**Chapter 42**
**M30. 870**

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**Tanya Russ**
**Zunnion**

The bio-monster came rushing at me, unconcerned for its own survival. I put a few rounds from my bolter into it, but that didn't seem to slow it down. So, I was forced to step to the side and engage in a slashing action, trying to cut off its legs.

I got a bit of a feeling of deja vu, probably from all the times I've had to fight monsters on Fenris. This brought a bit of a smile to my lips as I managed to slice off half of its leg. However, it stumbled a bit and tried to rush at me again, screaming.

Thankfully, I had prepared a spell by this point and shoved my sword straight through the monster's heart, freezing the organ solid, then the body as well. With a twist of the blade, the entire thing shattered and fell apart into soon-to-be bloody chunks.

I would celebrate, but another one of these monsters was soon to join the first, coming at me at full speed, with its massive arm-like pincers trying to clip off my limbs. I kicked it in the lower jaw, sending it up before slashing the area just under the jaw, freezing the bonesolid and shattering it off.

The screams it gave were horrendous, so I had no problem firing a few bolt rounds into the now open wound and putting it out of its misery.

“My King,” called one of the Marines who had not been overrun by these monsters to the point that they could not fight. He pushed through, firing his gun into the creatures and saying, “The front lines are overrun, everyone there is lost. The third line is asking to advance forward to support us.”

“No,” I called. “Tell them to stay exactly where they are,” as I fired a few more shots into the oncoming horde. This operation was not moving as smoothly as we had hoped it would. Of course, many of the operations since closing the bulge had not gone as expected.

The first goal of the operations against the Rangdan was to close the gaps in the frontier, prevent any more operations by them into our territory. That had been accomplished over the course of a year and a half, and a solid frontier had now been established, which meant we could now move into the next part of the operation: pushing into their territory.

And that had not gone well, from what I've been able to get from reports from across the line. Expedition fleets had entered all along the points of contact, trying to re-establish control of systems that were starting to fall under Imperial sway or could be taken easily enough through force of arms.

We aimed to take the human population away from the aliens controlling them and cut off supplies in the region. Hopefully, we could establish a new order and line of contact, and continue this slow crawl until we figured out where the homeworld of the Rangdan was and break them.

And I meant to break them. There were few ways to get on my nerves, but wasting intelligent life for biomonsters was one of them.

But that was getting ahead of myself. Of the original six expeditionary forces sent into the area beyond the frontier, three had managed to return. The other three were missing, presumed destroyed. Complete fleets full of soldiers and equipment were gone. The fighting that the other three fleets had suffered was just as bad as one would expect. They had mauled the Imperial Navy quite well, and from what I understood, more ships were now on their way. Thank goodness this had been a probing action, and none of the actual Space Marine ships had been involved. Otherwise, well, the border could have been left undefended.

But the situation was, as it stood, not untenable. Some smaller ships had been able to get through and scout out planets on the other side of the line of contact that were lightly defended. We could take those, establish our own fortifications behind their lines. We could theoretically force the line of contact back, catch their patrols unaware, maybe surround a few of them.

So it had been decided that small operations like the one I was on were to take place: attempt to break through, take a planet, turn it into a fortress, and bleed the enemy.

Of course, I wasn't in this alone. The Wolves had the Death Guard at their side on this operation, both me and Mortarion, and we were working together again in the attempt to hold this planet. The operation so far had been a success, up until a few hours ago when the bioforms came out of their holes.

We had some defensive structures thanks to this planet once being human-occupied and run—at least up to about the start of this war. It had been, but now it wasn't exactly in that sort of situation.

Humanity on this planet was dead except for my Marines and the Valkyrie and infantry we brought along. They'd been exterminated through the use of what could be best described as bioform metamorphosis.

Exactly how this was done was still up in the air. The Mechanicus had a biodivision that was trying to figure out how this all worked, and no doubt, we would have some sort of meeting to discuss this soon enough. But for now, what mattered was that there was something administered to the people of this planet that turned them into bioforms quickly. The same had been done to several other planets that we had attempted to rescue people from.

It was likely that all expeditions would run into this, which meant the Rangdan were willing to sacrifice the people of these worlds for weapons. They were willing to do that with humanity in their own borders; they were probably willing to do that with anyone outside their borders, which was why I had ordered all Marines to wear helmets in this combat just to have some sort of safety procedure in place.

It was not an impossible idea that this bioform metamorphosis could affect my Marines or the infantry supporting us and may explain some of the earlier rumors that there was something odd going on with soldiers from this front.

It may be an infectious disease or could be some sort of poison gas. Either way, I wanted none of that to happen to my men. They may die fighting like their ancestors demanded, but I would not allow them to go down as bioforms for these creatures.

There were some oddities that had yet to be solved when the campaign first began. There had definitely been orcs and human mercenaries in their ranks, including several other species of mercenaries they had dealt with in the past. Now, we just ran into bioforms. Where had all the mercenaries gone?

My best guess, which I would propose during an actual meeting on the situation, is that those mercenaries were being withheld. The vile creatures were not well trained and could barely use the equipment they were given, which was basically none. Sure, sometimes a report came in of one that had odd mutations allowing it to use a bolt gun, but it seemed more like rare one-offs than the standard mix, possibly a leadership caste.

If that was the endless wave force that they sent in to try and wear down the enemy, Tanya imagined the mercenaries were their experts, used for operations of exploitation and holding the line.

The fact that they had not run into them since their first encounter meant they were probably regrouping, figuring out the best way to hit them with those mercenaries. It was probably a wise move for us to start hitting the enemy first. Sure, we were taking losses as our new recruits had to learn to fight these bioforms and their various subforms, but they were putting pressure on them, not allowing them to find their weakness as easily as they could. They would find something, but Tanya hoped they could keep them off balance enough that whatever way they did it would not greatly affect them. Yes, a quite large number of their fleet had been lost in the first few expeditions into their territory.

However, those losses could be made up rather quickly, and they now knew methods of getting through their territory without suffering those attacks. They had learned from that, making their loss their victory in the long run.

So, at the moment, they were still evenly matched. They didn't grasp the scale of the Imperium, and we didn't grasp the scale of their empire. All we knew was that they were xenos and they

had no problem hurting humans in their efforts. But back to the realities of Tanya's current situation.

They had been holding the area around the former capital city of this planet. Their objective was simply to draw out the bioforms and maybe, if there were any of their elite forces, destroy them as well.

As night fell, the attack began. The first wave had held out for nearly 5 hours before running out of ammo. Hey, that was a surprise, considering Tanya had thought they'd stocked up quite a bit. But they had not had a good 24 hours to build up their fortifications, so she guessed most of the ammo supply was still in the second line where she was currently standing.

Theoretically, I should have been in the third line or perhaps not in the line at all. However, I wanted to get a better grasp on the savagery of these creatures. I had never fought them one-on-one, so I figured being closer to them than the back lines would give me better knowledge of how to fight these things.

I still believed that was true. I was probably fighting these things better, though if the front line in front of me had really just collapsed and there was nothing left, that was not great. Casualties in this conflict were mounting, and I was going to have to order more Dreadnought bodies when I got a chance.

My thoughts are interrupted as three Terminators of Cataphractii variant stumble down a trench line, unleashing hell into the bioforms as they did, massive Gatling Cannon hands protecting the front as Marines behind them protect their sides and rear.

They pushed through and unleashed an array of fire into the bioforms that were coming over the wall, and tried to establish an internal line within the trenches, allowing me to back off and catch a breath. I look towards the Marine who has been sending me signals about what the third line wants to do.

"Get in contact with everyone in front of us. Find out if we really lost the first line or if they've just been condensed into their bunkers. If they're still there, don't call artillery, and if they're not, call every bit of artillery we have."

The Marine nods and runs off, giving me a moment to grab the edge of the trench and pull myself up.

These trenches were dug extra deep simply because it was known I would be in the area, which means I was able to get somewhat of a look without getting my head too high up.

The horizon is black and red with these bioforms marching to their death, as lesser artillery pieces and Marines unleash hell into their formations. The front line is, as has been said, gone,

though I think I did see some bunkers still putting out a few shots into the charging mass of flesh.

The worst part about these insectoid-looking creatures, though, probably was not that they seem to be endless. No, it was the obvious reusability of the human voice box. The screams that came out of these creatures sounded human. Whatever language they were speaking was definitely not human, and voice synthesization was used.

It was a nightmarish battleground in front of us, and yet the Marines kept firing and kept holding the line. The Marines were built to know no fear, and they were proving that with every charge of the enemy formation, slaughtering them as they came.

Even in areas where I could tell the gunfire slackened, I think I saw evidence that they were using hand axes and other melee weapons to try and hold the trenches.

There would be a lot of dead Marines when this is over, but I think we would definitely come out with a better trade for monsters.

The only real problem is that their horde of endless monsters may outstrip my horde of Marines if this keeps up.

Turning to another Marine who was carrying a boltgun and had the insignia of a runner, I said, "Someone get the Air Force on the phone and tell them that we need bombardments in front of our position now, preferably flame-type weaponry. We need to create some barriers to slow them up and funnel them into better kill corridors."

The Marine nodded and immediately ran off, hopefully to find a communication center and get things moving. Turning back towards the line, even though the first part of it was overrun, I think we could hold it. Yes, it wasn't exactly the best look having the front line overrun, but our frontline were space Marines, they could fight their way through. The second line was also space Marines, they could definitely keep these monsters from moving on.

The third line was mainly made up of Valkyrie and regular imperial army, and all the tanks that I had acquired over the last decade, and it should be able to hold.

"Should" is the operative word. There was always the chance that I was wrong, but after training this army for nearly 40 years and fighting side by side with it over that same time, I seem to have acquired a sense of what my men can do. And my men, they could hold this line against the oncoming storm. Deep down I knew it. They were battle maniacs, and this was the stuff they were born for. Their ancient mysticism, which they held close to their hearts, believed dying in combat was the best way to go, so they would die killing as many of these things as possible.

With any luck, the deaths would be nominal, not too bad. Shaking my head, I turned and saw several more Terminators marching over from the third line past the smaller trench lines that

joined the second and the third, quickly working themselves into the line of the second before moving down the path that would probably find their way to entrances that would take them to the first line.

I had not ordered the third line forward, so obviously someone was deciding that Terminators were probably better used closer to the enemy.

I sighed. My commanders, the Wolf Lords, as they called themselves, were probably wondering if they were making a mistake doing that, but they should not. I did allow some liberty and movement of my troops. Terminators moving forward were probably an alright thing to be able to secure the front line again, possibly, and if they didn't, well, securing the entrances from the front line to the second line was a worthy endeavor.

Shaking my head, I turned back to the lines just in time for a real show to kick off as the artillery, somewhere far behind us, opened up, dropping explosives into the middle of the enemy line. Great bursts of fire and flame engulfed the enemy formation, broiling them alive.

The firing continued for a few moments before stopping, and that only stopped because obviously their communication between the artillery and the aircraft was pretty damn good. As that brief moment of opening between the artillery's stopping was only a few seconds before the aircraft came in low and dropped barrels of highly flammable promethium contained inside a gel that would allow it to spread around like napalm.

A technique that I had picked up from my campaigning for Space Vietnam. Fire quickly engulfed much of the front line in front of my position and beyond. Probably the entire northern side of the city, which was under my protection, now had a fourth line of fire in front of it.

The flow of monsters lessened almost immediately, and the gunfire into the areas that were still left open sealed them up pretty good.

Turning to a runner, I said, "Now the second line can push forward into the first and secure it. The third line can send troops to secure the second line again, and we'll see what the situation looks like after that."

He nodded and ran off to give out the orders, and I turned back, trying to decide what we should do next.

Frankly, the management of this operation was already handled. We would probably hold the line and would not fall. Once we exterminated the bioforms in their large formations, we would either engage in operations to wipe them out or drop orcs on the planet to finish it off for us. The Lion technically agreed on that plan, but seemed disinterested in the possibility.

Guess my proactive use of monsters to fight the monsters point of view was not as appreciated.

Be that as it may, I didn't think I had screwed up the relationship between the two of us. Sure, we would come to some sort of understanding eventually on how to work with each other. And if we never did, well, it's a big Galaxy. We could always just never work with each other and fight the monsters separately.

That's actually a good point. I wasn't fighting this battle alone. While my army was protecting the northern flank of the city, the southern flank was being protected by Mortarian's Legion. If we were facing this kind of threat up here, I wondered how the other Legion was doing. It was probably about time to find that out. Getting down from the parapet, I walked through the second trench line's avenue to the third and from there to the back lines. I found a communication station quickly and put in the information to get in contact with the southern front.

I attempted the numbers a couple of times but got nothing, which was odd. Confused, I pressed them in again. Still nothing.

Now, if this were a normal military situation, I would believe they were being jammed. After all, what better way to prevent us from speaking than to jam the airways? We hadn't even had time to lay down proper line communication systems.

Or perhaps they were too busy fighting. Or maybe both were right. Either way, I put down the communication device and quickly stepped out of the rear line trenches and looked for a vehicle I could commandeer. Grabbing onto the side of a Rhino, I knocked on the front of it and called into the machine, "Head towards the southern front."

The marine looked up in surprise before nodding and started driving south. The city we were protecting was not very big, 5 to 10 miles square. It was taller than wide, so getting them through the city to the southern lines did not take very long. When we got there, I found exactly what I did not want to see. The lines were a mess, and fighting was everywhere. The Death Guard were doing a damn good job of killing the oncoming hordes of bugs and bioforms, but they were obviously overrun in a few places. They had committed their Imperial Guard of their third line into position. Hopping off the Rhino, I tapped the side panel, allowing the crew inside to open it and said, "Call in some support, primarily the Honor Guard. It should be able to help us in this situation." The man inside nodded, and I grabbed my sword off my back, quickly moving towards the line.

Casting spells, I quickly started my active defense. The armor started to drop the temperature around me for a 30 ft range.

I pushed forward and quickly blocked a hole, slicing through the monsters there and freezing them before killing them. Blasting away with my arm, I did so until it was out of ammo, and switched from a two-handed stance with my sword to a one-handed stance with my bolt pistol Scorn's Spitter in the other.

Slaughtering my way through the line, I pushed the enemy back, making my way forward until the third line was secure. The Death Guard there looked a bit surprised as I jumped down into the trenches next to them but gave no complaint as I killed one of the monsters that had been able to penetrate this deeply into their lines.

"Where's Mortarion?" I asked, wanting to get a good account of the situation from the horse's mouth.

"They're at the front, Primarch of the wolves," one of the Death Guard said with a nod, pointing towards a passageway that would lead towards the front line.

Nodding, I started to move that way, noticing that the Death Guard fell in next to me, probably wanting to use my momentum to push forward to their own Primarch. It would suffice, I thought.

Either way, they followed me through the trenches, killing anything that got past my sword and Scorn's Spitter.

Continuing to push, we soon arrived at the second line and found the reason why this whole operation had fallen apart in the south. Tunnels from underneath, the monsters had dug up right underneath them while joining the assault. I stopped and grabbed one of the less armored Death Guard Marines by the shoulder and said, "Run back to my Rhino in the back lines and tell them to send word to the northern front that they have the ability to tunnel underneath and may use it to try and sow more confusion."

The Marine nodded and quickly headed back the way we came. Before I decided to fix the issue of the gaping hole underneath their lines, I shoved my sword into the ground. I cast a quick spell that froze it over, which would buy us time, but it wouldn't keep them out forever. Pointing to two Marines, I said, "Guard this. The rest of us can move forward." They nodded and prepared to fire at anything that made it through the frozen sheet of ice.

Pushing onward, we killed more of the bioforms trying to make their way past the forward lines. The creatures seemed to be interested in stopping us, probably because they were naturally just hungry and wanting to eat us. Though, I did wonder if there were any tactics behind the black eyes of the monsters. After all, separating a Primarch from their legion, that's a good way to experiment and see if you can kill a Primarch.

With the amount of close calls I already had, I didn't know if it was possible or not. After all, I had survived being naked in a Fenris winter for 48 hours. That was a pretty hard thing to survive. And, I had the assumption from some of the stories I had heard that it was a very similar experience for many of the other Primarchs. We were hard to kill, but did that make us unkillable?

Probably not, which was why I would rather rescue my brother than let them get murdered. What would we do with a legion that did not have a Primarch? What effect would that have on

the morale of the whole Imperium? One of the 20 Sons promised to bring about the unification of mankind was murdered along the way in the first few years of the conflict.

The morale situation would probably not be great, not to mention the legion would probably become nothing better than Ronans. Yes, they swore an oath of fealty to their Emperor, but they had also sworn it to their Primarch. Which one would be the determining factor on who stayed with the Imperium?

A unit that lost its Commander, its flag, its identity, was in danger of mutiny. Such a legion without a legion master would probably be broken up and sent to the other legions to fill out their lines. Not a great fate for a legion of the Emperor to be broken like that, and that may cause more problems down the line.

Best to save the Primarch, then, I thought. Best to save my brother. As I smashed through the last few bioforms, it appeared to be an artillery pit. A bit of deja vu played out before me as I saw my brother slashing their giant scythe into a monster three times their size. Being that they were a good two feet taller than me, that was a pretty big monster. The blade met the creature's armored claw, and Mortarion was sent flying, only to quickly get themselves back on their feet and come around again, slashing down with their scythe, trying to remove the limb.

A creature smaller than the one they were fighting tried to intervene in the combat on the side of the bioform monster. I quickly brought up Scorn Spitter and removed that from the equation. The other Death Guard quickly spilled out around me to fire upon the creatures around the big one, leaving it to their master, who seemed to be engaged in this one-on-one fight. Though they gave me a look from behind their hooded cloak, they seemed more wanting to stay in the fight, honor I would guess, wanting to be the one in command of the death of the creature. Since they had already started the fight, they wanted to end it, so I would allow them to attempt to end it. Keeping my sword in hand, I only focused my fire on anything trying to storm into the artillery pit and obviously trying to intercede and protect the big monster.

Mortarian's blade dug deeply into the creature's flesh. Its arms spasmed as it was nearly ripped off, but the creature didn't seem willing to die, simply taking its other arm and grabbing onto the blade in Mortarian's hand, ripping them out and smashing them into the ground like they were nothing but a toy. It did it a couple of times, and I was about ready to get involved when Mortarian's hand came onto another weapon that they held on their side.

With a flash of light, the limb that had been swinging them around was sent flying and Mortarian was back on their feet, now dual wielding the apparent directed energy weapon that was much stronger than any las rifle I'd seen and their two-handed scythe.

The said two-handed scythe ended up buried halfway into the creature's neck, holding it in place so Mortarian could line up the shot with their handheld lascannon for the direct brainstem.

One blast later, the creature fell down dead, a smoking hole in its brain case that had once supported any intelligent life in there.

Sliding my sword back into its scabbard, I stepped forward and clapped. It was a rather impressive show, and I wanted to show my appreciation as I moved forward.

"Good job, brother-" I wasn't able to finish my sentence as they turned and revealed something that took me by surprise.

Apparently, when they've been thrown about a bit, their cape had come loose enough that their head was no longer hidden, revealing short gray hair covering one eye that I hadn't really seen when they had their cloak up before.

That wasn't the real big thing though, because the mask had also come free, hanging down around their neck, lying against their armor that I hadn't realized up to now was designed in such a way that you wouldn't notice certain curves.

Mortarion's face, for the first time, was now on full display, and that face was rather girlish. Mortarion looked at me, confused at my stunned pause before they took a breath in and realized their mask was not in place. Without much fanfare, they reached down, got their mask, and repositioned it over their nose and lower face before grabbing their cloak and pulling it back over their head, hiding their deathly pale skin as they did, leaving only their yellow eye to glint in the darkness.

"Sister?" I asked, confused, causing them to look at me with what felt like annoyance.

"No. I am not your sister," she said, though now that I was looking for it, there was a definite curve in the armor that was hidden by the cloak around the waist. One that wouldn't be necessary to connect the two pieces underneath the suit. With the broad shoulders and the hidden features behind the fabric they had everywhere, it was hard to see these telltale signs that they were female, but they were definitely there.

I tilted my head in confusion before finally saying, "All right, brother. Well, if you're not my sister, then what was it I just saw?"

Part of me knew I probably shouldn't ask, but the other part of me was just so dang curious about what had just happened. I thought I'd already discovered my only sister and I had not even realized Mortarian was female until this moment. I kind of wanted answers and I figured I'd probably have to give over some trading information. It may create a bond of trust, but of course, it may result in a worse situation than my other sister. Only time would tell, though.

"I will explain later when we are not under combat conditions," Mortarian said, walking towards the nearby pair of pits. I shrugged and fell in behind. I got enough answers for now.

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Mortarian

For 16 hours, waves of these bioforms had rushed our fortifications, for 16 hours straight. At one point, I thought it would never end and it came close to causing my armor more damage than I think any other had since joining the Emperor's crusade.

All of which could be forgiven. Fighting monsters to save humanity was well within the purview of something I was willing to do. My curse, on the other hand, was not forgivable, especially revealing it to the only female sibling I was aware of.

I didn't know how she was going to take it, but considering her propensity for the boob plates, I feared she would attempt to sway me to change my armor style. Frankly, I was not interested in that happening.

Yes, I've seen her combat style. Besides her psychic spell swing, she seemed to be more of an agile fighter, moving quickly with her blade and gun to finish off many enemies as quickly as possible, and the ice component of her armor seemed to do a good job of slowing them down, making them back off enough that she was able to have enough room to maneuver.

That did not mean I was in favor of removing valuable protection from my front plate just for a bit of sculpted elegance.

Armor was meant to protect, not show off. That's why mine tended to be not as elegantly designed as my siblings', having less furnished gold and more iron in the areas of decoration that I did allow.

Looking across the field of dead bioforms, I sighed, wondering where the next wave was. It had been a good 30 minutes, and I still hadn't seen hide nor hair of the next wave, which was bad in the sense that, though things were now under control, that meant my comment about explaining more now had to be done. I was not a fan of explaining exactly what had happened to me, especially to that sibling. Maybe they would not be a problem.

Shaking my head, I turned from the trenches and moved down into the artillery pit. The said artillery piece now lay in many pieces across the battlefield, which wasn't good. It was on loan from the Imperial army. I had a few of these devices in mind, but I tended to borrow heavily from the Imperial army when I could. Most artillery pieces I needed were needed to be mobile to keep up with infantry on the advance, so the slower, larger pieces had to be supplied by local defensive units.

All around the trench line, I could see my Marines slowly ramping down their activities, cleaning their weapons, refilling ammo, and getting ready for a second attack that didn't seem to be on the way. A few of them were lighting fires and starting to put together meals.

We had been reinforced by several Guard units during the attack. They were helping out as well, gathering rubble that could be burnt and adding it to the pits and producing some of their own supplies to share.

It looked like it might be a peaceful night after all. The bioforms had no artillery with them, at least here. I think I'd heard reports that there may be some form of artillery bioform that was used in the opening days of the war on the planet Blank. Why it wasn't here, maybe it had to do with the fact that it was a more complex thing to create?

My thoughts, though, could not stay on the bioforms in the fighting for long. Near the center of the artillery pit, sitting on the barrel of the large gun that had been collapsed, was my sibling Tanya Russ, who apparently had been reinforced with all of her own guard and was sharing a meal with some of my men.

As she saw me coming our direction, she said something to one of her Marines, and they got to work clearing the area immediately around where she was sitting, moving another piece of the artillery gun across from her so that we could have a fitted and private conversation, quickly moving everyone further away.

Shaking my head, I slowly approached before sitting down on the seat and waiting to see what she had to say. “So, Mortarion, care to explain that surprise from earlier now, or are you going to keep your origins very mysterious?”

I sighed before saying, “I would prefer to keep it mysterious, but something tells me you will keep asking questions about this, and I'll have to answer it sooner or later. Plus, it's going to happen again. Maybe it won't be you, maybe it'll be someone else, but I will be knocked on my side like that, hood revealing my shame and failure to the world and our Primarch. Might as well start with one that seems more interesting and less willing to spread rumors of my condition.”

“Condition,” Tanya said with a nod. “I'm going to take it then that there's something more than just you arrived on your homeworld as you are now.”

I shook my head in agreement before saying, “I arrived on my homeworld as a male. Yes, I spent most of my life as a male on that homeworld. I fought the warlord of my homeworld to the point that he was forced to withdraw from the low valleys. As a male, I destroyed his armies and left him up there. I believed that if I left him up there, unable to harm the people, it would be good enough. And after all, even I had problems getting that far up into the atmosphere of my homeworld. The toxic conditions up there made it too poisonous for people to survive in.”

“If he wished to keep his Warp spawn dead up in the mountains where they couldn't hurt us, I might have been more than willing to leave them there.”

“But something happened that forced you to go against him, did it?”

I nodded before saying, “The Emperor came and challenged me to do the job. Every other Primarch had apparently conquered their planet completely, and apparently, I needed to stand up to that level of scrutiny.”

Tanya nodded as she sipped a large mug of ale that someone had supplied her.

“Sorry about that,” she said with a shrug. “I think me and the others got a little overzealous in trying to secure our safety.”

“Ha,” I laughed at that before continuing. “The Emperor set a challenge for me: climb that mountain and kill the father who threatened my homeworld.”

“With an objective put in front of me, I marched up those mountains to kill my adopted father and end his terror. And he did everything to stop me and weaken me, not just relying on the poison of the air but casting spells that did something to me.”

"By the time I reached the summit of the mountain, my form had to be as it is now," I said with a shake of my head before continuing, "I was left weakened and unable to finish the fight. My victory was stolen away from me at the last moment. All because of the Emperor's decision to make our bodies more malleable. If the Emperor had not given us the ability to shapeshift into what he deemed fit, I would have killed my adopted father and freed Barbarus on my own. But that is not to be. Instead, I am cursed for eternity to be in this weak form," I said before adding, "and I'm sure you are as well."

"What?" Tanya said, stopping drinking as she looked at me curiously.

Shrugging, I said, "Obviously, you've been cursed as well. Right? Father said that he had created only sons, but there had been issues when he found those sons. So, I must assume that you were a son before some cursed monster changed you as well."

"Huh, well no," Tanya said, shaking her head before continuing, "I came out of the pod like this, survived like this. Likely, it was simply different due to the conditions of being thrown through the warp."

"Oh," I said, realizing why she was okay with displaying her femininity like this. She wasn't a male Primarch turned female. She had always been female, which explained quite a bit. It also meant that I was a bit more alone than I thought.

Shaking my head, I said, "Well, be that as it may, you understand now that's the reason I dislike being called sister. My abilities have been nerfed by this curse. We are siblings, but my abilities have been weakened by the creature who called himself my adopted father."

Tanya nodded before saying, "Why not just try and undo the curse? All Primarchs are somewhat psychically charged, right? You should be able to undo what has been done to you."

"And risk being made even weaker by the psychic abilities, or worse, perhaps I won't be made weaker. Perhaps I will lose myself to the same corruption that made my adopted father such a monster on my homeworld. No, I would rather suffer as I am than risk those possibilities," I replied.

Tanya shook her head before saying, "Psychic abilities are a weapon at our disposal. We have to learn to use them sooner or later. It's an advantage on the battlefield that'll make sure we are strong enough to face creatures that have the same innate ability."

"Psychic abilities are a trap," I said with a shake of my head. "They offer you power in the short term for long-term weakening of your resolve. You cannot overcome your opponent in a straight-up fight. Sidestepping them and using magic to secure your victory just makes you a willing tool of what lies in the warp."

Tanya leaned forward at that and said, "What lies in the warp? That's an interesting turn of phrase. You're not the first one to have that feeling either. Tell me, do you ever feel like something in the warp is watching you or trying to reach out to you?"

I cleared my mind of memories and focused on the present, as Tanya spoke. "Once, I thought I heard something, as my defeat was before me. On that day, when this was done to me, I thought I heard a voice calling to me. I tried not to think about it."

Tanya nodded before saying, "Something similar has affected another Primarch. You're doing a good job not listening to it. Whatever calls out for you from the warp cannot be good, in my opinion. Nothing good comes from the warp, but that doesn't mean we can't use our abilities that are derived from the warp."

I was about to speak up, but she interrupted me, pulling up the sword she carried and pointing out the ruins that were engraved in the blade.

"For instance, my homeworld uses these runes-like structures in order to control elements of the warp safely. Drawing upon the warp unfettered, as some would do, is a bit dangerous, and I can see why it's a problem. However, if you build a rigid structure, something that is solid and will allow you to control the outcome of your casting, I think it is safe enough to use."

"That is ridiculous," I said with a shake of my head before adding, "I mean, I guess it is possible to safely build this formula, but assuming that they will constrain the abilities of the warp seems unlikely to be very successful. The warp is the material everything contributes to it, which means there's a ton of energy waiting there, just waiting for a chance to spill out into our world."

"Sounds like you have a good idea of what's in the warp," Tanya said, tilting her head.

"My adopted father gave me access to his library. I was able to learn quite a bit about the warp, at least from his world's perspective. I know a lot of his techniques as well."

"And those are techniques that you're not using," Tanya said with a nod, leaning back before adding, "I'll be honest. I understand your situation a lot better than you think. And it is admirable to simply suffer the consequences of a bad hand. However, letting that bad hand control the abilities you are allowed to use is a mistake. Every advantage will be needed before the end of this war. I think the Great Crusade will have to face who knows what, and these Rangdan are already proving to be a bit of a pain in our collective asses with their biomancy."

"Who knows what else they have in store for us? So, if you're willing, I'm willing to look into ways of undoing this curse for you."

I looked up at her, confused, saying, "How do you think you can undo it? Using the warp is exactly the problem. Perhaps when you try to undo this curse, you'll have to unfetter yourself and expose yourself to whatever is in there waiting to call to you."

"A good point," Tanya said with a nod before responding, "But here's the deal: shapeshifting is within our ability. This curse somehow hijacked a part of your Primarch brain that allowed you to be forcibly shapeshifted into a female form. Then there must be a way to unforce that setting. Maybe it's by the warp, maybe it's something else. Have you talked to our father about ways to undo this?"

Sighing in confusion before I remembered that the Emperor wanted to be called father, shaking my head I said, “No, I have not. This is my burden to bear, and I will solve it by myself. And you should not get involved either.”

Tanya nodded and sipped her drink before saying, “If you don't want anyone's help to solve this problem, that is fine. The ability to stand up on your own to solve something is always good, too mature and grow. But don't forget that your siblings are great warriors, politicians, and warp users, and if you ask, we're willing to help.”

I gave her thought before looking at her and shaking my head, "In my situation, the risk outweighs any benefit. As far as I'm concerned, I can fight like this."

That seemed to finally end Tanya's poking, and she shrugged and reached over and grabbed a container of liquid, pouring another drink before offering it to me.

“Well, brother, I don't know about your current situation, but I do know that we did manage to hold today. We've killed a lot of bioforms and probably carved a little bit of a hole in their defensive line. So, I say we celebrate with a few drinks and get drunk off that, not think about any problems till the morning.”

I looked at the cup before signing and reaching out, taking it and then offering a tip in Tanya's direction, moving the mask to the side so I could drink it down, and she did the same.

As I finished the cup, I sighed and said, “That's not so bad, actually. You would have to have a really good alcohol brewing system to make something this effective.”

Tanya nodded before saying, “Probably one of the best. During winter, there's not much to do but get drunk, and being that I didn't get drunk very easily, I inspired a bunch of brewers to give it their best shot.”

“Some of it was good, some of it was basically poison, but it did the job of getting me drunk. When the Space Marines arrived, this little niche economy of getting me the best drink possible expanded quite a bit, as it could get a Space Marine drunk as well.”

“I won't be surprised if one of the main economic outputs of my homeworld will be alcohol soon enough, simply because I keep sharing it with every legion.”

I chuckled at that before saying, “What are you trying to do? Get us all addicted to Fenrisian beer?”

I watched a slight smile appear on her face before it vanished almost completely a moment later, causing my eyes to widen. Really, and I may have hit onto the reality of the situation. She was trying to gain soft power through having economic control over the alcohol supply.

That was evil, also kind of ingenious. My sister had many talents. I guess I should start calling her sister now after all. Up to this moment, I had refused to call her that because I've been wanting to assume that she was a shapeshifter just like me, and I didn't know what her gender really was. Maybe it was female, maybe I've been male and cursed like I had suggested. Now I knew, so I could stop second-guessing myself on what gender she was.

Sipping the alcohol, I finally said, "Well, I'm sure every Marine will enjoy this, so I think my homeworld could probably produce something as good as this given enough time. There are a lot of crops in the valley, and the toxins in the air can create some rather strange flavors in the production of those crops. Especially the alcohol, never really giving it much thought, but there might be something there."

Tanya nodded before saying, "Free market. Everyone can enter it, after all. At least that's what I'm fighting for whenever I go around spreading the free market of products so people can improve their lot in life. Having two sources of alcohol within the Imperium just for Space Marines is probably for the best. The number of Space Marines is probably going to someday outgrow the production capabilities of my homeworld."

"Hmm, perhaps we should organize some sort of technology sharing between my homeworld and yours. I'm sure that our people could teach each other something," I suggested, thinking

that perhaps we may be able to get in on that market for my homeworld a little bit quicker with the aid of Fenris.

Tanya nodded and said, "That would be a wonderful thing to do. Sharing technology with the Imperium is what we must set out to do. From my point of view, every planet of a Primarch will be a pillar of the community after Earth, so we must improve our planets. Not to mention, considering that there has been an instance where warp storms have cut off whole parts of the galaxy, it may happen again in the future. Ephemeris does not have the advanced technologies to keep my legion in motion. It will just lead to another Dark Age for humanity. And the same will be for every legion."

I nodded my head to that as it made some sense. After all, the legion marched from their homeworlds. If their homeworlds were undeveloped or falling behind, the legion itself would be no better sooner or later. Creating self-reliance would probably be the best option.

"So, 20 redoubts of humanity to rebuild every time such a warp storm that brought us to the cusp of destruction never comes again," I said.

Tanya nodded before saying, "Hopefully, 21 or more. Earth, of course, is the homeworld of humanity and must be one of those redoubts. The Squat leagues of the core are also well placed to rebuild humanity, and I'm sure we'll find a few other places we can turn into redoubts for emergency purposes. Though I would hope that we will never have to experience such a warp storm again in human history and we can just continue to build up and expand the Imperium till trade can go from one side of the galaxy to the other without issue."

"Sounds like a wonderful dream," I said with a nod. "Personally, I would just prefer to have my planet self-reliant and free of any outside issues. Fighting in this crusade was nice and all, but to be fair, I'd rather continue to live on Barbarus away from this conflict." Shaking my head, I simply said, "Perhaps one day your dream will come true, and trade will flow as freely as you wish. Perhaps that day will see the end of war in this galaxy."

“War ending, well that's rather unlikely,” came a male voice from my right, causing me to look in that direction, confused. I was not the only one, as I saw Tanya doing the same.

“Who's there?” I said into the shadows of the night, not really making out the figure there in the darkness beyond the campfire.

“The Emperor's messenger, of course,” said the figure as they approached, their figure becoming more plain as to who they were as they approached, standing nearly 12 ft tall, carrying a large bladed weapon on a spear, and dressed in all gold like the Custodians. As he looked us over before nodding.

“The Emperor has sent me to collect his children. Being that you are the largest individuals here, I must assume that would be you two, Tanya Russ and Mortarion of Barbarus.”

“Yeah, that would be us,” Tanya said, before continuing by asking, “who are you?”

The figure nodded before pulling his helmet off, resting it between the crook of his arm as he said, “Constantine Valdor, Shield of the Emperor and Chief Custodian. I am here to deliver a message to his children.”

“Huh, all right then,” Tanya said, pouring him another cup and offering it to him as she said, “well, tell us this message over a good drink.”

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Constantine valdor

“Well, I really shouldn't, but it's been a long journey here, so why not?” I said, taking the drink offered and sipping it as I stood there.

“Not a bad alcohol. It could definitely give some of the stuff we're working on in the Palace a run for its money. Well, there are a few brews that I think would supersede this one,” I said with a nod, looking at the two children of the Emperor.

Mortarian wasn't much to look at - an armored behemoth, face cloaked and hidden. I would believe they were male if I hadn't just been standing off to the corner, listening with quiet interest.

After all, the Custodians are the eyes and ears of the Emperor, so catching the moment when these two had a conversation and memorizing it to tell him later was an important part of my duties.

And then there was Tanya Russ, who had a wild beauty about her. Even if her armor was meant to distract her opponents, consider me distracted. Though I would purge those thoughts in a moment to protect the Emperor and his works.

Though I must say, imagining spending some time with her after the Great Crusade was interesting, I would leave that by the wayside until my duty was done. Besides, I knew nothing about their personalities yet, not truly. I might as well get to know them before entertaining any thoughts like that.

Sipping the drink again, I decided to start off with a simple statement. “You two have done a wonderful job here, securing this planet for the Imperium. It will allow us a real forward base as we push deeper into Rangan space, but I'm afraid you'll be required to leave this planet very soon.”

Tanya nodded her head before saying, “The Emperor has arrived in the local sector, I take it then?”

I nodded in agreement before adding, “Just beyond the frontier, on a planet known as Xana 2, all the Primarchs and Legion leaders are to assemble there so we can discuss the coming campaign and what we do about the Rangdan and what we believe we know.”

“And how we're going to handle the problems of these bioforms, I assume,” Tanya said, getting a nod from me.

“Exactly. Nothing the enemy has done is creative enough to stop us or at least turn any victory we get to ash in our mouths. From reports that the Emperor has been receiving from the Mechanicus, it is not looking like this will be a pure victory unless we completely destroy their species this time.”

“Oh, genocide,” Tanya said with a nodding of her head, seeming a bit perturbed by that notion.

“The technical term is xenocide, but yes, we must remove their entire species from the board. They've shown themselves to be a threat to humanity, and whatever their bioform technologies allow them to do to humanity is enough to consider them heretics by the Mechanicum. That's why quite a few Titan legions and mechanical support units are on the way to join this war.”

“A large amount of troops all moving in this direction sounds like the war will be over quickly then,” Mortarian said with a nod, “that is unless they have some way of digging in and making us suffer.”

Tanya looked at Mortarion, seeming to be annoyed, before saying, "It probably is. They haven't been using their mercenaries. Why they haven't been using their mercenaries seems odd to me. Unless they've already reduced them to biomaterial for their bioforms, which seems unlikely. You don't give up trained soldiers like that. You move them to where their next big attack will be the most effective."

"It's the opening of a war, and," I said with a nod, "you'd think both sides would send their best in front. But the reality is you need to harbor your best and watch for moments to use them. This is the reality that the Unification Wars taught most of us on Terra."

"You served in the Unification Wars, Constantine?" Mortarion asked, raising an eyebrow under her hooded face, probably not aware that I could see through the darkness quite well enough.

"I led the army through the end of the Unification Wars. The Custodians brought about the peace on Terra with the help of the Thunder Warriors and a few of the Legions that were already ready for action. And we've maintained that peace."

"Ah, so you're one of the older ones. That would explain why you're so tall, right?" Tanya asked, giving me a moment to look at her in confusion before I realized what she meant.

"No, I'm just naturally tall for a Custodian."

"Ha! But it was like what we were dealing with when it came to being Primarchs, growing taller with every conquest."

I smiled and shook my head before saying, "No, I may get mistaken for a Primarch at a distance, but I am not like them. You're the Emperor's Children. I'm simply one of the Emperor's chosen. We both serve the same Master, but we are different."

"Hmm, all right then," Tanya said, sipping her drink before filling another mug and offering it to me. "Well, Emperor's chosen, you seem pretty good at sneaking around. Didn't even know you were over there until you made your presence known. So why don't I ask you a question that probably only you would know?"

I nodded. "Ask away. And if it does not interfere with the orders of the Emperor, I shall answer it."

"How many Primarchs are female?"

I smiled at that, seeing exactly what she was trying to do, and said, "None and all of them. Look, Tanya, I understand that you're annoyed, but let me continue. As the Emperor said, you should meet the Primarchs for yourself, get to know them on a personal level, and not let what the Emperor or the Empire says about them determine what you think of these people, your siblings."

"Okay, but that doesn't exactly explain why you said 'none and all of them,'" Tanya said, still raising an eyebrow at me.

"You're all shapeshifters. You have a choice in what you are, far beyond any other human. Some of you may be male now, some of you may be female later. It's all up to you and how you push your own skill levels. From my understanding, after all, you're a prime example of a Primarch who was born male and is no longer one, Mortarion."

The frustration and anger emanating from Mortarion made me stop looking at them and try not to flinch. At the same time, I accidentally stepped on their broken toe, which they didn't appreciate being reminded of. Understandable, but it made the point quite clear.

“All right then, if you're going to keep that secret, how about something else? Do you know the current gender ratio? You don't need to tell us what it is, just do you know it,” Tanya asked.

I thought for a moment before giving a short and simple response. “No, I don't. I think only the Emperor really knows. He had given me the impression that Mortarian was male, and I have been fooled up to this moment. So, I can assume that if there are any other female Primarchs outside of the two you know about, there may be more that I don't know about.”

Tanya sighed before saying, “I am definitely going to have a talk to the Emperor about this system he's worked out here. This was kind of fun at first, but we kind of need to know who each other are.”

I shrugged before saying, “Well, I've given you the location of the meeting. Talk to the Emperor when you see him, and see what happens. Perhaps he will agree with you.”

I finished the last of my drink and left the cup on the ground near her. “This is good stuff,” I said before turning and leaving quickly into the shadows.

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Writers note: surprises mortiaina got ranma… yeah  low blow but i hinted at it chapter they showed up, heavily including fact they had hair… hope you all enjoy this tender moment between mortarian and tanya and meaning valdor, and I hope you're already for more ragadon adventures!

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