**Escalation 4.3**

**The Imperium Strikes Back**

*We will not die quietly.*

*Human empires never die quietly, and I see no reason why we shouldn’t continue this tradition.*

*Our enemies find every opportunity to belittle us, of course. Look at the Imperium, they say. Their so-called Empire is an ignorant mass of barbarians and primitives. It is the long-dead corpse of a dream. It is a bureaucratic nightmare governed by a corpse on a golden throne.*

*This may be so. But you have to admit, these insults lose a bit of their lacklustre when their speakers are hiding in a gigantic Warp Storm protected by abominations no one sane would consider signing a pact with.*

*There are xenos who consider we are the lesser species because they master technologies far advanced to what we currently can deploy and have the ability to strike with impunity our most vulnerable systems. Still, is it not curious that they avoid the heavily defended worlds and flee beyond this reality when they see the retribution of the Imperium coming in their direction?*

*In the end, I think the only alien species which truly does not care about if the Imperium is weak or not is the orks. For them, the only point of importance is if humanity can give them a fight worthy of the name. Much as it is easy to loathe the greenskins for everything they are, you have at least to respect them for their martial attitude and their total absence of lies. From the moment we rose to the stars, we had to fight the greenskins for the domination of the galaxy and they met us directly in battle, without resorting to cheap excuses and treachery.*

*We fought. We are fighting. We will fight.*

*The Imperium is the Master of a million worlds, and while this is not the golden dream the Emperor promised, it is doing the task it was designed for.*

*Mankind rules this galaxy. Despite the constant threat of the Ruinous Powers, despite the raids of the perfidious eldars, despite the ravages of the orks, despite a thousand and one xenos and heretical threats rising yearly to assail the Dominion of Man, the Imperium endures.*

*United under a single banner, humanity can survive.*

*There is no back-up plan. The Emperor is silent. The Loyal Primarchs are gone.*

*But we are still there.*

*Humanity will not disappear into the night without a fight. We are stubborn. We are strong. We are Legion.*

*To the end of glory.*

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“*Don’t be ridiculous, we won’t put this ‘Starsmasha’ in the Endbringer category. You didn’t even need Weaver or my assistance to get rid of this greenskin*...” words attributed to Magos-Draco Dragon Richter, 291M35.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Outer Edges of the S-4697X5T4 System**

**7.621.289M35**

Thought for the day: A hundred thousand worlds, ten hundred thousand wars. There is no respite, there is nowhere to hide. Across the galaxy there is only war.

**Captain Viktor Furan**

Every Legion had had its legends by the time the great Crusade ended in blood and treachery, and the Alpha Legion had not been different in that regard. The only difference was the fact that few outsiders – almost none, to say the truth – had been granted the right to hear them.

One of those had been the legend of Phocron. Simple battle-brother of the Twentieth, Ladiel Phocron had been one of the operatives sent behind the lines of the Great Crusade. For several months, there had been intermittent reports, proofs of several sabotage operations against the massive ork empires waiting in the galactic north, and then nothing.

Nothing until an ork space hulk six times the size of a Gloriana battleship had exploded in front of the stunned eyes of the Astartes from three different Legions. The heavily-encrypted message sent seconds before the death of millions of orks had allowed the Twentieth to discover the fate of the missing Legionary. Phocron had not survived, but he had struck a formidable blow against the green xenos. Without this space hulk, a breach had been created, one which would eventually pave the way for the final assault on Ullanor. While it was exaggerated to say the Alpha Legion vanguard scout had won the war by himself, undoubtedly months of total war had been won without the Luna Wolves and the formidable armies following them firing a single shot.

The name had taken far sinister connotations after the Drop Site Massacre. The Primarchs had decided to use the name for operations which were in all honesty a stain on the name’s honour. ‘Phocron’ had sabotaged many fusion reactors of the Terran factories and hives before the failed attack on Pluto. ‘Phocron’ had convinced many Military Governors to join Horus by the ruthless use of blackmail, financial incentives and demonic promises of retribution. It was ‘Phocron’ who had made sure several thousand Astartes of the Dark Angels, White Scars and Ultramarines would arrive too late for the Siege.

After breaking off with the rest of the Hydra, the Harrowmaster had decided, wisely in Viktor’s opinion, to give the name a second chance. Phocron had been a killer of orks, and as a result the Seeker squad with the highest killing count of the greenskins was given the privilege to take the name if they wanted it.

The answer had been largely positive among the battle-brothers. And now for what was maybe their last battle, Squad Phocron was going to lead the assault on the monster’s lair.

The Harrowmaster, as was his habit, had not hidden to any of them how low the odds of survival were. This Battle-moon was literally crawling with orks and the battles the greenskins had fought in the last days guaranteed the weak specimens had been culled well before their landing. They were plunging into a green tide of death, they had nearly no orbital support, the few tanks they had left were not available for the drop pod assault and most of the Devastator Squads were not mobile enough to be included in this force’s order of battle. Non-Astartes would have called the mission ‘impossibly suicidal’. Even for the Alpha Legion, the size of the opposition was a bit overwhelming.

Naturally, each and every Astartes of the Cohort had volunteered.

Choices had to be made, and in the end, the Harrowmaster had approved his first choice. Their five Seeker squads Phocron, Omicron, Distortion, Fog, and Vortex would provide the bolter-heavy core of the Headhunter formation. The Assault Squads Shadow, Imperator and Gamma would provide the close-range elements and the Reconnaissance Squads Spectre and Sand would provide the means to localise the Warboss. All in all, sixty-four Legionaries veterans were under his personal command out of the two hundred and nineteen Cohort survivors.

Sixty-five Astartes counting himself, and none of them had less than one hundred and seventy years of battle-experience. This was a veteran force which could – and had on occasions – devastated planets.

Today they were launching themselves in a battle they ignored most of the rules.

For all their experience, even his brothers had relatively little experience trying to slay the monstrous orks in command of the Battle-moons. Trying to land small patrols over a long period for a long-term sabotage operation would have been more in their doctrine. But the safe choices had been already removed from the list of options, and now there were two outcomes. They killed the Warboss, or the orks would kill them all.

The shock of landing was similar to the thousands of previous ones he had made and in less than two seconds they were out and beginning to empty their bolters in the horde.

“Phocron takes the lead, Fog and Vortex guards the flanks,” the Astartes Captain ordered, killing five greenskins with his first five wounds and removing the head of a sixth with his battle-knife. “Remember to use Dark Angels protocols if you suspect there are non-xenos forces in proximity.” He added after killing an eight ork with his bolter and decapitating a ninth. “For the Emperor, brothers.”

“For the Emperor,” answered sixty-four voices.

“This is Assault Squad Shadow. We have ork forces with gold armours coming in this direction. They have a lot of rocket launchers.”

This was war in its truest form. Thousands of orks were converging on their landing position, and though each shot downed an ork, they were three to take his place in the seconds after. No need to bother about complicated strategies, mysterious stratagems or the motivations of their opponents. Orks only understood violence and for several seconds this was exactly what the Space Marines gave them.

For the better part of twenty seconds, the Alpha Legion proved to the orks how no infantry wave could survive a concentrated and accurate bolter barrage. In their green-painted armours copying the Dark Angels Chapter, the veterans slaughtered over the wave of roaring beasts and made a mountain of their corpses.

Finally there wasn’t anything to prevent their advance and the Astartes began to run away from the Drop Pods.

“This is Spectre-Two. I think we have localised the Warboss.”

“Why do I think this isn’t all good news?” asked Viktor Furan as two more orks ceased to pollute this galaxy with their fetid breath.

The Reconnaissance Legionary on the other end of the vox darkly chuckled.

“Because we are the Alpha and the Omega? Captain, the Warboss is in the middle of what looks suspiciously like a Gargant assembling facility. Proposed course north-east-east...”

“Understood,” he went to give his orders to the rest of his brothers. “We move north-east-east,” he grunted after emptying over forty rounds in a new horde which had seemingly appeared by a sort of crude teleportation burst. “Seeker Squads disengage and move independently towards Point Gargant-Boss. Assault Squads Shadow and Seeker Squad Omicron, delay the orks in our rear. Assault Squads Imperator and Gamma will lead an aerial attack on the Gargants should they prove operational.”

Progression was difficult. Astartes were built to be fast. But they were on foot, and the surface of this moon was a series of collapsed blocks, craters, scrap-yards and millions of ammunition parts the orks had not yet found a way to explode.

And there were a lot of enemies. Thousands of orks were already dead, but each minute they spent fighting brought thousands more and there was already a big horde pursuing them hundreds of metres behind.

“Spectre-Two, how far are we from the target?”

“You’re less than two hundred metres away from the precipice of the Gargant fosse, Captain. I suggest you change course and go on the left, there’s a sort of primitive elevator there which looks like it can support your weight.”

This day became better and better, he could not help but think. The information from his reconnaissance squads was accurate, on the other hand. Less than a minute after the exchange and over twenty orks added to his kill-count, he had finally his view on their objective.

And he could not help but growl in disbelief. Viktor Furan had seen Mars before the ravages of the civil war tore it apart. As such, he had a good idea of what sort of industrial output the forces of the Imperium of Mankind could churn out their factories when they were facing a galactic-spanning war. The grounds of the fosse before his eyes were comparable. Everywhere his transhuman eyes looked, there were fires outbursts and explosions, thousands of machines forging the vehicles and the weapons which would go to feed the war machine of the orks. The lack of true security measures was evident as torrents of promethium were poured in disorganised methods, but with a frequency of accidents which would make a Mechanicus Adept cringe in horror, the xenos were creating the weapons to kill their opponents – be it humans, other orks or any other species of living creatures.

And in the middle of this, the Gargants were in the process of being armed.

A lot of them weren’t operational, that much was clear. But give the green xenos a few more weeks, and the Alpha Legion Captain had no doubt the two dozen super-heavy walkers would march to war together.

As it was, only the ugly red-green first ork-Titan looked nearly operational...and of course it was where a gigantic green creature was bellowing loud orders. There were also tens of thousands orks surrounding the target.

“Distortion-Three. You think you can take the shot from here?”

Given how much the Ork Warboss seemed to tower over his subordinates, Viktor didn’t relish the opportunity to go below and kill him at close quarters. Such things looked really heroic on a pict-feed, but in a real war it was always a guarantee of a heavy butcher bill.

“We can certainly try, Captain. Can I have the other Seeker-Primes with me?”

“You don’t ask for much, don’t you?” Viktor chuckled. “Go ahead, Primes. And remember that if you fail, we will have to take down this monster with our blades and demolition charges...”

It was the moment the sky exploded in fire. Maybe an ork had called an artillery strike on their positions or some mad ork had decided to test its most devastating weaponry on the warbands running behind the Alpha Legion. In the end, the result was the same. Shells began to rain down on the battlefield, and the surprise effect had been lost. Here and there around the fosse, thousands of orks began to notice they had company, and despite the green colour of their power armours, it was clear for them the Astartes weren’t friends.

“WAAAAAAAAAAGGGHHHHHH!”

The roar was so loud the ground of the Battle-moon began to shake seconds before the world exploded in flames.

“Take the shot! Take the shot now!”

“Captain, the ork is protected by the shields of the Gargant! We haven’t a chance to pierce it with our rifles!”

The answer he whispered between his teeth was not one the Iterators of the Great Crusade would have loved to publish in their victory communiqués.

“The Warp takes these xenos!” the commander of Squad Phocron swore. The entire battlefield was a disaster beyond mortal imagination. There were clouds of dust and fires. Promethium and other fuel sources burned as more and more projectiles fell from the sky. Tides of squids began to coalesce around and there were hundreds of orks climbing from every sizeable hole. And unless he didn’t know how to count, he had lost at least three good Legionaries in the first barrage. “Switch to blade weapons, brothers. We must spare our ammunition stocks before the final shock. Assault Squads, you have seen the target. How are your chances to remove its ugly head for good?”

“Under-optimal, brother,” the Gargant assembly zone is crawling with orks. “If we take the elevator to descend, none of us will come back, and for all our evident skill,” the dark humour was impossible to miss in the Assault veteran’s voice, “I can’t pretend taking a Gargant with twenty or thirty Astartes without a few Land Raiders in support is a good idea.”

“Then rejoice,” replied Viktor Furan, Captain of the fractured and very much renegade Twentieth Legion, “for we are not going to use the elevator at all.”

“This is Shadow-One. Why do I think I am not going to like your plan, Captain?”

The orks fell under their knives or were pushed in the fosse.

“Do you see this big anti-air battery four hundred metres west on your auspex?” He did not bother making large gestures or pointing his fist, with all the dust and the explosions it was a waste of time. “Squad Distortion, I want you to remove the ork gunners and turn the cannons against the Gargant.”

“This is Fog-Six, Captain. I don’t know if these cannons have the firepower to shred these shields...”

“The battery looked like it was built to kill starships,” or at least the orks had thought so and given how much old Imperial war supplies they had looted, maybe they could use it and give the Warboss a reason to be worried.

“Assault Squad Gamma, go with Distortion. Reconnaissance Squads, give them fire support. The rest, with me, we need to attract their attention for a few minutes...”

This objective was not complicated to achieve at all. From every direction, the orks came. Hasdrubal was the first to fall, his blade broken and his bolter out of ammunition. By the time they counter-attacked, it was far too late. His gene-seed was lost forever, and all they could do was avenging him.

The orks came at their position relentlessly. There was no discipline, just ferocity. The big ones were pushing the smaller specimens of greenskins into the cauldron of war.

And then the Gargant blew up like a volcano.

The explosion was so massive that for a few seconds, even the columns of orks stopped shouting.

“Good work, Squad Distortion,” now they had just to wait for the inter-conflicts to kill the orks.

“But Captain, we have just seized the battery. The explosion wasn’t done by our shots!”

“But then...”

A vast shadow came upon his command and then the equivalent of an ork Drop Pod crashed fifty metres from their retrenched position.

“The Warboss is very much alive...rally on our position! Rally to me! Alpha and Omega!”

“To the end of glory!”

The ork ranks stopped rushing in. They formed crude lines and waited. Drums and parody of music instruments resonated.

And the monster came.

For a second, Captain Viktor Furan thought the orks had tried to make a sort of super-Dreadnought or a medium-hybrid walker.

Reality was far more terrifying. It was just the Warboss’ armour.

The xenos overlord had a green-black skin and by the ghosts of the Great Crusade, it was huge.

Maybe a bit smaller than Urlakk Urg of Ullanor, though his memories were a bit hazy and distant on the subject. But it was certainly not a Warboss humanity could afford to let live. It had to be nearly seven metres high, and the arms were like gigantic pillars of green steel.

One arm was fused with a cannon which would have been more appropriate for a Baneblade than a single living being. The other arm held a barbaric lightning claw coursing with blue energy. Three-quarters of the skin were hidden by a crude armour of plasteel and ceramic certainly obtained by dismantling Imperial tanks.

It was clearly an enemy worthy of Astartes Legionaries.

“Kill it! For the Emperor and the Throne of Terra kill it even if it’s the last thing you do!”

The monster roared and then it charged, each of its steps shaking the ground. Its body was slow, but it was moving like a Titan and in mere seconds the Warboss was on them.

Serkern was the first to die, shredded by the lightning claw before the gigantic gun shredded what remained of him. The Alpha Legionaries retaliated. Sniper bolts pierced its skin. Bolters barked in anger. Several Volkite and plasma grenades were hurled at the non-armoured parts of the body. Jun and Finn screamed and died as their battle-armours failed to protect them in front of the inhuman xenos strength. One entire block went in flames and Reconnaissance Squad Sand’s screams were on heard on the vox frequency.

They were the Twentieth Legion. They were the sons who had accepted their father’s grave error and had returned to the service of the Emperor. They were going to kill this threat...Squad Distortion began to turn the anti-air guns on the monster but after a few seconds the Astartes still alive realised with horror the Warboss was regenerating.

“We need more powerful weaponry! Squad Omicron! Do you have any vortex grenades left?”

“No Captain, the last two grenades in our stocks were used five days ago...”

“Retreat!” he ordered. The command was bitter in his mouth but as the monster agitated the corpse of Tyson impaled on the lightning claw, he knew he had no other choice. “Retreat and fall back towards the Harrowmaster position, we can’t kill this damned xenos with what we have, we need-“

“First shalt thou take out the Holy Pin, then shalt thou count to three, no more, no less.”

The voice which had pronounced these words was unmistakeably human and despite all his reflexes of veteran, Viktor turned his head to see who had the gall to utter such non-sense in a deadly fight.

When he did, he wondered if his reserve of water had been contaminated with toxins. The man – and yes, it was a normal human, was wearing the most ridiculous clothes he had ever seen. It was a combination of a great bright blue dungaree like the farmers of certain Agri-Worlds wore, coupled with a big red hat and an ‘M’ designed on it.

In short, the newcomer would have made an impressive buffoon to make everyone laugh...except he had also a pulsating orb in his hand.

“Three shall be the number thou shalt count, and the number of the counting shall be three. Four shalt thou not count, neither count thou two, excepting that thou then proceed to three. Five is right out. Once the number three, being the third number, be reached, then lobbest thou thy Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch towards thy foe, who being naughty in my sight, shall snuff it. Amen.”

“WAAAAAGGHHHH!” The Warboss had stopped being amused by this little interlude and charged the human, deciding to stop the amusement in its tracks.

“ONE! TWO! FIVE! THREE!”

And the human threw the orb before running in the other direction.

“Take cover and prepare to-“

It was like a Volcano cannon had shot its blast. The Alpha Legion Captain felt he was thrown in the air by a fantastic shockwave and two seconds later he crash-landed with a force he almost passed out in pain. The light was bright, and his advanced systems were out one by one...

And when he finally found the force to rise laboriously on his feet, he almost didn’t understand what he saw. The lightning claw of the Warboss was in pieces a few metres away and as the dust settled, it was clear the massacres and the era of conquest had finally arrived. Half of the gigantic greenskin was crouched on the flank, its ugly face forever fixed in an expression of complete surprise.

One by one, the mesmerised Space Marines left their positions as around them and in the fosse below the familiar sounds of greenskins fighting other greenskins arrived to their transhuman ears. Even around them, most of the orks were tearing each other apart, most superbly ignoring the last Astartes. The battle had cost them dearly, he saw with a heavy heart. Of the sixty-five brothers involved in this assault, there were now maybe twenty left and all were injured to varying degree.

“HA! HA! HA! YOU SAW THAT? YOU SAW THAT? I KILLED THE BOSS! I KILLED THE FINAL BOSS! LEET TRIUMPHS! YOU CHOSE THE WRONG LEET TO FIGHT, BOWSER!”

“Brother, will it be a problem if this...suspicious character receives a tragic case of friendly fire in the next fifteen seconds?”

Viktor gritted his teeth as the blue-red buffoon seemed to do his best to make himself insufferable. This damned grenade had incinerated at least five of his battle-brothers and the culprit was literally dancing on their graves. Had this buffoon no preservation instinct?

“To my great regret...denied. Whatever potent archeotech device this...human...used, it is one which is able to kill an extremely dangerous Warboss. Until we know how he acquired it, we need him alive...and able to answer our questions. Othar, ‘convince’ him to come with us. Ionas, see if we can recover gene-seed and equipment from our brothers. Miller, burn the Warboss’ corpse, I don’t want any potential mysterious regeneration abilities to bring it back to life when we have our back turned...”

Then he switched to the private command vox-frequency.

“Harrowmaster, I want to report...”

**Seer Maea Teallysis**

The return to consciousness was one of the most unpleasant she had ever experienced. When she took her first breath, it was like she had been forced to swallow glass and excrements. The second was worse. And the third was so difficult she tried to vomit but there was nearly nothing left in her throat and her stomach. The rest of her body was affected by similar symptoms. Everything seemed to itch or to hurt. Her vision was blurry and vacillating. Her muscles were in incredible pain.

For six more breaths, she wished for everything to stop. She wanted oblivion to claim her and stop this suffering. She wanted her soul to take refuge in her refuge stone and forget the pain her abused flesh sent by the intermediary of her nerves.

Then the unpleasantness diminished sufficiently that she managed to stand from her prison and notice that she wasn’t manacled anymore. The metallic Mon-keigh guarding her cell were unconscious on the floor, and Yvraine was standing before her, free.

“How?” she asked in a voice so distorted she winced at the sound. The Biel-Tan Asuryani was atypical for her Craftworld, but as far as she had observed, the precautions taken by the Mon-keigh were built to resist the skills of her race and this didn’t even consider that there had been a sort of primitive stasis technology, and if she had been imprisoned with one, then Yvraine had surely been too.

“Harlequin,” Yvraine uttered the word like it explained everything and indeed it did. “He freed me and gave me your location and those of our equipment. The moment I stopped watching him, he disappeared.”

“Only me? No other warrior?”

“Only you,” Yvraine’s visage was sinister. Maea understood her depressive mood. Losing her escort of rangers was already a disaster, both for the experience lost and the sheer value of every life. But her Rangers had been in squad-numbers. The Biel-Tan expedition had counted over a hundred Asuryani, and if they were not here held prisoners, it meant all of them were dead. Not even recovering the spirit stones of the fallen would be enough to compensate for this disaster.

“We need to get out of this location and warn our Craftworlds of this defeat.” She whispered as Yvraine and she walked out of the cell and marched out to another where their armours and weapons had been disposed. While they did not seem too much damaged, Maea seethed at the carelessness typical of the Mon-keigh.

In a few heartbeats and with mutual help, the two Asuryani were again in their war panoply and rushed out in the dark corridor.

“Is it not strange that the Mon-keigh have not noticed our evasion?” She queried, cursing her enemies for their lights which were neither completely darkness nor truly daylight.

“I suppose the Mon-keigh devices were disabled by the Harlequin before he liberated us.”

Maea nodded but something disturbed her.

“The security measures of these barbarians are so primitive they represent no great challenge for the Harlequins, that much is true,” she agreed. “But where are their soldiers and half-metal half-flesh automatons?”

Yvraine didn’t give her answer, and Maea had none to propose as they progressed faster and faster. They were evidently in the entrails of a starship. None of the two had visited one of the Mon-keigh hulls before, but there was no doubt it was one. As the duo paused to regain their strength, Maea figured they had been really lucky. If they had left the world where they had been defeated – a likely possibility since they ignored how much time they had been imprisoned – the Mon-keigh had certainly travelled through the Warp, and the prison-things they had been stored into had likely protected their souls from She-Who-Thirsts. It didn’t make the after-effects plaguing their muscles and the rest of their bodies more pleasant to endure, but it was at least a relief they weren’t devoured by the Doom of their species.

Guided by the sounds of loud and brutish footsteps, they arrived quickly to one of the great hangar-bays where Mon-keigh transports landed in unbearable rumbles and shrieks. By Asuryan and Isha, how could these barbarians tolerate this noise?

They were also Mon-keigh present. A lot of Mon-keigh, if she had to be fully accurate. A majority seemed to be the creatures in red robes, but there were other sub-factions of the species. Some were clothed in blue, others in white, black or green.

The barbarian warriors had however a bad common point. Most were injured, and severely. And as much as Maea wanted to mock their primitive medicine, she didn’t recognise the wounds as the result of Asuryani weaponry used on lesser flesh.

“They have found another enemy and it is a violent one,” she murmured.

“Yes, and they have also killed more Asuryani,” Yvraine coldly cut her, pointing at an isolated transport where recognisable bodies of Asuryani were thrown in one sort of metallic cage. The lack of respect was infuriating and it took a lot of self-control to not jump and slay these vile creatures for the desecration of proud warriors’ bodies.

“I do not recognise the sigil-mark of these warriors, but they weren’t with us when we were imprisoned.”

“But they are from Biel-Tan, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are...I count twenty-four bodies, none of them alive.”

The two young Asuryani moved like shadows around the hangar, Maea sending some basic mind-tricks every time they had to cross a large distance without something to distract the inefficient eyes of their former captors.

There were a lot of wounded arriving with each new bulky transport, and Maea rapidly arrived at the unpleasant conclusion that in the last battle, the Mon-keigh had really fought with a tiny fraction of their total forces.

“We had a hundred, they had thousands, but it was them who could bring thousands more from the skies...this was not a battle we could win,” whispered Yvraine angrily. “Kaeran better be dead, because I’m going to murder him if he isn’t!”

“Calm, Yvraine, calm.” She said in a soothing tone which lessened a bit the wrath of the Biel-Tan warrior. “We must assume the ‘great Farseer’ is no more. If he had somehow survived, he would have been in a cell close to us and he was not.”

“Thank Asuryan for small favours,” muttered between her white teeth the Dire Avenger.

“Of us two, you are the one which has the greatest military experience. What can you tell me from the Mon-keigh and what they are facing?”

Yvraine watched the inelegant and clumsy methods of the Mon-keigh for several heartbeats before replying.

“They have been fighting a long battle. A lot of the wounded have fresh scars and light injuries. By their appearance, they received the equivalent of the healing we give to our front-line warriors...only theirs is far more primitive.”

“And the Biel-Tan forces present on this battlefield?”

“There are certainly already destroyed,” the warrior reluctantly affirmed. “There is over two hundreds of the Mon-keigh injured here, but none look to be wounded by our weapons. And judging by the arrival of one transport transporting Biel-Tan bodies, I fear the battle was lost several micro-cycles ago. They were just unable to transport the bodies to their starship until recently.”

“And what are the Mon-keigh barbarians fighting?”

“That’s the easy part,” Yvraine smiled. “The green-skinned barbarians. Look at their transports and the liquid they are pouring on it. It’s a primitive and horrible liquid, but I think it’s a sort of decontaminant they use to get rid of the spores since they can’t do it like we do.”

This was not the answer Maea had wanted to hear. Of all the galactic species in this galaxy, Asuryani and descendants of the Aeldari had learned again and again there was nothing which could dissuade these violent beasts from their favourite activity: war. Even the Mon-keigh weren’t constantly that bloodthirsty.

“We have a difficult choice ahead of us...” the Malan’tai Seer spoke. “We can hide on this primitive starship, but the moment they enter the Great Ocean, we are certain to die and be devoured by She-Who-Thirsts.”

“Or we can hide in one of these transports and see if there are Asuryani to join on the battlefield,” completed Yvraine. “And the threads of fate are good all our potential allies are already dead and we will have to fight a lot of bloodthirsty creatures.”

“Don’t forget the insects,” Maea added while repressing a shiver. “I see none here, but I doubt the Mon-keigh commanders are stupid enough to lose one of their most dangerous weapons.”

“If I die, I want my last breath to mean something,” decided the Biel-Tan Dire Avenger. “Fighting against the brutes, it is!”

Good to see a defeat was not enough to remove the fighting spirit of Biel-Tan. They evaded the slow and predictable patrols and columns of the red robes and climbed in an empty flyer the moment no Mon-keigh was looking in their direction.

As they began to leave this bland and disgusting-smelling place, Maea thought for a second she saw a bright-coloured Harlequin saluting her with a large bow on a pile of crates...but the next instant there was nothing anymore and then they plunged into the war storm.

**Harrowmaster Jeremiah Isley**

Jeremiah tried not to scowl when the Battle-Barge *Anaconda* disintegrated on the screen. The starship had been home for so long seeing it break before convulsing and suddenly disappearing in light and explosions was more painful than seeing one of your Primarchs be cut in front of you by Guilliman. At least by that point, he had loathed Alpharius for all his mistakes. The Battle-Barge had been a refuge, a base and a secure location where the Legionaries could be themselves away from the lies and the failings of a galaxy they had so much contributed to create.

And now it was gone. The first feeling of loss for this battle, and he had the feeling it was not going to be the last. Furan and Seeker Squad Phocron had launched first with ten Drop Pods, right in the heart of the ork formations. A minute later, it had been the turn of the seventy-strong Force Beta with Quaril in command. With him had gone the Tactical Squads, their three last Outriders mounted on bikes, the Tactical Squads, their last Sky Hunter Squad and the Despoilers.

And now it was his turn. No Drop Pods for him, they hadn’t that many left, and anyway his group had the gene-seed stocks, the Devastators and the tanks to transport. It should have been an impressive deployment of force. It wasn’t. The Stormbird *Void Arrow* was half-empty, and Jeremiah knew the two Thunderhawks and three Thunderhawks Transports were sharing this fate. For all its...resourcefulness at acquiring spare parts and new equipment, the Cohort had been steadily declining since M32. It didn’t help their long-range travels in the Warp were making them re-emerge from the Warp centuries after their departure. These days they were taking more time discovering the codes of important supply bases to resupply than taking the fight against the enemies of humanity. The effect was not pretty to see in the armoury. They had no Land Raiders anymore, just two Rhinos, one Vindicator and of course the Predator Executioner *Hunter*.

It would have to be enough.

“HARROWMASTER, I WILL LEAD THE ATTACK.”

Had any other Legionary made this remark in public, he would have faced a concert of protestations. But not with this heavy booming voice. Pierre had already been part of this Cohort when Isley was inducted in the ranks of the Twentieth, and his internment in the Castraferrum Pattern Mark V Dreadnought and after the centuries he had grown to be an icon of their force as much as the banners and the most valuable transports.

He had also been one of the fiercest supporters in private to abandon the ways of the Primarch. Not surprising, since unlike nearly all of them, the Dreadnought had lived long enough to see the difference between the old Twentieth and the new.

“I approve. Strike deep, Ancient.”

“OH I WILL YOUNG ISLEY. I WILL!”

The deadstrike missiles pulverised the green horde under them and as they were roughly seven metres above ground when the doors opened. Ancient Pierre was the first to jump and save the tank drivers, the Apothecaries and the flyers’ crew, everyone followed him in the hurricane of war.

“FOR THE EMPEROR!” screamed the Dreadnought as he trampled the stunned greenskins into green paste. “DIE VERMIN! DIE XENOS!”

“FOR THE EMPEROR!”

The Alpha Legionnaires in the green of the Dark Angels bellowed and the Devastator weapons spread death in a vast circle. Old plasma cannons and heavy bolters scythed down the xenos, armoured or not armoured. Tanks and vehicles more fit for a museum of horror exploded and hundreds of orks died.

“Advance! Attack formation Alpha-Four!” This was like the good times, and in two seconds the Rhinos were there, supported by the *Hunter*. The tentative armoured counter-attack they were facing was murdered where it stood and the Astartes began their push westwards to catch the enemy between Quaril and his forces. The orks tried to resist, but with the two Breacher Siege Squads leading the offensive with the armoured fist of the Legions, it was vermin extermination like all the campaigns post-Ullanor.

Vox calls confirmed him everything was going to plan...until the orders of the Master of Signals he had sent with Squad Phocron stopped in an exclamation of pain.

“COME ON! COME ON!” encouraged the venerable Dreadnought, but it seemed his roars of defiance were doing more good to the orks than the Space Marines. No matter how many the plasma shots cut in two, no matter what the flamers did, there were hundreds of thousands orks coming.

At some point they had to stop the murderous rate of fire to give their weapons the time to reload. Plus they hadn’t an unlimited supply of shells for the tanks. And the orks took this as an invitation to attack. The multi-meltas could destroy their tanks and make fiery pyres of their columns, but they went in the fighting like there was no tomorrow.

“Captain, Quaril is down!”

“Spear-4 is down!”

“Vindictive-7 is down!”

The litany of losses began to arrive on his position.

“This is not working! Move south-west-west we must regroup with our other forces! Bolter-1, you are taking Quaril’s command. Regroup and flank the orks over the F-2 block!”

“Acknowledged, but I respectfully suggest we begin to think about a second strike on the Warboss’ positions. We aren’t anything anymore about Phocron and the other squads. I fear...”

The sound of bolters and lascannons drowned the last words of his sentence but Jeremiah Isley could guess the rest of the message.

If the orks weren’t disrupted or even trying to withdraw because their Warboss was in danger, the Seeker Squads had most likely failed. And judging by the green tide arriving each second, the orks had slightly more bodies in reserve than their opponents.

“We are going to form a new line a hundred metres with the Devastators fifty metres behind us,” he decided as the pressure on his brothers mounted in an unacceptable manner. “We need to stop the orks’ advances or-“

The insects struck from nowhere. Suddenly a gigantic swarm charged from the ruins and the orks, bloodthirsty brutes they were, roared and immediately disengaged from the Astartes to rush into these new opponents.”

“Err...are they ignoring us?”

There was some offended pride in the voice of the Devastator who had spoken. These feelings were soon avenged in a productive manner: dozens of plasma shots decimated the ork frontline and in the mean time, the insect swarms slaughtered the greenskins.

There had been some vid records of xenos insectoid species fighting the Legions during the Great Crusade, and when they had numbers, it was absolute hell purging them. Those ones had the numbers, and the intelligence to use them. First the big green ones charged, their cuirass allowing them to shrug off the orks’ heavy weapons. Then it was the time of the smaller ones to enter the dance and the aerial support in the form of bees disabled the rocket launchers and the scrap-flyers of the greenskins.

But the more frightening part was how they fed on the orks’ corpses. It was clear as day that the insects which fed were becoming bigger in seconds, before following the mass of cuirass and claws and adding more numbers to them.

It was attrition, pure and simple. A tactic no one had ever tried and found successful when facing the orks. The greenskins’ spores and numbers made the affair too difficult, even for Astartes.

But this insect swarm worked and the Astartes continued to devastate the orks’ ranks, a third type of insect after the green mastodons and the orange-blue flying insects with a nasty sting appeared on the battlefield. Approximately the size of a Dreadnought, they were a deep black and appeared to progress slowly...providing shields for the human soldiers which came behind.

And on the flanks, his second force was taking the enemy in its right unprotect flank. The greenskins roared and roared, but for the first time throwing their numbers at the problem wasn’t enough. They were dying, maimed at best and massacred at worst, they were shredded by the barrage of Devastators.

“MEN OF THE IMPERIUM!” boomed Ancient Pierre raising his plasma gun in challenge. “DO YOU WANT TO LIVE FOREVER? FOR THE EMPEROR!”

The guardsmen shouted like a baying crowd and suddenly the orks let go. They couldn’t stand and began to lose ground.

“Harrowmaster,” the tired voice of Captain Viktor Furan arrived on the vox channel. “I want to report the successful slaying of the Warboss thanks to some unexpected support.”

And where had been a gigantic ork horde, there was nothing of the sort anymore. In seconds the greenskins began to battle each other and slaughter the warriors they had stood side by side for so long.

“Good work,” he answered as Astartes and men screamed in triumph. “Heavy losses, I take it?”

“Extremely heavy losses, yes,” the reply was done in an exhausted voice. Jeremiah was not looking forwards the report. Still, they had won and by the looks of it, over a hundred of his Legionaries were standing over the corpses of the orks. It was a great victory and they would have the opportunity to live – and fight – another day. It had been by no means assured several minutes before.

“Will you be able to rally our positions, or must I send the Thunderhawks for a rapid extraction?”

“We will appreciate the extraction. Many of our brothers will need the Apothecaries patching them.”

“I’m sending them, brother.” The two Thunderhawks rose and pushed their thrusters hard on a northwards course. “Good work,” he repeated.

“Wait until you hear the full story,” was the reply he got as the vox-call ended.

Isley grinned before addressing the other officers he had under his command.

“Brothers, do you see where the commanders of these guardsmen are?”

“Indomitable-3, I am seeing a lot of red robes and Chimeras on D-18.”

“I see them, yes. Contact, standard protocol and by the love of the Legion, don’t let the Ancient intervene in the debate...”

“Oh I’m sure Pierre is suitably occupied.”

A quick glance at the Dreadnought and Isley raised his eyes to the grey fumes of the sky in consternation. The Ancient was surrounded by a circle of gaping guardsmen and if he had to bet the Tech-Priests would soon bow and scrap the moment they arrived.

“I am going to speak with the commanders of these regiments, try not to-“

“Eldar!”

Isley was fast but the blue lightning impact struck before he had the time to draw his blade. Still, he was surprised not to feel any pain...and more to see the two xenos be instantly neutralised by the orange-blue flyers and their large mandibles.

“Harrowmaster, we have a big problem...”

Isley grimaced as he saw the damned xenos goal had not been to hurt him. No, they had done infinitely worse. The paint they had used to coat their power armours in Dark Angel colours was not psy-resistant, and the damned xenos witch had taken advantage of that. Now six Legionaries, including himself, had suddenly their original Legion colours revealed to the whole world and the thousands of insects and guardsmen around them went from peaceful to threatening in behaviour.

“If we survive this, remind me to sue the Legion artisans for the sub-standard quality of our paint...”

**Tech-Priest Dragon Richter**

They had won.

The orks were busy fighting each other both on the battle-moon and in the void, their previous union of purpose nothing more than a souvenir. The Warboss, Gruzzkull Mag Uruk Starsmasha, had perished. Millions of orks were already dead, millions more were dying as they spoke, and millions more would undoubtedly die before the day’s end. When the Imperial Navy arrived, they would have a walk-over destroy this enormous planetoid. Its defences were in ruins, the endless armies of the greenskins too occupied killing each other to care about the humans coming to finish the job.

The tensions of all actors around certain didn’t feel like a victory.

A hundred and seven blue-armoured giants taller than the tallest human were encircled by thrice that numbers of humans and insects. Two of the ‘eldar’ who had tried to kill them on Andes were the prisoners of ten Sonora Bees.

“Twentieth Legion,” enounced Magos Desmerius Lankovar. “Excommunicate Traitoris. Officially declared wiped out by the High Lords of Terra in M31 and M32.”

The senior member present of the Adeptus Mechanicus emitted a sort of wheezing from his breathing system.

“I suppose the Inquisition and the Administratum once more botched the job and falsified the files to erase their mistakes,” grumbled the Magos.

“Or the Alpha Legion itself manipulated the High Lords to make them believe the Twentieth Legion nonsense,” Gavreel Forcas intervened. “It wouldn’t be the first over-complicated plot these Legionaries have made in their career. The sons of Alpharius have always been a bunch of sneaky bastards, and it looks like the last centuries haven’t changed that...”

“I RESENT THAT!” boomed the massive machine which had been introduced as a ‘Dreadnought’. From what Dragon had understood, it was a sort of heavy walker controlled by the brain of a heavily injured Space Marine. “WE FIGHT FOR THE EMPEROR!”

By the way they shifted and lowered their head, many of the ‘Alpha Legionnaires’ would have preferred their loud brethren to shut up. And Desmerius Lankovar, needless to say, didn’t look very impressed by the argument.

“This argument may have sounded acceptable a few millennia ago during the Great Crusade, but I fail to see how you can be considered anything else but Traitors,” retorted the Magos. “Your Legion showed its true colours during the Drop Site Massacre and betrayed the Omnissiah-Emperor in an abominable act of treachery. The millions of sabotages, seditious movements and insurrections you organised against the Imperium were done in clear support of the Arch-Traitor.”

“Yes, Magos,” answered the Space Marine who looked to be the leader. “But my Cohort and I no longer serve our Legion and whatever ideals our deceased Primarch used to justify his twisted actions. We decided to go our own way and renew our vows of allegiance to the Emperor. And I must make clear none of my warriors here participated in any manner in the Drop Site Massacre or the Great Siege.”

The red-robes leader emitted a lot of unconvinced sounds.

“By simple logic, if you had not proved your loyalty to the Traitor cause in some way, you would have already tried to go back to a Loyalist shipyard or Astartes mustering points like Holy Terra. And for all the allegiance you profess, you approached us under false colours.”

“Most units which see our colours begin to shoot first and pose questions later,” the Astartes explained as calmly as a transhuman giant could when he had over three big centipedes fixing him with hungry eyes. “And we prefer in general not to endanger the guardsmen and loyal citizens we are working with. The Inquisition and the high authorities of the Imperium tend to purge millions the moment they realise we have visited a Sector.”

“This is a nice and convincing explanation,” you had not to be a great expert of the Mechanicus to know Lankovar wasn’t convinced at all, “but you forget the fact the warbands of your former Legion are incredibly infamous to spread destructive cults which tend to cause more problems and losses of life than full-scale wars.”

“And by the strangest of coincidences, your third group of ork-slayers arrive with a parahuman,” continued the Magos, pointing at the newly-arrived Leet, which looked frankly out of place in his ridiculous costume of Mario. “Are we supposed to think that is a coincidence too?”

“Hey, I am not with them,” shouted the supervillain of Brockton Bay. “I was taken prisoner by some evil-looking clowns and they threatened me with strange drugs and acid pistols!”

The hundred Space Marines and the Mechanicus warriors turned immediately towards the two eldar.

“HARLEQUINS...”grumbled the Dreadnought. “ELDAR CLOWNS OF MURDER...WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN...”

The alien in light green armour and a blue helmet looked like she wanted to protest, but with the insects able to remove her head in less than a second if she tried something dangerous, she stayed silent.

 “Well, they told me to build the greatest weapon I could with some sort of junk lab, so I built a Holy Grenade of Antioch, and the next thing I know, there is this sort of Bowser parody charging straight at these guys,” the Tinker pointed his fingers at the Space Marines, “and I saved the day. Again.”

Dragon sighed internally and wondered what sort of horrible crime she had committed before her Triggering to deserve that. Taylor Hebert, she could understand, she had wronged the girl by helping revealing her real identity in front of an entire school, but Leet? The only thing she had in common with this video game supervillain and techno-moron was that they were both Tinkers. He was rude, unbearable, liked to harm people for the most selfish reasons and even had the gall to pretend sometimes with his acolyte Über that they were heroes.

By the cold expressions some helmet-less Astartes gave him, if they could shoot him a few times in the back and pretend it was a mishap, they would do it without much remorse. It was a new galaxy, and Leet had already found the way to piss off some of the deadliest genetically modified warriors alive. How typical of him.

“Ahem. We will be completely happy to release in your custody this...parahuman, you called him, yes we will be quite happy to release him to the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Imperial Guard,” said the Alpha Legion Astartes leader. “As for our Cohort, we simply wish to leave this ork moon and reach a civilised human shipyard. We promise on our honour to fight against the xenos as long as the safety of your group is at stake and we will depart the moment we can hire an interstellar transport for our Thunderhawks.”

Desmerius Lankovar didn’t seem to have an impressive opinion of the Astartes honour. Not if the way he looked at them was any indication. But he spoke in an incomprehensible binaric code seconds after and when he spoke again, his attitude was a bit more tolerant.

“The gravity beams of the planetoid are at last gone. We can finally escape.” There was a second of hesitation before the Magos addressed the Astartes once more. “We will take your Cohort with us. Your tanks will be used as a guarantee of your good intentions. And I want to make my logical judgement clear beforehand: should the Inquisition demand your heads, I will not oppose them. Major Hebert, please take the two eldar with us to the *Magos Laurentis*, I am really curious to discover how they managed to get out of their cells...”

It was after this ultimatum was delivered the earthquake shook the ground. Violently. The shake lasted over ten seconds and at a guess, was a good five on the Richter scale.

“I think the ork battles have caused some problems in the integrity of the battle-moon...RUN!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**7.622.289M35**

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

Once again, the maxims of his old Master had proved their worth.

Odysseus wondered if he should write a book on them when the rejuvenation treatments would begin to fail his flesh and bones.

Such a work would be evidently heavily restricted, even among the ranks of the Inquisition, but perhaps many promising Acolytes would grasp the implications in their young minds and do good work with the information. Then again, it was also possible the very opposite would happen too. He had fought enough the heretical servants of the Ruinous Powers to know everything was possible in this illogical galaxy.

And in the end, the *One Hundred Maxims of Lord Inquisitor Damian for Effective Inquisitors* would probably stay in his mind and the brains of whatever Acolyte he judged ready to follow in his steps.

Perhaps it was what his old Master would have wanted. Perhaps it was not. Anyway the Inquisition would continue its arduous task. And the maxims would continue to kill in the Emperor’s Name.

For his arrival, it was Maxim Twenty which had proved most useful: when you aren’t sure of the opposition leadership on an unknown planet, begin by investigating the Planet Governor.

That he was currently looking said Governor burning alive in a cage for his sins told more than one hundred speeches how much the Nyx aristocracy and the Inquisition had failed this Sector.

That two Inquisitors of the Ordo Nyx were sharing the fate of the former Governor to his right and his left would tend to support this argument.

Truthfully, the crimes and the sheer incompetence of the men currently dying were completely inexcusable. Governor Naxos XXVIII Menelaus, Kings of Kings of Nyx, Governor of the Nyx System and by the will of distant Holy Terra, Sector Lord of the Nyx Sector, had four duties once he had sworn his vows to the God-Emperor of Mankind. The first was to give all the psykers of his system to the Black Ships. The second was to give the tithe in ore, vehicles, luxury goods and diverse materials demanded by the Adeptus Administratum. The third was to give the Militarum tithe, the forces the Guard needed to fight its countless wars across the galaxy. And the fourth was to defend his domain against all the enemies of the God-Emperor.

Except for the first, Naxos XXVIII Menelaus had utterly failed in these duties. The tithes were regularly late and the masters of the tithe fleets regularly coming to the Nyx Sector had few good things to say about him. The resistance to the ork raids and attacks had proven one thing, and this was that the man couldn’t care less about the Sector as long as he could increase the taxes and his capital system wasn’t invaded by the xenos.

This would have been enough for a summary execution, but the reason Odysseus had been sent ahead of the tithe fleet was the unconfirmed presence of cultists in the Nyx upper classes. Unfortunately, the suspicions of the Adeptus Arbites and his Acolytes had been completely justified. There had been several heretics gravitating around the Governor’s court. And by gravitating, the Lord Inquisitor meant that two were the Governor’s own wives. Granted, the man had a harem of one hundred and thirty-eight women, but having agents of the Ruinous Powers so close and failing to excise the poison was not only incompetence of the highest order, it was treason against the God-Emperor. And between the corruption, the lack of devotion, the military reverses and the ridiculous investment in any regimental formations save his private guard, Naxos XXVIII Menelaus had betrayed the Imperium.

He was not the only one. Fifty of his wives were already dead. All the other female companions, wives, mistresses and prostitutes would follow him into the pyres. So would the two hundred children, the six hundred-plus grandchildren, the dozens of cousins, the uncles, and all the thousands of inbred aristocrats.

In three days, the Nyx aristocracy would be removed of the essential corrupt, heretical and treacherous elements. He may not have managed to arrest all the Tzeentch cultists – the damned cultists always had too many backdoors ready when it came to save their heretical lives – but he had over three hundred of them and coordinated investigations were marvellous things when the interrogated party had never had a reason to doubt the Governor wouldn’t fly to the rescue the minute he was arrested.

House Menelaus was essentially gone, and in the next forty-eight standard hours, House Romulus, Doris and Messenia would be removed from the scrolls of nobility and wiped out too. Save the impoverished House Attica, all the Houses of the Moira Hive-Continent were investigated and subsequently purged. He would have to watch over the Hive World until an acceptable Sector Lord was chosen, but this chore was more than acceptable compared to the problems unsatisfactory tithes and heretics in the long term would have caused to this Sector of the Imperium.

Still, he would have dearly loved to know how his shadowy colleague, this ‘Contessa’, had found the first leads to the traitors...

“You want to ask a question, Colonel?” Odysseus asked the man seated on his right. Like him, Edwards Cavendish had come in full armour. The Guard officer wasn’t an Inquisitor though and didn’t wear the black power armour Odysseus used to protect himself. No, Colonel Edwards Cavendish was in grey-green carapace armour of above-average quality. At sixty-two, the man had plenty of scars, some of them hidden by his large grey-beard. But he was also reliable, and had already a long and satisfactory in Inquisitorial service when he had hired him. The fact his regiment, the Thracian 5th Guard, was trained in his image and proved their valour countless times had not hurt either.

“I just wanted to say I’m surprised I don’t see this grox of Vandire burning with the heretic scum, Inquisitor.”

It would not do for a Lord Inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus to grimace in public, so Odysseus Tor didn’t, but it was a very near thing.

“Believe me, if I had the slightest evidence the man had been aware of heretics near the Governor, he would be already dead. Alas, he wasn’t. I personally rigorously interrogated several men and women of his staff, but he is really innocent of every heresy charge.”

Contrary to one believed, the Inquisition wasn’t all-powerful, especially in a Sector which hadn’t endured that well the ork attacks. Officially, he could execute every member of the nobility, the senior adepts, and then order an Exterminatus for good measure. Unofficially, if he didn’t happen to have a good reason for his actions, other Inquisitors would make sure this massacre would be the last thing he ever ordered.

An Inquisitor had a nearly limitless amount of power at his disposal...but an intelligent man – and Odysseus fancied himself sane and able to do his holy duty seriously – knew when not to push.

“Prelate-Procurator Nostradamus Vandire is currently the highest-ranking figure of the Adeptus Administratum in this system. He has only been accomplishing his duties in the Sector Capital for about eight standard months. Unfortunately, this means I can’t completely ignore him when he shouts the situation was worse before he arrived.”

The pale green eyes of the Colonel told him how much the officer believed the story. Fair was fair, Odysseus Tor didn’t too. And if Nostradamus Vandire was a minor scribe or a minor paper-licker, he would be a dead adept, no ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’. The amount of corruption this grox had been able to gather in eight standard months was a scandal of the highest order.

“If the only thing I had to fear was the protestations of the Administratum, I would go ahead and kill him,” he admitted as the pyres began to decrease in intensity under the cheers of the vast crowd which had come to assist to the end of their Governor. “But Nostradamus Vandire has a large and powerful family behind him, very influential. His second cousin is the third most powerful individual of the Office of Records and two of his brothers are working for the Segmentum High Procurators. Which, for your personal education, are the current councillors of the Master of the Administratum himself.”

Edwards grimly nodded.

“No, I will have to convince the new Sector Lord to remove Vandire and send him back to the Segmentum Solar in disgrace, preferably without the vast wealth he diverted to his secret accounts.”

“You will need to find a man more courageous and competent than the previous one,” commented the grey-haired Thracian guardsman. “I don’t think this waste of Governor ever contradicted a representative of the Administratum in public...for all the work he did during his few hours of duty per year.”

 “It is going to be difficult, to be sure...what is it, Virginia?”

Odysseus had known that the moment his Acolytes and assistants had tensed she was here. Virginia Nordbrandt was always spreading feelings of fear and angst wherever she passed. It must be said that she was always clothed like an angel of murder: a synth-material espoused her forms in a blue-white envelope and she had almost sixty sheathed blades in evidence from head to toe.

If there was a more perfect appearance for an Assassin of a Death Cult, the Lord Inquisitor had never met it...and the beauty of the entire affair, it was a massive hoax. Virginia was supremely gifted with her blades, but her specialty laid elsewhere. In reality, she belonged to the Venenum Temple and was a terrifying instrument of war.

“The Astropaths are formal, Lord Inquisitor,” she whispered in his ear the moment other jammer devices were activated. “The Neptunia Warp Storm is almost entirely gone.”

Odysseus Tor didn’t move a finger, but he knew the Assassin was already guessing his mood. She had explored his body sufficiently to know what emotions were inside in his head.

“I see. It seems our colleague Inquisitor was right. The Ruinous Powers are making their move. Let’s hope the forces we sent to the S-4697X5T4 System will be able to prevail...”

\*\*\*\*

*They came.*

*The naval forces of His Holy Majesty had been surprised by the appearance of a xenos attack planetoid on the northern frontier of the Nyx Sector, but the Astropathic Choirs had relayed the alert of the first contact and from there, the men and women sworn to the God-Emperor reacted.*

*The first warship to leave the Warp is the destroyer* Flower of Alacrity*, roughly six standard minutes before the death of the Ork Warboss. The Imperial warship is immediately engaged by over five xenos cruisers and destroyed in a furious engagement of seventeen minutes.*

*But it is enough. The* Flower of Alacrity*’s noble sacrifice had forced the beasts to leave their interception positions and the destroyers* Killing Ground*,* Holy Revenge *and* Xenophon *are able to deploy and engage in the next minutes.*

*This is just the vanguard of the Imperium retaliation forces.*

*In the next ten standard minutes, small flotilla from Aglaea, Harbin, Matapan, Montgomery, Andes and Atlas engage the enemy, launching hundreds of torpedoes and inflicting tens of thousands casualties to the disorganised greenskins.*

*The Battle of the Death Star, as it will be known in Imperial records, begins to escalate. The Imperial Navy has by this point twenty-six destroyers, fifteen corvettes and eight frigates dispersed all over the system.*

*The next waves of reinforcements come from Smilodon and Wuhan. Capital warships from the Battlegroups of the Nyx Sector acknowledge the magnitude of the threat and realise the priceless opportunity they have been handed. Two cruisers, six light cruisers and over thirty escorts of diverse tonnage attack the orks, inflicting heavy casualties on their ugly hulks.*

*The Imperial counter-attack has just begun.*

*Answering the distress signal from their Mechanicus counterparts, the 97th Expeditionary Fleet of Ryza, commanded by Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan, forms its battle-line and begins to pulverise the gravitic anomalies allowing the xenos to pour their reinforcements into the war zone. The orks have still the tonnage advantage at this turning point, but the presence of the Sands of Mars-class battleship* Lance of Logic*, the War-ark J-597-Alpha-class the* Equation of Triumph*, and half a dozen more capital ships with more emerging from the Warp is undoubtedly decisive.*

*The Adeptus Mechanicus is not the only loyal organisation to commit its forces. The proximity of S-4697X5T4 to the Atlantis Sector has not been forgotten, and with the benediction of its Cardinal, the 33rd Frateris Templar Fleet under Abbess-Crusade Theodora Gaius is committed. The battlecruiser* Holy Warrior*, the cruisers* Saint Mason*,* Divine Constitution*,* Hurricane of Faith *and over twenty-plus escorts are arriving to exact punishments on those who dare oppose the Master of Mankind.*

*And the Imperial Navy has also mustered from the Sector Capital and beyond. The 1239th Ultima Battlegroup of Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer followed them into the fires of war, bringing the grand cruiser* Indomitable Resolution*, the cruisers* Jupiter’s Fury *and* Consul’s Devotion *and dozens more lighter warships to increase the already formidable numbers.*

*Against such might gathered under His Most Holy Majesty’s banner, the abominable xenos were sure to be obliterated, but nonetheless the enemies of Mankind decided to resist and add more forces to their order of battle...*

 Extract from *Flames and Hell: the Battle of the Death Star* by Hinys Luth, 304M35.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**S-4697X5T4 System**

**7.622.289M35**

**Brukk Brukk the Mekboy**

Starsmasha was dead. The Big Boss was dead and everything was falling apart.

Bosses were fighting each other for the title of Big Boss and the machinery was ruined. The insect-killer stuff and the machines he was forging were ruined.

There was one thing to do and Brukk said it when one of his favourite squids fell in a trench which hadn’t been there a moment before.

“Weeb godda leave da moon. Weeb can't make nyoo waa enginz anymore.”

The dozen of Mekboyz he had been able to convince to work for him grunted in assent. The one who didn’t, he received a hammer on his head to teach him to agree with him. He was bigger than him, by Mork!

“Ugh, chief! But weeb donz ab ony flya!”

Brukk pointed at the big, flashy Blasta Bommer of Warboss Ski’rajhaaagh.

“Weeb will take dis wun. It in't used, so it iz ours. Follow meeb!

With their weapons they discouraged the other orks who had the same idea and detonated the mines while they pressed the big red boozers.

“'Ere weeb go! 'Ere weeb go! Weeb will cumz back, Swarm Bringa!”

**Autarch-Mariner Gladiel Imrik**

This, admitted the Autarch-Mariner, was a situation so perilous he lacked the proper words to explain exactly how bad it was.

As long as he searched, the only good news he could find was the destruction of the gravitic technology which had forced him to stay close to the murder-moon. It was good, because all his sensors were unanimously reporting this ugly aster had not long to live anymore.

It didn’t compensate for the aria of bad news arriving each micro-cycle. The *Spear of Asuryan* was heavily damaged, and he considered it a minor miracle from Isha his holofields still worked.

The violence, which had until a few micro-cycles ago been limited to the murder-moon and its immediate vicinity, was spreading across the entire stellar system. The Green Brutes and the Mon-keigh had obviously decided there was no better place to kill each other and the fury of their barbaric weapons was echoing across the void.

There was no beauty, no sense of art, no grand-standing. It was a bloody storm of violence, and with the death of the Brute-in-chief, the Mon-keigh held the advantage. They were more and more emerging from the Sea of Souls. They were more disciplined and organised than their primitive enemies – thought that wasn’t saying much.

Not that the outcome of the battle between these bloodthirsty species. Gladiel was more preoccupied by the fate of his battleship and the Asuryani souls aboard. He was currently trying to escape the pursuit of the Yngir Tomb Ship and it was far from an easy task. Undamaged and in a straight course, his flagship would have easily distanced his soulless pursuer, but his starship wasn’t undamaged. And it wasn’t a straight chase. There were warships fighting everywhere, and since mostly everyone fighting in this system was an enemy of the Asuryani, he had to avoid them or at least avoid the most dangerous barbarian warships.

Something the Yngir’s servant accelerating behind him was not exactly concerned about. The ancient enemy was pushing its engines hard, and didn’t show a lot of concern for the surrounding environment. Either the Green brutes or the Mon-keigh removed themselves from its path, or they were removed by disintegration rays. The same fate waited asteroid, ships’ debris, torpedoes, pulsars and every sort of weaponry, be it Asuryani or belonging to another race.

“Autarch, there are Mon-keigh ships trying to escape the grasp of the murder-moon,” the Mariner was speaking in a tone more appropriate for funeral ceremonies. “There is no trace of the Twilight Spear survivors.”

And there wouldn’t be. They knew it in their souls and bones. The High Farseer was without doubt dead, and the survivors of this defeat had been caught between the Mon-keigh and the Green brutes. Outnumbered, without his ships able to provide sky support, the only thing they could pray was for their deaths to be quick and painless. Given the barbaric species involved, it wasn’t likely to happen.

“Record the data for ulterior plans.” The Asuryani space commander commanded. “Maybe it will be useful for the future.”

Assuming of course they weren’t all dust in the cosmic winds in the next micro-cycle.

“Autarch, our reinforcements are here! It’s Autarch...”

And brutally, the strategic situation changed.

One instant the *Spear of Asuryan* had been trying to leave the system, with an Yngir battleship approximately one hundred and twenty thousand kilometres behind it. Seventy-three thousand kilometres ahead, a new fleet of Biel-Tan had materialised on their sensors, with only one two small barbarian warships between themselves.

The next there was a terrifying hole in reality of Yngir colours and the Biel-Tan fleet disappeared like it had never existed.

“NO! NO! NO!”

**Trazyn the Infinite**

“Yes, yes and yes,” Trazyn affirmed. It was likely the enemy commander couldn’t hear him, but the satisfaction of the act brought something approaching pleasure in his circuits. “My plan worked better than I envisioned.”

“Overlord, all the eldar warships save the battleship we are pursuing have been sent in the containment-collector CT-21 zone.”

“Excellent,” replied the Necron before snickering. “For a species supposed to be gifted with incredible foresight, the Aeldari are disappointments of the highest order.”

Oh, how far the race which had once been the shock troops of the Old Ones had fallen. When the War in Heaven had raged, their leaders had been redoubtable enemies. They had already been flawed, obviously. The Old Ones, the great hypocrites, had given their favourites the gift they had refused to the Necrontyr race. And unlike the dynasties of old, the Aeldari primitive civilisation had been far, far from the point it could achieve space-flight. One day, the Aeldari had been trying to discover the secrets of metal and fire. The next, they were the shock troops in a galactic war. They were immortal, with physical abilities every race could only dream of. And they were completely unable to improve, to invent and to increase their comprehension of the universe surrounding them.

The War in Heaven had been the power height of the long-ears. Trazyn was sure many of the old guard like the Stormlord would be amazed by the long decadence of their enemies. Their fall had lasted an eternity of sixty-five million years, but in the last hundred of thousand years he had been able to travel across the galaxy at his leisure. The depraved Empire had been too busy falling apart with its planetary orgies, religious sacrifices and depravation wars. They had created an Empyrean Abomination which had eventually provoked a massive cataclysm and destroyed their core worlds. And despite all evidence accusing them, they were still convinced they were wiser and more capable than the rest of the galaxy.

Yes, they had not lost their arrogance at all. But the survivors had that arrogance and not much else. If they came out of the Webway for a final war, they would not last a thousand Necron years before their complete and final extinction.

“Overlord, the Aeldari starship is hailing us!”

“Ignore him and change course,” Trazyn replied. “His escape attempts amused me for a moment, but I have a complete fleet for my collection and his battleship is too damaged to make a nice prize.”

Trazyn paused before changing his mind.

“No, I change my previous command. Send him the message ‘you are a disappointment, Aeldari’ in their high tongue and the salutations appropriate for a lesser enemy of our race.”

“Your will be done, Overlord...”

“Now tell me what my good friend the insect-mistress has been up to on this ork moon...”

**Dennis Peters**

Space battles were very impressive when you watched them in a movie, but you didn’t want to get caught in the middle of one.

At least, that was the conclusion Clockblocker had arrived in the first ten seconds of the one he was currently plunged into.

This was not a shining and funny affair with the red shirts of Starfleet running everywhere and the dashing captain saving the day or a Jedi coming from nowhere and making the impossible shoot.

It was too bad, because the planet of doom was here.

But the starfighters in this galaxy, while several times the size of the X-wing or the TIE, were completely insignificant compared to the titans fighting each other with star-destroying weapons.

Parahuman or not parahuman, you were tiny in this universe. The human warships were walls of armour supported by thousands of cannons. Their opponents were alien monsters bred and trained for nothing but war. And they exchanged missiles, laser and all sort of unknown projectiles Clockblocker hadn’t a single clue what they were, and he had talked to several Tinkers including Half-Beard.

“You are going to kill all of us killed!” he shouted as a sort of massive blue array nearly hit them on the right side of their Starhawk bomber before holding his harness of co-pilot like there was no tomorrow.

The ‘cogboy’ of the Adeptus Mechanicus behind them was even more vocal.

“Mighty Omnissiah, protect us. Mighty Omnissiah, shield us from the xenos weapons. Motive Force, pour your sacred energy in this holy machine and save your faithful servant from the void. There is no flesh, there is only the machine...”

Dennis didn’t move as the pilot made an insane manoeuvre. Of course, this was because he hadn’t anything left in his stomach by this point. The contents of his stomach had long gone in the futurist vomit bag.

Two orks fighters rammed each other trying to intercept their bomber and three of their pursuers slammed into their debris before exploding!

“Wooooh! That was close!” exclaimed the madman who was for best or for worse holding their lives in his hand.

“Starhawk Bombers are not supposed to be used like this!” squeaked the red-robed cyborg. “I must appease the machine-spirit!” and he – or was it? – ran towards the rear of their flyer.

“I don’t think he’s going to write you love letters if we survive this battle.”

“Bah,” shrugged Wolfgang Bach, “Tech-Priests are always too conservative with their machines. A good prayer, plenty of oil, fuel and ammunition, and everything always sort itself. At least that was what my father is always saying.”

The turrets of the bombers roared in anger killing more orks, who looked as crazy as the young man next to him when it came to driving.

“He’s an Admiral?”

“Oh, no he’s a Lord Militant of the Imperial Guard. The Navy doesn’t recruit men like him as a rule.”

“Why? He committed a terrible crime?” Dennis asked, before wincing as a red light blast passed above their bomber.

“He was poor and was a gardener for the city he was living in,” replied the blonde-haired pilot. “One of the Captains visiting Leuthen that year was deeply impressed to the lengths he went to secure a place for himself, but in the end, his lack of patrons and wealth doomed his petition before the selection even began. So he tried his chance with the Imperial Guard as a simple soldier. And he commands now an entire army battlegroup, though he’s close to retirement age by now.”

Dennis whistled before screaming as they made a violent turn to avoid a floating hulk.

“Yeah, I think that’s why he pushed so much the authorities of Kar Duniash when I told him I wanted to be an Admiral. He managed to get me a place at the Naval Academy.”

“And you failed, I suppose? I don’t see you wearing the same outrageous blue uniform this cretin of Lieutenant wore two hours ago?” A normal discussion was difficult with this insane driving, but it offered something to latch to in the middle of this madness.

“I don’t think I was ever supposed to succeed, Dennis,” answered Wolfgang and the fact his lips had only the ghost of a smile told Clockblocker the young man was still suffering from the rejection. “I was the son of a Lord General Militant, but these aristocratic pricks at Kar Duniash and in every Segmentum Academies look at your family tree and if there’s a non-noble ancestor before your great-great-great-grandfather, you’re not one of them. And if you’re not one of them, good luck trying to find a Captain to take you as a Midshipman.”

A starship went nova in the distance and for the fourth time of the day, Dennis was very glad to have anti-radiation glasses to protect his eyes.

“I finished third of my promotion,” declared Wolfgang as the front turret under his control made a slaughter of crippled ork bombers. “Wow, I think that’s make ten now. Double ace!”

“Third out of how many students?”

“Oh I think it was something around six thousand.” Dennis felt his jaw drop. And they had disregarded him just because he wasn’t noble? “I was first in flying, first in strategy, and first in duelling lessons...but it doesn’t matter when the idiot who finishes at the two thousandth rank has his daddy commanding Battlefleet Nephilim to make his dreadful grades disappear.

“What happened in the end?” He asked as enemy starships did the unthinkable and rammed each other instead of cooperating.

“Oh, I was congratulated for my results and then I received the message that due to an administrative problem, the Navy hadn’t found me a Midshipman posting, accept their humble apologies, etc...” Wolfgang then smiled widely and the parahuman found for the first time something almost childish on the face of the black-eyed pilot. “So the last night I spent at the Academy, I may have demanded the return of some favours I was owed, and I took one of these billion-worth Aquila landers reserved to the Admirals with a few friends and we invited ourselves to one of the high-select parties of Kar Duniash.”

“Was it worth it?” Dennis asked, burning with curiosity.

“I spent the night with the twin daughters of Lord High Admiral von Lohengramm, you bet it was worth it!”

If he was in his Clockblocker costume, he could have hidden the massive reddening on his cheeks, but as it was, no chance he could hid it.

“And the angry father didn’t kill you when he became aware of your exploit?”

“Oh, I may have received a message telling me not to set a foot at Kar Duniash again if I wanted my head to keep my head on my shoulders...yes, fourteenth victory!”

Dennis shook his head in disbelief. Counting the numbers of ork enemies he had destroyed with his manoeuvres, the killing count was at least the triple of this number, but for a reason which escaped him, Wolfgang only considered the enemy killed with his turrets and his missiles worthy to enter on his hunting list.

“Now plot me a new course to this big space hulk, I want to see if our plasma bombs can do some real damage...”

**Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper**

“Two more ork cruisers destroyed, my Lady.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

The Admiral’s liaison officer bowed largely before returning by his commander’s side on the flag bridge of the Avenger-class *Indomitable Resolution*, leaving the Lady Inquisitor to contemplate the massive space battle raging on the other side of the armourglass.

Rafaela Harper had seen a lot of military actions in her two centuries of duty, but only a couple of occasions she had seen a bloodbath like this, and it had been in officially-sanctioned Crusades. On the other hand, no living Inquisitor this millennium had proclaimed seeing one of the terrible Attack Moons and proved his assertion right.

Truly, this was a day of novelties. Eldar fleets getting shredded by unknown xenos species, and by a crescent-shaped battleship more powerful than the Apocalypse-class, no less. Thank the Emperor this monster of metal was seemingly disengaging from the battle after dealing with the eldar. A dangerous Ork Warboss threatening the stability of the Segmentum, only to fall against a small task force which was slowly escaping the attraction of the planetoid. There were hundreds of massive ork warships which could have created a terrible threat, but were now fighting each other more than they fought the Imperial naval forces.

Novelties like this, she could really live without. The investigations on the circumstances of this battle alone were going to take forever to deal with. She had absolutely no doubt about it. And the less said about the salvage operations in this system, the better. The Mechanicus, the Rogue Traders were used to barge in systems like this to recover anything which might look like a sample of archeotech, and there were already thousands of ork wrecks plus a few Imperial ones littering this area of space.

Still, Admiral von Schafer was conducting a skilled offensive for the moment, and so far she had no reason to complain about his tactics.

And then multiple red lights began to flash on the hololith and the displays spread over the immense bridge.

“Admiral, unauthorised Warp translations less than ten thousand kilometres away from the ork moon!”

“What? This can’t be right! No one in his right mind would dare-“

“Condition Extremis-Black!” barked her colleague of the Ordo Malleus next to her. “Cut the inter-ship chatter before...”

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!”

A detonation of a centuries-old laspistol and the warrant officer which had begun to convulse had suddenly a very big hole in his head.

“Deploy all anti-Chaos counter-measures. Condition Extremis-Black on all ships. High Commissar, your subordinates’ restrictions are lifted. We can’t afford any mercy and we certainly haven’t the time for court-martials.”

“Ignore the orks,” said the Lady Inquisitor, knowing very well they were missing a golden opportunity but alas, one threat was far more threatening than the other. “Reform your battle-line to face this heretical fleet, Admiral. Chaos comes and we will not be judged wanting in His Eyes.”

\*\*\*\*

*The Imperium had a name for hulls like these.*

*Daemonship.*

*A sight so hideous it screamed ‘enemy’ to every race non-corrupted by Chaos.*

*The ship had not always been like this.*

*The Imperium had ordered its construction in a better era. Adamantium, plasteel and ceramite had been assembled as the Great Crusade wiped out xenos threats after xenos threats and the Astartes Legions conquered the galaxy.*

*The Imperial Truth was triumphant. The dream of Humanity ascendant had been strong.*

*As it had approached completion, the warship had been destined to the Eighteenth Legion, the Salamanders.*

*Alas, it was not to be.*

*Horus Lupercal, the favourite son of the Emperor and Warmaster of the Imperium armed forces, was already beyond redemption and readied his forces to plunge a dark blade in the soul of Mankind.*

*The initial plans of the Traitors had been to slaughter the Loyalists before they had any chance to retaliate, and so this ship had been transferred to the custody of the Twelfth Legion, the World Eaters.*

*Thus when it had been commissioned in a great ceremony, the ship designation was:*

*Alpha-19, 0001-Delta, 005M31-Gamma, Mu-16*

*Alpha-19 identified the warship as one of the rare Goliath-class heavy battleships.*

*0001-Delta signified the hull had been built in the Ring of Iron orbiting Mars.*

*005M31-Gamma was the date of entry in service and the confirmation this starship was belonging to one of the Astartes Legions.*

*Mu-16 was the code for the Sixteenth Assault Company of the Twelfth Legion, the World Eaters.*

*But few had called the hull like that during the Great Heresy which had torn the galaxy asunder.*

*For the trapped Loyalists of Isstvan V, the defenders of Ultramar and the protectors of the Throneworld, this abomination was called the* Certamen Ferale*.*

*It was the second greatest warship of the Twelfth Legion, with only the Conqueror dominating it in size, cruelty and number of atrocities. It was the slaughterer of a hundred worlds, the murderer of innocents, a lair of monsters and the heart of a heresy so monstrous most records had been deliberately erased rather than risk corruption.*

*For centuries the Daemonship had waited in the Warp. The worlds of the small Neptunia warp storm had not been able to content its hunger, not when the monstrous hull had bathed in blood during the Siege of Terra, and after a few centuries even the daemon worlds were utter ruins where nothing survived. After exhausting the land-based sources of slaughter, the battleship had turned its bloodthirst on the other spaceships trapped with it.*

*In another history, the Certamen Ferale would have waited six hundred more years before being freed from its hellish prison.*

*But the threads of fate had changed. The future was now hazy and difficult to predict in this Sector, and the forces of the Anathema were on the verge of winning a great victory. An important STC database had been found. Cultists were slain and exterminated by the thousands. Eons-old plans were in peril.*

*This would not do at all.*

*The light of the Anathema had been nearly extinguished, and it was out of the question to give humanity a fragile hope.*

*An intervention was necessary.*

*The Four relinquished their hold in the weakening Warp Storm and a beacon of war was lighted for their slaves.*

*The* Certamen Ferale *screamed and shrieked in mad bloodlust. For the first time in more than four thousand years, it was going to return to the fires of eternal war.*

**Missy Byron**

“Oh by the Great Angel...”

Vista thought the exclamation from the officer in his red-black uniform was particularly appropriate given the circumstances.

A moment ago, the gigantic warship Contessa had somehow managed to find against the odds, the *Opera Exitium*, had been sailing through the system under minimal emissions. In her opinion, this hadn’t been really necessary. The battle raging in the system right now was such that it was extremely unlikely anyone was bothering to search for furtive warships.

It was the kind of spectacle film producers would have loved to film, assuming they could find the budget in their treasury. Around a gigantic artificial moon, hundreds of warships were killing each other with millions of atomic bombs, laser, plasma and every type of futurist weapon you could imagine. Cathedral ships exchanged salvoes with objects which looked like they were holding by some miraculous application of glue and prayer. Starfighters and smaller flyers danced in choreographies where the single misstep meant death.

And just as it was not enough, a massive warship had just arrived to escalate the situation.

It looked evil.

There was no other word for it. Simply looking at the images taken by the ‘augur array’ was enough to give you shivers. There were spikes, corpse-skull decorations and the red-black colour was disgusting. Moreover, there were sort of red tumours coursing through the ship, giving it both an evil aura and a diseased atmosphere. The eye near the prow which looked like a demon was just the last clue this newcomer was bad news.

“The *Certamen Ferale*,” Agiel Izaz, Chapter Master of the Brothers of the Red and one of the dozen Space Marines on the bridge declared. The giant had an angelic appearance with his beautiful blonde hairs and blue eyes, but at the moment his face looked haunted and his eyes shone with fury. “My apologies, Inquisitor Contessa. It seems your sources were correct.”

The transhuman warrior turned his head in the direction of one of his warriors. Unlike the other giants, this one was carrying a massive book, one Missy felt no normal human would ever be able to lift on his or her own.

“Brother-Chaplain, I would love to hear the wisdom of the Angel before waging battle in His Name.”

“Yes, Lord Izaz.” And to her fascination, the Space Marine opened the book in what looked to be a random manner before reading. “The Book of Lamentation, eighteenth page, second paragraph.”

The red armoured figure took a great inspiration.

“The Eternity Gate was vulnerable and the demonic legions countless, but the defenders prayed and their courage did not go unnoticed. The Angel Himself descended from the sky and his glorious wrath was such no corrupted pawn of the Ruinous Powers could stand against him.

He raised his blade and the legions of evil stopped, their will broken by the light. The Loyal Sons rallied and the Angel spoke.

For those we cherish, my sons. Today, we die in glory!”

“So spoke the Angel,” murmured all the Space Marines with something looking like religious fervour.

“And by his command humanity will be protected,” finished the Chapter Master. “Rouse the Dreadnought and the Death Company brothers. We are going to eradicate this source of evil in Sanguinius’ name!”

Salutes and cheers were given, and then everyone who was not vital for the good functioning of the bridge began to depart.

“Inquisitor. I trust I can count on your report to declare our Penance Crusade successfully completed?”

“Yes, Chapter Master,” Contessa answered, showing as much emotion as she used to, which was none. “Defeat these Traitors and Heretics in the Emperor’s name, and your Crusade will be considered accomplished and you will have the Inquisition’s commendation.”

The red-gold Space Marine seemingly was lost in his thoughts for a second or two before reacting like a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

“This will be welcome news. My Chapter is dying, Inquisitor. This Crusade and our...issues have caused important problems during the century away from His Light. As for our opposition...”

“Be prepared for the greatest fight of your Chapter,” the Thinker parahuman warned. “The Blood Abomination has decided to raise the stakes, and it will have not sent a small servant to command that many Chaos Astartes.”

“We are the sons of Sanguinius,” her interlocutor softly answered. “The monsters of the Warp will remember our fury and our weapons...”

**Acting-Colonel Taylor Hebert**

After their little stay on the ork moon, Taylor could safely say she hated the greenskins.

And when it came down to it, she was sure both the dead and the survivors shared her hate.

Maybe, if the green aliens had a redeeming quality, the hate would not be so strong. But frankly what sort of redeeming quality could you find in these creatures? They had no honour, they were loud, they stank, they wanted to kill every human they came across and the only thing they respected was a massive battle. Yeah, no wonder the Imperium wanted to exterminate them. A few hours in battle with orks, and the men and women who survived had the same idea: getting rid of these aggressive xenos.

Unfortunately, it was extremely difficult. Taylor supposed it was logical: if the task had been easy, the Imperium would have completed the eradication centuries ago. But damn, the orks were annoyingly persistent. Even as the planet below the *Magos Laurentis* burned in the fires of war and destruction, the aliens continued their attacks, fuelled by their lust for war and the fact the Mechanicus cruiser was one of the last escape possibilities. And for this, everything was acceptable for the orks. Teleportation machines – not always well-calibrated, hundreds were now entombed within the walls – fighters and helicopters which by all rights should never have flown for more than ten seconds top, strapping themselves to a big rocket, assault-boarding shuttles and the least favourite of everyone aboard, hiding inside the shells of their biggest cannons, therefore replacing the ammunition. If someone after this tried to say the orks weren’t mad, she would slap him. These xenos were utterly insane. No ‘if’, ‘but’ or ‘maybe’.

“We will need a lot of decontamination products to clean the ship by the time this is over,” Gavreel Forcas said as he removed his long sword from a greenskin corpse. It was just one of many littering the ground of the hangar.

“The Tech-Priests are throwing the corpses as fast they can into the incinerators,” she answered as she ordered her centipedes in a new neat line to see the carnage and destruction the enemy had wrecked here. Yep, two new transports completely wrecked. Lankovar was not going to be happy. “In six minutes, we should be out of range from the planetary boarders.”

“Which will leave the rest of their armada in space,” an Alpha Legion Astartes commented with an impressive gun burning with green flames. Traitors or not, she had to admit they were extremely useful purging the ship of the ork boarders. The big problem was to find sufficient supervision, most of the ship personnel were completely exhausted and she couldn’t direct her insects in every section. “I don’t think there are going to let us go like this.”

“Bah, the Imperium fleet is-“ the Andes officer who had just tried to interrupt the Space Marine stopped and let his lasgun fall to the ground like he had a seizure. “Gaahhh...”

His eyes rolled and his members twitched like he had a seizure. His eyes turned red and blood began to flow on his cheeks. “Blood, blood for the...”

He never finished the sentence as his head exploded in bloody fragments.

“His faith in the God-Emperor was weak,” Commissar Zuhev said as he lowered his pistol.

“What was that?” Weaver asked. She considered it a remarkable achievement not to scream as an Andes trooper brought a flamer and immediately burned the...thing...twitching from the pool of blood.

“Chaos,” snarled one of the Astartes. “The Great Enemy is here.”

Taylor activated her vox and tried to contact the Magos, but she cancelled the communication in a hurry after hearing only agony screams.

Two more men began to bleed and were executed in the same manner as the Andes Lieutenant.

“WE CAN EXPECT BOARDERS SOON,” commented the Dreadnought who had presented himself as ‘Ancient Pierre’. “THE INSECTS WILL BE USEFUL AGAINST THE SERVANTS OF CHAOS.”

The *Magos Laurentis* and the hangars shook like they had been struck by an asteroid and in a single second something heavy pierced the armour protecting the hangar from the void. Gavreel helped her to her feet as she moved her centipedes to rush against this new threat.

The next second a scarlet figure emerged from the smoke in a guttural howl.

“DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR!”

Her first Dreadnought-beetle removed his head in a clean strike before she had the time to properly assess what it was. But others were incoming. There were Astartes...and yet they weren’t. Unlike the Alpha Legion and the Dark Angel armours, these enemies were covered in spikes, skulls, blood and they were shrouded in clouds of red and darkness. One look at them and she knew they were evil with a big ‘E’.

“DEATH TO ANGRON DOGS! FOR THE EMPEROR!”

“SKULLS AND CARNAGE! SKULLS AND CARNAGE!”

Taylor launched her centipedes in a headlong charge as the Alpha Legionaries and Gavreel charged into the melee, swords drawn and bolters blazing.

Screaming obscenities and horrible incantations, the blood-soaked warriors charged to meet them.

In a minute the hangar they had been recovering from the orks was the scene of a new, more desperate battle. Space Marines fought evil Space Marines, and she was glad these enemies were as vulnerable to the orks, maybe more. The orks had tried some weird stuff in the last battles, including acid-insecticide liquids, mass-teleportation and tank assaults...but they had been somehow adapting.

These monsters didn’t. One tried to cut the centipede with his axe, never mind three bees were impaling him from behind. One huge red brute with a demonic figure had tried to duel an Alpha Legion Marine, never mind her beetle was squeezing him until he was more paste than flesh.

The problem was...they were a lot of them, and from other hangars, there were more coming...and the majority of the insects she had decided to save from the moon destruction were there with her. Moreover, the insects were unable to feed and breed from this fetid flesh...there was apparently something deeply wrong with it.

And the nightmare wasn’t over. Just as two soldiers were supporting one Astartes in burning the corpses after the first wave was broken, the blood these things had left on the ground and the image of a demon coalesced in the air.

Yes, a real demon. Big red wings, a long tail, the face of an abomination-beast, and all the details one associated with it in the horror movies. It was red-skinned, five metres-tall, it was evil beyond words...and it spoke.

“**I will bring your skulls to my Lord Khorne**.”

Everyone in view shivered unconsciously. For the first time, Taylor thought she saw an Astartes experience something to fear.

“**Tremble, little angels, for I am your bane**.”

“Ka’Bandha...”

The demon shrieked loudly, and the gates of hell opened.

“**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD**!”

**Author’s note**: And on this bloodthirsty note, the chapter is over. Next chapter will be the conclusion of the Battle of the Death Star. Its tentative title is Endbringer. All the protagonists have arrived for the great showdown, and in the words of a certain Warmaster, let the galaxy burn...

Thanks for all the reviews, the likes and the support!

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption