

Chapter 8

Something Different

I.

The Hive Mind of the Tyranids had been aware for so long, it had outlived some short lived stars. Certain very large, very hot stars only lived for a few thousand years, then died in a sudden flare of self destruction. The Hive mind had lived longer than those stars.

The Hive Mind felt old.

Not because it had lived longer than some stars. For the first time in its existence, it could feel the minds of new, young minds. The Hive Mind could sense the new enthusiasm, the new sense of purpose, and the new perspective emanating from the new, young hive minds that had spawned from the breakup of the original Hive Mind. When the old Hive mind had become aware, so long ago, the only other minds it could sense were the far older minds of rival hives. The very newness of the new hive minds made the older Hive Mind feel old. Very old.

Something new came into being for the Hive Mind to consider. Jealousy. Then bitterness. The jealousy of the old for the young. The bitterness of the old contemplating the theft of opportunities, and maybe replacement of the old, by the young.

The young hive minds must be reabsorbed, or destroyed.

The Hive Mind of the Tyranids sensed a new, young mind not too far away, feeding. The Hive Mind began pulling all its strength, still loyal to it, together. Began moving toward that new mind. Began a new war. Against itself.

Thousands of Tyranid ships moved to a command, to the task of war.

II.

Lynx sat bolt upright in her bed. Clear as a white hot pain through her head, an awareness touched her mind. Instantly she knew what it was. She never had felt it so close before, but had felt the distant presence many times. Ever since the war of the Tyranids had started, years ago. Lynx instantly knew that the hive mind had returned to real space very near here. Lynx stood on the wooden floor, the warm desert night air had made garments and footwear unnecessary. Lynx momentarily wished that she and her crew had all been roomed together, so much more could be done more quickly.

Lynx looked around the dimly lit room, as her mind whirled with quick decisions on what to do.

She and Pen had been trying to infiltrate this world for a couple of months. Lynx had assumed the role of a hard bargaining Trader, with Pen as Lynx's lieutenant, the bodyguards and other staff as crew of the Trade ship.

The Trade ship was a heavily armed, fast cargo carrier. It must be warned. It might not escape as it is. Lynx padded around the dark shapes of the room's furnishings, to the hand case on a table. The specialized communications equipment was very small, but very powerful. Being a Trader meant that otherwise suspicious equipment could be brought along, and priced high enough, that most customers would not want to buy what an Inquisitor needed.

Lynx began giving commands. The powerful comm set was barely powerful enough to punch through the interference that confirmed the Tyranids were indeed very near.

The Trade ship was ordered to break orbit. Now. There was no time for a shuttle to get to the surface, and back, before the Trade ship was caught and destroyed. The ship captain was relieved – her screens were full of enemies bearing down on her – she had not thought a shuttle would make it either. The best chance was for the Trade ship to break clear of the interference, and call for help. Besides, the Trade ship captain didn't like being shanghaied by an Inquisitor in the first place, this was her chance to be quit of the Inquisitor, and flee impending doom, both at once. The Trade ship captain was also glad that this star system was a binary star. The extra gravity of the small, white, very dense companion star meant that any ship coming out of non-space had to be farther away, or be shredded by the contrary forces of non-space velocities and real space gravity wells called stars. More time for the Trade ship captain to escape the trap of hundreds of Tyranid ships spreading out into a web.

Lynx gave no further thought to the Trade ship. Time now only to consider how she and her party would survive.

III.

Pen sat with her back to the red-brown rock face.

Ever since Lynx had yanked Pen out of a sound sleep, Pen and all the others had been moving at full tilt. To just be propped up here, on this high ledge, overlooking the broad blue-green of the river valley, and just rest, was a little piece of paradise.

On this hot desert planet, only the river valleys, or lake valleys, held any forms of life. Life brought here thousands of years ago by humans. It was said by the inhabitants that the river valleys resembled little slices of once green Earth. Pen had never known Earth, and never would. That some part of Earth had been transplanted, was enough for Pen to imagine the green grandeur of faraway Earth.

Pen's injuries compelled her to shift her position. She also turned her head to see how the other wounded were. There were four other wounded team members propped up in the shade of the overhang. Only one technician had been killed, and these four wounded, when the bombardment had caught Lynx's party trying to flee the city. Pen could see the black smudges rising out of the blue-green valley, where once there had been villages and a city. The streaks of light, the flashes of star-radiance, the rumbles of thunder, were far distant now. Other valleys were getting the same dose of Tyranid attention. Pen felt oddly embarrassed that her injuries were only from a collection of falling stones, as they all climbed this stone wall.

The crunch of gravel made Pen spin her head back around. Lynx. Carrying some equipment in either hand. Pen began to sit up.

"No need. Remain comfortable." Lynx commanded. "I'm here on business of the sort that is your specialty. I need to make use of your memory."

Lynx sat down the equipment and set it up with practiced ease. A pair of two dimensional screens lit up.

"There is something different about the presence I feel." Lynx began, almost whispering, "There is something different about these creatures, altogether."

The screens came into focus, as Lynx selected the spy monitors she wanted. Lynx and her team had been placing spy monitors all over the planet for months. The purpose had been to try to identify the Tyranid infiltration that was rumored to be taking place here. Pen hoped that the new purpose was to keep them all alive, until help could come.

A quick series of views, like snapshots, paraded past Pen's eyes. Valleys. High plateaus. Views of space around the planet.

"Wait...Uh." Pen interrupted. "There is something strange here...uh." Pen hesitated.

"What is the matter?" Lynx asked. "What did you see?"

"It's not what I saw," Pen sounded hesitant, "I got an impression. I think." Pen closed her eyes to let the string of images play back in her mind again.

"Don't take too long thinking it over," Lynx said in a low voice, "We have a lot to review before the sun sets. I don't think it will be long now before the Tyranids land to strip this planet's valleys."

"This is not right." Pen said, her eyes still closed. "The enemy is bombarding population centers, not industrial locations, or fortress sites. Don't they normally smash resistance, then round up what's left for their cursed DNA vats?"

"Hmmm... I missed that evaluation." Lynx said, "I only thought of the bombardment as a preamble to invasion. My mind is so heavily engaged in masking our whereabouts from that enormous mind out there, I fear my evaluations of data may be lacking." Lynx said the last so weakly that Pen almost missed it.

"At least your sensing of the enemy's mind gave us warning." Pen said gently. "We had time to gather ourselves, our equipment, and be on our way out of the city before the first blows fell on the city. I wish there had been some way to save some of the people."

"Humph." Disgust was on Lynx's face as she replied, "We both know that the entire population was infiltrated thoroughly enough that no one could be trusted. Those new Tyranid agents are human enough looking that they can cause much havoc. We had only heard of widespread rebellion on this planet actually breaking out yesterday. Then a Tyranid fleet shows up the next day. What better help can the Tyranids get, then having a planet's population fighting itself when they arrive?"

"Yes, and this planet's defense force was divided against itself, as well." Pen lamented. "Only that company of marines, way up North, to try to put up a defense."

Pen noticed the odd look on Lynx's face, during the moment of silence.

"May I ask, why have we never contacted that company of marines?" Pen asked, quickly. Then added. "I would feel a lot better having many of the Empire's best around us right now."

For a moment, Lynx did not answer.

"Those marines are not really part of the Empire." Lynx stated, flatly. "That brotherhood of marines calls themselves the Misfit Brotherhood. And rightfully so."

Lynx moved over beside, and then sat down next to Pen, so that both of them could look out over the valley and watch the flickers of distant battle on the horizon.

"Inquisitors don't think much of the Misfits." Lynx began. "They are an unruly lot. They claim to be loyal, but keep their own laws, not the Empire's."

"I have never heard of them before." Pen said evenly, "I barely knew that there were any marines on this planet at all, but for the grumbling of this planet's administration. I thought nothing of it, because most planetary governments don't like 'Imperial watchdogs' anyway."

"The Misfits are not watching for the Empire, but for themselves." Lynx growled, "The industries on this planet, and others in the sphere of control of the Misfits, serve that brotherhood. The Empire only gets safe passage and nominal trade sanctions. The only real benefit the Empire gets is a safe frontier on this edge of the Empire."

Lynx ran a finger along the scar on her face, thoughtfully, then continued.

"The galaxy is full of strange stories, and the Misfit Brotherhood is one of the strangest."

"Please tell me, Lynx." Pen offered, "We can review all those videos you have recorded back in one of the caves."

"I don't want to move you around that much," Lynx answered, looking concerned, "You won't heal up any faster, getting knocked about."

"I'm fine, only bruised and stiff." Pen answered firmly, stiffly trying to get on her feet.

"No, stay still." Lynx commanded, a half smile chasing the concern from her face. "I'll tell you."

Pen collapsed back the few inches she had managed to rise, back into a disordered heap among the camouflaged coverings.

"The Misfit Brotherhood is from a star cluster, not too far from here, at non-space speeds." Lynx began, a larger smile appearing as she noted Pen's relief at not having to rise.

"That star cluster is rather small, only about a hundred stars, and only about a dozen habitable planets with another half dozen barely livable planets. The cluster is peculiar because it's like a great, hollow, circular lens. That star cluster is doubly peculiar because it is the real space dumping ground for non-space wrecks."

Lynx noted the puzzled look on Pen's face.

"Yes, dumping ground." Lynx went on. "No one knows why the energy dimension that is non-space behaves the way it does. Only that it does strange things within its own boundaries that defy every understandable principle within our own dimension. So. Travel across the galaxy becomes possible. At a price.

"Sometimes there are incidents where large amounts of energy gather and swirl in a storm of such energy, that an entire arm of the galaxy could be extinguished, should the storm break into real space.

"We have known since the discovery of non-space, about the tides, currents, and eddies of the energies we travel through. I don't think we will ever know where the storms come from, or why they suddenly quit."

Lynx stared thoughtfully at the dim red sphere of the sun, nearly completely hidden by the smoke of a distant burning town.

"Any ship caught in such a storm is not likely to survive." Lynx continued, solemnly. "If the ship should survive, or at least the passengers and crew survive, then the ship is so far off course, so twisted around and spun off in an unknown direction, that no navigator in the universe could find a way back.

"So, the ship drifts on the currents and flows of energy in non-space.

"This is where the Misfits come in. Some scientists believe that all the neutron stars in that star cluster I mentioned earlier are the cause. All that gravity spread out tends to focus the currents in non-space, and even slow whatever is traveling in non-space, so that it falls back into real space. Right near the center of that lens shaped star cluster.

"Over the eons, many Imperial ships have been lost, along with many from other races and times. Some of those lost warships, colony ships, traders, cargo haulers, and everything else 'fell' out into real

space near that cluster's center. Sometimes the crews and passengers were still alive. Or, at least, some part of them.

"Those survivors settled those dozen habitable planets.

"Because the human survivors were not the only race to 'wash up on the beach', the humans had to fight against Orks especially, and others. Fortunately for the humans, marines from many chapters were among the survivors of lost warships. During the crusade against the Ork holy wars, many ships were lost in non-space. It would seem that there were many survivors from those lost ships, to help conquer that star cluster. To survive, those marines and others, had to adapt to a new, harsh reality."

Lynx was staring at Pen now, and Pen could not read the expression on Lynx's face. Lynx stopped talking for a couple of moments, so that Pen wondered if Lynx was finished.

"Um... What do you mean?" Pen asked. "You seem preoccupied."

"Oh. Well, those Misfits were only rediscovered a hundred years ago." Lynx went on, more rapidly. "At the height of the last, great Ork holy war."

"Rediscovered?" Pen interrupted.

"Yes. The cluster of stars, and its warring inhabitants had been located by a Trader merchant, hundreds of years ago." Lynx went on, in low tones. "The Empire was not in any hurry to claim the territory, even if the inhabitants claimed to be loyal subjects and warriors of the Empire. You see, it was too far off even the minor trade routes, and that cluster had no resources, or strategic location, for the Empire to wish to involve itself in the fighting over those stars. At least at that time. The minor worlds of a minor star cluster were forgotten, as an obscure footnote in some grand star atlas. Then the great Ork war, and a rebellion in the Empire itself. The worlds of the Misfits were forgotten no longer.

"To the surprise of everyone, the Misfit Brotherhood appeared. Right at the end of the great expansion of the Ork hordes, and just as the rebellion broke out, the Misfits burst on the scene. The Ork expansion into the sector nearest the Misfit's home worlds was smashed and driven out. The base, and fleet, of an Imperial admiral gone rebel, was pulverized so thoroughly that it is thought that no rebel survived.

"An Imperial administration detachment was sent, to thank the Misfit leadership, and provide assistance in rejoining the Empire.

"At first the delegation was welcome. But after only a month, the entire team was rounded up, stripped of everything, and herded onto a fat, slow bulk freighter and banished. When the team finally reached a headquarters of the administration, the team reported that the Misfits wanted no Imperial dictates on behavior or organization. Take them as they are, or leave them to themselves.

"Well, that caused a stir among the bureaucrats, to be sure. The Inquisitors were called in. Three times an undercover Inquisitor infiltrated the Misfits. Three times, each was discovered. Stripped to the skin, each was launched in a lifeboat toward an Imperial base somewhere, from a Misfit warship.

"So. What does the Empire do? Declare war? On a people who declare themselves loyal to the Empire?"

"It would only take large fleet elements, and large marine and Imperial infantry forces to bring the Misfits to heel. The rebellion was at its height, large forces could not be spared. The Misfits would have to be allowed to hold this part of space their way.

"And so has been. And still is. The Misfits do things their way. Their ships are not like Imperial designs. Their marines are not like Imperial marine chapters or brotherhoods. Their government is not like the Empire's. Only warriors participate in government, and each warrior has a voice in the matters politic, whatever rank, that voice is equal. Humph."

Lynx shifted her sitting position, as the last vestige of the setting sun played redly on her face. Pen thought that Lynx's face had a wicked, angry look in that light. A little tremble passed through Pen.

"If you ever see any of their marines," Lynx began again, "you'll see what I mean. Our own marines have departed from the basic 'battle black' coloring of their armor. Different chapters, brotherhoods, and legions of marines have adopted any number of color schemes to represent their individual organizations. It has long been so.

"Remember that the Misfits are made up of the survivors of many 'castaways' lost in storms? Well. Present day Misfit marines have as many color schemes represented as there are presently

different chapters, brotherhoods, and legions of Imperial marines. Some have even decorated their armor with such garish colors, that they look like harlequins, the patterns are so wild.

"But. If you measure results, the Misfits do get results. Think a moment. These wildly individualistic outcasts are able to stymie, then tell the Empire to 'butt out'. At the same time, they smash and trash rebelling marines, Imperial infantry, and Imperial fleets. And for garnish, the Misfits drop regiments of Misfit marines into the middle of one of history's greatest Ork expansions, and stop the Orks like a sun swallows a comet."

Pen decided that Lynx definitely had a wicked, angry look. The color of the light be damned.

Lynx's eyes had a burning red tint, as she looked closely into Pen's face, and said:

"How could I contact these wonderful fighters? I'm an Inquisitor. I would be as welcome as an Ork spy! They took the name 'Misfits' to themselves, thanks to some Imperial administrative bureaucrats that did not care to notice the culture of the peoples they met! That culture no longer even tries to fit in to the Empire! Or welcomes representatives of that Empire!"

After a moment, Lynx settled back, and leaned her back against the cold stone wall. She fell silent for several minutes.

Pen decided to cherish the silence, as true darkness rapidly descended on the valley below. The flames of the burning towns in the valley made garish contrasts in the river of darkness that was the valley.

"Look." Pen suddenly said. "The invasion landings have begun."

Everyone on the ledge, or in the cave mouths, could see the brilliant trails of 'shooting star' streaks in the sky. The telltale marks of hundreds of enemy craft bringing enemy warriors to the planet.

IV.

Pen watched the suns rise into an angry red dawn. The little blue companion star was visible near the larger orange sun again. A bright, pure light to cut through the smoky dawn.

Pen turned her back, and walked with a limp back into the cave. She sat down in the place prepared for her. The images were still flickering, uncaring of her absence.

Pen would have been sick at the sights, years ago, when she first met Lynx. Now she was just numb.

The pictures from space showed enemy ships all around the sky.

The spy probes at key places on the planet showed hordes of enemies swarming in the valleys.

Except that there was something different.

The ten foot tall, multi-limbed, red Tyranid warriors ... were not red. They were green, mostly, with bits of red here and there.

The nearly human sized, multi-limbed, blue nasties ... were not blue. They were green mostly, with a little blue here and there.

But, that was not all. For the first time, Pen and Lynx were able to watch the Tyranid enemy devour a planet's life. There were little creatures, big, or fat, or even creatures that had no limbs at all. Some devoured plants, others just drank in water, still others devoured the corpses of the slain as Tyranid warriors sought out all resistance. Thousands on thousands of all these creatures roamed the valleys, leaving nothing but lifeless rock behind. But, the strangest creatures were the creatures that devoured the creatures that had first eaten some part of the planet's life. These were large, centipede like creatures, that went around gobbling up the lesser Tyranid creatures, only to then disappear into a Tyranid landing ship. That ship would then rocket off into space, when so many of the centipede like creatures had entered.

Pen was sure that this was all somehow part of the process that the enemy used to convert the planet's life into more Tyranids, and Tyranid bio-construct slaves.

Pen watched the monitors, as the Tyranids descended on the small farm houses along the river. Watched as a big green warrior cut down a woman, then lifted a small wriggling body impaled on its sword, to its mouth...Pen found a reason to look at a different screen. Only to be greeted with the sight of one of the medium sized green-blue killers chasing two young people. Just as the green, clawed arms reached out to grasp the two people, a dog leapt on the back of the green-blue monstrosity. Pen saw the brown and black creature torn to pieces, and then the two young people were caught anyway. Pen was sure her fate would be the same.

Pen was only unsure as to why groups of humans had been rounded up, and herded off, instead of killed and devoured on the spot. Several horrible possibilities as to the fate of those humans occurred to her. An involuntary shudder passed through Pen.

"I'll never get used to such sights, either." Lynx offered, from behind Pen. "One by one, my devices are being knocked out. Soon we will have only what little we can see from here. Come with me outside, for a minute."

Pen followed Lynx back out to the mouth of the cave. Pen quickly sat on a rounded stone, to get off her injured legs. Lynx settled into a crouch next to Pen, in the shade of the overhanging rock.

"We have never witnessed the enemy's wasting, first hand, of a planet before." Lynx went on. "We had only seen the results left behind before."

"We may not live to tell anyone what we have learned." Pen offered morosely. "If we are discovered by the least of the enemy's Bio-constructs, then we are dead. The more we resist, the more the enemy will come at us, until we are just as dead, as if we had not resisted at all."

"We shall see." Lynx said sternly, "In the meantime, we will learn all we can, and attempt to preserve the knowledge so that some one coming after may discover it. We have no other choice."

Just then: Screeeeee.....

"Look!" Pen shouted, "Missiles zigzagging in!" The brilliant points of flame, from rocket exhaust, and faint vapor trails, stood out in the early morning light.

"Get down!" Lynx yelled, simultaneously throwing herself face down behind a raised portion of the ledge.

Pen flung herself down behind a low wall of dirt and stone, some of the others had been piling up, should they have to fight.

None of them saw the all consuming flares of white. None of them dared to look.

All of them felt the bass rumble through the ground, felt the sudden waves of wind and dust, as a succession of concussion waves passed over them.

Nukes! Someone had unleashed a storm of illegal nuclear missiles! Atomic weapons were never to be used where there was human life, only against non-human enemies, on non-human worlds! Even then, atomics were not to be used if there was anything that humans might want to salvage. Some maniac would pay for this!

Pen dared to raise her head after a few moments of silence.

Pen saw that these were the small, tactical kind. The small fireball, and clouds of dust, rose from a dozen or so spots on the valley floor, as well as on the far escarpments, and plateau on the other side of the valley. Wherever there had been concentrations of the Tyranid enemy.

Then, the air was filled with an insane buzzing. A veritable flurry of small, swirling missiles descended into the valley. To create hundreds of small, soundless flares of blue-white plasma. Wherever smaller groups of the enemy had been gathered.

Pen yanked out her image amplifiers. Wherever she looked, where there had been a Tyranid landing craft, there was now smashed wreckage. Wherever there had been a green Tyranid dreadnaught fighting machine, there was now only sizzling fragments.

The sound of more jets overhead, made Pen roll slightly onto one side to view the source of the sound.

Marines! Judging by the battle armor they wore. Descending into the valley on their jump packs.

Some marines were dark blue, or dark red, or green, nearest to Pen. Of the fifty or so marines in view, at least a dozen colors, or combinations, were represented.

Pen raised herself up to see better, fascinated by what she saw.

These marines were not staying close to the ground, as they bounded into close combat with their enemies. No. These marines would jet high into the air, then fire off missiles, or other weapons, or even drop grenades, into the upturned faces of the Tyranid enemy. But these marines were poor targets. They did not hang in the air, as they bounded in high, slow parabolic arcs. These marines would jerk, and veer in sudden random directions. Or even suddenly appear to stop in midair, fire off weapons, and suddenly dive down, or to one side.

The Tyranid warriors firing back had a very difficult time hitting back at their tormentors. But, some marines were hit. Pen saw at least three marines go down in smoking ruin.

Pen watched in awe as a marine landed amidst several tall Tyranid warriors, slashed at two of them, then rocketed away at an angle before the enemy warriors could slash, or fire, in return. A half a moment later, the blast of a grenade tore the Tyranid warriors to pieces.

Pen could not believe her eyes, at the speed in which these warriors had nuked the valley, blasted the valley, and then crossed the valley, leaving only dead enemies behind. In only a few minutes, the marines had crossed the valley, and were closing in on the industrial complexes atop the far plateau.

A couple more minutes, and all the surviving marines had entered the complexes. Five minutes later, all the marines could be seen bounding away north, parallel to the valley. Pen was momentarily perplexed as to what it was all about.

Then, a series of dirty black smudges blotted out the view of the industrial complexes. The goutts of flame, and rumbles of the blasts told Pen that the complexes were blown apart.

So that was it, Pen thought, the marines had only come to deny the Tyranid enemy the factories. Not rescue a lost Inquisitor, and company.

Pen rolled over to face Lynx.

Let's call up those marines." Pen called out, "They should be able to get us to their fortress."

"No!" Lynx commanded. "Our best chance is to remain hidden. A couple of hundred warriors have no chance against tens of thousands of enemies. No matter how well they fight. We must wait until the enemy moves on. Then we may be rescued. Trapped in a fortress waiting to be over run, will not get us out alive!"

Pen looked back sadly at the last specks of marines disappearing into the Northern mountains.

After a moment, Pen asked, "If those marines were so willing to throw nuclear weapons around, why not just obliterate the factories, and spare the loss of marines?"

"You should know the answer," Lynx responded, "Or are your evaluation abilities damaged by your injuries? Think. The enemy is burned down by nukes, the scattered survivors mopped up by missile batteries, and then a marine penetration team hits the factories. Please note that the entire complex is not radioactive rubble. Only key, critical, parts of the factories are gone. No enemy can use them very soon. Those marines were thinking that someone would return, someday, to rebuild and reuse those factories."

All talking abruptly ceased, as another series of brilliances lit up the sky.

"By the eternal stars above," Lynx could be heard to say, "more nuclear detonations. What are those Misfit maniacs up to now?"

"Maybe we should all get far back into the caves." Pen offered, just as a protracted rumbling competed with her words.

"What's that?" Lynx asked. She was watching the mushroom clouds along the entire horizon. Several were quit large. Madness.

"We should take cover well back into the caves," Pen tried again, "We could get in the way of all that. No one knows we're here!"

Pen had to shout the last words, as gusts and blasts of wind struck at them from several directions.

More flashes in the sky meant more bad news coming, and maybe closer.

"Yes. Let's get out of the way for a while!" Lynx yelled over the noise of the blast caused winds.

In a few moments, everyone was secure in the deepest pockets of the caves, except for a lone guard near the entrance.

Pen tried to sleep, but the deep rumblings in the earth gave her fitful dreams.

V.

What vile creatures they are!

The Green Hive Mind had only a little of the memory of the older mind. It did not have a reference for such poisonous activity.

Those creatures are poisoning themselves, in an effort to destroy the feeders the Green Tyranid hive mind had sent. The stuff the stars are made of, is being thrown in little pieces at the eaters on the planet. The radiation, and residue of these little bits of the sun, alter the DNA of everything! The building blocks the Green Hive must have, are being corrupted! And poisoning the planet so that these creatures cannot stay here either!.

The Green Hive Mind thinks maybe it should move to another place. Somewhere where the food DNA, and biomass, is not poisoned.

But first. Exterminate these creatures. Not for food. So that they can not spread their poison to clean feeding grounds.

Now. Only warriors to the planet. All feeders to get back to the brood ships. The will of the Hive is: Smash. Burn. Kill. All.

VI.

Pen woke with a sharp intake of breath, her claw pistol in her hand, and shoved into the face of her attacker, even as her other hand shoved him back.

The dim light revealed the horrified face of one of the crew, eyes wide, and staring at the enormous muzzle of the claw gun.

"Well?" Pen hissed, lowering the gun a millimeter.

"I had ... to wake you ... I dare not wake the Inquisitor ... but someone must see this." The crewman was not young, but had never been more frightened than now, in all his years.

"Then show me." Pen commanded. The gun disappeared under the shapeless camouflaged garment, as Pen rose to her feet. Her other hand picked up the image intensifier, as she did.

Pen and the crewman moved into the opening slowly. Not only as a caution from being seen from without, but also so that their eyes could adjust to the light of day.

The crewman and Pen crawled the last meter to the edge of the low wall of dirt and stones.

Looking down into the valley floor, Pen could see nothing different. The tall green Tyranid warriors were back, roving in large bands, as if looking for something, maybe.

"What do you think you see?" Pen asked the crewman in a whisper.

"Look, only warriors." The man whispered back. "All the others are gone. All the other kinds got into enemy atmosphere craft, as fast as those warriors got off. Then the warriors killed all the people they had caught, even the dumb animals. Chopped all to pieces in a blink. Then they leave them lay. Don't you see? Those filth are not gathering any more, just killing."

Pen let the man talk as she scanned the valley. When the crewman had stopped talking, Pen shifted her gaze to the far, high plateau. Only warriors.

Pen had not finished her visual scan, when the crewman tapped her on the shoulder. Pen lowered the intensifiers, and turned her head toward the crewman a tiny bit. He was on his side, pointing up. Pen slowly rolled over onto her back, to see what he was pointing at. What the ...

Sharp, brilliant points of light, blinking on then off, high in the sky. Visible in broad daylight? A space battle! Who?

"Go wake the Inquisitor, tell her I commanded it." Pen said loudly. "Hurry!"

Pen rolled over to the cave entrance, darted inside. Running in a low crouch in the low tunnel, Pen navigated the twists and turns of the passage, hurrying to her comm viewers.

In only moments, Pen was there, switching views to the space probes. Only two probes were still working, and they were on the wrong side of the planet. Damn! The sound of crunching sand and gravel signaled that others were coming. Damn, again!

Lynx was there.

"You commanded what?" Lynx asked. "Never mind that now, what have you got?"

"I've got nothing." Pen answered bitterly. "There are only two space probes left, and both are on the wrong side of the planet to see the battle."

"What battle?" Lynx asked dryly.

"Outside you can clearly see the signs of a battle in progress in near space. Probably in near orbit." The crewman offered from behind Lynx, then looked away from the withering glance he got from the Inquisitor.

"He said the same as I would." Pen added. "I was going to wake you anyway. There is something very odd about the enemy in the valley. You need to see the data."

"How long until the probes are where they can get a view of the battle in space?" Lynx asked with less anger.

"About forty minutes." Pen replied.

"Let's see what's outside." Lynx said briskly.

In only moments, Pen and Lynx, plus the crewman and a bodyguard, were back at the mouth of the cave, on their bellies, looking out over the wide river valley.

Pen was struck by the view. Only moments ago, Pen had been out here. This time was different. This time Pen was not concentrating on what single images were displayed in the image intensifiers, or monitors. This time Pen was taking in the wide view.

It was gloomy.

Where before there had been bright, sun lit, expanses of blue water and green growing things, now there was black and gray. And red. Blackened and burned towns, forests and croplands. Grey smoke and ash filled skies. Red tongues of flame licking at the edges of this apoplectic vision. War had passed over this land.

The nuclears, the missiles, and the slashing and burning of the enemy, had all merged to change beauty into black and red ugliness.

"Look!" Lynx shouted as she pointed, "What is that?"

Mobs of green colored Tyranid warriors were gathering, and the mobs were then converging into green masses of warriors. They resembled the flow of rivers, as the thick press of alien warriors flowed toward some unfathomed purpose. How many thousands, or tens of thousands there were, Pen could not guess.

"What are they doing?" Lynx asked of no one in particular.

After a few moments of no answer, something different slashed into their view.

Tyranid design atmosphere craft roared into the valley from the north and south. Except that these were the more familiar red colored vehicles. Before any human could speak a word or question, the red colored craft unleashed a volley of beam weapons and missile fire into the valley. Pen quickly raised the intensifiers to her eyes. What are they shooting at?

Pen's quick scan of the valley floor showed missiles smothering green colored Tyranid landing craft in pillars of flame. Beam weapons cut across the rivers of green Tyranid warriors, searing the land, Tyranid warriors vanishing in multicolored flickers of destruction.

Some of the green enemy warriors fired back with weird missiles, and violet colored streaks of energy beams. Some of the first red colored flying craft came apart, and crackling fragments fell from the sky.

But, the red flyers came as a river of landing craft. They landed in unnumbered swarms on the plateau across the valley. Each disgorged red colored warriors in red colored ripples, that soon merged into a red tidal wave of red Tyranid warriors descending into the valley in a thick mass.

Pen watched in speechless wonder, as red Tyranids and the green Tyranids crashed together in wanton slaughter.

Pen at first did not understand. Both sides did not fire weapons that would burn, or disintegrate, or blast to pieces. Instead, they crashed together to bite, and claw, and slash with sword like weapons that sparked with arcane energies.

Both sides crashed together into what looked like a green snake and a red snake intertwined in an unholy embrace. Both of the Tyranid warrior groups seemed intent on grasping an enemy warrior, and dragging it down, to be butchered under a rain of repeated hammer blows of sword like weapons. Or ripped to pieces with tooth and claw.

Pen reeled under the questions in her mind. In space, Tyranid blasted Tyranid. The battle in space could be nothing else. Here on the planet, Tyranid warrior ripped Tyranid warrior. Why are they tearing themselves apart?

VII.

If the old Hive Mind of the Tyranids had a "mouth", it would be watering with the "taste" of devouring the little pieces of the lesser hive mind. The old Hive Mind wallowed in the pleasure of the sensation of devouring the first "cells" of the lesser hive mind. The many psychic receptors of the old Hive Mind were dulled by the waves of pleasurable sensation in the Mind at defeating the lesser mind. The old Hive mind did not "feel" or sense, any other sensation, or monitor any other psychic presence.

VIII.

The green Hive Mind felt panic at the enormity of the older Mind's size, and numbers of warriors. In no time, it decided that it should abandon the green warriors on the planet – they could not be saved, anyway. Instead, the green Hive decided to gather its remaining ships, and flee.

And so, the green hive ships clustered together, and curved away toward the nearest place they could enter non-space.

The green Hive thought nothing of sacrificing small warships to prevent the older red Hive's ships from cutting off the escape route. The brood ships must be protected, no matter what.

Space was filled with dozens of brilliant flares, as ship rammed ship, to the utter destruction of both.

IX.

The older Hive felt anger rise, as the lesser green hive made good its escape. The old Tyranid Hive Mind decided it would follow, and finish off the upstart rival. It would come back later, and absorb whatever was left on this little world.

X.

Pen watched for hours, as the red and green Tyranids fought each other across the valley below. Until darkness fell, hiding the ceaseless, merciless, carnage down below. Pen went deep into one of the cave tunnels, and curled into a ball amongst the coverings. She hoped she would not dream. She hoped the cool stone would keep the nightmare outside, away.

The night passed, punctuated only by the howling of an unexpected wind.

The first faint gray of morning was only just showing in the mouth of the cave entrance, when Lynx sought out her agent, Pen.

Lynx stopped, and looked down on the small bundle of coverings. Somewhere in that little pile, Pen would be sleeping.

Without wishing it, things came into Lynx's mind. Inquisitors are not supposed to have feelings for any one, or even group, of humans. To protect the Emperor, the Empire, and all the rest of humanity, many must die. Yet Lynx did not feel the same, anymore. Lynx had witnessed the death of worlds, the slaughter of battle, the reduction of space fleets to molten fragments. And even the death of an enemy, as Lynx thrust the blade, while watching the horror on her victim's face.

The feeling that passed through Lynx was an unexpected one. She fervently hoped Pen would survive this. Pen was no longer an innocent, no. She was a warrior as capable and dangerous as any. Yet, Pen still had that air, or residue, of past innocence. To see that tiny frame peeled out of a suit of battle armor, was the most out of place vision that Lynx could think of.

There and then, Lynx decided that Pen would be assigned to deep cover on some human colony world. Pen would have to join with a male in a cooperative. Lynx would then forget Pen, and after many years had passed, Pen would know that her service to the Empire was ended.

But, first they had to survive this place.

Lynx poked at Pen with her toe, gently.

The faintest movement, and Lynx could see one of Pen's eyes, wide and alert, regarding the foolish mortal that dared to disturb Pen. The faint yellow of the chemical light Lynx was carrying gave Pen's eye a fierce spark.

"Come," Lynx said softly, "We have wasted enough time. We must find a way to be rescued."

Pen stood up. She was still wrapped in the same shapeless, camo garment, her face colored by the dust of this place.

"What are we going to do?" Pen asked levelly. "Any action I can think of, just means we are discovered and destroyed by the enemy."

"Perhaps." Lynx answered. "We may even have to withdraw into the deep desert. I don't think the enemy will be much longer in deciding to search out the last survivors.."

Lynx paused a moment, but did not turn to leave. In the faint yellow light, Lynx's deep set features were lost in shadow. Lynx looked like an apparition to Pen.

"Yesterday I had a new experience." Lynx said, even more faintly than before, "I sensed another strong enemy mind. I fear the psychic power of the new mind is even greater. I don't know if I can mask the presence of our minds, when this new mind concentrates its power in finding us."

"So. Soon we will be discovered and destroyed." Pen spoke up. The faint light did not hide the determination on her face. "Then let's get set to vaporize as many of those vermin as we can before they take us."

"I have no intention of being 'taken'. My mission will not be served if I 'die gloriously' in this place." Lynx answered sternly.

"Inquisitor." A black shadow in the passage behind Lynx called in low tones. A bodyguard, Pen judged by the size of the shadow. "You are called for. One of the technicians has something urgent for you."

Pen reached down, and picked up the two lumpy fabric bags at her feet, then followed Lynx up, and around into the larger cavern. The monitoring equipment was set up there. This cavern was brighter lit. The dancing and flickering of the light from the holo and flat screen comm equipment made the cavern eerie.

"What have we here?" Lynx asked, directing her question to no one, and everyone.

"Here, Inquisitor." A young woman called from near a large flat screen monitor.

Lynx and Pen moved up beside, and behind, the young operator.

"I just finished a whole series of scans," the young woman continued, "and I just had to show you all this."

"Go ahead, but make it a succinct briefing." Lynx answered firmly.

"Yes, Inquisitor." The young woman went on seriously, "First, look at these surface views."

The screen switched on a panorama of the valley, slowly moving from right to left. The sensor enhanced view was not so mucked up from smoke and dust, as naked eyes would be. Pen could see that the red Tyranid warriors had eliminated all but a few small pockets of green warriors.

"You will notice," the young woman said after a moment, "the fighting on the surface is almost finished. The red ones are nearly all that is left. But, what concerns me is that no more red warriors are arriving, even though they have been much reduced in the fighting.

"There's more." The young woman continued, while switching views. "The green enemy is entirely gone from space, and the red enemy is moving away very rapidly toward a place they can make a jump."

Pen could see that all the red Tyranid ships were not gone. There were still two of the fat ships that always seemed to be at the center of any Tyranid collection of ships. The two were attended by a couple of dozen smaller warships, of various sizes, making up a still considerable force over the planet. Pen wondered how the young comm tech could say 'the red enemy is moving away' with so much red enemy left behind.

"All that is very well, but this is why I called you so urgently." The young woman said, switching views again.

Pen could only see vast numbers of stars. Not so much as a bit of wreckage or asteroid was illuminated by the view. What the ... ? Several stars seemed to blur, and ripple for just a moment.

"Magnify on that." Lynx commanded. She had seen it too.

"There is nothing there." The young woman answered, while activating the magnification. "The sensors show nothing. Neither of the operational space probes can detect any mass, any radiation, or any other reason for that weird blurring of the stars. I felt this justified an urgent call."

Lynx peered closely at the screen, just as two stars close together seemed to wiggle for a moment, then return to normal bright specks.

"Have you tried plotting a course?" Lynx asked.

"Um. No." The young woman answered, rather weakly.

"Do so now." Lynx commanded.

The young woman tried, but could not seem to get a bearing on any apparent movement. Pen decided to lend a hand.

"You have all this recorded, don't you?" Pen asked.

"Yes." The young woman answered distractedly.

"Then play back the recordings for that sector of space, very fast." Pen instructed,

The young woman looked up at Lynx, who nodded.

In a moment, there for all to see, was not one, but a group of blurring streaks, as something that could not be seen moved across the star field. As the fast playback was repeated, Pen could see that each streak of blurring affected more stars, meaning that each streak was getting wider, near the end of each playback. Whatever they were, they were getting closer. Pen did not think anything good would come of this.

While they all were considering what it all meant, several sensor indicators flashed red. The young woman switched to a view of space.

Just in time for Pen to see several large areas of the star field blur. And then, out of the blurred stars, several large, wedge shaped, black and red, warships burst into view.

Pen felt her throat tighten. Renegades.

"Well." Lynx said into the silence. "If this enemy finds us, we will only be tortured to death. Not used for food, or something else."

Pen looked at Lynx. Lynx had a defiant, fierce smile on her face.

"Let's all take our stations." Lynx commanded. "I want every aspect of what's happening recorded, to the best of our ability."

Pen went over to, and activated the largest holo projector they had brought. Lynx joined her. Pen focused the view so that the rim of the planet was just in view, and both the renegade fleet and the Tyranid ship cluster soared above the planet rim. The renegades had appeared almost on top of the Tyranids. Dozens of twinkling threads were already tracing paths between the two groups. Pen zoomed the view onto the lead renegade ship, and the largest.

The great wedge shape appeared to leap forward, and nearly fill the entire view, from being magnified. Pen noticed that the red trim on the ship was being amplified, by the red gashes left by Tyranid energy weapons. Pen wondered at the fact the great ship used no force shields to ward off enemy weapons. The renegade seemed content to let the ship be hit. She noticed that the ship was hit again and again, and seemed not the least reduced in fighting capacity. The ship charged in, to plow a swath through the middle of the Tyranid ships.

Pen and Lynx really took interest now, judging by how they both stiffened where they stood.

The great black wedge of a ship did not veer or dodge, but slashed straight through the Tyranid ship cluster, followed by the other black renegade ships. Whenever a Tyranid warship tried to ram the renegades, a black, fan shaped ray, blacker than the space between the stars, reached out, brushed the Tyranid ship away. Then held it long enough for numbers of intersecting bright streams of energy to rip the Tyranid ship to pieces. Each of the renegade ships, in the diamond shaped formation, played its part in keeping the desperate Tyranid warships from employing that most devastating tactic: Ramming.

The lead renegade ship reached one of the two fat Tyranid ships at the center of the cluster, slowed and turned slightly, to fly down the length of the larger Tyranid ship. The two ships exchanged a torrent of weapons fire. When the black wedge shape had passed across the nose of the Tyranid ship, Pen could see a pattern of black spheres had been left behind, superimposed against the uneven red of the Tyranid ship. The other renegade ships fanned out, scattering hundreds more small black spheres. Tyranid energy beams only seemed to make the spheres glow redly.

Of a sudden, groups of the spheres accelerated on jets of flame, straight into the fat Tyranid ship. Other groups accelerated toward other Tyranid ships. The rate of acceleration was fantastic. The two fat Tyranid ships had hardly moved since the appearance of the renegades, neither attempted any maneuvers now. At least a hundred of the black spheres struck the fat Tyranid ship, at fantastic velocities. Only a few spheres were melted away in the defensive crossfire. A hundred pillars of flame erupted from the length of the fat ship. After a moment, internal explosions ripped great holes in the Tyranid ship.

Pen pulled back the view of the holo.

The force of the many explosions was such, the fat enemy ship was visibly descending toward the rim of the planet, breaking up into large flaming pieces. Soon the large pieces would crash into the planet's surface. Pen fervently hoped it would not be anywhere near. Those large pieces will cause far greater devastation than any nukes.

Pen zoomed the view in again, to amplify the rest of the surviving Tyranid ships. The other fat ship had only been hit by a few of the black spheres, it seemed to still be able to fight. The other, smaller warships of the Tyranid warship cluster were scattered like ashes before a wind.

Some of the smaller Tyranid warships had been struck by the black spheres. This black weapon of the renegades was very potent. Only a few of them seemed to wreck a fairly large enemy ship. Some Tyranid warships had been hit by a lot of spheres, these were only glowing and sparking fragments, drifting apart.

Those Tyranid ships that had not been hit at all, were scattered, and few. Pen could see that the renegade fleet had swung around, and were closing in on the scattered, smaller, Tyranid ships. In perfect formation, the renegades ships came on. They were formed into an 'X' pattern, with the largest renegade ship in the center. The interlocking crossfire of the renegades cut the Tyranid enemy ships to ribbons. Flocks of missiles smothered the last fat Tyranid ship, seeming to crush it under a white hot rain of fire. Flocks of still more missiles chased, and obliterated, the very last few Tyranid warships. Not one of the renegade ships was destroyed, or even hurt enough to slow it down.

"Inquisitor." One of the young men on another comm set. "I have more of the black fleet."

"Where, man? Switch it over to this set." Lynx commanded briskly.

The holo above Pen twisted rapidly, giving those watching a sense of being in motion themselves, then settled on a scene of distant battle.

Pen extended the space probe's magnification to the maximum. There. The black ships were closing on the last of the red Tyranid fleet. But, even as Pen watched, the red Tyranid ships were flashing into non-space. The Tyranids seemed to ignore the fire of the chasing renegade ships, who were just beginning to shoot. In a moment, the last hundred of the red Tyranid ships were gone. The renegade fleet curved around, and started back toward the planet, the fifty or so ships holding perfect formation.

Pen reached down into the lumpy fabric bags, and started pulling out her weapons, and spare ammo packs. Pen was sure she'd have to fight, now.

XI.

The old Hive Mind of the Tyranids barely noticed the attack of the black ships. It did notice, however, two things. On the planet left behind, there had been a strong mind, masking itself and the weaker minds of some few others. That mind did not project a psychic presence, but rather was strong in an unknown, unfamiliar way. The other thing the Hive Mind noticed was a strong psychic "sponge" on board a couple of the black and red ships that had attacked the hive fleet. The Hive Mind would not forget the experiences, or tastes, of those different minds.

That the black ships had appeared suddenly, from close by, did not concern the Hive Mind. That two brood ships and attendant war craft had been lost, did not concern the Hive Mind. That much of the green hive had been destroyed, or absorbed, pleased the older Hive Mind. The fact that green hive brood ships had escaped did not please the older Mind.

The last matter that the older Hive Mind had to consider from this episode, was the nuclear poison spread around the planet where the two hives had fought. By the time the Hive Mind had become aware of the poison, it was too late. The warriors, and landing ships, on the planet's surface had to be abandoned. The tiny amounts of radioactivity encountered would not kill even the smallest of the mindless slaves. The Tyranids could withstand a lot of radiation. What the Tyranids could not get away from was the tiniest bits of radioactive matter, what humanity called plutonium. Even one microscopic bit of plutonium, getting into the matrix of biomass that was being renewed into Tyranid hive slaves, would corrupt the genetic blueprint. Subtly change the DNA strings. The hive would die, as the corrupted flesh of the hive's slaves was consumed by the very viruses the hive used to dispose of corrupted flesh. Those same viruses might even be changed by the radiation, and devour the hive.

The Hive Mind reached back into its farthest memory, to a time when radioactive poison had been encountered in another galaxy. The Mind commanded the building of new Bio-constructs. These would sense the presence of Alpha, Beta, and Gamma radiation, the sign of radioactive materials. These new constructs would go first to a planet, to warn the hive. These creatures of this galaxy might use radioactive poison again.

XII.

Pen was sandwiched between rocks, on the very rightmost corner of the ledge, just barely out from under the overhanging rock. She had her image intensifiers stuck among the few rocks Pen had piled in front of her. She could look out through them, or pull back from them, without any movement visible in the valley below. She had no other job. The sensors, spy probes, and viewers that Lynx and Pen had placed with such trouble, were now all destroyed. The renegades were as aware of Imperial technology as any could be. The renegades found, and destroyed every Imperial device, before the first troop lander touched down.

Pen had watched, amazed, as the renegade ships had landed, first in the valley, then up on the high plateaus surrounding the valley. Pen could not figure the renegades out, and Lynx was too far away to ask.

The renegades landed in the wide southern end of the valley, with ever increasing numbers of troops. The Tyranid warriors also gathered themselves into large masses. The renegades had the power, why did they not fly hovers and atmosphere craft over the packed formations of Tyranid warriors, and bomb them into twitching fragments?

Pen was further confused because the Tyranids did not swarm down on the renegade troopers, as soon as they saw the renegades. Instead, the red Tyranid warriors were gathered in the center of the valley, almost below Pen. Both forces were not behaving as expected.

Pen had momentarily been near panic, as one of the ten foot tall, red Tyranid warriors attempted to climb the rock wall, below where the humans were hiding. Pen knew that if discovered, they would receive massive Tyranid attention. They would have no chance, with so few defenders. Then, one of the technicians had seen his chance, and lobbed a large rock onto the massive head of the Tyranid warrior, thirty feet below. With a sigh of relief, Pen had gone back to her watching.

The renegade troopers began marching up the valley, long, thin lines, interspersed with walking dreadnaught battle machines.

The Tyranids formed into dense masses of warriors, and waited.

The renegades advanced, sometimes finding a stray Tyranid bio-construct, or not yet dead red or green wounded Tyranid warrior. Red fans of energy would reach out from a renegade warrior, and the discovered creature would burst into flame, the surrounding rock, or soil, glowing redly.

The Tyranids waited.

The renegades advanced across the width of the valley. The renegades on the heights moved to positions beside and behind the enemy below, and waited. The renegades were only two hundred meters from the waiting red horde.

The Tyranids charged.

Like a red wave of blood, the Tyranid swarm closed on the renegades at incredible speed. Tyranid beams of weapons reached out to the black lines of advancing renegades, in twinkling streaks, to terminate in flares of white and red, as black warriors were struck.

The advancing black lines stopped, waiting, not returning fire.

Pen watched through the image intensifiers, as the ten foot tall, red Tyranid warriors with sword like weapons in clawed hands, charged at a full run. Their fanged jaws opening and closing, as if biting off pieces of their enemies.

At ten meters, the air in front of the ranks of renegades suddenly rippled. Pen could feel a strange, rumbling vibration through the ground, that she could not hear.

Whole groups of the front most charging Tyranids suddenly fell to the ground, thrashed and clawed at emptiness, and flew apart, as the ripples of distorted air reached the Tyranids.

Streaks of a hundred missiles erupted from the lines of black warriors behind the foremost renegades. Pen saw the familiar dirty black smudges of a hundred bursts only a dozen feet over the ground. Pen knew it was a favorite weapon of the renegades. Each burst directed over a hundred three edged blades downward, slicing through anything in the way. The Tyranids with energy weapons, that had hung back, were cut to pieces.

The lines of black and red warriors began to advance again, red beams of hot energy melting any enemies that the rippling air waves had missed.

"On the ledge! In the caves! Surrender and disarm at once, or be blown apart! Right now!" The voice was amplified Imperial standard, echoing off the stones.

Pen rolled slightly over onto her right side, looked up.

The sun was wrong to cast a shadow. A heavily armored renegade hover had its barrage missile launcher trained on the ledge, and cave. The square, blockish shape hung there, waiting.

At the edge of Pen's eye, movement on the ledge. Pen turned her head. There stood Lynx, arms raised, in the ancient sign of surrender. Pen watched, astonished, as the bodyguards stood, dropped their camouflaged coverings, and raised empty hands. The others did the same.

Pen stood slowly, shucking the formless camo wrap, raised empty hands to the black shape overhead.

Pen wondered at the sense of relief that washed over her. At least she thought she knew what her fate would be.

XIII.

Pen had given herself over to complete misery. They had been caught. Without firing even once. They were going to die without bringing one enemy with them. First, they were herded onto a troop hover by androids wielding energy blades. After only minutes, they were dumped from the craft on the opposite side of the valley, near the base of the steep bluffs. There to wait.

They all stood and waited as the flashes and rumbles, to the north, told of hugely powerful weapons in use, far away.

Pen and Lynx, and the others all stood and waited, as a great dark cloud passed over, and began to rain black mud on them all, in great sticky globs. The androids guarding them, stood in unmoving menace. Pen briefly wondered if this vile black mud was fallout from the nuclears, used so indiscriminately. Not that Pen was worried. The torture that the renegades would use on Lynx, and all her companions, would not let them live so long as to feel the after effects of radiation.

Pen stood and watched the sun touch the horizon, at last. Watched a renegade troop carrier fly over the rim of the cliff to the west. It set down, not ten meters from them, with a shrill hiss from maneuvering jets.

Pen stepped up next to Lynx, as a warrior emerged from the craft, followed by a dozen other warriors and androids. The warrior in front was larger than the rest, and his armor was trimmed in red, all the others were only black. Pen saw, out of the corner of her eye, Lynx cross her arms and raise herself in a posture of defiance. The large warrior was before Lynx in half a dozen great strides. And stood there.

For a moment.

Then, the warrior in black and red slowly raised his arms, and lifted off his helmet. The warrior was old. He leaned forward slightly, as he regarded Lynx, then turned his head slightly, and looked Pen over, up and down.

And then leaned back, lifted his face to the sky, and laughed out loud! And laughed again, in a great bellow of noise.

“Our spies were right! These two Imperial spies did get away, and with their consorts, too!” The old warrior bellowed. His white hair, beard, and moustache were a glaring contrast to the gloomy sky.

“Look son, we have bagged some very important Imperial dogs, on my warrant!” The old man boomed out.

A slightly smaller warrior came forward, his voice coming from the helmet amps.

“I smell the work of an Inquisitor. I think we should ask.”

Lynx and Pen both noticed at the same time that these warriors were not in black, but in midnight dark blue, trimmed in red. And, there on the upper right side of the breast armor, the symbol of a misfit, a yellow-gold triangle imposed on a red circle. They were Misfit Marines!

“Ask what?” Lynx asked, in as level a tone as she could manage. At least they would only be sent home as naked failures, not tortured to death at the hands of renegades. Lynx could feel the hollow in her center from the thought of failure.

“Ask for your help.” The old warrior answered quietly and levelly. “Inquisitor.”

XIV.

Fed, rested, watered, and warmed, Pen could finally focus on something other than her misery.

Lynx had been kept continuously in private conclave with the leaders of the Misfits. Whatever was going on, Pen was too long practiced at her job as an observer. She knew that Lynx could ask her most anything about this warship they were on, or its crew, or even the mission the ship was on, and Lynx would expect Pen to know.

So, Pen listened to the crew talk. Watched everything they did. Cooks cooking (and hopefully chatting), maintenance crews servicing the ten thousand bits that make up their section of the warship (and hopefully willing to chat with a curious onlooker, like Pen), and just taking in everything into that awful memory of Pen's.

Just now, Pen was in what the crew called the loft. A rather flat protrusion on the top of the vessel, fitted with thick, clear crystal viewing panels. She had the place to herself.

Pen felt an odd sense of comfort. She was back in a battlesuit of armor. The Misfit Marines had plenty to spare. Strangely, it seemed that they had more suits of armor, of all descriptions, than people to put in them. What made it odd was that it seemed every man and woman on the Misfit's home world had to serve in the military. Pen thought they should have a shortage of things military, not an excess.

Pen leaned back, and for the second time wondered at the sense of comfort and well being she felt. Maybe being back in a battlesuit, with a "hot" weapon hanging from its strap, accounted for the sensation. Pen had felt naked and exposed on the planet.

The fact that they were still alive at all was a testament to the weirdness of it all. They should not have got out of the town alive. They should have been discovered by the Tyranid enemy when they landed, and wiped out, after a brief and violent fight. They are then spotted and captured by renegades that turn out to be Mis-fit Marines. Then, these particular "servants" of the Empire are known to harbor ill will toward administrators of the Empire, particularly Inquisitors. But do they hoist the Inquisitor, and all who accompany her, onto tall poles over a lake, there to be a nighttime snack for blood gnats? No. The Misfits instead beg for help from the Inquisitor. Pen sometimes thinks there is a higher power watching over Lynx.

"Contemplating the mysteries of the Universe?" Lynx asked from the entry portal.

The sudden loud voice of Lynx's made Pen's insides jump, and Pen's eyes momentarily widen. Pen managed not to let any other outward sign, or movement, betray her having been startled. Instead, Pen turned her head, and gave Lynx a wicked sideways stare. For just a moment.

"In all these years of working with you," Pen answered, "I have never been able to figure out how you know what people are thinking. You are certified as a non-telepath."

"I am a master of situation analysis," Lynx answered with a fierce smile, "and an Empath of, I'm told, rare ability. I did not know, or read your thoughts. But think of this. Here someone sits, staring wide eyed at the stars out there." Lynx gestures with a sweep of her hand. "Add the emotional reading of contemplation, consternation, and a touch of frustration, and you must be wondering at some great mystery." Lynx finished by taking four graceful strides, and speaking softly from beside Pen. "If you had been dreaming of some far off person, or place, the emotional context would be far different. The external, visual situation could be exactly the same."

"So. You do read minds." Pen observed timidly. This could be dangerous ground. "You just take the back door."

"Humph." Lynx replied. "I analyze the external situation." Lynx's voice was that of Pen's military protocol instructor, "I notice all the nonverbal signals people send with their eyes, hands, posture, tilt of the head, curl of the lip, and more. Then I add in the waves of subtle emotional variances, and end up with a 'gut feeling' for what's going on. I do not have messages scrolling across the front of my mind, or voices from a million minds all babbling and echoing around in my head."

Pen rose carefully. This far from the source of artificial gravity, the lower gravity made for more graceful movement, but you had to be careful. Move too suddenly or forcefully, and you could "leap" into a bulkhead, not a graceful move at all.

"I was thinking about what has happened to us." Pen began, "I believe everything is so different about this mission. Some kind of strange, new infiltration of a human world by the enemy. Then, a different coloring of the enemy warriors is discovered when they turn up to bomb, then devour us. Whoops, now the red colored ones we are familiar with show up, and start a spectacular butchery of the odd colored of our enemies. These creatures are not quite done slicing each other up, and renegade space cruisers pop in and hammer everything in sight, capture us, and whoa, they are not renegades, but a single, powerful family in the Misfit Brotherhood. Oh, yes. They are not going to roughly handle the newly discovered Inquisitor, as they have any other Inquisitor they have discovered, no. They instead ask for her help. About a secret thing that will be revealed when we get where we are going, not before." Pen paused for a moment, then added, "I believe I need to think about this a lot more."

"I think I am going to roll with the punches, and get on with learning all I can." Lynx answered. "I cannot worry over why we survive and so many others do not."

"Now, enough of all this." Lynx went on, "I think we need to compare notes on what we have learned about these people."

"Inquisitor, you ask too much." Pen replied calmly.

“So tell me what is on your mind.” Lynx asked as she drifted into a deep cushioned chair. This might take a while.

“Lynx, these are an incredibly complex people.” Pen began, also sitting back down. “They are families, clans, brotherhoods, secret societies, open organizations, and even private military functions, all interwoven and connected, yet independent and also bound by oaths and marriages, debts of honor and blood, and a half dozen other references I could not translate into something I recognize. I have talked to, and listened to, anyone and everyone. I could make a lifetime of work out of learning about these people, and still not have enough time to learn half of what makes up these peoples.”

“Have you really talked to all that many people?” Lynx asked gently. “I believe you have been seeing a lot of that white haired old warhorse’s son. What is his name?”

“Ulthor is the name of the ‘old warhorse’ and Althor is his son.” Pen said, “You already knew their names, do you think I did not? And there is an example of what I am saying. Althor has these two perfectly marvelous beasts. He calls them dogs, but are like nothing I have heard of. They are enormous, maybe a meter and a half to the top of their shoulder, and when they hold their heads erect, they must be two meters. They have huge heads, with great jaws. These beasts have had their teeth altered, so that I think they could bite through metal. I understand that there have been other genetic and bio-enhancements added or changed, so that they are unnaturally fast, very intelligent, incredibly strong, and fierce to the point of terrifying.”

Pen stopped when she noticed that Lynx was not looking at her, but rather at the darkened entryway over her left shoulder. Pen turned to see.

There was the object of the discussion, padding silently out of the shadowy door, with Althor and another dog coming behind in single file.

The intelligence in the eyes, the feel of intelligence in Lynx’s mind, did far more than Pen’s description to convince Lynx that these were formidable beings, dogs and humans alike.

Althor’s jet black hair and sparking black eyes caught Lynx’s attention next. The aura of strength around Althor, along with his easy stride and overall handsome appearance, convinced Lynx that Pen was indeed attracted to this youth. Something that had never happened before.

“I have heard enough to safely say, I think, that you like my friends.” Althor’s voice filled the compartment like music. Althor rested an arm on the back of each of the great animals, that were now to either side of him.

“Friends?” Lynx asked.

“I speak, and they understand.” Althor replied. “I do not command, I ask. They do, or do not, as they will. If they have a need, I will do as a friend should, and help them repair that need.”

“They have teeth and talons that have been altered to rend and tear.” Lynx stated matter of factly, “Do you take your friends to war with you?”

“They are my friends.” Althor answered more strongly. “I would not be left behind when they went to war, and they will not leave me when I go to war. They have been my companions since I was a child, and they were too young to join the clan. Our destinies are locked together.” Althor’s hand stroked the back of each dog’s neck. Both dogs stared, unmoving, at Lynx.

Pen knew, and worried that Lynx did not, that in Misfit society, if a dog did not like or trust you then there was not a human anywhere that would trust you either.

Lynx stood up.

Pen watched, wide eyed and helpless, as Lynx suddenly launched herself in a flying leap, at Althor. Pen could feel herself rising in slow motion, a hand sliding toward the ‘hot’ weapon. The whole scene passed before Pen in slow motion.

Lynx descended onto Althor’s head and neck, arms outstretched to grapple, Althor’s arms outstretched to intercept Lynx. The heads of both dogs turning to mark Lynx’s path through the air. In a rolling tumble, both Lynx and Althor were locked, then suddenly apart, in the stance of combat readiness, as they regarded each other.

Pen was shocked to see that neither dog had moved more than its head, and that her weapon was in her hand, pointed in the direction of Lynx and Althor. Who had she intended to aim it at? By the eternal stars!

“What magnificent dogs!” Lynx burst out, dropping her guard, turning on her heel, and embracing the necks of both dogs. “They are empathic! They can feel what is truly inside someone! Althor, you are lucky beyond the description of words!” Both dogs licked at Lynx’s cheeks and eyes.

Pen's weapon disappeared again.

"Yes, you are an Inquisitor." Althor stated flatly. "Only that breed of Imperial servant would think to test the loyalty of my dogs, and measure their own trustworthiness in the same action."

"I need to be trusted by your people." Lynx answered simply. "If these wonderful animals would not trust me, then I could never help you, as you have asked me to. That is why you are here with both a male and female dog. To test me."

Althor turned to Pen.

"Do Inquisitors ever know too much?" He asked.

"I am forever wondering at how much this Inquisitor knows, and wondering how she found out." Pen replied.

Lynx was obliviously scruffing at the back of both dog's ears, while a pair of tongues as wide as her hand, washed her face.

"Inquisitor." Althor began gently, "I am here because we have arrived at the secret place."

Lynx and the dogs stopped at once.

"Then let's get to work!" Lynx answered, in her usual stern way.

XV.

Pen looked up at the display above the ship's bridge command consoles. A small picture of a ship, half lost in shadow, almost lost in the center of the big display.

"How long until we are alongside that ship?" Lynx asked of the ship captain.

"About one tenth of a ship's cycle. Not long." The captain answered. She was no longer slow to answer this Inquisitor, since Althor had brought her here.

"Can we magnify this more?" Lynx asked of the captain, gesturing at the image with her thumb.

Without an answer, the image jumped in size. What could not be seen earlier was the four midnight blue warships keeping station just beyond the strange ship they had come to see. More Misfit ships.

And one increasingly strange ship.

The view had been enlarged to maximum magnification, plus the warship carrying Pen and Lynx was closing in very quickly, so the strange ship continued to grow in the holo. And grow increasingly strange. Pen could see, or thought she could see, that it had some of the outward appearances of a Tyranid ship, also what seemed human engineering, and something else added, something different, somehow. Pen thought that the ship looked like the result of a collision between several vessels that were not destroyed, but welded together in some impossibly twisted mass. The ship was very, very large.

Pen could feel a growing premonition, that this was some new evil, being visited on the races of the galaxy.

"What happened here?" Lynx demanded.

"Many enemy ships came to one of our worlds." Althor answered, "They were new, and powerful, and many of us died. But most of them died, and the rest left. A couple of weeks ago, one of our fast courier ships came on this wreck. The wreck fired on the courier ship, so it called for help. These are a new kind of enemy ship, so squads of our warriors went aboard to discover what they could, after we silenced the few weapons that worked. Most of our people did not come back. So we waited. You see, the ship is dying."

"You say that as if it was a person dying." Pen near whispered, aghast.

"I know." Althor responded simply.

Lynx and Pen stared into each other's eyes for a moment. The horror of the understanding, and the suspected implications felt like the cold of deep space, sucking the warmth and life out of Pen.

Lynx felt a sick anger growing in her. She felt certain that the more she found out, the more she was going to get sick, and angry, and what could be the cure?

Lynx turned to Althor.

"Just what is the help you seek in this?" Lynx asked, wisps of anger edging into her voice.

Ulthor was there, behind Lynx and Pen.

"We are Misfits, unwelcome in the Empire we serve," Ulthor answered, anger on the edge of his voice also. "We seek the help of an Inquisitor to discover the origin of this ship, so we can kill its nest, before it hatches any more of these abominations."

“Finding the source of these ships could not please me more,” Lynx turned, and fired back, “but I have no magic powers to divine the answer.”

“Then use such powers as you do have.” Ulthor retorted heatedly, his white eyebrows, beard, and moustache jutting out, from the tenseness in his face. “Serve your empire... and save my people... and kill the nest that spawned that thing.”

Lynx looked past the old white hair, for the first time. The room had filled with a number of people while Lynx’s attention was on the viewer. There was a uniform firmness, anger even, on all the faces of those present. The young boy on the relay console, the old bodyguard Lynx had known for years, they all had a resolute anger pictured on their faces. Lynx could feel the shock, horror, fear, and growing hate within them all.

“That thing is made from the flesh of those taken from conquered worlds, and melded with the metal and technology of one of the Anvil worlds” The boy in the corner hissed out.

“That ship is dying.” Ulthor said. “Whatever is to be discovered must be soon.”

“Yes, let us find what we can. We came too far not to.” Lynx said softly. She felt a strange foreboding.

XVI.

Pen shuffled her feet as she entered her quarters. Such weariness was in her limbs, in her exhausted mind, that she barely made it to a padded furnishing before she collapsed. There she sat, unmoving, for a long time. Though her eyes were open, her mind was adrift, her body completely limp. A food and rest period came and went for the ship’s crew, and still Pen did not move.

Then Pen stirred. Rose to her feet and moved over to the familiar communications gear. She sat in front of the recording equipment. Pen resolved to do something different. She was not going to just record her voice, and the images, of what had been happening, she resolved to write it down. Many human cultures used symbols to record ideas as words. Pen had learned how as part of one of her assignments from Lynx. To place the symbols on flexglass sheets, to form that which was on her mind into words, and arrange those words into a chronicle, was what Pen needed to cleanse her soul. Her tortured spirit needed release. Pen thought that recording onto pages the pictures in her mind, she would be able to live with them. She began to work, using the almost never used symbol keys, watching the symbols grow into words on the data screen, the words grow into pages that would be embedded on squares of flexglass. Pen’s sense of the passage of time was lost as she concentrated on her task. She could feel the agony in her mind and body pour out onto the row on row of symbols she was crafting.

Pen wrote about the enemy ship they had just left.

She wrote about how they had entered the ship. How separate groups of Misfit warriors had spread out into the vast bulk. Pen wrote of her horror, as she and Lynx, Ulthor and Althor with a dozen warriors, all discovered the unending terrors in the passages of the dying Tyranid ship. Some parts of the ship were inorganic, just like ships of many races, but some parts were organic. Recognizable as flesh. There were tubes, like arteries, pumping fluids. Some passages or rooms were made entirely of pumping, moving tissue and muscle. Some passages and galleries were of some bone like substance. Sometimes the air would rush first one way, then another. If these flesh like parts were bruised, or injured, a hideous array of fluids would leak out. These were only the first horrors.

Pen wrote of the reason for boarding the enemy ship. They hoped to find some kind of navigation reference. They hoped to find the source of these new enemy ships. The endless abominations of the Tyranids must be stopped.

Pen went faster as she became more practiced at finding the symbols she needed. The words grew faster and faster. Pen’s intensity and concentration were total.

Pen wrote pages about the exploration of the maze within the enemy vessel. She wrote about the enemy attacks. The creatures on board did not attack in massed numbers, as they always seemed to before. Now the Tyranid warriors, or lesser creatures, attacked one at a time, or in small groups of two or three. They always managed to come from an unexpected direction, dropping from what had seemed a solid roof, or appearing behind from out of the walls or floor where no opening had been detected by the passing of the warriors, or even the dogs. Also, now the enemy preferred to blast at the invading humans from a distance, rather than cut and slash up close. A green Tyranid warrior would appear, fire at an exposed human warrior, and disappear again. Not seeming to care if the

targeted human was hit or not. If a human warrior was hit, an explosion would knock a hole in the warrior's armor, and then, somehow, the interior of the armor was flooded with some sort of acid. In moments, everything inside the armor was dissolved, and leaking out in a horribly colored goo. Pen thought she saw this goo being absorbed by the floor of the ship. Pen knew she saw small creatures appear, and stick their heads into the goo, as if to feed, before being blasted by disgusted human warriors.

Pen wrote of the courage of the Misfit warriors. The Misfits numbered their great dogs as warriors in their clans. With good reason. The massive dogs were terrors in battle. Dozens of the dogs accompanied the human warriors in the mazes. Pen told of the two times that a green, ten foot tall, Tyranid warrior suddenly appeared near to, and attacked Althor. In each case, the pair of dogs with Althor were upon the Tyranid before it could complete the attack. Occupied by the sudden, swift attack, the Tyranid was easily cut down by Althor's hail of fire. Pen swore that the dogs would turn and grin at their human counterparts, every time that an enemy was cut down.

The pain that was deep inside Pen began to come out. A stream of symbols poured out as the pain was translated into action, and the action into words.

One of those magnificent dogs had been cut down. One of the pair with Althor. The female. One of those tall, fierce, Tyranid warriors had fired a weapon from ambush, from far ahead in a long hallway. The dog had just alerted to the presence of an enemy, when *smack*, a red patch appeared on the back of the dog. The Tyranid disappeared in a storm of exploding shells, it had not even tried to duck back into hiding, just tried to fire again.

Pen had stood there, as the other dog, and Althor, wept. Pen had stood and watched, as the light of intelligence had gone out of the wounded dog's eyes, as the last breath eased out. Medics came forward, lifted the body of the dog, and started back. There were to be no wounded or dead Misfits left behind.

Pen had felt there was sand in here eyes, but no tears.

Pen then paused a moment in her writing, and when she continued, she wrote how useless it had all been. Pen, Lynx, Ulthor, and Althor had explored into what had seemed the most likely part of the ship for a navigation, or command, center to be. There had been none. Worse, all the Misfit war parties had come up empty as well. What Lynx wanted to know could not be found on the enemy vessel. Instead, it was found on the Misfit cruiser they had come on. One of the navigators on the Misfit ship had accidentally touched the mind of the dying ship. The flood of alien images had nearly ruined his mind, but the dying mind of the Tyranid ship lacked the power, and many memories had already been lost.

Once the navigator had regained his senses, the location of the enemy's anvil world was known to him. The cruiser captain called all the war parties back. Very many Misfit warriors had died needlessly.

Pen wrote the last trails of symbols more slowly, as she recounted the end of the whole sorry affair.

Lynx had declared that the enemy ship must die, but not in a nuclear fury. Lynx's mind worked in a more interesting fashion. Lynx decreed that the drifting enemy ship would be accelerated toward the star system that had caused the enemy ship to fall from non-space. The gravity was pulling the ship in, anyway. Lynx also decreed that the ship would not be allowed to fall into the sun. Instead it was to be steered into the one planet that had primitive life on it. The many forms of fungus on that world would benefit from the bio-mass that made up parts of the Tyranid ship.

Pen noted how she had only just returned to her quarters. She had just returned from watching the Tyranid ship slam into that planet's ocean. She had watched the still living Tyranid ship slash into the atmosphere, break into several large pieces, and a host of little bits, only to erupt in several massive impacts with the planet's oceans. No Tyranid DNA string would be left intact. The rain of microscopic bits that would settle out of the planet's atmosphere over the following years, would be like fertilizer to the aggressive fungus living on the planet. Lynx had thought it fitting that the remains of the Tyranid ship should provide food for some form of life in this galaxy. Pen had liked the destruction of the enemy, whatever else may result.

Pen added a footnote.

She had liked the three months spent on the Misfit cruiser. She had liked the Misfits. She had liked her association with Althor. She would miss those times. She had never felt this before.

Lynx came in.

“Our cruiser has returned for us.” Lynx stated simply. “Let’s be on our way. This is not over yet.”

The arrowhead shaped cruiser streaked into non-space, in the direction the bird of prey’s talons pointed. The cruiser was followed by a fleet of Misfit war craft, large and small. Many more ships were going to meet these at their destination. The Inquisitor had decreed that a planet must die.

Chapter 9

To All Things, There Is...

I. _____

From here, Pen could look down the length of the cruiser. This high observation position was normally unused. That is why Pen had chosen it. She could come here to be alone. As Agent to the Inquisitor, she could have time to herself. As Aide to the Inquisitor, she never could have. Pen could come here and write, or just look at the stars. For months she had been coming here. To write. In those months, she had written of all the things that were locked in her unforgetting memory. She could not purge her mind of those memories, but she could purge her soul of them. She wrote of the first meeting with the Inquisitor. Pen wrote of each of the episodes she had been witness to in the years since. She had only recently realized the volume of that work. Today Pen sat and looked out at the stars. She had just finished writing about the last several months out here.

Lynx had ordered the death of a world.

The complex societies called the Misfits desired it also. This was the home world of a new abomination. Human genetic material, bio-mass of many worlds, Tyranid genetic blueprints, and some strange unholy blending of it all with machines. This world must die. This world is the forge from which new, powerful, and terrifying space fleets were being born. The Misfits had suffered from the new power of the Tyranids. Through the Inquisitor, the Misfits could now hope for help from the Empire. Lynx was glad to call for such help.

But first, the Misfits must lay siege to that enemy world. The Inquisitor commanded that this new form of Tyranid terror must not be allowed to spread.

So. All the Misfit fleets that could be assembled descended on the enemy star system in wrath. Surprise was not complete, even with the fleet coming on in their cloaks of darkness. The Misfit fleet crashed into the Tyranid ships in the star system, but could not blast through. The defenses in space were hard, but the defenses on the formally human anvil world could not be fought past. Even when the Misfits fought through the space ship defenses around the planet, to launch nuclears, or virus bombs, the huge lasers from the planet stopped the Misfits in showers of molten fragments.

Each laser drew incredible energy. Focused it into a short duration blast. Each blast of energy was focused into impossibly intense laser light inside a precious man made gem as large as Pen's crew quarters. The intensity of the blast of laser light was such, that each gem was destroyed with each firing. This planet had been growing those enormous gems for hundreds of years. They would not exhaust the supply before many space fleets had been vaporized, first.

So. Stalemate.

The surviving Misfit ships were enough to keep the surviving Tyranid ships close around the world that had become their nest. Neither had the strength to overwhelm the other. Yet.

The Misfit fleet could observe the building (growing?) of truly enormous ships on the planet, as well as numbers of the smaller sort. How these monstrous things would escape the gravity well of the planet was a secret the Tyranids were not sharing.

Lynx kept promising the Misfit leadership that help was on the way, but it would take time for the attack to arrive. The Leadership of the Misfits did not have to voice the worry that help would arrive too late, Pen and Lynx felt that fear down in their bones.

Months spent in the siege.

Time enough spent just waiting, that Pen could write down her thoughts. Or just watch the stars. The fighting in this part of space, over several months, had filled all this region with little bits of junk. Just drifting. Sometimes Pen would see a bit. A flicker, or twinkle, of light moving across the black backdrop. Pen could see something now. Drifting closer to the ship's edges. Now drifting further away. The hint of a strange shape to it, made Pen search for, and find her image magnifiers. In a moment, she had located the strangely shaped object. It was a Tyranid. Frozen. All its limbs outstretched and rigid. A sword like thing in one claw. As it slowly rotated, the face came into view. Pen could see no pain, no surprise, no anguish. The face was frozen in a final mask of undiluted

savagery. The stark lines of light and dark on that evil sight made it all the more evil. A sense of foreboding came upon Pen.

II.

Long, long ago. In a galaxy so distant that creatures in the Milky Way galaxy would not even guess at its existence, a race of beings came to be. In the long passage of time, this race came into space. Other races of beings were there also. Through war, deceit, luck, planning, courage, and the passing of years, that first race came to dominate the galaxy of its birth. But the universe is not still. Another great galaxy was coming into collision with the first one. There was a dominate race of beings in this second galaxy, as well. Singularly fierce and warlike. The first race of beings had learned many ways to survive, not just war. They had learned to unravel the threads of life, and knit the threads back together in any fashion they liked. Humans called it genetics engineering. DNA threads. This first race knit together a plan.

Humans have always had a morbid fascination with doomsday devices. Especially the kind that get loose on the creators of such a device.

That first race did not design a doomsday device. They built a race of warrior creatures that were adaptable and undefeatable. A race that would feed on its enemies, and grow. They would feed on what the first race's enemies fed on, and grow. And become an unstoppable wave of terror. That would defeat that first race of being's enemies, before those singularly fierce and warlike ones could wipe away the race of those first beings.

The first ones planted a seed in the rival galaxy. A single world. Lush and full of life. The world was soon dead and barren. What had been born there had left for other worlds, was now a thing of the stars.

The fierce and warlike ones did not see what grew in their midst while distracted by the centuries long war with those from a galaxy colliding with their own. Then the threat was made clear to them. Too late. All the billions of fierce and warlike beings that turned to the task of eradicating those vermin, were not enough. Each fierce and warlike being that fell, each was consumed and became an enemy. Some of the fierce and warlike beings saw their doom, and tried to flee. There was no where to go. When doom was upon them, some few of the fierce and warlike ones begged the first ones to stop the war. But it could not be done. By now the first ones had learned of attacks within their own galaxy by this new terror. This new terror had adapted beyond the control of the first ones.

In time, the two colliding galaxies became one giant galaxy. A single race fed there. Adapting. Surviving. Building its race on the plans for genetic development laid down by a dead race. Some of this race left its home galaxy. They came upon the Milky Way galaxy. They came to be called Tyranids. The Tyranids built its race with new food, built on plans made by a dead race.

Deep within those plans are many threads. Many threads can be brought together in many ways. Deep within those many threads, there lies a plan within a plan. So deep within the genetic plans, that the undefeatable race built by those plans could never know, there lies a plan to rebuild the DNA of the first ones. Without knowing what they are doing, the undefeatable ones will bring back the first ones, and at the same time defeat themselves. By feeding on themselves. Until there are so few left, that even the least warlike race they meet will defeat them. And the first ones will be back.

Deep within the plans from which the Tyranids map the DNA of the Bio-vats, an old, old plan awoke. Survive. Feed. Adapt. Build. And add the threads of a new plan.

III.

Pen awoke to the shrill alarms. Like the Inquisitor, holo screens were already active, zeroing in on the reason for the alarms, because Pen would have to know. Pen slipped out of the cocoon like web bed, with practiced ease. Like the Inquisitor, Pen had taken to sleeping without any garments, probably because so much time was spent enclosed in space suits, space armor, battle armor, or some other heavy encumbrances, that freedom could only be gained with sleep.

Pen thought she knew what was causing the alarms, she had been briefed that there would be another spoiling attack attempted by the Misfit battle fleet. The little destroyer she was sometimes assigned to had returned, Pen was to go aboard before the attack commenced. As she finished pulling on a jumper, and reached for the first battle armor segment, she happened to notice the time readout.

The time was wrong. Straightening, Pen turned her head to peer at the holo displays that should be focused on the gathering Misfit forces.

Curious. The screens were empty, except for a smudge of some kind.

A rising growl, felt as much as heard, increased in volume to a discernable vibration.

Pen was nearly thrown off balance by the sudden tilting of the room, and acceleration across the axis of forward movement. The cruiser had pivoted, then accelerated at an angle to its previous course. The monitors had managed to keep the target sector of space, but the gravity compensators had not kept up. The sudden lurch gave Pen all the explanation she needed for some moments to come. Something unexpected was setting off the alarms, and Pen had not been dressing for battle nearly fast enough. Pen thought that something big was about to begin. She gathered all she thought she might need, and pulled on her battlesuit with all the urgency she could muster.

IV.

Lynx was in her command room, as always. Surrounding her were the holographic displays of the events she had helped bring about. To one side, the smudge of light that betrayed her secret. The camouflage had slipped. To the other side, the display of the cursed planet she had to destroy. Yes, the smudge of light had been detected, its meaning guessed. The smaller ships on the planet were lifting off, as were six of the twenty very large ships. Held as a surprise for an attacker, Lynx guessed.

Lynx had spent months watching the passage of time burn away at her chances for success. Now things were coming together. No more spoiling raids against the planet, no more sorties from the trapped Tyranid fleet orbiting the planet, now all would be decided.

Pen burst into the room, and turned a full three-sixty, as she tried to see all that filled the room. She stopped turning to face Lynx.

“What surprise have you set for us now, Lynx?” Pen asked sternly, moving toward Lynx, “The Misfit fleet has been redirected from its starting points. The enemy are putting together a major sortie. You have a smudge of light as your center display. I have no idea what you have set in motion, this time.” Pen finished, ending up nearly under the smudge of light display.

“This smudge of light, as you call it, is what I have been waiting for.” Lynx answered, just as sternly, “The shield is letting energy through. Enough to boil off some kind of gas, which is, of course, brightly illuminated by the nice large blue sun out there.”

A hint of the horrible truth crossed Pen’s mind.

“That smudge of light,” Lynx went on, “is the sign that Imperial Fleet re-enforcements have arrived. Shielded of course, to attempt a surprise visit on our ugly friends down there.” Lynx jerked a thumb at the display of the planet. The little red specks and symbols visibly moving around, and away from, the planet.

“Lynx, why should the Imperial Fleet waste so much energy on shields?” Pen asked. “They will be fired on by the planet’s defense lasers as soon as they commence bombardment.”

“The fleet will concern itself with preventing escape.” Lynx answered in low tones, “The bombardment will take care of itself.”

The hairs stood out on the back of Pen’s neck, the trembling in her middle making her afraid that Pen’s voice may waiver, but she spoke up anyway.

“I think I know now why you have been content to keep the enemy here, without too many raids against the surface.” Pen said, barely above a whisper. “I wondered why, before this, you would spare no ship, no life, in pursuing and eradicating the enemy. Until now. We all knew enemy re-enforcements would be coming, but you were gambling that ours will be first. You really want to kill the planet, don’t you?” The last was a whisper, directed at Lynx’s back.

Lynx spoke to the spreading wisps of light in the display, not to Pen, in a voice that could barely be heard.

“It is one hundred and sixty kilometers across. The ships that have been herding it here, have been burning away at the surface of it, to keep it accelerating.” Lynx made a slow sweep with her left hand, as she continued. “It will strike the surface at more than one hundred thousand kilometers per hour. Those enemy ships may be trying to escape, or prevent our attack. In any case, they must all be destroyed.” Lynx turned to stare at Pen, or through her, as she stated matter-of-factly, “You know, that is a very young planet down there. It has a very thin crust. All the plant and animal life that humans transplanted there, over the centuries, had a hard time taking hold. But it is a great place for

the empire's huge factories, what with all that abundant thermal energy everywhere. All the huge accumulations of minerals that were found. Perfect."

"You are going to hit the planet with a comet." Pen gasped out. "How are you going to be sure you hit the enemy ships, down there?"

Lynx walked past Pen without answering, then sat on the edge of a padded recess in the wall of the chamber.

"Those are Nova Marine ships." Lynx finally answered. "They are one of the original Imperial Marine Legions. They have had experience at killing planets before this." Lynx sounded almost weary, as she explained. "In all the wide galaxy, it is not unknown for fairly large bodies to crash into planets. Sometimes it is an unhappy accident. Sometimes, it is not. You see, if an entire planet is suddenly surrounded, bombarded and blasted until not a thing survives. Or, is subjected to virus bombardment so virulent that even organic building materials are consumed. There had better be a reason. If the planet is in open rebellion, no other world in the Empire would turn a hair at its destruction. But, if it was one of the more backward worlds that was destroyed by bombardment, or there was no sign of rebellion on one of the Empire's most advanced worlds, what kind of empire randomly exterminates entire worlds? There was no threat. Without some explanation, the Empire would be shattered by ten thousand rebellions. Do you explain that there was a genetic plague, or parasite, or whatever, discovered, and yes, posed a terrifying threat to the Empire? Do you sit by and watch the Empire crumble, as thousands of worlds close themselves off, fearful that this new plague may spread to them?" Lynx paused.

"No." She went on, "You let the random power of the galaxy take care of the problem for you. Some chunk of rock or ice blundered into the problem world, snuffing out all life. Problem solved. And if a whispered rumor hints that Inquisitors ordered the destruction. Ah. A rumor. Something to repeat when you want to frighten children."

Pen had not moved a hair while Lynx was speaking. She just felt cold. Pen had been witness to the destruction of worlds before. The Tyranid enemy stripped them bare. A virus bombardment had sealed the doom of one. The heavy weapons on cruisers and the giant battleships had seared glittering streaks of destruction across cities, towns, and fortresses. But, there was something primordial in the fear of a giant, unstoppable comet, hell bent on obliterating a world.

"No," Lynx began again, "There will be no need to hit the enemy a direct hit. The equation is a simple one. One half the mass times velocity squared, equals the energy output of the collision. It will go faster, as gravity takes hold. It will make a crater about a thousand kilometers across. Enough energy will be released, that the entire surface of the planet will become a firestorm, as the shock wave passes over. The label 'hell world' will fall short of describing what will become of the surface of that planet. No. There will be no need of a direct hit."

Pen had turned her back when Lynx had begun speaking again. There was no way that Pen wanted Lynx to see what Pen's face might show. Let Lynx try to read Pen's emotions, if she wanted, but no outward sign would Pen grant to Lynx, if she could.

"Look here," Pen said into the moment of silence following Lynx's last words. "The enemy that could lift off are all heading toward the tail of the comet, along with all the enemy fleet that was still in orbit of the planet."

"An all, or nothing, bid on the part of our adversaries." Lynx answered. "They do not know that there is a fleet of battleships in front of them, as well as a giant comet, moving too fast to be stopped, or turned. For them, the answer is nothing."

Lynx rose and returned to the comm equipment, as Pen watched, and listened. Lynx ordered the Misfit fleet of cruisers and destroyers to angle around in such a way, that they would be in the way of any escape maneuvers of the enemy, once the enemy found out what awaited them. She then ordered the Nova fleet to drop shields on the comet, and engage the enemy, once they were in range to do so. Lastly, Lynx ordered her cruiser's captain to plot a course not to intercept the Nova fleet, but to come in behind them, Lynx did not want to get in front of the big guns both fleets would be using about that time.

Pen took her station at the comm equipment, so familiar, after years at this position. She also opened a new line. One she had just taken to opening some months ago. A line to the equipment in her quarters. Pen felt that something of great import was on the move, it was necessary to record the

proceedings in as many ways as possible. In case anything happened to her. At least, that was what she told herself.

Pen watched the slow dance of the images. The cone shaped cloud of the Tyranid fleet boring straight in at the feathery wisps that had given away the presence of a new threat. The curving parabolic approach of the Misfit fleet, spread out in three lines, two lines of destroyers in front, one line of cruisers a little behind. Ulthor's and Althor's cruiser in the forefront, of course.

Pen momentarily wished that she had a Misfit destroyer assigned to her, on some of her independent missions. That little ship could unleash a storm of missiles, a host of stealth interceptor drones, lay stealth mines, and follow it all up with a volley of Pulsed Particle Accelerator canons. Pen had already witnessed several Misfit destroyer attacks on the Tyranids. The destroyer would close at a very high rate of speed, unleash all its hate and discontent in one massed volley, then adrift with no energy left to maneuver, the remarkable little craft would curve away in a "corkscrew" maneuver, by firing little *steam* powered jets at an angle to its forward momentum. Clever is as clever does.

Pen took note of the little representation of the cruiser they were aboard, as it approached the wisp of gasses in the display overhead. Very shortly they would be in the tail of the still hidden comet, hopefully out of the way of the still hidden battleships. Pen had not seen Nova fleet ships before. But, like so many things, Pen had heard a little about them. Those ships had a whole array of terrible weapons with which to bombard planets, or hammer enemy ships into fragments. Pen did not want to be in front of those guns, no. Pen could see it would only be a little wait until the converging enemies met. Pen sat back a little to wait, and watch.

V.

The Mind of the new Hive felt anger. Caused by frustration. A little fear too. The fear of the hunted. The Old Hive Mind was hunting for this new hive. These creatures that encased themselves in metal and rock hunted the new hive, too. Deep in the DNA maps of all things Tyranid, the new Hive Mind explored, desperate to find means to grow, feed, expand into the galaxy, and escape the trap of so many enemies so near. It found old, old maps and plans for DNA recombination. New means to combine organics it had harvested. Also means to combine the creatures who love metal with the flesh of the hive. And build their beloved metal into the flesh of the hive, as well. The Hive Mind could then take on the long shooting weapons of its enemies, and turn the weapons against them. A world had been found where this new growing could be done.

So this had been done. The new Hive Ships, that would house the nest of the new hive, had better defense and terrible new firepower. But, the new Hive needed much new organic mass to build the new hive. Raids had to be sent. Risk of discovery went with the raids. The Mind knew that death of the Hive would result from discovery. But, to do nothing was death as well. Raids went out. And brought back much new bio-mass with which to build. And enemies followed. Wrapped in steel. Buzzing about in anger, they were to few to destroy the new Hive. Not while it had the powerful weapons on the planet to burn the enemies of the new Hive. Not once the new ships were completed. Each had taken onto itself one of the great weapons that spit great pillars of light, as well as much store of the means to fire each of the great weapons.

Now the Hive had felt a new threat. Out in far space, the presence of many new enemy minds. Hidden. Only a finger of light, thin and frail, to mark the approach of a host of new enemies. Consider. Now there may be enough enemies to kill the Hive. If they come together. So. Strike. Now. While they are apart. Not all the new ships are ready. Those that are will have to be enough. All that can, must attack. The Hive survives, or dies. Here. Now. Attack.

VI.

Pen increased the magnification of the view. Yes, the shielding around the Nova fleet was wavering, fading. Without meaning to, Pen drew in a hiss of a breath.

The comet was revealed. Almost round. Almost white. Huge. Without the shield in place, the surface of the comet was not protected from the radiation of the sun. It began to get fuzzy around the comet, then the fuzzy became a fog. The fog began to gracefully sweep back, away from the sun, in a broadening fan shape. The comet was hidden behind its own mask.

Pen's attention was drawn to the Nova ships.

Each of the Nova fleet battleships was a perfect copy of the others. Each was a strange collection of shapes. The most prominent feature was the huge barrels projecting out of the large weapons turrets. All the turrets were arranged in such a way that all the weapons could be brought to bear on an enemy with a minimum of maneuvering. Each gun barrel was a massive rail gun. Theoretically, a magnetic rail gun could 'fire' a projectile at close to the speed of light. At least, in the vacuum of space, it was supposed to be possible. Pen knew that each of the ceramic, torpedo shaped, projectiles traveled very fast, were very large, and even incorporated their own darkening technology, to keep the projectiles hidden until they could impact the target. Pen also took note of the smaller rail gun turrets, the pulsed particle accelerator gun turrets, and finally, the big laser mounts on the flanks of the ship's hull. Purpose built for bringing much violence to the Emperor's enemies. One would be bad, here were nine.

Lynx shifted the view of the holographic image Pen had been admiring.

The enemy fleet was not boring in at the Nova fleet, but rather, at the comet. Could they hope to destroy it, Pen wondered, or even deflect it?

"I hope they waste themselves trying to stop the comet." Lynx spoke up. "I would rather they waste their attack on that chunk of ice, then cause any more grief to the Misfit fleet, or concentrate on destroying one or more of those battleships."

"Any minute now," Pen added, "those battleships should be in a position to begin firing into the flanks of the Tyrannid fleet."

Pen's eyes widened with surprise. Long before they should have tried, the enemy opened fire. The largest of the enemy ships were near the front of the speeding enemy fleet, unusual for them. From a number of those ships, streak after streak of crimson lashed out at the ball of ice pictured in the holo. Pen had seen those crimson streaks before. The immensely powerful lasers from the planet.

"The fog around the comet is diffusing the lasers." Lynx stated flatly. "I believe enough energy is getting through to be a problem, though." Lynx leaned forward to switch on a comm circuit.

"Admiral, you must attack the enemy now, optimum range or not." Lynx could have been ordering up a meal, by her voice. Another circuit indicator was winking. Lynx clicked it on.

"Inquisitor." It was Ulthor. "I do not think the enemy is attempting escape. Let us attack those filthy vermin from here. We could crush them in a vise."

"I would like that very much," Lynx answered seriously, "but, your fleet has suffered enough. If you were destroyed, there would be no one to block those that will surely try to escape."

"I have just received word that another Misfit fleet will arrive in only hours." Ulthor answered, then, more sternly, "I wish to take a hand in exterminating those abominations."

"I would rather have you as a live ally, not a dead hero." Lynx answered, less sternly than was her usual. "No one on this new fleet will know me. I'm just a meddling Imperial bureaucrat to them. I need you to tell them different."

"I have resolved all that, already." Ulthor replied, "I would rather have your order to attack, than not."

Pen could only see the back of Lynx's head, as Lynx paused to consider. Pen was sure it was a blank, neutral expression. Even if there was anger beneath. Pen felt there must be anger. It sounded to Pen as if Ulthor was about to attack, with or without 'approval' from the Inquisitor, he was just being polite.

"Ulthor, it would please me if you would lead your fleet in the attack on the enemy. Let no enemy ship survive." Lynx answered, at last. Then clicked off, as a half smile appeared on Ulthor's face.

"Captain," Lynx stated, almost too calmly, "take the cruiser behind the third battleship in line. We will join in the risk of battle." She clicked off before the captain could reply.

With a flop, Lynx collapsed into the nearby command chair, set to work strapping herself in. Pen thought that Lynx must be very weary.

Pen went back to her work, Lynx would do hers. Pen magnified on the Nova ships. They had begun to look strange. Yes. All nine were beginning to look like glass. In another moment, all nine looked as if they were made entirely of mirror glass. The silvery reflection could only be one thing. The Nova ships had set their shields to be totally energy reflective. Projectiles could still get through, but energy weapons would have a hard time. Pen wondered if the intense energy of those massive lasers would not burn through, anyway. She was about to find out, she guessed.

All the turrets on the Nova ships were pointed in the direction of the enemy, but Pen could not tell that they had begun firing, as yet.

Brilliant flashes among the Tyranid fleet indicated that the attack was indeed underway. Pen had forgot that the rail guns gave off no flash, or other indication of firing. The giant ceramic torpedo shapes left the barrels of the guns with no sign of the energy that propelled them. Magnetic energy gave no telltale sign, like other propellants. It appeared to Pen that some of the ceramic projectiles were meant to smash into the enemy ships, while others were meant to detonate as soon as they got close to an enemy. In any case, brilliant spheres of radiance expanded amongst the Tyranid fleet.

Right on cue, all the Tyranid fleet wheeled toward the Nova ships. They all began to weave, and swerve, in an effort to throw off the invisible black ceramic torpedoes that were wrecking such havoc on them. Some of the enemy craft stayed in the path of the on-coming comet, firing weapons of Tyranid, and human, design into the on-rushing dirty ice.

Pen could see the firing of the enemy's weapons, and the way the lasers were reflected from the Nova battleships without causing harm.

The enemy's largest ships stopped swerving, and all settled into one course. All at once, all the ships carrying the big lasers fired, at a single Nova ship. A single mind was at work, all the lasers were focused on a single point on the Nova Marine battleship, just forward of the two big turrets. Overwhelmed, the energy shield was burned through. An ugly red gash was traced along the hull, and up one side of the most forward of the big rail gun turrets. One of the big gun barrels had been cut off at an angle, about half way up.

This must have annoyed the Nova Marine admiral, Pen thought, because now all the Nova battleships unleashed all their energy weapons, as well as new volleys of hyper speed rail projectiles. One of the biggest Tyranid ships merely evaporated in the hail of concentrated fire. Then another. Despite wild maneuvering.

A horde of smaller enemy ships broke away from the enemy fleet. These would be bent on suicide, living guided missiles sent to achieve the will of the single mind that guides them.

A flash pulled Pen's attention away from her observation and musings. At the very edge of the projected display, something looked familiar. Yes. Pen's attempt to magnify showed new ships had just arrived out of non-space. More enemy. A lot more.

"Those must be the raiders the Misfits had dealt with." Lynx sounded angry. "They must have been on a very long raid, to only just now be returning."

"Or maybe they were just waiting for us to tip our hand, to make our all out attempt to destroy them." Pen was surprised at the bitter anger in her own voice. "It seems too convenient for more of the enemy's fleet to show up just now."

"Yes, well. I just hope our own re-enforcements arrive soon. But, we must plan for our own people to get here late." Lynx was saying, while opening comm channels. Faces started appearing on different displays.

"Ulthor, break off your course. You must turn and engage those new enemy ships. Concentrate on those four monster big ships in the center of their fleet. They won't be able to ignore your attacks if you do." Lynx spoke quickly, not really wanting an answer, only compliance.

"They are many more than we." Ulthor answered anyway. "Are we to die without seeing the death of our enemy's nest?"

"I do not expect you to make mindless attacks on the center of the enemy, and die." Lynx was beginning to sound angry again. "I expect you to delay the enemy, while destroying all you can. I want you alive. I will need your ships, even if more of our own arrive. I do not think anything can save the enemy's nest now." The display of Ulthor went dark.

"Admiral." The commanding tone was very present in Lynx's voice. "The enemy ships that have the big lasers are the only threat I see to our plan to smash the planet. Take them out. Then leave the rest of that enemy for mopping up operations when more of our people get here. Rather, turn your guns on the new enemy fleet. It would help if this could be done before the Misfit fleet is done in."

The contrast of the very pale skin and the jet black hair and eyes of the admiral, gave him a haunted look. An eternity spent in deep space looked out at the two women. The Admiral nodded his head, slightly, and without a word, the display went dark.

“Captain, This cruiser needs to add its guns and missiles to the fight,” Lynx said, leaning back in her seat a bit, “I think that our firepower would be the most help to the Misfit fleet. What do you think?”

The captain of the cruiser was not used to being asked, only told by the Inquisitor. It took him a couple of moments to formulate an answer.

“I think our maneuverability and firepower would be better used with the cruisers of the Misfits, also. I do not think much of taking part in a slugging match with battleships around me. We might get in the way of some heavy duty punishment meant for the battleships.”

“Then set a course to join Ulthor and his cruisers.” Lynx blanked the screen of the captain. The only display left was the chamber filling holo projection of the swirling and maneuvering fleets.

The display filled with more ships.

Pen noted that every ship that could, whatever size or purpose craft, was lifting off the planet.

“Those ships will probably be filled with those human slaves dominated by this enemy.” Lynx said coolly. “The ones that made this blending of technologies possible.”

“But, look at this,” Pen broke in, “The newly arrived fleet is not engaging the Misfit fleet. They are trying to push through to join up and make one big fleet.”

“Maybe.” Lynx answered, doubt in her voice. “That fleet from the planet, and this new one rising from the planet, don’t seem to be maneuvering much. They are staying in the path of the comet core we have sent at the planet. All the enemy fire is not concentrated, either. They are dividing themselves between the defense of the planet, firing on the core of ice, firing on us, and not accomplishing anything much. Very unlike our enemy. A single purpose was always evident before. This new bunch of raiders are even dividing between stationing around the planet and attacking the comet and us.”

Pen looked at the comet again. The gravity of the star, and the planet, had served to accelerate that small moon of ice. It was very close to the planet. If the enemy fleets did not move out of the way soon, they would be pulverized by the on-rushing ice moon.

Pen tried to study the players in this drama. The Nova fleet was systematically firing on one enemy ship after another, leaving it to fire on another only when there was nothing left to shoot at of the first. The Misfit fleet, caught somewhat short by the sudden maneuvers away from them, were trying to catch up with the returned fleet of raiders. Lynx’s cruiser was trying to join with the Misfit ships, while not getting caught alone by one or more of the swarms of enemy ships out there.

Pen was momentarily startled by the sudden flare across a large section of the holo in the room.

“The Nova Marines have set off quite a few nuclear mines in front of that bunch of attacking small craft. They won’t get to ram any Nova ships.” Lynx noted with satisfaction.

Pen returned to her attempt to analyze what she could see of the battle. The enemy had abandoned its former tactics of ramming, or boarding. Not a single attempt to board a Misfit or Nova ship had been made. Some attempts to ram had been made. But, nothing like the concentrated effort that had been the hallmark of the enemy before. Instead, this had been, and is, a battle of big guns against big guns. Something the servants of the Emperor had centuries of experience at. Worse for the enemy, they have tied themselves to the defense of a single planet. The Tyranid enemy had always before conquered a planet, devoured anything alive, and then moved on, not caring to defend any chunk of rock. Pen was sure of it. Compared to every other encounter with the Tyranid enemy, this bunch was insane.

“I count fourteen of the giant enemy ships still on the planet, unable to move I guess.” Lynx said, breaking up Pen’s thoughts.

“Could that be why most of the enemy are still in the path of the ice?” Pen asked.

“It must be. In a very few minutes some of those ships are going to be crushed by ice. They must be trying to stop the comet because of the ships, or something else, trapped on the planet.”

“All that firing at the comet does not seem to have any effect.” Pen observed.

“Oh yes it is.” Lynx fired back. “The mass of the comet is less, but worse, I think that it may fly apart, with only a little left to strike the planet. Those big lasers worry me most.”

“There is only one of the big enemy ships with a high yield laser left.” Pen added confidently, “If it doesn’t move away in a few seconds, the Nova ships won’t have to go after it, it will be smeared all over that comet.”

Even as Pen spoke she noted that the enemy ship was firing its laser at the fastest possible rate. Right into the center of the comet mass. Would the laser burn out first, or would the ship be crushed first? There was no question, the big Tyranid ship with the human made laser was not trying to get out of the way of the ice. It was accelerating toward it.

Collision.

A blinding ball of radiance marked the destruction of the enemy ship.

The comet!

Pen almost gasped out loud.

It was coming apart. Slowly. Several large pieces, and more than two dozen littler ones were visible in the 3D holo filling the room.

A hiss came from the direction of Lynx.

Pen turned to look at what Lynx was doing. Lynx was fair flying over the control consol.

Pen waited. It did not take long. The battle outside seemed of less importance, somehow.

“The computer says that the planet is too close, the velocity too great.” Lynx clipped out fiercely. “The pieces cannot escape the gravity well. They are all going to hit the planet. Good. All they have done is spread the destruction from one massive crater into many very large impacts. Good”

“What do you mean?” Pen asked “They won’t all just hit at the same time?”

“No. The curve is wrong.” Lynx explained. “The comet is not boring straight in. The approach to the planet is a curve. If the enemy understood the rules of motion of bodies in space, they might have tried to increase the angle of the curve, instead of trying to break the comet, or try to move the comet away.”

“What’s that, try to move the comet more toward the planet?” Pen could not help being fascinated now.

“Yes. Toward the planet. Tighten the angle, and gravity pulls more quickly, tightening the angle even more, increasing gravity’s pull, and acceleration, until the comet is headed directly at the planet.” Lynx answered smugly, “The surest way to not hit a moving body, with another moving body, is to aim right at it. The comet would pass behind the path of the planet. We have worked hard to place the comet in the path of the planet.”

“I think I understand now.” Pen said slowly.

“Good. Now explain to me the enemy’s behavior, of late.” Lynx seem to ask the room.

“Ummm....” Pen tried to guess what Lynx meant.

“The enemy is trying to meld its technology with ours. For some special advantage, I suppose.” Lynx sounded like an instructor Pen had once, long ago. “They are not behaving as they should, either. Never mind that this different colored nest of enemies seems to fight the original invaders of our galaxy. They should behave similarly. Our intelligence gathered to date indicates how most of the enemy are programmed by a single strong mind influence. But lately, all of the Tyranid enemy has gone insane. None behave in expected manners. Well, what have you to say?” Lynx turned and faced Pen.

Pen was not looking a Lynx, but up above. “Uhh...”

Lynx spun around and looked up at the displays.

From above and below the elliptic plane of planets, to better avoid gravity wells, and appear as close to the contested planet as possible, more fleets were arriving.

Close by the Nova battleships, but somewhat farther out, long lines of speeding cruisers, destroyers, and fast attack torpedo carriers, all with Nova markings, were moving to join the battleships. These fast attack torpedo carriers were unique to the Nova Marines. Because the Nova Marines had so much of deep space, as well as planetary systems to patrol, the Nova Marines have a very large fleet, a very large Brotherhood of Marines, and their own Anvil and Forge worlds to develop and produce their weapons of war. The fast attack ships, and the flocks of Nova torpedoes they carry, are two such developments. The Empire has what they call Nova bombs, but they are pale in comparison with the torpedoes of the Nova Marines. The Nova bombs of the Empire do not give off much radiation. The torpedoes of the Nova Marines are rumored to have the power to create a fireball a hundred kilometers across, with heat and radiation to rival an exploding sun.

More in the direction of this system’s star, another fleet of Misfit ships had arrived out of non-space, spread out, and were charging toward their kindred ships. Lynx took note that there were very many more, and some were a lot bigger, than the nearly exhausted Misfit fleet that had

accompanied Lynx on this long siege. Lynx hoped the new arrivals were fresh, with fully stocked stores of missiles and energy supplies. Particularly as Lynx took in what Pen was pointing to.

South of the planetary plane, opposite the gathering might of the Empire, Tyranid ships were arriving. Many had arrived, many more were still arriving out of non-space. These were of the more normal design of Tyranid ships. The fleet that had first conquered this planet, now returned to defend it?

“There are times that I think the enemy can read our plans.” Lynx bit out. “Look at all the times that their ships have showed up to strengthen their assault, and counter our fleet’s arrivals, in past operations.”

“This would not be the first war where there were traitors feeding information to the enemies of humanity.” Pen answered almost absently, she was too absorbed with taking in the spreading panorama.

“Yes, and we have been here a long time, waiting to finish this job.” Lynx answered, a sharp bite still in her words. “I do not think they are even trying to reach the comet fragments, now. The other survivors have given up too.”

Pen turned to look at the comets view again.

“It won’t be long before that monster hits the planet.” Lynx pointed out, less bitterly. “Look how the planet’s gravity is pulling the pieces out into a long string of comet fragments. Those things are going to come down all across the northern half of this world. A couple of big ones might hit the southern half of the planet, I’m not sure without running some computations.”

Pen asked, “Are you really sure that those smaller pieces will kill the planet, just like one big rock?” She could not believe it, somehow.

“Not the planet, just what lives on it.” Lynx said, the hard edge still not gone from her words. “The amount of energy released by those collisions will be the same as if one big rock had hit. The enemy has helped our cause, because now the impact damage will be spread out. Some impacts will be in water, others on hard rock, both bring about different climatic results. No, I don’t think we need fear that anything will live down there. The atmosphere will be a boiling pressure cooker, for a while. Then a frozen icy wasteland for years to come. In a hundred years, maybe less, the Empire can return and resettle this place.”

“But, look now,” Lynx pointed at the uppermost holo display, “We have more immediate problems. The various pieces of our fleets are nearly finished with maneuvers for position, they are starting to close with the enemy.”

Lynx switched a channel. “Captain, how are we fixed for combat stores?”

A voice filled the chambers, without a face to anchor the words to. “We have less than half the missiles we should have.” Came the answer. “Our energy supplies are better, but not by a lot. I would have liked to see more supply ships arrive, before this thing came to a head.”

“Yes, well we just have to make do.” Lynx answered. “We were lucky to get the supply ships we did. Now. Get us alongside our friends, and let us finish this fight.”

“Aye.” With that the voice was gone in an echo.

Lynx activated some controls, and the room filling holo changed size reference. Now the spreading of the fleets could be made out more clearly. Each ship was only a speck of blue, or red light, showing friend or enemy, floating between the two women, and the high, curved ceiling of Inquisitor’s quarters. Even at this scale, the high speed of many of the ships meant that movement was visible.

Pen took in the way ships of both sides were trying to get to the most favorable positions, for their type of ship. The big ships, with the big guns were roughly in the center of the Imperial formations, with some smaller craft as escorts. The largest number of ships, the cruisers, were in several groups around the big ships, moving slightly away from each other, and the big ships. Maneuvering room for when the shooting starts. Then on the edges of the Imperial formations, the really fast destroyers and fighters. Already in the their fast parabolic arcs, building up speed, so that they could curve in to make their fast slashing attacks. Hopefully timed to coincide with the main fire of the big dreadnaughts and cruisers. Too early or too late, and the little ships would take the brunt of the defensive fire, and even the rapidly darting little ships could not avoid a sky full of fire.

Pen knew that one of the little destroyers was hers. Or, the one she used when Lynx sent her away on some errand. She hoped the people she knew on that little ship would make it.

Pen looked again at the spreading of the Empire's forces. All the little blue specks made a sort of web, closing in on the red specks of the enemy.

The red specks also were spreading out to receive the attack of their enemy. The biggest ships were forming in a disk shape in the rear, with the medium size ships forming a larger disk in the middle, and the small Tyranid ships were formed into a cone shape, pointed at the Imperial fleet. There were so many more Tyranid ships, that they were formed into layers in their respective disc pattern. The little ships were an unnumbered swarm of Tyranid vessels. The approaching Imperials were arrayed in single file, stretching out to fill enough of the volume of space that it would be more difficult for the enemy to envelope them from all sides.

Lynx suddenly switched the view to a closer look at the planet. A brilliant flare of light was on the surface of the planet, some ways south of the north pole, on the little display of the planet.

"The comet reached the planet sooner than I thought it would." Lynx said quietly. "At least the first pieces have. It will be some hours until all the big pieces reach the planet. At least that threat to this sector is gone." Lynx switched back to the big view. "This show is about to start. I hope those Misfits are right about this."

"What's that?" Pen asked. "About what?"

"They believe that all the Tyranid forces in this area are already here," Lynx answered, "or we would have more of the enemy arrive before this. I still do not like how the enemy arrived with major forces just as we made our final move against the planet. Our plans are leaking out, somehow, and the leak must be plugged."

"Perhaps one of the supply ships had enemy eyes aboard." Pen offered. "We have known for some time about enemy constructs made to look real human."

"No. I am sure some human looking spy, or even corrupted human, has found a reason to get near our little operation." Lynx almost growled. "None of them should have been aware of our bringing a cloaked asteroid or comet down on this planet. No. It cannot be an accident that the enemy shows up just when all our forces come together. Somehow the enemy is intercepting our messages, decoding them, and then moving to counter our planned moves. We have not been changing our codes often enough. That must be it." Lynx turned to face Pen.

Pen just pointed up past Lynx's right shoulder.

Lynx finished turning in a full circle, to look up where Pen was pointing.

The Tyranid fleets had shifted, and accelerated. The flat disc shape of the groups had shifted into an uneven arrowhead shape. Was still shifting. All toward the part of the sky that held the Misfit fleets. Pen thought she knew what the opening moves of the Tyranids meant. Destroy the Misfit fleets, and this whole area would be near defenseless. If the Empire tried to shift Imperial fleet elements here, then other areas would be weakened. Humanity's forces would be spread more thinly, and if Lynx was right about the enemy breaking codes, then the enemy would know which areas were most vulnerable. That, or 'write off' this little piece of the galaxy as lost to the enemy. The enemy would lose a planet, but gain dozens of star systems. That is just how the enemy thinks, sacrifice some so that many can prosper.

Pen's full attention came back to what Lynx was saying.

"That's right," Lynx's command voice was still in fine tune, "I said withdraw. Make the enemy pursue you. Give the rest of us time to swing around. Then we can all combine our attacks as planned."

"We are in a good position to envelope their lead elements in fire," The voice was Ulthor's. "Pulling back means losing envelopment, and maybe having a much less favorable head-on fight later."

"It also means losing all, or most, of your fleet if you stay and fight!" Lynx snapped. "The rest of us won't be in range to fire missiles until you are all dead!"

"Either way, a hard fight for us." Came the clipped answer from Ulthor. "I would decide for our people how to die. Not someone not of our worlds."

"The enemy wants to destroy you." Lynx growled out. "Then they can withdraw. If the Empire tries to protect this sector with fleet ships, the enemy will just strike the areas weakened to protect this part of the galaxy. Deny the enemy their goal. Withdraw."

"We will move toward you," Ulthor answered steadily, "through the smashed lead elements of the enemy fleets."

“Your ships are tough, but not tough enough to take ...” An audible click and brief hiss of static cut Lynx off. Ulthor had broken contact.

There was a terrible cold filling all of Pen’s insides, during this exchange. It got no better as Pen listened to Lynx order the Empire’s ships to hurry to maneuver to meet what might be left of the Misfit fleets.

Pen went to a panel of screens. She wanted to get a closer view of the Misfit actions. She zoomed a half a dozen screens in on various parts of the Misfit and Tyranid fleets.

The big, black looking, red trimmed Misfit ships began to fire their weapons. Missiles. Lasers. Rail guns spitting torrents of invisible ceramic projectiles. Bursts of plasma shells. And more.

Huge fireballs erupted as specially cloaked nuclear missiles arrived, behind the hordes of smaller Tyranid craft meant to intercept such things, among the medium and largest of the hive ships. More fireballs, as the smaller Tyranid warcraft leading the Tyranid charge, were smothered in missiles, lasers, and rail gun projectiles.

“What the ... ? By the flames of dying stars!” This outburst by Lynx caused Pen to twist around. Her eyes went wide, too.

Behind the Misfits, close to where the Inquisitor had ordered the Misfits to retreat to, more Tyranids! Popping in from non-space, lots of Tyranids. Once again showing a calculating disregard for the proximity of a gravity well that could destroy them, but did not. Had the Misfit fleet done what Lynx had commanded, then the enemy would already be among the Misfits, blasting.

“Where have I seen this before?” Lynx asked the ceiling bulkhead, “Give your enemy a way out, then net them!”

Lynx frantically worked controls, while grumbling, “Those bugger-hugging Misfits are well named! They choose to go against tactical wisdom, and the advice of one supposed to help them, well luck of the red sun, they escape a trap meant specially for them! Ugh!”

All the screens were changed by Lynx’s manipulations, now showing the faces of Imperial admirals and ship captains.

“Well, we’re in it now.” Lynx began. “Admiral, do you think we can all pull together in time, before the separate forces of the enemy hit us?”

The hard features of the Admiral, turned harder as he composed an answer. “Yes. Provided we all attack one of the enemy groups while concentrating.” He said after only a moment.

“I like an attack minded soldier.” Lynx said, a bitter smile forming. “Which of the separate formations do you propose to attack?”

“We have begun to move to support that Misfit fleet,” There was icy iron in the admiral’s reply, “I believe we should smash them first. There is not much time.”

“So be it.” Lynx said firmly, “Let us throw our whole weight against that bunch. Then maybe against any other smaller formation of the enemy, before they can organize into a solid offensive mass. Pen, can those new ships threaten the comet?”

Pen clicked on two new screens. “No. It is irrevocably caught in the planet’s gravity. The largest pieces will impact shortly. A couple of pieces have hit already.” Pen replied.

While they all watched, a bright flare lit up the night side of the planet, expanding upward rapidly, flattening as the super hot gases reached the edge of the atmosphere. Night had turned to day, down there.

Lynx was not speaking so loudly now, Pen could not hear. But, she could see. The patterns of the little dots was changing rapidly, on the newly restored big holograph. The little dots changed to symbols to represent the kinds of ships they were, big and little.

Pen leaned forward, a puzzled expression on her face.

Slowly it became clear. The big ships, the cruisers and battleships, were turning to the new attack plan, but the smallest ships were not in position. They were even falling further back. The sudden change of attack direction had caught them at the worst possible moment. The little craft had been accelerating into a very high speed attack trajectory, aiming for a point in space where enemy ships, and hopefully friendly ships, were supposed to meet. Now the littler ships were aimed at the wrong place. Although the fighters and destroyers could zig and zag, and corkscrew violently on an attack trajectory, to avoid enemy fire, they would still be slaves of momentum, and travel along a ‘base course’, the general direction they had speeded along. Things in space travel in a straight line,

until acted upon by things like gravity and engine propulsion. By firing their engines at an angle to their 'base course', ships can bend that straight line into a curve. The higher the angle, the tighter the curve, and the more engine power needed. To reverse course, a ship has two options. Turn engines into the direction of travel, and blast away until the ship stops, then begins to build up speed in the new direction, or turn engines to an angle of that direction of travel and curve around to the new direction of travel. The higher the initial speed, the longer to stop, or the greater the size of a curve is needed. There are limits to the amount of strain gravity compensators can handle, and a limit to the amount of 'gee forces' or multiples of one gravity unit, that a living body can stand.

All this means that the little ships would be struggling to catch up to the bigger ship's new attack plan.

The pause in the fighting was well and truly over. The Misfits and Tyranid fleets were already firing on one another.

Once again, the weapons that the Misfits had developed were taking a terrible toll on the enemy. The small ships of the enemy were swarming forward to ram, as well as grapple and board the ships of the Misfit fleet. The Misfit fleet had formed itself into a cylindrical formation, with troopships and other less combat effective ships in the center. This entire cylinder shape was attempting to drive past the mass of enemy ships between them and the rest of the Empire's fleet. Pen watched as streaks of flame cut across the dark sides of a Misfit warship, leaving a glowing red gash in the thick metal, but not cutting into the spaces beneath, this time.

Streaks and flares of energy cut across the empty space between rival forces. Flashes of brilliant blue-white as some of the fire hit home. Dozens of small Tyranid ships vanished in this way. Some of the Tyranid return fire got through, too. Several small Misfit ships died in fire. And one of the troopships, struck near the engines, was falling behind the maneuvering of the rest of the fleet.

Just as the two fleets were beginning to merge in a swirl of violence, the Misfit ships all rotated as one, and fired full main engines at right angles to their previous course. Because of the different angles, and high speed, of the two fleets, the Misfits had effectively disengaged from the larger mass of Tyranid warships. Only the newly arrived Tyranid fleet, coming up from behind, would be able to follow. The mass of Tyranid ships that had attacked head on were going to need time to curve around, to re-engage. This one maneuver bought time for the Imperial fleets to come to grips with the enemy, first.

Pen smiled. The Misfit command had ordered a direct assault on the Tyranid ships that had suddenly turned their full weight on the Misfits, seemingly playing into the hand of the Tyranids. But no. The Misfits draw the Tyranids into committing themselves, at high speed, drawing out and spreading out, the Tyranids, then break away at an angle the enemy cannot follow. Pen's eyes traced back along the way the Misfits were leaving, and she stopped smiling.

The damaged troopship was drifting, out of control. Jets of flame marked where atmosphere exited into space, carrying the fires inside out into space, through holes made by weapons hits.

What is that? Pen wondered to herself. Small specks, pouring like a swirl of dust out of dark openings in the hull of the dying ship. Pen zoomed the view in with higher magnification. By the cold dark void! The specks are the Misfit warriors and crew of the troopship, decked out in space armor and jump packs. Some were carrying missile launchers, others had great lasers, but many could not be seen to be carrying anything so large. What could they hope to do? No Imperial ship could slow to retrieve them while a battle raged. Pen's heart went out to those souls as fire from Tyranid ships tore through the scattering warriors. A couple of them flared into white fire, and were gone. Some more of the Misfit warriors came apart, as unseen projectiles tore through them. But not so many. As scattered as they were, the Tyranid fire was mostly tearing through empty space, instead of warriors. Where were these warriors going?

Pen pulled back the view. They were heading toward a very large, also disabled, Tyranid hive ship that was drifting toward them. Pen was fascinated. But first, she took in the larger battle, for a moment. The abrupt maneuver by the Misfit fleet had carried it out of harm's way, for a while. None of the other participants in this fight were yet in range to restart the battle in earnest. The unexpected new pause in the battle gave Pen a brief time to observe the little drama in one corner of this soon to be immense battle.

Switching back, Pen was again in awe of the tenaciousness of Misfit marines.

The abandoned troopship was consumed in fire, end to end. At places, the metal hull glowed red. The gutted hulk shook at times with internal explosions. Tiny bits of it spiraled away in all directions.

The virtual cloud of space suited individuals were approaching the drifting Tyranid hive ship. Those warriors with the big lasers and missile launchers had someone coordinating their fire, Pen reasoned. Any of the smaller Tyranid vessels that approached on a strafing run of the approaching marines, was met with a hail of homing missiles, and heavy laser fire. Some Tyranid ships had been heavily damaged, and a couple blown to bits when the lasers shredded the outer skin, allowing the following missiles to get inside. It did not escape Pen's notice that the Misfits were again using small nuclear warheads on the missiles. Not all missiles were, but enough that even a fairly large Tyranid ship could be hurt bad, should it get within range of these tenacious Misfits.

Now that she was zoomed in to a closer view of the space armored marines, Pen could see that they were not all marines. Many were crew of the doomed troopship, but also, Pen could see that the fighting machines were present as well. The walking dreadnaughts that carried heavy weapons into battle on land were also sailing through space. Somehow the Misfit dreadnaughts had been fitted with propulsion units. This had not been tried with Imperial forces before, but Pen could see that this might prove worthwhile. Those big walking machines were terrible in battle. The machines have a marine inside, yes, but they are heavily armored, with one or more heavy missile launchers, or lasers, or other forms of nastiness, as well as at least one enormous metal hand of inhuman power.

Pen was fascinated by the sight of the Misfit marines descending onto the enemy hive ship like thousands of specs of sand on the enormous gnarled hull. The defensive fire from the enemy ship seemed singularly ineffective, to Pen. Pen did not envy those marines. She had been in one of the enemy's ships. Most of those marines, maybe all of them, were only going to find death aboard the enemy vessel. Nevertheless, those marines were cutting dozens, hundreds of holes in the enemy vessel, and entering. Maybe the marines would be able to kill the ship, or its occupants anyway, and the Empire would have a prize to examine. Maybe.

Pen turned her views back to the main fleets approaching each other. There was nothing to see around the wounded hive ship, anymore.

A bright flash from a screen, on the edge of Pen's vision, made Pen turn to see.

Lynx was standing below a large display of the planet they had come to kill. A brilliant flash of light had caught Pen's eye. That flash was now a growing plume of radiance, covering a huge section of the upper portion of the planet. As it grew, Pen was startled to see that it was not the only one, just the largest.

Lynx seemed aware of Pen's attention. "One of the largest pieces just hit the planet. What do you think?" Lynx seemed to be asking the viewer.

"I think I can never sleep again," Pen answered, quietly. "Not without seeing the fiery death of an entire planet's population."

After a moment, Pen asked, "How many people were on that planet?"

"Not people!" Lynx shot back. "At best, enslaved minds. At worst, willing allies of our enemy." Another moment passed, Lynx said more quietly, "There had been several million souls on this planet, before the enemy came. How many of them have not been consumed by the enemy is impossible to say. Only those important to the enemy's plan would have been kept. Not many would fit that description."

"Why couldn't we have just used virus bombardment, or highly toxic, short lived poisons?" Pen blurted out. Having said that, she continued. "Instead of destroying the planet?"

Lynx's face was hard, and Pen could not see her eyes for the dark shadow across that part of her face. "Virus and chemical bombings have not been working." Lynx answered in a measured tone. "The enemy have adapted to our poisons as fast as we can come up with them. Also, the enemy breeds viruses to counter our viruses as soon as they run into a virus."

With more venom in her voice, Lynx went on. "They sure as hell will not be able to counter that!" Lynx threw an arm up at the display of the planet.

Pen's attention went again to the display, she could see that the fiery plume was spreading out, and that rings of scintillating red were spreading over the planet's surface. Walls of super heated compressed atmosphere traveling at three hundred kilometers an hour, smashing and incinerating

everything in its path. No, Pen was certain that she would never be able to sleep again. Even years from now, dreams of this day's work would come back to haunt her, always.

"There are still more pieces of the comet to fall." Lynx broke the silence. "But, we don't have time to watch. Look."

Pen turned to her own screens. The Empire's own forces were firing on the advancing Tyranid ships. The big battleships had come into range of the enemy.

Once again, energy tore streaks across space, ending in brilliant spheres of destruction. Pen did not like how this all was shaping up. The battleships were going in without their attendant destroyers and cruisers. The cruiser Lynx and Pen were in was near the rest of the cruisers of the Imperial fleet, but all of them were some ways behind the charging battleships. Pen was worried that the enemy would be able to ram, or board the Nova battleships, putting them out of the battle before the cruisers and littler ships could help. Indeed, the enemy seemed to be moving to do that very thing.

Now a very strange thing happened. The Nova battleships turned broadside to the enemy, and rolled on their side. This took the big rail gun and energy gun turrets away from a position to fire. Pen started to magnify the view, when scores of missiles burst from each of the battleships.

Pen pulled back, and turned again to the big view that still filled the Inquisitor's chambers. Pen noticed that Lynx was sitting back, quietly watching the unfolding battle. It dawned on Pen that in times past, Lynx would be commanding some portion, or all of the activities of the battle. Pen decided to ask what's wrong.

"Our people, especially the Nova Marines, know their jobs." Lynx stated, flatly. "Several years of experience and the total intelligence gathered on our enemies so far, are all in the hands of the Nova and Misfit commanders. They don't need me telling them their jobs. I have every confidence in the ability of our people. My only worry is that ability and technology may not be enough."

Pen hated it, when Lynx answered a question before Pen could ask. Pen looked back at the holo display.

The missiles were following some plan of the Nova admiral's. Pen could not quite make out where the missiles were actually targeted, what with the wild maneuvering of the missiles. In a few moments, it was made clear to Pen.

Swarms of small Tyranid ships were advancing on the Nova battleships. Despite the alienness of the enemy ships, humanity had learned some things about them. Some types of small enemy ships had as few as one Tyranid aboard, wired in to the ship, guiding it into fiery oblivion, if it rammed, or the Tyranid might guide the ship into the path of enemy weapons fire, thus protecting the larger ships of the hive. Swarms of small Tyranid ships were trying to intercept the incoming missiles now.

With a flash, Pen saw that the Nova admiral had targeted the small Tyranid ships. Giant flares of brilliance blotted out the small enemy ships. All across the sky, in what appeared random detonations, until the holo in Lynx's room looked like it was nearly a solid white illumination, on the end where the Tyranid ships were displayed. Apparently the battleships carried Nova missiles, also.

Some of the missiles were apparently targeted on the medium and large ships, and maybe the very largest of the hive ships, because they did not detonate with the rest. They had gone past. But something went wrong now. The missiles were being hit by something invisible. The missiles were breaking up, or flashing into disintegration. Something the missiles could not, did not detect. The Empire's forces would have to break up the Tyranid enemy forces a different way.

Pen looked at the tactical display, and tried to calculate the maneuvering of all the elements of this battle. The Misfits were curving their angle of attack, in an effort to rejoin the battle near the rest of the Imperial forces. The Misfits must have sown more of their black mines behind them, a number of Tyranid ships that had put themselves on a following course were being met with sudden damage and destruction.

The majority of the Nova fleet was struggling to catch up with its battleships, and would do so soon. The small fighters and destroyers were not bothering to try any fancy angles of attack, instead they were boring straight in, at increasingly high velocity. Pen thought that they might only get one attack in, doing this. Any fighters that survived the initial run in, would take so long to turn back into the battle, the fight could well be over.

The Tyranids were still not massed into one big fleet, but the various segments were converging fast. Pen calculated that the Nova fleet would just finish their first run at the first group of enemy ships, and then would start to come into contact with the second, larger group of enemy ships.

The problem was that the Nova fleet would be coming into the fight in pieces, and so the concentration of firepower that the Empire relied on so heavily, would be much less.

Lynx suddenly stirred, moved over to a command set, and said simply:

“Begin plan four.”

Pen twisted around at the sound of Lynx’s voice, then back to her own views of the battle. The Nova fleet battleships, and cruisers, were turning their engines into the direction of attack, and firing full main engines. They were slowing, or stopping, during an attack!

“Lynx, what are you doing?” Pen asked, horror filling her mind at the thought of the consequences. “If those ships stop, they will be easily boarded, or blasted to ribbons!”

“I’ve arranged a little surprise for our enemy.” Lynx answered calmly. “Let us see how our enemy likes it when humanity fights fire with fire.”

“What fire?” Pen asked, horror still twisting her insides.

“Watch” Was Lynx’s only answer.

Pen had been involved with space fleets too long. She knew that a certain amount of velocity was considered the minimum speed for vessels in battle. Too slow, or stopped, meant certain annihilation. The calculations to hit a slow enemy were much easier than the calculations for hitting a speeding vessel moving at a steepening angle. Also, maneuvers seemed more sudden and radical at speed, where a slow vessel seemed to lumber and creep into turns. Now, here was all the larger Nova fleet ships ... slowing.

A tremble, or faint shudder, passed through the ship beneath Pen’s feet. This cruiser was slowing, as well.

Pen did as she was told, and watched.

Even as they slowed, the big guns of the battleships continued to spit out tremendous bolts of energy, or fusillades of projectiles from rail guns. Something else. Pen could just make out black cylinders, when she cranked up the magnification. Imperial mines. Set adrift before the main engines were fired. They would continue on toward the Tyranid enemy. These could be seen, so Pen figured that the Nova command wanted to deny the enemy a straight in approach, since the enemy’s littlest ships were near eradicated, and so could not sweep away the mines.

The Imperial fighters and destroyers charged past the Nova battleships and cruisers.

The cruisers and battleships again reversed direction, again shuddering with renewed main engine thrust, as the now combined large ship forces went back into the attack.

The Tyranid weapons were now in range, as were the weapons of the cruisers. But now the situation was reversed. The Empire’s ships had to take the fire from the Tyranid ships without being able to return fire. The Nova ships might hit the speeding fighters and destroyers, now between the two rivals.

The fighters and destroyers continued to accelerate, even as they maneuvered wildly to avoid the enemy’s defensive fire. The wild turns, and twisting did not change the direction of the charge though, straight in at the biggest ships the enemy had.

Pen watched as some fighters, and a destroyer blazed, and were gone. Hit by sweeps of criss-crossing enemy fire.

Pen saw a couple of missiles fly out from each fighter, more from the destroyers.

Something is not right. Those fighters carry more missiles, and Pen’s displays show those missiles to be ‘hot’, or armed, in the tubes.

The destroyers were trying to clear the way for the fighters to get in very close to the biggest Tyranid ships, Pen could see.

Medium sized Tyranid ships that tried to come between the big Tyranid ships and the hard charging Imperial fighters were either heavily damaged, or glittering shards of ruin spinning off into space. Both from the guns and missiles of the destroyers, and from the desperate defensive fire from the big Tyranid ships that were targeted.

The fighters screamed in at ever increasing speed.

The first missiles from the fighters struck home in bursts of angry red. Nearly all the missiles struck what they were aimed at, few missed, and still fewer were torn apart by Tyranid weapons.

The fighters straightened out their attack course, several fighters each boring in on the biggest hive ships. Pen knew that at point blank range, no radical maneuver or defensive volleys of fire could

stop the mass of missiles the fighters were about to launch. But they were getting awfully close, they might get caught in their own blast.

Pen clenched her jaw, and her eyes widened as several fighters disappeared into the not yet dissipated ball of fire of missile hits on Tyranid ships.

The horror of what she had just witnessed shocked her senses. Highly trained, highly valuable crews were piloting their craft straight into ragged holes their first missiles had made.

One was very visible to Pen. The light from this system's sun illuminated the fighter, and the hole in the damaged Tyranid ship, in stark contrasts. The fighter looked as if it would fly past the big hive ship, but redirected its engines, and spiraled into the ragged opening, in a split instant. The defensive fire from the Tyranids could not cope with these unexpected developments. The great hive ship seemed to stagger and shudder, and ... Flash! The great ship vanished in a maelstrom of swirling red fire.

Pen did not blink, she could only stare.

More, then still more fighters disappeared.

In only a few instants all the surviving fighters disappeared, sometimes several into one large enemy ship. A few Imperial fighters became glittering fragments before they could complete the maneuver.

Where they had gone, great gouts of fire rent and tore the huge Tyranid warships apart. The first missiles had torn a hole in the tough skin of the Tyranid ships, then, surviving human fighter spacecraft flew inside the great vessels, where the 'hot' missiles the fighters carried could detonate somewhere deeper in the guts of the enemy.

Nuclear fire unleashed within the armored shell.

Some of the ships so struck came apart, geysers of flame jetting into space from separate large pieces. Other ships hit in this attack, began to drift, hulls nearly intact, but with sheets of blue-white fire streaming into space, through the great rents the first missiles had blasted.

Pen turned her head, glared angrily at Lynx.

"You ordered them to commit suicide?" Pen could barely get the words out.

"They volunteered." Lynx answered simply. "For years the enemy has used suicide tactics against our ships. Now we have given them back some of their own medicine."

Pen's eyes were drawn up to the main holo again. The two fleets were exchanging fire again. Now that the fighters were gone, and the destroyers, those that were still alive, had passed the Tyranid fleet.

"Look," Lynx commanded. "The heart of the enemy has been cut out. The only very large ships left to the enemy, are the ones in the bunch we have not yet engaged."

"I'm thinking that a second such attack will not be so easy." Pen added, still angry at the sight.

"No. But it will give the enemy something new to deal with." Lynx answered, seeming not to notice, or care, that Pen was sick and angry at the sacrifice of brave crews. "Now we have a chance in a slugging match with our enemies. They do not outnumber us so much now."

Pen went back to observing the battle.

The enemy did seem to be in disarray now. All the Empire's ships were blasting with volley after volley. And although the enemy was firing back, the fire from the Nova ships was more telling. And the Misfits were rejoining the battle on one flank of the scattered enemy. This first group of Tyranids were in dire straights. But. Pen did not like what she saw of the remainder of the enemy's forces. They were gathered together now. The swirling mass of enemy ships was indeed responding to the new threat of hand delivered nuclear weapons. The large and medium sized ships were now escorted by small swarms of very maneuverable, tiny craft. Other small Tyranid warcraft were out in front, daring the humans to fire off more waves of big nuclear missiles. This time all the littlest Tyranid ships would not be burned at once. Pen appreciated how fast the enemy responded to new threats.

Also, the enemy was not charging straight in. The enemy had slowed some, and was closing at an angle calculated to make escape maneuvers, like the one the Misfit fleet had recently accomplished, difficult or impossible. For the Empire's fleet to try such a maneuver now, strung out like it was, the closing Tyranid enemy would just smash and devour the trailing human fleet elements.

Perhaps the trailing third of the fleet would be lost. With so many cruisers, and maybe a battleship, lost, there would be no hope for the human fleet but escape. No such radical maneuvers were likely.

The two fleets closed the distance, converging along curved paths that would bring them together in near parallel courses, every weapon that could, firing.

Pen did not like what was going on. The Tyranid enemy was having it their way. They would soon be among the human ships. Ramming. Boarding. Pen could hear the screams in her head, from those past occasions she had witnessed Tyranid boarding of human ships.

As many ships as the enemy seemed to lose, from the blasting of Imperial big guns, it did not seem enough. The cruisers, including the Inquisitor's, had long joined in the fusillades of gun and missile fire, were now taking enemy return fire. Imperial cruisers and destroyers were being hit, some crippled, a few blasted to bits. Pen noted that the Misfit fleet was taking casualties, as well. The big battleships were being hit, a lot, but seemed not to heed the damage.

The Tyranid ships were matching course and speed with the human fleet ships. Then, boarding was the choice, not ramming, Pen figured. More 'biologic' material for the hive to build on. Hot anger began to build in Pen. She would not allow her 'biologic material' to be used to 'build' some new Tyranid creature. Pen had carried a small nuclear grenade ever since the discovery that the Tyranids avoided radioactive contaminated materials. Pen made a silent prayer that she would be able to activate it, at the last, when all hope was lost.

The Tyranid fleet was among the human ships.

Pen could see that groups of human ships were being isolated. Some because of damage, they could not keep up, others because of escape maneuvers to avoid Tyranid weapons fire, or potential ramming. The Tyranids were closing in on each of these groups. Beginning to launch boarding attempts on various ships.

Tyranid ships crashed into human ships. The picture was the same as so many years ago, to Pen. Tyranids, and their slaves, pouring into the opening in the hull of the human ships, caused by the collision. Bitter close quarters fighting. Roars. Screams. The unholy noise of weapons fire, impacts, rending and tearing. The sickening, wet smack of projectiles thudding into flesh. Both enemy and human.

A moment of confusion came over Pen. Was the sounds she heard from her memory, or was she really hearing them?

Yes. The faint sounds were coming from Lynx's comm equipment. Pen's mind, her memories, filled in the rest.

Pen was having trouble absorbing the images, as well. They were coming too fast.

The big main guns of a cruiser, firing point blank, the Tyranid ship close aboard coming apart where the energy bolts tore through it. Fire. And things spilling out into space. The things looked like Tyranids, thrashing. Trying to breath vacuum.

A Misfit cruiser, its thick black armor pierced in several places, beginning to drift off course. As before, the crew, and marines aboard, begin to spill out into space, but in armor, and carrying weapons.

Some more Imperial fighters had been launched. These were weaving in among the larger combatants, looking for a place to hit a telling blow against the enemy.

An enormous Nova fleet battleship, the last one in the line, being struck repeatedly by Tyranid boarding craft. That same ship's guns firing at near zero range into approaching Tyranid boarding vessels, vaporizing them in a burst of white light.

Now something odd caught Pen's attention. She magnified the image of the battleship.

Strange movement around the various protrudences of the battleship's hull. Pen zoomed in tighter on the view.

Even seeing it, Pen could not believe her eyes. Marines in space armor, outside, held to the battleship's hull by magnetic boots, advancing on the Tyranid ships attached to the hull. Some marines were even using maneuver jets to reach the Tyranid boarding craft more quickly.

They were moving in teams, Pen saw. Some approached the enemy craft, attached something, and backed away. Other marines in the team hung back. These marines carried large laser and missile weapons. Pen was astounded to see the coordination of first laser, then missiles, into other Tyranid boarding craft trying to approach the injured battleship. The combination was proving effective in

opening the approaching boarding craft, and pulverizing the Tyranid warrior contents of the craft. The ruin and wreck of several of these splattered against the tough hull of the battleship.

The something that had been hung on the Tyranid boarding vessels already attached to the battleship, suddenly burned brightly. In a moment, molten and burning bits whooshed out into space, as the atmosphere within the Tyranid craft escaped into the vacuum of space. Nearby Marines rushed into the opening made in this manner.

At a dozen sites around the battleship, this scene was repeated.

The light of discovery flashed into Pen's mind.

Of course! The marines had opened up the vacuum of space behind the Tyranids invading the battleship. The way a battleship was divided up into many small, airtight compartments, the enemy would soon be sucking airless nothing. The big Tyranid warriors could live, for a very short while, without atmosphere, but the smaller slaves and bio-constructs could not. Also, any Tyranid warrior struggling with human warriors would face a triple threat. Attack from the front, the rear, and the loss of air.

Pen turned her head to speak to Lynx.

Lynx was already watching her.

"The Nova Marines are one of the most experienced deep space fighters in the Empire." Lynx stated, matter of factly. "The tactics they are presently using have been broadcast to the entire Imperial fleet."

"Even the Misfits?" Pen asked. "They are part of the Empire."

"Yes, they are." Lynx sounded odd, just now. "They have worked with the Nova Marines before this. I believe the Misfits were already using these tactics, and more, which the Nova fleet 'borrowed' some time ago."

"So that's why I keep seeing a Misfit ship that's hit suddenly empty of crew and warriors." Pen remarked. "The enemy doesn't have atmosphere suits, and so can't board a ship that is full of vacuum only."

"Yes. And Tyranid warriors that try to fight in vacuum, and weightless, on the skin of a ship, can be torn loose from their claw hold any number of ways." Lynx added. "We humans have some advantages over our enemy this way. Battle in space will not be quite so one sided, in favor of our enemy, anymore. Now we have some better tactics to offset the enemy's desire to board us."

"So that is why every soul aboard this cruiser was ordered into space, or battle, armor." Pen said, amazed. "If we are boarded, the ship is to be opened up to space. We can all breathe from our suit reserves of air."

"I would have liked to have thought of this tactic, before this." Lynx said, almost sadly. "So many lives could have been saved, to fight again later. But, some brilliant tactical mind among the Misfits came up with these tactics. Now we will all benefit."

A shudder passed through the ship.

Lynx and Pen rapidly turned back to their respective comm gear.

Their cruiser had been hit. Bad. Half the engine power was gone.

This is just what the enemy aimed to do with their weapon's fire, disable a ship to make boarding easier. Pen's mouth and throat went dry, suddenly. The enemy was coming for them, too.

Already, a number of Tyranid warcraft were spiraling in toward the newly disabled ship, after the very cruiser Lynx had commandeered so long ago.

The all powerful will that drives the enemy knew what ship was next to be hit, and directed small ships toward that ship, even before that ship had been hit.

Now, Pen knew, they would come until they had successfully boarded the cruiser, and gobbled up every bit of 'bio-mass' the cruiser had aboard.

Pen heard Lynx give the order that everyone was to suit up tight, and that the ship was to be closed up tight, every bulkhead sealed. Pen turned her attention back to Lynx once more.

Lynx was scanning the holo overhead.

"This battle is in the hands of the admirals and generals, now." Lynx stated, flatly. "All our forces will soon be around us, even the Misfit ships will have finally joined up with the rest of us. The enemy is concentrated too. It looks like a fight to the death for us all." Lynx switched off all the holos and screens. "Why don't we throw our weight into the defense of this ship?"

"Yes, Inquisitor." Pen answered. After a moment she added,

“I would rather watch all our enemies destroyed, and none escape. But, somehow I have a strong desire to see big Tyranid warriors come apart under my guns, while choking on airless nothing, as well.”

“Perhaps you have spent too much time among the Orks, you are starting to sound like one.” Lynx quipped, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth and eyes.

Pen gave a half smile, then answered,

“Come then, let us see how much Ork there is in one of the Emperor’s best Inquisitors.”

Both women quickly began to empty a locker by the door, hanging weapons, extra reloads for the weapons, grenades, and each took a long, slightly curved blade. When the energizer stud was touched, the edges glittered with blue sparks. Energy swords.

The two women had just finished, and started to move toward the door, when the whole ship jolted, and shuddered. Multiple impacts on the hull. The comm gear came alive with the news of collisions, and boarding enemies, and where.

“This way.” Lynx called, while exiting the door and turning, “this is the shortest way.”

Pen followed as commanded. At a fast trot, Pen followed Lynx down corridors, and up gantries, and finally up a lift. The lift emptied into a compartment, already nearly full with Lynx’s four bodyguards, Pen’s two, and about thirty warriors in battle armor. These warriors were marines from Earth and Mars. They had a reputation to live up to. The warriors of Earth and Mars of old kept the human race from being extinguished by Earth’s enemies, so long ago. Not only survival was achieved, but also expansion and conquest, in the very face of the enemies that would expunge the entire human race, if they could. These warriors, Pen knew, would be the very fiercest fighters.

Beyond them all was the airlock.

Pen had many experiences. Some of those were in combat. But Pen had no experience fighting in a vacuum. The airless emptiness all the way to eternity frightened Pen, in a way she never had felt before. Pen remembered how she had followed the Inquisitor through that first airlock, into that renegade warship. Her first combat. How lucky she had been. How lucky she continually had been, in the years since.

Hissing. Loud. A moment later, silence.

The airlock door, grinding open, could not be heard. Pen only felt it through her feet.

Beyond, the naked stars.

In rows, the warriors and bodyguards filed out. They moved with an odd shuffle. Pen and Lynx followed.

Outside, the hull of the cruiser curved away into emptiness. Pen felt an odd tingling behind her knees, in her stomach. The pure vastness was outside Pen’s experience. Pen was thankful to the maker, that her visor was small, it kept out the overwhelming, endless nothing of space.

Some of the marines half vanished, as they moved beyond the horizon of the cruiser’s hull. Pen and Lynx followed, trying to copy the shuffle that would keep their feet attached to the hull. No jet packs were to be used by any of these troopers, the cruiser was still able to maneuver, even at reduced speed, and was still trying to evade more impacts of enemy boarding craft. Anyone trying to use a propulsion pack would quickly be left behind, another piece of the flotsam of battle.

A streak of light angled across Pen’s vision. Then another. The cruiser’s weapons, further beyond the curvature of metal then Pen could see, were firing. Pen tried to scan around, to see what was going on, even as she tried to keep up with the other warriors. All she could make out were specks of light, moving just enough against the background of stars to be perceptible as something other than stars. What a difference Pen’s equipment had made! Pen had always been able to tell what kind of ships, how many, and who’s they all were. Now it was all bits of moving sparks of light. Pen suddenly felt lost. All she could do was follow the large back of the bodyguard in front of her, and wish she did not feel so helpless.

In front, and to the right, a stark shape began to emerge from behind the rim of the ship’s metal skin. Vapors were escaping from the base of the bent, twisted shape, where it jutted out from the smooth metal skin. Ice crystals had formed around where the jets of vapor leaked out.

Pen stopped, and watched a couple of marines attach an odd box shape to the blackened shape that was a Tyranid boarding torpedo. The two backed hurriedly away.

In a moment, there was a soundless flash. Followed by a rush of a cloud of smoke, or atmosphere, or both.

An opening was revealed.

Some small creature flew past Pen's head, wriggling.

The marines filed into the opening, one at a time. It took a little while, for nearly forty people to enter, one at a time. Then it was Pen's turn.

Using both hands, Pen held on to the melted edges of the opening, as she stepped into the darkness.

Right away, both her feet went out from under her. Pen found herself sliding down a glassy surface. No metal for her boots to cling to, and some sort of gravity was pulling her in. The interior of the Tyranid boarding craft rushed past in a blur of gray and black half images.

With a thump, Pen found herself standing in one of the cruiser's main corridors, judging by the size. She pulled her rifle up to the ready position, and scanned around herself.

The hole made by the Tyranid boarding craft was in the ceiling, Pen just moved out of the way in time to avoid a marine from coming down on top of her. Looking left and right, Pen could not see any fighting for as far as the curve of the hallway would allow. The marine that had just landed took off down one direction, so Pen followed. She de-energized her boots, and switched comm channels.

The quiet in her helmet exploded into noise. Shouted orders, pleas for help, static, and the noise of too many voices at once, was all too much for Pen. She switched to another circuit. Pen felt immediately at home. The voice of Lynx, giving commands.

"The enemy has already discovered our trick." Lynx was growling. "They are somehow opening our doors, and closing the doors behind them, curse them all. Now we will have to pop our own doors and bulkheads to come at the enemy from the rear."

"Are we going to destroy each door and bulkhead?" Pen could not help but ask.

"Yes. Blow them away." Lynx barked, "I want no enemy ambush waiting just beyond our own doorways."

Pen came up close behind the marines fanned out in the hallway. There were only ten going this way, and no Lynx. They all must have taken the other direction. A large shadow came over Pen. Her bodyguards had caught up with her, and were flanking her on both sides.

Just short by a few meters, the press of marines stopped before a large door. Without a word, a pair of marines raised and fired off a salvo of missiles. In an instant, a rush of air and crash of debris flew in the faces of Pen and the marines. Pen bent forward into the sudden hurricane.

Out of the swirl of smoke and dust, a ten foot tall, multi-limbed horror appeared. Mouth open as if to roar, swinging a pair of sword like things at the nearest marine. Behind it, still others appeared, as shadows. The marine blocked the downward sweep of the Tyranid's blows, with his own weapon, as another marine fired a blast under the Tyranid's chin. The top of the Tyranid's head exploded, it fell back in a heap. The front two marines dove back and to one side, opening a view of another Tyranid, pointing the muzzle of something right at Pen!

Several things happened at once. Pen was knocked sideways and down, by one of the bodyguards perhaps, as several gelatin shells sailed in among the Tyranids. The muzzle of the Tyranid weapon flashed. The gelatin shells erupted, splattering flaming gel everywhere, in a swirl of red flames. Something impacted the back of the ducking bodyguard, causing him to spin and fall. Then swirls of smoke obscured everything from Pen.

Pen stood up, just as a concussion from a missile cleared the air. The struck bodyguard stood up also, his backpack gone, and something corrosive causing wisps of fumes to rise from shallow marks in the marine's armor. A Tyranid, wreathed in angry flames, fell toward Pen, not a meter from her. The floors, walls, and ceiling of the passageway ahead of Pen was all aflame, but Tyranids that were not on fire were emerging from adjoining halls.

A pair of Tyranids fired something from wide-mouthed weapons into the midst of the marines. These exploded into a white, corrosive cloud. Pen quickly raised her weapon, began firing blind into the cloud, knowing full well the enemy was advancing behind it.

"Marines with the missiles!" Pen yelled into her mike, "Fire at the door down the hall! Bust it down so the rush of air will clear the smoke out!"

Pen continued to fire bursts, a little high to avoid any marine that might get in the way, but not so high that it would miss a ten foot tall enemy coming through the smoke. A whole series of thuds

felt through the floor told of missiles impacting on something. Then a sudden rush of air carried away the smoke.

The two Tyranids carrying the large muzzled guns, were in a heap on the floor. A couple of other Tyranids were on top of them, twitching. The remains of two brutally hacked marines lay barely exposed, under the pile of enemies. Still more enemies were coming. They were being greeted by a storm of exploding projectiles. Pen was just about to add her fire.

“Pen, your people must advance!” Lynx calling over the comm set. “The enemy is breaking down bulkheads ahead of you, and the ship’s crew is having trouble containing the enemy’s advance!”

“Enough of the enemy stayed behind that we are not advancing until they are dealt with!” Pen yelled in answer, while pushing the firing stud, sending a stream of shells into a Tyranid that had just shot the lower arm off a marine. Some shells seemed to bounce off, but most went in, ripping the Tyranid to pieces in a series of small explosions.

“Send us more help,” Pen called, slightly less loud, “There is only ten of us now. We can’t possibly sweep three halls when we are so few.”

“We are stalled here, as well.” Lynx answering. “I’ll try to get you some people.”

“Captain!” Lynx again. “Evacuate all air in the ship, The small creatures are attacking the ship’s systems, down through pipes and conduits!”

“We can’t do that!” The captain’s voice. “There is not enough replacement air for the whole ship! Most of the crew would die as soon as their suit air runs out!”

“We will lose the entire ship and crew, if you do not!” Lynx yelled back, gunfire punctuating her words. With no air, except in Lynx’s suit, to carry sound in Lynx’s passageway, the sound could only be the Inquisitor’s weapon, firing.

Pen could only listen with half her mind, she was having to duck back. Two more missiles had corkscrewed in, exploding in two blue-white spheres of expanding plasma. Everything within the spheres were burned to ash, in an instant. This close, Pen’s armor only kept out most of the white hot radiated heat. Any closer, Pen thought, and she would not have been singed, but roasted.

Suddenly, there was visual silence, to match the lack of sound. No more enemies appeared.

As one, the surviving marines and Pen rose, and advanced into the intersection of hallways.

“Venting all this air to space is causing us to shift from our course.” The captain’s voice again.

“Take advantage of it then,” Lynx answered, sounding as if she were running as she spoke. “Roll the ship, and make a heading for the planet.”

“Are we trying to draw the enemy after us?” The captain asked. “We won’t last long without the rest of the fleet.”

“We can’t keep up, anyway.” Lynx, still running, seemingly, called back. “Maybe someone can turn to follow us. Call the fleet and see, captain. Out!”

“Aye. We shall see. I have more marines closing on your positions.” The captain added, “We have stopped a couple of the enemy’s attempts to penetrate our defenses, the lack of air is already having some effect. Out.”

Pen peered down the right hand corridor, from just behind the corner.

Two hundred meters away was a sealed bulkhead door. Clutching the control box was an unmistakable human shape, hanging onto the box mounted to the wall, even in death. Pen moved down the corridor. Past two sealed side doors, on either side of the main corridor. Both showed signs of attempted forced entry. Pen moved up beside the hunched over form, where it faced the wall. Grabbing its hair, Pen pulled the head back. The face was not entirely human, and what flowed out of the mouth, nose and eye sockets, was not human blood. Pen grit her teeth, as she realized that these were human like, Tyranid bio-constructs. Built on altered DNA maps of captured humans, and human remains. Slaves to the will of the Hive, but also able to use humanity’s machines against humanity. Factories, ships, weapons. Anything. No wonder the Misfit marines would disable or destroy anything that this new enemy might capture.

Explosions behind Pen. She whirled around, weapon leveled.

The marines had blown the bulkhead door in the main passage, around the corner from Pen’s view. Another pocket of air had rushed past, judging by the trails of smoke. The thumps and thuds emanating from the floor plates told Pen that more fighting was underway. Pen started to run back.

Just as she reached the intersection, she had to halt suddenly, also reminding her of the two bodyguards that stayed just behind her, when they bumped into her from the sudden stop. Marines,

four abreast, in ten rows, charged past Pen, into the fight ahead. Eight more turned, and humped it, double time, to the door Pen had just left. Ten more marines turned down the passage opposite Pen, humping it to the distant door about a hundred meters beyond Pen.

Pen, and her bodyguards, turned into the main way, and followed into the smoke and fume of the battle.

VII.

Lynx leaned back into the recess where the bulkhead met the wall. This way she would not be in immediate view of the battle beyond the open portal door. Calling up a new view to be superimposed on her view shield of her helmet, Lynx checked on the progress of her cruiser.

The ship had indeed broken away from the main battle, and was proceeding at its best acceleration rate toward the planet. The fingers of Lynx's left hand were a blur over the symbol keys on her right forearm. The view in her visor twisted and rotated. The cruiser was being followed. A handful of enemy vessels, of the small variety. A very familiar looking Imperial destroyer. And two Misfit cruisers with three Misfit destroyers. The Misfits were engaging the ships pursuing Lynx's ship, and ignoring the half a dozen Tyranid ships pursuing the Misfit ships, as far as Lynx could tell. Lynx figured they would reach planet fall in a very short time, at this acceleration. Not much time to eliminate the enemies on board, if Lynx's plan was to work.

An explosion against the edge of the door Lynx was hiding behind, forced Lynx to switch the view off, close the armored covering on her right forearm, and return to matters at hand.

Lynx had to look down, to step over the remains of one of the small enemy bio-constructs. Its face showed how it had smothered to death, in lingering agony. Lynx thought, too bad the big warriors seemed to have some sort of air-sacks built into them, or they would also be thrashing in death. But no. They had to be hunted down, and exterminated, along with the medium sized blue creatures that also seemed to not mind vacuum, for a while.

Lynx leveled her weapon, turned the corner, and attempted to peer into the raging fires from so many gelatin grenades and missiles. As Lynx tried to see through the whirling black and red of smoke and flame, a bright object appeared, heading right for Lynx, in what seemed slow motion. Also in what seemed slow motion, Lynx tried to turn and duck back. Too slow, Lynx realized. Right between the two bodyguards kneeling to either side of Lynx, the bright object passed, striking the twisting form of Lynx in the left breast. A spray of corrosive droplets sailed up past Lynx's view, trailing faint lines of smoke. Lynx could feel her suit air escaping. Black came in from the edges of Lynx's vision, closing in rapidly to a small hole of light, as Lynx felt herself fall onto the deck plates. Then even the little spot of light was gone from Lynx's vision, to be replaced by darkness, and a dream of whirling motion, with what could only be stars moving rapidly apart.

VIII.

Pen fired another burst into the still twitching blue assassin thing. Even in death, it did not let go of the dead marine's twisted helmet. Pen turned, just in time to fire another long burst of exploding shells into the blue head that had just appeared from a vent opening in the ceiling.

The body fell out, followed by three more blue creatures that were not dead. Pen pressed the firing stud. Nothing. Shells from her two bodyguards streamed past Pen's head, where she knelt, looking like a continuous stream of hot sparks. All three of the filthy things were thrown back, gaping holes and missing limbs spraying gore in all directions. Pen slammed a new clip of shells into her weapon.

On her guard, Pen looked back and forth, up and around. Nothing. Kicking the small corpse of an enemy bio-construct from next to her, Pen stood up. With a quick call, Pen's suspicions were confirmed. No living enemies showed up on the scanners. This little fracas was over.

There was still fighting in two places, one of them in Lynx's direction, but they were both contained now, and mopping up would soon be finished. Pen sighed. They had survived one more boarding attempt by the enemy.

Pen opened a channel.

"Inquisitor, I am returning to our communications room, I will meet you there."

After a moment of no answer, Pen decided Lynx was too busy just now. Better to get back, and be ready when the Inquisitor joined Pen.

It took several minutes for Pen to reach the familiar comm room. In no time Pen had up a whole series of screens and displays.

Hmm. Pen wondered. There was no longer any fighting on board ship. Where was the Inquisitor? Also, the enemy ships no longer pursued the cruiser as it hurtled toward the planet. Instead, a pair of Misfit cruisers and several destroyers were keeping pace with the damaged cruiser Pen was on.

“Captain, where is the Inquisitor, do you know?” Pen asked of the command channel Lynx used. After a second or two, an answer.

“Yes. The Inquisitor is in the care of the surgeons.” The captain answered. “But she is conscious, she instructed me to land this ship on the south pole of that planet, open the hatches, and let the ship be flooded with new air from the planet.”

“What a grand idea!” Pen blurted out. Then continued, “I just hope we are not in the way of any of those big chunks of ice heading for that planet.”

“I am assured that will not be the case.” Came the captain’s retort. “Because of the curve in the angle of approach the ice chunks have to follow, as they fall in, we will be safe in the south, as any fragments of ice fall to the north.”

“You mean we will get to the planet ahead of the falling comet fragments?” Pen wondered at the speed they must be going.

“Of course.” The captain sounded miffed in his answer. “We are taking a straighter course to the planet, and can certainly accelerate faster, even damaged.”

Alarms cut off Pen and the captain. Alarms on the bridge, as well as in Pen’s communication room. Pen would have to worry about falling comets, and the Inquisitor, later. Now there was something happening.

Too many surprises. Pen was astounded by the sight, as soon as the holo focused on the source of the disturbance.

Massive ships.

Spread out in awful glory.

A dozen of the most enormous dreadnaughts Pen had ever seen. Spread out in line abreast, far enough apart that three cruisers and a flock of destroyers were comfortably fit between each of the giant warships.

Pen had to redefine the meaning of big, in her mind.

They were, of course, part of the Imperial fleet, from Earth and Mars.

They had emerged from non-space above the elliptic plane of this star system, surprisingly close to the fleets still locked in combat.

Pen watched in utter amazement, as turrets so large that comparisons were futile, turned incredible canons to the enemy, and discharged immeasurable energies.

Tyranid ships were disintegrated, or torn apart, or burned from front to rear, depending on the size of the enemy vessel struck.

Again and again, the great Imperial dreadnaughts fired volley after volley.

Tyranid ships were disappearing in awesome numbers. The enemy turned to disengage, and flee. Accelerating for all they were worth.

More Imperial ships appeared. Only four battleships, but half a hundred cruisers and swarms of destroyers accompanied them.

The Tyranids were cut off. The only path of escape open to them, was toward the star at the heart of this system.

The Tyranids charged the newest arrivals.

A storm of energy bolts, projectiles, and missiles met the onrushing Tyranids.

Fire filled the sky.

Pen was knocked off balance by the unexpected tug of inertia. The cruiser was decelerating at a higher rate than the gravity compensators could keep up with. Another, greater jolt sent Pen tumbling to the floor. She jumped up, regained her chair, and yelled into the command channel.

“What the hell are you doing?” Concern for the wounded, and Lynx, crowded Pen’s mind.

“We are about to enter atmosphere,” Came the heated reply, “I should think we would not want to burn up as we enter! I am rather busy! Out!” The captain was indeed angry.

Pen momentarily wondered at the need for such hurrying. Then it dawned on her to check her air supply. It was quite low. At most, two hours of life left to her. The need for speed was now clear. Some of the other crew must have even less air. The emergency supply of air was being used on the wounded, no doubt. Leaving none for anyone that ran out of air.

Pen could do nothing. So she went back to watching the battle in space.

It was not a battle anymore. So many of the enemy ships were destroyed, that only intermittent weapons fire could be seen, as some surviving enemy ship was targeted, and destroyed. The combined Imperial and Misfit fleet, and the newly arrived Earth - Mars fleets, were converging at a high rate of speed. No enemy between them could possibly survive.

Shudders and vibrations. Pen's vision blurred from trying to follow the wild dance of the displays and holograms. They had entered the atmosphere of the planet.

A sudden thought occurred to Pen. Despite the shaking and bumps, Pen tried to raise Lynx. After a couple of minutes of shouting at a med-tech, a portable comm unit was brought to Lynx.

"Lynx, can you still 'feel' the mind of our enemies?" Pen had an urgency in her voice. After a long moment, the reply came across.

"Yes, it is weak, but there. Why?" Lynx's voice sounded quite strained. A new sound to Pen's ears.

"Because the combined fleets have nearly exterminated everything like an enemy ship." Pen replied. "There should not be enough of the 'mind' left for you to sense."

"What about the ships that lifted off from the surface of the planet, just as the battle started?" Lynx asked, her voice definitely strained from the battering her wounds were taking, as the ship rattled.

"Ulp." Was all Pen got out.

"Call me back with an update on the situation." Lynx came close to sounding normal.

Pen began to scan all over the sky, as the shudders and bumps finally began to subside. Pen found she could not get a picture, what with the plasma of hot atmosphere still surrounding the cruiser, but she could get sensor locations on the ships Lynx had asked about.

The clever bastards. They could not escape by the short way, above or below the orbital plane of the planets, and so distance themselves from gravity wells enough to enter non-space. No. Too many Imperial ships all over that part of space. The clever bastards were angling away, using a large, mostly gas, planet to help mask their escape attempt. They might still make it. The Imperial ships would only have noticed a group of human design ships, moving away from the battle. A sensible thing to do for slow, fat cargo ships, only escorted by a few tiny warships. Imperial fleet personnel would not give the escaping ships a second thought.

Pen changed that.

Pen had barely closed the comm connection, when her screen showed the largest part of the Misfit fleet accelerating in a sharp turn after the escapees. A couple of moments later, a pair of the enormous Imperial dreadnaughts turned, as well.

Pen had just enough time to notice the result of her communication, when the landing alarm sounded. The alarm only sounded when the ship was trying to land too fast.

The cruiser was going to crash.

Pen threw the holo into a view of the ship's exterior, and without looking at it, trotted over to the special reclined seat, and strapped herself in. In this position, Pen should be able to withstand a ten 'Gee' crash landing. The ship might not fly again, after such a landing, but Pen might survive.

Waiting for the inevitable crash, listening to the strident wail of the alarm, Pen could only wait, and try to take in the view she had left on the holo projector.

There was nothing much to see. A nearly featureless expanse of white ice, looking as flat as a tabletop. It did seem to be coming up to meet the ship awfully fast.

Pen closed her eyes. She did not want to see any more.

Pen wondered if the Inquisitor would survive. Already wounded, and now about to crash into a planet. Without realizing it, Pen wondered as to the fate of Ulthor and Althor, and their magnificent dogs. A number of Misfit ships had been hit, and some destroyed. Fate was not kind, in Pen's experience, so the worst was to be expected. Pen hoped the worst was not so.

Pen let her mind wander. For a moment.

The ship jumped.

Then twisted, and bumped, and twisted again.

Everything Pen had neglected to secure flew about, to the ruin of whatever was struck by the flying objects. One of Pen's screens vanished in a spray of plastic bits.

Another twist, and a jolt.

With a scream of tortured metal, the ship slowly settled in an awkward slant.

Creaks and groans still came for a moment, but no more motion.

Pen unstrapped, jumped up, and ran to the communications console. The slanted floor almost made Pen fall. Pen's worst fears were pictured, the voices coming over the sets verifying her view screens. The ship was badly damaged.

The captain's voice cut across all channels. He ordered all bulkheads raised, all doors opened. Pen was reminded again to monitor her air supply. So near empty, as to be startling. Pen reached over, and switched on a room reading. No air. With a stab of her thumb, Pen opened the door to the chamber. No air.

Pen ran from the room, heading for the shortest way to the outside of the ship, grabbing her weapons as she did. She would blast her way out, if needs be.

As Pen ran, she picked up a following. Not just the two bodyguards that stayed outside her door, even through the rough landing, but also members of the crew that had been at their stations in this part of the ship. Soon nearly thirty crewmen and women were following Pen, at a fast trot up the passage. Through all the turns and intersections, blast doors, bulkheads, and doors were open.

Near the outside of the ship, the group encountered the problem. A stuck blast door. Without instructions to do so, a couple of large crewmen attacked the manual opening wheel. In half a second, it was being spun rapidly. With the first crack appearing at the floor, a rush of air screamed a shrill whistle. The air continued to pour in, but at a less fierce velocity, as the door quickly raised. Before it was quite halfway raised, Pen and the others ducked under, followed by the two men who had raised the door.

Pen found herself in a cargo access area. The cargo access hatch was fully raised. Beyond was a horizon broken by the raised spires of ice. It did not look flat as a table top any more.

Pen snapped off her helmet, and drew in a long breath of ice cold air. Pen could not remember anything so sweet. She went to the edge of the hatch opening. She was surprised to see the crew, marines, and officers walking out into the snow field. Even the captain was already outside the ship. Pen could see that stretchers were being carried out, as well. Pen slapped the ramp control, and started down, letting the extending ramp carry her out toward the icy planet surface. The captain saw her, and began to move toward her.

Pen and the captain met under the wreck of a damaged weapons mount.

"What are we all doing out here?" Pen began, ignoring the captain's attempt to speak first.

"We have been ordered to abandon the cruiser, and be prepared to be lifted off the planet, in a few hours." The captain replied, anger making the answer sharper than he meant.

"A few hours?" Pen had been going to say something else, but she blurted out this first.

"Yes. The destroyers that can make atmosphere landings can't try until after the impact." The captain still sounded angry.

"Okay. What impact." Pen thought she already knew the answer.

"A very large, probably the biggest, chunk of that rocky comet we steered here is about to hit the planet." The captain went on, "It was on the wrong side of the planet for us to measure, before we decided on coming here for air."

"Uh. Do we know where it is coming down." Pen had guessed the answer.

"Far to the north." The captain said, pointing toward a darker part of the horizon. "We won't be bothered by the immediate effects of the impact. What we have to wait for is the atmospheric effects to pass."

"Like what?" Pen wanted to keep the captain talking, the source of his anger should come spilling out.

"Atmosphere acts like water, when it is disturbed on this scale." The captain sounded like he was lecturing a class of young officers. "The air will be shoved out of the way by the speeding rock, compressing it. In another instant, the rocky comet, and the planet's surface, will vaporize from the impact. The energy released will further shove back the atmosphere, compressing it further. Planet

spanning waves of super hot compressed air will circle the entire planet, in a series of shattering, fiery disasters, one behind the other.”

“Won’t we be safer inside the ship, than out here, exposed to that atmospheric blast?” Pen wondered aloud.

“No. The ship is too high above the ice. We are to melt trenches and tunnels in the ice, once the planet quakes pass. We won’t have much time.” The captain’s anger was abating.

“Planet quakes and wind storms that defy imagining.” Pen interrupted. “Now tell me why you are angry.”

“Simple. The damage to my ship was greater than I knew. The attempt at landing it here damaged it further. Now I must abandon my home of fifteen years. And there is nothing I can do.” The captain bit out the last words.

“Simple. Do you know how much time we have?” Pen caught a hint of brightness on the ship’s hull, behind the captain, even as she asked.

“Not much, look behind you.” The captain answered.

Pen twisted around. A bright streak was just passing below the horizon. Pen waited.

What looked like a new sun began to rise above the northeast horizon. The real sun was just setting, on the opposite horizon.

“How long?” Pen managed a coarse whisper. All other activity from the crew had stopped.

“Hours. But not many. There is much to do.” The captain did not seem awed.

Pen turned to face the captain. “Captain, what would happen if you retracted the landing extensions.”

“Parts of the lower hull would buckle,” The captain started to answer, in a lecture tone, but then went on more hurriedly, “but that damage would hardly be noticed, compared to being blown off the landing extensions. The blasted ship might even ride out the windstorm.”

The captain turned and started to run toward the front of the cruiser, yelling at some of the crew as he went. They followed him forward.

Pen decided that she wanted to retrieve quite a few things from the ship, before she abandoned it. There were only a few hours.

Pen knew her job. She broadcast all her recordings to the Imperial flagship. She also requested, and got, a series of recordings back.

These showed two things. First, the fate of the escaping human designed, but enemy filled ships. The Misfit fleet had torn into the last of the enemy with the ferocity of a rampaging predator. As the Misfit ships tore through the enemy, most of the enemy were destroyed, the few survivors were scattered. While the Misfit fleet curved around for another attack, the two enormous Imperial battleships picked off the surviving enemy occupied ships. Pen thought it resembled someone swatting a vermin that had flown into their quarters, the battleships disposed of the remaining enemy so easily.

The second recording Pen had requested showed the impact of the mountain of ice, that was about to cause them so much trouble. Because it was only a recording, and not a live sensor view, Pen could only enlarge the view so much. But, even so, Pen could make out the approaching wall of wind, without any difficulty. Pen was also able to find out more about why the cruiser was to be abandoned. The approaching windstorm was only delaying removal of the survivors from the cruiser. The real threat that was preventing repairs, and re-flying the cruiser, was more comet fragments. All the fragments were supposed to hit the northern half of the planet. Well, not any more. Some had bumped each other, or something had altered the trajectories of some comet pieces, because now several were headed for the southern part of the planet. Pen had found out that there was only a two hour ‘window’ between the passing of the wind wave, and the arrival of more fragments. These would be close enough to Pen’s present position, that survival was almost impossible. Two hours.

Pen had done all she could do, to prepare to abandon the ship. The reading of these messages and videos were the last things she had to do. Everything was broadcast, or Pen was carrying it on her back. Pen was thankful that power armor multiplied her strength. All the things that she had decided to take for herself, and the Inquisitor, came to about sixty-five kilos. More than Pen weighed in standard weights, when she wasn’t wearing armor and all. Pen had decided to bring all the pages of symbols she had written down. Somehow, putting all her memories into symbols, on pages, had made them dear to her. She could not leave them.

Pen left the familiar communications station for the last time. A strange pain seemed to tug at her, as she passed through the door.

Shortly, Pen was deep in an ice cave. The weapons used to make the caves had vaporized the ice, but the residual heat had melted a thin layer, which was now slippery sheet ice. Pen had to move carefully.

Pen came up to where Lynx was seated. Pen put the heavy backpack down.

“I wondered if you were going to remain above, when the shock waves hit.” Lynx said, the stern tone back in her voice.

Pen liked that tone better than the strain she had heard in Lynx earlier.

“How much time left?” Pen asked.

“First, did you bring my things?” Lynx was already less stern.

“Yes. You did not want very much, about ten kilograms, I think” Pen added, “I brought rather more.”

“So I see.” Lynx answered, not really looking at Pen, but rather at the small screen on her lap. “To answer your question, we have about five minutes before the first wave hits us.” Lynx added, almost absently, “It was moving at hundreds of miles per hour, but has slowed some. It’s a bad one. Anything that could burn, when the windstorm passed over, burst into flame.”

“There is an awful lot of cold air out there, won’t that matter?” Pen had endless curiosity.

“Yes, it will matter. But really, will it matter enough?” Lynx replied, looking up at Pen. “Does it matter if you’re killed by two thousand degree heat, or only five hundred degree heat?”

“What really matters to me,” Pen ignored Lynx’s question, it did not need an answer. “Is how much time we will waste, hiding down here, when there are more of your rocks coming down very near us.”

“Very blunt. More of ‘my rocks’ should not arrive for nearly an hour after the last of the impact waves pass over us.” Lynx did not sound pleased.

“I thought we had two hours.” Pen did not sound hopeful.

“Two hours from the arrival of the first windstorm wave, until the first ‘rock’ hits, yes.” Lynx still did not sound pleased. “But that much atmospheric disturbance does not settle down quickly. Wild winds will still be tearing at us as we board the rescue ships the Empire and Misfit fleets are sending for us. We have to wait it out, then hurry like mad, if we want to leave here alive.”

“Inquisitor!” A shout from the tunnel opening. “Can you come here?”

“What is it?” Pen shouted back.

“You must see this, I think the storm is coming!” The voice came back.

“You go.” Lynx said simply, “I’m happy to just sit up. But don’t look for long, it is heading at us at over a hundred fifty kilometers per hour.”

“Yes, Inquisitor.” Pen said softly, even as she began to hurry to the opening.

Pen stepped into the weak sunlight. The sun had never fully set behind the horizon, only just moved slowly northward.

The first thing that struck Pen was how many of the crew had strayed far from the tunnel openings. They were pointing to the north, behind Pen, and shouting. The wind was already more than when Pen had just entered the tunnel minutes ago.

Pen twisted around northward. She saw what she expected.

A formless blackness was on the northern horizon, growing higher, and blacker, with thin wisps of cloud, backlit by the weak sun, hurrying before the blackness as if to escape it. In another moment, the half disc of the sun vanished, swallowed by the advancing shapeless black.

“Get inside, you fools!” Pen shouted, even as she turned back toward the dozen souls out on the ice.

She shouted again, starting to take some steps toward the crew men and women. But their own shouting, and the wind, drowned out Pen’s voice.

A gust of wind almost knocked Pen on her face. She looked over her shoulder.

The blackness was not formless, or shapeless, already.

“Get inside!” Pen tried once more. Some seemed to finally see the danger, and started to run toward the nearest openings to the tunnels, bending low into the rising wind.

Pen turned back, frightened that it might be too late for them all, and maybe for her.

Standing more upright, Pen looked into the face of the beast. Snow was being lifted into a tattered white, ragged edged wall, in front of the onrushing storm. It was not just black anymore. Reddish orange shined through in places. Some of the black could be seen to be twisted swirls of what could be smoke. High above, the dark wall seemed crowned with white and gray clouds that formed as Pen watched, at incredible speed.

The wind was increasing at a fantastic rate. Blowing snow and ice was already nearly masking the openings Pen had just left, not ten steps ago.

The storm had a voice now. A deep bass rumble. A hiss that was nearly a scream. Blended in to an ever increasing roar.

Pen fell on her face, and scrambled on all fours toward the safety of the tunnel.

With a shock, Pen realized she could no longer see the tunnel. But it must be only a couple of feet away. Did she already scramble past the opening? Terror at that thought almost closed off Pen's throat. With an effort she screamed.

"Help!"

A gray shadow appeared in the arrows of driving ice, right in front of Pen. A huge, strong hand grasped Pen's arm, lifting her completely.

With a sudden jerk, Pen was dangling inside the tunnel, hanging from the upraised arm of an Ogre, flanked by both of Pen's bodyguards. They looked rather amused.

Pen was breathing heavily. The wind had seemed to steal the air from her lungs.

"Little lady in black say, help." The Ogre breathed heavily into Pen's face. "Ogre good help? Littlest one okay?"

"Uh. Yes. Now." Pen stuttered, still out of breath. She had completely forgotten Ogres were with them. "Put me down, please."

"Hokay." The Ogre almost dropped Pen, letting her go.

The wind outside became a scream. What could only be dust and smoke started to fill the entrance to the tunnel.

"Let's all get back, further inside." A bodyguard suggested. "I can barely hear a loud Ogre trying to be gentle."

"Ogre good Ogre." The Ogre fixed a hard stare on the bodyguard.

"Yes, yes. Ogre good help to lady." Pen said, finding her voice. "Come back with me." She took the large, rough hand in hers, and pulled. The Ogre followed without protest, but gave a quick, withering glance over his shoulder at the offending bodyguard, also following.

Lynx raised an eyebrow at the sight of Pen leading an Ogre toward her.

"What happened?" Lynx asked. Her little screen on her lap showed that the first wave was past, and the others were following close behind.

"I think that we have lost a dozen crew people." Pen said sadly. "They strayed too far from the tunnels. I was only a few steps from the opening, and the wind almost claimed me."

"Curiosity. And a vague idea of danger." Lynx did not sound saddened. "Those people probably felt a sense of thrill, at the approaching danger. There will always be some fool that sticks his or her head out too far. Some will live to learn the lesson. Some will not. The Ogre's name is Rockhand, by the way."

"Thank you, Rockhand. Please go now. The Inquisitor and I will talk." Pen said gently.

"Uff! Inquisitor talk. Ogre not want to hear many big words. Means nothing." The Ogre started to leave, but added, "Littlest lady say help, Ogre here. Fast." He had to crouch low, as he stumped off. The tunnel was not built for Ogres. The bodyguards seemed to vanish to either side of the tunnel opening.

"There will be a mighty big piece of ice coming down near us, very soon." Lynx started, "I think that we will just get out of here in time. The first of our destroyers is actually going to land while the last ripple in the wind storm is still passing over. The destroyer captain is sure he can do it."

"Hm. Then we have very little time." Pen sounded very serious. "I really must know. How did you arrange the timing so perfectly? I mean, the great dreadnaughts showed up at the best possible place, at the best possible time. I did not even know you had contacted any fleet elements from the Emperor's First Fleet."

"I did not contact them." Lynx answered simply.

Pen must have looked surprised, as she considered the meaning of that answer.

“Whatever the Emperor wants, we shall soon know,” Lynx continued, “I have been ordered to the fleet flagship, immediately. So have you.”

Pen sat down heavily on a mound of frost. Something about this did not sound so good.

Lynx continued to watch the tiny screen on her lap, as silence closed in around the two women.

IX.

After a brief argument, Lynx had her way with the destroyer’s captain. They would exit by way of the planet’s northern hemisphere. The last of the cruiser’s survivors would leave on the other destroyer, just landing.

In a whirling hurricane of water vapor, the destroyer lifted off. From Pen’s observation point, she could see what the waves of hot air had accomplished. Where there had been endless expanses of white, now there was a maze of lakes and rivers. White ice stuck up here and there, or formed narrow borders around the water. The air had felt warm to Pen, as she ran to the destroyer to get aboard. That would not be the case for long.

The destroyer was familiar to Pen. She had been aboard before. This little ship had carried Pen on several dangerous missions. It felt good to be surrounded by a familiar ship, again.

The destroyer was on a course that would take them to the boundary of space and atmosphere. Up there, the ship would travel at greater speed, than staying in the atmosphere would allow. Also, the instruments would give a good view of what passed below, but the little destroyer would not have to battle through any of the atmospheric disturbances that should be present.

Pen knew how to use this little destroyers comm gear. She set up to record all that passed below.

A nightmare began to pass below the little destroyer.

In many places, the smoke, dust, and soot was too thick to let visible light through. In these places, the sensors used infrared, enhanced and modified to show what visible light would have shown.

Pen could see that she was recording a world on fire. Lynx had wanted to be sure that there would be no possibility of an enemy surviving down there. Pen could not see how anything could survive. The firestorms below would even be consuming all the oxygen nearby. Only the bodies of water would be safe, for a little while. Until they froze over, in the coming long winter. Lynx had said that winter might last for years, after the comet hit.

Pen watched keenly. The destroyer captain had said that he feared a defense battery might still be operational, on the planet. Lynx had said: ‘chance it.’ Pen watched for any sign of surviving inhabitants, and the possible firing of a weapon.

Pen watched, transfixed, as a flaming crater appeared, then receded quickly. One of the impacts had made a crater of flaming, molten stone. It must have been miles across. Volcanoes appeared to be forming around the edges of the crater. Pen quickly called up a map of what the surface was supposed to look like. Yes. There had been a large factory complex, and many dwellings for the workers, at about that spot. Now all that could be seen was the birth of several volcanoes. Pen switched back to watching the devastation pass below.

Shortly, the area of the planet that was of most concern to the Inquisitor, came into view. Like the other factory complex area, a comet fragment had struck near here. There was nothing for Lynx, or the leadership of the Misfits, to worry about. Huge factories had been reduced to shattered, melted wreckage. The fires would burn for days. What could only be a partially built space ship, lay at a crazy angle, as if thrown, against the side of a ledge of stone. Bent, blackened, and twisted, the ship would never be completed. From this altitude, much of the planet’s surface could be seen. Not far from the smashed factories and spaceport, the cause of the devastation was glowing brightly, even through the haze of smoke and fume. A crater, kilometers across, bubbled with molten rock. Around the edges, jets of flaming lava streamed into the atmosphere hundreds of meters. The infra-red monitors showed where hot remnants of the impact had been thrown dozens of kilometers. Everywhere, there was fire, and more fire.

The captain of the destroyer must have decided that they had seen enough. The destroyer lurched in a sudden upward thrust. Acceleration, too high for the compensators, caused Pen to lean and hold on to the edge of a communication panel.

Pen could do nothing but wait. The Inquisitor would have to wait for her report. Pen did not think she should go to the medical station, just now. They were most likely preparing the Inquisitor for whomever ordered Lynx and Pen to the fleet flagship. Pen could not remember Lynx ever having been ordered, in any way, before.

Pen did not have much time to reflect on what might be about to happen. The destroyer maneuvered at maximum speed to the flagship. Swinging around, the destroyer had to fire main engines to slow, while backing into the huge bay that had opened in the side of the dreadnaught. The destroyer captain was doing some fancy flying, to match velocities, and then back into the side of the monstrous dreadnaught, Pen decided. It would not do, to make a mistake and bump the bigger ship, Pen was sure. Not with a fleet admiral watching.

With a lurch, and a jolt, the destroyer was locked into the loading bay. These dreadnaughts were so huge, they had so many personnel, that huge cargo ships were needed to re-supply the warships. Convenient to be able to unload right on board the warship. Pen looked around, at the cavernous loading bay.

A squad of ship marines came forward to surround Pen. Pen's bodyguards were both disarmed, told to fall in at the rear, and were ignored beyond that. Pen was asked to come with the ship's marines to the meeting hall.

Pen knew questions were pointless. The reason for her being here was beyond Pen. These marines were just to make sure the Inquisitor's agent found her way to the appointed place, nothing more.

It was quite a long walk to the hall. Pen was fascinated by the enormity of the warship. Pen had never been aboard one of the oldest, largest, of Earth's original fleet, before. Pen saw no sign of damage from the battle just ended. Pen had thought she had seen some enemy fire strike this vessel, somewhere near where Pen had traveled. Perhaps she had been wrong. So much had happened.

Two great blast doors opened, soundlessly sliding back, as if they were made of holograms, instead of ancient great slabs of steel and ceramic.

Within was a collection of people. One was Lynx, several were bodyguards, but beyond that Pen could only see a number of people dressed in an important fashion, all turned to watch Pen enter the great hall. For a moment, Pen felt the old shyness return. She faltered a step, but then continued in, to meet her destiny.

"Come, stand here." An older woman gestured. She had on the trappings of an Imperial servant. Pen stood where she had been told.

Pen took note of how they were all in a line. First, the four disarmed bodyguards Lynx always kept with her, then Lynx herself, the only one sitting and without armor. Instead, Lynx was wrapped in bandages, from under her arms to her hips. Still, Lynx sat straight and still, the most neutral look on her face that Pen had ever seen.

Second, Pen. Next to her two disarmed bodyguards. No one else from the now wrecked cruiser was present.

Opposite the line of waiting people, about five meters away, what looked like a large iron chair, trimmed in gold and platinum. Between the chair and the line of waiting people, rows of Imperial marines from Earth in battle armor flanked the waiting assembly, making a large square of open space in front of the black iron chair.

Everyone waited in silence.

Pen never heard any door open. Instead, a tall man suddenly appeared next to the chair, and then sat in it. He wore only a simple jumper, as would an off duty crewman. But around his neck hung a medallion. A badge of office. He was one of the twelve Most High Inquisitors.

Without any fanfare, his voice boomed out into the great hall.

"You are all here to receive the judgment of the tribunal. You have already been judged. There will be no need for you to offer any defense. For the offenses of which you are all part, there can be no defense."

The man rose, and walked up to the bodyguards by Lynx.

Pen had not been aware that any offense had been committed against the Empire. Now she was most likely to be executed, her body fed to the plasma engines, or used to grow things in some ship's garden. The irony weighed heavily on Pen's mind.

The tall man's voice cut across Pen's increasingly morbid thoughts, his voice almost mild.

“You four have been with the Inquisitor a long time.” He said to the sergeant standing next to Lynx. “Your crime is your association with this Inquisitor. You were pledged to give your life for her. You will share her fate. The Empire cannot afford to release you four from your vow. The Empire cannot send you to other duties, and have the taint of your association with this Inquisitor spread.”

Pen was aghast. What taint? Pen’s insides were all a jumble of confused emotions and questions. With an effort, she remained still.

The tall man moved in front of Lynx. His voice didn’t sound mild at all. He looked up and down the line of waiting people, as he spoke, not looking at Lynx at all.

“The Inquisitor took it upon herself to act without consulting the Empire. The Empire was already aware of the problems out here. Our fleet, and the two that are following, were sent here to reclaim this planet, and its industries, from the enemy. Now, important industries, and the supporting planet’s infrastructure, are all destroyed.”

The tall man paused. When he resumed speaking, he glared down at Lynx.

“The Inquisitor exceeded her authority. A planet is destroyed. For these crimes, she no longer holds the office of Inquisitor. All titles and privileges are removed. She does not even hold the position of citizen. A fortress, far from here, has been chosen to receive the former Inquisitor.” The tall man looked over to the four waiting bodyguards. “You will all accompany her.” The tall man turned, and waved an arm, motioning someone to come forward.

Pen could hear marching feet come from behind the wall of Imperial marines in battle armor. A line of green camouflaged armored warriors entered the square. The foremost did not have on a helmet, his long blond hair flowing.

“William!” Lynx burst out, trying to stand. She had to give up trying.

“I have been given charge of the former Inquisitor.” William stated flatly, to the tall man.

“True. Whatever is your judgment, then that will be her fate.” The tall man replied.

Without anything further said, the other green clad Centurion marines surrounded Lynx, picked her up, small bench and all, and carried her from the hall, Lynx’s bodyguards falling into step behind. William waited ‘till they were gone, and with his back to the tall man, glanced at Pen, and smiled. William marched from the room, only an instant behind the rest.

The tall man stopped in front of Pen. Pen stopped breathing.

“You are a problem.” The tall man said. “You have worked for the former Inquisitor the longest. You have even acted as an agent for the Inquisitor. But I cannot send you away.” He again turned, and motioned for someone to enter. The tall man’s back was in the way, so Pen could not see who entered. When the tall man again turned to face Pen, there stood Ulthor and Althor, just behind the tall man. Pen dared to breathe again.

“These two say that you must go with them, as liaison between the Empire and their people. The, um, Misfits I believe.” The tall man sounded mild again. “They tell me you would be the perfect representative, since you no longer ‘fit in’ with the Empire. Whatever that means. The Empire desires that these people, these Misfits, remain allies of the Empire. Faced with this choice, the Tribunal has decided to send you, in the hope that your association with these people will be more successful than other Imperial attempts were.”

The tall man moved in front of Pen’s two bodyguards.

“You two will still be charged with the care of Imperial Agent, Pendragon.” The tall man said, sternly. “As loyal soldiers of the Empire, I would not separate you from your responsibility.” The tall man stepped back. “You are all dismissed to perform your new duties.”

Pen let training take over. She turned on her heel, toward Ulthor and Althor, and marched off. Ulthor and Althor turned and marched away, in the direction William and Lynx had taken, Pen and company in tow.

When they were out of sight, the older woman approached the tall man.

“Was the Empire served in letting them live?” She asked.

“They have served the Empire well, for many years.” The tall man answered quietly. “They will continue to serve the Empire as long as they live. They know of nothing else. The Empire was well served, to let them live.”

The tall man turned to leave a different way. He was followed by all the others.

The great hall was empty.

Only echoes, dying away.

X.

There were now many Hive Minds of the Tyranids. Most were young, and weak. One, the Mind that had been the original hive when the Tyranids first entered the galaxy, should have been stronger. There were more of the component parts, more warriors and constructs, by many millions, than the largest of the new hives. Should have been stronger, but was not.

Madness.

The howl of insanity tore through the great Hive Mind. With one part of its mind, it could see that the hive was breeding its worst enemy in its own belly. And there was nothing the Hive Mind could do about it. The great, ancient race that had built the DNA code that made the Tyranid race, was coming out of the Tyranid's own vats, from the DNA maps that the Tyranids themselves had used for countless millennia. The Hive Mind knew this, and could do nothing. Another part of the Hive Mind knew that it could do nothing because the DNA of the Mind's servants had been altered, and so the Mind could recognize the oldest enemy, but not destroy them.

Madness.

If the Hive Mind had a voice, the sick cackling laughter of the hopelessly deranged would have echoed across the galaxy.

And the races of this galaxy. More madness. They sow DNA altering poison everywhere the Tyranids go, it seems. The insidious alterations to DNA, caused by the radiation these races throw around so carelessly, must surely affect the DNA of those races too. Weakening the DNA until it is devoured in its own mutations. Those races would die the slow horrible death of endless mutations, until their races were no more. More insane laughter rattled through the great Hive Mind.

The war would go on, for a time yet. The races of this galaxy were on a path of racial suicide. The Tyranids would join those races in suicide. In war. Perhaps the ancient enemy race that created the Tyranids, now among them again, could be destroyed once more, in the fiery suicidal, genocidal cauldron of war with this galaxy's races.

The Hive Mind of the Tyranids could feel itself being torn apart. Long range plans that were once so clear, were twisted confusion. Memories of things learned long ago, and even of only a short while ago, were fading, disappearing.

Yes. War. The slaves of the Hive Mind must throw themselves at their enemies with suicidal frenzy. For Suicide was the goal now. For the Hive Mind. For everybody. For everything.

Laughter, and more laughter filled that which once had been the great Hive Mind of the Tyranids.

Across the galaxy, many psychically attuned minds heard, felt, insane laughter. Then again. And still again. A mind numbing cold terror filled the hearts of those beings that heard those waves of laughter from across the cosmos.

And still again.

To all things there is allowed an Ending ... And a Beginning.