**Escalation 4.2**

**Salvation of the Past**

*To save the future, we must rediscover our past.*

*We have not the choice.*

*Too much of the technology humanity considered for granted has been lost during the Age of Strife. At the height of the Dark Age of Technology, mankind could and did terraform thousands of worlds, allowing human colonies to spread and prosper across the galaxy. Civilisations flourished. Billions raced to the stars as there was no known limit to human ingenuity and the power of the weapons developed by the Artificial Intelligences.*

*The greatest strength of humanity in this era was undoubtedly the holy Standard Template Construct, which was encapsulating the entirety of human technological knowledge. A complete, functioning STC system was able to provide the templates for all colonist demands, whether it was a bunker, a house or a hive, and to adapt the plans depending on the available materials. It was a guarantee Mankind would never lose the data and the processes which had allowed it to become the dominant race of the galaxy.*

*No one had anticipated how long the Age of Strife would last, alas. As millennia of darkness, xenos oppression and cataclysms isolated the colonies of Blessed Mars and Holy Terra, the STCs faded into obscurity, the sacred texts and the copies of the Dark Age being fought over a thousand times. The existence of the Holy Construct couldn’t be denied, but traces leading to a working example were rare and millennia-old forgotten.*

*Then the Omnissiah came and the Great Crusade began. In a mere two standard centuries, more first-generation print-outs and comprehensive templates were found than in the last millennia. It was a time of triumph for Mars, as Forge-Worlds were once again able to share their technological acquisitions and a new age of knowledge beckoned for the servants of the Machine-God and the Imperium of Mankind.*

*This age was brutally murdered by the Arch-Heretic and his heretical armies. In two decades, the Great Heresy and the Scouring destroyed more templates and knowledge than any Tech-Priest in his worst simulations would have believed possible.*

*The Omnissiah Himself remained on the Golden Throne, his knowledge and his technological blessings denied to us. War never ended against the mutants and the xenos, and innovation had proved on all points it could not be trusted to not fire on your positions when the sensors didn’t watch over.*

*The Quest for Knowledge, the Quest for the Holy STC, is now our only hope to regain what was cruelly taken from our flesh and our augmetics. From Mars to the Eastern Fringe, from the Veiled Region to the Halo Star, hundreds of fleets crewed by servants of the Omnissiah are searching fragments and clues leading to new databases.*

*My name is Desmerius Lankovar, Magos Explorator of Stygies VIII.*

*And on 7.618.289M35, by the Grace of the Omnissiah, I was blessed to be the witness of a Thrice Holy Standard Template Construct’s discovery*.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

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

**7.618.289M35**

Thought for the day: The Alien fails because it cannot embrace the Emperor.

**Magos Desmerius Lankovar**

The Magos Explorator was explaining to the last ork survivors of a failed displeasure his annoyance when one of his Skitarii transmitted him the binary message. A message he would remember until it was his turn to return his essence of the Motive Force to the Omnissiah.

“Magos. Protocol Extremis-Omega-Extremis-Omega is in effect.”

“Your attempt at mimicking the humour of flesh-beings doesn’t amuse me,” the Stygies VIII representative transmitted back while examining the corpse of the greenskins. The guardsmen had been right indeed, the specimen of this war zone were growing larger and larger.

“No, Magos, this is not a false-alert emission.” Skitarii were not supposed to show emotions but excitation was spreading in the fibres and the artificial nerves of his sub-commander. “There is really a Protocol Extremis-Omega-Extremis-Omega in effect. Tech-Priest Enginseer Arcturus Morkys is formal: Major Hebert has found a functional STC.”

“SHE HAS FOUND WHAT?” Hours later, Desmerius Lankovar would lambast himself for this monumental lapse of control, but at this moment he couldn’t possibly care. “CONFIRM!”

“Confirmation requested and accepted. Material evidence is at 99.99%.”

“By the Omnissiah...” A holy STC. Here. What were the empirical possibilities of...no, no it didn’t matter. If this was true, it was the greatest discovery of the 35th Millennium...no, it was the greatest discovery since the Omnissiah signed the Treaty of Olympus.

“Tell Colonel Mack to assume tactical command of the advance guard and continue to eliminate the ork patrols until my return.”

“Yes, Magos!”

Desmerius Lankovar proceeded to run to the rear of the army, as the noosphere became a joyous illumination of triumphant psalms and cants to the Machine-God. The few Tech-Priests and Skitarii who had been blessed to stand and watch the activation were already propagating the information and from what his sensors reported, the stream was spreading through the ranks.

“This is the very reason the Quest for Knowledge exists...what I am going to do, Mighty and Generous Omnissiah?” At best, the Adeptus Mechanicus was finding bribes of code and broken ashes of what may have been templates. Few intact copies were found; the times of the Great Crusade were long gone and during the 34th Millennium, there had only been eleven ‘major’ discoveries, all of them rediscoveries of templates already in the mechadendrites of the major Forge-Worlds. Even the simplest database would surpass these victories a billion times over.

Since he had the exact positions on every member of the Imperial Guard in the force, it did not take long for him to find the command Chimera he was looking for. Just as he had expected, a circle of his own Tech-Priests and servitors had surrounded the holy construct...and Lankovar felt what was left of his flesh heart burst with joy.

The magnificent information-fluid coalescing in a cascade of holo-projections and multi-layered templates left absolutely no doubt. The material, while also damaged, was also proof the device had been built by the ancients.

This was a time for devotion...yes, it was time to pray and celebrate. The Quest for Knowledge has achieved an unprecedented triumph. This was what every Tech-Priest dreamt when the moment to depart his Forge-World was announced. For a couple of minutes, he prayed with the other Tech-Priests, incanting the holy blessings to this ancient and venerated machine-spirit.

Unfortunately, new vox contacts with his Skitarii announcing other orks were killed forced him to shorten his devotion to the holy STC. Just for this, the greenskins would pay heavily.

Slowly, he approached the sacred device, before watching Enginseer Morkys, who was ritually buzzing the appropriate cants for this blessed technology from the Dark Age and Dragon Richter, who had seemingly managed to connect a standard power generator to reconstitute the STC field-battery.

“Tech-Priests...is this the holy device...” For the first time in centuries, the words failed him.

“It has been damaged, Magos,” declared the senior Mechanicus tech-Priest of the Fay 20th. “And many templates have their data missing or incomplete but...yes, it is definitely a STC.”

“PRAISE THE OMNISSIAH!” Lankovar canted on twelve frequencies and he was rapidly imitated by each and every one of the loyal servants of Mars. It was difficult to contain himself...but searching on dozens of planets, and in the end, it was found on an ork battle-moon at the very moment he was not searching sacred archeotech.

“The database is divided in to several templates and seem to have been classed according to a certain...theme of data,” Dragon Richter intervened. “The first security-files seem to confirm this STC was built on Mars in the year 492M23. It was commissioned for the colony of Terrathens under the name ‘Athena Archive’. Authorisations granted by the Terran Federation...the firm which received the contract was Olympus Citadel Systems.”

Lankovar could not say he had heard of ‘Citadel Systems’...but ‘Olympus’ could only meant one thing. This STC had been created in the loving embrace of Blessed Mars. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

“How many templates are intact in the holy STC?” He asked the insect-controller parahuman who had just returned a billion times, no a trillion of the investment he had given her these last days.

“It’s difficult to say...” Weaver said biting her lips in a frown. “We have just consulted the database in a rapid lecture, I can’t read your binaric and there are passwords I haven’t the slightest idea how to unlock...so far we have five intact and complete templates. The first is a sort of power armour, the second is a bolt pistol...the third is a lasgun different than ours...the fourth is a water distillation plant...and the fifth is an analyser of poisons and venoms. Is the information valuable enough?”

Five intact templates with the possibility of more? Lankovar had to remind herself the parahuman wasn’t born in this millennium...she didn’t know how many Archmagos and Fabricators would sell their primary Forges to have access to this holy database...

“Let me provide a well-known example, Major.” For the immense service she had just given to the Adeptus Mechanicus, there was no reason to minimise this discovery. “Three hundred years ago, an Imperial Crusade recovered a partial template of a transport vehicle on the world of Karal II. The data was extremely fragmented according to all noosphere reports, and I don’t think Mars to this day has managed to produce a single exemplary of this vehicle. But it was part of a holy STC print-out, and all the soldiers involved in this discovery were at least promoted two ranks, given preferential colonisation privileges to several Civilised Worlds and the guardsmen directly involved were made Planetary Governors. For five complete templates and a working STC, the Adeptus Mechanicus will be happy to give you everything you want...save an audience with the Omnissiah and a seat at the Senatorum Imperialis. Everything else is negotiable.

Enginseer Morkys, you will explain in detail to the Major the sacred importance of the STC as soon as your cants have satisfied the machine-spirit.”

“Yes, Magos,” the Tech-Priest answered.

“This is the greatest discovery of the Adeptus Mechanicus this millennium. It is certain the Temple of All Knowledge will order the cants of victory and praise to the Machine-God to be sung twelve times per hour for a whole eyar when they will learn of this discovery.”

The sheer potential of this discovery was sufficient to give him fear and exaltation in equal measure...

“Logically, we all must ensure the holy STC suffers no more damage than it has already taken and every action allowing this blessed construct to escape this attack moon safely will be rewarded by the highest servants of the Omnissiah and the Emperor.”

“With all due respect, Magos, it is not going to be easy. I doubt the orks are not going to let us go like that. And if the eldar warriors are as inimical as the ones at Andes were, they will do everything in their power to kill us and destroy the STC.”

Desmerius Lankovar eyes fell on the holy Standard Template Construct. It was so small, for such a precious archeotech. It was smaller than an artillery shell, and yet the flow of data, the holographic projections, they shining with such potent knowledge that it was a holy revelation...truly the accomplishment of his Quest was a marvel beyond mechanic comprehension.

“This is why we are going to kill them all, Major. Failure is not an option today, and if the xenos want to destroy the STC, the Mechanicus will wipe them out for this sacrilege...”

There was no debate, no other possible outcome. The STC had to be taken into a secure place and the templates analysed...the Fabricator-General in person would murder him if it came to be know the Holy STC had been discovered and he had allowed to fall into enemy hands.

The major drawback, as far as he saw, was that he could not contact Wismer and ask for reinforcements from nearby Forge-Worlds...these messages were too often intercepted and he could not, would not, risk attracting the attention of the enemies of the Omnissiah on the sacred device.

“We resume the advance...” Lankovar transmitted. “Skitarii of Sixth Platoon, protect the Holy STC with your lives. Praise the Omnissiah and the Cog!”

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*The governance of a Craftworld is dominated by the Farseers or whatever titles the long-ears trying to unravel the threads of the future choose to call themselves. From a human point of view, this might seem ridiculous. Imagine any high-ranked administrator, General, Admiral, Governor or influential official unable to make any significant decision if he has not consulted for several hours the imprial tarot.*

*Of course, Farseers are far better trying to predict the future than any human psyker. And much as it is painful to admit, their success in preventing what’s left of their civilisation to die against the myriad of threats wanting to eradicate them once for all justifies the authority they are granted.*

*All of this is true. But it is impossible to forget the future is this: the future. It is, by its very definition, out of reach for the moment...and no mind, eldar or human, is strong enough to navigate the treacherous currents of the Warp and take into account the tens of billions possibilities birthed every second. Quite often, the experienced Farseers managed to win something they will be praised profusely by their kin once they go back to their Craftworld, no matter that the minor details they often have missed will provoke major cataclysms which will force them to return and meddle again when their assistance is unwanted and undesired.*

*But there are those times where for one reason or another, something has been obscured from their view and the threads of the future they manipulated are not the ones they must play with.*

*On these rare occasions, the Farseers are seeing the future like a psyker tries to manipulate a set of burning cards while under the fire of a thousand lasguns.*

*I think the outcome of these attempts can be best summed-up as...’poorly’.*

Extract from *Memories of the Fay 20th and the 35th Millennium* by Wei Cao

**Autarch-Mariner Gladiel Imrik**

Gladiel Imrik had not accepted his current assignment without a great deal of hesitation. By simple seniority in the Asuryani Biel-Tan fleet, he was entitled a prestigious command for wars of vital importance to his beloved Craftworld, and a revenge operation – because under the flowery words, a Twilight Spear was exactly that once you disregarded the appearances – did not seem to him it was a high priority.

There were war fronts where their under-strength forces required more Aspect Warriors, great warships and experienced crews to make the rebirth of the old Empire a reality. This punishing expeditionary force was not going to give them additional resources in the form of a long-lost Exodite colony. It was not going to give his Craftworld new warships or the vast and magnificent shipyards the Asuryani so desperately needed since all the major Webway ports were under Drukhari’s ownership.

Thus, yes, he had reservations. It had only been the knowledge of the High Seventeen was to take overall command and that a Sword of Vaul could possibly be recovered which had convinced him to give his approval.

Nevertheless, his reluctance had not dissipated, far from it. The world they were supposed to find their targets and their prize had not a Webway Gate; or to be more accurate it had not a Gate he and his warships could use. The entrance had been sealed long ago, possibly before the ancients Aeldari rose to rule the galaxy as was their race’s right, and given the impressive number of warnings on the seals, no one on Biel-Tan had thought the benefits were worth the risk to wake up the legions of abominations sleeping behind the door.

But this, in turn, implied they had to use a little-known method the Mariners liked to call the ‘Flash-Jump’: their warships were projected out of the Webway Gate like they had been ejected out of a whirlpool. It allowed them to reach stellar systems which would have been unreachable before dozens of cycles otherwise. The obvious advantage was as a result that Biel-Tan could deploy ships and troops well before any lesser race on a battlefield. The problem was that it was a one-way jump: the Asuryani arrived at an incredible speed but this fast FTL acceleration was not to last and then there was the return journey to envision. If they met something they couldn’t handle in the system the ancients had called the ‘Bastion of Horrors’ thousands of cycles ago, the Asuryani ships would have no choice but to escape and pray the speed of their engines was sufficient for this inglorious withdrawal.

Given how scarce their information was about their targets and whatever could be waiting for them in the darkness, this had not filled him with a massive amount of confidence. Still, they had many Seers and Farseers, led by a High Farseer. If there was anything dangerous for them, they would be able to disengage well before the threat materialised. And for all the Twilight Spear was a formation unworthy of his superiority, it was still a potent force.

His flagship for this punitive expedition was the battleship *Spear of Asuryan*, with three cruisers, the *Blue Star*, the *Battle-Seeker*, and the *Flower of Victory*, to form the core of his small fleet. They were six light cruisers, four frigates and five destroyers acting as his screen. He had over two thousand Mariners and High Farseer Aessen Manorith had assembled a boarding force of some eight hundred Asuryani Aspect Warriors.

This assurance lasted until the moment their acceleration-boost stopped and they were close to their target system. The displays showing a large blue star shine in the distance were just updating when two Seers began to scream and twist their ears like they were hearing something horrible the Mariners couldn’t listen to. The High Farseer nearly collapsed and had to use his sceptre-focus to not fall on the polished floor of his bridge.

The exclamations were not the most reassuring sentences he had ever heard.

“The future...green...I hear roars...”

“Beasts, too much beasts...flee...”

“Make these roars stop! Make these roars stop!”

The *Spear of Asuryan* shuddered and then went off course like it had been hit by something heavy. For several heartbeats, both Autarch-Mariner and the ones who followed him on the same Path were everywhere, singing to the wraithbone hull in order to increase its protective capacities, dancing on hundreds of stations and activating measures they had never thought they would have to.

Finally after long moments which were as strenuous as they were nerve-wracking, calm came back on the bridge and the Asuryani of the Path of the Seer retained their composure...except a youngling, who looked he had preferred using his personal weapon to cut his throat rather than to face whatever the visions had shown him.

There was no time to ask what the High Farseer had seen. The space around the warships was projected with a finesse any lesser race would have sold their souls for, but the view from the bridge was already making every the Asuryani present shiver with horror.

A moon. A moon was in front of them.

By itself, the phenomenon should have been impossible, they were too far from the star of this system to meet a planet or any celestial body of this mass.

But as the frequencies were listened to and the multiple explosions proved, this moon was not natural. It had been built and engineered for a single purpose.

War.

Gladiel Imrik had never seen one with his own eyes, but he knew what it was. The very symbol of ultimate brutality the green vermin could build if they were given a huge commander and the time to assimilate thousands of planets.

The Aeldari had given these abominations a fitting name: Those-Who-Seek-To-End-The-Planets.

His warships stood absolutely no chance against this, High Farseer or not, experienced Mariners or not.

“Change our course!” He ordered with for the first time in hundred of cycles fear in his voice. “Change our course on Talh-Ur-Ist! Fast before we enter the moon’s weapon range! Full power to our engines! Sing harder to prepare the wraithbone for the strain!”

More desperate commands fused but the Autarch-Mariner saw it was of no use. The warships, his warships, were managing some alterations but implacably, they were attracted to the odious, the roaring moon waiting for them in the distance.

It was all in vain, and after a couple of heartbeats hesitating on the course to choose, he ordered his crew to stand down and return to the normal duties before returning the power to the holo-fields and the other sections which had been deprived of energy.

“High Farseer, I hope you have a good explanation for this,” His voice was not in the slightest respectful and the Asuryani aboard the Spear of Asuryan didn’t look concerned at all by his total absence of the usual courtesy protocols.

He didn’t obtain an answer and for the next micro-cycles he was far too busy transmitting orders to worry about this lack of answer. His fleet had to be reorganised, the cruisers detaching themselves from his battleship’s sides to avoid presenting a single mass to the already-oncoming tide of missiles.

“Damn the Mon-keigh,” snarled one of his Mariners on his left as panels and displays desperately tried to present to their masters the storms of lethal projectiles coming their way. “They have excited the brutes and now we have completely lost the effect of surprise!”

“We have other more pressing problems,” another Mariner said calmly while ordering the sensors to focus on one large section of the moon which was seemingly vomiting debris. “The orks are launching their own parasite-cruisers. Number estimated...over forty and climbing.”

The commander of the Biel-Tan squadron was glad he had his Mariner mask on, otherwise he would have been unable to control his emotions.

“Prepare our fighters for a blade-emergency launch,” he commanded once he was sure he was not going to scream in a panic his instructions. “Improve your targeting solutions and prepare for a Scorpion fire-plan. Focus on the bigger ships, those are always the most dangerous of the lot. Once the torpedoes and the fighters are ready, give the Pulsar Lances the energy they need to transform the survivors in green paste. And prepare me a new course which will take this fleet away from their effective fire-range. We can’t escape this trap, but we can and we will avoid staying in this murder-zone.”

“Belay that order,” the voice of High Farseer Manorith, silenced for the last micro-cycles, “we need to recover the Sword of Vaul and exterminate all the Mon-keigh on this brute-moon. They represent a major danger to our species’ future.”

“High Farseer, how kind of you to join us back,” Imrik couldn’t keep his bad humour out of his salutation. “You may have not noticed, but we are about to fight a fleet of the green brutes and we are somewhat under-gunned. In addition, the tactical situation has become slightly unfavourable for our starships.”

Had the situation not been so dire, a smirk would have been on his lips. As it was, the expression he sent to the High Farseer and the other Seers on his bridge was a glare.

“My warships can’t escape, but the gravity-beams activated by this moon have their limits and the output of our superior reactors allows us to maintain a good distance between us and the death-moon. I will use the flexibility granted by our speed and our advantage in long-range fighting to slaughter all the vermin sent by these parasites. I will not send my valuable warships in this!”

“And you wondered why you were not granted a major fleet command?” a Farseer scoffed in the background. “This lack of audacity is really...”

“I will not accept the critics from you, Farseer. You have a duty and it is to thread the paths of the future to protect our forces. How could you fail to see something that huge to register in your visions?”

By Khaine and Vaul, he had rumours it was not pretty sometimes when Farseers were failing in their duties, but this was ridiculous!

Obviously, High Farseer Aessen Manorith was not pleased by his comment...too bad for him. The Autarch-Mariner wasn’t at all cowed by the stern eyes and the sparkles of energy dancing from head to foot on the representative of the Council.

“The Primordial Annihilator has shrouded this section of space in darkness and the threads of the future are in disarray in this region. The beasts and their unnatural moon were hidden from our view. It is this backlash from the piercing of the veil we suffered. The future is at our fingertips to command once more.”

“You will excuse me Farseer, if I don’t take you at your word...” for the first time, he really thought the opponents of the Farseers like one or two thousand cycles-old Autarch had a point about preparing correctly the battlefield without psychic assistance.

“If the Sword of Vaul is not recovered, these unworthy beasts will use it against the Asuryani and destroy Craftworlds. Is this what you want? Besides, they have just made a major discovery which will help their Corpse-Empire to rise in strength again.” With their masks, it was impossible to say if the Farseers were gritting their teeth. What a pity. “We must engage and prevent these threads before it is too late. The Mon-keigh soldiers are few in numbers on this moon, tired and isolated. If we strike boldly and in a precise manner, victory will be ours.”

By the tears of Isha, they were serious in this madness...and the worst part was that the natural subservience to Farseers was reasserting itself on one third of his Mariners.

“Will you obey your orders, Autarch-Mariner, or must I demand Autarch Mariderik on the *Blue Star* to relieve you from your command?”

“I will obey, High Farseer,” Gladiel Imrik snarled. “We will obey your plan. Go recover your Sword of Vaul, we will accelerate swiftly to allow you to teleport you on this moon...”

“Good, I’m pleased you can listen to reason...”

“I was not finished, High Farseer,” the Asuryani naval commander cut him with some amount of pleasure. “Watch your threads of the future carefully. Watch how many of my Mariners and your Aspect Warriors are going to die and be devoured by She-Who-Thirsts. And when you bring back the venerated blade to the Craftworld, explain to our families our souls were worth it...”

He turned around to give the commands to the rest of the high-Mariners.

“Accelerate and bring us in position. Time to kill the pale and the green Mon-keigh.”

The Asuryani warships charged towards the murder-moon. The torpedoes were launched and the fighters began to deliver death on the enemy warships.

“Autarch! Massive energy distortion on the northern quadrant!”

At the same moment the High Farseer began to shout.

“Take evasion course, Autarch-Mariner!”

Gladiel obeyed by reflex and instantly wished he hadn’t.

A death ray the size of a comet was fired from the moon, burning the equivalent of a massive city and vaporising everything in its path, including several of the brutes’ warships.

And then it stopped. But the damage had been done. This had been a shot while they were outside their enemies’ range...no danger for his battleship. The real problems were the millions of small dots now on his warships’ path, the little devices the cannon had dispersed all over space.

“Space mines! Space mines! Change course and divert your acceleration to...”

For what felt like the hundredth time, new desperate orders were given but this time it was well truly too late. With the acceleration they had pushed their warships with, the Asuryani warships had not the micro-cycles to find the holes in this barrage of death...they could only try to protect the vulnerable sections of their warships.

It was a disaster.

Asuryani warships were works of art, the elegance and the grace combined in a single form with an arsenal ten times more powerful than any non-descendant race of the Old Eldar Empire could forge on their own. But for their protection, they relied on holo-fields, partial hull regeneration, surprise attacks and incredible stealth. They could go against the brutish battleships of the Mon-keigh, but this was not their purpose.

And just like that, the green aliens had neutralised their technological superiority. The space around them became a cauldron of missiles, nuclear explosions, lasers and exotic weaponry the brainless race had scavenged on its millions of victims.

The frigates and destroyers were the first to go. Their armament was insufficient to blast the space mines so fast and they were nimble and armour-less hulls. Their holo-field projected between three and ten fake ships, but what use it could possibly do when the belligerent vermin sent over two hundred missiles at each target?

The light cruisers died too. Praise Khaine and Vaul, the few micro-cycles they were granted before becoming small stars meant their crew had the time to teleport to the cruisers...where they were soon busy helping the other Mariners fighting for survival.

This was a battle where the exquisite tactical moves were of no use. The enemy brutes were only using raw violence and unthinking anvils of destruction...and it was working.

Of the naval assets sent for the Spear of Twilight, the screen had been wiped out in this storm of death and sheer devastation. Technically a light cruiser was in a state which might qualify as a hulk...if one didn’t look too closely. And his heaviest warships weren’t intact. The *Flower of Victory* had several life-compartments opened to the void, and though his Mariners did their very best, he knew the cruiser was going to need cycles of reparations. The *Blue Star* had emerged more or less intact, but the *Battle-Seeker* was now slowing down, the stern of the starship having taken major damage.

“High Farseer Manorith and the Aspect Warriors have teleported on the vermin-moon,” the announcement made him turn around...in the midst of this disaster, he had not even remarked they were gone.

“Let’s pray they will not take too long...” Gladiel Imrik, Autarch-Mariner of Biel-Tan, gripped the holo-projection before him as his battleship shook under the close-miss of several nuclear shockwaves. “Our ships won’t survive long in this hellish war zone...”

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“*Scrap da Swarm Bringa, boyz. Dis wun iz nub weak loike da uvver uumies*.” Words attributed to Gruzzkull Mag Uruk Starsmasha, 289M35.

**Major Taylor Hebert**

The Basilisks were executing a flawless bombardment on the greenskin horde. The xenos were screaming war-cries and were throwing themselves into the melee against a torrent of insects. The Guard was pulverising them under the fire of a thousand lasguns.

It was an hour like any other on the *Death Star*.

“So,” Taylor asked Dragon. “Assuming we get alive out of this battle-moon, will we be extremely rich or insanely rich?”

“I think the proper term would be ‘galactic-insanely rich’,” replied Dragon as her two armoured flyers executed a new coordinated attack which wiped out from the sky dozens of the thing-helicopters the orks had tried to surprise them with.

“Oh, good,” two hundred bees were sent in a flank attack which rapidly made the entire ork ‘formation’ collapse into complete chaos. “I was worried about getting a few more medals and shaking a lot of hands next month.”

It seemed rather...weird...for the Mechanicus to be so crazy about ‘their’ Standard Template Construct, as Morkys had explained it, but Dragon had explored the sort of pseudo-Internet and confirmed the religious fervour which had more or less contaminated the entire contingent of red robes in less than a minute. Even right now, with the STC put inside her command Chimera in a heavily-armoured box, there were constantly two or three Tech-Priests praying near it.

Obviously, there was still a lot of data inside this unassuming container. Nobody had the specialised material on-site to download, copy or fully analyse what they had found, but the pessimistic estimation was that there was a small library inside this...assuming by ‘small’, you meant ‘continent-sized library with the height of a skyscraper’.

Yeah, ten thousand years ago humanity had become really, really good at storing information and providing nice tech to its citizens. Millennia ago, it had not been an autocratic Empire ruling humanity. Of course, without further information, they had no idea what the ‘Terran Federation’ had really stood for...

“I suppose the Adeptus Mechanicus must have procedures in place for this kind of discovery,” the parahuman girl said as a second ork wave crashed into her centipedes and the massacre of greenskins continued apace, as more of her insects fed and multiplied. Priority was to eliminate their sorcerer-psykers. She really didn’t like how their green sparkles multiplied and made the average ork angrier and more bloodthirsty.

“They have...sort of,” Dragon grimaced. “Terra and Mars signed an important treaty in M30 before everything went to hell...the Treaty of Olympus, they called it. But I don’t know the exact terms. Neither does Lankovar for that matter. It is a world above his pay grade and the original documents are in the Solar System. As far as it is implied, Article 12 of this accord makes clear the Forge-World of Mars must be given the STC for safekeeping and exposition in their Temple of All Knowledge, but the subject of rewards and everything is nebulous at best.”

“Negligent of them,” the psyker ork imploded after receiving a stinger in the head, vaporising the three bees and half a hundred greenskins in a new explosion. The horde finally had enough of being smacked around and tried to withdraw...only to meet a new wave of centipedes waiting for their sustenance. “If they don’t give their Explorers fleets the correct terms of the agreement, there must be tons of mistakes made.”

“Not really,” countered Dragon. “Taylor, the STC you just found is really unique. It has been over four thousand years since this treaty was signed, and it is the first authentic piece of Standard Template Construct the Mechanicus and the Imperium has found. From what I gathered in their data-files, certain Magos and Archmagos find from time to time print-outs and fragmentary templates of the time before the Age of Strife, but in their great majority this archeotech is damaged.”

Dragon whispered something inaudible as her two flyer-dragons roared and carbonised the orks trying to escape her ambush.

“I suspect, even if they were never going to admit of course, that the STC and their Quest for Knowledge was moving towards a dead end. They found a lot of partial schematics and valuable template-copies during the Great Crusade, but they lost much of their knowledge decades after, and the number of great discoveries fell considerably after that. Now they have to explore the regions the Imperium didn’t explore and while the galaxy is vast, they hadn’t much success...until today.”

“So instead of a ‘Gold Rush’, we are likely going to see a ‘STC Rush’ in the next years?”

“I would like to say ‘probably’, but it’s almost certain, by this point,” Dragon spoke with a humourless smile. “If the Tech-Priests of Magos Lankovar are any indication, this Sector will soon be the gathering point of thousands high-ranking Mechanicus leaders. And wait until they know this archive was one of a complete set...”

Weaver did her best not to raise her eyes towards the grey fumes covering the sky. She failed.

“You are certain?”

“Well,” answered Dragon after a short moment of hesitation. “I won’t pretend I have a degree in Greek Mythology, but between the ‘Olympus Citadel Systems’, the ‘Athena Archive’ and the general themes of the images we were able to see before storing the STC, I would say the odds are good we found a library-template-storage-base with knowledge related to what the Patron Goddess of Athens stood for: wisdom, war, and strategy among many things. Since it is extremely unlikely a future colony on an inhospitable planet can prosper with just that, they would have made other sets with similar-built STCs but with a different content inside. A Template ‘Demeter’ would have been more than necessary for the development of agriculture and food production. It’s only a supposition, I know...”

“But it would be logical,” Weaver agreed as the progression resumed and her staff efficiently began the familial rotation of new las-cells and exhausted old laser batteries. “Ares for the very destructive stuff they don’t want anyone save the military personnel to have access, Poseidon for anything involving the sea and the oceans, Hermes for the communications, the trade centres and the like...”

If they found enough evidence to validate this theory, the Mechanicus cogboys were going to become crazy. Okay, crazier and even more devoted to prayers than they already were...

“True,” conceded the greatest Tinker of Earth Bet. “It is not how I would have chosen to classify a highly-valuable technology base for sure, but I’m sure there have been more extravagant methods chosen in known history.”

Her tone seemed offended they had chosen this one, but different millennium, different rules it seemed. The Imperium of today was enjoying the Gothic cathedrals far too much for some reason which both escaped them, for example.

“Going back to the main subject...assuming we get out of this horrible place of wonders and xenos, what do you think there will be to extract from the STC?”

“A lot?” proposed Dragon. “While I realise calling it each part of this STC a ‘template’ is somewhat underwhelming, in practise it is far more impressive. Take the power armour. There is the holographic image, the entire technical specifications, the minimal and maximal performance, thousands of schematics, the materials required to build high and lower-grade versions of the equipment, the explications how to build the factory, the source-code, and the secrets to forge the alloys. Any Tinker worth the name could build this armour with his eyes closed...the people who imagined the STC definitely lowered the prerequisites to use their creation. If each of the templates has the same explications included, there will be enough information-data to study for the next century. At least.”

Taylor drank half of the water she had on hand during these explanations, noticing the Skitarii around her Chimera were trying very hard – and failing – to pretend they were not listening to this conversation.

“As for what we will be able to access from the template themselves, as I said before, we will need a lot of specialised equipment to copy and analyse, not to mention a lot of...I think, the Mechanicus call them Artisan-Cybersmiths?” Dragon continued while shaking her head. “I can confirm with absolute certainty five templates are completely intact and between ten and twenty incomplete should be accessible the moment we find the passwords to unlock the data-files. The rest will depend on the skill of the Mechanicus specialists and the experience they have reconstituting damaged archeotech.

It is not much, not when the entire database might have close to a thousand of templates when it was created, but it still is immensely better than anyone had achieved until now.”

“I will be sure to think of it when I buy you a planet or two...”

And then her insects gave her a first glance of the starship searched. She stood on top of her Chimera and passed command to across the column to turn right. A couple of minutes later and they saw it in the middle of one of the biggest mountain of scrap and metal they had seen on the battle-moon.

Taylor had seen many starships since her arrival in the Nyx Sector. Most were ugly. The Mechanicus was leading the pack, with their bulky and functional-above-all-else designs. The rest was not far behind. Many ships of the Imperial Navy were experiencing Gothic architecture. The majority of the merchant ships were big, bulky and not pretty to look at. That the warships were bristling with weapons, that one no one could dispute, but the standards of beauty of the starships had not been to her taste.

The section of the warship they were able to contemplate wasn’t like that. It was spear-like in design, and even half-hidden under the debris and a total lack of experience in space warfare, she could notice the aggressive shape of the hull. The starship had been a predator when it roamed across the stars. The colours which had survived the crash-landing on the moon were weird, however. It looked like the Astartes had decided to imitate the colours of the Teutonic Knights, if the black cross on white was any indication.

It was also a freaking huge warship. The parahuman of Earth bet had correctly assumed a battlecruiser was bigger than a cruiser like the *Magos Laurentis* but...damn it was big. Even with her insects, Weaver was not able to see the ship’s stern so it was more than...four kilometres long.

“Colonels and Majors, give the following order to your companies: they must withdraw a kilometre away,” ordered on the vox Lankovar.

“Magos, there are already orks on our trail, we can’t...” objected Colonel Ricardo.

“The warship in front of you has purged itself of the ork infestation with a combination of the life-eater virus and several other Exterminatus-grade weapons. The sensors are formal and logical. The potency of the weapon has diminished much for its activation was more than a millennium ago. It is diminished, but not insignificant for troops without adequate protections. My Skitarii and certain of my Tech-Priests can survive in this kind of environment. The Guard can’t, and the rare suits adaptable for use are aboard my flagship. Now withdraw, you are still in the safe zone. Let me search this starship for the weapons he need.”

“Hurry, Magos,” she communicated on the command frequency. “We are already seeing thousands of orks concentrate for the next assault and I don’t know how long we can delay them...”

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

There were men which talked of ‘fighting to the last shot and the last man’ before surrendering or fleeing in the first seconds of the battle.

The Black Templars had not boasted it; they had done it. As he ran in the corridors of the hulk which had once been called *Praetor*, Gavreel gave a silent praise to the Astartes who had defended the warship.

They had failed, yes. But not for lack of will. Every auxiliary centre, every corridor, every room had been the site of violent and merciless fights, both at close and long range. The descendants of the Imperial Fists, the sons of Rogal Dorn, had made the orks pay in blood for every feet of advance. Despite the activation of the life-eater virus, the ground was covered in bones.

Ork bones.

Plasma conduits had been broken in half. Compartments had been vaporised. Priceless equipment dating from the Great Crusade had been detonated in conventional and unconventional methods. Assuredly, it was not good at all for the goals of the expeditionary fleet he was part of. So far, the only thing almost recoverable the Skitarii were transporting outside were the bolters, the blades and the heavily damaged battle-armours of the fallen Astartes.

There were no Exterminatus weapons to be found in the hull. Either the orks had stolen the last of them, or, and it was far more likely in his mind, the sons of Dorn had fired them their entire arsenal before their final last-stand, trying to send the orks in death with them.

The Eclipse-class battlecruiser *Praetor* would never move again. As a Dark Angel, Gavreel had heard there were cases when the Mechanicus authorised the towing of a particularly important Legion warship for complete repairs. But he had never seen a warship show so much devastation and battle-scars. It looked like everything which could be used for battle on this warship had been one way or another. There were at least nine massive holes in the hull on the section they had used to enter the doomed Imperial warship. Everywhere inside and outside there were battle-scars. The engines from an air view looked like they had been smashed by the fist of an angry Titan.

No, he feared there was not a lot to salvage on the *Praetor*. The weapons and the damaged battle-armours were of course extremely valuable, if only because the Black Templars Chapter would be thankful for the recovery, but for anything else, the mountains of scrap waiting outside were far more likely to release impressive discoveries...after all once you had discovered an STC, what else could you find in the ork loot?

Choosing to maintain his concentrating and not speculate on what it would mean personally for his oaths, Gavreel was forced to slow down and take another corridor as he found his progression barred by what looked like a turret. How in the name of dead Caliban this engine of destruction had managed to arrive in the entrails of the warship from its dorsal location was sure to be an interesting story...one he would never know, due to the lack of witnesses.

And at regular intervals, the Skitarii reports were communicated, proving he was not the only one to meet disappointment after disappoint.

“This is Beta-4-Mu. We have reached the secondary bridge. One battle-armour, one bolter in a salvageable condition. Praise the Omnissiah, we move on.”

“This is Eta-Saturn-9. The control for the void shields has been destroyed beyond redemption. Machine-spirits will be mourned. For the Machine-God we move on.”

“This is Sergeant Gavreel Forcas. I’m moving on towards the Apothecarium. No orks encountered.”

Not that it was surprising. Greenskins lived for battle. This ship was a cemetery before their arrival, and one mildly toxic at that. Everything transported out of this hull had to be decontaminated and treated with several powerful chemical agents.

This was the final point on his check-list. If there were no weapons for them to use against the orks, everything aboard the Praetor was by definition of very limited value compared to their survival, and their lives had suddenly multiplied by a hundred their value after the discovery of the STC.

The next advance was difficult. This section and the compartments had been even more fought than the rest, as often the ceiling or the ground had collapsed, creating such difficult gaps there was no point for him trying to get through.

All in vain, because the moment he saw the Apothecarium, he saw there wasn’t anything to recover. The Black Templars had opposed a valiant resistance, but it had not been enough. Two crippled Terminator Astartes were sleeping for all eternity and a dead Apothecary was leaning against the wall, the dark traces proving they had sold every drop of their blood before the orks submerged them.

The delay had not stopped the orks and they had broken through the doors of the Apothecarium, probably mere minutes after the last of the defender. And since medical equipment was completely useless for them, they had ransacked the place before moving elsewhere. For plenty of xenos and human factions, the content of an Apothecarium were worth a little fortune...not for orks, though. The greenskins tolerance for pain was sufficiently pain and their sheer idiocy was probably enough to carry them in every battle.

“This is Sergeant Forcas. I’ve found the Apothecarium. There are two Terminator armours, one Apothecary suit and three bolters to recover near the breached doors. The Apothecarium is completely unsalvageable. Send a Skitarii team on my coordinates for the salvage operation.”

“Acknowledged, Sergeant.”

“I’m returning to the battlefront,” he sent this message to the Magos. “You should tell the Skitarii to do the same once they’ve localised the last recoverable Astartes armours, Magos Lankovar.”

There was no point searching for this destroyed starship when outside the forces of the Guard fought waves after waves of orks. It looked like their hope was going to be redirected on the arrival of Imperial reinforcements to get out of this war zone. And if they didn’t arrive soon enough, the *Magos Laurentis*, the *Courageous Traveller*, and the rest of the starships would have to take the risk of taking off without any support.

It was too bad that they wouldn’t be able to preserve much of the sacrifice of the Black Templars, but sadly their duty for the present was to the living, not the dead.

The living, not the dead...wait a minute...

Seized by an inspiration, he turned around and raced back to the corridor just as the Skitarii arrived.

“Sergeant,” blurted the lead Skitarii, “please do not move in such offensive and unplanned movements.”

“My apologies,” Gavreel answered before slowly pushing the Apothecary aside. For a moment, he thought he had been wrong...but no, once he removed the greater part of the dried blood, there was indeed a secret alcove dissimulated behind this wall. One good pressure of his fists, and a secret vault of durasteel was revealed to his transhuman eyes.

If everything had been working optimally, the lights would have been lighted with a reassuring green colour. This was not the case here. After centuries of oblivion, there were red lights of alert everywhere. Gavreel pressed a basic Astartes recognition code and let an armoured finger on the panel. The unlocking was slow, but after a few seconds, Gavreel heard the rumble of machinery long-inactive returning to life.

“Prepare a stasis-field,” he ordered as the vault unlocked, though it appeared the precaution had been superfluous. The vault was not filled with cryogenic equipment like every Apothecarium was. But the archeotech contained in it was.

While it had been a while he had never seen one – yes, he had tried to spend the minimum of time next to the Apothecaries – putting a name on it did not take more than a few seconds.

Portable cryogenic chamber Mark IV Pattern Luna. The favourite tool of the Apothecaries to harvest gene-seed on the battlefield when the casualties of a normal Great Crusade offensive began to be counted in the hundreds.

A rapid examination of the Apothecary made him sigh in relief. The energy levels were still good for a few years, which would be largely sufficient to find a recharge somewhere. Thank Terra the technology used to protect the genetic inheritance of the Legions had been built with the highest quality possible. He could not see how many Astartes gene-seed was inside, but it was really to bet on a large number: the container was heavy to move.

“Transmit to the Magos I’ve found the gene-seed stock of the Black Templars” the former Dark Angels told the Skitarii. “I’m resuming my mission of protection of Major Taylor Hebert now that the hulk of the Praetor has been explored to my satisfaction...”

It was the moment there was a heavy shrieking reverberating on all frequencies and suddenly the solid walls began to shake and tremble.

“By the Machine-God, what was that?”

“Out of the ship! NOW!”

**Colonel Daviev Larkine**

Without the warning of his second-in-command, they would have all died in the first seconds.

“The eldar are preparing an aerial attack at fifteen hours! Take cover!”

Before the warning was over hundreds of bees were taking the air, a massive swarm no one wanted to face in his right mind.

Dozens of missiles surged in and massacred insects and men. There was no time to give orders, no seconds left to adapt their defensive measures. The jetbikes of the eldar barrelled in and the Guard had just the seconds to fire a devastating volley and the batteries to deliver their first barrage before the xenos struck.

Larkine had read the reports from Andes and interrogated many of the survivors. He had thought he knew how fast the eldar had been...he had been deadly wrong. At Andes, there’s been some distance between the swamps and the Guard spaceport. There was nothing like that here. The eldar force had arrived at a terrifying speed and they didn’t pause.

Of course, the Guard still had the time to fire a single volley and the bees and the centipede charged to give time to the soldiers.

It was a dance of raw violence and hundreds of eldar were ejected from their machines as thousands of insects rammed their flyers or seized the xenos pilots in their maws...but there were too many and too fast.

“CHAINSWORDS! PREPARE FOR FIGHT AT CLOSE RANGE!”

“FIX BAYONETS! FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

“FIX BAYONETS AND CHARGE!”

Daviev had rarely felt more pride for his men and his women in that moment. Countless hours of training and their fights at Fay, Wuhan, Andes, and on this moon had forced the Fay guardsmen on a brutal process of survival and new tactics. They were all veterans now...and no one flinched as the xenos assaulted their lines.

For a second or two, Larkine believed the frontline was going to resist, that his men were going to resist. The Chimera and the Basilisk began to fire and inflict a heavy punishment, and for all the speed and strength of the eldar, it was close they weren’t enough of them. They were far more at Andes, more than five hundred to be sure...but this time they were facing the entirety of four regiments and all those men had been fighting orks for the better part of two days. For every three or four humans falling, one eldar was killed and in the back the insects were reorganising, preventing their flying tanks and their snipers to provide support.

“Advance! Section by section use your melta-guns and flamethrowers! We will prevail! We will...”

An explosion of green shrieked and exploded a few hundred metres away from their most advanced positions. It hurt, despite the earmuffs, the helmet and the various protections. For several seconds, he thought this had been one of the xenos sorcerers who had made a mistake...until he saw them.

For a second, Larkine froze. But training and the sheer will to survive came back in a heartbeat.

“MASS ORK TELEPORTATION! MASS ORK TELEPORTATION! ARTILLERY FIRE! FIRE! FIRE BEFORE WE ARE OVERWHELMED!”

This time the orks had corrected their early flawed assaults. Where before they had sent forces on little groups – which Larkine and the rest of the officers had believed it was within the means of a looted Imperial teleportarium – this time they had sent around a hundred thousand orks in a single wave.

Not each and every ork survived this transfer of matter and energy. But then those who did were quite sufficient for the job. Especially as the Guard was already fighting for its survival against the eldars.

“REGROUP! REGROUP ON THE SECOND LINE!”

Orders were screamed and the bug-clones transmitted the new commands to the warrant officers but there was simply no time, not with the fucking eldars pressing them so hard.

Which was why Larkine grinned when he saw the greenskins wave slam in the eldar rear-guard like a mag-lev train which had not been provided any brakes.

“WAAAAAAAAGGGGHHHHHH!”

There were more flashes of green light, more pyres of green lightning and the very fortresses three kilometres away opened to disgorge more orks.

The centipedes did what they could to slow down the green onslaught, but there were simply not enough of them. There was too many orks...and Larkine had not the time to give more orders as he found with his staff fighting blade against blade against one of the eldar white-armoured warriors. Five times, he believed he was going to die and in the terrible conflagration three of his men staff before a 6th Company arrived from behind and shot the xenos in the head.

Their saviour did not enjoy his victory. A blast of xenos witchery blasted him apart and suddenly he found himself gasp for air and his vision went for dark...until it stopped as soon as it had come. The reason for this interruption was evident when they watched a Dreadnought-beetle gave the xenos equivalent of a psyker an enormous hug, ignoring the blasts of blue lightning and light.

The skull of the sorcerer made a very satisfying crack as the beetle increased more and more the pressure before sending it one hundred metres away like a broken toy.

“Colonel, the line can’t hold as we are...”

The call on the vox was right, but Larkine had not the seconds to propose a new strategy. Over a hundred orks had made a breakthrough and guess who they had decided to murder? The Chimera weapons reaped once again their toll but there were not enough. The affair once more degenerated in a bloody melee, with some bees and a tank-sized centipede providing a welcome reinforcement.

It was a bloodbath and when it was over, only two of his staff were standing...and as he looked around, he realised with a grimace the melee had stopped him from withdrawing to the more defensible positions a hundred metres behind him...and that the rest of the Wuhanese and Ulm guards who had manned these positions were lying lifelessly on the floor.

That would not have been a problem otherwise...but the big centipede was dying, the blades of the orks in its vulnerable belly having proven too much. The huge beetle had lost its head and was carved by thousands of shots and stab wounds.

“Colonel,” the flies coalesced in the familiar humanoid face. “Run to our lines! I have no Dreadnought who can reach to your position in-“

A new blast of sorcery slammed in them and interrupted Taylor Hebert’s words. Daviev Larkine slowly stood up from the position he had been thrown to, and contemplated the mess. The insects, the Chimera and most of the battlefield had been pulverised. The orks were gone too, green blood and green flesh everywhere, cut and disintegrated in green fragments.

He had only one man by his side, and given that his poor subordinate had a spike impaled in his chest, no help would come from his agonising subordinate.

His eyes turned to the xenos which had murdered his men. The witch-psyker was in a brilliant red robe and all its attire screamed ‘I am arrogant and proud to be’. Xenos inscriptions shone everywhere on the robe and the helmet. The sceptre and the rest of the equipment would have forced a Commissar to shoot whoever decided to wear this on a battlefield, least he endangered the soldiers by attracting the enemy on his positions.

“Mon-keigh, you don’t know how to die...” Larkine rushed to seize his blade, knowing it was a forlorn hope, but he had to try...

An eldar he never saw coming in white armour and with a sort of feathered helmet struck him and he saw his good arm flying in the air and himself flying once more to meet the ground. There should have been pain. There should have been agony. But right at this moment he was too angry to care, even as the blood was in mouth.

“Wrong choice, you are going to be bait...”

Larkine smiled in return.

“Wrong arm,” there had been too many archeotech for the tech-Priests to seize in the last hours, especially as they couldn’t ferry it to the starships anymore. And one of his staff had found this little explosive device in an ork depot...it was called by the servants of the Emperor a plasma grenade.

The expression of the xenos was impossible to see given that he had a helmet, but Larkine could guess as the activated grenade rolled out of his hand.

“The Emperor expects, xenos.”

The last vision of the Fay Colonel was one eldar running away and then light engulfed everything.

**Autarch-Mariner Gladiel Imrik**

If he survived this battle, Gladiel Imrik swore that by Khaine, he would never allow any Aspect Warrior to insult the green-skinned enemies by the term ‘inferior barbarians’.

Not that the chances of him to leave alive the battlefield were looking good.

The next instant the *Battle-Seeker* succumbed to the ramming attack of a greenskin cruiser. There was a flash as the anti-matter containment of the Asuryani warship failed and then a bright star burst into existence, wiping out from this dimension six enemy cruisers and the last cruiser of his Spear.

“The *Battle-Seeker* is no more, Autarch,” the sentence was pronounced for the form, but it gave him a dark stab in his heart. With this loss, the *Spear of Asuryan* was now fighting alone.

“Isha show them the way...” and what a pleasant situation it all left them in. They had a single battleship against more than twenty cruisers and a gigantic battle-moon providing a constant stream of reinforcements, although it had appeared to decrease in the last minutes.

“There are no more cruisers, only raiders coming from the interior of the moon. Autarch, I think we have finally managed to force them to commit all their parasite-cruisers.”

“It’d better be,” Gladiel grumbled. “We have killed over one hundred of the things, and our holo-fields are becoming less and less efficient against our opponents.”

“We have a contact from our forces on the surface.”

Autarch-Mariner Gladiel Imrik sighed. This was going to be as pleasant as to try to convince a greenskin there was anything in this galaxy but war and slaughter.

“Transfer the contact on my display.”

He had expected to see the High Farseer, or at least one Farseer or a Seer. Alternatively, one Asuryani following the Path of Command to request some update on the battle happening over their heads.

He had not expected the visage of a bloodied, helmet-less, Howling Banshee staring at him.

“Autarch...” the experienced female warrior coughed blood and her face had a skin so pale he almost believed she had decided to become a Drukhari. “I request...extraction...for our troops.”

“Where is the High Farseer? Where are the commanders of the Twilight Spear?”

“Dead...they are all dead...” There were new coughs and a shifting of the angle allowed him to see several crippled Asuryani being provided battlefield-healing in urgency. It looked they had all been mangled by something vicious. “The visions were correct...until the orks caught us from behind while we were attacking the Mon-keigh. And we underestimated the insects... Merciful Isha, the insects...”

“Banshee-commander, the *Spear of Asuryan* is pursued as we speak by ten greenskin cruisers. We can’t approach your position...” he was forced to redirect his attention on the manoeuvres as they avoided another ramming attack and the massive detonations going with it. When he turned his head again, the communication had been cut off.

“I don’t think they will be able to slay down the enemy leader after all, Amrik.”

“I’m afraid you are right, Autarch-Mariner. Let’s see the blessing of Khaine: Manorith is not going to relieve you of your command now.”

“No, the violent aliens are going to do him this favour,” extermination of the Twilight of Spear or not, they couldn’t flee this battle. The gravity-trap of the murder–moon prevented that. “Begin to calculate me a trajectory which might give me a chance to teleport the survivors without risking too much our battleship. I want to know what in the name of Khaine happened on this moon. That’s the second time I hear of valiant Aspect Warriors terrified of insects. We need to know what this is about.”

“Yes, Autarch...by the Bloody-Handed, what is that thing?”

A sort of green beacon was lighted on the upper extremity of the moon. Slowly but surely, it began to rise to the stars. Reality shivered...and then the energy made the void scream. Iridescent green gates began to form, and new enemy warships began to pass through.

“They have reactivated one of their ancient brutish-imitation of our gates,” Imdrik commented with distaste. “And now they have more reserves to throw at us...”

There was no end to this tide of warmonger-monsters. There was simply no way they could win...

“Autarch, there is another warship translating through from the greenskin gate!”

Gladiel watched the displays and nodded with an ill-feeling. Of course, the aliens couldn’t just a wave of cruisers. The battleship was going to be right behind...

“Autarch, it is a Mon-keigh battleship!”

“What?”

**Harrowmaster Jeremiah Isley**

“In hindsight, pursuing the orks’ smaller fleet to avoid the bigger one may have not been the soundest decision, brother.”

“Thank you, Locron. I hadn’t been able to recognise this myself.”

“My pleasure, Harrowmaster.”

Jeremiah chuckled with some smile before his visage returned to total and absolute concentration.

“You were right. We should have avoided engagement and prepared to fight in the asteroid belt.”

It was not like they had any other choice, really. Their Battle-Barge’s Gellar Fields were more junk metal than anything else by this point and their Warp engines were in a state he doubted anything but a full year of repairs in a modern shipyard would make them work again. That was what happened when orks managed to ram several important sections of the Anaconda and kill their last two Techmarines.

“There was a good chance we could travel to a more advantageous destination...but now we have to fight *that*.”

Everywhere he looked below, the tens of thousands city-sized bastions and factories-sized weapons greeted his eyes. It was indeed an ork assault moon in all its ugly glory.

“Prepare the cohort for an assault on the surface. With the state of our void shields, I don’t think our battle-barge will be able to survive more than ten minutes.”

Especially as new and old ork cruisers were turning around to meet them. They were a lot of them...more than sixty to be sure. Other gates than the one they had used were disgorging waves after waves of greenskins scrap-starships.

“Our brothers are preparing our irreplaceable possessions for an emergency evacuation. The Apothecarium, the engines and the armouries are emptied as we speak.”

Jeremiah Isley gave one glance before observing the attack moon attracting them more and more in its gravity well. Blood of the Primarch, the xenos were madder than the stupidest members of the Administratum he had culled two years ago.

“No regrets, brother?

“You’re kidding, right? When you stranded Voldorius on this world in the middle of nowhere and told the Hydra Lords they could put their sneaky plans somewhere the stars don’t shine, the entire Harrow was ready to storm the Eye of Terror with you.”

The voice of the Legionnaire spoke the sentences of fifty years ago with the right tone of voice.

“What plan is it my Lords? The plan to use Horus and ensure Chaos exterminated all life before destroying itself? The plan to make our Primarch a God? The plan to eliminate all the senior officers of the Imperial Navy and replace them by vat-grown clones? The plan to impersonate ten thousand Inquisitors and destroy the unity of the Ultima citadels? You speak of serving the interests of the Emperor, but every plan I hear is contradictory and the more I hear, the less I am convinced you know what you are doing...”

A titanic explosion interrupted this pleasant reminiscent.

“That was an impressive nuclear explosion, brother.”

“Yes...redirecting auspexes on this quadrant...damn, that’s a lot of orks. And what it is they’re fighting against? Insects?”

Jeremiah Isley examined the images and the data, and found the assertion was indeed correct. On this warzone, there were indeed insects and orks fighting each other to a standstill.

A second nuclear bomb went off in the middle of one of the biggest ork armies. And then another.

“Either these insects have learned how to use Imperial weaponry or there’s something controlling them and carrying the fight to the orks.”

“It’s not good, brother.” Jeremiah gave him an interrogative tone as the batteries killed two cruisers and avoided the suicide charge of a third. “Pushing the orks like this is sure to excite them a lot. The more insects will be sent into the fray, the more the orks are going to slam their fists on their red buttons and send millions. The attack moon isn’t completely operational, but the orks are going to gain more and more reinforcements.

The more we escalate, the more the orks are going to escalate, and I would love if there was something left of this part of the galaxy once it’s over.”

By the way wave of insects crashed into the orks lines and new explosions flattened the artificial ground of the battle-moon, whoever was in command didn’t agree with this judgement.

“Solution?”

“I find the Seeker-Prime attack our best bet. A third of our brothers to make contact with whoever control these insects, a third to infiltrate and the last third to kill the ork Warboss.”

“Acceptable. Colours?”

“If I shout ‘Courage and Honour’ again, I think I’m going to be sick. Fists are known to be defensive, we have not the metal augmetics to be credible as Iron Hands. Salamanders and Raven Guard are too specific to not hinder us in this scenario, and we can’t afford the assault-oriented tactics of the Blood Angels and the White Scars. I would suggest the Dark Angels for this one.”

“For the Emperor, brother?”

“For the Emperor,” answered Jeremiah Isley, Harrowmaster of the Alpha Legion. “Let’s show the orks the Hydra’s fangs have not grown soft since our official extermination in M32.”

**Trazyn the Infinite**

“By the putrid breath of Mag’ladroth...”

Trazyn had suspected that he was going to arrive to observe a significant conflict in this stellar system, perhaps with a still-asleep dynasty waking up in the middle of the war.

It looked like he had underestimated by several orders of magnitude the chaos Weaver could create. Not that it was a problem, mused the Infinite Collector. It would give him more prime subjects to add to his collection, and contemplating the debris of an eldar fleet was always putting him in excellent spirits.

“Report.”

“Ork battle-moon detected, inferior derivative of the Krork war-spheres. Void Stalker-class eldar battleship detected, affiliation to the Craftworld Biel-Tan confirmed. Human Space Marine battleship detected, designation ‘Battle-Barge’, affiliation to the Twentieth Legion Astartes confirmed. Orks ships detected in great number, current estimations over ninety cruisers and two hundred raiders.”

“The Warp prediction algorithms?”

“Numerous Imperium human squadrons in transit. Numerous ork forces transiting from their Waagh-gates. The disturbances of the Soul Dimension indicate servants of the Empyrean Abominations are on their way too. Probability of Biel-Tan sending reinforcements considered high.”

“What is the situation on the surface of the attack-moon?”

“Extremely battles are fought in quadrant Si-68. Insects and orks detected in legion-sized numbers. Emissions of the Nebula Shard located in this war zone.”

So Weaver was down there and providing him with an abundance of prime subjects to acquire. What a nice attention from her!

“Place our escorts in an anti-ramming formation and engage the orks with the main guns of the Sublime Collection. Destroy the ork cruisers, I am not interested in them. Disable the eldar battleship, I’ve not one been able to acquire of this class in a satisfying condition...”

“Overlord, must we prepare a kill-team to slay the Ork controlling this moon?”

“No...we will give the human a chance to prove their skill first...and enlarging my collection takes priority as always.”

Trazyn tightened his grip around the Empathic Obliterator.

“I wonder though the expression our Mighty Silent King would make if I presented him this moon when he deigns returning to this galaxy...”

**Tech-Priest Dragon Richter**

“I thought I was done with Endbringer battles...” Dragon groaned.

“You miss Behemoth and Leviathan?” asked Taylor on the enormous centipede which had served as her ride for the last hour. Dragon shook her head in a negative nod.

“Not really, no. But you have to admit that at least the Endbringers were mostly limiting themselves to wipe one city every six months. The orks will never wait that long.”

“You’re right. As long as they have war to fights, these damned greenskins will continue ravaging planets and moons.”

There was a new nuclear explosion in the distance. Everyone took cover, and checked all the goggles and mask equipment the Mechanicus had managed to drag to the frontlines.

“I don’t think it was a good idea to send servo-controlled insects with the nuclear bombs the Ulm soldiers found in that depot.”

“Yeah, but what else could we do?”

Dragon grimaced but alas, she didn’t find a good answer to this question. The dual – and overwhelming – attack of the eldars and the orks had nearly managed to destroy the human forces fighting on the battle-moon. Without more than ten seconds of warning, they had been assaulted by what by all accounts had been eight hundred eldar warriors and over two hundred thousand orks.

It had been the very image of carnage. The enemy had attacked from every direction and while her two flying armours had downed hundreds of flyers and Weaver’s insects had launched themselves forwards to protect the Guard, there were limits in everything. This time they had found them. The orks had charged and human courage and sheer tenacity had not been sufficient. The Basilisks of the artillery had suffered sixty percent of loss, with Colonel Ricardo badly wounded and many of his officers decapitated by eldar blades. Colonel Ta had proven he was totally unsuited for command when he had tried to flee and received a Commissar’s pistol shot right between his eyes. His Captains had understood the message to hold the line, but their lack of training had not done them any favour. Eight captains in addition to the Colonel, most of the regimental staff and half of their remaining officers were dead. The Ulm former cavalrymen had died bravely, but they had died, many of them charging to throw their grenades under the ork tanks. And the Fay guardsmen and guardswomen had joined them in death.

Even with the cameras she had had in the action, Dragon had not been able to rebuild most of the action. Everything had happened too fast. What she knew was that when the centipedes had closed the breaches, the Fay 20th had lost two Captains, over one thousand and two hundred soldiers...and Colonel Daviev Larkine.

The Fay soldiers had not reacted well, and Dragon included Taylor and her Astartes protector – the latter had slammed with devastating fury in the melee with dozens of Skitarii once they had learned of the attack. Larkine had died fighting the eldar, taking six of them with him in death, and the long-ear aliens had received no mercy. Several of them had been eaten alive by centipedes or trampled to death by Dreadnoughts...a very bad manner to leave this world and yet, Dragon could feel no pity for the aliens. Seriously, there were millions of orks, a tide of green that if left unvanquished, could raze hundreds of planets, and these eldar focused on them? What was the problem in their heads?

In these conditions, sending nuclear warheads while they disengaged had seemed like the only tactic able to give them time. There had been no ‘miracle wonder-weapon’ waiting in the hull of the Astartes battlecruiser. Interesting armours and weapons, plus some things the Black Templars would be very happy to recover, but no means to destroy the battle-moon.

Two hours later, the orks had begun to mass again and several warbands had taken to use some of the most impressive insects as improvised rocket projectiles. With the nuclear weapons still attached to the carcasses.

What was wrong with this galaxy? How could this idiotic species be allowed to spread across the stars unchecked?

“We are terribly low on ammunition and promethium,” she preferred to say aloud. “My flyers are more economic than your Chimeras, but even by towing the transports and the artillery with your centipedes, there is too little fuel left. We have maybe enough for one large engagement.”

They may have replaced horsepower by insect-power on the battlefield, come on wasn’t the pun funny? But the insects were controlled by a single mind, and alas the former warlord of Brockton Bay was only a young woman with some weeks of military experience – and many of the soldiers under her had even less than that.

“I know. The las-cells are supposed to be able to recharge on solar power, but with the fumes the orks are burning on this moon, sunlight doesn’t work.” The visage of Taylor Hebert, even half-hidden by her breathing apparatus and the rest of the protections they were all wearing – and they would have still to be decontaminated the moment they left this damned moon – was the definition of exhaustion. “Still, the orks are completely disorganised and their precision is awful. As long as it continues, we will be able to return to the warships...”

Dragon watched the dark and tired eyes of the insect-controller parahuman and knew Weaver had realised the same ugly truth she did: judging by the powerful fireworks above their heads and the increasing number of comet-debris falling on the moon, there was a high chance most of their warships would be disintegrated before they reached orbital altitude...and even if they did, what?

The gravity-beams were active. The *Magos Laurentis* – which it had to be admitted, was likely the only starship to have the firepower to survive in this environment – was just a cruiser and would not be able to escape, which meant a short death battered by ork weird weaponry. The last strategic updates had made very clear that the hulks of dozens of ships of the same tonnage were pulverised or torn apart.

“That might alleviate a bit our supply difficulties...” it would be alas a very temporary relief. The cannons they had left had fired more rounds than a full-scale campaign; such had been the intensity of the fighting in the last hours. Moreover, they had hundreds of wounded carried by the middle-sized insects and their medical supplies had been entirely consumed. If they got out of alive, Dragon promised to reform the entire medical services of the Guard: despite Taylor’s earlier efforts and additional support from Fay and the Mechanicus, there was no doubt the sums the Departmento Munitorum was ready to give the frontline troops...well, it was ridiculously low, and this was staying extremely polite.

“Yes, it will.” A pause and the Mistress of insects turned her towards something she was the only one to see. “Two of the closest ork warbands are fighting each other now. We can move behind the line of ruined bunkers.”

The columns of Mechanicus and Guard advanced in an environment which was looking more and more life the apocalyptic landscapes of World War II. Many guardsmen were using their lasguns to help them walk. They were all tired, and unlike the Mechanicus, the majority had already forgotten the discovery of the STC or at least passed it as one of the amusing anecdotes which didn’t matter anymore.

It wasn’t hard to see why. Rewards and promises were well and good, but you had to live long enough to enjoy them, and many of the men had signed without knowing the horrors waiting for them on the immense battlefields of the Milky Way.

A soldier fell on his knees not far from the scarred centipede ridden by Weaver. His tattered Wuhanese uniform was more grey and brown than the light blue it had been a week ago, and he had a wound on his arm which didn’t look pleasant at all.

“This is useless...” moaned the young man who couldn’t possibly twenty years old. Dragon walked to intervene but the other parahuman had already jumped off her massive living transport.

“Don’t say things like that in the presence of the Commissar, guardsman,” the now Acting-Colonel of the Fay 20th declared while helping the exhausted soldier to stand and leading him to the centipede.

“Why?” A bitter laugh came to the lips of the man. “We were promised the blessings of the God-Emperor and the might of a billion legions when the recruiters came to our hive-blocks, but they never spoke of the legion of monsters. Why do you kill in His Name? There are things we can’t fight...”

“Because it is our duty,” replied the girl who had once been called Skitter by the inhabitants of Brockton Bay. “Because there are innocent waiting at home and some people have to take arms and become heroes to hold the line.”

A few guardsmen had paused to hear the exchange. Dragon observed them...and then decided to stay quiet.

“But we are all going to die!”

“We might. We might not. But do you know why I fight for the Emperor?”

“Because he’s the Master of Mankind, master of a million worlds and he gave you freaking-horrible insect powers?”

“No. It’s because for several thousand years, the Emperor has accepted to endure on his throne and protect his realm beyond what should be the limits of life. His sacrifice is so great no one may equal it...and yet, if we do all our part, if we all become heroes, we might be able to give this Imperium a better future.

Will you help me, Private?”

“Yes...yes, Colonel!”

The guard veterans from Wuhan, Fay, Ulm and Andes who had waited until now chose to cheer loudly at that moment.

“The spectacle is over! Go back marching or I swear I will...”

Then they heard it. A monumental roar, but not the noise made by the orks. Not the brutal battle-cry of the greenskins or the agonising shrieks their impossible machines made when they were pushed on the battlefield.

It had almost a martial tone...and it was coming down from the heavens.

The ork anti-air batteries began to fire...Dragon looked at the newcomers and zooming with the captors of her first flyer-armour saw the double-headed eagle of the Imperium on their flanks.

“Drop-pods,” declared Gavreel Forcas, who for all its height and size was able to move incredibly silently when he chose to be discreet. “These are Astartes drop-pods.”

The reaction from the Guard soldiers nearby when they heard this was a bit more vocal.

“THE ASTARTES!”

“THE SPACE MARINES ARE COMING!”

“WE ARE SAVED!”

Once again, there was hope on every visage and for an instant, all this exhaustion was forgotten, the wounds were less painful and the problems didn’t seem so grave or so pressing.

The smoke was pierced and some sun light pierced the clouds of pollution.

And the Angels of Death descended on the ork battle-moon.

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

**Author’s note**: After a short time of deliberation, I decided I could not decently stop the progression of the Weaver Option where I had left it the previous chapter. And since I have still a lot of preliminary work to do for the other stories I’m working on, the solution imposed itself: continuing writing. Hope it will satisfy all the readers. As you can see, the situation has completely grown out of control, and it is far from over...

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

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

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

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

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption