

The Number of the ED – A Fell Wind

*"Woe to you, Oh Earth and Sea, for the Devil sends the Beast
with wrath, because he knows the time is short...
Let him who hath understanding reckon the number of the Beast
for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty six."*

--Book of Revelations Ch. XIII v. 18

Charleston carefully closed the door as he got home to McKenzie. The psyker had very good hearing, and Charleston could bet he didn't want it damaged further. Battles were noisy, that Charleston knew very well. Furthermore, there was an old lady upstairs to McKenzie's apartment, and she used to bang a broomstick in the floor when they got too noisy, especially when McKenzie played his Iron Maiden records. Charleston liked some of the Iron's music, but he preferred Zeppelin.

"G'day Ed." McKenzie said as Charleston poked his head into McKenzie's kitchen. "Knew you were coming."

"You always do. So, why'd ya call?" Charleston asked.

"I thought we could go down to the pub, take a glass or two. Talk memories."

Charleston thought on this for a moment and then answered:

"Okay, but'll Eddie come?"

"No, he said he was busy with something, didn't state what."

McKenzie was obviously picking out dishes from the dishwasher. Charleston knew he was the butterfingers concerning kitchenware, so he told McKenzie he would wait for him at the door.

Fifteen minutes later, the two were sitting in the pub on St. John's Street, having their first beer. Charleston watched as McKenzie fooled yet another man with his coin trick. Charleston smiled to himself. He knew McKenzie never brought money to pay his drinks with, but he always seemed to have it when he had to pay. It was witchery, Charleston knew it, but he also knew that daemons weren't here, so McKenzie was safe from their malignant influence.

"So Ed," McKenzie said, turning to him. "What are you thinking about?"

"You tell me." Charleston replied.

McKenzie looked puzzled and uttered a quiet "oh" and looked concentrated for a moment. He looked up after a few seconds and turned to Charleston.

"You're thinking about the Yarricks, right?" McKenzie asked.

"Righto. More precisely about Seb."

"Sebastian?" McKenzie said and scratched his chin. He came to think that he should've shaved before he'd gone down to the pub, but he didn't care so much. "He was a hero. Talk about a legend reborn..."

"I thought Rolf was the legend reborn?" Charleston said, confused.

"Oh, he was, but he was also half-breed, Sebastian wasn't."

"I still recall the day Seb graduated from the Commissariat, when he'd earned his Ordo Imperialis and Commissarial Badge. What a day. I still recall it clearly."

"I still recall his answer to your question if he remembered you."

Charleston looked shocked and turned to McKenzie.

"He wasn't more than a baby when he met me the first time, on Armageddon. I thought he wouldn't remember me!"

"Well he did. To quote: 'Of course I remember you, Charleston! Such a stink as that of your feet, Lieutenant, can only be forgotten with therapy!'. I laugh at it still!"

Charleston got a sour face as McKenzie laughed out loud at this. Other people in the pub wondered what was happening at the counter. When they saw the two huge men, they decided not to pay too much attention to it. They had after all come on motorcycles, big ones. And the smaller, lankier fella had an orange tattoo on his left temple.

McKenzie suddenly stopped laughing, a streak of concern going across his face. He looked directly at Charleston, and this made the giant man reel away a bit.

"Ed, you've never told me what happened when you and Sebastian were left alone to fight both Orks and Berzerkers on Armageddon. Why haven't you?"

"Because it was the worst war ever. Sebastian had nightmares from that year on, every night! I'd rather not talk about it."

"Ed, please, I want to know. Either you tell me, or I'll probe you for the information."

Charleston's eyes turned hard to McKenzie at this.

"Y'know I hate it when you do so!"

"Then tell me"

Charleston sighed and began:

"It all began about ten, maybe twelve, years before the Siege. My 8th Company had been stationed on Armageddon for roughly a hundred years, or as long as the von Strab's had held the power as Governors of Armageddon. Seb was stationed there on one last mission before his retirement, to reform one of the Armageddon Steel Legions. It all began that fateful day known as the day of the Feast of the Emperor's Ascension..."

<<< Armageddon, 12 years before the Siege and Fall of the Imperium of Mankind, day of the Feast >>>

Sebastian Yarrick was woken by a wet nose that puffed him in his face. He opened one eye and looked at his dog, Cerberus. Sebastian'd had Cerberus since the day he'd graduated as Commissar. He'd gotten him as a pup, and that was nearly forty five years ago. Cerberus was a wolfhound, native to Callidus and from a race renowned for its longevity.

Sebastian opened his other eye and sat up in his bed. He stretched out to his full one metre seventy before he scratched his old friend behind his ear.

"This is the Day, right Cerberus?" Sebastian said as Cerberus tried to lick him as thanks.

He got up and got dressed in his finest dress uniform. This was a great day for celebrating, and that meant suave clothing. Seb dressed himself in the black highwaisted dress breeches and dress jacket of the Commissariat, tied his Ordo Imperialis around his waist and went into the bathroom to shave and fix his hair somewhat. Sebastian had earned his grandfather's genes concerning his hair, and he had to cut it every six weeks or so. He always cut it in a buzz-cut, much like Charleston's, but a little longer, but his hair, which was steel-grey for the record, seemed to want to grow into a hairstyle that made him look as his grandfather. Sebastian hated it. Unlike his grandfather, Seb had turned an old man just a few years ago. He'd noticed it one morning when his legs didn't want to get out of bed. Charleston had joked about it and said Seb had just gotten into the metal-age, the age when one has gold in the teeth, silver in the hair and lead in the legs. He was right, Sebastian thought, on two points at least. Sebastian had all his teeth left, as a matter of fact, and he was proud of it.

When he was in the middle of his thoughts and shaving, Cerberus came in, holding his food-bowl in his mouth. Sebastian looked down on him and said he would come in a moment. As Cerberus went out, someone came into his apartment, a place lying high up into the Spire of Infernus Hive.

"Good morning, Lieutenant Commander!" Sebastian said as he finished the tricky part under the chin.

"Morning Seb!" Charleston echoed. "I'll feed Cerberus for ya!"

Sebastian hummed an answer and washed his face clean of the shaving ladder. He was a commissar, with a good monthly income, but an electrical shaver was quite expensive. They weren't STC'd as Chimeras or Leman Russ tanks.

He went out of the bathroom and picked up the morning mail. For Sebastian, 'morning' was from 9.00 am to 12.00 am. The latter was usually when he got up. Armageddon was in times of peace now. The one letter that caught his eye was an invitation from no one else than the Planetary Governor himself; Herman von Strab. Sebastian hated the man for the simple fact that he was incompetent. His father, Luthor, had been much more intelligent. So had his brothers, but they were all dead. But, one couldn't deny an invitation from the Planetary Governor. Sebastian sighed as he thought of what he was going to miss by being stuck on a gala-dinner. He would miss going with Charleston to that Cathayan restaurant, he would miss the hours before the yearly meteorite rain, which always happened on the same time, every year. He would miss a bar fight or two...

"Ed," Sebastian called as he walked into the kitchen, just in time to see Charleston drop a plate. It fell to the floor and went to a hundred pieces with a crash.

"Sorry." Charleston said meekly.

"Don't worry. What I wanted to say was that we're invited on a gala-dinner tonight."

"At who's?" Charleston asked as he picked up the larger chunks of what once was a dish.

"At von Strab's..." Sebastian didn't get any further.

"No way! I know how he talks about me! He hates us Marines!" Charleston was so upset he almost dropped a new plate.

"Ed, look, it's for this evening only, and I believe he knows of the meteorites, so we won't miss it!"

"I don't care, he can go to Helsreach!" Charleston was very angry, at least of what Sebastian could tell.

"It's pronounced 'Hell's reach' Ed, when will you learn?" Sebastian sighed. He went out in the entry room and pulled on his jackboots. He'd polished them shiny the night before, and was very proud of their looks. After that, Sebastian pulled on his leather gloves and put his commissar's cap on his head, back brim first. He turned to Charleston who was approaching him as he took down his greatcoat from its hook.

"One night only, Ed." Sebastian repeated.

"Oh, okay, but it's his fault if he asks insulting questions."

"I'll be the judge of that." Sebastian replied and patted his thigh to call Cerberus to him. "Now, let's go find you a dress suit. Won't fit if you came in power armour, would it?"

<<< Later that evening >>>

"I feel stupid." Charleston said as he twisted a bit in his brand-new dress suit. "I look like a penguin!"

"Get used to the tails Ed." Sebastian replied as they walked into the great hallway of the Infernus Opera. Sebastian had been here before, but he was just as awed this time as last time by the huge marble walls. It seemed everything was carved from one enormous rock. The galleries and boxes in the main hall could be transformed, so to speak, into a space capable to field the tables that were laid out for nearly one thousand guests. To finish it all off, a huge chandelier hung from the roof, shaped like the Imperial Eagle. Sebastian estimated it weighed somewhere around a tonne.

As the two walked through the entry hall and entered the main hall, a voice snapped Sebastian from his thoughts:

"Excuse me Mr...Yarrick, is it? You must leave your 'pet' here." the receptionist said with a gesture towards Cerberus. Sebastian had forgotten all about him.

"Of course." Sebastian replied. "But be careful, he bites people he doesn't like."

Sebastian smiled towards the now nervous receptionist and patted the man on his shoulder before he went on.

Charleston looked nervously around. He was definitely not used to wear a dress suit instead of a suit of powered armour. He seemed to be looking for something. 'Probably the exit' Sebastian thought to himself.

"Ed, calm down. This isn't so bad and in merely an hour we'll be watching the meteorites, as we usually do." he tried. It didn't seem to work.

"I feel so out of place. Look at me! Look at them! I'm two and a half metres high and nearly all muscle, but they're thin and aristocratic!"

The commissar did not take notice so much of Charleston's comment on how they looked, he got more attached to the cats in the ladies' arms.

"Gyrinxes!" Sebastian spat. "I have to leave my dog outside, but they can bring in their Gyrinxes! Well ain't that the worst! Cerberus has higher intelligence than those felines! At least he's less malignant."

"Has this something to do with the Gyrinx that scratched you bad when you were three years old?" Charleston said and scratched his chin. "Of course it has Ed!" Seb replied. "And the worst is that Herman adores them, we're not equal on one..."

Charleston gave Sebastian a hard elbow as to warn that someone was approaching them. That someone happened to be Herman von Strab. Of course carrying his own Gyrinx, the chalk-white Sela. It had been in the von Strab family for many years, longer than Sebastian had been around and it had been that Gyrinx which scratched him. There was no love lost between Sebastian and Sela. None at all.

"Good evening gentlemen." von Strab said in his most pleasurable tone. Sebastian thought it sounded so fake he could be sick. Charleston felt the same. Herman von Strab was a man in his thirties, his head shaved bald and wearing a monocle over his left eye. He was around one metre ninety and quite powerfully built.

"Good evening, governor." Sebastian managed to get out, his eyes fixed on Sela. The Gyrinx purred softly, but it kept a steady eye on the old commissar. Charleston muttered forth an "Evening." and then decided it was time to visit the punch bowl.

"Good," von Strab began. "Now that the Marine is gone, I can talk with you Yarrick, one-on-one."

"Of course." Sebastian replied and in a sweeping chesture grabbed a champagne glass from a passing waiter's silver plate. von Strab was just startled over how swiftly the old man moved. He'd read about Sebastian's grandfather, the famous, and now legendary, Commissar-General Rolf 'The Wolf' Yarrick. von Strab had, how much he even hated to admit it, the Yarrick family to thank that his family now was in control of Armageddon. It could have been the other way around, Herman knew it.

"What is it about?" Sebastian asked after a moment's silence.

"As you know, you've been my tactical advisor the last ten years, but as you're going to retire, I'm wondering, who will replace you?"

Sebastian was taken aback by the question. He hadn't told Charleston yet that he had thought on retiring, but somehow, von Strab had managed to find out.

"I don't know," Sebastian replied while playing with the thought of what he would do to the man that had told von Strab he was going to retire, when he found him. "You'll have to ask Commissar Holt about that. He's in command of the Commissariat of Armageddon."

With that, Sebastian left von Strab to his thoughts. It was rude to leave a planetary governor just like that, but a commissar served the Emperor first and no-one second. Most people with sense knew this.

Sebastian tapped Charleston on his arm as he joined him. Charleston spun round and then looked down to get into eye contact with the old man.

"Ed, there's something I have to tell you." Sebastian said, his voice sounding troubled.

"What?" Charleston simply replied and handed Sebastian what looked like cheese and shrimp on a stick. Gourmet food wasn't in Seb's taste, but this was the day of the Feast, wasn't it?

"I'm going to retire."

Charleston nearly dropped the very expensive Cathayan mica glass in his hand. The glasses were made of the sand on the Cathayan seafloor, which was a good 10 miles below surface level and gave the glass a reddish-purple colour.

"You must be kidding!" Charleston yelled.

"Ed, I'm no Space Marine, I'm an old man now. My body has begun telling me it's had enough!" Sebastian played a bit with the stick from the snack between his left-hand fingers, placed it in between the thumb and the middle finger and broke it with the index finger. He looked up at Charleston.

"It's life, my friend, heroes come, and heroes fall. I'm seventy years old, and I would appreciate to celebrate my seventy first birthday."

"Sebastian Yarrick, is it really you?" a voice called from behind them.

Sebastian and Charleston spun round and a smile broke Seb's face.

"Ishmael Grisham! What are you doing here?" Sebastian said as he hugged his old friend in a brotherly embrace.

"I live here nowadays. Retired ten years ago. Had no idea you were here. How long have you been here Seb?" Ishmael asked. Ishmael was just like Sebastian seventy years old, but his hair was chalk-white. He was just as slimly built as Seb, but nearly ten centimetres taller.

"For thirty years at least." Sebastian said as the threesome walked away from the crowd of people. "I was stationed here after twenty years of service between different regiments. I've grown quite fond of Armageddon, despite its name!"

The other two laughed heartily at this. Sebastian had, despite his childhood, a great sense of humour. Charleston believed it was because his childhood, Sebastian had that humour.

"So, Ishmael, where have you been? We lost communication shortly after graduation." Sebastian asked after a while.

"I was stationed in the Border Planets systems. There had been reports of one planet being heavily infested with Orks."

"Orks?" Charleston asked, "What are those?"

"They're big and green, Ed, extremely savage, could tell you more, but it would take ages."

Sebastian suddenly remembered he hadn't introduced Charleston to Ishmael. How rude of him!

"I forgot, Ishmael, let me introduce you to Lieutenant Commander Edmund Charleston, 8th Company Death Angels. Ed, let me introduce you to ex-commissar Ishmael "IG" Grisham."

"IG?" Charleston asked as he shook Ishmael's hand.

"I hated my name when I was young, IG are my initials."

"So, Ishmael, what happened there?" Sebastian queried.

"The Orks put up some damn hard resistance. We fought for years. Thought that every new day was going to be my last. Nearly was ten years ago. We'd been fighting for two years on Gideon when it happened." Ishmael made a pause to rub his back as the war-wound that had made him retire reminded itself again. "The Orks fought like if possessed, and they were quite well organized. Haven't seen them so organized, with the exception of..."

"Gazgrim Nekksnappa, I know." Sebastian interrupted. "I made a study of them. I know their language and culture quite well, thank you Ishmael."

"Right," Ishmael said as he continued. "These were even more organized, like the Hive Fleets. The force I was in was attacked from behind, and what I saw before I was knocked into a coma, was the most fekking large Ork I've ever seen, must have been at least 3 and a half to four

metres tall. Without the mega armour it was wearing."

"Mega armour?" Charleston interrupted.

"Almost like Imperial Tactical Dreadnought armour, but less efficient, and more cumbersome." Sebastian explained.

"Yeah, but this Ork was the size of a Dreadnought walker! He didn't even bother to use the power claw of his on me. He merely smacked me in the back, breaking it. That's what made me retire and come to Armageddon. I was in coma for four weeks. The medics said it was risk for me breaking it again, so I retired. Believe me, they said it was only a few centimetres from making me lame from chest and down."

"Not good." Sebastian mumbled as he knocked back the last of his champagne.

Ishmael "hmm"ed an answer and started fidgeting with his left hand. Sebastian saw immediately that something was wrong with his friend.

"IG, what is it?" he asked. Sebastian grabbed his friend in his left arm, but snapped his hand back. With force, Sebastian rolled up Ishmael's sleeve. What he saw was the titanium skeleton of a bionic arm. He looked shocked at Ishmael.

"What...how...?" Sebastian stuttered forth.

"The giant Ork left me for dead, trampled my arm." was Ishmael's simple answer. He looked with sorrow eyes on Sebastian. Sebastian answered with the same look. They both had told each other to try to avoid bionic implants. Ishmael had broken that promise.

"I didn't notice because you were wearing gloves." Sebastian said after a long moment's silence.

"Something bugs me about that Ork Warlord though." Ishmael said as he pulled down his sleeve again. "On his claw was a glyph I've never seen before. Never. If I didn't know better, I would say he had his own, personal glyph."

"Impossible." Sebastian protested. None of them were paying attention to Charleston now. He just watched the conversation. "All Ork Warlords and Warbosses create their names from existing glyphs! There has been no record of personal glyphs before."

"Well, "expert"?" Ishmael said a bit irritated. "I still remember it clearly, I can draw it up for you. Then you tell me what it is!"

"Fine!" Sebastian said and crossed his arms over his chest. He and Ishmael often had conversations like this, but they were the best of friends.

Ishmael pulled out a pad and a pen from a pocket and drew down the Ork glyph.

"I'm writing my biography, if you wonder Seb." Ishmael said as he put the finishing touches to the glyph. "That's why I always wear a pen and pad nowadays." He handed the pad to Sebastian, who studied it intently for a couple of minutes.

"Never seen it before, but the iron gob and the horns give him away for being a mighty Warlord, but as for the one-eyed skull, I don't know." Sebastian said as he looked up from the pad.

"Half the Ork's cranium seemed to be made of metal, of what I saw the split second before he hit me." Ishmael added. "Maybe that explains the one-eyed skull."

Charleston took a look at the glyph. He remembered something with it. He'd seen it before, but where?

"I've seen it before, on a crippled Space Hulk. We thought it was Genestealer infected, but it seemed as if used by something else and then abandoned." he said as he turned to the two elderly men.

"How long ago was that, Ed?" Sebastian asked concerned.

"Couple of months ago maybe, can't remember clearly." Charleston said as he scratched his chin in thought. "But it was in an abandoned star system, far from any planet, so I don't know what happened to them."

"What did you do then?" Ishmael asked.

"Reported it to the Magos Xenos, and it was identified as Space Hulk 6-6-5." Charleston replied.

"6-6-5?" Ishmael repeated silently. "That was the hulk that left Gideon, the planet that they'd invaded. It just disappeared!"

"And Ed found it." Sebastian said as he thought of something. Something wasn't right here. Throwing an eye on his watch, he saw it was approaching mid-night.

"Yoinks!" he exclaimed as he saw the time. "We'd better get outside, Armageddon soon passes through the Belt."

Ishmael and Sebastian went outside, followed closely by Charleston. Although in a Hive, they were so far up that the night-sky was clearly visible. There wasn't a cloud on the star-strewn sky and Charleston inhaled the air as if it was the real. Armageddon's atmosphere was since long destroyed by all the industry, but the filter in the Upper Levels still kept the cool in the

outside air but wasted the toxins. He looked towards the east and saw the pyre rising from the Diablo Mountains. Beyond the Diablo Mountains lay Hades Hive, on the other side of the Euminedes River.

It wouldn't have been visible at ground level, but here, ten miles up in the air; one saw the black silhouette of the Hive where Sebastian had been raised. Charleston remembered the day he'd visited Rolf and his dead son's wife. Sebastian was cute, Charleston had thought. He'd born clear Yarrickian signs, like the blueish hair and the green eyes. Not to mention the slim build. But the accent from Callidus was lost as he was much with neighbours on Armageddon. He still had his grandfather's way of exclaiming things, but he lacked the accent. Charleston had thought it had sounded silly in the beginning, but now he liked it. Sebastian always had something to throw against possible verbal opponents. Anything ranging from an insult to a mere sarcasm. Sebastian had many times ended in trouble in the Schola Progenium because of his gift of the gab. At least that was what McKenzie had told him.

Charleston joined Sebastian who now was alone. Ishmael had gone to talk with some of the Armageddon nobles. He got along much better than Sebastian, a much more political commissar than Sebastian. Seb was more the lead-by-example type of commissar, Charleston knew so. He and Sebastian were standing by a marble rail, wonderfully sculptured by the best sculptor that Armageddon had to offer. Their eyes were focused at the horizon to the south. Suddenly, a blue-white streak crossed the sky, the Belt Passing had begun.

In the minutes that followed, all eyes were focused on the night-sky, as meteorite after meteorite crashed and burned in Armageddon's atmosphere. Some were of the larger kind and would probably hit the ground somewhere, most likely in the wasteland. Suddenly, Sebastian pointed towards something that seemed like, not a meteorite, but an asteroid.

"Check out the size of that thing!" the old man gasped.

Charleston saw the big rock as it came streaking towards Infernus Hive. It passed a mere kilometre above the highest spine, the roar of it's burning hulk almost deafening. Charleston guessed it'd been at least a few kilometres long and half as wide. But something with the huge rock troubled him. He wasn't alone on that point. He felt as Sebastian tugged his arm, like a small child calling an adult's attention. That was what Sebastian looked like in comparison with Charleston. A small child.

"Ed, don't you think it's odd that thing hasn't been pulled in by Armageddon's gravity pool earlier?" Sebastian asked.

"You too eh?" Charleston said and looked down on the small man.

Something fell down before their noses and tinged as it landed on the marble floor. Sebastian, with his keen eyesight, saw where it landed and picked it up. He got a concerned look as he examined the little piece of metal. It looked like a cruel and flat hook. Sebastian tucked it into the pocket of his breeches and turned to Charleston.

"Let's go inside. It's chilly and I don't want to catch a cold. Besides, I believe the dinner itself will begin soon." Sebastian told the Space Marine. He then turned and called over to Ishmael that they were going inside. Ishmael answered with a gesture that said they could go in before him, he'd join them sooner or later.

"I think I'll go visit the punch-bowl again, before dinner." Charleston said with a smile.

"I thought Marines weren't allowed to drink on duty?" Sebastian said with a shrewd look on his face.

"McKenzie once told me a Marine body could take more than ten times as much alcohol as a normal human body. I intend to find out if that's true."

"I see." Sebastian said and quickly added, "It's made from the Volcanus Hive Blanche Wine, right?"

"Yeah, mixed with Volrathian Vodka and Callidussian Retango fruit juice." Charleston answered with a big smile and rushed off.

As Sebastian was left alone, he shook his head silently to himself. Charleston was the perfect soldier, if it had not been for his somewhat cliffhanger like tactics. And his slow-to-get ways. But in the end, Charleston, IG and Cerberus were the best friends Sebastian ever had.

"Well, if it ain't the reckless old man?" a voice suddenly said from behind. Sebastian knew the voice.

"You still blame me for that thing, Hans Grauberger. They were up against bad odds." Sebastian said, as he turned on the two metres tall merchant noble. Grauberger was built like an ox, and had good contacts with noble houses as well as Underhive Gangsters. Sebastian had gotten on the way wrong side with Grauberger just a few months ago, when Charleston was gone on his mission in the abandoned star system.

"It was six of my finest bodyguards against you, a decrepit old man, and his pooch." Grauberger said and grabbed Sebastian by his collar.

"Watch the uniform, I'll use it when reviewing the troops next week." Sebastian said, trying to calm his rage against Grauberger. How Sebastian hated to be called decrepit old man. He wasn't one.

"One of them is still in coma! And by the way, we're a bit off from the rest of the crowd, so you're free to scream. I want the others to hear what happens to my enemies." Grauberger spat and came close to Seb's lean face with his own pasty features. Sebastian winced slightly. It was clear Grauberger was drunk, very drunk, judging from his breath. It frankly reeked of the stench of liquor.

"Can you allow an old man a last wish and will?" Sebastian said and raised his left hand.

"Of course!"

Without a word, Sebastian put his left hand index finger and thumb at the corners of his mouth and let fly a high pitched wolf-whistle. It was so high-pitched, that it was barely discernable for human ears. Grauberger winced at the high-pitched whine, but didn't let go of Sebastian's collar.

"What the fekk was that good for?!" Grauberger growled at the old commissar.

Sebastian simply smiled a wolf's grin back. "You'll see." he said. Grauberger raised his meaty fist for the blow.

In the lobby, Cerberus awoke from his nap and twitched his ears, searching for the source of the Call. His master was the only human that knew the Call that was all Cerberus knew. And when the Call came, the master was in trouble. Leaping up and across the counter of the reception in a blur, he ran towards the source of the Call. Cerberus long claws left horrible scratches in the marble floors and several Gyrinxes were sent leaping out of their owners arms as the Callidus wolf-hound ran past with the speed of a rocket. Sadly though, it passed by von Strab and Sela leapt out of her master's arms and ran and hid underneath a table, not to come out in hours.

Grauberger realized the commotion too late and turned only to see a grey-red-black ball of fur and claws come flying towards him. Instinctively letting go of Sebastian, Grauberger raised his arms to protect himself from Cerberus powerful jaws and tearing claws. With a scream issuing from his lips, Grauberger fell backwards to the ground, eighty full kilos of wolfhound landing on top of him. Noticing no biting, Grauberger lowered his guard and looked straight at the snarling face of Cerberus, standing astride over the big mans body, a low growl coming from Cerberus throat.

"Enough, Cerberus. He's learned his lesson." Sebastian said and Cerberus obeyed immediately.

"YARRICK!!" a hoarse voice screamed from behind. Sebastian didn't want to turn, but he did it anyways. He looked at the planetary governor, who was red-faced with rage. 'Oh, God-Emperor, why did I do that?' Sebastian thought darkly to himself.

"Get yourself and your mangy mutt OUTTA HERE!! NOW!!" von Strab screamed at Sebastian.

"Yes, milord governor." Sebastian managed after restraining himself from shooting the man. He always had a laspistol with himself, but remembered he'd left it home, because of the party. 'Damn,' Seb thought. A summary execution had been fine now, and Sebastian even had the prosecution laid up in his mind: "*Insulting of Imperial Commissar, punishable with what the commissar see fit*" according to Commissarial Edict 827f, Sebastian recited to himself in his mind. Now he just hoped that Holt had seen it all, or at least heard it.

Turning his back towards the angry mob made up of Gyrinx owners, Sebastian called his dog to his side and walked out. As he came to the reception, the receptionist had the guts to heave out: "Leaving early, Mr. Yarrick?"

Sebastian'd had about enough. He gave the snooty receptionist a stare that could have cut through adamantium and growled:

"That's Commissar Yarrick to you, you little whippersnapper! Now hand me my greatcoat and cap so I can leave this place!"

The startled receptionist handed the obviously enraged old man his belongings and watched him leave with his dog.

As Sebastian got to the door, a big hand on his shoulder tried to stop him.

"There's no use in trying to make me stay Ed." Sebastian said and sighed heavily. "I've been ordered out of here, by the governor himself."

"It's not that Seb." Charleston replied. "I just don't want you to end up in trouble. It's a dark night out there, and you're an old man."

"I can manage on my own." the old man said and shrugged of Charleston's grip. "I've got Cerberus to protect me."

As Seb walked out the main doors of Infernus Hive Opera House, he turned to Charleston, his eyes shadowed by the peak of his cap, giving him a sinister look.

"Two more things. Make sure Ishmael gets home safely. He's not the type that can take much liquor. And stop calling me old man." Sebastian said and walked out.

"Sure, I will." Charleston replied, a slight sadness in his voice.

As Sebastian walked down the boulevard, he turned towards the opera house and sighed. Why did things always go so wrong for him? As he kept walking home, Sebastian kept pondering on this. Why did no one listen to him? His grandfather hadn't that day when Sebastian had turned 15 and had wanted the Chaos Hound hunting delayed for a day. Luthor von Strab hadn't when Sebastian had warned him of the many fatalities around the Cathayan fugu-fish ten years ago. Fugu. Cathay.

"I know Cerberus, let's spend this Feast Day at Cheng Fu's Cathayan restaurant, as we usually do. At least you're allowed there, right, old friend?"

Cerberus gave to a bark as an approval. Sebastian Yarrick laughed to himself all the way to Cheng Fu's, together with Cerberus's joyful barks.

<<< Tertius Recreation Island, south of Phoenix Island, three days later >>>

"If you can stop doing those lobs!" Sebastian said as he threw himself after the LazerBall. He missed it with a hairs width and the ball bounced into the forest behind the LazerBall court.

"Can't help it Seb." Ishmael said and made a twitching gesture with his right wrist. "'S all in the wrist!"

"Whatever!" Sebastian replied and chased after the ball into the woods. Holt had allowed him a few days off after von Strab's explosion on him, and Holt had also said Seb could do some usefulness while away. Usefulness had apparently been; '*Keep Charleston of me back!*'.

Sebastian was soon joined in his searching by Charleston, but the big Marine seemed to be pondering on something else than finding a tiny LazerBall. They'd walked a good bit into the woods, when Charleston finally broke the silence.

"What did you do after you left?" was all he said.

"I went to Cheng Fu's. After that I went home. Did you get Ishmael home safely, Ed?" Sebastian replied.

"Yup, and I can say he was more than tipsy by three o'clock. That's when I got him to bed."

Sebastian made a sign to Charleston to keep quiet. He edged soundlessly further into the forest. Something had caught Seb's attention, and with pure curiosity as driving force, Charleston followed. They walked for a few minutes until they got to the other edge of the forest. It was the Tertius golf course. Said to be one of the finest golf courses in the Imperium. It was the 18th hole as far as Sebastian could tell. He could see the tee from where he was, and wasn't it...?

(Author's Note: On the contrary to popular belief, golf isn't native to Earth. Instead, it's a sport which mysteriously appears in all higher standing civilisations and races as soon as it reaches a certain technology standard and the office people and bosses have too little to do on their holidays.)

"Ain't we going a bit far away now, Seb?" Charleston asked.

"Shhh..." Sebastian hissed at the Space Marine. "I believe that's von Strab up there."

Sebastian pointed at the man at the tee point. He wasn't alone. He had a servitor caddie with him, and somebody else.

Charleston picked up the magnoculars he had around his neck and took a look in them. He was wearing them because he had to supervise his soldiers later in the day. That was where he was going when he had run into Seb and Ishmael at least. Now he seemed to have forgotten it all.

"That's von Strab alright." Charleston said and handed the magnoculars to Sebastian so he could have a look. "I don't know about the other two though."

"Excluding the servitor, they're three." Sebastian said quietly. "von Strab, Grauberger and..."

Sebastian hesitated a bit and touched the zoom runes on the magnoculars.

"By holy Saint Armagon!" Seb breathed. "I can't believe it. What is Holt doing here?"

Sebastian crept closer to the edge of the woods.

"Careful Seb." Charleston warned. "I've heard von Strab's got a good drive..."

"Get real Ed!" Sebastian snapped him off. "What are the odds on von Strab getting a ball on the green from there?"

The **-thwock!** sound from Herman's club reached Sebastian's ears to late and as he turned, the white ball hitting him hard on his brow. Seb was thrown backwards onto the ground and the ball disappeared into the forest. Charleston ran after the ball and was soon back with it. He pulled Seb a good fifty metres into the forest and hunched over him.

"You okay?" Charleston whispered. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Hmmm, eight!?" Sebastian exclaimed, his vision blurred by the whack on his head.

Charleston looked at the two fingers he'd been holding up and smiled back at Seb. "Good

enough! Get up."

"Now that's a head-in-one!" Sebastian said as he rubbed his forehead where one heck of a lump was forming.

"How's the head?" Charleston asked as he watched the threesome and the servitor get closer. Holt and Grauberger weren't as good golfers as von Strab on miles distances.

"It smarts a bit." Sebastian said and tried a half-hearted smile. He looked at the closing men.

"I see my ball, and Commissar Holt's ball, but I can't see milord von Strab's ball though." Grauberger said and gestured towards his blue ball and Holt's red.

"Maybe it flew into the woods?" Holt suggested. Holt was a tall man, lean but slightly built. His face had a scar across his right cheek, cut there by a Genestealer claw many years ago. His hair was closely cropped and blond, his eyes blue. Coming into his early forties, he'd been stationed on Armageddon for quite a while, nearly ten years.

Charleston took careful aim and, muttering the Litany of Secure Aim, threw the little white golf-ball onto the green. It stopped little more than half a metre from the hole.

"Talk about wonder screw!" von Strab exclaimed. "I believe the Emperor must be smiling on me today!"

"By all the saints, so must be the case, milord!" Holt said as von Strab received the putter from the servitor.

"But to get back to business," the governor answered after the sinking the ball into the cup.

"What do you think of these reports we've received?"

Holt realized it was him Herman was talking to.

"Don't you mean lack thereof? Maybe it's just Jungle animals. After all, it's only two squads of men."

"Of course, you are probably right James." von Strab said as he and Holt watched Grauberger put.

Holt got ready for his put but as he swung the club, von Strab cut in.

"By the way, who will be Yarrick's replacement when he retires?"

This remark made Holt miss the put and he looked up sharp at the planetary governor.

"What? Yarrick's going to retire? He hasn't told me anything about something as that? He looked tired last time he came down to the Commissariat, so I gave him a few days off from the reforming mission he has." Holt finally put the ball in the cup and the servitor got a blank look on its face before it told the three men their scores. von Strab had won, but Holt and Grauberger had been close behind though.

"Though he said this was going to be his last mission, but I thought he meant on Armageddon." Holt said, looking puzzled. "Who told you this?"

"That's something I also want to know." Sebastian thought to himself in the bushes, trying to block out the throbbing pain in his forehead.

"None of real importance." von Strab said and wavered it off. "But till his mission is complete, he remains my tactical advisor. Maybe I should have a talk with him when he comes back from his holidays?"

"I would also like to have a talk with that old man." Grauberger said and looked disgruntled.

"You know what he did with my bodyguards!"

"You were breaking Imperial Law, he was acting correctly according to the Book of Imperial Law and Punishment!" Holt snapped. He wasn't going to stand here hearing a comrade-in-arm's name being dragged in the dirt. "Drug dealing is breaking paragraph 284/js in volume 5 of Imperial Laws."

"I never got to deal them, he destroyed your only evidence!" Grauberger answered back.

"That's is not the matter right now!"

"Gentlemen," Herman eased them. "Let's not begin arguing over something that happened months ago shall we?"

"Milord Governor, should I remind you that the cases on the murders of your father and brothers still aren't closed?" Holt said and shot von Strab a devastating glance. von Strab looked taken aback by this. Holt looked dangerous even without his smart, black uniform, and Herman had the feeling that Holt could kill both him and Grauberger with the golf clubs if necessary, and dismiss it as 'Acting for the Imperium's Good'.

"Let's not talk more about this, shall we?" von Strab said as the three left, the servitor caddie crawling after them on it's mechanical spider's legs.

"Did you hear that Ed?" Sebastian said as he turned to face Charleston as the others disappeared out of sight.

"Yuh, our thoughts have been verified." Charleston answered.

"The plot thickens Ed. I have always thought that Herman killed his own family to seize the

power as Governor of Armageddon. Only thing that troubles me is why Holt doesn't stop both Grauberger's and von Strab's actions?"

"Though that about the missing squads worries me." the lieutenant commander said as he and Sebastian walked back to Ishmael. Seb picked up the LazerBall from the ground as he found it. "I have a Neophyte squad which hasn't reported back, and it's almost a week since it set out from base."

"I believe we'll just have to wait and see what happens Ed." Sebastian said as they entered the LazerBall court, where a very curious Ishmael waited.

"Where the fekk have you two been? It can't take that long to find a cursed ball, can it?" Ishmael suddenly saw the big red lump on Seb's forehead.

"What happened with you Seb?"

"Long story, but as I probably can't play any more today, I'll tell you as we get back to the hotel." Sebastian replied and picked up his gear.

"Gee, what for?" Ishmael asked and picked up his own gear.

"I must get back to Infernus Commissariat, we may have a situation brewing."

And as the threesome walked back to the hotel, Sebastian explained everything he'd heard to Ishmael. Charleston didn't pay too much attention. He'd heard it before. He smiled to himself over the two old men. Sebastian and Ishmael had been friends since even before the Schola Progenium. They had much in common, mostly their occupation, or in IG's case, ex-occupation. And the fact that they both refused to grow up. That was why they played LazerBall. It was mostly a game for 15 to 18 year olds with good fitness. Seb and IG had made themselves a reputation as LazerBallers back in the Schola Progenium. They were as good now as back then, but the poor youngsters that had been on the neighbouring courts had looked dumbstruck on the two old men playing as LazerBall pros, not believing what they saw.

Charleston was pulled from his thoughts by Sebastian's voice.

"Huh, what Seb?" Charleston said as he came back to reality.

"I said, do you think this is it Ed? McKenzie has made more horrible predictions than ever, and a big Warp Storm has cut off Armageddon from the rest of the Imperium. Or is it just Jungle animals?"

"Let's hope on Jungle animals." Charleston replied.

"Told you." Ishmael said from his side. "You're so negative Sebastian."

<<< Upper hab levels of Infernus Hive, 3 weeks after the Days of the Feast >>>

"Still don't understand why you harvest your own grapes, Seb." Charleston asked as he let Sebastian stand on his shoulders to cut down the uppermost grapes.

"Because I like the Callidussian better than those "native" to Armageddon, Ed. Stretch yourself a bit, I can't really reach that one." Seb replied.

Charleston grunted a bit as he straightened himself. Seb had a balcony to his apartment, or whatever one could call the "balcony". There he had for several years now farmed his own grapes and made his own wine from. With a little help from the Adeptus Mechanicus he'd turned the climate on the large balcony into that of the equatorial regions of Callidus. Sebastian had built some frames out of wood on which the grapevines could grow on, and they certainly had. The ones that stretched the highest were nearly out of Sebastian's reach, even when standing on Charleston's shoulders. The one topmost were at the edge of the next balcony on the apartment above.

"Ed, I said straighten," Sebastian muttered to himself. "Ten-hut!"

Hearing the order Charleston made a perfect attention and grew one more inch. That was all Sebastian needed to grab hold of the edge and stretch after the last bunch of grapes, but as he did so, he looked over the edge of the upper balcony floor.

"Aiiie! Look!" a female voice screamed. Sebastian, sweaty and red-faced having a firm grip around the edge, looked shocked at the young woman that was sitting on a sun chair, not wearing more than a bikini. She had obviously been sunbathing, this being the Season of Fire after all, but she hadn't been alone. A tall, muscular man rose from another sun chair and looked curiously at Sebastian. Then a grin split his face and he walked over to Sebastian and knelt down.

"Well, well, well. If it ain't the old man? Had no idea you looked on girls for fun. But I believe it's common in your age."

"Now, Grauberger, this is not what it looks like..." Sebastian tried to explain.

"Oh no Yarrick, you ain't getting away that easy." the big merchant growled.

"At ease?" Charleston asked from below. "Okeydokey commissar!"

With that, Charleston let rest and walked away. Sebastian, still holding a firm grip around the edge, fell down half metre before his arm muscles finally got it that they should start working.

He fumbled with his feet to find the pole that stuck out of the wall on his left. This part of Infernus Hive was built to liken the houses of old on Armageddon, before the Hives became a reality and industry turned the lush green fields and forests to Ash Wastes. Sebastian's left foot found the pole and he got his foot over it.

Down on the ground, Charleston paid no attention to what was happening. He was busy taking in the baskets full of grapes, when Seb's doorbell rang. Charleston went and opened it and saw the planetary governor standing on the outside, without Arbiter escort or anything.

"Is Yarrick here?" he asked, before he saw Cerberus coming up behind Charleston. The wolfhound was not enraptured of seeing the governor. He smelled Gyrinx. A low growl came from the wolf's throat.

"Get that dog away from me, Lieutenant Commander." Herman said and swallowed. He was aware of how dangerous Cerberus was, the quarter of Chaos-hound making him twice as dangerous and totally fearless.

"Now Grauberger, make no hasty decisions!" Sebastian squealed, falling very out of character with himself.

"Keep off my back Yarrick! And especially my dames!" Grauberger said and shoved off Sebastian from the edge. Sebastian landed on the pole, with a leg on each side of it. His face contorted into a wile grimace of pain and agony as he glared up on Grauberger. The merchant just gave him a pleased smile as reply and disappeared from vision. Sebastian let his head fall against the wall as he exhaled for the first time since the pole had smashed into his groin. He tried to hold back the tears of pain, but it was no use. They ran down his face and as he relaxed his grip with his hand around the pole somewhat, he spun round 180 degrees and became hanging upside-down, the pain easing somewhat. Sebastian poked his head through the green roof of the grape plants and looked around. Charleston was nowhere to be seen, but he heard voices and they were coming closer. It was Charleston and von Strab, which he could make out. Instinctively, he ducked back up and hung in a very uncomfortable sort of way, but he was supposed to be reviewing the troops, not harvest grapes. His head disappeared through the foliage just as von Strab and Charleston entered the balcony.

"I'm sorry 'bout Cerberus, governor. I believe you smell Gyrinx and Cerberus does not like Gyrinxes." Charleston chuckled.

"Right," von Strab answered, not the slightest bemused. "So, where's the old man?"

"I don't know really." Charleston said and looked around, confused. "He was here a minute ago."

"Maybe he got other things to do." von Strab tried. "He's a busy man, after all."

"But he didn't pass the door of what I know. Maybe he's hiding somewhere?"

"Never mind," von Strab said and waved off Charleston's question. "Just tell him when you see him that I want to talk to him. I'll be in the tactical room in the Upper Spire."

With that von Strab left, but as he got to the door, he stopped dead. Seb took a brief moment to relax his back and bent down beneath the foliage and looked at Charleston, who looked back with a confused and shocked expression, and then at von Strab. Seb ducked back up just as Herman turned round to look back at where Seb had been a split second earlier. von Strab walked up to where Seb had hung.

"What is hanging here then?" Herman said bemused and looked upwards. "A bunch of grapes?" He plucked down a grape and ate it, smiling at its taste.

"Had no idea Yarrick was growing his own." von Strab said as he left.

"He likes having a hobby, and he doesn't like the Armageddon grapes so much. You know, the ones grown in Volcanus, Tempestora and Tartarus."

"I see. Equatorial Callidussian, right?" von Strab asked standing in the doorway.

"Yup. By the way, I'll tell him governor." Charleston said and closed the door. Turning on the magnetic locks, Charleston went out on the balcony again. Cerberus where already sitting underneath where Sebastian was hanging, the old man's head poking through the foliage again.

"You okay Seb?" Charleston asked worriedly as he helped the commissar down.

"I'm fine, except my groin hurts a fekking lot." Sebastian replied and walked inside. "I think I'll have to freeze the grapes, no matter how little I like it. And as soon as the pain abates, I'll go see what the governor wants."

"Hope you'll wear something else than a singlet and your breeches." Charleston said as he carried the last basket of grapes inside.

<<< Infernus Hive Spire, Tactical Room, 2 hours later >>>

Sebastian walked in a quick march as he approached the tactical room. It had been a long time since he'd been used as tactical advisor, but by the Emperor, he had knowledge of tactics. He'd

been fed with it from a tender age because of his grandfather. When the other kids had played Loyalists and Traitors, Sebastian had learned how to fight and outwit a real Berzerker opponent, tactical wise and in close combat. He'd read about Imperial Law and Creed when the other had read comic books. Then Sebastian hadn't liked it, but now he was glad he had as he had a great advantage now. His many years of personal experience also paid off.

As he got to the entry doors, the two fully armoured Arbiters saluted him sharply and Sebastian answered it. With a hiss the entry doors opened, a sound Sebastian thought sounded too much as the hiss of the Ash Waste Cobras. He shrugged of the feeling of foreboding he got when he thought of the creatures. Horrible summed up the sand cobras quite well. He took off his peaked commissar's cap, went into attention and saluted the assembled officers.

"At ease Commissar Yarrick," von Strab said as he looked up from the map of Armageddon Prime that was projected on the glass of the table the men were assembled around. As Sebastian relaxed, he found much to his chagrin that no chair was empty. Seemed they didn't want him to stay long then. This was not a good sign.

Sebastian looked around at the assembled men. There was of course von Strab, but also General Hurley of the 1st Steel Legion, Colonel Archer of the 15th Steel Legion, Lord General Terhune of the Planetary Defence Force (PDF for short), Lord Inquisitor Yudka (who made Seb unintentionally shrug), Princeps Kurtiz Mannheim, Princeps Prime of the Iron Skulls Titan Legion, and Commissar Holt.

Hurley, Archer and Mannheim were temporarily stationed here, that Sebastian knew, so this had to be severe.

"Commissar Yarrick, may I ask you something?" Herman began. Addressing him with rank wasn't von Strab's way, so this was bad, Seb knew.

"Go ahead, milord."

"You know that three weeks ago, Armageddon was 'hit' by an asteroid the size not seen in centuries, millennia's even. Hasn't it bothered you that it never crashed?"

"Indeed it has." Sebastian replied, feeling the tiny shard of metal inside his greatcoat pocket. He'd put it there when he was at Cheng Fu's and completely forgotten it since. The same went for the paper with the glyph on that Ishmael had handed him.

"Right, because the answer's simple. It was a Space Hulk, and it has landed."

The silence after von Strab's words was deafening. Sebastian felt for the first time surprised in twenty years.

"Maybe it's fate that a warp-storm of immense size has started right now, disabling any help from the rest of the Imperium reaching Armageddon, but on the other hand we won't need it, as I'm fully aware that we can manage on our own." Herman said and smiled.

Sebastian couldn't take it; he had to put in his word.

"Permission to speak freely, governor?"

"Of course Yarrick."

"I think we should at least send out something to find out what we're facing..."

"We already know what we're facing, commissar!" the governor snapped him off. "This morning Volcanus Hive fell to an allied force of Berzerkers and an Orkish Horde under the joined command of Lord Kharn and an Ork Warlord named Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka."

Sebastian looked shocked at the governor.

"Is this some sort of joke, milord?" Sebastian queried.

"No, Yarrick, it isn't," Herman softly replied.

"Then we MUST inform the Imperium of our, hrm, situation. We cannot fight such a war alone! We need immediate assistance from the Adeptus Astartes!"

"I told you the warp-storm makes all inter-stellar travel impossible! Besides, we can fight this battle alone! We have got one and a half company of Space Marines already stationed here! We even have a Titan Legion at our disposal!" von Strab shouted. Seb was too well aware of the governor's short fuse. And glory-hunger and incompetence.

"It's barely ONE Company!" Sebastian shouted with a gesture. "The 8th is still drawing Neophytes!"

"Okay, have it your way, Yarrick. I'll listen to you." von Strab said and calmed down, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

"Good. We can fix it without help from the Imperium, but then you'll have to do exactly as I say. First and foremost is Kharn's Berzerkers. Never fight a Berzerker on equal terms. He's too good a tactician for that. If you're not careful, he'll outflank you and outmanoeuvre you like that!"

Sebastian snapped his fingers to emphasize his meaning.

"Go on, commissar" von Strab said, steepling his fingers.

"Secondly, the Orks. They're mean and green. That's how far most of your knowledge

stretches on orks. More so, they're tough as heck and they're quite capable of surviving in nearly any environment. The ash wastes of Armageddon poses no threat to them. Possibly the sand cobras, but nothing else will. I've never heard of Warlord Ghazghkull Thraka before, but as he's warlord he's undoubtedly very powerful."

"Your advise Yarrick?"

"With the aid of the Iron Skulls and 8th company of the Death Angels knock them out with an enormous military force in one decisive hammer blow."

"Thank you." von Strab said and smiled. "Dismissed."

Sebastian got the shocked look again.

"B-but, you said that...the foe..." he stuttered forth, completely taken aback by the order.

"You're my tactical ADVISOR," Herman and looked forgiving. "That doesn't mean I have to listen to you. Besides, we can do this without any help, so don't even think the thought of sending out a distress signal."

Sebastian stuttered forth something unhearable and involuntarily reached for his holstered laspistol.

"I'd strongly recommend not doing so, Yarrick. The exit's that way!" and with a gesture von Strab showed were the door was.

Against his own will, Sebastian left the Tactical Room, ignoring the salutes of the Arbiters. Once again he'd been incapable of doing his duty. The governor had after all broken several Imperial Laws, Seb was sure. In his mind, Sebastian kicked himself for being such a weakling. His grandfather would have shot the brains out of von Strab without blinking. But then again, his grandfather had been the military commander of Armageddon, not von Strab. It was horrifying for Sebastian to realize he would never become as great a commissar as his grandfather.

When Sebastian got home, he made certain Charleston wasn't there and locked his door securely. After that, he called Cerberus to his knee and as he hugged the big wolfhound, he started weeping tears of shame.

Princeps Mannheim didn't really listen to von Strab after Yarrick left, neither did Holt. Both had been worried about the old man. In their ears, Seb's 'advise' had sounded like a battle-plan especially made for this. Mannheim woke from his daydream when his name was mentioned.

"Princeps, if the orks and Berzerkers get through the jungle, which I doubt, do you think you can stop them?" Herman asked.

"Of course, with support. But shouldn't we do as Yarrick said?" Mannheim asked worriedly.

"Maybe, but what does he know?" von Strab said with a shrug. The governor went back to explaining his battle plan to the other officers.

"A fecking lot, it appears." Mannheim thought to himself.

"Mannheim," von Strab broke Mannheim's thoughts once again. "I want you to move north and engage the enemy."

"Of course. With who?" the princeps asked.

"Beg your pardon?" von Strab said with a confused look. "With your Legion of course."

"Governor, don't say your thinking on sending me up there alone, without infantry support?"

"What do you think, princeps?" Herman said dryly.

Mannheim saw in von Strab's eyes that the man was serious. This was madness. No Titan Legion could hold on it's own against an entire enemy force without infantry support.

"Maybe we should listen to Yarrick." Mannheim said and looked worried.

"Look here Kurtiz," von Strab said, an undertone of annoyance in his voice. "On this planet I'm in charge now, not the Yarrick family. It's been nearly a hundred years since Commissar General Rolf Yarrick gave my family command of this planet. You do as I say or you can get to Helsreach!"

"Yes milord." Mannheim said as he realized the insanity that lurked inside von Strab and his orders. "I'll go get ready."

In his mind, Mannheim thought on how to tell his wife and children he'd never see them again.

<<< Armageddon Prime, Tower of Doom Ruins 2 weeks later >>>

It's dawn on Armageddon, a bloody dawn. In the gloom of the ruins one can make out two figures. One huge and bulky and the size of a dreadnought. The arms of the figure end one in a big gun and the other in a pneumatic claw. The other figure, about two metres thirty, looks like a Space Marine with the possible exception of the horns on his helmet and the missing armour on his left arm. Suddenly, the power armour clad warrior starts walking into the ruins.

"I still don' get why da zog we're 'ere Kharn!?" the bulky figure growled.

"Because I need to make myself whole after all these years Ghazghkull." Kharn said and looked around. He'd left it in it's pedestal, but where?

"Waddaya mean wiv 'ole again?" Ghazghkull said and walked closer, the adamantium of his

partially metal skull glittering in the dawning light.

"Once, I had this planet in my grasp, but I lost it. The Imperial lackeys shuns this area, so it's probably gonna be here still."

"A weapon?" Ghazghkull asked walking even closer.

"Yes, a very potent weapon." Kharn realized Ghazghkull was getting dangerously close the edge. "Don't walk any further!"

"Why not?" the huge Ork Warlord asked in his deep voice.

"Because anyone who enters the Arena I must challenge. Only four has ever escaped alive." Kharn went back to searching.

"Which four wuz dat?"

"They were the Space Outlaws and that Commissar I've told you about."

"Oh, dat Yarrick..." Ghazghkull's voice trailed off. "I fink 'Umie commissurrs have smart hats. Uzbex, a big boss uv mine, collects 'em."

"That's a nice hobby." Kharn said as he started digging with his bare hands on a place.

"Ya nevvur nailed dat Yarrick, why not?"

"'Cause he was a bit slippery..." Kharn said as he dug deeper, cursing Armageddon and it's ash wastes as well as the Yarricks.

"He's got a grandson though. Heard he's quite an expert on orks." Kharn continued as he dug. Just a little further...

"Is he a commissurr?" Ghazghkull asked curiously.

"Yeah, but he's old now. Probably won't fight much more, sorry to spoil the fun. Anyways, the Yarricks are mine!"

"Righto Kharn." Ghazghkull muttered and kicked a 15-kilo rock away a good hundred metres. After all Kharn had told him about the Yarricks, Ghazghkull was quite hoping for a good fight. Seemed impossible now, Kharn wanting the 'Umie for himself and the man being old.

Ghazghkull weren't an expert on humans, but he knew they began to leak when one punched them too hard and that old humans broke much more easily. He remembered the commissar he'd broken the back on and then trampled the old human's arm. It had been very easy, Ghazghkull remembered. Old humans weren't fun.

"YESSSS!!" Kharn shouted as he pulled forth his trusty old axe from beneath the sand. "Behold Warlord Ghazghkull Thraka, the ultimate weapon!"

"Now dat's a zogging 'uge choppa!" Ghazghkull shouted astonished.

"It's more than a 'choppa' my friend. It's the most powerful deamon weapon in the galaxy! Deamon Lord Kharn, welded it, second in power to the King of Deamons himself, Kharzhan! An Eldar Craftworld had it, but the sissies were probably afraid of using it. I liberated them of their burden and since then, the Axe of Khorne has been mine! Once again, I'm made whole!!"

As Kharn's mad laughter echoed in the ruins, Ghazghkull felt his green skin get prickly. There was something very wrong with this human.

"'Oo made da choppa?" Ghazghkull finally asked.

"Huh?"

"Wot's da name of da mek wot made dat choppa?" Ghazghkull repeated.

"This weapon my friend, was forged by the best smith through time, but also the bane of all deamons. It was forged with hatred, the very essence of the deamons. Still, it's not as potent as Kharzhan's personal blade, but it's second best..."

"'Oo da zog made it Kharn!?"

Kharn eyes turned hard on Ghazghkull.

"Why do you want to know?" the Berzerker Lord said in a low, whispering tone.

Ghazghkull found no answer on the question so he decided to leave it at that. Something else took his attention. An Ork Nob was shouting something on orkish.

"What does he want Ghazghkull?" Kharn asked.

"Boss Tufzog sez somefing about 'Umie Gargants."

"Titans," Kharn muttered to himself. "Any support?"

Ghazghkull yelled something unintelligible back to Tufzog, who replied just as oddly.

"No, no support."

Kharn smiled to himself. "By the Throne of Skulls, they're more stupid than I thought."

<<< Infernus Hive, a week after the destruction of the Iron Skulls Titan Legion and loss of Death Mire hive >>>

"Lord Astropath Zebulon, you must send out the distress signal!" Sebastian nearly begged the psyker to do it. Armageddon Prime was nearly lost, and the loss of Hive Tempestora would prove a serious blow towards the forces of the Imperium. The tank factories in Tempestora was all that stood between the Imperial forces and total destruction on Prime, and Sebastian wouldn't such a minor thing as an order from the governor keep him from saving billion lives.

"Sorry commissar, but without clearance from the governor or an inquisitor, I can't send out the psychic distress beacon. Laws, you know." Zebulon replied with a gesture of sadness.

"Don't you understand!? Armageddon is being destroyed because of the governor and I don't trust the Inquisition for two seconds!" Sebastian shouted, feeling agitated.

"Commissar Yarrick, maybe it is you who don't understand?" Zebulon said and stood up, his skeleton like frame wrapped in green robes. "I have my creeds and edicts to follow, just as you do. Mine, on the other hand, are there for my colleagues and my own security."

"Believe me Zebulon, if you don't do as I say, you won't leave Armageddon alive..." Sebastian muttered between clenched teeth.

"Is that a threat, commissar?" the two metres tall psyker-skeleton said.

"No, a fact." Sebastian replied with a steely gaze. The Astropath seemed to understand and sat down.

"Right, I'll send out a distress signal. But beware, an Inquisitor may pick it up and wonder what's wrong."

Sebastian sat down on a chair a good ten metres away from the psyker. He felt so uncomfortable in their proximity. He realized his skin had turned to goose flesh and tried to shake of the feeling. Sebastian felt something heavy land in his knee and saw that Cerberus rested his big, furry head in his lap. The big wolfhound didn't like psykers either it seemed. Seb gently stroke Cerberus' grizzled fur, remembering when he'd gotten the dog as a pup. It had made him forget for many years his grandfather and that horrible day. He'd fled to Armageddon after completing his Commissar's training to forget, and Cerberus had helped him somewhat. But one day he'd stumbled upon a statue of his grandfather in Volcanus Hive. Sebastian had been 28 at that time, new to his duty, assigned to a Steel Legion nicknamed the Armadillos after the creatures out in the Wastelands. He'd fallen to his knees and wept as he remembered what he'd done when he saw the statue of the Liberator of Armageddon, The Wolf, Commissar General Rolf Yarrick. Since that day, Sebastian had never for one day forgotten his "mistake".

Suddenly, Cerberus raised his head so quickly it made Sebastian start. A low growl came from the hound's throat. Seb knew immediately what was happening.

"They're here..." he said quietly to himself, considering how good his odds were if he were to...? Sebastian shook his head and banished the thought. It would only get him into more trouble.

"Nearly done..." the Astropath mumbled, Seb glancing towards him, quickly regretting it, seeing that Zebulon seemed more skeletal than ever, blood dripping from the psyker's nose. The taste of metal was in the air because of the psychic powers. Cerberus bark woke Seb from his daily nightmare as he'd watched the psyker. Seconds later, a squad of Arbiters broke into the room, armed with combat shotguns. After them came their Judge.

"Commissar Yarrick!" the Judge called. "You're under arrest for breaking Article 3543, Section 6; Disobeyment of superior order!"

"What!?" was all that Sebastian got out, grabbing good hold on Cerberus, who'd spotted a cyber-mastiff amongst the Arbiters.

"Do not attempt to flee, it will only make it worse." the Judge said in a calm voice.

"The only superior I have is the Emperor of Mankind!" Sebastian shouted as two Arbiters disarmed him and put handcuffs on him.

"Wrong!" a voice called from the corridor. Sebastian knew it too well.

"As long as you're here Yarrick, I'm your superior." von Strab said and stood himself before Sebastian. He spotted the clearly pissed Cerberus and took a few steps backwards.

"Do something about that wolf too!" von Strab ordered the Arbiters. One tried to put a mouth buckle on Cerberus, but ended with a very bloody arm instead.

"Get them Cerberus!" Sebastian shouted. The old wolfhound jumped on the cyber-mastiff and tore the robot-dog's head from its body. Cerberus was about to jump on another Arbiter, when the Judge pulled his hell pistol and shot.

"NO!" the old commissar screamed as the powerful laser shot hit his old friend in the side, throwing him to the floor. Bashing himself free from the two Arbiters that were holding him, Sebastian rushed to his dog's side. This couldn't be true...

"Fekking bastards!" Seb mumbled to himself, feeling anger inside himself he hadn't felt for many years. "I hope for your sake judge, that he isn't dead! Because if he is..."

"He's stunned." the Arbiter Judge cut him off. "Do you really think I would kill an innocent animal? Only humans make mistakes."

"You're making one right now, following von Strab's orders!" Sebastian growled. "Wait till Holt hears about this!"

"There's no need in wasting your phone call on me, Yarrick. I'm already here." Holt said calmly as he entered. "I've heard all of it, and I'm sorry to say it, but Yarrick, you have disobeyed a

direct order from the planetary governor of Armageddon. There's not much I can do about it, either."

"Right," Sebastian said and looked the present men over. "I'm coming with you, but firstly I want to know what's going to happen to me."

"You're going to be banished from Infernus Hive." von Strab answered him. "I can't have you executed, that would cause some raised eyebrows, so I'm sending you off to Hades Hive. I heard you were born there, so why not spend some time there again, no?"

"Do I have a choice?" Sebastain replied and met von Strab with a steady, steely gaze. With that the Arbiters left, carrying Cerberus with them. Von Strab and Holt stayed in the Astropath Chamber. Zebulon looked up at them.

"Did Yarrick manage to send a signal?" Herman queried.

"No, and I had the Astropath Creed on my side." Zebulon replied calmly and quietly. This tone made both Holt and von Strab shrug.

"Good." von Strab said and left with Holt.

As the metal doors closed with a hiss, Zebulon smiled to himself.

"No, Yarrick didn't send a signal. I did." the Astropath said to himself.

And with that he closed his eyes and entered the Immaterium to send another distress signal, focused on a special mind.

<<< Hades Hive Spire Space Port, 2 days later, Hive Tempestorea under siege >>>

Sebastian wasn't welcomed by cheering crowds when the Thunderhawk landed in Hades. Instead, the spaceport seemed rather dead. Not a man as far as he could see.

"Let's go," Seb said to Cerberus after a moment of silence. Cerberus was sporting a bandage around his ribs where he'd been shot, being lucky that las-weapons fuse the flesh together after they'd hit. That the shot hadn't been so powerful had saved him too. Though it had been enough to throw Cerberus off his paws.

The two walked for a few minutes until a voice called their attention.

"Commissar Yarrick! Good to see you here!" a man called. He was thickset and seemed to be in his early fifties, his hair beginning to grey at his temples. Though the man was thickset, he was still a good ten centimetres taller than Sebastian. Seb recognized him immediately.

"Michael Atris!" Seb exclaimed. "What brings you here?" the commissar asked, although he already knew the answer.

"You, who else?" Atris said as he joined Seb and Cerberus. "When I heard you were going to be banished here, I sighed in relief, in fact."

"I see," Sebastian said and the two men and the dog walked off towards a turbo-lift that would take them to a lower level in the Spire. As they entered the lift and it began taking them down the nearly two miles to the level where Sebastian had been assigned to live. It was in the Upper Levels, not far from Hive Hades Ruler's home, but still, Hades was notorious for it's many gangs. There was a long moment of silence until Atris broke it.

"Going with light luggage I see," he said, indicating Seb's lone bag. It was a standard issue Imperial Guard equipment bag. It was made from a durable textile in black, with a gold Imperial Eagle on it together with the text:

Imperial Commissar Sebastian Yarrick
"The Emperor knows, the Emperor watches"

The motto was probably sewn into place later than the rest, Artis could tell.

"I weren't really allowed to pack down my entire home. This bag was all I managed to get with me." Seb said and looked at the Hive Ruler.

"And your weapons, I see." Artis said and looked down on the chain sword hanging from a chain underneath Sebastian's Ordo Imperialis on his left side. On his right side, his laspistol was sitting in its holster. Sebastian seemed armed and ready for battle, which was much the case.

"Out of pure curiosity, what is in that bag of yours, Sebastian?"

"Clothes, of course," Seb began. "Some extra tunics and breeches, data-slates containing information about Orks and Berzerkers, and of course my family gems."

"Orks and Berzerkers?" Artis asked, sounding surprised, which he was.

"So you don't know what we're facing? Armageddon is facing an all out invasion of Berzerkers and Orks. This makes Kharn's last assaults seem like walks through the park. And we're having an incompetent Commander. Great..." Sebastian sighed and fell silent.

"He won't listen to you, right?" Artis said and looked softly on the old commissar with his blue eyes. Sebastian wished he could meet Artis with the same soft eyes, but he couldn't.

"He's incompetent to the extreme, Michael. And it's all because he's a full-blood aristocrat. His father Luthor, may the Emperor watch over his soul, had worked hard to get his title, but not by assassinating his brothers and father, like Herman. Luthor worked his way hard to make his father understand he was the most suitable inheritor of the throne of Armageddon."

"You still believe that Herman was behind the murders, Sebastian?"

"Of course. I wonder why Holt hasn't nailed him? He's got sufficient proof." Sebastian said and scratched his cheek. He hadn't shaved this morning; there hadn't been time for such.

"Maybe he's being bribed?" Artis suggested. Seb gave him a shocked look, like what he said was more than impossible.

"I mean," Artis explained "Holt's only human, after all. You can never know."

"Of course." Sebastian replied as the elevator slowed down to a halt and they walked out. Seb saw the enormous plaza he was going to live beside under the conflict. There were much people here, seemed to be some sort of market day. Around the hexahedral plaza, dozens of levels of habs raised up into the Spire. The outside of all hives was just a sort of shell. On the inside several smaller 'hives' were. Seb was now standing on one of the levels of one of these mini-hives, looking down at the plaza a hundred metres below him. He felt a nearly boyish urge to spit down on the crowds below to see if he could hit someone, but restrained from doing so. Walking away from the railing Seb fixed on the huge crystal tree in the middle of the plaza. It looked like one of our oaks but it was about a hundred times larger. Seb couldn't remember that it had been here last time he'd been in Hades. As he watched, a paper-thin crystal leaf fell down in the water of the artificial lake that surrounded the tree. It was mechanical, Sebastian thought. It **HAD** to be mechanical.

"What do you think of our Elysian Crystal Oak?" Artis said and smiled. "It's a real tree, if you wonder."

"It's biological?" Seb said astounded. "I thought it had to be mechanical or some sort of biotech."

"It's neither. It's a living crystal. There are many such things on Elysion. Most remarkable are the Sapphire Rays and the Ruby Lizards. They're protected by Imperial Law and can't be brought off-planet, but the Crystal Oaks aren't. This one was taken from Elysion maybe thousands of years ago and has stood here since. It's as hard as diamond, so not even a Leman Russ could blast it apart."

"Yes, I've heard of the crystal planet." Sebastian said and pulled away his eyes from the oak and started walking again. "Believe my grand-father was there some time. He brought home an Emerald Raven. I think he had permission for it, of course."

"Bet he had. He was an Imperial Commissar General, and such have pull. Did it survive long?"

"Not long, I believe Callidus sun was too much for it. As it was a crystal animal, it turned quite stiff. It's one of the gems I have with me."

There was another long pause of silence, broken by the murmur of the crowd far down below. This time, however, Sebastian broke the silence.

"Artis, I must ask you of a favour." Seb said in a troubled voice.

"Go ahead, commissar."

"Can you put every working man on reinforcing the blast doors and the Shell? After that, I want to have a list of every man here who's got experience, either in the Imperial Guard, the PDF or in the Gangs. Make that every man and woman, above eighteen."

"Ay, ay Commissar." Artis answered with a smart salute. "I understand, I've been in the Navy, many years ago."

"Artis, you haven't been closer to the Black Sea of space than a bathtub." Sebastian snapped.

<<< Tempestorea Hive, the same afternoon >>>

"Say again, Commander?" Captain Mikos of the 8th Assault Company said to his commander over the roar of the Gargant siege guns.

"I said: fall back and take as many civilians with you as possible!" Charleston roared back over the storming guns.

"Why, sir?" Mikos said and raised a questioning eyebrow. Mikos was around fifty years old but had a childlike face and yellowish hair. He looked quite young had it not been for the numerous scars on his face.

"We're abandoning the Hive! Tempestorea is dead! I'm not even doing this on the Overlord's orders. I'm acting as the Emperor wants!"

"That's why we don't have any support?" Mikos asked as the two blasted off up in the sky with their jump-packs and landed on a roof. Fifteen Marines with gold-helmets followed them. They were Mikos and Charleston's Honour Guard, the personal bodyguard of Death Angel commanders and officers, the absolute elite of warriors and often equipped with jump-packs

and the best weaponry the Imperium can offer.

"Yep." Charleston simply replied as he landed and surveyed the battle tearing apart Hive Tempestra from above. The Berzerkers weren't many, and that troubled Charleston. Kharn allying with some other force wasn't uncommon, but the few Berzerker squads he'd met and gotten reported over the helmet vox-links was bothering. Why so few? There weren't even any trace of the Terminators that Kharn had under command. Something was fishy with this entire invasion. He had to get to Seb as soon as possible and tell him about this. That something wasn't right. Sebastian didn't have his grandfather's sixth sense of knowing what Kharn was up to. He didn't have the personal grudge, but still had a good reason for one...

"Mikos, there should be some Thunderhawks left up in the Spire that the nobles houses left behind. I'm going to pull out with the forces down here and salvage as many civilians as possible. You take the Honour Guard and take the Thunderhawks up in the Spire, with force from the nobles, if needed. Cram the Thunderhawks full of people, preferably workers, we'll need tank-constructors and weapons-manufacturers, not nobs."

"Yes sir!" Mikos said, saluted and with a simple order, the fifteen Honour Guard followed him as he put jump-pack on full blast and flew up into the Spire.

Charleston watched his aide fly upwards, but there was no sign of relief on his face. Rather the opposite. Mikos was young, for a Space Marine, and eager to prove himself. Charleston could bet he wanted to be transferred to one of the Battle Companies instead of 8th, which was a Reserve Company after all. But it hadn't been used like one lately. The numerous battles it was used in were because McGranth had begun using startlingly aggressive tactics. McKenzie couldn't be behind it, Charleston thought. McKenzie had his hands full of Genestealers and that Magos Grimjaw, who'd returned from death, in some odd way. McKenzie ranting about this wasn't worth listening to, Charleston had thought.

"Good luck, Brother Mikos." Charleston said and flew away down towards the hab-level plaza where some of the fiercest fighting was being done. As he flew over the plaza, he saw another squad of Berzerkers. God-Emperor, they had spread out. But still, the sixteen Berzerkers were just red spots in a sea of green-hided Orks. 'Like my boys.' Charleston thought darkly to himself. The Death Angels were so hopelessly outnumbered. They hadn't suffered heavy casualties, but were slowly being pushed back as wave after wave of Orks came storming. Charleston landed in the thick of the fighting, power sword and plasma pistol at the ready.

It was like being hit by a heat wave, the stench of the Orks were overwhelming. McKenzie often complained about Charleston's lack in personal hygiene. That was like nothing compared to the rotten stench from the Orks, their teeth yellow and their breaths vile like a predator's. One of them jumped at Charleston, only to be cut in half by the huge Marine. Charleston was probably the tallest Marine ever, bar the Emperor himself, but still the Orks were a good 2 metres tall. And the more powerful an Ork was, the bigger he seemed to get. Charleston had listened to Sebastian and Ishmael's conversation about the Ork the size of a Dreadnought walker. Charleston shrugged slightly at the thought of facing that beast.

Before he knew what had happened, he'd carved a path through the Orks and, followed by twenty Marines, he now stood face-to-face with the Ork Warboss, which commanded this warband. The bodyguards themselves were the size of a normal Marine, some of them clad in that mega armour Seb had talked about. With a mighty roar the Angels of Death and the Orks charged each other. The Orks that weren't dressed in mega armour fell quickly to the chain swords of the Marines. But before Charleston knew what was happening, the Orks seemed to get the upper hand. The chain swords couldn't pierce the thick armour of the remaining bodyguard, and the snipping power-claws of the Orks cut down the Marines as nothing. Feeling the anger burning inside of him of the loss of his brother-warriors, Charleston charged the Warboss, which had just beheaded Sergeant Young with its big, crude chain-axe. The Ork swung at him with incredible speed, but Charleston ducked away. The chain-axe tore off his helmet instead, which was dangling from the mag-chain in Charleston's belt.

"For that, I'll take your helmet instead, Ork-scum!!" Charleston roared. The Warboss was wearing a big, black helmet with huge horns on it.

"No, yoo won't Oomie! Dis iz a Waaagh! All Oomies die!! Da red deamon 'as said so!" the Warboss roared as he plunged his chain-axe in a wide arc, trying to catch Charleston in its reach. Charleston was shocked on hearing an alien, a crude and savage Ork for the matter; speak Low Gothic, though he had obvious problems with pronunciation. He thought he ducked and evaded slashes and swings from that huge chain-axe for five minutes before he saw a drop in the warboss' guard. Ramming his power sword deep into the chest of the Ork, Charleston pulled himself close to the Ork's face and hissed:

"See your deamon gods in hell! This planet belongs to the Emperor and not Kharn!"

With that Charleston put all his weight on the sword and forced it downward, carving open the

Ork from chest cavity to groin. As Charleston pulled out the sword with a powerful jerk, the Ork Warboss still stood up for half a minute, before falling over. Stone dead.

Picking up the warboss' helmet and putting it on his own head, Charleston looked around. He fended off another Ork deftly and, using the vox-link hanging on his ear, he ordered all the Marines to fall back using pattern Omega7. That was a fall back technique only used by the 8th Company of the Death Angels.

"That should surprise them." he thought and yelling the order to fall back, flew out of the combat and took flight to the Shuttle Bays on Hab-level 23. The entire of the 8th Company followed him as a whole. The Orks, too confused or too surprised, didn't pursue. The Berzerkers, on the other hand, had their orders. This was all going according to plan...

<<< Infernus Hive, 6 days later >>>

Overlord Herman von Strab was looking through some reports on data-slates, when Commander Charleston burst into his office. The big Marine hadn't even bothered to remove his armour, though he had been smart enough to take off the jump-pack. On Charleston's face was a look of anger, perfectly well qualifying him for 'Most Disgruntled Person of the Year'. von Strab understood the man's temper quite well. The reports he'd read from Tempestora were disheartening.

"It's lost!" Charleston said after standing quiet for a few minutes. "Armageddon Prime is lost, and you know why, dontcha?"

"I wasn't prepared for an assault this size, Commander." Herman replied, looking up from the data-slate he was reading.

"As fekk you were!" Charleston snapped. "There has been plenty of bad omens recently! Most notably the statue of the Emperor in Helsreach's Prime Church wept bloody tears just before the day of the Feast!"

"I haven't been informed about it."

"Oh, you have, by Commissar Yarrick even! You've just chosen to ignore him!" Charleston growled. If he just had the authority to remove Herman from his position, but only a Grand Commander or Commissar could perform such an act. Thinking of commissars, where was Seb?

"Speaking of the same," Charleston said in a milder tone. "Where is he?"

"Commissar Yarrick? I banished him to Hades Hive." von Strab answered without as much as blinking or looking up from the report. Seemed Hive Monitor Artis was up to something, reinforcing his blast-doors and Hive Shell.

"You what?" Charleston asked shocked.

"I banished him to Hades Hive because he disobeyed a direct order from me." Herman said and looked up again. "As a matter of fact, I had thought of executing the bastard, but Holt got me on other thoughts."

"Executing!?" Charleston shouted in surprise. "If you'd had him shot, I'd kill ya with me bare hands!"

"That is the punishment for disobeying orders, the same for deserting the Guard, Yarrick should know. He's a commissar."

What followed von Strab words was an uneasy silence. The last sentence had taken Charleston aback. He was in a loss of words. von Strab was crazy, that was clear. And that Holt, he seemed to cover the governor's back, but why? He was a commissar, just like Sebastian. Charleston finally came up with what to say.

"I just wanted to inform you, governor, that the enemy forces will probably go through the Jungle soon, so I'd recommend you to move your HQ." "They'll never make it through the Jungle, Lieutenant Commander. Never. It's too damn thick."

"You think so? It takes my scouts one month to move through the jungle on foot, and they're rookie Marines. How long time, or for that sake short time won't it take an army of veteran Berzerkers and Orks to move through it?"

With that, Charleston left the office. von Strab was left in deep contemplation.

"Maybe he's right." he said to himself. "Maybe I should move my HQ to some other Hive. Acheron, for example. Yes, Acheron's good."

Reaching with his finger to the vox-channel to inform his secretary, hesitating for a moment, but then pressing it, Herman called:

"Miss Renton, get me Commissar Holt. I want to talk to him."

Settling back in his big office chair, lighting a cigar, he thought on what was happening in Hades Hive. What was Artis up to? Then it struck him what was happening. It struck him like a lightning bolt and Herman spat out the cigar.

"YARRICK!" he shouted hoarsely.

<<< Infernus Hive, 4 months later >>>

The Berzerker assault came swift, they poured out of the Equatorial Jungle like a blood red sea. One thousand warriors of Khorne; a full company of Space Marines. Charleston saw them come at dawn. A swift army, mounted on bikes and in Rhino transports. Some even were riding in the fearsome Land Raider tanks, the worst of the tanks the Imperium could produce. He didn't, wouldn't believe his eyes when he saw the flashes of light from the jump-pack equipped Berzerkers. Raptors, they were called. Rare sight, those Berzerker Raptors. Raising the magnoculars to his eyes and zooming in he saw Kharn at the front, wearing his own jump-pack. Charleston remembered he'd found brothers of the 8th without jump-packs, snatched by the Berzerkers to use on their own. Charleston felt the spite rising in his throat at the thought of the vandalized suits of armour, belonging to the dead.

"Good thing we managed to evacuate the Hive." he thought to himself. "So many civilian lives we left at Tempestora makes me queasy."

Seeing the Berzerker army come to a halt at the very gates of Infernus Hive surprised Charleston a bit. But it also gave him a ray of hope.

"It won't be so here, this war ends with Infernus."

Down on the ground, Kharn walked forward, the mighty Axe of Khorne in his hand. He was going to give that fool Charleston a chance on surrendering and joining him. The time they'd taken on waiting out the Imperials was going to pay off. The long time had probably made their guard slacken. Kharn hoped so at least.

"Lieutenant Commander Charleston!! Show me your face, you Imperial worm!" Kharn shouted up towards the barricade facing him. His shout was amplified by the helmet's vox-system. Those words made his soldiers feel better, Kharn knew. Some were newly converted, the colour of their old Legions shining through the gore and gold colour of the Berzerkers Horde, so they needed proof they were the only real warriors. All others were worms.

"Whaddya want, ya little piece of traitor dung!?" Charleston snapped back. Kharn scanned the rows of Marines up on the barricade and soon found Charleston. He was standing a head taller than the others.

"Charleston, I give you one last chance. Join my forces, and we'll crush this pathetic Imperium ruled by a carcass!" Kharn did with a lively gesture.

"Go to Helsreach!" Charleston snapped.

"I'm just telling you the truth, brother warrior. What can this Imperium offer you, which Khorne can't? Battles, that is what a Space Marine lives for. What do you think will happen to you and all other Marines, when universal peace is acquired? You won't be needed any more. They'll get rid of you."

"I'm not so stupid I'll fall for that one. The Emperor can offer me ten times as much as your fallen god."

"It's the truth, lieutenant! You call us renegades, but we're Marines who've seen the light, who understand what will happen with us when we're not needed any more."

"There is always wars for us Marines to fight, and don't call me brother! Traitor!"

'Boy, he's slow.' Kharn thought darkly to himself. 'I called him that half a minute ago.'

"Think of it Charleston! You wouldn't need to serve under incompetent commanders any more. You'd be your own commander."

"It's no use Kharn. I know your tricks. Your honey-coated tongue can't shake my faith in the Emperor of Mankind. He created this Imperium and he created us! We will succeed!"

"No you won't!" Kharn shouted, losing his temper. He showed Charleston the axe so the dumb loyalist could clearly see the power Kharn held.

"See this, Charleston? See this!?! It's the Axe of Khorne! I had it once, but it was taken away from me by those pesky Omega Squadron Outlaws and Commissar General Yarrick, but what did that do for good? I have it once again; I'm made whole again! With this Daemon Weapon, welded once by Daemon Lord Kharn Fleshtearer himself, King Kharzhan's right hand, I am invincible! It's the most powerful weapon in the galaxy and with it in my hands nothing can stop me!! Not the Imperial Guard, not the Legio Titanicus, not the Adeptus Astartes, not you, not Yarrick!!"

Charleston slowly realized his mistake. Keeping a steady gaze on Kharn, he whispered in his vox-link to Mikos.

"Take half of eighth and get the fekk out of here. The renegade is right. We don't stand a damned chance against him now."

"So, what it's gonna be Charleston!?" Kharn shouted. "Surrender or prepare for your death at the hand of the Axe of Khorne. Or should that be the Axe of Kharn!?"

"Kharn," Charleston called down. "If you're going to take this Hive, it's going to over my dead

body!"

"My pleasure," Kharn thought grimly. "That can be arranged, worm! CHARGE!!!!!"

Kharn's roar was out-classed by the mighty "Blood for the Blood God! Skulls for the Skull Throne!!" that was shouted from the lips of every Berzerker as the gore-coloured horde stormed against Infernus Hive.

"Oh Emperor," Charleston whispered in his vox-link to his warriors. "May You hath mercy on our Souls and guide them to Your side..."

Then the Battle for Infernus Hive begun. A battle in which centuries of hatred erupted as the Angels of Death and the Berzerkers of Khorne clashed in the streets of the Hive. Charleston and Kharn never met, but their warriors did, and around a hundred Marines on each side fell before Charleston abandoned the Hive. Kharn ordered his men to hold. They'd taken what they'd come for.

Two days after Infernus Hive was taken by the Berzerkers, the chandelier in Infernus Opera house was torn down and destroyed.

<<< Hades Hive 4 days later >>>

Commissar Sebastian Yarrick looked out the great view-port of Hades Hive and saw the sea of green skinned warriors outside. They camped on both sides of the river Euminedes. It seemed quite weird that a sea of green being broken by a nearly grey river. He'd received messages from the Orks in the shape of captured humans, probably from Volcanus or Tempestora, humans with their hands or eyes cut out, some poor fellows even had gotten into the way of the Ork Meks. Some of those had minor bionic implants and some extreme cases had grotesque braintransplants. They all carried the same message with them: *Surrender or die!*

The first one to come in with that message had been Colonel Archer. He was taken care of now, medics tending him every minute.

Looking away from the horde outside, Sebastian sighed. They would attack soon he knew so. The siege guns of the Gargants had silenced, which meant the Orks were preparing for an attack. Sebastian had seen a huge banner pole out in the green sea and read the glyphs on it. This was an army belonging to an Ork Warlord named Ugulhard. Seb had heard of Ugulhard's Chargers. Their Warlord, Ugulhard, was notorious for his assaults, but Ugulhard bowing down before another Ork Warlord, that meant this Ghazghkull Thraka held power indeed. Ugulhard also had a big Ork Battle-claw, very much like the power-claws, but of an older design.

A messenger tore Sebastian from his thoughts.

"Excuse me Commissar Yarrick, but I have some messages for you." the young boy said. Seb guessed he couldn't be older than eighteen and he probably wouldn't survive the war. Sebastian swallowed hard at the thought.

"Thanks," Seb said as he received them. He handed the boy fifteen Imperial credits as a tip. The boy lightened up at the money and bowed deeply and ran off. Seb looked after him a long while until he opened the messages. The first one was from Ishmael. He had written that Holt had called him back to duty, as all commissars available were needed. He'd been stationed in Helsreach Hive to serve with the PDF and Lord General Terhune. He also wrote that an enormous Ork force was coming to Helsreach, but he'd never let Helreach fall. The entire of Helreach population, 10 billions all in all, had volunteered to defend their homes. He wished Sebastian luck and was sorry for that he'd been banished. There was also post scriptum:

"I'd check on Holt if I were you. He's been acting strange lately and he's grown gaunt in his appearance." it read.

"Good luck to you, old friend." Seb mumbled to himself, as if IG was in psychic communion with him. 10 billion, that was more than the 5 billions that Hades population were, and still, only a million had military training in any form. Sebastian sighed. There had to be the same number of Orks out there. That he was sure of.

The other message was from Charleston. Charleston had obviously written it in a hurry, so his messages, which were usually hard to read, nearly became impossible to read. There were misspellings everywhere. But Seb could make out what he meant. Charleston and the whole of 8th was speeding to Hades Hive in their Thunderhawks, and would probably be there in six or seven hours.

"If we're still alive then Ed." Seb said and closed the data-slate with a snap. He walked out of the office and took the turbo-lift to the ground levels. He'd managed to keep Atris out of going into battle by saying the Hive Monitor was needed elsewhere. He also needed someone to look after Cerberus. Cerberus had fought against many foes through time, but he was wounded and Sebastian didn't want to lose his best friend.

When Yarrick stepped out of the elevator, he seemed to have changed in appearance. At least the welders at the blast-doors thought so. They had met an old man, shortened by age, slightly

built and with slumped shoulders. What stepped out of the elevator was the most fearsome commissar they'd ever had seen. They knew it was Commissar Yarrick though; the blue-grey hair was hard to miss even though he was wearing his peaked cap. He just seemed to have gotten taller, more muscular and broad-shouldered. They just didn't understand how it made sense, such a transformation of a human. Sebastian walked up to the colonel of the Hive Defence Force who'd been supervising the soldiers and organized them into companies as they'd arrived.

"Are we ready, Colonel Logan?" Sebastian asked the tall colonel.

"As ready as can be. We'll take anything those Orks throw against us." Logan replied with a grin.

"I really hope so..." Sebastian said and turned on his chain-sword. He always had his sword hanging from his left side, even though he was left-handed. But Imperial Commissars' uniforms were made for right-handed people, with the pistol holster always sitting on the right side. Seb didn't like it. It was making things difficult, but beggars can't be choosers. He was brought from thoughts by the shouts of warning from a watchtower.

"Now it begins..." Sebastian said in a whisper. "The Battle for Armageddon."

The two forces met in a hideous roar of guns and screams of dying and wounded. Sebastian parried and slashed with his chain-sword. Each cut brought down a green-skinned beast. The soldiers saw the old man fight for the Imperium with vigour they didn't think possible, but it brought hope to their hearts and they attacked Orks with their lasguns and bayonets.

Sebastian was far from the only commissar present. He didn't understand how, but after fifteen minutes of fierce hand-to-hand, he was joined by four other commissars, all of them belonging to Armageddon's Commissariat, all of them younger than him, but they fought with experience and they formed a black spear that drove deep into the Ork horde. But as sudden as the young commissars had joined him, they disappeared. Sebastian didn't want to think on why.

'The moment you start to count the cost, is the moment you fail.' he thought to himself.

Warlord Ugulhard was cutting through humans with his big battle-claw when he saw Commissar Yarrick. He'd heard from Grand Warlord Ghazghkull that Yarrick had been banished for contradicting his leader's orders. Ghazghkull had also said that the Red Deamon wanted the Yarrick for himself.

'Wut da zog?' Ugulhard thought. 'I'ze will kill da Oomie now. Why does da Red Deamon want dat old Oomie for?'

Ordering his driver to drive towards the old commissar, Ugulhard readied himself to disembark from the warbuggie. As he reached Yarrick, Ugulhard threw himself at the old man with a bestial roar. Sebastian, being not as quick as his grandfather, but quick none-the-less, ducked Ugulhard's first attack with ease. The battle-claw flew towards him five, six, seven times, Sebastian ducking it every time. But when the eighth swing came, Sebastian jumped to the left, but felt a cutting pain in his right arm.

Ugulhard had caught his right arm by the elbow with the claw and cut it right off! The pneumatic claw had gone through bone and muscle like a hot knife through butter. Sebastian just stared at the stump that once had been his right arm; the blood was spurting out from the wound. When he saw the rest of his arm lying on the ground, the pain seemed to reach him finally.

Screaming with pain, Sebastian went down on his knees, clutching his severed arm with his left hand. He heard Ugulhard's mad laughter and victory shout, as if the Ork had killed him. Yarrick couldn't believe it. This couldn't be true. It couldn't be true. It couldn't, wouldn't end like this. He'd always thought he'd die of age or in the field of battle, but not like this, not like this! The Iron Will of his family pumping in his veins together with the hatred he held towards anything alinged with Kharn, made it possible for him to shut out the pain. Grabbing hold of his chain-sword and staggering up to a standing position, fighting the shock and pain like no normal man, Sebastian Yarrick, Imperial Commissar and Warrior of the Emperor, looked Warlord Ugulhard in the eyes. The Ork looked shocked back at the old man. He thought he'd killed the human.

"You can destroy our homes, you can murder our loved ones," Sebastian panted forth, putting the chain-sword in highest gear, making the motor scream as it pulled round the adamantium toothed chain. "But we'll defend our honour and homes no matter the cost! We will never forgive, never surrender!!"

With that, Sebastian brought the chain-sword about in a wide, crimson arc, severing Ugulhard's bony, green head from his body. The head sneered at the old man for a moment until the creature's metabolism conceded he was dead.

Sebastian breathed hard in and out a couple of times until he calmly reached down and

loosened the battle-claw from Ugulhard's twitching body. It was hard with one arm, but he managed. As he was bent down when he loosened the straps of the claw, he didn't see the Thunderhawks landing behind the Imperial force. Pulling off the claw from Ugulhard's arm, straining every muscle in his old body to lift it, Sebastian showed the battle-claw to all the warriors present, Ork as human. The battlefield fell silent. Human and Ork as one gazed at the old man, standing on Ugulhard's body, holding a battle-claw a third of his height above his head. There was another moment of silence before the Ork horde fled; wailing in terror as they realized their leader had fallen. The human army attacked the Orks with renewed vigour and now finally Sebastian saw the Space Marines amongst them. As the Orks were beaten from Hades Hive, Sebastian Yarrick finally allowed himself to pass out.

Charleston ran the fastest he could through the thick of humans. He sometimes flew short distances with his jump-pack. He had to find Sebastian, he knew the commissar in some way was behind the Orks so suddenly fleeing. The sudden silence he'd at first thought come because his force had arrived and surprised both HDF and Orks. But such wasn't the case. It had been Seb who'd caused the silence, but how.

"Lieutenant Commander, over here!" a Space Marine Apothecary, the Marines equivalent of a medic, called him.

Charleston flew over to the apothecary with a few jumps and landed. What he saw he didn't want to believe. Ugulhard's beheaded corpse, Sebastian's right arm and Seb himself lying on top of Ugulhard's body. The claw had slipped out of his hand and was lying on the ground beside Ugulhard's body. The apothecary walked up to Sebastian's body and checked it. He put on a field dressing over the stump, to make it stop bleeding, but as he put his hand on the old man's chest, he pulled it back. Charleston wasn't watching, he was studying Ugulhard's claw and weighing it in his hands. Seb probably wanted to keep it. Charleston was still wearing the helmet from Temperstora that he'd nicked from the warboss. Sebastian liked trophies, but Charleston wasn't entirely sure that Sebastian wanted to be reminded of this. He decided to bring the claw with him so Seb could decide himself. "Sir?" the apothecary asked, holding his hand over Sebastian's face as thinking on putting it down.

Charleston looked up from his thoughts. "What?" he asked.

"Sir, Commissar Yarrick, he..." the apothecary hesitated. "He doesn't breathe."

Charleston looked shocked at the apothecary. What had the man said?

"He doesn't what?" Charleston said shocked, almost dropping the heavy claw on his feet.

"Commissar Yarrick doesn't breathe, sir." the apothecary replied, a slight tone of sadness in his voice.