Update 08 December

**Shadowpoint 7.1**

**Black Flags in Flames**

*You have lost, Anathema.*

*Look at your Empire.*

*Where is the Imperial Truth you loved to threaten us with? Where is the Golden Age you promised to the ignorant worms you called equals? Where are the peace and the unmatched galactic domination?*

*You have lost. We made sure of it. I will admit you made it a challenge, but your projects failed all the same. Your sons were removed from the board or turned to our side. Your most trusted advisor agonised on your seat-prison to give you a chance against the Sacrificed King. Your great project perished under a storm no one could withstand. And in the end, your wounds make sure you are unable to rule the failed realm you called the Imperium.*

*You have lost and we have won. There will be no new invincible golden fleet sailing from Terra and Mars to reunite the galaxy under an age of reason. Your Tech-Priests have forgotten too much. Your administrators have stopped believing they can turn the tide. The trillions of humans crawling in the Hives don’t believe in logic, progress or any absurdities anymore.*

*They believe you are a God.*

*How does it feel, to know your defeat is complete? To realise the very thing you tried to prevent at the beginning is now a foundation of your long reign? The reason why you torched millions of churches and religious edifices, the motive behind untold suffering, was all for nothing?*

*You have lost, and you will continue to lose. I am the Architect of Fate, and I have seen through your feeble distractions. You think you can save Weaver and the fleet of your followers sailing to Pavia? It is far, far too late for that. The moment they will try to attack the slaves of the Serpent, they will have no escape from my talons.*

*Even your pathetic attempts at clouding my sight can’t change the unavoidable. I am amused by your decision to sacrifice some Eldar in your plans for the greater good of humanity, but I am not She-Who-Thirsts. You will not be able to incite strife between our Hosts for long.*

*But since you want to play, oh Anathema of the humans, we will play the game once more.*

*It is not like I take considerable risks. You could win a thousand impossible victories against a thousand different pirate fleets, and I will still win in the end.*

*I am Tzeentch, Architect of Fate, Master of Sorcery, Ambition and Plots, Changer of the Ways, and Great Conspirator. I stole hope before your birth and watched the downfall of a million civilisations greater than yours.*

*And so I say this, on the eve of my new victory. Everything is proceeding according to my plans.*

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*In hindsight, cousins, we should have been more careful. Yes, I know it is easier to say than accomplishing it in reality. We were not expecting Operation Caribbean to attract fame and Imperium-wide recognition. We were not expecting nearly every event which happened past the initial phases of War Plan Leyte Gulf.*

*But seriously, the amount of nonsense both Astartes and non-Astartes are praising our Lady and all our forces is becoming utterly ridiculous. I see nothing wrong with a well-earned laurel or two, or a speech in public to congratulate us for something well-done, but the victory hysteria is becoming...religious madness.*

*And yes, I find this colossal flux of pilgrims as unbearable as Gamaliel.*

*To try to mitigate the ocean of idiocy from spreading further, I have taken to list some of the most common myths and untruths I’ve heard in the last days, now that we approach the five years birthday of Operation Caribbean’s end. Public speeches providing counter-examples to these notions will be greatly appreciated. As much as I like Nyxians marching to the recruiting Guard offices, young men and women must receive a true idea of what war looks like, not the equivalent of an Ecclesiarchy sermon.*

1. *The Eldar are cowardly xenos and the battle was over before the first shot was fired.*
2. *Lady Weaver did not authorise the execution of any officer.*
3. *The* Enterprise *was always in the thick of the fighting.*
4. *The Heracles Wardens can infiltrate every installation known to Mankind (please don’t utter it when Ancient Pierre is nearby).*
5. *The Adeptus Mechanicus scout ships were invisible to the best tech-sorcery fielded by the pirates.*
6. *The Imperial starfighters crushed decisively one-on-one their xenos counterparts.*
7. *The Imperial Navy did not take part in the space battle.*
8. *The pirate fleets were united in their hate of the Imperium and obeyed to the letter the insane orders of their dread lord Sliscus.*
9. *Millions of pirates realised the error of their way in the end and were returned to the loving embrace of the Imperium, mind, body and soul.*
10. *Lady Weaver is an invincible space commander.*

Extract from a memo sent by Sergeant Gavreel Forcas to all senior members of the Dawnbreaker Guard, 291M35.

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“*Someone invited plenty of visitors without my authorisation. Kill them all before I flay your skin from your miserable bones and use it for a new fashionable robe*,” words attributed to Traevelliath Sliscus during the Battle of Pavia, 296M35.

**Beyond the frontiers of the Imperium**

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**8.183.296M35**

Thought for the day: Cease purpose and die.

**General Taylor Hebert**

In the last five years, Taylor had tried to convince some of the Guard and PDF officers serving in the Nyx Sector there were crimes the death sentence was best left out of the array of punishments. Light violence against a superior officer while under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs was one of these many, many cases she felt the culprit had better go to a long ‘volunteer’ session in digging fortifications under an enemy artillery barrage and be in the first line to charge the enemy fortified positions among a penal battalion rather than face a firing squad.

But there were crimes the parahuman hadn’t voiced her opposition against when she had learned they were worth a court-martial and a one-way ticket for the gallows if caught. Chaos worship was one. Anybody who worshipped the Ruinous Powers was either criminally stupid, treacherous and/or utterly insane, and the best path was to remove these people from your surroundings as fast as possible. Rape was another.

As a brand-new General, Taylor had believed a little trust between her and her troops was warranted. As a consequence, all the particularly treasonous activities she wanted banned had been printed in the new version of the *Infantryman’s Uplifting Primer*, and been repeated during several speeches in the Petersburg training camps. Zuhev had followed her directives word for word on this point, and in her persona of Basileia she had voiced it again during the last Sanguinala. Killing a fellow guardsman, abandoning your position without a Commissar’s order, throwing down your weapon in the middle of a battle to flee, mutiny in war-time; there were plenty of ways to have the pistol of a discipline officer against your neck.

But most of this list was for crimes and violations made in the middle of a battlefield. The insect-mistress had not believed someone would be so moronic to believe she was bluffing.

Unfortunately, someone was. His name was Major-General Gregory Lichtenlade, of the 1st Division, and he had been one of the few Munitorum problematic children to be assigned on the *Enterprise*.

The files about him had told the classical story about a noble of Kar Duniash promoted way over his real skills. Only his family connections had allowed him to survive a disaster where he had lost three-quarters of his command by virtue of sheer stupidity. Nowhere had it been mentioned he was a rapist, but his attempt to molest a woman of the Fay 20th had revealed this dirty secret. And now Taylor was wondering how many vices the Munitorum had deleted before sending her expunged versions of the records.

“You could have refused him the firing squad,” Dennis told her as the black-haired Major-General was escorted away from the tribunal to face his first and last meeting with death.

“I could,” the insect-mistress agreed. “But we are about to begin a new war, and I have other things to do than watching one of my officers dance at the end of a rope. Besides, Lieutenant Rovana has already executed half of the sentence by breaking his arm and removing five teeth from his mouth.”

Lichtenlade was not just a rapist, he was also a stupid one. Otherwise he would never have tried to behave like a sexual predator towards one of the women of the 2nd Company. Lieutenant Una Rovana was not a man-eater per se, but to her best knowledge the red-haired beauty had mastered two martial arts and was proficient with knife and katana.

“I just hope there won’t more incidents of this nature. An officer losing their wits in the middle of a battle is one thing I can understand, but that...” They were in the 35th millennium, but there were a lot of flaws humanity had kept during its conquest of the stars. Okay, best to change the subject to a more crucial issue. “Have you thought about what I told you?”

“That this system reeks of a trap?” The Ward known as Clockblocker asked rhetorically. “Yes, I have, and I think you have plenty of good points. We got here too quickly and too easily. The Warp currents pushed us towards Pavia and halved our journey’s duration by a good third, according to Chancellor Friar Achelieux. Even the usual disturbances trying to breach the Gellar fields of the *Enterprise* were weaker than usual. The denizens of the Immaterium are up to something.”

It was not paranoia if there was really someone or something after you. And Weaver knew deep inside there was zero chance a demon as powerful as Ka’Bandha was going to abandon his revenge at the first true campaign she had taken command since the Battle of the Death Star. So it stood to reason other demons had intervened to make their journey easier, and Taylor knew better to count on the generosity of the Warp abominations.

For a brief moment, the then-Major had looked deep at the other side of the Warp portal during the desperate fight in the hangars of the *Magos Laurentis*. There was no mercy, no benevolence, and no redeeming qualities where the Ruinous Powers were concerned. It was a primordial Evil, and the capital ‘E’ was more than warranted.

Some Archmagi had proposed to activate the small beacon which had been created during her fight with the Queen-ants of Catachan, in order to hope the denizens of the Empyrean. Unfortunately, it had been a failure. The light was going along with her powers now, but to generate a sort of luminous shadow reliably would require several thousand golden Queen-ants under control now that the population of Catachan ants refused to engage into a mental-psychic confrontation with her.

It would be exhausting for her, mentally and physically. It would be logistically difficult, because the Queen-ants were big and had to be located somewhere, and there were many other things that had to be brought on her battleship. And it would ruin completely the effect of surprise if she really needed to use it offensively or defensively.

No, the golden Queen-ants she had brought with her would be kept in reserve for now. It was one of the many trump cards Army Group Caribbean had to ensure the success of this operation.

Dennis threw a few jokes to lighten the atmosphere, and before she had the time to look at her watch, they were back on the primary bridge and saluting the personnel who had momentarily stopped working, despite her pleas for them not to.

It took two minutes to finish the protocol, but at last her senior officers and she were surrounding the large hololith, who was now detailing the Pavia System with precision.

“All the fleet assets have left the Warp, my Lady. The Equation-class destroyer *Three-Dimensions Coordination* has suffered significant casualties due to an error of navigation and will have to be left with the escorts protecting the fleet train.”

It was hard to remain emotionless without pouring emotion into her insects. These were the first deaths of Operation Caribbean, and the knowledge this could have been far, far worse given how far they were from the Astronomican gave her no comfort.

“I see.” Her eyes turned to the shiny red dots indicating the vast pirate armadas waiting in the Pavia System. “Our presence remains secret for now?”

“Yes, my Lady. The Heracles Wardens have taken control or disabled the augur arrays, the long-range auspexes and the communications of the *Palace of Feasting*. I believe they have also engineered a squabble between Ork and Sheed captains to shift attention away from their own efforts.”

“I will have to increase their material allocation after this,” and remind them not to become too arrogant. Pirates were hardly the most difficult of targets, with their non-existent professionalism and decades spent believing no one would dare challenging their outer minefields, fortresses and warships. “How are the enemy fleets disposed?”

Wolfgang spoke an order to a Tech-Priest, and a mass of icons nearly on top of the first Malta Starfort shone in a magnified red-black colour.

“This is the Kroot fleet of Shaper Qorok. They are in charge of the close-protection of the Starfort, as expected. They use it a lot for ammunition and fuel storage, so nothing too surprising. They have six Warspheres, which are equivalent in tonnage and firepower to a Hecate-class heavy cruiser. Nineteen Battlespheres are playing the roles of escorts. They are small light cruisers with a rather antiquated lance armament.”

“They have been reinforced.”

“All the pirate fleets have been reinforced,” a Magos she hadn’t remembered the name pointed out. “Our pre-battle data-analyses will take too long to answer if these are squadrons they have recruited in the last decade and we weren’t aware of, or allies they have recruited for their murder sprees.”

It was not the priority anyway, and in case of victory, Taylor supposed they would take enough data to reply to all the interrogations the Logis Magi had.

But still, this was an extremely gathering of pirates. Granted they were divided into thirteen fleets and if they had not a warlord-level criminal at the top to rule they would likely be busy fighting each other, but the hololith threat assessments announced for example sixteen battlecruisers of different species mustered in the outer and inner belt.

“But we can still execute War Plan Leyte Gulf with reasonable chances of success?”

“I believe so, my Lady.” Wolfgang replied serenely. The Kroot warship’s representation stopped to shine and two other fleets waiting at the end of the ‘outer corridor’ were highlighted. “These are the Ork and Sheed fleets, and all the information we have gathered on them confirm Kiddz Blackdakka and Brakorth are the most aggressive pirate commanders. The moment they will see the *Palace of Feasting* under attack, they are going to rush into the corridor. I don’t think there will be much thinking involved.”

For the Orks, Taylor completely agreed. The promise of a good battle with Astartes was going to be more motivation than the average greenskin needed. They may even thank her for the huge bloodbath waiting for them. The Sheed were a more uncertain proposition, but the Imperial records were firm on the stance the Sheed species as a whole loathed humanity.

“These are the fleets which are able to answer in less than one hour,” Archmagos Thayer Sagami declared. “The closest fleets after these three are the humans of the traitor Kalmar on Quadrant A-8, the Sunblitz Brotherhood in Quadrant C-11, the Bloodweaver fleet in Quadrant C-13, and the Jaeger squadrons in D-12.”

“You believe we can close the trap around them too?” Weaver asked Wolfgang. The four fleets combined were a massive amount of firepower, but it was likely they were going to see the Kroot and their allies torn apart before being at extreme range.

“Yes, my Lady. If this was a purely human affair, the odds would be problematic, but two of the pirate commanders here are Eldar. Their contempt for us is absolute and their long series of victories against the Imperium should have encouraged their titanic arrogance.”

The irony of the long-ears being their best allies in the fight to come amused her, and judging by the amount of smiles around the hololiths, she wasn’t the only one.

“Will you be able to catch the other fleets before they’re able to retreat?”

“I’m confident we will able to destroy Tanaka and his Poker fleet,” her naval expert said carefully. “Lakadieth and his Lugganath pirates are going to be more problematic. But whatever happens, the four other fleets are too distant to be hurt by our traps and our torpedoes.”

Yes, this would be the toughest part of the fight. Per the ‘suggestions’ the Heracles Wardens had hinted to several captured Rashan, the furry white-black xenos had concentrated their forces a few dozen kilometres away from the Malta Starfort *Pillow of Jasmine*. If the Rashans surrendered, the plan would be far easier to implement. But if they decided to give her forces a fight, the surprise effect would be gone. To increase the tactical problems, the Siren had established her headquarters some fifteen kilometres away from the inner belt in this sector of space. And of course that left the space assets of Hoth and Sliscus, which were still waiting around the ex-Space Hulk *Empire of Sin*.

But it was the way the pirates were irregularly disposed towards the outer exit of the system which worried her. Since the stations and the defences were not significantly powerful there, the only reason for them to be in this sort of general fleet’s configuration was...

“Wolfgang, are the pirates preparing to leave?”

Her blonde-haired subordinate gave her one of his roguish smiles.

“Yes, it is one of the possible explanations we have thought about. It is logical, when one think about it. Sliscus is likely behind this muster, and I don’t think he intends to launch a civil war between the different pirate factions of this system. I personally think he must have a spatial Webway Gates not far from Pavia. The Eldar warships can’t travel through the Warp and their signatures are impossible to track when you haven’t a clue what to search for. Magos Wismer wouldn’t have been to find it.”

“Thank the Emperor we have arrived in time to crush them,” the representative of the Angels Sanguine spoke. “If this pirate fleets attack with the element of surprise an Imperial system, it is going to be a disaster. There are Segmentum fortresses which can hold against such an assault, but there are few and far between.”

Thank the Emperor...no, not the Emperor. Suddenly, Taylor understood why the Warp had been so easy to navigate. If the 24th Mechanicus Fleet, the *Enterprise* and all their capital ships arrived too late, they would indeed crush the defences of Pavia...because there would be no pirate fleets to destroy here. They would indeed be able to meet Trazyn and the Necrons without military issues, but this would not be a battle, more like a one-sided skirmish...

Yes, someone had wanted to engineer a slaughter here. It was unlikely it was the Eldar supreme commander. Traevelliath Sliscus had done some awful things, but baiting her with more half of his fleet would be a hell of a cold-hearted move, even for the pirate called the Serpent. No, based on the reports, the Eldar was the flamboyant type. He wanted spectators for his exploits, and if his subordinates were murdered, this was not exactly going to be good for his prestige.

But if Sliscus wasn’t the mastermind...

“My Lady? You are searching for something?”

It couldn’t be the fleet commanders of the outer belt. There were too many risks to be slaughtered in the first minutes of battle. And that left...

“Hoth. It’s Hoth who is waiting for us...” the General muttered.

Wolfgang watched her with a dubitative expression.

“With all due respect, if this treacherous ex-Cardinal knew we were coming, he would have alerted the other pirate fleets and especially Traevelliath Sliscus. I don’t think the other pirate commanders are going to thank him if they manage to win by losing two-thirds of their warships and crews.”

“You’re assuming Hoth cares about the other pirates or anybody save himself.” Yes, he could see it now. Several Missionary-class destroyers and Preacher-class frigates were just behind Bloodweaver attack flotillas, haphazardly dispersed. “His biggest ships are safe and sound close to the *Empire of Sin*, but the light units are ready to play their role. He must have packed them with tens of thousands of cultists.”

“There has never been any evidence the traitor worshipped...” the representative of the Frateris Templar protested, but didn’t finish the sentence as his face became livid.

“Whether he’s an arch-heretic or not, it’s going to be problematic hitting these ships at such distance,” Wolfgang said.

“Maybe not,” Dennis countered. “They have stayed in really predictable trajectories and repeat the same weird moves for the last one hundred hours. If we send a few hundred torpedoes in ballistic mode and they are overconfident, we may be able to erase them from the battle before they understand they’re under attack.”

“The Inquisition will investigate move against Hoth and all the heretical plans which will be discovered in the next hours,” Contessa announced coldly, so icily in fact Weaver almost pitied the xenos and humans who were going to face her and the other Inquisitors.

There were more points to debate and modifications to accept, but after half an hour it was clear the only thing left to do was a last verification.

“The Astartes task force?”

“Chapter Master Dupleix and his warships are ready to make their micro-jump.”

“The Heracles Wardens?”

“They are in position and have received their orders. In three minutes, they affirm they can take the command heart of the Starfort. The void shields are already under their control.”

“The Kane particles and the world-flame warheads?”

“Dispersed upon the agreed war zone and ready to fire, per your instructions,” Thayer Sagami answered with a bow and a smug expression.

“The asteroids, the minesweepers and the carriers?”

“They are in position and awaiting your orders.”

“Leet’s project?”

“Completed after several horrible incidents. Let’s pray the Omnissiah we won’t need it.”

“All the components of Operation Caribbean are at full readiness, my Lady.”

So this was it, then. The great moment they had prepared the last couple of years training for.

“Give two hours to our all forces to rest, eat a last warm meal and don their armours.” It was not going to be good if half of her effectives were exhausted and prone to mistakes before meeting the enemy. Plus she wanted to go back to her quarters and kiss Wei a last time. “Once the two hours will be over, prepare the Nemesis-Hunter cannon and bring the entire fleet to battle-conditions.”

One by one she met the eyes of all her senior commanders and representatives surrounding the hololith.

“It’s time to burn a lot of black flags.”

**Supreme Arch-Ecclesiarch of the People Pius Hoth**

Pius Hoth had believed it was his destiny to be a mighty servant of the God-Emperor when he was a child.

Of course, there had been some obstacles on the way. His father was no doubt a powerful and influential man, since he was the Great Pontifex of Sigil, Civilised World of one billion souls. But his genitor also had plenty of sons from several noblewomen. And the ‘plenty’ was because, even to this day, he truly ignore how many half-siblings had been sired in two hundred and sixty years.

They did not have his name, for the Cult of the Saviour Emperor forbade his sworn priests to marry and have children. Officially, at least. Unofficially, there was one opportunity to seize: the Great Pontifex sent a worthy bishop to the holy world of Ophelia VII every fifty years.

When he was twenty-eight, Pius Hoth was this worthy chosen.

“I had to kill my eldest brother and twenty-nine half-brothers and sisters, but it was worth it.” The nine slaves cleaning the floor of his bridge with blue oils did not make a sign they had heard him. They wouldn’t, since he had cut their ears and sealed the orifices with iron-wax. And they wouldn’t answer, since he had cut their tongues and paid a heretek-surgeon to make sure they could only eat and drink...and not too easily or quickly.

Besides, his eldest brother was an uncharismatic fool and Pius had never enjoyed his company. The others he loathed them, and the feelings were largely reciprocated.

He had begun the God-Emperor’s work, or so he believed at the time. To be honest, Ophelia VII was just Sigil, it had just a far, far larger population, and the respective donations, pilgrim flocks and senior Ecclesiarchy seats which came with it.

Pius Hoth had begun his work, spreading the good word of the God-Emperor, discrediting his rivals, removing those who caused problems, presenting a smiling face to peons unable to understand the magnificence of the Master of the Imperium. And at first he had believed it was working.

His convictions had been more solid than the foundations of the Imperial Palace...until he was named Cardinal of the Kerguelen Sector.

It was a humiliation. Even as the Cardinal mitre was lowered on his head, he had heard the laughter of his enemies.

The planets of the Kerguelen Cluster were a Sector only by the sheer dumb luck of meeting somewhat the Administratum definition for the name. It was an extremely poor and neglected region of Segmentum Obscurus, with a sole Cardinal World for diocese.

Hoth had travelled to his new seat, and been depressed at the mere sight of it. There were a few Feudal and Feral Worlds, most of them preaching the Cult of the Saviour Emperor so badly it could and would be recognised borderline heresies if his superiors became aware of them.

There were no secular authorities to befriend there, no pilgrim crowds to speak before, and a grand total of zero donations.

Hoth had prayed day and night for a month the God-Emperor to show him a sign. The Corpse on his Golden Throne had not given him one. And after thirty standard days, he had decided that it was at last time to fly with his own wings and find a new God far worthier of his allegiance. The Frateris Templar accompanying him had been purged of their narrow-minded elements, and true warriors of the Word had replaced them. Once his power base had been secure, the lances of the renamed *Will of Hoth* had scoured the planet of its imperfect and seditious population.

“It was the correct choice to make, of course,” The former Cardinal declared to the silent throne room of his battleship-kingdom. The banners of the eight-pointed Truth were magnificent; he had taken great care to use only the most perfect priest’s skin for the flags, the sweetest virgin’s blood for the ink, and the bones of fallen innocents for the flagpoles. “I made sure millions worshipped the Corpse-God, and he recompensed me with nothing but silence, failures, and poverty. Now I have killed billions of his servants, and I am ninety-nine times more powerful than I would be if I had stayed on this path of delusion and weakness! For these are the gifts the Architect rewards his servants with!”

He raised a finger and ninety-nine slave-guards leaning against the walls cheered him.

“Nine point nine million followers of the Great Changer stand ready to accomplish His Will. My fleet is immense and unbeatable. I have spread so many traps and levers to summon the favourites of the Architect no one can detect and parry in time my plots. I...no...We have never killed a False-Saint before, and this battle is a priceless opportunity to correct this mistake. Glory to the Changer of Ways! Glory to me! Glory to Tzeentch!”

He heard it then. It was a whisper, not the clarion he was used to, but the intensity had been lessened these last days. It was a minor effect of the great moment of his ascension coming nearer, undoubtedly.

“Our guests are here! Bring forth my Change-Bishops, for we have to receive them IN CHANGE AND CORRUPTION!”

**Shaper Qorok Trek**

“I really hate the chairman,” his Shaper-Second complained while masticating some human meat.

Qorok huffed and raised his eyes in consternation.

“Everyone hates Sliscus,” the commander of the Kroot fleet remarked. “I have not found a non-Eldar who truly loves him.”

“But he poisoned the meat supply of Hunter Nurkh!”

“No, it must have been the work of one of his creatures.” Qorok contradicted the Shaper-Second. “Sliscus would have poisoned over a hundred supply caches and made the symptoms humiliating or impressive. Or both.”

Many hunters of his personal guard grumbled in agreement. The old Kroot had been on the receiving end of the Serpent’s black humour enough times to recognise what actions had been ordered by his voice.

This was one of the many reasons why Qorok had been reluctant to participate in the coming battle. Feasting on Eldar flesh was a great boon by itself, but attacking Pandaimon, even by a ‘secret pathway’, was going to bleed his warships, of this he had little doubt. The Eldar weren’t going to let them win and bare their throats for the feasting. And then there were the true motives of Sliscus. The Duke of the Sky Serpents was a Commorragh Eldar. They were beings deprived of trust, and pack unity, and eating them was akin to devour a slow-acting neurotoxin. At first it felt good, but you soon realised the darkness and the soul-tainting of the Eldar killers was adding to your senses the worst traits of the long-ears.

Qorok contemplated for several seconds the green meat in front of him before taking it and swallowing it. The Shaper had the urge to vomit. Eating the flesh of greenskins was always giving him this feeling, but alas given how many hunter cadres he had gathered here, the best meat reserves had been already consumed. It left only one source of available food source and the recent squabble between Sheed and Ork captains had been too good an opportunity not to resupply.

Hunter Loxrukh stormed in without being invited.

“Shaper! There is something strange happening with the green brutes!”

Qorok Trek’s hand gripped the handle of his hunter rifle. The only things you could expect from Orks were battle and a lot of casualties. And it was getting worse as the departure date was in two local cycles.

“They have tried to storm the *Palace of Feasting* again to stop being bored?” They had done it six times already, so it wouldn’t be a novelty.

“No...they...they are shouting. They are shouting something on their communications to all fleets. And they are preparing for battle.”

Yes, this was extremely concerning. What kind of idea had arrived in Blackdakka’s head again?

“What sort of nonsense are they shouting?”

“Something likes ‘Da Swarm Bringa iz 'ere. Dis iz da baddle o' our livz!’ and they are adding a lot of ‘WAAGGH’ and other screams.”

Qorok didn’t understand more than the basics of this horrid language, but he could understand the gist of it: something had agitated the greenskins.

“Tell our great Hunters to turn their guns against Blackdakka’s fleet. He’s violating the rules, and I think we have to remind him...”

The explosion shook the *Guaathow* like the end of the world. Furniture, meat and hunters were thrown against the walls and the couches they had taken from the human’s dead fingers.

For the first time in dozens of local cycles, Qorok felt pain and saw a small wound on his arm. This made him angry. He was back on his legs nearly instantly and watched from the large glass-bay his fleet.

It was a feasting-catastrophe. The Kroot warships had been disposed to repel lone bored Orks and Sheed, not a true attack. Three Warspheres were shaken by huge explosions and their doom was all but assured. Five Battlespheres were in an even worse state, disintegrating and opening their compartments to the void.

“Human warships! Human warships converging on our position! Multiple Nova cannon explosions reported in the corridor!”

“Raise the *Palace of Feasting*! Raise all commands and sound the alert!” Qorok shouted. “Engage all countermeasures and begin to fire back!”

It was an attack. By the bones of the Great Looter, Pavia was under attack. And he and his fleet were on the frontlines.

Shaper Qorok Trek was no coward. But as he ran to the bridge of the Guaathow, and saw what they were facing, the sensation in his stomach was not hunger, but a very unpleasant pit of fear. The massive warship leading dozens of warships was eminently recognisable: it was what the humans called a ‘Battle-Barge’.

“The *Palace of Feasting* is not raising its shields, Shaper! They are not fighting!”

Fear turned into despair.

“Raise them! Raise them and tell them to hurry or we are all dead!”

There were too many warships and the corridor had been purposely cleared of mines and other traps before the departure of the thirteen fleets. Right at this instant, there were only two things stopping the humans from breaking through: the *Palace of Feasting* and his own fleet. And as he watched the hunter-display, Qorok knew his fleet wouldn’t be enough to even slow down the invaders.

The surprise bombardment had slaughtered the Battlespheres and the Warspheres. Of the lesser units, barely six could called intact, and with three Warspheres dead and one crippled, the Kroot fleet was already nearly gone...

“There are no answers! And the humans are sending their transports directly into the fortress’ docking facilities!”

How? How had the humans been able to do this? Qorok stared in unbelief at the unfolding hunting-catastrophe and broke two claws in his rage against the command wall.

It was...no it couldn’t happen! Not after hundreds of profitable contracts and tasting so many delicious meat! He was the strongest of the Kroot Shapers, and he would be the one to find back their homeworld and bring galactic renown to his race!

“*Deek’kroot* is gone. *Byazz’hork*’s crew is abandoning ship. *Xi’lodetrek* is in critical condition!”

One by one his fleet was beaten. No, not beaten. It was slaughtered. They were not defeated in a great hunter contest like so many operations had been. They were slaughtered. They were *prey*.

Qorok didn’t believe he had loathed someone so much, even Sliscus, to this day.

But hated or no, he couldn’t defeat these invaders. Not with the *Palace of Feasting* silent and refusing to fire on the enemy. Whether it was treason of some Hunter cadres or something the humans had planned all along would be discovered later.

“Give my command to the fleet. I order a general retreat towards the inner belt. We will let Blackdakka and Brakorth deal with these bloodthirsty intruders...”

“Boarding torpedoes! The human Battle-Barge is launching boarding torpedoes at us!”

“Counter-measures! Counter-measures and evade!”

But Qorok knew it was already too late, and the Guaathow, the flagship which had seen him hatch and become a great Shaper, was too damaged to focus fire on such nimble objects.

The ground shook under his talons as the ugly machines collided with his flagship.

“Continue the retreat as long as possible,” the Shaper ordered to his bridge’s cadre, knowing truly well it was certainly going to be the last order he would ever give them. “All hunters able to raise a rifle are to rally on me! We will defend our home against the human invaders!”

The roar of defiance pleased him, and Qorok suppressed his feat to concentrate on his hate. It wasn’t difficult. For as long as he had lived he had tried to find a way to return their homeworld and make the Kroot race stronger, and now a lot of these experiences and efforts were gone because the human ‘Imperium’ was unable to see a non-human and not shoot on him. They were going to pay.

Most this resolution vanished when he saw the first giant fighting its way in a hall. They were only three, but each burst of their massive weapons and blades were killing dozens of his best hunters.

“DEATH TO THE HUMANS!”

The ambush was perfect. His rifle found the exact spot he had earmarked, and so did the next six shots of his companions.

The pale green armour shrugged the impacts like they were useless darts.

“Beware! Their armour...”

An incredible amount of pain exploded in his lower body and the last rifle shot he had been preparing fired in the ceiling. The world collapsed in blood, blood of his hunters, blood...

“For a 700 Billion bounty, Cannibal, you were a disappointment.”

Something stepped on his body and then Shaper Qorok Trek died.

**Scout-Brother Phanuel**

Pat Howe would have been afraid. The space separating the Strike Cruiser *Blood Remembrance* from the Malta Starfort *Palace of Feasting* was war in its purest expression: dozens of xenos’ starships ripped apart and agonising under a concentrated barrage of lances and macro-cannons.

But he was not Pat Howe anymore. He was Phanuel, and he was a son of Sanguinius. He was one the twenty Space Marines inside the Thunderhawk *Wings of Resolution*, and the training and the courage of the Blood flowed in his veins.

The endeavour should have been a death sentence, of course. One or ten Thunderhawks, piloted Astartes or baseline humans, had less than a minute to live when in firing range of an operational Star Fort. But the *Palace of Feasting* was not firing or bringing up its shields and considerable defences on-line.

And this meant the initial infiltration had worked and the Brothers of the Red and the rest of the Astartes boarding force could begin their work.

“The Heracles Wardens have accomplished all their goals and seized the heart of the station,” Sergeant Sidriel vox-cast like the operation had been a good training session for the veteran Space Marines. Then again, knowing the rumours circulating on the leadership of the Wardens, maybe this was routine for them. “Now it is our duty to prove our Chapter has not lost its strengths. We take the docking facilities and we advance. The Heracles Wardens have taken all the human and xenos prisoners which may have a tactical and strategic interest, so don’t worry about surrenders and intelligence acquisition. You have the adequate frequencies. You have the training. FOR SANGUINUS AND THE EMPEROR!”

“FOR SANGUINIUS AND THE EMPEROR!” the nineteen Nyxian-born Space Marine Scouts answered in a loud howl.

Three seconds later the hatch of the Thunderhawk opened two metres above Docking Facility Gamma-2, and they jumped behind the Sergeant. Five Kroot gaped at him like they had never seen an enemy before, and they all died before his feet touched ground.

“Eldar! Neutralise them before their use their sorcery!”

Four bolter rounds decisively ended the threat before it had the time to do more than make a few blue sparkles with their hands.

“I’m going after the Sheed group,” Phanuel told Eleleth. “Cover me.”

The young Scout had at first believed the ugliness of the Sheed had been exaggerated. After all, the entire galaxy knew the greenskins were the ugliest beasts the Imperium was fighting, right? But no, the average was Sheed was just that awful too look at. The tail was looking like it had been specifically created to create fear and impale people on its spikes and massive sting. The maw and the reptilian head were built to devour everything on its way and its eyes shone with cruelty and malice. As if it wasn’t enough the central section of the carapace was slightly opened, revealing two proto-appendages the Sheed used as a substitute for hands.

They were not strong enough to withstand the Krak grenade he threw in the middle of their group, though.

“Brothers! We advance! Glory to the Emperor!”

“Death to his Foes!”

This was a one-sided slaughter. As much as Phanuel wanted to pretend the xenos were coordinated and strong, this wasn’t the case. They were coming at them piecemeal, with nothing but light guns and the odd anti-tank weapon. They had no leaders, and the few figures of authority shouting louder than the xenos or human grunts were rapidly silenced with a bolter round in the head.

“Phanuel, Eleleth, take the avenue Delta-5 and join our brothers of the Angels Sanguine in removing the pirates’ infestation.”

“By your orders, Sergeant!”

The battle continued, and in a couple of minutes the Brothers of the Red Scout lost count of how many people he had killed. In fact, most of the problem consisted in not wasting the bolter ammunition and knowing when to trample or execute with their blades. Though the Heracles Wardens informing the Sergeant spoke of no resistance nodes, there may be tougher opponents than humans to face in the entrails of this citadel.

Yes, there were a lot of human pirates. From a tactical perspective, Phanuel understood the reasoning. A Malta Starfort was an Imperial fortress, with human-sized machinery, corridors and accommodations, a majority of human weapon batteries. But to see that they were so many traitors ready to raise their guns against the gene-sons of Sanguinius and the fleet of Lady Weaver...it was making him glad none were trying to surrender.

“They weren’t prepared for boarding actions,” he commented after punching a first Kroot and decapitating a second one which had shrieked something he was glad he was unable to understand the xenos language. “Do you think the toughest ones were aboard their fleet?”

“Maybe, brother,” Eleleth answered with a tone of voice he already used during the first trials of the Sanguinala. “If so we won’t be able to have confirmation. Chapter Master Dupleix and Lady Weaver have destroyed the Kroot fleet before it fired a single shot.”

They had to stop talking and take their bolters again however as a wave of Kroot warriors ran into their direction and there were too many armed with these dangerous venom-rifles to take risks. Twenty shots later for him and twenty-two for Eleleth, the corridor was filled with dead xenos.

“It looks like they were fleeing, brother.”

“Yes, but from what? The Angels Sanguine platoon is advancing on a parallel avenue, not...”

“THEY WERE AFRAID TO FACE ME.”

Phanuel was glad donning your helmet was mandatory, because else he would have gaped at the sight of the Venerable Dreadnought waiting before the elevators in what could honestly be described as a mountain of Sheed, Eldar, Kroot, Orks and human corpses.

**Mekboy Battery Commander Brukk Brukk**

Pavia ad bin a bit borin' latelee. Da big baddle promiseded was nub comin', an da boyz woz teddin' rowdy.

But evreefin' ad changeded. Weava was 'ere. Da Swarm Bringa was here.

Da Kroot ad takun a beetin' koz they woz weaklin's. An nows it was an Ork'z job ter win in a bigun baddle.

Dis was goin' ter be funz!

“AWL ROIGHT BOYZ! FULL SPEED AHEAD! SMASH DA UUMIES!”

Brukk roared in approvul, loike lotz an lotz o' uvver orks.

Da waitin' part was ober. Nows it was time ter smash sumthing.

Dis time they woz goin' ter win, big time. Dis time they woz goin' ter smash da uumies an conqwa evreefin'.

Wif Blackdakka commandin' dim, they woz unstoppabul.

“FURST TER BADDLE, FURST TER VICTOARY! WAAAAAAGGGHH!”

“WWWWAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGHHHHHH!”

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

“We can trust the orks to remain predictable.”

Jeremiah Isley allowed himself a chuckle at his second-in-command’s remark.

“Yes, I have to agree. Of course, we did everything to ensure they would remain predictable.”

Unless they were blind, dumb, and twice stupider than the average greenskin, the Pavia Orks could not possibly miss the total destruction of the Kroot fleet and the assault of the Caribbean fleet. The Battle-Barge *Honourable Shield* of the Iron Drakes alone would not have been a model of discretion; with five Astartes Strike Cruisers and dozens of destroyers accompanying it, it was the equivalent of agitating a large flag in front of a beast.

“Raise the void shields and prepare all the batteries to fire on my command. Things are going to get lively.”

Several growls answered his order. Isley sighed under his helmet. Despite his tolerance for absurd situations, the scene of the command centre of the *Palace of Feasting* operated by furry black-white xenos was something he had difficulties adapting. The Legionaries had done a lot of things they weren’t exactly proud of, but employing xenos for their operations had not been one of them.

Unfortunately, the rapid capture of the vital key sections of the Malta Starfort by the Space Marine assault teams was in several ways not fast enough. Thunderhawks and deployment transports could transfer impressive quantities of garrison troops and supplies, but deploying over fifty thousand Tech-Priests to take control of the fortress until it was fully secured had been judged too risky, even by the lowest standards of the Imperium. There already were a few thousand Skitarii and Tech-Priests aboard, but they were in the dozens at best.

Practical: if they wanted to use this engine of war to a fraction of its real potential, they had to use the Rashans.

Fortunately, between their thirteen-strong team and two hundred Navy personnel, they had ‘convinced’ all the Rashans to lay down their arms and accept captivity. By the latest count they were three thousand white-black xenos and one thousand humans prisoners of war on the *Palace of Feasting*.

“The Ork fleet is entering the corridor at full speed. Blackdakka’s flagship is leading the mob. The Sheed starships are following the greenskins.”

The term ‘mob’ was appropriate. There was no discipline, no squadron organisation, and the communications were utterly available to everyone willing to ear, not that anyone could learn something from the brutish screams the Orks had the gall to call a language.

The Ork fleet was still a threat, though it was far smaller than the endless waves which had appeared in the Battle of the Death Star. Kiddz Blackdakka was a big name among the pirates, but he had not an attack planetoid. What he had however, was a profusion of fast attack escorts and ram ships.

The numbers were coming on his hololithic terminal, and they were impressive. Not counting the *Blak Dakka*, there were three other ‘Kill Kroozers’, eleven ‘Lite Kroozer’ and five ‘Basha’. These ramshackle capital ships were intermingled with a cloud of smaller warships. Tentatively, the augurs and auspexes announced twenty-three Brute Ram Ships, twelve Onslaught Attack ships, four Ravager Attack Ships, eight Savage Gunships, three Grunt Assault ships, thirty-five Miner-Bomber Attack Ship, over two thousand Fighta-Bommer and six hundred or so Assault Boats.

And the Sheed pirate N’Fffjt Brakorth was coming right behind with seven Deadly Sting-class Cruisers, twenty-one Cruel Fang-class Light Cruisers, and forty-three Bleeding Claw-class Frigates.

“I know we provoked them to do exactly this type of mad charge,” the Captain next to him spoke conversationally, “but this is just madness. Even if the *Palace of Feasting* wasn’t in our hands and what Dupleix had under his command represented the entire fleet we mustered to attack this system, this would still be a massive butchery. The corridor between the minefields is too narrow to manoeuvre in this sort of pack-like formation. They are going to take losses before...”

The first explosions appeared on the holographic picts before Viktor had the time to finish his sentence.

“Two Onslaught attack ships have collided, Chapter Master,” one of the rare Tech-Priests present reported.

“Acknowledged,” Isley replied. “Please contact Archmagos Hediatrix. It is time to begin Phase 2.”

For nearly five minutes the Ork and Sheed fleets charged thoughtlessly in the corridor between the mines, the psychic bombs, the wrecks of dozen xenos and humans starships, and the clouds of debris, taking casualties even a bloodthirsty Imperial Admiral would have winced at.

And then the *Enterprise*, the *El Dorado* and the *Utopia Planitia* fired their long-range guns. Precision was a bit lacking at this distance and with the battlefield conditions, but given the size of the corridor they could hardly miss.

“By the Golden Throne...”

“Omnissiah be praised...”

The explosions of the Nova Cannons and other super-energised ordnance lit the void in a bright and astounding explosion. And then came dozens of others. They were rapidly followed by a deluge of macro-batteries, rare Plasma barrages and advanced lances as the battleships *Machine’s Stand* and *Standard Template Construct* joined their bombardment with the *Honourable Shield*. The fifty-plus destroyers and frigates in position launched half of their torpedoes’ ammunition stores at target which couldn’t evade.

The great corridor the Pavia pirates had continued to use as an exit became an inferno of dying ships. The collisions tripled in the next seconds, and Isley increased the collision as certain sabotaged lasers and minefields were activated by his command.

“The *Blak Dakka* has survived.”

“Yes.” The reports indicating the Ork Warboss had an uncanny amount of luck were accurate, it seems. “Inform Pierre to regroup the Brothers of the Red and the Angels Sanguine, and to return to the docking facilities. The Skitarii and the Tech-Priests are continuing their landing operations, and I would prefer not spending the next weeks not hunting Orks aboard this Star Fort.”

But as at last the xenos entered their extreme torpedo and lance range, the flagship of the greenskins was the exception. The two mob-fleets had not a single warship bigger than a Cruiser when they had charged ahead: the Ork ‘Roks’ were still five or six hours away, and the Sheed had no hollowed asteroids or massive space station to throw in the melee. Given that the defence was organised around several battleships and had the long-range support of two Arks, this was a fight they had not a chance to win.

Perhaps if they had waited for the other pirate fleets, these brutish and idiotic creatures would have been able to cause more damage and casualties. But they hadn’t, and now they were paying the price.

“Eighty-six percent of the Ork fleet destroyed. Ninety-one percent of the Sheed fleet wiped out.” Interestingly, the debris and the collisions were now decimating the ranks of the warships following the greenskins’ starships, as they were caught in the unruly mess of the Orks. They were even many xenos starships fighting each other now.

“The *Blak Dakka* is on a collision course with the *Palace of Feasting*!” A Rashan squeaked.

Five seconds later, the *Cant-Requiem*’s fire ripped apart the ugly prow vaguely looking like a black flag with bones and opened half of the starboard’s side to the void.

“Enemy flagship launching new bombers and boarding torpedoes!”

Well that was smart...for an Ork. It seemed Blackdakka had understood its flagship was never going to reach the Starfort, so the Ork Warboss was trying to close range the old-fashioned way.

“The Orks are going after the docking facilities, aren’t they?”

“The xenos which aren’t going to be disintegrated by our batteries will ram there, yes.”

“Chapter Master, the remnants of the Ork and Sheed fleets are closing in!”

This was insanity at its finest. The Ork and Sheed ‘Captains’ had to know that with most of their starships already dead or busy agonising, they couldn’t break the battleship line crossing the ‘T’ with them. It was firepower with a ratio of three hundred-to-one to their disadvantage, and the torpedoes and long-range fire support were pulverising more and more xenos escorts and attack craft.

And yet they charged nonetheless to meet their death.

The *Red Fiefdom*, Lunar-class cruiser, was lightly damaged, and two Cobra-class destroyers had to roll out of the line of battle as their shields fell and hundreds of their crew died by the second, but when the battleships fired again, there was no enemy opposition anymore.

The next fifteen minutes were spent exterminating the crippled hulls and blasting apart the xenos debris.

It had been three and a half hours, and three pirate fleets had already died. War Plan Leyte Gulf was proceeding well for now.

“CHAPTER MASTER, I HAVE KILLED THE ORK. HIS PIRATE’S TRICORN IS MINE.”

“I’m glad to hear this, Pierre.” The Chapter of the Heracles Wardens told his unruly subordinate. “All the greenskins are dead?”

“ALL THE GREENSKINS HERE ARE DEAD AND ALL THE SCOUTS ARE ALIVE. BUT I SAW A FEW GUNSHIPS FLY AWAY FROM THE DOCKING BAYS.”

“They are flying away into the minefields. I don’t think they will be a problem anymore.” Given how dangerous the ‘natural obstacles’ were in this system, Isley wasn’t going to bet in their survival. “Burn the corpses and wait for extraction to the *Enterprise*. “

“ACKNOWLEDGED.”

Isley cut the communication and turned towards Viktor.

“Now we can begin Phase 3.”

“It’s not going to be easy towing the Star Fort in the middle of this...battlefield mess.” The Captain said with a large swipe of his arm towards what had been three hours ago two very dangerous fleets.

“No, but the effect of surprise is mostly gone. The other pirates must have a good idea what they face, and they will not try to rush one by one anymore. I am never in awe where traitor’s and xenos’ intelligence are concerned, but even these pirates can realise the danger of repeating the same mistake over and over.”

“True. A pity we haven’t been able to place spies on the different flag bridges to see how the pirate scum react.”

**Fleet Admiral Fitzgerald Tanaka**

“Oh my Gods...”

Fitzgerald Tanaka did not believe in any deity save the Goddess of Fortune and Card Games, but for the first time in his life, he agreed with the feeling.

“Four hours. They destroyed three full fleets and took one of the greatest fortresses in less than four hours...” the supreme Admiral of the Poker Fleet whispered in a tone where he was unable to remove the shock and the disbelief.

Before today, he would have thought it was a feat bordering on the impossible. The Sheed Brakorth had never lost a battle, and the Kroot Shaper Qorok and the Ork Blackdakka had list of victories which would have been hundreds of metres long if they had bothered erecting monuments with their exploits on it.

But now? Three of the great thirteen pirate commanders of Pavia were dead. And their fleets had died with them without inflicting more than cosmetic damage in return.

“Israel, what do you make of the enemy?”

“It is a considerable fleet,” answered his intelligence officer while cleaning up his monocle. At this moment, Israel Goldsmith looked like the scholar he had been before fleeing a planetary Inquisitorial purge, with his perfectly tailored white uniform. “My subordinates are still working on a firm count, but it looks like we have the core of a Mechanicus armada against us. The cogboys have brought two Arks Mechanicus, seven battleships, one war-ark, one battlecruiser, two heavy cruisers, sixteen cruiser-sized capital ships, over two hundred escorts and more specialised units our specialists have not seen before.”

“And they have brought the pet killers of the Corpse-God with them,” his second-in-command Phineas Claver added bitterly. “Best to not forget that, Israel.”

“I have not forgotten them, Phineas,” the intelligence specialist replied with a short nod. “They have indeed one battle-barge and five strike cruisers employed by the Adeptus Astartes. This should bring a complement between five hundred and six hundred of transhuman warriors specialised in boarding operations and anti-xenos warfare.”

This was disastrous. The Poker King was well-aware his ship crews were inferior one-on-one to the murderers and mercenaries Sliscus and Bloodweaver filled their starships with, but it had always been his assumption that if an attack came against Pavia, the sheer numbers he would be able to bring against the enemy would seal the doom of the invaders.

But when the enemy was including the terrifying Space Marines and the mechanical robots of the Mechanicus, these assumptions were not worth the saliva to speak them. His men were veterans of hundreds of raids, but even their heaviest portable weapons would do nothing but annoy genetically-enhanced warrior in heavy power armour.

“There is also a large battleship of a class we have never seen before,” Israel continued his analysis calmly. Fitzgerald admired his assurance. Each sentence was sinking the morale of his crew in range to hear the words rather damn fast. “Judging by the five massive explosions it created, it appears we can’t count on the dreadful accuracy of the Nova Cannons to save us from this warship. It is also eleven kilometres-long, so for all intent and purposes we will have to fight the firepower of a third Ark Mechanicus.”

“Is that all?” Fitzgerald Tanaka promised himself he would order Phineas to keep his sarcasm to reasonable levels if they survived the carnage to come.

But Israel talked like it had been a genuine question.

“Yes, there is the last report of the outer stations indicated a great amount of minelayers and minesweepers. The latter are busy cleaning up the debris of Blackdakka and Brakorth fleets in the corridor, but I fear the fifty-plus starships we have never seen are busy reinforcing the minefields ‘above’ and ‘below’ us in the debris clouds. There are also like I said specialised transports. Knowing the Mechanicus ability to build monstrous machines, I would not be surprised if they had brought large ammunition stores and their God-Machines. And of course they have captured the *Palace* *of Feasting* intact and by the looks of it, the Imperials are busy towing it through the corridor with improvised tugs.”

“Phineas?” Tanaka asked, watching the colossal estimations of the enemy forces coming to exterminate them.

“I think we can take them, but only if we unite the ten remaining fleets and prepare a coherent strategy.” His aggressive subordinate answered. “The chairman has beaten the Imperium rather soundly before, and between Bloodweaver and the other Eldar, there are plenty of superior battleships and battlecruisers there. Obviously they came prepared, but we have hundreds of starships and traps to destroy them.”

“I completely disagree with everything Phineas has said,” Israel immediately said. The glare the two exchanged was one more proof these two were best kept far away from each other every day. “To take the fortress protecting our outer defences so quickly, they must have infiltrated the *Palace of Feasting* and eliminated the Rashan and the command leadership hours before the assault began. And to move their entire fleet like they are doing, they must have excellent data on our system. They would never have risked such a large fleet against our defences otherwise. No, I think they know exactly what they are against, and they think their current strategy can annihilate the thirteen fleets with what they have.”

Fitzgerald had to admit, the arguments of Israel Goldsmith were far more convincing than those of his second-in-command. In normal circumstances, he was more likely to jump on the ‘audacious’ tactic than the ‘prudent’ one, but it wasn’t every day his fleet was outmassed and outnumbered by an enemy.

And to be painfully honest inside his mind, the pirate Fleet Admiral was afraid. Fleet combat was supposed to be a sum of elegant manoeuvres and daring decisions. It was not supposed to be this kind of merciless slaughterhouse where fleets died in mere minutes. The enemy fleet commander had not come here to fight. He had come to murder them, and if they committed a mistake, they would all end like Qorok. Fitzgerald didn’t like the Kroot, but Qorok had in all likelihood not been granted more than five or six minutes of fight before being defeated. If he had been in the Shaper’s place, the result would have been exactly the same.

Not that he was going to say it aloud in front of his lieutenants.

“Admiral, there is encrypted wyrd-message...Jaeger Day is asking for a few minutes of your time.”

“Of course he is, the ‘Void Tyrant’s’ courage...”

“Phineas,” Fitzgerald stopped the criticism before it had the opportunity to go further. “Our survival in the hours to come may very well depend on our ability to present a united front with the other great fleet commanders of Pavia. Moreover, unlike us Jaeger Day is a Navy deserter. If he is captured by Imperium forces, he won’t receive the airlock or the rope.”

The local human authorities were never gentle with pirates, but the fate of Navy deserters often rivalled in cruelty certain methods of torture exhibited by Sliscus and Bloodweaver.

“I am going to talk with the ‘Grand Admiral’. Make sure the entire fleet will be ready to sail once I return to the bridge.”

It was not a tall order, but at least it would stop Claver and Goldsmith from bickering too much when he was not able to keep an eye on them. Tanaka had not a long distance to walk to. Roughly fifty metres on the secondary avenue leading to the bridge of his *Poker’s Reward*, and one of his rings along with a password opened a secret door. Ten abrupt stairs had to be descended, a new door was opened and the human pirate commander felt a deeply unpleasant contact on his skin, despite being quite alone.

Fitzgerald Tanaka winced but took five step forwards. Being in presence of the artefact in question was always something best to avoid if you had a choice, but Sliscus had been adamant all long intra-system communications had to be done this way if the pirate fleets were under attack. The irony amused him for a second or two. He had expected even Pandaimon would not require too much activations of these dark objects.

Sliscus had called them ‘Dark Mirrors’, and had told them that to his best knowledge, they were only thirteen of them in existence. As always there was no way to verify if the Serpent was speaking true or lying through his treacherous teeth.

At first sight, it looked like a mirror...although one whose creator had a very macabre sense of decoration. Screaming faces and tortured expressions were everywhere on the cadre. The Dark Mirror had only one theme, and it was suffering. The moment your eyes fell on it, an oppressing sensation of wrongness surrounded you and Tanaka knew that the longer you stayed near the ‘mirror’, the worst the effects became.

Undoubtedly it had greatly amused Sliscus to give them these ‘presents’.

“Show me Jaeger Day.” And he threw a vial of human blood where the ‘glass’ of a normal mirror should have stood.

But there was no noise of grass broken or a clue the liquid had come into contact with something. The transparent surface shifted and for the blink of an eye, the commander of the Poker Fleet saw the shiver of...something. In his mind, he pretended to be convinced it was Sliscus who was observing them. And maybe it was true. Maybe the Serpent was laughing at their discomfort.

But he could not repress a shiver as Jaeger Day appeared like he was in front of him. This had not been the shadow of an Eldar...

“Grand Admiral Jaeger Day,” normally Fitzgerald wouldn’t have bothered with the niceties, but the hour was sufficiently grave to indulge the delusions of the Lieutenant deserter. “I suppose from your wyrd-message you want to talk about the unwanted newcomers who have decided to invite themselves in our star system.”

“I do, Fleet Admiral.” Today Jaeger was wearing his shiny emerald-green uniform, which was cut to mark a notable difference with the usual fashion in vogue with the Imperial Navy. It was quite different from Tanaka’s white clothes with red and black card decorations. “I think the deaths of Brakorth, Blackdakka and Trek have shown beyond doubt the hostile intentions of the Imperium. If we don’t make common cause, we are doomed.”

“One of my subordinates just told me the same thing,” Fitzgerald admitted. “I quite agree, as it happen. But it would be better if we could count on the support of our chairman...”

“Sliscus didn’t answer my request for a Dark Mirror communication.” Jaeger told him with the angry expression of someone dreaming to impale the Serpent’s head on a spike. “And Bloodweaver and Moonblitz outright told me they were going to deal alone with the ‘Mon-keigh invaders’. I was only going to slow them down and my presence wasn’t tolerated.”

This was unpleasant news, but Tanaka wasn’t that surprised. These two had been convinced they were the true masters of the galaxy centuries ago, and in their perfect vision of the galaxy the humans only existed to lick their shoes or serve as slaves and torture subjects.

“I doubt they will manage to reach optimal firing range. It’s the Mechanicus which is our enemy, not the Imperial Navy. Their ships have the best augurs and auspexes. And my intelligence officer told me the Imperials certainly scouted the system for a few months before launching this attack. If this is true, the Eldar are going to be the next victims. They have a bigger fleet, but the Arks aren’t exactly easy targets.”

“I know,” Jaeger Day really looked like his age of one hundred standard years with his exhausted expression. “And Kalmar is also leading his fleet against the enemy.”

“Why would he do something that idiotic?” Tanaka voiced loudly.

“He believes the might of his carrier wings and his two Exorcist-class Grand Cruisers will be enough to break their line. That and if he is involved in the fighting when Bloodweaver and Moonblitz inflicts a severe correction to the Mechanicus, he will be able to seize the greatest share of the hulks.”

“Yes, this sounded like the gold-lover, all right.” And he had met Kalmar enough times to be aware of the man’s grox-stubbornness.

Fitzgerald allowed his fellow pirate commander to see his grimace.

“At least this simplifies our range of tactical choices. Bloodweaver and Moonblitz are going to attack in about seven hours, maybe preceded by Kalmar if they feel like letting him plunge his head into the traps the enemy has prepared. One way or another, the battle will be over before we will be in position to do anything about it.”

“Yes, and most of our chances to win will have disappeared with it.” The Grand Admiral’s rage could have warmed the void itself if it was fed by psychic power. “Three fleets are gone. I concede they were three of the smaller ones, but there were nonetheless representing a considerable amount of tonnage and firepower. Our chances to repulse this invasion are already bad enough, but if we lose three more in eight hours, our chances will be nearly non-existent.”

“There is the *Empire of Sin*. And Sliscus has his fleet.”

“This ex-Space Hulk can’t move and while its armament is impressive, it can be reduced by a conventional space siege.” Jaeger Day said dismissively. “And if they have a plan to crush several Eldar fleets, I won’t deny the possibility they have a way to deal with a large target that can’t move unless towed by hundreds of starships. There are enough asteroids in this system to bombard artificial stations until the next millennium.”

“You have a point. What are your suggestions?”

The pirate in green uniform took a deep breath.

“If the Eldar fail recruiting Lakadieth will not serve our aims. And there’s no way a Rashan assault team can infiltrate an Arm Mechanicus.” Tanaka snickered. Yes, the idea of the furry technophile aliens beating the Mechanicus would be extremely funny to watch, but the chances of that happening were infinitesimal. “So we need Lox’ena. There are a lot of things you can prepare against, but an Alpha-level psyker isn’t one. The Siren should be able to inflict them enough damage to give us a chance.”

“And if she tries and fails, we will be lucky to be tortured for a month before our long and violent execution.” Fitzgerald Tanaka shivered, and not because the Dark Mirror’s sorcery was becoming more awful by the second. “I will contact Lox’ena. But if the price the alien witch asks is too high...”

This would probably mean the Siren had received protection promises from the Duke of Commorragh. And that meant they were – minus one fleet commander – all completely expendable.

**Duke Traevelliath Sliscus**

“MWHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Traevelliath Sliscus didn’t remember having laughed so much since the Fall. No, he didn’t remember having laughed for so long...at all.

“Ah, I needed that,” the Duke of Commorragh said after a last burst of laughter. “It’s been a long, long time I’ve been that amused.”

“Your Excellency...the Mon-keigh...the Mon-keigh are killing your servants!” Tshaelgu, the poor impressionable soul, was spluttering the noble Aeldari tongue in his anger and rage. “They have utterly ruined the operation against Pandaimon! They...”

“Oh, forget about Pandaimon,” Sliscus rolled his eyes. Attacking the Sub-realm in the first place had only found grace to his eyes because the payment was good. “Pandaimon is boring and the same pitiful plots are orchestrated there every cycle. For once, the Mon-keigh leaders are doing something extremely interesting and we’re in the best position to observe them! Isn’t it fascinating?”

“Yes, your Excellency...it...is fascinating.” The words were more hissed than spoken, and the supreme commander of the Sky Serpents sighed. Why, oh why, his subordinates weren’t able to lie so convincingly?

“My poor Gourmet,” his vassal’s dining habits had allowed him to take the nickname, “except me, do you think there would have been a single commander of the thirteen fleets who would have dared challenging me by destroying three fleets?”

No one answered the simple question, and so Sliscus accepted the cup filled with thorn-wine and three different doses of Commorragh toxins. The elegance and the tactics of his vassal Captains were awfully limited, but Khoryssa, Ehlynna, Kresthekia had an excellent knowledge of poisons, venoms, and paralytic elixirs. They had officially been included in his harem two nights ago, and he hoped their torrid nights and reasonable ambition would indulge him for half a hundred cycles. It was rare to negotiate the services of three sisters in the same specialty, and their membership in the Wych Cult of the Stilled Heart was providing a lot of extra-inspiration.

“You want to say something, Tshaelgu,” Sliscus gave back the empty cup to Khoryssa as the poison spread in his veins and pain and pleasure mingled in a new and satisfying combination. “Speak.”

“Your Excellency, why aren’t you moving against the Mon-keigh? With your talent and your fleet, you could crush them in one cycle! Show the feeble pirates of Pavia the true difference between their failures and your magnificence!”

Sliscus closed his eyes. When had the new generation become so narrow-minded and uninspired? By the tits of Lileath, where were the strategists and the dreamers? Where were the new promising captains?

“I could indeed intervene, like a hero of the old sagas sailing to the rescue of my poor subjects,” the Duke admitted while caressing the lips of Kresthekia. “But where would be the fun in that?”

“Your Excellency?”

Sliscus took a dagger and threw it negligently into the throat of a slave who had twitched and thus committed an unforgivable breach of protocol.

“In case your tiny minds haven’t been able to arrive to this conclusion, the Mon-keigh enemy commander must have observed this planet for several local solar cycles. And if this Mon-keigh strategist attacks now, he or she must think his chances of success are sufficiently high to inflict me a major defeat.”

“This Mon-keigh primate will learn the errors of his way soon enough, your Excellency. Bloodweaver and Moonblitz will bleed these ugly ships, but they may lack the strength to finish it...”

How terrible it was to be so narrow-minded and unable to grasp the magnificence of beautiful schemes.

“No.”

“Your Excellency?”

“No, Bloodweaver and Moonblitz are not going to win.” Sliscus, deep inside, was disgusted. It seemed Tshaelgu was even more limited in mind than his most pessimistic plans had allowed for. The Sky Serpents were really going to need a new treacherous second-in-command. The Gourmet was really lacking in everything.

“But...but your Excellency, they are Eldar and have two vast fleets...and the enemy has a lot of metallic Mon-keigh and not enough of their genetic-enhanced killers!”

Sliscus supposed this had been the same reasoning which had led the ancient Aeldari Emperor and his chief councillors to let the Cult of She-Who-Thirsts grow unchecked. The idiots must have wondered ‘after all, what’s the worst that could happen?’, and the Fall had been the result...

“You have seen the recordings of the surprise attack on the Kroot, and the utter destruction they visited on Blackdakka and Brakorth. In your opinion Gourmet, is it a strategy which allows your opponents to strike back and fight a conventional fleet against fleet action?”

“Forgive the impertinence of Tshaelgu, Lord Sliscus,” Ehlynna bowed before giving a new cup filled with a blood-coloured elixir. “He has not a mind for strategy and grand games like you do.”

“Exactly,” Sliscus answered, taking notice of the flash of hate in the eyes of his second. Someone’s utility was ending very soon. “Your opinion on the Mon-keigh tactics?”

“I think the invaders’ carriers have already launched during the second phase of the attack, and are right now staying silent in the debris field next to the corridor,” The Wych explained. “The enemy will let them advance until they believe they have neutralised the *Palace of Feasting*, and only then their fleet will close in while their pilots devastate them from the flanks and behind. Assailed from three direction, Bloodweaver is going to lose his mind and will likely try to teleport aboard the Mon-keigh flagship. Moonblitz will try to retreat and sacrifice the golden Mon-keigh auxiliaries for short-term gain.

Sliscus clapped his hands in genuine compliment. Maybe he should hire more Wyches as his vassals, given the superior mentor skills of the arena performers compared to the failures of the young generation.

“It is indeed what a good strategist would have thought. It is a good plan. But it has a flaw: it allows the Eldar commanders charging towards the invaders a chance to fight. No, I think our new enemy has a more...destructive tactic in mind.”

Sliscus has a totally unfair advantage of course, in that he had already visited the bridge of the *Incessant Agony* before beginning this conversation, and as such several of his most secret stations had already reported an unexplained appearance of the Mon-keigh innovation they called ‘Kane particles’ in their horrid language.

It had been a long time since Traevelliath Sliscus had seen them in action, but it was not something one forgot easily. And the best advice to counter this strategy was ‘by the nonexistent love of Khaine, get away from the saturated zone’. The world-flame warhead should have been ready to be fired the moment Qorok Trek had perished. There was never any hope to counter-attack. The fleets which were rushing to fight the invader were as good as dead, and then the starfighters and an attack from the flanks was going to finish the encirclement. The outer belt was lost.

If Lakadieth and Calico didn’t try to betray him the moment Bloodweaver got himself incinerated, Sliscus would be very surprised. And of course, there was Hoth, probably the least hidden Tzeentchian worshipped in the history of Pavia piracy.

Sliscus laughed. Yes, the ongoing battle was many things, but not annoying and boring. He could work with that.

“Activate all the Dark Mirrors in Klaineth Mode and tie them to the life-essences of the surviving fleet commanders. I want to see their plots, betrayals, and deaths.”

“Yes, your Excellency...Calico has not used his. We won’t be able to observe him.”

So one of these sickly adorable furry lesser beings had been smarter than three Eldar pirates. This was a new low for the Aeldari species.

“And then them a command by wyrd-messenger to all pirates in this system. Inform them we have plenty of unwanted visitors. It’s open hunting season for everyone! They will kill the intruders or I will flay their skins from their agonising bodies and use the material as new collection or robes!”

“The orders will be given, your Excellency.”

The Duke of Commorragh bared his teeth.

“Now withdraw our full fleet into the *Empire of Sin*’s shipyards and order Lox’ena and Hoth to protect the corridor of the inner belt with their fleets.”

He would have to prepare his grand entrance, of course. Whether they were aware of his presence in the system or not, the Mon-keigh invaders had dared raising their weapons in defiance against him, and that he couldn’t tolerate.

He could let them spread hopelessness and destruction into the outer system. But to let them seize a great victory without blood and despair in their hearts? No, that wouldn’t do at all.

“Oh, and I suppose we should send a messenger who has failed me to Pandaimon and our benefactor. It looks like we aren’t going to attack there after all.”

And Sliscus laughed again.