

## Chapter 60, The Wolf on Terra

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**Tanya Russ**

**Terra**

Well, I was finally on Earth, or now known as Terra, something I had not done since my previous life.

My landing ship had arrived at the Imperial landing area not too far from the Palace. From what I understood, we had landed in what my previous life knew as the Tibetan region, not too far from my old homeland or, for that matter, not too far from the newer homeland of my second life. From what I remember of both those lives, the region had been a snowy mountainous region with plenty of plains and bodies of water, from what I was seeing now at least the place was still mountainous. And well, considering what Terra had been through it was a miracle they were still standing.

Still looking at Terra now and comparing it to what I remembered, it was a far cry from the glory and beauty that it once was.

Freeing my head from thoughts of the past, I took my first ground view of the Imperial Palace. Walls within walls for a strong redoubt, so that men could fall back if the lines were broken, all the classic features you'd see in a fortress that had been designed to withstand the worst that could come at it. And from what I could see, there was continuous construction going on. In one area, there were work crews being led by men of the Imperial Fists. Another area, a little bit to the north of it, had men of the Iron Warriors staging what appeared to be a mock siege of the area, not using actual ammunition but trying to probe for any weaknesses they could use to break in.

From the looks of it, they hadn't found one yet, but I did notice there appeared to be men trying to dig a tunnel not too far away. Sapping was probably what they were up to, trying to dig under the wall to see if there were any weaknesses beneath the surface of the earth.

Beyond that, well, I think I found where most of the gold we happened to stumble across ended up. The palace was filled with gold, blocks upon blocks of gold, more gold than I think could be found on Terra naturally. Considering its immense size, several miles wide at least, and who knows how deep, I wondered just how much gold was involved in the process.

It did seem to be very gaudy, but when you are rich, sometimes it's best to impress people to let them know how wealthy you are. After all, he had to oversee squabbling nobles that had once ruled this planet, and the best way to show that you have control over the future of a planet is to make them realize that you have the most monetary reserves and the forces to protect them.

Shaking my head, I put my helmet under my arm and looked at my entourage. I had not expected to bring a large group of people, but, well, it was a rare thing, so I had brought some men of importance.

My personal Valkyries, of course—Helga, Turid, Maria, and Yrsa. They would, of course, be helping me with daily duties. Several men of my first company and Wolf Lord Gunnar Gunnhilt, who had shown enough initiative during the Rangdan and Ark Reach Cluster campaigns that I decided to give him the rank of first Wolf Lord, basically the new legion master to replace the fallen Commander Enoch Rathvin.

That was the majority of my staff, though I did have one straggler who'd come along, Miss Adelheid, who had left her Svellgard to make sure that the work she had put into the dresses turned out fine.

Said dresses were packed away in luggage being carried by servitors that were behind her. She was looking around, rather amazed—probably the first time she'd ever visited the palace, I would guess. But again, it was the first time for everyone here, and they were all rather amazed, looking around at the structures and buildings. There was a large flat area around the palace, part of the defensive fortifications, I would imagine. But beyond that was a large expanse of ever growing construction of the new Imperial capital. Frames of large towers stretched into the sky, but none reached the same heights as the palace itself. Looking around I spotted some Iron Warriors overseeing construction on what frankly reminded me a bit of the dome from that one Star Wars movie I've seen. A massive construction that looked like it was meant to be some sort of governmental building, rounded in a way that most of the square buildings of the empire didn't gel with. Granted, there were square areas to the building, with large pillars along the sides of the dome holding it up, as well as towers reaching out above it and away. It kind of reminded me of the Hagia Sophia, just mega-sized to ridiculous degrees. And instead of four points of contact with the building, there were probably half a dozen all around it.

"Tanya, you're finally here," came a familiar, elderly voice. Turning, I saw the Lord of Terra, Malcador, approaching, heavily leaning on his staff, with his own group of individuals following him. Apparently, he had taken time from his busy schedule to come meet me, which I smiled at. "The honor is mine," I replied, taking a bow. "Lord Malcador, good to see you. It's been too long since we've talked face to face."

"This is undoubtedly true," Malcador said with a shake of his head. "But you've been doing good work for the Imperium. By my calculations, you've got something like 300 to 400 Worlds to sign on to us just by the fear of you turning your wrath on them. So many lives have been saved just because your presence has been felt in the area."

I was unaware of this, I mused out loud, although I was quite aware that my presence had been properly utilized as propaganda for some time. It was confirmation on how the propaganda about me was being utilized.

Shaking my head, I said, "Well, that's good to know that lives have been saved, unless fighting has been involved because of my actions. Now the real question is what has the Administratum been doing? It is after all still a conquest, it's a concern of mine on how the Administratum is using those victories."

"Yes, I've noticed that," Malcador said with a nod before turning and saying, "Walk with me. We have a gathering going on tonight, celebrating your arrival. So, we might as well talk as we move. We have to get you to your room."

"Of course," I said, matching my pace to his. After all, if I were to walk completely at full power, I'd probably outpace him quite a bit.

As we moved, we headed in a generally eastward direction, which brought us closer to that building I noticed when we were coming down—the half-sphere slightly glowing from whatever material they were using for roofing.

"Well, that's right there will be the Imperial Senate," he said, "with an odd 20,000 seats, give or take. We have designs to add more later on, but 20,000 looks like a good number to start, since most likely worlds would be separated into sector confederations for easier management."

I nodded in understanding before asking, "So there will be an element of democracy or republicanism in the end goal?" I was slightly concerned about that.

"Like it or not," he replied, "yes, however, I imagine there'll probably be so much bureaucracy built by such a system that the Emperor will maintain some control over it simply if something of a military nature comes up, he probably comes out of retirement to deal with it."

"So a president but for life," I noted, to which Malcador nodded too. "Exactly, but he's probably going to give up a lot more of his power to the levers of democracy as time goes on. You'll probably end up only in control of the military, the same with the other Primarchs."

"As it should be," I said. He nodded in approval.

As we continued to walk, Malcador said, "One thing to keep in mind, though, I imagine you will still maintain some control over your home world. I know in the original plan, the idea was that you and the other Primarchs would go out to conquer the Galaxy and then return home to Terra and basically live the good life here at the Imperial Palace. But now you've all put down roots outside of Terra, the Emperor will probably have to redesign his plans to accommodate those changes. I know he's not a big fan of that, but he'll do it. After all, he found out some of his sons were in fact daughters, and he had to adjust then, figuring out what would work and what wouldn't. What's more important is the survival of humanity and the continuation of the human species. Minor issues, such as the gender of a Primarch, or are they living at the Imperial Palace or not, that's not something he wants to concern himself with."

"Focus on the problems that are a problem for everyone, not on the minor ones for his own plans," I noted. After all, a company leader should never put their own personal goals above the company. That's how you get shareholder revolts and lawsuits.

Malcador nodded. "Yes, right now his biggest problem is finding the remaining Primarchs and preparing for any other large-scale issues, as well as trying to decide what to do about certain problems."

"Problems?" I asked, curious about what was on his plate. After all, I wanted to be of service to the company's head, and I needed to know what was on the docket of issues that they were worried about.

"Just general funding for the war is the most major problem that I've been aware of. Currently, most planets get a very small tax—just a little bit of 'you're part of the empire,' a 1% contribution to allow us to fund the Crusade. But, well, things are getting more expensive as we expand. We need more troops to protect the backlines, and we need more ships to deal with expanding borders and Xenos threats like the ones you fought to the north, and other problematic species. Basically, it looks to me like we're going to have to institute a new tax on the outer sphere of imperial holdings. Currently, we only tax the inner sphere—Terra and planets close to it, which I know will be a problem. The Emperor knows it will be a problem. Going from getting no tax to actual tax is always a challenge, but it needs to be done. It's just a matter of when we'll do it."

I nodded in understanding before saying, "I imagine you're probably going to hold off until the last possible moment. It's unfortunate, but you're going to have to telegraph that this will happen sooner or later."

"Exactly. We've got to prepare the people for the tax, let them know it's going to happen; otherwise, it'll be too big of a shock to the system and could cause some trouble," he replied.

I agreed as we arrived at one of the gatehouses to the main fortress, a massive walkway that three heavy tanks could drive through, with heavy metal doors currently lined open. Foot traffic in this area was minimal, mostly military personnel walking back and forth, with a few, who I guessed were nobles and other diplomats, coming and going. Once we passed through, I noticed that the interior of the fortress, between the heavy walls and the Imperial Palace itself, was another impressive sight. There were gardens and an actual man-made lake visible from where I was standing inside the wall, not to mention what looked like a forest, with almost every other tree that probably existed in Terra's history, off in a distant western area.

I nodded in approval. It appeared that the Emperor had turned the area into not only a garden but also a bit of a preserve for plant life. Perhaps he hoped to terraform Terra in some way, and with most of the planet being a desert besides several major cities, the best hope for that ever happening would involve dumping a ton of water onto the planet and hoping that would somehow fix it. With the resources the Imperium had, it should not be impossible. This probably would be one of the goals he'd focus on once major campaigns were over. Having a garden like

this also served to show the nobles who came and went within the outer fortress walls what they were striving for.

Malcador coughed and tapped his staff, pointing to my right. "Although you are welcome to keep one weapon, Tanya, you and your staff must leave at least the majority of the items here. Old habits, you know. We don't want assassins on the property. Preferably, just a bladed weapon, after all. It's much harder to make a regretful mistake with a bladed weapon compared to a firearm."

I raised an eyebrow, looking at the other members of my entourage. They didn't look happy to be disarmed, but as they say, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.'

I nodded to myself, took a step forward, and walked over to what appeared to be an armory, with a Custodian standing right by the door. Two regular humans were working behind the counter as I started to deposit various blades and ammunition on the counter. They looked up at me with a mix of fear and awe before taking my things and stowing them deep into a locker in the back.

"Don't worry, Primarch Russ," the Custodian said. "Anything put in there will stay in there. Nothing will be stolen while you're here. That's why I'm standing here—to keep a close watch on the weapons that the Primarchs leave in our care."

I tilted my head and asked, "Do many Primarchs leave their weapons in your care?"

The golden figure turned their head before replying, "Officially, I'm not allowed to talk about how many, but quite a few. You know your father's rules."

Shaking my head, I said, "Hopefully, I'll meet enough of my siblings that those rules will finally just go away. I'm getting tired of the whole 'don't talk about your other siblings' thing."

"Ain't that the truth," came the familiar voice of Perturabo as he approached. He wasn't wearing armor, but rather more relaxed attire, which was unusual for our interactions. He was actually smiling quite widely.

"Perturabo," I said, reaching my hand out to greet him as we exchanged familiarities.

"Good to see you, sister. When was the last time we talked? It was during the Rangdan conflict."

There was a cough from Malcador. "Northern aliens," he said, which made me raise an eyebrow since that was the second time he had refused to use the proper name of the enemy.

Perturabo shook his head before saying, "Sorry, Malcador. I keep forgetting you want to censor their name."

"Censor?" I questioned, familiar with the concept of someone being so reviled they are forgotten by history. Turning to Malcador, I inquired, "Is there some reason we want them removed from living and future memory?"

Malcador gave me a slightly annoyed look and sighed, saying, "So little is known of what they actually were. I think it's best that they are forgotten. Not only that, we have confirmed that there was human DNA at the base of the creatures, and it's better for people to not know just how far the Dark Age of Technology went."

"But what if they return?" I pressed. "Isn't it better to have information on them in case something were to happen?"

"Yes, in a way it is. I have created a library on a distant planet within the solar system to store such information. However, I do not think it's wise to let everyone know everything unless something were to happen. If the regulars invade again, we will release the information to those who need to know how to fight them. But at this moment, besides some flare-ups of some of their bio-weapons, they appear to be dead, and I think they will remain that way."

"For now, Malcador," I said, and he gave a nod of approval. It was better to be on the cautious side, than to assume we'd simply killed them all. When an enemy had the ability to time travel, one always had to consider the possibility that there was something we didn't know. For all we knew, they'd traveled back in time and fled to the far, far south of the Galaxy to rebuild. We'd have to fight them again in a few years or, alternatively, they went forward in time, somewhere where they wouldn't be found by the Imperium.

Granted, the fact that these other faction possibilities had not popped up to help their main faction during the worst part of the war did imply that either that didn't happen or that they were now smart enough not to get involved with the Imperium. However, making the assumption that they were that smart was a mistake, in my opinion.

"Anyways," Malcador said, "What are you doing over here, Perturabo? I thought you were overseeing the construction of the Imperial Senate."

"I am, but we're at the final stages of construction. The main construction and main pillars will be done by the end of the month. Past that point, it's all about furnishing, which can be handled by any two-bit artisans," he said with a shake of his head. "There's plenty of room for art. Perhaps Sanguinius would like to contribute a statue or something for the front. I hear they're good at that kind of work."

"Sanguinius?" I said with a raised eyebrow.

"Another of your siblings, leader of the Blood Angels. Not your typical art-filled name, mind you," Malcador filled me in. "They're the IX Legion, as I understand it. I paid attention to the numbers

since that was the only information I was allowed. They were mainly fighters of the far reaches in the galactic north."

"They are a bit artistic. The initial Legion was a bit rough, as I think you've noticed from their records, and after their Primarch introduced them to art it helped shape up not only their success rate but also their ability to fight, in my opinion. Anyways, I'll send them a message and let them know that you're interested in perhaps having some sort of statue in front or on top of the dome."

"I'd prefer it in front," Perturabo said, taking a firm stance on it. He added, "I also need to talk to The Phoenician later. I hear they have some artistic ability, and I need someone to paint the roof."

"Paint the roof? That's not exactly what the Emperor requested," Malcador said with an annoyed noise, rubbing the bridge of his nose, before adding, "Fresco on the roof, not painting it. And yes, I'll make sure The Phoenician visits you later. Anything else you want to discuss with your sister, or can I continue taking her into the Imperial Palace so she and her entourage can use the rooms there?"

"No, no, that's it. Just let Dorn know that another one of my units found their way through the wall, and make sure he works on fixing the hole they found."

"You should just talk to him yourself, you know that."

"As soon as he admits that any defense can be penetrated, I'll talk to him. Till then, he'll just have to continue to suffer my annoyance at a distance," Perturabo said before adding, "Later, sister," and turning to leave without a further word.

Turning to Malcador, I asked, "Still not getting along with Dorn?"

Malcador shook his head before saying, "They're being stubborn, that's all. Both of them. They're both right; a good defense can hold off any enemy, but there's always going to be something that can be used to penetrate it. But neither one of them is willing to admit that one is better at something than the other."

"Sounds like Father needs to have a family meeting with those two to stop them from acting like whiny children."

"That's the truth," Malcador agreed as we started walking. I soon followed after making sure that all of my entourage had dropped off their gear at the office. I caught up quickly thanks to my large stride. "Now, the Emperor would like to have a lot of conversations, but things keep spinning out of control whenever he's busy, just making them even busier. He's tracking down evidence of another son, located on a planet that has already joined the Imperium, and from what reports he sent my way, it's not good."

"Not good?" I asked, eager to know more.

"The Emperor's understanding of the situation has made him angry, but he's not sure what he should do about the whole thing because there are quite a few problems, from what I understand when it comes to who his son is hanging out with."

"Another one of those Nobunaga situations, perhaps?" I asked, trying to identify the problem.

"Something like that, but not really. Nothing like the Beastmen your brother associates himself with, more like the improper use of technology from the Dark Age of Technology."

"I'm sure the Emperor will come to a decision on the matter soon enough and return to the Imperial Palace, but at the moment, he's not really sure what to do. Being up there and already on an Imperial planet, bringing down a hammer on a compliant planet is not a good look for the Imperium."

"Hmm, must be a serious issue then. You know, with how many worlds there are, I would have figured the easiest way to solve such a thing is to offer to remove the problem from the planet," I commented.

Malcador stopped deep in thought for a second before saying, "Another thing I have to call the Emperor about. That's one good thing about you, Tanya. When we're missing the forest for the trees, you're good at spotting the tree."

I smiled as I replied, "Itemizing an issue is the best way to figure out how to solve it. Sometimes having a full understanding of it is needed. Sometimes the easiest answer is just to find the crux of the problem."

"Hmm, ever worried that you're going to miss the forest for the trees?" Malcador asked. I shrugged and replied, "I imagine I will, but I'm pretty good at dealing with that kind of situation as well," with a smile, as we entered the gates of the Imperial Palace. The massive structure was quite beautiful in its own gaudy way, with pillars of gold, hallways that seemed to go off into nowhere, and many other strange things. Perhaps relics from a distant time, I thought, as I looked at what appeared to be something of Eldar origins sitting on a pedestal, as well as artworks that I did recognize. Surprisingly, considering I would have figured most of Earth's cultural works would have been destroyed, the Mona Lisa smile was still here by some miracle.

Looking around, though, I noted that it seemed like there wasn't a lot of Eastern artwork surviving. My guess was proven wrong as we passed one section that surprised me. What appeared to be a first edition of Berserk was sealed inside a glass container. It appeared to have slight differences, probably because this was an alternate reality to the first time I'd seen Berserk, but it did also appear to be by the same author, as if it was destined to happen. I also noted a complete collection of Tolkien's works nearby. I shook my head in surprise. The

universe always had to throw me a curveball. Who knew that those two things would, 20,000 years or so, end up on display next to each other, as well as many other works that I didn't recognize. Which shouldn't be too surprising, considering 20,000 years is a long time, and I only had a small window of 2,000 years of knowledge of art and culture to draw on.

"It's all rather distracting," I said as I followed Malcador through the palace. I also noticed that standing at almost every corner were Custodians, their weapons held high as they watched us go by.

"Top-notch security," I commented.

Malcador nodded, saying, "The best in the galaxy. The Custodes are quite skilled at what they do." We made a turn and went up a set of stairs before arriving at an elevator. "Most of your staff will probably have to take the next one," Malcador said, stepping in, some of his staff staying behind. "Unless, of course, you don't mind them just being shown some quarters to stay down here."

Nodding, I replied, "Gunnhilt, follow Malcador's staff to a quarters ring. I think this place is only for my Valkyries."

"Of course, Wolfking," he said, stepping back.

"What about me?" Miss Adelheid called out. "You'll probably have to take the second one. I know it's looking at the practically full elevator," I replied.

The Mechanicum woman sighed before saying, "Alright."

The doors closed, and Malcador spoke up, "We're heading to the floor that was prepared rather recently for you. The original rooms that were set up for you are in the basement, the best place to keep your kids safe and all, especially with things that would want you dead. But we're building a second room for you on the top levels with windows and such. I had experts in your culture quickly put something together."

"My culture" I raised an eyebrow, knowing that it probably meant whatever room awaited me, was based on Fenris or Old Earth Scandinavia. Well, I was somewhat comfortable with it at this point, so I guess it was a nice gesture, though I would like to know what exactly Imperial culture would look like. After all, this was the culture of the Imperium, and it would probably affect all planets under its reign. That's how culture spreads, after all.

"Yes, your culture, well, it's as close to Fenrisian as we can get, Scandinavian, but we call it something else nowadays, Nordyc."

With that, we came to a hallway with multiple entrances. My eyes were more on Malcador than the pathway. I was completely at ease and not checking what was in front of me, a mistake I regretted as I bumped into something.

More precisely, I bumped into a large man, most likely a Primarch accompanied by another Primarch with hands of iron, the best way to describe what I was seeing as I was falling back. The force I had caused me to bounce off of them. Of course, I did not end that fall as a hand grabbed my wrist and prevented me from falling completely. I was pulled close to them, one leg up in the air, and my hair almost touching the ground.

I blinked once or twice as I saw that I had been saved by what I would have to assume was another brother. "Careful there, dear sister," the white-haired man said, wearing rather formal clothing as he noted the scar on my face. "Ah, you must be the King of the Wolves, Tanya Russ, correct? Perturabo describes how you had a mark across your eye. I must say he overplayed the damage to your beauty."

I felt slightly uncomfortable by that statement. "Mind standing me up?"

"Oh, of course," the Primarch said, standing straighter and pulling me up into a normal stance, no longer nearly falling to the ground. He pulled out his hand and said, "I'm Fulgrim, Primarch of the III Legion, the Emperor's Children."

"Tanya Russ," I said, giving him a handshake. "Primarch of the VI, the Wolves of Fenris."

"I can see that," he said, looking at my back armor where there were two wolf heads on either shoulder of the power pack. "I heard that your legion had an affinity for the snowy hunters. I didn't realize it was that great."

Smiling, I simply said, "Fenris is a home of snowy hunters, as you put it."

"Interesting. Oh, where are my manners," Fulgrim said. "Sister, this is the Primarch of the X Legion, the Iron Hands. Ferrus Manus or the Gorgon as he is sometimes called."

"You're really the only one who calls me that, brother," the man said with a nod, pulling out his hand that looked like it was made of metal. I took it and was surprised to feel that not only was it warm but it did feel like it was made of metal. There were quite a lot of questions I wanted to ask, but I don't think I would receive an answer anytime soon. As Ferrus plowed forward with the greeting ignoring my questioning look, "Welcome to the capital, sister. Would've met you sooner, but we got preoccupied with one issue after another on the border region east of the conflict with those who should not be named," he said, giving Malcador a look as he added, "We didn't rag on orders as much as everyone else. Had to defend the frontier, but we had to face one or two waves of what they sent at us."

"You didn't miss out too greatly," I said matter-of-factly. "It was a bad campaign."

"Yes, I have heard that. Anyways, me and Fulgrim, we're going to go do a little sparring down in the outer park. Feel free to come by and join us once you're done settling in," Ferrus said, putting his hand on Fulgrim's shoulder and pushing him onward. I noted that Fulgrim seemed to continue looking at me for a bit before they were out of sight. Hopefully his first impression of me was not that of a klutzy girl, I thought, before deciding it wasn't worth worrying about at the moment. I had other things to do. I'd worry about relations and finding things out about my other siblings later on this trip.

"Those two are probably the most brotherly of all the Primarchs," Malcador said with a shake of his head. "A shining example to the rest, in my opinion, and the only ones where the Emperor has been right about the bonds of brotherhood, as far as I'm concerned."

Although Malcador shook his head before saying, "Could you have gotten on a bit better with your sister, Tanya?" I raised an eyebrow to ask what he meant before he said, "Reports start to indicate that you two were a bit prickly with each other during the Rangda campaign, which does not help my whole thing where I told the Emperor that he should have done daughters because they got along much better."

I smiled before saying, "Malcador, as much as you believe that, I think you've never had daughters."

He let out a deep sigh before saying, "I guess I've never had kids to begin with, so I wouldn't know exactly what would be the best trait. I guess it just seemed like, from what I've seen, well, brothers tend to compete too much, from my experience."

I shook my head, saying, "That's just an ingrained nature of all children. It was going to happen either way."

Malcador chuckled before saying, "The Emperor said that too." He shook his head, turning away from me, and said, "Come on, let's go to your room. It's right around the corner." I followed behind him down the corridor, passing five other rooms marked with legion numbers and emblems of their legion. They appeared to be large rooms, like hotel suites. I wouldn't get a good look until I saw exactly what I was dealing with.

We arrived at door number six, marked with the symbol of a wolf. Malcador tapped the door with his staff, and it opened, revealing a very large room. Stepping in, I saw a spacious living room with an angled window that allowed me to see out onto the park outside, between the wall and the fortress. The angled window allowed sunlight to flood in. There was also a kitchen, a dining area, a hangout area, as well as what appeared to be a TV. I was curious about what exactly was on Terra's TV, but I would have an answer to that soon enough. There was also a doorway leading off to the side that seemed to go to a communal bathtub that was large enough to be counted as a pool. Something I would be checking out later with the girls. The room next to that appeared to be some sort of service quarters, as it opened directly into the kitchen. Turning

around, I saw that there was a stairway leading up to a second level, also lit by the angled window. Climbing the set of stairs I entered into a landing where I was greeted by a large cozy fireplace surrounded by plush Primarch sized chairs and the room was decorated in traditional looking Scandinavian styled arts and carvings, which made me double take and smile when I noticed the Great Wave off Kanagawa and the Wanderer above the Sea of Fog proudly hanging on the wall. There were also a couple of doors on this floor, one I assume led to a bedroom and judging from the look of the other an armory, there was also a door that led out onto a balcony with what appeared to be two dog houses. That was good; I would have Freki and Geri brought down so they could enjoy their time here as well, and a small roost for my bird.

This was a perfect place to relax and learn everything I needed to know about the Imperium's governments and legal bodies. Turning to look at Malcador, I said, "This is great, thank you."

"No thanks necessary," he replied. "This was always going to be in your future in my mind. No, probably if you had been raised here, you wouldn't have gotten such culturally interesting things. By the way," he pointed off to my left, showing a doorway, "there's a small library in there, lovely ancient history of Terra if you want to catch up on anything that you're not aware of. There's a larger library deeper into the pyramid; a Custodian will be placed outside your door to help you find your way there if you need to."

I smiled and said, "Custodians right outside my door, almost makes me wonder if you were worried I'd get lost."

"Yes, but not anymore," I said matter-of-factly. "Do you know how complex and deep the Imperial Palace is? I'll tell you what I don't know – how deep it goes. There are projects so far beneath the palace that even the Emperor won't tell me about. So, it's better for you to have someone nearby who can be your guide until you get familiar with the place."

"That sounds fair?" I said in agreement. "Alright, thank you, Malcador." I turned towards the others and asked, "Is there anything I need to know about for tonight? Any meetings or anything?"

Malcador thought for a moment before saying, "There's a small court meeting tonight. Several local nobles will be attending, as well as a few of the larger Navigator Houses. One of them would like to talk to you, but I'll discuss that with you later. For now, make yourself at home and make sure to have something appropriate for an Imperial evening ready."

"Will do, Malcador," I said with a bow as he walked back out of the door.

As he left, Miss Adelheid stepped in, murmuring, "You left me behind."

"No worries," I said. "Make yourself at home. We have plenty of room, I think."

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**Kori Bretakollrsson**  
**Rangdan Exclusion Zone**

A giant whip-like tail lashed out from the creature, flinging its worm-like arm like a constrictor, attempting to rip a Marine in half. His armor held as Marines nearby grabbed their chainswords and went to work, though it wasn't ideal that they were exposing themselves to more genetic tomfoolery left behind by the Rangdan.

Thankfully, Bjorn was in range to do some real damage. "Out of the way!" he called, pushing the Marine aside. He raised the battle-ax he had above his head and brought it down on the worm arm, freezing it solid as the weapon he wielded was a frost blade.

The Slaught ripped its arm to pieces to prevent the frost from spreading through its body. It brought up a seized bolter and unleashed a harrowing few shots at the Marines gathered around their coiled comrade. But it didn't get off more than three shots before Marines who had been waiting for a clear shot unleashed hell upon its body, exploding it into smaller pieces. Quickly, flamer-wielding men and Volkite weapons burned the area, disintegrating the genetic mess.

Bjorn shook his head as he put the ax on his side. He turned towards me and said, "Well, at least we have an answer as to why there's a resurgence of this."

I nodded, looking past them at what should have been an abandoned town. It was obviously not abandoned after all. Instead, it seemed to be an attempted recolonization. Someone had violated the exclusion zone rules and tried to rebuild here. It was an honorable attempt, but it seemed that some rogue trader could now officially be charged with likely bringing this scourge to the planets that had been infested.

"Whoever was in charge of maintaining a watch in this area is going to be in trouble," my companion commented, shaking his head. As I stepped over what appeared to be a child's toy, I hoped it had been left here since the last remnants of humanity were ruined by the resurgence of the Rangdan.

"Xana 2 to Governor," Bjorn said, looking over at the small town mechanic. "Yes, we're going to sweep in, I believe, to make sure it's thoroughly cleansed before they attempt their own settlement." He glanced at one of the bodies and added, "I don't think this was a Mechanicum settlement though. Nowhere near enough cybernetics on the bodies."

"So just a colonization effort by some local official, probably trying to rid themselves of an unwanted population," I offered. I shook my head at the waste of perfectly good people on such an operation. Whoever was responsible for this would have to be tracked down, that was for sure, and they'd likely face severe consequences. Such a waste of human potential.

I shook my head, pondering why I thought of humans in this manner. My thoughts soon shifted back to the situation at hand. The Marines were busy cleaning up as many of these worm bio-weapons as possible, using fire and Volkite weaponry to burn out every building they came across. Grenades with incendiary properties were thrown into structures to ensure they were burned out thoroughly. A few Marines entered the buildings to check for survivors, but they quickly emerged shaking their heads. The men got to work, burning the structures, though the chances of finding anyone alive were slim. Still, you never knew.

There was always a chance for a straggler, though there hadn't been many stragglers in the last campaign. That was mainly because the Rangdan had turned the entire sector's population into potential enemies.

"Why didn't they burn down every planet?" I mused aloud. "It's a good question."

"True," Bjorn replied. "Maybe the Mechanicum wanted to get some use out of these planets as soon as possible and thought they could just wait out the bio-weapons until they died out."

"Yeah, maybe that's it," I agreed. "But it does seem odd. Why not just burn everything down? Virus-bomb all the planets and turn them into lifeless rocks?"

Bjorn shrugged before saying, "Virus bombs are the last resort option, and we're not supposed to use them on most missions. It's probably as simple as that. These planets were marked clear, so they left them as they were."

"Hmm, I wonder if they're going to change their minds after this infection and make us virus bomb every planet that was within Rangdan space or under their control."

I shook my head and replied, "Probably not. There are too many worlds with potential use to go to waste like that. If I had to guess, the Mechanicum will be tasked with building some sort of bio-weapon to fight the infection, something that can eliminate it."

Bjorn chimed in, "So, just get some feral Orks and drop them on every planet? Wouldn't that eventually get rid of the bio-weapon? Orks usually come out on top in these situations."

I agreed, "That's what Tanya was suggesting, I remember. Maybe they'll finally take her up on that option."

"Yes, infest the world with one problem to get rid of another. That is very much like Tanya," a voice came from behind us. We both turned to see Dark Angels approaching, their Primarch leading the way. She looked across the town with interest.

"If the enemy is as problematic as the Orks, then I see no reason why we should leave the job to the Orks when we'll just have to deal with them later. These creatures, these monstrosities, are an old weapon that needs to be destroyed, not left to possibly do something unexpected,"

she declared."And who knows what could be created by the merger of these monstrosities, if we leave them and the Orks left unattended," she added, making me envision the disastrous consequences.

Bjorn gulped down air before adding, "Of course, Primarch Lion, you are correct. We're just trying to figure out what the best option is. It's not like we have any control over the higher-ups in command. This is just some casual discussion."

Lion made a motion that resembled a raised eyebrow, not too dissimilar from what Bjorn and I would do, as she said, "Casual discussion, very well."

She moved past us, her cape billowing in the wind, and said, "Well, your 'casual discussion' might be correct on some fronts. But what about the normal bio-weapons, the bioforms, and these Slaught? However, what about the other bio-weapons, such as the one approaching us at high speed?"

"What?" I said, looking in the direction she was gazing, seeing something running at us. It glowed blue with strange energy flashing in and out around it.

Bjorn added, "By the two-headed wolf, Bjorn said, looking ahead before calling out, 'Everyone, gather up! We've got a psyker coming at us at high speed. Prepare to fire and defend ourselves.'"

The Wolves of Fenris and the Dark Angels quickly formed a battle line on either side of where Lion, Bjorn, and I were standing, guns pointed downrange. Flamer and volkite units were in position, and we had brought along a Frost Cannon, a weapon designed to use the properties of frost iron to turn plasma cold and freeze anything it hit.

Even with all that firepower, I was worried. I had never faced one of the blue psykers, the Cerevares. I had heard stories of conflicts with them, tales of how some had even tried to summon entities from the Warp during battle, but I had never been involved in such a fight. Here I was, facing one with a relatively small force: a full squad of Wolves of Fenris, a full squad of Dark Angels, a Primarch, and a tank. While those were decent odds, I had also heard stories of several squads of Wolves of Fenris being decimated by a wave of power from such creatures, so our odds weren't the best.

The creature was running at near supersonic speed, seemingly accelerating. It extended its crystalline blue arm, creating a long blue field of energy as if preparing to sweep us all away with a single swipe when it reached us.

Lion drew her sword and assumed a fighting stance, more professional than I had ever seen Tanya wield a weapon. Could that stance really stop the approaching monstrosity? I didn't know.

The answer became apparent as the creature swept its arm forward, sending a beam of energy crashing through the buildings on the left side of town, cutting them in half. Lion stepped forward to the left, her sword smashing into the creature before it could touch the nearest Dark Angel. She blocked the energy beam from going any further and then used her frame to bounce the energy blade up, freeing her sword. She brought it down on a spot that weakened the creature's structure, sending the dissipating energy blade and the extended arm behind the speeding monster, impaling it in the ground.

Now that it had stopped, I got a better look at it. It reminded me of the Rangdan, the little fox creatures, but instead of being three or four feet tall, it was nearly ten feet tall, if not taller. It seemed stretched, with its fur replaced by diamond-etched rock. Its eyes were not flesh but glowing portals of blue. It extended its other arm, attempting to strike the Primarch.

Lion caught the arm with her blade, deflected it into the creature's chest, and followed with a kick to its gut, sending it tumbling backward.

Several Marines unleashed gunfire, as clear lines of fire had been established, but the rounds bounced off the creature. Flames did nothing, and while it appeared to melt a bit under volkite fire, it kept channeling more energy from the planet itself, glowing increasingly blue with each passing moment.

Lion rushed forward, smashing her fist into its face and bringing it down to the ground. She reversed her sword so that both hands were on it, the blade pointed down, and jammed it hard into the creature's chest cavity.

The monstrosity let out a strange, echoing cry of pain. Its hand, or what was left of a hand, perhaps a reforming one on the severed arm, reached out to grab her blade, channeling energy into it. Lion smashed her foot into the arm, exerting more pressure until the arm shattered into glassy shards.

She stepped back, drawing her sword up into the sky as she pulled it from the creature's body, then jammed it again into the neck of the creature, severing it and letting the head bounce free. She followed up by crushing it under her foot.

The creature was still glowing, but it wasn't emitting the same intense power as before.

"Is it dead?" I asked, genuinely unsure. Silicon-based life was not something we encountered often during the campaign; most creatures were carbon-based.

"I believe it is. Most creatures can't survive without a head," Lion mused before kicking the body into a nearby building, causing it to shatter into blue shards.

"Have some men bring down plasma and melta weapons. Volkite is also good, but not as effective as needed. We need to burn it up completely to make sure it doesn't regrow."

"Can it do that?" Bjorn asked.

"I would have to assume so. It either regenerated itself from near death in the last war or more likely someone or something converted it. The question now is who converted it," she said, looking out at the town.

"You're not suggesting there's some rogue Rangdan left over from the war with access to the tools necessary to recreate these bio-weapons, are you?" I asked, confirming what I suspected she was thinking.

She nodded, saying, "That would be the most likely option, I think. Just because we blasted all their planets doesn't mean there wasn't a ship or two that escaped. Even though we killed many, there were sightings of a small fleet, remnants of the larger armada that faced Dorn, not too long after the end of the war. It's possible that there are some out there floating around causing problems. It's not impossible. We need to find out where those ships are and if it's real."

"Too bad we blew up their homeworld. Perhaps there would be files on their ports of call in those old fortresses on the mountainsides."

"Why?" I turned to Bjorn, tilting her head. "Those old fortresses were buried deep. They may still be there." Nodding, she continued, "I will contact your commander and have you sent to that planet to do a bit of investigation. We need to see if there's any evidence that they survived and if there are any records we can use to locate any hidden ports of call."

"Good work, Marine. That's good thinking," she said with a wise nod before walking back toward her own.

I placed my hand on his shoulder and said, "Nice job getting in good with the First Primarch."

"I'm not so sure about that," Bjorn said, before adding, "We just got told to go to a dead world that should be airless and burning. I think we just got punished. We won't be able to fight anything."

"Oh, that's a good point," I said. "We're in for disappointment. We'd better conduct the search quickly, find what we can, and report back so we can get back to the campaign."

"Here's hoping we can get it done," Bjorn said in agreement.

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**Lord Wolfen**  
**Ark Reach III**

"Really, I do not know why you want to try and find that particular gene," came a slightly annoyed voice from across the laboratory as I stood there, equally annoyed. The red-cloaked Priest of Mars shook her head, her white hair hiding her eyes. In fact, much of her was concealed—her face behind a mask of some kind, and her hands within heavy-duty gloves. I noted that she looked a lot more human than some tech-priests I'd encountered. Supposedly, this one was a relative of Adelheid, the armorer who currently ran Svellgard.

"I want to find this gene because it is important. Whatever that gene is, it could be useful for the Wolves of Fenris, Tanya, and the Valkyrie. If we don't understand it, how can we use it?" I replied.

"It's a flaw, a failure," the girl said with a shake of her head, leaning on a cane she had. "Gene-Seed flaws are not rare; they happen. The Emperor's work is a masterpiece, I admit this, but even masterpieces can be flawed. That's simply what it means to be human."

I let out a deep breath. I had asked for help with this project to try and understand the Gene-Seed flaw that affected a small percentage of Space Marines, those who ended up like me. I also wanted to comprehend the gene that was taken from me and used to create the Valkyrie project. Unfortunately, I had not received the aid of the Wolf Priests; they were all too busy creating more Space Marines, refining that process to ensure my mistake was not repeated as often. Instead, I had contacted this girl before me. I say "girl" because that's what she sounded like—a young Tech-Priest. However, whether that was the reality or just some Tech-Priest tom foolery remained to be seen. After all, she was wearing a mask, and her voice sounded a little too clear to be someone who was wearing a mask. For all I knew, she could be an ancient Tech-Priest pretending to be no more than 18, with that figure and voice.

Taking a breath, I said, "Well, obviously, you must find some interest in this project, after all. You wouldn't have left your labs on Svellgard to come all the way out here to the Ark Reach Cluster."

"So you do have a brain. Good. I don't want to work with idiots," the girl said, tilting her head before nodding emphatically. "I am somewhat interested in the process that causes this flaw because a flaw, or some people will say, a curse, is just a gift that has yet to be greatly understood."

I raised an eyebrow at that before she continued, "Look at you, for instance. You were a big noble warrior of Fenris, a barbarian lord. You were given the Gene-Seed of the VIth and were overcome by the wolverine nature of your planet's DNA. Your Primarch then took you to the place where she grew up, where she found who she was, and you reawakened yourself there. Granted, you were reduced in size and stature, but you were given something else—something you didn't have before: psychic abilities. Like most of the Mechanicum, I want nothing to do with

those abilities, far too unscientific and filled with too many uncontrollable variables, but it is interesting that the Gene-Seed changed you so you could be more receptive to them. I would like to study that. That is my reasoning for assisting you in this endeavor. Because you want to find out what can be made of your Gene-Seed, what miraculous things can be harnessed by your sisterhood of Valkyries, and I'd like to know what that could be as well."

"So you want to use me as a test subject?" I said, not particularly happy with the way she just came out and said it.

"Didn't you plan to use failed Aspirants as test subjects? Your sisterhood is full of Valkyries who've also taken the variant Gene-Seed that came from you, something that is officially not supposed to be possible. After all, Gene-Seed is only supposed to work on men, and all other attempts to create female Gene-Seed, from my understanding, have not actually happened or worked. Granted, there's only something like half a dozen Primarchs that could fall into the category of having to worry about this."

"Half a dozen?" I said, trying to do the math quickly. Tanya, Lion El'Jonson and Lorgar. I guessed you could count Magnus, as they were a shapeshifter, so they could be whatever gender they wanted. Then again, if I were in the Mechanicum's position I would just simplify the problem and go yes, Magnus would count as both, which still meant there were more female Primarch's unaccounted for out there if Adelheid's relative was as knowledgeable as she was making herself appear.

"Sorry, I misspoke—about a third a dozen," she said matter-of-factly, raising my suspicions even more. "Anyways."

"Fine," I said, matter-of-factly, too, "So you're willing to help me investigate the Canis Helix."

"Yes, under the assumption that you will actually let me look at this DNA sample. I tried to look at the DNA for what we made of the Valkyries, but the Wolf Priests would never have that with me hanging around the lab."

I blinked before saying, "That was nearly 20 years ago."

"So it was. Oh, how time flies," the girl said, shaking her head. Perhaps her hair was naturally white, or perhaps that was a sign of aging. Either way, she was not telling the truth about something with the way she presented herself, and I was suspicious of her.

"So now, Miss Wolfen," she said, ignoring my title as she approached, "let us begin at the origin of this. Do you remember much about when you were a wolf?"

I raised an eyebrow before shaking my head, leaning on my staff as I pulled the hood back. "No, I don't remember much about that time. Scrabbling through the darkness, hunting elk, is about as much as I could recall."

"Do you remember finding this?" she asked, pointing at my staff. "Vaguely, if memory serves me right, I thought, 'Oh, that's a neat stick, I'll take it with me.'" I answered

The Tech-Priest chuckled as she said, "Really now, just a neat stick? I would have thought the runes on it and the Eldar design would have been a lot more noticeable. But then again, you were nothing but a barbarian at the time, even before becoming a wolf. You wouldn't be able to recognize race from bone."

"Well, maybe that affected you as well. Dogs and wolves do like bones. From what history I understand," she said, coming forward to look at my staff, "I would've expected it to be a little bit more nibbled on. It's almost in pristine condition."

"I broke my teeth on it," I said matter-of-factly, which got her to look up. "Thing is, my teeth broke, and it took a while to regrow."

"Regrow?" the Tech-Priest said, tilting her head as she stood up straight, leaning on her cane. "Canines don't regrow lost teeth. Even my studies of the native Fenrisian wolves out in the wild have shown that many of them are missing teeth after severe damage. Not even Space Marines regrow their teeth either, from what I know, though each Legion does enjoy keeping their own little secrets especially the I Legion. So perhaps they do though the question would then be why would they keep their dental records a secret. Or perhaps this is just a symptom of being exposed to the Vlth's Gene-Seed, or it's possibly another clue as to how your form must be established, though at this point it's all conjecture."

She shook her head, her hair bouncing a bit as she walked over to a central table that had been built for the study of any failed Aspirant I could get my hands on. "Come here and give me a blood sample. I have many things I must do."

Letting out a deep breath, I approached, removing my cloak as I came and pulling up the sleeve of my shirt.

"Very masculine clothing there. Doesn't really show off your feminine form at all."

I gave the white-haired woman a look before saying, "How closely related are you to Adelheid?"

She chuckled before saying, "Not that close, thank you very much. I'm just taking notes for my own information about your mental state. Obviously, you're not as accepting of your female form when you're outside of your armor. You favor male clothing underneath your cloak, correct?"

"Correct," I said, as one of her mechanical arms from her back moved forward to draw blood directly from a vein.

"One other thing, I recently heard there was an incident with your Gene-Seed while facing something in the battle for Ark Reach II of unsettling nature. Other Space Marines felt as if they

were losing themselves. It's a rumor, but it has been reported that it happened to several Wolves of Fenris and some Valkyrie. Did you experience this feeling?"

I raised an eyebrow before saying, "A bit. Why?"

"Because I'm interested in why you would have felt that way. Perhaps this is something else, a gift that I've proposed. Maybe it's in your Gene-Seed. Some counter-reaction to Warp abilities, say a natural affinity against them, to fight them."

"That's a bit of a jump," I said matter-of-factly, folding my arms in front of me.

"Well, I wouldn't be out here if I was one of the standard Mechanicum scientists. Those of us who like to jump to possibilities get run out of the main Forge Worlds. It's really good that your Primarch, Tanya, built her own for Adelheid. It has given those of us with let's say more unconventional ideas a place to live and work and still contribute to the Imperium."

"Huh, did not know that. Never been to your planet."

The Tech-Priest nodded before saying, "Yes, well, we are a private lot. I mean, your people believe in the All-Father instead of the Omnissiah, so we are not exactly on the same wavelength. So, us being a separate entity within your system is to be expected."

"Huh, which All-Father, the Emperor, or the original one before people started thinking the Emperor and the All-Father were the same thing?"

She stopped for a moment before saying, "How very interesting. I hadn't realized that there was actually a difference there. I assumed it was just ancient superstition being misunderstood for the time. Hmm." The device that was sucking my blood was pulled out of my arm, and she placed the cylindrical tube of red into a nearby device.

"Now, I just let this machine do its work, and I will be able to compare your blood before your transformation and after your transformation."

"Don't see why that's interesting," I said, holding my arm. "It's just blood."

"Oh, I could say so much about your ignorance, but I'll just say this, everything that makes you, you, comes from your blood. What determines your physical traits and aspects before your transformation was in your blood. And those traits and aspects are determined the same way after your transformation, by your blood. So what determines your reaction to the Warp and other possible quirks, is in your blood as well. And that's only something we can do through studying and comparing your blood at those three times, so no, it's not 'just blood'."

"Ah, sure," I said, backing away from her. "Do you need me for anything else, or can I go visit with some of the other Valkyrie, make sure they're doing all right?"

"Oh, yes, take your time. It'll probably be a few days before the results are in, or maybe, if the machine is good enough to me, within the evening. I'll send a message to you later, Miss Wolfen."

"It's Lord," I said, matter-of-factly, before grabbing my cloak and pulling it back on, walking out with my staff as quickly as possible.

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**Writers note:** wow that was a hell of a turn around on getting this chapter took me by surprises but welcome one!

**Please comment, review, and generally enjoy yourselves...**

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