

Commissar General



"When Chomaki fell, and Yarrick took his place, I knew I'd seen the birth of an Imperial Hero."

--Commissar Hendrik Irwin



"Sir?" There was a tad of anxiety in Hendrik Irwin's voice. He was looking at his commander, Commissar General Amadeus Chomaki, and Chomaki in turn was staring at the lanky young man next to Irwin.

"I... I... I..." was all that Chomaki managed.

Rolf was as astonished as Irwin over Chomaki's reaction. He looked at the fragments of Chomaki's shot glass. Drinking on duty? He hadn't expected that from a man as famous as Chomaki. Now Rolf remembered the face of the man that had visited his family when his father had died. It had been the same man that had stayed a while and talked to his granduncle. It had been a commissar and it had been Chomaki. Chomaki had met Rolf, but only briefly. But Rolf clearly remembered the middle-aged commissar.

Getting tired of the obvious stalemate, Irwin ambled over to the tray of drinks and picked up a bottle of soda water. Pouring it into a drinking glass, Irwin stood himself before his commander (now being able to read what it said on the non-regimental T-shirt Chomaki was wearing) and tossed the water into Chomaki's face.

"Welcome back to reality." Irwin said simply and poured the glass full of soda water again. This, however, he drank. Putting down the glass, he handed Chomaki his handkerchief, so that the commissar general could wipe his face dry of the water. Chomaki handed back the handkerchief to Irwin without even looking at the chunky man. He was still staring at Rolf, transfixed.

"I can't frekking believe it..." Chomaki mumbled. "Is it really you, Rolf?"

Rolf nodded. Yarrick threw a glance at Irwin, who now had bent down to pick up the biggest pieces of the destroyed shot glass. It was obvious it went badly on his knees and hips.

"Shouldn't we get someone to clean that up?" Yarrick asked cautiously. Chomaki looked down at his colleague, gripped Irwin by the collar of his shirt and pulled him upright.

"You shouldn't do such things, Hendrik. They're not good for your knees, nor is it suitable work for a commissar."

"I just removed the bigger shards," Irwin replied, holding out his hand, showing the glass fragments he'd picked up.

"Alright, but now, go and get a cleaner. Off you go, Hendrik." Chomaki gently shoved Irwin before himself so that he and Yarrick were left alone in Chomaki's office. Chomaki noticed Rolf's curious look. "I know, he means well, but right now, he'd only be in the way. Never met a man with so little imagination..." Chomaki sighed.

"So, you're here then, Rolf ma boy." Chomaki said to ease the tense feeling between the two. "I saw on the news recently what happened to your family... I'm truly grieved over it, just as you, no doubt." Chomaki looked at Rolf. The young man didn't move. Chomaki poured up some soda water in a glass and tipped a little brandy in it. He offered it to Rolf. "Take this, it'll help, I promise."

Rolf looked dubiously at the glass, and then took it. "I've never tasted alcohol before..." he mumbled.

"Then drink it slowly." Chomaki said and guided Rolf to sit down on a chair. "Then we might be able to talk about this sergeant business with you."

Yarrick nodded and drank the (by now) amber coloured water slowly. Chomaki picked up a data-slate that Irwin had slipped on a table. Irwin had his ways... His thumb on the scroll button, Chomaki read about Rolf. He knew full well who the lad was, and as he'd thought, he was too young for Guard. Chomaki's brow furrowed.

Yarrick noticed this and looked up. "I know, sir. I'm far too young for service in the Imperial

Guard, no?"

Chomaki nodded. "Yes, but it seems Irwin has put up a display of incredible ingenuity... for him. He has suggested that we change your age to an older, until you're old enough to be officially listed. Irwin believes the Administratum won't notice, because it will only be for... three years?" Chomaki paused. "You're fifteen years old, Rolf?"

Rolf nodded.

"And I take it you're aiming for a career as an Imperial Guard officer?" Chomaki asked, putting down the data-slate. Rolf nodded again.

"I have a suggestion, Rolf. Instead of becoming an Imperial Guard officer, how about becoming a commissar?" Chomaki noticed Rolf's shocked look. "I know, it sounds crazy. But I mean it. Caspar had only praise for you, Rolf. You seem to be a bright boy, and according to Caspar, you're a-

"I know what you're going to say, sir. Please don't say it. My mother wasn't too happy about it. Neither was my father. It was only Caspar who liked it. And I'm not too fond of it either. At school I've been called..." Rolf hesitated a moment. He didn't want to say it...

"Mutant?" Chomaki tried.

"Wolf."

Chomaki looked shocked. He remembered how Caspar had told about the werewolf children that cursed his family, but he'd thought it to be just a story. Something to scare children with. But he had to admit; there was something lupine over Rolf. He doubted in every way that Rolf was a half-breed, as Caspar had told him, instead he believed Rolf to be something far more. Chomaki knew the Legend of the Eagle, the Wolf and the Hound of Chaos as well as any other educated individual in the Imperium. But he also knew the life history of Hrodwulf Le'man, told to him by eager Yarricks when visiting their home to see Caspar. They were proud over their past, and ever more proud of Hrodwulf, the first Imperial Saint. He had died at an incredible age: over three hundred years old, and it was long before the Space Marine Legions had been formed. A legend amongst legends: that had been Hrodwulf Le'man. Was Chomaki seeing this incredible human reborn? He doubted it, but to hope is always fun.

But how to tell the young lad this? Chomaki decided not to. Instead, he was going to take a new turn, as there was a light knock on the door, and the cleaner came in. It was a hunched man, wearing a cowl over his head. Chomaki knew who it was.

"Hello there Skuli," Chomaki said and smiled down at the hunched figure. The cowl turned up to look at the commissar general. A pair of yellow cat's eyes looked back from inside the cowl. They seemed surprised first, but later had a milder tone to them. Skuli smiled.

"Good afternoon, master Chomaki," Skuli said. His voice was disturbingly hoarse, but it didn't seem made-up or strained. "I'm just here to take away those nasty glass shards Commissar Irwin told me about."

"It was just a mistake. The young lad here surprised me." Chomaki gestured to Rolf. Skuli looked up from his doings and studied the young man.

"You're that boy on the tele-slate, right? You must miss your family." Skuli said and went on with his duty.

Rolf stared at the creature. "He's a mutant?"

Chomaki stared at Rolf. Skuli stopped working and stared first at Chomaki and then on Rolf, his eyes glazed. "Yes, Skuli is a mutant and I don't like it..."

"But you're a kind mutant, Skuli. You help us humans, don't you?" Chomaki said and knelt down beside Skuli and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Yes, I am a nice guy." Skuli said and snivelled silently. Chomaki looked at Rolf.

"He doesn't like to be reminded of his impurity, see." Chomaki turned to Skuli. "Skuli, show Rolf here your face."

Reluctantly, Skuli removed the cowl and turned to face Rolf. Rolf had expected to see a face distorted beyond recognition, but Skuli's was remarkably human. So, he had cat's eyes, fangs and quills instead of hair. He had only three fingers, and his feet seemed made for climbing,

with two toes, and a thumb-like third toe and his skin was in a greenish hue. But overall, Skuli seemed very human. He looked a tad like a lizard, but otherwise there was no ugliness to his face.

"For this, the Inquisition would kill him." Chomaki said and gestured towards Skuli's face. A few seconds later, Skuli pulled the cowl back up. "But, I am generous. I saved Skuli from certain death, with the promise to make a fine Imperial citizen of him. He's just as smart as you and me, he just... has his looks against him."

Skuli had finished his work and left, excusing himself.

Left alone again, Chomaki turned to Rolf. "In a way, you and Skuli aren't very different, right? It's just that his mutation is visible in a different way. And I've had enough of that hypocrisy! I've learned everybody else in this regiment to accept that Skuli is one of my best aides, helping me with many things, and he's ferociously loyal."

"He has his reasons, doesn't he, sir?" Rolf said and emptied the last of the soda/brandy.

"Yes, of course." Chomaki said silently and sat down. "Now, Rolf, what do you think of becoming a commissar cadet instead of officer?"

"I don't know what to think, sir. It's an honour, of course, but I'm not trained in the Schola Progenum."

"Why should that prevent you from becoming a cadet? Now, I have enough influence in the Commissariat to do this kind of thing. They've been nagging me a while to take up a cadet, but I've refused, or they haven't simply allowed me to have a cadet. But now that you've entered my life..." Chomaki shrugged. "It just seems natural."

Yarrick nodded. This was more than he could imagine. "But, how will I become a cadet commissar?"

"You prove yourself in battle. I have no doubt of Hendrik's judgement of people. Although he happens to be a bit of a gourmand, he knows what he's doing when he suggests promotions. And you must be special indeed to make him choose you as your father's replacement. Of all things..."

"My father was first sergeant in Lieutenant Kamer's platoon?" Rolf asked, genuinely surprised.

"Yes, and a good one too. He was taken by nothing less than a Berzerker Champion. Brave man. And in a way, it's my way of seeing if you are worthy of cadet hood, Rolf. See, Kamer's platoon happens to be the mechanised wing of the 27th."

"I see..."

"Good that you do." Chomaki looked at his timepiece. "Almost time for my little afternoon stroll." Chomaki saw Rolf's wondering look. "I like to exercise and keep in shape. Otherwise I'd look like Irwin, wouldn't I? Nothing ill about him, but he's a bit... weighty, right?"

Rolf tried to hide a smile. "I guess so, sir."

"Now, Rolf, remember that my door is always open for you. Have any problems or questions, ask me. Even if it so concerns your family, because I knew your father and your grand cousin very well."

Rolf stopped in the doorway. "You knew Uncle Caspar?"

"Rolf, he was my mentor; the man that made me a commissar. I owed him much." Chomaki bit back to talk about a strange prophesy he'd been given once.

"Well, then," Rolf said and walked out. "Have a nice day, sir."

Chomaki watched the young man leave and sighed silently to himself.

"Damn you, McKenzie. You're always right, you frekk." Chomaki mumbled silently to himself.





Time passed quickly in the Guard for Rolf Yarrick. He couldn't believe that time would go that

quickly. Most of the time was waiting anyway. Waiting for battle, orders and the like. A dog's life. The life of a dog-soldier, a ground-pounder... An infantryman. He progressed too. Rolf soon proved worthy of even higher command than first sergeant. Chomaki wasn't slow to recognise this. When Kimal Kamer finally fell in battle (guted by a Berzerker's chainsword), Chomaki promoted Rolf Yarrick to lieutenant over third platoon.

In the three years that passed until his eighteenth birthday, Yarrick was hardened and sharpened by the Fires of Battle and the Anvil of War. Rolf received his promotion to lieutenant at his seventeenth year, although Chomaki and Irwin were the only ones who knew how old he truly was. The Imperial Arbiters had been informed of Rolf Yarrick's whereabouts, and as soon as that was cleared up, the Yarrick family slaughter was quieted down.

Indeed, Rolf fought many battles at his tender age, honing his skills with the family sword and becoming a terrifying opponent to meet in close combat. Irwin and Chomaki knew of Rolf's gene strand, and they watched as Rolf grew up, and became taller, quicker and stronger for every day. They both knew they were on to something. But still, Rolf cared but for one thing: To become the warrior to be the Dark Lord's match!

Things started to shape up for Rolf Yarrick nearly two months after his eighteenth birthday. Irwin had notified Rolf early that he'd switched back the true age information on Rolf. But that was months ago. This was now, and now he had been called to Chomaki's room on the great big transport ship. They were in orbit of Elysion, the crystal planet, to give the Callidussian regiments some days off from the killing and slaughter.

On his way to Chomaki's office, Rolf passed Irwin. He liked the man, as he'd thought. Irwin was easy to like. He was perhaps a bit leisurely in his ways, but he was at heart a kind soul. But Rolf knew full well how heartlessly Irwin could kill the minions of the Dark. And, despite being overweight, Irwin had turned out to be very agile, his chain-sword being where the enemy was the softest. Yarrick had started fencing against Irwin, but after only a few months, Rolf had proved the better and shoved Irwin over his shoulder in one of the training sessions, breaking one of Irwin's wrists.

Irwin walked up to Rolf. "So, you have been called up to Amadeus, eh? Day of Judgement," Irwin said and smiled. A rare expression for him. Irwin rarely showed emotions.

Rolf looked down on the rotund little man. "I believe so, sir. But I doubt I'd fail. Do you?"

Irwin shook his head as he walked along with Rolf. Rolf slowed down a bit, so that Irwin could keep up. Rolf measured just over two metres ten now. Irwin was just under one metre seventy and rather round over the belly now. There was no denying for Irwin now that he was going fat. Rolf had seen Irwin in battle, yes, but it wasn't often, and only on engagements with Berzerkers, not otherwise. Rolf guessed Irwin was tied up with tedious regimental and political stuff most of the time, and thus he didn't move around much. Rolf felt very sorry for the man. He knew how pained Irwin was by his knees and hips. Rolf had talked to the regimental doctor and gotten the answer that Irwin had been told to lose weight, but didn't. Rolf felt he was the only one that cared for the poor man; being caught in a downwards spiral that ended with death.

"How are you, Hendrik?" Rolf asked, concern in his tenor voice.

"As usual; my knees ache every single minute. So do my hips and my back. And I'm not getting younger." The short man sighed heavily. He looked up at Rolf, as if reading the young man's thoughts. "I just can't lose weight. I just can't."

Irwin left Rolf by Chomaki's office. Rolf watched the squat man shamle off. Irwin had his head bowed as he walked, in deep thought it seemed.

"Or depression..." Rolf mumbled silently to himself before knocking on the door. Hearing Chomaki's reply, he went in and closed the door.

"Ah, there you are, Lieutenant." Chomaki said and turned, beaming. "Sit down, by all means." Chomaki gestured towards a chair.

Rolf sat down obediently. "Sir?"

Chomaki thumbed a bit on a paper he was holding. "I submitted this to the Imperial Commissariat more than a month ago, and now it is signed and ready. Read it yourself." Chomaki handed over the paper to Rolf. Rolf looked at it, brow furrowed. It was written in High Gothic, a language he knew naught about. He knew what it was, of course, but he couldn't read

it. He handed it back to Chomaki with a shrug.

"I can't read it, sir. I'm sorry, but I don't understand High Gothic."

"Then I'll read it for you," Chomaki said and held it up in a suitably solemn way. "I'll skip the boring bits in the beginning, and just read their reply, okay?"

Rolf shrugged.

"Right..." Chomaki cleared his throat for measure. "It is hereby decreed, by the Will of the Emperor Most Holy, that Commissar and General over the Callidussian 25th, 26th, 27th, 28th and 29th; Amadeus Viktor Chomaki has the right to accept Imperial Guard Lieutenant of the Callidussian 27th's 3rd platoon 1st company, Hrodwulf, that's High Gothic for Rolf (apparently), Yarrick as Cadet Commissar. The training period is as listed by the Creeds and Edicts of the Imperial Commissariat, i.e. I have you as cadet as long as I consider you to be in need of training. When the training period is over, when I say you're ready Rolf, the induction into the Imperial Commissariat by the subject must be supervised by named tutor and a member of the Administratum."

Chomaki paused. "There's more, Rolf: Should the subject, you, fail in any way that the tutor deems as severe, the tutor has the right to mete out punishment as he/she sees fit..." Chomaki paused again. "That means that if you screw up, and I catch you doing it, I have the right to take back the rank as cadet commissar. Should the... crime be of a lighter state, I have the right to send you to a penal legion, where you most surely will serve as some sort of riot control."

"Does it read that? With riot control?" Rolf asked anxiously.

"Not really, but it is what they mean." Chomaki put down the paper. "So, what do you think, Rolf? I am now your tutor. And you're my first cadet. They haven't allowed me before due to 'unorthodox' proceedings. Seems they've given up finally."

Rolf sat silent a good while. So, he was a commissar cadet now. The galaxy would be at his feet if he succeeded in this training... It would be hard, it would be craving, but he was ready. Contemplating this a while, Rolf then looked up Chomaki in anticipation.

"I see you're waiting for something..." Chomaki said and smiled. "Come with me, then, cadet Yarrick."

Rolf would savour the sound of his newfound rank for hours to come, rolling the sound in his head. He liked it.

Chomaki and Yarrick walked with each other down to the belly of the huge transport. An Imperial Guard regiment wasn't just soldiers. It was a whole lot like a circus; there were cooks, barbers, tailors and others accompanying it. Rolf followed Chomaki to one of the tailors.

"Now," Chomaki said as they entered the tailor's office. "We need to get you a suitable uniform, right? And," Chomaki said and picked down a size-58 peaked cap from its stand. "The right headgear." He handed the peaked cap to Rolf, who tried it out. Putting it squarely on his head, he looked at himself in a mirror while Chomaki went to fetch the officers' tailor. The cap was in the yellow/green camouflage of the Callidussian regiments with a plastic black peak and red lining on the top. It was fitted with a pair of holes on the side, just above the ears. Rolf guessed them to be for brass braids, for those that held such high rank. He studied himself; Rolf liked the cap already. It gave him... something he couldn't put his finger on. It wasn't charisma... it was something more.

Chomaki came back with the tailor, tearing Rolf from his thoughts.

"Here he is, Yosef. Cadet Commissar Rolf Yarrick." Chomaki said and gestured to Rolf. Rolf looked at the small, thin man accompanying the commissar general. He was grey-haired and wore small glasses. Behind the glasses a pair of genial, brown eyes looked back.

"Ah, you've found a tall and athletic young man, Amadeus!" the tailor exclaimed. He stuck out a gnarled hand to Rolf. "I am Tailor Yosef Kylaun, but all officers know me as Yosef."

Rolf took the hand and shook it. There was something strangely reassuring with Kylaun.

"Now, I need to take some measures on you. Unlike the foot soldiers, officers have the privilege of tailored uniforms, which will fit you like a glove. Other officers are also quite good at filling out their uniforms... so to speak." Kylaun glanced quickly to Chomaki, who tried to

hide a smile. They both knew whom Kylraun referred to. Kylraun pulled out his tape measure. "Now... let's see."

He tapped a tiny microphone by his cheek, so he would be able to record the measurements and write them down later. He spoke softly as he calmly and with used hands measured Rolf from top to bottom. As he finished, Kylraun tapped the microphone again and beamed up at Rolf.

"There you go, sonny!" Kylraun turned to Chomaki. "The usual, Amadeus? Black leather greatcoat, black twill dolman's jacket and breeches?"

Chomaki looked thoughtful. He studied the peaked cap that still was on Rolf's head. "No, make it camouflage, as the rest of the Callidussian. I just can't imagine Rolf here in a black uniform, for some reason..." Chomaki scratched his head. "What do you think, Rolf?"

"I-" Rolf began but was abruptly cut short by a rushed aide.

"Commissar General, we have a major brawl in the 29th's 5th company's troop deck! Knives and bayonets have come out!"

Chomaki rose and put on his peaked cap. "Have the regimental commissars been informed?"

"Yes, but it wasn't enough!"

Chomaki stormed out, cursing freely in Callidussian, with the aide in tow, leaving Rolf behind. Rolf stood where he stood with the tailor.

"Does this happen often?" Rolf asked.

"Mostly when we are in transit like this..." Kylraun replied, looking up from his scribbling. "You should get used to it. This is part of a commissar's daily work. To maintain discipline."

"But I'm a cadet now; why didn't he take me with him?"

"You heard the aide, boy. Weapons had been drawn, and most surely blood too."

Rolf sagged down on a chair. "I feel left out."

"Can't say I feel sorry for you," Kylraun replied simply from his desk. "Now, Chomaki didn't want you to have a black uniform. That's odd. What would you like? Camouflage?"

Rolf nodded slowly. "Yes, but skip the breeches and the dolman's jacket. Just the coat."

Kylraun looked up, surprise in his eyes. "Why?"

"I don't know... I have a feeling they'll hamper my movement... and I rely on my agility when I fight."

Kylraun chuckled. "Can't argue over such a good reason... Only the coat then? And that cap?"

Rolf removed the cap from his head. "Yes, I like it." He handed the cap to Kylraun.

"Thank you, sir." Kylraun said as he took the cap and put a tag on it with the label 'ComCadYar'. "You should know, it's not often I get such a well-trained man here. Chomaki excepted of course."

"You are referring to Irwin, Yosef?" Rolf said and had a dark look in his eyes. Kylraun noticed this.

"As the officers' tailor, I can't go by without noticing that Commissar Irwin has become rather plump these last seven years. It's especially noticeable around his waist."

"That of course, but it is of no good to make fun out of him. I heard your... gibe. You and Chomaki, you have no idea of how much pain Irwin is in, both physically and psychologically. He can't help himself. Irwin happens to be a buoyant man at heart, but it's apparent he isn't anymore."

Kylraun looked stumped. "Commissar Irwin has looked quite... depressed lately, now when you mention it."

Rolf took up his officer's jacket from the chair he'd been sitting on and put the jacket on. He didn't button it though. "There are times, Yosef, when I believe myself to be the only one to care about Commissar Irwin's well-being, besides the regimental doctor. And there are times like this, that confirm that rule." Rolf walked over to the door and looked over his shoulder

before walking out. "Irwin is no less human than me or you, Yosef. So stop making fun out of him, despite that he happens to be a bit rotund."

With that, Rolf left the tailor to his work and his thoughts.



Wearing his long camouflage coat and the peaked cap tucked under arm, Rolf entered the officers' mess. The air was tense with anticipation. Chomaki had informed them all that they were to attack the Berzerkers on the planet Kiitar. Rolf couldn't say he didn't belong to those that longed for the battle. He longed to fight against the heretics and to show them what the Imperial Guard could do. Six years had passed since he joined the Imperial Guard. It had been six years since he'd seen Callidus. In some way, he missed it and never wanted to go back at the same time.

Taking the beaker full of steaming caffeine from the stand, Rolf walked off in thoughts. Just six hours left before landfall. They would have assistance from the Sister Sororitas. Rolf had heard the other officers call them Nuns with Guns, but he refrained from such. He didn't find satisfaction in such things like others did. The officers of course thought themselves witty, but Rolf didn't agree. He had seen enough of their 'wit' over the years. For how much he admired Chomaki, the man couldn't be funny except at others' expense, especially Irwin's.

Rolf found Irwin sitting all by himself by a table. He had perhaps a dozen data-slates before himself and a cup of coffee. Rolf steered towards where Irwin was sitting and sat down next to the rotund man. In the last three years Irwin had perhaps put on another seven kilos and he'd gotten himself quite a potbelly now. Coming into his forties, Irwin's hair had already begun greying at his temples. It was obvious that Chomaki burdened Irwin with political and bureaucratic work, and it was equally obvious that the little man didn't like it. But instead of complaining, he performed the tasks given to him with perfection.

Irwin barely noticed Rolf when the young man sat down next to him. He continued working with the data-slate he was holding. After a good five minutes, he put it away and leaned backwards, one hand on his capacious belly, the other one gripping the beaker of caffeine. After sipping it, Irwin closed his eyes and sighed, and then looked at Rolf.

"Good afternoon, Rolf," Irwin said and tried a smile. Rolf saw clearly that Irwin's eyes were bloodshot and puffy from lack of sleep.

"Afternoon, Hendrik," Rolf replied, trying to hide his concern for the man. It didn't work. "You look like you need sleep, sir."

"Indeed I do," Irwin replied and put the beaker back down. "But I must finish these things first. Chomaki expects it from me."

Rolf sneered. "Are they more important than your well-being?"

"Well... I don't think so..." Irwin said and looked bewildered. "What's your point?"

"My point is..." Rolf said and put a hand on Irwin's shoulder. "That you need rest, a lot of rest, Irwin. You're pushing yourself too hard. And it's not good for you, I can see that." Rolf put his cap on his head and started gathering together the data-slates in front of Irwin. The squat man seemed immensely pained by this.

"Rolf, what are you doing? Just a few more hours and I would've been finished."

Rolf gave Irwin a stern look. "I'll tell Chomaki that he must find some other commissars to do this for him, or maybe an Administratum clerk. But not you, Hendrik!" Seeing Irwin's startled look, Rolf explained. "You need to rest, Hendrik. You've been pushing your body too far and you only have one of that. I have seen how you've changed over the years. I met a slightly plump man six years ago. It was a man with rosy cheeks and a buoyant way. Now, that man has become pasty and grown one big potbelly. I just do this for your best, Hendrik. I do it because I care for your welfare and health, and both have fared ill lately."

Rolf stood up, cradling the many data-slates in his arms. "Come, I'll take you to your quarters, so you can get some well-deserved sleep. I'll dump these in Chomaki's office and tell him to put someone else than you on it."

Irwin got up from his chair, with a little effort and a groan, and shambled after Rolf, who

walked with a secure stride. Irwin almost had to jog after Rolf, who seemed to very agitated over the situation at hand. This wasn't made better than that Rolf heard yet another gibe aimed against Irwin. Rolf spun round and fixed the man who'd uttered the insult with a stare that could've cut through adamantium. It was another commissar. Rolf felt disgusted over the fact.

"Rolf, don't..." Irwin advised, but it was too late. Rolf stalked over to the commissar. It was a pug-nosed, blond man in his mid-forties with broad shoulders. Rolf recognised the character. Noble blood from some Hive World, Rolf thought contemptuously. Snooty ass.

"Commissar Grauberger..." Rolf growled, as threatening as a plasma weapon. "Do you enjoy yourself insulting others?"

"Cadet Yarrick, I have no idea of what you're talking about. I just made a fine statement about comrade Irwin's physical state." Grauberger replied indifferently.

"Do you believe I'd take it as such? Do you believe he'd take it as such?" Rolf leaned closer to the man. Grauberger didn't flinch. He looked past Rolf, at the tubby Commissar Hendrik Irwin, who seemed mildly worried over Rolf's behaviour.

"I don't think-" Grauberger began.

"No, you don't think, and that's is a fact of life!" Rolf snapped. Irwin tried to hide his smile over the caustic remark. "Have you become so hardened by battle, that you can't even show simple commiseration towards others? Or maybe the problem is elsewhere? Maybe it's due to the fact that you never have known common soldiery and people well enough to care for them, eh?" Rolf made a rude remark over Grauberger's heritage and his mother's private life.

Grauberger lost some of his indifferent cool, because he went a bit red around the edges. "Now listen you little-"

As Grauberger got up, he noticed how much taller Rolf was than himself. Standing nearly thirty centimetres taller than the broad-shouldered commissar, Rolf Yarrick spread respect around himself. Grauberger faltered and lost his edge towards the two metres fifteen tall man. This was all Rolf needed. "As you seem to have gotten to senses, Karl Grauberger, I give you this to work with." Rolf handed over the dozen data-slates and Grauberger couldn't do more than accept them and sit back down. He put the data-slates on the table he shared with four other commissars. They all looked at Rolf, attentively. Something was not entirely right with this cadet. He wasn't meant to instil such fear in them, was he?

"Chomaki expects those to be done by the time we make the planet fall. Good afternoon, gentlemen."

With that, Rolf left the officers' mess in a march, Irwin ambling after, a new buoyancy to his gait.

Rolf followed Irwin to his quarters and made sure that the short man came to bed. Irwin almost fell asleep as soon as he lay down on his sheets.

After that, Rolf went back to his own quarters and started polishing up his sword. He knew, somewhere deep inside himself, that the mere shine would frighten the followers of the Dark.



"Behold, the might of the Emperor's Imperial Guard!" Chomaki said as he gestured around himself. He and Rolf were standing on a small hill, in the middle of the Callidussian regiments. "Almost brings tears to your eyes, no?"

"Almost," Rolf said, not the least bit amused. He'd seen the scene before, and wasn't impressed. Besides, he was eager for battle.

Rolf was clad in his battle-dress, as was Chomaki. The exception between the two was that Chomaki's uniform was black, where as Rolf's was camouflaged. Chomaki also had the pips of a general; Rolf had that of a cadet commissar. And that Chomaki was equipped with a bolt pistol and a power sword, and Rolf carried a lasgun and the sword of his family.

"Come, Rolf," Chomaki said and walked down the hill. "Now we'll show these scum the might of the Imperial Guard!"



After a short re-brief of orders with the colonels of the regiments, Chomaki played out his plan. The Berzerkers had dug in hard, thanks to the help of local cultists. Chomaki had said they had a name: Kathlas Cult, worshippers of the blasphemy known as Khorne.

With the armoured 25th and the mechanized 27th, Chomaki formed a spearhead with his forces. The light 26th and 28th had the role as flanking parties together with the Sister Sororitas, which were under the command of Canoness Nazerine Almita. The 29th, an ordinarily equipped Guard regiment, with its share of heavies, scout troops and tanks, formed a rear guard as it numbered nearly four thousand soldiers. With the command from the commissar general given, the army advanced.

Rolf, sitting in the rocking belly of a Chimera transport, remembered the briefing just before landfall. The Berzerkers numbered barely a hundred here. The net around Armageddon was closing and, Emperor willing, the Hive World would be liberated within the decade. Rolf looked forward to that. Perhaps he would be present at the liberation of the famous Hive World; perhaps he'd be elsewhere. Who knew?

Looking up, Rolf saw straight into the face of a young Guardsman, not older than himself. Rolf smiled, trying to encourage the man with such a simple emotion. There was no need for words. It seemed to work, because the man brightened up a bit and nodded with a secure face at the commissar cadet.

Now Rolf realized what he meant to the soldiers. And what Chomaki meant to them all. He had been like a father to Rolf, yes, but he was equally as much father to the men of the Callidussian regiments he controlled.

There was a chime in the Chimera transport and the large APC lurched to a halt. Rolf knew what awaited now. The Guardsmen stood up and checked their weapons, pressing their bodies against the hull of the transport. Rolf pulled out his lasgun, a weapon he'd tampered slightly with, giving it a higher discharge. He held it in both hands, just like the Guardsmen around him did.

The back hatch of the transport opened slowly. They all knew to wait. And it was not in vain, as a spatter of lasfire rained into the tank. The turret of the tank swivelled round and shot a searing blue beam of multilaser fire into the Kathlas ranks. After a few bursts of laser, the large smoke grenades it carried were shot off and gave the eleven transported men a chance to get out.

The squad with Rolf was far from alone. One thousand Imperial Guard stormed out of their Chimera transports. Throwing a look backwards as he ran, Rolf saw perhaps a good dozen of burnt out wrecks of Chimeras and perhaps seven destroyed Leman Russ MBTs. The enemy had support weapons.

Jumping down in a trench, Rolf broke the neck of one cultist with the stock of lasrifle. He exploded five others with quick controlled bursts of his lasrifle and ordered the squad he was with to fix bayonets, fast as frekk. The Chimeras had been closer than they'd calculated.

Rolf pulled out his own, silver gleaming sword and charged against the enemy, lasrifle held one-handed. He knew he was in the thickest fighting, and Rolf found himself delighted over this.

"Let them burn in the very pits of Hell!" Rolf screamed as he thrust forward and speared a Kathlas on his sword. Not bothering to pull it out, Rolf swept round in a wide arch of death, spilling out the enemies entrails on the muddy ground in the trench.

A few minutes later, and they were advancing into the next trench. This kept going as they reached the wall of the city the Berzerkers held. Losses were horrendous to both sides. Rolf knew, however, that Chomaki had counted on this, and that this perhaps was the best way, despite the losses. And still, they'd met no Berzerkers. But Rolf knew better than to contemplate the archenemy's tactics.

Cutting, thrusting, parrying, he made his way towards the city walls, always sure that he had cover to his flanks. There is no better example of textbook stupidity than to go so far that you get cut off from your own forces. He made sure he kept within vox-range, so that he could pick up Chomaki's orders.

If the trenches had been hard, the walls were nigh on impossible. The Guard found themselves being pushed against an enemy that could take everything they threw at them.

Rolf felt a tinge of dismay in him over this seemingly impassable point. And it was in this dismay that one of his first 'make-up-as-I-go' battle plans formed. He called up his vox-officer.

"Eaglet to Eagle, over." Rolf called. 'Eaglet' was Guard slang for commissar cadets and Chomaki had found it fun to call Rolf this on missions. He adapted the name Eagle himself, after his looks and his Callidussian name.

"I read you Eaglet." Chomaki's voice frazzled back. Seemed the general used a personal vox-booster.

"The walls are impassable, I repeat, the walls are impassable, over."

"As hell they are! Never say die, Eaglet! Over."

"They are, Eagle. Face it. But I have an idea. Over."

There was a moment of silence before Chomaki's voice came back. "What sort of idea?"

"It's crazy as hell, but it is the only way I believe, sir. I want you to pull back the forces to..." Rolf consulted a chart he had in a coat pocket. "Map section F2-F22."

"Go on."

"Then we call up Major Markere's Basilisks."

Chomaki chuckled over the vox-link. "I like that! Good thinking, Eaglet."

The order was sounded. Without warning, the Imperial forces fell back and gave up a good three hundred metres. The Kathlas forces wondered why this was and sent out eight hundred men to reclaim the trenches the Guard had given up...

...And walked straight into a barrage laid down by the twenty Basilisk support weapons of the Callidussian 25th. The power these guns have and the devastation they make is hard to believe. Each shell weighs a good six hundred kilos and the calibre of the gun muzzles are nearly forty centimetres. Few things can survive the barrage laid down by a Basilisk company. Not even cockroaches. The cannons are capable of hurtling shells beyond the horizon if needed, but when such force is used, the gun platforms have to be steadied on the ground with either special 'legs' or they are dismounted from their Chimera based tank hulls and refitted to the ground and nailed there for good with six centimetre thick bolts.

However, the Basilisks that roared this day had no need of being nailed to the ground. They fired their shells a good two kilometres without problem, blowing the enemy forces in the trenches to bits and razing the walls surrounding the city.

This is what Imperial Guard officers mean when they speak of the Mailed Fist. The armoured might that the Imperial Guard can bring to bear is as effective as a planetary bombardment, as subtle as a sledgehammer.

For an hour the angry roars of prehistorical beasts could be heard; the roar of angry Basilisks. When the barrage finally died away, nothing was left of the city walls. Nor of the Kathlas force sent out to reclaim the ground.

Before the smoke from the shelling had dissipated, the Imperial Guard charged once again, the Sister Sororitas advancing with them. Under the covering fire of Leman Russ Exterminators and Conquerors, the Imperial Guard regiments with their heritage from Callidus, assaulted the city.

Rolf was with his commander and tutor for the first time since they landfall. Rolf's gleaming adamantium sword sliced the Kathlas in two by the ghostly blue sheen from Chomaki's power sword.

Once inside the raised city walls, the Callidussian Guardsmen and the Sister Sororitas met fierce resistance from the Kathlas, who were suddenly joined in by Berzerker renegades. Rolf engaged a squad of Berzerkers head on, whirling and dodging out of the way of their crude chain weapons. His sword passed through helmets and throats, leaving no more than a very deep cut and mortal wounding. Although once Space Marine and now infused with unholy wrath and bloodlust, the Berzerkers didn't stand a chance against the determined young man with the pins of a commissar cadet. Rolf had sworn to the Dark Lord to become his match, and it seemed he was a good bit on the way. Not even the champion leading the squad of renegades stood a chance. After a short combat between the two, Rolf lunged forward, thrusting his sword into the chest of the warrior of blood.

Rolf checked himself. They weren't far from the heart of the city now: the main stronghold of the Kathlas and undoubtedly the heart of the taint too. Yarrick and Chomaki pressed on, the two outmatching any opponent they met. Things went smoothly, until the black tower that was the heart of Kiitari Port loomed before them. The defence put up by the Kathlas was tripled, and the Imperial Guard was beginning to feel the press. But Chomaki urged them on, a tremendous charismatic presence amongst the Imperials. Yarrick's presence helped too, of course, but there was something holding together the Kathlas as efficiently as Chomaki and Yarrick held together the Guard. Rolf had a vague feeling he knew what it was.

After two hours of fierce battle, the Imperial Guard finally broke the will of the Kathlas, and the cult fled, the Sister Sororitas chasing after in hot pursuit. But there were still Berzerker elements at large in the city. The battle was far from over...

Rolf slumped down by a wall. His coat was torn and he was covered in blood. No battle he'd ever fought had been this fierce. This was not ordinary behaviour for cultists. They'd held out twice as long as Chomaki had expected. And when they broke, it hadn't been in a rout. It had been a controlled and steady fall back in some way. And the Berzerkers were oddly enough still holding out. Chomaki said he'd expected them to disappear as soon as odds turned against them, but it seemed they were going to fight to the last man... or whatever.

"Taking a breather?" a strangely familiar voice said by Yarrick's side, and Rolf looked round. He saw Irwin sitting there, chainsword in hand, purring.

"Aren't you supposed to be asleep, Irwin?" Rolf growled.

"Perhaps..." Irwin seemed thoughtful. "But something tells me I should be here. I just couldn't sleep. I have a gut feeling something bad will happen, Rolf. And in my case, there's a lot of gut."

Yarrick smiled. Irwin didn't usually pull a joke about himself, so this had to be a real feeling.

"To tell you the truth, Rolf," Irwin said and looked round the corner of the building they were hiding by. "Skuli had the same feeling... And I can only say I don't usually trust that guy..."

Rolf stood up behind Irwin and looked over the tubby man towards the huge black basilica looming before them. "Because he's a mutant?"

Irwin didn't reply to this, and Rolf knew full well why. Irwin was like all other commissars when it concerned Skuli, with Chomaki and Yarrick being the exception for the poor creature. Irwin rejected the creature and was extraordinarily open to show this.

"I don't like this..." Rolf muttered, indicating the basilica. "I'll take that building myself, if I have to."

"Be my guest." Irwin said and smirked.

Rolf looked down on the short man. "And you're coming with me, sir."

Irwin looked shocked at the lanky youth, because Rolf was still tall and wiry, despite growing older. He didn't seem to have filled out with the adult muscles that people did. "What did you say, Rolf?"

"You heard me, sir. You're coming with me. Chomaki wants the basilica to be taken by sunset. And that's soon. He'll personally lead an assault from the east."

Irwin gulped. He wasn't afraid of combat, he was a commissar after all, but to run over the street before them was a gauntlet with lethal outcome if you tripped. To get perforated by las-shots was not a good way to go. "I'm no sprinter, Rolf, you know that."

"I can see that..." Rolf mumbled silently. The remark passed Irwin by and Rolf was happy for it. Rolf didn't usually make such remarks, but couldn't hold back this once. Rolf cocked his head suddenly and listened to the incoming vox-traffic in his ear.

"Get ready, sir. Chomaki is about to launch his assault, and we have 27th's 4th company's 5th platoon at our service."

"Makes little difference to me..." Irwin muttered. He sheathed his chain sword and pulled out his hellpistol. "I'll cover you first."

"Sir..."

"No buts. Rolf, when the signal comes, you sprint across and cover me. Vox the soldiers that

reach the other side to do the same to their comrades, understood?"

"Sir." Yarrick said and nodded. When Chomaki's signal came, Rolf was up and sprinting across the wide street, reaching the far end the fastest of all. He pulled out his lasgun and went down on his belly. He voxed the members of fifth platoon to do the same as they got over. He put his lasgun on semi-automatic and fired covering fire down the street. Rolf saw a man drop down by the corner of his eye. It was a man in his middle-thirties, thickset but tall and muscled. He was carrying a missile launcher.

"Commissar cadet?" he said as he crouched down beside Rolf.

"Where's your loader?" Rolf asked instinctively.

"Got nabbed by the las," the man said and looked pained. "I just have a few fragmentation missiles left..."

"All we need." Rolf said and got up. He pulled out a frag missile from one of the soldier's ammunition pouches, primed it and slammed it home in the tube-like weapon. "Make them duck, that's all we need, trooper."

"Consider it done, Cadet Yarrick!" the man said and grinned as he aimed the support weapon. As he pulled the trigger, there was a whoosh and a trail of smoke as the rocket went away. It slammed home and screams could be heard from the enemy lines, along with the pinging sound of the ricocheting slivers of metal from the missile.

Rolf turned his head towards the road. He saw Irwin running across the street best he could, and felt nothing but pain in his heart over the man's constitution. It wasn't helped up that a las-shot winged Irwin in the arm, but Irwin kept on moving, determined to get to the other side.

The short commissar sagged to the ground as he reached the other side, clutching his burnt arm. Rolf bent down by him, wanting to examine the wound, but Irwin resisted.

"It's just a flesh wound, leave it be," he groaned, apparently in great pain. "It's nothing, hear me?"

"It's not just nothing, sir." Rolf said and held Irwin firm. By now, the field medic of fifth platoon dropped down by them as well. Rolf gestured to Irwin, and the medic understood. Rolf advanced into the basilica along with two squads of Imperial Guard. With these squads was the missile launcher armed trooper, a man named Ynker, Rolf learned later. He was a courageous fellow, Yarrick felt. So were they all to follow along into Emperor-knows-what that hid inside of the basilica?

He looked around. It was a huge building indeed. But all Imperial iconography had been stripped down. Statues, altar, and curtains: everything carrying Imperial marks. Not an Aquila as far as the eye could see. All covered in the crude scriptures of the Dark tongue. Rolf put back his lasgun and drew his sword with a curt "Cover me." The sword glowed in the murky light that filtered through the black twill curtains. Rolf moved up to one such curtain and touched it with a gloved hand. They weren't entirely black. There was a brown tone to them. Disgusted, Rolf let go of the curtain. It wasn't ordinary toning that had stained the curtains; it was dried blood.

He felt someone by his side and spun round. It was Chomaki.

"These scum, to them, nothing is holy." the powerful, now sixty years old Commissar General growled. He had his power sword drawn too.

Chomaki turned to his men. "Search the basilica. I want to cleanse this Imperial city of the taint of the Dark!"

It must have been some sort of cue, Rolf reflected later. If Chomaki hadn't raised his voice, the Berzerkers would never have known their presence. To Chomaki, this simple show of devoutness would be fatal.

The gore and brass coloured power armour of Berzerkers appeared all over the place. Chain weapons screaming, the fell servants of the Etherdark attacked the Imperials. Ten men of the Guard fell before the initial shock of surprise had dissipated. The Berzerkers weren't more than seven, but it was seven of the best of whatever commander they had here. They butchered the poor guardsmen, threw them aside as limp dolls once their chain axes and swords had done the work.

Yarrick found himself up against worthy foes for the first time in a good while. They put up a good fight, but in the end, Rolf's agility and the keenness of his sword outmatched them. Yarrick had noticed the peculiar glow of the weapon. It shone with an inner grey/blue light, a behaviour it had never had before, Rolf noted. He would soon be educated why this was.

Chomaki fought as good as two Berzerker Honour Guard put together. His power sword ripped open great holes in the thick, ceramic armour of the Berzerkers with ease. Alas, in an unguarded moment, he was knocked to the ground, with the giant red shape of a Berzerker looming over him, a low, guttural chuckle coming from the creature. Its head disappeared suddenly, and the beast toppled forward, Chomaki throwing himself clear. Rolf stood behind; in a stance that suggested that he'd sliced the Berzerker's head clean off.

"Thank you, Rolf." Chomaki said and smiled at the young man, but Rolf's face was set grim. Chomaki barely noticed this and threw himself against the Berzerkers again, unaware that they'd been reinforced...

...Reinforced by mutated comrades-in-arms. The Chosen warriors all sported hideous mutations; taloned limbs, spiny backs, wings. The armour of all of them was buckled in the most grotesque forms due to the bulks of the lesser deamons warping their bodies for their purposes.

Rolf understood why the sword glowed now. It reacted on deamonic presence, at least in his hands. But it was a faint glow, and he doubted anyone else even noticed it.

All of a sudden, the battle died away, as the remaining Chosen and Honour Guard backed out of the fight, extremely peculiar behaviour Berzerkers. There were two mutants, and only one Berzerker Honour Guard left. A sudden clapping of hands, or gauntlets, could be heard, accompanied by a dark, throaty laughter. The voice was seemingly amused.

"Bravo, bravo," it said. "Very good for Imperial maggots, indeed. Especially the Wolf's child." Rolf knew that the voice meant him.

The voice stepped out into view. It was a Berzerker, all right. But he was taller and wider than his servants. He wore a seemingly heavier version of the power armour, but it wasn't tactical dreadnought armour. Rolf would later learn it was designated as Chaos Armour. It was very spiky anyhow, the rune of Khorne etched on the right shoulder pad, the left one blank, as to symbolise his status as Legionless. The helmet had long, curved antlers; the eyes glowed with a sickly, greenish light. In his belt hung a large power axe and a bolt pistol, both weapons distorted by the effects of the Warp.

The champion looked at Chomaki. "You are Commissar General Chomaki, I presume?" he said in an amused tone.

Chomaki stepped forth. "Yes, that is I." Inside himself, Yarrick felt that something was awfully wrong.

"I am known as Fanthragos. Count Fanthragos."

Rolf saw the almost impossibly fast move the Berzerker Count did.

"Sir, look out!" Rolf shouted and threw himself against Chomaki, punching the man out of firing line. Fanthragos' bolt pistol fired in the gloomy light, and Rolf felt how Chomaki's body went limp.

They landed in a heap some bit away, Rolf's powerful thrust throwing them clear of the firing line of the Imperial Guard, who let rip on the renegades.

Rolf paid no notice. His mentor was dying in his lap. The bolt had merely scratched Chomaki's temple, but it had left a horrible gash in the head.

"Sir?" Rolf said, his voice already thick with sorrow. "Don't go die on me, not now!"

"We all go someday, Rolf." Chomaki whispered. "I just run out of luck. But I have had forty eventful years in the Imperial Guard." He coughed blood, and the spittle landed in Rolf's face, but he didn't care.

"Now, listen to me, Rolf, and listen closely. I won't be able to repeat this." Chomaki gasped. "I should've let you go long ago. You proved yourself worthy after one and a half year. I just wanted to see what I could squeeze out from you, and that was much indeed. You're a protective man, I have noticed. The way you want to help Irwin, Skuli... Frekk, every man you

meet. But that's a weakness too. Don't ever let the enemy use that weakness, Rolf. That's the only fault I find in you." Chomaki paused. Rolf had heard that Chomaki's Callidussian dialect was coming back. Seemed Chomaki was aware of it too. "Heh, what irony... I fled from my home on Callidus, took a new name and worked away the dialect, just because of a trifle... And now a trifle takes my life, no?" Chomaki went back to topic. "Now, Rolf, Irwin will take care of you when I'm gone. He'll make sure of the formal passing. The Commissariat won't approve, but Irwin is a sly bastard. Trust him to hell and back, I do. No other man I've known is as loyal as him. And, he'll help you to become the greatest commissar ever, Rolf. I promise you that he will, but I need your promise to try, and don't let a thing like this dishearten you..."

"I will. God-Emperor knows I will!" Rolf said and squeezed one of Chomaki's limp hands firmly, but the famous commissar general was already dead. Rolf came back to reality. He heard shooting: the barks of bolters and the dull krak-noises of the lasguns. He heard screams, and sickly enough, laughter. He felt odd on the inside: empty, hollow. Something was missing on the inside. He'd felt the same when Caspar, good old Caspar, had died in his lap, in a very similar manner. But he also felt a force inside him. It was a warm, sweet feeling, but also cold and bitter.

Without thinking, Yarrick grasped the bolt pistol in Chomaki's holster and cocked it. Then he rose and looked Fanthragos straight in the eyes. The Dark Warrior stopped his insane laughter, and his three bodyguards stopped fighting, dumbstruck over the youth in the coat and cap. At least Rolf thought so.

For true, the Dark Ones had been mildly shocked by the sudden force of martial prowess that issued forth from Rolf. It was like a warm blanket, covering all around: an aura of hatred. It was a hatred born from loyalty and servitude, not bloodlust and betrayal. Rolf raised the bolt pistol against Fanthragos' head, muttering underneath his breath. "Never again. I cannot permit thee to live. Therefore, as the Sword and the Hand of the Emperor of Mankind, Blessed be He in His nine-fold glory, I grant thee His punishment at my hand. May some other force absolve your sins, for God-Emperor knows I can not!"

Rolf pulled the trigger twice in quick submission. The first shot blew a hole in the massive helmet armour and the second blew Fanthragos' head clear off his shoulders. Rolf swung the bolt pistol round and repeated the process upon the lone Honour Guard. As he turned to the demonic Berzerkers, a dull, metallic clack was heard.

The beasts charged him, but Rolf took it easily, discarding the spent bolt pistol. The first was decapitated by a perfect slice of the Yarrickian sword, the second finding its brain pierced by a length of adamantite. As the last daemon-possessed fell, the dull glow disappeared from the Yarrickian Slayer Sword. Rolf wiped the sickly coloured blood of the demons off on one of their loincloths. Then he took out some polishing-cloth from a coat pocket and wiped it off properly.

After that, he looked around. Four guardsmen were still alive, including Trooper Ynker with his spent missile launcher. He heard voices, far off. One female, another male, both in conversation, both agitated about something.

Rolf sagged down on the ground next to Chomaki's corpse and closed the man's glazed eyes and his open mouth. He looked at the sword in his hand and drew a diagonal slash in his right palm. Clutching his fist tight together around Chomaki's dog tags, Rolf swore an oath that was to follow him throughout his life. "I swear now, in my own blood, as well as the memory of an Imperial Hero, that I won't rest until this realm is rid of the Dark Lord. I won't rest until Lord Kevlinn, King of Berzerkers, is laid to rest. Then first, will I be through with this world."

After tucking the dog tags back inside Chomaki's collar, Rolf wrapped a strip of bandage around his palm and sheathed his sword. He tried to rise, but the ebbing adrenaline made him dizzy.

The voices were closer now. He recognised one as Irwin's. He looked up, and saw the tubby commissar walking along with a tall, slender and handsome woman, dressed in the powered armour of the Sister Sororitas. She had a long, silver gleaming blade sheathed by her side. It was a simple leather strap sheathe, not like Rolf's intricate. She also wore a long, white flowing cloak, lined with gilt embroidery and Imperial litanies. Her face was high cheek-boned and her golden hair was cut in a short haircut, but not as short as Rolf's. Rolf knew instinctively that that was Canoness Nazerine Almita.

She and Irwin walked up to Rolf, where he was sitting.

"God-Emperor..." Irwin mumbled silently as he saw Chomaki's corpse and Yarrick sitting beside it with his eyes full of tears.

"This demands some sort of explanation, I believe," Almita said softly. "Cadet?"

"The Dark Lord..." Rolf muttered forth. "He shall die!"

With that, he passed out from fatigue as the last of the adrenaline kick left him.



Rolf woke with a groan. He was lying on a simple stretcher bed, which meant he was still on Kiitar. He wondered what day it was and checked his wrist-chronometer. He sighed and tried to remember. Eighteen hours ago, his mentor, Amadeus Viktor Chomaki had been alive. Now, the famous Commissar General was yet another name in the Great Book of Fallen Comrades in the Commissariat on Secundus. Looking around, Rolf saw that he was lying in a makeshift infirmary. There were groans and silent crying from nearby cots, where wounded soldiers lay. Rolf got up, and now finally noticed he was wearing only a white singlet and his breeches. He pulled on his mud-caked jackboots and walked out, not bothering to put on his coat and cap. He'd commission new ones, if they were lost.

Walking out into the sunlight, Yarrick felt oddly hollow. The odd feeling hadn't left him. This was victory, but still a terrible loss, not only to Rolf, but also to the entire Imperium. Chomaki had been a great commander. Rolf tried to focus on something else. He looked around the street he was walking in. The civilians that had been kept as prisoners had been freed and taken back to their homes, or whatever was left of them. Some turned and saluted Rolf as he strolled along, but he barely saw them. He was looking at the surroundings. The large, exploded holes in buildings and the black, smoke pillars that rose in the horizon. A fine setting, Rolf thought darkly to himself, a fine setting indeed for the funeral of one of the Imperium's greatest Heroes. He also saw the blankets lined up at even intervals that covered the dead faces and bodies of soldiers. Their relatives would be informed of their loss via a standard pattern letter from the Commissariat, where only the name and personal code were exchangeable. No personal comments, nothing. All so very formal and solemn... Maybe not even that.

Rolf sadly remembered how Chomaki personally had visited his mother when his father had died in the Guard. But he had only done it for his father Sylvester, no other. He even doubted Chomaki had known all of his soldiers by name. Rolf looked down at his right hand. The medics had fixed a better bandage to it, but it couldn't hide its secret from Rolf. Rolf made a silent promise to himself that he would never let any soldier under his command feel expendable. He would make them all count. He'd make this promise to the Emperor, and him alone. Rolf therefore steered towards the basilica, in which he'd lost his mentor.

As he stepped into the building, he was surprised to see it full of light. The blood stained curtains had been torn down and burnt, and new Imperial iconography once more adorned its walls. Some soldiers had painted crude, but unmistakably Imperial, aquilas on the walls, the paint still wet. Most of the basilica had been turned into a makeshift staff office. There were perhaps a dozen Munitorum clerks milling around and half a dozen officers. Rolf walked amongst them like a zombie, paying no heed to what they said. But one voice tore him from his thoughts. It was Irwin's, and it seemed very upset. It soon was made clear to Rolf whom he was talking to as he walked towards where the voices were coming from.

It was Skuli, the hunched mutant aide that Chomaki had treasured so and he seemed to the aim for Irwin's anger. Rolf watched the dialogue played out before him, in a dazed, apathic way. It was the way of man who had lost close to everything.

"Master Irwin, what are you saying?" Skuli said and looked terrified. He'd pulled back his hood, knowing that he was amongst well-known company. "Is Master Chomaki dead? I can't believe it..."

"He is dead, you nitwit!" Irwin growled. "Why won't you accept that?"

"Because Master Chomaki has cheated death before. I have seen it myself."

"Not this time..." Irwin said and lowered his head. "He caught a bolt in his temple. He died in Cadet Yarrick's lap."

Skuli seemed to finally accept this fact. "But, he was the one who took care of me. I was under his wings... What shall I do now?"

Irwin looked up, eyes blazing. "I for one won't take care of you, bastard! I have always wondered what Chomaki saw in a mutant like you? To me, you're nothing! You're not even worth the cloth you wear, eyesore!" The short commissar took a step closer to the mutant. Skuli huddled together like a scared animal. He knew what he was to expect.

And he was not to be disappointed. The punch that fell on his cheek was going to leave a mighty bruise. Irwin loaded up for another blow, and Skuli braced himself. The blow fell straight in his face and he was thrown backwards, landing hard on his back. What could be called Skuli's nose started to bleed profusely. Irwin's considerable bulk loomed over Skuli.

"When we get back to Callidus, I'll give you over to the Inquisition, you bastard! And there, you get what you truly- GAH!"

Skuli, who'd held his yellow cat's eyes closed firmly, opened one and looked up. He saw the Irwin was held high in the air by the hand of Commissar Cadet Yarrick, who seemed to be anything else than happy. Rolf was clutching Irwin with a firm, choking grip around the man's fat throat.

"Who's the bastard around here, Irwin?" Rolf said grimly. "Skuli wouldn't hurt a fly, and you know that! You know that damn well!"

"It was just a minor misunderstanding, Master Yarrick." Skuli tried to explain. "Matter of fact, I'm quite used that he punches me-"

"Is it usual that Irwin punches you, Skuli?" Rolf asked and threw a sideways glance at the creature.

"Well, yes..." Skuli admitted. "But I have iron tough skin. Doesn't hurt so much."

Rolf nodded slowly and turned back to Irwin, who was going slightly red as he was held in the choking grip. His feet didn't touch the ground, and he had a nasty feeling that he was going to be strangled by his own weight.

"You hear that, Hendrik?" Rolf said softly. "Is it usual that you punch Skuli? And what has he done to you, eh? Was he being indignant? Or was he just born!" Rolf tightened his grip.

"Rolf... you're... strangling me..." Irwin gasped and put his hands on Rolf's in an attempt to loosen the grip, or maybe pull himself up a bit.

"It's Commissar Cadet Yarrick!" Rolf roared. "To even think that I felt commiseration for a man like you! All kind and good to those over you, but you kick down hard, no? Listen now, commissar, I won't let you die like this... But I want you to swear, to the Emperor and Chomaki's memory, that you'll never again bear hand upon Skuli. Hear me?"

Irwin, who had gone purple in his face now, gasped. "I...promise... To the...Emperor, I...promise..."

Satisfied with this answer, Rolf put down the paunchy man and walked away from him. Skuli was soon by Irwin's side, trying to help the gasping commissar into a good position which gave him free breathing. He succeeded after a few tries, and Irwin slowly caught his breath. Then he looked at Skuli with a look with both fear and gladness. After a few moments of hesitation, Irwin stuck out a hand. Skuli grabbed it with his muscly three-digit paw and shook it. Then, surprised at himself even, Irwin hugged the mutant man tight.



Commissar General Rolf Yarrick stood by one of Cardinal Boras' vast bay windows and gazed into space. It had been three years, roughly, since Chomaki's death. Three highly eventful years.

When the regiments had gone back to Callidus, to reform the 29th, it had been made clear that Chomaki had one last ace to play. He had, as Rolf knew, promoted him to commissar rank, and Irwin dealt with this formally when they'd returned as he'd been told of Yarrick's graduation. Despite being elevated to full commissar-hood, Rolf decided to keep his camouflaged coat as long as he stayed with the Callidussian regiments. He also kept the lasgun, but he'd had a slight tinker with it, to the disgust of the Tech priests.

But Yarrick had only kept his rank of commissar for a few weeks. Then Chomaki's Will had been found. It stated that Chomaki gave over the command of the Callidussian regiments under him, to Rolf. The Commissariat had raged over this, but, as Chomaki had predicted, Irwin had played a good political spin to it and Rolf had been promoted to Commissar General. Few of the commissars in the Callidussian regiments had liked this; even Irwin had been slightly grumpy about it. But it had turned out to be Chomaki's perhaps wisest decision ever. Yarrick proved to be of the right mettle, and he'd lost no battle ever since he attained his command.

Yes, it had been three very eventful years...

The giant Retribution-class battleship Cardinal Boras lay in orbit over the crystal world Elysion again. The Guard had once again been allowed a few months off. Rolf didn't know if he liked it, or hated it. He liked the time off, yes, but the time off made the soldiery lazy and unfit for their duties, and as a commissar, he couldn't accept that.

Yarrick smiled to himself as he walked along the gantry, towards the mess hall. Irwin, who'd turned quite kind against Skuli (whom Rolf had decided to keep on as an aide), had taught Rolf well in the sneaky ways of politics that commissars often used. Rolf had resented such at first, but seeing how it could be used to good effect, he opted to learn more about it. Knowledge was no burden.

As he entered the mess hall, he looked around. Yarrick wasn't hungry, not even thirsty, but he had a reason to be here: Irwin. Yarrick had often spoken with the physicians accompanying the Callidussian regiments, and they were united in their answers.

Rolf spotted the potbellied little man in the sea of faces. He was sitting together with Skuli, who was watching intently as Irwin worked with a bunch of data-slates. Rolf had delegated work to other commissars instead of Irwin, but it seemed he liked to check things. As Rolf approached them, he saw Irwin break the stylus he was holding by mistake. Rolf heard the man's curse, and smirked. But he was quite astonished to see Skuli pull out one of his quills from his head and grant to Irwin. The hole that the quill left behind bled profusely and Skuli was handed a handkerchief by Irwin, who then continued his work.

"Didn't that hurt, Skuli?" Rolf said as he sat down beside the two. Skuli just grinned his fanged grin and Irwin smiled softly.

"Skuli here doesn't have a fully-functional neural system as you and me, Rolf." Irwin said without looking up.

"True," Skuli agreed. "I do not feel much, Master Yarrick, although it bleeds greatly."

Rolf smiled back at the mutant creature. Skuli was a strange thing. Any other man, and woman, in the Imperium considered Skuli dangerous. Dangerous due to his mutations. But Skuli was not a warmonger, and, strongly contradicting to most beliefs, he was smarter than most would like to think, or even imagine.

"Skuli, do you mind if I talk in private with Irwin for a while?" Rolf said softly.

"No problem, master." Skuli said and scurried off. Rolf turned to Irwin and grabbed the man's hand so that he would put down his makeshift stylus. Irwin looked up at Rolf, confusion in his eyes. Irwin's complexion wasn't as pale as it had been three years ago. He'd regained some colour.

"What's the matter, Rolf?" Irwin asked, seeing the concerned look in the commissar general's eyes.

"Irwin, I need to talk to you about-" Rolf began, but Irwin cut him off, knowing what would be coming. He'd been nagged about it for the last three years.

"My overweight? Fine! But I should let you know, Rolf, I have lost weight these last three years. Now I weigh around ninety kilos; that's ten kilos less than three years ago. I know what danger I am in, but Skuli has helped me lose weight, in some odd way..."

"Of course you've lost weight, Hendrik, I can see that, but it's not that... It's not enough. Consider this; you're mid-forties, overweight and work too hard. Text book causes for cardiac problems, no?"

"I feel fine, Rolf. Never better, I promise."

"You're a ticking bomb, Hendrik. And that's what the medics think too."

"They don't know crap!" Irwin barked. He didn't like where this was heading. "Now, if you would allow me to-"

"No, I won't. They recommend that you take a long time off, Hendrik, and I agree with them, seeing black on white the situation at hand."

Irwin was silent a moment, the red colour in his face subsiding slightly. "How long time off, Rolf?"

"Early retirement usually lasts your entire life." Yarrick said softly. He looked into Irwin's eyes, trying to look kind. They met an icy stare.

"You're kidding!" Irwin blurted out after a moment of silence. "Sir, with all due respect! This is my career. My life! You can't just take it away from me!"

"If it endangers your physical health, I can." Rolf replied smoothly to this outburst.

"By the Saints, I endanger my physical health by just being a commissar!" Irwin stood up. "With all due respect, Commissar General, but I can't stand this! I belong in the Guard! I do not want to end up on some backwater planet where electricity is a wonder!"

"You won't. I'll make sure of that, Hendrik."

"Crap talk!"

"Hendrik, your heart-"

"Shut up! If you want to ruin my life, shoot me instead! I live for the Imperial Guard! This is my life!" Irwin suddenly grasped his left upper arm as he got a stinging feeling in it.

"Now don't be like a stubborn mule, Hendrik! I can have you forcibly retired if I want to, but I thought I could refrain from that."

"Shut the frekk up! You're talking like a blasphemer in my ears!" There was fear mixed with rage in Irwin's voice now. Every single officer in the mess was looking at the two commissars. Irwin continued. "I know frekking well what's good for me..."

The last words of the sentence were lost as Irwin slumped to the ground in a heap. Yarrick was soon over the man to check him. It was all too obvious: heart attack.

"Fudge..." Rolf muttered to himself as he got the confirmation to his worst fears. "MEDIC!"



The medical bay's room was cold and quiet. However, the quietness was broken by a low sigh and a grumble. Commissar General Rolf Yarrick sat by the cot upon which his comrade in arms and friend, Hendrik Irwin, lay. Yarrick had been sitting by the man's side for nearly three days, relieved at intervals by Skuli.

Resting his head in his hands, Rolf sighed once again and felled a silent tear. He'd just wanted to help Irwin and this was the reward. A man whose health and life he'd wanted to save was now lying in an infirmary cot because of Rolf's eagerness.

"Damn," Rolf said and sighed again. He stood up and thought on calling Skuli. He'd been sitting here for nearly ten hours. As he turned to walk out, he heard a slight groan from the cot. Turning and looking over the bulge on the sheets that formed Irwin's belly, Rolf saw that his aide was awake, if faintly. Keeping calm, knowing that Irwin needed complete rest, Rolf walked over to his rotund friend and sat down next to him, clasping one of Irwin's hands in his own.

"Sir?" Irwin asked in a faint voice and looked with clouded eyes at his commander.

"Don't speak, Hendrik," Rolf said softly. "You need rest, total rest. Your life is safe, thanks to our splendid physicians."

"What happened?" Irwin asked, trying a confused look on his face.

"You suffered a heart attack, Hendrik. It was my fault, I pushed you too hard in a way you didn't like..."

Rolf paused to see a response in Irwin's face, but received no answer. Rolf continued, "I should've known better than to not have left well enough alone. You're satisfied as long as you have things to work with, right?"

Irwin nodded. "You should've known better..."

"Quite so, Hendrik, but... see, the doctors still claim firmly that you have to lose weight..."

Yarrick had spoken softly, as not to agitate the ill man even more.

Irwin nodded again. "I agree with that now..." he said cautiously. "I feel unhealthy. And this, Rolf... it has made my standing point adamant. I don't believe I have much of a choice but to lose weight, if I want to remain in the Guard... even more alive..."

Yarrick nodded, if gravely and stood up. "I'll inform the medics you are awake. I sincerely hope you keep your little promise, Hendrik, as I wouldn't want any other man to perform the duties you do. I can't ask for more than your impeccable work, can I?"

Irwin managed a smile. "I'm chuffed, sir."

Yarrick smiled down at the man. The usage of the Icharian slang sounded off in Irwin's fine-flowing Low Gothic. Without further word, Rolf left the man alone. As Rolf came outside the room, he found Skuli huddled up on a chair, clutching his knees. After telling a doctor about Irwin's awakening, Yarrick went over to Skuli. The mutant creature turned his hooded head towards his master.

"Good evening, master," Skuli said softly, trying hard to avoid the slight lisp his fangs gave him. He had a perpetual fear for the physicians and didn't want to be discovered. A slight smile crossed Rolf's lips as he saw that Skuli had put on mittens and socks to avoid people seeing his three-digit feet and hands.

"Good evening, Skuli," the commissar general answered. "It might be of your interest that Hendrik is awake now."

Happiness flared in Skuli's eyes. "Is he? Is he in pain? Or has it gone from him now?"

"He's fine," Rolf replied. "Although tired. He needs much rest... and a diet. Remember this, Skuli, that Hendrik has promised to lose weight, and you'll help him with that, right?"

"Of course, master." Skuli went silent a moment and spoke when Yarrick was about to leave. "Sir, I must say that you agitated him a bit too much in the mess hall. It was highly unnecessary. You could have lost one of your finest subordinates."

With that, Skuli hopped down from the chair and scampered into Irwin's room to join him. Which left the young commissar general in deep contemplation.





Commissar General Rolf Yarrick tried to keep his numbing fingers warm by blowing on them and rubbing them together, but it was no use. Volrath was damn cold, and he envied the red-armoured Space Marines in their heated power armour. His snow-camoed greatcoat couldn't keep him as warm as he wanted and he'd gladly exchange his peaked cap for a wool hat, the kind that his soldiers had issued to their cold-weather gear.

"You don't like the cold, sir?" a voice said suddenly aside Yarrick. The commissar general glanced round and down at Irwin.

"Oh, really, what made you guess that?" Yarrick replied caustically.

"Your envious looks on the Astartes Adepts, Rolf," Irwin replied smoothly, ignoring, maybe not even noticing, the remark.

Rolf took himself a closer look on Irwin. In this last year, Irwin had kept a very strict diet, but still had not lost more than four or five kilos of weight. Still, he seemed much healthier now than a year ago. Irwin still was slightly rotund and his thick greatcoat only strengthened that aspect.

"You look like a Moskvanian matroyska doll, Hendrik," Yarrick commented, which made his aide chuckle. Irwin produced a hipflask from somewhere inside his coat and offered it to Yarrick.

"Want a snifter? It's a cold planet and an equally callous enemy."

"No thank you, Hendrik. I want to stay away from drink... at least this early in day. And especially not before a battle."

"Have it your way," Irwin replied and to a hefty swig of it. There was a moment of silence afterwards, and Irwin screwed back the plug of the flask, as the two commissars watched the Imperial Guard unload side by side with Sisters of Battle and the huge Space Marines of the Death Angel's legion.

"They never cease to impress me, those Space Marines. No matter how many times I see them, I always seem, and feel mind you, small next to them," Irwin remarked.

"You seem small next to anybody, Hendrik." Yarrick said and tightened the coat around himself, as a chill wind blew down the pass.

"Yes, but I don't lack an air of authority, do I?" Irwin said and looked at Yarrick. The tall, slender man nodded. "Well," Irwin continued, "I do next to them. All my Commissarial authority is gone. Even Chomaki felt that way, you know."

Rolf didn't reply. He chose not to and instead watched as the Marines deployed from their Thunderhawk gunships and transports. He saw one particularly immense Marine walk out from one Thunderhawk. The man was huge; around two and a half metres tall and broad and muscly, even without the extra bulk his armour granted. His hair was cut severe and his bushy eyebrows were so close that they seemed to form one. He had a jump pack mounted on his back and a power sword and a holstered plasma pistol hung from his belt.

He walked towards where Yarrick and Irwin stood, saluted (strange, it seemed on the commissars) and introduced himself. His voice was a deep melodious bass, with clear signs of the middle-hive accent from Ichar.

"Lieutenant Commander Edmund Charleston, 8th company commander of the Legio Angelicus Mortis," he said flatly and stuck out a hand which Rolf grasped and shook, after answering the salute.

"Commissar General Rolf Yarrick, C-in-C Callidussian Imperial Guard regiments 25 through 29," Yarrick replied just as flatly. Irwin had to settle for just saluting, no introduction of him. He didn't matter it seemed.

A soft smile entered the big Marine's face. It bared glittering and perfect white teeth. "We've heard a lot about you, Commissar General. And it's all praise. Is the saying true as people tell; that you simply blew the head off Arch-traitor Fanthagos?"

"Yes," Rolf replied, sounding timid at the sudden tone of awe in the Marine's voice. "But not before the bastard had killed my mentor, Commissar Chomaki, may his soul rest eternally."

"The Emperor protects," Charleston filled in dutifully. He turned and looked, literally, down on Irwin. "You're Commissar Irwin, right?"

"Yes, that is me," Irwin replied simply.

"Seems you've got it on a good footing with Canoness Almita, buddy. Dunno what you've done for that, but you're a lucky stiff."

Charleston grinned, as Irwin blushed deeply red. The tubby man mumbled something and then moved off.

"So, it was as McKenzie said then..." Charleston said silently to himself, but Yarrick heard him.

"What did you say?" Rolf asked, startled at the name.

"I said that McKenzie was right, as usual," Charleston said and rolled his eyes. "He claimed that Irwin was a tad intimate with Almita, more intimate than perhaps necessary, but nothing dangerous. She's in celibacy and he's having a crush on something taboo."

Yarrick didn't quite follow the man's reasoning, but knew what he meant in some way.

"Hey," Charleston said and gestured over his shoulder. "McGranth wanted me to get you before the briefing, so that we can get introduced... again on McKenzie's advice." Under his breath, Charleston added, very silently "Damn psyker..."

As the huge Marine strode away, Rolf followed him, not having much of a choice. They went into a large conference room, the room meant to house Yarrick and all his staff, the Marine commanders, the Sororita officers and some more Imperial Guard, from Kenthas, Yarrick had been told.

But now, the room was empty, bar himself, Charleston and two other Marines, one dressed in intricately decorated armour and the other in a bulky Tactical Dreadnought armour suit.

The one in the Terminator suit introduced himself as Grand Commander Eddie McGranth. He was short, for a Space Marine, and stocky and had a healthier colour to his skin than his two companions. His eyes were lined from his many years in duty, the left one even had a crude and old looking scar over it, and he kept his black hair very short, with the exception of three, in lack of better words, braids. A thin, well-kept moustache sat on his upper lip and gave him a slightly aristocratic air. From his belt hung a massive power axe and a storm bolter was slung over his shoulder. Yarrick guessed that he wasn't more than one metre ninety and a very apt commander as well as a master opportunist.

The other one, in the strange power armour, was taller and more slender than Yarrick himself. Measuring somewhere around two metres twenty he still held a commanding presence. He had a powerful chin and a slight up nose. His hair was black and kept in similar braids to his grand commander's, though many more and most of his hair was covered by a large black slouch hat. A tiny starburst tattoo sat on his left temple. From his belt hung a holstered bolt pistol along with a strange sword in a blue metal. He took Yarrick's hand and shook it, surprising the commissar at the strength of the grip.

"Master Lexicanum Edward McKenzie," he said simply. Yarrick suddenly noticed a tang of metal in the air, and remembered from where he'd heard the name and where the feeling of metal had come from.

"You're a witch!" Rolf snapped and pulled back his hand.

McKenzie sighed. "I'd prefer the title psychically apt humanoid being, though it is most probably a matter of personal taste."

"What more do you expect from a pious man like a commissar?" McGranth asked softly his Master Lexicanum. "Even more so, as he is a Yarrick, I believe."

"Of course..." McKenzie said silently.

"Now," McGranth said and turned to Yarrick. "You should know us all as friends. We mean no harm." McGranth glared at McKenzie. "We all have thought highly of you since you killed Fanthragos. We all value you in our own ways. We have known Imperial Heroes to have fallen at the blades of Fanthragos-

"Wait a minute!" Yarrick cut them off. "I killed Fanthragos by blowing his head off with Chomaki's bolt pistol." Rolf showed them the weapon in its holster. He had kept the pistol close since that day, as a memory of his mentor. "I never got close to him... And I couldn't do it until after Chomaki had been killed..."

"Yes," McKenzie spoke, "However, have you got any idea why Fanthragos didn't react and why he didn't duck out of the way? His reflexes would have made that possible."

"I haven't thought much of that day, to tell the truth. The memories scar me," Yarrick replied and lowered his head.

"I think that is were you go wrong, buddy," Charleston said and put a hand on the commissar's shoulder. "Don't leave things like that untouched. Your enemy can use that against you one day. Memories like that hurt, yes, but only when you let them grow and mature like that. Think about them when you have time, and reflect on them. Honour your lost and loved one's memories. That way, you can remember them as the people they were, not the sorrow their loss brought you."

Rolf looked up with tear-glazed eyes at the huge Space Marine. Charleston seemed a simple man; calm, straightforward and loyal. But it was obvious a deep mind and an intelligence of its own played behind his blue eyes.

"Let's get back on track," McKenzie interrupted. "The reason Fanthragos didn't duck was that he simply couldn't. I felt the Warp itself recoil from around Kiitar when Fanthragos met his death. I thought then, foolishly, that it had been the death of one of Dark Lord Kevlinn's most trusted lieutenants that had caused it. Now I know better. It recoiled because of you, Commissar General."

"But, how can that be?" Rolf asked. He was genuinely confused.

"You might scarcely believe it yourself, but the Dark is afraid of you," McKenzie said with a

wry smile. "It is afraid of the damage you can cause it. For more than seven hundred thousand years it hasn't had anything to fear. Now it has, and it has come suddenly indeed, too sudden even for something as adaptable as the Warp."

"But," Yarrick said and sat down. "What has that to do with me?"

McGranth checked his watch. "You have ten minutes, Edward."

"Thank you, commander." McKenzie took off his hat and ran a gauntleted hand through his thick black hair. "You are without doubt in knowledge of your family past, right?" Seeing as Yarrick nodded, McKenzie continued. "Good, as it is of great value. Your family's founder; Hrodwulf Le'man, the forger of the Deamon Slayer sword, left a legacy saying that when the time arose, he would return to save the Imperium and guard his Emperor once more."

"I know of that," Yarrick said simply. McKenzie put his hat back on.

"Good, see, the Warp believes you to be the Deamon Slayer reincarnate, and now it hastens itself to conquer the mortal realm. That is why this sudden outburst of Dark activity has become. The Dark Gods know that there's only one mortal that can threaten their existence; the Imperial Legend Reborn."

Rolf realised McKenzie meant him. Yarrick knew he was stronger than most men, taller too and it went without mentioning that he had a constitution beyond normal men, but he'd thought these mere trifles. He had been diagnosed as a half-Space Marine, and that was it, he'd thought. It was a mutation that the Inquisition accepted. He had heard of other cases, but not that he would be his great ancestor reborn. That was ridiculous.

"It can't be me," Yarrick said with a sneer. "I'm but a young man still, unskilled-"

"Unskilled?" McKenzie raised his eyebrows in mock query. "I wouldn't say so. There are Space Marine captains that would fall for your blade. Not to mention the wicked warriors of the Dark. And yet, you are not more than a quarter of a decade old. And you most certainly have very much time left!"

"Still, I would not be able to match the Dark Lord himself in battle skill and prowess, would I?"

"His skill is formed from countless battles after centuries of savagery," McKenzie said and scowled. "His greatest wish is to slay and spill blood in his Master's name. A wish you don't share. But you will also gain skill, Rolf, as time progresses and you will have more than enough time to perfect your skills and gain experience.

"And do I not guess correctly when I say that you want to be able to face him in battle and defeat him one day?"

Rolf nodded but spoke not a word.

"I believe we have made clear to you our reason to respect you, haven't we?" McKenzie asked and smiled warmly.

"Indeed you have, although it seems unbelievable," Yarrick replied.

A few minutes later, a good fifty officers and juniors gathered in the briefing room and McGranth laid out his battle-plan. McKenzie also gave a brief on what they were facing: Hive Fleet vanguards called Genestealers. They were tougher and stronger than Hive Fleet Behemoth's Genestealers and thus they could only belong to Hive Fleet Kanker. This Hive Fleet had held a firm grip on Volrath a long time. It seemed however very strange that the insecticide aliens hadn't stripped Volrath, and their declared home world New Hope, of its resources, something that seemed too human in nature for aliens. McKenzie voiced none of his concern for that Kanker was preparing the coming of its parent Fleet Behemoth. If it was so, the Imperium had little hope, even with the Deamon Slayer reborn...

After the briefing the Imperial warriors spread out as McGranth had instructed and the force advanced upon the Genestealers. They would not let this cult survive. McKenzie felt an odd feeling when he advanced with a bodyguard of Tactical Marines. It was the feeling of being stopped, held back. He could not see as far as he'd liked with his psychic sight. Something was hampering him.



It had been more than two hours since brief when Rolf Yarrick met the enemy for the first

time. He and three platoons of Imperial Guard along with a squad of storm troopers stood face to face with a Genestealer brood. Some of the Genestealers were pureblood aliens, but the vast majority of them were mutants: half-human and half-Genestealer. The mutations were grotesque. Instead of four arms, the mutants had perhaps three, of which one was a Genestealer talon. The Genestealers themselves were no pretty sight. Standing close on two metres tall, six limbed and with a strange colouring of dark blue carapace and pale blue skin, they could instil terror in anyone. Their eyes had a neon-blue light in them and their fangs were long and silvery. Their feet and one pair of arms ended in sturdy, three-digit talons and the other pair of arms ended in human looking hands with silver gleaming claws. The heads looked faintly human, though hairless. A short stubby tail extended from their rears and they all moved with an inhuman speed.

Although they fell easily for the lasguns and hellguns of the Imperial Guard, their speed enabled them to get very close very fast. Yarrick noticed this and ordered his men to fall back a pace to get a better shot. As long as they could keep a few hundred metres between themselves and the Genestealers, they would be safe. Yarrick found it odd that the half-humans didn't carry lasguns or at least autoguns. Instead they carried blades and axes. However, the lack of long-range weaponry didn't seemingly impede on them, and they were soon all over them. Yarrick found himself fighting for his life. No Dark madness could have prepared him for this. The half-humans proved able opponents to his brave Imperial Guard. The powerful talons of the Genestealers cut without greater problems straight through the carapace armour of the storm troopers, and that distressed Yarrick greatly. Turning round after decapitating another half-human, he looked into the face of one particularly large Genestealer. Viscous drool ran down its fangs as it studied the young commissar general. Yarrick saw the inhuman intelligence that worked behind the cold eyes. He raised his sword just in time to parry one of the powerful talons.

The beast hissed and made a new attack. Yarrick brought his sword round and took off the beast's left clawed hand with it. The snow beneath them was painted purple by the strange ichors flowing in the veins of the Genestealer. The thing jumped backwards, and sprung forwards so fast that Rolf barely saw it coming. He managed to get out of the way just in time, but the Genestealer took part of his left arm coat and flesh with one of its talons. Shutting out the pain, Yarrick could not prevent that his blood mixed in the snow with the Genestealer's purple ichors. The beast lunged at him again, but this time Yarrick was ready for it, despite his pain. He fell backwards into the snow, the beast coming on top of him. Rolf sent both his jackbooted feet into the belly of it and cut a long, deep gash in its chest with his sword. Half a second later, he threw it over himself so that it landed several metres away into the snow. Rolf stood up and tottered on the spot a while. The beast didn't move. Rolf doubted he'd killed it. He could've impaled it on his sword if he'd wanted, but he did not want to risk it having death spasms. His breath came in gasps now. The blood hadn't dried in his arm; it had frozen. He noticed a movement by his side and spun round with his sword, decapitating a lone Genestealer. Looking around, Yarrick saw he was the last man standing amongst his own. The fight hadn't lasted long, the corpses still smoked because their own body heat. A small movement behind him caught his eye and he saw the huge Genestealer standing up. It launched itself at him and knocked the Yarrickian sword out of his hands and landed firmly on top of him, knocking the air out of the Imperial Commissar. It stood up to its full height and screamed out a victory shriek. It was wordless, alien and it pierced the thin air of Volrath, carrying far, proclaiming its victory over the Commissar General.

Bending down, opening its maws to chew off the knocked Yarrick's face, it found itself with a cold bolt pistol's muzzle in its mouth.

"Eat this!" Yarrick growled and pulled the trigger. The back of the Genestealer's head exploded in a mist of purple ichors and pale blue flesh. The beast toppled backwards and landed with a wet thump in the snow. Its limbs twitched a few moments before finally coming to rest.

Rolf let his extended right arm fall back into the snow, still clutching the bolt pistol of his dead mentor. "God-Emperor have mercy," he muttered before passing out of pain and cold.



McKenzie walked the lines. The battle was long since over, though he couldn't find the commissar general. He saw Commissar Irwin stepping out of one of the command buildings and approached the short man. McKenzie felt a tang of envy as he felt the smell from the steaming

caffeine in Irwin's hands. There was a stiff measure of Scotch in it. McKenzie felt it. He damned himself that he couldn't have the stuff. Marines were meant to be able to take more than ordinary humans when it came to alcohol, but they were forbidden from drinking it any way.

"Commissar Irwin, have you seen Commissar General Yarrick?" McKenzie asked as he came up to the commissar.

Irwin stopped the jug just at his lips and gave it a think. "Not recently, if you mean now after the battle?"

"Strange," McKenzie said and scratched his head. "No vox from his platoons. Nothing?"

Irwin shrugged. "Damned if I know."

"Where was he last reported?"

"Colonel Ilkan said that the last report from them was somewhere around map section C4," Irwin said after a few moments of thinking.

"When was that?"

"Damn, you ask many questions!" Irwin spat. "I thought you were a mind-reader, McKenzie? Ah, well, it must've been two hours ago, or something. I'm not sure."

"Oh, frekk!" McKenzie growled and ran off towards a collection of big Space Marine snow-bikes. Irwin shrugged. He felt that it was no rush really; he knew that Yarrick could take care of himself. Besides, it was hard to worry with a good, heavy meal filling the stomach. He'd allowed himself to be a bit indulgent over the diet just this once.

McKenzie shouted to Apothecary O'Brian to get his medicae kit and come with him. He also picked out four Marines as escort, in case there still was Genestealers at large. McKenzie jumped up on one snow-bike, ignited the engine and sped off towards map section C4. He brought the map online on a tiny data-screen mounted in the steering bar of the snow-bike. He threw a hasty glance behind himself to see if the others were following. They were, though it was hard to make out the Apothecary in his white armour against the snow. McKenzie pressed a few buttons to make the cogitator unit plot a course to section C4. In a moment's notice, he got response and turned his bike to drive down a deep ice valley. Apothecary O'Brian and the four Marines followed without hesitation, fully confident in their leader.

They came out of the ice valley and McKenzie set off to the north. He still had the strange feeling of being held back. He didn't like it. He slowed his bike down as they reached the map section. He tried to scan for life signs in the entire area, but it was futile. Something was really blocking him out. McKenzie ordered them to spread out and search the area for any survivors.

McKenzie tried once again to scan for life signs as he rumbled slowly across the snow. He could feel about ten metres around himself, he guessed. McKenzie felt O'Brian coming up behind him.

"If this young man was alive but wounded two hours ago, he won't be alive any more, Master Lexicanum," O'Brian said gravely.

"He is alive," McKenzie growled. "I have a strange feeling he is damn well alive."

He rolled down another valley, though smaller. Suddenly, the impeding blanket was gone from his psychic mind and McKenzie took in the entire of section C4. There was one more soul there, except the five Marines and himself, but it was a faint one. McKenzie programmed the coordinates into the cogitator and ordered all Marines to follow him. He brought his bike round and drove due east, towards the reading. As soon as he left the valley, the blanket of psychics were there again and hampered him, but he needed not his mind any more.

McKenzie reached the spot where Yarrick had passed out and saw the devastation wrought by the Genestealers. It turned his guts to see so many brave men gutted by those foul aliens. Still, they'd taken every single Genestealer with them down. McKenzie got off his snow-bike and crossed over to the corpse of one particularly large Genestealer.

"Brood leader," McKenzie whispered to himself, recording what he spoke. "Was highly psychic undoubtedly, close to two metres fifty, weighed probably around two hundred kilos." McKenzie examined it closer and saw that one hand was missing and the jaw had been broken, the back of the head blown off and several fangs were broken. It also had a deep cut in its chest. McKenzie reported all this in his link. The Magos Biologis would be proud of this specimen of the

Genestealer species.

McKenzie spun round abruptly as he heard a low groan behind him. He walked over the form of Rolf Yarrick, which was lying sprawled in the snow. The commissar's lips were blue and his usually tanned skin had taken a pale hue instead. He was in dire need of medical help.

"O'Brian! Over here!" McKenzie called out.

The apothecary rushed over and bent down by McKenzie's side. "He's very frozen," O'Brian said, stating the obvious. "And he's suffered from blood loss as well."

O'Brian pulled out a thick blanket from somewhere and they wrapped Yarrick up tight in it to keep him warm. They then carried him over to the Apothecary's combination bike and put him in the sidecar. McKenzie watched as the medic performed his duties. He then glanced down on the ground. Something had caught his eye. He picked up the bolt pistol that Yarrick had had in his frozen hand, and also his sword as he found it sticking out of the snow a few metres away. He went over to Yarrick in the sidecar and sheathed the sword in its scabbard. He didn't put the bolt pistol back though. Instead, he kept it with him as they drove back to the main base.



Yarrick slowly opened his eyes. It felt like crawling up an icy slope. He looked up into the roof of the sickbay of the transport ship and then to his left as he felt someone's presence. It wasn't psychic; it was something gained through battle. There he saw Irwin sitting on a chair, wearing the same expression that Rolf had worn when Irwin had had his heart attack. Rolf smiled to himself and called Irwin's name. The short man looked suddenly up and a broad smile spread on his lips.

"God-Emperor be merciful! You're alive, sir!" Irwin exclaimed and sat himself closer to the medic cot. "We all thought you were going to die, considering the condition McKenzie found you in."

Yarrick didn't reply immediately. He studied Irwin. The man seemed haggard, despite his roundness. It was obvious he'd been sitting by Yarrick's side for a long time.

"What state did McKenzie find me in?" Rolf asked politely.

Irwin was just to reply, when Skuli spoke. "In a bad condition, and that is all you need to know, master."

Yarrick looked surprised at the mutant servant, but Irwin smiled warmly. Rolf thought he'd never seen such a genuine smile on anyone's lips.

"That is true, Skuli," Irwin said. "Rolf need not know what terrible state he was in." Irwin turned to Yarrick. "Honestly speaking, Rolf, we were afraid of losing you."

Yarrick's emotions must have shone through, because Irwin patted him soothingly on his hand, like a father might do with his son. A long moment of reverent silence followed. But it was suddenly broken by angry voices from the outside. Yarrick recognised one at once as McKenzie's. The other one, not as high in tone as McKenzie's, he knew, but he couldn't place it. He heard pieces from a heated argument, as did Skuli and Irwin.

"...Must one day find out! You can't keep it from him, inquisitor!" That was McKenzie's voice.

"I can keep it from him if I prefer to, Master Lexicanum!" the inquisitor replied coldly.

"I doubt that!" McKenzie threw back. "You know full well that I have no love lost for your kin."

"True... Alas, it is not you or your damned family it concerns, but the Yarricks."

McKenzie replied with something unintelligible. Which was perhaps just as good, Yarrick thought. It sounded rude.

Irwin had also listened and now lost his temper with the two men outside. He got up from his chair, put on his commissar's cap and walked out to them. Yarrick heard his angered voice through the walls as he chased McKenzie and the inquisitor off.

"What do you think you're up to? This is a medical bay and it is supposed to be quiet. It won't be quiet if you argue as loudly as you do now, kind sirs. So, off you go! Argue some other place, but not here. Tsach!"

Yarrick heard the heavy tread of power armoured feet and the lighter tread of feet in

jackboots. A few seconds later, all was silent again and Irwin came back into the room.

"No respect for the wounded, those two," he muttered to himself as he sat down heavily on a chair. Rolf smiled to himself. It must have been a funny looking scene, he thought. Tall McKenzie and undoubtedly a powerful and tall inquisitor chased off by a short, tubby commissar. It was a crazy world...

"Hendrik," Yarrick asked after a moment of silence. "Who was that inquisitor?"

"An Inquisitor Felix Rovannion," Irwin replied as he sat down. "If you want my opinion, he's not to be trusted, that inquisitor."

"They must have been surprised at you chasing them off, Hendrik," Rolf said and grinned.

Irwin didn't notice the joke, but Skuli did and grinned too.

"They should respect the solitude that people want when in convalesce and not just speak away like that!" Irwin said sounding irritated.

Yarrick looked at Skuli and both laughed out loud. Sometimes, Irwin's total lack of any greater imagination was laughable.





Rolf Yarrick remembered well that day as he now reflected on it. It had been the first time he'd met McKenzie, Charleston and McGranth, but it had also been the first time his strange iron will had saved him from certain death. It was also then he'd been made aware that Inquisitor Rovannion had been at his home all those years ago for more than coincidence. But that was two years ago and it seemed an eternity away.

He was once again standing in the Cardinal Boras, reflecting over his life. He hadn't lived for long; little more than twenty-seven years, but he was already an acknowledged and revered officer. He wondered if this year might be his last in life? So much had happened in two short years. The Genestealers on Volrath hadn't been able to be contained; they'd spread to Ichar and in some extent even to Holy Secundus itself. There were purges mounted against them, but it wasn't stopping the coming of the gigantic Hive Fleet Behemoth. Yarrick could but hope it would turn away and leave the Imperium alone. Hive Fleet Kanker was one thing, Behemoth something entirely else.

Without notice, an Eldar Craftworld had appeared out of nowhere two years ago. Craftworld Pano. McKenzie had told Yarrick it meant 'plank', but the commissar hadn't become the wiser for that. The presence of the Eldarain was both reassuring and terrifying at the same time. None could understand the Eldar's true reason to be there, but to have one of the eldest races in the galaxy fighting by your side felt well.

And then there were the Berzerkers... They had managed to find a way to his home-world Callidus without using interstellar ships. It scared Yarrick very much, but he dared not confess it to anyone. Dark Lord Kevlinn's attacks became more and more desperate, and it McKenzie was right; it was all due to Rolf Yarrick. The thought didn't fancy him.

And now, they were en route to a planet beyond Volrath; the infamous jungle world Lost Hope. The heart of the cancer, as Irwin had referred to it, meaning the Hive Fleet that resided there. Rolf noticed the short man by his side suddenly, Skuli not far behind. The little mutant didn't seem to leave Irwin for a minute's notice. This behaviour amused Yarrick greatly.

"I tell you what, sir," Irwin said sincerely. "I don't like going to Lost Hope. It was there that the magnificent Grand Commander Dante lost his life, after all, and to this very Hive Fleet."

Rolf nodded. "Perhaps so, but we must aid these new Saviours as greatly as we can, no?"

"You refer to the Outlaws of the Omega Squadron? Yes, of course." Irwin turned silent a while. "Saviours'... Almita coined that name, didn't she?"

"What do you believe?" Yarrick asked with a smile.

Irwin was just to reply when Skuli broke in. "Master, Lost Hope is a jungle world just like Morrokk, isn't it?" Skuli asked as he peered out the bay window. His yellow eyes seemed to glow with an inner light.

"Yes, it is." Yarrick replied; trying to see what Skuli was looking at. He soon found it.

"Then it is supposed to be lushly green," Skuli continued. Irwin had also taken interest in looking at the approaching ball that Lost Hope was. "How come it is scorch brown?" Skuli asked politely.

Irwin made the sign of the Aquila and said in a mournful tone, "Emperor watch over their souls..."

"Our Saviours can't be..." Skuli tried, but when he saw Master Yarrick's stern face, he fell quiet.

"Those Eldar will be in dire trouble if they are..." Yarrick said grimly. "Now we at least know why they departed so quickly."

None spoke this time. All they could do was to pray to the Emperor and hope that they weren't too late.