**Shadowpoint 7.1**

**Black Flags in Flames**

*You have lost, Anathema.*

*Look at your Empire.*

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

*You have lost. We made sure of it. I will admit you made it a challenge, but your projects failed all the same. Your sons were removed from the board or turned to our side. Your most trusted advisor agonised on your seat-prison to give you a chance against the Sacrificed King. Your great project perished in a storm nothing could withstand. And in the end, your wounds make sure you are unable to rule the failed realm you call the Imperium.*

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

*They believe you are a God.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Extract from a memo sent by Sergeant Gavreel Forcas to all senior members of the Dawnbreaker Guard, 301M35.

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

**Beyond the frontiers of the Imperium**

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**8.183.296M35**

Thought for the day: Cease purpose and die.

**General Taylor Hebert**

In the last five years, Taylor had tried to convince some of the Guard and PDF officers serving in the Nyx Sector there were crimes that did not merit the death sentence. Light violence against a superior officer while under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs was one of the many, many cases she felt the culprit had better go on a long ‘volunteer’ session in digging fortifications under an enemy artillery barrage and be in the first line to charge the enemy’s fortified positions among a penal battalion rather than face a firing squad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It took two minutes to finish the protocol, but at last her senior officers and herself were surrounding the large hololith, which was now depicting the Pavia System in precise detail.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They have been reinforced.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wolfgang, are the pirates preparing to leave?”

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

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

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

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

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

But if Sliscus wasn’t the mastermind...

“My Lady? You are searching for something?”

It couldn’t be the fleet commanders of the outer belt. There was too much risk of being slaughtered in the first minutes of battle. And that left...

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

Wolfgang watched her with a dubious expression.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Astartes task force?”

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

“The Heracles Wardens?”

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

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

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

“The asteroids, minesweepers and carriers?”

“They are in position and awaiting your orders.”

“Leet’s project?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Shaper Qorok Trek**

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

Qorok huffed and raised his eyes in consternation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hunter Loxrukh stormed in without being invited.

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

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

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

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

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

“What sort of nonsense are they shouting?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Alert the *Palace of Feasting*! Raise all commanders and sound the alarm!” Qorok shouted. “Engage all countermeasures and begin firing back!”

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

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

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

Fear turned into despair.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most this resolution vanished when he saw the first giants fighting their way into a hall. There were only three, but each burst of their massive weapons and swing of their oversized blades were killing dozens of his best hunters.

“DEATH TO THE HUMANS!”

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

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

“Beware! Their armour...”

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

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

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

**Scout-Brother Phanuel**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Death to his Foes!”

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

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

“By your orders, Sergeant!”

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

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

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

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

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

“It looks like they were fleeing, brother.”

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

“THEY WERE AFRAID TO FACE ME.”

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

**Mekboy Battery Commander Brukk Brukk**

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

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

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

Dis was goin' ter be funz!

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

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

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

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

Wif Blackdakka commandin' dim, they woz unstoppabul.

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

“WWWWAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGHHHHHH!”

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

“We can trust the Orks to remain predictable.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“By the Golden Throne...”

“Omnissiah be praised...”

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

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

“The *Blak Dakka* has survived.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Enemy flagship launching new bombers and boarding torpedoes!”

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

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

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

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

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

And yet they nonetheless charged to meet their death.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“ACKNOWLEDGED.”

Isley cut the communication and turned towards Viktor.

“Now we can begin Phase 3.”

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

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

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

**Fleet Admiral Fitzgerald Tanaka**

“Oh my Gods...”

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

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

Before today, he would have thought it a feat bordering on the impossible. The Sheed Brakorth had never lost a battle, and the Kroot Shaper Qorok and the Ork Blackdakka had lists of victories which would have been hundreds of metres long if anyone had bothered to write them down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Israel continued as if it had been a genuine question.

“No, there is the last report of the outer stations indicated a great amount of minelayers and minesweepers. The latter are busy cleaning up the debris of Blackdakka’s and Brakorth’s fleets in the corridor, but I fear the fifty-plus starships we have never seen are busy reinforcing the minefields ‘above’ and ‘below’ us in the debris clouds. There are also like I said specialised transports. Knowing the Mechanicus ability to build monstrous machines, I would not be surprised if they had brought large ammunition stores and their God-Machines. And of course they have captured the *Palace* *of Feasting* intact and, by the looks of it, the Imperials are busy towing it through the corridor with military tugs.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why would he do something that stupid?” Tanaka questioned loudly.

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

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

Fitzgerald allowed his fellow pirate commander to see his grimace.

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

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

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

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

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

The pirate in green uniform took a deep breath.

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

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

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

**Duke Traevelliath Sliscus**

“MWHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your Excellency?”

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

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

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

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

“No.”

“Your Excellency?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The orders will be given, your Excellency.”

The Duke of Commorragh bared his teeth.

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

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

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

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

And Sliscus laughed again.

**Marshal Werner Groener**

The General was dangerous.

And yet...no, that word was too weak.

An Astartes was ‘dangerous’ by Cadian standards. Someone who managed to stand, never mind win, against a Bloodthirster represented a level danger High and Low Gothic failed to convey.

But physical abilities were not everything. Too often it was the mind of a person which was one’s most dangerous weapon.

When the first three pirate fleets had been shattered beyond any hope of recovery, shouts of victory had been heard from prow to stern. Crewmen had jumped in joy and even the double-time on salvage operations had not dampened the spirits of the guardsmen and the rest of the soldiers.

Taylor Hebert had allowed herself a smile and declared “there are ten more to deal with”. And then had continued to give orders, speak with her naval advisor, and begin a new wave of deployments, sending Skitarii and Tech-Priests to the newly captured Malta Star Fort.

That was all. The bridge’s crew had been sent to rest and have a meal in a long rotation of service, and now Taylor Hebert and her strategist Wolfgang Bach were once again relaying their orders to the Astartes Chapter Masters, Mechanicus Archmagi and squadron commanders.

It was, in many ways, the perfect enforcement of war authority. Glory and victories were acknowledged and recognised. The claims of the champions and heroes were acknowledged – the salvage crew who had found the Sheed leader’s lifeless body in the ruin that had once been a cruiser had received a triple bonus which might be worth ten years of pay, and the Astartes had also been promised several armours and other rewards. And the war machine of Operation Caribbean continued to turn, like a well-oiled machine of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The plan which had been called Leyte Gulf continued its implacable advance, with its subtle and obvious effects. The star fortress *Palace of Feasting* had been towed across a corridor full of warships’ wrecks, despite the logistical and material challenges involved. Starfighters and squadrons had gone invisible in the void, waiting for a simple signal to be unleashed.

It was incredibly impressive. It also gave him the feeling he was useless.

Not that he believed he was the only one; there were many civilians and several representatives who had not been given the authorisation to speak once these last days. Weaver, denied a general staff by the Munitorum, had evolved a different structure, relying on Lieutenants, Captains, and Commissars to make sure she had overseers everywhere she felt her commands needed to be verified. Maybe if a land campaign was about to begin, the situation might be somewhat different, but given the beating the pirates had received and were about to be hammered with, Werner did not have a great amount of faith in an eventual planetary resistance, assuming the air of the single planet in the system was breathable.

The pirates were not prepared for this. By the God-Emperor, they were not prepared for the invasion the General had engineered. The Kroot had not understood what was happening before half of them were dead. The Orks and their xenos ‘friends’ had tried to charge into the melee and got slaughtered. And now it was the turn of the Eldar.

“They have pushed their engines to their upper limit,” one of the red-armoured Astartes observed with a disapproving expression. “The cloud of Kane particles is only at ninety-three percent of its optimal size, and the human pirate fleet will arrive too late.”

“Yes...” there was no indication of fear, hate or anger on the young woman’s face. “I suppose we will have to leave the survivors of Kalmar’s fleet to Abbess-Crusader Gaius. His destroyers, his starfighters and half of his capital ships will be in the blast-area unless they make a major course change in the next three minutes.”

Werner continued to watch the command-hololith and suppressed the urge to comment out loud that it was a magnificent murder. Calling it a battle would have been a misnomer. ‘Battle’ assumed the enemy was somehow able to retaliate.

The Kane particles were the key. According to the basic sum-up the Tech-Priests had given to all senior personnel, the ‘particles’ were a man-made joint project funded by Holy Terra and Mars in late M30. Using technology so advanced the numbers and principles made no sense to him, the Legiones Astartes and the expeditions of the Great Crusade had spearheaded their assaults on heavily fortified non-human systems in a simple but devastating method.

Step one: disperse the Kane particles with Kane-Pattern Particle-Disperser Cannons in the area of space you want to disintegrate.

Step two: fire a special warhead called ‘world-flame’ torpedo.

Step three: watch the system’s defences and fleets in the saturated area burn.

The only drawback was the fact the invader needed to wait for ten hours for the inferno to stop. Of course there were rumours the weapon had been heavily restricted because during the Scouring, certain Magi and Archmagi had decided to forego the ‘ten hour’ limit or the Kane particles altogether, and decide to manufacture warheads which could consume entire systems in a few standard days.

No, there was a second drawback too. The fantastic price and the Mechanicus contacts a commander had to take for granted in order to deploy these extremely destructive weapons.

So yes, it was obvious that used incorrectly or amorally, the combination of Kane particles and ‘world-flame’ warheads could easily serve as an Exterminatus weapon. But since the Lady Inquisitor had not said a word against it when this phase had been explained, Werner supposed the risk must have been judged minimal.

And if it went wrong, well, the only victims were pirates. They would not exactly be mourned by the Imperium.

“The Eldar warships have not changed course. Their fleets are in a trident formation and have increased their speed by two percent.” The Blood Angel who looked like Sanguinius Himself in his golden armour spoke. “We will have to readjust our estimations of the long-ears starships’ maximum accelerations.”

Left unsaid was the minor point the *Enterprise* was able to follow the moves and the courses of the Eldar warships, despite their damned furtive tech-witchery.

“The Starfort is in position?”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“In this case...tell Archmagos Gastaph Hediatrix he has my permission to kill them all.”

**Corsair Prince Mariuvahn Moonblitz**

Mariuvahn had always hated and loathed the Mon-keigh.

The first expedition outside his home Craftworld, his first experience on the Path of the Mariner, he had seen what the Mon-keigh could do if they were not eliminated quickly. Where a pure Maiden World had once stood, nothing remained. The world had been transformed into a monstrosity of metal and smoke, where the air was impossible to breathe and nature had been destroyed, the flora and the fauna killed to satisfy the bottomless hunger of the brutes.

By Asuryan, they had taught the defilers the price of destroying Maiden Worlds that day! Metal and Mon-keigh flesh had been purged with the great weapons of the battleships, and perhaps in ten thousand cycles the Maiden World would recover from the taint these monsters had inflicted on the gifts of the Goddess.

At first, Mariuvahn had thought, naively, that this had been the sole presence of the Mon-keigh in this galaxy, but the reality was far darker. The primates were everywhere, and despite all efforts to remove the problem, they were endlessly regrouping and contaminating new worlds. Stern measures had to be taken. The bases where the Mon-keigh built and launched their defiler-fleets had to be destroyed.

His fellow Asuryani had not been pleased by his actions. Cowards, all of them. They had banished him, taking the pretext of several of his actions to accuse him of deliberate insubordination and trying to usurp power from the Farseers.

The latter had been the most galling, by Khaine. If he wanted to take power in the halls of Alaitoc, he would not have bothered appeasing the ridiculous sensibilities of those on the Path of the Seer.

And in the end, he was sure he had emerged far more powerful than the Farseers had ever imagined. Asuryani were flocking to his banner, and if they had acknowledged the authority of this crazy Duke for a few dozen cycles, the Seers aboard the *Eternal Song of the Moon* had been right once again. The Mon-keigh had been stupid enough to launch an assault against Pavia and give him the victory he needed to remove Sliscus from his position as chairman.

To be sure, he would have preferred one or two of his corsair allies to be there to support his bid, but he was sure that once the primates fled with their horrid starships destroyed, Lakadieth and Bloodweaver would support his coup.

It was time for the children of Asuryan to reunite and purge the galaxy of the barbaric infestation of the lesser races. And with five Phoenix-class battlecruisers, thirteen Shadow-class cruisers, thirty Aurora-class light cruisers and sixty Aconite-class Frigates, plus the thousands of Void Sunblitz Interceptors, Mariuvahn could at last wield a spear everyone would respect. Unlike Sliscus and the other senior Eldar commanders, he never hired mercenaries, and as such his ships were a haven for the eighty-three thousand Eldar who wanted to make the galaxy theirs again. Soon there would be more...

“My Prince, we will be at extreme firing range of the *Palace of Feasting* in less than a hundred heartbeats.” His Herald told him. “Do you wish to fire immediately?”

“No,” the Corsair Prince shook his head. “Thanks to the incompetence of Qorok Bird-Brain, the fortress fell to the Mon-keigh intact and operational. I will not waste my shots announcing my presence at extreme range, especially since our enemy can’t see us coming. We are going to close in to one hundred thousand kilometres and cripple the fortress in a single pass. If we can break the cohesion of their fleet at the same time, Bloodweaver will have nothing to do but slaughter and board the wrecks.”

And while normally he would pity whoever fell into the claws of the Reaper of Shaa-Dom, it wasn’t like the Mon-keigh barbarians were truly intelligent. Like the greenskins, they had reached the stars by random chance. Like the greenskins, you didn’t bother crying over the deaths of a few million because they were always billions and trillions more crawling in the mud and destroying hundreds of worlds.

“My Prince, I’m registering a strange concentration of gas anomalies in this zone...”

“There are always anomalies in Pavia’s space.” Between the defences every senior pirate commander erected, the wrecks of hundreds of starships, the Mon-keigh and the brutes, the pollution and the defilement of everything they considered useful for mining and living, and the last hundreds of cycles of battles, Pavia was almost an anomaly by itself. Fortunately it was about to end. Once he overthrew Sliscus, the lesser species would be removed and purged.

This he swore on the names of the Phoenix Lords.

“Yes, but we should have registered them during our last travel across the outer corridor...”

Mariuvahn Moonblitz detached his gaze from the formation led by the Phoenix battlecruisers, escorted by the swift and lethal Void Sunblitz Interceptors to view the readings of the sensors. The insistence was unbecoming of his Heralds, but since there was nothing else to prepare for, he might as well humour him.

A series of three commands, and he acknowledged the spreading of the mysterious gas emissions was concerning. Everything up to the lair of the greenskins was engulfed in it. Mariuvahn initially believed it was a consequence of the Ork ‘Roks’ trying to intervene in the battle, but there was no reason the warmongering brutes would have not shouted it on all frequencies beforehand.

And then the sensors confirmed the origin of the infestation and the size of the trap they had entered.

“The Mon-keigh starships can see us! I repeat the Mon-keigh starships can see us! Alter course at Point Scorpion! Decelerate and do not enter their torpedoes’ envelope!”

One warship, a single Mon-keigh warship, fired.

And then a firestorm engulfed the Sunblitz Brotherhood Fleet.

“By the blades of Khaine, get us out of here!” Mariuvahn screamed.

Three heartbeats later a wall of the *Eternal Song of the Moon* broke and the Corsair Prince and his entire crew were bathed in an inferno of world-flame.

**Archmagos Gastaph Hediatrix**

“The flames of the Omnissiah are once more burning the xenos and the traitors, proclaiming His might to all.”

Gastaph Hediatrix didn’t react to the cant vocalised by the Master of Auspexes.

Like everyone on the bridge of the *El Dorado*, he was watching the result of the devastating attack his Ark Mechanicus had delivered to the pirate fleets.

An entire area of space in the Pavia System was burning, consuming minefields, starships’ debris, xenos weapons...and close to three entire fleets of pirates.

And with each passing second, new flames and explosions were added to the initial blaze. A lot of the dispersed Kane particles had been concentrated in the zone where the greenskins had built their shipyards and bases, and since by their very nature the loathsome Orks did not know the meaning of security measures, the world-flame must have increased in potency burning so much fuel and unstable ammunition.

“How many pirate survivors are there?”

“There are two so far, Archmagos. The two Exorcist Grand Cruisers of the traitor Rogue Trader, the *Gold Triumph* and the *Golden Sword*, were too slow to keep up with the rest of their fleet. So far, we have no sign of any survivors from the two other pirate formations.”

And it was very unlikely there would be any once the inferno stopped raging in ten hours. Even capital warships like his Ark Mechanicus would not have been able to survive for more than fifteen minutes, and that was with void shields at full power and a hull built to endure everything the enemies of the Machine-God could inflict upon his faithful servants.

The Eldar ships relied on misdirection and advanced tech-psychic secrets to evade enemy fire. It had been enough to lead many, many human fleets to humiliating defeats. But when there was no salvation wherever you fled, their fragile hulls were doomed. The xenos couldn’t try an emergency Warp jump because they didn’t use that technology. They couldn’t stop the void from burning.

It was at this moment an alarm blared. And then another.

“Archmagos, there is something emerging from the flames!”

“It’s a ship! An Eldar ship has survived the inferno!”

Gastaph Hediatrix almost didn’t believe the data. He wanted to cant it was impossible. But the evidence dissuaded him from canting it to his subordinates.

The emerging ship was sinister. Long and sleek like a dark blade, the Martian Archmagos didn’t need to access a data-bank to know this was not a beautiful hull ritually built by tens of thousands of Mechanicus Tech-Priests, but an instrument of murder and massacre.

It was cloaked in a dark shroud which seemed to absorbed light and everything in the vicinity. But the shroud was clearly not perfect. Here and there, there were wounds and flaws in the shadowy protection, and where they were, it was evident the world-flame had caused immense damage. The xenos-tech was still sufficient however to negate the lances and the torpedoes which had automatically fired at the enemy hull.

“The ship is identified. It is the *Crimson Impalement*, battleship of the Crimson Squadron Fleet. Magos Wismer and her scout forces believe with ninety-one percent probability it is the flagship of the xenos known as Iath Bloodweaver.”

“Bring back the fleet in formation Beta-Zeta,” Hediatrix ordered. “If one ship has survived, then others may have too.”

But as several seconds passed, no second warship joined the *Crimson Impalement*. The inferno continued to rage behind the damaged battleship, whose speed had brutally slowed down. As debris and ship parts were slowly consumed by the dark field, Hediatrix felt confident making the hypothesis this battleship’s miraculous escape had crippled it.

“Permission to finish this crippled Eldar hulk, Archmagos?”The Master of Armaments asked after a short processing cycle to assign the targeting priorities.

And that was when a scream overwhelmed all vox-channels.

“MON-KEIGH! I AM IATH BLOODWEAVER! I CHALLENGE YOUR COMMANDER TO PERSONAL COMBAT!”

**General Taylor Hebert**

“MON-KEIGH! I AM IATH BLOODWEAVER! I CHALLENGE YOUR COMMANDER TO PERSONAL COMBAT!”

The scream was loud, with an accent which was soaked in arrogance and cruelty. It was Low Gothic, but while she wasn’t a linguist, she could tell the voice didn’t belong to a human.

The content of the sentences, on the other hand, reeked of desperation.

“Amusing,” Archmagos Thayer Sagami commented. “The Eldar must have really acknowledged his situation is hopeless to try such a stupid scheme.”

Taylor had to agree with the representative of the Mechanicus. First, because it was evident Bloodweaver had no idea who she was and what sort of abilities a parahuman had at their disposal. Secondly, a duel by combat in these conditions assumed the other side had a modicum of trust in a pirate’s word.

But the ‘Lord of Corsairs and Fleets’ would have not challenged her if there wasn’t something he could bargain with by issuing this ridiculous challenge.

“Archmagos, order the fleet to cease fire. Gamaliel, tell Kratos to oversee the loading of the species I’ve prepared before the boarding torpedoes.”

“My Lady?” If surprise and incomprehension could colour an Archmagos’ voice, then the two words uttered by Sagami were full of it. Taylor grinned, figuring she owed her subordinates some form of explanation.

“I don’t have much love for pirates of any kind, but I must assume that, given his bloody career, Iath Bloodweaver has a brain between his ears. He knows the moment the dark cloud protection fails around his flagship he is a dead pirate. He knows we have him dead to rights. The only reason I see to take the risk provoking an unknown enemy by challenging them to as duel is that he has something aboard his flagship that we desire.”

“I will transmit the orders,” Gamaliel said. “But...the distance between the *Crimson Impalement* and the *Enterprise* is approximately fifty thousand kilometres. You won’t be able to command the insects which will be placed in the boarding torpedoes.”

“Yes. That’s why I’ve only prepared two carnivorous species: the Bayou moth and the Ripper spider. One golden Queen-Ant will be launched ten minutes later to make sure I will be able to control them in a few minutes when the clean-up crew will go aboard.”

Dennis and Wolfgang grimaced at the same time, unlike the rest of the personnel of the *Enterprise*. It was true that they were the only ones to have watched some of the tests involving those two breeds. The Bayou moth was a fist-sized insect with a beautiful red-black hue. But its homeworld had been invaded by greenskins and it had been forced to adapt and become carnivorous. The purge of the Orks a few centuries later had just changed the meal of choice; now if given the opportunity they devoured humans. Emphasis on the devouring. A whole flight of Bayou moths could number in the tens of thousands, and villages were sometimes wiped off the map in a single hour. As for the Ripper spider, the yellow-blue arachnid did not create silk, but instead burrowed into living organisms’ flesh to reproduce.

The tests had been organised on certain beetles and animals in very secure Mechanicus Biologis vaults. Taylor had decided she wouldn’t use them if there were innocents in the vicinity...but Bloodweaver was anything but innocent, and if the reports of Isley’s kill-team had even a grain of truth within them, removing this monster would be doing the galaxy a favour.

“Boarding torpedoes ready to launch,” Gavreel relayed after three minutes.

“Fire,” the General of Army Group Caribbean ordered, “and let’s see how the mighty Reaper of Shaa-Dom is going to duel the insects I have chosen to be my champions...”

**Lord of Corsairs and Fleets Iath Bloodweaver**

“They are in Scythe-4! They are in Scythe-4! Khaine save us!”

“Stop them! Stop the spiders! Stop them before...”

“Oh yes! Oh yes! I feel them devouring me...the pain is supreme!”

“The moths are reproducing by the thousands in the torture halls! I need reinforcements here and I need them NOW!”

Iath Bloodweaver growled and cut half of the communications to concentrate on the half he could do something about.

“Seal Scythe-4, Scythe-5 and Scythe-6 and open them to the void. They are lost, and stop complaining. It’s unbecoming of a corsair warrior.”

“Activate the Dark Muse protocols in the torture halls. Eternal Torment-level ammunition is authorised to purge the infestation.”

Iath cursed as two more yellow lights burst into existence before he had finished his second command. Then he cursed again when he saw the insects had reached some of the last crucifixion pens he had kept to entertain himself before the battle.

“You should not have challenged their commander to personal combat.” Usually, Iath would have tolerated the Haemonculus’ remark. But today it was too much. The green gauntlet covering his right hand, the artefact he had felt so sure the Mon-keigh would not dare take from him save by personal combat, activated and after a few seconds the master of biological manipulation was a screaming torch. His servants then extinguished it with a few streams of ultra-acid.

“Does anyone else want to criticise my command choices?” The infamous Shaa-Dom pirate snarled.

Yes, in hindsight it had been a bad idea to challenge the Mon-keigh commander. He had wanted a duel, and instead the coward had sent him insects! Insects! What sort of fleet commander considered insects to be Champions worthy of the name?

Ironically, he had no need to destroy the weapon he was using anymore. These insects were going to crawl across his flagship for hundreds of cycles, devouring everyone who might try to board the *Crimson Impalement*.

A true wave of pure agony and pain washed over the bridge, and Iath had to fight it to remain master of himself. As tempting and easy as it was to enjoy his slaves’ and warriors’ deaths, it would be a death sentence to let his basest urges take control right now.

“What is the situation on the reserves of water? Has the detachment we sent there reported success?”

“They have not...we can’t obtain an answer from them!”

The deck rumbled. The deck shook. And then under Bloodweaver’s astonished eyes the very ground of the bridge erupted, sending splinters and spikes everywhere. A wave of arachnids swarmed his domain. There were tens of thousands of them...

“Defend yourself! Do not revel in the agony! Slaughter the spiders!”

Words he had never expected to speak, and if he survived, he would make sure that the evidence would be consigned to oblivion.

His super-flamer inflicted thousands of ‘casualties’, but his was the only weapon to be somewhat effective. Splinter and other Aeldari weaponry killed ten or twenty insects per shot, but they were replaced too quickly...and his officers had not obeyed his instruction.

“Oh yes, glorious pain...eat me! Eat me, I want more pain!”

“They have my leg! Give me back my leg!”

“This is too much...yes...no...yes!”

The great doors they had barricaded began to crack.

“Oh no...”

The doors exploded and an endless swarm surged in to end his life.

Iath Bloodweaver tried to draw the dark gun at his side...resurrection chances were nearly nil and he wasn’t eager to be devoured by She-Who-Thirsts, but he didn’t want to be the living meal of thousands of these creatures. He was an Aeldari, and he was above...

A spider he had not seen jumping fell on his hand and the bite was an incredible pleasurable agony.

Six heartbeats later the swarm devoured him.

**General Taylor Hebert**

It was difficult to believe, but the closer one got to the *Crimson Impalement*, the uglier the ship became in her eyes.

At least since the *Enterprise* was barely one kilometre away from the crippled battleship, the ugliness levels weren’t likely to increase for the outside. For the inside, it was an entirely different story altogether.

Chains, torture chambers, screaming corpses which should have died long ago but continued to agonise unnaturally; the halls and the rooms of the Eldar battleship were a nightmare given life. The very air seemed tainted with malice, cruelty and death. And somehow Taylor was sure the insects she had sent had not stayed long enough to cause this awful sense of sheer evil.

“It is bad.” She told Dennis and Leet.

“How bad?” the Tinker asked.

“Save the Queen-ant, all the insects inside this wreck are going to stay and die there.” Seriously, she didn’t like the long-ears, but what the hell? This ship was like it had been ruled by a crazed psychopath who had decided to ignore all limits of BDSM and then added some pseudo Ruinous influence for the ambiance. “And even the golden ant will need to be decontaminated.”

“That bad, got it,” for once Leet stayed silent. He couldn’t see what she was seeing through by the eyes of her swarm, but the outside, the spikes, the skulls and the decorations of flayed skin were already giving an advance warning of the depravity and the evilness of Bloodweaver.

“Are there interesting things in the vaults, my Lady?” Archmagos Lankovar inquired from the vid-link between her flagship and the *Standard Template Construct*.

“For the moment, nothing that will be of use to the Adeptus Mechanicus, I’m afraid.” The insect-mistress replied. “Bloodweaver loves to collect a lot of things, but I’m pretty sure most paintings, sculptures and artworks I am discovering in his vaults will be considered tainted and heretical should I give them to the Inquisition.”

The Gothic style of the Inquisition was at times a bit gloomy and depressing, but she was pretty sure painting demons feasting on ‘lesser species’, as some titles had so joyously explained, was not going to be something to be shown to the citizenry at large. Moreover, a lot of objects seemed to spread an aura of dread and despair. Her insects should have been totally immune to it, but they weren’t, and it was only under her control they had explored several empty sections of the battleship. Now that she knew why these locations were empty, the General regretted having satisfied her curiosity.

“Nothing at all?” The Master of Exploration insisted, evidently disappointed.

Taylor shrugged.

“It appears that the ‘Lord of Corsairs and Fleets’ loved to store weird and dangerous xenos artefacts inside his vaults. But he certainly wasn’t interested in human archeotech. Or if he was, the relics were stored somewhere else.” Taylor paused. “I’m sorry Archmagos, but there’s certainly nothing interesting in this hull save Bloodweaver’s corpse.”

To be honest, it was the tattered armour, the rest of the equipment and the personal weapons of the pirate which had made identification possible. The spiders had stripped his skeleton clean of all flesh with an incredible efficiency.

Fortunately, the equipment was not edible...there were two trillion Throne Gelts at stake – though the battleship was also absolute proof they had defeated the monstrous Eldar.

“Let’s hope the bases and wrecks of the other pirate commanders will have more to offer. Gamaliel, you can order Kratos to bring back my Queen-ant and Bloodweaver’s remains.”

“Yes, my Lady. Chapter Master Isley, the 2nd Company of the Iron Drakes and the Inquisitorial representatives will examine the few artefacts you’ve collected.”

For the moment, the loot from the defeat of several pirate fleets was considerable, but hardly exceptional. And the overwhelming majority came from the near-instantaneous fall of the *Palace of Feasting*. Many, many pirate captains had used the Star Fort as a resupply/repair shipyard, and a society of crime and murder was not known to work for free. Tens of thousands of tons of ceramite, plasteel, metallic ore and raw materials had been seized, along with vast cisterns of promethium and lubricants. It would pay back approximately thirty-three percent of the investment the Mechanicus had made for Operation Caribbean...but so far, there was nothing on the level of a damaged STC template or archeotech from the Age of Strife.

“I am going to return to the bridge. There is a battle to continue.”

Though slaughter was more appropriate, the parahuman woman admitted in the privacy of her own mind. Wolfgang’s plan had so far worked perfectly, but it was one thing to watch a simulation on the hololith, and quite another to see it in reality.

Like the plan had called for, they had taken the Kroot by surprise, played on the bloodthirst of the Sheed and the Orks, and then incited the Eldar to drink deep from the well of arrogance their species was so infamous for.

Six of the greatest pirate fleets of this galactic region were no more. Not defeated, not decisively beaten; they had been obliterated, purely and simply.

In most battles, this would be the time to celebrate. For the campaign of Pavia, over half of the enemy strength still remained intact.

“Abbess-Crusader,” Taylor saluted the image of the woman a few minutes after once again being seated on her command chair. “I understand congratulations are in order; Kalmar’s career is over.”

The elderly commanding officer of the Ecclesiarchy forces smiled back.

“I wish I could tell you it was a difficult endeavour, General, but frankly the most difficult part was ambushing him before he escaped our torpedo range. The only problem will likely be finding Kalmar’s corpse. A good part of the *Gold Triumph* is a slaughterhouse, and the Archmagos Dominus Mu-Sever-400101 has refused to give an estimate of how many hours he will need to explore the ship.”

“But the *Golden Sword* surrendered as soon as the flagship of the traitorous Rogue Trader was defeated?”

“Yes, General. At first I was surprised that it didn’t pose more resistance, but it seems Kalmar had filled several compartments with gold, silver, gems, and precious metals instead of torpedoes and ammunition.”

Taylor stared before allowing herself a large grin. The *Golden Sword* was an Exorcist-class Grand Cruiser, and it wasn’t exactly a small starship. The Exorcists were 7.3 kilometres long and weighed approximately 37 megatonnes. If even five compartments were filled with spoils from a lifetime of piracy, this entire expedition had just become very, very profitable.

“You have done an excellent job,” the young woman said. It never hurt to compliment your subordinates, especially when the prizes were so huge. “Since the Poker Fleet of Tanaka is obviously not respecting the part it was supposed to play in our plans, please wait at your current position for the *Cant-Requiem* and the *Arsenal of the Omnissiah*. We will deploy a few thousand Skitarii and Tech-Priests to command the Grand Cruiser.”

“If I may ask, General, what are your intentions towards the crew of the *Golden Sword*? I accepted an unconditional surrender, and I’m aware we have not taken many prisoners until now...”

The insect-mistress chuckled. That was an understatement of epic proportions. For obvious reasons, her captains – and herself – had not been very interested in taking prisoners when facing the Kroot, Sheed and Ork warships. The bulk of the prisoners had been taken by Isley in his infiltration of the Malta Starfort, and there were four thousand of them. There were another thousand prisoners, mainly specimens Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper had politely requested for the Holy Ordos, and they had been transferred aboard the *Judgment*. What was going to happen to them in all likelihood would not be covered by the Geneva convention, but frankly there were battles she wasn’t willing to fight with the Holy Ordos.

“They are unlikely to know secrets and information of great importance...you can arrest the officers and send them aboard the *Holy Warrior.* Keep them under heavy guard. We will put them on trial once this battle is over. The rest of the crew, as long as they behave properly, will be kept under Mechanicus observation until I decide what to do with them.”

“By your will, General,” Taylor turned her head towards Wolfgang as the conversation ended. “It looks like we are going to use one of the variants of the War Plan.”

“Yes,” the blonde-haired man grimaced. “I underestimated the psychological shock of the world-flame warheads. Fitzgerald Tanaka and Jaeger Day fled too quickly, too soon. They must have already been badly shaken by the elimination of the first three fleets, and when we stopped the Eldar offensive dead in its tracks, well...”

Yes, they had retreated as fast as their ships were able to flee.

And by all auspex and augur-data, they were fleeing towards the *Pillow of Jasmine*, the Malta Starfort garrisoned and defended by the Rashan leadership. In addition to this, the Hoth and Siren squadrons were deploying in the inner corridor right behind the Rashan.

“It looks like they have finally wised up and realised that divided, they are going to be crushed one by one.” Of course, given that the first shot had been fired around twenty-two hours ago, it was not exactly an exploit of brains triumphing over pirate instincts. “I think we will have time to use your contingency plans. And the Dragon Armours will be of use too.”

Whatever her Naval Secretary and senior advisor-strategist in naval affairs was going to say in response, it was interrupted by a company-sized column of Tech-Priests, who looked like they were providing an escort to Kratos, Zuriel and Wald, entering the bridge without bothering with the niceties of protocol.

From the two spiders she had at the entrance, the Imperial Guard officer saw that Kratos held in his hands the heavy flamer Bloodweaver had on him when he was eaten alive...except it had become much, much larger, and now that it had been somewhat cleaned up, there was a large dragon head decorating the weapon. Given that Dragon had not manufactured an object like this, the emblem was more likely than not the totem of the Salamanders Chapter, First Founding, the former Eighteenth Legion.

“Chosen of the Omnissiah, you have recovered a priceless piece of archeotech from the Great Crusade!”

Taylor internally sighed. And here she’d believed that, for her, the issues like those with the Athena STC database had ended a few years ago...

**Fleet Admiral Fitzgerald Tanaka**

If someone had told him his world would end in thirty-six hours, Fitzgerald Tanaka would have laughed and likely blown off the head of the person stupid enough to tell him that to his face.

Thirty-six standard hours was a very short amount of time.

But when one was on the receiving end of the greatest naval attack ever launched in the Acacia Expanse, it was an eternity.

Some part of his mind, the careful and methodical one, tried to whisper to him all he had observed could be easily accomplished with long years of preparation and the unlimited wealth of the Imperium. Yes, they were meeting a determined enemy, but they had fought against determined Admirals and other corsair fleets for decades. This was just another challenge to beat in his quest to become the greatest pirate in this region of the galaxy.

This tiny attempt to remain optimistic was drowned under several waves of panic.

In thirty-six hours, the superiority of the invaders had been made all too clear. If anyone was inclined to forget that, the vids of the inferno which had destroyed Moonblitz and the rest of the Eldar counter-attack were sure to remind them attacking this enemy without a solid plan was going to result in complete annihilation.

Even several hours after the void had stopped burning, the Fleet Admiral couldn’t stop shivering about the gigantic slaughter which had occurred there. For a couple of hours, they did not have accurate records of what had happened, as he and the other surviving fleets had been too busy fleeing. But then Sliscus’ subordinates had delivered to them the last moments of the flagships.

These were memories which would haunt him until his death. Fitzgerald had done some ugly things in his life, but watching Moonblitz burn to death as his psychic strength failed him was some very ugly stuff. Kalmar’s death had not been easy either. In the last five minutes when the *Gold Triumph* had been crippled, mutiny had spread from prow to stern in the corridors of the Grand Cruiser. But these vids and tech-sorcery stuff were nothing compared to what had happened to the *Crimson Impalement*.

From the moment he had met the pirates of Commorragh and Shaa-Dom, Fitzgerald Tanaka, supreme commander of the Poker Fleet, had arrived at an adamantium-strong conviction: the long-ears were masters of torture and agony, and nothing humanity could do had ever been able to challenge them in their ‘domain’.

Watching Bloodweaver and his entire crew be devoured alive by a swarm of carnivorous insects had shattered this conviction.

Humans, it turned out, could very well teach the Eldar and the other species of Pavia the true meaning of fear.

The voices which had been raised above the general tumult of panic had been abruptly and totally silenced. For this, the Poker Admiral supposed he could feel generous towards Sliscus. The odds of a widespread mutiny, not insignificant after the final destruction of the Kalmar fleet, had diminished to non-existence.

Maybe the enemy human commander could make mistakes.

“Tell me, Israel. Have we been able to derail the enemy’s offensive?”

Judging by Phineas’ offended expression, the opinion of his second-in-command was not difficult to guess. But for the moment Fitzgerald Tanaka wasn’t interested in bluster and praises. He wanted a stark, blunt assessment.

“No, Admiral. The enemy’s plan has not been derailed. At best, I think we must have forced them to cancel some moves and activate a few contingencies.”

Tanaka hissed between his teeth. It was as he’d feared.

“Come on, Goldsmith! Stop being a defeatist! The enemy has failed to catch us in their double envelopment!”

The intelligence officer stared emotionlessly at his counterpart.

“May I remind you that the enemy destroyed six entire fleets without those two task forces? Or that the naval detachments in question belong to the Ecclesiarchy and the Imperial Navy? We are not facing a small alliance of the Mechanicus and the Astartes, Phineas. We are facing a full muster of all the important military organisations of the Imperium.”

Tanaka had to acknowledge the point. The Mechanicus space assets were outnumbering the rest of the warships by a large margin, but several boarding operations had revealed the presence of Imperial Guard elite units fighting with the dreaded Skitarii and fanatical Frateris Templars. There had even been several fragmented reports of soldiers bearing the infamous ‘I’, though they had no survivors and no information to analyse.

“As for their ‘failed’ envelopment, yes they failed to catch us and Grand Admiral Jaeger Day in the rear, but they suffered no losses from this failure and it has not slowed down their rhythm of operation. Our stations and defensive traps are falling without inflicting any losses, the small pirate squadrons are getting slaughtered, and we lose all our supply bases. The *Poker Base*, the *Gambling Den*, the *Ill-Gotten Gains*, the *Palace of Pain*, the *Sun Freedom*, the *Golden Ark*, the *Cradjath Brakorth*, the *Scrapzyardz*...they are all gone or in enemy hands. The combination of long-range carrier attacks, asteroid pummelling, Nova bombardment and assault from troops in carapace armour has wiped out our defences.”

The eyes of Phineas flashed with loathing and anger. It was him who had suggested that as long as the Imperium didn’t use its Space Marines to lead their boarding forces, the enemy would have to pay an extravagant price in blood and resources to take them the old-fashioned way.

This estimate had been *extremely* optimistic, to say the least.

“I know our supply situation is...less than optimal,” saying it in a calm tone was taking all of his control. As everyone among his officers knew, the supplies they had loaded the fleet with before fleeing in direction of the *Palace of Jasmine* were all they would have for a very, very long time. Tanaka was certainly not counting on regaining control of the vast stocks of ore, fuel, plasteel and spare parts accumulated during his career of piracy. “But from their actions in the last thirty-six hours, I think we have ample evidence their intentions aren’t friendly. And Sliscus has expelled everyone save his captains from the *Empire of Sin*. We have no choice but to fight here, with the combined might of six full fleets.”

And that included the slimy piece of grox-shit calling himself Pius Hoth. Tanaka didn’t doubt the ‘Supreme Ecclesiarch’ would have loved hiding in Sliscus’ shadow until the threat was gone, but the chairman had not given the former Cardinal that option.

Fitzgerald had thought about leading the cyborgs of the Mechanicus on a merry chase initially, but the imaginative destruction visited on Bloodweaver and Moonblitz had convinced him this idea wouldn’t work. For all his implacable ruthlessness, he was fairly sure the top commander of the enemy wasn’t a Mechanicus Archmagos.

“I know, Admiral, but our fleets have never manoeuvred together before today. The attack on Pandaimon was to consist of thirteen individual fronts, so we saw no need to work on a combined fleet formation.”

It was yet another mistake that was now coming back with a vengeance.

“Too bad the Orks are all dead,” his second muttered. “We could have used their ram ships to disrupt their formation.”

Fitzgerald nodded grimly. The gigantic fleet bearing down on them was a marvel to behold if you liked perfectly laid out fleet formations. There were two Ark Mechanicus, one overly large battleship, ten smaller battleships of different classes, surrounded by an imposing sea of void predators. There were Grand Cruisers, Battlecruisers, dozens of first-rate Cruisers, and his ship augurs had failed to count the full number of escorts like the Frigates and the Destroyers. Starfighters, by a conservative estimate, were likely well over ten thousand.

This fleet was intact, and given the pause of two hours the main body had taken before accelerating towards the inner corridor, they were well-rested too.

“We will have to strike the flagships first and pray the confusion will disable their fleet.”

“Admiral, the biggest battleships significantly outrange all our ships save Lakadieth’s warships. And I’m not confident at all we will be able to follow this strategy if the enemy decides to board our flagships with Astartes and guards with carapace armour and Krak weaponry.”

“We can’t use our fleet formations without creating big holes the enemy will be able to exploit.” It was a fact, as much as he wished it wasn’t so. “If we begin with the escorts, we will never see the end of it. There are too many non-capital warships. No, we must disable the command structure of the enemy. We must break their plans in the fires of war. If they begin to react to our moves, we will have a chance to gain the upper hand.”

“Five minutes until we enter the extreme torpedo range of the enemy. Ten until the modified Nova cannon will be able to fire effectively.”

Fitzgerald Tanaka muttered a prayer to the Gods of Poker, assuming they existed, to give him a bit of the luck he had accumulated during tens of thousands of games. His fleet was sailing with him. A mighty fist of guns and technology he had gathered hull by hull, raid by raid, triumph by triumph. His beloved *Power’s Reward* was leading one Mars, two Cardinals, one Lunar, one Dominator, one Dictator and five Dauntlesses, and the capital ships were escorted by seventy-plus escorts and four hundred starfighters. It was generally enough to convince Civilised Worlds to surrender without a shot fired. Today it was all that stood between him and ignominious defeat.

“We will prevail.” Tanaka opened the general vox-frequency to all his warships. “We will win this fight. Our enemies are fighting for feeble concepts like honour, devotion to their God-Corpse, and respect within their insipid hierarchy. But we are fighting for far nobler purposes! We fight for greed! We fight for plunder and the pleasure of conquest! We are the predators of the stars! HOIST OUR BLACK FLAGS!”

Everywhere on the different ships, slowly at first, words were sung. Words no man alive could truly remember the origin of, but that every pirate knew by heart.

“Yo ho, haul together, hoist the colours high. Heave together, traitors and heretics, never shall we die...”

And then something struck the transparent walls of the *Poker’s Reward’s* bridge. The walls resisted, for his Corinus-class Grand Cruiser had been built tough...but Tanaka froze in terror at the sight of a gigantic reptilian machine staring at him from less than ten metres away.

He saw the gigantic wings. He saw the missiles. He saw the huge maw opening and the inferno burning in the metallic furnace.

And as the screams of panic once more spread, the Fleet Admiral remembered a proverb his long-dead mentor had told him to keep in mind.

“Here be dragons.”

Two seconds later, he and all his men on the bridge were dead.

**Autarch Ulion Lakadieth**

“They have done it again.”

“Yes,” Ulion replied. Because, really, what could one answer as the fleet of Fitzgerald Tanaka was decapitated by an attack they had not seen coming? And the worst part was that it was the third time in a very short period the defenders of Pavia were caught totally by surprise. Once, you could find excuses. Twice, it wasn’t a coincidence, by the spear of Asuryan. And three times, it was better to assume your opponent was predicting your moves and had your life in his hands.

The Autarch of Craftworld Lugganath was exhausted. Part of it was due to not resting from the moment the invasion had started, but at this moment he knew it was just not physical fatigue which was weighing heavily on his shoulders. The problem was in his head too.

He had spent so much time trying to anticipate the actions of the enemy commander, and in the end, he still had come up with coming.

“I think we can all agree that our chances to inflict a decisive defeat to our opponents have just disappeared.” Ulion remarked as three huge explosions tore apart the fleet which had belonged a few moments ago to one Fitzgerald Tanaka. Between the dozens of escorts destroyed and the strange mechanical flyers having decapitated the fleet, it did not take a Farseer to realise this fleet was gutted. Worse, the surviving starships were trying to change course and many were trying to join the other fleets of their species, increasing the confusion, the lack of discipline, and naturally the number of fatal collisions.

“We can still win.” A Howling Banshee spoke in a voice full of hesitation. “We still have five fleets to-“

As if Cegorach had been challenged to make the situation worse, this was the moment the *Pillow of Jasmine* chose to open fire. But the fortress didn’t target the enemy fleet – which was out of its range anyway. It struck the warships of the cowardly Mon-keigh calling himself Ecclesiarch or some other nonsense.

Three heartbeats later, the rest of the Rashan fleet, three Unpredictable cruisers and one hundred Comet destroyers, imitated their brethren. As they were right behind the Hoth Fleet, it was impossible to miss...and indeed they didn’t. In a single, coordinated salvo, starships began to explode, vent air and debris, and break formation to try to escape their assassins.

“I don’t think we have five fleets anymore.”

Ulion didn’t consider himself a pessimistic Asuryani, but between the Starfort and Calico’s fleet, he was rather sure one more fleet was going to be destroyed, and the casualties wouldn’t go to the one which had just betrayed the cause of piracy.

No, there were three left...and the Autarch decided he didn’t want to die for nothing.

“The Dark Mirror has been psychically neutralised?”

“Yes, Autarch. The procedure has been completed.”

“Good. In that case, immediately jettison it by an airlock with a few bombs and a detonator.”

“Autarch? The Duke is not...”

“If Sliscus wanted our fleet to remain loyal, he would fight and not let us die for his amusement. You have your orders and I have a difficult negotiation ahead of me.”

“It will be done, by the spear of Asuryan.”

Ulion Lakadieth closed his eyes for a moment as his subordinates departed the bridge, before adjusting the crystals in front of him to Mon-keigh...no to the human communications. Better to remember the polite way to address another species when the enemy had you at their mercy.

Five heartbeats passed and the pirate fleet to his right, the one owned by Jaeger Day, began to suffer in turn from the second bombardment of the enemy. Without doubt it would be his fleet next.

It took five more heartbeats before someone at the other end decided to answer.

The quality of the image and sound was below average, but superior to the communications of the human pirates. It was sufficient anyway to detect the presence of a young-looking human female in ornate golden power armour. Usually, Ulion would have made a disparaging comment about anybody trying to emulate the idiocy of Kalmar, but there were many things which stopped him.

One was his survival and that of his fleet, obviously. The golden armour also looked like it was fully functional and would protect its wearer if worn on a battlefield. The third was the massive arachnid the human was petting.

Despite having excellent self-control, Lakadieth could not suppress a shiver. He had wondered if the horrible demise of Bloodweaver had been allowed by mistake or was a ‘one-use only’ weapon the enemy had wanted to test. The Autarch now had an excellent guess about the answer, and it wasn’t the one he had prayed to Isha for.

“I assume I am speaking to the commander of the forces attacking the Pavia System?” Receiving a curt nod, the Asuryani commander continued. “I am Autarch Ulion Lakadieth, and I have been informed by several shadowy contacts that there was a possibility to prevent any bloodshed between your forces and my fleet.”

“The understanding was that your fleet would stand down after your fellow Eldar got themselves incinerated.” If someone had wanted to draw the complete opposite of Sliscus, this commander would have been perfect. “Yes, I was the one who authorised those ‘shadowy contacts’. I prefer easy victories, and your defection would have fatally weakened the pirate alliance. But you didn’t contact me, and your actions didn’t help at all, Ulion Lakadieth. So tell me, why would I consider sparing you and your fleet when my battleships will have finished massacring the rest of your crippled alliance?”

The eyes were icy and the Lugganath Asuryani didn’t doubt for a moment the human female would kill him there and then. And why wouldn’t she? If she had really captured Bloodweaver’s flagship like Sliscus had implied, she must have seen the horrors of the Reaper’s slave pens and torture chambers. Most beings who discovered such sights and were in position to act militarily tended to massacre all Aeldari in the vicinity.

Pleas of mercy were useless. That left his work, tactic and best asset: ransom. Unfortunately, as long as he could remember, he was in the position of the robber, not the victim.

“I’m sure you would gain satisfaction from my fleet’s elimination, but feelings are fleeting things.” At least Kalmar, Day and Tanaka had pretended it to be true for the human race. “Material possessions are far more likely to last than any anger I have caused you. I propose to ransom myself, my fleet and all the Asuryani in this system sworn to my flag.”

For the first time, he believed he saw an emotion on his interlocutor’s face. Unfortunately, he didn’t know enough about the mortal to guess what it was.

“Your head is worth a great prize for any commander able to take it back to the proper authorities, pirate Lakadieth. And some of my subordinates have studied the records of your raids. You ransom a lot of crews, but you love to repeat that you have ruinous expenses.”

And on this point he wasn’t lying. Yes, he was keeping some baubles for himself, but the majority of what he extorted was sent to Lugganath. The Craftworld needed a lot of repairs and resources after the raid of the Primordial Annihilator which had almost destroyed them.

“Yes, but I have been in the ransom work for far longer you have been alive. There are caches...”

“Those are words, Eldar.” A new sun was born a moment later, and Lakadieth grimaced as he saw Lox’ena’s ships were turning away and trying to flee...leaving his fleet extremely alone and outnumbered. “You have given me no reason to believe your words.”

The accusation was insulting...but he was not in position to protest.

“In this case...” Sliscus was going to kill him if he survived this battle, but what other choice did he have? “I will ransom myself and all my people in exchange for a ransom of the metal your species call adamantium. I have 2.5 million tons of adamantium ingots, refined to ninety-nine percent purity, sealed and ready to be shipped in one of my secret asteroid bases.”

This time he was able to observe for a brief moment the incredulity on the female’s face, but it disappeared as quickly as it had emerged.

“You have intercepted one of the fleet-tributes of Mars.”

“A Warp Storm and several greenskins had already done great damage and left few survivors.”

And of course Sliscus had learned of it, and demanded the precious cargo be given to him in exchange for several large shipments Lugganath would need to return to its pre-disaster glory. The thought of missing this opportunity made him ill, but his Craftworld wouldn’t thank his memory if he and his fleet were wiped out here.

“Fine.” Was it regret for not being able to disintegrate his warships? Too happy to receive a positive reply, Ulion decided not to ask the question. “Change course to evade the debris to your right, my fleet won’t fire on you. Provided you say the truth, you will be able to ‘escape’. The moment the adamantium is delivered, you will have forty-eight standard hours to leave this system. Any attempt to intervene in battle against my warships or rescue other pirate fleets will result in a renewal of hostilities.”

“I will abide by these terms.”

The Autarch wasn’t stupid enough to even think about the contrary. Not far from his fleet in the void, tens of thousands of pirates were dying.

**Grand Admiral Jaeger Day**

The moment the Rashans had betrayed them, Jaeger had understood the battle was lost. Save a last-minute intervention of Sliscus, they had lost – and why would the vicious predator masquerading as a ‘respectable chairman’ decide to save their skins? The probability of winning this engagement had become zero.

They were pirates. They were traitors, criminals, betrayers and, in his case, deserters. There was no trust between them, and the fleet they had assembled followed six beings which were for all intent and purposes warlords, kings, judges, executioners and treasurers.

The instant the Poker Fleet had lost its commander, whatever discipline and strength had animated it was gone. The moment Hoth’s warships came under attack from behind, the cowardly captains reeled and panicked.

And three minutes later, Lakadieth and his fleet changed course and abandoned them, with the enemy not firing at them. It looked like the long-ear had decided to become Betrayer Number Three, since Lox’ena had abandoned them before the Eldar.

“Admiral, we have lost all our starfighters and two-thirds of our escorts!”

Jaeger Day gritted his teeth in silent loathing. It had been many, many years since he had been outmanoeuvred this badly. Usually his opponents didn’t understand what was happening before he had destroyed half of their warships, but today neither surprise, superior firepower nor tactics were on his side. The enemy was bombarding at long range, forcing them to come to them, and his attempt to bait them with starfighters had resulted in his pilots being pulverised by the concentrated fire of fifty-plus destroyers.

The enemy’s strategy was clear. Jaeger Day and his forces could close the distance and enter the range of the primary battleship’s batteries, in which case their survival was going to last less than one hour, or they could stay where they were and let the enemy take their time wiping out their squadrons.

“Break the formation and escape.” The Grand Admiral barked. “It’s every ship and captain for himself now! We are in their killing ground, and if we stay here we are all going to be destroyed for nothing!”

Jaeger would lie if he claimed the idea of betrayal had not crossed his mind too, but the odds of a Navy deserter keeping his head when there was a battlegroup of the Imperial Navy on the other side were very low...at best.

To be honest, he did not give a high chance of successful survival of the Rashans and Eldar once the invaders no longer needed them, which with the pirate forces in danger of being annihilated should come in a few hours at most.

“We are on death’s ground,” whispered someone a few metres away.

No, the fate of the two betrayers was of no interest to him personally. It was an idle musing, nothing more.

What really mattered now was avoiding capture by the Imperial Navy. Jaeger knew the fate awaiting Navy deserters, though he had not thought about it much this last century. His raids had been one-sided victories, and who would dare challenge the defences of Pavia?

The *Sovereign of Stars* shook violently. Crimson and dark lights indicating catastrophic failures began to shine in every section.

“We have lost the void shields,” if human personnel had not become so ridiculously precious in the last hours, the green-uniformed Admiral would have shot the moron who made such a useless observation.

“But we can escape this trap.” That was everything that mattered. They were on a course to reach the ruin the killers of the Imperium had made of the ‘*Poker Base*’, but this was just the first step. The minefields and psychic beacons encircling the system now had huge breaches in them; if they were not guarded well, escape was feasible.

“Admiral, our rear-guard is overtaken.” Jaeger looked at the situation and his unhappiness grew. Several of his Lunar-class cruisers had been slowed down by the survivors from Hoth and Tanaka, and now they were like grox in a slaughterhouse. Half of the pirates’ fire was hitting other pirates, as their biggest ships did not have clear lines of fire to their Imperium foes!

“The Poker Fleet has only two light cruisers left. Hoth is leading his flagship and his two Deacon-class battlecruisers on a long chase towards his *Holy Fortress of the People* station.

This was one of the stupidest ideas Jaeger had heard in the last days, and he had heard quite a few.

“What is he thinking?” Assuming ‘thinking’ was the correct expression when one spoke of the brains of Pius Hoth. “There are no secret passages in the minefields and his ‘holy station’ has a fifth or sixth of the firepower of a Condor-class bastion.” And in his opinion, that was likely too generous. “What do we have left?”

“Aside from the *Sovereign of Stars*, there are ten frigates and the Lunar-class *Myrmidon of Raids* who have escaped the encirclement.”

Jaeger couldn’t help but look at the cauldron of destruction they had left behind. So many ships, lost. The efforts of several decades, ruined in forty-something hours. Before the first attack on the *Palace of Feasting*, Jaeger Day had been one of the most powerful pirates threatening the frontiers and weak Sectors of the Imperium. He had his Executor-class grand cruiser, one battlecruiser, eleven Lunar cruisers, fourteen light cruisers, and eighty-nine frigates, with half a dozen pirate lords in service and large resources which could have supplied and armed many, many rebellions and insurrections. Now he was down to his *Sovereign of Stars*, a cruiser, and ten frigates. Someone was going to pay for this. Even if he had to live three hundred more years, even if he had to bow to xenos and monsters of the Outer Dark, the people who had ruined his fleet and his reputation would pay.

The grand cruiser shook again, more violently. This time the flashes of red and black announcing critical damage and compartment breaches didn’t double; they tripled.

“Lance batteries four and five, utterly destroyed. The torpedo compartment is impossible to reach. Lance battery seven is severely damaged. Plasma conduit in Zone Indigo is damaged. All fire-team parties of that level are trying to stymie the damage. Gun crews in X-4, X-6 and X-9 are rioting...”

“The Astartes Battle-Barge has broken formation. It’s chasing us!”

There was terror in the officer’s voice, but this time it was simply common sense. A Battle-Barge was a small battleship built to participate in planetary assaults and bombardments, and at long-range could be handled by two grand cruisers working in concert. But there was no second Executor-class grand cruiser to provide a distraction or ally with. Jaeger just had a Lunar-class cruiser and a few frigates, and the Space Marines were not chasing them alone. There were two carriers, a battlecruiser and four or five flotillas of destroyers. If they had been undamaged, his ship would not have been able to handle them. In their current state, if the pursuers managed to catch them at optimal range, they were all dead.

“Divert all the power we have left to the engines. Stop all non-essential machinery and secondary systems.”

“But...” one of his subordinates gave him a horrified expression. “We are condemning thousands of our brothers and sisters to death!”

‘Brothers and sisters’, really. In what fantasy world this idiot was living? The life of a pirate followed the laws of predator and prey, and any captain who turned his back on a rival without a large number of bodyguards was going to die in the next two seconds. It was practically a law at Pavia. Like Tanaka had said, they were united in the love of greed, plunder, and war for profit.

They weren’t friends. And they were certainly not brothers or sisters.

“And what do you think the Space Marines are going to do after they destroy our engines?” the Grand Admiral asked sarcastically. “Send us flowers?”

“Why not? Flowers are always appreciated after the Arbites organises the execution of several high-profile traitors...”

Jaeger turned his head and gaped, like all his officers and crew members. They were there. The massive giants in bright red, terrible and armed with massive bolters and blades covered in blood, were at the entrance of his bridge. And none of his guards in the corridor behind had managed to shout a warning, or if they had, it had been covered by the alarms and the shocks endured by the *Sovereign of Stars*.

“How?” No, no they couldn’t be real. They couldn’t have boarded his ship without his awareness. They couldn’t...

“Lady Weaver was generous enough to give us access to her new teleportarium. Once your void shields were disabled, it wasn’t difficult to teleport aboard your flagship...”

Jaeger Day drew the exquisite laspistol he always keept on him.

“You will never take me alive, tyrants of the Corpse-God!”

The bridge then exploded into a cacophony of blood, screams and pain, and the last thing Jaeger heard before losing consciousness was a voice full of contempt.

“The Brothers of the Red have promised to bring back your miserable body breathing, and we don’t care about your wishes, traitor.”

**Fist-of-Diamond Calico**

Calico couldn’t remember being so worried and fearful, and he was one of the few Rashans old enough to have seen their homeworld die.

The Fist-of-Diamond shivered. Unlike many of the other pirate leaders of Pavia, he had had a clue that a storm was coming. When he had tried to contact Angalifu and the other Metal-Crafters two days before the invasion, a short message had informed him all the Rashans who were repairing the *Palace of Feasting* half a system away were prisoners of war. The kidnappers – who had identified themselves as the Heracles Wardens – had presented him a choice: he could cooperate, and he and every member of his species would be spared. Or he could try to fight. The mysterious figures had been very clear this defiance would result in an outcome of tears and annihilation.

Calico had hesitated before accepting. There had been enough evidence to be sure the three thousand Rashans were still alive, but Calico was not a lowly apprentice. He was the highest-ranked of the Rashan survivors.

It was his duty to ensure the survival of the Rashans since the Great Syndicate of the Old Forests had entrusted him with this sacred mission. If he had to sacrifice three thousand to save four hundred sixty-seven thousand, then Calico would do so.

Ultimately, the Rashan commander had accepted. With the benefit of hindsight, he was really glad he had done so. Yes, not warning Sliscus and the others had been a great betrayal. But what could he have told them? That there was an imminent attack? When Tanaka had warned them of this possibility three local years ago, following several counter-raids of the Imperial Navy, no one had taken him seriously. ‘Pavia is impregnable’ had been the motto and the banner of hundreds of thousands of pirates.

Calico had disagreed at the time. In competent paws, it was true the system would be a very difficult fruit to grasp. Pavia offered thousands of possible ambush sites. It had thirteen fleets to defend itself. It had formidable fixed defences.

But the patrols in the outer perimeter were rare. Most of the time, everyone who was not a Rashan was drunk, busy plotting the murder of a rival, or experiencing the dreams provided by drugs and esoteric narcotics. Without him and his Metal-Crafters, the maintenance levels would have been downright awful. Yet it did not matter that the guns were ready to fire if the gunners and commanders failed to read the instructions and ‘forgot’ to regularly train their troops.

At the same time, his thoughts had been that it would take a very, very big attack to smash apart the fleets and the other defences. It would take an attack similar to the Hrud migration which had condemned the survivors of his race to exile and his homeworld to extinction. It would take an implacable tide of violence and destruction to sweep aside every obstacle and kill every great pirate assembled there.

The humans had done it. One by one, the members of the Thirteen had perished. Qorok had been the first, and the Kroot squadrons had been butchered before they had the time to understand that death had come for them.

“The humans are about to land.” The Master of Spirituality said.

“I am old, not blind,” Calico huffed. “And remove that ridiculous hat, please. These humans have proved beyond a doubt they do not like pirates, even those who belong to their own species.”

The human called Tanaka had been totally surprised by the out-of-lotus strategy of sending strange machines across the minefield to decapitate him via a head-attack on the flanks. Fair was fair, Calico had not seen it coming either. Kalmar had been confirmed dead. Jaeger had officially been captured, and his deserter status guaranteed him a horrible demise. If Hoth managed to escape for a local day, Calico would eat the tricorn of his fellow Rashan.

No, being a human pirate was no protection from these newcomers. So it was better to not indulge in piracy-supportive behaviour.

“But I love this hat!”

The shuttles chose this moment to land in the vast docking facility of the *Pillow of Jasmine*, and rapidly they opened to let small groups of Rashans return to their home.

Calico sighed in relief. Barring a Sliscus-level method of reasoning, it was a good indicator the humans were going to keep their word after all.

He still raised his paw to tell his strongest warriors they had to be prudent. Yes, the Rashans looked in good health and weren’t in chains, but Pavia had taught everyone there were an infinity of traps in the galaxy, and not all were detectable by eye or scent.

Obviously, the humans had no need to use tricks and traps. They had an entire fleet surrounding the *Pillow of Jasmine* and the Rashan fleet. Moreover, the transports not used by his Rashans were gunships and assault craft, and many had brought the giant ‘Space Marines’. If it came to a fight, it would take at least fifty Rashans to wound one, and that was if they were ready to use anti-tank ordnance inside the station. And the fleet outside would in all likelihood make sure they were all dead before they could say ‘Lotus’.

Calico knew all that...and couldn’t help but be greatly intimidated when three of these giant warriors approached, surrounding a more ‘normal’ human in golden armour. Of course, there was an even larger machine of war behind the quartet. One the humans called ‘Dreadnought’.

Calico shivered again as the scent of the golden-armoured female became more and more powerful. Certain humans smelled of blood and smoke, especially the pirates here at Pavia. Others smelled like disease, excrements, and a few thankfully understood the concept of perfume. But this human...she smelled of insects. And it was not the remains of someone who had been in contact with insects a few days ago. The insects were still there, in her cloak and on her back.

The faint golden light surrounding her body was even more suspicious. What was this strange ability? For his sake and that of the Rashan species, Calico hoped it was controllable. He had seen a human psyker blow up twice, and it was always hard to put down whatever abomination crawled out of the corpse.

Trying to show a bravery he didn’t have in his bones, the Fist-of-Diamond stepped forwards in bipedal position. He must look really tiny, even the baseline human had a good four heads on him.

“I am Calico, Fist-of-Diamond of the Rashans.” He introduced himself.

“Pleased to meet you, Calico. I am Lady Taylor Hebert, General of the Imperial Guard and commander of the fleet which has attacked this system.”

Calico sniffed. He had no means to verify if the human was saying the truth, though she had no need to lie to him. She could be a slave of the Space Marines and it would make no difference at all for him and his people.

“What do you want...General?”

“For the short-term, I want to tow your Malta Starfort out of this war zone.” The female human declared in an imperious tone. “The *Pillow of Jasmine* is intact, but we have cornered Sliscus in the system’s core and I doubt he is going to surrender peacefully.”

“He won’t,” Calico was not a specialist about the Serpent; those who wanted to ‘study’ the Duke of Commorragh disappeared and were never seen again. “Sliscus is not Bloodweaver, but surrendering to humans would cost him all his fame and influence.”

“I will ask him once.” The General didn’t sound disappointed. “If he refuses, he will die like the others.”

Calico opened his mouth to say killing the leader of the Sky Serpents wasn’t going to be easy, but he closed it instead. These humans had penetrated so deep into Pavia, they must have some clues on every potential opponent. If they believed they could defeat the chairman of the Pavia pirates, who was he to tell her it was impossible?

“For the long-term, I want you to employ your skills and those of your Rashans in technology-related affairs. You will keep the *Pillow of Jasmine* in full ownership until I find an acceptable planet to settle you on, under the condition of having twelve Mechanicus observers aboard. Officially, I will be your protector and your liege. You, Calico, will be the chief of the Rashan Protectorate, under the aegis of the Imperium of Mankind.”

These were pretty words in the flowers of Lotus...

“OF COURSE YOU WILL HAVE TO WORSHIP THE GOD-EMPEROR AND BUILD A CHURCH.”

“Damn it, Pierre...what did I say about letting me speak?”

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

The Supreme Arch-Ecclesiarch of the People had hated a lot of the pirates using the Pavia System as their lair, but at this moment his loathing for one in particular knew no bounds.

“SLISCUS!” Pius Hoth shouted before the Dark Mirror. “SLISCUS! ANSWER OR I SWEAR IN THE NAME OF TZEENTCH I WILL-“

The dark glassy substance turned transparent, revealing the Eldar on a throne of screaming faces. And naturally, the creature was smirking.

“Who is calling for me at this late hour? Ah, it’s the Supreme-Ecclesiarch, the Voice of God, the great Pius Hoth himself!”

“Stop pretending you haven’t observed the battle from your quarters inside the *Empire of Sin*, Serpent!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, dear.” The Eldar made an appeasing sign....and bared his teeth in an expression where respect and fairness had no place. “What has gone wrong, Hoth? You look a bit redder than usual...”

“You know what’s wrong, you sad excuse for a traitorous rattlesnake! The materials you sold me were of incredibly poor quality! And the slaves I purchased have all died before reaching the altar!”

“That is a serious accusation to make against my sublime greatness,” the Duke of Commorragh replied with the same smirking expression and a bored attitude. “The slaves and the materials looked perfectly fine to me last time I checked.”

“Well they didn’t look fine to me!” He screamed in return, and this time, to his satisfaction, the Eldar’s smile disappeared.

“Mind your tone, Mon-keigh,” the Eldar had abandoned the charade of benevolence, and his voice was cold, very cold. “I will freely admit I may, may have stockpiled the blue stones you wanted so much with several significant quantities of Death’s Kiss powder.”

Pius Hoth became livid. Death’s Kiss powder was a substance which became extremely unstable the moment it was exposed to high levels of psychic activity. The materials he had used to prepare the daemon summoning and the sacrifices had all been contaminated with it. No wonder there had been so many accidents and all his aetheric activities had collapsed so catastrophically.

“But this can’t be a problem for you. Because you certainly didn’t use those onyxes, blue stones and crystals, or rare substances to prepare something aetheric in purpose, didn’t you?”

He knew. Hoth had few doubts left before activating the Dark Mirror, but he had none now. Sliscus was aware of his allegiances, and had deliberately sabotaged him.

“What did you do to the slaves? Some sort of Blank poison? An anti-empyreal micro-bomb imbedded in their skulls?”

“You wound me, my treacherous subordinate.” The smirk was back, and it was more annoying than ever. “I used an ancient toxin called the Despair of the Thirst.”

Explosions resonated in the distance, and the floor trembled. Hoth ignored it.

“You ruined everything. You ruined my plans.”

“Hum...maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t. To be honest, our unwanted guests crushed your destroyers and the majority of your big stratagems without me raising a single finger to help them.”

“I think you would have preferred my plans to what is about to follow,” Hoth for a second could show the ‘chairman of nothing’ a vicious smile. “There is a massive cultist fleet waiting three light-years away from Pavia. Should I give a signal, and I gave it one hour ago, they will know I have failed and will sink this system into the Warp. And you will be torn apart together with the Mon-keigh you despise so much.”

He had expected many things from the Duke after this little improvised speech. Anger and fury had been the feelings he had bet on, but despair or shock would have worked fine too.

Sliscus instead showed...pity? Then he seized a glass of poisoned wine and fondled the breasts of the Eldar female which had brought him the brewage for several seconds.

“My poor Hoth, if your uninspired life wasn’t about to end today, I would advise you to stop serving the blind Fate-bird and retire from your career of piracy.” The leader of the Sky Serpents stated once he had satisfied his sexual gestures. “A lot of things you have said are...a bit outdated. The moment my agents informed me there was a Shadowpoint close to my bases, I sent a few of my starships to nearby worlds of the Expanse, and I’m afraid the fleets of the Primordial Annihilator which were supposed to correct any failure of your part aren’t very discreet. It was extremely easy to discover their mustering points. Your allies have really no concept of operational security, you see. They should take lessons from the forces assailing us. Now that is a properly executed invasion. No, all those fleets are gone. I personally participated in their destruction.”

Hoth wanted to skin the Eldar alive and torture him until there was nothing but a broken mass of flesh at his feet and all that was left was feed the soul of the Serpent to powerful daemons.

“And your accusation I despise your species is completely ridiculous. I have many female humans in my harem, and I can tell you in all confidence I love them as much as love my Eldar concubines. It is not an absolute truth, but they tend to last far longer than my Eldar favourites. Perhaps because they are more loyal and trusting than the younger generation from Commorragh and the Corsair fleets.”

Hoth had committed many atrocities and acts the Ecclesiarchy considered heresies of the highest order, but the very idea of imagining this arrogant Eldar with human women gave him the urge to vomit. It was...it was a perversion of galactic order. It was unnatural! And yes, there were plenty of rumours floating around, but Pius Hoth had assumed that was all they were: rumours. Bloodweaver was flaying and torturing all humans who fell into his hands, and the servant of Tzeentch had seen no reason to assume the same wasn’t true for Sliscus.

“You can mock me, but you are in the same desperate situation I am.”

Sliscus sighed.

“I want to continue this little game, but if you don’t realise your life expectancy is measured in human minutes by now, you’re even more stupid than I assumed when I sabotaged your supplies. No, Pius Hoth, I am not in the same desperate situation you are. My fleet is intact, and I have the *Empire of Sin* to protect me and my assets. You, on the other hand, have...one of your battlecruisers about to break in half any second now, and your old battleship. Your flagship, the *Will of Hoth*, in case you haven’t noticed, has been boarded by the fearsome Astartes and several platoons of Inquisitorial Stormtroopers. If you want my advice, it would be in your best interests to kill yourself immediately. For some reason, I don’t think they are going to be pleased to have the confirmation that you serve the deranged volatile. A Traitor Cardinal, a Pirate Admiral and a Sorcerer of the Primordial Annihilator? I saw an Imperial execution of someone accused of a tenth of your crimes, and it took the man ten days and ten nights to die...”

“And then my patrons will be really, really displeased with you. You have ruined many, many plans, ‘Duke’ Sliscus.”

The Eldar raised his glass in salute.

“And I will continue to ruin them. I am Traevelliath Sliscus of the Sky Serpents, and in my domain, my word is law and I reign with elegance, kill boredom and raise unpredictability to new heights. Now do me a favour and do not cut the mirror-connection. I want to watch your violent and pathetic demise.”

Loud impacts and gunshots echoed not far from the dark chamber. And while he wasn’t interested in weapons per se, Pius Hoth knew he hadn’t issued his guards weapons making those kinds of noises.

“May your soul rot in the Warp for all eternity!” Hoth cut the communication and ran out of the alcove-room where the Dark Mirror had been hidden. Quasi-instantly, he tripped over a body...a body which happened to be the corpse of one of his senior slave-bodyguards. And when he raised his head, it was to see five bayonets directly pointed at his throat.

“Gentlemen, it isn’t what it looks like.”

“Pius Hoth, in the name of the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition, you are under arrest. Guards, if he tries to speak again without authorisation, gag him and break his bones.”

**First Naval Secretary Wolfgang Bach**

It was said to contemplate a Primarch’s weapon was to contemplate a small moment of perfection. Wolfgang wasn’t sure how much of this theological ‘truth’ was true. The object in front of him, assuming it had indeed belonged to one of the demi-gods of legends of course, was extremely advanced but it didn’t give him undiluted feelings of awe.

Obviously, it wasn’t good to be on the receiving end of this thing. The gauntlet in its ‘normal’ size looked like it was made to break down walls in a few minutes. The heavy flamer, according to the Tech-Priests, was able to release an inferno at the wearer’s discretion. And as they had learned by first touching it, the Gauntlet adapted its size depending on the DNA of the being wearing it. Oh, and it also had a teleport homer somewhere inside. The realisation that the Salamander’s head serving as decoration was made of pure adamantium was the guarantee this was a priceless relic.

“I may have to apologise to Trazyn next time we see him,” Lady Taylor Hebert said, her eyes never wavering from the freshly repainted green Gauntlet. “His ridiculous assertion he met the Primarch Vulkan at Pavia may not be so ridiculous now that we have this piece of evidence in our hands.”

Wolfgang had to agree. And he had to admit, the idea filled him with exaltation. Many of the God-Emperor’s glorious sons had disappeared in the decades after the Horus Heresy. To learn one had been in the very system they were fighting in was extremely promising. But he also had to be realistic.

“Unfortunately, we don’t know when the Necron met the Primarch. For all we know, it may have been during the Great Crusade. And Bloodweaver might have recovered a relic the Lord of the Eighteenth Legion gave to one of his sons when the planet was made compliant by the Salamanders. Eldar are really long-lived.”

The insect-mistress closed her eyes for a couple of seconds, a miniscule evidence of fatigue when thousands of men and women were utterly exhausted by the actions of the last hours.

“Epistolary Hendrik is on his way to send an astropathic call to the homeworld of the Salamanders. Hopefully, we will get an answer from the sons of Vulkan soon.” The Basileia of Nyx yawned. “Has Lakadieth paid his ransom?”

“Yes, he has,” Wolfgang savoured the irony of a xenos specialising in ransoming humans finding out the gun was against his temple for once. “Two and a half million tons of adamantium are yours, as he promised.”

“Good.” The fighter ace knew for sure the Lady Nyx and the Eldar were never going to be friends, not after news of what had been discovered inside the *Crimson Impalement*. “Make sure he is gone within the next few hours. I don’t want him anywhere nearby while we deal with Sliscus.”

“I sincerely doubt the ‘Autarch’ would try to negotiate with the Duke. The Sky Serpents are not a pirate fleet renowned for their forgiveness and tolerance of betrayal.”

“Maybe not,” the General agreed. “Still, I think it’s better to not tempt the xenos into doing anything we would all regret. The other pirates?”

“Hoth is in Inquisitorial custody. Jaeger has been transferred onto a Navy prison-ship. Both will be kept neutralised until the time comes for their interrogation...and their execution.”

Honestly, he was quite surprised the Astartes and the Inquisition had taken the two pirates alive. Maybe their long successful careers of piracy had dulled their instincts. Nothing else could explain the fact they were captured, because the fate the top authorities of the Imperium had in mind for traitors, deserters and heretics was infinitely worse than being devoured alive by a swarm of insects.

“The Siren?”

“The Siren flagship is trying to evade our pursuit by taking refuge in the outer asteroid belt. The Inquisition has sent the majority of its naval assets and requisitioned several Mechanicus ships for the hunt. Since all the escorts and the lesser warships of Lox’ena have been sacrificed when we cornered the six pirate fleets, if they manage to catch up with the *Choral*, they will be able to slow it down and capture it.”

“Let’s hope the Ordo succeeds. The pirate-admirals of Pavia were able to gather armadas by fear, talent and their names. Except those I have sworn to spare, I’d rather see these criminals dead and gone. It is unlikely for the humans, but certain races amongst these xenos might be able to live centuries or thousands of years for all we know. I don’t want the descendants of our descendants to have to deal with the same problem we crushed here.”

“Piracy is not going to be seen as a risk-free career in the region anymore. Not when the Administratum and the other Adeptuses will announce that we have claimed the bounties on their heads.”

“Speaking of which...”

“For the Kroot, the Ork and the Sheed, there will be no problems. We have their heads and the wrecks of their starships. Kalmar and Bloodweaver are also going to be clear-cut cases. Their corpses might be a bit difficult to identify, but their personal possessions, their flagships and the tactical data will dispel any doubts we haven’t killed them. Hoth and Jaeger are our prisoners, and the ‘alive’ bounty will be delivered promptly. The problem is for Moonblitz and Tanaka. In the former’s case, the world-flame burned everything, and we have no corpse, no flagship, and little evidence to give in addition to the battle-records. As for the latter...we are still searching, but the *Poker’s Reward* broke in many, many parts, and suffered catastrophic mechanical malfunctions. It is very unlikely we will find the ‘Fleet Admiral’ in this mess.”

“If it’s all we can claim, it’s all we will claim,” Wolfgang was certain most people would not be so jaded when it came to so much money. Of course, not every man or woman was a Sector Lord or Lady. “And when it comes down to it, I am not doing this for the bounties, though they will provide a nice profit when Operation Caribbean ends.”

Their eyes were no more on the Gauntlet, but the inner system thousands of kilometres away before them. With the stars to provide light and the momentary cease-fire in the assault on the Pavia’s defences, the natural spectacle was awe-inspiring.

“The Archmagi want ten more hours to tow away the *Pillow of Jasmine* and the more problematic wrecks.”

“They will have them. A lot of the crews need rest, and the repair ships are working overtime on the damaged ships.”

“They are doing their best...and at least the ships are repairable.” Two destroyers and one frigate had been devastated so badly in the last engagement that even for the technology-loving cogboys, there was no hope of rebuilding those hulls to their former glory. But even though the losses were ridiculously light for a battle of this magnitude, there were over thirty warships damaged to varying degrees, and this had an effect both on the operations’ rhythm and the real strength of many squadrons.

“I’m not exactly excited at the idea of giving more time to our enemy to finish whatever plans are in motion.” The insect-mistress admitted in a tired tone.

“I really want to say it will make a difference if we attack now, but logically it won’t. The Eldar has not raised a finger to help his fellow pirates, and whatever strategy he decided to use against us, it had likely already begun before we crushed the second enemy counter-attack.”

“And naturally it makes no sense. If indeed he understood our strategy from A to Z, why not warn the other pirates? When it comes down to it, while the last fleet has five battleships, it is seriously lacking in proper escorts. The successive defeats of the other pirates have seriously weakened his ability to defend the inner system from us.”

“The only reasonable scenario I have been able to imagine is that the Duke Sliscus believes he will be able to beat our entire force alone and unsupported.”

“Well if he thinks that, we will just have to disabuse him of that notion, won’t we?” The expression on the general’s face was more annoyed than truly worried. “Ten hours to rest, and we move on to sever the head of the Serpent.”

**Duke Traevelliath Sliscus**

“At last, they are moving. The comedy, no, the great and glorious battle, is about to begin. On one side the merciless brutes, the young ignorant children slaughtering their way across the galaxy, the humans! On the other side, the genial, the sublime, the prodigious, the great and magnificent Duke of Commorragh, the jewel of a dark civilisation, Traevelliath Sliscus!”

The leader of the Sky Serpents finished his little presentation speech before wondering one thing aloud.

“Was I too partial in the announcement of the participants?”

“You called them ‘Humans’ and not ‘Mon-keigh’, lord,” Kresthekia replied. “I think the arena masters of Commorragh would call you too partial in your opponent’s favour.”

“Yes, you are right,” Sliscus agreed in a fake aggrieved tone before baring his teeth and giving a large smile. “Alas, one must try to warm up the audience, no matter how one-sided the upcoming confrontation promises to be.”

“One-sided for whom, I wonder?” Tshaelgu interjected with an uncomplimentary tone and an expression where no respect was visible. “The entire outer system is lost. Out of thirteen fleets, nine have been entirely destroyed, and the only reason Lox’ena’s warships are not on this list is because her flagship fled the battlefield first. The Rashans, horrible furry lesser creatures, have betrayed the cause and stabbed many fleets in the back. Lakadieth didn’t fight for the Mon-keigh, but he didn’t fight against them either. So that makes nine fleets entirely destroyed, one fleet nearly annihilated and two which have betrayed us and can’t for good reasons be counted upon. We are surrounded by a massive fleet which has twice the number of our battleships we do and easily five more times cruisers and escorts!”

“When you present it like that, it’s true our enemies have a slight numerical advantage in numbers and mass,” Sliscus conceded generously. “But you don’t need to worry; I have complete confidence in my strategic skills.”

“You have complete confidence in yourself?” Tshaelgu repeated like a specimen suffering from an acute lack of brain power. “Are you completely crazy or have the drugs addled what is left of your senses?”

“Careful, Gourmet,” The Duke of Commorragh warned his second. “My drugs are making this dour wait more bearable. And they don’t ‘addle’ my senses. They stimulate them, increase them to ecstasy, and bring untold potential to my veins.”

“I think he was expecting you to deny the ‘crazy’ part, lover,” Khoryssa chuckled.

“I was expecting him to have a plan!” Tshaelgu snarled. “But it’s obvious the supposed ‘exploits’ and ‘victories’ of Traevelliath Sliscus are lies or complete fabrications. The self-proclaimed ‘Serpent’ is nothing but a thin-blooded nullity. You are a coward, and even Lakadieth is ten times the Aeldari you will ever be. You hiss and spit poisonous words, but whenever it is time to do something dangerous, your blade is always devoid of blood...”

Sliscus used this priceless opportunity to seize two daggers and launch them right into each eye of his unruly second-in-command. Tshaelgu the Gourmet fell on his back, dead with a pleasant expression of terror and surprise on his insipid face.

“He was evidently mistaken,” Sliscus grinned to the dozens of spectators having witnessed the elimination of this irritating treacherous lieutenant. “I now have blood on my daggers. And this once, I’m willing not to clean it up. Does anyone volunteer to test if my sword is as cutting as it should be, or must I leave the poor blade to rust in its scabbard?”

Every conversation and whisper stopped, and more than a couple outright forgot to breathe.

“No? What a pity. Khoryssa dear, what were we talking about before Tshaelgu was afflicted by a fever of mutiny?”

“I think the subject was what to do about the irritating visitors Pavia has been forced to entertain during the last cycle.”

“Yes, I think it was indeed this military dilemma we were supposed to discuss calmly and with good humour.” Sliscus sighed. “Now as amusing as the succession of defeats suffered by the pirates of the system have been, I’m afraid the climax of this tale relies on my sublime talents breaking the hopes of these invaders and turning their victory into feelings of despair so deep and dark they will beg me on their knees to kill them before their mortal bodies succumb to the cruel cycle of entropy.”

The Duke of Commorragh clicked his fingers, and a dark screen materialised from the very void, establishing contact with the Haemunculi and the Dread Artisans he had negotiated for Project Star’s Scream.

“The time has come. Activate the anti-empyrean fields, bring the Dark Nova generator to full power...and reveal the Sliscus Cannon to our visitors.”

Sliscus laughed, and this time he was pleased that all the audience was laughing with him.

“The *Empire of Sin* will advance and destroy the enemy. Now!”

And for the first time since he had torn the Space Hulk from the void, the gargantuan mass of wrecks and metal moved under its own power.

**General Taylor Hebert**

“Omnissiah preserve us...”

Religious prayers and calls to deities had annoyed her more times than she was able to count in the last five years.

Still, when the *Empire of Sin* was surrounded by a purple-black corona and began to move, Taylor had to admit deep inside it was an appropriate reaction.

The *Empire of Sin* wasn’t supposed to be able to move under its own power. Hells, it wasn’t supposed to be able to move at all! Not without catastrophic consequences for the people inside anyway. It wasn’t a Malta-class or a Ramilies Starfort. It was a conglomerate of thousands if not tens of thousands of Warp-capable ships which had been stuck to each other by the vagaries of the Empyrean.

More importantly, the *Empire of Sin* was huge, roughly one hundred times the size and mass of a Mechanicus-built Ramilies. And the largest class of super-fortresses the Imperium had the industrial capability to build weighed approximately two hundred and forty million tonnes. It went without saying the Ramilies had no conventional drives of any kind, and towing one across a system was a nightmarish task. Towing one across the Warp was extremely difficult too, and demanded coordination and a fleet-sized effort.

And yet, the gigantic Space Hulk was moving. Like a natural satellite passing before a planet to give the spectacle of a natural eclipse, the last lair of the Pavia pirates was shrouded in darkness, with the engines and other xenos-tech providing a corona of light on its periphery.

But there ended the similarities with a natural eclipse. The darkness was definitely not natural; it was the same sort of defence Iath Bloodweaver’s flagship had used to avoid perishing in the world-flame inferno. The corona was different shades of blue, green and violet, and even with the limited data the auspexes and the augurs had, it felt incredibly wrong.

“Force field detected surrounding the *Empire of Sin*. Abnormal energy signs detected. Five thousand drives of unknown design detected. Numerous cannons of unknown type detected.” Thayer Sagami listed with a voice in which incredulity wrestled with fear. “The integrity of the enemy hulk is holding despite the damage caused by the engines’ activation.”

“The xenos has completely lost its mind...” A Magos whimpered.

Taylor watched the hololith without giving a reply. It was true no sane Admiral would have ever considered killing so many people for a gesture like this. In one move, dozens of wrecks on the surface of the *Empire of Sin* had been disintegrated or had seen their bonds with the larger bulk of the hulk broken. In the first moments of deployment, the stream of debris was colossal, and it increased second after second.

The surface of the Space Hulk was rocked by humongous explosions. Several drives flickered on and off under the colossal strain they were no doubt experiencing.

But it didn’t change the truth: in one second, the Space Hulk had transformed from the status of decrepit, dead-to-rights Space Hulk into a mobile citadel of apocalyptic size.

“How did Sliscus manage to keep it a secret from the other pirates?” The female parahuman wondered. “This must have required decades of effort, and not exactly the discreet kind...”

“I suppose the Eldar eliminated all spies and pirates who somehow stumbled upon this project,” Gamaliel suggested.

“Central section is venting a lot of debris,” Thayer Sagami spoke.

“It looks like they have installed a sort of super-battleship Eldar cannon to go with the rest of this madness,” Wolfgang commented with a large grimace.

“They must be killing hundreds of thousands of their own crew just to give it the capacity to shoot at something,” Dennis said, visibly appalled, like everyone else on the bridge by this one-sided cruelty and folly.

“This course of action is completely illogical,” one Archmagos said via the command-link. “The Space Hulk is now mobile, yes, but it will be too slow to pursue us or make any sort of manoeuvres a starship takes for granted. And the sections the pirates must have reinforced won’t hold forever until the strain exceeds the resistance capabilities of all known materials.”

“Unless they are dabbling into witchery to move the *Empire of Sin*,” one of the Navy liaison officers muttered in a sinister retort.

But Epistolary Aslan quickly shook his head negatively.

“Impossible. If they were drawing power from the Immaterium to accomplish such a feat, I can assure you every psyker including the Librarian Space Marines, in the fleet would be busy screaming in agony. This is not the kind of action you can ignore even if you are at death’s door. No, whatever heretical technology the Serpent is using to power its Space Hulk, it is not psychic in nature.”

“That’s a relief,” Taylor admitted. Having this sort of ‘surprise’ was already bad, but if the enemy had psychic sources to feed such a gargantuan endeavour, it would have been a disaster in the making...especially because they would have to kill the psykers responsible for this, and survive the fallout. Here at least they ‘only’ needed to fight a Space Hulk made mobile by a technology no one in the fleet of Operation Caribbean had ever studied.

“Wolfgang. Suggestions?”

“Archmagos Sagami has already hinted at the safest one, I think,” her blonde-haired naval advisor answered. “In less than two minutes, the Space Hulk has lost thousands of tons, minimum, and judging by the auspexes, the problems are only going to increase as this insult to starforts continues to move. We stay over four hundred thousand kilometres away, and disperse the squadrons in a Saturn formation. We keep our current speed and evasive manoeuvres, and the losses should be limited. If the enemy is willing to destroy its own base to get at us my Lady, I see no reason why we should hinder this stupid plan.”

“Abnormal energy readings in the central section of the Space Hulk! The *Empire of Sin* is about to fire!”

Taylor narrowed her eyes. This was completely ridiculous. None of her warships were even in range to use their Nova-Cannons or similar long ranged weapons. As for torpedoes, at this distance they were only useful if your opponent was dead asleep. And to make the matters worse from a pirate’s perspective, the gigantic gun was not pointed at the Imperium’s fleet or anything she wanted to protect. Unless Eldar energy weapons could behave like Legend’s lasers, something they had failed to do in previous encounters, there was no way the enemy could shoot at them within the next ten minutes.

Prudence still recommended not being too arrogant. This Hulk was not the Ork planetoid, but the lack of precedent meant she had no idea about its capabilities.

“Archmagos, relay to the fleet commanders the need to make evasive manoeuvres, just in case.”

“Yes, Lady Weaver...”

The *Empire of Sin* fired. Everyone fell silent. The energy released by the titanic cannon was red-purple, and it raged like a hungry beast ready to devour everything in its path. It was a beacon of apocalypse, a death ray nothing would stop.

It struck the massive inner belt asteroid-minefield like an Astartes hammer meeting something fragile and continued to blast away debris of pirates’ stations, wrecked starships and quantities of defences her forces had not bothered to disable.

In less than one minute, there was now a five kilometres-wide breach in the inner belt where nothing, not even car-sized debris, had survived.

“We were not the target this time. Sliscus just wanted to make himself an exit door.”

It had been a grave mistake to think they had this xenos cornered.

“Chapter Master Dupleix is asking for a moment of your time, General.”

The insect-mistress winced. Of course Dupleix wanted to speak to her. With the dark force field protecting the *Empire of Sin*, the only option available which did not include the words ‘retreat’ or ‘fighting withdrawal’ was to send an elite force of Astartes into the Hulk and blow all critical systems into radioactive debris from the inside. It was the very kind of mission the transhuman warriors had been gene-forged for.

It was going to be incredibly costly, however. They were going to lose a lot of veteran Space Marines. But if the Serpent Admiral was able to fire the super-cannon once or twice per hour, the fleet would not survive until the Hulk disintegrated. Not if they tried to fight conventionally.

The former warlord of Brockton Bay studied the hololith. Surely there had to be a weakness, a flaw they could exploit without taking an insane percentage of casualties. But there was little she didn’t already to know, they couldn’t even use the moon to...

“Pavia doesn’t have any natural moons.”

“General?”

“Pavia does not have a satellite,” she repeated louder. “Why is there a moon Wismer and all our survey crews have missed in...”

It was lucky all warships were at battle-stations and in a loose formation, because the gravity ‘shockwave’ was overwhelmingly massive. Taylor managed to seize her side of the hololithic table and stay standing, but not everyone was that lucky and when the deck had stopped changing its inclination, there were plenty of wounded, and Medicae teams were called.

“That is no moon. Omnissiah save us, that is no moon,” Archmagos Sagami babbled in shock. “It has come out of the star...”

And none of the alarms warning of translation out of the Warp had triggered. But then as the artificial planetoid began to shine in green lights, Taylor knew the owners of this devastating weapon didn’t use the Warp, whether by choice or inability to draw power from it.

“It seems the Necrons have arrived a bit earlier than our most optimistic schedule.”

“Bah, at least it’s not going to be boring,” Dennis said, suddenly recovering his sense of humour. “The mobile *Empire of Sin* Space Hulk will go against the Necron version of the Death Star. Let’s call it the *Death Star II*.”

Taylor didn’t laugh, unlike Leet who had fallen to his knees and begun to giggle hysterically.

“Gavreel, establish hololith communications with all the Astartes commanders. I have a few requests to propose to their companies.”

**Duke Traevelliath Sliscus**

No one was laughing anymore in the war hall of the *Empire of Sin*.

“That,” Traevelliath Sliscus stated, “is a totally unfair way to win a battle.”

The fact he had been trying to execute a smaller version of this strategy a few minutes ago was neither here nor there. He was a Duke of Commorragh, and hypocrisy was a trademark signature expected from someone of his exalted rank.

“What...Duke...what is that?” Kresthekia stammered, her voice filled with unfeigned terror.

Sliscus closed his eyes, trying to remember what his best source on the subject has confided to him. The leader of the Sky Serpents was old, but he had never seen a moon-sized weapon before today.

When he reopened them, he had an answer...and he took absolutely no joy from this fact.

“I think this is a World Engine, a relic of the War in Heaven.”

“Yngir,” one of his followers spat.

“Yes,” Sliscus shortly answered. “The presence of a human invasion fleet explains so much.”

“The Mon-keigh leaders have allied with these soulless abominations?” one of the Shaa-Dom exiles who had deserted Bloodweaver’s side exclaimed.

“No,” Ehlynna retorted vehemently. “The invasion fleet has neither the time nor the means to send the metallic reapers a call requesting reinforcements. It is more likely they always intended to use this system as a meeting spot, and the pirate fleets were just in the way.”

This reasoning made sense, unfortunately it was a supposition made with little evidence or reliable information.

Unfortunately, the destruction of the other fleets he had once been able to control was now limiting his options considerably. During better nights, he would have crushed the weaker opponent and thrown the other twelve Admirals as cannon fodder against the World Engine, but that was no longer possible.

The Sky Serpents could flee. Sliscus would have to self-destruct the *Empire of Sin* once they were a safe distance away from it, and plenty of treasures would have to be abandoned. But he and his fleet could escape. The Yngir were born killers, but even their FTL engines would need time to recharge. The intra-system speed of human starships was slow, and since he was between them and the breach he had just created in the minefields and the asteroids, Sliscus was sure they could chase him for a thousand cycles and never enter firing range.

But this would imply admitting defeat. And while Sliscus didn’t care what the pitiful Dynasts of Commorragh said, acknowledging he had suffered a defeat while firing only a single shot in return would not be good for his influence or his great trade of sex, drugs and slaves.

The Sky Serpents were intact, with all ships fully repaired and loaded with the most powerful weaponry he had been able to acquire. He had the *Empire of Sin*, as unstable and inelegant as the ex-Space Hulk was.

What was that saying the last Rogue Trader he had put in his bed had whispered between two sessions of love-making? Ah yes. *Audaces fortunate juvat*. Fortune favours the bold.

“Turn us around, helmsman.” Sliscus gave a smile to the Wyches and the rest of the audience. “It seems we have an occasion to re-enact the War in Heaven at Pavia today.”

**General Taylor Hebert**

“At least it looks like we aren’t going to be in the crossfire this time.”

It was a sad day when she was of the same opinion as Leet, but in this instance Taylor was sure the feelings were shared by every person inside the *Enterprise* and probably ninety-nine percent of the entire fleet.

The *Empire of Sin* and the newly arrived Necron moon were quite evidently moving against each other. Since there was a very high likelihood the warships of the Mechanicus could not absorb enough damage to avoid being crippled or pulverised by the conflagration it was best to stay out of the way and wait for the winner of what should be a space opera in itself.

“This way we know Sliscus is utterly crazy.”

“I knew that already.” If letting your subordinates be massacred just to do a grandstanding move didn’t involve some characteristics of madness, the female parahuman would be really, really surprised. And now he was charging against an opponent that had a bigger space asset than him, with no data and information about the Necron anti-starship weapons.

There were many ways to describe this strategy, but Taylor was going to settle for ‘suicidal’.

“For now Chapter Master Dupleix and Chapter Master Izaz will have to wait before launching their attacks. It’s one thing to send them against the Space Hulk when there is no other option; it’s completely different now. Moreover I think...”

The figure she saw leaving one of the administration quarters some three hundred and fifty metres away caused her to forget what she was about to say. It wasn’t possible...but since she was well-rested, the increasing number of insects she had watching him and the fact she in the last minutes had not detected anything making her think she was subjected to hallucinations...

“You think...?”

“We have an unexpected visitor.” The commanding officer of the Enterprise announced in a voice as casual as she could make it. “I don’t remember the exact protocol, but I think we should all bow.”

“Bow?” Commissar Zuhev had an unhappy expression on his scarred visage. “With all due respect...”

“He’s here.”

The principal doors of the primary bridge opened and like her, the men and women working there for a second experienced total incredulity before prostrating themselves.

Because what else could they do before a three metres-plus transhuman shining like a lighthouse? Her own power armour had used Auramite in its creation, so she was able to recognise the metal. But it was evident the art of the Magi and Archmagi who had forged the *Angel’s Tear* had been a level or two behind the sheer level of magnificence available on Terra.

He was a giant. Whether the Dawnbreaker Guards were wearing tall helmets or not, they were smaller than the golden figure. No impression of brotherhood was emanating from him. Her insects had not been able to see another presence, but even if she had been able to prove the contrary, the newcomer gave her the impression of a lone super-predator. He didn’t need companions to be dangerous; he was danger itself.

It looked like the reputation of the Adeptus Custodes was not as exaggerated as she had thought a couple of years ago.

Because beyond question, it was a Custodes who stepped onto her bridge. The great spear, the large golden shield decorated with the double-headed eagle of the Imperium, and the Raptor Imperialis on his breastplate were perfect and giving off vibes of purity, duty and steadfastness. The red cloak which should have been completely impractical on a modern battlefield was just as regal and martially-minded as the rest of the equipment, a flag and a promise of defeat to all enemies of Mankind.

Taylor bent the knee when the golden-armoured giant was five metres away from her. A lot of people thought she was a Saint, but frankly this was a transhuman who had seen the Emperor in person and done many, many things which would likely make the Battle of the Death Star an amusing little anecdote.

“Taylor Hebert,” the voice was powerful and awe-inspiring. It was like it had always had been, and always would be. “His Majesty is pleased by your actions and wishes to give you a new mission.”

Simurgh damn it, could the day get any ‘better’? There was but a single question to ask.

“What is the Emperor’s Will?”

**Author’s note**: The Battle of Pavia will continue in Shadowpoint 7.2 after this (by my standards) evil cliffhanger.

Many questions will be answered, and the inner system of Pavia will burn in the fires of war...

Merry Christmas to all, happy holidays, and see you soon for the end of the seventh Arc...

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