Omnis Arcanium, preparations were being made for Jada and Anath's departure. Since their mission required them to travel in secret, they had to make use f a smaller ship. However, even if their departure wasn't secret, their business was; Vidya made sure of that.

The two boarded and assumed command of a vanguard cruiser by the name of Divine Retribution with an unheard of detachment of two squads of the vaunted 1st company terminators along with two other squads of veterans, all of whose renowned skills were required on this secret mission. Jada and Anath's orders superseded even 1st companies; their task ordered from Vidya himself.

Their craft dropped from the armada and jumped into the warp, leaving Vidya to his contemplations. He stared out of the view port, lost in thought, but not so ensconced that he didn't hear and feel the librarian coming silently into his chambers.

"Sir…" The man started.

"No" Responded Vidya quietly. "I recognize this risk for what it is. The ebb and flow of fate is rarely easy to detect, even for me." He turned around to face the librarian. "I made my decision, although I understand your concern. You would champion Jada above Anath, this is easy to see, as are its reasons. Jada is the best of us all; he has shown courage in extraordinary situations and has never failed his squad once in battle. However, Anath is needed to…even the fate if you will."

"With all due respect sir; are you suggesting that…"

"Jada is untrustworthy? Not at all. In fact he is too trustworthy, if that can be a fault. His mindset and actions are sure and are a paragon of everything a space marine should be. However, this makes him predictable." He slammed his hand on the back of his throne, causing even the floor to tremble.

"You must understand. This is a game in which predictability is a curse, whatever form it takes. Anath upsets this predictability. Although he appears to be less…perfect… than Jada, he has shown unsurpassed tactical brilliance, and the ability and intellect to surpass preoccupation with honor. He has shown that he can change fate. There are those who flow along within the stream of time, tossed from side to side by the fluctuations of the universe and there are those who are lynchpins, rocks in that stream, around which the water is disturbed."

Vidya paused and studied the librarian before continuing.

"It is this disturbance that will ensure a beneficial outcome in the future…if you understand me…"

"I see only your actions. What you speak of is hidden to me. I speak from my abilities and my observations only, you understand. From what I can see, you…favor Anath. And it has something to do with his actions on Tremorkor and the rescue of the chapter artifactician."

"…you always had the ability to cut through things…that is your gift. Yes, Tremorkor was one of those moments when fate was…diverted if you will. The stream perturbed. He had a choice, as I learned from talking to him on the subject after the event. The artifact…a sword I believe… and its housing were under threat by the Orks, who has laid waste to Tremorkor.

He and his team were under threat from all sides and time was slipping its noose over his neck. He could only fit one of the items on the ship he had been given, either the artifact and its case, a massive shielded pillar, or the artifactician and his crew."

"He left the artifact" The librarian said with disgust. "No worse; he destroyed it with his own hands."

"To ensure it could not fall to the Orks."

"A timeless relic, surrendered to the void, for some...man"

Vidya turned again, sharply, his eyes flashing.

"You speak of a fellow battle brother!" Vidya cautioned. "Such thinking is inexcusable and may I remind you that the same artifactician detected the gene seed; the holiest of all relics."

The librarian made to speak but Vidya silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"I appreciate your cognitive abilities but you must remember that you hold no special rank. You are here and able to speak with me through whim and my whim alone…Think about your words librarian. You may leave"

The space marine looked at Vidya for half a second before slowly turning and leaving the room.

Finally after two months of drifting, Arnon and Stevan were able to fix the warp engine. This news was instantly known to the entire ship, as Arnon came out shouting "The fraking devil machine works! We did it!" at the top of his augmented lungs. Stevan came out a moment later to confirm, yes, the drive was working.

The jubilation was palpable. After two months of Creed's drilling, everyone was only too glad for a disruption. Don and Saide gave the word and within seconds, the ship tore into the warp.

Everyone was on edge, but Saide already had a plan formulated. He and Greynor had been able to contact some of Greynor's "friends" under a false name. It turns out that a trader license would be required. Therefore, Saide and Voor would attempt to obtain the license the proper way, through the miles of bureaucratic red tape imposed by the imperium for tax resources.

In case this plan met resistance (which it would), Greynor and his pals were to obtain a license through…less legitimate means. Meanwhile, everyone else would be allowed shore leave, at least for the duration of the stay.

The days spent in warp seemed to melt by, one after another in quick succession and before Creed could drill everyone to death, they had arrived at starport 1019, a refueling and ship construction port that was, quite literally, in the middle of nowhere; they were still in the outer reaches of the galaxy.

Amidst the bustle of space traffic, Saide saw the multi-chromatic ebb of the warp give way to the usual black of space. Before Saide floated a massive superstation, a veritable planetoid surrounded with over ten thousand other craft. It served as the refueling and ship building and maintenance depot for the quadrant, and since there was not much out there, it was the only one besides the now annihilated one that orbited the Sargos system.

In addition, because of the lack of other ports or inhabited planets, it also served as the imperial strong point, enforcing the will of the emperor even in this backwater.

Since no one else knew how to dock a ship, Zell took over with fine steering. As the barge got closer to the wall of steel that was the side of the station, they found themselves hailed by the station master.

"Unknown ship, please relay identification information at this time", the bureaucrat droned with all the excitement of a guardsman being told that they were scheduled for latrine duty for the fifth time that week.

"Crap," Zell waived Don over." What is the identification number of this ship?" He asked frantically.

"Do we even have one?" the command officers hysterically threw around papers and searched the computer on the bridge looking for anything resembling a number.

"There nothing here!" Caff growled angrily.

"Unknown ship. I am awaiting a response. Further failure to follow protocol will result in…questioning" The voice had taken on an evil glee to it. …bastard is like a little runt who gets picked on at school and is taking his frustration out on ants with a magnifying glass. This is probably the only excitement he's seen in ages.

"Frak it!" Saide cursed. "I wanted to keep a low profile! Zell…" he turned to the man and gesticulated wildly, "what do we do? We don't have the ID for this ship; what do we do? I'm a fraking ground trooper, I don't know about this stuff!" He repeated.

"Gah!" Zell exclaimed as he was verbally beset upon. "It's probably illegal; it wouldn't have one then; it would also explain the deviation from standard building protocol. Erk!" he saw the starport signal again.

Before the other man could deviously set upon their ship with police craft, Zell snatched the com, sweat now running down his neck. "Ship identification number is 2-18-9-2-5, special procedure protocol 500. Zell waited, "Common, work damn it" He said under his breath.

"Oh, sorry, I believe you meant special procedure protocol 1000; did you not?" There was a threatening air around the other man's voice.

"Ah yes, but of course! Special procedure protocol is of course a private ship" He answered, drawing out the word "private".

"Heard loud and clear; report to…" and then listed off a set of instruction on where to dock. "Just follow the blue lights in and report to the coms center to receive your…private tour." The voice said, noticeably more cheerful than before.

"What was that?" Saide asked. "Where did you find the number?"

Zell started to laugh, as did Greynor.

"Zell didn't give them a number; he bribed the sucker" Greynor laughed.

"Sorry guys, we're out 1000 credits; it was the only thing I could think of."

"I guess it could have gone down worse" Saide said as the ship docked with the mammoth station.

"If we don't pay that guy though, he'll make our lives a living nightmare." Greynor warned.

"Agreed" Saide said, "We don't need any more trouble. Just pay the guy and get this trouble over with."

"Yes, sir. I will take care of it." Zell responded.

Saide breathed a sigh of relief as he looked around at the people ringing him and Zell. "Ok, 1st through 5th squads are free to go. Voor, with me. Greynor, find Kane and do what you got to do."

The various commanders exited the bridge to muster the troops for leave.

"Don, what are you going to do? You staying here, or do you want to leave?" Saide asked once everyone else had left.

"Saide" Don said gruffly. "I was trapped in my room for three days and on this ship for two months. No force in the world will keep me on this ship."

Saide laughed. "I'll meet up with you after we get the license." He turned to Zell, who he realized was still there awaiting more detailed instruction.

"You done with the docking stuff?" Saide questioned Zell who was flipping switches and running from station to station.

"yeah, I got everything covered here. I'm shutting off the engines since we're docked now…wait…the damn thing did it by itself. This AI module is either the best thing invented, or the most annoying.

Saide explained in detail what he wanted Zell to do and how to negotiate with the station master, that is to say, not at all. "Don't draw any attention to yourself. Overpay the guy if you have to; just keep his mouth shut. We've most likely got over two thousand illegal or stolen items in our hold, on board an illegal, non-standard ship, that is piloted with an alien heretical AI module…We don't want any loose eyes looking our way.

"yessir" Zell saluted, and went off to join 1st squad for muster.

In the cargo hold, the troops were already changed into civilian garb (one of the many, many, many things onboard the ship)

"…and remember, if any of you maggots makes trouble for us, he'll be doing laps around the station, not just the ship" Saide heard Creed yell as they exited along the boarding connector. Saide caught his eye and couldn't help cracking a smile. The station was the size of a very small moon.Gods, let's hope no one makes trouble. We'll never see the poor bastard ever again.

Creed saluted. "I'll keep these recruits from destroying anything while you're gone" Creed boomed as Saide followed the other troop off the ship.

**Chapter 38: Old Friends**

Although comical, the sight of sixty grown men crowding around a map station wasn't a rare sight; not at a starport with a size comparable to a small moon. It was easy to get lost, in fact, many made their business on such map stations, which charged three credits a view before turning maddeningly black.

However, Saide soon found the administratum building in all the mess. He and Voor ventured off straight while Greynor and his pals, who knew their way around somehow, slunk off into a side alley.

This left the rest of the guardsmen milling around the merchant street that ran the length of the station. Pretty soon one of the men found a bar and it all went downhill from there, much to Caff's chagrin.

The smell of a thousand exotic, but inexpensive, foods wafted from around Don as he sat with Caff at the bat. Behind them lounged most of the men, the rest pawning their few credits for items, alcohol and other trinkets.

Don looked down the table to find that Hessert had already challenged another large man to a drinking contest and the two had built up a crown. Zell and Lechor were cheering Hessert on and it seemed that neither of the challengers was ready to give away a victory; bottles spread around the floor like discarded rounds from a heavy stubber.

Even Elban seemed to mellow out, and through no effort of his own, seemed to have caught the eye of more than one woman, who now exchanged inane banter with the man. Don chuckled before he turned back to his drink.

"So how do you think this is going to go down?" He asked Caff.

"I guess the usual. Someone will get stone drunk, someone will get in a fight and pretty soon everyone will have been swindled out of their money."

Don guffawed, obviously already over his alcohol tolerance. "You can say that again!"

There was a pause before Caff turned to look at Don. "Say, what exactly where you up to before you got involved in all of this. I think I heard something about the guard?"

"Well, I think I'd better begin at the start as they say. I was a really stupid kid with stupid ideas about the stupid galaxy…" started Don, and pretty soon the two of them were exchanging stories and experiences just like the closest of friends.

Meanwhile, Saide and Voor were starting what would be the closest experience any of them had come to death: the imperial bureaucracy. Voor had dressed the part of a rogue trader and Saide as his second in order to convince them that they were legitimate. Voor actually looked the part quite well. He was festooned with sashes and a bandolier and he had finished the costume with a wide brimmed hat he had bought. Combined with his perpetual toothy grin, he resembled the stereotypical rogue trader.

They now approached the administratum building, which was an actual building in a cavernous room of the space port. From the building stretched a crowd of people. Visible from even the farthest point in the room. Saide groaned. "You've got to be fracking kidding me; is this the line for the trading licenses?" he asked an arbites officer who was keeping peace in the line.

"No, this is for all requests" Replied the man, before turning around to jab some unlucky person in the rib with his shock stick.

"Emperor above, this must be a mile long!" Saide stammered, horrified by the winding queue. "how is this even possible?"

"Listen pal," the arbites officer responded, standing above the collapsed body of the former agitator, "Don't cause any trouble or…" he palmed his shock stick with a loud smack.

"What choice do we have?" Saide said and got to the back of the line; Voor followed him.

After a minute of standing, the man in front of the inched forward a position.

"At least the line is moving" Voor commented with a grin.

"Oh shut up"

While this was happening, Greynor was searching for the man he had contacted earlier. That was easier said than done, as the station was ridiculously large. What complicated that task was that the place where he would most likely find him wouldn't even appear on a map.

Greynor's friends liked the shadows and as such, that's where they were now, in some back alley red light district, filled with the scum of space and all the undesirables that the station had in its closet.

A scantily clad girl called out to Greynor as he passed, beckoning from an establishment of questionable reputation.

"No, I'm on business" Greynor called out, "But maybe you could help me. Have you heard of a guy, about my height, name of Rodion?"

The girl paused as if to think. "Yeah, I've seen him around; you can find him about two blocks up in a place there; some sort of bar."

"Thank you kindly" Greynor said and continued his search, some of his men following him.

As Greynor approached the bar, the first thing he noticed was that it was built into the station itself. It was an actual building, unlike the sheet metal shacks that he had passed on his way to the place.

The bar reached from floor to ceiling and probably contained some sort of support column from the space station. Its size seemed to give it some legitimacy in a district filled with sleazy dives.

Greynor looked at the three men with him. Ostan, Gregor and Lucious met his glance and nodded. They were all ex-gang muscle and the guard had only reduced their brawler mentality by a small fraction. Greynor couldn't think of any other people he would want covering his back, especially in a bar like this one.

Speaking of covering my back…Greynor whirled around but Kane had left him a long time ago, for what reasons? Nobody knew. Ostan shrugged. "He was with us until that big intersection back there. To be honest I wasn't really paying that much attention to him." Lovely. My back up; perfectly attentive and always on guard…way to make me eat my words…or rather, my thoughts.

Greynor and his crew entered despite their reduction in number. Greynor quickly realized that despite the time he still remembered the social minutia that accompanied a meeting of this sort. He had Lucious, the biggest of the lot pull out a twisted metal club he had found on the ground, more for show than purpose as they were all armed with pistols and combat blades. However, it did make an impression, and that was what they wanted.

They stepped into the bar as one. Business was hot and not many people noticed the intruders. The group entered the gloomy crowded bar and stood in the corner, only barely illuminated by the colorful neon lights above them.

They had only paused a moment when they were approached by an unassuming young man. He would have looked out of place had not half of his face been missing. "I assume you're this Greynor character? Rodion has been expecting you; come into the back here."

Greynor caught Ostan's attention and the guardsman stood behind and waited for them. When dealing with these sorts it always helps to have a back up, even if it's only one person.

They followed a dimly lit corridor to the back of the building and then up a set of stairs. They emerged into a completely different bar. This one had fake crimson carpeting and gilded picture frames and was illuminated by glass hanging lights. Hugging the wall was a polished metal bar with more liquor than Greynor had even seen in his life, which was quite a considerable amount.

In the middle of the room was a raised platform where another scantily clad girl twirled and twisted provocatively. In the corners and around the room were luxurious tables with what looked like real leather and real wood for the seats and tables respectively. This room is meant for men with real cash. I'm not surprised that Rodion would be here. He always was one to love flouting his ill-gotten gains in front of others.

The man in question was a broad bald man flanked by two other men who could also have been rogue traders or body guards, possibly both, there was an odd hierarchy to the trading business.

Greynor sat down opposite him and allowed his body to melt into the opulent chair.

"Greynor, my friend! It has been too long!" Rodion flourished, "How have you been? Last I heard you'd gone straight after being sent to some mining planet."

"Me, a respectable member of our vast imperial society? You must be thinking of someone else" The accent rolled off his tongue like old times. Lucious almost blew the entire thing be flinching at the tone of voice. I was a different man then; if I had continued what I had been doing…well, I would be where Rodion is right now instead of the other way around. Too many lives though…too many lives.

"Nah, I've got a new deal now, trading and the like. I hear there's some money to be made!" He recovered boastfully.

"You're correct, as I was just talking to my friends here" Rodion motioned to the rogue traders nest to him."There's some fraking profitable routes out there. But let's cut to the chase." His voice almost lowering to a whisper, "What do you want from me?"

"Well, this route that you've so kindly described to me stops off in some heavily guarded areas. Places where an arbites eye costs a pretty credit. I figure it'd be more economically advisable to acquire a proper trading license. But I also hear that they're rarer to find than an intelligent ork!"

"Sure, sure" Rodion replied. "I can get you one of those, and quick too. But…" he trailed off.

"There's always a 'but' isn't there?" Greynor commented.

"So true my friend, so true, always is. It'll cost you"

"I expected so. So how much are we talking here?" He made up a figure that would have been his salary for the half year, had Sargos not been so cruelly destroyed.

"Is that what you think? Maybe the rumors where true then! These licenses go for about twice that now!"

"What!" exclaimed Greynor, almost rising to his feet, "why, I could bribe an inquisitor for less than that!" He exclaimed.

He suddenly realized that the room had gotten very, very quiet. At the mention of the inquisition, a couple of heads turned with violent faces. Rodion's own face darkened.

"You'd better not mention that particular institution again Greynor. They've been cracking down, hence the profits to be made by us that are left. My offer is as it is. Take it or leave it. " He said with less hospitality than he had shown before.

"No…no…"Greynor said quietly "I know a sale when I see one. I'll take your license. But I gotta be on my way…got business you know!" he made as to get up.

"Business? I haven't seen you in years!" Rodion said, some of his former excitement returning. "Least I could do is offer you and your men a drink."

Greynor considered. Well, it's not as if we are exactly wracked for time. We're on our own schedule now. And also, in this business, knowing people is a must. I've may have been out of it for too long.

"Sure thing Rodion" Greynor said, "but just one!"

The two looked at each other for a very long second before bursting into laughter.

"That's the Greynor I used to know!" Rodion exclaimed. The two commenced drinking until not a one had a credit left in their pockets.

Virgil and Zell walked along the empty corridor towards the flight control with the amazing sum that Zell had bribed the controller. The normal sounds of the station had downed to a dull murmur as it was 'night'.

'Night' in the station was essentially the station control manager dimming the lights but although that change was a simple one, it changed the atmosphere in the place to a frightening degree. It went from bustling mega-metropolis to vacant in some streets in about an hour. The station had its rough types and no one chanced going out during the night, especially when the arbites weren't around.

Twenty floors down, Saide and Voor had gone about a sixth of the way. To their increased horror, no one budged from the line. Nobody wanted to risk losing their place in line. Saide and Voor were forced to take shifts sleeping and keeping place in line.

At the twelfth rotation Saide reached down and woke Voor. He looked at Saide for a moment and said what was on the mind of every citizen in line: "This is fraking retarded".

Don and the majority of the men were sleeping in rented rooms. Only one officer was awake, and that man was Kane. He had made an appointment with his contact and the time had come to meet.

Like a shadow he darted from dark recess to dark recess avoiding the few arbite patrols that came his way. He was looking for a weapon he loved and always carried with him, however he had somehow left it behind in the Tyranid invasion.

With one fluid movement he slipped into a back corridor that was completely black. Operating from intuition and some sort of sixth sense he was able to run in the right direction. After what seemed like five minutes of solid running, Kane found the man he was looking for.

The hooded figure was crouched, but turned around upon Kane's arrival and straightened to talk to Kane. "Ah, Kane, I apologize for leaving you behind, but one does get several perks of being nobility. I hope there are no…hard feelings?" Kane didn't say anything rash; the hooded man was a killer, nobility or not and Kane knew when to keep his mouth shut.

"Ah good then. What bring you to my neck of the station?" The man hissed.

"I am in the need of some of your most potent products. I lost my vial on…or rather in a fire fight. Salazar, it needs to be strong but delayed."

"How specific a time?" The other man asked as he brought out a case, seemingly from the walls themselves.

"Just two minutes ought to do it. I like watching their face as they scream in pain. I find that it adds to the experience." Kane chuckled and twirled a wrist knife before accepting a vial and holding Salazar the money.

"Heh, heh, you were always a murderous sadistic bastard weren't you?" Salazar said with a strange grin. As Kane went to walk away Salazar gripped Kane by the wrist.

"…But wait…there's something else! You've got your talent back it seems; the old power has returned" he said almost triumphantly.

"Enough" Kane spat and freed himself from the old man's grasp. "And you better not talk to anyone, otherwise you can see just how much it has returned…" he said suddenly smiling, enjoying the change in superiority in the conversation.

The old man suddenly backed off very quickly. The tables had been turned. "I …I wouldn't think of saying anything" Salazar stammered.

Kane left as swiftly as he had come. It would be 'light' soon and patrols increased as it got closer to 'daylight'. But as he ran he got a twinge of premonition. He would be caught.

"Damn it all," he whispered to himself and readied a wrist blade, its small smooth edge hidden by his uniform's cuff.

Just as he scampered past another arbite officer, a commanding voice yelled "Freeze!"

Kane was like a deer in the headlights. His premonition had been real. He began to comprehend what that meant.

"Yeah you, skulking around. Hands where I can see them." Kane stood in the hallway and raised his hands.

"I do not know what you are talking about sir; I have done nothing. You have no reason to arrest me!" He protested. He knew it would not work. Another premonition.

"Nice try, I saw you coming from Salazar's place. We got him scouted out; we know the stuff he sells, the sick frak." The officer came closer, suddenly dismayed by something in Kane's body language.

"Hands behind your back!" he yelled.

As the officer went to handcuff Kane, he lashed out and caught him in the stomach with his foot. The air rushed out of the man with a surprised 'oof' and he dropped the pistol he had been carrying.

Before the man had recovered, Kane lay his hands on the man's helmet and concentrated. The arbites was paralyzed with fear as the room turned cold and the unmistakable smell of ozone came to his nostrils. His limbs went numb with fear and perhaps something else. He couldn't move; his mind raced.

With one burst of effort, Kane focused on his hands. His arm glowed sickeningly green, lighting up decade old sigils just under his uniform sleeve. His entire hand burned but Kane held on, a brilliant smile lit on his face from the eldritch phosphorescent glow. With a muffled thump the arbites skull ruptured beneath his helmet.

Kane let the body fall to the ground, clutching his arm in pain. Kane's grin only got larger as he dragged the body into the nearest trash chute. It led directly to an incinerator, leaving no trace.

Then with a spring in his step Kane slipped back into the inn before night ended, the vial safe in his pocket.

**Chapter 39: A Close Call**

Virgil and Zell were most definitely lost. They knew they had made a wrong turn somewhere, but they were not exactly sure where.

The station, still in night mode, offered no help, and the map stations only worked at day. Plus, they had no money to spare. They walked nervously down the hallway, squinting at the signs trying to reacclimate themselves.

A face leered back at them from one of a thousand side alleys before slipping back into the shadows. Zell checked to make sure that the knife he brought was still there. Virgil was unarmed. The trip was supposed to only take an hour.

As their footfalls resounded down the blue-white lit corridor, Zell thought he heard a sound.

"Hold on a sec; what was that?" He asked.

Suddenly and without any warning the lights turned off, leaving them in complete black.

"Fracking hells" Virgil cursed, groping around for a light switch.

"Hold on, someone's here" Zell warned. With the draw of an accomplished duelist Zell drew his dagger and not a moment too late.

His blade hit another and drew sparks. Fighting only by intuition, Zell held off the assaulter until Virgil could find the light panel. He switched it on, revealing the identity of the attacker.

He was nothing more than street scum, intent on their wallet. He was obviously willing to kill them for it. Zell and the man traded blows.

Virgil ran up behind the tramp and cracked him in the back of the head. However, the man didn't show any signs of pain and Virgil was cut across his left arm for his troubles.

"Frak!" Virgil cried out in surprise. Blood dripped from his arm and he quickly held his hand against the wound to stop the flow of blood. However, since the street rat was distracted by Virgil and intent on wounding him more, he didn't notice Zell who ran up and attempted to stab him in the neck, which would instantly disable and kill the opponent.

The man, who obviously had never fought any more than one person at a time, only saw the attack at the last second and jerked his own arm around to block the attack. He didn't make it in time, but instead of a fatal neck wound, the knife plunged into his shoulder blade instantly making him drop his own knife.

The man screamed in pain, and by this point didn't even want their money. His mind, under assault from pain, was reduced to its primal instincts and its choice was to fight or to run. He had chosen to fight.

"I'll fraking teach you to stab me. You're all fraking dead" He said through gridded teeth. In his rage he managed to get a solid kick off on Virgil, who doubled over, lucky not to have broken a rib. Satisfied that Virgil was out of the fight, the man drew a pistol and fired at Zell. Fortunately, since it appeared that the man could not use his left hand to fire, he tried to use the pistol with his injured arm. Because of this, Zell was spared a bullet to the body and instead the shot glanced off the wall behind him.

Zell responded by throwing his knife in a attempt to disarm the attacker. His throw was true and it stuck with a sickening sound in the already wounded arm. He again dropped his weapon in pain. The metal beneath their feet was now saturated with blood as the two both spied one of the nearby knives. The two traded a blow before the man realized that he already had a weapon…sticking out of him.

With visible agony, he wrenched the knife out of the bone and slashed at Zell, who slipped in the blood drenched smooth metal flooring and fell to the ground, completely helpless to the attacker's next move.

However, the fatal blow never came. As the street rat raised the knife to stab Zell, a small hole appeared above his eyes as a beam of concentrated light spattered his brain into useless grey matter. He collapsed on top of Zell, revealing Virgil with the pistol still outstretched in front of him.

Zell pushed the bleeding corpse away from him a slowly got to his feet.

"Are you ok?" He asked worriedly to Virgil who was still recovering from both the kick and the slash across his arm.

"I don't know. But flight command is bound to have medical personnel, its right over there by the way." He managed between heavy breaths.

Zell half carried Virgil to the well indicated office that was the flight coordinator's office. He smashed the door in with his foot and he dragged Virgil inside.

"I need a fraking medic kit!" he shouted. "Anyone!"

One man had more experience than Zell, being a retired medic himself. The two sat down in the waiting room while Virgil was tended to.

To make a long story short, they got Virgil cleaned up and delivered the bribe, ensuring that their passage to and from the station would go relatively unnoticed. Virgil was feeling better so the two made their way back to the same bar that the rest of the troops had established as theirs, much to the simultaneous chagrin and cheer of the owner.

Saide awoke to Voor's prodding. They had made it to the administratum building and were just about to enter when Saide's comm. Buzzed.

He reached down and turned it on.

"Saide? This is Greynor; I've got it."

"You've got to be fraking joking…" Saide muttered.

"What's up?" Greynor asked.

"Nothing. We'll meet where the rest are staying" He turned off the comm.

"He got it?" Voor asked.

"He got it" Confirmed Saide. Voor closed his eyes for a second and sighed.

"Can I borrow that?" He pointed to the vox set that Saide had just used.

"Sure" Saide said, not understanding Voor's intent.

Voor picked up the vox and messed with it some.

"Test, testing 1…2..3…" he said into the unit. His voice became amplified and resounded all around the huge clearing in the station for the administratum building.

"OK, folks at the back" he yelled and raised his hand, "how much for this spot?" Screams of monetary amounts overwhelmed the arbites protests.

"400? I hear 400? 500! Perfect, wait… was that…was that 700? 700! 700 folks, 700 credits for this space in line, so delectably close to the front…" At this point the closest arbites officer reached him. "I'll give you ten percent" Voor whispered nonchalantly. The arbites wandered off and turned away as if he was oblivious to the sale going on behind him.

"1000, anyone higher? Going once, going twice…Congratulations! 1000 it is!" he said to a very pleased looking noble.

Saide shot him a look as they were leaving. Voor pretended to ignore him and handed over the 100 to the guard. Finally Voor acknowledged Saide, "Yeah, I know that that kind of snobbery just makes the nobles think they can buy themselves anywhere and anything, but don't worry. That's why I stole his wallet!...and boy oh boy was he loaded!" Voor said excitedly as he searched through the bills.

"Voor…" Saide said threateningly. "Oh, ok…fine, you can have ten percent also." Voor said, and flashed a trademark grin.

Anath and Jada were sitting together in the relative dark of the command bridge. Their ship, the Emperor's Ire, had searched over a dozen planets in the last few days with no luck.

"Maybe we are going about this the wrong way" Anath ventured. "The chance of us finding them on a planet is small. They are probably in transit somewhere." Jada rubbed his head as if it ached.

"Fine then. What do you suggest?"

"I advise our navigator to send a message to all ports in range of our ship. We say we're the inquisition or stay anonymous and no one can learn of our mission."

"A message could take days. Plus our epsilon radiation sensors are very finely tuned. You told me this yourself" Jada countered.

"True, true" Anath admitted, "But a message would ensure the cooperation of arbites forces on almost all ports. I believe that this course of action would increase the possibility of finding him."

"Him…"Jada repeated. He paused. "What do you know of this man, this Don Ridman?"

"I know little more than you. He deserted the guard and was presumed dead. All his records were destroyed then and he was declared a traitor if alive. He was found on an unnamed planet where our geneseed was found and taken to the Omnis Arcanium, but after a warp storm he mysteriously escaped with our prized possession."

"He obviously has some sort of craft to have moved so fast. We can only assume he's somewhere in this sector. "

"That presumption sounds correct, but since his ship is obviously warp capable, every second we don't find him increases the search range. I will have admiral Kenshaw relay the message and I will have him include Don's description."

"Good, Don shall learn that no one can escape the wrathful justice of the space marines.

Two days after the events during the night, the ship was being loaded with cargo and Greynor had received the license from Rodion. Almost everyone was on board except for Don and Caff, who were still knocking back a cold one in their new favorite bar.

"…so then I took the plasma gun and cut down the biggest one I could see, and let me tell you , the smell of roasted orc flesh never gets out of your clothes!" Don finished and Caff laughed his head off.

"That reminds me of the time I was lost behind enemy lines on Sargos II. The command had me and my squads marked as dead, and the enemy had armor all around. We were huddled up in a ruined building when…" he cut off his sentence as several Arbites officers approached them wielding stun sticks and shotguns.

"Are you Don Ridman?" The one in lead asked.

"And if I am?" Don responded slowly, knowing that things were about to get very very messy in a second. "How can I help you officers?"

"You are arrest for crimes against the Imperium, as dictated to us by an Inquisitor Kenshaw along the most secure channels of communication. You must come with us. Now."

Don looked at Caff. Caff was calmly reaching for his laspistol, hoping the arbites wouldn't notice. They did.

"Freeze!" The lead one said. The others started to raise their weapons.

"Frak!" Don yelled as he smashed his bottle across the lead arbites' face, spraying the entire company with alcohol. The man went down. Don couldn't tell how bad the damage was witout allowing the others to move. Don drew his pistol and fired at the leg of one.

Doused in alcohol, he and his friends soon wee screaming as they tried to put out the flames that engulfed their bodies.

"Come on, dammit, lets get the frak out of here!" Don yelled. Caff seemed out of it, but followed at a sprinting pace.

The two tore through the crowd and thundered across the gangway to their ship. The cargo was loaded, but Saide seemed surprised by their flight.

"What's going on?" He commanded.

"Trouble. I'll explain later. What was the first planet that we were supposed to deliver goods to? Kroth, ok, engage and lets get the frak out of here!"

Saide knew better than to question a man in motion so he bellowed down the corridor to Zell, who was at the bridge. "Lets go!"

The ship slipped away from its mooring, its shields cam up shortly after. The engine was already on and running. Don and Saide ran to the bridge.

"Zell, lets go! Get us into the warp!"

"I've got to get the ship away from the station's gravity well; it'll screw up the calculation."

Already, Don could spot the sleek shaped of police cruisers powering up.

"Come on Zell," Don barked. "Don't make me jump blind again."

"Emperor, ok we're out of the well. Lets get the frak out of here."

The world turned multichromatic as they plunged into the warp, their ship aimed for their first trading planet, only a short jump away, a planet called Kroth.

The adrenaline was gone, Don noticed suddenly and with that realization he acknowledged his stupidity. Zell had explained to him the dangers of jumping blind. He had returned to his quarters immediately after boarding the ship to verify the authenticity of the license.

Only now did he realize that he was alone in his dark room again, this time with the madness of the outside warp to keep him company. He expected the worst.

Slowly rising from his desk in the corner, he switched off his lamp. His room was now only illuminated by the dull light of the warp contacting against the geller fields. Although he knew and had heard that staring into the warp usually drove men mad, he cautioned a glance, just for curiosity's sake.

"So close!" Jada thundered. They were moored at starport 1019 and had just been informed that they had arrived too late.

"How could you let them escape?" he berated the flight controller, who was also head administrator of the port.

"I had little choice, our warp capable ships had just been refitted with new components from Mars, and were experiencing problems."

"Useless" Jada spat and left the controller's room, his bulk almost destroying the doorway. "The epsilon detector confirms that they were here, there is signature all around but its fading by the second; it will be gone in about an hour."

Derailed from his rage, Jada shot an exclamatory question, "So soon? What use is that machine?"

"The amount of time that the signature stays depends on the atmosphere of space around the source. The more interstellar gas there is, the more the signature resides."

"Hrm, but we know where they have gone. Apparently they, and by 'they' we know now that he had accomplices, got a cargo freighters registration."

"Interesting" Muttered Anath as he fiddled with a piece of equipment as they boarded back onto their ship. "They are headed to Kroth"

"Kroth?" Anath lifted his head up. "Why would they be headed there? Kroth had nothing of use. "

"I suppose they could be bringing supplies to the rebels. Only the forces of chaos would act so randomly even as they were pursued!"

"I recognize the possibility but…what of the tyranids? Are our orders to ignore them?"

"Why do you ask? What does that scourge have to do with our mission?" Jada asked.

"While we were in the flight control I saw reports of the Tyranid menace in the sector."

"Our orders were clear, we pursue and kill this man and his accomplices; We return the gene-seed and come back heroes. Tyranids are not our concern."

Anath scowled. "Let us follow them. Admiral Kenshaw, plot a course for Kroth." "Yes my lord" He responded.

"But how are they warp capable? Could it be that they had a navigator with them?" Anath wondered to himself. He tensed slightly as the ship ripped into the warp with all the grace of a 380 pound superhuman.

Saide hammered on the door. "Damn it Don, open up! Stope moping around or whatever; I thought you were done with that!" Saide typed the password into the door but it refused to open which was strange because it responded with the appropriate beeps as if the door had opened. So the mechanism is not broken. It must be a problem with the door…jammed maybe?

He peered at the crack between the door and the doorway. The lock was unlocked and there were no obstructions. In fact, there was a crack all around the door, he could even almost see through it.

What? If there's nothing in the way… He tugged at it with increasing vigor. Suddenly, to his horror, his skin bristled with a cold unnatural breeze.

The warp. The fraking warp, probably that thing that I saw him with before. It seems I don't know all I thought I did about this man.

As the warp breath washed over him, his fingers went to his aquilla. It seemed hot to the touch. He gripped it subconsciously and hit the door again.

To his surprise and without warning, the door exploded open, washing Saide again in cold air. The blazes?

Don was standing back facing door, staring out the view port.

"Don?" Saide called, advancing hesitantly into the room. He drew his sidearm, a small laspistol. He looked around the room for any telltale shadows or anything out of the ordinary. Demon or not, everything can be killed with enough shots with a gun. However, there was nothing there, no shadows out of place, no monsters.

"Throne Don, you sure scared me there." He spun Don around "Emperor Protects!" he yelled in fright.

Don stood, apparently in some sort of trance, his eyes bloodshot and wide open, focusing on something outside the ship.

"Frak!" He tried shaking Don, but the man's body did not awake. However, it did respond. With a frighteningly strong grip of cold steel, Don removed Saide's hand from his shoulder all the while transfixed on whatever it was that had captured his attention.

Saide was thoroughly frightened by this point. He slammed the view port shut. After he made sure it wasn't going to open he walked over to the sink, cupped some water, and threw it at Don's face. Besides soaking him, it did nothing. Getting frantic, he tried shaking Don again. This time Don responded violently.

Don wrapped his hands around Saide's neck seemingly intent on choking the life out of him. As he did so though, he seemed to be jolted by something.

"Wha?" He asked, as if just awaking from some sleep.

"Throne above, thank the emperor you're back. What happened?"

"I…I…Not sure. I was staring out the window and then, and looking at the lights, the field." He grimaced suddenly as if he had just chewed on metal foil. "But then, but then…" his voice increased in volume "it, I SAW something out there, a thing. I saw it! I saw it! And, but then it did the same!"

"What? What do you mean it did the same? Calm down; I need to figure out what is going on here!"

"It…looked at me! Looked at me…and horrors of horrors of horrors, sights, sounds, and confusion. GODS, a million sensations like being hit by…a tram or something and each one was hiding pain like a cloak. No, more than pain….it hurt so so much. I was outside, outside I tell you, looking in and it was me and I it!"

Dear emperor, he's lost it, completely lost it. The idiot looked outside and now he's lost it. Whatever I saw before, maybe that wasn't actually real. It's more likely that Don's just bat-shit insane. So what do you do with a mad man? I guess I'll listen…

As if reading his mind Don calmed down "But let me explain. What I'm sure happened was that I fell asleep… another chaos induced dream. It must have been. But…but it seemed so real, more real in fact than…this" He gestured around the room. "The colors, you can't believe the colors! The smell and the sights, all seemed more real, as if this were the dream and that real. But… ha, you must think I'm crazy."

Saide said nothing for a moment. Maybe only slightly insane. He seems to be making more sense now. Probably only temporary….yeah, only temporary.

"Where did you …go? You said you were outside. What do you mean by that?"

"At first it was just…you know, outside" he said, gesturing to the view port which was still open, "but then I was on another planet and everything was so clear…I can describe it. It can't be described. But it was just a dream. It was a nightmare really, because under all that glamour was just horror. You really must think me crazy…" he repeated.

"Well…I mean, what else could I think, you know?"

"No, no, I understand, but I think its all past. I think it was…temporary. I just don't want to go back into the warp again."

"Back into the warp?"

"Yeah, we're in real space now." Don looked puzzled, as if surprised by Saide not realizing they were in real space.

Saide walked over to the view port and opened again. The reddish grey of Kroth rotated below.

"How did you know? The port was closed; I closed it!"

Don looked more surprised. "I…I don't know" he stammered, "ugh, my head hurts." He sat down on the edge of his bed.

Their discussion was interrupted by Caff. "Sirs, we're here…why is that view port open? Regulation says that should all close automatically. That's pretty important actually. I should have Arnon look at that." He thought aloud.

"yes, thank you Caff; get the troops ready to transport the stuff. You have the list? Ok, good" As quickly as Caff entered, he exited, leaving them alone again.

"Keep yourself together Don, some of the troops are starting to talk, and honestly I can see where they are coming from. You freaked me out there."

"yeah, sorry but I don't think I'm going crazy , not yet at least…maybe close, ha ha" he tried to joke.

Saide didn't return the smile. "I need to look after the safety of my men. I thank you for letting us use this ship, but I can't have to watch my back if you know what I mean."

"Yes, of course. Sorry again for disturbing you with my dreams." Don said sheepishly.

I better have someone keep an eye on Don, but I've also got other things to do. Lets see if the troops are ready. I hear Kroth is dangerous. We got to keep on our toes, at least long enough to offload our stuff.

He shook his head and took one last look at Don before he spun and walked out of the room. Don looked understandably disturbed.

**Chapter 40: Landfall**

The men were arranged in the cargo bay, the expected cargo neatly piled next to the cargo shield. Saide saw that the troops were already in squads, the sergeant in head of each squad.

I… We've actually put something together here. This is actually going to work!

"Lets see here…I am going to go up front and figure what the situation is planet side then we'll get on our way." The troops nodded, the artificial light gleaming off their weapons.

"Caff, come up with me."

"Yes sir. By the way, have you talked with Creed?" Saide asked Caff as the two made their way to the front, meeting up with Don, who was waiting for them in the hallway.

"Yeah, I figured that something had gone down between you too also. I had talked to him earlier. I had to lay down the law, but I think he understood that I honestly needed him. I did it for his own good…and mine." Saide explained.

"No, I think you did the right thing. I would have wanted to take all those men with me, willing or not. No one deserves to die like that."

That particularly morbid comment kept the three silent for a long time while Saide fiddled with the controls on the panel in front of them.

"Now lets see…Arnon showed me how to do this…hrm, everyone should have training in these blasted devices. " The instrument let out a bleep that sounded correct.

"So that should have sent a signal to the Imperial stronghold, and…here's their response…best behavior men, we'll be talking to the commander himself." Saide whispered as the communication connection manifested.

"Hello sir, are you…" he checked a data slab in front of him, "Captain Vernheim?"

"No" The other man replied, "I am Junior Officer Hawkings, Communications Officer and Aide to the Captain." The man said importantly. Emperor, what an ego.

"…However" The man continued, "This frequency is classified important. What is your purpose vessel?"

"We are carrying a shipment of arms for your troop. The Munitorum hired us to supply you as they are being taxed by campaigns elsewhere."

"I see, and you would be?" The man asked.

"Darius sir, an armed trader."

"Good, well then Darius, you can land at these coordinates and the captain and you can discuss more when you land. Stronghold out." The transmission severed.

'He seems like a climber. Damn junior officers can't be happy with what they have. I was a blasted junior officer for nearly…Emperor, I can't even remember; it all just bleeds together…regardless, let's get that troops and cargo ready. I want this to be as quick as possible. " Saide said.

"Don, you want to pilot the ship down Caff you stay here and help Don, I'll get everything ready."

Ugh, I don't want Don touching anything every resembling a steering wheel after that incident, but technically this is his ship and I don't want to make him mad. I'm sure he already feels useless after all this standing around watching us train. Plus, Caff will be there to help. He's much better at this technology stuff than I.

Saide left the cockpit and walked back to the cargo hold.

"Ok men," He addressed the masses before him, "We got word to land, we're green to go. Don's bringing us down." His announcement was met by cheers as everyone was glad to be off the ship once again.

He lowered his voice. "Creed, I want your squad to unload the cargo; they should have a crane for the larger ones. Greynor you and your men help him also. I want no slip-ups. Remember, we're carrying ammo and shells in addition to promethium and the other stuff. One crate falls and we all go up, especially because we have all our stuff right next to it."

He then shouted to a squad that was still waiting for additional orders. "4th squad, Caff will join you as soon as you touch down. I want you to negotiate for food and water but don't pay any more than five thousand credits for either. I know how these places work and I know that they have both food and water stockpiled like crazy." 4th squad went back to attention.

"2nd and 3rd squads, I want you on defense. It didn't sound too bad but from experience that could change very quickly." He moved on to the last squad.

"1st squad..." He paused for a second, "You're coming with me. Elban and Virgil, you're with us also." Je shouted and then looked around.

"And when Arnon and Stevan show themselves, tell them to refuel on extra coolant…Well, what are you men all waiting around for? Get any last things; we land in five!" he commanded.

Everyone scrambled to get ready and in proper place for decent. Not a moment too soon. Saide mused as the ship descended through the thin atmosphere, fire and contrails of vapor streaming after them as the ship plunged to Kroth like a comet.

He motioned for 1st squad. "Voor, are communications up? I don't want a repeat of the fall offensive."

Voor blanched. "No sir, and we're not using local codes either, encryption level 2 and ready to jump to 3 or 4 in case of…hostilities. I don't have the hardware for 5 yet. Arnon's promised me he can do it on the ship's array, he just needs some time."

"Sounds good" Saide appraised, "Everyone else,; best show. I want to impress this guy. Legitamacy is crucial for traders. I remember the nobles taking advantage of them back on Sargos. Lets put these PDF to shame." He held on as the ship made its final stages of descent.

Arnon appeared unphased by the bumpy ride as he popped out of emperor knows where.

"Arnon, you heard the message? "

"yes sir, although the chances of us running out of fuel or coolant are…"

"Don't care; I never want to be trapped, just flailing around in space like that again." Saide said grimly.

"With all due respect sir, we didn't drift because we ran out of fuel; we drifted because Don jumped the damn ship before it was ready!" The techpriest said, exacerbated. It was very strange to hear a tech priest exacerbated. Saide would rank it up on his list of top strangest things he'd ever experienced.

"Fine… um, just get that door open when we set down."

The earth loomed up to meet them. Saide could only see a blur of a large building and red rock in the distance before they came to a sudden stop. All the men where rudely shoved to the floor as momentum hammered them into the ground. The doors swung open on the side and the cargo shields dropped as the men collected themselves and got up.

Saide looked around at the men complaining. "Lets go men!" He barked. Everything and one moved in seconds.

"1st squad to me!"

They walked out into the crisp morning air.

Kroth's sun, which had been hidden by the bulk of the planet as they landed, was just peeking its head over the mountains off in the distance. The land was desolate. From their landing pad, Saide could see straight for as far as his eyes could see and it was all flat semi-desert, filled with red rock and occasional shrubs. Off to the south there was what seemed to be a city but Saide could see the smoke from where he was. It was obviously an area of contention.

Finally as he took all this in, he looked around in his immediate vicinity. A representative of the PDF was coming to meet him and the PDF men were "securing" the ship. They wore dark tan, which was in contrast to Saide's men's olive drab.

The landing facility stood out as it seemed to have been built to the highest standards. He saw rockcrete pilliars big enough to stand four men side by side and those pillars looked to be driven into bedrock. Presumably the top soil was unstable.

Even with the high caliber of the landing platform it obviously wasn't built to handle ships of their size. Their ship just barely fit on the pad and the back exhaust vents leaned out over the landing. The rockcrete was burned black from where the super heated landing gear from entry had scorched the strip.

Above them towered a stereotypical Imperial Guard Bastion, with its massive walls and armaments, with the one unique aspect of it also being based with several massive pillars such as the landing pad had been built.

Around the strip and facility was a larger curtain wall that had not been built to the same exacting engineering standards as the platform and bastion, as it lacked the pillars which were apparently important as parts of the wall were noticeably sinking into the ground or otherwise leaning at frightening angles.

Further towards the bastion there was a group of smaller command guard vehicles, along with almost four squadrons of tanks and lighter support vehicles.

After taking it all in, Saide nodded to 1st squad, Virgil, and Elban, all of whom were in full combat attire, weapons ready.

"Are you the trader Darius?" An aide asked, presumably the Supreme Junior Officer Hawkings that Saide had the privilege of talking to before.

Saide replied in the affirmative.

"Come with me. Captain Vernheim wants to speak with you.

Saide and the first squad were swallowed by the gaping maw of the bastion. The inside hallways were so large that you could have driven a chimera through, in fact, they were probably designed for that.

The walls were the same tan as the PDF and made of massively reinforced metal. This was imperial military engineering at its finest. Their footsteps echoed on the rockcrete floor in the dimly lit hallway. Aides and other PDF personnel scurried around, some catching a glimpse at the off-worlders.

Hawkings motioned for them to turn into a side corridor. They went down a flight of stairs and found themselves in the captain's office and briefing room. His desk was actual wood, probably an antique and was carved exquisitely and seemed out of place with the austerity of the rest of the room.

He looked at the person in the chair, whose face was lit by one solitary light. The captain reached over the desk to shake Saide's hand.

Saide accepted the handshake.

"So, Captain Vernheim, how can I help you?" he motioned for 1st squad to join the PDF guards outside of the room. Vernheim tensed when Saide made his motion but did nothing.

"Well mister Darius, fighting has been tough these last few months, and the rebels got us into a rather sticky situation. They gave us something that we had to take; our capital city, or whats left of it, and now they are making us pay for it. We desperately need supplies but this planet never had any reason to build manufacturing until the rebellion and obviously we can't construct manufactoria with fighting going on. This means that we are low on weapons and ammo, which you so happen to have for us."

"Sounds good, name your price and we'll get started from there."

The two bartered for at least five minutes until Saide got the price up to what he thought was reasonable. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Voor, who had apparently stayed in the room, shake his head violently. Thus, the bartering continued. However, Siade had an advantage. It was clear that Vernheim truly needed the supplies.

"Look Mr. Darius, point is that I can only afford to pay you minimum price" "But…" Saide tried to interject.

"Now hold on. The problem here is not really the price per se. It's the men; it's the logistics of it. Let me explain. He motioned to a tactical layout.

"I'm not sure if this means anything to you but look anyways. Here is where we are here…" he motioned to a large octagon where a three dimensional representation of the area appeared and flickered in the air.

"The city is almost exactly 60 miles away. Now if I send a convoy to resupply the troops, its bound to come under attack since the damn road goes through canyons… some massive geologic upheaval about ten thousand years ago almost rent the planet in two. What's left of that event is a ten mile band across Kroth where the softer rock eroded away leaving these canyons. It's what made Kroth such a good mining planet for a while before the revolts started. " He paused and made sure that Saide was still following him.

"Thus, I need to send a guard with the convoy. However, our foe will then surely take advantage of the opportunity of reduced garrison here and sure inflict heavy losses, even take this building, and that I cannot let happen." He sighed, "But the worst part of this…saga is about the city"

"I can't withdraw the troops from their positions. We fought for years to regain that city and the higher ups will have my head if I give it back to them. I have no more reinforcements and I can't send civilian militia, only the PDF can be completely trusted. So as you can see, I am in a bind." The captain said, sitting back down slowly in the chair, wincing as he did so as if it hurt.

"That's all well and good but how does that have anything to do with my payment?" If I know where this is going…and I really really don't want to do it…

"I need you and your men to transport the arms."

Frak, I knew it. Let see we got the marines following us but at the same time he will have to pay significantly more, and that money we could use. I am also pretty sure that rebels are not going to attack foreign troops not knowing the size of our deployment, especially in space. For all they know we have an armada overhead, and why risk that?

Our shipment on Allistar is not due for another two weeks so we have time if things go sour…

Vernheim named a price. It was almost ten times what he would have normally paid. Voor almost couldn't hide his enthusiasm.

Saide feigned contemplation for a few moments.

"Captain Vernheim, you have yourself a deal." He shook hands on it. "On the condition that you do pay what you said and a reasonable amount is deducted for coolant, food and water to resupply our ship."

Vernheim was overjoyed, "Of course! I had been trying to find a way out of this mess for months. You were sent by the emperor himself!"

"Well, I don't know about that…" Saide trailed off. "We should start off right away. I trust that you have up to date information about enemy troop deployment and topography layouts for those canyons and city?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Hawkings will get you those. As for transportation, we can't spare the tanks I'm afraid, same reason that it would decrease the garrison here too much. Not to mention that half of them are mostly ruined from a ambush getting them here in the first place… But I can get you some of the lighter armed vehicles, certainly most of the chimera and some cargo trucks."

"I will report here after when we are done and I hope you're not stupid enough to try to skimp out on the payment."

"I wouldn't dare," the old man swore.

Saide nodded and exited the room, 1st squad trailing behind him.

"Ok Virgil, I know you are probably excited about getting back into a vehicle; I'll give you the lead. Elban, you scrounge up some other people who know how to drive these vehicles moderately well. Voor, you go with Virgil and get communications working between the vehicles.

They were now out in the sunshine, the sun, whatever it was named had risen over the mountains in the distance and was glaring at them though the thin atmosphere. Saide could tell that it was going to get hot soon. The land from where they were to the city was all desert, fortunately, this made ambushes hard to impossible on the flat featureless plain that surrounded the road, excepting the canyons.

Saide walked back to the ship.

"Don, what was your impression of the captain?"

"He seemed genuine. I have no doubt that he'll pay. Maybe not the best officer in the world, but he'll pay."

"Good, Voor, what did you think since you snuck back in to hear the price?"

"Same, only I get the feeling that he might not be telling us the entire story. The road looks like a straight shot and the terrain's all flat. He could send the damn convoy himself without trouble. I notice he didn't really mention the fighting in any detail. We still have no idea what we are going up against. Hopefully that junior officer will fill in some of the gaps.

As they approached the ship, something hit Saide.

"We are all idiots." They spun and faced Saide who had stopped walking.

"Why even risk the road?" Saide continued, "we've got a ship; lets use it!"

Suddenly the Junior Officer who had disappeared up until now came back from where ever he had gone.

"That's what we though also. You can see the smoke from our last couple of attempts." He pointed out to the billowing smoke that we just visible from the city off in the distance.

"Surely our ship is more than capable of handling whatever anti-air capabilities they possess?"

"Maybe for a couple of hours, but two things limited out ability to use air to transport supplies. Firstly and more importantly, the ground all around here is sand. Just sand a quarter kilometer down or more, something about geologic activity a couple thousand years ago. If you try landing a plane let alone a ship on it, you'll be stuck and grounded in instants. Landing on roads or other cheap covering doesn't work. We had to get all the starports on the planet specially designed."

"Furthermore," the man continued, "it takes time to unload cargo. We found that the instant that our landing gear touched the ground we got hit from all directions and hard. Combine that with the fact that our planes were literally sinking into the ground…"

"You said they were sinking, doesn't your capitol have a starport?"

"Yes, in fact every one of our cities had a stable landing strip for intra planet travel. Unfortunately the enemy realized this. Every city they've attacks, the first thing to go is the air strip. Air supremacy is useless if your effective range can't even cover all the battle zone. "

They were now next to the ship conversing in a circle. 1st squad had been joined by the officers of the other squads.

"5th and 6th, we've got new objectives," He shouted, "load the supplies onto those trucks."

"Hold on, we've got to bring the crap to them?" Caff asked, clearly annoyed.

"yes, but Vernheim is making it worth our while."

"You know what this means," caff interjected, "possible combat."

"Yes, I just hope its nothing we can't handle. I believe that we have reached a level where only battle experience can aid our men. Would you agree?" Saide asked.

"We haven't…don't you have some place to be?" Caff asked Hawkings who had been listening in on their conversation.

"Wait, before you go," Saide grabbed Hawkings by the shoulder, "what are we going to face out there if we do get attacked? Is this an organized resistance or just general unrest?"

"So far the rebels have been doing ambushes against the convoys, shooting up supplies and disrupting communication. Word of caution, when they do attack, it is always with the element of surprise and superior numbers. They only attack in battles they know they can win."

"Hrm, and how well armed are these rebels?" Creed asked.

"fairly well as rebels go I guess. From what I've heard, most men have guns, mostly auto and las gun, the occasional heavy weapon but no armor and no air. They're desert raiders, or at least that what they used to be. Recent fighting has shown them to be more organized and more…um…blood thirsty."

Saide narrowed his eyes. "They aren't chaos are they?" Saide asked suspiciously.

"No! Not on Kroth. There is no taint on Kroth." Hawkings blurted out, then saw that Saide wanted a better explanation.

"The raiders are actually all that is left of the indigenous people of Kroth. When the imperium came some hundred years ago, most of the people go violently ill, happens sometimes. We couldn't stop the outbreak and it killed most of them. Then rumor has it that the planetary governor screwed up in some diplomatic meeting. Combine that with the regular racism and you have Kroth. They have been fighting us ever since." The aide explained.

"How long has it been?" Saide asked, remembering the long year of fighting in the fields and hills of Sargos II.

"Over thirty years…but you should really start out now. It gets dark quick here in the desert."

Saide thanked the man and turned to his officers once the aide went back into the stronghold.

"It sounds like a straight run but it could turn sour. Only take troops that are ready for combat. And Emperor above, where the frak is Kane? Why is he always missing?" Everyone shrugged. No on had seen him in a while.

"I'll have to have a word with him…" He trailed off, "Anyway, that is how its going to work. Creed, you stay here with 6th squad and Arnon. I want to make sure we have a ship to get back on once we return from this excursion. Everyone else is coming. Greynor, I want those trucks packed yesterday. Use anyone you need from the other squads. " Greynor nodded and signaled to Hessert and Lechor who started stacking boxes.

Saide dismissed the group.

He had a problem on his hands.

"Seymore, Menon! What the hell do you think you are doing?"

The two were struggling to lift a huge crate onto a truck. "I said 6th squad to the ship!"

"yeah but we thought we could help. Plus we've been on that thing for ages." Saide grumbled but it seemed like they were actually working rather than just shitting around so he left them alone.

I van walked by with a barrel marked flammable.

"No, NO, NO, NO!" Saide repeated to himself as he dashed to the man before his clumsy tactics killed them all. It was too late. The barrel flew out of his hands as he tripped.

Saide could do nothing but follow its trajectory with dread. It landed with a thunk in the mechanical arms of Stevan. His augmented limbs easily whipped the massive barrel around and placed it gently on the ground.

"If you don't mind Saide, I would like to be part of this convoy. Plus if anything breaks down or goes wrong you'll need my help. Arnon can stay here with the ship."

"Sounds good. I was just going to ask you to come anyways."

Saide walked back to the ship to finalize plans, the sun now at its zenith and beating down relentlessly on him as he entered the cargo bay.

**Chapter 41: Convoy and Seeing Stars**

The rest of the day was uneventful. Creed spared them all from fiery destruction by finding Ivan some job where he couldn't hurt anyone. Other than that, the day was filled with the squads filling the trucks and assorted vehicle with the supplies.

Saide triple checked the supplies.

"That everything Virgil?" He yelled into a truck after the temporary quartermaster.

"Far as I can tell sir."

"Alright, spread word, we're moving out in ten minutes."

Vehicles revved and men ran from place to place. The local garrison did absolutely nothing to help, standing and staring, apparently glad that they were not the ones who had to do the heavy lifting.

Caff did the final rounds and 6th squad and Creed stayed behind with Arnon to make sure nothing happened to the ship.

The departure was quick and without fanfare or any major announcement of any kind. With Virgil at the head, the convoy simply rumbled out of the protected bastion, all thirty vehicles spewing plumes of smoke as they churned up the gravel and sand behind them.

Virgil leaned out of the driver's seat window and looked down the road.

Road? They call this a road? Its only packed sand, not even paved! He then realized that in fact there was a rather nice road that was paved, but shifting winds and the natural ebb of time has covered the entire thing with a horrible blanket of sand that obscured most of the length.

This isn't going to go well. Vehicles like these, unarmored, rely on speed, surprise or advance notice of enemy positions in combat situations or were just used to scout ahead. Here, they were being used for none of these situations.

If I had my choice about this, I would have bled the commander for every tank and ever treaded vehicle he had and just would have driven the convoy right up the enemy's ass. Lets see them try to stop an entire battalion of tanks with simple rocket launchers, ha.

But its not my choice. He reflected Here we ride into the desert, into the literal middle of nowhere…

A fleck of dust whipped into his eye at that very moment.

"Dammit" He cursed as he rubbed at the annoyance. In that single second a glint of some distant metal object made him sit alert.

The canyons, that's where I'd have an ambush; nothing is supposed to be out here, a coincidence? No, it has to be the enemy. And we're riding right to them. He grimaced and laid on the gas. Lets see if we can get there before dark and screw up some of their plans.

The trucks rumbled to a stop, finally succumbing to their own could of dust which had been riding on their tail. A foggy brown cloud enveloped them.

Virgil choked as he spat out some dirt.

"Ah Virgil, there you are. You've been pushing the convoy, why?" Saide asked as he appeared out of the suffocating dust.

Virgil coughed again. "Well the idea was to beat the sun. I didn't want to be ambushed during the night…that's what we're facing here, you know that right?" He pointed off in the distance to the darker colored broken earth that marked the beginning of the canyons.

"That's where they'll be . That's where we'll get hit." He turned to Saide who was whipping his brow, "what do you plan on doing so they don't get away with it?"

Saide didn't answer at first, adjusting his cap while he stared at the canyons.

"We'll just have to hit the bastards back harder. " he growled and walked back to the command truck.

"Me and Creed are going to look over the maps that Vernheim gave us in more detail. You should join us."

Virgil paused. "I'd like to and I'll have to talk to you about it later, but none of these men seem to know how to fill up a truck properly. We should have been back on the road at least 5 minutes ago." He saluted and went off to find who was fraking up his convoy.

Despite his best efforts, Virgil had to accept that he couldn't get the convoy past the canyons before sundown due to the inordinate amount of time it took to get the convoy refueled, even with Stevan and his multiple limbs helping and knowledge of the machines. He sighed heavily and scowled at one of the passing truck drivers who shrugged. Virgil went back to pumping the promethium.

Virgil stared up into the sky as he pumped. The startlingly clear sunset and sky indicated a lack of manufacturing on Kroth and it enabled him to see stars come out even as the nearby star slowly sank behind the mountains off in the distance. Virgil could just barely see the smoke still rising from the far off capitol.

Looks like fighting had already hit there once or twice. All he could see were the ruins silhouetted against the red-orange sky. He scanned the canyons again for any more tell-tale glints but he found none. He closed the hatch and took over from his co-driver.

The sun had now vanished behind the mountains only leaving a blood red bruise where it had once been. The bruise extended out from the mountains until it mingled with the swiftly approaching dark to make a purple sky that was slowly filling with the pin pricks of light that inhabited the cosmos.

In the command truck, which was not the first in line for obvious reasons, Saide finally threw down the maps in disgust.

"There's no way around it!" he exclaimed, gesturing violently at the canyons on the map. "For whatever reason, every damn road goes through them, and we can hardly go off road with these vehicles!"

"The roads travel through them for a couple of reasons. Firstly, have you taken a look at the size of these canyons? They literally cross the entire planet! There is no physical was around them." Zell pointed out.

Saide muttered something about a bridge.

"Rebels would have blown it by now, and secondly, like on Sargos, the roads were intended to transport ore. I assume that these canyons hold mines. Finally, they are the only form of shelter in this entire desert, and from a survivability perspective, having the roads go through the canyons would actual help travelers." He laughed but without a smile

"Although I guess all those aspects now work against us now that there is a war going on." Zell admitted.

"Mines huh… so not only are we forced into an area in which we give them the stragetic advantage, but the attack could come from any direction in any force and our enemies have a network of mobilization that we have no details on at all?" Saide asked exacerbated, running his fingers though his hair.

"Yeah, that pretty much sums it up." Zell said.

Not wanting that glum comment to linger for too long, Caff attempted to save the conversation.

"So what are we going to do about it?" Caff questioned,

Saide thought for a moment.

"I'm not sure there is anything we can do. Lack of range rules out our ship, Stevan explained something about planetary navigation actually being harder on the ship than space…but whatever. I think the real crux of the matter is that Vernheim didn't really inform us of the real situation here. I didn't see any flight capable vehicle, even suborbital ones. There wasn't any naval officer either. If I didn't trust Vernheim as much as I did, I'd say he set us up!"

"You think he would do that?" Caff asked, "We still have time to turn around and hold him for money at gun point."

"Emperor above Caff, where did you get that idea from? Greynor talk you into it?" Saide asked.

"I resent that type of slanderous and libelous stereotyping of my former employment." Greynor objected.

"No, we're not doing that. A trader's reputation is everything and those who work like that lose the most import contracts out there. The imperium usually does not deal with pirates and brigands...so nothing that serious…its just…I've met men like Vernheim, not mean or conniving, just poor leaders and at times tactically and practically stupid."

"Vernheim just shipped us out with no information, although I guess my eagerness, the novelty of the experience made me less…rational than normal."

"How existential" Zell muttered.

"Shut it" Greynor growled.

"We all make mistakes Saide. I don't intend for this to be out last mission together, lack of information or no."

The four slumped down in their chairs in thought. Saide shuffled around the maps again, Zell fiddled with something on his uniform.

"Wait!" Caff exclaimed, "we're all idiots. We can't be more than thirty miles from the city. We should be able to contact the troops there!"

"Of course!" Zell responded and raced over to the vox equipment and started to adjust the set.

"That's funny, all I'm getting is a bunch of static."

"How is that? You sure you're using the right codes?" Saide asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Weird thing is that I did contact something, and there is a connection but all I'm getting is static. They're probably getting the same thing on the other end."

"Or…" Greynor growled as he snatched the vox away from Zell and turned it off violently, "…the codes have been compromised and we just told every hostile from here to the city exactly where we are." Greynor said gruffly.

"Greynor, while that may be true, to be honest, if they had half a brain they would already know exactly where we are. Its not like we were stealthy by any definition of the word as we were driving today. We had a dust could that you could see at least fifty miles away, maybe more." Saide said.

"That doesn't mean we have to make it easy for them" Greynor countered.

A silence fell over the room. There were no more brilliant flashes from anyone.

"Well it look like we're out of ideas. So we wait until at least dawn to go though the ruins and make the best of who ever…whatever goes after us…" Caff said morbidly.

"I'm afraid that seems to be our only option Caff. Tell Elban to inform the men that we'll be leaving nice and early. I'm sure they'll love that, but the quicker we're though those canyons the better."

"Yes sir, goodnight." Caff saluted and exited the now stopped vehicle.

"Zell, when did it become night?" Saide asked distractedly, noticing the lack of light when Caff exited the Chimera.

"About an hour ago sir. We've been stationary since then, defensive perimeter; Voor and the rest of 1st have the first watch."

"Sounds about right…I need some air." Saide commented, "Despair doesn't smell good." He started out the hatch.

"Do you mind if I join you sir?" Zell asked.

"Not at all" Saide replied. The two of them climbed out of the vehicle onto the top of the Chimera.

They sat on the roof of the parked tank, the heavens above them glittering and sparkling in sharp contrast to the canyons that now lay some ten or so miles in front of them , wreathed in shadow.

"Throne that's beautiful." Saide said, looking at the sky.

"Would it disappoint you to know that at one time or another, millions upon millions of men have died to obtain those stars?" Zell pointed out.

Saide frowned. "Yes. Yes it would."

Moments passed and in the darkness of the night time was meaningless. How long have I been staring at those stars? A minute? An hour? The effects of time to not inflict themselves upon bodies such as those…above me is an eternal world that will exist long after I am dead and buried. Those same stars will shine on for countless millennia and all the while, sentient life will do their best to kill each other over pathetic ideas like…

"You feeling alright Saide?" Zell asked looking over at his commander.

Saide paused a moment and frowned, still looking up at the sky.

"Yeah, why?" Saide responded as if distracted.

"Well, you've been staring at the sky doing nothing for almost ten minutes now."

Saide glanced at Zell. "What, a man isn't allowed to be in awe at the beauty of the universe?"

"No, no, that's allowed, just don't let a commissar see you do it. He'll think you've caved into the ruinous powers, staring at the stars like that." Zell laughed.

Saide didn't respond, still raptly staring at the night sky. His thought however were now turned earthward.

"Why are we doing this Zell?" He said suddenly.

It was Zell's turn to frown at his commander. "Do what? This mission?"

"Just…everything, this mission, our becoming armed traders…Why are we doing this? Here we got one chance in a life time, a infinitesimally small chance at that, to be free of the kind of lives which kill trillions, we had a chance to do anything, to be anyone we wanted to be. Do you know there are whole planets who would die for a chance like that? Well we take that chance and we go right back to what we were doing. The same old job; the same old danger. " Saide monologue, shaking his head as in disbelief.

Zell paused a second as if in thought.

"I think you're looking at this wrong sir. Yes, we were given a opportunity but it was one forged of blood, and to be honest, I'm not sure it's an opportunity that any of us actually wanted, except for maybe Don, but I don't know much about him." Zell brought out a canteen from somewhere and took a swig.

"Anything good?" Saide asked.

"Just water sir, anything else would dehydrate; we can save the good stuff for when we get back."

He set the canteen back down.

"Anyway as I was saying… The PDF had always been voluntary; emperor knows there were enough people who were willing in order to receive that dependable a job. Each of us…chose this kind of life, apart from the miners, the shop keepers, the farmers, the criminals…we each had this decision long before any Tyranid set claw on Sargos and we all chose to be soldiers, every one of us."

"Yes, I had forgotten t about that. Voluntary PDF service is rare on a planet like Sargos."

"Furthermore, all that was presented to us, and I'll say it again, was a choice we didn't even want. Hells, Job and most of 4th platoon…most of the whole PDF died to defend that choice. They were sure in their decision and they died soldiers rather than live as anything else." Zell paused again, this time to let his words sink in.

"We lost a lot of good men that day." Saide remarked sadly.

"We lost a lot of good friends" Zell added.

The two stared up at the magnificent night sky and tried to comprehend the meaning of it all.

A handful of trucks away, Don Lay on the floor of his chimera the hatch open on top allowing the accursed light inside. He lay slumped against a cold metal wall, not quite asleep but not quite awake either. His mind was racing at inhuman speed, sweat dripping off him as his brain churned information.

Where was it coming from? Don didn't know; he wasn't even fully conscious but sight and sounds and smells still appeared in his mind, as real as if they were right in front of him.

Everything looked out of perspective, shadows danced, moonlight bounced and appeared in impossible places. He smelled fresh cut grass, ozone, blood, fire and cinders, bread, sweat and a million other smells, a sickeningly disturbing yet staggering array of odors that were attached to images not his own.

His eyes twitched back and forth by themselves and he slowly reached up to the sky to try to block the assault, to close the hatch to the stars with their infernal torture. He never even got close.

His hand quivered and slowly closed as he collapsed on the floor, arms spread, looking to the sky.

**Chapter 42: Portentous Arrival**

The next morning, Virgil and Stevan conducted another maintenance on the trucks and APCs. Besides some tired troops, the convoy was ready to move out. It churned to life as it began its decent into the canyons, everyone strangely subdued, most likely out of anticipation or dread.

Voor looked around himself at the massive stone edifices that were starting to envelop the convoy. He scowled.

"Why are we doing this again?" he complained to Elban. "Can't we go around these basted canyons somehow?" he asked, throwing up his hands.

"Look" replied Elban, "you saw the maps same as I did. They run thousands of miles, practically cutting the planet in two. There surely no way around them…Just be glad we can cross them in a day. According to Virgil and Saide, we'll be in the city by the end of the day at the latest.

"It we're still alive by then" moped Voor dejectedly.

The convoy was now fully inside the canyons. Saide sat atop his command chimera, hatch open beside him. Theentireworldchangeswithsomethingasmundaneaslocation.The earth seemed silent, all the wind from the vast expansive desert was gone. An eerie quiet took its place as red stone walls loomed over them, casting shadows on most of the caravan.

Tactics change with location. Morale changes with location, as to logistics. These canyons are a death trap; with a company of troops and supplies, I bet I could hold these against any enemy…any conventional enemy. The troops are nervous. They know that any boulder could be hiding a man with a krack launcher. These paths can only be taken a couple of ways, its basically a straight shot. Sure there are multiple roads, we all considered taking some of them but they all ran parallel, so what's the point? One good artillery battery behind an outcropping could cover them all and you would never know until the damn shells were hitting you.

No, I can understand the apprehension. As for logistics, we are a supply line; we don't really need one ourselves. We're armed to the teeth and that's pretty much the only good aspect about this entire thing.

I can understand these things, but what I can't understand are these rebels. Why have they not attacked us yet? What are they waiting for?

His eyes scanned the red rock above and to the side of himself for any telltale flashes off metal or any movement. There was nothing. Whatisgoingonhere?

Anath punched in the trader's license number and route number as he had for the last twenty times. The machine in front of him churned its telepath connected wireways and shot back the same information it had the last twenty times: gibberish. Anath almost smote the machine in anger.

"They deceived us Anath. I do not know for what purpose, for the gall of their action astounds me to thoughtlessness, but the flight and trade coordinators that we spoke to on the starport deceived us. Your machine is just telling you the truth. There is no route information because there is no route. " Jada said with distain.

Anath threw us his hands and made to speak, but for some reason decided against it and instead collapsed into a chair at the ship's bridge. The impact was audible; Anath still had his armor on.

"No, no. Jada, I can see why you would say that, dear emperor knows these men had some sort of affinity with our mysterious Don, but I don't believe their actions would go so far as to give us false information. Look here." He pointed to the number of the screen as Jada stooped to read over his shoulder.

"I am an …enjoy or puzzles, of codes and cyphers. I have memorized some of the basic structure algorithms to the empire's bureaucracy. These numbers are in the correct format. I could bring one of our tech priests but he would say the same thing. The information is correct. Then maybe the device?..." He pondered as he examined the piece of equipment.

"Well, while you complete that action, I will meditate and honor the god emperor. Perhaps I shall receive some flash of brilliance while I pray."

But Anath was no longer listening to him. The marine was intrigued by the machinery, and looking it over for any altercations. There were none. A visible frown played across Anath's face as if he sense foul play. He asked Admiral Kenshaw to bring in a tech priest.

The tech priest entered the room and made the sign of the aquilla which looked strange coming from mechandrills rather than hands.

Anath explained the problem while the priest ran his many sensors over the equipment. It was only a couple of minutes until he finished his results.

"My lord, the sacred rituals of the omnissiah still preserve this machine spirit and I can find nothing wrong physically with it. However, this machine works by checking codes and communicating with a similar machine on a nearby bureaucratic office through the help of a navigator. It is possible that warp storms could complicate or discombobulate the data sent or received." He expounded.

"Fascinating…by any chance would you happen to have any other trade route codes on hand? I would like to see what information should come out from a proper transaction."

The techpriest nodded his head. "An excellent Idea my lord…I…" he stopped. He had put in the code and now he stared at the machine.

"What, what is it?" Anath asked. The cyborg did not reply, instead he grabbed a red intercom device to the ship's navigator.

"Circee, are you feeling what this display is indicating? Yes? How unfortunate…"

"What? Tell me, what is the even which has just transpired!"

"The communication wasn't even making it back to the starport. It was bouncing off the front of a massive warp storm. The transmission time decreased, therefore the storm is getting closer." He said breathless as he quickly ran from station to station, pulling levers and changing settings. Anath felt the shields come up.

"How close" Anath said grim-faced, as klaxons began to wail behind him and as Jada appeared in the doorway.

"It is already here" The tech priest responded as the ship rocked under them, buffeted back and forth violently by the reaction between their geller fields and the immaterium.

Anath suddenly ran his hand to his head and staggered to his knees. Jada gasped as he looked out a view port. "Praise be the god emperor" he intoned quickly. Everything went black.

It was mid-day when they spotted the man. He had been nailed to a upright pentagram with metal spikes through his arms and legs. The wood was still fresh with blood. Suspecting a trap, 1st squad and the rest of the officers waited until the site was cleared for mines and other lethal surprises by Stevan before they got closer.

The man was disfigured, mutilated. His eyes had been burned out and his skin shredded by fire and abuse. The ground below his feet was colored red and smelled rancid.

Infection seemed nonexistent but his skin and the burns were imbued with sand, giving his appearance an almost alien look.

Zell took one glance at the man and pronounced him dead on the spot, so everyone was understandably shocked when he started speaking.

"Is there anyone ther? Of course there is. I don't have much time; hah, I knew my fate but who knew they would be so cruel. Who knew it would hurt so? Who knew I could endure so much pain in the name of my god.

The eyeless body shifted and stared down at his pocked marked flesh. "Oh, it seems that I didn't endure…shame."

"How…what…who are you? Is this some sort of trap?" Saide asked warily. "You speak nonsense."

"I am not here for you, Saide, emperor worshipper. My god will defecate on his long dead carcass…in time."

"Wha…How do you know my name?" Saide shouted, clearly mad, yet at the same time unwilling to get closer to the nailed man.

The impaled man chuckled. "I know many things, many many things. But to business; where is Don?"

"This is a chaos taint and I know how to deal with this shit...Lechor, you want to do the honors?" Saide asked disgusted.

"Sure thing! Heretics are best frying material, second only to orks." He said with a little too much glee in his voice as he advanced on the body, pilot light on his flamer blazing to life with an eager crack.

"Wait" A voice called out, in almost a monotone, "Hold it one second" Don said. Everyone turned to him. It had been the first time he had spoken for the entire trip so far.

Mygod,healmostlookslikethatcorpse.Don's eyes were sunken and his skin was deathly white, his irises read and blood shot. His uniform was somehow tor, his legs and arms skeletal. His hair was falling out.

"Don't be alarmed by my appearance, its just…I have a hard time sleeping now a days." He turned to the corpse. "You know my name; you asked for me; here I am. What possible message could you impart to me in my state?"

As soon as the words left Don's mouth, the corpse laughed. A bone chilling rattle that shook the group visibly.

"I have an important message for you Don. You have dreamed of destruction and madness, for these are the dreams of the down trodden, the oppressed, the constrained. The only way to be free of these chains is if the oppressed work together. Great powers always arise in arms to conquer what they perceive to be their threats."

"The ones who are the most chained are the ones who need to be set free!" The corpse said with sudden force.

"The ones... who are most chained…need to be set free" Don repeated, eyes glazed. His head lolled back and he lost balance.

Siade caught him as Lechor and his flamer advanced on the man.

"What did you do to Don?" He shouted, "what did you do to my friend?" He asked threateningly.

"It's not what I did to him, idiot. It's what he is doing to himself." The corpse said chuckling.

"Damn this chaos trickery." Creed spat. "Destroy it Lechor".

"With pleasure sir…hey, my flamer isn't working!"

"Ah, such fickle devices, guns, " the corpse taunted, "besides, I have given my message, me who was loyal out of all of them who turned away. I will show myself out!" He started laughing again, skin peeling off as he did, showering down to the ground is disgustingly large flakes until one could hardly tell that the figure was a person.

A sudden foul breeze swept across the desert that smelled of rotten flesh, and in this breeze the body disintegrated into ashes. What was left of the body was scattered with the wind, leaving only the blood drenched pentagram.

"Whoops, Flamer works now" Lechor said embarrassed as a burst of flame ignited from his weapon.

"Lechor, please, in the Emperor's name, just burn this damned place once and for all." Siade asked.

Lechor obliged. By the time he was done, the entire hill top where the body had stood was blackened by flame until not even the soil itself survived immolation. Lechor and the rest of the officers turned their back on the accursed place, Saide carrying Don as they walked away from the hill silently, not a single person making a sound.

The convoy traveled on through the canyons, albeit with a little less gust. Word had filtered through the ranks that something had gone down, something bad. Hopefullytheydon'tknowexactlywhathadhappened.

The troops were still staying vigilant, but Saide had a feeling that they were relatively safe. They exited through the last of the rock formations and were back on the desert. The city lay ahead of them.

Its massive spikes had mostly fallen and even though it once was as large as Durmen, the Sargos capitol city, it now lay in ruins.

Its massive curtain wall had been breached in a hundred different places from what looked like massive explosions and smoke from its center, presumably the headquarters of the PDF.

It loomed closer.

Saide gasped. What he once though were tall buildings were actually the remains of spires broken off at the middle. He imagined that the cyclopean upper stories lay in pieces in the city somewhere, perhaps on some unlucky smaller building.

A ripple of murmering broke through the men, most of whom were now on the tops of their vehicles to see the view.

"I believe we were lied to about the capabilities of their enemy." Caff commented to Saide. Siade nodded but said nothing.

After a while though, even the most majectic or breathtaking sights, no matter how violent, grow boring, and the men soon retreated back to the shade of their vehicles.

Even though the distance was deceptive , as the city proper was still miles away, shops and low rise houses, usually slum-like started popping up around them, and pretty soon the dirt and sand covered road gave way to a regulation paved one, if strewn by debris.

Emperor, what is that feeling? These house, these buildings... Someone or something is watching us. A sniper? A scout? We still have no idea what we are getting ourselves into. Best stay on the safe side.

Voor emerged next to Saide and was about to say something about the vox unit he was wearing. Saide had different plans though.

"Sorry Voor, I need to barrow this for a second." He took the speaker off the unit and set it to project intra-convoy.

"Attention. As you can see, the city had taken some punishment. How or by what exact means is unknown. However, we need to stay at attention, especially when the buildings start getting taller. One bad shot could box us in. I want any potential threats taken care of before they can even get a single shot off. That being said, don't get too jumpy; there might be civilians left or scouts from the PDF observing us. "

He turned to Voor. "Any other additions?" he asked. Voor shook his head.

"Ok then, what is it that you wanted to show me?"

"I got a fix on a vox signature. Most likely it's the force here in the city."

"Sounds good, patch me in."

"Unknown force, identify yourself or be fired upon. I will have no tricks this time." A harsh voice grated from the other side of the unit.

"Wait, hold on, we're here to resupply you. Didn't Vernheim tell you that?" He said, looking around wildly for snipers.

"Wait one minute. I will verify your claim." The man on the other side counseled with someone else. Saide relaxed somewhat.

Several moments passed before the other people returned to the set.

"Ok, we did get orders about resupply. I just assumed it would have come from our own men. Who are you anyway? I see you have our trucks with you."

"I am Darius, an armed trader. Vernheim said that he couldn't spare the men"

"Yeah, that because he has all the tactical prowess of a small rock. Why don't you advance about four blocks to your north. That is where our headquarters is located. We can talk more then."

The vox went silent. "Well, you heard the man" Saide called up to Virgil. "Lets get this thing finished."

They entered the city center, frequently having to go through blasted away sections of spire that had fallen and blocked the road. Presumably either the PDF or its mysterious enemies had cleared the roads after the initial assault.

The convoy slowly made its way through debris strewn streets treads commonly crushing some lamp or other article of common living.

Saide started seeing movement in the windows and realized that he was seeing men in uniform, PDF who were so caked with dust that they appeared grey. In fact, now that they were in the city, the massive remains of the spires next to them, combined with the dust and smoke hovering above, limited the amount of sunlight to almost nothing.

It was still morning and they had made good time to the PDF HQ, even given the poor condition and had attracted some soldiers, mostly likely under orders to escort them. They arrived amidst infantry and some heavy infantry but all of the troops looked worn and ill equipped.

Saide was about to write them off when he caught a look in one of their eyes. It was hard, hard as any metal, cold as ice and as unforgiving as looking down the barrel of a lasgun.

Thesemenwillfighttothedeath. He realized as he looked around for more evidence to support his idea.

Every single one of them has a gaze that sends shivers down my spine. Emperor, I remember that look. The last garrison in Sargos I to fall to us…we had four times the men and material and its still took us a month to take the city. The only thing that could kill these men is bad leadership…speaking of…

A PDF officer climbed out of a building to meet him. Saide jumped off his chimera and motioned to 1st squad to follow him, Lechor and Hessert lugging their heavy weapons. They had finally reached the capitol.

**Chapter 43: Kroth**

Note: I apologize for the lack of a new chapter in almost 60 days. I attribute this to an increased workload in the past couple of months. Luckily, things have gone back down to manageable levels, and you can expect faster updates for the time to "The One" for spying a rather embarrassing auto-correct mistake. The word was supposed to be 'flechettes', which is a word not recognized by Word's dictionary (nor Firefox's).

Anath slowly got to his feet. He looked around the bridge. It looked like his and Jada's penchant for wearing armor, even in the relative safety of the ship seemed to have turned out to be a good idea. The regular unaugmented crew members lay strewn across the command bridge, some simply unconscious, some more seriously injured. Jada came up beside him, watching and helping the engiseer and Admiral Kenshaw regain consciousness.

"What hit us brother? A warp storm? I have seen many strange things associated with the warp but never something like that. Chaos, despite its name usually is more subtle than just hammering us." Jada puzzled.

"No, that was no regular warp storm. There are no cases of such things with such magnitude." He consulted a cracked monitor.

"Ships functions are still online, no signs of a hull breach, whatever hit us just brushed us aside. Imagine if we had been impacted head on…"

"So if not a warp storm brother, then what?" Jada asked as the rest of the bridge started coming to.

Anath was suddenly hit with a realization. "Oh emperor I hope I am wrong, but…" he picked up a in ship transmitter as he helped a crew member to her feet.

"Circee, are you well? No? Yes, I assumed it would be the turbulence. No I have never experienced anything like…No, unfortunately this cannot be logged. This mission requires secrecy; attribute the findings to some other ship. Very well." Anath slowly set down the receiver and stared at Jada.

"What? What dangers await us?" He asked, getting frustrated

"There are several possibilities. The first is that what hit us was the edge of the disturbance cause by a tyranid fleet, although the proverbial 'shadow in the warp' is, as you said of chaos, more subtle, at least in how it interacts with physical objects. The second is much, much worse. I…I need to…that is what it is…it is what I feared. There is a malign presence in that turbulence. Jada, come with me now."

He spun and started walking purposefully out of the bridge. Jada quickly followed him, still confused.

While nowhere near as large as the Omnis Arcanumm, the Divide Retribution still held a staggeringly large amount of passageways, some official, some less so. Anath led Jada into the heart of the ship. They could hear the massive dynamos that distributed power throughout the ship and could feel the heat of the engine rising out of the floor, even with their power armor on.

At the end of the hallway lay a nondescript door, whose only interesting feature was a small ancient arcane symbol etched into the handle. Anath reached out and touched the handle. The smell of ozone wafted through the corridor as sigils ran across its entirety, flooding them with soft blue light. Symbols also ran along Anath's face as he concentrated.

"Chaos? Here?" Jada spat, drawing his chainsword.

"No brother…"Anath said through gritted teeth, his face sweating with effort.

"But then…Anath, you are a psyker?" He asked in shocked disbelief.

"Yes, but now is not the time for this conversation!" With a last final exertion of effort, Anath opened the psychically locked door. It swung open slowly, its foot thick metal panels ringing as it hit the wall. The passageway before them was unlit.

Jada took one hesitant step forward. "What is this place?"

Anath waved his hand and glowlights came on one by one, revealing a simple bookshelf.

"This, my brother, is knowledge." He started to walk towards the bookshelf, disabling wards as he went.

Jada looked around the blank room in disappointment. "This is nothing like the library on the Omnis Arcanum." He said, eying the single bookshelf and accompanying pedestal with distain.

"This ship is nothing like the Omnis Arcanum. It is merely a strike cruiser, albeit a special one. Information is precious and a ship like this one alone might lose it. However, despite its small size, this 'library' has a surprising amount of information."

"What book are you looking for?" Jada asked as he peered closer at the tomes. "But…There are no titles to these books. They are all the same!" He exclaimed, pointing to the identically arranged and colored books.

"One just has to…know. It is mostly intuition." He paused. "But time is short!"

Anath's hand shot out and closed around a book with surprising gentleness considering he was in his power armor. He lay the book down on the pedestal nearby. He passed his hand over the book, turning the pages without touching them.

"These are over millennia of years old. Were I to touch the pages themselves, they would fall to pieces. But…the shadow," his face darkened. "I fear I have heard an earlier account of an even like the one we just experienced. It took me time to remember. A demon of staggering strength and cunning, upon its emergence into the material world was so disruptive as to distort the very flow of time and space, causing a warp event like the one we just encountered."

He then turned to the book. "I am translating from an older gothic, so the words are not exact, but I can tell you the main idea of the book. It relates the history of this demon."

"Our blessed battle brothers laid down their lives combatting this demon and its forces. However, through some guile or other, the book is not clear, the demon was found to be…I…there really is no direct translation for this word…familiar to us in some way. This affinity destroyed the minds of our more…sensitive brothers."

"Psykers?" Jada asked with a frown on his face.

"Yes, only though the combined efforts of almost half a company was this evil beaten back, though at staggeringly high cost. The survivors were worn out like no other campaign they had encountered, and for one horrible moment we feared that we would not have the strength to destroy this evil. A bit of the next section is missing, but I believe it merely related causalities. Here, it continues on the next page: However, one man, one hero arose from the ranks and did battle with this creature, wounding it greatly and driving it back, back to its last held planet, Allistar. There with the help of the survivors, this hero defeated the demon's last guard."

"Grieving from the losses of his allies, he smote the demon a blow so powerful that it laid the beast unconscious. Thus faced with an almost defeated opponent, the hero found that he had neither the strength nor the power to truly and definitively destroy the demon."

"The beast was awakening so he had to act fast. Gathering all his strength and the strength of the remaining men, he sealed away the demon, to be trapped forever under the frozen tundra of deserted Allistar, alone and constrained."

He put the book back. "I believe that even trapped and imprisoned as it is, its power still seeps into the immaterium, changing fate ever so slightly."

Jada took a moment to collect these facts. "Why have I not heard of this story; why has this hero gone uncelebrated? His actions rival the great champions of old!"

"Ah that is the true sorrow of this story. The previous command, upon hearing of this demon, was concerned about its affinity with our brothers. It was decided that no one would learn about that event. All electronic records were purged; all associated with the event were listed as dead."

"The ignominy of such actions! To win only to lose. Such sorrowful irony wounds me Anath. To think to do such actions and yet be forgotten…that is a crime…but this hero and his men, what did they do with their lives, expunged from records?" Jada asked.

"The book does not say, and I cannot speculate, for besides this book, I have only heard the story once from Vidya himself. But the reason I lead you here, technically breaking several pacts is because I think that this Don, who has also stolen our geneseed, is a thrall of this demon and seeks to release it. The next planet on his trader pass is Allistar. We must intercept him before he reaches that planet, otherwise it might be too late. We must go to Kroth." Anath explained as he replaced the wards and ushered Jada out of the room.

"Then we must plot our course now!" Jada exclaimed. "Kenshaw, has the disruption passed enough to plot a course? Perfect. Do so at once. We must go to Kroth." Agreed Jada.

Saide finished his discussion with the PDF officer and the supplies were now being unloaded from the trucks, which would be used to transport them back after a night of rest.

Despite no indications of attack, Siade remained nervous. This still makes no sense. Why let the supplies reach the PDF? They are obviously capable of a massive attack by the look of the city walls, so why have they not done so before we are dug in? "I don't like it" He muttered as the PDF commander walked away.

"I don't like it either" Caff added, "we should take up a defensive perimeter of our own. The PDF troops may be sound but that officer has his hands tied by Captain Vernheim. He may be forced to make a tactically unsound decision."

"I agree, let's get the command together before the night." Caff nodded and went to relate the message.

Saide obtained a somewhat up to date map of the area and started planning.

The rest of the day was uneventful, with the troops of both sides mingling. However, even this jovial event was jaded by the wear that the local PDF displayed. Fighting for too long and unconvinced of a possible victory, there were starting to give up hope.

Saide poured over the map, analyzing every facet. He was so enthralled that he barely noticed the passage of time or the fact that the rest of command was waiting for him to begin the meeting.

Caff coughed loudly. Saide startled and looked up. "Oh, you're all here…so, I have been over the map and from what I can tell, and from your ground reports you can either agree disagree, that it would be in our best interests to form a perimeter only in the inner city, where we would be able to use height to our advantage."

"Like in Durmen, the buildings have been connected by walkways, allowing for quick mobilization of troops. In addition, in some locations the PDF have made defenses, emplacements and the like, so we wouldn't be fighting alone."

"Umm, with all due respect sir, you make it sound like you know they're going to attack tonight. What gave you that idea?" Virgil asked.

Saide sat back in his chair. "I..." he stammered, "I have no idea really, it just popped into my head. But it can't hurt to be prepared if there is one."

"I notice that you have not placed any troops on the curtain wall; why is that?" Elban asked, pointing to a holographic depiction of the city and possible troop deployments.

"Ah, yes, I thought about that. Let me first say though that if they were to attack, it would be no siege. We have no shield generator here and the wall seems to have been breached very strategically. Were we to position men there, I would wager the enemy would surround the wall segments, cutting them off. I don't want that. Plus, to be honest, we only have eighty odd men. We can't defend the wall alone even if it was tactically sound to do so."

There was a pause in the conversation.

"Forgive me if this sounds rude, but we've done our job already. Why not just leave?" Voor asked.

"Voor, what the hell are you doing here? This is an officers meeting, despite your inflated ego , you have neither the rank nor the authority to be here…wait, but that means we are one short! Where is Kane? That man has stretched my patience for long enough damn it! This is the last straw." He said slamming his hand on the table, causing Caff and Greynor to jump.

"These meeting are not fraking optional and he had purposefully skipped every one since…well since Sargos. This ends here." He said with a wave of his hand.

"Elban, you have a new job. Find Kane wherever he is and relieve him of duty. Make sure he doesn't frak this up for the rest of us."

"If I may…going back to what I said earlier; why not just leave now?" Voor ventured.

Saide let out an exasperated sigh, "because, firstly, we are already here, at least for the night, to refuel. Secondly, even if we were to leave, we would not get out in time and it is better to fight from a defendable area than from out in the open."

"How do you know that we 'wouldn't get out in time'? Hell, we haven't even seen the enemy since we got here. Maybe they don't even exist. Maybe everyone here has just gone crazy and is fighting themselves. We should leave!"

"And most importantly, because we don't run away from a fight. That would make us no better than those bastardish Sargos lords who cut and ran when we needed their private armies the most. We will not do that to another PDF. Do I make myself clear?" he asked with a piercing gaze, directed at Voor. Voor withered.

"Yes sir" He responded.

"Then go, all of you. You know where to go, the time is now, but I want you to be there five minutes ago. Dismissed." Saide said with finality.

Caff stayed behind for a moment.

"Sir, just one thing; Voor had one true point. Although we were in a position to be attacked many times in the canyon s and outer city, why would the enemy choose to attack now when we're obviously dug in and in well defendable positions? It doesn't make any sense."

There was a paused and Saide turned from Caff and sighed, pulling his great coat close as he opened the hatch to the cold desert night.

"Don't tell anyone else this, but to be honest, I have no idea. Call me crazy, call me mad, whatever, but every fiber in my body tells me that we are going to be attacked tonight."

There was another pause as the two exited from the chimera and started walking towards where they had agreed the command should be.

"That isn't like you." Caff said quietly. "That's not like you at all. Our late captain, emperor protect him, he was always the impulsive one, brilliant in his unconscious deductions, perhaps a little too so. You were always the rational one Saide, and that's what made him choose you for second in command.

Saide ran a hand through his hair as he strode. "I know Caff. I know. But everything seems so clear now. We just wait for a night and then leave. Hell, maybe I am wrong, emperor I hope so, who knows…" He trailed off as the two entered the building established as the command HQ.

Kane and Lucius were crouched around a fire, snacking on some food they had obtained from a broken in store earlier. The two camped on one of the island like battlements, separated from the rest of the wall. A handful of other PDF were with them as well as the rest of 3rd squad, Kane's men. They were generally having a good time disobeying orders when one of them put his roasted meat to the ground and drunkenly pointed into the distance.

"Did you umm…did you guys see that? Something…in the moonlight there for a second." He slurred.

Kane peered out lazily. "Relax, no one knows you're here, besides…Frak, that's a man. Two men. Frak me that's a squad!" He sprung to his feet and grabbed the man by his collar. "You! You guys have any patrols out that way?" He asked, shaking the poor guardsman.

"N…no, none in that direction as far as I know" he stammered.

"Then get me the vox. People need to know about this."

As he reached for the vox, a volley of shots sounded from behind them and ripped through their ranks. One stray shot hit the vox unit in Kane's hands, destroying it.

"Frak it!" he screamed. "We're under attack you idiots!" he said grabbing his lasgun.

Finally, true to prediction, fighting had come again to Kroth, and they were right in the middle of it.

**Chapter 44: Kane's Hand**

Elban was almost to the wall when he first heard the shots. His instinctive reaction was to dive into the nearest building. He fumbled with his vox piece.

"Sir, we have fighting. I repeat, unknown force, unknown strength, north west side of the city."

He peered out of the window just as a nearby street grate popped out of the ground. He stayed perfectly still, not wanting to betray his presence. From the hole climbed several men with ragged clothing, metal gleams in the streetlight and moonlight betraying weapons and cruel implants. They were cultist for sure.

"They're using the sewers to bypass the walls. Outer PDF perimeters are in danger of being cut off"

"…frak it. I hear you Elban. Try to get to Kane; I can't contact him for some reason. Stay alive man."

The vox went silent, leaving Elban alone.

Two PDF had already died and one was bleeding out. The squad was surrounded on their perch atop the wall section, encircled by another unit that had appeared out of the sewers.

Lucius and Kane were crouched below the parapet trading shot with those below. Lasbolts cut the air around them and a cruel stench of madness wafted on the otherwise crisp night air.

Kane quickly shot over the cover, dropping an assailant.

"This isn't good" bellowed Lucius. "They have us surrounded!"

Kane hissed but didn't reply. The cultists started chanting. Strange twisting words filled the air. Kane knew the allure of these words all too well.

"Don't listen!" He screamed, holding a nearby PDF by the collar.

It was too late, the man's eyes lolled into the back of his head and he collapsed, shaking violently and drooling in a puddle on the ground.

Then, just when things seemed to be sealed, just when it appeared that the clench of fate had tightened around their necks, three important things happened.

The first was that Elban shot the cultist leader in the head from behind a street corner, disrupting the chanting of the madmen. The second was that Kane, despite his words to the PDF earlier, listened to the chaos in the air, the abyssal chants reawakening lost power. The third and arguably the most important event was that the cultists, seeing their leader dead, let loose a blood chilling yell and started charging Kane and his men, weapons held high.

In the charge Elban rolled out from behind cover, shooting his lasgun into the backs of the charging foes. Horrifyingly, those hit continued to run forward even with holes right through bodies, internal organs open to the world.

Kane smiled. That familiar pungent smell ripped into the air; a heavy weight seemed to be placed on the backs and hearts of the PDF and other defenders. For one ridiculously long moment the air and everything in it seemed to stand still. The moon lost its light, shadows danced and swayed and something shuddered from Kane's triumphantly out stretched hand, something that shouldn't exist, something that couldn't exist, something that forced its impossible being upon the universe like a poisoned scar as it tore tortuously through the fabric of reality with little regard for sanity.

It struck the lead berserker squarely in the chest and with a wrenching yet organic sound and tore messily through him. The singularity continued its flight a few more feet to the ground where it exploded with a cacophonous concussion that even the PDF could feel.

The rest of the berserkers quite impressively kept on charging even though the blast had torn skin from their bodies and wrenched limbs from their sockets. They started scrambling up the wall section, knives and swords in hand while the defenders rained las shots down on their heads.

Shots fell, people fell, knives were flashed, cartridges spun in the air from solid shot guns, and through all this Kane smiled sickeningly as he slew one life after another with savage glee.

Elban watched as Kane decimated his enemies. Elban had a nauseous feeling about Kane's powers. This is wrong. This isn't fighting. This is just what Kane does normally. It's just murder, only the enemies this time happen to be my enemies also.

His reservations would just have to wait though, for as he dashed from his cover to the nest street corner, some of the brutes spied him and with a yell, redirected their efforts towards him.

Everything faded out of concern in a second. He whipped out his gun and fuelled one outright with an extremely lucky shot to the head, while he himself started to run in the opposite direction. He could see the base instincts in their eyes, their desire to kill and maim, all apparent in their bestial glare.

He raked them with a few more shots but only managed to injure one, who had his leg blasted off by the shot. A volley from Kane's men felled all but two from behind and another chance shot from his lasgun dropped another, leaving just one fanatic.

He was so close that Elban barely had a chance to fumble for his sword before the cultist crashed into him.

The crazed man's blows were like getting hit with a club even though he blocked the simple smashes. He could see the man's face up close, a rugged beard covered his face with a hood covering his eyes.

One particularly strong blow forced back both opponents revealing the cultists full head. Bloody rents and metal plates were nailed into his head which was otherwise bald. The smell of human blood reeked from his mouth as he closed with Elban once again.

Elban lunged under the swing and stabbed him through the stomach. Although blood ran from the wound, it seemed to only make him angrier. Elban blocked the next strike, which resonate through his body forcefully. As the block was released Elban swung his own knife across the hand of his opponent, fingers cleaving away by the deadly sharp metal.

The cultist was forced to drop his sword and quickly hit Elban in the stomach with a fist that felt like a block of metal, forcing the wind out of Elban. Before Elban had any time to recover, the fanatic swung his arm at Elban's head cracking him on the forehead.

Pain exploded in Elban's mind, violent colors played across his vision as he swayed. With a last action Elban saw the man drop his guard, thinking Elban out. Elban slid his blade through the man's eye killing him instantly. Elban remembered wiping off his weapon before blacking out in the alley against the wall.

While frantically shooting his lasgun, Lucius spied Elban drop but barely had time to register the fact before Kane let loose another psionic blast, clawing Lucius back to the present.

Next to him Kane stood panting from the effort, scorched everywhere from the unnatural flames. He whipped his head around looking for more targets but all that remained were stumps and bits of smoldering flesh, which filled the air with their putrid stink. One surviving PDF lost his lunch behind them.

He turned around slowly to see the fear in the remaining soldiers. He smiled.

"If you want to survive, you'll come fight with me." He threatened with a deadly quiet voice, a chilling contrast to the continued carnage and screams that rent the night from the inner city.

"You're…you're unnatural, freak! Get the hell away from us!" yelled one PDF, backing away in horror at the glee brought from the destruction Kane had wrought. He didn't even get five steps before kane shot him in the stomach.

The man screamed and grasped the wound, collapsing to the ground twitching in pain. Kane peered down at the writhing man and gave him a savage kick in the ribs, causing renewed screams.

He looked at the remaining soldiers but was annoyed by their horrified looks.

"Boss, they…" Lucius started.

Kane hissed him silent. Relishing every muscle movement he slowly outstretched his arm and shot the man on the ground in the head.

"Like I said, you'll be coming with me. These false worshippers need to be taught the true meaning of pain, or agony and blood. I will remind them with just my own two hands." He outstretched the desiccated digits causing the PDF to back away in fear.

"But…where are we g-going s-sir?" one ventured. Kane's grin grew.

"We're going to smoke them out of their own territory. Follow" He barked as he descended from the wall section. The small group followed him, not speaking a word.

He ran a finger along the etched sigils in his skin and let out a breath of pain as the came to life once more.

"Here" He yelled, his voice and breath heavy, barely hiding his obvious intense desire to kill.

They dropped into the sewer grate one at a time. Kane held up a hand. The sound of running feet quickly approached. His smile flared up again.

"It's killing time!" He said before launching himself at the completely surprised cultist squad.

Elban awakened with a splitting pain in his head. He felt his hand to his temple and almost instantly regretted it; an enormous bump met his hand, sore and inflamed. He looked over himself. He seemed to be otherwise fine with the exception of feeling sore everywhere.

He then remembered where he was. He spun around almost comically, ready to be attacked but no one was there; the alley was empty.

He cautiously peered outside the alleyway but not a soul met his eye, not a live one anyway. Those killed by Kane still lay there, mutilated, gristly frozen faces silhouetted in the light of the street posts.

Elban peered out into the darkness, trying to spot Kane and his men on the wall but he saw nothing save the ruin of war, debris and spent ammo littering the ground.

Reaching the end of the street, he clambered up onto the segment to see where they had gone.

Nearly three stories tall, the wall provided Elban with a fairly good look out of the city. He could see at least a half mile in until the buildings started getting taller. He looked at his feet.

The remains of the fire still smoldered. So that means I have been out for no more than an hour or so. Not long, but plenty of time for Kane to screw things up. But where could he have gone? He puzzled, looking around for some sign.

What iis like Kane? Where would he want to fight? He likes to bring the fight to the enemy, but where are they?

He looked around again. The sounds of battle still met his ears, but they were further into the city. So that means the outer posts were overrun, or perhaps defeated their foes and have regrouped further in, only to be attacked again, which leaves me in theoretically 'enemy' territory.

He tried to use his vox but found that it was missing. Damn, probably fell out when that cultist swung at me. Emperor it still hurts. So I am alone, which mean I need to follow that last order given if they still apply, which brings me back to Kane again.

Suddenly, everything clicked together with a sudden brilliance. He clambered down the wall segment as fast as he could and ran over to what he had seen. He looked at the sewer drain triumphantly.

It all makes sense. The walls were breached on purpose and with precision. The enemy knew that the wall was too strategically obvious to go undefended so they isolated each section and used the sewer system to outflank the defenders. But they wouldn't suspect someone to go into the sewer systems after them!

Kane's brilliance is a bit unnerving. But I bet that is where he is now, merrily slaughtering heretics.

He looked disgustedly at the sewer entrance. "Here goes nothing" he said to no one in particular before dropping down the hole.

The stink of sewage filled Elban's nostrils as he landed with a splash, ankle deep in what he sincerely hoped was water. Light filtered through from sewer grates above and Elban didn't turn his light on for fear of being seen.

Now where would he have gone? He thought, surveying the tunnel in front of and behind him.

He stumbled forward a bit, boots splashing until his foot hit something. On closer inspection it proved to be a body. Right, how could I forget? To find Kane all one needs to do is follow the corpses. Emperor above, this guy looks like he's had his face melted off!

He continued cautiously, but after a while it became clear that whoever had been in these tunnels was either gone or very, very dead Or both…it seems that the path leads away from the city, the grates are getting less common. Damn it Kane, you'll get us all killed like this.

He switched on his light finally. Passages twisted on and on, a vast network of lines that branched and split, convened and sloped in different directions and sizes.

Finally after what seemed like ages, he thought he heard splashing. He stoped to listen Yes, very faint, but from up ahead. He made a gamble.

"Kane?" He yelled into the darkness. There was a moment of silence.

"No, is that Elban? Kane is gone." The voice got closer as both Elban and the speaker neared on another. It became clear that the foot steps were actually a group of people, which was proven when a sudden blinding light caught Elban, who ended up staring at Lucius, Ostan and Gregor, along with the rest of Kane's squad and most of the PDF. They looked uneasy, the PDF the worst of them all.

He looked them over. They were worse for wear alright. One of them was limping and Elban coud tell a couple of the men were missing, most likely dead. The rest were tattered and or bleeding. Kane's squad was in better shape but not by much.

"What happened to you guys? Where is Kane?" Elban asked the group.

"We killed hundreds of them, Kane maybe more. Those cultists are not true soldiers . They just charge at first sight. He loved it, cleared a path through the worst and we just followed, but we lost him at a point and he was gone. His vox was destroyed." Ostan answered. Lucius himself was quiet.

"We need to find him. We just need to…follow the bodies" Lucius nodded and the group started moving again.

After at least ten minutes of walking, the darkness of the tunnels was pierced by a light in the distance.

"Probably and entrance, be careful." Elban cautioned. Lucius grunted in reply. The edged closer to the light.

Elban had one of Lucius's men take point. They exited out of the sewer cautiously, all in one group and very swiftly but no one shot at them. Well that's a god sign.

Elban looked out and gasped. Before them was a very well camouflaged landing pad, hand assembled and obviously not imperial judging by the demonic symbols etched into the metal plate of the pad. It was about the size of a small plaza.

This is big enough to land our ship on. The cultists must have been receiving supplies from space. I wonder why its deserted now? He looked around but besides the lights being on, there was no sign of anyone.

"Anyone still have a functioning vox?" Elban addressed the group. One PDF took off his pack. "One in here sir."

"Thank you. Now then, I am under orders to take command of this squad. Lucius, no trouble?" Lucius shook his head but made it clear that he wasn't going to be happy about it.

"Good then. Plans have changed. We need to secure the landing pad. People might be gone now, but if the attack fails they might intend to regroup here. Lucius, you tell Saide what's going on. PDF you're coming with me. We need to find Kane."

Meanwhile, Kane, the man in mention was slowly coming out of his blood rage, and blood rage was an appropriate word for it. He was covered from head to toe in gore, almost none of it his own.

He could still feel the satisfaction from each kill, but the specifics were infuriatingly hazy in his mind. He stumbled suddenly, and looked around.

He was out of the sewers, that much was clear. He then remembered how he had slaughtered the men in the sewers then, seeing light just as Elban had, been enticed, hoping that it meant an outpost or sentry guard, or anything as long as it meant that he got to kill someone. However he had been severely disappointed, enraged in fact, only some pointless metal floor, nothing to kill at all. He had screamed in frustration, a guttural bestial yell, which had helped none. Nothing could change the unrelenting fact that he was out of targets.

He looked around. He was standing in a dip between hills. He climbed to the nearest on and looked out. The vast emptiness of the desert hit him and filled him with anger. He whirled around. The land pad lay some miles away. He could just make out…was that Elban? It was, and he was giving orders to Lucius! How dare he take control of his squad! That sniveling little son of a bitch, he was going to kill him for taking away his squad.

Unmatched hatred ran through Kane like a sudden fire. He clenched and unclenched his hands and the desire to kill blossomed again from deep within like a tainted rose. But it was not to be. For as his fury rose, something snapped in his head, perhaps from over exertion, but perhaps from something more sinister. He collapsed onto the ground like a rock, his body rolling down the hill, coming to a rest well concealed by the hill.

**Chapter 45: The Good Fight**

Note: Last Man Standing is not done and until the day it is finished I will continue to think about and write it. There might be long delays between chapters (like the last one) but I will finish this. Thank you to everyone who has reviewed and favorited; expect more soon.

They had hit like a wave. No that was not the right simile, for their presence had gone undetected for too long, nothing like a wave. In fact, their strategy was well planned, as Saide found out later. Their sewer ploy had allowed them to outflank and destroy most of the outer PDF defenses.

It was only the barbaric call of the cultists and the screams and futile shots of the sentries that had alerted the more cityward elements.

After that it had been a slaughter on both sides, for although the cultists seemed to had somehow come up with a brilliant tactical move in the sewers, their next choice had been just to relentlessly and stupidly charge the hopelessly outnumbered defenders. Thus, what could have been a total rout of the PDF turned out to be only heavy losses.

Saide had been quick to advise the PDF commander to draw his remaining elements back to the HQ deep within the heart of the more well defended section of the city together with Saide's own men.

The vox spoke constantly, relating screams and yells and other horrors that Saide could only imagine as he and the PDF commander surveyed the field within the safety of the command tent.

"There seems to be a strong force coming from the North, along street 1506. Have your team in that building ready." He gestured at the holographic projection.

"Your team at street 1504 seems to be moving to intercept. Did you order that?" The PDF commander asked.

"No," Saide looked at him, "It seems like my troops are taking the initiative."

"Rather than follow orders?" The man countered. Saide did not press the point further.

"They have set up a heavy weapon of some sort nearby plaza 5, no, overlooking plaza 5. We're taking heavy casualties from it. Probably an autocannon." The commander pointed out.

Saide snatched up the nearest vox. "1st squad, Voor; you see that heavy weapon the street over?" There was a pause and then a reply of the affirmative.

"Can you take it out from where you are? You should be up high enough..." Saide said.

Voor pointed at the heavy weapon platform far below them. They stood atop a shattered hive spire, wind whipping at their uniforms and weapons. Zell paused a moment to let the breeze settle before carefully aiming his long-las at the target. He exhaled and took his shot.

A brilliant laser suddenly existed between him and the platform. The surprised cultist gunner jerked his head up. The shot had gone wide. Snarling, the gunner moved to aim the large gun at the spire. He never got a chance. The next shot hit the gun, again missing the gunner. however, it detonated the shell inside the barrel. Metal exploded in every direction as the greater part of the weapon disappeared into shrapnel.

The next shot from above hit the cultist in the chest, blasting through him. He had a second to realize that his heart and several other internal organs were no longer there before he collapsed to the ground. The spotter beside him, not knowing that the gun was inoperable, or simply acting out of an animalistic rage went to take his comrade's place. He was rewarded for his efforts with another laser that took his leg off.

He looked down with an interesting expression at his missing appendage as another shot took off his head.

Atop his lofty perch Zell grumbled. "That was sloppy. It has been too long. Far too long", he commented as another 1st squad member on the building over took out a rival sniper team. Voor only grinned and threw him another ammo round and pointed out the next target.

Down on the ground, things were far less comical. The PDF had and continued to, take a significant beating at the hands of their cultist counterparts. In some places command structure had fallen apart, some leaving their posts, other frozen into inaction, just waiting to fall into the unforgiving and unmerciful fist of their enemies.

Virgil had ended up with a squad of men who usually performed non-fighting operations, either other vehicle commanders or miscellaneous personnel not part of regular infantry. They called themselves the auxiliaries and right now they were trapped in the suburbs, only about six blocks from the PDF fortified position that they were supposed to join.

Some of the former 4th platoon from Sargos was there Virgil noticed, showing that they had learned from the hardship that had cemented their camaraderie. Along with them were some minor players, some motor pool drivers and of course Virgil himself, the displaced and displeased tank ace.

Not only had he not been able to touch a true tank since Sargos he also vehemently hated fighting as a regular, an experience he had the misfortune of having been forced upon him only once when his tank had been ambushed behind friendly lines.

A lasbolt split the air above Virgil's head, knocking off his hat, shocking him back to the situation around him.

They were in the ruins of a three story building but only the walls remained and not much of those either. Hidden behind the cover left by collapsed wall segments were Virgil's unofficial auxiliaries.

The 4th platooners were firing over cover, keeping the enemy down. Menon was tending to a PDF who, along with his squad, had joined them. He also had been hurt bad but a solid shot in the chest. He was now slumped in a corner.

Seymore was in what was left of the upstairs, picking off whoever had the tenacity to show their head.

This can't stalemate. Whatever condition the PDF fortification is in, it almost definitely needs our help...But we can't help them if the cultists are between us and them. He took a look at the situation. From what he could tell, there were upwards of twenty cultists occupying the ruin. he had about the same number. From the direction of the bullet holes, the cultists were all in the building next to theirs. he reached a simple conclusion: an assault.

"Men, we are going to take the building." He said, pointing to the ruin in question.

"Are you mad?" one of the PDF yelled at him, "we would be gunned down like..."

"From what I've seen, their aim is subpar and they seem to only be using pistols. Grenades out men, frag."

They looked at him like he was mad but obliged. he pulled out his own grenade and tore off the firing pin, letting the loop of metal fall to the ground amidst the rubble and spent ammo casings.

He counted silently in his head, then with all the strength he could muster, lobbed the device at the opposing ruin. The rest did the same. Some timed it short, others long, but the end result was the same: death.

The grenades hit in a cascade of explosions that deafened and rung the ears of the men. A sudden concussion ran through the air with every deadly thump. A cultist screamed over the attack as shrapnel tore into his body from behind. The bloody corpse tumbled off the second floor and hit the ground with a muffled crunch.

Before he had time to wait for any noticeable change, Virgil ordered a charge across the streets. "For Kroth!" Some of the PDF cheered as they affixed bayonets. The rest of the men vaulted over the cover they had been hiding behind and started to dash across the street.

Stevan had found someone interesting, an engiseer of the archenemy. He was very eager to kill him. No one realized how long a man could live if enhanced to the amount that Stevan was. Years meant nothing. The failing of the flesh was merely an obstacle, a challenge, a puzzle, and like any challenge it could be solved with enough innovation through engineering.

Too many times had his plans been laughed at. No one was laughing now, it had taken years to rebuild Mars after the initial betrayal and yet history repeated itself. The pathetic leaders of the mechanicum seemed to live and breath conservatism, appalling at Stevan's radical ideas and innovations. Behind his enhanced bio-optics he had painfully experienced the Magus declare his designs as unsound, even heretical.

Stevan had accepted the ignominy of exile on a colony ship, destined for the distant outer reaches of the galaxy, a planet of no importance called Sargos.

When his scans had first picked up the tech priest he had been excited. A meeting of minds was always preferable to any other sort. However, as began to charge with Virgil, his sensors had picked up energy discharge to the right.

The logical conclusion what that they were under attack by a separate force. His hypothesis was further strengthened when his data sensors were attacked by bits of machine code. These attacks were repulsive: bits of logical fallacies, paradoxes and other impossibilities designed to tax or even fry his logical systems.

Stevan signaled the existence of the enemy to Virgil and indicated that he would take care of it.

As he now ran down the seemingly deserted street the attacks intensified. However, he had come prepared. As many younger organisms forgot, there was as much room on a tech priest's body for weapons and armor as for sensors and other banal instruments. He chuckled to himself as he shed his iconic rust red robe along with some useless masking, kept only for aesthetics.

He stretched his machine arms and legs and breathed a slow breath of air into his still organic, if heavily bio-enhanced , with what could only be considered a smile, he shot into motion at superhuman speeds.

The cultist tech priest scanned the building. It was mostly deserted, some life signs but mostly insects. There was however, a rather fat feline of the third floor. He made a note to kill it later. That was not it. He had sensed something larger, he could have sworn he had detected another techpriest and was eager to blast the false believer into his component materials.

He sensed around. Nothing. Nothing on visible sensors, nothing on enhanced ones. Whatever it was, it had vanished like a ghost. He rechecked his data storage. There had been a person there. He frowned.

Some shadow moved just at the range of his sensors. He moved over to where it had been. Nothing. No heat or radioactive signature, no bio trail. Then he noticed the footprint in the dust.

The first shot destroyed his left most mechadendrite's 32nd actuator, which controlled clenching and unclenching. It was now useless. He spun around in dismay, sensors at maximum power, his organic body pumping adrenaline furiously. There was no one there. It was impossible.

Even under the employment of chaos he had seen subtle things, improbable things. Things which a lesser mind would speak of as magic or sorcery. Or he had until the treacherous humans decided to switch to a more bloody route, forcing him to go along with them. What choice did he have? He saw what they did to the lone cultist who had remained faithful. he wanted to live. He rerouted power to newly installed prototype sensors of his own design.

There. A flicker. A sudden peak in the likelihood of a positive match to a techpreist. Whoever they were they were moving fast and obviously armed he concluded.

He leaned up against a duracrete and enhanced steel pole for cover. Many like it spanned around him across the entire building. The building had clearly been under construction at the time of abandonment.

The second shot destroyed another mechadendrite, leaving only one left, which was quickly destroyed by the third shot.

Subsystems squeeled for him to find cover. He spun around the pole, logic systems churning. He is fast, somehow hiding the output of his own systems to escape detection. His balistica systems are non-standard, possibly also experimental. Rationale for output referenced the three accurate shots from unknown distance in extremely rapid succession. His logical circuited returned that the best form of attack would then be to close distance and nullify his foe's advantage.

His own brain double checked the result and was suspicious. That tactic was a possible effect of the ritual with the new god. Another solution? Cover every possible space with death.

A pair of heavy stubbers emerged from his arms and started firing into space at an incredibly fast rate, filling any possible attack vector with bullets. To minimize possibility of an attack he had backed up against a wall.

Two mechadendrites burst from the wall behind him, each disabling his proper arms through cutting of ligaments. His logic circuits warned him that his opponent was trying to destroy his means of attack.

He opened his mouth in retaliation and a torrent of liquid flaming promethium engulfed that wal, shooting out the holes caused by the attack. No response. No scream of subnets; no smell of burning synthetics. He had missed somehow.

Scarcely a second passed when a shot from his left severed the tube leading to his promethium tank. Code coalesced in fear. Logic circuits screamed about non solvable results. How does he know my system so thoroughly? How is he destroying everything with such precision?

What could only be described as rage blossomed within him. The stubbers emerged again and filled with air with deadly shells, aided by an improved firing algorithm.

This time right at the end of the round there was a slight tinging noise, as if metal off metal. The note reverberated through his sensors. I hit the bastard, now all I need to do is adapt my firing...

A shot tore his automatic cartridge feeder on his back. Another destroyed his current magazine on his left hand. In a futile effort to hit his attacker he emptied the one on his right. The enemy techpriest suddenly appeared, not even half the building's length away.

The cultist stared at the shape, bio-optics straining. Rage billowed. His enhanced voice rose to an inhuman level. "Blood for the blood god!" He screamed as he rushed at the enemy priest. Shots streamed down on him, each destroying some weapon or critical system. He did not care, and charged faster.

Subsystems burst and electronic fried as he lurched his mass, rerouting all power in an attempt to close against the false believer.

The enemy stood calmly still and fired two shots, each severing critical biosynthetic structure in his armored legs. Lubricant oozed out of the wound as his run ungracefully turned into a fall.

All four hundred pounds of him smashed into the ground. "Skulls for the skull throne" His audio path blasted, although it sounded a little defeated. His torso flexed allowing to see that the figure was approaching and now in range.

A taser shot from his mouth, sparks flying as the line arced through the air.

The enemy caught it in a mechadendrite. "Really?" It mocked. "Is that all you can think of? A mouth taser...Really?" he reversed the flow of energy in the taser and shocked the cultist priest with enough electricity to power a small town.

He let the line drop with a single command and checked power levels. Drastically low. The cloaking device had drained nearly three percent more than experiments suggested. Steven frowned, tearing off pieces of his fallen enemy for use later. "Well" he argued with himself, "that is why there are field tests".

A surprised expression met Virgil's eyes. The solid bark from the auto pistol turned the expression into an abstract painting made from only reds executed artistically on a canvas of cracked drywall. The body collapsed to the ground.

Virgil had just enough time to mentally pat himself on the back before he saw a cultist deal a nasty blow to one of the auxiliaries. "Frack!" he yelled, diving through a shattered doorway, tackling the belligerent. The force of the attack smashed the enemy's head against what used to be the tile of a kitchen floor with an audible man's eyes closed while blood ran from the back of his head.

"Thanks for the save" the auxiliary gasped.

All around them, PDF and auxiliaries grappled with cultists, some winning, other not so lucky. A shot from the ruined 2nd story hit the ground next to Virgil, spraying him with shrapnel. Most of it lodged in his chest plate but a burning sensation in his left arm told him that he was wounded.

A large cultist tried to set up a heavy weapons tripod, fumbling with the heavy legs, near the back of the building. Virgil shot at him but the pistol kicked funny and jammed on the last shot. The man fell but now Virgil had no weapon. He quickly looked around as he ran for cover. He checked the chamber of his pistol; the bullet hd prematurely detonated. Virgil cursed and threw the thing to the ground and drew his knife.

In front of him a cultist was busy hitting a PDF into oblivion, blood running down the victim's face. The PDF lay on the ground in shock while the brute kicked him relentlessly. Virgil lodged the knife up to the hilt into the man's neck from behind.

The cultist issued a gurgling sound and clumsily turned, hatred burning in his eyes. He brushed Virgil away, making him trip on the remains of a sink. While he attempted to regain his feet, the cultist grabbed for the blade lodged in his neck, pulling it out with a savage yell. The auxiliary that Virgil had helped before returned the favor by smashing the man's head with a piece of masonry.

Virgil's heart raced. Are we winning? Emperor this turned bloody. I suspect that the PDF had numbers and we had better training. Together I assume this made up for the sheer strength of the cultists.He observed bodies on both sides, but the majority were cultist.

Suddenly there was silence, an almost deafening absence of sound. Could the fight be over already?

"Men, to me!" He yelled in a cracked voice. A handful of men answered his call. "Jameson, how many did we lose? 3? Looks like we're missing Caleb and Fret. I think I also saw two PDF get hit in the charge."

Several PDF also emerged from the wreckage. The ground was limping bleeding and bloodied. Some were supporting others. Menon and Seymore entered with them.

"The other's dead. I am sorry. It was an unlucky shot; took him right in the thigh. He must have also hit his head when he fell because he lay there and bled to death."The boy said, grimacing.

"That quickly?" Virgil said with a pained expression on his face. "It hit an artery sir; explosive round. If he had stayed conscious he could have staunched the bleeding but it looks like he hit his head on the curb."

"What about Ben?" another PDF asked, pushing the group aside to look at his comrade.

Menon glanced downward. "He's better, took one shot to the foot and another one to the arm. He blacked out from the pain. You should get him to a medic station. There's only so much I can do for him here."

"Alright!" Virgil announced, looking over the men. "jameson, you take the wounded back to the city center; Menon, you go with him. I don't want anyone else dying today. Seymor, you and you five are coming with me. PDF, I don't know what your orders were but we appreciate the help. I am sorry about Ben. I am sure he was a good man." he looked at the corpse and sighed.

Another of the PDF stepped up "We were ordered to, and I quote: 'follow the elements of the auxiliary division of the armed traders and assist in all and any military actions at their discretion'. Basically, the way I see it, you got the recruits. Commander wanted us to tag along for free training, with all due respect sir."

"Well" pointed out Virgil, "that might work in our favor. These cultist cell seem to be small when not ambushing. The best course of action is to proceed to our objective. The PDF bunker should be just a block or two down. Everyone, Move!"

The group split, the wounded retreating back to the nearest medical zone; the rest followed Virgil through the back of the building.

Through the ruins of the rest of the block, Virgil could see the dull concrete bunker of the PDF. He could just make out the sound of a machine gun.

"Common" he yelled, "it sound like they need help!"

That did not prove to be the case though. After climbing over the veritable wall of cultist bodies they found the PDF bunker not only in good shape but also good morale.

Virgil enquired and found the PDF sargent easily enough. "Yeah for a minute there in the beginning we thought we were done for. I hear some of the smaller emplacements and squads didn't fare so well. Turns out that the rebels were using the sewer lines to sneak under the curtain wall. The outer defenses took a beating. I am afraid we lost some good men but the reports are still coming back." He gestured to a holo-table that, between horrendous bouts of static, displayed the current defenses and casualties.

"All those cultists, how did you kill them all? We had trouble taking even a handful in close combat." Virgil said, surprised.

"There are no cultists on Koth. The men were are fighting are rebels. They are scum and they are unworthy of life but they have no connection to the archenemy." The sergeant corrected. "As to answer your question; it turns out that the nearest sewer grate to this bunker is right over there." He pointed to a small hole in the middle of the street, morning light just allowed Virgil to see the dark recess amid the piles of bodies.

"They just rushed us from the hole. Didn't even wait to group up, just started yelling some aweful thing and ran at us. It was pretty easy to just turn the heavy guns on them." he patted a heavy bolter. "Its a good thing that they don't have brains. They could have gotten us good. We weren't warned, but apparently your commander anticipated their strategy and got the message out to some of the squads."

A sudden beam of light entered the bunker as the door slid open.

"Hey, who is that? Who let him in?" The sergeant yelled as he drew his weapon.

Stevan moved into the bunker and closed the door behind him.

"You should really upgrade those locks. Child's play, mere child's play" He said in a deadpan voice.

"Don't worry," Virgil assured the PDF sarge, "thats Stevan, our head engiseer. He's a bit eccentric but he knows his stuff." He said. he then turned to Stevan. "I thought you were supposed to be here earlier, what happened between you and whatever enemy you found?"

"I encountered someone interesting. He lent me a hand with some problems I had been having" Stevan said in a strange tone of voice.

Virgil looked at the cyborg incredulously. If he didn't know better he would say that the machine was almost cheerful. "Well, whatever, you're here now and thats all that matters."

"Yes, you are correct" Stevan agreed."Sir, I also must inform you that Saide has some new information for us. The contract is fulfilled, the enemy defeated for now and Elban seems to have found us a starport on the outskirts of town. Saide has already called the ship. We are to leave this planet as soon as all personnel have been accounted for." The engiseer said, leaning in and communicating in a whisper.

"Good news! I guess that is that, although I would have to say it feels weird leaving when the war hasn't been won yet." Virgil said.

"Ex-guard huh? Where were you last?" The sargent enquired.

Virgil was about to answer when Stevan cut him off.

"My speech networks are old, so they might not include all the newest idioms but I am 'pretty sure' that the information in question is classified as 'none of your business'."

"My apologies." The sergeant said, taken aback. He shrugged and walked over to the holo-table to look at something.

"Say, Stevan, didn't you only have two mechadendrites" Virgil enquired as they and the rest of the squad left.

Stevan paused for a moment before replying. "Presumably, you could argue that my opponent was...well armed." Stevan paused a bit, confusing Virgil.

"Umm...well it looks like you fared well. I don't see any damage. Was it another tech priest you fought?" Virgil asked.

"Emperor, and they say we can't understand humor." Stevan replied.

**Chapter 46: Deep Strike Mishap**

Note from the Author: Hey look, a new chapter! [Insert humorous joke about not updating in four months]

Saide's men gathered at the edge of the starport, weary and carrying wounded and injured. Saide stood with the rest of command.

"Caff, how badly were we bloodied?" He asked, data slate in hand, reviewing numbers.

Caff stepped forward. "I will be honest sir, we got pretty damn lucky. The PDF took most of the casualties. Your plan to only hold the inner defenses proved to be prudent, as was your decision to dig in instead of leaving. We would have been caught unawares in the open!"

"Yes, will, we all get lucky sometimes Caff. I want to know though, how many good men did I kill with my decision to stay?"

Caff's smile vanished. "Sir, you made a decision, for good or ill. It turned out to be the right one. Surely more would have died if you had not…"

"The numbers Caff. Just tell me the…No, tell me the names." Saide asked. Caff consulted with the other who were beside him. Zell, Greynor, Elban and Virgil huddled together and shared information for a moment.

"The auxiliaries were hit the hardest. Virgil made a decision like you and I am still reviewing the circumstances but I believe it to have been the right one also. Five men are dead, from the rest, seven although several are seriously injured."

Saide ran his fingers through his hair as he took off his cap. "Twelve out of eighty odd men. A guard commander would look at those statistics and call them acceptable, especially for the defense of a city as important as this. I call it unacceptable. I know most of those men and their comrades. Once business is done I will pay my respects."

"As you wish sir," Caff said hollowly. "Arnon and Creed reported that they should be here shortly." Saide nodded and dismissed the command.

"No sign of Kane then?" Saide asked Elban as he went to leave. "No sir, although after what I saw him do, I'm not sure that's a bad thing. He's dangerous and psychotic, as well as a psyker. I'm sure you read my report."

"Yes, I did. You have permanent command of Kane's men. I am not sure what to do with Kane. I suppose I will speak to him when Lucious returns from his search."

"Sir, you aren't thinking of letting him stay with us! Emperor, in any other guard or PDF unit he would be shot on the spot!" Elban exclaimed.

"While I agree that he is dangerous, I must point out that we are not a regular guard squad. He killed none of our men and has lead his squad reliably for years on Sargos I. The only offense he is guilty of is a breach of orders. And you can be assured that he will be no sergeant until he regains my trust."

"Are you crazy? He could kill us all if he wanted to! Emperor knows he killed enough cultists!"

"We are not cultists and while Kane continues to recognize that, and follow orders I must at least give him a chance. Commander Fatum trusted him. There was not a single man in that PDF that he didn't trust. He would not have made him a Sargent without his reasons." Saide argued.

"Fraking hell! Saide, Fatum is dead. Look where his trust lead him."

"Enough Elban, that's enough!" Saide shouted, inviting turned head from the guardsmen around them.

"Think about it from my view. Here is a man who has served loyally for over five years. Suddenly I am informed that not only is he a lunatic, he is also a psyker. Now what the hell do I do with that information? I will give him his last chance. I will speak to him and learn what I can from that conversation. I will not condemn a man without allowing him to defend himself."

Elban bit his tongue with difficulty. "As you wish sir, but let it be clear that you are making a mistake."

"Maybe so" Saide admitted quietly.

Lucious found Kane's body in a ditch . The psyker was alive and conscious again, but lay still, looking at the sky.

"Lucious" He said without averting his gaze, "the power is gone, again." He stated simply.

"I am so sorry sir. I can only imagine…" Lucious started. "NO" Kane shouted suddenly. "You can only imagine!" He screamed as he tried to get up feebly. "You can all the other insignificant little shits in the galaxy. You cannot imagine the pain, the anguish of losing such power. It…it reduces you from that of the gods down to the lowliest of worms." He turned his head and spat. "I barely made it last time, the withdrawal was so severe.

"I know sir, the scars, the sigils on your body are still there." Lucious pointed out.

"Yes" Kane agreed between clenched teeth. "Pain, mine or others, it doesn't matter. Only pain can keep the regret away, the longing…the void." He shivered with anger.

"As long as you are alive sir." Lucious said. "Can you stand?" he asked Kane, bending down to help him up.

"No" Kane spat again, "you will have to carry me to get to the ship."

"The ship is not here yet sir." Lucious corrected him.

"No, it is. We must hurry. Something is about to happen." Kane said. "Something important. Something evil." He smiled as Lucious picked him up and started back to the starport.

Aboard the bridge Anath paced nervously. "Are we in orbit around Kroth?" He asked impatiently.

"Yes milord" Kenshaw answered. He frowned. "There are reports of fighting on the ground, especially around the capitol."

"And the radiation?" Anath asked in a whisper.

"Abundant, sir. What are your plans if I may ask milord?" Kenshaw enquired.

"We must leave at once." He turned to Jada. "Are the others battle ready?"

"Yes my brother. I must admit, I am still at a loss about our situation…" He admitted.

"Our man is down there and we must stop him. Now. Have Sargent Aberial and his squad meet us at the teleporter room. Time is of the essence. Something is about to happen; something important. "

Everyone seems to have forgotten about him. Emperor, I forgot about him once the fighting started. I have no idea what Don's been up to all this time.

Saide opened the door of the command chimera, the last one to arrive. Behind them, the ship sat, cargo door open as men streamed into it. Most were already aboard. Saide almost jumped when Don came out of the vehicle. Skin hung loose and eyes were sunk into his head. His uniform was faded and torn and a smell of something horrible accompanied his when he stepped out.

"Emperor above, have you had Menon or Zell look at you? It looks like you've got some plague." Saide said, concerned.

"I keep telling you, its just the dreams. Another trip through the warp won't help but it's the only way to Allistar" Don rasped.

"Yes…Allistar." Saide said surprised. "I had almost forgotten ou next destination." He commented with a bit of a laugh. I will also admit it will be nice to get off this dusty planet. I am just glad things worked out as well as they did. As Caff keeps reminding me, this could have gone down much worse." Saide said as they started across the platform to the ship.

That was when the first marine materialized in front of them. A strange whirring sound met their ears, accompanied by the sound of tearing paper and a massive, fully armored marine appeared in their path.

His red armor was scarred by year of war. His pauldrons and belt festooned with holy scripts which fluttered weakly. His face was covered by a similar red helmet, turning presumably human features into something more sinister, a face of metal broken only by the artificial glow of this helmet's optics.

All around them marines tore into reality, to the evident surprise of the men boarding the ship. Saide had a retching feeling in his gut as he supported Don. Don clutched the package he was holding, eyes wide with fright.

The marine glanced down at the two men as he signaled to the rest of the squad, which fanned out taking defensive positions around the starport with little regard for the guardsmen. To the guardsmen's credit none of them panicked, although they did ready their guns and trained them on the marine in front of Saide, ready to defend their commander. Luckily no one shot or else things might have turned out differently.

"Orders?" Caff yelled at Saide.

Saide, anticipating the chaos that could break out any second, yelled back. "Hold your fire, not a man shoots his gun or we're all dead."

"Smart" The marine spoke through his helmet. "I am sergeant Aberial. I have been tasked with the execution of Don Ridman. If chaos taint or rebellious acts are suspected, I am ordered to kill everyone here.

This is an Imperium sanctioned, armed trader detachment. On who's authority are you authorized to kill one of my men?" Saide asked, trying to buy time to think.

"My orders were given by Lord Anath, who reports directly to High Lord Vidya, may is name be praised. Now," he turned to Don, "do you have…"

Shots broke out from the sewer drain that Kane's squad had traversed. Saide ignored the marine for a moment. "This is not our fight" He yelled. "1st squad, provide covering fire. The rest of you, get on that ship!"

The other marines, presumably ordered to defend their sergeant during the proceedings immediately opened fire as the mad stream of cultists poured out of the pipe. 1st squad also took positions behind the marines, shooting any unlucky man that survived the rain of bolter fire.

"No!" Aberial yelled as Don and Saide made to get on the ship in the ensuing confusion. He strode over to Don and picked him up off the ground. "My orders stand." He threw his shoulder to the left and deflected a stray round off this massive power armor. "You will die, but at my hand, not by whoever these men are."

"Milord," Saide addressed the marines. "These are cultists, enemies of humanity. We were authorized…"

"I care nothing about your authorization, I…" An explosion hit near the marine and Saide, knocking Saide to the ground. The marine surveyed damage and picked up the stunned Don and carried him off to a starport hanger.

"I am not authorized to talk about the nature of what you carry. However, I was told that you have a black package that is of importance." He said as he threw Don to the ground and pulled out a bolt pistol. "Where is it?" He asked as he aimed the gun at Don's head.

Don looked at the package next to him and hastily threw it off. As he did so, the marine tapped on his helmet and Don could have sworn he heard him say "Strange…". The marine snatched up the package. "I have seen no chaos taint in your compatriots. Therefore, you must be tricking them somehow into following you."

"No, wait, I can explain! I…" Don babbled. "Your stories do not interest me. " The marine said as he flicked off the safety on the weapon. "Don Ridman, under the authorization of High Lord Vidya himself, and by extent, the Emperor of Mankind, I sentence you to… "

A shadow fell across the battlefield. In space, Anath clutched the railing of the teleport platform as the techpreist finished recalibrating the device. "Chaos" Anath uttered with furious contempt. "Teleport me and Jada now! I care not for your 'recalibration'!" He said dangerously.

On Kroth the cultist mortar team atop the hill overlooking the starport suddenly came under fire. The cultist operating the device loaded one last projectile before a bolter shell hit him, killing him instantly. Blood spattered, distorting the vision of the second as he wildly fired the device before succumbing to the same fate as his brethren. The shot arced into the air, slowing majestically at its zenith before plunging purposefully into the hanger. The resulting blast destroyed the entire building which housed some partially filled pressurized tanks of promethium.

Don stood up as the world exploded around him, shrapnel shrieked into life and splinters danced. A shadow was on his face and a fleeted for a second as the blast subsided.

Aberial leapt to his feet. "Coincidence is chaos!" he yelled and went to fire his gun, but found that both it and his knife had been torn from his body in the explosion.

"I care not. By gun or by my own hand you will die!" he shouted, taking his broken helmet off and throwing it to the ground. He suddenly remembered something and looked around his shoulders for the package which had been strapped there. Don staggered a bit as he felt the package slung over his shoulders. "How?" he questioned as the marine advanced on him.

Meanwhile, the Blood Ravens were doing what every marine does best, slaughtering the enemies of the imperium. The cultists, not really expecting a fight and just retreating from their failed offensive, suddenly found the Imperium's finest waiting for them. Hundreds died in only minutes.

Caff, seeing that his men's help was not needed quietly ordered them on board. He looked around."Frak! Has anyone seen Don or Saide?" 1st squad shook their heads. Caff gridded his teeth. 'We don't leave without them, Arnon, Stevan, you hear that?"

Something was wrong, Aberial quickly realized. Too many coincidences, the attack, the explosion and now it…he threw out a hand to strangle the man but somehow the guardsman dodged out of the way. Too quick. His vision was still blurred from the head injury he had received from the explosion, but surely he could kill the thing in front of him.

He picked a piece of debris and hurled in in anger at the fleeing shape. Don dove behind a pile of twisted metal reinforcing. A sudden anger fell over Aberial. Emperor accursed ten thousand missions across the galaxy and this is the 'special' assignment given to him? He had slaughtered Orks in space wrecks, hunted tyranid infestation in countless jungles. He had killed an Archenemy marine officer in one on one combat with his bare hands but he couldn't even seem to hit this one doomed guardsman.

"I am going to enjoy killing you, you pathetic human shit!" He yelled, looking around for where Don had hid.

"No regard for human life?" Don said, the words just spilling from his mouth without intention. It was getting harder to see for some reason. Shadows danced amid the debris and it grew darker as something blacked out the sun completely. He stepped out from his hiding place, dizzy, not really sure what was going on.

"Just like that family on your oh so vaunted mission!" Don said, words forming on his lips that were not his own.

"How do you… That family was tainted, as was the city. What we did, we did in the Emperor's name."

"But were they tainted? I don't think so, and I should know…" Don paused and laughed, now seeing things from a detached point of view. His body moved and spoke and all he could do was watch. "and there were so many families that night, weren't there?"

"No! Stop talking you chaos fiend. You say only lies!"

"But surely you remember the smell? The piles of corpses burning beneath the light of the moon? Surely you remember the screams? The yells of mercy? The crying of children as you…"

"No, No! I…No!" Aberial yelled. "Stop talking, stop!" He ran forward, his vision clouded in red as exertion aggravated the wound in his head. And just like that, the marine, once known as Aberial creased to be, a raving berserk creature was left in its place.

Don looked around as the first punch hit him in the shoulder. The bones broke instantly and he fell to the ground in excruciating pain.

"I did not kill them; I saved them!" The marine screamed as he kicked at the huddled form on the ground.

Don was no longer on Kroth. He was a boy on his first mission with the sergeant standing over him.

"Won't kill them? You pathetic excuse for a man. I tell you what you do or do not kill and you do it, by the Emperor!"

"They're civilians." Don pleaded. "They surrendered! One of them even helped us during the fighting." Don said with gritted teeth, tears running down his face. "They're just like us. They fought with the PDF against the Orks."

"They are xenos!" The sergeant yelled, foot splintering Don's rib cage. "I don't care if they fraking mated with the Orks, it's a Tau outpost and if I ask you to kill them, you do it. By the Emperor, you'll like it too." The sergeant finished expecting that to be enough.

"Its not right…"Don said softly, coughing up blood. The sergeant's eyes widened.

"Its what?" He asked dangerously.

"Its not right." Don repeated, getting to his feet.

The sergeant's eyes bulged and a vein popped out on his head. He grabbed Don by the throat in two hands and lifted him slowly off the ground, choking him.

"What did you say?" He shouted, hands tightening.

"Its…its not right." He wheezed, "they were civilians!" He said with all his effort, feet swinging wildly.

The marine shuttered as he held Don aloft. He took a breath and shouted in Don's face.

"They were not civilians, they were tainted, tainted!" He cried out louder hurling Don to the ground. Don skidded along the concrete, blood running from his mouth and the exposed bone popping sickeningly through his shoulder.

"I don't give a damn what you think they are or how you judge them. They're fraking living intelligent life just like fraking us!" Don said, pitifully punching Aberial in anger, breaking all his fingers on the marine's armor.

"I am doing the will of the Emperor!" The marine countered.

"Frak your emperor!" Don exclaimed. The marine gasped and smashed him in the forehead, breaking his nose through sheer force, part of his skull fractured. Don fell to the ground again, blood spurting from the egregious wound.

"How dare you! You and I do the will of the Emperor and there is not a thing you can do to stop it!" Former Aberial shouted, spittle flying from his mouth.

"But there is…" The Don shaped body on the ground muttered amid its blood. The smell of ozone hit the marine's nose. Bones snapped and reshaped, healed and regrew. The body rose off the ground, hands clenched in fists. Sigils in no language known to man snaked around his body, burning pale green on his skin through his clothes. "With every last ounce of strength, I will fight you!" Don shouted at the top of his lungs.

The marine punched at Don's head, intending to kill him once and for all. Don gripped the armed fist with an equally superhuman strength, blocking the blow and countered with a stunningly powerful hit to the face.

The marine fell to the ground as Don continued to rain blows on him. Consciousness returned. "Su…something is wrong here. Chaos!" Aberial said, holding up a hand to warn Don.

"Chaos? I do not care about your infantile rationalizations. They sicken me!" Don yelled, delivering a concrete shattering stomp just as the marine rolled out of the way.

"No, chaos, its using you. It used me. You can fight it!" He said backing away.

Anath and Jada teleported in just as Saide finished dusting himself off. Saide saw the marine and Don fighting through a destroyed section of wall. "Don!" He yelled, running towards the fight, behind him the ship was hovering,

Anath's eyes widened as he saw the thing attacking Aberial. "No!" He yelled as he saw it advance on the marine. It was too late. Don delivered his last punch, green flames ran along his arm and heat lightening defiled the sky with hideous cracks and cacophonous shrieks.

His fist connected with the marine's armored chest, shattering and partially melting the ceramite. With a horrible crunch it traveled through the marine's body and emerged on the other side in a shower of blood and shattered metal. The two stood still. The marine starred down at the hole through his chest. Don's face was rent with tears and madness, his arm extended out.

Saide ran into what was left of the building and grabbed Don away from the marine, who fell to the ground in shock. Don quickly passed out, blood streaming from his entire body. Saide picked him up the best he could and with much difficulty clung to a synthetic rope ladder that descended from the ship.

Anath and Jada ran over to the fallen marine and turned him over. A sickeningly green ooze dripped from the wound. "Stay back" Jada ordered the rest of the marines. "Take that ship down, this is chaos taint!" He said with hatred.

"Belay that order" Anath said quickly, surveying the debris. "We don't know where the package is. The guardsman must have taken it with him." He turned to the prone marine. "Report Sergeant Aberial."

"Subject escaped" he said grimacing with pain, "location of package…unknown. I am so sorry milords. I have failed you. I…I gave in to the manipulations of chaos."

"Anath, you know what this means. You know what must be done." Jada said quietly. Anath nodded. Aberial grasped Anath's gun. Jada leaped back and drew his own but Anath held up his hand, stalling him.

"Permission to purge the taint milords?" Aberial said, fumbling at the safety.

"Permission granted. Do you have any words Sergeant Aberial?" Anath asked.

The marine sighed and shook his head yes. "I was only following orders." He said to Anath before ending his own life. Anath shook his head and left the gun where it lay.

"Squad, assemble for extraction on the port. We need to go after them. Package is unsecured, subject has escaped." Jada said, walking toward the center of the starport as the ship above them gained altitude. He glanced up at the escaping ship and scowled. "Mission failed" He added as the teleport beam quickly dematerialized them.

The hatch closed with a pneumatic hiss followed by a palpable sensation of metal on metal. Saide barely had time to drag Don and himself into the ship before he was flattened to the ground by sudden acceleration.

He was barely aware of the voices yelling around him as he stumbled to his feet, grabbing a nearby handle for support. He was assaulted with words. Guardsmen shouting questions, Arnon asking about their destination, Caff requesting orders; all of it was a blur of sound.

"Every…" He coughed, noticing the taste of blood on his mouth. "Everyone shut up!" He yelled as loud as he could. "Arnon, plot a course for Allistar. As soon as you can make the jump, do so. There's a marine ship waiting for us up there. Caff, the mission is over. Get the troops calmed down. We're going into the warp soon. I want everyone ready. Menon and Zell, you look at Don. See if you can save him." He ordered, gesturing for the crowd to disperse.

Once most had left he slumped to the ground. "Emperor, I just don't know what to do anymore. Chaos, marines, all this with Don and Kane…I was never trained for this. It was so much easier when I just took orders rather than gave them." He said to himself.

"I know what you mean" Caff said as he sat down beside Saide.

"Didn't I order you to ready the troops?" Saide said, exhausted.

"Superseding orders, plus Creed can handle that. Looks like he's got the new men up to par. " Caff added.

"Superseding orders?" Saide questioned.

"Fatum said to keep you and the men safe before he died. It looked like you needed someone to talk to. "

Saide paused for a moment.

"I appreciate that Caff…its just…I don't know what to do. How can I lead if I have no idea what to do? Kane, is he on board? Emperor, I need to figure things out with him, or see his body safely shoved out the airlock. "

"Sir, I don't advise dealing with Kane right now, not in the condition you are in. Things could get ugly. " Caff said, pointing to a piece of shrapnel sticking out of Saide flak vest. "Is that deep?" He asked quietly.

Saide laughed, followed by a bout of coughing. "I didn't even notice it." He rasped as he took off the vest. "No blood. That's good" He noted. "I think I got hit by the edge of that blast, the concussion knocked me around some. Hell, my ears are still ringing."

"As soon as Menon and Zell are done with Don I'll have them look you over."

Saide nodded.

Suddenly the lights went out, plunging the two into pitch black.

**Chapter 47: Allistar**

Arnon stood on the bridge with Stevan as the ship rose dizzyingly away from the planet. "The marine ship is not firing, curious." Stevan noted. "I almost wish they were; it would be a wondrous time to try out those shield modifications you were working on." He communicated to Arnon.

"Indeed" Arnon replied, feeding input into the ship. "It seems like you have obtained an additional appendage." Arnon pointed out.

"Oh that?" I salvaged it from a enemy techpriest I had the fortuitousness of running into. We are almost about to clear the atmosphere." Stevan said as the redish tinged clouds that blocked their ascent suddenly fell away, revealing the darkness of space.

"Omnisiah be praised, what is that?" Arnon pointed to a sensor. "These numbers are impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible, merely improbable." Stevan countered as he stepped forward peering into space.

"The stars are wrong." He said cryptically. "We're about to fly right into a warpstorm." He warned as he started activating shields and rerouting power.

"This is going to hit hard." He said as space in front of the ship crackled with energy.

Stevan had time to see the marine ship with its shields flashing visible in response to hits from the other worlds power. The entire ship lurched dangerously as they flew into the storm. The lights went out suddenly.

"There is an energy fluctuation in the core!" Stevan exclaimed. "Quick!" He said with urgency as the two ran to fix the problem, leaving the ship unpiloted.

Zell and menon yelled to loitering guardsmen as they transported Don by stretcher to their make shift hospital on the ship. They carefully deposited him on a table before examining his wounds.

"Skull is fractured, possible cranial damage. " Menon pointed out gravely. "Emperor take mercy. There is a protruding bone fragment from the left shoulder, probable broken ribs. Where do we even start? " He asked.

"Try to prevent blood loss for now. I will dope him up; it looks like we will have to replace a few ribs. I will check for internal damage. " He said as he leaned over Don, putting on surgical gloves. "Still has a pulse" He said grimly as he checked for more injuries.

"Hold on, didn't you say his skull was fractured?" Zell said quickly, examining Don's head.

"Yes, his head was covered in blood and had an apparent impact…What the hell?!" Menon exclaimed as he looked at Don. "Its…its gone!" He blurted out, surprised.

The two stared at the body. "Holy fraking…!" Menon started baking away from the body. Zell stared as the body before him started mending itself. He heard the disturbing sound of bones cracking as they reset themselves, the body distorting as if it was made of jelly rather than flesh. Lumps shifted subcutaneously as internal organs realigned.

"This is not natural!" Zell said and a dark look fell over his face. "This is chaos!" He stated as the exposed bone fabricated material before their eyes before slipping back into the body with a sickening wet sound. Zell's exclamation was proven to be correct as sigils appeared stringing themselves across the body and burned with eldritch greens.

The body let out a moan and a palpable sense of fear descended on the room. Both Zell and Menon recoiled in horror as the shape stirred before them. Light flickered and equipment arced. Zell reached for his pistol but they were suddenly thrown against the wall by a deceleration of the ship as the lights went out.

"Of frak, something's wrong with the ship too, there's never any deceleration on this thing…Frak, the door wont open " He said, as he collected himself and fumbled in fear at the door controls, not wanting to see or recognize what was behind him. He felt something strike his head and he collapsed.

Anath appeared on the bridge of the Divine Retribution much to the surprise of the crew. As he hit the ground, a techmarine dashed in. "My lord, are you injured? We were just hit by a warp storm as you were teleported up!"

Anath looked himself over. "No, I appear to be unharmed. Where are the others?"

The techmarine checked a display "Most got through to the correct room, but Lord Jada had been found in the engine room. He is also unharmed my lord."

"Good. Kenshaw, we need to go to Allistar immediately." He ordered.

Admiral Kenshaw swallowed. "My lord, I apologize, I just finished talking to Circee. We cannot safely leave now. With the warpstorm present, she says anything could happen, but we would most likely be torn apart."

Anath clenched his fists and closed his eyes. "Then they will not leave either!" He stormed out of the command room and went to his chambers.

It is all the manipulation of greater powers. He mused as he searched for his target, a man he had felt while briefly on Kroth. All it takes is one murderous psychopath, warp influenced. The ship can't leave if it doesn't have a pilot. He smiled with revenge as his mental connection quickly gained control of the man in question. He barely even noticed as his ship was hit with a sudden wave of warp impacts.

A voice spoke out in Kane's mind. Kill the pilot. It seemed a very reasonable and logical thing to do, for after all, the other voice had convinced him that Elban was piloting the ship. The second voice assured him that the right man would be in the cockpit, just waiting for his knife. He coated the blade in the milky white poison that he was finally going to get to use. Kane smiled and eagerly slipped to the front of the ship and opened the door to the control room.

There he was, standing at the controls. The bastard would finally pay for taking his command, for doubting his abilities. The infuriating little shit would finally get what was coming to him, for leaving Kane to die alone in that ditch. With a cry of madness, Kane sunk the dagger up to the hilt into the spine of the man.

Don's body forced open the door as the lights faded and walked purposely down the hall. Later, the guardsmen there said they remembered the smell of ozone and a sudden irrational fear, but saw nothing.

The body threw the door to the control room open and quickly entered information into the navigation system, plotting an impossible route to Allistar through the storm. A smile ran across its face as it engaged the engines, blasting the ship into the warp. It then rerouted all remaining power to the shields and the inertial dampeners and waited patiently, back facing the door, for the knife strike.

Don's eyes shot open as unimaginable pain flooded his body. His newly healed brain recoiled at the electro-chemical assault but was unable to protect itself. The defense of unconsciousness was denied to it.

Don gasped and his body twitched as the poison flooded his system, its fire immolating his muscles. Behind him, Kane laughed wildly and stabbed him again, blood seeping from the wounds and splashing dark red on the metal floor.

Without thinking, Don reached around and grasped Kane's hands. Very quickly, Kane's laughter turned into screams of pain as Don broke his fingers, prying Kane's hands off the knife. He turned slowly, drawing the knife from the back.

"You!" Kane screamed, nursing his broken, bleeding hand. "No, it was supposed to be Elban! They said! They said it would be the right man!" He babbled, backing away.

Blinking, body still roiling in pain, Don held out the knife. Mind on the edge of collapse, he shuttered involuntarily. Very plainly he stated "I am not Elban," in a matter of fact tone before stabbing the razor sharp knife into Kane's forehead, killing him instantly. Don's eyes slowly started to bleed as he collapsed to the ground, poison making him contort and writhe in pain. He remained in this condition until he was found by Saide.

"They got away again." Jada said quietly as Don's ship slipped into the warp. He stood facing Anath, watching the psyker sit in his barren room.

"I know." Anath replied. "I have been tricked," he said, suddenly opening his eyes. "I have been deceived by the forces of chaos and I am not amused."

Jada scowled. "Chaos? How? Were you able to kill the pilot?" He asked as Anath got to his feet.

"Yes and no. As I have learned, the ship does not need a pilot." He said in a grim tone. "The man I manipulated was insane. Now Don, our target, is dying, stabbed by the man I coerced."

"Then half our mission is complete! Don was the cult leader, without him we should be able to obtain the package easily. Cultists are only brought together by charisma or fear. Without that bond, they are as leaves on the wind."

"If only it were that simple. Chaos has dealt its hand and I know that unless we act quickly we will be hit by the fist. Don was forced to be stabbed. It was not his choice. There were foul forces at work there. Whatever I have started in motion, it was to chaos's benefit, I fear." Anath admitted.

"I will admit, I do not understand you psyker and your ways: all this manipulation and planning, it might be easier to meet your enemy in open combat, but who are we fighting? We serve to fight the enemies of mankind but where are they? From your response, Don is as much a pawn in this game as we are. "

"It's the demon sealed away in Allistar. It is the cause of all of this. It reaches out and bends reality, just enough to ensure victory for itself. It sows discord, changes fate, and turns man against man. There is a reason these warp storms hit us. Its gaze follows us, delays and infuriates us. It killed Aberial and it will kill many more if it gets its way."

"It must be destroyed then. No more sealing, no more delaying." Jada stated.

"I doubt we would be able to kill it if it were in this room with us. I am not sure what to do." Anath admitted. "We are ants trying to vie with giants here."

Jada placed his hand on Anath's shoulder. "Then we do the only thing we can do: follow orders. Vidya has placed trust in us. The Emperor watches over us Anath. We got to Allistar, for whatever fate meets us there."

"Frak!" Saide yelled as he opened the cockpit door. Don lay convulsing on the floor. Virgil and Elban ran over to the man, Chem-lights illuminating the screen as red blood reflected in contrast with the metal floor.

"Emperor, looks like he's been poisoned. His muscles are all locked up and he's foaming at the mouth!" Virgil yelled.

Elban kicked the knife away into the dark corner.

"Frak me, it was Kane. The bastard was trying to kill us. Looks like Don did him in though." He surveyed the second body. Kane's face was a twisted mask of rage and pain, even in death his mouth screamed and his eyes were wide in anger. In the shadows of the hand held lights there was something hideous about it, something grotesque and other worldly. The face was one of a monster, not a man.

"Poisoned alright." Elban looked at Kane again. "He wanted me. I was his target." He said softly and suddenly with some unknown conviction.

"Get this filth off the ship." Saide said as he kicked Kane's corpse towards the airlock. Where the hell is Zell? We didn't run from space marines just to let him die to this shit." He spat on Kane's bloody form. "Someone get the lights on! Where is Stevan?" Saide ordered.

"Found Stevan!" One man yelled. "He's down below. Something's wrong with the ship." He warned.

Hessert barreled into the room. "Someone knocked out Zell and Menon!" he yelled. When no one seemed surprised he finally locked down at Kane's body. "Kane did this?"

"Definitely. Did anyone else notice that we're in the warp?" Elban pointed out, he eyes fixed on something outside the ship. "I think I see something out there."

"What? When did that happen?" Saide asked. "Don't look at." He waved his hand in front of Elban's face. Elban seemed fascinated. Saide hit a latch on the wall and a heavy metal shield closed the cockpit to the wonders and horrors of the immaterium.

"Elban, snap out of it. You and Virgil get Zell and Menon. Hessert, don't move him. We don't know what Kane did to him exactly. Just make sure no one gets near him until we can sort this all out. Rest of you make sure the troops have not gone crazy staring into the warp; close the shields. Don't just stand there, move!" He said, pointing at the door.

"Now where exactly are we going?" he said to himself as he exited the room, striding down the hallway towards the stairs to the engine level.

Below, Stevan and Arnon were running around doing something.

"What's going on here? Why did the lights go out?" he asked the two.

"Sorry sir, were are a little busy trying to make sure that we survive when we smash into Allistar. Navigation is locked and power has been rerouted to the shields and the dampeners"

"Hold on, we're going to crash?!" Saide said grabbing the techpriest in shock.  
"Well, yes, and there doesn't seem to be anything that we can do to stop it. Someone commanded the navigational system towards a point well within the grav-well of Allistar. I have a hard enough time making out this alien technology as it is." Stevan explained.

"We can't change the heading? We can't cut the power? How did this happen?" Saide asked. "How much time do we have?"

Stevan turned to look at him. "To answer your questions. No, we can't just change the heading. That would be like trying to change the gravitational trajectory of a planet with a las-pistol. As for power, we are not really expending any now. Whoever, put us on this route evidently wanted us to survive. We are going slow, for starship speeds and all power is already routed to the shields and dampeners as I said before. I suggest leaving it there."

"As to the perpetrator," he continued, "it was an individual with impeccable knowledge of this navigational system and of Allistar's gravity field. No one onboard could have done this. I suspect the involvement of Chaos. Finally, as for time, exactly five minutes and thirty seven seconds. I suggest holding on to something. The dampeners might not take all of the impact." Stevan finished.

"Frak!" Saide yelled again for the second time today. "That soon!" He started to run upstairs.

"Everyone!" he yelled to the guardsmen. A group formed around him as it always did. "This ship is about to hit Allistar. Stevan said we will survive. Everyone hold on to something." The group started to panic. "Men!" he commanded. "You have fought cultists and rebels and near destroyed an entire splinter fleet of Tyranids yourself. Regardless of what happens today, I want you to know that I am honored to have you as my men. A commander could not ask for better soldiers. For Sargos!" He yelled, with the men joining in until it became a chant, a bastion of word and courage against their inevitable situation, and the fire burned bright in their eyes when the ship fell.

Allistar rotated peacefully, hung in its orbit around an old star. From orbit one could see gigantic glaciers, ice plains that spanned the world around. Snowcapped mountains ran along the ground, giving the white planet dimension. Amid this beaut, there were three things that struck out.

One was the imperial research base, located in the southern hemisphere, just an insignificant dot of black amid the white. Unfortunately for them, their requested supplies would not come this year.

The second structure of notice was a monumental stone and ceramite fortress, exactly as the geographic north pole. Perpetually blanketed with storms, it lay hidden. But beneath the frosty skies their lay a winding network of towers and walls, all surrounded by an immense curtain wall. It rose form the featureless icy plain around it. Silent guns of unimaginable power pointed from their batteries, unmanned for millennia.

Further in, the massive citadel loomed. The combined effort of a legion had made it in secret and its location was known to only a few. Its craftsmanship remained, even as ages had ground against its walls, and the icy wind had sought to crack and break its vast heights. Halls and gun emplacements, generators and walkways all sat silent amid the snow. The would not stay silent for long, for above the citadel was the third occurrence of notice. It was a moderately sized armored trading ship dropping out of warp only a mile above the fortress.

Ice crystals, aloft by comparatively warmer air from the equator, vaporized instantly, creating a splendid cone of water and then steam as the shielded ship screamed from the heavens. Those inside only had a few moments of horror before the projectile obliterated its first tower.

The fortress had stood against the winds for thousands of years, but never against any attack, and even its strongest ceramite could not withstand the crushing momentum that en entire starship brought. Emplacements that had lay for ages turned to powder. The ship slammed into the citadel proper breaking layer after layer of reinforcements until it reached the heart of the facility, where it finally came to a rest.

"We are always playing catch up." Noted Jada as the warp storm finally dispersed.

"Agree, it is yet another sign that we are the pieces, not the players in this game of fate. Let us find out whether our good admiral can get us to Allistar before our foe frees himself." The Divine Retribution tore into the warp.

Aboard Don's ship, a hand emerged and grabbed a rail as if in defiance of the horrendous impact. Stevan pulled himself up and immediately noticed that he ship's floor was slanted as a 40 degree angle as he slid into a wall. Righting himself, he looked around. Bodies and equipment were piled everywhere. He switched to thermo, and was surprised and glad to see that many of the men around him were alive, albeit hurt and unconscious.

Smashed boxes lay strewn along the ground. The lights were out but he was surprised by the sudden presence of light. He turned around and noticed that a hatch was open, its double doors both open, with the last one forced. Behind him a figure rose out of the carnage.

Saide checked the men around him. "Thank the emperor we're alive."

"Thank the shield modifications that Arnon added also." Stevan added.

"Fraking chaos, this ship was all we had. Now its been taken from us, and for what?" Saide yelled bitterly to the empty hallways.

"The machinations of chaos rarely make sense, but when they do, you will find a logic more insidious than any of man or marine."

Don thought for a moment while he checked on a fallen man. The form beneath him moved slightly and he rose. "We have been forced here. I often hear you say that there is no such thing as coincidence. Hell, we don't even know how the coordinates were entered into the ship to begin with. Chaos had a hand in this but why I cannot say."

He sat on a bit of ruined masonry and stared intently around him as he mulled it over in his head. Warp storms and twisted men; chaos has been playing with us for a while. Don, Kane, all of us are trapped in its conniving plans. Although, Don… now that's interesting, everything seems to have started with Don's arrival on Sargos. Before then there was no events linked with chaos. The Tyranids are a wild card, but Don's battle with himself? That twisted replica can only be the work of the enemy.

Don came to a sudden realization. Whatever force is interfering here…it doesn't care about us at all. Don has been the one with nightmares, he is the one who is now a shadow of his former self. It's never cared about us. But why would it care about Don? Who is he to it? It doesn't make any sense, from what Don has told of himself, he is no great general, nor champion of the Emperor, why Don?

The men were coming to, and helping each other up. Caff was shouting orders over the crowd and men swirled around Saide as the group came to life. Saide sat and continued to think. He fumbled with his necklace and looked up. A beam of pale white light came from above and was illuminating the fallen ship. Overhead, one could barely see the sky amid a dizzying maze of rock and metal. The ship had torn a hole straight through the fortress. The cathedral like room that they currently were in was a monumental one with arched ceilings and s stark tile floor that had been shattered upon impact.

Don stood up. He suddenly remembered a crucial piece of the puzzle. The package! How have I forgotten about it? How is Don different? He's got the fraking package! Where is it? Saide dashed into the ship and climbed his way up to the cockpit. Hessert was laying sprawled on the ground with a nasty looking bump on his head. He was still alive though.

Saide looked frantically around, but no package met his search. Don has the package. How could I have not seen it before? The marine he killed. Damn, I must have been in shock from the fighting. Don is completely under Chaos's sway and he has the package!

"One part of this doesn't seem to make sense though. If Kane and Don were both controlled by Chaos, why attack each other? Why Kane try to kill Don" He said out loud.

Caff shook him urgently. "Sir, I know you won't like this, but I have some horrible news."

Don but a hand to his forehead and sighed. "What could possibly be worse than our situation, Caff?"

The other man grimaced and pointed up. Saide followed his finger upwards, through the hole in the fortress, up through a floors and floors of smashed building. Through their improvised skylight Saide could make out the unmistakable and terrible shapes of a Tyranid bioship descending into the atmosphere.

"Frak" He said.

**Chapter 48: An Icy Death Waits Below**

There was chaos as soon as the guardsmen came to. Confused and scared of another encounter with the Tyranids, their fear soon gave birth to steely resolve as they saw that there would be no running away from this fight. Saide and a group of veterans walked in awe up a massive staircase form their current position.

Don will have to wait. It doesn't matter how many chaos plans we're caught in if we're all skewered on the end of a Tyranid spike. We need to see how defendable this place is. And what it is. We were brought here for a reason, no doubt.

"Arnon, Stevan, I hope you're remembering all of this. I can see how this fortress was made to be defended, but it was designed for the strength and number of a chapter in mind, and to be defended by marines. We will have to do our best to take their place." Saide ordered as their tiny footsteps reverberated in the massive hall.

"We are recording as we go. We should have a model of its layout for you when we are done." Stevan replied while Arnon jerked his head back and forth mechanically, analyzing the structure.

Behind them, a grey blue wall of native rock dimmed the cacophony of the guardsmen. The group was suddenly hit by a certain sense of awe. The size and stark majesty of the fortress was not lost on the group. Elban stared down the center of the winding grand staircase.

"This fortress is peculiar." He stared down the chasm into the blackness below. "This winding staircase seems to be built into the very heart of the keep. Some of the emplacements are also pointing inwards. I have never seen such a design. These steps are burned and chiseled with symbols that I have never seen."

Saide nodded with a cryptic understanding. "It is peculiar because it was designed both as a fortress and a prison. It was meant to keep something in as well as out. All the lines of fire are specially designed," he pointed at the surrounding silent guns. "This would be murder to anyone trying to escape."

The group silently agreed.

"What would they want to keep in?" Virgil asked, but Saide did not respond.

The group finally passed an exit from the winding staircase that seemed to lead outside, and not to the maze of subterranean halls that they had come from.

Surprisingly, they stepped out from the gloom and were hit with the harsh dim atmosphere of Allistar. They stood on a high palisade overlooking the curtain wall and the plain below. "We do not have a thousandth of the men required to man that wall." Elban pointed out.

"Agreed. We will have to man the inner keep only. Most of the more powerful emplacements seem to be located there anyway. Stevan, can you tell if they are still functioning? Saide said as the group neared an emplacement." The giant gun was surrounded by a thick concrete dome, its barrel extending from the inside. The way into the emplacement was hauntingly open, its door swinging in the frigid air.

"We have little time. I suspect it will only be an hour or two until the Tyranids begin their attack." Caff said. "We have no mountain pass to protect us now." He added. The group stopped outside the artillery piece. Saide stopped and adjusted his cap. "Stevan, can I have the vox, thank you"

"Voor, can you read me?" There was a foreboding silence for several moments where Saide became increasingly aware of the shadows around him and the chilling cold.

Finally a reply spluttered back amid static. "I can read you. What are our orders sir?"

"Looks like we're keeping to the inner part of this fortress, we are going to check out what conditions the guns are in. Have the men ready to man them. Looks like there are six of the monsters, equidistantly spaced around the wall. They can access them the same way as my group and I went up. I want the rest of the men manning the smaller guns and bunkers. This place was designed to be unbreakable, let's use it as such. "

"I hear you." Replied Voor "We'll break these Tyranids yet." The connection severed.

"Let's hope these guns still work, I have the feeling we're going to need them." Saide commented as the group approached the massive domed gun. An icy breeze blew across the wall as Saide entered the emplacement causing him to shiver involuntarily.

Elban entered first followed by the rest of the group but they were suddenly stopped as they heard Elban dive quickly, smashing against the metal floor. The rest of the group hastily drew there weapons and ran in to help.

Elban was just getting up off the ground where he had dove, a look of embarrassment on his face.

"I thought…" He muttered and pointed at the gun controls.

Still slumped over the controls was a space marine with crimson power armor. Initially on guard, it took the group a minute to realize that the marine was not moving.

"Dead" Elban said, simply. He pointed to the marine's back. A hideous blade stuck out the back of the power armor. When Saide went to look at it more closely, he saw another marine on the ground nearby. The marine's helmet was off and a single bullet hole to the temple sealed his fate.

"Looks like not everyone was getting along here." Virgil commented, tapping the unmoving body lightly with his toe.

Saide looked at him. "I think we don't know the half of it. Stevan, you check to see if this gun is usable. Virgil, guard him. This place may not be as dead as we first assumed. The rest of you, check the other five emplacements, and have troops man them if they're functional."

Saide could not shake the feeling that he was needed somewhere else. That sudden feeling rose in strength as he stared up at the massive Tyranid bioships.

"It doesn't make any sense, but I don't think I am supposed to be here." Saide uttered, still looking up at the orbiting monstrosities.

"What?" asked Elban, stopping with Saide. "What do you mean?"

Saide's head finally snapped down. "Now I am sure of it. Elban, get a message to Caff. He's in charge now. Tell Creed that he's Caff's second. I have somewhere I need to go."

"Where could you possibly have to go?" Elban asked shocked. "We need you here!"

Saide shook his head. "I have to go down." He stated, pointing down just visible winding stairway that they had just climbed. "I can't explain, just follow orders for now. Everything will make sense later."

Saide suddenly turned and sprinted back the way they had come.

Thousands of feet below him, a man limped from the last step of the winding staircase and met an ornate doorway, at least two people tall. The small anteroom was shrouded in darkness but from what that man could see the entire surface was covered with sigils. However, newer cruder ones were sliced into the stone, a hideous mockery of the originals. The man fought a wave of nausea and stepped toward the door.

It was puzzlingly small, yet incredibly thick, more of a tunnel than a doorway. A space marine would have to stoop to pass through it. The door itself, a mammoth solid block of sigil etched ceramite lay near the feet of the steps. Something very powerful had dislodged it, perhaps several melta bombs. As the man passed through the entrance he almost didn't notice the piles in the corner of the anteroom.

Stacks on bodies lay in the shadows, and as he man looked down he saw that a sickly dark red had replaced the blue stone beneath his feet. Marines died here. Many marines died, and many more will soon, he thought to himself.

The inner sanctum was an ornate affair. The luster of gold and velvet covered most of the bleak stone, but again cleverly interspersed in all objects were the same sigils. However, and without exception, all of them were blackened and charred as if in a fire. Reinforced columns held up the cavernous roof, and bleak chemical lights gave the space a sinister aura, casting shadows everywhere.

However the man only paused a second to observe all of this. His fascination lay with the far wall. Unlike is three other brethren, this one was clearly not stone. The dull lights only hinted at a metal but the man knew what lay beyond them. It was a vault. It was a prison and he had the key. In front of the wall was what appeared to be a small altar.

His eyes drifted down to the ground besides him to rest on a black case that had not been there several moments earlier. He almost smiled. He bent to drag the object closer to the wall and stopped. He was suddenly overcome by pain surging through his entire body, shrieking through every muscle. The poison that Kane had inflicted on him yet lingered and it would be the death of him.

Somewhere in his brain another voice, hard and sharp railed against this eventuality. His grip tightened on the handle to the case and through agonizing pain, he dragged the case over to the altar.

His fingers knew the object. Knew it well, they slid and manipulated the shifting surface with ease, bypassing and unlocking hundreds of codes and cyphers. Finally, the last measure was broken and the altar revealed its true nature. The front slid open smoothly revealing a pale blue light. It was a geneseed repository, the key to this prison.

He shuddered through another bout of pain as he bent down to undo the latch on the black case beside him.

"Stop!" A voice commanded, and despite himself, the man stopped. His head snapped to the doorway. Another man stood defiantly blocking the path. "Don, you don't have to do this!" Saide yelled, slowly approaching the other man.

"Yes! It must be!" the other man grated, almost surprised at the harshness of his own voice. "You do not truly know the horrors of this world, of this accursed universe and the one beyond. There can be no fighting them. They are numberless, they are un…"

"I know of chaos" Saide spat, "I know of that corruption that even now clouds your mind. I know it can be crushed. I know it can be defeated." He said softly, still approaching. "Help me fight it." He added, arm outstretched as if to shake hands.

A look of understanding almost danced across Don's face before another wave of crippling horror spread from his insides. A rasp emerged from his throat. "No this is the only way! You claim to know? You know nothing of power! For too long have too many lives been tossed aside, forgotten; crushed under the strength of others. This offers life, this offers power!" He said, almost yelling, the same barbaric sigils as in the antechamber played across his body in eldritch ethereal green.

"A life of curses! The power only to kill!" Saide countered. "It will betray you, just as it betrayed Kane!" Saide shouted, now standing mere foot steps away from Don.

Don suddenly collapsed against the ground, shuddering violently. Saide took a step back as the shadows elongated around him. Horrifyingly he could hear he distant scrape of something against metal from the vault wall. He drew his sword and other hand clasped around his aquilla.

A muffled voice came from Don. It was only after the figure rose that Don realized that it was laughter. "Saide, you foolish man." A voice said from Don's mouth, "there is really nothing left to betray!"

"No!" Saide said lifting his sword. The smile widened on Don's face and his eyes emerged bloodshot amid small green flames enveloping his body. Saide suddenly felt a violent inexorable force wrench the sword from his grasp and he watched it fly across the room before embedding itself in the wall.

Don raised his hand and pointed a finger towards Saide. Saide felt his hand clutching he aquilla involuntarily tighten around the trinket. His grasp tightened and tightened, even drawing blood while he feebly tried to arrest his own hand. His eyes bulged as he felt the metal of the necklace suddenly crumple like tissue paper. Saide's hand then tore his fingers from their grasp revealing a crushed bit of metal, and mockingly paused before his arm swung against his own volition, the scrap shattering against the floor.

A wave of doom swept over Saide, and he could feel the grasp expanding, now crushing his lungs. He struggled for a breath that never came and the world began to swim before his eyes.

Above Saide, the Tyranids had begun to make their assault. Drawn still maddeningly by the allure of the geneseed. The biopods soon littered the ground near the fortress. The intruders sprinted towards the guardsmen.

High above the plain, situated on the inner defense Caff looked over the battle field and shook his head. There are just too many of them, even depleted by their last two assaults. When we faced them on Sargos, we had the remains of an entire planetary force. Now we are just a group of men. But maybe that is what we always were. A group of men facing impossible odds.

"Men!" He yelled to those collected in front of him. "I do not believe we can win this fight." He paused as grim faces peered back at him under dented helmets. "But this was never was a quest for victory. This was a struggle against death. Twice we have survived unbelievable hardship. The universe couldn't kill us when Sargos went, it couldn't kill us pinned down by cultists on Kroth, it couldn't kill us when our ship crashed, and by the Emperor's Golden throne if it wants us to die here, we're not going down without a fight for the centuries!"

A cheer rose among the guardsmen. Caff smiled. "For Sargos! Now get to your posts and make them bleed!"

The rag tag command grouped up and looked to one another. They knew that even with the fortress, there was no way they could repulse the fleet. And Saide was gone somewhere. None of them were stupid, they knew something bigger than them was going on, but as far as they saw, as long as they could keep their head down, it didn't concern them.

Everyone was there, Creed and Caff stood together while Elban gestured to the map Arnon and Stevan had put together. The dull hologram depicted the fortress as they scanned it first hand, so they could only guess on the condition of the outer wall.

"This outer wall, is there any chance that it has a void shield emitters inside it?" Elban wondered outloud, waving his hand along the segment.

"It is certainly possible and highly likely in fact. The question is whether these systems will still work." Arnon voiced. Stevan interjected. "From what I know of fortress design and where these systems would need to be located, not only does the outer wall have a shield, but the fortress proper has one also."

Eyebrows were raised around the circle. "Two? Two void shields? That's unheard of!" Creed said.

"Well, as Saide noticed, this is a very unusual fortress. However there is a piece of information that invalidates this shield," Stevan voiced. "The generators that powered these shields are destroyed, and in fact were before we crashed our ship into them."

Elban glanced through the archway into the main chamber where the ship lay beneath them under several floors. His heart sank as he saw the smashed and in some places, melted machinery.

"Before we crashed?" Greynor asked skeptically. "This place seemed to be untouched."

Several of the other commanders nodded in agreement.

"Not as untouched as we thought." Elban remarked, remembering the dead marine from the turret. "Unthinkable, but from the damage and what we saw, I would say sabotage."

"Unthinkable indeed." Creed said, drawing his great cloak closer to him against the wind. "Don't mention it. It will only hurt morale. This is a last stand, not a detective case. Are your troops ready?"

"Veterans are ready. We've positioned ourselves higher up along two of these towers. We intend to have a good line of sight to take out the big ones. I've taken the liberty of equipping Lechor, Hessert and a few others with what few missiles we have left." Zell said, resting his long las on his knee.

"Our regulars are ready. We're all along the inner wall. I have the ones who know how manning the turrets that are still working. Stevan, some of these things are energy weapons. Do we even have power?" Greynor asked.

"One of the smaller units survived from the fortress. Combined with what's left of the ship's fuel, we should make it through the battle" Stevan responded.

"Speaking of making it through the battle, I found ammo in one of the side rooms, but it looks ancient, and it's almost all for bolters. I took the stuff that looks like we could use though." Virgil spoke up resting a foot against a crate of ammo.

"The recruits are ready, although for some this will be only their second or third time facing the enemy." Creed added.

"Well that's it then." Caff said, looking out at the steadily approaching wave of tyranids. "Dear Emperor I hope they don't have fliers." He said as he group disbanded.

The sea of biomass approached with the thundering of feet and the inhuman screeches Caff wished he could never hear again.

Caff got to survey the ocean, a small grin apparent on his face. "No fraking fliers. We might almost stand a chance", he said to himself.

"Don't waste your ammo!" He yelled as the guardsmen began to open up as the first wave got into range. "Focus on the big ones! They can't get through the wall anyway."

A steady stream of Tyranids hit the wall, a ferocious grinder of claws and teeth against the sturdy bulwark of the outer wall.

Up above Voor pointed Hessert to a large bioform hulking through the assembled creatures, getting close to the wall. "Get that bastard. Don't let them break the wall!" Voor opened his mouth as the concussive blast of the missile shot rammed through him.

The brilliant arc of light following the projectile streaked almost majestically from the wall, missing the beast and slamming into the assembled mass of bodies. Limbs flew and ichor spurted amid a vibrant explosion. However, within seconds the hole was covered with more bodies.

"Frak!" Hessert grunted as the hulk got closer to them. Voor scrambled with the missile ammo behind them, before slamming another round into the tube. "Quick, get him!"

The second missile scored home, ripping through the beast's feet and lower torso. The mess of flesh crashed to the ground, taking a few little ones with it in its death throws as it spurted caustic acid from its gaping wounds.

A cheer went up from the guardsmen below them and Voor suppressed a smile, before scrambling for the next shot. There were many more massive forms approaching. The battle had just started.

A third of the way around the upper towers, Seymour and another veteran rested their long las against the edge of a balcony.

The boy slowly exhaled, having found one particularly repulsive looking creature below him. Unlike the other smaller ones, it was firing globs of what looked like acid at the guardsmen, who were forced to take cover under the lip of the wall.

A shot; a beam of cohesive light flashed red. The beast's head was gone, bored through by a lucky shot to a unarmored part of its face. The thing shuttered and collapsed, its gun silent.

Creed ducked behind the lip of the wall as a shot of deadly acid etched the wall behind him, assaulting his nostrils with a hideous smell. He waited a few seconds before shooting his head over the crenellation. The bastard was still there, now firing at a group of guardsmen occupied with another of his kind.

Creed fired his las at the thing, the comforting beams of lights slicing through the mass of creatures, felling one or two. However, the beast in question, although his by nearly five rounds refused to fall. "Damn" Creed said as he looked around his person for a grenade.

Suddenly a shot came from one of the upper towers, and heard a guardsman yell in triumph. The beast has already fallen over, a very good shot from what looked like Seymour. That kid is a natural.

Caff looked over the battlefield, directing concentrations of fire. They were doing well so far. The smaller ones couldn't even reach them. He larger ones lacked the numbers to either make it to the wall or inflict sizable damage on the defenders, although he had seen one or two men get dragged off by Menon or Zell.

A sudden realization hit Caff as he looked at the beasts below him. His overhead position gave him a commanding view of the enemy, but not of how high they were. All the claws and bodies climbing over one another, he had ignored he little ones so far.

He dashed from his position, ignoring the sporadic globs of acid and razor sharp needles flung his way as the attackers homed in on his movement and the buzz of his vox as other commanders asked what was going on. He flew down the steps to the upper wall and ran to its extreme side to get a better angle.

It was as he had feared. The mound of biomass was nearly three quarters up the side already and growing by the minute.

"They're building a damn ladder! Zell, get some of your missile guys on it!" Caff looked out at the icy plane. A line of massive figures doted the horizon. "Cancel that, we're going to need every shot we can get. Greynor, can you get your turrets on it?"

There was a crash of static before the man replied. Caff could hear the patter of needles hiting metal from the other side. "Sorry no can do, these guns have great range and are powerful as all hell, but we don't have the angle. We can pulverize the smaller ones before they join the pile if that would help."

Caff considered for a second, ducking as a rather accurate pair of needles embedded themselves where his head had just been. "Clear out what you can, but get ready for that line of big guys coming up. I don't want a single one of the bastards making it to the wall."

So far they had prevented any of the large creatures for actually physically making contact with the wall, and Caff intended to keep it that way. Made by the marines or not, the fortress had decayed apparently for centuries, and he had seen Tyranids make a mockery of supposedly 'invincible' defenses on Sargos.

The large guns swiveled above and to his side, their massive casings dully gleaming in the pale light. One by one they opened fire on the swarm of bodies below Caff, massive barrels pulling back sharply as hey reloaded. The impact was deafening as some of the weapons were conventional basilisk type, albeit older models. Huge holes were ripped in the assembly of Tyranids. Bodies flew and the ice slowly turned the color of ichor as round after round slammed into the beasts. It was glorious, but at the cost of letting the larger monsters advance.

After the barrage had quieted down some Caff took a quick peek over the edge of the wall. The ladder was still there if smaller. There was now a noticeable gap between his wave of Tyranids and the oncoming assault. The ice was now flowing with bile, scarring the pristine landscape with pit marks caused by dead corpses slowly sinking into the permafrost.

"Great job Greynor, we bought ourselves some time. Creed, can you get some grenades down here maybe?" Caff said into the vox as he strained for a better view at the surging mass of chitinous bodies.

"I believe me and my men can do that. Have Zell keep the ranged one's heads down for us."

"Ok, Zell, you heard that? Especially get those bastards with the acid. I don't want to loose anyone if I can help it and as you know we have minimal medical facilities."

Zell replied in the affirmative and soon several streaks of red light lit up from above him as Zell's veterans tried to hit some of the medium sized beasts. He saw one or two go down, but the rest proved frustratingly resistant. Their hide seemed to turn the las shots like armor and it seemed like only through weight of fire or luck could they be killed. Caff nodded his head and waited for Creed's attack.

To his side Creed brought his sub officers together. "I want a quick throw. Don't bother trying to time them, just hurl the things as far as we can and then get back to cover. Sound good? Alright then, on the count of three…" Creed peered over the edge of his cover, and alarmingly stared directly into the eyes of one of the large beasts.

It noticed his movement and swung its weapon around. "Shit!" He yelled as foot long spikes pierced the crenellation in front of him, narrowly missing him by inches. He huddled behind the bulwark as he heard the steady tapping of shots against the stone. The vox started up next to him.

"Creed, what's going on down here? We need that tower destroyed! They're close to getting over the edge!"

Creed snuck another look over the edge while shots arced overhead from the veterans above him. The report of a missile impact directed his attention to the approaching line of heavy bioforms. The veterans were struggling, they needed his weight of fire also.

He stared at the men next to him. His second in command nodded slowly.

Creed smiled grimly. "Men!" he shouted, "take that thing down!"

Grenades appeared as his platoon rose from their defended positions, and hurled their projectiles as one, towards the increasing pile below them.

Creed sprang up and hurled his primed grenade with the rest of them. However, before he could get back behind cover he felt something pierce his side. He gasped and slowly looked down, time seeming to slow.

One of those foot long spikes was neatly embedded through his cloak and into the left of his stomach. He opened his mouth but no words came out. Pain enveloped his body and he started to double over when another shot clipped his shoulder. This time a yell escaped his mouth.

His second in command tackled him to the ground and looked around. Several other men had been hit and a handful were clearly dead or bleeding out.

Creed grabbed the second in command by the shoulder. "Oh emperor, I've been hit." He groaned in pain. "They're fucking poisoned" he had time to say before another shudder tore through his body and his head went limp in the second in command's hands.

"Fuck" the second in command cursed. "Fuck me he's actually dead…" She put her hat over Creed's face.

Still shocked, the young woman half consciously found her hand around the vox unit. She down at the former pile of Tyranids. Where there once was a massive gathering, there now was a bloody pile of misshapen body segments and charred corpses flung lifelessly every which direction. The ants had been drowned in a torrent of high explosives.

"This is Merida, Creed's second in command. The tower is down, but Creed's dead. It looks like we have several others s well and even more wounded. We need help down here now." She heard herself say before she slumped against the wall in disbelief.

Down below, the fighting, Stevan was sprinting around the makeshift energy linkage connecting the remains of the ship to the power system of the fortress. Everyone once and a while a wire would catch on fire or melt, or a junction box would explode, mimicking the popping noises that filtered down from the fighting above.

Behind him, Arnon was constantly fiddling with settings in the remains of the ship, making sure they that the reactor didn't turn all of them into fine ash.

Amid all of the external chaos, Stevan's augmented mind perfectly responded to all of these threats, categorizing the severity of each one and acting in order. However, even with all of these issues, he was still able to catch something small in front of him.

He was in fact standing currently in front of a wall. This troubled him. He ran a diagnostic on his infrared sensors. Everything was in order. He double checked what he was seeing against his seismograph. It was as he feared.

He opened up a vox line of communication from his internal set. "We have a very big problem" He announced to the guardsmen.

The news of Creed's death hit Caff hard, but there was still a battle to survive, but as he put down the vox he was very quickly revaluating whether even that was possible.

Realizing what he was doing, he picked the vox back up and started yelling orders as we started running back to the higher sections of the fortress. "Greynor, I need you and all your men to retreat to the inner fortress right now! Everyone, retreat back to the inner fortress" He yelled breathlessly as he sprinted inside.

Before anyone responded asking why this strange order, he clarified. "They're digging under the wall! Stevan says that they'll be through in minutes. You will be cut off if they do that and they will have access to the lower levels of the fortress. Zell, I want your veterans to help Arnon and Stevan reinforce the main doors and buy us some time to get in position. "

"We'll have to abandon the larger guns" warned Greynor, "we won't be able to touch some of the larger monsters."

"Damn, I know, but they'll have to get through the wall first. If we can regroup and kill the tunnelers, perhaps we can retake the guns in time but if we don't move, they'll surely come up the stair or climb the walls and separate your men from the fortress. "

"…I agree, lets fraking move!" He heard Greynor yelling. "We should be able to get out in a few minutes, we have a few wounded."

"Grab them and move!" agreed Caff as he approached Elban and Virgil. As he got to them he could see Zell and the rest of the veterans coming down the central stair.

"Only a couple hundred…" Elban was saying, "Its almost winnable. If only we knew where they were coming out, we could mow them down as they emerged, or grenade them to pulp like we did before."

"Be warned guardsmen" Stevan crackled over the vox, "They're coming for the courtyard now, but I suspect if we move to engage, they'll come up around us. There is intelligence in this horde, by no doubt you've noticed already: the pile and heavies to distract us while they outflank. You will be happy to know though that the fortress is solid to the foundations, and if my sensors are correct, those go down to an almost unimaginable depth, they can't come up from beneath us."

"Good, how are the doors going?" Caff asked as he shrugged for the veterans to go to help as Zell approached.

"Best as us two can handle. We checked the two main doors earlier, those look secure, but we just found two postern gates that are completely open."

"Ok, I'm sending the veterans down. "

Caff started up the stairs to the upper balconies, avoiding stairways destroyed by their crashlanding. Luckily here were enough left and the structure seemed more than stable even up to the top. "Greynor, Elban, Merida, was it? As soon as you get into the fortress, start manning the inner guns, block the stairs with whatever you can, put up blockades on each landing. We're going to have a hard fight."

He reached the top of the fortress. One final floor. He pushed open the sealed door. Snow and icy wind bit into his face. He was up hundreds upon hundreds of feet. Huge drifts of snow dominated the roof covering what looked like several ancient anti-aircraft guns. This is where we are going to have to make our final stand.

He looked around the almost featureless expanse of roof interrupted only by the huge hole on one side, left by their ship as it had crashed.

He looked over the edge at the continuing battle. Greynor and his men had successfully retreated from the wall, but he could just far below him the ground of the courtyard stir.

Beyond that a still disheartening amount of Tyranids continued to rain from the skies. Caff was starting to suspect that once the bugs were sure they didn't have any anti-air guns, they would start dropping them in on top of them. He eyed the half buried emplacements with skepticism. Maybe Stevan could get a few...

He didn't have time to finish the thought. A sudden explosion wrenched his eyes to the battlefield. A dark shimmer existed if only for a second before a large section of the wall melted before his eyes. What? Is this what brought the walls down at Sargos? However no physic horror emerged through the newly formed gap, but a two legged one, massive in its size and raw display of power, its four talons tearing pieces off of the wall as it went to clear the way for others. They almost look like swords he commented to himself. Could this be a Tyranid queen? Did they even have queens?

What ever the beast was, it was big, dwarfing even the larger bioforms they had seen by almost half. It had a scythelike tail that swung behind it, and Caff almost convinced himself he could hear its footsteps as it made its way through the now ruined wall.

Caff could see what had happened now. At the core of the wall now lay a head of ruined metal which, in the otherwise solid wall, could only have been a void generator. Ironically, in its unpowered state, it only made the wall weaker. The Tyranids had breached the wall at its weakest point and now they had gained the courtyard.

His expression grew grim as the rest of the horde stared pouring in through the hole following the monstrosity. "I hope you have those doors sealed" He heard himself say.

Miles above them, the Tyranid fleet lay in low orbit. A nightmarish conglomeration of hooks scales, and flesh armor sat, held in place by unknown mechanism. A sense of finality might have been present. The last bioform had been sent down to the planet. It was all in. Only one lay still above, waiting perhaps for a time that would never come.

It might have predicted what came next, but perhaps was powerless to prevent it. Like it had so many times before, the Divine Retribution exited from that strange and frightening world of the immaterium and tore into a Tyranid bioship. The geller shields, still active from the journey to the warp, protected the vanguard crusier from the worst of the impact with the effect that the larger ship simply tore into the defenseless bioform.

Sacs of unknown fluid ruptured, ichor spewed like water in a wat from every imaginable orifice as the pressures of space slowly contorted the once intact bioship into a grotesque mockery of what I once was. Finally, something, perhaps a spine or other such structural mechanism broke, thrashing the two halves of the broken creature against one another, before the broken pieces started their slow descent to Allistar's Surface.

**Chapter 49: The End**

Author's Note: Its been a while. Its been a really, really long time: 4 years, 7 months, 27 days since I started. However, when I said I would finish Last Man Standing, I meant it.

I actually had finished the last chapter earlier this summer and had written in all down in a spiral notebook. The next week I was going to type it up and upload it. It was glorious. I was enthusiastic that I was finally going to finish my story. However, that week, the car I was using was broken into. Nothing of conventional value was stolen, however the perpetrators took my bag containing my un-typed chapter. It was the only copy I had.

I was in disbelief. I stopped writing at all following that. It took me the whole semester to regain the notes I needed to finish the chapter again. However, some aspects were forgotten. The story has the same general ending as the version I originally wrote, but details, fight scenes and dialog are completely different.

In retrospect I don't think I will ever proofread any of this, and I also believe this will be he last fanfiction I write. It is simply too much work, for a story you can never publish. In some way, I also grew out of warhammer. I no longer paint or model, and am not up to the newest fluff. However, while I was, it was a profound influence on me and has resulted in this piece of fanfiction.

So here it is, the final chapter. Thanks for getting this far.

Admiral Kenshaw saw Anath off the ship along with his terminator contingent.

When he arrived back on the bridge, the ship was already engaging a straggler Tyranid bioship, vastly larger than itself. "Helmsman, why are we moving towards that enemy ship?"

The young adjunct looked a bit confused. "Its just out of range at the moment sir."

Kenshaw nodded silently to himself while approaching the helm. "And in my orders to you before I left, did I say you could start this party without me?" The old man said, grinning.

The helmsman grinned slightly before being jumping aside as the Admiral sat. Kenshaw grabbed a communicator. "Rotate us fifteen degrees, I want to be able to use every stationary gun we have on this ship, and several we officially don't."

Kenshaw looked up from his calculations at the approaching tyranid mass and grinned himself.

"Helmsman, do you know which ship you should fire at first when engaging a tyranid fleet?"

The helmsman stopped as he was returning to his post further down the bridge and turned to face his superior.

"No sir. Please enlighten me. Which one?"

Now Kenshaw was truly smiling.

"All of them!" Kenshaw pronounced as he finished communicated to the battery officers. "All guns, open fire!"

A million rays of light came into being connecting the Divine Retribution with the enemy ship. At each point of contact its horrible energy weapons tore straight through the bloated squid looking creature. The helmsman could barely see, but via silhouettes through the glare shielding he gazed as a flood of internal liquid gushed from the creature, bursting through holes newly formed, evaporating at frightening rates into the depths of space.

As suddenly as the blinding eminence started, it was gone. The helmsman blinked in awe. In some places he could see straight through the ship. Something on its main section quivered. A disturbance agitated the surface of the bio vessel. Suddenly, a white shape began to emerge.

"Admiral, there's something there! It might be a weapon! Should we take evasive action?"

Kenshaw listened to the helmsman but shook his head.

"I want manual control of a lascannon here, now!" Kenshaw said pointing to his control station.

The other helmsmen complied, obviously mystified but intrigued. Kenshaw studied the enemy ship, taking careful measurements, guiding his hand along the control in front of him.

"Ha!" He yelled, slamming his hand down on the button.

One insignificant lascannon sputtered at the tyranid monstrosity, hitting it right below the white extrusion. The helmsman watched as it quivered again. Suddenly the enemy ship was wrecked with violent contortions as the entire bulk of the ship started to fold. Flesh spilled as skin ripped and muscles tore, organs being pushed out into space, some rupturing on contact with unwelcome vacuum.

The helmsman watched in awe as the entire ship crumpled before them into a floundering mass of biological debris.

"That" Kenshaw, said gripping the railing and staring intently at the rest of the fleet facing them, "was good, but..." he paused as several larger tyranid ships noticed the disturbance and turned to meet them. "gunnery officers, I want everything reloaded...this is the truly fun part."

The helmsman swallowed forcibly and relayed the orders, all the while not taking eye contact off the oncoming fleet.

Jada and Anath materialized in complete darkness below a massive stone stair. The two took a quick looking around themselves, confirming their location. The mammoth blue grey stone around them narrowed and harsh light played through a small opening in the wall.

Anath could see the stained floor before them and nodded to Jada. The two advanced silently forward. Jada pointed at the bodies on the ground, but Anath merely shook his head and pointed at the doorway. The two squeezed through the narrow opening.

They saw a man standing in front of a tall metal vault like door. Back lit by the overhanging chem lights Anath checked his sensor kit and then nodded in affirmation. The radiation was strong here, the man was bound to be Don.

Anath was about to suggest something when he was distracted by a small groan off to his right. A guardsman was lying against the wall unconscious. In the wall next to him was a sword, impossibly embedded in the stone. Anath said nothing but was surprised to recognize the guardsman. He had been with Don on Kroth.

A sudden noise demanded his attention and he spun around, suddenly realizing that Jada's arm was outstretched, his bolt pistol extended. The barrel smoked ever so slightly and a mad shadow played across Jada's face.

Anath turned his attention to the man.

"So you've finally arrived." The figure said, turning slightly, revealing a gaze ripped by pain and unholy symbols. The bullet fell to the ground in front of him.

Anath went to stay Jada but it was too late, the large marine was already sprinting across the tiled floor, footsteps deafening in the silence. Anath collected himself. This would be a duel far greater than any he had seen before. Jada raised his power sword and swung down.

The blow was impossibly stopped by the man's hand. Jada's eyes widened as the runes he had seen earlier on Kroth played along the man's body. He tugged madly at the sword but the unnatural grip held firm. Jada snatched at his bolt pistol and started to raise it for a point blank shot.

The man stretched out his other hand and a force crushed Jada in the chest. As his feet left the ground and his weapon was wrenched from his hand, he had time to see claw marks appear on his armor as he was flung backward.

He hit a pillar hard, the psychic power driving him into the solid object, shattering the surface of the stone and twisting his arms unnaturally backward along the pillar. When the blast was finished, he dropped into pain onto his knees.

Meanwhile, Don slowly returned his gaze to Anath, who finally had finished his preparation.

"And what will you do psyker? Librarian of no books?"

"I will kill you. I have seen it." Anath said calmly.

The figure actually laughed, hollow voice rebounding off the cavernous space. "and how do you expect to do..."

"I am the conduit" Yelled Anath, bringing up memories long forgotten of decades of training. In his mind's eye he saw Vidya, solemnly gazing at him. He could feel the power there, perhaps even something alien. It shone like a all exposing beacon and blinded him if he even looked close.

He felt outwards with his mind, trying to reach the all revealing light before he remembered. He stopped and opened his mind further. Conduit not controller. It enveloped him.

Anath raised his sword, an ancient relic given to him solely for this purpose. The opposing figure's eyes widened, and threw up his hands in defense. It was too late.

The beacon of light surged through Anath, wrapping itself around his hands, burning the flesh with its intensity. The metal of the sword seared in his hands, but he held fast. He must. Static discharge leaped from his body and contacted with places on the floor. In that instant he was all powerful, he could feel the mind numbing pressure only he could bear.

"I name you, creature of the void, ancient enemy. You are nothing before the light of the emperor, and to that nothing I return you!"

For an instant the light filled the entire room, a single thread of illuminance burning its way across time and space, it passed out of Anath's sword and across the room towards the figure. The man tried to reach out to block it, but his hands burned away when they came too close. His mouth opened and a blood curdling scream issued from his lips as the power connected with him.

He was aflame, every part of his body a conflagration of insurmountable power. Anath gasped as the exertion of the conduit staggered him. He held fast still.

The scream increased. It filled the room, louder than a single human could voice, working its way into the stones and rocks themselves which took up the vibration. The sigils on the figure's body blazed their eldritch green but were swept away by the overpowering force of Anath's attack. Every symbol quivered for a moment as even more power surged through the connection.

Then it was done. The man fell to the ground, no trace of the symbols. His body burned slowly for a moment before the white hot flames dissipated to quiet smoldering. The glow of the chem lights was all that remained.

Anath collapsed to his knees, vision swaying before his eyes. He held himself up only through his armor and sword, now firmly planted into the ground. It was over.

Jada collected himself shortly after and ran to Anath. "Are you well brother? What was that?" He asked the librarian.

Anath heaved for breath and when it came i was raspy and without strength. "I am afraid I can't tell you. However, the deed is done. Our mission is accomplished. Don is dead, just as I foresaw. There is not a creature alive in this world that could have survived that."

Jada nodded and helped Anath return to his feet. The librarian was frighteningly weak, and Jada could hear the power armor's power systems increase as it took the majority of the work in righting him.

"Come" Anath whispered. The two dragged themselves over to the raised black rectangle before the metal vault door. The black package lay discarded beside it.

"Its kind of ironic really." Anath said as they approached.

"What is?" replied Jada, turning.

"We came all this way to see if we contained heresy, if that ancient geneseed hand any signs of heresy. But it you think about it, the psychic seal on the door wouldn't have even opened if the DNA had any signs of corruption. We have learned nothing." Anath coughed unceremoniously.

Jada scowled. "You're right. But at least we have the genseseed..." He reached into the storage device to retrieve the seed but then stopped.

"Anath, brother, there is something very wrong!" Jada warned, not peering quickly in and around the package. "The seed is not here!"

"Impossible! It should be in the container...unless." Anath sprung towards Don and checked his vital signs. "This can't be. This man is still alive!"

"What does that mean?" Jada asked, now drawing his sword and looking around the room in suspicion as if expecting enemies to come from out of the pillars themselves.

"It means that this wasn't the demon! It was just a man being controlled. That means..." Anath cut off and stared in horror at the vault door. "No, emperor no."

A bone chilling laugh seeped through the vault door. Anath and Jada took a step back almost involuntarily. The laugh continued deeper and horribly, closer.

A voice forced its way into their heads, horrible and raw. "You have been deceived." A sudden horrible sound of metal on metal screamed from the other side of the vault.

"The device had already been activated." The voice pounded into their brains. A force thundered into the vault door and Jada leaped back on instinct. Something deadly raked the inside of the massive construct, forcing the metal to yield, bulging the outer door.

"I am free." It mocked. The vault went flying off its cyclopean hinges and Jada and Anath dove to one side as the hunk of metal flew across the open space and impacted into one of the pillars. Something horrible emerged.

It form was constantly changing, wild images of claws beaks and hands, eyes of all shapes and size appearing and disappearing along its bulk. It was clearly of humanoid form, but monstrously so. In its appendage it held a fearsome sword, almost half its size emblazoned with the shifting sigils that Anath had come to know too well. Atop its head were curved lines of some sort which appeared and disappeared, sometimes tusks sometimes spines. In the center of its torso, embedded and half a screw was the geneseed.

"How interesting that you speak of secrets and heresy, for I know much on both. Would you care to talk, librarian?"

The demon's shifting nauseating form came to rest towering above them, blurring the light in the room.

Jada's pistol rang out again. Anath turned and was not surprised to see Jada holding his ground, calmly emptying his magazine into the being. Anath looked up to see the bullets lodge into the things eye, and stay there.

The monstrosity turned, somewhat disappointed looking towards Jada and swung his staff at a blinding speed, caching Jada off guard, hammering him into the ground. Although fatigued, Anath drew his sword and was about to swing at the demon when a crushing force also brought him down.

His suit protested and emergency readouts ran as he saw that the being had impossibly hit him without him noticing it. He staggered, and was held in place by another crushing force. The demon stared at the two.

"All comfortable? Your actions are admirable but worthless. Personally though, I am a story teller. I like to share my knowledge with others. How ironically unlike the maxim you Blood Ravens spout tirelessly. And seeing as I have a...captive audience…Why don't we start with your friends out there?" The demon shifted, pointing to the pile of bodies just visible outside the door.

"Would you like to know what happened to them? To their great commander?"

"I wish to know only what I choose to, demon spawn." Jada said, drawing to his feet, power sword in hand. He launched himself at the demon.

"Fair enough, let us do battle. And maybe when you see how pointless it all is, you will be quiet like your friend here."

"Don't listen to it Jada!" Anath yelled, as the psychic force suddenly crushed him again, seeking to silence him. "Break its concentration! Its here in physical form, perhaps we can actually kill it!"

Jada's sword swung out and bit into the thing's leg. But it was like striking clay, it hardly made an impression and Jada had to pull quickly to free it from the thing's body.

"Yes, yes, let us duel" The demon rumbled. Its sword swung down at lightening speeds, splitting the air itself with its path. Jada left out of the way and dove backward behind the closest pillar. When he came up he had reloaded his bolt pistol, and rapid shots impacted the demon.

Hardly phased, the demon took a step forward and smashed the pillar, sword easily slicing through the reinforced rock. Jada looked up just in time to see the massive stones falling. He sprinted out of the way, this time aiming at the demon's torso. The results were hardly better.

"Your pathetic weapons can't hurt me." the demon boasted. "Enough running around." It took two thunderous steps forward and smashed down at Jada who only had time to catch the oncoming death with his own blade.

The two sparked as he massive weapon drove Jada into the ground. When the blade was withdrawn Jada had been forced through the rock tile floor, cracks spreading.

Jada leaped out of the way of the next swing and only heard a terrible metal against rock of the sword connecting where he had been only seconds earlier. He propelled himself closer to the demon and stabbed it its legs, power sword doing somewhat better than his pistol could ever hope to accomplish.

Something connected with him, and Jada looked down to see himself being lifted through the air by a massive foot. His journey wasn't complete yet though, before he had even hit the ground, he was swatted out of the air by an outstretched sword.

He had just time to see Anath, break from his physic bonds as he impacted through a pillar, shattering it with his speed, emerging to strike the more solid side wall at an oblique angle where he skidded as he dropped to the ground in crushing agony.

Anath lifted out his sword, lightning arcing from its tip to the demon where its form swirled around the energy unpleasantly.

" pathetic." The demon shook its head. "I remember when you marines were a force to be reckoned with, when the enemies of mankind trembled before your approach. You have fallen so low. Fragmented, splintered, lost. A shadow of a shadow. I waste my time."

Anath yelled in frustration, fire emanating from his hand, wrapping itself around his sword. He rush forward, dodging another life ending swing of the massive sword. He spun suddenly and jumped back as the demon smashed its other hand down where he would have been. Seeing his chance he stabbed his ensorcelled weapon into the demon's wrist, fire coursing into the wound until none remained.

It jerked in pain, flinging Anath off, who retained his weapon, rolling to rest on the floor. "Your brothers were unfaithful. Their leader, a man of once great heroism was brought low by his own pride." The demon growled, looking quickly down at the injured arm, now frozen in shape at the area of contact.

Jada had finished recovering and was running to help. Hoping to play for time Anath answered the demon. "Lies, we saw the damage to them. You corrupted one of them. The wounds were bolt shots, the door breached by melta-bombs!"

"Corrupted? You can call it what you want." the demon said readjusting its grip on the shifting sword. "It was time that did him in. You astartes cannot die. And what a curse that was for him! Stuck here by his orders, forgotten in a forgotten fortress on a forgotten planet defending a prison that no one remembers. How it ate at him!"

Jada and Anath attacked at one. Swords striking out, seeking weak points, somewhere, somehow, there had to be a way of hurting the thing. The two danced, evading blow after blow from the terrible sword, which clawed its way into the ground with every swing. The demon growled in frustration. It terrible strength meant nothing if it could not hit the elusive pair. Anath and Jada's blows on the other hand stuck again and again, small cuts appearing with every one.

"That device there is what finally did him in. The same one made long ago to imprison me. It was made so cleverly, in way you probably couldn't even understand now. Only the uncorrupted marine can open it. That way my allies could never free me, however hard they tried."

"But therein lay the curse." The demon continued, driving them back with vicious attacks. "What better way to test to see if the Blood Angels were tainted? That eternal secret. He laid his hand on the device, only to have it fail!"

"Quiet" Jada yelled, summoning all his strength, driving his sword into the demon's foot.

The demon clicked in pain, but responded by driving his own sword down on Jada from above, spearing him through the shoulder. Jada screamed in pain as the evil weapon split his armor.

"Jada!" Anath screamed, running toward his battle brother.

"Convinced he and the others were tainted, he slew his own battle brothers, determined to rid the galaxy of this peice of Blood Raven corruption once and for all. However, at the end of it all, when he and the silence were the only ones left, I spoke to him and told him the truth. The very act of trying to open the vault, for whatever reason, was proof in itself of his own damnation! His pride and lust for glory had overwhelmed him. He took his own life."

The demon withdrew his sword, eliciting another shriek from Jada and stood over the two.

"Let me tell you another truth, something I have seen. You will die here Anath" the demon said. Raising his sword to finish the job.

"Is that everyone?" Voor yelled as Hessert and Lechor held the door against the accumulating mass of deadly bioforms. The last of Greynor's squad were seen scurrying up the stairs as fast as their legs could take them. Barricades had been constructed at the top of the stairs, and the smaller guns on the side of the fortress had been turned inward and manned.

Voor looked concerningly at the stone cracking beneath them. "We have to go! Now!" he yelled at the pair before running for the stairs, jumping over unsettled foundation stones. The two let loose one last burst with their flamers, frying several unlucky tyranids before they ran for it also.

They were halfway up the stairs when the first digger emerged. It slivered from beneath the stones with threatening quickness and started to flick some sort of spine projectile at the fleeing group. "Lets go! Almost there!" Voor yelled.

Lechor fell, one of the spines embedded in his ankle. As he yelled in pain, more creatures emerged from the floor. Hessert stopped and doubled back grabbing the large man and heaving him to his feet.

"Oh frak." Breathed Voor as he also swung around and started emptying his lasgun into the approaching tyranid mass.

A brilliant red beam seared his eyes and the lead digger collapsed to the ground. Most of its head was completely missing. Seymour waved from the barricade then took aim for another shot. Behind him, three other veterans also opened fire, careful not to hit any of the three on the stairs. Lechor and Hessert limped up the expanse. When the reached Voor, he pushed them over the barricade and took stock of the proceedings.

The diggers seemed to rely on the element of surprise, since, although the same size as some of the more fearsome enemies the tyranids had thrown at them, they were hardly the most durable. Even with their limited success though, there was no way they 7 were going to be able to hold them back. Luckily he also glanced at the door just as a monstrous tusk broke through into the fortress.

"We can't stay here either. We need to move up higher, where we have more heavy weapons and had more time to reinforce the barricades!" The others nodded and started the ascent up to the next floor. The huge spiral stair ran the center of the fortress but they had only been able to fortify the top half to an acceptable degree.

"We need to delay them up to the 1st reinforced floor! Lets go!" Voor and the rest started running, the other two veterans helping Lechor. As Voor sprinted up the stairs, he began to hate the solid construction of it. If only we could blow the damn thing at the bottom… Next best thing he thought as he dropped his timed satchel charges on the way up.

After what seemed like hours, but was probably only minutes of fighting retreat, they had accumulated the whole of the veterans assigned to the bottom stair. The group was notably missing a few members, but it was better than Voor had feared. Beneath him he could see the swarm reeling from the mines he and the others had placed, but he feared soon even the large tyranids would soon start up the stair.

They were at the first reinforced level. A crude collection of boxes, loose masonry and heavy weapons sat at the top of this flight and the guns to the side were all mounted. It was a kill zone, and a good one but probably not enough to stop the assault Voor knew. "We made it. Greynor's men are waiting for us. Lechor, find Zell, have him remove that."

Just a few moments to wait now and they will hit us. The air tore in front of Voor's eyes on the landing below the barricade. Where before there was only the debris of battle, there now stood sixteen huge armored marines. These were even different from the ones they had seen earlier. They were even bigger if possible! These must be the vaulted terminators. Voor stopped firing and looked at them.

Their gargantuan red armor covered their entire body, plates interlocking among plates. In their hands some held fearsome hammers and shields, the likes of which Voor had only seen in drawings. Others wielded massive barreled guns, and one even seemed to be holding an assault cannon with only his hands!

The terminators took no time to acquaint themselves and started firing immediately on the ranks of incoming tyranids, their explosive round decimating the scurrying little ones, and what was left of the diggers.

One of the terminators was not wearing a helmet probably signifying him as in command, which Voor thought was mad until he felt his own head and realized he had lost his own on the mad dash up the stairs. The terminator without a helmet drew a massive sword of some sort and stared at something on the ground. Voor realized with a sinking feeling that it was his helmet.

The two locked eyes. Voor felt himself go numb. The terminator looked like he was about to say something, but his squad mate yelled as a monster of a beast with giant tusks smashed its way up the stairs though the bodies of its smaller compatriots. The terminator without out a helmet dashed forward, and in one solid strike, had severed one of its feet.

Reeling, it stumbled and clumsily struck at him. He caught the tusk with his sword, and topped it off too. Wasting no time, he struck off another of the beasts legs. When it fell he was there under it, sliding his massive sword into the thing's head. He emerged covered in tyranid blood, but unharmed. Voor was amazed.

Distracted, he heard the rest of the squad behind him asking for orders. "Go for the smaller ones, keep them from overwhelming the marines through numbers. Careful not to hit them, although I doubt it would matter much."

Voor continued to stare in awe as the terminators actually started beating the tyranids back down the stairs.

"Well frak me. Emperor willing, we might actually make it out of here alive!" he said, before realizing his vox was still on.

Anath looked up at the demon without hope, but calmly held his sword as the blow slammed into it. He buckled under its massive strength. The demon paused and looked at the two, laughing. "You believe you actually stood a chance? That trick of yours was something. Perhaps I should rip your brain apart to see how you did it. I'm sure I would find something interesting there!"

Anath could feel the being turn its unbelievably powerful psychic power toward him. He held up his sword, ready to distract.

"You simply don't understand how powerful I am. Me and my underlings held back your entire legion for decades. If it wasn't for your unfortunate and eventually psychotic hero, I might have even won. My power spans across the stars. I once held entire systems within my grasp, and all fear my coming. Let me show you a small fraction of my being."

Anath could feel something terrible rise from within the demon. The room shook and the smell of ozone seemed everywhere. Without any warning Anath's sword started to melt. He looked at the psychically attuned weapon in amazement. This was impossible. As far as he knew, artifact as it was, the weapon was indestructible.

The flowing material dripped off the rest of the sword like candle wax. Where the line of melting ran down the length of the sword, the sigils engraved into its length burned white and sputtered one by one. Anath gritted his teeth, holding the now useless hilt.

"So you see. Nothing is sacred, nothing is divine. There is only your foolish meaty bodies and your technologically inept weapons, and the incalculable power of the immaterium. That is where the strength lies. Even your emperor was nothing more than a particularly adept conduit..." the demon almost smiled at him, "for the powers of the warp. I am of that place. I am not what I am!", the demon raised its hands, "I am more! There is not a being alive today that can withstand my power."

Anath looked over at Jada who was writhing on the ground presumably in agony. Oddly, for the end of his life, Anath felt strangely detached, as if all of this was happening to someone else. Actually a number of other people, all speaking in unison. Not speaking, whispering, screeching. Like a thousand knives along metal. Anath turned facing the far wall in detached curiosity and noticed the demon was also. It shifted its weight and turned towards the wall.

What is going on here? Anath had time to think before another massive shape darted across his vision.

The wall exploded in a burst of man sized rock shrapnel, causing Anath to dive over Jada, taking the brunt of the explosion. Dust filled the air and for a split second, Anath saw something move in that dust.

The demon was struck by a massive force. Sword flashing in incredible speed, it parried innumerable blows by the unseen enemy. Astonishingly, the demon was slowly driven backward under the ferocity of the attack. The demon shifted faster and faster, blows now coming in faster from both sides, the clash of its blade against some unseen object ringing in Anath's ears.

My god, its a tyranid. Anath realized as the dust settled somewhat over the battling opponents.

It stood as tall as the demon, and its massive carapace and armored body belied a ferocious and almost imperceivable speed. It stood on two scaled legs, as thick as any man but lashed out with four appendage scythes and occasionally a muscular barbed tail. It maw opened wide, revealing blood dripping mandibles and immeasurable rows of deadly teeth.

It screamed.

Anath felt the scream inside his head louder than any noise in his entire life, clutching his ears, he realized that it wasn't a noise at all. He rolled to Jada, who had stopped the bleeding at least for now.

"What is it?" Jada asked.

"We have heard of such creatures from our previous encounters. It is a powerful adversary. Many marines have died fighting it. Worst of all are its speed and psychic powers." Anath said, looking over Jada's wounds the best he could.

"Are you telling me that that thing is a psyker?" Jada asked incredulously.

"Not in the traditional sense, but it may as well be. Can you hear the scratching?" Anath asked, "Its horrible, even compared to the psychics of the Eldar".

"No" Jada admitted, "how could you hear anything over this fight?"

Anath listened with his ears with some difficulty. The stomp of two massive beings, tiles crushing under the weight, the constant ringing of metal against chitin as the two vied for power.

The tyranid creature suddenly overwhelmed the demon's defense and a sword like appendage slashed across the demon's arm. The demon was not talking now, concentrating only on its enemy, it howled as the scythe bit whatever body the demon had, forcing the demon's form to cease its shifting. Taking advantage of the demon's preoccupation, the tyranid scored another slash across the demon's waist, eyes on the demon's body ruptured like sores, oozing caustic liquid.

The demon howled again, ducking low under the next two sideways attacks, and brought his sword up, now firmly grasped with two hands.

It struck the tyranid in one of its arm, spilling ichor and severing muscles, its blood eating like acid as it sprayed along the stones. The Tyranid's screams increased.

It launched itself at the demon, kicking it into the already weakened pillar behind it. Pushing again and again with its three remaining arms, Anath could see it also opportunistically stabbed with its barbed tail seeking the demons flesh. Such was the force of the attack that, although the demon fended off all of its blades, the rush broke the demon through the pillar and across the floor.

If a demon could bleed it would be doing so at this point. Arm aside, the tyranid was relatively uninjured. It leered at the demon through the dust caused by the remains of the pillar before resuming its deadly offensive.

Jada was now stabilized, giving Anath more time to look around. Previously unseen during the entire combat, he saw the guardsman he had seen earlier, kneeling over Don, presumably attempting to wake him. I didn't matter, the deed was done. If they survived they could slay the heretic.

The demon was now resorting to using its arsenal of psychic powers. Lightning arced from its fingertips, and fire from its hands, but everything just seemed to hang in the air towards the tyranid, nothing connected. Anath eyed the situation and perceived that the tyranid was creating some sort of psychic sink.

The tyranid retaliated, Anath clutched his head as the rasping noise tore through his skull.

The demon was obviously not expecting such an assault. Space warped along a path towards the demon, distorting the air, causing it to shimmer as it fthe air itself were burning. The projectile collided with the demon, breaking its grip on its sword which, rung heavily against the tiles, smouldering as the weapon touched consecrated ground.

The tyranid was quick to take advantage of the opportunity. It rushed forward, scythes ripping at the demon's body, gashing its torso seeking something in the demon. The geneseed! Anath realized. The demon was not out yet, though. Anath felt a massive upwell in psychic energy and saw the demon blast a hole through the creature's carapace.

The demon scrambled to grab its weapon, but the tyranid skewered its hand to the ground with one of its arms. It raised its other two arms to finish the job, but never got to. The demon held them in place with its terrible psychic powers. Anath almost felt the crushing power between the two as a psychic battle began. The tyranid shook its head, mouth tentacles writhing as its unknowable physiology somehow struggled to reinforce its psychic powers.

Anath felt the power this time for sure, building clashing and unable to reconcile. There was only one way that this would end. "We need to get behind cover" Anath told Jada, half dragging him, half supporting him as the two ran as fast as they could behind a pillar. Anath saw Saide similarly dragging Don into what was left of the vault.

Finally, one of the combatants could hold onto its hideous power no longer. The two energies tore at each other, released. Like a bomb going off, there was a huge and sudden pressure, Anath could feel the masonry and reinforcing of the pillar straining against its terrible force. All around them, the floor seared in flames and distorted as tears in the very fabric of reality spiraled through the air, annihilating all they touched.

One by one, all the unprotected vast sigils on the floor and walls glowed with a sudden brilliance and continued to do so until they melted into the ground by the force of the psychic blast. The vault door went flying into the far wall with such force that there was simply nothing left of the regular metal door when the blast was over.

Everything eventually went silent. Anath stared at the ground beside the pillar. All tiles were now gone, revealing the foundation stones themselves. Even these hadn't remained untouched. Anath saw that there was almost 3 inches of burned stone that had been etched away by the explosion.

Jada got to his feet, his hand never straying far from his wound, and looked around the pillar. The front half of it was gone, exposing the metal reinforcing, half of which was melted to slag. Closer to the source of the explosion, the ground was carved out, ripped apart by the strength of the confrontation.

Of the two combatants, little was left. Half an scythe still embedded itself in the demons arm. But the whole bottom half of the demon was gone and Its other had was seared off at the wrist. The tyranid fear little better. A massive hole gaped in its torso, surprisingly bloodless, no doubt cauterized by the heat. All its arms were gone, one of which lay across the ground, the rest subsumed by the warp eddies.

Still cautious, Anath approached the two. Upon closer inspection Anath saw that the tyranid was also missing half of its head, brain tissue seared and burned to an unrecognisable char. Anath didn't blame Jada though, when he saw the marine scramble up the corpse best he could and sink his power sword up to the hilt into the things brain.

He struggled to pull it out as Anath approached the demon. It was no longer shifting, its physical form stationary and seemingly lifeless. Anath knew better. He could still feel the echo of the demon's psychic imprint on the world. It was still alive somehow. Terribly battered, but still alive.

"Dear emperor on his golden throne. It's still alive." Anath said breathless. Out of the corner of his vision he saw Don and the other guardsman emerging from the vault, seeming unharmed.

"Is there nothing in this world that can kill it?" Jada said. "Surely this will cease its pathetic corruption" he stepped forward and stabbed his power sword into the being's head.

Anath wondered for a moment, but then shook his head. "No such luck. It will take a lot more power than that sword to kill this thing. Perhaps another one of these biomorphs" He waved his hand at the dead carcass. "but from what we've seen of this fleet, I presume this was its final push."

The two thought for a second. "Could your sword kill it? Can you use the conduit?" Jada asked hopefully.

Anath shook his head. "If I tried not only would it kill me but it would also fail. My sword..." He glanced down at the useless hilt still clutched in his hand and held it up for Jada. Jada exhaled deeply and looked around.

"Perhaps if we can haul it back to the vault we can reseal it." Anath said, looking around for the vault door. His hope vanished when he saw the careful workmanship of the psychically attuned portal smeared across the far wall in globs of twisted hardening liquid metal.

Anath shook his head, but quickly became alert again. "Is waking up!" he cried hoarsely, drawing his own bolt pistol, for all the good it would do him.

"We could nuke the damned thing from orbit if only we could make sure it doesn't move" Jada suggested.

A sudden green light caused him to spin around and he saw the other guardsman a hesitant distance away from Don. Don's face grimaced in pain still, but Anath could feel his power. He turned the bolt pistol towards the man, ready to kill him.

"No, look!" The other guardsman yelled, pointing at the demon. Little by little Anath could see the force encircling what was left of the demon, locking it in place.

Anath suddenly understood. "Yes, Jada. Give the order for orbital bombardment once you and the rest of the terminators are safely back on the Divine Retribution. Spare nothing. You can tell Kenshaw that word for word. He will know what you mean." Anath dug deep at the source of his power, feeling it flow reluctantly back to the surface. The demon's body arched, and its eyes lit as it came to. Just in time, Anath's power hammered it into the ground.

"These are runes of binding, demon. Even in their damaged state, I can use them to keep you here. Your soul will not return to the void."

"Anath, do you realize what you are saying?" Jada said, laying a hand on Anath's shoulder as the psyker concentrated on the binding.

"Yes" Anath, said, through gritted teeth. I was always willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the imperium."

"Then that just leaves these two heretics." Jada said, rounding his bolt pistol on Don and the other guardsman. The other guardsman went ashen faced.

"Don't!" Don coughed, blood trickling down his now gaunt face. The demon bucked again, this time more powerfully. "Shoot him, and I'll let go." Don threatened.

Jada turned slightly to Anath, never taking his gun from pointing at Don's head. "Anath, surely you can do this by yourself. These are heretics!"

"No Jada. I do not have the strength. As it is, this man is keeping half of the demon down." Anath admitted. "The conduit was supposed to kill any demon completely. I have almost no power left in me."

Don matched Jada's stare gravely, and the sigils flared on his arms, encircling him slowly, constricting like a vipers embrace. He grimaced. "Its the demon's own power. With his own power I hold him here!" Don said.

Jada shook his head reluctantly but looked to Anath. "Brother, truly? Will I lose you as well as Brother Strom? Can the Blood Angels sustain the loss of such heroes like you?"

Anah paused before responding. "Jada, for allowing this guardsman to live you have showed that you have gained something far more valuable than this pet librarian." Anath clutched Jada's arm, "and I believe in the time to come, you will find yourself glad you made this decision."

Anath let the words sink in.

"Fine." Jada accepted. "I will let this one live, and his crew, if they can survive. But pray to the emperor I never see you again guardsman. I do this for Anath."

"Yes my Lord." the other guardsman said. "Goodbye Don Ridman. We are but men, playing among giants." a tear traced down his face, "but who could tell next to your kingly stature? Me and my men will forever be in debt for saving us on Sargos. Not one of us will forget you."

The other guardsman went to leave, but before he was halfway to the entrance, Jada yelled to him.

"I will give you...", he asked Anath something, "thirty minutes. We can spare no longer. But I cannot simply call you guardsman. What is your name?" Jada asked.

The other guardsman bowed to Jada. "Thank you my lord. I will not speak of what I saw here. The others know nothing." Jada nodded. "and my name is Saide. Just Saide. " He finished, turning slowly, then departed from the room.

"Saide it is. I will know whether you keep to your promise Saide." Jada said to himself. "The emperor protects."

Saide exited the room and sprinted up the stairs. Thirty minutes.

As soon as he got to the ground floor, he was awed by the sheer mass of the corpses he found. They hung from every available inch of staircase, covered every inch of floor. Big and small, every one leaking its toxic ooze into the stone and ice.

As he started to run up the slick of bodies that covered the stairs he felt strangely detached. Thirty minutes… and counting.

At the first reinforced position, he found the first two human corpses. Little of them were recognizable but what he could make out looked Greynor's men. He continued on upwards.

At the second position the casualties were worse. He gritted his teeth in painful sorrow as he passed the bodies of men he had served with for years. Half way up from the second position, a huge swath of tyranid bodies covering the stairs were burned beyond recognition. As he grasped through the ashen pile, he spied Lechor's body cut into ribbons. The veteran had held his ground to save others. It was worse the further up he went.

He wasn't sure it was any better when he came across the first living human. Menon was huddled over Seymour, heaving cries too sorrowful for Saide to hear. Thirty minutes. He continued upwards. By the fifth floor he found Greynor, surrounded by hundreds of tyranid corpses stacked up to the height of the barricades. He and Voor stared up at the sky together.

"Saide! You're alive" he heard Ostan, one of Kane's former men, call. He and Lucious stood over the body of their friend, Gregor. The massive man still had his arm around one of the smaller biomorphs. "Yes." Saide heard himself say, "we need to be gone from this place. Grab everything and start heading north as quickly as you can."

"We don't even have time to bury the dead?" Ostan objected, pointing to Gregor.

"We will have time for that later, move now or die here. It is your choice." Saide said. Thirty minutes. How long has it been? Five? Ten? How large is the impact radius? Can we even get out in time if we run?

He found himself running out of floors. Everyone he met he told the same thing he had told Ostan. He finally came to what was left of the core of the troops. They were assembled on the second to top level. Some were lying prone on the ground, Zell tending to them as best he could. Virgil and Hessert guarded the hatch but stood aside when they saw Saide coming.

Saide stepped out into the frigid Allistaran wind. He had no way of telling what time it was. Or how much time they had left.

"You're alive!" A shout of joy went up from the command group which now really only consisted of Elban, the two techpreists and Merida. Caff stayed reservedly back as the other met with Saide.

"I managed to keep the generators going" Arnon said, "we should have heat for almost a year and food for a fifth of that if the troops keep to starvation diets."

"Something tells me we won't need that" Stevan admonished. "I managed to rip out the warp drive," he smiled drawing close to Saide and whispering, "should we need it in the future".

"The troops who are left are battered, but word that you are alive is circulating fast. Everyone is glad to see you Saide." Merida added.

"Your preparations were adequate, superb even," Elban said looking up from readouts of the battle wiping the weariness from his face. "There...there were just too many. I'm sorry sir."

Saide took all this in, but remained staring at Caff, who said nothing.

Finally Caff walked up to Saide and embraced him. "I thought you were gone sir." The hug turned to a crushing vice grip as pain seeped into Caff's voice; "We needed you Saide. We needed you and you weren't there for us. You weren't there for us!" he whispered.

"I am afraid I can't tell you what happened." Saide admitted. "And I deserve nothing but contempt from you for my absence. But the thread around our necks trailing from Sargos is gone. We are free men now." Thirty minutes.

"If we can make it out of here alive."

"What do you mean?" Caff asked, emotion leaving his voice.

"We have much less than thirty minutes, possibly more on the order of fifteen, to exceed an orbital bombardment radius from this place." Saide said breathlessly.

"Well frak" stated Caff, before diving for the comm to relay orders.

Jada appeared on the teleporter, his armor cracked and broken, still bleeding heavily from the stab wound. As the swarms of med-servitors attempted to attend to him, he complicated their procedures by striding to meet the terminator sergeant.

"I would give you and your brothers the highest honors and esteems if I could." Jada said.

"Those that are left would, no doubt be honored." he sargent said, somewhat cynically.

"How many did they bring down." Jada asked graven faced.

"Five my lord, a whole squad. There was a rush of monsters the size of which I've never seen near the end. Two went down in the initial assault, two more during the ensuing melee. The fifth died of poison, sustained from hundreds of accumulated shots while he and I took down the biggest of them."

"I see. Only one thing left to do." Jada turned and gave the order to Admiral Kenshaw. "Spare nothing" Jada added at the end, remembering Anath's words.

"Of course my lord." Kenshaw smiled gruffly and went to obtain approval from the head engiseer.

Down below on the surface, deep underground. Don an Anath were gripped in a battle of time. The demon was reawakening, and neither of them could hold it for long. Worse yet, it had regained the ability to talk.

"Secrets, secrets!" it shrilled while it struggled. "I will tell you the biggest secret of them all Blood Raven. And of course, who better to tell it?" The voice said, coming from nowhere on the body.

Don turned to Anath, "Surely there must be someway of silencing this foul creature."

But Anath did not reply.

"Oh yes, I know much about your chapter. All there is to know really. You were told there was a hero that did battle with me. How Vidya twists his words, same as I. A hero did battle with a demon, but there were one in the same."

Not taking his concentration off the demon, Don yelled at Anath, "you know it only tells lies! Don't listen!"

"But...I knew Vidya was hiding something." Anath said concentration loosening.

Don grunted in increased effort as the burden fell on him to maintain the bonds.

"Damn it, do it already" Don said, looking up at the ceiling.

"Yes, a hero of great renown. The greatest. There was no one who matched him, excepting perhaps his twenty brothers."

"No!" Anath yelled, realizing what the demon was implying.

"Each one flawed in some way, unbeknownst to themselves; pride, cowardice perhaps, fear of the unknown, a psyker, this one no different. Torn between himself, and angel and a demon. And Anath, you know who won" The demon laughed.

"NO!" Anath screamed, "I won't believe it!"

Time seemingly stopped. Don watched the proceedings with a sudden detached apathy. He saw he anguish rippling across Anath's face as the demon told him what Anath had probably always feared. He saw two paths. The invisible yet now somehow visible flow of time ebbing and strengthening around him.

He saw the demon breaking loose, smashing from his prison and turning this sector of the galaxy into an unimaginable hell. But he also saw how he could stop that from ever happening.

"And well you shouldn't. Lies!" Don yelled at the demon. "Anath, I can't possibly understand what the implications of what this demon is telling you, or what significance it holds, but listen to me. If there were taint in the heart of the Blood Ravens, that door I opened never would have cracked an inch."

The demon thrashed insanely as if burned by Don's words. "You are right guardsman. I... forgot myself." Anath admitted. The thing below them screeched. "You see as I did once. The strands of time before you. Left or right. On the sun scorched hills of Tremorkor this began...to save the artificer or the artifact."

Anath paused and looked down at the writhing mass below him. "That is why you twist and turn. That was your chance. That was your twist of fate. You are dead demon. Forever."

It stopped struggling and looked up at Anath, a grizzled ancient face forming from the shifting mass. "The first strike has already left the Divine Retribution but this fortress above us can withstand two or three. You still have time to call it off. The truth. I was never a Primarch, although I often walked in his shadow. Anath, what I tell you know is true. This is his geneseed, pure and uncorrupted, as you know. All you need to do is call off the bombardment and all the secrets of your chapter will be known to you in time. Glory beyond measure, knowledge beyond imagination." The ancient marine head implored.

Anath paused and for a moment, Don horribly thought that Anath would actually take the demon up on the offer.

Anath plunged what was left of his sword into the demon's face, melting the marine illusion. "You must think me dull to try to play the same trick on me as the one you said you used on the previous command of this fortress. My hands are clean. You will die with me."

"But this is His geneseed!" The demon gurgled. "You'll finally know!"

Anath simply plunged the broken sword further. "There are some things worth more than knowledge." he turned to Don. "Thank you." He said before they were annihilated by the thermonuclear impact of the orbital bombardment.

Saide and the rest of the survivors flung themselves to the ground just as they had made it to the first of the foothills overlooking the fortress plane. A blinding impact engulfed the fortress, and it disappeared in pure light.

Saide made himself look.

"Isn't that bad for you?" Virgil asked huddling behind the hill.

"I don't intend to live long enough to find out." Saide admitted. "Don's back there. He saved my life. Probably all of our lives. Least I can do is watch him go."

Saide starred until the blast wave whipped across the plain, forcing him to shelter under the crest of the hill as well.

"What do we do now? Merida asked, sneaking a glance at the spectacular thermonuclear impact cloud slowly rising from the ground where the fortress had been.

"Well, there's always that research station." Zell added helpfully.

Saide laughed, remembering a time it seemed long past. "Ha, that's where we we wanted to end up in the first place! How ironic."

In front of them, now raining down, were continuous nuclear blasts, turning the whole plain into nothing but the finest water vapor and dust.

"Saide, that station is over a hundred miles away through those mountains!" Caff pointed at the imposing peaks. But Saide merely laughed again.

"As Voor would say, we'd better start walking then." Saide responded.

So they started out into the hills, all that was left of them.

Far above them, the Divine Retribution, heavily damaged but still functional, finished sealing its last burst airlock.

Almost a thousand miles away, hovering above the planet, was the last tyranid ship. Amid the fleshy remains of its kin it remained unseen, cloaked by the dead bodies of its kind from the marine's sensors it lay.

The intelligence within it was almost gone, rampant mutation now spreading cysts and cancers across its length. It knew it had failed, despite how close it had come. Quickly it died, rupturing from inside, and slowly joined the rest of its kind, to rotate slowly around Allister, until the gravity of that ball of ice took it in.