

Arrival to the Chimera Front	2
The Shadows Lengthen	6
The Harvest of Galiben	13
The Anvil and The Crone	16
Traitors Reveal Themselves.	21
The Sword of the Infinite	28
Showdown In the Desert	32
Fear's Nightmare	36
The Smoke Rises	41
Two Fires in the Dark (Prelude)	47
Two Fires in the Dark	52
A Grey Dawn	62
The Maw Widens	64
Knives in the Night	69

Arrival to the Chimera Front

=][=

Dialog ID# 287716104

Encryption: Beta Noctis v2.3

Ident Recognized...

Decrypting....

...

...

...

Decryption Completed:

Record of correspondence as follows.

Origin: Astropathic Choir on Folden IV

From: Magos Calophernes Phi, Folden IV, Director of Polar Facility Agamemnon's Grace

To: Chimera Sector HQ

"Heresy grows from the smallest seed. A closed mind is a safe mind." Thought of the day.

Message as follows:

short burst of binaric cant

"Threat to important facilities under construction, Xenos infiltrators detected by Skitarii patrols. The vile aliens refuse contact, dancing at the edges of sensor ranges like ghosts. Xenos make use of heretical technology in an affront to the machine god. Resources are limited due to ritual requirements for facility additions. Request immediate assistance to remove their presence so that work may continue unimpeded. Ignore this message at risk of offending my superiors on Tejana. Prompt response expected. "

-Message ends-

-Response transmitted 2 days later by small flotilla of vessels transiting into the system at high speed.-

Origin: Astropath of Strike Cruiser Voltaic Justice

From: 3rd Company Captain Gustav von Francois

To: Magos Calophernes Phi, Folden IV, Director of Polar Facility Agamemnon's Grace

"Idleness is a failure, excoriate it." Thought of the day.

Message as follows:

“Old oaths are remembered. The Coal Hearts answer your summons.”

-Message Ends-

Ultima Nihlus Primer, M42- minor campaigns, A Historians Guide

Pacho and Calbrecht publications.

Distributed by services of House Anzhelyke

Chapter 6:

Section 2:

The Coal Hearts are veteran pirate hunters and this could be seen in their tactics during the early stages of the Chimeran Crusade. Arriving first on the sleepy world of Folden IV in response to early probes by the Tau. Having never before faced that particular breed of Xenos but eager for battle, captains Gustav and M’otann both took the field personally when the aliens were brought to heel.

After being detected by skitarii patrols the Xenos tried to retreat through the maze like Mechanicus outerworks. The astartes landed via thunderhawk in a section of unfinished warehouses before setting off after the interlopers. A younger lieutenant led the way with Gustav following behind leading heavily armoured Gravis teams. M’otann would remain in orbit with a squad of veterans for the lieutenant to mark the drop zone and close the jaws of the trap. A mighty dreadnought would serve as a flanking force. Together they would envelop the alien’s reconnaissance units all at once.

The Tau tried to turn and strike at the astartes as they harried their retreat, nearly killing the lieutenant as their dreaded battlesuits tried to eliminate him when the homing signal was detected. The battlesuits then found themselves immolated by Aggressors and battered when their sensors were blinded by streams of holy promethium, allowing the heavy troopers to close in with their power fists. The Lieutenant completed his task despite his injuries and the drop pod arrived in the midst of the Tau formation. Ambush and counter ambush escalated in the narrow confines of the half built Mechanicus facilities. A Ghostkeel suit and breacher teams assaulting into the teeth of the marine vanguard. The Astartes heavier armour and experience proved telling in the end and they savaged the aliens.

However they were unable to pursue the Xenos into destruction. The Coal Hearts instead had to pause and dress their wounds in the face of unexpected casualties, with half the astartes force injured or slain outright during the short brutal firefight. Even the alien leader managed to escape. Though badly wounded at the hands of M’otann himself in personal combat. The Tau proved much more capable and organised than any typical band of cutthroat marauders.

As the fighting in the sector escalated, battles of this sort would quickly become footnotes.

Vox record ID #8872

Personal conversation between 3C Captain Gustav and 5C Captain M'otann. Preserved for future inquiry by Interrogator Wahn for the perusal of Inquisitor Aahbreel Santohs. Recorded by Vox scanner planted in 5C Captain M'otann's personal quarters.

G: "The battle was a mess, Tejana's auspexes have never failed us before, the aliens were practically on top of Ut'erehs before we even realised they were moving. Not to mention that abominable giant machine. Thank the Emperor that Imenehs arrived when he did."

M: "It was expected, you know that, these Xenos' techno-sorcery sometimes even rivals the Aeldari. Though at least it doesn't carry the foul taste of sorcery. From what I was able to pull from records of the Damocles Crusade this was just a foretaste of what they can bring to bear. Besides, they came apart easily enough when we closed, they were obviously inexperienced with us as well. Their leader actually attacked me to save one of his own. Clearly he didn't know how hard it is to kill a space marine."

G: "We should be careful is all I'm saying Mo, especially if they don't take the hint and this escalates. Or if Emperor forbid, they bring in their own heavy weapons..."

A long silence

G: "I have another question though... Why didn't you kill it? The others may not believe they saw it, but I never doubt my eyes, not even the augmetic one. Do... Do we need to talk to the chaplaincy?"

-silence for several seconds-

M: "Do you accuse me of leniency against the alien?"

G: "Never brother, we've fought before enough times, I've seen you split Aeldari skulls and we burned the Nekbethi Colony on Cethrum V together. But... I saw it during the fighting. It was at your mercy, and you turned your back on it while it crawled away."

M: "The creature was defeated and so were its subordinates. There was no honour in finishing it, besides I believed the wound was mortal. I didn't realise its ilk would retrieve it in the face of our attack. In any event the Tau can be negotiated with, at least their warriors, it will remember this loss and be more willing to listen in the future. They're not our only enemy here. You've seen the same scans I have. It's just like the Circlet of Shadows, They Soulless waking up. This... this is a sideshow. That's why I didn't pursue them. We can't afford losses this early. And

frankly when the Soulless begin marching I'd prefer them to have other things to worry about than just us."

G: "... I believe you brother. But such... Miserly actions could be looked at poorly by others who do not know your convictions. We are used to being more... economical on the frontiers where the reach of the blessed Imperium is not as long. Here, closer to the heartlands they are more zealous about these things. You are no Inquisitor to make such decisions."

M: " I understand Gus. I will speak to Menendehs when duty permits. He will judge my actions and administer whatever penance he sees fit. By His Light we See. Until then..."

-Pneumatic hiss of a sealed cupboard opening, Sound of a creaking hinges and rustling followed by the click of an archaic firestarter-

G: "Ha Ha! Honest to the throne Nicstubs. I thought none of the freighters made it through this year?"

M: "They didn't, the local governor offered these as a gift and thanks for 'Obliterating the alien menace on our soil'. They were delivered to the ship while we were still fighting. He seems to be a patronising sort but apparently they grow some Nic as a luxury for the local nobility."

G: "Praise be to him on Terra. Sorry for getting you into the habit. I'm amazed you still bother with them after all the augmetics. Warp, can you even taste anymore brother?"

M: "Well enough, and besides it's the act that matters if that makes sense. Or at least that's what your father used to say. I remember when-"

Transcript ends as remaining conversation is of little use, mostly reminiscence and various anecdotes involving family of the speakers on Oracleus Minor.

=][= For information on Coal Heart traditions with regards to their families following induction into the Astartes see file code: Familus Uasculum

The Shadows Lengthen

Debriefing Log# 66631

Neutrum II Defense Command

Recorder: Captain Stella Antioch 37th Neutrum Dragoons

Subject: Former Sergeant Zheremiah Calos. 12th Desnairian Fusiliers

Location: Forward Operating Base Sword of Defiance**

S: "So what happened after your company reached the impact site?"

Z:"The LT had us set up a cordon while Alvion supervised things, standard procedure I guess. We burned back the local flora and fauna while the engineers prepped charges to destroy the remains of the alien ship. There was no sign anything had survived the landing, The ... ship's carapace was all cracked and it stunk like hell. But all the wriggly bits sure looked dead. We figured the defence platforms had fried it well. Goran and second squad took the north, my squad had the west. There was a cliff face to the east. To our south was the path we'd come to the drop site. Things were mostly fine but there was a hinky feeling in the air. After we'd been there a bit the LT started getting twitchy. Yelling at the engineers to hurry, toying with his pistol a bit much.

He wanted to have things done before the Mech's* arrived. Seemed really important to him that we be done before they got here. He just kept getting angrier while the engineers worked. The weird thing is the unease that seemed to flow out of him. Wherever he went along the line your skin crawled. The night seemed to get darker, and.. something like bugs picking at you. Never felt anything like it Ma'am, like ants crawling in your bones.

On his third pass he stopped one of the engineers prepping a melta pack. Couldn't hear what he said but they went back and forth once or twice. Then the LT shot the engineer. That shot must have been the trigger or something cuz that's when they came out of the brush. I didn't see what tore commander Alvion apart but I saw *what* it did to him. But the little ones were just like in the holovids from Neustrum I they use in the PDF training. We poured fire into them and formed a decent little strongpoint. I saw one though, like nothing from the vids, it's head was huge and it was all tentacles and talons. It was just sitting behind the others. It seemed... colder than the other critters, like it was actually thinking.

The LT didn't even try to organise the defence, he just kept shooting other engineers and muttering to himself until Gunny Capo managed to knock him out. The Gunny tried to get us out when we realised they weren't gonna stop coming. Barely a handful of us made it back to the road and our Tauros, right about then is when the Mech's* arrived. They drove the Xenos off before they could finish us.... But I don't know if they really did or if the monsters deliberately backed off, they'd attacked us without a care for losses until then. I heard rumours from some of the vets that rotated back from Neustrum I, they talked about invisible monsters that would stalk

them until they felt safe. Then from nowhere things would murder their way through the foxholes, barely visible and tough as hell. I worry they've followed us back. That they're hiding in the woods or the fields."

S: "Thank you for your testimony Sergeant, you're lucky to have made it. But I'm sure you're safe now."

*Mech's: a slang term for the Valbars 3rd Mechanised, noted for their extensive use of Sentinels and Chimera borne heavy weapon teams.

**All contact with FOB Sword of Defiance was lost 5 hours after the report transmitted to planetary command for administratum filing. Orbital and aerial reconnaissance show no signs of life at base or nearby population centres. No biovessel present at impact site.

=][=

Dialog ID# 3871194

Encryption: Mortis Umbra v1.7

Ident Recognized...

Decrypting....

...

...

...

Decryption Completed:

Transmitted by Astropath of Light Cruiser Alacrity following transit from Neustrum.

To: Sector Command, office of Lord Cathalus

From: Neustrum II Planetary Command, office of General Antioch

Thought for the day: Zealotry in the obliteration of heresy is no vice.

"Confirmed reports of Tyranid Vanguard presence on Neustrum II, looks like they've finally started to notice us over here. The fleet gave them hell but I've got at least four Biovessel landing sites, two required nuclear sterilisation, one was already dead and confirmed by sterilisation teams, but the last has gone to ground in the highlands. We can't track it and the zone of Tyranid contamination is spreading. We need reinforcements and soon, at the very least to eliminate the leading organisms before they can establish a proper hive. My forces are spread thin thanks to the fighting on Neustrum I and the fleet assets we've had to send to Macronta. In the meantime we will fight for every inch of territory. The sector cannot afford to lose another agriworld."

-Message Ends-

Transmitted from Astropathic Relay Lucaris VII
To: Neutrum II Planetary Command, office of General Antioch
From: Sector Command, office of Lord Cathalus

Thought for the day: Praise the Angels of Death, for they bring the end of all unclean things.

“Astartes forces rerouted from Folden IV following cessation of Tau infiltration activities there. Cordon Xenos infestation until their arrival. Be careful Antioch, reports from surveillance on Macronta indicate Tyranid presence is growing sector wide and their vanguard contain psychic predatory organisms. Stay strong and strangle this infestation in its cradle. The Emperor Protects.”

-Coal Heart vessels arrive 5 days later and make for Neustrum II at maximum speed-

Neutrum II
Low Orbit

M’otann studied the Auspex readout and telemetry being relayed to him by the ground teams while he waited in the drop pod’s shock frame. Ut’erehs had already been nearly killed again. Instead of Tau battlesuits flushing him from cover it was an honest to the emperor carnifex. The Embershields and Imenehs had managed to save the young loner this time. Though the Lieutenant would have to be commended for managing to survive close combat with a monstrous biological war engine like that. The report from the PDF forces on the planet hadn’t indicated anything larger than warriors were present yet.

The rest of the strike team reported minimal contacts though there was a large heat signature centred around the FOB’s administration centre. After the initial surprise of the carnifex the sweep and clear was going smoothly. It seemed M’otann and his squad of veterans would be destined to remain in orbit while the others cleansed the facility.

This assumption changed when Gustav and his squad’s vitals suddenly spiked. M’otann wordlessly bid his armour’s machine spirit to bring up the telemetry from Gustav’s artificial eye. A mottled shadow had pulled itself from a wall and was wrestling with Gustav. There was a brief movement by the old marine accompanied by an inhuman shriek. Ichor sprayed across the helmet lens M’otann watched through. The ichor was brushed away to reveal a retreating Lictor, its massive killing talon limbs snapped at the midpoint and a vicious gash leaked from its side.

The vox came to life at last, “It’s an ambush M’otann, again, they drew us in, I’ve got a swarm of genestealers and at least 2 more lictors nearby. One of them is a witchbeast. We could use your help shortly.” Gustav rumbled, his voice punctuated by bolter fire and boastful shouting from the aptly named Anvil squad.

M'otann clicked his Vox twice in the standard rite of acknowledgement and his gauntlets danced across the drop pod's control runes for a moment before he leaned back into his shock frame.

The customary shudder and weightlessness followed as the pod broke free of Voltaic Justice before screaming down to the planet below. M'otann and the rest of Hidalgo squad muttered joint prayers to the Emperor when the pod hit the atmosphere and shuddered. One of the cogitator units promptly shorted out and immolated itself. The prayers took on a note of urgency. They hadn't quite finished the third round of verses when the pod crashed through what had been an office room, ploughed through several parked vehicles and finally came to rest in the courtyard in front of the Administratum building. The drop pod's data lectern bleeted in warning that the pod had dropped off course and there were hostile Xenos outside.

M'otann waved away the warning and hammered the release button. His and his brother's shock frames promptly disengaged and the pod's doors dropped open. With a vox amplified roar he and Hidalgo squad rushed out of the pod in a wave. They were met by a hail of fleshborer beetles. One unfortunate squadmate went down as several of the beetles by some dark miracle found a gap in his armour.

Brother Hezonn sent a burst of flame from his pyrecannon at the source of the beetles while the rest of the squad poured bolter and melta fire into the larger warrior forms that emerged from the building's entrance.

The drop pod's own storm bolter soon joined the song of war, shattering the facade of the now merrily burning building. The tyranid warriors weathered the storm of fire and charged M'otann and Hidalgo squad. One of the aliens exploded in a shower of Ichor and Chitin as bolter shells tore it apart at the last moment.

M'otann was confident as the monsters closed. He had killed tyranid warriors before, and even Hive Guards on Saint Alvarehs' Rest before its fall.

As the warriors rushed in he blasted one's chest carapace with his bolt pistol. The creature fell, staggered for a moment and shrieked as he tried to holster the pistol and draw his sword. From within the clump of warriors a winged bioform suddenly leapt up and over the gunsmoke and clouds of powdered carapace. M'otann lifted his shield to bat it aside but it moved with unbelievable speed. It was faster even than the Lictor that had nearly killed him a decade before on Saint Alvarehs Rest. It crashed down on him with its greater bulk and drove him to the ground. M'otann tried to get his sword free to strike but couldn't quite manage it before the warrior prime forced his shield aside. The alien raked his masterfully crafted armour with its talons and tore through the ceramite like paper, nearly severing his right arm and tearing open his chest in a mist of blood and sparking machinery.

The pain fought a brief losing war with the pharmacopoeia of M'otann's augmetics to keep him awake and fighting.

He managed to force the alien off of him with a final burst of effort, swinging his shield's edge into the creature's side and knocking it off him. Around M'otann the rest of Hidalgo squad fell back behind the drop pod as more Gaunts and Lictors emerged from their hiding places to charge in the warrior's wake.

M'otann watched the warrior prime scuttle around his failing body. The beast ignored him to survey the battlefield for a moment and guide its brood. It seemed to make a decision and looked back down at him, the self aware malevolence of its mind flashing in its eyes as it waited the barest second before finishing its wounded prey. It reared up and M'otann took his last moment to contemplate an alien sky, then the world disappeared in fire and light as the ground quaked.

The sharp stab of a medical stimulant forced him back to wakefulness. M'otann's eyes took a moment to clear before he realised he was back onboard the Justice. The pain was monumental but he was alive. His implanted chrono told him it had been the better part of a day since he had lost consciousness.

A brood of medical servitors and Yeomen Medicae filled the alcove around him. Bresh'o, the lead techmarine of the strike force was also present, the flesh half of face contorted into a dour frown as he spoke when he was sure M'otann was awake.

"You take poor care of the Omnissiah's gifts, Captain. Your augmetics are badly damaged and you will have to be fitted with more, your right arm was not salvageable. Your respirator and augmetic lungs will likewise require replacement due to the damage sustained. I've already had the backups pulled from storage."

M'otann could barely speak, but managed a whispering rasp, "I... see, at this rate I'll soon be just like you brother. The others?"

"They extracted after clearing the area. There was no sign of survivors and the Tyranids dispersed after Imenehs introduced the creature that felled you to the Emperor's light. The Xenos got what they wanted it seems. Gustav is running things planetside until you're fit to fight again. Seems he's having a grand time killing Genestealers. The only other losses were in Hidalgo and one of Anvil squad's new Initiates. Cadmus recovered their geneseed, he's already taken a medicae team to start screening the local population for potential new recruits. Hwan and K'me are dead from Hidalgo. Hesperus, Alvarehs, and Hek'ulon were wounded though not as badly as you were. They're already back down on the planet. I'm glad you're up brother. I'll tell Menendehs there is to be a new Reforging. We'll need you fighting again soon." Bresh'o explained.

"With the Emperor's grace I'll be fit to fight quickly enough." M'otann grated.

“That’s good then, more good news as well brother, Space wolves are coming to aid us. As the resident Force Commander, once you’re moving again you will have the honour of a Fenrisian greeting.” Bresh’o said with a slight smile.

“I hate Mjød.” Was M’otann’s sullen response.

In the end M’otann was confined to the Medical Bay for only four days while replacements for his lungs and respiratory system were installed. It took a further two days of tireless work in the ship’s sacred forge shrine to craft his new arm. Bresh’o helped only with the most difficult parts as was allowed by the traditions of Reforging. After all, the sacred braided wires required to ensure the Motive Force was properly respected when it powered his new limb were nearly impossible to do properly with only one arm in the time available. The casting and installation of all the various solid components and even the final assembly were left to M’otann alone.

The final inscriptions and sanctifications were then laid, including exact copies of the ritual battle brands and tattoos his old arm had borne. When it was ready M’otann took it to the ship’s chapel for inspection by Menendehs and Bresh’o. The other marines of the company had returned from the planetary surface the night before. Recalled from battle for the ritual.

M’otann entered wearing red robes symbolising the chapter’s bond to the Mechanicus. He slowly walked the aisle of the chapel, each step deliberate and measured. When he reached Menendehs and Bresh’o he dropped to one knee and offered the Augmetic to Menendehs first. The grizzled old chaplain was silent for some time as he looked over the new limb. Turning it in his hands and inspecting every inch to ensure M’otann had not hurried or made any mistake. Finally he handed it Bresh’o who repeated the procedure before nodding to the older Astartes.

Menendehs then began the Rite of Reforging as Yeomen tech adepts readied M’otann for the new limb’s installation. The chaplain recited Hek’ulon’s admonition to the wounded after the first battle of Oracleus while the augmetic’s connection port was cleaned with sacred oils. Bresh’o followed along, repeating the words in binaric cant. The chaplain’s rasping voice forming an odd harmony with the techmarine.

Next came the traditional exchange between M’otann and Menendehs.

Menendehs, “You have failed in your task and fallen in battle, are you broken?”

M’otann, “I am unbroken.”

Menendehs, “You have been shamed by the enemy, do you accept the humiliation?”

M'otann, "I spit in its face."

Menendehs, "You have travelled through the valley of darkness, did it still your hearts?"

M'otann, "My hearts beat with renewed strength for my trials."

Menendehs, "You have been struck upon the anvil of war, what will you become?"

M'otann, "I will become the hammer."

Menendehs, "Rise and be reforged brother, for you were, are, and will always be one of Mankind's greatest tools of war and the guarantor of its future peace."

With that M'otann rose and looked the old chaplain in the eyes. The yeomen carefully lifted the new arm into place and Bresh'o's mehadendrites spooled forward. Bolts spun, seals hissed, and with a faint sizzle and pop M'otann's new limb came to life. He raised it in front of him. The faint hum of its newborn machine spirit filled his head for just a moment and he lowered the arm before bowing again.

"Thank you, honoured keeper of the light. I am ready to resume my duties." M'otann said solemnly and the ceremony came to an end.

With Everac's contribution to the crusade due to arrive any day M'otann busied himself with reports from Macronta while Gustav did what could be done to contain the growing Tyranid infestation. The missing biovessel had managed to evade detection in the mineral rich highlands of Neutrum II. According to the information he could access, the Necrons or Soulless as the Coal Hearts referred to them had been joined by outside aid of their own, luckily the Tyranids had drawn much of the still awakening Necron's ire. Everac's wolves had already engaged the Necrons as well, destroying a large power node and slowing their resurgence.

M'otann was working through some of the observation platform auspex reports when his desk Vox came to life with shipmaster Anto's voice. "Captain to the bridge, multiple friendly ships detected at the transit point. It looks like they aren't alone, I'm detecting weapons fire and Xenos vessels in close proximity."

The Harvest of Galiben

=][=

Encryption: Beta Noctis v2.3

Ident Recognized...

Decrypting....

...

...

...

Decryption Completed:

Incident report #970-Delta-4

Cogitator recording from Platform Nero III.

Original data deleted as per operation: SEPULCHRE SHROUD following resolution of Chimera Crisis.

Record originating from the office of Inquistor Aahbreel Santos.

All timestamps are in Neutrum System Standard Time.

-1731.45. Multiple warp transits detected, signatures include two strike cruiser class vessels, two Cobra escorts, and three Falchion escorts. Xenos vessels also detected, One Scythe class, two Jackal raiders, a Dirge raider, and a Taweret carrier vessel-

-1733.55 Both flotillas engage in battle, the cobras are almost immediately destroyed by particle weapons and the Taweret crippled by lance fire. Energy signatures consistent with teleportation assaults detected from both flotillas.-

-1742.23, Dirge class vessel explodes spectacularly, Coal Heart and Navy elements begin high burn towards battle, projected arrival at 1854.12-

-1753.11, One Jackal class vessel explodes, reactor explosion detected from one of the strike cruisers, ship survives but drifts from battle without power. Rising energy readings from Necron vessels.-

-1753.21 Necron vessels disappear from sensors as massive pulse blinds platform temporarily.-

-1753.50, telemetry resumes, Necron vessels are gone including crippled Taweret. No sign of the Xenos detected anywhere in system.-

-1855.15, Navy contingent and Coal Hearts vessels arrive to render aid to damaged Space Wolf ships.-

Vox log of Skywatch station Danté.
Eastern Hemisphere of Neutrum II.
Dispatch to office of General Antioch
Original data deleted as per operation SEPULCHRE SHROUD following resolution of Chimera Crisis.
Record originates from the office of Inquisitor Aahbreel Santohs.

21 hours after incident 970-Delta-4.

Datascribe Hillier; "Auspex array 2 is acting up again sir."

Commander Robles; "I'll make a note for the maintenance shrine. Cawdrick should be able to fit it into his schedule."

Datascribe Hillier; "Alrig- Sir it just went down completely, array 4 and 7 as well. I-"

Datascribe Chellec; "I've lost contact with the garrison at Galliben Bay, all the lines just went dead. Surveillance servitor Gamma managed to send a picture before it cut off. It... I've patched it through to your console sir."

Commander Robles; "Dear Emperor, I see it now. All that water, the city is... wait what are those Hillier sound the invasion alert, those aren't Tyranids. Chellec, dispatch log to the General. Activate all the auto defences! I want the rest of you to sift any data from the servitor buoys to see if we can trace where those ships came from."

Multiple voices, "Aye sir!."

-Recording ends-

Post combat analysis summary by Watch-Brother Demarius, constructed from data requisitioned from both Space Wolf and Coal Heart Astartes forces during the cleansing of Galliben Bay.
Presented to the Datavault of Watch station Unyielding Malice for posterity.

"The alien's attack on the coastal city appears to have had a twofold purpose. First as a reprisal for the past efforts of the Imperium to slow their awakening, second to recover some of their

heretical technology that had been under quarantine and research by the Convent Omnis located there. Thanks to the stiff resistance of the convent's fanatical tech-guards the facility held long enough for aid to arrive despite the aliens sudden and inexplicable assault.

Perhaps it should be expected that both of the Astartes relief forces showed poor coordination during the early stages of the battle. The veteran warriors of Everac's wolves were especially eager for revenge, having previously bested the Necrons of Sundu'ka on Macronta they turned to the Mahuzakh forces that had come to aid the alien onslaught. They teleported directly into the mechanicus convent and engaged the phalanxes of Warriors and their leaders. Eventually driving the aliens into returning to their tomb ships without their prize. The blessed Terminator armour of the Wolf Guard being perfect for the engagement and allowing them to devastate the phalanxes of Necron warriors and Immortals.

The Coal Hearts meanwhile landed in a city on fire to try and prevent the Sundu'ka harvest forces from finishing their grisly work. Using arcane technology the Sundu'ka managed to outmanoeuvre the slower Coal Heart assault teams but not outfight them. The Coal Hearts took light losses despite obliterating a number of the dreaded Destroyer variant Necrons in a series of close range engagements. Instead the Necrons mostly ignored the marines to focus on eradicating the scattered survivors of their tomb vessels' first pass.

Captain Gustav is noted as desperately defending one group of survivors so tenaciously as to even impress the arrogant Xenos commander. In the end he duelled none other than the Sundu'ka's Overlord himself. The alien seems to have deemed him a worthy opponent and engaged Gustav and Anvil squad while the lesser Necron Warriors carried out their tasks. The captain and the overlord proved evenly matched in the end, only being separated when the press of battle forced them apart. Regrettably the Coal Hearts would be less successful than the Wolves. The loss of the city's populace was almost total."

For force estimates of involved Necron dynasties see Section 2.

For information available on Imperial forces involved see Section 3.

For detailed breakdown of individual engagements see Section 4.

The Anvil and The Crone

Neutrum II
Minotaria
Hedren's Prospect

The first sign of trouble was the smoke blanketing the small town, obscuring it from the sky. It was even proof against the Thunderhawk's auspexes. The village was one of many towns near the Tyranid quarantine zone that had been taken over by the PDF and fortified against the alien infestation. Though it was far from the main fighting and was serving as a transit hub as the front line ground steadily closer.

M'otann had dispatched one of the apothecaries and a team of medicae to it before the battle at Galliben. While the Coal Hearts were fighting for any given world they often sent out small teams to aid the refugees war inevitably created. It also allowed them to screen the population for potential recruits, a tactic that had proved useful in their long history to keep their numbers up on campaign.

Apothecary Cadmus and his team should have called for transport or at least used the local Vox station to send a report but there had been only stony silence for a full day now. Following the Soulless' retreat from Galliben M'otann and Gustav had decided to investigate, taking with them a fairly large force while the Wolves searched for any clue of their prey's next move.

House Dylgado had also sent a contingent to aid Chimera in its time of need. They and the Coal Hearts shared many oaths of mutual fealty thanks to millennia of coexistence on Oracleus Minor. In the end it had been a simple matter to have Gustav talk the lead Quaestor into sparing one of his charges. The armiger pilot, one Pacho Von Dylgado, had seemed particularly eager for the chance to prove himself. When M'otann checked chapter records during transit he had discovered Pacho was a relative of the apothecary that had been sent out. A grand-nephew in fact. Though Astartes typically eschewed their mortal families, the Coal Hearts still embraced the traditions of their progenitors and it was possible the young knight had even met the apothecary. M'otann hoped it would keep the young lord focused on the task.

The Thunderhawk circled the town twice before setting down on the southern end and disgorging the rescue force. They moved through the town's outskirts slowly and cautiously. The constantly billowing acrid smoke reduced visibility to a few dozen feet. Strangely it seemed to offend their power armour's machine spirits as well, causing the targeting aids to paint false threats everywhere.

Ut'erehs lead the way ahead of the main force, a near ghost as always. Gustav and Anvil squad following close behind Pacho's Warglaive as it stomped down the main thoroughfare. Joachim's Embershields took the right flank while M'otann took the left with Calopodius' infernus squad. Bringing up the rear was an eliminator team. Soon they passed through the empty untouched outer town and into the proper Imperial hab blocks. Here the signs of battle were unmistakable. Most of the buildings were scorched and wrecked. They were not empty however. The horrors the Marines found in the shattered habs were enough to turn even an Astartes' stomach. Crude caricatures worked out of corpses mocked them from every shattered window. M'otann needed only one look to recognize the cruel work of Drukhari. He had seen similar vile "artwork" on a hundred different derelicts. His first reforging had come at the hands of the creatures.

The tension built as the town's centre neared, the small business district and administratum sector had been badly damaged. Garish slogans in an alien language had been emblazoned on several storefronts in human blood. Many others were little more than smouldering wrecks that had collapsed in on themselves. Eventually the avenue the strike force had been following opened up into what had once been a park. The source of much of the smoke were two large ruined buildings on either side of the open area.

Ut'erehs reached the edge first, examining it from inside a ruined pub's main room. The park was a charnel pit now. A small platform had been raised in the middle, made out of the strange dark metal material that the Drukhari favoured. In its centre, shackled to a frame was the apothecary Cadmus. Still alive as his occasional moans of pain indicated. Several other corpses were raised next to him, clearly having expired from their injuries without the superhuman vitality of Astartes physiology. They were likely what was left of his medicae retinue and the local government. A pale skinned Haemonculus worked diligently at the Apothecary, stopping every so often to mutter to one of its attending Wracks. No other Drukhari were in sight.

The smoke seemed unnaturally still around the edges of the pit. The air was clear in the centre despite the horrible slurry that had replaced the grass. Ut'erehs shifted left further to try and find a discreet way to begin circling around the pit.

Gustav and M'otann restrained themselves with difficulty when Ut'erehs reported his findings. Seemingly every battle thus far had been an ambush during their time in the Chimera sector. This was more clearly a trap than most of the others had been. A far more petty and personal insult than the clever invisible stalkers of the Tyranids or Tau. Obviously intended to make them attack without thinking. As the others got into position to assault across the pit the smoke suddenly stopped billowing out of the buildings and a shrill bone deep whining tone began assaulting their ears. A pair of the sleek bladed hovercraft the Drukhari favoured rose out of the damaged buildings to either side of the pit. A pack of smaller reavers orbited them.

An amplified voice speaking in oddly accented and clipped low gothic roared out of the larger vessel,

“Welcome, finally, friends and foes. You should all be honoured, the ones below us failed to properly appreciate my offers, today you have the rare gift of being able to make a deal with me-“

While the voice settled into an obviously rehearsed monologue M’otann and Joachim split off to either side of the pit to circle around the flanks. Meanwhile the eliminator team climbed one of the wrecked buildings to try and gain a vantage point.

While they took aim the speaker neared the end of their point.

“-show that useless runt who really runs things. Which is why I’ve gone through the trouble of meeting you here. It’s a shame you took so long, we’d hoped to be done with this some time ago. I’d like to offer you a deal, your apothecary and the runts he found compatible with your recruitment. In return for his release from pain and the turnover of these poor little innocents all I ask is that one of your officers offers himself up in their place. What do you say?”

The voice dripped condescension and boredom. Silence blanketed the pit for a moment longer as the eliminators of Lucem squad finally reached their perch. The alien craft lowered themselves slightly and time stretched. Then the voice returned, this time with edged with vicious fury,

“Fine. Fine, your kind are always so selfish. I’ll enjoy cutting your last survivor’s throat at my leisure. Vortrax end that one’s life and make sure we take one of the others alive.”

The Darklances on the ships swivelled and alien war cries rose from their decks. The Haemonculus had gone on with weaving pain while the Archon talked. At the curt command he produced a syringe and smiled as he stroked the side of Cadmus’ sweating head. M’otann clicked his vox 3 times giving the signal to fire at will. The first bolt fired was an Executioner round from the eliminators. With perfect precision it severed the hand the Haemonculus was holding the syringe in. The second was a Mortis, full of toxins fit to kill even a master of biology like a Haemonculus. Unfortunately the alien suddenly blinked out of existence for a microsecond before impact and appeared just out of the threat radius of the specialised ammunition. Dark lances from the ships raked the eliminator’s vantage point, shattering the corner of the building. One of the alien ships then lowered itself to interpose its bulk between the marines and Haemonculi. The other, larger one rose up and over the buildings before disappearing from sight. Only the whine of its engine indicated where it had gone.

Gustav and Pacho charged out of hiding as the other ship disappeared. Pacho’s thermal spear and the ship’s darklances fired at nearly the same time. The coruscating beams of antimatter from the dark lances missed by bare inches. Flickering off the armigers ion shield.

The alien ship shimmered for a moment before the powerful melta blast sheared it in half. The kabalites aboard it spilled out of its wreck and traded fire with Gustav and his men as they followed behind Pacho. The ship’s dying final volley punched clean through the warglaive’s ion shields and bored a chunk out of its hull, detonating a secondary power bank and crippling its

targeting systems. Gustav and Anvil squad waded into the Xenos warriors, eager to recover the apothecary before the Drukhari could enact petty revenge for their defiance.

Joachim and his men blotted the Reavers out of the sky as they dropped to attack in a hail of promethium and smoke. While they were distracted a cackling brood of wyches and succubi boiled out of hiding. The alien's knives proved poorly suited to dealing with the Embershield's heavy Gravis armour but they easily danced around the hulking marines and the struggle quickly turned into a vicious brawl.

M'otann and Calopodius' squad pushed through an abattoir of a hab block and ran into the other ship's disgorged troops and a pair of pain engines in the interior garden courtyard. The marines rushed to close with the aliens. The Infernus marines poured flame on one alien death machine and the kabalites while M'otann charged the other pain engine. His new arm proved even faster and more precise than the old one. He severed a beweaponed limb with a slash while deflecting the spray of vicious toxins released from its scorpion-like tail weapon. The struggle reflected garishly in the glass windows that once allowed families to enjoy the view of flowers.

As the abomination retreated he turned to the Infernus marines that had accompanied him. They were engaged in brutal close fighting with the kabalites, several of them lay at the feet of a sword wielding Xenos in intricate and intimidating armour. M'otann pointed his weapon at her in a clear challenge and she cackled before rushing forward to meet him. She was fast as the Aeldari always seemed to be. Every shift and step pushed further into his guard. He caught one slash on the edge of his shield and managed to strike back, as his sword arced up from below her stance a jewel on her ear flashed and a blast of shadowy energy propelled M'otann backwards. He skittered across the stones of the courtyard and came to a stop against the wall before standing.

Where the alien had stood a rolling sphere of darkness loomed in defiance of the sunlight now breaking through the dissipating smoke clouds.

"My my aren't you an interesting little creature."
The shadow said as M'otann readied himself.

"You almost caught me, a shame for you it isn't so easy. Come and fail again Mon'keigh. There will be no 'reforging' after this. You really should come up with a better way to excuse your failures anyway.", The archon sneered.

At the insult M'otann rushed forward and was again thrown back by a pulse of the shadow field. He slammed his blade into the ground to anchor himself and drew his pistol, he emptied the gun into the shadowfield to no avail. The bolts detonate harmlessly on the outer field layer. The darkness pushed forward now. A flickering blade slowly emerged from it almost mockingly. M'otann hurled the empty gun at the Archon and the blade arched for a moment, bisecting the weapon. The shadow spoke again, "It would really save some time if you just gave up already."

“My death will come long before I give up vermin.” M’otann said at last and pulled his sword out of the ground before taking a tall guard stance. The shadow giggled obscenely and battered at him. The energy field on his shield managed to deflect much of the buffeting waves of shadow but not all. One strike made it through and scored a line across his chest plate, his augmetics stuttered as coolant and oil began leaking only to immediately be absorbed into the huskblade. The Archon sensed weakness and pressed the advantage. M’otann soon found himself against the wall and with nowhere left to move when Sergeant Calopodius intervened. Lashing the Archon’s shadowfield with his pyreblaster as his men cut down the last of the kabalite warriors. Under the assault a patch of shadow thinned and M’otann took the brief chance to stab through it. His power sword sheared a hole through the shadowfield and the air filled with the smell of boiling blood.

The archon reeled back as the field flickered and fought to maintain integrity. M’otann stalked forward, giving no respite. As he raised his sword to finish the fight a nearby window exploded in a shower of glass as an arc grenade sailed into the courtyard.

“Ut’erehs yo-“ M’otann began just before they detonated.

The pulse of electricity finished off the shadowfield and it overloaded before collapsing. The shadow’s sudden absence revealed the bleeding Archon. On the edge of the pulse, M’otann’s armour immediately shut down as errors cascaded across his HUD. The flabbergasted Archon reeled as Lieutenant Ut’erehs slammed directly through the wall next to the window the grenade had come from. The lieutenant leapt forward with a shortened warhammer and a combat blade in a whirling spin. The hammer came first, battering aside the hastily raised huskblade and the knife followed directly behind like a bolt of lightning. The Archon made a last shocked grunt as the lieutenant’s blade nearly split their head. The dead alien crumpled as Ut’erehs turned to his commander with a grin across his scarred face.

“We will speak later brother Caputo, you interfered when you should not have, the creature was mine. You interrupted my duel when I needed no help and shamed us both.” M’otann said and the younger marine’s smile died, he had clearly expected gratitude.

“Yes sir I realise my mistake. We should move though, the Ravager is-“, his words were cut off by a trio of darklances blasts carving sections out of the courtyard. The hail of fire drove M’otann and the others to take cover. The ship descended into the courtyard behind the blasts. When the shooting finally slackened the alien vessel was gone, and so was the dead Archon.

“Guess I should have warned you faster Brother Captain.”, Ut’erehs said laconically as the other teams began reporting victory. Joachim and his aggressors had made short work of the wyches. Gustav and his men had seen off the Haemonculi and managed to recover Cadmus, though Pacho’s armiger was badly damaged. Overall the battle had been a success, only Calopodius’ men had taken any serious casualties and they had utterly devastated the aliens. Of the enemy, the one ship with barely a handful of its crew had escaped. Vanishing from auspexes before it could be intercepted.

Traitors Reveal Themselves.

=][=

Transcript ID# 287716104

Encryption: Beta Noctis v2.0

Ident Recognized...

Decrypting....

...

...

...

Decryption Completed:

From the archives of Inquisitor Aabreel Santohs, Ordo Xenos.

Location: **Zeta-Terminus-SW01**

Transcript of last transmission from astropathic monitoring station Omega Tarses V, personal log of Astropath Harridari Cham.

Message transmitted 6 days before arrival of Inquisitor Santohs and a full Astartes strike team.

“This will be my final message, the others are all gone, taken for the archenemy’s rituals. Darkness will consume me soon too. The voices scream in my head now, the empty angels bring perversion to the materium once more. The red son’s poison spills outward from his false kingdom. Ambitious conquerors rob the sleeping graves of the past. The eyes of hell march with them, their gaze twisting all creation. The emperor’s light is kept from us by grasping shadows. All is lost. A dark serpent shall cut itself from the shadow and rise to meet the burning angels and both shall face the gaze of evil. The wolf, too, faces the eyes, hoping for revenge easing the pain of its wounds. In the end the fires will consume us all. Goodbye my brothers in His service.”

Zeta-Terminus-SW01

Plain of Martyrs

Lady Aahbreel was unimpressed by the moon below. A dusty wasteland, its only purpose was to serve as a bulwark against those who would assault Uldiddast II. She had only been drawn here because of the still slumbering Necron tombs buried beneath its surface. The Mechanicus assured her that the tombs were dead, their occupants never to wake. With the events on Macronta she was not so sure. These tombs had drawn ever more dangerous foes in recent years and they should have been destroyed long ago. The transmission from Tarses V had been a warning and shed some light on what was coming at least. Aahbreel's own psychic talents had felt the taint of the warp immediately on arrival. There was also the icy touch of sorcery in the air. Harridari's message could only mean one thing, empty angels, a red son. The Thousand sons had joined the rising conflagration of the Chimera sector. Technically this would be the work of the Hereticus or Malleum, but none of their agents were available. Too many traitor and alien forces assailed the Nihlus in these dark times. The Inquisition was spread thin.

So it had fallen to her to stop whatever plot was afoot. To that end she had drawn a pair of strike forces from the Astartes embattled on Neutrum II. The forces were now assembled and ready to launch. Everac's wolves would strike one of the potential targets while Aahbreel and the Coal Hearts would hit the other. She had been surprised to see such zealous warriors as the Coal Hearts harbouring Black Dragons, much less a mutated librarian and his entourage. She had chosen to overlook the mutations of Lucian and his men. All records indicated that despite their appearance the Black Dragons were as loyal and dedicated as their gene cousins and she could respect the total dedication of becoming a living weapon in the emperor's service. Together with Lucian and Wyrdmaw, the rune priest who had accompanied the space wolf force to Chimera, they had pinpointed the sites of two rituals. Even now the Thousand sons worked their sorcery within long dead Necron tombs. Such evil could not stand. Would not, she assured herself as the shuttle touched down and the strike force moved out.

She had been assigned a bodyguard of Gravis armoured marines who had been ordered to keep her alive at all costs by Gustav himself. Additionally, knowing the danger they would face the Coal Hearts had opened their armoury and donated a venerable land raider to the attack. The Obsidian Tempest, filled with Embershield aggressors to burn and crush the heretics when they were found. Lucian, Ut'erehs and a sniper team had inserted ahead of their arrival and Reivers under Cadavarius were ready in a circling valkyrie requisitioned from the PDF to drop in when the time was right. Everac's troops were on Uldiddast II dealing with the heretic's incursions there and she hoped they would be successful without guidance. The space wolves thirst for revenge after the Siege of Fenris was legendary but they could be... Impulsive.

The entrance to the tomb had been guarded by a small mechanicus research outpost. It was now a shattered ruin, the stink of the warp blanketing its remains.

As the Tempest and its cargo approached the ruins the vox came alive with Ut'erehs flat voice, "Signs of traitor presence but no positive identifications. The tomb's gate is unsealed, looks to have been burned through somehow, though not by any weapon I'm familiar with. There are also mines scattered around the entrance, it looks like the Mechanicus didn't want anyone getting in. Shame it didn't work."

Ut'erehs had pushed ahead of the others in his haste to find the enemy. He had been shamed by M'otann following the recovery of Cadmus and sent on this mission as a chance to redeem himself. Aahbreel chose not to pull him back, the Thousand sons would need to be drawn out of the tomb somehow. It would be suicide to try and dig the sorcerers out with a frontal attack. Reports from the prior battles showed the young lieutenant had an impressive knack for avoiding death. If anyone could kick the fire wasp's nest and make it out it would be him.

"Shame indeed, push up further, we need eyes on them. If you take fire, pull back to the outpost. Emperor willing they'll come out to chase you and we can crush them in the open," Aahbreel ordered. Ut'erehs clicked his box twice in acknowledgment and began navigating the minefield.

The marines and Aahbreel spilled out of the Tempest when it stopped for a moment on the outpost's edge. Aahbreel and her bodyguard occupied the former command centre of the outpost. Or at least the half of it still standing. Lucian and his team set up in what had been a vox tower for the outpost before its destruction. Carefully sighting on the intersection of paths that was the centre of the outpost. The Tempest itself hid as best it could behind the blasted heap that had been a vehicle depot. With everyone in position they had only a few minutes to wait.

The noctilith doors and walls was horribly scarred Ut'erehs as he pushed his way into the darkness. His power armour's autosenses stripped away the shadows as best it could and he slipped from hiding place to hiding place. The first chamber was full of wrecked Soulless constructs. Many of the metal skeletons were partially melted or riddled with bolter damage. More still were terribly warped as though their alien machinery had gone haywire. Ut'erehs stopped only long enough to carve the inert eyestalk from one. Another trophy taken from a hated foe, and a small technological marvel to be cautiously studied. The second chamber had a handful of humans, all normal aside from a handful of minor augments, perhaps they had been the crew in the outpost when the Son's came. Now they were clearly slaves to the traitors. Shambling and near mindless. They had been bewitched, bearing sigils that hurt Ut'erehs eyes carved into their skin and a sickly glow leaked from their eyes and mouths. Beyond them stood a truly enormous and open door. To either side shadowy alcoves full of alien machinery rested.

The guards were clumsy and drained of will, it took only a moment for him to decide on a course of action. Sticking to the shadows as he closed to within a few feet before leaping into their midst. Ut'erehs was among them in an instant, his hammer and combat knife shattered their bodies easily and silently. Unfortunately silence was not enough, their death had been all the alarm necessary for their master. As they struck the floor a sickly purple light erupted from around the open door and the air frosted. Before he could move Ut'erehs felt his mind gripped by an unknowable and alien power. His limbs paralyzed. The presence was hungry for information. In a near panic he began repeating the mechanical hymns all young coal hearts learned in their studies of artifice in his head. This seemed to stymie the presence for a moment and it recoiled, responding with a sliver of pain that pierced him to his core and made his heart

stutter. The light grew stronger and figures in elegantly crafted power armour and flowing robes strode out. Behind the sorcerer lurked a gigantic leonine form of a kind Ut'erehs did not recognize. Floating in the air above its muscled back was a pulsating vortex of light and impossibilities that seemed to bore into him. Ut'erehs felt somehow that the presence in his mind was coming from the vortex, in some way channelled through it by the Sorcerer. The sliver of pain grew into a knife. Ut'erehs' mantra nearly broke, but he switched to a passage from the Horologium. The chapter's holiest book. It was one that had spoken to him as a young orphan, stolen from a hive on Tejana during a cull by the mechanicus.

The Sorcerer moved to within a few feet and cocked their head before they spoke, "Pretty words boy. But I have broken better men than you. How did you track us here? I will give you one chance to answer and save us both time. Speak the truth." The voice was entrancing and pleasant, far from the phlegmy growl of the average servant of chaos.

Ut'erehs' mouth unfroze and he flexed his jaw in the helmet for a moment before speaking, "Truth always, an inquisitor pulled my strings."

At the code phrase of 'pulled my strings' his power armour activated a preprogrammed movement. His right arm darted to his hip and triggered a grenade on his belt before gently lobbing it at the nearest living thing. The movement tore apart his right shoulder and elbow joints, the power armour's servos overpowering them even in their rictus state. The pain flashed across the link between Ut'erehs and the sorcerer, slowing the Thousand son for a moment. The grenade struck the Sorcerer in the chest and they grunted a flabbergasted, "What!?" Before it went off, the arc pulse blew the sorcerer off his feet and triggered a snap reboot of Ut'erehs armour, its machine spirit raging in protest. The brief distraction was all he needed though. With the sorcerer's concentration broken Ut'erehs was able to take off at a sprint. He kept up his mantra as he ran. Stopping for a second to lay a haywire mine at the passage between the first and second chamber. The huge warp beast loped after him when it recovered from the arc pulse but Ut'erehs managed to keep ahead thanks to the narrow confines of the tomb tunnels. The clank of marching feet on noctilith told him as he retreated that the rubric marines were active now too. He had hurt the pride of the Sorcerer and they would try very hard to ensure he wouldn't get away with it. They would chase him in a fury. He hoped it would be enough to make them stupid.

He didn't dare vox ahead and give the Son's warning of what waited. Their eldritch powers were perfectly capable of intercepting any messages he sent now. The rumbling thump of the mine detonating followed Ut'erehs out of the tomb's mouth. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and the air filled with the smell of ozone. Ut'erehs hurled himself to his left out of instinct. A ball of actinic flame scorched the spot he had been only moments before and turned the dirt into glowing green glass. The sorcerer stood at the tunnel's mouth now, having somehow kept pace with Ut'erehs. On the sorcerer's right the creature Ut'erehs had seen before stood, its left foreleg charred and its tentacled maw scorched and bloody. Another horrific monster rose up to the sorcerer's left and Ut'erehs scrambled to his feet, running again.

As the sorcerer raised an arm to send warp fire after the lieutenant a bolt round exploded barely a foot away from him. The mortis round had been defeated by the sorcerer's wards but the fresh attack distracted him long enough for Ut'erehs to disappear into the broken buildings of the outpost. Enraged, the Thousand son directed his mutalith pets to eliminate the snipers while he reached out with his mind to find his true enemy here. Twin beams of pure warp energy lanced out and the Vox tower melted. Lucian and Lucem squad barely evade the blasts as they leapt to safety. The sorcerer reached out with his mind and felt the presence of Aahbreel and her guards realising at once the danger his cabal now faced. Gathering his rubricae he directed his junior sorcerer to push into the outpost with the Megaliths and eradicate any loyalists hiding there. Then he carved an obscene symbol into the ground with his staff and uttered a lengthy spell in a language that would drive lesser men to madness.

A shimmering wave filled the air before him and he waved the rubric marines forward into it before walking through himself. The teleportation spell worked perfectly and in an instant he and his warriors were past the ambush sight and pouring fire into the flank of Aahbreel's squad.

Aahbreel was caught off guard, she had felt the energy of sorcerous workings but hadn't been able to identify their purpose before the marine next to her exploded under a hail of bolt fire. The others returned fire but there was little they could do as the rubrics pinned them in place with constant volleys. Aahbreel triggered her Vox, "Tempest, Now!"

The sorcerer felt the ground rumble and turned to see the land raider leave its hiding place and dart towards his warriors. He had only a moment to realise his mistake as the ancient flamestorm cannons of the Tempest washed over him and the rubricae. His wards collapsed as the flames roared, leaving him alone still standing, the rubric's armour melted to uselessness. The pintle mounted multimelta on the raider swivelled towards him as the flames died down and the Sorcerer triggered his emergency teleport. The flash of heat from the melta left a glassy crater where he had stood as he disappeared into the warp. The marines with Aahbreel roared in approval at seeing their enemy laid low. A blast of warp flame smote the side of the raider and stilled their cheers as it rocked. Luckily the blessed armour held and the Tempest rotated in place to face the Mutaliths emerging from the ruined outpost. Another phalanx of rubrics stood between them and they rushed to battle. The Tempest's assault ramp dropped open and the Embershields poured out. Aahbreel could barely see what happened next as the fight was obscured by walls of flame and explosions. In the short nasty melee that followed the Embershields immolated one of the mutaliths and then tore apart its still wriggling body with their gauntlets. The Tempest surged forward, crushing several rubric marines under its treads and rammed the second mutalith. The mutalith rolled forward onto the land raider's armoured prow as its left legs were pulled. It let out a hideous alien shriek from its many mouths before the Tempest's assault launchers activated. The warp beast exploded in a shower of gristle and vile fluids. The remaining rubrics and their attending sorcerer fell back and disappeared into a whirling vortex he summoned. With their departure the strike force were left the victors, though the escape of their most powerful enemies was unfortunate. Cadavarius' reivers had dropped on the tomb entrance silently while the Thousand Sons fought Aahbreel and the others. They

promptly eliminated the remaining enthralled researchers and planted chargers throughout the structure as Aahbeel had ordered during the briefing.

As the strike force lifted off of the moon's surface she personally detonated the charges. The outpost promptly imploded into the ground as the tomb complex that had endured millions of years was sealed once more.

=][=

Dialog ID# 889012

WARNING: Inquisitorial Correspondence protected by Lex Imperialis regulation 237, subsection 93, book 101. Unauthorised perusal is punishable by forced servitorization to the 6th familial generation.

Encryption: Servus Calphi v0.83

Ident Recognized...

Decrypting....

...

...

...

Decryption Completed:

From: Inquisitor Aahbreel Santohs of the Ordo Xenos

To: Lord Inquisitor Challec Vertarim

Transmitted by Astropath of courier vessel Corvidium Duris, relayed from astropathic choir of imperial garrison on Uldiddast II

Thought of the day: "The failures of the faithless are legion. Prove your belief with success in His name."

Message as follows:

"Blessings on your house My Lord.

The forces of the Archenemy and the Alien grow in power in the Chimeran sector despite the faithful's best efforts. I am dispatching this message following hostilities on the world of Uldiddast II as a report and a warning. The Necrons are waking up too quickly, the tyranid tendrils

fleet seems to be driving the sleeping tombs into activation out of self defence. Despite the sector fleet's best efforts the tyranid invasion has only been slowed, not halted. Additionally a second Necron force, bearing completely different dynastic markings has appeared and began aiding the dynasty slumbering under Macronta. The local command's efforts to stymie the ancient Xenos have seen mixed success.

Now I have found evidence the forces of the Archenemy have also begun tampering with the Necron's xenotechnology. While their vile sorceries are beyond my understanding or specialty I believe they wish to wear thin the veil between worlds using the alien's devices. I have studied what little information we have that emerged from the fall of Cadia and identified similarities between the Necron's constructs here and the ones destroyed there. Luckily the Xenos have made the task difficult for the Thousand Son warband that has been at the forefront of the most recent attacks. However it is only a matter of time before their arrogance betrays them into empowering the heretics.

With the aid of the Astartes chapters already committed to the defence of this sector I have thus far been able to prevent that eventuality. The Coal Hearts, Black Dragons, and Space Wolves are to be commended for their efforts in assisting me. The space wolf force especially have been badly mauled by the fighting but have offered no complaint.

I will continue my efforts here to try and contain the situation, though I request aid from the Ordo Hereticus to better combat the growing taint.

Your faithful servant, the Lady Aabreel Santohs."

The Sword of the Infinite

Uldiddast II

Low orbit

Scythe class cruiser Tkhesphet

Mahneezha, First of the Triumvirate, Guardian of the Codes, had seen hundreds of thousands of worlds in her long, long unlife. Uldiddast was one of the more beautiful, at least from orbit, a gleaming reddish bead like the ones she had played with in a childhood that she now only barely remembered. She and the rest of the triumvirate had led their tomb vessels here as part of the great work to restore the local dynasty. Her master required more warriors to show the upstart races their proper place. Aiding other, smaller dynasties was one of the most rewarding ways of gaining the troops necessary. That said she and her compatriots in the Triumvirate had been unprepared for the sheer number of primitives who had gotten involved in the growing conflict. The Devourer's swarms the worst among them. The Sundu'ka had slept overlong and the infestation of the mortal races had been allowed to grow far greater than it should.

Technomantic warnings and calls for aid had brought her and the others from Macronta where the Sundu'ka's overlord dwelled to Uldiddast and its moon. Someone was violating the still sleeping tombs here. Small though the tombs were, it was still sacred Necron territory. For lesser beings to pollute their ancient halls was an insult that had only one response. Destruction. She held that thought as she surveyed the phase pad, surrounded by her faithful Lychguard and even one of the venerated Eyes of Mahuzakh. Kathepzahka, the Triumvirate's Technomancer floated in the air, muttering in his grating rasp of a voice as he calculated their transit. Sohkomet, as boisterous now as he had been in life, walked up and down the precise line of his precious Immortals. The familiar fuzziness that came before a phase transit enfolded Mahneezha and in a split second they were on the planet's surface. The neat ranks of the Hand and Sword sheltered to either side by the fallen walls of a Necron tomb. They were in a mess of ruins that filled an old asteroid crater on the planet's smaller desert continent. The Necrodermis structure had survived the impact but been exposed to the elements and imprudent incursion. Thousand Son sorcerer's had taken advantage of the exposure to infiltrate it and destroy the canoptek guardians. Even doing away with the slumbering Lord who had been protected by the constructs before they could be roused to defend themselves.

Distant thunder told her that on the far side of the structure a battle already raged. The Imperials had discovered the sorcerous cabal and sought to destroy them before they gained whatever

prize they were after here. Normally Maneezha and the others would have let the primitives batter each other bloody before moving in but this facility was too important. The risk of damage to something important during the fighting was too high. Both bands of primitives needed to be slain or driven off

It was a control node for the small pylon network buried beneath the shifting wastelands. Nothing compared to the great works that had once hemmed in the Eye of Terror. Still if they could be properly reactivated it would do much to bolster the Sundu'ka's rising, helping stabilise the region's veil. Control of it would indebt them to the Mahuzakh.

A bolt of actinic fire arched into the dusty sky and the roar of some alien beast told Mahneeza their arrival had not gone unnoticed. From the breached walls of the tomb a massive warp monster rose and bellowed defiance before charging the arrayed Necron phalanxes. From a broken battlement blue armour glinted and the world broke for a moment as a bolt of pure madness lanced out and struck the imposing bulk of the Right Eye of Mahuzakh. The Necrodermis of the Ark boiled and writhed as though it had been suddenly given life. Even its shielding was insufficient to stop the energy that smote it. Luckily the Necrons had already won a war against those who used such powers. As the subtle wrongness of warpcraft receded the living metal began to heal and renew. The Eye's pilot carefully coaxing the repair protocols and rotating it to bear on its attacker.

"Burn that mindless filth from my sight Ahmenthetesh!", Mahneeza ordered the pilot.

The Sword tilted her phase blade towards the enemy and the majesty of the Triumvirate went to war once again.

The Eye's blasts struck the towering warp beast square in its broad chest, just below the wriggling maw. The monster disappeared in a flash of light as it was consumed by an incandescent fury beyond even plasma weapons. While the Eye searched for other targets Sokhomet led his immortals to the courtyard outside the main tomb structure. Mahneeza and her Lychguard pushed into the structure through a gaping hole in its side. The interior was dark and cold, other holes allowed some light in but only served to make the greater gloom more oppressive. As the Sword and her minions reached the centre of the tomb a brief wave of gunfire bounced off their armour and blasted craters in the floor around them. The surprise of the attack caused her to activate her chronosense.

Time slowed as she gauged the attackers, a small squad of space marines clad in black armour dropping from the walkways above. Probably assassins looking for the sorcerer that had damaged the Eye.

They were descending at high speed using grappling devices, each carried a large pistol and short sword. Their forearms and elbows bore bony spikes. The primitive weapons would be inadequate, she decided. Mahneeza dialled her awareness back to regular time as the

Astartes dropped, surrounding her. Eager for a duel Mahneezha's command nodes arced and a silent order not to interfere went out to the Lychguard. The primitives attacked in unison, trying to take advantage of their numbers. The Sword's void scythe whirred in an arc, and Mahneezha used her massive strength to scatter them. One of the bravest leapt back towards her immediately and she bisected him mid jump with a flourish of the void scythe.

The others paused for a moment as the body of their compatriot cooled. Now realising how tough an Overlord truly was. At a nod from the marine wearing the most ornate armour they charged again. Mahneezha met them head on. She was taking her time to test their skill, the leader of the assassins was most impressive.

Not impressive enough to save them.

The Sword thought to herself in satisfaction.

That satisfaction evaporated as a chunk of wall on the far side of the chamber gave out and a land raider surged through the hole. It was already damaged and wreathed in flame, the hole punched in its side matching the blast of a doomsday cannon. As it ground to a halt the enormous flamethrowers on its sides turned towards the Lychguard. A torrent of superheated promethium washed away the ancient warriors, melting them in place or otherwise disabling them, most of them phased back to the Tomb Ship in orbit. Mahneezha however brushed off the flame with a wave of her scaly cloak. The few remaining black armoured marines fell back under cover of the fresh assault. Disappearing even to the enhanced senses of a Necron as they shot up into the upper levels with their grapple hooks.

As Mahneezha contemplated the destruction around her she heard a stirring in the dark and turned to find herself face to face with a warp beast like the one that had died outside. She realised it had emerged from a side passage, moving in impossible silence. The whirl of energy in the air above it strobed and a bolt of warp energy lanced out of the darkness and smote the land raider again. Its floodlights promptly died, the crude engine choking out. The beast then turned towards Mahneezha and leaped through the air at her. It struck her head on and pushed Mahneezha to the ground despite her massive frame. It clawed and bit at her, rending chunks of Necrodermis while its tentacled maw tried to pull off her arm. With a tremendous effort Mahneezha spun the Void Scythe in her hand and slammed it into the neck of the monster. The monster shrieked so loud her auditory transducers had to temporarily shut down and it stumbled backwards. Horrible fluids spilled to the ground from its cut throat.

Across the chamber the assault ramp on the Land raider slammed open as it was forced from the inside. A pack of heavily armoured marines bearing forge icons and massive flamestorm gauntlets stomped out and sent a wall of fire at the gravely wounded vortex beast. It reeled back in pain, fleeing into the tunnels. With the beast dealt with, the marines charged Mahneezha where she stood, encircled by the wall of flame that had driven off the beast. The fight was short and brutal as she dodged their clumsy blows and lopped off arms with sweeps of her scythe. Only one of the marines managed to actually land a hit, but it crippled her necrodermis body.

The foolhardy warrior had allowed himself to be stabbed with the void scythe and lived long enough to crush Mahneezha's right side with a vicious low blow from his massive gauntlet. It would take some time for the self repair protocols to set to work.

The land raider coughed to life and reversed out of the tomb, the wall collapsing in its wake. Mahneezha was alone now in the tomb.

'Victory in the courtyard, the Imperials are falling back my Sister. The twisted ones have also all but disappeared. We're coming to you now.'

Sokhomet's message scrawled across her vision.

Mahneezha leaned on her staff, supporting her weight as her self repair protocol worked. Turning to the vastness of the tomb she felt the urge to smile. It was a shame that biotransference had taken that from her. A warning rune flashed in her vision and Mahneezha looked around to locate the source. Her oculars registered an error and highlighted the distortion. A pair of invisible shapes were trying to creep past her. After a moment the distortion cleared and she realised it was a pair of marines, one wielding a force sword, the other carrying an oddly shaped carbine. Their armour was scorched and damaged. The sword bearer twitched as she looked directly at him and touched his temple before gesturing at her. The air chilled and Mahneezha was flung into the air by a bolt of fire that arced from the marine's palm to her chest, melting the ornate symbols there. Her left ankle and hip snapped as she hit the wall and fell to the ground. The two marines retreated as she lay, fuming, and waiting for her joints to pop back into place.

Luckily she was able to stand by the time Sokhomet arrived and so she avoided his jeering. He greeted her with a jaunty wave of his warscythe as his Immortals spread out to clear the rest of the tomb.

"It was a good harvest Sister, the occultists made a last ditch attempt to kill me on our way here, sorry for the delay," He surveyed the carnage around her and her battle damage, "It looks like you had the harder fight though."

She made a curt gesture to quiet her brother and waved Kathepzaka to her, "The intruders died well, but we have our prize. Kathepzaka I leave it to you to restore functionality to this node. Glory to the Infinite Empire!"

Sokhomet's Immortals repeated her victorious cry.

Showdown In the Desert

=][=

Report ID# 387225

Encryption: Mortis Umbra v1.7

Ident Recognized...

Decrypting....

...

...

...

Decryption Completed:

Transmitted by Astropath of courier vessel Herald of Bounty following transit from Neutrum.

To: Sector Command, office of Lord Cathalus

From: Neutrum II Planetary Command, office of General Antioch

“Thanks to the valiant efforts of Neutrum II’s PDF the Tyranid vanguard threat has been contained, at least for now. The majority of the smaller southern continent, Minotaria, has been effectively destroyed following the latest wave of biovessels to run our orbital blockade. Multiple nuclear weapons were required to cauterise the infection and our stockpile is now nearly exhausted. The portion of that continent we still control is protected by a large desert, the open ground making the Tyranid’s swarms easy pickings for air assets. There is little biomass there for the Xenos to use as well and they have been slow to adapt. The Coal Hearts have been instrumental in slowing the Tyranid swarms down and giving my men more time to prepare ever greater defences, striking out into the desert to destroy the smaller tyranid vanguard forces that can avoid our airpower. This great work is hindered however by the Drukhari. The aliens have taken full advantage of the Tyranid threat and their raids in our back lines continue despite our best efforts. The Coal Hearts have themselves stymied several of these raids but they cannot be everywhere and my PDF aren’t up to the challenge despite the measures I’ve taken to stiffen their resolve. Most recently one of my best units was wiped out after being attacked by the Drukhari. The Coal Hearts were nearby and responded, killing a number of the aliens but were unable to save my troops. The Xenos have some hidden means of accessing the world and

bypassing the fleet. Scans by what remains of our satellites have failed to reveal where they are coming from. They attack from seemingly nowhere, kill and capture as many as they can and disappear. The rate of attacks is increasing and I worry that a full scale real space raid may be brewing. I will continue my utmost efforts here, may the Emperor be with you my lord.

Neutrum I is in even worse straits, almost all message traffic has stopped and the Navy has singularly failed to force a breakthrough to send relief or at least exterminate the planet. The Devourer will soon turn towards us with its full might.

Your humble servant, General Cassian Antioch.”

Neutrum II
Segmerto Basin.
Minotaria

M'otann was glad to be back in the desert. It reminded him of home. Though without the glass flats or piles of ancient scrap machinery it couldn't quite match the austere beauty of Oracleus. The simple adobe houses of the village he and his brothers had come to clear were just as brightly decorated as those of his homeworld at least. Or they had been before war came to Neutrum II. Now most of the buildings were shattered wrecks. The local militia had managed to send out a distress call before being overwhelmed by a tyrannid vanguard brood and the scars of their last stand were everywhere. The main street that led through the town was at least mostly intact. The defenders had holed up there and been butchered in the room to room close fighting. Lictors and Genestealers excelled at.

The Tyrannids knew M'otann and his men were coming and had hidden within those structures. The veterans of Hidalgo had greatly enjoyed picking off the smaller Xenos that had shadowed the Coal Heart's approach. The last few had managed to flee into the handful of closely packed buildings in the centre of town. Perhaps hoping the Coal Hearts would close to investigate. The marine's auspexes had already detected a network of burrows like spider traps around the way station at the village's centre. M'otann and Hidalgo took a position in the remnants of a groundcar repair shop to the north while Calopodius' squad began methodically burning the buildings to the south before working northward. The precinct and waystation would be their last targets. Imenehs' massive armoured bulk loomed ahead of M'otann's men, standing in the open. The dreadnought ready to crush any larger xenofoms should they emerge to try and make an opening for their brood kindred to escape. Behind them all Gustav and Anvil squad kept watch over the craggy bluffs that had protected the village from sandstorms.

As the conflagration grew on the other side of the hamlet M'otann and Hidalgo waited. The sergeant in charge, Uzek, sidled up to his captain as they watched the fire grow.

“Auspex indicates the swarm is gathering in the tunnels sir. Seems they mean to try and overrun us to escape the flame.” The grizzled veteran said.

M'otann replied, "Good, I believe this brood is the same one we faced at Sword of Defiance, the carapace patterns on the ones we killed on the way in match. It is time we got proper revenge for Hwan and K'me."

Imenehs machine modulated voice came over the Vox to them, "Indeed brother, try not to lose your other arm this time."

M'otann guffawed, Imenehs was old for the inhabitant of a redeptor chassis, he had spent several years asleep in just a sarcophagus following New Kydov before the new chassis had been made available. It was rare for him to talk anymore, rarer still to joke. A few minutes later the auspexes bleated in warning and a swarm of gaunts and genestealers boiled out of their hiding places, many rising from burrows in the ground. They rushed across the sandy clay toward Hidalgo squad and Imenehs. Hezonn fired his pyrecannon in a sweeping arc that killed many of the gaunts while Imenehs blasted the genestealers with his chest mounted melta guns and the bolters on his enormous arms. The gaunts not caught in the initial fire blast leaped through the flames to close, quickly surrounding Hidalgo squad and flowing around their position like water.

Imenehs briefly disappeared as the genestealers swarmed over him, a broodlord taking up the rear. Calopodius' squad too reported contact over the vox as lictors and ripper swarms tried to escape the inferno and ran straight into them.

The fight with the gaunts was short and brutal, M'otann's new arm was stronger and faster than ever and he carved a bloody path through them as he moved towards Imenehs position. Hidalgo squad followed behind, hacking apart the smaller Tyranids with their combat blades. When they broke through the swarm there were no living gaunts left behind them. Imenehs meanwhile smashed and crushed half of the genestealer brood, tearing them off of him as they climbed up to try and find weak points in his armour. With the hiss of pistons and whirring servos he scattered the brood and stumbled back, smoke and coolant pouring out of the dreadnought in equal measure. One of his legs briefly lost power but he caught himself and stood again.

Before the genestealers could take advantage of his weakened state M'otann and the others rushed forward. They blasted apart most of the remaining brood before charging into melee. The Broodlord managed to score the armour on M'otann's shoulder before he carved the alien monster into pieces.

A shadow and the whine of engines passed over the battlefield as M'otann and Hidalgo squad took a moment to survey their handiwork. M'otann's Vox crackled to life with a familiar lisping voice, "Inquisitor Aahbreel sends her regards cousins, we're dropping on the far side of the village, it looks like there are some Warriors on their way to you."

“Thank you for the warning Cadavarius, I take it things went well on Uldiddast.” M’otann responded.

“Mostly, your Soulless intervened. They seem to be keeping the heretics occupied now.” Came the Black Dragon reiver lieutenants answer.

Further discussion was precluded by the sound of splintering masonry as the warriors Cadavarius had warned of smashed through the facade of the arbites precinct and rushed for Hidalgo. From the north a deep roar echoed as a carnifex pulled itself from its burrow, it was injured visibly as it bellowed a challenge at Imenehs. It seemed the locals had put up a stiffer fight than M’otann had realised.

The dreadnought responded with a twin blast from his multi meltas that silenced the challenge in a blinding flash of light. The carnifex crumpled to the ground, already dead or dying. M’otann and Hidalgo faced the charge of the warriors head on. Uzek and M’otann paired up and smashed aside the first warriors to make it through. Uzek’s crackling powerfist sufficient to kill the creatures in a single blow while M’otann’s power sword carved through the others. The combat blades of the rest of the squad were more poorly suited to the fight and several marines went down in clouds of blood as the Xenos savaged them. From within the brood loomed a winged warrior prime. The hive mind’s malicious intellect reflected in its eyes as it sized up M’otann. For a moment he could have sworn it recognized him as it stopped when they made eye contact.

If it somehow held the same awareness as the one that had almost killed him at Sword of Defiance he hoped it felt a moment of fear. Without the protection of the other warriors it was ill prepared to face him with his weapons already in hand and expecting its ferocity. The first lashing talon arm was deflected with the flat of his blade and he severed the elbow joint as his sword continued its arch. M’otann ducked low next and uppercut the creature with his shield. He felt the bony carapace of its jaw shatter and it was launched backwards. One of the last warriors tried to interpose itself between M’otann and his revenge to no avail. He nearly bisected the alien monster with a sweep of his sword, not even pausing in his stride. The prime turned and spread its wings to try and flee but it was too late. With one arm crippled it barely managed to get airborne before M’otann’s sword struck it in the back and nailed it to the ground. It scratched feebly for a moment and died in a pool of ichor on the sun baked sand. Its eyes full of hateful hunger to the last.

Victory and revenge were soothing balms for the losses suffered today. Three more of the veterans of Hidalgo had fallen to the tyrannids but the village would be cleansed. M’otann hoped the souls of the people who had lived here would find peace with their killers slain.

Fear's Nightmare

Neutrum II

Magnataria

Observation Post Peerless Vigil

A monster strode across Neutrum II and her name was Lady Seraphina, Archon of the Obsidian Serpent. She was here not for some grand scheme, but merely to profit from the chaos of war. The embattled world held a great bounty of fresh captives for the markets on Commorragh.

There was also a measure of pettiness to the specific choice of targets as well. Seraphina's second death had come at the hands of Belesiamus of the Forgotten Light Kabal and she had never forgiven the slight. It had been a miserable experience but she paid her haemonculi regularly and with interest so it had proved only a temporary setback. The old man's assassins had missed one of her backup gene samples and she had steadily rebuilt her Kabal in the shadows before re-emerging. Now her fortune exceeded his in every way. Belesiamus had suffered quite a few serious setbacks thanks to the Coal Hearts, making them a sore spot for the fool. Already her servants had captured almost a full squad's worth of the Astartes, all sent back to Commorragh to earn her renown in the arena and rub her superiority in Belesiamus' face.

Seraphina meanwhile had run rings around the world's defenders so far. Her overconfidence early on had cost her yet another death at the hands of the marines. But after the long millennia she savoured such things now. A rare fresh experience in a life too often dull. The odd batch of lost warriors was also of little concern. She had mostly contracted low quarter mercenaries for her raids on Neutrum II. Her trueborn needed only to control the hidden webway gate to make any potential treachery pointless from her mercenaries. There was no point in risking her own valuable personnel. Aside from herself.

Seraphina grinned at the thought while she watched her kabalites load a fresh group of terrified former guardsmen onto her ships. The defenders of the little fort her raiders were looting now had barely even put up a fight. Word of her people's actions was spreading, as were tales of the price of defiance. Vortrax was a true gem for such tasks.

Her smile turned to a sharp edged frown as her chief sybarite, Phocalis, approached with a small tablet. On it was the feed from her personal ravager, the Obsidian Vengeance's sensors. Astartes were approaching, they had landed far out and tried to sneak close from the south. Perhaps they thought to catch her people on the ground before they could finish loading their new chattel. They were certainly moving quickly. It was hard to judge how long she had left.

Seraphina handed the tablet back and purred, "Finish loading now Phocalis, the local barbarians will have to be shown their place as usual. I don't care how you speed things up. We pull out as soon as the transports are full. I want to be comfortably back in the webway before dawn rises on this miserable rock."

The sybarite bowed stiffly and muttered into a wrist mounted communicator. Splinter rifles wheezed and the slowest of the new drukhari slaves were made into examples. The humans remaining to be crammed into the Obsidian Vengeance and Silent Serpent cried out in fear which invigorated the raiding party as they were goaded forward. In under a minute they were all stowed. Soon the drukhari would leave the fort and its walls behind. Seraphina would once again have outsmarted the pathetic humans.

Her petty pleasure died in a flash of green lightning on the northern side of the fort. She had seen that light before and knew at once that a far greater foe had arrived. Why they would have come here was impossible to guess. Maybe revenge for the early raid on Macronta. It didn't matter, Necrons had come to Neutrum II again for the first time since Galiben Bay and she was now caught between them and the marines. It took several precious moments for her to decide on a course of action.

She issued orders to the raiding force with her own communicator in a flurry of goading invective. The pain engines lumbered off to stall the Necrons while her mandrakes readied to ambush the marines when they launched their assault. She hoped that with both foes distracted the Obsidian Vengeance and Silent Serpent could escape. The hail of missiles that rained down from the south killed that hope too. The Mon'keigh had brought heavy weapons this time. The

missiles were poorly aimed but scythed down a number of the Wyches standing on the Vengeance's deck by luck.

A shout from one of the Obsidian Vengeance's gunners drew Seraphina's attention to the southern wall of the fort where an enormous metal hand had appeared and began to lever aside the plascrete and metal of the wall. The marines had arrived too soon, the appearance of the Necrons hadn't made them slow to reconsider at all.

Seraphina waved the Vengeance's gunners to fire, dark lances speared through the wall and the dreadnought's arm disappeared. Smoke rose from the far side of the wall, and Seraphina could see sparks through the holes that had been made.

The wyches spilled from the Vengeance's deck to the ground at the bidding of their succubus, combat drugs already flooding their systems as they raced south without orders. Seraphina cursed them and tried to begin organising the other raiders. This effort failed as the chaos spread. The Serpent's pilot outright daring to refuse to listen. The raid was coming apart, they'd been too successful thus far and the sudden attacks were too much. The Silent Serpent tried to lift off and was hammered back to the ground by another wave of missile fire. It caught fire and its engines died. The warriors who'd been on its deck scattered from its failing hulk and took shelter as best they could. The cargo within cried and burned as the raidship smouldered.

A cry in over a dozen Vox amplified voices came from the far side of the southern wall, "We stir the embers of His wrath!" At the shout several holes were blasted through the wall and the marines poured forth in a wave. The wyches met the marines at the breach and scythed down several of the power armoured warriors as they charged. The ones behind doused the wyches in flame from their pyreblasters, turning the skilled duelists into briefly living torches.

From the north two phalanxes of Lychguard led by overlords made short work of her pain engines. The arcane technology of the Necrons allowed them to simply phase through the northern wall. Seraphina realised at once she faced another death. The best she could hope for now was to get the Vengeance out with its cargo intact. Nasudrenazzar, the nightfiend of her contracted mandrakes materialised next to Seraphina, almost as though he had sensed her thoughts. He was utterly unflappable and had served her well as an assassin and advisor.

She turned to him and spoke, "Take your killers away from here and wait until after the Necrons and Mon'keigh have finished killing each other. Recover what you can of our fallen. I will want my revenge. This.... Insult, will not be allowed to stand."

The shadowy assassin bowed and slipped into the shadow cast by the Vengeance's void sail. Seraphina gathered her bodyguards and leapt off the Vengeance's deck as it poured fire into the Lychguard. The wyches were all dead now and the marines began to cross the fort's parade ground.

The drukhari were focused on only one target. They dodged a hail of fire before closing in on the marines bearing ridiculous looking missile launchers. The marines had pushed too far

forward in their haste to get a shot at the Vengeance. Seraphina killed one with her first strike. It was beautiful, a full clean leap into a somersault, coming down with the point of her huskblade to bisect the Astarte's helmet. The rest of her warriors followed behind, scything down the marines. The battered survivors fired at point blank range with the smaller rotary launchers below the anti-tank pods. They injured themselves with the close range fire but managed to clear enough space to fall back as Seraphina shouted insults at their retreating forms.

With them falling back she gave the Vengeance the order to escape. The bone-vibrating whine of its engines rose to a pitch that would have burst the ears of normal humans before it launched into the air. A barrage of green lightning arched after it as an annihilation barge rose over the wall to fire at the retreating drukhari vessel. Luckily the whirling night shield of the Obsidian Vengeance threw off the Necrons' targeting enough for the ship to get away. As Seraphina watched the Vengeance disappear she saw most of the marines fall back in the face of the Necrons. The exception came from one group in the heavy armour the newest Mon'keigh warriors sometimes favoured.

She watched as one in ornate armour and wielding a power sword clambered up the wall with supernatural grace and leapt up to the barge, using his power sword to spear into the side of it before hauling himself onto it. With a mighty blow of his fist decapitated the tomb vessel's pilot before riding the pilotless construct most of the way to the ground, leaping aside before it crashed in a sickly green explosion. He landed badly and drove a furrow in the ground as he slid to a stop.

She didn't have time to admire the spectacle for long before a phalanx of Lychguard reached her and the battered squad of kabalites. At the head of the metallic charge was one of the overlords. Seraphina activated her shadow field and met the towering machine with a flourish of her husk blade.

The Necron didn't even try to dodge and Seraphina had only the briefest instant to question why before the overlord's void scythe crashed into her side like a bolt of thunder. The shadowfield failed instantly when faced with the Necrons' equally arcane power. Seraphina's attack glanced off of the gilded mantle as she was tossed aside. Rolling to her feet Seraphina charged again and this time pushed the overlord back despite the mismatch in size. The Necron stepped back, whirling their scythe in a long dead fighting style. At every turn deflecting the huskblade. The Lychguard wasted no time in butchering the kabalites but paused as their master duelled Seraphina. The duel finally came to a head when Seraphina, enraged at being toyed with, used a trick that had saved her from more than a few assassination attempts in Commorragh.

As she slashed with the huskblade she twitched a muscle in her off hand's wrist, causing a hidden blade to emerge from her hand in a spray of scarlet. She jammed the new weapon into the overlord's neck cables as she grappled them. The fluid that spilled out immolated Seraphina's hand in an instant but she grinned as the ancient warrior, twice her size at least, stumbled back and held a hand to their cut throat. Seraphina's shrieking laugh pierced the din of battle for several seconds. The laughter faded as the Necron let go of their neck and turned

back to her. The overlord hefted their scythe into the air before speaking, "Your resourcefulness does your kind credit Aeldari. When your haemonculi return you to life, find me and try again. I enjoy surprises, you know."

The voice was surprisingly feminine. Seraphina started to laugh again as the Void Scythe came down and split her heart. The archon crumpled with a surprised gasp. The overlord made a small bow and turned to the rest of the battle.

Seraphina still took a long time to die, the careful ministrations of Haemonculi and the suffering of tens of thousands had strengthened her body beyond that of any kabalite. So as she slipped into the dark her failing eyes caught the sight of the same warlord that had bested her dismantling the space marine captain she had seen earlier. His power fist was too slow and his thick armour no protection against the void scythe. At the last the overlord even discarded the weapon and began beating the marine with their bare hands. Seemingly to mock them.

Ha... how's that honour working for you Mon'Keigh? Where is your wrath now? Ha haaaaa...

Seraphina finally slipped into darkness at last.

Seraphina's next feeling was pure, exquisite, all-encompassing pain. The mewling of hundreds of pain slaves tickled her ears as vitality flowed back into her spent shell. Nasudrenazzar had followed her orders it seemed. Vortrax was already weaving his tapestry of suffering. Despite his skill it would still take time before she was whole again. *I wonder if a Necron can be broken.*

I'll damn well find out. She promised herself as the sweet pain pulsed again and again from her chest wound. *If not I'll still nail your deathmask to my throne.* The seething anger sweetened the pain further and Seraphina began plotting her revenge.

The Smoke Rises

=][=

Transmission Recording ID# 09778-3

Encryption: Gladius Foedia v7

Ident Recognized...

Decrypting....

...

...

...

Decryption Completed:

Recording of transmission from capital city Horicalchis on Uldiddast II, received by orbiting Astartes escort vessel Vainglorious Repentance. Forwarded to Sector Command.

-Recording Begins-

-A middle aged dishevelled guardsman in an officer's uniform faces the pict captor. The small dark room seems to be an administratum office, file cabinets and cogitators line the walls. The whine and crackle of lasgun fire echoes in the distance, punctuating his words. The door behind him is open and figures can be seen rushing back and forth in the hallway beyond. Periodically the thump of an explosion sends dust raining down from the ceiling and causes static to wash everything out momentarily.-

“My name is Samul Cantares, until today I was a colonel in the supply corps of the 7th Brenkiva Light Mechanised. Now I’m the commanding officer of the remaining loyalist troops on Uldiddast II. Yesterday in the early evening a large-scale riot broke out among the civilian support staff for the outpost. General Amenadius ordered it crushed immediately. However when his troops arrived the rioters were found to be well armed and supported by unknown mercenaries. To my shame most of the guardsmen sent in were killed or joined the riot. The rioters then marched on the outpost proper, that is when true disaster struck. Almost half of the outpost’s guard force had been subverted and they launched a sneak attack coordinated with the assault. The General, most of his command staff, and all the fleet staff present at the command bunker were killed. The traitors then cordoned off the landing grounds and blew up one of the primary vox relays.”

-His face contorts in a mix of shame, fear, anger, and finally pride as he tries to find his next words.-

“However it seems the traitors were not fully prepared, those of us who remained loyal were able to secure the secondary command bunker and several underground sections of the base. The few of us who remain are separated into small pockets, fighting wherever possible. How this malignant cancer was allowed to spread I do not know, the commissariat reported nothing before it was too late. We are outnumbered six to one and have no heavy weapons or supplies to fight long. The enemy is slowed by having to dig us out in close combat but they have the bodies to spend and time is on their side if we receive no aid. I am recording this message so that it may be transmitted from whatever Vox systems remain to us. We need help, but if none arrives, know that we sold our lives very dearly indeed. Uldiddast will not fall until the very last of us lie dead, bathed in the blood of slain traitors. The Emperor protects!”

-recording ends-

Uldiddast II

Borus Plateau

10km from the capital city.

The weak red sun bored down on Uldiddast II like the baleful eye of a hating god. Aahbreel couldn’t quite ignore her worries of that becoming all too literal as the land raider full of marines rumbled through the wasteland. The forces of the Ordo Hereticus that had finally arrived were helping to keep the pressure off but the Thousand son warband had managed to make off with some noctilith after the last battle. The strange Necron building material seemed their only focus on the world. Now other heretics had risen up at the planet’s capital.

Aahbreel had access to information no one else could hope to view and knew that the attacks there were all too likely to be related, there was a black site on the military base attached to the city. Dedicated to studying Necron relics to find a weakness that might be exploited. The Coal Hearts had surprised her when news arrived of the uprising, they had been more worried for the lives of the remaining loyal guardsmen than she expected from marines. The strike force had at

once leapt into action, landing outside of the anti-air weapon envelope of the base and disgorging a full mechanised spearhead. All done with the greatest urgency. Even now the Tempest was running at maximum speed in the hope that they could arrive in time to save some of them. An invictor and several other vehicles kept pace only barely. The holo projection of the outpost layout was hanging in the middle of the troop bay with three buildings highlighted. It was also being transmitted to the huds of all the marines in the strike force. Es'kwailuh was briefing everyone on the planned assault. The young librarian impressed Aahbreel. His forthright attitude and incredible willpower were commendable. His gentle tone and mannerisms concealed a calculating warrior with perhaps a bit too much hunger for glory for Aahbreel's taste.

Es'kwailuh waved at the holo and pointed at each target in order, "This is objective primus, the entrance to the command bunker complex. Our goal is to punch through the traitor's lines and clear a path to here. Once done we will coordinate with the loyalists there with the intention of reclaiming the base and landing field. Reports from the Vainglorious indicate that most of the base defences have been badly damaged in the fighting so we should be able to surprise the traitors. Objective second is the main transit control terminal at the landing field. If we take it we can disable the remaining air defences and allow reinforcements to land, guaranteeing the defeat of this uprising. From there we can retake Oricalthis. Objective Tertius is also near the landing field, consisting of a supply transit facility. Lady Aahbreel has alerted us to the presence of important documents and material there. While the main force is clearing the way to the bunker and landing field Aahbreel and a handpicked team will attempt to secure the facility and ensure its contents stay out of the Archenemy's hands. The enemy is currently focused on trying to dig out the remaining loyalists and hopefully are unaware of the importance of objective Tertius, arrival is in 3 minutes. Ready yourselves brothers. It is likely that traitor marines are involved in this and we can expect them to try and stop us. By His light we See. We will save those who can be and cleanse in fire the unclean who bar our way."

The holo image disappeared as Es'kwailuh finished and sat down. His beaked Mk6 helmet swung to lady Aahbreel as the other marines performed last minute rituals before battle. "I am sorry we can't focus all our efforts on your task my lady but I cannot abide leaving those who had the strength of character to remain faithful in the face of disaster to die."

Aahbreel sighed and nodded, "I understand Es'kwailuh, no matter what happens we can't afford to lose this city completely. At the very least those guardsmen who have remained loyal will be needed elsewhere. Macronta is growing stronger as we speak and the hive fleet is only speeding that up. But the consequences if the traitors can bring their plans to fruition will be no less disastrous. I hope your decision is right."

Es'kwailuh nodded in response before settling in place. The remaining time before arrival passed in thoughtful silence.

It was finally broken by the tinny sound of small arms fire bouncing off of the Tempest's armour when it passed through a shattered, smoking checkpoint in the base's curtain wall. The deep thunder of the forward mounted assault cannon and the cogitator controlled storm bolter on top

of the land raider responded as the massive vehicle slowed to a stop. Aahbreel and her bodyguard dismounted and sheltered behind a blasted barracks wall, the gravis armoured marines taking pains to interpose themselves between the inquisitor and enemy fire. Once they were out the raider lumbered forward, its flamestorm cannons opened up and poured flame over a retreating force of ragged traitors as they fell back.

The Lux Caecium, a sturdy invictor warsuit had been following the tempest at a run and remained behind to act as Aahbreel's fire support while the rest of the coal heart troops moved on. The broken streets and paths of the militarum base were a maze, and the small force moved slowly through it, the Lux Caecium leading the way. The servos of the large warmachine were eerily silent, a testament to the technical excellence of its manufacture. In the distance the growing sounds of battle were echoed as loyalists who had been hiding in wait took their chance at the arrival of the Coal Hearts.

Aahbreel and the others had almost reached the blacksite when screams and an inhuman shriek slowed their pace. The parking lot outside of the target building was filled with shipping containers of all kinds. From their midst a trio of panicked longshoremen appeared, likely having hidden there when the fighting started. Something had driven them out.

A large spike-covered spider-like daemon engine clambered up and over the crates and leapt after the fleeing longshoremen. Landing on one and impaling him on a bladed foreleg. It shrieked in a hideous pitch and the bizarre cannons near its mouth blasted a second man to pieces. The last one almost got away only for a bundle of writhing tendrils to ensnare them and drag them screaming into the abominable flesh metal maw of the daemon engine. With her second sight Aahbreel saw the monster devour both the body and the soul of its final victim and she fought back a wave of primal fear. The marines to their credit leapt into action. The Caecium blasted the unnatural beast with its incendium cannon, then charged forward. The heavy bolt rifles and heavy bolter of Aahbreel's other escorts peppered it too, blowing fist size chunks out of the machine horror's carapace.

The Caecium weathered a hail of fire from the monster's weapons again as it rushed forward. The spider engine reared up and lashed at the invictor with its limbs only for them to be deflected aside by the incendium cannon. The massive fist of the Caecium then slammed into the bulbous body of the daemon engine and crumpled it with ease. Sickly witchlight poured out of the wound. As the venomcrawler turned to flee the Caecium grabbed one of the daemon engine's legs and ripped it off in a spray of unholy lubricant. The daemon engine spun and clawed a furrow through the Invictor's front plate and ripped the protective cage off. The pilot pushed the warsuit undeterred and kicked the daemon engine in the body, crunching carapace and causing the abomination to collapse. It tried to scabble feebly away as the warsuit drew the enormous heavy bolter "pistol" mounted on its hip and shot the venomcrawler till it stopped moving.

The fight drew other attention and from the windows of the transport terminal earsplitting riffs picked up. Twisted chaos marines bearing bizarre instrument-weapons took flashy stances and

proceeded to hammer the Invictor with sonic energy in an orchestral cacophony. The concentrated sound waves caused the plascrete of the parking lot to rapidly shake apart into a fine gravel. Lux Caecium managed to swing and spray fire at the building's facade, bringing down several of the noise marines. Aahbreel and the others moved up and pushed along the fence to flank from an alley while the sound waves caused coolant to boil and sensitive electronics to short out on the Caecium.

As though on cue the auditory assault stopped and the cackling monsters that had once been Astartes leapt down from the windows to charge the Caecium. The Invictor managed to swat one away as they hacked at it with abandon using their bizarre weapons. One of them managed to rip the pilot from his seat and hack him apart in a spray of blood. Aahbreel and the remaining marines unleashed a hail of heavy bolt fire while Aahbreel summoned her will power and unleashed a shockwave of power that scattered the noise marines. Without cover most of them were cut down before they could flee. In the ringing silence that followed the marines of Anvik squad made the sign of the Aquila over the fallen Invictor pilot and one stayed back to perform the necessary rites while the others pressed on.

They were met by a hail of auto cannon fire from the wrecked offices inside. The enemy had already been on their way, likely the noise marines had been the outer guards while the havoc marines escorted the attack leader. Most of the remaining Coal Hearts were blasted from their feet, silhouetted in the doorway as they approached. Aahbreel and the remaining heavy intercessors took cover as best they could and returned fire while the chaos marines slowly moved closer behind a wall of gunfire.

Aahbreel gathered all her will and peeked for a moment to send a roiling wave of psychic force back at the havoc. One of them promptly exploded into a cloud of viscera as the psychic power struck him head on. Another havoc fell bonelessly as one of the Coal Heart's landed a lucky shot. From the middle of the wedge of chaos marines a vile warpsmith suddenly rose, pushing aside the others and dodging fire with unnatural grace. The remaining coal heart marines tried to intercept the warpsmith but were smashed aside by whirling mechadendrites. The sergeant was speared through an eye slit while another marine was simply bisected by a melta weapon on one of the mechanical tentacles. All at once Aahbreel found herself in single combat with one of the most deadly beings in the galaxy. She was taller than average for a normal human woman but the warpsmith was still nearly twice her size and had extra arms. Still she knew she had to try. Years of training and a force shield powered by her psychic talent gave her a chance at least.

She dodged the first swing of the warpsmith's hammer and deflected another blast of the melta weapon with her mind. A sweep from another mechadendrite nearly caught her as she flipped nearly over the charging marine. Landing behind she stabbed forward with her force blade and was rewarded with an incoherent mechanical shriek from the warpsmith. He spun on her, losing a mechadendrite in the process as she leapt back and flourished her sword. The massive hammer missed her by the barest margin. The warpsmith was still shouting in bizarre and disorienting static, never actually speaking a word as he stalked forward. Distantly Aahbreel

heard the sound of aircraft engines but couldn't turn to look as she desperately backpedalled and looked for an opening. It never came. Pushed back further and further she finally stumbled for a moment and failed to dodge the hammer.

The blow shattered her force shield, shorting out their generator completely and lighting it on fire. A mehadendrite snaked in as she was disoriented and speared her leg like a fishing hook. With a contemptuous flick it threw her into the air a full twelve metres in a long parabola before she slammed down on top of one of the shipping containers and rolled bonelessly to the ground. It took a moment to recover her senses amid the pain, she could feel the strength leaving her body as she bled. The wound in her leg was bad and she knew could feel an assortment of broken bones. Her augments were keeping her going but would only be able to keep her conscious a little longer. Despite her injuries she managed to roll to her stomach and begin crawling. The engine noise was much closer now and as she watched a plain looking shuttle dropped out of the sky and landed near the wreck of the Caecium. Its doors opened and traitor cultists hopped out and bowed before their masters. Aahbreel bled and watched as the warpsmith and his bodyguard boarded the shuttle. They carried with them a crate bearing the inquisitorial seal and quickly loaded it onboard. With her last strength Aahbreel pulled a small oddly shaped pistol from her belt, aimed, and fired. The pistol coughed out a dart that embedded itself on the wing of the shuttle. She passed out before she could see the shuttle lift off.

When Aahbreel awoke it was to the sound of hurried urgent voices and the rumble of armoured vehicles in the distance. She opened her eyes and looked around, she was in a separated section of a triage tent. A young plump faced medicae bearing the badge of the Coal Hearts was looming over her.

“Welcome back my lady, don't try to move, we managed to stop the bleeding but you're lucky to be alive. Your spine is broken at your L3 and L4 vertebrae. And your ribs aren't in much better shape. We're going to transport you to the Vainglorious as soon as we can. The medical equipment onboard should be able to get you moving again within a day or two. The base is ours again. Once my lords linked up with the remaining loyalists the traitors folded. Most of them scattered into the wasteland. We found you and what was left of your strike team only minutes after the fighting ended. I was on one of the first shuttles down and was ordered to see to your recovery.”, the medicae finally finished.

Aahbreel tried to talk through the ache in her ribs and back for a moment before grating out the words she needed, “Br- Bring me Es'kwailuh. Now.” She croaked, almost fading back into unconsciousness at the strain.

The medicae to their credit simply nodded and ran out of the tent.

Even if I can't speak I can at least share my mind with him. He'll know what to do. The Archenemy cannot be allowed to complete whatever ritual they have planned. Hurry young Librarian. Or to damnation we will all be bound.

Two Fires in the Dark (Prelude)

(Credit for Tau sections to ZoodleZoo)

Location Uldiddast II, Wasteland Grid Square Chi-Camaros Delta 711

Two days after the uprising quelled at the planetary capital.

“Ui't'e!” The voice of fio'la t'au Oru'elan, the ship's comms specialist fills the otherwise sombre transport, ever since they entered the atmosphere the comms relay had been emitting a strange static sound, and he was determined to fix it. The force of the ship hitting ground shocked shas'la t'au Tsua'm, normally it would be much softer but it, among other systems had been wrecked. During their fight with the Gue'auk'sha their strange magic had twisted and morphed parts of their ships into an almost unrecognisable state; it was almost a miracle they had even been able to get to this planet. it would take the repair Kor'vesa a while to get them fixed, until then all they could do was wait on this planet and lick their wounds. A loud chirp from the sensors knocked him out of his thoughts, Oru'elan split off from the comms relay to take a look before getting a worried look on his face. “Tsua'm, go inform the shas'vere: a force of Gue'ron'sha, and close. Hurry!” with this startling news, Tsua'm grabs his kit and exits the ship. They can't afford to have a fight with the Gue'ron'sha, not in this condition. As he walks he yelps as a large arm sparks and appears from thin air, the rest of the XV-95 uncloaks, he notices

spots of armour where clearly rushed repairs had been made, with the colour not matching correctly. He steps around the large machine and continues to move with purpose.

The arrival of Xenos at this critical juncture was worrying, but Aahbreel had an idea that might turn things to their advantage. The aliens were cut off, alone, and likely desperate. If she could offer them a way out, and a chance at avenging themselves on the Thousand sons, it could well prove worth it. As an inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos and a rogue trader she had considerable leeway in dealing with the unclean creatures. She was no Xenarite but on the frontiers she had learned that some Xenos could be useful, especially against those who were not. The Coal Hearts had provided her with a support exoskeleton so she could move while her body healed, she'd been surprised they would have such devices. A brief conversation with the ship's medicae had revealed it was normally used for failed or crippled aspirants until more permanent augmetics could be installed. A rather sentimental use of resources compared to most chapter's treatment of those who failed to become Astartes.

The heretics had been tracked to a series of mountains on Uldiddast II's third continent. Reconnaissance was already underway but it seemed that the Thousand son warband and the cult the warpsmith belonged to were working together. The Space Wolves had already returned to Macronta before the uprising. Aahbreel hadn't been willing to overrule them at the time thanks to the arrival of the Sisters. Now she regretted it. After the uprising the Sororitas were busy rooting out any remaining traitors and could spare a few battlesisters for a major assault. With only the forces of the Coal Hearts available in the near term she was unsure they could break the heretic stronghold before they completed their dark work.

Which was why she was out in the wasteland, about to try and negotiate with trigger happy Xenos. It was... a risky plan, and if the Coal Hearts wished to report it to her superiors it could very well cost her life. But it would be infinitely worthwhile if she succeeded.

The Coal Heart force stopped well short of the crash landed tau ship. Blocking one end of the small rocky valley the vessel had come to rest in. Perhaps its pilot had hoped it would be hidden there while they made their emergency repairs. Now it panned in the tau. Aahbreel and her entourage dismounted from an impulsor and began walking on foot while the rest of the marines spread out and dug in. She had selected the Coal Heart Lieutenant Ut'erehs and a handful of her personal armsmen to escort her. The Lieutenant was a rabid xenophobe in the finest tradition of some deathwatch marines she had met. But his hunger for redemption and vindication after being shamed by M'otann tempered it. He would follow her orders to the letter. Besides he had shown a near supernatural talent for survival thus far. She hoped it might keep her alive if the Tau decided to shoot first.

Aahbreel's little group had made it about halfway down the valley when Ut'erehs waved them to stop. A shimmer that she had believed was simply heat distortion rippled as a stealthed tau

drone revealed itself. The saucer shaped device simply floated in the air, its large eye like camera shifting to inspect each person. A burst cannon hung beneath the saucer but was pointed at the ground.

Aahbreel stepped ahead of the others, still out of reach of the drone before speaking in broken poorly accented T'au.

"I greet you in the name of the Empire of Man and request a talk. My name is Aahbreel Santohs, by my caste of trade I have the right to negotiate with you."

The drone chirped and a hidden Vox unit came on. A hoarse weathered voice spoke in perfect though accented Imperial.

"I can understand your language better than you can speak ours Gue'la. We have no water caste to speak with you properly. Why are you here? We have no plan to stay. Once our repairs are complete we will be gone from your world. Leave us be in the meantime. That way neither of us may trouble the other."

The audio quality of the voice speaking was impressive. The sound was infinitely better than the static filled hiss of a standard Imperial Vox. Aahbreel took a moment to compose her response, this time in Gothic.

"No water caste? Then I presume I'm talking to the senior fire caste commander? I'll speak plainly then. Your very presence here is illegal. If you do not have the means to leave at this moment then your lives are all forfeit by imperial edict. As such the planetary authorities, myself included, are duly bound to kill you. Which was originally what was planned. The Astartes or Gue'ron'sha as you call them would be more than willing to attack still and even now are preparing for such an action."

Aahbreel paused for effect,

"I however think that such a battle would be a... waste. Instead I would offer a better way out of this predicament. While I'm sure your mighty weapons could kill many of us they wouldn't stay our wrath in the end. You are simply too few. Rather than start a bloodbath that weakens us both I want to offer you a chance at revenge against those who stranded you here in the first place. Their plans are a threat to both our peoples. The sorcery they used on you are but a small part of their heinous power. Even now they prepare a ritual that could doom not only this world, but threaten the one in this sector you have already taken. If your force aids us in disrupting the ritual I have it within my power to grant you and your subordinates pardon and sanction both. We would give you not just time, but whatever material resources you need to repair your vessel and leave. Though any interactions between our troops should be... carefully managed. For the sake of honesty I will tell you that I take no joy in this and frankly would just as quickly see you all killed, but my position compels me to be... pragmatic on this point. 'tis better to kill a traitor before an enemy."

She stopped and waited for a response. The resulting silence stretched for almost two full minutes as the tau commander deliberated. Suddenly more stealth fields powered down around the negotiation party. Revealing two squads of the lighter battlesuits the Tau used for reconnaissance. Their fusion guns pointed down and their posture somewhat calm. The Vox chirped back to life.

“You would do well to remember that the cornered Ge’tshesh bites the hardest. For it has nothing to lose. Outnumbered though we are, it is not impossible to kill you all while defending ourselves, the might of the Greater Good is not to be underestimated. I will accept your offer though. It is a good thing for your people to realise the futility of fighting between us. Call off your Gue’ron’sha and come aboard the vessel. We will talk and discuss your plan. I must weigh its merit.”

Aahbreel smiled despite herself and Ut’erehs scowl deepened. He still hadn’t forgiven the aliens for their attack on him when first the Coal Hearts arrived in system. The plasma burn he had received on his scalp still itchy even now, months later. Now he would have to set foot on an alien ship, and worse he wouldn’t be able to destroy the abomination. The teachings of the Omnissiah were wound deep into the chapter cult, and alien machines were not to be trusted. But M’otann had been firm. Es’kwailuh and the inquisitor were to be obeyed without question.

He hoped that one of them would give the order to fall on the Tau when the heretics were slain. After all it was barely a dishonour to break an agreement with Xenos. That thought soothed him as Aahbreel and her party began following the stealth suits and drone to the vessel.

Aahbreel paused for only a moment to Vox back to the Coal Heart QRF on a private channel,

“Hold position and cease assault preparations. The aliens have gone for the deal. Be wary in case it is a trap, I’ll be in touch.”

Es’Kwailuh responded briefly, “We will monitor your vitals in the meantime. If your life signs should falter we will strike without mercy. I still have my misgivings about this, my lady. But I was wrong about Oricalthis, I owe you for our failure there. I will follow your lead.”

The silence was not long when Aahbreel finished her explanation and the assault plan.

“Your plan is.... What is your phrase? Grox shit.” Shas’vre T’au O’aji’ta Xun’tsiq’la said to the insane humans on the far side of the command table. Their expressions immediately soured, particularly the Gue’ron’sha who had accompanied the negotiator.

“How dare you talk to us in that manner, vermin. If you had any idea how important this-,” the gue’la female who spoke terrible T’au waved down the space marine. He simply stood back, his expression impossible to read behind his helmet. O’aji’ta’s guards in the doorway clenched their pulse blasters tighter but otherwise tried to appear disinterested.

Aahbreel was short for a human and stood at eye level with O'aji'ta. Her amber eyes seemed to look into his very soul. Given the bizarre abilities sometimes exhibited by Gue'la perhaps he wondered if that was literal.

"Please explain why the plan is bad, Shas'vre. When we put it together it was based on assumptions of your capabilities gathered from combat against you. We are also rather pressed for time. What did we miss?" She asked coldly.

He responded immediately, "Our speed for one, and you underestimate our stealth capabilities. They would be wasted on a frontal assault. Close fighting in a fortified location is a terrible place to bring our firepower to bear. The Gue'auk'sha already tore us apart in one such engagement. I believe that instead we should look for a different angle of attack. Possibly even try to draw them out of their hole."

Aahbreel rubbed her temples before answering, "There... may be a way but it's a risk. They have all the material they need but they require a place of power for their ritual. There are only a few such places on this world. Thanks to one of the traitor Astartes we captured during the rebellion we know where it is. I had thought it better to strike the enemy first, before they could make for the ritual site. By doing so we would ensure there was no chance of them completing it. "

"Your instinct is not bad at first glance gue'la, but it would be a folly. They would see us coming no matter how carefully we approached. With my people's devices we could conceal our forces close to the ritual site and ambush the foe when they try to work their... magic. That is the way of the Kauyon. Between the determination of your Gue'ron'sha and my battlesuit's guns we can surely crush them." O'aji'ta said.

"Fine. I will talk to the Coal Hearts. When they are ready to go I will contact you.", She tapped at the cogitator on her wrist and a data wafer popped out. She handed it to O'aji'ta.

"This has the coordinates for the ritual site. I'll be expecting you, Shas'Vre. Come now Ut'erehs, we must speak with Es'kwailuh and Lucian.` After those last words she turned and left. Guided out by the same drone that had led them to the vessel. O'aji'ta watched her leave and pondered. Aahbreel seemed to understand the value of the Greater Good. It was a shame she only seemed to apply it to the Imperium.

Two Fires in the Dark

Uldiddast II

Wasteland Grid-Square Cham Delta 81190

The convoy moved under cover of night, only one of Uldiddast II's moons shone to light the darkness. Father Koenig and his finest warriors lead the way. Only his most faithful servants had been chosen to guard the precious Noctilith. With it they would build a passage between this world and the next. Then their mighty patron would emerge once more into the mortal realm. Koenig was hardly a true believer. Power was all he cared for. Power came from those who would give their lives for him. This was true even of his master.

Though he would never let it be known. He hoped one day that he might seize the power from his dark patron and transcend, to be worshipped as was his just due. But for now simply bringing his master into reality would be enough. With closer examination much could be learned.

Auraxis, the truest follower of their dark master and second in command was in the centre, guarded by his precious havoc and daemon engines. He would ensure there was no slacking. He was utterly merciless in his mechanistic pursuit of perfection. A brood of horrific servo skulls bearing warped flesh machines under his control ranged far and wide to search for potential enemies.

Voraster and his brood of sycophantic servants took up the rear. Carried on a motorised palanquin as he communed with the immaterium, searching with his mind for those who might interfere with the great work.

Amonhep had gone ahead to secure the site before Koenig's cult arrived. It galled Koenig to rely on the sorcerer and his minions. They did not understand the importance of the lesser members of any cult. Their arrogance had been difficult to stomach. But without their sheer sorcerous power there was no way that the master could be brought through from the other side. Voraster liked to brag, and he truly was mighty, but the power of a dedicated cabal of Magnus' children easily eclipsed him.

The site upon which they would perform their ritual had once been a penal mining station. The very ground stained by the blood of thousands of workers toiling in monotony for hundreds of years. It had finally been closed decades ago. Long before Koenig and his band had arrived on the planet and begun the slow process of bringing truth to the servants of the Imperium.

The convoy ground to a halt in the shelter of a rusted excavator and dismounted. Sickly green light greeted them as Amenhep and his warriors revealed themselves.

"Greetings... Father. We have swept the area three times and performed two divination rituals. The site is clear. Though we must hurry. My seer says something is still hidden from us that may endanger our goal." The lord of the cult of nine eyes said in a hundred voices at once.

Koenig waved away the echos, Amonhep reminded him of his noise marine's amplifiers when he spoke.

Koenig then answered, "Your diligence is commendable Amenhep. Of course we will hurry."

He then voxed Auraxis, "Begin the assembly at once. I have a feeling we will be short on time." An acknowledging blast of white noise answered him.

The convoy exploded in a flurry of activity as servants began dragging arcane machinery and sealed crates full of blackstone to locations marked by Auraxis. Koenig meanwhile re-entered his rhino and took a moment to talk to his Chosen. Commending them for their dedication. Amonhep and his rubrics stomped off to what had once been a worker's barrack. A massive leonine mutalith beast lay on the ground outside. Seemingly napping. Its twin was elsewhere, prowling the outer perimeter alongside Auraxis' newest daemon engine. A replacement for the one lost at Oricalthis.

The lesser cultists set to work under the watchful gaze of the legionnaires and noise marines. The twisted structure made of human bones, alien stone, and warped machinery soon began taking shape. All seemed to be going well but Koenig couldn't shake the feeling that somewhere the other shoe was waiting to drop.

Shas'ui Shaawa crouched as low as he could in the rocky debris of the quarry. With his pulse blaster he carefully sighted the strange structure the Gue'auk'sha's servants were assembling. The rest of his breacher team sheltered around him. Doing last minute equipment checks. Elsewhere along the southern edge of the old mining facility more teams were moving in.

The spider machine and warp beast had passed the breacher's position twice without spotting them as the pathfinder and stealth teams worked their way closer to the target. Behind his squad, sheltered by larger boulders was a full squad of the Gue'ron'sha aggressors. The hulking armoured warriors were to be the spearhead of the attack on the left flank. On the right more of the space marines were moving into position using long abandoned outbuildings and forgotten mining equipment to stay out of sight.

Their strange psychic warriors shrouded both forces, paired with T'au stealth technology there were few in all the galaxy who could have seen the attackers coming.

Even the Xalim Va'na had been able to approach without detection. The massive hammerhead and Tor'ken's broadsides would be essential for putting down the hulking warp beasts the enemy was so fond of. Himoya and her crisis suits stood ready as a mobile reserve. To cut off the enemy's retreat or rip out the heart of the enemy's reaction force, as necessary.

Any minute now the signal to begin would come, and once again all would be cast into the fire of battle.

Es'kwailuh stomped through the darkness alongside the veteran squad assigned as his guards. They moved in a tight column towards the right flank through the shadowy night. Somewhere ahead lay the barrack that the Thousand son sorcerer and his lackeys were resting in before their ritual. One of the veteran marines led him as Es'kwailuh's mind reached out, gathering shadow about the scattered attack force as Lucian had shown him.

Obscuration was not one of Es'kwailuh's specialties. He was a battle psyker, at his best when he could conjure his righteous fury into walls of fire that protected friends and immolated enemies. This was a struggle in comparison, the unfamiliar tangle of the warp resisting his will. If Lucian hadn't spent time tutoring him it would have been impossible. But for now the cloak

was working. Lucian and his reivers were somewhere in the dark too, further off on the right. Boldly moving across open ground to be ready to exploit the heretic's flank when the time was right.

Es'kwailuh needed only to keep the shroud up a bit longer. With his mind's eye he saw all of the elements of the attack moving into place. Even Imenehs, freshly arrived only the day before alongside other reinforcements from M'otann. The dreadnought was by far the hardest to keep hidden. His mind shone like a pillar of fire through Es'kwailuh's warpsight. Luckily the tau's souls were so dim they helped to smother the light of the dreadnought's pilot.

Es'kwailuh hoped it would be enough.

Voraster rode the gentle current of the immaterium. Floating high above the ritual site looking in all directions for the sparks of life. It was a sublime experience, and yet another reminder of his immense power. Yet for all that he was uneasy. Something gnawed at the back of his mind, and for once it wasn't one of his daemoniac familiars. He was missing something. Something important. His spectral form redoubled its efforts. Trying to spot the problem.

As he turned his empiric gaze to the south his spirit froze. The warp all along that edge of the mining station was calm, far, far too calm. All at once he realised his mistake. His spirit returned to his body with the force of a lightning bolt. One of Voraster's servants promptly absorbed the backlash of the sudden change and simply exploded in a reddish pink mist that coated the inside of the palanquin. The blood was then promptly absorbed into Voraster's fleshmetal exoskeleton as he stood and rushed outside, shouting for Koenig. His legionnaire bodyguards struggled to keep up.

"Attack! They come from the south, protect the-"

His next words died in his throat as the shroud he had detected collapsed and blue fire erupted from the southern ore field.

Throughout the galaxy there were many ways to announce or order a surprise attack. The Coal Hearts had long adopted the habit of coded Vox clicks to subtly give the command. Orks of course simply shouted at their enemy before they fired. The servants of chaos tended to scream slogans of their dark gods. The T'au however were more practical. Surprise attacks began when the first heavy weapons fired. In this case it was a shower of missiles from the Xalim and the broadside suits.

The first salvo rolled across the open ground of the ritual site, shredding the cultists and blasting apart the nascent Noctilith crown they were building. The second crashing wave of missiles rocked Koenig's rhino as indirect fire bracketed the stopped convoy.

Surprise was near total as explosions and shrapnel marched through the unsuspecting heretic astartes. The chaos marines were not inexperienced troops or cowards however and their long experience in warfare showed in their almost instinctive response. With barely any commands from Koenig they rushed towards their attackers. Braving the rising storm of fire. Hoping to shatter them and drive them off with a charge. At the heart of their hastily adopted formation rode Koenig and his chosen in their rhino.

Amenhep meanwhile waited and watched. With the shroud down he could sense foes nearby. Instead of leaving the cover of the barracks he commanded his mutalith to march forward. Using the warp rift on its back as a third eye through which he could channel his power.

At the sound of explosions Joachim and his aggressors surged forward alongside the breacher teams. It galled him to fight beside the aliens, but their bravery was... respectable. Despite their light armour they charged forward right alongside his men. A venomcrawler rushed out of cover and sent a shrieking fusillade off towards the centre of the attack force, to the east of Joachim and the tau warriors. It only saw Joachim and his men at the last moment. It tried to scuttle away far too late. They doused the forge beast in promethium, creating a flaming beacon in the dark. It shrieked in pain as its carapace began to melt and contort. The rest of the aggressors piled in, working together to tear its legs off and brutalise the daemon engine. It managed to spear one of them through the helmet with an armoured foreleg before it died. Collapsing at almost the same time as the unfortunate marine. The breacher team poured their fire into a squad of noise marines that tried to intervene. Keeping them momentarily pinned.

A thundering rumble announced the charge of one of the mutaliths the thousand sons seemed to enjoy using. A raking hail of auto cannon fire came with it, the fire was fit to punch through even the thick gravis armour of the Embershields and another was blown apart. The warp rift that hung above the mutalith vomited warp flame across the tau breachers as it thundered forward, causing them to warp and twist as they died. Their alien cries of pain rose up into the night sky as the fight devolved into a vicious melee.

The mutalith trampled the burning venomcrawler and began savaging the aggressors. Tearing one of them apart in a shower of ceramite and organs. Joachim managed to deliver a brutal punch to the mutalith's maw as it grabbed him, sending tentacles and teeth flying. The mutalith whined in pain and stumbled back. Before he could take advantage of it the noise marines attacked. They sent out roiling waves of sound that overloaded his armour's protections. His helmet lenses shattered in an instant and his vision filled with blood.

A railgun shot came flying out of the darkness and punched clean through the mutalith's body, spraying ichor in all directions. Its whine turned into a shriek. The Mutalith swatted Joachim away with a massive clawed paw as it reared up and flailed in agony. He landed bonelessly among the Tau breachers. Joachim tried to stand and found he couldn't feel his legs. He was still puzzling out why there was no pain when the darkness took him.

Shas'el Himoya loved her coldstar. Even more than her old crisis suit. Few things in life could compare to the singing joy of flying through the air and delivering destruction to your enemies as she was now. Her Ta'rocha followed behind as they arched through the air to land in front of the enemy's main attack. As they descended she designated targets and flicked them to each of her subordinates via their datalink. Even before they landed the crisis team unleashed a wall of fire on the enemy. The crisis team's fusion blaster neatly severed the track of the rhino leading the way while the rest of their weapons scythed down the chaos marines around it.

Himoya's plasma rifles punched through the warp tempered armour of the foe with ease and she smiled as she watched them fall. Though to her horror several of them picked themselves back up and continued to charge forward despite their grievous injury. The troop doors on the rhino opened up as it tried to grind forward and even more chaos marines piled out. These ones towered over their fellows and their cruel looking weapons glowed with malevolence. As the battlesuit's weapons approached critical heat levels she spoke into the com link, "Fall back now. Form up around the Tor'ken H'ka'sum'oi."

With a short jump to gain momentum the suits rocketed back into the air and towards the main gunline. The Gue'auk'sha followed them at a preternatural sprint. Moving faster than any astartes she had ever seen. Even with the rough terrain her crisis suits barely landed in time to block the chaos marine's charge and try to protect the broadsides. The lumbering heavy weapon suits were too slow to react in time. They had been busy blasting at the large warp beast on the eastern flank to clear the way for Es'kwailuh's assault.

The Gue'auk'sha surged into melee, braving the storm of fire and all thought disappeared in the heat of battle as their glowing blades carved through reinforced Fio'tak. The battle suits responded with point blank plasma and missile fire as the fight degenerated into plain murder.

Codicier Lucian Nelos hated as a matter of course. Even in his long forgotten childhood he had been full of seething contempt for the world around him. Made only worse by the horrors of the Black Ship that had taken him from his old home. Long years of training had cultivated that hate until it bloomed like a dark flower in his heart. It had been tempered and focused toward the enemies of man by his mentors. That dedication has seen him dispatched to help the Coal

Hearts rebuild their Librarius over a decade ago. It could be said he even hated the Coal Hearts, their pomposity was grating to a man like him, born and raised among the Black Dragon's fleet before being selected to become an Astarte when his psychic power was identified.

Battle was the only time he could release that hate and be free of its corrosion. As he and the reivers of Noctis squad sprinted through the pitch black night they watched the pulsing lights of the growing battle. Pushing hard to the east in a long arc to hit from the flank right as the attack in the south got going. The sudden glare of a beam of octarine lightning lit up the night and gave them a target.

The reivers slipped in out of the darkness towards the mutalith and Amenhep's warriors. The barrack mutalith beast managed to see through Lucian's shroud just a little too late to turn its warp vortex on them as they approached. In an instant they were on it. The creature was already wounded from a railgun shot that had severed one of its forelegs and it hobbled forward to meet their charge. The reivers used their grappling hooks to restrain it as Lucian drew its attention. Severing grasping maw tentacles with a sweep of his force sword and diving out of the way as it tried to crush him with a clawed foreleg.

Es'kwailuh and his veterans arrived a moment later, charging across open ground and blasting away at the massive mutalith with their mastercrafted combimeltas and pyrecannon. Es'kwailuh even sent a burst of witchfire at the beast too, causing its mottled hide to melt and slough off. The fire spread and shortly the creature was completely ablaze. The warp rift above the monster strobed and a bolt of octarine lightning slashed out at Es'kwailuh, blasting him off his feet and overloading his psychic hood. He stumbled to his feet a moment later, smouldering and bloody but alive and charged back in to slash it with his force sword. The mutalith thrashed in pain and managed to grab one of the cables holding it. It threw the Reiver holding on into the air and caught them in its mouth. He didn't get the chance to scream as his lightly armoured body was shredded. The warp beast then reared up to its full height, breaking several more tethers, before crashing down onto a second unfortunate Astarte and crushing him with a choked off scream.

Amenhep's rubricae made their appearance as the Coal Hearts and Black Dragons battled the huge beast. Amenhep himself and his subordinate sorcerer goading the soulless constructs forward. The reivers and veterans took the rubric marines head on, making the most of the slow movements of the rubrics to dodge in and out to strike. Lucien and Es'kwailuh waded into melee against the rubrics with abandon, carving the empty suits apart. Combat knives and force swords met with the psychic fury of Amenhep and the methodical blades of the rubric marines. The burning mutalith continued to thrash and slowly die behind them.

Voraster and his entourage had followed close behind Koenig's rhino when the countercharge began. By sheer good luck the vehicle had come to rest in front of the nascent Noctilith crown, giving him some measure of cover. He had been insulted by Koenig's insistence on the help of the Thousand Sons. Fear and respect had kept him in line but now he would show his true

sorcerous power. Carving blasphemous runes into the ground he began reaching into the immaterium to wind back time on the destroyed altar. If he could get it working then everything would have been worth it. He would have the respect he deserved from Koenig. Perhaps he could even push it to overtake the charismatic dark apostle as master of the cult. For a moment it seemed to work as the shards of Noctilith pulled themselves from their scattered resting places and began reforming into the proper shape.

Yes! Yeeees! I am Voraster Caine. They will tell tales of my power for all time! I need no cabal, I have no equals!

He exulted in his deepest self and smiled as immense power flooded him, aided by his god. Voraster craved acclaim, perfection, and beauty and success here would see him granted all three.

His revelry died as the ground shook behind him. One of his bodyguards stumbled back pointing over his shoulder. Voraster was still turning when the rhino exploded and flipped him through the air. The incredible power he was channelling fizzled and cut off as his concentration broke. Voraster rolled twice before stopping when he landed. He stood up shakily before gathering himself as rage flowed through him. He looked up and saw hell. Highlighted in the flames of the burning rhino came the Brutalis dreadnought. The twin heavy stubber mounted on top of it chattered and scythed down Voraster's legionaries while the bolt rifles on its fists punched through the armour of others. The legionaries responded with a hasty burst of fire before the dreadnought bowled into them. Snatching up one in a fist and crushing him in a spray of blood and ceramite. Another it stomped on before it turned to Voraster and rushed forward. With all his psychic might Voraster channelled a wall of force into being and threw it at the dreadnought. The wall slammed into the brutalis with tremendous force and stopped the loyalist warmachine in mid stride. Voraster collapsed to his knees exhausted as the dreadnought reeled back.

A squad of rubrics under Amenhep's second in command, Azmek-yr, marched out of the darkness and poured bolt fire and sorcerous energy into the dreadnought. At the same time the western mutalith turned and lanced it with octarine lightning. The war machine's right arm blew off in a gout of flame as it first fell to its knees and collapsed backwards.

The tau's hammerhead announced its presence again, showering the rubric marines with missiles and blasting at the western flank mutalith with its main gun. Unfortunately the Railgun shot was aimed on the fly and distorted by the warp rift above the monster. The shot missed and disappeared over the horizon. Azmek-yr summoned a bolt of pure psychic power and threw it at the Hammerhead. It impacted on the Tau tank and its hover engine sputtered and died, the sleek craft dropping to the ground, seemingly disabled.

Before Voraster could celebrate, a withering hail of pulse weapon fire and the smaller railguns forced him to take cover. Tau pathfinders had been moving up alongside the hammerhead and were now sheltering around it to keep the faithful away.

Koenig slammed his crozius down on the armoured chest of the tau battlesuit and was rewarded by a mighty crunch as it collapsed inward. Alien blood leaked out and for a moment he gloried in the thrill of a fresh victory before the blast of a missile tossed him to the side. One of his Chosen helped him to his feet and he surveyed the fight. One of the broadside suits lay in a smoking ruin. Koenig had just finished one of the smaller crisis suits and his warriors had dealt with another. But the tau had bled his forces badly. Most of Koenig's best warriors lay dead on the ground around the fallen suits and more of their foot soldiers were flooding in. The battlesuits had fallen back further now and with his remaining warriors Koenig knew he wouldn't be able to reach them again.

Dorialis, the sergeant of the Chosen approached, wiping grime from his mutated face with his remaining arm.

"You must go, Father. The battle has turned against us. We will stay behind and distract them, if you live at least we can begin our great work again. The loyalists have fallen to using Xenos against us. Their dishonour must live through you."

Koenig hesitated briefly before laying a gauntleted hand on Dorialis' shoulder, "Your sacrifice will never be forgotten my child. May the True Gods watch over you and usher your soul to paradise."

The chosen raised their weapons and roared war cries before charging with renewed determination. Koenig didn't even look back as he ran the gauntlet of pulse weapon fire and bolters back north. He saw the wounded Mutalith on the west flank finally brought down by the damaged Commander of the battlesuits his warriors had died to try and destroy. Close range plasma fire obliterating its ribcage in a flurry of blue explosions.

Koenig was met by some of the human cultists at the northern end of the mining camp. They were already making ready one of the surviving transports and went to their knees when they saw him. He activated his Vox as he climbed aboard the transport, using one of the cultists as a stepstool.

"To all children of the Cult of Cacophony, fall back now. The servants of the corpse throne and the aliens will face our vengeance another day. Voraster, Auraxis I will wait only one minute for you to make your way to me before leaving. Let the Cult of Eyes delay our enemy while we make our escape."

Koenig knew he could have worded it better but the thousand sons had sworn the site was clear. Covering his escape was the least they could do as recompense.

Amenhep sent a sizzling bolt of octarine power at the Black Dragon librarian leading the reivers and tried to contain his rage as it was deflected by a wall of shadow that swallowed and attenuated it. Most of his rubricae lay in pieces around him.

Amenhep was outnumbered now, his forces scattered, and Koenig's servants were falling back. Leaving Amenhep and his cabal to die. The Black Dragon sent a surge of shadowy energy at Amenhep that was absorbed by the sorcerer's wards and redirected to the Coal Heart Librarian. The concentrated psychic power threw the librarian back with a clap of thunder and he did not stand up again.

Amenhep fell back, using his momentary breathing space to try and decide what to do. Azmek-yr was no fool. He could see that the battle was lost just as well as Koenig. They would already be preparing their escape. Amenhep needed only to make it back to him. The remaining Coal Heart veterans and the Black Dragon librarian harassed him as he tried to flee. The Black Dragon was the most driven. Seething hatred poured off him in waves as he pushed on. The burning red force blade in his hand whipped about endlessly while he sought an opening in Amenhep's wards. Again and again the sword bounced off glowing geometric shapes that appeared in the air between them, the psychic power coursing through it deflecting the strikes. Amenhep lashed out with his own staff and managed a beautiful strike against the phobos armoured librarian's helmet. Knocking him to the ground. The helmet shattered revealing a pallid man with blonde hair and black lips. A bony growth protruded from his eyebrow and blood poured out of a cut in his scalp from the staff strike. A forked tongue briefly darted out as the librarian tried to catch his breath and focus. Amenhep could barely contain his amazement at the sight.

A mutant *and* Xenos working for the loyalists? Their hypocrisy had only grown worse in the millennia since Prospero had burned. The downed librarian tried to stand as blood poured over his face. Amenhep raised his staff to finish them when he heard the hiss of a flamer's pilot light. One of the Coal Heart veterans had followed the librarian and used their fall as an opening to try and douse Amenhep in fire. The blessed promethium briefly slowed as it hit his wards before splashing across his armour and igniting. He shrieked in pain, the unearthly echo of all the souls he had stolen in his long life adding to the cry. His cape shed embers as he flew backwards blindly. Trying to get away from the fire.

It was then that Azmek-yr and his men arrived. With a gust of conjured wind the flames were extinguished while Amenhep fell from his disc of Tzeentch. The subordinate sorcerer caught his master as he fell and the rubricae closed ranks to protect them from any further attack. Azmek-yr chanted a familiar spell and poured his remaining willpower into summoning a glimmering portal in the air behind him. He dragged his master through before closing it behind him. Leaving the Rubrics behind to be butchered by the vengeful Coal Hearts.

When Uldiddast II's primary star finally crested the horizon the ritual site was a smoking ruin. Full of bodies and wrecked vehicles. But of the leaders of the chaos cults there was no sign. The Noctilith was recovered by Aahbreel's armymen and packed into specially shielded storage crates for transport. She and O'aji'ta walked the ruins as they completed preparations to transport it off world for safe keeping.

The old tau veteran was near heartbroken at his losses. He seemed to be trying to convince himself it was worth the cost. Priceless battlesuits and warriors he had fought with through the 4th sphere had fallen the previous night. But if the Inquisitor spoke the truth, and he believed she did, it had been necessary. A world saved from corruption and death, perhaps to one day serve the Greater Good in turn rather than be reduced to ash and debauchery. Aahbreel for her part was beaming. The losses among the Coal Hearts and Black Dragons stung, but they had hurt the Archenemy just as badly and set back their plans greatly. The dead Xenos didn't even enter her accounting.

"It seems you fulfilled your end of the deal Shas'Vre. As I said, I will use all my authority to see to it that your earth caste engineers receive whatever they need to get your ship off this planet. I hope that if we meet in the future any agreements we make will turn out so well. But I should warn you, once you're off the planet whatever happens to you is none of my concern. Best be cautious." She said, with genuine feeling.

The tau commander for his part responded coldly, his eyes tinged with grief "Indeed Gue'la. The greater good is best served by cooperation. I will have a list of materials presented to you. In the meantime I must see to the recovery of my wounded and dead. Good luck until we meet again." He then stalked off. Disappearing into the light of the rising sun.

A Grey Dawn

=][=

Message ID# 097753

Encryption: Malleum Ultra v/nil

Ident Recognized...

Decrypting....

...

...

...

Decryption Completed:

Thought for the day: Fear not the victory of Martyrdom.

Message as follows:

From: The office of Lord Inquisitor Challec Vertarim

To: Inquisitor Aahbreeel Santohs

To my faithful servant Aahbreeel, your efforts have been above and beyond what could be expected of you given your area of specialisation. Despite the dire straits in which the Nihlus finds itself, your example is one that gives me hope that we will still overcome the myriad foes of mankind. This praise is not given lightly.

Thanks to your warning special assistance has been procured. A small but powerful strike force is on its way. They are of the Ordo Malleus and that is all you need to know. Under no circumstances are you to attempt to aid them in their efforts. All information pertinent to the situation on Uldiddast II is to be transferred to their representative when he arrives. You and the Astartes who have already aided you are to leave immediately after this has been done. The remaining militarum personnel are to be left behind on the planet, along with those elements of the Sororitas who have been involved with fighting the traitors. You are to travel to Chimera Prime and make preparations for an assault on Macronta. The Astartes may return to their desired battlegrounds. The Necrons must not be allowed to rise and your expertise will be needed for planning the necessary strikes. Especially in light of SEPULCHRE SHROUD's... success.

Further reinforcement is extremely unlikely at this point however Aahbreeel. Especially with the losses suffered by the Chimera sector fleet thanks to Necrons running the blockade of Macronta. May the Emperor protect you in the days to come. Darkness gathers on every horizon and we must fight to find the light.

-Message Ends-

From the office of General Antioch

Incident report #87738-Phi

Cogitator recording from void station Algernon Topiary Gamma-V.

All timestamps are in Neutrum II local standard time.

Record begins:

-0237-: Coal Heart strike cruiser Vainglorious Zealotry and three escorts detected translating into real space on the system's edge and setting course for Neutrum II. Data sermon handshakes confirm the identity of flotilla.

-0422-: After two hours of light acceleration unknown energy signatures detected in close proximity to the Coal Heart strike group. Alert declared in local void region. SDF vessel reinforcement unavailable due to increased Tyranid activity around Neutrum II

-0425-: Exchange of weapons fire begins as stealthed torpedoes destroy one of the escort vessels. Broods of strike craft emerge from the Vainglorious and form a sphere formation. A third, larger, energy signature detected and two more salvos of torpedoes partially intercepted, explosions detected against Vainglorious' hull and the vessel's power signature falters.

-0427-: The three unknown energy signatures become unambiguous. Two drukhari light cruisers and a flayed skull class cruiser detected. Long range duel ensues. Another Astartes escort craft is disabled by darklance fire. Vainglorious Zealot's defensive weapons intercept multiple salvos of missiles from drukhari ships. Macro batteries and bombardment cannon destroy one of the smaller drukhari vessels with lucky hits. Xenos ship explodes spectacularly.

-0503-: After half an hour of long range engagement the Vainglorious' power grid suffers unexpected failure. Strike cruiser drifts off course without power. Final escort veers away to seek help under orders of Strike Cruiser's shipmaster. Drukharri ships close in to board the stricken vessel. Counter boarding by Caestus Assault rams and Thunderhawks detected.

-0515-: Power restored on Vainglorious despite multiple raider assaults on its enginarium. Flayed Skull cruiser experiences increasing dysfunction as marine boarding parties run rampant through vessel. Multiple internal explosions detected, weapon batteries fire without target, scattering scythe missiles into the void. Remaining Drukharri light cruiser flees as boarding craft return from the Flayed Skull to the Vainglorious. Macro battery fire resumes at almost point blank range.

-0530-: Flayed Skull is reduced to a drifting wreck and Voltaic limps toward the system interior. Moderate damage detected. Slipway on void station Hephaeia Cronac opened to allow the Vainglorious Zealotry to dock and begin repairs when it arrives.

-Telemetry recording ends-

The Maw Widens

Neutrum II

PDC Benediction of Alacrity

Favelomas Mountains.

The tunnels of the buried planetary defence command centre shook and the lights flickered. Far above, a battle raged on the slopes of the forested mountain the PDC had been buried under. Every rumble of fresh artillery sent dust raining down on the people within as they raced to coordinate the defences of an entire world.

A fresh wave of Tyranid bioships had erupted from Neutrum I, several making it through the orbital defences to disgorge their horrid infection into the forests and agrifields of Neutrum II. Two of them had unerringly focused on the hidden planetary defence command bunker. The PDF and guard forces, as well as a knight lance of House Dylgado, had stood ready to meet the teeming swarms when they spread outward from the biovessels. With the nuclear stockpile so depleted it had been decided that immediate eradication was no longer feasible. The imperial defenders had fought a brief but vicious mobile battle against the alien invaders before retreating into the mountainous foothills. The tyranid swarm had followed them unerringly. Devastating the once beautiful landscape and converting it into more biomass.

By chance Captain Gustav and a small force of Coal Hearts had been present when The Benediction had come under attack. He had been meeting with General Antioch to coordinate efforts to cleanse Belicalia. The world's smaller second continent had thus far been the main target of tyranid infiltration efforts as vanguard organisms had spread across it with terrible speed. Now the main continent was threatened.

Most of the marines had joined the battle above but Gustav remained behind with a handful of his best troops. The hive mind was cunning and he had seen similar assaults before, it was a near certainty that the main attack was a distraction. The swarms weren't powerful enough to guarantee the fall of a fortified PDC and the forces it was coordinating. There had to be a surprise of some sort in store.

Gustav and his handful of marines had elected to stay in the main command centre. In orbit a squad of terminator armoured veterans of the 3rd company were waiting in the teleportarium of Gustav's strike cruiser, the Dura Maledictum. The gnawing feeling in his gut told Gustav the Great Devourer was sure to play their hand soon. Antioch was busy coordinating the above ground defence now and so the marines left him to it. In the meantime Gustav and his guards engaged in brief prayers for the warriors fighting and dying above them. This was joined by several of the command staff briefly before they returned to their vital work.

The prayers soon petered out as anticipation mounted. As the battle on the mountain slopes approached a crescendo, klaxons howled to life in the bowels of the PDC. Red warning lights flashed across hundreds of data lecterns and the overhead lights flickered briefly.

Gustav pulled a terrified technomat out of their seat and tabbed through the warning runes briefly before smiling. He turned to the bulky Gravis armoured marines of the 3rd company and spoke,

“Vanguard beasts have managed to infiltrate the facility through the ventilation system. The primary fusion generator control shrine is under attack, the vermin likely intend to overload it while our forces are concentrated above. We will not let that happen. With me brothers, today we show the alien true predators!”

A chorus of Vox clicks and affirmations flooded back and they spread out into the warren of tunnels. They moved quickly, trusting the maps overlaid on their HUDs to guide them through the unfamiliar structure. The marines made good time, using a cargo tram to transport them three levels down to where the void shield generators and other important technical shrines were located. They were met by a wave of retreating technicians and wounded pdf guardsmen who flowed around them. The Coal Hearts for their part waded through the mass of humanity towards the sound of gunfire and screams.

At a T-intersection near the generator control shrine Gustav and his men split up. Vox traffic from the pdf security teams wove a tapestry of sudden attacks by genestealers and some kind of invisible monster. The guardsmen were steadily giving ground as the tyrannids killed their way through them.

Gustav and a trio of Embershields went left, towards the main control shrine. Anvil Squad split off to the right, toward the cogitator bank filled data pews. The security checkpoint for the Fusion shrine was located there. They would clear it and set up a teleport homer for Nova Squad to use. Once the Terminators arrived Anvil squad would sweep back toward the control shrine. Gustav and his Embershields would be waiting.

Gustav led the way through a series of maintenance corridors the marines could barely squeeze through and slammed through a closed hatch into the shrine’s control centre. The circular room was lit by the blue fiery brilliance of the plasma reactor’s containment field through the enormous glasscrete viewing window.

All over the room lay dismembered techpriests and guardsmen. Crouching amid the carnage were a pack of genestealers, the aliens reacted instantly to Gustav’s arrival. They scattered in all directions to avoid giving him a bunched up target and scuttled towards him. Some disappeared into open vent hatches on the ceiling. His boltstorm gauntlet roared and one of the multi armed horrors flew apart in a spray of chitin and ichor mid leap. The Embershields spread out around him and closed ranks in front of their commander, levelling their flamestorm gauntlets at the other skittering Xenos. Gouts of promethium spread in every direction, burning the aliens off of the walls and cleansing the bodies of the dead humans in purifying flame. Some of the Xenos made it through the wall of fire and met the fury of the aggressor’s powerfists. Gustav split off toward the data lectern that actually controlled the plasma generator while the aggressors dealt with the aliens.

The technomat in charge of operating it still sat in his chair, his head was several feet away however laying face up with a surprised expression. Gustav pushed the corpse aside and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that none of the controls had been damaged or altered. Likely a synapse creature

The sound of rending metal behind him drew the captain's attention and he spun on his heel. The reinforced plasteel main door leading toward the security checkpoint was bending outward. A large taloned limb was steadily forcing its way between the door and its frame. As Gustav watched more arms joined in and with groan the door began to buckle completely. The fanged maw of a tyrannid warrior appeared in the gap as the aliens on the far side began forcing their way through the narrow passage.

Gustav opened up with his boltstorm and blew the first alien's face apart. The creature's head popped like an overripe melon and gushed acidic ichor that caused the plasteel to bubble and corrode. Bolter fire promptly erupted behind the tyrannid warriors as Anvil Squad began their flanking attack. The aliens were not to be deterred from their goal and redoubled their efforts rather than turn towards the new threat. Their massive frames squeezed impossibly into the confined space of the hatchway as Gustav continued pouring fire into them.

One of the monsters managed to squeeze through all the way and rushed forward, slashing at Gustav with their talons. He caught one of the massive limbs with his powerfist and crushed it in his grip. At the same time his relic blade flicked up and spilled the beast's steaming guts onto the floor. It shrieked and pushed forward, snapping at him before he smashed it with the powerfist on his left arm, neatly decapitating the alien but dousing him with its acidic blood. Gustav's armour began smoking just like the plasteel door had. The last warrior finished widening the hole enough that Gustav himself could have climbed through and came at him in a thundering sprint. Gustav sidestepped its swing despite his heavy armour and kicked it in the left knee. With a pained squeal it collapsed before violently spasming and trying to claw at him again. Gustav shot it where it lay, shattering its armoured rib cage with a hail of bolter shots.

Before Gustav could savour his victory a sudden blow from behind launched him through the air. He slammed into a bulkhead and fell to the floor, before he could get his bearings he was picked up and slammed into the ceiling. Only the maglock of his gauntlet let him keep a hold of his blade. He rolled onto his back and kept rolling as a massive lictor killing talon tore a groove out of the floor. Gustav scrambled onto his feet as sparks arched from the now broken ceiling lights. The sparks cascaded down the hulking barely visible form of a mighty Deathleaper. Gustav had fought enough lictors to recognize the legendary strain. With a Vox amplified shout he charged the monster. He dodged another swing of the killing talon and delivered a brutal punch to its side. The creature's hide rippled as its camouflage was disrupted and it wavered into horrible visibility. It raked at Gustav's helmet with one of its smaller arms, the claws scoring through the ceramite and nearly ripping off the protective headgear. Gustav severed the arm with a swing of his relic blade in response and was sent flying by a strike of the Deathleaper's tentacle. The attack crumpled the armour over his chest and cracked his ribcage in an instant. Gustav stood

up, coughing blood as the monster stalked forward and let loose with another burst from his bolter. The Deathleaper reared up to its full height as it entered the control room.

The Embershields raced to Gustav's rescue, sending a spray of promethium at the alien assassin morph. Their charge was interrupted by the broodlord of the pack that had been slaughtered moments ago. It dropped from the vent it had been hiding in and killed one of the aggressors with a single strike to their head, decapitating the poor marine. The other two aggressors turned to the creature but were too slow. In a whirling cloud of sparks and blood the broodlord tore into them. In moments both were dead or disabled, though the sergeant had managed to land a glancing blow to the alien and crushed one of its legs.

Gustav had no time to lament the fall of his brothers as the Deathleaper pushed the attack. He parried a slash of the killing talon with his fist and severed the limb at the halfway point with his relic blade. The lictor's blood boiled off of the power field and filled the room with a vile stench. The creature streaked and its remaining killing talon slammed like a comet through Gustav's left shoulder. The powerfist's power field died as the claw severed the cables that fed it. The monster hoisted him into the air and grabbed his helmet with its facial tentacles. Despite the pain Gustav tried feebly to stab the creature with his relic blade but it caught his right arm with its tail and bent the limb until the servos failed and his wrist broke with a wet pop. With a click the creature found the release for his helmet's mag seal. It popped free and Gustav spat at the creature but the mild acid of the betcher's gland only inconvenienced the alien. It slammed him into the wall until he was senseless and then leaned in for the kill. Gustav saw the abyss yawn out before him through the bloody haze as the feeder tendrils twitched closer.

The roar of a heavy bolter pierced his fading consciousness and he was brought back to his senses by the pain of the Deathleaper tossing him away to turn on its attackers. Anvil squad had arrived. The broodlord tried to skitter forward but was slowed by its bad leg, heavy bolt rifle fire tore it apart long before it reached the heavy intercessors. The Deathleaper fared little better. At point blank range the relic heavy bolter that brother Malicesh O'mehs carried was too much even for a near perfect killing machine to dodge or withstand. The alien faltered and collapsed to the ground inches from the heavy gunner.

Gustav coughed up a half coagulated gob of blood and called out to them. "Welcome friends, it seems the entertainment wasn't to our guest's liking!"

Knives in the Night