

Janus watched from within the manufactorum spire that rose high above the cityscape of Civitas Haephor as the forces of Chaos maneuvered their great and terrible war-machines into place. His hands, heavy and worn from forgework and bedecked with guild rings, sat folded behind his back, twitching ever so slightly.

The weapons of the Archenemy were frightful and awesome – monstrous daemon-mawed cannons, heavy tracked howitzers, and brutal tanks all vied and jockeyed for position outside the city walls. Grainy pict-feeds captured from city-wide broadcasts showed the yellow-and-black iconography of the Iron Warriors in riveting detail, and Janus knew that death had come to visit Haephus Prime.

It was no surprise that the forge world had fallen under siege. Its natural resources were plentiful, its output high, its capacity for industry unmatched in the local system. As far as Janus was concerned, invasion and assault were inevitable – the forces of the enemies of the Imperium were manifold and relentless, with foes encroaching on Imperial space from all points along the galactic landscape.

Had it not been Chaos, it would have been the Orks, or the Tau, perhaps even the Eldar, though the sylvan race held, due in no small part to Guilliman's return, a tenuous alliance with the Imperium of Man. The galaxy was endlessly ablaze with war, and Janus knew that Haephus Prime was of great value.

He was not the Planetary Governor, so coordination of defense did not, thankfully, fall upon his broad shoulders, but as one of the Nine Lords of the Forge Guild and a man of great experience, he knew more of the galaxy than did the common Imperial citizen.

He knew that Mankind was beset upon all sides and that despite the efforts of the Returned Son, the Imperium was holding on by a thread. The Emperor, blessed though He be, was gone, rotting atop the Golden Throne, and the dream that had been His was dying along with Him.

Haephus Prime would fall, as had its sister worlds across the system, and the Archenemy would gain yet another foothold in its persecution of the Eternal War.

Astropathic calls for aid had, as of yet, gone unanswered. His Angels, the Astartes, though bolstered by the Primaris Marines of Belisarius Cawls' great work, were stretched thin across the galaxy, bent to their labors of reclaiming lost worlds under the flag of the Indomitus Crusade, and were a preciously scarce resource in such times. The Imperial Guard, the mortal forces of the Imperium, were equally yoked to war, driven ever onward by the Lords of Terra and the Lord Commander.

In essence, Haephus Prime and the massive hive cities that sprawled across her face, were alone.

Janus was not a fatalistic man, but decades of life had taught him the value of pragmatism and practicality.

Manufacturing was all numbers – units in, units out. His livelihood had, until recently, depended on the balance of those numbers, and he understood them deeply. Quality was also a requisite factor – poor standards yielded higher output, but an unsatisfactory and ultimately failed product. He was not a general, nor was he a warfighter, but he understood that the forces

mustering beyond the city walls were of both greater number and skill than those dedicated to repelling them.

The human spirit was a mercurial thing though, and while perhaps statistically insignificant in the greater scheme of things, could, possibly, inject a degree of hope into their situation.

Qualitative measures were fickle however, prone to degradation over time and under strain. Quantitative metrics were precise, with outcomes based on data and odds, and appealed most to his perspective.

“Lord Septimus?”

The voice in his ear is tinny and weak, unsure and lacking gravity.

Janus closed his eyes, slowly, and took a breath before responding.

“Yes, Havre?”

“Apologies, Lord, but your presence is requested by the Council.”

The Council.

Self-important bastards who promoted themselves masters of the city, more concerned with protecting their profits and coffers than the populace or the city itself. Withered husks, soulless, self-serving.

Janus had not risen to his rank through unadulterated altruism, but had, by virtue of his lowly birth, developed a keen understanding and fatherly affection for the city’s inhabitants, particularly those who toiled under the yoke of the Guild.

Had Haephus Prime not been corralled by a blockade of Chaos vessels, Janus was sure the members of the Council would have already fled, carrying with them all the luxuries of their station and abandoning the planet to its fate.

“Lord?”

“Yes, Havre. Inform the Council I will be there momentarily.”

Janus took another long look at the streaming pict-feeds, his flinty eyes panning across the multiple screens.

The calculus of war was not in their favor.

The Council chamber was set deep within the heart of the manufactoria spire, shielded behind layers of plas-steel and rockcrete. It was, as were all of the spaces of the Forge Guild, built for purpose and function, meant to outlive its occupants and serve as a constant reminder of the Guild’s steadfast and inexorable progress.

Not that there wasn’t opulence - no, the Nine Lords of the Forge Guild simply *must* have their finery. What was a lord, or a lady, without a tangible expression of status?

“Humility is for the poor,” said Lord Secundus Heilos once, when questioned on his misappropriation of Guild funds for the commission of a monstrously huge (and in Janus’ opinion, *hideous*) portrait depicting the Lord Secundus as a being of noble-militant stature, bedecked in golden armor, spear in hand, a great serpent coiled dead at his feet.

The painting, titled “*Ser Heilos, Lord Secundus of Haephus Prime, Slays the Great Serpent of Chaos,*” hung above the fool’s great hardwood desk, such that all who might enter his office were forced to reckon with its buffoonery.

Janus’ boots, hard-soled and practical rather than the soft slippers worn by his fellow Councilmembers, crushed the plush velvet of a lavender rug that spanned the distance between the chamber door and the great iron and brass table that dominated the room.

He noted, as he made his way to the table, how murmuring quieted as he drew closer. Mumbles became whispers, whispers became knowing looks, looks became weapons.

He moved to his seat; as Lord Septimus, his place was the third chair on the Lord Primus’ left, between the Lords Quintus and Nonus, to his right and left, respectively.

Lady Quartus Vix, Mistress of Coin, glared unlovingly at Janus as he took his seat, her cold, hawkish features doing little to conceal her distaste and disdain.

“Lady Quartus, always a pleasure,” said Janus as he settled into the plush high-backed chair, his long leather jacket unfurling from his sides.

“Lord Septimus, ever the tardy one,” replied the Lady.

“I beg of you, Lady Quartus, in your overflowing and unending magnanimity, find it in your heart to forgive an old man his transgressions.”

A haughty smile spread across the Lady’s face as she assumed victory.

“Had I known the Council was so keen to abandon its duty to the city, I would have been here sooner, though perhaps the Lady might not have approved of my company.”

“Meaning, Lord Septimus?” The Lord Tertius Caahn now, his eyebrow raised in query.

“Meaning, Lords and Ladies, that had I known the Council to be such a nest of yellow-bellied vipers, I would have simply opened the gates for our assailants and invited them in.”

The Chamber erupted in uproar – the Lords and Ladies of the Council, each and all masters of their domains and career politicians, rising from their plush chairs and shaking their fists in condemnation.

“Traitor!”

“Heretic!”

“Chaos worshipper!”

The words fell on uncaring ears – Janus had struck a nerve, intentionally so, and had known full well the response he would receive.

The Council were a fickle lot – they were, Janus knew, more concerned about their profits, their quotas, their productions, than they were the safety and security of the city itself.

Lord Primus Sandros, who had remained seated through the outburst, raised a hand, silently.

One by one the Lords and Ladies of the Council took notice, their reddened faces coloring further with shame and embarrassment, and took their seats.

Lady Quartus, ever the obstinate and strong-willed, was the last to be seated, her hawkish glare fixing Janus with murderous intent.

As silence fell over the Chamber, the Lord Primus ran his gloved hand along the surface of the table, as if wiping away some unseen detritus.

“Lord Septimus Janus,” the Lord Primus began, “as always, your words have the greatest of effect. I can appreciate your perspective, though I do not agree with it. The Council takes its duty as overseers and custodians of the city, and its populace, *very* seriously, and I would caution you to better temper your words when speaking to our esteemed order.”

“Then why,” Janus responded slowly, “does the Council hide behind the Chamber doors instead of acting? Why do we lounge here, in the safety of the spire, while the men and women of our besieged city cower in fear at the monsters just beyond our walls? *Why*, Lord Primus, are we discussing *anything* other than the defense of the city?”

“Tell us, Lord Septimus,” said Lord Nonus Vail, Master of Coin, his pudgy, ring-encrusted hands laid flat over the table, “what exactly you would have us do? We are beset upon by the Archenemy, the greatest of His foes, and we are, if you have failed to take notice, *woefully* outgunned and outmanned. We are a city of industry, not of war – ours is the lot of the forge, not the cannon or the great engines of salvation. Our people are not combatants; they are the smithy and the boilermaker, the laborer and the indentured.”

Janus drew a deep breath, swallowing a caustic retort.

“Lord Nonus Vail, you make a valid point. We are not a city of war. But your own words, though perhaps unintentional, bring to light my very point. We are a city of industry. What is industry if not the backbone of war? Cannot a coin be smelted into an ingot, an ingot refined into a coin?”

“Speak plainly, Lord Septimus.”

“Should the Lady Quartus afford me the floor, I shall,” replied Janus.

“We are a city of industry. Perhaps not of the grand and great weapons of war wielded by the Astartes, the Guard, or the Mechanicus, but enough to forge the weapons necessary to outfit a militia-“

“A *militia*?” The Lord Quintus’ tone was incredulous, his bionic right eye whirring open in a pathetic facsimile of surprise and disdain.

“Yes, Lord Quintus, a militia. A city defense force raised from the populace.”

“And how, Lord Septimus, do we pay for such a force? With the cordon surrounding the city and the planet itself, coin isn’t exactly flowing freely.”

“We don’t, Lord Nonus. We retrofit the forges to produce cannon and mortar – we mount them along the walls. We arm the populace, use the local peacekeepers as an *ad hoc* command structure, and stand our ground. We conscript the forge-workers, the smithies, the boilermakers.”

“To what end, Lord Septimus?”

“Survival, Lord Primus. We all know that aid is, as of now, not coming. We are alone, not just as a city, but as a planet. The Archenemy is at our doorstep and will come to call sooner than later. It is, in my mind, better to fight and die than to simply be pounded into oblivion and enslaved by the forces of Chaos.”

Silence fell over the Chamber. Janus could all but see the calculus occurring in the minds of the Council.

“Lords and Ladies, I say again, *we are alone*. No one, not the Astra Militarum, not the Astartes, not the Inquisition, is coming to save us.”

As if on cue, a heavy rumbling reverberated through the spire.

The siege had begun.

Perticar Voln, Warsmith of the *Sons of Perturabo*, warband of the Iron Warriors legion, was incensed.

The siege of Haephus Prime, an Imperial forge world central to the local system's industrial output, had, as of yet, not gone to plan.

The opening artillery strike had been delayed by sixty seconds, an error that had not gone unnoticed, and the initial barrage had been off target by a scathing five degrees.

Perticar stood atop an iron platform that afforded him a view of the siege-field, providing a full perspective on the layout and formations of his now-established artillery batteries. His banner, an iron skull overlaid atop a black-and-yellow chevroned field, fluttered above his bare head, the dull breeze of the planet's withered atmosphere tugging gently at the pennant's length.

His helm rested beneath his arm in the crook of his armored elbow, its machine spirit dormant and at rest. It was equipped with all manners of siege-data interpretation cogitators; range and distance, altitude and elevation, degrees and firing arcs, but he needed none of it. The city lay sprawled before him, a fat iron beast atop a tortured plain of landscape, its heavy rockcrete walls rearing up from the ground to encircle its soft interior protectively.

Lesser men might have balked at the walls' height and depth – from the outside they seemed impenetrable, with massive rockcrete blocks laid atop another, and reinforced with great iron bands. But to Perticar and his warband, they were simply another bastion to be broken.

He had broken greater fortresses, laid waste to more fortified cities, and claimed grander prizes. This hive, with its towering spire and manufactoria stacks, would be no challenge.

“Lord Perticar,” said Draxxon, his heavy tread echoing off the iron platform as he approached.

“Draxxon,” Perticar said flatly, not turning to face his second.

“Firing solutions have been rectified, Lord, and the Master of Guns appropriately corrected. Subsequent volleys will not deviate from prescribed vectors.”

Perticar nodded, satisfied.

“See that it is so, Draxxon, lest you find yourself, how did you say it – ‘*appropriately corrected.*’”

Silence followed.

Draxxon was a capable Siege Marshal, a veteran of numerous assaults, and viciously loyal to Perticar and the *Sons of Perturabo*. He was not an overly ambitious man, seemingly content to follow the Warsmith’s lead and delegate orders across the warband. He was, however, as were they all, proud and confident in the execution of his duties, and took poorly to chastisement.

Draxxon had yet to feel the sting of Perticar’s scourge, but Perticar was not above such correction should the need arise.

“Lord,” Draxxon began, his tone cautious and tentative, “would it not be more prudent to target the spire and the manufactoria first?”

“To what end, Siege Marshal?”

“To cripple production and industry, Lord. A city of industry that lacks the capacity for industry is impotent.”

“There is truth in your thinking, Draxxon, but it is incorrect all the same.”

A deafening report sounded over the siege-plane as one of the great daemon-mawed cannons belched a screaming shell over the field toward the city. The round struck home, crashing heavily into a hab-spire, shattering the upper levels of the unit.

“You are correct, Siege Marshal - an impotent city is a toothless city, incapable of standing its ground. But,” Perticar paused, gesturing at the crumbling hab-spire, “a terrified city is a city that will tear itself apart from the inside. The populace will lose faith in its leaders and will take to the streets in fear and rage, tarring and feathering those who claim to offer succor and protection. Idols will fall, faith will be abandoned, and the gates will open.

“Yes, we are here to lay waste to the Imperium and its strongholds, to sow terror across the stars and to topple the False Emperor’s Golden Throne. But we cannot do that without resources, Siege Marshal. Munitions do not materialize from the Warp, cannons are not forged from the spaces between the stars, and slaves are fragile and temporary. We must, in order to continue our crusade, acquire and secure the makings of war.”

Draxxon leaned forward, placing his heavy augmetic hands on the platform rail, watching as another shell arced across its trajectory and found its mark among the hab units. His machine hands, signs of a true Iron Warrior – flesh corrected by iron - served him well as Siege Marshal; they afforded precision and control, removing error and missteps, and demonstrated dedication to the cause.

The sounds of masonry crumbling and steel screaming, though muted by distance and the rough growling of artillery engines, were audible from their position – they were the music of siege craft, set to a rhythm of destruction and chaos.

“Fear, Siege Marshal,” rumbled Perticar, “is just as potent a weapon as the greatest of siege engines, and one that only multiplies in its depth. The mortal mind is not as that of the Astartes. We are made of sterner stuff, forged for warfare and strife. To be mortal is to fear; it is a universal truth of their souls and spirits and is inexorably linked to their existence. They cower behind walls and fortifications, misplacing their faith in a false idol and a rotting Imperium. It is our duty to liberate them from such misgivings and falsehoods.”

“As ever, Lord, your wisdom is humbling.”

“Save me your bootlicking, Draxxon. You and I both know that were you given command, you would rain ruin and damnation down upon this city. Such is your way, and when the day comes that your blade finds my back and you carry the mantle of ‘Warsmith,’ you will bring death and discord to the stars under the banner of the Fourth Legion. I advise temperance and patience – your time will come soon enough.”

Perticar gestured to a knot of ragged and shriveled slaves laboring under the baleful watch of a squad of *Sons* cannon-masters.

“See there, Draxxon. Efficiency is degrading among the shell crews. Volley-cycle timetables will be negatively impacted without adjustment. See to it that this is corrected immediately.”

Draxxon stood, his augmetic hands clicking and whirring as he released the iron rail. He turned to face Perticar, his red lenses glowing ominously from within his pitted grey helm.

Perticar turned his neck, looking up at the larger Siege Marshal, who seemed, briefly, to be weighing the logic and calculus of challenge.

Such tension was expected, not just among the warriors of the Fourth, but of all Chaos legions. Command, a place of honor, was coveted, and no one man, Draxxon included, was above vying for his place as tip of the spear.

Perticar met the Siege Marshal's stare, his own flinty eyes hard and cold, never fearing, but always measuring.

The strain held for a moment, the two warriors, each lethal and unfathomably violent in his own way, silently holding ground as artillery reports sounded in the background.

"Temperance and patience, Draxxon."

"Iron within, iron without."

Draxxon clamped his fist over his twin hearts, an immortal warrior salute, and bowed slightly.

With that the Siege Marshal turned and strode away, his tread ponderous and heavy atop the platform.

Perticar turned his attention back to the siege field, watching, calculating, measuring.

He did not doubt that the city would fall – such things were simple mathematics, inputs versus outputs.

Whether it would before Draxxon showed his hand and betrayed him was something different entirely. The calculus of war did not account for pride.

The first shell hit Hab Spire Ascendant like a hammer from the stars. The impact reverberated through the lower levels, shaking the spire to its roots and threatening to topple the mighty structure.

Enorum Galt, a lifelong forge-tender, had been laying atop his thin sleeping mat, clutching at an effigy of the Emperor All-Mighty, whispering fervent prayers for salvation and deliverance. His hab-unit was located halfway up the spire, and while not outright damaged by the blow, the small and myriad trinkets adorning his simple shelves rattled and toppled all the same.

He didn't know *who* or *what* was assaulting Civitas Haephor – the Masters had yet to address the general populace, but he knew that this would be the city's undoing.

He had never faced an assault – riots were not uncommon among the forge workers, but they were often short and brutally put down by both the city's native peacekeepers and the Guilds' hired thugs. Full-scale assault and siege had, by the Emperor's mercy, been absent in his years, at least until now.

As if the rumbling and the impact hadn't been enough to alert him, red light strobed from under his hab door and wailing klaxons sang their siren songs from the hallway beyond.

[ATTENTION: THIS IS NOT AN EXERCISE]

The vox-casters blurted out a tinny and staticky refrain.

[ATTENTION: THIS IS NOT AN EXERCISE – EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY]

Enorum could hear the hiss and grind of hab doors opening as his neighbors followed the automated alert.

He did not move. He knew he should, but fear gripped his flesh – he knew death was swiftly approaching, and every sin, every black tally on his heart and soul came rushing to mind.

Would he find salvation in the afterlife? Would the Emperor take pity on his soul? Or would he be damned, living an eternity of persecution and punishment?

A sudden pounding at his door roused him from his fears.

“Enorum, get up damn you!”

Still he did not move.

“Enorum, it’s Killinger! Get up!”

Enorum cradled the Emperor’s idol tighter, clutching it to his heart and whispering more fervent prayers.

Again came the pounding, a heavy and frantic beat.

“ENORUM!”

A pause, and then the pounding ceased.

Enorum curled into a ball, pulling the Emperor into a fearful embrace, and wept.

Draxxon’s augmetic hands flexed and extended in frustration.

Perticar Voln was a fool.

Munitions, manpower, resources – they were all excuses and facades.

The *Sons of Perturabo*, and the whole of the IVth were a patient lot, renowned and feared for the cold and calculated precision with which they executed siegecraft, but that did not mean they should tarry in their duties.

Death, destruction, desolation – these were the hallmarks of a true warrior of Chaos. The *Sons* were terrible and vicious hounds to be let loose; their lot was to be first into the breach, to

trample and tread the weak, to bring ruin to the stars. The great and terrible weapons of war they commanded were meant to wreak havoc, to tear down walls and break strongholds.

Perticar's preferred method of warfare rankled and insulted Draxxon's pride – let the XXth skulk and slither, let the VIIIth haunt. The IVth had built its legacy on utter annihilation of its foes, razing cities to the ground and leaving naught but scorched and salted earth in its wake.

In the calculus of war, Perticar was an inefficiency.

As Siege Master, Draxxon was tasked with removing inefficiencies, correcting errors, resolving solutions.

Perticar was a variable to be refined, removed, rectified.

Draxxon would see it done.

Things were not going well.

After much jockeying, bickering, and bureaucratic nonsense, the Council had begrudgingly approved the formation of a civilian force, as well as the refitting of the forges for munition production.

Janus was disappointed, but not surprised, at the Council's reluctance to act. They were creatures far removed from the suffering and toil of the common man or woman, elevated high above the streets and the misery of those who bent their backs to labor.

Discussion of finances, logistics, and command had abounded, mired infuriatingly in ego and pride.

By the time the Lord Primus had finally banged his gavel and blessed off on expenditure measures, conscription methods, and forge retrofit, Civitas Haephor had been shelled no less than ten times.

The blows came in a steady rhythm – methodical and unhurried, patient and precise. Reports indicated that Spire Ascendant was the first of the habs to be hit, its upper levels obliterated by shells that hammered home like the fists of an angry god. The steel and masonry of the upper levels had, by firsthand account and pict-capture, screamed and groaned, cascading in a billowing avalanche toward the streets below.

Evacuation of the hab had started almost immediately – the spire’s internal systems transmitting warnings and orders to its residents. Those in the lower levels, those who were able to escape the flood of panicked bodies pouring down stairwells and choking lift-shafts, were, by the Emperor’s mercy, spared a crushing and choking doom, fleeing the hab and its footprint before the ruins of the upper levels came crashing down.

Those who tarried, or who were caught amidst the wash of humanity seeking flight, were not so blessed.

The hab shed its skin, titanic blocks of tumbling rockcrete, and cast off its bones, great lengths of steel and iron, all of which thundered into the streets surrounding the hab’s mighty roots, catching those citizens who, thinking themselves saved, had choked the avenues and alleys in a roaring cloud of doom.

Death tolls had yet to be estimated – such a thing was beyond reason right now, but Janus knew that they would be heavy and only continue to climb as the siege labored on.

He had left the Council Chamber immediately following the Lord Primus' ruling, his heavy black greatcoat trailing behind him as he moved swiftly toward the Spire's main lift.