



HORIZON

WARP RIFT

PRESENTS

REG STEINER

A TYRANID WAR

COVER MODEL: GIULIO TAVERNA, COVER PHOTOSHOP CLAUDIO SANSONE
INTERNAL ART: STUGMEISTER, JUDDSKI

Introduction

The stories that follow were inspired by the Games Workshop games collection. These were started as an amusement for fellow gamers that shared my enthusiasm for a galaxy of possibilities forty thousand years in the future.

These stories are purely unauthorized stories from the Warhammer 40,000 universe. The name “Tyranid” is a registered trademark of Games Workshop, that was borrowed for the stories because of the need for continuity between those stories, and the people that were meant to read them. Any other person that reads the yarns that follow, should know something about the Warhammer 40K universe, but I am assured that it is not necessary, the stories entertain without prior background knowledge. For those of you who have prior background knowledge, the stories do not follow the “Tyranid War” as it has been laid out by Games Workshop, hence the unauthorized nature of the stories. There has been sketchy information on the war with the Tyranids, as reported by the Games Workshop folks, so these tall tales were meant to lay out some background. The other reason, of course, was to entertain my friends.

I invite gamers to read the stories in the light in which they are given. Gamers should not take these too seriously, but maybe the stories will kindle an idea that will enrich your future games playing.

Anyone who has not gotten involved in sci-fi gaming, might not quite grasp the significance of some of the details, but if you have read sci-fi stories before this, you may still be able to “get into” the story line. I hope so.

Thanks to all my friends that encouraged me with their compliments, and criticisms.

R.S.

Forward

I am only the ancestor of the famous person named in the narrative that follows. She led our people for nearly forty years of war. Then for fifteen years of peace. Over fifty years of peace that followed have made her a legend.

I have made available some extracts of her life, before she was a legend. These are records from her own hand. There are many more records available. Perhaps someday the ancestors of a legend will allow more to be told of those perilous times.



Chapter One

First Contact

I.

The brilliance of the blue-white light was painful to his one good eye. The electro-optic sensor that replaced his right eye felt no pain from the intensity. The ornate armor clattered slightly as he paced back and forth in front of the open window.

It was the waiting.

He had been waiting for this moment for many years. A warrior does not take defeat easily. He had been one of the very best warriors in the human's Empire. But, he remembered how he had been seduced to rebel, like so many other warriors. The Emperor was corrupt, evil, and had enslaved humanity in the name of genetic purity. Believing in his just cause he had joined in the civil war against the Emperor. He remembered the final defeat. The Emperor and his slaves had won. His jaw set, hard, as he remembered the long flight, the running fight, to this remote Eastern edge of the galaxy. He could now appreciate the irony. He, and all the other surviving rebels, now worshiped the dark gods that were the enemy of everything human.

But that was the past. He stopped and peered out the window. This barren cinder of a planet had seen much activity. Many ships had been built, here and elsewhere, and great machines of war. So many years. So many little raids and battles, while building up for the great battle.

The warrior strained to see through the glare. Down the slope, and across the plain the vast preparations could be seen. Long lines of figures boarding shuttles. Equipment moving about. The sky dotted with war craft.

He jumped at the sudden alarm. They were under attack! Quickly running to the orb, he set the scan to search the area that was indicated by sensors. It must be a spoiling attack by the Imperials. The metal that was his left hand and arm flew over the controls. Where are they?

No, this cannot be. The threat comes from beyond the edge of the galaxy. What is this? The presentation from the orb shows millions of ships. The Empire would not attack from out there, and they never could have so many ships. The warrior's one good eye blazed with hatred as the answer dawned. This was some new force from beyond this galaxy. Very well. The warrior would get to try out his new weapons on this invader first. There was still time. Barking orders into the communications set, he began the gathering of warships to meet these newcomers. The prospect of battle again made him want to smile, but the plastic that was his lower face would not bend that way.

II.

Beyond the edge of the galaxy named Milky Way extends a vast emptiness. It is not really empty, but it is vast. An odd asteroid, planet, or even rogue star, wandering the void into which it was cast. There is gas and even "dark matter". But, now something else appears. A great, dark mass is approaching the Eastern edge of the Milky Way galaxy. It is not one enormous object, but rather millions of little objects, like an asteroid field. They are many different sizes, like asteroids. The objects are not asteroids. They all move in the same direction, "drifting" toward the galaxy.

Then, it awakes. Little by little, as each part begins to stir, the mind that is the sum of billions of parts, becomes aware. Aware that, at last, a new galaxy has been reached. New pastures. New Conquests! The Hive Mind of the Tyranids becomes fully alert to its needs. The billions of minions that make up the hive mind have not all survived the three millennia long sleep. Fully half have not waken. The Hive Mind hungers. And hates. Hungers for anything, any Bio-mass, any biologic organism on which to feed. Hates everything that is not of the hive mind.

Many of the beings that make up the hive-mind are self aware, intelligent, and capable of independent action. But the hive mind "guidance" is stronger than two days of thirst. Almost all the other creatures that make up the rest of the population are virtual mindless slaves. All creatures, large or small, are products of the Bio-construct technology vats and the DNA maps the Tyranids build. Most of the intelligent ones are also psychic. With millions of psychic receptors, a small psychic presence could be felt at a great distance. This is the very thing that awoke the hive mind. As this

new galaxy came closer, then a psychic presence was felt. Now fully awake, the hive mind set about gathering its scattered brood. And to planning on how to absorb a new galaxy.

III.

The black and red battle armor completely hid the old warrior's damaged face. His one good eye was now enhanced, and as good as the device in the other socket. The warrior felt powerful in his armor.

The indicators and sensors showed the fleet approaching the alien ships. The warrior hated this part of the battle. He was in his element on the surface of a planet, or forcing the assault on the decks of an enemy ship. It was the plan, in fact. The warrior and his thousand renegade marine brothers would board an enemy ship, one of the big ones, as soon as the fleet could fight past the small ones. Then, energy weapon in either hand, the warrior would lead his ravenous slayers in an orgy of fire. There would only be a few prisoners left to be studied back on the base. The warrior knew it would be this way. They had the power. They knew how to hate. The long banishment had taught them that.

The warrior pressed several keys. A holographic display filled the cylindrical room. The enemy fleets looked like a cloud of brown dust, swirling about, without any pattern. His own fleet was in the classic "spear thrust" formation. Several "spears", each making slicing attacks, should be able to break up this mass of enemy ships. Then crush each surviving section separately.

He hated just watching. The warrior's blood called out to come to grips with a foe. He must be patient, and watch, as the ships begin their massed volleys.

The hologram display showed exactly that. Each conical array of ships of all the "spears" lit up as one. The display did not show the traces of energy across the room. But, it did show the flares as enemy ships were struck. A most satisfying sight, thought the warrior, as repeated volleys were displayed. Whole enemy ships were gone, and great gaps appeared in front of the advancing fleets. Just like the plan. The "spears" of the fleet started to cut through the mass of brown specks as if they were scattered leaves. Just like the plan. The warrior watched as his own ship followed at the back of a spear. The *Murder* class cruiser would blaze a path for his *Havoc* class troopship following close behind the cruiser. Its powerful broadsides could cripple almost any warship in a single storm of destruction. He knew that very soon a big enemy ship would be chosen as a target, then he would satisfy his lust for blood.

The warrior physically jerked his head back in disbelief. The swarm, they were suddenly moving with an obvious purpose; surrounding and intercepting ships of his fleet. He watched as enemy ships returned fire, once they were closer. He watched, as enemy ships rammed into ships of his own fleet, as both vanished from the holo. He watched, his jaw sagging in disbelief, as enemy ships of all sizes closed, matched velocities, grappled, and boarded the great warships of his fleet. The enemy far preferred to board ships, the warrior saw, this was how most of his fleet was being attacked.

The warrior quickly began to switch on viewing orbs, his artificial arm flying over the control sequences. Each sphere displayed one of the other ships the warrior had called up. Each was to have displayed the old warrior's counterpart on another ship, instead there was a picture of madness. In no case was a counterpart warrior to be seen anywhere. Instead there were strange, shadowy shapes moving in a blur, screams and flashes, roars and booms. In some displays there was only a display of over-large, bizarre dark shapes moving across the view. No sign of his own kind were in the view of the warrior. What is going on?

A shrill siren cut across the question. The displays automatically cut off, the holo vanished, and orders were barked from every comm channel. The ship commander was brief. Imminent collision. Take positions to repel boarders.

The old warrior yelled commands to his comm link, ensuring all one thousand brother renegades were alerted, even as the old warrior wondered at the unexpectedness of it all. Not even the hated Imperial marines tried to board a troopship filled with bitter rivals. Just blow it away from a distance. This new alien would soon learn that lesson, the warrior thought, as he set up his displays with his own unit's projections. None of this had been in the plan!

A thump, and shudder, rattled through the ship. A rumble felt through the deck told of an explosion. The warrior could see that all his fellow warriors were in position for defense of their zones. But no sign of the invader, yet.

Another thump, then another. More invaders! The violent maneuvers and ship's guns were not keeping the enemy away.

The main command link was full of orders, counter-orders, and calls for one, then another, then another sub commander that did not answer anymore. The sound of battle could be heard throughout the ship.

The warrior put up the ship security hologram. In 3-D, the infestation of the ship was pictured deck by deck. The warrior could see that the invaders were not driving on the vital sections of the ship, but were merely spreading out in a random fashion. He squinted his one good eye in concentration. There! If the old warrior gathered his troops and counterattacked through this storage bay, then up these three parallel corridors. His soldiers and he could fall on the rear of the largest part of the invaders, as they are halted by the strong resistance they would shortly encounter.

Quickly the ship commander was informed, and although reluctant, he agreed to the plan. Veterans of many raids and battles, the chapter of renegade marines gathered for the counter attack. The old warrior worked his way to the front of his host. He would lead this attack. He paused for a few moments to await the attack signal. The old warrior looked around at the portion of his warriors gathered at this point. The dark armor made each of them more shadow than distinct individuals. Many had been part of the rebellion, but most were recruited into the brotherhood after that bitter defeat. They were all good fighters. They would attack in an insane frenzy, as they always had. An unstoppable sustained ferocity would carry them through, again.

The signal for the attack sounded.

The old warrior felt the hate burn in his veins as he charged down the passage. The heady insanity, the electric thrill, that gave his broken life meaning, fired his brain into fury. Up ahead, the ship's crew were fighting desperately. The black horde swept past them, firing wildly down the passage. A few unrecognizable pieces of alien were in the hall. The marines burst into the empty landing bay, now filled with small groups of Tyranid warriors and Bio-constructs.

The warrior yelled as he fired off the weapon in each hand. A pair of small, multi-armed creatures were caught in the burst of energy from one. A ten foot tall silhouette, also multi-armed, pointed something at the warrior, then flashed, as a flare of an energy shell passed through it. The warrior fired again and again, shattering the tall silhouette.

But a sudden weight slammed the old warrior down, electric agony in every nerve, the smell and taste of ozone. Then all is Blackness....

IV.

The Tyranid Hive mind dispassionately evaluated developments. The edge of the galaxy was inhabited with a variety of organisms. Some also traveled the void between suns. Some even fought. Hundreds of Tyranid ships had been lost, but these were mostly empty, with a bare few Tyranids aboard left alive from the long journey.

The enemy had been drawn in. Then the ships had been boarded. Only a few had escaped, or beat off the Tyranid warriors that boarded, to then escape. The hive mind determined the loss was more than offset by the gain. The life on all these star systems could now be taken. All that biomass would be stripped, fed to the vats, and reassembled into many new bio-constructs and Tyranid warriors. Many more star systems would have to be consumed to replace the massive losses from the long journey. The battle losses were nothing in comparison.

The Tyranid hive mind then began the ordering of the many fleets of ships, according to a plan. The systematic devouring of a galaxy was planned. And the billions of creatures in the fleet set about accomplishing the first hungry tasks. The captured ships were stripped, and the biomass fed to the vats.

The hive mind noticed that the DNA code of many was altered. The blue white light of a nearby neutron star was the likely cause. The Tyranids are masters of Bioengineering and DNA, they have uncounted eons of experience in such things. And the Hive mind remembers.

V.

The old warrior awoke to a world of pain. He was alive. He thought the release of death had at last taken him. Instead, the bio-med machines were again working on him. Everything was pain.

At least his one good eye still worked. Little else seemed to. The machines moved over him again, and darkness returned, punctuated by sparks of pain.

The light returned somewhat later, and the warrior opened his eyes. He was sitting naked. Or rather, without his armor. There was very little flesh to see. Mostly machine. Both arms and legs, almost all his torso, and two thirds of his head, were now machine. There was no more pain, only a dull headache. He could feel the hum where his heart had been. Death had been cheated again.

The chair he sat on was in his private chamber. He had been carried there to wait for the drugs to wear off. The warrior moved to the comm station. The warrior had to know what had happened while he was being rebuilt.

An hour passed.

Then, at last, the old warrior let out a long sigh, and moved about the chamber. He put on his marred and singed armor by instinct, his mind swimming with what he'd learned.

His fleet was largely destroyed. They had been drawn in and pounced on. Almost all the lost ships had been boarded, then overwhelmed by the ferocious hordes. They would come on, uncaring of how many were blasted. They would come on, and rip to pieces anything that stood in their way.

The old warrior resolved to go and view the remains of the aliens stored nearby.

How his own ship escaped the massacre was partly luck and partly savage fighting. The fact that such a relatively small ship had so many warriors on board must have come as a surprise to the enemy. His ship had not been overwhelmed like so many others. Even so, the ship was badly damaged. Most of the crew were dead, with half of the survivors injured. The old warrior liked the last displays he'd seen the least. Of the thousand warriors that had counter attacked, only two hundred remained, and only fifty were without any hurt.

The troopship carrying him was fleeing the scene of the battle in a series of short jumps. They had been pursued, initially. But they had lost the ones following.

The old warrior walked stiffly to the tube lift where he would go down to see these fearsome aliens.

Everywhere he walked there were signs of the fight with aliens. Even the lift car had signs of blood and gore. Apparently some of the smaller things had gotten into the ducts, channels, and even wall spaces. They then emerged all over the ship, to attack unwary crew members from unexpected directions. Everything about these creatures was unexpected. None had been taken alive. Even when surrounded by flaming death, even the smallest continued to attack. There was no way to capture one of the big ones, of course.

He arrived at the cold storage unit. A young Xenobiologist was waiting. Even he was injured.

There were a number of specimens on display. Only the least damaged had been kept, the remains of all the rest had been fed to the plasma engines. The specimens were a strange array. The small ones came in many shapes, sizes, and colors. The medium, or nearly human size, were dark blue in color and had six limbs. The largest ones were mostly shades of red, with six limbs also. The big ones captivated the warrior's attention. While all the rest of the creatures had been fierce, only the big ones used weapons. They also looked like a nightmare. The big warrior creatures looked like a genetic mutation where arachnid and ancient Tyranosaur DNA had been blended. Yes, exactly; the warrior thought, the head of a Tyranosaur and the body of some impossible spider or insect. A ten foot tall, coldly vicious, intelligent insect warrior. Add master of bioengineering. Also, grand master of military necessity. They had not cared how many die, only the result gained. The result these terrors had gained was the destruction and scattering of the renegade fleet. Years of work destroyed so easily.

The rage welled up again in the old warrior. His metal hand crushed the corner of the table he had leaned on. The act of breaking something eased the rage. He turned and stormed from the room.

There was little he or any one else on board this ship could do. Except find one of the other bases of the renegade fleet.

The old warrior was getting better at walking in his new metal legs. As he made his way back to the comm station in his quarters, a new resolve filled the mind of the warrior. A cold, bitter hate of the new aliens. He resolved to communicate this new hate to every renegade fleet commander, marine commander and allies. This new alien would feel the sharp edge of that hate. The Imperials could wait. First, the entire weight of the renegade forces would be turned to destroying these new enemies.

He swore it.

Chapter 2

The Imperial Hunter

I.

A cruiser, shaped like a broad arrowhead, materialized into real space. Engines smoothly settled the pace to half the speed of light. The Imperial eagle was painted across the entire forward half of the ship, talons reaching out front to shred its prey.

The lieutenant had been happy with her assignment to this ship. A new design, this was the best type of ship in the fleet. Faster than any other ship, in or out of real space or non-space, outclassing other cruisers and destroyers, they could get in or out of trouble real fast. The ship was even designed to handle planet side atmosphere. This meant that the new design of cruiser could accompany the boats landing troops on a planet, for the first time. Yes, a design meant to be kept busy with important work. The lieutenant hoped that this new *Trident* class would shortly be as famous as any other class of warship.

The lieutenant allowed a slight frown to cross her features. The transfer from the *Middenheim* had been welcomed, indeed. Little more than a robot, the lieutenant could only follow the orders of the toughest training instructor in the fleet. The *Gothic* class cruiser was both training vessel, and warship, and so doubly tough on all its crew.

She had been happy until this new twist on this new assignment, that is. She sat stiffly in the molded red aluminum chair. A so called "universal" chair meant to accommodate the huge framed humans from the barrier worlds, as well as the more delicate mass of the half sized humans from the Signa planetary swarm. She was sure the only universal was the discomfort to all who had to sit in it. She was also sure that was the intent of the personage beyond this anteroom. She did not like her new designation either. She was no longer a lieutenant in the Imperial Fleet, now she was an aide. Aide to an Imperial Inquisitor. Just the thought of an Inquisitor on board brought an edge of fear to the entire crew. Inquisitors had evil reputations.

It is said that Inquisitors had to make the long journey to Earth to see the Emperor, as the final act to becoming an Inquisitor. There they would meet the Emperor, and be forever mind linked directly to the Emperor.

The Emperor. Kept alive, and prisoner, by vast machines. Psychic. Powerful. The force of mind that kept the scattered worlds of humans knit into one Empire.

A small sound from the hall outside, distracted the lieutenant momentarily.

Imperial Inquisitors were the outward manifestation of the Emperor. Answerable only to the Emperor, the Inquisitors traveled the galaxy, their purposes known only to themselves. There is a dark story circulating that an Inquisitor ordered a planet's destruction. A huge asteroid was smashed into the planet to annihilate all life. It is said that an alien genetic infection had spread among the people of that planet. So, to prevent any further spread of the infection, the planet was smashed to pieces and became an asteroid field. There are many stories of Inquisitors, all of them bad.

The lieutenant felt her uneasiness settle into her stomach. Then, three faint tones sounded, the door leading into the Inquisitor's sanctum slid open, revealing darkness. She felt weak all over, as she stood, then gingerly entered.

The door shut behind with a whisper, leaving her in near total darkness. She could just see that this little hall turned right a couple of steps ahead. The faint glow from that opening was all the light there was. The lieutenant's eyes adjusted quickly. She rounded the corner to face her new duties.

The only light in the room came from the gold and silver flickering of display orbs, and from the washed out colors of the 3-D holographic images all around the room. A figure in a light colored jumper, with long light colored hair, stood in the center of a circle of shifting images, changing colors and patterns washing over her. The Inquisitor was plainly a her. The maintenance crew style jumper did not hide that. The lieutenant looked up at the ceiling, where patterns of stars blinked on and off from sections of the ceiling, seemingly at random. The lieutenant decided to stay put until the Inquisitor took notice of her.

Without stopping what she was doing the Inquisitor said: "As my aide, I do not expect you to show the fawning deference so many find necessary. You need only be as courteous and respectful as

you would be to an elder relative. In private I am Lynx." She turned and motioned the lieutenant to enter. "And you are..?"

The lieutenant entered, trying to look self assured. "I am called Pen, your Hi..., that is, uh..." she fell silent hanging her head in embarrassment.

"You'll get the hang of it," Lynx said, "I am not madam, miss, or highness. Just Lynx. A code name I happen to like. On old Earth the lynx was a solitary hunter. So am I." With a sweeping motion, Lynx indicated a small chair next to a small table, just outside the circle of light.

"Have a seat over there and refresh yourself Pen. I will be a few more minutes sorting out this batch of displays, then we'll talk." Lynx said as she turned back to the displays and holos.

Pen sat as she was told, and watched in fascination as Lynx switched through the different picture and data displays at mind numbing speeds. Pen just remembered the offered drink, after a couple of minutes, when all of a sudden, Lynx shut down the entire room full of equipment. Total darkness. Then, a golden glow filled the chamber from no visible source.

Lynx briskly walked over to the table next to Pen. So businesslike in manner, so youthful and energetic, Pen decided. But, plainly did not look young. Pen watched as Lynx picked up the strangely shaped carafe from the table.

"This water comes from the glaciers on Helcarax 5," Lynx was saying, "so pour a cupful for yourself. You'll find it lacks the taste of ammonia you get from the ice balls you gather from space."

Pen's eyebrows shot up in surprise, and she quickly poured the cupful. She then slowly raised the cup and eased a mouthful down. Her face showed near ecstasy.

"So sweet and pure," Pen whispered, "I can hardly believe there are whole planets covered with this."

"You've spent your whole life on board ship, haven't you?" Lynx asked.

"Yes, born and raised aboard ship. Never been allowed off the ship I'm assigned to." Pen said, her eyes closed. She then took another swallow of water.

"You have the look of someone who has not been planet side." Lynx mused, "That may change."

"Now, to business," Lynx said louder, "Your duties are simple. You will do whatever I ask. In private, I am Lynx and you are Pen. Beyond that door, Aide is your name and position, you have no other rank or position. You will not announce or introduce me, and if you must address me beyond that door, then call me Inquisitor only. Your last duty is this. Some people will try to get to you as a means to influence me. Your last duty will be to repeat to me every word said to you, or even near you, about anything. Repeated exactly. I selected you because you have what is called a 'flash memory'. Our work together may very well hinge on your ability to be exact."

Lynx picked up the carafe again. "Here, have another cup of water." she said as she held it out.

Pen just sat, her eyes open wide, her hands both wrapped around her cup.

Lynx poured the water, and went on. "You will no longer wear a ship's officer uniform. Instead, you will wear the neutral gray outfits I have selected for you. The black and yellow striped left shoulder will help me spot you wherever you are. Your atmosphere suit will look the same. Are you weapons trained?" Lynx asked as she sat down.

"Yes, all ship's personnel, and especially officers, are given a broad spectrum of personal combat training." Pen said, somewhat mechanically. "I had just finished powered armor training, when I was told to report to the newly arrived Imperial Inquisitor as Aide."

"See, you can talk," Lynx said smiling, "any training in what they call heavy weapons?"

"No, none. Am I going somewhere?" Pen asked, looking somewhat paler.

"As I said, you will do whatever I say." Lynx said, more seriously. "I will order a suit of power armor for you in the same neutral gray, with the same shoulder marking."

"All this preparation has me confused...Lynx." Pen said slowly, "I thought I was to be your assistant while you are aboard this ship. You make me think I'm leaving."

"This may be only temporary," Lynx said quietly, "or may last the rest of your life, however long or short that may be. I will decide as we work together."

"Now finish that cup." Lynx said, standing up. "Go over to that corner and change in the antechamber beyond. Any of the outfits will do you for now. We must get to work."

Pen stood as Lynx started back to the display control console, then started to make her way to the back corner she had been directed to.

"By the way, Pen," Lynx called over her shoulder, "everything you heard about Inquisitors is true. As are a lot of things you have not yet heard. Accept your fate, and don't worry. At least your fate will be interesting."

With that, Lynx powered up the holos again. Pen had stopped when Lynx spoke, but now went into the antechamber.

A few minutes later, Pen emerged. The light gray fabric looked dark against the pale blue white of Pen's skin. "Lynx, I'm ready, is there anything you require of me?"

Lynx was sitting, studying a holo of a group of stars. "Yes, come sit in this empty chair," she indicated behind her, "and I'll tell you when I want something."

Pen came over as instructed and sat just behind Lynx.

"Be ready to relate back to me what you observe." Lynx said, then went on with switching through display after display.

"We are looking for a ship to come out of a jump somewhere near here." Lynx began again, after several minutes. "The ship has been making a whole series of short jumps, and every time it comes out of a jump it fires off a bunch of message traffic. The codes and frequencies are only used by renegade forces."

Pen's mouth dropped open. It was just one surprise after another. An interesting fate was an understatement.

"We think we can intercept this ship here, because it has not deviated from a straight course, since first detected. This is not the only renegade ship either," Lynx went on, still flicking through displays, "there are dozens of them scattering through the galaxy. There seems no rhyme or reason to it. They seem hell-bent to get somewhere, but where or why has to be discovered. If we catch up with this guy, this ship will try to disable the renegade. Our marines on board will then assault and board the enemy, taking prisoners and the ship's records, intact or else." Her voice had grown hard.

After a short time of silence, Lynx leaned back and switched off all the equipment but one.

"All the station, base, and ship reports for this sector have no indication of the target ship passing through before us." Lynx stretched as she spoke, "We may still get to bushwhack this noisy renegade."

"Lynx, a meal period has come and gone. Should we not give food a thought?" Pen asked quietly.

"Yes, see what you can put together for us." Lynx said, somewhat distracted. "Any planet side fruits and vegetables will do, also a small portion of protein. Don't bother with protein composite, I take my protein from prepared land or water animals from planet side."

Pen felt a little queasy at the thought. "Whatever you wish, Lynx." she said, and got up to leave.

"Don't pass judgment till you try it, Pen." Lynx commented, "I'll have protein composite when there is nothing else. Now go, in the mean time, I'll stay here. We could get busy anytime."

Pen went, and found that all the items were prepared, even her own. It was dawning on Pen that Lynx knew entirely too much about her. She returned to find Lynx going through a complicated navigation program. They ate in silence, then waited for something to happen.

After four false alarms, and the passage of two ship's cycles, Pen was quite tired of sitting quietly and waiting.

"Lynx, I apologize for the interruption..." Began Pen.

"What's on your mind?" Asked Lynx, without turning.

"We are more than one cycle into a sleep period, and I am still on that sleep schedule. Should we both not rest?" Asked Pen. When Lynx did not respond, she went on, "The alarm set off by those four ships that came in were each noisy enough, I think. We should be able to get here, and get the displays up, before a ship can even stabilize its engines from the jump."

Lynx looked over at Pen with a strange intense expression.

"While you were bringing the food, a new report came in." Lynx said, her eyes bright and looking far away, "The two items of any note were about renegades. The ship we're waiting for was detected at a predicted jump point. It is on its way here. The other item was about another renegade ship that was ambushed too. A very strange bit of display on that one. When our ship approached, it seemed dead. No defensive fire. It was a big ship too, able to put up a good fight. A couple of boarding parties were sent to see what they could find out. Both wiped out almost instantly. Some

strange and very vicious creatures were reported before communication stopped. The warship commander we had sent decided not to lose any more men. He just got behind the renegade ship, and blew it to cosmic dust. He may next command a sewage tanker shuttle, I think."

Lynx stood up, and started to pace in a small circle.

"The nav program I have running shows that the other renegade ship should arrive any time in the next two cycles. Right here. We must get prisoners." Lynx bit out the last part.

Several new displays came up by themselves. New reports coming in. Pen was beginning to get the hang of what was happening. Lynx stopped and scanned them quickly.

"Just some more routine traffic." Lynx said, resuming pacing, "we simply must find out what's going on. And to do that we need to be able to read a ship's log videos, talk – or rather interrogate – some living renegades. What are they up to? Why are renegade ships suddenly popping up all over the galaxy, without rhyme or reason? What do they know of this incident with vicious aliens – anything? I fear something drastic has happened. If so, does it threaten the Empire? Wild rumors have begun to circulate, but we need facts." With that, Lynx spun around to face the monitor to the ship's bridge.

And alarms went off all over the ship.

All the holos and screens flashed red, and the high pitched collision alarm stabbed the ears. Pen just had time to grab hold of the console before the ship lurched violently. Lynx seemed not to notice as she swayed from the motion, but called up a big video display. There in the center of the display, a violently twisting ship.

A troopship by configuration, Pen thought, but with extra nubs and bulges that could only be extra weapons mounts. And as Lynx magnified the view, there were the ship's markings. An unmistakable view of the crossed hammers over a stylized comet's tail. A renegade marine troopship. Some of the nastiest bastards in the galaxy. Pen wondered how they were to take prisoners when the enemy would rather die than surrender. Pen held on and watched with fascination.

The big video display made Pen feel like she was drifting in space, watching. The enemy ship had started firing at the Imperial cruiser almost immediately. Just as quickly had Lynx called up the weapons crews and personally instructed them to only disable the enemy. Knock out the engines and guns – okay – but any "stray" shots, and some weapons crews would find themselves in a rapidly decaying orbit around a remote moon. The resulting fire from the cruiser proved accurate, systematic, and satisfactory to Lynx after that. While the shooting was still going on, Lynx called up the Imperial marine detachments that would board the enemy, once it was disabled. She instructed four NCOs that they were each responsible for bringing back one prisoner each, and that if they were killed, then the next ranking corporal would be responsible. If they had their four prisoners and were then driven off the enemy vessel – fine. But everyone was expendable until those four prisoners were taken. Pen was chilled at the thought that Lynx could order so many to their deaths so easily.

Almost before it began, it was over. The enemy vessel was adrift with no weapons firing back. Lynx was vocally unhappy that the enemy put up such a weak fight. Were they committing suicide? Pen was sure she was not required to answer.

The little boats that carried the Imperial Marines came into view. The little crab shaped craft jockeyed for position and then grappled the enemy troopship. From all around the vessel were flashes of light, as an energy burst coincided with the ram beak smashing through the hull, creating a self sealing breach. The squads of marines then pour in on the heels of the blast. Then the vicious close quarters combat that can only take place in the tight confines of a vessel in space.

Lynx switched the view. From an external view, there was a flicker, and then several displays showed what the helmet receptors of the marines were recording. Pen watched, fascinated. How could anyone make sense of the confused glimpses, the chaotic noise, and the suddenness of an enemy appearing and shooting at you? She could see, by way of the mangled and smoking bodies in the passages, that there were no weird aliens here. Just what was expected – former Imperial marines turned renegade.

Once again Lynx was not happy, she was making impatient mutterings as she rapidly switched views back and forth. Once again, the enemy was not putting up much fight, the ship seemed to be almost deserted.

Then, all at once, Lynx straightened up and started to leave the room. "Come with me to the armory, Pen. We're going over there."

And, just like that, Pen found herself squeezed into light battle armor, hurrying to keep up with Lynx and the four picked bodyguards Lynx had brought with her, and wondering why she was hurrying to follow Lynx into a fight aboard an enemy ship.

Excitement began to race through Pen, along with dread. After all, these huge bodyguards, in their heavy armor, might just help keep her alive too, Pen thought.

In a blur of hurried activity, the six of them were on a boarding shuttle with a collection of specialist technicians and more assault troops. Pen found her combat armor suit functioned just like the training suit she was used to, thank the stars.

A few minor thrust adjustments and they were at the airlock of an enemy ship. Pen felt sure she was going to die.

Then they were in. Smoke and dust hung heavy in the air. Two of the bodyguards took up position in the front, near filling the passage, and two more fell in behind Pen and Lynx. The technicians and others fanned out in different directions and disappeared. There was a lot of damage apparent everywhere, as they moved through the ship. But, some of it was from some time ago, because attempts at repair could be made out.

The thump and rumble that came back to the little group meant fighting up ahead. The posture of the bodyguards changed as they crouched a little more, and stalked a little more slowly. Pen had been given a weapon, and knew how to use it. Designed for weightless conditions, it fired a burst of four little missiles with each touch of the trigger, and with the propellant inside the missiles, there was no recoil to send the firer spinning through space. Not so bulky as most energy weapons, it was perfect for the smaller or lighter framed humans that lived in low gravity conditions. Pen switched the weapon to "armed" status, even as she hoped she wouldn't need it.

Smoking blackened holes in the decking and walls meant that the fight was closer now. Pen realized they were near where the troops had been quartered on this ship, and that the bay for the enemy assault shuttles was just ahead, through the large pressure door up front.

II.

The Old Warrior ran past the bodies of his fallen comrades, his one good eye watering and burning from the smoke and fumes filling the passage. His burned and cracked helmet no longer kept it out. He cursed as he ran and dodged, cursed as he stopped long enough to fire a quick shot back behind him, cursed some more as he turned and ran on again. Things had gone from disaster to ruin and back to disaster again, ever since that first folly of attacking that alien fleet from beyond the galaxy. The past six months had been spent looking for other renegade bases or safe havens. But nothing had turned out right. Every time they had come out of a jump, the old warrior had sent messages. Messages calling for a grand rendezvous of all renegade troops and ships at a specific location.

The old warrior stopped to catch his breath behind a bulkhead support.

When he got an answer to his messages at all, they all said he was crazy. Crazy. If they knew what had gathered at the Eastern edge of the galaxy, they would be crazy too. Then add to that the appearance of an Imperial warship, at every jump exit point for the last three months, and things were beyond frustrating.

This last episode convinced the old warrior that he was doomed. An Imperial cruiser waiting at the exact exit point, and the plasma engine malfunctions immediately, making another jump impossible, all add up to fate.

And worst of all, the frustration in the old warrior was unbearable. His oaths of revenge, his unrequited hate, would not be carried out, no fierce satisfaction at standing over the ruined corpses of defeated alien invaders. At least there were a few Imperials to vent his rage and frustration on.

He got up and quickly made his way to the shuttle hanger, having caught his breath, and seeing he was no longer being followed. In the hanger, the old warrior found only eight of his troopers working to get a shuttle ready. Eight out of a thousand. The bitter cold anger would never be answered for this. After a quick look around, he headed for the ramp of the shuttle, when:

Bang! The pressure door to his right was blown in!

Imperials! Starting to run for the ramp, the old warrior instinctively fired in the direction of the charging Imperials. Then, in what seemed slow motion, he saw the sparkle of the charged power beam reach out for him. The power of the electric shock effect tore painfully through what was left of his body. The old warrior's last thought was how much he hated his rotten luck.

III.

Pen instinctively ducked into a crouch when the pressure door blew in. Then, they all rushed through the gaping hole. The impression of being hemmed in gave way suddenly to the realization that everyone had fanned out, leaving her exposed, and running headlong into the transport bay!

There – in front – a renegade in space armor painted black – and firing right at her! She quickly pointed her weapon at the dark silhouette and fired even as she tried to run faster and turn aside. But, a red flash filled Pen's eyes, and she felt herself falling, and she thought how she had known she was going to die, and then peaceful, dark, nothing.

IV.

Lynx held the small holo-orb in her left hand as she settled farther back into the chair. This way she could keep up with viewing the video reports, while waiting for the specially engineered viruses to finish their work on Pen. The combination of cultured viruses, enzymes, and drugs seemed to have repaired Pen's nervous system in record time. The small amount of skin damage was easily repaired, and the two missing little fingers from the left hand would be replaced with bio-techs very soon. Lynx looked over at Pen.

Lynx allowed herself to feel pleased with her new aide. Pen had charged straight in with the rest of them, then straight at an enemy warrior that popped up. Took him out neat as neat. Just was a little slow on the dodge out of harm's way. This little, fragile looking, pale specimen had a mean streak. Yes, she will do. A small movement caught Lynx's eye. Pen was waking at last.

"Uhhh...Unhhh...I feel terrible." Pen sighed quietly.

"You look better than you sound, the skin burns are almost completely gone." Lynx said, making a sweeping motion with her full left hand.

Pen looked down at herself, just to see she was completely nude, under a plastic sheet. She felt a hot flush come over her, to add to the nausea she felt.

"I'm not used to lying around like this, on public display." Pen managed to say.

"You should know that the clear plastic thermal blanket is for monitoring the healing process, sensibilities notwithstanding. You did good, you know." Lynx smiled.

"By getting shot?" Pen asked incredulously.

"The way you charged in, flushed an enemy, then took him out with one well placed burst. The skillful break to the side would have kept you from harm normally, but your target had launched a nova grenade. Still, you only caught the edge of it, instead of being immolated in the center of the blast. You even impressed my bodyguards, and that takes a lot." Lynx stood and placed her empty hand on Pen's shoulder. "I knew you would probably make a good aide, I'm surprised to find you're a good bodyguard too. Your training reports gave no indication."

Pen stared down at her toes thoughtfully, for a moment. "I didn't do anything brave. I was confused and stupid. I found myself in the middle of the bay, facing a dark shadow shooting at me. I just instinctively tried to get out of the way."

"I think your instincts function better than your memory." Lynx said, backing away from the bed, a little. "You just get your rest and don't worry about your performance – or anything else. Heal up fast, I've got you back in eight time periods, and we begin the interrogations then. I'll leave you now, so you can get the rest I just ordered you to take." Lynx said the last with a wry smile barely visible, then turned around and left the room. In a hurry as always.

Pen looked at the door that had just sealed behind Lynx, mouth hanging slightly open. She wondered how she could be regarded as a good and brave fighter, when she felt so sick and confused. Maybe what other people thought of you was more true than what you think of yourself.

Pen stabbed the button for a medical aide. A sleeping potion sounded like a good idea.

Prompt to the minute, Lynx picked up her aide at the end of eight periods, and always in a hurry, rushed Pen into the deepest recesses of the cruiser. This was where Lynx had set up her interrogation facilities.

"You will operate the recording devices," Lynx was saying as they hurried down the corridors. "I will handle the actual memory imagers. Be sure you don't miss a fragment of the memory holographs – we need every scrap of information. Also, be certain to take the drugs I set aside for you, Pen. I don't want a shred of emotion to surface in you that could interfere with the chronicling of this interrogation."

Pen just nodded her head in answer. She shuddered inside from imagining what form of interrogation needed drugs for the interrogators. And then they were at the chamber door.

It opened into a cylindrical room, with a single circular hatch or door at either end. There was not a single man, or device to interrupt the curve of the metal wall or ceiling anywhere along the length of the room. But, the floor was divided into five similar arrangements of equipment. In the center of each arrangement was the "interrogation rack" she had heard of.

Each was only a framework to hold the fine steel wires which actually support – and constrained – the victim. Some of the fine wires were attached in such a way that to struggle causes excruciating pain; kind of like the reverse of acupuncture. Each of the five frameworks held a body. Four men and a woman, nude, with tiny drops of blood dripping from wire connections.

At least Pen thought it could be four and one; one of the bodies was missing a considerable portion of its mass. Pen was drawn closer by curiosity. It could have been a woman, once.

"This is our lucky break," Lynx said from behind Pen, "A bonus that could prove more valuable than all the others." Pen stopped next to the mangled body, as Lynx went on. "He was a commander of renegade marines, which means he may know more than even the Captain of that rust heap of a troopship. This guy is the prize, we'll do him first."

"Lynx," Pen asked, somewhat pensively, "I feel overwhelmed by all this, I don't know what this is all about..." Pen looked up at Lynx, and said more strongly, "And now your going to torture these people to death, but for what?"

Lynx sized up Pen, with her little fists balled up at her sides, and sighed. "I don't, and the Empire may not, have time for much explanation, so I'll give a little now, and the rest you will have to pick up as we go, or later. First, take your drugs." Lynx held out her hand.

Pen just stood unmoving, her eyes flashing. If she was going to be damned, it might as well be for taking a stand.

"You must take these drugs," Lynx, beginning to frown, was saying more forcefully, "What we are about to do is not pretty. We are about to look into the mind of a leader of a band of renegades. This particular band is widely known for its savagery in raids on Imperial colony worlds. This particular individual may have taken part in some really horrible acts. I need you to be unaffected, Pen, doing your job quickly and dispassionately." Lynx lowered her voice, holding out her hand in Pen's direction again.

"Now take these and let's get to work, or get out of here." She paused a moment then said, "I would hate to see you waste your potential."

Pen could still feel the sense of dread, but reached out suddenly and swallowed the little orbs. Then turned smartly, and walked over to the controls and displays that would record these proceedings.

By the time she had finished setting up the recording instruments, she turned to see Lynx and two medical techs were just applying the last brain probe. The skin had been pulled back from a four centimeter square area, and the exposed bone dissolved away, just like the previous two probes. They were inserting the long, soft, pale bundle of artificial synapse material. That would be the one that gathers the memories for display. The other two bundles would just control and regulate the brain so that the memories would not be suppressed. Pen thought that the drugs must be working, she felt no emotion at all. She thought she should feel something, anything, seeing a brain being systematically invaded by maggot colored serpents that will devour the brain. But there was no feeling of any kind. The holo-monitors showed the filaments spreading throughout the brain, just as they were programmed. The recording devices and computers were set, and had begun receiving the memory images. There was nothing for Pen to do now, but watch.

The images were coming through at random, it was up to the computers to sort them out later. What was coming through now was a kaleidoscope of images flashing on, then being replaced, in less than a second each.

Pen watched in a state of detached curiosity. There came flashes of battles, spinning fields of stars, a woman, a strange nebula, some children, then a horrible bloody massacre flicked past, and it went on and on.

Pen thought to herself that she should feel something. The groans and even screams from this victim moved her not at all. And the horrid life he led, she should feel anger, or fear, or at least something. But there was nothing. Only those awful, terrible flickering and flashing scenes burning into her unfeeling brain, like a red hot iron burning into flesh.

And then Lynx found what she must have been looking for. The images came slower, and a voice was added, and it was now a continuous chain of events, like a story, complete with flashbacks to earlier memories.

A blue white neutron star. A cinder of a planet. The view showed the gathering of many mighty ships, but they were the wrong colors. Renegades. And then planet side scenes. The gathering of war machines and warriors; men, women, and aliens. Companies of mutants – insane and hell-bent on revenge against all normals. The assembly and preparation of a major war against the Empire.

But then, the parade of images again shift rapidly to space. A brownish cloud against the star field. Then a vast multitude of individual specks of faint brown. They grew into a host of ships – large and small. Millions. And the renegades were attacking! They slashed into the brown specks, and then were in turn decimated by the onset of the aliens. A brief fight on board the renegades troopship. Blackness. Then scenes from the victim's memories showed a collection of prostrate alien creatures being examined. The exam centered on a big, multi-armed, and reddish colored monstrosity. Abruptly the scenes came quicker, then stopped with a view of Lynx, Pen, and company charging into the cargo bay. All the holos and display orbs went dark.

Pen turned to see what was next. What she heard next must have been a mistake.

"That's right," Lynx was saying, in her usual forceful manner, "I want this renegade put back together better than when we started. Remove the synapse probes very carefully, and damage nothing. The only memory I want erased is the memory of this interrogation." Lynx paused while one of the techs mumbled something. "You'll be done faster than that. You saw those events – Billions of lives are at stake. The task I have for this renegade commander requires a living, functioning, and thinking participant – not a brain dead collection of metal and plastic parts. I'll return in four time periods, and all will be ready."

Pen had made her way to the table beside Lynx during this exchange. Without thinking, Pen looked down at the old warrior hanging from the wires. The one real eye in that scarred, semi artificial face looked glazed. Pen thought she could see a bottomless ocean of pain. She turned away.

"Come, Pen," Lynx suddenly said in Pen's ear, "We are needed elsewhere."

In the transport tube, Pen took another pill offered by Lynx. By the time they reached the warship's command center, a flood of emotion had washed over Pen, and then subsided. Pen had never engaged in the ritual of loves, but from what she'd heard, the pinnacle of the ritual must be something like what the drugs had done. She could not imagine why anyone would want to repeat the confusion of the experience. Her reverie ended with the realization that they were upon the ship commander's door step.

The door zipped open as Lynx was about to put her foot on it. Pen realized that Lynx knew this otherwise locked door would open for her like that. And here were four bodyguards, still in armor, still alert, and still as large and intimidating as ever. Only now it was the ship commander, and his staff, that looked intimidated. The commander started in as soon as he spotted Lynx enter.

"You simply can not do this, Inquisitor. Order this ship destroyed if you will, but if you release that renegade the whole empire will suffer!" He said sharply, as he drew himself up in front of Lynx.

"There is no room for bravado in this, Captain," Lynx said, casually, "the plan I am setting into motion will counter some portion of a very serious, very real, threat to us all. Ok, and don't bother about the stain to your honor because of the escaped renegade. The story is already spreading around that the Inquisitor has achieved a decaying mental orbit. I can take the heat. You can follow orders."

Pen watched a whole series of emotions flash across the Captain's deep set eyes. The man she had feared and respected was being slammed. Hard. She could only bite her tongue.

"Enough playing out our roles, captain," Lynx began again, "I calculated a series of jumps on my way here, and I want your navigator to confirm the courses. Aide, go down to the galley and bring back the foods and drinks waiting there. This will take a while."

"Yes, Inquisitor." Pen said, bowing slightly – as she would for an elder relative. As she turned to leave, she could see the faces of the bodyguards for the first time. They were smiling at her. Not amusement. Camaraderie. A strange sensation came over Pen, driving away the cold tension that had been in her middle, and leaving a warm sensation behind.

V.

The renegade commander felt himself swimming up out of the fuzzy grayness of semi-consciousness, again. His one good eye wasn't focusing very well, but the device in the other eye socket still worked fine. He saw that he was still strapped in where he had demanded his brother marine set him up. She had not liked it, his hurts were far from mended, but she had strapped him into the Comm station operator's seat, as ordered.

The old warrior felt the grim pleasure wake in him again, as he dwelled on developments, again.

Their shuttle would shortly be met by a renegade fleet destroyer. Then they would be taken to one of the major bases still hidden from the Empire.

How his luck had changed. When he was hit, he was sure he would finally die, there on the shuttle ramp. But, the woman had enough presence of mind to drag him up the ramp, as she made her own escape. Now there was only the two of them left. Even her memories of blasting out, and escaping the Imperial cruiser were fuzzy. The old warrior thought about the strange twists of fate. From failure to a new beginning – and he had not even been awake for it! Now he could carry out his oaths of revenge at last. At last the other fleet and marine commanders believed the holos he had broadcast. At last, the stinking alien invaders would feel the burning hatred they had earned.

Yes, satisfaction washed over the old warrior, even as a holo orb flashed the arrival of the destroyer.

Now, if only he could be rid of the nightmare that haunted him, whenever he blacked out, or slept. Not of multi-limbed horrors, no. He dreamed of two women, and pain, and things crawling in his mind – under his skull – and another woman looking on with pained compassion in her eyes, and he couldn't decide which he hated more ... and he would wake up.

A most annoying dream to lessen his pleasure, while he plots his revenge on the aliens.

VI.

Pen watched the long range display intently. The two little red dots merged into one.

"Lynx, the destroyer has picked up the renegade shuttle. They are starting toward the jump point to reenter non-space." Pen called over her shoulder.

Lynx looked up from the piece of land animal she had been cutting. "Good, then the last couple of days were not a complete waste. Flash up the ship captain, tell him to execute the first of the Nav programs – right now." She then went back to putting a steaming piece of animal protein in her mouth.

"As you say." Pen said, even as she activated the orb to the bridge.

Pen's mind was racing in hyper mode, as she contemplated the immediate future. She felt sure that there were going to be plenty of unpleasant episodes, and adventures, in her future. She wondered for a moment if she would live long enough to see all that many. But then, she put the thought aside, and concentrated on carrying out Lynx's instructions.

Chapter Three

A New Enemy

I.

The hive mind of the Tyranids can operate on many levels. Many different plans can be made, many different solutions to problems formulated, and a single unified purpose and direction achieved for all the members of the hive.

The problem of largest concern to the hive, was how to best tackle the problems of assimilating an entire galaxy. Several different solutions were possible, but the one solution adopted was the "Octopus plan."

The Octopus plan was simplicity and adaptability at its best. The hive would spread throughout the galaxy like an octopus' tentacles, with the main bulk of the hive following behind-like the body of an octopus. Each tentacle would probe this way and that, locating each system to be conquered, over running the easiest systems. Should a tentacle be damaged, or destroyed, then it could be replaced easily from the bulk. If the hive mind decided that a system was too strongly held, then that star system would be surrounded. The continuous attacks that would follow would be to wear down, weaken, and finally, overrun the weakened defenders. If this took years, this still fit the plan. The hive mind did not worry over the passing of so short a time.

The hive mind was constantly reevaluating new data, new sensory input from millions of creatures in the hive. A new, strong, psychic presence was felt coming from the Southern Edge of this galaxy. Very strong. A hive cell – a hundred hive ships – was sent to investigate.

II.

The Eldar artisan shifted his sitting posture as he entered a new level of concentration. The interference he was experiencing was totally new. The psychic presence he felt was new, powerful, alien and...hostile. The artisan surrendered to the inevitable, and allowed the dream state to slowly unravel his concentration.

Drifting in seemingly pointless thought-directions, there was a certain sense to the array of thought pictures playing themselves out in his mind. There was a great deal of the human presence in this. Some powerfully psychic human was under much stress. A reflection on humans danced around the edges of his consciousness.

Humans resembled Eldar in some ways. Outwardly, the humans were more heavily built, but still had the same body design. Some were even psychic. Some Eldar thought that humans were a branch of long lost cousins of the Eldar. But Eldar had been among the stars for many thousands of years before humans. Most Eldar that had studied humans believed in parallel development, not in Human and Eldar being branches of a common family tree. The thousands of years that humans had been in space, spreading like a disease, had brought Eldar and human into frequent contact. Although there had been some fighting between the two peoples, there was little enmity. The two peoples were on different courses, as a race, and so clashed seldom.

The drifting mind of the artisan was invaded by new scenes. These were a succession of individual terrors. The psychic mind, and purposes, of a new alien were revealed. War, and bitter loss were not unknown to Eldar. Even if there was no war with humans, the Eldar have bitter enemies, when they find the Eldar. But these are a new enemy. These invading aliens will hate the Eldar most of all. This new enemy hates individualism, and most of all, hates powerful minds that are not slaves to the enormous will behind these aliens.

The artisan awakes from the dream state with an effort, the images were still coming in a stream. But, the council of the Old Ones must be asked of this matter.

As he rose, he looked out the portal. The action caused the opaque dark gray to give way to a clear view. Beyond the now clear crystal rose the high delicate structures that resembled spun glass. Delicate as a thought. Strong as a belief. The artisan mused on the growing prosperity of this place. They had come far, since settling on this world. Eight hundred years of peaceful growth, on a planet where all environmental conditions were perfect, how could the people not prosper?

The visions of imminent danger now threatened that world out there. The blue and green of water and life could be replaced with the black and red of darkness and fire.

The artisan turned away from the portal, which sensed his mental focus shift and returned to dark gray opaque.

The artisan made his way down to the transporter gate, two levels below. There the frameworks rose from the center of the room. The complex design required manual operation and would not respond to mental projection, like the simpler viewing portals. With a few quick motions, the proper mechanisms were engaged, and the gate activated. At least the hum, and static electricity, in the air indicated an energized state. But there was no opening or other appearance within the framework. Ah. The artisan was momentarily embarrassed. He was on the wrong side. A two dimensional gateway had no reverse side, which was why he could see the far side of the room. He stepped around the edge of the frame, and there was the view he expected. How many times had he made that same mistake. Too many. The artisan told himself again that it was because his art was not machinery.

The artisan peered deeper into the view the 2-D gateway presented. The outside of the chamber of the old ones already had a crowd, and more arriving by the moment. Many arts were represented. The only art he could not find were those who represented the art of war. Curious. There were only a few from his calling, as well.

He decided to use his rank to help him gain an audience immediately. Age, skill, and reputation were still honored. And then he stepped through the energy barrier that had kept out the reality of his destination.

And nearly knocked down a novice apprentice from the art of Celestials, who was hurrying toward the front of the crowd.

"Forgive my intrusion, Artisan," the novice said, "I was rash to hurry through a crowd." He looked anxious.

"It is nothing, the unexpectedness of my appearance surprised you." The artisan said, waving one hand, "Do go on, no harm or insult done."

Looking relieved, the novice moved aside, obviously making way to the artisan. The artisan noticed that all the crowd was aware of him, and a path to the door had opened. The artisan nodded to left and right as he passed through. He must acknowledge his fellows, no matter what station or art.

At the door, a member of his own art was waiting. He recognized her. Her skill was not yet fully developed, but would come with time and practice.

"You are expected, Artisan," she said, "please follow me."

She led him through the edifice at a rapid pace. There were more sentinels than usual, he noticed. She stopped at the entrance to the sanctum of the Old Ones.

The artisan entered, and the entrance sealed behind him. The gardens spread before him, a zoological collection from many worlds, a vast triangular shape, with many levels. It was curious how, as the old ones came closer to death, they surrounded themselves with more life.

III.

The cruiser, shaped like a broad arrowhead, appeared out of non-space. The painting across the top surface, of a bird of prey with talons outstretched, could barely be seen because of the blackened damaged areas. Searing energies and massive explosions narrowly missing still leave their mark.

Lynx sat looking at her reflection in the polished metal. Things had been happening so quickly, she needed time to pause, and review things in her mind. The quiet moments were few. Pen was again down where Lynx's bodyguards were quartered. Pen seemed to have found friends there. The extra training Pen had been learning, simply as a pastime, had certainly come in handy recently. Lynx looked over at the computations displayed on a view panel. Yes, there was going to be time yet, they would not arrive at the Eldar colony world for two days yet. Time to continue emergency repairs. Time to allow the mind to wander, to reflect on recent events. Maybe some important detail would come to light. Lynx settled back, allowed her eyes to unfocus on her reflection, and let the tightly coiled steel spring of her mind relax.

Only three months ago, was it? They had popped into real space quite close to an Imperial colony world. With the threat that the Tyranid fleet might be close by, they had torn across the system at dangerous speeds. They reversed engines and settled into the colony world's atmosphere in swirls of flame.

The Tyranids had been here first.

The planet was dead. Every living thing had been erased. Even the lakes and seas were reduced to shallow, poisoned, scummed over cesspools. Thousands, or even millions, of enemy ships had to take part, to carry so much away.

The cruiser blasted out of the system even more quickly than it arrived. Lynx had set them on a new course, toward the Southern sectors of the galaxy. There were a number of heavily populated, and heavily defended, worlds that must be warned. The mysterious interference with all forms of communication in this region was becoming a major headache.

The cruiser captain and navigator were good, Lynx reflected. They had brought the cruiser back into real space closer to the next planetary system than anyone would have thought possible.

Lynx made a sour face. How could she have foreseen the ambush? There was no way to tell that this planet's human population had been enslaved thoroughly, prior to the Inquisitor's arrival. The planetary governor and council had set them up in a near perfect trap. Only Lynx's unquenchable suspicion had saved them. The attack of the blue horrors had nearly wiped out the honor guard from the cruiser. Her bodyguards, and Pen, laid down the covering fire that made escape possible. Even Lynx barely had any ammo left when they boarded the shuttle.

Then the worst of it. The Tyranid fleet had arrived. They came in from above and below the elliptic plane of the star system. Meaning that the Imperial cruiser could try to escape through the approaching enemy fleets, to reach a safe jump point, or try to escape along the elliptic plane – a longer path to a jump point. Both were evil choices.

But first, the cruiser launched a pattern of virus bombs at the planet. In ten planetary hours the virus would complete its work, there would be no living thing on the planet for the Tyranids to feed on. Only a waiting virus to feed on them.

The escape went badly, even with the speed and firepower the cruiser possessed. Advance knowledge of the enemy's desire to board the cruiser did not help. With so many enemies to dodge, it was only a matter of time until they were damaged enough to be brought to a halt, then self destruction was the only choice. The captain and crew were inspired, and invented brilliant new maneuvers. The weapons crews set new standards for accurate shooting. And still they were almost lost.

They had just escaped the system, and were almost at the jump point when they were finally caught. A medium sized enemy ship got past the defensive fire and rammed into the cruiser. Had the cruiser not been trying to dodge away, then both would have surely been destroyed by the speed of the collision. As it was, the enemy grappled long enough to discharge hundreds of enemy creatures into the cruiser, through the hole in the lower hull. Then the enemy ship was blasted to bits, at last. And they fell through into non-space a moment later, at the jump point.

The next two ship days were spent destroying the big enemy warriors, even with all the automated ship defense systems. The next two weeks were spent hunting down the littlest of the invaders. They had spread out into every nook in the ship, damaging what they could, attacking anyone they found from unexpected directions. The Inquisitor and her guard had joined in the fight, and the hunt.

Lynx looked at her reflection in the polished metal again. Never a particularly beautiful reflection, neither had it been plain. That was changed now. The bright red scar of the partially healed wound, curved from left cheek to chin, and stood out strongly on the lightly bronzed skin. The medical section of the ship was all but destroyed in the fighting, so the wound had to heal as best it could. Lynx decided she would not have the scar removed later. She would keep it as a reminder, of many things.

And Pen. She was not the pensive little half trained lieutenant anymore. Her fear had turned to anger. She thirsted for more knowledge and training from the bodyguards, which they were glad to give. Lynx wondered, if her bodyguards were faced with a choice between saving Lynx or Pen, if that choice would be as easy as it once was.

Damned little girl. She had stepped up behind Lynx, and fired a whole clip into the blue horror atop Lynx, all before the beast could do more than leave this scar. Lynx shook her head. Damned little girl.

The chime of four low tones snapped the steel coil spring of Lynx's mind tight again.

"Incoming messages for the Inquisitor." The voice of the ship's comm officer from a panel. "Shall I route them directly to you, or record them?"

"I'll take them now," Lynx said, turning from her reflection, "and make it a secure connection."

"Aye."

Instantly the face of an aged Eldar male appeared, a young Eldar female just behind.

"Salutations," Lynx said with a half smile, "You are the artisan of structures named Borleorl, I believe."

"Skill and honor to you," Borleorl replied, "and I, of course, remember you, Inquisitor human." A spark of emotion in his voice. "I have called you at the request of the council. Since I have had dealings with humans, and you, before."

"This is a secure line, Artisan," Lynx stated matter of factly, "you may begin now, or wait for our arrival in one more planetary sun cycle."

Just then the door behind Lynx opened and closed with two quick whispers. A quick glance at a polished reflector, Pen has returned.

"My aide has my complete trust in all matters, please continue." Lynx said, as Borleorl's mouth started to open.

"I will start to address matters, now, Inquisitor." Borleorl said, eyebrows slightly lowered. "I wish for my assistant, Daene, to begin. I will amplify later." And with that he disappeared from view, leaving the younger female in the projection.

"My skill increases," began Daene, "and so my honor, by your presence."

"We are honored that you would speak with us in our language," Lynx replied formally, "but, important matters should take precedence over formality. Please, let us begin."

"At your insistence, then." Daene replied evenly. "As you may know, ours is a planet of Artisans. A retreat for the mastery of a chosen path to high art. We are not warriors, though we number the art of war among us. We are in terrible peril by a new invader."

Pen tensed behind Lynx, the slight rustle of movement barely audible to Lynx.

"We have just had several encounters with these new creatures, ourselves." Lynx stated flatly, "The damage to our ship and crew bear testimony."

"And you yet live?" Daene asked, surprised, then regained her neutral expression. "Such skillful help will be much needed. We have had two encounters with this new enemy already. The first was only a hundred of their space craft. Our small fleet met them, they were hostile and attacked, and we defeated them easily. The second encounter was more than a thousand of their ships. Our small fleet defeated them as well. There is now a fleet of several thousand approaching, and we have almost no ships left. We hope for help from one of the war guilds, but there is little time left. Many of our people are leaving any way they can. Many more are unable to leave."

"Do you know when these enemies will arrive?" Lynx asked.

"Yes, about eight cycles of the sun through our sky. Perhaps less, our information is not too recent." Daene replied.

"That's almost seventeen of our ship days," Lynx said distractedly, a look of intense concentration coming over her face. "That may be time for some help to come after all. Put Artisan Borleorl back on as soon as you can, Daene...."

"I am here, listening. What is it?" A disjointed voice from the projection. Daene stepped back, and Borleorl filled the view.

"You must tell the council to expect more warships from the Empire soon, most should be here in six or seven of your planet's cycles." Lynx was saying hurriedly, "I ordered those ships to rendezvous here, because this is the last friendly planetary system left in this sector. You see, the three Imperial fleet bases near here have been attacked as well. Two destroyed, and one abandoned when its forces were destroyed. What is gathering here is all the survivors of those battles. Also, all the ships are filled to the airlock gaskets with marines and planetary infantry. I hope your council will allow human warriors to join in the defense of your peoples."

"You are forever in a hurry, and forever placing me in difficult positions." Borleorl answered slowly, a look of intense concentration on his face now. "You have already brought human warships together here, and now you ask if the council will consent? You forever go too far with your hurried decisions!"

The sharp emotion from Borleorl came through the projection so well that Pen's hair stood out from the back of her neck. The fact that the visual was three times life size did not help a bit, either. A moment of silence passed.

"I spoke with you before about my sorrow at your loss, please do not let that past occasion lessen our help on this occasion." Lynx asked quietly. "We can always have the ships depart as fast as they arrive, then the Eldar can look to their own skills."

"The past will not interfere with the present," Borleorl was saying less forcefully, "but the past is not forgotten. You interfered with my destiny."

"Yes, but ..." Lynx started to say.

"Yes, and the Eldar destinies run long," Borleorl said, his face softening, "and a life mate contract is for all an Eldar's destiny. A life mate is greater even than art."

"I regret that the contract was withdrawn," Lynx was saying more sternly, "because you aided me, and that no other contract will be offered, I regret even more. I can say it no more plainly. Now please go to your council, there is much to do in a short time."

Borleorl smiled a strange smile, and Daene appeared behind him again, still impassive.

"I believe your communications channel was not as secure as you may have thought." His eyes took on a wicked look as he went on. "You and your aide have been standing before the whole council this entire time. They had to see, before they would believe what you are really like. Your projection of will was not focused on them, so they can see and feel what you really mean behind your words. You will hear from us again soon."

And while Lynx was opening her mouth to speak, the view vanished. Borleorl was positively grinning when he spoke the last sentence.

"Damn. Damn. Damn." Lynx said very softly to the indicator dial in front of her. "I risk all the Empire's forces in this sector to help these people, and I have to deal with the one being of an entire race who would rather hear of my distant death, on a far away, meaningless rock."

"Then just order our ships away before we make more trouble for ourselves." Pen offered.

"No, no." Lynx said more loudly, turning on Pen. "I am willing to sacrifice every human life in this sector, if it means my plan comes to fruition. Remember, Inquisitors will sacrifice millions for wind and smoke. Only this time something more substantial should result."

Pen took a step backward as Lynx became more animate, and her voice rose.

"The Eldar have a deep sense of obligation and of honor. If every human warship and soldier dies trying to defend an Eldar world, here, then maybe the Eldar will join the Empire in organizing a proper resistance to the invader." Lynx was near shouting as she took a step toward Pen. "Every race in the galaxy must be made to resist! Or every race will fall, one by one, to an ever stronger invading enemy! No sacrifice is too great, if it means the destruction of those unclean vermin!"

And then suddenly, Lynx almost whispered, "The Eldar truly understand the meaning and obligation from a life sacrificed."

Pen signaled understanding by letting her jaw sag.

"Yes Pen. You and I will die at this place, if I feel the Empire will live to defeat the enemy." Lynx said evenly, staring into Pen's eyes.

IV.

The Hive Mind of the Tyranids sensed a change. Resistance was building in the minds of the more intelligent beings, in this part of the galaxy. There will be incidents where the creatures of this galaxy try to deny food and slaves to the will of the hive. Whole worlds will be laid bare of all life in the path of the hive's advance. The hive mind thought of this in the same light as a human would feel, finding the only water source in a star system poisoned. There would be no restraint or mercy to such a perpetrator.

The hive mind considered. A steady advance meant that there would be time for preparations, even more virus "poisons" to have to neutralize. What was needed was to appear suddenly, before the more dangerous creatures of this galaxy could prepare, and sweep over them in a sudden storm of warriors. This meant the breakup of the hive, and hive mind, into smaller, and weaker, elements to scatter across the galaxy. The hive mind considered this a dangerous course, only to be taken if desperate threats should be encountered. That time was not yet.

A safer plan was begun. The infiltrations and subversions of worlds was stepped up. This plan would have the help of the newly constructed agents, fresh from the Tyranid DNA Bio-vats.

V.

Pen watched as a line of cargo ships lifted off in unison. They had exchanged their cargo of human warriors for one of Eldar noncombatants. There were still too many of those left behind, but every ship that could, took all the Eldar that they could squeeze aboard. They quickly disappeared straight up.

Pen then turned around to look down the ridge behind her. How strange it looked. The big, blocky, and out of place, metal outcropping that was the cruiser. The front quarter slanted into the lake, and the huge engine outlets pushed into the sky at a crazy angle. How undignified for a ship of war.

Someone was approaching up the slope, so Pen sat down to wait. The gravity on this planet was more than on board ship, it made her legs ache to stand for long. She had stayed in her power armor for most of the two weeks on the planet, that way her increased weight was distributed over more of her surface area, and so less pressure on her legs. She understood better now why Lynx's bodyguards kept the gravity compensators turned way up in their quarters.

And, Pen felt she could relax, just a little. The arrival of two *Retribution* class battleships, to join the human fleet assembling here, gave Pen real hope. One *Apocalypse* class had not been enough to deal with the threat fast approaching. Squadrons of cruisers of every type, and more squadrons of frigates and destroyers, continue to arrive as well, but Lynx still felt it wasn't enough. The approaching enemy armada was larger than any yet seen by humans.

Pen could now see that the approaching someone was an Eldar female in armor. The Eldar armor resembled a coat of paint, except for the helmet. Pen admired the effortless grace with which the Eldar moved about their planet. Pen always felt as if she were wading through something thick and sticky, anything but graceful.

The Eldar female stopped two short paces away from Pen, and stood, just looking at Pen for a couple of moments. She then took off her helmet.

"Ah, Daene - you people all look the same in your suits." Pen said, stretching out her legs, and leaning back on her hands. "Come sit with me, we can watch this planet's star settle over the spires of your city."

"We do not sit in that type of flora," Daene was saying past a wry smile, "notice how it hugs every part of you? This species likes to climb into the sky, so sit there for a while, and this fast growing climber will cover you, until you are only a green mound."

Pen jumped to her feet. "I would not sit still for that!"

"Can you not smell the fragrance? Soon you would be dreaming. Yes, you would sit still." Daene said.

"If this plant eats people, why don't you get rid of it?" Pen asked, backing onto the blue gravel bar a little further.

"This plant does not consume, only cover over," Daene was grinning with amusement, "and keep you dreaming forever. It would climb our tallest structures, if it could. That is why we surround our spires with wide glass walkways, this flora can't take hold."

"Wonderful," Pen complained, "my first chance to get off the ship, and I'm nearly a nutrient pile for the local flora."

"Yes, well, I came to get you to return to the ship." Daene said more seriously, "The last repair crews are leaving, and your Inquisitor has been calling all over the planet for you. Let's get back."

"Oh my stars," Pen hissed out between clenched teeth, "I didn't take a comm unit with me. I've always been close by when called by the Inquisitor before." She quickly started back.

"Perhaps your punishment will be less than you imagine." Daene suggested. "There is still some hours left before the enemy come in range." Following the little stiffly moving human was amusing, but difficult on communicating.

"What worries me is the kinds of punishment that the Inquisitor can imagine, all that the enemy can do is kill me." Pen said over her shoulder, still hurrying.

"Now that I have found you, I will say that I kept you, that we had to talk." Daene said, having taken one long stride, so as to be in front of Pen. "Please stop a moment and speak with me."

Pen stopped short. Something was on this Eldar's mind. "Well, if it won't take long. The Inquisitor said we were all to act as ambassadors."

"I know there is no chance you will answer this, but I must ask. What power does your Inquisitor have over my people? There is not one thing that has been asked that we have not delivered up to her." Daene still had her helmet off, the sun setting behind her illuminated her dark swirling hair into flame.

Pen tried to keep a neutral face as she considered the intense face of the Eldar opposite her. Pen had been warned that someone might try to get to Lynx through Pen, but such a direct approach was unexpected. Pen could see no harm in a truthful answer.

"I do not know, but I think that her power is her habit of being right." Pen said carefully, "I mean, when she told your council that our warships would hide on the far side of the sun, from the approaching enemy, she had considered every other option first. She really thinks that the time to commit our ships is after the enemy have started their assault on the planet."

"But that means our planet will be laid waste!" Daene unconsciously put one foot forward and leaned over Pen, slightly.

"No, I think I follow the Inquisitor's logic." Pen said, not in the least intimidated, "Our ships have no hope of destroying so many of the enemy, but by letting the enemy divide themselves between the assault on the planet, and meeting the sudden appearance of our ships, we may just have a chance."

"No, you do not follow the events that will occur." Daene said darkly, "Our warriors are dusting off the ancient weapons that were stored here. They are very terrible, so terrible that they have not been used for ages, because of the danger. You see, when they are fired they create a tear in reality. Everything over a wide area is destroyed. Everything. To use over the surface of a planet will leave only molten craters, or maybe crack the planet in that place." Daene looked up from Pen, and scanned the horizon. "We have won nothing, if we destroy ourselves as well." She looked back at Pen. "So you see, we must not let the enemy reach the planet."

"I am not a general," Pen started, quietly, "but I do know that nothing can stop the enemy from landing here." Pen's expression darkened as she added, "I also know that to destroy this planet's entire biosphere is preferable to letting those creatures feed on it, and have them grow stronger. I hope I am blown to atoms, if we lose here, before they can feed on me."

After a couple of minutes of looking at each other, Daene spoke up. "Come now, let us go back. I am no general, either. I only want my home to be here when this is over."

VI.

Lynx looked away from the holo as the door hissed open, then closed. "So, my lost aide has been found and returned."

"I kept your aide busy as we talked of humans," Daene stated flatly, "I would increase my skill by learning all I can, in preparation of future encounters with humans."

Lynx seemed to be considering, as she looked at the two females over her shoulder. Then said, "I believe you are needed in the city, Artisan Crafter Daene, I will not also be guilty of keeping someone from their duties." She then turned back to studying the holo in front of her.

Pen nodded as Daene exited, then stood rooted to the spot, not daring to think. Several minutes passed. At last Lynx turned to face Pen.

"It has begun sooner than expected. Once again we are sitting in a trap." Lynx growled out. "So now we cannot join our fleet. I have just told the Eldar council that this ship is going to sit right here until the enemy landings start, then we'll see how we can best help." Lynx turned and walked over to the small table at the edge of the room. She then sat and stared at the holo still trembling above the projector.

"May I bring a drink to you?" Pen offered.

"No, come sit here," Lynx said softly, "in a few minutes we will both put on our full space armor. I'm sorry to have gotten you into another trap, Pen. I don't see how we can win through, but at least we will put up a good fight."

Pen could not remember Lynx not having some back up plan for every event, at any time since they met. Pen did not like the sound of this, not at all.

"Oh, and remind me later to think of some interesting way to remind you to carry a comm set." Lynx said in her normal, semi-severe tone of voice.

Pen couldn't help cracking a tiny smile.

VII.

Borleorl watched the dancing colors from the views. Things could not be going more badly. One by one, the last Eldar ships were being lost. It reminded him of the winged things that darted above the waves of the sea, they could pluck at the waves, but not stop them.

Never had Borleorl seen such things. The Eldar would try to attack one of the biggest enemy ships, but one or more of the little ones would sacrifice itself, by getting in the path of the Eldar weapons. And there were a lot of littler ones. Still, some of the biggest ones had been stopped, or destroyed. Borleorl could not see that it had made any difference.

The pattern of the enemy ships changed. It now resembled an outstretched hand, about to encircle the planet. The big ships, and even the medium size ships, began to disgorge a swirl of dust – a myriad of tiny ships heading toward the surface. The small ships that had been such trouble also headed toward the planet's surface.

Borleorl turned about to see what the others were doing. Each of the other views was partially blocked by the other Artisans in the command complex. All the other Artisans were too busy to look around. For the first time in his life, Borleorl was not sure he had done enough, was doing enough, at his assigned tasks. In his youth, he had walked the path of war, but it was not his calling. If all continued to go badly, he would walk the path of war again, at the last.

Returning to his view, he switched to a planetary map. With all the Eldar colony concentrated on one land mass, there was no way to stop the enemy landing on the other land masses, once the defense from space had failed. The automated defenses there would give those enemies some trouble, for a while. It was hoped that as the enemy kept dividing themselves, then perhaps the forces of the humans and Eldar could defeat the smaller pieces separately.

Borleorl shifted the view again. The human ship still sat, unmoving, its engines still barely warm. The mind of humans, and particularly of the Inquisitor, was too disorganized to be fathomable. Perhaps they were going to wait until the enemy warriors knocked upon their doors, before they would fight back.

The first enemy ships touched down on the planet's surface. Borleorl got busy directing his part of the defense of the other land masses.

VIII.

Daene sighted down the length of her firelance. A small group of enemy creatures tried to move quickly through the narrow opening between two buildings. Once again, the creatures blackened, then burst into flames, as the nearly invisible energy caught them.

From this vantage point, on an upper level, Daene had an excellent view. All around were signs of other firelances in use, and other weapons too. She could see that her home was being destroyed, a little piece at a time. The big weapons she feared had not been used near here, yet. But, judging by the thunderclaps that were even felt through the ground, they were being used elsewhere. The growing anger in her was making her sick.

One of the large warriors stepped into the opening and fired his weapon in Daene's direction. She shot it before it could continue. But where the enemy shot had hit the building, the metal was burning. An acrid smoke interfered with Daene's view. Even so, she could see large numbers of the enemy massing just out of firelance range.

Just then, a huge shadow blocked out the sun.

IX.

Pen always stood just behind and to one side, but this time she had to hold a rail on the side, away from Lynx. The ship was about to lift off.

"That's right, Captain," Lynx was saying, "this ship can maneuver in atmosphere, so that's just what we're going to do. We're going to attempt to break up every concentration of enemy warriors we can find, and we're going to try to interfere with as many new landings as we can. Now let's get going."

Lynx changed channels, swaying from the motion of the ship lifting off.

"Admiral Thext," Lynx had a definite commanding tone, "hurry those battleships of yours, or you'll be late to the party. Remember that they will try to ram you, especially the smaller ships. Use the hammer and sword tactics you suggested yesterday."

The jerking of the ship, and the intermittent hum thru the deck plates, told Pen that the cruiser was engaging the enemy.

"We need you to take some pressure off the planet's forces, Admiral." Lynx was saying sternly. "Your ships will stay engaged, even until the last of your ships is destroyed. That is how it must be. Good luck." And she switched off.

A quick motion of her hand, and Lynx had a series of views of the outside of the ship, as well as a schematic of the enemy force concentrations in a twenty mile radius. Lynx seemed to be talking into three channels at once. Ordering the fire of the ship's batteries, choosing courses to the next threatened area, and ordering the trajectories of the Nova Bomb missiles to be fired. All at once. Pen could only watch intently, remembering how Lynx will question her later on what was observed. If she was still able.

The central view shifted to the capital Eldar city, there were several large concentrations of Tyranid warriors massing just on the edge of the city. Lynx ordered the ship to come about and smash those vermin. The ship's captain protested that masses of enemy ships were concentrating on that position, he could not hope to take on so many. Pen knew what the answer would be, and sure enough, they bored straight in on the enemy masses.

X.

Borleorl watched as the human cruiser lifted off, then began to fire in every direction. It turned this way and that, not as high above the surface as some Eldar buildings were tall, as it skimmed along. Small enemy landing craft were tumbling, burning, from the sky all around the cruiser. Large weapons, meant to be used on enemy ships in space, were turned on gatherings of Tyranid warriors and slaves, scorching wide swaths across the land. Missiles arced off into the distance, causing sudden flares of brightness, followed by thunderclaps, even at the capitol city a great distance away. Numbers of the larger enemy ships were desperately trying to ram the human ship. The humans were drawing a lot of enemy attention to themselves.

Suddenly the human cruiser turned toward the Eldar capitol. Ah, they noticed how much enemy attention the capital was drawing. All around the city, gathered enemy hordes were smashed and scattered, as the human ship swept over. All over the city, flaming wreckage of enemy craft fell upon the town. Perhaps this was the time. Yes. Borleorl received the signal. He quickly set the destination focus for dozens of transporter gates, then ordered the human and Eldar warriors that had been held back in reserve to charge through the gates. They fell upon the disorganized and scattered enemy rear, just as the forces in the city were ordered to counter attack the shattered enemy before them.

XI.

Daene watched the huge ship pass overhead, bolts and blasts being fired in every direction. She could see the groups of large enemy warriors advancing on the city being blasted to bits. She then got the order to reform with the rest of her unit, they were going to counter attack! She hurried down to join up in the ranks.

Almost shoulder to shoulder, the red and gray armor reflecting the flashes of energy bursts, the Eldar ranks advanced. Dozens of firelances flashed out in front of the advance. Flames leapt up before the advancing Eldar. Sometimes a Tyranid warrior would rear up from the smoking piles of dead, and an Eldar would go down. Sometimes an enemy weapon would burst among the Eldar ranks, but the Eldar swept on.

XII.

Pen lay with her head propped on the belly armor of a dead human marine, one of Lynx's bodyguards was bending over her. He assured her that power would be restored to the damaged suit in a few minutes. She didn't mind the wait.

They had been fighting nonstop for hours. Ever since that succession of enemy craft had succeeded in getting past the defensive fire, and ramming the engine section of the cruiser. They had managed a controlled crash near the capital city. Lynx had ordered every nonessential crewer and soldier off the ship, and to secure the ridge overlooking the cruiser. That included Lynx's bodyguards. Pen offered to go with them, and all Lynx said was "go".

She could hear the fighting still going on around her. If it had not been for the Eldar infantry that had suddenly shown up, Pen was sure that the ridge would have been over run, and the cruiser destroyed by now.

It had come as quite a shock when the cruiser had suddenly lifted off, and then rocketed straight up into space, a few minutes ago. Power surged through Pen's suit again. Pen picked up her weapon, took a deep breath, and moved back up to where the fighting was intensifying.

XIII.

Lynx had not liked leaving so many of the crew on the ridge, but if they had tried to withdraw back to the cruiser, the enemy would have swarmed over them. Better to leave them in a strong defensive position. Lynx was needed in space.

The Imperial fleet had arrived.

The first slashing attack made a hole in the thin ranks of the scattered Tyranid ships. Lynx's cruiser tore out into space through the gap. Lynx ordered the hammer to fall, and where. The second group of Imperial ships hit the gap, making it wider, and then launched thousands of Nova Bomb missiles at the land masses where enemies were gathered, but no Eldar were in harm's way. The resultant waves of fireballs that spread over the planet was most satisfactory to Lynx. Millions of exposed enemy warriors were being obliterated.

And then reality distorted and twisted.

Instantly, Lynx's head ached from trying to fathom what was happening through the blur and distortion.

A large group of enemy ships that had been gathering, and the first section of what the Imperial fleet was about to attack, was gone. In place of the enemy ships, there was now only what appeared to be a whitely glowing thread, miles long. The bend and warp in reality had seemed to open a hole, and the enemy had disappeared, as if sucked into a black hole, shredded as they were pulled in.

Lynx looked back at the planet, and was shocked. There were fissures and great craters, glowing redly, visible even out in space, at various locations on the planet.

Again and again, the twisting and blurring, until Lynx felt space sick for the first time. She had to look away.

And then it stopped. And for the second time, Lynx was surprised. The enemy was running away! The impossible weapons of the Eldar had caused the impossible. For the first time the Tyranids were in retreat!

Quickly Lynx flashed Admiral Thext. Ordered him to pursue the enemy closely, to destroy every one, if he could. She could barely believe it was over.

XIV.

The hive mind of the Tyranids considered.

The price to pay for that star system was too high. For now. There would be another time. Other matters needed to be dealt with, for now.

XV.

Pen stood just behind Lynx, and to one side. The newly repaired, and repainted, cruiser was heading for its jump point near the edge of the Eldar colony's star system. The surviving two bodyguards stood just behind Pen.

"Let me say again how sorry I am," Lynx was saying to Borleorl's holo image, "Daene was a most skilled Eldar. Both our races are lessened by her loss."

"Our race is most heartened by the aid the human empire brought in our time of need." Borleorl replied formally. "We must abandon this world now, and leave it lifeless and barren, we now know. We have been defeated." Borleorl paused, then continued, "We will not forget how so many humans died, so that we might yet live a little while. Your purposes have been served, Inquisitor."

"Our two races will stand stronger, together, against the test of this new enemy. Until we meet again, Master Artisan Borleorl." They both gave a nod, and Lynx switched off.

Lynx turned to Pen.

"Now Pen, call in those two marines you recommended." Lynx said, semi-sternly. "Let's see how they would like to work for me."

The cruiser, newly painted Imperial eagle reaching out to shred its prey, reached the jump point, and disappeared as it fell into non-space.



Chapter Four

The Fall of the Imperium

The commander was losing the battle to keep his temper under control. The whole galaxy is being caught up in a war that is spreading like wildfire, and now all his navigators are holed up in some sort of sulk!

Without navigators to pilot his fleet, his marines can't reach the threatened sectors. What a time for a strike! What rot!

As the commander took long strides down the winding passage, he told himself how he would not stand for any more self-important, elitist nonsense, from those mutant navigators.

The great double doors, leading into the head navigator's inner sanctum, now opened as the commander approached. In the half light of the great circular room, the form of a robed and hooded figure could be seen. Surrounded by great tapestries, seated on huge pillows, the figure seemed to be staring into a large, flat, crystal. Little sparks of light seemed to flicker inside the odd shaped crystal. The room was soundless. Not even the ceramic soles of the commander's grav-boots on the metal floor clicked. The air was hot, heavy, and felt thick.

The figure on the floor turned when the commander was a pace away.

There was obvious pain on the face of this mutant master of celestial navigation. The commander opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off. "Sit." said the navigator.

The commander shrugged, then sat on a huge over stuffed cushion. May as well find out what the navigator has to say, there will be plenty of time later to vent his anger. The commander stared straight at the figure opposite him, his back ramrod straight. He hoped he was projecting the fierceness he felt.

"All my brethren and I have been witness to terrible events." Began the navigator. "Bear with me while I try to describe the terror and the doom we have experienced." A faraway look came over the navigator, almost a trance, as he went on.

"You know we can see into the future, if not very far. This is how we can guide our ships through the non-space between space. We must focus on our role, so we remain generally unaware of other human events. The destruction of a world is nothing compared to our great calling. But this has changed." He shifted a little as his gaze was drawn to the crystal again. His voice remained steady as he continued.

"The leader of all our order can also see farther than any other, yet even he could only grasp a few years. But, he has been overcome by a vision so powerful, it cannot be denied. This horribly powerful vision then radiated out from our leader in a psychic power wave that has overcome every navigator. We have all seen the death of the Emperor and the destruction of the Empire."

A cold chill seemed to flow over the commander slowly. "Many of the Emperor's enemies have no stronger wish, and most have strong psychic powers to send that hatred." The commander said, gesturing toward the patterns of stars that were moving across the domed ceiling. "You and your people have only felt that wish broadcast in some new, powerful way."

"No, the hatred of Emperor and Empire is not new, and colors the very fabric of the psychic powers our enemies possess. This revelation was pure and sudden as a thunderclap. Let me tell you the whole story, then you can tell me how your fleet and soldiers need navigators."

There was not a flicker or hint on the navigator's face of anything other than the statement of plain fact.

"Then tell me of the future," the commander said, "And when you have finished, we will speak of the present, and the tasks we have before us today."

"Pragmatists make the best generals." Began the navigator. "Now listen again. Very few know their history and far fewer know their history to come." Slowly the old navigator turned back towards the weirdly flickering crystal, his profile lit by the intermittent light, he droned on, almost a chant.

"The war that has now begun will last a thousand years. Before that time of ending comes, there will be terrible deeds, terrible destruction, to all of the galaxy's races. Of all we know now, all will disappear. We have seen the Tyranid war erupt in ten thousand battles. Uncountable billions of lives lost. But that is not the worst. Some of these battles are won by the enemy, some by the forces that

stand against them. This does not concern the enemy, for they will never quit, never seek peace, only endless war

Until one is destroyed.

The terror for us is when the Tyranid enemy discovers the full weight and source of the threat to them.

There is a great power in the Emperor, greater than any of us can fathom. Even though the Emperor is nearing death – he has been for many years – he has great wells of untapped, unbelievable power. The Emperor begins to exert that power to counter the hive mind of the Tyranids.

Immediately the hive mind is aware of the threat to its existence.

All of a sudden, where ever they are, what ever they are doing, all the scattered cells of the Tyranid fleets, stop. Stop and turn. Turn toward Sol. The star system Sol, and its planet Earth, must die. All the creatures of the hive mind turn to do that single task. Destroy the Emperor, and his entire planet, Earth, with him."

The commander's eyes close as visions fill his mind and the words fade away

"For two hundred and fifty years, the Tyranids fight their way across the galaxy. Stripping every star system they come upon, as they come out of each jump.

Stripping all life – all Biomass where ever it is found, they craft this new Biomass into new Tyranid Bio-constructs. The mindless horrors that will sow pitiless destruction on the Tyranid's enemies.

Sometimes they are ambushed when they come out of a jump. Sometimes, though too seldom, an entire hive cell is destroyed. But this does not impede the cold malice, or progress, of the Hive Fleets.

They arrive at the star system named Sol. From every direction they come in uncounted millions of vessels, large and small. All the parts have arrived near the same moment, from across the galaxy.

The Emperor has not been still. He has decided who will live, and who will die.

As the Tyranids moved toward Sol, so too were whole chapters of Marines. Whole armies of Imperial Guard. Whole oceans of space craft.

All the great factories on Mars craft thousands of new vessels. *Dominators, Lunars, Emperors*, and every other class of ship pour out of factories. New, powerful designs of every size and type join the vast fleets assembling all over the star system named Sol. Large populations are moved into the new ships of war. Whole regions of Earth and Mars become ghostly relics of the thriving cities that once were. Every human is now made a warrior, taught not just knife and gun, but also operating the great engines of war.

Both sides know the truth. On the plains of Mars, the vast city that is Earth, the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, and on the asteroid defense bases; on these fields will the fate of an entire Species be decided.

Not all the Emperor's forces arrive in time.

Tens of Thousands of ships, large and small, deploy in a vast sphere between the orbits of Neptune and Uranus. Tens of Thousands more deploy between the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn. And lastly, the final thousands of ships deploy in a great sphere between the orbits of the Earth and Mars. The last defense.

The Tyranids come.

Thousands, millions of huge weapons fire across empty space. Whole groups and squadrons of ships flare, boil, and vaporize in a blinding maelstrom of incandescence.

The outer defensive ships come to grips with the enemy and are driven back. Or do they retreat by design? Hundreds, thousands of Imperial ships are left behind, adrift and ruined. Their crews battling against the hordes that have boarded to finish off the last survivors. Thousands and thousands of enemy ships drift unguided also, dead and glowing with nuclear fire. But the Tyranid hive mind does not notice the loss.

The second line of defense is now engaged. So bright are the fires of destruction, from all around the Solar system, that they are plainly visible from Earth and Mars. Even from nearby star systems, the sun will appear to flicker brighter.

Again, the great weapons of the Imperial ships unleash deadly fierce volleys. Again, vast numbers of enemy ships die, with all aboard them. Again, the enemy fires back, but with lesser effect. Again, the preferred Tyranid way is to close upon them, then board Imperial ships. Then destroy every living

thing, leaving a drifting metal shell, the size of a city, to fall for an eternity through space. Again and again, thousands of times, this scene is repeated.

The sky fills with drifting hulks, each filled with desperate battle. Or death.

Imperial marines invade key hive ships to find and destroy the heart of the hive mind. Desperate, merciless slaughter again.

Battle has broken out among the asteroids. Each base, station, and satellite is invaded like the ships were. To the same result.

The first Tyranids have landed on Mars. They are relentless. These first Tyranids and their mindless constructs are instantly destroyed by the hordes of human warriors waiting on the plains of Mars. More of the enemy come, more this time. Again, the enemy is destroyed. Now a great wave of enemy warriors washes over the surface of Mars.

The stories of courage, sacrifice, and death are millions. The stories of courage and survival are thousands.

The story of Tyranid pitiless savagery is only one, often repeated. The enemy drives forward with a single thought, a single command from the hive mind: Kill.

The defense forces of Mars are driven below the surface of the planet. Into the vast honeycomb of tunnels and galleries that make up the huge factories of Mars. There the battle breaks up into thousands of fights. To take or hold a passageway or stair. To take or hold a storeroom or office. Living quarters become a smoking ruin as battle passes through them. The dead are everywhere.

The surface of Mars is covered with the smashed wrecks of humanity's machines. Great striding machines lay broken. Vehicles and engines of war – smoking, blackened, and crushed. Also something else. Piles of steaming, smoking, and shattered corpses of the enemy. Here and there, the remains of a human warrior. In some places are groups and little circles of pierced and savaged human remains. Long lines of Tyranid warriors and their Bio-constructs can be seen descending into the openings leading into the fight below.

The bitter fight for the underground of Mars will take a long time. Factory workers and administrators fight beside the warriors. A smoking bomb in her hand, a worker is grabbed by an enemy. Both are shattered, unrecognizable.

Several technicians are hard at work on one of the furnaces that powers the factories of Mars. The sounds of battle come closer. The technicians work feverishly. The thunder of guns and screams of the dying can now be heard. The technicians are finished, they stand and wait at the end of a large gallery. They watch the enemy enter from several passageways, savaging the defenders. The gallery fills with Tyranid warriors, pressing against the last defenders, filling the entire gallery with thousands of horrible terrors. The technicians are the last to fall under the enemy's slashing weapons. A bleeding, dying hand releases a switch.

The magnetic envelope around a plasma bottle opens, channeling the heart of a sun into the gallery. Instantly, the gallery becomes a glowing incandescence of boiling energy. Things can't burn in this. Enemy warriors glow whitely, then vanish. The flood of wild energy and heat storms through the passageways, seeking the surface. All in its path vanish in sizzling agony.

The hell that has been released from a furnace bursts out of several openings. A surviving human warrior, wounded, hiding among the crags of a dead volcano, sees the sudden columns of light burst forth. He's struck with awe. He wonders at the thought that nuclears would be used below.

Another group of technicians are working on another plasma furnace. This one adjoins the very deepest cavern and galleries. These great rooms are filled with the very old, the very young, the invalids, the helpless. These technicians have resolved that the helpless people in these halls will not fall prey to the murderous enemy. When the enemy first storms the barricades at the entrances, then the hell that is in the magnetic bottle will burst forth. The enemy will be denied these helpless souls. With grim purpose, the technicians complete their preparations. They then turn to await the enemy. They hear and feel the rumble from above. They know it is caused by the release of a plasma furnace. Their faces become hard, and determined.

The wounded warrior on the surface leans back among the boulders where he took refuge. He looks up at the sky above Mars. Thousands of lights, like stars, are moving. All moving toward the sun. And Earth. Violent iridescence streaks and flashes between some of the moving lights still. But much less than awhile ago. He lays there gasping and tired. His hurt is numb now. Laying there, he

knows that the fate of Mars is about to fall on Earth. Perhaps, but some nagging feeling, or instinct, makes him seek out a lava tube and head deeper into the shelter of Mar's iron mantle.

The old navigator paused, looked over to the commander. The commander was bent over, slightly, and his shoulders stooped. His eyes looked hollow. The navigator asked; "Would you rather I stopped? You do not look well."

The commander shook his head slowly from side to side. His mind was in awe. With each phrase the navigator spoke, a picture of the events described scrolled across his consciousness. He was seeing with the wounded warrior's eyes as events unfolded. He saw through the woman's eyes as she prepared the plasma reactor adjoining the hall of innocents. The images threatened to unhinge the commander's mind. He shook his head again – more vigorously.

"No, go on," The commander said, "I will see this through, in spite of your mental projection tricks."

The patriarch of the order of Navigators did not miss the faint edge of fierceness in the Fleet Commander's voice. He judged the commander would see it through to the end. As he always had.

"I am not using any tricks." The navigator said. He gestured toward the flickering crystal beside them. "This device was being set to enhance and project a psychic beam. It instead recorded the psychic vision that emanated from the head of our order. It is playing and replaying that vision now. I only clear the way so you can receive the unaltered, undiluted power of the vision.

The flickering illumination of the two men's faces became brighter as the activity in the weird crystal increased.

"Relax your mind," began the voice of the navigator, "all things end, even the story this vision portends." Again, the droning, almost hypnotic, chanting voice. The mental images again seized the commander's mind.

"All the little sparks of light are heading inward, to the Earth. The Imperial fleet takes up a protective sphere beyond the orbit of Earth's Moon. The elements that survived the battles at the outer two defensive perimeters have all retreated to reinforce this last defense of Earth, from space. Here too, are the fleets of small interplanetary defense fighters, committed to this battle for the first time. Armed with nuclear missiles, these one and two warrior ships swarm toward the approaching Tyranid enemy. They will intercept beyond the range of the big ship's guns.

The last desperate phase of the battle for the star named Sol begins.

Swarms of tiny Imperial fighters attack. Hordes of small enemy craft come out to meet them. The fighters fire a portion of their missiles. The artificial intelligence in each sets them to a pattern. Sets them to detonate at a certain time and place. A curtain of nuclear fire unfolds across a section of Earth's sky.

The small fighters charge past the remnants of the enemy's small craft. The Tyranid warships fire on the approaching fighters. The fighters are too fast and too maneuverable to hit. The men and women who pilot them are specially chosen for their high tolerance to the fierce "G" forces their maneuvers cause. Gravity compensators cannot keep up with human/computer enhanced maneuvers. Some fighters are hit anyway, caught by the sweeps of crossfire that seems to come from nowhere.

The fighters launch the last of their AI missiles. This time the intelligence that drives the missiles hungers to plunge deep into the guts of Tyranid ships, then detonate. Most evade the enemy's defensive fire, and strike home.

The enemy's numbers are so great, they press on without regard to their losses. New swarms of small craft drive off the Imperial fighters. The hive mind commands the destruction of Earth, this single purpose drives the enemy fleet on.

Now the huge ships of both sides are engaged again. The story of the previous defensive spheres is repeated again. The Tyranids break through. And, for the first time, the Imperial fleet is driven off. Human ships turn to flee, to get clear of the system and make a jump away. The enemy ignores the fleeing ships. Instead, the enemy concentrates on the remaining Imperial ships, and the assault on Earth.

Earth is not Mars. There are no great red plains on earth. Instead, there are vast cities that support the Imperial Administratum. Above them all rises the vast Imperial palace and fortress. Huge, thick

walls of metallized ceramics, the dark, smooth surfaces glisten above all surrounding structures. The heart and mind of the Empire.

The noncombatant populations have fled below ground here, also. Like Mars, the surface has become the province of warriors. The very best warriors defend this place.

The Tyranid horde breaks through the defensive fleets again. The first landings of the enemy begin. Huge weapons turrets on the surface turn and blast whole enemy ships out of Earth's sky. Earth is bombarded with flaming wreckage. More Tyranids come. Earth is bombarded. Flames leap up from Earth's cities as enemy weapons rain down.

Enemy ships get past the defenses and disgorge tens of thousands of warriors.

Earth's best warriors are waiting. Now they come forward, great striding war machines supporting the charge of the infantry. The first landings of the enemy are wiped out in merciless, savage fighting.

Again, as ever before, the enemy losses are replaced. Replaced by warriors that know no fear, that never surrender. For eight days, the enemy attempts landing after landing. Finally they gain a foothold, then rapidly spread out through Earth's cities. A dark pall of smoke blankets all Earth's cities. For the first time, the Tyranid enemy deploys large numbers of huge, multi-armed, and horrible looking Bio-constructs. Deadly energy blasts are their weapons. The dreadnaughts of conquest for Earth. Thousands upon thousands of these dreadnaughts storm the key Imperial installations, and the Emperor's fortress. With the exception of these few places under siege, most of the planet's surface is overrun. The fight goes on in the deep places, again.

There are no plasma furnaces here, the energy production plants are remote and deep underground. No human can take refuge near those plants. Instead, the fight is in the labyrinth of ducts, tunnels, passageways, conduits, and galleries. This time, the last defense of the huddled mass of noncombatants is the ancient store of nuclear devices.

A young boy, too young for the rite of manhood, is given a switch. He is told he will earn his manhood, now. He is told he must release the switch when the enemy enters the cavern. His mother then picks up her weapon and joins the defense of the halls.

The boy waits. An explosion in the hall. A swift blue terror rears up in front of him. Something warm is in his eyes. He releases the switch.

On all the continents, the deep rumbles tell of these last desperate acts of defiance.

The assault on the Imperial palace is renewed.

The Tyranid dreadnaughts mass together, and unleash a volley of energy blasts that crash into the fortress walls. Metallized ceramic, meters thick, cracks. Imperial marines fire back, smothering some of the enemy in fire.

The sight becomes a bizarre symphony. A waltz of lines of warriors, locked in a final ballet of destruction. A picture of a marine, hiding behind a fallen block of ceramic, edged still in glowing red. He fires, ducks back, fires again. Then a flash, and the flesh and armor fuse together, a misshapen mass.

The outer walls of the Emperor's fortress are breached.

But, a sudden change. The hive mind's attention is drawn back to space.

The Eldar fleets appear!

Led by the Eldar tribe whose home world first felt the Tyranid assault, all the other Eldar worlds have committed their forces to the hunt. Not so many as the humans, the Eldar have been among the stars far longer. Their ships seem delicate, but are strong. Their weapons are beyond understanding.

The Tyranid warriors on Mars no longer press the battle in the tunnels below. They direct their mindless Bio-constructs from the surface. The loss of the mindless ones will not be missed. The warriors on the surface begin to gather the Biomass of their enemies for the vats. The Tyranid warriors on the surface of Mars are unaware of the sudden appearance of the Eldar, nor is the hive mind aware, until too late.

The Eldar fleets swarm all around Mars on their way toward the gathered Tyranid hive fleet. The bombardment that sweeps the surface of Mars leaves almost no enemy warriors. Great glowing craters and fissures mark the tortured surface of Mars, where once Tyranid warriors were gathered.

Many Tyranid ships set out to meet the new threat, the rest pull closer around Earth to form an impenetrable sphere.

Around the Imperial palace, elite marines and palace guard throw themselves into counter attacks. Piles of marine bodies plug breaches in the walls, and palace guard lay strewn about the halls and

stairs of the palace. Where ever human warriors gather in defense, then there is where a Tyranid dreadnaught comes. Then another and another, until all human defenders are smashed.

The enemy is at the walls and gates of the innermost citadel, where the Emperor waits. The palace guard fire madly from every slit and portal.

Vast ships of the Eldar and Tyranids meet in violence. Tyranid ships fire off volleys, but the Eldar ships dance and weave. Tyranid ships try to ram or grapple their enemies, but Eldar ships flit and swerve. Then, unfathomable energies rip the fabric of space. Whole Tyranid ships vanish. Sometimes an Eldar ship is caught, boxed in, and cannot maneuver away. Overwhelmed, or smashed like some delicate toy, some Eldar craft drift into the eternal night. Flickers of dying energies spark at the edges of ragged holes.

But, great holes are smashed in the formation of Tyranid ships. Eldar ships swirl through and attack the sphere around Earth. Again, great holes are ripped in the enemy ranks by fantastic Eldar weapons. Can the siege be broken? But no, just as quickly as they came, just as suddenly, they turn and all remaining Eldar ships fly away at full speed. Very soon the only ships inside the orbit of Jupiter are Tyranid, all other Imperial and Eldar ships having fled away.

The last defenders of the Empire now fall with no hope of relief or aid. The hive mind now knows victory is in reach. The hive warriors press forward with fierce abandon. Find the Emperor and all resistance will crumble. The whole of the galaxy will then be devoured.

A great double door is smashed down. There! The inner sanctum of the Emperor. There he waits, a prisoner of the machines that keep him alive. The enemy warriors that broke in surge forward. The last guards fall.

For two hundred years, the Emperor has been planning for this moment. For two hundred years the Emperor has been baiting a trap.

The room is filled with a sudden illumination. The force within that sudden light radiates out. Far out in space. The last great psychic power of the Emperor is unleashed onto the Tyranid Hive Mind. With a shock, the hive mind is immobilized with fear. For the first time in uncounted eons, the hive mind knows fear, and doubt.

All the Tyranid warriors and Bio-constructs freeze in their tracks. With sudden, terrible abandon, the surviving human warriors on Earth and Mars spring forward among their foes. They inflict wanton carnage on their immobilized enemies.

But, in space a more terrible event takes place.

The sun heaves in a giant pulse. Eight minutes later, the heat and radiation of the expanding sun reaches Earth.

In space, the Tyranid fleet lies exposed to the undiluted fury of a sun gone Nova. The hive mind dies, with its millions of minions, and a psychic scream of pain, rage, and loss streaks across space and time. Tyranid ships break up and burn under the merciless, endless onslaught of heat and radiation. What's left drifts away on the cosmic wind.

On Earth, the power of the sun is lessened by the atmosphere. But, the heat and radiation that reaches the surface is enough. Enough to kill any Tyranid or human that is not deep below the ground. The Emperor dies as waves of radiation wash over him. The death cry of his enemy still ringing in his mind. The Emperor's last thought is that he knows that humanity, and maybe the galaxy, is saved.

The terrible bombardment from the sun lasts for a day, a night, and a day. Under that unrelenting blast of heat and radiation, the huge ceramic structures crumble into mountains of black sand. Plastic turns to gray dust, and is blown away on the winds that now begin to howl across the planet. Soon, all that remains is a few naked metal beams, thrust at crazy angles into the sky. Earth's atmosphere is cooked, and some swept away by the solar wind. But the Earth is not dead. Below the surface, in deep caverns and galleries, there is much life that will begin again on the surface. The last trace of anything Tyranid is eliminated, below ground, while still helpless.

On Mars, the increase in heat and radiation goes unnoticed on a lifeless surface. But, the sudden paralysis of the hated enemy is noticed down in the halls and passages. The thousands of human survivors, warriors and not, surge out in an orgy of murder. Some few of the Tyranid warriors regain their senses near the end. They are too few and too late. They go down in ruin.

The sun's fury is spent after two days, and the star Sol settles back to a normal size and power.

Now, the Eldar and human space fleets return. Driven away by the Emperor's psychic warning, not by Tyranid ferocity, they now return to try to aid the survivors on two planets.

The images fade in the commander's mind, the voice of the navigator stills. For some minutes, there is silence only in the darkened room.

"You must go now," Begins the old navigator again, "the events contained within the crystal will start again soon. There are others that must be witness."

The commander straightens his back and shoulders, unclasps his hands, and takes his eyes off the weird crystal.

"This is supposed to chronicle events that will happen long past my death. There is nothing I can do." The commander's voice was again edged with hard anger.

"Wrong," the navigator said, "You and I must win the fight in our sectors of the galaxy. There must be many victories, all over the galaxy. These will become the petty empires and kingdoms after the Empire. These will be the places from which humans can begin again. Not all was destroyed in the final battle. Many ships survived, and more were recovered. Each marine chapter had been ordered to keep some warriors at their home worlds. These are the building blocks from which we will start again. The dark age that follows the war will not last. But only if we first secure our little piece of the galaxy."

The navigator and the commander both stood. Eye to eye in the semi dark, they seem to be looking into each other's minds. Satisfied at last, the commander steps back, turns to go, but stops.

"I still don't know when my fleet will have its navigators back." The commander says over his shoulder, "The war goes on as we sit and wonder at the future. You must have your brethren join us soon, Navigator."

"Some of my people are already making preparations to go. They had begun preparations even before you came through my door." The navigator's face could not now be seen.

The commander chose to believe there was a slightly amused expression on that old countenance.

"So be it. I have preparations of my own then. Goodbye, Navigator." The commander said the last word slowly, almost respectfully, then turned and marched out, straight and tall.

"Goodbye, Commander." The navigator said to the back of the departing figure. He sat again, facing the crystal. The dancing and flickering lights begin again.

The great double doors swing shut by themselves, latch soundlessly.

Epilogue

The commander returns to his operations center, and as he enters, he stops short. There in front of him, two women and four armored guards, and one of the women wearing the medallion of an Inquisitor. Oh, perfect.

"Well, Fleet Commander," Lynx began "I am told you were having an audience with the Patriarch of the Navigators. Are you ready to put your fleet at my disposal?"

"I am getting my fleet ready to meet the vanguard of an invading alien fleet." The commander replied sternly, "I am not disposed to put my fleet at your command. You Inquisitors are too ready to throw away whole star systems or fleets. I will not have my command sacrificed for some nebulous and questionable goal of a glory hungry Inquisitor."

Lynx smiled, but her eyes didn't. "I have come to help. You have seen the vision of the future that the navigators worry over. Together we can set up a defense for this whole region. If we fall to fighting among ourselves, then all humanity in this region is lost."

"Then do not order me, but advise me." The commander said in low tones, "I can use an ally, not an usurper of my command."

"Agreed." Lynx said, and turning to her guards, "Guards, you may go now. Aide, go with them and make sure they are quartered properly. Then see to our quarters. I will summon you again shortly."

The commander took in the young woman called aide for the first time, as she moved past him. There was a certain air of assuredness and confidence about her. The only time he had felt the same

instinctive wariness, was when he had been in the presence of particularly dangerous warriors. He raised one eyebrow as he wondered what had made this little female so dangerous.

"Now come, commander," began Lynx again, "let's lay out a plan for this fleet of yours."

The commander stepped over to the holo projector as Lynx brought up a series of displays.

"The Emperor has started vast forces moving to meet this threat," Lynx continued, "This fleet of yours is to stay in these sectors. When the Emperor's forces hit the Tyranid enemy, the Emperor believes they will scatter into hundreds of smaller cells, and set out for all corners of the galaxy. Your fleet will be one of those left behind to meet those cells."

This is how the war will then proceed for many years to come. There will be peace for many years, then one or more cells of the Tyranids will appear. If a sector can defeat the cell, and the hundreds of ships that make it up, then that sector should remain free of further attacks. If the Tyranids win, then all life will be absorbed and converted into new Tyranid cells. These new cells will then spread out to attack new territory, and the Tyranid threat will grow and grow. We must stop that growth. Your fleet has the power to do just that."

The commander turned back to face the Inquisitor as the displays finished. She was facing him with her hands on her hips. The severe expression on her face made the light colored scar, curling from cheek to chin, stand out plainly.

"As I'm sure you know, there is a Tyranid fleet approaching us right now." The commander said.

"Yes, but that is only a small scout force, an advance reconnaissance." Lynx waived her hand in dismissal, "You will find a series of displays already programmed, giving you Imperial orders and guidelines for future operations. I have no time to command your fleet in battle, now or later. You will have operational control of your fleet, but within the context of those orders and guidelines. In three days you will bring your forces to battle that enemy scout force. I will observe from my cruiser. Then I must leave for other threatened sectors."

Lynx started to walk past the commander to leave. "Oh, and by the way, you will also find some displays on the latest intelligence," she said from the doorway, "and a complete breakdown of observed Tyranid battle tactics. No other Imperial commander has that information, and is still alive."

With that, the Inquisitor turned and strode from the room. The commander had to admit he was glad to see her go, ally or not. The commander began to scan the data in the displays the Inquisitor had loaded.

It was shaping up to be a very long war, he decided.

...TO BE CONTINUED...

