

Whisper - Dark Fantasy, Modern

Arcadia

Marshland Needles

The howling never did stop. In a single stone room, near the heart of the tower where the walls were thickest, the screaming never did stop. In that room were bookshelves, lining the walls, with but a single wall bare. Upon it were weapon racks, wooden things that held the deadliest in the master's arsenal. He liked killing things. He prepared for it. Near the center of the room was a rug, vast and plush and joyous, and an oaken table. Above the reading man was a lantern, a book in his hand.

The man looked normal enough. Simple enough. Normal enough. His hands were craggy and bitten, as though one worked a lifetime upon vessels, and callouses from ropes shown on those hands. They were nimble, though, handling the page with effortless dexterity. His shirt, a loose affair, hid a musculature born from being on the water, and the man's hair was the color of bleached sand, white until the white is like a beacon. His eyes were the color of aquamarine and moved across the page like a wave. Fine stubble coated the man's face, as well, short enough to be a mere fad.

This was the Watcher over the River, though no river could he watch from here.

He turned a page, the sound of water crashing on rocks in his ears. The screaming seemed just outside, and the single door opened. A man peeked-in, though to a degree he wasn't a man. His smile held that quality of a wolf, a grin that never could cease and ears that never could be still. He held himself with the quality of a hunter, the poise of a spring that would never be released because it could not afford to be released. In being released, it would mean death for the hunter. His eyes were luminous, seeing what things mere humans would never see. For a Changeling, he was also remarkably well-kept and remarkably in good health.

Whisper never did like to harm his soldiers, nor his pets.

"M'lord, another pair of prints have been found, leading out of the Hedge." The Changeling didn't raise its eyes to meet Whisper's, instead taking a keen interest in the floor as the Fae kept his eyes on the page.

Pair of prints. Out of the Hedge. The first was a metaphor and the second was a reality; they hadn't actually found footprints. In all reality, the Changeling must've found a trail, as it were. A scent. A lingering thing. That's what he had them for, after all. The Hedge was his purview and he fully intended to keep it secure, and the Beasts were his loyal dogs. Quite loyal.

Yet this realization brought the Realm to a standstill, everything halted and everything quiet. A particularly shrill scream, more of a shriek, was cut short in the middle of it, simply ended as though broken with a sword. The water, moving and dancing and crashing upon the rocks in the distance, was also cut short. Everything was silent, with only the deep breaths of the Changeling to denote any sort of life in the room. Whisper didn't breath, one hand closing the book with a sharp crack as the Actor rose.

“To what end?”

“Out of the Hedge. To a gateway.”

So one of them *had* escaped. That was alright, at least; it was better than a Changeling dieing in the Hedge. It was far better than that. One might think it to be odd, that he was glad such a trespasser did not die, but the Hedge was his. It was his domain and Whisper held the belief that people should only die, in his realm, when he wished it to be so. He wanted a live body to exact vengeance on, not a cold corpse to bury.

“Good. Call your brothers. Have them meet me in the courtyard.”

The Changeling bowed, shoulders deforming ever so slightly and arms elongating ever so, forearms becoming distended and long as though the skin could only stretch so much. With that, it exited, closing the door behind it. There was silence for a moment, before the screaming started again. Whisper rose from his seat, going to the door to open it. A warm breeze, the smell of overripe fruit and jungle thorn, wafted into it, smacking into the Fae as though it were the tide and he the beach. Those were the smells of the Hedge, yet there was another smell. Iron, heavy and tinted and rusted, hung in the air, the smells of flesh rotted hanging there, too.

That was the Hedge, and the Fae made his way to the battlements. About the lower levels of the tower were the Hobgoblins, angry little creatures some say had been distorted and distended by the Hedge, blackened and maddened to the point wherein reason had no meaning aside from copulation and feasting. They assaulted the tower, and from above came the Realm’s denizens. They were neither hero nor soldier, not wraiths and not devils. The denizens looked to be Changelings, yet each one howled and screamed and threw itself at the enemy as though there was nothing left in life. From high battlements Ogres came plummeting down, falling upon the foe and either death or bloodlust took them.

Whisper watched, for a moment, seeing a Wizen dance about one Hobgoblin’s blade, blade whipping-out like a serpent’s tongue as the bastard found a hole in his neck. The Wizen laughed one of those insane laughs, without restraint or end, before another blade found his own neck. Such scenes played-out before him, the Hobgoblins torn asunder by both sheer tenacity and sheer weight of numbers. They were an integral part of the Realm and as such the Realm made them as each died. He neither smiled nor frowned at the scene before him; it was as it was, a fact of life that could not be ignored and could not be halted.

And then he disappeared, another place in the tower holding his Actor. The Fae looked as though he should, nearly, with the stubbe and the hair and the eyes. He was not yet hunting and his faces did not have to be shown without restraint to those who did not deserve to see them. He was at a door, though, and iron door and a hallway. Dim light shone through the slits in the walls, casing shadows of banner onto the ground.

Whisper knocked, and nearly immediately the door cracked open. The face there was something one might expect from a fairy tail; her face was round, with little lithe cheeks that were like gentle hills and skin the color of the clean sky. A scattering of freckles on each cheek was framed by red locks that came-down her shoulder in a braid. For a brief moment the girl’s face was one of surprise,

though that quickly turned to one of submission. The Fae took few measures to insure his were physically able, few surgeries as the others did, yet he did take measures to instill loyalty in them and those were, needless to state, quite effective.

"My Lord," she said, bowing as the door opened a measure more. The girl was dressed in a white dress, simple enough, one which was perhaps just a tad too short. It showed-off the powerful musculature of the leg in such a way that few could, or indeed would, ignore. She was nude underneath. Walking backwards, she allowed him to end into the relatively spartan room.

"Have you been stretching, Genevieve?" He inquired, though the tone suggested something else.

"Yes."

"Show me, then."

And so Gene did so, bending forwards so far that one might think she to be a contortionist, swinging her torso down until her hands grasped the ankles and she pulled just a bit farther. Whisper watched, nodding; he did enjoy working with these Fairest. They always could make a little spark happen in the cold hearts. Or inspire lust. One of the unfortunate two.

The Fae approached her, though, one hand against the small of her back and the other placed upon her shoulder. The girl shivered at the touch, the action moving down from her head to toes, a sensual little shake that made suggestions for now and promises for later. He applied pressure, moving her just a bit farther and just a bit more. He quite enjoyed the sight he saw and the soft skin beneath the thin fabric. Quite. She let out a little noise, at once a growl and at once a moan, with no rancor in it. Whisper laughed, a smile coming to his face as he enjoyed watching the inherent reaction in Gene, and it sounded like bells. She laughed in response, a reaction that could not be halted in the slightest as he body writhed in the motion, her entire body set into it. If Whisper's laugh sounded like bells hers sounded as though the angels themselves had come down for a joke.

"Very good," he said, hands moving away as he let the girl get back up. Her face was red, so much so that the freckles were lost in that sea of crimson and her hair was a lighter shade than it. Gene could merely smile, deep breaths giving her chest good cause to undulate and Whisper good cause to watch. Life had some bestial pleasures. It was good logic to enjoy them while they lasted. "Thank you, My Lord."

And he merely smiled, before inquiring "A Hunt approaches. Will you join?" Yet that question wasn't really a question. The upward tilt to the words that was always there in the question wasn't there and it was, to simply state, merely a statement.

"I would be honored to."

"Good. Meet us in the courtyard."

Arcadia
Marshland Needles

The “Courtyard” was grandiosely named. In reality, it was merely a large, vaulted room near the ground level of the tower, a large gate sitting inside one wall with glyphs and sigils carved into the stone. It was a key position in the defenses of the bastille and, if broken into, would be a death trap few could escape. To state that it was like the beaches of Okinawa would be charitable to the island, as each possible entry point was covered in possible death, from fire to acid to sheer straight-up explosive potential. It’d taken a long time to perform.

The room was filled with soldiers. On one wall was a half-dozen Wizeneds, short men and women who wouldn’t reach 6’ if they tried yet looked like barrels of muscle and sinew. Biceps bulged underneath loose shirts, the chests covered in a combination of modern and age-old technology. Bulletproof vests covered dirty chainmail and kevlar helmets were on each of their heads. Each of their faces had that sort of blissful look, the kind of look a professional gets when he’s told he’s going home.

They were going home, after all. At least for a little while. Some of them starved for a good, honest-to-god hamburger that wasn’t made with Hobgoblin meat. Some of them prayed for a damn Coors beer; they couldn’t get the normal stuff in Arcadia. It just didn’t exist in any form. They were going home, like for a holiday.

In the Wizeneds’ hands were rifles and machineguns, weapons that would look at home on the modern battlefield. One even carried an MG 3, a machinegun that spewed-out bullets like there was no tomorrow, and another had a SAW. For the most part, though, they carried rifles, high-caliber weapons that looked to be more works of art than weapons of war. Engravings lined the woodwork on each of them, scenes of hunters and hunts, death and glory. On their waists were weapons long-past in history, swords and long knives, axes and coiled chain. At the sight of their host, they cast an eye to him, nodding in almost perfect unison.

On another wall were the Beasts, the hunters and watchers of Whisper’s forces. Three of them stood, each moving with that idle twitch of the dog awaiting its master’s beck and call, waiting to be let off that invisible leash that was tight about its neck. They were dressed far lighter than the soldiers, chainmail haubergeon about their chest. They, each of them, had a long rifle upon the back, wore naked steel thrust through belts. Their features, while not normal, were quite closer to human than any other Beast. A tail here. Furred feet there. They were, for the most part, normal, though the distended limbs still shown. A back that was too crooked. A mouth that naturally snarled. They grinned at the sight of Whisper, eager to begin the hunt.

Yet these were not the most interesting of all. Two of the tallest people one could ever see, a female and male, stood aside the rest. Their skin was gnarled like tree-trunks, knolls of hardened skin about them, and their arms were just simply massive. They didn’t look like apes, it’s just that, in entirety, the two were massive people, standing ten feet easily. Their faces were marred, scratched and scarred by the thin claws of a feline some time back, and the two’s hair was short. The woman’s curls hung about her head like a forest, framing her hard face like a crown. The man just had a buzzcut and square jaw.

They were, both of the Ogres, dressed in armor the kind one would only ever see in the depths of hell. Heavy plate, brown-tan like that of a tank, turned both into chitinous, almost lobster-like beings, each plate overlapping the next and few holes were left to be seen. Heavy boots clothed their feet and, beside their discarded gear, were two tan great-helms of old. Their gear looked to be just as

heavy as they; two M2 heavy machine guns that were modified with stocks. Large box magazines were beside them, a trail of bullets on their belt coming off of the gun.

Yet that wasn't the most eye-catching thing.

Dressed in full plate, the two moved with the sort of speed one would expect from professional boxers. One would hold-up two hands, palms facing the other, and would receive two punches, and then they would switch roles, the other holding-up two hands to receive the next twin punches from the second, and so on and so forth. They moved with a daring speed, one attempting to trump the other and punch before they were ready, and not a breath could be released in the space of twenty punches. They were punching with *force*, too. The noise confirmed that.

The woman saw Whisper, standing as he was above them next to a door, and nodded to the man. Her mouth moved, saying something that Whisper knew was the obvious answer, and they both lowered their hands in near perfect unison. Ogres, he thought to himself. They weren't bad folk, in most situations. Just a bit annoyed. The two of them began to gear-up, box magazines sliding onto the M2s with heavy clicks. The *click-clack* of the cocking echoed about the room.

He moved past them, past the soldiers, to the Beasts. The one who had come earlier, the man, stood-up from his crouched position, bowing his head ever so at the Fae. Whisper's face was pensive, a subtle smile that couldn't be shaken-away, and he spoke with that low voice. "Does the scent still linger?"

"It does, My Lord."

Whisper nodded in responsive, surveying his men and noting them to ready. Upon the high door was Gene, dressed in what could only be called a tank top for practical purposes and a knee-length skirt. Lithe sandals covered her feet and the braided hair hung loose. About her waist was a belt with a kukri in it's sheath, and the woman wore little else. She approached the Fae rather quickly, bowing briefly to him.

A soldier screamed-out his orders, the Wizeden forming into ragged ranks and the Ogres heaving-up their weaponry. The Beasts jumped to the front, fluid in that bestial, unknowing sort of way that merely occurs with little thought. Gene followed her Keeper to the front ranks, and a mere nod was given.

The door opened and hell was it's call. The devils on the wall screamed their screams, throwing themselves into combat with such little regard for themselves and the Hobgoblins themselves let-loose a ragged cry. Yet their battle-cry was easy shadowed by the roar from the Ogres.

They let-away no battle-cry, no yells or screams of glee at their quarry. No, they merely brought the butts of their stocks to the shoulder, aiming the massive M2s as though they were hunting rifles, and let-loose with a scream of .50 caliber bullets. The guns roared, discarded cartridges littering the floor, and the Hobgoblins took note. Some brought-up their shields, yet these were cut to splinters as they should. The bullets they used were cold iron and the Hobgoblins, despite being neither Changeling nor Fae, were torn to shreds by it. Some ran for the shrubbery, for the forest and for the Hedge, and these found no refuge there. They were cut-down like dogs.

The two Ogres lowered their rifles, nodding in satisfaction, and the retinue continued to their chosen gateway.

Arcadia

The Hedge

The Hedge was green. People liked to call forests pulsing or living, but those forests had nothing on the Hedge. The Black Forest lived, but everything was just green. The creepers in the Hedge were massive, nearly thick vines, and the trees stood up like spires into the heavens. Heck, the veins of the trees were bulging, bigger than a person's torso.

Whisper's group marched through it, through the foliage and mountainous bushes. The path was fairly clear, though either side was covered by brambles and thick brush. Vines hung above them, little shards of light piercing through the foliage onto the ground. It was nearly quiet, the only sounds nearby being the crunch of leaves between booted feet and the light breathing of the soldiers. In the distance were the sounds of howls, wolfish and long and piercing. These put the soldiers at-ease, oddly enough; it never was the predators who screamed their presence that got you. It was the silent ones. It was the motionless ones. The loud ones would be stupid to try.

Then they moved.

The Hobgoblins came out of nowhere, moving out of the bush and sharp brambles as though they were ghosts. They didn't howl, didn't scream, and didn't roar any cries. Just as they did so, a volley of arrows came through the brush, zipping like angry hornets. Whisper reacted nearly immediately, hand raised as a barrier of brief energy flared-up on either sides of the column, white blasting through the forest like twin floodlights. Then the Hobgoblins did scream, some throwing a hand up to shield themselves from it and others merely seeing the light, merely being blinded. Battle was joined.

In an instant, the ogres threw-down their guns. One of them took a hobgoblin's head, grabbing it by the face, palm smothering it, before smashing the creature into the viney ground. Blood and skull fragments littered the green. The other took a more simply route, drawing what could be considered a two-handed blade and wielding it like a scythe, cutting-down the creatures.

The soldiers, the Wizen, they held their ground, firing almost en-masse into the brush with automatic weapons. It was at point-black range, the blood splatter from their victims staining their own gear. A few of them drew blades, holding their ground and treating it almost like a textbook against the hobgoblins, dancing-about them.

The beasts, to their credit, did not hold their ground, jumping at the hobgoblins and meeting them in mid-air. One of them, a girl who looked somewhere between her thirties and fifties whose hair cascaded like a black cloak behind her, met a hobgoblin with her teeth, ripping-apart its throat as she used him as leverage, swinging-about into a full-on two-leg kick into the head of another goblin. The animal jerked, falling backwards with a head that was nearly backwards and a neck that no longer connected. Another drew his blade, cutting the throat of a hobgoblin in a thin slice as blood poured from the wound like a waterfall, staining the creature's skin red. Another took the route of breaking arms at the joint, leaving mewling bodies scatter the floor to be crushed underfoot.

Yet, as all this barbarity occurred, there was a small spark of generous grace in it's midst. Gene, in her dress, moved among the hobgoblins like oily smoke. A hobgoblin would swing his blade at her stomach and she, in return, would bend so far backwards that it nearly looked as though her spine would never recover. Then her leg would shoot upwards, like a piston, revealing both a generous amount of flesh and connecting with the goblin's chin with a satisfying, crisp sound, the creature unable to ever look downwards again. And then she moved-on. She moved with a dancer's grace, no, a goddess's grace, slipping between them and behind them and, even when she was in front of them, never seeming to be quite there.

Gene's face was contorted into the face of a woman unable to be disgusted, a face that was in bliss. Her face was that of a lover in the midst of a haze, the face of an artist after a beautiful painting is produced, a face of excess and ecstasy and satisfaction all in the same time. She was, in a word, happy, though it was so much more than that. It was her life's training realized, a moment wherein a professional may do their work and have it seen by the world, and she was happy. Ecstatic. Fulfilled.

And as all this occurred, Whisper moved with a brutish force. A hobgoblin attempted to take his head off with a violent swing, and the Fae blocked it with his hand, one on the hob's hands as he brushed it aside with the strength a hobgoblin simply didn't have. The other hand shot-out, grasping the creature's neck and raising him up by it. It gurgled, choking, before realizing what was happening.

How to describe the changing of a Name? It's an odd thing to be sure. Whisper's face elongated, his mouth opening in a wolfish smile as white teeth rotted away from blocks, turning long and slender and somehow cruel in their bent. The flesh of his cheeks turned sour, from tanned flesh to rotted yellow to diseased black before falling-off in flakes. Horns grew from his head, the nubs first pressing against dead skin before breaking-through in pustules, the fluid scattered across the ground. Whisper's legs turned to those of a stag, hooved and bent, and yet all this was not what the hobgoblin was concerned with. He didn't notice the tanned flesh turning into paper and nail on the Fae's waist, no, his attention was turned to more pressing matters.

It was the claws. His hands turned from calloused things, those of a well-worn grandfather, to that of an animal. The bones became long and boney and the nails thick and long, sharp talons that could rip flesh. The skin turned away and instead of a hand of a man the hobgoblin felt the claws of an eagle. He squirmed, eyes bulging in fear at what had occurred before him, and rivulets of blood began to lazily flow through Whisper's claws.

Whisper moved-in, like a creature taking it's bite, head turned to the side and mouth scraping the hobgoblin's face. He screamed until his skull was smashed-in from the canines. Oh, did he scream.

By the time the battle was over, each of Whisper's had been bloodied, though none of it was their own. Most hung-about like shades, head and eyes alert yet bodies saying that they were glad it was over. Few enjoyed the march through the Hedge, though one such person was in front of them. Gene straddled the corpse, laughing as though one had just been told a good joke at the costume party and everyone was standing-about with champagne. It was the kind of laugh that just *was*, echoing through the air. Her hands played at the corpse's chest as though he was a boyfriend, her hands stroking about the well-defined pectorals, tracing the lines of the musculature. The corpse had no head, the intestines drooling blood onto the grass, teeth-marks from one of the beasts on the skin.

Whisper approached, jaw still locked into that wolfish smile as blood dripped from long teeth. Gene looked up, and her face went from that of a playful woman to the face of a child, features curious and pleading, eyes nearly wide and mouth drawn tight. He smiled a bit more, leaning down, and a long talon reached to the stump of the dead body. Tracing about the torn flesh, he brought-up a blood-stained nail, and offered it to Gene as one would a finger covered in chocolate. Her reaction was one of instant surrender, mouth opening and letting the talon in, and she sucked the blood off of it, cutting her own tongue in the process. Already coagulating blood mixed with her own and the dancer shivered, a rolling motion that traveled all across her body. Drawing back his talon, which perhaps was a bit more bloody than it had entered, Whisper smiled at the sight in front of him, Gene's eyes closed as blood swirled in her mouth before opening them and giving a sinful smile.

And so, they marched through the Hedge. No-more trouble was given after that sight had been seen.

They arrived at the gateway with some speed; the Hedge was a miserable child at times, yet this time it had given a boon. A gate that was ten miles away moved a good deal closer, and they stood-about it, putting Masks on carefully. The Ogres turned into two large linebackers who looked like they'd been kicked-out of the leagues, muscles bulging even under the loose coats they wore. Their guns turned into golf-bags, large and teeming with metal rods. The Wizen turned into the rest of the football team, short yet stout as though they were attempting a dwarf imitation, and each of them had a backpack on. The beasts were much the same. Gene, however, put-on the guise of a normally young girl, skintight, black leggings and a gray hoodie. Whisper, meanwhile, turned back to his Watcher over the River, muzzle turning to face and claws turning to hands, antlers falling to the ground in puffs of smoke.

And so, they entered the real world.

USA
Los Angeles, California

They exited through a window of a fire escape.

It was crowded, damn so, as they each shuffled out onto the metal bars as quickly as was all possible. The Wizen immediately produced a long line of knotted rope, one of them securing it to a rail as they slid down. The Ogres, metal straining underneath big boots, instead simply jumped from the railing, the metal shifting a good quarter foot as they left it, landing with the sound of hammers against bedsheets, the noise dulled despite there being dents in the concrete. Magic was useful for many things. The beasts took a different route, jumping onto the side of the next apartment before jumping downwards. Gene jumped down, the same way as the Ogres, yet she landed with far more grace compared to them.

A breeze blew back, into the opening, and Whisper heard a noise. Feet on carpet. The squeaking of a bed as the springs relaxed. The flutter of bed sheets He turned, and before him was a kid. She couldn't have been more than eight, dressed in little pajamas, with dark skin and dark hair and too-wide eyes as though the girl just couldn't believe what was in front of her. Old men didn't stand in windows, crouched there. That was more than odd.

She opened her mouth, ready to call for mom, call for dad, and Whisper's eyes widened too. He didn't want an issue, not right now, not because some human child had made the human authorities

come for him. That'd bring unnecessary complications to something that could be far, far easier. One hand raised, and he snapped, and the little girl opened her mouth. She didn't say anything, though, not a squeak and not a peep. He made a rolling motion, fingers rippling towards him like the waves of the ocean, and the little girl walked towards him jerkily, legs moving with almost robotic autonomy. He needed her near him to do this; no trails, no breadcrumbs, no witnesses.

She paused, right next to the window, and Whisper passed a hand over her forehead, mumbling a word, and the girl's eyes shut closed like iron clasps. She very nearly fell, legs buckling from underneath, and Whisper slowly made his way into the room, careful to not disturb the ground or creak the floor. That would prove unfortunate, too. He picked her up, gently, and carried the girl over to her bed, laying her there. Simply leaving her, asleep and on the ground, that would provide suspicion. Mysterious events attracted unwanted attention, too.

And so, Whisper exited, jumping from the fire escape and landing with not a sound. One of the Wizeneds looked up, the rest of them already on the ground, and whispered a word. The rope uncoiled itself from the metal, falling down as he caught it, wrapping it back up and putting the length away. One of them looked at him, her features Indian, with dark hair and dark skin and hawkish features.

"How long's it been since you were here again, Fritz?"

"Long time," he replied, a Frankfurter accent there, "Was '36, last time, I think. Something like that." His face was far more European, with a brown moustache that covered his upper lip. He looked about pensively, nodding to himself as his hands worked the rope. "Not much has changed here. Smells different, though."

"Shut up, both of you. We can reminisce about the days of ye olde times later," snapped another as she checked her 'backpack', before getting back up from her crouched pose. "Everyone's accounted for, m'lord."

"Good. Hannah. Frederick. Kingston." The three looked up at him, their eyes down each way of the alleyway as they watched for potential prey. Each of their movements were somehow furtive, like animals caged and ready to go, to hunt, to be free and be wild and be one with their environment. This wasn't nature, but it felt close to it. The city pulsed with that same vibrancy they knew, the same energy that was in the forest. "Find him and return to the others."

"But we're *hungry*," replied the red-hair, Kingston. "Might we have a bite on the way?" His eyes spoke of very, very cruel things, of little things and big things. He said hunger like it was more than food, said bite like it was more than a meal. For a Beast, perhaps it was more. It was a confirmation of one's connection with nature, a confirmation that the link was still there, that it was still viable and joyful and it was a confirmation of the power granted by that link. It was dominance and fury and spite, all in one, and each of them loved it for being that thing. Hannah, the black-haired woman, echoed, "A bite," biting her lips to suppress a mewl like a cat.

Whisper considered it. On one hand, unwanted attention was a rude thing to bring to a city. On the other hand, if they killed those humans who were...useless to society, who wouldn't be missed, who had little in the way of worth and little stake in society...perhaps it might be alright. If his Beasts were hungry, eventually that hunger could overtake them. He did not want beasts on the loose,

killing random people in full view of the world. That would make the trail go sour, go cold, go dead. Distracted pets were poor hunters, after all.

"Very well. Just a bite." He rumbled the words, before addressing one of the Wized. "Go to a inn. Take residence there." Then the Fae disappeared, leaving them to move-out, the Beasts splitting-off from the main group.

"I smell him. He smells sweet," said Frederick, nose raised into the air like a wolf. He licked his lips, a quick gesture. "Do you suppose we'll be allowed to eat him, later-on?"

"Doubtful. He doesn't like skeleton reminders, remember? Prefers live ones to be in the cages. Like that one elderly crone we caught." Kingston was irritable, one ear twitching.

Hannah laughed at this, the image of that old woman being brought-forth from the depths of her mind. That woman had, indeed, been old; she'd tried to run-through the Hedge and nearly was about to be eaten by Hobgoblins before one of Whisper's patrols had found her. He had taken care to break those crooked bones slowly, before leaving her in a hanging cage in front of the gates. They'd had a good decrease in trespassers after that. She'd remembered the old woman to have been a brewer of some repute.

"True, true, true," the lady said, wiping away a tear, and they continued to go through the city, eventually leading to a bad part of the city. It was dark, dark by a good bit, and the cowards were coming-out. The criminals were walking, some of them being more calm about it, looking into cars to try to see if there was anything worth stealing and trying to see if there were any cars worth stealing. Some of them stood at the corner, the weather temperate enough to allow the prostitutes to come and try their trade. In an alleyway, though, one such prospective was not having such good luck. The first thing Hannah heard was an argument, and she paused, her eyes narrowing as she saw the events unfolding before her. A girl, dressed in a black dress with pumps and heavy makeup, stood against a wall, five individuals scattered about her and one with his hand against the wall, right next to her head. He was smiling.

"Look, baby, it's not like I'm asking much. Just a half-hour so we can get to know one-another."

"Yeah, right, that's what you said *last* time. Full price."

"Look, baby." The man's words got tighter as he spoke with some deliberate pauses. "Either you help me out of some nice little things will happen to you." One of the others played-around with the zipper of his crotch as a hint to her, grinning a stupid, wide grin, and the man placed his hand right onto the girl's hair, pinning her to it even more so. She was scared. "This way or the hard way, honey."

"Look," was Hannah's reaction. "Dinner." The other two chuckled.

They approached the group, faces pensive. The gang reacted accordingly, each one turning to face them as a very awkward thing happened. Gangs weren't used to people walking right-up to them. The elderly knew better, the young adults knew better, and the kids were scolded enough by those two groups to at least know they'd gain a spanking by doing such a stupid thing. These people looked like they should be smart enough to steer-clear or, if their conscience was so irritable, to

simply call the police. They didn't look to be the types to walk-up to gang. There was a moment of silence as each one of them considered what the heck was going-on, before it was broken by the man next to the wall, with the girl. Her eyes widened.

"The hell do you want, then? Fuck off."

"The kid's got a mouth on him," said Kingston, licking his lips again. He smelled the air, nodding to himself. "Kid's got a mouth on him," he repeated, smiling a little grin. Hannah shook her head, frowning as she considered the prey. The farthest one to the back was biggest, and that meant more meat, but he had too much muscle and sinew on him. The girl looked to be the better option. "I don't know. Doesn't take a genius to say poor words."

"Hey, shut the fu-" he nearly replied, before being cut off.

"Shut it. Sheep don't talk." Commanded Frederick, shaking his head. "You should know that, sheep." The gang moved, almost as one, each one looking to the other to see if he was moving too. Knives got drawn, though they were hesitant to draw their guns. The cops came quickly and they still wanted the prostitute to play with. They didn't want noise and knives were a better way of doing that.

The first one lunged, knife outwards as his whole body went into it, and Hannah lunged-out herself, sidestepping the knife by mere inches as her face went for his neck. She bit, a quick bite that was like the motion of a seabird catching it's fish, darting in and out and dancing back. The man dropped his knife, hands shooting up to his neck to try to stem the flow as he gurgled. The other gang members paused, eyes wide too now as they tried to figure out what the hell kind of freaks they were fighting.

"Be careful, sister," said Kingston, as he moved crouched, "you don't want to get blood on your clothes."

"Oh, please. If one of us is more messy it's you," she shot-back, flashing him a knowing smile. One time he had been so messy it was almost as though he had taken a bath in the stuff; to be fair that person had taken a long, long time to die. They'd struggled a lot, during that period, and he'd still be unexperienced.

And then the Beasts moved with that predatory waltz, dancing their way between knife and blade and hand, moving just out of reach before bolting-out with their mere hands. Sometimes the marks that were left were playful, little smacks that broke bones and bruised skin purple. Other times those blows snapped the neck of the man, scratching at his throat to leave wounds that left the Adam's Apple nearly fully exposed. In the space of a few frenzied seconds, perhaps even fifteen, the six were on the ground, one of them moaning softly as he clutched his broken leg, the foot facing the other way. He didn't have the breath to speak.

Frederick passed him, casually bringing-down a shoe onto his throat with such force that the blood splattered across the sole, and the corpse twitched it's last.

The prostitute, during this entire time, had not moved, standing there with a face of shock. She was scared; that much was plain. Scared so much that the muscles of her face had frozen and turned cold. Hannah regarded her like a buyer regards a horse, walking up to her before taking a finger,

playfully checking her teeth before crouching-down, reaching up the skirt to feel the flesh there, to see how tender it was. The Beast nodded appreciatively, and the girl didn't move an inch.

"Got the cutlery," Hannah called to Kingston, and the man produced a series of sterling silver knives.

By the time the police would come, it would be a very, very dead corpse.

Black Company - Dark Fantasy

Sample 1

Mayryan Pousa & Vinaqa sen Patil
Rousse, Bite'tour

"Every Crow to the gardens in the next ten minutes or you'll be decked so hard they'll have to force feed you through your arse and clean up the rest of you off the floor!"

The Tourman's voice was deep and surprisingly loud, but despite what he said it contained not a drop of humor to it. If anything, it was brutally serious.

"And Azher, stop that stupid fuckin' walk before I break your kneecaps."

"Sah!" came Mayryan's reply as he continued his stride with the rest to the rear courtyard, well-aware of the minor issues that the Biter had in store. Gollome was not a pleasant man, not by the least of it, though he did ignore the comment of Azher's. The seafarer was particularly lucky, it seemed, though a bark from the front of the hostel made the Matroyan turn his head about.

There was his dog, Imrysi, bounding-along as he would with all that energy that he had held. Imrysi was a Matroyan dog, you see, one of those that had been bred over the years in the cold climates of the mountains. He wasn't a fluffy pup, not at all, and was really rather large. A lot of the hounds Mayryan had seen were the kind who were bred from sad dogs, the kinds who tarried in the street, begging for scraps or eating small children, as it were, the kinds of dogs whose backs were used to the head hanging low and the tail between the legs. Imrysi wasn't that kind of dog; he'd been bred for rescue in the mountains, for finding those mountaineers and soldiers and living among the peaks and snow. The irony wasn't lost on Mayryan.

The dog bounded-up, tail wagging before getting in-step aside Mayryan, tongue out and panting happily. The old rifleman just tickled the dog's head, scratching right behind the ears, briefly, with a smile on his face. Lord did he love dogs a bit more than people. Pups were so damn happy all the time, nearly, and they were so very faithful. Those other breeds of hound, they were pitiful, but the right dog? The right dog was a glorious dog.

Vinaqa's reaction to the yelling, as rapid and as out-of-fucking-nowhere that it was, was as easily telegraphed as could ever be. She jumped, ever so briefly at the thing, before really rather noticeably speeding-up her pace. The voice threw her back a good deal; it reminded her of another voice, one that truly never boded good deeds. Just as quickly as she jumped, the girl remembered.

The straw was always damn. Whatever the conditions were, the straw was always damn, be it as hot as hell or as cold as the devil, and the smell always was there. The smell of manure, putrid and running and stinking in it's place, combined with the phosphorous of piss in the straw, Lord it was always there. There never was a place to piss, a place to shit, and so the slave masters just set straw down on the ground and whenever one had to go, they went. God, was it bad. The food was just as

terrible, rotting and stinking, and despite everything, never would sit well with the rest. Vinaqa sometimes just...wouldn't eat, for fear of the future and whatever it might hold. The rest of them, sometimes they starved, sometimes they wouldn't, and whenever they did...well, force-feeding was a cruel thing to see and hear and there were no walls to block-out the screams.

They'd always wash-down the slaves, before going to the house to dress in soft silk that would only be ripped-away for the patrons and bastards there. They'd always wash-down and the marks wouldn't show.

Yet that yell, the sheer style of it and method in it, it reminded her of one man in particular. Well. He was not a man in the strictest sense, not a man for he was not kind and not good and held nothing in the way of what a man should be. A man should never be as he was, not even in the darkest dreams he held or the deepest fears. A man should never imagine him. The bloated beast was a larger person, large in appetite, and his head was always shaved, with a topknot. He was one of the guards, the enforcers of Vinaqa's father's wishes, and he took advantage of this position. He was of the night guard.

The bloated mass would unlock the door, at night, before tipping on his toes into the room to choose who he would have. The smell was such that he always had a wet cloth about his face, wet and with a pinch of herb or spice there to ward the smells always. He would wake the sleeping up, never having to tell them to shut up for they knew if they would speak then the punishments would be so much worse. Then he would lead them away, away and out of the barracks to wherever he held, and they would come back, late as ever. They never would speak of it.

The bloated mass was not picky in who he took. Vinaqa was among them.

She shook the thing from her mind, eyes closed; Gollome was a Biter, true, but not even Biters were as that mass had been. Not even Biters were as he was. Gollome was not a slaver, this wasn't the barracks, the piss and shit was not in the straw and the straw was not scratching at her legs. She felt a piece of grass scratch there and was reminded again and had to force it away. This in not then, not Sein, not the barracks, father is dead, this is not then, not the barracks, father is dead, Vinaqa repeated that, again and again and again in her mind, and her eyes opened again to the world.

They were pure red, the spell long forgotten in the mists of memory.

A dog was beside the group, trotting and panting happily, a calloused and tanned hand about his head from Mayryan, and to that dog and to it's happiness Vinaqa offered-up a nervous little smile that spoke of no happiness behind it. The dog looked-up at her, eyes still bright and tongue still wagging, though it increased its pace just a little. The pup nudged at her leg, her skirt, ever so briefly, and just to please that dog she put-out her hand, letting the dog smell there before scratching about the ears.

"Don't you have a...raven?" Mayryan said this so very casually; he could recall it before, and could recall of Vinaqa talking to the bird in a hushed tone.

"She's out for a...walk," was the girl's reply. The dead began to talk, then, and Vinaqa blocked-out their voices. She did not need to hear of the dead adulterers or the whores in the street. Not now. Not ever.

Sample 2

Co-Written with The Nameless Wayfarer, Skaldia, Yuzhou

With ears ringing from the shrieking of Gollome, Azher caught up to the party of now five as they approached the grove. Pousa's dog, a mut if Azher had ever seen one, trotted over to the group like one of the Three come to life and was all the center of attention suddenly! A memory rose to a surface; it was a beach in Guryshan, the sound of a growling greeting the pirate band as they rounded the corner and found a feral mutt rooting in the guts of a dead infant. Even in the face of six heavily armed pirates, all the dog did was raise bloody, foaming mouth and stand them off, eyes glowing in the dark of that burning village.

Azher blinked his eyes and the image floated away. Seeking something besides the damn dog to look at, Azher glanced over to the woman, Vinaqa. She was a woman, and Azher had a thing for dangerous women. A smile was just touching his lips when his eye fell upon two bloody orbs where Vinaqa's eyes should have been. The color draining from his face, Azher looked away quickly and sought out in the crowd anyone else who might have seen it.

Azher was normally not one to feel fear, that particular nerve found in most men having been carved out of him in the home of his adolescence but something about those eyes reminded him of that particular brutal recent memory.

Vinaqa's eyes were those of the that feral canine

Vinaqa noticed the man's reaction, eyebrows raising briefly with little understanding as she sook-out the reason for why he was so afraid, why the color was away from his face, why he was looking-away. Then she felt it, felt the lack of a spell and the lack of the frame that held it. It;d gone and those eyes...well, they were back. What an interesting little...thing, she thought to herself, not quite finding the correct word for it. "Something wrong?" She asked him, a thin little smile forming as she goaded the man.

Like stone, Azher's face lost all emotion and his remaining eye became hooded. What color in his face remained returned in obstinate defiance of his brush with fear as he stared off with Vinaqa."Only you, witch." Without waiting for a reply, he smirked and broke eye contact with Vinaqa to find a log. Once sitting down, he brushed at his pant legs in nervous habit, and glanced back up at Vinaqa in obvious contempt.

Her smile turned to a frown. Well, that was to be expected, then, wasn't it. It really, really was. Damn. Vinaqa knew of the Biters and thought that, perhaps, some of the Company would understand; they had, after all, had their own issues in life and their own trials by fire, but apparently not. Apparently they were all religious cucks.

Bastards.

She followed them, pointedly sitting next to the seafarer with her hands in her lap, when Vinaqa was mildly interrupted. From the sky came a little bird, a raven who was smaller than most and yet

seemed rather old. It's head moved far slower than one would expect, as it landed upon one of her hands, and did not fidget as much as could be expected. She leaned in to it, as though listening.

"Oh, yes. You know how people are these days," Vinaqa said to the bird, nodding as though it had said something, before leaning in and listening again, intently. "No, no. Of course not." A little smile appeared on her face again. With her other hand, she adjusted her hair, tucking a strand behind her ear.

The Black Prince, leaning on the remains of a cylindrical pedestal in the center of the damp grove, watched the exchange between the former privateer, Azher, and that peculiar Seinese woman, with silent interest. Normally, the commander would have stepped in by now and diffused any drama or conflict; yet, this wasn't the old Black Company, nor was he the young idealist he was so many years ago. These were new faces - new men and new women, who, if they were to have any chance of fighting together successfully side by side, needed to evaluate each other and test boundaries - and, in Alderic's mind, their interactions needed to be studied, closely. As the quarrelsome pair sat next to each other, indignantly, a lone crow flew down and perched itself on the red-haired woman from the famed city of Sein. *Is she... is she holding a conversation with that damned bird? Gollome, where the hell did you find these folk, an asylum?* Nonetheless, in an effort to break the nearly palpable tension in the air, the Prince removed his thick great-sword from his back with a sharp pitch, and quickly plunged it into the muddy soil. He put his weight on the blade's hilt and let his piercing blue eyes settle on Vinaqa. He said, "Vinaqa, is it?"

Golome simply glanced at Alderic and shrugged a resigned motion that said only *'your guess is as good as mine.'*

"Yessir," she said, almost automatically. Lord was it strange to just...automatically go to that. A holdover, she supposed, from far earlier days. It was strange for the Commander to approach her, too, but...this was a strange place it seemed.

"You're a Magi, are you not?"

With that information suddenly tossed in the air, Azher visibly scooted further from Vinaqa.

"Yessir," was her, again, reply. Of course she was a Magi; what else would Vinaqa be, a camp follower? To hell with that, she wasn't one of *those* women. She didn't spread her legs for any dirty-haired bastard, didn't cook for any bleary-eyed mercenary. Vinaqa noticed the seafarer's response, though, and leaned-in again towards the raven. "Of course he's a scared little boy. They always were, momma." A melodious little laugh came from her, a shaking thing that followed her full body. The raven crowed along with it, and a smile was left on Vinaqa's face.

"Pansy arse." Gollome uttered as his eyes shot to the moving Azher. "Afraid of a little girl now, are you?"

The Prince rose a single, pointed finger toward Gollome, beckoning him to be silent.

"Tell me, ya ole fuck, does every little girl hear the dead?" Azher snarled back at Gollome, his hand drifting towards a knife on his belt.

Farelle went to respond, but the Prince's warning caused him only to glance sharply at Azher and give a resigned grumble.

"Only when they talk," was her more serious response, one brow raising on the seafarer, before her hand curled into a cragged ball, as though beckoning something that was not to be bidden, and her red orb eyes turned darker, more murky.

Azher's eyes shot back to the Commander and his hand fell away from his blade.

Alderic growled, his voice taking on a much more formal tone, "Captain Farelle, lock it down; now." He swung his attention toward the snarky yet admirably ballsy Azher, "And you, boy, stay your hand from your knife before you lose it. Is that clear?"

A moment of silence passed, long silence that seemed more than it actually was. The tension in the air was like a long breath before the rush of battle, the sort of thing that cut into the heart and made the mind pause and go numb. Neither man answered the Black Prince. Vinaqa's brow remained raised, though she lowered her cragged hand and leaned-in to the raven, not saying anything of the sort in a response.

With no response from either of the stubborn men, who, as far as Alderic was concerned, had much more in common than they let on, his voice rose to a menacing baritone roar, "Are you deaf? Or is my point clear to you?"

Gollome first replied, saying, "Yes, your grace. I'll keep my mouth closed next time."

Azher's face went from white hot rage to stone cold in a moment, "Yes sir."

"I want to make something clear, and widely known: I have no use for men with active tongues and idle ears," he said, as he lowered his voice and turned to Vinaqa, "Nor do I have a use for a snide Magi and her parlor tricks." The Prince slowly stalked over to the red-haired woman whilst his dark leather boots stomped the muddy earth beneath him into a vile pulp. "That is, unless your capable of doing something more than whispering sweet-nothings to a well-trained raven," he inquired, curiously.

Vinaqa leaned in to the raven again, before looking-up to the man and saying, "My mother does not like being called a parlor trick, M'lord, and I am sure I can do a bit more." Laying her hand open, palm up, she curled her fingers again, as though tugging on something with an invisible twine, and the Prince would feel something a little different. Ants about his feet, he could see, swarming-about before beginning to crawl-up his legs. His mind might play tricks, but the mind was a powerful thing, and he could feel them, too.

Alderic shuddered at the Magi's invisible touch as she weaved otherworldly webs with her delicate, lady-like fingers; a familiar feeling, it was. He maintained his outward composure, nonetheless, and said, "An illusionist, aye?"

"Aye, aye," she said, nodding ever so.

To Azher, watching her hands tug the air and the immediate reaction of the Commander, he covered his mouth as if coughing. The laugh would have surely killed him.

"I must regret to inform you that this is not the first time I've witnessed someone of your special ilk, milady," he said, his smile nearly tangible in his voice, as he glanced at Azher. "A pleasant surprise." The Prince turned on his heel ever so slightly and unsheathed his Guryshani parrying dagger, swiftly pointing it in the young Azher's direction, "And you, jester, what is your talent?"

Vinaqa crooked her head forwards a tad, closing her eyes briefly as her own hand closed, the ants disappearing from the Prince's sight. The girl leaned towards the raven yet again, nodding with her eyes still closed, a small smile returning.

Smirking at the Commander, Azher was suddenly the image of a professional and rose fluidly from his perch as his left hand drifted to one of the barbed arrows in the quiver on his back. "Fond of the dagger, sir?"

Mayryan, meanwhile, sat down upon one bench and nodded, enjoying the events before him. He was a bit wary of the woman, red-eyed as she was, but the revelation that she was a Magi was no such big thing. It meant there was a bigger reason for the red eyes, and her raven was apparently her mother. All was normal there. Curious, though. He began to idly pet his dog, watching from a greater distance.

"I'd say I am; but, I'm always down for a good old wager."

Grinning at the chance of reward, Azher said, "You can point at anything you want. I can put two arrows in an ant's ass before you blink."

Alderic, shaking his head in amusement, conceded to the young man's wild desire for a challenge to prove his skill. He spun around, slowly scanning the grove for a target sufficient to his liking, settling on a rotting apple hanging from one of several gnarled trees in the distance, located near the back door of the hostel. The Prince gestured to it, "Go on, then."

With his eyes falling on the rotting apple still grimly holding on to dying tree at the rear exit of the courtyard, time seemed to slow. In one fluid motion that, to the others gathered around was merely a blur, Azher's fingers entwined on two of the arrows in his quiver and notched them to his bow. Half a breath and they were loosed. With uncanny accuracy, both arrows thunked into the rotted apple a moment after leaving the string, bursting the apple in a welter. One arrow was actually almost embedded in the other. Eyes rolling slowly over to the Commander, Azher held his hand out. "Got anything else that's similar to my new dagger?" Before the Commander could reply, Azher waved off the proffered dagger. "Call it even, sir. Plenty of other times to rob ya later down the road."

Albeit more impressed than stunned by Azher's prowess, the Prince was nonetheless surprised by this cocky fellow's precision with a bow; it, along with the refusal of his prize, nearly excused his arrogant demeanor. Alderic tipped his cap to the archer as a sign of respect, remarking, "Well, you have quite the aim, there," pausing for an instant, he eyed the man with his cold, calculating orbs of ice, "Sir Azher." Without warning, the Commander of the Black Company, adroitly holding the curved knife by its fatal tip, threw it towards the former sea-raider. It stuck into the hardy stump he sat on with a *thwack*, a very short distance away from the delicate appendage that lay between his legs. He

said, plainly, "You have skill; now temper it with humility." Leaning back on a sturdy tree, he said, "Now, be a dear and hand me my dagger, please," and as he looked towards the crumbling archway, he finished, "Ah, I see more of our lot are arriving."

Sample 3

Co-Written with Kwadai

Vinaqa bowed her head slightly back, closing her eyes as she leaned-in to listen to the raven speak again. The comment was obviously funny, her face breaking-out into a little smile and a brief little laugh coming-out once more. The Seinese whispered something back to the bird, and it cawed back as well.

Vasu had little in the way of material to gather for their mission, save his dagger. He had always believed too much extras were nothing more than recipe for disaster, failure as it were. Silently he turned his head to the pair standing barely metres from him observing them with a peculiar interest. He reached slowly to his head, pulling the scarf off to reveal his black Guryshani hair and to properly expose his face. As the two finished their brief conversation and Azher departed the scene making his way to the Prince, Vasu stepped out and walked over to Vinaqa. "Well...what can I say?", he started, looking directly at the young woman in front of him, all the while being aware of the nearby raven's almost piercing stare. "I would be lying if I said I expected our paths to cross again so soon, especially not here", he continued, speaking with a relatively neutral edge to his voice. Vasu had never been the type to dwell on the possibility of owning slaves, his family on the other hand were a different story, driven by their own insatiable greed. Whether Vinaqa's resentment extended to him, was a fact still unknown.

Vinaqa paused, eyes narrowing on him as she tried to place his face. He looked...familiar, somehow, but where, where, wh...her eyes lit-up with understanding. If you removed a few lines on his face, he looked...very similar to a man back in Guryshan, on a birthday of her master's, then. They were...related, she could recall. Pathes crossing...of course, that would explain much. He was a part of that family, that family that threatened murder at times or enslavement at others after she had been freed. Of course.

"I did not expect to see you here, either," she said, notably slower than normally.

Vasu smirked ever so slightly "She remembers. Them at least", he thought. His face turned expressionless again after her answer. "You seem uneasy", he responded to her dragged out sentence. He was certain this girl was strong. It would take determination and an equally large amount of skill to escape from the situation she had been in, and still be able to get by in Bite'tour. His expression eased slightly. "You don't trust me?"

Swallowing, she nodded briefly, ever so little as to not dislodge her bird from her shoulder. "I do not trust many. You should know why." Vinaqa couldn't recall him ever talking to her why she was...employed. Those days weren't ones she regularly thought of as slavery; the old man had been too kind for such a word, though there were times that she could still feel. Punishment was handed-out heavily enough that it rarely needed to be applied more than once, though only out of the old man's sight.

"I'm aware of that. Trust is hard to come by. Even harder to earn", Vasu told her "You're probably wondering what I'm doing here, why only now I decided to talk to you or why I didn't then?", he asked, though not actually intending it as a question. "I couldn't tell you for sure myself. We had nothing in common then, now we do. In one way or another". She was right to be wary, he wouldn't rush to trust himself had he been in her position.

A little chuckle came from her; she could find his reasons to be fair, though then? Then it would have been a bit nicer to have a friend, or at least someone to talk to. Red hair meant you weren't really one of *them*, in that far-off place where black hair and dark skin ruled, and such things would have...yeah. The old man was kind, but he was also an old man and master. Vinaqa could not call him friend, whatever kindness he bore. "True, true. Why are you here?"

Expecting that question, Vasu paused briefly before replying to her. "I can't say it's because I hated Guryshan because that's not true, why would I leave somewhere as beautiful as that to come here?", he laughed gently kicking the ground. "Nobody 'just turns up here' do they?", he added but immediately regretting his first statement remembering Vinaqa's experiences with his home country were anything but beautiful. "As for the real answer, I think I wanted something new, something different...and that I got". He sighed a little knowing his search for normalcy did the exact opposite. "Where did you go? After you left Guryshan?"

"Sein. You can guess the welcome I got there." Her voice was easily bitter, being able to be heard by the deaf. The raven beside her started to nuzzle, as it were, head leaning against hers. One of Vinaqa's hands moved-up, passing over the black feathers gently enough. "Was the only port I could go. I didn't stay long."

Vasu nodded, he knew these memories were painful for her. As the bird on Vinaqa's shoulder leant in to rest its head with hers he became somewhat distracted from her final words. His curiosity was starting to get the better of him. "Your raven. It's a special bird isn't it", he stated looking closely at its glossy black plumage, beak and small eyes.

"Yes, my mother is a unique individual," came Vinaqa's reply, nodding having become more like a gentle sway forwards. One corner of her mouth turned upwards, hand still passing over the bird.

"Your mother...", Vasu initially began to say, but seconds later trailed off. Some things, were perhaps better left unsaid. Unusual, captivating bird aside (or as aside as one's mind could place a bird like that anyway), Vasu was glad he started talking to this girl, even if he too wasn't one hundred percent sure in the trust department either. That would come. "Are you ready for our mission?"

"Yes," came a firmer reply from her. "Though whatever it may be, I am...not so sure." The Red Lady was...well, in Vinaqa's mind, was the sort of person who could develop and create quite bad scenarios if she screwed-up too poorly and...well, they were mercenaries. They were expendable, in capital letters and bold underlines. If she wished to hire them, then whatever job it would be would not be particularly pleasant.

Despite the two separate thought processes, Vasu shared a similar outlook to the situation as Vinaqa. He too was not expecting that whatever task they would be undertaking was one for the faint hearted. "I'm as ready as I think I can be. There's not much we can do now but wait."

"I disagree," came her reply, and a brief roll of her shoulders dislodged the bird there, the raven flying-away and disappearing into the sky, silent as death. Vinaqa leaned downwards, hand tracing the dirt and soil in a brief pattern as she picked-up a handful of the fine stuff, straightening back upwards as she threw it into the air, a little gesture. The dust hung there, caught by a gust of hair, and one hand held it up there, capturing the little pieces in their places.

Vinaqa's body was still, her breath deep and eyes fixated upon the dust, before one hand moved, as though stroking the air as though one might do to the cheek of a lover, a gentle and light thing, her thin fingers illuminated by the light between and seeing nearly to disappear there.

And then they could hear them, the armor rustling and feet patting the ground, as though there were others about them. Mutterings could be heard as well, low things that meant little to anyone who focused upon them, the shapes becoming real, slowly, laboriously. The people starting to be seen, grim men with crows about their faces and scuffed armor, the kind who could pass as a veteran army coming from the front.

And then the dust dropped to the ground, forgotten, and Vinaqa's face was one of a little delight.

Across The Stars - Sci Fi

Sample 1

Tru'Tat System, Forma
Byream'Ika Hall
Troaki'Dhau Autarky

The hall was dark; the Dhau disliked the brighter lights. It didn't sit well with the eyes, which did not precisely care for such menial utilities. If they could see, why would they make it brighter, so went the general idea. The hall was dark, long and stretching out into the distance, and the walls, lined with paintings and bits of art, went-up to the vaulted ceilings. It was a dark hall, but an open one. Upon the floor was a carpet, thick and plush and patterned with a mosaic of art. Upon this carpet, in this dark hall, stood a figure.

He cut a curious image. Tall at some nine feet his stature was one of the military, one of the aristocracy, a stature that implied strength and wealth, the knowledge on how to use these and the wisdom to know when to use these. The Dhau's legs, thick and powerful and oddly jointed, stood-out, open, their dark green flesh and pieces of armor standing-out against the onyx-gray wood of the wall, his hooves like little pieces of star they were so bright, shined. He stood-up, tall, despite the joints of the leg and a minor growth of *zyvax* upon the right. The doctors said it would present no trouble, treated it to ensure it's benign nature, and would later treat it to ensure it's dead nature. The Dhau appreciated their efforts; they were, it had to be said, well-paid enough to be worth it.

His upper torso was covered with a long, red robe, red as the color of coagulated human blood and red as the flowers on the planet's surface. This was a thin thing, something meant for the planet and meant for such wear, yet over such a thing was an object of far more significance. A thick, heavy cloak, the kind one would expect to wear upon the winter's day, the king one would expect to wear outside in the freezing blizzard, hung about his neck and shoulders upon a clasp. This was bloodied red as well, with a white trim, and the Dhau was careful with it about his shoulders. It had far more history than he, perhaps far more than the Autarky itself.

He shifted, both pairs of hands clasped, as though in reverence. The figure paused, eyes looking slowly from each painting to the next. One was an image of the *Tromakiy*, a cavalry unit during the Great War, charging across a bloodied field and charging across a bloodied line, whatever enemy they faced routing and fleeing. The artist had tastefully omitted the fact that an artillery bombardment had killed their mounts before the charge, and that the cavalry unit had charged across the field on their feet. The artist had also omitted the fact that the unit was wiped-out in that charge. Another image was that of Troumou'Dyantari, an explorer during the Second Expansion. He cut an impressive figure, it had to be said, though the artist had omitted his lack of one lower arm, something lost in a childhood accident. Each picture, the Dhau remembered, recalled the events and what was missing.

All just to forget what was coming.

He shifted again, nervously, eyes shifting and careful to know that what was coming was not the sort that occurred often. It was a grand action, a grand opportunity, something which had occurred very seldom in the Autarky's history. It was an event which few Autarchs performed. A door, ornate and heavy, opened, and a human exited it, holding the door open. He was, in some ways, an example of the normal human in the nation, a tall figure whose musculature was extensive and whose irises were large. He was clothed as an officer ought to be, in his collared jacket, black, and trousers with boots, the sort whose medals and symbols marked him as a Lieutenant. He bowed his bald head slightly, one hand motioning for the Dhau to come.

And so, the Dhau followed. He moved through the door and was greeted by the Byream'Ika Hall's sight, a massive thing whose architecture rose-up into the sky so far that it seemed one could imagine the very clouds forming. A cold breeze came over the figure, the wind blowing-through the great ornate windows. Upon either side of the hall were stands, high stands that extended upwards, and they were packed. Dhau and humans occupied these stands, with even a Fatvr colony in a little tank off to the side, watching, waiting, listening. The Fatvr enjoyed this sort of thing to a great degree. They thought it to be mind-opening, and the existence of one in the hall was a sign of the changing times. The last time such an event occurred, they had not existed in the Autarky.

In the center of the hall, however, was a formation. Standing in their places, standing at attention and holding in their hands those pieces they had carefully trained upon, the formation stood at their military attention and stood with their heads forward. They dared not look at the figure. The hall was silent, everyone pausing, everyone waiting, everyone watching. In the highest portions of the stands, snipers waited, soldiers waited, and these, too, were silent. They paused, and so did the figure. The Lieutenant beside him moved-up, behind him, taking the cloak from his shoulders and handing it with reverence to another Dhau in dark blue robes, who accepted with just as much reverence, eyes closed and head bowed.

To them, it was a religious object, something which held power simply by existence and held power simply by age. It was an old cloak, made before Forma was unified and made before the Autarky had come into being. It was an old cloak, worn here in the same hall before, worn in the same events before. It was old, and it had power. The entire planet knew that. The Dhau approached the formation, coming upon a high pedestal sat before them, and he mounted it. His lower hands still clasped, his upper two picked up a slender piece of wood, motioning with it. The formation sat down in their seats, other staying standing, and with another motion they brought those instruments up. Thus began the concert.

It began with the brass, a low rumble that continued as though the very ground was shaking. It began with the brass, the rumble of thunder in the greater distance before the winds and strings set-upon the concert with a will, coming with a rolling rhythm as though one was quick-marching in formation. The percussion turned into the footsteps, a fast thing as the two Dhau in the back of the formation set to work with their lower, powerful arms, beating against the drums with a will. The concert had begun, and it continued for perhaps an hour. The event did not happen often, for the concert to be conducted by the Autarch himself, and he was damn proud of it.

It was a hobby of his.

The Emperor's Finest - 40K

Sample 1

209th Charnisi Cuirassiers

Col. Sheol Harlan

Forefather

Across the river, another force stirred.

The paved roads were filled with a clamor. Debris along the ground began to shuffle about, rattling against the hard rock. Black smoke sifted against the windows, the creak and groan of wheels and tracks a signal of itself if it weren't for something a little bit more tangible. To the east of the 222nd Arcadian, another unit had found itself on the battlefield, maneuvering as they were to place themselves in the perfect position to engage the enemy. The Augur arrays hadn't lied. They never lied. Even immediately following their landing, targets had been acquired. Even immediately following their landing, the Vox chatter had not ceased, feeding information from warships in near orbit to the unit commander. Information was key in all things and in this, Harlan was well and truly supplied in almost an excess. The man glanced at a screen, the holograph showing a three-dimensional model of the battle unfolding before him.

He had found his target. He was content in that.

The first sign of that unit was the Vox mast along the road, lumbering along at a slow pace and gently swaying back and forth, back and forth, then the turret of the Forefather itself. The stubby barrel of the Hellhammer trained itself on the targets across the river, the tank maneuvering about a building as its sister in the hull was also brought to bear. The Augur array, on one side of the hull, could see the enemy as clear as day through the muck and rubble, through the rabble they called troops which poured from the enemy Chimera like a pustulent wound. To each of the Forefathers flanks, the 1st and 2nd Companies of the 209th emerged from the cityscape, battle cannons training against the enemy forces as the sponsons came to bear. Farther down the riverbank, the 3rd Company positioned itself as well. Many of the Russes kept near enough to cover, distinctly aware that the enemy might just possess some form of AT gun.

The Augur operator was the first to speak through his headset, nodding to himself as he peered through his sight. The kid was young, pretty young, but good at his job. To be on the Forefather, you had to be. His clicks were sharp, consistent as he started to maneuver the array, tagging each enemy vehicle as he came upon it. "Enemy force, direct front!"

Harlan himself responded, leaning back as he stood over the holographic display. As the information was fed in, both from their own Augur and the accompanying Vanquisher tanks, the units began to appear on the map before him. They were clustered together, heavily clustered together, with those distinctive Sentinel formations as well as the Centaurs mixed in. In any case, it was an especially light formation. Perfect for a good, honest breakfast to start the day. Harlan almost smiled. He

tapped the micro-bead in his ear on. "Confirm. Five-zero Sentinel, two-five Chimera, one-five Centaur. Does Assassin confirm?"

A rush of static as Assassin, his five-unit Vanquisher command, came through. "Five-two Sentinel, Forefather. On all other accounts Assassin confirms."

A little chuckle. Specifics were forever useful. "Confirm. Take up targets. Fire on my command."

A pause as each Company took up their own targets, cannons already loaded with HEAT rounds. Each turret made their tiny little adjustments, horizontal drives making those characteristic little whirrs and grunts as they made the shot perfect. The turret hatches swung open, gunners poking their heads out to aim their lascannons. Generally such an action would be a rather quick motion but they, too, wanted to make their first shots count. Through their targeting scopes, they picked out their own Sentinels to engage and destroy, eager to turn the lightly armored walkers into burning wrecks. A significant mistake had been made by the traitor guard, bring such vehicles so close, and one they would pay dearly for. Even the sponson gunners, by far the lowest on the totem pole, were quite eager. It wasn't often they got a turkey shoot.

To the rear, from behind cover the Leman Russ Vanquishers took up their own targets. A building was not especially difficult to see through, considering their Augur scopes, and such cannons seemed to be pointed directly at and through the thin, inconsequential buildings. For the most obvious reasons, revealing their existence was considered unwise to say the least, especially if the traitors had counter artillery at their disposal. Their engines quiet, the long guns began to still as they found themselves upon the enemy.

There was no hesitation on the first; Harlan's own gunners had the enemy units targeted in from the first second they crested the turn, though not for lack of accuracy. The twins on board Forefather were simply very, very good at performing death in an area and were not, by any means a simple shell. The detonations from those could very well damage the nearby buildings. "Titan holds targets."

"Assassin holds targets."

A rush of crackle and pop as 1st Company came in; their vox array had been damaged by some idiot guardsman on the way over who thought he could breach the tank's turret from the rear with a rifle grenade. He hadn't lived through that, but neither had the entire vox array. Wasn't precisely worth a life, but in any case it was amazingly annoying. Their CO had to yell through his mouthpiece to be heard. "Raider...holds targets!"

"Hunter holds targets."

"Saga holds all targets."

"Affirm, all units hold targets. Ready to fire. Fire."

The first to fire were the Leman Russes, their main cannons a riotous volley as smoke and fire bellowed from each barrel. Amongst the Chimera and Centaur, none were safe as the fire that began. Some shells found their mark, punching holes clean through the thin armor of the enemy. A good

many of these failed to detonate, the armor was so very thin, the explosions just behind each of the ruined vehicles to shower them in shrapnel and death. Dismounted infantry found themselves out in the open, cut down by the steel rain and pieces of their own armor, and whatever cobbled armor they held failed to stop it. In the midst of that volley, the Forefather itself fired, hellhammer and demolisher ringing true. Against a tight-packed group of Chimera, the hellhammer cannon wrecked devastation with her 180 kg shell. The three tanks were ruined, holes the size of a human head turning each of them into swiss cheese and whatever infantry about them incinerated in the temporary, sun-like blast. The demolisher fired, a bright rocket sprinting the distance to the enemy before finding the foe. Those three Chimera were thrown some feet, tumbling their way in fire and flames and crushing whatever infantry hadn't been shredded.

As Sentinels began to turn themselves around, lascannon and multi-las made their presence known. Red streaks struck out from each vehicle, fingers of an unknowing, unfeeling god with which to know is to die, to consider is to suffer wrath. The Omnissiah was neither kind nor cruel, merely a strength of battery and charge, and the smell of ozone was invoked in the air like an incense of the church itself. Red flame licked at the Sentinel cabins, their exposed occupants feeling the wrath of the God-Emperor, and the effects varied from one to another. Multi-las strikes turned upper torsos and heads into charred hunks of flesh, skin melted from skin and marrow boiling in the bone as they didn't even have the time to scream before being reduced to mere flesh. Others felt the wrath more wholly, lascannon strikes against their bodies turning torso into bloody pulp and tossing charred pieces into every direction. Many a walker was so reduced, the cabin heating until the metal was red with hellish power. Many of these detonated, their strained engines and batteries succumbing to weakness and scattering pieces in every direction.

As the enemy infantry were scattered by the instant maelstrom, most were cut down where they stood by the shrapnel of their own vehicles. For most, they turned unrecognizable where they stood, legs becoming strangers to their bodies, arms and heads turning into red mist, chests exploding as flechettes drove through them. Some few of the smarter traitors hit the deck as soon as the firing started, though the falling Sentinels proved that even that sort of reaction was hazardous. Yet, as the multi-lasers died down with their fury and the dust settled, only the secondary explosions in the distance as ammunition cooked off, the reactions by those guardsmen who lived varied. Through the Augur, one could see some crouched down near the burning carcasses of their tanks, the interference almost looking like rocking back and forth, back and forth, arms around the legs and head down. One team, however, had no compunctions about the issues at hand.

He could see one pair crouch up, a missile launcher in one of the traitors hands, and they started to aim it. What fools was this, that they thought a single missile might perform against a whole regiment? Harlan sighed, removing his eyes from the sight and rubbing at them. "Continue firing multi-las as necessary."

"Confirm."

"Machine Spirit, Accept my gift, Swallow the light and spit out Death." The Litany echoed in the vast recesses of the Hellhammer, one of the multi-las gunners reloading his blessed weapon, and then the twin turrets of the Forefather spoke once more. It was in measured bursts, however, adjustments made to the shots with each firing of their weaponry, and two or three other Leman Russes began to fire as well. As Harlan applied his eyes to the sight once more, he could see that it was intermittent, a discordant array compared to the cascading waterfall their red fingers had been

prior. And yet they were no less effective. Shots rang out against the remaining guardsmen, turning many into pulp, though the missile team still fired. In some ways it was impressive. In all others it was idiotic. They fired low, the rocket careening into the river below before being cut down like dogs.

Watching the enemy turn to ash, Colonel Harlan nodded with a measure of satisfaction.

"Withdraw from the riverbank. All units, move to marker Gold, one-five kph."

"Confirm."

Sample 2

209th Charnisi Cuirassiers

Col. Sheol Harlan

Forefather

"Bridge, direct front."

The armored column had steamed through the town on the northern side, punching directly west in order to link up with friendly forces. It would have been nice to not have had to worry about such things as enemy sappers or morons on their flanks, though earlier experiences had taught the 209th that such a thing would always be present. It was a hive, an urban environment, and while the idea of having no enemies behind oneself was a great one, one that Harlan could wholeheartedly get behind, it was nonexistent in the practical sense. Following Regiments would be forced to deal with those enemies as they pushed through and, eventually, hopefully, they would be wholly eradicated. Harlan doubted that, obviously, as any smart bastard would try to get back in with the civilian population. Best they could hope for was that the civilians knew what was best, that they would see what had happened and not want a repeat, and lynch the traitor themselves.

Best they could hope for. It was annoying, to say the least. And yet, Harlan felt resigned to that position, to the fact that in all honesty he lacked the firepower and force, the manpower and the doctrine, not to mind he lacked the simple *duty* to do what he'd love to do. Putting a bolt-shell into the head of a heretic was all well and good, a nice self-fulfilling thing that just warms the heart. He did not, however, have the men or time to do that to every single heretic alive planetside, nor for that matter did he have the authority to perform those actions. It simply wasn't Harlan's job to execute every damn heretic alive, despite what he wanted to. The tank rustled to one side as they took the turn, moving over the bridge.

Looking through his Augur, Harlan could see some movement. He could see the bodies being dropped off to the side of the bridge in a massive pile, most of their guts on the outside of the body as the cultists had, of course, shot through the refugees some time prior. The bridge itself was covered in blood and guts, in gore and skin and ruined bone that had been either ingrained into the metals or pushed off to the side by soldiers' boots. The troops moving about, taking down some number of...totems. A shiver ran up the man's spine as he looked them over on the scopes, seeing the varieties of manner those people had died in, the dried blood against ruined skin, the heads lopped off at the jaw, faces turned into uncomfortable smiles or screams that defied the throat. It tore at

Harlan's spirit in a definite manner, grasped against his heart and turned it cold in the imagination of such things, the performance of such things, and the questions those images bore. Did they lay at ease as such abominations were performed, screaming in ecstasy or fear? Were they willing heretics or prisoners of the dark gods? Sighing, the man turned his attention to far more important and useful things.

He could see the friendly infantry that had already crossed, the Arrageois and some of the Morridanes. The Arrageois was something of an unknown unit to Harlan, as he couldn't recall much in the way of their Regiment aside from the fact that they hailed from a Fortress World of the same name, though from some talk he gathered that they were exceptional amongst such units for their discipline and zeal as could be expected from units of that background. They could be expected to hold the line as well as push it, and to his knowledge had the sheer numbers to back up that zeal. The Morridanes, meanwhile, were somewhat known to the man by their traditions and methods as armored reconnaissance units. Their sword culture was quite interesting, as was their tactics and clear preference for open combat. They were smaller, though still had a good deal of armor in the form of Pegasus AFVs. The Morridanes seemed to have just stepped-off from the bridge, forming up to perform reconnaissance further into the hive. To either side of the bridge Harlan spotted positions being formed by other units and by the Arrageois, reinforcing the area in case of enemy counter attack for trying to cut-off embarked units on the southern end of the bridge with heavy stubbers and other emplaced heavy weapons.

"All callsigns, all callsigns, this is Titan, be advised friendly foot-mobiles to our two and ten o'clocks, how copy."

"This is Hunter 1-1, I confirm foot-mobiles. Be advised I hold a heavy obstruction to our two-ans o'clock across the bridge, approximately 200 meters from the bridge. How copy?"

He turned his Augur about, spotting the rather extensive pile at that heading. The rubble was clearly constructive, the sort of thing that had a rather large plan behind it considering the amount of effort that would have been needed. Massive pieces of hive architecture laid beside smaller pieces of rockcrete from such things as roads, perhaps, and on the whole it seemed as though the amount of rubble had been attempted to have been pushed into the river. That sort of displacement would have been disastrous if done properly, something that gave Harlan pause. Yes, it would have been quite disastrous. They didn't have the necessary time to move such rubble, however, considering the extent of the pile and how large some pieces were, and besides that it wasn't out of the realm of possibility for such rubble to have a good amount of IEDs, mines, or other stockpiles of explosives there. To try to move the rubble would garner the potential for casualties, easily, and would have to be done by far more populous Regiments which had the manpower to do the task rapidly and sustain losses. Of course, that sort of work couldn't be immediately done; they would be perfectly set up for an ambush.

Clicking on his vox, Harlan gave his short reply, considering precisely what they needed to do. "This is Titan, solid copy. All callsigns, all callsigns, make preparations for Condition 1, make preparations for Condition 1."

"Raider...co...ms." They were breaking up again, the solid wall of static proving too much for the damaged vox array on Raider 1-1's vehicle. Harlan sighed, shaking his head at the fact. They'd need

to get that fixed soon enough, but of course that couldn't be done now. They had too much at stake and had to keep on the move.

"Hunter 1-1 confirms." The turret-gunners on lascannons sat themselves down into the tanks, their hatches closing behind them. Condition 1 was a very simple concept; the environment expected was going to be contaminated and the vehicle had to be secure. They didn't know what the KIG had, but Harlan was assured that his own unit had gas. Of this he was assured. He was also quite assured that they would be forced to use such gas in their movements throughout the hive.

"Saga 1-1 confirms."

"Assassin 1-1 confirms."

"This is Forger 1-1, confirm all."

"Sweeper confirms."

"Raider 1-1 I read you broken, say again."

"Raide... 1-1 confirm." They talked slower that time, slower and louder. Harlan gave a single sharp nod, satisfied.

"Solid copy on all."

A few minutes pass, the suspension handling the irregularities in the bridge with indifference, the river below passing. Harlan could hear the various clinks and clanks, the equipment on the tank's hull clattering against the armor plating and the hatches being closed and sealed for CBR, the various crewmembers getting their gasmasks from the holders and getting them about their necks for easy access. Harlan turned to the side, clicking open one of the thin little metal holders and drawing out his own gasmask. Setting his headset on the holder, in reality a peg next to the vox-box, he drew the straps about his head and let the mask hang on his chest, letting the canister stay in it's holder for simple ease. Wiping off his headset with his sleeve, tha man sat it back on his head and was immediately given to static. Raider, as could be expected, was talking.

"...aider 1-1, I...have movement on fourth floor, 10-ans o'clock...10-ans o'clock, possible hunter-killer team. Glassed...ith Augur, I cannot confirm."

"Titan copies, I hold no foot-mobiles in that building. Wait one." Harlan turned immediately, looking over the command table and seeing that the infantry hadn't deployed into those buildings or that area. Sucking in quickly, he tapped his headset again, face in a grimace. Hunter-killer teams in the buildings was one of the many, many possible issues that could plague the 209th, specifically forward units, and he shook his head at the possible thing. Turning back, he grasped the augur scope and turned the array about to the location, looking through. No movement. He could see several support pipes from the collapsed and damaged rockrete, though, something that could set off wary eyes.

"Raider 1-1, this is Titan, I've glassed it. Pipe."

“Raider 1-1 confirms.”

Nevertheless, he continued his scan through the debris; the range of the device was exceptional on a clear day and still very good on a less-than-clear day, especially a day that was full of rubble and buildings. It would be good to have knowledge on the other things in the area, whether or not what was present. What he was was...very, very interesting. To their direct front, through the massive hive structure, was a large cluster, a massive thing that seemed to be...he honestly couldn't determine. The augur thought it was of interest, however. An amount of what looked to be smaller APCs, likely Chimeras given their profligation throughout PDF forces and such, were in lines at the vehicle's direct front, 10-ans, and two at 1-ans were all present, as well as what seemed to be infantry near 2-ans o'clock. A sharp inhale; yeah, they were waiting for the Guard, that was for damn certain that they were waiting for the Guard to come. It was a clear ambush. He clicked his vox over to another channel, speaking clearly and loudly enough for the other crew members to hear.

“HighCom, HighCom, this is Titan. Stand by for Augur readings, over.”

“This is HighCom, standing by, over.”

“This is Titan, Augur readings sent, how copy.”

“This is HighCom, solid copy on readings, out.”

The convoy of armored vehicles continued, halting at the end of the bridge in formation as Harlan began to formulate his plan. He didn't precisely want to just waltz in there unannounced, as on the whole moving against what was likely a bunch of Armored Fist squadrons was a poor choice indeed while one lacked infantry cover. He needed infantry, supporting units to act against what was either a massive cluster of mines, a massive cluster of infantry, or something else entirely. He needed infantry to cover against the random soldier with a shaped charge, one who's entire plan was to charge in and get close. Narrowing his eyes, the man shook his head before clicking his comms over to the Regiment. To wait was, at this point, to fail completely. They had to maneuver in and engage the enemy, to dictate the battle in accordance to their terms. They needed to dictate the tempo of battle.

“Saga 2, this is Titan.”

“This is Saga 2-1, send it.”

“Saga 2-1, push out with your squadron to our 3 for a visual on marker.”

“Saga 2-1 confirms.”

A moment passed as that unit moved forwards, their engine smoke drifting away and giving some measure of interference to the augur in such close ranges. The vehicles moved off, though, in their standard three tank 'arrow' which was, in all honest opinion, rough and blunt. It could more be akin to a line abreast than anything else. And yet they trundled along, up until Harlan could see that they had halted by the decrease in engine fumes. He paused, waiting with some anticipation as the squadron commander was glassing over the disruption, whatever it might be. The wait was far shorter than it seemed.

“Titan, this is Saga 2-1. Marker appears to be craters filled with sand, over.”

“This is Titan, solid copy.” Harlan considered it all. The craters filled with sand could be just that, crater filled with sand. They’d be hazardous to the tank crew who wasn’t aware, considering the issues with weight and sinking into such things, and by that virtue such things were practically harmless towards anything that had eyes. They could also have been filled with explosives as improvised bombs, though in all reality anyone who had enough explosive for *that* would have also rigged the bridge to blow and just have...blown it. It wasn’t like that was the only way the Imperial Guard was flooding down south into the main hive, no sir, not like that was a major artery that if severed would have crippled and slowed efforts down considerably. Of course not. It could be higher concentrations of mines, which would prove to be a significant issue towards most of anything. In any case, he simply needed to not run it over.

The enemy was arrayed in clear preparation for an ambush. They had not, however, anticipated on some fool with a Hellhammer and an Augur comparable to something a Tech-Priest would want for his ship. The line to the direct south would not prove to be an immediate danger to his unit, considering the cover they had from a west approach, and would be forced to either leave their cover to engage or wait for forces to maneuver east into their fields of fire. The lines arrayed due west lacked forewarning to their armored advance with no observers or any such personnel dismounted and positioned forwards and as such would prove to be easy prey for a sudden emotional event by way of Hydra. That line east, while in range to engage, would also be in range to be engaged by the entirety of the Regiment. Harlan had a good feeling about those odds. He clicked on his vox.

“All callsigns, all callsigns, this is Titan. Prepare to maneuver due south. Sweeper will cover direct west against Chimera lines. All callsigns, prepare to pop smoke direct west on contact with next road. Raider, Hunter, direct fire due east on Chimera lines. How copy.”

“This is Sweeper 1-1, solid copy. Switching to manual fire.”

“Th...Rai..er 1-1, copy.”

“Hunter copies.”

“Proceed direct south at 25 kph.”

They began their movement, a blistering twenty five kilometers an hour, all in their formation, all arrayed up as the turrets maneuvered to their respective fields of fire. The Hydras, for their part, were quick in their movements, crews at the ready with gasmasks already donned due to their open natures, the quadruple autocannons at the ready to tear into whatever they might get a crack at. The Leman Russes maneuvered their turrets due east, lascannons unmanned and buttoned up, multi-lasers maneuvering as the sponson gunners figured they might have a shot at getting some infantry or another or, at the best possible likelihood, actually pierce the armor of a Chimera and melt the crew. While the multi-las was intended to be the infantry deterrent, it most certainly could kill light armor. After all, they’d slagged the Sentinels in the last engagement. They started to come upon the west road’s opening.

“Smoke, smoke, smoke.”

Starboard smoke canisters popped off, some being a little early with the canisters scattering out immediately before the road, some a little late and the canisters smacking against the other side of the road wall, careening upwards and detonating haphazardly. For the most part, though, the smoke was popped right where it should, up parallel to the road and at around forty meters distance from the armored column. It quickly filled up the space, toxic gas having an almost magenta hue as wisps quickly turned to solid cloud turned to a wall. The heretics got nervous; Harlan didn't blame the fools. First one lascannon shot from them, a clean miss as the beam cut a whole through the smoke, up and away into one building or another. The Hydras responded in kind.

They concentrated fire, beams of tracer fire mixed in with shrapnel shot, firing on one vehicle, then another, then another, the periods of fire more akin to sharp inhale of breath in it's timing. Another lascannon fired, another miss as they aimed too low in their haste, the shot melting a piece of rockrete some meters in front of the unit. Four missiles came in the shot's wake, fast buggers that left barely a stream of smoke behind them, barely a whole in the smoke, barely a breath between seeing the firing and knowing it was right next to you. Two missed, the detonations of no consequence, while two found their marks. Harlan knew the Omnissiah was kind, though, for one skidded over the armor of a Hydra and found itself impotent while the other impacted against the shield with the side of it's nose, deflecting off in fury. The Hydras, for their part, did not stop their fire, beams of autocannon rounds gutting the Chimeras until only ten could be considered salvageable, the other four turned inside out.

Clicking his vox to Regimental channels, Harlan spoke. “All callsigns, all callsigns, this is Titan. Enemy forces south of bridge suppressed, read enemy Chimera group remaining due direct south, enemy Chimera group remaining due direct east, suspected enemy Armored First units. Read large enemy Sentinel force remaining due south-east, read large enemy infantry force due north-west, all contacts confirmed via Augur. Intents to follow: Maneuver west via corridor in support of Mechanicus facility. Requesting infantry support. How copy, over.”

The Chosen Few - 40K

Sample 1

Primarch Igneous

II Legion

Perpetual Discipline

There was silence in the chamber, the vast expanses of the Warp just beyond the panes of hardened window. It's mysteries were like an ocean ever churning with new whispers, depths endless. Igneous sat, waiting, listening. He could hear the Navigators yell in their chambered haunts, hear them yell that the destination neared ever so close. He heard them, both through the minds of those about them and through the Warp, to some degree, itself. He sat, waiting, thinking. It was not often for the II Legion to be called by Father, to be called to a destination specific and not a target vague. For so long they had lingered, taking targets at leisure, taskings vague and simple. They were directed to sectors, not planets, and the sieges were brutal, swift, uncompromising affairs lacking much pomp or prance. Not that Igneous would have allowed pomp or prance of course, that wasn't befitting to a Legion. No, Father had directed them to a singular world for a meeting. Why?

It was perhaps a new offensive, but nothing said there could be secret enough that a mere Vox transmission couldn't have been used. Unless, that was, the campaign itself could not bear to be known by any who dared intercept Vox and Astropath. Who had the means and reasoning to intercept such, to cause such a meeting? It had to be important. It had to. And yet, Igneous was mildly disappointed that the full strength of his force could not be brought to bear on the campaign. For the most part his Sons were deployed elsewhere, deployed as marauders, invaders, vanguards in general to a dozen other Expeditionary Fleets. Only a token force, some three Chapters totaling 15,000 Brothers, could be moved forth from their positions without breaking the strategic picture. That force should prove sufficient, especially if the II Legion would be acting as they ought, in a vanguard role with Imperial Army and Navy working to secure and garrison taken territories. The naval assets he could muster were likewise depleted in nature compared to the full force of the Molten Sons, with his flagship and three battleships, three linebreaker squadrons, five Avenger-class vessels each, as well as associated, various escorts being able to be drawn from the front lines. They would, or rather should, be enough for his purposes even against a deadly enemy.

Nevertheless, on deciding that the foe was adequately dangerous and that, in nearing the target in question he should prepare, Igneous rose from his seat. Synth-leather creaked and groaned, relieved as it was under the weight, and the Primarch absentmindedly closed the vast tome that had been before him, red velvet and all. The simple tunic was slowly shed for what was by far more fitting, servitors worked in their smooth, collective motions to place armor against body, breastplate against chest, black carapace against connector. Slowly, his armor was placed about him, and from behind the Primarch heard the door open. He did not need to be a Psyker to understand who had opened the door, who had come to inform him of the Navigator and other such bits of information. It was Paulus, one of his trusted Sons, one of the 1st Chapter. The man had spent time with the Legion, being one of those who had fought the Thunder Warriors on Terea, one of those who had been strong in character. Despite being called Father by him, despite being a Gene-son, despite the

structures and hierarchy, in many ways they had more of a teacher-student relation, had a good deal more leeway. Nevertheless, Paulus kept by the structures, the hierarchy. He respected them.

"O Father, I dutifully report that the Navigator reports entry to the Dolgata system is imminent. Shall I muster an escort, sir?"

"Unnecessary, Paulus. The meeting is between myself and Father. In his light, I have no fear. Thank you for your concern, though."

Were the communication means by which the meeting was called for and the planet were any different, there may have been cause for concern, for ambush, for trickery. And yet, it was by and had been confirmed by the Emperor's Astropath, by his own seal, and the planet in question was one tasked for taking by the 5th and 8th Legions from ork infestations. The orks would not have been able to devise such trickery, to forge such intimate knowledge and Seal such as names, and those Legions were more than capable of dealing with orks. He'd seen their work. He knew their Mother and Father. It did occur to Igneous, in that time, that the campaign might draw more than one Primarch to it if the foe was serious enough. After all, Elyrian and Vasilisa had recently taken the world. If that were the case, then he had even less need for a guard. Besides, guards would not be allowed on account of the Custodes, the Tears would be a nuisance and likewise would be barred. The Custodes were thorough if nothing else.

"By your command, Father." A creak of armor as Paulus bowed his head ever so slightly. "A shuttle is ready to ferry you when we enter orbit."

"Thank you, Paulus. Dismissed."

Another creak, before his footsteps betrayed his exit. Silence filled the chamber, only the smooth clicks and hisses of mechanism and pneumatic betraying the work of the servitors, the whirring of bolts being set into place, the steady hum of magnetic locks. Igneous could feel them, the pieces, the armor, the room, and his eyes closed just so. The ship thrummed about him, miniscule vibrations betraying their Warp travel before...there. A hiss as the final piece of armor fell into place. A pause of silence and stillness as they exited the Warp. Igneous opened his eyes as the plasma engines came online, burning themselves in the void, and the Molten Sons made their approach to Dolgata. Igneous exited from his chamber quickly, moving through the passageways with long strides. Unadorned, tiled with white and blue, the walls plain metal girding, they were quiet, his footsteps filling the length of it, for few Molten Sons strode the same walkways as the officers did. Every now and again he found one though, and in turn they stripped out of his way, bowed their head curtly, and gave some form of greeting. Igneous moved on, giving his due replies to satisfy custom and little else. When he came upon the vast hangar bays, cavernous and ever-extending down the length of the vessel, no honor guard gave him sendoff, no rifle salute was held. No, instead of such grand things the Marine beside the door saluted, he stepped aboard the transport, and over the intercom of the massive vessel came a bell and a voice. It crackled to life before, with sharp distinction and noise and in pairs, there came eight bell tolls. They were measured, almost perfectly so.

"Captain, 2nd Legion, departing."

One last ring, and the intercom fell silent yet again. The Thunderhawk's engines roared to life, pilots already having permission, and Igneous was strapped down in his seat. Before him a small cogitator

came online, presenting a holographic sphere to the Primarch as well as various dots about it. The planet had been swarmed by Imperial vessels of any make imagined, of vessels massive and small, and he could see the Legions present. Counting quickly there looked to be thirteen Legions present in total, most in only partial strength. Their fleets were arrayed about the planet, each keeping to their own for the likely purposes of easier disembarkment when they had finished the meeting, and on the whole had generally similar compositions to the fleet dispatch of the II Legion. The Sons of Calmora and Sun Angels were situated closest to the planet, as would befit their most recent status as conquerors of the world, while various Imperial Navy battle groups moved closer and farther depending presumably on their needs. Swarms of transports and ferries moved between the vast battleships, the barges and cruisers, and in that swarm Igneous's transport became one among many.

Donning his helmet before exiting, the Primarch became simply one face among many, one Astartes among the armies of the Emperor, albeit one which was a good height taller than the rest. Most of the common soldiers paid little notice save for that which would be attributed to a normal Legionary. He didn't expect them to pay much to a man slightly taller than the already tall giants. The Primarch could feel the miasma of emotion about him, the celebration and revelry as they set fireworks, some packing their tents and structures, some mustering for disembarkation, and things of that sort. It was nearly overwhelming, though not so much as to be unexpected. Igneous could see some of the Legionaries look up, though, up and see the bulk of the man, and when they did the Primarch saw their forms stiffen, their motions turn a bit more methodical, a bit more practiced. Nebulous thoughts and lists turned into pauses and honors rendered, some giving a simple nod in their recognition that he did not want or require the honors spent and given. Others gave him the Sign of the Aquila, something to which he simply rendered back. Needless to state, the man continued his march through the camps of Imperial Army, Auxilia, Legion, up to the palace. In the distance he could see the spires rise up, up into the heavens like the fingers of a fallen god trying to touch the very heavens. Dolgata was once a human world, a world of princes and princeling territories, of men ruling men. The orks came and slaughtered what was, though for the most part they had turned to ash just as the men did. In the distance, soldiers worked on removing their structures still. Briefly Igneous paused. The men here, those who built the towers, who tried to strive for more for themselves, perhaps more for their people, did they know who would remember them? Did they think about the future beyond the monument, the history that would be left if none who to which ruler of which dynasty built that spire in the greater beyond? Did they know their legacies would be bleached in blood? Perhaps not. Perhaps. They were dead, though, of this Igneous was certain. He continued his march, the strides purposeful.

He strode up the steps to the palace, those Sons of Calmora there barring his entry. The man had not expected to be let in without challenge, though; such a thing was expected. They gave their query as to his name and reason for attendance, likely perturbed by the fact that Igneous was of the Molten Sons, bore no recognizable insignia indicating he was a Primarch, and yet was of the height and build to be just the same. In response, the man removed his helmet, allowing the burnished red hair fall against his breastplate and about his gorget, helm held to one side, and the two Sons of Calmora bowed with the Sign of the Aquila, opening that door. Igneous strode through, hearing them close behind the footsteps, and could see Elyrian and Vasilisa there greeting others. Embracing both, the latter a bit more tenderly and gently than the former, before going inside. They all sat about the table, though some spoke and others didn't. Igneous wasn't a part of the first group, preferring instead to sit back and await Father. The meeting was not a social call, after all. And yet, it wasn't he who entered, instead the golden armor of the Custodes striding into the room to be followed by a

smaller figure. Malcador the Sigilite, the architect for so much, the confident for so much, and one teacher to Igneous. The Primarch enjoyed him, his work, some of his methods.

"Our Emperor sends his regrets that he could not come, but urgent matters aboard the Bucephelus keep him from attending. My Lord Primarchs, I come forward with grave news. The 78th and 901st Expeditionary Fleets, near here in the Kythonar Gulf, have been completely destroyed. No survivors." Malcador held up a hand to forestall the cries of outrage and denial. "We believe this to be the work of Xenos, more specifically that of the Eldar. This is no doubt in an attempt to keep us from the Ishariel Sector. Instead of accomplishing that goal, however, the Emperor has ordained the Sector be cleansed of all life in retaliation for the loss of two fleets and for the repeated transgressions of the Eldar."

Two fleets dead, completely destroyed, with no survivors. Of the many things and pieces of news he expected to receive, that was not one of them. It made sense, of course, as such a collection of Primarchs would be performed for a punitive mission against an enemy who had already demonstrated a clear capability to destroy Imperial forces. That statement, however, made it clear that such a destruction had been with ease, not with simple clear capability, and the fact that no vessel survived made it clear something greater was afoot.

"Two whole fleets? Surprising. Well, we do have lots to talk about."

"What you mean by cleansed? Do you want these worlds to be void of life in total? We can do that for you. These planets can easily be turned into quarry-worlds in the aftermath. No need to be kind to the wildlife and people here. Besides, there are plenty of other habitable worlds."

"I assume you have a plan for us, Malcador? Of course, I don't mind to plan for the whole campaign right now. It'll simply be annoying to delay ourselves while we decide what to do. The overall goal is to burn the Eldar into dust. I understand that, but we need finer details to the whole campaign."

"You don't tell everything, so speak of it."

"If the Emperor demands it to be done," Napoli yelled from his seat. "Then by his will, it shall be done! The Imperium will not be humiliated by this act of cowardice. Father just needs to send the word, The Emperor's Talons will make short work of the Eldar!"

Igneous was comfortable, though a little surprised, by the statements of Samael. He was not one to speak often. He did, however, speak concisely and bluntly as was expected for the style of such a person comfortable with silence. Nikolai, likewise, was placid and calm, urging for some more information when none was there. In contrast, Napoli was a firebrand, a radical who wanted glory and plunder, who wanted some sort of gift and recognition, and in that vainglory Igneous was annoyed at the child. He did not let such a thing show on his face, however, as he merely listened.

"My heart is sore for the families of the Imperial Navy today. But it would be folly to see the trap sprung once, and then to walk into it again. We need reconnaissance. And reconnaissance means landing troops on these planets. So it might be wise to refrain from burning them to a crisp. If this is the will of the Emperor, the Hospitallers will see it done. But planning and preparation are a surer path to victory than pride and vengeance."

"Malcador, when you say cleansed of life, I must presume you mean of Xeno life, not those humans that had nothing to do with this attack correct?"

"I agree with Remigius, we need to be smart with this and not blindly go into another trap. We need to plan and prepare so we will not lose any more fleets and evict the Eldar from this sector with minimal losses".

"Sigilite, it is good to see you. I agree with Remigius. The complete destruction of two Expeditionary Fleets demonstrates that the foe holds a superiority in information or technology. The periphery of a system is vast, too vast for any Eldar fleet to maintain a continuous patrol while holding local superiority, and the destruction of those fleets with no survivors shows that the strike against them was rapid, negating any capacities for defense against the foe. They knew the exit point before the vessels emerged. We must not allow the Eldar to continue to hold that advantage over us. I hold three Raider detachments at this time. At your will, they may aid in the reconnaissance of those systems, along with your Hospitallers, Remigius."

False Gods - 40K

Sample 1

XX LEGION, VOID TYRANTS

PRIMARCH CREATRIX

HIVE WORLD FALLUJA, SEGMENTUM OBSCURUM

++LANDING ZONE ALFA-ALFA-DELTA TWO-THREE-SEVEN HOT

+REQUEST FIRE SUPPORT PACKAGE TWO-TWO

+TWO ROUNDS, NO DELAY

+CONFIRM?++

++CONFIRM

+FIRE SUPPORT PACKAGE TWO-TWO, TWO ROUNDS, NO DELAY

+STANDBY++

The Filii Vetustissima was a heavy shadow over the hive world down below, and activity could be seen about her heavy form. Two turrets, each bearing the stub nose that marked a Bombardment Cannon, turned to face that planet below. They were pieces of ancient war, the likes of which seldom seen in such quantity as upon that giant vessel, and yet two were more than sufficient for the tasking at hand. Servitor-guided loading rails brought the massive plasma-based shells into place, all while the incessant whine of linear accelerators became louder and louder. The targeting arrays activated, rad-domes peering down and down under the careful control of Tech-Priests, ensuring that the rounds would land precisely where they should. To fail at such a task would be, very likely, the complete deletion of allied units. Those casualties would be unacceptable, both to the forces and to the machine itself. It was a disgrace of the operator, by extension the machine. It could not be allowed. They prayed all the while, the incantations of Blessed Binary weaving into the razor-sharp focus of the mind and machine. All things would be done in accordance to the Omnissiah's will, his grace, his power. He could not be denied, not by mere man, not by mere traitor. Their cursed blood would flow, just as it should, just as it had in past centuries.

The heavy barrels and turrets turned, ever so slightly, accounting for the planetary rotation and for the data constantly streamed to those operators. They settled, eventually, in those little rotations, like twin half-spheres in that ethereal sky. The Binary cants did not cease, omnipresent within the great halls and centers of the warship, and that order was given. Electric shivers coursed through the priests, their ministrations finally coming to fruition as the sheer majesty of the Machine God was unleashed before them. The two cannons fired, their rails giving speed to that almighty charge as it coursed through the air down and down and down to the planet's surface. They wrought down, through cloud and sky, each of them breaking that sound barrier far before ever reaching the surface. Twin comets, unseen by all, hurtled down and down towards the target. Such weapons were rare, rare to be used and rare to be found, though the Filii Vetustissima held a choir of them for which the symphonies of war might be conducted, and such weapons were as deadly as they came.

++STANDBY

+ORDINANCE INBOUND
+APPROACH AUTHORIZED
+CONFIRM?++

++CONFIRM
+APPROACH AUTHORIZED++

Beside them flew, down and down through the flak and fire and flaming debris, down and down through the broken clouds of smog and soot, a fleet of the Imperium. They were larger transports, each one heavily armed, armored, and carrying with it a retinue of spawn. The cog of the Mechanicum emblazoned upon their wings and hulls, they followed the twin shells down and down, jets blasting even as the traitor artillery began to find its mark among the clouds. Among the vast legions of dropships and landers, some would be hit among the wing, their flight systems failing as fire trailed behind the craft as though a cruel cloak. Others would be hit in their main hull, gutting the craft with a shell as only just that plummeted to the ground below. Pilots there and Tech-Priests above viewed those positions, those artillery posts and their likely directors, and such simple retribution was commanded. The missiles were launched, each one falling a short distance from its host before activating the jet engine. Thin trails of exhaust weaved their ways down, down and down to their own independent targets. With some few detonations, the distance lit by their exultations, the artillery targeting those very landers were silenced either by death or by their crews moving.

++ALL UNITS, ALL UNITS
+ADVISE COVER
+ORDINANCE INBOUND
+REINFORCEMENTS INBOUND
+POTESTAS OMNISSIAH, OMNISSIAH VULT++

Chapter Master Jean-Pierre Gustav's eyes widened as he received the communique, before he quickly relayed the message to the rest of the detachment in the area, mentally cursing the timing of the 20th Legion's orbital bombardment. They had just deployed the last of their Legionnaires into the AO, and several Valkyries were awaiting clearance for takeoff. He turned to his Primarch, who towered over even his Terminator-clad form.

"I know, Chapter Master. Take cover. I will provide what shelter I can," Angeline responded, before she strode forward to stand in the middle of the squadron of Astartes and her daughters that had advanced further into the City. They were currently exposed on a street, without much in the way of real cover, and so Angeline had to improvise. The Primarch raised her hands and focused, causing the glow around her form to grow nearly incandescent as she projected a psykik shield around the entire group. The gold-clad form spread her legs wide and braced, preparing to block the shockwave from the orbital bombardment.

They landed. Artillery had been firing there, cultists running from their dug-in magazines to ferry shells up to the positions. Lascannons were blasting away, behind their armored gunshields, taking aim at anything that might possibly be a Marine or light vehicle. Behind rubble, cultists fired off their inaccurate weaponry or lasguns, peeking in and out of cover. Farther behind the lines, they were mustering for a massed infantry charge, ready and willing as another exhorted their aim, their

blood, their skulls and slaughter and death. They were chanting, roaring out their prayers to what was never truly known, roaring out their victory so that the very heavens might shake when they finally would knock on those doors and burn that holy place down, too. They were there in force, strong and willing to die.

They never even felt it.

In the distance, twin suns erupted into being, two massive hemispheres of blind death. Near the impact, everything and anything was simply wiped away from existence. Steel turned to wax and bodies to soot stains, the ash whipped away by the sheer force of it all. The shockwave shattered glass and rockcrete, the damaged buildings collapsing into great heaps of rubble. A wall of fire followed, hotter than Promethium jelly, baking and charring everything in its path before finally dissipating. It passed over the troops, in some ways harmless to those allied forces which laid outside the immediate range of death and destruction, though the eager and foolhardy did not exactly survive. Armor did not save, nor did faith always provide, and the Ommissiah's wrath was absolute in its efficiency and lethality. Those below had been judged.

The smoke and soot obscuring the destruction, fire and flame having melted the worst of it, the troops finally landed. Landers didn't linger long, their troops disembarking with eagerness, with the machine's speed and man's joy, moving forward with little pause. Sicarian Ruststalkers were the first off the transports, sprinting off into the wastes to fulfill their names in packs, servos whirring and whining all the way. Then came the Skitarii, moving forwards cover to cover to cover. Rifles snapped off shots one by one, their Alpha Conqueror Imperatives giving blessed reactions to destroy the foe which lay before them. Their speed, their reaction, was pure, a machine in clockwork order. At such close ranges, one simply could not miss the foe before them. Rattling abominations of armor came against them before being wiped from sight, Transuranic Arquebuses snapping off their own shots.

The Cult Mechanicum had arrived.

Sample 2

XX LEGION, VOID TYRANTS

PRIMARCH CREATRIX

HIVE WORLD FALLUJA, SEGMENTUM OBSCURUM

Creatrix and others of the Twentieth felt the sound in the distance, felt it oncoming through that Vox, and it put the fear of the Ommissiah into that being's digital soul. It was a grating noise, the cacophony and din outside of the gate, the screams of roiling masses entangled in the passions of human war. It put fear into Creatrix, nearly transfixing the Primarch with the intricacies laden in that digital code, and yet emergency protocols were carried out with that machine's speed. Like oh so many, like some of the Lightbringers and some of the Burning Scrolls, that Vox was shut down and disabled. Unlike brothers on the ground, Creatrix was not enveloped in the din of combat, not entangled in the foe before, and so more certainly had enough presence of mind. At least, that was the thought, brief as it was.

The fleet shuddered.

The fleet died.

Lights flickered to nothingness both on the bridge itself and the vessels in the distance, pulsing away as the Vox-Operator screamed, high-pitched human voice degenerating into digital white noise and fragments, body convulsing in rhythmic, irregular pulses, almost as though a whole body went alight with sheer fury. Some of the Tech-Priests shut down without even a syllable, their forms still standing as head, arms, and Mechadendrites went limp, light dying from their optics, though exceptionally few were so lucky. One raised Servo-Arms to deliver a crushing blow to its console before that body found a fist sized hole in the neck, head nearly decapitated from the bolter blast, and it fell limp against the ground. Others fell to the ground, convulsing where they lay there. A few, however, screamed as their forms and postures turned feral, one beginning to sprint against a Marine, Mechadendrites flailing about the form as though a demented creature, before being cut in two by a burst from a Bolter. Creatrix was struck by this, by the heresy before the optics, by the fact that such a planet had the technology and knowledge to strike down the mightiest of the Imperium, of the Mechanicum, and it was wrong. It made little sense to the Light Child that they could develop such technology in secret which left, oddly enough, the idea that they either traded for or found it. Whichever it was, such a thing meant either a live enemy turning the Imperium against itself or another which had faded away to leave such heretical things where it once was. Both potentials were not desirable.

The Primarch turned to the Magos at the throne's side. In part the Forgefather prayed that this companion, this font of knowledge tempered by experience, this trusted advisor was not cut down by whatever plagued the rest. In part the Forgefather knew one could not be so lucky. The Magos was shuddering, shuddering as though icewater had replaced blood and it seeped into the very soul, shuddering as Mechadendrites hung limp about the form and hands reached out. It vainly grasped at the air, fingers trembling in electric fear, vainly stroking whatever stood before in the mind's eye. Then that advisor turned lightless optics upon Creatrix, cocking the head quizzically as a spasm coursed through the whole of that tainted being. When the Magos spoke, it was scratchy, afflicted. It somehow had that tilt in the tone of the machine, a tone of grave reverence. Hands outstretched in supplication, the Magos spoke.

++LET ME
+<<CORRUPTED>>
+YOU++

Creatrix cocked head in return. It wished to do what to him? It spoke? Both things seemed strange and unusual to the Primarch, especially compared to the bestial natures of those others who seemed to be afflicted as the vessel was. The Magos had always been a quiet one, one who seemed contemplative on the uses of the thing in addition to its methods. It didn't quite fit.

++NEGATIVE
+POWER DOWN AND SUBMIT TO EXAMINATION MAGOS
+FAILURE TO COMPLY WILL RESULT IN FORCE++

It moved fast, though not fast enough to catch the Primarch by surprise, as both beings burst into action. Mechadendrites intertwined and caught one another, Transonic blades humming in the air, many others simply bouncing off of the shields of the other. Creatrix, however, resorted to a more brutal method as the Magos brought his Omnissian Axe to bear down in a cleaving swing. One mechanical hand grasped the haft of the axe while the other stretched out to catch the rebel throat. Of course, strangulation wasn't a threat to such an augmented being, but that wasn't the intention. With explosive force Creatrix squeezed, compressing that metal and blood neck in a split second as blood coated gleaming steel about the hand and between the fingers, as oil ran in thin rivers here and there while it burst away from the Primarch in a pitiful fountain, before tearing outwards with the neck still in tow. Most of it left in that clenched hand, bloody with steel splinters jutting out from odd angles, though just enough remained for the head to remain attached, and from that ruined neck blood and oil flowed freely. The Magos swayed in place, hands losing their grip, Mechadendrites paused where they were. It looked down, far as it could at the ruined neck and the blood staining the robes, at the treasure clenched in the hand. It spoke before collapsing in a heap, finally dead.

++BLOOD
+<<CORRUPTED>>
+THE BLOOD GOD++

The sounds of Bolter fire died down on the bridge, those afflicted no more than blood spatters and carrion on the deck, and those about it were on the alert. Some covered the entrances, ready in case of a flood of crazed, ill priests would howl through the doors. Another, the black armor marked by a simple, white I upon the helm, approached the Primarch. His extensive modifications to the Terminator Armor worn, from a host of armed Mechadendrites to the Heavy Bolter and modified helm, said the being was of the Conquestus. Shouldering his weapon, the Astartes meshed armored knuckles together in the Sign of the Cog, not an easy task by any measure, and bowed ever so slightly before making his report. Creatrix made the sign in return, bowing as well.

++I DUTIFULLY REPORT
+BRIDGE CLEAR
+DAMAGE REPORT AS FOLLOWS:
+POWER LOST ON ALL DECKS AND ESCORTS
+MACHINE SPIRITS ARE INOPERABLE
+TECH-PRIESTS ARE INOPERABLE / HOSTILE
+UNKNOWN CASUALTIES / HOSTILES
+ASSESS ENEMY STRIKE ORIGINATED ON OPEN VOX NETS
+METHOD: UNKNOWN
+REQUEST PERMISSION TO ISSUE STANDING ORDER: VOX RECEIVERS TO BE RENDERED
INOPERABLE ON ALL UNITS
+REASON: SYSTEM VULNERABILITY PRESENTS TOTAL VULNERABILITY TO UNKNOWN WEAPONS
SYSTEM
+REQUEST PERMISSION TO PERFORM SYSTEM REBOOT ON ALL SYSTEMS WITH EXCEPTION OF
VOX RECEIVERS
+REASON: MACHINE SPIRITS ARE INOPERABLE. ALL SYSTEMS ARE AFFLICTED BY UNKNOWN
VIRUS
+TIME FOR SYSTEM REBOOT ESTIMATED FOUR-EIGHT STANDARD HOURS++

Creatrix looked over the Marine. The assessment was deemed correct by the Primarch's account; after all, it had been the Vox Operator who was first injured by the unknown malady. Through shutting off Vox receivers they had avoided most of the issues which would normally hold such issues. It made sense, considering that Vox transmitted, in a way, information over nets, but that sort of thing shouldn't have spread as it had. It should have been stopped, ideally, by the Vox Operator and yet...and yet it had killed with little to no warning. Something worse was present. The system reboot was a heavy handed suggestion, however, considering the time it would take to restore all systems to what they were. And yet, compared to the other issues at play, compared to the likely problems half-solutions presented, it was their better bet. With their vessels incapable for so long however it was necessary to take the fight to the enemy on the ground, necessary to put Astartes down there to engage the foe. To perform effectively however they required friendly unit positions. To gain those positions Creatrix needed Augur up. To do that, it needed the Tech-Priesta back online.

++PERMISSION GRANTED TO ISSUE STANDING ORDER
+PERMISSION GRANTED TO PERFORM SYSTEM REBOOT
+ADDENDUM: REBOOT UNDAMAGED TECH-PRIEST UNITS WITH EXCEPTION OF VOX RECEIVERS
+QUERY: TIME TO RESTORATION OF AUGUR ARRAYS?++

++ORDER CONFIRMED
+UNKNOWN
+PRIORITY SET FOR AUGUR ARRAY RESTORATION++

++POTESTAS OMNISSIAH, OMNISSIAH VULT++

With that, both made the Sign of the Cog to one another and repairs were soon underway. The Tech-Priests were reasonably concerned with what had happened, some even displaying concern or fear at the idea of such a weapon being in possession of the enemy. They did not enjoy the idea of technology being corrupted in such a fashion, of Blessed Binary being turned into a parody of its most simplistic self, or for that matter of their own mortality and fragility in regards to that virus. One stared at a corpse for a few moments, looking over the ruined corpse of the Magos who just a handful of remembered seconds before had been leading them in their knowledge. Blood pooled on the ground, had splattered on the consoles, and they attended to those tasks before them well. If any had difficulty swallowing the idea of taking orders from a Primarch, they concealed them well in their own mechanical way. After all, a more important task was at hand in the restoration of the ship, of their own abilities, of their Skitarii legions and servitor aids. They needed to mend before the questions had to be asked, for the act alone was in the nature of the Martian Priesthood.

As they toiled away, Creatrix aiding where one could as but another Priest of the Cog, a quiet sound could be heard. It was a whisper, the quietest whisper that was drowned out by the laziest breeze on the placid fields. The Primarch heard it, though, heard it from the communications console and in but a few strides moved there. Picking up the black phone and raising it up, concentrating on that noise, Creatrix could hear someone on the other end. Blessedly, sound-powered systems acted just as the name implied, though they were usually aided by a series of amplifiers along the route of their wire. This one however was not, and neither was any other for that power was down. Nevertheless Creatrix heard someone roaring at the other end and, unless deceived, there was that sound of Bolter fire.

++BRIDGE, PORT STORAGE++

++BRIDGE, GO++

++TECH-PRIESTS INOPERABLE / HOSTILE

+SERVITORS HOSTILE

+SPACE INACCESSIBLE DUE TO DEBRIS

+SPACE ACCESS NECESSARY FOR 05-130-48-S REPAIR ON 2B SENSOR RELAY

+REQUEST PERMISSION TO VENT LOCAL ATMOSPHERE

+REASON: CLEAR DEBRIS / HOSTILES

+HOW COPY?++

Servitors in revolt. Well, it did make sense considering how the virus acted on many of the Priests, how it seemed to afflict mechanical devices specifically, and servitors were not very biological in any remaining sense. Most of their bodies were machines, a mind slaved to a controlled and wiped for one reason or another, and the fact that such units were puppeted by effectively Vox systems made them even more vulnerable than Skitarii. On the positive side, however, they were extremely cheap and easily replaced. It was no great loss.

++PERMISSION GRANTED TO VENT LOCAL ATMOSPHERE++

++CONFIRM, PORT STORAGE OUT++

And yet, as Creatrix looked out from vast, stained windows to see outer doors on the port side open up, to watch clutter and corpse and pieces in between float out from the vessel with explosive force, something else caught the eye. Something was transiting into the system, something in the distance, but it was by no means a small thing. The Primarch could count the new stars in the night sky, count the new ships upon the precipice of the system, and more and more translated in from the Warp. One could see the space boil and rend, see it wring fabric and position as each warship entered. Reinforcements. They had sent reinforcements. As systems came online, gradually Creatrix regained control, regained more of the picture. First the ship's 1MC system, the announcement system, came online and the Primarch was able to muster officers on the bridge, able to receive reports from across the ship. There was damage to all sectors, all areas as Servitors and Tech-Priests had gone insane, bloodying the vessel, one-another, and their inactive comrades. Minor hull breaches were present throughout the outer hull area, venting some areas, while other systems were damaged significantly. Repairs were underway while fireteams continued to clear hostiles from the vessel, using the sound-powered comms to coordinate their efforts, though despite best efforts substantial rogue servitor elements still roamed the ship. Internal Augurs were unable to be brought online, in part due to the suspected efforts of afflicted Tech-Priests. External Augurs were, likewise, inactive. A Marine approached the Primarch, standing as one was on the bridge.

++I DUTIFULLY REPORT

+ASTROPATHIC COMMUNICATIONS SAT WITH REINFORCEMENTS

+REINFORCEMENTS OF FIFTH PRIMARCH LEGION ORIGIN

+BOARDING PARTIES EN ROUTE TO ASCERTAIN CONDITIONS++

++VERY WELL++

Vasilisa. It had been some time since Creatrix had seen her. In a way the Primarch could appreciate that tenacity in her, could appreciate as one might appreciate a fellow tool. She was harsh, fair, and to a degree was of the opinion that the Imperial Truth was the way forwards over all others. Creatrix clicked the 1MC on.

++ALL HANDS, BRIDGE
+STAND BY FOR FRIENDLY BOARDING PARTIES++

Sample 3

XX LEGION, VOID TYRANTS
PRIMARCH CREATRIX
HIVE WORLD FALLUJA, SEGMENTUM OBSCURUM

The lightless corridors howled and screamed in black fury and the airlock swung slowly open. They had been boarded. They had been boarded and those far, far below were still at war. Servitors hunted in their great packs, oil foaming at some of their mouths while others shivered and shook in electric joy at the thought of finding their prey. They hunted, finding some few inactive priests to delight in their unnatural sadism, their carnage. They wanted to paint the walls in holy crimson, the bones of their once-friends being all the more delightful to find for they were all the harder to extract. They crowded about doors, suspecting them to play host to prey, suspecting them to hold joy. In the distance, the echoes of Bolter fire made itself known in the characteristic bursts, the burst of a frag grenade punctuating every time as though the period at the end of the sentence.

The door opened and the deck reeked of blood and oil. Servitors littered the deckplates, still as could be, many bearing the marks of their termination from Void Tyrant service. A Bolt had cut one in two, guts mixed with electronics and armored plating, raw meat with noodles and glass, while another simply had a stump where the head might be. Intermixed with such things were priests, red robes stiff with blood and viscera, optics torn away with many bearing the lenses in their hands. Another still had its own Mechadendrites embedded in the body, face a hundred slashes and gouges deep into the flesh, neck torn to pieces as though a dull knife had sawed away at the flesh with grim determination, and one could only hazard to guess that it was once a humanoid. Another had legs displaced down the corridor, bloody strips at the tear as though it had simply been removed with great force, and such legs had not a single intact bone within them that they were contorted into neat swirls as one might store line. Blood was ever present and, down that corridor, blood was yet tracked in the form of two pairs of massive footprints. Bolter fire yet again in the distance. Over the ship announcement system thundered a mechanical voice.

++ALL HANDS, BRIDGE
+STAND BY FOR FRIENDLY BOARDING PARTIES++

The boarding craft came in the form of various transport craft and Shark Assault Boats. Not that they were assaulting or even breaching, but just in the odd chance it was required the potential was there. And so the boarding ships arrived by mag-locking to the hulls of various ships and having to manually restore power and open airlocks. Once within the various ships knocked out in orbit were boarded by entire companies of Naval Armsmen.

The situation they were met with varied but generally started the same. Airlocks opening to empty halls or straight carnage. Destroyed servitor and tech priests down gallery passageways and cramped corridors. Workshops pocked with weapons impacts. Blood and oil pooling on the floors of the ship decking. It was only a matter of time before contact was established with surviving Tech Priests and Void Tyrants heavily engaged in clearing their vessels from the corrupted machine-servants which once served them.

Platoons of Armsmen armed with shotguns, stubguns, and the occasional squad support rotary gun on a half dozen ships lent their additional firepower to the Void Tyrants fighting in the bowels of their vessels.

As time progressed, however, more and more systems came online and what was a brutal, simple hunt before turned into an extermination. Auspex equipment proved useful as a stopgap before the internal Augur arrays came online and, linking up such systems with their helmets, the Void Tyrants began to direct efforts with a greater ease. Ambushes would be set up, pushing the servitors into tight corridors before completely eradicating their corrupted forms. Conversely, they were led into sealed, external spaces before being vented out into space. As time passed, that space about each vessel grew cluttered by a fair margin before, finally, the Filii Vetustissima's shields came online and that orbital cloud slowly dispersed into the void. Judging their time of danger over, Vox systems were brought online as well and, as to be expected, that first order heard by Creatrix was the one to evacuate the planet, the chatter to prepare Cyclonic Torpedoes.

They intended to invoke Exterminatus, to purge the world of everything, and the Light Child could only watch.

Creatrix had been called to the Vengeful Spirit and, striding through the passageways, could only think of what had occurred. The Primarch had failed. They all had. The planet resisted far more than it had any right to, their forces moving slower than they should, and in deploying no Astartes planetside Creatrix had contributed to their failure. The Primarch had not committed to the war, landing only what seemed to be adequate for the task at hand before being struck down by an attack which should have been prevented. There had been a failure upon many shoulders and as a result blood had been spilled in excess for little to nothing. As the Primarch boarded that transport, a prayer wheezed from that grill.

++DEUS EX MACHINA
+MACHINA MAGNUS
+COR MEUM AUTEM INFERNA
+TAMEN PROGREDI++

Sample 4

XX LEGION, VOID TYRANTS
PRIMARCH CREATRIX
HIVE WORLD FALLUJA ORBIT, SEGMENTUM OBSCURUM

As the transport shuddered and danced, vibrations coursing through the whole of the vessel even in defiance of the harness about her sole passenger, that same passenger considered everything in detail. The Primarch had, in a time of distress and necessity, effectively overstepped their bounds by ordering Tech-Priests as Creatrix would order Astartes. While the Forgefather was of the priesthood, with all the rights therein, it inherently placed the Primarch within that chain of command. And so Creatrix had completely overstepped those bounds by giving orders. It was a necessity, though, considering the alternative options. The Primarch could have given no orders and had chaos run rampant before the priesthood had decided on who, of those still alive, was of what rank and experience except that was simply too slow. Even by taking command Creatrix had been unable to join the battle before it was declared over by Vasilisa. The fact that there was an overstepping of bounds would come under the eye of the Mechanicum, especially when the knowledge that a non-deployed Magos Dominus had been killed by none other than the Primarch, in person. If the Pict-feeds were blanked, serious issues might have arisen but as it stood the matter was still exceptionally serious.

As it stood, overall the response from Mars was likely serious. Kelbor-Hal, the Fabricator General of the Mechanicum, had proved difficult and reluctant in the past and it was by Creatrix's understanding that many of Mars did not hold warm feelings for the Primarch. It would make sense that the Fabricator General also would not have any sympathy there, considering that he was elected. The fact that a Primarch of the Imperium ordered Priests of the Mechanicum would only amplify those dislikes, for in their eyes the Treaty of Olympia Mons was absolute and infallible, unable to be proven incorrect or too inflexible to adapt or apply to a situation. As such, what had occurred could not go without notice. Creatrix could not, however, anticipate what form of punishment Mars would decide to inflict. Their intentions could not be adequately predicted. It was likely that such a thing would revolve around

Another shake of the hull. Vasilisa had arrived, possibly bidden by one of the other Primarchs. She would likely be annoyed by their lack of progress, by the fact that some no name Hive World had resisted the efforts of three Legions. Something had happened on the planet, however, for an Exterminatus to be called by Vasilisa, for her to declare that the blood had been for nothing and that it was truly lost. Something had happened down below in the midst of all those battles. Perhaps they discovered the origin of that foul, malignant virus, that such a thing was of such unnatural creation that it all had to be destroyed. It hinted at something larger occurring, some other entity which was capable of producing devices or held enough knowledge in order to strike down man and machine with simple transmission. The fact that it took such a cruel hold of the priests could nearly be likened to the old possessions and superstitions, to demon and devil and black cats. Remarkably useless information and yet the overall fact that it correlated showed to the Primarch that something larger was there. The universe is exceptionally large, more than able to hide the true meaning of some of its rules, and it was entirely possible that there was something else. The Warp wasn't even a simple measure of folding space, holding its own secrets as it was, and they employed the Warp daily. The universe was vast and full of terror.

In the dark belly on the transport, Creatrix could see the light on his gauntlet come alive with a red glow, a sun that cast long shadows with its intensity. Communicating? It had been decided that Vox was acceptable at that time, so such a thing made sense. The danger of the malignant virus had come and gone for now. With a thought, the Primarch accepted and opened up comms.

++INCOMING TRANSMISSION++

++VERY WELL++

++I DUTIFULLY REPORT

+FILII VETUSTISSIMA DAMAGE REPORT IS AS FOLLOWS:

+EXTERNAL AUGUR ARRAYS OPERATIONAL

+PROPULSION SYSTEMS OPERATIONAL

+NAVIGATION SHIELDING OPERATIONAL

+HULL BREACH REPAIRS UNDERWAY. O2 LEVELS DROPPING ON OUTER DECKS. DEEMED NOT CRITICAL AT THIS TIME

+FLOODING REPORTED 8-260-35-B, BATTERY LOCKER. SOURCE: RUPTURED CHT PIPE, 2 INCHES. PIPE SECURED. DEWATERING UNDERWAY VIA VENTING. DEEMED NOT CRITICAL AT THIS TIME

+FLOODING REPORTED 03-500-02-S, STORAGE LOCKER. SOURCE: RUPTURED FIRE MAIN PIPE, 1 INCH. PIPE PATCH APPLIED. DEWATERING UNDERWAY VIA DECK DRAIN. DEEMED NOT CRITICAL AT THIS TIME

+CLASS B FIRE REPORTED 5-30-0-M, MAGAZINE. FIRE OUT BY VENTING O2. SPACE UNSAFE FOR ENTRY DUE TO DECK PLATE BUCKLING. REQUEST PERMISSION TO DE ENERGIZE GRAV PLATES IN SPACE TO INSPECT. DEEMED CRITICAL AT THIS TIME

+HOW COPY?++

On the whole, the flagship of the Twentieth had sustained some, but not major, damage. There was flooding, but that was to be expected; the pipes posed an easy target to destroy, especially for brute force servitors, and flooding was relatively easy to take care of. Those pipes which were not critical to the vessel's operation could be temporarily secured and rerouted, while those which were critical could be patched and sealed up. It was a temporary measure that could be anything but; Creatrix had seen pipe patching last for years on low pressure systems. Fire Mains were another thing entirely, but the Primarch was assured that the patch would hold until a more permanent solution was applied. The magazine fire would have been extremely problematic and though it was put out a dangerous condition had been applied. Deck plating buckling could cause a complete magazine detonation in that area and, being so far forward, put a hole right through the warship's defenses. It would have to be remedied. The easiest answer would be shoring, something that could be done in a short period of time.

++SOLID COPY

+PERMISSION GRANTED TO DE ENERGIZE GRAV PLATES

+COMMENCE VERTICAL SHORING AT 4-30-0 SPACES AND ALL ADJACENT AREAS++

++CONFIRM, VERTICAL SHORING TO COMMENCE FOLLOWING INSPECTION

+FELIX DAMAGE REPORT IS AS FOLLOWS:

+HOSTILE SERVITOR / TECH-PRIEST ELEMENTS ELIMINATED

+EXTERNAL AUGUR SYSTEMS OPERATIONAL

+PROPULSION SYSTEMS OPERATIONAL AT THREE FOURTHS STRENGTH

+HULL BREACHES ON ALL AFT ENGINEERING DECKS

+PLASMA FIRE REPORTED ON AFT ENGINEERING DECKS. HALIEX DEPLOYMENT UNDERWAY, 3 MINUTES

+HEAVY CASUALTIES. TECH-PRIEST COMPLIMENT INOPERABLE. THREE-SEVEN XX LEGION INOPERABLE, NINE-FIVE XX LEGION WOUNDED

+HOW COPY?++

The Felix had taken a beating. To Creatrix's knowledge, maintenance performed aboard the vessel had been in progress when the virus had struck. Servitors went mad in the engineering spaces, detonating several charges and causing a near meltdown before the engineers eliminated the immediate threat. The self-detonations across the battleship had not helped matters at all. As a direct result, Creatrix deemed the vessel inoperable for combat conditions and could not be forced into such conditions without being completely destroyed. It would have to go into a shipyard period, at the very least to bring all systems online; having a fast battleship at only $\frac{3}{4}$ speed was not acceptable in the scheme of battle, especially when it was that speed Creatrix and the Chapter Masters relied upon.

++SOLID COPY
+DIRECT FELIX TO FALLUJA ORBITAL SHIPYARD FACILITIES FOR REPAIRS
+VENT ALL SPACES TO CONTROL SECONDARY FIRES
+VENT FUEL TO CONTROL AFT PLASMA FIRES WITH THE EXCEPTION OF FORWARD TANKS
+HOW COPY?++

++SOLID COPY
+FUSILIS DAMAGE REPORT IS AS FOLLOWS:
+UNRESPONSIVE TO HAILS. V LEGION BOARDING PARTIES REPORT HOSTILE SERVITOR /
TECH-PRIEST ELEMENTS STILL ACTIVE
+V LEGION BOARDING PARTIES REPORT SICARIAN RUSTSTALKERS INFECTED AND ACTIVE
+REQUEST PERMISSION TO DEPLOY REINFORCEMENTS
+HOW COPY?++

They needed that vessel operational. With the Felix inoperable, at least one battleship had to be able to perform void operations. They needed it now, too, and the solution was simple: the application of brute force. Creatrix had no immediate battles, no wars that had to be fought in the moment itself, and as such could spare a few people. The Primarch set the deadline, too; pressure was good for the operations at play and frankly would determine their success or failure. Creatrix was quite sure that they would not fail, however, considering the numbers contemplated for that cleansing.

++SOLID COPY
+DEPLOY II, III CHAPTERS TO FUSILIS
+DEPLOY I, II, III FULGUR MANIPLES TO FUSILIS
+TIME TO CLEAR: SIX STANDARD HOURS
+FUSILIS OPERATION CRITICAL TO LEGION OPERATIONS
+HOW COPY?++

++SOLID COPY. DEPLOYMENT OF LEGION ASSETS TO COMMENCE IMMEDIATELY
+SOL FILIUS DEI DAMAGE REPORT IS AS FOLLOWS:
+HOSTILE SERVITOR / TECH-PRIEST ELEMENTS ELIMINATED
+MODERATE DAMAGE ON ALL DECKS. INSPECTIONS UNDERWAY. REPAIRS UNDERWAY
+LOW CASUALTIES. TECH-PRIEST COMPLIMENT INTACT. OH-THREE XX LEGION INOPERABLE.
ONE-THREE XX LEGION WOUNDED
+HOW COPY?++

And on and on and on, every ship one by one, as they reported their conditions. The Tyrannus Inanis had no Vox at the time and had to resort to flashing light in the eldritch Morse code, though they had a good reason. With a reactor operating at a fraction of full and heavy damage to those decks, they were just trying not to detonate. The sad result was that the Tech-Priests had suffered heavy casualties while the Marines on that cruiser did not. As such, Creatrix had some doubts that the vessel could become combat ready in a short period of time, much less fully recover. That vessel was also ordered into the shipyards in order to restore her reactors and thereby make her combat worthy. The Sine Culpa had survived extremely well in contrast, that vessel suffering no dead and few wounded with light damage across her decks. At the time, they were mustering parties if landing Astartes was deemed necessary and as such were rather well prepared for the event. The frigates suffered similarly low amounts of damage and dead, their size allowing the troops aboard to breach and clear with few issues, if any. They were only hampered following that by a lack of personnel to bring systems online. The whole of the reports and orders took less than a minute.

As the transport continued on its way, Creatrix opened up in the mind's eye what feeds were available to them. The Primarch, having never been on the ground, had need of all the information which might be found. The request to the Lightbringers was sent and allowed in mere breaths, though such a thing was to be expected when a Primarch requested for information pertinent to their operations. Combing through the feeds was a nauseating experience, one which Creatrix bore through with a stubbornness to be expected of that kin. Information was necessary, an ichor nothing else quite matched. Most of the pict-feeds were nothings among nothings, simple cleansings and screaming fanatics armed with little else than sharpened steel. They were bolstered by something, possibly that Blood God which the Magos had referenced. Others screamed the same prayers and exultations as they charged, screamed as long as mouths and lungs were whole which on average wasn't all that long. Yet then the Machine found what was desired: the reason for the Exterminatus. There were creatures the like of which had never been seen, beings which resisted bolter and blade, which struck down Astartes like wheat under the scythe and broke Fellblades like simple toys. There were monsters, one which took the combined efforts of both Clausewitz and Angeline.

It was concerning.

Creatrix quickly boarded the Vengeful Spirit, following the Sun Angel to the Strategium. All of the others were there, waiting, hungry. Vasilisa was the first to speak, as to be expected.

"Clausewitz."

"The Warmaster is most displeased. Three siblings, forces from four legions if you account the Azur Marines, and two months of stalled progress in a single city."

"Now, I have seen the reason why, these Warp-Xenos are just as such. They will be such in official reports and explanation to ranking officers with the proper clearance. Now...,"

"...Need I remind you all the Imperial Truth is the ideals our Great Crusade. The Emperor tolerates some superstition but that has limits. Let it be clear that proselytization of any kind is forbidden. Should such activity continue unabated then I will be forced to take measures I personally find most...unsavory."

Creatrix felt it about the body, about the soul, about the being as warnings echoed in the helm. Mechadendrites shivered in instinctive vigor, in a preternatural desire to strike out and destroy whatever caused the pain and unnatural death, and only through Creatrix were these things silenced. The buzz of transonic razors would not reach the Strategium of Vasilisa, not those of the Primarch, and to do so was most certainly death for all present. The adamantium limbs prevented the Forgefather from falling, the armor preventing weakness in the posture, though a twitch in Creatrix's neck betrayed that uncomfortability, that instinctual wish. Not much was said.

++THREAT ACKNOWLEDGED. THE OMNISSIAH PROTECTS++

"The meat of the matter. Our sibling, Eyrian, has abandoned the Crusade for means that which the Warmaster is investigating personally. Several fronts have been stalled, set back, or delayed by this action. The Steel Men and Brazen Beasts have already flung themselves into the effort of plugging in such gaps and recovering a half dozen Compliance actions alone. But, those two legions cannot be everywhere and we are gathered in strength once we put this world to the sword."

"The Kalas Sector, Ultima Segmentum, due Galactic South-East of us, was host to some of the fleeing remnants of Ullanor. Likely would have been purged by now if the 8th had not abandoned their campaign. Now, Warboss Urrlak Ghar, one of the surviving lieutenants to the Greenskin leadership at Ullanor has gained momentum. They have overrun twenty-seven systems and are present in all of them by now. Imperial casualties range between eighty and one hundred and sixty million both military and civilian. The 2202nd Fleet diverted to assist was ambushed in the Kalas System itself. Estimates range that forty of fifty ships are lost or unaccounted for given last astropathic transmission. We are to blunt and purge this threat to the Triumph of Ullanor. For already more remnants are flocking to Ghar's banner and his forces swell by the day."

Odd. It wasn't the way of Eyrian to simply abandon what was in his purview. Something else was at play. It had to be. The Primarch of the Eighth was not a coward, much akin to the opposite, and such was his stubbornness that some dared consider Eyrian a foolish man. Creatrix was not one of them, though the action put distaste in the mouth and doubt in the soul. The Forgefather had considered Eyrian a tool that merely needed some measure of work, an item that could be improved, and yet it seemed that perhaps such a thing was only a mask. Before, the Eighth was one of the most honorable, though Eyrian did seem to have some trouble distinguishing human and xenos in regards to Creatrix. It was good, however, that Creatrix was not the only one to think this way as Angeline was the first to speak in response to these troubling events.

"Sister, it is unlike Eyrian to simply abandon the crusade. Something tells me that there is more to this than is apparent at first glance. The world we just came from was crawling with xenos hailing from the Immaterium. They lure us to this world, bog us down in it for two months, and at the same time somehow someone manipulates our brother's legion into abandoning the crusade. Titus, our warmaster, is forced to abandon us as well in order to investigate our brother's action. And then a massive military force, with Astartes in numbers that have not been seen since Ullanor, is called to deal with the splinter factions of the Waagh from that battle."

"I feel as though we are pieces being moved on a board, on a scale so grand that we can not see the players nor can we know the endgame."

"At any rate, our numbers will be good for one thing. These Orks will not be as entrenched as the ones on Ullanor, and their roots will not be so deep that it will be as hard to rip them out. From what I can see, Moorn's World has yet to fall. If we can halt their advance there, the Orks should throw all their strength at us for the chance of a good fight. It will be easy enough to quarantine the world after they've devoted the bulk of their forces on-world, and then it'll just be a matter of closing the noose."

"Looks like three Auxilia groups are holding the line on that world. The question is, do we think they could hold long enough for our relief fleet to arrive? From what I could tell, my fleet is another 48 hours away from being fully functional again, and I hesitate to imagine the state that your fleet is in, Creatrix."

++AGREED

+EYRIAN'S ACTIONS DO NOT FIT PERSONALITY PROFILE

+THERE IS A NEW ENEMY AT HAND

+THEIR ELIMINATION IS PARAMOUNT

+ORK INCURSION THREATENS VITAL ASSETS AT THIS IMMEDIATE TIME. THEIR DESTRUCTION IS THE IMMEDIATE CONCERN

+AT THIS TIME, FLEET ASSETS ARE DAMAGED. TWO CRUISERS REMAIN UNDAMAGED. ALL OTHER ASSETS UNABLE TO PERFORM COMBAT DUTIES AT THIS TIME. DAMAGE CONTROL IS ONGOING. REINFORCING FLEET ELEMENTS REQUIRED FOR IMMEDIATE COMBAT DEPLOYMENT

+DO YOU UNDERSTAND?++

The Empire's Finest - Star Wars

Sample 1

**Grand Moff Progre, 209th Fleet
Legacy
Endor System, Moddell Sector**

Endor was not alone.

A vast sphere, skeletal in its appearance and nature, hung suspended in the shadow of that forest, about it the bustle and hurry of industry. To test the newer technologies was its simple purpose, though the industry required for such a test surpassed many projects in their entirety. Smaller vessels made their way to and fro, Star Galleons leaving their cargo pods for the drones and evosuit workers to unpack and make ready. A fleet laid in wait, their own purpose quite simple to the observer if there ever was such a thing. Star Destroyers of various classes, heavy cruisers, corvettes, interdictors all were present, their shapes like kitchenware scattered in the big black while the gray was scattered and broken by fighter shadows. Patrols ran rings around the massive installation, ready to intercept and put down any intruder.

Why they hadn't placed the prototype in the Maw Installation with the rest of the Empire's vast collection of secrets was patently known by Progre; he'd been told so in his briefing on the matter. ISB suspected a leak at that place and had started an information quarantine on the whole area, compartmentalizing each and every project, turning each and every scientist and engineer within each of those projects into a suspect and prisoner, and effectively putting a hold on any new projects that would require as much manpower as this did. They hadn't been apologetic about it, either. Business was business, in those guys' eyes, and as far as Progre himself had been concerned it was a great unfortunate thing that they hadn't decided to place the project under Rothana's jurisdiction. In his opinion, they were far more equipped to deal with that construction, far more equipped to deal with prying eyes, and generally it would have streamlined the process a great deal more.

In his objective opinion, they were better. Nothing to do with emotions.

Grand Moff Progre had been requested, however, to deal with the project personally. The Emperor had given a call, made that request, because he had experience with restoring industrial projects, had experience with eliminating technical mistakes and errors. Requested. No, he'd been told and ordered, though not in those words, and told that were he to do as asked he would be rewarded with more resources. Progre could already see the writing on the wall when that sort of thing happened, when it was as vague as the ISB agents before. The fact that he was to be a passive during the project's construction, that he was to watch unless interference was absolutely necessary, gave some annoyance to the man as well. Sitting by was hardly his forte.

Of course, it made sense though. At least Progre told himself that it made sense. He tried to rationalize it and the best way one could think on it would be that Endor was, for all intensive purposes, a system that was watched by none, noticed by none, traveled by none, and further stood

in the middle of a massive, uncharted cluster. It was a hazard to navigate on a purely technical basis, not to mention could be considered to hold no worth in attempting that feat to begin with. And yet there seemed to be better systems that held the same. The galactic center, for instance, was never explored due to the amount of black holes, forming stars, and general gravitational anomalies that could make hyperspace travel lethal. Likewise, the Bastion System was a well-fortified, out of the way area that could serve the same purpose. He signed, leaning back in his chair.

He'd set off for the system once notified. Details were given on the overall command structure and Progre had poked around on each of the names he had been given. Kaltal had found a post as one of the directors of the ISB and she gave the information right on back. For the most part they were inoffensive, quiet little people, people who'd undergone screening for their participation and held little to no connections to the Rebellion. What connections they did have were deemed coincidental at worst and each and every member was watched constantly. She even said ISB concentrations there were higher than most in the Empire, including such quiet spots as Corellia, Sullust, and Kashyyyk. If anyone knew of fishy things like the Endor project, it was always the ISB. The new supervisor for the project was one Fleet Admiral Trenaur of the 9th Fleet, was an oddity. For the actions of killing some notable Jedi on Gatalenta, he was given command of an Imperial I-Class, the *Resolute*, as well as the rank of Commodore. ISB agents aboard that vessel were suspicious for this action, though no actual proof could be found of wrongdoing at that time. Due to the lack of Imperial leadership by virtue of the DS-1's destruction, he was rapidly promoted.

Inoffensive, friendly, and polite was how his crew described him. An odd Fleet Admiral if there ever was one, though it gave some concerns for Progre. A man of that stature and power who had accumulated not only nearly a dozen Star Destroyers but a Star Dreadnought as well, who was friendly and beloved by his crew, that was a man creating a cult of personality about himself. Progre found those dangerous, even if they were made by staunch loyalists. A loyalist with such a thing, if ever killed, proves a deadly blow to morale for those they once lead. They become a figure too easily cut down. Just as dangerous, even more so, was a traitor with such a cult of personality. They could turn traitor nearly every ship under their command, gift the Rebellion with such a force of arms with such an intimate level of knowledge of Imperial technical data, tactics, and force dispositions that could turn the tide of the conflict in whole. That was unacceptable for Progre. ISB agreed with that assessment, too, and they had watched the man for some time. The only difference between Progre's assessment and the Bureau's was that Progre disapproved of the Emperor's cult, too. They did not.

In any case, there was some more recent information in ISB reports on that man's activities. He was outspoken of the Emperor's tactic in constructing a second battlestation, as was noted in one Mordur's report, a Sector Governor, advocating for a more numerous heavy capital ship fleet. Of course, that was behind closed doors but still was a notable enough event. He was impetuous and impatient, as well as somewhat infantile, as the secretary and exterior guards had noted in their own separately filed reports. He made little effort to disguise his rank, flashing it to a civilian on that same station in order to bully his way into a necklace of kyber crystals. That civilian, a Togruta apparently, had fallen to the ground in fear. That would be the usual cruelty displayed, Progre found, except for the fact that the man lacked a personal guard throughout the event. Rebel sympathizers, the Grand Moff found, were rarely as sensible as their heroes to know self-sacrifice was a poor thing. One of them, with one blaster, would likely be enough to kill the Fleet Admiral in a quick event. It was a good thing ISB agents had followed him through his stroll to his shuttle of the man might have

very easily been murdered. Of course, that assumes the agents would intervene. Not even Progre would speculate on that idea.

Progre had quickly assessed the man to likely give some issues in the months to come. He was too personable to those about him, gave too little of a concern on some of the basics of security, and likely rose through the ranks by virtue alone of the power vacuum that followed the Battle of Yavin. The swathe the Rebels had cut through the upper Imperial ranks had allowed far too many average or even sub-standard officers to rise to ranks they should not while also allowing many of the new faces to be given power. The old guard that Progre knew well during the Clone Wars, those advocates of a strong capital ship power, were largely dead and gone if not retired in their old age to more civilian postings. Perhaps some of the new would be able to finally get starfighter programs up and off the ground. After the notable failure of the Alpha-Class Xg-1 Star Wing, Progre was interested in the furthering of those sorts of projects. This man, however, did not seem to be either old guard or new, nor did he seem especially capable. His actions on the Leikanger, an old Arquitens-Class, demonstrated a possible ability in lower level command but as any officer knew the fact that one could command a gunboat did not instantly make one fit to command a full-grown Star Destroyer, nor mean one able to command a fleet of Star Destroyers. It remained to be seen. His actions following Yavin did seem to imply a capability, though against any fleeing enemy even an invalid could be a hero.

The Legacy was on it's way, along with the full force of the 209th Fleet, and Progre leaned back in his office chair. The soothing sounds of a timeless Tarisian song blasted over a small set of speakers on his desk and the man leaned further back in his chair, head nodding to the beat, foot twitching to the drums. Everything was coming together, especially since everything about him seemed to be falling apart. The galaxy didn't seem to be able to last with the Galactic Empire, in Progre's thoughts, and what he could do best was strengthen his Oversector against all others.

His own thoughts, however, were cut short with the knocking on his open door. Opening his eyes and looking over his opened jacket, the man's mouth turned into a wry little smile as he pushed himself back upright, tapping the speaker off with the eraser of his holopen. After all, when your aid comes to your office, it doesn't really do to have a good song like that blasting. Ruins the ambiance, Progre found, motioning for Mirtaya to come it before he looked down to his jacket and buttoned it. Closing the door behind her, the Lieutenant approved with the quick strides of someone who'd been yelled at before for being too timid, too fearful. Fearing a yelling for being fearful, now that put a spark into people Progre had found. It was also just a little bit funny. He hadn't yelled at her since, in fact apologizing at one point, considering how annoying that exact day had been. Looking back up, Progre was just in time to see her set down a sheath of folders on his desk.

"Three requisitions for additional personnel on Rothana, two Captains requesting leave, an Imperial Navy request for a fleet from the Oversector Fleet in order to halt a Mid Rim incursion near Phorsa Gedd, and a status report from that Oversector Fleet on anti-piracy operations. In that order, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," came the often-said reply, the Grand Moff's eyebrow raising nonetheless as he picked up the first three folders and opened one. "Additional personnel? For what?" He was already reading that report.

Looking up as she talked, almost as though reading from a book in the sky, the black-haired woman provided the details. "The construction of that new platform. Apparently there was an outbreak of

the Cardooinie Chills on one of the transports bringing in construction workers and they've had to be quarantined in orbit. That quarantine still has a month to run after the last case is finished. Flare-ups and all that. They're requesting an additional group of around four-hundred, I think the number was."

Clicking his teeth together, Progre scratched the back of his neck. "And all three requests are for that?"

"Yes sir."

"Ask Captain Wilsta if the Corps of Engineers can help with that. Maybe the Army can do better than the civilians for once. Deny the leave requests. We're in the middle of a war and frankly I don't need warships commanded by their XO's or CO's getting killed by Rebel cells." Pausing for a second as she wrote the information down, the man let her look back up before continuing. "We can spare the fleet for the Imperial Navy. Just as long as it's not a hundred ships just for a few Rebels."

"Of course, sir."

"Dismissed."

Progre watched her leave, clicking his teeth together discordantly before taking up his holopen and clicking the speaker back on. Shuffling the folders to the very back one, the man leaned right back into his chair, reading the report as the feet started to twitch again, the head started to bob again. It was good news. It should always be good news. The man was glad he'd appointed some actually competent people for once. Of course, just as soon as the song started the speaker cut-out, a different voice filtering into the room over the circuit and across the ship.

"Entering Endor System. Hyperspace exit in one minute."

Jumping back forwards, Progre made his way to the bridge. It was time to meet this Fleet Admiral Trenaar.

A Risen Rebellion - Star Wars

Sample 1

Adm Gharro Volte
Freedom's Call, 405th Battle Squadron
Kashyyyk, Kashyyyk System, Mytaranor Sector

"We're in. Sensors detect two ISDs, two Immobilizers. They're scrambling fighters."

Ena leaned-down on the two chairs forward; sure might have seemed relaxed, but damn was there tenseness in the shoulders. She got that way for every single battle, whether it was a freighter to intercept, a light cruiser, an Imperial II-Class, whatever it was she was tense on it. Every battle was something that could be more, regardless of what it was, more because the enemy might be smart, more because some random fuck in a fighter might have a deathwish, more because they might actually get reinforcements during it all. Her back straightened; she didn't even need to see the consoles in front of her because the goggles. Nodding to herself in some little form, Ena's mouth went wry.

"Begin comms jamming. Launch Blue and Gold Squadrons, Revenge and Not A Chance to follow suite. Launch Vultures."

She spoke in a careful tone, a measured tone, a tone that while it didn't radiate confidence and clarity most certainly radiated a bit off experience. Every battle was uncertain, every single one, though that said the tactics were fairly straightforward. Fairly.

"Begin jamming, aye. Launching Squadrons."

The Freedom's Call and her escorts started to launch, Z-95s out and taking up their formations alongside the cruiser while the X-Wings locked S-Foils. The Vultures had a more disorderly pattern, fighters clustered in twos, threes, and fours as the more advanced droids began to take over control and command methods. Some of them had been equipped with heuristic learning systems early-on; as aces with a minimum of forty kills under their belts, these were the fighters considered to be the cream of the crop, the best. They acted as squadron leaders in a way, forgoing the normal direct control a cruiser might have. Some hundred and forty droids, twenty Z-95s, eighty X-Wings were launched, scrambled out in less than a minute's time as the Freedom's Call powered on, engines lighting up the path behind her.

Volte leaned-in, fingers intertwined. He could see the enemy TIE/In squadrons in their distinctive victor formations, the Star Destroyers and Immobilizer-418s. It was a fleet, that was for certain, though not at all the sort of thing he'd consider to be extensive. Kashyyyk was a plantation world, put simply, a manual labor place that derived worth from a population exploited for centuries. It was by no means free under the Republic and was definitely by no means free under the Empire...but even then, the Imperial fleet wasn't massive. It wasn't the sort of thing he expected. A few Procurator-Class, a few Imperial-II frigates, a squadron of Tartan-Class Corvettes, that was the

expectation. There'd been a small expectation that the call for reinforcements might have to be made or that a reliance on starfighters would have to be done...they were definitely screaming for reinforcements. Definitely.

"Emergency power to shields. Open fire with the main battery, escorts to do same; concentrate fire on the Imperial II. Order Imminent and Agency to launch a spread of concussion missiles on that Imperial II. All units, begin radar jamming."

"Aye, Captain."

The ship's frame immediately shook, long lances of red turbolaser fire speeding to the enemy formations and, specifically, their main capital ship. Two of the frigates performed their launch, four missiles streaking-out from their launch tubes to that very same target. Of course, the Immobilizer-418s could potentially start-up their gravity generators in order to attempt to alter the courses of the missiles, but that was an idiot move for an idiot child. It would leave them defenseless and dead, without shields or cannon, something that Volte found quite appetizing. A ragged hand delved into one of his pockets, drawing out a little plasti pack. A tap against the hand, one, two times. They kept streaking, red hands reaching out to meet the Imperial forces. A thumb opened-up the pack, another tap. Volte watched, watched and watched as he brought the little wrapped tube of tobacco and bacta up to his mouth. Another hand rummaged-about the pockets as he considered it in entirety. Yes...yes he really would rather the Immobilizer-418s had their gravity well generators up.

He'd rather they would be exposed, but...in all reality, the vessels were useless to begin with. Their armament did not warrant significant attention, their fighter compliments were barely worth the attention of his own...it was, altogether, simply an issue of trapping them significantly. They held around 200 fighters, probably...probably. Altogether not that bad.

A light as the turbolaser fire smashed into ISD shields, sensor jamming still going on.

Sample 2

Adm Gharro Volte

Freedom's Call, 405th Battle Squadron

Kashyyyk, Kashyyyk System, Mytaranor Sector

"Enemy vessels returning fire," came the report from one of the droid technicians at station, just as the jolts impacted the shields. A clatter and clank, as though one had decided to take their ship through the asteroid field, rushed through the bridge space, Ena bracing herself once again on the chairs before her for stability, Volte holding onto his Captain's Chair with one hand. The man's mouth went wry; why yes, yes they were returning fire and doubtless with far more an effective result than Volte's. An Imperial Star Destroyer was deficient in many areas, from it's fields of fire to it's exposed points to the remarkable lack of point defense systems, but one thing they most certainly did not lack was the ability to engage a large combatant at range and destroy them. They were ships of the line, battleships, and if he played the game to their strengths...that was worse than not playing the game at all.

"Shield strength reduced by six percent."

That was their first barrage; he'd be lying if he said that didn't concern the Anzati. Dropping by that much, especially when one's forces had not yet actually engaged the enemy, that was giving the advantage to them. That was a surrender of strength, a gift given freely and without thought, and that sort of thing angered him. They would play his game, not he theirs.

"Transfer power from nonessential sections to shields. Launch..."

A wave of fear, a sudden flash in the night of a man's mind, exploded in Volte's mind; one could compare it to the chill of ocean water suddenly against the torso, the deep-seated feeling that came from a realization that something wrong, terribly wrong, was at foot. It was blind, without reason, and Volte inhaled sharply. Ena's stance said that she felt it, too, felt that same unreasoning, uncommon wave of fear through her. Her stance was sharp, without any sort of relaxation, any sense of quiet confidence, and a strange shiver had taken to her shoulders. She'd felt it too; that thought echoed throughout Volte's mind, there. He knew what it was. He definitely knew what it was. He'd felt that same fear, that same grip of panic and confusion, during the Clone Wars. The explanation was simple...a Force Witch accompanied the devils.

Damn them.

"Give me the fleet. Now!" Volte yelled, something uncommon for the man in his services. One never did seem to yell to droids and yet the man felt he had to. Embrace the anger and rage to guard against the fear and panic, that was a psychological tool the Admiral understood well enough. They would burn the Imperials where they sat, where they stood, burn them all to the ground and dance among the ashes and...

"Comms active, Admiral."

"Fleet! Reclamation is upon us! The enemy hold a Witch of the Force among their ranks, a parlor trick magician! We have killed many of their kind before, many. They are no different! Death to the Empire, to the Sith, to the cowards who have surrendered before them! End transmission!"

Volte stood back up, the shields before the Freedom's Call still flashing with the impacts. Of course he couldn't see such things, but one definitely felt the shots throughout the ship. The frame and deck shook with each punch, shook with enough power and strength to worry you more than enough. It felt like a giant stood over, stood there and just continued to rain down punches against your bulwark, felt like that bulwark was unlikely to hold and unlikely to keep you safe. Yeah, it was a concerning feel, even when he knew he had done something to prevent it, even with that knowledge Volte was still shaken.

"Order Black Squadrons up and out, Firespray-31s included. Launch Tri-Fighter Squadrons. Order the X-Wings to engage enemy fighters now! Order the Vulture Droids to engage!"

"Aye, Admiral. All X-Wing Squadrons, lock S-Foils close, engage enemy fighter units. Launching."

The movements were instant, the sort of things one saw practiced time and time again. The T-65s locked their wings down and in, afterburners flaring-up in SLAMs like little torpedoes out and away.

The speed of those sorts of fighters was such that made Volte wish he'd had them in a few other engagements. They were useful, damn useful, and the strategy he was able to employ with them made the man happy. The Vultures followed in their massed cloud, a hundred savage riders sent down and over the hill to raid the poor and defenseless, wild in their unkempt natures. Meanwhile, the Freedom's Call went into a frenzy of it's own, the hangar bays moving with the speed of machines.

The Skiprays launched, the Black Squadrons which held little comparison to their aged counterparts. Each one, by Imperial standards, was a capital ship of it's own, each one carrying a heavy payload and well-trained crew. These were the quality boys, the mercenaries who'd thrown their lot in with the Confederacy when the money still ran like rivers and kept with the group, some out of connections, others because they had no other place to turn and too much honesty in their hearts. They formed up in their V-formations of five, blazing off some distance behind the Vultures and beginning their runs against the enemy capitals. The Firespray-31s launched, too, oversized engines blazing a trail bigger than themselves as they made way to the void, turrets good and ready. Those ships rapidly made their way up and past the Vulture Droids, their own engines flaring in the void as they took up formation with the T-65s. Then came the Tri-Fighters, nimble little bastards who took up formation with the Providence-Class, and they kept a far looser formation than the Vultures ever did. Spaced good and wide, theirs was the style of superiority in coordination, superiority in maneuverability, superiority in firepower. Smaller than a TIE/In, their thrust ratios exceeded the more modern Imperial fighter, their firepower more than enough to deal with half a squadron of the eyeballs. Of course, it helped that each and every one of them had a more advanced computer aboard, every one of them knowing just how to kill a TIE, just how to place the shots and keep every other bastard alive. It would be concerning if they weren't on Volte's side.

They engaged, though, the T-65s locking S-Foils open at just the right moment prior to the strike before letting-loose with a massed, close range volley into the Imperial ranks before breaking to engage. The Firespray-31s weren't much gentler to the TIEs; droid-operated Composite-beam laser turrets from LAAT/i's cut into their formations, the computers knowing precisely how long one needed to fire on a target to cut a wing off, cut-through the hull, and frankly that time wasn't all that long, before moving on to the next target. The distance hardly mattered to fire them, the beams reaching-out like a lance to touch an Imperial before the ship shattered and the gunner took to it's next victim. They hardly looked like beams at all, just flashes of a line to a temporary sun. The Firespray-31s barely even paused as they cut right through, engines still flaring with the SLAM, heading straight for the Imperial Star Destroyers.

Behind them, alongside the 405th, came Home One, shields colored like a blue sun as the warship first came between the two Imperial Star Destroyers and Freedom's Call before turning towards the fleet. Sublights flared in the void as the Star Cruiser moved on, heedless of the blasts the warships threw her way. Near a hundred fighters disgorged themselves from her hangar, taking their own positions alongside the massive Mon Calamari. It seemed that Admiral Ackbar had some intention of performing a one-man Ackbar Slash, something impressive as all hell considering the size of the balls required. Her turbolaser batteries started to fire, firing in vast salvos across her entire length into the Imperial II-Class without restraint. Volte paused as he saw the readings, saw the information before him; damn it all, but...moving between the two Star Destroyers would hamper any sort of efforts to coordinate, would destroy the sense of comfort they might have. It was a bold move.

“All Ahead, Full! Protect Home One!”

“Aye, Admiral,” a droid droned on back.

And so, the 405th Battle Squadron moved up alongside the Rebel, DP20s reaching ahead before loosing salvos of concussion missiles. Freedom’s Call took up her position just ahead of the Star Cruiser, batteries now blazing with the rest, just as the two Dauntless-Class Heavy Cruisers took up positions port and starboard of the whole formation. Imperial turbolaser fire raked the formation brutally, for just a few seconds concentrating on the Revenge; her shields flashed briefly as the cruiser took the brunt of the assault. Despite whatever might be said for the shields of a Dauntless-Class, despite how strong they might be, one ship was almost never capable of withstanding the brutality two Imperial Star Destroyers could inflict. Her shields flashed, her captain taking emergency procedures into his own hands as the engines of the warship went dead, all power to shields.

Sample 3

Adm Gharro Volte

Freedom’s Call, 405th Battle Squadron

Kashyyyk, Kashyyyk System, Mytaranor Sector

“Sir-”

The ISDs jumped; of course, they didn’t jump to lightspeed to escape the Rebel formation, no not at all. Even as fire licked the sides of the Revenge, her hull failing in several areas, the two Star Destroyers jumped to hyperspace and exited right there, right behind the Rebels, before then immediately turning. This was his chance, this was Volte’s chance. They had tried to outflank him, tried to strike at his rear and in that attempt they had shot themselves in the foot. There two Imperial Star Destroyers were to his rear, without fighter support and without a screen, laid bare like a feast trying to stab you in the back.

Home One reacted first, odd enough, perhaps spurred on by the very simple fact that a force of personality was born on her. Admiral Ackbar, after all, had few detractors and very, very many supporters, not to mention the fact that the Mon Calamari knew what was required of him in total. The Star Cruiser turned to starboard, here batteries engaging in full yet again despite the fact that the enemy vessels had not yet completed even a forth of their turn. Fire slammed into the rear of the Star Destroyers, piling on with little inclination towards halting. He wanted them disabled before the turn, disabled and adrift facing out and away where all things were safe. The formation astride Home One turned to engage as well, A-Wings forming loose and fast before speeding-off to engage the rear, the X-Wings locking down to bring themselves within range to fire off a concussion missile volley, while the Y-Wings lumbered behind. The formation of Tri-Fighters reacted nearly instantly; they turned aside, engines blaring to close the distance with the Star Destroyers. The orders to escort the formation were kept to and, as such, the fighters moved in for the kill. The rapid little thrusts each fighter made, designed to spoil any organic gunner’s aim, were magnified by their size and the fact that they themselves did not have organics; G-Forces meant little to the buggers. Among them lay the Z-95s, the fighters having been held in reserve, and their manner of flight was far more ungainly compared to the furtive droids.

Massed torpedo salvos from the two formations was the result, the little ships marked by the exhaust trails from their payloads. It looked like the stars in movement during hyperspace, so many lines reaching out like a thousand strands of blue and red grass against the foe. Impacts moved across the aft sections of the two Star Destroyers near the event horizons of their engines. For a moment it seemed as though a sun had gone supernova there, a bright flash as the shields took the brunt of the assault against them. Y-Wings launched their ion torpedoes, aiming to sever the tie the two mainline capital ships had to life itself. The flash gave way, though, the massed assault just barely breaching the shields of the two warships which shuddered and fell away. Home One's bombardment continued on the enemy Imperial II-Class, the Tuk'ata. Explosions started along the aft sections of the warship, one of her engine exhausts almost immediately detonating.

Of course, Volte didn't want to be left out from it all. It was his duty and requirement to engage the bastards, especially as the wreaked havoc on one of his own. Revenge's shields had born the brunt of the enemy assault, failing before the two warships had made their jump to stab the formation in the back, and detonations licked at her port side. Several holes made themselves known, metal curving inwards in jagged spikes in some areas, outwards in others where secondary explosions had torn into the interior before damage control had halted the worst of it. There was some luck in her, though, as the detonations hadn't reached the heavy cruiser's reactor systems. Those gone and she would have gone out like a sun, dead and gone with no survivors at all. As it stood, the vessel's outer hull had become clouded by debris and shards as well as the uncommon corpse.

"Bring us about, maintain formation. Concentrate all firepower on the Star Destroyers' engines. Order the Black Squadrons to disable the Immobilizer-418s."

"Aye, Admiral."

The 405th turned, a tad delayed but turning nevertheless, with the Freedom's Call lending her own firepower to the fray. Turbolaser batteries fired at will, a discordant hail on their armored hulls as the two Star Destroyers completed half their turns and finally became able to unleash their own broadsides. Octuple turbolaser fire ripped into the Providence-Class, her aft sections holding for just a moment before failing completely, two engines destroyed in a single blow to leave only a single brother. You felt it on the bridge, too, a massive shake and the dull, thunderous roar like a clap of death down the corridor. Then the long groan, metal tearing from metal. It most definitely didn't sound good, that was for certain, Volte's stomach turning with the very depressing realization that they had breached the shields indeed. Bastards.

Meanwhile, the remnants of the Imperial Fleet were torn to pieces. The TIE/ln fighters left without support fell victim to relentless Vulture droids, no mercy being found there, and the X-Wings kept their own formations up well and good. It was very hard to combat that sort of force, outnumbered as the Imperials were, with the discordant arrays of Vulture droids forming ad hoc squadrons whenever they damn well pleased, firing missiles in four rocket salvos against singular targets, while the X-Wings kept to their own squadron-mates to cover one-another's backs. Careful consideration was taken to ensure that the enemy fighters weren't allowed to form back up whatsoever, something that murdered any attempt to form a cohesive counter strike against the frenzied assault. The Firespray-31s didn't help at all, cutting through the enemy formation like a hot knife through butter, powering on through to be followed by the GAT-12 Skiprays.

They made their runs on the two Immobilizer-418s; there was little the interdictors could do, really. Their shields and weapons had been disabled by the usage of gravity well generators, the power necessary for such things a great massive drain to anything normally useful. The Fireprays came in first, salvos of ion torpedoes running out before them to impact along the upper hulls of the light cruisers. The first one, closer, felt that wrath as shields shut down and away, hyperdrive dead, sublights dead. The farther interdictor, though, she had different plans. There was little forewarning to the detonations across the Immobilizer-418's hull, the reactor overload turning the vessel into a deadly cloud of debris. The other, however, laid adrift and dead. The Vultures began to make passes on her, each squadron launching volleys of Discord missiles into the Immobilizer-418's now depressurized and unprotected hangar bay, little explosions in midair as Buzz Droids boarded the cruiser. Of course, these little models weren't armed with the standard saw one might see during the Clone Wars; they were armed with E-5 Blaster Rifles and, despite their stature, used them mercilessly. The orders were simple; eradicate the Imperial presence on the warship. They intended to do so punctually.

Empire's End - Star Wars

Sample 1

TITAN COMMAND

ADM. HALDER, SUAN

H.I.M.S. *DOMINION*, UNCHARTED SPACE, L-13

COORDINATES: 5.402, -330.241

The empty stars hung like candles upon the canvas, the steady hum of lights about the well-lit office, and sat at the wooden desk in one corner was the Admiral herself, datapad in hand. Fingers scrolled over the various fleet reports, the fuel information, rationing, maintenance reports, so on so forth. Minor engineering casualties were kept at levels lower than her, major casualties filtering up to that level, and so her list there was blessedly brief. The *Palatine* was experiencing reactor issues, leading to her being scheduled for dock with the station for inspection and necessary repairs, while the *Verdant* had a plasma fire on her port main battery and as a result had vented that area of atmosphere. Inspections were still being performed on the damage and what had precisely led to such a fire. A small handful of support craft were in drydock with a variety of issues, some stemming from their initial retreat from the New Republic and the patchwork repairs since. All in all, from her fleet and command a total of two *Victory IIs*, one *Carrack*, four CR90s, and one *Raider* were damaged in one way or another and therefore were not combat capable.

The Admiral sighed, setting the datapad on her desk and leaning into it, fingers instinctively templing. They were drops in the shallow bucket, drops she otherwise couldn't afford but really couldn't prevent. The scattering of Imperial fleets and vessels had caused the ships themselves to miss dock periods, miss repairs, and many crews had taken to attempting the same repairs themselves with whatever they had on hand. Many ad hoc things were now, finally, coming loose.

The forward posted squadrons were not impacted by this issue, but her own defense fleet was impeded by such losses. The *Victory II* was a modern enough vessel, capable of standing toe-to-toe with many Republic vessels, and their loss would be felt in the escort squadrons for her main capitals, while the rest were valuable additions to the screens and convoy escort fleets. Their loss was most unfortunate. Thinking it through, she gave pause to such immediate concerns; the losses to the defense fleet was poor, true, but with the twin *Executor* class warships she held supreme control in the department of mainline capital ship support. Such supercapital grade warships were not known to the New Republic as well, something she wished to keep in mind. It was useful to have such a massive surprise for the enemy. About the window stood that same fleet, the *Megador* in view with her plain, Imperial gray hull on full display. Running lights blinked slowly, pulsing as miniature stars on that canvas, while smaller Star Destroyers were placed in view as minnows to her shark.

The whole of Titan Command was not present, though, not by any means. Sixteenth Squadron, under RADM. Freeste, was down in the Diamal System in preparation for strikes against the New Republic. She trusted Freeste enough to perform the task at hand; the man was not as aggressive as she, but he was certainly adept at commanding fighter-based fleets. His actions in the Clone Wars, in command of a squadron of *Acclamators* out on the Outer Rim, spoke of that. He'd outfitted them as light carriers, striking and exiting battle at will while utilizing such strike craft in deadly, concentrated attacks against the unwary and overly aggressive. His force was much the same, small and focused about the strike craft within his command. A total of two *Venators*, one *Victory II*, two *Victory Is*, three *Carracks*, four *Imperial II* frigates, eight *Ton-Falks*, twelve CR90s, four DP20s, and seven *Tartans* with the full complement of over 1,300 fighters and bombers made up his force, a strong enough squadron to break most New Republic task forces which weren't expecting it guarding a system which didn't warrant a fleet large enough to destroy it. It would stand, that's for certain.

Of course, such things assumed that Fondor fell which was, in Halder's personal opinion and in the opinion of some officers, unlikely. It's orbital defenses were nothing to be snickered at and it's fleet was substantial enough for most attacks. Unfortunately, the resources present at Fondor itself in terms of it's shipyards gave a massive target to the system itself. To her knowledge, the fleet numbered some few Star Destroyers and a number of medium sized warships while the escorts were numerous. Unfortunately, as for the Moff in command of its operations, she knew him by name and reputation only; he was of the usual Imperial style Moff, a man consumed more by administration and money than by the guarding of his own territory, a man who held the New Republic in such low esteem that he let his own guard down. While it would suffer for now under his administration and may not survive an assault it would otherwise, Fondor would prove to be something of a large speed-bump to oncoming New Republic forces. It was unfortunate that she did not have a tool to remove him for someone more capable, but for now the man had to stay.

A light knock on her door broke the process, Halder looking up with her eyes only to see Lieutenant Peetrum. His long, young face was pensive, stance inquiring and paused as though a stature of a stork, the gray uniform about him tight and clean as befit someone formerly of the I.S.B., while a plain red folder was under one arm. Noting that she had taken notice of the knock, Peetrum popped to attention and gave his report.

"Afternoon, ma'am. New report from the Esstran sector which may interest you."

Something *interesting*? Doubtful, at least in Halder's mind. Things were rarely so interesting, though then again Peetrum had a certain viewpoint of the world. To him, even minor details were interesting. Crew transfers and the scheduling of personnel movements were interesting, the outfitting of vessels interesting, delays due to pirate attacks on construction of fighters were interesting. To him, they each revealed a fraction of the greater picture, a picture he constantly strove to understand and influence. She feigned boredom, tone bland and unimpressed, while a single raised eyebrow betrayed the interest Peetrum had devilishly cultivated in her. His lust for details was nearly infectious, but only nearly.

"A new warlord, Lieutenant?"

"Of a sort, Admiral. Read for yourself." He crossed the distance of the office somewhat fast, long legs striding to eat up the distance while the Lieutenant somehow maintained that stiff, formal posture. Peetrum held the folder out for her to take which she did, opening it up and reading as the man came at ease before her. His own eyebrows raised, though less for interest of what the folder itself read but more for her own reaction. He measured the importance of things by the Admiral's reaction to them once she understood properly what she was seeing, and in many ways drew happiness from distributing such information to those who could do something about it. The officer kept himself at ease, though, hands clasped before him and back ramrod straight.

She started reading. At first it was fairly standard information, something about a Nineteenth Fleet of the Imperial Navy which had defected in the area. Strange, considering what was there. All that stood in the Esstran sector, to Halder's knowledge, was...Horusset, Dromund, Ziost, and some other smaller, less important systems. *Of course* it was one of the Emperor's pet projects, his little undertakings. He'd always had an interest in artifacts from the past, something which Halder knew of only through talking to officers who had to deal with such events. They talked of special agents whose talents most certainly did not always lay in the command of ships and men, nor really in talking at all, agents who were bastards by most accounts. Arrogant, violent, and hyper-focused was how most characterized these. According to the folder, Nineteenth was to aid in the...excavation of an ancient city on Dromund Kaas in the Dromund system, accompanied by an agent of the Emperor's. He'd proclaimed himself a Sith, taking on the ancient title of Darth, and had apparently made the attempt to brainwash his crews. Those under his command were so swayed by old tales of failures and dead men that they abandoned the Emperor and the Empire for a fool. Of the many things Halder expected, a fool who hearkened to the long gone days of the Republic and Sith was not quite among them. He was a fool, too, for thinking that he could brainwash so many. The I.S.B. seldom bowed to the force-user.

The Admiral's eyes had changed, reading slowly at first before they darted along the pages in interest, leaning forward against the flimsi as she did. He possessed a *Bellator* class, the *Rage*, as well as eight *Imperial I* and *Imperial II* Star Destroyers, ten *Victory IIs*, and twenty smaller craft of the common *Tartan* variety. Overall a smaller fleet with the exception of the *Rage*, though the Darth, calling himself Herlucan, possessed a sizable ground force. It didn't matter, though, not really. The ground he'd taken was unimportant and poor, the result of which being that Halder didn't quite care to really take it. She would be content with a Base Delta Zero for such planets as Ziost and Korriban. Of course, it was not within striking distance for Titan Command in any way and as such was outside of her operational sphere.

"A Sith? Will the Kumaury Empire pay us a visit as well? Perhaps Xim might join in?" She scathed, shaking her head and adding, "The fool. Keep me posted on this man. His eccentricism will likely prove his downfall." Halder chuckled, closing the red folder and holding it back out for Peetrum to grasp. He did so, smiling at the resulting reaction. It was entertaining to see her in such a manner.

"Of course, ma'am. In addition, the Tetan Civil Authority has contacted us for a treaty."

The Tetan Civil Authority. Halder pursed her lips at their mention. By and large a breakaway warlord state which had declared general independence following Endor, they occupied both a large fleet as well as multiple important Deep Core states. They could also blockage Byss which would limit the usefulness of any possible forces there; the Admiral had not been capable of reaching them by normal Imperial channels and, though she knew a substantial fleet was present, she did not know of it's precise composition. It had been classified beyond her when she had still been a Captain. Nevertheless, the Tetans were on fairly neutral terms with the Imperial Remnant and could yet prove useful. She wanted them either where they were as a neutral party to the Imperial Remnant with no recourse to turn to the New Republic should needs arise or as an ally, complete and total. The opinion was still held that, while the Empire had fractured into warlord states with overblown titles, they could yet be convinced to work together, to aid one another, and to one day reform into that same Empire. It was a process which would take time but...it was better than the alternative. The alternative was full civil war. Halder had full intention to crush the New Republic into either surrender or a desirable peace but the rest? Those who had turned their back upon the Galactic Empire to seize their own power, own territory? They may yet be reasoned with.

"A treaty?"

"They request...a nonaggression treaty between our forces, a mutual defense treaty for the same, open movement throughout the Deep Core, and in return they offer a small fleet of warships with crews they state are...desiring to continue service with the Imperial Navy. They also would confirm that the Tetan Civil Authority would provide convoy escort throughout the Koros run."

It was quite the deal, even if the fleet was full of lemons; effectively the Tetans wished to confirm what Halder had always intended. Should the systems under Empress Teta control come under siege or, stars prevailing, *fall* to any sort of hostile force it was without a doubt that the Admiral knew that same force would be hostile to her as well. Those systems were worth their weight and more, an ecumenopolis and mining systems within the Deep Core. Even if they were useless dust balls with barely a hint of population or resources, the placement alone of the systems made them important. A force there had the potential to strike behind the normal defensive lines and emplacements of the Core systems, had the potential to constantly be present and tie down forces which may otherwise be employed. Halder desired a nonaggression treaty, too; in her mind, neutrality existed between most Imperial successor factions until otherwise stated. A confirmation of that was quite agreeable in her mind. Open movement within the Deep Core was not something she could entirely grant, however, but the words themselves spilled easy enough. Her permission was not the permission of, say, Byss.

The fleet was interesting to the Admiral. It was a sign that not all was as it seemed with the Tetans, that there was yet some small form of dissent within their people and military. Not all Imperial desired to serve with that government, that Tetan Civil Authority, and they were trying to find a way to both placate a friend as well as get rid of whatever dissidents may be present. She tempered her

fingers again, nodding in tune to her thoughts. It was possible that some vessels which had been taken by the Tetans had merely been present within their drydocks undergoing repairs and as such did not have crews which were convinced over to their side; effectively they had taken the ship with less than no permission, but really Admiral Halder couldn't argue the point. What court or authority might reprimand and punish them for such an action, by what power might convince them to give all their captured and stolen ships to the proper authority, Halder? No such thing existed, not anymore, and so the point was really quite mute. All it meant was that a number of Imperials were within Tetan custody and rathered to still be with the Imperial Navy, that's all. She considered it all; they were vessels within the Deep Core and as such likely had crews associated with that sector of operations. Less fighting and anti-piracy patrol, so somewhat experienced in those operations, but the discipline should be of a strong quality in her opinion. They could be retrained and relearn their jobs, get the "Yes Man" mentality out of their systems, and become proper officers, sailors, and marines.

She looked up at the LT., eyes narrowing.

"A fleet? How many?"

Peetrum drew out a datapad, tapping several times before he came to what he wanted. Angling his head just a tad and clearing his throat, the man's tone still held just a glimmer of amusement as he began to read through the listings of vessels by their class, ensuring that he didn't get any of the numbers wrong like an idiot might.

"A total of three *Dreadnaught* class heavy cruisers, five *Carrack* class lights, and fifteen *Vigil* class corvettes. Not the largest number of vessels."

"No. It's not."

The *Dreadnaughts* would be good for rear line units and, if she had the opportunity to do so, would be useful on the front lines when their systems were suitably upgraded to more modern standards. That would be an extensive refit, however, especially considering that they were nearly universally obsolete in most of their systems such as their reactor, weaponry, and sensors. Their hyperdrive was inadequate for the pace of battle as well, being only a Class 2 when the majority of the fleet was outfitted with Class 1. It would take a heavy amount of modification to bring them up to par indeed and, even then, it was no guarantee that they would be worth the cost. New Republic vessels and their crews liked to tinker and develop, standardization hard in a fleet of misfits and traitors, Mon Calamari ships being notoriously variable in their capabilities and modifications, and the direct result was an enemy whose next vessel, normally a pushover or your equal, was just enough more than that to provide the ample edge. The squadron of *Carrack* light cruisers would prove valuable as such small vessels were good at punching holes in an enemy corvette screen; their small size and title as light cruiser belied a far greater durability, their armament a competitor towards larger vessels. Halder looked forward to using them in combat, though in her opinion they required a heavier punch than what they currently held. They needed something *more*, something the engineers had been working on. In any case, it was a welcome addition. The *Vigil* patrol vessels would be good as picket vessels and keeping presence in less important systems, anti-piracy work, things of that nature.

“But...it’s a start. Most definitely a start,” the Admiral finally murmured, looking up at Peetrum from her desk. “The Tetan Civil Authority has a treaty, then.”

“Very good, ma’am. I’ll convey the message.”

He kept standing there, though, standing and frowning slightly about the corners of his mouth. Halder looked up at him, noticing it and the little details about the man. She could see his feet shifting just a bit between a few degrees, arcing back and forth like wipers, the little motions of his fingers as he held the folder there. Peetrum had bad news, she could tell, bad news for a bad time. Sighing, the Admiral spoke up. She might as well be direct with him since he’d done the same in the past, and keeping secrets was worse than making them known.

“Well? What it is. Spit it out.”

“Reports indicate that 4th Fleet has lost contact with one of their *Victory II* class frigates. *Argus* was on patrol before she went dark in the Steelious system. My local I.S.B. agent suspects desertion.”

Desertion of whole frigates, *that* was something which Halder never thought she’d see occur in the Imperial Navy. Some Planetary Defense Force, sure, she could believe a Captain deciding to gallivant on his own and run around, but not the Imperial Navy. Apparently the discipline in the organization had...rotted away, much as she hated to think of it, and the duty found was now lost. Of course, many had seen the Emperor as a symbol of the Galactic Empire, the Empire itself, almost worshipping the man. His cult of personality didn’t help such matters. When the Emperor died, a lot of what people thought was the Empire died with him. Halder leaned into her hands, rubbing at the temples, whistling out air. No, it hadn’t yet died. One man couldn’t spell the end for a whole state, whole country, a whole set of values. To her the Galactic Empire meant hard work, meant striving up for something better and more worthwhile, it meant duty and it meant the completion of the task ahead. One man couldn’t embody all that and take it with him to his death, no. She wouldn’t let it. The Emperor had demanded much when he was alive, he couldn’t demand she surrender her honor in his death.

The loss of the *Argus* was not a massive thing, the *Victory II* frigates being of a limited capacity to engage enemy vessels, but it was what such a loss represented. If a whole vessel can desert, what does it tell the rest? What does it imply? It shows that the authority of the Imperial Navy and Titan Command specifically did not extend to it’s ships, that vessels can come and go, that it had no authority. It spoke of underlying issues which led to the *Argus*, her Captain, and her crew feeling that they could simply *leave*. That was a problem, one which had to be examined carefully. For the vessel itself, though, a concrete response had to be made.

“Dispatch the *Hellion* to find and capture those bastards. No executions or interrogations, however; I want to question that Captain myself.”

“Aye, Admiral.”

TITAN COMMAND, SIXTH DEFENSE SQUADRON
CMDR. HANWEA, ZAYNSAN

H.I.M.S. ADVANCE, GIJU SYSTEM, L-13
COORDINATES: 3.068, -354.823

"Captain on the bridge!"

"Captain on the bridge, aye, all stations Captain on the bridge."

"Log it."

The light taps of boots on deck plating rung out as Commander Hanwea strode onto his bridge. The *Advance's* layout did not lend itself well to grand egos or grand designs, small as it was with trenches set into each side and sailors set about at work. Before the bridge stood the Giju system, a planetary system which was once in control of the Heralgic. It was their home system and homeworld, in fact, something which did not escape the Commander's notice. Most certainly a useful system to hold and be in control of as the facilities and factories there produced war materials for the Empire. Of course, that could quite quickly change. The Heralgic had chafed under the Imperial yoke, their rights often refused. In Hanwea's opinion, it had been a travesty of an event, one all too often repeated by the Empire. They could have cultivated something akin to loyalty but instead bred resentment within the local population. Fear could only lead them so far and, in his opinion, he could not allow it to fully occur. Of course, Halder agreed.

Commander Hanwea himself had had the pleasure of speaking to the Heralgic representatives and to the local Moff in control; he had subsumed himself towards the good graces of Admiral Halder. The Moff, one Renric, lacked some of the most basic necessities of a Moff. He had no major fleet to speak of, just some few small vessels to police his space, and the result of such was submission towards Titan Command's authority. Through this, the Commander was able to summarily enact some few changes to keep the Heralgic in line with the greater Empire. Their rights were restored under Imperial law to the equal of humanity, despite the Moff's protests, his own authority subsumed to a council of elected Heralgic leaders; in effect, he no longer had command save for that of his own small fleet, though the Heralgic did agree to give authority back in some limited sense should war come upon them. The output of the factories in Giju would still be set aside for Imperial production, mainly starfighters and their associated equipment, but at a far less margin than previously. The Heralgic could actually make a profit instead of subsisting themselves off of the Empire.

All in all, Hanwea was satisfied with his job there and had already sent the report up the chain of command. Inquisitive eyes surveyed the bridge itself, pausing on some few, before he nodded in satisfaction. His bridge was operating well, just as it should, with none of those furtive little motions that belied one problem or another, usually navigational though sometimes related to a variety of engineering difficulties. There was no scribbling in the log, rapid and desperate, that would speak of an overload of information. No, all was pretty calm and smooth, just as it should be. The Captain took up his usual comfy spot, one hand on the console out to the right of the bridge next to what was normally his seat.

"Hammer Seven-two this is Price, dock order confirmed."

His ears pricked up at *that*, checking his chrono and the bridge chrono just to be certain the man wasn't going somewhat insane or had lost track of time. No, it was still some hour and a half before they were scheduled to switch out the patrol squadron. The Commander looked at his Officer of the Deck, the man who'd confirmed the dock order, eyes narrowing and tone sharp, clipped.

"Issue, Mr. Urad?"

"Seven-two's got a bad case of the three-shakes, sir. Requested to come in. I rotated in Glen One-three for temporary replacement."

Three-shakes? What a shame. It was one of those diseases that no one, *absolutely no one* wanted. A sharp intake of air by Hanwea spoke of precisely how much no one would want it and precisely how much sympathy he felt for Seven-two.

"Keep me apprised on it. I *swear* if that spreads..."

"Oh well aware of it, sir. Nasty business."

"Quite."

TITAN COMMAND, OH-FIVE-TWO SQUADRON
LT. NORWHE, ELVIKEYS
DIAMAL SYSTEM, L-13
COORDINATES: 10.115, -342.49

"Orbital this is House Two, all conditions normal, over."

"House Two this is Orbital, all conditions normal aye, out."

Clicking his comms off to *Watcher*, Norwhe sighed; it'd been a long hour in the seat, that was for certain, and it'd be an even longer three hours to go. Combat Air Patrols were annoying like that but, as anyone could see, they were more than important enough. It was obvious really. The Alliance and its mutant offspring, the New Republic, preferred their snubfighters over capital ships and the best antidote to a starfighter was another starfighter. Constant patrol and vigilance, as such, was paramount. Nevertheless it was a thankless task which was most uncomfortable, especially for Norwhe; he stretched out his neck as much as he could in the bulky flightsuit, taking one hand off the controls to give some semblance of free movement for his fingers.

"House Two-one, House Two-three, remember the golden rule: It's longer if you think about the time."

A dry chuckle as he clicked on the squadron comms. Of course it was Trilet who started the quipping about long time and CAP time dilation or whatever he liked to refer to it. The man's Tatooine twang came over loud and clear over the comms, that farmboy style he sort of basked it.

Sure, some of the ladies weren't so impressed by it but those that did existed in some smaller areas, some of the stranger planes of existence, and it was those areas Trilet most definitely enjoyed.

"Sorry not all of us are so used to staring at absolutely nothing, Two-three."

"Oh-ho-ho, the old man talks. We'll get you into the retirement home one day, don't you worry."

Old man? Norwhe snorted into his helmet, shaking his head as he switched hands on the stick. He wasn't that old; at least, he wasn't that old to retire. He'd been at some of the later battles in the Clone Wars, sure, and by the most common measure was an Ace four times over, but that wasn't really the point. He was a Lieutenant by virtue of his desire to stay in the cockpit and by virtue of his former allegiances; being a Confederate did that to you, though in his total defense working for the Trade Federation had been a pretty sweet job. It just sucked by other accounts, such as the fact that the whole war was completely and totally lost. That bit.

"I'm not that old and you're not that young."

"Aren't you near ninety?"

"Point?"

"Two-one this is Two-five, red light on my number two. Diagnostic running."

"This is Two-one, copy that. Diagnostic runs for five minutes at red we'll inform Orbital."

"This is two-five, roger."

"Roger roger."

"I hate you."

A moment of silence passed, one of those where you just sort of flew about in the circuit planned and kept an eye out. Diamal wasn't all that active as far as commercial traffic, not at all, and what few cargo ships which were moving up to Abregado-rae or down to Fondor lazily passed by the system and the Imperial vessels within it. In the distance, silhouetted by the planet itself, was the Sixteenth Squadron itself. The twin *Venators*, with their distinctive dagger hulls, hung there in the void with engines idle, burning, and Norwhe could only really sigh. There was a moment in his life when he'd see that shape, that hull, that bridge and would be afraid, concerned, or as eager as an Akk, depending on what was happening at the time, and now he could only look at it and think of the rack he had on her, the hot meal he'd get once he was out of the damn flightsuit, and the comfort of a toilet. It was a decent enough ship, the *Watcher*, though there were times when he wondered how much man was replaced with metal under their skulls with how robotic some officers acted. It was stifling in some ways, though nearly to be expected.

"Red light cleared, Two-one."

"Copy that. All units, maintain four-zed throttle, maintain formation."

The flight continued its long patrol, on and on, and Norwhe hoped the time would pass quickly.

Other Empire's End - Star Wars

Sample 1

CAPT. DORSSINY, TREROS
STAR DESTROYER ABERRANT, WASP SQUADRON
SYSTEM DESIGNATION 090-235-J

An alarm rang-out throughout the ship near twenty minutes before the exit to hyperspace and Captain Dorssiny was already on his bridge. It rang out in a harsh, sing-song tone, loud as could be save for the muffled noise about the bridge. He could still hear it down the hall and, with it, the clatter of boots on deck plate, of men running to their stations. The man wasn't donned in the gear Granger recommended, though, by every means he wasn't. No, instead he wore the usual flash gear which accompanied any of his own major fleet experiences. Gloves and a gray hood, that was his gear, the sort of thing one would wear before having to fight a fire, combat flooding, that sort of thing. In his own experience, Dorssiny found them to be far better than the Imperial Army breastplates and helmets Granger liked. After all, whoever boarded a Star Destroyer? For that matter, whoever had shrapnel ping about the bridge? He personally considered the Cruiser 13 incident, which he had read-into after being struck by curiosity, to be a fluke at best, bad luck at worst. Shrapnel through a bridge, but no hull puncture? That wasn't the sort of thing proton torpedoes did, nor laser cannons. In some ways, Dorssiny felt it was a design flaw in the Acclamator design, that something had gone wrong in the internals upon the bridge which had led to a detonation, to shrapnel. It was a wartime situation, though, and no actual report on how the event occurred was present. If that were true, Granger based his choice on a singular event from a now isolated and defunct class.

Besides, there was something in the man which didn't quite like the idea of an Imperial Navy officer wearing Imperial Army gear. Something which said that the idea was degrading as a whole. Pride, Dorssiny supposed, that's what it was. Nothing wrong with that.

"General Quarters, General Quarters, all hands to battle stations!" repeated an Ensign over the 1MC, "Set Material Condition Aurek throughout the ship, make all Aurek reports to Damage Control Central." The alarm kept going.

The vast expanses of hyperspace stretched out before Dorssiny, swirling blues and whites. It didn't look like the ship was going into battle. It didn't look like there were rebels on the horizon, that they were right there in front of him just moments away from a major battle. No, it didn't look like that at all. In some ways, it was good. It was a mark of the times that hyperspace should separate the emotions like a curtain before everything came clashing down. It was tradition, seeing how old hyperspace travel was and how far along they had come since ancestors charted the first lanes. In some ways, though, he just didn't like it. It had an odd feel about it, a strangeness that the fleet was so close to combat and still they were merely powering through hyperspace like it was a pleasure cruise out of Coruscant. The man shook the feeling. It did little good now to reminisce about things never experienced and never to be experienced, not before a major battle, not at all.

A few moments passed as stations sent in their reports, as the ship prepared for combat. Bulkheads slid shut, separating sections on the ship from one-another, and down below Dorssiny knew that his crews were geared up and ready. Damage control parties were standing by, the guns manned, and the bridge was altogether as quiet and professional as could be. The last fleet operation they had involved a chunk of station breaking into them and over a million men and women dying. Some people turned into bloodhounds, Akk dogs, when the moment of retribution came about. Some people turned into machines, cold-blooded as can be. He'd been sure he had as few bloodhounds as possible. They made mistakes that cold anger wouldn't dare to make. Hate turned into concentration, the tension in the air a spider's web, and Dorssiny stood by, listened to the reports. They came in fast and thick, clear voices muddled by the circuits, hiccups in communication swiftly dealt with by Central's controllers.

"Condition Aurek set throughout the ship, time five," came the call over the 1MC. It was good. It was very good. They'd had practice in setting that sort of thing though, and the Captain found anything less than very good to be not.

"Flight line cleared, craft ready to launch."

"Very good, Mr. Paulee."

Minutes turned into hours, the last few seconds like days passing by. Judgement was present at the scene already, to Dorssiny's knowledge, and though he didn't know the Captain for the vessel he did know that even a poorly-captained Star Destroyer would swing odds more in their favor. The rest of the enemy fleet was negligible in strength and could be destroyed at relative leisure, especially considering the corvette screen. They were good odds, despite what Rollwhe might've thought. Granted, he did not relish the idea of standing by and acting as a shield for the carriers, but orders were orders. It would take skill to maintain the cordon against the enemy MC80s, especially considering their ease in repositioning compared to his. True, he had less distance to go but to maintain good fire he would need to keep the bow pointed at the enemy...and had to start and stop the engines. They merely had to blast at full speed. No, they were good odds Dorssiny told himself, good odds so long as they took advantage of them.

"Thirty seconds until hyperspace exit."

"Thirty seconds until hyperspace exit, aye. Stand by to open hangar bay doors. Stand by for one half aft burn."

"Aye, sir standing by to open hangar bay doors."

"One half aft burn, aye, standing by."

A countdown from the Conn. Zero. The blackness of space swung into view as streaks of blue and white turned into stars, as a blue-red sphere dominated the bridge crew's sight, and before them lay a battle. Dorssiny didn't hesitate for a moment to consider the layout of the battle, the disposition of the enemy, nor the disposition of friendly forces, shooting out his orders quickly to the bridge in a staccato rhythm.

"Open hangar bays doors! Launch fighters! Helm, one half aft burn, slow to point five!"

"Aye, sir launching fighters."

"One half aft burn, aye! Conn, my helm is one half aft burn."

"One half aft burn, aye."

Dorssiny could feel the Star Destroyer pull back from her initial burst of speed, pull back as his heart felt like it was surging forward, and the sensor screens showed his fighters jetting out at speed from the hangar bays. It was a ballsy move, what they were doing; most pilots preferred to move out more cautiously from the hangar, seeing as how it was facing another hangar directly opposite from it and the exit was downwards, but his pilots were just a tad different. Of course, such a maneuver was made possible by the slow, yet still. He waited for the next report, the expected one, as his eyes darted back and forth on the long range. The Judgement and her escort were already engaged with the enemy fleet, closer than Wasp Squadron. Her fighters and bombers were also launched and had engaged the enemy, though by his count were either evenly matched or slowly losing. Granted, Dorssiny had never been a pilot, but one was taught how to gauge things like that.

"Sir, fighters out and in holding formation."

"Comms, send a message to Indomitable. Message reads: Moving to intercept Rebel fleet to draw fire. Out."

"Aye, sir!"

"Helm, come about course 352 mark 5. Increase speed to full forward burn for fifteen. Weps, weapons free! Concentrate fire on the nearest MC with the heavies."

"Come about course 352 mark 5, full forward burn for fifteen, aye. Conn, my course is 352 mark 5, full forward burn for fifteen."

"Weapons free, aye!"

"Conn aye!"