

Men, EDs and Machines



"The stern-faced leaders in their temple of doom
Creating nightmares made for me and for you
Here come the raiders they're invading us all
We stand in silence with our backs to the wall"

--Excerpt from Gamma Ray's Damn The Machine



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In the galactic south of the Imperium of Mankind lies one of the most notorious of its Hive Worlds: Armageddon. It was aptly named, cause it really was the end of all; it had seemed to the first colonists. Rumours went, that a general in the predecessor of the Imperial Guard had coined the name. He had exclaimed that this seemed like the end of the world, but in his own native tongue: "*Shima tikre ountar tirmal edla harmagedon!*" or roughly: "This looks like we've come to the end of worlds!" But as said, it was only a rumour, a legend. Just like that of the Eagle, the Wolf and the Hound of Chaos.

Armageddon had a very adaptable plant and animal life, it had appeared. The many volcanoes erupted oftenly and with force. The worst regions being that of the East of the Acheron Meridian. They had so many volcanoes, that the people dubbed it the Fire Wastes. Later, the Fire Wastes would prove to have one of the richest ore findings throughout the Imperium. To the West of the Acheron Meridian, however, there were no volcanoes, and due to Armageddon's peculiar rotation, most of the year on that part was left in darkness. This left it very cold, making the colonists name it the Deadlands, as nothing seemed to live in the cold. They were wrong. Unlike the 80 degrees Celsius sands of the Fire Wastes where nothing lived, many creatures lived and thrived in the icy Deadlands, like the six metres tall snow grizzly, a hideous predator. Its prey consisted mostly of the small, but numerous feathered lizards: ice lizards that lived on fish and the like in the seas of Armageddon. But these creatures are since long gone, due to the epitaph of survival of the fittest.

The reasons are as follows: Armageddon once was a lush, green forest covered planet, with the exception of the Fire Wastes and the Deadlands, and people settled down there, on the fields that were, and lived of agriculture. Then, when the ores where discovered in the East, and the oil in the Deadlands, Armageddon quickly was turned to industry. The Imperium's rulers (the Emperor mortally wounded from his fight with Karzhan and no longer fit to rule in the eyes of his minions) used the template from the first true Hive World: Ichar. Eight major Hives were quickly erected (count a few hundred years as relatively quick) and several minor ones. The major hives were to be named as follows, in no special order: Death Mire (due to its surroundings), Volcanus, Tempestora, Acheron, Infernus, Helsreach, Tartarus and Hades. Many huge factory complexes were also built, in the middle of nowhere. The lush, planet covering forest was reduced to a small strip that departed the continents Armageddon Prime and Armageddon Secundus from each other, and supplied the planet with oxygen.

Most of the animals fled into this thin strip, and the jungle became placed under protection of the Imperial Law. But not all animals fled to the jungle, some fled to the mountain ranges Diabolus and Palidus, where no sound human would go, these two mountain ranges housing

some of the biggest volcanoes known. Amongst the fleeing animals, were tribes of feral Orks, who'd probably been there since the dawn of time. Humans have encountered them on every planet they've began colonizing, for record.

But there were those animals that didn't flee, and those plants that survived the horrible toxins and poisons spread out by the human factories. Most of the plants were tiny shrubs and cactuses, plants that could survive months without water, and then storing gallons of it, when the Season of Storms broke after the Season of Shadows. These plants also quickly became highly toxic to all animals that tried to eat them, as the plants took their water from the polluted rains that came from the Ash Wastes, which were created by the many factories and Hives. But amongst the herbivores on Armageddon, two have proved superior. The first being the Rock Turtle; it looks like a rock when it pulls in its head and legs. Its hard shell has saved it from many a predator, humans and Orks included. It's not too big, about half a metre high. The much bigger then is the second herbivore: the Seven feet armadillo. This armadillo is, as its name implores, seven feet long. It's not truly an armadillo, as it's no mammal as such. Only reptilian animals have proved successful out in the Wastelands of Armageddon. The Armadillo lays eggs, which easily can be mistaken for rocks. Humans and Orks oftenly miss them, but some animals don't.

Like the Sand Raptor. The Raptor is a bi-pedal dinosaur, the size of a horse. It lives mainly on eggs from the Seven feet armadillo and the Rock Turtle, but it can attack and kill young turtles and armadillos, but never grown ups. Armageddon natives (humans as well as Ork) take the eggs that the Raptor lays and nurses them themselves, to get the perfect riding beast for the climate of Armageddon.

The most dangerous of all animals on Armageddon, however, are the 20+ metres long Armageddon Ash Waste Sand Cobras! These beasts usually become a length of 30 to 40 metres, but there have been reports of a huge wyrm living in the Plains of Anthrand. The rumours say that this wyrm is full 200 metres long, and has lived on Armageddon since the first human colonists arrived. It's the mother of all cobras. The sand cobras in general aren't too picky about their food. They eat what the heck they feel like. In times of dire need, it can happen that they eat smaller cobras. Many are the Ash Waste adventurers on Armageddon that have ended up as a Sand Cobra's dinner.

But, this isn't the story of Armageddon's plant life and ecological system. It's about men and machines, and their eternal struggle to get control over the other. And it was just fitting for Armageddon: It had never been a peaceful world. From the days when the colonists tried to push back the Orks from the fields, through the Deamon Age, into the Age of the Imperium when Kevlinn invaded and took it under command. The numerous wars waged upon him and Armageddon's final and inevitable liberation at the hands of Commissar-general Rolf Yarrick. Smaller civil wars, the Genestealer incursions and the Chaos Cults of the Underhives also wracked Armageddon. But the battle that became Armageddon's last, was also its most glorious (how wars now can be glorious). A huge alliance of Orks and Berzerkers invaded the poorly prepared Armageddonians and almost all resistance was swept away at once. But, despite this, Armageddon held through it all. And in the end, how you twist and turn it, it was down to one man:

Imperial Commissar Sebastian Yarrick, the Saviour of Hades Hive. And it's in that very Hive that this story begins in its true nature:

Hades had changed, that was obvious. Where children had played, and people gone on market to buy their daily needs, these places were now empty. A ghostly feel was over the huge hive city. Hades was built to house a full seven billions of people. To even think the fact that such a big thing can be suddenly abandoned and left empty is a scary thought. And it had been abandoned in a hurry. Apartments and habs remained as they were, people only grabbing the most essential and setting off. Mag-lev bikes had been thrown away as people had thought it sounder to go by foot, or just that the mag-lev rails had seized working. In the many ports, several Thunderhawk transports remained. It was as if people hadn't cared of the interstellar ships, and tried to get out of the Hives, into the wastelands instead. Overall, the city looked normal. The scars from the Last Armageddon War was still visible, but it was unsure if those scars would ever go away... The city of Hades remained as it always had, waiting in vain for its inhabitants to return.

The great Crystal Oak, that was like a trademark for Hades Hive, had grown wildly the last four hundred years. It stole most of the artificial light on Upper Hive Lv 45. But, still, it was a crystal plant, from Elysium, and the light filtered through the patchworks of twigs and branches and through the leaves and the tree itself, due to its semi-transparent, glass-like construction. It had broken through the wall surrounding it on several places, but still the water remained in the fountain around it. Not far from the Crystal Oak, about a few hundred metres, a statue stood. It had been left untouched by whatever had scared the inhabitants of Hades away. It was also unscathed by the claws of time.

The statue was of an old man, dressed in the greatcoat and peaked cap of an Imperial Commissar. In his left hand he held a mighty storm bolter and his right arm ended at the elbow. It was replaced by a huge Orkish so-called battle claw. He raised his huge claw in defiance towards the northwest, and the ruins of an old pyramid, a monolith and the wreckage of a so-called Space Hulk. The old man didn't only miss an arm. He also missed his left eye, it being replaced by a bionic implant. He stood upon a heap of Orkish skulls and Berzerkers' helmets. On the base of the statue, one thing could be read on each side. On the one facing the Crystal Oak, one could read the following:

Commissar Sebastian Yarrick, Saviour of Hades Hive.

"Iron Will, Iron Fist"

In smaller lettering above it, one could read: **"This statue was erected in honour of"**.

On the side facing away from the Crystal Oak, one could read one of Sebastian Yarrick's most famous quotes:

"The green tide of Orkdom is upon us and we are alone. There can be no mercy. No surrender. If we survive this day it'll be a miracle!"

Underneath the quote, a text could be found, though it had been covered in dust over the years. Overall, the old man seemed to be looking back at past glories and lost honours and memories.

By the Crystal Oak, the silence was suddenly broken by a whining sound, as a Warp portal opened itself. Out stepped a smaller group of men and women. Stepped, well, the majority fell out of the hole and onto the concrete ground of Hades. Of the squirming mass of children, one could make out a camouflaged greatcoat. Rolf struggled out of the pile and stood up and looked around. McKenzie, being the last one to step out of the hole, his leg nearly cut off by the closing portal, took a deep breath and took in the surroundings. As he saw the Crystal Oak, he knew full well where he was.

"Ah, Hades Hive!" he exclaimed and looked around. "It's been such time! It feels so... wet..."

McKenzie looked down and saw that he was standing knee-deep in the water of the fountain. He got out of the fountain and smiled sheepishly towards the others. Now firstly did he notice that the hive was abandoned. "Not good," he muttered.

The rest of the kids had now gotten to their feet. They looked awestruck at the surroundings. They'd never seen anything like this before. The huge, spike-like Gothic buildings. The many gargoyles and eagles carved out of stone and the fine mica-glass windows. The fact the entire place was abandoned didn't seem to concern them. Kevin still had the strange and giddy feeling left from his first warp-travel.

"Ooh, what was that?" he asked. "Better yet, where are we?"

"We appear to be on Armageddon," Edd said carefully. "A name that really fits this Hive world. It lies in the galactic south of the Imperium." Edd didn't mention his concern over that the entire place was abandoned.

"You mean we're really in another solar system?" Nazz asked. "We really did it?"

Yep," Eddy replied. "We're a full one thousand light-years away from Earth."

McKenzie turned round and saw the statue of Sebastian Yarrick. "What do we have here?" he said and strolled off. The others followed far behind. After a few minutes, it had gone up for the

kids that a thing this big, shouldn't be so empty. It seemed like a ghost town.

"Hey look!" Charleston shouted and ran towards the statue as he recognized the person, almost flattening McKenzie in the process. "It's Sebbie! But, I can't remember he had a statue erected over him?" Charleston said with a thumbing.

"Who's Sebbie?" Kevin asked, cocking an eyebrow. The old man looked imposing, despite his obvious age. There was something familiar with him, Kevin thought. He recognized the nose and the overall facial structure. He threw a glance at Rolf, and then back at the statue. "Naaah!" Kevin said in disbelief.

"That's Commissar Sebastian Yarrick." McKenzie said as he walked forward to read the inscription on it.

"Guess it must've been erected while we prepared the defences elsewhere..." McGranth said and looked up at the statue. Sebastian had been a good friend of him, just as the commissar general had. "How far into the future do you think we are, Master Lexicanum?"

"About four hundred years after the Fall of the Imperium, I guess." McKenzie said as he read what it said. Some of it was written in High Gothic, and he'd gotten a bit rusty.

"And from the time we had on Terra?"

"Maybe seven hundred years..." McKenzie replied simply. McGranth couldn't believe it. 700 years! Had it been that long since the Outlaws first showed up for the Imperial citizens? And how the heck had McKenzie been able to take them through so many years of time? Seemed impossible.

"What does it read?" Charleston asked as he looked over McKenzie's shoulder.

"It says that this is a statue erected in honour of Seb. And it also states his personal motto." McKenzie walked round the base to the other side. "Here it reads one of his most famous quotes:" McKenzie read it out to the others. "Seems he was no optimist." McKenzie brushed away the dust covering the last of the text. As it was written in High Gothic, it took a while for him to interpret it, but when he finished it, he looked crossly at Charleston. "Can I have a word with you?"

Charleston swallowed hard. He understood what McKenzie had read. He had seen through his lie those many years ago that had made them abandon the Imperium and go for the Outlaws.

"I remember you said Sebastian was killed by a Dark Eldar dark lance, right?" McKenzie asked briskly. Charleston nodded meekly. McGranth was also a bit intrigued of what McKenzie had found out. "Then," McKenzie said and showed the text he'd read. "How comes it reads here they found his dead and broken body, outside the Imperial Palace some four hundred years ago? There was no sign of violence on his body; except for his broken back and that he was obviously dead. Dead, from that his power claw had been rammed into his old body!" McKenzie crossed his arms over his chest and looked sternly on Charleston.

"You lied to us, brother commander?" McGranth said and looked shocked.

"I believe he has, Grand Commander." McKenzie replied, not letting go of Charleston with his gaze for a second. Charleston gave up and sighed.

"Okay, I admit it; I lied!" he said with an open-handed gesture. "But did I have a choice? I knew what you would say if I told you the truth. We'd be stuck in the Imperium, and these children would most certainly find themselves slaves to darkness! I lied, with a clean conscience, that we would avenge, not only Sebastian, but also the entire Imperium and the Emperor, given our time! We could in no way have defeated Kharn as it was! He had for crying out loud the Axe of Khorne or Khaine or whatever, again! He retained the damned thing on Armageddon, here! He only invaded Armageddon as a distraction, and I knew it! He only wanted the Axe back, and for that, he pulled upon himself the attention of three full Space Marine Legions and unnumbered Imperial Guard. And he nearly won, brothers, he nearly won."

"Then why didn't you tell us so, Ed?" McGranth said and looked distrustfully upon his friend.

"I tried, but no one cares to listens to the big and obviously stupid Lieutenant Commander of

the Assault Company!" Charleston made a pause to regain his breath and let this sink in. This had obviously been brewing in him for a long time. "Just because I'm tall and brawny, doesn't mean I'm dumb." he continued in a calmer voice. "Sebastian knew it too, but again, no one listened to him. His grandfather hadn't either, you know, the day he was killed. Neither did Luthor von Strab, Herman ignored him and Holt... well, that's another story. Seb told me stuff that no one else would listen too, and I always knew what he meant, and that it was undoubtedly true. Seb and I shared the same ability; to solve puzzles that seemed unsolvable to others." Charleston turned to McKenzie. "Sebbie undoubtedly told you about Holt, but did you listen? No! He told me before he paid his visit to Holt, and I believed in his theory, cause it sounded okay. He trusted me more than you, Edward, because I listened to him!"

McKenzie stood dumbstruck for a while. Then he silently nodded. It was time to pay more attention to his friend. Both he and McGranah had always seen Charleston as someone acting under them, not someone to listen to. He just did as he was told, and that was it. Charleston never complained; he did his duty with delight, it seemed. But apparently, he'd had other things on his mind, all the time.

Jonny broke the sudden silence between the assembled humans.

"This place sure is quiet," Jonny whimpered, pulling Plank closer to him. "Where is everybody?"

"He's got a point," Eddy agreed. "Shouldn't there be people here?"

"I don't understand," McKenzie muttered as he scratched his head. "It appears as though the entire hive was abandoned, and in a hurry!"

"Why should somebody just up and leave a whole city empty?" Ed wondered as he looked up at the huge construction that was the main spine.

"I don't know," McGranah answered with a shrug of his armoured shoulders. "Commander, Master Lexicanum, I suggest we go take a look. You guys," McGranah said, turning to the others, "You stay here. Rolf, I put the responsibility of their safe-keeping on your shoulders."

Rolf saluted, and seeing he'd made his point, McGranah moved away from the plaza with the others two Marines. They walked down an alleyway named UHLv45/56lj, or by most Hadesians: Rue Morgue (Road of the Dead), due to the fact that many dark and hideous murders had been conducted on this alleyway, despite it being so high up into the Spire.

Looking down upon the three Marine officers were nearly faceless gargoyles and angels. Saints looked down on them from the arched windows of the gothic buildings. McKenzie made a simple flex of his mind, finding no other life than themselves and the kids back at the statue.

"I don't like this..." McKenzie said quietly, "Where is everyone?"

As he said that, the three got out of the alleyway and out to another plaza. This, however, carried clear signs from battle. A statue had stood in the middle, or if it was a monument; it was hard to tell, nothing was left of it. McKenzie let a faint gasp leave his lips as he saw the incredible destruction. McGranah simply nodded. He'd seen the kind of damage a lascannon could do when it hit rockcrete. This was far worse. Something, undoubtedly something big, had destroyed most of the plaza with controlled and sustained bursts of some high-energy, rapid-fire weapon. Probably a gatling-system, as it was called in the Imperium.

"Look at this place..." Charleston said and gave a low whistle. "It's a disaster area, so I guess they had to evacuate." Unwillingly, he trailed his hand down to his power sword's resting place at his belt.

"Evacuate from what, is what I'd like to know..." McGranah said, grabbing his storm bolter firmly. He had a weird gut feeling, which he didn't like.

High up above the Space Marine officers, something was watching them, intently. It's nearly invisible in the shadows, but its red, unblinking eyes revealed it to be a mechanoid being. It's been on a long stalk, for months now. Finally, something to report. Twisting its inhumanly agile body, the shadow climbs upwards, towards the up-link mast of Hades Hive Main Spire.



Somewhere out in the Warp, on the fringe between the mortal realm and the domains of the etherworld Deamons, a huge ship is waiting. Waiting, for what, a human can never comprehend. The ship carries designs that would make one think it was Eldar, though it seemed too technologically advanced to be Eldar, ironically. As a matter of fact, it's the design of the old, fallen C'tan culture. On it, resides one of the last members of that ancient and powerful race, a race capable of creating new worlds and new races to inhabit them, to do their bidding. Despite that, the C'tan are forever gone, replaced by their own creations; Eldar and humans, although the Eldar have begun to dwindle in number them too. Of the many races in the galaxy, only the Orks, and the interstellar race of planet-eaters called simply the Hive Fleets, are not created by the C'tan. The deamons, being what they are, are the very stuff of our nightmares, thus making them linked to any creatures that thinks and has dreams...

Back to the ship; there's something else with it, that is wrong, or off, so to say. There's no artificial atmosphere. Whatever lives on it, is not biological.

In one of the part of the big ship, a chamber is situated. The chamber is a masterpiece of C'tan design. Not a centimetre of the adamant like Wraithbone is off. On Eldar ships, the Wraithbone would contain the souls of the dead. Here, its purpose is solely artistic. In the middle of the chamber a six metres high, battle suit-like piece of armour stands. It goes in the same moods as the C'tan architecture; with the great exception this was the design of war. The body is powerfully set, but there's still an air of agility over it. This is further heightened by its legs: long, lean legs, ending in bird-like feet. The arms are powerful and armoured to take shots that would pass through a Leman Russ battle tank. On the forearms, different weapons are mounted; on the right a beam-weapon like the ones the Necron warriors use and on the left, a huge, gatling, multi-barrelled high-energy pulse gun, designed to blow holes in the leg armour of Titans is situated. On the back of the big suit of armour, a jump-pack like flying system is placed. Its biggest difference from the jump-pack of the Imperium is that the exhausts are mounted on joints, making them movable, for increased agility in the air and that it takes its energy from an Eldar spiritstone, of the bigger size. The one thing spoiling the whole picture is that there's no head on the figure. The head rests on a platform nearby. Half of it still remains from its original lizard C'tan looks; the other half is a mechanoid death's mask. On the mechanoid head's half, on the right side, a tiny laser is mounted on the side of the head. Both the mechanoid and the biological eye are closed. The creature seems resting.

This creature is none other than Master War General Metallix, military commander of the Necrons. He was once C'tan in his nature, but that was so many thousands of years ago, he's even forgotten the name he used then. He doesn't even see himself as C'tan any more. He's Necron, and that's period. Those who beg to differ, find their viscera on the other end of the room.

A sound is heard from outside the chamber. The head remains still, but the body awakes and moves agilely over to the head. The three-fingered hands grab the head and puts it on top of its shoulders. Leads connect and electrical impulses are sent through the bionic brain of Metallix. Opening his eyes, Metallix looks at the chamber door. With a simple command, he knows, he'll allow the Necron Immortal ranked soldier on the other side to enter. By not uttering the word, the droid will remain outside, until it's let in. It won't complain over such treating. Inwardly, Metallix smiles, his outwardly face unable to project feelings since he received his new brain and face.

"Vostoria!" Metallix speaks in the hard-clipped tongue of the Necrons. The C'tan tongue, containing too many soft sounds for the droids to be able to master, had been bastardised over the aeons into Necron, a curt, hard language spoken by roughly one hundred million beings in the galaxy.

(For the readers convenience, I'm going to present just this first part in Necron, with human interpretation, but after that, the Necrons will speak English, but only when they converse between each other. I could, of course, continue to have the Necron tongue represented, but as I'm lazy, that will only occasionally happen from now on. Vostoria means enter, by the way.)

The Immortal entered through the door. It stood a good pace over two metres, but it was bulky in its frame, giving it a clumsy but strong appearance, which was much the case of its abilities.

"Ser, ortetie nardho terha nakin voklen panra lurin. Armageddon." the Immortal said simply,

saluting the leader with the Necron salute.

(Sir, report of human scum on captured world. Armageddon.)

"Duutame sankre plantra etsi lurin nardho terha nakin?" Metallix asked, as softly as possible in his tongue.

(Did you not clear this world of human scum?)

"Mant, ser, sener imoe pontre nedanse." the Immortal replied, a slight tone of disgust in its mechanical voice.

(Yes, sir, there have appeared recently.)

Metallix had made them self-conscious, but not so self-conscious that they got moral qualms. They did, however, have feelings, but not to the same extent as true mortals. Metallix thanked his friend Daimien (as the humans called him) for this extra bonus. To have robots feeling hatred but no remorse, that was deliciously horrible...

Metallix walked over to a wall, in which a hole appeared from out of nowhere. Opening his hand and showing his palm before the hole, tentacle like cords shot out and attached itself to the hole. Before his eyes, Metallix saw what the recon robot had seen. It displeased him, and amused him at the same time. It was an odd feeling. It had been an odd feeling to attack their own creation, as Daimien had put it, but in the years that had passed, it was obvious that the humans didn't have any memory of their creators. Metallix couldn't see why this was; he remembered the humans clearly. How they'd served his every whim... And now he was systematically exterminating them. The universe was insane, he concluded, as he saw the collection of children by the statue. Metallix got a sting in his 'heart', as he remembered past times, when he'd been joyful to see human families at his old home. How the children had run around, playing and joking. Metallix had liked children, be they human, Eldar or even the few C'tan children that had been born... Metallix knocked the sentimental feeling away. These people were obviously there to destroy him, no other reason than that!

He changed perspective and saw the three Marine officers. His reconnaissance Necron had proved well in its duty, taking good shots of their faces. Metallix knew the armour colorization: Death Angel Legion. He tapped into the databank he had found on Ichar, the Death Angel's home planet and compared the faces of the Marine officers with the records from Ichar.

He received the service records for three men: Eddie McGranth, Edmund Charleston and Edward McKenzie. He studied them all, showing great interest for all of them. The Charleston-human had obviously defended Armageddon with that old commissar that the Ork Ghazghkull Thraka had been ranting about. Good that the Ork was rid of now... Metallix thought.

The McKenzie was a psyker; a very powerful psyker. Necrons didn't have psychic powers, but the C'tan had. Maybe Damion would find the psyker useful?

Metallix almost stopped reading and calculating data as he got to McGranth. The service record and honour roll of the Grand Commander was immense. His losses had only come at an early age, as eager and over-zealous warrior, but as he'd grown older, it was obvious he'd become an opportunist of grand scale, but also a great tactician. McGranth had obviously out-witted someone called the Dark Lord in these references many times. Metallix had no idea as to whom this Dark Lord was, but he kept wondering why the humans had settled down in a cluster of systems so rife with deamons? Oh well, that didn't matter now.

"Perhaps, I've found a worthy opponent at last, but only perhaps... Firstly, a test..." Metallix said to himself in his deep voice. He released himself from the databank and turned to the soldier. "What do we have stationed in that area?"

"In Hades Hive, Armageddon, we have one host stationed, sir!" the Immortal replied rapidly.

"Send three squads of Warriors and accompanying Scarabs to the humans location. I don't think we'll need more, do you?" Metallix said, trying a smile on his dead face. It was an odd feeling having no mouth any more.

"No, sir, we don't." the Immortal replied, bowing and leaving his lord alone.

As the soldier left, Metallix walked deeper into the chamber, into the darkness of the unlit places of it. Metallix superior C'tan vision adjusted easily to the gloom and he walked up to a glass tube of gargantuan proportions. Inside the glass tube, giving the closest surroundings a ghostly green highlight, a huge, emerald green crystal hovered. Metallix gently touched the glass surrounding of the crystal, something ancient and longing in his one, biological eye. The crystal was surrounded by what seemed like smoke...

"Let's see what the great Grand Commander of the Death Angels can do, shall we?" Metallix said to no one in particular.

The glow from the crystal increased in pulses.



Back on Armageddon, McKenzie and McGranth had joined up with the kids again. Charleston wasn't with them, but McGranth said he'd gone to see if there was any Thunderhawks left.

"If we're going to get off this rock, we'll need one." McGranth said and sighed. He leaned himself at the foot of the great statue of Sebastian Yarrick.

McKenzie was pacing up and down, obviously unnerved. Something was not right when McKenzie behaved that way; McGranth knew it very well. Involuntarily, he gave a shrug. There was something not quite right with Hades Hive...

Charleston was nearly a kilometre away from his friends, walking up and down the lines of Thunderhawks he'd found. He was happy that Hades wasn't like other Armageddonian Hives, having its ports quite far down, in relation to the others. It seemed Hadesians cared more for the workers and common habbers than the nobles. The Thunderhawks weren't pretty sights. Charleston cursed silently as he walked down the line over the incompetence of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Although they had claimed to know everything about machines, when it came to it, they didn't know a crap. They thought, just like McKenzie, that there was a machine spirit in the mechanical things that were created, and that these spirits could be soothed by sigils and incantations. Charleston snorted at such behaviour. He hadn't uttered one sacred litany over his jump pack ever. Instead, he'd maintained it precariously, and it had never failed to him. He'd taught all Assault troopers coming after him the very same, putting him under the scrutinizing gaze of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Charleston stopped by a Thunderhawk that seemed to have been spared by the worst rust. He saw that the name of it was Nighthawk. He was still muttering curses under his breath towards the Adeptus Mechanicus. He checked the landing gears; they seemed okay. Pulling a finger across a joint, finding it soaked in oil, he smiled. He took a look on the wings; they were strangely enough armed with two Strike IV rockets each and an assault-cannon gatling each. This ship was apparently meant for escort of the others. Now came the horrible part, where most ships maintained by the Mechanicus failed in Charleston's tests: to see if the engines were in working order. The Thunderhawk transports had two kind of engines; two on the wings for atmospheric travel and three in the rear for interstellar travel. Most didn't have a proper Warp-drive. Charleston checked the interstellar rocket engines first. They had some dirt in them, but otherwise they seemed fine. Before checking the atmospheric drive, he opened a hatch and went into the Thunderhawk. A rush of air hit him, some hundred of years old. It smelled odd, a bit thicker than the air that Charleston now breathed. Stepping into the 'Hawk, Charleston checked the fuel; the levels were okay, but if McKenzie had ideas for longer trips, he'd need to refuel. Something on the control board caught Charleston's eyes: he'd never seen this in a Thunderhawk before.

He took a inspection of it all, and made the conclusion that it was a Warp-drive. This sucker was meant to travel between systems! Charleston felt the joy rise inside him. No wonder it seemed in better shape than the others. The Warp-drive equipped 'Hawks were just developed when Kharn attacked and the Imperium fell, so there was never any greater use for them. But it seemed such a highly industrialized world as Armageddon had managed to nab a few.

Stepping out of the cockpit, Charleston decided to check the main engines. There was one mounted on each wing. The left one was okay, but the right one was full of dirt, for unknown reasons. Charleston started to take it out and soon realized it wasn't only dirt... I was the remains of a very long dead body. Bacteria had broken it down into dirt. Some poor son had

been thrown towards the engine. Why, Charleston didn't want to know.

As he pulled out the dirt, he threw a quick glance to the left and froze. He looked again. Charleston saw nearly a hundred, red, slanted unblinking eyes staring at him. He heard the creeping sound of the Scarabs' legs as they crept closer. Pulling out his plasma pistol, Charleston hoped that nagging feeling of being watched had been McKenzie.



McKenzie looked up sharp from his ponderings. He'd been monitoring Charleston's brainwaves, and a wave of stress had just gone through the man's head. And McKenzie knew why. He didn't have to turn to McGrath; the grand commander had seen the psyker's sudden movement. McGrath almost felt a bit ashamed that he found it joyful that something finally happened. After all, he'd spent a lifetime fighting the enemies of mankind, and he didn't know much else than how to lay up a battle plan that couldn't fail.

"Okay," McGrath said to no one in particular. "Seems Charleston has gotten into a bit of a situation. Commissar, you assist me and McKenzie, you others stay out of the way, as good as you can." He could think of much else right now, he needed to see the enemy first, to get an even better order from his lips, but this would suffice for now.

The group followed McKenzie, whom quickly made his way towards the star port. The slender Marine had pulled out both bolt pistol and force sword. The blade of the psychic weapon shone with a bright blue colour and McKenzie unlocked the safety lock on the bolt pistol, thumbing in a different kind of ammunition than the common bolts. Rolf took up a rear guard, the Yarrickian sword held two-handed.

When they arrived at the star port, they saw what Charleston was fighting. Necrontyr warriors and tiny Scarabs overwhelmed the big Marine. Rolf moved up to support the others and the kids took refuge behind another Thunderhawk.

"Ed! Get the frekk out of our line of fire!" McGrath shouted. Without warning, Charleston activated the thrusters of his jump pack and flew out of the way, so that McKenzie and McGrath could fire their bolt weapons at the mechanoids. Controlled bursts of Kraken Penetrators burst they head of many Necrons on sprays of oil and otherworldly fluids. McKenzie noticed the tiny, beetle-like Scarab attached to Charleston's leg before it had the chance to detonate itself, and McKenzie destroyed it with a psychic impel. Drawing his force sword, he joined the fray together with his Grand Commander, Charleston and Rolf. Swinging left and right with his sword, he cut off arms and severed torsos from legs, but the Necrons repaired themselves. McKenzie ducked away from the glaive of one of the mechanoids. This was not good.

McGrath attacked the Necrons with sheer force, slamming down his massive power axe into the head of one of the glaive-armed warriors. The shots of the Necrons and the hacks from their strange knives didn't do more than scratch his ancient suit of Terminator Armour. He made a quick glance around the "battle-field" and immediately saw that this wasn't good. Changing clip in his storm bolter in a matter of seconds, he took up new aim and blew twenty or so Scarabs into oblivion. He saw Charleston blowing big holes in the Necrontyrs' torsos with his plasma pistol, only to see them repaired seconds later. Charleston spun round, thrusting his power sword through the head of one Necron. He didn't see the glaive armed one appear behind him.

"Commander, behind you!" McGrath shouted, feeling a sting in his right shoulder. He looked round, and saw the death's mask that was the face of a Necron Lord. The thing had snuck up on him an unguarded moment...

In the meantime, Charleston spun round and atomised the head of the Necron behind him with a powerful punch of his huge fist. As he did this, he saw Rolf, jumping and dodging the Necrons with ease. Charleston felt a bit awed by the young man's capabilities. He knew how agile and lithe the commissar general had been, refusing to wear armour, as it would hamper his movements, but this boy was almost better. Charleston guessed it was because of the lad's young body.

McKenzie turned when he heard the scream from his grand commander. The mighty Necron Lord was all over him. Focusing, McKenzie sent a surge of electric power through the droid. He

hoped he would short-circuit something. He soon found himself joined by another force. It was Edd. The boy joined in with glee it seemed. McKenzie couldn't blame him. He'd also been eager for battle. The time on Terra had been all too calm. He didn't like it so much. Maybe this was something that had been gleaned down to the Space Outlaws as well? McKenzie wasn't sure.



"What do we do?" Ed asked. He wished so he could be out fighting with his friend. Edd was lucky to have psychic powers. He looked at Eddy, as seeking help.

"We get into the Thunderhawk." Eddy replied simply, a stern look on his face. The Nighthawk wasn't long away from where they stood. The sprint would be short and easy. "Let's go!"

With that, Ed and Eddy darted off, taking no heed to the other six cul-de-sac kids. Kevin looked shocked. They were abandoning them?

"I can't believe it... " he murmured to himself. He looked back to the fight. Edd had done something strange with that robot, and he was still firing strange lightning from his hands, and he seemed to enjoy it. Kevin sighed.

"My suggestion is that we follow Ed and Eddy, they seem to know what they're doing." Nazz said and tugged Kevin's arm.

"That is what bothers me," Lee interrupted. "They seem to know so darn much about this... Imperium, it's spooky. I have a feeling our dear Eds know more than we want to think. And just look at Rolf!"

"So," Kevin said, throwing a glance at Rolf, "you're trying to suggest we follow Dork and Dorkky into that ship?"

"Exactly!" Lee said, crossing her arms over her now quite ample bosom. "Because if anyone can help us get this right, it's them."

Kevin considered this for about five seconds. "Let's go then!"

The six sprinted after Ed and Eddy and into the still functioning Thunderhawk named Nighthawk. When they saw the interior, their jaws dropped. It was like nothing they'd ever seen before. The Gothic architecture they'd seen on the outside seemed to have been implemented to the interior of the Thunderhawk. And the manifold sigils on various places spooked them as well. Johnny threw a look on one. He liked languages, and recognised this as something close to Latin, but still not. It seemed hard and... industrial in its construction. Johnny had no idea he was looking at and reading the language of the Adeptus Mechanicus: the Lingua Technis. Meanwhile, Kevin had seated himself on a chair behind Ed, who was sitting in the pilot's seat. The 'Hawk seemed constructed to house twenty or so of the Emperor's finest, i.e. the Space Marines. Ed studied the controls intently.

"Strange, I can't remember how to function this sucker," he mumbled. "I only remember how to steer."

"So," Eddy said and leaned against the controls, making sure not pressing anything by mistake, "you've no idea what these buttons do?"

"Exactly commander..." Ed replied absently.

"This is not good..." Eddy sighed.

"Wait a second," Marie interrupted. "I have an idea... "



On the outside, McKenzie temporarily froze the Necron Lord with a psychic move and Rolf destroyed the head in a flurry of sparks and super conducting material, as the Yarrickian sword passed through the robotic leader's head. McKenzie was short but amazed at the power of the sword in this youngster's hands. When Commissar General Rolf Yarrick had wielded it, it had been able to pass through Terminator armour with ease. These droids were obviously just as hard nuts as Berzerker Terminators, and the sword responded to every whim of the young man.

McKenzie had his thoughts on that there was a speck of Yarrick in Rolf, but how could that be?

Something caught his attention. Snapping his head round to face behind the Necrons' that were attacking. The curious look on face changed to one of terror as he realised what it was that had snapped his attention. He saw the red eyes, the faintly green light from Hellblades and the glittering of brass armour and trims. He saw how the Juggernaut jumped out of the shadows, its rider a two metre tall and inhumanly muscled Bloodletter Knight. Following the Khornate daemon came lesser Bloodletter warriors. The deemons on foot were also about two metres tall and well muscled like their leader, but unlike their leader, they weren't as well armoured. Like it would matter, their skin was tough as iron anyway. Their heads had ebony black horns and their teeth were ivory white. In their clawed hands they held viciously shaped so-called Hellblades, jet-black in colour, but with a faint green glow around them. The swords trailed greenish smoke as well. The Juggernaut the Blood knight rode upon was a four-footed beast. Instead of a normal skin, it had an armoured hull, making it look more bulky than it already was. It also had a neck-shield covering its neck, where the collar was situated. The collar made the Juggernaut and its rider immune to psychic powers; McKenzie knew it. The Juggernaut was black, with brass trims and a lot of spikes. The Juggernaut looked over-all like it was mechanical, but McKenzie knew better.

The small daemonic warband attacked the Necrons with a ferocity that McKenzie hadn't thought was physically possible. The Juggernaut opened its maw and closed it around the leg of a Necron warrior with a sickening crunch. The leg didn't come off and the Juggernaut started to shake its head to loosen the Necron from its leg. Instead of panicking, like any mortal would've, the Necron silently raised its Gauss gun and fired of a shot into the eye of the Juggernaut. This didn't stop the Juggernaut in any way; it only left an ugly hole where one of its eyes had been. Now, the Juggernaut raised one of its massive frontal limbs and crushed the Necron's head underneath its enormous weight. McKenzie didn't know what to do. He had fought deemons before, yes, but these deemons seemed in some way so much more powerful than any deemons he'd ever encountered, like the Dark Gods had adapted towards this new threat. He looked around. Charleston was gone! Where was the big oaf when one needed his strength? McGrath was busy crashing through Necrons, but he soon noticed the new threat he too. He quickly put himself beside Rolf, who'd already engaged a daemon. The young man in the commissar's coat was howling in fury as he attacked the daemon, Rolf Yarrick's memories searing through his mind. McKenzie, so gripped by his thoughts, was knocked to the ground by a daemon that had gotten close to him and now it raised its Hellblade, ready to pierce it through McKenzie's heart...



In the Thunderhawk, the Kankers were busy pressing every button they could. That had been Marie's idea, at least. Ed didn't like it; Thunderhawks could be a bit temperamental, he knew so. May keyed one and a hatch opened above Kevin. Ed noticed.

"You'd better get out of the chair, Kevin." Ed said with a worried look on his face.

"Oh yeah, what do you know about that, dork!" Kevin snapped. The chair was quite comfortable, and he'd grown fond to it.

Lee touched another button. This button sends the chair behind the pilot's high into the air with a roar of its rocket engines.

Ed lay on the floor, over Kevin. He'd thrown the other boy out of the chair nanoseconds before the chair flew up and out of the 'Hawk.

"That's why..." Ed panted forth and rolled off Kevin.



The flying seat didn't go unnoticed on the outside. The Imperial servants ignored it, but the Necrons and deemons didn't. This gave McKenzie a chance to boil the brain of the daemon above him and hurtle it back to the Warp, where it belonged. Edd had ducked for cover behind the Thunderhawk when he saw the deemons arrive and thus didn't technically take part anymore in the skirmish. McGrath plunged his power axe through the heads of the remaining Necrons, incinerating their controller chips with the distortion-field around his weapon. Rolf took the change and plunged at the Blood Knight and sent his silver gleaming sword, which

now was largely covered in oil and black daemon blood, through the black heart of the Knight. The thing screamed and retched as the Deamonlayer sword passed through it. Rolf jerked it out and jumped backwards. The Juggernaut got temporarily confused as its master twitched and died upon it. Swinging his sword in a graceful arch, Rolf decapitated the huge daemonic beast. The Juggernaut spasmed and collapsed in a heap, daemon blood spurting from its severed neck and steam oozing out from within its hull. Rolf turned to the other daemons, the warriors and butchers of Khorne, the Bloodletters. In his eyes was the look of hate, in its most pure and raw form. The daemons saw the look. They also saw what the young human was wielding and what it had done to their leader. They looked back at the young man, fear colliding with feelings for revenge and to fulfil their role in Khorne's army; to take skulls and spill blood to His honour.

The daemons settled their dilemma and stormed towards Rolf, howling and baying. Rolf braced himself for the inevitable, but it never came. McKenzie was suddenly at his side and so was McGrath. The two Marines attacked the daemons with a grim determination in their faces, a determination that, Rolf realised, was the look of a true Space Marine, doing his duty.



"What in the name of the Emperor of Mankind are you up to?" Charleston asked the youngsters sourly as he entered the Thunderhawk.

"Nothing!" was Eddy's snapping answer. "Well, at least until Marie here came up with the brilliant idea... "

"Yeah, just make me the scapegoat!" Marie cut off Eddy.

"Doesn't matter who did it." Charleston said, calming down. With a flick of a switch, he closed the hatch above where the seat had been. He pressed another button and a console opened in one of the walls. "I assume you were looking for this."

Charleston gestured towards the console. In there lay lasguns, many lasguns. Ed noted them to be of the standard variant but...

"Why do they have reinforced barrels?" Ed asked as he picked one up and studied it. He picked up a power-clip and slammed it home. He turned a switch on it and heard the pleasant sound of a laser weapon charging up.

"They're hotshots; lasguns that fire a more powerful round, but... it has the downside that it puts stress on the barrel. Therefore the reinforced barrels." Charleston replied. He picked out a bunch of lasguns and loaded them and handed them out to the other kids. "Let's help your friends!"

As Edd crawled into the Thunderhawk, he got a lasgun pressed into his hands and was forced out, into the battle again.



McGrath shoved off a Bloodletter from himself. The thing had tried to bite him. He prepared to meet it with his power axe as a red beam of plasma stabbed into it. The daemon exploded and covered McGrath in filth. He was going to need a bath after this. He turned his head and saw Charleston storming towards the daemons, the nine other kids in tow, lasguns spurting. The distinctive crack-crack from the lasguns was apparent, even though the air was full of inhuman screams. McGrath raised his storm bolter and aimed it towards the clique of daemons, yelling to Rolf to get out of the way. The young man nimbly somersaulted out of line of fire and McGrath pulled the trigger. The storm bolter kicked in his hand for a couple of seconds, until the dull clack came to indicate the sickle-pattern clip was empty. By then, all the daemons were dead.

"Nice job guys!" McGrath said and wiped daemon pus from his brow. He shot Nazz and the Kankers a look. "And girls, of course!" he added with a sheepish smile.

"Let's get the frekk out of here." McKenzie said curtly. McGrath startled at this. He wasn't used to the fact that McKenzie used that sort of language. But sometime has to be the first, he thought. The thirteen boys and girls moved towards the Nighthawk.

As they got in, Charleston seated himself in the pilot's seat and flicked several switches. He adjusted a bit in the seat, and then turned, punched off most of the backrest of the seat, and settled again. The rest had been in the way for his jump pack. The others buckled in on the places that were meant for passengers, McKenzie helping them with the buckles. McGranth didn't sit down like the others. He remained standing. McKenzie put back the lasguns and then settled down in the seat meant for the Navigator.

"Know what Edward?" Charleston said with a smirk to McKenzie.

"This Thunderhawk has a Warp drive? I know." McKenzie replied after both reading Charleston's thoughts and seeing the new panel.

"It's no fun playing guessing games with you..." Charleston replied sourly and turned back to his controls.

"I hate them, Ed, they're too easy." McKenzie replied absently as he strapped himself in.

Charleston pulled the control stick towards him and the Thunderhawk rose. It hovered in the air for a while, and then the landing gears retracted into its hull. He keyed a couple of buttons and sent a prayer to the God-Emperor that the automatics of Hades Hive still worked. His authorisation code was received by a database somewhere in the hive, a new signal was sent down to their level and the star port doors opened before them. Charleston pressed the thrusters to maximum and the Nighthawk sped out of Hades Hive. The kids looked out of the portholes beside them and saw what Armageddon was. Sand, sand, sand and even more sand. Kevin reeled backwards as he saw something huge roll under the sand dunes. McGranth had seen what Kevin had seen over his shoulder.

"Sand cobra," McGranth said. "Big carnivorous snakes. Can swallow a man whole. Be glad we're not down there."

Kevin just swallowed. They went higher and higher up into the air. They passed a greenish-black river. The problem with the colour was that it looked like the green was snot and the black oil.

"Euminide River." McGranth said explaining to Kevin. He had no idea why he did this. The child awoke such bad memories to him. The Nighthawk passed through the sulphur yellow clouds of Armageddon and the sight of the ground of Armageddon was forever lost to Kevin. He felt the pull as Charleston witted the propulsion system from atmospheric to interstellar. He also wondered why McGranth didn't start floating. He asked why.

"Electromagnetic boots." McGranth said and showed Kevin one of his boots. There were ridges in it, like any ordinary boot, but nothing that was strange overall with, except for the fact that they were made out of adamantium. McGranth put down his foot again, and as if to demonstrate, pulled out his power axe and let go of it. It drifted in the air. McGranth took it again and fastened it at his belt. He'd made his point.

At the front, McKenzie was discussing with Charleston.

"What do mean 'low on fuel'?" McKenzie asked, leaning as much forward as the seatbelt would allow.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," Charleston replied. "I'll have to refuel if we're going to make any longer trips. Now, where are we going?"

McKenzie considered this for a while. "Ichar... our home. There the kids can get armour."

"I know what you're thinking, but what about the girls... I mean, there weren't any female Space Marines as you know, and our armour..."

"I know what you mean commander." McKenzie replied softly. "It's just... I long for home."

"So do I." Charleston replied.

"Good." McKenzie said and patted his friend's shoulder. "Take us to the Warp-gate then, Commander Charleston."

"Roger that, Master Lexicanum. But, I'll need a Navigator."

"I'll take care of that... " McKenzie said and leaned backwards. He closed his eyes, and concentrated. He'd never done this before, and hoped it would work. With his third, mental eye, he saw the swirling energies and eddies of the Warp. The tricky part wasn't to go right and avoid being lost. The tricky part was to stave off deamons.

Charleston shut off the engines as they approached the Warp-gate. The colours hurt his eye and he hoped McKenzie knew what he was doing. Charleston felt the push as the Nighthawk was sucked into the Warp. He put on the engines again, but just to such speed that he could navigate.

Four hours later, the Nighthawk came out of the Warp outside the Hive-world Ichar. Charleston took over the navigation again and aimed it towards the northern parts of Ichar. As the retros of the Nighthawk flashed and broke their downfall, he felt a sudden rush of joy over him. He was home!

