My Life as A Death Guard

Chapter 386: Many Sides Before the War

[Terra]

White marble, pale as snow, was laid across the floor. A dazzling white radiance spilled down from the room's sole light source, splashing into a blinding tide of brilliance.

The only desk in the chamber cast a dim, ominous shadow across the ground. Within that shadow, the golden armor dulled for a moment.

The Emperor stood in silence, staring at the map spread out on the desk before Him.

…They… They no longer wished to play.

The Emperor slowly tapped His fingers against the tabletop, producing crisp sounds. Each pulse of sound sent forth a dazzling ripple beneath the white light; the veil trembled, and through it He was able to glimpse the flowing currents beyond.

His earlier actions had angered Them. Now, Chaos was about to show Him Their wrath.

…Hades.

The Emperor silently mouthed the word.

No… the Emperor corrected Himself—desperation.

He could sense Their state: exalted yet frail. Chaos was angry enough, and They had wagered enough of Their power. This was not—this was not something Hades alone could resolve.

Hades could not perceive the matters of the Warp. That meant he could not foresee the enemy's moves.

The Emperor thought calmly, lowering His gaze to the map, counting one by one the factions that would appear upon this battlefield.

The hand tapping the desk paused slightly. The Emperor breathed steadily; for an instant, golden light flared—then vanished.

Behind Him, the hunched old man stirred faintly.

"My lord," Malcador's aged voice rose, heavy with exhaustion, "I can go."

"No," the Emperor said.

"Remain on Terra, Malcador. The Webway needs you."

Malcador coughed twice.

"My lord, I still do not believe Magnus should be released."

"I have given Leman Russ control," the Emperor replied. "When necessary, the Wolf King will make his decision."

"The true battlefield is not here."

The Emperor spoke without a ripple of emotion. Behind Him, Malcador frowned deeply. He wished to say more, but the Emperor raised His hand, halting Malcador's next words.

“Prepare for the shattering of the realm… Malcador.”

Like a sigh, the Emperor spoke softly,

“We must preserve our winning hand. Order Mars to prepare support vessels, have them ready for long-duration voyages.”

. . .

The Emperor’s—*the Emperor’s*—holy middle finger had gone dark!!!

Hades screamed inwardly. After the final Warp jump ended, the Emperor’s finger bone flickered once with light, then went out again.

Don’t mess with his mental state at a time like this!

Hades rapidly listed the possible scenarios in his mind. The first: something had gone wrong on his side, perhaps the Four Gods had used the Eye of Terror to weaken the Emperor’s finger bone. But Hades had detected no signs of blasphemy, nor had the Black Domain picked up any psychic activity.

—The second possibility was that something had gone wrong on the Emperor’s end.

Hades desperately hoped the Webway hadn’t exploded. Even an ill-timed joke from the Emperor would have been preferable.

But unfortunately, the finger bone now truly resembled an ordinary human bone, no longer shrouded in even the faintest golden glow.

That meant he could no longer perform Warp jumps on his own. At the same time, he was also unable to use his signature technique, [Primarch Evolution].

His gaze drifted inadvertently to Ferrus's mouth beside him.

Hades fell silent. Then, what he needed to do next was very simple: stop the Four Gods from opening the Eye of Terror. If the Eye were successfully opened, the Silent Sisterhood and the Iron Hands alone would be unable to halt the daemonic hosts advancing through Warp turbulence.

Before the Eye of Terror was opened, they still had a chance.

Though he was screaming soundlessly inside, Hades showed no reaction on the surface. Expressionless, he continued idly fiddling with that middle finger bone while speaking with Ferrus before him. The fleet was about to reach the region bordering the Eye of Terror.

"Beings that possess autonomous consciousness, or machine-spirits, will resist my electric arcs," Hades said. "The stronger their self-awareness, the harder they are for me to control."

Ferrus pondered this. So that was why the mind-controlled automatons still maintained such high efficiency.

"Then any mechanical entities with autonomous consciousness we encounter will be prioritized targets for elimination by the Iron Hands."

Ferrus spoke with measured calm, but Hades smiled.

“No need. I still have the Black Domain, it can erase autonomous consciousness.”

Ferrus fell silent. The Lord of Medusa quietly drew a deep breath.

"I think that if we truly end up fighting Perturabo… Perturabo would not wish to be your enemy."

Hades broke into a brilliant smile.

“That is also why I am willing to lead the Silent Sisterhood to the Eye of Terror.”

Because both Legions present here relied on mechanized warfare, Hades could at least guarantee that the battle would not collapse in the short term.

As if catching the deeper meaning in Hades’s words, Ferrus paused. Then he fixed his gaze on the command console and spoke,

"I’ve heard that your Archmagos is spreading a different doctrine within the Legion."

The smile on Hades’s face stiffened. Before he could respond, Ferrus cut him off. The Primarch looked at Hades with a meaningful expression.

"Does this increase your power, Hades?"

Hades fell silent. Through Hades’s explanations, Ferrus already understood Chaos and the concept of “gods”… and an ominous thought surfaced in Hades’s mind.

Slowly, but firmly, Hades nodded.

"Then let your Archmagos speak more with the warriors." Ferrus said casually.

"They also think you are very different. You truly frightened them."

Ferrus's tone relaxed somewhat. The Lord of Medusa crossed his arms.

"I imagine you originally intended to teach them some skills. But unfortunately, the knowledge you revealed, combined with the goodwill you expressed… produced a discordant reaction."

Hades gave an awkward smile.

"That may be my mista—there's a situation."

His words abruptly shifted. Before his sentence even ended, several red dots—representing other fleets—lit up on the avian-servitor display.

That was…

Hades frowned.

…Word Bearers?

The motion of Hades idly twirling the Emperor's finger bone came to a halt.

This was not a scenario he had anticipated. By normal Warp travel calculations, the Word Bearers could not possibly be here.

Then… there was only one possibility.

Hades stared at the avian-servitor display. The number of Word Bearer vessels was not large, but concealed forces could not be ruled out.

Ferrus was about to accept the incoming communication request from the Word Bearers when, beside him, Hades's voice sounded softly, "Highest alert level."

Ferrus froze mid-motion, about to approve the request. He turned to Hades in disbelief.

In response, Hades had already connected to the monitoring channel.

. . .

[Cadia]

In the underground trench beneath the largest blackstone obelisk, Perturabo stood silently before the command console, though one who knew everything as he did hardly needed one.

Scalding steam vented from his side. The Lord of the Forge bent its massive, jagged frame, its loathsome vapor curling as it spoke with a hint of seductive triumph on the eve of victory.

+Look, they've arrived.+

The monster spoke gleefully.

+Perfect timing. I think they'll arrive just in time to join the celebration at the moment we open the Eye of Terror.+

Perturabo ignored Vashtorr's muttering in silence. The Lord of Iron focused intently on reversing and manipulating the blackstone obelisks across other worlds. With Cadia as the central anchor, the defensive line gradually extended toward it.

At this very moment, that great river was about to converge. Cadia would be the final piece of the puzzle.

"You are very interested in him?"

Perturabo asked lazily. Vashtorr responded with an irritated blast of steam.

+Only when you witness it with your own eyes will you understand why he is the one the gods have spat upon.+

As if recalling something, Perturabo let out a cold laugh.

"I've seen it. My "brother" values his little soldiers quite highly."

Perturabo spoke casually,

"It's nothing more than an anti-psyker ability. He can't shrug off artillery fire, nor can he ignore gunfire. Death would still come easily."

Vashtorr fell silent. After a long moment, crackling arcs of electricity flared among the heavily coiled cables.

+Do not underestimate him,+ Vashtorr hissed.

+Beyond anti-psychic properties, he possesses other abilities.+

"And what would those be?"

+Control over machinery.+

How amusing, Perturabo thought, he could actually hear a faint tremor in the monster's voice.

"It seems he has mastered a rather rare skill."

Perturabo mocked, but Vashtorr replied softly,

+No… you don't understand… Perturabo, you need assistance. You should be grateful that the psychic density here is extremely high, this gives us the leverage to suppress him.+

Vashtorr spoke as gears thundered. The loathsome creature raised its head, its gaze seeming to pierce through layer after layer of defenses as it fixed thoughtfully on the blackstone obelisk.

+Fortunately, we won't need to face him directly… once the rift that inverts reality opens, he will be erased on his own.+

Vashtorr let out a rasping laugh.

Perturabo ignored it with practiced ease. A message had come in from the Word Bearers.

Lorgar… Perturabo thought. The Word Bearers' Primarch had changed, utterly changed. Or rather… his soul was already dead.

The blasphemous thought brought Perturabo a strange sense of satisfaction, even as a faint, bone-deep dread crept up within him.

. . .

Argel Tal stood there uneasily. He had been exiled. When the Primarch had planned to kill the Custodians, Argel Tal had spoken out to dissuade him—and for that, Lorgar had sent him to the most remote section of the ship.

Argel Tal silently tightened his grip on the black spear in his hands. Its heavy weight granted him a brief sense of reassurance. At least the Primarch had not confiscated the punitive weapon he had obtained in the Perfect City.

Lorgar… had changed.

Argel Tal drew a deep breath. Ever since speaking with the Fourth Legion's Primarch, Perturabo, Lorgar had seemed like a different person. He ordered all the books he had written after the Perfect City to be burned, and commanded the Word Bearers to scatter around the Eye of Terror to gather the indigenous faiths of the region.

At the same time, the Primarch was hastening the compilation of new holy texts, disbanding the old priesthood and training priests according to the new faith.

That was not the Lorgar he knew.

Argel Tal believed this firmly. Something had definitely happened. He needed to confirm the Primarch's condition once more. So far, aside from Argel Tal, all other warriors who doubted the Primarch had been sent by Lorgar to the fringe sectors in search of faith—exiled even farther away.

Argel Tal did not know whether it was the punitive spear in his hands that had spared him, or whether the Primarch still believed Argel Tal had his own uses.

But that was not the point. Right now, Argel Tal only needed to do one thing: confirm what had truly happened to the Primarch.

Although he had long since been kept far from the Primarch and could not learn of his every move, the Blessed Lady Cyrene could.

Cyrene was intelligent, unlike the impulsive Argel Tal. After realizing something was wrong with the Primarch, the perceptive blind woman had decisively and tactfully accepted the new faith. Yet in private, Cyrene continued each day to secretly pray to the Emperor and to the Silent Ones.

It was also Cyrene who brought Argel Tal the Primarch's daily schedule. The young woman crawled out of a ventilation duct, delivering the latest updates on the Primarch's movements to the on-duty Argel Tal.

According to Cyrene, the Primarch went alone to the confessional chamber every day at noon, allowing no one to approach. Priests who had previously tried to seek an audience with the Primarch were harshly reprimanded, some were even flung against the walls by their impatient gene-father.

A period of solitude for the Primarch… this was Argel Tal's last chance.

Relying on the map provided by the Blessed Lady, Argel Tal skillfully avoided the patrolling warriors. He walked silently through the corridor, unconsciously gripping his spear so tightly that the web between his thumb and forefinger ached under the cold pressure of the blackstone shaft.

The confessional chamber was right before him. Argel Tal felt his breathing grow heavy.

Was he doing the right thing?

Argel Tal asked himself. He could have chosen not to do this. The fact that the Primarch had merely exiled him to the ship meant there was still hope. Argel Tal could have obediently served for a few years in some remote post aboard the flagship, then returned to the Primarch's side and once again become his most trusted warrior.

But… it wasn't like that.

Something was wrong with Lorgar, Argel Tal thought in anguish. Even if he still shone like a demigod, everything had gone off the rails the moment Lorgar conspired with Perturabo to kill the Custodians. There were always the perceptive among the Word Bearers who noticed the Primarch's abnormalities, but they were either exiled ahead of time or chose to remain silent—this was, after all, a period of major changes in rank and position.

When Argel Tal's thoughts finally settled back into the present, he realized he was already standing before the door to the Primarch's private confessional.

The door was tightly shut.

Argel Tal swallowed. He slung his spear across his back and raised his hand to knock.

His gaze lingered on the hand suspended in midair. In the end, Argel Tal chose to follow his heart. He turned his hand over and gently pushed at the door.

Argel Tal's eyes widened.

The door was not locked.

Flickering firelight danced through the crack in the doorway. Flames crackled softly, accompanied by heavy, drowning-like breaths.

Lorgar—Lorgar stood there with his back to Argel Tal, facing the blackstone scepter displayed in the corner. Bonfires roared around the Primarch. Argel Tal saw the corpses of books—Lorgar had set his own writings ablaze.

Argel Tal recognized the texts. Among the book fragments were Legion tomes from before the Perfect City, revised editions written afterward, and even drafts of the version the Primarch was currently compiling.

As if unaware of Argel Tal's arrival, the Primarch stood there in silence, nailed in place, his breathing ragged, as though fighting a brutal internal battle.

Argel Tal pressed his lips together and cautiously took a step into the room—

"Get out."

Lorgar's voice rang out, yet the Primarch did not move.

Argel Tal felt as though his throat had been seized by the Primarch's grip, but he chose to firmly take a second step forward.

The Lorgar he knew would never tell his son to "get out."

Lorgar's breathing grew even more erratic. He gasped in short bursts, still unmoving.

Argel Tal took his third step.

Pressure crashed down on him. He saw blood spill between his armored boots, and a metallic sweetness filled his throat.

Lorgar let out a gasp like that of someone on the verge of death.

“…Father?”

Argel Tal opened his mouth, a red line sliding down from the corner of his lips.

"…Don’t."

A shattered, broken voice rang out,

"Look…"

Drip

Amid the flickering, dim-yellow firelight, Argel Tal saw a single drop of blood appear on the floor at the Primarch’s feet.

Yet the Primarch’s silhouette remained silent, like an abandoned house left to decay for thousands of years.

The sound of adamantium striking echoed, armor brushing against armor. Lorgar slowly raised one hand and pointed toward the dull, golden scepter.

"Go…"

Blood flowed from Argel Tal’s eyes like tears. He understood—he understood. He began to walk toward the scepter. As he passed by the Primarch’s side, accompanied by a great cry of anguish, the Primarch turned around, once again presenting his back to Argel Tal.

Argel Tal successfully grasped the scepter.

"Go…"

The Primarch gasped,

"Go… go… find the gods."

Argel Tal felt the bloody tears had spread across his entire face.

“How can I help you, Father?” he asked in sorrow, his voice breaking.

"Go… quickly…"

Argel Tal clenched his teeth.

No… he thought. *No…* he could not help the Primarch. From the very first moment he saw Lorgar’s back, Argel Tal had realized that the Primarch’s state was far worse than he had imagined.

But now, the only thing he could do was obey Lorgar’s command.

It felt as though a mountain had been placed upon Argel Tal’s shoulders. The Primarch’s voice urging him to leave was growing weaker and weaker—there was no time left…

Lorgar listened to the sound of Argel Tal’s chaotic footsteps fading away. After an unknown span of time, the fires around him gradually died out.

Lorgar faced absolute darkness.