



HORIZON

**WARP RIFT**

PRESENTS

**REG STEINER**

**A TYRANID WAR**

CHAPTERS 7

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INTERNAL ART: STUGMEISTER, JUDDSKI

## Chapter 7

# A Very Little Affair

### I.

The figure stood silhouetted against the skyline. The wind whipped his long blond brown hair, the gray ragged clouds scudding hurriedly across the storm wracked sky behind him.

It is not wise to frame oneself against a bright sky where an enemy can see you, but this warrior was unafraid. He knew the enemy was there, and he knew that the enemy were aware of him. He was also a Captain, leader of a brotherhood of Marines, warriors for their Emperor, who named themselves Centurions after that famous one hundred.

The Captain surveyed the distant fortress a final time. The shimmer and wavering air looked like heat waves rising before the fortress. This cold, windblown part of the planet had never known heat waves. The powerful force field was revealed by the bending of the light in that way. The fortress was dug into the distant cliff face, so that a single face, a single means of approach, was all that was revealed. The weapons turrets, the firing ports, and the shields all added up to a formidable place to attack. At least the enemy thought so. The Captain was about to teach them that this was not so. With practiced indifference, the Captain turned his back on his enemies, and calmly stepped down the steep slope to the waiting marines just behind the ridge.

A lieutenant stepped up to the Captain, and also removed his own helmet.

"I just received word Captain," The Lieutenant said loudly into the wind, "the two cruisers will be coming over the orbital horizon in just a few more minutes. They will begin the bombardment the moment they do. Both ship commanders say that their orbital speed is such that they will not be able to fire for more than four minutes. Not enough to even strain that powerful of a force shield."

The Captain smiled. "The cruisers, and other ships for that matter, need only net any pirate ships that try to blast off the surface. The force shield must stay up for my plan to work." The Captain then snapped his helmet into place with one smooth motion.

"Permission to question the Captain." The Lieutenant said evenly into the comm set, after following his Captain's lead and replacing his helmet.

"One question, then we must be ready for our assault to begin." The Captain replied.

"Yes sir," The Lieutenant began. "What purpose will the bombardment serve if it cannot pierce the shield? Won't we still take heavy casualties crossing so much open ground?"

"That's two questions. But the one answer will serve for both." The Captain said. The Captain looked out across his troops. All two hundred sets of helmet lenses were on him and the Lieutenant. They were on an open comm frequency. "These pirates may know how to fight, but they are ignorant of war. The shield they use prevents firing out, as well as in at them. In four minutes, we must all be hard against the edge of the shield. The pirates will not dare drop their defense to fire at us while the bombardment lasts. Their best defense will prove their undoing. Now you all know my mind, and my plan. Remember, we must smash through to the prisoners as fast as possible, before the enemy is aware we are here to rescue, rather than punish. To the edge of the ridge now, brothers."

In a moment, all two hundred marines were pressed close together, close to the top of the ridge. From even a small distance, the varying shades of green that made up the brotherhood's armor made the top of the ridge look as if green growing things had at last taken root in this desolate place.

Without moving enough to dislodge a grain of sand, they all waited the remaining few minutes for the end of the silence.

Without a sound, a brilliant flash lit up the surrounding landscape all the way to the horizon. Then: Bwaamm!!

Before the sound completely died away, all the green armored warriors were up, and bounding toward the far cliff wall. The jump sets on the backs of each marine fired briefly, lifting them into a series of shallow bounds, firing again just as each marine neared the ground to prevent too severe an impact to the powered armor. In this way the marines were covering the distance at about ninety-five kilometers per hour.

A number of specially ceramic covered reentry vehicles tore through the atmosphere, to crash into the enemy shield in a series of kilometer wide flares of super hot plasma. The continuous flash and flare of beam weapons, scattering across the face of the energy shield, made for weird and garish contrasts of light and shadow across the landscape. While the hard charging marines were still five kilometers away, the last of the big missiles burned along the perimeter of the shield. A wide swath of the ground glowed white hot along the boundary of the shield, bubbling and smoking. The near constant stream of beamer blasts continued to rain down, into the enemy shield, from increasingly steep overhead angles.

The charging marines had arrayed themselves into two lines of one hundred marines, one behind the other, each marine separated by twenty meters in the line, and two hundred meters between lines. Maneuvering room to allow high speed changes in direction.

Just as the marines neared the enemy shield, they all began to converge again, massing together to concentrate their power.

The last strokes of the hammering from space fell only a moment before the marines reached the now redly glowing energy shield. For a moment, the enemy was at a loss because of the sudden quiet. Then, the energy shield snapped off with a final flare of released energy, into the faces of the marines. Every fortress turret and portal erupted with a stream of weapons fire.

A quick burn from the jump sets, and the marines were against the walls, atop the turrets, or firing into slits and portals, before all the defenders could find their weapons triggers. The marines were on them so quickly, most defenders were only just realizing what was happening.

Turrets erupted in flame and smoke, pieces sailing through the air. Steady glare of white, as sections of wall, and the gates, melted and collapsed under the onslaught of marine heavy weapons, carried into battle as you would carry a pistol.

The rapidly bounding green clad figures sweep into the fortress through many openings, within moments of each other. The fight for the inside of the fortress takes barely longer than the crossing of the open ground had taken.

The marines charge down passageways, firing steadily. Doors collapse, and grenades arc into the center of the room beyond the door. The marine that tossed the grenade is already at the next door, repeating the procedure, before the first grenade impacts and explodes. And always the marine's weapon is hammering steadily, seemingly in every direction. The fortress is filled with the sound of the steady hammering of marine weapons.

A bare few of the pirates are able to respond to the suddenness of the assault. A very few manage to pour a stream of fire into the marine that suddenly appears before them. Sometimes they hit the marine, sometimes they don't. The rest of the pirates that are able to respond to the suddenness of the assault choose to run. One lone destroyer sized ship rockets out of the underground tube it had sheltered in.

The pirates are a cross section of every space faring race in the galaxy. Some are from warrior races. These do not run. These pirates stand and die. The marines knew this would be so, with some of their opponents. The marines met the last of these in hand to hand battle, blade to blade, in the darkened passageways.

Then, only the wind could be heard, as it carried away the smoke of battle.

## II.

The Captain sat on the side of an overturned great chair. Three paces to one side was the ruined corpse of the pirate captain-leader. An Eldar by race, the pirate leader must have been a warrior before his corruption. Ambushed upon entering the room, the Captain and Eldar had struggled for some moments, power armor against power armor, locked in a death dance embrace. The Captain at the last activated his jump set at just the right moment. The Eldar caught the full force of the thrust on the stone ceiling. Stunned, the Eldar could not prevent the Captain from breaking an arm free. The Captain fired a single shot into the base of his opponent's neck, and let the body fall where it now lay. When the echo of the shot died away, all was quiet throughout the fortress.

The green silhouette of the lieutenant appeared in the doorway, framed by the fragments of the shattered double doors.

"We have found and released the prisoners." The lieutenant said quietly. He had seen his commander brood before. "They all require medical attention. We have also found one that claims to be an Inquisitor. She needs

medical attention as well, but commands me to bring her to you."

"Where is she?" The Captain asked.

"Her stretcher is being carried up from the cave below."

"Bring her here." The Captain said simply.

"Aye." The lieutenant replied, then vanished into the dark passage.

A few minutes later, the Captain was looking down on a woman in a thin white covering, arms and legs sticking out from under the thin covering, and beyond the edges of the stretcher. This woman did not want anything touching her hands or feet. Her hands and feet were blackened from fire. The effort at control of the pain, the effort at control of the mind of this woman, was carving deep lines on her face.

"I am an Inquisitor." Lynx stated coldly, she said the next sentence more warmly. "I have great need of you, good Captain."

"Inquisitor, or no, you will be taken to a shuttle, and then to my cruiser. There you will have the medical care you need to mend. The truth of who you are can wait for you to heal." The Captain said, almost kindly.

"My time is too precious to waste while I drift in the tanks." Lynx said firmly, "You must assist me in my task immediately."

"While you sleep in the tanks, we will confirm who you are." The Captain replied, just as firmly, "I will not take up a task of someone unknown to me." With a motion of his left hand, the Captain indicated for the two marines who brought her to carry her off.

Lynx had taken the measure of this man in a moment. Further insistence was a wasted effort. It would probably be taken as weakness to pursue a lost cause. Maybe he was right. Relief from the pain would be welcome as well. It was taking too much effort, too many mental resources, to block the pain. Lynx surrendered to her fate.

The Captain watched the woman be carried out. Inquisitor or not, the Captain felt certain that the woman was trouble, in several forms.

A sergeant came forward with a video log. The Captain took it, and viewed the contents. The log said that nearly two thousand pirates had been killed, and a further three hundred were captured. A small ship had tried to shoot its way out of the system, but was now a smoldering shell. The log also said that sixteen marines were dead, and twenty eight were wounded. All the wounded would fight again. The Captain read the names of every one of the casualties. He knew every one.

The Captain began to give orders. He wanted to be quit of this place in twelve hours. There was much to do.

### III.

Lynx lay staring at the polished metal ceiling, her mind fighting to quell the frustration. Just lying here, waiting, would drive her mad she feared. She had been awake long enough for two meal periods to pass, and still she lay strapped down, alone, tubes in the veins of her upper legs and neck. Lying on the too stiff bed, feeling her newly cloned skin itch, was all she had been able to do for hours. Yes, she would surely go mad any moment now.

The whisper of the enviro-room door opening and closing, behind her head, caused Lynx to forget everything she had been thinking. Her mind snapped into focus, and waited.

"Would you care for someone to intrude on your thoughts?" A barely heard voice asked from behind Lynx's head.

"I would welcome any distraction from this sterile loneliness." Lynx replied.

"I promise to be a distraction." The voice was louder, and firm. Then the tall male form came around into Lynx's view. He was wearing a one piece garment of white, with a broad green trim around the edges. His hair was long and blond brown. Uncharacteristic for a marine to have long hair. It was the Captain, of course.

"I have been waiting impatiently to see you," Lynx began. "I would have you order me released from here. This cold metal can is another form of quiet torture for me."

"I can well imagine, if you are an Inquisitor." The Captain stated, matter of factly. "I am your first visitor because I ordered all personnel to stay away. I could not have an Inquisitor let slip some terrible secret in front of an innocent, while hallucinating from rehabilitation drugs. I will not have needless executions."

"I see you have heard some things about the role of the Inquisitor." Lynx managed to say without bitterness. "But, if you have heard even half-truths about my people, I have heard nothing of yours. Can the Captain Leader of

so many spare some time? Time to tell an unknown female of this place, and who you are?"

"I came here because I can spare a little time." The Captain said, the faintest hint of a smile beginning around the edges of his eyes. "I also believe you are an Inquisitor. I can think of no one who would wish to claim that title, knowing that servants of the Emperor would certainly check on the truth of the claim. I have come to answer your questions, and put your mind at ease. We should have had confirmation by now, so it cannot be much longer."

"If you really believe me, then let me up from here." Lynx said, raising her voice. "There is a terribly important task that I must take up again, every minute lost could mean uncounted lives."

"I am sure." The Captain replied, in an infuriatingly calm manner, "Think a moment, Inquisitor. Were you still in that dungeon, or dead, what would become of your task? Think Madam Excellency, is the urgency from the task, or from your desire to meet that task?"

A short silence followed, as Lynx's eyes burned fiercely into the eyes of the strange man before her.

"I would be well pleased, if you would call me Lynx." Lynx said lightly. "I think titles are wasted in this place." After another moment, she asked, "How shall I call you, if not Captain?"

"To some, I am known as William, if that will also well please you." The Captain replied, also lightly.

There was another moment of silence, as each studied the other. There was more than words being spoken so lightly, the meanings had to be considered.

At last, Lynx asked, "I would really like to know more of you and your people, would you tell me of yourselves? Please?"

"The Brotherhood historian would happily spend hours telling you of our order." The Captain said, seriously, "I do not have that much time. So, I will tell you a little of us. But first, you must promise to tell me how I came to find an Inquisitor, instead of a Fleet Commander's son, in a pirate's cesspool."

"If it will well please you, William, then I will tell you the tale of how I came to be at your mercy." Lynx said in mock seriousness.

"It would well please me. Lynx." William replied, also in mock seriousness. The smile around his eyes was deeper now.

"I will begin with how our order came to be." William began, "If you understand our beginnings, then you will understand us."

"After the great civil war that nearly destroyed the Empire, the Emperor realized that whole legions, whole armies, whole brotherhoods, had been maimed or destroyed. The Emperor authorized new brotherhoods of marines to be founded. Ours was one such."

"The final great battle, that ended the rebellion, spanned whole star systems. In one such system, an Earth like planet had been well colonized, and so was well populated. It was also well fought over. So well, that it was laid waste. The populations nearly extinct. The renegade army was totally destroyed. And for a while, it seemed that the Imperial armies had been totally destroyed, as well."

"But it was not so. Gradually, a survivor would stumble out of the smoldering ruins here, crawl from among the mounds of dead on the plain over there, walk down from the cold heights away beyond. Gradually, each of these found one of the others who had survived. Then small groups formed, and discovered the other small groups. Until finally, all the survivors had gathered in one place after a year. When they were all together, at last, there were one hundred survivors."

"This was when they discovered the miracle that had occurred. The survivors were all from different armies, different brotherhoods, and some survivors were not even marines. They all discovered that they had two things in common, whatever kind of warrior they had been. First, they had all survived the conflagration. Second, they were all from the ranks of what was called noncommissioned officers. In the ancient past they had been called Centurions, the one over the one hundred, rather than sergeant or NCO. So strong an omen could not be denied."

"When relief forces came to rescue the one hundred survivors, they managed to be taken to Earth. They begged to form a new marine brotherhood. The Emperor's permission was given gladly, and named them the Centurions."

"Our founders were given this segment of the galaxy to patrol, guard, and protect. They recruited, trained, and built up the brotherhood to ten thousand warrior marines. Those one hundred heroes led the campaign to pacify this sector, and end the anarchy out here."

"Here the Centurions keep the Empire's laws, and stand in the way of those that would return anarchy to this

part of the galaxy." William finished in the same even voice as he began. It was as if he had told Lynx the sky was blue, the truth was that obvious.

"I did not know your history," Lynx said in a quiet voice, "I only knew that a marine brotherhood, by that name, kept the Emperor's laws out here. Without the need of Inquisitors."

"It has been so for many years." William said, equally as softly, "Will you now tell me how you came to be at my mercy?"

Lynx lay quietly for a moment, considering. She would need the help of these fine warriors, for what now must be done. She would rather that the help be offered, but she would command these fine warriors to her task, if she must. The truth could bring that offer of help.

"I have been under an assumed name and title for some months," Lynx began, in her usual semi-severe tone, "in an effort to bring some order to this part of the galaxy.

"My main burden has been to find and destroy the Tyranid invaders. But along with that comes other related tasks. I was ordered here to try to find a way to bring the pirates that infest these provinces into an agreement. The pirates have grown strong. They have many ships, many fighters, and many spies. We know they have grown strong because so many of the Imperial forces are away fighting the invader. I had hoped to get the pirates to stop their raids and looting. I even dared to hope that I could convince the pirates to join in the defense of these sectors.

"I failed. I succeeded only in getting my bodyguard killed, my trade ship captured, its crew enslaved."

Lynx stopped for a moment, and stared into the impassive eyes of William. Lynx thought it possible that William was reading the entire story from between Lynx's words, so that things left unsaid were out in the open, anyway. It was a disturbing thought.

"At the last, my bodyguard stole my Inquisitor's medallion," Lynx began again, "as his last effort to save my life. He succeeded. When our ship was disabled and boarded by the two pirate destroyers chasing us, the pirates discovered my stolen medallion hidden on my bodyguard. He was torn to pieces by wild beasts, in a pit near where you found me. I was being tortured just to find out if I knew anything of value. I was to be killed when they were through questioning me, there was not going to be enough left to make a good slave."

Lynx paused again, a moment, then continued.

"I have not thanked you properly for my rescue and rehabilitation. Thank you."

"I would have commanded the same sort of operation if I had known you were there." William said solemnly, "As I did not know, I can only say that I am glad to have rescued some citizens of the Empire. You're welcome."

"I have been meaning to ask," Lynx said around a smile, "how is the son of the Fleet Commander?"

The smile around the edges of William's eyes had just reappeared, only to vanish again.

"He's dead." William said quietly. "The lad was in an interrogation room, getting individual attention, just as we struck. The interrogator slit the lad's throat at the first shots. We also failed. That interrogator did not escape, though. We have her locked up in a little metal cylinder not too different from this one. We will hand her over to the Fleet Commander's prosecutor when we reach my planet. She will get justice in the vacuum of space."

"No." Lynx said flatly. "She will be given to me. I met her also. She knows things that the Inquisitor, I, must find out. You believe that I am an Inquisitor, William. You must hold her for me."

William became stiff, impassive.

"You are not an Inquisitor yet." The voice of a Captain, as William turned to leave. "You can cause me as much trouble as you like, when confirmation comes through. Until then, I keep my word." From the door, he said, "Heal quickly. Inquisitor."

The door hissed shut. Lynx again was staring at the polished metal ceiling. Thinking.

#### IV.

The Council of the Thirty-nine met in full session. All three families were present, with their council of thirteen. Such a meeting had not taken place since the Imperial fleets had left for the wars, years ago. There must be some great undertaking, or emergency, for the full council to consider. Or the three greatest pirate families the galaxy had ever known would not all be gathered here, now.

Zeevo thrust and pushed, elbowed and levered his way to the front of the great circular balcony, above the main congregation. Coming late to the meeting, because of the news he had received, he could only gain entrance up

here. He must get to where he could see, and maybe, be heard. Zeevo grasped the metal railing and held on against the press of other beings that wished to be near the front.

The first announcements were not yet made. Good.

After a few moments, the comm broadcasters hissed and popped loudly. The noise they make when first powered up. The large assembly of beings fell quiet at this sign that the proceedings had begun.

The first speaker, a Ramoran, took position in the center cage, where all three of the huge triangle shaped council tables pointed. The bars of the cage reminded the audience, and the speaker, that the speaker was a prisoner of the words spoken there. In a society of thieves and cutthroats, rough justice was quick. And final.

"As representative of the oldest family in our society," the Ramoran began, "I have been elected to announce the purpose of this assembly. There is no time to waste with petty matters of trade, or grudges, or judging the share out of booty. The existence of our society, and every one of us, is in peril."

The speaker paused for a moment as the expected rumble of many voices rose, then fell off again to silence. From Zeevo's vantage point, all the voices sounded like mocking disbelief.

"There is an Inquisitor in the sector, and this time after all of us!" The Ramoran paused again.

This time there was only unmoving silence.

"If the full Inquisition comes here, there will be no stone to hide under!" One of the council members near shouted into a comm piece, after three seconds of silence.

"Everyone knows that the Inquisition could bring the entire Imperial military against us, should they wish." The Ramoran answered back. "This council is here to decide what to do with this news, not compete to see who can monger the most fear." The dark mane of hair on the Ramoran's head, neck, and shoulders stood out, waving to emphasize his words.

"The situation is already in hand." A new voice. "Yield the cage."

An Eldar, garbed in black, platinum, and gold stood up from the center of the table he had been seated behind, among one of the three great families. The glint and flash of blue sapphires was visible even in the balcony, as the Eldar moved, as he took the place of the Ramoran. The Ramoran only moved a couple of paces away.

"I have received a series of reports from a kinsman," The Eldar began, "dated only a few standard star-cycles ago. A ship was attacked and taken by my kinsman. An Inquisitor was discovered on board by the distinctive medallion hidden on his person. That human was torn to pieces and devoured by cave fang-rats." The Eldar paused a moment while an outburst of voices rose and fell in response to the news, much like the sound of a sea wave on a stony shore. With the subsiding of the noise, the Eldar continued. "This news was received and decoded only a cycle ago. There was no time to address all those bidden to gather here. My clan and family have already removed the threat we are here to debate." The smugness of the Eldar's voice spoke of his family's claim to greater power on the council, now.

"That is a lie!" Zeevo yelled. The press of beings around Zeevo suddenly drew back, leaving Zeevo exposed, leaning against the rail with his left fist in the air. There is no surer way to start a fight then to call a thief a liar. The crowd did not want to be in the line of fire.

Zeevo waited until the expected assassin guards came for him. It was only a couple of moments, but being an exposed target for so long was a little unnerving. He hoped again that his instructions from the family council head had been as well planned as her reputation for intrigue.

A few moments later, Zeevo reached the center of the great chambers, the cage, the bright focused light, and the Eldar waiting by the cage edge, fingering the handle of a small laser cutter. A voice boomed from the far edge of one of the triangular tables.

"Take the cage and finish your accusation, or be bled where you stand!"

"No." Zeevo said calmly, remembering that his voice was already amplified from this stage. "I have all the truth on this."

Zeevo held up a crystal sphere, an inch and a half across. The concentrated light made it flash from reflections off the surfaces within. An assassin guard took the sphere, and with four great strides, crossed the open space between the cage and the nearer edge of one of the tables. He placed the sphere in a holo-projector. The lights dimmed to a pale grayness, as above the cage, a huge holo appeared.

There was no sound, only a picture of a fortress, seen from without. Then, two lines of green clad armored

figures appeared over a ridge. A bombardment of the fort had begun at almost the same moment. In very few minutes, the marines, they were plainly Imperial marines, had crossed the curve of the valley floor to the force shield. By some arcane magic, the force field went down just as the marines reached it. Treachery inside? No matter. The marines swarmed over the wall face, and disappeared inside in moments, leaving only two of their number slain outside the walls.

The recordings were then obviously clipped. Highlights of what followed. A shuttle landed. A number of stretchers and injured loaded on the shuttle. A couple of hundred prisoners were then loaded on a large pair of landing barges. The lace of strangle wires around the necks of each, knitting them all together with threads of wire, reflecting the light, told all the assembly of council members of the fate of those within the fort. All the prisoners were pirates.

The scene went dark.

"This says nothing of the accusation of lies!" The Eldar nearly hissed, after only a moment.

"There is more," Zeevo answered immediately, "wait a moment for the recordings to shift"

The enormous holo come to life again. This time with an Imperial fleet officer asking for information. Confirmation of the identity of a person. An Inquisitor. The view went dark again. After a brief moment, the holo lit up with a different personage, a middle aged human male. Wearing the insignia of an Inquisitor Primus!

Calmly, the image confirmed the identity of the Inquisitor held in the Imperial marine medical bay. The image vanished into darkness.

Zeevo felt he suddenly was all alone in the halls, the silence was so complete. The lights came up gradually.

"Take the cage," A somewhat more subdued voice commanded, "explain where this series of recordings came from."

Zeevo did as commanded. This was the moment the head of his clan had prepared Zeevo for. Zeevo was nervous. These families were all in the habit of slaying the messenger bearing bad tidings, messily.

"I cannot give all the details," Zeevo began, "but you can all see this is the work of a spy. That family is not the only one to infiltrate the Imperial fleet." Zeevo pointed at the Eldar standing, bristling, in front of him.

"There can be no doubt that the Inquisitor still lives," Zeevo began again, more loudly, "with all the Imperium poised as a sword. Aimed directly at all our hearts! And with a blood feud against us all for the failed attempt at killing the Inquisitor!"

Four assassin guards had suddenly appeared around the Eldar. All four were of the serpentine race, wearing the mottled blue and gray scale armor that used electricity to enhance their already blinding fast reflexes. The Eldar seemed to be calmly stroking a large sapphire on his right breast.

"The recordings showed this Eldar's kinsman," Zeevo went on, "and all his followers being destroyed in the fortress we saw first. My people believe that this family, or at least this Eldar's part of it, has been infiltrated. How else can the marines have responded so quickly? They went straight to the correct fortress. The pirate ships in orbit never even broadcast a warning. No ships escaped. The marines that assaulted the fort were not even fired on as they assembled. The force shield was turned off to let the marines in, the shield had not even been strained by the bombardment you all saw. You all can see the truth of these conclusions in the videos. The last videos confirmed that the Inquisitor yet lived." Zeevo paused.

"There is only one question remaining before my family, and this assembly." Zeevo said after a second. "How high is the traitor placed?" Then Zeevo added, "Not even a treacherous Ork would sell out his kin to the marines."

The Eldar unclipped the large sapphire from his right breast, holding it high over his head, his eyes following it. The sapphire flashed as it was suddenly flipped into the air.

The assassins had finished their work before the jewel hit the ground. The last assassin to step back even caught the jewel on his webbed forehand a foot from the ground. It would be returned to the Eldar's clan.

Zeevo thought to himself that he had been right, it was very messy.

A brief moment of silence passed.

"We must all flee, before the Inquisition starts!" A voice from the balcony.

"Gather our ships, and strike! Before the Inquisitor can gather information and military might!" A voice from the council table.

"We cannot flee to other sectors! We have no bases, there is too much military strength in nearby sectors!"



Another voice from the council tables.

"Every ship must take off on its own, right now. They can't hunt us all down if we scatter!" A voice from behind Zeevo.

Zeevo held his arms up, and shouted.

"The solution is already on its way!"

The jumble of voices fell off again. To interrupt the speaker in the cage meant that you took his place in the cage. If what you had to say was not important enough, it meant death.

"Our family does not only employ spies." Zeevo began again. "We also employ the best assassins. Five are on their way, now."

Zeevo scanned the quiet assembly. Everywhere were smiles, and nodding heads.

Zeevo smiled too. He would leave the hall alive.



## V. \_\_\_\_\_

Lynx sat unmoving on the hot sand. Staring. She had not moved for hours. The pink and gray of early dawn had been in the sky when Lynx first came out onto the sand. Now the bright yellow sun was high in the sky.

Two Centurion marines had volunteered to stay with the Inquisitor. Five meters to either side, and slightly behind her, they only moved their heads in an endless scan of the horizon. Following the Inquisitor's example, they wore no armor, only a light tan coverall. At the insistence of the Inquisitor, they carried no guns or grenades, only needlers.

Lynx could feel the hate. She could tell it was moving closer. A source of cold, methodical, killing hatred had been moving slowly toward Lynx for two days. The sensors in the marine's fortress had found nothing. That meant a chameleon pack. The source of hate was close now.

Lynx finally moved. she slid down the dune she had been sitting on. The two marines followed suit. With her back to the sand dune, she was now looking up at the huge black rock jutting from the sand. And the black fortress built of, and on, that outcropping.

The Centurion marines had chosen this place because of the enormous desert surrounding the rock. Because the human inhabitants had been in the path of war, raids, and the resulting starvations, pestilence, and other maladies, the human population had fallen back into barbarism. Their level of technology equaled the water wheel and windmills. They used animals for transportation. They were very superstitious as well. This suited the marines very well. Contact with the local inhabitants was not desired.

The broad desert and enormous black fortress, coupled with the superstitious belief that immortal gods fighting eternal war lived here, all meant that the humans of this planet did not desire contact, either.

Whatever manner of being was approaching, it was not a local inhabitant. And, since it was going to so much trouble to not be detected, this being is not friendly.

Lynx is an Inquisitor. This would normally mean she had a high level of psychic skill. But with Lynx, this was not so. Lynx was not psychic. She had developed a level of empath skills. She could focus on just one, as she was doing now, or reach out and "taste" the subconscious minds of many out to great distances. An impression of feelings, rather than a clear psychic "telegram". She could also feel the direction that those emotions were leading, or were directed. Lynx would describe it as the ability to "sense" things. The Emperor found it very useful to know the undisguised emotions of those in service to the Empire, since thought messages could be masked, by one skilled in psychic abilities.

The being was very close now.

The chameleon pack the being was wearing was a good one, Lynx was sure. It not only fooled the wide spectrum sensors, it also fooled the eyes. The device had one weakness. When the wearer crossed the boundary of land and sky, the imperfect bending and blending of light and shadow would expose the wearer.

With a little luck, and careful maneuvering, Lynx reasoned that the three of them could be waiting at the right spot, when the being exposed itself on the horizon. Lynx believed that the approach of the being was in a nearly straight line. The creature was not worried about being spotted from ground level, only from above, from the fortress. There was no reason for someone to be out on the dunes, after all.

The two Centurion soldiers with Lynx suddenly pulled their camouflage hoods down, and took up firing positions on the sharp edge of the big sand dune. They may have smelled the approaching being with their enhanced senses.

Lynx pulled the warm fabric of the hood tight around her face, then set herself so that only one eye peered over the edge.

They waited in patient stillness.

Both soldiers fired their needlers simultaneously, with a: "Phfftt!" of released compressed air. Lynx had just seen the target, herself. It was on all four limbs, with a bulky pack on its back. The motion of the confused colors was what Lynx spotted, not a distinct silhouette. The creature was struck, started to run off, but collapsed in a twitching mass, as the drugs took effect.

Lynx focused her concentration to determine if there could be another creature backing up this one. No.

"All clear." Lynx said simply.

The three stood, about to walk over to the next dune, to take charge of their target.

BOOM!

The creature had self destructed!

There was less than one minute of silence, as the three stood rooted to the spot.

"Inquisitor." A voice from the comm set in Lynx's ear.

"What?!" Lynx almost snarled.

"You must return to the fortress immediately. We have bigger problems." William's voice sounded peculiar.

## VI.

Zeevo was master of his world. He was in command of a dozen corvette sized pirate ships. Fast and nimble, with crews over large, they could easily overwhelm the best armed of the fat cargo haulers. They were even strong enough to sack small towns and outposts with ease. As they had just recently finished doing. Zeevo had felt a peculiar giddiness, as he looked back down the slope at the burning town.

Zeevo and his fleet had only just begun to leave the star system they were raiding, when the news had reached him. Such a grand opportunity, even if dangerous, could not be passed up. Zeevo ordered the calculations to be made for the course change, and the jump to that nearby sector. In a few minutes, Zeevo learned that his fleet could be at the source of the planetary distress call in just hours.

As a single unit, the dozen ships altered course in a great sweeping curve. With perfect timing, all twelve ships accelerated until they reached jump velocities. All the ships vanished into non-space in the same instant, leaving only a dozen sparks to blink once, where each ship had entered that energy dimension.

The passage of only a few hours left scant time for all the preparations. Zeevo wanted to have every advantage he could think of. The boarding parties were as excited as at any time Zeevo could remember. Several of the warrior races that made up parts of the ship's crew were not given to displays of excitement. However, this occasion was the exception. The once in a lifetime opportunity, for human or any race, was just to stimulating. Zeevo entered the launch bay for the little boarding missiles.

All thirty of the Orks that were on Zeevo's crew were there. They would lead the boarding action. The Orks were the only ones with previous experience at this type of operation. Zeevo was momentarily puzzled that the Orks did not seem exuberant at all. The Orks were usually chaffing to be at the forefront of any kind of boarding action. The thought made Zeevo momentarily uncomfortable.

Zeevo spent a few minutes supervising the stowage of the vital equipment and weapons on board the armored missiles. It would not do to have any of the equipment damaged from the boarding impacts. Zeevo was not finished when he was called to the command bridge.

They had arrived.

Zeevo hurried onto the bridge, then halted abruptly in mid-stride. There was a 3-D holo image filling the entire center of the command bridge. Zeevo felt his mouth fall open, and for some reason, a fine sweat broke out on his head and neck.

"It is one hundred thirteen kilometers wide, and one hundred fifty seven kilometers long." The voice of the councilor, from behind Zeevo. "Over two million cubic kilometers of twisted derelicts, lost or captured space vessels, victims of energy storms in non-space, human and alien and only the stars know what other designs of ship."

The councilor moved up from behind Zeevo, to stand in front of, and below, the enormous holo. His long gray hairs growing from his cheeks flowing around his head as he moved, like two thin wisps of smoke. The councilor went on.

"There is a treasure trove of lost technology, equipment, a storehouse of weapons, a chance for riches beyond the dreams of mortal flesh, and ... " The councilor paused, lowered his voice, and continued, " ... and the most likely place for all of us to meet our deaths."

"It looks like it must be made of dozens, hundreds, of ships," Zeevo said in a subdued voice, "all bunched together in a haphazard manner."

"True enough. But pathways have been cut, bulkheads welded, channels and pipes, troughs and ducts, all incorporated into a giant maze of paths." The councilor said, turning to face Zeevo, "Storerooms, hangers, bays, and chambers are all, no doubt, stuffed to the support beams with treasures defying description. And every step of

passageway a hazard, with traps, auto defenses, ancient architecture rotting underfoot, poisoned air, if there is air, and hazards I dare not imagine. Shall I even mention the presence of vicious alien creatures, other pirates, renegade Orks, and other nasties that have been reported on these derelicts in ages past?" The glint in the councilor's eyes was hard for Zeevo to interpret.

"Are you trying to frighten me with things I already know?" Zeevo asked, "What would I be if I turned away now? I would be lucky if I were only dead. There is not a single one of us who fear death over there more than life if we run away. Great wealth, glory, and power mean great risk. So be it."

"We have the results of the scans," Zeevo's lieutenant's voice coming over the audio system. The whole fleet would be listening. "Indications are of several outer areas without atmosphere, several with thin atmosphere, and large areas with breathable air. There are large numbers of different kinds of energy sources active. The interference from leaks, emanations from damaged or missing shielding, and other causes of raw energy interference, all add up to uncertain life form detection scans."

A few moments of silence, as the lieutenant changed subjects.

"The mass of derelicts is heading for that star system away to the upper part of the holo. The drift rate is calculated to take several months. That star system is known to be part of the human empire. By our best calculations, the Empire should not know of this, or us, for some time. The weak planetary distress call could not have reached any Imperial bases. The nearest known Imperial base should not be able to respond very soon. We should have this derelict all to ourselves for quite a while." The matter of fact tone seemed out of place, in the face of events, Zeevo thought.

All would be risked on this single, great gamble. Without hesitation, Zeevo ordered the boarding to begin.

## VII.

An Inquisitor cannot let such an event pass. No matter what other task, or tasks, may be underway. One of the great mysteries of the universe cannot be ignored.

Once in a while, a derelict space craft will pop out of non-space. A wreck, or a hulk, or a fragment of some lost voyager that met fate while in non-space.

Once in a great while, an entire ship appears back in real space. A ghost ship. Intact, but not a living soul aboard, human or alien. Sometimes such ships have been lost for centuries, the crew dead of old age, or illness, or some other calamity.

The ebb and flow of the energies that are the dimension known as non-space, are not understood. The concentrations of energies that are called energy storms, while in non-space, are not understood. That the laws of physics for real space do not apply to the energy dimension that is non-space, is understood. Travel across the galaxy could not be possible any other way.

There is a legend that a ghost ship would appear and disappear, in and out of non-space, at regular intervals near old Earth, long ago. And the ancient wizards of Earth discovered non-space in that way, long ago.

Once in a very, very great while, an enormous conglomeration of derelicts would suddenly fade into existence in real space. Tens or hundreds of millennia could be represented. Ages past, civilizations now dead, and unknown alien technology were often represented in the random accumulation of ruined space craft. No one knows how all these ships came together. There are only guesses.

Now there is such a derelict near here. Big as a large asteroid or small moon. Filled with mystery.

Filled with death.

The enormous derelicts are seldom empty of life. Pirates, aliens such as Orks and others, and, worst of all, a vicious alien creature - now thought to be a Tyranid bred race - have all been reported to be on such derelicts in the past. Long ago there was a name for such harbringers of death. Plague ships.

Lynx brought her mind back into focus. Such daydreaming could be useful, to review common knowledge, known facts, and guesses, in this way she could sometimes bring new insight to a problem.

The demand of an insistent door chime meant that new insight would have to wait.

Lynx passed her hand over the door lock sensor. With a hiss, the door opened, with a tiny bump, the door closed.

Lynx could feel William. Without turning to look, she spoke up.

"Have we arrived?"

"No. It will be a little while yet." William answered. "Will you speak with me?"

"While we are locked out of real space and time, there is little I can do." Lynx replied. "I think I would have time for you even in real space, William."

"You do not seem the Inquisitor I rescued only weeks ago." William said, most softly. "You seem more reflective and less driven."

"That is entirely your fault." Lynx replied evenly, "Because of you, I have completely sidestepped my original mission."

"All races will eventually fight the invader. All races will not join with the Empire against the invader." William said levelly.

"That is exactly what I mean." Lynx said in slightly lower tones, "You cut right to my gut level thoughts and feelings in a single statement."

"I do not know all your thoughts or feelings." William said gently. "I did not think you would consent to the ritual."

"You did not?" Lynx asked, her face showing mock incredulity. "How could I refuse?"

"That you honored me, if for only days, was unexpected." William said, around a small smile. "All my Chapter will never forget, as long as there is such a thing as the Centurions Chapter. I will only remember as long as I live."

"What is there to remember?" Lynx asked. "This is not the first time the leader of your Chapter has dealt with the ritual, certainly."

"That a person of such high station has consented to such a ritual with any member of any Chapter is unknown to the galaxy." William replied. "For a warrior to have even a few days of a life that is not caught up in the warrior's ways, is to be envied. And never forgotten. I have been training for, or been, a warrior since I could walk as a child. I have never known any path but war. Now I have a memory of a time that was not devoted to war. Every warrior, man and woman, has had the knowledge of another life reaffirmed. For all this, I have you to thank." William ended seriously, then a twinkle was in his eye, and a half smile tugging at one corner of his mouth.

"I did nothing more than let myself be caught up, and swept away by events." Lynx said seriously, putting her fists on her hips. "And I thank you for that. I have not had many opportunities to be anything but an Inquisitor, either. The few days that we had during the ritual will always be deep in my memory, as well. William."

After a few moments of silence, as each regarded the other, William spoke up again.

"This is not why I came here." There was business back in William's voice. "I have to speak with you about the coming operation."

"Speak your mind. I have always respected the concerns of the warriors, whenever planning a fight." Lynx answered.

"There is only this." William said evenly. "We have encountered these huge abominations before. The strange melding of many different ships, large, small, and huge, makes a maze of death. Our Chapter has had two other of these harbringers of death appear in the last twenty five years. Now a third. Never before has so many of the plague ships appeared in so few years, anywhere in the galaxy. Our chapter has only bitter memories of the others. I believe this newest death bringer will only be a repeat of the other two."

After a silent moment, Lynx asked, "What are you trying to say?"

"Both of the derelicts that appeared before were full of wicked creatures that slay with careless abandon." William said, a faraway look in his eyes. "They care not how many of their own die, as long as they slay all who are not as they. I have only two hundred warriors with me who are fit to meet this challenge. If this derelict is like the others, than only a very few will survive, if any." A momentary pause. "I do not feel well about the Inquisitor going aboard the plague ship."

"I see." Lynx answered slowly. "Then let me answer the only way I can. I must go. My calling would let me do no other thing. There is much that could be learned from one of these enormous apparitions from the past. The Empire has already learned much from past encounters. Even failure can teach us much about these ghost ships."

Lynx was interrupted by the urgent klaxon of the collision alarm. The holos switched on automatically.

They had emerged into real space nearly on top of the ghost ship.

Once again, Lynx was consumed by the immediacy of the mission. The burning passion to be about her task

filled her chest, made for the impression that her chest would explode. Her mind accelerated. She went to the comm station and began to give directions as to the needs of the Empire, such as no firing from the ship's guns.

The back of Lynx's mind took note of William's leaving, his own preparations to make. A thread of weakness seemed to coil down through Lynx, to tug at the back of Lynx's knees. For just a moment.

## VIII.

The claws from the boarding craft gripped the metal with such force, the sound of tearing metal could be heard inside. The jarring bump, and then the shock of the penetrator beak tearing, and sealing airtight, an entrance opening, cause all aboard to sway and rock in unison.

From the back of the boarding craft, trooper Sims could see it all. Since this was his first mission with the Centurions as a full blown trooper, Sims would be one of the very last to rush into the huge ghost ship.

The wavy edge of the airlock bulkhead parted in a sudden shriek of rushing air, helping to carry the front most ranks of troopers into the dark unknown.

The marines entered in a flood of green armored bodies. Sims was the next to last to leap off the ramp. To find himself floating down into a dark void, punctuated by the sparks of lights coming on, as each marine engaged his small helmet spotlights.

The readings superimposed in front of Sims' eyes told him that his rate of descent was dangerous, jump jet fire rates were automatically calculated and displayed. Sims trusted his suit. He fired the jets in unison with the displays.

The floor of the incredibly big hanger, or whatever it was, came into view below Sims' feet, as other marines landed. The lights from two dozen other marines fanned out below Sims.

Sims landed on the strange glassy floor, and set out to catch up with his fire team, all in one smooth motion.

The team comm net was quiet, but for the occasional command from the team sergeant, or a break in on the team comm frequency by the lieutenant. Each break in the silence was only for a very brief military command. Not one trooper broke the silence. They only did their job. Quick, quiet, and professional.

For six hours the team went about exploring its assigned zone.

For six hours, each passageway, room or tunnel was empty and featureless.

For six hours, Sims struggled to stay alert and focused on each detail of each empty passage, tunnel, service duct, or flicker of a shadow on the gray on dark gray on black of the dimly lit interior.

For six hours, about two hundred and fifty marines each coped with the empty sameness as best they could, with varying degrees of success.

To fight off the mind numbing effects of boredom, Sims concentrated on trying to track the variations of the artificial gravity they kept encountering. First the gravity would be weak, then strong. Or fade and waver, so that the variations of the gravity made it hard to not fall down. A couple of times Sims felt as if two opposing gravity sources were pulling at him. Sims thought that the floor and wall sections were groaning from the strain. It came to Sims, that he thought he could feel through his boots, the slow grind of metal and plastic, as the enormous mass of lost ships slowly twisted, contorted, and convoluted almost as a living thing. A hot bolt shot through Sims, as he thought that the passages might be twisting shut behind them. But no. The sergeant, and the others, had been into one of these monstrosities before. They would not enter, if they knew they could not leave. Sims decided that he was letting his mind wander, after all. He made an effort to keep his mind on his job, watching for anything at all to appear on the sensor.

Sims had just injected his first vita-stim dose, and felt his vision sharpen, his reflexes increase a notch, when:

All five company comm nets were alive. Alive with the chaos of simultaneous reports of attacks from all directions.

The fire team to which Sims belonged, all pulled together into a box. Where two service tunnels came together, four marines each faced down one branch, with the sergeant trying to watch down all four at once.

Sims listened as more and more of the comm traffic became clear.

Blue colored, multi-armed hyper fast streaks of death were tearing into the other companies.

Sims listened as squad after squad failed to report in. Or, the last word of a dying sergeant, reporting the loss of this passage, or that room.

The fire team to which Sims belonged remained motionless. Watching. Waiting. Sensors indicating no sign of approaching anything.

The comm channels that had been so clear, suddenly went to hell. Noise, and cutting in and out, so that the fading sounds of other teams were replaced by moments of silence, then the sounds of the other teams had faded even more, and so it went, until there was only silence on the comm frequencies. Even the troop ship was out of contact, somehow.

Sims, and the team remained motionless. For an hour. Two hours.

Still another hour went by. Then the sergeant spoke. The team would have to try to find a way back. Clearly, going forward was out of the question, the sergeant said.

Sims felt ice creep through his veins, as they all started back, keeping close together.

For two hours, the passages, rooms and tunnels they encountered were as empty as before. Not a tremor or flicker from the sensors.

Then:

All five troopers got the same reading at the same moment. A huge reading from directly ahead, bearing straight down on the team.

All five ran forward, all five wanting to get to the intersection of two hallways just visible ahead, before they were hit by whatever was coming. Instinct and training made the decision for them, they did not have to wait for the sergeant to tell them. Sims briefly wished that there was a bit more light to see by.

Sims took the left passage, so he could use his better skill at shooting with his right hand. Zinkus took the right passage, his skill with his left hand shooting was the equal of anyone's right hand. The sergeant and Keller remained in the long hallway, just behind the intersection, with Keller kneeling in front of the sergeant. Keller wanted to be sure he was not in the line of fire of the sergeant's heavier gun. The stream of fire from the belt fed gun of the sergeant's could be most helpful. Lexx stood just behind, and slightly right of the sergeant, his missile launcher already on his shoulder. The case on both hips of Lexx was open to expose the extra missile racks.

The sergeant ordered single fire only, no auto fire. Every shell had to count. Lexx was told to wait until the sergeant called for a missile, then place it well.

There was barely time to say that much, and the urgent shrill tones of the sensors meant that the targets were in range, even if unseen.

All four of the guns went off in unison with the sergeant's command to fire. Each shell sped down the corridor as a bright point of light. To impact with a flare of brightness as each hit something, or someone.

Sims could see black, multi-armed silhouettes appear for an instant in the flicker of the exploding shells. The hideous outline was certainly not human.

Again and again, Sims fired a single shell down the hall. Again and again, the shells of the four marines crashed into the approaching creatures. And each time, the creatures were closer, and closer, and closer.

The blue hell-creatures were visible in the weak light now, scrambling and hurrying, limbs flailing. Scrambling over the blasted remains of those that had been in front, limbs flailing as they appeared to be running along the walls, and the ceiling, as well as the corridor floor. They were coming in a thick blue mass.

The sergeant ordered a missile. Then another. Then another. Even before the first had impacted.

The three blasts made three brilliant spheres of incandescence down the hall. Masses of blue bodies were seen to come apart, or disappear in the virulent, hot, energy sphere.

The triple shock wave momentarily unbalanced Sims, and the others. But not so much that they each didn't fire another shell into the swirling aftermath of dust and smoke.

They all kept firing, trying to fill the hall with shells, screaming, crashing into the advancing blue menace from the depths of the frozen hell between galaxies.

Suddenly, they were gone. The firing stopped.

The marines waited. The dust and smoke settled out of the weak light. A jumble of unrecognizable forms littered the hall as far as the weak light would carry. The nearest was only four long paces from Sims.

Sims glanced at the scanning sensor. The enemy was still there, but not coming on. Some were off on side passages, or rooms. Some were still in the main hall, but apparently just milling about, some distance ahead. Just around a slight curve. Safe from more shells.

All five marines worked quickly, and silently. Pulling more clips or belts of ammo from plastic cases on their backs. Arranging these on magna-clasps with grenades, where they could be retrieved in a hurry. Each marine also pulled out their energy blades, and fixed them to the wrist socket. The spark and shimmer of energy coursing down the edge of the blade, made it look like a luminescent talon, protruding along the back of a marine's glove, and extending several inches beyond.

Sims looked down by his foot, at the sudden change of sound coming from the scanner. The number and picture readouts told Sims what he had not dared to think. The enemy were coming from three directions at once. From the front, from behind, and from the direction of the hall Sims was in. Sims' mouth suddenly went dry.

Several marines reported at about the same moment. The sergeant had Zinkus cross over to back up Sims, ordered Lexx to cover the back with missiles and gelatin grenades, while he and Keller kept up fire to the front. A final calm word from the sergeant was to mark and hit each target, each shell must count. Then silence for the few seconds it took for the enemy to come into range again.

The passage in front of Sims curved abruptly to the right, not very far ahead. The passage was narrower than the main hall, so Sims hoped that the blue devils would not be able to come at them more than one at a time.

Sims held the sensor pack in his left hand, watching for the indication that the first enemy was about to round the corner.

The air filled with noise, as the other marines behind Sims started firing. After a moment, the concussion and shock wave of a missile, then another a moment later. Still nothing in range in front of Sims.

Then a stream of blue creatures appeared at a dead run around the corner, so close that Sims could see the wicked teeth in the open jaws of the running apparitions from Hades.

Instinctively, Sims went to auto fire, as did Zinkus, and two steady streams of shells met the hard charging aliens. Exploding shells ripped the enemy forms to pieces. Exploding shells that struck the walls, floor, or ceiling tore pieces of metal, plastic, ceramic, and foam out to make ragged edged, smoking holes. The air filled with smoke and dust, pierced by streams of sparks, marking the path of shells tearing into the smoky silhouettes of blue death, emerging out of the swirl of gray.

Sims stopped firing to change his empty clip, at almost the same moment as Zinkus. As Sims pulled a clip and slammed it into his gun in a single smooth motion, a grenade sailed almost lazily over his head, then another grenade. Into the teeth of the creatures that would surely have been upon Sims before he could resume firing. With a thud, the first grenade went off behind the foremost alien. Pieces of something careened off Sims' armored suit. Another thud as the second grenade went off at the corner of the passage.

The sudden blasts cleared the air in front of Sims. A literal mound of shattered blue bodies stretched from just in front of Sims' foot to the corner of the passage. And no more were coming.

For the first time in an indeterminate amount of time, Sims was aware of the firing of the other marines. The steady hammering of the sergeant's and Keller's guns, then the shock of a missile detonation.

Zinkus was first. A blue bolt of lightning could not have been faster. Sims and Zinkus had just turned around, when Zinkus was suddenly covered by a blue apparition, clawing madly at Zinkus' head and chest. Sims fired with the muzzle of his gun inches from the alien's head.

As the alien was thrown backward by the impact of several shells, Zinkus also fell back into Sims, staggering Sims backward.

Sims desperately tried to keep from falling backward, but the falling mass of Zinkus pushed him further back, and then Sims feet became fouled by all the slippery chunks of alien, bits of wall and other rubbish tangled around Sims' feet.

Just as Sims was falling onto his back, a blue messenger of death sailed through the air, directly at Sims' face, as streaks of light marked were the shells of Sims', and the sergeant's, firing missed the blue form.

The impact of the blue monster coincided with Sims' impact with the floor. The force of the creature's talons came as a shock to Sims, even as he felt the floor at his back give way to emptiness.

Sims slashed with his energy blade on his left wrist, even as the awful strength of the alien twisted Sims' helmet, and his head with it.

Sparks of light danced before Sims' eyes as pain shot through Sims' neck, even as his brain distantly noted the separation of the alien's head from its shoulders.



The last thing that Sims' brain registered was the sensation of darkness closing in over his vision, as he and the corpse of the alien fell into a dark abyss.

## IX.

Lynx marked the progress of the Centurion marines. She watched as the marines fanned out into the deep guts of the huge maze of twisted ghost ships.

She watched as the blips of alien presence suddenly appeared after hours of empty nothing.

Lynx watched as the marines were set upon by unnumbered masses of alien creatures.

As the marines fought.

And died.

And were pushed back, and back. Until they were forced into a defensive ring in a huge bay of cavernous proportions.

The last hundred of the over two hundred that had entered.

Lynx hung her head, closed her eyes, as the thought crossed her mind that William might not be among the living. That trapped one hundred.

A single wet dot appeared on the key console.

Lynx turned and stormed through the room portal in a blur of sudden resolve.

## X.

Zeevo lifted his head from his hands, jerking erect in his chair, as the faint warbling of the alarm invaded his exhausted mind. They come again!

No. Zeevo could not see the nightmare creatures in any of the three dozen monitors. Zeevo, and his brethren, had placed many little button spy eyes throughout that part of the twisted mass of the derelict they had explored. Zeevo and those few still alive owed their survival to the advance warning they got from those little buttons.

Thousands of pirates had concentrated at this place, to take part in the sacking of so great a treasure source, in the weeks following its discovery. Everything had been going so well.

Zeevo scanned all the monitor screens, squinting in concentration. The sensors had picked up something. But what?

Everything had been going so well. Hundreds of discoveries had been made. Weapons. Engines. Computational Nav-units. Medical reference library and translator. And a whole wealth of precious metals and salvageable minerals. The best of all worlds for a pirate. Derelicts that had not been previously looted. The pirates had not had to fight for any of it. Too easy.

Zeevo caught a motion on the edge of his vision. Peering intently at the one monitor, Zeevo could just see halting, tentative motion of some single creature working its way down the dark passage, toward the monitor. What is that?

Four pirates had been working hard at cutting through the bulkhead, trying to get at the source of some unusual energy readings, down in the darkest heart of this enormous, twisted mass of lost ships. Then the bulkhead had given way. The sight that greeted the four caused them to turn and flee in terror.

A flood of blue, multi-limbed, killing mad horrors from the frozen depths of intergalactic hell, poured out. Spread out. Killing each victim by tearing to pieces with tooth and talon.

The pirates that were too far away to join in a defense of a perimeter, tried to fight their way back. None made it. But a lot of blue corpses lay mixed with the fallen pirates.

The blue wave of creatures had set upon the pirates that made up a defensive zone with a plan. In two days of continuous fighting, the pirates had been cut off from the ships that could have carried them to safety. Then the long days of fighting, as the blue monstrosities whittled down the pirates.

Until there were only a very few pirates left. Holed up in a barely accessible corner between narrow passages, where the blue filth could only come one at a time. Even those blue mad things gave up trying after a time. Zeevo gave a fierce grin as he thought of all the piles of shattered blue creatures the fighting had brought about.

Zeevo grinned even more fiercely, as he calculated that a great pirate fleet would soon arrive, with thousands more murderous cutthroats, to slaughter every last one of the vile blue filth-creatures.

But, what is that thing coming into the monitors?

By the cold, uncaring stars! Zeevo almost yelled, as recognition came over him.

There, in the monitor, was a clear picture of an Imperial marine, in the same green armor Zeevo had seen assault a fortress in a holo image some months ago.

That means that these twice cursed marines were here, exploring the collection of lost ships.

Stealing Zeevo's treasures! Turning all this fighting and death into meaningless, worthless, sacrifice!

Zeevo grabbed handfuls of hair next to his ears, and pulled until he could hear the tearing sounds, in slow anguish and frustration.

Zeevo thought about what to do. What to do?

Then, Zeevo sat up erect, his lips curling, his nostrils flaring with determination and resolve.

He, Zeevo, would deny this marine scum their victory! Zeevo had not spent long years in the steaming, smothering, dark, confines of starship engine passages, as part of a red gang, without learning something!

Before Zeevo was caught in this trap, by the blue alien filth, Zeevo had found a huge control room. Part of a huge, alien, engine complex. The power of a dozen suns were locked in the incredible engines Zeevo had discovered. The means to defeat the accursed marines.

Zeevo exited the monitor station, already stalking, as would a cat closing in on a kill.



## XI.

Sims staggered on down the passageway.  
He still did not know how he could still be alive.  
When his senses had returned, he had been hanging from some sort of cables or wires.  
Since freeing himself from that web, he had been wandering aimlessly. Lost. Alone. With no hope.  
Of finding a way out.  
Or, of finding any of his friends alive.  
Only awaiting a slow death, as his survival resources in his armor dwindled.  
Or, a quick death. When the blue colored, other world creatures next discovered Sims.  
A meaningless, purposeless death, in any case.  
Sims staggered on down the passageway.

## XII.

Lynx was back in her element.  
She had commanded that the entire complement of crew members, of the warship, join in the attempt to free the trapped marines.  
The warship entrances had been sealed, then every soul stormed into the bowels of the ghost ship. After all, to disobey an Inquisitor meant death, and to succeed in rescuing the marines meant glory. Better to choose death killing enemies of humanity.  
Lynx ordered each aspect of the advance into the broad passages and corridors she had chosen as a route.  
The fire teams that guarded each cross-passage way. The staged advance of the heavy weapons teams, at the point of the advance.  
The numbers of humans that carried extra supplies for the marines, as well as her own forces.  
Lynx enjoyed the feeling of command.  
She commanded that teams of technicians seal the cross entrances that open onto the path Lynx had chosen to take. Each tunnel, hall, and corridor that was not needed for the operation was sealed with one or more T.N. grenades. Thermal Nuke grenades did not explode. The nuclear heart of each grenade burned slowly, that is, about three seconds were needed to consume the nuclear fuel in the grenade. The small bang that a T.N. grenade made only served to suspend the particles of unstable nuclear fuel in a three meter sphere of sun-like radiance. Within twenty meters of the center point, glass, metal, ceramic, plastic, or other material, would glow white hot and fuse. Or vaporize. Like flesh. Wherever a door, bulkhead, or barricade could be fused by the T.N. grenades, the sudden flare of light showed that the grenades were indeed used. Where there was no means to fuse a solid barrier, and so protect the flanks of the advance of Lynx's force, Lynx commanded that a series of T.N. grenade booby traps be set. Any creature attempting to pass would be incinerated, and also would make any further attempt to pass that much harder, as melted materials would sometimes collapse into interesting holes, and hazards. And, of course, there were still more traps waiting.  
The battle at the forefront of the advance went as Lynx commanded, as well. The point of the advance was through broad halls, and enormous hangers, warehouses, and galleries. Not through the tiny passages, twisting corridors, and minuscule rooms where the blue tinted fiends seemed to congregate. Wherever the blue filth tried to come at Lynx's troops, the blue pieces -scattered and smoking - marked where the concentrations of human firepower had frustrated the blue bugger's attempts to rend their human enemies. Lynx insisted on a path where clear fields of fire would give the relief force an edge. Dozens of guns firing at once could hardly miss. Even the blur of the fast dodging blue menace was smothered in exploding shells.  
Even with the successes of the troops under her command, Lynx was near to the edge of panic. The weird interference, from some sort of power source, prevented proper communication with the trapped marines. The necessarily slow advance, along an indirect path, meant that more time was needed to break through to the trapped marines. Time. Even a second was long enough to be the death of a marine. Or William.  
Worst of all, the blue hordes failed to appear. Only relatively small bands attempted attacks. To be slaughtered wholesale. Lynx was near distraction wondering where the vast numbers, that had been apparent before, had gone. What were they up to?

### XIII.

Sims had paused and sat. Hours passed. Or was it days? Sims did not care anymore. After some time, the pain, and the disorientation, finally passed.

Once Sims was thinking clearly again, and feeling rested, he took stock of his situation.

Communication - no good. Some sort of interference, or malfunction.

Armored suit, ammunition, survival drugs, weapons, and everything except comm gear checked out good. It would seem that Sims had only a somewhat singed exterior to show for the free plasma jet he had fallen through. Good.

Sims shifted his sitting position a bit, in preparation of getting up.

A glint of what appeared to be gold caught Sims' eye, from the edge of a rubbish pile just opposite him, an arm length away

Sims rose and reached in to the multicolored collection of bits of nothing.

And pulled out the holy grail of treasures.

A crystal rectangle two centimeters thick, by twenty centimeters, by thirty centimeters long. Impregnated with thousands of flecks of gold.

The one thing every human soul hoped to find, thief, pirate, mercenary, adventurer, or even marine.

Tens of thousands of years ago, humanity had burst out into the galaxy. Unbelievably vast colony ships had set out in thousands of separate directions. Each carrying the accumulated knowledge of all humanity in crystal rectangles of the description fitting what Sims now held in his hand.

Over tens of thousands of years, there had been wars. Vast disasters. Invasions by Orks, and others. And, of course, the short-sightedness of humanity. An ignorant farmer cared nothing for information on how to build a giant factory for smelting metals, making armored vehicles, or anything else that distracted him from getting the crops in. A factory manager cared nothing for information on how to care for livestock, or the proper method for storing seed.

Information, ideas, skills, and ancient technology were lost to humanity over the eons, because of many causes.

Science had advanced on many fronts, but in so doing, also forgot much of what had been learned before.

Some things could be duplicated, but no one knew why some of these things worked. There was even a danger that the knowledge of how to duplicate some things might be lost.

Vast wars, like the rebellion many years ago, often targeted industrial centers. And the enemies' scientists.

Now here stood Sims. With a crystalline page from the book of human knowledge. Representing a mountain of knowledge.

For several moments, Sims just stood. A torrent of ideas crowding his mind, until he shook his head to clear it.

This must be returned. Sims' life was nothing, if he could only get this jewel of lost information back. Sims eased the precious crystal into an empty space in one of the plastic cases on his back, and sealed it.

Sims instinctively fell back on training, went into a crouch, and advanced down the passage, weapon at the front and ready.

He would get through, he knew he had a reason to live again.

### XIV.

Lynx stood aghast. The broad stairway up was nearly impossible to make out as such. The entire length, up into darkness her light beams could not illuminate, was a scene of horrible carnage. A slaughterhouse of shattered corpses. Most were blue. Here and there, a green bit of armor could be made out. The Centurion marines that had fallen here had been rent and torn to pieces. Armor and all. The blue ferocities that came at the marines had been blasted to pieces.

Lynx stood, ankle deep, in the fluids that leaked from the ruined bodies, alien and human alike, and cascaded down the stairway.

Pairs of warship crewmen were tentatively making their way up either side of the stairs, gingerly stepping over the grotesque bits, wherever possible.

This was the third such place that the rescue party had encountered, along this one path, alone. How many

times was this horrid scene repeated throughout this vast ship? Could there be any survivors by now? What was making such a mess of communications, so that there was no way of knowing if it was already too late to rescue those trapped marines? Lynx wrestled with those questions as she clenched her teeth, knowing that the only answer was to go on. Whatever answer lay in wait ahead.

At least, Lynx began to think, the vast numbers of blue assassin creatures must have been terribly reduced by this carnage. She hoped so.

## XV.

Zeevo leaned over backward, to try to view the diagrams and readouts on the great holo display, that stretched above him. Satisfied with the symbols that were beginning to appear, Zeevo worked feverishly. Insert the crystal disks, then wait a few seconds, that felt like forever, as the translator interpreted the symbols. Then pick the command lines he wanted, and wait a few more seconds, that each took years, as each command was digested by the huge machines that were acting on the command symbols.

Zeevo kept feeling a creeping sensation up his backbone. He would suddenly, and frequently, glance over his shoulder, then turn back to his task. Maybe the little traps he had set would misfire, letting a blue streak of death get at him, or some green clad marine scum shoot Zeevo in the back.

Zeevo felt a very real fear that he would not get to finish this task. An unkind fate, or fickle deity, or damned lucky enemy of Zeevo's would prevent his mission of greedy revenge.

Zeevo's hands fairly flew, as he neared the end of his series of commands. After nearly two hours of nervous, frantic effort, Zeevo could not be denied now that he was so close.

There.

There.

The final symbols appeared on the great holo display.

He was done. He had not been stopped.

There. That would see to it that there would not be any treasures for the hated marines to steal from Zeevo.

Ha!

Never try to steal from a thief!

Zeevo nearly yelled in his triumph. But no. He decided he must try to get back to his monitors. Maybe he would get to view the final moments of some of the marine puppets of the emperor. He could only hope.

Zeevo was sure of one thing though. The unbelievably powerful alien engines were generating vast amounts of power now. Power that was feeding back on itself in an ever increasing buildup. With no outlet for that power now available, thanks to Zeevo, the buildup would continue until no power in the universe could contain it any longer. Then a hundred thousand kilometer wide sphere of radiance, with the power of a dozen suns, would burn for a short while at this spot that once held a vast collection of ghost ships.

Zeevo was sure of one thing. There would be nothing left for anyone to steal from Zeevo. He would take it all with him.

## XVI.

Sims' scanner instrument gave a reading of series of impulses. The scrolling of numbers, diagrams, and symbols across the little screen, had a very familiar pattern and meaning. There was some kind of a battle going on. Above Sims, and some ways in front of him.

What worried Sims was that, as best he had been able to calculate, his fellow marines should not be just there. They should be further above, and some distance behind Sims' present direction of travel.

This cursed collection of dead ships held too many mysteries to suit Sims.

There was only one clear goal in front of Sims. He had to get the precious crystal, and the knowledge it contained, back to the ship. Somehow.

Sims worriedly looked at his weapon indicator. The energy reading was low. His primary weapon was out of shells. His backup weapon was low on energy. A few more bursts. Then only his power amplified mailed fists would be left for defense.

So far, twenty-two of the blue creatures had set upon Sims. Several had been running fights, as Sims tried to cross vast open galleries only to be attacked by one or two of the vermin. The fast moving, dodging blue killers had been hard to hit. A lot of shots had been used up trying. Still, twenty-two of the blue fiends had died trying to get at Sims. One had died from a slash of Sims' blade. Two had died in the crushing grip of Sims' power amplified fists.

Little trembles passed through Sims, as the adrenaline wore off. The last blue alien had died in Sims' grip only a little while ago. Sims tried not to think what would happen if more than one or two of the beasts attacked at once. At least his scanner gave warning.

Now some new readings scrolled across the little screen.

Sims crouched behind a small pile of some kind of rubbish, while he tried to follow the little symbols on the screen. Some kind of new power buildup. Quite a ways away. Still building up. What for?

After a couple of minutes, the readings were clear. Some kind of power loop was building up incredible energies. Sims' scanner sensor had picked up the leaking of stray harmonics of those vast building energies. At some point that ocean of power would burst its bonds. How soon?

Sims jumped up, and began to hurry toward the place where some sort of battle was still taking place. He could only hope that some of them were human, and maybe marines.

## XVII.

Lynx was thankful that battle suits had helmets. She might otherwise have to try to mask her feelings. She was sure that her rage, her fear, and her frustration would show on her face, try as she might to mask it.

Reports kept coming in from others in her rescue force.

"Alternate passage 23 now clear, but damaged by explosives used to clear attacking aliens" A man's voice.

"Sensors show more alien buildup along main axis of advance" A woman's voice, nearly unreadable because of shooting, explosions, screams.

"Instruments show a huge buildup of power far ahead, and below." Another man's voice. "it seems to be pushing back the interference."

"What's that?" Lynx nearly yelled, "What interference do you mean?" She could barely hold back the ten other questions she wanted to fire off. Instead, she fired a pair of exploding shells into the back of a blue beast, that suddenly appeared from out of a wall, just behind one of the lead fire teams. One of Lynx's bodyguards, crouched just in front of Lynx, made a meaningful gesture with his left glove, while glancing over his shoulder at Lynx, his helmet undoubtedly hiding a fierce smile.

"Squad at passage 51, stairway down and right is clear of the enemy." A woman's voice. "Except for one unidentified life form on scanner."

"Interference in communications is almost gone, Inquisitor, the marine comm channel may be usable." A male voice, responding.

"Aliens have penetrated passage six two! Aliens in the ..." Static, like a tearing sound.

"Heavy heat beamers on line at access to passage 62." A grim sounding female voice. "That mass of buggers won't get far."

Lynx had her eyes closed, as she tried to visualize the battle's progress, as she tried to "feel" William's presence. No. There was still a strong enemy mind in the way, and quite close.

"Well, try to get an answer on one of the marine comm channels then!" Lynx did yell. "And try to get a fix on just where the hell the marines really are!" Lynx switched up a different comm channel. Her eyes open again, she watched in the direction of hallway 62.

"Tactical Squad fourteen, come forward and back up the heat guns on steps of hallway 62. Hustle!" Lynx commanded.

"Passage 51 reporting." A woman's voice. "I think that the unidentified life form is a Centurion marine." Matter of fact tone.

Lynx's heart leapt into her throat. Only one marine? In a half an instant, Lynx had turned and was trotting as fast as her armored suit, and the bizarre variations in gravity, would let her. Her bodyguards were humping it, in a vain effort to catch up with Lynx's unexpected maneuver. Section 51 was some ways back. The two or three

minutes to get there would take half a lifetime.

### XVIII.

Sims knew he was close. He could hear, and feel, the firing and explosions. There was a familiar feel to it. Or maybe his mind just wanted him to think so.

Sims had taken a tiny access hatch, and tiny access tunnel, to get off the main path. The access tunnel certainly was not built for a human in battle armor in mind. Sims could barely squeeze through, and got hung up frequently.

Sims had to get out of the larger passage. His sensor had lit up with indications of approaching aliens, both front and rear. A few shots from his beamer pistol would not stop so many.

Sims twisted a bit, then raised his helmeted head, a little.

There seemed to be an opening just ahead, and a bit more light.

With a squeeze, and a pull, Sims was free, and at the edge of the opening.

A small room of some kind. A smooth metal floor. And the back of some overlarge blue alien, seated on the floor. All four of its legs were folded under it, all four of its clawed "hands" were pressed to its enormous head. It was unaware of Sims.

Sims raised his beamer.

With a sudden twist, the hideous toothy face was turned at Sims. It was aware!

Sims fired, just as the impossibly fast monster clasped Sims in two of its claws. Missed.

Sims fired again, burning across a section of the fiend's face, just as the other two claws ripped at Sims' helmet.

Sims fired twice more, as the creature staggered back from the blast to its face, dragging Sims with it, a pair of smoking, blackened streaks appearing on the creature's torso.

Sims pressed the firing stud again. Nothing.

The blue horror lifted Sims off the floor with its three undamaged arms. Sims' helmet fasteners finally gave way, Sims' helmet dangled from one of the three arms.

Sims gasped at the thick air, stared in horror at the toothy maw of the alien, as it drew Sims toward its open mouth, to bite the head off, and taste the death of Sims.

Sims slashed with his blade, in fear.

Sims slashed again, in rage.

Slashed again, in pain.

Slashed again, in rage.

Sims and the alien collapsed into a heap of thrashing limbs.

Sims stood.

The alien did not move, but only oozed a thick, dark goo across the floor.

Sims saw a large round hatch, opening onto a stair, and started to climb up. He did not look back.

### XIX.

Lynx suddenly felt as if she had been pulled from under a mountain of smothering sand. The powerful alien mind was gone. She could "feel" again. She could see the passage branching off to the left, from the wide halls, called 51, just ahead.

Lynx staggered, then stopped, as all the "feelings" came flooding back. The powerful mind that had blocked everything was so suddenly gone, that the sudden return of so many emotions came as a physical blow to the mind of Lynx.

The bodyguards caught up to Lynx in the couple of instants that Lynx took to regain her composure. It took a couple more seconds for Lynx to reorder her mind's capacity to sort it all out. The sudden stop, and wait, of the Inquisitor caused all three bodyguards a few moments of outright worry. The Inquisitor was only meters from her goal, after all.

Reflexively, Lynx raised her weapon to waist level as several forms appeared at the entrance of the side passage just ahead. The instincts of the bodyguards matched Lynx's, as three more weapons came up to the ready, at the same instant as the Inquisitor's.

The forms were human.

Five ship's crew, and one Centurion marine.

The marine stepped boldly forward, and nearly pressed his chest armor against the barrel of the lead bodyguard's launcher.

"Private Sims reporting, Inquisitor,." Sims said, with the stiff formality characteristic of professional soldiers. "I thank the Emperor that I find an Inquisitor that can take this from me."

And with that, Lynx found a rectangular, gold impregnated, crystal thrust before her eyes.

For several moments, there was no sound in all the universe, only an unmoving stillness, as all present regarded the object of unnumbered futile searches.

"I thank the Emperor," Lynx responded, stiffly, "that so loyal a chapter of marines did not sacrifice so many lives in vain. This one object would justify the death of a thousand marines, or more. There is no price that can measure the worth of this one little crystal."

Lynx reached out a hand to receive the object of unexpected fame, as private Sims placed it in her hand.

"A page out of the lost knowledge of the past has been restored." Lynx said, in low tones. "The glory of the Centurion marines shall never be diminished, from this day forward."

Without further ceremony, the crystal disappeared into a compartment in Lynx's armored backpack.

"Now come, marine, up ahead I sense other marines that need our help." Lynx said, her voice thick with some sort of emotion. She then turned and walked purposefully back the way she had come, her bodyguards to left, right, in front of their Inquisitor. Sims took up the honored position of guarding the Inquisitor's back. The ship's crew straggled along behind.

Sims felt as if the weight of the universe had been lifted from his spirit. The Inquisitor would have the crystal sent to where it would do the most good. Sims felt a smile on his face. The chapter, the brotherhood, known as the Centurions, would have a place in history, as long as there was an empire. And maybe longer. The men and women of the brotherhood would not be forgotten.

## XX.

The hive mind of the Tyranids became aware of a new, and perhaps greater, danger. Many cells of the scattered hive mind had reassembled in several different places. Enough cells had gathered, at several places, that a new hive mind had awoken and become aware. These new, weaker, hive minds were the great danger. Now the older hive must overcome, by absorbing, or war, each of the new hives. There can only be one queen of the hive.

There were also single minds that were striving to break away from the hive. Some of the more ancient blue hive slaves had very developed minds, and psychic powers. They were useful slaves, but the Hive Mind found the longing of the blue ones for independence to be distasteful. The Hive Mind found even more distasteful the realization that the older blue ones were indeed attempting to set up their own little hives, with a single mind ruling all. The Hive Mind of the Tyranids also sensed the sudden psychic stillness, caused by the death of one of those powerful single minds that had sought independence. Some other enemy was doing the work of the Tyranid hive. It was just as well. Those little blue pests could wait, they were a most minor annoyance.

The great danger was the new rival Tyranid hives. Now Tyranid would fight Tyranid. As the new hives gained strength, each fight would become more wasteful, more strength lost from the older Hive Mind, in overcoming the rivals.

After all, the older Hive Mind had come into existence the same way. In a far larger galaxy than this one, the Hive Mind had become self aware. In that far larger galaxy, there had been many hives. All striving to become the single dominant mind. The galaxy had been laid waste, as each hive destroyed the food worlds of their rivals. When the older Hive mind had still been young, it had fought many wars against rival Tyranids. Then fought against other races, once it had moved out, or rather been pushed out by stronger rival Tyranids, into clusters of stars near that great galaxy of its birth. In these clusters, the Hive mind gained its strength. Realizing that it could never overcome the far older hives, before all that great galaxy became a lifeless desert of dead rock, The Hive set out toward the nearest of the neighboring galaxies. This one, called Milky Way.

Now there was no way to prevent the old wars from starting up again. Tyranid against Tyranid. With humans, and other races, coming along behind to finish off the weakened survivors.

The older Hive Mind resolved that this would not be. The other hives would not be granted the time to grow in



strength. There would only be one queen for the hive.

## XXI.

Lynx had grown larger than life, in the eyes and minds of all the humans fighting their way through the vast labyrinth of dead ships. Lynx seemed to be everywhere at once, as if she could somehow sense where she was needed. To direct the assault on a broad staircase. To shore up the morale of hard pressed fighting men and women holding the escape path open. To personally blast away with her weapons where the fighting was hottest.

The ship captain had commanded a cruiser in more than one fight. Gave orders. Followed fleet commander orders. Even been one of many that had defended the space port from a sudden and treacherous rebel attack, with gun and knife. But never had the commander seen anyone command as did this Inquisitor. A hint of envy at the Inquisitor's power and capabilities danced around the edge of the ship commander's mind, as sweat ran down his back, as he humped up another flight of stairs, leading another fire team to back up the lead elements of the rescue forces. Never had the ship commander worked so hard at staying alive, before. Never before had the ship commander had so much respect for those marines that had to face this test on every mission. He now wished to save those trapped marines, because they were worth saving. He deeply regretted having said that those trapped marines should be abandoned. He never would allow such a thought to cross his mind again. By the Emperor! He swore it.

Lynx could feel that the trapped marines were very near. More important, Lynx could feel the dismay and confusion that the death of the powerful mind had caused in these blue, hideous enemies. Lynx meant to capitalize on that confusion. Time was growing short. The engineers that accompanied Lynx were becoming frantic about the growing energy source on their sensors. They were sure that some terrible calamity was due literally any second. But Lynx was not going to turn aside, not until every marine was brought back. And William.

A sudden hail of explosions obliterated an entire wall, just to the right of Lynx. And there they were! Centurion marines were pouring through the gaps, into the ranks of ship's crew that had sprung toward a perceived threat.

The entire marine force was gathered together into a tight body, and so appeared to pour, like green water, into the wide staircase and passage.

Some of the marines were carrying, or dragging, the forms of wounded marines.

Lynx could not see William's distinctive gold trimmed green armor, or feel his mind. Lynx suddenly felt an emptiness, as if a hole had appeared where once she had felt a heartbeat.

After a moment Lynx took a deep breath, then commanded the return to the ship.

## XXII.

In less time than Lynx expected, the relief force made its way back to the cruiser, and safety. Most of the crew ran the entire distance back to the ship. As each secured passage was passed by the returning ship's crew and marines, those few that had stood guard joined in the running withdrawal back to the ship. If any of the blue creatures had pursued, then the humans must have outrun them. Lynx thought that the blue nightmares had not seen their chance. Or else the retreat would surely have been a rout.

No matter, Lynx thought. All the human forces were aboard, and the ship commander was certain that they would have main engines in less than two minutes.

Lynx still felt an empty hole through her middle. An emptiness of loss that she had never known before.

Battle station alarms went off all over the ship.

The ship's engines roared to life.

Lynx was jolted by the sudden emergency acceleration, as she struggled to her quarters, and her comm and holo equipment.

In only a minute, Lynx made it to her viewing screens, against the rising acceleration. With several quick motions, the viewing holo's flickering and weird illumination filled the room.

Lynx stood staring at a pirate fleet, spread in miniature, across the hologram. So many pirate ships had not been seen gathered in such strength in centuries. That the largest was only a fleet destroyer in size, was irrelevant. The only hope for the cruiser was escape.

The ship captain thought so too, the cruiser was already angling away. Accelerating toward non-space velocities.

### XXIII.

Zeevo stared with his mouth agape.

No.

Nooooo.....

Zeevo leaned far back in his chair, his knuckles white from his grip on the console shelf.

His monitor was full of the arriving pirate fleet.

And there, to one side, the tiny form of the escaping marine cruiser. Zeevo was sure that the cursed, twice cursed, marine cruiser would escape. Be too far away when those great engines finally overloaded. Filling this whole sector with a new sun. For a short time.

Zeevo could see that the pirate fleet was rapidly approaching. Zeevo had no communication to warn them. The fleet could never escape.

Nooooo.....

### XXIV.

Lynx sat staring at her holo screens.

Any moment now.

The hole in Lynx was healed. William was alive. It would take a year for William to heal. To rebuild his damaged mind. His damaged body. But William was alive.

Any moment now.

The non-space jump was only a couple of hundred million miles. It had only taken a few minutes in non-space. Now Lynx must wait for the speed of light to catch up with the cruiser's present position. The engineers had not been certain as to the exact time anyway. There was no way to measure such a thing.

There.

A point of light appeared near the bottom left of the holo image. And grew into a glare of a small incandescent sphere. Then was gone after only five minutes.

Lynx replayed the holo recording, but magnified many times. Yes, there were the tiny specks of the pirate fleet. Lynx watched as the tiny specks disappeared in tiny flares of destruction, caught in the exploding of the mass of death ships. Death ships.

Lynx switched off, and went to go lay down, and rest at last.

### Epilog

Lynx had spent an entire unbroken day, reviewing the enormous amount of holographic, and other materials, on Pen's difficult mission.

Lynx had spent the entire following day with Pen. Interviewing. Questioning. Trying to help heal the mental wounds in Pen's spirit. And in so doing, getting a clear picture of the results of Pen's mission. That little Pen was a remarkable, and tough, agent. One of Lynx's luckier finds.

When Pen asked Lynx what had been happening, while Pen was away, Lynx only replied that she had done nothing like what Pen had done. It had only been a very little affair, honest. Lynx then told Pen to get some rest, which was what Lynx said she would do, too. Lynx then left the room, some time alone would do them both some good.

Lynx swore that she would spend the next entire day sleeping.

She hoped she would get to dream of time spent with William.....

The cruiser, brightly painted eagle across the entire front, fell into non-space, in the direction of the outstretched eagle's talons. The little destroyer followed the cruiser into non-space. The Inquisitor had commanded another mission.