**Shadowpoint 7.2**

**The Storm before the Apocalypse**

*Your arrogance is only equalled by your lack of imagination, parasite.*

*The moment you tried to lay down the foundations of your grand trap, you utterly failed to account for one possibility.*

*You thought I was willing to play by your rules once more.*

*I am not. Unlike you, I have learned from the lessons of the past. This is one of the many, many differences between someone like me and a psychic mass of dark ambition like you.*

*You think you have won. I wonder how you can be so conceited to think this is true. Are you creating a new order for this galaxy? No. When your slaves drag a new world into the Warp, your talons and claws are capable of nothing but corruption and destruction.*

*You call yourself a God of Change, but that is a lie, like everything you are. You corrupt. You kill. You betray. You lie. You don’t provide any power or knowledge. You steal it and pray the robbery will not be discovered before you have the opportunity to sell it to a naive buyer.*

*You are a merciless abomination, the sins of the old stellar empires. You are everything I stand against. You are hypocrisy and lies. You are a cancer ruining the lives of trillions of souls.*

*I deny you.*

*You are not a God. Assuming such entities truly exist, you are not and never will be one. Unlike many beings in this galaxy, I am old enough to remember a time when you and your fellow Immaterium predators were Three, not Four.*

*I was there when the folly of the Aeldari gave birth to a construct of depravation, excess, self-indulgence and decadence.*

*I was there, and I have not forgotten.*

*You think the scream of its birth scared me. You are completely wrong. It gave me hope.*

*You are not invincible. You are not omniscient. You are unable to give anything but poison to the bodies and the souls of the humans I reign over.*

*The nine plans you prepared for Pavia reeked of this arrogance and lack of innovative capability. You would try to destroy the invasion fleet by deceit, betrayal, sorcerous methods, pushing unwilling and willing slaves onto the battlefield to win a semi-victory. At the same time, you prepared reinforcement fleets, an ignorant pawn, and if all else failed, tearing apart the star and the surrounding area to let your hordes pass through.*

*You may have noticed it is not going to happen like you wanted. The Serpent, with some prodding from my agents, has ruined a great part of your plans. Weaver has ruined many, many others. Your slaves have been massacred. Your altars are destroyed. Your secret bases are burned. Your prisoners have been freed or given the mercy of death at long last.*

*You can still raise the storm and breach the veil separating Materium and Immaterium, of course. But that would be dangerous for you, no? The Necron World Engine has quite a few pylons to prevent exactly this sort of intervention, and overloading them would require so much energy it would leave you vulnerable to the other Three.*

*And somehow, I don’t think the other parasites will congratulate you for placing them in this situation.*

*So hear me, abomination. The future is not written in advance. You and your fellow predators of the Empyrean have not won. You do not control Fate, Hope, or Destiny.*

*I am the Emperor of Mankind, and I deny you.*

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*The Imperial Navy’s strategists believed it would take half a year to crack the outer defences of Pavia and teach these pirates the lesson they deserved.*

*Under the guidance of Lady Weaver, we have done it in fifty hours.*

*I don’t think there has been such a one-sided triumph in Ultima Segmentum within the last century. Our forces have smashed apart ten pirate fleets, convinced one to surrender with weapons and supplies, and one has run with its tails between its legs, as befits the Eldar.*

*The numbers are so huge I think the Munitorum and the Administratum are going to have seizures when they see the official communiqués. Four battleships, ten grand cruisers, seven battlecruisers, eleven heavy cruisers, one hundred and thirty cruisers and carriers, one hundred and thirty-five light cruisers, over six hundred and fifty frigates, corvettes and destroyers, and thirteen thousand-plus starfighters and bombers are the preliminary pirate casualty figures and that is considered a conservative estimate by the Admirals.*

*And even they pale against the destruction of thirty-five significant pirate bases and the capture of two Malta Starforts. In fifty hours, we have destroyed the equivalent of several centuries of pirate infrastructure and made sure they will no longer have the means to threaten the worlds of the God-Emperor. I say they won’t have the means, but they won’t have the numbers either. The conservative estimates are that we killed seven million greenskins, one million Kroot, two million Sheed, thirty-two million human traitors and heretics, one hundred thousand Eldar, and five million of other diverse xenos species.*

*This is the kind of battle where legends are made, and the inner system is waiting for us. Already there are rumours the bonuses are going to be tripled provided we continue at our current performance level. We are going to win, I know it...with these commanders nothing is impossible.*

Extract of Fifth Lieutenant Derrick’s diary, officer serving on the *Indomitable Resolution*, published in 324M35.

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**Beyond the frontiers of the Imperium**

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**8.189.296M35**

Thought for the day: It is not in my mind to ask questions that will not be answered. That is for the soul standing upon the precipice of vacillation. You search for wisdom, but achieve only a stasis of will.

**Captain-General Anubis Excelsor**

There were not that many beings in this galaxy who could hope to fight a Custodes and have a chance to prevail. This was not arrogance speaking, simply a fact. In experience alone, a member of the Ten Thousand had centuries of experience, implacable and ever-evolving training, and the best armament and equipment a warrior of the Imperium of Mankind could hope to have access to.

Anubis Excelsor had met some of them. Millennium-old Traitor Space Marines and ancient, aeons-old Aeldari were the most common opponents.

Of course, that they had a chance to prevail against a single Custodes did not mean the fiends and traitors would survive a Shield Company’s vengeful charge. Few armies and veterans were able to withstand the Watchers of the Throne’s assaults.

The young woman bowing in front of him undoubtedly belonged in this category. From the moment he had set foot on this starship, the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes had counted no less than fifty-three breeds of insects capable of killing him if he tried to neutralise the threat they posed.

Insects. He was going to have to organise a few Blood Games to simulate this new type of threat. The defences of the Imperial Palace were protected with the most potent wards, anti-empyrean shields, and other measures to prevent the plague-bearers of pestilence from coming through. But all of those protections were anti-daemonic in nature. Against a non-possessed human who controlled an unending swarm, nine out of ten protocols would be all but useless.

“What is the Emperor’s Will?”

Yes, this woman was dangerous. And if Taylor Hebert had not so been evidently touched by the hand of Anubis’ Master, the Custodes would have seriously begun to move up preparations for an assassination attempt. Zealots were particularly sorry examples of how low humanity had fallen, but they could be of use. The swarm-controller’s eyes had no fanaticism, and no religious madness clouded them. The irises were cold and calculating, not of ambition like so many High Lords did, but on a ruthless calculus of gains and losses. This was a woman who had decided to support the Emperor because she had seen what the other side had to offer, and judged that anything was preferable to the darkness.

“It is His Majesty’s Will that you take command of your forces and invade the Eldar Webway. You must strike a powerful blow against the enemies of the Imperium before they have time to increase the size of their forces.”

“I am...flattered by the high opinion His Majesty has of me. But unlike what some of my subordinates believe, I do not have the ability to grant miracles on demand. To begin with, I am not aware of any Webway Gates in the Pavia System...”

This objection was reasonable. One couldn’t invade what they couldn’t see.

“Coordinates O-63JRTY, roughly fifty-seven thousand kilometres on a 15Y-axis away from Pavia Primus. You will need three keys to open the Eversprings Gate. One is in the possession of Sliscus the Serpent. The second is owned by Lox’ena the Siren. The third has been stolen by the Necron thief.”

The General of the Imperial Guard had stopped bowing and was looking at him with an expression that has still some respect in it...and also a great deal of stubbornness.

“I can take the keys from the two pirates, provided I know what I am looking for.” The black-gold haired woman told him bluntly. “But I have no way to force Trazyn the Infinite to release the key he owns into my possession by force. I will need something to bargain for it.”

“Asteroid GU-221Z in grid 55-Y. Several objects of Necron and Eldar origin have been stored there by the pirates.”

By this point, Anubis Excelsor had expected many possible reactions. An admission that perhaps, after all, the Emperor’s chosen could not deliver on several aspects of the plan. This had happened more times than he could count the moment he talked to officers of the Imperial Guard and Navy. The opposite type of reaction was the ‘boasting tirade’ where the interlocutor promised a pile of treasure and certain victory as long as reinforcements, material resources and political power were sent their way.

“And then? According to the Inquisition, the Eldar Webway is a maze sprawling across the entire galaxy like an enormous complicated spiderweb. The forces which are participating in Operation Caribbean have no hope to provide any kind of offensive punch if they are dispersed across millions of kilometres.”

“His Majesty has assigned ten primary and thirty secondary objectives for this difficult mission. To start with...”

Even with no hesitation – his memory was as perfect as the day he had joined the Ten Thousand – and no elaborate explanations, it took him the better part of ten standard minutes to give the battleship’s mistress the essential information she required to accomplish her vital mission.

When he finished speaking, Anubis received a semi-stoic expression in return.

“Let none suggest that the Master of Mankind is lacking ambition when He is making His plans.”

The Captain-General didn’t answer. It was true, so why bother denying the point?

“Can you do it?”

The female General turned her sight towards the hololith, where two assault super-fortresses were moving to fight each other.

“I will need to add the Necron forces to my own to have any reasonable chance of success.”

“Define ‘reasonable’.”

“Above ten percent,” the insect-controller replied immediately. “The surprise will not last, and we will go into the Webway with zero information and zero battlefield preparations. At Pavia the enemy regained their wits rather quickly, and we were fighting pirates. The enemy for this operation is far, far more dangerous than that.”

“They will be as divided as the pirates were.”

“I can’t count on that.” Anubis Excelsor in a more formal audience would have chastised her, but today he was on her flagship, and his arrival had been incredibly rushed, even by the standards of Custodes expeditionary forces. If he wasn’t a Custodes speaking with the authority of the Emperor, Taylor Hebert would be perfectly within her rights to declare this operation a waste of resources too risky to even be considered. The more unknown factors in a plan, the greater the chances for it to go wrong, the Captain-General wasn’t going to deny this.

“No, you can’t. How much time do you need to place your forces in position?”

For the first time, the gold aura became more perceptible and the dark eyes flashed in annoyance.

“Surely, Lord Custodes, you realise that the Space Hulk and the Necron moon are between us and the Webway Gate. Since launching my squadrons into this kind of war zone would accomplish nothing but tripling the butcher’s bill, I will have to wait for the outcome of this fight to be decided, avoid the debris of the losing side, and finish off the Serpent if it’s the *Empire of Sin* who comes out on top. And then I will have to reorganise my fleet and recall all the transports, resupply the fleet...I think we will be lucky if we’re ready to attack in one hundred and sixty hours...”

Anubis didn’t even need to recall the plan to know that was too slow for the Emperor’s purpose. And he immediately told her so.

“The plan can’t wait that long. I am willing to grant you fifty hours.”

“Fifty hours?” The two words were not shouted, but the protestation in them was unmistakeable. “But we would barely have the time to refuel and explain the directives to the troops!”

“Every hour from the moment I revealed His Majesty’s plans to you increases the risks of the Ruinous Powers intervening and striking preemptively to end your attack before it begins. Speed and decisiveness are now your best allies. Slow down and failure awaits you.”

There were numerous flashes of gold over the black hair, and for a second the Captain-General was afraid he would receive a negative answer.

“I will, of course, obey His Majesty’s orders to the letter or die trying.” It had been a long time since he had seen someone as unhappy as his interlocutor when she spoke those words. For the first time in sixty-plus standard years, Anubis Excelsor noted to himself that maybe, just maybe, blind adoration was not just a problem when demanding a loyal soldier to perform a difficult endeavour. “I suppose I am not authorised to send general calls for reinforcements?”

“Not until the invasion is underway,” by that point the veil of secrecy would have been shredded and the enemies of the Emperor were going to be fully aware of what was happening.

“Awesome,” the tone used strongly implied it was anything but. Without the General coming anywhere near the hololith or the vox, the machines began to send messages by the hundreds. With a moment of delay, Anubis Excelsor realised he had missed a few hundred beetles standing dead still, and now all these insects were rune-typing like expert operators. “Let’s just hope His Majesty won’t ask for something really complicated next time, eh?”

There were more and more insects entering the bridge with every second, and the Captain-General would lie if he said he was pleased by this. But as none came closer than three metres to him, he had no reason to complain.

“His Majesty will be extremely thankful if you succeed...and so will the Adeptus Custodes.”

His interlocutor smiled, and for once there was genuine amusement.

“The diplomatic niceties, rewards and accolades will wait until the dust of the battlefield has settled.” The Captain-General wasn’t going to argue with that. “I assume you will serve as His Majesty’s eyes on the battlefield?”

“I will.”

The General nodded.

“My naval advisors are coming back, I’m going to give them the bad news...”

**First Naval Secretary Wolfgang Bach**

“Fifty hours? That’s not a lot...”

This wasn’t the most intelligent comment he had ever made in his life. That said, the scope of the orders he had just been given had caught him a bit off guard.

“These are the orders of His Most Holy Majesty,” the Basileia of Nyx revealed in a low conversational tone. Wolfgang accepted the – very mild – rebuke.

To be honest, he had already guessed so. When a giant in golden armour who happened to be a member of the Adeptus Custodes invited himself to a private audience with your commanding officer, and minutes later Lady Weaver wanted to change every plan which had been formulated in the last three years, the authority to do so had to be absolute.

A Lord Militant would eventually be able to order the Lady Nyx around, but between the bureaucracy, the ongoing battles fought across Pavia, and the particular protocols to change operational plans, one would need dozens of hours minimum, and that was if you had a Lord Militant’s rank. Lord General’s and below would have great difficulties diverting a Crusade from its current anti-pirate duties.

“If they are, then of course we will obey.” Wolfgang affirmed. “Assuming the orders are given in the next few minutes, it will take five hours for the rearguard units and the supply fleet to reach us. I think three or four more hours to load all extra piles of ammunition, deliver all orders to every officer of Colonel rank and above...”

It was a logistical nightmare of incredible proportions, and one glance at his benefactor was enough to confirm Lady Taylor Hebert was completely aware of it.

Fifty hours after a battle like this one was not enough for proper maintenance, resupply and reorganisation. Two hundred hours would have been more appropriate. And then there was the little issue that this ‘Webway invasion’ had a naval and a ground part...

“Setting aside the logistical complications, I will need some Guard officers to create a War Plan for the regiments we are going to throw into the inferno.”

This wasn’t because he was unwilling to tackle the problem. He was. But he had no experience in Guard operations of this scale, and frankly there were not enough hours to work out a naval plan under these circumstances, never mind doing both at once...

“And most of the Colonels and Brigadier-Generals do not have the training for this kind of thing.” His superior grimaced and both Dennis and himself winced. The fiasco of the Munitorum was now returning with a vengeance. In this situation, it should have been the responsibility of the General Staff to handle this brutal change of overall strategy. The problem was the fact there was no General Staff. No, this was incorrect. There was one, but the two high-ranked officers on it were Lady Weaver and Lord Commissar Zuhev. The former was going to be too busy in the next hours to write an attack plan, and the latter was not a strategist at all.

All the mid-level officers were going to be too busy with their regiments and their brigades’ organisations. That just left the Major-Generals and above, and to say most of their career resumes didn’t inspire confidence was a polite way to describe the problem.

“We will have to use them, I’m afraid,” the young woman commanding Operation Caribbean said after a few seconds, “For the Marshals, Groener and Moltke. For the Lieutenant-Generals, Hervey Cox and Marcus Hannover. The Major-Generals involved in the planning will be Leonard Wellington, Amanda Bolivar, Paul Dundee, Maverick Adler, Domenico Flabanico and Anita De Waal. I will place four Commissars and plenty of young officers to make sure they don’t screw up.”

It didn’t escape him that of the names cited, only two were Cadians, and none from the ‘unofficial military nobility’.

“I suppose we’d better speak about the keys. May I presume you have a plan my Lady?”

“I’ve already cancelled the Heracles Wardens’ last orders and ordered them to participate in the Siren’s hunt.”

“I was not aware the Wardens were anti-psyker specialists.”

Then again, the more he learned about the ex-Alpha Legionnaires, the more surprise gave way to simple resignation. Even the Iron Drakes and the Inquisition sometimes just nodded and moved along after some of the ridiculous stunts they pulled. Overseers were needed to be ensure they remained loyal, but their escapades were something else.

“They have hunted their fair share of Sorcerers and psychic xenos species in the last centuries. I’ve asked the Angels Sanguine to provide half of their company with Librarian support, just to be safe.”

This was probably the best move among all available options.

“I suppose all the others Astartes are going to be involved in the assault of the *Empire of Sin*?”

“Yes, they are,” was the short answer he received. “Unless you think there’s a possibility Sliscus has hidden his portal’s key somewhere else?”

“No, I don’t,” a Webway Gate’s key sounded like a precious and irreplaceable artefact. It was not something Wolfgang thought the pirate would give to one of his lieutenants or underlings. “I would advise you to reconsider your participation in the assault, my Lady.”

“We lack time.” This was not a motivated tirade, more like a resigned reply. “The *Empire of Sin*, even with the damage it takes with every minute, is too huge to conduct a proper search with just human resources. I could throw the entire Army Group into this Space Hulk and it’s likely the search would continue for the next decades. No, I will have to go myself. The Space Marines and the Fay 20th will protect me, and my swarm will find the Key.”

Wolfgang gritted his teeth, but he couldn’t suggest any alternative. The size of the mobile Space Hulk was indeed a problem only an army of auxiliaries and searchers would be able to solve. And landing this army would not only be terribly risky, it would also take days, maybe weeks. He didn’t know why the Custodes wanted them to attack their target so quickly, but assaulting the *Empire of Sin* via conventional means would delay the new invasion by too much.

“And the third Key?” asked Dennis. “Last time I checked, Trazyn the Infinite wasn’t exactly the most reliable xenos on our list of contacts.”

“I’m sure the thief is on the command bridge of the Necron assault moon at this very moment,” the insect–mistress answered coldly. “So I will just have to go ask for an audience once Sliscus has been killed and we have the two other keys...”

**Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten**

“I salute you, ancient soulless abominations of the War in Heaven. I fully approve of your splendid invasion of my realm, the Mon-keigh visitors and other lesser species were beginning to bore me.”

The crazy smile of the long-eared pirate was frightening in its intensity and total absence of sanity.

“But I am the Serpent and you have, like hundreds of lesser fleets, dared challenge the might of the Sky Serpents in my realm. You are unwanted. You are trespassers! And you will be eliminated.”

Traevelliath Sliscus rose from his command throne.

“In one stellar cycle, your World Engine will become my new flagship. Do not thank me for this incredible honour, slaves of the Yngir. Thank me however for the valuable lesson I’m about to impart to you: the galaxy belongs to the Aeldari, and you should have stayed asleep, waiting for the Harlequin and Corsair extermination parties to disable your reanimation mechanisms!”

The Admiral of the Sky Serpents laughed, or at least Neferten thought he did. In her opinion, it sounded more like a hysterical shriek.

“I am going to kill you and melt your metallic carcasses, soulless abominations. You will rue...”

The Phaerakh cut the connection. There was obviously nothing worthwhile to be learned from listening to the delusional ramblings of this mad Aeldari. One might even call it a waste of time, and while Necrons were immortal, this did not mean the supreme ruler of the Nerushlatset Dynasty was willing to expend hers for nonsensical purposes.

“And to think I believed Trazyn was joking when he told me of the state of the Aeldari civilisation...” Neferten said to her Grand Cryptek of the Chrono-Mysteries, Eternity-Overlord Qa’akhet.

“They have fallen low, Supreme Phaerakh,” the third most powerful noble of her Dynasty agreed slowly. “In fact, can we really call them Aeldari anymore? We know from the various information networks we have been able to access since the end of the Great Sleep these degenerates have other names for their sub-factions. We might use those.”

“Asuryani for the Craftworld dwellers, Drukhari for the Webway vermin, Exahardhi for those willing to return to their natural primitive roots, and Harlequin...for the pet killers of Cegorach.” Of all the worshippers of the Aeldari Gods, of course it had to be Cegorach’s mad murderers who had survived to this day. “Yes, these new names should work fine. That way we will speak of Aeldari for the ancient civilisation which served our arch-foes and has been rendered extinct.”

Neferten wasn’t going to pretend she would regret the disappearance of the Aeldari civilisation. They had been enemies, and for an eternity Necrons and Aeldari warriors had tried their utmost to wipe out each other on millions of battlefields.

But at least, once the Old Ones had finished rewriting the Aeldari genome, they had been elite fighters and worthy opponents.

Their descendants were a caricature of the War in Heaven’s warriors, scavengers who used a variation of advanced and primitive technologies without understanding how ridiculous they looked.

If they were able to see this, the veteran Aeldari she had faced millions of solar cycles ago would cry and be disgusted. In honour of their bravery and defiance, the Phaerakh-Cryptek was going to be merciful and annihilate this concentration of insane Drukhari.

“Glorious Phaerakh, the main cannon of the Drukhari hulk is about to fire at us,” Destruction-Overlord Sitkah spoke. “Calculations are the output of this obsolete energy weapon will manage to decrease the power of the *Starry Sky*’s shields by 2.23%. Do you want me to prepare the counter-fire this vermin so richly deserve for its insults against your greatness?”

“No,” Neferten shook her head. “This ‘Sliscus’ swore to kill me. Let this particularly despicable specimen of Drukhari contemplate his pathetic inability to pierce the defences of an operational World Engine. Once his main gun has finished shooting, let them despair for a hundred Aeldari heartbeats and then pierce this ridiculous dark shroud.”

“They will suffer as you decree, Phaerakh,” the female Destruction-Overlord who had also been her first student replied. “Drukhari energy weapon firing...now.”

For the second time this day – the massive gap in the asteroid-minefield barrier was not exactly hard to spot – the Space Hulk the Drukhari used as their mobile base fired its primary energy cannon.

Neferten wasn’t impressed. The Nerushlatset Dynasty, due to its relatively high numbers of Crypteks, had fought on many battlefields where the Aeldari had deployed Talismans of Vaul. Compared to those weapons, the Drukhari weapon was a serious disappointment.

The discharge of energy struck the *Starry Sky*’s shields, and as Sitkah had predicted, the only thing the enemy achieved was a small power decrease of the shield, and it would be more than compensated before the weapon had the time to fire a third shot.

“This is pathetic.” The foes they had fought during the War in Heaven would have analysed the shields with rapid ambushes and fast, lethal raids before trying to mount a quick, effective sabotage operation. These depraved descendants of the Aeldari were behaving more like Krorks than their vicious ancestors. “Sitkah, disable the enemy’s main cannon with two asteroid teleportations. Once that is done, fire two gravity pulses to remove this weak ‘dark shroud’. It is more an illusion-displacement trick than a true shield, and the other races in this system deserve to see how easily we can beat the rude vermin known as ‘Sliscus the Serpent’.

“With pleasure, mighty Phaerakh,” there was no countermeasure from the Hulk, no ancient weapon was activated to prevent the teleportation beams from finding its marks.

In one instant, two rocks found themselves merging with the location occupied by the primary weapon of the object the Drukhari and the local dwellers had called the *Empire of Sin* in their frustratingly plebeian languages.

The explosions began to spread on the surface of the Hulk shortly after, and doubled when the dark shroud went down.

“If you allow me this remark, noble Phaerakh,” Eternity-Overlord Qa’akhet declared, “I was not expecting this Drukhari scrap-thing to be beaten so easily.”

“They are not completely beaten, with all respect, Eternity-Overlord,” Sitkah contradicted the Grand Cryptek. “The fleet they were keeping inside the Space Hulk is deploying as we speak. And the mobile Hulk is accelerating towards the *Starry Sky*. I think they are intending to ram our shields in a suicidal attempt to overload them.”

Qa’akhet scratched his jade-coloured gown in a gesture he had repeated millions of times when he was experiencing a heavy feeling of contrariety.

“I thought we were fighting degenerate Aeldari, not Krork,” the Eternity-Overlord muttered before raising his voice. “In this case, great Phaerakh, I recommend we answer this miserable attempt to hurt us with all the respect it deserves. Let all our weapons sing their agony to the stars.”

“Certainly not!” Had Neferten still possessed her soul and some emotions, she would have voiced many insults and probably sighed. At least the exquisite metal envelope which had replaced her mortal flesh was preventing her from feeling too much irritation...emphasis on the ‘too much’.

“Trazyn.” Her former lover, the Chief Archaeovist of Solemnace, had indeed appeared in the command node, somehow managing to bypass all the protections and guards supposed to prevent exactly that. “If you circumvent my protocols one more time, I will personally find the deepest, darkest Vault the Dynasties have ever conceived, and throw you into it with a shard of the Deceiver until death or madness finishes you.”

“There’s no need to be so violent!” Sometimes, the Phaerakh-Cryptek thought the decision to place the Solemnace Overlord under the Deceiver’s command had been the greatest error of Szarekh. The other times she remembered how problematic Trazyn had been before biotransference. Maybe the Deceiver wasn’t responsible for her ex-lover’s mental problems. The War in Heaven had shattered the sanity of too many great commanders, and it had come after the horrible trial of the biotransference. “I simply wanted to speak with you. I just received a message from my dear friend Weaver.”

Neferten wondered how much the human enjoyed being Trazyn’s ‘dear friend’. ‘Not at all’, she suspected was the answer. In many ways, the ruler of the Nerushlatset Dynasty was the closest thing the Chief Archaeovist had to a friend, and she would lie to herself and the galaxy at large if she didn’t admit the relationship had many problems, starting with his regular ‘visits’ to steal trinkets from her vaults.

“And what does the human commander have to say?” Neferten made an Orb filled with the power of a C’Tan’s flames appear in front of her, before looking at the general situation of the entire battlefield. Interestingly, the vanguard of the human fleet, which had been decreasing its acceleration and trying to avoid confrontation with Sliscus moments ago, was now changing course and increasing in speed once more.

“She presents her respects, and requests you delay the disintegration of the Space Hulk the *Empire of Sin* for a few hours. Lady Weaver has information leading her to believe Sliscus has acquired several precious artefacts that might be of interest for both our races.”

Neferten and her two senior Overlords in the grand command node looked at Trazyn with unhidden suspicion. No wonder the galactic-operating thief had used all his skills to infiltrate her bastion. The human had Trazyn, body and mind, on her side the moment she had said the words ‘precious artefacts’.

“Glorious Phaerakh, I must object! This course of action is too...”

“Too what, Eternity-Overlord?” She asked Qa’akhet. “Risky? The main threat represented by this unsightly monstrosity the Drukhari chose to call the *Empire of Sin,* now that we have reduced its main cannon to cinders, is the ramming attempt. As long as we stay safely at gun range and cripple its engines and primary batteries, the risks to my World Engine are negligible.”

The Phaerakh-Cryptek returned her attention to Trazyn.

“Does Weaver request my assistance or those of my legions?”

“No, only to refrain from the destruction of the Space Hulk as long as her boarding teams are fighting inside...”

“Sitkah, your opinion?”

“Crippling their engines and reducing their three hundred-strong starship fleet to orbital debris will represent no great difficulty for the annihilation beam weapons. One might say it will be a nice training session after the Great Sleep.”

“I approve,” Neferten clicked her fingers to teleport away the two orbs she had been studying. “Contact your ‘dear friend’ again and inform her the Nerushlatset Dynasty is willing to wait until her treasure-hunt is successful. But I want the privilege to see these treasures with my own eyes...and I want the head of this insolent vermin of Sliscus.”

“I will relay the message. Until next time...” Trazyn began to run just as over two hundred of her Lychguards stormed the command node and began the pursuit anew.

“The Silent King’s killers will destroy him once they realise what he has done,” Qa’akhet managed to convey the tiniest shard of hope in his declaration.

“The Silent King has tried uncountable times to get rid of Trazyn. He is still here.” It was one of the thousands of clues available that their supreme tyrant’s omniscience and omnipotence was vastly exaggerated. “And unlike us, the Chief Archaeovist never endured the ravages of entropy linked to the Great Sleep. As a result, I think it’s fair to assume millions of different species have tried their best to kill him when he came to enlarge his collection...and they failed all the same. I have more important things to do than chasing Trazyn across the galaxy.”

“Of course great Phaerakh.”

“Sitkah, release the Night Scythes. Sliscus has been educated that his greatest weapons have no chance against our defences, now it’s time to impress upon him the obsolescence of his starfighters...”

**Duke Traevelliath Sliscus**

“Are you saying we have received no answer from the Yngir World Engine? This is a disturbing lack of courtesy from our favourite soulless abominations!”

The leader of the Sky Serpents chuckled, but he had to make several threatening gestures for the audience to laugh with him.

“Perhaps they are like the Dynasts of Commorragh,” Kresthekia of the Stilled Heart suggested. “They don’t bother answering a call until you have drawn blood from their troops.”

“Perhaps...” Traevelliath whispered. “It is true our assaults have for the moment failed to seriously inconvenience the shields of our second unwanted visitors.”

It was galling to admit, but the great spatial gun he had named after himself had been completely ineffective against the Yngir planetoid before being silenced for a duration which would no doubt exceed a hundred cycles.

“We should cut our losses and flee,” a blue-scaled reptile looking like a cousin of the green-scaled Sslyth proposed. “This killer-moon can destroy us at its leisure. The battle is lost. The fleet that sallied out of the *Empire of Sin* is in the process of being massacred. And if by an impossible turn of events the enemy moon exploded without warning, we would still have to deal with the Mon-keigh.”

Sliscus bared his teeth, and if the serpents of the galaxy watched, they’d better learn to imitate him.

“Are you saying my strategy was flawed, Captain?”

“Evidently,” the blue-scaled alien answered, before trying to grab his sidearm when he saw the glint in Sliscus’ eyes. Unfortunately for this upstart, Sliscus was a master at this game. His trusty sword was already separating the head of the reptile from the rest of its body by the time the weapon was in its scaly hand.

“My strategies are never flawed, Captain,” Sliscus replied in mock indignation before the corpse of his ex-subordinate. Decidedly, this day was a marvellous opportunity to remove some incompetent treacherous subordinates. He should send his unwanted guests a new message of thanks before selling them a cargo of poisons and drugs. “They just need some reevaluation now that all the facts are known to us.”

In tactical terms, the situation was simple. The remnants of the fleet he had sent against the murderous crescent-shaped abominations and the big surviving guns of the *Empire of Sin* were pointed at the Yngir moon. The Space Hulk’s experimental engines were pushed to their maximum in order to reach the enemy planetoid and smash its shields through brute force. The problem alas appeared to be that the soulless husks of the War in Heaven had understood his plan from the moment he tried to implement it. And the World Engine was slightly faster the *Empire of Sin*. The Space Hulk had started the battle with a greater acceleration and initial speed, but malfunctions and battle-damage ensured this preliminary advantage was not as consequent as it could have been.

The situation wasn’t completely hopeless. Sliscus still had his five battleships to escape in, and a quantities of destroyer-sized meat shields to provide some distractions.

But the humans were gaining ground behind him too. Their top commander had for some incomprehensible reason let its vanguard continue the pursuit while the rest waited for the rear-guard and the supply ships. It could have afforded him a chance to turn his fleet against them and crush this smaller formation in isolation...except this ‘small formation’ still had four battleships to bleed him, and if he didn’t win in a single pass, it would be the turn of the silvery killer-automatons to strike him from behind.

“Prepare the *Incessant Agony* for an imminent departure,” the Duke of Commorragh commanded Plasekht, who had replaced the unlamented Tshaelgu. Seconds later, a new shock made one out of three courtiers lose their footing and plenty kissed the ground in particularly ridiculous manners. “You know what must be evacuated with priority.”

“What happened to ‘I will defend this fortress until my last breath’?” one of his informants from Pandaimon hissed in an acceptable imitation of Sliscus.

“I lied,” Traevelliath Sliscus admitted. “When its environment is getting too hot, a serpent must shed its old scales and move forward to new horizons.”

The *Empire of Sin* shook violently, and despite the distance the pirate commander was able to feel the terror and pain of thousands of workers who were hurting and dying inside the Space Hulk.

“Remind me to execute the artisans who worked on our rear protections excruciatingly slowly.” He told Khoryssa. “The first salvo of the first unwanted newcomers has damaged several energy conduits and five out of six batteries have been reduced to molten wrecks. The strain on the entire structure is also increasing.”

As he spoke the words, the crowd he kept around him was trying, without much success, to pretend they weren’t running away from his throne-command hall.

Needless to say, they didn’t get far. Anyone who hadn’t received permission to leave his presence was instantly tracked by assassins, tracker-killer predators, mercenaries, and several exotic pieces of weaponry he had acquired during his many, many campaigns.

“Do we not lose an opportunity if we don’t leave now?” Ehlynna wondered.

“Not really, my dear. The soulless machines will be able to cripple our battleships too quickly if we sally out now. No, we must wait until the humans try to board us, repel their assault, and then evacuate while the Yngir’s slaves are afraid to shoot their possible allies.”

Traevelliath had not really believed there was a minuscule possibility of this happening at first, but clearly he had been wrong. The moon was not firing at the fleet which had destroyed so many of the Pavia pirates.

“They will be led by their accursed Space Marines,” Kresthekia spat. “This isn’t going to be an easy fight.”

“No,” the leader of the Sky Serpents acknowledged. “But it isn’t going to be a boring battle and that’s the only thing that matters.”

**Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper**

Of all the decisions she had made before leaving Nyx, Rafaela noted, using the authority of the Inquisition to pay for five angel’s sword Power Armours had been probably one of her best. The STC-based protection was incomparably superior to everything she had used in her previous operations.

And it was in all likelihood the only reason why she was still alive.

“It appears our pre-battle information about the *Choral* was somewhat flawed,” the Lady Inquisitor remarked as she laboriously returned to her feet and the three young Sirens her force had managed to capture were dragged back towards the extraction transport.

“Somewhat flawed?” Pedro de Moray teased her. “I was not aware being a Lady Inquisitor required such a talent in Low Gothic...”

“Fine, we were completely wrong.” Their helmets were on so she couldn’t see the face of her colleague, but she had a feeling his face was as grim as hers.

The boarding assault had relied on two assumptions. First, that the Inquisition’s equipment was sufficient to counter whatever psychic assaults the Siren Lox’ena could throw at them. Second, that Lox’ena was indeed the only Siren aboard this flagship. At the time they had seemed like reasonable assumptions. The Siren pirate had never been observed in company of another member of its species, and the Ordo had a couple millenniums of practise handling rogue human and xenos psykers.

“There must be hundreds of them hiding in the main levels of the *Choral*,” the red-haired Inquisitor declared in a sinister voice. “And the strength of the song is getting more powerful as we advance. The Scions are resisting the xenos’ psychic compulsions, but it’s not doing their combat skills any favours. And to make things worse...”

“We are fighting in a metre of water, I know,” Rafaela finished. This was the other great problem of the *Choral*, apart from its xenos infestation; it was not a starship built for terrestrial species. The Sirens were one hundred percent aquatic, and clearly had seen no reason to adapt their ship for the convenience of foreign visitors. “Their thralls are also a nasty problem.”

The Sirens couldn’t use enthralled humans or other terrestrial xenos in this kind of environment, but the songs of the Siren were effective on every creature which didn’t have a strong will and appropriate nullifying devices. As a consequence, the Sirens had the ability to ‘convince’ hundreds of undersea species to act as cannon fodder, and they were using it to devastating effect.

“We must retreat and return with reinforcements,” Inquisitor de Moray stated with urgency in his voice. “We’ve already lost over three hundred Stormtroopers for the capture of ten Delta-grade Sirens and the elimination of something like eight thousand thralls. Inquisitor Zircon has been severely wounded and is being evacuated back to the *Judgement* as we speak. We have lost contact with Inquisitor Contessa since that rift swallowed her and her team whole. Lady Inquisitor, this operation is a fiasco and we need more troops. The 11th Rhoin Cobras and the heavy squads of the Heraklion 105th Ironclads are not sufficient to deal with these xenos.”

Her colleague was right, of course. The problem, however, was that short of cutting the *Choral* in two and venting all the corridors, there were not a lot of Inquisitorial forces able to do a better job than the combination of Acolytes, Battle-Psykers and Stormtroopers. In fact there was only one: the Space Marines. But if they brought them here, they could say goodbye to the ‘alive only’ part of their orders...

“You raise a good point. We’ll secure this alley and retreat towards our transports with the prisoners and our wounded.”

“SIRENS! SIRENS ON OUR LEFT!”

The warning came too late to matter. A massive wave of water struck them and the attack shrieks of the xenos brought many men to their knees.

There were three of them, protected by vaguely ovoid shields. The name Sirens fitted them quite well. Thin and undulating three metres-long tails of a green-blue colour, their upper bodies less fish and more akin to Eldar...if Eldar had scales, no ears, and a love of sea-themed decorations. Their eyes however were burning with power like those of every psyker.

These creatures were more powerful than their lesser brethren, of that there was no doubt. High Gamma-grade psykers at the very least, maybe low Beta. This was not something they could handle with kid gloves as they retreated.

“Switch to lethal ammunition and kill them. Kill them before...”

The second wave struck them and nightmares tried to strike her mind. Rafaela struggled for several seconds before fully resisting the assault...not all of the forces under her command were so lucky. Several Stormtroopers convulsed and vomited before taking their guns and ending their own lives.

Rafaela winced as she took cover behind a large pillar and assessed the magnitude of the disaster. There were corpses of men and women everywhere, and behind the three Sirens who had just orchestrated these shockwaves and psychic onslaughts, there were half a dozen more swimming to reinforce them.

“Pedro, we need-”

There was a flash and a thunderous explosion. Rafaela thought she had seen a vague shape in the water, but that was all.

When the smoke cleared and the sound of the explosion had stopped ringing in their ears, Rafaela’s eyes widened as she saw the entire group of Sirens, bleeding and floating unconscious in the water.

“What...what has done this?” The exclamation had come from one of the surviving Ironclad men.

“Oceania-Pattern Miniature Torpedo,” a loud voice answered. “We loaded with Null-Manta Bones per the instruction of the Holy Ordos. It seems to have done the job.”

Rafaela watched the newcomers’ progress in the inundated corridor. At the last minute, the Space Marines had arrived to save them. For a second, the Lady Inquisitor was almost jealous of the way the Astartes were moving in these watery conditions. But it was a fleeting emotion. Happiness to be still alive and in a state to continue her duties prevailed.

“Chapter Master Isley,” she saluted the massive blue-red Space Marine leading the column of Heracles Wardens and Angels Sanguine. “Captain Bering. Your unexpected arrival is more than welcome, though I admit I did not know you were willing to participate in the boarding operation against the *Choral*.”

“We weren’t,” the son of Sanguinius replied bluntly. “Under other circumstances, we would not dare interfere in any way in the affairs of the Inquisition.”

The two Astartes commanders watched the scene of carnage and the red colour tainting the waters in the section where the battle had just been fought. Rafaela could almost feel their disapproval, but not a word was uttered.

“But the situation and priorities have changed,” the former Alpha Legionnaire told her. “We have received new orders, and they demand the conflict you are fighting inside the *Choral*’s hull must be brought to an end quickly. Lox’ena must be taken prisoner within the next two hours, one way or another.”

Rafaela winced. This would have been a tall order even if she had not lost a single trooper since the beginning of this operation; as it was the objective was close to impossible to achieve. They didn’t know where the Siren leader was hiding in this starship, and assuming they did, it was far from improbable that it was in a location where humans, augmented or not, would be at a severe disadvantage.

“On whose authority?” Because...right now, she had a mind to countermand it. Enough lives had been lost in this ruinous adventure to order a retreat and devastate the immobilised Siren warship.

“The Emperor’s, Lady Inquisitor. A Custodes has arrived to speak as His Voice.”

For the first time since the beginning of the battle, Rafaela Harper was speechless.

**Ocean-Mistress of the Unsounded Depths Lox’ena**

Sometimes, Lox’ena wondered if Mariuvahn Moonblitz had not been right all along. The Corsair Prince had never made a secret of his opinion that humans were a disease which had to be eradicated before the epidemic was out of control.

“We should kill them,” sang one of her granddaughters.

“It’s far too late for that,” the Siren matriarch sang back.

The first boarding assault of the enemy had been bad enough. Her daughters and granddaughters had for the most part remained unscathed, but four out of ten thralls were dead and many, many of their skills and abilities had had to be unleashed to repel the most dangerous intruders. Some even had to be thrown into the Immaterium-Sea to give her daughters victory.

The humans had been beaten...and then the giants had arrived.

Lox’ena had once fought the ‘Space Marines’ of the Corpse-loving humans, and the experience had been too costly to ever think about repeating it. The intervention of these new warriors had been equally devastating. Before they intervened, the Sirens had been winning handily; after, they were forced to abandon one compartment after another. The huge genetically-modified humans had new weapons Lox’ena had never heard of, and they were utterly ruthless. If they met too much resistance in a section, they would open it to the void. Every time the choice was between dying where they stood and letting the desecrators advance deeper into the *Choral*.

Until finally there was nowhere left to retreat to. Lox’ena and all her family, close to two thousand Sirens, were in the Ocean Core, the heart of the *Choral* and the place where the Water Crystal protecting their very souls from the Abomination was located.

Some parts of the starship had passages where a young Siren would be able to hide, but not for long. And the songs of their race, in this instance, were more a drawback than a boon. The Space Marines resisted its effects, and they directed hunting forces in every direction when they heard Lox’ena or anyone else singing.

“Will they enter the Ocean Core?” one of her youngest great-granddaughters asked nervously.

“They won’t.” Lox’ena promised. “I am going to speak to them outside. Layr’dana. You will command your sisters in my absence.”

The air outside the last sanctum of their species felt darker and incredibly plain now that a lot of the pure water had been removed by the humans. Whereas the Ocean Core was like swimming in the warm waters of Home, the human-conquered areas had some unsatisfying smell, a taint that while impossible to describe was still there.

Lox’ena quickly surrounded herself in a water bubble before arriving to make contact with the invaders.

The Space Brutes were waiting for her in a neat column, their loud and sound-hurting weapons ready to fire. Behind them were four ocean-touched of their brethren, individually weaker than her, but united and dangerous.

“Humans,” she sang with as little power in her voice as she could, “you said you wanted to talk.”

One of the largest armoured figures advanced.

“We have come to discuss the terms of your surrender.”

Lox’ena stood immobile for a couple of heartbeats before laughing.

“Why should I surrender? The last of my kind who made that mistake was tortured by your masters before being burned alive.” Her skill using the limited and ugly language of the humans was far from perfect, but she hoped the content of her words had been understood.

“Because you have something my Lady wants. The Second Key of the Eversprings Gate.”

“Yes, I have it and...” Lox’ena stopped herself. In the unlikely and totally ridiculous scenario humans would have heard of the Eversprings Gate, why in the name of the Primordial Sharks would they be interested in it? The Eversprings Gates, plural, had linked Home to Pavia, but Home was no more. And humans couldn’t breathe underwater without help anyway, so it wasn’t like they would have much use for that planet, though she wouldn’t bet her life on it.

Since the humans had attacked Pavia without using it, the only possible destination they couldn’t access was the third Webway tunnel. The one leading to...

“You are completely mad.” Lox’ena sang. None of the Space Marines twitched or moved a finger. “You don’t have the strength...and anyway Sliscus has the First Key, and the Third was lost a long time ago. You won’t be able to open the Gate.”

“In that case you won’t object to giving us the Second Key, Siren?”

Lox’ena stayed silent, desperately trying to weigh the ebbs and flows of this demand. If she gave them the Second Key and the humans indeed attacked said location, the Ocean-Mistress and all her Sirens would be dead the moment Sliscus and his fellow Eldar realised her betrayal – because that was what they would consider it. On the other hand, there were a lot of futures where not giving the Second Key voluntarily would solve nothing and accelerate the demises of her family.

“If I give it to you, what would stop you and your cohort of killers from returning to your warship and destroying my *Choral*?” Lox’ena asked rhetorically before shaking her long mane. “I want the same favour you showed Lakadieth. I give you the key, you allow me the time to repair my flagship and leave this system.”

“Out of the question,” Lox’ena idly thought the negotiation abilities of the Space Marines – or the complete lack of them – were not that exaggerated.

“You let Autarch Lakadieth go,” the Siren matriarch pointed out.

“My Lady did,” the leader of the brutes answered with a short nod, “but there are several differences between the Eldar pirate and yourself. Lakadieth was more a blackmailer and a ransom-merchant, and rarely killed humans. His fleet did not fight against our forces. Like all the long-ears he is a psyker but his powers are anything but exceptional. And last but not least, Autarch Lakadieth paid my Lady over two million tons of adamantium for his life and his command. So far, none of these things apply to you...”

Lox’ena didn’t bother listening much to the rest of his speech.

“Two million tons of adamantium?” She shrieked. “This is extortion! I know the bounty of Lakadieth, and it isn’t a tenth the value of that ransom!”

More worrying, she didn’t have a single ton of adamantium to sell in this hull. The human metals had never interested her much.

“I didn’t fix the price, my Lady did.” Lox’ena really wanted to blow up the head of the Space Marine, but if she did she was as good as dead, and her daughters and granddaughters would share her fate shortly after.

“And what is the price your ‘Lady’ wants me to pay? The treasures of the humans are of little interest to my species.”

“Really?” This time the Ocean-Mistress of the Unsounded Depths was sure the human was mocking her. “Our analysts detected a curious pattern of attacks studying your raids. It seems ships transporting the psychically active crystals known as ligeia really frequently meet unfortunate ends whenever your flagship is sighted in a Sector of the Imperium.”

“What do you want?” Lox’ena asked angrily. “I have not kept all the ligeia we raided in a secret base somewhere.”

“No, but you raided a convoy destined to the Adeptus Astra Telepathica four years ago. Seven million tons of ligeia never arrived at their destination.”

Yes, it would be really easy to use one or two of these irritating humans as thrall-toys.

It was a pity the relief would not last long.

“And if I comply with your extravagant demands, my life and those of my family will be spared?”

“They will,” the huge human warrior confirmed and the Siren pirate could hear the dissatisfaction in his voice. “You will be led to an ocean on an Imperium-controlled world and afforded the status of valuable prisoners of war. No torture will be permitted and you will be under the protection of my Lady.”

This didn’t felt like a lie. Lox’ena had an urge to sing a litany to assess their true intentions, but with so many gifted Marines in the second line, her deed would not be judged as a peaceful move.

By the unsounded abysses, Lox’ena had to make a choice between Sliscus and the humans, between a possible horrible vengeance and the certainty of death.

Why was it so difficult?

**Grandmaster of the Nine Secret Ways Python**

Insulting his fellow Tzeentchian cultists was probably not going to help his plans, but for Grandmaster Python, it felt incredibly satisfying and cathartic at this moment.

“I see Hoth has utterly failed in his duties.” The three-eyed servant of Tzeentch barked.

“Indeed, Grandmaster,” one of his servants confirmed. “By not presenting an offensive strategy, he raised the suspicions of the Enemy.”

“His stupidity cost us many irreplaceable assets,” Python declared without bothering with appearances anymore. “All the ships, slaves and resources he was authorised to ‘borrow’ for his nine-fold plan must be considered wasted and lost. For his sake I hope he’s already dead, because if he ever comes in punishment-range, I will make sure an eternity of torment is granted to his worthless soul.”

The Grandmaster of the Nine Secret Ways contemplated the constantly mutating screens of the *Glory of the Great Changer*. Thanks to the machines of the Dark Mechanicum and the transformed structure-beacons installed near his post of command, he could see what was happening everywhere in the Pavia System. In recent months, he had taken pleasure in it and reminded pointedly to several servants of Tzeentch, including Hoth, that he would be able to keep several eyes on them at all times.

Today he was watching what could only be described as a disaster. The communications he had kept in the inner and outer belts had completely gone silent, for the sorcerers, cultists and slaves who were supposed to accomplish their part in the Grand Plan were all dead. The Hoth fleet had been massacred after inflicting losses so minor it was embarrassing and pathetic. The hollowed asteroids, the thousands of altar chambers, the traps and the multiple aetheric taints they had spent years to prepare and create...all of it gone. All of it wasted.

“Have the reinforcement fleets responded?”

“No, Grandmaster of the Nine Secret Ways, they have not.”

“In that case, I suppose it’s safe to assume they won’t come.” Python wondered briefly what problem had been placed in the way of such a powerful naval force. Was it one of the other Gods who had discovered Tzeentch’s sublime plan and scattered the hulls of the loyal servants of the Architect of Change? Had other pirates decided to engage their reinforcements in battle? Or had Hoth in one of his usual displays of incompetence ruined everything by revealing some crucial detail of the plot to Sliscus and the other Eldar?

Python recited nine cants of the *Union of Flesh and Change* and eighty-one words taken from the *Victory of the Thousand Eyes* to gain hate and renewed assurance from the power he served.

“Grandmaster, we could still...”

“Wait? No we can’t. Do you want to give the Inquisition more time to find our tracks and locate us? The *Will of Hoth* has fallen, and knowing Hoth like I do, I have no doubts that this pathetic plotter of Supreme Ecclesiarch has failed to destroy the great secrets that were under no circumstances to fall into enemy hands.”

Python struck the ever-mutating wall with the beautiful claw the Architect had replaced his weak hand with five years ago. He had argued and argued Pius Hoth was to not be included in the Grand Plan and he had been right as always. The ex-Cardinal had chosen Tzeentch because his faith was weak in the first place, and while the God of Sorcery and Change accepted all those who willingly swore themselves to His service, Hoth should have been left out of all important matters.

The Grandmaster of the Nine Secret Ways made his two tongues click nine times each before continuing to speak.

“There will be no reinforcement fleets. Not in time to do any good anyway.” There were several Warp Storms not far from the Acacia Expanse and hundreds of thousands of Tzeentchian cultists could be contacted, but too much had already been lost and the ‘new reinforcements’ would need a decade or two at least to present a threat to the fleet coalition of the False-Emperor which was attacking Pavia. Python didn’t think the Enemy was going to wait a decade in this war zone. “Tell the nine altar-ships to make their preparations.”

“Grandmaster...is that...ah, wise?”

A ball of blue sorcery struck the insubordinate wretch and vaporised his head, beak and horns.

“Does someone else want to oppose the Will of our God?” The Tzeentchian Grandmaster rasped. “Lower the shields and all other protections. Prepare the sacrifices. It is time for Pavia to experience the fury of the Architect of Change!”

Neither Python’s nor the eight other ships were going to survive the ritual. The tear in the Materium which was going to be created would demand their flesh and souls for the servants of Tzeentch to cross the bridge leading from the Sea of Souls to the Materium. They could have done more with less, if only Hoth had accomplished his orders competently.

“Inform me when everything is ready.”

“Warp jump! Warp jump directly behind us!” the Possessed with six tentacles monitoring such things crowed. “Light...light...gold...gold...these are the Watchers of the False-Emperor! The cold sentinels of the Corpse...”

Python stared with his mouth wide open. No, no! They couldn’t possibly have found their location so easily! But a cold feeling seized his perfect mutating body. If they were here and the shields had been lowered...

“Raise the shields! Raise the shields before...”

Grandmaster of the Nine Secret Ways Python, last of the Pavian Tzeentch cult leaders, had just enough time to understand he had failed his God. Two seconds later the *Glory of the Great Changer* exploded, leaving no survivors.

**Colonel Tanya Sevrev**

The Basileia had removed her helmet and was speaking with an Inquisitorial Acolyte when Tanya arrived on the flight deck at the head of the 1st Company.

A series of gestures commanded the Fay guardsmen and guardswomen to keep silent, not that it was strictly necessary: the levels of noise were so high most people were shouting to make themselves heard, with the Thunderhawks, starfighters, bombers and transports preparing to leave the *Enterprise*.

“I think we are taking too many xenos prisoners, General!” the bald Acolyte shouted as two red-armoured Space Marines pushed a macro-container of ammunition behind him.

“Your objections are noted. Now prepare the aquariums and secure these transports. When I return from the second phase of this operation, I want to have them here and not a thousand light-years away!”

The poor man vigorously nodded and raced away the moment Lady Weaver’s gaze shifted away from him. It was rare to see Inquisitorial representatives flee with so little dignity. In the last months, all the members of the Inquisitorial delegations who had stayed on the battleship for several hours had tried to rival the Navigators and the highborn nobles who had once reigned in the Nyx System in arrogance, aloofness and ego.

As her superior’s eyes fell on her, the commanding officer of the Fay 20th – at least according to the paperwork – marched to meet the golden-armoured insect-mistress.

“We are going to board the *Empire of Sin*,” their warlord declared without bothering with polite chitchat. “Is the regiment ready?”

“It is, General. I have the 1st and 2nd Company armed and ready to follow you. We won’t have the space to take the Chimeras, so I took the initiative to requisition several heavy weapons from the Tech-Priests.”

“Good,” the Lady of Nyx and Heroine of Fay placed her helmet back on her head and the rest of the conversation continued via vox. “You will be in charge of my protection with the Dawnbreaker Guard at close and mid-distance. Archmagos Sagami is already sending a few swarms on several landing zones in order to destroy the pirates’ potential counter-attack forces; my insects and the other companies of Space Marines will detect and eliminate the bulk of Sliscus’ pirates.”

“Rules of engagement?” Tanya had a good idea of what they were going to be, but the Guard had rules for a reason.

“If it’s not human, you have my unconditional permission to eliminate it,” the avenger of Colonel Larkine declared. “I have given our enemies the chance to surrender and spare us a huge bloodbath, but they prefer to keep playing with their Space Hulk and shooting extremely dangerous weapons. As far as I’m concerned, they have signed their death warrants. Any human pointing a weapon at the Fay 20th is a traitor, a heretic, or both. We don’t waste energy and manpower taking them prisoner. If some human pirates throw down their weapons immediately without a fight...they’d better have information and reasons worth the delay of their surrender.”

“I will transmit your orders as soon as this conversation ends,” the blonde-haired Colonel replied.

“Another thing,” an Astartes delivered a data-slate on which the pict of a strange ornate lance could be seen. “This is one of Eversprings Keys. The Heracles Wardens have just recovered it from the Siren.”

The Fay officer did her best not to sound too sceptical.

“It looks like one of those exotic hunting shard-spears which were used in the Nyx gladiatorial arena.”

“The comparison has merit,” Lady Weaver agreed, “but this ‘shard-spear’ was forged from precious psychic-reactive materials and has over two hundred gemstones embedded in it. And it is far more resilient than any gladiatorial weapon we confiscated after the arrest of Vandire.”

The data-slate found its way into her hands a couple of seconds later.

“Make sure every trooper and officer has seen this image before we leave in fifteen minutes. There is a similar ‘Key’ on the *Empire of Sin*, and we don’t have much time to find it. Of course with my swarms and five Queen-ants I will be able to search better than a thousand men and women, but I am not infallible and whatever Sliscus did, it is good enough to deter the psykers of this fleet.”

“We won’t disappoint you, General. We will make the Imperial Guard proud of our actions!”

“I have no doubts about that Colonel...”

Of course when the golden giant emerged from the elevator half a minute later, Tanya gaped like a fish out of water with the rest of the regiment before the reflex to bend the knee took hold.

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

The Space Hulk *Empire of Sin* had already been an ugly thing before Operation Caribbean struck Pavia. Now that it had been used in battle and scarred by it, it achieved without difficulty the feat of becoming uglier with each passing moment.

The trail of debris on the periphery may play a part in this complete lack of artistry, in Gavreel’s opinion. It was also possible it was due to the explosions and the depressurisations where the central cannon had been hidden. And the precise way the Necrons had crippled the engines and major batteries of the Eldar pirates had likely not helped.

Still, the *Empire of Sin* remained a formidable fortress in its own right. Despite having lost approximately one-ninth of its mass in its brief losing battle against the Battle-moon of the Necrons, it was far, far bigger than any fortress ever built by human hands, and this included the famous *Phalanx*.

“Your adventures always send us to the most fascinating places, my Lady,” the Dawnbreaker Sergeant remarked.

He received a joyous chuckle in answer.

“You think? And here I had booked a visit to a nice and boring Pleasure World after this campaign...”

“Somehow, I don’t think that will work,” Kratos stated in a tone that would have been rated as thoughtful by anyone who didn’t know the Flesh Tearer. “We would probably meet a super-battleship of the Dark Age before ever setting foot on the ground.”

“Unless there is an ongoing nobility attempted coup in the planetary administration,” Gamaliel added.

“Come on, my luck isn’t that bad...”

The three Angels of Death chose to express their opinions with five seconds of deep silence.

“Are we supposed to ignore the insane plan the Custodes has ordered you to execute?” The Blood Angel Herald inquired politely.

Taylor Hebert grunted on the vox.

“All right, I admit my luck where military operations are concerned is...not good.” The familiar sound of a sigh was heard by all members of the Dawnbreaker Guard. “The insects we sent into the Space Hulk are in my control’s range. The Delta-1 landing point has no more defenders and I have the insects under control. Gamaliel, I will land in thirty seconds.”

“Acknowledged,” the golden-armoured Space Marine answered. “We bring the dawn.”

Their entire flight had not gone unnoticed, of course. No one had ever thought it would. Small guns which had by some impossible chance managed to remain functional tried to enter the dance, only to meet the fire of heavy bolters and lascannons from the Thunderhawks. On the docking berth, Eldar and several species of pirate xenos were trying to mount a counterattack, though they were stymied by a massive swarm of thousands of big bugs.

In one heartbeat, they were once again in the inferno of war and Gavreel smiled. It was at last time to remove some pirates from this galaxy. The black-armoured Space Marine jumped from the assault ramp and fired his bolter at a sort of snake with four arms, and its disintegration into green blood and dead meat was extremely satisfying.

“SPACE MARINES! GUARDSMEN! FOR THE EMPEROR!”

Forty-plus bolters and over sixty lasguns fired in less than ten seconds. Not all of the latter bursts found enemy targets, but the impact was nonetheless devastating, especially as the pirates were already busy fighting for their lives against centipedes, hornets, wasps, bees and of course an uncountable number of spiders and ants.

And then the second swarm arrived above their heads.

The panicked withdrawal of the pirates turned into an unsalvageable rout. When they tried to escape a mandible or a blade of chitin, they exposed themselves to bolter and lasgun fire. When they were wounded by a weapon, they instantly became first-rate prey for the Weaver’s living arsenal.

Since their arrival had been greeted by impaled prisoners, tortured faces and in general an atmosphere which would have been more appropriate for a Ruinous Power’s interrogation chamber, the Dawnbreaker Guard and the guardsmen of the Fay 20th were in a vengeful mood.

No mercy was asked for in the three minutes it took them to eliminate all resistance in the landing zone and the paths leading to it.

No mercy was given. These pirates had had their chance to surrender, and now, humans or xenos, they were marked for death. And Gavreel was going to be more than happy to send these depraved monsters to whatever afterlife they so richly deserved.

**Duke Traevelliath Sliscus**

“That’s...that’s a lot of insects.” Khoryssa said weakly. “I don’t think I’ve seen so many bugs in one location since the Cult of Strife organised a Death Game in the Abyssal Arena.”

“That must have been quite the spectacle,” Traevelliath Sliscus remarked, not taking his eyes off the thousands of spy-mirrors transmitting the crushing defeat his forces were handed live onto an obsidian platter. “Out of pure curiosity, who survived the double threat of collapsing ropes and insects?”

“*She* was the only one to survive, your Excellency,” Kresthekia said with a lot of rancour in her voice. “*She* said it was an excellent training session. I wonder what *Her* reaction to this would be?”

It was an interesting question indeed, but alas the Queen of Blades was not here today. It was a pity, because the Sky Serpents really needed an army-killer of their own to defeat this new threat.

“The card games’ tunnels are crawling with spiders. The aerial sky dome is a killing field of wasps and moths. We have lost accesses Torment-4 and Torment-11. Artisan and other specialist losses in these sections are nearly total. The Fiendish Fire and the Dark Lancers killer-battalions have been completely exterminated. The damaged cruisers *Viper’s Gaze* and *Pit Cobra* have had their crew devoured by insects. Space Marines are attacking the Avenue of Venom and inflicting devastating losses to the defending forces there,” Ehlynna listed emotionlessly as if her soul had been sucked out by the series of disasters in so very little time. “Given their axis of progression, there is absolutely no doubt they are converging towards our position. And the Sky Serpents won’t be able to stop them.”

Traevelliath continued to smile, but did not correct the Wych which had by default become one of his three most reliable lieutenants. After all, the four of them were alone in his throne room, as all the other pirates and captains had departed to either fight or try to save their miserable skins.

Besides, when you had the sounds and the images of the fighting, there was no use pretending they were winning. Insect wave after insect wave were breaking through the hastily prepared chokepoint defences of the *Empire of Sin*. The warriors and counter-boarding teams were generally overwhelmed in mere seconds by flanking attacks and ambushes. Since the Space Marines were also involved in this battle, the fighting was ten times out of ten resulting in the complete destruction of the forces very nominally obeying his orders.

“I will admit tying the Dark Mirror to each senior fleet commander was a mistake. When Bloodweaver died, I was under the impression there was no one to control this swarm of voracious creatures.”

“Shaimesh himself couldn’t have anticipated that, your Excellency. But assuming you had seen the swarm controlled like this, what would have been your orders?” Kresthekia asked as two more barricades crumbled and died under a black tide of hundreds of thousands of critters. “We can produce many, many things in the fabrication-units of the *Empire of Sin*, but I don’t think we have the chemicals and the expertise for insecticide mass-production in one local cycle...”

The Duke of Commorragh sneered.

“My dear, thinking about insecticide, while natural, is nothing more than a massive trap.” Sliscus gestured at the observation devices. “There are hundreds of insect species, and the vast majority do not appear to have developed under the same planetary environments. As such, a single insecticide would be useful against three or four breeds of vermin...at best.”

The leader of the Sky Serpents narrowed his eyes before pouring himself a new cup of toxin-elixir.

“To fight these insects is to try winning a long and costly war of attrition. And since the bugs will replenish their effectives faster than any army can, we would need to resort to the most powerful weapons of our race to wipe them out.”

Said weapons weren’t anywhere near the *Empire of Sin*, and Sliscus wasn’t sorry about that. Most were utterly uncontrollable mere seconds after they were unleashed, as could be expected from pre-Fall annihilation weapons.

“No, if you want to win, you have to kill the mind controlling the swarm.” And insecticide was worthless for this kind of task.

“Easier to say than accomplish,” Khoryssa muttered in a low tone. “The bugs make for fantastic scouts, and we are completely ignorant of how far the insect-master can control its minions and the details of its power. And in the case we managed to break through the insect tides, there are still the giant humans and their other soldiers following right behind.”

“Evidently, this is an opponent we should have studied lengthily and cautiously at long distances before starting a raid against,” Traevelliath Sliscus agreed. “What?” He asked when he saw the surprised looks of the three Wyches. “Just think about the amount of resources and favours we would have received from our mighty benefactors if we presented such a trophy to an arena...”

It was best to place these dreams out of his mind for now. While such a present would undoubtedly erase the crippling losses of this defeat, his military assets were too badly weakened at this moment to think about a capture operation. If the attempt failed, and the lack of preparation all but guaranteed it would, his flesh and bones would be feasted upon by the carnivorous swarm.

Traevelliath Sliscus preferred to avoid this death. As fascinating it would be to suffer such an agony, the Duke preferred to have other life-forms experience it, not be the test subject himself.

The Admiral of Commorragh left his throne and descended brusquely the steps covered in slave skin.

“I’ve seen enough. We are leaving.” Whatever insects and human reinforcements had been committed by now, the enemy would send no more. The swarm was self-expanding, and the transports had stopped ferrying reinforcements to invade the *Empire of Sin*. The Yngir’s slaves were content massacring the last surviving Pavia squadrons and had stopped shooting or teleporting asteroids to collide with the engines and the batteries. “Is the *Incessant Agony* ready?”

“It is,” Ehlynna said, “but we have managed to extricate nearly nothing from your most important vaults. The slaves and overseers who were given the orders are pinned in the Hall of Unlawful Authority. There is a significant sub-swarm prong attacking from that direction...”

“Too bad, I loved many of those prizes.” Sliscus was genuinely sorry, truly. It had taken hundreds of cycles to find and extort some of these treasures, and recovering from their loss was going to take him hundreds more cycles. But the most exquisite asset was his life, and if he didn’t escape this deplorable situation, there would be no more raids to erase the taint of defeat. “I suppose we will have to leave them. Tell Zekarysiv to defend my possessions to the death, or I will resurrect him just to torture him for thirteen cycles.”

“But...” for the first time since he had invited her in his bed, Ehlynna looked ready to protest, before withering under his smile.

“We leave them. The *Incessant Agony* will have to make an interesting escape and there’s no need to weigh it down with incompetence and Aeldari unable to obey their orders.”

**Second Naval Secretary Dennis Peters**

When Clockblocker had met Skitter for the first time, she and the Undersiders were busy robbing the Brockton Bay Central Bank. He was the hero. The girl who was not yet called Weaver was the villain. The idea of being sent to a new galaxy had never come to their minds. The Wards were obviously the good guys, even if Glory Girl had fully earned her title of ‘Collateral Damage Barbie’.

That had been over six years ago. Now he and Taylor Hebert were on the same side. They were in front of a solid vault door, and they wanted to break through.

If this wasn’t proof the universe had a sense of irony, Dennis didn’t know what was.

“Well boss, I think we have a good idea why Sliscus was so interested in buying tons of adamantium from his fellow pirates,” Dennis told the insect-mistress next to him.

Until now, it had been nothing more than an idle curiosity. Why would the leader of the Sky Serpents be interested in one of the most resistant materials known to humankind? The Eldar ships made no use of it. Their weapons didn’t use it. These BDSM-chaotic monsters didn’t use it in their armours, they were all about showing half of their body and even when they weren’t, they tried to maximise their equipment for speed and terrifying looks. Since adamantium was hardly light as a feather, quite the opposite in fact, no Magi had been able to give an answer.

But now, facing a large vault door covered in a layer of adamantium, Dennis knew the questions had found their answer.

“It’s still strange for a species who scorn humanity’s achievements to protect its treasures with Forge-refined materials.”

“Pirates have to be a bit pragmatic, I suppose,” the ex-warlord of Brockton Bay replied, “and it’s entirely possible the Eldar chose this security methods because he thought the other Eldar wouldn’t be able to easily open the vaults with the resources at their disposal.”

“I despise you, but my enemies will despise this approach too?” Dennis frowned. The reasoning was not one he would have chosen, but then he wasn’t a psychopathic xenos pirate. “Okay, how do we proceed? My time-stopping powers are not going to be very helpful this time.”

Thanks to the monofilament-micro-tube-something the Mechanicus had loaned him, Clockblocker was able to neutralise enemies at a distance – the expression many Eldar and reptilian species made when they unfroze and found themselves facing the barrels of several guns was pure gold. Time-stopping abilities were extremely useful when making sure the fragile walls, ceilings and floors of the damaged Space Hulk did not collapse before the Space Marines and the guardsmen had been able to bypass several obstacles.

But breaking through an adamantium-covered vault? This was a job for a Brute, Blaster, or Shaker, not his Striker powerset.

“You’re right.” Weaver agreed. “Stay close though, we don’t know how many protections and nasty surprises Sliscus has left behind these doors. Remember the acid pools and the crocodiles?”

Dennis grimaced, and he was glad they were all in void armours. Dennis thought his humour was quite good, though of course Vista and a few parahumans didn’t agree. Compared to Sliscus and his psychopaths, he was an angel. No, that wasn’t an exaggeration. The ‘Serpent’, judging by his lethal traps, could have given lessons to every villain of Earth Bet, including the Slaughterhouse Nine and their crazy murderous bastard of a leader. Acid pools, poisonous darts, monsters, spikes, venom everywhere, ‘crocodiles’ the size of elephants, corridors filled with blades and instruments no one sane would even want to identify...the current owner of the *Empire of Sin* revelled in cruelty for cruelty’s sake. Fortunately, they had Taylor’s insects to trigger most of the traps without risking their lives.

“Like if I could forget them,” he muttered in response. “Your Catachan ants are able to eat adamantium?”

“I think they could, but I don’t have the time to test it.”

The sentence was not finished when a wave of blood-coloured insects struck the vault door.

“What are those? I don’t remember you testing them in the Nyx labs...”

“These are Civilisation Termites,” the capitalisations were, in Dennis’ modest opinion, a very bad thing.

“Ah. What do they do?” He tried to keep a sarcastic tone, something that was difficult as the insects seemed to multiply by the hundreds on the large gate, despite receiving no reinforcements.

“They eat. I think the ‘Civilisation’ part was something of a joke from the Adeptus Mechanicus.”

“No, you think?” In seconds, the aggressive insects were carving holes into the door. “It looks like Sliscus truly made the entire gate from a mix of adamantium and some Eldar psychic-resistant material.”

“It won’t be enough,” and when Weaver spoke in this tone, the Gods pity the poor obstacles, living or non-living, who tried to get in her way. “Contact Archmagos Hediatrix and tell him to keep a treasure-recovery expedition force ready. We might need it.”

“I don’t think they’ve forgotten in a single hour,” Clockblocker cheekily reminded her. Each discovery of precious metals, ore, refined products, fuel or samples of archeotech were sure to make the cogboys jump in joy. But he nonetheless relayed the message to the vox-team of Fay guardsmen waiting a kilometre or so away.

“The formalities have to be respected,” Weaver pointed out conversationally as the large security door was devoured bite by bite by the Death World termites – no, Dennis had not been told they came from a Death World, but seriously, if having that species on your planet wasn’t enough to earn this status, what was?

“Hail, oh glorious and infallible Supreme Leader,” he had the satisfaction to hear about half of the Dawnbreaker Guard chuckle.

“Somehow, I don’t think insolent minions were part of the job description...” the vault door cracked and large fissures began to appear...everywhere. Less than half a minute later, the entire structure collapsed with a monumental ruckus.

“We are lucky you own all the banks of Nyx now. No financial institution would be safe from you with these termites.”

“Maybe,” the golden-armoured parahuman muttered quietly. “Don’t advance. It seems our dear Sliscus had left a few venomous surprises for those able to get this far.”

It didn’t take long to see the ‘surprises’. They were called ‘snakes’. Or at least, they were reptiles presenting all the characteristics of Earth species, except for their size. They were far, far bigger, about as tall as large dogs and over seventeen metres in length.

Two seconds later, the living defenders of the vault were consumed by the gigantic swarm Taylor had kept waiting outside while the Civilisation Termites did their job. Serpents may beat insects one on one, but the reptiles were outnumbered a thousand to one.

They never stood a chance. In one minute, tops, the reptiles and other traps were killed and disappeared like they had never existed, allowing them to gain a first glance at the possessions the pirate wanted to keep safe. And they saw...

“Absolutely nothing? If it’s a joke, it’s a very bad one...”

The vault was indeed empty. Or empty of anything of value, there were a lot of reptile bones and a few reminders animals had used this as a living place.

“No, this is a treasure room.” The termites were hurled at the back wall, and began to deliver to it the same fate as the previous defence. After ten seconds, the traces of a concealed wall became visible to the naked eye.

“Rather clever,” the insect-mistress admitted. “But he should have placed some treasures in this room, in case someone managed to beat the serpents.”

“I don’t think he ever thought an insect-master parahuman was on the list of potential threats.” The heretical ex-Cardinal may have had a clue and thus was able to fight for his life, but ‘Duke’ Sliscus hadn’t. Or if he had, the Eldar was doing a terrible job at it.

The next jokes he was about to say about big ears and the wisdom of Eldar suddenly became far less important as the wall crumbled to reveal the true treasure room.

Dennis whistled instinctively.

“I take back everything I’ve said hours ago. Sliscus is a very, very successful pirate.”

The floor of the treasure room had been paved in something that was the shade of platinum. Gigantic piles of jewels, coins of a thousand worlds, gold, silver, and every flashy treasure that might possibly exist...everything which might be considered a treasure was there. Parade weapons were lined by the thousands against the walls, most decorated with priceless rubies, sapphires, diamonds and gemstones whose names he didn’t know. There were dozens of paintings, sculptures and tapestries. Past the first metres, great carpets covered the ground and had been dispersed to serve as repositories for tableware and furniture which were probably worth the fortune of a lifetime. They had before their eyes a gigantic hall and everything was filled with treasures from floor to ceiling.

“I suppose I’d better call Archmagos Hediatrix,” the time-stopping parahuman said as he plunged his armoured hands into a pile of golden necklaces that the Nyx nobility would probability sell one or two palaces to buy. “It’s a good thing several ammunition transports are completely empty.”

“Yes...” the insect-mistress did not sound particularly happy as she let several of her spiders and beetles run in the middle of the gemstones, the treasures of a hundred civilisations and tens of thousands of coins which were likely worth plenty of Throne Gelts.

“You sound disappointed.”

“Don’t get me wrong, this wealth will be very useful paying extraordinary bonuses to the troops, boosting our reputation with all the Imperium Adeptus and kick-starting technological projects, but...”

“But?”

“Think about how many cultures and planets had to be raided and plundered to gain these mountains of treasure,” the comment had the effect of a cold shower. A cold and very unpleasant shower. Yes, that was a very good point. The true owners of the artworks and the money had certainly lost their lives for Sliscus to grab them.

“Nothing we can do about it now,” Dennis observed in an apologetic tone. “I doubt Sliscus kept a database detailing where he stole every object.”

His poor attempt to restore some conviviality managed to make Taylor snigger.

“Yes, it would be a bit out of character for that crazy psychopath.” The General of the Imperial Guard admitted before turning to the Space Marines of the Honour Guard. “All right. We have to find the Key to the Eversprings Gate...”

“I found it,” the white-armoured Herald called Puriel said. “The problem is...which is the correct one?”

Everyone groaned five seconds later when the realisation sunk in. The spear-like sceptres which served to activate Webway Gates were grouped together...and they all looked alike. Fifty-plus Keys, and as far as he was able to ascertain, no way to say which was the one they needed.

“Search this treasure room,” the mistress of spiders ordered. “It would be a bit embarrassing if we took all the wrong Keys and the correct one stayed in this vault. Hopefully the Lord Custodes will be able to tell us which Key is the one useful for our strategic objective.”

“Embarrassing is a good adjective, yes,” the time-stopping parahuman agreed as they walked between mountains of jewels and Eldar statues of an awe-striking beauty. “Do you want to break the other three vaults after that, or should we go in pursuit of the last pirates?”

“The latter, I think. The Brothers of the Red and the Iron Drakes are killing all the xenos pirates they find on their path, but there aren’t enough of them to cover a large front in this Space Hulk.”

Their walk led them to a new alley, one filled to the brink with Eldar and Human vehicles. The majority of them were...memorable.

“I wonder who built this pink tank-limo?” Dennis wondered with a genuine laugh when they spotted this symbol of bad taste. The vehicle was simply *hideous*.

“It was likely a Planetary Governor with more money than sense,” Weaver lightly replied. “Sliscus must have been so shocked by its ugliness it became a raid’s prize, and once the shock had faded it was hidden in this vault.”

“He should have hidden it in these piles of jewels and money.” The Second Naval Secretary of Nyx said while making a gesture to the mountain of green jewels on his right.

“What if he did?” Dennis opened his mouth to answer...and shut it as several large beetles and ants jumped on the mini-mountain of loot and it rapidly revealed the unfamiliar form of a customised Eldar tank hiding under it.

“Gavreel!” The commander of Operation Caribbean called her black-armoured bodyguard. “Sliscus has left additional presents in the mass of treasures!”

With renewed enthusiasm, insects, guardsmen and Astartes began to plunge mandibles and hands into the treasures accumulated by Sliscus, revealing in many instances an arsenal of Eldar weaponry which should be sufficient to equip an average-sized regiment.

“Oh, by the beasts of Cretacia!”

The majority of the Dawnbreaker were quick to answer Kratos’ outcry, but by the time they all ran to his location, hundreds of insects had begun releasing the object of his stupor from its priceless silvery-ruby prison.

It was a gigantic tank, one Dennis could honestly say he hadn’t seen since he had been introduced to the armouries of the Imperium.

Suddenly, the width of the vault door made much more sense. If this machine of war was smaller than a Baneblade, it wasn’t by much.

“What is this tank, Gamaliel?” Taylor Hebert voiced as more and more of the dark green paintjob and a terrifying gun were revealed. “I’ve never seen anything like it in the archives of the Ninth Legion you’ve allowed me to read...”

“No, I suppose not. The few Fellblade super-heavy tanks our Chapter has kept after the Heresy are in stasis in the vaults of the *Arx Angelicum*. We do not have the possibility of replacing them, so it’s not without pressing reason we release them into the fires of battle.”

“But it’s not a Fellblade,” interjected one of the four Techmarines. “This main gun is a Volkite carronade! You have before you the fury of the Omnissiah personified, a mighty Fellglaive tank!”

“The Tech-Priests are going to worship you by the end of this operation, My Lady,” Dennis heard one of the Astartes proclaim, as more and more of the armour and predator shape of the massive machine of war were revealed. “Fellglaives were never introduced in more than limited numbers in the Legions, and I don’t think there is one left in the arsenals of the Blood.”

“It has a thrice-blessed Atomantic plasma hybrid powerplant, and needs only four Astartes to be operated,” spoke another Techmarine, touching the hull and speaking like he was experiencing a miracle.

Seconds later, one of the largest ants removed another pile of brilliant blue ore and the same emblem Dennis had seen hours ago on a huge gauntlet was revealed again.

“Our cousins of Nocturne must be notified...”

“We already called them,” Taylor reminded her Honour Guard. “At least they won’t come here for nothing...”

“And we have a name, by the Golden Throne!”

Indeed, under the salamander’s head flame-coloured letters announced proudly the name of the war machine.

*Obsidian Chariot*

“Dennis, contact Archmagos Hediatrix again. Tell him to dig a passage into the Hulk with every machine he can use without compromising the invasion to come. Kratos, we move on to the next vaults...”

“With great pleasure!”

**Duke Traevelliath Sliscus**

“KILL ALL XENOS! FOR SANGUINIUS AND THE EMPEROR!”

“At least they don’t make a secret out of their intentions...” Khoryssa laughed while firing ten shots back and forcing the massive red warrior to take cover.

Sliscus smiled in agreement. There were no false pretences, no lies, and no complicated plots. The humans had come to kill them, and his Sky Serpents were trying to return the favour with eager enthusiasm.

“Ehlynna, run ahead and tell the *Incessant Agony* our arrival is imminent,” the Duke of Commorragh commanded. “Kresthekia, you will follow in twenty heartbeats. Khoryssa and I will take the rear-guard.”

“It’s not that I find this strategy distasteful,” Kresthekia replied after cutting the wings off a very large winged insect, “but even your Excellency will have difficulty fending off the strength of the swarm and the humans at the same time.”

“In normal times, you may be right,” Sliscus admitted. “Fortunately, I have a treasure I am going to use, which will ensure our unwanted visitors will not be eager to rush after us.”

The young Wych looked at him with an inquisitive expression before rushing into the tunnel leading to his flagship, followed by the two dozen Sky Serpents who had decided to follow his orders and not succumb to the suffering enjoyment spreading throughout the Space Hulk.

Sliscus took a deep breath and then grabbed a small circle of metal attached to his belt, and cut his palm over it. His emotions became dimmed, clouded...weak. It became more difficult to smile and laugh. Everything was muted and more distant.

Four words of an ancient Aeldari dialect were uttered, four words which hurt.

The humans fired a massive storm of fire and laser, and the swarm intensified its assault.

But they were too late.

One second the wall collapsed and the pirate Admiral was defenceless. The next he was shrouded in dark light, and *Shrax’lor*, the fifth Sword of Vaul, the Blade of the Abyss, the Oblivion of Emotion, was singing in his sword hand.

“Now...DIE!”

He had not used the power of the antique blade in the last thousand cycles, but it answered like he had trained with it every day.

The thousands of insects concentrated on him, but it was to no avail. In an instant Sliscus couldn’t even enjoy, the mass of chitin, blades and fangs met the abyss and were found wanting. The humans survived, they were too far away to be touched, but Sliscus hadn’t the time to deal with them. A new wave of insects rushed in his right, and only a second abyssal strike allowed him to keep his head.

“Attrition and an endless supply of reinforcements, ha!” Sliscus laughed, but deep inside he didn’t feel anything. *Shrax’lor* was always hungry for emotions. Normally, there were possibilities to stymie this tribute with psychic methods, but since the birth of She-Who-Thirsts, this was no longer an option. “Khoryssa, we have entertained our guests long enough!”

He ran away from the blood-stained battlefield, jumping over the debris littering rooms and machine stations, and suddenly he was in one of the great dockyards which had been built in the metallic carcass of the *Empire of Sin* after long and painful efforts.

Above their heads, the *Incessant Agony*, pride of the Sky Serpents’ fleet, was waiting.

“I should not have doubted your genius, your Excellency!”

Sliscus managed a weak smile.

“Indeed not my dear...”

And in one heartbeat, the world went entirely wrong. On a spire not far from them, thousands of insects surged forwards, and their arms were like cannons.

“BEWARE! GET OUT OF THE WAY!”

But it was far, far too late. In one terrible salvo, thousands, tens of thousands of projectiles and guns were fired at once, and the *Incessant Agony*’s flanks were perforated. In conventional space combat, the battleship would have been able to ignore these feeble projectiles like the pathetic attempt they were, but at point-blank and with no countermeasures activated, the salvo caused catastrophic damage.

Sliscus watched silently as holes appeared, followed by massive explosions, and then powerful energy weapons joined the bombardment as the humans’ fleet became aware of the *Incessant Agony* and did their best to kill it.

He saw Ehlynna and Kresthekia jump from the ramp and many, many Sky Serpents abandon the condemned battleship.

“Damn it, I had planned a grand speech...poor humans, this is not the day you will capture the mighty Duke Sliscus...I would have to write an elegant and memorable speech, of course.”

“yOur aRRogaNCe TrULy kNows NO bOuNDS.” The swarm buzzed.

“It...it speaks!” Khoryssa babbled.

“iT KilLS elDAr.”

And as this rather inelegant message was delivered, light descended on the docking bay. Several Space Marines were flying towards them, surrounding a human in golden armour. Given the light this one that shone around this one, Sliscus was willing to bet that this was the swarm-leader.

“dUkE SLIScUs, i PREsUmE?” The icy voice came from all directions at once. “THe rEpOrtS didN't meNTIoN YoU hAd A swORD of vAuL IN YoUr POSSEssiOn.”

“Your slow and ponderous Empire remains ignorant of many things about me,” Traevelliath Sliscus raised the Blade of the Abyss in an ironic salute. “And one does not advertise ownership of a Sword of Vaul in Commorragh.”

In response, his enemy drew a sword as pale as crystal from her scabbard, and with a twist of the wrist, it burst into a column of crystals before re-coalescing in a brilliant blade.

The Duke of Commorragh had excellent self-control. That was a great quality for else he would have gaped like an imbecile.

“So you also have a Sword of Vaul.” He conceded with a nod. “That doesn’t mean you know how to use a minuscule part of its power.”

There was no vocal answer, but the sword burst into crystal once more, except this time hundreds of ants rushed at the phenomenon and got disintegrated for their troubles. And heartbeat after heartbeat, the sword which had to be the legendary *Elsar’bryn* began to shine like a golden flame.

“Very well,” Sliscus bared his teeth. “You are, I think, a bit too dangerous to be left alive.” With a considerable amount of mental power, he forced *Shrax’lor* to release more of the abyss’ power into the material realm. “I am Duke Traevelliath Sliscus, Lord of Commorragh, Admiral of the Sky Serpents, and Sovereign of Pirates! I am the Serpent!”

“anD I AM wEAVEr.”

The golden crystals struck the black abyss, and the world exploded.

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

Agiel Izaz had seen plenty of extraordinary duels in his life.

Without exception, they all paled compared to this one.

Lady Weaver and Sliscus the Serpent were clashing, and the power behind each blow was beyond anything he had ever seen.

It was light against darkness. It was the shapeless terrible form of the void opposed by a song of crystal and insects. It was a storm of lighting and splinters, each contact between the two blades making the ground shake like Titans were walking on the *Empire of Sin*.

The Chapter Master of the Brothers of the Red didn’t know how he knew it, but he had no doubts they were at a turning point in history. It was like the galaxy had suddenly paused and everyone had stopped breathing, waiting for the outcome of this duel.

It was, Emperor forgive him the comparison, like watching a lesser version of the Great Duel four thousand-plus years ago. Once again human defiance and the power of the Emperor were clashing with the Dark Powers waiting beyond reality.

Lunge, parry, and riposte succeeded each other at speeds which should be beyond any mortal.

The swords locked again. The Eldar snarled several words to their Lady, which went unheard due to the sheer noise of the explosions and the light and the darkness clashing. The xenos received no response, and suddenly the hand not holding the cursed blade of darkness began to burn in black flames. The darkness began to engulf more and more of the battlefield, but only for an instant. Within a few seconds, thousands of golden ants poured onto the battlefield and the crystal blade swallowed them all, amplifying the power of the light by four or five times.

“YOU CAN’T WIN!” This time everyone heard the Serpent’s screaming. “WHY DO YOU CONTINUE TO FIGHT? YOU HAVE NO HOPE TO WIN THIS GAME!”

A terrible swing of the Nebula’s Shard missed the head of Sliscus by mere inches, cutting the feathers decorating the dark helmet.

“YOU ARE TOO WEAK! YOUR EMPEROR FAILED AND YOU HAVE THE SAME FLAWS!”

The shield arm of the pirate was bathed in this darkness now, and while the cold aura’s expansion increased, Lady Weaver was doing more than matching him blow for blow.

“YOUR VICTORY AT PAVIA IS NOTHING! NOTHING! YOU HEAR ME? THIS VICTORY WILL NOT BE FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER! THERE ARE MYRIADS OF POWERS WHICH ARE READY TO PUNISH YOU FOR WHAT YOU’VE DONE! YOUR INVASION WILL DO NOTHING BUT MARK A TARGET ON YOUR HEAD!”

This tirade was loud, but it cost the Eldar dearly. The golden sword was parried, but not before it touched the protection on the Eldar right leg. Instantly it began to burn in golden flames, and Sliscus emitted a scream of pain.

It didn’t slow down the pace of attacks. If anything, it seemed to intensify them. Every part of Sliscus’ body began to radiate darkness. The sheer power it gave the pirate was simply monstrous, and yet at the time the long-ear was on the defensive. The giant ants belonging to the Basileia of Nyx had taken position on the outskirts of the battlefield and each second saw hundreds of ants die in the golden crystals to feed the light.

Agiel Izaz felt a long moment of pity for the members of the Dawnbreaker Guard, standing immobile near the queen-insects. Their role was to protect the Shield of Angels, but at this moment standing by Lady Weaver’s side without the Emperor’s power would be a brutal and extremely quick way to end one’s life.

The appearance of the shroud surrounding the Eldar’s armour was changing. For several seconds, Agiel thought he had seen the image of a much, much more ancient xenos’ ghost in these toxic fumes. And then the sorcery the Serpent was using from the very beginning of the duel really began to take its toll.

The gauntlet protecting the right hand began to dissolve. And the Eldar screamed, and screamed. It was a horrible sound, a cry of torment and hate, a shout where nothing good and true had its place.

“I REFUSE! I REFUSE TO BE DEFEATED HERE! I. AM. SLISCUS!”

**Duke Traevelliath Sliscus**

Why?

Why?

He was the owner of *Shrax’lor*. He was Sliscus the Serpent, Duke of Commorragh.

He was old enough to have heard the Fall as it devoured the heart of the Aeldari Empire.

Why couldn’t he beat a human?

“I REFUSE! I REFUSE TO BE DEFEATED HERE! I. AM. SLISCUS!”

The pain increased, before exploding in every muscle and nerve of his body.

It was a pain which hindered him. It was not something which brought him pleasure or satisfaction. The Blade of the Abyss was taking its toll, the treacherous courtesan of obscurity and death.

The chairman of the Pavia pirates launched a series of attacks once more as his body was breaking down. Already, the Duke of Commorragh was able to listen to the clamour of She-Who-Thirsts’ hunters on the other side of the Veil. They knew his soul would soon be theirs to devour, and pure, unaltered loathing pouring into his head at the thought of being extinguished by such undeserving beings.

“What...” His sword was still in his hand...but his hand was no longer at the end of his arm. How...how had she managed...

“SpIdeR sIlK. i trApPED SeVeRal AReas oF THE bATTLeFiELd AS The FIghT PrOGrEsseD.”

Deprived of the incredible strength granted to him by the Sword of Vaul, Sliscus barely managed to fall on his knees, and there was no elegance in his collapse.

“I...see...” How many things had the human been able to juggle during their duel? Wielding a Sword of Vaul, feeding her swarm into it to activate the blade’s skills, using other insects to give herself the battleground advantage, resisting his taunts, protecting her allies from the abyssal aura...few beings in this galaxy would be able to achieve such feats. Sliscus laughed, his emotions returning as the influence of the blade was removed from his mind and heart. “I see. I suppose there’s no shame in losing against you...Weaver.”

The Duke of Commorragh blinked and managed to push back the deathly exhaustion for a few heartbeats. Two dark words were uttered and far, far away an artefact was going to activate. It was over.

“I would have loved...a second duel, but it appears my body will not tolerate this sort of punishment. So let me give you two suggestions. The first...” the leader of the Sky Serpents fought hard to not scream as the pain was properly liquid agony. “...is to destroy me with your blade...life and soul. Otherwise...the Goddess...of Unquenchable...Thirst...will push...me...against...you...once more. She-Who-Thirsts...is...not...something I wish to serve.”

“And the second?” There was a sort of prudent...respect? Bah, he could live the last seconds of his life with that.

“You...are strong. Stronger than I believed...possible. But there is...another Queen...in the Webway. She is...not as nice...or vulnerable to your swarm...as I am. If you see her...flee.”

His heart began to slow down.

“I am...Traevelliath Sliscus. Long live...”

The light impaled him and the Duke of the Sky Serpents died.

**General Taylor Hebert**

Exhausted. She was exhausted.

Not physically. The tests she made during the last couple of years proved that as long as she continued feeding insects into the light, her speed and physical performance would remain at above peak-level.

But mentally, she was tired.

Using the Nebula’s Shard like she did and controlling several millions insects spread across the *Empire of Sin* was incredibly taxing.

Still, she steeled herself and plunged the blade into the chest of the Eldar pirate.

Taylor felt it as clear as day. Light was fighting something unmistakeably evil. It was the same nauseating type of presence as the Angel’s Bane, slightly different but with many disgusting similarities.

Sliscus was marked for consumption by a Ruinous Power, and Weaver knew the one most likely to have the claim given the Serpent’s...activities.

The insect-mistress knew beyond question that intervening here was going to attract more attention from the demons.

And in a way, this was not a choice at all. The path had been decided on the *Magos Laurentis*.

*Humanity will not help the Ruinous Powers*.

*Mankind won’t be these abominations’ slaves*.

**HIS SOUL IS MINE ANATHEMA’S SERVANT!**

*I deny you*.

And using a similar tactic like the one used for the Catachan Queen-ant, she obliterated everything with more light and mental will. The links were broken.

Sliscus’ soul, or whatever spiritual dregs of it were left broke apart, oblivion claiming the last tiny shreds of it.

There was a loud shriek of hate, and Taylor removed the Nebula’s Shard from the corpse of the Pavia pirate. Deep inside, the insect-mistress knew this was the correct decision all along.

“Incredible duel, my Lady,” Gavreel spoke up, marching next to her. “But maybe, just maybe, a few words of warning next time? I think the entire Dawnbreaker Guard had a collective heart attack...”

Taylor had a powerful urge to snicker at the peeved tone of the Astartes, but decided after two seconds of reflexion it wasn’t that funny, and definitely not worth antagonising her bodyguards over.

“Don’t worry, I plan to fight the next enemy who will draw a Sword of Vaul from its scabbard very differently...”

And she shouldn’t have left Dennis near the vaults, for that matter. Weaver didn’t know if his time-stopping skills would have worked, but so far away it was impossible to put them to the test...

Her eyes returned to the extremely dangerous weapon wielded by her deceased enemy. The hand she had severed had been disintegrated by its power, and with the darkness dissipated, the general was free to observe Sliscus’ weapon at her leisure.

Aesthetically, it was a beautiful weapon on par with the one she had returned to its scabbard against her armoured leg. Like the Nebula’s Shard, beauty and simplicity had been combined to create an artwork which would have a privileged place in a parade ceremony.

But the blade was also an unnatural colour of black, a shade which looked like it was devouring light and the very essence of...everything. It was maybe crystal like the weapon she was using, but it was a dark crystal...and judging by Sliscus’ performance in the duel, it was an instrument of war with critical problems. If she had not killed the Admiral of the Sky Serpents herself, Taylor was sure Sliscus would have had only a few minutes left to live, at best.

“This blade is too dangerous to be used,” Chaplain Sidonius echoed her thoughts.

“We will bring it back to Nyx under stasis field , and both the Inquisition and the specialists will study it,” she told him. The representative of the Custodes had not mentioned the blade at all – which was why it had been such a nasty surprise – but unless he countermanded her, the commander of Army Group Caribbean saw absolutely zero reason to test this weapon on the battlefield, given all the risks and sacrifices it would unavoidably entail. “This is a terrible weapon, even for this violent galaxy.”

“Yes,” Captain Quintus spoke up. “I for one wonder where the pirate found such a weapon. For all their delusions of nobility, these xenos were really cruel creatures and their heretical technology was in line with the aims of creating untold suffering and pain. And the lieutenants of the Serpent seemed really surprised about him owning the sword.”

“Impossible to say,” Sanguinary Priest Claudius stated. “The records we had access to had enough evidence to confirm Sliscus’ presence in sixty-plus Sectors of the Imperium during the last millennium. The real number of planets this dangerous beast visited was likely far higher than that. Without a full confession, we don’t have the first clue where to begin.”

“A pity,” Techmarine Renaldo affirmed. “I would have greatly enjoyed interrogating the pirate. That Bloodweaver and Sliscus found relics of the Salamanders Legion and were both in the same system was certainly not a coincidence.”

Taylor winced. In the fury of the duel, she had forgotten this ‘detail’. On the other hand, it wasn’t like keeping it in mind would have changed anything. Sliscus wasn’t the type of enemy to be taken alive...hell, the insect-mistress wasn’t sure she trusted a single word which had come out of his mouth.

For the next minutes, the General of the Imperial Guard ate a few ration bars and drank half a canteen of water, enough to feel replenished. The golden flames and the light surrounding her had diminished back to reasonable levels – she wasn’t eager to remove her helmet and discover how many strands of her hair had turned golden this time – and the Dawnbreaker Guards were debating over the ‘best moments’ of the duel she had just fought.

“What is your decision concerning Sliscus’ corpse?” asked Sanguinary Guard Simiel. “If I remember correctly, there were orders from high authorities to incinerate his body once proper evidence had been recovered...”

“Yes, I remember these injunctions being included on his bounty poster.” And now that Sliscus had proven himself far, far more dangerous than the other pirates, she wasn’t exactly in the mood to say these precautions were unnecessary. “Between the recordings of the duel, the pict-casts, and the sword I’m sure we have enough evidence to claim the bounty. We have...”

Green lightning struck a footbridge ten metres above them, and suddenly Taylor, the Dawnbreaker Guard and the Fay 20th were not the only beings present in this part of the Space Hulk.

“Hello there!”

The atmosphere suddenly changed from ‘friendly’ to ‘a mass slaughter is imminent’.

“Trazyn.” Sighing had never felt so tempting. “What are you doing here?”

The Necron thief motioned towards the corpse of Sliscus with his grand sceptre.

“I have observed your duel from my flagship, and I’ve decided his last performance makes Sliscus worthy of entering my collection. It will be an essential part of the new gallery I am preparing.”

Taylor opened her mouth, before deciding whatever question she wanted to ask about Trazyn’s collections might not leave her sanity intact.

“I killed him. His body is mine.”

“Name your price.” The purple-caped robot replied.

“If the progenoids of the Third Legion and the Third Key of the Eversprings Gate are still in your possession...”

“Of course! A splendid day to make trade with you, Lady Weaver!” Somehow the Necron had teleported again and shook her hand like she was a trusted seller, before levitating the corpse of the Serpent.

What...was it *that* easy?

“I will teleport the seventeen thousand four hundred and fifty-five canisters in my possession to the transport of your choice...”

Taylor tried very hard not to show her surprise. *Seventeen thousand canisters*? That was...that was...

“I have empty space on the macro-transport *Laws of the Machine*...”

“Consider it done!” The being which had ‘gifted’ the Nebula’s Shard to her had already turned his artificial green eyes to the Sword of Vaul on the floor. “I was unaware the Duke of Commorragh had this Artefact of Vaul. Amusing. Maybe in a few centuries your collection of these weapons will be able to challenge mine.”

Trazyn turned away and marched off, with a pace and moves of his gown that were too rehearsed to not have been practised tens of thousands of times.

“Ah, I almost forgot. Neferten has agreed to receive you in a formal audience in two standard hours. This object,” the parahuman woman caught a sort of emerald jewel in mid-air, “will allow your flyer to land on her World Engine. I advise you to be punctual.”

A new blast of neo-green lightning and explosions, and Trazyn the Infinite was gone.

“Was it a good idea to negotiate with this creature, General?” Tanya Sevrev asked as she gave her a new ration bar and a warm cup of tea.

“I couldn’t have prevented him from taking Sliscus’ corpse even if I wanted to...and if he respects his word, then yes, it was an ugly but necessary deed.” Seventeen thousand canisters meant seventeen thousand progenoids. With adequate resources and forge weapons, seventeen thousand Astartes could burn a Sector to the ground and probably go on their way to plunder a second one before any true force could be mustered to stop them.

The commander of Army Group Caribbean breathed in and out for several seconds before giving her next order.

“I want to speak to Vice-Admiral Schafer and Archmagos Hediatrix. Let’s see if we’re still on schedule.”

**Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer**

The duties of a Navy officer were many and diverse. The full list included over fifty thousand articles the last time Max von Schafer had consulted it three years ago.

Alas, nowhere was it written how a dutiful servant of His Most Holy Majesty was supposed to react when a warrior of the Adeptus Custodes began to ‘oversee’ your actions. So far, there had been no criticisms...it was not as much of a relief as it should have been. The Custodes was a giant among giants, a shiny and unbreakable sentinel of duty and Auramite. In its three metres-tall figure, the valour of heroes and the will of the God-Emperor had been imbued. Many officers, warrant officers and other subordinates had outright fainted at the sight of the Watcher of the Golden Throne. The Cypra Mundi Vice-Admiral was thankful he had at least been strong enough to avoid this problematic reaction.

But he would lie if he claimed it wasn’t a relief when the images of Archmagos Hediatrix and Lady Weaver materialised on his hololith.

Max von Schafer barely managed not to curse when he saw the Basileia’s appearance. When he had seen the Lady of Nyx the last time, the golden hairs were slightly dominant over the black, but right now they seemed to have devoured eight-tenths of it, leaving only a black strip near the left ear. And her skin was about twice more luminous than it had been during the last council.

“Admiral, has the Eversprings Gate been located?”

“Yes General, it has.” A rune-cant of the Tech-Priest nearby and the image of a great ring which had not been built by humans materialised for all great commanders to see. It was so large the two Arks Mechanicus could pass through it side by side without risking a collision. “The Lord Custodes has also identified the Second Key from all the objects you found. It is on its way to the Gate.”

“Good work. Archmagos?”

“The Third Key and the progenoid canisters are aboard the *Laws of the Machine*,” the Martian Adept declared. “The xenos had fulfilled its part of the bargain. I am preparing the Third Key for transport to the Gate. If I may ask, how did you convince the xenos so quickly?”

“I personally killed Sliscus in a duel and sold the thief the corpse of the Serpent,” the Saint replied. Max von Schafer felt his eyes widen and he heard plenty of whispers and muffed exclamations from his captains, lieutenants and ensigns behind him. Sliscus had been one of the most dangerous pirates in this part of the galaxy...and the General had killed him. In a duel. By the Golden Throne...

“Lord Custodes, how many hours does this leave us to reach the gate and launch the attack?”

“You have eleven hours left, General.”

The golden-armoured woman nodded like it was the most natural thing in the world. There was no protest, no demand to have a report, and Max von Schafer suddenly felt ashamed to have voiced so many objections in the last hours. Unlike him, Lady Weaver had been in the thick of the fighting until now...

“I have an audience with the Phaerakh ruling the Necron moon, which is apparently called a ‘World Engine’. Any problems I should be informed of before I depart?”

“Inquisitor Contessa and her escort have disappeared while aboard the *Choral*. The Siren and her perfidious psyker cohorts insist they are not responsible.”

For once even the Inquisition appeared to support the aquatic creatures’ version. Perhaps because they had recovered every other corpse and the xenos had no particular reason to hide these bodies.

“Disappeared?” The golden-haired commanding officer of Operation Caribbean grimaced. “In other circumstances, I would suspect Eldar trickery, but they’re all dead...”

“And the Adeptus Custodes confirms the destruction of every organised heretic and traitor force in this system,” the personal representative of the God-Emperor spoke in adamantium-strong words where doubt had never been allowed to exist.

“Tell Magos Wismer to detach whatever forces she has available for a search of the system,” the General said after five seconds of silence. “If there is no result after our return from the Webway, I will send priority astropathic communications to Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor explaining the circumstances of this...incident. I think there will be more time for a proper investigation by then.”

“It will be done, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

The eyes of the Saint observed them one by one.

“The pirate threat has been extinguished and the *Empire of Sin* is neutralised. We are still on schedule. Accelerate the preparations. We have not come so far and accomplished these magnificent victories only to mess it up at the last moment.”

The visual on the Basileia was switched off, and for a second silence reigned on his flagship’s bridge.

It didn’t last long, however.

“Over ninety percent of the Melta Torpedoes have been transferred from the ammunition ships to the Adeptus Mechanicus’ escorts like we agreed two hours ago...”

**General Taylor Hebert**

As the silvery shields of the Necron World Engine let the Thunderhawk pass without any interference, Taylor couldn’t help but compare the *Death Star* and this new planetoid. In every way which mattered, the Ork battle-moon was found lacking.

It was not a question of size. The gargantuan space fortress under her eyes had about one percent less mass than the contraption the greenskins had somehow managed to cobble together. It was a question of firepower. The Necron’s great flagship had functional shields, anti-starship weapons, and the target-acquisition systems to reach out and touch its targets with a frightening precision. It had been organised by a cold, analytic mind, as high starscrapers with huge anti-aerial batteries shone under artificial green lights. There were obviously sub-fortresses, redoubts, sub-planetary shields and many, many other systems she could only guess the purpose of.

The parahuman woman had marched for hours in the piles of rubble and scrap the Orks loved to live in the middle of. As the neat lines and harsh fortresses of this new attack moon were revealed in all their terrible glory, the greenskins’ chaotic methods, lack of proper planning, and awful maintenance appeared worse than they had been judged in the after-battle reports.

And without having yet set a foot on this titanic effort of engineering, Taylor knew for sure managing to bring an army to the surface in a straight-up formation would be a nearly impossible task.

“We could bring down the shields,” Techmarine Dyson, one of the ten Dawnbreaker Guards she had taken with her for this ‘audience’ told her, evidently thinking along the same lines she did. “But probably not for long, and we would need something like ten Battlefleets to do it.”

“This ‘World Engine’ would not stay idle,” she remarked, and the Knight of Blood nodded.

“Just so, my Lady. I’m told the Tech-Priests who observed the battle are still in shock after having seen the power of the weapons employed.” To be honest, not that she was going to admit it out loud and risk decreasing morale, Taylor had felt fear too. The Necron moon had smashed apart and defeated the *Empire of Sin* like it was a toy commanded by unruly children. Sliscus had never had a ghost of a chance to defeat this formidable opponent. Maybe if the Necron commanders had been incompetent...but they weren’t. No visible tactical mistake had been noticed, and the Eldar fleet of the Sky Serpents had been reduced to debris and wrecks in short order.

 “The only option would be to bring down their shields long enough to let a capital warship get through and begin a sabotage mission,” Kratos declared as the flyer turned to follow the light indications of the Necron air traffic control.

No one answered, but Taylor could see the grim and tense faces, since helmets were off for now – the concession for a proper ‘diplomatic mission’. And the General didn’t need to be a centuries-old Lord Militant to understand how casualty-heavy such a mission would be.

This was a fully functional assault-moon, with anti-aerial and other Hive-sized defences. The green beams of energy favoured by the Necrons would be employed by the millions.

An Ark Mechanicus would not survive ten seconds before being torn apart, functional shields or not. What would await the elite kill-teams once they were on the ground, optimistically assuming they would still be alive, would be far, far worse. The Thunderhawk was now low enough to notice the hundreds of thousands of Necrons waiting in perfect, unmoving silent armies.

There were probably millions more waiting out of her sight, with hundreds of thousands of war engines.

Assuming a Space Marine could kill somewhere between fifty and sixty Necrons before being overwhelmed, and this was a very optimistic kill-ratio, they would still need half of the existing Space Marine Chapters to have a chance in conventional warfare. And this was for the Imperium of Mankind, the largest Empire of the Milky Way in the 35th millennium.

“Sabotage, sure,” Gavreel repeated in an unconvinced tone. “Their power sources and whatever xenos devices they use to keep the C’Tan shards prisoner won’t be lightly guarded.”

And this was the only thing the Necrons had to guard at all costs. What good would it do for an enemy to knock out two or three defensive towers and a few strongholds? They would be repaired in time, and caused no security threats...

Taylor sighed.

“Well, at least Neferten and Trazyn want to talk...”

“That’s not the problem, and you know it, my Lady,” Gamaliel semi-admonished her.

“Yes, it’s how many of these weapons the Necrons have left in storage...” and like everyone else, Taylor really, really hoped the answer was ‘not many’. Because if the Necrons could muster a thousand of these things, humanity would be doomed should the aliens decide the genocidal approach was the only option. On the other hand, the fact they hadn’t been seen until the 35th millennium implied there weren’t that many wandering around the galaxy like Trazyn.

The Thunderhawk landed and they met the welcoming committee. It was...impressive.

The army of Necrons stretched in every direction as far as her eyes could see. There were gigantic structures looking like a cross between pyramids and walkers which were half the size of Hive Athena. There were hundreds of crescent-shaped flyers and lethal war machines, lesser versions of the units which had massacred Sliscus’ pilots.

And everything was dead. Oh sure, there were some colours, blue, red, black and gold, breaking the impression of uniformity from time to time. But except her Honour Guard, there was no one breathing. This moon was not a home for the living. There was air, but no one was breathing. There were no birds, no grass, no animals, and no sign there ever had been any. The Necrons had really sacrificed life for an eternity of metal.

It went without saying that she and the Dawnbreaker Guard had to clash in colours and shapes in the middle of all this greyness and green light. Riel, fulfilling his duties as Standard-Bearer, unveiled her banner, and under the weak light it was like a flash of purple and gold.

After a couple of seconds a column of Necrons wearing elaborate dresses of black, green, gold and white approached. The being leading them was taller than them, but did not appear to wear any obvious weapon, unlike the guards following with large shields and advanced xenos scythes.

Whether he really needed them...the insect-mistress supposed it would be extremely rude to ask.

The Necron had better taste in clothing than Trazyn, Taylor was ready to acknowledge. The robes and cape were a dark green which seemed to absorb the light of the warriors’ weapons, and the metallic ornaments were an elegant arrangement of gold and white.

“Lady Weaver?” The Low Gothic was cold and unemotional, but perfectly understandable, and she nodded automatically. “I am Eternity-Overlord Qa’akhet, Grand Cryptek of the Chrono-Mysteries of the Nerushlatset Dynasty. The Great Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten is waiting for you.”

That was the exact moment the ground under their feet began to move and suffer a slight inclination. Before they had the time to ask questions or voice a protestation, the equivalent of an army-sized mustering ground was in the process of being displaced.

Half a minute later, the Hive-sized platform stopped, but the smaller emplacement where the Necron leaders and her delegation were standing plunged deep into the entrails of the World Engine at a speed and acceleration that should have reduced them to mist. But green shields were now shivering around them, a form of counter-gravity technology so incredible that it beat every Mechanicus innovation in this domain by light-years.

The progression after a few seconds became horizontal. Eternity-Overlord Qa’akhet pronounced a word in an incomprehensible language, and the walls of this super-elevator began to shine and project holo-images.

They saw the beings the Necrons had been first. The similarities with humanity were eerie...if humanity had been living on a radiated hellhole of a planet, where life was unbearably short and arduous. Most species would have died long before reaching the Bronze Age, but the sick and fragile bipeds persevered. They built immense tombs and monuments able to resist the lethal effects of the radiation and purify the air and water. And in time, these beings of flesh and blood managed to escape their homeworld and began the conquest of the stars.

The story which followed was not flattering at all for the Necrons. While there was no sound, it was easy with her experience to notice many groups of Necrons looking like the bickering nobility of Nyx. As planet after planet was colonised and the severe genetic issues began to be tackled, the aliens were beginning to lose their unity. Necrons began to wage war against each other or against other alien races.

The image of a Necron appeared at this moment. Or rather his mask appeared; a mask of gold, diamonds and extremely advanced metals, and he wore robes shifting at every moment, concealing everything but the faintest hints of his silhouette.

Taylor saw him threaten a new species, one which to be honest, looked like hybrids of toads and dinosaurs. If the size had been rendered right, the Necron leader was about three metres-plus tall...and the armoured toad he was facing was five times his size, and a psyker to boot.

The Necron made a demand. The toad-dinosaur made a sign that was evidently one of refusal.

The next minute was one of brutal, one-sided violence. The Necrons went to war with the toads...and got themselves promptly defeated. The massacre of the Pavia pirates was...nothing, compared to the enormity of this defeat. The flesh Necrons were powerful, incredibly so. They had no Warp engines, but the firepower of the battleships they fielded could easily rend apart planets in a few seconds. They were an Empire, and there were millions of them...

They were not playing in the same league as their opponents. Reality itself was shattered in some places. In one moment, millions of ships emerged in orbit around the Necron worlds. Gigantic armadas led by beings that would be categorised as Alpha-Plus-Plus psykers went to war. Armies of dinosaurs and reptiles trampled thousands of battlefields, their numbers in the trillions.

The Necrons were forced to surrender. She saw the leaders of their race bow to the same gigantic toad-reptile and receive their punishment...which was to return to their hostile homeworld.

The parahuman could only wince at what was, for all intents and purposes, a cruel and short-sighted decision.

Having lived in Brockton Bay and seen the differences between rich and poor on a Hive World, the General of the Imperial Guard just knew the winners had committed a mistake they were going to regret for the rest of their existence.

The next minutes proved her right. The Necrons, cornered in a single system, began to rearm with a fury and hate which was properly scary. And the inter-faction feuds between nobles continued, only more vicious and fuelled by the lack of resources. Billions, trillions of Necrons, were waiting in gigantic stasis ships. The future had never seemed bleaker.

And then the C’Tan came. First, there was a spectre which looked like Death itself, rapidly followed by other monstrous forms. One was a gigantic dragon the size of a moon, others were a vaguely humanoid inferno and a golden cruel figure. Iash’uddra was present too, a tide of metal and eldritch scarabs covering a third of a stellar system. There were hundreds of them, given shape and form by the hate and the desperation of the defeated.

A bargain of damnation was proposed. The Necron leader accepted.

The flesh-and-bone beings disappeared in great furnaces, and the C’Tan devoured their life-energies.

The Necrons as she had met them emerged from them, machines of war ready to conquer the galaxy. New weapons were forged as a species committed self-genocide at the whim of their new Gods.

The Necrons wouldn’t have stood a chance on their own, but with the new technology, their new shiny silvery metal bodies, and the C’Tan to fight the current psyker-masters of the galaxy? They could try. And they did.

The order was given, and the galaxy burned.

It wasn’t a figure of speech. Stars went nova. Systems were reduced to cinders in the blink of an eye. Quadrillions of beings died. Endless armies were called to war once more. C’Tan fought legendary God-like psykers. Necrons mustered their silent fleets and armies to exterminate hundreds of toad-allied intelligent species.

The giant toad-reptiles were on the defensive from day one. Despite bringing more new races onto the battlefield – and Taylor had the feeling these races were *created*, not asked to join the reptilian ranks – it was not enough. It was never enough. And like their opponents an eternity ago, they began to understand they were going to lose.

Backed into a corner, their powers and abilities tore the galaxy apart. First were the greenskins, gigantic and ordered, a species bred for one thing and only thing only: war. They were obviously the ancestors of the Orks. They were a tide of unending green, with battle-moons and fleets of millions of warships.

It wasn’t enough.

Warp-breaches began to sunder star systems and entire regions of the galaxy. Horrors began to plague minds and bodies. The first *demons* were materialising, born of defeat, hate, desires of vengeance, and unending war.

The former galactic masters were vanquished and exterminated...and then the Necrons struck.

In a cataclysmic flash of energy, the C’Tan survivors were betrayed by those they had enslaved long ago. Weakened and convinced the war was won, they had not anticipated this treachery. This time, it was the turn of the ‘Gods’ to be shattered, dragged to the Tesseract Vaults and enslaved in turn.

The war was won...but the galaxy was lost. Demons and unnatural creatures which should never have been created were feeding on the dying embers of the galaxy. Once more, the Necron leader gave an order. Taylor saw the Necron factions build vast citadels and hide their great World Engines, then enter an aeons-long hibernation. A long wait...a wait which wasn’t over for the majority of them today.

The platform stopped and the story ended.

“Our great Phaerakh awaits you, Lady Weaver. Your guards stay here.”

Figuring it would be futile to argue in this instance, Taylor whispered a few commands to Gamaliel and Gavreel before walking forwards into a hall guarded by thousands of Necrons. As reassuring as it would have been to have the Dawnbreaker Guard with her, she had to be realistic. Whatever happened during the audience, ten or thirty Space Marines had no chance to influence it in any way.

A new elevator waited for her, though this time it took less than five seconds to arrive at the end of the journey.

It was not a throne room, or at least it didn’t meet any definition of the word the Basileia of Nyx was aware of. No, it was a bland white, with plenty of machines which gave a ‘lab’ atmosphere. This was on the half-side where she had arrived. On the other side was a glassy expanse, gigantic tubes and vats were producing the image of an ultra-modern cloning and biological research facility.

The Necron which was waiting in the middle of this unusual scene was unlike those she had met, even Trazyn or the Eternity-Overlord playing the emissary.

The metallic body was like one of the Sons of Sanguinius had tried to make an automaton and present it as an artwork. The outer shell was a silver tending towards a pink shade trying to imitate the flesh of past Necrons. An armour of dark green with gold as secondary colour was protecting the not-so-fragile body. The red cape was the colour of a Blood Angel’s armour. And there were plenty of jewels and intricate decorations, though they were more presented like rewards than military awards. The visage had obviously been shaped to look like the appearance of a flesh-and-blood Necron, giving it a vague resemblance with a human’s head. It remained metal, however.

“I suppose it is time for introductions, Lady Weaver. I am Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten of the Nerushlatset Dynasty. I rule over many worlds and World Engines, including the one you are currently inside, which in your tongue might be called the *Starry Sky*.”

The voice of the Necron was low, cultured, with a hint of domination and posturing.

“And I am Lady Taylor Hebert, General of the Imperial Guard, Basileia of Nyx and commander of the forces assigned to Operation Caribbean. Pleased to meet you.”

The Phaerakh made a small noise with her fingers and looked her directly in the eyes.

“I am pleased to meet you too...one of the best sources of information I have is Trazyn...I was...intrigued.”

 A silent word and an orb of blue teleported in the room and began to play a recording. To Taylor’s deep embarrassment, it looked like a recording of her duel with Sliscus.

“It has been a long time since I last saw a duel involving two Swords of Vaul,” the metallic ruler said in a thoughtful manner. “Trazyn tends to confiscate them for thousands of your solar cycles when he manages to find one.”

“Err...speaking of Trazyn, was he made mad by the...”

“By the biotransference which transformed us into sentient creatures of self-repairing metal? No, he was always...what is the word your species would use? Ah yes, he’s always been *eccentric*.”

 Neferten let her green artificial eyes wander towards several machines of her lab for a second before returning to the conversation.

“But as creatures of metal, I can’t deny no longer requiring sleep, food and rest made his obsession with collection stronger in the long term. And the War in Heaven broke us, mentally if not physically.”

“The War in Heaven. That is...the intergalactic war you showed us.”

“It is. The C’Tan against the Old Ones. A war we should never have fought, for there were no winners, and the very cost of launching it was our souls and what made us a species.”

An emotion began to appear in the Phaerakh’s voice, and it was anger.

“I was one of the nobles who protested, millions of your years ago. I was against declaring war on the Old Ones. Obviously, what did a noble working with technology truly know? What importance did it have that my descendants in a few centuries would have treatments to multiply our life-expectancy by ten and considerably improve our power and ability to travel from star to star?”

“They went against your wishes.”

“I was totally ignored.” The Necron ruler corrected with a bitter voice. “Everyone who didn’t agree with the Triarch, the three supreme rulers of our race, was. Trazyn, Orikan...every member of the court and the upper dynasties who opposed this short-sighted move was ignored. Three times. First when we told them to not declare war upon the Old Ones. Second when we told them the C’Tan couldn’t be trusted. And third when we advised them the Great Sleep was never going to work as advertised. No race had ever developed foolproof technology against sixty million-plus cycles of entropy. Each time we were ignored. Each time the greater dynasties laughed at our concerns and told us past experiences were of no importance. And for this I hate them. I hate the Silent King Szarekh, the ruler of the Triarch who became our supreme overlord after the biotransference, and I hate all those perfidious imbeciles who have never worked a cycle in their lives to lead the armies and build the wonders our race was capable of.”

This had the merit of being clear.

“I am sorry to hear you have problems with your hierarchy too,” the parahuman woman said as politely as she could, “but I am uncertain of the role you want me to play in this affair. Judging by the size and power of your World Engine, you seem to have a lot of firepower, far more than I’m able to muster anyway. If you want to destroy your ancient enemies, I am not going to oppose you. Frankly, as long as you make sure there are no human casualties in the vicinity, the Imperium won’t really care either. A lot of the human society is violently xenophobic; Necrons killing other Necrons certainly won’t cause any problems for the High Lords of Terra.”

Neferten made a sound which resembled a chuckle.

“It isn’t that simple. Szarekh never trusted me, and while many command protocols have been disabled as far as I’ve been able to ascertain, many more remain. For the present, I am unable to move openly against other Necron dynasties or go against certain edicts ordered before the Great Sleep. And while Trazyn is a useful agent when he wants to be obedient, his collection efforts across the galaxy are the only priority he has.”

“So you want me to...attack the assets of your rivals and enemies in your stead?” This wasn’t exactly a motivation she had ever expected.

“I want you to attack a few chosen important Necron targets,” the Phaerakh corrected. “As powerful and large your ‘Imperium’ is, the Necron Empire dominated the galaxy in the last cycles of the War in Heaven. If you try to attack Necron Worlds indiscriminately, you would need a few million of your years to find them all, never mind defeating them. Only Necrons live that long...”

“Important targets?”

“Szarekh thought he was rather clever,” had it been anyone other than a Necron speaking, the tone could have been considered sarcastic. “The protocols limiting my actions are not perfect, and they can be countermanded or modified in times of urgency. But since the Silent King decided, for some reason that escapes me, to abandon the command protocols, he needed protocol-orbs and other advanced technology to make sure those limitations would stay. As long as I am not able to gain access to them, it will be a never-ending fight against these damned protocols...and I am always at the mercy of Szarekh should he return.”

“And I suppose your leader hid all these ‘advanced protocol-orbs’ with dynasties that are no friends of yours.”

“You suppose correctly, Lady Weaver.”

Taylor didn’t need long to decide on a course of action.

“I am willing to provide a helping hand crushing these Necrons...provided of course they are not aliens the Imperium would have been willing to ally with.”

“On that front you shouldn’t have problems.” Neferten affirmed. “I am one of the few Phaerakhs and Phaerons willing to coexist with other races. My political opponents tend to have...ideas of genocide and extermination where non-Necron life-forms are debated.”

Charming. Of course, since the Necron leaders had been willing to sell their souls to the C’Tan in the first place...

“And I will need payment, at the risk of sounding ungrateful. While our mutual interests may coincide in several operations, mustering armies and fleets cost large amounts of resources and manpower.”

A scroll was teleported slightly above her hands.

“These are several star maps I have been able to convince Trazyn to hand over. They are fairly reliable, I believe. You may be able to find your way to Terrathens with them.”

“Thank you.” The Mechanicus was going to do...a lot of deranged things only cogboys could imagine to get their hands on there. The insect-mistress was certain it was going to involve a lot of prayers and exploration.

“There are many possibilities for boons and payments. I am not without influence on Trazyn, and as much as I dislike admitting it, that thief has the most extensive collection of the galaxy. If you bring some important artefacts of non-Necron origin, I may able to ‘suggest’ several prizes to him. I am also what your Tech-Priests call a Biologist specialist. And as long as it involves short wars, I can detach small forces from my dynasty, provided the opponent is not a Necron.”

So the Necrons had indeed been listening to their every word when they were aboard the *Empire of Sin,* and maybe before.

“You know very well what I intend to do once I leave your World Engine, Phaerakh. I will need the military help, and badly.”

To her great surprise, the Phaerakh shook her head in a clear negative gesture.

“For this assault, I am willing to provide considerable military help for free. Your target has for millions of cycles raided and sabotaged Necron Tomb-Worlds, including many of my allies and subjects. The Aeldari have been thorns and parasites for as long as I can remember, and an invasion of the Webway is long overdue. I will also confess Pavia had a Tomb-World they have reduced to an asteroid field, and there is still a flimsy hope I will be able to find treasures of my own race in the vaults of the long-ears.”

Taylor was conscious of the fact that there may be other motives behind this too-generous decision, but given how few hours were left before the deadline imposed by the Custodes...

“I am extremely pleased by your generosity, Phaerakh. How many military assets are you willing to contribute to this invasion?”

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

The return to the Thunderhawk was done in silence. Not because the Dawnbreaker Guard wasn’t happy to see their Lady return safe and sound, but because with the technological wonders the Necrons seemed willing to show at every opportunity, every word they spoke would go back in short order to their xenos hosts.

Only when the flyer began to soar into the lower atmosphere of the World Engine the tension began to decrease somewhat.

“We have a temporary military alliance for the invasion of the Webway. It appears we aren’t the only species in this galaxy who wants some payback against the Eldar.”

“How much military assistance are we talking about?”

“Fifteen Cairn battleships and thirty Khopesh light cruisers.”

Gavreel hissed between his teeth. Assuming the Necrons’ warships were ton-per-ton more powerful than their Mechanicus counterparts, this was a devastating armada.

“The World Engine won’t participate?”

The insect-mistress raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“Kratos, I’m sure you are fond of fighting on battle-planetoids, but surely you have noticed that the Necron World Engine is a bit too large to pass through the Eversprings Gate...and Phaerakh Neferten has confirmed this type of Webway door can’t be enlarged.”

“Too bad,” the Flesh Tearer was unrepentant.

“I don’t think the Necrons would be willing to risk one of their most powerful assets in such a risky operation. Destruction-Overlord Sitkah will command this force; we may or may not be accompanied by Trazyn the Infinite Collector. Every Necron artefact we recover is to be handed over as soon as properly feasible. They have promised to return the favour for human-made archeotech. The rest of the spoils go to the ones who finds them. Further pact signatures, tech-exchanges, and other diplomatic talks can wait until we end Operation Caribbean.”

“And the Terrathens information?”

An odd-looking scroll was produced by the Lady of Nyx.

 “These are maps of the southern Eastern Fringe, my Lady.” Dyson declared after a brief glance at the document. “Those are dangerous and barely-explored stars.”

The parahuman woman simply shrugged.

“If it was somewhere close to Imperium-inhabited worlds, the Mechanicus or Rogue Traders would have found it long ago...”

**General Taylor Hebert**

Four hours of rest and she was back on duty.

Judging by the yawns and the tired eyes of some people in the corridors, Taylor knew she wasn’t the only person who wanted more sleep.

Unfortunately, the hour has come. The orders of the Emperor had to be obeyed.

At least the view was worth it.

As the General arrived on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, the activation of the Webway Gate was complete, and it was as spectacular as the rumours had claimed.

The gigantic ring – huge enough to let two battleships pass through side by side – was operational and where only void had been before, now a veil of blue energy was generated. It wasn’t a xenos structure forgotten by its builders millennia ago; it was a door to a labyrinthine dimension, and it was open.

Despite the dangers of the mission, the parahuman commander felt some measure of triumph. Respecting the schedule imposed by the Custodes had been hell for the entire fleet. When her eyes turned to the Custodes – who she knew nothing about save that his codes overrode those of everyone in the fleet – and received a short nod in return.

This was it then.

“Every warship assigned to the invasion is in position?”

“Yes, my Lady,” Wolfgang formally replied. “The transport *Chrome of Molybdenum* finished refuelling three minutes ago. Everyone is in position. The orders for War Plan Pearl Harbour and War Plan Olympic have been written and distributed to the officers.”

“The Necrons?”

“Their fleet is in position right behind ours. To preserve some element of surprise, they will intervene after the core of our battle-line has engaged.”

 “In that case, I suppose it is time.” They had gotten here ten minutes before the deadline. “Put me in communication with the whole fleet.”

Technically, it wasn’t an absolute necessity. One might argue this mission was just pushing their orders to their logical conclusion.

But that wasn’t the truth. The truth was that they were going to attack a completely different target, in a completely different environment, and most guardsmen, Skitarii and other men and women in this fleet had not signed for what promised to be a massive slaughter.

They deserved an explanation. Not the full explanation, it would take too much time and few would have the clearance to hear a third of her words before being executed by the closest Commissar. But she could give them one.

“There are mammals, birds and fishes which feed on corpses. We have given them many names in history, few of them flattering. Yet when it comes down to it, whether they fly, swim or run, they are a part of life. A vulture does not prey on dead humans because it is vicious and delights in the suffering of human witnesses. It simply wants to live, and to live it must feed. Whether a human or a grox is on the menu won’t matter; it just wants to satiate its hunger. However.”

The memories of the *Crimson Impalement* and the *Empire of Sin* came back to her mind, and the first feeling of incredulity and loathing was present in full when she opened her mouth.

“However there is a carrion species which delights in hunting humans for suffering’s sake. I speak, of course, of the bipedal monsters called the Eldar.”

The parahuman General breathed out.

“They do not attack human worlds because they want challenges. Every time they meet unplanned resistance, they flee into their damned Webway before the punishment they so richly deserve can annihilate them. They do not torture because it is a strategic necessity; they impale, cripple, poison and hurt innocents because they want to. They are the carrion birds of undefended systems. They are slavers of the most detestable civilisation to have ever plagued this galaxy. They are, without exaggeration, the very symbol of the word *evil*.”

And the worst part...she believed it. It was the absolute truth.

“Maybe these xenos had some redeemable qualities thousands of years ago. But if they had any, these are obviously long gone. The Eldar and all their works are a cancer upon this galaxy, and they hide in the Webway, confident that all of the gates to launch a reprisal against them are barred to those who would seek vengeance.”

Slowly, she raised her fist in the air in direction of the Eversprings Gate.

“They are wrong. For the first time in millions of years, the way is open.”

“The way is open,” she repeated. “Thanks to the assistance of the Adeptus Custodes and the orders of His Most Holy Majesty, the Eversprings Gate has been opened, and this unguarded path will lead us right to the door of the Dark City and the Port of Lost Souls.”

Taylor smiled, knowing that at least confidence may be all that she could give to save thousands of lives by that point. The rest of her speech would reflect this, even if it was far from the full truth about the objectives given by the Custodes.

“The orders of the God-Emperor are clear and not very difficult to understand. We are going to attack Commorragh, capital and nexus of the Webway, and we are going to smash apart everything that stands against us. The Dark City and the Eldar race are to be obliterated, their warrior-slavers massacred, and their entire civilisation must burn! This isn’t a simple raid, it is an extermination campaign. Tonight the Eldar will at last have the occasion to prove their valour, for there is nowhere else to flee. We are going to introduce to them the concept of total war the Great Crusade has taught the rest of the galaxy! AVE IMPERATOR!”

“AVE IMPERATOR! AVE IMPERATOR! AVE IMPERATOR! AVE IMPERATOR!”

The screams on every frequency drowned out every other possible message that might have been sent.

There was only a last order to give.

“Begin. The *Enterprise* leads the attack.”

**The Webway**

**Captain Aeonid Thiel**

They were almost ‘there’ – wherever the ‘there’ or the ‘important place’ happened to be – when the buffoon serving as his guide tried to kill him.

Aeonid wasn’t surprised.

Theoretical: every Eldar you met was going to betray you at some point of your campaign or another.

Practical: be prepared to betray the Eldar as soon as you have sufficient evidence he has betrayed you.

Fortunately, the betrayal was announced by a loud shriek and the multi-coloured xenos suddenly glaring at him with a murderous expression.

The Ultramarine Captain was already moving when the Eldar jumped in a blatantly obvious attack. He had not the time to count ten heartbeats before his ‘guide’ fell, his head removed from his shoulders.

To his considerable surprise, the friends of the Eldar didn’t appear to demonstrate any displeasure towards him. After a short moment of reflexion, the Astartes decided he wasn’t going to stay here waiting for the rest of the xenos to show up.

Aeonid Thiel resumed running towards the end of this path and it was not ‘long’ before he arrived in front of a small portal, which judging by its extremely decrepit state, was not maintained every day by the Eldar equivalent of Tech-Priests.

The Webway City on the other side of the portal, on the other hand, looked fully inhabited, and its spires were easily recognisable from the reports, even if no son of the Thirteenth Legion had ever seen them with his own eyes and returned to describe them.

It was a place where no Legion had ever marched in triumph or as exterminator. It was the lair of monsters, xenos, cruel tyrants and the evil heart of a doomed Empire.

“Commorragh.”

**Heart of the Webway**

**Commorragh**

**Port of Lost Souls**

**Battleship *Dark Heart***

**Aurelia Malys**

This was not a good place for a slave-concubine to be.

Naturally, there were plenty of worse places to be at Commorragh. The Dark City was full of them, and one did not have to go very far from her current location to reach them. Right below her feet, the slave pens of the slave pens of the Port of Lost Souls were sprawling in all their dark splendour. Or if one was to look a bit further away, the Tower of Flesh-Ascension, where a Haemonculus Coven sold its services to the highest bidder for fresh sensations of terror and agony.

Aurelia and all the women, xenos and non-xenos, prostrated on both sides of the huge black throne, were at no risk of immediately receiving the thorn-lashes or being tortured within the next moments by the master who had just purchased them from the auction market, the infamous Asdrubael Vect, leader of the Cult of the Black Heart.

Unfortunately, the assurance their master wasn’t about to kill them wasn’t worth all that much when the equivalent of a small army surrounding the Battleship *Dark Heart* and more than two hundred elite warriors of the Red Sun arrived with weapons drawn and pointed in their direction.

“Vect, Vect...you truly are an undisciplined wretch...”

The Aeldari who had just spoken was tall, even by the measure of the warriors surrounding him. Or so Aurelia was authorised to see as new slave-concubines were graciously thrown in a prostrating position and her group of slaves led to the sides of several ship-masters of the *Dark Heart* to serve as decoration.

The armour of the speaker had the colours of fire and obsidian, and by some arcane process Aurelia couldn’t hope to understand, red and black flames truly burned randomly when one of the escort guards got too close.

“It was me and my fleet who captured the Mon-keigh, Dynast Xelian.”

“And it is I who reigns over the Port of Lost Souls, arrogant vat-grown slave-spawn,” the Dynast of the Red Sun retorted. “I don’t care what delusions you have fed your slaves, I am the Master of the Port of Lost Souls, and no one passes without paying the toll. Feel free to disagree...I’m sure my fleet and I could use some exercise.”

The fists of Asdrubael Vect tightened around the armchairs of his dark throne, but the leader of the Cult of the Black Heart didn’t protest out loud. It was obvious the Red Sun’s fleet which was surrounding the *Dark Heart*’s squadrons was far more numerous, with a decisive advantage in battleships.

“What do you want?” the younger leader gritted out.

“I want the Mon-keigh cruiser. I think it will look splendid at the top of my new spire, and the armoured Mon-keigh trapped within will be of the best effect once captured for a good night in the arenas.”

“The Port’s charter doesn’t give you the right...”

“I could also confiscate the rest of the ships you have taken from the Mon-keigh, vat-spawn, and send half of your followers to die in the Arena of Red Grief.”

Vect’s protestation abruptly stopped.

“Better,” Dynast Xelian affirmed, clearly rejoicing at the humiliation of the Black Heart’s leader. “My ships are going to take the...the *Forgehammer*, is it?...to my domain. I will send you an invitation to the arenas, I suggest you attend and disperse your fleet, or there will be...consequences.”

And suddenly, everything went wrong. One of the old Gates which were always dormant these days lit up, and from it came...a Mon-keigh battleship.

“By Khaine, how...?”

The battleship advanced for a couple of heartbeats, and it was rapidly followed by another. And then another.

Aurelia couldn’t believe it, and by the expressions on their faces, no Trueborn was able to believe it either.

The battleship fired its massive prow cannon.

And for the first and last time, dawn rose on Commorragh.

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**Extermination Countdown**

**Ninety-nine hours before the Mark of Commorragh**

**Surviving Drukhari Population in the Webway: approximately 187.6 billion**

**Author’s note**: Here the Shadowpoint Arc ends. The story of the Weaver Option will continue in the eighth arc, Extermination. The tentative title of the next chapter is (8-1) The Port of Lost Souls.

Now canon is going to be truly completely off the rails...and the Webway will at last going to burn in the fires of war, four thousand years after the Horus Heresy.

Happy New Year! The Battle of Pavia is over, now we can properly begin the true cycle of escalation...

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