Deamon Slayer

"*I didn't believe it was true when he proposed to me; but it was! To this day, I can't understand what he sees in me. But it's not hard the other way around, so to speak.*"

--Fiona McAllen, later Fiona Yarrick.

Commissar General Rolf Yarrick stood watching the manifold spires of Infernus Hive through the thick view-glass. It was fifteen years since the Space Outlaws of the Omega squadron had come and gone. Their six-day blitz was already the stuff of legend, and Yarrick could do naught more but agree. Quietly, to himself, he wondered what had made them so focused on their goal; to destroy Lord Kevlinn. It couldn't have been what he'd told them. They came from another world, Terra, and thus would not care much for a distant Imperium. But they had cared, and why, Yarrick knew not.

That of course; they hadn't killed Lord Kevlinn, but they had destroyed what he'd accomplished and they'd helped regain Armageddon. The planet was currently being repopulated and it was in need of a new government system. That was why Yarrick was still there, along with fifty of his staff. He had a faint idea of what it would be like, but not the absolute and minute details. Trying to ignore his political doings, he thought of the Dark Lord instead. It had been too easy to defeat him. Perhaps it was just a lucky shot on Yarrick's behalf, but still... So they had been four to one, and yet, something felt wrong. No Berzerker would ever do so and certainly not the Lord of them; retreat and use as base tactics as a thermo-detonator, would they? It seemed so wrong. Kevlinn had counted on that; he had been prepared. He had been prepared to lose Armageddon. He had a greater plan, but what? Yarrick rested his head against the cold, thick glass of the view-port and sighed.

He looked down at his left forearm and saw the scar from the knife that had made him blood brother with Grand Commander McGranth. It was a fine gesture and Yarrick enjoyed the friendship with the Space Marine. They trusted each other unswervingly.

Yarrick looked up and saw that Armageddon's yellow sky had turned red. It was closing on night now: an entire day given over to tedious politics. But, Yarrick concluded, it was neccessary to make Armageddon work again. The Imperium needed Tempestora's tank factories, the oil from the Deadlands, the ore from the Fire Wastes and much more.

He turned to his left and saw Irwin ambling out from the meeting room, Skuli skampering along behind him. Irwin had kept his promise and lost weight, though somewhere on the way, he must have found his comfortable weight and kept to that. That led to that he still was a bit plump but with his squat body, it didn't look out of place. It fitted him. His hair was now steel-grey with a salting of white at the temples, though the bushy moustache he'd grown was black. Yarrick believed he coloured it, though he didn't have the heart to ask. The little man was after all in his early sixties.

Skuli, on the other hand, had aged just as much as Yarrick: none at all. His skin had perhaps taken a slightly darker tone than it'd had twenty years earlier. Otherwise, it was the same little mutant as always. Yarrick had been adamant that the rest of the officers were to get used to Skuli and it had been done so. Skuli no longer used clothing with a cowl.

"What are you thinking about, Rolf?" Irwin asked softly.

"The Dark Lord," Yarrick replied silently. "He was up to something... He's not done with us in a long while..."

Irwin nudged Skuli and told him to fetch something. Irwin then turned to Yarrick again. "Perhaps you should focus on the new governing system of Armageddon instead, sir?"

"That is what made me think of the Dark Lord, Hendrik. How did he keep enough humans alive without making them cultists, because he did keep them alive and they are still loyal. That is what puzzles me, Hendrik."

Skuli came back with two beakers of caffeine and Irwin took one gratefully as did Yarrick. "I believe that we shouldn't even contemplate that, Rolf," Irwin said softly, but with a determined tone underneath. "No sane human should." Irwin went silent a moment and sipped his caffeine. "No sane, loyal human," he added.

Yarrick took a deep swig and nodded. It was true; no sane man should try to understand the tactics of the Etherdark's followers. He decided to aim the politics some thought instead. He wanted to finish the ruling system firstly and today if possible, even if it so would take all night. Yarrick knew they would have to have a military junta ruling the first fifty or so years, and he knew whom the High Lords wanted for that job: Commissar General Rolf Yarrick; himself. But they desperately needed something to replace the junta with and it wouldn't be as corrupt as Armageddon's ruling system before the Dark Lord's rule, which had been a rule of blood and mayhem. He had a wacky idea of something to keep it all in check. Yarrick gave his empty beaker back to Skuli, who also took Irwin's.

"Hendrik, call together the others. We'll finish this tonight."

The squat man nodded and went off to collect the other officers and commissars of the Callidussian regiments and the new-minted Armageddon Steel Legions. Yarrick himself went back into the conference room and stood himself before the great map covering the wall. It was a map over the southern Imperial systems. There was Armageddon, of course, and the Secondus system, Cathay, Morrokk and... Terra. Terra he knew the Omega Squad Outlaws had come from. He wondered what they did now? They had been younger than him, so they probably had families and busy lives. That Lexicanum Edd had seemed bright. Perhaps he'd won an award or something, despite being a witch.

Yarrick turned round and saw Irwin sitting down next to his own seat. Skuli hid in a corner of the room, trying to blend with the shadows. He also saw how the other officers came in; Colonel Kinthas of the Callidussian, Commissar Thurs, General Mikain of the Armageddon, Commissar Grauberger, Lord Commissar Kileth who was sent there on the Imperial Commissariat's behalf and a Zampolit Voshkov. These were the ones Yarrick new more personally. The others, so many as they were, he knew as associates and comrades-in-arms, but not as friends.

Grauberger sat down and put his hands on the table, rolling his thumbs. He sat next to Yarrick on the opposite side of Irwin. His hair was white now, one of his hands bionic. He was old, older than Irwin, and still in service. Yarrick admired his grit and duration, but one day Grauberger would break and that would be completely and sudden. Yarrick had gotten on good terms with him, though he still had a hidden disgust for Grauberger's arrogant ways.

Colonel Kinthas sat down next to Irwin. He was a tall, powerful man in his early forties with a genial way that seemed out of place with his fierce appearance. His face was covered in scars, many of them ritual as he came from a northern part of Callidus where ritual scarring was common practice. Yarrick trusted the man very much. They were both the same age and had a similar childhood, although Kinthas hadn't lost his parents to the Dark Lord.

Next to Grauberger, Lord Commissar Simen Kileth landed his corpulent bulk. Yarrick knew him from communiqées and not much more. However, he seemed to be an able man although much bound to paperwork as he undoubtedly was, considering his state. Yarrick doubted there was a wilier politician than Kileth in the entire Imperium. Kileth was nearly one metre ninety but his girth belied his actual height. Yarrick guessed him to be in his early fifties. He had a healthy tone to his round cheeks and seemed eternally calm as he reclined in his chair. Not even a psyker would've been able to tell his true feelings, Yarrick concluded.

Yarrick looked up and saw Michail Voshkov close the doors and then find no chair left for him.

"Highly peculiar..." Yarrick heard the Moskvanian political officer mumble before leaning his weight against the wall. Voshkov had been transferred to Armageddon for but one reason: to imply that the Moskvanian government system was the one way to rule. Voshkov as a person wasn't pushy, but his profession called for it at times. He was nearly two metres tall, well built and had the distinct heavy nose and red-blond hair of his people: an archetype Moskvanian. The one thing that made him out as a zampolit and not a full commissar was the laurel and star insignia on his cap, instead of the winged skull that the Imperial Commissariat used. He was in his mid-thirties and Yarrick knew him since many years back. His face seemed a tad thin, but Yarrick guessed it to be because of his austere life. In a way, Voshkov was as much opposite as one could get from the sumptuously living Kileth.

"Gentlemen," Yarrick addressed them all. "I sincerely hope we can end this... concern today. And, I might say, that it is now we will start dealing with how Armageddon is to be ruled. For real." Yarrick made a deliberate pause here. He wanted to see their reactions. Not much yet, but he didn't expect any either.

"Now, we do not want the same thing over again, do we? The last government Armageddon was ruled by had been much the same for nearly a hundred thousand years. And then came the Reign of the Dark, as we all know. The thing is that the Dark Lord had better control over the populace than the Imperial Governors ever could have dreamt of. And, gentlemen, before you start arguing; Lord Kevlinn had a happy workforce. He need not use whips. Hear me? They never even noticed the change from Imperium to Etherdark. It was smooth, flawless and unexpected. Not as violent as we'd think. Also, the Imperial governing system had been corrupt for a longer time back... much like Moskva was before the Revolution. The people were opressed and the nobility grew fat on the hard labour of the... what was the nice word you used to describe workers, comrade Voshkov?"

"Proletaires," Voshkov replied.

"Yes, the proletaires." Yarrick said and nodded. "It was laid out for a new Proletaire Revolution; this time on Armageddon. But it never happened. Why? I can give you the answer easily, gentlemen: they had no discipline or a charismatic and driven leader. Instead, and excuse me for my blaspheming, their salvation came from the Etherdark. Ironic, no?

"Now, as said, the old governing system was, and is, corrupt. It can't ever be put to use again. Therefore, I've worked out a new system. I got the idea after a visit to comrade Voshkov's wonderful homeworld Moskva."

Yarrick saw that Voshkov couldn't hide his soft smile. He'd touched the right button on him then... Now for the others as well.

"I sincerely hope you're all sitting comfortable, as you will be in for a long explaination, my friends," Yarrick said and smiled. He threw a quick glance at Voshkov by the wall; who shifted uneasily, and on the bulky form of Kileth. He seemed to be asleep, but Yarrick knew better. The lord commissar was listening to every word he was saying.

"The one thing we must have is an Imperial Lord. I have gone through some of the major influential families in the Imperium... and discarded all. I need a family untainted by the corruption of power. Thus, I made my choice amongst the merchants of Charvia." Yarrick noticed, in the corner of his eye, how Grauberger became suddenly very interested. He was, after all, from Charvia, the same world that was the home of the Black Templars Space Marines. "I will reveal the family in time," Yarrick added after a short pause. "Before they get to rule, we will however have a military junta leading Armageddon. Unluckily, for myself, the High Lords are adamant that I should lead this junta..." Yarrick let out a sigh, which was met by a slight chuckle from the assembled men.

"Now, this Imperial Governor, or Lord, should not be bound by other things than that the tithes are collected in time and the qouta of Imperial Guard filled. Thus, each of the eight major hives will be ruled over by a seperate Hive Monitor family for each hive. The Adeptus Administratum will choose these, as they have check on such things. Also, each of these hives is to have eight High Noble houses, nine if we count the Hive Monitors. Should the Monitor family in some way fail, the Adeptus Arbites may remove them and install a High Noble family instead."

"But," Commissar Thurs interrupted. "This system, it is very much alike the one that Armgeddon had once. Besides, it seems you have it pretty much planned out, Commissar General."

"Yes, in fact I have. I just see this as an example. A sound example, though. You may come with comments later," Yarrick replied smoothly. He took up where he'd left. "Also, each hive will have one hundred and forty four Noble families. They will each be responsible for a part of the hive and answer to a High Noble family. They are to make sure that taxes are paid and such. Then come two hundred and eighty eight Houses Common. These will be the servant families of the Noble families, though not the High Noble families. Two Houses Common per Noble family.

"These are the cogs of the governing system of Armageddon. Together with the workers and clerks by the billions that form Armageddon's populace, they will make this world flourish once again. Now, they all need economical stimulance. All worlds need such to work. Thus, I have the idea of having so called Guild houses, or Merchant families. Two hundred and twenty four Merchant families and sixty four Merchant Lords-"

"Excuse me, Yarrick," Kileth interrupted. "Why Merchant Lords?"

"Someone must ensure concurrence is upheld, and keep from monopoly creation, no?"

"Yes, so?"

"The Merchant Lords will, in my ideas, have the power to split up cartels and such, with the Imperium behind themsleves. They will, however, not be able to create monopolies themselves. The Merchant Lords will just be priviligied Merchants, and I hope we can make this a circulating rank, so to speak."

"Sounds good..." Kileth said silently and nodded slowly. "But, what about Law enforcment? All Hive worlds have problems with that."

Here's where I've got you all, Yarrick thought to himself.

"That is why I made my trip to Moskva..." Yarrick said softly. He gave a slight smile and was met by interested eyes. "Moskva is, as you all know, a highly industrialised world. Crime should be rife. Alas, it is not. Moskva has an incredibly low crime rate. Why is this? It puzzled me, until I found the obvious answer..." Yarrick fell silent to even further heighten interest. "What institute has total control of all affairs? Which organisation makes sure that crime is kept low, and that the Arbites do their job? Who makes sure that the council of governors stays loyal and isn't corrupted? The answer, gentlemen, is the same as the answer to our question of how to control Armageddon once the junta is used up, so to speak.

"The answer lies within the Naroddnyj Komissariat, my frie-"

"Are you seriously suggesting another planetbased commissariat?" Kileth interrupted. "The Imperial Commissariat has already sheer hell in keeping sure that the zampolits of Moskva doesn't stray!"

Kileth didn't notice that Voshkov's glare behind him. And if he did, he ignored it.

"An Armageddon Commissariat is the only way to remain in control, Kileth," Yarrick replied smoothly.

"Yarrick! Sincerely, there has to be another way!" Kileth was now standing up, his bulk shaking with restrained rage. "You have no idea of how much work it is behind it all, do you? You're not more politician than the Dark Lord himself!"

"Watch your mouth, Lord Commissar," Grauberger growled.

Kileth threw a sidelong glance at Grauberger and spat, "Frekk you!"

"Kileth, please," Irwin said softly, "calm down. This is no good for your health-"

"You," Kileth bellowed and pointed a stubby finger at Irwin, "shut up!"

Irwin went silent. Yarrick couldn't take how this man was treating one of his best friends and turned to look Kileth straight in the eyes. Few could withstand his cool, penetrating gaze, but Kileth persisted. Yarrick was amazed.

"Kileth, listen. The Armageddon Commissariat would be self-sufficient considering administrative things. We would only have to make sure they use the same teachings as us, perhaps modified to fit Armageddon's nature as a Hive world."

"I've been trying to tell you that that is what clogs up the Commi-"

Kileth suddenly fell backwards and landed with a crash on the floor. The entire collection of officers was dumbstruck at the sudden happening. Skuli was fast on his feet and inspected Kileth as he lay gasping for air on the floor.

"Heart attack?" Kinthas asked and voiced everyone's suspiscions. Skuli shook his head. He touched a spot on Kileth's chest with his sturdy digit, scraped a bit and took it up and showed it to those that had flocked around him. Irwin saw immediately what it was.

"Colonel Kinthas, get a medic, now!" Irwin shouted and the Callidussian colonel scurried off. Irwin knew needle weaponry when he saw it.

In the mean time Yarrick, Grauberger and Voshkov had found out why the Moskvanian zampolit had had no seat. An unknown man had dressed up as a Steel Legion officer, sat down with the others and waited for the right moment to strike. His shot had been well placed and timed. The compact needle pistol had lost no force over the short distance across the table.

Now, Yarrick was leading the chase on the Dark servant. Grauberger and Voshkov weren't far behind. The cultist was damned quick, but Yarrick evidently had height on his side and kept up with his pace.

The cultist rounded a corner and came out into the entrance lobby of the council room. The lobby was packed with people and the cultist didn't hestitate to shoot at the civilians and militaires. He felled two generals and five colonels with quick and silent shots from his needle pistol. He dove out of the lobby, Yarrick not far behind, shouting to people to get medics quick and to get out of the frekking way.

As Yarrick got out on the gantry, he just saw the cultist toss a woman and a child out of an elevator and go down one level.

Yarrick ran over to the railing of the gantry and looked down. He saw the cultist run out down below. The street below wasn't as packed as this one and it wasn't so far down. Yarrick swung a leg over the railing.

"Yarrick, no!" Grauberger shouted as he saw his commander jump over the railing and down. He reached the railing at the same time as Voshkov and saw Yarrick run after the cultist.

"You must admire comrade Yarrick's courage, comrade Grauberger," Voshkov said in his rich Moskvanian dialect.

"You should know, Voshkov, that there's a very thin line between courage and madness," Grauberger mumbled silently. He turned round and ran over to another elevator, gently pushing aside the woman who'd come out of it together with her husband. "Excuse me, mississ. Commissariat business," he said and dragged Voshkov into the elevator.

One level below, Yarrick was chasing the cultist. He had drawn his bolt pistol, the weapon that once had belonged to his mentor. But he couldn't fire here, in risk of hitting innocent people.

"Stop!" he shouted for all the help it would do. "You are only prolonging the invitable, heretic!"

The cultist turned hard round a corner and ran down some stairs. Yarrick didn't think twice on running. He took a giant leap into the air and landed hard on the cultist's back. The two rolled in a heap down to the foot of the staircase. The cultist was first up of the two, but a firm grip around his ankle felled him flat. The Etherdark follower rolled round and looked up into the grim face of the commissar general. Yarrick sat down on his chest, putting the cultist's wrists under his knees, preventing him from moving.

"Let's have a talk, scum," Yarrick hissed and placed the bolt pistol against the cultist's forehead. "Who sent you?"

"Frekk off, Imperial dog!" the cultist spat hoarsely. It seemed someone had conducted some amateur surgery on his larynx.

Yarrick pushed in the bolt pistol slightly. "Who sent you?" he repeated.

The cultist seemed to recognise whom the man sitting astride him was. "You of all people should know!" he growled and then spat a vad of blood in Yarrick's eye. Yarrick removed it with a gloved finger and then leant closer to the cultist.

"Way wrong answer, scum!" he hissed and pulled the trigger of the bolt pistol, smearing the cultist's brain over the street.

Seemingly pleased with having done his duty, Yarrick stood up and holstered his bolt pistol. Voshkov and Grauberger had finally caught up with him now.

"Well, that was neccessary, now was it?" Grauberger said in his disturbing, haughty way.

"He was a cultist, Karl, not a leader. A minion. They know nothing of worth. Besides, I think I know where he comes from."

"A minion with needle weaponry?" Grauberger sneered.

"You'd be amazed at what they can get their hands on, Karl," Yarrick returned smoothly

"Tell us who sent him then," Voshkov said simply.

"Probably a still active cult in the Underhives, serving indirectly under the Dark Lord.

Voshkov, inform General Mikain that we might have to flush out the underhives, ASAP. And get someone to clean this up."

Voshkov left and Grauberger was just to follow him, when Yarrick grabbed his arm. "Karl, wait, I want to talk to you."

"About what, sir?" Grauberger asked.

Yarrick seemed thoughtful for a while, and then spoke, "What do you think of the Armageddon Commissariat?"

"Soundest idea you've ever had. And frankly, Rolf, most officers present most surely did agree with you. Kileth just overreacted."

"Good," Yarrick said and fell silent. He studied his surroundings and spoke again. "What do you think of Infernus hive?"

"Nice place. I especially like the Opera House. Well," Grauberger added, as an afterthought, "at least when they've rebuilt it... I might go there when, and if, I retire."

Yarrick nodded thoughtfully. "Very well... What would you say of early retirement?"

Grauberger just stared at his commander. "Wha-?" he managed.

"I wondered what you would think of early, or whatever, retirement? It is, as a matter of fact, way past your time, Karl."

"I have considered it, Rolf. It is just..." Grauberger sighed, "I have nowhere to go to once I've retired."

"You do," Yarrick replied simply. "I said I had checked Charvia's noble families and that included the Graubergers; your family. You might be arrogant, but you are sound folks. What would you say of retiring as a commissar, only to become an Infernus Hive Merchant Noble, eh?"

Commissar Karl Grauberger didn't know what to say.

It was a week after the incident with the shooting and Lord Commissar Simen Kileth had just awoken from his unconsciousness. He was sitting up in his medical cot, Commissar General Rolf Yarrick sitting on a chair nearby. Yarrick wasn't in uniform and that lead to a more open conversation between the two. Kileth had excused himself several times for his behavior, as he now had been able to study Yarrick's data on how the new Armageddon ruling system was to work. In the past week, Yarrick and the other politicos had been working hard on working out a governing system, based on Yarrick's ideas. The same went for the Armageddon Commissariat. But that was not the matters they discussed now.

"Are you saying I was minutes from death, Rolf?" Kileth asked and shifted uneasily.

"If Skuli hadn't seen that it was 'needle work' and not a cardiac, as all others thought, you'd be very dead, Simen." Yarrick replied softly.

"Skuli..." Kileth mused. "That's that mutant of yours, right?"

"I know it seems like heresy, but Skuli is one of my best men."

"No, no, I wasn't thinking of that, Rolf," Kileth said excusingly. "I was going to say that we need more men like him... psychologically."

"I see your point, Simen," Yarrick said and smiled.

The two were silent for a while. Kileth shifted his bulk again.

"'Needle work'?" he asked.

"Needle weaponry," Yarrick replied. "Loaded with choke toxin. It was slowly filling your lungs with fluid."

"I'll be damned," Kileth muttered.

"You almost were, weren't you?" Yarrick replied with a wry smile.

Kileth chuckled. "The Commissar Yarrick I've heard of isn't gifted with such a caustic wit. When did this appear, Rolf?"

"Recently..." Yarrick answered. He was about to add something when a low rumbling cut him off. Yarrick looked around and then stared at Kileth.

"What the hell was that?" Yarrick asked.

Kileth smiled warmly and put a hand on his big belly. "I might get nourishment through the infusion, but it doesn't give my stomach anything to work with. What I wouldn't do for a hearty meal right now..."

"I think you'll do fine in losing some weight, Simen," Yarrick replied and rested his head in his hands. "Don't you?"

"Even fat people turn hungry, Rolf," Kileth replied with a grin. Yarrick nodded his assent. "What's the matter? There's something on your mind, isn't there, Rolf?"

"Indeed there is," Yarrick replied and looked troubled. "You see, Simen, the junta will of course govern Armageddon until the government system is stabilized. Alas, the Armageddon Commissariat goes into the works in a few years. It was fairly simple to arrange, see. It has a programme laid out to train officers of the Armageddon Steel Legions to political officers, as well as taking full-fledged commissars from the ranks of the Imperium. It even has an army of clerks ready. But what it doesn't have is a leader, a chief commissar. There, we are found wanting. And I need an able politician there, not a warrior."

"I follow you, Rolf," Kileth replied as Yarrick looked at him.

"Now, that it isn't to be a warrior effectively rules me out, no? Besides, the Imperial High Lords wants me as leader of the junta those fifty years, curse their hides. I persuaded Grauberger into retiring and move here with his entire family, and become a Marchant Lord of Infernus that the Imperial authorities could trust. But I need an even more able man as chief commissar."

"Your man; Irwin. What about him?" Kileth suggested.

"Too old. Too unimaginative," Yarrick replied with a sigh. "No, I need a wily politician, if not the wiliest. Lord Commissar Simen Kileth, what would you say about ruling the Armageddon Commissariat?"

Kileth was stunned. "I- I don't know what to say..." he mumbled.

"Your life wouldn't change much," Yarrick tried.

Kileth was silent a long while. He scratched his double chin in deep thought. After a few minutes he spoke.

"Ah, what the hell?" he said and smiled. "I'll do it, but you must stand for a dinner in Infernus main spire resturant Templum Diynos."

Yarrick clasped Kileth's plump hand tightly. "Whatever it takes to convince you, Simen. Whatever it takes."

Commissar General Rolf Yarrick contemplated his life as he stood watching Hive Hades below himself. He was in the main spire, several kilometres up in the air, in the room where Hive Monitor Christoph Artis had governered his Hive. Where the Hive Monitor was now, Yarrick knew not. Perhaps he was covering in a refugee camp somewhere. Maybe he even was off world and in safety. God-Emperor love him if he was. War raged on the streets and paths far below in the Hive. The Second Armageddon War raged.

Suddenly, he slammed his fist forcefully into the panzerglass of the view-port.

"This shouldn't be happening!" he shouted out loud. His one companion in the room, Grand Commander Eddie McGranth seemed unmoved by the commissar general's sudden outburst.

"McKenzie spoke of a new cloaking device. Perhaps spawn from his new allies, the dark eldar?" McGranth spoke softly. His Terminator armour whirred as he turned and moved over to Yarrick by the viewport.

"Damn that witch, McGranth," Yarrick said and fixed McGranth with a hard stare. "Unless he can give a straight answer, he should shut up!"

"Now, Rolf, ease up! This is not the end of the world!"

Yarrick turned and grinned like a wolf, as that was the only way he could grin. "No, you are wrong, Eddie. This is the end of the world! This is Armageddon, after all!"

McGranth sighed. "Chomaki would've told you not to lose hope and so do I."

"Do so, because I haven't lost faith. Not in the Adeptus Astartes, but in Armageddon ever becoming what it once was! As recently as four years ago, there was an attempted assassination on me! Why? Because the ass-hole wanted to rule the junta instead of me! Lord General Kurth became traitor and heretic to gain power, Eddie. Power corrupts, and Armageddon is the best example of that."

McGranth sighed and turned to leave. "Whatever," he said, "but you should know, most people see you as what you are; an Imperial Hero. Don't forget that, Rolf. Now, if you excuse me, I have a Legion to lead."

And thus, McGranth left Yarrick alone with his thoughts. Yarrick shuffled over to the desk and sat down heavily in the comfortable chair. He was fifty-seven years old and wanted to live longer than that. But every time he looked into the mirror, he saw a thirty-year-old man. Something was wrong with him. Very wrong.

He had lately confronted Inquisitor Rovannion personally and demanded an answer to why he wasn't ageing. Rovannion himself didn't seem a day older than when Rolf had first seen him, all those years ago home on Callidus... when Uncle Caspar was still alive...

Yarrick wiped away the tears that had formed in his eyes at the thought of his grand-cousin. He felt a sudden warm feeling inside of him and started up. He realised it was hatred, pure hatred, towards the beast that had robbed him so: Dark Lord Kevlinn, or Kharn, as he called himself nowadays. It didn't matter. Yarrick was going to present the head of the Dark Lord, no matter his name, before the Golden Throne of the Emperor. No matter the cost!

A soft knock on the door of the office brought Yarrick out of his thoughts. He walked over to the control board and opened the door. As it slid away with a soft hiss, a small man leaning on a cane limped in. He wasn't more than one metre fifty, his hair was white as was his moustache and his eyes were dark brown and gentle. Yarrick knew who it was.

"Hendrik Irwin! God-Emperor! What are you doing here?"

"Just visiting," Irwin said and smiled warmly. Yarrick wasn't slow to bring the old man a chair to sit down in. Irwin heard how Yarrick muttered in Callidussian under his breath.

"Kersani! Inamu hun karn! Mitikor un brekan! Karn! Karn!"

"Now, show some respect for the eldery, Rolf," Irwin said as he put down his cane. "And I am not crazy, mind you!"

Yarrick turned and looked over his shoulder as he hung Irwin's coat on a hook. "You know Callidussian, Hendrik?"

"Keni," Irwin replied, using the Calidussian word for 'little'. Irwin saw Yarrick's look and added, "You said 'Emperor! He has to be crazy! Come in the middle of a war! Crazy! Crazy!"

"Exactly my words, Hendrik," Yarrick replied and sat down in front of the little man. "So, then you know what my name, and Chomaki's, mean, right?"

"Bless his soul, I do," Irwin said and smiled. "Yarrick is the Callidussian word for wolfhound, although it is spelled why-ay-ar-eye-kei-kei. And Chomaki is the word for eagle."

"And double eagle is taochomaki." Yarrick smiled. "It has been such a long time since I spoke Callidussian with anybody, I was afraid I'd forgotten. So what brings you here, Hendrik?"

Irwin gestured around himself. "This war," he said idly. "It shouldn't be happening, right?"

Yarrick nodded. "Indeed. And all these... dark eldar. I do not like it."

"Of course," Irwin said and sighed. "Rolf, the reason I'm here is because of Skuli. He's worrying me."

"Skuli? What's wrong with him?"

"I found him sitting wide awake in the middle of the night. He was sitting in a patch of moonlight, looking at the moon that cast it."

"And?"

"I walked up to him and asked why he was sitting there, and Skuli replied 'It's not genuine.'"

"What did he mean with that?" Yarrick questioned, surprised.

"I have no idea either," Irwin replied, "I was hoping you'd know. But my guess is it has something to do with Armageddon."

"Is that all, Hendrik?"

"Yes, I think so," the little man replied and got up. Yarrick helped him on with his coat and followed Irwin to the door. There, the old man suddenly stopped and looked up into Yarrick's face, concern shining in his gentle eyes.

"Rolf, believe me, something isn't right with this war. I feel it."

"So do I, Hendrik, but Kharn is now here and we will defeat him."

"Of course," Irwin said and smiled sadly, "but they managed to get Kileth after all, now didn't they?"

"So you heard, didn't you?" Yarrick said and looked pained.

"I'm sorry, Rolf," Irwin comforted and grabbed Yarrick's left arm gently. "I know how much the Armageddon Commissariat mean to you, and in losing Kileth, you lost a very valuable man."

"So we did..." Yarrick replied and was silent for the rest of the day. Irwin left him alone and went home. Yarrick would seek his comfort in battle, as he always did, though.

The Berzerker never saw the silver gleaming sword coming. Its head rolled on the ground amongst rubble and body parts and its massive body toppled over like a great oak. Rolf Yarrick leapt clear of it easily. He was fighting on the streets of Helsreach Hive, accompanied by an entire regiment of Helsreach Hive Defence Force, HDF for short.

A quick spin and Yarrick brought his sword round in an arc that decapitated several cultists. There were millions of them, he silently concluded. Millions. And the Berzerkers weren't even a thousand. The dark eldars' numbers he didn't even want to contemplate. To him, they were sadistic aliens that only could serve the universe by dying by his sword.

Yarrick jumped up and landed his jackboots firmly in the back of a cultist. His group comrades turned round and faced the Imperial Commissar. Their first mistake, and last. Yarrick brought his sword round and sliced through them all with an ease that could only be fuelled by fury. And it was fury Yarrick felt burning inside of him. It had been nearly a month since Irwin had visited, but what the little man's visit had dredged up from Yarrick's memory still burned. But it was welcomed and relished. It meant his hatred would burn higher against these followers of the Etherdark.

A close swipe to his head brought him back to reality. An immense Berzerker stood berfore him. The chain axe in its hands had nearly swept Yarrick's head off. The beast raised the axe again and charged at the commissar.

Yarrick ducked away and let his sword gently pass through the right shoulder pad of the power armoured monstrosity. It roared in pain and brought itself round to attack once again. Yarrick ducked underneath the wild swing of the chain axe and burrowed his blade into the chest of the Berzerker. As the beast toppled forward, Yarrick pulled the blade free and decapitated the Marine.

"Let them burn! Burn the heretics! Let them feel the purifying flame of the Emperor's Wrath!" Yarrick bellowed as he charged at the blood red horde before them once again.

It took the Imperial force of HDF nigh on four hours to claim the cathedral that was their objective. But still, there seemed no end to their enemies. The Berzerkers had dimnished, perhaps called to serve elsewhere, but the cultists were still numerous. Alas, the one thing that disheartened Yarrick the most was the sight of the long-limbed, dark purple armoured dark eldar. He recognised their kin: A dark eldar lord and his retinue of Incubi bodyguards and ordinary warriors.

"Kill the aliens and purge the heretics!" Yarrick roared and led a squad of Imperial Guard storm troopers against the dark eldar lord. The hellguns of the storm troopers spat deadly

lasfire against the aliens. One of the troopers welded a grenade launcher and shot off a fragmentation grenade at the dark eldar. When the smoke dispersed, it showed that every warrior in the squad was dead, but the lord and his Incubi were unscathed.

"Frekk," Yarrick muttered and led the squad in a charge towards the lord.

Battle ensued between the two forces and Yarrick squared up with the lord. The tall, thin alien was wearing armour with many sharp blades along with a grotesque death's mask on his tall helmet. In his hands he held a glaive with wickedly shaped blades in both ends. His armour matched his warriors' with it's deep purples.

Yarrick prepared himself for a long battle. He was not to be disappointed.

The alien was quick, quicker than anyone Yarrick had ever met before. There seemed to be no end to the many swipes that the lord could perform with his glaive. After one graceful sweep of the glaive, Yarrick managed to get a stab in at the dark eldar, only to see the sword reflected by an invisible shield. Noticing the human's feeble attack, the dark eldar swung round in another graceful sweep with his glaive.

Yarrick ducked back, just avoiding the glaive and striking in at the lord again with his sword. Once again it rebounded off an invisible wall. The dark eldar quickly spun round and fired the scorpion tail like contraption on its helmet. Yarrick dodged that too. Now he knew what it was for at least.

The two were locked in combat for a long time, neither gaining the upper hand. However, after a good five minutes, Yarrick noticed frustration in the haughty alien's movements. He guessed it was because the vile creature couldn't understand how a human held him off. The frustration led to lack of concentration, and the lack of concentration meant that Yarrick could get a firm grip on the glaive after one too frustrated swing on the dark eldar's behalf. Yarrick pulled the alien closer to him and sent his sword towards the head of the alien, knocking off the scorpion tail.

Wrenching the glaive from the dark eldar's hands, Yarrick threw him off himself and charged in with the sword. This time, the shadow field merely fizzled and the deamonslayer sword passed easily through armour, flesh and bone. The head of the lord flew through the air whilst the body slumped to the ground.

Yarrick checked himself. The Imperial storm troopers had managed to take down the Incubi bodyguard through sheer weight of numbers. But it had cost them.

And it would continue to cost them to regain Armageddon from the Dark Lord's grasp. Life was the Emperor's and the Imperium currency.

Rallying his men for the next charge, Rolf Yarrick contemplated this. It was the only way. Not only for him, but for the Imperium. The only way to remain a part of the Galaxy was war. All out, total and unforgiving war.

Howling in fury, Rolf Yarrick led his men in a charge of glory. They would reclaim Armageddon, whatever it may cost!

"Raiyah! How could he miss that one?" Katsuro Daichi, Cadet Commissar, shouted as the star kickballer missed an obvious goal attempt.

"That means 2-1 to the Helsreachians, Cadet Daichi," the bartender, a stout, middle-aged man named Fermeaux said softly. "Seems you'll lose our little bet, then."

"The game's not over yet," Daichi said confidently.

"The Helsreachians aren't up to it," a voice said softly by Daichi's side. The young Cathayan turned and looked at the tall, lean figure in the black greatcoat. The bluish-black hair that stuck out from underneath his peaked cap gave him away.

Commissar General Rolf Yarrick sat down next to his cadet. Katsuro Daichi wasn't his first cadet. He was his third and most promising so far.

"Really, why do you reckon so, sir?" Daichi asked.

"They've been dragged around with player damage for a long time," Yarrick said simply.

"Also, the Armageddon Commissarial team is quite good, no?"

"They are," Fermeaux agreed. "The usual, commissar general?"

"If that means Callidussian whiskey; yes, please," Yarrick replied amiably. Daichi took the chance to have a refill of his Cathayan sake.

Yarrick spun round on his chair and took in the entire of Upper Spire Bar 23/gn, also known as the "Skull and Laurel" because of all the commissars who frequented it after they'd gone off-duty. There were mostly Armageddon Commissars at the Skull and Laurel, but it happened that Imperial Commissars, like Yarrick and Daichi, dropped in. Of course, Yarrick was the leader of the military junta of Armageddon and Daichi was his cadet, so they were both more or less stationed here on unknown time, but still.

Yarrick looked back at Daichi. "Do you want another reason that the Helreachians won't win, Katsuro?"

Daichi tore his eyes from the tele-slate and looked at Yarrick. "Go ahead, sir."

"If they now do win, against all odds," Yarrick said with a soft smile, "and do knock out the Commissarial team, the Commissariat of Armageddon will claim that the tournament never took place."

Daichi snorted with laughter. He was already familiar with how the Commissariat functioned, despite his tender age of twenty. Heck, Yarrick thought, at that age, I was a commissar cadet as well. Now, he silently reflected, he was to be seventy years old next month. And he didn't look a day over thirty.

There was a shrill whistle-blow from the tele-slate, and the entire bar erupted into cheers. Armageddon Commissarial had won, and Daichi had lost his bet with the bartender. Daichi easily fished out fifty Imperial crowns from his waistcoat pocket.

"C'est la vie," Fermeaux said as he scooped down the Imperial crowns into his big hands. "Better luck next time, mon fils."

"Hai," Daichi replied, using his own dialect of Low Gothic to counter Fermeaux' Low Armageddonian. "Next time. If there's going to be one."

Yarrick raised his glass. "For the Armageddon Commissarial kickball team, Katsuro. Worthy opponents and winners, no?"

"Yes, indeed," Daichi replied and raised his own glass. "As we say on Cathay: Wunsai!" With that, Daichi knocked the shot back easily.

"Wunsai," Yarrick replied and sipped his own drink.

The evening continued in a cheery mood for all of them. However, at half-past one, Yarrick felt enough was enough and thanked everyone present for the fine company they'd been, as he'd always had done. He tried to convince Daichi to come with him, but the young commissar cadet wanted to stay with the others. Yarrick decided to leave well enough alone and left by himself.

For being a hive, Hive Infernus was awfully quiet at night. At least in the upper spires. The sodium lamps that had been lighted as the night-cycle had been begun cast stark light and equally stark shadows all around.

Yarrick wondered if there were places were the sodium lights never shone their crime-damning light. He also wondered, what he'd be doing with his life. He was now sixty-nine years Standard Imperial. Soon to be seventy.

And he had no children.

The thought struck him as a battle-axe. He was famous and powerful, everything an ambitious man would want to be, but he had no family to share it with. The thought saddened him, to say the least. Where would he find a wife? Who would love him in any other way than as the Liberator of Armageddon? He thought of old Hendrik Irwin. The old man was over eighty now, nearly ninety. Irwin had loved him as a son, hadn't he? Same went for Chomaki in those days.

But Yarrick had played the son. He wanted to play the patriarch for once. He wanted someone who loved him in the word's sexual sense too.

He came to think of Skuli, but that had been a master-servant relation. And Skuli had the same relationship with Irwin, who was the main concern of the little mutant these days.

A sudden pang crossed Yarrick's mind again, and the horror of it made him stop dead in his tracks.

He was the last member of his entire family! The Yarrick family would end with him, if he didn't do something about it. Suddenly, it seemed to him that it was his duty to find a wife to love and have children with, not only something his love-sick heart longed for.

Yarrick shook his head. He was going to life forever in the annals and codices of Imperial History, and most surely mortally as well, but he'd never leave anything behind. No children. No grand-children. Life had a cruel sense of humour.

Fiona McAllen, born Icharian but now in the Upper Spires of Infernus Hive, felt for once safe. It wasn't often she felt safe. Her entire life had been a long run to escape something. The latest example was the pimp she'd been working for. "His property", eh? Right. She had her own soul and nobody would have it if she didn't want them to. They could take her body, frekk, they could take her. But they wouldn't ever have her soul.

She was young, not more than twenty-three years old, and painfully beautiful. She'd never needed the use of make-up, not even in her so-called profession. Men had chosen her anyway. And they paid really good, though she'd only get a little share of that. At current, her brown hair was long and tied in a pony-tail. As all people of her planet, she was tatooed. Hers was a blue Icharian knot over her right wrist. She was wearing a knee-length, white jeans skirt, black tanktop in velvet and a white jeans jacket. Her feet were in white sneakers and gold necklaces hung around her neck. Despite she wasn't at work, she was an inviting sight.

She stopped dead. What had that sound been? She shrugged and kept on going. She passed a dark alleyway.

And a massive hand reached out and snatched her from the street. It placed itself over her mouth, clamping it shut so she wouldn't scream. Fiona didn't scream outwardly, but inwardly she screamed for it to stop, to never happen again. She was right, in a way...

Yarrick strolled down the gantry. His mind was still heavy with thoughts of family and much else. He thought of paying Irwin a visit again. It always calmed his mind to see the old man. He had much experiences from life and was a great knower of people. What Irwin lacked physically, he more than well made up psychologically. Hendrik Irwin was his surrogate father, Yarrick had to conclude.

He passed an alleyway and heard some muffled sounds from it. At first he thought it was homeless trying to make some sort of ranking and a cosy jumble to keep warm. It took Yarrick five seconds to recall that he was in Hive Infernus' Upper Spire. There were no homeless people here!

He walked back and strolled silently into the alley. It was dark, but he could clearly make out what was happening.

There was one big man, not as tall as himself, but much broader. He was holding a girl firmly in his muscly arms. He had two companions, shorter and lankier, unbuckling their waistbelts and getting ready.

"Gentlemen," Yarrick said softly, but he got their attention immediately. "I don't think the young lady wants to, so let her go."

"Frekk off, spirer!" the thug shouted. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

Yarrick reached into his coat and picked out a light-stick. It was a common thing employed by Guardsmen who didn't want to waste batteries and only needed very little light. Thing with the light-sticks was, that if in contact with flammable material, they would ignite the material in question.

Yarrick broke off the top of the ten centimetres long light-stick and dropped it into a pile of papers. He aimed no contemplation as to why there was a pile of paper there.

The paper-pile broke into flames. The yellowish flames gave light to the scene. There was the

thug, holding a beautiful young woman firmly, so that his two friends could her easily.

And there was Commissar General Rolf Yarrick in his black dress-uniform. He looked straight back at the thug, who now had a very shocked expression on his face.

"I think I am an Imperial Commissar," Yarrick replied coolly.

Before the two lanky men had time to draw their laspistols, Yarrick had smoothly drawn his own side-arm: Chomaki's bolt pistol. The weapon still served him gallantly.

The bolt weapon barked once and glanced the nearest of the lanky twosome's throat. The result was that half of the man's neck disappeared. He fell to the ground, stone dead.

The second one fired his las pistol at Yarrick. The shot would've hit, if Yarrick hadn't had his extroadinary reflexes. He dodged to the left and fired his bolt pistol again. The shot struck the man in his pistol holding hand, exploding the las pistol and the man's hand. He fell screaming to the ground.

The thug threw off the girl, who landed on the ground next to the screaming and convulsing man without any right hand.

"I give frekk in that you're a black coat or not, you're gonna die, man!" the thug roared and he charged in with his fists at Yarrick. Instead of firing another round and finishing the job quick and easy, Yarrick sent one of his legs into the elbow of the onrushing thug, breaking it. The force of the kick sent the thug off balance. He crashed to the ground, whimpering and holding his broken left elbow.

Yarrick grabbed the thug's head by what little hair he had left and pulled the man's face up to face him. With his free hand, Yarrick raised the bolt pistol and pointed it between the thug's eyes.

"Bang," Yarrick said silently, "you're dead."

For being a man whom his entire life had relied on muscle power and some brute resemblence of courage, the big thug wet himself for the first time since he'd been three years old.

"Raiyah!" Cadet Daichi yepled as he entered the alleyway together with three other commissars. "Yarrick-san, what has happened here?"

"Cadet Daichi," Yarrick said slowly, "get a medic, and an arbitrator. These men are accused of rape..." Yarrick went silent. "Or attempted rape. It still rings disgustingly in my ears. To sink so low." He pulled a little in the thug's hair. "I should shoot you here and now, know that!" He then let go.

"All three?" Daichi said and indicated the two prone men.

"Only two, one is dead," Yarrick replied coolly. Daichi scurried away to find what he'd been ordered and took one of the Armageddonian commissars with him. The other two went to help the two criminals into the street so it would be easier for the arbiters to pick them up.

Yarrick, on the other hand, went over to the young woman. He helped her up and quickly saw how torn her clothes were. Instinctively, he got out of his greatcoat and offered it to her. The air was a bit chilly this night.

She gladly took it and put it on. He walked her out of the alley.

"Dare I ask for your name, sir," she asked cautiously. Yarrick noted her rich Icharian dialect. He didn't blame her for being afraid. The warrior in him was a terrible thing to see up close, especially if you weren't used to it.

"I am Imperial Commissar Rolf Yarrick," he said and looked at her. God-Emperor she was beautiful! If he was to have a wife, he'd want one like her.

"The Liberator of Armageddon?" she said, startled.

"Are there any other Yarricks of your knowledge?" Yarrick said and cocked an eyebrow.

She shook her head.

"Can I ask for you name, miss," Yarrick asked politely.

"Fiona McAllen," she replied. "Thank you so much, commissar. But I wasn't cautious. I

should've been."

"You were cautious. They are the criminals, not you. Tell me, miss McAllen, is it a crime on Ichar to be born pretty?"

She shook her head again.

"Good," Yarrick said and smiled. "Neither is it on Callidus."

Little did he know that this was only the beginning of the happiest part of his life.

Rolf Yarrick looked up into the sky. He was back on his home-soil; County Invas, Callidus. And he loved every second of it. It was all made better that today he was to be married to one of the most beautiful, loving and intelligent women he'd ever met.

The sky had the same colour as the Omega Squadron Space Outlaws' armour, he concluded to himself. And not a cloud in sight! The last two years had thankfully been very silent on the war-front. A few skirmishes, but that was all.

Deep within, he knew Kharn was planning something. However, he decided not to bother his mind with this. Not now anyway.

He checked himself over. He was clad in his best dress-uniform. Black greatcoat, something that would make him sweat enourmously as soon as he got out into the sun, with all his medals pinned to his chest. Well, at least the most prolific of them. He also wore a silver frogged black tunic, black dress-breeches with a red edging. His jackboots had given way to more ordinary foot-wear. But his shoes were polished shining black and immaculate. His leather gloves were artic white and his black peaked cap was decorated with gilt braids and the golden aquila along with the red edging.

He turned round and saw McGranth. Grand Commander Eddie McGranth. His best man and one of his best friends. McGranth was dressed in his Tactical Dreadnought armour, though unarmed. The armour had been repaired and polished. Several honour parchments and seals were attached to his armour, not to mention marks of brilliance he had around his neck.

Next to McGranth was Commissar Katsuro Daichi. He was too dressed in commissarial dress uniform, just as Yarrick. His medals were just half a dozen and that was most surely all he owned. Yarrick liked the young man quite a lot.

On one of the benches out in the sun, Yarrick spotted old man Irwin. The old white-haired man was wearing a black dress-suit and was sweating profusely as a result. Yarrick silently reflected over how small and hunched Irwin seemed. He was ninety now, Yarrick marvelled. Ninety years old and still having energy enough to come to something like this.

Shame be if he hadn't, as Irwin had said himself.

And Skuli sat just behind him.

"Rolf," a soft voice said behind him, "what are you thinking about?"

Yarrick turned and looked at Fiona McAllen, soon to be Fiona Yarrick. She was just as beautiful as the first day he'd met her, more than a year ago.

"Not much," Rolf replied and held her lightly around the waist. "Just how perfect this day is..."

Fiona only smiled softly. They both knew that her white dress, although symbolizing purity, did cover a wonderful secret. Within a month, it would be impossible for Fiona to try to hide it any more. And only then would Yarrick tell his colleagues and friends about it.

She put her arms around Yarrick's neck and hugged him tightly. She wanted to kiss him, but today's first kiss would be symbolic for all people present.

The cardinal came out of the cathedral of County Invas and smiled at the couple to be united in holy matrimony. He was a thin man with a good-natured face.

"Shall we proceed?" he asked softly, and the commissar and the young woman nodded.

Neither Rolf Yarrick nor Fiona McAllen did listen too closely, but still they knew what to say. They'd known it for over five months now.

Commissar Daichi brought Yarrick the ring for Fiona's finger whilst McGranth brought Fiona the ring for Yarrick's finger.

The long awaited kiss came and went.

For the loving couple, Rolf and Fiona Yarrick from now, the rest of the day went quick and endlessly slow at the same time. For them, there was little else in the world this day than each other. But it would change, they both knew.

So better make the most out of the day.

Carpe diem, Yarrick thought silently. Well, I truly have, no?

"He hasn't got much time left, master! You must come!"

The words still stung to his mind.

Rolf Yarrick sighed heavily. He had everything now. A loving wife and two wonderful girls; three-year-old Eloni, after an aunt Fiona had, and one-year-old Viktoria, which Yarrick named after his old mentor Chomaki.

But now, another important part of his life was slipping away.

Yarrick looked away from the window. The weather outside was sunny and clear and not at all suitable for such a dreadful day. He slowly walked over to the bed in the centre of the room. Yarrick caught himself Skuli's attention and gestured to him to leave the room.

After that, he sat down on the bed and clasped Hendrik Irwin's gnarled hand. The small old man looked back at him and smiled weakly. Irwin was very old now; in his nineties. His hair was as thick as ever, but it was white, not grey any more. And it went without mentioning how thin Irwin had grown.

Physically, Irwin was dying. Yarrick knew that all too well. Irwin's body was ten, maybe twenty years older than it should be. Yarrick knew why. The same had happened to his grand-uncle. It was something you got the commissarial occupation, one could say.

But despite that his ailing body was going to kill him, Irwin still kept his spirits up it seemed. His mind was just as clear as ever. Perhaps clearer still.

Yarrick sighed again.

"Rolf, please," Irwin said and patted Yarrick's hand with his free one. "You must've known this? I am not like you. I age. I've grown old. It happens to everyone sooner or later."

"But not me..." Yarrick muttered darkly. He looked up into Irwin's warm brown eyes. "Do you regret anything in life, Hendrik?"

Irwin looked nonplussed for a while and then said, "Well, that would be signing on for staff service all those years ago, but then I wouldn't have you, right?" Yarrick nodded his assent. "Okay, so then I don't really have any regrets. My life has been damn good, you should know."

"I do," Yarrick whispered silently. "It's just... Damn..." He wiped away the tears that had gathered in his eyes, but there were new ones to take their places. Yarrick also had this thick clot in his throat. He hadn't felt like this since Uncle Caspar had died in his lap. Chomaki's death hadn't given that feeling, but Irwin's did.

However, in both the earlier cases, Yarrick had been on the field of battle, or at least had a fight near, so he could went his sorrow as anger and fury. But know, in the home of Hendrik Irwin, in times of peace, there was nothing like that to relieve him.

Yarrick bore the full brunt of sorrow for the first time in his life.

Irwin seemed to know what was on Yarrick's mind.

"Rolf, say it," he said weakly. "Say it, you will feel better, I promise."

Yarrick let go of Irwin's hand, leant towards the old man and hugged him as tightly as he dared. Irwin felt how the commissar general was shaking with tears now.

"Hendrik," Yarrick got out between the gulps of air he forced into his shaking lungs, "Hendrik,

you've been like a father to me. The father I never truly had. I thank the God-Emperor for having the pleasure to have met you."

There was a brief pause as Yarrick gathered his breath. Irwin stroked him gently on his wiry back.

"The rest, Rolf."

"I love you, Hendrik," Yarrick snivelled forth. After having said that, it felt like a weight had gone from his heart. He unclasped Irwin from his grip and stood up. Irwin was smiling at him. Softly and weakly, though.

"I've been waiting for that, Rolf, know that. How I've been waiting. I've loved you like a son. The son I never had. Makes us even, eh?"

Yarrick was to reply, when he saw how Irwin slowly closed his eyes, a faint smile on his lips. A content smile.

A few seconds later, and the thin chest under the blankets stopped heaving.

Yarrick waited a few minutes and then leant forward and touched Irwin's wrinkled cheek with one hand.

"Of all the heroes I've known, Hendrik," Yarrick whispered, "you were the greatest. Your commitments weren't on the battlefield, because you were no warrior. You put your efforts where they mattered."

With that, Yarrick walked out of the bedroom. When he came out, he whispered to the doctor present what had happened. Then he turned to Skuli, his wife Fiona and his two children. Skuli had entertained them with trick and acrobatics.

They all noticed the grim set on Yarrick's face. No words were needed. Fiona got up and walked over to her husband. The two hugged each other tightly.

Skuli felt the tears roll down his cheeks as he held the two young girls to him. Nothing was ever going to the same again.

Not for Yarrick and certainly not for Skuli.

Two weeks later, Hendrik Irwin, Imperial Commissar and Loyal Servant in His Imperial Highness Holy Guard, was buried in the soil of the land where he was born: Kilarney Hive on the southern continent of Ichar.

Commissar General Rolf Yarrick attended, in full dress uniform, together with his wife. They hadn't been many, but all men and women had one thing in common: they were all in some way linked to the deceased and to the Imperial Commissariat. As a matter of fact there was no preacher to read out the proceedings from the Ecclesiarchal Creed. Instead, a commissar had been called in.

During the entire funeral service, Yarrick tried discreetly to locate Skuli in the crowd. He knew that Skuli had become of average human height.

The mutant had been nowhere to be seen.

And Rolf Yarrick would never hear from him again.

At the end of the service, when the coffin had been lowered into the ground and people were starting to walk away from the cementary, Yarrick darkly reflected that he'd soon enough would lose someone perhaps even nearer.

He knew he would outlive his wife. But it didn't make things better at all.

Things were going to very grim, he concluded. Very grim indeed, before they got better.

Commissar General Rolf Yarrick had no idea that this was a grave understatement on his behalf.