**Shadowpoint 7.1**

**Black Flags in Flames**

*You have lost, Anathema.*

*Look at your Empire.*

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

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

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

*They believe you are a God.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*\*

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

**Beyond the frontiers of the Imperium**

**Acacia Expanse**

**Pavia System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**8.183.296M35**

Thought for the day: Cease purpose and die.

**General Taylor Hebert**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That this system reeks of a trap?” The Ward known as Clockblocker asked rhetorically. “Yes, I have, and I think you have plenty of good points. We got here too quickly and too easily. The Warp currents pushed us towards Pavia and 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 usual. The denizens of the Immaterium are up to something.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They have been reinforced.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wolfgang, are the pirates preparing to leave?”

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

“Yes, it is one of the possible explanations we have thought about. It is logical, when one think about it. Sliscus is likely behind this muster, and I don’t think he intends to launch a civil war between the different pirate factions of this system. I personally think he must have a spatial Webway 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 to find it.”

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

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

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

But if Sliscus wasn’t the mastermind...

“My Lady? You are searching for something?”

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

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

Wolfgang watched her with a dubitative expression.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The Astartes task force?”

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

“The Heracles Wardens?”

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

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

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

“The asteroids, the minesweepers and the carriers?”

“They are in position and awaiting your orders.”

“Leet’s project?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Shaper Qorok Trek**

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

Qorok huffed and raised his eyes in consternation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hunter Loxrukh stormed in without being invited.

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

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

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

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

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

“What sort of nonsense are they shouting?”

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

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

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

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

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

It was a feasting-catastrophe. The Kroot warships had been disposed to repel lone bored Orks and 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!”

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

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

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

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

Fear turned into despair.

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

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

The surprise bombardment had slaughtered the Battlespheres and the Warspheres. Of the lesser units, barely six could 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 unbelief at the unfolding hunting-catastrophe and broke two claws in his rage against the command wall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“DEATH TO THE HUMANS!”

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

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

“Beware! Their armour...”

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

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

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

**Scout-Brother Phanuel**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Death to his Foes!”

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

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

“By your orders, Sergeant!”

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

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

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

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

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

“It looks like they were fleeing, brother.”

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

“THEY WERE AFRAID TO FACE ME.”

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

**Mekboy Battery Commander Brukk Brukk**

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

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

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

Dis was goin' ter be funz!

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

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

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

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

Wif Blackdakka commandin' dim, they woz unstoppabul.

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

“WWWWAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGHHHHHH!”

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

“We can trust the orks to remain predictable.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“By the Golden Throne...”

“Omnissiah be praised...”

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

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

“The *Blak Dakka* has survived.”

“Yes.” The reports indicating the Ork Warboss had an uncanny amount of luck were accurate, it seems. “Inform Pierre to 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 spending the next weeks not hunting Orks aboard this Star Fort.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Enemy flagship launching new bombers and boarding torpedoes!”

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

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

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

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

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

And yet they charged nonetheless to meet their death.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“ACKNOWLEDGED.”

Isley cut the communication and turned towards Viktor.

“Now we can begin Phase 3.”

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

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

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

**Fleet Admiral Fitzgerald Tanaka**

“Oh my Gods...”

Fitzgerald Tanaka did not believe in any deity save the Goddess of Fortune, 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 where he was unable to remove the shock and the disbelief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Israel talked like it had been a genuine question.

“Yes, there is the last report of the outer stations indicated a great amount of minelayers and minesweepers. The latter are busy cleaning up the debris of Blackdakka and Brakorth fleets in the corridor, but I fear the fifty-plus starships we have never seen are busy reinforcing the minefields ‘above’ and ‘below’ us in the debris clouds. There are also like I said specialised transports. Knowing the Mechanicus ability to build monstrous machines, I would not be surprised if they had brought large ammunition stores and their God-Machines. And of course they have captured the *Palace* *of Feasting* intact and by the looks of it, the Imperials are busy towing it through the corridor with 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 said. The glare the two exchanged was one more proof these two were best kept far away from each other every day. “To take the fortress protecting our outer defences so quickly, they must have infiltrated the *Palace of Feasting,* and eliminated the Rashan and the command leadership hours before the assault began. And to move their entire fleet like they are doing, they must have excellent data on our system. They would never have risked such a large fleet against our defences otherwise. No, I think they know exactly what they are against, and they think their current strategy can annihilate the thirteen fleets with what they have.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fitzgerald allowed his fellow pirate commander to see his grimace.

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

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

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

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

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

The pirate in green uniform took a deep breath.

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

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

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

**Duke Traevelliath Sliscus**

“MWHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your Excellency?”

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

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

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

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

“No.”

“Your Excellency?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The orders will be given, your Excellency.”

The Duke of Commorragh bared his teeth.

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

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

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

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

And Sliscus laughed again.

**Marshal Werner Groener**

The General was dangerous.

And yet...no, the 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 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 the heroes were acknowledged – the salvage crew who had found the Sheed leader’s lifeless body in the ruin that had 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 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 Feasting had been towed across a corridor full of warships’ wrecks, despite the logistical and material challenges ensured. Starfighters and squadrons had gone invisible into 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 that. 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 in 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 repressed 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 join 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.

Act one: disperse the Kane particles with Kane-Pattern Particle-Dispersers Cannons in the space area you wanted to disintegrate.

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

Act 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 acknowledged as minimal.

And if it turned 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 on a trident formation and have increased speech 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 speeds.”

Let 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 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 stood, nothing remained. The world had been transformed into a monstrosity of metal and smoke, where the air was impossible to breathe and the 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.

Mariuvahn had thought naively at first this was 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 endless regrouping and contaminating new worlds. Stern measures had to be made. The bases where the Mon-keigh built and launched their defiler-fleets had to be destroyed.

His fellow Asuryani had not pleased by his actions. Cowards, all of them. They had banished him, taking 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 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 of 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 intact and operational to the Mon-keigh. 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 until 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 the deaths of a few millions 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 read the recordings 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 before.

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 on 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.

To the flames were added more flames and explosions second after second. A lot of the concentration of Kane particles had been concentrated in a 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 follow the rest of their fleet. So far, we have no sign of any survivors for the two other pirate formations.”

And it was very unlikely there would be some 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 this was with void shields at full power and a hull built to endure everything the enemies of the Machine-God could inflict to his faithful servants.

The Eldar ships relied in 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, these fragile hulls were doomed. The xenos couldn’t try an emergency Warp jump because they didn’t use this technology. They couldn’t stop the void from burning.

It was at this moment an alarm screamed. 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 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 assimilate one data-bank to know this was not a beautiful hull ritually built by tens of thousands Mechanicus Tech-Priests, but an instrument of murder and massacre.

It was surrounded in a dark shroud which seemed to soak 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 fired automatically 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 believed with ninety-one percent probability this was 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 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 its 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 explanation.

“I have not 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 his 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 in duel if 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 seconds 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 these two breeds. The Bayou moth was a fist-sized insect with a beautiful red-black shade. 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 were devouring humans. Emphasis on the devouring. A whole flight of Bayou moths could reach in the tens of thousands, and villages were sometimes wiped off the maps in a single hour. As for the Ripper spider, the yellow-blue arachnid did not create silk but borrowed in living organism’s flesh to live.

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 kill-team had a shadow of truth between them, removing this monster would be a favour to the galaxy.

“Boarding torpedoes ready to be launched,” 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...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 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 him save by personal combat, activated and in a few seconds the master of biological manipulation was a screaming torch. His servants then extinguished it with a few streams of ultra-acid.

“Someone else wants 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’ death, 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 have sent there reported success?”

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

The ground rumbled. The ground shook. And then under Bloodweaver’s astonished eyes the very ground of the bridge erupted, sending splinters and spikes everywhere. A wave of arachnids stormed 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 for the evidence to be consigned to oblivion.

His super-flamer inflicted thousands of ‘casualties’, but his was the only weapon to be somewhat effective. Splinter and weaponry killed ten or twenty insects, 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 an endless swarm surged to end his life.

Iath Bloodweaver tried to draw the dark gun to 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 closest one got from 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, dismembered bodies 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 was she was watching by the eyes of her swarm, but the outside, the spikes, the skulls and the flayed decorations were already giving an advance warning of the depravity and the evilness of Bloodweaver.

“Are they interesting things in the vaults, my Lady?” Archmagos Lankovar demanded 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 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 into 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 cleaned his skeleton of all flesh with an incredible efficiency.

Fortunately, the equipment was not edible...they were two trillion of Throne Gelts at stake – though the battleship was also an absolute evidence they had defeated the Eldar bloodthirsty monster.

“Let’s hope the bases and the 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 lubricant. 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 STC damaged 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 head. Wolfgang’s plan had so far worked to perfection, but it was one thing to watch a simulation of 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 Kroot, and then incited the Eldar to drink deep 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 remained intact.

“Abbess-Crusader,” Taylor saluted the image of the woman a few minutes after once again being seated on her command. “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 ambush him before he escaped our torpedo range. The only problem will likely to find 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 traitor Rogue Trader was defeated?”

“Yes, General. At first I was surprised that it didn’t oppose 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 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 of 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 the *Cant-Requiem* and the *Arsenal of the Omnissiah*. We will place 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 don’t have taken many prisoners until now...”

The insect-mistress chuckled. This 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 Orks 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 one more 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 import...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 about 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 fast, too soon. They must have been already badly shaken by the elimination of the first three fleets, and when we stopped the Eldar offensive dead in their 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 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, 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 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 archeotech from the Great Crusade!”

Taylor internally sighed. And here she believed the issues like those 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 the head of the opponent 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 into 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 during 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 forget that, the vids of the inferno which had destroyed Moonblitz and the rest of the Eldar counter-attack were sure to remind him and his men attacking without a solid plan this enemy 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 had not accurate records of what had happened, as he and the other surviving fleets had been too busy fleeing. But then Sliscus’ subordinates had delivered them the last instants of the flagships.

These were memories which would haunt 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 to 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, after all, could very well teach the Eldar and the other species of Pavia the true meaning of fear.

The voices who had been raised about the general tumult of panic had been abruptly had been 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 at. 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 worse, 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 had feared.

“Come on, Goldsmith! Stop being a defeatist! The enemy have failed catching 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 these 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 missed catching 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 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 piracy career. “But from their actions in the last thirty-six hours, I think we have ample evidence their intentions aren’t friendly. And Sliscus had expelled everyone save his captains from the *Empire of Sin*. We have no choice but to fight here, with the combined of six full fleets.”

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

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 this idea wouldn’t work. For all its 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 consisted in thirteen individual fronts, so we saw no need to work on a combined fleet formation.”

It was one more mistake that was now coming back with a vengeance in tow.

“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 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 able to follow this strategy if the enemy decides to board our flagships with Astartes and guards in 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 by 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.”

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 games. His fleet was sailing with him. A mighty fist of guns and technology he had gathered hull by hull, raid after raid, triumph after triumph. His beloved *Power’s Reward* was leading one Mars, two Cardinals, one Lunar, one Dominator, one Dictator and five Dauntless, and the capital ships were escorted by seventy-plus escorts and four hundred starfighters. It was enough in general 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 of 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, 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 struck the transparent walls of the *Poker’s Reward* 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 watching him 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 him.

“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. Two, 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 hadn’t 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 dozen of escorts destroyed and the strange mechanical flyers having decapitated the fleet, it did not take a Farseer to know 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 tried 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, they 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, jettison it immediately 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 conversation ahead to negotiate.”

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

Ulion Lakadieth closed his eyes for an instant as his subordinates departed the bridge before adjusting the crystals in front of him for Mon-keigh...no for the human communications. Better to remind the polite way to address another species when the enemy had you at your 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 before someone at the other end decided to answer.

The quality of the image and the sound was below average, but superior to the communications of the human pirates. It was sufficient anyway to acknowledge 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 this idiot of Kalmar, but there were many things which stopped him.

One was his survival and those of his fleet, evidently. 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 an excellent self-control, Lakadieth could not repress 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 had an excellent guess about the answer, and it wasn’t the one he had prayed 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 end the 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 these ‘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 battleship 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 here and there. And why wouldn’t she? If she had captured Bloodweaver’s flagship like Sliscus had implied, she must have seen the horrors of the Reaper’s slave pens and torture chambers. Most of the beings who discovered these 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 the ransom. Unfortunately, as long as he could remember, he was in the position of the robber, not the victim.

“I’m sure you would take 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 an interlocutor’s face. Unfortunately, he didn’t know enough 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 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...”

“These are words, Eldar.” A new sun was born an instant later, and Lakadieth grimaced as he saw Lox’ena 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 argument 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 choice was left to him? “I will ransom myself and all my people in exchange of 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 short instant the incredulity on the female’s visage, 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 of several large shipments Lugganath would need to return to its pre-disaster glory. The thought made him ill to miss this opportunity, but his Craftworld wouldn’t thank his memory if he and his fleet were wiped out here.

“Fine.” Was it a regret to not be able to disintegrate his warships? Too happy to receive a positive answer, 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 idiot 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, deserter. 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 Two.

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

Jaeger Day gritted his teeth in silent loathing. It had been long, long years since he had been outmanoeuvred that badly. Usually his opponents didn’t understand what was happening before he had destroyed half of their warships, but today surprise, superior firepower or 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 the enemy was going to take its 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 saying the idea of betrayal had not crossed his head 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 success of Rashans and Eldar to survive once the invaders had no longer need of them, which with the pirate forces in danger of being annihilated should come in a few hours at worst.

“We are in death 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 curiosity, nothing more.

What really mattered now was avoiding to be captured by the Imperial Navy. Jaeger knew the fate awaiting Navy deserters, though he had not thought about him 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 on 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 remark.

“But we can escape this trap.” It was everything which counted. 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. Several breaches in the minefields and psychic beacons encircling the system had now huge holes 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 of Hoth and Tanaka, and now they were like grox in a slaughterhouse. Half of the pirate’s fire was hitting other pirates, as their biggest ships were unable to provide clear, unquestionable targets!

“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 a sixth the firepower of a Condor-class bastion.” And in his opinion, it 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 the 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 that. 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 reputation and his fleet 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 torpedoes’ compartment is impossible to reach. Lance seven is severely damaged. Plasma conduit in Zone Indigo is damaged. All fire-team parties of this 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 is 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 had just 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 flotilla 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-existential 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 was the law of predator and prey, and any captain who turned his back on a rival without a large number of bodyguards was doing to die in the next two seconds, it was almost 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 was always keeping on him.

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

The bridge then exploded in 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 rare 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 a storm was coming. When he had tried to 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*’s half a system away were prisoners of war. The kidnappers – who had presented 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 annihilation and tears.

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 told 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 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 to plot 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 murdered before they had the time to understand 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 this ridiculous hat, please. These humans have proved beyond 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 by 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 not a 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 hold to 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 has taught everyone they were an infinity of traps in the galaxy, and not all were not 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 this was if they were ready to use anti-tank ordnance inside the station. And the fleet outside would in all likely make sure they were all dead before they could say ‘Lotus’.

Calico knew all that...and couldn’t help but be largely 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 those 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 hadn’t 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 presented himself.

“Pleased to meet you, Calico. I am Lady Taylor Hebert, General of the Imperial Guard and commander of the fleet who 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 he 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 told 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 lose 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. These humans had arrived so far inside 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 reserve 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 Void 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 not their place. “What has gone wrong, Hoth? You look a bit redder than usual...”

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

“It is a huge 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 all 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 important quantities of Death’s Kiss powder.”

Pius Hoth became livid. Death’s Kiss powder was a substance which went 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 they had been so many accidents and all his aetheric activities had so catastrophically collapsed.

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

He knew. Hoth had few doubts anymore 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 I 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 they will drown this system into the Warp. And you will be torn apart 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 for several seconds the breasts of the Eldar female which had brought him the brewage.

“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 said 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 from 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 example on the forces assailing us. Now that is a properly executed invasion. No, all these 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 there was nothing left but to 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 young generation of 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 was giving 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 this 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 by 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 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 gun shots 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 that kind 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 on 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 theology ‘truth’ was true. The object in front of him, assuming it had 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 of this thing. The gauntlet on 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 was adapting its size depending the DNA of the being wearing it. Oh, and it had also a teleport homer somewhere inside. The realisation that the Salamander’s head serving as decoration was made in 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 unwavering 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 had also to be realist.

“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 faint 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, like 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 in the next 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 in doing anything we would all regret. The other pirates?”

“Hoth is in Inquisitorial custody. Jaeger has been transferred on 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 pirates 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 greatest share 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 down it.”

“Let’s hope the Ordos succeeds. The pirate-admirals of Pavia were capable to gather armadas by fear, talent and their names. Unless those I have sworn to spare, I rather see these criminals dead and gone. It was unlikely for the humans, but certain of these xenos can live centuries or thousands of years for all we know. I don’t want the descendants of our descendants 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 Adeptus will announce 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 can’t raise 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 machines’ 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 many people would not be so jaded when it came to so much money. Of course, not every man and 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 will end.”

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 of Pavia defences, the natural spectacle was awe-inspiring.

“The Archmagi wants 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 in the last engagement so badly that even for the technology-loving cogboys, there was no hope to rebuild these hulls to their former glory. But if the losses were ridiculously light for a battle of this magnitude, there were over thirty warships damaged to diverse degree, 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 to give more time to our enemy to finish whatever plans are in motion.” The insect-mistress said 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 was likely already beginning 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 forces alone and unsupported.”

“Well if he thinks that, we will just have to disappoint him, 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 cut 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’s 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 itself to be.”

“One-sided for who, I wonder?” Tshaelgu intervened 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 warships are not on this list is because her flagship fled first the battlefield. 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 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 never be. You hiss and you spit poisonous words, but every time 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 in 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 assisted to the elimination of this irritating treacherous lieutenant. “I have now 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 rusting 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 indeed it was 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 really 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 was materialised from the very void, establishing contact with the Homunculus 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 like 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 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 was 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 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 the mass of a Mechanicus-built Ramilies. And the largest class of super-fortresses the Imperium had the industrial capacity 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 where incredulity disputed it to 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 gesture, 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 instants 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 were flickering 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 managed to keep it a secret from the other pirates?” The female parahuman wondered. “This must have represented decades of effort and not exactly the discreet kind...”

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

“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 said 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.”

“This is 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 must ‘only’ fight a Space Hulk made mobile by a technology no one had studied or properly understood in the fleet of Operation Caribbean.

“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 the Ramilies continues to move. We stay over four hundred thousand kilometres, and disperse the squadrons in a Saturn formation. We keep our current speed and evasion 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-range 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 asteroid-minefield inner belt like an Astartes hammer meeting something fragile and continued to blast 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-long hole 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 word ‘retreat’ or ‘fighting withdrawal’ was to send an elite force of Astartes inside the Hulk and blow up all critical systems into radioactive debris. It was the very kind of mission the transhuman warriors had been gene-forged for.

It was going to be incredibly costly, evidently. 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 they 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 moon.”

“General?”

“Pavia does not have any 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 properly overwhelming. Taylor managed to seize her side’s of the hololithic table and stay there, but not everyone was that lucky and when the ground had stopped changing its inclination, there were plenty of wounded and Medicae teams were called.

“This is no moon. Omnissiah save us, this is no moon,” Archmagos Sagami babbled in shock. “It has come out from the star...”

And none of the alarms warning of translation out of the Warp had functioned. But then as the artificial planetoid began to shine in green lights, Taylor knew the owners of this devastating weapon weren’t able to use the Warp, since they weren’t made of flesh and bones.

“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 finding back his humour. “The mobile *Empire of Sin* Space Hulk will go against the Necron version of the Death Star. Let’s call it the *Death 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 said, “is a totally unfair way to win a battle.”

The fact he had been trying to execute a smaller version of this deployment a few minutes ago was not here or there. He was Duke of Commorragh, and hypocrisy was a trademark signature expected from someone of his exalted rank.

“What...Duke...what is this?” 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 had not the time or 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 place, and the pirate fleets were just in the way.”

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

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

The Sky Serpents could flee. Sliscus would have to self-destruct the *Empire of Sin* once they were safely away from it and plenty of treasures would have to be abandoned behind. 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 into the minefields and the asteroids, Sliscus was sure they could chase him for a thousand cycles and never reach 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 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 ship 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 the ex-Space Hulk was.

What was this 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 replay 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 would not do 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 by itself.

“This way we know Sliscus is utterly crazy.”

“I knew it already.” If letting your subordinates be massacred just to do a grandstanding move wasn’t involving some characteristics of madness, the female parahuman would be really, really surprised. And now he was charging against an opponent having a bigger space asset than him, with no data and information about the Necron anti-starships 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 was one thing to send them against the Space Hulk when there was no other alternative; 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 had been 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...

“Moreover?”

“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 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, 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 was giving 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 on her bridge. The great spear, the large golden shield decorated with the double-headed eagle of the Imperium, and the Raptor Imperialis on its 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 secondary tale.

“Taylor Hebert,” the voice was powerful and hero-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’? And there was 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.