**Legacy Interlude**

**Hell Garden**

*Hell Garden.*

*Of all military operations of the First Age, it is certainly one of the campaigns most shrouded in an aura of mystery on Nyx.*

*There is no Weaverian Marvel dedicated to it, though the names of the fallen, both Nyxian and non-Nyxian, are forever carved on the third floor of the Hagia Sanguinala.*

*Obviously, part of the reason why it stayed as close to a near-unknown war was the relatively low number of troops engaged in the conflict. And most of the human veterans were Catachan Jungle Fighters, who are not exactly known for their prose and the quality of their memoirs.*

*In addition to these points, a lot of the information was classified by Her Celestial Highness herself, and it remained so until the arrival of Hive Fleet Behemoth ushered in the Tyranid Wars.*

*One must also point out that although three Stars of Terra were earned, all of them were awarded posthumously to the heroic guardsmen.*

*And last but not least, it was Catachan.*

*Operation Hell Garden happened during the third century of M35, millennia ago, and it remains to this day the only moment an Imperial force truly tried what can qualify as an 'invasion' where this infamous Death World is concerned.*

*And for good reason.*

*Though all the reports written afterwards conceded the logic of the operation was sound, the after-battle reports of the surviving Space Marines and the Adjutant-Spiders made for very grim reading.*

*Worst of all, even today, the Swarm of Her Celestial Highness is forced to acknowledge that the rapid reaction of the Imperium after the end of the operations in the Eastern Fringe took the Tyranids by surprise.*

*There was no counterpart to the 'Zoanlord' ready to annihilate armies, tides of billions of Hormagaunts, or the insidious poison of the Genestealer infiltrators.*

*Unfortunately, this didn't mean the Hive Mind of the Endless Devourer was defenceless.*

*And the strategists had missed a very dangerous problem.*

*On the battlefields of the world that had then still been called Ardium, the regiments of Nyx, Fay, and hundreds of other famous recruitment worlds had learned to their sorrow how dangerous it was for your health when Behemoth unleashed its unrelenting offensive power.*

*No one, sadly, had thought to predict what it would mean if a Tyranid Hive Fleet turned its malevolent instincts to a defensive strategy.*

*The answers would be horrifying, both in the numbers of casualties they generated, and by the implications they brought into the minds of every senior military commander of Mankind.*

*Now, with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear Operation Hell Garden was the first encounter between the Imperium and Hive Fleet Python.*

*And it was indeed a hellish experience none of the survivors would remember fondly for as long as they lived.*

Extract from *Bloody Hell – the First and Last Invasion of Catachan*, by retired Admiral Roxana Brasidas-Groener, 900M41.

**Catachan System**

**High Orbit over Catachan**

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Pax Imperium***

**5.503.313M35**

Thought for the day: Her will be done.

**Sister** **Kyra**

There were things the harsh training regimen had tried to prepare them for.

Unfortunately, Kyra was sure trying to comfort one of the Adjutant-Spiders of Her Celestial Highness was not one of them.

"What was wrong with the title I chose?" Adjutant-Colonel Bellona sobbed. "It is a perfectly fine name! I didn't have the time to send it to the Webmistress, but I'm sure she would have approved!"

The young battle-sister of the Order of the Silver Rose silently begged for help. Alas, all the older girls smirked and didn't intervene. What had happened to the bonds of sisterhood?

Suddenly, just because she was the youngest oath-sworn warrior...

This would not be forgotten.

Of course, this also meant that for the next ten minutes, Kyra had to apologise again and again.

Because the Catachan officers and some other 'ruffians' had dared rechristen the work of the Adjutant-Spider to the offending name of *Codex Tyranid*.

"They aren't able to recognise the greatness the Webmistress imbued in me!" Bellona bemoaned again before changing the subject. "Please, I want some good news, any good news!"

"Err..." Kyra looked at her new data-slate. "We have possible Space Marine reinforcements incoming?"

"Oh?" The sorrow disappeared, replaced by excited curiosity. "How far away are they?"

"One standard month, I'm afraid, Adjutant-Colonel. One company-strong."

"That's too long," was the immediate and predictable reply. "The enemy knows we are here, and we have everything we need for the assault, since the latest weapon shipment from Ryza has been distributed to the troops two days ago. We can't afford to wait for a month. Please send a message to...what is the name of the Chapter wishing to answer the call to arms, Sister Kyra?"

"The Blood Ravens," the young woman answered before frowning. "I am not familiar with the name."

"Neither am I," Bellona shook her large head. And judging from the expressions of all the Sororitas present, it was evident everyone shared the same bafflement. "They certainly aren't of the Blood, the Webmistress made sure we can recognise the colours and sigils of every Chapter of Beloved Sanguinius' line! And I don't think they were signatories of the Conference of Macragge. I could be mistaken, of course. I wasn't there, and the Space Marines have not been my focus. Theresa! Access to my console, please!"

Obviously there was a small moment of rush to the devices installed nearby, which was over in a minute.

After that, it was just a question of time before the small spiders unlocked the highly-secure database reserved to the Adjutant-Colonel. A few more seconds and-

"Has someone placed thieving Trazyn's file in the wrong location?"

The question out of Bellona's mouth made her raise both eyebrows in astonishment. If there was something everyone took great pride in when it came to serve Her Celestial Highness, it was in making as few mistakes as possible and-

"How in the name of Holy Bacta did they manage to steal a Fra'al Battlecruiser?"

What?

"And they used it as a Q-Ship to board and steal more xenos hulls! Oh, I bet the Inquisition loved that."

*What?*

"They also earned five Penance Crusades in the last two millennia," Bellona read aloud. "I've never heard of a single Chapter earning so many black marks and not being purged by the High Lords...save the Space Wolves, of course."

"It could be a corruption of the data, as you said, Adjutant-Colonel," Claire suggested. "The Inquisition can be tolerant of some...eccentricities when it is the Adeptus Astartes doing them, but there are limits."

"I shall hope so, because it is written here," an accusatory leg was pointed at the hololithic screen, "that these thieves stole a *Battle-Barge* of the Marines Malevolent, and a Lady Inquisitor sent them away with a 'well-done' message! I mean, which Chapter would be so mentally crippled as to name itself the *Marines Malevolent*! Even the Traitor Marines have far more sense than that!"

And this was the Adjutant-Spider who had thought using a variant of the Uplifting Primer's name was a good idea for her book speaking...

"Anyway," Bellona sighed loudly. "I suppose we can always accept the help. If the Tyranids are all dead before they arrive, I will apologise for the fact their services are not needed, and the Adeptus Mechanicus will offer them a few weapons, along with the gratitude of the Webmistress for their dedication."

There was more frenetic tapping. No further remarks came out, however.

And as always, the elder sisters were of no help at all.

Kyra had to clear her throat...again.

"I suppose this means there is no reason to change the schedule of Operation Hell Garden, Adjutant-Colonel?"

"No reason at all," the answer came promptly and unflinchingly. "We located the ancient crater where the World Spirit of Catachan is almost certainly hidden. And all the Space Marines deployed on the world below agree that the aggression levels of the fauna and the flora skyrocket the closer we push in this direction. On the subject of good news, Adjutant-Captain Kali had rallied many colonies of spiders to our cause. We are ready to execute the Webmistress' orders."

This was the positive view, yes. Yet there had been disappointments. Wherever the few Adjutant-Spiders went on Catachan, there was no denying the ant colonies fled like they were facing an invasion of the Archenemy. Actually, would the insects of this Death World flee a daemonic invasion in the first place? Something to ponder at a later time.

"The approach still presents a...significant amount of risk," Claire said in the names of everyone present.

"One must take risks when the Webmistress demands we do our utmost for her!" Bellona told them joyously. "And I have extensively analysed the threat represented by the Tyranids! We are going to surprise them by an insertion right on their doorstep! The 'Toad' strategy has no precedent in Imperial history, and this will bring them on the defensive from the very beginning!"

Kyra saluted, trying to not let excitation take too much of her. This was it, then her first battle!

"Oh, and Sister Kyra?"

"Yes, Adjutant-Colonel!"

"Please inform the good Rear-Admiral I will be a bit late for tea today..."

Yes, many of her sisters laughed. The young battle-sister swore there would be retribution one way or another before this campaign was over!

**Beyond** **the last star of the Eastern Fringe – the Galactic Void**

If the Hive Mind had been able to gather half of the resources expended on the world where the Golden Prey had prevented it from satisfying its hunger, victory would have been certain.

It was inconvenient that those resources did not exist.

This pantry-world had been acknowledged as critically important.

It was, after all, the only one where the Hive Mind knew for certain that the Golden Prey was aware of one of their scouts' existence.

There was never any question on whether a counterattack would come.

It was a pity the hive-vanguard's presence was weak.

The Bio-Ship of the first expedition had underestimated some species of Prey, and it had crashed violently on the pantry-world.

The destruction created by this event had been assuredly sub-optimal for the Hive Mind's plans.

By the time contact had been made to investigate if the Golden Prey was known to the synapse unit, the number of assets could be counted on one operation-extremity, with claws left to spare.

Measures had been taken to remedy this, but the process had been incredibly slow. After being left alone so long on its own, the synapse unit had grown stagnant, content to devour pitiful quantities of biomass and to pour its hunger into the gestalt-construct's core.

It was an imperfect tool.

But it was the only one the Hive Mind had, and sending a replacement was not possible.

It would have to do.

Still, it was inconvenient.

The Hive Mind had to assign an entire Relay-Moon to take control of the synapse unit, and the entire process had taken more time than efficiency called for.

And then the lesser prey serving the Golden Prey had come, far faster than had ever been estimated feasible.

This was not a major setback, for the Hive Mind was now aware that this all-too-cunning-prey had greater faster-than-light deployment capabilities than initially thought of.

A cold intellect would always prefer losing as few assets as possible when discovering capacities of utmost importance, and the Hive Mind's intelligence was very cold indeed.

It was still one more inconvenience the Hive Mind could have done without.

The reorganisation around the synapse unit was incomplete.

There was only one Brood Nest active, and its ability to create more than the most basic assets was negligible.

They would be no match for the prey armies, though the first screening indicated the Golden Prey was not present in person.

It had taken some calculations, but the Hive Mind had decided to offer the prey the battle it seemed to seek on this pantry-world.

While the assets were small compared to the far greater resources expended against the Golden Prey, the choice of this particular Relay-Moon to give orders had proven a strong advantage, for the Norn-units merged into it had evolved and mastered their hunger. On the offensive, they would not have been as strong as the Vanguard Fleet which was on its way to devour this galaxy the pantry-world was part of.

But the circumstances were perfect to test the lesser organisms gravitating around the Golden Prey.

Yes, a defensive mindset had its use here, and it would be supported by the influence the synapse unit had over the gestalt-construct.

The calculations did not ascertain the Hive Mind would emerge victorious from the struggle.

But the lesser prey had settled this world. If the vigour it had defended the other one from the ancient asset's assault was any indication, the pantry would not be destroyed to deny the Hive Mind its due.

If the hunger was stopped once more, neither the Relay-Moon nor the Hive Mind would lose anything important.

Yes, the strategy was as efficient as the limited assets allowed for.

Much would be learned from this new battle with the lesser preys.

And if the organisms devoured resulted in a significant loss of capability for the Golden Prey, so much for the better.

The Hive Mind had been taught a very painful lesson, in addition to being denied.

It was going to be incredibly satisfying sating two types of hunger at the same time.

The Hive Mind readied its assets and waited for the prey to make the first move.

**Catachan System**

**Catachan**

**Somewhere in the Green Hell**

**5.504.313M35**

**Sergeant** **Javier Cortazar**

Contrary to what one might believe, the Catachan Guardsmen had a rich vocabulary to describe the different parts of their planet.

And like many Death Worlds, the reference points were the Redoubts, which were the closest thing you had to a safe haven on Catachan. The further away you were from one, the greater dangers you were likely to face.

The difference between Catachan and other Death Worlds of the Imperium, of course, was how fast the odds of survival dropped when you left a Redoubt. Modern artillery being modern artillery, on plenty of planets settled in the name of the Emperor, there were men and women who lived a couple of kilometres away from the great walls of a fortress without selling away their lives. The 'safe zone' was often close to twenty kilometres in radius, though it applied mostly to the less dangerous categories of 'Death World'.

In this verdant wilderness the Jungle Fighters called home, anything beyond a kilometre of a Redoubt was best translated as 'Green Hell'.

Simple deduction could tell you that the aforementioned 'Hell' of course covered most of the planet.

And Sergeant Javier Cortazar of the Raptors Space Marine Chapter had not been surprised that some local cants described the idea of travelling there alone as a particularly audacious form of suicide.

This was for reckless adventurers who tried to reach points twenty kilometres away from a Redoubt, mind you.

Javier had pushed far, far further than that; as the warships in orbit were able to calculate his coordinates with precision, he was some two hundred and ninety-seven kilometres away from the closest Catachan settlement.

Some bureaucrat idiots – the galaxy was filled with them, alas – had complained to Lady Weaver some months ago how it was possible in the first place that the Catachan garrisons had not noticed a Tyranid presence on their homeworld.

The Victor of Commorragh and Macragge had been perfectly right to lambast them and retort that it would have been way more surprising if the Catachan jungle-experts had been able to report the sign of a Tyranid presence in the first place.

The new communication relay installed in his Mark IX's helmets buzzed, and the voice of his Captain arrived to his ears a second after that.

"Almost in position, brother?"

"'Almost' is the key word," Javier grunted, striking down one of the big yellow-black snakes which had tried to attack from behind. Fortunately, the brand-new Nyx-pattern Power Sword severed the beast effortlessly, and his armoured boot made sure the head was appropriately dealt with. "I am more and more convinced the pace of the offensive the Spiders want is deliberately optimistic."

"I feel the same." There was a pause. "The Mark IX?"

"The shields are down, permanently, as I feared. They have not been designed to deal with permanent attacks coming every minute." Javier snorted. "This might be for the best. They were drawing too much power and the outcome wasn't satisfying."

"We can't help but count the days separating us from the arrival of the Mark X, eh?"

The Raptors Sergeant had to slaughter a series of Strangleplants by blade and then send one of his last Bolter Shells inside a Venus Mantrap's maw before saying one more word.

"With each footstep, I become more and more convinced the appropriate armour to deal with this Death World is a hover-tank with the firepower to incinerate entire square kilometres of jungle, brother."

A chuckled was heard on the other end of the communication relay.

"I'm afraid that if Nyx or another Imperial world has armoured vehicles like the one you want, they are currently not selling them to any Chapter. And I see you are in position now."

"Yes. I have a superb view of a glorious piece of Green Hell."

Some of his brothers may have even appreciated the beauty offered by the fangs, claws, and spikes of Catachan.

Javier had arrived on the ridge giving him a view of a massive valley flanked from north and south by moderately elevated peaks.

It was a landscape of lush green colours, and the roars of carnivorous predators – assuming *anything* wasn't carnivorous here – accompanied every step.

"The records were right. There must have been a Redoubt here built at some point not long after the first settlers arrived."

Of course, by now, the Redoubt's whole structure had been devoured by the jungle.

"Poor bastards," his Captain voiced. "The Tyranids, you think?"

"I don't think so, although maybe indirectly? The wildlife seems unusually aggressive in the last hour."

"You have the coordinates?"

"I'm sending them. I'm playing it with a big buffer: roughly three kilometres east of the Redoubt's ruins. That should provide the army enough margin if something goes wrong."

"Coordinates received and acknowledged, brother." Javier had only to wait for ten seconds before the announcement which was in many ways the opening stage of Hell Garden arrived. "The Mechanicus Cruiser is launching the BX-T torpedo."

In a void battle, the outcome would have required several minutes of patience.

Here, with the fleet in high orbit, the explosion arrived a second after 'torpedo' was uttered.

It was an enormous airburst explosion, several metres above the highest trees of the valley that for some long-forsaken reason, the Catachan had nicknamed 'Devil's Den'. And no, according to satellite imagery, the quantity of Catachan Devils here was not superior to any other region of the Death World.

Plenty of Flesh Tearers would clearly have been disappointed by the lack of devastation.

There was a small zone where the trees, plants, and animals had been blasted away, but damages like that were erased by the jungle within ten minutes.

But razing the valley by orbital fire was far from the plan's intention.

The purple smog that was now spreading was the true attack; the torpedo launched from a Cruiser's tube had just been means of delivery.

And the effect was impressive.

In the distance, several croaking sounds resonated.

And the valley's jungle began to fall silent.

The thunderous roars vacillated, the hisses of the myriads of snakes betrayed something like fear before ending.

The purple smog spread.

And the croaking symphony increased in potency, with thousands of 'singers' joining the 'song'.

"The Toads are reacting as expected, Captain." He said formally.

To be honest, Javier didn't know who had this vicious idea of spreading Barking Toad pheromones over a single concentrated area, but he approved it with all his two hearts.

Because now, you had the equivalent of a small army of Greater and Lesser Barking Toads, the most dreaded animals of Catachan, all converging on the zone the Mechanicus ordnance had saturated with pheromones.

Understandably, all the fauna of the valley tried to flee this unanticipated migration, understanding what was to come.

One single Great Barking Toad could liquefy anything within a one kilometre-radius, and there were now hundreds, maybe thousands converging on a single location.

"I am taking cover in a cave nearby." The place had most likely a drake or something equally nasty hiding in it, but it was better to ensure one more layer of protection, even if according to Mechanicus cogitators, he should be well outside the blast zone. "I recommend sending the second torpedo in ten seconds."

"Recommendation sent...and accepted. Good luck, brother."

"Who needs luck when the Barking Toads are providing a natural Exterminatus?"

Javier's Power Sword was plunged into the neck of a Catachan Mountain Drake when the entire world became white behind him.

**Catachan System**

**High Orbit over Catachan**

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Pax Imperium***

**5.504.313M35**

**Adjutant-Colonel** **Bellona**

"Ha! Ha! Ha! It worked! It worked!"

The Mechanicus Archmagos on her screen bowed.

"It is as you say, Adjutant-Colonel. The unconventional attack has resulted in a level of destruction that is not unlike one generated by decades of war, or by the glorious ordnance of the Exterminatus."

"Radius?" she asked. Professionalism came before gleeful satisfaction.

"The auspexes estimate an imperfect circle eight kilometres in radius. The mountains on the north and the south of the valley have attenuated the effects of the blast in these two cardinal directions."

"Excellent! The variant 'Toad' has proven extremely effective! Praise the Webmistress!"

"I still recommend to execute it two more times, Adjutant-Colonel."

"Really?"

"It is probable we missed quite a few Barking Toads of the Devil's Den valley the first time. And we have produced six BX-T torpedoes in the last few days. A surfeit of prudence will not be a hindrance to the Chosen of the Omnissiah's plans."

Bellona thought about the idea for several seconds, deliberated with two of her sisters, and decided the argument may be overly cautious, but it wasn't wrong.

"You have my permission to proceed, Archmagos. I give you four more minutes to deploy the pheromones for two more 'Toad-blasts', as the Jungle Fighters have already nicknamed them."

The baby Ogryns were certainly as strong physically as they lacked originality in their naming conventions.

"I leave you to your duties, Archmagos. On my side, I am going to be very busy with Chapter Master Yarhibol and General Schwarz coordinating the first wave. We have our landing zone, and we deploy in twenty minutes!"

"You will have-"

At first, Bellona thought the representative of the Tech-Priests had a problem with his hololithic imagery, for he seemed to have frozen.

But no, everything was working fine on both hands.

So why-

"Adjutant-Colonel," the red-robed cogboy told her, and his voice was shaken. "We are detecting a lot of energy signatures on Catachan that weren't there before."

"By a lot, you mean a few dozens?"

"Three, no four thousand, and the numbers are rising...some are generating more energy than Theta-pattern Imperial cities?"

Bellona froze.

"What?"

**Beyond** **the last star of the Eastern Fringe – the Galactic Void**

It seemed the Prey's resourcefulness shown during the battle against the ancient asset was the norm, not an exception.

It was cunning, the Hive Mind acknowledged.

The toxic amphibian lifeforms of the pantry-world had been a source of interest for eventual assimilation. The toxicity of the explosion obviously caused a loss of precious biomass, but the affected zone did not stay dangerous for long, and the effect the amphibians had on the rest of the untouched biomass were incredibly useful.

The prey had realised that, and used it to destroy the unfavourable environment where it would endure significant losses before facing the Hive Mind directly.

Guessing the strategy of the Prey directing the will of the meat-assets did not require a lot of forethought.

What it had done once, it could do several times. The limits of such a brutal yet effective strategy were the number of amphibians nearby and the supply of projectiles the fleet in orbit had at its disposal.

The Hive Mind arrived rapidly to the conclusion that there was an unacceptable risk the synapse unit and the other assets would be annihilated long before this unplanned bombardment ceased.

This was extremely inconvenient.

Nothing was learned of the tactics of the Prey that way, and the goal of inflicting significant losses to the Golden Prey's assets was out of reach since the lesser organisms would not deploy somewhere the Hive Mind's local assets could strike at them.

The bombardment had to stop.

This was beyond the capabilities of the Hive Mind, but the gestalt-construct linked to the pantry-world was not so limited.

It carried a high amount of risk. The gestalt-construct had a Guardian. Though it had slept for longer than the first synapse unit survived on the pantry-world, the Relay-Moon could not calculate precisely how much agitation would result in the Guardian's awakening.

The Hive Mind weighed the benefits and drawbacks coldly and hungrily.

The decision was made.

The fleet above the pantry-world had to be disorganised.

The gestalt-construct had to be pushed to activate all its anti-orbital defences.

It would be imperfect, for the Hive Mind wouldn't have control of them.

But perfect solutions, with the limited resources the Hive Mind had at its disposal on this world, were not feasible at all.

**Catachan System**

**High Orbit over Catachan**

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Pax Imperium***

**5.504.313M35**

**Rear-Admiral** **Fujiko Yamamoto**

"By the Golden Throne! What are those things?"

The satellites of the cogboys had been unusually focused on the tumulus which had been at some point a human Redoubt – it had been almost invisible as the vegetation had swallowed it whole, but now that the Toads had sterilized everything, the relief was revealed to everyone.

It wasn't something she had a lot of seconds to marvel at.

Why?

Well, it gave everyone a prime view of the giant flower which was digging itself out of the earth.

It was a gigantic thing: easily the size of an entire Hive hab-block.

It had long blue roots and when the entire process was over, a giant flower of pink and green opened as if to greet the sun of the Catachan System. In a recess of mind, the thought came it looked a lot like the 'Heliosa' some artists of Hive Athena had commissioned in attempts to impress Lady Weaver.

Of course, normal flowers didn't generate such tremendous energies. Nor they did produce seismic anomalies and plenty of other extremely worrying signs.

"Raise the shields," Fujiko ordered.

"Admiral?"

"Full power to the Void Shields!" she barked imperiously. "I don't know what form it will take, but this is a reaction to our attack! The fleet is to pour all the power it can into the Void Shields, defensive measures are to be engaged! Our priority is to defend the transports!"

One by one, the Captains obeyed. Some of them clearly took their time, and it brought an expression of disgust to her face.

Lax. Despite her warnings, many officers had been lax and overconfident, certain this was an easy mission that couldn't possibly in any way threaten their ships and crews as long as the quarantine procedures were properly followed.

"Enemy fire! Enemy fire coming from the giant flowers! Ionisation...God-Emperor, those are giant plasma batteries in all but name!"

And in stationary high orbit with only minimal warning, her fleet couldn't possibly evade.

The delay of reaction was too short, and the same was true of the distance of engagement.

Explosions began to light the atmosphere of the Death World.

"Six hits! Shields to ninety-seven percent, Admiral!"

There were many sounds of relief.

Fujiko didn't share this feeling in the slightest. Three percent for a Battlecruiser of the Mars-class like her flagship was equivalent to above *thirty percent* for a Destroyer.

And as the thousands of signatures representing hostile flowers clearly indicated, enemy fire had way more than six shots. So-

"Critical damage on the Warrior-class *Red Rider*!"

Plenty of new officers had been given command of the new Destroyers recently completed by the Nyxian shipyards. Fujiko didn't know if this one had been incompetent or had yet to train his crew to competent standards, but he paid for it, as his Void Shields had clearly not been raised in time.

And the Navy was going to lose the Destroyer. Already it was ravaged by explosions, and there were escape pods pouring out of several sections.

Fujiko winced, before checking on the rest of the fleet. So far at least, no transports had been destroyed. This was the good news. The bad news was that some had shields at twenty percent after this onslaught.

Her lips tightened.

It was said no plan survived contact with the enemy, and once again the old military saying had proven true.

The Rear-Admiral exhaled, and then punched a button.

A second later, the arachnid's head she wanted to see appeared on her command display.

"Adjutant-Colonel Bellona. My fleet can't endure the kind of orbital fire we've just been targeted by for long. If the enemy was human or some other technological-advanced xenos, I would suggest we destroy the anti-orbital batteries one by one. But here there are far too many of them, and if we destroy them, I fear the enemy will simply grow new ones."

The action dictated by the events was simple. That didn't mean it wasn't going to leave an atrocious taste in her mouth, because she knew very well how many people were going to die from it.

"I suggest you deploy all forces at your disposal on Catachan immediately. My fleet will try to neutralise all the anti-orbital flowers while you make your descent, but after that we will have to leave this exposed position. We will try to provide you as much reconnaissance and supply capacity as possible, of course, but I'm afraid the original plan has just been scrapped."

To her relief, the Adjutant-Spider didn't scream or show any kind of displeasure. The behaviour, as much as the frenetic moves of Lady Weaver's arachnid lieutenant betrayed, did indicate the confidence of Bellona had been shaken.

"I completely agree with your conclusions, Admiral." The golden spider made a very human-like nod. "But you can't make orbital strikes on the giant flower of Devil's Den. It's right in the middle of the landing zone. Our Space Marines and the special units will have to neutralise it the hard way."

And if the enemy had anticipated their reaction, it was going to be a nightmare to do so.

"I myself will deploy with the second wave, Admiral. If we don't see each other again, I suppose I can tell you I will miss the tea ceremonies. May the blessings of the Webmistress be upon us all!"

"And I will pray the God-Emperor for your survival and victory, Adjutant-Colonel. You look like you are going to need it."

**Catachan**

'**Heliosa Flower' – anti-orbital Plasma Battery of Catachan**

**5.506.313M35**

**Captain** **Hekamiah**

Hekamiah didn't know what the most infuriating part of the affair was.

That he had spent several hours firing everything he could at a giant flower?

That said flower had literally endured the assault without bothering to do anything but spraying his forces with some acid-loaded spores?

Or was it that the whole giant thing had been neutralised by a few Ambulls burrowing under it under the command of an Adjutant-Spider?

"This is Agent Renegade," the giant arachnid pointed one of her armoured legs at a no-less-gigantic Catachan Ant. Unlike several the Lamenter Space Marines had seen so far, this one was not golden at all. "The information she brought us was critical to stop the fire of this Heliosa Flower."

"How?" the Captain asked.

"It's rather simple, you see," the servant of Lady Weaver announced in a somewhat smug tone. "The main tube is regenerating too rapidly to be damaged permanently, but there's a womb solidly protected in its depths, and that's where the Heliosa Flower is taking commands from. Thanks to Agent Renegade, we were able to jam the orders originating from the World Spirit, and replace it with a 'cease fire' of our own!"

"This is impressive. And can you give it other orders?"

"Ah, no," the agitation of the Adjutant-Spider could have been embarrassment, though perhaps he was looking for things that didn't exist. "We're really learning as it is?"

There was a sound akin to a mass of rocks all released from a rock all at once, and about half a kilometre away on his left, a vast section of ground collapsed, and a huge arachnid column poured out.

"Ah, here come our new sisters, who recognised the truth of Adjutant-Captain Kali's words! It is better to serve the Webmistress today than stay in the darkness forever! Am I right Agent Renegade?"

Hekamiah didn't speak ant-dialect, and the clicking of the Catachan insect made him glad he didn't.

"Per the sake of my curiosity, what kind of boons did your 'Renegade' defector gain upon swearing allegiance to you?"

"Oh, nothing too expensive," the arachnid answered as more and more of her brethren arrived and the Thunderhawks returned to land more Space Marines on Catachan. "She wants to guard the Heliosa Flower to make sure we don't abuse the power of the planet for ill-conceived reasons. And once we leave, Agent Renegade wants to rule over an Ant Hive of the Webmistress!"

That sounded like very big concessions to the Lamenters Captain, but it was something for Lady Weaver to judge, not him.

"Agent Renegade has brought excellent arguments to the negotiation table," the golden spider continued as if trying to dissipate his doubts. "For now, she is the only member of an insect caste spread across Catachan who has taken the sacred duty of remembering and feeding the Heliosa Flowers. This makes her contribution invaluable if we are to one day harvest the boons of these natural anti-orbital batteries!"

What? No, Hekamiah must have misheard the last part-

"Imagine it, Captain!" The Adjutant-Spider continued enthusiastically, confirming his worst fears and proving that no, it had not been him a hallucination of his. "No need to protect the Agri-Worlds of the Imperium with enormous and cumbersome silos! We just place a few colonies of Catachan ants, supervised by your humble Adjutant-servant here, and the flowers are lying in wait, enjoying the sun and the water, until the right moment comes. Just imagine the extraordinary possibility it offers, Captain!"

Oh, Hekamiah could see the possibilities it offered, all right.

The first salvoes of the 'Heliosa Flowers' had been more than sufficient to kill two Destroyers, damage several more warships, and strategically, it had forced the Imperial Squadron to leave high orbit. It had been that or facing a relentless amount of orbital fire which simply couldn't be stopped.

Worse, when they were closed, the flowers had a petal that protected the 'plasma generator' so well that it could stop Thunderhawk guns and other aerial bombardment. Nothing but the fire of capital warships had been able to destroy them, and their roots had an absurd rate of regeneration.

The thought of this system of defence becoming a rule and not an exception across the galaxy...

Hekamiah shuddered.

Space Marines didn't know fear, he repeated to himself.

They didn't experience fear.

What he was feeling...what just extreme concern, and the ugly certainty that some things had forever changed today.

**Imperial Landing Zone**

**5.507.313M35**

**Sister** **Kyra**

There were so many disturbing things about Catachan that Kyra begged her head to not think about it too much, lest she go insane prematurely.

To begin with, how was it possible that grass was already covering the Landing Zone?

The area had received a Toad-made Exterminatus several hours ago!

There should be nothing growing there at all!

You know, aside from the starscraper-sized flower behind them.

A flower which also happened to have anti-warship capabilities, shoot plasma, and somehow, the Adjutant-Spiders had scrambled the control the planet had over it.

This was...Kyra was going to need minutes to get used to *that*.

At least her orders were simple.

She was to protect Adjutant-Colonel Bellona, with her life, if needed to be.

That the Swarm was spreading seeds of Nyxian fruit trees and flowers as an 'offering' for Catachan over the entirety of the Landing Zone was, fortunately, not her problem.

That the Catachan guardsmen who had just arrived to reinforce them were not equipped with any kind of advanced armour was, you guess it, not her problem.

"Ah, General Sharp! You are right on time!"

"Adjutant-Colonel," like all of his men and women, the General was making the nickname 'Baby Ogryn' a reality for looks, muscles, and plenty of other reasons. "No one said it out loud, but I suppose we have the Tyranids to thank for the change of plans?"

"Indeed," the Adjutant-Spider grumbled. "I seem to have underestimated the influence they held over the planet's defences. Though to my regret, I didn't imagine Catachan had weapons like that to deploy in the first place! None of the reports mentioned anything like that!"

The Catachan officer shrugged.

"We saw some flowers a fraction of this size taking down Drakebats to eat them, but in all recorded history, if one of our Jungle Fighters saw one of the anti-orbital flowers emerge, he didn't manage to spread the word before being devoured."

Now that they were all rushing towards one of the rare structures the Mechanicus had been able to send them, Kyra realised how young General Sharp truly was. In fact, all the Catachan soldiers here looked way younger than the ones that had been acting as trainers or elite forces in the Nyx Sector.

"I can't say I enjoy hearing that after being so surprised by these 'Heliosa Flowers'," Bellona stated bluntly. "And it is playing hell with some of my contingencies. Before the first shot was fired, it was agreed that we would ask for more Jungle Fighters from other Catachan Redoubts if the Tyranids threw some unforeseen threats at this army. Now I am told this is impossible."

"The other Generals have far bigger problem than Hell Garden," Sharp confirmed. "I learned from the messages relayed by the *Pax Imperium* that an immense army of Catachan Ants is besieging the Wall Redoubt. They are holding, but they certainly can't send several regiments your way. And given the use Lady Weaver has for the ants-"

"It is clearly an attempt to make us spread our forces too thinly," Bellona finished. "The Tyranids wants us to force to react to every distraction they send to the other redoubts."

"Exactly," the Catachan General told the Adjutant-Colonel. "And an airlift is the best solution to bring in thousands of our Jungle Fighters in a timely manner without risking catastrophic losses. As long as the anti-orbital flowers won't have calmed down, this will be an incredibly risky affair."

No one around chose to comment that the skies were on fire, and that countless aircraft were in the air expending missiles and shells to make sure the Landing Zone was relatively safe.

"If it is the best we've got, then we will have to win with it," Bellona remarked philosophically as they entered the newly built command centre and moved to surround the hololithic device the cogboys had just switched on. "Thank you, Magos. The situation is not too bad for now. I wish we could have cleared more parts of the Catachan jungles to increase our pace of advance, but we were still able to land most of the forces assigned to Hell Garden a mere twenty-two kilometres away from the Crater, where we think the Tyranids have built their primary base."

"Twenty-two kilometres on Catachan is not the same thing as twenty-two kilometres from the world you come from," the General warned the Adjutant-Colonel.

"I believe I have been severely corrected on my optimism, yes. But it is still twenty-two kilometres. This is a very slim defensive depth. If you were the enemy commander, would you have left us land without trying a vigorous counterattack, General?"

"No. I would have tried to push you further away. And my artillery would already have placed your Landing Zone under continuous bombardment from my heavy guns." The grim-faced officer expression became even more severe. "You think the Tyranids don't have enough artillery to bring to the party?"

"Or the guns weren't ready and they are preparing them as we speak," Bellona answered, proving that yes, her optimism had been definitely curbed by the recent surprises. "In either case, it is vital we push eastwards as fast as possible. Our new sisters are securing the flanks, slaying all the snakes and other troublemakers they find. But it is from the east the Tyranids will come, the geography of Devil's Den Valley does not permit the fancy tactics of other battlefields. And if they want to bleed us, they have a perfect natural obstacle four kilometres away from where we are."

"Ah yes," another Catachan officer grimaced. "The Acherax River."

**Eastern bank of the Acherax River**

**5.518.313M35**

**Jungle** **Fighter Veteran Jan 'Gator' Murk**

"HA! HA! HA! I killed two Swamp Mambas! We've run into Blood Wasps the size of Bombers! I eviscerated a tank-sized Grox! And it's just one hour past dawn! I love my job!"

"You're all damn insane, crazy Catachan bastards!"

Jan glanced at his brother, who shrugged. The man in Power Armour was a Nyxian, and as everyone knew, the Nyxians had a need to feel a bit protected by their Living Saint. They weren't as tough as the Jungle Fighters.

"We have more jumping lizards coming this way, and the plants are trying to grow more Spitting Cacti!"

"Oh, are they?" Jan bared his teeth. "How unfortunate...for them. GRENADES!"

The explosions promptly devastated the jungle, as the artillery resumed the bombardment.

Flamers roared, and the new Plasma Guns killed the beasts as fast as they came.

"Do our reinforcements want a written invitation? We've been holding this beachhead since yesterday!"

"The army is moving as fast as a Spinebore Leech when removed from its Spore Tree!"

"More killing men! Less talking!"

"Aye, Captain!" Jan stopped using the Plasma Gun – poor thing needed a few minutes of cooling anyway – and went on to use his Devil's Claw to kill a few more snakes.

"Spiders are bringing more ammunition boxes for us!"

A cheer rose from many throats. As much as their non-Catachan 'partners' were slow and cumbersome, the way their spiders had 'allied' with the local arachnids was something no one was going to argue against anymore.

Not when their silk-made bridge was the very reason the entire regiment had been able to secure the beachhead on the other side of the river with only two wounded.

"We can always find a use for more shells, can't we?"

"Demolition Charges, one kilometre, all ready!"

"Send them back to the Green Hell!"

BOOOM!

Jan had to admit, it was a nice fire show, and it cut down plenty of Strangleplants. They would see further away and-

"WAAAAGGGGHHHH!"

"Oh, great," the Jungle Fighter plenty of his brothers loved to call Gator because he had tripped on a huge saurian and had to kill it instead of the shark he wanted to be tattooed for groaned. "We were only missing the brutes for the party to be entertaining!"

"They're coming via the river!"

Of course they did.

"Must I do everything myself?" the Captain roared. "Three platoons of Plasma Weapons with me! And if you dare let a Greenskin get you, I will bring you back from the dead myself and then strangle you personally!"

Jan Murk gave a look to his right, and sure enough, there were three big rafts crawling with Greenskins descending the Acherax River.

"WAAAGGGHHH!"

"Where did they come from, those ones? There hasn't been an invasion in a long while."

"Survivors of an invasion before our time, no? I mean, look at them, Gator! They aren't exactly looking like the Greenskins the other Guardsmen are telling tales about."

It was true that the Orks there were true primitives. They had even tried to imitate their tattoos and the camouflage paint of the Jungle Fighters!

Which proved their idiocy, of course, since painting yourself black and green on a freaking big river was not going to be of any help.

Bone clubs, fancy trinkets, helmets made of the skulls of Catachan beasts, and several were riding swimming beasts along their rafts.

These Orks had survived Catachan...until them.

"FIRE! CATACHAN IS OURS!"

"WAAAAAGGGHHH!"

The shells began to impact the rafts, and the Barracudas reared their ugly heads, joining the bloodbath.

The Acherax River began to turn red, again, and the arrows of the Orks fell too short to be worth more than a good laugh or two.

"Come on, it's too easy!"

"Gator, I bet I can kill twenty more Greenskins than you! Two rations of Amasec!"

"Prepare to lose them! Me, I say I will have-"

"TYRANIDS! TYRANIDS INCOMING!"

They came out of the jungle with barely ten seconds of warning.

And all eyes widened as everything in their way died.

It was no herd or mindless formation.

Instead, what came at them was a true army.

The monsters were divided into three 'waves', and their chitinous carapaces were a dark green, quite unlike the black-red beasts they had been told to be wary about. The bellies, legs, claws and pincers were white, though.

Their natural weapons were so big you knew instinctively you didn't want them to arrive at close-quarters and play the Devil's Dance.

"FIRE! TAKE YOUR PLASMA GUNS AGAIN AND FIRE WITH EVERYTHING YOU HAVE!"

The artillery thunderously echoed the order, and shells rained down.

The blue streaks of energy slammed into the now-revealed enemy.

"Now that's going to teach them a lesson they won't forget! HA!"

"They aren't dying! They are taking the punishment!"

"WHAT?"

This was just-

They were pouring in several companies worth of firepower here! And there was an Artillery Regiment on the Landing Zone specially assigned to support them!

Everything died, up to Devils and Giant Vein Worms!

"FIRE! FIRE EVERYTHING YOU HAVE!"

This was a shield of dark green and white.

This was a storm of unrelenting violence, and acid sprays began to bombard their defences. Many Jungle Fighters screamed in agony and were unable to continue firing.

The Artillery hammered them.

Oh, God-Emperor, it was magnificent.

And the Tyranids just kept coming, their bodies resisting something that would have buried trenches and destroyed entire companies on another world.

Suddenly, Jan Murk and every Catachan Jungle Fighter understood why the High Command had been so afraid of Tyranids they were ready to come to Catachan and deal with the problem.

"USE THE FLAMERS, AND READY YOUR DEVIL'S FANGS! THEY WANT TO FEAST ON US! THEY WILL LEARN WHY WE ARE NAMED JUNGLE FIGHTERS!"

"THE ONE WHO HAS NOT SLAIN TEN SNAKES BEFORE HIS TENTH BIRTHDAY IS A COWARD!"

"WWAAAAAAAAGGHHHH!"

The Tyranids screamed, and the sound seemed to swallow everything else.

"IF IT MOVES, WE CAN KILL IT!"

And now was the time to make sure the boast stayed truth.

**Acherax Beachhead**

**5.519.313M35**

**Captain** **Lecabel**

Battle-brothers of the Lamenters were not prone to hating something or someone easily.

Captain Lecabel was really beginning to hate the Tyranids and Catachan. At the moment, the verdict was still out if he hated the planet more than the xenos, or the reverse.

"And now it is raining, as if things couldn't get worse." Predictably, the words were punctuated by killing a blue-tattooed Greenskin while his Bolter was firing at the green-white Tyranids.

Unfortunately and frustratingly, the projectiles managed to down only a single Hormagaunt, while the other xenos survived.

"KILL THE DEVOURER! FOR THOSE WE CHERISH!"

It was a very good thing he had a new Power Katana in his hands. Several of his battle-brothers had already seen their Chainswords' teeth break against the diamond-hard exoskeleton of the Tyranids.

"Tough bastards," a Chaplain of the Raptors who had decided to join them in the relief of the Catachan soldiers spat, "and those are only the infantry units we saw in the final phases of the Battle of Macragge. Thank the Golden Throne they don't have Carnifexes here!"

Lecabel was too busy decapitating Hormagaunt after Hormagaunt to respond, then launching the third into the river, where predictably Greenskins and the local fauna proceeded to rip it apart.

This was one of the lessons of Catachan: there was always something ready to eat you, from the flowers to the apex predators.

His fists painted in gold holding the artisanal-made weapon of the *Masamune*, the Captain of the Lamenters scanned the tree line for new enemies.

He didn't find any, at least when it came to the Tyranids.

The Termagant survivors were fleeing through the trees as fast as they could now that their last assault had been repelled.

"Cunning xenos," he voiced out loud, before emptying his last Bolter rounds into a few Ork heads. "They struck, they bled us, they forced us to lose time, and now that their purpose is fulfilled, they fade back into the Green Hell."

"They used a two headed-snake formation," one of the Catachan fighters who was still standing spat, before ferociously stabbing several Tyranid corpses. "I think their main goal was to destroy the bridge all along."

If so, the good news was that they had failed. The silk of the spider-made artwork had suffered some damage, clearly, but the spiders the Adjutants had promptly called 'Silk Architects allies' were already at work repairing it.

And they worked fast.

These arachnids were way smaller than the titanic specimens of Helspiders and other representatives that had come by the order of the Shield of Angels, but they were only a head below a non-Catachan guardsman in height.

No one would have called these spiders beautiful: their leg joints were a vivid orange, and the big abdomens had their black hair striped with a fluorescent green.

But only a fool would deny their usefulness when it came to logistics: without them, the Imperial columns wouldn't have been able to reach the Acherax River in large numbers.

Something that may or may not have been a good thing, as the hundreds of corpses of the Catachan Jungle Fighters spread everywhere indicated.

"Behemoth was all about total offense," he explained, both for his battle-brothers and the other veterans of this hard-fought skirmish. "But the colours of the Tyranids' carapace do not belong to Behemoth. Is it possible we are fighting a Tyranid sub-species bred to fight on Death Worlds?"

"I certainly hope not," one battle-brother of the Brothers of the Red replied. "Because if that is the case, we are going to take high casualties everywhere before cornering them in their lair. If they have a single lair, that is."

"I can't deny the theoretical is sound, Captain." The Chaplain chimed in. "They sprung without warning, kept our advance guard and our rearguard busy, and then sent an overwhelming force against the bridge while we were still reeling from the assault."

The rain increased in potency with each word.

Soon, it was not 'heavy rain' anymore, it was a deluge.

"This whole disaster has, if nothing else, made clear we need more bridges." He finally commented while gritting his teeth.

"And we have final confirmation the Tyranids are here, waiting for us in considerable numbers."

"Yes," Lecabel waited for a few seconds. "Do you think my request for a mass incendiary bombardment will be approved at last?"

"I don't know, I admit...we may need for this rain to stop. And I would advise for us to cross the bridge, brother. Rivers like this one have an unpleasant tendency to flood on Jungle Worlds, and Catachan is already hellish as it is."

"True." The next words felt like acid on his tongue, and it seemed the humidity was draining his strength and will. "Pursuit would be futile. We can't see forty metres away now."

And then there were shrieking alarms resonating and the Catachan reinforcements which had followed them to the Acherax River cursing loudly.

"Angelic wings guide us, what now?"

"Lord Captain!" A local Colonel ran and saluted quickly. "It seems that all this agitation in Devil's Den has riled up some Drakebats. We would appreciate some anti-air support to shoot them down."

The day couldn't get any better, could it?

Lecabel had killed a few of those enormous winged reptiles nesting in the upper canopy of Catachan's jungles. And yes, they were as big as Ogryns, if not larger. They were ambush predators, but when they were too many in a single area, they definitely could prove a grave threat for anyone.

"How much is 'some'?"

Something that could have been described as amusement flashed on the Colonel's fight.

"Thousands, at least, Lord Captain, and they come from the north, divided into two spearheads. One is going to fly over the Acherax, and the other is going for-"

"The Landing Zone," Lecabel sighed after finishing the sentence.

This was official: he really hated Catachan.

**Catachan**

'**Heliosa Flower' – anti-orbital Plasma Battery of Catachan**

**5.520.313M35**

**Tempestus** **Scion Rijah**

A simple garrison mission, they said.

It will be as easy as gardening, they said.

Right now, disciplinary actions be damned, Rijah wanted to strangle the officers who had dared utter such stupidities.

Yeah, it was gardening.

Gardening with carnivorous plants, that was!

All around the so-called 'Heliosa Battery', for some reason that only this eternally-cursed planet knew, there were a multitude of carnivorous trees and flowers trying to grow from the ashes of the 'Toad Exterminatus'!

And guess which sustenance these murder flowers and trees had in mind?

"I hate Catachan!" Rijah snarled, unknowingly repeating what thousands of mouths had already spoken aloud in the last twenty-four hours.

"Less complaints, more cutting!" a grizzled Catachan veteran ordered. "Is this what the finest of the Imperium can do? My grandmother uses these flowers for her cooking in her old age!"

"His grandmother," someone muttered on a secure vox-frequency, "can likely beat any of us in an arm wrestling contest..."

"And they don't even have proper armour..."

This was the biggest difference and an easy way to differentiate between who was born in this Hell and who wasn't, Rijah had to admit.

Of course, like everyone else, the thirty-years-old Tempestus Scion had been extensively reminded at every point of the pre-battle process that if they thought imitating the Jungle Fighters was a good idea, they'd better think again.

The air of Catachan could support life; that much was evident to any person with a functioning pair of eyes.

But it was an air so filled with toxins that you had to be a life-form born on Catachan to not die in the next twenty-four hours as your lungs and respiratory system progressively – or abruptly – succumbed to the poisonous spores and everything else generated by the vegetation.

How bad was it?

Well, the Catachan Warriors who had left to serve in the Imperial Guard and were now back home for Hell Garden had been forced to don sealed armours too, because their immunity to the toxins was no longer sufficient.

Damn this planet.

Damn the gardening.

Rijah slashed and killed more young Venus Mantraps.

Damn these flowers. The Catachan men said that if you gave them the time to grow, the biggest Mantraps could swallow a tank.

Of course, neither the Jungle Fighters nor the rest of the Catachan flora generally gave these monstrous flowers the time to grow that large-

"I hate gardening!" One of his partners told him via the vox. "And I hate this rain."

"It's not even rain anymore, it's an unending flooding. Rumours say the command camp of the Mechanicus had to be placed in sort of an Ordinatus chassis to make sure it didn't drown."

"This is a damn green hell, that's what it is. I hope that when the signal to withdraw back to orbit will be given, order will come to spread a 'Toad Exterminatus' across the entire planet."

"Well, at least it can't get worse-"

"Shut up!" Ten different voices immediately barked on the same frequency.

It could always get worse on Catachan.

The last days had proven that beyond doubt, from the moment this titanic flower dug itself out of the ground, to the mass attack of the Catachan Devils a few hours ago. You fought, you rested when it was your turn to step out of the line, you ate what rations were available, and you returned to the frontline, wherever it happened to be.

And that was often frighteningly close to wherever you slept.

"The flood is decreasing in intensity."

"I think I'm beginning to see a ray of sunshine!"

It was like a switch had been flipped, and the downpour ceased within thirty seconds.

According to the information provided by his helmet, the temperature change was brutal, and humidity levels made him wonder how the hell the Catachan madmen nearby weren't sweating to death.

"There are still clouds to the north, but I suppose-"

"Those are no clouds! THAT IS NOT A CLOUD! CALL THE ADJUTANT-SPIDER! TELL HER WE NEED TO ACTIVATE ALL ANTI-AIR DEFENCES NOW!"

"HYPER-AUSPEXES CONFIRM THERE ARE TENS OF THOUSANDS OF DRAKEBATS! AND MORE ARE COMING FROM THE JUNGLE NORTH OF THE MOUNTAINS!"

Catachan was gearing up to kill them. Catachan delighted in killing them.

Rijah had known it in the first hour since had stepped foot on this never-cursed-enough Death World, and here came on more piece of evidence of that.

Predictably, one of the big arachnids stormed out of the tunnels, surrounded by an entire cohort of smaller ones.

"For the record, I am authorising Agent Renegade to implement Contingency Solar!"

"Are you sure?" a black-armoured Space Marine seemed to appear out of nowhere. "I seem to remember you telling the Lamenters you didn't have a lot of control over the command centre of the flower..."

"If you have another solution, I'm eager to hear it!" the armoured spider replied peevishly to the Angel of the Emperor. "There are more Drakebats coming than what our Hydra guns have ammunition in store for today! Do you want to have a functional Landing Zone tomorrow?"

To this, the Space Marine clearly had no answer, or at least none he was willing to give in presence of Tempestus Scions and Catachan Jungle Fighters.

"Agent Renegade has authorisation to proceed, per the authority granted to me by my beloved sister Bellona. Open the petals. Transmit coordinates."

All the while the cloud grew closer...of course as it grew near, the Imperial guns shouted their fury for everyone to hear.

And they claimed many, many beasts, making sure a rain of carcasses dropped over the jungle's canopy.

But there were too many of the flying reptiles.

It was like an army was on the march, except this one was born to fly, and for countless worlds, it was more apex predators than they ever would see in their entire lives.

And then it was like a blue-coloured dawn came.

There was a flash. A beacon was lit.

It was nothing but the prelude to a pyre which could consume Jungle and Sky alike.

"Unleash the firepower of this fully functional Heliosa Battery, Agent Renegade. FIRE!"

Rijah turned his head away, for it was like the guns of a Battleship had decided to fire up incredibly close to them.

"Oh, Golden Throne..."

There had been a gigantic cloud of Drakebats coming for them.

There were now two smaller ones, and they were separated by an enormous gap.

It might have to do with the cascade of corpses falling all over Catachan, with countless predators fleeing the battle of the Landing Zone to feed 'elsewhere'.

"Oh, Webmistress, we thank you for your blessings," the Adjutant-Spider prayed loudly. "We are not worthy of your magnificence and your Administrative wisdom."

"There are still many Drakebats left," the black-armoured Space Marine noted.

"Oh, I have not forgotten them!" The tone of the Adjutant-Spider remained quite metallic, but you could hear the smugness and the satisfaction from where Rijah stood. "FIRE AGAIN!"

**About one kilometre east of the Acherax River**

**5.522.313M35**

**General** **Vincent Sharp**

"Now *that* is going to be a problem."

It was bad enough when it was a Jungle Fighter who said it.

When it was a living legend telling it to you, you knew you were in for a world of hurt.

"I thought the men were joking when they told me the Tyranids had a diamond-tough exoskeleton." General Jack 'Death' Schwarz commented idly, ignoring how he had just carved the green-white Hormagaunt open bit by bit to learn the secrets of its body.

"I'm sure everyone would have preferred a joke, General." Vincent deferred to him, of course. Not only did Schwarz have an enormous seniority over him, he had sailed across the stars to kill a lot of things that weren't supposed to be slain by a single guardsman. "And that's only half of the problem."

"The cunning," the black-armoured legend muttered. "We knew the Tyranids' devouring intelligence was frighteningly intelligent, of course. Millions died in the Macragge System for the lesson to be hammered into our skulls. But it was always a sort of...force of nature. Behemoth was an elemental storm of destruction."

"The battering ram which overwhelmed the guardsmen by raw ferocity and sheer numbers," Sharp agreed after clearing his throat.

When reading the highly-classified reports from Nyx, there had always been the shadow of doubt that the officers had panicked and exaggerated the scale of the threat.

Now he knew for sure that they hadn't.

"Yes. This Tyranid breed, however, is showing us a formidable array of defensive tactics in the jungles. And so far, it does so only using Hormagaunts and Termagaunts."

"It is possible they only have the resources to breed these two sub-species in significant numbers."

Jack Schwarz snorted.

"I will be happy to part you from your yearly pay if you're willing to gamble on that, Sharp! Tell me more about the tactics they employed."

"First they launched the initial assault with a classical two-headed snake. Then they used the 'Strangler-Mantrap', the boys of the One Hundredth were decimated before reaching the Acherax. Several Colonels report we also have imitations of the Devil's Due. And of course they're trying the 'Barking Toad Push' as revenge for what we did by our opening bombardment."

It pained him to admit it, but the Tyranids had proven far better than many of his regiments. The elite Jungle Fighters had handed them a few defeats, but the Tyranids were not stupid: every skirmish lost against a superior foe resulted in their retreat, and they then went on to attack far more vulnerable targets.

"In fact, the men are whispering that the tactics are quite similar-"

"To a Glutton Python?"

Vincent Sharp grimaced. Of course Death had noticed it, probably well before he did.

"Yes, General. Exactly like a Glutton Python." He spat on the Tyranid corpse, right as rain once again started falling over the Flamer-created clearing. "There's also the incredible levels of aggression the valley is straining under. The Drakebats should never have tried to cross a mountain barrier to attack us, yet they did. And I'm willing to wager my hand that there shouldn't have been a tribe of bone-crushing Greenskins in the first place, either."

Naturally, it had attracted others, and plenty of Ork spores had spread. More were undoubtedly born as they spoke, courtesy of the Flamers and the other incendiary ammunition being unable to burn everything that needed to be incinerated.

"Reinforcements are on their way. Thorn Redoubt committed fifty thousand, and we have twenty thousand more from my own Redoubt. I think we will get one hundred thousand from the others. High Command acknowledges we can't leave this threat to fortify here or anywhere on Catachan. But we're taking an awful toll of casualties for so-far minor advances, and this is with something like seventy-five thousand big arachnids of all species protecting our flanks."

This was, if anything, understating the contribution of the Adjutant-Spider commanders, since there were other 'logistical spiders' transporting food, water, ammunition, and the other vital stuff all the troops committed needed to stay alive one more hour around the clock.

For now, they were still able to advance.

But it was a slow and bloody offensive.

And as the 'Drakebat Clouds' had proven, it would take very little to change the half-success into a bloody disaster.

"The Tyranids fight like the Glutton Python." Jack 'Death' Schwarz declared coldly. "While I don't subscribe to the theory they are limited to Hormagaunts and Termagaunts, it can't be denied they must have some actual limitations, otherwise we would be busy fighting for our very lives around the Landing Zone. The Tyranids want to devour us all; if they had the strength to crush us in one blow, they would have done it by now."

"They must have a reserve in or around the crater ready to be committed, but I agree with you."

He didn't add the 'and?' out loud, but his face must ask for it silently.

"We have been fumbling in the dark, trying to beat this...this Python at its own game. It can't work. Plenty of our troops were not born on Catachan, and of those who are, many don't have the time to acquire the necessary skills, not in such short order. We need to stop that game while we have the strength. We are the Behemoth, both in artillery and other resources. It is time we act like it."

"This is not going to be pretty." Using the Jungle Fighters like a battering ram was going to leave a mountain of corpses, and while plenty would be Tyranids or reptiles, many would belong to Catachan warriors.

"I know. But with the Heliosa Flowers returning underground for the most part and the Drakebats out of the way, I think we can afford a short orbital bombardment followed by an aerial-launch of incendiaries."

"And then we attack." Vincent nodded. "How long?"

"Two hours." The General who had taken up the name of Death answered. "We're pushing one more kilometre eastwards this time."

**Imperial Landing Zone**

**5.549.313M35**

**Sister** **Kyra**

Kyra couldn't ever remember be so tired, and the God-Emperor knew her Nyxian teachers had forced her to push beyond her limits a year before swearing her oaths.

But this had been 'beyond her limits'.

Now, on Catachan, you were so used to ignoring them that the red line was kilometres behind you, assuming it wasn't further than that.

She was exhausted.

They were all exhausted; on her way back to the giant mobile command post, the young Sororitas had seen her fair share of Catachan Jungle Fighters collapse in exhaustion.

And this was on the Landing Zone, a place where the danger levels were described as 'tolerable'.

Outside of it, it was hell, pure hell.

"Adjutant-Colonel," she saluted with a sloppiness that would have seen her smacked around by her old teachers. "The Chapter Master sends his respects, and says the final Tyranid counterattack stopped. They've left four hundred Hormagaunts and Termagaunts dead on the field before fading back into the jungle."

"This is very good news," Bellona affirmed, the armoured spider turning her head to watch her with most of her attention. "I've just finished speaking with my sisters; the positions behind him are as secure as they can possibly be. And the intensity of the flanking diversions is decreasing. For the last twenty-four hours, we've been able to consolidate and burn a path at an excellent pace. The eighteen-kilometres-long supply line is holding strong, and two more colonies of Alchemist Spider and Far-Seeing Widows have arrived to partake in the blessings of the Webmistress."

The legs of the Adjutant-Spider trembled, clear sign that Her Celestial Highness' servant was as exhausted as she was.

The enthusiasm was also mostly gone.

Eighteen of kilometres of advance were an impressive distance for an offensive on Catachan, but it had taken...fifteen or sixteen days, she was pretty sure this was fifteen, but it was late-

No. It had to be fifteen. But one more day or no, it didn't count the bloody tally of the dead and wounded which were evacuated each night by Lander. Some arrived in time to the Hospital Ship in space, which along with the rest of the fleet now did its best to stay away from the Heliosa plasma anti-orbital fire.

Some even managed to recover and return, courtesy of Bacta, mechanical augmentation, and medicinal miracles.

Many didn't.

"This campaign is a slaughterhouse." Bellona remarked bluntly. "Theresa and Claire?"

"The Hospitallers say they are going to recover..." Kyra coughed. As exhausted as she was, she had definitely noticed there had been nothing said about *when* they would return to duty. In all likelihood, they may need some of the finicky procedures Nyxian clinics had developed to recover fully. "The 'Tyranid Tenth Day Offensive' failed in its objectives thanks to them."

That the key objectives had been to eliminate all the Adjutant-Spiders was obvious to everyone.

But the sheer ferocity of this attack had been so bad that over forty Ambulls and ten Space Marines of the Lamenters had perished within ten minutes, and the arachnids had died in the low thousands.

The attack had been repelled, yes, but the Helspiders playing the role of bodyguards had had to be engaged in mass at close-quarters, and the Imperial counterattack had to commit all its reserves to prevent both its officers and supply lines from being decapitated.

The Tyranids had spotted a single weak point that they had not noticed, and this had been just a gigantic day of butchery.

Kyra shook her head and pushed the dark thoughts away. There would be time later to cry...assuming the army survived said battle.

"The Jungle Fighters' reinforcements are finally able to reach the front in significant numbers via the air bridge. Python's strike has missed our throat, Adjutant-Colonel."

"At the price of too many veteran soldiers and allies." Bellona replied grimly. "I will have to beg the forgiveness of the Webmistress for everything twelve times."

"It is not your fault, Adjutant-Colonel. And save the God-Emperor and Her Celestial Highness, nobody could have done a better job!"

"I don't share your optimism, Kyra...but I suppose I will wait for the Webmistress to judge me when I kneel in front of her and beg for her forgiveness. I was too arrogant, too confident in my own cleverness. I forgot that the Tyranids were clever too."

Something was mumbled about 'asymmetrical warfare' and 'Tyranid soup' for a few seconds.

Kyra chose to stay silent. The Adjutant-Spider had done her utmost, as had every man and woman of the expedition. Her Celestial Highness would forgive her; that was never in doubt. The question was how long Bellona would need to forgive herself.

"I can hear their psychic hunger. It is very different from Behemoth. They still want to devour us, yes, but here, it is something leashed, patient. The predator mentality is chained, ordered to serve a far greater and different purpose."

Despite everything she had seen and fought in the last days, Kyra shivered. Fortunately, her Power Armour – which had lost both colours and decorations in the last days – hid her reaction.

Yes, the Tyranids must have a greater strategic purpose for the diamond-tough creatures they spawned here than just garrisoning a tiny part of Catachan, and wasn't that a horrible thought?

"But this will be something for my sisters waiting in the Nyx Sector to analyse later. I have regularly updated all my best theories and the Tyranid stratagems of this campaign. Whatever the Tyranids may think, I feel we have learned an immense quantity of information about them, far more than what they learned about us."

"I pray to Her Celestial Highness and the God-Emperor you are right, Adjutant-Colonel," Kyra replied while making the sign of Aquila.

"So am I," the golden arachnid admitted as smaller insects did their best to repair the damages on her armour. "Whichever psychic creature is in command of this Python army, it fights very intelligently with diminished resources, and every metre of ground we conquer is paid in blood."

Bellona gave a silent command, and the hololithic displayed changed.

Instead of the entire Devil's Den Valley, the images changed to show the 'Devil's Crater', as everyone now called it.

"With our mortars now perfectly in range to bombard the rim of the Crater," the Adjutant-Colonel mused. "And our heavy artillery is now fed enough reconnaissance imagery to strike when and where we want."

The Mechanicus-made device zoomed in further, in order to focus on the left flank of Devil's Crater.

"Unfortunately, the Tyranids have not grown any stupider in the last hours, and they have fortified around this big hill here. It makes sure we can't achieve a successful flanking attack like they themselves attempted five days ago. This gives them an excellent redoubt of their own, with superior firing positions. As long as we can't dislodge them, a direct assault towards the Crater can only end in disaster."

"They must be burrowed in deep, Adjutant-Colonel." The Tyranids had had both the time and the motivation to fortify themselves for fifteen days.

"The Ambull probes report that they aren't, surprisingly."

"Then it is a trap," Kyra replied without hesitation. "It's always a trap with the Python Tyranids."

"Yes, it is. This is why I am going to pulverise them with artillery first before a single Catachan Jungle Fighter launches the assault."

"And the Space Marines?"

"They have taken too many losses, and we're reaching the end of our Blue Bacta stockpile. Save the strike force of Chapter Master Yarhibol, I want them to prepare for whatever awaits us *inside* Devil's Crater and beneath it."

There was more grumbling and-

"I really hate Catachan, Webmistress be my witness."

**Approaches of the 'Devil's Crater'**

**5.551.313M35**

**Colonel** **Wilson 'Strike' Rock**

The artillery thundered over and over, and with every one of hundreds of shells, you could watch the hills north and north-west of the crater get pulverised one by one.

"The spiders are really going big this morning," one of his men chuckled while distributing Lho-sticks. "The men from Thorn Redoubt say there are smoked Tyranids everywhere."

"Be careful," Wilson told him.

"About what...Colonel?"

"The Lho-sticks," he added, trying to not sigh. "The Nyxian Commissars don't like seeing troopers have one."

"Next you will tell us they don't want us to have sex or enjoy the fine things of life, Colonel." Plenty of his regiments' longest-serving men and women laughed. Wilson didn't. "Wait, you are serious?"

"I am."

"Sweet Devil's spawns, what is wrong with them? Fortunately there are separate chains of command...or I might begin to think we need to 'lose' a few of them in the Green Hell."

"I wouldn't recommend it with *those* Commissars." The Jungle Fighter Colonel tied once again his red bandana around his head, before emptying his metallic jug of Amasec. "They have survived fifteen days here, and with all the fighting they've done, they aren't exactly Whiteshields."

"Right, right, Colonel, we will be *on our best behaviour*."

"I'll believe it when I will see it, hard fists of the Sweat Redoubt."

Laughter answered him, a hilarity which quickly decreased as a new column of spiders approached. 'Silk Architects', the non-Catachan named them, but the orange joints and the green back arachnids had long been known as 'Threefold Tarantula' by the regiments of the Jungle.

For all the news given by the High Command, there was something that put him ill-at-ease at the idea the spiders who tried to eat you if you tried to enter their territory were now carrying ammunition and food between the Landing Zone and the frontline.

There were plenty of rumours, though nobody seemed to know for sure why the Tarantulas had submitted so easily. Some in High Command said the bigger Adjutants had psychic powers which forced the Catachan species to obey no matter the order. Others were convinced the Tarantulas wanted to get off-world and settle somewhere else, and had negotiated hard with the newcomers to be given some sort of land prize when victory would be won.

"We haven't seen the Tyranids in a few hours, I guess."

"They're like us, boys. The xenos are keeping their heads down as long as artillery pummels everything on the hills and around them. They will get us out of their trenches when they won't be at risk of exploding immediately."

And it wouldn't be long now. The number of shells raining down per minute was decreasing, sure as the rain was coming soon to drown more of this part of the Green Hell.

Logistics were at a premium thanks to the arachnids and the cogboys, but nobody could ferry millions of shells every hour to sustain that kind of bombardment. And assuming you somehow managed to do it, you would still need to repair the damage to your barrels at some point.

"Alex, run; we have to alert the others. Signal is going to be given in ten to twelve minutes, and I want us to be the first there. The men of the Twenty-Seventh say Old Death himself has come to see the battlefield. If we can be the one to take the hill-"

It was then the ground shook under his feet. Hard.

Colonel Wilson 'Strike' Rock bared his teeth in a parody of smile.

"Who gambled here for an earthquake today? Nobody? Right, we have one here-"

"Colonel! I don't think this is an earthquake! The hill! Something is destroying from the inside!"

Green Hell damn it...

"That must be one of those 'Heliosa' flowers." A few curses went through his teeth in the next few seconds. "Okay. It appears Catachan didn't like being bombarded with too much artillery."

The roar was so powerful that the officer nicknamed 'Strike' sweated when he heard it.

It was something which easily drowned out the thunder of the artillery and the screams of the Imperial Guard.

"Colonel...I don't think it's an earthquake...or a plasma-spitting flower..."

The first thing they could see was a giant claw.

Wilson had seen the old propaganda vids of the Titans. This limb could have served as an 'arm' for one of them.

It was dark green.

And when a second claw dug itself out of the hill, every Catachan warrior worth the name knew what the artillery bombardment had woken up.

"'Devil's Den Valley...of course."

"Colonel! That...I think I took too many Lho-sticks..."

"No, you didn't."

"This is impossible! The biggest Fiddler ever spotted in the last millennium was forty-three metres long!"

"Yes, the biggest Fiddler ever seen by human eyes...but this one may have slept for far longer...and we forgot about it."

The hill exploded. There was no other way to describe it.

Segmented sections of armoured chitin surged forwards.

Most of the Catachan Jungle Fighters fell silent.

What was there to say?

It was bigger than one of the fearsome Knights some legends of Catachan had fought with on long-distant Death Worlds.

It was one of the most feared symbols of Catachan.

It was a Titan woken from its slumber, and unquestionably the reason why there had been so few tunnels found in this direction.

It was a brutal killing machine, and the Lord of this Valley.

It was a titanic-sized Catachan Devil.

And they had mightily angered it.

**Imperial Landing Zone**

**5.551.313M35**

**Adjutant-Colonel** **Bellona**

"There are really days when besides the smile of the Webmistress, I wonder why I bother waking up in the morning..."

Complaining was, of course, definitely a defence mechanism to mask other feelings right now.

The Adjutant-Colonel could definitely feel the volcano-hot wrath of the monster which had just shattered so many of her plans.

Catachan Devil.

Weren't they supposed to be somewhere thirty-metres long when fully grown?

The Jungle Fighters' lore appeared very, very incorrect in this case.

A million calculus and thoughts played out in her head.

Along with a certainty.

Bellona couldn't control this monster.

The Webmistress could have, of course.

But the Webmistress was not here, and Bellona didn't have a tenth of her sheer brilliance and power.

It had already been difficult enough to command young ones; the species was naturally allergic to all forms of order and good administration.

This wasn't a young Devil; it wasn't even an extraordinary long-lived one.

It was the equivalent of *Tyrannosaurus Rex* for Chaos Titans; something above and beyond the most redoubtable specimens one usually encountered on a battlefield.

"Were the Tyranids aware of its presence and did they bait us into waking it up?"

In hindsight, the answer was particularly depressing.

The Ambulls hadn't found the usual tunnels for a fortified position. The way the Hormagaunts had ceded ground in the last few hours. The relative scarcity of enemy artillery on the Crater's flanks.

Yes, the enemy had baited her. And she had fallen for it.

"Adjutant-Colonel," a Jungle Fighter of her command post grunted, his presence being made necessary as several Vipers had tried a sneak attack several minutes ago. "I recommend withdrawing the vanguard troops to the morning's trenches."

"Don't be ridiculous, please!" Bellona reacted in disgust. "Do you want them to be caught out in the open by *that*?"

There had been no model established to calculate how good the senses of centuries-old Catachan Devil were, but the beast was a giant of its kind. If the guardsmen stepped out of their hideouts, they were as good as dead.

"The Space Marines are begging for the honour to charge and claim the Devil's head."

"I bet they are," the Adjutant-Colonel answered sarcastically as the wisdom of her sisters flowed into her and gave her comfort. "But no, I have to decline. Their Power Swords and the blessed Katanas the Webmistress gave them would take too long to do the job and cause them incredible casualties. It is like asking a guardsman to cut up a Baneblade with a molecular-cutting knife!"

It could work, technically, but it was going to take you an entire day, and the enemy wasn't going to stand still.

"No. We had contingencies ready, no? The Webmistress herself approved them! Tell a Warrior-class Destroyer I want a pin-point Railgun orbital strike on the titan-sized Devil. Then we teleport Asset W on the surface."

"Err...Adjutant-Colonel?"

"Yes, I'm aware we are way too exhausted to properly control Asset W. But between its natural aggressiveness and the Devil's own ferocious nature, we don't need to exert much administrative oversight. Well? What are you fighting for? The Catachan Devil is shaking off the after-effects of its beauty sleep, but it is not going to wait for hours-long deliberations to be complete!"

**Approaches of the 'Devil's Crater'**

**Battle-Brother** **Goya**

His battle-brothers were still wondering which approach was the least likely to result in annihilation when the first counterattack of Lady Weaver's arachnid servants arrived.

Goya had to give credit where it was due from his sniper position; the Adjutant-Spiders worked *fast*. They weren't exactly brilliant or unconventional strategists like the Angel of the Emperor, but their moments of hesitation were measured in micro-seconds, and when committed, they struck *hard*.

Like now.

Thunder roared from the heavens as an electromagnetic-launched heavenly bolt hit Catachan like a warhammer wielded by the Master of Mankind.

There was no finesse, no subtlety, and little warning.

The titan-beast roaring its defiance at the top of the ruined hill didn't even realise what was about to hit it before the Destroyer fired.

The explosion was colossal.

Light and smoke abruptly blinded everything, and Goya plunged into the hole he had prepared for contingencies like that one.

He spared one thought for the guardsmen of the advanced positions, hoping that they had dug deep enough.

And then the shockwave hit.

"To say we've had to resort to that against a Catachan beast, and not the Tyranids..."

The inferno quickly died out in the next few minutes.

The entire area north-west of Devil's Crater had been utterly razed, it went without saying.

Most of the high trees inside the Crater had been pulverised too, incidentally.

"I suppose it's far better than to ask us to charge that damn thing..."

In a perfect world, Goya would have shot the titanic Catachan Devil at long-range. Eyes were supposed to be a weak point in the chitin of these beasts, after all.

The problem was that this long-lived Devil was armoured everywhere, and this included the joints and other locations which should have been weaknesses for the lesser specimens it had once belonged to.

"Report! Does anyone see the Devil?"

"No, Captain." He cleared his throat. "There is too much smoke...wait...oh, by the wings of our father!"

The Catachan Devil was still moving.

How was it still moving?

Goya felt something unpleasant forcing his two hearts to beat faster.

Abundant green blood flowed out of several wounds. The beast had been hurt.

But as he watched, the injuries were already healing.

And suddenly the weird stripes visible everywhere on the chitinous armour took on an entirely different meaning.

They were not stripes at all; they were *scars*.

The Catachan Devil had thousands, maybe tens of thousands of scars.

This was the apex predator of Catachan, and they had-

"Captain, the Railgun had just managed to anger the Devil. I must regretfully inform you that I don't think Railguns can do the job."

And unfortunately, the predictable idea of 'using something bigger' to take out the Catachan Devil was likely going to kill them all, no matter how deep they dug into Catachan's soil.

The announcement which was given across every frequency was not the one he expected to hear.

"Adjutant-Command is about to deploy Asset W. Teleportation incoming! Don't intervene!"

The Raptors sniper had just enough time to blink before the familiar disorientation sensation and the pungent ozone smell arrived, regardless of the fact that his Mark VII was sealed.

The light must have illuminated everything for miles around.

And when it ended, a new colossus had joined the battlefield.

"So that's why they needed some analogues to the Titan void transports..."

Goya had not walked into the ruins of Ardium or Macragge. He had heard the rumours like every battle-brother of the Adeptus Astartes, however. And while visiting Nyx, he had watched the Titan-Moths and even been allowed to pet one.

He knew insects obeying the Victor of Commorragh could be really huge.

The titanic Worm which had been teleported onto the battlefield was indeed huge.

It was a Titan of its kind.

It was just tall enough for when rising its 'head-maw' in defiance, to arrive to the level of the head of the Catachan Devil.

For a second like lasted like an eternity, the two super-predators observed each other, as if aware that a life of struggle and unending war had led them to this moment.

The pale yellow colossus of another world against the green-black titan-beast of Catachan.

There was no roar, no screech of challenge.

The two apex monsters attacked each other, and Catachan itself shook as their battle began.

**Advanced Camp of the Catachan Jungle Fighters**

**5.553.313M35**

**General Jack 'Death' Schwarz**

Order had been given to withdraw to the secondary lines once it was clear the fight was not going to be over in a few minutes.

Ironically, the Tyranids seemed to have adopted the same approach.

And the animals and plants which had the ability to flee imitated them.

No one wanted to be close when two alpha predators like that fought for supremacy.

The Giant Worm against the Alpha Devil.

Jack really wondered where Lady Weaver had found the former. If the Living Saint had 'found' it in the first place, of course. The Titan-Moths had been created from several different species, in order to be perfectly attuned to their mistress. It was entirely possible this worm had been bred using similar methods – minus the ability to generate Aethergold-imbued radiance, of course.

"Let them fight, eh?" Sharp drawled next to him.

"You want to get in the middle of that? Go ahead."

"No, I think I'll pass." The younger General grimaced. "It's almost over anyway."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

The two titan-beasts had formidable regenerative capabilities, which had allowed them to recover from wounds that would have killed most living organisms of this galaxy. In fact, it was entirely possible there were plenty of Titans which would have perished in the first minutes of this monster duel, their metallic armours unable to stand against the ferocity fuelling the two predators.

But everything had a limit.

The Giant Worm's flanks were so badly mangled it was impossible to say how many wounds it had taken in the last hours.

The Alpha Devil's green blood had never stopped flowing since the Railgun had pummelled it before its main opponent arrived.

The two apex monsters of Catachan were moving at a fraction of the speed they had begun this fight.

The contest of ferocity was over.

Now it was a series of hit-and-evade phases, each 'duellist' preparing for the death blow.

And in that kind of fight, as much as Jack Schwarz wanted to pretend the contrary, the Giant Worm was simply not as good as the Alpha Devil.

The long creature had no true counter for the enormous pincers that had grown on the front legs of its nemesis.

It had nonetheless been a terribly long fight.

Ferocity had been the order of the day for several hours.

Giant maw against razor claws and bony hooks.

In addition to this, of course, the two beasts had the sheer weight as an additional weapon.

Plenty of times one of the two had tried to crush the other by sheer brutality and exploding all its internal organs, wherever they were to be found.

It had left more marks.

But it hadn't worked.

The Catachan General wondered if there was something else in the two beasts' heads that did not think about killing the foe in front of it.

Probably not.

"Here they come..."

Everyone with the instincts of a veteran felt it.

They charged.

Catachan shook under the weight of these flesh-born Titans.

There was a dolorous amount of shrieking at this distance.

And then it ended.

The massive claws of the old Catachan Devil were impaled into a point right next to the Giant Worm's head, while at the same time, the huge maw had closed up on plenty of legs and a part of the chitinous green-black body.

But the latter was not a death blow, while the former most assuredly was.

The claws pushed and struck, and the Giant Worm at last fell, severed in two parts.

Its maw never opened up again, nevertheless; the Catachan Devil had to sever its own limbs to escape the last attempt of its foe to take the mutual kill.

But cut itself it did, like some of the Vipers that were caught into the traps of the Jungle Fighters.

And once it was freed, it once again plunged its main weapons of destruction into its enemy, and roared in triumph.

This was a roar, many observers would later swear around drinks, had been heard everywhere on Catachan.

"It seems the strategy of the Adjutant-Spiders was good, but not good enough. We should evacuate the zone, and prepare the orbital strikes. The Devil is wounded-"

"Wait."

The Alpha carved apart a small section of its vanquished enemy, and the maw plunged into its flesh. Whatever it found, however, did not much please it.

There was a new roar, and then the Devil went on to ignore the massive carcass.

"General?"

"Don't you remember? The older the Devil, the more picky they are with their foods. And this one is very old indeed."

"Yes, General, but I don't think that applies when a beast is on death's door."

"Evidently it does...and I'm not sure the beast is as close to dying as you think. Some of its wounds have stopped bleeding." Thank the Lady of Nyx for these new drones, they really allowed them to monitor the battlefield by several better orders of magnitude than before.

The Great Devil roared again, and the jungle did not dare move or make a single whimper which could be mistaken as a challenge.

There was loud rumble, and then the ancient super-predator turned up and began to march north, ignoring the devastation, the corpse of the Giant Worm, and the shocked Imperial army assembled next to the Crater.

"Next time we are told to invade some place Devil's Den Valley, let's not pretend it was superstition from the first settlers." The only man of Catachan to have earned the nickname 'Death' in his generation laughed.

"Yes, General!"

"And call me the closest Adjutant-Spider. Now that the Old Devil is moving away, we can prepare the final assault against the Tyranids."

**Beyond** **the last star of the Eastern Fringe – the Galactic Void**

This had been...unexpected.

The Hive Mind had been aware of the Titan slumbering near the Crater, of course. The latest defensive strategy had involved the lesser preys waking it up and enduring its fury, after all.

But it had been thought this ancient not-prey would inflict far greater devastation than it did before succumbing or retreating from its domain. The lesser golden prey's reaction had been cunning; they had decided to sacrifice one of their Titans to defang the trap the Hive Mind had prepared for them, preserving the core of their assets.

The Hive Mind had hoped the battle against the Titan would win them several days, and inflict great losses upon the warships orbiting around the pantry-world, as they tried to support their assets on the ground. It was something the flower-guardians would have made them paid dearly for.

Now this tactic had failed.

And with it, the access to the Brood Nest and the Hatchery Chamber was open to the lesser prey.

Already, the Hive Mind could sense the approach of several burrowing prey units deploying cautiously.

It was logical.

Where a far more limited prey species would have been forced into an attritional fight underground, this prey was going to bypass as many fixed bastions of the Hive Mind as possible, leaving the choice between starved encirclement and slow annihilation.

It was extremely inconvenient.

And there was one more dilemma the Hive Mind had to solve.

The awakening of the not-prey of the jungles had given the Hive Mind time to compensate for the significant losses taken by its assets in the course of this long series of ambushes and bleeding.

But now the Guardian was stirring.

The Hive Mind would try to calm the gestalt-construct so it would stay unconscious; it had no interest in opening a second front when it was already struggling to win on the first one.

And while much knowledge had been gained from the actions of the lesser prey, it was not yet enough to justify the energy expended by the Relay-Moon.

The temporary loss of intelligence about the pantry-world was going to be already problematic for the next campaigns against this lesser prey.

Cold logic demanded in return that everything was known about the eight-legged golden prey and the other assets assaulting the Crater.

Thankfully, there were still options.

As long as the Guardian failed to intervene in this battle.

If it did-

If it did, the Hive Mind would lose all its ability to oversee and command this battle, for everything from the Hatchery to the Prey's Landing Zone would cease to exist.

And it would be extremely inconvenient for the Hive Mind indeed.

**Catachan System**

**Catachan**

**The tunnels near the Hatchery**

**5.556.313M35**

**Txacopec** **Hell-Rider Tlacael**

When Tlacael had been given the opportunity to be part of this campaign by an Adjutant-Spider, he had been overjoyed and accepted immediately.

He was going to ride a Helspider again and kill plenty of enemies! This was going to be such fun!

At the time, nobody had told him the whole blood war was going to be fought on Catachan itself.

Obviously.

At first, like a proper Hell-Rider, he had shrugged off the matter.

So what? The Jungle Fighters believed they were the holy gift of the Emperor to Mankind, but nobody was that good.

Catachan was going to learn the word 'defeat', same as all the traitors, heretics and xenos who tried to stand against the Lady.

Tlacael admitted it had been a bit too arrogant of him.

Catachan had punished them.

Catachan continued to fight and try to kill them.

And it never bloody stopped fighting!

"Okay," he admitted as one more time, the giant tunnel they were progressing into opened to reveal one more underground river. "This isn't funny anymore."

"I agree...you heathen of Txacopec."

"At least I don't have a disgusting serf-owner overlord of Atlas as my relatives!" he told his second – though all of it was unofficial, and 'only accepted to compensate the losses of officers taken during Hell Garden', per a spider's words.

"We don't choose, alas, our family, *honorary* Lieutenant."

"That we don't," Tlacael agreed before returning to the more important point. "You think our Scorpions can cross?"

"No. Hell no. It's going to be dangerous as it is *for us*, and we don't have a problem with water."

"That's...not good."

"Tell me about it. I still think High Command should have committed them earlier and not so late into the campaign."

"They apparently were some problems during Warp travel, plenty of the Scorpiads and the other big beasties challenged each other and caused havoc in the transports they were in." He shrugged. "Or so the rumour mill claims."

And thus the few Hell-Riders like him had discovered very, very late that as much as the guardsmen loved to hate Catachan, their bad feelings were really minor compared to the instinctive loathing the scorpion-like species of the Swarm had for the Death World.

"We have to try."

"And if there's another river?"

Plenty of sighs were heard through the vox and from Catachan 'advisors' in their columns.

"The Silk Architects will be here soon."

"They said that two hours ago." Tlacael of Txacopec shook his head. "It's taking too long. We have to keep the pressure on the Tyranids. It's been ten minutes since we killed the last one."

"Well," another veteran of Macragge and the Ymga Monolith cleared his throat, "they may be running short of troops."

Scores of men scoffed at that.

"You have to excuse Scar here, honorary Lieutenant," a Nyxian gave a friendly poke to the shoulders of the man who had just spoken. "He's from Theta, they're a bit slow to learn how things go on operations like that."

"All is forgiven," he retorted happily.

"Hey!"

Plenty of guardsmen chuckled.

"But seriously...we haven't yet to reach anything which could be a facility where the Python commanders breed and train their troops."

"We haven't found it on the surface for sure."

"It's going to be here, underground."

"Yes. And you can bet that in the last day, they did everything they could to replenish and bolster their numbers. So we have to keep pushing and corner them in a place they can't afford to lose."

"Easy to say, more difficult to achieve...I don't think the Scorpions can pass that kind of obstacle without silk bridges."

"Then we leave them, and we press on."

Minutes later, everyone knew this decision had been the correct one.

For there was another river.

And then another.

They had known the Tyranids must have built something huge under Devil's Crater to protect themselves from satellites and Mechanicus fancy toys, but this was completely insane!

The tunnels were bigger than some Hive-galleries he had seen when they had to wait months for deployment in the Sector's capital.

It was like there was an entire world beneath the surface.

The further they pressed upon, the more it felt like you could throw an army of thousands of Helspiders here – assuming you could bring them in the first place.

It wasn't just a big cavern.

It was...it was more.

"How did the Tyranids build something so big without the Jungle Fighters finding out?"

"I...look, the flowers and everything...they are different. They're growing on top of some sort of ruins?"

"There was something here before?"

Someone far cleverer than him may have the answers; he didn't.

And at last they caught up with the Tyranids, some two hundred of them forming a wall of dark green and barring the entrance into another chamber.

"Bring out the big guns!" He roared.

In all the skirmishes they'd fought, everyone had learned the best thing you could achieve with a Lasgun against a Tyranid of Python was to make it laugh itself to death – and no, it had never happened, but one could dream.

If you wanted them dead, you used the heavy firepower, as much as you could. Grav-guns were ideal, but Ryza cogboys only had a handful of them. Most of the time, it was Plasma, Melta, or Volkite, whichever you had on hand, and supported by the Bolters of the elite units.

It had almost become a tradition by that point...and so was the Tyranid answer of 'hit-and-run'. Unlike the black-red beasts of Behemoth, Python Gaunts never tried to fight the long battles. They struck and they disappeared into the jungles...or since a few hours, into the tunnels.

But these ones didn't.

They shrieked and hissed, and they stood firm, living wall of fangs, super-tough skeletons, and claws.

Many good insects paid the ultimate price to fight them at close-quarters, and so did a few of the brashest Catachan reinforcements, who had not yet learned it was suicide to go push a Devil's Fang into the armour of these monsters.

But the outcome was never in doubt.

It took them a lot of time, but all the Tyranids died in the end.

"VICTORY! VICTORY FOR THE LADY!"

"FOR CATACHAN, SURVIVE THE GREEN HELL!

"There are proper steps below! I think we've broken through and are near their command centre!"

They incinerated the fallen as best as they could, and the column advanced.

It took several hundred metres for his instincts to alert him something was wrong.

The lights were dimmed.

It should have been the norm, but this maze of tunnels was in reality excellent for fighting because there were quantities of fluorescent mushrooms – they were all poisoned or could expel poison gas if you got too close to them, but they provided plenty of light.

And here it was no longer the case.

They were plunged into the shadow and-

"Fireworks' fuses," he ordered, "NOW!"

The weapons were not for fireworks, of course, but-

"Oh, Golden Throne."

The darkness vanished, to reveal the horror.

They had stepped into an immense cavern, so big they didn't see the end of it.

But that was not the worst.

The worst was all the big translucent red eggs which were sprawled...everywhere.

And since the eggs were indeed translucent, you could see the dark forms waiting inside them.

These were clearly-

"The abominations led us directly into a Blackback Viper's Hatchery!" a Jungle Fighter veteran screamed. "GET OUT OF HERE! GET OUT OF HERE NOW!"

They tried to follow the suggestion.

They really tried.

But the 'mothers' of the Hatchery attacked first.

**The Hatchery**

**General** **Vincent Sharp**

It was always an unpleasant moment when you realised the Tyranids had managed to place you exactly where they wanted you. *Again*.

The worst part was that they should have seen it coming.

The Jungle Fighters and every part of the Imperial Machine had been assigned several Adjutant-Spiders. The arachnids born in Nyx could clearly communicate and allies with beings of other species – preferably Catachan arachnids, but there were plenty of other examples too.

Why couldn't the Tyranids do the same indeed?

They didn't lack the intelligence or the cunning for it.

The only thing they really lacked was the *motivation*.

The Tyranids hungered.

They wanted to eat everything and everyone.

But this breed of Tyranids was clearly different. They knew it since the first encounter.

They still hungered – Adjutant-Colonel Bellona had been very vocal about that – but the Hormagaunts and Termagaunts could choose to not feed, spreading out in the Green Hell and trading short-term satisfaction for long-term strategic victory.

The only problem left had been the same the spiders of the Living Saint faced at the beginning: most predators of Catachan wanted to eat you rather than waste time negotiating alliances.

But it appeared that a pact of sort had indeed been sealed.

And with the Blackback Viper, one of the most dangerous species of snake of Catachan, which effectively meant one of the most aggressive and ferocious species of the Jungle Fighter's home.

Vincent Sharp could see it now; there wasn't a single Hatchery, there were two: and the Tyranid one was built right behind the Blackback Viper's.

You entered looking for one army of predators, and you ended up surprised by their allies.

It was vicious, ruthless, and implacable.

It was exactly why they had bled so much fighting the Python Tyranids for weeks on their way to the Crater.

And it was too late to change anything.

Communications had broken down, and as the few survivors of the vanguard which had escaped the trap had made clear, there were easily tens of thousands of Blackback Vipers beginning to hatch.

"Attack!" The Catachan General ordered, wincing inside as he knew how many men were going to die in the chaotic melee. "All units are to converge on the Hatchery and kill the Vipers and the Tyranids! Adjutant-Captain Kali! Contact your superior and tell her we need all the Space Marines NOW!"

"Yes, General! I hear and I obey!"

"Good!"

The cavern was endless.

How had the Tyranids built something like that in the last days?

No, there wasn't time to ponder such a question right now.

All around him, his men were already firing, pulverising eggs, incinerating an adult Viper at long range. Since one's fangs could kill you in thirty heartbeats by liquefying your organs, it was vital for things to not devolve into close-quarters.

"FIST FORMATION!" He screamed. "The mortars and the heavy guns are coming, along with the rest of the Emperor's Angels! HOLD JUNGLE FIGHTERS! HOLD FOR CATACHAN AND THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

"FOR CATACHAN AND THE GOD-EMPEROR!"

The red eggs exploded by thousands as Lasguns and plasma Weapons fired, but this was nothing compared to the sheer number of them which hatched a second later, creating a tidal wave of young Vipers. And of course more Tyranids were coming, supporting their new 'allies'.

"FIRE! FIRE FOR AS LONG AS YOUR GUNS CAN!"

This was his last order, for then all coordination efforts stopped.

Plenty of Vipers had somehow slithered sufficiently high up the walls to make absurd 'jumps' that saw them crash-land in the middle of their formations.

Devil's Fang were drawn, and the battle escalated to an unimaginable degree of butchery.

The entire world turned red and there was only screaming and hacking through monsters.

Men fell around him, and Viper heads fell with them.

Tyranid corpses were burning along those of Jungle Fighters.

But always by sheer folly, there seemed to be more and more of the Gaunts and the Vipers coming.

There was no masterful defence strategy.

There was no more skill, no proper tactics.

There was just death, and the dance to avoid joining everyone screaming in agony.

He was getting out of breath.

Vincent knew his arm was slowing down, his cuts were getting sloppy.

But they were more enemies coming.

They had to-

The bright flash illuminated the entire cavern, so much that everyone present, human or not, turned his head towards it, almost fascinated like when you discovered a Great Barking Toad in front of you.

The smell of ozone was impossible to mistake for anything else.

And the Catachan General couldn't remember ever feeling as relieved as he did right now.

More than two hundred Space Marines had just teleported into the Hatchery, and their mere sight rekindled the fires of Imperial resistance.

"FOR THOSE WE CHERISH!"

"FOR THE EMPEROR AND THE LADY!"

"FOR CATACHAN!"

More Imperial columns stormed in, blood in their eyes, and at last the enemy's relentless attacks slowed down and began to be pushed back.

**The Tyranid Brood Nest**

**Chapter** **Master Michael Yarhibol**

There had been a lot of Astartes and high officers wondering during the entire day why exactly the Tyranid commander hadn't been evacuated from the 'headquarters' under the Crater in the last days.

Assuredly, a Guard Marshal could have believed a glorious last stand was the right idea, but any Catachan officer with skills in jungle warfare wouldn't have.

Yes, the Tyranids of the Python breed had inflicted considerable casualties, but by the time the first strongholds of Devil's Crater were bypassed or overwhelmed, the battle was lost, no matter how many guardsmen the Tyranids now managed to drag down with them.

That the enemy xenos had indeed cost them tens of thousands of dead in the last terrifying battle for the Hatchery was something making Michael extremely unhappy, of course.

Much like the Adjutant-Colonel, he really didn't look forward to explaining to Lady Weaver how often the Tyranids had baited them, trap after trap, horrifying gambit after horrifying gambit.

The Battle of the Hatchery had been a song of heroism, of resistance against all odds, of men desperately holding the line with the spiders.

And that it had taken the final intervention of more than five hundred Space Marines – equipped with all the functional Power Armours still able to act as sealed power suits – along with over two hundred tanks and armoured vehicles, most of them directly teleported in or driven through newly created tunnels, was saying quite a lot about how bad things had been.

The Tyranids had wanted to wage a war of annihilation and they had gotten their wish.

There was a mountain of corpses behind the Lamenters.

Little surprise that when they entered the new Hatchery, the xenos assaults were so feeble they couldn't really qualify as assaults anymore.

And that left the Hive Tyrant Lady Weaver had been able to perceive with her insect-controlling senses years ago.

It was a huge monster, much like the specimens the Chapters of the Blood and other Astartes had fought against at Macragge.

The Tyranid commander was easily between five and six metres in height, possessed four huge scything claws which looked perfectly capable of eviscerating a Predator battle-tank, and it wasn't a surprise any longer to see some kind of malevolent intelligence shining in those beastly-looking eyes.

But it had no legs anymore.

The lower body parts, it appeared, had been completely merged with a sort of green conduit which plunged deeper into the earth.

"This is definitely how the Tyranids were able to do everything they shouldn't have been able to," one battle-brother of the Raptors Chapter declared, having arrived at the same conclusion he did. "It gave them a lot of advantages, but in exchange the Hive Tyrant couldn't be moved, no matter how much its subordinates might have wanted to."

"And thank the Emperor for that," Operation Hell Garden had been bloody beyond all expectations; more Catachan Warriors had fallen right now than their initial commitment called for. "Flamers, Meltas, and Volkite Blasters, brothers!"

They had slaughtered the majority of the Tyranid infantry in the last battle; it was out of the question to give the Hive Tyrant time to rebuild a second army.

And in a storm of violence, the Adeptus Astartes did accomplish exactly that.

They were not Deathwatch, but this point, it was likely plenty of battle-brothers would be recommended; every battle-brother which had survived more than fifteen days of near-constant battles was an expert in the art of killing xenos and hostile non-human species, be they flowers or reptiles.

The Predator Tank of the Brothers of the Red which had been given the honour to lead the column would have made Sanguinius himself proud: the Flamestorm Cannon and the Heavy Flamers carved a trailing blaze into the nest, and eradicated any chance for this base to represent a danger again.

At last, the Hive Tyrant reacted.

The green-white flesh conduits around it seemed to distort and vibrate.

The xenos resources suddenly appeared to be drawn to the Hive Tyrant instead of being directed away from it.

And from the ceiling, two Zoanthropes levitated down, burning with eldritch green auras of energy.

Michael Yarhibol within a single heartbeat knew for certain there could only be a single reason the Tyranids would have left those behind when the rest of their forces were slaughtered.

"LIBRARIANS! PROTECT US! THEY ARE GOING TO TRY-"

He would have had finished by 'to take us with them in death', but the enormous explosion basted them apart first.

It was as if a hungry maw attempted to swallow them all, which was fitting for such xenos.

But the battle-brothers of his Chapter had reacted in time, and a fragile shield was erected when the world went green and white.

The Librarians had not had enough time to prepare, and as a consequence the shield didn't last long, but it bought the time for other Epistolaries and Codiciers, along with Prognosticators and other gifted specialists, had conjured plenty of psychic shields by then and, slowly but surely, they pushed back.

It took nearly three minutes for the inferno to die down.

But when it finally did, the Hive Tyrant and all the other Tyranids which had been alive before were now reduced to ashes.

**Beyond** **the last star of the Eastern Fringe – the Galactic Void**

The Hive Mind had lost the battle.

The moment the red armoured prey stormed the only Brood Nest of the pantry-world, it had been over.

There had been some small units spread out in fifty-seven different tunnels, but none of them had a fraction of the command capability the synapse unit had.

And creating a new synapse unit to replace the one which had been hiding beneath the crater had taken too long in the first place with all the attention of a Relay-Moon could give it.

It would take an unacceptable amount of time to create another now that the support base was destroyed.

No, the Hive Mind had reached the logical decision.

The assets on the pantry-world were no longer able to mount any credible resistance.

The battle had to end, and the synapse unit was not to fall into the hands of the lesser prey.

The infantry units unable to reach the Hatchery in time for the last battle were ordered to scatter.

Once the synapse unit ceased to be, they would return to their baser instincts, and with a high degree of certainty, increase the eat-or-eaten process ongoing in the jungles.

This would bring more benefits once a proper Hive Fleet arrived.

...

It appeared the synapse unit had perished, as per the last command.

The connection with the pantry-world was gone.

This was...inconvenient.

The Hive Fleet had been unable to inflict near-fatal injuries to the prey, though the foe had suffered and showed in several instances a resolution to storm the Hive's defences that had been missing during the previous battle with the Golden Prey.

Should the Relay-Moon try to control and send several scout-ships ahead of a proper Fleet?

No.

The limited resources of the synapse unit had played a great role in the not-devouring of the enemy.

And the Golden Prey was going to observe this pantry-world for long rotations of its star.

At this moment of the assault of this galaxy, sending more assets to fight the Prey was not logical, efficient, or prone to result in gains.

The Relay-Moon had assimilated much information on the eight-legged prey commanding the forces opposing the Hive, but it couldn't be denied that the prey had adapted too.

The hunger could be satiated by other means.

There were always other pantry-worlds.

Not as promising as this one, for they had not been touched and urged to devour by a synapse unit, but they could be transformed provided enough time.

The Hive Fleets would wait. The hunger could be endured for a little longer.

It was nonetheless a pity the Relay-Moon couldn't see what would happen after the Guardian emerged from its slumber.

There had been no models for something approaching this not-prey.

And the battle between the eight-legged prey and the Guardian promised to be a worthy addition in the hungering calculations of the defensive-fighting Hive.

But the connection was broken, and there was no use to wait for any longer.

The Relay-Moon would be reassigned.

There was always more to do in the void between the stars, like preventing the irritating indigestible silver prey from fleeing back to the same stars where they had encountered the Golden Prey.

The Hive Mind hungered.

The Hive Mind waited.

The Hive Mind prepared for the next devouring.

**Catachan System**

**Catachan**

**The Destroyed Brood Nest – deep under Devil's Crater**

**5.558.313M35**

**Sister** **Kyra**

They won.

They won, and it really didn't feel like a victory.

Kyra wanted to believe it was a stunning and crushing defeat handed to the Tyranids. The monstrous xenos were at last vanquished.

But as you desperately tried to save as many guardsmen lives as possible by pumping vial after vial of Bacta into their mangled bodies, it was near-impossible to rejoice.

And that had been her opinion when she was far away from the battle.

Now that she had crossed the battlefield where thousands upon thousands of Blackback Vipers had ambushed the Imperial forces, it was worse.

Though the fighting had ceased since one side had been utterly obliterated, there was enough left to fuel years of nightmares.

The Vipers and Tyranids were already terrifying in death, but the things they had done to human flesh with claw and venom...

Sometimes the best thing you could hope for was that it had been quick and the Emperor had spared you a long agony.

How many of the Jungle Fighters and other guardsmen had died?

Kyra didn't know, but she expected a massive number. The one hundred and fifty thousand Catachan soldiers had been ravaged in the very first days of Hell Garden, and every day since, the Adjutant-Spiders had thrown every regiment and spare unit that could be found into the inferno.

The final tally was going to be awful, the young Templar Sororitas knew it.

And-

No, there was no use thinking about that now.

The Tyranids had been exterminated – the few survivors were hunted mercilessly by the elite tracker battalions of the Fang Redoubt.

And it was still very much a pleasure to see Space Marines burning everything once they arrived in the vast chamber which had been once the heart of the Tyranid war machine.

"Chapter Master, excellent work!" Bellona saluted the commanding officer of the Lamenters.

The many, many dents in the red armour were clear indications how hard-fought the final assault had been.

"Adjutant-Colonel. The will of Lady Weaver is done. The Tyranids' influence has been purged."

"And I have already prepared the foundations for an Astropathic message informing the Webmistress of this great victory!" the golden arachnid assured him. "Has something changed after your last report one hour ago?"

"No, it has not." The scion of the Sanguinius gene-line seemed to shrug, though as always, it was difficult to be sure, since everyone here was in sealed armour. "We are unsure of the original purpose of this series of caverns, though my Techmarines are reasonably certain that it wasn't the Tyranids who dug them first. And while there are clearly several levels beneath this chamber, the psychic levels remain stable-"

It was as if spirits of irony had been conjured at that very moment, because the psychic scream slammed into them a second later.

It was anger.

No, it was *wrath* incarnate.

It was the fury of an angry beast transformed into sheer power.

Kyra felt herself flying, and only the sheer number of hours spent training ensured she didn't collide with/didn't get smashed against the walls.

It was a rain of white-blue-green psychic power.

It was-

It was like there had been a xenos sun deep into the entrails of Catachan, and now that sun had been switched on.

"Webmistress! Protect your servants!"

The hostile power had been abated, and Kyra was able to force some air into her lungs.

What was-

Bellona. Bellona and the other Adjutant-Spiders had saved them.

Five of the favourites of Her Celestial Highness had arrived, and they were gathering around the Adjutant-Colonel, who herself had revealed a flame-sculpted crystal of Aethergold.

It was thanks to them that they hadn't been hammered worse than they did.

"Adjutant-Colonel Bellona! Whatever is doing this, we must defeat it before it destroys all our forces!"

"Chapter Master!" the spider she was supposed to protect shouted back – it had to be emphasized Bellona was protecting herself very well. "I don't think there is anything you or the other Space Marines can do against that sort of threat! Sound the retreat!"

"But if there is one more Tyranid we've missed-"

"This is no Tyranid! This is something far older than them!"

"But you can't deal with it on your own!"

Over a dozen halos of white-blue-green energies coalesced, and if there hadn't been a counterstrike of pure golden energy at that moment, Kyra was certain they would have all died on the spot.

"We can't, but fortunately there is someone in this galaxy who can! Sisters! I believe this is a dire situation which fulfils the conditions required for the activation of the Sanguine Decree! Do you disagree?"

"NO!" the other arachnids – and they had been joined by a few Catachan Ants and plenty more spiders – shouted unanimously.

"Then protect my mind, I invoke the Sanguine Decree! **Praise Sacrifice**!"

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Giraffe Spaceport**

**2.562.313M35**

**Sergeant** **Gavreel Forcas**

It hadn't been more than a few minutes since they had landed on Nyx, and everyone from the most important nobles to some exotic spells already knew they had returned.

Gavreel wished he could claim he was surprised, but he wasn't.

As it was, the black-armoured Angel of Death was very happy he was not a member of the PDF ordered on security duty: the poor men and women did not look like they had fun trying to keep the crowd relatively orderly and calm.

"I hope you are not going to load some Battleship-sized homework onto your shoulders, my Lady." He said while his eyes monitored their surroundings as their not-so-little convoy marched for the terminal where one of the trains awaited their arrival.

"Don't worry, I'm just reviewing the latest Astropathic message from Aglaea," the Basileia snorted. "And by the way, I'm really looking forward to having Ansibles deployed across the Sector. Every time I read something weird like this, I wonder if it's the Governor trying to play me for a fool, or the Astropath who simply failed to interpret the message correctly."

"Having met the two Governors of Aglaea, it's likely the latter, my Lady." There were some particularly idiotic individuals among the Governors of the Nyx Sector, but the two of this specific system were not among them. "I suppose you will have to wait for the courier which has no doubt been sent with the exhaustive message."

"Quite right..." the data-slate was switched out, and the golden-winged insect-mistress began to salute the thousands of Nyxians nearby, prompting more cheers and proclamations of joy.

"It is good to be back on a world where you have universal approval, my Lady."

"Gavreel, we received perfect welcomes on Matapan and Bahamut."

He cleared his throat in answer.

The Basileia of Nyx sighed loudly.

"True. Some *other* planets were far less enthusiast about my presence, including some where I wasn't invited in the first place."

The word 'Atlas' was not uttered, but there was no need to.

Personally, Gavreel couldn't wait for the moment where the incompetent wastrels of that system got what they really deserved.

If Pierre appeared here and now to ask for a few Throne Gelts to buy more ammunition for their 'tragic accident', he would not hesitate, at least!

"At least there are no problems at Matapan and Bahamut."

"True." The Shield of Angels waved at the crowd, a genuine smile on her lips. "Or rather it's the kind of problem that comes with an Agri-World: the harvests, the harvests, and did I mention the harvests yet?"

Gavreel chuckled.

"Diamantis complained he didn't see any fortifications across most of the planet."

"And he's right to do so. But Matapan is an Agri-World. I don't see how I can fortify it in the first place. Like all worlds classified as such by the Imperium, most of the manpower is focused on food production; they really have no spare capacity for the military. Whereas Agri-Hives are definitely the solution for Hive Worlds, in order for everyone to have a nice security blanket in time of crisis, I have yet to find a solution for that."

And this was a problem, Gavreel knew. Oh, not at Matapan; the system was hardly at the edge of a perilous Warp route or near a region where Greenskins thrived. And its inhabitants were now very loyal, as the removal of a previous Governor had made sure they could now enjoy a far better lifestyle while their loyalty was recognized.

But for plenty of other Agri-Worlds across the galaxy? Many of these worlds wouldn't hold for more than a few days against a serious assault, and too often the Planetary Governors were too busy bickering with their peers to forge strong diplomatic ties that may be their only shield if an enemy appeared.

"It is a dilemma," he admitted out loud.

"Yes, it is." His Lady giggled. "But let's look on the bright side: this appears to have spurred the imagination of Diamantis, and I expect to have two or three new Starfort plans on my desk before the next week is over."

"I think you are probably underestimating how many hololithic-generated plans Diamantis is able to draw up, especially if a few Tech-Priests can be counted upon to support him."

"Yes, probably, I will...**I hear you**."

There was no warning.

No word had been given to prepare them, and the Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard were as surprised as the rest of the spectators.

It came from the heavens, certainly from the Pylon of the *Enterprise* in high orbit above their heads.

It was a pillar of golden Light.

It was like the sun and the Emperor had descended to light this section of the Spaceport.

It was a ray of Dawn incarnate.

And as it touched the floor in front of them, it became an inferno of gold.

There was a lot of screaming, some of it in awe, far more in shock, he suspected.

The golden flames flickered, before transforming into a shape that pretty much everyone on Nyx could recognise with a glance.

It was an Adjutant-Spider.

An Adjutant-Spider, ensconced into a metallic armour which looked like acid had been poured on it, and with two legs holding an Aethergold Crystal.

"**Webmistress!"** the cry was one where relief and panic coexisted, and Gavreel's hearts began to beat faster. "**Adjutant-Colonel Bellona reporting. Tyranids defeated, but we have encountered an Alpha-Plus Psyker Creature next to the primary goal! Strength insufficient to defeat it, I invoke the Sanguine Decree! Please help us, Webmistress**!"

There was not a second of hesitation.

"**I am at the Giraffe Spaceport. Catachan is too far away, and it's not mine, Bellona. You will have to summon me by Sacrifice. Do you understand**?"

Gavreel grimaced. The Dawnbreaker Guard was still learning the 'rules' governing the life of a Living Saint at the same time their mistress did, but they knew at least what this one would require.

"**I understand completely, Webmistress. Twelve seconds is all I need!"**

The spider manifestation disappeared into an inferno of golden flames, but the latter didn't flicker out. Instead, they seemed to grow in size and brilliance.

All around them, Gavreel could hear the stupefaction sounds and the excited conversations.

So much for operational secrecy.

"**Liandra, come here immediately, your services are required**!" the command was imperial and tolled like a great bell. "**Gavreel**."

"My Lady?"

"**There are going to be repercussions for this. I intervene, and the parasites are going to notice. It is inevitable. They can't intercept me, but they can use the opportunity to stab me in the back. Raise the alert level, and tell my chief of staff to prepare Contingency Scorpiad**."

"Yes, my Lady."

There was a flash of energy, and the most infuriating long-ear of Nyx – a title the Dawnbreaker Guard had rewarded her unanimously – arrived like a miniature storm and kneeled.

"My Empress?"

"**It seems the forces assigned to Hell Garden have encountered a foe beyond their strength. You come with me**."

**Catachan**

**The Hatchery**

**The Destroyed Brood Nest – deep under Devil's Crater**

**5.558.313M35**

**Sister** **Kyra**

By the tenth second, Kyra knew for certain they were all going to die.

Two Space Marines – she didn't even know the Chapter they were part of – had tried to charge down into the deeps as the psychic attack momentarily faded.

They had been disintegrated entirely when the enemy resumed its onslaught.

The power was suffocating.

It burned you.

It scorched her armour, and felt like a thousand Vipers were trying to pierce into your soul.

Kyra had seen several Sororitas die.

The wrath...the wrath couldn't be denied.

Some guardsmen had tried to flee.

But it was too late.

Everything in the chamber was saturated with something that was born and raised to kill you.

If you stepped outside of the field where the Adjutant-Spiders' Aethergold holy power kept the attack at bay, you died.

And it hadn't escaped the young woman that with each second, this circular aegis fuelled by the devotion of the arachnids for Her Celestial Highness was shrinking.

"Courage, sisters! The Webmistress heard my call! We are almost there! In the name of **Administration**, **Hope**, and **Sacrifice**, we will all be saved!"

It had been an attempt to boost their morale, Kyra was sure of it.

It worked.

The problem was that the foe they were facing did understand enough to know this defiant hope had to be crushed as swiftly as possible.

The explosions and giant flares of tri-coloured psychic power stopped like a button had been pushed.

And then giant tendrils of pure energy erupted from the deeps, bringing incandescent destruction with them.

It looked like one more overwhelming assault, but it wasn't.

Milliseconds before they hit the golden sphere erected by the Adjutant-Spiders, the tendrils began to twist at supersonic speeds, becoming akin to terrible spinning blades.

The rampart ceded.

One Space Marine Librarian fell to his knees, utterly exhausted before being disintegrated by the progression of the hurricane of annihilation.

One Adjutant-Spider collapsed, then a second.

Several Space Marines raised their Crozius and tried to do...something before being blasted away like they were mere projectiles in the middle of some huge cannon.

"This is not-"

The light was too brilliant-

The light-

"**You shouldn't have done that. They are mine, Guardian. Mine until they go in front of the Emperor**."

The assault tried to increase.

Everyone felt it.

But the tendrils suddenly began to burn.

They burned in golden flames.

Kyra turned her head.

*She* was here.

*She* was here, standing in the middle of a circle where ten Lamenters had fallen.

For a moment, Kyra frowned. Hadn't the armours of the sons of Sanguinius been red, not this yellow-gold?

The thought was banished as quickly as it had appeared.

Her Celestial Highness was here.

Adjutant-Colonel Bellona had told them to pray for a miracle, and their faith had been judged true in the end.

Her Celestial Highness was here.

And she was not alone, another tall golden figure was by her side.

"Orders, Webmistress?"

"For the Emperor."

The tendrils withdrew, but as they did, they threw a blast against the ceiling, creating another massive hole.

And the dust was still spreading that thousands of snakes revealed themselves.

It did not matter.

The psychic assault was gone, and with it, a swarm of insects rushed into the chamber.

"FOR THE EMPEROR AND THE DAWN!" the banner-bearer of the Lamenters shouted, his armour of red scorched by gold and yellow. "FOR THE ANGEL AND FOR CATACHAN!"

Kyra was not the first to draw a Power Sword and charge into the melee, but she was not the last either.

The golden flames were soon joined by a rain of crystal, and the battle swallowed them all.

**Chapter** **Master Michael Yarhibol**

Once the latest snake was torn apart and it became clear that whatever extraordinarily powerful beast which had been about to annihilate them wasn't about to strike in the next few seconds, Michael Yarhibol bent the knee.

"Your Celestial Highness..."

"Please, Chapter Master." Lady Weaver's voice did not sound like a choir of angels singing an opera. "Rise. If anything, it should be *me* doing the kneeling. From what I had the time to assimilate from my faithful Adjutants, it seems that you and every other person I sent to Catachan have been through *Hell*."

"Perhaps, your Celestial Highness, but we needed you in the end, otherwise our defeat would have been certain."

"The defeat would likely have been unavoidable, but for no fault of your own. This Guardian is extremely powerful. The Emperor could have defeated it with ease, along with a few Primarchs. I'm pretty sure it has enough psychic power to handle practically everyone else."

"That is...extremely concerning." The Chapter Master of the Lamenters replied after several seconds. In particular because it confirmed that the 'Guardian' had made a tactical withdrawal at the critical moment. It had suffered a defeat yes, but it was hardly neutralised.

"Yes, it is. And the Guardian was not inactive on other fronts either. Kali!"

"I hear and I obey, Webmistress!"

"You seem the healthiest Adjutant-Captain I have left. Run to the Apothecaries, heal yourself, and then rush out of the tunnels to go negotiate with the Catachan Queen-ants. It seems that the moment the Tyranids were killed, the Guardian began to call them to his side. As it stands, there is a formidable army of a few million on the northern approaches of the Crater. My arrival was enough to convince them to stop their advance; this must continue. Negotiate with them like you did with the other spiders, and be your usual diplomatic yourself."

"Yes, Webmistress! Err..."

"Yes, I could control them. But I'm sure that the Guardian can observe them. And he wasn't that fond of our presence on the Death World to begin with."

Michael didn't know if he should feel really relieved or angry. On the one hand, disaster had been averted. On the other hand, the Guardian had...what by the Golden Throne had they been facing here?

The Angel of Sacrifice turned back her human eyes towards him.

"It must be a bit obvious to say it now, Chapter Master, but I acknowledge your sacrifice, and swear it won't be forgotten. I will try my best to shave as many years off of your Penance Crusade as I can, and if I can declare it complete and successful, I will."

"That is...thank you, Great Angel."

"You deserve it." The Basileia answered. "Bellona?"

"I implore your forgiveness, Webmistress! I will take the blame!"

The sigh was incredibly loud.

"You are way too hard on yourself, Bellona. I have a feeling I will have to give you plenty of holidays and some of the delicacies you adore."

"Webmistress..."

"There is nothing to forgive. You did the best you could with what you had at your disposal. Now take charge of the Swarm on the surface, and begin salvaging as much as you can. I am going to meet the Guardian; hold the fort until my return. You have my permission to draw as deep from the Bacta reserves as you feel necessary."

More words of praise and thanks were spoken.

"I will repeat it: you all have done extremely well, soldiers of the Imperium. You have conquered Hell, and defeated something that could have ravaged entire Sectors if left unattended. I will not forget. Take pride in that, and mend your wounds. I will have need of your experience and your rested minds in the days to come."

The blade of crystal was drawn from its scabbard again.

"Liandra? I think we need to explain to the Guardian why I am greatly displeased by its behaviour."

The Angel and her follower burned in gold, and they jumped into the hole leading far deeper than the tunnels of Devil's Crater, leaving the sight of Space Marine and guardsmen alike.

**Deep under the surface of Catachan**

**The Remnant of the Galaxy-That-Was**

**The Heart of the World – Psychic-saturated zone**

**Liandra** **of Caledor**

The descent did not take long: seventy heartbeats of hers, give or take a few.

It was sufficient to know that Her Empress' decision to not bring anyone had been wise.

This was a powerful World Spirit awaiting them, and it was guarded by an even more powerful Guardian.

Save perhaps the greatest arachnid sent to command the expedition, the foot soldiers would have been destroyed in short order, their frail bodies unable to breathe and endure the pressure the Guardian generated by simply existing.

They landed on sand.

At first, it seemed like they had somehow arrived at one of the Maiden Worlds created by the Goddess Isha.

The temperature was perfect for Aeldari, her armour insisted, not too much humidity, not too little.

You had to love the water, however.

For in front of the yellow sands where their fall had led them to, there was a considerable amount of water, so much that her senses were unable to perceive the end of it.

"So that's where all the rivers my Spiders had so many difficulties with led to," her Empress mused. "The Old Ones created this underworld?"

"I think they would have preferred the term 'world-shaping'," Liandra replied amused. "And yes. Look at the overgrown pyramid in the jungle."

"The one covered in psychically active crystals?"

For a heartbeat she chuckled; there was certainly no other pyramid anywhere else, and the caress the World Spirit spread outwards was impossible to ignore.

"Yes, that very pyramid, my Empress."

It was an impressive structure, all told. There were over a dozen levels before the summit one could imagine beneath the verdant mantle and the golden colour was rather elegant...oh.

"Is there a reason, Liandra, why the structure seems to be entirely made of gold?"

"It is beautiful?"

She heard a loud sigh.

"And here I thought the Emperor had some peculiar tastes by armouring himself completely in Auramite. I know gold isn't that rare when you are an interstellar civilisation, but this must have been a lot of effort to bring everything here."

"You are right..." Gold. There was something she had heard about it long ago, long before the Fall. From the Queen of Blades? No, this had come before even that. Where had her ears listened to a tale which talked of it? Ah. "Chaqua."

"Cha-what?"

"Chaqua, my Empress," Liandra smiled. "If the pyramid is any indication, I think we're the first noble Rangers in millions of cycles to have rediscovered Chaqua, the legendary City of Gold. The nobles of the Phoenix Court's horrified expressions would be visible from here if they were still alive. Many of their Houses searched for it their entire existences and never found it."

It had been a subject of amusement among her family, especially as one of the Princes had disappeared a few cycles before she was acknowledged as an adult.

Plenty of courtiers had whispered that Chaqua was a legend, a tale which had to have been merged with a black hole given how most of the Aeldari who searched for it were never seen again.

"Is it also possible that the ancient Aeldari Rangers did discover it and the Guardian killed them?"

Liandra grimaced, and she felt it good that her helmet hid it from her Empress.

"It is possible, yes. And speaking of the Guardian..."

"It can't be on the beach, there is no cover. It is not on top of the pyramid. Therefore logic dictates it is in the lake, is it not?"

There was a shockwave. A series of geysers which reached as high as the ceiling of the planet were born.

And at last the Guardian levitated out of the giant lake, floating in an enormous bubble of water, final evidence that wasn't really required of its glorious aetheric presence.

"A xenos jellyfish?" she heard her Empress mutter. "The Guardian is a species of psychic jellyfish..."

"That's how human call it?" Liandra asked intrigued. "I had seen some in the heart of our Empire, but they could fit in the palm of my hand. I had never heard of one which could grow to such a size, I admit."

"It has a bell which is easily sixty metres in diameter, and the tentacles are easily more than two hundred metres long, Liandra. How did the Old Ones bring it here in the first place?"

That was a good question, really. The Webway solved many problems, but there were limits to everything.

"I don't think they did. I think they brought the Guardian here when it was young, and they let it grow into adulthood in this very lake."

And now it must have had enough of observing them, for it was like a new sun was born again, except this sun was the Guardian, and it burned in lights of every colour.

It didn't stop there, of course.

With the lights, so diverse there was enough for an incredible rainbow, came song and emotions.

"Is the Guardian trying to communicate?"

"It...seems that way?" Liandra hesitated. "Given the click of the tongues, unfortunately...I think the Guardian speaks the tongue of the Old Ones' favourite servants."

She could feel the annoyance from the Angel of Sacrifice.

"Of course, it would have been too simple. And I certainly can't control the toads of Catachan around to act as translators...unless you learned the language?"

"I did not, my Empress. But the emotions...wrath, sorrow, worry...I think the Guardian was asleep for too long. Something about the Tyranids influencing the World Spirit into not following the traditional reawakening ritual? And the servants of the Old Ones are all gone now, of course."

"But the Guardian is still alive. How old is this jellyfish exactly?"

There was something in her Empress' voice that she had almost never heard since she had entered her service: wonder.

It was, Liandra would concede, completely justified here and now.

The former Blood Muse *focused*.

She tried to listen; not to the words, but the pace and essence of the Guardian's light.

In time, maybe her Empress would be able to do it, but she was far too young for it now, even with a Muse's memories to help her.

"I think...I think it was brought here before the War in Heaven was even on the horizon. What is the measure your Imperium uses? Terran years? The Guardian has been here for some seventy million of them...plus or minus one."

The Guardian shone, as if her words pleased his essence. Was the Guardian a 'he', anyway? So many things she had never bothered to ask her teachers when it came to these species...

There was a ray of rainbow colours, which directly lit up a part of the pyramid, revealing of course more gold, a profusion of gold...and some clearly broken crystals.

The Guardian sang once more, and plunged into the depths of the lake again.

"What is it saying, Liandra?"

"I think...it wants us to repair the crystals of the World Spirit. They are clearly hindering the protection of the planet, and if nothing is done, it will cause more and more damage."

"Can we do it?"

"We can." She nodded quickly. "It is not a complicated process, my Empress. I suppose the only reason the Guardian isn't doing it himself is that the Old Ones made sure he could only guard the World Spirit, not manipulate it. They certainly brought other servants for that."

"And now the other servants are long gone." The Empress of the new Aeldari Empire muttered a few curses. "Are there any alternatives?"

Liandra shrugged.

"I suppose we can always go fight the Guardian in an epic clash which will be remembered for all eternity." It was the former Apprentice of the Queen in her speaking, apparently. "But I'm not exactly confident in our victory. And assuming we did win, I'm pretty sure we will do more damage to the World Spirit, and the planet is already badly affected by the 'fight yourselves' orders of the Great Devourer."

"It killed plenty of my spiders, guardsmen, Sororitas, and Space Marines."

"I won't try to minimise the losses, but I think that when the Guardian woke up, the lashing out was his way to punish everyone for the disastrous state of the planet and the absence of the servants. By repelling his first attacks, we gave him time to calm himself and return to a more proper role of Guardian, instead of Avenger."

"Hmm..."

"And if it helps, my Empress, I think the Guardian is incredibly old. Yes, the Old Ones could give some gifts that other species thought to be immortality, but the Old Ones are gone, and I don't think the species of the Guardian was brought here to be an immortal warden of the World Spirit. The old Ones may have intended to bring other Guardians, either for reproductive purposes or one-for-one replacements."

"Except the War in Heaven began, and they suddenly had far more pressing concerns than bringing new jellyfish to support this one, yes. It is a theory, but it would fit the facts we have. Actually, is it possible they ordered the servants they had there to dismantle the Webway Gates? Bellona and the other Adjutants didn't see a single ruin which could be one, and that is something the Tyranids would have loved to get their claws on."

"I can't be certain, but it would likely be a security measure that makes a great deal of sense. According to the Queen, by the end of the War the Star Devourers had weapons that allowed them to detect worlds where they were activations of Webway Gate. If Chaqua was as important to the Old Ones as the stories implied, it would make sense they tried to protect it by hiding it and cutting it off from the Webway Network. And it sort of worked: the Void Dragon and the other C'Tan didn't find the planet."

"But by the end of the War, there was no one to return. The Guardian waited, and waited...maybe it was during that time the servants stranded here began the 'rituals' telling it to sleep? The Guardian and his allies were smart, they had to know super-aetheric jellyfishes weren't immortal. The 'slumber' would add some millions of years, well beyond his natural life-expectancy."

"But they miscalculated." Liandra finished. "Instead of the Old Ones, it was a Hive Ship of the Great Devourer which came to the world. And the servants, pale shadows of their former glory, were unable to repel them. They likely made the Hungering Maw pay dearly – all the forces mustered against your Adjutants were young and recently born, you said – but they died. And the Devourer was not going to wake up the Guardian."

This was of course only a theory. But it fit the few facts they had in their hands.

"The more I learn about this galaxy," her Empress announced in a disappointed voice, "the more I feel it is a tragedy opera written across ten billion stars."

Liandra didn't reply.

After all, her Empress was absolutely correct.

"Repairing the crystals, you said?" the silence lasted only thirty heartbeats.

"Yes, my Empress. I suppose we can add some slight purification too?"

"As long as it doesn't take too long. The **Sacrifice**'s duration is not unlimited. And no, I am not going to let you stay on Catachan unsupervised."

Liandra giggled. That she had never doubted.

"Your will be done, my Empress. Once we will have done it...I suppose we can ask for a proper audience?"

"He better give me one. Without the Guardian, there would have been no reason for us to intervene by the Sanguine Decree, and this is going to have consequences I'm not going to like."

**The** **Guardian**

The Guardian felt a twinge of satisfaction as the lesser matrixes of the Great Heart were repaired and shone anew with potent vitality.

The works of the Creators should never have been allowed to fall into ruin, but this offense had now been erased.

The Heart would endure.

The Guardian could fulfil his purpose, which was to guard the Heart and the World.

And yet a far greater disaster loomed.

The Guardian could feel it, the old ravage of entropy no one but the Creators was completely immune to.

The Guardian was too old.

The Guardian was going to die.

Once upon a time, the Skinks had insisted they had a solution. Surely, they had told him, the Creators were going to return any cycle now. The part of the Great Work hidden here made this inevitable. They had beseeched him to sleep; to take a lapse in his guardian duties. When the Creators returned, they would awaken him immediately.

The Guardian had believed them, and even if he hadn't, it wasn't like the Guardian had found a better plan.

It had been a foolish idea.

The Guardian had slumbered, preserving his last embers of life, but as he did, the Skinks had disappeared. The World had been invaded and was unfit to serve the purposes of the Creators. The Great Work's secrets were ruined. Only the Heart remained readily accessible, and even it was damaged and would require the Guardian's song to be reminded its true purpose.

And the Creators had not returned.

The Creators would not return.

The Guardian was long-lived and patient.

He was not a stupid and aggressive creature like so many which crawled, slithered, and hunted in the jungles above.

The Heart and the Great Work were too important. It was why the Guardian had been made the Guardian, after all.

If it hadn't been important, the Creators would have just placed the Skinks here and left.

The Creators would not return.

The Guardian was certain about very few things, but he embraced this harsh and unpleasant reality.

And soon, there would be no Guardian to guard their creations.

It was a disaster.

Without the Skinks, the great machines of the Great Work had not been maintained. Without all the other servants of the Creator, the cities of gold and the matrix were unusable.

The Guardian guarded nothing but the Heart, and soon there would be no Guardian to protect it.

The Guardian couldn't create others of his race. There had been debates between the Creators to bring another Guardian who would have this appreciable quality when he was young, but the Creators had never gone through with it.

And now the Guardian was too old.

There was one hope. The Guardian could transfer the purpose and the knowledge to other Guardians. This the Old Ones had benevolently consented to when they had forged him to be the Guardian.

The Creators were gone, or they would have returned from their journeys across the stars.

But the Guardian had hardly been unique among his species.

There had been others. The Creators had showed them to him.

It had been a long time, but maybe the capability to sire new Guardians had been given to them.

The Guardian was aware the reasoning was as flawed as the one the Skinks had given to him long ago.

But it was all he had.

The Guardian had to guard the Heart; this was the essence of what he was, the order his Creators had given to him.

It had to be done.

It was important.

And even if for the flicker of a thought the Guardian found a way to not do it – a sacrilegious idea to be certain – he was too old and too close to death.

The water that had been his domain was troubled.

The two golden lights plunged into his resting place.

One the Guardian didn't trust at all. It still smelled of blood, no matter how much it had burned recently, and he had dealt with the species before.

Oh, yes.

The Guardian didn't forget.

He remembered how in the days where he hadn't yet slumbered, these arrogant creatures had the audacity to sail here and order him, order him, the gall of these creatures! To give to them the secrets of the Creators!

For this arrogance he had killed them, and let the Skinks feast upon their flesh.

Many more had come, but he had been young and powerful in that era.

The arrogant no-longer-servants of the Creators had been no match for him.

The other light was far more interesting.

It had assimilated some other essences, but it was not the same species as the other light. It controlled the weaker light, and this was intriguing.

It also clearly ruled over some of the web-throwing creatures fighting outside. It could clearly give precise orders to some of the species living in the jungles of the World.

It was a powerful Light.

Not as great as the favourite servants, the Slann, but then so few lights were.

Yes, it was a great messenger for a greater purpose.

Unfortunately, the major light was not speaking the noble tongue of the creators and was...different from other servants.

The Guardian had to touch with his appendages and speak via the weaker light.

It would have been intolerable before; it had to be tolerated now given how limited the time remaining to him was. The Guardian didn't have enough time to teach anyone the tongue of the Creators the proper way, assuming he did have the strength, which he assuredly did not.

It worked.

Communication was opened.

It was not pleasant. The Guardian felt one of his appendages begin to burn gold.

The Guardian proposed an exchange.

He wanted the lights to search outside for new Guardians.

He stressed the terrible dangers a World-without-Guardian would bring.

He promised that with new Guardians, the World would be restored and fit for the Great Plan.

The lights answered.

The Guardian saw horrors, some from the aether, some other not.

They wanted his help.

They wanted some of the Creators' secrets.

The Guardian paused.

The purpose was truer than those who had come before, but the Guardian had been told by the Creators to safeguard them with his life.

The Guardian had been forged to preserve. To guard.

But what good would it do since clearly the Great Works and the Great Plan had failed everywhere but this World?

And new Guardians would not be bound by the Creators.

They could make their own promises.

The Guardian needed to find a new Guardian, in the end.

He spoke again to the greater of the two lights.

**Devil's Crater**

**5.559.313M35**

**General** **Jack 'Death' Schwarz**

Obviously the moment Lady Weaver stepped out of the tunnels, there were tens of thousands of cheers to welcome her.

Proud Catachan warriors didn't cry, so naturally all the water on their faces would be blamed on the rain and the inability of the red bandanas to provide any sort of cover.

And they were the witnesses of something that had never been seen before: over a million Catachan ants bowing to a lone Angel. They had arrived as the battle went down, and now the battlefield and the approaches of Devil's Crater were filled with them.

Several ants began to turn gold, hundreds or thousands in the multitude.

Plenty didn't.

Jack Schwarz was really too exhausted to wonder why.

Instead he made sure most of the men moved out of the way, and saluted his commander as she reached the place where one of her Adjutant-Spiders awaited.

"Lady Militant," he saluted, knowing the Living Saint would prefer the military ranks to apply. "I am happy to see you solved the problem. Your Adjutants spoke of a Guardian?"

"The Guardian is a huge jellyfish that would have been likely capable of giving the Emperor the fight of his life in his prime."

It said something of the stuff he had heard in the last few years that he accepted it as the truth after a few seconds.

"Is?"

"I wish I could have killed it for what it did to the Swarm and all other forces," Lady Weaver admitted. "But the Sacrifice which brought me here was not going to last long, and assuming I won, I would have in all likelihood severely damaged the World Spirit of Catachan. And besides, this ruthless jellyfish is old. Time will slay it far more surely than my blade."

"I can't pretend I will be sorry when it happens," Jack replied honestly. "Your bodyguard?"

"Communicating with the Guardian consumed much of the Sacrifice keeping her here. She is on her way to Nyx right now. And in a few minutes, it will be my turn."

The last part did not really surprise him. It had taken a truly disastrous situation to force the Adjutant-Spiders to bring their Mistress to Catachan. This wasn't without costs, clearly.

The former part, however...

"A jellyfish can communicate?"

"Of sorts, yes, we clearly didn't speak the same language, but my bodyguard had advantages I lacked. I'm pretty sure most of the content was lost in translation, but we were able to have negotiations. By stretching the definition of that term several times, of course."

"Of course." Jack spoke acidly. "And what does a huge psychic jellyfish can possibly *want*?"

"Replacements, essentially," the Lady General Militant informed him. "It is too old; death is not far away, and someone has to pick up the mantle."

"That's sound like a very bad idea."

"The very reason there are Tyranids on this planet in the first place was because the Guardian had to slumber in a sort of psychic coma in the vain hope those who left him behind would come back with a replacement."

"Ah."

"Webmistress? What about the ants?"

"During the negotiations, the Guardian and I arrived at the conclusion that the Crater, the tunnels, and everything around it must be protected militarily, precisely to avoid the kind of problems that the Tyranids caused, Bellona. The Guardian isn't returning to its slumber anytime soon now, but it needs a neutral force to act as physical shields. Neutrality being what it is, unclaimed ant colonies will be this living rampart."

There were more golden flashes, and several tank-sized Queen-ants began to move westwards, linking up with columns of arachnids.

"Of course in exchange for recognising this neutrality, the Guardian leaves me the freedom to pick a reasonable number of Queen-ants and other colonies, as well as a fair array of specimens from other species. It just has to be beings that I can control and protect. Naturally, since my presence here is coming at an end, I will need someone to fairly administer the selection process."

"I won't disappoint you, Webmistress!"

Jack grunted. Death didn't smile for a giant spider sprinting away. And if some Jungle Fighters laughed, well, they were young and impressionable.

"I suppose there are plenty of top-secret matters which will become known later, but for now, I will only ask if I can formally end Hell Garden? Sharp's boys have killed all the Hormagaunts they could find, though a few unavoidably fled into the Green Hell to the east and south."

"Hell Garden is officially over, General. Evacuate the survivors, and let my Swarm provide all the Bacta that I fear is solely needed."

"Victory,"

"Victory," the Lady of Spiders echoed. "And it could have been far greater if the former homeworld of the Guardian wasn't somewhere in a region which has been swallowed by a Warp Storm."

The golden wings unfurled again.

The Living Saint began to rise effortlessly.

"No Sacrifice too great to restore Hope. No Administration skill too unsuitable to stand against evil. Ave Imperator."

"AVE IMPERATOR!"

The sky burned in golden flames, and when they faded, the Angel of Sacrifice was gone.

\*\*\*\*

*Vermin-things!*

*Once-once again the ugly-bad threat of Unity chooses to lift-raise its snout, yes-yes!*

*The insult-curse!*

*The gall-gall! The arrogance!*

*The brute-things chose to spit-spit in our eyes!*

*They dared-dared hide in miserable dirty lair called 'Harmony'!*

*This-this* *is an insult-curse that can't be borne, no-no!*

*And so it won't be!*

*Unity and Harmony are bad-bad!*

*Only in Anarchy can all-all* *things find salvation, yes-yes!*

*Remember: it is better-greater to die-die* *in single day of Anarchy for Malal than to live without obeying Council of Eleven!*

*Lackeys! Raise pulpit higher, I can't read my speech-screech!*

*Yes-yes! You will be-be only adequately punished!*

*Vermin-things, anarchic-things!*

*It is very necessary to go-go to war!*

*The Despoiler-thing must not-not achieve its plans!*

*In my-my glorious name, the last seat of Council will be mine-mine! What? Did I squeak badly? Oh yes-yes, I wanted to say every glorious victory will be won-won in name* *of Council of Eleven and Great Primarch-thing OmeSkaven, long may* *he see-see me triumph!*

*Let anti-Harmony Grand Skaven Warpstone Crusade begin!*

*Eye of Anarchy will be ours-ours, or we will blow-blow it up, yes-yes!*

*Praise Anarchy!*

*Praise Malal!*

Eleventh recording attempt made by the Unholy Pontifur-Bishop Supreme Skitisk Doombane of the Inverted Nexus, Master of the Anarchic-Bringer Sermons, Unstable Crackpot of Verminous Insolence. It is estimated that the temple only nearly collapsed eleven times that day, which was seen as a most divine blessing on Skavenblight.

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**The Eye of Terror**

**Harmony System**

**Gloriana-class *Vengeful Spirit***

**Space-Temporal Anomaly – Date Estimation Impossible**

**Lord** **Vigilator Iskandar Khayon**

It had been a given that there would be a reaction.

There were three fleets present in this system, and Iskandar didn't doubt that Fabius Bile had some void assets hidden somewhere they couldn't see. The Clonelord was arrogant, but he wasn't lacking in intellectual capacity; there was no way he would have come without back-up.

Even without counting these hidden assets everyone was trying hard to locate, the military might assembled in this star system was impressive.

The Tzeentchian fleet was small, but each unit had clearly been extensively modified to carry psy-weaponry, be it from Q'Sal or another sorcerer-ruled planet.

For any raid force against minor planets, it would have been a respectable display of force.

Here and now, it was completely outmatched.

Gluthor Skurvithrax had pursued said ships across the Eye of Terror, and though it might not be the entirety of his armada – one had to account for garrisons, scouts, and the whims of the Gods – there were enough capital ships present to destroy an average Imperial Battlefleet.

It was extremely fortunate the Black Legion had brought more firepower than that.

While there were other ways to dissuade a warlord of the Death Guard from attacking, mustering a fleet which was several times stronger than your order of battle remained the most efficient method.

Ezekyle was no fool, and neither were the members of the Ezekarion.

They wouldn't have allowed the Warmaster to step a foot on Harmony without some considerable military support.

Nonetheless, the Lord Vigilator of the Black Legion had never doubted there would be a reaction.

Three fleets of three different allegiances in the same star system, and not a single one was shooting?

This could have been allowed if they weren't inside a Warp Storm.

But this was the Eye of Terror, the prison of the Legions, the Hell of their sins and uncountable species' nightmares.

There would be a reaction.

And since the Architect of Fate and the Grandfather both had warlords of theirs present in considerable numbers, the only real question was if the Lord of Skulls or the Beast of Anarchy were going to open the hostilities.

The moment the Coven aboard the *Vengeful Spirit* informed him they were forced to protect against some mental attack where rat squeaking played a major role, Iskandar knew he had his answer.

But it was an unpleasant surprise to see over a thousand starships translate into the Harmony System close to the barren planet some had called Marvel's Bane.

"Over one thousand and two hundred starships, Lord Vigilator! At least sixty Battleships!"

And then the explosions began.

There was no gravipause and the rules of the material universe governing Warp travel didn't exist in the Eye of Terror.

But if you were really stupid enough to come so close to a planet, the outcome was assuredly incredibly destructive.

"At least twenty Battleships destroyed," the litany of losses began to be tallied, "four hundred starships gone or so crippled there won't be functional again. And Lord Vigilator..."

"Yes?"

"Based on the first probes of the Augur-Prophets, all these ships are made of Ethereax alloys. Every single one of them, no exception."

"Well, at least we know how the servants of Anarchy were able to rebuild a fleet so quickly after they lost theirs at the Second Battle of the Tyrant Star."

The Black Legion itself had discovered the Ethereax alloys well before launching the first offensive of the Long War against the Imperium. He remembered those days, and the optimism the discovery had generated. It was a Warp-infused metal that gave a Legion the industrial capacity to build war machines, from a Land Raider Tank to a mighty Battleship, with a fraction of the resources and the technological lore that it should have required elsewhere. What was not to like? With the desultory facility the alloys bend to the will of their Dark Mechanicum allies, you could easily build one hundred Battleships for every Infernus hull other shipyards would create.

The big problem, because good things didn't exist in the Eye of Terror, was that the moment you arrived in a zone where the influence of the Warp dimmed or grew particularly instable, the Ethereax-made ships self-destructed. You tried to get out of the Eye of Terror? Destroyed. You got too close to the Firetide of the Astronomican? Destroyed. You sided with some Tzeentchian Cults, infused the alloys with Change-based sorcery, and then tried to invade Khornate-claimed planets? Destroyed.

It went without saying that once they had realised the drawbacks, the Ezekarion had unanimously cancelled the construction of Ethereax hulls, and banned everything having to do with it. The edict was still active to this day, incidentally.

The Black Legion wanted to fight the Long War; it had no interest in committing a Battlefleet and letting the Cadians laugh themselves to death as their entire armada disintegrated without a shot being fired.

All other Legions had followed their lead, though some had needed some quite spectacular disasters exploding in their faces before admitting it was a bad idea.

"It seems," the Black Sorcerer mused, "that the Skaven and all their anarchic allies are going to need a painful lesson of their own."

"I suppose that is true," Valicar Hyne agreed by his side, as more enemy ships arrived in the Harmony System, "but for today, they suffer little drawback from having an Ethereax fleet. The Warp is rather calm here, we're far away from the Firetide or the edge of the Eye. Let us praise their stupidity, for...what in the name of Lorgar's gullible ideas are they doing?"

"They are shooting at the planet, Lord!"

This...this didn't make any sense. Marvel's Bane may have some lesser daemons crawling on its surface, but it didn't have anything more than that. It was barren, near-lifeless, the result of an Emperor's Children 'parade' having gone horribly wrong, or right, depending on your point of view and the opinion you had on murder-parties.

"Several of their Battleships are activating prow cannons generating absurd levels of energies!"

"They can't possibly-"

Iskandar grimaced as the Sea of Souls reacted violently to whatever new insanity the slaves of the Beast had decided to use.

There were rays of malevolent green shots illuminating the entire Harmony System.

And then the colossal explosions began.

It didn't take long to make a preliminary assessment.

First, the planet of Marvel's Bane had just suffered a partial disintegration, and was in all likelihood going to end up as a series of bloody gigantic asteroids.

Then there was the ridiculous fact that this stupid 'battle' had cost the enemy seventy more starships, primarily hulls of Raiders and Destroyers tonnage.

"Are we supposed to laugh or to cry?" the Master of the Fleet asked, honestly puzzled. "If they intend to fight every piece of rock in this system before challenging our fleet, I have no problem with it, of course. This is definitely new. I don't think even the Greenskins ever considered such a strategy."

"These giant rats are insane."

"Lord, there is a strange communication coming from the enemy."

"Accept it," Valicar said.

Precisely eleven seconds later, the erratic holo of a black-furred creature with maniacal red eyes appeared on the Vengeful Spirit.

"Brute-things!" the chaotic creature stopped licking...whatever he had been licking. Had they surprised it, or was it a deliberate insult? "You stand-cower in presence of most revered, most unholy, most unvanquished, sublime Pontifur-Bishop Supreme Skitisk Doombane of the Inverted-"

"Shut up," the Master of the Black Legion Fleet returned the insult. "Mutants like you I enslave ten million of during every campaign to work in the depths of the *Vengeful Spirit* and the other Legion flagships!"

"You dare-dare?" the rodent spluttered. "You are guilty of foul-foul heresy!"

The servants of the Beast assuredly had the merit of issuing swift religious judgements, it must be said.

"We're all the heretics of someone else," Iskandar replied in something that could approach diplomacy. "Anyway. The Black Legion has need of this system for a short period of time, Skaven. You will not interfere. If you do, your fleet will be destroyed. This I swear on the ashes of Prospero."

"HERESY!" the furry xenos screeched. "You dare-dare challenge will-orders of Council? Blasphemy! Treachery! Heresy!"

There were times when you wondered why the return of a certain Fourth Power had been such a priority for the Golden Throne and all those who served Terra. Really, after the death of Slaanesh they should have been happy to have removed a God from the equation, no?

But now, as you watched an enormous upstart creature trying to read a vellum roll like a parody of an Administratum Adept, you could only acknowledge that the Imperium had likely struck the most devastating blow they ever did since the Siege of Terra.

The Skaven were creatures of Anarchy, and if they gambled everything on Ethereax-built ships, it wasn't like they would ever be a problem for the defenders of Cadia.

"I'm beginning to think it wasn't a good idea to open this communication, Iskandar."

"You think?" He snorted. "Brothers, try to cut the feed, I have heard enough."

"You will submit to great-mighty authority of Skavenblight, Peerless Jewel of Anarchy!" The rat-leader squeaked in its horrible cant insulting Low Gothic with every syllabus. "You will beg-beg to be saved by the Great Horned One, or you will die-die! Praise Anarchy! Praise **Malal**!"

At last the communication ended.

Given how resistant it had proven to jamming and other countermeasures, Iskandar thought some combination of sorcery and technology had been used, which was anything but good news.

"The enemy fleet is accelerating, and its course is not subtle."

"They are coming straight for our throat, or so they think," Iskandar commented fatalistically. "Let's look on the bright side, we are not going to be bored while we wait for Ezekyle to finish his part of the plan..."

**Harmony**

**The Tunnels under Canticle City**

**Space-Temporal Anomaly – Date Estimation Impossible**

**Warlord** **Malicia, the Destiny Unwritten**

Malicia had to give it to him, Abaddon the Despoiler was a charismatic bastard.

Then again, he had to be to survive as the leader of the Black Legion, a force which many factions in and outside of the Eye of Terror would love to destroy forever.

"Free will," the Heir to Horus' legacy declared as he continued his speech, "why the Gods covet our souls and our allegiance, and it is also why they hate us."

Predictably, he was interrupted by Fabius Bile.

"You give them way too much credit, Ezekyle."

It said quite a lot about the Primogenitor that he was willing to call one of the most dreaded warriors of the entire galaxy by his first name. As far as the Tzeentchian sorceress knew, Abaddon hadn't given him permission to do so, and the glare hinted he never had.

"A million civilisations ended because they underestimated *them*. My own gene-father believed the Four were mere overlords that could be convinced to bend the knee in time. I think he understood quite clearly the magnitude of his mistake when his own father's blade ended him body and soul."

Fabius Bile looked like he clearly disagreed, but he didn't open his mouth again.

"And this is where Cambion and Living Saints truly fundamentally diverge." Malicia raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I have agents of my own on Terra and elsewhere. And yes, I agree with them. They can tell the truth, if by accident."

"The Corpse on the Golden Throne," the younger Tzeentchian sorceress declared, "can force the Angel of Sacrifice to obey his commands, much like a daemon can control the limbs of the being it possesses."

"Yes, the power and the ability do so exist. But *did he do it*?"

She would have to add, besides the charisma, the ability to ask critical questions just at the right time.

"The Gods wouldn't be pleased by your insinuations."

"I don't insinuate anything." The Despoiler spoke bluntly. "The Lord of Blood and Skulls left **Valkia**," the name resonated across the Empyrean, "some free will of sort after he effectively reforged her and removed from her all the so-called weaknesses he found unpleasing. The one who waits on the Golden Throne offered true free will to his servant."

"You could be wrong," Bile pointed out.

"I could," Abaddon agreed. "I have only met Weaver once, after all."

And somehow, the Warmaster and the Angel had ended up not killing each other.

Malicia wasn't sure if she had to be disappointed or terrified by the outcome.

"This is all very intriguing." She acknowledged. "Is this supposed to convince me that the rewards of being a Nephilim Queen are not worth the drawbacks? Because I assure you, I already had several doubts about it."

But it wasn't like there was any better alternative. The pact she had made with Tzeentch was as binding today as when it had been made years ago: she was given this new body, instead of staying a freaking nightmarish mutant that made most Chaos Spawn look reasonably pretty.

"I want to convince you that whatever you think, trying to let your little empire of the Calyx Hell Stars resurface and expand here, in the Eye of Terror, is not something that you really should aspire to."

Fabius Bile laughed, and this was something that gave her the urge to hurl a few curses at him.

"Oh, Ezekyle!" the mad scientist laughed louder. "Come on, this is going to be good. I'm prepared. What reason are you going to give this child? That you haven't battered the other Legions enough to become the uncontested Lord of the Eye? That as long as Cadia won't have fallen, you will punish all those warlords who will rise above their stations? Or is it maybe that Weaver convinced you that there was no hope to win the Long War and we need to surrender to Terra as soon as possible?"

If Fabius Bile had not been Fabius Bile, he would likely be a corpse by now.

"I am saying this, because the First and Last Lord of the Light Imperium intends for the Eye of Terror to be the prison of Anarchy."

The Clonelord instantly stopped laughing.

"You're serious."

"The Warp Storm has always been a prison where the inmates fought against each other regularly. But this time, the Judge has decided monitoring the situation isn't enough. No, the warden has decided the inmates must fight against each other *at all times*. There must be no diversion from this purpose. Permanent alliances must be sundered forever. Solid powerbases must collapse and be replaced by non-productive realms where disunity is the rule. It doesn't matter if a majority or a minority is sworn to the Beast of Anarchy; all inside the prison will be effectively neutralised while the Imperium is given the time to deal with its internal problems."

Seen like this, the strategy indeed seemed brilliant. While the Chaos Legions progressively got weaker, the enemy outside would get stronger.

Of course, seeing the trap was cold comfort when you were already inside it and the exits had been shut in front of your face.

"This may be the truth, but it is merely acknowledging the problem. The rodents and the other souls who are enslaved to the whims of Anarchy are not going to stop their relentless assaults, because they don't have the free will to do anything else. And other factions like the Death Guard won't listen to us either. They will prioritise their plans over yours, Warmaster, assuming they even bother listening to the latter."

"She's got you there, Ezekyle."

It seemed Fabius Bile had decided to enter 'really unhelpful mode' for this reunion.

"And I will add my humble opinion," the body who was certainly a clone of the Primogenitor continued. "I don't think you have a plan anymore. Yes, the Eye of Terror is a prison. Yes, Malfi and many other worlds are trapped inside a layer beneath the surface, much like a secondary ocean denied to us. Yes, the giant rats are treacherous backstabbers, and in the next centuries, we can expect them to crawl everywhere in the Eye of Terror and become a common presence. *All of this will end inevitably by the decline and the fall of the Black Legion, and you can do nothing about it*."

There was a couple of seconds of silence.

"Warmaster." At this point, it was almost injury added on top of everything else.

This time, the parahuman sorceress really felt Abaddon was going to kill the Clonelord...or well, at least his clone.

The supreme warlord of the Black Legion opened his mouth.

He uttered a word.

Fabius Bile suddenly became very afraid, and a second later, Clonelord and Primarch's clone disappeared with the smell so familiar of teleportation.

"The clone is possibly more irritating than the original."

"Yes." There was really nothing else to say. "I presume you didn't want him to hear of your plans?"

"You presume correctly."

The strange golden eyes stared at her.

"The plan I'm willing to reveal to you has two parts. One is going to come very soon. One will come much later."

Her curiosity was piqued, she had to admit.

"Let's begin with the one which will come soon, then."

"A good choice," the Warmaster of the Black Legion nodded. "When Weaver will use her power of Sacrifice again, and I assure you the moment will come soon, I want you to activate the cult you have in the Atlas System of the Nyx Sector."

Malicia tried to not show her fear.

Save Ax'senaea and a few others, she had told no one this cult existed in the first place. It was one of her strongest intelligence resources to make sure the forces of Nyx didn't go to war without her warband being aware of it. Obviously, it wasn't useful anymore for Weaver herself, the Angel of Sacrifice had proven that at the Tyrant Star and elsewhere. But for anything above minor military deployments, it was deadly useful.

How in the name of Tzeentch had Abaddon known *that*?

The Tzeentchian sorceress didn't ask the question, though it burned on her lips.

But she had to ask another.

"Why would I sacrifice one of my strongest information networks?" Malicia asked bluntly. And yes, the cult was for information-acquisition only, no matter what personal delusions certain cultists entertained. The moment they stepped out of line, the Space Marines, the Inquisition, and the rest of the Nyxian military were going to pulverise them.

"Because you will get some of use out them before it is too late." Abaddon replied with as much bluntness.

Undeniably, the female Warlord would have to replay a lot of the information she had read in the last few years. There were plenty of things she had missed.

"Let's assume I believe that for a moment. What would be the second part of your plan?"

"You have to help Weaver reach Terra when the time comes."

**Plague Battleship *Virulent Blight***

**Space-Temporal Anomaly – Date Estimation Impossible**

**Warlord** **Gluthor Skurvithrax, the Ferryman**

At first, he had thought the situation favoured him.

The Anarchy fleet had charted a course which would lead it directly into collision with the Black Legion. While the presence of the deranged slaves of the Beast was not good news by any means, it offered him an opportunity to deal with Malicia while the rest of his foes were distracted.

And then it had all fallen apart.

The Anarchy Fleet had suddenly decided for some unfathomable disease plaguing their pathetic brains that dividing a big fleet into eleven sub-formations was a good idea.

It was a complete violation of the void doctrine that you had to concentrate your firepower.

It looked ridiculous on a map display.

It made no tactical sense whatsoever, unless your main goal was to lose the battle.

Or unless your objective was to make sure *Anarchy* was the rule everywhere.

"Three-sub formations of the nihilistic rodents are coming for us, Great Ferryman."

"So I see," Gluthor gurgled. "It seems that for all its myriad of flaws, Ethereax-built drives are faster than ours."

That or the Skaven had simply copied human-made technology and just decided to forego all the safety limitations. These creatures had no self-preservation instincts, after all.

"Great Ferryman, they appear to outnumber our ships two-to-one. And the formation...I think I saw something like this somewhere before."

"You must be thinking of the Slaughter of Dagon."

There were some grumblings and other expressions of discontent on the bridge.

It was hardly surprising.

The Slaughter of Dagon was hardly the most brilliant page in Death Guard history. In fact, it was one of the worst.

It wasn't every day that the Primarch Roboute Guilliman, may his flesh soon enjoy the blessings of the Grandfather, trapped an entire fleet of the Fourteenth Legion and proceeded to wipe it out with few losses of his own.

Humiliation supreme, Guilliman had actually been somewhat *outnumbered* by the Death Guard fleet.

"With all due respect, Great Ferryman, I doubt the rodents are such avid students of history that they are aware of that battle."

"Don't underestimate the ability of the Beast to steal secrets while it spreads discontent in our ranks," Gluthor warned his subordinate.

"Of course, Great Ferryman!"

"That said," the Warlord of the Death Guard spoke in a more neutral voice, "whether our cowardly foes remember Dagon or not, it seems indeed they have adopted a strategy similar to the one the Thirteenth Primarch adopted during the Scouring. They have spread their forces in three different fleets, and intend to assail us from three directions at once, progressively devouring us from each side, preventing us from ever focusing on one fleet proper."

"Seen like that, it doesn't sound too stupid, Great Ferryman."

"As long as the three fleets are properly coordinated, it isn't." Gluthor smiled as one of the sub-fleets accelerated even faster, leaving the two other ones several hundreds of thousands of kilometres behind. "But they aren't."

The truth would probably be not be known for sure, but the Heresy veteran guessed that the Anarchy warlord had lost control of his ambitious subordinates, and now the rebellious underlings were all attacking on their own without supervision.

"Increase our acceleration by two percent," the Master of the *Virulent Blight* ordered. "Straight attack, right into their miserable fangs. They want a battle? We are going to eradicate them!"

The battle-line he had brought with him to Harmony was a heavy one, by the standard of the Legion.

There were going to be losses, it was unavoidable with three fleets of such size, but he was confident in his victory.

"FIRE! PROVE TO THEM THAT THEIR GOD IS AN UPSTART THING IN NEED OF A LESSON!"

The Skaven fleet in the vanguard suddenly realised it had been a bit too reckless, but devoid of support, it had no choice but to push forwards and engage the Death Guard.

It was a massacre.

There was no other word for it.

Cruisers exploded by the dozens, and Battleships rapidly followed them.

The Anarchy sub-fleet was a ramshackle mess, and it rapidly became more chaotic and disorganised as the seconds went on.

"Release the Heldrakes. Send the Bombers with maximal support. We have the opportunity to wipe them out, let's take it!"

"Yes, Great Ferryman!"

"Status of the other two enemy fleets?"

"One is outright trying to evade us completely," the answer came promptly. "The other is charging to...they are beginning to shoot at their own allies?"

Gluthor Skurvithrax shared the incomprehension.

Betrayals were extremely common in the Eye of Terror, for reasons as ordinary as plunder, old feuds, spare parts, slaves, Dark Mechanicum contracts, when it was not all of those at once.

But here it simply didn't make any sense. Gluthor had not promised anything to any Anarchy warlord, and increasing the devastation visited on the rodents was disastrous for Anarchy and no one else.

"By the Garden, what are they doing?"

The void battle had been a one-sided affair before; now it turned into an outright slaughterhouse. After a few minutes, it became clear the three enemy sub-fleets were all firing at each other, all ideas of unity and proper fleet manoeuvres forgotten. Coordination, which had been already low, was now properly inexistent.

Gluthor was a veteran of countless void battles.

He had seen Sol burning in cataclysmic battles. He had survived the Legion Wars. He had learned to stay silent and never refer to far worse wars that he had been involved into for the sake of survival.

But this...this was insanity.

It was what Anarchy wanted to transform all the Legions into.

It was a contagion which was chaotically anathema to the blessings of Nurgle.

"Kill them." He commanded, hiding an unease he had not felt for millennia. "Wipe them from the Harmony System!"

"Great Ferryman, Malicia's fleet is leaving the high orbit of Harmony! Hundreds of Warp micro-anomalies detected consistent with sorcery spells equivalent to emergency teleportation evacuations!"

"Damn it! Do you have an estimation of their most probable course?"

It took a few seconds for some of the Legionnaires who could be spared from the battle to obtain an answer from the daemonic devices.

"They are going to come extremely close to the rearguard of the Black Legion fleet, but they won't join the squadrons around the *Vengeful Spirit*, Great Ferryman."

"Abaddon is allowing her to use his capital ships as a shield while she makes her escape." There were other possible explanations, but none of them would make a lot of sense. "It seems that whatever the Despoiler wanted to obtain by getting here, he obtained it."

As the sorceress was rumoured to have pillaged quantities of artefacts and valuable weapons in her short career, this was not a reasoning which would favour the Death Guard in the long-term.

"Orders?"

"We continue the purge of these rodents who had the audacity to stand between us and our prey." It was common sense to kill the enemy you faced so that when turned around, it couldn't stab you in the back. If you didn't understand that, you were not going to live long in the Eye of Terror. "And then we will resume the pursuit. The Grandfather ordered this fleet to bring Malicia to the Plague Planet alive. We will not fail to accomplish *His* will."

"The Black Legion?"

"Ignore them, they have the rest of the rodents to slaughter." And the Anarchic horde – it couldn't be qualified as a fleet anymore – facing the guns of the Despoiler was faring as badly as the one facing him, despite outnumbering the enemy four-to-one. "Begin to search for any systems nearby a Tzeentchian fleet could use as rallying point. Harmony was no haven for them, they will try to resupply elsewhere."

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Atlas Sub-Sector**

**Atlas System**

**Atlas II**

**3.563.313M35**

**Venerable** **Ancient Pierre**

When he had been young and not yet trapped inside a Dreadnought, someone had told him that the rulers of a society could expect exactly as much loyalty from their subjects as the efforts they invested to ensure the living conditions of those subjects were not miserable.

The galaxy had not stopped spinning by then, but some things never changed.

The old proverb still applied.

And since the nobles of the Atlas System were doing nothing for the ninety-nine point nine percent of the population which didn't have some family connection to them, it was absolutely not a surprise to discover the 'plebeians' had zero loyalty to the Arch-Duke and his cousins.

Several Priests were happy to repeat that it was the will of the Emperor everywhere they could, but all the indoctrination in the world couldn't prevent a man from realising that the splendid palaces had to be built by someone's toil, and it wasn't the aristocrats sweating it.

You didn't need to be a Heracles Warden to know that extreme social inequalities like the ones which could be seen everywhere generated plenty of discontent. When the judicial system was in the hands of the nobles, the non-nobles had no recourse when they wanted to make their voices heard. There were exactly three dozen members of the Adeptus Arbites in the Atlas System, and none of them had been allowed to land on one of three worlds in a decade. Their main role these days was to be on the receiving end of idiotic petition after idiotic petition which tried to bury the desk of the Nyxian Arbites.

Discontent had been a given.

That said, Pierre had been slightly surprised that it had reached so deep as to influence the majority of some lesser commands of the Atlas Sapphire Host, the Planetary Defence Force of Atlas Secundus.

"I can find the men you want, Lord Astartes." Captain Dino, who had by default become his chief of staff for the ground operations mere days after his arrival, swore. "As long as it is only spying, of course. The Northern Gardens are heavily guarded at the best of times, but now that there is a Grand Hunt, there will be three more regiments at the very least. And that's not even counting all the professional duellists the Earls, Marquis, and Barons always surround themselves with."

"OBSERVING IS ALL I NEED THEM TO DO FOR NOW. I AM DEEPLY UNFAMILIAR WITH THE PALACE AND ITS FOUR GARDENS. YOUR RECRUITS HAVE THE MOTIVATION, BUT NOT THE SKILL OR THE TRAINING."

"You are right, Lord Astartes. Err...do you think a hunt is the best time to accomplish what your orders called for? I don't doubt your skill, of course. But all the nobles carry weapons when they're releasing the beasts. And they are surrounded by a lot of guards, as I said before."

"I DON'T KNOW," Pierre admitted honestly. "BUT THE PART OF THE ORDERS I'M WILLING TO REVEAL TO YOU DEMANDS THE THREE DUKES MUST HAVE TO BE PRESENT. AND YOU ALREADY TOLD ME THAT WASN'T THE CASE DURING THE LAST FOUR SANGUINALAS."

Captain Dino's face was grim, but determined.

"Yes. They stopped spending a few months of budget during that holy day right after Her Celestial Highness destroyed Commorragh. These last years, all the big events, Balls and Hunts, took place between the Day of Renewal and the Day of the Emperor's Ascension. And every time the Grand Duke of Primus or the First Duke of Tertius came, it was during these festivities."

"I SEE."

"With all due respect, Lord Astartes, is the hunt not a bit obvious? I mean, from the information you honoured me with, the Emperor-blessed ability of insect-mastery of Her Celestial Highness is hardly a secret for the rulers of Atlas. I can't imagine the Dukes would ever be so arrogant as to choose a giant spider or a tank-sized ant to serve as a target for their afternoon enjoyment. My cousins always insist they have grown into believing only the God-Emperor can give them orders, but it is this ego that will make them value dearly their lives."

"YOU ARE PERFECTLY RIGHT. THE MOMENT THEY SEE A GIANT INSECT, THEY WILL NATURALLY ASSUME THE WORST AND PANIC. BUT HER CELESTIAL HIGHNESS' POWERS ARE ONE THING, THE FRIENDSHIPS SHE HAS WITH OTHER PLANETARY GOVERNORS ANOTHER. THE QUESTION I HAVE IN MIND IS HOW GOOD THE HUNTERS ARE?"

"Lord Astartes?"

It was too bad the youngsters of Atlas were not trained to Wardens standards. Bah, it would come in due time, as would proper training and wisdom.

"SAY I FIND A WAY TO ADD A CATACHAN MAMBA TO THE EXISTING ANIMALS THAT ARE TO BE HUNTED THIS AFTERNOON. WOULD THE MASTERS OF THE GAME RECOGNISE ONE IMMEDIATELY? WOULD THE DUKES BE AWARE THERE IS A DEATH WORLD BEAST PRESENT THAT SHOULDN'T BE THERE? THESE ARE THE SORT OF THEORETICALS I'M TRYING TO FIND OUT."

"Ah, I see Lord Astartes. I think the Dukes and their Masters of the Hunt have quite an extensive knowledge in this field. I'm afraid the court is hunting at least twice per week. Those aren't the 'Great Hunts' like the one organised today, but they are very common. And all the interesting 'game' has long been killed on Atlas Secundus. Therefore they have no other option but to purchase a lot of animals and other things from other Sectors."

Obviously, they weren't going to buy them from Lady Weaver. They were not that stupid.

"SPECIFICS?"

"They once purchased some big hound-like monsters from Demogorgon IV years ago. Oh, and three years ago, we got some Giga-Stags from Byssta. Those were really popular, from what my cousins told me. Are you sure Lord Astartes? While there are always a few Barons and Knights who die in these 'tragic hunt accidents', the high nobles are never caught up in them, they were far too well-protected."

"THE BEST PART ABOUT ACCIDENTS, IS THAT THEY ARE SO TRAGICALLY UNANTICIPATED. OTHERWISE WE WOULDN'T CALL THEM ACCIDENTS, I SUPPOSE."

And honestly, he was right at the beginning of his 'research'. His instinct told him the 'Gardens' – more like immense forests that had been turned into hunting grounds, really – were the best way to accomplish his mission. But he could be wrong. The mission had just begun; finding the adequate transport to infiltrate into the Atlas System had taken longer than he expected.

"MY ORDERS STAND. SEND YOUR PERSONNEL, AND TELL THEM TO OBSERVE EVERY DETAIL, NO MATTER HOW TRIVIAL IT MAY BE. ONCE THEY WILL REPORT, I WILL ASK A LOT OF QUESTIONS, THAT MUCH I CAN PROMISE. BY THE END OF THIS MONTH, I ASSURE YOU, CAPTAIN, YOU AND I WILL HAVE BECOME QUITE EXPERTS IN THE INTRICACIES AND SECURITY PROCEDURES OF THESE HUNTS."

**Atlas II**

**Palace of New Bologna**

**3.564.365**

**Marquis** **Galeotto da Montane**

At last.

Galeotto had feared more than a few times that this day would never come, but he had been proven wrong before.

It would have been a tragedy for Atlas.

The Gods had marked him for greatness, and it was not to stay thirty-eighth in the succession for the title of Arch-Duke.

Who cared if the accusations his maternal grandmother had won the Marquis title by her charm and seductive talents?

It was ambition which truly mattered.

You needed to have the fire burning in your veins.

You needed to have the will to claim what you wanted on the corpses of your rivals.

Even the worshippers of the False Emperor acknowledged that.

Hadn't Weaver won the Nyx Sector by exterminating the Greenskins and all other enemies which stood in her way?

He, Galeotto da Montane, would continue that Nyxian tradition.

But before that, there was a Grand Massacre to prepare for.

With regret, the Marquis of Three Seasons removed the bloody bone knife from the body of his first cousin.

It wasn't because he regretted to have killed him, oh no.

No, Galeotto only regretted there hadn't been time to have made him suffer longer. The bastard had never missed an opportunity to bully him when he was a child, plunging his head into fountains, stealing his favourite toys, and blaming him for everything he did wrong.

Once they had grown older, the enmity had escalated to higher stakes.

And the funniest part? The liar had never gone to a proper Cathedral with pure thoughts in mind, but he had died praying to the Golden Corpse, thinking the False Emperor would save him!

How ridiculous.

The Living Saint's powers were wildly exaggerated, and in a star system which had spent decades denying her, the influence of Weaver was almost non-existent. There were no shrines to her here. There was no significant praise given to Sanguinius and everything associated with the favourite son of the Corpse.

"You who have pledged yourselves to the truth of the Nine Secret Ambitions, know that our triumph is at hand."

"Guide us, Grand Master!"

"The Warlord of the Destiny Unwritten, blessed be Her name, told us our names are whispered into the Crystal Labyrinth at last. Plots within plots have been acknowledged. The Arch-Duke will fall, and from his ashes, we will rise."

"The Arch-Duke is on his guard after his fourteenth wife tried to slip a laxative into his drink two months ago, Benevolent Master. I heard his guard for the Great Hunt is going to be twice the size of what it used to be."

"A good point," Galeotto conceded, "but it is still easier to strike him during a Great Hunt, for only a limited number of people are admitted into the Northern Gardens outside of these games. Moreover, the beasts this odious incompetent of Arch-Duke are hardly dangerous when he hunts away from the public. We see a lot of exotic furs and other extraordinary pelts, but hunting an herbivore with a Melta gun is not sporting odds."

"But Grand Master, we can hardly personally select the beasts which will take a privileged role in the Great Hunt!"

"We don't have to," the Marquis of Three Seasons sneered. "That is the beauty of the plot, don't you see? It has come to my attention that the incompetents working under the Master of the Hunt have at great expense bought an Apep Dragon of Indiga. Last night, your brothers of the Changing Daggers, my elite Coven, convinced the guards to look the other way for a suitable amount of time while we carved the Nine Litanies of Transformation into the Dragon's flesh."

Great Tzeentch had appreciated the irony. With one dagger, they had struck several blows. Assuredly Weaver would be mightily displeased they had used such an animal, for one of her chief Ministers shared a name with the beast. It would also be a slap in the face of the Indigan Praefect regiments of the Imperial Guard. The Arch-Duke and all his relatives present would die, as well as a great deal of the upper nobility that acted like leeches every day.

Suddenly leaderless, the nobility would turn towards the only candidate that could be a credible candidate in his tumultuous time: himself.

"Grand Master, I have no problem with the plan in and of itself. With the Arch-Duke and his close family removed, we should be able to take control of the Ducal Palace and the capital quickly. But I'm more worried about what the rest of the Sector is going to do. We don't have the assets to wage war against Nyx."

"Not yet, no," Galeotto admitted out loud. "But the Warlord of the Destiny Unwritten has assured me personally that all across the Sector, hundreds of Cults are preparing to seize power, just as we are! The Inquisition and the Space Marines of the False Emperor are not as omniscient as they want us to believe! Soon, they will be struggling to deal with a thousand rebellions at once! And this, at a time while we will hide our true allegiances for a few more years, will give us the time to expand the Cult to the two other worlds of Atlas, and bring billions of souls into the Great Changer's embrace."

Many of his followers laughed and applauded, as could be expected.

The expressions of doubt disappeared, and determination was now forged anew in the flames of the Architect of Fate.

"The Great Hunt is going to begin any minute now! Praise the Nine Secret Ambitions! Praise Tzeentch!"

"DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR!"

**Ducal Palace of Agra-Napoli**

**The Northern Gardens**

**Arch-Duke** **Brabanto XV da Flor**

In his youth, Brabanto remembered cursing the ancestor who had forbidden all types of transportation more advanced than a trained animal inside the Gardens.

Some of his courtiers, eager to please a young Ducal Heir, had of course pretended it was because the man enjoyed seeing his entire court sweat while they tried to please him.

Now that he was much older, Brabanto knew this almost-forgotten ruler had been a wise man: without these edicts no Arch-Duke could go against, undoubtedly he would have grown as fat and lazy as some other Planetary Governors in Sectors outside of Nyx.

And yes, the same could apply to his court.

But when you had to be physically able to walk some ten hours on your own four or five times per year without screaming for a medical specialist – one could technically scream for help, but it was a major loss of prestige and influence taken in mere seconds – an Atlasian aristocrat had to be physically fit to participate in the Great Hunt.

Brabanto of House Flor, the Fifteenth of the name to bear the name and ascend to the Arch-Duke's seat, tried to hide how bored he was.

To say the truth – not that he would admit it to the small army of nobles preceding him – it had been a long time since the hunts, royal or not, had stopped giving him any joy or feeling of satisfaction.

Once you had participated in your hundredth, you could change the game and the preys as much as you want, it rapidly became boring.

But it was tradition, like so many things on Atlas.

Like every tradition, it was rarely spoken of in a critical fashion. And obviously, it would never change. There had been two noble-order coups in the last centuries when two of his ancestors who hated the idea of hunting had tried to abolish the practise.

Oh, the conspiracies had eventually been put down brutally, the Earls and Viscounts involved losing their heads...but before the last shots were fired, his two *reformist* ancestors had not been among the living.

The lesson had been bloody, and not lost on anyone.

The Hunts would continue.

It cost a horrible amount of Throne Gelts. Unless you wanted to hunt the Camox-Rabbit, the prospects of finding good local prey was inexistent on any world of Atlas; the quarries were long-extinct, courtesy of too many Great Hunts.

It was boring him to death.

And the nobles too lazy to preserve their hunting abilities had found a loophole to avoid putting in any effort: they weren't coming to the Great Hunt anymore.

"And I fear that the Marquis of Three Seasons and his coterie all decided to fail your Exalted Grace this year. I will prepare their punishment, with your permission."

Brabanto dismissed the Master of the Hunt with a nod.

The man obsequiously bowed, his face indicating he wanted to stay by his side for far longer, but when the Arch-Duke gave an order, a mere Baron had to obey.

He may need to replace the man soon, that said. This one was getting ideas above his station.

The arrival of his Prime Minister gave him some joy, and the Arch-Duke slowed his pace. The bad leg of the only man he could truthfully call a friend was worth the gesture.

"I hear the hunt began splendidly, your Exalted Grace."

"Please," the Head of House Flor and supreme ruler of Atlas Secundus snorted. "I'm sure your spies informed you how we poured over a thousand rounds of special ammunition into *ducks*."

Admittedly, these were giant ducks, specially bred on an Ocean World of the Atlantis Sector, and they grew up to the size of an Imperial Guard armoured vehicle.

But in the green gardens that his servants tried to pretend was a forest, it was impossible to miss an *orange-feathered duck*!

"I'm sure your Exalted Grace will...take the necessary actions where your hunt prerogatives are concerned."

"I'm sure of it too." Brabanto clicked his tongue before making a motion of his head. This was the agreed signal to activate the 'buzzers', the strange archeotech that made sure no one, not even the Adeptus Mechanicus, would be able to listen in on his private conversation with his Prime Minister.

"Do you think we've become too arrogant, Leonardo?"

His nobles would have been aghast, of course, and likely tried to pounce on his moment of weakness.

But this was why the Prime Minister was trusted, and they weren't.

"I think angering Lady Weaver like First Duke Mocenigo did is utterly counterproductive. And the three Dukes of Atlas speaking as one may be tradition, but in practise I fear it is most likely to convince the lady of Nyx that we are all obstacles in her way. And obstacles get *removed*."

Brabanto grimaced.

This, unfortunately, very much echoed his own thoughts.

"How bad is it going to be?"

"For the moment, it is a series of stings. The Gutenberg Heiress is a mercantile genius, but her influence is not that great. She's moving a merchant ship away from our Sub-Sector here, increasing some tariffs on the perfumes we buy there. The financial losses are limited for now."

"But?"

"But I am your Prime Minister, and it is my duty to warn you that in my opinion, the Sector Lady, who also happens to be a Living Saint and a Lady General Militant of the Imperial Guard, has made the decision to remove you from your seat. I don't know how, I don't know when, but I fear it will happen eventually. It may take decades, but according to my most rational agents, Lady Weaver is going to make sure none of your children ever sit on the Arch-Duke's seat."

The other Dukes would likely have whipped any man who brought them such ill news, to be sure.

Brabanto merely sighed.

He could recognise the truth when he heard it.

"The smart course of action would be to negotiate with Nyx," the Arch-Duke mused as his column passed by the corpses of some carmine-striped felines, earning a few hunters a nod or two for their sharpshooting skills. "We know why the Lady of Nyx is displeased."

"I think the Baron of Sacred Spear made a complete list, though he labelled it 'outrageous proposals and why Nyx is a decaying power'."

Both men exchanged a few disabused glances. Nyx had begun building Battleships, everyone knew that. Atlas, by comparison, had yet to complete a single one of its Cruiser-sized Defence Monitors, and the order had been given some sixty years ago.

"What's outrageous is his wig," Brabanto commented with a small grin.

"Yes. Unfortunately, there are a lot of nobles who think like him. I fear that at the first sign you may order something 'reformist', they would replace you with one of your sons."

That was all too likely, yes. There wasn't any great bond with his children and him.

"Not my daughters?"

"Half of them are likely to travel to Nyx so they can urge Lady Weaver to slit your throat," Leonardo 'reassured' him. "The recent ascension of so many female Planetary Governors has given them *ideas*. I'm sure they are as *reformist* as the Baron of Sacred Spear, but unlike some, they would be willing to pretend the opposite just to be addressed as 'Arch-Duchess'."

"If they really believe that, they are going to encounter some ugly surprises when...if they eventually face the Basileia of Nyx."

Leonardo gave him a far too pleased expression.

"Bah. My children's ambitions aside, I need a plan, and I need it fast. While I want to believe the Lady of Nyx would wait for my death to try something, based on the latest moves she ordered, I fear we don't have that time."

"I could send a secret emissary. We have no idea of the minimum of...tradition-bending that will be acceptable, after all."

The Head of House Flor rolled his eyes.

"I'm rather sure that we spend most of our resources on hunts, balls, palaces, and other pleasant festivities when the plebeians are toiling in the fields with their bare hands because the factorums are unable to produce enough agricultural machines is not a state of affairs the Sector Lady is happy with."

"Yes." His Prime Minister sighed. "I can nonetheless have something ready for you in three days. Will that be acceptable?"

"It will." A gesture of his, and the buzzers were switched off. "I know your leg is aching, Prime Minister. I formally dispense you from participating in the rest of this hunt."

Of course now that his only friend left, that meant Brabanto had to make conversation with all the other hunters.

He had to listen to their insincere compliments about him shooting *ducks*!

Merciful Emperor, an *Ogryn* would not have missed them!

But it was the Great Hunt for you.

It was hours after hours of boredom, and this one was no different.

The afternoon had never felt longer.

"Your Exalted Grace, the Master of the Hunt sends his compliments. He's only waiting for your command so that the tenth and final part of the hunt will begin."

"I assent."

What was in this one? Some kind of big reptile that they had paralysed the wings of, a few more big felines, some Mega-Stags – those had been popular a few seasons ago, it was an attempt to revive the fervour...oh, it wasn't like it was important.

"Your son is hunting like a born Master, these days, your Exalted Grace!"

"Truly?"

"Yes! He has assured me tonight at the banquet he will present you the head of the Apep Dragon!"

"We will see," Brabanto said evasively. "That is audacious of him-"

There was a horrible shriek.

And suddenly half of the woods a kilometre in front of them disappeared in an inferno.

"Golden Throne!"

"Your Exalted Grace!"

Those were flames, yes. But they couldn't be possibly true flames.

No normal fire spat by the weapons they had here wasn't supposed to burn *blue*.

"Your Exalted Grace!"

"Master of the Hunt. I was a little distracted, but I think I missed the part of your speech where you informed me that the Indigan Dragon indeed could breathe *accursed flames*!"

"It...it can't breathe fire, your Exalted Grace. Or at least...it couldn't."

This time there was an abominable roar. And more of the woods disappeared forever, the efforts of uncountable professional gardeners ruined within mere heartbeats.

"Sound the alert. Tell the Atlas Sapphire Host to mobilise. This is no normal beast."

"But your Exalted Grace, tradition forbids-"

His glare must have made it quite evident how little he cared.

Or maybe it was the hundreds of hunters fleeing in his direction which convinced the idiot of the seriousness of the situation.

And the Apep Dragon began to rise above the burning trees.

Something that shouldn't be possible, since the game had explicitly called for the wings to be clipped so that they'd be unable to bear its weight.

But the Indigan-born Dragon was flying.

It was flying, and as it approached, Brabanto saw the two tails, the scales coated with dark fluids, and the heretical fires burning within its maw.

"Treachery and heresy," the Arch-Duke of Atlas Secundus muttered.

He barked new orders.

Unfortunately, he was afraid he was too late.

The Great Hunt was almost over, and everyone had been anticipating the glorious finale.

The PDF and its heavy weaponry were too far away.

Brabanto XV da Flor grabbed a heavy Plasma Archeotech Relic from the hands of one of his servants, and prepared to fight for his very life. And in his heart, he dreaded this was going to be the first and last time.

Was he bored anymore?

No.

But with the benefit of hindsight, being bored was not that bad...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Giraffe Spaceport**

**2.564.313M35**

**Forgefather** **Vulkan N'Varr**

Exactly twelve minutes and twelve seconds after the female Eldar returned, the nexus of gold activated again.

This time, the effect was significantly more spectacular.

For precisely ten seconds, the now deserted hall of the Spaceport was akin to a golden sea.

The Dawnbreaker Guard was standing on the surface of a lake of molten gold.

Except it was not a lake, and it was nothing something as mundane as gold, of course.

It was Aethergold in liquid form, and it burned with **Sacrifice**.

The paint of their armour was charred by it. Whatever the original colour of the Chapter they were from, the armour began to be striped with radiant light.

It ended before the process could do more than some cosmetic damage, of course.

The Angel emerged from the depths.

And the radiance withdrew in the blink of an eye.

After three seconds, the show was over.

There was only Lady Weaver in her angelic armour, to prove the whole scene had not been some clever trick played by a cunning psyker.

"My Lady, you are safe and sound," the Forgefather was the first to approach. "You will be pleased to know we sent the irritating long-ear to rest while we waited for your return."

"Good," the voice was definitely far more musical than it had ever been. Then she coughed, and the effect was broken. "Good. Speaking with the Guardian took its toll, and she had to play the role of the translator. I'm fine...or as fine as one can be when doing what I did."

Vulkan N'Varr helped her stand, of course, before their Lady removed her helmet.

There were no changes this time, at least from the outside.

"Sacrifice?"

"This time it was the Lamenters who paid it willingly." The stars-filled eyes were sorrowful; the Salamander knew her enough to recognise the signs. "I wish it could have been avoided, I wish..."

"You couldn't have known," he gently interrupted her.

"I know that, but right now, that is very cold comfort."

There was nothing more to say on the subject. Lady Weaver had gone to war, and while it had not lasted a single day, the Forgefather was certain she had assimilated all the weeks of battle and butchery the Adjutant-Spiders 'recorded' from Operation Hell Garden.

The Dawnbreaker Guard would have to lead her to the Regina, and make sure she will rest properly.

This was all that could be done for now.

"How bad it is?"

"Bad, I'm afraid. There have been eight Vermilion messages across the Quadrant since you departed, and since it has not been twenty-four hours, more may come. The Inquisition is mobilising, with several warships of the Holy Ordos about to jump into the Warp."

"The abominations certainly didn't waste any time."

"No, and my Lady...one of the Vermilion-level alerts is coming from Atlas Secundus. It was from Pierre. There is a reported coup attempt involving daemonic activity and cultist manipulations. Thankfully, the Magi were conducting some Ansible testing, as the exercises for-"

"I remember perfectly, seeing as I'm the one that approved the budget for these tests, don't worry." Taylor Hebert snorted loudly. "It seems the Ansibles already prove their worth before even formally entering service."

"It certainly seems so," Vulkan N'Varr agreed formally, trying not to wince as the signs of exhaustion became clearer. "Pierre asked Gamaliel for permission to intervene."

"I hope he granted it."

"Of course," the son of Vulkan immediately reassured her. "We may hate the guts of the Atlasian nobles, but I had no wish to see them devoured by a slave of Ruin."

Anything beneath that threshold would have been fine, in his opinion. But the nobles, as abhorrent as they were in how they treated their serfs, did remain loyal to the Emperor. Of course, their incompetence was not going to be forgotten or forgiven.

"But there is no question that since the vigilance was lower in the Atlas System than it was elsewhere, *someone* decided it was a good idea to create a cult there."

The Basileia, needless to say, looked really disgusted by the idea.

"You are in all likelihood right. The Holy Ordos is already responding, you say?"

"I suspect that before you pass through the gates to board the train station, you will be intercepted by at least one Inquisitor."

"No need to waste such time."

"My Lady?"

"Send two members of the Dawnbreaker Guard. Give them the critical information you have, and confirm that I formally grant them all authority required to deal with the problem. My faithful Dreadnought will have to be extracted from the disaster, of course."

"Are you sure, my Lady? I know you had plans-"

For the first time of the day, he is given a sad smile.

"My plans don't matter anymore. As good as they were, they have just gone down in flames."

And wasn't that terrifying? Coincidences happened. It was a big galaxy.

But this time, Vulkan N'Varr thought the coincidence was far too big.

No, someone had known of his Lady's plans for the planets of the Atlas System. This was enemy action, and the architect of it was sworn to the Ruinous Powers.

"I am not in position to intervene a second time. I don't have the strength, and I don't think there are people willing to voluntarily give their lives for me on Atlas. Even assuming I was wrong about the latter, the former problem still remains in the way."

This was unfortunately true, alas.

"The Ordo Malleus will have to live up to its reputation," Lady Weaver finished apologetically. "I can only hope as few innocents as possible are going to be caught in the crossfire."

**Catachan System**

**Not too far from Catachan**

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Pax Imperium***

**Quarantined Compartment**

**5.593.313M35**

**Sister** **Kyra**

The Adjutant-Colonel was sleeping when she entered, as she often did these days.

It took only a few seconds for smaller spiders – all was relative, the silk-weaving orange ones were as tall as she her days – to wake up their bigger 'cousin'.

"Ah, Sister Kyra. Perfectly punctual, as always."

"There was no need for your guard to trouble your sleep, Adjutant-Colonel. You look like you need your rest."

"I will be very tired for many months," Bellona confessed, not moving from the giant red air mattress where she spent long hours. "The Sanguine Decree took a lot out of me."

Her expression of concern must have shown, because the Adjutant-Spider immediately tried to reassure her.

"**Sacrifice** always comes with a cost, and my orders were to preserve all the troops I could now that victory was achieved. Since I wasn't able to fight the Guardian, logic dictated I had to call the Webmistress and do my utmost to bring her here."

The golden spider made a sound which could have been a sigh from other mouths than hers.

"I lost plenty of martial abilities I was proud of, and my speed will never equal some of my sisters'. My military career is certainly over."

"I didn't think it would cost *you* so much." The Adjutant-Colonel was a favourite of Her Celestial Highness, after all. Now Kyra acknowledged the favours of the past didn't matter; everyone had to *sacrifice* dearly to pay the price.

"If you aren't ready to sacrifice something you hold dear, how is it supposed to be a sacrifice in the first place? The Webmistress repeats that to us quite often, and the Chapters of the Blood agree with their two hearts!"

Bellona stared at her with four of her eight eyes opened.

"It is not so bad. The Webmistress has quite obviously decided it is not yet time for me to join the Light Web, and I can enjoy the taste of honey and other sweets. I will likely be assigned to one of the administrative duties on Nyx itself. I will terrify some Administratum Adepts, despite them being several Sectors away. One must always see the good side of things."

"You might also help us strengthen the position of the Templar Sororitas," Kyra suggested. The words were improvised, but as they left her mouth, they felt right. "We made a good team in the Green Hell, no?"

"Absolutely true!" Bellona acquiesced. "Of course, for this mission, the main chokehold was not the number of valiant hearts ready to volunteer, but the numbers of advanced armours available. The Magi and the other logisticians thought the Death World was going to destroy Power Armours faster than Operation Stalingrad did, and unfortunately, their worst predictions were not pessimistic enough." There was some familiar arachnid grumble following the sentences.

"The Mechanicus looked like they were able to keep up in the field."

"They did, but if the battle against the Tyranids had continued for four more days, we would have been in real trouble. I think Chapter Master Yarhibol will be particularly insistent about that when he will meet the Webmistress."

"He's already on his way?"

"We can't exactly waste the important military force represented by all these valorous Space Marines, Sister Kyra! Yes, they are on their way. They were the first to be decontaminated and quarantined, I insisted on it. The Lamenters had to return to Nyx for political and military reasons, and the other Chapters...I suppose they go to whatever battlefield they are needed on."

The young woman cleared her throat.

"Ah. I presume, Adjutant-Colonel, that my arrival was about this problem. You see, I'm afraid you made a mistake."

"A mistake, surely not!"

"You never cancelled the deployment of the Blood Ravens. And you didn't announce the end of operations until Her Celestial Highness departed, so for the sixteen-seventeen days of active operations, there was a big signal 'all Space Marine assistance appreciated' for the Catachan System."

"Oh, no," Bellona said mournfully. "You're completely right! I was so tired I completely forgot!"

"That and you wanted to write your book," hey, Kyra felt she had gained the right to tease the Adjutant-Spider, after everything.

"That isn't an excuse! While the *Codex Tyranids, Hive Python revised with the volume 'how the Webmistress saved the day after I battled the Hormagaunts in the hellish jungles of Catachan*' is going to be epic both in prose and content, my military duties must take priority until the Webmistress relieves me!"

Well, at least one thing was reassuring: whatever horrors had been battled, no matter how many Sacrifices had been made, the Adjutant-Colonel's taste in book titles remained *awful*.

"The Blood Ravens have arrived, haven't they?"

"The Rear-Admiral detected the arrival of one of their Strike Cruisers close to fifty minutes ago. Do you want to meet them?"

"I must! Per our new orders, we have to find some super-giant jellyfish so that this horrible psychic lake diva in the heart of Catachan relinquishes its secrets to the Webmistress! And I'm afraid the tourist guides of Imperial propaganda aren't exactly good at seeking something like that. Talking to the Blood Ravens likely won't produce good results either, but it is a start."

Yes, the jellyfish guardian was the kind of monster the Imperium sent the Adeptus Astartes and the Holy Inquisition to deal with, not the Administratum.

"But the Guardian didn't remember the worlds where it was raised before being transported to Catachan?"

"Oh yes, it did. But it is of no use. You wonder why? The coordinates the Webmistress gave me are in a zone of the Galactic Core that was swallowed by the Maelstrom millennia ago."

"The Maelstrom?"

"The Maelstrom," Bellona confirmed while grumbling. "I've seen a lot of web threads being pulled in that direction these last couple of years."

**Author's note**:

The legacy of Hell Garden and the disaster unleashed on Atlas II by the Tzeentchian cultists will continue in the next chapter, which will be named Legacy 11-3 *Legacy of Change*.

Plans are now in ruins, the galaxy is changing, and stratagem after stratagem, all the sides prepare for the next war, one which will certainly see the galaxy burn again.

And remember.

The Emperor protects. Always.

Until next time, readers.