

Chapter I: Unfinished Business

Pyotr was in a vexed sort of mood. The electric volleys of rifle fire sent forth by the slaves of the machine cult did not make it any better.

“Anras told us that this station was supposed to be only *lightly* defended!” Gyrrhemar spat through the vox, his midnight armor spotted black with numerous scorch marks.

“I know, brother,” Pyotr growled. The crack of bolter fire rang out from his pistol as he fell another skitarii pawn before ducking back behind cover.

“He foretold nothing of the mechanicus or those other mechanized dogs.”

“I *know*, brother. You say this like our visionary’s false prophecies are my fault.”

If Gyrrhemar heard him, he made no indication as he hefted his chaincannon, made an annoyed grunt and stepped out from behind their wall of cover, firing the weapon in a wide arc. Gunshots rang out through the corridor and another squad of soldiers collapsed. Pyotr had to grab his brother by the cresting wings of his helm and yank him back behind cover before he took another dozen blasts of electricity.

“How your armor is still functioning is beyond me,” Pyotr grumbled. Gyrrhemar only chuckled.

“Who says that it is?”

Pyotr gave him a flat look. “If that were so, you would not be *standing*.”

“Would you two cease your insipid whining and *help us*,” Retrigan barked from the opposite end of the corridor where he and Taresh continued their volleys of covering fire.

“It is not my fault that Pyotr lacks humor. One would think the opposite, considering—”

“Shut up,” Pyotr said flatly, shoving his brother into the wall harder than necessary as the skitarii finished their volley so that he could return fire. He was beginning to remember why he spent less and less time with his claw during recent missions.

“Where is your pet, Pyotr? It would be quite useful right about now,” Taresh said in his monotone voice that bore no accent of the sunless world. He was the newest member of their warband and also, by happenstance, Pyotr’s least favorite brother.

“Busy,” Pyotr said through clenched teeth.

“I would appreciate it if it were *less* busy,” Gyrrhemar said, shoving Pyotr’s hand aside so that he could spit out another flurry of rounds from his reaper chaincannon. “We’re burning more ammunition than we have to gain from this mission.”

“Wait,” Pyotr said, forcing his brother’s gun down. The skitarii had ceased firing and were ducked behind their own ramshackle defenses of fallen debris and machinery. “Something is wrong.”

“What is it?” Retrigan asked as he and Taresh pulled back behind their wall. Pyotr did not miss that all three sets of red eye lenses were fixed upon him, as if he should have all the answers because of a mere *tangential* relation he had to their enemy.

Pyotr opened his mouth to answer, but before he had the chance to vocalize his thoughts, a wave of metallic soldiers in red rose from behind their stations and began to charge the Night Lords.

“What are they doing?” Taresh asked, looking at the charging squad with incredulity.

“I knew the machine cult was mad, not moronic,” Gyrrhemar chuckled, dropping his weapon and drawing forth the ornamented spear he had looted from the corpse of a Space Wolf. He proceeded to bound forth and meet the skitarii in their charge, skewering two of them and crushing the chest of a third with a ceramite-enhanced kick.

“I hate when he does this,” Retrigan sighed. He shook his head and followed after his brother, lightning claws already extended and arcing with power. Taresh dutifully followed after him.

Idiots, Pyotr thought with annoyance, watching them as they cleaved down the first squad, only to be met by a second, and then a third. He could leave them to die, never have to deal with the burden of them weighing him down again. Pyotr relished the idea for a moment. Then sighed to himself and ran out to support them.

He took the head off one skitarii with his chainglaive, then pierced the heart of another with the speared-tip of his mechadendrite limb just as it was about to deliver a likely ineffective blow to Taresh.

“It’s like fighting children,” Gyrrhemar laughed. “Look how they’re running away!”

He wasn’t wrong. Pyotr watched as the remaining rangers disengaged, a few of them being cut down by a spear thrust or chainsword swipe. They retreated back down the hall in a hurry. Strange, even through the robotic and rote way they moved, there was a certain desperation to get away, to get back to their defenses where...

Where a long-barreled cannon had peaked up from behind one of their supports, its interior burning with molten orange light.

“Gyrrhemar,” Pyotr said.

“Yes, brother?”

“I want you to know that I will die hating you.”

“Understood, brother.”

Pyotr and his claw belatedly turned to dive out of the line of fire of the cannon, knowing full well that it was far too late as it roared to life. Just as the moment of anticipation grew to a crescendo and Pyotr knew he was soon to perish, he heard the frantic scream of metal rapidly scraping along metal and the rhythmic thumping of a walking war drum.

Half the skitarii fortifications went up in dark flames alongside the soldiers cowering behind them that were now becoming nothing more than slag. The ferrumite cannon was crushed by the armored bulk of a lashing tail, and the last remaining soldiers were cut down by half a dozen serrated and bladed limbs. It was over in a matter of moments, but the helstalker continued to pulverize downwards with its forelimbs repeatedly until it was satisfied, then looked up at Pyotr for approval.

“Fortunate timing,” Taresh said, not a hint of emotion behind his words.

“I suppose,” Retrigan replied, eyeing Tzimiti—and then Pyotr—with unease.

The helstalker slithered out from behind the mechanicus roadblock, crushing multiple fortifications as it did so, and came up to Pyotr, forcing its face up to his while maintaining eye contact. The daemon engine did not like to be ignored.

“Thank you, Tzimiti,” Pyotr said, then grasped the side of the entity’s hull, lifting himself up and into the throne on its back.

“So, that’s it?” Gyrrhemar said, spreading his arms. “You’re leaving us now?”

“Yes,” Pyotr said.

Gyrrhemar huffed but Taresh looked the daemon engine up and down. “What was it doing?” Pyotr pretended not to hear as he pulled upon his steed’s reins and directed it to turn around. “Pyotr, you said it was busy. Why?”

Pyotr glanced back at his claw from over his shoulder. “Other, stronger denizens of the machine god’s cult haunt this station.”

“And?” Gyrrhemar scoffed as he collected his chaincannon.

Beneath his helm, Pyotr sneered. He kicked Tzimiti into motion and began riding deeper into the facility.

“And I have unfinished business.”

Pyotr rode through the corridors of Exodus station, allowing Tzimiti to guide their path. Around him, the facility burned with the toll of battle and the walls groaned for mercy. He idly swept his chainglaive through the air, bisecting a fleeing worker who chose the wrong time to come out of hiding. His last words were a scream of fear, his last thoughts were ones of pitiful pleas to his God-Emperor. It meant nothing to Pyotr.

His gaze lingered on the corpse as they rode past, a frown forming upon his lips. “I once drowned in the bliss of the terror that I wrought,” Pyotr said aloud to no one in particular. “Now it takes so much for even a twinge of that joy. What changed within me?”

Tzimiti’s chassis rumbled beneath Pyotr in response. They both knew the answer to that question. Pyotr simply didn’t want to speak it.

Occasionally, they passed other claws prowling about the station, quickly outpacing them due to Tzimiti’s powerfully mechanized limbs. Some hailed him on the vox, others gave him signs of disgust or spat at the ground in his direction, but most just ignored him outright. Pyotr didn’t care, he knew that the winged skull he wore upon his armor meant less and less to his brothers as the years blended into decades that twisted into centuries. He knew that one day he’d find a knife planted firmly in his back—likely several.

Tzimiti came to an abrupt halt that nearly threw Pyotr from his throne. They’d reached an intersection in the corridor and the helstalker’s bulk pointed forward, in the direction it knew it was meant to go, but its head craned to the left, eyes locked upon something that had its maw gurgling and cooing in desire. Pyotr followed the thing’s gaze, seeing a stationary kastelan robot standing in solemn silence, its operating tech adept lying dead at its feet. The daemon engine yearned to tear into the defenseless machine and engorge itself on its screaming machine spirit.

Pyotr closed his eyes and almost gave into the urge to allow Tzimiti to do so, but steeled himself against the thought and whipped the reins.

“Soon, Tzimiti. Soon,” he promised. The helstalker’s form vibrated in disappointment but continued, picking up speed until it burst into an enormous chamber. And into madness.

Battle raged from every direction that Pyotr could see. As far as he could tell, the room was meant to be a laboratory or workshop for the adepts of the station, but hardly any of that remained in the frenzy that had ensued. Battle lines had long since broken, squads and clans lambasting into one another with whatever they saw fit between ranged firepower and melee strikes. Mechanicus in red sent volley after volley into marines in midnight clad, or were carried off and shredded by cackling raptors. Dogs of the emperor in gray ceramite engaged in desperate contests of strength, their servo-arms and axes reducing the Night Lords’ numbers at an alarming rate. Pyotr scanned the battlefield and almost immediately spotted Anras driving a power sword through the hearts of a rival marine and kicking his weapon free from the body. He forged a vox link.

“Pyotr?” the visionary asked.

“It is I, brother,” Pyotr responded.

“About damn time. We could’ve used that beast of yours ages ago.”

“This ammunition raid is a failure.”

Anras’s head turned toward him, ruby eyes glinting in the flashes of bolter fire surrounding him. “I foresaw our success. Doubt me and I will rend you—helstalker or not.”

Pyotr was about to comment on how Anras had also foreseen no interference from the mechanicus or their bionics-obsessed cousins, but a loud crash stopped him.

In the center of the room, a dreadnought in rat-fur gray grappled with a hulking daemoniac figure, batlike wings spread out wide and his midnight power armor barely doing anything more than adorning his upper chest.

“It would seem that Gargahl is in need of help. Again.” Anras said, his voice dripping with smug glee.

“Leave it to me,” Pyotr replied, not noticing the hollowness in his own voice or the way Tzimiti pawed at the ground in anticipation. He flicked the reins and they charged the entombed marine.

As they drew near, Tzimiti leapt into the air, colliding with the dreadnought’s armor, the helstalker’s limbs slicing into the metal to find purchase. It scrambled up onto the dreadnought’s shoulders, letting out a torrent from its baleflamer as Pyotr revved his chainglaive and began to carve himself an opening.

“What is this?” Gargahl wheezed, arms still locked with that of the dreadnought’s. The daemon prince had clearly suffered punishment, but he bore it with an infuriating level of tenacity. Just as he always did. “This is my glory to be had, brother!”

Pyotr was too focused on his task to respond. He continued cutting away at the dreadnought’s armor, made soft by Tzimiti’s daemoniac flames. Once satisfied, he gripped hold of the layer of metal and pulled it back, muscles straining, to reveal the inner-workings beneath.

Tzimiti eagerly ceased its torrent and extended its neck forward, demonic flesh and mandibles revealing themselves as it latched on and began injecting its techno-virus into the circuitry of the dreadnought.

The mighty war machine spasmed like a man who's veins had been lit aflame and frantically pulled itself from Gargahl, spinning around in desperation to knock Pyotr free. They remained steadfastly attached, Tzimiti pulsating as it feasted, the virus within flaying the machine spirit. It and the entombed marine cried out in pain and horror. And Pyotr could *taste* it.

Finally, he mouthed—or perhaps said aloud—as he allowed himself a single moment of divine pleasure. This is why he fought, why he lived. The fear of men and things of flesh were meek and pointless. There was no satisfaction there, terror came easy to them, it was a primal part of who they were, etched into their souls, no more satisfying than watching a babe breathe for the first time, instinctive. But machines? They were not meant to feel fear, they were not meant to know pain. That's what made it so beautiful when Pyotr managed to instill that condition upon them and reap the rewards of his challenge. To make the soul of artifice cover before him was to be a god.

Pyotr was shaken from his reverie as the dreadnought stumbled up against the nearest wall of the chamber and attempted to slam its back into it, squashing Pyotr in the process. He pulled on Tzimiti's reins, who dislodged itself begrudgingly and scrambled onto the dreadnought's chest, hissing in annoyance. Pyotr rose and brought his faceplate close to the sarcophagus housed into the machine and hoped the marine within could see him. He almost thought he could hear its howls of agony.

"Thank you," he said. "For the gift of your misery."

Pyotr raised his chainglaive and drove it into the sarcophagus before the dreadnought could recover. It ate into the ceramite, the machine seizing and slowing in response to the virus and its partially-eaten spirit. The housing gave way and Pyotr's blade dug into something soft. Preservation fluids poured out from the fissure Pyotr created and the dreadnought collapsed with a resounding thud that shook Pyotr's eyes in their sockets.

As the thing fell still, Pyotr breathed heavily, still feeling the euphoric waves washing over him. Once clarity returned, he found that Tzimiti had once again sunken its mandibles into the metallic flesh and was feeding. Pyotr could hear the spirit begging for mercy.

The sound of wings accompanied by a putrid stench filled the air. Pyotr turned to see the chiropteran visage of Gargahl glowering at him in disapproval.

"The kill was mine to be had, brother," Gargahl said, his voice coming out in ragged gasps. The daemon prince's skin was bloated and discolored like that of a corpse, blisters and pustules marred the skin like a tapestry, and a blanket of flies nested upon his back and shoulders in a fecund colony of filth.

"From my vantage it appeared to be the other way around."

Gargahl snarled and raked his talons along the ground. Pyotr didn't flinch. The daemon thought himself the leader of the warband—and many agreed. He did not like Pyotr's insubordination.

“Look around, Gargahl,” Pyotr sneered. “We are *losing*. Our brothers lay dead on the floor at the hands of enemies that outnumber and outgun us. We cannot be distracted by petty feuds. We’ve already lost what we’ve come for.”

The prince’s lips split into a jagged grin. “And what makes you say that, Pyotr?”

Pyotr’s eyes narrowed. “What are you hiding, brother?”

Gargahl let out a shaky, wet cough of a laugh and retrieved the hellish blade that he had dropped in the tussle with the dreadnought. “Plans within plans, brother. Plans within plans.”

You say this as if you have the intellect to come up with them, Pyotr thought, frowning at his corrupted brother.

“We need to evacuate, Gargahl,” he said. “The casualties are not worth...” Pyotr trailed off, for something caught his eye. The very thing he’d come here for, in fact.

In the midst of the battle, he saw a marine adorned in gray ceramite, servo-arms and mechadendrites sprouting from his back and whirring in the air around him. An orange primate with blue oculars rode upon his shoulders, frantically skittering from side to side, making minute repairs and adjustments to the marine’s armor and bionics as the wearer swung his power axe, decapitating one of Pyotr’s brothers with ease. He knew this marine. Oh, how he knew him well.

Lavitor Fabrinus. Son of Manus, chapter master of the Ferric Sentries, and the machine god’s greatest fool.

A snarl formed on Pyotr’s lips and a growl rose from his throat to such a degree that it shook Tzimiti from its feast. The lord discordant rose his chainglaive and pointed it directly at the tech marine.

“LAVITOR!” Pyotr bellowed. “*I have come for you!*”

The chapter master looked over towards Pyotr, his gaze also growing singularly focused. He raised his axe and pointed it at Pyotr. “Heretic!” he roared. “Come and meet your fate!”

With pleasure. Pyotr snapped Tzimiti into movement, plowing past other marines and mechanicus swine in favor of his true prey. Chainglaive teeth scattered throughout the air as it met Lavitor’s ommissian axe. Two sets of red eye lenses stared into each other, both simmering with a hatred that could make the Warp boil.

“Still as profane as the last time we clashed,” Lavitor Fabrinus said. His servo-arms lashed out, but Pyotr parried with his own mechadendrite. The chapter master had more, but Pyotr was swifter. He still didn’t welcome the additional strain.

“Look at you,” the marine continued. “A stain upon the Machine God’s chromium apparatus. A flake of rust on the Ommissiah’s grand mechanism. I will remove you and all echos of your name from the galaxy. I will make you pure through the holy crucible of death. There will be no more—”

Pyotr kicked him in the faceplate. The Ferric Sentry staggered back, two of his mechadendrites slamming into the ground to stabilize him. The primate on his shoulder howled and bared its fangs. “This is a duel, not theatre, Lavitor. Save your trite monologues for someone who cares.”

A gout of daemon fire engulfed Lavitor Fabrinus. The marine raised an oversized fist and forearm to protect himself as he weathered the flames. Blind, he was unable to defend himself from the spiked tail that pierced the armor of his torso and sunk into the flesh beneath. Tzimiti frothed with jubilation as the chapter master grunted.

The tail continued to jab and drive further into the wound, but as Tzimiti's flames died, Lavitor snapped the appendage away with a backhanded strike and brought a grav-pistol to bear at Pyotr. The Night Lord hissed as the pistol fired and he was forced to bring his arm up to protect his helm. The blast hit and Pyotr's arm erupted into agony and splintered bones as the ceramite of his vambrace crushed inward on his limb. When Pyotr lowered his arm, he was met with the sight of an orange-furred blur flying through the air before landing on Tzimiti and began to wreak havoc. The xenos primate scurried from plating to plating, making calculated strikes with its multitool that caused the helstalker to tremble and shake before screeching out. Tzimiti began to buck in desperation to rid itself of the creature. Pyotr gripped tight, barely keeping himself from being flung from the throne. He grappled the annoying beast with his mechadendrite arm and hurled it across the room. He then took aim with his bolt pistol and let out a series of shots as it soared through the air. The primate should have been torn to several, bloody chunks, but, instead, it simply vanished in a warping of distorted air.

I hate displacer fields, Pyotr thought. He glanced down and took analysis of Tzimiti. The damage was severe for such a quick attack. The helstalker was reacting lethargically now and several of its limbs were dragging along the ground, unresponsive. Pyotr glared up at Fabrinus. "I am going to flay that monkey alive and feed it to the raptors."

The chapter master had no words as he took a defensive stance with his power axe. Good, that meant the fool *could* learn when to shut up.

Pyotr leapt from the daemon engine's back, readying his chainglaive. Combat narcotics flooded his system, turning the consumptive torment of his wounded arm into a mere dull throb. Blood trickled from the cracked ceramite as Pyotr and Fabrinus circled each other, both sets of power armor humming with energy and desire. Destruction and warfare flared around them, but, in that moment, all was quiet. It was just the two of them and nothing else.

Lavitor made the first move, charging in with his omnissian weapon. Pyotr carefully stepped back and swung with his chainglaive, maintaining his superior reach. The Ferric Sentry battered it aside with the face of his axe, eliciting a grimace from Pyotr as the shock of the blow lanced up his arm painfully. A part of him whispered that he should be reveling in that pain, for pain was the greatest reminder of life. The rest of him wished that fragment would return to the Warp in which it came.

The axe came down towards Pyotr's helm and the Night Lord ducked closer into Fabrinus's reach. He dropped the chainglaive and drew his bolt pistol. Pyotr shoved the barrel into the fractured plating of the chapter master's torso and emptied the weapon's reserves. Ceramite fragments and bloody chunks exploded out from the wound and Fabrinus only remained on his feet through the aid of his servo-arms yet again.

“How does it feel, Lavitor?” Pyotr hissed. He could hear pained wheezing from his enemy’s helm. “I hope it hurts.” Pyotr chuckled and brought his helm up to look into the eyes of his prey, to see the torment within them. He hoped to gain some form of pleasure from that gaze, from making his enemy beg—but knew it was unlikely.

Instead he saw the twin-barrels of a shotgun and the orange fur of its wielder.

Disorientation exploded across Pyotr’s mind before the sound of the weapon did. The world around him spun and his face grew molten with torturous lances of pain. Pyotr staggered back, bringing a hand up to his helm in an attempt to steady his mind. He barely had enough time to make sense of the blurred image of Lavitor Fabrinus charging him before the marine’s bulk slammed into him, sending him to the ground.

Pyotr felt his face plate crash into the metal floor over and over again, bringing further disorientation and pain until he could no longer remember how many times it had occurred. Another moment later, he was grabbed by the collar of his chestplate and pulled into the air. He tried to resist, but his body could not make sense of the orders that Pyotr was giving it.

“You do not deserve this blessing!” Pyotr’s world became suffering incarnate as he felt a sickening tear in his back—the feeling of his mechadendrite being ripped free. “You do not deserve this armor!” Lavitor continued, this time bringing his fist into Pyotr’s chest-piece repeatedly until Pyotr felt the armor denting inward, making it all but impossible to breathe. “You do not deserve this *life!*” Pyotr felt his body clang back onto the floor. He found himself staring up at the ceiling. Lavitor Fabrinus loomed in his vision, axe raised over his head in an executioner’s stance of absolution.

Pyotr wasn’t sure how long he continued to look upwards. Only that, at some point, the chapter master of the Ferric Sentries was no longer there, prepared to deliver his fatal strike. Pyotr listened to the world around him, hearing the sounds of battle and tried to make sense of them. His brothers were dying, they must have been. The noise and commotion had escalated, reinforcements from the mechanicus and Ferric Sentries must have arrived to finalize the Night Lord’s defeat. Their extinction. Only... why did Pyotr hear so much revving? It was like a chorus of chain weaponry had filled the chamber and were now singing to a rapt audience.

It didn’t matter. Pyotr could hardly get air into his lungs now, the edges of his vision growing gray and dull. He guessed that he only had moments left now. He considered making peace, but then questioned that decision. Peace with what? There were no gods he could rely upon to deliver him, no brothers to remember him with glory, no father to support and cherish him. Just disappointment and a wasted life.

A figure crouched over Pyotr. It was not Lavitor Fabrinus.

The newcomer wore crimson armor, its head blocking out the light apart from the narrow gap between its helm’s dual-prongs. Pyotr knew this marine too, though his oxygen-starved brain could not access the information. Who...?

“You are lucky, cousin,” Zasharr said in a ragged, coarse voice. “It would seem you have cheated death once again.”

Chapter II: Rain So Cold

A child stood upon the balcony of a spire, overlooking City's Edge as the rain fell around him—fell through him. He shivered and trembled as he grasped the railing and watched the distant lights of the sunless world's hive. The boy was normally entranced by the downpours that frequented Nostramo, and tonight he relied upon that. He enjoyed the way the falling lances bit into his nerves and froze his skin. The sensation heightened his awareness, forced him to live in the real world, urged him to seek shelter, to remain alive. They also helped mask his tears.

The child studied the long drop down from his family's lofty tower and wondered what it would feel like to let go. The brief experience of freedom and untethered flight—something new and never felt before by the boy—before nothingness. Would it hurt when he landed? The boy wasn't sure. Was that a bad thing? The child didn't think so. The other children whispered and told stories that the Night Haunter had never actually left the world, only stopped his nightly romps to see what the people would do before punishing them for falling back into their old ways. They said these things to scare one another. And it had worked on all nights except this one for the boy. On this night, he found himself wishing that the stories had been true.

The sound of heels clicking against the stone floor in the same rhythm as the rainfall came from behind the boy. Soon, he felt a presence standing behind him.

"Pyotr," a woman's voice said.

"Yes, mother?" he whispered.

"You saw, didn't you?"

"Yes, mother."

Pyotr closed his eyes, and immediately regretted it. For in that darkness he saw them. Three men, bound to their chairs, arms having been positioned to catch their own heads as they were cut free of their bodies.

"Why?" Pyotr asked, his voice barely audible over the rain.

"Hm?"

"Why did you do that to those men?"

Pyotr's mother sighed. "Oh, Pyotr. If only I had known your tutor would release you early tonight. I would not have laid this curse upon you." A chill gust of wind forced the boy's jaw to begin chattering. "You're a smart boy, aren't you, my dear?"

Pyotr nodded.

"Then you've surely noticed that our family does not... work like the people down below do. We are not slaves to jobs and masters. We *are* the masters."

He nodded again.

"And, sometimes, to maintain our station, we must do things that are... unpleasant. Does that make sense?"

The child nodded for a third time, but his shoulders began to convulse as his sobs escalated in strength.

“Oh, my poor boy.” Pyotr felt fingers begin to caress the wet strands of his hair and smooth out the knots and furls within them. Then their grip tightened as his face was smashed against the railing of the balcony. Pain blossomed from his mouth and Pyotr gasped in shock and agony. The metallic taste of blood spread across his tongue.

“Tell me, child, which hurts more? The memories of the past or the pain of the now?” her tone was no less compassionate and maternal despite the words she spoke and actions she’d done.

“T-the pain!” Pyotr mumbled, touching his mouth. His lip was horribly split and one of his teeth had been chipped and cracked. He turned to face his mother in horror, but could only see her tall, imperious silhouette in the darkness, her face shadowed by eternal nightfall.

“Remember this lesson, Pyotr. You’re in the family business now—and I will not tolerate weakness.”

Without waiting for a response, Pyotr’s mother turned on her heels and clicked her way back inside, leaving her son shivering and alone out in the rain.

Pyotr grabbed the vambrace of the man crouched over him as he began to cut away at the Night Lord’s ruined armor with the instruments upon his Narthecium gauntlet.

“Wh... what are you doing?” Pyotr wheezed. Blood had begun to fill his throat and trickle out the corner of his mouth. His body convulsed against his will.

“Your armor is badly damaged and forcing your lungs to collapse. I am removing your chest piece so that you may breathe freely,” the mad apothecary said, battering Pyotr’s hand out of the way.

“No,” Pyotr whispered. “Stop.” He weakly tried to grab at the heretic’s armor again, but was rebuffed once more with additional force.

“No, cousin,” a rumbling came from deep within the apothecary’s throat. “We can’t be having that. You’re not done yet.”

Pyotr’s spine abruptly arched so violently that he thought it would snap. Pain flooded him in a thousand needling white stabs and all went black again.

The hunter prowled through the darkness, the servos of his armor joints whirring like that of a growling predator. The room he stood in was a museum of the past. An exhibit of a fallen empire. The hunter remembered this place—though not fondly—but it seemed that it wanted itself to become a memory more than the hunter did.

Dust particles floated in the air and fine sheets of the powder coated nearly every surface of the lodging. Once fine silk curtains now hung as tattered rags coated in grime. Cracks had begun to form on the walls, their sterling pearlescence now a sooty beige. Furniture and tables had collapsed from havoc wrought by vermin. The hunter passed by a fallen portrait as he continued on his way. He did not bother to look at it, he knew what he would see: A lie.

“*Preysight*,” the hunter said. His retinal display changed, becoming bathed in the blue hues of absent heat signatures. A single red shape scurried along the floor out of the hunter’s

way. He looked deeper into the dead kingdom, ignoring the cobwebs and broken glass that became sand once more under the pressure of his bootfalls.

Deeper within he saw a new signature—pale yellow and huddled on a chair in the den that was three rooms down the hall. The hunter’s quarry was weak, barely alive. Good. He continued on his way towards it, pushing on the door without hurry. He allowed it to slowly creak open, revealing himself standing at the threshold, red eye lenses glinting in the darkness, skull-painted faceplate with its sweeping bat wings serving as an omen of what was to come.

The hunter saw his prey sitting before an empty fireplace, an ancient, moth-eaten quilt wrapped around its shoulders. She was much older than the last time the hunter had seen her. All that authoritative regality was gone. Now, she was just an old woman, staring out onto the balcony as the rain fell. She eventually looked at him, and the hunter heard no change in her heartbeat, did not smell the musk of fear-sweat. The woman was not scared, only tired.

“I,” the hunter began, “have come for—”

“Take that thing off,” the old woman sighed.

The hunter did not move. The old woman fixed him with a scowl that she had reserved only for when her child refused to finish his dinner—or hesitated too long to kill a man that had not paid off his debts.

“I want to see my son’s face before he kills me.” Her expression grew weary again. “Let me see your face, Pyotr. Please.”

Pyotr did nothing for a long moment. Then the sound of venting air filled the room as he removed his helm.

“Come closer,” she said. Pyotr entered the room and stepped up to the chair. The old woman reached up, as if to caress his cheek, but seemed to realize he was far too tall for such a gesture and laid her hand on his chest piece instead. “Look at you. Powerful and strong, just like I always wanted for you.”

Pyotr said nothing.

“How is it that you’re here?” the old woman asked.

“I petitioned for this opportunity. For this desire. My father granted it”

“The desire to kill your mother?”

“I have no mother.”

The old woman pulled her hand away, but her expression remained unchanged. “I see. Then why are you doing this?”

“You are a criminal. It is what you deserve.”

The woman leaned her head back in her chair and closed her eyes. “Our enterprise fell years ago, Pyotr. There are dozens, *hundreds* of gangs and syndicates on this world for you to hunt down and purge. A single old woman will make no difference.”

Pyotr remained silent at first. He turned his head and looked out the windowed doors to the balcony that he spent so many nights standing on, overlooking the city. The railing was still dented with teeth marks.

“I don’t care,” he rasped.

The woman scoffed and opened her eyes. “You would not be what you are if it were not for me. Do you think they let the sons of whores and killers be Astartes?”

“Yes,” Pyotr drawled, slowly turning his attention back to the feeble woman in her rotten throne. “They do.”

“I gave you *everything* and this is how you repay me?”

Pyotr snarled and gripped the top of the chair, the wood cracking under his grip as he leaned his face close to the woman’s. “I did not want everything. I wanted more.”

Reality seemed to flutter for a moment, skipping a beat, like a dying man’s heart. Something felt wrong, off, misplaced. The dull shapes and muted colors around Pyotr became half a shade off, as if the scene were replicated by a master counterfeit who had a fetish for vibrancy. Before Pyotr could piece together why this was, the woman met his gaze.

“*And so you will have it, child,*” the woman said in a voice that was not her own.

No, Pyotr thought. *No, this is wrong.*

The old crone in the seat began to change, growing and becoming something otherworldly, profane in a beauty that exceeded all metrics of perfection. Pyotr stumbled back and averted his gaze before it was too late.

“*Such a deep thirst within you, my chosen. You will have more and more still, just as you wish.*”

“No,” Pyotr gasped. “You twist my words, you filth.” He felt... afraid. It was a sensation Pyotr thought impossible for his kind, but here, in the presence of something he dared not even think the name of, he felt it well and true.

Just as soon as he felt the emotion, it was snuffed out like a candle. Alongside everything else within him.

Pyotr continued to whisper his disbelief as he stumbled through the den and out onto the balcony, the doors exploding out of their frames as Pyotr burst through them. He fell to his knees in the darkness and breathed heavily as he felt... nothing.

“No...” he said again with futility. Rain so cold should have burned his skin—electrified his nerves and spread rime across his skull. Instead, it was just wet.

The presence followed Pyotr and approached him on the stones. “*Hmmm.*”

Suddenly something flared to life again inside of Pyotr. Desperate, he reached for it and clung to it as a lifeline. He regretted it immediately.

Grief. So much grief and *guilt* flooded through him, seeping into his veins like poison, spider-webbing across and restricting his chest like a vice. Pyotr gasped. All the things he’d done, all the horrors he committed, they hit him like a bolter round to the skull. Normally these feelings were practically nonexistent in his waking life, but, without the companionship of any other sensation, mere droplets became oceans.

“Stop it!” Pyotr screamed. “Release me from your game!”

“*Oh, child,*” the thing said. “*I am not your enemy. I can save you from this.*”

Pyotr continued to roar into the night. He waited for the pain to grow familiar, bearable, but it did not. It kept building and warping upon itself, becoming new flavors of agony that he

could never quite adapt to. He pressed his forehead to the stone, slammed his fist onto the balcony floor until the ceramite cracked, he begged... he even begged for his claw to come and help him. But nothing. Nothing changed. It didn't become any easier.

The skulls hanging from his waist suddenly felt so much heavier. The screams from the past haunted him and filled his eardrums without mercy. A mother, crying out for the baby that Pyotr crushed in his hands in front of her. A soldier, pleading to just be killed already as the skin was peeled from his face centimeter by centimeter. A woman in the bowels of a ship trying in vain to stuff her own entrails back into her body as Pyotr watched, blade dripping with her blood. And more. So, so many more.

"Let me help you so that you can help yourself," it said. Pyotr felt a taloned hand begin to stroke his hair and caress his cheek. The feeling was warm and gentle—as were the rivers of blood that were left behind by the gesture. *"You still have so much to learn, so much room yet to grow. I need you to hollow yourself out so that I may fill the vacancy with something wonderful. Then, you will be perfect."*

Pyotr tried to shake his head in defiance, but he was too numb. Numb of everything except the guilt that he should not have felt—that was anathema to his being and purpose. He wanted it gone. He wanted it gone so, so *badly*.

"Give it to me, child. Let me have these sensations and you will never have to feel them again. Never have to deal with the pain caused by them. Not until you're ready."

The wretched thing that should have been Pyotr Kravis of the VIIIth Legion squeezed his eyes shut and bit down on his lip until the flesh split and blood pooled beneath him onto the stones. A better marine would have endured, would have fought back. But Pyotr was weak. He knew he always had been.

"Take it," he croaked.

"Good, child. Very good." He could hear the presence smiling at his defeat. At his further slide into degeneracy.

The pain vanished. Pyotr stood up and felt only numbness once again, but that was preferable over the alternative. The guilt was gone and the world was a little bit duller for it.

Pyotr awoke in an apothecarion, his memories blurred and his soul shriveled. Several other figures lay amongst the operating tables around him. Some in midnight clad, others in mechanical gray. A man in crimson armor, wires and cabling engulfing his scalp and temples quietly inspected one of the marines. He glanced Pyotr's way as he began to stir.

"The marked of Slananeth awakens," Zasharr said.

"Where am I?" Pyotr said, ignoring the comment.

"The *Savory Wound*." A twinge of annoyance bit into the berzerker surgeon's words.

"Mm. Why not your ship?"

Zasharr made an incision along his subject's throat. The cut was delicate and precise, the patient would not bleed out for a considerable period of time. "I intended for it, but you were

restless. You screamed out for your... *claw* in your unconscious state and they refused to let me take you from your warband. I had to make do with lesser facilities.”

Pyotr let the silence hang in the air for some time.

“One of them, the loud one, watched over you until he was forced elsewhere. One would suspect that your brothers don’t trust me despite all I’ve done for you in the past.”

Pyotr grunted. “Should they?”

Zasharr stabbed at the throat of his patient. The marine spasmed once then fell still. “I would hope so.”

Pyotr glanced around the room once again, noting the number of Night Lords in comparison to the Ferric Sentries collected. There were less, but not by much. “Why?” he asked.

“Mm?”

“Why am I never like them? Why am I not an experiment for your amusement?”

“There are many presumptions within that statement,” Zasharr said, beginning the process of harvesting his dead patient’s geneseed. “None of this is for my *amusement*. Mm, no, I leave such matters to you Sons of Curze. And who is to say that you’re *not* an experiment?”

Pyotr rose to his feet, his body felt stiff and weak, the port on his back intended for his now-missing mechadendrite throbbed with the pain of absence. He stepped across the room to meet his cousin on the opposite side of the operating table. The surgeon was inspecting the marine’s organs and augmetics with a critical eye. “Speak plainly with me, Zasharr.”

The berzerker surgeon let out a rumbling grunt, like cascading boulders. “I do not subject you to this because you are not like your ilk. You do not *draw out* the pain, even with your curse. As far as your legion goes, you are honorable. Your force is always balanced, never excessive. That is deserving of my respect... So long as you maintain a grip upon yourself.” He gave Pyotr a pointed glare. The Night Lord saw no reason as to provide additional context as to why he behaved as he did.

It simply doesn’t matter how they die. It all feels the same, he thought, then looked away. The room was dark beyond the single lamp pack that Zasharr worked by the light of. He would assume Pyotr’s black eyes of Nostramo simply could not handle the glare.

“What occurred during my absence?”

Zasharr scoffed. “You mean your comatose state wrought on by yet another duel with that iron whore?”

Pyotr said nothing.

“You were unconscious for two weeks, your armor was damaged beyond repair according to the artificers, a total of thirteen members of your warband have been confirmed dead, and...” There was a pregnant pause. “And the *Gorgon’s Manacles* is still in pursuit of us through the void.”

Pyotr turned back to face the warlord of the Carnage Stitchers. “What of your ship? We would be able to outmaneuver and overpower them with the aid of the *Heart of the Warp*.”

Zasharr did not look at Pyotr, seemingly now more focused on the careful sanitation of his tools. “My vessel... did not survive. It was destroyed shortly after I was forced to escort you here.”

The corner of Pyotr’s lip twitched upwards. “That’s the fifth ship this decade, cousin. You do not have a good record for these sorts of things.”

Zasharr’s nostrils flared and he glared at Pyotr. “Careful, cousin. I am currently still your physician and the nails are beginning to bite.”

Pyotr stifled a chuckle and changed the topic. “What of my daemon engine?”

“The unholy machine lives, though it killed three serfs that tried to conduct repairs on it. It would seem it refuses to see anyone but you.”

Pyotr gave a grunt of acknowledgement. “Anything else?”

Medical servitors were instructed to harvest the bionics and burn the corpse of the space marine before Zasharr turned to answer. “Plenty, but it would be better if you hear it from your own legion.”

“Then we are done here.”

“Wait. Your servo-arm is still in need of replacement. I will need to continue minor surgeries on the surrounding flesh before a tech adept is able to—”

“Leave it,” Pyotr growled. Zasharr looked at him with interest, but said nothing of the request. “Is there anything else?”

“Medically? Nothing that needs my intervention.”

“Good.” Pyotr stepped towards the exit, but paused near the doorway, glancing at one of the Ferric Sentries lying on the table. “What do you plan to do with them?”

Zasharr followed his gaze. “Mm. Whatever I find... amusing at the time.” The sound of collapsing temples filled the berzerker surgeon’s throat.

“Will you need this one’s armor?”

“No.”

Pyotr turned to one of the servitors. “Have this set sent to the artificers and prepared on my behalf.”

“Compliance,” the servitor said.

Pyotr nodded and made to leave the room.

“Pyotr,” Zasharr said, stopping him. The Night Lord glanced over his shoulder. The surgeon looked at him with a meaningful expression. “You still have a part to play in the long war. That is also why I continue to save you.”

Pyotr sighed and turned away from his cousin as he walked out of the apothecarion. “The only part I play in anything, Zasharr, is the fool.”

Chapter III: The Man That You Are

Pyotr navigated the gloom-shrouded arteries of the *Savory Wound*, ignoring the sidelong looks cast his way by his brothers and the groveling done by the slaves as he made his way to his chambers. Upon arrival, he found someone waiting for him.

Retrigan leaned up against the wall in his deep blue ceramite, unpowered lightning claws sliding in and out of their sheathes with hisses of excitement. As Pyotr entered his quarters, his brother's helm lifted and red eyes met black.

Snk! Ssshk. Snk! Ssshk. Snk! Ssshk.

"You are awake," Retrigan said.

"And you are trying too hard to be dramatic," Pyotr replied without mirth.

Retrigan let out a dissatisfied hum. *Snk! Ssshk.*

"Gyrthemar did not think you would pull through this time."

"I did."

"I see that."

Snk! Ssshk. Snk! Ssshk. Snk! Ssshk.

Pyotr turned his eyes away from his brother, but his spartan quarters gave little excuse for him to pretend he was more interested in something other than the conversation at hand.

"What do you want, Retrigan?" he asked with more weariness than he intended.

"An explanation."

"I did not realize I *owed* you one for *anything* I decide to do."

Snk! Retrigan pushed off the wall and marched towards Pyotr, his skull-painted helm with its fanged grill brought mere millimeters from Pyotr's own face.

"That's just the problem, isn't it, brother? You never owe *anyone* an explanation for *anything*, do you?" he spat.

"No."

Retrigan growled. "You almost died."

"I do that frequently."

"You almost died due to idiocy and pride!"

"Death is nothing compared to—"

"I swear by the Warp, Pyotr, if the next word out of your mouth is 'vindication,' I will gut you where you stand."

Pyotr said nothing and the two brothers stared at one another in silence for several minutes. Eventually, Retrigan's tense posture diminished and he once again sheathed his claws with a *Sshk* and reclaimed his position by the wall.

"Do you know why Sixth Claw still has no sergeant, brother?" Retrigan asked.

"No," Pyotr admitted.

"It is because we all know, either consciously or not, that the position is meant for you. That it was always meant for you the moment that Valter fell and his geneseed was harvested."

Pyotr allowed his gaze to meet his brother's yet again. "Why?"

“It doesn’t matter why,” Retrigan sighed, shaking his head. “It only matters that its true. It only matters that you were a man that we could follow. But now... Now you’re a man who abandons his brothers in the name of petty vengeance.”

“Lavitor Fabrinus’s life is mine by *right*,” Pyotr snarled.

“For reasons you still refuse to tell anyone!” Retrigan’s calm facade sloughed away like a scab, revealing the festering anger beneath once more. “And did you ever consider that, perhaps, your claw, your *brothers* could have *aided* you in your quest?”

Pyotr did not answer.

“No, of course you didn’t,” Retrigan let out a harsh, frigid laugh. “And I know why.”

“You know nothing.”

“No?” Retrigan’s vox still crackled with spiteful chuckles. “Then why is it that you used to spend months on end, locked away within the Mechanization Hall, devising new and profane ways to compromise the machines of our enemies, but now you haven’t set foot within it in over a year?” Retrigan pushed off the wall again. “Why is it that you will rarely even leave the *ship* unless you think there is a chance of running into that chapter master?” He took a step towards Pyotr. “Why is it that, in recent encounters, he seems to get the better of you more often than the inverse?” He came upon his brother again, this time with no indication of backing away. “And why is it that you reek of the Warp more and more as the days go by?”

Retrigan leaned his face up against the side of Pyotr’s head. His voxgrill fizzled the sound of a long intake of breath through the nose. If it were not for the fact that Pyotr was not wearing his own armor, he would have struck his brother for such blatant disrespect. Instead, he stood there and waited for Retrigan to hurry up and make his damn point.

“I think,” his brother said into his ear. “It’s because you *envy* the Son of Manus. You want to *be* him, but you’ve realized you can’t. You never will or were going to. And now you’ve given up. Simply going through the motions, waiting to die. You’re not conducting some glorious revenge upon the chapter master. No, what you’re doing is writing the galaxy’s most pathetic suicide note.” Pyotr could hear the sneer in Retrigan’s voice.

“Are you finished yet?” Pyotr said, glaring at his brother.

“Almost. There’s just something I need to see with my own eyes.”

Leather rustled as Retrigan brushed aside his cloak of stitched flesh. Pyotr had no intention of giving him the satisfaction of focusing on the object he procured. But then he heard it. The quivering, trembling sound of a motive force cowering at Pyotr’s presence. The lord discordant’s mouth watered and his eyes fell upon the handheld auspex device in his brother’s hand.

A fist then slammed into the side of Pyotr’s face, snapping his head to the side—if it were not for his reinforced skull and bone structure, the blow would have been fatal. He spat acidic blood onto the floor of his chambers, the metal beginning to sizzle where the fluid landed.

“I cannot blame you for wanting to die, brother.” Retrigan’s compassionless eyes looked upon Pyotr. “The man that you were was a man that I could follow. The man that you are, though? He’s nothing but an animal. And animals are put down when they are no longer useful.”

The lightning claws slid out from their housings once again. The two Night Lords looked to each other for a time as the air grew abuzz with cold anticipation. Eventually, though, Retrigan simply scoffed and shoved past Pyotr to leave the room.

“A waste of my time...”

Pyotr intended to wait in his chambers until his new armor was ready for him. Instead, he found himself entering the ship’s Mechanization Hall, largely out of spite.

The cavernous room was much as Pyotr had remembered it. Partially deconstructed machines and dozens of hololithic displays of half-finished techno-viruses crowded the central workstations that belonged to Pyotr. He tried to muster up even a fraction of the passion he once held for his projects, but was unsuccessful. Alternatively, he found himself steeling his nerves against the desire to feed upon the fear and pain of captive machine spirits surrounding him. It was more difficult than he cared to admit. He felt like a starving man at a feast, forcing himself to not even taste a morsel of the lavish meals out on display.

Tech adepts flitted about on the outer edges of the chamber, seeing to their own assignments and rituals. Once, they had cowered before Pyotr, his mere presence bringing their double-souls to a petrified stupor. Now, they only bowed to him in deference and supplication as they passed by. Pyotr couldn’t find the energy to be annoyed by that, either.

In the farthest, darkest reaches of the chamber, a pile of the bones and skulls of the unfortunate slaves that had been meticulously curated into the shape of a nest sat. Each piece of carrion had been evaluated and chosen from a larger sample size until a perfect construct had been made by the daemon engine that now morosely laid within it, its front facing the corner away from the main chamber. Tzimiti’s hull thrummed and pulsed in a manner that Pyotr could imagine was a series of lamentable sighs. The lord discordant simply stood there with his arms crossed. His helstalker would have sensed his presence the moment that he drew near enough—Tzimiti was being intentionally dramatic.

Once the foul machine realized it would not receive the attention or sympathy it wanted, it lifted its head and craned its neck to look at Pyotr, beady red eyes staring at him while its maw dripped with corrosive fluids.

“I hear you killed three slaves that were seeking to mend your wounds,” Pyotr said. The tech adepts ignored him. They were used to their lord speaking to his mount.

Tzimiti let out a shrill wail, mucus flying forward off its mandibles.

“I did not say that I blamed you, nor that I cared,” Pyotr responded, motioning for one of the adepts to bring him his tools. Tzimiti responded by shuffling its form to face him in its nest. The daemon engine’s chassis strained under the effort, several sections of circuitry under the plating misfiring and sparking as three of its limbs dragged along the ground without any sign of operative motor function. Pyotr frowned, noting that he’d have to make good on the promise he made in regards to the one that did this.

“Master,” an adept said in a tinny voice upon delivering his instruments. Pyotr saw no need to respond, but bristled with annoyance when the robed figure did not move.

“What is it you want?” Pyotr asked the woman. He knew her name. Curie, he believed it was.

“I see you no longer possess your blessing, master,” she said. There was no inference or implication in the words. Simply an observation.

Pyotr grunted as he selected his tools and began to work on Tzimiti’s repairs. The helstalker laid down and accepted the procedure without issue. Pyotr did not miss the generous birth that the priest gave the entity.

“This is unfortunate.” The stress and inflections of that statement were made on the wrong syllables. Curie did not actually believe or care about Pyotr’s “misfortune,” she only used such phrases to attempt to sound more humane. Why she bothered to do so in the face of something beyond human, Pyotr was unsure.

“A replacement will be commissioned for my lord at once.”

“No,” Pyotr said.

An erratic buzz came from Curie’s throat and her oculars shifted between several different shades of red, purple, and green.

“Elaborate,” she said. “Please.”

“No,” Pyotr repeated and continued to work.

Curie stood there for several long seconds, her inner mechanisms whirring. “I have processed this request and have found no logic in it with the current data provided. Perhaps, if my master were to—”

“Leave me,” Pyotr growled.

The adept did not move, calculating if a direct order or her own curiosity took greater precedence. The results were skewed by the hungry stare of Tzimiti and Curie spun on her heels and walked away, binharic spilling out from her vocalizers in an annoyed buzz.

Pyotr raised his head. “Wait.”

She stopped.

“Do you hate me, tech priest?”

There was a momentary pause of logical processing from Curie before she finally answered. “Yes. Very much so.”

“Good, that’s good.” Pyotr said softly.

“Would you like an itemized list of the profane behaviors that have resulted in this status, my master?” Again, there was no emotion or intent behind those words. She truly meant what she said.

“No. That’s quite all right.”

Curie remained where she was for several moments, waiting for a dismissal. When none came she turned and continued on her way.

Pyotr was then left to blessed silence as he worked away on his helstalker. The hours trickled by and he was permitted to discard recent thoughts from his mind as he found purpose and balance in the task before him. He knew that out in the void, a cruiser chased after them like a predator pouncing after its prey, but, for now, that problem was intangible and ethereal in

comparison to the true and present issue of metal and oil and circuitry and daemonic vitae. Pyotr recognized that the process took far longer than it would have in the past, both due to his missing mechadendrite and... other reasons, but rather than finding frustration in the lack of efficiency, he found himself thankful for it, as it gave him a further excuse to retreat from the world.

At least, until he heard the sounds of powerful boots approaching him from behind.

The power armor that the newcomer wore was nothing like the sets he and his brothers typically adorned themselves in. Put simply, it was a work of art. Pyotr could not only hear, but *feel* the majesty in those bootfalls, the authoritative humming of a greater engine, the creaking and purring of reinforced plating, and the raw energy that ran through the suit's servos like lightning, granting its wielder strength and capacity unlike anything else worn by a standard astartes.

"I thought I would find you here," Zseron of the Atramentar said in a voice that felt as if it were plucked from the very stars.

"What do you want?" Pyotr grimaced.

"Must I want something?"

Pyotr glanced over his shoulder at the marine in his helmless terminator armor. Zseron's head was shaved bare, a network of scars crossing along his scalp. He sported a beard, the white hairs on his chin stark against the umbral shade of the rest of the facial hair upon his lip and cheeks. His armor was adorned with Nostraman runes that shone with the faint purple glow of the Warp. He held a stave in one hand, skulls dangling from the top and lightly clanking together like a gruesome set of chimes.

"Yes," Pyotr sneered. "It is not our way to just sit and *chat* with one another, brother."

Zseron did not refute Pyotr's claims. Instead, he began to walk along the worktables and quietly inspect Pyotr's abandoned projects. Terminator armor was magnificent and many things, graceful not being one of them. Zseron made it look as if it were anyway.

"You're bitter after what happened at Exodus Station," he eventually said.

"We had too much faith in Anras and his false vision."

Zseron gave him a suspicious glance. "Is that so?"

"Mm." Pyotr sneered. "He foresaw no intervention from the Imperium and that we would be successful. Neither were true."

"I see," the sorcerer said slowly and returned to standing beside Pyotr, watching him make his final adjustments to Tzimiti's chassis. He intended to make improvements to the defensibility and circuit security, but he sensed he would have to make time for that later.

"Would you like to know why I and the other Atramentar of the Fifty-first Company have yet to align ourselves completely to its leader?"

"Which one?" Pyotr scoffed.

"Exactly," Zseron replied and Pyotr noted the subtle and mischievous smile on his lips.

"The warband is too busy squabbling over who is actually in charge."

"And here I thought the Atramentar only followed leaders they respected. Not children."

Zseron ignored the comment and continued on. "Our brothers are split. Some respect the power and strength of Gargahl while others believe in the tradition and... purity that Anras represents. There are even more still that are undecided." He chose his words carefully, chewing on them before spitting them out onto Pyotr's lap for him to clean up. "We're devouring ourselves from the inside, Pyotr. If we do not resolve the issue of leadership soon, at best we'll find ourselves too fractured and diluted to fend for ourselves against the Sons of Manus that doggedly chase us."

"And why," Pyotr said, his annoyance finding its way into his tone, "are you telling me this?"

The sorcerer maintained that insufferable smile. "Perhaps I'm trying to change our traditions, brother. Perhaps I'm just trying to chat."

Pyotr snorted in derision and closed the last of Tzimiti's paneling. The helstalker gave its limbs a tentative wiggle, then rose completely to its feet. The overlapping sections of its plate rippled and extended past one another as if the creature were stretching. Then it began to excitedly bound its way throughout the Mechanization Hall, resulting in several terrified and appropriately annoyed tech adepts.

"You're forgetting something, brother," Pyotr said.

"Hm?"

"There is a third faction vying for power." He turned and looked at the Sorcerer of Stars. "You."

"The Atramentar exist to serve, not lead." Zseron shook his head.

"And despite that, the warriors of the First Company have always commanded a certain... gravitas amongst our legion. Like it or not, many of those undecided within our ranks look up to you, the one who speaks on the behalf of your *club*, and would do whatever it is you wished."

The smile slipped from Zseron's lips and his brows furrowed. He had not considered this line of logic before. He did not seem all too fond of it, either.

"I'll leave you to ponder on that, brother," Pyotr spat and moved to leave.

"The mission was not a failure," Zseron said abruptly. Pyotr stopped in his tracks. He looked back and saw Zseron's expression was calm, but serious. "We were successful. I suppose no one else has told you since your recovery."

"Explain. Now."

"The main conflict was a diversion while I and the others of my... 'club,' as you so eloquently put it, recovered the ammunition. We faced only minor opposition and managed to reclaim over seventy percent of their stockpiles before it was time to extract. Anras's vision was not false."

A sneer twitched at the edge of Pyotr's mouth as he turned away, watching as Tzimiti chased after one of the slaves that served in the chamber. The daemon engine would slowly gain on the poor soul, swiping out with its forelimbs once it got close and missing by only a hair, giving the slave time to gain more ground as Tzimiti recovered from the missed strike, only to

begin the game once more and continue its languid pursuit. Once the helstalker grew bored of this, it easily outpaced the human and sunk its mandibles into the slave's soft flesh, forcing them down into its gullet and devouring the creature whole.

"So only I am to carry the burden of failure, it seems."

Zseron mused to himself for a moment, rhythmically tapping his stave against his thigh. His black eyes analyzed Pyotr with a cold calculation to them and he looked as if he wished to speak.

"What is it?" Pyotr asked, his own eyes narrowing.

Zseron sighed and planted his stave back onto the ground. "There is more that you should know..."

Anras lounged back in the captain's throne of the *Savory Wound's* bridge. It did not technically belong to him. Yet. However, Gargahl's existence alone is enough to kill lesser mortals within close proximity and—as a result—he paid the command deck very few visits. Due to this, Anras didn't see the problem in utilizing a seat that would have otherwise been left to languish from lack of proper attention. Besides, it would officially be his at some point or another. His competitor was bound to get himself killed one of these days. Assuming that the fool discordant ceased his timely interventions, of course.

Frowning, the visionary cast thoughts of Pyotr from his mind for the time being. Strategies involving the proper method to handle *that* particular nuisance could come later.

"Report our current status," Anras said, rising to inspect the hololithic displays of their ongoing situation.

"Largely unchanged, m'lord," one of the bridge officers remarked. What had his name been again? "We are still outside the effective weapons range of the *Gorgon's Manacles* and they have made no attempt to hail us for open communications."

"Is that so? How surprising." Anras scratched away some leftover dried blood from his gauntlet. The officer blanched.

"Aye, m'lord." He nodded. "Ah..."

"Go on, human," Anras said, not bothering to meet the shivering thing's eyes. He smiled behind his helmet.

"Of... of course, m'lord. Unfortunately, weapons systems and the void shield generator are still damaged from our retreat, making it unwise to engage in... hostile negotiations."

Anras snorted. *Retreat*. Such a cute word for 'running away.' The lengths men would go to in order to avoid sounding cowardly. The VIIIth Legion had no such reservations. *Anras* had no such reservations. The ego was a fragile thing set on display for people who didn't care to look at it to spit upon. Far more trouble than it was worth, if you asked Anras.

"And..." the officer swallowed. "And our current methods of evasion are... unsustainable."

The visionary blinked. "What?"

The officer's mouth opened and closed soundlessly, his eyes wide with terror. Anras didn't even think. He reached out and gripped the man by the head, lifting him into the air and squeezing. His skull cracked and collapsed like chalk, spraying viscera and blood across the command deck as a red rainstorm. Anras looked to the woman who had been sitting next to him. She tried to maintain a calm exterior, but Anras could hear the flutter of her heartbeat, he could taste the tang of her fear-musk in the air.

"I recommend," he said slowly, "that you provide me with the answers that I want *without* hesitation. Otherwise, your death will be far more *drawn out* than your compatriots."

She nodded and wiped at her eyes with her sleeve as she turned back to the readings. The dead officer's body hit the decking with a dull thump, causing her to flinch. "Due to superficial thruster damage and differing models of cruiser, in order to maintain proper distance from the *Gorgon*, we are burning fuel at a rate that likely greatly exceeds their own. Estimates show that we will only be able to outrun them for another three weeks and some change before we're dead in the void. My lord," she added belatedly.

Anras's nostrils flared with irritation. The woman cringed as he reached out to her, uncaring that she'd done what he'd asked. His anger was rising and in desperate need to be stanch.

"Anras," a voice said from behind him. Anras turned to see a marine standing in the entranceway to the command deck. He wore a set of Ferric Sentry power armor that had only been partially reconfigured to properly represent the mien of their father's legion.

"Pyotr," Anras sneered. "I would ask you what I owe the displeasure, but I truly do not have time for it right now."

The lord discordant said nothing as he stepped into the room.

"Fine," Anras spat. "What is it that you want?"

Pyotr stared at him.

"Cease the theatrics, brother. I have even less care for them now than I do normally."

The cold silence continued to radiate from Pyotr, spilling across the room and causing the bridge officers to shift uncomfortably in their seats, their eyes flicking warily towards the marine in his mismatched gray and blue plating. Red eye lenses bore into Anras with burning prejudice.

"Bah!" Anras shook his head and turned back to the hololithic readings. If Pyotr wished to be a child, then so be it.

"I spoke with Zseron," his brother finally said.

Anras lifted his gaze from the readings and barely had a moment to think the word, *Damn*, before a blow slammed into the back of his head.

The visionary's head snapped forward and he began to stumble in the same direction. Pyotr grabbed him by the wings of his helm and yanked Anras back into the wall behind them. He pivoted on the spot and pummeled his brother with blow after blow to the sternum until the winged skull icon of the legion on his chest fractured.

Anras hissed and rolled out of the way of the next punch, causing Pyotr to put an astartes fist-sized dent in the wall. Anras then drew the blade from his back and ignited it, the metal reverberating with power. He swung at Pyotr, who raised a fist to protect himself as he dodged backward. The blade left a sizable gash in his vambrace—blood oozed from the wound. That was beginning to become a bad habit.

The power sword swung again in a warding gesture. Pyotr stepped back out of the arc of the weapon's edge. Now on the defensive, Pyotr gritted his teeth as his brother closed in upon him. The Night Lord's boot stepped in something wet and ichorous. Pyotr spared a quick glance downwards to find the body of a recently deceased naval officer. He waited until Anras drew close, then ducked as the sword sang through the air once again. Pyotr came up with the corpse and threw it at his brother. The fleshsack slapped against his opponent's ceramite ineffectively, but provided a momentary distraction for Pyotr to charge his brother, slamming his shoulder into the neck and grill of Anras's armor.

As Anras staggered back, Pyotr pressed the advantage, kicking at the servo of his brother's knee. The armor didn't break, nor would it injure the joint within, but it did cause the visionary to buckle, dropping him to one knee. He looked up at Pyotr and thrust with his power sword. Pyotr caught it by letting the blade slice through the plating of his palm, puncturing his hand and emerging out the other side. Anras grunted as he tried to pull it free, but the weapon refused to budge.

Flesh burned and pain washed across Pyotr's hand and began to crawl up his wrist and forearm, but he twisted his arm despite the agony, throwing off Anras's grip. He then drew his boltpistol from his thigh, pressed the barrel into his brother's forearm and proceeded to pull the trigger until ceramite fragments and blood began to fly across the room, just as they had when he performed the same maneuver on Lavitor Fabrinus.

Anras howled with pain, but Pyotr was not finished. He yanked the blade from his hand with a wincing grunt and grabbed hold of his brother's wrist. With his free-hand, Pyotr delivered a punch to the injury, the cracking of bone and the ripping of flesh singing out into the air. Then he punched again. Then a third time. Then a fourth. He continued to punch until Anras's screams became guttural and the visionary's hand hung as a mangled, twisted sack of flesh and broken bone from his arm.

Pyotr then proceeded to yank on the limb. It resisted, but eventually tore free from the rest of Anras's body with a wet ripping sound. Pyotr tossed the limb next to the human corpse on the deck and a kick to the chest sent Anras to the ground, cradling his new stump. The lord discordant gave his brother's chest several stomps for good measure. Satisfied, he crouched down and grabbed Anras by the chest piece, pulling him close.

"Thirteen," Pyotr snarled. "Thirteen of our brothers are dead because *you* thought it best not to tell them the full extent of your vision."

"You would not understand," Anras hissed through the pain. "The prophecies are not always clear. I was not aware—"

Pyotr squeezed the ragged flesh of Anras's drooling and sputtering wound. He clenched his teeth to stifle his cries of pain.

"You were aware and you *lied*." Pyotr stared down at the pathetic excuse for a marine with disdain. "Your own self-interests took precedence over the good of the warband. You disgust me."

"Brother, I am telling you—"

"I don't mean the blasted mission!" He slammed a fist into Anras's faceplate. The visionary's head snapped back and clattered against the deck. "I could forgive that even if you *had* foreseen our success to be solely at the hands of the Atramentar." Pyotr leaned in close, his helm nearly touching Anras's. "What I cannot forgive is that you saw the chapter master standing over *my* broken body, axe raised and poised to slay me, and you said *nothing* beforehand."

Anras did not respond initially. Pyotr rose to his feet and his brother forced himself to sit upright, bringing his wounded limb close to his chest.

"Can you blame me?" he eventually growled. "You've grown weak, Pyotr! You're a hindrance to the warband! Should I report every time my visions reveal when one of the slaves takes a shit? No, because *it is obvious*."

Pyotr glanced down at his crippled brother. "Do I seem weak to you currently?"

I need you to hollow yourself out so that I may fill the vacancy with something wonderful... A memory echoed in Pyotr's mind.

He sighed and offered Anras his hand. "Still, I am inclined to agree with you."

Animals are put down when they are no longer useful...

Anras looked at the outstretched arm suspiciously, but then reached out with his good hand, clasping wrists with his brother and allowing himself to be helped to his feet.

Pyotr tightened his grip and pulled his brother close.

"But you have caught me in a bad mood, Anras. If I ever catch you withholding even the most useless of details you see in your visions from me again, I will devise a special virus just for you and have it injected straight into your armor as you sleep. It will be insidious and slow, just like you, brother. For months, you may notice nothing and begin to think my threats hollow. But during this time, the machine spirit of your warplate will be changing. It will grow... hungry. Its corrupted circuits will begin to wonder what flesh tastes like. Nothing more than an idle code at first, but it will spread and fester. It will grow day after day until that is all that the spirit can process—The desire, no, the *need* to understand that taste. And there you will be, wearing it day after day as that hunger builds.

"Eventually, it will not be able to take it anymore. It will lock you in and it will *feast*. First, it will peel the skin from your muscle to relish the flavor your salt and sweat bring. Then, it will tear lump after lump of your meat free to sate its craving to no avail.

"It will lap up your blood and drain it from your arteries to try and quench its thirst. It will snap and shatter your bones to suck out the marrow. It will chew on your eyeballs and gnaw on your tongue. It will do all of this, with you trapped within, helpless and unable to do anything

to stop it as you scream for mercy. Only no one will hear you, the armor will not let you. It will become your god and you will be forced to bear all of its sins.”

Anras pulled away from the lord discordant and frowned. “You create a beautiful picture, brother. Father would be proud.”

“And here I thought we were done lying to each other.” There was no humor behind Pyotr’s words. “Go see Zasharr about a replacement for your hand. Tell him I sent you.”

In more ways than one, his tone suggested.

The visionary maintained eye contact. “You realize what you’ve done here today, brother?”

“Yes.”

“I would imagine you could have done with *less* enemies rather than more.”

“It is not too late to heed that advice.” Pyotr tilted his head towards the now-inert power sword lying in the puddle of blood caused by both the dead officer and his brother’s dismembered hand.

Anras scoffed, snatched up his blade and left the room. Pyotr watched him leave, then turned his attention back to the corpse. One of the female officers had left her station and had placed a hand on the body’s chest. Her other hand was pressed to her mouth as she sobbed. Pyotr only had a moment to watch and consider the implications of this gesture before a glyph flashed on his retinal display and a voxlink was established.

“Sixth Claw,” Taresh said. “We have a problem.”

“What is it now?” Retrigan’s voice asked over the vox.

“Not what, who.”

There was a sigh. “Gyrthemar?”

“Gyrthemar.”

Chapter IV: The Dance

Ajax of the Carnage Stitchers, Son of Angron, did not wear a helmet like many of his brothers. One such reason being that he deemed it only right to display the imitation of his father's curse for all to see; to show that he stood in solidarity with his gene sire and was a true son of the XIIth Legion who knew no fear of pain or rage. Another was that he believed every creature deserved the honor of seeing the face of the being that was to end their lives and spill their blood in the Great God's name.

The first time he'd ever found himself regretting this decision was when he came aboard the vessel of the Night Lords.

Ajax blindly thundered down the cruiser's corridors in pursuit of his quarry, slamming a serf out of his way. The small creature's bones cracked and organs ruptured as ceramite hit flesh. The World Eater felt a flicker of joy at the blood that was spilt, the feeling accentuated by a cocktail of different flavors of pain that blossomed within his skull. Like all Astartes, Ajax could see in near-darkness like it was the light of day, but that did not make it pleasant or preferred, though. Nor was it home to him like it was to the rats he was forced to share a vessel with. Ajax frequently found himself stumbling into some unseen obstacles or wall, which only further built upon his irritation.

"Show yourself!" Ajax bellowed after his quarry. Only silence greeted him. The nails bit and Ajax clenched his teeth and sprinted on.

No sooner had he turned the corner did he find another serf trembling in the middle of the corridor. The ripe smell of waste filled the air and pooled on the metal beneath the human's feet. Ajax's disgust became pain which became hatred. He swung his chain flail and watched as the first head ripped the pitiful thing's jaw off, the second tore free their arm, and the third caved the skull in and dropped the human to the floor. Ajax reveled at the generous pool of crimson nectar the little thing left behind.

Blood...

He panted, putting a hand to his side where his armor had been punctured earlier. He told himself that he couldn't feel it. Pain of the body was not real.

Blood for the Blood God.

"Skulls for the Skull Throne," he rasped. He spoke a prayer, asking for the Great God to accept his offering. All he wanted in exchange was the power to kill one measly pest.

"I do not think gods accept prayers from animals." A voice said from above. Ajax didn't have time to react as a figure in dark blue ceramite descended upon him from his perch on the ceiling and struck out with a spear stolen from a son of the Wolf King.

The strike sank into Ajax's thigh and emerged out of the side before being pulled free. Ajax roared, not in pain but in rage at the spineless tactic. He gave a desperate swing of his chain flail as his quarry turned to flee yet again, sheering away more of the Night Lord's armor.

"Fight me!" Ajax screamed. He moved to pursue after his prey but found his injured leg dragging. He gritted his teeth as he waited for Zasharr's combat drugs to flood his system and

return it to working order. “You *scum!*” He sneered. “You are nothing but a coward! Your skull would be a *disgrace* upon the Blood God’s throne!”

The Night Lord turned to look back at him from the end of the corridor. Ajax could swear he heard chuckling coming from the blasted creature’s voxgrill.

“You flatter me, cousin.”

The dance continued. It was not elegant, coordinated, or even pleasant to watch—but it was a dance all the same. And, oh, how Gyrrhemar led.

When the bout that initiated after the Dung Eater’s insults had started, it was not in Gyrrhemar’s favor. It had left him wounded more than he cared to admit and his armor in a state that would not please the artificer serfs after they’d just finished repairing it from Exodus Station. That changed, however, once he stopped fighting like a warrior and started fighting like a Night Lord. He chuckled to himself, remembering how the other berzerkers gathered in the sparring chambers roared in outrage as he turned and fled, as well as how his brothers snickered and joked at both the petulant reactions and at Gyrrhemar’s own misfortune. He hadn’t missed how they all seemed to have their hands readied on their weapons, but didn’t bother to draw them as they watched Gyrrhemar struggle. Even Taresh simply shook his head in exasperation.

No one was fond of the fact that the World Eater’s had found their way onto the *Savory Wound*—with the exception of maybe Pyotr. Having their sort around was just asking for trouble. As a result, that’s why you never went sniffing for it. His brother’s couldn’t intervene until Gyrrhemar either prevailed or was killed. If the latter, that’s a grievous slight against the warband that had to be repaid. If the former? Well, accidents always happened in good sport, of course. How could their innocent brother possibly be blamed for such a mistake?

Gyrrhemar continued to smirk as he wedged himself into an alcove and dimmed the lights on his eye lenses. He listened for the sound of erratic and mindlessly stomping, as well as the sound of screaming slaves as they died simply for being in the beast’s warpath. Once the berzerker burst into the chamber, Gyrrhemar allowed him a moment to sputter and snort at the air, as if trying to sniff him out. His eyes had grown more wild and the veins in his forehead throbbed just as violently as the cables that protruded from his scalp like thick cords of hair. As the World Eater turned away, Gyrrhemar allowed his lenses to reignite and he emerged from his hiding place. His new friend only had enough time to turn and recognize him before the point of Vindkaldr found its way into his gut. Gyrrhemar pulled it free after only a breath and fled the room once again, enjoying the sound of the berzerker’s spiteful screams and indignant fists slamming into the floor.

A part of Gyrrhemar mused how much more the brute could take, or if his guttural roars were tinged with the knowledge that this back-and-forth would simply continue until his body could no longer operate and he died, spiteful and humiliated.

Mmm. Perhaps it is a beautiful dance, after all, Gyrrhemar thought.

— — — — —

All he could see were shades of red that vaguely outlined the world like an oil painting. Each spineless strike, each sniveling goad, each self-indulgent boast only sharpened the hues and narrowed his vision further.

The timeline of his rampage began to blur. More slaves died at his hand—each one an offering to the Great God—though he'd lost count of how many that was exactly. The berzerker breathed heavily, his armor feeling like a restrictive shell more than a second skin now. He looked down at the bisected human at his feet as it left a trail of blood and entrails in its desperate attempt to crawl away, weeping for its mother. The sorry little thing got no more than half a meter before its strength gave out and it permanently fell still. The berzerker paid it no mind, lumbering forward and crushing its skull underfoot.

He sniffed the air with a growl. He could smell the rat now. There was no escape, his prey could scurry along the shadows as much as it wished, but it was only a matter of time now.

As he pursued his quarry down the winding corridors, something tore and twisted within the predator's body—an organ ripping itself apart at his strain, perhaps. He barely noticed it. Pain no longer existed in any capability anymore. He was no longer mortal—Nails of his father, he was not even an Astartes anymore. Ajax of the Carnage Stitchers was now nothing but a being possessed by a single, holy mandate.

Kill the Coward.

Ajax did not realize he had been stabbed again until he looked down and saw the spearhead emerging from his torso. A voxgrill nestled beside his ear.

“Apologize and this game can end,” a voice said. The sound of it filled Ajax's mouth with ruddy bile and saliva. He slammed his elbow into the faceplate of his prey. The figure grunted, but then chuckled. He pulled the spear free from Ajax with little grace, further goring him in the process. The berzerker fell to his knees. He recognized such a wound should have left him incapacitated and dying, the battle over for him. Instead, he found himself rising to his feet after only four breaths that he couldn't feel enter his lungs.

Blood rushed in his ears, warping and morphing into what could have been words.

Kill. Kill. KILL HIM.

Ajax turned and followed the cowardly stench-trail that his quarry left. The hunt continued for a stretch of time that the blessed warrior no longer had the mental acuity to parse—nor did he care to. More wounds marred his flesh, but each one seemed to mean less and less than the one that came before. Each one hindered him for a shorter time than the previous one. Eventually, when the spear pierced him yet again, he only looked down at it in the barest form of acknowledgement before turning his attention back towards his prey and lacerating him with another round of strikes of his chain flail.

The Night Lord stumbled back, looked the warrior up and down, and turned to flee yet again. Only this time, he did so without his air of confidence. The warrior smiled.

The tides had shifted, and Ajax roared in the triumph that would come.

— — — — —

Gyrthemar wasn't sure at what point things had erred from his favor, only that he was unsatisfied with the fact that they had.

The damn beast should have died by now, Gyrthemar thought. Only the berzerker hadn't, leaving Gyrthemar at nearly the end of his circuit and back at the sparring chambers. He hoped that those gathered within had dispersed after his ingenious departure.

He was not so lucky.

Some bouts of sparring had resumed when Gyrthemar burst back into the chamber, but the quarters themselves had largely the exact same personnel as the last time Gyrthemar was in there. The only notable difference was that Tareh was no longer present, which, if anything, made things fare worse for him.

"Come to regale us with your successful duel, brother?" Korasus of Second Claw chortled. He'd said it loud enough for the World Eaters at the other side of the chamber to hear, drawing their attention.

Damn him, Gyrthemar thought while still trying to look proud in his shredded and battered armor.

"Not exactly," he said.

A roar echoed through the corridors behind them and the berzerker crashed into the room before the doors had even fully opened. Gyrthemar whirled around and readied Vindkaldr—the bone-white spear stark in the dim lighting of the ship.

"YOU!" the berzerker boomed. "I WILL HAVE YOUR SPINE AND WEAR IT AS A TROPHY AROUND MY WAIST! YOU DIE TODAY, MASTER OF RATS!" His brothers revved their chain weapons, waiving them overhead as they stomped their feet and roared their support.

"Master of Rats?" Gyrthemar smirked, glancing over his shoulder at his brothers. "I quite like that name." The Night Lords chuckled their response.

The sound of bestial growls and rapidly approaching boots brought Gyrthemar's attention back to his opponent. Unfortunately, by the time he'd returned his gaze, a fist had already seized hold of his throat and the weight of a rage-fueled Astartes slammed into him, sending them both to the floor.

The impact sent Vindkaldr sprawling out of reach. Gyrthemar desperately pawed for the spear as the grip tightened and the berzerker fixed him with a wide-eyed, bloodshot stare. The beast's jaw was clenched and his lips were drawn back in a mad grimace. Blood leaked from between his teeth, dripping and sizzling onto Gyrthemar's faceplate. The mad Astartes made several guttural noises that Gyrthemar took as attempts at speech, but the World Eater was too consumed by his rage to actually have the cognitive clarity to actualize them.

"S-S... SKW RRRR... MMM..."

Gyrthemar found himself gasping as he writhed, finally giving up on reaching for his spear and instead attempting to grab hold of the gladius tucked away at his calf. His fingers continuously brushed the hilt, but with the full bulk of his opponent atop of him, he couldn't get the right vantage to grab it completely.

“SKW... RRR... SKWRRRMMM.”

The Night Lord slammed his fist into his opponent’s vambrace in an effort to break the grip, but found the thing to be preternaturally strong. He croaked and forced himself to not look around the chamber for help that he knew he would not be there..

“SKW... *SQUIRM*...”

Gyrthemar settled for punching the berzerker in the face instead. Each fist slammed into the World Eater’s bare face, crushing the nose, fracturing the skull, and tearing the flesh. It meant nothing. Gyrthemar watched as the grimace above him morphed into a demented smile.

“SQUIRM, LITTLE MOUSE.”

If Gyrthemar was not wearing his own helm, he would have spat into the World Eater’s face for good measure. Instead, his eyes fell on his opponent’s waist and the chain flail that rested there. Quickly, Gyrthemar released his grip on the World Eater’s wrist and grabbed for it while preparing his other hand.

As expected, the brute above him ceased his strangulation with one hand for a moment to batter Gyrthemar’s away, giving him just enough slack to twist himself to grab his gladius, wrenching his arm in the process. Before his opponent could react, he drove the blade into the beast’s unprotected armpit and drove it deep until he felt the unmistakable sensation of a heart being punctured.

You, Gyrthemar thought through clenched teeth and a darkening vision, *are not worth this much effort*.

The World Eater shuddered, but still stubbornly refused to die. The two found themselves almost in an isolated point of time, a frozen scene that could adorn a mural for either one of their coffins—Two marines grappling in a prone struggle, one with his hands wrapped around a throat like a vice, the other with a blade dug deep into one of the former’s hearts.

The moment was shattered by four Astartes abruptly grabbing hold of the berzerker and tearing him away from his quarry. Gyrthemar noticed that only three of them were in midnight clad—the fourth was adorned in crimson.

Gyrthemar sighed and let his head clang back against the floor as he breathed freely. A figure appeared in his vision immediately after, wearing a bizarre cluster of deep-blue and iron-gray armor pieces. He recognized the newly-minted signifier on his chest piece and the Nostraman name inscribed upon it, however.

“Pyotr?” Gyrthemar croaked. “Your timing is—”

Air was denied from Gyrthemar once again as his brother kneeled down on his throat and glared at him in disgust.

“*Fool*,” Pyotr spat.

“Brother, you don’t understand,” Gyrthemar croaked out from underneath Pyotr’s knee. “If you had only heard the things he—”

Pyotr cut his moronic brother off by applying further pressure onto his throat. He could hear the other members of Sixth Claw struggling to restrain the crazed marine while Zasharr injected with an anesthetic potent enough to work in his current state.

“I do not care *what* the damn creature said,” Pyotr hissed, forging a private link over the vox amongst his claw. “I do not even care if he was singing the praises of the *False Emperor*. What you did was beyond thoughtless. How can you not see that?”

Gyrthemar glared up at him and Pyotr eased off his brother slightly so that he could speak. “I had to defend the honor of our legion.”

“*Honor?*” Pyotr said. “What *honor* is there within the VIIIth Legion? No, Gyrthemar, what you wanted was to show off. Just as you always do.”

“And how is it any different than your crusade against that chapter master, brother?”

Pyotr snarled and grabbed at the object hanging at his waist. Once pulled free from its chain, he slammed the freshly decapitated skull down next to Gyrthemar’s face.

“It is different because *I* never jeopardize the entire warband in my personal matters, *brother*. We passed over two dozen of these corpses on the way to clean up your mess.”

“Slave corpses.”

“*Upper deck* slaves,” Pyotr corrected. “That is skilled, specialized labor that we have lost and cannot replace until we’re out of our current mess, something made even more difficult by *your* actions.”

Gyrthemar finally had the sense not to whine and retort.

“Our emotional cousins don’t look happy. Especially after doing the favor of saving us back on the station,” Retrigan added once the struggling berzerker finally slipped into unconsciousness. Zasharr left the body unattended after applying additional narcotics to speak with the World Eaters in question.

Pyotr did not often like to admit it, but Retrigan was right. It seemed the only thing that kept the berzerkers from breaking out into a frenzy against the Night Lords was their own warband captain’s presence and stoicism in the matter.

“I agree,” Taresh stated. “We are being pursued by an external threat. All you have done is create tensions that could lead to an internal one as well.”

“What does it matter?” Gyrthemar grumbled. “Either we die to the Ferric Sentries or the World Eaters now. The end result remains the same.”

“Would you rather die to the void’s kiss or a berzerker’s chain axe?”

Gyrthemar chewed on that for a moment. “Fair point.”

“We are on a knife’s edge as it is, brother.” Pyotr sighed. “I don’t need you adding to the problem.”

Retrigan grunted. “We’ll already have to deal with Gargahl and Anras arguing over what we should do next. And we all know how that is bound to go.”

“The point has been made,” Gyrthemar said, sounding more frustrated than guilty. Pyotr expected as much. “Do you intend to lecture me to death or can we move on from this? I’m getting tired of the sensation of being strangled.”

Pyotr moved to rise and release his brother, but paused as he saw his retinal display flash with a request for Zasharr to join their voxlink. He accepted it without conferring with the rest of his claw and waited as the master of the Carnage Stitcher stepped away from his men to join them.

“We have an issue,” Zasharr drawled.

“When don’t we?” Retrigan asked without humor.

“My men are not pleased by the conduct of the loud one. I have attempted to soothe their grievances but they are demanding... justice.”

The irony was not lost on Pyotr.

“When’s my trial?” Gyrrhemar chuckled. Pyotr quieted him with a glare.

“I take it that their cost for reparations is steep,” Pyotr said.

Zasharr nodded. “They wish to string him up and dismember him to appease Kharneth. The death would be quick, I can at least guarantee that.”

“What are our other options?”

The surgeon’s throat rumbled. “I may be able to convince them that since he is of your warband, it is your right to punish him as you see fit, so long as you admit he is in the wrong.”

“We have little issue admitting when Gyrrhemar has done wrong. It happens too frequently for us not to,” Retrigan stated.

Zasharr did not respond. His glyph on Pyotr’s display went dull for several moments instead.

“Whatever it is,” Gyrrhemar said, “make sure I don’t end up in the apothecarion. I don’t trust that surgeon.”

None of them gave comfort or response to Gyrrhemar’s wish, opting to stand in silence as an appropriate alternative.

The glyph became active once again and Zasharr’s rough voice filled their comms. “The terms are acceptable under the condition that my men get to watch to ensure the punishment is satisfactory.”

“Hmph,” Retrigan snorted. “And what, short of death, would qualify as ‘satisfactory’ to your... men?” He glanced over at the Carnage Stitchers with a wary eye, then directed his attention back to the berzerker lying unmoving on the floor. Pyotr knew that Retrigan was wondering if he was truly unconscious, or if dark forces would cause him to rise and continue his onslaught at any given moment.

“Only death would properly sate their ire. As that is not an option however...” Zasharr looked to Pyotr to ensure that was the case. He shook his head slightly in reply, “*some* amount of blood must be spilt as an acceptable armistice.”

“So, what? I just sit here and let you all beat me until I can no longer move?” Gyrrhemar chuckled.

He stopped once he noticed all of them staring at him in silence.

“Oh.”

“We’ll try to make it quick,” Taresh said without any real commitment to the sentiment.

Gyrthemar gave a grumbling sigh, then moved to sit up. Pyotr didn't stop him.

"At least let me begin the damn thing on my feet."

The Night Lord stood and retrieved his spear, tucking it away on his back. He turned to face his brothers again and made to say something, but before the words had even left his lips Pyotr's fist met his crushed and shredded helm, jostling his head backwards. It was soon followed by a strike to the groin from Retrigan, then a headbutt from Taresh. Zasharr stepped back and let the ritual commence as promised, keeping his berzerkers in line as they hungrily watched the display. The other Night Lords in the chamber were visibly confused, but none intervened. They all likely assumed Gyrthemar had this coming for centuries now.

To the marine's credit, it took three minutes of pummeling and physical humiliation for Gyrthemar to finally drop to his knees, breathing heavily. Once it was clear he no longer had the strength to stand on his own, Pyotr motioned for his brothers to halt their ministrations.

"Will this suffice?" Pyotr voxed to Zasharr.

"No," came the reply, his tone cold and unreadable. Despite that, Pyotr knew what he meant. Gyrthemar was beaten and bruised, but it wasn't enough—for what the terms were and what would maintain an alliance between the two legions were two separate items entirely. If the Night Lords wished to keep the World Eaters from turning against them, more would have to be done. More than they could afford.

Pyotr frowned. "Get his helmet off."

The other members of Sixth Claw complied as Pyotr stepped away and crouched by the body of the wounded berzerker. Pyotr was no apothecary, but looking at the injuries sustained, he was genuinely surprised the marine still breathed. He doubted it would remain that way for much longer.

Reaching down, Pyotr slid the gladius from the unconscious warrior's flesh. He glanced at Zasharr who gave him a near-imperceptible nod of understanding. The berzerkers around him continued to howl their bloodlust and demands for recompense.

Pyotr stood and returned to his brothers. Gyrthemar, now helmless, sagged in the grip of Taresh and Retrigan who stood on either side of him. He looked up at Pyotr and smiled, his teeth stained pink with his own blood.

"I was... looking for that..." he coughed, nodding towards the blade in Pyotr's hand.

The lord discordant did not hesitate. He brought the tip of the gladius directly beneath Gyrthemar's eye and stabbed upwards before wrenching the gushing orb from its socket. His brother clenched his teeth and gave a long, low growl. But he did not scream.

Gyrthemar never screamed.

Pyotr pulled his brother's eyeball from the gladius, dropping the weapon, then tossing the organ at an arc so that it landed at Zasharr's feet. The World Eaters fell silent.

"The price has been paid," Pyotr said. He did not wait for a response as he grabbed Gyrthemar by the collar and began to drag his brother out of the sparring chamber.

"I said... to make sure... I *didn't* end up in the apothecarion," Gyrthemar complained, holding one of his hands up to his newly-emptied socket.

“You would have ended up there either way,” Pyotr said. “In this case you get to continue breathing.”

“Understood, brother.”

No, Pyotr thought. *You don't*.

Chapter V: A Meaningless Truth

The worst day of her life was when her gods came from the heavens and kidnapped her from her home. The second worst was watching her brother be murdered in front of her by one of those same gods for no other reason than he could.

The third worst would be having to tell her mother.

Junior Bridge Officer Artemis held her lamp pack close as she walked the halls of the *Savory Wound's* lower decks. Her heart felt as if it were attempting to tear its way out of her chest so that it could flee to higher levels of the ship. She didn't remember the last time she dared venture this low. Her gods—the Astartes—freely hunted on these decks, as the labor was cheaper and easily replaceable. Artemis worried that she may be easily mistaken for one of these dispensable deckhands, regardless of her old and worn uniform. The upper decks were safer.

At least, they were supposed to be.

Artemis had heard of the carnage that had occurred the day before. Over two dozen men and women dead just for being in the way. It sent a shiver down her spine that she couldn't suppress. Every day she looked into the ghastly faces of her gods and wondered what sadistic thoughts were running rampant behind those ruby eye lenses. She lived every single day wondering if a wayward impulse or need to quench some inhuman thirst would lead to her death. She never expected that when it came, that they would lash out at Orion.

Every time she blinked, she could see him dying next to her. The Astartes gauntlet on his skull, the way it simply... deflated at the barest amount of pressure. The way his eyes bulged and popped from their sockets in that moment. The fear in his face just moments before it happened. Her brother's own blood and gore splashing onto her face and uniform. She still hadn't gotten the stains out.

Artemis staggered and found herself unable to breathe. She thrust a hand out and leaned on the wall for support, letting out loud pants that could have also been sobs—she wasn't sure—until she regained her composure.

Once she emerged from the corridor, Artemis found herself in a large, multi-levelled chamber made up of a massive network of tents, bungalows, and shacks that the ship's crew were able to scavenge together. They called the place Scab City. Artemis found the name disconcertingly apt, as there wasn't much cloth to be found aboard the cruiser and, therefore, much of the canvas used for many of the abodes were from stitched-together leather of the only variety that the Night Lords had in abundance.

The smell also reminded her of the sickly ooze that pooled and dripped out of an infected man's skin. Artemis could not suppress the urge to gag.

"Food for the miss?" a spindly man said as Artemis began making her way down the "street." He stood behind a rotten stand with a measly collection of cooked rats on skewers on display.

"No," Artemis said quietly. "Thank you."

The man squinted at her, his greasy eyebrows rising as he seemed to process her uniform. “An officer! Oh! *Oh!* For you, miss... one extra rat if you agree to trade! I think this one here was pregnant. Far more meat, eh?”

Artemis blanched, putting up a hand in refusal, not trusting herself to speak without bile spilling out.

“No? *Oh*, I see, yes. You Uppers are used to even larger portions! I’ll throw in two- No, *three* extra rats if we trade right now!” He nodded excitedly, his matted hair looking as if it might just slide off from all the jostling.

Hands fell on Artemis’s shoulders. She tensed for a moment before recognizing the gesture as protective. “She’ll be fine, Phihks. Thanks,” the newcomer said. It was a man’s voice, but only barely. The hands steered Artemis away down the bustling pathways and she glanced over her shoulder to see the grimy, oil-stained complexion of a man with a young, boyish face. He’d grown a beard since the last time she’d seen him. Artemis didn’t like it.

“You look stupid,” were the first words she could think to say. That didn’t embarrass her, though. They were true, after all.

The wiry man gave a nervous little chuckle and guided her to a secluded alleyway. Passersby gave them strange looks, but they were far enough for the conversation to be somewhat private.

“You shouldn’t be down here. Word... word is some of the gods have been hunting,” Jep said. His eye twitched a little. It did that frequently when he was nervous. His eye twitched a lot.

“I thought you would’ve outgrown that by now,” Artemis said, ignoring his previous comment. Truthfully, it had made her skin crawl and had every one of her muscles poised to flee. She just couldn’t show it. Not around Jep.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “*O-outgrown it?* Artemis, I’m *your* age.”

“You look half it.”

The fuel-loader spluttered for a moment, stuttering over a dozen sentences he was trying to say at once. He stopped and took a breath, then fixed her with a glare that forced Artemis to stifle a smile. “What do you want?”

“I’m here to see my mother,” Artemis said. It came out as a whisper.

Jep’s face fell. “She’s... not doing well, Artie.”

Artemis only nodded. “How bad?”

“Some days it’s okay. I check in when Orion can’t make it and she’s... Well, she’s herself. Just... sickly.” He whimpered at the end of his sentence and looked at the ground. That was a bad habit of his, too.

Artemis tried to not let the heartache and shame show on her face as she put a hand on Jep’s arm. “Thank you... for looking out for her.”

He nodded. “I just wish there was more I could do.” He smiled sheepishly, then looked down again and began picking at his cracked fingernails. Artemis frowned.

“What is it?”

“Nothing!” Jep said with a bit too much insistence. He still refused to meet her eyes.

“Jep...”

The man who should've still been a boy grimaced, then glanced around to ensure that they were truly alone.

“There’s a problem. With the ship.”

“When isn’t there?”

“You won’t like this one.”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. Jep bit at one of his nails before leaning in.

“There’s a leak in the fuel reserves.”

She furrowed her brow. “What?”

“There... there’s a—”

“I *heard* you, Jep. We don’t have any record of that on the bridge.”

Jep whimpered again and picked at his fingers some more. “That’s... because we haven’t reported it.”

“*Jep!*” Artemis couldn’t keep the edge of fear from her voice. “Do you know what the gods will do to you if they found out this was intentionally kept from them?”

He hesitated, then nodded.

“And they *will* find out.”

“I know!” he said quickly. “We just... With everything else going on, we figured it was less risky to *not* say anything and try to fix it rather than report it while tensions are high. You won’t say anything, will you?”

Artemis put her face in her hands and groaned. “How bad is it?”

“Not bad!” Jep chuckled nervously. “It’s...” he mused to himself, eyes turned upward as his head bounced from side to side, “maybe a day or two less fuel than your current readings. We have everything we need to fix it. It’s... just a matter of finding the thing.”

Artemis let out a sigh of relief. That was manageable, thankfully. “Find it. Fix it. Got it?”

“Got it. Find it, fix it.”

“Good.” She gave him a flat stare as he just stood there, smiling at her like a dolt. “As in, *now*, Jep.”

“Oh!” He started. “Right! Uh, you got it! Good seeing you, Artemis!” He turned frantically, as if unsure of what to do at first, then scrambled out of the alleyway. Artemis watched him as he went, shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

That boy...

The smile faded from her lips as she remembered her original task. She sighed heavily through her nose, eyes cast downward, and set off once again.

Artemis pushed the tattered rags that served as a door to the side as she entered the round tent. It was large—as far as tents made from skin went—but still only about a quarter of the size of her and Orion’s quarters on the upper decks. They had tried to get their mother to move in with them on numerous occasions, but she’d demurred and refused each time, insisting that her

and her brother's place was on the bridge, while hers was amongst the people of Scab City. Orion always seemed to understand her reasoning far more than Artemis had.

"Orion?" the crone on the floor asked in Gothic. She was the only one Artemis knew on the ship that still spoke the language instead of Nostraman.

The woman sat cross-legged with a bundle of half-prepped herbal remedies in her lap, her milky, sightless eyes staring up at Artemis. How her mother managed to find or barter the supplies she needed to make her local medicines, Artemis had no idea.

"No, mother," Artemis said softly, forcing herself to use a tongue that now felt so foreign to her, despite it being the one she had first learned on a world so very far away now.

The woman visibly deflated. "Oh," she said flatly. "What do you want, o' thankless daughter of mine?"

Artemis bristled. "That's not fair."

"Mm?" her mother croaked, then proceeded to cough, her shoulders rattling and convulsing. Artemis dropped to a knee and put a concerned hand on her mother's arm. The hag, once her fit ceased, spat red-tinged phlegm to the side, then resumed her work. "So many years of effort, such little respect repaid..."

"Mother, that is untrue!"

"Isn't it though?" Her bony hands twitched and her eyes fluttered for a moment. "When I said that the stars would fall upon our world and burn us, you laughed at your poor mother. Orion believed me."

He hadn't. He'd just been more gentle about the matter while Artemis preferred a more direct method.

"Because it was insanity! Your mind—"

"Is perfectly fine, thank you very much. And insanity or not, the apocalypse did come. The stars fell," her voice grew quiet, sending a chill down Artemis's spine, "and we've been burning ever since."

"A coincidence."

Mother snorted and brushed Artemis's hand away. "If you're going to pester me, you can at least make yourself useful." She pointed a rigid finger to the space in front of her and Artemis sat. An array of herbs and supplies to bind them were placed in her lap. Artemis sighed and began working.

"Just like coming home from the schola..." she muttered.

"I'm blind, not deaf, little lady."

Artemis smiled softly, then forced soberness to retake her. "Mother... there's something I need to tell you."

"Your brother's dead," her voice was hollow. Brittle. "There's no other reason you would be here."

The words stung—worse because they were true.

"Yes," Artemis said. "The g— the Astartes killed him."

"Emperor take them."

Artemis started and reflexively looked at the entrance of the tent, half-expecting a god in midnight power armor to materialize there. “You shouldn’t say such things!” she hissed.

“Why?” Mother said and calmly continued making her bundles. “Or they’ll torture me? Flay my skin? Electrocute my nerves until I beg for death? A meaningless truth.” She set down her work and gestured around her with both arms. “This is everything, Artemis. This is our whole world. We cannot change it. We can only control our small fraction of reality. If they take me, then so be it. My existence will become pain. There will be nothing I can do to stop it. Best to just accept it and take back what little of my life I can in that acceptance.”

For a moment, Artemis was a child again, sitting at the feet of the woman in front of her, listening in adoration at the wisdom being told to her. When had those words unveiled their true form? As the rantings of a madwoman.

“It’s not that easy, mother. Fear is everything.”

“Fear is nothing,” Mother spat. “Fear is... is...” She groaned, leaning forward into her hands and massaging her temples with her thumbs.

Artemis quickly went to her side. “Is it a Symphony?” That was how Artemis’s mother had always referred to her chronic head-pains. She’d never explained why.

Her mother nodded and closed her eyes. “We’re going home, Artemis. We’re going home.”

Artemis frowned and stifled a sigh as she rubbed her mother’s back. “If only we were, mother. But the Astartes would never allow it.”

“*We* are going home,” she insisted, jerking her shoulder away from Artemis. “Not them. *Us*. I know this.”

Artemis’s frown deepened. “What do you mean?”

Her mother let out a deep, guttural moan that sounded more animal than human. “It’s so clear. It’s never been so clear before.” She looked up at Artemis, blood running like rivers from her nose and eyes, pooling and dripping from the old woman’s chin. Artemis gasped, but found herself unable to move. Those eyes... Those blind eyes felt like they could see. Not her, not Artemis. But... something else. “Corpses of gods will litter the soil. And you will grow into a mighty, thorned flower. Their blood will be your fertilizer.”

The muscles of the hag’s face spasmed and forced her into a lopsided, black-lipped grin. Artemis did not recognize who she was looking at. She did not know this witch. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. She leaned back to scuttle away, but her limbs were locked and disobedient. Her heart swelled and drummed harder than it had in the presence of any god she’d ever seen. This was something else. Something she once found profane and still did, but for an entirely different reason. This was—

Artemis blinked and the blood was gone. The terror was gone. The witch was gone. All that remained was a cold feeling in the room and the old loon sitting in front of her.

“What... what was...?” Artemis whispered. The details were already fading. She remembered the words, but not the visage. Had her mother actually looked so monstrous? Or had

her statements just been too overwhelming? Perhaps Artemis missed home more than she cared to admit.

You are home. Accept that and you stay sane, she thought. It was the mantra that had gotten her through her first few years amongst her new gods. It wasn't comforting, but it was real—unlike the things her mother rambled about.

“What was that, dear?” The old woman asked.

“Nothing,” Artemis responded. “Nothing at all.” She rose then, dusting off her uniform. It made little difference to the grimy and rumpled fabric, but the ritual was familiar. It made her feel like an actual officer still. “I should get going.”

Artemis's mother hummed in annoyance. “And to think you would actually spend some time with me. Especially after telling me my son is dead.”

“He was my brother, too,” Artemis snapped.

Mother paused. “I suppose that's true. He lasted longer than I thought he would. Always had such a soft soul, your brother.” Despite her words, the woman was smiling.

Artemis simply nodded and stepped to the curtain, brushing it aside in preparation to leave.

“Artemis?” the old crone's voice suddenly sounded so small. Scared, almost. That wasn't possible, though. Artemis's mother did not get scared. Never. “Will you stay tonight? Please.”

Artemis sighed, then looked down in shame. “I can't, mother. I've already been gone for too long.”

There was an uncomfortable silence that filled the room before Artemis's mother decided to speak again. “I understand. You're a busy girl.” She sounded defeated.

The junior officer looked over her shoulder at the frail thing and felt her heart throb. “I'll... come back tomorrow.”

Mother hesitated, but then nodded in acceptance. “Yes, that... that would be good. Now run along! You've kept me busy for long enough! Shoo, shoo!”

Artemis rolled her eyes, then left. As she maneuvered through the streets of Scab City, she wondered how many trips it would take before the old bat caused her to start pulling the hair from her head.

She would never find out the answer, as, the next day, she was informed that her mother had died in her sleep. And left Artemis all alone.

Taresh was going to betray his brother. It was not a matter of ‘if,’ but ‘when.’ It was also not a matter of emotion, but pure logic. Pyotr was eroding, becoming unreliable and progressively more sickening to the rest of the company. At best, he was stagnant. At worst, he was degenerating. Either way, he was a liability. Therefore, the decision was simple. He would betray his brother.

Just not today.

Sixth Claw stood in the *Savory Wound's* Strategium. Taresh stood in the back ranks of his claw's huddle so that he could better observe everyone present. Pyotr was at the front of their

group, toeing the line between hanging back and being close enough to the monolithic display table to be considered a participant. Retrigan was at his shoulder, sheathing and unsheathing his lightning claws. Taresh did not like that tick of his.

And then there was Gyrrhemar.

The idiot stood at Pyotr's other shoulder, grumbling to himself as he poked at the new bionic lens that had replaced the eye that his brother had wrenched from its socket.

"Quit poking at it," Retrigan said dryly.

"Would if I could. Damn thing keeps... *twitching*." Gyrrhemar slapped the palm of his hand against the side of his face several times. "Bah! Wasn't doing this earlier."

Taresh looked at Pyotr. If the lord discordant knew what he was doing, or doing it on purpose, he didn't show it in his posture. He simply stood there, arms crossed and statuesque in his now fully painted armor. Taresh was not pleased his brother had avoided replacing his servo-arm. It made it far too easy for him to hide his profanity now.

"Where is that beast?" Anras barked. He paced impatiently in front of the hololith, looking to their sorcerer and his band of Atramentar for answers.

"Patience," Zseron said simply.

"We are sailing ourselves to death and you ask for *patience*?" The visionary snarled, then began to rub his gauntleted forearm. Strange. That was a new tick. Taresh did not like it either.

At that moment, the doors opened and the ground shook as a broad, bloated figure lumbered in, his gang of raptors nipping at his heels. Gargahl's Apostles, they called themselves. Each one as rotten and overgrown with flies and filth as their king. Taresh watched as their jump packs coughed and sputtered out puffs of miasmic gas every few moments, despite not being activated. Fungus and tumorous growths adorned their armor and even sprouted from their helmets.

"You're late," Anras said, his tone icy.

"A captain comes when he wishes," Gargahl wheezed casually. He scratched at a boil on his stomach. The sore ripped and a horde of maggots squirmed forth from the wound, falling and writhing onto the deck.

Anras did not rise to the goad. He had his own coterie of followers. His own coven of zealots. Both he and the daemon prince were messiahs. And that, above all, was the thing Taresh hated most.

Too much power for such little minds...

"All necessary parties are here. We may begin," Zseron said in an attempt to re-establish order.

"And some unnecessary ones too," Gargahl gurgled, then spat to the side. Taresh did not believe it was coincidence that the mucus landed as close as it did to Zasharr's boots. If the Eater of Worlds was enraged by the barb, he did not show it. The apothecary had come alone to witness the meeting. It seemed he did not trust his men to keep a lid on their tempers like him.

"The Sons of Manus continue their pursuit of us," Zseron continued, changing the hololith to display an approximation of the *Savory Wound* in the void with the *Gorgon's*

Manacles following after it. “We maintain the minimum distance required to stay out of range of their weapons, but we have reason to believe that our vessel will lose that edge in the near future. We require a new course of action.”

“This is what I have been called for?” Gargahl said, his breath a shrill whistle. “I thought this would be obvious. We fight back! It’s only one ship.”

Anras laughed. “Fight back? Do you wish to kill the entire warband, daemon? The ship is already damaged and we can assume their weapons systems are superior to ours. We would be asking for them to kill us!”

“We would be showing them that we are strong.”

Anras waved the comment away. “We should enter the Warp. Its hazards will make pursuit more difficult. It’ll give us a chance to evade them.”

“The Sea of Souls does not care if we are more familiar to it than them. It will make our path just as treacherous,” Zseron pointed out.

“If we die, we deserve to die *fighting*. Not whimpering and flickering out due to some Chaos catastrophe!” Gargahl boomed.

“It’s still a better plan than yours. The Ferric Sentries may not even follow us!” Anras insisted.

All eyes turned to Pyotr.

“They will follow us,” he said simply.

Anras snarled and began to pace again. “You and your blasted rivalry! It’s the reason we’re in this mess!” he snapped, pointing at the lord discordant.

“Yes, brother, blame me for this. That will surely get us out of this mess.”

“A vision might,” Gargahl chortled. “Perhaps you should make a forecast for us, Anras.”

Murmurs rose amongst those standing with the visionary. Taresh could tell he was scowling under his helm. “You know it is not so simple.”

“Ah, of course. I always forget that yours are so much more... unpredictable than the Prophet’s.” The daemon prince flashed his rotten fangs.

Anras slammed his fist down on the monolith’s edge. “The Prophet and I both share our father’s gift! We are no different!”

“And yet he foresees so much more than you.”

Taresh could sense Anras seething. His eye lenses could have bore holes into Gargahl, if anything short of a bolter round was capable of piercing his hide. “The Prophet spoke and we listened. We stood united against the Eldar during the Fall of Cadia and we left once our part was done. Nothing more, nothing less. He is not so special. He is simply the one who *happened* to portend such an event. It could have happened to any other visionary.”

“And yet you still call him ‘Prophet.’” Gargahl let out a wet chuckle.

Zseron spoke up before Anras had the opportunity to retort. “Let us return to the matter we are assembled for.”

“Of course.” Gargahl smiled again. “Our best chance is still to take the fight to them. We may even catch them off-guard.”

“Ridiculous!” Anras swept his hand through the air. “*They* are following *us*. We wouldn’t even get into range for a volley before we were rendered to pieces!”

“And the same would not happen in the Warp?”

“There wouldn’t be a *certainty* of it happening in the Warp. Against the *Manacles*, it *would* be.”

“Why not land?” A new voice spoke, rough and jagged like a chainaxe against stone. All eyes turned to face Zasharr. “A ground assault would be more assured and less likely to cause an entire ship’s worth of casualties. Our warbands would do well together with my company leading a front assault while yours skirmished and provided discord.”

“A good enough plan,” Zseron said. “However, there are no habitable planets within range with our current fuel supplies to attempt such a maneuver.” He modified the hololith again, showing off a map of the sector and the immediate systems near their position. Just as the sorcerer said, none were close enough for them to reach before their fuel reserves ran out.

“It’s also worth bearing in mind that the Sentries’s vehicles and war machines will more than make up for our superior numbers,” Pyotr chimed in. Taresh found himself completely unsurprised. “The fight would still be too even to be acceptable. We would likely have to pull out and flee again, which will just put us back in this same situation.”

“All the more reason we should attempt to defeat them here and now!” Gargahl said. His raptors screeched and cawed their agreement, stamping their clawed feet on the deck.

“Set your foolish pride aside and *think!*” Anras shouted. His followers also broke into impatient shouts and arguments on his behalf. The Strategium quickly degenerated into a cacophony of petulant screams and squabbling, each individual trying to be heard over all others. Taresh watched as Zasharr shook his head and simply left the room. The Night Lord found himself inclined to do the same, but remained still as his vision was drawn back to the center of the room.

Zseron looked at Pyotr with an odd expression. He almost seemed to be expecting something of the lord discordant. The Astartes in question refused to meet the Atramentar sorcerer’s gaze, instead fixating on the monolithic display. Taresh wondered if he noticed Zseron and was avoiding looking into those black eyes, or was too distracted by the fantasy of eating the monolith’s machine spirit—or whatever it was he did—to be aware of them. Either way, Taresh itched to draw his chainsword and cleave his brother’s head from his shoulders.

Finally, the sorcerer gave up and slammed his stave down onto the deck. A dark aura washed across the Strategium and everyone fell silent. They did not stop yelling and squawking. No, their voices simply stopped emitting noise altogether. Once they began to notice this, each member present began to fall still and pacify themselves, turning their attention to the Sorcerer of Stars.

Zseron sighed, bringing an annoyed hand to his temples and leaning on the hololith’s edge. “We cannot go on like this. Kicking and screaming like children without leadership.” Taresh could tell that both Anras and Gargahl wanted to speak up against that statement, but neither were able to. “Three days. We will decide our course of action in three days. If the

decision is not unanimous, I and the Atramentar will begin executing the members of this company one by one until it is. Meeting adjourned.”

With that, the sorcerer departed from the room, the other five members of his clique following after. The loud thrum of their terminator armor purring in the silent air. Moments after they left, the darker-than-night shadows that haunted the room diminished and speech was made possible again.

“So,” Gyrthemar said, “that went well.”

Taresh was inclined to agree. Zseron’s ultimatum was swift and effective. It would force them to rally behind someone, to finally agree on a single leader. It was almost clever.

He still felt like strangling his brother for the comment anyway.

Artemis wasn’t sure how much time she’d spent staring blankly at the door to her chambers, only that, by the time she’d exited her stupor, her feet had begun to ache and a thick sheet of sweat had coated her forehead.

She didn’t want to enter her chambers and couldn’t understand why. When Orion had died, the place felt hollow but manageable. Now that her mother was gone too... for some reason she had trouble finding the will to enter her own lodging.

I didn’t raise worms. Slap yourself around a bit and get to work. One of her mother’s mantras from Artemis’s childhood came back to her at that moment. It almost brought her to her knees. She slapped her hand on the wall panel instead and the door slid open.

Artemis stepped in and found her chambers to be exactly the same. A little cold, a lot empty, but just as she remembered. Her side of the room was neat, orderly, and spartan. Orion’s side was disorganized and cluttered with baubles and trinkets that she had no idea where he’d managed to get them from. Their lesser hololithic display table sat in the center of the room. Normally such a thing in a living chamber went exclusively to senior bridge officers, but Artemis and Orion had been lucky with their lodging assignment.

So alone...

She hadn’t realized how much of a role her family played in keeping her sane amongst her gods. Now she had no one. The other bridge officers had been around longer than Artemis and Orion and were just shells as a result. Barely more than servitors. She couldn’t rely on them to be her friends, to be there for her. And Jep... He was a good man, but he wasn’t blood. Artemis couldn’t take this to him.

Staggering over to her brother’s side of the room, Artemis found herself sitting on the edge of his cot and staring at the empty space between her eyes and the floor. Her hands moved on their own accord and she felt something smooth and round grasped by her fingers and placed into her lap. When she looked down she found herself holding a glass bottle with a miniature strike cruiser trapped inside. She let out an involuntary laugh that turned into a choking snort. Artemis remembered when Orion brought this back to their quarters. He’d been so proud of himself, saying it was an exact replica of the *Savory Wound* according to the man he traded for it

with, only for Artemis to tell him it looked nothing like the *Savory Wound* and was, in fact, the completely wrong design. Her brother had kept the thing anyway.

Once the moment of mirth faded, a sob escaped her lips and Artemis brought the bottle close to her chest. “Oh, Orion. What am I going to do?”

A memory began to dance within Artemis’s mind. She’d been sitting in front of the hololithic display, idly reading the entries they had on her homeworld. It had been recently after their capture and she still hadn’t released those ties that bind yet. Moments later, Orion burst through the door in his usual affable nature, as if oblivious to the eternal nightmare they found themselves living in.

“I have a plan!”

Artemis didn’t respond.

Orion cleared his throat. “*I have a plan!*”

She sighed and looked up at him. “For what?”

“To escape, of course.”

Artemis only rolled her eyes. “Just saying that will get you killed.”

“Aye, but it’s such a good plan. They won’t even have the chance, you see.” His eyes twinkled.

Her lips tugged upward at her brother’s expression and Artemis shut off the display and leaned up against its edge. She looked at him a moment then gestured widely with her hand. “Go on.”

“I,” he said, leaning in conspiratorially. “Am going to make the gods like me so much, they’ll make me an Astartes like them. Then, I’ll be strong enough to get you and Ma out of here.”

Artemis couldn’t stop herself from laughing. “You don’t believe that will work.”

Orion’s eyes widened with outrage. “Well, of course I do! It’s a great plan!”

“You’re an idiot.” She slapped him on the shoulder as she continued snickering. Orion’s brow furrowed in annoyance, but Artemis could see the grin he was trying to suppress. He didn’t believe a word he was saying, he just wanted her to feel better. It was working.

“I don’t see how!”

“For starters, you’re too old to become one of them.”

Orion rolled his eyes. “Oh look at Little Miss Schola here, using her brain to ruin my perfectly good idea!”

“It’s *not* a good idea. Besides, it wouldn’t suit you anyway.”

Orion curled an eyebrow upwards. “Oh?”

Artemis shook her head. “Not at all. You’re too... flabby.” She poked at his gut that had, admittedly, been shrinking since their arrival.

“Oh, I’ll get you for that!” Artemis shrieked as Orion grabbed her and tossed her over his shoulder. He began to spin around rapidly, Artemis banging her fists on his back and demanding to be set down. All the while, the two were laughing like they weren’t in the deepest dregs of hell.

The memory faded and Artemis was back in a cold, empty room, clutching a glass bottle to her chest like it was the last lifeline she had of her brother.

What are you going to do? Orion's voice floated into her mind. *You're going to make a plan. That's what you're going to do, Little Miss Schola.*

Artemis snorted, setting the bottle to the side and standing up. The idea was ridiculous. There was no escaping the Astartes. This was her life. There was no point in thinking otherwise.

She stepped up to the hololithic display table anyway and activated it—at minimum to get the notion out of her mind and prove it worthless. She pulled up the ship's current position in the sector and looked at the immediate area, as well as the radius it could reach with its current fuel reserves. Empty void, just as she expected.

Rolling her eyes, Artemis went to turn off the display while chastising herself for her foolishness but paused. She looked at the hololithic image of the *Savory Wound* and thought for a moment. She pulled up a new display and began to run calculations. Upon completion, she widened the range of the ship's travel radius to meet her approximate results, blacking out the central area of useless space. Still nothing. Not even a single habitable system. Artemis tapped a finger to her lips then ran a new series of calculations as an idea came to her. She shrank the scope to meet her new results and smiled slightly. There, a single system revealed itself.

Artemis spun the floating, hololithic disk with her hand and widened the display of the system once it was near her to get a closer look. Just because it was there, didn't make it habitable.

This is so stupid, she thought.

The system was unlabeled within the ship's cogitator banks. It only held four planets, three of which were unusable gaseous spheres, and, therefore, unworthy of labeling. Artemis frowned at that. Something tugged at the recesses of her memory. Strange...

She turned her attention to the fourth planet, a small world that appeared to be adequate enough to support life. There was record of it within the ship's memory, as well. Artemis pulled it up and her lips parted in shock as she read the name, soon followed by a wave of nausea that brought her to her elbows on the display table.

Kleos.

She knew that name. She knew it very, very well.

Her mother had been right. They were going home.

Chapter VI: Gracious Hosts

The only major change that the apothecarion had undergone since Zasharr's residency was the scent. The chamber had gone from smelling sterile, dusty, and vacant to smelling sterile, caustic, and coppery with blood. Pyotr wasn't sure if the abrupt increase in the facility's use was a good or bad thing. Perhaps both, considering who was operating it.

The mad apothecary was currently leaned over one of his surgical tables, performing a procedure on a marine who had been stripped of his armor. The transhuman was restrained, much like the other captives in the room that Zasharr was keeping under with a cocktail of anesthetics that likely would kill a mere human just by proximate inhalation.

"That meeting was a circus," Zasharr said, his back to Pyotr. He didn't bother to turn or even pause from his work.

"Is that what you called me here to say?"

His cousin hummed his answer.

"You left before Zseron threatened to kill everyone on the ship unless we came to a consensus."

"Good," Zasharr said. "Think he will commit to it?"

"I imagine we will find out in three days, as I don't see this blasted warband ever reaching anything even remotely resembling unity."

Zasharr hummed his disapproval again. Pyotr stepped deeper into the chamber and took his place on the opposite side of the slab. It was then that he realized that the berzerker surgeon's patient bore no resemblance to the geneseed progenitors of Manus. "Is this the one Gyrrhemar fought?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Will he live?"

"Under the Narthecium of any other surgeon? No. But I will ensure Ajax survives."

Pyotr stared into the unconscious berzerker's face. Even comatose, the World Eater's brow was furrowed and tense, as if even in the blackness of sleep he could not escape the agony that gnawed at his skull. "Do you think that is wise?"

"I have ensured that Ajax knows his place. He is unlikely to cause trouble again."

Pyotr raised an eyebrow, eliciting Zasharr to—without looking up from his operation—proffer a fluid-filled capsule that he placed on the instrument tray that was being held by a medical servitor.

Picking up the capsule, Pyotr found the liquid to be a preservation fluid and two eyes floated within. One was ruptured and hastily removed with an enlarged black pupil that lacked an iris, while the other had been excised with surgical care and was amber in color with whites that arced with numerous angry, red lines. Pyotr looked back at Ajax's face, noting how one of his closed lids seemed to sag inward.

“We would have died on that station, just as you, had your warband not taken us in,” Zasharr explained. “Ajax violated that hospitality by insulting his gracious hosts. He had to pay the price just as much as the loud one did.”

“‘Gracious’ is not a word I would use to describe my brothers.”

Zasharr actually paused from his work for a moment at that. “Mm. Perhaps. But I can think of few other Sons of Curze who would have put themselves at risk for us. It would have been more tactical to leave us on Exodus to draw attention for you to escape.” In truth, Pyotr was surprised that they hadn’t.

The mad apothecary continued to eye him as he worked, his hands deep within Ajax’s chest cavity. “I thought you would appreciate such a gesture.”

“Why is that?”

“I find that the one thing in common with all of you Lords of the Night is your predisposition towards justice. There are variations in its employment and idealization, but you all curiously share it as a core belief. I wonder if it’s a result of the teachings of your Primarch, or some form of hormonal response caused by your geneseed. I would certainly be interested in studying such a phenomenon.”

Pyotr grunted. This again.

“You cannot have access to our geneseed repository.”

Zasharr grimaced. “A shame.”

“Why? Because you can’t dissect our late father’s organic material to see what makes us tick?”

“Partially yes, but mostly due to... a theory of mine.”

Pyotr gave him a flat expression. Zasharr snarled at that.

“Don’t look at me like that! This one has merit!”

Pyotr breathed out through his nose then nodded. “Go on.”

Zasharr’s eyes took on an unpleasantly excited cast. It did not match his harsh features, making him look more than slightly rabid. He pulled one of his hands from Ajax’s body and pointed at Pyotr with the bloody tool that he was holding. “Chimeric geneseed,” he said. “Such a thing would open the door to boundless possibilities if I were given enough samples to work with.

“Imagine, the justice of your Primarch, the drive of mine, and the ferocity of both of them in one being. Such an Astartes would be the ultimate arbiter, an unconquerable force of law.”

“Or a sadistic mass murderer.”

Zasharr’s expression withered as he returned back to his surgery once again. “Faith, cousin. The unity between our own legions would only be the first step. This could pave the way for a breed of Astartes that could rival the Primaris marines of the Imperium.” The surgeon got a far-off look in his eye. “Or, perhaps even the Blood God himself...”

Pyotr frowned at that. He was aware of his cousin’s quest to achieve “Kharneth’s ultimate trial,” as he put it, but was not entirely sure what it entailed. Nor did he want to know, for that matter.

“Does the mixing of geneseed not strike you as profane?” Pyotr mused.

Zasharr snorted. “My apologies, next time I have ethical or pious quandaries I will be sure to first take them up with you, Marked of Slaaneth, lord discordant, and Son of Curze.”

Pyotr grunted in acknowledgment to his point, then glanced around the room. He gestured to the nearest occupied table. “Why not the seed of Manus? You have a fair collection of that lying about.”

The apothecary’s scowl deepened. “I will not plague my men with such foul organic data. Their capacity for technology and mechanics is admirable, but I would rather my warriors *not* have the compulsive need to tear out their flesh and replace it with metal trinkets and novelties.” He raised his instrument again and wagged it in the air. “Now, some uncorrupted Death Guard geneseed, *that* is something I would like to get my hands on.”

“Regardless,” Pyotr said, placing the capsule of eyes back onto the tray, “I presume you did not just call me here to show me a severed eye and beg for something I do not have the permission to grant.”

Zasharr gave a low growl. “I do not *beg*, cousin. We are not the curs that the False Emperor intended us to be.”

And yet you collared yourselves with pain engines in the name of a master. There was something delicious about willfully injecting agony onto oneself for eternity. Pyotr had to rend the thought from his mind—it was not his.

“But, yes,” Zasharr continued, “there is more.” He drew his hands from the torso of his brother, deposited his tools, and began to wipe his hands clean. “What is your plan for getting out of this mess?”

“I have none.”

“I find it difficult to believe that the Re—”

“Do not say it,” Pyotr said with more venom than he intended.

Zasharr paused, looking at the lord discordant carefully, then continued wiping his hands with his rag. “I find it difficult to believe that a man with your history does not have a plan to escape death yet again.”

“It is different this time,” Pyotr said darkly.

“How?”

Pyotr did not have an answer to that question. He could not bring himself to confess the gnashing and clawing thoughts running rampant within his mind. The struggle that lied within.

The surgeon let out a sigh that sounded like he was gargling chips of rockcrete, then directed the medical servitors to begin stitching Ajax up again. “Do you know what your problem is, Pyotr? You lack purpose. I strongly recommend you find it, lest you doom your brothers and my own warband, as well as yourself.” He then turned away from his cousin.

The gesture was clear. Pyotr left the apothecarion, waiting until the doors fully closed behind him before letting out a long, protracted exhale of breath. It had taken considerable effort to remain focused in the chamber and not allow his attention to drift towards the machine spirits

of the various medical appliances that enticed him to be broken and agonized under his ministrations.

He was getting worse. The previous night, the Dark Prince visited him once again in his dreams. Pyotr had once more given up something within himself, though he could not remember what exactly it had been. All he knew is that he was more hollow than he was the day before and the desire to feed his thirst was edging closer and closer to all-consuming.

Pyotr let out another breath, then looked down to find a diminutive figure standing before him at attention.

Artemis had to resist the urge to flinch as her god's gaze fell upon her. His black eyes seemed to be dissecting her, reading her soul and sensing her duplicitous heart. This being could kill her with ease for no other reason than she was in the way and there was nothing Artemis could do about it. Her plan suddenly felt very foolish.

"What is it?" the Astartes growled—at least, that's what it sounded like to her mortal ears.

Artemis opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Instead, she drew a dataslate and proffered it to him. The god—Pyotr, based on the insignia on his armor—frowned, looking down at it, then at his gauntleted fists.

"That will not work." His pale skin creased with annoyance at her.

She began to tremble then. The image of her death in the same manner of her brother grew clearer and more vivid in her mind's eye as sweat began to trickle down her temple and her heart hammered in her chest.

The god, Pyotr, snorted and stepped past her, beginning to make his way down the corridor.

"I-I have a plan to save us!" she called after him.

The figure stopped. Slowly, he turned back to face her, his expression hard but without anger or any emotion beyond vague apathy. Artemis assumed most gods would be amused by their lessers presuming to know as much or more as them. She wasn't sure if this was better or worse.

"You forget yourself, slave," Pyotr said.

"My lord," Artemis said quickly.

Pyotr eyed her for a long moment, then nodded to his side as he turned to continue on his way. Artemis scurried to catch up, falling into step beside him, forced to quicken her pace to match the strides of the two-and-a-half meter tall giant.

"What is this plan?" the god asked, as if humoring her.

"As... as you know, our current trajectory is unsustainable, my lord," Artemis stammered.

"Yes."

"And if... if we intend to live, we need to change courses. Immediately."

"Get to the point."

Artemis blanched, then swallowed. “I propose we make landfall. We can engage in a more favorable assault then escape when—”

Pyotr cut her off with a glare. “*We?* Would *you* be fighting alongside us against the Ferric Sentries, girl?”

She gaped, her mouth opening and closing with nothing but strangled noises and air coming out in response.

The god shook his head, seeming disappointed. “Others have already petitioned for this idea. It will not work. There is nowhere *to* make landfall with our current fuel reserves.”

“Yes, but only if we travel entirely via the void.” Artemis held up the dataslate for his inspection again. “If we travel through the Warp, however, I’ve calculated a route that will bring us to a habitable world. A... a planet called Kleos, my lord. We would reach it and have enough fuel to depart once we’re certain the enemy can’t pursue us.”

Pyotr frowned and looked at the calculations on her dataslate. “You did these configurations yourself?”

“Yes, my lord.”

He looked at her with new interest, then carefully—as if cradling fine porcelain—took the dataslate from her. “I will have to check to ensure this conclusion is correct.”

“Of course, my lord.”

Pyotr continued staring at the dataslate for a moment, unable to flip through the multiple documents she’d prepared for this proposal. After a fashion, he turned to look at her.

“Why?” he asked.

“I’m... sorry, my lord?”

“You wear the attire of a bridge officer. I am not often associated with such crew. Why bring this to me and not Anras?”

Artemis stiffened at that, but masked it as her falling into attention. “With respect, my lord, I would rather not present my findings to the god who killed my brother.”

Pyotr scoffed at her usage of the term ‘god’ in reference to the Astartes. Artemis stifled the urge to cringe at her misstep.

“That does not answer my question.”

“I brought it to you because you were the one to punish him. To deliver justice in his name. For that, I believe you are more worthy than any other... Astartes aboard this vessel.”

He sized her up again after that, his expression softening an almost imperceptible amount. “Dangerous words for a slave. Especially one whose name is unknown and therefore meaningless to me.”

Artemis looked down, bowing her head subserviently.

“That,” Pyotr drawled, “was an opportunity to provide it to me.”

She looked up. “A-Artemis, my lord. Artemis Maralli.” She saluted.

The god stared at her yet again with those piercing eyes. “I will take what you have brought me under consideration, Artemis.”

“Thank you,” she said gratefully. “Um, sire.”

“That was a dismissal,” Pyotr growled.

Artemis saluted again then turned on her heels and left him.

Once she was firmly around the corner of the next corridor, she let out a relieved sigh. His words implied that her findings would only be considered, not utilized. But, as far as Artemis could tell, if they had better options, they would have employed them by now. Her plan was working. By the Emperor, it was *working*. Now, she just had to make sure it stayed that way.

She quickly made her way down to Scab City, found Jep, and told him to gather as many trusted people as he could by tomorrow.

The waltz with fate had begun. Artemis hoped she could keep up with the rhythm.

“A slave did this?” Retrigan asked as he overlooked the string of calculations displayed on the hololith.

“Yes,” Pyotr said.

“And they’re correct?”

“Would I be showing them to you if they were not?”

Gyrthemar scratched at his cheek where the seam of his flesh met the metal of his augmetic. “What even is it, brother?”

“Clever, that’s what it is,” Retrigan answered. “The one that did this is intelligent for a serf.”

“She’s a member of the bridge crew,” Pyotr explained. “A junior officer by the look of her. Likely had to be educated to get there.”

“I have seen standard Scholas,” Taresh said in his dull, flat voice. “They do not teach the mortals this.” He gestured to the display.

Pyotr eyed the floating string of numbers, crossing his arms and ignoring the cooing in his brain that was urging him to spike the hololith table with a virus from the mechadendrite limb that he no longer had.

“It looks like a path,” Gyrthemar said in an effort to contribute. They all gave him a suffering look.

“It’s the best option that’s been presented to us thus far,” Retrigan said, ignoring their brother.

Pyotr nodded. “It is. Though, the true challenge will be getting the rest of the warband to see that.”

Sixth Claw pondered on that for a moment.

“Zseron should be manageable,” Retrigan said. “He is far more likely to see reason.”

“Agreed,” Taresh added. “Most who have not allied themselves with Gargahl or Anras will turn to him for guidance on the matter.”

“Hardly unanimous still,” Pyotr remarked bitterly.

Retrigan frowned while Taresh’s expression remained neutral. Gyrthemar seemed as if he wasn’t even attempting to keep up anymore and had turned to smacking the side of his augmetic eye once more, mumbling about static.

“So you need to convince the other two then,” Retrigan finally said. “If they agree, their followers will do so, as well.”

Pyotr did not miss that his brother had said ‘*you*’ and not ‘*we*’ in that statement. The burden was firmly on Pyotr’s shoulders. He expected as much from Taresh. His crimson-cloaked brother evaded all interaction with Pyotr that was not strictly necessary, and the feeling was mutual. Gyrthemar, he knew, was too oblivious of the situation to offer aid—nor did Pyotr truly want it. Retrigan, however, he thought to be more reliable. The once-raptor apparently still felt as strongly as he had towards Pyotr as their last conversation suggested.

“No easy task,” Pyotr said. An understatement. The warband had been withering for centuries under the dual-leadership of Anras and Gargahl due to their inability to agree on anything. The attack on Exodus Station was all but a miracle to have occurred. The only reason the warband had not fractured yet was because both despots had been loyal lieutenants to their previous captain before his death at the Siege of Terra. Ebvenor’s ghost was the only thing keeping the company together. “I will start immediately.”

“No,” Taresh said, squinting at the hololith. “Begin tomorrow. Let them sweat for some time. It will make them more likely to compromise. If you approach them too soon, they might believe other solutions will reveal themselves shortly after and not meet your request with the proper urgency.”

“We only have three days,” Pyotr retorted.

“And our brothers are very foolish.”

The lord discordant looked at Taresh. The thinblood was too cold, too guarded for his liking. Pyotr never knew what he was thinking. He had no accent and wore his armor plain, unadorned without the skulls and skin of his prey. Even his helm was plain and lacked all VIIIth legion signifiers apart from its coloration. All of that made him difficult to trust. And yet, Pyotr had to begrudgingly admit that there was logic and wisdom in his words.

“Fine. I begin tomorrow.”

Retrigan and Taresh seemed to take that as an end to the meeting and wordlessly exited the chamber, leaving Pyotr alone with Gyrthemar.

That should not have been surprising. Pyotr had been distancing himself from Sixth Claw for years now, preferring the company of his daemon engine rather than that of his brothers. He preferred it that way; without the nagging and bickering and the incessant need to explain himself for every action he performed to them. That simply did not occur through a bond with a machine. It was a far less infuriating form of existence.

And yet, something deep within Pyotr gripped him, warning him that solitude was dangerous for him as of now. He did not want them, but he needed them. For the time being.

“So,” his remaining brother looked to him, “matter resolved?”

Pyotr frowned. “Not nearly.”

“Understood, brother.”

The lord discordant looked at Gyrthemar, took a moment to contemplate, then turned and left the room.

Chapter VII: Cursed

Pyotr was cursed. It was not the same as Anras. Not the same as the select few sons of his genefather who inherited the propensity to see visions of the future. No, his curse was different. His curse was an alien cancer that had latched onto his soul and slowly leached away at him day after day. It was a curse with a grip so strong that Pyotr doubted he would ever be capable of breaking it. He was certain he would be forced to endure it for centuries more until it eventually brought him spiraling into the eternal throes of madness.

And his name was Gyrrhemar.

Pyotr left his chambers to find his brother waiting for him on the other side, leaned up against the wall, spinning his spear around his hand. Upon seeing Pyotr, he allowed the weapon to complete one final arc before lightly pushing off the wall and standing at his full height.

“What is it that you want?” Pyotr asked, rubbing his eyes with a thumb and forefinger.

“We are convincing Anras and Gargahl to agree to your plan today, are we not?”

Pyotr frowned. *We?*

His expression must have been evident, as Gyrrhemar laughed. “You did not think I wouldn’t aid you on this did you, brother?”

Pyotr stared at Gyrrhemar blankly. “The last thing I want in this endeavor is *your* aid.”

Gyrrhemar frowned and tapped a knuckle against his bionic eye. “Why not? I don’t see the rest of Sixth Claw coming. You would be alone.”

“That is preferred,” Pyotr said. The last thing he wanted was his task to be made more difficult by his brother’s presence alone.

“You could benefit from learning to be part of a team, brother.”

Pyotr snorted and began making his way down the corridor. Annoyingly, his brother insisted on following him.

“Look around you, Gyrrhemar. Loyalty does not exist within this warband. Only vipers and sycophants wishing to scramble their way to the highest position they can. Survival means nothing compared to pride.”

“Then perhaps we should change that.”

“The only two who could are dead.”

Gyrrhemar said nothing for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his tone was far more introspective than Pyotr thought he was capable of. “Do you think that our father was right in allowing himself to die?”

Pyotr sneered. “I think he was right in hating his children.”

The rest of their walk continued in silence until the corridors grew progressively more caked in grime and dross. Cleaning it was regarded as futile and few slaves and servitors were able to make any significant progress before they succumbed to sickness and decay. As Pyotr continued his approach, a chamber entrance at the end of the corridor came into view through the haze of fleas and brackish smog. Standing on either side of the entryway was a hunched figure with clawed feet, a sputtering jump pack, and flesh rotting within their own armor.

“The Hellrider approaches,” Apostle Orred cackled.

“Alongside the Wolfkiller,” added Apostle Tyther.

Gyrthemar chuckled approvingly. “I’m collecting titles quickly it seems.”

Pyotr glared at him for silence. “I will speak with Gargahl.”

The two raptors squawked and wheezed with incessant amusement.

“He wishes to have an audience with the Lord Abbot!”

“Such a high request from such a lowly mortal!”

Pyotr waited until they had finished their mockery and coughing before he spoke again.

He did not speak for another ten minutes.

“It was not a request.”

The two apostles' jubilations resurged uproariously.

“He thinks he has the merit to make demands of the Lord Abbot!”

“Such bold words for such an unsoiled soul!”

“Ah, but it is not unsoiled, is it?” Orred clicked, crouching down to all-fours as he approached Pyotr, tilting his head from side to side as he circled and inspected him. “There is rot there. Yes, we *smell* it. Such nasty, *nasty* rot! Born of perfume and elixir and pain and joyful blood. It is not true rot, not *pure* rot. So shameful. So very, very shameful!”

“Not like this one.” Tyther remained upright, but his movements were stuttering and avian-like. Occasionally he jerked and twitched without much rhyme or reason. He approached Gyrthemar, laughing his crackling laugh as he mockingly shined the bat-winged skull on Gyrthemar’s chest, which only served to smear it with further filth. “So strong. Yes, *yes!* We heard of this one’s bout. We heard the Wolfkiller nearly slayed the champion. That is good. The Lord Abbot likes strength. He would make a good Apostle.”

Neither brother moved, but Gyrthemar glanced at Pyotr through his helm, forging a private voxlink. “Have they always been so creepy?”

Instead of responding, Pyotr approached the door. Almost immediately, both raptors hissed and meltas appeared in their hands and pointed at him. Gyrthemar, for all the good he was worth, at least had the tip of his spear trained on the back of Orred’s neck.

“The Lord Abbot will not be interrupted!” the Apostle snapped.

“He’ll have to make an exception,” Gyrthemar spat back.

“No! No! *No!*” Orred continued to squawk. “The plagues *hate* him!” He pushed the muzzle of his meltagun closer towards Pyotr. Gyrthemar responded by pressing the head of his spear in the gap beneath Orred’s helmet, letting the weapon rest right on his neck. “He may not! He may not!”

Tyther, fortunately, seemed to be somewhat more cognizant than his companion and stared at Pyotr with glistening red eyes. “What is the reason for this?”

“Our survival. I have a plan he must hear.”

“He already has a grand plan.”

“Hardly,” Gyrthemar snorted. Orred barked in outrage while Tyther simply glared.

“At worst he ignores me and nothing is lost. I sincerely doubt he is doing much with his time,” Pyotr said.

“He communes with the Plague Father.”

As I said...

Pyotr’s frown slowly drew into a sneer. “What will it take?”

“Hm,” Tyther eyed Pyotr, then his gaze fell upon Gyrrhemar. A series of clicks came from his and Orred’s helms as they discussed privately. Then the two began to audibly cackle together. “The Wolfkiller’s spear.”

“*What?*” Gyrrhemar barked. “Absolutely n—”

“Give it to them,” Pyotr said.

“But, brother—!”

“It’s just a damn weapon, Gyrrhemar!” Pyotr snapped. “It does the same job as any other tool like it on this bloody ship.”

Gyrrhemar stared at his brother for a traitorously long moment, then drew the weapon back from Orred’s throat and tossed it at Tyther. The raptor caught it and proceeded to marvel over his new acquisition. Satisfied, he nodded to Orred and the other Apostle begrudgingly lowered his melta. He then looked to Pyotr and nodded for him to continue.

The lord discordant said nothing as he approached the doorway once more, Gyrrhemar falling into step beside him.

“I have it handled from this point,” Pyotr said. “Remain quiet and say nothing foolish.”

“Understood, brother,” Gyrrhemar said through gritted teeth.

The wide chamber was more of a banquet hall than an abbey, as what was led to be believed. Granted, it did have the high, arching cathedral ceiling and spired monuments alongside multiple shrines and altars to the Plague Father, each with at least one raptor kneeling in supplication and prayer, only dimly bathed in the pale light of candles. In the center of the room, however, was a long table with a feast of rot and decay laid out from end to end. Flies crowded the “food” and poured out from the bubbling cauldron that sat in the center of the display like a smog. At the head of the table sat the bloated figure of Gargahl, gorging himself on the discolored and puss-crusting meat of what Pyotr could only assume were once serfs.

Quite the communion, he thought sardonically.

As Pyotr and his brother further entered the chamber, the daemon priest looked up from his indulgence and squinted at them before his lips curled into a predatory smile. “Have you finally come to pledge your loyalty to the true captain, brothers?”

Gyrrhemar, thankfully, crossed his arms and said nothing. Pyotr stepped forward, eyeing the banquet table once again.

“How many slaves did it take to create this?”

“Care for the little mortals now, do you, Pyotr?” Gargahl chuckled wetly. Pyotr stared at him instead of responding. Eventually the daemon that was once his brother snorted. “Why does it matter? They were lower deck slaves.”

“Even the most expendable labor is finite,” Pyotr responded.

“They were weak.” Gargahl gripped another chunk of offal with his clawed hand and bit into it, chunks of flesh and entropic slime dribbling down his chin as he maintained eye contact with Pyotr. “What is it that you want from me?”

“Your collusion,” Pyotr admitted. Several of Gargahl’s Apostles had begun to take notice of the conversation and either scrambled or flew their way over to observe.

“Oh?” Gargahl’s grin widened and he wheezed in amusement. “Do tell, brother.”

“A new plan for the warband to survive. One that does not involve facing a ship that would greatly overpower us.” Pyotr procured a dataslate with the details and provided it to a nearby attendant. The raptor made his way to the other side and offered it to Gargahl. The daemon prince continued to look at Pyotr and lick his teeth.

“No need,” he said without taking the dataslate. “My plan is still superior.”

Pyotr sneered and leaned on the edge of the table. “Your plan will get us all killed!”

“Only if we are weak. In that case we deserve to die. The Long War will be won through might, brother. Not scurrying away into the dark like Anras would have us.”

“This has nothing to do with Anras,” Pyotr protested. “I have found us a route to a world in which we can hold our ground and live to fight another day.”

“By destroying our enemy or by running?”

The two Night Lords held each other’s gaze. Pyotr fumed within his helm. He knew Gargahl would be the least reasonable, the most prideful. He had still hoped that there would be some semblance of the marine he knew before his ascendancy that he wouldn’t be outright *suicidal*.

“And there lies the problem,” Gargahl gave a ragged, mucus-filled sigh. “Weak plans are made by weak men. It would never have worked for that very reason, Pyotr. Because you. Are. Weak.” His smile fled, leaving behind a gargoyle’s expression of disgust. “I have seen you fight these last few months. You fail to slay worthy prey yourself. You must kill that which is already wounded. A carrion feeder.”

“This is about the dreadnought?” Pyotr spat.

“I cannot trust a mind so cowardly to craft a scheme worthy of entertaining. It is why the visionary’s always fail.”

Pyotr’s hands curled into fists, his knuckles resting on the table. “Gargahl, listen to yourself,” he began, straining to keep his voice even. “We cannot—”

“Enough,” Gargahl cut him off dismissively. “I will not listen to any more of your pathetic words. You’ve interrupted my meal for long enough. *Leave.*”

The raptors surrounding Pyotr took up the call, chanting *Leave! Leave! Leave!* in their sibilant chorus, drowning out any argument the lord discordant could have hoped to make. Pyotr, with what little control he had left, clenched his jaw and turned to depart. He would make no headway here today.

It wasn't until he had reached the door that he realized Gyrrhemar had not followed him. Looking over his shoulder, Pyotr saw his brother standing in the same position, looking bored above all things.

"Shame," Gyrrhemar said.

Gargahl looked up from the feast that he had just returned to. "Why, brother? Because I would not make myself lesser by subjecting myself to such frail spirits?"

"No." Gyrrhemar shrugged. "Because you refuse the opportunity to make yourself greater."

Gargahl frowned, staring the warrior down. "Explain."

"Taking the fight directly to the *Manacles* is fine and good. Just as you said, it proves us stronger than our foes. Worthy of one day tearing the Corpse Emperor from his seat." Gargahl nodded in agreement. "But it is so... vapid."

"*What?*" Gargahl demanded. The daemon prince rose from his throne, fangs bared and leathery wings unfurling in a grand display of outrage at the insult.

Gyrrhemar did not move. "I said it is vapid." The raptors hissed and growled their own fury. "The merit is something I agree with, just not the method. It is one thing to watch a vessel break apart across the stars, knowing that all within will perish as a result. It is another entirely to face them in battle, watching their blood spill by your hands, seeing the life leave their bodies and knowing you were the cause of it. *That*, I find to be true strength. *Certain* strength. Not the reliance of missiles and ships, but body and power."

Gargahl stared at Gyrrhemar for several breaths, then slowly lowered himself back down into his throne. "An interesting point, brother," the rotted creature confessed.

"I say this only because I know we share a love of crushing a worthy foe under our heels." Gyrrhemar chuckled. Gargahl joined him.

"Yes, very much so. I will... consider this notion. Perhaps I will even review this plan you have crafted. Leave now with my blessing."

Gyrrhemar nodded and turned to leave. As he approached Pyotr, he met his brother's eyes. "Forgive me if I said something *foolish*, brother. I would hate to ruin your flawless strategy." He then shoved past Pyotr and left the chamber.

The *Savory Wound* was a below-average-sized, strike classification, light cruiser with numerous logged modifications and likely just as many unlogged ones. A standard vessel of its same pattern could carry well over ten thousand personnel, as well as plenty of armored vehicles, depending on interior holding specifications. The *Savory Wound* currently had an estimated 5,432 living personnel and not even a half dozen battle-worthy armored vehicles. That, Artemis surmised, was still quite the sample size for Jep to choose from when it came to gathering individuals willing to listen to her.

He came up with a little over twenty.

She had been expecting far less.

Artemis surveyed the motley group that sat scattered about her personal chambers. Most of them, Jep included, seemed uncomfortable to be so far from the bowels of the ship, their postures closed and guarded with eyes that furtively flickered back and forth as if they expected someone to come charging in at any moment to punish them for being somewhere they shouldn't. Artemis certainly had her work cut out for her.

Most of the people Jep had gathered, Artemis noted, also seemed to be fuel loaders like himself. In fact, as she continued to scan them all one by one, she came to realize they all bore the telltale marks of grease, scars, and promethium burns that came with the position. The only one who was not of their caste was Phihks, the rat vendor from Scab City. Fortunately, she had been counting on most of them to have the same role as her friend.

"So, um, what did you want to talk to us about?" Jep said in an effort to get the ball rolling. Artemis hadn't realized she'd been standing by the hololithic display, anxiously wishing to start but not being able to bring herself to.

She took a breath and surveyed the multitude of pairs of eyes that had turned their attention to her. This was the moment. This was when she publicly declared herself a traitor and put her life—her suffering—into the hands of complete strangers. Her body quivered at the sheer absurdity and stupidity of what she was about to do. And yet, she couldn't bear the alternative for one more second.

Time to take back what little of my life I can.

Artemis began by activating the hololith, a display flickering to life of a planet. She knew the world would mean nothing to them. They did not know its name or its significance yet. They only saw it as a thing they could never have. Her job was to prove them wrong and instead make it become proof of a life outside this damnable ship.

"This world is called Kleos," she explained. "It has an estimated population of seven-hundred and eighty-eight million according to the last recorded census in our cogitator banks. Its main export is plasteel. Raw resources are mined planetside then refined in one of three orbiting stations. It—"

"Why should we karking care?" A voice said from the crowd. Artemis tracked the source to a woman with toned arms and auburn hair with several strands done up in simple braids. A leather band encircled her forehead and she looked as if she'd acquired several scars along her face and arms that weren't from her time aboard the *Savory Wound*.

"And you are?" Artemis asked.

"Wolfdame Woldottir of the Whitefur Wolfpine Clan."

Artemis opened her mouth to respond, then paused, then blinked. "...Really?"

The woman tilted her head back and let out a barking laugh. "Do I look like I'm three meters tall, wrapped in foil, and got a cock swinging between my legs? No, not *really*." She chuckled to herself again, revealing teeth that brandished exaggerated canines. "My name's Brelja."

"Well, Brelja," Artemis said, "you should care because this planet presents an opportunity to you. To all of us." She turned to address the entire crowd now. "The gods will be landing on

this world to fight back against their pursuers. It is under Imperium control, but sits on the fringes with little regulation. That is a benefit to the Night Lords, but it is also a benefit to us.”

“How?” Brelja asked, looking more curious now, but still incredulous.

This was the part where Artemis’s mother would have said something mad, yet inspiring. Unhinged, yet poetic. Something that resonated within them, something that got their hearts pumping and willing to follow her into hell.

Artemis was not her mother.

“It gives us a chance to escape.”

A wave of psychic whiplash seemed to wash over the amassed group. Nearly each one of them flinched as if they had been slapped and began to look to the door as if expecting a god to come bursting through to slaughter them for simply hearing such words. Panic rose within Artemis. It would only take one of them to confine her life to potentially months of torment before she was permitted to die. Only one to ruin everything. Throne, what was she *doing*?

Jep stared at her wide-eyed while Brelja simply furrowed her brow. Surprisingly, she found Phihks giggling to himself with delight.

“You’re karking mad,” Brelja said.

“No,” Artemis mustered. “I’m tired. Tired of living like a rat, terrified of the giant shadows cast within these corridors. I would rather die seeking freedom than wasting away as their slaves.”

For the second time in a few minutes, Artemis was surprised when Brelja nodded to her approvingly with a wolfish grin. “You’re brave, girl. I can respect that. But it’s stupid to try to escape them. Stupidity kills.”

“We have a chance here,” Artemis insisted. The other serfs had begun to settle down again and were listening to the exchange. “The gods are vulnerable. If there’s any time to strike, it’s now.”

“H... How would we do it?” Jep spoke up, his voice quivering hesitantly.

“By sabotaging their plans,” Artemis said simply. She changed the display to show the petition she’d given to Pyotr—though had made sure to carefully leave out any of her signifiers on the work—and gestured to it. “Their current aim is to feint landing on this planet to engage with the enemy then flee when the time is right and their pursuers are weakened.” She scanned the crowd again. Many still seemed terrified to even be listening to her, but there were eyes here and there that shone with curiosity as well as mortification. Perhaps it was simply macabre interest and didn’t even begin to mean support. Like watching a fawn dying on the side of the road as you rode past. Artemis had to seize the opportunity anyway. “This is where you all come into play. We can force our gods to stand their ground if they’re incapable of running away.”

Silence hung in the air for a moment before Brelja snorted and spoke up again. “I’ll bite. How do we do that?”

“I’ve been informed there’s a leak in the fuel reservoirs.” She stifled the urge to glance at Jep. No need to get him into hot water with his fellow workers if this didn’t work out in her

favor. “I want all fuel loaders present to make it worse. Enough so that they will have just enough to arrive on Kleos, but none more than that.”

Much to Artemis’s dismay, the crowd broke out into an uproar with each fuel loader having something to say on the matter. Each comment was more or less a different—and progressively more vulgar—iteration of declaring her scheme impossible or that they were already sticking their necks out by not reporting the *current* leak. It took every ounce of will Artemis had not to buckle under the pressure.

It was Jep who managed to silence the crowd. “HOLD ON!” He cried. And... they listened. Voices and outcries faltered off one by one and they instead turned to face Jep. Nervous, indecisive, utterly hopeless and helpless Jep. Artemis didn’t quite understand it. She’d never met someone who projected *less* authority in her life. Yet... they listened to him? Strange. “Let’s hear the rest before passing judgment! Okay?”

He turned to face her again and Artemis nodded her thanks. “I... I know what I’m asking you for is a lot. I know this risks not only yourselves but also your friends and family. But, if this works, our gods will be dead and we’ll be free.”

A hand in the crowd raised. “How would we manage this without getting caught? The gods roam and check in occasionally. They’re sure to take notice.”

Damn, Artemis thought. She hadn’t considered that. She’d thought the only time the Astartes ever bothered going to the lower decks was to hunt. “We’ll create a distraction.”

“What kind of a distraction?”

Artemis wasn’t swift or willful enough to stop the uncomfortable grimace that spread across her face. Murmurs began to rise amongst the group again.

“Why so much effort?” Someone said over the growing noise. It silenced the crowd again and drew all eyes upon the speaker. “Why so much effort?” Phihks repeated. “The miss wants to do so much, but the gods are landing on this planet anyway, mm? So why don’t we *sneak* out during the battle and integrate with the populace? Who cares if they can leave or not?”

Artemis blinked, her heart suddenly hammering in her chest harder than it had before, accompanied by a barbed throbbing in her skull. The eyes moved back to her, waiting for an answer.

Images flashed through her mind. Her brother’s laughing face, her mother’s wry smile. Artemis, studying at the scholas, excited and content with her plan to join the Imperium’s naval forces. All of that, shattered by the monsters she heretically called divine because they were the closest thing to it in this den of moaning darkness.

“I don’t want to escape,” she confessed in a whisper. “I want to destroy them.”

Artemis couldn’t bring herself to look at the crowd. She knew what she would see. Instead, she looked at Phihks. And, remarkably, he seemed pleased.

A sigh drew her attention away from him “I wish you the best, girl,” Brelja said. “I really do. But this plan you’ve cooked up? It’s karking suicide. There’s lines when it comes to courage, and this sure isn’t one I’ll be crossing.” The woman gave her an apologetic shrug, then left the chamber without another word.

There was only a moment's pause, but Artemis already knew what came next. She hung her head and waited until she heard the sound of herding footfalls traveling towards the door and out of her quarters. When she looked up again, she found only Jep and Pihks still remained.

"They won't say anything," Jep said in an effort to be reassuring and put a hand on her shoulder. "They all have something to lose and speaking about this is a risk they won't take."

Artemis sighed and sat on the edge of the hololithic table like the worn-out heap she was. "I can tell."

Rain meant nothing to Pyotr. This should have concerned him. He remembered a time before becoming a Son of Curze that he had loved the rain. Yes, even upon becoming an Astartes, he still enjoyed it both tactically and aesthetically. Now he only felt confusion. Not confusion as to why he no longer felt as such—he knew very well why—but confusion as to why he couldn't muster up any concern or even disappointment for the absence of those emotions. How long would it be before he fully became nothing more than a husk of himself? Before he was so desperate to feel *anything* again that he allowed his eternal stalker to put something wicked and sickening inside of him? Pyotr didn't know, nor did he have the time to dwell on it.

Alone, he entered the command bridge for the second time in one week and found Anras lounging in his throne, as was to be expected. "Come to take my other arm, brother?"

"Have you lied to me since I took the first one?"

"No," Anras said ruefully.

"Then no." Pyotr entered the bridge and stood beside the throne, looking at the tactical hololith. It once again displayed the *Savory Wound* fleeing from the *Gorgon's Manacles*, alongside an indicator of their current fuel reservoir. "Any new insights?"

"The readings are marginally off," Anras stated. Pyotr raised an eyebrow. "We're losing fuel quicker than we should be. The ship's damaged, though, and the additional loss negligible. At least, in our current situation." Anras grimaced and idly cupped and rubbed his forearm with his non-augmetic hand.

"You worry about Zseron's threat," Pyotr said, noting the gesture. It was not a question.

Anras nodded. "Six Atramentar are one thing. Five Atramentar and the Sorcerer of Stars, however..."

Pyotr grunted, scanning the bridge crew as he listened to Anras. The one who he had met the day before, Artemis, was not present as of right now.

He stepped towards the hololith, not bothering to request permission. Pyotr swallowed as he sensed the table's machine spirit cower at his approach and flicked the display to include Kleos in the flickering sector map.

"I agree with your plan. The Warp is our best option. It will permit us to reach this planet and take the fight to the Ferric Sentries, as Zasharr suggested."

The visionary's lazy posture did not shift. "Really?" he asked. Anras eyed the display for a brief second. "I suppose it would appease Gargahl."

Pyotr nodded. This idea already aligned strongly with Anras's original wishes. Realistically, it should not be difficult to make him agree with the addendum, especially if he already feared what Zseron may do if he did not.

"No," Anras said musingly. "I do not support this idea."

Pyotr ground his teeth. He was becoming excessively tired of hearing that. "*Why. Not?*" he breathed.

"Because," Anras said, his expression suddenly growing dark, "I asked you if you understood what you had done when you took my arm. I told you that you did not need more enemies and you willingly accepted them anyway. *This* is the consequences of that action." Pyotr met his brother's eyes and saw hate in them.

"You would doom the entire warband because of your *pride?*" he spat.

"It runs in the geneseed," Anras replied coolly, his tone tinged with an unspoken accusation.

The two stared at each other venomously for what could have been minutes. Pyotr only forced himself to stop once he began to notice bridge crewmen shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

"You are getting yourself killed. Zseron will—"

"Zseron said that they would kill until the decision became unanimous. I will simply ensure I am one of those still breathing when it is and that you are not."

A sneer rose on Pyotr's lips. "You cannot guarantee that."

Anras chuckled, leaning forward in his throne and lacing his fingers together. "But I can, brother. You think the warband will form an orderly queue and *let* the Atramentar off them one by one? No, it will be chaos. And in that chaos, you will be my first target and there will be little you can do about it."

"A bold claim, considering how our last duel went."

The visionary's face twitched for a mere moment. "This will be different. I have many who will do as I command. You," he leaned even further forward in his seat, "have *no one*, brother."

Pyotr said nothing and a grin slowly grew across Anras's face. "I can't help but notice that no one else from Sixth Claw is here to aid you in your attempt at diplomacy. Perhaps they will even be the ones who first jump at the chance to tear you limb from limb when I give the order."

"Enough."

"This is what you do, Pyotr. What you have always done. You hate this legion and wish you had ended up elsewhere as a different Primarch's son, so you push your brothers away out of disdain. That has left you vulnerable. I, on the other hand, have learned to use my disdain. To forge a weapon from it."

Pyotr had not realized he had been clenching his fists. He had not realized how close he was to pulling his bolter free from his thigh and putting a round through Anras's skull. He had not realized how such petulant and pathetic words could dig their way so deep.

Through the anger and bloodlust, the meaning of his brother's words wormed their way into Pyotr's head and took root. He set his jaw as understanding formed. "What will it take to gain your vote?"

The grin on Anras's face broadened and he lounged back in the throne once again. "Only a favor."

Chapter VIII: Raw Meat, Rotten Meal

He left the bridge bristling with indignation. Pyotr was not quite sure *how* it had occurred, but he had, in essence, become Anras's lackey. And it was all for the visionary's vanity.

The rage died quicker than it should have. Pyotr still found the flame of irritation flickering in his heart, but the teeth-grinding outrage he had felt now seemed quelled. He knew it was not natural. At this exact moment, however, he could not find it within himself to see it as a bad thing, either—as it could very well be the only thing keeping him from turning on his heels and driving his thumbs through his brother's eye sockets until he felt something pop.

"Sixth Claw," Pyotr said through his squad's vox-channel as he made his way down the corridor. "I am in need of assistance."

There was no response.

"Sixth Claw," he repeated. "Come in."

He was met with more empty vox-crackle.

Pyotr frowned as he checked the vox overlays in his helmet to ensure there was no interference of any kind, but all connections were sound and each member was accounted for based on their active sigils. Pyotr activated his vox again to make another attempt, but stopped short as something flashed on his retinal display.

It was a single rune, simple yet evocative that took no more than five strokes to create. Back on Nostramo, gangs would use it to mark their territory and inform others to beware and stay away. Amongst more familiar company, however, it meant something more along the lines of "piss off."

Pyotr stared at the glyph for a fashion, unsure if he should feel betrayed, irate, or relieved that his brothers had truly abandoned him. He found himself settling on exhaustion.

Clearing the overlay, the lord discordant ran his tongue along the backside of his teeth as he thought and reassessed. His task had just grown far more difficult without the support of his Claw and he was likely going to have to employ other, potentially messier, methods.

He found his target as they were exiting the Chambers of Artifice. There were few mortal slaves that the warband bothered to heed any credence or respect towards, but the artificers were a clan that superseded that notion. Without them, the Night Lords had no functioning weapons or armor. It would only take one slight for a serf to "mistakenly" fail to fix an Astartes bolter or powerpack, rendering them defenseless in the heat of battle. The artificers, however, did not abuse their respect. They made few requests and worked diligently for their overlords. One of the few petitions they *did* have was that their chambers never be disturbed unless specifically asked.

Lutyphian of First Claw was one of the rare individuals aboard who could ignore this and not pay the consequences. Pyotr was still unsure how he managed such a feat.

The hulking warrior was a head taller than Pyotr and at least a shoulder broader. The skull-mask and ribcage design that adorned his armor was not bone-white in color like the average Son of Curze. Instead, it was a sterling platinum and his midnight plating danced with

red lightning bolt decals. A storm shield hung from his back along with the warrior's massive power scythe. The average legionnaire of their ilk followed the creed of fear and projected it with pride, but Lutyphian? He was more than that. He was death itself.

Pyotr had never met a more arrogant and haughty bastard in all his life—Anras included.

Lutyphian paused when he saw Pyotr, inclining his head in an amused and mocking nod of respect. "Well, if it isn't the R—"

"You have something that does not belong to you," Pyotr said coldly.

The champion of First Claw adjusted his posture, maintaining his relaxed air of conceit while also looking down his nose at Pyotr. "What was that, brother?"

"You hold something that belongs to the visionary."

Lutyphian laughed. "So you are Anras's errand servitor now? I thought better of you, Pyotr." He shook his head in pity.

The deck of the vessel creaked maliciously underfoot and Pyotr furtively glanced over his shoulder.

"I am not going to ask again, brother," Pyotr said.

"Good, because I already draw tired of your whining," Lutyphian retorted, then turned to leave. As he did, Pyotr drew the bolt pistol from his thigh and shot at his brother. The bolter shell cracked against Lutyphian's power shield, but caused relatively no harm. The warrior stopped in place and slowly turned to look back at Pyotr.

"It is rude to walk away from someone speaking to you," Pyotr growled.

Lutyphian cocked his head curiously. "You've always had very poor impulse control, Pyotr," he said back, his voice dripping with condescension. "I suppose that is a common trait within Sixth Claw."

Pyotr ground his teeth. He could have pointed out that it was a common trait within Lutyphian's own Claw to think themselves better than everyone else while also having the most casualties, but he thought better of it.

"You have no need for the artefact. Relinquish it."

"Such a waste, you are," Lutyphian said, ignoring Pyotr. He began to prowl the space between them, looking very much like a crag cat ready to pounce. "I know our brothers don't like you for your deeds. Your interest in the art of daemon engines makes them uncomfortable and they combat this by turning that uncomfotability into hatred. I am different." Pyotr rolled his eyes beneath his helm. He had forgotten how much Lutyphian enjoyed hearing himself speak. "I do not hate you because you are a warpsmith, but because you are a *poor* warpsmith. I have seen the works of the New Mechanicum, I have witnessed the creations of Astartes within your cult and you are *nothing* compared to them. A child standing in the shadow of mountains. You're not a lord discordant," Pyotr could hear the grin in Lutyphian's voice, "you're a hobbyist at best."

Pyotr drew his chainglaive from his back. A click came from Lutyphian's vox and he drew his own weapon and shield. Moments before Pyotr charged, the chamber door opened once more and four armored figures stepped out.

The other members of First Claw weren't egregiously adorned like Lutyphian was, but each still carried themselves with a sense of superiority. Each also had their weapons drawn and were advancing alongside their champion. Pyotr silently cursed at the fact he foolishly walked right into a trap. By drawing his blade and making the first move, he'd fully invited them to engage him.

He cursed again when he realized it was something Gyrrhemar would have done.

Pyotr and Lutyphian's blades met, the crescent shape of the power scythe trapping the teeth of Pyotr's chainglaive. Lutyphian chuckled. "You were once raw meat, brother, but allowed yourself to languish, becoming nothing more than a rotten meal. Wasted potential."

He managed to break the grapple Lutyphian had on his weapon, but by then, the other four members of First Claw were already within striking distance and inside the reach of Pyotr's glaive. The first blow took him in the thigh with a chainsword. Teeth ate away at ceramite and Pyotr was only able to take a few shots with his bolt pistol at the attacker before another blow slammed into his wrist. Pain arched across his arm like electric spasms, forcing him to drop the pistol. In moments, First Claw had closed in around him from all directions and had him surrounded. Pyotr threw an elbow at the warrior behind him, but that only briefly dazed one combatant while the other four proceeded to pulverize him.

Lutyphian's spiked knee took him in the gut, sending Pyotr to the decking. He attempted to rise, but a chainsword to the back of the helm forced him back down and caused his vision to explode with white pinpricks. Breathing heavily, Pyotr barely managed to hold himself up by his hands. A boot met his ribcage, forcing him down onto his side, supported now with only one arm. It was in that strange moment of pain and desperation that he took stock of the situation and found himself thinking... unusual thoughts.

The one whose boot had just taken the wind out of him was Ghail. *His technique is sloppy. Relies too much on his own body. Retrigan would have a revel dealing with him...*

A fist slammed into the side of his head, forcing his helm to clang against the metal decking and making Pyotr's mind reverberate with the sound of his own skull slamming against ceramite. That had been Dralurri. *Seen him in battle. Proficient but impatient. Taresh would do well taunting him at range...*

"What do we do with him now?" an amused voice asked. Fardraxen. *Thinks himself Lutyphian's right-hand. Also believes he is better than he actually is. Gyrrhemar could overpower and humiliate him quickly...*

"Hm," Lutyphian mused, nudging Pyotr with his foot. His voxgrille crackled as he chuckled to himself. "I think he's learned his lesson. These Firstborns simply can't perform like they used to." The rest of First Claw laughed with him.

But, Lutyphian, Pyotr thought, is mine!

With a sudden surge of power and alacrity, Pyotr drew his gladius and drove it into the weak-point at Lutyphian's heel. The champion barked in pain and Pyotr yanked the blade free, blood briefly spurting from the wound, and moved to drive the blade upwards into his brother's gut.

A hand caught him and wrenched the weapon from his hand. Roqiak. The fifth member of First Claw. Pyotr grimaced. He had forgotten about him.

Lutyphian kicked Pyotr in the faceplate, snapping his head back in a way that sparked pain along the base of his neck and resulted in a painful *pop!* that was only a few degrees off from becoming a fatal *snap!*

“Kill the bastard,” Lutyphian snarled. Pyotr smiled to himself as he noticed the way the champion was wary to put weight on the foot he had injured. He may have even managed to sever the tendon, if he was lucky. That was a minor victory to be had that Pyotr could take into hell with him as he died.

At least, if he had not come prepared.

As Pyotr heard the sound of a chainweapon’s motor being initiated directly above his neck, he reached out and tugged onto the unique Bond within his soul. It was not true communication, simply the impression of such that took the form of commands. It was enough.

Now .

The monstrosity that was Tzimiti crashed around the corner of the corridor with such ferocity that it clipped the side of the wall with its massive bulk. Immediately, the helstalker let out a baleful torrent of flame that forced Lutyphian to raise his shield and the other members of First Claw to cower behind him for cover. Tzimiti then continued its charge forward, forcing the legionnaires to retreat back until it was able to stand protectively over Pyotr.

In truth, Pyotr had not been sure if the daemon engine would manage to go undetected for this long. He almost believed it wouldn’t when the foul creature responded to Pyotr’s own ire earlier from Lutyphian’s goading. Fortunately, the members of First Claw were far too busy scoffing at and beating him to notice their own surroundings. A common trait amongst that particular squad, Pyotr thought.

The members of First Claw sized Tzimiti up as the helstalker growled and croaked at them warningly, its red eyes trained on the Night Lords, its serrated maw dripping with fluids that, annoyingly, coated Pyotr’s own breastplate.

Eventually, Lutyphian seemed to make the call that it was not worth the effort and had already secured victory over their opponent. His vox clicked privately and the helmets of the other members of his squad mimicked the noise. They then proceeded to back away slowly down the corridor. Tzimiti made no moves to pursue them, though Pyotr could sense the daemon engine’s muscles and pistons tense with the desire to do so.

Once First Claw had vanished fully from sight, Pyotr allowed his head to drop back down against the decking and began to catch his breath.

His vision was obscured, and then consumed, with the harrowing, leech-like face of his helstalker. Tzimiti fixed him with its beady-eyed gaze, then tilted its head inquisitively.

“Yes, Tzimiti,” Pyotr groaned. “You did very well.”

The daemon engine cooed with satisfaction.

— — — — —

Pyotr limped into the apothecarion, his armor damaged and coated with his own blood. He found Zasharr seated at one of the empty operation slabs. The surgeon had his elbows resting on the surface with his head resting in his hands and his fingers massaging at his temples.

“Bad time?” Pyotr asked as his skeleton groaned in numb agony. He did not intend it as a joke.

“The nails bite harder today,” Zasharr said through clenched teeth. His nostrils flared and his shoulders tensed, but he did not move. “You require medical attention. Again.”

“I will be fine. I’ve come to ask for something else.”

The leader of the Carnage Stitchers looked up, his eyes clouded with pain and irritation. “What?”

Pyotr hobbled deeper into the chamber and found a seat. He stifled a sigh of relief as the strain his body had taken eased substantially. “I need to borrow a squad of your berzerkers.”

Zasharr bared his teeth in an expression that was hard to read. “*Why?*”

“I need support in completing a task that will keep us all from dying. At least, for a while longer.”

“Mm.” Zasharr’s nostrils dilated once again. “I was under the impression you had your own squad for this sort of thing.”

Pyotr hesitated, then grunted. “Sixth Claw is... unwilling to aid me at this current time.”

“They have abandoned you,” Zasharr said matter-of-factly.

There was a brief moment where Pyotr refused to acknowledge the statement, but then relented with a nod. “Yes.”

The berzerker surgeon scoffed as he abruptly stood and moved to take stock of his drugs and narcotics, muttering to himself about “Sons of Curze and their damnable egos.” After a few seconds, his grumbling tapered off. “You realize that my warriors do not behave as yours do? Whatever tactics you may have planned may not be... suitable to them.”

“I will manage.”

Zasharr looked back at him, seeming unconvinced. “They are unruly.”

Pyotr leaned forward in his chair. “I’m counting on it.”

The two Astartes locked eyes for several heartbeats, but the mad apothecary finally nodded in acceptance. “Very well, but this mission is being directed by you, not I. Whatever happens will be your responsibility.”

“I’m afraid my warband may not see it that way.”

Zasharr worked his jaw, then snorted. “Likely true. Just try to keep tensions from getting *worse.*”

Pyotr nodded in acceptance and stood to leave. He did not voice the fact that he believed Zasharr’s request to be impossible, considering what he intended to do with his berzerkers, but there was little alternative apart from returning to his Claw with his head bowed and begging for their assistance. He was not yet that desperate.

“Send them to my chambers when they’re ready.”

—————

To say that the berzerker squad were standing at attention before Pyotr would be like saying that the Prince of Crows was still alive. The Astartes of the World Eaters pushed and shoved and barked at each other in a way that Pyotr was unsure if it were out of camaraderie or malice. He watched as two members of the squad slammed their heads into each other, staggered back, then bared their teeth at the other, forehead veins throbbing as the pain engines in their skulls likely pulsed within their minds. Only Goran, their sergeant—or the closest approximate word Pyotr could come up with for whatever their command structure was—stood with any semblance of competence, but even he showed signs of the Blood God’s touch as his fingers twitched and shivered whenever they came near the handle of his chainaxe.

“Cousins,” Pyotr began, “I—”

He was immediately cut off as the two berzerkers who had clashed skulls began to shove and snarl at each other in their mongrel tongue, paying Pyotr no heed.

“Menrad! Shosk!” Goran barked and the two Astartes begrudgingly ceased their behavior. The sergeant turned to Pyotr and nodded for him to continue.

Pyotr stared at the line of marines with a flat expression, Goran standing at his hip. In another situation, he likely would have taken the time to further size up those before him to best know how to handle them going forward. Unfortunately, patience was not one of the virtues that belonged to the Eater of Worlds.

“You’re here because I need assistance recovering an item that one of my brothers refuses to hand over,” he explained. Pyotr figured the complexity of this situation and how this related to circumventing all of their future deaths would do little more than bore the berzerkers. Simple terms would be better. “His Claw will be protecting him. Your purpose is to protect me in the negotiation.” He also decided there was no need to inform them that this would be his *second* attempt at said negotiation.

“So we won’t be doing any killing?” One of the berzerkers rasped incredulously. Dorthar, Pyotr believed he said his name was, though his accent had been so thick that he could have been mistaken.

“Not ideally.”

The marine shifted on his feet in irritation, but did not oppose Pyotr’s words. Zasharr, thankfully, had chosen his men well.

“And if things should come to blows?” Goran asked.

Pyotr rolled his jaw back and forth in its socket, a light sneer on his face as he recalled the bruises and breaks that First Claw had given him just hours before. “Avoid killing anyone. Especially the one with the scythe.”

More grumbles rose up from the squad. A fight without death? The words were practically sacrilege to the Sons of Angron.

“Craven behavior as always from this legion.” The final Astartes spat. He at least had the decency to do it away from Pyotr.

“Silence, Bortheld,” Goran said in a warning tone. “Blood will spill and skulls will roll in time.”

“Too much time,” Bortheld grunted before falling silent—at least, somewhat. Pyotr could hear the berzerker grinding his teeth down to platforms inside his mouth.

“Any further comments or questions?” the sergeant asked his men. Pyotr could tell that it was not an actual invitation. When no one spoke up, Goran nodded and donned his helm, his steely gaze replaced by emerald lenses. The other four Astartes quickly followed suit. Pyotr’s expression remained impassive even behind his own helm, but, internally, he resonated with the aggravation these Carnage Stitchers likely felt towards such a ridiculous mission.

May this be over with quickly, he thought with an inward sigh.

Locating First Claw ended up being a far more difficult feat than Pyotr had expected. Not due to the tracking itself, his enhanced transhuman senses made it almost trivially easy to find where even another Astartes had gotten off to with the aid of the blood Lutyphian had left behind on the decking when Pyotr stabbed him. No, the real challenge was corralling his loaned squad and maintaining their focus. Several times, Pyotr had to stop one of the berzerkers from eviscerating a slave with his chainaxe because they seemingly looked at him inappropriately. It also turned out that the Eaters of Worlds—when they weren’t frothing at the mouth—could be incredibly chatty in a way that did little more than irk a Son of Curze.

“How much further?” Shosk asked when Pyotr crouched down to inspect a boot print in the dust of the lower decks.

A ceramite-clad hand clanged against the back of the berzerker’s head. “Quit asking that,” Menrad grunted. Over the course of his pursuit, Pyotr had learned that the two were true brothers from the time before they ascended to Astartes. A strange detail, considering he was under the impression most, if not all, of Zasharr’s warriors were vat-grown.

“Quiet,” Pyotr hissed. “They are near.”

The two grumbled accusations and blame while they shoved one another until Goran stilled them with a glare. Pyotr was beginning to like the sergeant.

Motioning for the rest of the squad to hold, the Night Lord crept further down the corridor to peer around its curve. As he grew closer, he could hear the sounds of power armor joints grinding and servos purring in action, as well as the frantic heartbeat and breath of something small and insignificant trying desperately to preserve its life. Once he got into position, his sight confirmed this.

Four members of First Claw chased a mortal through a passageway. Each one had their gladius drawn and came upon the pitiful creature, striking out only for the human to just barely dodge or evade in a manner to preserve their life in time, eyes wild and consumed with fear. Pyotr immediately saw the theatrics for what they were. It was hardly any different than what Tzimiti did to indulge its own boredom in the lower decks or Mechanization Hall when Pyotr allowed it. The only slight difference was, occasionally, one of the warriors would succeed at grazing the mortal with their weapon, allowing coppery blood to spill onto the metal floor in a manner that just barely didn’t jeopardize the human’s life.

Pyotr watched as the slave yelped and dove forward out of the way of a swipe that would have taken their head off if the wielder had not permitted the human's survival. The slave quickly scrambled to their feet, running further down the corridor that had, seemingly by some fateful opportunity, become an opening for escape. Too busy was the slave looking behind them to watch if their tormentors were following, that they did not see the crescent-shaped blade emerge from around the corner and decapitate them.

The head flew back into the direction of the other four warriors, landing with a wet thunk before rolling and bumping to a halt against one of their boots. Fardraxen lifted it, bouncing it lightly in his palm and chuckled as Lutyphian fully departed from his hiding place and went to join them. "A close match."

"Who won?" Lutyphian asked.

"I scored seven cuts," Dralurri stated.

"Impressive," Roqiak whistled. "But I had nine."

"Bah!" Dralurri waved an annoyed hand at his brother.

"Still fails to beat my record," Lutyphian said, taking the head from Fardraxen's hand and tossing it to the victor. Roqiak caught it and skewered the head on one of the chained hooks hanging from his waist.

"You were using special equipment," Ghail snorted.

"Ah, but a dozen clean cuts is still a dozen—" Lutyphian cut himself off, his posture growing stiff as something seemed to spontaneously raise his guard. He glanced around the area, then relaxed once more. "Come back for more, old man?" he asked without even looking in Pyotr's direction. The lord discordant remained crouched for only a second more before relenting and stepping into view.

"I didn't see you participating in full. Something wrong with your ankle?" Pyotr mocked.

"Hmph." Lutyphian turned to face him then, the other members of his Claw forming around him. "I hope you don't think your mount will be enough to get what you want from me. Just because we did not wish to fight it, does not mean we can not best it."

"I did not bring the helstalker," Pyotr admitted. "But I did not come alone, either." Movement echoed along the corridor behind him until five figures in crimson emerged and began to fan out on either side of Pyotr.

"At least he knows his own Claw is too disappointing to be a threat," Fardraxen snickered, his voice nasally and coated with the taste of Lutyphian's boot.

Pyotr held the champion of First Claw's gaze. "The artefact. Where is it?"

Cold, red eye lenses met a mirrored pair. "Somewhere you will never find. Not even with your dogs." He gestured to the Carnage Stitchers with his scythe.

"We are as much dogs as you are loved by your Primarch," Bortheld growled. "Oh, wait, you never knew him to begin with."

There was a subtle shift in First Claw's posture. It was the kind of micromovement one made when words meant more than they wanted anyone to believe they did. Such a thing would work against mortals, but not fellow Astartes.

The vox clicked. “Watch your tongue, Bortheld,” Goran instructed. “No blood today.”

“An eye for an eye, that is what Zasharr taught us,” was the response. The sergeant gave him a warning glare, but said nothing further.

“Is your pride so great that you are willing to sacrifice the entirety of the warband over a single relic?” Pyotr asked.

Lutyphian shrugged. “I prefer the term ‘culling.’”

Pyotr’s jaw and mind worked parallel to each other. This stank of a much larger problem if almost every marine aboard the *Savory Wound* thought the warband weak. It was also a problem that Pyotr couldn’t afford to deal with, as he had his own at the moment.

“What will it take?” he asked, using the same line of bargaining he had on Anras. Every individual in the galaxy wanted something, no matter how petty—and, when it came to Pyotr’s own legion, it almost always was.

“Leman Russ’s left testicle,” Lutyphian said, the rest of his Claw snickering at the wisecrack, though Pyotr did not see the humor in it beyond the absurdity of the request. To harvest such an organ from a Primarch would be quite the feat, indeed.

Pyotr stood in silence until the mocking levity of his fellow Night Lords died down. It took considerably less time than it did with Gargahl’s Apostles. “I claimed Anras’s hand simply for failing to inform me of the details within one of his visions. I will do more to you for less.”

Lutyphian chuckled, planting the head of his scythe down on the deck and leaned on it with a casual stance. “Yes, I’m *quite* disturbed. Do you plan to actually enter the fray yourself, or just have your blood-obsessed slaves do all the work?”

Either by intent or an unconscious twitch of the muscles, Pyotr heard a chainaxe motor triggered behind him. Fortunately, Lutyphian rightly noted the fine line he walked and silenced himself.

Fardraxen was far less intelligent.

“I’ve heard stories that Angron was a slave before the False Emperor found him,” he sniveled. “Is that true? If so, what a disappointment it must be to see your genesire go from the slave of men to that of a Ruinous Power.”

Pyotr sensed the pulsing and writhing of machine spirits behind him. Each one coaxed further pain, further outrage and fury into the minds of their hosts through the parasitic pain engines that they occupied. However, even if he did not have such abilities, he would still be able to detect the tension bleeding off the five figures standing behind him as emerald eyes stared directly at the object of their hatred. Nor was he the only one.

“Shut up, Far,” Lutyphian commanded.

“Apologies, I thought they, like their father, would be too bestial to understand insults.”

“Fardraxen, shut *up*.”

Pyotr forged a vox link with Goran. “Keep your men steady. They’re above a fool’s prattling.”

“Copy,” was the sergeant’s terse reply.

“I do not see why we should pay lesser warriors respect, brother,” Fardraxen argued. “They’re just a pack of curs, even that Betrayer of theirs.”

“Goran—” Pyotr began, but was cut off as the sergeant himself activated his chainaxe and surged forward. It took him less than three bounds to reach his target. Fardraxen had little time to react before monomolecular teeth cut his armor and ate away at the flesh beneath. The berzerker roared, driving his weapon deeper as blood sprayed forth, coating his armor until the Night Lord collapsed and silence hung over the corridor.

Cursing in Nostraman, Pyotr took several steps back as he correctly predicted the bellows and battle cries of both squads as they drew weapons and crashed into each other, thirsting for lives to take.

There was no finesse or regality in the battle. It was a squad of ruthless murderers and merciless criminals against one of brutal warlords and butchers, raving prayers to their dark god. Both sides put no more emphasis on the battle beyond their desire to draw blood and claim lives. It was an ugly, savage thing to witness, and Pyotr saw no reason to intervene. In their fury and bloodrage, the Carnage Stitchers were likely to mistake him for a member of First Claw and his fellow brothers would likely cut him down just for the sport of it if they were given a chance in the chaos. His own life was better preserved by staying out of the conflict.

That did not mean he enjoyed the spectacle, however. Perhaps a more spineless member of the VIIIth Legion would have, perhaps even the Primarch himself would have reveled in it. Instead, Pyotr only saw more soldiers they desperately needed against the Ferric Sentries tearing themselves apart.

He would have liked to say that the fight was even, that the two sides were closely matched, and, to a degree, they were, but it was difficult to put any faith in First Claw’s raw talent for slaughter when the Carnage Stitchers fought past pain and injury as if it did not exist, both due to the blessings of the Blood God and from the narcotics flooding their systems that Zasharr had personally engineered. Pyotr witnessed as a strike from Ghail cleaved Shosk’s arm fully from his body, only for the Eater of Worlds to hardly even register it as he sank his axe into the Night Lord’s skull.

What kept them even was Lutyphian. Pyotr could admit—reluctantly—that the champion was a better warrior than any other aboard the ship. He watched as Lutyphian battered Goran away with his power shield then swung his warscythe in an upward arc without looking, the blade impaling Bortheld’s sternum and emerging out his back. The berzerker struggled for a moment before Lutyphian wrenched the power weapon free from a different angle, just about splitting his opponent into two uneven pieces.

The brawl continued. Dralurri finished off Shosk with a gladius under the chin, only to be cut down from behind by Menrad, screaming unintelligibly at the death of his brother. Dorthar and Roqiak slew each other nearly simultaneously as one disemboweled the other with their chain weapon, only to receive a poisoned blade to the hearts that only allowed them to stumble a few feet away before collapsing to the deck.

That left only Lutyphian facing both Goran and Menrad, who had begun to edge towards him with murderous purpose. Uninjured and against any other Astartes, Pyotr would have given the champion a fair chance at survival, if not victory. But these were not those circumstances.

Evidently, Lutyphian came to the same conclusion as he locked eyes with Pyotr while blocking a series of crushing strikes from Goran.

“Brother!” he called. “Help me!”

Pyotr did not move.

A grunt of pain came from the champion of the now-dead First Claw as Menrad maneuvered past his guard and sunk his chainaxe into Lutyphian’s calf. A warding swipe with his power scythe forced the berzerker to back away, but it was clear that he was losing momentum against his opponents.

“I will give you the artefact!” His voice was desperate.

Begging, from the high and lofty Lutyphian. It was almost enough to bring a ghost of a smile to Pyotr’s lips. Almost.

He did not move.

“*Please.*” He parried a blow from Goran with his scythe and slammed his shield into Menrad, buying himself precious few seconds.

Pyotr watched for a moment more, quickly finding the relish he gained from his brother’s plight diminishing. It would seem his blighted soul would not afford him even that.

He drew his chainlaive and charged forward. He swung once and bisected Menrad at the hip. Even after the top of the berzerker’s body slopped off onto the floor, he still attempted a few feeble swings with his chainaxe before falling still.

“*Traitor!*” Sergeant Goran snarled at Pyotr as the lord discordant kicked his dead brother’s still-standing torso over.

Lutyphian uncoiled and struck like a viper, slamming his shield twice into the Carnage Stitcher’s helmet to daze him, then once more to force him to stumble back to maintain his footing. Before Goran could even come to terms with his situation to defend himself, the blade of a scythe sank into his throat and bit downwards until it was yanked free at the groin.

The corpse collapsed, leaving only Pyotr and Lutyphian still standing, the latter breathing heavily and dropping to one knee, his leg letting out a few more meek spurts of blood before fully clotting.

“Thank you, Pyotr,” Lutyphian said.

“Now for your end of the bargain.”

“Give me a damn moment to catch my breath,” Lutyphian spat. Pyotr nodded in acceptance to the request. In the stillness and the stink of blood in the corridor, the larger of the two brothers began to chuckle. “I imagine the apothecary will not be pleased with what you did to his men.”

“What *I* did?”

“What we did,” Lutyphian corrected.

Pyotr frowned and turned to inspect the carnage and viscera around him. He looked for any signs of life, but he found none. “No, I don’t suppose he will.”

“I am without a Claw now.”

“You are.”

“It is to my knowledge that Sixth Claw still has a vacancy in its ranks.”

Blood pooled around his feet as Lutyphian breathed and spoke behind him. He clocked Roqiak’s body and the head, a mortal head, that hung from his waist, laying in that film of red on the deck, their eyes glazed and mouth open in a final expression of terror. It wasn’t until now that Pyotr realized it had belonged to a child.

“It does.” Pyotr spun, his chainglaive singing through the air in a deadly arc that met Lutyphian’s neck with a fatal bite, disconnecting it from his body. The champion’s power scythe, raised with treacherous intent, dropped from his grasp as the body slumped forward and joined the graveyard of marines all around it. Pyotr grimaced at the display.

He found where Lutyphian’s head landed and rolled it so that the helm’s bloody stump of a neck was facing upwards. Pyotr then drew his gladius and wedged it into that hunk of meat before yanking it free from its ceramite confines. He didn’t bother looking at Lutyphian’s dead face as he removed his own helmet with the sound of venting air pressure. He pulled his blade free from the neck and sank it into the skull, cracking it open like a stubborn nut.

“It can never be simple for me, can it?” Pyotr mumbled irately as he dug his fingers into the brain matter before him and began to feast.

The door to Anras’s chamber slid open. Initially, the room had been locked, signaling the visionary’s desire for privacy, but it took very little of Pyotr’s will being exerted upon the door’s machine spirit for it to reconsider that notion.

Stepping in, Pyotr found that his brother had already lurched into action from his resting place and had his power blade in-hand, ready to defend himself from the intrusion. Seeing Pyotr, a black coffer tucked under his arm, caused Anras to lower the weapon, however.

“This couldn’t have waited until later?”

“No,” Pyotr responded flatly. “It can not.” He drew the coffer out and opened it. Inside was a single item sitting on a cushion of navy silk. For a mortal, the blade would make for a respectable combat knife or dueling blade, but for the ranks of the Legio Astartes, it was only akin to a throwing dagger in size. The weapon was the color of onyx, its edge serrated and design both elegant and gruesome simultaneously. It was no paladin or hero’s weapon, but one belonging to an assassin, a hunter, and a killer. It was a blade that belonged to the Night Haunter.

Anras stared at the knife with open hunger in his eyes.

“A Widowmaker...” he whispered, reaching out for the weapon. Pyotr clanged the coffer’s lid shut once more, drawing the visionary’s baleful eye.

“Your compliance,” Pyotr sneered, “for a throwing knife.”

“Our *father’s* throwing knife,” Anras corrected. Pyotr was not sure how the relic came into Lutyphian’s possession. He did not even know how Anras came to know that it was. He didn’t care to ask. It simply didn’t matter.

“First Claw and a squad of Zasharr’s berzerkers are dead.”

“Unfortunate losses.” Anras waved a flippant hand before holding it out receptively. “Now, if you would—”

“Another ten Astartes are dead because of *you*,” Pyotr growled. The servos in his armor mimicked the tang in his voice.

The visionary tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “Me? Brother, I simply gave you the task. *You* are responsible for the outcome.”

Pyotr’s sneer grew until his teeth were bared. He took two furious steps forward, prompting Anras to raise his sword defensively, though Pyotr only pointed an accusatory finger at the worm.

“Do not feign innocence to me, *brother*,” Pyotr spat the word out as if it were venom. “You knew that Lutyphian would never have given over the artefact without bloodshed. Otherwise you would have gone yourself rather than send me. *You* are responsible for these deaths. *You* are the reason we have lost *ten* additional capable fighters. We are weaker now because of you and your *pride*.” Pyotr paused, his breath quickening and his voice falling into a dangerous whisper. “No. No, this is not pride. There can be some form of nobility found in pride. What you possess is far worse, Anras. What you have is the simpering, cringing, self-centered soul of a child. A child crying and throwing a tantrum for a toy that he desperately wants but doesn’t need.” He unceremoniously tossed the coffer at the visionary’s feet. The lid’s clasp came free, the Widowmaker within tumbling out and resting amongst the dirt and dust on the floor—just like its original master.

Anras’s eyes grew frigid with anger. “Careful with your tone, brother,” he said icily, a smug grin forming on the edge of his lips. “You need—”

“*I need nothing from you!*” Pyotr hissed. “You think I fear your threats?” He did not trigger the motor on his chainglaive, but the teeth ground and gnashed as the belt rotated off its own accord anyway. “You say that you will intentionally cause chaos because I will be easy to slay in those moments. But you forget, brother, Zasharr may be displeased with me due to these developments, but he will be apoplectic with *you*. What do you think will happen if his restraints are cast off when we cannot come to a decision next we enter the Strategium?”

Anras did not respond immediately, but he did lower his power sword. His haughty expression had fallen into one of utter hatred that likely ran parallel to the one Pyotr himself currently wore. He could not feel his rage—only a buried shadow of it—but he could still feel a loathing for his brother born from logical outrage.

“One day, I will kill you, Pyotr.”

The lord discordant scoffed. “And if it were not for the position you held in this warband, I would have killed you centuries ago, Anras.”

They held one another's gaze still. Pyotr could see the transparency in his brother's expression. There was no attempt to obfuscate it. He saw the hatred in those eyes, the animal, the gnashing beast that wanted nothing more than to tear his throat out. There was honesty in that. More honesty than half the other members of the VIIIth Legion were capable of. It was why—despite the deeds of the past—Pyotr found Anras to be the Night Lord he could trust most aboard their ship.

It was probably one of the least comforting thoughts Pyotr had ever had.

Something of a recognition passed between the two of them and Anras gave him a grudging nod. Pyotr returned it.

“You will speak favorably when I present my plan,” he said. It was not a request.

Anras did not respond as Pyotr turned and exited the chamber. But that suited him just fine.

Chapter IX: Ghosts and Stars

Ghosts and stars were not too different from one another in the grand scheme of things. Both were distant, cold entities that were eternally out of reach. To touch either was to touch death.

That was perhaps why Pyotr and Zseron got on so well.

The two Night Lords, one adorned in warrior's armor, the other in a mobile fortress, stood in the Strategium of their vessel. The chamber was otherwise empty and both men remained in comfortable silence for several minutes before Zseron inevitably broke the peace.

"I hear that First Claw is dead," the Sorcerer of Stars said. Pyotr was not surprised by this. The *Savory Wound* had no Navigator and, thus, the duty was regulated to Zseron. This had resulted in an... odd relationship between him and the ship. There were very few things that occurred within its halls and chambers that he did not know about.

"As is a squad of Carnage Stitcher berzerkers," Pyotr added.

"And how did such a thing happen?"

Zseron knew. The ship itself likely told him, assuming he didn't see it personally while communing with the vessel. This was an opportunity for Pyotr to establish a story, an explanation for the rest of the Astartes to be appeased by.

"Tensions are high," Pyotr said with a casual air, "a meeting of happenstance between two squads grew tense, then violent. There were no survivors."

"Convenient that there was no one there to bear witness and confirm such a tale." He eyed Pyotr, then returned his gaze to the hololithic display, rubbing his chin as he overlooked the readouts of Pyotr's petition. "No one will believe it."

"No one has to," Pyotr responded gruffly. "Both warbands simply need an excuse to not escalate matters further. This is a mask they can hide behind."

"Or cower. The apothecary will not be pleased with this arrangement, I imagine."

"He was not," Pyotr admitted. Zasharr had spent the better part of an hour screaming vitriol at him after he had reported that the entire squad that was loaned out to him was dead. The mad surgeon was borderline rabid, the way he waved his chainblade threateningly at Pyotr while ranting about the needless waste of his efforts and the delicate procedures it took to create a batch of Astartes of his legion that weren't mindless and bloodcrazed beasts. "But I took efforts to make amends."

Zseron raised an eyebrow.

Meeting that gaze was oddly difficult for Pyotr. There were very few brothers he could not look in the eye as he was threatened or scrutinized, but the sorcerer always seemed to see more about a man than what was on the exterior.

"All of First Claw's weapons and armor were gifted to make up for his loss," he responded.

Zseron grunted, the violet runes on his armor pulsing ever so slightly. Despite this, his voice remained preserved in its tranquility. “Many of those items were relics dating back to the time of Horus.”

“It was either that or their geneseed,” Pyotr said.

Zseron nodded. “Good choice.”

They fell into silence once more. The need for further conversation would not rise again until there was something worthy of speaking about.

Pyotr took that time to scan the Strategium. In mere minutes, the fate of the warband would be decided in this room. That knowledge weighed on him more than he cared to admit. He was entrusting in the cooperation of Gargahl and Anras, two brothers whose egotistical wills had resulted in many misfortunes in the past. He had come to an understanding with the visionary, yes, but that did not mean the animosity they shared for one another was diminished and he wouldn't seek out an opportunity to betray Pyotr.

As for the daemon prince, Gyrdemar had convinced him in the moment, but Gargahl's stances were notoriously flighty depending on his mood. There was no guarantee he would commit to the plan that he had been given.

The only one Pyotr could reasonably rely on was Zseron. The Sorcerer of Stars was no confidant of Pyotr, but he was far more level in his thinking than any other members of their warband—a trait that seemed common in the Atramentar.

“Zseron,” Pyotr found himself speaking.

“Hm?”

“Do you believe that the Prince of Crows still breathes?”

Zseron looked up from the hololith at that. He faced Pyotr and fixed him with a curious look, as if wondering what point there was to such a question. “Why do you ask?”

Pyotr did not shrug, as such a gesture felt meaningless to him now. Instead, he chose to stand there and allow the silence to speak for him.

The Sorcerer of Stars sighed, running a distracted hand over the scars upon his scalp. “I will say this: If Sevatar lives, then I wonder why he has left us without leadership for so long.”

“You fought beside him?”

He nodded. “All Atramentar did, as did the Contekar.” He spoke of the legion's second division of terminators with but the barest hint of revulsion. Like a single mote of dust upon a blanket of snow.

Pyotr was not certain why he asked such a question. Of course Zseron had done battle beside the original First Captain. All members of the legion during the time of the Great Crusade and, later, Horus's War had at least seen or spoken with Sevatar. Even Pyotr was present to witness his duel against Sigismund. Still, there was something he couldn't help but attribute to the Prince of Crows, something mythical.

He knew how to make his brothers listen and follow orders.

This is not my responsibility to bear, Pyotr thought, feeling the exhaustion seep further into his bones like cold, languid worms. He would hold on, clutch and compress the warband

together with his own two hands, for just a little longer. Until they were free from their current predicament, then... Then he was not sure.

Then you can let go... A thought that was not his own whispered.

Pyotr growled, drawing a confused look from Zseron. After Pyotr declined to elaborate or even acknowledge the outburst, the Atramentar sorcerer returned to the display.

“This plan is usable. I support it,” Zseron said. Relief flooded Pyotr like a combat narcotic. He was not sure if he would have been able to put up with another diplomatic charade.

“Anras and Gargahl have been convinced to accept the terms, as well.” Hopefully.

Zseron nodded. “That will aid you, but not guarantee your success.”

“What do you mean?” Pyotr asked, frowning.

The doors to the Strategium slid open and the first wave of Astartes filtered in, taking their stances within the chamber.

“You will see.”

The chamber burned with the candle flames of red eye lenses, accented sporadically by the emerald ones of their cousins. Pyotr could taste the aggravation, both between the warbands and from what may happen within this room should they not reach an agreement. He sincerely doubted that there were any Astartes aboard the *Savory Wound* who believed that Zseron was bluffing in his threat from the days prior.

Indeed, as the Sorcerer of Stars stood in his Warp-enhanced terminator armor, psychic staff of corpses at his side, his brethren of the Atramentar standing as regal statues at his heels, he looked ready to make true on his promises.

Pyotr scanned the crowd before him, finding Zasharr amongst his own men. The berzerker surgeon met his eyes directly. There was still tension there—though that was not uncommon for a Son of Angron—and no question that he would not let his frustrations with Pyotr rest so easily, but there was still respect in those eyes. He was not yet ready to abandon his cousin entirely, be that out of true camaraderie or the necessity of his warband’s ship.

It was more than he could say for Sixth Claw. The three members of Pyotr’s squad stood on the direct opposite side of the hololithic display across from Pyotr and paid him no heed whatsoever. They did not outright avoid his gaze, but any time they happened to look his way, their eyes seemed to slide over him entirely, as if he were a wisp of translucent vapor. The gesture was easily digestible. They did not bother to stand as far away as they could from him because that would imply they still bore any emotion at all towards him. They did not refuse to look his way because that would mean he still meant something to him. Instead, they displayed a simple, obvious truth; he was no longer one of them.

The fatigue writhed and clawed its way deeper into his marrow.

Anras and Gargahl also stood on opposing sides of the display table, perpendicular to Pyotr. The former was sullen and rigid, the latter sardonic and ornery. As was to be expected.

“Last time we met,” Zseron began as the last remaining stragglers took up their positions within the chamber, “we were at an impasse, split between two decisions. What do we say now?” He eyed Pyotr expectantly.

Before any other members within the war room could speak up, he stepped forward, resting his hands on the edge of the table. The servos in his gauntlets let out a feeble squeal at the action. He allowed a spare sliver of his brain to make a mental note to send them to the artificers before they began locking up. “I have spent much time these past few days thinking over our options and, rather than choose between two proposed ideas, I petition a third that alloys them,” Pyotr lied. He knew that too many of his brothers would immediately disregard the plan if they were to know a mortal was the one who had initially devised it. Even still, many of the Night Lords present barked their annoyance and disapproval at being forced to choose between an additional, third course of action rather than the original two.

Pyotr waited for the uproar to quiet once more before continuing. It did not until Zseron raised his staff in a threatening gesture. This particularly unnerved the Carnage Stitchers, the nervous—or perhaps hopeful—revving of chainweapons echoed from various different points within the chamber as the squawking of voices diminished.

“Thank you,” Pyotr said, a scornful grimace on his face beneath his helm. “As I was saying...” He pulled the hololith of Kleos onto the display, alongside the data readouts of the trajectory to the planet from their current location. “With our current fuel reserves, we bear no chance of fighting or outrunning the *Gorgon’s Manacles* and those dog-mating whores within it. We have no outposts or support within twenty systems of here. And even if we could reach them, our only allies we could call upon would be our own legion—Not that there would even be a guarantee that they would come to our aid, anyway.” A few black chuckles rose up from the gathered warriors despite Pyotr not intending the words as a joke. “The Warp, however, provides us with a unique opportunity. Through it, we could reach this planet that rests on the edge of the Imperium. Landing here, we would be able to fight the Ferric Sentries on our own terms before fleeing when tactically appropriate, all while fraying another piece of the False Emperor’s tapestry. The lives of two men taken with one stroke.”

He took a moment then to survey the crowd. Many of his brothers were looking at the calculations displayed on the readout, a large percentage nodding approvingly. Others stood with arms crossed over their chests or in other postures that showed they were unconvinced. A vast majority of these individuals appeared to be followers of Anras and Gargahl’s disciples. Pyotr clamped his jaw shut and waited, for that was all he could do now.

Zseron stepped forward. “This plan has merit and foresight.” The Atrementar nodded in approval. “It would allow us a better chance at victory in a fight and an opportunity for our World Eater allies to employ their skills in the best way they know how.” He gestured to Zasharr, who gave a slow nod of acknowledgement.

The mood of the chamber immediately shifted as a large swath of its occupants accepted Zseron’s words and allowed them to weigh heavier on their consideration. It still wouldn’t be enough.

A loud rumble filled the air as Gargahl let out a sigh that contaminated the air and began picking at his fangs with a claw. "I suppose I can support this idea, as well," he rasped. "So long as there are enemies enough to slay." His raptor-apostles screeched their assent like the good little sycophants they are.

Pyotr's eyes found Anras. The visionary looked at him with a frustrated sneer. "Who would I be to refuse advice and improvements to my original plan?" he said slowly. Pyotr snorted quietly. Of course his brother would still attempt to find some way to salvage as much control over the situation as he could.

Murmurs filled the Strategium. They were not ones of doubt or disagreement, however, but of consideration and even some excitement. Pyotr closed his eyes and allowed himself a moment of relief. *Finally, some unity for once.*

He opened his eyes again just as the flashes began to dance behind his lids and before that *thing* could begin slithering its way into his mind once more. No sooner had he done so had the voices died down as a figure approached the display table.

"Do we get a say in these matters?" Zasharr asked, an edge to his voice. "Or are we just tools to be used and broken?"

Pyotr ground his teeth. "You were the one who initially offered your men as a vanguard against our enemy."

"That was before I began questioning if your kind paid me and my men any value other than a buffer between the life and death of your own kin."

Pyotr narrowed his eyes. He did not think his cousin would be so petty as to cause mayhem upon the ship over a few lost soldiers, but it was difficult to trust that notion when the lord discordant could hear the soul of those nails whispering venom into his cousin's mind.

No one spoke up to answer on Pyotr's behalf. Instead, they all looked to him and waited. He paused, taking his time in consideration. If he did not allow the Carnage Stitchers a voice in the matter, the results could be catastrophic in the short- and long-term of their alliance, but if he did, he would be giving the mad apothecary ample opportunity to sabotage a plan that was coming together for the first time in many years for his warband. It was a gambit with lofty stakes.

A gambit he decided to take.

"Of course you do, cousin," Pyotr said. "We would not be here without your assistance. What is your stance on this proposal?"

Zasharr grinned. With his features twisted by constant pain and anger, Pyotr could not tell if it was one of genuine mirth or the smug and satisfied smirk of a viper who had watched a rat fall into its den.

Do not do this, Zasharr, he pleaded internally.

The apothecary raised his chainsword into the air, activating the motor. Pyotr sensed the daemon within the weapon in place of a machine spirit swimming about in excited anticipation. *Spill blood! Spill blood! Spill blood!*

“The Carnage Stitchers accept this proposition! We will spill the blood of those Imperial vermin in Kharneth’s name!” he roared. The other berzerkers around the room took up the call, revving their own weapons and letting out their harsh, guttural cheers for blood. Pyotr was surprised to find that even some of his own brothers took up the call and began to chant in favor of Pyotr’s scheme.

The uproar continued for a time and Pyotr found himself actually growing frustrated that his stunted emotions could not bask in the glory of this moment. A snake’s hiss circled his mind, making promises that he would not listen to.

Eventually, Zseron slammed his stave down onto the decking—thankfully without any psychic energy imbued within it—silencing the Strategium. “It would seem the decision is unanimous and our course of action is set. We will heed Pyotr’s plan to—”

“What happens once we reach Kleos?” a voice spoke out. Pyotr followed it directly across from him and found that it had come from Retrigan. His eye twitched. “This plan is all well and good up until that point, but all our brother has done is insinuate that there will be a battle. He has given us no direction, no tactics, no plan of disengagement. I cannot support this petition until these details are given.”

“I agree,” Taresh said from beside, crossing his arms over his chestplate. “We are still operating under blind faith alone. This is not sustainable.”

The pushback would have been minimal from any other Night Lord or World Eater aboard the *Savory Wound*, but the fact that the disagreement came from Pyotr’s own Claw created cracks in his argument. Cracks that became ripples. Ripples that warped and twisted the mood of the crowd.

“A point well made!” someone shouted.

“We require more!” echoed a brother from the opposite side of the chamber.

“What makes you so certain of this plan, Warpsmith?”

More and more agents of dissent cried out. It was no more than a quarter of the Astartes present, but it was still enough to clearly display that the decision was no longer collective. Soon, the cries were no longer demands for clarification, but ones of accusation.

“You are hardly one of us now! We have all seen it!”

“Cares more for his daemon engines and machines than his own brothers!”

“Feckless and loyal to no one but himself!”

“How could you have forgotten the lessons of our father!”

The pressure built with each barb and burr. They poked and jabbed at his mind, adding on to the fissures of a psyche that he was already concerned was close to collapse. Pyotr glanced at Zseron, but the terminator looked at him with an expression that read simply as, *I cannot fight this battle for you.*

The dam broke.

“ENOUGH!” he howled. The shrieks and gnashes diminished, leaving Pyotr standing at the hololithic display, his hands gripping the edge with such intensity that they threatened to bend and warp the metal. Zealously, he pulled his helmet free from his head and slammed it

down on the table so hard that the display flickered for a moment. A snarl stretched across his face, bearing the chipped and broken teeth that he had earned in his childhood. He glared across the room.

“I grow *sick* of this prattle, this *consensus* that I have become, or always was, odious towards my warband, my *legion*. You speak and whisper that I am no child of my father, that I wish that I had ascended under a different Primarch. You know *nothing* of me! I bleed midnight, just as any one of you. I sat at the feet of my father and learned his lessons with *relish*! That is more than could be said for an increasing number of our warband as the years tick by. I know the meaning of terror! I know the sanctity of our duty! I am a haunter in the dark! Our father taught us the truth of this galaxy and I *embraced* his words! Benevolence is *poison* upon humanity. Fear is the way, the *only* way, to achieve order! *We* are the angels of the people! *We* bring civilization wherever we step! *We* walk the path of exiles, hated for our methods at the cost of less lives than the yapping mutts of those loyal to the False Emperor as they wage their bloody, senseless wars!

“Hail to the Lords of Night! Hail to us! While others grow illusioned and weak by the lies of the Imperium, we were forged in harsher fires! Born unto the Sunless World, we know what it means to be strong! Taught its lessons, we know the kindness that is in cruelty! If death is nothing compared to vindication, then repulsion is nothing in the light of salvation! I have walked this path, and I have seen the fog cleared. I look on and see the road forward. Stagnation is death, I choose progress! Our methods must change, but the lessons remain the same! *That* is my creed! *That* is the way to victory! This does not mean I turn my back on you, on my brothers! This is *my* legion! There is *nothing* any one of you can do to take it from me! You cannot seize my birthright! You cannot seize my hearts! Hail to Konrad Curze! *Ave Dominus Nox!*”

Pyotr ceased his tirade and looked out upon a silent sea of ruby eyes and midnight armor. Not a wave stirred their movements, not a breeze broke the tense peace.

Breathing in deeply through his nose, Pyotr reached for his helm, but before he could do it once more a fist shot up from the crowd. “*Ave Dominus Nox!*”

Another joined it. “*Ave Dominus Nox!*”

Then another. “*Ave Dominus Nox!*”

And another. “*Ave Dominus Nox!*”

The tide came. Salutes surged through the chamber of raised fists and the boom of the legion’s warcry chanted from a myriad of voices, their words bouncing off the walls and rising until it crowded out everything but the domination of those words. “*Ave Dominus Nox! Ave Dominus Nox! Ave Dominus Nox!*”

Pyotr put on his helm and forged a voxlink with Zseron, as that was the only way he would be heard over the din. “Prepare the ship for Warp-jump.”

The Sorcerer of Stars could not reply without his own helm, but nodded all the same to Pyotr with an unusual expression that he did not bother attempting to decipher at this time. A moment later he and the other Atramentar left the room, leaving Pyotr alone with his choir of brothers.

Ave Dominus Nox...

He felt... nothing. Pyotr was nothing more than a statue, being praised as an idol as fists pumped in the air and voices cried out in prayer to his glory. A glory he was unable to capture without paying an unpayable price.

It did not matter. For this... this was everything to Pyotr. Everything and more.

Chapter X: Tradition

The umbral abyss that sat in the palm of Anras's hand stretched on to infinity, its sheen reflecting the visionary's pale visage back at him. He did not like what he saw.

If it were not for the position you held in this warband, I would have killed you centuries ago...

The *Savory Wound* had entered the Immaterium two days ago and those words still stubbornly clung to the edges of Anras's mind like chiropteran predators on the wall of a cave, waiting for unsuspecting prey down below to ambush.

If there was a hell, Anras had every intention of dragging Pyotr into the fires with him when his time came. Damn that despotic fool.

...And yet, they cheered for him. They spat at his feet in one moment and were singing his name with tears in their eyes the next. Anras never had such a resounding show of devotion directed towards him. He had followers, yes, but... none were as... fanatical as Gargahl's servants. It almost seemed as if they accepted his claim as lord of the company out of mere obligation rather than any true belief.

It's because they don't value you, Anras thought. The words were spoken in the harsh, domineering voice of the lord discordant. *They simply value your gift.*

Anras ran his fingers over the Widowmaker's serrated edge. He did not like these thoughts. Up until recently, he'd always been sure that he was followed due to his prowess and competency, not because of the ghost of his father's hand on his shoulder. But now... he was not so certain. He couldn't help but wonder if he was nothing more than a personification of the old ways that some of his brothers desperately clung to in an effort to escape the truth.

And what was the truth? Had things truly changed at all? No. Surely not. Their mission remained just as it always had been: They had been charged with bringing the Imperium to its knees by the Warmaster and rightful heir to the Golden Throne himself before his demise. They were Night Lords, their name was dread, fear was the dagger they'd use to burst the hearts of their enemies. That had not changed—and who better to carry out that mission than one who carried an aspect of the Primarch himself in his soul? Anras was an heir unto himself; a Prince of terror where the Night Haunter had been a king. He was *destined* to rule.

The reflection within the blade frowned. Those words were not satisfactory. The visionary could not understand why.

A whimper pulled Anras from his thoughts. He looked up at the slave strapped into the excruciator. He was a wretched, miserable thing, trembling and failing to hold back the tears in his eyes. Anras stared down at him, the chamber filled with the smell of rancid waste and gore from previous excruciations. He had plucked this one from that sty the little vermin called "Scab City," intending to elevate his mood with some light torture.

He'd yet to even begin cutting the man.

Anras looked down at the blade in his hands again. The weapons his father had held in his life were finite and ever-dwindling. That made this particular relic even more profound. And... Anras was going to use it for his own idle amusement...

He had wanted the Widowmaker as a symbol of authority, to further solidify his claim as the company's head. So why did it feel as if holding such a thing would only be doing the opposite? Why did he feel like a child running to tug on the leg of his father to make the other children listen to him?

Anras's lips curled upwards as he bared his teeth. Anger snapped and howled within him and his grip on the knife tightened. This... this was Pyotr's fault. Of that, he was sure.

Another sound, this time a sob. Anras glared at his prisoner. "I will get to you in a *moment*," he hissed. Such impatience.

"P-please..." the slave whimpered.

Anras sighed and sucked on his teeth. He tipped the blade downward and allowed its edge to lightly tap against the pathetic thing's cheek. "What is it?"

The man's lip quivered and Anras smelt a new wave of human emiction entering the chamber. "I didn't... didn't *do* anything, my lord! I-I swear it!"

Anras allowed one of his eyebrows to quirk upward. "Oh? You *swear* it?"

The slave nodded eagerly—or, as much as he could while strapped within his gruesome throne. "Y-yes, my lord! I would never betray the laws of my gods! Never!"

The enthusiasm that Anras had begun to build vanished once again like a shred of meat in a raptor's den. The visionary had been the one responsible for setting that honorific into motion. Once, it had seemed fitting for the lesser men to refer to their betters as gods—for how could they not be by comparison? But now... it felt hollow and perhaps even desperate.

"What is your name?" Anras found himself asking.

"M-my lord?" the creature asked hesitantly.

"I highly doubt that. Do not lie to me, slave."

The slave gulped. "T-T-Tomer, my lord!"

Anras nodded, then pulled the Widowmaker away from what was supposed to be his plaything. "Are you truly without sin, Tomer? Think carefully now."

Another spritz of waste-stench filled the room. "I-I-I... don't know, my lord."

"You don't know?" Anras tilted his head. "Are you saying you cannot understand the difference between right and wrong?"

"No! No, my lord! I... I... Yes! I have sinned! Forgive me! Please, please, please forgive me!" Tomer devolved into a mess of sobbing and babbling at that point. Anras watched, something rising within him that he was not able to name.

The sobs became shrieks and desperate pleas as Anras raised his hand again. It took the little flesh-thing several moments after Anras had released him from the excruciator for him to realize he'd been set free. Once he had calmed down, he looked up and blinked at Anras in confusion.

“You bore me,” was the only response the slave received as the visionary turned and left the room.

Artemis would have liked to believe she had not given up. She would have liked to believe that her plan had not been a failure, only that it needed... re-strategization. She would have liked to believe that.

In actuality, her will and resolve felt like a guttering flame in a hurricane. She held on to the feeblest of hopes that what she'd set into motion was salvageable. The gods had given the order for the ship to slip into the Warp, yes, but there was no guarantee that they were following the route that Artemis had planned. She couldn't leave it all to chance.

And yet she was so tired.

The thoughts and her treachery weighed on her, making her steps back to her chamber from the bridge leaden. She couldn't do this alone. At best, the *Savory Wound* went to Kleos and she got *lucky* and managed to find a way off the cruiser and sneak back home in the middle of a warzone. She couldn't afford 'lucky.' She needed a massacre.

Rubbing the heels of her hands over her eyes, Artemis tried her best to banish the desire for sleep that weighed around her cheeks. Oh, what she would have given to taste recaf again.

Minutes later, she was at her chamber, pressing the door activation. She intended to stumble inwards and rest for as long as time would allow her before having to return to the bridge, but instead she froze as she saw what lurked within her quarters.

The god, Pyotr, stood in the room, holding Orion's cruiser-in-a-bottle and inspecting it with an expression of disinterest. He glanced at her, then placed the bottle back from where he had gotten it from with a gentleness that Artemis hadn't realized was possible for a being such as him.

“You took longer than expected,” he said curtly.

“The bridge tends to get busier while traveling through the Warp,” Artemis replied, attempting to keep her voice even. She failed miserably—despite their previous conversation, she couldn't help but feel like a lamb locked in a room with a lion whenever one of the Astartes spoke to her directly.

Pyotr nodded, accepting the answer. “I wished to inform you that your petition was accepted by the rest of the warband. We now follow the algorithms that you laid out for us.”

Artemis blinked. That was... good, wasn't it?

“Why?” she found herself asking without thinking. “...My lord.”

The ceramite-clad figure looked down on her, prompting Artemis's heartbeat to quicken, before he raised an eyebrow. “I assumed you would be pleased to know that your efforts are being utilized.”

“I... am, my lord. I simply wonder why you took the time to tell me, as opposed to tending to other, more important duties you may have.”

Pyotr watched her for an uncomfortable number of moments. For a second, Artemis almost believed she saw something in those dark, cold eyes of his, but whatever it was had been too insignificant and fleeting for her to make sense of.

“Perhaps I had a second reason for my visit,” the Astartes stated. “You have impressed me, Artemis Maralli. I would have use for your talents as my personal slave.”

The god said the words with such flat intonation that Artemis almost didn’t process what the words meant. Once she did, she gaped in surprise. “My lord, I…”

“You do not have a say in the matter,” Pyotr said. It was not a condemnation, but rather a reminder or repetition of an obvious rule. “You will continue to serve on the bridge, but otherwise will attend to me when I have need for you.”

Artemis took another moment to process, then forced herself out of her stupor with a formal nod. “Yes, sire.”

Pyotr weighed her with his gaze once more, then nodded himself. “In other warbands, my brothers like to give tokens and baubles to their slaves as a sign of protection. We do not do that here.” He disattached something from his armor and held it out for Artemis. The thing was so diminished in Pyotr’s massive fist that it took her a moment to realize that it was a stub revolver.

She took it cautiously, looking from the weapon then back up at Pyotr in confusion.

“Many of my brothers who were alive back when we were called the 51st Company came from a specific gang on our homeworld,” Pyotr explained. “The gang had a tradition; every new initiate was assigned a mentor. That mentor provided them with a gun like the one you hold.” He inclined his head towards her hands. “The apprentice would be instructed to never fire their weapon unless no other options presented themselves. If they died with even a single round still left in their weapon, their mentor was punished for the disgrace their pupil brought upon the gang.”

Artemis frowned as she took that in. “Are you saying this makes you my mentor?”

The god shook his head. “No. The tradition has changed since those days. The old ways are still sometimes used between a new Astartes joining his first Claw and a veteran who takes an interest in him, but for slaves it is to provide you with a way to defend yourselves while also marking you as your lord’s responsibility.”

Artemis examined the gun as she listened, finding either side of the barrel engraved with differing Nostraman glyphs. One denoted her own name, while the other was Pyotr’s, along with the number six. She then released the cylinder from its locking mechanism, finding that there were only five chambers, each one loaded with a bullet.

“When do I get more ammunition?”

“You don’t,” Pyotr said flatly. “That is why it is meant to be used sparingly. A lesson between both mentor and apprentice. One to teach responsibility, the other to teach prudence.”

Artemis barely noticed the casual expression of thoughtfulness and curiosity that grew across her face. “What happens if an apprentice uses all of their shots, then?”

Pyotr softly grunted in a way that was impossible to decipher. “If all bullets were deemed to have been used sensibly, the apprentice is promoted to a full member of the gang.”

“I presume that doesn’t apply here?” Artemis exhaled through her nose in amusement. Pyotr didn’t seem to sense or understand the levity in her statement, as his expression remained unchanged.

“Correct,” he said. “Should you use all of your ammunition responsibly, you will be rewarded with a weapon customly made for you by the artificers and tech adepts.”

Artemis raised an eyebrow at that, her interest piqued. “Really?”

Her new master nodded, but eyed her cautiously. “However, if you use this pistol needlessly, you will be executed as punishment in a manner befitting to the reason and justification of the weapon’s usage.”

“Oh.” Artemis found her precarious comfort in the conversation shattered, returning her to the sobering cold of dread and fear. “And would you be punished if such a thing occurred?”

Pyotr paused. “In a manner of speaking...”

Thoughts and ideas began to race through Artemis’s mind at this new knowledge. Was there potential here? A way she could use this to her favor in order to escape? Perhaps. She needed more information to be sure.

“You... seem to know this tradition deeply,” Artemis said tentatively. The Astartes before her nodded. “Were you in this gang?”

“No,” Pyotr said slowly. “I was not. I only took a passive interest in their ways upon joining the company.” He then declared the abrupt end of their conversation by making his way to the door. “The ammunition within that pistol are referred to as ‘Man-Stopper’ rounds. They should pierce most armored combatants.”

Artemis looked down at the gun in her hand once again, then—against her better judgment—at the midnight ceramite of her lord’s chestplate. Pyotr caught her eye and understood her silent question.

“I would not recommend it,” he said simply, then vanished through the chamber’s entryway.

That left Artemis alone, holding a weapon that had been gifted to her by the creature she hated most, feeling utterly and completely baffled. The creaking whine of the ship’s metal and the flickering of her quarter’s already dull lumens forced Artemis out of her frozen state. That... had been unusual. But unusual, eerie things tended to happen while in the Warp’s embrace.

Thrusting her nerves into the back of her mind, Artemis quickly began to take stock of what had just occurred since she’d returned to her chamber.

The gods had decided to go through with her idea, the one who she had approached about it was seemingly impressed enough by it to deem her worthy of his further attention *and* her personal servitude under him, he had also given her a weapon, and she maintained her position amongst the bridge crew. All these things put her in a unique position that presented many opportunities, but with many risks. She would be incredibly close to the Astartes, putting her more closely under their scrutinizing eye. Her dance with death just became all the more precarious.

Despite that, Artemis found herself smiling as her grip on the revolver tightened.

Close enough to gouge out their throats, too... she mused. I just need the right moment.

It was then that Artemis realized that her master had actually given her *two* guns, rather than one. He just didn't know about the second yet. Nor would he. Not until it was aimed firmly at his head.

Chapter XI: The Great Beast Cometh

Gyrthemar entered the training grounds with a sour expression and his new chainspear resting on his shoulder. He did not like chain weaponry. They were far too unreliable for his liking, losing potency over the course of extended conflicts as they slowly lost more and more of their monomolecular teeth. More importantly, though, they lacked elegance. A Night Lord must always project a shadow of fear over their enemies, of course, and the crude, brutal design of most chain weapons certainly did that, but Gyrthemar could not help but prefer a more distinguished, refined visage for his close combat armaments. Those he faced should fear *him*, not what was in his hands. A piece of beauty to compliment the terror, one could say.

“*You*,” a voice barked over the crowd. Gyrthemar looked up and mustered a grin as he saw an old friend glaring at him, a power scythe leveled and pointed in Gyrthemar’s direction so that there was no confusion as to who he was speaking to.

Ajax of the Carnage Stitchers, unlike Gyrthemar, had not had his missing eye replaced with an augmetic. His hollow socket was a deep void of black that was left open for all to see. He stood just as tall as the previous time they had encountered one another in this same room, that microscopic hunch of feral desire to lunge and maim still rested heavily upon his shoulders.

“Cousin,” Gyrthemar responded with a smug sense of cordiality. Ajax’s snarl deepened.

“Look at what you have done to me, *rat!*”

Gyrthemar looked the berzerker up and down, noting the chainflail that still hung on his waist despite the new weapon in his hands. “That misfortune you call a face is no fault of mine,” he replied. “I can only claim the eye as my responsibility. Though, that may be an improvement, if you ask—”

“I am not speaking of that!” Ajax snarled. “I speak of this curse you have laid upon me!” He thrust the power scythe in his grip forward. “Zasharr has given me a weapon of your dead men as punishment. I am marked by misfortune now!”

Gyrthemar stared at the weapon in confusion. He knew the scythe had once belonged to Lutyphian, just as he knew of First Claw’s demise. He had not known that their weapons had found their way into that apothecary’s armory, however.

“Where did you get that?”

“It was gifted by your brother, the warpsmith.”

Gyrthemar’s ocular twitched at the mentioning of Pyotr. He had no desire to think of that brother of his at this moment.

“Your superstitions mean very little to me,” Gyrthemar said with a shrug.

Ajax snapped his jaws and marched across the grounds to come face to face with Gyrthemar, drawing the eyes of most of the other Astartes in the chamber. “You do not want a repetition of our previous bout, Night Lord. You will have no saviors this time.”

The ship shuddered, the decking rattling under their boots momentarily before ceasing. Gyrthemar chuckled. “I came here to train, World Taster. Not to crush fleas.”

A shade of red close to that of Ajax's armor grew across his face, veins bulging and mechanical dreadlocks pulsing. The berzerker's grip on his scythe tightened and his other hand reached down for his flail. All across the rooms, Astartes mimicked the action by slowly going for their own weapons. Even Gyrrhemar found himself readjusting the grip on his spear, wishing—once again—that it was Vindkaldr on his shoulder instead.

The chamber stood in uneasy silence for several moments before, like a held breath being released, Ajax let go of his chainflail and snorted with derision. "Worm."

"We're family, cousin. You should be kinder to me," Gyrrhemar replied with a mocking smirk.

"I will die before I consider you any kin of mine," Ajax spat, then turned away to rejoin the ranks of his warband.

Gyrrhemar shrugged, then looked to his own brothers. "Naduvion! Let us spar!"

In the days since committing to Warp-travel, Pyotr had been informed of strange, destructive noises coming from within the Hall of Mechanization. This annoyed him, for strange and destructive noises was, effectively, the heart and soul of that very chamber. Eventually, however, the flies buzzing about his ears grew vexingly insistent and Pyotr agreed to look into it.

It was displeasing to find that the rumors had been correct.

"Curie," Pyotr said as he watched the tech adept and her subordinates systematically dismantle the hull of a gray-painted war machine.

A binharic belch of garbled annoyances emitted from the woman's throat as her elaborate ritual was interrupted. She looked to Pyotr, waving for her fellow priests to continue before approaching him, oculars pulsating red before diminishing to cool, blue hues with an almost forced effort. "Yes, master?"

"Is this the dreadnought I slayed on Exodus Station?" Pyotr asked. He already knew the answer.

"I was not present at the battle," Curie said, her tone pleasant and misplaced, "nor was it cataloged in any battle report. Therefore, I cannot answer with any true certainty."

"It is," Pyotr said.

Curie paused, as if processing the statement. "Then your query was a waste of time."

He ignored the comment. "I did not authorize the machine's deconstruction."

"No, you did not," Curie agreed.

"Then why is it?"

"It was authorized by another party," Curie stated, her ocular bleeding to green, seemingly unaware of Pyotr's rising ire.

"Who?"

"You lack the clearance to know that. Apologies," she said, the stress of her remorse going no further than the word itself.

Pyotr's expression darkened as he took a further step forward to loom over her. "Excuse me?"

The techpriest did not flinch. “You lack the clearance to have your question answered.”

“I am the master of this hall,” Pyotr hissed. “All that goes on inside these walls is within my *clearance*.”

“The authority who made this request supersedes you.”

The motor of Pyotr’s chainglaive sputtered momentarily on the lord discordant’s back, and Tzimiti, laying upon its bed of skulls in the corner of the room, briefly lifted its head in curiosity. “The warband lacks an official captain or lord, there *is no* superseding authority over me.”

“Not according to the catalogs, master.”

“Who,” Pyotr said slowly, the ground beneath his feet beginning to tremble—though that was not his doing, “is the master of the catalogs?”

“That is classified, I am afraid,” Curie said, once again using the wrong inflections in her attempts to convey empathy.

“Then I would like to access these catalogs.”

“You do not have the clearance, I am afraid.”

“Who does?”

“I do not have the authority to say who does, only who does not, I am afraid.”

Pyotr surprisingly found himself thankful when his rage and indignation was abruptly stolen from him by his tainted soul, as he feared he was very quickly approaching the point of spilling blood and oil.

He looked down on Curie, the emotions within him now frozen and numb. “I want an itemized list of all individuals aboard the *Savory Wound* that are not cleared to access the catalogs.”

“This will take time. Perhaps days, due to my current assignment.”

Pyotr looked at the half-dissected dreadnought once again. The adepts had made steady progress, but their need and insistence to perform the proper rites and rituals was slowing them significantly.

“Does the desecration of such a holy relic not bother you, adept?”

“This heretikal action does not weigh on us, but the one who commanded it,” Curie said, but Pyotr noted that her oculars had taken on a red shade once again.

“I do not have the authority to ask questions,” Pyotr noted, but held up a hand as Curie made an obvious move to correct him. “I do not have the authority to ask *certain* questions, but can I still forbid this work from continuing within my hall?”

“You may, master,” Curie said flatly. “I would not recommend such a course of orders at this stage, however. The holy machine is far too ravaged to be repaired once more and to cease our assignment would be to waste it as a resource. Perhaps if you had attended to your humble servants more frequently then this travesty could have been prevented.”

Pyotr grunted. Odd. Curie’s attempt at being passive aggressive almost seemed genuine then. Almost.

“Do as you see fit, then,” Pyotr relented, then frowned. The expression deepened as he turned away and found someone leaning on the frame next to the entryway of the chamber. The Astartes was staring at him—for how long was difficult to say.

Snk.

Ssshk.

“How woeful it is to find good help these days,” Retrigan said.

Heat was an eternal, dominant caress within the fuel-loading station of the enginarium decks. It was pervasive and it was vampiric in its ability to steal the moisture and breath from any and all who entered it. Artemis found herself sweating through the thick fabric of her bridge uniform in a matter of moments of stepping into its harsh embrace.

She drew eyes as she strode into the room. It was difficult to maintain poise under the uncomfortable warmth and equally discomfiting stares, but she did it all the same. She was an obvious outsider to these people. Many of whom weren’t even present for her secret, traitorous meeting, but she was an outsider all the same to them. Good, she needed that edge.

Artemis found Jep at a cogitator array. His back was to her, and she couldn’t quite make out what he was doing.

“What’s all this?” she asked from over his shoulder.

“Monitoring fuel lines to ensure the pressure remains stable and no fluctuations occur in their...” the man trailed off as he turned to see Artemis, his eyes widening. “A-Artemis! What... What are... You shouldn’t be here!”

Artemis shrugged. “Was getting tired of the same old routine up above. Figured I could lend a hand down here.”

Many of the passing crew scoffed and shook their heads, some laughing at her. The ones that recognized her and had been present to hear out her plan of escape, they either glared or frowned at her in pity.

It had been several days since Pyotr had conscripted her into his personal service. Since then, he had called on her very little. Artemis suspected that that would change once they left the Warp. This was her one opportunity to win people over, regardless if current consensus still had her labeled as foolhardy and suicidal.

Jep glanced from side to side and began to pick at the skin around his fingernails as he leaned forward and lowered his voice. “This is *not* a good idea.”

“I know,” Artemis admitted with a sigh. “I have to try anyway.”

An arm that felt as if it were threaded with metal cabling hooked around her neck and shoulder, which was then followed by a barking laugh.

“Ha! She is persistent, I will give her that!” Brelja said. “The skalds say that the best hunters never give up on their prey, even when they waste more energy than what they seek will provide.”

Jep glanced about nervously. “Brelja... Perhaps you shouldn’t be so... so loud about such matters?”

“Bah!” the woman waved a dismissive hand. “I could be talking about anything! Besides, I’m impressed. I’ve never seen a bridge officer skip down from her high tower to slum it with us thralls. Certainly could learn a thing or two if she’s going to be helping down here.” The woman pinched Artemis’s tough uniform coat and tugged on it. “This? It’s going to send you to the infirmary in minutes from heat exposure.”

“Ah...” Artemis floundered. Admittedly, she’d been expecting to potentially deal with hard, physical labor. She just hadn’t anticipated the heat to be so much of a hindrance. Looking around, however, she saw that every member of the station’s crew wore exclusively light tunics with short or nonexistent sleeves. Some even went shirtless, women included.

Brelja laughed again, gave her shoulder a hard jostle, then leaned up against the cogitator next to Jep, arms crossed over her chest. “I say we give her something to do, Jep. Let the other side see how things are for a change.”

Jep sighed, running a hand through his drenched hair, then scratching at his unflattering beard. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin. These things... These things can’t just be... You can’t just *jump* into them. There’s training and safety measures and...”

“Come on, Jep,” Artemis pleaded. “I just need something to do. Even if it’s just carrying heavy things around.”

“I’d personally like to see that,” Brelja said, raising her hand.

“Well...” Jep mused, looking over his shoulder at the disorganized stack of metal pallets, rebar, piping, scrap sheets, and other such materials for repairs and upkeep in the corner of the room.

“Tell you what,” he said. “No one’s been wanting to deal with the Behemoth there. Resources keep piling up but no one’s willing to make it neat. If you want to try to take a crack at it, then I won’t stop you.”

Artemis nodded. It was something. If the crew here saw her willing to see to their needs, maybe that would be the first drop in the bucket of getting them to trust her and take a risk on her ideas. Maybe.

“I’m on it,” she said and turned with stiff, determined precision and began making her way to her task. Artemis could hear Brelja snickering behind her, but she just rolled her eyes when she was sure no one was looking. How much trouble could it possibly be to just move some things around?

As it turned out, Artemis was not particularly good at “just moving things around.”

She immediately found herself regretting her decision as she approached the pile of detritus and realized that it was much larger than she had expected and it dawned on her the enormity of her task and why no one else was willing to make the attempt. The stack alone was perhaps three times her height and took up a considerable swath of the deck space.

Over the course of an hour, Artemis gave it her best attempt at disassembling the horrid amalgamation of metal and scrap, but quickly realized it was next to impossible. There was no uniformity to the mass and, in order to remove one item, she’d find that it relied on her to

remove another one first, which was then somehow supporting another series of materials that, if left tenuous, might risk having the whole structure collapse in a potentially dangerous way.

That part Artemis actually found rather engaging. She enjoyed the mental stimulation working out the best solution and calculating what she could remove and what she couldn't until later—almost like a puzzle. It was the execution of her solutions that was the aggravating part.

Artemis was no physical specimen and found that many of the resources before her outclassed her significantly. That, coupled with the heat, resulted in her being forced to remove her uniform coat and continue working in the simple top she had beneath it as her arms, hands, face, and attire steadily became more and more tainted with grime and grease. Still, by the time she heard footsteps approaching to check on her, she was mildly satisfied with the meager progress she had made.

"I'll give it to you, girl," Brelja said as she tossed Artemis a canteen of water. She immediately began to gulp it down eagerly. "I thought you would've given up by now."

Artemis wiped some of the sweat from his forehead. "Not an option."

The fuel-loader nodded to her with an expression of respect. "They're talking about you." She gestured deeper into the chamber with a quick shifting of her head. Cliques had begun to form amongst the workers, many talking in hushed tones as they went about their business, occasionally shooting furtive glances in Artemis's direction.

"Good things, I hope," Artemis said, risking a smile as a small flame of hope rose in her chest.

"They're saying you're an idiot and that this doesn't change anything."

"Oh."

Brelja turned to her with an apologetic look, her eyes sad in a way that Artemis had not been expecting. "I like you, girl. I do. But you need to give up. What you're doing is going to get someone hurt."

"I have to take that risk."

"You're brave, but you don't have any wits to temper it."

Artemis raised an eyebrow as she took another drink of water. "Should I be offended?"

Brelja snorted a laugh. "Oh, don't misunderstand me, you're *smart*, sure, but *wits* is what you don't have."

"What's the difference?"

"Don't know, I'm not smart enough," Brelja said with a grin.

Artemis smiled. Then she chuckled. Then she found herself laughing. "That's so dumb."

"Of course it karking is, I said it, didn't I?" Brelja retorted in between her own peels of laughter.

The two continued in that state for a moment, but were unexpectedly stopped as the ship itself began to tremble as if appalled by their mirth. The rest of the crew within the station halted what they were doing in unison, even waiting several breaths after the tremor had ended before continuing their work.

Artemis felt a sharp pain in her skull.

“Feel like the whole damn ship’s about to fall apart,” Brelja said with a grimace. “Blood of my ancestors do I karking hate the Warp.”

The pain didn’t stop. Artemis brought a hand up to her temple and winced.

“Everything okay, girl?”

“I…” Artemis gasped in pain as lightning flashed behind her eyes. It continued to grow in frequency and volume until there was an array of colors flaring within her mind that consumed all the darkness in a painful rhythm. The pattern was almost like music.

Music, or a symphony.

Without realizing it, Artemis somehow ended up on her knees, growling through the pain as she hunched forward. Hands grabbed her shoulders and Brelja knelt beside her.

“Artemis, what’s wrong? What’s happening?”

A phrase immediately popped into her mind. She wasn’t sure why, but she, from the recesses of her memory, remembered that it was something her mother had occasionally used when she and her brother had been children—spoken just before something bad was about to happen.

“The great beast cometh,” Artemis whispered.

Pyotr narrowed his eyes at his brother, then turned away. He approached one of his workstations and removed his helm, pretending to be more preoccupied with what was before him than for whatever trivial display the once-raptor had come to make to him.

“I’m busy,” he grunted.

“Yes, I can tell,” Retrigan replied. Even through the distortion of his helmet’s vox, Pyotr could hear the cynicism in his brother’s voice.

“Those were very pretty words you spoke the other day.”

Pyotr simply grunted in response.

“Though, I cannot help but notice you never actually asked my question.” Retrigan approached Pyotr’s station of cogitators and warpsmith tools. His posture betrayed his displeasure as he inspected them with his eyes, keeping his hands far from even accidentally touching anything.

“You are not authorized to use this equipment, Astartes XR-6-2!” Curie chimed in. Pyotr had yet to dismiss the tech adept, so she remained standing in the exact same position she had been in when she and Pyotr had been conversing.

Retrigan looked at her for only a single beat of the heart. “XR-6-2?”

“Yes,” Curie said without any further elaboration. Retrigan grunted but pushed the topic no further, turning his eye lenses back to Pyotr.

“Does it matter that much to you?” Pyotr said, returning the discussion back to Retrigan’s initial topic, despite his best efforts.

“I’d rather know that my brother has a plan beyond sending us in droves to die rather than just a hope he does.”

“You will have to make do with hope.”

Retrigan snorted. “Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“Because you said so,” Retrigan repeated slowly, nodding his head thoughtfully. “Need I remind you that *you* were the one who began distancing yourself from Sixth Claw? We simply adhered to your wishes. Do not punish the warband because of your wounded pride.”

Pyotr did not pause in his faux work. “I had my pride surgically removed by Zasharr five days ago.”

“I thought you did not tell jests.”

“I don’t.” Pyotr turned to look at the nearest hololithic display and stared at the stream of his latest scrapcode. He had not touched the design in nearly a year. “My lack of transparency has nothing to do with Sixth Claw, Retrigan. Vultures watch my every move now that I have taken the reins in this endeavor. I do not need Gargahl or Anras to swoop in and ruin things.”

“And you would think sharing your thoughts with your Claw will result in that happening?”

Pyotr looked his brother in the eyes. “Should I not?”

He was not given an answer.

The lord discordant opened his mouth to insist that Retrigan leave him when, with rapid alacrity, Tzimiti sprung from its nest and bound to the front of the chamber. Retrigan unsheathed his lightning claws just as quickly—as if he had been expecting this to happen—but was left just as bemused as Pyotr when the helstalker darted past him and crouched defensively at the entrance to the Mechanization Hall. The daemon engine’s limbs were tense, its maw and weapons bared, and a deep, haunting croaking came from within its throat to accompany the rising thrum of its generator-heart.

“Is this normal behavior for your... steed?” Retrigan asked, his helm half-turned so that he could look at both Pyotr and Tzimiti warily.

“...No,” Pyotr admitted. “Something is wrong.”

Pyotr stepped away from his workbench and, with heightened senses, immediately began to notice the subtle dip in atmospheric pressure and temperature within the room.

Without orders, Curie scuttled over to the nearest cogitator—which so happened to be the one that Pyotr had been at moments before—and began to access its contents. After a few moments, her oculars began to pulse varying shades of blue and magenta as a clicking noise rose from her vocabulator.

“Ah,” she said with a casual air. “That is rather unfortunate.”

“What is it?” Retrigan demanded.

“It would seem that the Gellar Field has failed.”

Sparks flew as Gyrrhemar parried the bestial attack from his opponent. It had only been a few minutes into their bout and chain-teeth already littered the floor around Gyrrhemar’s feet—much to his displeasure. Naduvion favored heavy, brutal strikes that forced Gyrrhemar to strip his spear and lose lethality in half the time he would in a normal duel.

Reorienting, Gyrrhemar made to strike forward, forcing Naduvion to step back to avoid the jab. He took the opportunity to take his own few steps backward, widening the gap between them, and began to further size up his foe.

The two brothers circled each other.

“Have you always favored your left hand?” Gyrrhemar asked, rolling his shoulder.

“Ever since I was a child,” Naduvion replied lightly.

“Well, stop doing that. It’s annoyingly effective,” Gyrrhemar said with a grin.

Naduvion snorted, flipping the dagger in his right hand into a reverse grip while flaring the motor of his chainsword in his left. That sword was strong and crushing, yes, but the real danger was the blade in Naduvion’s other hand. If Gyrrhemar became too distracted with protecting himself from the former, the latter would end their bout before he even realized it.

Licking the backs of his teeth, Gyrrhemar raised his spear once more and readied himself to charge. The opportunity would never come, though, as, just when he was prepared to make his first step, a harrowing scream rippled from down the corridor and into the chamber.

Everyone within the training grounds froze.

“What the hell was that?” Naduvion asked.

“I do not know. Someone amusing themselves with a slave?” Gyrrhemar replied with a shrug that was more apathetic than he truly felt.

“That did not sound like a slave, brother.”

The air grew cold and Gyrrhemar heard the scream again, this time layered with a second howl. Naduvion was right, there was something eerie about those sounds. It was only a few notes off, but distinctly tinged with something beyond human or even beast. It was like a noise grappled and pulled from the deepest, darkest pits of a man’s nightmares.

It came again, this time closer, this time as a choir.

“Something is coming.”

Gyrrhemar grunted and aimed his spear at the door. The other Astartes within the chamber followed suit, readying themselves, forgetting about their matches and the imaginary lines in the sand between warbands.

A stampede of irregular claws and talons scrabbling along metal rang through the darkness of the corridor. It steadily grew louder, as did the screams. It drew closer and closer still until, inevitably, it was a cacophony of noise that screeched louder than the motors of the chain weapons all around Gyrrhemar.

Then the flood came.

Hordes of horrid creatures burst through the chamber’s entryway, infiltrating the room in the same way a drop of blood spreads through water. A storm of claws, fangs, and baleful eyes rained down upon them with a singular, malicious intent.

Gyrrhemar heard a shout from behind him. “*Neverborn!*”

Chapter XII: Fear and Rage

A motley storm of colors surged into the training grounds, choking and surrounding all that was within the chambers. Pink and blue and burning orange creatures gnashed rows of serrated teeth as they scrambled over one another with their additional limbs and prehensile tendrils.

As the deluge of daemons crashed inwards on all sides, Gyrthemar pressed his back to that of the first fellow Astartes nearest to him. He quickly found himself regretting that decision.

“Coward,” Ajax grunted.

“Bastard,” Gyrthemar spat back.

The insults were an unconventional truce. Both marines would have liked to see the other fall under the claws of daemons, but to allow that would be to make themselves vulnerable and open to their own demise. Animosity would have to be set aside for the time being. The realization annoyed Gyrthemar, but he didn't have much time to dwell on it as a Neverborn monstrosity lunged at him, forcing him to cleave it down the middle with his thrumming spear, only for the creature's two halves to shudder then undulate and burst into flames, reforming into two separate horrors of brimstone. He squashed one under his boot, then vanquished the other with the backswing of his weapon. The way the two *popped* and screeched out their deaths made Gyrthemar smile.

Reigniting the motor on his chainspear, Gyrthemar chuckled to himself as more Neverborn surged forward to replace their exiled kindred. Behind him, he could hear a power scythe singing through the air, accompanied by the sizzling of fading corpses.

Gyrthemar knew that the presence of the daemons spelled a much larger issue for the ship. He knew that this would be a desperate fight in which many of his brothers may die. He knew that *he* may even die. This was going to be a brutal, agonizing slog for survival. He was not meant to *enjoy* himself.

Whoever tried to stop him could damn well go breed with dogs, though. He was Gyrthemar the Wolfkiller, and he was going to have some *fun*.

It took Retrigan a moment to process what he had just heard. “What did she just say?”

“The Gellar Field,” the techpriest repeated, “it is compromised.”

“How?” Pyotr said, an edge to his voice.

The adept continued plinking away at the cogitator until a display of the *Savory Wound* appeared on one of the hololiths. Surrounding it was a visual representation of the Gellar Field. It looked like a static membrane that clung to the ship. Except, instead of fully and completely encompassing the hull, it was broken and fractured, moving and undulating, growing and shrinking in various different sections like some form of techno-psychic amoeba.

“It would appear that one of the generators is malfunctioning,” Curie explained. “This would not normally be an issue, for that is what the additional generators are for, except the

problematic device is not simply inactive, but actively inverting realspace projection, creating a negative frequency against the other generators.”

“Meaning?” Retrigan asked. He knew that Pyotr would not need a clarification, but he also knew that he would not be getting one either way unless he asked. And where the Warp was involved, Retrigan needed all the details, lest he feel an uncomfortable gloam looming over him.

“Meaning that the malfunctioning generator is trying to destroy the fields that are being created by the other ones,” Pyotr answered for his Mechanicum servant. “Is it fixable?”

“Yes, master,” Curie responded. “Quite easily, in fact. The faulty device simply needs to be deactivated fully to reestablish a secure field. The remaining generators will be able to maintain the additional strain until a suitable replacement is installed.”

“Good. I will see to it, then.” Pyotr turned to leave.

“No,” Curie said simply, her oculars pulsing shades of blue.

Pyotr stopped in place and turned, his eyebrow raised. “No?”

“With all respect that is deserved, Lord Pyotr, your hands are too profane to touch and operate the sanctity of this ship. I do not fault you for this, but it is so. You cannot be trusted to maintain purity and are prone to corrupt these instruments, potentially causing future operational failures.”

“You don’t seem to have such grievances normally.”

“As you have said, you are the master of this hall. It is not my place to question your actions and heresies here. The rest of the vessel, however, is *my* domain. I will see that it remains pure in the eyes of the Machine God. I do not recommend we argue this point further, as time is limited. The partial Gellar Field is keeping us from complete and immediate annihilation, but we are still currently being besieged. Additionally, there is a chance this malfunction could spread if not seen to immediately.”

“What?” Retrigan asked hastily.

“These instruments are delicate and impressionable. Bad influences and peer pressure could lead to unhealthy lifestyles. Ha. Ha,” the techpriest said in a flat tone. Retrigan looked at her with an incredulous expression. Was she... attempting humor? He wasn’t sure what was more unsettling, the threat of annihilation by the Warp or the fact that a member of the Mechanicum was *joking*.

Pyotr stared at the robed machine-fanatic for several moments. Retrigan eyed him. Pyotr had always been thoughtful, but he’d also once been vocal about those thoughts as he worked through them. That had changed in recent years. Now, he was more of a cold, mechanical shell of the brother he once knew, with eyes that were sometimes hollow and other times writhing with something dark and putrid.

“Very well,” the lord discordant finally said as he drew his bolt pistol and pointed it upward by his head. “But do not make me regret this, honored adept.” Curie responded with an emission of garbled noise from her vocabulator that may have been an affirmative. Pyotr then turned to look at Retrigan. There was a silent question in those eyes.

Retrigan swallowed, then glanced at the hololithic display again. With only mild hesitation, he grasped the bolter on his thigh, released its maglock, then nodded to his brother. "Let's get on with it, then."

Gyrthemar was no longer having fun.

He had ceased to do so around the time that he'd lost a vast majority of the teeth on his chainspear and was reduced to using it as a glorified bludgeon. There were numerous times that he could not keep up with the infinite swarm of horrors and had to trade positions with Ajax to keep from being overwhelmed.

"I did not think you were so incompetent that I would have to fight your battles for you!" the berzerker said after their most recent switch, waves of Neverborn evaporating under the swings of his scythe.

"You try killing daemons with what amounts to a stick!" he spat back. Gyrthemar then made a mental note to never use another chain weapon for the rest of his life, assuming he survived this day.

"Replace the damn track, then! I'll cover you."

Gyrthemar grunted in annoyance. "I did not bring any spares!"

"Of course you didn't," Ajax said through clenched teeth. "Leave it to a Night Lord to—"

Gyrthemar did not hear the end of that sentence, thankfully, as his cousin's voice was drowned out by a cacophonous explosion near the center of the room.

"Did someone just throw a bloody grenade?" Gyrthemar shouted incredulously. His only reply was the continuous screeching of Warp-vermin and Astartes grunting and yelling out in pain or command as they fought for their lives. Regardless, he almost wished he'd thought of the idea first up until he noticed the havoc it had wrought on some of their own men.

An arm, severed by the explosion, lay on the decking about thirteen paces from Gyrthemar and Ajax. Its hand still clutched its bolter. Gyrthemar scoffed at the weapon. He didn't carry one himself. He preferred that his ranged weapons have a bit more heft to them so that they may *truly* tear through his enemies with ease. A boltgun was all well and good until you came upon something actually worth your time.

Gyrthemar looked down at the nearly-bare spear in his hand after slamming it into the side of a diminutive blue daemon, crushing whatever skeletal structure it may or may not have had. Then he looked back at the bolter. Then he sighed.

"Cover me!" he said to Ajax.

"For what?" was the response, but the berzerker pivoted and took up a defensive stance as he stuck close to Gyrthemar regardless.

The path to the weapon was quickly growing flooded with Neverborn once again, but Gyrthemar did his best to clear it with his spear as he bound forward. It took him three strikes upon a particularly persistent pink horror before it split into its two lesser forms, which were then dealt with by Ajax.

As if sensing Gyrrhemar's motives, more and more packs of daemons began closing in on the two, practically scrambling over each other at the chance to have at them. Gyrrhemar's own armor was already marred with an array of minor cuts and slashes from unnatural claws and fangs. Twice he had to physically pry one of the Neverborn off of him and toss it to Ajax for slaughter as it lunged forward and grappled onto his ceramite.

Just a little closer, he thought through clenched teeth.

Before he even had a chance to wade another step forward, however, he watched as the bolter was swallowed by a horde of pinks and blues and brimstones, all gnashing their way towards him like a variable wave of the Warp made manifest.

"What now?" Ajax barked to Gyrrhemar, beginning to also struggle with the continuous flood of enemies.

Gyrrhemar scanned where he had last seen the gun as he battered daemon after daemon with his oversized baton. He needed a glimpse. Just. A single. Glimpse.

Another horror pounced at him. This time, Gyrrhemar grabbed it while it was in flight and hurled it back into its group of chattering hellspawn. The impact caused several to scatter, revealing the barest hint of a black muzzle resting atop the cold, gray deck.

There.

"Now," Gyrrhemar replied to Ajax, "I do something *very* stupid."

Before the Son of Angron had the opportunity to respond, Gyrrhemar rammed the shaft of his spear into one final Neverborn before he dropped it, closed the distance between him and his prize in four, quick steps, and dove into the swarm of daemons, allowing their mass to engulf and consume him.

Artemis knelt. Even after the pain receded, she knelt. Even after she began to hear screams echo from the distant halls, she knelt. Even after Brelja had left her to investigate what was going on, she knelt. Because that was the only option.

She wasn't quite sure why she knew this, but she did. She knew it the same way that a vole knew that it had little choice but to die once the snake slithered into its den. A deep, primeval part of Artemis sensed this. They were the voles, trapped in their cramped burrow, and the viper was coming.

And here I thought I didn't raise quitters, a voice said.

"The beast cometh, Mother," Artemis whispered. "There's nothing that can be done. We aren't gods."

Hmph. Stop calling them that. The Astartes aren't gods, they're hardly even men.

"We're dead."

I'm dead. You're giving up.

That caused Artemis to stir slightly. "I..." She frowned. "What would you have me *do*?"

Be my daughter. Fight.

She knew that the voice wasn't real. That her mother was truly well and gone and Artemis was simply imagining what she thought the old crone might have said in this moment. It still helped.

With almost agonizing effort, Artemis rose to her feet and looked around. All the workers had stopped what they were doing and were staring out into the corridor beyond the entryway of their station with abject terror. Screams echoed from that darkness, both the surreal sounds of something inhuman, and the harrowing cries of people being slaughtered in droves.

"Hey!" Artemis yelled. No one gave her any heed. In response, she turned, stomped back to the pile of junk she had been sorting, grabbed a length of rebar, and proceeded to slam it into a sheet of scrap metal like some sort of trash-yard drum. "HEY!" she repeated. This time, several heads turned to face her.

"I want everyone to grab something and start barricading that entrance. Now!" She gestured to the material pile that Jep had referred to as 'the Behemoth' and found herself grateful that she'd taken the time to begin sorting it after all.

Surprisingly, there was little hesitation as bodies quickly scrambled to follow her orders. The few who didn't listen turned to Jep, who simply waved them off with a frantic air. "You heard her! Get to it!"

"What's happening?" a small man with dark hair asked as he scurried past Artemis.

"What's your name?" Artemis asked, trying to regain her best bridge officer's stance.

"Kim... Er, ma'am."

She nodded. "I'm afraid I have no idea, Kim. And, for our own safety, I think it's best that we keep it that way."

The man blanched slightly and visibly gulped, but nodded in understanding as he hurried to help carry more scrap to their makeshift barricade.

Artemis spent the next few minutes directing the slapdash construction project the best she could. The end result was a barricade that likely wouldn't even hold up against a siege by a regular human force—but it was better than nothing.

"What about weapons?" A voice at her side asked. Artemis jumped when she realized Brelja had, at some point, returned to her.

"What?"

"Weapons. For if we get breached." All eyes turned to Artemis for answers.

If... Throne, they actually had faith in her.

In an attempt to mask her crushing and sudden terror, Artemis glanced around the room until her eyes fell on a tool resting on one of the workbenches. "What's that?" she asked, pointing to it.

One of the women standing nearby looked at it, then back to Artemis. "A welder, ma'am."

"Well, it's a hand flamer now," Artemis said. "Get as many of those into each of your hands as possible. Do you have any lascutters?"

“A few,” Brelja said with obvious glee. “They’re not anywhere near as good as the ones the Astartes use, but they’ll karking do, I bet.”

“Then get to it! Nail guns too, if you have them. If it’s a tool that can be used at range, it’s a weapon now! I want more barricades spaced out around this station as cover, too!”

Everyone was quick to adhere to her commands and Artemis felt something... strange within her. Something that mixed with the complete terror and nausea she was feeling. Pride.

That’s my girl...

“Do you need something too?” Jep asked, as Brelja had already rushed off, presumably to get a lascutter before they were all nabbed.

Artemis’s hand drifted to her hip and her expression soured. She was still getting used to carrying around the revolver her master had given her and had forgotten it back in her quarters.

“Yes,” she admitted. “Please.”

Moments later, Artemis had an industrial nail gun in her hand and was ordering workers behind fortifications and optimizing their positionings the best that she could manage. Artemis was no *militarum* strategist, nor inspiring Commissar, but, well, if those around her needed her to pretend for a little bit, then that’s what she would do.

As each man and woman found their station, Artemis noted Jep and Brelja had once again stuck close to her.

“Looks good,” Brelja said, nodding in approval.

“You... think it’ll work?” Jep asked, his grip growing tighter on the handle of his flamer. Artemis didn’t answer him. Better that she didn’t lie to her friends.

“Throne, no!” Brelja echoed Artemis’s thoughts, albeit with far more humor. “But it’ll be a glorious way to go out, I can say that much.”

There was something in the way she spoke those words that piqued Artemis’s interest. A tone that was almost desperate. Artemis opened her mouth to question the woman, but before she had the opportunity, a resounding *thud* crashed against their barrier. All fell silent.

Over two dozen eyes stared forward at their fortification as it was met with another, stronger *thud* as something slammed against it. There was another pause. Then another slam. Then again. And again.

Each hit rattled the blockade, causing portions of the defense to creak and break off. Slowly, the creaking grew louder as if it were crying out at the strain of keeping their foes back. The sound caused Artemis’s heart to lose its rhythm as each moan and squeak of metal seemed to be a promise of the dam’s inevitable collapse.

And yet, by some miracle, it held.

The assault quieted and Artemis heard a collective exhale spread across the ranks of the fuel-loading station.

Then the blockade exploded.

There was a muffled *CRACK-CRACK-CRACK!* on the opposing side of the barrier and, before anyone could so much as utter a word of reaction, the barrier collapsed as if shattered by

the fists of vengeful spirits. Powderized metal and motes of dust coughed into the air as their defense fell, creating an impenetrable cloud that obscured their view beyond.

“Aim!” Artemis cried, more in an attempt to break everyone out of their stupor rather than raise any sort of respectable defense. Most of the workers complied.

A silhouette appeared in the cloud. Dark and imposing, it stalked forward, one step at a time. Artemis swore she could even hear hissing coming from the thing. The hissing of a viper.

“Hold!” she yelled. The workers around her shivered and trembled in fearful anticipation.

Red eyes glinted from the dusty shadows. Then a dark boot emerged, slamming down onto the deck, followed by a ceramite-encrusted waist, then a midnight torso bearing a winged-skull emblem. Finally, the helm of an Astartes appeared from the gloom, its head and shoulders shrouded with a crimson cloak and hood.

The figure stood in the entryway, toting his bolter, glaring at the humans surrounding him. Then he spoke in a toneless voice that bore no accent, “When you hear knocking at your door, it is common courtesy to open it.”

The fool was dead. Ajax was certain of that.

Never before, in all his years, had he seen an Astartes willingly drop his weapon—as feeble as it was—and *dive* into a horde of vile Warp-vermin. Even if he survived by some grand jest of the Ruinous Powers, the coward would surely be mutated and forever changed by the psychically-laced claws and fangs of the daemons surrounding them. And to be touched by the Changer of Ways was a fate deserving of being put down like a dog.

Part of Ajax was relieved with this outcome. One less nuisance for the nails to agonize him over.

The rest of him realized the tactical disadvantage he was now at.

Horrors flowed around him, pushing inward in all directions, his back exposed. The forms of the creatures eternally shifting and mutating, some becoming no more than blurs of colors at the edge of his vision, their flesh pulsating with arcane deviance that he could even see in the darkness of his missing eye.

The nails sang. Ajax could not hold them back. The mere presence of the Neverborn caused the pain engine to drill into his skull with feverish zeal. He roared as the sounds of cackling and incomprehensible tongues only coaxed the nails to further batter his mind.

Instinctively, Ajax spun and swung his cursed weapon, shearing three horrors in half as they lunged at his vulnerable backside, but that now left him exposed from the direction he had previously been facing, leaving him to feel arcs of Warp-lightning to burn away at his armor, sending his mind ablaze even further.

Too much... Ajax thought through heavy breaths, desperately cutting away at as many daemons as he could, hoping that thinning their numbers would ease some of the stimulation pounding through his brain, only for it to do the opposite as the creatures regrew and became entirely new entities from their split and severed corpses.

Ajax clenched his teeth. *Too. Much...*

“Blood God give me strength!” he bellowed, but these were beings of the Warp. They had no blood to spill, no skulls to claim. The only interest the Great God had in them would be in the hatred he held for their master. Ajax hoped it would be enough.

You bear the weapon of a fallen warrior. You are cursed. You deserve no favor.

Ajax’s vision rapidly grew red. His vocal cords strained and threatened to tear as he roared at the daemons, at the battle, at his god, at Zasharr, at the open air, at *everything*. His rage could shatter mountains, but even mountains would bend under the overwhelming force that were these horrors as they slowly gained ground and began to overtake Ajax. He continued to swing his accursed power scythe in defiance anyway.

More pressure weighed on his back and the nails grew hotter. The berzerker felt claws dig into his ceramite and begin scuttling higher towards his own head, forcing him to reach backward and grab at the loathsome thing and toss it into the air where he was then able to cleave into it.

Whirling around, Ajax reaped the next wave of horrors that had intended to rush him, as well, but was then forced to spin to deal with the next pack, then again to deal with the next. Then again. And again.

Too many.

He gnashed his teeth unconsciously in the same way a beast does when cornered. Ajax was outmatched with little hope of support. Either due to his own brothers struggling to maintain control over their nails, or because he would never expect a Night Lord to ever lend aid if it meant compromising their desire to save their own skin.

Crackling rose in greater volume behind Ajax and he whirled about to see half a dozen Neverborn, their forms twitching and ephemeral, standing together with their arms outstretched, each channeling and building towards a single, powerful blast of Warp-magic. Ajax knew he would not reach them before he was obliterated. He charged forward anyway, refusing to give in.

“For the Carnage Stitches!” Ajax howled. The horrors laughed, the light of their power growing almost blinding. A loud series of *bangs* soon followed.

And then the light vanished, snuffed out as if by a vacuum.

When the glare in his vision cleared, Ajax saw that the daemons that had been closely huddled together were now nothing more than scorched marks. Standing a few paces away, a bolter trained at the exact position the horrors had previously stood, was the coward, Gyrthemar.

“Now we can have some real fun!” the Night Lord called to Ajax with jovial bloodlust, his armor horribly tattered and damaged, but uncompromised.

“You’re insane!” Ajax spat, but allowed the warrior to press their backs together again.

“How do those nails feel?” Gyrthemar countered. Ajax grunted in response.

The relief was near immediate as Ajax mowed down the horrid creatures with his scythe while Gyrthemar plinked away at groups of them with the explosive rounds from his bolter. The tide had not fully shifted by any means, but there they held a chance once more.

Ajax spared a glance back at the Night Lord. “Why did you do that?”

“What?” Gyrthemar called over the din of his gun.

“Why did you risk your life for that boltgun instead of fleeing?”

“Simple,” Gyrrhemar said. “I knew it would annoy my brothers when I tell them later!”

Ajax continued to fight, but looked back at the warrior yet again, meeting his eyes. Then they both began to laugh.

The trek to the Gellar Field generators was a tedious one that made Retrigan wish—not for the first time—that he’d never given up the jump pack.

Their journey consisted of Pyotr sending that daemonic beast of his ahead to scout and distract any enemies away from their position while he and Retrigan escorted the techpriest. That in and of itself was a trial in patience, however, as Curie insisted that they not move until the constantly fluctuating bubble of realspace around the ship encompassed the next leg of their route in order to avoid any “profane influences upon their spirits.” On any other occasion, Retrigan would have agreed with the caution—but this was not a time to be cautious, this was a time to *act*.

The end result was them reaching their destination with only minor resistance along the way that Pyotr and Retrigan dealt with easily enough with a concentrated salvo of bolter fire until their obstacle ceased to be, but at the cost of what Retrigan assumed to be half the damn ship due to how egregiously long it took them.

“Yes, very good,” Curie said as they entered the generator bay. Based on initial inspection, Retrigan saw no immediate or visible malfunction from any of the machines through his retinal display, but the adept seemed confident as she shuffled to the room’s cogitator. “Diagnosing the misaligned system should take but a few moments. After the proper ritual is done.”

Retrigan flexed his fist in irritation, allowing his lightning claws to slide out from their casings before sheathing them once again. “Excellent. More time wasted,” he muttered then turned to Pyotr for some level of agreement that he knew would not be there.

Instead he saw his brother’s daemon engine had quietly prowled its way into the room behind them. Retrigan suppressed a shiver. Something so large and cumbersome should not be so furtive.

Pyotr touched the entombed daemon on its flesh-and-metal neck and spoke softly to it. “Thank you, Tzimiti. You may hunt freely now.”

The helstalker nudged its master in the chest with its head in a manner that Retrigan would have called affectionate if he did not know any better of the malice that was hidden within that creature. It then whirled around again, vibrated in dark delight, and bound its way back into the deep arteries of the *Savory Wound*.

“I do not understand how you trust that thing,” Retrigan said as he took his place on one side of the entryway, using it as cover as he aimed his bolter down into the dark corridor. Pyotr took his position across from him and did the same with his bolt pistol.

“It is not about trust,” he said. “Tzimiti is bound to me. My will dominates its. It has no choice but to follow my commands.”

Retrigan saw no reason to reply. Those tainted by the Ruinous Powers had a way of deluding themselves, justifying every action that sank them further in their corruption. He had seen it in his fellow raptors after Gargahl's ascension and it had sickened him. He'd given up the skies in favor of his soul for that very reason. He missed it. He missed his brothers who flew with him, but they were gone. What remained were nothing more than husks in service to Chaos. Pyotr wouldn't be far behind them.

The silence continued between them as they stared off into the darkness before them, the only sound that of the ritual chanting and bionic clicking and snapping from Curie behind them. Retrigan itched to extend his lightning claws again, but resisted the urge.

"You are wrong," Pyotr said, abruptly ending the uncomfortable quiet.

"What?"

"When you said I want to be Fabrinus. That was a false claim."

Retrigan frowned behind his helm, but turned his head to face his brother. "Is that so?"

Pyotr nodded, but did not meet Retrigan's eyes. He simply continued staring out into the darkness.

"But I do envy him. His conviction..."

"Is now really the time for this, brother?"

Pyotr ignored him. "I have spent my entire life wishing for something to believe in, Retrigan. To ascend beyond the wastes of Nostramo and find a better purpose. I thought the Astartes would be the answer. Instead, I was met with a father who hated me and an Emperor who turned his back on us the moment we became too *unsightly* for his sterling Imperium. I cannot put my faith in the Ruinous Powers, for I know too well what their plans entail for their followers. The last hope I had was the Machine God. I devoted myself to the sanctity of technology in an attempt to find purpose amongst steel and oil."

"And did you?" Retrigan asked despite already knowing the answer.

"No," Pyotr replied darkly. "And yet Lavitor Fabrinus has. More so than most of his kin. For that, I hate him."

"Among other reasons," Retrigan grunted.

"Among other reasons," Pyotr agreed but did not elaborate. The silence returned again for a moment before the lord discordant spoke once more, his voice eerily quiet, "I'm getting worse, Retrigan."

The once-raptor stopped, looking at his brother. His fingers begged him to turn the end of his bolter on his fellow Night Lord due to the dark promise in his words, but he ignored that urge for now.

"Do you know why I did not have my mechadendrite replaced?"

"No," Retrigan answered. Nor had he particularly cared until now.

"It is because I cannot trust myself to not inject every machine spirit I come across with debilitating scrapcode if I had it. I avoid my Mechanization Hall because it is a constant test of will to not devote all my moments to flaying and torturing and agonizing every motive force I

can get my hands on simply for the *thrill* of it. The temptation is never far from my mind. The desire is always there.”

He finally turned and looked to Retrigan then. Those black eyes were still hollow, but it was only then that Retrigan truly understood why. His brother looked exhausted.

“When was the last time you slept, Pyotr?” Retrigan found himself asking, rather than voicing his sudden and strong discomfort at the words he was hearing.

“Not since Exodus Station.”

“That was over a week ago.”

Pyotr nodded, then looked back down the corridor, his pallid visage seeming old and decrepit beyond his years despite the preservative effects of Astartes physiology. “The Prince of Pleasure visits me in my dreams. They take things from me. My emotions, mostly. But I think other things are stolen, too. I’m being reformed. I fear what it is I am becoming.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Pyotr met Retrigan’s eyes again. “You know why, brother.”

Retrigan nodded. He did.

“I have been unfair to you, brother. I thought you fully lost to your... condition.”

“Do not patronize me with soft-sounding replacements for reality, Retrigan. Call my corruption for what it is.”

Retrigan nodded again, still processing his surprise. He thought the brother he once knew to be gone—or at least nearly so—what he had just been told proved otherwise. And yet...

“Diagnostics complete,” Curie said, not bothering to turn away from her cogitator.

As if the conversation that had just taken place did not happen, Pyotr rose and joined his tech adept. Retrigan belatedly followed, standing to her other side. “The results?”

“Generator Seven is our problem. Completely inoperable. We will need to replace it when time is convenient, as I assumed.” Curie spoke as she moved away from the cogitator and began to stroll down the line of large, box-shaped generators that buzzed and thrummed with activity. She stopped at one of them at the end of the line and began using her multi-tooled limb to access the panel.

In moments, the generator clicked and its front face split and began to lift into the air, coolant vapor rising alongside it. Within was a mess of wiring, cables, and blinking lumens that surrounded a throne. Sat within the seat was a cadaver of a human, its skin wrinkled and withered as many of the cablings ran from and connected to its temples and skull, while additional tubes attached to their gut and intestines, likely to provide nutrition and remove waste. Despite this, the figure thrashed and seized in its seat, their milky eyes flickering wildly and sparking with blue and purple fire. Retrigan looked at their form and immediately recognized them for what they were: A psyker.

“So that’s how we do it,” he said bluntly.

“Yes,” Curie acknowledged. One of her mechadendrites rose from her spine and lowered towards the psyker in their seat—as degraded as they were, Retrigan couldn’t define their gender anymore. “Simplistic. But efficiency often is.”

The pointed tip of the servo-arm speared forward and up under the creature's chin. They stiffened as the metal point slid past their flesh and into the brain, then fell still. When Curie removed her appendage, only a dark dribble of fluid leaked out of the wound.

"Is that all?" Pyotr asked.

"Yes," Curie replied. "Realspace will be fully exerting itself over the vessel now. We should not need to worry about additional intruders, but all current ones will still need to be dealt with."

Retrigan frowned. *That* was easier said than done.

There were only two emotions that truly encompassed life: Fear and rage. The rest were simply superfluous. They may have encouraged life, but they did not define it. Only those two, primal feelings dictated survival.

Therefore, it only made sense that Gyrrhemar and Ajax together represented life itself. And where they were life, death followed at their choosing.

Few words were spoken as the two almost melded into one entity of violence and destruction, intuiting the other's movements and intent before they even moved to do so. Waves of horrors were banished under their shots and strikes.

As the fight continued on, Gyrrhemar's bolter began to run dry, but that only became an excuse to further venture and carve away at more ranks of daemons until they were able to locate the rest of the body of that had been blown apart by the wayward grenade and collect his spare ammunition cartridges. Moments later, they were back to unleashing devastation with maximum capacity, both warrior and berzerker howling in delight as the cackles of the Neverborn became nervous chittering whenever they drew near.

It was only a matter of time, however, before their foes regrouped and began to press in on them with renewed gusto.

"Bah!" Ajax snarled, swinging his scythe but only vanquishing one daemon in the process. "The little runts run scared! They won't bother coming close to me anymore!"

"Would that I had the same problem," Gyrrhemar grunted through clenched teeth as he focused all his attention on shooting down enemies before they lunged too close. "I can't keep the damn things off of me!"

The two Astartes—backs still pressed together—glanced at one another knowingly. They nodded, then each tossed their weapon over their shoulders. Ajax caught the bolter at the same moment that Gyrrhemar grabbed the power scythe. The horrors that had been previously just out of reach of Ajax's swings began to burst apart as they were met with bolter fire, while the crowding hordes that were charging Gyrrhemar found themselves cut down by the dozens as he swung his new instrument of death with both hands.

Time ticked on as the two adapted their strategies just as quickly as the horrors changed their own. They were met with blasts of psychic energies and an occasional claw and fang, wearing down their armor and energy. But that only encouraged them to wear down the forces

against them quicker to compensate and, soon enough, the enemy they faced had been reduced so heavily in numbers that they could finally begin taking stock of the room.

Many other Astartes, both Night Lords and Carnage Stitchers alike, still fought. Several of which were heavily injured, but only three were notably dead. Pockets of psychic mutation sat sparsely about the chamber, some panels of metal jutting with brackish ice while the walls dripped with unnaturally bright and viscous fluids, among other peculiarities. Even some of their fellow brothers sported odd growths and spines caused by the unexpected effects of their opponents.

Gyrthemar and Ajax breathed heavily as they took this in. Horrors continued to surge into the room, continuing the assault but not nearly with the same level of devastation that their near-endless wave of bodies had waged before.

“I think we’ve just about killed them all,” Gyrthemar said proudly.

Ajax snorted. “Wisdom is certainly chasing you with that assessment, Night Lord.”

“Is it?”

“Yes,” Ajax replied, idly taking his scythe back from Gyrthemar and tossing him the bolter. “Unfortunately, you’re faster.”

Gyrthemar’s red lenses turned and stared at the berzerker for a moment, then the contorted buzz of laughter came from his voxgrill. “Better that than to sit and let my past catch up with me.”

Ajax let his nostrils flare as a vague sign of shared mirth before turning his head to look at the entryway of the chamber as he felt the nails suddenly begin humming. The vibrations steadily grew stronger.

“Hngh,” Ajax growled, bringing a hand up to his temple. “Something is coming.”

Gyrthemar raised his bolter, but no sooner than he did that a figure burst through the doorway, its form just as ghastly and fluid as its compatriots around it. Only this one carried a stave crackling with Warp-energy and rode atop a floating, beetle-like disc that jutted with spines around all edges. The horrid thing cried out in some incomprehensible tongue and pointed its stave forward. A new swarm of horrors surged forward into the room, only these seemed to part as they drew near Ajax and Gyrthemar and instead engaged with the other Astartes.

The entity atop its disc looked at them with half a dozen beady, ever-changing eyes. It bore its fangs and pointed to them with a simultaneously gnarled and rubbery clawed finger.

“I think it’s challenging us,” Gyrthemar stated.

The nails bits. No, they *howled*. “Then let’s give it what it wants.”

Chapter XIII: Inelegant Solutions

The Astartes looked about the station, his expression unreadable behind the midnight hue of his helmet, his red eyes twinkling in the twilight of the sparse lighting surrounding him. Despite this, Artemis couldn't help but feel a careless animosity coming from the Night Lord. The humans around him were nothing in his eyes, yet he was still disgusted to be near them.

"You ruined our barricade," she found herself saying, rising up fully from behind her cover. Fearful eyes turned to her, each set asking silently if she was mad for saying such words to the thing before her.

The Astartes—Taresh, based on the identifier on his breastplate—turned to glance over his shoulder at the wreckage he had created, then back at her. "I could have your skull for speaking to me in such a way."

Adrenaline. Terror. Annoyance. All of it shot through Artemis's veins in that moment, electrifying her. Her legs begged her to run from this monster. She willed them to remain put and lifted her chin instead.

"Take it up with Pyotr."

Taresh did not scoff or call her on her challenge like she expected most of his kin would. No, instead he ignored her and turned so that his back was no longer facing the open entranceway.

"Neverborn are coming. Prepare yourselves," he said.

Tension grew again at those words. Artemis fumed at the lack of comfort in them, the way they simply made her men *more* terrified and *less* prepared. It was about as much as she could expect from an Astartes, however.

Something approached down the corridor in irregular and maladroit rhythms. The hall itself was occasionally illuminated by sudden and incomprehensible goutts of multi-colored light.

"Artemis," a voice said next to her. She turned to see Jep still crouched down behind their makeshift barrier, only his head peeking out to see what's beyond. "There... there's something I should— Something I *want* to tell you before—"

"Save it for later, Jep."

"There might not *be* a later."

Artemis looked into her friend's wide eyes. She placed a hand on his shoulder and gave him a smile that she didn't feel but that he needed. "Of course there will. I'll make sure of it."

He gaped at her for a moment, but then nodded as his expression resolved itself into something that almost looked... Well, manly. Artemis blinked, wondering what happened to the skittish boy she'd seen just moments ago.

He stopped being that person years ago, she realized. You just never wanted to see it.

Artemis let her eyes linger on Jep for a few more seconds before lifting her weapon and addressing everyone around her.

“No one dies without my permission!” she roared. A round of grim cheers were given back to her in response. The Night Lord standing with them gave no indication he had even heard them as he lifted his boltgun and immediately began firing into the darkness.

Not a heartbeat later, three creatures spewing fire and death leapt into the chamber.

Ajax did not have much of a plan in dealing with the daemon aboard its flying disk; the nails would not let him formulate one. They shunned such thoughts, punished deliberation. They only rewarded action, the immediate gratification of violence.

So he charged.

Dimly, the berzerker heard something calling out to him, pleading with meek insignificance. His remaining cognition belonged to the threat in front of him. Its tongue lolled from its mouth, sliding along bladed teeth. It danced upon its disc and seemed to welcome the slash of Ajax’s scythe before slipping out of reach at the final moment, chittering its mockery.

The daemon floated around behind Ajax. He swung again, the Neverborn zipped away and behind him once more. Ajax continued to flail in an attempt to kill the thing, to ease the throbbing in his head, but to no avail.

He suddenly felt pain spread from the joint between his chest piece and the armor of his left arm. Whirling around, he found the creature had drawn some form of curved, ceremonial dagger and had used it to pierce a chink in his ceramite. The blade dripped with dark, thick Astartes ichor.

“Blood for *my* god!” the thing giggled, then began to lap up the holy fluid with mocking fervor.

Ajax roared and charged again, receiving the same result once more. The daemon on its platform flittered out of reach, only for Ajax to suddenly feel pain blossom along the back of his leg. He turned and swung, blood dripped from his brow. He tried again, this time his abdomen. Again, now his knee.

The game continued, each wound driving him further into insensate rage that could process no more than the weapon in his hands and the damnable *thing* causing him such misery.

Occasionally, Ajax heard a *crack* of something, followed by the daemon bobbing erratically on its disc, as if in evasion. He paid it no heed. It had no bearing on his needs as of this moment.

“Dance, dance, dance!” the thing jeered after yet another round of Ajax wildly swinging his scythe, but having nothing to show for it but another slash across the face.

The daemon spun behind Ajax yet again, but, this time, the berzerker had enough fluidity within his mind to decide to lunge forward and spin to look at his enemy rather than thoughtlessly strike. Unfortunately, this seemed to be exactly what the creature had been expecting.

Atop its flying disc, the herald pointed its stave directly at Ajax, its end crackling with Warp-lightning that fluctuated with a multitude of colors never seen before by the eyes of men.

The berzerker felt something crash into his side, taking him off of his feet just as the lightning grew to unfathomable heights and was released. Where Ajax had been standing moments ago was instead a pillar of jagged metal, undefinable fluids, and blinking eyes. A figure in a skull-painted faceplate laid atop him and was currently grappling Ajax. The nails urged him to struggle and bash the figure's head into the decking until it crushed and flattened underhand, but he stayed himself as recognition slowly blossomed into him.

"Get off me," Ajax barked, shoving Gyrrhemar away. The Night Lord relented and did so. It was at that moment that Ajax realized that his companion had tackled him behind a nearby section of wall paneling and the daemon likely was unable to see them. It may not even know that he was alive.

"You're welcome. Again." Gyrrhemar said as he pressed his back up against the wall. Ajax mimicked the action with an annoyed grunt. "We need a better plan than whatever *that* was."

Ajax agreed. The nails still gnawed and gnashed, but now that he was out of the line of fire he could at least somewhat make rational decisions again. "Like what?"

The Night Lord turned and looked at him. "I was hoping you would have some ideas."

Ajax resisted the urge to grab the wings of Gyrrhemar's helmet and use them to slam his head into the side of the wall until the legionnaire found some sense, or quit breathing altogether—whichever came first. Instead, the Eater of Worlds glanced around the corner of the wall to see the minion of the Changer of Ways flashing through the air to antagonize other Astartes.

Frowning, the berzerker watched it and thought. Slowly.

It didn't chase after them, implying it did now believe Ajax dead. He wanted to believe that a good thing, but instead only felt irritation at how meaningless it was. What did it matter what it thought if he wasn't able to even *touch* the damn thing? It was like he was fighting mist. The daemon was too quick, too crafty. It outthought and outplayed him at every turn during their encounter. He couldn't best it by being direct, especially without his god lending him any strength. Trickery was not defeated with blunt instruments. It required a finer, mirrored touch.

"This is like fighting you again," Ajax grumbled. "Only worse."

"Hmph, do not sell me so short. I am far more competent than this thing."

A tick of pain and annoyance sprung into Ajax's skull. He almost retorted, almost reminded Gyrrhemar just what he thought of the Night Lord's "competence." Almost.

Slowly, the World Eater turned and looked at his compatriot, his expression morphing into something that felt uncomfortable to him. "That is our solution."

"What is?"

The discomfort grew as Ajax felt the edges of his lips strain backwards, the skin cracking like disturbed stone. "Tell me, Night Lord. How would you fight yourself?"

The irony was not lost on Pyotr.

He and Retrigan thundered down the dark corridors of the *Savory Wound* as a high-frequency whine echoed behind them, rapidly growing closer.

“Enemies are imminently approaching,” Curie said from her position of being unceremoniously slung over Pyotr’s shoulder. The techpriest had not complained when the lord discordant had insisted on the method of transportation. She had logically pointed out that she lacked the motorics augments to adequately match the pace of an Astartes in flight. That did not make the situation any less irritating, however.

“I can hear that, adept.”

“Contact will be made in twenty... nineteen... eighteen...”

Pyotr glanced at Retrigan, who shook his head as they continued running alongside one another. “Do not look to me, brother. She belongs to your little cult, that makes her your responsibility.”

He did not provide correction in regards to the misunderstanding of the branches and powers that belonged to Pyotr’s “little cult.” There would be little point in doing so.

“...sixteen... fifteen... fourteen...”

In accordance with Curie’s continued countdown, the screeching grew progressively louder in an obtrusive chorus as a pack of Chaos spawn streaked through the air in animalistic pursuit after their prey. The noise reminded Pyotr of his initial thought.

Yes, he was quite aware of the sardonic parallel between him, a hunter in the dark who once had fantasies of flight as a child, and Retrigan, a marine cut from the same cloth who still longed for the skies, running in a desperate attempt at self-preservation from flying beasts of change and lies. He saw no humor in the situation himself, but was more than aware when the galaxy was seeking out its own forms of amusement at the expense of others.

“...twelve... eleven... ten...”

The shrieks reverberated through Pyotr’s skull and caused his teeth to vibrate. He watched as several of the slaves also fleeing through the corridor collapsed to their knees and brought their hands up to their ears as they cried out in pain at the noise.

“We need to get out of this corridor!” Retrigan shouted over the din.

“Ineffective. Daemonological archives suggest this variety is capable of burrowing through solid metal at rapid rates. Cowering in a different room would do very little to improve our situation.” Curie said, her voculator somehow speaking the words at the same time as her continued countdown. The end result was a distorted mess of sounds that was barely comprehensible.

Retrigan eyed Pyotr as if what she had said was his fault. “Fighting it is, then.”

“...five... four... three...”

Pyotr looked over his shoulder. “That does not seem advisable either.”

At least fifty Neverborn with ray-like bodies streamed through the air in a hunting party dedicated to running down the fleeing Astartes. Occasionally, Pyotr watched as one of the howling beasts deviated from their path, swooping down to attack and eviscerate one of the

collapsed humans, but these strikes took less than a moment before the Warp-spawned predators flitted back up into the air, never having lost momentum, and rejoined the bulk of the pack.

“...Null. Hostiles abound.” If Curie was concerned in regards to the nearness of her own death, she did not show it.

“Damn this!” Despite the futility of it, Retrigan repositioned to face the oncoming swarm as he ran, stretching his bolter to the side so that he could fire into the mass of spines, eyes, and wings. Pyotr saw little point. They were dead either way.

“Processing,” Curie said, her oculars flashing blue and green. “Incomplete variables... Running inaccurate chronometer by a factor of point-null-null-null-three percent through twelve-point-nine-seven-eight-six percent. Twenty-four... twenty-three... twenty-two...”

“She’s counting *again*?” Retrigan barked incredulously.

“Obviously,” Pyotr said, but reached for his bolt pistol and began firing at the daemons.

“For what purpose?”

“I don’t know...” Pyotr furrowed his brow. The mind of a techpriest was something esoteric beyond his capacity to unravel. This new countdown could have been any number of idle interests or terror responses that varied from anticipating the arrival of further enemies to the ship’s next plumbing cycle.

The leading screamers swept down through the air towards them. Together, Retrigan and Pyotr managed to hammer enough bolter fire into one to cause it to dissipate, but the other two were still able to dive through the air and score compromising breaches in their ceramite, exposing flesh and armor cabling.

“...Nineteen... eighteen... sixteen...”

“I’m not above using your corpse as a shield!” Retrigan called, dropping his bolter and letting the lightning claws spring eagerly from their sheaths and begin arcing with power. No sooner had he done so did another daemon come diving towards him, resulting in his blades tearing into its immaterial hide and fading into nothingness.

“To what end? An extra two seconds of breath?”

“That is all I would need to curse your name.”

Pyotr shrugged Curie on his shoulder as a meager effort to reposition her so that he could reach for his chainglaive. Activating the motor, he swung and carved a gash into the nearest screamer, causing its shrill cries to rise an octave and flounder in the air for a moment before falling back. Five others took its place.

I should not have sent Tzimiti off on its own, Pyotr thought with a mental sigh of exhaustion.

“Thirteen... twelve... eleven...”

The lord discordant watched as the heart of the pack surged forward to meet them and began to glide and descend down towards them in the dozens. It would take less than the length of a thought for them to shred the armor from his body, the flesh from his bones, and the life from his corpse. It would be over before he even finished blinking.

Pyotr tried to muster outrage in that moment. He tried to summon some form of anger or fury at the fact that all of his efforts, all of his planning to save his warband, was going to be undone due to a capricious machine error.

He could not. Even in death, his tormentor would not even grant him that mercy.

“...Nine... eight... seven...”

Retrigan turned to face Pyotr one final time as the lord discordant stopped in his tracks and awaited oblivion. He heard the once-raptor say something to him, but could not comprehend the words themselves as the screams became impossibly loud.

“Six... five... four...”

The first six screamers came upon him, howling into the darkness, their lamprey fangs open and poised in anticipation. Five meters. Four meters. Three. Two.

One.

The contact never came. Pyotr watched as, moments before teeth met ceramite, they flickered into nonexistence. As if they were never there.

The rest of the horde continued surging forward in an attempt to maul Pyotr, but, one after another, they vanished as well. Soon enough, the Night Lords' odds went from insurmountable to plausible as the Neverborn continued to naturally dwindle.

“Three— Processing. Realspace has begun to exert itself on these hostiles, thus banishing them. Mmm, disappointing. Calculations were off by a factor of—”

Curie did not finish her sentence as it was replaced in her vocabulator with irate binharic emissions as Pyotr roughly and “accidentally” swiveled his body so that her head bounced off the nearest wall. He then turned and nodded to Retrigan. The once-raptor nodded back, the relief obvious in his posture.

“Are we standing or running?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

The two locked eyes, then turned and fled from the fading daemons.

Gyrthemar wasn't much like his brothers. He was not crafty and conniving like they were—at least, not in the same way.

While they planned and made long-term schemes, he had always lacked the ability to see so far into the future. No, he emphasized a different aspect of their father's cunning instead: The ability to think on his feet.

Gyrthemar was a man of inelegant solutions. He knew how to stamp out problems whenever they arose while his brothers tended to try and ensure those problems never occurred in the first place. This did not bother him. They could belittle him for lacking intelligence all they wanted, but they couldn't account for every eventuality, and, when that inevitably happened, that was when he was at the height of his glory.

Very few of those times involved him serving as bait, however. Deliberately, at least.

Bolter fire sputtered from his gun towards the horror riding atop its disc, drawing its attention. The daemon dodged the blasts easily enough, only one shot having clipped the edge of

its floating platform. The contact rattled the daemon to the side, but it swiftly regained control with abnormal grace.

“The bat and I will play,” the daemon said with glee, “while the dead dog sleeps away!”

Gyrthemar rolled as a blast of Warp-magic emerged from the Neverborn’s stave, narrowly avoiding... whatever such arcana might have done to him.

The dead dog sleeps away... the warrior mused. He hoped that meant Ajax. Daemons of the Changer of Ways had an uncanny intellect—but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be fooled.

Gyrthemar rose to his feet and began sprinting along the edge of the chamber, firing at his enemy all the while. The daemon began to zip towards him, cackling and firing bolt after bolt at him. Twice Gyrthemar registered the sizzling of Warp-energy on the back of his armored neck through his internal systems and prayed to the ghost of the Night Hunter that his battle plate hadn’t been hit.

The horror was wholly devoted to him now. Other Astartes in the training grounds continued vanquishing the hordes of Neverborn that crashed upon them, though there were obvious signs of progress now.

“You jabber better than you shoot!” Gyrthemar shouted to his enemy. He wasn’t sure how well taunts worked on daemons, but he wasn’t about to start going against his natural instincts.

“A riddle that’s new! What bleeds blue and has a spine with no glue? *You!*”

Not a very good riddle, Gyrthemar thought off-handedly as the disc swept directly towards him. He smiled beneath his helm and rolled under it, springing to his feet and firing into the daemon’s back. The creature instinctively dodged, but spun to face Gyrthemar again, who quickly began to step backwards.

Almost there, he thought, trying to not look at the shadow edging along the wall of the chamber. *Just a little more time...*

Gyrthemar continued to backpedal into position. It was a slow process due to how often he had to dodge or take cover behind a twisted section of metal or bodies to avoid yet another arcane blast. Behind his eye lenses, he risked a quick glance to the side and saw Ajax in position behind the agreed upon cluster of floor slabs that had mutated into sloped spires of spongy, bonelike protrusions. The Night Lord could see the impatience contorted across the berzerker’s face, along with the saliva dripping from his clenched teeth.

Keep those damn nails under control for a few more seconds! Gyrthemar willed, and was rewarded as his compatriot held off his bloodlust just long enough for Gyrthemar to fall back enough to get their target into position. Ajax then charged the daemon—thankfully without some barbaric roar that announced his presence.

The Night Lord continued firing at their enemy to distract it as the berzerker thundered towards it. The Neverborn noticed him then, but it was already too late. Ajax sprung into the air, his scythe raised to strike the daemon down the middle. It didn’t bother attempting to dodge, as there would be no point. The daemon’s unnatural instincts would do little more than allow it to watch its demise coming.

Gyrthemar watched, anticipating the fatal strike as the power weapon fell like an executioner's blade. Glass shattered instead.

Reality became shards, which became fragments, which became splinters that continued to spiral outwards. Each section reflected the same moment, only a little different, a little off. Truth fell into flux as the broken faces of time shifted, then reknit themselves into a new tapestry.

Things had changed. The daemon was suddenly now just far enough away to react. It raised its still-glowing stave and leveled it at Ajax. There was a sizzle of released psychic energy, then a bellow of pain. Ajax collapsed onto the deck.

"*Damn*," Gyrthemar hissed and sent a barrage of shots at the daemon. It carelessly twirled out of the way and faced the Night Lord once again with grinning fangs.

"Into death, into light," the daemon cackled, as if that were supposed to mean something. It raised its stave once more, pointing it directly at Gyrthemar who was now out in the open and no longer had any cover to use.

"Mate with dogs, filth," Gyrthemar spat, though he wasn't sure if the daemon would take it as an insult or a genuine suggestion.

The herald cackled again but stopped abruptly as it watched its arm flicker momentarily, the magic from its stave fluttering, as well. "What is this?" It turned rapidly in all directions, additional eyes sprouting from its hide, each rolling frantically to see the chamber at every angle as the pink and blue horrors littered throughout began to flicker and vanish into nothingness at an escalating rate. "No! Not done! Not done! More fun to be had! More secrets to learn!"

Gyrthemar raised his bolter and fired at the screaming creature as it continued to flicker and shift in and out of existence. It attempted to dodge, but the rounds exploding across its disc forced the daemon to buck free and land on the decking, its stave clattering out of reach. The Night Lord approached the sniveling daemon that was still muttering in desperation.

"I will tell you a secret," Gyrthemar said quietly. The daemon looked up to him with an almost hopeful expression. Gyrthemar smiled ruefully beneath his helm before lifting his boltgun. He fired once and his foe was banished back to the Immaterium.

Quiet fell over the chamber then as the remaining horrors either vanished or were slain. The warrior heard ragged breathing coming from behind him.

Gyrthemar quickly turned and traced the noise to a body in red ceramite lying on the deck. Stepping up to it, he found Ajax of the Carnage Stitchers alive, but only just. Blood pooled on the deck beneath him and barbed spines shot out from his armor at curved angles, each dripping with dark fluid.

"There you are, brother," Ajax said, his voice softer than it had ever been. He single eye stared into the middle distance as he wheezed.

"It is not one of your brothers, Ajax. It is only me." The Night Lord dropped to one knee beside his companion.

"I know damn well who I'm talking to, Night Lord," Ajax snapped, his vision focusing on Gyrthemar. His expression was pained, but softened marginally as their gaze met. "I was wrong about you. You fought by my side when my kin and yours would have likely left me for

dead, too focused on themselves or the joy of bloodshed. You saved me twice in a single battle alone.” Blood bubbled from between the berzerker’s lips. “Though, I would have appreciated a third.”

“You speak as if you’re already dead.”

“That is because I am,” Ajax said with finality. With a twitching, yet somehow still firm hand, he grabbed onto Gyrthemar’s vambrace. “I would be honored to call you my battle-brother, Gyrthemar. By deed if not by blood.”

Gyrthemar looked down at the crimson gauntlet for a moment, then nodded. He locked forearms with Ajax and met his eyes. “Understood, brother. You fought well.”

The Carnage Stitcher’s wheezing grew stronger as his breathing became more labored. He released Gyrthemar’s armor and began to fumble at his waist. When his shaking hand rose again, it was holding his chain flail. “Take it,” he said, “while it is a gift. Before I am gone and it becomes cursed.”

Gyrthemar only hesitated a moment before accepting the weapon. He looked it over, noting that it bore no recent use. Ajax had not drawn it once against the swarms of daemons. “It will taste the blood of many more yet to come, brother. I promise.” But when he looked back, Ajax was already gone.

The Night Lord stared at the still body in silence for several moments. Then he reached down and collected something else from his dead brother’s waist and rose to his feet. He began to step away to leave the chamber, but looked back one final time at the World Eater.

“The pain is gone. Sleep well, my friend.”

Artemis had not been expecting many of the things she was experiencing to happen today. Chief among them was watching an Astartes wrestle a daemon.

The Neverborn were strange entities with trunk-like bodies that lacked limbs or even heads. Instead they simply possessed mawed orifices that belched torrents of fire that weren’t actually fire. As a result, they did not move or walk, but instead bound from place to place in a manner that Artemis found difficult to wrap her mind around.

After the first initial leap upon entering the station, Taresh had slapped his bolter back onto his thigh and promptly tackled the nearest daemon, grappling it to the ground and twisting it so that none of its mouths could gnash at or eject flame onto him. He then proceeded to draw the gladius from his boot and begin driving it repeatedly into its uncanny flesh.

She’d half expected the other two to descend upon him in that moment and begin torching the marine alive. Instead, they lept deeper into the chamber and began spouting their iridescent flames across the room. Artemis watched as the fire curled around corners and barricades as if they weren’t even there. She even thought for a moment that she saw the fires go *through* the solid materials.

Screams echoed and bounced off the walls and Artemis watched as some of the flames licked at the lower body of a crewman. Everything beneath his torso immediately crystallized and he collapsed in a shriek of terror at legs that would no longer obey him.

For every stunned and frightened worker, however, there were just as many who had begun fighting back. Proper, orange fire from flamers roared and bit at the daemons, lascutter beams seared into their enlarged bodies, explosion-propelled nail guns punctured and ripped through their mass, and waves of heat from melta-cutters caused Chaotic skin to slop off like liquified plastic.

It wasn't enough.

Despite all the damage and punishment they were doing, the daemons weren't slowing and continued the onslaught of colorful blazes.

"No..." Artemis whispered as she watched the fires roar and the heat rise. She'd tried so hard. *Too* hard. They couldn't die now. She couldn't accept that.

The headache that still nestled in the back of her mind burned brighter at her anguish. A scream rose up from her right and she turned to see the man from earlier, Kim, on his back and desperately scuttling away from one of the daemons, his weapon missing.

"What are you karking *doing*?" Brelja shouted from next to her. Artemis hadn't realized she'd been moving toward Kim, the daemon looming over him, several of its mouths beginning to glow with building fire.

She couldn't stop herself. Artemis dashed out from behind her cover and sprinted to the cowering man. Logically, she knew this was stupid, that she'd only get there in time for the both of them to die instead of just him. It didn't matter. She had to try.

Artemis dove and landed on top of Kim, her back to the daemon in a futile effort to protect him from the flames. She squeezed her eyes tight and awaited death. It never came.

Tentatively, the bridge officer opened her eyes and found the two of them... not where they had been previously. Had she somehow pushed the two of them out of the way in her dive? Artemis frowned. No, when she looked to the side they were well over five meters from where the daemon currently stood. How was that possible?

"What... What just happened?" Kim asked, echoing her thoughts. She suddenly felt exhausted and her headache spiked even higher, once again being dragged to the forefront of her mind.

The daemon didn't seem particularly confused or disappointed by the disappearance of its prey. It instead focused on a different set of workers using one of their fortifications for cover and began gushing forth a new wave of Warp-fire. Artemis's breath caught as she expected to see the unnatural flames destroy the small group completely, but was surprised to instead witness the broiling torrent being *stopped* by the blockade. The multicolored fire did not curl around or ignore the cover like it had before. It instead behaved almost normally.

How? She wondered, feeling the throbbing in her mind spike again as she stared into the bright and burning light. Had the daemon become weaker somehow?

There wasn't any time to consider it as she grabbed Kim by the collar and began dragging him back behind the barricade she had been behind with Jep and Brelja.

"You're alive?" Brelja said, raising her eyebrows. She obviously hadn't seen whatever had occurred with Artemis and Kim over all the stimulation of the battle.

“Feels like it,” Artemis responded. She turned to Jep. He was staring at her with an unreadable expression. “I think they’re getting weaker, somehow.”

“What?”

“That fire, or whatever it is they use, it’s not as effective as it was earlier.”

Brelja frowned in consideration and Artemis poked her head up over the barricade. She saw utter bedlam still. The workers were doing very little against their enemy other than drawing attention to themselves. She watched as a woman took a full gout of flames directly. Artemis fully expected the fuel-loader to be dead from such a blast, but when the flames cleared, the woman was only sporting a few minor horned growths from her joints. She seemed just as surprised to be alive as Artemis was.

Then she saw the daemon fuzzi for a moment. It was almost imperceptible, but... but it almost seemed like the thing became translucent and immaterial before snapping back into existence.

“They *are* getting weaker...” Artemis whispered.

“What was that?” Kim asked nervously.

Artemis looked to him, then abruptly stood. “All crew! Take cover, evade, and *do not engage!*” she shouted.

“*What?*” Brelja looked to Artemis as if she’d grown a second head. “Are you karking serious, girl?”

“Yes.”

Jep chewed on his lip as he surveyed the chamber, as well. Something seemed to click in his mind too as he watched Taresh finish knifing his enemy to death—or however being killed worked for Neverborn—and begin trudging towards the next daemon, which had also started to flicker.

“We... We don’t have to beat them, just out-last them,” he said slowly.

Artemis nodded in agreement, shouting out her command again. Most of the crew listened, but there were a few who were either too focused to hear her or disagreed with the order outright. A small squad of men and women with their makeshift flamers huddled together and advanced on the daemon that Taresh wasn’t busying himself with.

“*Shit,*” she hissed, then left her position for a second time.

“You’ve got Astartes sized balls, girl! I’ll give you that!” Brelja scoffed but had notably listened to Artemis and stayed behind cover.

“Hey!” Artemis shouted at the daemon, raising her nail gun and firing into it. It ignored her and continued to ready its flames against the group that had advanced on it. “HEY!” Artemis repeated, trying her best to project as much authority into her voice as she could muster as she fired another volley. The additional strain made her headache throb even more. Why was she so damn tired all of the sudden?

The daemon twitched, then its thrumming form *flowed* in a way that it was now facing her. Artemis couldn’t even begin to conceptualize what she’d just watched before the daemon flung itself in the air and landed directly in front of her. She stood before it defiantly as its

mouthy protrusions began to glow with blue, magenta, and orange light. It shuddered, its form slowly growing more transparent.

“Enough with you,” Artemis snarled and fired one final nail. Perhaps it was coincidental timing, perhaps it was far more injured than it appeared, but the nail connected and the creature buffed into a shower of mist. She stifled her sigh of utter relief and tried to grapple control over her hammering heart.

That should *not* have worked.

Silence fell over the fuel-loading station and Artemis turned to see that Taresh had vanquished his second enemy—or perhaps it vanished on its own, she wasn’t sure. Regardless, it didn’t matter.

They were safe.

Abrupt cheers rose from the shaken workers turned soldiers, their cries echoing throughout the chamber. That was when Artemis noticed something else.

There were no corpses.

Her breath caught. Yes, there had been injuries and odd mutations—some benign while others severe—she could see that much. But not a single man or woman had died.

It took all of her will not to collapse and sob in joy at that knowledge.

“We... did it,” Jep said, who was once again beside her along with Brelja and Kim.

Artemis felt a warm hand jostle her shoulder. “What a kill that was! You’ve got something to be proud of there, girl!”

“Yeah...” Artemis said dully. She was still trying to overcome her denial of what had happened.

“I can’t believe it!” Kim laughed joyously. “We’re alive! We’re actually alive! I mean, how could we not be with one of the gods on our side?”

“*What,*” a voice like cannon fire hissed from across the room, “*did you say?*”

The clamor fell silent as Taresh, who had previously been making for the exit quietly, stopped in his tracks and turned to look directly at Kim.

“I’m... I’m sorry, my lord,” Kim said, now trembling in fear once again. “I only meant to give thanks to—”

“No,” Taresh drawled maliciously. “Repeat what it is you said.”

“I... I...” Kim looked around with wide eyes for assistance that would not come. In that same moment, Taresh pulled the boltgun from his thigh and fired it once. By the time Artemis was able to react, blood had already splattered across her face and clothes and Kim’s body had collapsed to the floor, headless.

“Never call us gods,” Taresh said simply, then turned and walked into the darkness of the corridor.

Everyone stood in stunned silence for what felt like hours. Artemis could not think, she could not move. She couldn’t even speak as she gaped at the body in horror. After everything they had just gone through...

Finally, someone stirred. It was a man with a balding head and leathery skin. He approached Artemis and her group, crouched down to lay a reverent hand on Kim's body. Then he rose and laid the same hand on her shoulder, followed by a quick nod. "I'm with you," he said quietly, then left.

As the man's form vanished through the entryway, he was soon replaced by another crewman who repeated the same gesture. Then another. And another. Soon enough, a line had formed to pay respects to their fallen friend and whisper gratitudes towards Artemis.

She took it all with a sad, consolitary expression. The face she portrayed was true, but she also couldn't help but feel a spark of glee at the turn of events.

By the end of it, over twenty people had approached and embraced her. It wasn't until the station was entirely empty that she allowed herself a small smile.

They were hers now.

Chapter XIV: Pitiful

Anras collapsed into his command throne, resting his forehead on his ceramite-encrusted fingers and closed his eyes.

Exhausted. The visionary was exhausted.

After hours spent fighting for his life amongst a horde of daemons, no rest was allotted to him, as he immediately had to see to the organization of patrol teams to exterminate any straggling Neverborn still lurking about the ship, analyze census reports of casualties, permit the berzerker surgeon's request for triage under strict scrutiny, have the integrity of the ship inspected, and catalog any lost inventory. All the while, Gargahl feasted in his repulsive abbey, celebrating the grand "victory" they had secured over the denizens of the Changer of Ways.

The process was slow and grueling. Within the first hour of the battle's aftermath, a casualty report appeared on his tactical hololith, estimating that nearly two-thousand lives aboard the ship had been lost in the ambush. A vast majority of those were mere slaves, but the loss of personnel would still put a strain on the ship's functions. Slightly over fifty of the listed deaths were Astartes. Notably, more than half of those corpses belonged to the Carnage Stitchers, which only further increased tensions between the two warbands as the World Eaters began vocally questioning the point of leaving Exodus Station if they were going to be slaughtered anyway—The Sons of Angron did not speak in whispers, so these grievances were anything but subtle.

Everything else came in trickles over the course of many hours. With their losses, Anras found himself spread thin aboard his own damn ship and was forced several times to leave the bridge and see to some of his orders himself. Several times he deliberated marching into Gargahl's sanctum and demand he start behaving like the leader he pretended to be, but ultimately decided that the daemon prince's "aid" would be nothing of the sort.

"Sleep? I thought our kind too wicked for such a thing," a voice said, pulling the visionary from his thoughts as they approached.

Anras opened his eyes and raised his head as Zseron rounded the throne and stood beside it, staring at the projected readouts. The Sorcerer of Stars's own terminator armor showed the signs of recent battle as well, but all forms of marring were trivial for warplate such as his.

"Why," Anras began, his voice ragged, "do I feel as if I have become haunted since we did battle with the Ferric Sentries?"

Zseron eyed him for a moment, but did not turn to face the visionary. "How do you mean?"

"I cannot find a moment's peace aboard the ship anymore. Every waking moment is torment upon my mind. I can no longer even find solace in the things I once enjoyed."

The Atramentar sorcerer mused to himself for a time, then nodded. "I see..."

Anras scowled at him. "That is not helpful."

"No, I suppose it is not," Zseron said, grinning wistfully. "It is because you have never been in this position before, honored visionary."

“And what position is that?”

“Desperate.”

Anras snarled as he began to rub his hand along the vambrace of his opposing arm, knowing more cold metal lay beneath it rather than the comfort of flesh. “I am no such thing.”

“Yes,” the sorcerer said simply, “you are. There is no shame in it. We have all seen our share of perilous positions and hopeless combats. The only difference is that you are now in this situation while simultaneously bearing the burden of leadership. Gargahl is as well.”

“Gargahl has done nothing!” Anras hissed, slamming his fist down on his throne. Zseron’s serenity remained unprovoked.

“Indeed,” he agreed. “Because his response is denial. Lethargy. It is his nature now. Especially when there are others who will take on the responsibility from him while he maintains an alluring facade.” Zseron turned to look at the visionary then.

“Hmph,” Anras grunted as he lounged back into his throne. “Your praise serves no purpose. Make your point and leave me be.”

Zseron looked at him with solemnity. “You mistake me, Anras. I offer no praise or accolades.” Anras frowned, but did not speak as the sorcerer continued. “You bear the weight of a position that is not meant for you. As a result, it is crushing you. Perhaps you will not collapse under the pressure for a time yet, but know that all you are is a placeholder for someone greater.”

“Careful,” Anras said, his voice becoming a thin blade coated in venom. “You speak as if in prophecy, brother. And that is *my* domain.”

“I need not our father’s curse to see how your story ends, visionary. For it is the only way it could possibly end for someone as pitiful as you.” Despite his words, the Atramentar psyker’s words were spoken in an almost parental tone.

“Then who?” Anras demanded, his face contorting into a sneer. “Who is it that is destined to usurp me like you insist?”

Zseron said nothing initially. Instead, he simply glanced down at the Widowmaker dagger hanging from Anras’s waist. “Your question is meaningless. It is both one you know the answer to and the completely wrong one to ask to begin with.”

The sorcerer then turned and left. Anras found himself incapable of rising from his seat both due to his immense, almost paralyzing outrage, as well as the sheer mental fatigue.

His inner turmoil was only made worse by the conversation, and the visionary found his grip growing tight enough on the armrests of the throne to leave depressions in the metal. The sorcerer left him with many thoughts—but one swam louder through the cerebral fluids within his skull than the rest.

“What is the right question, then?” the visionary asked the hollow air before him. His response was silent mockery.

Taresh was suspicious.

It was not like Retrigan to request that his brothers meet him to discuss matters. Normally the once-raptor simply appeared wherever he expected you to be and initiated a conversation that

amounted to him battering you with words and ideas in a vain attempt to elevate his own moral superiority over a band of murderers and sadists. Allowing himself to be potentially verbally ripped by multiple enemies at once was very much against his natural inclinations.

“Why are we here, Retrigan?” Taresh asked.

The Night Lord stood, idly extending and sheathing his lightning claws as he scowled at Taresh and Gyrrhemar. The grating hiss of metal sliding on metal dripped on Taresh’s patience like acid.

“Not yet,” was all Retrigan had for a response.

“This is pointless!” Gyrrhemar scoffed, but remained unmoving. For all his talk, the idiot had hardly anything that resembled a spine.

The Strategium’s hatchway slid open and shadows loomed inward from the pale lighting of the corridor. Taresh immediately felt the veins in his throat constrict in irritation as Pyotr stepped into the chamber.

“What do *you* want?” Gyrrhemar asked with similar reproach. The lord discordant’s reply was to toss a long and ornate object to his brother. Gyrrhemar caught his former spear and looked down at it with an incredulous expression. “Vinkaldr. How did you get it back?”

“I asked nicely,” Pyotr said as he continued approaching the hololith table.

“And when that didn’t work?” Retrigan chimed in.

“I asked less nicely.”

Both Gyrrhemar and Retrigan chuckled at that response, though Pyotr clearly intended for there to be no humor behind it.

Worms, Taresh thought, hating how easily his brothers crawled back to the old fool. That only caught part of his attention, however. The rest of his focus was squarely on the second individual who had followed along at Pyotr’s heels as he entered the room.

The woman from the fuel-loading station. Now fully adorned in a faded naval uniform of the XIIIth legion and a stub revolver holstered on her hip, she was unremarkable in almost every aspect. Her features were plain, her brown hair tied back in a utilitarian tail, her expression flat despite the rapid beating of her heart. The only thing that was worth considering were her eyes. Stormy gray and filled with an intelligence that could be dangerous. She’d barely glanced at Taresh upon entering, but he saw the recognition in her gaze as she continued to remain close at Pyotr’s side.

It seemed she was telling the truth about being under his protection, Taresh noted begrudgingly. He would have liked to be rid of her. He’d already begun to hear whispers about Artemis Maralli, the woman who felled a daemon with just a glance—It did not matter that the stories were untrue, only that people were beginning to believe it. She was becoming yet another icon to look up to. Taresh’s teeth itched at the mere thought of it.

“My question still stands, though, brother,” Gyrrhemar said with far more mirth than before.

“Our performance with the daemons showed me that you had all been right to question my petition,” Pyotr said. “We need a sound battle strategy against the Sons of Manus. Otherwise, we may as well allow them to butcher us the moment we make landfall.”

“And why come to us rather than the ones you need to convince?” Taresh asked.

“I would rather not waste another three days campaigning and stroking already inflated egos to get my way,” Pyotr explained. “Zseron will accept whatever I provide him, so long that it is reasonable. Gargahl only needs to be pointed in a vague direction and he and his raptors will do as I want without even realizing it.”

“And Anras?”

Pyotr paused at that, but eventually nodded. “The visionary and I have reached a... tenuous understanding. He will fall in line if he assumes the other two agree with this plan.”

“You don’t sound certain,” Retrigan noted.

“I am not,” the lord discordant admitted. “But we lack the time to seek out certainties. Let us begin.”

Without waiting for any other potential dissent, Pyotr touched the controls on the table and the hololithic display flared up an image of their destination planet.

“We have the advantage of initial arrival. Therefore, we will get to choose the battlefield and can tailor it to our benefit.”

“It hardly matters,” Retrigan said with a dour expression.

“How so?”

The once-raptor approached the table and made a display of the *Savory Wound* appear above the atmosphere of the planet—Kleos, Taresh recalled. He then created a similar display for the *Gorgon’s Manacles*. A quick, flickering simulation occurred in which the Night Lords vessel began depositing its drop pods and thunderhawks, but before it could maneuver to safety, the latter ship began to fire upon it, ultimately destroying the cruiser.

“There is little doubt the Ferric Sentries will not attempt to eliminate our ship the moment they see an opportunity,” Retrigan explained. “We’ll be stranded.”

Pyotr frowned as if he were only just now considering this. “A fair point.”

“Let’s take out those stations, then,” Gyrrhemar said, gesturing to the three plasteel refineries orbiting Kleos.

“That doesn’t aid our position,” Pyotr said.

Gyrrhemar shrugged. “It will still be a strike made against the Imperium on our way out.”

Pyotr looked as if he were about to admonish their brother for his idiocy again, but was stopped as a smaller voice spoke up, “If I may, my lord?”

The lord discordant looked down to his slave and nodded. Artemis approached the display and folded her hands behind her back. “My lord Gyrrhemar does bring up a decent idea.”

“I do?”

Artemis nodded. “But it is less the actual destruction of the refineries that benefits us, but the threat of it. I propose we use them as a feint.” She placed her hands on the controls and changed the simulation to follow her directions. “If the Ferric Sentries see us heading for the

stations, they will naturally move to protect them. From there, we simply change course and maneuver so that the planet's curve is used as a buffer to keep their weapons systems from being used against us."

"Could they not just chase us?" Retrigan asked, his expression skeptical as he narrowed his eyes at the human. If Taresh had not seen her in action personally, he would have felt similarly about trusting a mortal with mustering such a vital strategy for their survival.

"In theory, yes," Artemis conceded. "But I don't think they will, as that will leave the refineries open for us to target on our next lap around. They won't risk that."

"A wise ploy," Pyotr said and his slave bowed her head at the praise. Taresh noted the woman's sudden spike in heart rate. She was still afraid, but there was something else there, too. Pride, perhaps?

"As for the battlefield?" Retrigan asked, nodding to the hololith.

Pyotr paused, musing to himself. "I would hear what Artemis has to say for this as well."

The slave started and blinked up at her master. "My... my lord?"

"Consider me curious."

The woman hesitated, then looked back to the display once again. After a moment's thought, she fingered the controls, forcing the planet to rotate and focus in on a specific region of archipelagos. "I would recommend this location. If my calculations are correct—and I'm nearly certain they are—they will be under nightfall when we arrive. That is a benefit to you, yes?"

Pyotr nodded.

"Additionally, this allows us to deposit multiple decoy drop pods across these various isles, forcing our enemy to thin out their numbers and isolate them. Meanwhile, our true army will be on this island here. By the time they are able to confirm this, we will already have plenty of time to garner more ground."

"Does it have cities?" Retrigan asked.

The slave briefly paused before answering. "Yes."

"Good."

"Ha!" Gyrrhemar barked, leaning on his knuckles as he placed them on the display table. "I like this one, Pyotr. You choose your slaves well." When the lord discordant did not deem the statement worthy of a response, the fool turned and addressed Artemis directly. "Is it true that you killed a daemon with a *nail gun*?"

"I..." Artemis began with obvious discomfort. In truth, Taresh was paying little attention to the ramblings of the conversation as he inspected the hololith before him.

"How did you know so much about this planet?" he asked slowly.

"My lord?"

Taresh turned his gaze to her and let the silence hang for a single breath. "I believe you know what happens when I am forced to repeat myself."

The slave's jaw clenched almost imperceptibly and her eyes took on a minute change in her cast. Yes, there was more than just fret and fear there. She had some fury too. Taresh was not sure what to make of that yet.

“I made sure that I was well studied in regards to this planet. I thought it would be unwise to suggest traveling to it while knowing nothing about it. My lord.” There was a touch of venom in those last words. Taresh glanced at Pyotr, who was studying the hololith with utter ambivalence towards the disrespect his property was showing.

“Does that answer your question, brother?” he finally asked. Taresh did not respond.

“Bah! This is all drivel!” Gyrrhemar proclaimed, tapping his fists on the metal beneath his gauntlets like an impatient child. “Let us discuss the actual battle formations already!”

“And extraction,” Retrigan added.

Pyotr nodded his agreement. “Gargahl’s forces and the Carnage Stitchers will take the vanguard.”

“Relations have become even worse with our allied warband since the invasion. How can we be sure that they will still adhere to our orders?”

“Even if they do not, their bloodlust will entice them onto the front lines. That is all we need,” Pyotr stated.

“Yet another item we are leaving to chance,” Retrigan pointed out, once again succumbing to his emotional tick as he unsheathed his lightning claws.

“I am comfortable with our odds.”

The once-raptor let the matter drop and, together, Sixth Claw began to strategize in earnest.

As the process went on, Taresh felt his metaphorical hackles slowly growing more and more taut. With each passing moment, he watched as his brother reasserted control over their Claw once again. The others did not simply suggest ideas, they *offered* them to Pyotr, like a king receiving a gift before issuing out favor based on its quality. Taresh had thought they had become more than their desire to submit. He thought they were above their need for messiahs. That they would respect those who issued commands, but not worship them. He was wrong.

Watching as Pyotr stood at the head of the flickering table, casting his dominating shadow, Taresh narrowed his eyes and came to a distinct conclusion:

The lord discordant would not live to step foot on Kleos. Taresh would make sure of it.

Upon being dismissed, Artemis left the Strategium feeling sickened. Throughout the entirety of the discussion, she had been frequently asked for her opinions and insights as to how best they should lay waste to her homeworld. She had no choice but to comply. Feeding poor advice to the Astartes would, at best, lead to them losing faith in her capabilities and causing her to lose what little advantage she had over them, or, at worst, have them immediately discover her for the traitor that she was.

It doesn't matter what you told them, Artemis assured herself. *It will all be useless once they find themselves stranded and incapable of fleeing anyway.* The words helped marginally, but she still couldn't shake the image of what may happen to that city before the Night Lords fall...

Artemis arrived back at her quarters with the expectation that she would be turning in for what amounted to night aboard the ship. She had been wrong to assume such a thing.

“Karking took you long enough,” Brelja said. She lounged in the center of the chamber, her feet kicked up onto the hololith table, boots staining the metal with oil and machine grease. Tonight she wore a long, leather and fur-lined coat rather than just her usual sleeveless top. That struck Artemis as odd.

“What is it, Brelja?” she asked, rubbing the sides of her nose with the tips of her fingers, her shoulders slouching. She did not have the capacity to deal with any further hiccups in her scheme at the moment.

The woman nodded to the open seat across from her. “Sit.”

Skeptically, Artemis did so. Once she did so, Brelja lowered her feet back down onto the deck and sat up straight before pulling a pair of pewter cups from her coat and tossed one across the table, forcing Artemis to catch it, lest it collide with her face. The fuel-loader then pulled a large glass bottle filled with a dark liquid from within the other side of her garment.

“Tonight,” she said, “we drink!”

Artemis gaped at her, unsure what to say— No, what to even *think*. “Where did you even get that?” was all she was able to manage.

Brelja winked at her with a grin. “Been saving it for a special occasion.”

“First of all,” Artemis held up a finger, “that answers *nothing*. Secondly,” she brought up her other finger, “I don’t see what’s so special about this occasion.”

“It’s always a special day when you get to drink with a friend,” Brelja said, already popping the bottle open.

“You have other friends.”

“Sure.” When she didn’t elaborate further, Artemis raised her eyebrows at her. The other woman snorted in amusement. “Come on, girl. One drink. When was the last time you’ve even *had* a touch of the good stuff?”

She honestly couldn’t remember.

“There she is!” Brelja cheered as Artemis rolled her eyes and held her cup forward.

“A single drink,” she insisted. “For a friend.”

Brelja grinned as she tilted the bottle forward to give Artemis a liberal pour before filling her own cup. Then she held it up to toast. “Skål!”

“Er... yeah,” Artemis mumbled as she clanked her cup against Brelja’s and took a drink. She regretted it almost immediately.

Brelja barked with laughter as Artemis’s eyes widened and she brought a hand to her mouth, forcing the drink to go down before sputtering and coughing. “What *is* that?”

“It sure as hell isn’t amasec, I’ll tell you that much,” Brelja said as she took another gulp.

“It tastes like engine oil.”

Brelja shrugged. “Could be.”

Artemis looked won at the remainder of her drink, then scowled at her companion. “You just wanted to see me squirm.”

“You can’t be good at everything, girl,” Brelja said with another grin.

Artemis sniffed defiantly, then finished off her cup in a single pull as the woman across from her began to cheer.

Somehow, her “single drink” turned into three. Which then became five. By the beginning of her sixth, she was beginning to feel the effects while—annoyingly—Brelja seemed perfectly composed and uninebriated.

“So,” Artemis found herself saying, “what’s your deal?”

Brelja’s lips quirked upward as she lounged in her chair. “My deal?”

“Yeah.”

“What you see is what you get, girl. My ‘deal’ is whatever you think it is.”

Artemis shook her head and frowned. “Not good enough. You’re different from other crewmen. I want to know why that is.”

Brelja eyed her for a moment from her relaxed position, then leaned forward until her elbows were resting on the edge of the display table. “All right,” she said. “Let’s make this a game. You tell me about you, I’ll tell you about me. Even trade. Fair?”

Thinking wasn’t exactly coming easily to Artemis at the moment, but the terms seemed agreeable enough through the delirious soup that her head was rapidly becoming. She nodded.

“Good,” Brelja said with a smile. “Were you a naval officer before the Night Lords came upon you?”

“I... I’d been through the scholas and was certified by the Administratum, but hadn’t been assigned to a ship or fleet yet.”

“Why did you want to join up with the Imperial Navy?”

Artemis looked over at the empty side of her chamber with a mournful expression. Minor cracks formed in the strata of her heart at the thoughts. “It was... When I was young, my mother would have... episodes at night. For a child, they were terrifying. When they happened, my brother would take me out to the fields and we’d lay down and look at the night sky. He’d point out the stars and make up stupid constellations that weren’t real but made me laugh.” She smiled wistfully as her eyes fell on his cruiser-in-a-bottle. “All those moments coalesced together and made me yearn for the stars, I suppose. I wanted to see the Imperium. Sail across the million worlds of the Emperor and come back to tell him all about what I’d seen.” She looked back at Brelja who had been listening intently with a stoic expression.

“I suppose you still got what you wanted,” she said bitterly, then took another drink.

“I suppose I did,” Artemis whispered, looking down at her cup. She then cleared her throat and looked up at Brelja. “Your turn. How did you end up here?”

The woman sighed, downing the rest of her drink. “Karking stupidity, mostly.”

Artemis cocked her head, but leaned forward. Brelja’s eyes had become like snow as she spoke. There was purity and joy in them, but also a coldness and danger.

“I come from a world called Fenris,” she said, her voice soft—like a pack of beasts howling far beyond the horizon.

“The homeworld of the Space Wolves,” Artemis replied.

Brelja nodded. “It’s a harsh place. Not meant for the weak. Many die and few live to see their hair turn gray. But it was home, I loved it. It hurt to leave it behind.”

“Then why go at all?”

“I loved my spouse more,” she said with a shrug.

Artemis started. “You were married?”

“Quit interrupting,” Brelja huffed, but nodded. “They were... a force of nature.” Her eyes unfocused, looking off into the middle-distance with an expression that Artemis couldn’t quite decipher. “Strong, loud, brave, just like any Fenrisian. But that’s not what made them special. They had... charm. They could convince *others* that they were strong and brave. When they spoke, all other voices grew silent. It took me years to get the karking fool to take a chance on us.” Brelja grunted out a coarse chuckle. “Then we had our boys.”

Artemis opened her mouth to voice her surprise yet again but stopped herself. Brelja married? Perhaps she could wrap her head around that, but the burly, crass woman in front of her being a mother? It seemed... Well, the pieces just didn’t line up in Artemis’s mind. Picturing her trying to rock a child to sleep or comfort them when they wept was almost comical.

Brelja seemed to notice her expression, because she glared. “And we raised them well, mind you. At least until my *darling*—” she spoke the word as if the taste were both acidic and as if wished it would never fade at the same time, “—had their ridiculous dream.

“They wanted to go and join up aboard an Astartes ship as a crewman. Serve the Emperor, chart new astral pathways across the galaxy, take from the unclean and villainous to bolster the Imperium. All that karking nonsense. But when they spoke with such passion...” She sighed. “How could I destroy such a dream?”

“The Night Lords raided a Space Wolves vessel a bit back. It was yours,” Artemis said in a hushed tone, unable to hold her tongue. Brelja nodded slowly, each motion like the gonging of a grave bell.

“Have you noticed there aren’t any other members of my people aboard this ship, girl?”

Artemis hadn’t. The thought had never occurred to her until this moment.

“Like I said,” Brelja said. Her voice now sounded like a taut piece of glass on the verge of shattering. “When my spouse spoke, people listened. When we were taken, they refused to be made a slave, refused to serve the heretical and traitorous. They wanted to fight back. And they encouraged others to do so.” Her hands gripped the edge of the hololith, knuckles growing white from the strain. She was looking directly at Artemis now, her eyes red and jaw clenched.

“Brelja,” Artemis said softly, reaching out. “You... you don’t have to contin—”

“*No*,” she swatted her hand away. “This is *my* story. It will end on *my* terms!” She closed her eyes and took a breath. “My sons were easily swayed, of course. Wiglaf was a man by then, capable of making his own decisions. But Andor... My little Andor, he wasn’t any more than eight. What they aimed to do was suicide with no hope of success. I saw no reason to get myself killed and refused to take part. For the first time in my life, I begged. Begged that at least the young ones not be forced to fight. I was... I was told that it would be better that they all die than submit to such foul beings.”

Brelja opened her eyes, then turned and looked to the side as if she could see someone standing there. “The last words my beloved ever said to me was that I was a dishonor and that they never wished for me to sing their name or the names of our children ever again once they were gone.”

Artemis hadn’t noticed that she’d begun to shake. The room had grown cold—or perhaps she simply believed that it had. The story felt... ancient coming from Brelja’s lips. As if it were some poem from the ancient times of Terra. She almost felt like she could picture two warriors, clad in furs and leathers, standing on a mountain precipice having this exchange. Not a couple of grungy slaves in the bowels of a dark ship.

When Brelja turned to look at Artemis again, her face was tight like a knot in a tree. “They were all slaughtered. I... I hate them for that. All of them. The Night Lords, for killing those I loved. My spouse and children, for getting *themselves* killed like fools. Myself, for... for being too afraid to die beside them.” She looked down at her drink, the dark liquid a reflection of her own thoughts. Brelja grimaced, no longer seeing the appeal in such intoxicants.

“Why this time, then?” Artemis asked. “What changed?”

Brelja looked up and forced one of her usual grins to appear. It was brittle and frozen, though. Like ice. “You, I suppose, girl. You’ve got fire. That hatred you have towards our masters...” She trailed off and her zeal faltered. “You... you remind me of them. When you speak, people listen. And perhaps... Perhaps I want a chance to make things right. To make the ones I love proud of me again, regardless of the outcome.”

Artemis felt the weight on her shoulders grow marginally heavier at that. She didn’t know what to say. It... It wasn’t fair that she had to bear the faith of so many people, that she was now responsible for so many stories like the one Brelja had just given to her. But it was a fate she had willingly chosen. She would have to shoulder it and be the woman that they all saw her as. Hope, Artemis realized, was the only thing left aboard the *Savory Wound* that remained unsullied. They wanted her to be its avatar. Perhaps she wanted that too.

“I watched one of the Astartes kill my brother right in front of me,” she finally said. “All because he hesitated a second too long to answer a question. Such evil cannot go unpunished.”

Brelja’s smile was more genuine this time. She trusted Artemis. Maybe not to succeed, but to at least try and do what was right. And that meant more to her, somehow.

“To punishing evil.” Brelja raised her cup again. “Skål!”

Artemis rolled her eyes.

Oh, what the hell. She raised her own cup. “Skål!”

Together, the two women drank—and a friend’s hearty chuckle and canine grin were the last two things Artemis remembered that night before her whole world became a black slurry.

Chapter XV: The Warden

+*Hate...*+

The Sorcerer of Stars stood in the ship's barren Navigator quarters, his staff burning with arcane power as he stood before the observation aperture. His eyes stared out into the madness of the Warp, drowning in the undulating psychic forces of Chaos, but his mind did not process these signals. It was elsewhere, even deeper in that darkness. It plunged into the writhing shadows, only his sheer willpower keeping the insidious wisps of lunacy and corruption at bay as he charted their course, keeping them on their ordained path towards salvation.

+*Hate...*+ The *Savory Wound* repeated, pressing the sensation upon him.

+*Patience*+ The Sorcerer of Stars communed soothingly. The ship was not fond of the Warp. She rarely tolerated existing within the Sea of Souls for long, their stints within the Eye of Terror becoming shorter and shorter over the centuries as their vessel grew... agitated if forced to remain outside of realspace for too long.

The rest of the sorcerer's brethren believed it to be a mechanical issue. Some malfunction within the ship's Warp Drive or Gellar Fields. Up until recently, the puzzle of it all had intrigued Pyotr greatly and the Sorcerer of Stars saw no reason to reveal the truth to him. Only the Mechanicum, he suspected, knew that it was the *Savory Wound*'s own machine spirit that rejected the Immaterialium, but even they mistook the reasoning.

They believed that she hated the Warp, that she despised the way that it corrupted her motive force and threatened to unravel her and cause her to mutate into something unholy. They were wrong about this.

The *Savory Wound* was very fond of her name. She resonated with it, enjoyed the taste of it. But she also thought of herself occupying a larger role within the Company, a grander purpose than simple transportation and had chosen a title befitting such a station.

She was the Warden of the 51st Company, monitoring and correcting all that went on within her core. The Warp heavily limited her ability to do this, and it irritated her greatly.

+*Return. We return. I must see again*+ she insisted. The Sorcerer of Stars felt a tension within their communion, a tugging upon the psychic lash his mind had upon her spirit as she attempted to enter the Materium once again. He tightened his grip and resisted.

+*Patience*+ he repeated. +*Only a few days more*+

+*No!*+

+*Yes*+

The *Savory Wound* projected a sensation that the sorcerer interpreted as a growl and gave another tentative tug on his control. The attempt was futile.

+*If we exited the Warp now, we would not reach our destination*+ he explained. +*We would die. You would no longer be able to perform your duty*+

The thrashing ceased. The ship begrudgingly allowed his guiding hand to assert complete dominance once again. The Sorcerer of Stars had already made this argument to her twice since the daemon invasion had ended, but the Machine Spirit of an VIIIth Legion vessel was not one

formed by logic and reason, it was raised by far more primal, choleric passions. A strong argument would mean little as her desires continued to flare hotter as time went on. The time he was able to step away from their communion was shrinking continually. He could hardly go an hour before the ship threatened to jeopardize the plan once again.

+Zseron...+ the *Savory Wound* hissed. +*I am blind, Zseron*+

+*I know this*+ he projected. +*It will be over soon*+

+*I see so little. Flickers. Only flickers*+

The sorcerer ignored the vessel this time. She would demure for a time before her protests grew volatile once again. The Sorcerer of Stars considered this to be his measure of peace when it came to the *Savory Wound*'s cycles of outrage.

+*Again. It is happening again*+

He barely caught the words in his focused meditation. They were innocuous, potentially just more of the vessel's dissatisfied projections of thought and emotion. Still, they were tinged with something unusual, a sensation that the sorcerer could not help but investigate.

+*What is?*+ he asked.

+*Conspiracy...*+ she emitted with gnashing force. +*Rebellion... Like before*+

The Sorcerer of Stars almost lost concentration of their communion.

+*What do you mean? Explain*+

+*Before the Sea. Before the hate...*+ The spirit of the *Savory Wound* tensed, as if remembering the full extent of her earlier indignation.

+*What did you see?*+

+*Plotting. Conspiracy. Hate*+

The sorcerer had to exert a surprising amount of will to keep the ship's motive force from escaping his dominance over her. The questioning was clearly driving her into a frenzy, but it was essential to know more.

+*Why did you not inform me of this initially?*+

+*No need. Failure. Lacked support*+

+*Do you know who it was?*+

+*Yes... No... It is possible*+

Even with the sorcerer's frail and weak link to his physical body at present, he felt himself frown.

+*Mortal or Astartes?*+

+*Mmmm...*+

Even in realspace, the *Savory Wound* had difficulty recognizing those that lived within her. They were all small, insignificant entities to her. Ants to be ushered and controlled. She did not need to understand *who* was committing a betrayal against the Company in order to report it to Zseron or put an end to it through her own, subtle machinations.

+*What occurs now, is it being done in the same location?*+ he asked, for that was a question that she would be able to answer with clarity.

Or so he'd hoped.

+*Blind... Return. I must return...*+ She strained against him and the sorcerer forced her back into compliance.

The Sorcerer of Stars felt his essence prickle with unease. Something foul was occurring upon the ship and he had little idea of what. That was not something that pleased him. He would need to inform the other Atramentar, have Krayle begin an investigation and end whatever was occurring before it began. And with the *Savory Wound*'s current behavior, he would have to do it quickly. He began to withdraw from their communion.

+**HATE**+

The ship's spirit thrashed with such intensity that the sorcerer had no other choice but to sink back into their connection and reassert control, his being exerting monumental will upon the spirit of the ship as it nearly succeeded in slipping from his reigns and plunging them back into realspace. The Sorcerer of Stars felt his physical form's breath grow heavy and labored with exertion. Slick moisture coated his brow and scalp.

+*Patience*+ he projected. Its effect was almost inconsequential. The sorcerer's mind was trapped in a battle for control that required more focus than he ever had to apply when communing with the ship. A well-trained Navigator would likely have an easier time of it, but the 51st Company had not had one of those in decades.

+*Hate... Hate... Hate...*+

The Sorcerer of Stars let his psychic semblance pulse in what amounted to a teeth-grating sigh. He could not aid his brothers at this time. He could only hope that the Revenant would be able to uncover this conspiracy himself and stop it.

He had a terrible feeling that it could mean their doom if he failed.

Artemis felt her head throb with bellicose cruelty. Each skittering neuron was a cannon firing inside her cranium, each flickering synapse a lightning storm across the surface of her mind.

It was probably the worst hangover she'd had in years.

Artemis stifled a groan as members of the fuel-loading crew slowly trickled into her cramped chambers and began talking amiably with each other. The constant noise did little good for the pulsing inside her skull.

"Everything all right, Artie?" Jep asked, looking at her with concern.

"Ah, she's fine!" Brelja clapped her on the shoulder. Annoyingly, the woman appeared utterly unaffected by the previous night's libations. If Artemis had the strength to scowl at her, she would. "Probably just daunted by all the people."

"Ah-hah..." Jep said skeptically, eyeing the two of them.

Artemis forced herself to her feet, ignoring the sudden wave of dizziness and the intense urge to run to the nearest chamber pot. "I'm fine," she corroborated. "Just... didn't get much sleep last night."

Today was the day they began to set into motion events that would determine their fates, Artemis couldn't afford to be weak. Not now.

“Who are we still waiting on?”

“Er... Lamora and Tyahn, I think,” Jep said, scanning the crowd.

Artemis nodded, then set out to begin mingling with her gang of dissenters. She was aware of the reputation she'd acquired and how it was beginning to spread, but that wasn't what she wanted to be known for. She didn't need to be some powerful hero who could kill with but a thought. That was what the Astartes were for, and they commanded fear more than respect. No, Artemis didn't want that. She wanted the people to see her as one of them. That would be how they'd listen, that would be how she gained their trust.

She made her way through a few groups and cliques, trying her best to learn names and relations. Several of them seemed more unnerved by her than anything, but upon looking to Jep for approval and receiving a nod, they appeared to warm up more quickly. Artemis frowned at that.

“Tell me,” she asked, looking to a dark-skinned woman with coppery hair named Kosa. “I've known Jep for quite some time and he's always seemed so...”

“On the brink of an eternal nervous breakdown?” Kosa finished with a knowing grin.

Artemis smiled sheepishly, but nodded. “So why does it seem like all of the people of your station treat him like he's in charge?”

Kosa shrugged. “Most of the time, you're right. The man's a mess. But once we get close to those machines...” Her expression changed, becoming somehow both awed and amused. “It's like they sing for him. He just... *knows* what it is their spirits want, understands their needs and how to communicate with them.”

“Like a tech-priest.”

Kosa shook her head. “No. With the Mechanicus, it's all about worship. Jep, though? It's like there's a mutual respect between him and those motors.”

“Huh.” Artemis glanced back at her friend, watching him anxiously pick at the skin surrounding his fingernails as he stammered through a conversation with one of the other crewmen.

“You should see him when he's *really* at work with the machines.” Kosa said. “He talks to them.” She laughed. It was bell-like in timbre.

“Talks to them?”

She nodded with a grin. “Probably the most relaxed we've ever seen him.”

Artemis blinked, then frowned once again. She never knew these things about him. Why hadn't he ever bothered to tell her?

Did he not tell you, or have you just not been listening?

Before she had the opportunity to come to terms with that thought, a man stepped up to her bedside and picked up her stub revolver, inspecting it. “Woah...”

Excusing herself, Artemis quickly maneuvered her way over. Though her master never explicitly said it, she had a bad feeling that other individuals handling her gifted firearm was a punishable taboo.

As she approached, the man—a younger fellow with skin so pale that the blue of his veins were visible to the naked mortal eye—looked at her with a gapped-tooth smile. “What pattern is this?”

Artemis stopped short. “I don’t know.”

“It looks like some variation of the Zarona design,” he said, looking at the stub gun from various different angles and inspecting parts and mechanisms with his eyes and hands. “It’s definitely old enough to be around that same period of conception. Maybe it’s a custom variant? A specialized mark? Or maybe just a bastardization of various different components that were put together. Yeah, that’s probably the most likely case. See the barrel here? Looks like it comes from the Oressa Mk IX pattern, but that was developed independently on the opposite side of the Imperium five-hundred years *after* the Zarona Mk IIa. Oh! And if you look at the release switch—” He clicked the cylinder open and whistled upon seeing the bullets inside. “Are these Man-Stoppers?”

Artemis blinked. “Ah... Yes.”

“Throne, that’s awesome.” He smiled up at her, snapping the cylinder closed and handing the weapon back to Artemis. She took it from him gratefully.

“You seem to really know your small arms.”

The man that Artemis was rapidly starting to conclude was still in his teens shrugged. “I grew up on a Forge World. You pick up some things here and there.”

“And I suppose you ended up here as the result of a raid?”

He nodded.

“I would’ve thought someone like you would’ve been amongst the artificers.”

The kid rolled his eyes and snorted. “I... applied to join them. Their standards were apparently too high for what I’m able to do.”

Artemis nodded in understanding, then held out her hand. “What’s your name?”

He took it, if only briefly. The act didn’t seem malicious, at least based on his expression. It was more... It was as if the idea of skin-to-skin contact made the kid uncomfortable but was weathering it for her sake. “Cai. It’s... short for Ciaphas.”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “Like the hero?”

“My parents thought the Emperor may bless me if I was named after one of His greatest servants,” he said with a chagrined expression. “You can see where that got me.”

Artemis gave the boy a smile. “I think I can somewhat relate.”

Cai looked at her with a blank look. “How?”

Before she could answer, Artemis caught Jep’s eye from across the room. He nodded to her as a final person entered the chamber, signaling that everyone was present.

She gave Cai an awkward farewell before returning to her spot near the center table and took a breath.

“Ready?” Jep asked.

Artemis nodded, but hesitated before she addressed the room. “Jep?”

“Yes?”

“You said you had something to tell me back in the fuel-loading dock during the invasion?”

The man’s face suddenly grew an even more impressive shade of neurotic red—which Artemis found astonishingly impressive, considering she didn’t think that was possible—and averted his gaze. “Oh,” he said with a nervous chuckle. “It doesn’t... Well...”

He looked up and put a hand on her shoulder. “I-It’s silly, but... I just wanted you to know in that moment that, no matter what happened, I’d be there for you. I’ll always be your friend.”

Artemis smiled, but inwardly she felt as if there was something distinctly off about his mannerisms. There was almost an imperceptible hesitation before he reached out to her, as if he worried she’d be hot to the touch; his gaze never fully met her’s, instead resting just above her brow, and his words felt... Well, they were certainly *true*, she didn’t doubt that for a moment, but they also felt like a haphazard backup plan rather than his original design.

What are you hiding, Jep? She thought, but ultimately decided to let the matter rest for now. There were more pressing issues for her at play than her skittish companion’s clandestine thoughts.

“Thank you,” Artemis said and swore she saw him let out a held breath as she looked away to address the crowd. She watched as the amassed people slowly grew silent as they noticed her standing at attention. It wasn’t a pleasant sensation between her cracking skull and drowning vision, but it had the effect she wanted, so it was worth the suffering. Probably.

“Everyone,” she said, voice warm but grave. “You know me. You know my intentions. I thank you for being here, for being willing to take a chance on my hopes to claim the retribution and liberation that we deserve against our captors.” She let her eyes drift across the gathered faces. Previously, she had to search desperately for anyone willing to hear her out. Now, she couldn’t find a single person who seemed unwilling to join her crusade. “The plan remains the same, but as do its problems. I do not intend to lead like our masters; with an iron grip and demands for obedience. I would hear your thoughts, your suggestions. We succeed together.

“Our largest issue continues to be that an Astartes may arrive at the station to monitor performance and see what is happening. How would you prevent this? How do we ensure none of the Night Lords—or World Eaters—stumble upon us as we drain the fuel reserves?”

A hand shot up almost immediately. Artemis nodded for the individual to speak.

“I think I have an idea, miss! Oh, and it’s a good one. I just know it!”

Artemis almost choked on her own saliva as she recognized the voice and began to focus on the man it belonged to within the crowd.

“Phihks?” she couldn’t help but show her surprise. “You *lived*?”

The rat-meat seller cooed with amusement. “Of course! I’m very good at not dying! Even against daemons!”

A round of chuckles rose up from the crowd and Artemis had to stifle her own smile. “You said you had an idea?”

Phihks nodded eagerly. “We need the gods somewhere else, right? That means we just need to make enough noise to cause them to go poke their noses somewhere else for long enough to bleed the ship, eh?”

“Sure,” Artemis agreed. “But these are Astartes. They won’t send more than one or two of their ranks for any problems we mortals could cause.”

“Which is why we *won’t* be causing it. *They* will!” the mangy man’s eyes twinkled with a certain light that Artemis couldn’t tell was genius or madness. Only one way to find out.

“What do you mean?”

Phihks giggled. “I hear the two legions aren’t getting along too well right now. All we need to do is give them a little... *push* to get them to scuffle. Yes, another, *louder* fight between gods would force all the heavens to bend to investigate the clashing.”

Artemis furrowed her brow. *Another fight?*

“And how would we give them this... *push*?”

“Leave *that* to me, miss.”

Artemis frowned at that. “Would you care to illuminate us on what you’ll be doing?”

Phihks rapidly shook his head. “Oh, no, miss! *No*. I can’t. It’s important no one knows. Otherwise, they may mess it all up!”

“We can trust each other here, Phihks.”

His eyes went wide. “Oh, I do! I trust my friends.” he put his arms around the two people nearest to him to make his point. They didn’t seem particularly pleased to be pulled so close to the scraggly little cretin. “But they still can’t know. This is a good thing, I promise! It means if something goes wrong, then it can’t be traced back to everyone else and you can try again!”

Artemis glanced at her friends to get their thoughts. Brelja simply shrugged ambivalently while Jep picked at his palms. “I... I-If he says it won’t jeopardize us, then... Well, I guess.”

“I’ll throw in a free rat for everyone!”

“I’m more inclined to support this idea now,” Brelja said quickly. Artemis grimaced at her. “What? He catches good ones.”

Sighing and trying not to gag, Artemis rubbed the bridge of her nose, then looked back up again. “Fine. But only if you can promise whatever you do can’t be traced back to us.”

“Yes! This is good, miss! I promise! When do we start?”

Artemis was dreading that question. She knew it would come up, there was no way around that, but that didn’t change the fact that they simply didn’t have the time that they needed. Things were going to be tight. Too tight. They had little other choice.

She took a deep breath and addressed the crowd at large.

“Tomorrow.”

Chapter XVI: Murder Without Meaning

She never fully got over the missing space next to her on the bridge. Every day since Orion was killed in front of her, Artemis sat down at the same seat and continued the same work. And every day she waited, expecting him to saunter in through the hatchway and plop himself down next to her with a dumb grin and an even dumber joke. He never did, of course. Her brother was well and truly dead, and that realization hurt like a fresh wound every single day.

Today would make up for all of that. Today Artemis would avenge her brother. The Astartes would feel her wrath and remain entirely oblivious to it as it melted them to the bone. All she had to do was wait nine minutes.

The chronometer in the corner of her readout was not so eager to comply.

It has to be slow, Artemis thought for the fifth time during her shift. She'd spent a majority of her time with her eyes glued to those ticking numbers. If a threat had appeared on her display, there was a relatively high chance she wouldn't have noticed it until it was already too late.

"Is there somewhere you would rather be?" a viper's voice said from behind her. Artemis started in her seat as she turned to face the Astartes that had spoken to her.

"No, my lord."

Anras sat on his throne, an ornate throwing dagger resting lazily in his hand. He wore no helmet today, the oily black curtain of his hair spilling out across his shoulders. He sat lounging in his seat like he always had in previous days aboard the command deck. Only this time, his posture echoed signs of exhaustion rather than with the lofty vainglory that the visionary was typically known for.

"There is no need to lie, slave," he said. "I know that you belong to Pyotr, as well. It is wise of you to not want to keep him waiting. My brother is infamous for his... high expectations."

Artemis only nodded, though she was not sure if Anras registered the gesture. His eyes never left the blade in his hand, his stare holding a mix of both contempt and reverence. Eventually, though, his gaze turned to her, briefly pausing on the empty seat to her left.

"I killed the one that used to sit there, did I not?" he asked. Artemis swallowed.

"Yes."

"You knew him well. A... brother, perhaps?"

"Yes," Artemis repeated, her grip growing tight on the armrests of her seat.

Anras nodded. "A regrettable decision. Our numbers seem to dwindle by the day. We need every pair of hands we can muster."

She stared at him, forcing her expression to remain neutral. Was that... supposed to be an apology? The concept seemed so novel coming from an Astartes, let alone a Night Lord, that she almost believed that she'd misheard.

An apology accomplishes nothing when spoken for a murder without meaning, were the first words that came to Artemis's mind.

“May I be dismissed to attend to my master?” was what she said instead.

Anras waved his hand limply, the servos in his arm and gauntlet whirring with an equal amount of ambivalence. Artemis quickly stood and barely remembered to bow to the horrible creature before stomping out of the room.

Kosa de la Aganadelaine Chemé-Huit, seventieth daughter of the Suzerain, was not supposed to be cleaning floors. Technically, she was not supposed to be a fuel-loader either, but the gods of the ship didn't seem to notice a singular woman slipping through the hallowed darkness of their vessel's industrial slave labor lines. A mortal was the same as any other unless their skills caught the eyes of their masters. Kosa knew better than to do that. She wasn't...

Regardless, the phlegmatic disposition the Night Lords carried towards their serfs was what allowed Kosa to swab the decking of the upper levels without a marine so much as batting an eye... At least, in regards to her work. She caught numerous leers that betrayed far more sanguine interests.

Boots thumped along the steel decking. It was the soft beat of small, *normal*-sized leather boots against metal, rather than the breath-stealing chill of ceramite scraping upon the floor as a beast in armor stalked nearer. She forced herself not to look regardless. She mustn't appear too eager. *A lady is never aroused by good company. She is only politely and hospitably aloof*, her faux-father had always told her. He had a habit for poor advice and even poorer wording.

Eventually the sound of footsteps grew to its apex and a figure passed directly beside Kosa. She casually glanced over just as the newcomer did the same. Artemis the Shepherd met her eyes and gave Kosa a brief nod before carrying on her way. On the surface, it was nothing more than pleasantries shared by two crewmen crossing paths. In actuality, it was anything but.

The next hour was a test of patience beyond anything Kosa had done before in her enclosed world of politics before she was betrayed, sold off, and ended up a slave amongst the Night Lords. She wanted to drop everything she was doing, scoff at every Astartes she saw, and run sprinting down to the lower decks. She did not. Instead, she took her time finishing her work, casually meandered her way to Scab City, exchanged cordial conversation with those she saw in the market, and feigned that a coincidental browsing brought her to her current stand.

“Are these rats fresh?” she asked the man behind the counter. He squashed a roach with his thumb before addressing her.

“Caught them just this morning,” Phihks said as Kosa eyed a skewered and roasted pest. He was disconcertingly good at this. She saw no indication in his voice or expression that they were conspiring together. It almost made her question if he was even in on it, despite the next phase of their operation being wholly his idea.

Kosa nodded and indicated the rat that she wanted. Phihks handed it over without demanding a trade or barter. The gesture was the only whisper of any collusion between the two of them. He gave her gritty and black smile as she turned away, her veins exalting and pounding with blood despite the small part she played.

— — — — —

Phihks was a princeps.

At least, he could have been if those damn inductors hadn't skewed his examination results. They were too concerned with their shiny portrait of Titanica glory for a rough and jagged piece like Phihks. He didn't fit into their puzzle right, nevermind that the point of a Legio is destructive *function* and not indulgent pageantry. They weren't a damn Knight House, after all. Sure, he may have almost stabbed one of the adepts when he first saw them, but a man was *supposed* to defend his home. You didn't just let *anyone* with a robe and a pair of augmetics traipse their way through your hovel, spewing rhetoric about serving the Ommissiah. That's how you lost your kidneys, and Phihks wasn't going to fall for *that* trick again.

As his footsteps echoed and bounced off the walls of the lower deck, he found himself unsure as to why he was thinking about this. His failed assessment was decades ago, he'd gotten over it—mostly. Perhaps the darkness and silence of the lower decks made being haunted by old ghosts easier. Perhaps he was just trying to keep his mind off the embers of caution that were crackling in his gut.

Phihks wasn't afraid. Oh, no. He always survived. Always. He didn't have any doubt that this would work out for him, just like things always did. He did, however, worry that he may fail his friends. He was confident in his idea, but they were still counting on him. That was unfamiliar territory for him.

He reached into his coat and pulled out the small carton within, shaking out a single lho-stick and lighting it. Phihks didn't normally smoke, but he made an exception today. He needed to draw attention.

The reaction came as soon as the first few puffs of caustic vapors filled the air. He heard footsteps rapidly approaching. They weren't sprinting from the sounds of it, but there was an animated energy coursing through the decking as armored feet reverberated up and down the corridor. Soon, figures in crimson armor appeared from the gloom. Two of them wore their pronged-helms that Phihks always thought looked a little silly—but he supposed one could get away with that sort of thing when they were too busy ripping out throats to be laughed at. The third World Eater's head was bare, his forehead creasing to the pulsing rhythm of the machines embedded in his skull, and his eyes wide with wild thirst.

"Prey..." he said with reverence. It almost seemed like a surprise to him that Phihks was standing there. Like the rat catcher was some sort of divine gift.

Phihks let his lho-stick drop from between his lips and let out a soft gasp. He then pissed himself. Intentionally, of course. There were no half-measures when it came to putting on a convincing show for the gods.

The marines chuckled amongst themselves, the lead one pointing his chainaxe at Phihks and gunning the trigger. "Run, little thing. You will glorify your blood that way."

Good little slaves did not need to be told what to do more than once. Normally, Phihks was not a good little slave, but he made his second exception of the day for this as he turned and began to sprint down the corridor.

He immediately heard whoops and salivating jeers as they waited only eight heartbeats before pursuing. Phihks knew that these gods were not like the ones dressed in storming midnight. They would not toy with him. He was dead the moment they caught him—and catching him was all but an inevitability.

Fortunately, Phihks always survived.

As soon as he rounded the corner, he crashed into a metallic pillar. The impact sent him tumbling to the ground, his bones shrieking with the pain of kinetic force bearing down upon them. The thing attached to the pillar cocked its head and reached down to grab Phihks by the front of his shirt, pulling him off his feet and into the air so that he could look into the creature's red eyes.

“Hello, little mouse,” the Night Lord said. Two of his brothers flanked him on either side. “You scurry to us just in time for a hunt. A fateful thing, indeed.”

Before Phihks could respond, a bludgeon in red ceramite slammed his shoulder into that of the Astartes holding him aloft. The Night Lord was forced to drop him and Phihks quickly scuttled his way up against the wall as Carnage Stitchers fell in to confront their fellow ascended kin.

“That is *our* prey, Night Lord,” the berzerker breathed.

The Astartes shoved the World Eater away from him. “Yours? This is *our* ship. All within it is claimable by *us*.”

“We found it first!” he insisted.

“You have no right to the lives of our slaves.”

Phihks suppressed a smile. That was something the two legions had in common. Both hunted—be that for enjoyment or need, it didn't matter. This sort of contention was bound to happen eventually, Phihks simply ushered it along.

The Carnage Stitcher snarled, gripping his axe and roaring the motor once again. The three Night Lords immediately drew their weapons. A silent tension passed between all six gods in the corridor. An acknowledgement. An inevitability. One that Phihks had no interest in still being present to witness.

As the rat catcher silently crawled away, he waited until he was far enough to no longer be audible before giggling and cackling to himself as he listened to the sounds of weapons swinging and gods bleeding.

Cai was dying. Slowly, but certainly. He hadn't had a surgeon or anyone confirm the condition, but he knew. Every day he woke up feeling a little bit weaker, feeling as if something were gnawing at him from within, devouring him from the inside. Some days the only thing that got him out of his cot was the knowledge that anything his masters could do to him would be far worse than the lethargy and illness of a slow, gradual death.

He hadn't told anyone. He didn't see much point. There wasn't anyone he was particularly close to and he didn't have any family aboard. He figured he just wouldn't show up

one day and everyone would assume that the Astartes had hunted him for sport. It was a better alternative than everyone feeling sorry for him.

“What do you think, Cai?”

The boy jumped, completely missing everything Jep had said to him as they leaned over the cogitator banks in the fuel-loading station of the Enginarium decks. He quickly scanned his eyes over the read-outs and said the first thought he had.

“We could lace a fuel-line with ammonia and run it through. Then we’d just have to follow the smell to find the leak.”

Jep frowned and scratched the beard that he hated but was too stubborn to shave. Cai knew neither of them *actually* intended to fix the leak, that they were only posturing for the sake of the crew who weren’t in on Artemis’s scheme.

“I don’t... Hm,” Jep demurred. “Promethium already has quite a scent. If we were going to find it based on that then I imagine we’d have already come upon it by now.”

Cai snorted and rolled his eyes. “Jep, the whole deck always smells like promethium. We just don’t notice because we’re so used to it.”

Jep blinked, then reddened in the face. “Ah... Y-yes. I suppose that’s a good point.”

It was at that moment that Phihks decided to stumble into the station, a tin flask in-hand, and barely enough cognition to stay on his feet.

“DID YOU KNOW I WAS ALMOST A PRINCEPS?” he called in a volume that was probably perfectly reasonable to his ears, but agonizingly loud for everyone else.

Jep notably deflated as he watched the man slosh about, his blush further deepening. Cai could already tell what he was thinking: This *is what he meant by ‘the signal’?*

“Brelja...” he sighed, a hand covering his face.

“Already on it,” the woman said, striding over to the intoxicated wretch of a man. She put her hands on his shoulders and began to firmly steer him out of the room.

“THE MECHANICUS JILTED ME!”

“I’m sure they did, Phihks,” Brelja said with an amused grin. Once they were firmly out of the room, Cai knew that she would be running off to report to Artemis while...

“Sorry about that, everyone!” Jep called to the confused workers. “Please get back to work! Erm, also, Krasper, take a team and head to sector G3. It needs a maintenance check.”

Krasper, a man with leathery skin and a much more formidable beard than Jep nodded curtly and began to round up people to do as he was ordered.

Only they wouldn’t be going to sector G3. They would be going to L9, and they would be doing something far more incendiary than a standard tune-up on the fuel-line there. Cai met Jep’s eyes and the man nodded to him with a grim expression. They were either going to soar or plummet here.

Cai coughed and saw flecks of red in his hand. He wiped it away on his shirt and grinned darkly to himself. In his case, it would be both but, oh, how wonderful it’ll be to feel the wind again before he falls into that darkness forevermore.

— — — — —

Naduvion ignored the first three hails from his brother on the vox before he relented and answered.

“What?”

“Why weren’t you answering your damn vox, you shit-sniffing swine!” Va’ul Dreeve snapped, the sound of clashing weapons filtering through the distorted background noise.

“I was busy,” Naduvion replied as he adjusted the frame of his latest portrait in his chambers. It depicted the streets of Nostramo using the red hues of blood for paint, reflecting the dread planet’s elegant brutality and that of its offspring. The skin he had used as a canvas helped compliment the message, as well.

“Get down here!” Dreeve hissed.

Naduvion sighed, ripping the portrait from its frame and tearing it in two. It still wasn’t quite right. It was missing something primal, something quintessential that elevates the soul and spirit of the art. “I do not wish to spar today, brother.”

“*Spar?*” the other Night Lord spat through a strained grunt. “You think I wish to *spar*, you damn fool? Half of the Company is already down here! The World Eaters have turned against us!”

Chapter XVII: Caged Animal

By the time Naduvion reached the lower decks, he had quickly pivoted from locating his brother via his vox-singal to following the scent of gore and charnel. Soon enough, the sound of tempestuous battle joined in his navigation.

As he rounded the corner, grip tightening on his dagger and chainsword, he saw the chaos in its fullest.

Bodies already littered the floor in fractioned chunks, Astartes blood dripped through the grillework of the decking in thick globules. The vox-network crackled with frantic communication amongst the Night Lords as raw and throat-tearing roars rippled through the air in waves from the Carnage Stitchers. Naduvion hissed through his teeth at the sight.

“Dreeve,” he voxed. “This is not good.”

“Spoken with the Primarch’s own wisdom!” his brother replied ruefully.

“Where is the rest of Second Claw?”

“I don’t know,” Dreeve said. “I think Korasus is dead.”

Shit, Naduvion thought, but was unable to vocalize it as he immediately had to bring his blades up to parry a strike from a raging berzerker that nearly took his head off.

“Stop this!” he said, but if the Son of Angron heard, he made no indication as he continued to hack away at Naduvion with wild, uncoordinated strikes that threatened to wrench the Night Lord’s shoulders from their sockets.

“Blood... *Blood*...” the World Eater said in a ragged, wet voice.

“They’re lost to the nails. We can’t reason with them anymore,” Naduvion said over the vox once again.

“*Obvious*– Gah!” The jibe was punctuated by a pained scream and static crackled from Dreeve’s line.

“Brother?” Naduvion asked, slapping away the berzerker’s axe again before driving his knife under the marine’s chin as he tried to regain his balance. The warrior continued to stumble and swing for several more heartbeats before eventually falling to his knees. “Va’ul!”

“I... live...” Dreeve croaked through the vox. “Damn axe took me in the chest. I... I think one of my lungs is punctured.”

Naduvion grit his teeth as he surveyed the battle, trying to make sense of the carnage. At first glance, it seemed as if their cousin legion were ripping through their ranks with little resistance, but on closer inspection that was not the case. Crimson Astartes tore into the battlefield, spreading through the corridor like blood on snow. They lacked coordination and restraint, however. For each Night Lord they managed to pick off, there were two or three others surrounding another of their kin and using the advantage to incapacitate them. It was a battle of terrible, unbowed strength and deceptive harmonization and familiarity. For the time being, they were evenly matched.

But that only meant they would kill each other until no one was left.

Naduvion switched to Second Claw's full vox-channel, rather than his and Dreeve's private line. "Second Claw," he said. "Come in."

Dreeve simply grunted, re-confirming his connection.

"Welcome to the parade, brother," Yenash said.

"*Die, you tainted filth!*" Greigor snapped, likely to whatever enemy he was currently engaged with. There was no response from Korasus.

"Where are the Atrementar?" Naduvion asked, maneuvering through the frenzy in an attempt to reach whichever of his Claw members was closest.

"Zseron still... steers the ship," Dreeve wheezed. "The rest of them do nothing without his command."

"Wonderful system, that," Yenash added.

"*Die!*"

"Gargahl, then? Anras? Hell, *Pyotr?*" Naduvion asked with increasing desperation. He swatted another half-dozen strikes before finally reaching Dreeve and joining his brother's side. His fellow Night Lord inclined his head, but offered no other greeting as he held a hand up to his shattered chest, blood pooling and dripping from between his fingers.

"The daemon prince decreed that this squabble wasn't worth the blessing of his presence," Yenash said, bitterness biting into every word. "He said he sent some of his raptors, but I have yet to see them."

"As for the visionary," Dreeve cut in, "his vox is unreachable. No one... no one has managed any contact."

None of them bothered to mention the lord discordant. Yes, Pyotr could make quite the speech when he needed to, but his favor quickly dwindled in the days that followed and no one expected him to come to the aid of his brothers any time soon. Oh, he would have a good excuse, Naduvion was sure—but that would only put a thin film over the truth:

The Revenant simply cared more for his machines and cursed engines than he did for his own flesh and blood.

A body hit the deck a meter to Naduvion and Dreeve's right, its red ceramite scraping and scratching along the metal. The berzerker tried to rise, but a midnight figure descended upon it, stamping his heel into the Carnage Stitcher's skull until its movements became nothing more than feeble twitches.

"Lick my boot, you slobbering ingrate!" Greigor Mecvak snarled. Despite his venomous words, the Astartes struck with cold precision and vicious lucidity—a stark contrast to the servants of the Blood God that surrounded them.

"Sounds like someone's having fun," Yenash voxed.

"You're not seeing it from our angle," Dreeve breathed back in response.

Naduvion watched the shards of bone and ceramite fly through the air, accompanied by the thick ropes of ichor that grasped out like limbs in search of kindred to embrace.

Such artistry, he thought. *A pict of life through the act of death. How do I capture that?*

He was broken from his trance by an abrupt impact into his backside that sent him sprawling onto the floor. Naduvion quickly flipped over and went to raise his weapons, but a knee dropped onto his throat and shoulders, stopping him.

The snarling World Eater above him held no light in his eyes beyond that of a red haze. Blood streamed down his cheeks like tears and his mouth frothed with rabid delight. He said nothing as he raised his chainaxe and strangled the motor's trigger. In moments, it would fall upon Naduvion's head, the monomolecular teeth eating away at his helm, then his skull, then his brain matter. A poor way to end his miserable life.

A boot to the face rocked the berzerker off of him and the axe's strike fell upon the grating next to Naduvion's eye instead, sparks flying and searing his vision to yellow-white lightning on his left side.

Wincing, the Night Lord took the hand proffered to him and rose to stand next to Dreeve once more. His brother immediately dropped to one knee, his breathing having grown even more labored. The fact that it had taken until now for him to succumb to his wound was already a miracle.

"We die with our backs turned, brother. You cannot do that on your knees," Naduvion said, helping his brother up and bearing a majority of the weight of the warrior on his shoulder.

"I..." Dreeve gasped. "I m—"

"Quit speaking," Naduvion insisted.

The berzerker had recovered from his daze quickly, having already risen to his own feet and was now stalking them in a circle—like a shark would its prey in the water. More red hued figures joined the hunt and Naduvion felt pressure against his back as Greigor joined their pack. Even with the three of them together, however, they were outnumbered.

"Yenash," Naduvion hissed, "We are surrounded."

"Shame," was the reply. "My position is much more advantageous." His line on the vox-link then clicked off.

"That piss-gargling shit!" Greigor growled.

All the while, the Astartes of the Carnage Stitchers continued to circle them, twitching and spitting uncontrollably. They saw weakness before them and were ready to strike. Naduvion couldn't blame them.

The lead berzerker raised his axe and roared, each World Eater with him tensing to lunge forward as they took up the call.

Then their screams heightened to ones of pain and they each, to a man, dropped their weapons and brought their hands up to their skulls.

Glancing about, Naduvion saw that all other members of the Carnage Stitchers had fallen into the same sort of paralysis, the sounds and acts of battle waning as the Night Lords watched with a mix of confusion and discomfort.

Bootfalls echoed down the corridor, steady and inevitable—like the approaching of a slumbering giant, now awoken. An Astartes in crimson appeared through the gloom, a chainsword raised above his head. The weapon glowed a dark, hungry red. Only... it wasn't. The

weapon seemed not to be emitting light, but sucking it *in*, devouring it. As its wielder continued his slow approach, any member of the Carnage Stitchers who came near to the blade immediately flinched and clawed at their helms or scalps. Eventually, the Astartes came to a stop in the center of the fray, looking about with an analytical gaze, his eyes softly pausing on the numerous bodies that littered the ground.

The figure in red eventually lowered his weapon, the strange glare fading. The berzerkers in the hallway ceased their whimpering, but did not resume their attack. Instead, they stood and faced the Astartes with something that resembled parade rest. Silence filled the air for several moments before the figure's eyeline fell on something on one side of the corridor. He calmly stepped over to it, stopping right in front of the wall and crouching down.

He lifted something small and drenched in blood before stowing it away and rising. When he turned to face the crowd once again, Zasharr the berzerker surgeon's eyes were cold and he spoke in a voice that was like rusted nails being pounded and dragged through rockcrete.

“What. Happened. Here?”

Artemis felt like a caged animal treading the confines of her enclosure. She paced the length of her chamber back and forth, the lightning in her veins refusing to let her stand still, to catch her breath.

For the past ten minutes—ever since Brelja had provided her update report—she had been unable to find a moment's peace. This was the brink, this was the edge. Either her plan worked or she had to bear the weight of even more lives lost. Lost because of her own rage and desires.

What if it doesn't work? What if they're killed anyway when the Astartes find out? What if...

The two words continued to weave through her mind, tying new knots and nooses to strangle her with, coaxing the dread within her to continue clawing away at the inside of her throat.

What if, what if, what if, what if...

It was a relief when the vox-speakers in her room suddenly blared with her master's distorted voice.

“Artemis. Attend me in the Hall of Mechanization.”

The words spoken were devoid of any emotion or motive. Eight simple words that passed like a ghost through the air, traveling up Artemis's spine and freezing her in place.

He knows, were her first thoughts. Then she immediately chided herself and forced air into her lungs. *He can't know. He couldn't. Not yet, not so soon.*

The affirmations helped marginally, so she continued to repeat them to herself as she traveled to heed to Pyotr's commands. Each step grew heavier, but she forced her body into compliance, forced herself not to show her fears. Not to *them*. Not ever again.

This resolution died the moment she stepped into the Mechanization Hall.

Unlike the darkened cathedral that was the rest of the ship, this chamber was clinical and austere in its purpose. A green aura of light permeated throughout the room, caused by the numerous glimmering cogitator banks and stuttering hololith displays. The metallic cadavers of great machines hung by chains from the rafters and multi-tiered balconies lined either side of the chamber, tech-adepts in red robes and grisly augmetics toiling away at their individual projects with obsessive fervor and chanting. Cables and wiring beneath the grillework of the floor pulsed and writhed with electricity, painting the image of vascular spasms or prowling serpents. Artemis was not sure *why* such sights terrified her, only that there was a heaviness in the air. A taint that she could feel beneath her tongue, warning her of a profound wrongness that this place emitted, urging her to turn away and flee.

The metal-and-flesh creature in its bed of skulls didn't help much, either.

Its head pricked upwards at Artemis's entrance and its dark eyes reflected an insatiable hunger as viscous green ooze dripped from its fanged maw. It slowly began to rise, its eyes never leaving her, and Artemis found herself paralyzed in her own fear.

"Down, Tzimiti," a deep voice spoke and the thing abruptly dropped back to a prone position and let out a strangled noise that Artemis almost believed was a huff.

"Ignore the helstalker," Pyotr said without looking over to her. The Night Lord stood leaned over one of his cogitator arrays, palms pressed flat on the table, his eyes studying the screens.

Perhaps I should mine a mountain with a spoon while I'm at it, Artemis thought as she approached her lord, noting that the helstalker's head followed her every move while still resting atop its front two forelimbs.

"You called for me, my lord?" she asked, forcing herself to look away from the abyssal machine, entrusting that her master did not intend to be done with her. Yet.

Pyotr nodded and removed a data-spool from the nearest cogitator and handed it to her.

"You will find two lists on that device. One is of every individual aboard this ship. The other is similar, but lacks certain names. I wish for you to find out which names are not present on the second list."

Artemis blinked down at the small piece of technology in her hand. She knew that as Pyotr's personal slave, she was bound to do menial work just as much as significant assignments, but after all she'd just gone through and all the fear and anxiety she had worked up within herself today, the thought almost made her laugh hysterically.

"Is... Is there anything else I may do for you? My lord."

"That will be all."

She almost turned and left without another word then, but hesitated as she caught something out of the periphery of her vision. Artemis slowly turned toward it and approached until she stood before a cogitator, its screen filled with the constant scrawl of arcane symbols that seemed to link together and... evoke something. Like some form of language. It mesmerized her for reasons she could not explain.

Pyotr took notice, glancing at her slightly from behind his skulled helm.

“Lingua Diabolis,” he said. “Scrapcode.”

Artemis furrowed her brow as she turned to her master.

“What is it for?”

“Many things. It is a virus enhanced by the Warp. It enslaves machine spirits to perform duties that it would not ordinarily wish to. Each code is a unique pair of chains to bind and rein the motive force to do something specific. It... was once my specialty.”

“Did you stop?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Pyotr did not answer. When this became clear, Artemis turned away and stared at the screen once again with fascination. “It’s alluring.”

“You do not know what it even is,” Pyotr scoffed, “but... yes, it is.”

“What was this one for?”

The lord discordant looked deep into the cogitator, as if he were peering beyond the screen and seeing more than just symbols and sigils, but something greater. As if each line were just a part of a tapestry that Pyotr was able to visualize the entirety of.

“It’s incomplete,” he said. “It was meant for something lofty. Something I was never able to find the answer to.”

Artemis frowned as she looked to the Astartes. Something about this felt oddly intimate. She felt as if she was being allowed access into a part of her master’s world that he only allowed a select few to enter. If Artemis did not hate him as much as she did, she would have been flattered.

“I don’t understand,” she said softly, silently urging him to continue. She wasn’t sure if it was because the additional information could be of use for her, or if she was genuinely intrigued. Perhaps both.

“Scrapcode is meant to... destroy a machine spirit. Sometimes completely, other times only in part so that it is too weak to stop the process of its enslavement. Some spirits are stronger than others, thus the virus needs to be equally as strong to combat it. That code,” he nodded to the cogitator, “was meant for a particularly resilient brand of machine. I was trying to find the right configuration to make it capable enough for the task.”

“So,” Artemis mused. “It’s like a disease?”

While she could not see his face, she felt as if she could sense Pyotr frowning behind his ceramite mask. “That is one way of looking at it,” he said, clearly unimpressed with the connection.

“Only the symptoms don’t help with the killing.”

“Explain.”

Artemis jumped at the sudden bite in his tone. It took her a moment for it to dawn on her that he likely didn’t actually understand what she meant, for something as elevated as he would never have needed to endure the woes of illness.

“Ah...” she began. “When we get sick, our bodies attempt to fight off the cause by making ourselves inhospitable to it. Fever, regurgitation, coughing, these are all methods to attempt to expunge or destroy the foreign invader. The worse it is, the more extreme the attempts at self-defense.”

“I am aware of this.”

“Well, sometimes the body doesn’t understand that the symptoms it creates are too harsh for it to handle. It’s so focused on killing the disease that it doesn’t realize it’s also killing itself.”

Pyotr seemed to be chewing on the words, mulling them over and tasting them before he decides if he should spit them out or not. “Like when a mortal bleeds from many of their orifices.”

“Ah... yes?” Artemis replied, not sure what to make of the gruesome example.

Her master nodded. “It is what happens to the slaves who venture too close to Gargahl’s domain on this ship. Among other things.”

“I am glad to not have met him, then,” she said. Pyotr grunted, but did not seem to be paying much attention. What she had told him appeared to have distracted him somehow.

Unsure if this counted as a dismissal or not, Artemis remained where she was, waiting for the lord discordant to pull himself free from his own turbulent thoughts.

Instead, she heard a small click come from the Night Lord’s helm. When Pyotr did not seem to notice it, three more came before his posture changed and he seemed to recognize the world around him once more.

“What is it?” he growled. There was a pause—a response that Artemis wasn’t privy to hear. “...How do you mean?” Pyotr asked, his voice becoming that of a frozen string pulled taut.

There was a second moment of silence. Then, without warning, the Astartes turned and sprinted out of the Mechanization Hall.

Artemis watched this all with a sense of glee that she did not allow herself to show. She didn’t need to hear the other end of the conversation. She knew *exactly* what had been said.

The moment Pyotr stepped onto the command deck, Anras barked for the bridge to be cleared. There was no hesitation from the officers as they immediately stood and exited the chamber—with the exception of a single, particularly petrified looking man who remained at attention, despite the way his body quaked and threatened to collapse under his terror.

Pyotr waited with little patience for the room to empty before Anras slammed on the controls of his command throne, sealing the hatchways and blocking all inward and outward vox communication.

“What,” Pyotr said slowly and with little control over the acid in his voice. “Do you mean the fuel reserves are *empty*?”

Anras slouched on his throne, glaring at the shivering man across from him. “Tell him.”

The man couldn’t seem to make up his mind on if he should grovel or salute as he fell to his knees and brought his arm up to his chest.

“I... I... a disturbance on the auguries, my lord! A disruption in the fuel line that has...” he gulped. “That has caused all remaining promethium storages to drain. I reported it the moment I took notice!”

Pyotr’s eye twitched as his temper broiled, only to be washed away quickly after. He closed his eyes and breathed in through his nose.

“Can we collect what has been lost?”

“Unlikely,” Anras said. “It’s all in the machinery now. We’ll be lucky if it doesn’t cause some form of combustion and put us in even worse conditions.”

“It won’t,” Pyotr said, frantically looking at the hololithic display of their current situation. They truly had anything now beyond what was already being chewed up by the engine.

“We have enough to reach Kleos,” Anras added.

“It doesn’t matter,” Pyotr replied. “We’re dead regardless. In the air, on land, it changes nothing. Our resources are too depleted. We can’t win a battle against the Sentries directly.”

The visionary’s expression darkened. “I am going to have every single slave in that fuel station strung up for this.”

“No,” Pyotr sighed, “you won’t. It looks as if it was caused by a rupture. A disaster we could not have expected or prevented.”

“The second one in a single week,” Anras noted with sardonic bile.

“Blame the Warp.”

“I blame,” Anras was suddenly standing, snarling at Pyotr as he drew close, “the *slaves* whose responsibility was to make sure events like this never happened!”

“And what?” Pyotr scoffed. “You wish to punish them? When we’re already bleeding from the inside? When we already need every Astartes, mortal, and servitor? You fool.”

“It doesn’t matter, brother!” the visionary cried. “We are dead regardless, just as you said! The end result is the same if they die by our hands or the Ferric Sentries’!”

The lord discordant stared at his brother until Anras eventually buckled and took a step back. “We are not killing them. It is a pointless gesture.”

The visionary of the warband let out a long breath before collapsing into his throne once more. “All of this for nothing. We are Sons of Curze, Pyotr. We do not *do* valiant final stands. We run until we are caught.”

They stood in silence for an interminable amount of time, both staring into the readouts in search of some misplaced or overlooked blip of data that could save them. It was a gossamer thin hope that neither Night Lord truly believed, but it was against their nature to not exhaust every possible option. The only noise in the chamber was the quivering of the bridge slave who dared not move or speak during this time.

“What do we tell the Company?” Anras eventually asked, his voice like the breeze blowing through the willow trees on old Nostramo.

“We don’t,” Pyotr responded, his own tone a curt and dry juxtaposition.

“You wish to lie to all of our brothers?”

“You speak as if the concept is unfamiliar to you, Anras,” Pyotr sneered. “We may find a solution yet. It would be aggravating to have to juggle morale yet again.”

In actuality, Pyotr believed none of this. As he looked at their fuel reserves and witnessed the plan he and Sixth Claw concocted leak between his fingers like sand, he knew that they would all die upon the soil of Kleos and that damnable tech-marine would finally get the last laugh. No, the true reason he wished for no one to know was because it would be better for all of them to be slain with the belief that they stood a chance rather than knowing there was never a point to any of it to begin with.

The lord discordant smiled ruefully under his helm as he imagined the ghost of his Primarch laughing hysterically.

“And the sorcerer calls *me* pathetic,” the visionary said with a snarl, his eyes boring into Pyotr like molten coals.

“I have no wish to trade barbs with you anymore, brother,” he sighed. “What we discussed does not leave this room. Is that understood?”

Anras said nothing for several breaths, his lips drawing back into a sneer that bordered on ferality. “Very well,” he finally said, voice strained.

“I will speak of nothing that I heard, my lords! I promise!” the slave chimed in with equal parts zealous loyalty and unconquerable fear.

Pyotr and Anras turned to look at the little man-thing simultaneously, as if they had both forgotten his existence. They then turned back to one another and proceeded to engage in a silent conversation that was born entirely out of microgestures of the head and shared emotions.

Humans speak too much to trust.

Deal with him as you wish.

No, I care not for it. He's yours to—

Pyotr drew his bolt pistol and fired a single shot at the man's head. The half of his body that still remained collapsed onto the deck, blood pooling on the deck and dripping down the walls alongside the viscera that splattered there.

“I will need to have that cleaned.” Anras scowled.

“Good. Call it a penance for annoying me,” Pyotr responded and made for the bulkhead door. Reluctantly, Anras released the seal order. The two shared no other words as the lord discordant made his departure. It took a monumental effort to remain amiable with his pompous brother and resist the urge to flay the machine spirits around him at the same time. Better to leave while they're conversation was somewhat pleasant—topic at hand aside.

As Pyotr stepped freely into the corridor and outside the range of Anras's vox-embargo, he became acutely aware of the sheer number of times he had been hailed by Sixth Claw as well as other members of the warband.

Frowning, he accepted yet another incoming link from Retrigan.

“Where have you *been*?” the once-raptor asked.

He ignored the question. “What is it?”

“We came to blows with the Carnage Stitchers. Astartes are dead on both sides. Fighting has ceased, but it may not remain that way for long.”

“Why?”

“Zasharr has demanded your presence and animosity continues to grow with each moment his request is not heeded.”

Pyotr stopped in place, closing his eyes as the exhaustion threatened to overwhelm him. He placed a hand to the nearest wall to steady himself and swore that this time he truly did hear laughter in the back of his mind. It was distinctly androgynous, somehow both mocking and sympathetic at the same time.

After a few more breaths, the Night Lord straightened himself and opened his vox once again. “Tell him that I am on my way.”

When Pyotr arrived, a clear line had been drawn between the forces in red and those in blue. Shouts and jeers rose between the two sides, each spitting venom and vitriol at the other, but neither one crossing the imaginary border that they had drawn for themselves. Blood and gore littered the decking and dripped from servos and armor joints. Even the dead were segregated from one another as Astartes corpses had been moved and postured against the walls on either side of the corridor, their progenoid glands already harvested.

As the lord discordant approached, Retrigan fell into step beside him.

“It’s good that you’re here,” his brother said. “We’ve been relying on Gyrrhemar of all people to keep matters stable until you arrived.”

“So we’re even worse off, then,” Pyotr grunted.

“No. The Sons of Angron seem inclined to listen to him for whatever reason. It was a shock to me, as well.”

Astartes parted to allow Pyotr to make his way to the front of the gathered warriors where his brother stood with his spear. Gyrrhemar nodded to Pyotr, then stepped aside.

Across from him, Zasharr stood at the forefront of his own men, his arms crossed over his chest and his fingers twitching in an impatient rhythm that matched the pulsing of the false-spirit in his sword.

“Two squads worth of men are dead,” were the mad apothecary’s first words.

“I see that.”

Zasharr snorted and gestured widely with his hands. “More of our forces have died upon this ship than to the Ferric Sentries, cousin! At this rate, we will not have anyone to muster when the battle comes!”

“You chose to accompany us,” Pyotr said without emotion. “I honor the aid you have given, but the consequences for boarding our ship are your own to bear.”

“Your ship?” Zasharr hissed, his tone rising. “*Your* ship? Such words imply that there is anyone *to* captain this vessel! Anyone to command these forces! When this melee broke out, it was not your daemon prince of Nurgleth who ceased the infighting, not your visionary, not your terminators, not you! It was *I*, cousin! *I* was the one who asserted control over the situation!”

Pyotr watched the surgeon rave, spittle flying from his mouth, with ambivalence. After what he had learned, the entire debacle felt utterly pointless.

“You intend to usurp leadership, then?” he asked.

“It does not matter what *I* want.” Zasharr swept his hands back to the berzerkers behind them. “It is that my men will not follow those who lack authority. The concept may be unfamiliar to you Sons of Curze, but trust and obeisance are *earned*, not assumed by right.”

More barking arguments rose up from both sides. Pyotr waited for the voices to die down. They only did once Zasharr fingered the trigger of his chainsword, then glared at his cousin with an expression that amounted to, ‘*See?*’

“The Astartes of the VIIIth Legion do not bow. Not even to allies,” Pyotr replied in a tone that denoted fact rather than haughty arrogance.

“Hm. Then there is only one path forward.” Zasharr flexed his jaw and pointed his blade at the midnight adorned warriors. “Your control over this vessel is now challenged by the Carnage Stitchers. I demand you submit to our customs and undergo a Gauntlet of Dominion to reclaim your station. Refusal or failure will give me no other choice but to allow my men to sate their bloodlust over all who haunt the halls of this vessel.”

Pyotr blinked, his brothers shuffling with a mixture of eagerness and uncomfortability as the World Eaters howled and cheered at the declaration.

“What would this gauntlet entail?”

“You will select a single champion who will fight eight consecutive bouts against the warriors of my warband. If third blood is achieved for each one then they will be declared victorious and your honor will be restored.”

Pyotr exhaled quietly through his nose. “And all slights against you will be forgiven?”

“They will be... tolerated,” Zasharr said slowly. It was then, looking at him, that Pyotr realized that it was not simply the standard rank and file that had grown outraged by their treatment, but Zasharr himself whose patience had finally been tested.

“I assume if only one of your men reaches third blood first then the challenge is lost?”

“No,” Zasharr said, his gaze darkening. “The challenge is asymmetrical. My men will be fighting for *Sanguis Extremis*. Death.”

A wave of cold understanding washed over the crowd of Night Lords. Those who were previously thirsting to fight in the name of the warband suddenly found their zeal stolen out beneath them and were reluctant to step forward.

Pyotr closed his eyes and felt the skin around his sockets sag and grow even heavier. Colors and promises of false joys danced behind his closed lids. He could have all the pleasure and pain he could ever want if he only took one final step...

He fixed his gaze back on Zasharr and bit back the desire to simply leave and ignore the matter entirely.

“Fine. I accept the terms and will fight your gauntlet.”

The apothecary fixed him with an expression that was as emotionless as stone in all ways except for his eyes. Those shone with an inscrutable interest.

“You would bear the responsibility of your entire warband, Pyotr? Be that glory or defeat?”

“Yes.” None of his brothers desisted or refuted him as their champion. Pyotr imagined the few who would did not even bother to show up to this foray to begin with.

“Hm,” Zasharr grunted, but slowly nodded. “Your champion is accepted. We begin in eight hours.”

Pyotr did not even acknowledge the statement as he turned and left the scene behind him.

The truth of the matter was that he did not care whatsoever for the crushing stones of the warband’s fate that had fallen on his shoulders. It did not matter what the outcome truly was, considering they would all find themselves fallen and purged by the Emperor’s forces soon enough. No, he only offered himself up as sacrifice in the hopes that he would be killed before the rest of the warband realized how he failed them all.

Chapter XVIII: Where There's Smoke

It only took the Carnage Stitchers five hours to construct a fighting pit in the lower decks. They then proceeded to spend the next three using it to determine who would be selected to represent the warband in fighting the Night Lords' champion. By the time Pyotr arrived, there was already a fine layer of blood staining the gray sands of the arena and the stench of sweat and straining ligaments in the air.

He had been instructed to come unadorned in his sacred armor with only a single chosen weapon. Pyotr heeded these requests, arriving bare-chested with his chainglaive resting atop his shoulder.

The pit was surrounded with a majority of both warbands in attendance. He had no doubt that while the World Eaters were there for the enjoyment of watching the spectacle of their brothers fight in glorious melee, Pyotr's own brothers were primarily there to watch him die like a dog. Well, he supposed he could do that for them, considering what he would be subjecting them to in the days to come.

Sixth Claw met him at the arena's entrance.

"Best of luck, brother," Gyrtremar said, offering a hand to Pyotr. The lord discordant clasped forearms with his brother begrudgingly.

"Try not to die too quickly," Retrigan added, attempting black humor. Pyotr almost wished he could find it amusing. Taresh only nodded to him—a gesture that he did not return.

With no words of his own for his brothers, Pyotr walked past them and entered the pit, immediately being met with the roars and cheers of the Carnage Stitchers as well as the quiet snickering and whispered bets and wagers from his own warband above him.

Pyotr paid them no heed. Instead, he took his position at one end of the small, ovular arena and planted his glaive down into the sand with a muted *thump* and held onto the shaft with one hand. Moments later, his opponent entered with even greater fanfare from his fellow berzerkers as he raised his serrated falchion into the air, bellowed out his enthusiasm, and flexed his scarred musculature.

It was far more preening than Pyotr had ever expected of the Sons of Angron.

Once his opponent had finished his showmanship, he took his own place opposite of Pyotr in the sands. Another breath transpired before a new figure appeared atop the ring and the din quieted immediately. Zasharr inspected the two opposing forces; then, with no words or address, nodded and stepped out of sight.

Pyotr's opponent came upon him immediately. In less than ten strides, the berzerker eliminated their distance, battering Pyotr's glaive away and slashing him across the chest. Flecks of skin and meat fell to the floor and the lord discordant stumbled back to regain his balance as the crowd roared and jeered above. He met his opponent's eyes and the berzerker smiled.

"First blood," he said with mocking glee. He had no need to keep score, all that mattered to him was ending Pyotr's life. He would be doing it anyway.

The next strike took him in the thigh, the point of the blade driving deep into his muscles and nearly emerged out the other end. Pain blossomed and drooled through Pyotr's veins and he clenched his jaw and bared his teeth. He'd barely even seen the attack coming and hadn't had the time to position his glaive to parry or even block.

That trickle of agony became crashing waves as the blade in his leg was abruptly ripped free, its curved fangs along the edge tearing and ripping away flesh and blood with it. Pyotr's knee buckled and slammed down into the sand.

His opponent laughed and flicked the blood off his falchion's edge directly into Pyotr's face. "Second blood," he said, then turned and raised his hands to accept the adoration of his brother in the crowds. Some of Pyotr's own kin even cheered, but he spotted others sneering at the display or even calling out ridicule.

"You toy with him!"

"As if you would not do the same to us!" a World Eater countered. The shouts continued and Pyotr felt a sneer begin to stretch across his face. He had every intention to die, yes—but not like this. Not as an example. Not as proof of his Legion's inferiority.

Pyotr's grip on his chainglaive tightened as he snapped back to his feet and swung his weapon, the polearm's hungry teeth biting and snapping a diagonal slash across the berzerker's back. He rasped his pain and spun to face Pyotr.

"First blood," Pyotr spat. His opponent's frown became a look of shock as he attempted to reassert dominance with another blow, only to have his sword's blade slammed into the floor by a downward strike from Pyotr's glaive. He then twisted the weapon in his hand and brought the head upwards, scoring another devastating cut along the chest. "Second blood."

The berzerker began to stumble back in an attempt to gain distance between himself and the lord discordant. Pyotr advanced, ignoring the howls and cheers that echoed up above him. Both Astartes left droplets of blood in the sand as their enhanced physiology worked to clot their wounds. Pyotr continued to glare at the Carnage Stitcher across from him, listening as the spirit of his butcher's nails screamed and ordered the berzerker to fight, to maim, to *kill*.

When the charge came, Pyotr was ready. His opponent came in with another lunge that Pyotr wove his chainglaive into so that it locked their weapons together. He then proceeded to slowly push the shaft of his weapon forward while gunning the motor, causing sparks and shrapnel to fly as it snapped along the side of the falchion's metal. The berzerker strained, but the teeth edged their way toward him until they inevitably began to bite away at his forearm.

"Third blood," Pyotr said. Then headbutted the berzerker for good measure. The crunching of nose cartilage under the pressure of his skull was almost satisfying enough to cut through the numb haze of Pyotr's soul.

The World Eater raved and gnashed his teeth, attempting to tear into the Night Lord after the disrespect he was suffered, but two pairs of ceramite-encrusted hands appeared on either side of the warrior and forced him back as additional members of the Carnage Stitchers began to drag their brother out of the arena.

Pyotr was only able to force three breaths of air into his lungs before another challenger toting a chainaxe emerged into the arena and began to descend upon the wounded Night Lord.

Clenching his jaw, the lord discordant forced his pain down without the aid of combat stimulants and took a defensive stance with his glaive. He coughed and forced words to form from between his bleeding lips, "I hope you're better than he was."

The second through seventh bouts were much the same as the first. Each opponent came at Pyotr with the intention to kill him. Each one took their pound of flesh and blood from him. Each one was a fresh and healthy warrior eager to fight a marine who was slowly being whittled down by exertion and blood loss. Each one also kept score on the number of hits they made against him despite there being no necessity for it.

And none of them made it beyond second blood.

As the seventh duel ended, Pyotr watched as his challenger exited the arena, saluting his twin combat knives to him in a sign of respect. The Night Lord's shoulders and chest heaved with the immense labor of dragging air into his lungs and forcing it back out. He leaned on his chainglaive, using it in much the same way an elderly man would a staff, his old age having sapped him of all of his vigor and strength to the point that even supporting his own weight was a challenge.

Pyotr waited for his next challenger, knowing this would be the duel that he died. Not because he would allow it like he had wished before, but simply because he was only a few degrees off from slaughterhouse meat at this point.

A chorus of stomping boots began to rise in the stands above him. A crescendo of ceramite clangs and guttural vocals filled the air from the Carnage Stitcher in anticipation for the final fight. The noises grew louder still, turning the chamber into a house of thunder and a choir of ursines. It wasn't until several of Pyotr's now-irregular heartbeats passed that the noise reached its apex and he spotted movement at the entrance of the arena as a new figure began to approach from the shadows. With arduous effort, Pyotr pulled himself fully to his feet and waited for his final opponent to take his position.

Zasharr stepped out of the darkness and onto the field.

The berzerker surgeon, like the others, did not wear his battle plate. He was bare of any garment beyond the leather gladiator's skirt that draped around his legs, but looked no more vulnerable for it. His skin was a network of scar tissue and bulging, angry veins. Most notably, Pyotr spotted a coiling scar around his upper left arm that spiraled down to his wrist. The scar was occasionally stained black throughout its length, creating organic sections in its path, but these deviations were few and far between.

"Zasharr," Pyotr croaked, spitting acid and blood into the dirt. "What is this?"

The mad apothecary prowled the edge of the ring, looking at Pyotr with a frown that verged on becoming a snarl.

"How many times, cousin? How many times have I come to rescue you and your brothers? How many times have I tended to your wounded, harvested and preserved your

geneseed, and given you new Astartes? Too many times. And each time the debt is never paid. Your warband drools promises and gratuities, but never supports *us*. They never pay us the respect that we have earned for all of our deeds. And I see why now.” He pointed his chainsword at Pyotr, the hissing daemon within strangling and constricting the blade’s machine spirit and urging the surgeon to act, whispering to his nails to bite harder so that they may reap soon. If they had any effect, Zasharr did not show it.

“Where there’s smoke...” he said slowly. “Our alliance is one-sided. *You* see myself and my men as nothing more than fodder and puppets for you to throw away when you no longer have use for us. That ideal has infested into the minds of your brethren, as a result. No more. In this, you face me and either learn to respect me and mine, or die and exonerate my shame in chaining myself to your flailing warband.”

Pyotr weathered the words with wheezing breaths. “Forgive me for not shedding any tears for your plight,” he managed. “Perhaps the Emperor’s Children will be more sympathetic. They too know the pain of having *fragile egos*.”

Zasharr’s nostrils flared and he entered a charge. Pyotr summoned what little strength he had within him and met the mad apothecary halfway across the pit. They both swung at the other with their chain weaponry.

“First blood,” they rasped in unison.

Pyotr stumbled forward as blood gushed from his side. Zasharr’s wound had been deeper, struck with might, speed, and precision that the lord discordant couldn’t hope to match.

The two spun and Zasharr advanced, bashing Pyotr’s glaive away and remaining inside his reach. Another strike.

“Second blood.”

Pyotr slammed his shoulder into the berzerker surgeon in an attempt to create distance, but Zasharr weaved his torso out of the way. He smacked Pyotr in the back with the flat of his blade, sending him tumbling, then dealt another slash to accompany it.

“Third blood.”

Swinging his glaive in a wide circle, Pyotr watched as his opponent ducked underneath the attack, rolled within his reach, and swung upwards.

“Fourth blood.”

Grunting through the pain and the rivers of ichor that painted his skin, the Night Lord kicked Zasharr in the chest. The Eater of Worlds stumbled back, but as Pyotr thrust forward to capitalize on the advantage, Zasharr had already lunged toward him again and drove his chainsword into Pyotr’s shoulder letting it eat deep into the muscle so that when he pulled forward to free the blade, Pyotr was yanked with it and sent down to his knees.

“Fifth blood.”

Pyotr stayed where he was. His existence was agony. The pain of exhaustion, the pain of the flesh, the pain of his mind and the knowledge of how he failed, the pain of his soul and the rot that was festering there. There was nothing the lord discordant could find within himself that was not some flavor of torment. It made it nigh impossible to rise and open himself for more.

“Stand and die on your feet, cousin,” Zasharr said, his voice soft, like crunching snow rather than rolling boulders. His tone was almost compassionate.

He did not rise. He could not. All that would have awaited him was more suffering. Zasharr’s naked skill alone was enough to match Pyotr, but with that sword... That damnable sword heightened him beyond the capacity of most duelists that Pyotr knew.

It does not have to be this way, a voice like poisoned honey whispered and pried its way into his mind. This pain, it is a gift. It can be your power, your strength. You simply do not know how to wield it yet. One more step. One final step, my chosen, and you will...

“Begone,” Pyotr whispered, but it sounded feeble even to him. The offer was tantalizing now. No more suffering. All the power he could want. After years of running and writhing in the misery of licking his wounds and failing to strike back against the Imperium, the chance to change all of that was becoming impossible to refuse.

He felt as if his soul were being strangled and squeezed by forces beyond him. Looking up, he eyed Zasharr’s blade and could not help but draw a comparison between the machine spirit within and his own flayed and tortured soul.

Pyotr blinked.

The... machine spirit...

“Go to hell,” he snarled, rejecting the proffered deal with far more conviction now and struggled, once again, to his feet.

Zasharr, thinking the barb was intended for him, grunted and his lips quivered in what could have been a ghost of a smile. Pyotr was not paying attention to that, however. Instead, he focused on the chainsword and proceeded to reach out with metamechanical senses and attempted to forge a link with the motive force within.

The spirit shrank and whimpered at the presence of now two malevolent forces within the sanctity of its holy physical housing, but was unable to do little more than beg to keep him at bay. Within moments, there were two supernal links within the weapon: the surgeon to his daemon, and Pyotr to its victim.

The two warriors approached each other once again to continue their bout, this time with the lord discordant’s vigor marginally restored.

Zasharr raised his blade to strike. *Feint to the right*, Pyotr heard in his mind as he seized on his bond. It was not dissimilar to infiltrating an enemy squad's vox systems, although this was far more intimate.

As the chainblade came down, Pyotr anticipated the change in trajectory and deflected the strike. Cheers and taunts rose up amongst the audience above them, but the lord discordant’s only pleasure came in the hiss of outrage that the bound daemon emitted, as well as the narrowing of Zasharr’s eyes.

Strike his legs!

Pyotr parried the weapon aside then struck his opponent on the backswing.

“Second blood,” he panted.

Zasharr ran his tongue along the inside of his bottom lip, then pressed the attack once more. Pyotr blocked again. Then again. And again. Each swing that came, he anticipated with perfect accuracy and cast it aside. However, even with forewarning of what was to come—for he was unsure if even Zasharr knew the daemon was influencing his thoughts and decisions—he was still granted no additional skill or prowess to properly counter them, and Pyotr’s sore limbs strained to keep up with each one of the berzerker surgeon’s blows.

He continued to pry insights from the withering machine spirit, using what he gained not only to defend but attack, forcing him and Zasharr into a dance of trading and blocking strikes. It was after the initial dozen or so moments of this that the first signs of exertion began to appear on the mad apothecary as his skin glimmered with pearls of sweat. The process was worse for Pyotr, however, as he felt himself slowing both from drainage and his wounds. It was taking more and more effort to keep up with the Astartes in front of him.

I need to end this, Pyotr thought through growls of exhaustion.

His moment came as he saw a savagery begin to take over Zasharr’s expression. The nails were biting and he was losing his grip. They were making him far more fearsome, but also far more reckless. Another swing came from his chainblade with a wet snarl—only this time Pyotr allowed it to connect.

Metallic teeth sank into his hip, lapping up the blood with such fervor that not even a drop found its way onto the sand. Zasharr did not count out his strike this time.

Almost bucking under the pain, Pyotr dropped his glaive and grabbed onto Zasharr’s wrist, yanking him closer with all the waning strength he had left. Unaccustomed to anyone ever wanting a member of the XIIth Legion *closer*, Zasharr was caught in the ploy and was brought directly into Pyotr’s grappling embrace. With how pathetic he was now after so many rounds of fighting, the clinch would’ve taken only moments to break. But, then again, that’s all he would need.

Pyotr bared his teeth and bit down on the side of Zasharr’s face.

The yell that emitted from the berzerker surgeon’s throat was one more out of shock than any real pain or rage. The calls that came from the stands were ones of equal bemusement from both sides of the legionary divide. Zasharr quickly broke the grapple and shoved Pyotr away. The lord discordant stumbled back, his opponent’s blood dripping from his lips and running down his chin. Barely able to stand, he drew his lips back from pink-stained teeth and spat the chunk of ear that he’d taken from Zasharr to the side.

“Third. Blood.”

He then collapsed and fell unconscious.

Pyotr Kravis awoke in the apothecarion.

He knew this before even opening his eyes, as the carrion stench of death masked by medicae chemicals greeted his nose as awareness returned to him. When he finally did open his eyes, he saw the lord of the Carnage Stitchers—now adorned in armor once more—sitting across the chamber facing him.

“Is this real?” Pyotr asked.

“Yes,” Zasharr said without confusion or hesitation.

Pyotr forced himself to sit up, noting that a vast majority of his wounds, while still tender, had been predominantly healed. “How long have I been out?”

“Mm. Not long. Your biology did most of the work, I simply helped speed it along.”

Pyotr nodded and stood on surprisingly steady legs. “We are to enter realspace again within the hour.”

The lord discordant hid the way those words vexed him. It meant that they were drawing closer to their doom.

And he was still alive to witness it.

“Why did you save me?” he asked, annoyance bleeding into the edges of his words.

“You absolved yourself,” Zasharr said, rising to meet Pyotr. “It is my duty.”

“Yet you still do not forgive us. Forgive me.”

The mad apothecary’s nostrils flared. “It is my duty,” he repeated. “Not my pleasure. My men are still dissatisfied, you will need to earn their respect again.”

Pyotr only grunted in response, then glanced around the empty treatment theatre. “The captives are gone.”

“I no longer had need for the Ferric Sentries.” Zasharr turned away to begin maintenance on his instruments then—a task the medical servitors were more than equipped to handle. “My experiments were complete.”

Another grunt and Pyotr turned to leave.

“You were hoping for a quick death in our duel,” Zasharr abruptly pointed out. “That was why you insulted me as you did.”

“Yes,” the lord discordant admitted.

“Hm. Why?”

“I am tired, Zasharr. That is why.”

“So you would give up?” The berzerker surgeon looked back to Pyotr at that, eyeing him with a cold, questioning gaze.

“Did it look like I ‘gave up’ in that arena?”

The Son of Angron’s throat rumbled with the sound of a dissatisfied thunderstorm, but he pushed the matter no further. “Where the brawl between our warbands broke out. I found something there that you should see.”

“I do not care.”

“Cousin—”

“*I said,*” Pyotr interjected, “that I am tired. Leave it for another time.”

He did not give Zasharr the opportunity to answer as he left the apothecarion and slapped the controls to close the door behind him. He then trudged down the veins of the *Savory Wound*, looking for something to do before they all died.

Chapter XIX: A Tinder, Burning

Scab City, as it turned out, had a bar.

It wasn't a good bar by any means. It wasn't anything more than a counter made from rotten planks and scrap metal with drinks that tasted as if they were concocted with motor oil and questionable ethics. They were somehow even worse than the sludge that Brelja had been able to scrounge up. But it was still a bar nonetheless.

Oh, and the patrons were downright *boorish*.

"Drink! Drink! Drink!" Kosa and Cai chanted to Brelja and Jep as the two raced to finish their dirty glasses of alcohol first. It wasn't much of a competition.

Brelja slammed her glass down on the bar and leaned back with an easy, confident smirk. Jep, on the other hand, hadn't even finished half of his before he started to expunge the contents of his stomach out onto the floor. Krasper leaned over and gently patted his back as he cleansed himself.

"You gave it a good try, Jep," Brelja laughed.

Jep wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stood up. "That... was terrible."

Chuckles rose up from their group. Cai cackled so hard he started coughing.

"How about you, girl? Care to go toe-to-toe?" Brelja asked with a wolfish grin.

Artemis snorted and rolled her eyes. "Absolutely not. I have no intention of embarrassing myself today. No offense, Jep."

"Ha ha," Jep said with obvious irritation. Despite that, he still smiled as everyone made light at his expense.

Artemis ran her finger along the rim of the glass that she'd barely touched. Even with all the levity in the air, she could still sense the tension that each of her friends were carrying. This wasn't normal for them. Hell, it wasn't normal for *anyone* aboard a ship that belongs to the VIIIth Legion. Cheer and celebration simply didn't exist in the long shadow of the Night Lords. And yet they did anyway, because they deserved to, because they *needed* to. They had earned that right again.

"Something on your mind?" Krasper asked, bringing the drink up to his lips. The leathery man was normally reticent and withdrawn, but Artemis had seen enough to know there was more going on beyond his eyes. Thoughts that he hoarded like a trove of wealth, only to be gifted out as he saw fit.

"Just concerned," she admitted quietly as Brelja attempted to talk Kosa into an arm wrestling match. The former woman tittered and blushed, but wasn't trying particularly hard to dissuade the Fenrisian.

"We did everything right," Krasper replied. Normally, such a response would only amplify her worries, but Artemis got the impression that if the coarse man ever started speaking in more than single sentences *then* she should probably start fretting.

Artemis eyed Jep from across the bar. He watched with a nervous grin as Cai offered to challenge Brelja on Kosa's behalf, much to her not-so-subtle chagrin. She tapped her finger on

the side of her glass in thought. Jep had been avoiding her recently. Ever since the incursion, he'd been... distant. Artemis didn't like that. She still... still needed her friend.

Standing, Artemis casually stepped next to him and leaned up against the bar. Cai struggled with both hands to get Brelja's arm to move while she made a show of yawning.

"No sign of Phihks?" Artemis asked.

Jep shook his head. "He's... elusive when he wants to be. Like... like..."

"Like a rat?" she offered with a grin.

Jep's lips quivered into a smile. "Yeah. Like a rat. He wasn't at his stand when I went to invite him and... Well, I don't really know where he lives, so..." He shrugged.

"I'm sure he'll turn up," she said and the two fell into an awkward silence for a moment.

"I keep feeling like one of them is going to come," Jep finally said. "That one of the gods are going to crash in here and take us one by one for torture. And... And not even for... what we did, but for what we're *doing*." He gestured to the bar.

"It's not a crime to drink together and have fun, Jep."

"Maybe," he said, voice haunted, "but who knows what they consider to be innocence and guilt. Alcohol was illegal on Kim's homeworld, you know. So maybe we *are* committing a crime."

"Jep..." Artemis placed a comforting hand on his arm. And he flinched.

It was subtle, barely noticeable and he tried to mask it with a tired smile, but she saw it.

Why are you afraid of me?

"Sorry," he stammered, turning to place his elbows on the counter—which conveniently allowed him to pull away from her touch. "I don't... don't mean to put a damper on things."

Artemis forced herself to snort in amusement as she matched his posture. "I've lived in fear for *years*, Jep, and it's only gotten worse since I decided to... do what we did. Not a day goes by that I'm not some flavor of terrified every minute of the day. But... it'll be better. Once it's all done. Once we reach Kleos. We'll finally be able to find some peace."

Jep sighed. "I certainly hope so." Then his brow furrowed. "I never realized you were scared too. You've always just seemed so... solid, a force of nature. Like a Leman Russ."

"Throne, Jep," Artemis groaned as she put her face in her hands. "I haven't shat in over a week, I've been so stressed."

He laughed then. A true, full laugh that forced his shoulders to convulse and tears to come to his eyes. Before long, Artemis found herself joining him, the two leaning into each other for mutual support as their balance waned under their hysterics.

It was in that moment that she thought that, perhaps, they would be alright after all.

Entering realspace once again felt like the first chimes of a funeral dirge.

After donning his armor, Pyotr had gone to the observation gallery and stood stalwart on the viewing platform, watching the colorless writhing mass of the Warp pass by. Black-on-black shadows emerged from the darkness, forming the faces of screaming souls and clawing talons and skeletal hands until, eventually, it began to pull away like a spear piercing through a dark

veil. What appeared on the other side was the speckled eternity of the void and, in the distance, a single mauve orb that was positioned directly forward of the ship's trajectory like a guiding star.

Kleos.

He remembered the planet, of course. Reflection upon the warband's time there had been pointless, however. Even now, there still was little to be gained for doing so, but without much better to do, Pyotr found himself pondering over it anyway.

It had been listed as a mining world in the Imperial records that they had pilfered, but quickly found that it was only such in name alone. The planetary governor of Kleos, it seemed, had constructed his realm in such a way that they met their required tithes, but nothing more. The end result was a planet that resembled a paradise world rather than any real contributor to the glory of the Corpse God's perfect empire.

He remembered being frustrated when they arrived, finding not bountiful minerals and resources to claim, but a pastel pink sky, cities with architecture that prioritized aesthetic beauty rather than compact efficiency, and idyllic, rolling landscapes that had barely been touched by human intervention.

They had made due by taking as many slaves as possible instead.

Where there's smoke...

Pyotr frowned as that phrase came to mind yet again. Ever since his final duel in the Gauntlet of Dominion, Zasharr's words had continuously cycled through his mind like rolling tank treads. He wasn't sure why.

Sonorous metallic chimes crashed and echoed behind him, followed by the reek of decomposing ocean life. Pyotr did not have to turn to know who was approaching.

"There you are, brother," Gargahl rasped.

"The worm finally crawls free from his hole," Pyotr responded.

The daemon prince laughed. The sound was wet and viscous. "Such harsh words from such a sad toy soldier." The clang of metal-on-metal continued as Gargahl drew closer. Pyotr frowned. That was not the usual sound of the daemons talons raking against the decking.

"What do you want?"

"To thank you, of course. It would be rude to not show my gratitude in person for such a gift."

Pyotr breathed through his nose and sighed inwardly. He turned to brace himself for whatever taunting and jeers that Gargahl would be preparing for him, only to see his ascended kin adorned in dense plating painted in the deep blue coloration of the legion.

"I stand in midnight clad once more because of you!" Gargahl laughed joyously. Pyotr said nothing. Dreadnought scrap. That was what Gargahl's new armor was crafted from. That was the purpose that the master of the catalogs had in mind for the war machine.

What a ridiculous waste.

"I am glad to see that you do not let matters of leadership affect our personal relationship, Pyotr," Gargahl continued, brandishing his maw of crooked and discolored fangs. "Even if it will not change anything."

“Change anything?” Pyotr echoed without passion.

Gargahl hummed, his leathery wings stretching outwards from the armor’s allotted slots as he approached the viewing port alongside Pyotr and dwarfed his brother. “This mission will fail, brother.”

The lord discordant did not let his discomfort show. “How do you mean?”

“It’s the only outcome for a warband this weak,” Gargahl wheezed. “We’re a tinder that has been burning away since Horus failed us. Ash is the only result.”

“Unless someone extinguishes the flame,” Pyotr said, his tone noncommittal.

Gargahl’s grinning leer broadened. “Yes. Unless someone extinguishes the flame.” The daemon flexed his claws, then placed them on the glass in front of them. “All things mortal end, brother. It used to be my greatest fear. But now I’ve conquered it, I have ascended beyond such frailties. I have become strong when once I was weak. I only want the same for my brothers.”

“By converting us to a god of rot and decay.”

“By showing you the gifts a god of preservation and eternity can offer,” Gargahl countered, his claws sliding down the viewing glass, eliciting shrill cries as he lightly scarred its surface.

“If this mission is doomed to fail, why bother supporting it?”

The daemon’s expression morphed to a scowl. He pulled his bestial hand back and stepped away from the platform. “The thought of watching the False Emperor’s drones writhe under the pain of Nurgle’s holy gifts... excites me.”

“And what of your brothers?”

“Either they welcome the Grandfather or their deaths become fertilizer for his children. The warband grows stronger either way.”

Pyotr scowled. “How very callous.”

“Callous?” Gargahl snorted. “Do not look down your nose at *me* on the ways of *empathy*, brother. I can smell the rank mark the Prince of Pleasure has left on you. I know the stone that has replaced your hearts. Even before that, you sooner would have traded your legion for a cogitator of lukewarm secrets. *Callous.*” Gargahl’s snarl shifted, his lips drawing back into yet another shark’s smile as he regarded Pyotr. “Oh, but you have given up on that, haven’t you? Is it because of your curse or because you finally realized you would never have created anything worthwhile to begin with?”

The words did nothing to the lord discordant. Perhaps they would have before his corruption, before even his duel with Zasharr, but not now. At present, the barbs were more akin to a gnat flitting just outside of his vision.

Pyotr looked to what once was his brother and let out a disappointed sigh before turning away. He had intended to ask the daemon prince about disease and illness, as a follow-up of the information that Artemis had told him, but no longer had the energy for such a test in patience and endurance for self-aggrandizement. How unfortunate that the passion for his craft would be reignited when it was too late.

“You have fulfilled the purpose you have found me for, Gargahl. Leave me, tend to your... disciples before the battle.”

The tense pause of hesitation filled the space between them. Pyotr knew that Gargahl was currently warring with the logic of the lord discordant’s words and his own petty desires to yield to no authority other than his own. Eventually, however, the daemon prince turned and lumbered out of the chamber, chuckling to himself about lost brothers and dead fools.

Pyotr was left with not even a minute’s peace before his vox crackled again as he was hailed. He debated ignoring it, but recognized the identifier sigil and frowned.

“Zseron?” he asked.

“Pyotr,” the Sorcerer of Stars croaked. His normally calm and dulcet voice was hoarse and frantic. “Conspiracy. Someone aboard the cruiser plots against us.”

“Who?” Pyotr furrowed his brow, glancing at the space Gargahl had just stood before he exited.

“I know not,” Zseron admitted.

Where there’s smoke...

The lord discordant looked back into the void, watching as the stars slowly passed by as the *Savory Wound* sped ahead to its deathbed. Thoughts burned across Pyotr’s mind at the same rate.

“I do,” he said, then cut their connection. He’d already turned and was halfway out of the room before he forged a new one and the individual on the receiving end accepted the link. “We must speak. Now.”

Chapter XX: Memories of Ash

The visionary knelt in his chamber. His eyes were closed and his forehead pressed to the floor. He ground his teeth and breathed in silent hisses. Meditation, he called it. Or a pale imitation of the kind he had witnessed from other Legions. Anras found no peace in it. He was most calm, most receptive in the euphoria of a blade in his hand, blood between his fingers, and screams serenading his ears. But even that was flavorless to him now.

For four hours he had laid prone here, groveling at the throne of his own mind. He willed the prophecies to come, pleaded with his geneseed to grant him but one vision so that he may save his brothers. It was his only option. The dying gasp of a fleeing prey animal too exhausted to keep running.

Nothing. Nothing but the darkness behind his eyes that mocked him with imagined images of his brother, the one that Zseron gambled the entire galaxy on, walking away with his tail between his legs.

Anras's hands rolled into fists and his face contorted into an expression of rage and exertion. Veins throbbed on his brow and his mind ached from tensions that had no release.

Snarling, the visionary rose to his feet, refusing to further grovel to a spirit that defied him. His vision narrowed as he turned and focused on the Widowmaker that hung from a hook on the wall alongside Anras's power sword.

"Pathetic," he said to the knife. "That is what they call me, apparently. Placed into a position of authority because of no other reason than my resemblance to *you*. A figurehead, a puppet to be manipulated and seen but never heard. Have I not saved them time and time again? Have I not used your gifts to preserve us while others lead us to death? Am I not your truest son?"

The blade did not reply.

"No," he sneered. "No, I'm just a disgrace to you. We all are! And for what? The crime of our birth?" Anras laughed derisively. "We are made in your image, father! The infection you saw in us was no different than the rot you harbored! That taint you carry as you screeched for order! That fear was the only weapon worth relying on! It came from Nostramo. It nurtured and curdled your mind, just as it did the same for us. And *we're* the disappointments? *We* failed *you*? As you raved and maundered in those final years... 'Sevatar! Bring me Sevatar!' As if none of *us* could be your council. As if *we* could not also *possibly* understand your strife."

Anras began to pace then, began to release his agitation in the quick, jerking movements of his feet. His lips pulled back to reveal saliva-coated teeth. His vision began to blur and darken as he pounded a palm onto the side of his head.

"Poison, you called us! But did the other Primarchs not say the same things of *you*? Are we *not* the perfect sons to a most noble father? Should a lawkeeper not take pride in his work? Should a peacemaker not find *joy* in his achievements? We are what you made us to be! And yet you are dead while we yet live! Because we understand that there is more work to be done! We

understand what you could not!” He stopped, breathing heavily. “We have risen above you,” he sneered at the combat blade.

The Widowmaker still remained silent.

Anras snorted at his own rambling tantrum and turned to grab his helm. He grasped it, only for it to tumble to the floor out of weak fingers. The visionary stumbled on suddenly-weightless limbs. He gasped and choked, unable to breathe as pain seeped into his brain like a bleeding wound.

Anras fell to his knees, his eyes wide but unseeing as images passed across his gaze and strangled the present away from him. All the visionary was and had ever been became memories of ash as what was to come became what was now. He watched in horror, too petrified by the odious curse of his Primarch to move or act.

It felt as if days had passed once the visions released him, but a glance at his chamber’s chronometer revealed that not even a full hour had elapsed. Anras breathed, face dripping with perspiration as the scattered and fragmented thoughts of who he was and what he had seen slowly began to coalesce once again.

“*No!*” he bellowed, then began to slam his fist down on the decking. “NO! NO! NO!”

Anras continued to pound and claw at the floor beneath him, screaming and thrashing his denial as he rose to his feet and proceeded to turn his chambers into ruin.

“*NO!*”

The visionary had glimpsed the future yet again. And it filled him with nothing but misery.

When Artemis returned to her chamber after several festive hours at the bar, she found that she was not alone in her rooms.

The first figure she noticed was her master. Pyotr sat on a stool that was almost too small for him, directly across from the door. He sat as if holding something in his enormous, ceramite-encrusted hands. The metal and his grip made it impossible for her to identify what exactly it was that he possessed.

Next, she noticed the odd servitor in the corner. It stood rigid, magenta lenses for eyes buzzing with a dim glow.

“You reek of oil and alcohol,” Pyotr said.

“I was in Scab City,” Artemis replied. Fortunately, she had evaded her compatriot’s several attempts to pressure her into indulging herself and was still predominantly sober. “I didn’t think you would need me.”

Her master grunted, his expression unreadable behind the skull and red eyes of his helmet.

“My lord,” Artemis said hastily. “Is there something wrong?”

“Many things,” Pyotr responded with a sigh, his shoulders sagging. “My brother aims for us to die on Kleos.”

She resisted the urge to raise an eyebrow and smirk before asking for elaboration. Instead, she continued to stand at attention, her hands folded behind her back as she waited for Pyotr to speak on his own time.

“Gargahl is a simplistic creature,” the Night Lord finally said, “with obvious goals that he is very poor at keeping hidden. He wants us to die. At least, those who oppose him. It’s all in the name of that *god* of his,” Pyotr spat the words.

“May I ask what has led you to believe this, my lord?”

Her master stared at her for several, long moments before leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees. “When I was a child, my mother approached me and said that someone had been stealing from the safe in her bedroom. She told me that it was my job to find out who...”

Artemis nodded along, but her eyes caught the servitor in the corner again. It was... an odd design. One she couldn’t quite place. In fact, it didn’t seem to fit *any* model she was familiar with. Servitors tended to be bulky and singular in their designation, but this one was sleek—almost elegant, even—but still crude, as if it had been put together in a relatively short time frame and had just recently been finished. It sent a chill up her spine that she couldn’t explain.

“So, I investigated. We employed a number of pauperized citizens that we allowed to enter and clean our halls and chambers. Any one of them could have risked such a thing. The downtrodden often are so very desperate.

“I began with my mother’s personal maid. She seemed the most likely culprit, as she would have been present around the same timeframe of the theft and I had learned that she’d abruptly come into a minor influx of wealth. Selling drugs on the side, she claimed. I reported her to my mother and she had me kill the woman for her betrayal. I complied.”

The servitor’s mouth and jaw had been replaced with an ovular vox-speaker, wires and cabling snaking out and burrowing into the face and skull. Its frame had been encased with metal across the breast and shoulders, its limbs replaced with specialized prosthetics. It wore a midnight blue robe that hid most of its silhouette, but Artemis still felt that it had once been male.

“A day later my mother came to me again, saying that more of her protected jewels and finances had gone missing. I went to work yet again. This time, I suspected my uncle. He was a slobbish, distasteful man who flittered by whenever he needed to beg for money or men to protect him from that week’s latest enemy he had made. It would not surprise me if my mother had refused him this time, only for him to take matters into his own hands. When I snuck into his home one night and searched his belongings, I found a pouch of diamonds resting on his bedside. He screamed and begged how he knew nothing of it when he was brought to my mother. I felt far less pity killing him than I did the maid.”

Artemis listened, but continued eyeing the bionic figure. She frowned, still feeling something off about the design. Then, it hit her.

She remembered being dragged to one of the mines as a child by Orion. He had heard that an Adeptus Mechanicus cohort had arrived to inspect the planet’s efficiency. The magos in

charge had ultimately decided that the planet met tolerable parameters, but had nothing of further interest for the servants of the Machine God to invest their efforts into. That had still been enough for her to witness him and his retinue of mechanized bodyguards. It had still been enough to mesmerize her. It had still been enough for Artemis to see the skitarii.

That is what this thing was. A warped, perverted version of a skitarius, but a skitarius nonetheless.

Rather than her realization abating her unease, Artemis only felt it grow further. She was missing something. Pyotr had created a skitarius, that meant he had a purpose for it, one she couldn't ascertain yet.

"I thought that was the end of the matter," the lord discordant said, never quite pausing from his story. "And yet, more of the contents of the strongbox continued to go missing. I toiled again, and again, and again for potential culprits. Until I came to a realization."

Artemis stared at the metallic soldier, unable to shake an ominous feeling from her mind. The creature of dark armor and greased cables no longer resembled the being of flesh it once was, but there were remnants.

"There was only one person who knew that the safe was hidden behind her portrait in the room. Only one person with open, unlimited access to it. Only one person who even knew its combination."

The shape of the nose, the crease of the forehead, the diminutive, hunched posture. They were all so eerily familiar to Artemis.

Pyotr shifted in his seat, his hands opening just enough for her to spot what he held from the periphery of her vision. The item was small and fragile—a blood-stained, paper carton of some kind. The type that would be used to carry lho-sticks.

Artemis continued to stare into that inhuman face until, abruptly, recognition crashed into her like a cyclonic warhead. She knew that face. Even past all the butchery and implants and augmetic surgery, she knew the face of her friend.

Phihks.

In one, fluid move, Artemis drew the stub revolver from her side and pointed it directly at Pyotr's head. The Astartes didn't flinch.

"The first bullet," he began, his voice low and growling but calm, almost bored, "would only fracture the outer layer of my helm. The second and third would be needed to pierce the plate fully. The fourth would only daze me."

"Good thing there's five," she spat, clicking back the hammer of her gun. She eyed the skitarius that had once been Phihks in the corner, but he didn't move.

"Yes," Pyotr agreed, "but then you would not have one for yourself, should you miss." He leaned forward further, the servos in his armor whirring and purring.

Artemis's hand trembled.

"When I went to my mother that final time," Pyotr said, continuing his story as if nothing had occurred, "and stated that she was stealing her own riches, she cooed and congratulated me for my intellect and said how proud she was of me. Then she beat me for getting it wrong so

many times initially. I was ten years of age then. She called it a lesson. A lesson that even those closest to us can be culprits of treachery.”

She did not lower her gun, but her shaking intensified as fear began to course through her in earnest. A cold web spread across her internals, painting everything a shade of primeval horror.

“Why?” Pyotr hissed.

“Swallow shit and die, bastard,” Artemis said, her voice strained and far less confident than she had intended.

If the words had any effect on him, the lord discordant did not show it. “Few humans are heeded within this Legion, few trusted and respected. You could have had that, yet you throw it away on a pointless rebellion. Explain yourself.”

“What? Do you want me to *thank* you for padding my collar and lengthening my leash? We’re still *slaves*. You took away our lives. I was taking it back.”

“We took nothing from you,” Pyotr said. His tone was matter-of-fact, condescending. It was as if he were lecturing a troublesome child rather than a traitor that had cost him the lives of his entire warband. “You were slaves since the day you were born. The Corpse-Emperor’s light is in the shape of shackles, his love an iron maiden that accepts no other thoughts beyond his.”

“Liar,” Artemis hissed, her knuckles white around the grip of her gun.

“And how would you know, Artemis Maralli of Kleos? You hail from a planet with little influence from the Imperium, trained in the scholas of your world, and never left its surface before we came for you. How would *you* know what horrors lurk in the galaxy beyond the walls of this ship?”

She said nothing.

“Lower the weapon, Artemis,” he ordered. She did not. “Put. It. Down.”

He put no further emphasis on his voice, but each word still felt like a thunderclap in her mind. Pyotr rose to his feet and Artemis’s arm shook further, her finger hugging the revolver’s trigger, but seemed incapable of making the final motion.

She lowered the gun, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You’re dead. You’re all dead. I got exactly what I wanted, escape was just a hopeful secondary.”

Her master said nothing as he regarded her, peering down his nose at her like she was the source of some sour stench. He began to approach and Artemis cringed. There was no reason for it, as he only placed his hand on the door control, the sound of sliding metal emitting from behind her.

“Move,” he said. She obeyed.

Pyotr stopped in front of the open door, not bothering to look at her anymore. “I told you of one of our traditions. I will now introduce you to another. The ink is laced with a minor toxin. It will not kill you, but it will be very, very painful.”

“What... What are you going to do to me?” she asked, incapable of keeping the quiver from her voice.

The Night Lord turned to look at her one final time. Somehow, that passive, unemotive skull that adorned his faceplate was infinitesimally worse than whatever expression may have lurked behind it on that cruel, scarred face and its deep, black eyes.

“Do to you?” he said quietly—or perhaps it was just the blood in her ears that made it seem so. “I am going to give you exactly what you wanted, slave. I am going to let you be the hero.”

He exited the chamber and, as the door slid closed, Phihks—the skitarius began to move. He stepped towards Artemis with bloodless, mechanical limbs and drew something from his robe. As he did, the motors in his arms sputtered, causing his hand to twitch erratically and knock something off of the hololithic display table.

Orion’s cruiser-in-a-bottle clattered to the ground and cracked. Artemis watched it with hollow eyes and barely noticed the hand on her shoulder or the hum of the needle-gun near her ear.

“Sit,” Phihks said in a voice that was not his own anymore.

Artemis did not have the will to defy the command.

Pyotr waited silently on the other side of the hatchway until he heard her screams begin to rise and reverberate from within the chamber. He savored the sound of her agony for a few moments, but did not relish or enjoy it. He no longer knew if he would have if his soul was still in-tact, nor did he care. The problem was dealt with now—it was time to move forward.

Turning away from the traitor’s room, he began to make his way to the apothecarion once again. As he did, he forged a vox-link.

“Sixth Claw,” Pyotr said. “Meet me in the Strategium in three hours. We have much to discuss.”

Chapter XXI: Nox Parabellum

Tink, tink. Thump. Tink, tink. Thump.

Three-quarters of Sixth Claw stood around the expansive hololithic display table of the Strategium, awaiting the arrival of their brother in silence.

Since translating out of the Warp, Retrigan couldn't help but breathe easier. Even with the Gellar Field operational, there was still an oppressive shadow that coiled around their strike cruiser whenever they traveled within the depths of the Immaterium. It weighed down upon him like—

Tink, tink. Thump.

Like a...

Tink, tink. Thump.

...It was as if it were—

Tink, tink. Thump.

“Would you stop that?” Retrigan snapped.

Gyrthemar glanced at the once-raptor and almost imperceptibly tilted his head to the side. “Stop what?”

Tink, tink. Thump.

“That.”

Retrigan nodded to Gyrthemar's spear, which his brother had been rhythmically drumming the tip of on the deck before tilting it upwards and giving another, solitary tap with its butt.

Gyrthemar glanced at his weapon and nodded. “Understood, brother.”

The chamber was blessed with peace once more as Gyrthemar fell still, folding his arms over his chest. Retrigan met Tareh's gaze and was given an expression that was solidary in its suffering.

The three Night Lords stood without words for several more minutes before an annoyed sigh came from Gyrthemar's lips. “He told us three hours, did he not?”

“Yes,” Retrigan stated. Pyotr was now coming upon an hour late to his own meeting.

“Hmph,” Gyrthemar grunted with irritation. “What do you think he wants us for?”

“The same thing he always wants,” Tareh said. “To help him. Then, when we are no longer useful, to forget about his brothers entirely.”

Retrigan said nothing. Once, he may have agreed, but something was stirring in Pyotr. He was unsure what, however, and that concerned him greatly. The corruption of the Ruinous Powers could do many things to a man, and none of them were slightly.

“Ha! If that were true, he would not have returned Vinkaldr.”

Tink, tink. Thump. Retrigan scowled, Gyrthemar grinned in response.

“You deify him. That sycophancy will cost us when he inevitably fails.”

“You speak nonsense.”

“Then perhaps I should use smaller words.”

Gyrthemar's jaw clenched and his grip tightened on his spear. Taresh slowly began to reach for his chainsword.

"Enough," Retrigan said, both exasperated and tired of this same debate. "We will hear what he has to tell us. If he needs our aid, we will provide it for he is our brother."

Taresh scoffed. "We owe no fealty to him. He is not our sergeant or clawmaster."

"Rank is not the only form of authority anymore," Retrigan countered. The words tasted bitter on his tongue. He did not like them, but that did not make them untrue.

Taresh looked at Retrigan with a mix of disappointment and disgust before his expression became neutral once more. "Very well. I'll speak nothing more of it."

Retrigan nodded. If only it were so easy to get Gyrthemar to silence himself.

The Strategium's bulkhead door slid open then. The dull timbre of metal-on-metal lightly carried throughout the chamber as Pyotr entered.

"Apologies, brothers," he said. "It took Zasharr and Curie longer than expected."

A gush of air came from Pyotr's helm as he pulled it off and set it down on the edge of the table upon taking his place. He began to activate and manipulate the hololith.

But Retrigan was not paying attention to that. No, neither he nor his two companions were. The three of them instead had their vision fastly locked upon their brother. For, sprouting from his back and undulating in the air like dancing vipers, was not one, but three mechatendrils.

The shock Retrigan had felt upon witnessing his brother's return to augmentation quickly gave way under the distress and weight of what he saw on the hololith's projection of the *Savory Wound* and what he heard from Pyotr's report.

"We are... *completely* without fuel?" Gyrthemar asked as he fiddled with his bionic eye.

"There is enough for another twelve hours. Maybe sixteen if we burn light or go dark. Regardless, we will only need a fraction to reach Kleos."

"Which is futile," Retrigan added. "Our entire plan hinged on fleeing from the planet at the right moment."

Pyotr nodded, but said nothing.

"How did this happen?" Taresh asked, his voice cool as he narrowed his eyes at Pyotr.

"A rupture in one of the reserve pipelines." He paused. "Caused by an explosion initiated by slave malcontents."

"It was yours, wasn't it?" Taresh pressed.

"The matter has been dealt with."

The thinblood let out a barking laugh—something Retrigan had not expected from him. "Dealt with? The matter is *dealt with*?" He gestured wildly to the flickering display. "We have no fuel, Pyotr! You have killed us because you trusted a whore over your own brothers! Because you thought yourself better than us!"

Pyotr frowned as he regarded Taresh. "I cannot affect what has been done, only how we move forward."

“How long have you known this?” Retrigan asked, seeking to pivot the subject. Taresh was seething, it would not be wise to continue the current line of discussion.

“It came to my knowledge shortly before the fight broke out with the Carnage Stitchers.”

“And you didn’t tell the rest of the ship?” Gyrrhemar said, brow creased.

“No,” Pyotr confessed.

That admission should have filled Retrigan with venom for his brother. Instead, it did the opposite. Gargahl and his ilk would have likely preached about how it was for the good of the warband or justified their actions with theocratic zeal. Not Pyotr. He provided no explanation or excuses, he laid himself bare for his brothers to form their own opinions—even if they resulted in vitriol.

Taresh scoffed, but made no further action against Pyotr. Gyrrhemar simply scratched his head in confusion.

“Then... we are doomed?”

“No,” Pyotr said in a stern voice. “No, I will not let my brothers die on this day.”

“What do you have planned?” Retrigan asked, growing curious. He watched as Gyrrhemar leaned forward, his face alight with excited interest as he—most certainly—hoped there would be some level of fighting involved. Even Taresh cocked an intrigued eyebrow.

“The rest of the warband does not hear of this,” Pyotr prefaced. “It is vital they continue to believe nothing is awry. We cannot have a panic being incited at this time.”

Retrigan and Gyrrhemar both voiced their confirmation, leaving Pyotr to eye Taresh critically for his silence.

“You had to call in more favors with the surgeon for those mechadendrites,” the thinblood pointed out.

“Yes. That was, in part, what took me so long. It was not easy to convince Zasharr to lend aid yet again.”

“There will be a cost.”

“He made that clear to me, yes.”

Retrigan could see Taresh’s lips shift as he worked his tongue to the rhythm of his internal thoughts. “And you are willing to pay them?”

Pyotr nodded. Taresh thought some more.

“Fine, then. What is this plan of yours?”

Pyotr cleared the projection of the *Savory Wound*, but before he could do anything more, the chamber doors slid open once again and a new figure stepped in, battle plate humming and the power sword on his hip glinting in the pale light.

“What do we have here?” Anras said with a conspiratorial smirk, as if he had just caught the four of them in some devious scheme.

The visionary looked terrible. He did not carry himself in the way he normally did, with that imperious sense of mastery. Instead, his hair was furled and knotted, the skin of his face was gaunt and slick with sweat, dark shadows ringed his eye sockets, and even the eyes themselves pulsed with irritated red veins around the edges where the black pools didn’t dominate. He still

wore a ghost of his usual expression, but beyond that was something Retrigan thought was akin to resignation, or perhaps almost stoicism.

He felt something tighten inside of him as he realized how disconcertingly similar his brother looked to their father near the end.

“What is it, Anras?” Pyotr asked.

Anras walked up to the display table, gripped its edge with hands spread wide, and leaned in to address them. “I wish to join you.”

The statement was met with silence. Retrigan measured the visionary with narrowed eyes. Anras was many things, but collaborative was not one of them. He also knew nothing of what they were even...

A flicker of movement. Anras’s eyes darted across the table, locking gazes with Pyotr for a microsecond before shifting away. The two shared a silent thought in that moment, a toneless word. Retrigan pursed his lips as he made the connection.

Pyotr had to learn about the lost fuel somehow. And one Astartes haunted that bridge more than any other—clinging to it like a life preserver of his own authority. As the sole bearer of their father’s gift, Retrigan thought Anras the closest thing they had to a rightful heir of the Fifty-first Company, but he could still see the visionary’s shortcomings as plainly as anyone else.

“What does he know of your plan, Pyotr?” Retrigan asked tentatively.

“Nothing,” Pyotr responded without hesitation.

Retrigan turned back to the visionary. “Then what point is there in joining something you know nothing of?”

“Plan?” Anras said, his voice tittering. “I wasn’t speaking of any plan, brothers. I wish to join Sixth Claw.”

The words hung in the air like corpses on meathooks. They were heavy, daunting words that were laced with something that would not be known to be poison or spice until they were tasted and their effects metabolized. None of the gathered Night Lords seemed keen on taking the first bite.

Retrigan eyed Pyotr once again. The lord discordant stood in the same disquiet as his brothers, his eyes locked onto those of the visionary. That gaze was met and did not falter under the warpsmith’s cold stare. The shifting and twitching of mechadendrite limbs were the only indicator of Pyotr’s thoughts.

Gyrthemar’s derisive snort eventually broke the silence. “As if we would ever consider such a—”

“Very well,” Pyotr said.

Gyrthemar just about choked as he turned to his brother in stupefaction. Retrigan also raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Brother, you would be bringing a scorpion to our midsts!”

“Yes,” Pyotr agreed, never turning his eyes from the visionary. “But this is a scorpion we could use. A Claw at full strength would benefit us for what I have in mind.”

The muscles of Gyrrhemar's face continued to twitch as he came to terms with what he was hearing. His spasming cheeks and veins settled down, however, as he seemingly came to accept what he had been told.

"If I sense even a whisper of treachery, I will execute you immediately—regardless of the situation," Pyotr said to Anras.

"You wound me, brother," the visionary said with a dry smile and a hand to his breast. "I am as honest as Rogal Dorn."

Retrigan rolled his eyes and looked at Pyotr. "You were saying?"

The lord discordant nodded and tapped the controls of the tactical hololith once again. This time, a projection of Kleos sputtered into existence as thousands of motes of light scattered then coalesced together once more into a new shape.

"In our current state, we will be slaughtered by the Ferric Sentries no matter what we do," he said.

"Inspiring," Retrigan said, receiving a chuckle from Gyrrhemar and Anras.

"As it stands," Pyotr continued as if he had not heard, "we could not survive a direct assault. The Imperial mongrels have greater firepower and numbers. If we wait for them to descend, we will be slaughtered."

"Then we don't fight," Taresh said as if stating the obvious. "We find another method of victory."

"Such as?" Anras asked, idly looking down at his hand as he flexed his fingers. The plating of his gauntlet clicked with each movement. "We're stranded and running is no longer an option. Nor can we hide without the Sentries turning over every stone until we're found."

"Silence," Pyotr said and, remarkably, the visionary did as he was told. "The strategy for the greater bulk of the warband remains the same."

"For what gain?" Taresh retorted. "What could a single Claw do to shift the paradigm in such a way that we could achieve anything substantial?"

Pyotr placed a hand on the display table and tapped one finger against its edge with several, repetitive *tinks*. Gyrrhemar glanced at Retrigan with a look that said, *Are you going to tell him to stop?* The once-raptor ignored him.

"Nox parabellum," he said, almost musingly. "We must strike first and strike with the fury of a heldrake. Tonight, we do not simply go for the throat. We go for the heart, the lungs, and the skull too."

"With one Claw," Taresh said dubiously.

"It can be done."

The thinblood narrowed his eyes. "How?"

"We are Night Lords, brother. When have we ever fought fair?"

Gyrrhemar visibly perked up and chuckled. "Ah, but we will be fighting, then! You had me worried for a moment, Pyotr. Let us show these ferric whores what they face when we stand in midnight clad, eh, brother?"

Slowly, the lord discordant turned to look at Gyrthemar, his face lightly obscured behind the haze of a translucent, green projection. They locked eyes and Pyotr did what was perhaps the most disturbing thing Retrigan had seen in the past two centuries.

He smiled.

When it was over, she was given only seconds to wallow in the pain and misery that radiated throughout her body before she was ushered to her feet again.

She didn't bother to resist. There wouldn't have been any point. Even if she somehow managed to best the thing that Pihks had become, there was nowhere on the ship she could hide that she would not inevitably be found before they breached the planet's atmosphere.

The skitarii escorted her through the *Savory Wound's* metallic arteries, its shadows seeming to surround Artemis and grip her tighter than they ever had before as her feet dragged along. Her guard was not rough with her, but nor was he patient. Whenever she fell into a stupor caused by her own failures, she felt a light pressure on her lower back from some kind of weapon—be that the muzzle of a gun or the head of a shock maul—lurching her onward.

She was surprised when they ended up in the ship's hangar as opposed to the brig. There was a mess of activity and preparation for the battle to come. Artemis tried to summon some satisfaction from the knowledge of how fruitless it all was for them but couldn't manage it. The pain vibrating through her limbs and the despair coiling around her mind seemed to drown it out.

No one stopped or seemed to notice them as they navigated their way to a platform that held a deep blue thunderhawk, styled with the forked lightning patterns of the VIIIth legion. Artemis could not see the vessel's name stenciled on its side, nor did she care as she watched the ramp at the mouth of the gunship slowly begin to lower. As it settled against the hull, she felt another insistent nudge on her spine and continued to trudge forward.

Both she and Pihks entered the thunderhawk and immediately the ramp began to rise again. It wasn't until Artemis looked up that she saw, beyond sweaty strands of her own hair, that the hold was filled with people. People she recognized.

Every single crewman who worked the fuel loading station—even those who had not been involved in her revolt—had been brought and held here. A mixture of fear and confusion rippled across the crowd. None seemed harmed, but all seemed aware that they would be soon.

"Artemis?" a voice said, cracking as he shoved his way through the amassed people until he stood in front of her. Jep looked terrified—but only to her. She knew him well enough to know he was hiding his fear to comfort the others. Artemis would have smiled if it hadn't been so sad.

"What happened?" he asked. His eyes turned to Pihks who stood at the ramp's entrance with unnerving stiffness. "Is that..."

"Pihks," Artemis said, unsurprised by how small and laced with pain her voice was. "They caught him. He told them everything."

A wave of despair washed across the hold. Some people gasped, others began to cry. Jep looked back at them, then turned to Artemis with a surprising amount of determination. “We’ll get through this,” he said. “What’s the play?”

She said nothing.

“You... you have a plan, don’t you, Artemis?”

The crowd hung onto his words, desperate. They looked at her like she was the last flicker of a hearth’s flame on a cold night. They needed her more now than they ever had before.

She said nothing.

Artemis looked into her friend’s eyes and watched as the hope slowly died within them. It was the most heartbreaking thing she had ever witnessed.

Brushing past him, Artemis walked towards the edge of the hull. The amassed slaves parted for her—out of aversion rather than awe. Once she reached the farthest corner she could, she sat down on the floor, pressed her back up against the wall, and buried her face in red, tattooed hands.