**Escalation 4.1**

**The Death Star**

*The galaxy is not a peaceful place.*

*Xenos. Traitors. Heretics. Mutants. Warp-spawn. Abominations new and old.*

*The list of enemies humanity has to fight on a day-per-day basis would be enough to terrify the most courageous souls if they had conscience of the perils waiting mere light-years away to ravage their homes and murder their families in horrifying ways.*

*Yet for all their techno-sorcery and blasphemous powers, the enemies of humanity have failed again and again. For all the myriad of threats assailing the Imperium planets, there are few threats capable to rival the sheer amount of firepower an Imperial Battleship can concentrate with its countless macro-batteries. More often than not, the self-proclaimed xenos ‘super-weapon’ will be reduced to orbital debris days after its reveal. When Eldar Craftworlds, Traitor battleships and thousands years-old races have been consigned to oblivion, most enemies encountered in space can be beaten; the problem lies in gathering the required tonnage of warships to wipe out the enemy having the audacity to declare war against His Most Holy Majesty’s Imperium.*

*Then there are the Ork Attack Moons, also known as Battle-moons, Omega-type battle-stations and dozens of other names, all more fearful than another.*

*The prototypes of these monstrous creations were supposedly met during the Great Crusade, and humanity paid dearly to exterminate the gigantic greenskins in command of these massive scrap-hulks.*

*They were nothing but a shadow of the real threat. When in M32 the War of the Beast began, the orks had dozens of these Attack Moons ready to massacre the planets of the Imperium.*

*The fact these massive voidcrafts have more powerful void shields than the greatest of battleships is bad enough. But there is worse. On the entire surface of the moon, the xenos place a sufficient amount of firepower to sterilise entire worlds, break armies and destroy Astartes Chapters. These are the secondary weapons, by the way. The Battle-moon has on average three to five super-cannons an Apocalypse-class battleship would be unable to fire alone and a formidable ‘Gravity Whip’ which can be the doom of worlds and fleets if given sufficient time to charge.*

*At the height of the Beast’s power, any arrival in-system was preceded by gravitic anomalies. While the moon was flickering in and out existence, phenomena causing massive geological catastrophes like super-tsunamis were unleashed over the unsuspecting world. Tides were reversed, orbital structures crashed on a planet and forces were soon too busy fighting for survival to oppose more than a token resistance against the incoming green monsters.*

*The list of bad news could continue on and on. It has been acknowledged these planet-machines built by a merciless xenos race can and will create others from the ruin of the systems they attack, razing and carving planets after the eradication of all resistance. Moreover, the battle-moons could and would disgorge an endless tide of ork warships and armies to protect itself. At the heart of the abominable structure, ork portals teleported millions of reinforcements at will. In mere minutes, beam emitters could tear every shield and adamantium armour by simple but unlimited gravity manipulation.*

*It went without saying that in mere years, the Ork Attack Moons became a symbol of terror and dread for all living races and especially humanity.*

*Entire Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes and Battle-fleets of the Imperial Navy fell in futile attempts to destroy them. And the successful battles, bought in oceans of human blood, revealed themselves hollow victories. For every Attack Moon made inoperable, there were two or three to take the empty place left by their cousin planetoid.*

*In the end, only the Third Battle of Ullanor and the death of the Beast allowed the Imperium to claim victory in this era of death and defeats.*

*With the death of the greenskin leader, the Ork Empire fell apart as Imperial strategists had predicted. Seconds after the execution of the gigantic xenos, the great Orks Warboss began to fight each other and the greatest xenos weapons to threaten the existence of Imperium did not escape this rising civil war.*

*United, the Adeptus Astartes counter-attacked and profiting of the divisions plaguing the ork ranks, detonated plasma cyclonic torpedoes in the heart of the moons. The Orks, unable to rally, accelerated their decadence themselves and dozens of battle-stations and super-sized engines were wiped out in an infamous and desperate attempt to use a technology level now unavailable to them.*

*By the beginning of M33 as I write these lines, the Imperium has formally declared an end to this Extremis-Alpha-level threat and while wars against orks are unfortunately all too common all over the galaxy, the forces of the Deathwatch, the Astartes Chapters, the Mechanicus Biologis and of course my own Order of the Inquisition have sworn to remain eternally vigilant. The simple presence of an Ork Attack Moon increases considerably the aggression and the growth size of the greenskins. Should any of these xenos planetoids reappear, their destruction is a priority surpassing every other potential enemy, and yes, I include the Black Crusades in the list of lesser threats.*

*The Beast is dead. It is the duty of the Order Xenos to ensure the throne it left empty finds no successor until the stars grow cold.*

Extract from file 5-DBV-999-ZYF-QVR, dictated on the orders from Lord Inquisitor Volk in 046M33, stored on Level 7-OC of the Archives of the Encaladus Tertiary Library.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

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

**7.616.289M35**

Thought for the day: Only the insane have strength enough to prosper. Only those who prosper may truly judge what is sane.

**Major Taylor Hebert**

In all the war movies she had been able to see when living at Brockton Bay, the soldiers were standing to attention or waiting patiently in their bases for the action to begin. Perhaps they were already engaged with an enemy outnumbering them one hundred to one. Often they were explaining to their commanding officer why their contingencies’ plan sucked and why they were going to be forced to save the day one hour later. Anyway, in most cases the hero was going to fly to the rescue of troops imprisoned a hundred kilometres behind the enemy lines in a non-authorised operation or hold the line by himself while giving a couple of hours for the reinforcements to arrive.

Reality was rarely that obliging.

When the transport ship *Courageous Traveller* began to rumble and shake like it was caught in the middle of a gigantic storm, Taylor had been asleep...a state which unfortunately did not last as the violent oscillations of her small cabin woke up in a matter of seconds.

“What in the name of the Simurgh?” She shouted as the rare objects she hadn’t locked as per Ministry regulations went flying everywhere.

They weren’t supposed to arrive before half a day to their destination, and even if they were, the arrival at Wuhan and Andes had certainly been not marked by any incidents like this in space. No, there was something deeply wrong...again. By sheer reflex she began to put on her battle-gear while at regular intervals unlocking the boxes where the razorbeetles and all the ‘portable’ insects of her arsenal had been safely stored.

It did not take long, but every moment passing brought more rumble from the hull of the Courageous Traveller and three times she had to hold to something before being thrown around by what could have been mini-earthquakes if they were on a planet. After putting on her boots, she opened her door and began to rush out in the direction of the bridge...and the strident alarms of the transport chose this moment to begin their blaring.

The voice of the captain screaming over the alarms wasn’t of a nature to reassure her mind.

“ALL ESSENTIAL CREW TO BATTLE-STATIONS! EMERGENCY WARP TRANSLATION ONGOING! ALL THE OFFICERS ON THE BRIDGE! IMPERIAL GUARD PERSONEL MUST GO TO THEIR MUSTERING AREAS! THIS IS NOT AN EXERCISE NOW MOVE IN THE NAME OF THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

The rapidity with which the doors opened and uniformed troopers and red-robed Tech-Priests surged from their resting rooms told her she was not the only one to have prepared for the worst. In the two and a half minutes it took her to run for the bridge of their transport, the parahuman saw the machine of the Imperial Guard and the Adeptus Mechanicus wake up in a hurry and prepare to war.

As much as she didn’t want to hamper the mobilisation, she had twice to stop Sergeants and order them to make sure the heavy sleepers were told to get the hell out of their couch and prepare themselves for potentially being dropped in a war zone.

As such when she reached the bridge, Colonel Larkine and two Wuhanese Captains were already there...fixing an image which should definitely be impossible, even for this reality.

The curse she muttered at she looked at the image would not have been appreciated by her father, that was sure. But what do you say when you are face to face with a moon-sized monstrosity bristling with cannons decorated with a gigantic Ork head?

“The orks have a freaking Death Star...”

She had been so absorbed by the image on the display she didn’t realise Magos Lankovar was on line. His mechanical voice thus almost made her jump in surprise.

“Thank you for the suggestion, Major. I was just searching a designation for this abomination of Attack Moon, and ‘Death Star’ looks like an excellent name.”

“Forget that!” the insect-controller shouted in a voice which was alas not assured at all as they now all could see the metal orb waiting for them in the void. It was a very unpleasant feeling, like you were a pigmy declaring war to the Nazis. “How in the name of the Endbringers could the greenskins build anything that big? Their average warrior has difficulties knowing whose extremity of the gun serves to shoot! You told me the Imperial technology...”

“...was far superior to anything the greenskins have invented, yes I remember Major.” The voice of the Magos was filled with something that she had rarely heard coming from his mechanic apparatus. “And in ninety-nine point nine percent of the encounters with orks, this is absolutely true. But the reason why we kill the biggest Warboss as fast as they appear in this galaxy is precisely to avoid powerful and illogical leaps in their brutish and impossible technology. Because in M32...well, most of the information is classified, but let’s just say this Battle-moon is a remnant of this era.”

“How do we destroy this xenos horror?” Commissar Zuhev asked sternly.

“There are only two options. Either we combine the firepower of an entire battle-fleet on one of the weakest power-generating sections until something overloads, or we send a strike team in its heart and detonate our most powerful warheads in its main reactor.”

It looked like the Death Star analogy had been justified, in the end.

“Both look like rather problematic strategies,” Dragon had arrived. “I mean, I don’t know the sum of firepower you have at your disposal to call Magos, but this entire squadron will not be able to scratch the paint of the Battle-moon.”

“The Nyx Sector Capital has two battleships available, and one was in extensive repairs,” declared the Captain of the *Courageous Traveller*. Like most of the officers he was really pale. Taylor felt a twinge of sympathy. It was worse than an Endbringer fight, and in principle even military transports of the Imperial Navy had no business being less a thousand light-years from this super-sized Ork battle-station. “I doubt the Admirals of the Battle-Fleet have half of the firepower we need to engage this moon, and if they do, they will probably suffer catastrophic losses.”

“How many Orks are we speaking about?” asked Colonel Larkine. “If we can infiltrate the structure, a few teams of the Imperial Guard may try their chance. I realise we are not Adeptus Astartes, but if needs must an elite strike force...”

“I suppose you’ve seen the battle-scars of the moon,” replied coldly Lankovar. Every officer of the growing effectives which continued to stream on the bridge nodded. “It is quite likely the Orks have only made superficial repairs to their ancient assault planetoid once they found it. In the contrary case, all our ships would already be dead. But between sensors and short simulations, I estimate the ork population hiding in the entrails of this thing will number half a billion with a six-seven percent certainty.”

One man collapsed, and there were plenty of muffled expressions of horror. Taylor herself felt her body shiver and this wasn’t because someone had lowered the temperature on the bridge.

Five hundred million Orks. Maybe more, because it was clear the Magos and his teams couldn’t scan a moon-sized ship in so little time.

“I’m sorry, Magos,” said Colonel Ricardo of the Andes 10th. “But...half a billion Orks?”

“Yes, Colonel. It is a...conservative estimate based on previous calculus done in the last three millennia while examining ork behaviour. My ship is named for the Magos who made the first discoveries in M32 and I’ve captured a lot of orkish life-forms in my career, so my confidence is high.”

“Emperor protects us,” someone moaned.

“I realise this runs completely against everything the Guard stands for,” said Ricardo deliberately speaking in a slow manner. “But we simply can’t fight against this...this...Battle-moon. You spoke of a strike force in their depths, but I’m not sure even if we send the four regiments on this transport, all your Skitarii and every man, woman, child, and servitor aboard the squadron on this moon, we will manage to make a dent in the orks’ warbands.”

Particularly telling was the fact not one of the ten-plus Commissars in the room made a move to draw their laspistols.

“My boys are ready to redeem their honour in the fires of war,” confirmed Colonel Karl Mack. “But if we try to land on this thing, we are going to be wiped out before we manage to destroy anything important. We will do it, if ordered of course...but between the four regiments we have less than thirty thousand men, and the biggest guns are those of the Andes regiment. We have no super-heavies, few flyers and we lack proper armour. Chimeras are no proper substitutes; they are transports and completely inadequate given what could wait us in the corridors of this moon. If the orks have a couple of million of infantry to throw at us, we will be buried under their numbers because we have not a tenth of the ammunition to slaughter them.”

“I hear your words,” answered the Magos after an uncomfortable moment of silence. “Indeed, I agree with them. The simulations we are running at this very moment gives us negligible chances of even causing small damage to the ‘Death Star’ structure given the current rapport of force.

Unfortunately, servants of the Emperor and the Omnissiah, we have no choice but to engage.”

A man burst into tears. Several officers looked increasingly rebellious.

“Why?” It was Colonel Ta, his Wuhanese-Asiatic traits distorted in anger. “We made an Oath to the Emperor to defend His Realm, we will achieve nothing by throwing our lives away...”

“You mistake me,” interrupted the Stygies VIII Magos. “When I said we have no choice but to engage, I was literal. The majority of the major weapons and around a third of the void shields of this station looks to be damaged and non-functional. But while the planet-destroyer ‘Gravity Whip’ is not active, the Orks have managed to restore a low-scale ranged weapon of a gravitic nature.”

“You mean...”

“The warships of this squadron are slowly attracted to this Ork Battle-moon, and the emergency rites of my best Tech-Priests are only delaying the unavoidable. Even with full power diverted to the engines, we will be forced to land on this planetoid in less than twenty standard hours.”

“And the closest reinforcements are more than three days of Warp-travel away,” murmured the transport’s Captain.

The music of the Imperial March looked more and more appropriate by the second...

Half a minute later the first cannons of the Ork Battle-moon began to fire, greeting them in the only way greenskins knew.

**Tech-Priest Dragon Richter**

When a Magos of the Adeptus Mechanicus flew in person to your transport, disdaining the encrypted frequencies ciphered with high-level binary encoding they considered absolutely impossible to crack, you knew what he was going to say was not pleasant. The fact he had only demanded to see Taylor and she alone...well, it hadn’t reassured her at all.

At least Dragon had to say Desmerius Lankovar was far more honest than about two-third of the PRT Department Directors she had the unpleasant honour to meet during her career in her heroic occupations such as being a member of the Guild and the warden of the Birdcage.

Low bar to beat, Dragon knew, but in this case she was going to find hope where she could. In fight like this, the presence of the Triumvirate would have been the strict minimum to have a chance...assuming that she trusted the three most powerful of ‘heroes’ anymore, and she didn’t.

Besides, Alexandria, Legend and Eidolon were either dead for ten thousands of years or in another dimension. In both cases, they would not be of any use for this battle.

“I will not waste my words,” began without the usual greetings the Magos. “In twelve hours, we will enter the effective range of the orks’ weapons and all my attention and coordination will be needed to evade their fire. In eighteen hours, we will be forced to manoeuvre at low altitude over the continents of this artificial moon. Given the overwhelming strength the orks have at their disposal, all my simulations do not give us a single hour of survival once I engage my cruiser in the canyons the previous ork-hostile foes have created.”

Dragon grimaced. This was worse than she had imagined...but then all she had of experience against the orks were futurist nightmarish videos. The faces of the Guardsmen and Taylor Hebert as the orks had demonstrated their fury in a completely stupid manner had been a fresh reminder this alien race, as impossible and brainless as it was, was a real danger to the galactic empire humanity had created across the stars.

“I see why you didn’t want to tell this the rest of the officers that,” declared quietly Taylor, her face pale and doing her best to be emotionless. She wasn’t terribly successful. “But I’m unsure why you wanted to talk to Dragon or to me about this. We are parahumans, not miracle-makers. I can promise we will do our best, but while my swarm can kill a few thousands orks per hour, they are simply too many of them.”

Dragon made a nod to agree. As Skitter, the teenage girl could kill about anything, Alexandria was proof of that. But she had been shown the ‘razorbeetles’, the flea-vampires, the super-hornets, the glutton mosquitoes and several of small but very dangerous insect species the Mistress of insects had available. On a normal-sized battlefield, they would cause enormous damage...but given that the opposition had a planet worth of armies ready for war, a few razorbeetles were not going to be enough.

“I know. This is why I’ve decided, considering the circumstances, to close my eyes and support the production of certain of your...radical...innovations, Tech-Priest Dragon Richter. As for you Major, the events are sufficiently grave for me to give you access to the most deadly insects I have in my possession.”

The intensity in the Magos’ eyes and gestures made very clear this decision was not done lightly. He really believed they were going to die if they didn’t unleash their most extreme measures from the very beginning of the action.

A servitor advanced at the representative of Stygies VIII’s command, carrying a massive container. Dragon had imagined an extensive range of awful-looking insects...but the metallic big box was containing only very small three cubes of the stasis technology so present all aboard the *Magos Laurentis*. In them were respectively a centipede, a bee and what looked to be a dung beetle. All three of the insects did not look any bigger than their Earth cousins, although their shades were completely different than the species she had met in her life so far.

“These insects are extremely dangerous and I will thank you in advance to make sure none of them are disseminated in a planetary environment. If given the chance to spread, these insects can make enough ravage to convince the Imperium to bring the Exterminatus-grade weapons. Needless to say, if the orks destroy us, you can forget this directive but remember to keep the strict minimum of these specimens alive in case neither I nor any Tech-Priests is able to recover the insects in the aftermath of the battle.”

Obviously, maybe appearances were more deceiving than she had thought.

By the way she had slightly raised her eyebrows, similar thoughts had crossed Weaver’s mind.

“I suppose you chose small and young specimens to facilitate their containment?”

“You suppose correctly,” said the red-robed humanoid who had once been a man but by now more a machine in the service of the Omnissiah-Emperor.

The green centipede was the first to be handed to the former warlord of Brockton Bay.

“This is the Ondu Terror,” explained Desmerius Lankovar. “Its potential of destruction is...significant. The moment it finds access to living or dead flesh, it tries to bury in it...afterwards it either tries to eat you inside or pour between eight hundred and a thousand eggs which will promptly hatch and also devour you from the inside.”

Yes, in hindsight...that was a really horrifying way to die.

“Of course, what makes the Ondu Terror a serious threat is only partly its feeding and reproduction methods. Yes, they are in the high-tier of reproduction’s rate for Death World species, but what makes them a deathly threat on their homeworld is the fact they really never stop growing for the duration of their two years-long life. The only limit to their growth is the quantity of food they can eat.”

“How big are we speaking about?” Weaver asked with what could only be a very evil smirk. Dragon was already almost ready to pity the orks.

“Oh, I saw an old female the size of a Baneblade,” Dragon consulted the extended base she had acquired more or less illegally at Andes and launched the search. Baneblade...Baneblade...oh God...super-heavy tank, the kind of armament to smash a regiment and not slow down for more than ten seconds...

Yes, ensuring these insects were destroyed after the battle was now her utmost priority.

The orange-blue bee was next. In other times, Dragon would have found it a rather pleasant insect to watch. But if this seemingly-innocent bee was on the same level of danger than the Ondu Terror, she was going to install anti-air cannons around her as soon as she could.

“This is the Sonora Bee. At full size, an average Bee is slightly taller than you. But since the first Bee which finds unable to communicate with her Hive spontaneously begins her transformation into a Queen by eating everything from flesh to metal, this makes them an extremely dangerous swarm. In natural conditions on the planet they colonise, their sky-hives can reach several hundreds of kilometres and contain millions of individuals, all working to protect and feed the Queen. Their sting can pierce metal and they are extremely ferocious against any intruder on what they perceived to be their territory.”

A Queen which was apparently capable to birth all these million of Worker-Bees and Hunter-Bees, wonderful. The insects had not yet come out of stasis and Dragon already regretted it. But there wasn’t any choice. These dangerous insects only gave them a chance to win, and not a very good one.

Dragon as a result watched with a certain apprehension as the third insect was examined.

“You wanted an insect-bodyguard and this is the optimal candidate I found for the envisioned task. The Magos Explorator who delivered it in my possession named it the Dreadnought-beetle.”

“It doesn’t look that tough,” the dubitative tone was more than justified as the insect was no bigger than a human’s finger.

“Once fed the correct plants, it can rapidly grow to be bigger than a Chimera. And its carapace is so strong it can shrug tank shells and other heavy weapons’ fire. All my simulations predict this beetle will be very useful to shrug off the ork bombardments.”

“I will take you at your word,” whispered between her teeth Taylor Hebert before raising her voice. “I suppose I better go prepare both my insects and my troops, then.”

“Affirmative, the higher mysteries of the machine-spirits which are going to be debated do not require your presence,” for a Tech-Priest, it was almost a diplomatic way to say ‘go elsewhere to play with your insects’.

To her credit – or perhaps she was too absorbed thinking of the future tactics she was going to put into effect with her new insects – Weaver rapidly nodded and left the room.

Less than two seconds later, Lankovar restored all the security measures before activating one of his private holo-devices and projecting the image of one of the dragon armours designs she had passed to Questor Wismer for approval.

“If we survive this battle, I will have to give you and Major Hebert a long course why innovation is far from the best path to take in these troubled times,” said in a concerned tone the Magos. “But as it is, I am forced to approve the deployment of one of your armour-flyer classes, under the strict condition you are always controlling them at distance. I don’t want any ‘dragon armour’ deciding to fight against us in forty-eight hours and my more conservative colleagues will have my skin if I don’t establish considerable safeguards on this...impressive new machine.”

Dragon rapidly sent her accord in this weird binaric code the Tech-Priests for a reason which escaped her had declared ‘holy’.

“One armour, then?”

“Yes, we have the resources for one,” replied the Magos Explorator, sending her various schematics by this aberration of Internet called the noosphere. “The models you called Ancalagon and Smaug will take far too long to build and I lack the specialised weapons to install in the hypothetical case we had days to prepare for battle. The armour called Saphira is far more acceptable for the offensive against the Death Star. If we gain the resources on the moon, you will be authorised to build another.”

Dragon did her best not to show her amusement or roll her eyes at the name the Ork battle-moon had been granted. Hopefully, if there were other Earth bet parahumans nearby, they would get the joke.

“I took the liberty to make some modifications to your design in order to increase the autonomy and facilitate the weapon reloading,” added Desmerius Lankovar as she began to study the new Dragon-Armour Saphira Mark One.

If she had to make an expose in public in front of the Tech-Priests – which she would rather not do, thank you very much, as she still had much to learn what these people considered heresy, unacceptable and abominable – Dragon would admit this was a far more innovative design she was used to. Contrary to what PHO commentators posted, she didn’t have dozens of new armour models waiting in gargantuan vaults somewhere. Most of her new creations were old units repurposed with several new weapons and tweaks here and there.

This new armour was definitely breaking the status quo. First, because it had so much firepower the PRT would have forbid her to use it on anything save the Endbringers and the S-class threats. And they would have been deadly right.

The Saphira Dragon-Armour was going to incorporate armament from this galaxy, and both the Imperium and the Adeptus Mechanicus believed in overwhelming firepower. She had taken example from the Melusine for the maw. But instead of a customised flamethrower of her invention, the maw of the model had been equipped with a modified Inferno Cannon. The dorsal armament was consisting in two ‘small’ and ‘miniaturised’ Storm Eagle rockets launchers for anti-air defence. The ventral section had a lascannon and for the fighting at extremely close range, the front paws were armed with ‘lightning claws’. As such, it was a magnificent blue and quadrupedal dragon...and she could already tell all the ‘modifications’ proposed by Lankovar were not all to her taste.

The length was relatively unchanged, but several additions were going to make the prototype slower. At fifty-four tonnes, the Saphira armour was already not that swift, though it was more than compensated by the Melusine-type armour and two Ladon-type force-fields.

“While I have no objection to paint the Stygies VIII symbol on the flanks, in my humble opinion you have overcharged the tail with new fuel storage and those two cogitators are not necessary...”

“Ridiculous! The processing time alone demands more cogitators per the STC-archives found by Blessed Magos Arkhan Land, at least one extra cogitator will be necessary for the regulating of the promethium...”

Ultimately, they had both to compromise in less than twenty minutes. Work had already begun on the *Magos Laurentis* during that time, of course, and Dragon had to admit that the Tech-Priests could really build fast when they weren’t mumbling prayers to the Machine-God every ten seconds. No luck convincing them to tone down on the incense, alas.

“We will return to full alert in eleven hours and thirty minutes standard. May the Omnissiah be with us...”

Okay, now she definitely had to play the Star Wars theme as Guardsmen and Tech-Priests rushed back to their muster points....

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

There were many things Gavreel missed about the Imperium of the Old Crusade. The brotherhood of the Legions, the true friendship, not the sinister parody of it their so-called ‘wise leaders’ had provided on Caliban. The formidable weapons they had access to and that the Priests of Mars took great pleasure to shatter the enemies of humanity. The Tech-Priests on the *Magos Laurentis* had still access to impressive batteries and incredibly destructive ordnance but it was still underwhelming when compared to the weapons every Legion took for granted as the Emperor led the armies of Mankind to a new Golden Age.

More painful had been to learn that the oaths of moment, the very symbols of the allegiance they owed to their supreme commander, had been forgotten. The worst part was that the former Dark Angels Sergeant understood the reasons behind this choice.

Horus had destroyed the credibility and the honour of the Astartes, and according to all records he had been able to consult, the Primarch Guilliman had had no choice but to destroy the Legions in the aftermath of the Heresy. Oath or not, it did not take a genius to think what the Thirteenth Primarch had been thinking: the Legions were too powerful, had too much power and they had proven they couldn’t be trusted with it. Better to break them in thousand-strong Chapters.

But it also meant the oaths of moment had fallen into disarray. Some Chapters may swear some limited vows when they joined a Crusade, but they were the exception, not the norm. And millennia after millennia, uncountable wars after uncountable wars, the trillions of soldiers had stopped to remember.

Well, Gavreel was going to try and revive this tradition. It might not last long, not when all the lives aboard the *Courageous Traveller* could possibly die before one human foot touched the metallic surface of the Attack Moon, but there was hope and if they left a mark in history, maybe there would be someone to remember...

And so he stood, in front of a thousand guards in neat lines, asking similar words to the ones his Captain had once asked to all their battle-brothers of the First, the Tech-Priests serving as witnesses of these oaths.

“Do you, soldiers of the Fay 20th, accept your role in this? Do you accept to march into the fires of war, cause untold damage to the perfidious xenos and show them the bravery of the Imperial Guard, no matter the ferocity or ingenuity of the foe? Do you swear to wipe out the abominable Ork battle-moon from this reality despite all they might throw you at you and your brothers-in-arms? Do you pledge your lives and your eternal honour to the God-Emperor of Mankind?”

The roar he received in answer came from all the hangars where his words were communicated.

“We swear, by these weapons and our souls!”

“Then go to war, guardsmen of the great Imperium of Mankind, and in the name of the God-Emperor, purge the impure xenos and banish their souls into eternal damnation!”

There were various applauses and for a few minutes the officers left the troops cheer and shout many war-cries before giving new orders and prepare for what promised to be the greatest battle of their lives.

Gavreel would have loved to say he was doing the same...but since he was in Mark VII Aquila Power Armour, bolter and sword in their scabbard and holster respectively and his helmet ready to be locked the moment it became necessary, he really had nothing to do.

And so he sat on a dusty box, preparing for the battle ahead. In many ways, something in heart was joyous for this was certainly one battle the Astartes were built to fight and win. A seemingly invincible xenos enemy, with a frightening amount of world-destroying weapons available, bent on destroying humanity and everything the Imperium built in the last millennia. This was why the Emperor had created the Astartes.

Because there were battles the greatest human Generals could not fight against creatures understanding nothing but war and bloodshed. Because there were wars Mankind could not afford to lose if it wanted to survive in a galaxy of horrors.

An ancient litany came to his lips as the ship began to shake and tremble. There was more acceleration now, and he had no doubt they had entered the range of the ork batteries.

“What is our Duty? To serve the Emperor’s Will. What is the Emperor’s Will? That we fight and die. What is Death? It is our Duty.” He murmured.

This was the Litany of Space Marines, and he wondered how many millions had died after serving their gene-sire to the very end.

Gavreel Forcas rose and walked at a regular pace towards one of the rare observation posts in armourglass this ship’s section was granted. By the Golden Throne of Terra, this Battle-moon was really a monstrosity which should not exist. The greatest space stations of the Legions and Mars were tiny things compared to the size of this xenos creation. No civilised race could justify the kind of efforts required that kind of things...it would be too ruinous, waste billions of lives...and for what? Unless you were ready to sacrifice an entire stellar system on every Warp-translation, all your forces would have to be ferried across light-years from this battle-station to the battlefield.

Unfortunately, orks weren’t civilised...and this moon was the very proof the galaxy was too small for humans and the greenskins to share it. Vague dots became continents of metal. Scars on the surface transformed into residual canyons and wounds received from the punishment of Nova-Cannons. Missiles, lasers crossed the void, hundreds of thousands, millions of them, the kind of ammunition prompt to make collapse an Industrial World and give heart strokes to the bureaucrats in charge of the Imperial logistics.

Most of it was wasted. The old joke about the greenskins hitting everything but their targets was once again proven true. Six Imperial ships were in the tiny squadron, and at best three could be qualified as true warships; the three other should not have survived more than seconds against the concerted attack of a competent commander.

But the orks were not skilled and if the explosions on the surface were any judge, they were not fighting solely against humans. They were also fighting against other orks. Granted there were millions on this miserable ball of metal, but it was still a waste which offended his Astartes sensibilities.

“Magos Lankovar has just transmitted he has localised what looks to be a promising landing zone near of the biggest canyons,” announced Major Hebert, arriving to his left and watching with a slightly fearful expression the hurricane of violence rippling the space around all the ships.

“I hope it’s not an anti-air battery,” the Space Marine lightly remarked.

“The Magos is confident it is a big scrap-yard the orks have accumulated over the centuries. The Tech-Priests want it for the possibilities of war production it offers them, and for us, well it looks relatively defensible.”

“This looks reasonable.” Gavreel affirmed as entire greenskin starscrapers and billions of structures became neater and neater. The *Courageous Traveller* shook as the explosions grew closer and the young woman gripped the back of one of these new bike-sized black beetles she had acquired a few hours ago.

“Glad you agree,” the smirk was thin, but the former Dark Angel was glad it was there. While there was nothing wrong with fear when you weren’t an Astartes, it was better to go in the battle in good spirits and confident of your abilities...doubt led to massive casualties. “Will you follow me into this battle, Sergeant? Will you fight by my side until the orks are taught the meaning of fear?”

Gavreel didn’t hesitate and bent the knee in front of the parahuman. He had sworn a vow and he was going to uphold it as long as there was life in his body to sustain it.

*I, Gavreel Forcas, swear my sword and my life to Taylor Hebert, also known as the parahuman Weaver. I will fight her battles, protect her life and pursue all goals she demands in the Emperor’s Name. I will endure and fight against the enemies of Mankind until the Imperium’s final victory, my death or my Lady releases me from my oaths. So it was sworn on my sword and my honour, and so it will be. The stars can die, but I will stay by her side until my watch is ended.*

“You have only to give the order.” Gavreel said.

“Then let’s go to war...it is going to be a ride to remember...”

Music began to play instead of the blaring alarms customary for the Imperial Navy and Imperial Guard. It was rather stimulating and the former Legionary found he liked it.

“Do you know the name of this song?” He asked by pure curiosity.

“This is the theme of Star Wars...it was a rather popular holo-vids on Earth Bet...”

Somehow, the Sergeant found the name incredibly appropriate.

**Brukk Brukk the Mekboy**

Brukk had been beating a squig with his favourite hammer-cog when the human ships descended on the mountain of scrap.

He was one of the few orks to have escaped the Fay campaign alive and he needed to restore his prestige among the other Mekboyz. He had grown somewhat, but the other boyz were unimpressed he had left war before its explosive conclusion. He needed to make things big, and all his rockets had burned with his escape pod.

The young ork didn’t see the warships. They still were too high. However, like the tens of thousands orks fighting, drilling and pillaging in the scrap-yard, he couldn’t miss the plasma and laser rain the ships above their green heads unleashed with vengeful fury.

Brukk Brukk was one of the lucky orks. The shockwave of the first wave threw him hundreds of metres away, when ten seconds later his former location became a death zone and hundreds of his fellow scrappers were reduced to green paste.

If Brukk Brukk had been a human, the shock would have pulverised his carcass and put an end to a year of ill-fated choices. But Brukk Brukk was an ork, and too idiot, too dumb to die.

The shapes of the human warships lost altitude, and while the other orks alive tried to shoot at them with their portable weapons, the Mekboy ran down the mountain-scrap, trying to grab the heavy weapons waiting on the heavily customised tank of their perpetually angry Warboss.

Brukk Brukk had not the opportunity to seize one. The ork was still over a hundred meters away when a macro-battery of the biggest human warship touched the tank and the insect-killer products he had stored under it.

One heartbeat later, and half of the zone was a living inferno, and thousands more orks were dead.

The human warships were close, smashing apart the heavily damaged ork warships and those in the process of being ‘converted’ to proper ork ‘Kultur’. Heavy doses of explosions and incineration terminated the work of a million hours. And then smaller ships began to land all over, disgorging soldiers and little things which were disagreeably familiar to the ork.

“Dis iz nub a gud day. Weava iz comin', an meeb lost awl mi insect-killa stuf...”

“Wodda weeb du, Mekboy?” asked one of the smallest Mekboyz around.

“Weeb need biggur shootaz, dimwit!” shouted Grukk Grukk, hitting the lesser ork with half of his strength on his head.

“In't it...leg'n ut?”

“Nope, weez jus' waitin' ter git biggur shootaz! Den weeb dakka!”

As the fires of hundreds lasguns at once was heard and small groups of orks here and there fell dead, the dozen or so of orks around him obeyed without question.

“Calls da uvver orks 'ere! Weeb gotsa propa scrap!”

**Colonel Daviev Larkine**

The orks, thought Larkine, were a perpetual source of irritation.

Any other sane race, when faced with a massive bombardment coming from warships would have already fled or withdrawn in good order. If that wasn’t enough to convince a xenos commander to keep his head down and pray the abominations they had the gall to call Gods, the mass of centipedes and bees unleashed by his second-in-command should have filled their heads with dread and shivers of their imminent death. If that wasn’t enough, thousands of lasguns, the massive dragon-shaped armour dominating the air over their heads, a tank-hunter, the long-range support of the Chimeras, and the sheer fury of the Imperial Guard would have convinced them to scurry elsewhere before they were annihilated.

But the orks were known for their absurd stupidity and these ones had so far not failed to live up to their reputation of idiots. The moment they had realised his regiment was landing on their endless plains of loot, debris, machine parts and metal, the greenskins had picked up their weapons and charged in the killing zones where laser fire and the voracious maws of the insects waited for them.

Larkine didn’t know how many had died in mere seconds, but it had to be at least in the high thousands. The piles of corpses were so high the centipedes and the bees which were tasked to devour the orks’ remains were not able to consume the entirety of the feast they were presented with. Not in the short amount of minutes they had before the next green waves arrived.

“We have to move, and quickly,” said Colonel Ricardo, his muffed voice coming out of his rebreather. “For the moments, the insects are able to stop the brunt of the assaults before they reach our lines and our casualties have been extremely light. But if we stop, our ammunition levels are going to stop and not even your second-in-command talents or the tricks the Tech-Priests have under their robes will be able to stop us.”

“Can your Basilisk batteries keep up the pace?” The Chimeras of his regiment were able to reach the maximum speed of their engines, as they were freshly painted from the Wuhanese manufactorum. The Basilisks were not, and they were conceived for slower advances in the first place.

“My men will do it, they know what the alternative is,” the Fay Colonel nodded with a grim smile that was progressively hidden behind his rebreather. This was the good thing with orks; you had not to scream to your troops there was going to be no quarter or no surrender, the men knew it already. Orks as a rule were too bloodthirsty to understand the mere concept of negotiations or surrender, and the few humans who were captured, military and civilian alike, were always wishing they had died mere minutes before. “I’m more worried about the Wuhan Infantry 23rd. The men of Colonel Mack have understood your force is experimented and knows what not to do when you fight greenskins. They’re providing our boys a nice light infantry reserve plus the escort for the Karon Tank.”

“Their casualties are still light and acceptable for two hours of battle,” he said while returning to his command Chimera, parked side by side with the command Basilisk of his counterpart.

“I’m not as optimistic as you are...”

“But what other choice do we have, hey?”

There was none, and both knew it. While Lankovar had started to call for help the moment he had seen the Battle-moon, it was going to take many days for any Imperial force to be gathered. The time to travel to the battlefield was going to take more days. And the warships as result were trapped in the gravity attracting-beams of the orks, unable to escape as long as they didn’t find it and destroyed it.

As they didn’t even know what they were searching for, the task was a bit difficult as the search zone was the size of two continents and one ocean. Not to mention the orks had forgotten to leave convenient directions for him and his soldiers to follow.

A cloud of flies coalesced in front of him and the distorted voice of Major Hebert came out, made creepier by the distortions of her own rebreather, not that Daviev Larkine had the intention to tell her this.

“Magos Lankovar demands we change our progression on a north-east-north course, Colonel.”

“He has found a clue how to get us out of this mess?” he asked more by pure formality than by true hope.

“Not really, but he seems excited by something and at least there are several bridges we will be able to blow up if we want to delay the orks...”

That was all well and good, but the columns of vehicles were already too stretched and part of their infantry was failing to meet the standards the Guard demanded of its veterans.

“At least two companies of the Wuhan 23rd are badly lagging behind. Can you cover them with your centipede rear-guard?”

He ignored one of said green disgusting grox-tall insects coming near his vehicle with an ork arm between its mandibles.

“I will try,” buzzed the swarm, “but do not expect miracles. It’s bad enough opening the way. The orks are rushing back and we must pulverise their scrap-forts one by one with head-on centipede-bee-beetle charges. If I stop my efforts for the vanguard, our progression will stop in less than five minutes. There are so many greenskins...”

This was exactly what he didn’t want to hear. Unfortunately, he couldn’t fault her from telling him the truth and after a few short reports he allowed the priceless insect-mistress to return her full and undivided attention to the thick of the fighting.

With his magnoculars and the vox, Larkine in the mean time tried to ensure they had not lost any company to a sudden ambush or a vicious assault coming from nowhere. So far, he was reassured to learn they had been rather spared in this regard. When they had left Andes, there were five thousand two hundred and ninety-six men and women in the regiment, and so far they had lost twenty-eight soldiers, with six more wounded which had to be transported in the Chimera. It was not bad, and nineteen of the lethal casualties had been taken when an ork had strapped itself to a rocket and decided to ram one of their transports.

The problem he could already see coming was exhaustion. There were always more insects to throw into the melee, as they were always more orks to feed the inexhaustible hunger of these carnivorous bees and centipedes, but Fay soldiers were not Space Marines; this fact had been made abruptly clear by the black-clad colossus leading their advance and cutting apart the greenskins by the hundreds.

“Colonel, enemy vehicles coming directly on sixth company at ten hours, estimated number...over a hundred. Presence of several battle-tanks in the ork formation, and a lot of infantry is coming behind them.”

On Fay, these numbers would have given him pause. Now? This was just a small detachment of greenskins, perhaps a small detachment which had separated itself from one of the main warbands, thinking to take a short-cut in order to arrive first on the battlefield.

“I see them, Lieutenant,” the visibility was not that good on the surface of this ork planetoid, not between the ork fumes, their dejection, their non-existent protocols for industrial production, and whatever xenos sorcery they used to ensure they didn’t die slowly breathing vacuum. But orks were as always able to make a Basilisk and a Chimera column look like models of silence and peace.

“Fire one barrage, then let the bees execute their aerial raid and the centipedes finish them. We will not waste our ammunition on these brutes. Tell the Ulm officers to stay close and take cover when they will begin to fire their damned salvoes.”

It was hard not to growl when the air erupted once again in flames well beyond the Chimeras range. The ork artillery was firing...again. At a distance of over twenty kilometres, there wasn’t any precision but they were still forced to take cover from time to time.

During this time the ork column had caught up with them...and by the look of things, they were roaring with pleasure. The shells and the laser fire had downed one-fifth or one-sixth, but it hadn’t convinced them to slow down, quite the contrary in fact. And now the greenskins were fighting for their very lives, surrounded by a swarm of human-tall bees and monstrous centipedes, while the Ulm guardsmen took cover behind what everyone had already nicknamed the ‘Dreadnoughts’. The black carapace of the massive beetles was shrugging ork fire like they were in ceramite or any of the toughest alloys known to mankind.

This was a horrible spectacle, nonetheless. Neither Larkine nor most of his women and men under his command were going to shed a tear for the orks, but you couldn’t say it was funny to see an ork hide behind a tank and see his head get shredded as a plasteel-cutting sting got through the metal and the green flesh like it wasn’t even there. The centipedes were relatively slow and popular at first, but when they rammed the ork defensive lines and began to eat alive the greenskins, the scream of horrors had been heard kilometres away, of that he was sure. There were now fourteen-fifteen of the centipedes about to challenge a Chimera in length and weight, and by this point most of the jokes had stopped coming out of the mouths of his regiment.

A dragon came up next and the insects withdrew. Seconds later, the last tank and over a score of various engines, bikes and hundreds of ork gunners experienced what it was to be in the path of the blue fire released by the magnificent blue dragon-flyer. Promethium went in flames before a cataclysmic series of explosions devastated the area. Men cheered and Larkine heard a couple of Tech-Priests in the Atlas behind his personal vehicle rasp prayers for the Dragon.

“Sixth Company advance, before the greenskins decide to send us another column!”

The speed increased as the men obeyed and kilometre after kilometre, they began to see the huge bridge they had to pass across. Though honestly, ‘bridge’ was a nasty insult to everything the Mechanicus or any human builder had ever built to pass over an obstacle. The orks definition of a bridge was to throw a lot of loot, metal and various things which may or may not include their fellow greenskins in the concrete-type materials, and to try to throw it over the abyss until it worked. Then they built pillars and everything they needed to ensure it didn’t collapse immediately. The God-Emperor alone knew how many xenos had perished building this kilometre-long insult to everything artistic, but it existed and his regiment was going to need to pass over it.

A detour in these conditions was a guarantee to fight more orks they might not be able to handle. And the black abyss the bridge was passing over looked extremely deep and sinister, like a black maw waiting to devour their lives.

“Magos Lankovar, the last three Fay companies are going to cross the bridge,” he called by vox the Magos, since the red-robed Explorator was still their most senior commander available. Some part of Larkine wanted to scream at him for this mess, but in this case it was sheer bad luck and the commander of the *Magos Laurentis* had come down on the moon to fight with them. According to his experience, not many Generals of the Guard did this, even when their presence was very much demanded on the ground.

“Increase your speed, Colonel,” the Magos said tersely after nearly five second of massive interferences. “And for the love of the Omnissiah, vox Colonel Ta and tell him to stop his crawler-speed if he doesn’t want me to replace him by his Commissar. Our ships report a massive ork formation gathering at the site my landers chose for the first deployment eight kilometres south. We need to blow the bridge and be on our way before they catch up with us.”

“How many orks are we speaking about, Magos?” Since they had begun to fight against these orks, the terms used to describe the ork warbands had begun to lose all their pre-Andes context...

“Estimates are between one million and one million and two hundred thousand greenskins, all largely above the average of the specimens you fought at Fay.”

“We have attracted the attention of their Warboss?” He asked as his Chimera began to engage on the bridge, praying the God-Emperor it was not going to send all his command to their deaths.

To his relief, the structure was stable and looked to be sturdy enough.

“No, merely one of its sub-commanders. The leader of this force appears to be called the ‘Bloodzerbarrgh’ or something close in their abominable language. If the communications we have intercepted are true, the Warboss may not be aware of our presence yet, though how long it will last, only the God-Machine knows.”

The Magos was however not inclined to talk further and Daviev had to call Captain Tanya Sevrev of the 2nd Company for more tactical details on their situation. Overall, things had been progressing quite well at the front, with the Ulm, Fay and Andes companies engaged suffering little casualties as long as they were in the range of the Major’s insects and their dragon was able to fire its devastating armament. The Karon Tank had claimed a kill-list of eighty-nine enemy vehicles and several of the guardsmen were already calling it ‘the Bane of Greenskins’ while the dragon-flyer was ‘the Doom of Greenskins.’

“But you have to force the Wuhanese to press on, Colonel.”

“My influence over Colonel Ta and his troops is limited, Captain.” He was not going to say it on the command frequency where the Wuhanese officers might listen to, but he was wondering if bringing this regiment had been a good idea. They were providing a boost in numbers as the Ulm, Fay and Andes companies were far smaller, but these ten thousand-plus infantry were lacking in motivation, training, discipline and offensive spirit compared to their counterparts...and Larkine had not the pretention to say his men and women were the elite of the Guard.

“I will do what I can, but try to convey to the Magos we may need to give free reign to the Commissars if we want them to not be the rope which will hang us in a few hours. Any other news I should be aware of?”

“Well, we have a name for the ork leader responsible for the raids and the wars on our Sector. Not that it was difficult, the cogboys say the orks are screaming it as loud as they can on their xenos-vox.

The beast’s name is Gruzzkull Mag Uruk Starsmasha. And Colonel...I hope the picts the orks are transmitting hapazardly are distorting its height and size...”

**Corporal Wei Cao**

Wei watched for several seconds the sleeping face of her Major before returning to her inspection of the 5th Company lasguns. While she was more and more attracted to their formidable insect-commander, when she saw her taking a rest on the sole couch of the Chimera Fury of the Swarm, the former Wuhanese noblewoman realised a fact most guardwomen and guardsmen had completely forgotten in these last hours.

Taylor Hebert was terribly young.

In fact, she shouldn’t even be in the Guard in the first place if important people had not pulled strings behind the Administratum. Of the four regiments fighting on the surface of this horrible battle-moon, three out of four had homeworlds where any PDF and Guard volunteer had to be at least eighteen years old. Oh, there always were the boys taller than their age which convinced an under-pressure recruiter to accept them a few months before their eighteen birthday, but in general the authorities tried to stomp on this sort of behaviour. Not because they really cared about what happened to the recruits after they were shipped off-world, but because the letters ‘I regret to inform you your son has perished fighting valiantly against the foes of the God-Emperor’ were a propaganda nightmare when the boys and the girls in question were underage. The only exception in the squadron had been Ulm, and their limit had been lowered at seventeen because they needed their men to be trained for a couple of years if they wanted not to die in the first cavalry charge.

So yeah, while Taylor was not the youngest of the Fay 20th – a few muscular boys had managed to evade the net of reports and bureaucrats in the euphoria of the victory at Fay – she was definitely in the lower percentile and at times like this, when she hadn’t her army of chitin, mandibles and blades to surround herself with, it was really becoming painful to acknowledge.

What times were they living in to send underage girls to the battlefield because they represented a too useful asset for battle against the xenos? For that matter, what sort of horrible planet these ‘parahumans’ were really living in to forge such battle-hardened men and women? Wei had learned many anecdotes in her time with the regiment, and while the music and the games were fun, the battle-experience was just frightening. The Nyx Sector had been at peace for several centuries before the orks decided to pillage their way through this part of Ultima Segmentum. War before this had been limited to a few rebellions and pirate raids easily defeated by the Guard and the Navy.

“She’s still sleeping?” The Tech-Priest which had come near quasi-silently was the now famous Dragon Richter. Virtually an unknown before this battle, in mere twelve hours, the red-robed woman had become a heroine for every woman and man of the Guard. It was her who controlled the two big ‘dragon-flyers’ which had taught the ork the skies weren’t theirs to dominate.

“Yes, Lady Dragon,” Wei didn’t care the title of the woman was only ‘Tech-Priest’. When someone controlled a tank-sized flying creature which exterminated the ork in blue fire and ripped apart their vehicles like the rag-bunch they were, you were respectful. Moreover, Taylor had been extremely respectful with her despite admitting the two of them had been more opponents than friends.

“Good, please let it stay that way for another fifty minutes,” Dragon sighed and while there was nothing on her traits to show tiredness, for a few seconds the exhaustion had been impossible to miss. “The big orks formations have lost our trace for the present and Questor Wismer has landed all our warships in an abandoned fortress one hundred kilometres south of our current position.”

“Isn’t it a big risky, my Lady?”

“Please, Corporal...Dragon will suffice,” the woman chuckled lightly before turning her eyes to one of the smoke columns in the distance. “And yes, it is risky, but we are an impossible environment and the orks are starting to bring too much heavy anti-starships batteries for the Magos or any Tech-Priest’s taste. In the last hour before we crossed this last bridge, we destroyed more than five hundred cannons of all types the orks were moving to shoot us. Besides, in most cases the main problem would be escaping the gravity well of the planet once again, but here fortunately it isn’t that much a problem...”

The Corporal wasn’t sure she was supposed to hear the angry murmur which was debited out of Dragon’s mouth.

“This whole planetoid is impossible...there shouldn’t be gravity like this...the orks have created a pseudo-atmosphere but they have little way to maintain it...these weapons it’s like they build them with half of the schematics distorted and yet the principles are completely sound in theory...”

There were a lot of technical things said minute after minute and Wei’s attention returned to the last lasguns, ensuring the other sleeping soldiers would find their weapons cleaned and fully loaded when they woke up. The loot they had taken from the dead orks had been plentiful – enormous warehouses of Guard equipment and ammunition had been looted from the Nyx Sector and sent to this moon by the greenskins. No doubt the eternally-damned xenos had intended to stockpile a lot more for their future conquests, but now the Guard was taking all these las-cells, shells, helmets and everything of importance for the war effort of His Majesty’s regiments. It was Captain Sevrev first, who had said that no matter the outcome of this battle, using the very weapons and ammunition the enemy intended to use against human worlds was going to be tantamount to give a hammer strike in the orks’ skulls. The green beasts were ugly and could make their horrors with a lot of scrap, but even then would have a lot of difficulties when their depots were empty and the Basilisks rained destruction over their heads.

In the mean time, Dragon had finished cursing the orks for their illogical and barbaric behaviour.

“We will try to be more discreet for the next hour of progression. Magos Lankovar has found the Astartes cruiser hulk he was searching for, and it would be in our advantage not to be disturbed too much by the orks’ warbands.”

“Do you think they will try the same thing? The insect waves stopped the last Ork leader and its troops dead...”

Since it hadn’t been possible to keep Major Taylor Hebert awake indefinitely – Dragon and the other high-ranking Tech-Priests had been extremely vocal denying the insect-controller the use of combat-stimulants – it had been decided to servo-control the biggest insects and send the rest against the ork horde which had constantly hunted them for over six hours.

It had been something worthy of a battle of legend, or so the Sentinels of the rear-guard had reported. Twenty-seven Chimera-sized centipedes, ten Dreadnought-beetles and over five thousand bees had been given the sole and only order to slaughter the orks and then be thrown in the melee against over a hundred thousand orks. Tens of thousands smaller insects had followed them into the carnage and more had come, forced by the pheromone-inducer devices to participate in this deadly slaughter.

The *Gracious Overlord* had sterilised the war zone twenty minutes later with a nuclear torpedo, but to be honest the fury of the engagement had been such there had not been a lot of things still living around. The orks’ fury had met a tide of violence Wei was ready to bet they had rarely involved in their decades-long conflicts, and most of their leaders had been killed in the first minutes. The vids-casts she and the rest of the staff had watched by holo-projection had only reinforced the firepower of the insect army at the disposition of Taylor. The orks, creature bred and made for war, had bled and perished under the insect assault. She was sure the Imperial regiments of Wuhan and Nyx would have fared considerably worse...the Guard had more precise artillery, but the carapaces of the centipedes and the dreadnoughts were shrugging sometimes even direct hits from ork cannons...

“I’m afraid neither I nor the other Tech-Priests are able to predict what an ork might do, never mind a horde of them. I fear they are far too alien compared to us to make accurate estimations of their future reactions.”

“So all the red robes prefer searching for the interesting archeotech?”

This time Dragon giggled, though she kept it somewhat low and no one asleep in the temporary camp woke up.

“My...colleagues...have a fascination for archeotech, I can’t deny it. But put you in their place, often they are forced to search in the middle of dangerous ruins to find a worthless example of technology. On the other hand, this moon has entire scrap-yards full of broken, damaged and partially functional archeotech. In four hours of only limited investigations, I know they found over twenty plasma rifles and pistols, over a dozen ancient models of lasguns from M33, capacitors the last three millennia destined to power their forges, cogitators from six different Forge-Worlds and I have no doubt Magos Lankovar has filled several more transports with valuable technological parts while I had my attention focused on controlling the *Saphira* and the *Glaedr*...”

“They must be really happy...” Dragon shrugged before giving her a very ironic grin.

“It is the nature of humanity to always want more than they have, and I’m afraid they’re now convinced they can find more invaluable things in the depths of this battle-planetoid...”

May the Emperor saved them of the archeotech-thirst of the Priesthood of Mars...Wei breathed loudly, and wondered what it would take for some of the Mechanicus explorers to change their priorities...

**Magos Desmerius Lankovar**

Magos Desmerius Lankovar wondered if in the last eighty standard years exploring the galaxy, he had not closed his augmetics and lowered the sensibility of his sensors on too many things. Granted he was a Magos Explorator, and there were simply not enough processing cycles in a standard day to do everything he wished. That was why everyone from the Fabricator-General of Blessed Mars to the humblest Tech-Priest in the Adeptus Mechanicus had to make the priorities clear in the service of the Machine-God.

He had unfortunately not simulated on the *Magos Laurentis* a scenario where he and his subordinates would be forced to attack an ork planetoid full of archeotech. Somehow, it hadn’t been in his top hundred threats for the year 289M35. And even if his imagination had been able to realise such an unlikely situation, the simulations wouldn’t have probably not been realistic enough to make him realise how eager some Tech-Priests were to return to the Omnissiah’s side for gains that had to be considered dubious by any serious human organisation’s standards.

“Eta-Julian found a new plasma archeoetech, Magos!” The Tech-Priest Minoris shrieked in binaric. “Let me take ten Skitarii and go...”

Lankovar, out of patience, had to use the handle of his primary weapon on the back of his unruly subordinate.

“Eta-Julian got dismembered by the orks, Tech-Priest Minoris Lunar-Theta! And since he was under your supervision, be sure I will record the blame on your files. Now take your place back in the column where you were supposed to be instead trying to find inaccessible archeotech. For your personal enlightenment, all these subterranean vaults we have found until now are crawling with orks and two Tech-Priests of your calibre have absolutely no chance to gain anything whatsoever with your illogical actions! Now return to your duties and by the cog and the purified oil, don’t give me any reason to ask for your designations!”

It pained him to use the binaric language for something so vulgar like reprimanding his careless Tech-Priests. But it was better than to announce to the servants of the Emperor less than fifty metres away the magnitude of the problem.

Slamming his weapon on the dusty ground, Desmerius turned to watch the Astartes waiting for him.

“Sergeant Forcas, your report.”

“At this hour, we appear to have evaded the orks scouts, Magos. Of course, the orks themselves have made our retreat considerably easier. The moment we ‘disappeared’, the warbands following us mostly decided to fight each other. I’m certain there are others still hunting for us, but for a couple of hours we still should be able to avoid any major engagement. As for the beacon you wanted me to investigate, you were indeed right. It is the beacon of an Astartes warship, though I’m afraid I didn’t recognise the colours...”

The tarnished debris of power armour was presented to Lankovar, and even though the Magos could truthfully say he had far from a complete knowledge of the thousand-plus Chapters fighting the Emperor’s wars on thousands of stars, these ones were rather famous: a black cross on a white field.

“These are the colours of the Black Templars, one of the most crusade-oriented Chapters of the Imperium. There were founded during the Second Founding from the Imperial Fists Legion.” It took only five seconds to study the data and compare it to the voluminous data-bases he had prepared for the analysis. The match was not long to find. “Both the armours and the pieces of hull found are consistent with what would have been damage taken by an Eclipse-class battlecruiser. If I’m not mistaken, we are twenty-four kilometres west-north of the current location of the *Praetor*, a warship which disappeared during the War of the Beast.”

“I suppose you’re right,” the Astartes nodded. “But how does that help us?”

“It is obvious the Space Marines, while they inflicted serious damage on the Attack Moon, were unable to inflict sufficient destruction to destroy it completely,” Lankovar said, giving a sign of his mechadendrites in direction of one of the city-sized canyons in the distance. “But if their warship has survived in some fashion, we need to find the hulk and take what was stored in its ammunition to finish their duty.”

The former Dark Angel Legionary tensed and Lankovar knew Gavreel Forcas understood what he had implied.

“Yes, Sergeant, the Eclipse-class battlecruisers, unlike the *Magos Laurentis*, were all equipped to carry Exterminatus-grade weapons in their secure vaults, and in my most pessimistic simulations, there is no way for this moon to absorb successfully the damage provoked by one new cyclonic torpedo detonating in its core.”

“There’s still the problem of the orks guarding the region,” warned him the Space Marine. “They have a lot of warriors, and not the small variety.”

“I suppose you’d better then contact Dragon Richter and tell her to wake up the Major and...what is it Questor?”

He had ordered Wismer and the rest of the Mechanicus Tech-Priests to stay silent on the *Magos Laurentis* until the time for extraction came. Omnissiah preserve him, why did his subordinates chose to disregard his orders twenty times per hour today?

“My apologies, Magos, but we have an Alpha-level emergency.”

Oh, God-Machine, what now?

“The monitoring devices we left behind us to know when our reinforcements would arrive have transmitted an emergency warning. There is an Eldar squadron in the system, Magos. By its projected course, it is coming straight towards the Attack Moon...”

Desmerius Lankovar grunted before running a new simulation and arriving to a chance of survival of 0.000000000034% for this whole endeavour, by which he meant one ship managed to get away from this unending series of disasters.

Tech-Priests were told early luck was a concept abhorrent to the Machine-God. At this time, the Stygies VIII Explorator wished his made a triumphant return.

**Major Taylor Hebert**

“The orks are the equivalent of xenos lemmings,” she cursed as one particularly ugly specimen threw itself into one of the canyons by trying to ride a horrible mechanical contraption between a helicopter, a tank and a dirigible.

“Lemmings, Major?”

The question had come from one of the Ulm infantry company which had found itself more or less detached to play her bodyguards.

“An animal of my homeworld well-famed for its stupidity and the speed it is able to reproduce. It was said that every summer, thousands of them threw themselves from the cliffs to die. It was apparently a genetic way to regulate their overpopulation and ensure they didn’t devour anything in a few years.”

“It’s stupid,” commented one of her staff.

“And orks aren’t?” A greenskin ran away in flames and when it saw the bees were onto it, decided to imitate the behaviour of his predecessors and throw itself into the gaping abyss. “I begin to be concerned about how deep these canyons are, by the way. We already threw tens of thousands orks in them, and at the rhythm the battle goes, we are going to send thousands more.”

“Magos Lankovar affirms...” began Tech-Priest Enginseer Arcturus Morkys.

“WAAAAGGHHHH!”

There was a massive flash of green and suddenly there were hundreds of orks arriving from nowhere south of their position. And to make things better, there were several of the psychotic-psychic greenskins with them, with a massive and stupid brute holding a large horrible totem over his head.

“FIRE! COVER FIRE NOW!” screamed the Commissar attached to the Ulm troopers and hundreds of lasguns answered his call as twenty of her bees immediately descended on the interlopers, two of her Dreadnought-beetles formed an improvised shield and hundreds of centipedes charged.

Seconds later, she was thankful she had done this, for the leading ork surrounded by a halo of green exploded...burning half of its own assault group in the process but also killing one of her big centipedes and inflicting terrible wounds to one of her Dreadnoughts.

But the orks had shot their bolt, literally and metaphorically. While two Ulm soldiers had fallen, the orks were massacred in seconds, and soon they were in the process of being prepared to be devoured.

“Major, this was teleportation technology!” gasped Valeriya Petrov. Weaver made a short grimace, suddenly quite glad the rebreather masks they all wore for their own security were hiding part of her mask. The orks were becoming cleverer as the hours passed, and the progression of the Guard column was becoming slower, as they tried to silence the greenskins small groups before they alerted the big warbands which were no doubt searching for them kilometres away.

It was certainly another technological device they had raided from a long-lost Imperial ship. The alternative was...the orks had built it, and wasn’t that a terrifying thought?

“We need to move, Major,” said sternly the Commissar. “Whether it was an accident, they came far too close. We must assume this isn’t a coincidence.”

“Agreed, give the orders...and please stop the men from wasting their ammunition on the ugly ork idol.”

She turned her head to give another order to Alya Sevrov when seeing by the eyes of one of her beetles she saw the sabre of an Ulm guardsman break in half against the ork idol. Curiously, there had been no flash of green, any characteristic smell of burnt-ozone or the small pressure she noticed from her insects’ senses.

Silently, she made a centipede grab the curious idol and tear the decorations apart.

“Major, may I remind you the work of the xenos is to be abhorred, not studied,” the Commissar – she thought his name was Kars or something like that – was rather young but he had definitely the disapproving face of the political officers perfected to an art.

“I’m not interested in the idol, Commissar...I’m interested what it was before the orks used it for their religion of idiots.”

The Commissar grunted but made no further move...perhaps because as they marched away from the small battlefield and the smaller centipedes sucked out the green paint, the skull and the atrocious attempts of orks to ‘decorate’ their trophies, the thing they had used as the base of their idol was revealed and it was...interesting.

The mysterious object was in the shape of their artillery shells, but definitely smaller in its proportions. It was also a deep black in colour...or it would have been if it wasn’t visible several hundreds of orks hadn’t tried to shoot, eat, or slam the object with considerable violence, deteriorating the paint to a mix of black, green and grey.

“Have you ever seen something like this since we’ve landed on the battle-moon, Tech-Priest?” she asked to Morkys.

“I can’t say I have, Major,” assured her the red-robed man-machine on her left. “I don’t know what use it can possibly serve, but it looks like an impressive piece of archeotech. The materials used for its construction were sturdy enough to resist the assaults and the humiliations of the ork vermin, and for this alone the servants of the Omnissiah will thank you profusely for its discovery...”

Her centipedes had almost finished the clean-up duty by then – and the voracious critters really ate everything, this green goo may be nutritive, but neither she nor any of the women and men around her were going to risk their lives eating a mouthful of this disgusting substance – when she distinguished a sort of small lever on the ‘below’ section, one which reminded her of the las-cells of the weapons the Imperial Guard took for granted.

“Wei, give me one of your reserve las-cells, please.”

“At once, Major!”

“With due respect, Major, I don’t think it is going to...”

A centipede touched the lever and the las-cell immediately seized from her hand fifty centimetres away by a blue flash. There were multiple flashes of brilliant blue lights and as seconds passed, the black piece of archeotech was shining like a Christmas tree...before the blue lights began to shine in a coordinated fashion, once, twice, and ultimately a third time.

She was keeping an eye everywhere with her insects, so she was well-aware the troopers of each platoon had sent their most curious members to see what was happening as she examined the item on top of her Chimera.

Without warning, the lights went out....and a hole opened, revealing a minuscule tube...which projected a large holo-screen.

And the screen had only a single word, one she had seen all too often in front of her computer at school, at the library or in the Undersiders’ base.

**PASSWORD?**

“This is *human* archeotech?” blurted Morkys. “Praise the Omnissiah! Praise the God-Machine! Skitarii, inform the Magos we may have found a worthwhile prize fighting the orks...”

Taylor only listened to him with one ear. A password? And of course, nothing to indicate how...never mind, a sort of keyboard was now materialising on the surface of the archeotech. This was the sort of rune-letters, the Mechanicus of Mars loved to use, but even then the letters of the alphabet were quite recognisable.

“Any idea what sort of password anyone would use?”

“Without dating the piece of archeotech and long studies, we have not...”

“In this case, I think I will try it my way,” she continued. Really, one wrong password may reveal at least how many attempts are available...

And so she typed the first password anyone in computer programming would think of.

**HELLO WORLD!**

Alex Dev snickered when he saw it.

“Major, with all due respect this is not going to work...”

Taylor pushed the button she supposed was the ‘enter’ on the keyboard and withdrew in all haste her finger when she felt something unpleasant happen to it. Examining it, there was now a small drop of blood pearling from her skin.

“I suppose it is some genetic verification...but for what use?” mumbled Morkys.

The archeotech answered one second later.

**PASSWORD VALID**

**HUMAN GENECODE VALID**

**AUTHORISATION 54DGVNSKGJ-7QMDVR GRANTED**

**BATTERY LOW (8%) ENERGY LEVELS MINIMAL PLEASE INSERT NEW BATTERY**

**WE THANK YOU TO HAVE CHOSEN OLYMPUS CITADEL SYSTEMS**

The screen went from a blue to a green colour before returning to something lightly blue and begun to show a familiar loading phase common to all computers before announcing a new message.

**WELCOME NEW USER!**

**DO YOU WISH TO ACCESS THE STANDARD TEMPLATE CONSTRUCT DATABASE? (Y/N)**

Taylor suddenly became quite aware all the Tech-Priests and Skitarii in the vicinity had thrown themselves on their knees or whatever mechanic equivalent they had, and were now truly praying, bowing and prostrating themselves in front of the archeotech.

“Can somebody tell me what we have discovered?”