



HORIZON

WARP RIFT

PRESENTS

REG STEINER

A TYRANID WAR

CHAPTERS 5 & 6

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

Chapter 5

A Trap, and A Warlord

I.

A year was spent gathering and analyzing the data. Six months to choose the site. Four years to build the factories and recruit. And through it all, the old warrior marked the progress of his enemies. His one good eye needed artificial enhancement a lot of the time now, but it was hardly noticed. There was too much to do.

The brotherhood had been rebuilt. Not with just recruits, but with the new androids from the new factories. Each of the one thousand warriors in the brotherhood had one hundred androids to command.

The old warrior had insisted that all be outfitted in the same armor, even the androids. The old warrior had plans for one hundred and one thousand fighters in jet black armor, yes.

The old warrior had enjoyed watching the progress of his enemies. The steady advance of the Tyranids. The nearly futile attempts by the human empire, and other races, to stem the tide of the Tyranid advance. There was grim satisfaction in watching his two enemies waste themselves. It had been no surprise that the hated Emperor had massed his fleets, and attacked the Tyranids. Or even that portions of other race's fleets had joined in the attack. What the old warrior was expecting was for the Emperor's fleets to get the same rough treatment as had the renegade fleet. The surprise was the way the Tyranids reacted.

The Tyranid fleet had continued to expand through the Eastern segment of the galaxy, and so were less concentrated when the Imperial fleets showed up. How the old warrior would have liked to see that battle that took place. For two years, the two sides slashed and smashed each other, bringing more and more forces to bear. But, all the old warrior could do was read the intercepted message and intel traffic about that grand fight.

Then the big surprise.

The Tyranid Hive fleet had broken up into thousands of separate fleets - and each had taken off in its own direction. It was as if a bomb had gone off, with each piece rocketing off in its own direction. This had changed the way the war would go, forever. This had changed the way the old warrior would plan his revenge. If he could not destroy all the invaders, he could certainly destroy any part of them that came his way, now.

The old warrior got up, and turned his back on the endless displays of reports, data, and other unimportant time wasting static. He walked over to the arch that looked out, his new power armor humming pleasingly. He stopped and stared out from under the arch.

From his fortress on the ridgeline, the old warrior looked down on the broad plains.

Some of the "buffalo" were just visible. The giant slugs were as big as that ancient animal. Best of all, they were powerfully psychic. Not intelligent, just enormously powerful psychic transmitters. The Tyranid enemy seemed to be irresistibly drawn to any source of psychic power. Bait for the old warrior's trap. This planet was doubly important. The plant life here almost all manufactured an oil that was vital to the renegade war machine. The old warrior could have anything he wanted for this planet's defense.

From this vantage point, the old warrior could see that a lot of work was in progress, as well. The brotherhood, the androids, and the insane mutant slaves were all busy with the preparations to greet the Tyranids.

The old warrior had learned much about this alien enemy, during the years of preparations and years of watching. The old warrior went back to his panels of displays. One had said a large Tyranid hive cell was headed toward this place he defended. They would arrive soon. He and his forces would be ready.

II.

The Tyranid hive mind had a migraine headache. The pain of so much separation, so many "cells" of the mind were lost, that a wicked hang over is the nearest comparison to the pain. The hive mind could not concentrate so well, could not evaluate on so many levels as before. But at least it was alive, still able to plot and plan.

The assault by the thousands and thousands of warships, from several races, had been unprofitable to the Tyranids. The Tyranid hive fleets had not been concentrated to meet so many enemies at once, instead, they were spread over a wide region, trying to convert enough Biomass to regain the strength lost on the long journey. The losses from the lengthy battle were too great, with too little gained in return. The Tyranids could not concentrate

fast enough, with enough ships, to defeat the enemy fleets. The need to feed came first. So, a different course was chosen. Hive brood ships, with attendant warcraft, set out in thousands of directions, away from the battle. One such segment, the largest, made of hundreds of brood ships, and thousands of warcraft, headed for the galactic core. This was the heart of the hive mind. It would survive. The other segments might grow into a hive mind too. It was a risk that had to be taken. The hive mind sensed a single will behind its enemies resistance. This dangerous threat must be found, its source eliminated.

III.

Lynx tried to ignore the four tone signal as it rang again and again. She would have to speak to this comm officer for being so insistent. Plainly, Lynx did not want to answer. Pen was planet side, waiting to escort the planet's governor out to the cruiser. He knew he was under suspicion, and so was reluctant. Pen would find a way. She had gotten quite good. But, Pen could not help now. Lynx was at the mercy of the demands and interruptions that Pen normally screened.

Lynx gave a sigh of resignation in unison with the eighth series of tones, and answered.

"I gave orders not to be disturbed - for any reason," she growled menacingly, "this had better be good."

The young comm officer was taken aback, she had not been warned to hold traffic meant for the Inquisitor. Her predecessor had claimed she was exhausted, and so hurried away. The Inquisitor was waiting, her complexion darkening.

"I was not told to hold your messages, Inquisitor," she said, as evenly as she could manage, "but I would have rang you for this anyway. We are receiving a series of top priority videos, you have always ordered them flashed straight to you in the past." The young lieutenant at the comm station waited for the ax to fall.

Lynx stared at the comm officer for a moment. The mystery of where in the galaxy all the mutants were going, and why, would never be solved with all these interruptions. Millions of beings had to be going somewhere. As an investigator for the Tribunal of Magistrates, Lynx was becoming a dismal failure. All these distractions only made an already sour mood worse. Lynx decided not to vent her frustration on this officer any further.

"Send the messages to screen system two," Lynx said only a little less gruffly, "and notify the ship captain to put the ship on standby alert. These videos may require immediate departure." Lynx disconnected with a snap.

Twenty minutes later the alarms throughout the cruiser signaled imminent emergency departure. The cruiser's shuttle that had been on the planet screamed back into space, less the planetary governor it had been sent for. The Inquisitor wanted her aide back, now, by the stars!

The shuttle hanger doors had not even started to close, when the great cruiser shuddered from being forced into emergency acceleration. Pen recognized the signs. It had been two years, but it could only mean that this ship would again be dealing with the Tyranids. Pen struggled to hurry to the Inquisitor's chambers against the rising acceleration. The "G" force compensators always seemed just a little behind, and could not completely cancel out acceleration or maneuver caused "G" forces.

Pen entered the familiar room, and stopped dead in her tracks. Lynx was staring straight at her. The burning glare was almost physical. There was also a young man in the room. The gray jumper, and striped black and yellow left shoulder, identified him as aide to an Inquisitor!

"Pen, I no longer require your services as an aide." Lynx said flatly. "I believe you are ready for new duties."

The arrowhead shaped cruiser hit the jump point with such velocity that an energy flash resulted, and a ripple in real space that would cause minor earthquakes back on the governor's planet.

IV.

The video screens and holos were full. Every view showed the approach of the vast hive fleet. The commander felt he would burst from satisfaction, his red and black armor unable to hold it in.

The commander spoke his acknowledgments into the voice channel. The renegade fleet would make its appearance as scheduled, after the fight on the planet will have been on for some time. The lack of a space defense was necessary to draw in the enemy, and besides, it was also necessary to the personal ambitions of the commander. To take a personal hand in the slaughter of Tyranid warriors was the commander's driving ambition. Through those efforts the commander had just been promoted to Warlord.

The Warlord shifted and changed the views. All was in readiness. The millions and millions of mutants that had been drawn here were armed and ready in their slum towns. The robot defenses were active and tracking the enemy. The warriors of the brotherhood, his marines, and the androids were waiting in their underground bunkers, waiting for the signal to burst forth and begin the retribution. The Warlord had studied every detail on how the Tyranids would fight and try to consume this planet. He could not be more ready. His one good eye gleamed with anticipation.

V.

The Hive Mind of the Tyranids felt driven for the first time. Driven by hunger. Driven by the need to find the source of the will behind the Tyranid's enemies. Now the hive mind thought it could satisfy both hungers at once. The planet before it emanated a powerfully strong psychic presence. And the logic of being so near the galactic center was not lost on the hive mind. The psychic senses of the Tyranids told the hive mind that the planet had many minds, was rich in Biomass, and that there was a consuming hate of the Tyranids there. It was decided. This planet must die. Thousands and thousands of ships, and uncounted millions of warriors set about the tasks that would bring about that end.

VI.

The Warlord stood on the ramparts of his fortress. The battle now underway did not need his personal direction, it was now in the hands of each of the fighters and local commanders.

The enemy was landing all over the planet. They were slaughtering the big slugs grazing on the plains. The Tyranids were driving against the lines of mutants outside their towns. Whole formations and masses of Tyranid warriors were rampaging across the landscape.

Just before stepping out onto the ramparts, the Warlord had checked the progress of his enemies. He noted one consistent trend in the Tyranid way of war, during his studies. Wherever there was resistance, there the Tyranids would concentrate. The Tyranids were behaving that way now. It was the one thing the Warlord was counting on, if his trap was to work.

The Warlord's train of thought was interrupted by the sudden volley fire from the remotely controlled weapons turrets above him. Then the enemy had broken through the mutant lines at the mouth of the valley. Good. His one good eye strained as the helmet receptors magnified the images. The Warlord could see that masses of ten foot tall Tyranid warriors were swarming toward the fortress. There must be a million of them. Too bad for them. The cold hate felt like a cold knife in the heart.

The Warlord went in and down to the courtyard. Ten thousand androids and a hundred picked brother warriors were waiting in the courtyard, and in the emplacements around the fortress. Through the open gateway they watched the Tyranid horde swarm up the valley, watched as the energy canon tore holes in the packed ranks of the Tyranids. But nothing would stop the momentum of the Tyranid charge. The enemy was almost to the fortress.

The Warlord raised the transmitter in his hand, pressed a button. Immediately, a whole series of brilliant flashes rippled down both sides of the valley. The Tyranid swarms were hit on both sides from hidden gun positions. Then hundreds of openings appeared and disgorged a hundred thousand androids and warriors in black armor. It was a black tide that swept down from both sides of the valley. The fifteen foot tall renegade war striders emerged from hiding, and began to blaze away with all their weapons. The Tyranid warriors turned and charged to meet the oncoming black wave of renegades. Then clouds of smoke and dust obscured everything, illuminated redly from explosions within.

The Warlord had waited long enough, he stepped to the front of his personal guard and gave the signal. Without a sound, the packed ranks of black and red armored warriors advanced.

The Warlord roared his battle cry as his marines engaged the forefront of the Tyranid host. Rage filled his very being as he came into close combat with the source of his most virulent hatred. Satisfaction, that bordered on orgasmic, flashed through what was left of the Warlord's body, as he saw Tyranid warrior after warrior go down before his weapons.

Then, of a sudden, the old warrior was in a clear space, there were no enemy or friendly warriors near. He had emerged behind the line of enemy warriors. He looked all around him. Over there, a big war strider is half covered

with Tyranid fighters, their weapons blasting and slashing through the armor. On the other side, the Tyranids are no longer stopped, but are pushing back his brother marines! For the first time, the Warlord notices that there are piles of bodies in black armor mixed in with the red of the big Tyranid warriors, and amongst the blue of the nearly human sized Tyranid fighters. Too many of the black armored bodies.

The Warlord turned back toward his fortress, determined to fight his way through again. Coming from behind the Tyranids, the smoke, dust and confusion masking his sudden attacks from behind, the old warrior easily broke through again. His warriors were retreating, backing toward the fortress under the relentless onslaught of Tyranid ferocity. Sometimes a big, red Tyranid monstrosity would strike down two or three brother marines, before being blasted to pieces itself. Sometimes a marine would roast four, five, or more enemies before being struck down.

The warlord reached the wall of his fortress, turned, leaned his back to the wall, and started blasting away with determined precision.



VII.

Pen and Lynx stood looking at the screens. The displays were of two fleets. One Tyranid, and the other renegade. The Tyranids were leaving the star system, not attacking it. There were hulks and ruined ships all over the sky, especially around the second planet from this small sun.

When the cruiser had appeared back in real space above the star system, the sensors had all told of massive discharges of energy. A distant battle. In the hours it had taken to get this close, the battle had been resolved. The renegade fleet was now pursuing the Tyranid ships, which should not be leaving. The Tyranid fleet is still larger than the renegade fleet, and should be attacking. Here indeed was another mystery.

The cruiser took station over the second planet. Pen, in her new job as agent of the Inquisitor, took a fast shuttle to the surface to investigate the distress signal coming from somewhere below. This would have to be fast, Lynx had said, any creature around here that discovered them would be an enemy.

Pen stepped out of the shuttle. She had seen all this before. In all directions, there was the litter and carnage of battle. A few paces ahead was a partially smashed fortress, fires still burning in damaged areas. Pen's new aide called out to her - a strange bright red armor, trimmed in black, on a warrior by the wall. Pen stepped over to see, and was startled to recognize the form.

"I am troubled by the dream, even as I die." The Warlord said. "Two women will not let me sleep in peace, now I see them in my last waking moment."

"I am Pen," she said, "let me help you, we only want to know what happened here."

"No! Leave me to die here!" The old warrior rasped, struggling to rise, but collapsing back. "I have earned the right to die surrounded by fallen enemies." He pointed the stub of a broken weapon.

There were indeed piles of dead Tyranids, of all sizes, all around.

The emergency alarm sounded from Pen's wrist monitor. Pen's aide, and her two bodyguards, began to sprint for the shuttle.

"You have earned your glory, old man," Pen said, "die knowing that." She then turned on her heel and bolted for the shuttle, the old warrior's cackle of laughter in her ears.

VIII.

The hive mind of the Tyranids felt confusion. The purposes of the hive seemed stymied at every turn. The small planet seemed ripe for the taking, but instead, exploded into bristling weapons and warriors. And a host of enemy ships had intervened just as the Tyranids were sure they were going to feed. The hive mind felt as a large bull must feel with a small dog nipping at its heels. The enemy fleet pursuing was an annoyance beyond bearing, but the Tyranids could only flee. The hive mind began to doubt the wisdom of dividing itself. This galaxy could prove to be too well protected. Time could still be on the side of the Tyranids. The hive mind resolved to find safer feeding grounds, for now.



IX.

Lynx was waiting in the shuttle bay when Pen returned.

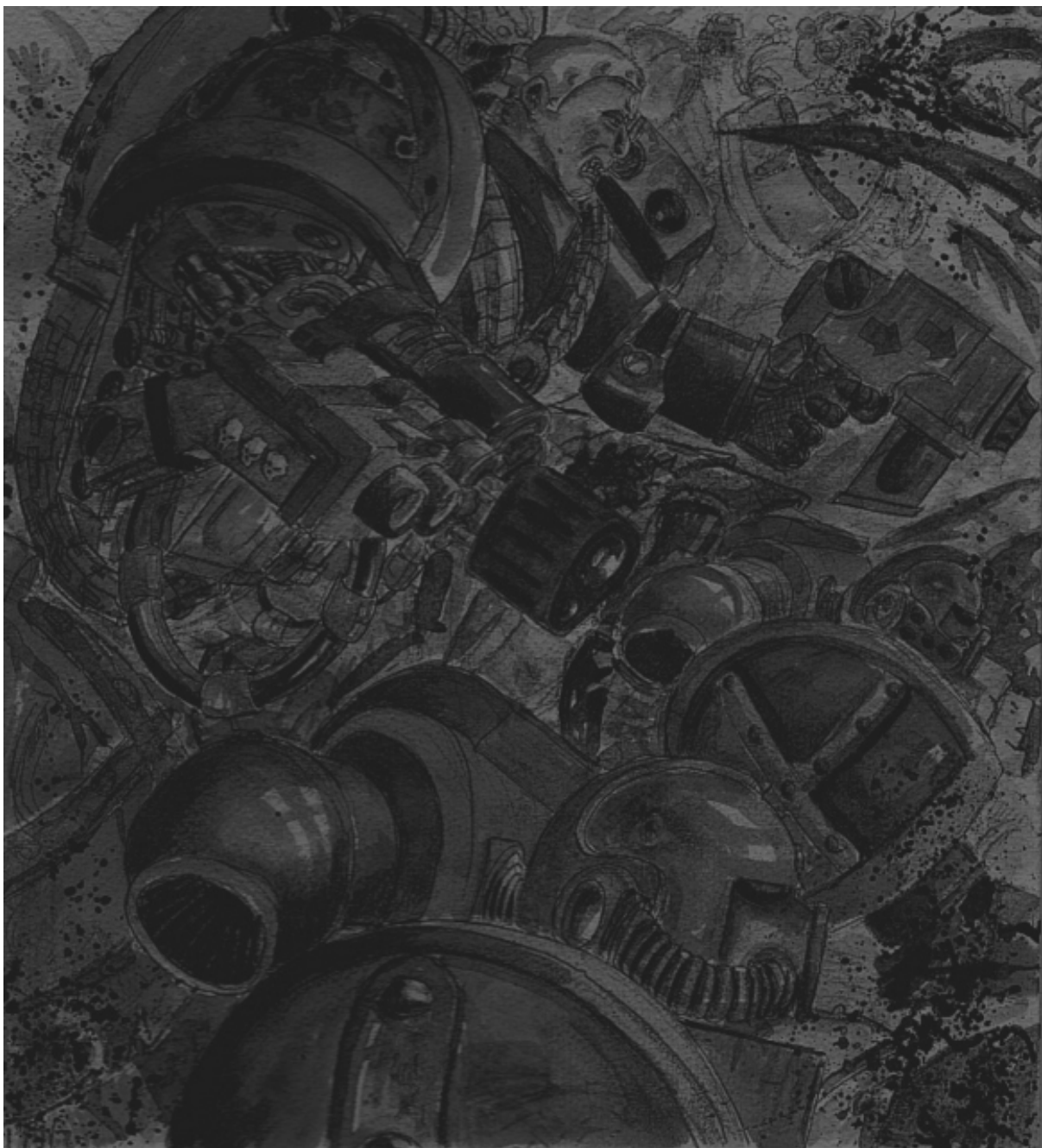
"A renegade dreadnaught has detected us, and is heading here. We will reach the jump point ahead of him, now that you're back on board." Lynx said reproachfully. "How long did you think you could keep us waiting?"

Pen had learned by now that some questions were not for answering.

"We will never find out what happened here, now." Pen replied, instead.

"We may not learn the details, but have learned that the renegades have declared war on the Tyranid invaders." Lynx said, crossing her arms. "That is certainly worth knowing. I have a dozen robot probes flying over sites on the planet, we'll have plenty of recorded holos by the time we reach the jump point. And we learned the answer as to where the mutants had gone. They were gathering here. Why, I can't say. Sometimes we have to settle for some answers, instead of all the answers." Lynx turned toward the exit. "All of you come with me, there is still much to do."

The cruiser accelerated toward the jump point. The red color of the small sun turned the outstretched eagle's talons painted on the hull to the color of blood.



Chapter 6

Holy War is for Warriors

I.

Pen stood dead still, as the volcanic ash fell, lightly dusting her best armor a dark gray. The two nearby volcanoes were continuously erupting. But then, on this world, there were hundreds of volcanoes constantly erupting somewhere. That was why such worlds were called hell. Even the very air had a weak sulfur acid. Life expectancy was only a very few years on such worlds, even for those that tried to protect themselves from the many dangers of such places.

Pen could see the procession coming from the great gate of the distant city. Only a couple of miles, but in this gloom, it looked more like a dozen. The race that occupied this place cared not for life expectancy. They live only for battle. With the hope to die in battle.

"They come, Agent." The voice from the comm set in Pen's ear sounded faintly troubled.

"Yes, watch to see if they fan out, or stay together around their leader." Pen instructed her aide. "If they fan out, it's a fight, and if they stay together then it is a parlay, like we asked."

"I don't understand any of this, Agent." Pen's aide replied. "I don't even understand what we have been told about all this."

"You had probes to teach on the long sleep here, you probably have all the information I have." Pen subconsciously reached up to scratch an itch at the back of her head, but the helmet was in the way. She went on, "With the War-King on his way, it's a little late to have to rethink all this."

"But these are Orks! They are only fit for killing!" Pen's aide blurted out. Pen did not have to turn her head to know that her aide was gripping his weapon more tightly. His people had fought the Orks on many worlds. Pen was counting on his fear and distrust of all that race.

"Be specific. They will be in weapon's range in a few more minutes, and then we will be too busy to talk about this." Pen commanded. "Are you just voicing vague fears, or is there some point to be made?"

After a moment, the aide responded. "I just don't understand any of this. We fly this little destroyer into a nest of enemies, instead of a fleet of battleships. Then we get out on the surface of this hell world, and calmly wait for a procession of Ork scum to walk up and murder us." A moment more passed, then he added, "The probes we had attached to us just filled our head with Ork history and customs, there was nothing about what I'm about to die for."

Pen allowed herself to smile under her helmet. This all sounded vaguely familiar.

"Watch and listen, while I try to explain a little." Pen said evenly. "The Ork that is approaching is a very important being, to his race. We are here to make him more important. Watch as the Orks come closer. Every weapons turret on the destroyer is tracking that bunch. Every weapon in our hands will be pointed at them, when they are closer. This is not only caution. To an Ork, it is a sign of respect. Orks have no use for humans either, except as opponents, slaves and food. Orks eat everything. Fight everybody. Enslave all races, even each other.

As you saw from the probes, Orks are hardy, tough, strong, and can live most anywhere. They are not very smart, but have spread into space to conquer untold numbers of worlds, including this one. During the Ork Holy War of a century ago, the Orks conquered a thousand worlds in just under a hundred years. The Empire has only taken back a couple of dozen in the last hundred years. You are familiar with their raids and fresh invasions, even though they have no leader whipping them into a holy war frenzy, and are instead divided against themselves."

Pen paused to look to her left and right, checking on the line of soldiers and marines that stood waiting for the Ork procession. She then continued.

"The Inquisitor I work for as agent has sent me to try to push this race into Holy War against the Tyranids. To do that, the Orks need a leader. The War-King of this planet is that leader. The Orks have fought the Tyranids already, but only piecemeal. The Orks have even won a couple of times. The chance to unify all the Orks against the Tyranids, instead of against humanity, must be taken."

Pen paused again. The Ork procession was close now, almost close enough to hear the uproar of Ork insults, common to the rare times Ork and human have spoken over clutched weapons. Pen spoke quietly.

"Since Orks shoot Inquisitors on sight, with no chance to parlay, I brought this ship here to take that chance. Now keep that energy sword pointed at the biggest Ork you see. The Orks have come to parlay, instead of fight, but watch for characteristic Ork treachery." Pen finished.

Pen switched comm channels. None of the others were talking. Her new aide had not been chosen from the ranks of these professionals. He had been chosen because of his hate and fear. Of Orks. A century and a half of war with Orks, on his planet, had left room for nothing else in her aide.

The group of about a hundred Orks were close enough now, so Pen switched to external sound systems. The confused roar of a hundred Ork voices shouting insults could plainly be heard, even two hundred meters away. Pen kept her weapon pointed at the place where the Orks were clustered the thickest. That would be where their leader was.

Pen stepped up to the center of the three long metal tables, next to the left edge, and placed her left hand on the surface. The signal that she was the one to talk to. The two small missiles, mounted on little rails under her weapon, made the weapon nose heavy, but not overly so. Pen wanted to be sure that her target would be done for, if it came to that. Each missile would surround the target with a sphere of white hot metal particles, the heat lasting long enough to burn armor, and boil flesh. Anything, or anyone, close by would also get cooked. The table was one and a third meters wide. Pen reflected that her armor might, and might not, keep her bacon from sizzling along with her victim.

The Orks fanned out in front of the tables, gesturing obscenities, waving their weapons threateningly, and occasionally firing one into the air. Two Orks threw themselves onto their hands and knees opposite Pen, then a great, heavily muscled, Ork emerged from the press of the gathered Ork warriors, and sat on the backs of both of them. He set both hands heavily on the table. Both held weapons, a short energy sword in the left, and a large barreled gun of some kind in the right. Both pointed at Pen's middle.

With a sudden howl from the seated Ork, all the others fell silent and motionless. Then the green-green flesh of his mouth curled into a leering grin, exposing a single long tusk, along with his jagged, sharpened teeth.

"Warmonger Longtooth," Pen asked gruffly, "or is you some water spawn impersonator bugger?"

"Har! A human half-she breeder of half-rats asks me who I is? Har!" The big Ork bellowed, then scratched his left ear with the point of the sword. Showing his lack of concern.

"Any big bellied, flat nosed greenskin can claim Warmonger," Pen snarled back, "but none live up to it!"

A series of snarls and guffaws rose from the other Orks, as Longtooth har harred and waved the short sword point at Pen. Pen had been told that the more biting the insults, the better the negotiations would go. Pen found it easy to voice her disgust at these creatures. Pen did not find it so easy to understand how delicate negotiations could be handled with insults, threats, and treachery.

"Ha! Smart mouth half-she are fun for all day, I bets!" Longtooth growled, "but I gots bigger wars to fights. Say what itches you to come here." The big Ork's bright eyes watched Pen intently.

Pen slowly lowered her weapon to the table, keeping it pointed right at the ugly chin of Longtooth, then reached her left hand around her back, slowly. She then held out the rolled metal sheet that had been hooked to her belt. Longtooth took it with his right hand, leaning across the table, and imbedding the short sword a couple of centimeters into the table. A move, Pen was sure, to show that Longtooth no longer was threatening her. To continue to do so would elevate Pen as dangerous, when Longtooth wanted to show disdain.

Longtooth unrolled the metal foil sheet. It was covered with the blocky scrawls that passed for Ork writing. Longtooth held down one edge with his hand, the other with a stab of the sword point. While he harred and humphed, snarled and growled, as he read the symbols, Pen took the moment to switch internal helmet displays. The little window display by her left eye showed her aide's vitals. His body temperature was rising, and the nerve readout showed rising agitation. Pen felt it was just about time to push his last button. She turned her head slightly to see that, yes, her aide was pointing his energy sword straight at Longtooth. Her aide's trembling with rage made the sword point weave little circles.

Longtooth's head was down, as he struggled to decipher his own language.

"Fat Ork gasbags are only good for killing!" Pen yelled, and stepped back, weapon at the ready, "Bugger your own spawn and die!"

And the aide exploded into action, leaping forward, and windmilling the great sword forward, at Longtooth.

But the big brute was also fast. The great sword sliced through the table where Longtooth's head had been, with a brilliant flash. And just as suddenly, Pen's aide had a large hole through his back armor, and Longtooth's sword sticking halfway into his helmet's eye lens. Pen never took her eyes off Longtooth as he reared back, and let out a howl.

The forward surge, and weapons firing, of the other Orks halted in mid-action. As did the return firing of Pen's other soldiers and marines.

Longtooth stood a pace back, both hands on his hips, his gun in right hand muzzle down, his left hand somehow holding the metal foil scroll. He turned his head left and right. Pen followed suit, and saw that at least a dozen Orks were down, as well as two of her marines – one with a lightning spear still crackling from his neck, a twitching Ork under him. Pen saw that the two sides were just an arm length apart. She faced Longtooth again.

"By your own laws, you expected treachery," Pen said into the face of the rising growl from Longtooth, "there is your blood to seal the bargain – both Ork and human."

"Rrrr... You think you smart. Har! You try smart trick first, but Longtooth to fast, Har!" Longtooth stepped forward, placing one foot on the corpse of Pen's aide, where it lay on the collapsed wreck of the table. The lightly falling volcanic ash already hiding the yellow and white of her aide's armor under gray.

"This was also a test, Longtooth." Pen growled in return, thankful for the voice modulator enhancing her lower register. Her natural higher pitch did not sound threatening to Pen, so she was sure that the Ork would have found the unmodified effort hilarious. "If you did not survive, then were unworthy of our offer. Then we would find some other unwashed greenskin to join the fight."

"So! Human trash have itch to fight! Har! Want Ork king to help scratch! Har har har!" Longtooth bellowed, "This better than too much to eat! Har humph har!"

"Ork scum belly wrong again," Pen shouted over Longtooth's uproar, "the rest of that scroll serves notice that we humans can't be bothered by Ork worms that make such weak war!"

Longtooth stopped laughing in mid-har. It was an article of their war-religion that Orks were the best fighters in the universe. That humans and Eldar had better weapons just meant they were luckier, not better warriors. And with just the skin a human was born in, no human could stand up to an Ork. In that, the Ork war-religion was right. But now humans think Orks are weak warriors – such a thing was deep blasphemy!

"Ssss...So, human want Ork king to fight, but Ork king a half size snot nose no-tooth." Longtooth said in low tones, the other Orks hissing and growling. "Human half-she brain twisted and troubled with being so smart. No sense. Longtooth say parlay over, no more fun to be had with twisted brain half-she human." Longtooth backed away a step, raising his weapon again.

"We fight a fresh enemy that has entered the galaxy." Pen snarled back, "You may know them, big and red, tall as two of me. Some are large as you, lotsa teeth, blue and more arms."

"Red bugs and blue teeth!" Longtooth shouted, then spit, "Puth, foul big red-bugs fight, but are no good, Pweth!" A few of the other Orks howled and spit also. That an Ork would spit anything out was the ultimate insult, they would try to eat anything. Some Orks had met the Tyranids, and did not like the memory.

"We call them Tyranids. They number more than the grains of ash that fall on our heads. They would make slaves of all the universe." Pen said coolly.

"Not the Orks! We break red-bugs to pieces, then feed pieces to bone gnashers for chew practice!" Longtooth snapped. "We don't need humans to break red-bugs to little pieces!"

"The Tyranids catch Orks in small little king worlds, all the Orks they catch, they take out the brains, then put worms in Ork heads. Orks now happy slaves of the red bugs." Pen said quickly, then turned the knife as Longtooth put a hand on his bald head. "Orks are no match for the red bugs while Orks are many little kings."

"Orks don't need humans or red-bugs." Longtooth said, his left hand still on his head. "Smart mouth human asking for big hole in middle, with twisted brain talk. Go away now. No, you wait in ship for Longtooth to think this twisty talk. Try to leave now, and big guns burn this little ship down!"

Then Longtooth spun about, and set off for his fortress, a new series of curses and insults rising from him, and then from the crowd of Orks that pressed around him.

Pen watched him go. She felt unsure how it all had gone. They were not dead yet, which was a small victory owed to Ork curiosity. Pen wondered how she would stand to wait until the Orks answered them, or killed them.

A bodyguard stepped up behind Pen.

"You need a new aide, Agent. But I doubt you will get any volunteers. You use them up too quickly." The bodyguard's voice came from the private comm channel. After a moment of no answer from Pen, he went on. "Please come inside, Agent. The dust and acid is starting to degrade the weapons. A fight can start anytime. They may start one just to amuse themselves."

Pen looked down at the ruin the attempt at treachery had caused. She was thankful that her aide's helmet had stayed on. She did not want to see that young man's ruined face. The memory of that protruding sword would haunt her always, as it was.

"He was sent to me by his chieftains." Pen said quietly, "He was too unstable, even for them and their war on Orks. He was able to die for what he thought was a try for glory. And he paid the expected blood sacrifice. Orks expect treachery, nothing could be accomplished while the Orks watched for our treachery to be exposed. Once we had failed at our try, Longtooth could be confident. We must watch for Longtooth's attempt at treachery, now. It will probably be something big. Let's go."

Crew members were scurrying around in the dust, trying to clean up the mess in a hurry, so that the destroyer could be sealed up quickly. They had to be space ready as fast as possible. Agents of Inquisitors were capable of anything.

II.

Two ship's sleep cycles had come and gone, plus one ambush from the Orks. A human slave of the Orks had been used as bait. Pen had been sleeping. A couple of dozen Orks had jumped the crew members that had tried to save the "escaped" human slave. Five crew were dead, and four had bitter wounds that would never heal right. Only two Orks were killed. And the human slave, caught in the cross fire she had helped bring about.

Pen sat staring at the big projection screen. Trying to will it to come on with Longtooth's ugly, fiery eyed, leering grin. Somehow Lynx always seemed to will things to happen. The fruitless waiting was frustrating. Pen got up and turned to leave.

A few moments later, Pen was on the destroyer's bridge. The vessel's captain was also anxiously watching view screens. But his weren't empty, all the screens showed some portion of the destroyer's exterior. He turned at the sound of Pen's entrance.

"We must get away from here soon, Agent." The Captain said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "The accumulation of ash is getting serious, not to mention the odd group of Orks that come by to throw stones at the hull. I can't send the crew out to deal with the dust for fear of another fire-fight."

"Yes, we will leave soon." Pen said softly, almost sadly. "The time limit I set with Longtooth will be up in just a few hours. At the precise minute that it expires we'll blast off – and hope to get past the ring of ships Longtooth has in orbit."

Pen turned and crossed the room, sat in front of the weapons console, put her heels on a shelf protruding from the console, and then leaned back with her hands behind her head, and her eyes closed.

"Until thirty minutes prior to that moment, we do nothing." Pen said, after a moment.

The Captain wondered how this Agent had known he was about to fire up the engines. He had no more than made up his mind to try to shake some dust off, and – Presto! – the Agent strides onto his bridge. Then she calmly orders them all to sit and wait for a Nuke missile to fry 'em alive inside the destroyer. Where does the Empire get such people as Agents and Inquisitors, the Captain wondered. Ah, well. The devil take them all, when they risk his ship and crew like this, he decided. He then sat, and continued watching the volcanic dust bury their chances of escape.

After ten minutes of this waiting, the Captain was startled to see three Orks had just appeared. He had not seen them approaching on any screen, they just appeared – as if by matter transfer beam. Beamers! Wait a minute! Orks aren't supposed to have matter teleporter ability!

"Great exploding suns!" The Captain bellowed, slapping the general alarm switch. "Agent! Get over here! We have beamers – and no force shields up to stop transporter boarders! Damn!"

"Hold it, captain." Pen was suddenly holding his arm back from the generator switch, and speaking softly in his ear. "If they wanted to board us, they already would have – and without tipping their hand by dropping some

boarders in front of a security monitor outside. Go ahead and keep your crew on alert – but leave the shields down."

Pen let go of the captain's elbow, and stepped up to the view monitor for a closer look. The three orks were still just standing there. What the hell? Longtooth? And virtually alone?

"Captain!" Pen said, raising her voice, "Charge up all the guns on the port side – then target the whole lot on that center Ork's wishbone! I want enough static electricity and laser designators on that spot to give sunburn!"

With that said, Pen hustled from the bridge, signaling her bodyguards as she hurried to her quarters. As an afterthought, she also called to have the cargo ramp lowered, and to have four of the others join her outside. It was time to tip her hand about them anyway, she decided.

In just a few moments, Pen had retrieved her weapon and helmet. And then was striding down the still lowering ramp.

Longtooth was in danger of having the ramp crush him, he was so close. His two bodyguards were nervously watching over their right shoulder. Pen looked in the direction of their glances. As expected, with great lazy strides, four Ogres were approaching.

The only humans that Orks respected, Ogres come from barrier suns. Huge framed, thick legged, enormous hands, and very coarse in nature. Rough and tumble that would kill a normal human or ork was light exercise to ogres. Normal humans gave the large human folk from the Barrier worlds the name "Ogre", probably because the big brutes tried to live up to the name.

"More treachery, says I." Longtooth snapped. "I'se come with no guard mob – so you'sa bringin' big Ogryn to squeeze Longtooth's guts."

"Gwan," Pen gruffly replied, "those big guns Ogryn carry does makes little green wet spots of Orks."

"Gar, muff, sputt – Rrrr...Half-rot she-human treacherous sting-worm!" Longtooth sputtered and growled. He clearly was not ready to be a wet spot. "Ogryns shoot Longtooth even if you say no – not parlay nice."

"Longtooth makes lotsa noise, but say nothing." Pen tried to sound bored, "G'wan with itch to come here, 'er g'wan back. I be busy."

"Human rubbish make crack – not care if Orks fight – Orks peasty stingy toe-worms, now that human filth got Red-bugs to fight. Taste bad brain pain lies and treachery."

"All humans want Orky joining to beat up on Red bugs, then when Red bugs done in, Orky and humans settle hash." Pen growled out slowly. The whole crux of the matter was on the table. "Or all humans be gone forever – Orky slugs roast on own spit for Red bugs to eat. Join or humans turn backs forever!" Pen roared the last sentence, then turned her back on Longtooth. On cue, so did her bodyguards – and even the Ogres.

Longtooth choked. All three orks paled to a lighter gray, drawing in a long breath as a hiss. Never before had any human ever turned their back on any living Ork.

Suddenly, dozens of Orks jumped up from where they had been hiding, and started to howl. Some threw down their guns, drew out knives, and started to advance. This was not an insult – this was blasphemy of the worst kind. The humans must die the death of a thousand cuts. Some Orks started to fire their weapons wildly in the direction of the ship.

Then, Boom! Boom! Boom! Longtooth snapped around, roaring, and blasted the nearest three Orks. Each shot hit dead center, blowing the three to pieces. Spinning back around, Longtooth saw that only the she-human was again facing him, the other eight had not turned.

"I tell these lads that I do any killing here." Longtooth growled almost quietly, "The human blaspheme will start unending holy war. We smash, burn, pull down everything human everywhere."

"And I says Orky nuisance only to humans," Pen said loudly, "Red-bugs better, greater fighters than Orky! Humans fight Red-bugs! Not bother with small meat greenskins, no more!"

"You trouble Longtooth like brain worm." Longtooth growled louder, "You gnaw on brain – make no sense. Ork greatest fighters!"

"Then fight Red-bugs, you see they toughest." Pen said, "The Red-bugs come in very many ships – more than stars are. All greenskins together could not win war with Red-bugs. Red-bugs bring blaspheme – take away the stars – chew on little pieces of small meat Orks. Red-bugs blasphemers, take away war from Orks – No Red-bugs,

then humans give Orks fight till humans squash last Ork!" Pen had to shout the last words over the rising growl of Longtooth.

"No! No! No! Arrrr – rahh!!" Longtooth suddenly howled – then started blasting.

The large exploding shells landed all around the little group of humans, causing the other eight to spin around, but they did not shoot, seeing Pen's upraised left hand.

Pen fired once.

Longtooth's head snapped around to follow the little missile that just missed his ear. About six paces back, an Ork, with mouth hanging open in rage, had just picked up a particle gun. Before the Ork could straighten up and uncork the gun, the little missile caught him. A silvery ball of flickering metal dust surrounded the Ork, then turned bright red, and abruptly rushed inward. With a: Rrruumff! A fireball enveloped the Ork, and two nearby others. For a couple of instants, the glaring red and swirling black smoke of the fireball sat on the ground, then rose into the sky, becoming a great black smoke ring. On the ground, the Ork that had been in the center was crisped down to the cartilage that passed for Ork bones. The other two Orks had similar treatment to their upper bodies, but the lower half looked intact. The big particle gun was obviously ruined.

"Very pretty." Longtooth growled into the silence. "Humans love fancy toys. Longtooth go now, you stay. Next time Longtooth plan treachery, not let half-she rat human talk first!" That said, the big Ork turned and strutted off, howling and growling. The other Orks rushed to his side and joined in the racket.

"Not..good.Orks." One of the Ogres said with difficulty, "Orks..talk..not..fight.....Orks gone..soft." His expression of distaste was almost comical.

"Lets get these Ogres back inside," Pen instructed, "They must be inhaling a ton of dust and acid, with those big lungs of theirs. I wish we could get them to wear helmets."

"For..love..of..lady..in..black....we..not..fight." One Ogre said, without budging.

"Hard..thing....not..want..to..do..again."

"I hope you won't have to." Pen said, the voice modulator turned off. "Now, get into your quarters. Some nice, hot, roasted animals are being brought for you. You all did very good."

"Lady..in..black..good to..Ogres.....Ogres..not..forget." The big brute then turned and tread heavily back to the big cargo ramp.

Pen had only just crossed the threshold of her quarters, when she saw that all her comm equipment was flashing. Priority incoming traffic. With a sigh, Pen stepped up and engaged the screen system.

Pen had no more than passed her hand over the controls, and there was Longtooth, roaring into the room.

"Idiot slimy she-human start war!" Longtooth's visage was all teeth, and flashing eyes, "Sneaky peasty Orky spies see whole thing on spy screens! Send human blaspheme to all Orky see-screens, everywhere! Even to Orky off planet!"

Pen stood unmoving during Longtooth's tirade, thankful that her helmet was still on. Pen waited for Longtooth to run out of steam.

"Longtooth no boss no-more! All Orky demand War! War forever!" Longtooth continued shouting, "Orky demand human guts roasted or Longtooth guts on pole! Human big mouth she-rat make Longtooth unking!"

"Then give them what they want." Pen calmly replied.

"What say? What treachery now this is?" Longtooth almost whispered, guardedly.

"I will come over there, alone. I will tell you of a planet full of humans near here. Almost undefended." Pen said, smoothly. Pen could feel her insides trembling, and briefly wondered if it showed outside her armor.

"You'll do no such thing!" One of her bodyguards shouted.

Pen nearly jumped, not having heard anyone enter, what with Longtooth shouting. She quickly killed the audio, but left the video on. She did not want to cut off Longtooth completely. His answer would surely be a full cannonade from the heavy weapons he commanded.

"I do what I must do. The Inquisitor taught me that." Pen began, turning around to face two bodyguards.

"Do what you must," The first bodyguard broke in, "but you will not do it alone."

Pen suddenly understood. She turned back to the screen, and turned on the sound.

"I was mistaken, I will come over there with only two bodyguards." Pen said calmly. The trembling in her insides gone.

"Then come to me. I wait at big gate." Longtooth's leering grin was unmistakable. The screen went black.

III.

Pen struggled back into the realm of the living. Struggled past the clouds of pain and confusion in her mind. The cramps and agony in her muscles awoke again, but was nothing compared to the stinging, burning, sharp edged, screaming pain from her flesh.

Pen was again naked.

She was again on public display.

This time she was hanging from barbed hooks, several in the back of each hand, and several through the bottom of each foot. She was hanging, spread-eagled before a seated Longtooth, and a room full of hopping mad Orks. Longtooth had assured her that her agony was being sent to a hundred Ork worlds.

Pen struggled to open her eyes. She had decided to die, looking her tormenters in the eye, if she could.

She saw a great, large Ork standing just before her. He was still twitching the many-thronged metal whip. Each of the metal thongs crackled from the electricity coursing through it.

Pen looked down at herself. Her ruined flesh hung in tatters, dripping blood. She thought she could see bone through some of the rivulets of blood. She remembered how, years ago, a renegade had hung from wires, dripping blood. She had felt sorry for him. Pen realized that she could feel nothing now. Her mind was dull from all the pain.

The big Ork flicked his wrist.

Pen screamed as pain exploded in the front of her chest.

All the other Orks cheered. Except Longtooth. He was not even smiling.

"Longtooth ask again. Longtooth not ask much more." Longtooth growled quietly, into the sudden silence. "Tell Longtooth of human planet. Not far. Not many guns. Lotsa human slaves and meat. You tell Longtooth where is. You die quick. End Orky play."

"Suck... pond scum.. and... rot." Pen managed to say, past the blood and pain of her broken teeth, broken jaw.

The big Ork whirled the whip, and let fly with a mighty stroke. The ends of the thongs snapped around and bit into Pen's back, cutting fresh rivers of fire into her back.

Pen screamed, then spit a bloody froth into the face of the Ork. He licked at the specks of blood, and smiled.

"Longtooth ask last time. Answer, or Longtooth just sit and watch as she-human be eaten."

Longtooth gestured, and an Ork carrying a large bowl stepped forward. The bowl was tipped forward, and Pen was horrified to see it was filled with hungry bone-gnashers.

"Answer, or Longtooth have she-human lowered into gnashers, little bit and little bit. Take long time. Many little bites. But gnashers always hungry. Longtooth watch while she-human die, lowered into bowl."

Pen screamed her horror, struggling and twitching at the end of the tethers. The bowl came closer. And suddenly, Pen could hear someone telling how to find the nearly undefended human planet. She felt herself choke, then cry.

The room full of Orks cheered, then began a war chant. In short order, the room was empty of Orks. Except for Longtooth.

"Little human better than many big humans." Longtooth was standing just in front of Pen. "Little human restore Longtooth to King. Now lead great war. Little human keep word. Maybe other word be kept too. Errrrr...."

Pen could say nothing, she was too spent to do more than stare, now that the terrible bowl had left.

Longtooth turned and left the room with great, swinging strides. The room was empty, but for the bleeding remains of Pen.

IV.

Pen awoke on the cold floor. Someone had lowered her, and removed the tethers. Pen felt too weak to move or speak, she opened her eyes to stare stupidly up at her rescuer. One of her bodyguards was wrapping her in a coarse Ork blanket, the other was standing guard. Both the men were naked also, but for an Ork blanket draped over each of them. Both had also been roughly treated, judging by the wounds. Their hurts were less than Pen's mangled body, however. The bodyguards must have been hurt as an afterthought, since Pen was the one guilty of

blasphemy.

"Come, Agent." The biggest bodyguard said. "You have worn out our welcome again." He lifted her small body easily, pressing Pen against his chest snugly. "The Orks make sloppy guards. We must be gone before we are missed."

Pen could just see over the big shoulder of her rescuer, as the two ran from the room, out into the open. A fierce wind was blowing, and the swirling dust was making it hard to see. Somehow the two men could make out directions. They quickly made their way out the great citadel gate, left open for some reason. The driving wind was worse outside the gate. Pen's eyes were filled with grit. She could only blindly hope the two men knew where they were going. Each jarring step of her rescuer's caused waves of pain to flood through Pen, as the two men ran full tilt. Finally, unable to take it any longer, Pen blacked out from the pain.



V.

Pen opened her eyes again. She was submerged in the Bio-tanks. Lying horizontally. Tubes and hoses coming from every orifice. More tubes extending from a dozen veins and arteries. Feverish hot waves passed through her. Through the rippling solution around her, Pen could see dark silhouettes moving about. Her brain felt sluggish, as she wondered why she, they, were still alive. The need to sleep came over her, became irresistible. Drugs. Pen surrendered to the warm, soft, siren call of sleep.

VI.

A bright light, painful to the eyes, stabbed into Pen's brain. She sat up with a start. Or tried to. The loosely fitted straps held her down. Pen opened her eyes more slowly, and looked about her. She was in her own quarters. She turned her head the other way. There by the door were the two bodyguards, one with eyes closed and head slightly hanging, the other with eyes open and kindled with sparks from the bright illumination – and staring right at Pen.

"You are still numbered among the living," the big warrior said quietly, "at least for a little while yet."

"How long have I been sleeping, what's happened, why the straps...?" Pen started asking.

"One thing at a time, Agent." The bodyguard broke in. "You are healed, but must take it slow for a while, or your new skin will tear, the new bone crack. The straps are there to keep sudden acceleration or maneuvers from pitching you on the floor."

"Do you have a name?" Pen asked suddenly, "You have been Sergeant and Corporal since I first met the Inquisitor." As if in answer to his title, the corporal opened his eyes.

"You are not of our Brotherhood, just as I am not an Inquisitor, or Agent." The big Sergeant replied smoothly.

"You saved my life, maybe my mission, risked a horrible death to stay with me, and I am not to know your name?" Pen asked, even as she reached from under the thick blanket and started working on the zip releases of the straps.

"If you really want to know our names, they are recorded." The Sergeant replied, "I would ask that you not use them, anymore than I cannot ask, or use, your name."

"I see I am wasting time on this." Pen said lightly, as she slid from under the blanket, opposite the bodyguards. She felt no need for false modesty, only the need to pick up the burden of her task, again. The soreness in her entire body reminded her to slow down. "Tell me what I've missed, what is going on, why are we still alive?"

"I will try." The Sergeant started, but paused, as Pen stopped suddenly in front of the polished metal mirror.

Pen was startled to see her pale white flesh was covered with red stripes. Everywhere. Even her face. She thought she looked like a picture of some ancient cat creature, out of an ancient text. She briefly wondered if this bizarre condition was permanent, or not. Then resumed padding toward her storage space to retrieve a jumper, and armor.

"We escaped the Ork redoubt too easily." The Sergeant began again, once the Agent again headed for the storage space. "The Ork Longtooth did not keep his word to kill us quickly, once you had betrayed that human world to him. Every Ork view screen carried your interrogation, but then went dark just after you gave the data up. As I said, we too easily escaped our bonds, killed the only guard, found you, and escaped to the destroyer in the dust storm. We did not see another Ork."

"Yes, we were meant to escape." Pen said, while wriggling into a jumper. "Longtooth is clever, in his own way. If I had just told him where the human world was to be found, he and his lieutenants would just suspect more treachery. By yanking the information out of me, unwillingly, the truth was verified the only way an Ork trusts. I had hoped to just be held hostage, and taken with the Orks against that human world. Longtooth wanted something else in response to open rebellion in his ranks. What better than broadcast entertainment, as punishment for blasphemy? I was sure I was dead."

"Just what is the significance of this human world?" The Corporal asked, at last feeling the time was right. Millions, or billions, of human lives laid before the alter of Ork war had to have some significance.

"I can not tell you, yet. I did not choose the world. The Inquisitor told me that I may need to have information about a nearby human world, if the Ork war fever back lashed against humans." Pen said, in almost a whisper. "I only hope that it was not a needless sacrifice."

"Do you wish for me to continue, or will you view the events for yourself?" The Sergeant asked.

"No, do go on, I will listen while I finish with my armor." Pen replied, half smiling.

"We had only just entered the destroyer with you, when one of the famous Ork force fields slammed down on us. You were out for nine ship days, about eleven rotations of this dust ball world. While you were out, the Orks began to gather. Some arrived the first day. By the tenth day, space was full of Ork hulks, from all over. They have not been quiet, either. Our comm people have monitored Ork talk, of how a great many more ships are headed toward this first human world to feel holy war."

The Sergeant paused. The Corporal had stood and begun to help the Agent with the last of the armor, where the seals were hard to reach. The Sergeant began again.

"On the tenth day this ship was contacted. We could launch, and fall in next to Longtooth's ship for the journey, or be melted to slag on the spot. No talk, just action. We spaced, since you were still under the care of the Bio-med. The self destruct devices were set up, as a precaution. We are still held in a force field, close aboard Longtooth's dreadnaught. We have entered a jump, but don't know how long 'till we are back in real space."

"We will come out tomorrow." Pen said, now completely clad in armor, and standing just in front of the Sergeant. "We will see what has become of my betrayal tomorrow."

VII.

Longtooth was certainly enjoying having his own way, Pen mused. He had his own way in insisting that Pen and her warriors join in the rape of the planet. Pen had protested that another hundred warriors, more or less, would make no difference.

Longtooth showed his canny nature when he asked "Why humans want all Orks fight, but not want hundred humans to fight?" Pen could only have her soldiers follow her down to the planet.

It had helped to reveal to her marines that this planet was infected with a newly discovered genetic parasite. Passed from being to being, most of the population had been corrupted. That, and new agents of the Tyranids had been discovered here. They looked passably human, but were Tyranid Bio-constructs. And carriers of the genetic parasite.

An Inquisitor, and an entire company of Imperial marines had been murdered, after finding this all out.

Now they were all gathered on the planet's surface, watching the Orks sack a world.

Longtooth had shown he was smart in many ways, was still showing he was smart in the way of war. He had forbore from bombarding from space. He was smart enough to look first. This planet had enormous factories for building space vessels. Several had been under construction. Longtooth saw an opportunity, indeed.

So, a full blown ground assault was launched. Pen was sure that this made the rank and file Orks happy, they would rather get in and mix it up, than sit back and watch a bombardment. Pen was near Longtooth, as his central force attacked the biggest human city on the planet.

Hundreds and hundreds of Ork ships had shown up, with more arriving by the hour. Thousands and thousands of Orks descended on every human city and village on the planet. The Orks were making certain that this planet would be theirs.

Pen could hardly hear for all the loud blasts from the Ork guns. To breach the walls around the city, the Orks were using ultra velocity penetrator rounds. Lasers and plasma blasts might not penetrate the thick white metallized ceramic walls, but screaming, super fast, ultra hard solid shot would.

From where Pen stood, she could see holes already blasted through the walls. But the Orks were not yet charging through the gaps. All around the city, on three sides, regiments of red, or yellow, or black clad Orks were gathered. The front most ranks were taking a beating from the firing from the walls.

"Longtooth!" Pen shouted above the din, "Why not let yer boyz go in?! They be gettin' it rough!"

"Har! Har! Good for them!" Longtooth roared back, genuinely amused, "They good boyz! Draw shooting from walls! Then we see where shoot come from! Then we swat 'em! Soon no shooting from walls, anymore! Then big surprise! Har! Har!"

Pen looked to where Longtooth had indicated with a sweep of his arm. Behind a ridge, out of sight of the city, four long tracked vehicles had pulled up. They looked like bizarre caterpillars or slugs, with three great eye stalks in front. Behind each vehicle were more regiments of Orks in their garish colors, yellow and blue, green and red.

Pen had seen the antennas at the end of the "eye stalks" before. The energies radiated from each antenna would not notice walls, or even hills, but where the three beams came together, that would be the focal point for a matter transmitter. Beamers. The open back of the trailers was to let whole regiments charge through in a column. Whole Ork regiments would literally appear at a dead run in the heart of the city. Pen was not sure why Longtooth was letting her see all this.

Pen was distracted by the sudden high pitched whine from overhead. Flyers! Longtooth had even managed to get jet sets! Lots of them, maybe thousands of Orks were flying like a cloud of gnats toward the walls, twisting and dodging as they got closer. The sporadic firing from the walls could not begin to stop them.

Longtooth began hollering into a comm mike. All the Orks began to charge the walls, on foot, by vehicle, on jet sets, and through the beamers. The continuous roar of weapons firing increased into a deafening crescendo.

Longtooth commanded that Pen and her troops follow him into the city, and he set off at a jog. A couple of regiments of Orks followed Pen's hundred warriors, and her, following Longtooth.

The mad press of Orks through the gaps and fissures in the walls had sorted itself out by the time Pen arrived. She found it distasteful to have to walk over a solid carpet of Ork bodies, to get inside the city with Longtooth.

Pen had no emotion, or adjectives, to describe the insides of the city. It looked as if the human population had thrown itself at the Orks, wholesale. Unarmored humans had no chance, yet piles of men and women lay hacked and blasted. Shattered pieces of them were even sticking to the walls. Small streams of blood were running down both sides of every street and avenue in red torrents.

The crushed and sliced young people and children upset Pen the most, particularly when a face could be made out.

As Pen, Longtooth, and entourage made their way further into the city, the bodies became less.

With a Bang! Two humans appeared, gunning down one Ork. A dozen shells ripped through the man and woman in an instant, the pieces of the two flying about to become unrecognizable hunks of red meat and white bone.

"Arrrr..Ha!" Longtooth yelled, "Good fight! Longtooth thank human she for pretty little war!" He waved the smoking barrel of his gun toward Pen as he capered. Then he resumed his swagger up the main boulevard, toward the center of town.

Four more times, one or more humans emerged from buildings to throw themselves at the Orks. Some did not even have any weapons. Pen was sure normal humans did not fight this way. Unarmed, they should flee, not impale themselves on Ork lightning spears. Then the confirmation Pen had hoped for.

Four streaks of blue lightning tore into the group of Orks and humans from a dark doorway. There was a hot fight for all of three seconds, then five Orks were dead, and four blue, multi-armed, toothy, near man sized clawed horrors lay in a heap among the dead Orks. The torrent of human firepower had stopped three of the blue hell creatures before they could kill a second time.

"Blue-teeth!" Longtooth howled, "What here!? Blue-teeth and humans together pals, huh!? Treachery! Treachery!" Longtooth whirled around to face Pen, a crooked finger caressing the firing stud of his weapon, obviously wanting to be shut of this troublesome human.

Pen stood facing Longtooth, legs apart, weapon and arms at her side, as if inviting death.

"Yes, treachery. But not what kind you think." Pen managed to get out smoothly.

"You only yet live 'cause Longtooth want witness!" Longtooth growled loudly, "Witness great Longtooth make war! Make short snack of all humans here! Orky greatest warriors! Longtooth bestest war king! War priest!" All the nearby Orks began to howl and roar, jumping up and down, firing weapons in every direction, even knocking each other about.

The humans were half a dozen rings of warriors, up the center of the wide boulevard. Pen knew she could not let the Orks work themselves up, or Longtooth's plans be damned, here were more humans for killing.

"Get ready for a real war!" Pen shouted over the uproar, "This war has just started!"

"What smart mouth lies now?" Longtooth asked from almost next to Pen. The noise of the other Orks fading away. "This place finished!"

"Oh no, not now." Pen sounded smug. "This was slave planet of Redbugs. This place build ships for Redbugs. They be here soon, and push greenskins off. Easy as Longtooth pick blood bug from ear."

"We see about that. Errr...orr....." Longtooth growled, perhaps thoughtfully. "Longtooth like this place. Stay here. Pushy Redbugs come here, they sure get surprise! Har!" Longtooth got louder as he made up his mind. He turned his back and headed on up the street. He still had somewhere to be.

"Hoi! Longtooth!" Pen shouted after Longtooth, "Where we off to? You on about something special?"

"Longtooth send lotsa boyz to city center through beamers," Longtooth grumbled loudly, "not hear nothing but static since begin. Gotta find where are. Maybe find good loot, not wanna share. Maybe not. Gotta see." Longtooth seemed almost introspective.

The groups of Orks and humans set out again, up the broad highway.

The Orks started to show why they are the warriors feared throughout the galaxy, by every race. They began to hunt the blue demons and humans that were still waiting in ambush. The Orks seemed to be able to smell the blue colored Bio-constructs of the Tyranids, as well as humans. Jetsetters swooped up to the rooftops, and into upper windows. The Orks on foot took up strategic locations around doors, and low level windows. The Orks then seemed to either bait, or flush the blue agents of hell. Even when several of the blue creatures attacked in a sudden rush, the Orks seemed to be expecting it.

The Orks were throwing gelatin grenades into certain doors or windows. The flaming gelatin sticks to everything when the charge goes off. The blue beasts don't like fire, Pen notices.

House by house, building by building, the Orks repeated the procedure. Sniff out the location of hidden "Blue-teeth", a well placed grenade, and one or more of the creatures waiting in ambush break cover. Into the open where waiting Orks blast 'em to pieces, all the while shouting and making wagers as to who will "off" the most Blue-teeth. The drill worked equally well on any humans waiting in ambush. More than two dozen of the creatures were killed in this way, and half dozen of the human inhabitants. Only three Orks were killed, and two more wounded.

Pen and her escort stayed to the middle of the highway, and continued to move up toward the city center. Longtooth did not join in the "fun" either, his mind seemed set on getting his troops to the city center.

A broad, sweeping curve in the roadway, and then the center of town came into view.

Pen was startled at yet a new scene of carnage.

There were a few dazed Orks staggering about, or half hiding behind some broken masonry, or just standing, gibbering. But, what filled the view framed by the buildings on either side of the street, was the piles of bodies. Limbs and pieces of Ork. A blue clawed arm. A half burned head. Orks torn to pieces. Blue colored shattered remains of those creatures blown to pieces. All mixed together. The citadel that had made the center square of town was in flame. Even so, mangled bodies could be made out among the ruins of the gate, or hanging from a smoking window. The orange colored sun was completely hidden by smoke.

Longtooth stood surveying all that remained of the regiments he had sent here.

"Arrrrr.... Blue beastly thick here." Longtooth said after a moment. "All gone now. Stinking, foul, nasty taste Blue-teeth ruin Longtooth smart plans. Phew-ah!" Longtooth spit onto the severed head of one the blue corpses. Then turned to face Pen.

"Come to other edge of town, you see smart Longtooth. Longtooth smarter than this human cattle, you see." Longtooth snapped. "Then smart mouth brain worm she-human get gone to tell big boss human how Longtooth make war. Forever!"

"You bring me here to see," Pen replied, "so show me smart Longtooth."

"We go!" Longtooth shouted, then turned and strutted away, followed and then enveloped by a swirling mass of Ork warriors. They had been gathering around Longtooth from all over the city. Now thousands were moving along with Pen's little force, following Longtooth's lead toward the opposite end of town.

Enough Orks went ahead that Pen no longer witnessed the hunt for surviving humans, or blue horrors. But, she could hear the weapons firing that went on, intermittently.

Without incident, Longtooth and Pen came to the far wall of the city, sometime later. Longtooth climbed the broad stairs that led to the top of the great wall of thick, white ceramic. Once there, he began to hoot and laugh. And once Pen joined him, to brag.

"Har! Longtooth smart! Humans think Orky stupid!" Longtooth shouted gleefully, "Humans think Orky only come from some places, so humans think they get out of bag this way! Ha! But Orky got cork for bottle. See how humans get caught in net!"

Pen was again thankful for her helmet. She was sure her dismay would show on her face. It could only be taken as weakness by Longtooth. There before her was a large crowd of humans. Being driven by their new Ork masters. Like cattle. Into slavery.

"Work every time!" Longtooth went on. "Leave hole, and human rats try to escape! Har! Har! Now human rats work for Longtooth! Too bad Longtooth so smart! Har! Ha!"

Pen knew the truth. These poor wretched humans were the ones that had not yet been infected by the Tyranid gene, or dominated by the mind controlling will of the Tyranid hive mind, through these blue agents of destruction. The ones dominated by the hive mind were the ones that had thrown themselves heedlessly at the Orks, at the wall breaches, and elsewhere. Only humans so dominated would attack a heavily armed band of Orks with only a piece of pipe, or empty handed. What a terrible way to sort out the innocents from the corrupted, Pen thought. Pen turned her back on the view of the human flotsam and jetsam, to face the still bragging Longtooth.

"This mean nothing." Pen broke in, "Orks catch humans before. What important now, Longtooth not see. Longtooth find out soon, oh yeah."

Longtooth miss nothing." Longtooth snapped. "Human smart mouth she not like Ork slice and dice nice human town with Blue-teeth friends!"

"Blue-teeth not friends!" Pen snapped back, "Blue-teeth put brain worm in these humans, make them fight stupid! You see humans fight before, they not throw themselves on Ork spears before! You find out, when Red-bugs put brain worm in Longtooth and make him dance pretty!"

"Har! So human she not like blue things as friends, eh?" Longtooth said around a toothy grin, "Human she not like little fun, eh?"

"We have lotsa fun when we watch Red-bugs put chop on Longtooth and Orky pals, oh yeah!" Pen growled back, "Not have to wait long, either."

"Human name own poison now." Longtooth said, no longer grinning. "Longtooth was said for human get gone. But you stay longer now. We see who laugh last. Longtooth got to much to do now to let pesty human keep pesting Longtooth." Longtooth then whirled around and shouted orders in Ork language.

Pen and her escort were taken back to their shuttles, and ordered to wait in their ship until Longtooth summoned them. Pen was more than ready to be away from the grisly horror of a planet being looted by Orks. She wondered how she would be able to continue to deal with the repulsive leader of a repulsive race.

VIII.

Two weeks passed in tense watchfulness aboard the little destroyer. The crew were needing drugs to sleep, and drugs to work efficiently, after so long a period of unremitting danger and tension. Pen was worried that the hard edge of instinctive combat skill may have been lost in the crew. That hard edge would be needed. Soon. Pen was looking at a display that said that a large space fleet had just appeared into real space some distance away. The characteristic static and interference, and other signs, all indicated that the Tyranids had arrived.

Pen leaned back to wait. She was sure it would not be long. It wasn't.

Longtooth's visage appeared on the central monitor screen.

"Smart thinking she human getta laugh on Longtooth, eh?" Longtooth's sour expression matched his sour tone. "So now human ship come down and join in laugh when Redbug maggots get here. Yes. Now."

Pen turned to look at the others in the room with her. Her four bodyguards sat impassive, they had given themselves up for dead long ago. Pen's new aide, a young man that the ship captain had sent, had darting eyes and moist look to his skin. He looked like a hunted animal. Pen turned back to the screen.

"This little ship no good sitting on ground," Pen offered, "better to get in missiles and torpedoes up here."

"Longtooth don't need human mizzels!" Longtooth shouted. "Human ship wait in hanger I say or be first target in battle! No more listen to she-human smart brain talk!"

"Turn on a beacon, we're coming." Pen said evenly. There was nothing else to do. Pen switched off as Longtooth started in with a string of insults about humans in general.

Pen watched the holos intently as the captain maneuvered the little destroyer past the great hulks Orks called ships. Quite a few had been arriving in a constant stream, ever since that broadcast of Longtooth's, weeks ago.

Each had been brimming with Ork warriors hell bent on joining in the latest war. The quick victory Longtooth won gave even more impetus to those who wanted to be part of the next victory. Pen ordered a series of spy probes to be launched. Small black plastic probes were invisible to the naked eye, to radar, and generated so little heat that a rock would re-radiate sunlight with a greater heat signature. Pen wanted to see the developments in space first hand, or at least recorded, if she had to be away.

Shortly, the destroyer had entered atmosphere, and then lowered itself into the great hanger on the beacon. Pen did not like the portent of being below ground, and a narrow opening closed over by a blast door. Sensors showed a number of other small and medium space craft parked in the cavernous underground hanger. Repeated underground Nukes made big hangers.

Pen switched on all the holos, and switched on the channel that Longtooth used. The back of Longtooth's head came into view.

"Hoi!" Pen shouted at the image, "Longtooth! Leave hanger open so our boys can join in. Hokay?"

"Arrr... Door stay open," Longtooth whirled around, and answered, "but you'sa stay inner little can. I send for you, you'sa come pretty quick! Garr..ah, Longtooth busy, pushy human wait." He blanked the screen with a snap.

"Well, that Ork makes less sense by the minute." The bodyguard called corporal said, from where he was seated, "First he wants us here RIGHT NOW, then he's put out that we are here."

"He makes perfect sense, for an Ork." The bodyguard called sergeant replied, from where he stood next to the corporal. "He's busy setting up a welcome for his new visitors. That's all they've been doing for weeks, consolidating their hold on this place. I think we're in for quite a show."

"Yes," Pen added quietly, "I needed the door open above us so that I could launch my recon probes. I plan to broadcast, as well as record, everything we can observe. If we don't get out of this with the recordings, at least the broadcasts of our progress will have gone out. They may ultimately do some good. I hope."

"Why don't you have a couple of your probes latch onto those three spires that rise above the former governor's palace?" The sergeant asked, "It'll be a great view all around the city, and for some miles out across the grasslands."

"Yes, good." Pen answered, "and they will not be flying around to be shot at by both sides. I'll lose enough probes that way, anyway."

"Glad to be of help." The sergeant said, smiling wryly.

"You can be a lot more help." Pen said, turning to face the four bodyguards. "Each of you has a different background in combat. I would like any and all evaluations of what you see. If you do not wish to speak up immediately, then speak into your comm set. I'll set up to broadcast and record everything said. Please."

"I'm not a tactical school teacher." The sergeant said smoothly. "I'm sure the others here will agree, analysis is for the experts, not us."

"You're the only experts I have. All your experience counts for something." Pen offered. "I could miss something."

"As you command, Agent." The sergeant said seriously. He looked at each of the other three, and received a nod from each. "I would suggest first that you get about two dozen Ogres in the hold outside to guard the ship." The sergeant continued. "They are all itching to do something, and no Ork will come near without armored vehicle support."

"As you command, Sergeant." Pen replied, with an impish smile. "I had almost forgotten Ogre impatience."

"Then, the second thing," The sergeant added, the wry smile back again, "turn around, the Ork and Tyranid ships have met. They're shaking hands."

Pen whirled around without comment. The less than serious quip that came to her mind would have to wait.

The two fleets had indeed met. Pen's spy probes were recording a spectacle.

The Ork ships were not dodging or maneuvering, even though the great hulking monstrosities could do so. No. Pen could see that the Ork way of war matched the Tyranid way. Great Ork ships lumbered up to a big Tyranid ship, and slapped a force field grapple on it. Any smaller Tyranid ships that tried to intervene were either "swatted" away by other force fields, or vaporized by a sudden volley of Ork missiles and heavy energy canon. Whatever fire that came from the large Tyranid ship, was likewise ignored. The sheer bulk of the Ork war vessels, as well as more force shields protecting the Ork ships, made for the appearance of Ork disdain for Tyranid firepower.

The Tyranids still preferred to ram, as well as grapple and board, enemy ships. As they had always done.

Smaller Ork space craft were frequently rammed by smaller Tyranid ships. To the destruction of both. The sky was becoming full of small Ork ships, mostly boarding torpedoes. These would smash deep into a Tyranid ship. Pen knew they were specially armored, with special force shields, and packed full of Orks. Who flooded out of the torpedoes to spread out inside an enemy ship. Human ships had already experienced Ork love of force field applications, and boarding torpedoes.

Pen saw that something new was being added to the scene of carnage, exploding and burning ships. The sudden ionization around some individual Tyranid ships told of enormous grappling beams coming from the planet. Some Tyranid ships were merely held in place, as before. But others were forced off course. To crash into another Tyranid ship – to the utter ruin of both. Or to suddenly twist down, toward the planet – to flare whitely through the atmosphere, and burst with a mighty flash on impact with the planet's surface. Pen thought that if there had been more of the grappling energy projectors, they could have been a real threat to the Tyranids. It was the same with the enormous planetary energy canons, they were deadly when they hit something, but there were too few.

Apparently the Tyranids thought there were too many guns coming from the surface. For the first time in Pen's experience, the Tyranids were sending warriors to the surface, without first expunging all defending enemy ships. In fact, it looked to Pen as if the Tyranid fleet was getting the worst of the fight in space. Ork ships kept appearing from non-space, and hurried to join the fight. They were still coming from all over the galaxy, apparently. A steady stream of individual Ork ships was coming from the edge of the star system.

With a sudden earthquake, the appearance of a new Tyranid fleet in real space close to the planet, announced itself. With a shock, Pen saw that coming out of a jump so close to a gravity source caused the expected result. A considerable number of Tyranid ships, large and small, were shredded by the sudden acceleration change. With too much gravity pulling on atoms that were still moving at non-space velocities, the result is that the atoms cannot hold together. As always, Tyranids do not care about losses, only expediency and results.

This new group – the survivors – immediately launched a swarm of landing craft at the planet also. Ork ships that had not yet engaged an enemy turned their attention to the newcomers.

Pen figured that about seven tenths of the planet's orbital sky was still held by Ork ships. The Tyranids were not driving steadfastly against the Ork ships, only keeping a corridor open for surface landings. Why? They acted like they were trying to reinforce, or rescue? Pen tried to call Longtooth, he may know what the enemy is actually up to. Only an overly decorated Ork came on, shouted something in an Ork dialect, and then switched off. If Longtooth was too busy, then it probably meant just one thing. Pen launched the atmosphere spy probes to find out. Before she switched views, Pen noticed some more bad news. Another enemy fleet had just appeared near the edge of the star system, then still another even further away. There were now five separate distinct groups of Tyranid fleets, all coming together on this one planet.

"I think I see something very bad." Pen managed to get out above a whisper. "I think the Tyranids are reassembling their vast hive fleet, right here. These five groups are made up of hive cells like we have encountered before. I think we're really in for it, my friends."

"Even if they are not all gathering here," The sergeant said, "It is still bad for the Empire. The Tyranids will have too many ships, and warriors, for any nearby forces to handle."

"Yes, and it will be very hard to get out of here, with so many bad guys trying to burn us." The corporal put in.

"You knew the job was dangerous, that's why you took it." The sergeant replied, then turned back to Pen. "Are your other probes in position yet? I would like to see what is on, up on the surface."

Pen switched channels. The holos and screens lit up with the brilliant colors of the planet's surface. The small yellow sun was high in the sky, but was made dark red by all the smoke curling skyward. The reddish glow gave things a coppery look, or colored things the color of blood.

The grasslands were on fire, the city smoldering at many sites, and flaming wreckage fell from the sky. Everywhere Pen looked, there were groups and knots of Tyranid warriors rampaging about. But this time there were no strong places waiting for the Tyranid attack. Instead, there were also groups and knots of Orks rampaging about the landscape. There were indeed Ork fortifications, but they seemed more for Orks to stage from, or go to for re-supply, not for Orks to hide behind until the Tyranids attacked.

Pen watched a group of Orks emerge from the besieged city. They tore from the gate, riding on wildly careening land vehicles of several descriptions. The group of vehicles stayed together. The Orks spotted a bunch

of Tyranids and Bio-constructs just emerging from a landing craft. They descended on the Tyranids in dusty wrath, blazing away with every gun as they came on. Orks leapt from the vehicles as they swerved just short of crashing into the landing craft. At close range, the Orks would rattle off several bursts, or hack at the limbs of Tyranids. All the Orks that could, would instantly hack to pieces any Tyranid that fell, wounded or dead.

The Tyranids, for their part, met the Ork ferocity with savagery of their own. Since only the big Tyranid warriors carried weapons, the Bio-constructs depending on tooth and claw, Pen expected the Tyranids to want to use their weapons. But no, the big Tyranid warriors seemed to most desire to rend their opponents, whenever possible. Orks running headlong into the arms of the Tyranids made it possible. Both sides took perverse pleasure in being up front and personal with their violence. Pen noted that out of about fifty Orks that attacked, there were still ten standing when the last of the thirty Tyranids and forty Bio-constructs were killed. The extra firepower and mobility from the vehicles seemed to help.

Pen switched main views. There were Tyranids in the city. But, from what Pen could make out, the Orks were hunting down the Tyranids. From atop the spires, Pen's spy probes could make out the different groups moving down the streets. Here, a small knot of Orks are ambushed by a larger group of Bio-constructs, and blue creatures. Every Ork is quickly killed. There, a bunch of Tyranids and blue horrors break cover, and run from a burning building. They are spotted by several Orks watching from rooftops. The Tyranids are caught in the street, caught by a blizzard of gelatin grenades. All incinerated. Further along, a large knot of Tyranid warriors is moving up a broad highway. They are met head-on by a flood of rampaging Orks.

Pen's attention was diverted by the sergeant clearing his throat.

"I think I see something." The sergeant said. His eyebrows were knit together, and one hand was gently pulling at one end of his dark moustache.

"What is it?" Pen asked, glad to have to look away from the sickening carnage.

"The Orks are holding their own, aren't they?" The sergeant asked. "The Tyranids are not just sweeping over the Ork defenses, as expected."

"Yes, and if the Orks continue to get fresh forces, because the Tyranids fail to seal off the planet, this could go on for a very long time." One of the other bodyguards added. As the only other female in the room, she usually kept her thoughts to herself. She was there to protect the Agent, not advise her. But, the Agent asked for some input.

"You are leading up to something." Pen said, after a moment. "Are you all in agreement? You all seem to be nodding approval of the last two comments."

The sergeant glanced at his comrades, then went on.

"Think about what we are seeing here. There is a manifest difference between this place, and other Tyranid incursions we have witnessed." The sergeant said thoughtfully, "Look again, Agent. The difference is so obvious, I almost missed it myself."

Pen turned to the screens and holos again. The most prominent view was a close in look at several Orks surprising a small group of Tyranids. The Orks leapt out of doorways and windows into the midst of the big red Tyranid warriors. The Orks were literally climbing on the tall figures, hacking and chopping, while other Orks grabbed hold of arms and legs. Tyranids were being pulled down by sheer weight of numbers, then hacked to pieces. Some Orks were shot, or slashed, or even bitten by their Tyranid opponents. The Orks seemed not to care.

"The Orks seem to have the upper hand," Pen said tentatively, "at least, when they outnumber the Tyranids. That won't help much, the Tyranids keep coming until they outnumber their prey, then sweep all before them."

"How many Orks there are, or are not, is not the issue." The sergeant answered.

"Then tell me your mind, sergeant" Pen said, sounding slightly exasperated, "I cannot see a sky full of stars, if this system's star is in the sky. Tell me what is hidden in plain sight."

"Very well." The sergeant said, a little louder. "What is so obvious that it is hidden, is the way the Orks are fighting."

"Yes, they are very savage fighters." Pen interrupted, "But I don't see where that has ever made a difference."

The sergeant waited a few moments in silence.

"Sorry." Pen said. "Please continue. I did ask for your comments."

"Individual viciousness might defeat your nearest opponent, but not an army." The sergeant said evenly, but

slightly louder still, "A savage mob can't beat a disciplined army that uses its head. These Orks, by accident or design, are having the 'upper hand' because of how they meet the enemy." The sergeant paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

"Look," He went on, "When human, or Eldar, or any allies have been attacked by the Tyranids, we have always hunkered down behind our fortifications and waited for the attack. We have been counting on our heavy defensive firepower to defeat the enemy. Whenever we did venture out, it was to counter attack, or to sortie against, the Tyranids to try to weaken the attack waves descending on us. Even our fleets have really only been conducting a series of spoiling attacks, meant to wear down our enemies before they could attack our strong places.

"And we have failed, and failed, and continue to fail. We have never defeated the Tyranids, not really. The very few times that they have been turned back were only temporary reprieves. The only defeat the Tyranids will ever acknowledge is the total destruction of every creature – ours or theirs.

"But, I'm getting off the point. The central issue is how we fight the Tyranids, compared to the Orks. We sit and wait for the Tyranids to come to us. This lets the Tyranids mass into huge armies, and gives the Tyranids the choice of time and place to attack. Time is on their side.

"The Orks are not doing this. Look at what they are doing. The Orks are attacking every group of Tyranids, or Tyranid slaves, as fast as they hit the ground. The Tyranids are being kept from massing into those huge, unstoppable waves of warriors. The Orks are keeping this fight at the level of one-on-one."

"I think I see it." Pen blurted out. "The Orks are keeping the Tyranids divided. That way the Tyranids are prevented from using their only tactic, the flood of warriors that has always overwhelmed our defensive firepower." Pen paused a moment, thoughtfully, then went on. "That's fine for this planet, but there are a lot of Tyranids out there. The Orks could fight and win for a hundred years, and not kill all the Tyranids."

"No, but there must be millions of Ork held worlds scattered across the galaxy," The sergeant answered, "at least the Empire seems to encounter them everywhere we go. I think that if all those Orks go Tyranid hunting, then the Tyranids could well be driven out of the galaxy, or be wiped out totally. Even if human kind does not survive to see that end." The sergeant said the last quietly, as if he feared it would come true, if heard.

"HMMMMMM... I think it is more imperative than ever to keep the Tyranids divided into small hive cells. We must somehow prevent a reunion of all those separate parts." Pen was looking thoughtfully at the videos again. "Even if the Orks lose this fight, the Empire may have learned something valuable."

"If the Empire uses the information." The female bodyguard added.

"What do you mean?" Pen asked, startled. "Why wouldn't we?"

"Because, humans are going to be reluctant to charge out to meet the Tyranids, exposing themselves to be cut down in the open." The corporal answered, "Very reluctant."

"I don't think that field commanders will want their troops 'wasted' in that manner, either." The sergeant said.

"But if hitting the Tyranids in small groups, before they can mass together, will ultimately win, we must do what it takes to win. That would ultimately save countless lives, of many races." Pen said firmly. She added, "There must be some way to win."

"I think that will have to wait," The sergeant interrupted, "I think you are being summoned." The sergeant jerked a thumb toward the leftmost video. Pen twisted around.

Longtooth. Shouting and gesturing from a soundless holo. And angry.

".....make human sorry not already eaten!" Longtooth was grinding his teeth, between shouts.

"What Longtooth want, now?" Pen asked.

"No time for wasted fun," Longtooth shouted, waving his arms, "lotsa Redbugs moving on ship docks! Not many of my boyz inna way of bunches of Redbugs! You betta git lotsa fighters up top and fight Redbugs less you wanna be eaten in yer can! You think you hot stuff in fight with Redbugs? Well, get hot! Longtooth needs ships at docks, you hold alla docks, you get good fight – Hah!"

"Ya, ya, I get da idea," Pen said impatiently, "Longtooth finally want more than go here, go there. We tired, we no longer playtoy for Longtooth. We hold ship docks till ya get here, then we go. Go back to our Bigboss. He'sa waiten and not like waiten."

"Longtooth tired of snotty humans. My boyz think Longtooth empty head, itch to scratch humans and eat what e'er left." Longtooth growled in return, "Longtooth think you human trash otta git gone, soon as Longtooth sure

ship docks okay. Yeah, you git soon, but not if yer slow gitten up top, now git!"

"Deal. We gone soon as you come down to ship docks, but don't take too long, or Redbugs eat yer ships anyway." Pen switched off before Longtooth could start any more talk. Pen thought Longtooth would rather talk, than fight, sometimes.

"We get to finally earn our pay." The corporal spoke up.

"If every soldier, marine, ogre, and ship's crewmember take up positions, we'll still be short handed." Pen answered, "But, we have to have some crew left, or this ship stays here."

"I have an idea." The sergeant interrupted. "Leave the minimum number of crew to operate the ship and the weapons. We will take some of the laser designators, then have this ship launch missiles up through the hanger door, programmed to angle over toward the laser signature. We can hold this tactic back until the Tyranids start to mass outside our weapons range. That ought to help break up the larger groups. We'll have to handle the smaller groups, ourselves, not enough missiles to do anything else."

"Yes, it makes perfect sense." Pen said, starting to hang extra grenades, clips, and an extra weapon on her utility harness. "Sergeant, you set it up with the ship captain. Corporal, I want you to be in charge of setting up a re-supply relay. We will burn our ammo and energy packs as fast as we can get them. My aide will stay behind to make sure our broadcasts continue to go out. Let's get up there and finish this."

IX.

Pen removed her helmet. The cold wind felt wonderful. A few ice crystals were coming down with the cold wind. Pen leaned against a rough brown outcrop of stone. The long climb, more of a run really, had made Pen hot inside her armor.

Not a single Tyranid had been near the boundary of the space docks, or hanger openings. Pen liked the idea of having the enemy climb up to reach her, and her warriors. So, Pen had ordered her people to take positions on the ridge that separated the ship docks from the main city.

Pen took inventory of her people. One hundred marines in standard battle armor. Twenty five more in the heavy battle armor similar to the kind her bodyguards wore. One hundred fifty planetary infantry in light battle armor. Two hundred fifty of the ship's crew with a distressing lack of armor, but plenty of long range laser rifles. Four bodyguards, and Pen herself. And the ninety six Ogres. They had raced ahead to the top of the ridge. The Ogres would fight their way, from the forefront. To be held back would be the worst form of insult. Pen only hoped that the Ogres would not rush headlong into any oncoming Tyranids. Pen did not want to see the Ogres' ferocity wasted.

Pen turned this way, and that, ensuring that all her people were taking up their positions. They were. Pen welcomed the fact that she was surrounded by professionals, she felt sure she would be doing good to hang onto her life, directing every facet of the coming fight would only overwhelm her, and probably get everyone killed in the bargain. Professionals do their job without prodding.

Pen turned to face the direction of the main city. She saw only what she expected. Groups and knots of Orks were hunting down every group of Tyranids, or Bio-constructs, they could find. Except for a very large group of Tyranids heading across the valley floor, toward Pen and company. These Tyranids simply brushed aside every group of Orks that rushed them. Pen could see a number of Ork groups taking up positions in front of, and below, Pen. There were too few to stop the large mass of Tyranids that were closing in, gathering other, smaller, Tyranid groups up as they advanced on the ridge. Pen's sergeant's voice came on.

"We'll give that big group a surprise, when they get closer. I don't want to use the laser designators through so much smoke. It might confuse the missile's computer. Make sure everyone's head is down when I call for a pair of missiles, they will go off close enough to be dangerous." The sergeant said.

"If the Orks can keep Tyranid ships from coming down, and blasting us off this ridge, we can make it rough for the enemy, for a while." The corporal added.

"Sergeant," Pen spoke up, "shift twenty of the marines on our left. There is a group of Tyranids coming down from the mountains over there. They could cause us a lot of trouble, coming from that way, if we are hit in the front as well."

"We'll sweep 'em." The sergeant replied.

Pen was in no position to fight, just yet. From her place in the center of the defensive line, she could see the most, and would probably fight the most, when the enemy hit her defensive positions. She had set up the destroyer's monitoring and transmission equipment to broadcast all the helmet visual sensor data, from all the helmets of all her troops, as well as her own. Pen hoped that the data would be received, and used, or else all this pain and sacrifice was wasted. Pen did not like the idea of being wasted. She put on her helmet, the Tyranids were closer now.

Pen hunkered down behind the rocky outcropping that had elevated Pen to her all encompassing view. The Orks down below were firing at the mass of approaching Tyranids. Her own troops, with the long range lasers, also began firing. The rest of Pen's people held their fire, waiting till the enemy was in effective range. The laser designators reached out, their beams only visible because of the broad spectrum enhancement of Pen's helmet sensors. Pen gave the order to duck down, too many of her troops had little, or no, protection from the blast that was coming.

Pen got down on her belly, then wedged her helmet tight against a gap in the rocks. She had to see the results. More missiles might be called for.

The missiles screamed overhead, not more than five meters up, it seemed. Low flying, dodging and weaving, missiles were harder to shoot down. Pen thought that if the missiles had been any lower, they would have parted her hair, judging by the noise they made.

The bright flame trail let Pen mark the progress of the missiles. One hit just a bit left of center, and the other to the right of center, of the half moon shaped mass of enemies. Two brilliant spheres of white radiance appeared simultaneously. The very air was destroyed within the sphere of impossible heat. The spheres appeared to collapse in on themselves, and a huge rush of air swept from behind Pen. Rushed in to fill the sudden vacuum with a thunderclap. Right behind the thunderclap, a return rush of a compressed air wave swept dust and small gravel into Pen's face. Through the low cloud of kicked up dust, Pen could see a large cloud of dirt mushroom up from the site of each Nova missile detonation.

Unlike nuclears, Nova bomb plasma lasted too short a time to superheat air into a rising fireball. Instead, the super hot, but short-lived, plasma sphere destroyed the very atoms it contacted, leaving a few ionized atomic nuclei where once there was a molecule. And no lingering nuclear byproducts. Nukes had their place, but not here, not now.

Pen watched the dust blow away on the freshening breeze. Yes, both hits were perfect. The half moon shaped mass of enemies had been divided into three pieces by the pair of blasts. And the center section of Tyranids had been doubly hammered, rendering it nearly nonexistent. There were a pair of tiny piles in the center of the pair of craters made by the twin detonations. All that remained of everything caught in the sphere of super heat, crushed together by the inward collapse. The two outer wings of the Tyranid mass picked themselves up, and continued to advance.

Pen called into her comm set, alerting everyone to open fire. Under the cover of the dust clouds, several more small groups of Tyranids and Bio-constructs had continued to advance. Now that they were closer, the Tyranids were charging at full tilt.

The Orks below broke cover and met the Tyranids head on. The sharp and vicious fight interfered with the human troops ability to target the enemy. More groups of Tyranids converged on the position, knocking down, rending and tearing the last Orks.

The weapons fire from the ridge line grew in intensity until the lower slopes of the ridge appeared to be on fire from the constant impacts and detonations. And still the Tyranids advanced into the hurricane of human weapons fire. The Tyranids tread on the broken remains of their own with the same disregard as when they tread on the ruins of their enemies.

Tyranid weapons fire impacted all around Pen. The very stones seemed to burn under that fire. Thick corrosive smoke curled around Pen. The enemy seemed to be trying to converge on Pen, perhaps sensing the source of a threat to them. This was a mistake. The ridge was formed in a wide "V" shape, with Pen at the center. The Tyranids merging on the center meant that the human forces on the wings of the ridge could fire on the exposed flanks of the enemy, without coming under fire themselves.

Four times the Tyranids rushed the center of the human positions, to the destruction of the four groups that

attempted it. It was almost murder.

Three more times were missiles launched, but all three times were to Pen's rear, toward the mountains beyond the space port. The Orks there had been keeping the Tyranids chopped up in little pieces. But, continuing landings by the Tyranids had made for several large groups to come together and attempt the ship docks. The missiles had left few enough survivors that the Orks could easily deal with them.

Four times the laser designators were used on Tyranid ships that came to blast the ridge. Four times had a Tyranid ship been plucked from the sky.

New trouble was coming. Pen looked up and saw the trails of many bright shooting stars. The signature of more Tyranid landing craft coming in.

Pen checked on the re-supply to her troops. The speedy six wheeled vehicles were scurrying back and forth in reckless haste. Some of the wounded were taken back to the destroyer on them.

Pen had been firing steadily, along with the rest of her warriors. The humans had not yet come to close grips with the Tyranids, so the Ogres had been forced to hide back among the rocks and wait impatiently. The Ogres were the only ones who were not in need of more ammunitions. The new landings of the Tyranids promised to change that.

The pause in the fighting gave Pen a chance to pull out a small holo-orb, and check on the progress of her probes, as well as what was happening elsewhere. The probes in space still functioned, but only the probes Pen had attached to the spires were still in operation. All the other flying probes were gone. Pen sent the codes to launch a new series of probes to key locations. The fighting was picking up again as she finished.

Pen stuck her weapon through the gap between two rocks. The enemy was closer this time. Four large groups of Tyranids were approaching, with five more groups following a short distance behind. Orks were descending on these groups in increasing numbers. Ork vehicles were charging in recklessly, with battalions of Ork infantry following behind in blocks of colors, red, yellow, black, green, blue, and some mixtures of colors. The city was getting as much, or more, attention.

"We can't fire any more missiles at those Tyranids approaching." The sergeant called over the comm set. "We would snuff too many of the Orks trying to help us kill the damned Tyranids. Those groups are barely big enough to use a missile on anyway, and the groups are staying far enough apart that I can't nail two groups with one missile. These buggers are getting too smart."

"Then we do it the hard way." Pen answered, evenly. She had known it would come to this, anyway. It always had. "Have the planetary infantry we were holding in reserve charge up to the front of the line, just as the enemy are about to hit our front. That way the poorly armored ship crewmembers can fall back, and give cover fire, as well as pick off any enemy that break through."

"It will be done, Agent." The sergeant replied. "The Ogres will be told to wait until the planetary infantry join the front line, that way the massive firepower they carry can be most effective, at the closest range."

"Yes, sergeant," Pen added, "tell the Ogres that the 'lady in black' will honor them always, if they wait a little longer to join the fight. Tell them that I already know they will fight magnificently."

The sergeant didn't answer again. Pen knew he was too busy. The enemy was upon them.

Pen fired a whole clip, one shot at a time, marking her targets. She quickly put in another clip of tiny rockets. The enemy did not always fall when one of the explosive rockets tore into it. The ten foot tall red horrors had to be shot to pieces, often times. Only once in a while was one hit enough to down a Tyranid warrior, so that it stayed down. Pen set her weapon to fire bursts of three little rockets. She hoped that would do it. The blue devils that accompanied the Tyranid warriors did not always need so many hits, but sometimes one hit was not enough, either. Three hits would make sure of them, if she hit the fast moving blue streaks.

Pen went through the next clip more quickly. It looked like a laser cutting through vegetation, the way the enemy appeared to go down in rows. But every time a warrior went down, another Tyranid was just behind, and it would advance several long strides before it too was cut down. The enemy would be upon them in just moments. Pen quickly changed clips again, pulled her second weapon from its hook, and called for the planetary infantry to charge up.

Pen stood up, and took a step back. From the corner of her eye she saw her bodyguards, and others, do the same. Rows of Tyranid heads appeared above the ridge of rocks the humans had hid behind. A number of the

heads exploded, or were splotted with dark holes, in a moment. A line of blue terrors appeared on the top of the rocks, all at once. Pen fired both weapons, holding them at her hip, as she rotated at the waist to fan out her firing. Her second weapon had a belt, back to the holster, so that a continuous supply of shells were fed to the short barreled weapon. Each shell it fired contained a dozen dagger-like blades. An instant after each blade sliced into their target, the white phosphor inside explodes out. It was not a nice way to die. Pen continued to fire steadily as more and more of the Tyranids, and other Bio-constructs, appeared. Lasers were cutting past Pen's head, from the ship's crew behind Pen. An Ogre lifted a Tyranid over his head, and threw it back down the slope. Another Ogre was covered with three of the blue demon things. The Ogre was plucking them off, and crushing their heads, one by one. Then the Ogre fell, and Pen could not see him, anymore. Pen began to think they should all back down to a new defensive position.

A sudden, heavy, thud to the left side of Pen's helmet. Pen saw hot sparks of white light, and she fell, blacking out.

.... Longtooth and a huge red Tyranid bending over Pen Longtooth laughing and chewing Longtooth reaches down, and tears a strip of flesh from Pen's belly and hands it to the Tyranid who puts it in his mouth, while reaching down with another clawed hand and pulls out some of Pen's insides pulls them toward its mouth

Pen wakes with a yell, sits bolt upright – a Tyranid is just bending over her, a sword-like weapon raised over its head. As the sword starts down, the horrid red thing is blown to pieces. Pen jumps up, screaming, firing her short barreled weapon in a constant stream of shells, her other weapon empty.

Then the second weapon runs out of shells, at last. Pen draws the short, curved, energy sword from the leg sheath. A blue devil-creature leaps on Pen, knocking her on her back. As she falls, she screams again, slashing wildly at the thing's head and belly. It tries to tear off her head, but dies before the armor gives way. Pen rolls from under the corpse.

She takes a moment to reach up, and recover her weapons, and then leaps up to sprint down to join the others at the second defensive position. She is the last to do so. The only remaining of her warriors at the first line of defense, are the dead. She sees that she only made it back alive, because the enemy were not coming as thickly, just now.

Pen jammed another clip into her first weapon, while calling for another belt for her second weapon, and scanning this new position for some idea of how many of her other people were still alive, all at once. About half of her people were still with her, Pen saw. A belt for her weapon would be a few minutes getting to her, she heard. Pen pulled one of the grenades from her utility harness with her left hand, her left thumb poised over the actuator.

The Tyranids came on again. Only now the falling ice crystals were falling thickly, as the little sun started to go down behind the distant mountains. Pen heard someone yell that the snow was interfering with the lasers. Then Pen threw her grenade with all her might, and started to aim burst after burst into the enemy. The enemy were coming in a mass of dark shadows, coming out of the falling snow as from behind a curtain. Pen saw that they were coming in a solid wall, this time. Pen threw another grenade, and emptied her clip.

And suddenly her ears were full of hoarse yells, curses, and screams. A wave of Orks passed over, and through, the human line of defense. Without thinking, Pen snapped another clip into her weapon, even as she rose to see what the hell was happening. The Orks crashed into the oncoming Tyranids like a sea wave crashes into rocks. Only now the scene was of Tyranids borne down under several Orks each. Orks that were chopping with axes, or shooting large, short barreled, pistols into the face of a Tyranid, or both.

"HA! HAR!" From next to Pen's right ear.

Pen nearly jumped out of her skin, and whirled to face the noise. Longtooth. Looking very amused, judging by the leering grin.

"Bet she-warrior think Longtooth not get here, huh?" Longtooth rumbled, loudly. "Longtooth take long way around, gather lotsa boyz to kick Redbugs in teeth. Great fun! Good eating! Har! Humph!"

"Longtooth got strange way of keeping bargain!" Pen yelled over the din of battle. "Redbugs coming thick over here!"

"Longtooth keep bargains," Longtooth laughed back, "even with nasty twisty brained she human. Har! Har!"

Before either could speak another word, a huge red Tyranid warrior appeared out of the shroud of snow. Aiming a sweeping sword blow at Longtooth's neck. Pen twisted, and fired off a pair of three round bursts – shattering a pair of the Tyranids arms on one side. Longtooth fired also, hitting the lower arm on the other side. And then he leapt onto the upper torso of the Tyranid. That an Ork so big could jump so high, amazed Pen into momentary immobility. Pen saw Longtooth stick a sword into the upper part of the Tyranid, and then arch his head



forward to clamp onto the Tyranid's neck, Longtooth's other arm forcing the Tyranid's head back. The Tyranid raked Longtooth's back armor with its last undamaged claw. Both fell, as the Tyranid fell over backward.

Then Longtooth reared upright, turned to face Pen, and spit out a huge chunk of Tyranid throat he had ripped off. The Tyranid did not twitch. Gore made dark streaks on Longtooth's chin. And colored his one exposed tusk, darkly.

"Bloodfang! Bloodfang! Bloodfang!" All the nearby Orks were shouting. "Bloodfang has come!"

Longtooth raised his arms and howled a blood curdling cry.

"Longtooth now Bloodfang to his people!" Longtooth shouted. "Bloodfang of long ago they say now in me! Bloodfang now leader of unending war!"

Longtooth strode up to Pen in two swaggering paces.

"Humans go back to ship. Leave here." Longtooth said, almost quietly. "Humans help Longtooth be Bloodfang. Bloodfang grants humans life. Go tell human Bigboss how Orks fight unending war. Orks happy. Go."

With that, the new war-priest - Bloodfang - turned his back on the humans. They were no longer any concern. He began to animatedly direct his boyz into renewed ferociousness against the Tyranids.

As Pen ordered her people to hurry back to the ship, she thought she heard Bloodfang say: "What a hard fight, what a lovely war."

In no time, the humans had re-boarded their little destroyer. Some of the troops had clung to the returning six wheelers, risking falling from the smooth sided thing, in an effort to get far away, as fast as possible.

The destroyer blasted out of the large opening in the ground on a huge column of smoke, every thruster burning maximum. Once out of atmosphere, the plasma engines were kicked in to add to the thrusters, which would normally be shut down. But the drive to be away from Orks, Tyranids, and captivity to politics, was so great that caution be damned.

The destroyer swerved and weaved its way through the press of Ork hulks in orbit around the planet. The Tyranid ships were still only holding open a corridor of access to the planet. For whatever reason, Pen no longer cared.

Pen felt relief flooding over her in a dizzying wave. All the pain. All the unending tension. All the uncertainty. All the pain. She collapsed into a chair next to her comm equipment. Still on. Pen hoped that damned, forsaken, Inquisitor had gotten whatever the hell she wanted. Pen knew she could never repeat these experiences, or even the threat of these events, ever again.

The little destroyer neared its intended jump point, above the elliptic plane of this star system. With a prolonged series of brilliant flashes, an enormous number of arriving ships announced themselves. The destroyer captain frantically ordered his ship to the alternate jump point. The destroyer bent its course to avoid the arriving mass of Ork warships and transports. A new fleet to add to the growing might of Bloodfang. Pen thought that maybe that Ork was indeed the reincarnation of that ancient name.

The little destroyer reached its other jump point, and leapt into non-space with bone jarring suddenness.

Pen fell asleep on the corner couch, her armor only half off.

Chapter Six

Epilog

The little destroyer was hovering just over the huge eagle painted on the bows of the big cruiser. It looked as if the eagle's talons might be clasping the little destroyer. The Agent had returned to her Inquisitor.

"I believe your task was a success, Pen." Lynx was saying, as she stood before a seated Pen. "All the galaxy monitored your transmissions, since you chose to break with tradition, and send all your broadcasts in the clear. We even monitored the Ork's broadcasts."

"We saw your ordeal," Lynx added quietly, "all of it."

After a few quiet moments, Pen spoke up.

"So many killed. So much suffering." Pen was nearly whispering. "Two of my bodyguards grievously wounded. The corporal killed. My aide killed, trying to bring supplies. Half the ship's crew, and more than half of the marines and soldiers killed. All the loyal Ogres killed. What a price to call a success. All my fault."

"War has always been a waste." Lynx almost whispered in return. "A waste of talent. A waste of worlds. A terrible waste of unimaginable possibilities, with every death. That is why every true warrior wants peace, more than life itself. It is the holy cause of every true, thinking creature in the galaxy. The holy cause that makes us all take up the path of the warrior. To try to buy a time of peace for others, somewhere, with our lives. Those who fight for the sheer joy of the fight, are shallow and base creatures, whether human or alien."

After a few more moments, Lynx went on, still almost whispering.

"You have a memory that will not let you forget a thing. I know you will not believe it, but in time it will all hurt less." Lynx said in as velvety a voice as she could muster. "I know that the galaxy has been bought a chance. You must come to know that the sacrifices of everyone were not in vain. I will try to help."

Pen looked up to stare at Lynx. For the first time, a trail of tears glistened on Pen's cheeks, while before her Inquisitor.

The arrowhead shaped cruiser, and the little destroyer, fell into non-space together. A new task was calling them. Even before rest and healing were complete.