

Soldier

Death Korps of Krieg - III

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DEATH KORPS: SOLDIER

by Richard Marsden

I

The First Army

The summers of Jendra IV were generally warm, but this particular season had brought about a stifling heat. The sun shone bright and hot in the noon-day sky and not a cloud decorated the azure horizon to offer shade to the Men of Krieg.

Despite the discomfort of the day, ranks of soldiers stood at attention in parade formation upon the slab of the starport awaiting their distinguished guest and future commander. The men wore charcoal uniforms and gray, shell-shaped helmets upon their heads, decorated with a ceremonial point. Like ranks of spears, the spikes glittered in the sun. In steady and silent rows the men stood, while a large banner, depicting a crowned skull and the number 76 fluttered in the wind making whip-crack sounds.

The Aquila lander lazily hovered over the soldiers then set down upon the slab, sending out a circular blast of heated air and dust into the gathered men. The soldiers did not flinch. When the craft had fully touched down a gilded ramp extended and a large, cherub decorated door opened to reveal a stream of occupants.

Field-Marshal Hartwin von Reiniger had worn his attire with some discomfort. There had not been a Field-Marshal for an army of Krieg since the civil war, centuries past. The uniform was a brilliant shade of gray, with a high collar and a golden Aquila at the throat. A host of medals, many of which he never remembered earning, decorated his chest, while his flared pants and riding boots completed the ceremonial outfit. His aide clutched his iron gray storm-coat and cap and stood dutifully at the ready. In short, von Reiniger was as ill prepared as one could be for Jendras heat and sun. But the traditions of Krieg had to be honored.

An officer bearing the rank of Major stepped forth from the arrayed ranks of soldiers and offered a crisp salute and a click of the heels.

He spoke loudly, so that his voice could be heard by everyone in attendance, The 76th Regiment welcomes you Field-Marshal! Grosse-Kapitän von Gotslieb is in the field and has appointed me to keep the city of Kynder secure. He regrets not being here. Will you accept the sacred duty of his command?

Field-Marshal. The rank still felt as uncomfortable as his ceremonial attire. An army of Krieg had not marched in so long, and the weight of potential success and possible failure beat down as surely as Jendra IV's sun. Von Reininger returned the Major's salute and boomed out his scripted reply.

Major, I have brought with me three regiments of Krieg and accept your regiment. Sub-Sector Lord Trajean, on behalf of Terra, and the Kaiserina has named us the First Army of Krieg. With their blessing, redemption begins in earnest!

The soldiers were well trained, but they gasped and shot glances to one another none the less. The Field-Marshal was not surprised; his statement was full of news that would shock, and he hoped, ultimately inspire the Men of Krieg.

With the ceremony ended, the Major stepped back and von Reininger glanced to his aide. Get these men into sensible uniforms, throw that blasted coat away for now, and I want every Grosse-Kapitän, minus Gotslieb, in my command tent within the hour. Oh, and build me a command tent while you're at it.

The aide clicked his heels and without blanching said, Yes, Field-Marshal.

Field-Marshal. It was going to take time to get used to that title.

Within the hour Hartwin von Reiniger found himself in a sturdy chair underneath the canvas of a large tent complete with tables, maps, portable coginators and voxes, as he so wished. He had cleared everyone out of the tent except for his dutiful aide, the assembled commanders of his army, and one other notable exception.

Hartwin began, Time for proper introductions. We are all of noble birth here, and so at least we wont have to worry about a confused upstart peasant in our midst, von Reiniger said lightly, offering a smile to his fellow blue-bloods.

Pleasant laughter ensued and the Field-Marshal continued, You know me. I hardly know any of you, and you all are no doubt curious about one another. Some tension drained from the collection of officers, but von Reiniger could see them eyeing his 'special' guest warily.

Taking the cue, a short Grosse- Kapitän who smelled of lho sticks spoke up, Von Maur, 708th Death Korps Regiment. Ive brought much the same as the 76th. Infantry, some tanks, and other siege equipment. I completed my refit at Krieg, barely.

Von Schild, 11th Armored Company. Its taking time to get the big boats to send all my men down, but I will be operational shortly, said the youngest of the officers in a quiet voice. Not typical of the usually raucous behavior of tank commanders.

Von Saunder, 52nd Jäger Regiment, said a wiry looking officer. I have my light infantry and cavalry.

The Field-Marshals eyes lit up, Horse?

Of course.

Excellent. Von Gotslieb of the 76th, as you know, has been here on Jendra IV for some time. First he was chasing eldar, next, keeping the city Kynder safe from orks. Hes currently in the field driving the green tide back. But hell need help. His regiment didnt fully rest and refit back on Krieg and-

His guest sniffed.

Von Reiniger blushed and put a hand to his chest, My manners! My apologies. Gentlemen, this is Marena von Adler, liaison and might I add, cousin to the Kaiserina.

The assembled men all quickly rose to their feet and dipped their heads to the petite woman clad in simple gray attire. The blonde young woman smiled faintly and with a pale hand bid the men to sit.

She spoke in a cool and cultured voice, It is not usual for the Planetary Governess to appoint a liaison, I know. However, Krieg has not had an army unto itself in some time. She wants everything to proceed smoothly. This is Kriegs chance. Perhaps the only one it will ever get.

The squat von Maur bobbed his head, Begging your pardon my lady, about that

Yes?

Kaiserina?

The blonde woman smiled and her eyes narrowed, Yes. By a stroke of good fortune, old Adler died, just as the news came that Krieg was to have its own army under its own command. His daughter has not married, and she is the eldest, and so now she is the Planetary Governess and your Kaiserina.

Maur nodded a bit, dumbfounded at the news. He bobbed his head again to the member of the royal family as he spoke, Sad that old Adler died. How did it happen if I may ask?

Marena von Adler beamed a smile, I told you, Kapitän, a stroke of good luck. I meant that. He had a stroke.

Field-Marshal Reiniger cleared his throat, Yes, well. Marena von Adler will just be observing us if you will. Now, back to the situation at hand and what to do about it. Lets do this quick. Good news. We own the skies and orbit. The Ork Rok has been destroyed. The 76th beat back the initial ork assault and is going on the offensive. I plan to capitalize on that and secure the continent. Reiniger eyed his assembled commanders a moment then sighed, Bad news. Were on a terribly hot planet. Not much rain and mud for our boys to play in Im afraid. The PDF are useless, the locals dont much like us, and ninety percent of the planet is

still infested with orks. Oh, and then there are the eldar.

What about them? von Saunder asked, his brow raising.

We cant find them.

Typical.

II

The Advance

Jagg was drunk. He had never been drunk before and he wasnt quite sure if he liked the sensation or not. Thus far the benefits had outweighed the negatives. His back didnt hurt as much and he found himself saying all manner of things to Section Four that he otherwise would not have, often using endearing terms. On the other hand, he felt like he was continually spinning and had already thrown up once. But a celebration such as this was rare indeed, he had been told, and should be savored.

Sergeant Taubover looked around the dimly lit tent and raised up a sloshing bottle of clear liquid. He waved his free hand and barked out, Silence! A toast.

Toast! the men of Section Four cried.

Taubover wobbled, Silence damn you. A toast. To the children who are children no more. To the boys who are now soldiers. To Jagg, Raous and Callum. You are one of us. Well, on the way at least, ha!

Silence greeted Taubover and he shook his head and glared at the old-timers of his section; Grieg the vox-man, Lufsen the morose medicus, and Sheer, who operated Mr. Heavy.

Well?

Jagg smiled and stood up from where he had apparently fallen. Not that he could remember falling in the first place. Shergaunt! I amz the drunk. But I know that, that, that, that, you have already made that toast. First one.

Taubover belched, Did I? Ah! Did I toast you for saving those civilians against orders, even though it meant twenty lashes, courtesy Commissar Razin?

Yesh, Jagg said and fell back down.

Did I toast the First Army of Krieg?

The men of Section Four mumbled and nodded in the affirmative as they lounged about their hastily erected tent, each man clinging to a bottle of potent stuff acquired by Sergeant Taubover from undisclosed sources. Though Lufsen claimed the stuff smelled suspiciously medicinal. While everyone had a drink or two since coming to Jendra, this was a true booze-up. It didnt matter if they were getting drunk on medical supplies.

Ah! Did I toast the Kaiserina? A woman ruling the Men of Krieg. What progressive times these are. May she not turn this into a blunder, and may the man she made Field-Marshal not get us killed before we have Kriegs redemption!

That, was a new toast, and so the men drank and celebrated and drank some more. It was after the days march and late in the evening. The tent was barely lit and the section had endeavored to keep their carousing clandestine. However, Jagg noticed that they were getting awfully loud despite many a shh from one another. Sure enough the noise drew unwanted attention.

Leutnant von Zietdel entered the tent. Instantly everyone came to attention, though Jagg needed Callum on one side and Kellen Raous on the other to help him stay standing.

First Platoons commanding officer was a small man with a thin moustache and continually distant look in his eyes. He was a strange sort, but Jagg had avoided summary execution at the Commissars hands, thanks to his good word. That had not spared Jaggs back later from being flayed open by the same Commissar, but he couldnt fault von Zietdel for it. He considered him a decent, if odd, commanding officer.

Celebrations, Sergeant?

The sergeant nodded, Sir! Celebrating the army, the additions to our section,

Jaggs bit with the civilians, and the Kaiserina.

Honest to a fault, Sergeant Taubover. Drinking while at war is however one of those annoying, shoot you, offenses if you were to ask Commissar Razin. Von Zietdel wandered to Taubovers side and took the bottle from him, sniffing at it once. He glanced over at Jagg and said, Your back isnt paining you too much I trust? Dear, oh dear, your quite the hero of the moment Trooper Jagg. Even we officers have heard the tale. Razin orders you to shoot civilians, you misplace them. Youre lucky he didnt execute you on the spot. I think hes fond of you.

Jagg doubted it. He did not respond to his Leutnant either. For one, he knew he was so drunk that there was a good chance he might throw up again. He also had just enough sense to know that if he did say anything, he might tell the truth.

The section believed he had let the civilians escape because of some sense of compassion. Contrary to popular belief, the Men of Krieg were not butchers and heartless. They were hard men, from a hard planet, but ultimately were defenders of humanity, not its destroyers. If it could be helped. Jagg however, did not let the civilians flee because of some sympathy he felt towards them. Not at all.

Earlier that same day he had flung a grenade, poorly at that. It had nearly killed the entire section, and only by the grace of the Emperor himself, had his comrades been lightly wounded and not outright killed. That mistake however had made him a liability to the section and Sergeant Taubover made it quite clear to the unit that Jagg was not worth protecting. He would be on his own, and thus a dead man. The freeing of the civilians had cost Jagg twenty strikes on the Repenting Rack, but more importantly had won him back the protection a man needed from his section. A man didnt survive alone in war.

The men of his section, even his friends who had graduated from Krieg, Raous and Callum, didnt know the truth. It was a selfish desire for safety, and not compassion which drove Jagg to his now famous act of mercy.

Von Zietdel handed the bottle of liquor back to Taubover and said, Im not happy when my platoon gets drunk. So see to it you are sober by morning and that those bottles are finished off. I take it; tonights fun is a unique event? Conducted now for the sake of the sections morale and because weve had no sign of the

orks?

Yes, sir. To all that, sir, Taubover replied and glanced to Lufsen, You have those pills handy like I told you stop-gap?

Lufsen blinked his bleary eyes and nodded. Well be puking all night and fit by morning, Sergeant.

Right then. Good eve, Sergeant. The Leutnant smiled patiently then left the tent.

Hes a tolerant fellow, Callum said and sat on the tent floor heavily.

When its right. He knows weve been moving hard and fast, and the orks are on the run. Its relatively safe, and so he lets it happen. If he were on us like a commissar day after day, night after night, without end, well Taubover trailed off.

Lufsen however finished the statement as he began to hand out small white pills, Hed get a request.

Jagg took the small, pale pill from Lufsens hand and swallowed it. With a confused look he asked, A request?

Yeah, when an officer gets shot by his own men, its called a request. A request; to go off and die, Sheer said. He laughed as Jaggs eyes widened.

Sheer beamed a smile. Oh dont worry. It rarely happens, Jagg. We have good officers. They know when to let Commissar Razin have at us, and when to let us relax a- Sheer was cut off as he turned as pale as the pill Lufsen had given him. The drug had taken effect, not only on him, but on all of them.

With drunken giggles, the men of Section Four stormed out of their tent and vomited up a collective pile well into the night.

Jagg was unsure if he enjoyed getting drunk like a Man of Krieg or not. It consisted of; hard drinking, wild tales and laughter, dizziness, then painful vomiting for hours, followed by voracious guzzling of water. Come morning Jagg smelled awful, but was none the worse for wear, feeling as if he had not gotten enough sleep, which was true.

Lufsen had said without the pills they would have been sick in the morning, caught by Commissar Razin by the afternoon, and shot dead by night.

The dawn's rays were just touching the surface of Jendra IV. The planet was an agricultural world sporting only a handful of urban areas and endless waist high grass. There were shallow oceans as well that Jagg had yet to see. It was not the typical locale for the Death Korps. Jagg had been trained to wear heavy gear and fight in toxic environments. Jendra IV was neither toxic, nor particularly suited to heavy gear.

On Jendra IV, Jagg wore his tunic rolled up at the sleeves while his rebreather mask, storm-coat, rubber boots and gloves were stored away somewhere with the Regimental Quartermaster. It was summer on Jendra and the Death Korps had adapted to the warm sunny weather by travelling light. They even painted their normally iron gray vehicles a light tan, marked with browns and yellows, for camouflage.

The camp was a confused mass of tents, military transports and civilian haulers that had been pressed into service to meet the needs of the 76th Regiment. For days they had been advancing, acting like a spear to thrust into the heart of the orks; who had nearly claimed the world a few weeks ago.

Miles behind Jagg, the city of Kynder, with its starport, was still facilitating the assembly of three Death Korps regiments who would soon be assisting the 76th in their offensive. Word was that even more Men from Krieg were on the way.

Krieg had an actual army, under its own command on Jendra IV, a thing not seen since Krieg's bloody and atomic civil war. Since the war the subterranean Men of Krieg had been seeking redemption for a world almost lost to the enemy, saved only by self-inflicted destructive fire. It was a harsh lesson of what happened in the face of treachery, and how far one had to go to achieve victory. Better a

world die than be lost to the foe. They were renowned across the galaxy by less than pleasant adjectives. So be it, Jagg thought.

He never knew why Kriegs regiments were sent individually across the Imperium of Man, and not as an army. He did know however, that there was profound excitement and pride in the creation of the First Army, under Kriegs own, Field-Marshal Reiniger. Jagg shared in this general excitement, even though he wasn't fully aware as to why, or what was so profound about it. The older soldiers implied that Krieg often found himself attached to spineless generals and found themselves fighting alongside inferior men. This would no longer be the case. The war would be fought and directed by Men of Krieg alone.

Section Four were soon busily breaking down their tent and storing it in an impressed civilian hauler. Orders came down that the soldiers of the regiment would be marching on foot, while the vehicles were headed to a makeshift depot a few miles behind the lines for refit and repair. If possible the haulers would meet them at the end of the day so they could set up tents and get warm food and maybe showers. Jagg had learned quickly that only seeing was believing, and he didn't count on any of these maybes being kept.

Swift advances were dramatic and exciting, but Jagg had also learned that they wore the vehicles down quickly. Kriegs war machines were designed for sieges. Hard defense or quick breakthroughs were their specialty, not grandiose leaps into enemy territory. To the tank commanders credit, they did all in their power to keep up a swift momentum, but broken-down vehicles were becoming a common sight.

Already Jagg had fought numerous times in towns and grassy fields against the barbarian ork. Lately, the alien menace had been falling back under pressure from the 76th. That in itself was strange.

Jagg was still new to the Death Korps, and he had only seen, let alone fought, orks for a handful of weeks. The aliens were massive, stubborn creatures that were eager to kill and destroy at the slightest chance. Jagg had to admit however, that the greenskins were brave. They had attacked Death Korps trench lines at Kynder repeatedly, no matter the cost.

Now that the orks were on the run, Jagg found it unsettling. Since when did orks

run? It was not typical of the creatures that Jagg has seen with his own eyes run headlong, without breaking stride, into heavy stubber fire.

Time to go! In column. Come on, Trooper Jagg! Quit your day dreaming, Sergeant Taubover yelled.

The foot soldiers of the regiment were forming a column of men on an ill-used road meant for the occasional grain hauler. Now the road would be trampled by the boots of a thousand plus men. On the flanks of the column tan colored Chimera transport tanks trundled along, keeping a watchful eye on the men.

Jagg placed himself with his section, amongst the mass of men, and at the order to march began to shuffle forward. Everyone knew what Jendras sun was like, and skin-burns were becoming common amongst the men who normally never fought with unbuttoned tunics and rolled up sleeves. Jagg, and everyone around him placed their shell-shaped helmets atop their heads and shifted the brim to shadow as much of the face as possible. The helmet was heavy and made his bald head sweat, but it was far better than a kiss from Jendras sun on the scalp. Still, he sorely wished they had been issued fabric caps, or at the very least allowed to wear bandannas.

The column of men was noisy as it marched. Boots trampled the road, and the sound of hardened soles on gravel mixed with the clangs of canteens, shifting of kit bags, and the quiet banter of men. Litter was another side effect. No one wanted to be burdened with the slightest of weight, and so anything used up, was discarded. Every march left a trail of cans shimmering in the sunlight, broken straps, boot laces, and other refuse on the road.

For days they had been doing this. Training on Krieg had prepared Jagg as a conscript for long marches, but dealing with the sun and heat was another matter. The heat led to humid waves rising up off the golden grass that swayed in on all sides. The grass endlessly stretched out in all directions making his eyes marvel at the sheer expanse.

Jagg sweated, and the stench of unwashed men became profound in the close confines of the column. Worse was the biting insects that seemed drawn to the scent of sweat. They were little black things, with buzzing wings, and sharp mandibles meant for chewing grain. Unfortunately those same mandibles were

equally adept at chewing on the occasional Death Korpsmen.

The scenery, he imagined, was pretty enough. The world sported a blue sky, a few rolling hills, and so much uniform grass as to entrance the eye. It could be unnerving at times. It was a far cry from the pale man-made light and subterranean tunnels of his homeworld.

He had learned firsthand that the orks were a destructive race; not only to their foes but to the land they conquered as well. Where they went the creatures burned away the grass and flung up piles of junk, strange alien totems, and steaming piles of dung. There was no sign of any of that now. While Jendras engineered plant life recovered at phenomenal rates, explaining the lack of scorch marks, the utter lack of the xenos presence seemed suspicious. It was more un-orky behavior to worry about. Why were the beasts in such a hurry to get away?

Where are they? Jagg voiced his concern aloud.

No kidding. No smoke on the horizon, no flyers in the air. This place looks deserted. Whens the last time we saw action? Raous asked from behind Jagg.

Callum responded from behind Raous, Last scuffle was Jaggs stunt. Days ago at that town, whats it called? He shrugged and added, Whens the last time we hitched a ride? Im tired of walking.

Kellen Raous smiled and said, Me too! He leapt atop Callums back, causing the ammo bearer to cry out and stumble.

Get off him Raous. Youre a married man, Taubover said dryly from the head of the section as it marched in column. Nearby soldiers from other sections laughed and pointed. And stop looking so pretty with those green eyes and that flat nose of yours Callum. Look less like a girl will you? So no one else gets confused.

Raous hopped off and more laughter rippled along the column. Jueve-like humor pleased the men the most Jagg noticed. But the jokes of being married made him think of his wife back on Krieg. Had she given birth yet? How long had it been since he had last seen her? It felt like only weeks, but transit between Krieg and Jendra IV in the immaterium meant that time was a hard thing to measure. He

had only a handful of ration cards, from when reinforcements arrived, to judge. It was how he found out she was pregnant in the first place, and hadn't received a ration card since. Would it be a boy? A girl? Jagg tried to focus on Klaras face in his mind's eye. It was harder each day to remember a woman he had only known for three days. But when he thought hard, her brown eyes, dark hair, cut short, and curves, began to coalesce in his thoughts.

A motor shuddered and then popped. Black acrid smoke rose from a Chimera transport tank and it lurched to a halt, kicking up a flurry of shredded grass. It had been driving through the grass fields alongside the road, and its tracks wound all the way back to the encampment of the night before. The cupola opened and a black clad man, with a white cap stop his head, exited the armored personnel carrier followed by the rest of the crew. Normally the vehicles were used to rush the Men of Krieg into combat, but during their long marches they doubled as flank guards for the column. No one wanted to roast inside the things anyways lest the journey was quick and the officers had forbidden sitting on their hulls Valhallan-style.

There goes another one, Lufsen sighed.

The sight was a common one. The vehicles wore down. Treads fell off, or became gummed up with grass. Sometimes, as in the current case, the motor just broke and the machine-spirit coughed out its displeasure.

The column of men continued snaking past the broken-down Chimera, while its crew began to open up hatches and attempt repairs. A few of the more playful soldiers made snide comments. There was a pleasant rivalry between the foot-sloggers and tread-heads.

Taubovers microbead squawked and he placed it to his ear. The sergeant sighed and said, Looks like its our turn to play guard duty. I need two volunteers. Jagg, Raous. You two are troopers, and thus expendable. I mean that in the nicest way possible and I am so glad that you volunteered.

Jagg groaned. A section normally contained ten men consisting of several troopers and specialists. Section Four hadnt fully refitted back on Krieg when Jagg, Kellen Raous, and Callum joined it. With their joining, the section had seven men and was now down to six. Klyst had died in the defense of Kynder. Of the six, everyone but Jagg and Kellen had a specialist job.

Come on, gun-bunnies. Guard the tread-heads and their toy, and once its fixed youll get a nice hot ride back to camp. Taubover jerked his head indicating them to step out of file.

What if they dont fix it? Jagg asked as he and Kellen Raous stepped out and onto the side of the road. Waist high grass instantly swayed about them and a small flurry of obsidian colored insects buzzed into the sky.

Taüber looked over his shoulder as the men kept marching past and smiled. Then youll be the last to camp. Dont get killed by the sentries.

Kellen Raous stretched and bent over to rub his legs. Men continued filing on past and the youth yawned, Im going to sleep. Wake me in an hour, or if we get shot at. Though he trailed off, stood up, and spread his hands wide indicating the great fields of grass, and the lack of orks.

Jagg spat and shifted his helmet upon his head. While marching, the pain in his legs, and on his still recovering back, faded into a bland ache. Now that he had stopped moving it felt as if acid was sloshing up and down his calves, and his back burned from the marks of the electric whip. Resigned to his discomfort, he and Kellen Raous, made their way over to the broken-down Chimera, while the rest of the regiment marched away. More than a few men offered Jagg and Kellen amusing hand gestures.

The tanks commander had his black tunic unbuttoned and his white, smudged cap turned on backwards. He was squatting by two crewmen who were coated in oil stains and working away at an open hatch. Jagg didnt know a thing about machinery other than a few simple prayers that revolved around keeping his lasgun working.

Here to guard you, sir, Raous reported to the tanks commander.

The leutenant didnt even bother turning around and waved his hand dismissively, I want one of you up top, keeping an eye out.

Think there are orks around? Jagg asked.

The leutenant again didnt turn around and instead leaned into the open hatch and fidgeted with mechanical parts, he replied, and his voice echoed from within the hatch, Orks? No. Im thinking we cant fix this, and already called in a pickup. My crew and I need a new tank.

Raous shrugged and Jagg un-slugged his lasgun from his shoulder. With a grunt, and

sparks of pain in his legs, he climbed atop the tan-hued tank and settled against the turret. He looked about at the golden grass, then up at Jendras merciless sun. He heard Raous settling down in the shade of the tank and could hear the lieutenant and his crew working away in a vain attempt to revive the things machine-spirit.

An hour passed and Jagg cursed his luck. Just when he was about to switch places with Raous and get some rest, he saw a hauler making its way up the road from the direction of the depot.

Haulers here, sir, Jagg reported.

The lieutenant and his crew had done the same as Raous, and lazily they stood up from their shady respite and stretched. Raous un-slung his weapon to look more proper and he wandered off a few paces to go guard something.

The requisitioned civilian hauler sped down the road then veered off into the grass, flattening the reeds as it came to a jarring stop. The hauler was small, with an open cargo bay in the back. It would fit the lieutenant and his two crewmen just right.

Jagg hopped down off what he assumed was about to be an abandoned Chimera. As he did so he thought he saw movement by the hauler. A quick look revealed a bored civilian driver, swaying grass, and nothing else.

Sir? What do you want us to do? Jagg asked the Chimeras commander as he and his crew climbed into the back of the hauler.

The lieutenant adjusted his white cap and buttoned his tunic. He glanced up in a distracted manner and said, A towing hauler will be along when it can. Tank crews are valuable and we need to get back to the depot. Do any of you foot-sloggers know how to drive a tank? Fix one?

Silence greeted the officer.

Thought not. Hold here till the tow-hauler comes then walk back to your camp. If the hauler doesnt show up, you have my permission to return to your camp at sunset. Itll be pleasant walk at night, Im sure.

Jagg didnt say anything but he was sure his expression conveyed his sentiments quite nicely. The leutnant laughed and tapped the side of the hauler. With a grinding of gears it started up and headed back the way it had come. Jagg had never even learned the leutnants name nor that of his crew.

Nice guy, Kellen Raous said offhandedly as the hauler sped away.

Hope his hauler flips over in a ditch. Im getting some sleep, Can you keep an eye out? Jagg asked and moved over towards the shade of the abandoned armored personnel carrier.

Yep. Great fun isnt it?

Jagg tilted his head in confusion at Kellen Raous.

Being in the First Army! All this adventure were having right now! Raous laughed and hopped atop the tank, lying by the turret so as to keep a watch for the towing vehicle.

Some advance. Were stuck guarding a tank that doesnt work and waiting for a tow hauler that isnt coming, Jagg sighed and settled down for some much needed sleep.

III

Amongst the Common Men

Field-Marshal Hartwin von Reiniger smiled as he gripped tightly to the leather reins of his horse. It was a fine animal, with strong flanks, and an eager disposition. Von Saunder of the 52nd was quite the gentlemen to loan he and his companions such fine steeds. Every nobleman born on Krieg knew how to ride. The tradition dated back to well before Kriegs civil war, and after the atomic cleansing, the practice remained. That in of itself was a miracle. Radioactive wastelands and subterranean hives didnt exactly seem like horse-country.

Granted, the breeding of horses on Krieg was considered by any foreigner as strange. Kriegs stables were located in the center, wealthy portion of the subterranean hives. Entire levels of replicated pastures and obstacle courses were dedicated to the steeds. A noblemans horse on Krieg would have more land

dedicated to it than a hundred commoners would. It was amongst the replicated pastures that the nobility learned their birthright, the practice of riding. Select soldiers, the Death Riders, used steeds as well. They did not get the benefit of the manmade pastures and instead rode on the solid portions of the Rad, Kriegs surface, where the animals needed to be either augmented or otherwise protected from the hostile environment.

Hartwin could see impression lines upon his own horses head, a clear sign that the animal wore a rebreather mask frequently and was trained somewhere on Kriegs irradiated and lifeless surface. He would have preferred a pasture-raised animal, but even Field-Marshals didnt always get what they wanted.

He looked over his shoulder at his aide, who rode with some unease, and Marena von Adler, who handled a horse with a skill that Hartwin had to admit was superior to his own. She did not so much ride the horse, as simply guide it with easy movements of the reins and slight kicks with her heels. She wore a gray divided dress, specifically for riding, and offered Hartwin a small smile. She had been thrilled at the idea of a daring ride to the front. She had been fine company for the past few weeks while in transit. A cultured woman, who despite her frail gender, handled military life with aplomb.

Riding amongst his peers did have a taste of his youth to it. How long had it been since he had ridden in the pastures of the center levels?

The sun was starting to sink low into the horizon and red light spilled out across the beautiful landscape of swaying golden grass. The heat of the day had started to recede and with the wind in his face, Hartwin had to remind himself that he was in fact in a warzone, on his way to the very front lines. His aide was more verbose about the matter.

Field-Marshal, with all due respect, I must say, again, that this is unorthodox. Dangerous I might add. We are terribly exposed. If you were to fall the aide trailed off.

Do you think von Reiningers riding skills have grown soft with age my good man? Marena said with a small smile touching her pale features once again.

The aide instantly blanched, No, my lady! I dont mean if he were to fall. Rather,

if we were accosted. We really should have a more fitting escort.

You've mentioned it, von Gaul. But I think a bit of dash at the front lines is needed. A Field-Marshal needs to be comfortable amongst his men! What a sight eh? Just the three of us, coated in dust, riding in to greet them! Hartwin laughed and shook his head at his nervous aide. Von Gaul was a good lad, but he didn't know when to let his master be a little irresponsible. War was as much about morale as lasguns and tanks, and the sight of a hero on horseback was just what the weary men of the 76th would take to.

The Kaiserinas liaison nodded. I agree, Field-Marshal. Speaking of the men, I believe I see some. Is that the 76th? she asked, and slowed her horse to an easy canter by gently pulling upon the reins.

He looked ahead. Off to the side of the road a Chimera transport tank was nestled amongst the waist high grass. A pair of soldiers, in tunics rolled up at the sleeves, were standing, slipping on their helmets and picking up their lasguns. Hartwin raised a hand in greeting and directed his small party towards the pair. Pickets? Von Gotsliebs camp was surely not so close.

The horse whickered gently and the Field-Marshal pulled on the reins as it trotted up to the Chimera. A quick inspection revealed that the vehicle was disabled. Its hatches were open, there was no sign of its crew, and the two unfortunates standing next to it must have been selected for guard duty. It was not unusual for the machines of the Imperial Guard to suffer such, nor unusual to post guard on the vehicle to prevent locals from looting or some animals making a nest of it.

The two men saluted and stared wide-eyed at their Field-Marshal. One was short and had a smile on his lips and a glimmer of wonder in his eyes. He had the look of a man ready to fight for Krieg and please his officers. Hartwin instantly liked the fellow.

The other, was typical common trash that wound up in the Death Korps. He had narrowed eyes and the look of a man in need of sleep. He smelled of sweat and alcohol even at a distance. Perhaps they both did, but Hartwin was fairly certain it was the narrow-eyed one who had been imbibing the most. The commoner shifted his shoulders frequently, a clear sign that his back was painning him.

Hartwin had been a Grosse-Kapitän for a decade before being promoted to Kriegs High Command. He had ordered the punishment of hundreds of disobedient soldiers, and after their time on the Repenting Rack, they all shifted in place. Just like the soldier before him. Hartwin instantly disliked the fellow.

Good afternoon, troopers. Picked for guard duty I see? You know who I am? Hartwin flashed a smile.

The two soldiers nodded rapidly and then their eyes wandered. Hartwin's brow raised and he smirked. He knew quite well what, or rather, who they were looking at. He wasn't going to bother introducing a member of the royal family to a pair of basic soldiers. They both were doing their duty for Krieg, but that did not make them fit for high society, even in passing.

To regain their attention, Hartwin leaned up in the saddle, Good! How far is Grosse-Kapitän von Gotsliebs camp? I think the 76th needs to see their Field-Marshal in person. I am told your regiment earned much glory and honor in the defense of Kynder. I'd like to thank them.

The smiling soldier pointed down the road and said, The tank broke down about mid-day, sir. Regiment marched on. I gather about five hours or so, on foot, with breaks, sir.

The Field-Marshal nodded and glanced to his nervous aide, Alright, von Gaul, go ahead and microbead the 76th. Let them know we are about two hours out, but I want no ceremony or anything of the kind. I'm half tempted to just ride up unannounced but the sun is about to set. I'd hate to be shot by a nervous sentry.

With a sigh of relief the Field-Marshal's aide adjusted the microbead he wore and began speaking into it.

Well, my good men. I shall leave you to your duty. Perhaps I sh- Hartwin saw the mean-looking soldier suddenly lurch forward. The brute, grabbed Marena von Adler by her dress and pulled her from her horse. She fell into his arms and he in turn fell to the ground, taking her with him. The woman barely had time to give a startled squawk.

Hartwin's eyes bulged and his mind blanked out for a moment. His face turned

red and he reached for his side arm, an ancestral bolt pistol. By the Throne! You scurrilous filth! Ill-

A light pinging noise echoed forth and Hartwin saw a spark leap from the Chimeras armored hull. He blinked in surprise and his threats died upon his lips. They were being shot at!

Down you go, sir! the smiling soldier said and pulled the Field-Marshal off of his steed.

The horses were trained to not be disturbed by the loud noises that accompanied an army, and whoever was shooting at them, was quiet enough that the horses didnt sense any danger. The animals nibbled at the grass, unconcerned that their riders were diving for cover.

His pulse quickened and he looked around rapidly. Beyond the party, and Chimera, he could see nothing through the sea of grass. On the ground, hidden by yellow reeds, Hartwin crawled towards the Chimera alongside the troopers and Marena. A quick glance revealed his aide had dismounted and was speaking rapidly into his microbead as he too low crawled his way over.

Von Gaul, get the 76th to send help. Seems weve found that trouble I was scoffing at moments ago, Hartwin said as he kept crawling. He felt some embarrassment at having insisted at such a foolhardy stunt as travelling to the front by horse, virtually alone. Self-berating could wait though!

On it, sir!

They all managed to crawl to the other side of the Chimera and huddle close to one another. Hartwin saw the soldiers with their lasguns in hand, moving into crouching positions. Their eyes and weapons swept, but low as they were, the grass reeds obscured any foe.

You alright? the narrowed-eyed commoner asked of Marena. The woman was breathing fast and she licked her lips nodding once as the soldier moved closer to her.

Dont talk to her. And do not touch her, Hartwin warned.

Sir? the soldier asked, his narrowed eyes betraying confusion.

That isnt someone you should be talking to, or touching without permission, trooper. What did you see, trooper, that inspired you to such bold acts in the first place?

The soldier licked his lips and jerked his head, Saw a glint of something in the reeds on the other side of the road, sir. I pulled my eyes from the narrowed eyed youth looked over at the woman in question, awaiting a name.

Before Hartwin could silence the soldier for his further impudence the blonde woman spoke.

Marena von Adler. I think, Field-Marshal, he saved my life. Soon as we hit the ground I heard a sound in the air. A whistling. Someone is shooting at us, correct?

The two soldiers shied back from Marena like she was poison. The smiling youth wasnt smiling anymore, though he let out a weak laugh, Jagg, you just touched a royal.

Frick me. I-I- the man named Jagg stuttered and then he stood up, shaking he said, Sorry, my lady. I didnt mean it. Oh, Holy Terra. Oh! Sorry, Field-Marshal sir, I didnt know!

Get down, Jagg! the smiling soldier shouted.

You fool! Hartwin hissed, The sniper is still out there!

As if on cue a whistling sound came forth and a small round skipped atop the Chimera and bounced past Jags helmeted head.

Raous, that guy just got me a death sentence. Come on! Jagg growled and to Hartwins utter astonishment, charged around the Chimera and towards their hidden attacker.

Much more amazing, the soldier named Raous smirked and nodded his head to Hartwin and the von Adler. Sir, my lady, He charged, screaming, For the Emperor! Raous followed his companion towards certain death.

Even more amazing, and much to Hartwins horror, Marena stood up and moved after the pair.

She called out, Wait! You dont have to do this.

Von Gaul finished speaking into his microbead and upon seeing the royal cousin expose herself, he bodily pulled her down to the ground shouting, No, my lady, you mustnt! Sir, von Gaul glanced to his commander and licked his lips, 76th is sending support. Permission to tell the Field-Marshal that his idea of riding about unescorted with himself and a member of the royal family at risk was not only a bad idea but-

Permission granted, von Gaul, but later. Hartwin drew his bolt pistol and leaned up against the hull of the Chimera. If two of his soldiers were going to take on the sniper they were going to need help. Swiftly, he stood and braced his bolt pistol across the chassis of the Chimera. He braced just in time to see trooper Jagg and Raous dive into the reeds on the other side of the road. Hartwins eyebrows rose as he saw a grenade, thrown by one of the troopers, arcing into the field.

The grenade landed amongst the reeds and detonated with a loud, whump. Smoke, bits of grass, and a human arm spun into the air. Silence then descended and a pale cloud from the grenades explosion swirled once before dissipating into Jendras sky.

That got him! Raous shouted and slowly rose to one knee. He then cautiously stood, weapon still at the ready.

He braced again, if there was another sniper, he would take a shot at poor Raous as he stood. That was a pity given the Field-Marshal preferred Raous over the other one, Jagg.

Yes. Remember when the eldar were sniping at us back at Kynder, when we first arrived? replied Jagg.

Raous laughed and started to move further into the field, his weapon at the ready. The Thud Guns! A grenade isnt quite the same, but

But just as effective, Jagg finished. The narrowed-eyed soldier rose and brought

his lasgun up to his shoulder. Steadily he followed his companion into the field. The Chimera's shadow was made long by the setting of the sun, and covered the pair in its embrace.

Raous halted and waved Jagg over. The two troopers stood in an area of the field, now cleared of grass. Raous tilted his helmet back and shot his companion a strange look.

Sir, its safe now. You better come see this, its strange, Jagg said.

Ill go, sir, von Gaul offered and started to rise.

Stay by the von Adler, Hartwin ordered and jogged over to the pair of soldiers. He holstered his bolt pistol and placed his hands upon his hips as he saw what had perplexed the men.

That is strange, trooper Jagg, Hartwin admitted.

In the small circle of destruction were the remains of the sniper. He was human, and missing an arm. His contorted body was riddled with small chunks of metal, which still smoldered. The snipers weapon was an old fashioned, small caliber, bolt action slug thrower, complete with a scope. Not a high powered weapon, but it was accurate enough and quiet. The strangest thing was however, his Death Korps of Krieg uniform.

He looked back to the Chimera and rubbed his jaw, The setting sun and shadow cast by the tank fouled his shots. Otherwise I do believe many of us would be quite dead.

Hes one of ours, sir? Raous asked tilting his head in a confused manner.

Yes. The Field Marshal said bluntly.

He must have made a mistake. Been on patrol and mistook us for someone else. Raous nudged the body with his foot.

No. Hartwin and Jagg said at the same time.

Hartwin glanced at the pair. You two arent to talk about this. As far as you know,

we were shot at, and thats it. You do not know it was a Man of Krieg, and you do not know that I travel in the company of a von Adler. To emphasize the point the Field-Marshal gave each soldier a long stare before adding, Understand?

Yes, sir! they both replied.

Jagg is it? Hartwin asked.

Sir.

Check the body out, around his neck, any tags? Check for ration cards, anything that might make this mans identity known.

Jagg nodded, slung his lasgun over his shoulder and knelt by the corpse. His dirty hands flew over the body with a certain amount of practice and ease that Hartwin found disconcerting. The trooper found nothing, but then flipped the body over. He inspected the inked tag on the back of the neck. Every soldier in the Death Korps bore the eternal marking. A frown crossed Jaggs features as he looked up to his Field-Marshal.

No tags, no cards, and scar tissue on the back of the neck. Hes not from the 76th though, sir. At least, I dont recognize him. Kellen?

The soldier, who he knew as Raous, shook his head, Never seen him before. Never seen a bolt-action that small either.

Jagg stood and gave the body a kick, A five, six, five.

Hartwin cleared his throat, A what?

Sorry, sir. Nothing, sir. Did anyone know you were coming this way, sir? We didnt, Jagg said.

Not that they tell us much, Raous added.

It had been awhile since he had to deal with the banter of common men. Hartwin grunted. Part of him was repulsed by their crudeness and lack of proper seriousness. Part of him missed the brotherly nature soldiers shared with one another. It had been a long time since he had seen it. The High Command of

Krieg was a place of proper rights, rituals, and ceremonies.

The Field-Marshal shook his head. My visit was supposed to be a surprise. To lift morale. Some of the old banter came back to him, Arent you two happier for meeting me?

Oh yes, sir. Quite pleased, sir. Kellen Raous said with a broad smile.

The other frowned ever so slightly and he nodded. Same here, sir. Im truly inspired. Sir, I can see a trail through the reeds. It leads back towards the road that way. Jagg pointed and continued, But we didnt see anyone come up from the road all day, besides you.

Not true, Jagg. Raous said, then he laughed faintly, A hauler came up from the depot, to pick up the Chimeras crew. You saw it first, did you see anyone in it when it arrived?

Hmmm, right. The driver, but I didnt look all that hard. Someone else could have been hitching a ride in the back and I wouldnt have noticed them slipping out. Jagg exhaled a long breath and looked to his commander. What now, sir?

Field-Marshal Hartwin von Reininger rubbed his clean shaven jaw. Someone knew where he was going and had enough forewarning so as to plant an ambush. They must have known he would have stopped to greet the troopers by the abandoned Chimera. It was a perfect place to conduct an assassination. Who was involved though? While the 76th was supposedly unaware of his arrival, the breaking down of a Chimera to act as bait seemed too coincidental. Did someone within the 76th know of his plan to ride unescorted? Or did someone back at Kynder, who knew of his trip, plan a hasty assassination? Was the breaking down of the Chimera just an opportunity taken by whoever sent the sniper? The multitude of questions weighed upon Hartwin.

Sir? Jagg prompted.

Just thinking, trooper. Jagg, you saw the glint of a weapon in the reeds. In your opinion, who was the sniper aiming at? Hartwin asked.

The royal, sir. Im sure of it.

The Field-Marshal let out a long breath, That, my boys, complicates things.
Cover this body up best you can.

Two working Chimera armored personnel carriers raced to the scene from the direction of Kapitän von Gotsliebs camp. With precision they boxed in the area and soldiers stormed out of the exit ramps in a cacophony of pounding boots.

Von Gaul and the royal were by the abandoned Chimera, while the Field-Marshal had led the two troopers to the road to speak in private.

There was little time to plan. He had a war to worry about, and the complication of an unknown agent, or agents, trying to assassinate the von Adler didnt help things. He needed loyal men, and as far as he was concerned he had three he could absolutely trust on immediate hand. Von Gaul, the good natured trooper Kellen Raous, and the one Hartwin didnt like all that much, Jagg. Two of them were expendable.

Listen up you two. I borrowed these horses from Kapitän von Saunder and hell want them returned. Ride back- Hartwin stopped himself. Lead the horses back to Kynder and find von Saunder. I passed by the depot that hauler you spoke of came from. Itll be dark by the time you get there, and a good excuse to camp the night.

Sir? Jagg asked shifting uncomfortably in place. It seemed as if his back was causing him pain again.

I said listen! Once there, find the driver of the hauler and those tread-heads. First, find out if the driver gave anyone a ride, say our sniper? Then, figure out if the Chimeras machine-spirit was simply lacking proper maintenance, or if it breaking down was an act of murderous convenience. Report your findings to von Saunder the next day at Kynder. Hell be expecting you, Ill see to that.

The two looked stunned. The mission was obviously not one either had been expecting nor had they been trained for. Soldiers from the freshly arrived tanks were forming a perimeter and a Major with a detail of men was gathering up the von Adler Hartwins aide. There wasnt much time to talk in private.

Sir, not to, well- I,

Out with it, trooper Jagg.

You just said you borrowed the horses from Kapitän von Saunder. Forgive me sir, but that means he had an idea of where you were going and how long it would take to get you there if he knows his horses. Jagg kicked uneasily at the gravel road.

The Field-Marshal peered at Jagg. He looked like one of the more criminal elements in the Death Korps, but he had a sharp mind.

He nodded. I know. I have a plan for that. Ill contact you through von Saunder or through men I brought with me back at Kynder. The soldiers were closing all around them, there was no more time to speak in private, and Hartwin dare not say anything further to ears that might be disloyal.

Major! We were fired at, not sure by whom, but its time we leave. Not much daylight at all left. These two troopers will take the horses back to Kynder, but the primary mission is to get myself and my two companions to the safety of your regiment. Think you can accomplish that for your Field-Marshal? Hartwin flashed his most charismatic smile, a smile that had helped him win over troops and disarm rival nobles in High Command.

To his relief the Major puffed his chest out to say, Yes, my Field-Marshal! Come with me, we shall see you safe to my Kapitän. As an afterthought the Major looked to Jagg and Kellen Raous. You two heard the Field-Marshal! Get those horses back to Kynder! Go!

The Field-Marshal was hustled into the back of one of the waiting Chimera tanks. As the exit ramp started to close he saw in the dying of the day, the forms of trooper Raous and Jagg standing dumbfounded. Raous saluted with a broad smile, Jagg narrowed his eyes. The Field-Marshal couldnt help but bark out a laugh at the pair. They werent the best agents one could ask for, but they were all that was on hand.

Riders of Krieg

IV

The Chimera ramp closed, hiding the Field-Marshal from view. The two armored personnel carriers revved up their engines and sped off just as the sun sank

below the horizon banishing the light. Jagg and Kellen Raous were left in a cloud of dust, with an abandoned tank, a dead sniper hidden in the field, and three horses.

Bast*ard. Shows up with no escort and nearly gets us all killed. He put a royal in danger! Not to mention me. Id shoot him if I were...him? Jagg looked at Kellen Raous, Anyone outrank the Field-Marshal on this grass ball?

Nope. Though I imagine that the royal you grabbed, then tackled, might have a tremendous amount of influence. Cant believe you did that. Dirty hands all over her creamy perfect flesh. Id shoot you if I were a Field-Marshal for that! She might be Kaiserina one day! Now that apparently its fine to have women in charge! Kellen Raous chuckled.

Dimly Jagg remembered something Klara, his wife, had said. Something along the lines that Kriegs women probably ran the whole damn planet while the men went off to war. Was it true?

This isnt funny Kellen. We are a pair of gun-bunnies. The Emperor alone knows whats going on in the Field-Marshals mind to think we can uproot some hidden plot. Jagg glared at the retreating shapes of the tanks.

True enough, this is quite a fix. We were used as bait already today. Now we get to do it again. Is it just me, or do you think he wants us to die, just so he can figure out where his enemies might be hiding? Kellen asked and moved over to two of the horses. He gathered up their reins and gently pulled on them so as to lead the animals along the road.

Yeah, the thought crossed my mind. Jagg retrieved the other horse and started down the dusty road.

Have a plan yet?

Yes. We get to the depot, beat the driver half to death, and then ask him questions. The tread-heads are another matter. Ones an officer. Jagg licked his lips and slowly looked over to Raous, offering a faded smile, But the other two arent.

Getting to the depot wasn't a difficult feat. It did take half the night though. The sky was illuminated by thousands of twinkling stars and with the sun set, the air grew pleasant and cool. It was the only consolation Jagg had while marching back over the territory he had covered hours earlier.

Sentries halted Jagg and Kellen Raous, but their story about having to return the horses was accepted. The Field-Marshal, or perhaps one of the 76th's officers, had been good enough to vox in their task. While the sentries didn't shoot Jagg or Kellen Raous, that was about as far as their hospitality went.

When Jagg asked where he could put the horses for the night, the sentries shrugged. When Jagg asked where he and Raous could sleep, they shrugged again.

Finding the guards of no use Jagg and Kellen Raous entered the depot and walked aimlessly. Tanks, haulers and other vehicles were parked in an area cleared away of grass. Tables and portable machine-shops were lit by large, phosphorus lights. Repair crew scurried around vehicles whose Machine Spirits were distressed and crew chiefs barked out orders. Everyone was dressed in the coveralls of a mechanic, or in the black garb of a tank crewman. Jagg knew he and Kellen Raous looked out of place in their charcoal attire, and the three horses they led about didn't keep eyes off of them. It didn't take long before someone in authority questioned their presence in the depot.

You two! What in the name of the Throne are you doing here? a burly crew chief bellowed. The large man stomped towards the soldiers and turned his cap backwards upon his head.

Field-Marshal is having us take his horses back to Kynder, sir, Jagg answered wearily.

So? Take care of them, you can't just let them wander about here. They sh*t everywhere, piss out veritable pools, and I don't like stepping in either! The crew chief eyed the three steeds before getting closer to Jagg and Kellen Raous.

Sorry, sir. Don't know what to do, sir. Don't know a thing about horses, sir. Kellen Raous chipped in and offered a shrug.

The large mans eyes rolled and he said, Oh, good. Field-Marshal trusts his horses with idiots. I should just let them die, and laugh when he finds out about it.

Rather you not, sir. Kellen said swiftly.

I dont know much about horses soldiers. Heres the basics. Get them saddles off, and the bits as well. You can put the beasts over there, outside the light where we dont walk. The things are pretty well trained, they wont go far and they can eat the grass. You need water? Find some buckets. The crew chief pointed out to the darkness beyond the light of the depot.

Sir, anywhere we can sleep and get some food? Jagg inquired; though he had a sense the crew chief was going to be as helpful as the sentries.

Just stay out of our way. I need these machines up and running, and I dont have time for errand boys. You might consider giving riding a try. Kynder is days away on foot. Its dangerous still on the way back to Kynder. Best you travel quick as you can. The crew chief began to turn, to go about his business.

Orks still about, sir? Jagg asked.

What? No. Locals. Theyve taken to shooting at us. Hows that for thanks. The big man spat and strode off.

Jagg and Kellen handled the horses as best they were able. As the crew chief said, and as prior experience had shown, the animals didnt wander far. There was still some time left in the night and the depot growled with the sounds of engines, and the shouts and curses of mechanics. The smell of promethium was strong in the air, and other mechanical fluids.

Im exhausted, Kellen Raous admitted.

Jagg could sympathize. His back was still sore from the whipping, and the marching had made his legs burn. The lack of sleep was getting to him as well. I know. We need to do this tonight though. We cant just hang around here tomorrow, itll look suspicious. Jagg noticed a wry look Kellen Raous was giving him, he added, Itll look even more suspicious. Split up? You find the hauler driver and question him, Ill see if I can pick out one of the abandoned Chimera crewmen.

We just beat them to a pulp, ask questions, get a good nights sleep, then leave? Raous shook his head and sighed, Your plan has spirit, Ill give you that. But it lacks the brains I gave you credit for. Lets do polite. Whats the worst that can happen?

They are in on some strange conspiracy to kill a relation of the Kaiserina, and kill us as we sleep, Jagg said blandly.

Kellen Raous eyes flashed, Right! So lets get to it.

Jagg tried to dredge up some other plan, but he kept coming back to the direct assault on driver and crewman. Admittedly his plan could end up getting them in already worse trouble than they were in. What if one of the men they accosted wasnt so easy to take down? Or if an officer caught them brawling. No one knew of Jagg and Raous clandestine mission. Theyd be tossed into a makeshift brig. The idea somewhat appealed to Jagg. It would get them out of the mess the Field-Marshal had placed them in. Then again, an unhappy Field-Marshal was probably not in ones best interest.

Frick, Jagg sighed wearily.

Ha! You dont have a better plan do you?

Jagg shrugged and spread his hands out wide, Not a one.

The matter of finding the hauler and its driver proved easy, but in the end fruitless. Jagg and Kellen Raous had asked a few questions to the busy mechanics and discovered the hauler and its driver had deposited the valuable cargo, and then continued on; probably back to Kynder. An officer would know more, but Jagg knew theyd likely get stern stares, lots of suspicion and no answers for their trouble. What business did common soldiers have with a hauler driver?

Raous located the tank crewmen with a few casual questions. The two men, in black uniforms, were sitting by a glow lamp on upended ammo boxes. They talked quietly amongst themselves, and their officer was nowhere to be seen. Tank crews seemed to stick to their own, much like infantry sections did. A benefit in this case Jagg reasoned, since they wanted as few observers as possible.

Hello, hello. Jagg said, forcing a smile to his face. The men looked up from their conversation and no recognition registered on their features.

We kept you two safe, while your tank was broken-down, remember? Cant believe youd be so quick to forget your valiant defenders! Are we really that far beneath your treads? Kellen Raous smiled far more easily than Jagg and sat himself down, uninvited, at their make-shift camp.

The crewmen looked surprised at first, but at Kellens barb laughed.

One said, Dont be mad. You all look alike to us way down there. But yeah, now that I see you up close, I remember you. What are you doing here? Thought youd be back up with von Gotslieb by now. Did you see the Field Marshal?

Kellen grinned, Thats why we are here. Hes having us take his horses all the way back to Kynder. I dont even know how to ride! By any chance you see that hauler around here?

The other crewman shook his head, It dropped us off, and left. Might be still here. Why?

Jagg kept quiet. He wasnt a good liar. Kellen however, seemed quite the natural.

When we were walking back to the depot, came across a part. I dont remember seeing it as we marched up, so I think it dropped off your ride. Must be an unimportant part, Kellen said and shrugged.

The crewmen stiffened suddenly and the first shook his head, Every piece is important. The Machine Spirit is displeased if one part is out of place, or not tuned correctly. You should never, ever think a piece, no matter how small is unimportant. Ive not seen the driver around, but if I do, Ill tell him his hauler needs a blessing.

Jagg cleared his throat, So you take parts seriously. Why are you two lounging around here while your Chimera is sitting in an empty field up the road?

You foot-sloggers. You dont know a thing, the second crewman said. Our Chimera has every holy part in place. We keep it clean and operational. It is not our fault that the motors choke on so much grass. They havent been outfitted for a place like this.

Raous raised a hand, No offense. Dont mind my dour-looking companion here. You mean your tank was defeated by grass?

The two crewmen looked slightly sheepish.

Jagg cleared his throat, Its been nice chatting. We just wanted to remind the tread-heads we exist.

The first crewman waved, but he did not smile as he spoke, Weve been reminded. Your ignorance is astounding. See ya on the ground, sloggers.

Kellen gave a small laugh and rose to his feet, See you in a burnt-out hull, tread-heads.

Jagg and Kellen Raous left the tank crewmen and wandered towards their dark encampment. It smelled of horses, grass, and urine. Jagg cursed as he stepped into one of those pools the crew chief warned him of.

I believe them, Kellen said.

Jagg shook his booted foot and wiped it in the grassy earth. He had to agree with

his companion. Yes, I do too. So whoever sent the sniper, knew the Chimera was broken-down, but werent the ones who caused it.

So it was someone just choosing the moment then. They knew the Field-Marshal and von Adler were going to be travelling unescorted to meet up with the 76th. They found out about the broken-down Chimera, and knew it would be a prime ambush location. Kellen looked up into the star laden sky. That doesnt clear much up, Achim.

He nodded, I know. At least we know that the 76th is not a part of whatever is going on. Or are at least, we are reasonably sure.

Kellen Raous sat upon the ground, removed his helmet and limited kit. He laid down closing his eyes. Kellen Raous yawned, Im positive this isnt a 76th mess. Someone that came down with the Field-Marshal isnt happy with von Adler. That leaves quite a few suspects.

Jagg laid down and sighed deeply, That leaves every man in the 708th, the 11th armored bridge and in the 52nd Jäger Regiment. He closed his eyes; he was too tired to think straight. Still, a thought came to him that was not pleasing in the least. Which of those regiments has plenty of snipers and crack-shots in it?

The Jäger Regiment, of course. It gets better, Jagg. Who are we going to be meeting in Kynder and telling our tale to? Kellen giggled.

He found the next thought anything but funny. He grumbled aloud, Kapitän von Sauder. Commander of the 52nd Jäger Regiment.

He sure was nice to lend the Field-Marshal and the von Adler these horses, eh? A few moments later Kellen Raous whispered, Sleep tight.

The horses made noises during the night, and the depot remained a place of light and gurgling engine noises. But it wasnt the sounds of the evening that made Jagg rest uneasily.

In the morning, Jagg and Kellen ate a few rations from their kit, sipped from their canteens, and managed to pry water-buckets for the horses from a sympathetic mechanic. Afterwards Jagg began to learn about steeds.

The first thing he encountered was the difficulty of putting a saddle back on. The leather contraptions were heavy, and required quite a bit of torque in the hips to get them on the horses back. While the animals were good-natured, Jagg had a feeling they were acting slightly rebellious. The first three times he tried to get a saddle on ones back, it walked at the last moment, making Jagg miss his target. This earned him the snide laughter of a collection of mechanics who were drawn to their plight.

Once the saddles were on the backs of the horses, Jagg and Kellen Raous spent the next hour attempting to re-buckle and tie everything correctly. In the night, they had simply unbuckled and yanked till the things fell off. Now, they argued over which strap went where, and how tight it had to be.

Once the saddles were haphazardly fastened to the horses, the bits had to be placed back in their mouths. Roars of laughter greeted Jagg as he made a face of disgust when the horses grass filled mouth fiddled with the bit and his hand. Kellen Raous yelped as he nearly lost his fingers to the grinding and large teeth of the horse he was affixing a bit to.

By the time Jagg was ready to attempt mounting the horse, the work at the depot had stopped. Even officers had gathered, hands on hips, to see the commoners give a try at riding.

You first, Kellen Raous suggested.

Thanks.

Jagg had never seen the Death Riders while training on the Rad, and he had certainly never been to the center levels of Kriegs subterranean hive to see the nobility ride. He had seen vid-pics however and dimly recalled a few where valiant riders would mount up and charge off to battle. He shut his eyes and tried to imagine the vid-pics in his mind, he then grasped the horn of the saddle, placed one foot in the stirrup and lurched up. Horses were rather tall creatures,

and Jaggs long legs became a hindrance. By the time he was able to straddle the animal, his groin muscles were stretched uncomfortably.

Applause rang out and he smiled and opened his eyes. The smile left his lips instantly as he stared down at the swishing black tail of the horse. He had mounted it, and in his haste, ended up backwards.

Slipping his foot out of the stirrup, he rotated in place on his flanks, and flung his legs out. With great effort, and more gales of laughter, Jagg put himself the right way on the horse, and slipped his feet in the stirrups.

Kellen Raous, having learned from his peers mistake, tried to mount the correct way. Raous was shorter than Jagg, and his first two attempts led to abortive hops that sent him into the horses side, which whickered in annoyance. By the time Kellen had finally made it atop the horse, the applause he earned was tremendous. More at ease with the teasing, the soldier doffed his helmet to the gathered crowd of mechanics and tank crews.

Enough, enough! a tank commander shouted, though his smile was broad and did not fade. The officer jogged over to Jagg and Kellen Raous. He looked appraisingly at the pair then said, Youre a spectacle. The whole depot has stopped working. Good for morale, not so good for efficiency. Obviously, you two dont know a thing about horses or how to ride.

Yes, sir, Jagg and Kellen Raous said at once.

The officer toyed with the reins of the unoccupied horse and affixed them to the side of Jaggs saddle with enough slack to give both animals room to walk and not crush Jaggs leg between them.

Point your toes up. Right. Now out. Ahh, hurts does it not? Youll get used to it eventually. Use your heels to make your horse move quicker. Gently mind you, or it will throw you right off like you deserve, the officer said. He then patted the neck of Jaggs horse and looked at the pair. The reins control direction. Pull back, and the horse will slow. Pull back too hard, and it will rear, and you will find yourself on your back, in a prime location to be defecated upon. Dont travel at night, dont go too fast. Break for food and water.

Thank you, sir. How long will it take to reach Kynder you think? By horse that is, Raous asked.

The officer looked over to the shorter soldier, Take the road the 76th took to get this far. No detours. Youll reach a settlement after about a day.

Jagg felt his back burn. It was at that settlement he had allowed civilians to escape, and suffered for it at the hands of Commissar Razin. Jagg smiled inwardly. If the accursed commissar could see them now! Seated upon horses they didnt know how to ride, engaged in some bizarre covert operation that very well could mean the life or death of a royal. Jagg wouldnt blame the commissar all that much if he shot them then and there for security purposes.

The officer pointed, The settlement still has elements of our regiment there. Mostly wounded. However, word is, reinforcements from the 11th armored company will be coming. Just get off the road when they do. After you reach the settlement, Id say two days of slow, easy riding, and youll be in Kynder. The officer patted the horse again and smiled. He spoke quietly, Dont get your necks broken.

Well do our best, sir. Thanks for the advice, Kellen Raous offered.

Jagg nodded his thanks and he practiced a few times directing the horse. Thankfully, the animal more or less knew what to do, and he only had to give it suggestions.

As Jagg and Kellen made their way out of the depot, and on the road back to Kynder, the applause from the mechanics and crew came forth once more along with hooting and shouts. Despite the noise Jagg could still hear the officer behind them mutter aloud.

Commoners on a horse. Always a bad match.

Jendra IV's sun shone its golden rays upon the equally golden expanse of the planet's surface. Patches of grass were burned and blackened, and Jagg could make out squat farms that had been reduced to skeletal shells. It was damage inflicted by the orks earlier. A few scorch marks still scarred the area, where grass had been carelessly burned away.

There was something about the planet, Jagg noticed, that allowed it to heal quickly. He was sure the last time he had come down the road the blackened scorch marks were larger and more plentiful. In the time between marching down the road and back up it, even the largest scorch marks were populated by shoots of fresh grass. Jagg surmised in a month the only sign of the orks passing would be the ruins of human settlements. The soil seemed ever-ready to spring up yellow waist-high reeds no matter the damage done to it.

The horses plodded along the road and he didn't need to steer them in the slightest, nor change their pace. He was happy to let the horses move as quick, or slowly as they pleased. Though his muscles hurt from straddling the wide animal, it beat walking and was faster.

Conversation with Kellen Raous was light, and focused around the many possibilities regarding the sniper. Anyone who knew the Field-Marshal's schedule could have arranged the ambush. But other questions remained. How many knew he was travelling with a von Adler?

Jagg knew which regiments from Krieg had landed on Jendra IV, and who commanded them. There was not even a rumor about a von Adler on the planet. The latest Jagg had heard of the royal family was in a tent drunk with Sergeant Taubover and the rest of Section Four. The news was brief, the old von Adler was dead, and against custom, his daughter had taken the title Kaiserina, and thus Planetary Governor as well. By tradition the eldest male of the direct line, took the throne, but the elder von Adler's death was sudden. He had no sons and his daughter had not married yet, nor had he any brothers. Krieg, for the first time in recorded memory, had a woman ruling it.

Between Jagg's racing mind and Kellen's they had come up with many possibilities but each time they lacked in the realm of motive.

Time and again Kellen Raous asked aloud, Why kill such a beautiful woman? Wish I had man-handled her like a crate of ammo.

To which Jagg responded each time, Shut up, Kellen.

It was unusual to call a man by his first name, but Jagg had gotten into the habit of it. Kellen was a strange one. Loved his role in the military, enjoyed adventure and took, what Jagg found as a perverse pleasure, in the danger they were in. They werent facing elusive elder or charging orks, but rather a conspiracy they hardly understood and had no direct way to confront. He found himself desperately missing the front lines, with all its marches, monotony, and moments of bowel-churning terror.

The sun was still up when he could make out the distant shape of a small town. He could barely discern shattered roofs, collapsed walls, and broken streets.

Well be there by sundown for sure, Jagg offered.

Easy, Kellen Raous agreed.

I dont think so, said a voice.

Velvet Gloves

V

Field-Marshal Hartwin von Reiniger sat back in the metal chair inside the command tent of his host, Grosse- Kapitän von Gotslieb. His aide stood over his shoulder, and Marena von Adler sat at his side, hands serenely in her lap, blue eyes downcast, and her expression unreadable.

Hartwin had not received news from the troopers he sent back to Kynder yet, and so he dare not trust anyone with information about the sniper. Not even von Gotslieb could be trusted until Hartwin knew for certain the abandoned Chimera was not planted as bait. Keeping von Adlers identity a secret from him would be impossible given the rest of the regimental commanders already knew of her presence. Still, he hurried the introductions and didnt explain the interests of the royal family.

Maps were splayed out along the table, indicating recent actions and enemy activity. Beyond attempts to assassinate Marena von Adler, there was still a war on.

Thank you for your timely assistance Grosse-Kapitän von Gotslieb. Whoever it was, attacked us and fled quickly. I believe we were just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Ah! It was foolish of me to try and ride in here unannounced and without a proper guard. Hartwin glanced back with mild annoyance at his aide as the fellow nodded in agreement.

Von Gotslieb was a charming man, of good birth and energetic disposition. He tapped the table they sat at and said, Im only pleased my men offered you protection till rescue could arrive. I also have an idea of who it was who dared to attack you, sir.

Hartwin and von Adler looked up suddenly. He cleared his throat, Really? Id love to hear it. Not every day that a Field-Marshal gets shot at while behind the lines.

Locals. My regiment took heavy losses keeping Kynder safe, and for our hard work and spilt blood, theyve been harassing my men. The regiment has taken a handful of casualties at the hands of angry Jendrites. Ungrateful people. Von Gotslieb shook his head sadly.

Troubling. Did this start recently? Ive only been on the planet a few days, but none of my Regimental Commanders reported any such thing. Highly unusual, Hartwin said, but instantly dismissed the idea that the sniper they encountered was from Jendra. He was a Man of Krieg. The obscured meat tag confirmed it.

Recent development, sir. After we broke the orks at Kynder, my assault began. Already my men reported the locals being a bit unfriendly. There were a few outlying communities that had to be reclaimed. Thats where the trouble really started. As other regiments come to support me I fear theyll encounter the same, von Gotslieb reported. The kapitän stood and shook his head angrily and growled, I get an incomplete refit at Krieg, lose many men here, and now that we are liberating the world, my regiment gets shot at by its populace. Bad stuff, if I might say so, Field-Marshal.

Marena von Adler spoke up, catching the attention of everyone at the table, Pardon me, Kapitän von Gotslieb, but I think I know why you may be having trouble with Jendras population.

The regimental commander did a poor job of hiding an amused look. However he deferred to the privilege of rank. Im interested to hear your thoughts, my lady.

Hartwin nodded slowly, I am as well.

The young woman nodded politely and smiled once. She then spoke in cool tones, I have access to your reports. I read up on them soon as we landed on Jendra IV. During the siege of Kynder, didnt you use conscripted civilians to act as living shields for your men?

Yes, von Gotslieb said without hesitation.

Is it also true that in the outlying towns you had standing orders to execute any humans enslaved by the orks? the woman pressed.

Yes. At Comissar Razins suggestion. He feared corruption and alien collusion, von Gotslieb responded again without flinching.

A silence hung in the air which Hartwin broke, War, my lady, means hard decisions.

I agree, Field Marshal, Marena von Adler responded. But is it any surprise that the population is resentful when used as sacrifices and having friends and family shot because they had the misfortune of ending up in the hands of xenos? She raised a brow and glanced at both men.

My lady, you are young. With all due respect, and no insult intended, you do not know what war is like. We cannot be soft. Krieg itself is a constant reminder of the price of treachery and weakness, and how far we will go for victory, said von Gotslieb. He sat back down and kept his gaze steadfast upon the royal.

The woman did not seem dissuaded and continued her point, The Kaiserina values the strength and duty of the Death Korps, Kapitän. She believes that the forming of the Death Korps into an actual army is a test. A test that we will fail if we do not temper some of our ways.

What is this?! Temper our ways? My lady, do you or our new Kaiserina have the slight-

Hartwin cut von Gotslieb off before the kapitän got himself into trouble, What my good von Gotslieb means, my lady, is that the Death Korps is designed to win. To win, sometimes horrific decisions need to be made. It is the very essence of us. Do not be mistaken, my lady. In the end, the Death Korps wishes to save humanity, not kill it. But this still is war.

Oh, I agree gentlemen. I do. But you are thinking rather small. There are those who dont want the Death Korps kept as an army. There are those who much prefer the old way of things. They like to use our men to carry out the worst parts of war, then ship them out. So easy to say, we saved you! So sorry those nasty Men of Krieg were so brutal about it, but theyre gone now. The blonde woman tilted her head and paused a moment. It is convenient for them. The moment Sub-Sector Lord Trajean blessed our people with the right to form an army unto itself, we gained political enemies. Krieg has an army gentlemen! Let us not lose it to our political opponents. Think of what we can do for our world as an army, compared to isolated regiments scattered across the Imperium doing the dirty work others dare not do!

Von Gotslieb sighed, I prefer the old way. The First Army of Krieg is a fine thing! Do not mistake me. But if we must become soft, in order to stay together, then what is the point? Someone must fight war, in all its cruelty. If not us, then who?

Hartwin leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms; he knew well enough the new Kaiserinas thoughts. She wanted the Death Korps First Army preserved whatever the cost. That such a thing meant fighting wars half-heartedly, so as not to rile the sensibilities of distant political figures, was not something the Field-Marshal had counted on. He wasnt altogether sure if he could support any softening of the Death Korps, even if it meant having their army disbanded. Still, he had to be diplomatic with one of the royal family.

There are ways to remain soldiers, and not lose our edge. Grosse-Kapitän Von Gotslieb, Im going to issue a decree. Any Death Korpsmen killed by the locals of Jendra IV, will result in the execution of ten Jendrites. As Hartwin expected, von Adler stood up.

Field-Marshal!

He raised a hand for silence, My lady. I am indeed, the Field-Marshal. I have heard your advice, and I cannot take it. At least not in full. Kapitän von Gotslieb.

Sir?

The next town you liberate, treat the human slaves. No mass executions. Make a big production out of it too. Complain how much it costs, but do it anyways.

The kapitän looked like he was about to object. His mouth opened, but with a look sent von Adlers way, he nodded and said, Yes, Field-Marshal.

Its settled. Hartwin could see Marena von Adler was unhappy, but he didnt care. He had a war to win, and he could not lose sight of that. Assassinations and politics be damned. He looked to von Gotslieb. Now then, orks. Where the hell are they?

Von Gotslieb rubbed his forehead, Damndest thing, Field-Marshal. Theyve retreated. Their contraction is the likes Ive never seen. They arent looting, burning, or anything of the kind. They just head north away from us, faster than I can give chase. I need some flyers or better orbitals to give you a clearer idea as to what the greenskins are up to. It isnt like orks to run like this. We bloodied their fat noses at Kynder, sir. But, we are still just one regiment.

Hartwin pondered. Orks didnt run. Not in his experience. He would vox Kynder for flyers, orbital pictures, and of course to tip off his loyal men that there was more subtle dangers afoot. When trooper Jagg and Raous reached Kynder, he would be curious what they had discovered. Still, they were just common soldiers. The chances of them failing were rather high. But even that, would be telling.

Intolerable

VI

His weapon was slung carelessly across his back, and the lasgun was too cumbersome to be swiftly spun about, while on horseback. Jaggs hands stayed gripped to the reins of his steed. He tried to turn his head to get a better look at

whoever had spoken, but soon as he moved he heard other noises amongst the grass. The wind? Or was it other assailants? He tried to make out how many there were, but could not be sure. His heart thumped decidedly faster and louder in his chest.

Get off your horses. Make any moves I find foolish, and you'll be dead, the voice said.

Jagg was unsure if there was just the one man in the golden field, but he highly doubted it, and did not risk turning his head to find out. He clumsily made his way off the horse and wavered a bit on legs unused to walking. He strained his eyes down the road. The settlement, where he had earned his time on the Repenting Rack, was not far off. Ironic that he wished it was closer! If the 76th had posted sentries worth a damn, they might even see Jagg and Raous. The young man pondered. Would that be a good thing though? If the sentries raised the alarm he was fairly positive they'd be shot, and their attackers would flee into the ocean of swaying reeds.

Whats this about? Kellen Raous asked cautiously as he dismounted.

The grass itself stood up before Jaggs eyes. Men, wearing cloaks, coated in golden reeds, rushed forward. Within moments Jagg found himself hurled off the road and into the fields of grass. His weapon and kit bag was stripped from him while his helmet was hurled away. He felt snapping pain in his side as one of the camouflaged men kicked him in the ribs.

A pair of officers out for a stroll. Well get much for them, said a gruff voice Jagg didnt recognize.

The first voice Jagg had heard from the grasses replied, No, not officers. Look at their uniforms. These are pair of nobodies.

Lets kill them then and be done with it. Their animals too. We could use the meat, the gruff voice said.

Jagg felt his heart quickening to a fast staccato and he shifted as if to rise. His ribs pained him, but he was damned if he would just let the men kill him and Raous without a fight. Help wasnt far off.

Pain cracked into Jaggs ribs again as the one with the gruff voice kicked him. Jagg rolled onto his side, doubling up and glanced at his attacker through tear-stained eyes.

The man sported a white, dirty beard and sun-baked features. The grass coated cloak must have been uncomfortable, and Jagg could see sweat coating the exposed arms and face of his attacker. A black boot, of Imperial Guard issue, reared back and Jagg had just enough time to turn his head as the boot struck his skull.

His vision turned into blurring lines and pain rocketed through the side of his head and face. He coughed up blood, and tasted a coppery and oily taste in his mouth. He had bitten his own lip hard enough to bleed.

Enough, Ivean. We take them both. The animals are too big to smuggle, or drag if we kill them. Katya, Urien, get the invaders moving. And blindfold them while youre at it. Ivean, take the lead. The original voice quickly sounded out orders to what Jagg knew to be three others.

And you, Kaspar? asked the one named Ivean with the gruff and harsh voice.

Im leaving a note for the invaders. Theyll want their men back, wont they?

Ivean grunted, And if they dont care?

A hand gripped Jaggs head and then a blindfold stole his vision away. The hand was soft and delicate. A womans hand or perhaps a child he reasoned. Jagg could hear Kellen Raous spit out a curse, but then nothing more.

Kaspar replied evenly, If they dont care? Then, Ivean, you can kill them. Slowly, like you prefer.

The people who had ambushed Jagg and Kellen Raous forced them to crawl through the grasses. Reeds slapped into Jaggs face and he blindly reached forward and used his legs to push. Insects nibbled at his reaching fingers and bit at his cheeks and chin, while the heat caused the air at the base of the vegetation to become humid and heavy. Sweat soaked his tunic and he found himself desperate for water. His attempt to reach for his canteen was prevented with a kick and an order to keep moving. His assailants, camouflaged as they were, had the luxury of being able to shuffle along hunchbacked. Jagg could hear their boots amongst the reeds as well as Kellen Raous labored breaths.

Without the sun to judge by, Jagg had no idea how much time passed. It felt like a great deal of time before a voice, that of the woman whispered, Stand up, invader. You can walk. But only where I guide.

Her small hand gripped the back of his neck, and Jagg wearily stood. The hand then rested on his lower spine and gingerly pushed. Jendra IV lacked much in the way of rocks or other serious impediments to trip him up, a small blessing. Grass whipped at Jaggs waist, and only dips in the landscape caused him to stumble, despite being blindfolded. The feeling however was maddening. Every moment that passed, Jagg half expected his captor to ram him into a wall or some other unseen obstacle.

Unable to talk, Jagg listened and his captors spoke more freely as they journeyed. They were from Jendra, that much Jagg knew right away. Their voices were accented, making every word sound longer than it needed to be. While a man of Krieg would say, trouble, the Jendrites pronounced it, trauuuble.

They were not soldiers, at least not by trade. Though they had done a fine job of surprising Jagg and Kellen, they were far too chatty once they felt safe. Jagg had learned their names and a bit about each just from paying attention to their idle talk. They were making mistakes a soldier would not have.

Ivean, was the eldest and a farmer, he hated the Death Korps just as much as the orks and often referred to both as the invader.

Katya was a woman, small, and for the most part quiet, she kept a hand on Jaggs back and offered little to the conversation amongst the men.

Urien was also a farmer and spoke at length of the needs of his family. Jagg learned he had a wife and two young children, both in need of food. It struck him as odd that a planet whose sole resource was food, could be lacking in it. Was something wrong with the grain?

Kaspar was no soldier either, but had been and still acted as if he was in the PDF. He kept the people moving, and was clearly in charge of the ambush, but not the leader of the group. A few times Kaspar spoke of a Commander Churnev.

Jagg soon heard other sounds as well; people talking, a creaking of old gears and he noticed that the grass reeds were no longer brushing up against his legs. He heard the crunch of road beneath his boots and then heard Kellen Raous cry out in alarm.

Idiot. Get up, Ivean said and Jagg could hear some of the others give short, cruel laughs.

I fell, Kellen Raous said sheepishly.

Katya pushed Jagg along and veered him this way and that. He heard the voices of the others drift off and for a moment he wondered if he was alone with her. It wouldnt be hard to turn about and fight. But then what? Jagg contemplated. He heard his boots, her own, and another. Two guards? The hand left his back and he heard the sound of a door squeaking. If he was going to act, now was the time. The moment came, then passed. Caution over boldness. He waited.

Katyas small hand returned and with a shove Jagg was pushed through a doorway. He slammed into the opposite wall of what must have been a small structure and fell over heavily. A moment later he felt someone crash atop him.

Ow, Kellen Raous grumbled.

The door shut and Jagg heard a chain being put into place with a noisy rattle. Angrily he tore the blindfold off. He was inside a tiny shed of wood. The shed was dark, dank, and had no windows and barely fit himself, let alone Kellen Raous who was untangling himself from Jagg and removing his own blindfold.

Damn it all. I was going to make a go for her, but hesitated when I heard other boots. Yours! Jagg shook his head, rubbed his neck and rolled his shoulders. His

back was weeping again. He could feel bloody wounds stinging under the sweat and press of the fabric of his tunic.

Kellen Raous smirked, I had the same thought. We foiled one another's plan. But did we even know where we were? We very well may have ended up accosting her in plain view of their town square. Speaking of which, we are in a town. They process food here, but there are far too many people in this place for their one mill to feed them all.

Jagg stared at his fellow soldier, Kellen, how in the name of the Throne do you know all that?

The young man offered his broadest smile as he spoke, When I tripped and fell. I could see past my blindfold, long enough to see where we are. This place is teeming with civilians and guess what else?

Jagg sighed, PDF?

It was Kellen's turn to give a quizzical look.

I'm not stupid either. While they were leading us here, I listened in on their conversations. All of them are civilians except for Kaspar, and he mentioned a Commander Churnev. Jagg shrugged. Name mean anything to you?

No, Achim, sorry. Now what? I take it they think they can ransom us? My, will they be in for a surprise. If they try to set up an exchange our glorious leaders will just hit the place with an artillery barrage. Crude

But effective, Jagg finished. He rose unsteadily to his feet and leaned forward towards the door. It was chained shut, he knew, but was it guarded? While the civilians knew next to nothing about warfare, the PDF apparently knew enough to keep their prisoners guarded. Through cracks in the door Jagg could see leaning against the wall of a small hab, a brown-uniformed soldier with a lasgun. He was about twenty paces from the door of the shed and had an easy view of it.

Jagg sat back down alongside Kellen Raous.

How many?

One, with a lasgun and beyond him the town. We cant kick our way out of here quietly. Jagg placed his head in his hands and shut his eyes.

Dig? Kellen Raous offered.

He raised a brow then lowered a hand to the dirt floor of the shed. The black earth was damp and soft. By digging behind them they could perhaps make a tunnel large enough and slip out the back. Jagg tried to see if he could see through any gaps in the wall. It would do them no good to dig into an area that was heavily watched. However, he could see no gaps large enough to peer through.

His lips pursed in thought then he came to a decision. Not now. If they plan on ransoming us, it may take a few days to arrange.

Kellen Raous grinned, You mean it will take a couple of days for our boys to zero in the artillery on any potential exchange site.

Jagg could only nod, Right, he continued, If we dig, we best do it by night and in a single night! No way will we be able to hide our efforts in a place this small. If we plan to tunnel out, has to be done fast.

Kellen Raous nodded his approval. Next question!

Jagg glanced over to Kellen. Yes?

Why are the PDF ambushing the very army which is liberating their planet from orks?

Jagg took a deep breath. He thought back to all he had seen his fellow soldiers do in the name of securing victory. No price was too small. Better a world burn than fall, was a motto his drill sergeant had taught him numerous times, and Jagg had seen Jendras civilians do some burning.

Because they dont think we are here to liberate them, Jagg finally said.

The shed had them sweltering as the sun shone, then shivering as it set. Jaggs back felt sticky and he was desperate for food and water. Between the two of them, they had finished off their canteens. Their kitbags had been taken away from them along with their lasguns, and with it, rations and any other useful supplies. When the doors chain dropped and opened, he hoped it would be a brown-uniformed PDF soldier with food and water for the prisoners. He was disappointed to see a woman. It had to be Katya. She was framed by the dim light of the town at her back.

She was short, with closely cropped hair that reminded Jagg of his wife back on Krieg. There the similarities ended. Katyas features were mousy, and her lips pinched in a scowl. She might have been pretty, but clad in a dirty tunic, with a lasgun in hand, she defiantly did not look appealing. Nor was she carrying any form of sustenance.

Come on, she said and stepped back, leveling her weapon.

Where are we going? Jagg ventured as he rose, helping Kellen Raous to his feet.

Interrogation. If you are truthful, you then go home. She gestured for them to step out and once they did guided them into the town. The guard of the shed was still there and tipped his cap to Katya as they passed by.

Wow! Hear that? We get to go home if we are honest, Kellen said with a smirk.

Jagg looked up at the night sky and around at his surroundings. The town was small, with several stone buildings and a single windmill which creaked lazily as its wooden sails caught air. Beyond the town was total darkness, and Jendra being what it was, had no landmarks that Jagg could ever pick out beyond the larger settlements.

She pushed Jagg and Raous into a well-lit stone building. Inside several brown uniformed men wandered and more than a few shot the Men of Krieg dire looks. Through several rooms they were led then down a flight of rickety wooden stairs into a damp cellar. Two chairs, with a glowlight focused upon them, had been conveniently set up. A crowd of PDF approached.

The uniformed PDF forced Jagg and Kellen Raous into the chairs while Katya

watched. Jagg winced as his arms were pulled behind his back and locked in place by restraint cuffs. The light in his eyes forced him to turn his head away while Kellen Raous underwent the same treatment.

Katya, left but the PDF stayed. There was silence in the room. Jagg could feel the gazes of hate upon him. He felt a sudden slap strike his face. He heard Kellen Raous cough a moment later as a blow struck him. The PDF who had hit Jagg spat at him, and another took his place. A full punch broke Jaggs nose. Pain registered from his entire face with the strike and blood poured. He tasted hot blood and before he could spit it out, another PDF soldier grabbed his neck and started to squeeze.

Air was denied him! He fought in place, but could only manage a weak kick, while the PDFs hands crushed his throat. Jagg heard Kellen give a high pitched scream, and then his own vision began to fade. A moment before it did, the hands released his neck. Jagg breathed deeply and wheezed. Vision returned, but also the pain from his shattered nose became more sharp and distinct as he took in a lungful of air.

His head lolled back, but all Jagg could see was a brilliant white light and the silhouette of yet another PDF soldier stepping up to administer pain. The punch was aimed right at his stomach, and he bent forward as far as the restraints would let him. Water and blood vomited forth to the amusement of the PDF. They laughed, it was the first sound they had made since Jagg and Kellen Raous had arrived.

A soldier growled, Let Ivean have a turn. Hurry, before the Commander gets here.

Jagg narrowed his eyes, and through the light and pain he could make out Ivean, dressed in plain and well-worn attire. The bearded man stomped up towards Kellen Raous and produced a gleaming knife from his belt. He moved behind the soldier, who was breathing deeply after having taken a series of beatings similar to Jaggs. Ivean knelt behind the chair and Jagg could make out the smallest of smiles hidden in his white beard.

Kellen Raous screamed. Jagg had never seen him show such pain and negative emotion before. Smiling Raous scream? The scream was long and high pitched

and became a shriek. For Kellen, the Death Korps was an adventure, an escape from boredom. Kellen had told Jagg himself he enjoyed the thrill of life in the Imperial Guard opposed to a dull and monotonous existence. Jagg swallowed nervously and could only wonder if his friend had wished he never left Krieg at all.

Ivean stood and stepped in front of Jagg. Kellens screams faded into shuddered out sobs and hitches. The large man stood with the light at his back and then flung something at Jaggs face. It was small, and wet, and upon striking him fell to the floor and rolled.

He looked in horror at what it was.

Even if you live through this, and I pray to the Emperor that you do not, invaders, you will never shoot a son or daughter of Jendra again, Ivean said in low tones. He stepped behind Jaggs chair, blood-stained knife at the ready.

Terror the likes Jagg had never encountered before gripped him. He clenched his fists, but felt the tip of Iveans bloody knife, pressing in, seeking to pry out the trigger finger. The tip was already piercing his skin! God-Emperor!

Ivean! It was Kaspar, standing at the top of the stairs. I told you before. You get them when we are done with them. Not the other way around.

My wife. My son. My daughter. They are dead because of these invaders. Let me disarm them at the very least, so they can do no harm. Ivean said and stood slowly, wiping his blade upon Jaggs shoulder.

Revenge will be had, but not yet, and not on these two. Leave, all of you, Kaspar ordered.

The PDF walked up the stairs past Kaspar; the last to leave was Ivean. He commented as he sheathed his knife, That one, his back is wet with blood. He will die from it. We didnt do it. Ask your questions quick, and give him to me before he dies. My knife, not infection is how he should end.

Kaspar nodded and descended to the floor of the cellar. Behind him an old man with a frosty, white, thin moustache and small, forked beard followed. He too was dressed in a brown uniform, but his attire was far more elaborate than any

Jagg had thus far seen on the PDF soldiers. It was also the cleanest!

Kellen Raous was trying not to cry. Jagg could see his head hung low and his teeth biting into his lip. He tried not to look at the object on the floor which was still leaking crimson blood. Kellen Raous wasn't the only one in trouble. Jagg had heard Ivean claim his back was wet enough with blood as to be fatal. It hurt to be sure, but not nearly as bad as his nose. Jagg decided that if something was supposed to hurt, but didn't, it wasn't necessarily a good thing. Numbness meant infection he had once been told.

I feel no pity for you. Do you know what you invaders have done? the old man spoke and began to pace around the chairs. His hands idly rested, clasped together in the square of his spine.

Saved you from the eldar, then the orks, I believe. Sorry about that, sir. Won't do that again, sir. Jagg said weakly and spat up more blood as his broken nose drained into his throat leaving a coppery taste and scent.

Despite the pain he must have been suffering, Kellen let out a tiny laugh.

You mock me? You are no different than the murderous eldar. You kill our people. You are no different than the rampaging ork. You conquer and enslave, the old man paused before the chairs and stood with the light behind him. You came to Kynder, promising our salvation. Instead half the population is wounded or dead thanks to your commanders. While fighting armies of the PDF cried out for support, your commanders did nothing. Even now, with orbit in Imperial hands, not one supply drop, not one message of assurance. All of Jendra and its people written off as already dead! Your commanders are not here to save us. They are here to conquer. Town by town, farm by farm, and kill everyone they come across.

Jagg shook his head, That's not true.

You are right. Those you don't kill, you enslave. Do I need to educate you on the matter? Yurek, a town outside of Kynder. Liberated a few weeks ago by your army and destroyed in the process. The people who came out of hiding were either instantly shot as traitors, or shipped to camps run by your army to do valuable work. Meanwhile every vehicle your army can get its hands on is

requisitioned. Our food stores? Stolen! Our skilled workers? Abducted at bayonet point. The old man laughed without humor. We are on a planet full of grain, and thanks to your liberation, we are starving. I see though that you two are well fed.

Jagg glared at who he assumed to be Commander Churnev. A debate with him was unlikely to be won. However, he was not about to listen to the insults and half-truths in silence. Without us, the orks would have killed you all. War is terrible, and demands a high price for victory. You think that kidnapping us, or killing us, will defeat the Death Korps?

The old man offered a thin smile and said, No. But we are not helpless. Word has been sent to those in power outside the system. Your atrocities will not go unnoticed.

The Imperium is full of atrocities, Jagg countered.

The old man nodded, Yes, but your destruction of a once valuable food producing world will harm the pockets of some very powerful men. The galaxy may not care one whit if Jendra suffers, but they do care if it stops producing. Your liberation has so far done nothing to see the world return to its former prosperity. The Imperium will tolerate a loss of life, but not a loss of profit.

Kaspar spoke up, Its only a matter of time. We dont need to defeat you, invader. Your own masters will take you to task soon as they see what a failure the army of Krieg is. Once more you will be broken up, and sent to alien infested sh*t-holes to die. Never again will you bring misery to those you are supposed to protect.

Kellen shuddered and leaned up the best he was able, A-a-a fine speech. Are you trying to convince us? Count me in. Where ca-ca-can I get one of those snappy brown uniforms?

The PDF officers looked at one another then the old man stepped towards Kellen Raous and leaned down to peer into his eyes, I am so glad your humor remains. I have none left ever since my grandchild was crushed beneath one of your tanks for failure to get out of the way in time. Give me your names and I will see your wounds treated. Give me your purpose for being on the road and I will see you

given food and water. Tell me where the Death Korps are positioned, any plans you know, the names and any details about any officers, and I will set you free.

Jagg looked to the old officer, You are Commander Churnev?

The man looked up away from Kellen Raous, I am.

I am trooper Jagg, this is trooper Raous. We are taking the Field-Marshal's horses back to Kynder. It's a bad duty even without the torture and idyllic speeches. Jagg jerked his head, My friend there is going to die if his finger isn't treated, and I spent some time on the Repenting Rack and don't think I'll live much longer either.

The old man rubbed his thin beard in thought. I will see you bandaged up and given food and water. I am a man of my word, trooper Jagg. Now, as for the other information I need?

Jagg smiled and spit up a blood bubble. It popped and he said, Sorry, sir. Not going to tell you anything else. Going to kill us now?

Not yet. We might be able to trade you for some medical supplies. If we can't, and you don't tell me anything of value, then you die. Churnev said matter-of-factly.

Kellen Raous coughed, You should have kidnapped the horses. Bet you could have gotten your medical supplies with them.

The Commander nodded, And I would have found myself in better company. Major, see to it they are treated. Then lock them up. If they aren't compliant, shoot one of them. We don't need both.

Major Kaspar had Jagg and Kellen Raous taken out of the room separately. Raous left first. Jagg found himself escorted later. He was moved out roughly by brown-uniformed men and taken to a tent, where a PDF surgeon, donning oversized spectacles, immediately frowned upon seeing a wounded Man of Krieg.

What is this, another one? the surgeon asked as he idly washed a table down, cleaning off the blood of a past patient, perhaps Kellen Raous? Medical supplies were lazily spread upon a lectern that probably belonged in a schola somewhere. The medical tools looked to Jagg as if they had once belonged to a butcher.

Fix him, came the curt reply of one of the PDF soldiers escorting Jagg. A hand pushed him forward towards the skeptical medical officer.

The surgeon wiped his hands down his crimson stained apron, Fine, fine. You, he said to Jagg. The be-spectacled man pointed to the table, Sit. Whats your problem?

Ive had a bad night.

Your friend is missing a finger. Whats your problem besides the ugly face? the surgeon asked.

Jagg sighed and removed his tunic. He gritted his teeth as dried blood clung to the dirty fabric, and scabs re-opened. The pain was not quite as sharp and distinct as Jagg expected. It was a worrying thought.

The surgeon drifted closer and scratched his head, Repenting Rack?

The fact the surgeon was aware of the term caught Jagg off-guard. He didnt answer but his look was enough to betray his surprise.

I thought so! I saw your Death Korps punishment in Yurek of a soldier. The elderly surgeon guided Jagg to lie face down on the table and began to poke and prod at his back with his various medical tools.

Jagg could feel scabs being moved, inflamed flesh being tapped and the occasional thoughtful hmmm from the surgeon who examined his flayed body.

The surgeon tsked several times and said, They made the whole town watch, as if to learn a lesson. Do you feel that?

Jagg felt nothing and said as much. He then glanced back at the doctor who was bent over and adjusting his spectacles to get a better look at Jaggs wounds. What lesson was that?

Im not sure. The soldier had let some civilians escape rather than be shot. For his kindness the lad was whipped, and the loyal survivors of the town were forced to watch. I was not there personally, but I remember the name of the punishment. The Repenting Rack. The surgeon produced a bottle of anti-septic from his blood stained apron and poured it along Jaggs back.

Interesting, Jagg said slowly, sensing a bit of luck finally coming his way.

Indeed it is! You should be screaming in pain from that dash of liquid, but arent. Im afraid your back is quite infected and in some places decaying. Hence you cannot feel it. Ill clean what I can, but without a proper medical facility, youll be dead in ohhh. The surgeon pondered, trying to calculate how long it would take infection to claim Jagg.

Not that, I meant your story about the Repenting Rack. Interesting. Turns out I was in a town not long past, and I was ordered to shoot some civilians. Jagg forced his voice to waiver, I couldnt do it.

The surgeon moved to Jaggs side in a flash, Youre lying. You think the scars on your back are going to get you out of the mess you are in. It wasn't a question.

Jagg stared over at the man. The lanterns inside the tent cast the light just right so he could see his own reflection in the old surgeons glasses. His face was blood spattered, his nose bent, and his eyes narrow and cold. He smirked, You know anyone who was in that town? What was it called?

You bast*rd, you dont even know the names of the places you conquer and decimate. I should slit-

Jagg hastily cut him off, Is anyone from that town here? Anyone who saw this soldier take his twenty strokes? You bring them here, and youll see Im not lying!

The surgeon paused a long moment. If you are lying-

Im not.

The surgeon straightened, replaced his tools and stepped out of the tent. Jagg could hear him speaking with some of the PDF soldiers, but could not make out what they were saying. When the man returned he started to wrap his back up in bandages.

Well? Jagg asked.

Shut up. Say nothing or I will make sure your wounds are instantly fatal. I am told we only need one of you, and your friend is resting well. Do not press your fortune. The surgeons brow raised and only when Jagg nodded did he return to his work. He set Jaggs nose with a sickening twist, and cleaned him up with rags.

He was ordered to put his blood stained tunic back on, and without further conversation the PDF soldiers were told to take him back to the shed. Jagg looked over his shoulder briefly at the surgeon as he was led away, but the blood-stained man refused to look up from the metal blades and tools he was cleaning.

They trudged along and through the town. It was dark, but despite the lack of illumination Jagg could feel the eyes of the town upon him. Quiet conversations ceased and were replaced by curses in the local dialect. A PDF soldier was leaning up against a squat building, a few paces from the shed. He smoked idly upon a lho stick and nodded to the escorts, but paid Jagg no mind.

The chain from the shed was removed and the door opened. It was dreadfully dark inside. Hands grasped Jagg and shoved him in violently. The door shut and he tried to make out shapes and shadows. Some light made its way into the shed through spaces in the dry wooden boards and Jaggs vision gradually adjusted.

I have some food here and water. It isnt much, came Kellen Raous voice.

He sat down, and felt his body slump. The night had been incredibly tiring indeed. Kellen offered up a bowl full of some soup spiced up with, not surprisingly, grassy bits. Food was food though, and Jagg ate swiftly and helped

Kellen Raous drain another bowl of water.

Your finger? Jagg inquired.

Escaped. It should be halfway to Kynder by now, come dawn it will get there and report in, Kellen Raous said, some of his old humor returning, despite the ordeals he had suffered. That Ivean brute, he said your back was going to be the death of you. True?

Afraid so. Though I think my back may be just the thing to help us out,

As if on cue the chains on the door rattled.

Jagg and Kellen shifted in place while the door was opened. As the door creaked Jagg could see the shapes of two men. He could tell by the stooped frame that one was the surgeon, the other could have been anyone.

That him? the surgeon asked and flicked on an illuminator. Jagg turned his face away as the bright light pained his eyes and Kellen Raous went as far as to place his arm over his eyes.

A thin voice whispered from behind the illuminator. Whoever it was clung close to the surgeon. Jagg couldnt be sure of the gender, but he could make out the content, I think. They all look so much alike though.

You must be sure! No doubts, is this the same man, or not? the light blazed in Jags face and the surgeons comments hung heavily in the air. Nothing.

Forget it then, come, the surgeon decided and switched off the light. Jagg sighed and turned his face towards the opening. He was too tired and weak to say, let alone do, anything.

The companion of the surgeon spoke, Its him. But there is a way to know for sure. The whispering voice addressed Jagg, You. Why did you set me free, when you were told to kill us all?

Jagg felt elation at first when the former prisoner recognized him. That elation then dissipated like Jendras heat soon as the sun set. Jagg cursed himself. He had set the prisoners free, but not out of good will. He had done it to earn some form

of sympathy and respect from his section. They had balked at the idea of shooting unarmed and apparently loyal citizens. Jagg all too quickly volunteered to defy Commissar Razin. It was a selfish move to gain back the protection a man needed from his fellow soldiers. Twenty strikes on the back to Jagg was nothing compared to the thought of going into battle knowing that the men around him were just as likely to shoot him as the enemy. Jagg had not acted out of bravery, but out of cowardice. This in of itself would have been no concern. Jagg had told no one of his true motives. Except the prisoners.

Jagg remembered back. He remembered how he had told the prisoners he had nearly killed his own squad with a poorly thrown grenade, and that their freedom would earn him their trust again. He had almost gloated about it to them.

A long moment passed and the whisper asked again, Why did you set us free?

Did you a kind turn, you half-wit. You should be thanking him. We arent the monsters your blind commanders are making us out to be, Kellen Raous said.

Jagg swallowed. To confess his true motives may in fact not be that wise. But he had been the one to make the claim, backing down now would do him, or Kellen Raous no good either. A decision was made.

I did it to make up for a mistake I made clearing your town out of orks, Jagg could feel Kellen Raous stare at him. He continued none the less, I set you free for selfish reasons. Kellen is right. We arent all monsters. We arent here to kill you. I benefited, yes, but I set you free.

You are a coward then? the whispery voice asked.

Sometimes, Jagg answered truthfully.

The figures remained in the doorway of the shed, then without a word backed out. The door shut and the sound of the chain locking back into place resounded. A long silence ensued.

Youre a right bast*rd, you know that Jagg? Kellens voice was stern.

Jagg stared up at nothing and shut his eyes. I know.

VII

The Hunt

Days passed and a routine was set. Three times a day a guard would let Jagg and Kellen Raous out of the shed to use a latrine. Three times a day they were fed soup and water. Three times a day they were questioned, briefly; given Jagg and Kellen Raous gave nothing more than what they already had. They were questioned together, and separate. Thankfully, no beatings ensued.

Each night Jagg collapsed into a fitful sleep. He knew his back was literally killing him, and though Kellen had been recovering from his torture, their poor diet and cramped conditions were wearing them down physically and mentally.

It was late at night Jagg guessed when the chain rattled. It was not early enough to be fed or use the latrine and Jagg nudged Kellen in the ribs with his elbow.

The soldier coughed and sighed, What now?

The door opened and a small figure whispered, You found me in a state that you now bear. You let me go, for selfish reasons. I let you go because I believe in debts being repaid.

Jagg grabbed Kellen, and they both stumbled to their feet. Jagg tried to pierce the darkness to better see his benefactor, but little could be made out. He judged the whispering voice to be male. He tried to look past the shadow of the man in the doorway.

Wheres the guard?

Getting another pack of lho sticks. Not much time, follow me. The figure turned and slipped around the shed.

They hastily followed, arm in arm for support. The cool night air wafted over Jagg and he looked cautiously at the collection of buildings. It must have been late in the evening, for only a few structures were lit, and Jagg could see only a handful of people in the town, drifting like wraiths between the worn-down buildings.

The small figure led them over a fence, and around a large grain-silo near the mill. There the figure raised his hand in caution.

Jagg could see nothing past the silo except Jendras ocean of grass and perhaps a faint glow on the horizon. Tense moments passed before the figure shuffled past the silo and into the reeds. Jagg and Kellen Raous followed in haste, then separated from one another so as to duck low in the cover provided by the grass.

This is as far as I can take you. I have brought two canteens of water and some rations. Head towards the glow, its the lights of Yurek. Where we first met. Fitting, no? The man pointed for emphasis towards the haze of illumination.

Jagg offered out his hand, Youre a traitor twice over, you know that?

The mans hand was small, still frail from the suffering he had endured at the hands of the orks. His head bobbed in acknowledgement, Yes. To your Death Korps, and now my own people. But I am a man of honor. A man who has principles. You wouldnt understand.

Jaggs grip tightened, Not true. He was tired from his days spent in captivity, but he was not as weak and frail as the man whose hand he held. Jagg pulled the figure in and brought up his other arm and dashed his elbow into the figures jaw. Jagg heard the mans teeth snap shut and his head lurch back. Blood leapt into the sky.

Wildly the figure scraped at Jagg with one hand, while the other tried, without success, to pull free from Jaggs dirty grip. Swiftly the Man of Krieg moved, releasing the Jendrite before him, only to leap forward and grasp him by the throat with both grimy hands.

Achim! Kellen hissed and tried to pull Jagg off, while keeping as quiet as possible.

He shook his shoulders to loosen Kellen Raous insistent grip and kept his own tight about the mans throat. No sound issued forth from the flailing figure as they tumbled in the grass reeds. Jagg placed his thumbs on the hot arteries and pressed down. He could feel the mans pulse wild and fast. He could feel his hands slapping futilely at Jaggs face, much like the reeds did when he was

forced to crawl to the encampment of traitors.

Achim, what the hell are you doing? Get off him, Kellen Raous pleaded, but he ignored him.

The pulse spiked, then slowed, and then grew slower still. The hands scraped and clawed with less purpose, as if the man was drunk, and then went limp. He was unconscious, Jagg could have left him there, in pain and with a headache in the morning, but none the worse for wear. Instead, Jagg killed him.

When it was over he released his hands from the cold throat, and never bothered to get a good look at him. From the corpse Jagg took two canteens, rations, and a small utility knife. He counted himself lucky the man hadn't the sense to use it in the struggle, Jagg doubted he would have been able to see the blade coming. No soldier would make such an error. Only a weak and sickly civilian.

You murdered him, Kellen Raous whispered and crouched low, slowly easing back from Jagg as if he might round on him next.

Jagg tossed Kellen Raous a canteen of water. I killed a traitor. I may be many things, Kellen. A bast*rd. A coward at times. But I'm a Man of Krieg; faithful to my planet, the Death Korps, the Imperium and my Emperor. Its people like this piece of trash who lead worlds into rebellion and death. They cloak their treachery in words like honor, duty, and principal.

Kellen was silent.

Kriegs a radioactive waste, you know why?

I don't need my own world's history from you. Yes, I know why. We vaporized it ourselves, to deny to the traitors.

No second chances. We let a traitor live, then he could very well be the one who forces a world to incinerate itself. The road to ruin and damnation is littered with good intentions Kellen Raous. Remember that, before you judge me. Jagg could not see Kellen's features amongst the darkness and reeds, but he could see him nod.

I understand. It feels wrong though, Kellen Raous confessed.

Who said being in the Death Korps would feel good? Come on, eventually they'll know what has happened. In the state we are in we need a good head start before they give chase.

You think they'll chase us? Kellen Raous asked as he shouldered the strap of the canteen.

Im counting on it.

The morning sun cast long golden rays out over the fertile landscape of Jendra IV. The planet had been engineered in the days of the Great Crusade to become an agricultural paradise. In the spring the rich brown earth sprouted endless shoots of gold as clouds formed in the sky. The cloud cover was artificially created by devices whose origin and reproduction had been lost long ago. The atmos-towers were probably far fewer in number these days, Ivean thought.

Summer brought the grass to waist height and long warm days. Fall, was a time of work, a time when Iveans family would operate the harvesting combine tractors. The Death Korps had taken his family and the tractors away. Winter was everyones least favorite time of the year. The harvested grain would be shipped off to distant planets, while Jendras soil remained barren and black as it recuperated to begin the cycle anew. Somehow the winter made Ivean think of the Death Korps. It was a dark and ugly time, just as they were a dark and ugly people. But like winter, they would pass and Spring would come again. Jendra would outlive the invaders.

Strangled, Master-Surgeon Trozy pronounced as he knelt over the twisted corpse of a man from Yurek.

It was ironic, Ivean thought, that the man from Yurek escaped the Death Korps firing squads for failure to properly die while in ork captivity, only to meet his demise in a place he thought was safe from them. The Death Korps killed him in the end.

A collection of farmers, like Ivean, and PDF soldiers clustered about the silo and the body in the grass. Already the town had become alive with activity. A meeting would be called soon, where Commander Churnev and a committee of the outlying farms elders would meet and discuss the next course of action. Time would be wasted and words shared on what to do, and by then, Ivean knew, the prisoners would reach Yurek. They would escape.

We must give chase. We must find them and kill them.

Major Kaspar, was staring with concern at the corpse alongside the surgeon. He looked up, No.

Planetary Defense Force. That is what you are, and yet I, a farmer, am the one who wishes to defend the planet. Ivean thumped his chest.

The Major stood and removed his cap, glancing to the rising sun and the clear trail the two prisoners left through the grass. No, Ivean. You want revenge. You have lost much, as we all have. But a blind chase is not the answer. Think of the resistance. Think of all the people here. Major Kaspar spread his hands out wide and looked about the town with all its sons and daughters of Jendra.

Ivean planted his hands upon his hips and glared at the Major. I am. If those two reach Yurek, then the Death Korps will descend on this place and slaughter us all. The fools get lost easily without a trail. Well look! Those two are making such a trail! Like ants, two go forth, and bring back the hive.

Major Kaspar pursed his lips in thought.

Ivean is right. The Commander and elders will either vote to give chase, and it will be too late. Or they will decide we need to relocate, and it will be too late. Yurek is a days crawl away. At a mad dash those two Katya did not finish the sentence as she stepped out from the crowd of civilians, lasgun in hand.

Fine. Ivean, Katya. Go. I did not see you here today. Do we all agree on that?

The assembled men and women nodded.

I would like to go too, the master surgeon said as he shut the terror-stricken eyes of his dead friend.

Ivean thought about what a loss a surgeon would be to their community. Too risky. No. You are old.

So are you, Trozy said quietly.

You are valuable. I am an old man with no family. Katya and I can handle this. They are two wounded invaders.

The surgeon sighed and removed his spectacles. Ivean could see tears in his eyes as he spoke softly, Ivean. The one with the wounded back.

Yes?

If you can, kill him slowly.

Ivean drew his blade from his side, I shall, with this very knife!

Major Kaspar looked at Katya with her lasgun then at Ivean, Take my weapon, he offered, reaching for his side to produce a pistol.

Ivean smiled and shook his head slowly. I do not need it. These lands I have known since before you were born. I know every dip in the land, every range of reed, and do not need anything but these old hands and this blade! We are wasting time, Katya, come. Ivean moved down the trail left in the wake of the clumsy invaders.

Kaspar called out from behind Ivean as he departed, Brave words my friend, but be careful. Theyve murdered already. They are killers, trained in death.

Ivean laughed darkly, Thats why Im bringing Katya. If I cant handle the invaders myself, shell shoot them. Shes a good girl.

Jagg did not bother to hide his trail. Time was more important than stealth, and he seriously doubted he could evade Jendrites on their own soil. His back was sore all over, and he felt light-headed, no matter how much water he sipped or what rations he ate. Infection was killing him, just as the surgeon said it would. The sun was just cresting the horizon and with it the lights of Yurek blended into the day-glow of the azure sky. He was certain if they kept a straight enough path they would either run into Yurek, or at least the road leading to it.

Kellen cradled his arm in an effort to protect his hand from the grass and insects that were excited by their passing. His breathing was ragged, but Jagg noted he was keeping up a better pace than he was.

You're slowing up, Kellen breathed out heavily and shook his head clear of a layer of sweat that the fresh dawn had brought to him.

Jaggs muscles ached and his tender back started to feel numb again. He had sweated the whole night, and not from heat. He nodded to his companion and attempted to pick up the pace. He sung to himself familiar tunes. Onwards Emperors Soldiers, Our Terra is a Mighty Fortress, and a few marching songs that were defiantly not approved by the ecclesiarchy, ran through Jaggs fevered mind. Since his last burst of adrenaline, when throttling the traitor, he had felt his whole body winding down like a machine low on promethium.

The sun moved higher in the sky, and beat down upon the fleeing pair. Jaggs vision blurred but still he ran until Kellen Raous, who was well in the lead raised a hand and came to a stop.

Kellen bent over and placed his hand on his knee, and cradled the wounded one protectively to his heaving chest. He drew in heavy breaths and streams of sweat poured off of his grimy form. Rest. Not long, or our muscles will seize up.

Jagg couldnt find the strength to speak, and collapsed to the ground. He flung his arm over his face, to try and blot out Jendras searing sun. He thought back to Krieg, with its massive subterranean levels, and its constant cool temperatures. He longed for the world of gray rockcrete and artificial lighting. Jagg was no longer enamored by Jendras oceanic plains of golden grass, its wide open blue sky, and most of all its sun. Give me a bunker any day.

Hey, Achim? Kellen Raous asked as he knelt down and took in deep and wheezing breaths.

Jagg licked his dry lips, and fumbled for his canteen. There was plenty of water left. They had both agreed to be cautious with how much they drank.

He sipped the coppery tasting water and swallowed before speaking, What?

We have to go back. I think I left something back at the town. Kellen offered a weak smile and raised up his wounded hand.

Youre handling your mutilation marvelously, for what its worth. Jagg laughed and wearily stood. His muscles were already trying to tighten up from over-exertion.

Better than you. Youve gone pale and youre getting slower. The day isnt half-over yet. We still have a ways to go. It took almost a day to crawl and walk here. Kellen straightened up and put his good hand under Jaggs arm to help steady him.

Jagg nodded and jerked his head as he lied, Come on then. We might make it to Yurek in time for lunch. He started to walk, then jog. His muscles instantly caught fire from the result and despite Jendras warmth, a cold chill ran down his spine and into his limbs. He was fighting exhaustion, a few days of malnutrition, and infection. Which will kill me first, Jagg wondered.

They jogged, then walked for Jagg couldnt continue at the quick pace. He looked at the ground, and stumbled through the reeds, his sole thought was that of moving one foot before the other. Keep moving. Dont stop. Keep going!

Oh, Throne, what is that? Kellen Raous said sharply.

Jagg glanced behind them, expecting pursuers, but saw nothing but their clumsy trail through the reeds. Already though he could see the trampled grass starting to right itself. The planet was durable, Jagg had to admit. Seeing no foes he looked ahead. A black haze could be seen. It moved.

Smoke? Jagg wondered.

Maybe. Orks kick up a lot of smoke. You dont think Kellen shot Jagg a nervous glance.

Doesnt matter. No going back, come on. Jagg started to walk, then tripped over his own feet. Kellen was there, and wrapped an arm around him. Together they staggered towards the darkness like drunken men.

The haze grew larger and a noise came with it as well. It sounded like motors running. For miles the black haze stretched and it was hard to tell where it was moving, but Jagg was certain that it was indeed moving. He could see the haze change shape and he perceived direction as well at times.

I know what it is.

Jagg glanced at Kellen. Eh?

Since the troubles began on this planet, farmers havent been able to tend to their crops, Kellen said quietly.

So? Jagg wheezed. What do you know about farming. You were born underground.

Kellen kept Jagg supported and gave a swift kick to the grass. The reeds swayed and a few black insects buzzed and took to the air.

Jaggs eyes widened, You have to be kidding?

Kellen shook his head, No. No ones been tending to the planet. Keep your head low, its coming.

Jagg looked at the swarm. It was miles wide and over a hundred feet high. It must have been filled with millions of the small, black, insects which had routinely offered little bites to the Men of Krieg for disturbing their grass. The sounds of motors, increased. It was the wings of a million bugs beating. The sound made Jaggs gut clench in an instinctual manner. Krieg had no insects, but he had learned quickly what they were on Jendra, and his mind disliked their shape, color and sound. There was a natural revulsion towards insects that Jagg, and he assumed every human, keenly felt.

Kellen started to haul him along, Ill carry you if I have to, Id rather not though.

Lets get this over with, once we- Jaggs statement was cut off by the distinct crack of a lasgun. Kellen Raous toppled forward, taking Jagg with him.

Into the grass they tumbled. Jagg leaned up a moment and looked back, just in time to see a red lance of light pass by his face. He could feel the heat of the passing round. The woman Katya was glaring at Ivean.

The bearded Jendrite had knocked her weapon aside, otherwise the lasround would have taken Jagg in the face. The older man drew his knife and though he was some ways off Jagg could see a smile. Ivean began to run towards them, while Katya followed behind, lasgun in hand.

He gripped Kellen and pulled up on him. Run, Jagg coughed. We have to run

Kellen moaned and opened his eyes. He raised himself to his knees, and between the two of them pulling and supporting one another, they managed to stand. Kellens shoulder was a mass of blood, and still smoking from the lasbolt that had dropped him. He looked at Jagg and sighed, Your plan of having them pursue is working perfectly.

The sound of the motors was now a roar in Jaggs ear.

Shut up, come on! Jagg couldnt quite run, and neither could Kellen Raous. Arm in arm, wounded and sweat drenched, they passed into the immense cloud of insects.

Katya yelled over the whine of the feasters, You should not have done that Ivean! I could have taken them both.

The whining wings became louder as the swarm approached. They were annoying insects accidentally introduced to Jendras perfect ecosphere a century ago. It hadnt been the first time alien life had been set loose on Jendra IV to devour the grain without fear of predators. It had however, been the first alien life to resist pesticides so well. Every spring, eggs in their billions would hatch, unless poisons were extensively used. Even then, thousands would resist the pesticide and rise up to feast upon the crops. Lately the feaster population had been allowed to grow and exponentially multiply. It was just one more gift from the invaders, and one more reason for Ivean to take his revenge, slowly.

I want to see them die. Eye to eye. Look at what they have wrought on our world, Katya! A lasgun is merciful. If Katya replied, Ivean could not hear as the swarm descended upon them. He had no time to look after the woman, and he did not fear two heavily wounded invaders would cause them trouble. Knife in hand he ducked his head low and pressed on into the living, biting cloud.

Insects batted against his features, and he could feel them cling to his eyebrows and wriggle inside the whiskers of his white beard. With narrowed eyes, and his ears filled with the sounds of a buzzing wings Ivean peered ahead. He could hardly see past the blurring black clouds of insects that nibbled on grass and tried, futilely, to bite Iveans weather-hardened skin. Though he could not see far, he could still see the invaders path through the grass. A tank might as well have passed through the field.

Ivean stomped down the trail, glancing left and right, just in case one of the invaders was being clever and hiding. He saw ahead a shape on the ground. Ivean gripped the hilt of his knife in anticipation and jogged closer to the shape. It was a body, an invader sprawled out on the ground face down. Already a carpet of insects had descended upon him. Beyond the dead man, Ivean could see the other invader, clutching his arm.

The invader turned and upon seeing Ivean walked backwards, crouching like a beast. Ivean recognized him as the one he disarmed.

I have come to cut more than a finger this time. Look! Look around us at what you have done! Ivean stepped around the body and stalked towards his prey.

Time for justice.

You should not blame me! the invader yelled and backed up further, then fell onto his hindquarters.

Ivean smiled darkly and within a few moments towered over the fallen soldier. He shook his head and grumbled, Then who? Ivean reared his knife back, ready to plunge it into the Man of Kriegs heart.

Me.

Ivean felt a lance of pain in his neck and a weak, but surprising push. He lurched to the side and his free hand came to the ground to arrest his fall. The soldier before Ivean crawled backwards, just outside his knives range. Ivean let loose a choked off growl and looked to his right.

Staggering back from Ivean was the invader he thought was dead. The soldiers nose was a mess, his skin pale and his body on the verge of dead. But not! Insects buzzed about the invader as his narrowed eyes watched Ivean. In desperation he reached up to his own neck. He felt the hilt of a small blade, lodged firmly in his neck. Already his vision was swimming as the two invaders watched him from a safe distance. Like an animal Ivean let loose a howl, that choked up with his own blood. His vision grew darker and the buzz of insects in his ear grew louder. He didnt recall falling over. Insects were swarming onto his face, clustering by the wound in his throat. In a futile last gesture he tried to throw his own blade, but it tumbled from his hand that had grown numb and unresponsive. Everything went dark, but Ivean distinctly heard the invader who had killed him. It was the last thing he heard.

Get his knife and lets get out of here.

Katya chased after the fool, Ivean. The old farmer had been blinded by rage, and that Katya could understand. Ivean had lost his family to orks and Death Korps alike. But they had a more important task, they had to prevent the prisoners from fetching help.

The swarm of feasters swirled around her, and she could feel them in their hundreds in her hair. Their beating wings obliterated sound, and every time she tried to call out, the insects sought to fly into her mouth, drawn by the moisture. She could see the trail of the invaders and moved slowly but steadily along it. She had lost sight of Ivean but doubted he could be too far ahead.

She picked up her pace and her hands clenched tight about the lasgun. She saw a shape on the ground. Insects coated it and hesitantly she raised her gun. She swept her weapon left to right, but beyond the buzzing wall of winged bugs, she saw nothing. Cautiously, she padded towards the shape and could see it was a man. She used her foot to clear the insects away from the bug-encrusted face.

Katya stared at Iveys features before the crawling feasters obscured it once more. Her eyes then flickered up to the obvious trail the invaders had left in their murderous wake. She pursed her lips and stood a long moment in the swarm of feasters, before she let out a curse and gave chase. They had to be stopped.

The path was not difficult to follow. She kept her head low and retraced the invaders steps. They had left crushed grass, and drops of blood in their passing, that had excited the insects. The swarm however was lessening, and she could see further. She imagined she saw figures moving. She leveled up her lasgun and pursed her lips.

Katya narrowed her eyes and took a breath before firing a single shot. She couldnt tell if it struck or not. A moment passed.

A dozen cracks broke through the sound of the receding swarm and glittering bolts hissed past the Jendrite. She dove to the ground, and laid flat in the trail left by the prisoners. Bolts of lasgun energy sizzled through the air, singing the tops of the reeds. Crack after crack resounded and Katya curled up and screamed. The swarm left, but the lasbolts continued flying past scorching the air with their fury. She tried to make her small frame, even smaller, as the onslaught

continued. Desperately her hands clawed at the earth, as if she could somehow bury herself.

When silence came, it was stark. No insects, no lasbolts, not even the wind. Katyas eyes were streaked with tears and she shakily looked up. In the field before her, dozens of charcoal-clad invaders stood, weapons leveled.

Briefly a thought came to mind of raising her weapon. She would die, but die defending her world. It is what Ivean would have done.

But Katya wasnt Ivean. Carefully she set her weapon down and raised her small hands in the sign of surrender.

VIII

Reversal

Field-Marshal Hartwin von Reiniger stared at the holograph. The machine projected shaky orbital picts of the orks who had been retreating north. For days Hartwin had been with the 76th, at the tip of the spear, giving chase. Elements of the 11th armored company had arrived, but had the same issues as the 76th. They were an army meant to hold lines and break them. Pursuit was not the specialty of the Death Korps. At first, he was not worried overly much; if the orks were retreating then what did it matter if it took forever to catch them? But the orks were not retreating.

Techpriests busily adjusted controls of the holograph and the commanding officers of the 76th and 11th armored, stared intently at the monochrome images. Silence pervaded in the tent as pict after pict revealed itself. The orks werent retreating at all; they were joining up with an even larger force that had sailed from the neighboring continent. That continent had fallen to the orks well before Hartwins arrival and had been written off. A mistake.

As you can see, we now know why the orks are moving north. When the 76th broke the initial ork assault, the beasts became restless. When their Rok was destroyed it caused a Hartwn glanced to his aide for the correct words.

Von Gaul stood up from his seat and said, A change in leadership, if you will, sir. The orks cant abide by failure and two major setbacks toppled the warlord that

once bound them. This threw them into confusion across the world. Orbitals indicate the orks have established a new war boss. They are organizing, and I use the term loosely. Von Gaul nodded to the officers in the tent and sat.

Von Gotslieb snorted, So the orks aren't so much as retreating, as greeting their new leader. It's a welcome party! Fantastic. How many orks exactly?

The Field-Marshal offered a thin smile, The usual endless amount. We've begun orbital bombardment of the ocean to try and stem reinforcements from sailing here on what can only be described as barges. Intelligence believes this new ork warlord has already arrived. Hence the lovely party north of here.

He strode up to the shaky images of the holograph and pointed at a flickering map. This turn of events may be advantageous. I want the 76th and the 11th to continue their pursuit. Soon as the orks are engaged, dig in, get them to attack you.

It's what we do best, von Gotslieb offered, to the polite chuckles of the commanders in the tent.

I'll have specifics sent to you shortly and then will be making my way back to Kynder. Hartwin saw the men shift in their seats. He inwardly smiled. Did they think him a coward? He let the officers soak in his words before continuing, We have, if you can believe it, other pressing matters besides the orks. Jendra has gone into open rebellion. PDF regiments hand-in-hand with civilians have taken to the countryside and started actively ambushing our convoys and smaller patrols.

Traitors! What do they think they are doing? the 11th armored company's Kapitän von Schild roared, standing to his feet in alarm.

Other officers offered similar curses and Hartwin had to raise his hands for silence. When the tent quieted down he cleared his throat and said, Traitors who could not have picked worse timing. If we are to crush this latest ork warlord, we need to do it fast. Orks build their barges at a rate I find almost impossible. Orbital fire, and the fact that more than a few will sink on their own, will keep the orks at bay, but only for so long. We need to disrupt the xenos leadership as fast as we can. The attacks on our supplies jeopardize that. I will be returning to

Kynder to handle the issue. And to find out who wants Marena von Adlers death, he thought to himself.

With respect, Field Marshal. Von Gotslieb stood and dipped his head politely as he spoke, My regiment has been battered, and with no insult directed my fellow noblemans way, I do not think the 11th will be enough for us to break the orks. They will overwhelm us. The commander of the 76th returned to his seat.

Von Schild nodded his agreement. We can give the orks hell, Field-Marshal, but without more support we may be overrun. We will need von Maurs 708th. Field-Marshal? von Schild asked with a raised brow, Cant some of the light infantry handle the rebellion? Von Saunders lot seem better suited to quelling the locals.

Hartwin nodded, alas he didnt trust von Saunder, but did not say as much, Indeed gentlemen, you are both correct. Without full support from, at the very least the 708th, the orks will overwhelm you. Time is not on our side. On the other hand if we become fully engaged and the Jendrite rebellion continues, well find our throats cut just as the orks arrive in force. The officers murmured to one another a moment.

He removed his peaked cap. So we are on a deadline. Kapitän von Gotslieb, Kapitän von Schild. I want the orks engaged, and hurling themselves at your trenches and guns in two days. You will then hold for up to five more days, unsupported.

Both men looked grim, but Hartwin was pleased to see them nod. He glanced to the orbital images, Ill arrive within those five days with everything I can muster. That gives us about a day to kill off this latest ork warlord and send the beasts into anarchy again. Just before orks start crashing into the beaches of the continent. Timing is everything.

No disrespect, my Field-Marshal, but what if we do not meet these deadlines? And will not orks land on our shores regardless if we slay their warlord? von Gotsblieb asked as he pensively watched the holographic images filter past.

If we fail, then ork boats will land on the shores of this continent in too many places to count, and theyll be organized under a single leader. Well be cut off, surrounded and die glorious deaths. Hartwin casually looked over the officers

then smiled as he spoke, If we kill their leader, the orks will still make landings, and promptly fight one another as well as us. A far better option. The Field-Marshal shrugged and added, Such is the nature of war, bad choices all around. My aide will give you the pertinent details, are there any other questions?

Von Gotslieb cleared his throat before speaking, Yes, my Field-Marshal, how do you plan on putting down the rebellion and returning here within seven days?

Hartwin flashed his most charismatic smile and donned his peaked cap. He said loudly to the collection of officers, That is my secret! If I told you, you wouldnt need me anymore and send me home! He laughed with the men, but in truth he had no idea how he was going to make good on his claims.

Hartwin strode from the tent, leaving the capable von Gaul with the task of giving the officers the finer points of their mission. Marena von Adler had been at the meeting, dressed in a simple, Death Korps, uniform. She looked quite the figure with her blonde hair, and perfect skin, sheathed in the dull charcoal hues of a Death Korpsman. Charming yes, but the sight still unnerved him, despite her beauty. Women weren't supposed to behave in such a way. Not that he would openly challenge a cousin to the newly elevated Kaiserina.

Field-Marshal, your men will continue to treat civilians as such, when you encounter them? the woman asked as she kept pace with Hartwin's long strides. Men about the encampment saluted him as he passed by, and he took in the smell of canvas, promethium and sweat. It had been a long time since he had been at the front lines of a war, and the smell brought back fond memories of his youth.

Field-Marshal?

He blinked and smiled politely at the von Adler. Lost in thought, forgive me, my lady. I have not rescinded the order to treat the liberated as civilians.

And your other order? she inquired, raising a frosty thin brow.

Commissar Razin of the 76th has shot one hundred civilians at Kynder and the areas about, Hartwin replied bluntly.

Field-Marshal! Marena von Adler's blue eyes widened and she gaped a moment before setting her jaw. She whispered fiercely, And you wonder why there is open rebellion? You must stop these executions at once! If the orks have rallied and are to land on the continent, then we need every able-bodied man fighting them. The Death Korps cannot hold the planet alone at this point.

A flicker of annoyance raced through his mind. He did not like having his orders or judgment questioned. The last thing he needed was doubt wearing away at him. That would lead to true disaster. The Field-Marshal halted and turned to face the small woman.

We are carrying out the Emperor's will. War is horrible. I cannot make it nice, my lady.

Marena von Adler bristled, and her voice became low and cool as she whispered, I did not ask for that, Field-Marshal. This war is not a usual one. The Death Korps are not in their element. There are matters to consider, beyond orks. There are politics involved now. Local and she hesitated before adding, Not so local.

Hartwin sighed, We are the Death Korps. We land, we kill, we do the Emperors work, we leave. What is different?

You must think like a general, not just a commander of a regiment. A general does not land, kill, and leave in His name. They broker arrangements with the locals. They make plans to face the physical foe, but also the political one. There are enemies of this army who are not green or wearing quaint little brown uniforms! Marena stepped close to the Field-Marshal. Although their words were quiet, body language alone guided soldiers and officers alike in a wide circuit around the pair. Marena von Adlers identity had been impossible to keep a secret from the higher ranked officers. Time had then done the rest and the rumor was out that a von Adler was amongst them.

It had not been the first time she had referred to unseen foes. Hartwin let out a heavy breath and planted his hands upon his hips. He spoke levelly, Who are you talking about? How can I fight an enemy when I dont know who it is?

It is best you do not know. What you need to know is this; there are powerful people who want us to fail so as to keep us as their own dirty tools. There are also powerful people, who once made a mighty profit on this planet, and are fearful we are going to ruin the world before we leave. We have enemies, Field-Marshal, and not the kind you can roll over with a tank. Marena von Adler let out an exasperated hiss, If we are to pull this off, we need to defeat the orks, and get the planet producing as it once did. To do that, we need Jendras population on our side!

I plan on getting them on our side, Hartwin assured her.

By shooting them?!

If necessary. But I will try your way first. A Man of Krieg will do the unthinkable. Ill attempt to negotiate. But if the leadership of this rebellion will not come to terms, in the next few days, then I will revert to the old ways. Fair?

Hartwin eyed the von Adler.

She stared at him, her eyes unwavering. The woman nodded and let out a held breath. Marena von Adler looked out at the mass of soldiery in the camp. We are going to Kynder then?

He nodded and said, Yes. Those two men who saved your life, I sent them to do some investigating.

Hartwin had yet to tell Marena von Adler the extent of his plans involving the men.

She tilted her head and her brow furrowed. I am thankful that they saved me. But they are common men. Why are you she trailed off then peered at him, You did not let me see who was shooting at us. Who was it?

She was a clever girl; Hartwin had to admit to himself.

Death Korps.

Her skin paled and she started to pace like some caged animal. He followed after, much more leisurely. The woman shook her head, You believe the ambush was planned? Who was the target, you or I?

The trooper who hauled you off your horse was confident it was you. You spoke of off-world enemies; Powerful ones at that?

The cousin to the Kaiserina turned to face Hartwin. Yes. Our glorious Kaiserinas sudden ascension, the Death Korps establishments as an army unto itself, and Jendras lack of production, have all created foes. She shook her head. Assassination is not unheard of, but I expected an off-worlder, not a Man of Krieg. This bodes ill. Who do you trust?

Hartwin gestured with one hand, and guided the von Adler towards his personal tent. Soldiers scurried out of their way, and though he was confident none could overhear their conversation, he had his tent supplied with electronic counter-measure devices just in case. He parted the flap to allow the slight woman to enter, and followed after. The tent was plain, with a table from which to work, several glow-lights, and a cot to call a bed.

I trust the Techpriests, in so much as they dont want you dead. I trust those two soldiers we encountered on the way here. And that is about it. I sent the pair off to see if that broken-down Chimera had truly bogged down, or if it was planted as bait for us.

Marena pursed her lips. And?

And they were under the guise of returning the horses we borrowed from Grosse-Kapitän von Saunder, who I might add knew where we would be and roughly when, Hartwin could not help smirking as he added for effect, Oh! And he has a whole regiment of sharpshooters. Anyways, after I sent them, the two vanished.

Marena von Adler licked her lips and blinked rapidly in succession. He could tell the royal mind was spinning.

There is some good news. They were captured by Jendras rebels, tortured, escaped and are recuperating in some small town outside Kynder by the name of Yurek.

Will we be visiting these two men, who Im not sure to call lucky or unlucky? Marena asked.

Correct, on the way to Kynder we will visit the wounded, to raise morale of course.

Of course.

I had hoped they would have had time to get a feel for von Saunder, but the Jendrites put a dash to that plan. They may have no information for us at all. He shrugged and scratched his thin nose. I have men back in Kynder I trust with my life, but everyone knows who they are.

Meaning out of this entire army, outside your personal staff, you trust the Techpriests to not outright try and kill me, she said eyeing him.

Correct.

And beyond that you have two wounded, common, troopers who you trust.

Yes. Add in the intrigue of these off-world forces you speak of, the rebels, and the orks; Id say Im going to earn my ration-card during this campaign. I need you close to me, my lady. I dare not leave you here. Orks aside, I cant trust Kapitän von Gotslieb or Schild with your safety. We will leave by Chimera in say, an hour? Hartwin watched Marena and when the woman nodded he smiled, and said, Good.

Marena von Adler left the tent and he adjusted his peaked cap. In her exasperation Marena von Adler had been more forthright than she perhaps had planned to be. She had revealed more about the off-world forces working against the Death Korps and her own interests.

He had heard her mention them before. People who wanted to keep the Death Korps as their own personal, if loathed, disposable force. He could understand that. She had mentioned people upset that Jendra IV was no longer making them wealthy. This too he could understand. But in her haste, Marena von Adler had also mentioned people displeased by the Kaiserinas sudden ascension. She had not mentioned that before. Of all the reasons that a Man of Krieg might kill one of the royal family, only one of the motives fit. Revenge for a murdered monarch.

IX

No Rest for the Wicked

Pain, an old and reliable friend, came to Jaggs face and back. His eyes opened and he found himself lying face down on a serviceable cot. He could not remember ever lying down, or a cot for that matter. The last thing he recalled was stumbling out of the swarm of insects into sentries of the Death Korps. As Jagg hoped, the sound of lasgun fire had drawn them. After falling at their feet, he remembered nothing.

A lamp hummed from above and shed stark white light onto the small area. Glancing around he could see he was in a building that had been converted to a medicae station. Torn white drapes blocked him in on all sides. It had the distinct feeling of a prison cell.

Frick, Jagg cursed as his back and face felt fire racing through them. He tried to

count himself lucky that he actually felt his back and that decay was no longer numbing it as it had.

Not exactly a proper way to address me, A cold voice said.

Jagg turned his head, and his eyes widened. Sitting on a stool next his cot was Commissar Razin. Razin, who had once tried to execute him for desertion. Razin, who had sent Jagg and his section numerous times into danger. Razin, who had ordered Jagg to execute civilians of Yurek for the misfortune of being used as slave labor by the orks. Jagg had found himself on the Repenting Rack for that; it was why his back was still a mass of raw nerves and pain.

The Commissar wore a black stormcoat, despite the heat of Jendra, and his pale thin features showed no sign of sweat or discomfort. The brim of his peaked cap was decorated with all manner of skulls and symbols of death that the Commissariat so adored. The Commissars were the inspiration of the Death Korps. They were independent political officers who could reward, or punish, at will. Even the Field-Marshal himself would have a high level Commissar appointed to him. A man who could, if he deemed it necessary, put a lasround in the Field-Marshals brain. Jagg was no Field-Marshal and he instinctually cringed at the sight of the black-clad Razin.

The specter of darkness stared, his face blank of emotion, his eyes hard. Gradually he raised a brow.

Well?

Jagg blinked then spoke. His voice was dry and rasping, Sorry, Commissar, sir.

Better. Quite the adventure youve had. Your companion Raous told me all about it. Id like you to do the same. Razin stood, and like some reaper of legend, hovered over Jagg.

He blinked and tried to clear his mind. It was difficult to think, he felt pain, and a general weariness, not only from his ordeal, but he imagined from the drugs administered to him by the medicae staff. Jagg was unsure how best to proceed. Field-Marshal von Reiniger had made it fairly clear their mission was a clandestine one. There was a conspiracy within the Death Korps itself! Jagg

hadnt been sure his own regiment was in the clear until questioning the tank crewmen at the depot. And though he felt the men of the 76th were loyal, that didnt mean he could reveal the Field-Marshal's concerns to just anyone. Jagg took his time and then told Commissar Razin the cover story.

They were returning horses to Grosse-Kapitän von Saunder, by order of the Field-Marshal himself. It was a reward of sorts, for preventing an unexpected and unexplained ambush.

Commissar Razin listened to the tale in silence, asking no questions nor making any gestures at all to indicate what he felt. When Jagg finished his story Razin placed a gloved hand lightly on his wounded back. It burned and Jagg could not help but let out a hiss of pain.

Razin said in conversational tones, We keep meeting under the strangest circumstances, trooper Jagg. I have this sense you have evaded my justice on numerous occasions. This little wound to your back, Razin's hand pressed down, I believe is hardly punishment for crimes you've committed. I enjoyed administering these marks to you. I shall however, truly enjoy finally shooting you. I should have done it in another medicae station, not that long ago.

The agony was sharp and distinct, a pain that spider-webbed through his flesh with every move the cold glove made. Only when the Commissar's hand pulled back, so that he could reach for his sidearm, did Jagg let out a shuddering breath. He tried to lean up, but his arms felt weak, and whatever drugs were in his system made his muscles unresponsive and sluggish.

Im not a traitor! Jagg managed.

No? But you are a liar. I am the representative of His will! And He does not tolerate lies from a common soldier such as you. Your companion had much more to tell me than you, trooper Jagg. And you yourself had much more to say in your drug induced sleep. Razin drew a sleek laspistol and idly thumbed a switch to power the weapon up. Razin examined the pistol and placed its muzzle squarely against Jagg's spine. The icy metal burned his wounds.

Razin whispered, You are going to tell me the truth; everything. You will leave nothing out. As you talk, if I sense the tiniest of lies, Im going to cripple you.

You'll live through that. Then I'll have you taken to a burial pit filled with Jendrite traitors. The sinister figure smiled casually and leaned closer to whisper in Jaggs ear, I'll bury you alive under a mountain of rotting corpses and dirt. In my mercy, I give you three seconds to start from the beginning of your tale. One, two,

Jagg told the Commissar everything. At first, it felt like cowardly betrayal. Jagg was breaking the confidence of his own general, to save his own life. It was not his finest moment, it was startlingly similar to an experience he had on Krieg as well. Jagg strained to hold back tears. Though he hated himself, Jagg left no detail out, and detailed the story from the moment he met the Field-Marshal and the von Adler, to the moment he awoke in the medicae station. When he finished, the muzzle of the weapon remained, and the commissar was still bent close to Jaggs ear taking in every word.

Time passed and Hagg noted with a new sense of terror, that he had not felt Commissar Razins breath upon him, despite how close they were. The Commissar might as well have been a walking corpse! Still the silence pervaded.

I've told you the truth, Jagg finally said as the stillness unnerved almost as much as the weapon ground into his spine.

The muzzle lifted away and Razin holstered the laspistol with a practiced motion. He walked outside of Jaggs vision at the foot of the bed. I know. Field-Marshal Reiniger should have handed this matter over to his Lord Commissar. Not you two. If a man cannot trust in the faith of the Commissariat, then he might as well put a pistol to his own head. We are the ones who ensure the Men of Krieg are loyal.

Jagg sighed, I've betrayed him, and von Adler. A fricking royal. How is that loyal? If I wasn't a traitor before

You are not a traitor. Believe me, I wish you were. Zap. Alas, you have proven loyalty and in doing so have done your duty to Krieg. Who matters in the Death Korps, trooper Jagg?

The question caught him off guard. He had been taught the correct reply while a conscript back on Krieg and he parroted it from memory. No one. All that matters is that the Death Korps performs. No one is important. We all obey.

No one is important. Not even a Field-Marshal. You have been of service, trooper Jagg. You saved a von Adler, you delivered to me a Jendrite prisoner, and left a path right to one of their bases of operation. Additionally, you've given me information that is imperative to the functioning of the Death Korps. All in all, I am pleased. Surprised as well. Jagg heard the curtains part, and the click of the commissars heels. Before he left Razin whispered, Consider your slate clean in my eyes, trooper Jagg. The Field-Marshal is paying us a visit today. Tell him the truth of this conversation. Hell know what to do next.

Jagg rested and shut his eyes. He sorely missed being a soldier on the front line. Things were easier. The enemy was the large green creature with the axe loping towards you. Your orders were simple. Kill the enemy, don't get killed in return. His head hurt with the intrigue and doubts that gnawed at him. As a simple soldier he knew what was right, now he was unsure.

Bunderson had Jagg on his back in the gray, slick, mud. The older boy was stronger than he was. His gloved hands began to fumble for Jaggs rebreather mask. He groped desperately at Bundersons hands and stared up at him with wild eyes. The older boy barely looked human with his rebreather mask on. Jagg couldnt even see his eyes through the tinted goggles. Bunderson breathed deeply, and methodically, and nothing Jagg did could prevent him from getting his hands around his mask.

This wasnt how it was supposed to be.

Jagg looked around, for Callum, but he was not there. Bundersons three cronies stood in a ring, coldly staring down at Jagg. They were unmoving, like statues.

This wasnt how it happened.

Jagg screamed and tried to turn his body, to somehow move away from Bunderson, but everything he did failed, every move he made, ended up assisting Bunderson in the end. Slowly, as if it was no great effort, Bunderson, number five, six, five, pulled off Jaggs rebreather mask. The toxic, radioactive world of Krieg was now free to sear Jaggs skin, blister his tongue, cook his eyes and melt his lungs from within. Jagg let out a gurgling horrific scream as the traitor killed him.

It was a dream. Jagg knew it was a dream, but that did not alleviate the terror. It did not slow his beating heart. He was still lying face down in a cot, lit by a humming glow lamp. Sweat coated his body from the horror of the dream and his nose and back burned with fresh pain. How long had it been since Commissar Razins visit?

Jagg heard steps approaching. He could not look behind him, but he heard the curtains part. A feminine gasp came forth, followed by a gruff clearing of the throat. Jagg didnt need to turn over to see who was visiting him.

Field-Marshal, sir. Trooper Jagg, reporting in, sir.

At ease, my boy. At ease. Your back is a fine mess. The Jendrites did that to you? Field-Marshal von Reiniger inquired with a touch of concern edging into his voice.

Actually, Commissar Razin had been the one to flay Jaggs back open, the Jendrites had allowed it to be reopened and get infected. Jagg wasn't about to complain about the Commissar. He blamed the Jendrites by agreeing. Yes, sir. Have you seen Kell- Jagg coughed, Trooper Raous, yet?

Field-Marshal von Reiniger moved to Jaggs side, and then guided the petite von Adler to take the only seat in the curtained cell. Jagg was terrified at the rank she held, the sheer power she wielded by association. But he was still male, and could not help but eye her. She looked fetching in her military uniform.

The Field-Marshal raised a brow, as if sensing Jaggs less than savory thoughts and quickly spoke up saying, No. He is up and about though! It would look strange to talk to a common trooper except in passing.

Not so strange to thank the wounded for their service and pray for their quick recovery, Marena von Adler said, with a soft smile, that didn't quite touch her azure gaze.

My thanks, my lady. Will I recover? I've not spoken with a medicus. Jagg leaned up, and was pleased to find his body more responsive. A sheet had been draped over his nakedness, but his back had been left exposed, treated with all manner of medicines he supposed. There was a definite sterile smell that he was sure was rising up from his wounds.

Yes. The medicae team recommends you get a few days rest. I'm afraid though, my good man, that such is not possible. We need you. Marena von Adler reached out and hesitantly put a hand on Jagg shoulder.

It was the softest touch Jagg had ever felt. And he recoiled slightly only because of who she was. Jagg licked his still dry and cracked lips before he spoke, I'm not so sure you'll want me, my lady. I have much to tell you and the Field-Marshal.

Oh? von Reiniger said.

He took a deep breath, and told them the truth, just as Commissar Razin had asked.

For the most part Field-Marshal von Reiniger and Lady Maerna von Adler

seemed pleased by the story. They smiled when it was confirmed there was no obvious treachery in the 76th. Alas, those same smiles fell as Jagg, almost cheerily, told them how he let Commissar Razin in on everything.

I gave you orders, trooper Jagg, to be discrete. The Field-Marshal gave the von Adler a look and she in turn sighed in mild annoyance.

Commissar Razin was persuasive, sir. Jagg confessed.

Im sure. And he wanted you to tell us this?

I believe the Commissar wants transparency. Complete faith and trust amongst the Commissariat and you, sir, Jagg reasoned.

Perceptive fellow arent you? the von Adler patted Jaggs arm and drew back, looking up to von Reiniger.

What does this mean?

The Field-Marshal rubbed at his nose and gave a grunt. It means the Commissariat will be involved. They will do what they do best. Find the disloyal and have them up against a wall. Ill be signing sheets in triplicate as it happens. The Lord Commissar will be most verbose about this as well.

A bad thing? Marena von Adler asked.

The Field-Marshal shook his head, Not exactly. My fear is that their blunt methods will catch a few of the game-pieces, but not the player. Theyll chase our true foes underground and for a time theyll be quiet. And when they strike again, theyll be better prepared.

And I thought you were unskilled at the finer points of intrigue, the von Adler said with a sly smile.

My time amongst Kriegs High Command has not left me ignorant of what occurs. But this is beyond the petty jealousies amongst noblemen. This is an effort to undermine the First Army of Krieg.

Or an effort to kill lady von Adler, Jagg said with a pointed look cast both their

directions.

The Field-Marshal and von Adler glared at Jagg. He bobbed his head as best he was able and relaxed, offering no further insights to the conversations of his superiors.

Im very displeased with you, trooper Jagg. However, as lady von Adler has indicated, we need you. The Field-Marshal eyed him.

Jagg in turn tried to restrain a groan. He had hoped his confession would make him of no further use to the intrigues of high command.

Thus far, the existence of Marena von Adler is known by a few. This is a secret that will gradually become known as officers and men talk. Im afraid a beautiful woman amongst the ranks, does not go unnoticed.

The royal cousin smiled wide, and to Jagg it looked like she took well to the obvious flattery.

Von Reiniger pointed at Jagg. You, and your companion are the only ones who know that there is treachery in the ranks and that someone is out to do our royal liaison harm. Well, you, trooper Raous, and now the damned Commissariat. Its a fine mess, trooper. Assassins, orks, and off-world frickers who either miss their ill-gotten wealth or are envious of Kriegs newfound prestige.

It all meant nothing to Jagg. Plan, sir? he prompted.

First thing is first, I need the Jendrite population quelled. One way or another. Ive discovered that your flight from the rebels ended up placing one of them in our hands. Im going to release her, and attempt a face to face meeting with Commanderthe Field-Marshal looked up as he tried to recall the name.

Commander Churnev, sir? Jagg provided.

Correct. He escaped our reprisal raid on that town you led us to. Hes out there, and she can find him.

Jagg cleared his throat, No offense sir, but Im not sure if you can get him to expose himself.

I shall be my most charming, and make it clear to him that if he doesn't deal with me, he will be dealing with more orks than he has ever had to contend with before. The fact I am willing to negotiate, should be enough to get him, or at the very least one of his officers to meet with me here in Yurek.

Marena von Adler nodded and said, Which leaves your part.

My part, my lady?

The Field-Marshal chuckled, Yes, your part, trooper Jagg. I'm not happy with you, but I still trust you. At least, I trust you not to betray the army or the royal family. As for betraying Field-Marshals

Jagg swallowed.

Anyways, you and trooper Raous are going to be assigned to another man. Together you will continue to track down that hauler to Kynder. It is the only lead. I need to know who is behind the attempted assassination. Von Reiniger crossed his arms.

Who is this other man, sir? Jagg tried to think who he would be appointed to. One of the Field-Marshals aides? A trusted man from Kynder?

Commissar Razin, of course. I need people I am not connected to working on this. You will have a higher chance at succeeding than anyone else who might be watched and countered. Though I admit, having Razin added to the mix probably lowers our chances of unraveling whatever conspiracy is afoot. But I'm sure you'll get to shoot someone.

Jagg's jaw dropped, he fumbled in his mind for some way to refuse the general. None came.

He looks pleased, Marena von Adler said with a coy smile.

Serves him right. Jagg, you brought the commissar into this mess, so you get to keep him with you. I'll meet with Razin now. With luck he hasn't alerted the Lord Commissar, or this will be a real mess.

Von Reiniger? Shall you tell him the other good news?

Jaggs eyes widened. Theres more?!

Oh right. You have roughly six days to figure this out. By tomorrow the 76th and the 11th armored will be clashing with orks. After that, we need everyone at the front and Ill need von Saunders lot to stall any additional ork landings on the continent. Well be spread thin at best. And I need to know who is loyal and who is not, and I need to know soon.

Jagg felt his back and nose burning again. This wasnt how life in the Death Korps was supposed to be. He was a solider! A gun-bunny. A nobody. Jagg knew he should not be chatting idly with a general. He knew he should never even lay eyes on a member of the royal family.

As the Field-Marshal continued, Jagg could only dread what he was going to say next.

I looked over your files and had a quick chat with the medicus. Your back will be bandaged, and if you arent out in the field too long, youll live. Probably. It was quite infected. Your nose, a little crooked, but its shaping up fine. Shouldnt interfere with your duty. Now your testicles

Jagg coughed and felt his already wide eyes, almost fall out of his head.

Marena von Adler straightened in her seat; she swiftly rose and smiled thinly. I do not think I am needed for this conversation. I shall meet you outside, Field-Marshal.

Von Reiniger blushed and he nodded, opening the curtain for the woman to leave. My apologies, I sometimes forget.

She nodded and slipped out.

Etiquette be damned Jagg thought and said, What the hell is wrong with my test-

The Field-Marshal swiftly took the seat Marena had vacated and leaned in, Shut up. Nothing is wrong. I just wanted a moment alone. Youre clever. Yes?

Jagg shook his head no. I dont think so, sir. Look where I am.

The man smiled wide, That sounds clever to me. Unlucky, but clever. So listen up. You are positive Marena von Adler was the target?

Without a doubt, sir.

Our new Kaiserinas ascension was sudden. I didnt think much of it, till she let slip that there were those who were not pleased by it. The Field-Marshal whispered, You are a common man, Jagg. But think. Think; who would be so furious at the Kaiserinas ascension as to take action? To seek revenge and harm her, or her kin? Von Reiniger peered intently at Jagg.

He wanted to roll off his bed and hide. It was too much. He shut his eyes, to block out the sight of the peering general and moaned, I dont know, sir!

The Field-Marshal spoke quietly, Neither do I, trooper Jagg. Even to the nobility, the royal familys internal politics is secretive. But be aware of that angle. A Man of Krieg tried to kill Marena von Adler, not an off-world assassin or a hired Jendrite. One of our own is behind this.

Jagg didnt open his eyes until he heard the Field-Marshal leave. An hour later the medicae staff cleaned his body, shaved his head and dressed his wounds. They gave him a dozen pills to take, warned him that he should still stay in bed, and sent him off anyways to meet with his temporary commanding officer; Commissar Razin.

Jagg had been given a new uniform, which lacked any unit designation or rank. He was also given a sleek laspistol. Yurek looked much the way he remembered it. It had orderly streets, with squat ugly buildings that had been devastated by ork and Death Korpsmen alike. Few civilians wandered the churned up roads and those that did kept their eyes downcast. Streams of military vehicles were travelling through Yurek; on their way to the front.

Several posters had been plastered to the dirty walls of the town. Posters depicting Men of Krieg in valiant poses with charming phrases written in Low Gothic.

The Death Korps are Your Friend

or

Liberation! Welcome Us!

or

Jendra and Krieg! Brothers

A black, mirror-polished, open topped transport was waiting off the side of the road. Commissar Razin was impossible to miss in his dark black attire, and at his side stood a pale and nervous looking Kellen Raous. Like Jagg, Kellen Raous donned an inconspicuous uniform. It was good to see him.

Jagg jogged up to the pair and saluted quickly. Trooper Jagg, reporting, Commissar sir. Jagg offered a quick nod to Kellen and glanced at his right hand. Kellen wore a black glove, hiding his missing digit.

Razins smile was purely serpentine. Trooper Jagg, the Field-Marshal has placed me in command of this little clandestine operation. My superiors in Kynder will give us roughly two days to root out treachery subtly, before they do it the old fashioned way. To emphasize, Razin pointed to a ruined wall not far off.

The wall was made of red brick and had scorch marks dotting it from lasgun fire. Heaps of bodies were piled up at the foot of the bricks, their forms twisted and crumpled. More than a few hands still clawed at the sky, frozen and unmoving in

death. Charming motivational posters adorned the same wall, though they were blood streaked. A red hand print splayed on one poster was of particular, and unsettling, interest to Jagg.

Having an army unto ourselves is quite the challenge. I must admit, I miss the way we used to things. Far less politics. Wouldnt you agree?

He didnt have to lie. Yes, Commissar sir.

Can either of you drive? Razin looked at them both and when silence greeted him he smirked, I thought not. In the back you get. Look depressed. Look like Im taking you off to your executions. Who knows

Jagg opened the door to the back of the transport and slipped into a nice grox-hide seat. Kellen Raous joined him. Dutifully they clasped their hands and looked down. It wasnt hard to look depressed.

Razin sat behind the wheel of the transport, and the vehicle lurched into motion. The Commissar drove as if he owned the road. And apparently he did. At one point Razin drove headlong towards a Leman Rus tank; the moment the driver of the armored behemoth noted who was heading towards him, he spun the tank off the road. Commissar vs tank? Jagg would bet on the commissar every time.

They wouldnt let me see you. They just kept me in an empty room, like some prisoner. Commissar Razin had to fill me in, if you can believe it, Kellen Raous said as they sped down the road kicking up a plume of dust in their wake.

Im sorry, he has a way with words and I told the commissar everything. Jagg kept his voice low and with the wind from outside, he was sure Razin couldnt hear them. Your finger?

Nothing to be done about it. They medicae patched me up well enough, but they recommend I lose the whole hand and get an augmetic. Kellen laughed morosely, They told me a finger replacement is too expensive for a trooper. A clumsy metal club for a hand that can barely hold a gun and pull a trigger, thats do-able!

Jagg gave his companion a sympathetic look. Im sorry.

Eh, you put a knife in that bearded bleeps neck. Dont be sorry. Actually, the fact we are with Commissar Razin, is that your fault?

Jagg sadly nodded.

Never mind, be sorry. Where are we going anyways?

Commissar Razins ears must have been able to detect the slightest of whispers, even with the open topped vehicle sending air sheeting past them. He called out, Kynder! I tracked down that hauler, or more importantly, its driver. An impressed Jendrite. We are lucky the conspirators didnt kill him.

Whats the plan, Commissar sir? Jagg asked loudly.

The man turned, and his hat rippled in the wind, yet stayed firmly attached to his skull. We are going to beat him half to death, then ask him some questions!

Jagg and Kellen Raous stared at one another and at the same time said, Huh.

X

Negotiations

The Death Korps had never negotiated. The regiments of Krieg landed on blighted worlds, killed the enemy, and if the enemy tried to surrender, generally shot them. Negotiation was for the weak. Negotiation was for others to worry about. Generals had to fret over negotiations. Field-Marshal von Reiniger sighed. He wished for a moment Krieg had no army, that he was not its general. He longed for the old ways. The moment of doubt faded as von Gaul, dressed in his ceremonial best, whispered in his ear.

The reb- or rather, the Jendrite leadership is here, sir.

While the Death Korps knew little about negotiation, and were in fact given such lovely titles as uncompromising and remorseless, they were good at ceremonial pomp.

The meeting had been arranged just outside of Yurek. Tanks lined the road, guns up, as if saluting. Soldiers were dressed in full attire and in parade formation.

Given the meeting was conducted at night, glow lights had been arranged to cast their white illumination over a wide expanse. Replace the grass with rockcrete and it would almost look like Krieg, Hartwin thought. In the center of the reception ceremony a long table had been placed, right on the churned up road, with two chairs.

Hartwin wore his gray stormcoat and a chest full of medals, while the golden Aquila at his throat glittered. His aide stood at one side and two others to his left. One was an emissary of the Techpriesthood. The other was a priest of the Imperial cult. He wanted it to be clear that every aspect of the Imperium supported him. If the Jendrites were true rebels, such a fact would not impress them. If they were loyal, but misguided, the sight of such holy authority might make them more agreeable. The idea had been Marena von Adlers.

He had at first decided not to allow her to come to the meeting. It was dangerous and he was tired of her interference. She refused to listen, and invoked her right as a member of the royal family to go where she pleased. She had been good enough however to stand at a distance, clad in simple soldiers attire. She seemed to fancy playing at warrior, and Hartwin wasn't about to criticize her for it. At least not out loud. Besides there was something alluring

From outside the ring of light, men emerged. The people of Jendra understood ceremony as well, and though they lacked the resources of the Death Korps, they put up a good show. A youthful man in a PDF uniform strode towards the table, flanked by two brown-coated soldiers, who carried with them, large, decorative, bolt-action rifles.

Hartwin was no fool, and he had the area well canvassed with available snipers, thermal-imagers, and hovering servo-skulls. As added insurance he had already pre-sighted artillery to rain down around, but not too near, his own position. In his microbead various soldiers reported that there were more Jendrites hiding in the grass and that they were setting up a mortar. He casually instructed his men to kill them all the moment he gave the word.

He walked towards the table and his entourage hung back respectfully. His PDF counterpart did the same. The two men stared at one another, and Hartwin did not veer his gaze away.

The officer cleared his throat and spoke, I am Major Kaspar. I represent Commander Churnev who commands the civilians and remaining PDF of our world.

I am Field-Marshal von Reiniger. I command the Death Korps, First Army and have been appointed by the Imperium to command all military forces here on Jendra IV. I am sorry your Commander Churnev could not be here. Hartwin gestured for the other to take a seat.

Major Kaspar did so, and removed his cap, setting it upon the table. My Commander offers his regrets. He is tending to wounded men, women, and children. You raided one of our outposts a few days ago. Many suffered for it.

The Field-Marshal sat and removed his own cap. He shrugged, The Imperium suffered for it. And I do not want that. The orks have returned. They have sailed here from the neighboring continent under a new war boss. Organized under a sole ruler, the orks are a threat I cannot contain.

Major Kaspar frowned, If you had supported the other PDF regiments those other continents would still be in our hands. You forsook them, and now are reaping the rewards.

Yes.

The Major was stunned by the casual tone of the Field-Marshal as well as his admission of guilt.

Before he could reply Hartwin said, That is war. It is dreadful decision after dreadful decision. If I focused on the scattered PDF units, perhaps the other continents would have held? Or, perhaps the orks would have overwhelmed them regardless. Perhaps this continent would have fallen as the orks launched an assault while my resources were scattered. All were possibilities. Hartwin tapped the table, But we must speak of realities. The orks are here, in force, and under a single banner. More are coming from the sea. I need every man who can lift a weapon to assist me in keeping what we have.

You need fodder! You throw our soldiers into the orks, to spare your own men. You starve this planet to fill your own bellies. You strip us of vehicles with

which to make commerce and steal from us skilled men so that we cannot take care of ourselves. Kaspar shook his head and spat, You are killing us, Field-Marshal. Slower than the orks, but killing us none the less.

Yes.

Kaspars eyes blazed, You mock me! You admit your cruelties?! You said you came here to negotiate; instead you rub my face in the death you have brought us. We do not want the orks ravaging our world, Field-Marshal, but what is the point if you kill us all?

Worlds can be repopulated. Fight, and you might live. Oppose me, and you will all die. Everyone on this world will perish if they do not bow to my will. That is reality, Hartwin stated coldly.

We can fight the orks on our own. We will not let them kill us, even if you fall before them. Major Kaspar crossed his arms.

Thats not what I mean. I need your men to assist and fight. I need your men to stop attacking my supply lines. If you continue doing that, then my army will suffer and surely fall. And so-

Kaspar broke in with a shout, And so you must come to terms! No more slave labor. No more hoarding all the food and skilled men for yourself. No using the PDF, and by the Throne, untrained civilians, to soak up orkish charges!

The Death Korps honor guard clutched their weapons, and voices in Hartwins ear asked for permission to slaughter the entire rebel delegation. He ignored it all, and was silent a long while. The tension did not totally dissipate but Kaspars face grew less flushed.

The Field-Marshal spoke softly, I am not asking. I am telling. You will place all armed men under my command. Your civilians will obey me. It is the Emperors will. I need you now. And if you oppose me, then you and your people will die.

The Major shook his head, How is THIS negotiation? This is the same as it was before.

Because in negotiations there are choices. You serve, without hesitation, without

question, or you die. See? And if you choose death, then you will not die by orkish hands. Hartwin leaned across the table to make the point clear.

The Major was not phased and leaned in as well as he spoke, You mean by your hand? You dont have the resources to fight ork and Jendrite alike. You can barely hold onto this continent let alone find us and kill us!

Correct. And so if you do not agree to my terms, I will gas the entire region. The crops will die, the soil will die, and you and everyone you know, will die. The orks, they seem fairly immune to even our most virulent gasses. But Id rather face just them. Hartwin did not smile, or raise his voice during the entire encounter. They both leaned back in their chairs at the same time. Silence hung heavy once again.

Kaspar put his cap back on his head, and looked at Hartwin with narrowed eyes. He whispered fiercely, You are a monster. This world is too valuable to poison.

Soil can be brought back to life. People can be imported in once the war is won. Its happened before. Ive done it before. Shall I list off the places? Garridan Nine, the Kullex Forge-World, Lenders Respite, the fourth moon of-

Enough! I hear your offer. We fight under you and die or we fight against you and die. Kaspar stood.

He shrugged, You fight under me and some will die, so that the rest may live. Do you have an answer?

Kaspar shook his head, I must consult with Commander Churnev. We need time.

Hartwin slowly stood and placed his cap back upon his head. He planted his hands on his hips and the Field-Marshal offered a semblance of a smile. There is none. Tomorrow, elements of the First Army will be engaging the orks. I then have five days to kill the greenskin leader. By then, orks will be landing on the continent. Under one banner, they beat us. Divided, we have a chance.

But we must contact-

The Field-Marshal roared, loud enough that he was sure even the hidden mortar team in the grass could hear him easily, There is no time! Whatever off-world

allies you have, are not here. I am here, and the orks are here. Thats it. Do you serve Him on Earth, and thus me? Or not. Answer!

Kaspar made a motion with his hands and tried to speak. Hartwin did not allow him.

Answer!

Tears formed at the corner of the officers eyes. What choice is there?!

None. There never has been. Your world has grown soft and doesnt realize it is, in the end, expendable. No one is important. No world is important. The Imperium is important. And the Imperium demands the removal of the orks. Your officers will present themselves at Yurek. From there you will be sent to the front or towards the coastline to stall any ork landings.

He did not wait for a reply, he had negotiated enough. The Field-Marshal turned his back on Major Kaspar and strode away from the table. He could see Marena von Adler, wide eyed, and her jaw gritting. He didnt care. He had only a handful of days left.

XI

Privileges of a Black Coat

The regimental commissar drove the transport at top speed along Jendras worn roads. Thousands of boots and hundreds of treads had turned the gravel roadways into torn up and hardened earth bearing gouges, scars and ruts. Where the gravel had been obliterated, shoots of yellow had sprung up, eager to reclaim the land. Jagg was certain the vehicle would need serious repair by the time they reached Kynder the way Razin propelled it down the mangled roads.

Kynder was less than a days travel away from Yurek if one was leisurely. For Commissar Razin, it was a handful of hours. He owned the roads, and not even military checkpoints moved to bar his path. Jagg would almost find it comical how eager people were to avoid the man, if not for the fact he was in the back seat, an unwilling agent of the dreadful man.

When the city came into view Jagg sighed as memories flooded past. The capital

of the planet was where he had first seen combat. The city was the most valuable place in all of Jendra IV, due to its fuel reserves and massive starport. The orks had scorched the hills and land around the city and put it under siege. Through willpower, luck, and the liberal use of civilian meat-shields, the 76th had not only survived, they had broken the ork assault. It was then that the reinforcements from Krieg began to arrive in force and the orks began to fall back.

The city bore the wounds of the siege. Buildings had collapsed from artillery fire, and shell-holes decorated nearly every structure. The roadways had been cleared, but this resulted in piles of rubble and debris lining the streets. As the open-topped black transport whisked past another checkpoint, without stopping, Jagg could distinctly make out a rotted limb jutting up from the rubble.

Is that a restaurant? Commissar Razin shouted over the sound of rushing air.

Kellen Raous peered ahead and nodded, Looks like it, Commissar sir.

Jaggs stomach lurched as the transport skidded to the side of the road and ended up half perched atop a pile of rock and splintered furniture, just outside a small outdoor café. The only patrons were men in grey uniforms and they jumped to their feet as Razin parked. If the men felt any anger at having a vehicle nearly bowl them over, they showed no sign, nor said a word as the black clad-man leapt out of the vehicle and idly brushed dust off of himself.

Raous, food and drink for three. Jagg, by my seat fetch the microbeads and dataslate, Razin said and crested the rise of debris. The black transport looked almost like a flyer that had failed to land properly, with its hood and two wheels protruding into the air, still spinning.

Jagg gave Kellen Raous a sidelong look and dutifully obeyed. He gathered up the wires of three microbeads and a thin dataslate. Jagg and Kellen Raous hopped out of the transport. Raous went to place an order with a pale faced Jendrite, while Jagg followed Razin to a small table. Unsurprisingly the soldiers having a quick meal ate a bit quicker and business began to clear out of the café before Razin had even seated himself.

Jagg enjoyed a Jendrite meal of flavorful bread, and imported meat, with a cup

of iced water to wash it all down. The café manager stood several paces off, a forced smile on his face. At Razin's slightest whim, the man swiftly obeyed to replenish the refreshments. No complaint was ever offered.

Razin had instructed them to don their microbeads so that they could, if needs be, separate and still stay in communication with one another. The commissar looked over the data slate a long while, leaving the table in a state of awkward silence. Jagg half-jumped when Razin spoke.

According to my records the hauler driver that rescued the Chimera crew, and incidentally smuggled in the would-be assassin, is one Slahgo Vledenovic. He lives in Kynder and performs local runs at the behest of the First Army, transporium. Razin glanced up at the pair, On the day in question he was at the makeshift depot, and from there was assigned to pick up the crew of the Chimera you were guarding, a few hours before the Field-Marshal passed by.

Raous frowned and said, Sir, we are sure the Chimera breaking down was by accident? How would an assassin know that; A, the Chimera was going to break down, and B, that this Vledenovic's hauler would be given the task of heading out there for crew retrieval?

Razin nodded slowly. Indeed, the assassin would know neither of these things. He took an opportunity as it presented itself. But I think it safe to assume the assassin knew the Field-Marshal and our dear lady was on horseback, and that they would be travelling relatively unguarded. That has dire implications.

Von Saunder, Jagg whispered.

Razin's brow shot up and he gave Jagg a stern look. You mean Grosse-Kapitän von Saunder. He is implicated only circumstantially, trooper Jagg.

He paled and nodded, Yes, Commissar Sir. However, with no disrespect intended, Grosse-Kapitän von Saunder provided the horses and knew how fast they would roughly travel, as well as the undefended state of the lady in question. Additionally his regiment is one made up of Jäger sharpshooters. They had been told by Razin not to mention Marena von Adlers name out loud, lest he did so first.

Hence I am skeptical, Razin replied.

Too obvious. Even if the assassin had been successful, Kapitän von Saunder would have fallen under some suspicion, Kellen Raous agreed.

Really? If the assassin had been successful, would it not be written off as a lucky shot by a disgruntled Jendrite? Jagg countered.

Razins thin lips formed a half smile. We have theories, but need some more proof. Hence we start with Vledenovic. Thank the Emperor our beloved Death Korps loves its checkpoints and paperwork in triplicate. Vledenovic had been in Kynder the day the Field-Marshal set out on his ride. He arrived at the depot, well before the general, dropping off some supplies. The hauler was small you say?

Jagg and Raous nodded.

Razins smile widened, Vledenovic spent all day there, and most of the next. He was there when the Field-Marshal passed by still offloading his vehicle.

I think that is an awful long time to unload one hauler, Commissar Sir, Kellen Raous offered.

I agree, trooper Raous! Lets go for a short drive. The last place Vledenovic checked in is at a munitions dump in the center of the city. Razin stood and walked over to the café manager who shrank back. An excellent meal. It was as close to payment as the owner ever came.

Jagg and Raous helped push the black transport off the debris pile, and miraculously it started without trouble. Razin drove more cautiously through the streets, but traffic still made efforts to give the commissars vehicle a wide berth. Patrols of Death Korpsmen wandered the roads and Jagg saw sharpshooters on more than a few rooftops. Trucks laden with men flowed past, all heading north.

The munitions dump was a public park for children. Or it had been. Razor wire now decorated the playground, and boxes of ammunition and giant artillery shells were stacked ten feet high alongside swing sets and slides. Non-descript haulers came and went, and this time Razin stopped at the gate to speak with the sentries, rather than drive past them. After a quick conversation the solider

speaking to Razin pointed to a hauler that Jagg thought looked familiar. A fat man with greasy hair and a lit lho stick in his mouth sat asleep at the wheel.

Razin moved his transport into the park and swerved around a pile of crates. He parked his vehicle horizontally in front of Vledenovics hauler.

Trooper, Jagg, Raous. See those crates. Place one behind each of the rear wheels if you would. Just in case.

Dutifully they did just that so the hauler was boxed in by the black transport, and heavy ammo crates. Raous rubbed his gloved hand, but whatever pain he felt, he kept to himself. Meanwhile, soldiers began to find other places to be and the impressed civilians left with only half their loads complete. Vledenovic slept, lit lho stick still smoldering in his mouth, unaware that Imperial retribution was about to take place.

Commissar Razin stood off to the side of the hauler and clasped his hands behind his back. He tilted his head slightly to look at his soldiers.

Trooper Jagg, Trooper Raous. Would you mind waking Vlednovic up. Oh, and do remember your current troubles perhaps revolve around his actions. Consider this fellow to blame. The black-clad man smiled faintly.

Jagg needed no further encouragement. His back was still sore and he felt weary from his captivity with the Jendrite rebels. How long ago had it been? He had lost track of time, but it could not have been more than a few days. He was tired, but not too tired for this. Jagg opened the door of the Hauler and heaved the Jendrite out by his shoulder.

The man sprawled on the ground and spat up his burning lho stick. What? What you do? he said in a thick Jendrite dialect.

Kellen Raous delivered a swift kick to Vledenovics stomach. The man coughed violently and curled up, as Kellen Raous crashed his boot into the mans paunch once more.

Jagg was not about to be left out and he stepped in raising his foot to deliver a heavy stomp to the Jendrites head.

Razin cleared his throat, I need him talking.

He altered his course of action and crushed Vledenovics left hand, grinding flesh and bone into the ground. The man screamed and tried to stand, but powerful kicks by the pair kept him down. He cried for help. He pleaded. He begged. The beating didnt stop.

If Jagg had been with Callum, his other companion from his days as a conscript on Krieg, the ganger turned religious moral authority, would have balked at what they were doing. If Jagg had been with Sergeant Taubover or any of Section Fours veterans, Jagg was sure he would feel somewhat sheepish for what they were doing. But Jagg was with Kellen Raous, and the two of them had suffered greatly thanks to whatever machinations were afoot. It may not have been Vledenovics fault, but he was the closest they had come to a culprit. Jagg beat the Jendrite half to death, and he felt good about. His heart warmed. Every kick brought out a cry of anguish and a tiny smile to him. As ordered, and with relish, they beat the man. There was no hesitation in the act.

Bring him here, Razin hissed, his eyes blazed beneath the brim of his morbidly decorated peaked cap.

With angry hands they grabbed the weeping man by his broken arms and dragged him before Razin. Streaks of blood stained the ground from where his shattered feet dragged leaving a slug-like trail.

Do you know what I am? Razin asked.

Vledenovic tried to turn his head away. His perfect head. Nothing had been done to his face at all. Raous used his gloved hand to grip the mans ear and yank, encouraging him, in a brutal fashion, to look at the man in black.

Do you know? Razin repeated with more force.

Vledenovic cried but nodded.

Good. Im going to ask you some questions. If you are lying, you will pay in ways you cant imagine. You see that fellow holding you up? Razin nodded Jaggs way. I flayed his back open once for failing me, and he is one of my men. You are not; imagine what Ill do to you if you displease me. The commissar waited a

moment before he began his line of questioning.

The questions were simple at first. Razin asked questions he already knew the answers to. When Vledenovic lied about how long he had been at the depot Razin sighed and said, Trooper Raous, would you mine plucking out this mans eye? Just one.

Vledenovic shrieked and quickly told the truth. Jagg blanched when Razin didnt countermand the order. He had never seen an eye pop out of the socket by use of a curled up finger. Watching it dangle was enough to make him nearly throw up and he focused on Razins cold features instead.

The rest of the questioning went more smoothly. Vledenovic told Razin what he wanted to know. The Jendrite had been paid by a Death Korpsmen to take him from Kynder to the depot. The Man of Krieg had hidden under a tarp in the back of the hauler and avoided detection. He had slipped out of the hauler at the depot and Vledenovic thought that would be the last he would see of the Death Korpsemen. However an officer had insisted his hauler remain. No explanation was given. Later the Death Korpsmen returned with the officer. The orders were simple; retrieve the crew of a broken-down Chimera then return to the depot, then go back to Kynder. The Jendrite had never worried about the why of it all, nor did Razin press him on that matter.

Interesting, Razin said after the confession.

So he is paid to deliver the assassin to the depot. An officer, holds Vledenovic there. Opportunity presents itself and the officer and the assassin instruct Mr. Danglely to assist. Raous shook Vledenovic and his hanging eye dangled in the appropriate fashion.

I believe the initial plan was to shoot the target as she came upon the depot, and then in the confusion Vledenovic would smuggle the assassin back to Kynder. Plans changed though. Razin pursed his lips and dipped his head in thought.

This mysterious officer, who arranged it all, got word of the broken-down Chimera. It would be isolated, barely guarded and a sure way to bait the target into standing still for a moment. So plans are changed to take advantage of the situation. Jagg smirked, And if the assassin had been successful, hed be well

hidden in the grass and could take his merry time returning to wherever he wanted to go. He felt proud of himself, the plot was beginning to make sense. A brutal beating could go a long way, Jagg decided.

I believe that makes sense. Alas, we are lacking some details. Razin looked at Vledenovic. What name did the man you smuggle go by?

The beaten man sobbed, I dont know. He no tell me.

I believe you. What name did the officer go by?

Hehe no tell me, Vledenovic repeated.

I believe you. What name did you hear the officer go by? Someone was bound to use his name; you were with him for an entire day. Think hard. Razin leaned close. Time passed by painfully slow.

Major. He was Major. I dont know rest. MajorK. K, something.

The Commissar turned around and paced away a few steps. He was still, and Jendras summer wind brushed his obsidian-black stormcoat lightly.

I believe you. Drop him. I need to review some records. The day is almost over, that leaves us tomorrow to uncover this mess. Back to the transport.

Jagg released the broken man and Raous did the same, onto his knees Vledenovic fell. He wrapped his splintered arms around himself and moaned quietly, while his dangling eye swayed and wept blood.

They climbed into the back of the vehicle, and their boots stained the interior with prints of red.

Razin walked past Vledenovic, drew his pistol, shot him, and returned the weapon to its holster without even looking or breaking stride. Vledenovic stayed kneeling a moment, then toppled forward.

Let us procure a hotel for the evening. A nice one. The nicest in fact. Razin sat behind the wheel and started the engine.

Commissar sir, if this Major K finds out Vledenovic is dead, wont he, well, do something? Kellen Raous asked while casually glancing at the body they were going to just leave behind in the ammo depot.

The thin man nodded once. With the assassin not reporting in, and presumed dead. I guess this Major K to be nervous. When word reaches him that a commissar, quite openly, interrogated then shot Vledenovic, I expect he will indeed do something. Probably something dangerous and drastic! Razin gave a sly smile before he backed the vehicle out and sought the nicest hotel in all of Kynder. Meaning one that didnt have too many holes in it.

They left the corpse behind for the men at the ammo dump to deal with. Through Kynders street Razin drove them, and more than once he used the pedestrian walkways to skirt around traffic. The nicest hotel was one that had only suffered damage to its uppermost floors. The Sunny Respite was one of the few structures to bear decorations of any sort. Cherubs sprung from the walls, while flowing ivy, carved from faux-marble, decorated the windows and doors, except where a few shell-holes had pulverized them.

Razin parked with a screech of tires in front of the hotel, and a Jendrite valet jogged forth to stare wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the commissar as he leapt from the open-topped vehicle and landed with the clicking of his boots on the pavement. A few other hotel staff wandered out and stared dumbstruck.

Know what I am? Razin casually asked.

Jagg exited the vehicle along with Kellen Raous, he didnt need to look to know that the gathered hotel staff were nodding and fearful.

I want my transport parked, and cleaned up. And watched. If it blows up due to some rebel bomb, then know that my fellow commissars will ensure this hotel and probably this entire hab-block comes crashing down. I want your nicest room, and while we wait for it, Razin planted his hands on his hips, I want the best meal your cooks can manage.

The hotel staff burst into motion. The valet took off in the black transport, a uniformed hotel doorman moved to take Razins coat but a stern glance sent the fellow scuttling away. Meanwhile other employees scurried forth to carry out Razins demands.

Jagg shrugged at Kellen Raous, who shrugged back. Slowly they followed after the sinister figure. A rattle behind made him whirl, only to see a hubcap from the transport clatter after it must have been left behind.

The interior of the hotel was nice enough. Jendra IV was clearly not a planet meant to receive guests of importance. The carpeting was clean and the walls decorated with copies of statues and paintings that didnt strike Jagg as awe-inspiring. He had seen in the view-picts images of places far more grandiose and

elaborate. If anything, he felt as if the Sunny Respite was just a copy of a nice hotel, and a poor one at that. But it was the best Kynder had to offer and he had to admit to himself; it was a far cry better than a storage shed, basement, medicae cot, or trench for that matter.

Obeisant hotel staff guided Razin to a dining room. The room had two guests, who were promptly hurried out. Whatever complaints they may have had died on their lips the moment they saw Razins dark uniform.

At a large table, draped in white fabric, they sat. Food arrived quickly. Bread was the Jendrite preferred dish, but the Sunny Respite also provided cooked meat, salads and deserts. The water had been flavored with fruits and Razin had been incredibly courteous to the hotel manager, when he presented a bottle of unopened wine. It was the finest meal the soldiers had ever had.

Thank you, we shall be enjoying this. Razin said to the smiling hotel manager. Despite the smile, Jagg saw the mans knees shaking.

The cork was popped and Jagg had his first taste of wine. It smelled good, but the taste was somewhat rancid in his opinion. Kellen Raous however, fawned over his single glass, much to Razins amusement.

He was still deathly afraid of Commissar Razin. He had a thousand reasons to be, but he did like the privileges one of his station had. For all the terror, there were certain fringe-benefits.

Razin swirled the glass of wine under his nose and took only the smallest of sips. His eyes flittered up to the waiting hotel manager. A fine year, and taste. I shall pass on to others your exemplary service to your guests. Now then, I must have some privacy. he sipped the wine once more while the manager bowed hastily and all but darted from the room.

They sure are eager to please, Commissar sir, Kellen Raous said with a smile and a raising of his half-empty glass.

They know Ive shot hundreds of them, Razin responded before draining his own glass. He held the wine in his mouth, swished loudly once, then swallowed. And theyll be passing on information about our adventure today. Anyone with their

ear to the ground will know we are here, having a grand time.

Jagg rubbed his stinging nose. Wincing he looked at Razin. I take it this is all on purpose, Commissar sir?

Quite right. If this Major K has any sense at all, he'll have been trying to find a way to kill Slahgo Vledenovic in an inconspicuous manner. Too bad for him though. Razin set his empty glass down.

I think I understand, Commissar sir. Jagg nodded. It made sense. Make a big production of entering town, of questioning and killing Vledenovic and of feasting at the Sunny Respite. It was a lure. The Major will come for us. To silence us.

The man's smile was thin, but his eyes twinkled, I hope so. He won't have time to be careful either. A commissar is on his trail and that means the hammer is coming. He'll use whatever resources he can and soon. Tonight I imagine; after we finish off several bottles of wine and stagger up to the finest suite available. Drunk as a band of Space Wolves of course.

What's a Space Wolf? Jagg asked.

They ordered bottle after bottle of wine, and promptly poured them into the planters of several flowers by the window. Jagg wasn't sure if plants could get drunk or not. While any member of the hotel staff was around, the trio acted inebriated. For Jagg it was easy, he had recent experience. When the staff was busy carrying out demands for more drink or food, Razin detailed the plan for the night ahead.

Jagg was to set up a simple trap with a grenade and the door to the suite. Then via the window climb into a neighboring room which Razin said he would quietly procure. He warned Jagg they might be on one of the upper floors, but his only advice on the matter was, don't scream if you fall. The plan can still carry on without you.

Kellen Raous was going to be waiting outside the hotel itself, hidden. Razin left it up to him how to manage such. By microbead they would stay in contact. The objective was simple enough. Kill anyone who made an attempt on their lives, and try to capture or track at least one assailant.

Soon as the sun set Razin bawled to the hotel manager about needing a suite; the nicest of course. An old fashion turnkey was handed over and the three of them headed alone to the elevator.

As they came upon the elevator Kellen Raous pointed to an emergency exit, Ill duck out there, Commissar sir.

The drunken demeanor of the commissar vanished immediately. He nodded and said, I will keep in contact with you. If you see anything suspicious, report in. The microbead channel is secure.

Even from a major? Jagg ventured.

Razin didn't answer but instead pressed a button on the elevator. He stepped in. Jagg had only a moment to wish Kellen Raous good luck before he stepped into the elevator. The doors shut, and over a vox-caster, lousy music played.

The music was loud enough to make conversation awkward and bad enough to make him seriously consider shooting the vox-caster.

"A fine meal." Razin mused.

"Yes, commissar sir!"

The black-clad man shot him a viperious look that sent him into a nerve-wracking silence.

Being alone in the elevator with the commissar was an unnerving experience, but moments later he found him in a worse situation.

Razin had opened up the suite and set Jagg to work. The black-clad man then kicked in the neighbors door and shut it behind him. Jagg was unsure if had been occupied or not. The commissar had produced four small grenades for him to plant about the room. The broken-nosed youth used furniture to wedge grenades in place, and torn strips of bed fabric to make crude trip-wires. They werent exactly inconspicuous so he went about the room and merrily used a wooden chair to smash out every light. The sun had set and only by the city-lights of Kynder could Jagg see in the large and now thoroughly damaged suite.

Jaggs microbead hissed, Raous sees visitors, copy? It was Razin.

Copy, sir. Im about done here. Not the best job, if they are careful I dont think itll work, Jagg said into his microbead.

Worry about that later. Get over here. Theres a nice shell-hole you can climb through, out.

Jagg sighed in resignation and moved to the window. He slid it open and looked out at the city. Orange tinted light met his eyes and the gleaming red eyes of vehicle break lights or the shimmering beams of headlamps. He cautiously clambered out of the window and found purchase on a narrow ledge. Wind hissed by and he used his hands to grip the wall, almost as if his fingers could slide into the façade. He began to shift, and with great care, edge his way towards Razins commandeered room. He could even see the shell-hole in it, and from that, a dull light beckoning to him.

Seven of them, Razins voice came loud in Jaggs ear and he startled. Cold sweat poured down his face and he pressed his chest to the wall. Mentally he told himself over and over again, to not think about how high up he was.

Copy, Jagg squeaked. He continued moving. It wasn't far, but every motion he made was difficult. The wind blew fiercely and he felt his grip loosening upon the wall. With a muffled cry, for he wouldn't want to break Razin's orders and scream, Jagg side-hopped towards the shell hole, and missed.

He felt his foot hit the ledge and the ledge simply crumbled away like dust. His world began to spin and the wind howled heavily in his ear. Panic seized him and a scream rose in his throat and threatened to burst forth like a volley of lasgun fire. It took all his willpower not to shriek in terror. It was a very human fear, the fear of falling and difficult to suppress. A hand grabbed his, just as he stumbled and fell past the shell hole towards what would be a messy end.

Razin nearly went out the window with Jagg, and it would have been an ironic death. Gritting his teeth, the commissar reached with his other hand and Jagg returned the motion. By using his feet, and with Razin leaning backwards, Jagg made it through the shell hole. He fell into a room damaged by the war, and devoid of furniture or any decoration. He couldn't be happier for it.

They'll be here soon. Razin helped him to his feet and drew his laspistol.

Jagg trembled and he gave a narrow glare at the shell hole and the air beyond. With a slow nod he wiped the icy sweat from his brow and drew his own side arm.

What about Raous?

Shhh. He's spotted the covered military transport they came from. He has his job, we have ours. Razin raised a finger to his lips and gestured for Jagg to follow him. They moved to the broken door and waited.

The stomping of feet echoed. Men were running down the hall and they weren't making any attempt at stealth. Jagg gripped his laspistol tightly. He heard the door of the suit being hastily kicked open and a moment later the twin thuds of his trip-wire. The wall shook and chunk of the ceiling fell to the floor and exploded into crumbling dust.

Go! Razin yelled and in classic commissar fashion let Jagg go first.

The door had already been broken into by Razin, so he just leaned his shoulder against it and entered the hallway. Smoke poured from the doorway into the neighboring suite and three men lay on the ground, groaning. Two others were still standing. They were Men of Krieg in charcoal-hued uniforms and wearing rebreather masks. Jagg fired first.

His first las-shot cracked deafeningly in the confines of the hallway and the scarlet bolt jarred one of the mens head to the side. A smoking hole was left in his helmet and he fell without a word. The other spun about laser carbine in hand

Two quick shots from Razin sent the man sprawling on his back. The Commissar strode past Jagg and quickly surveyed the hall. He placed one round into each of the wounded men, silencing their groans and moans without a care.

Two left. Jagg muttered.

We have you surrounded! Razin yelled, We are coming in, throw your weapons down and your hands up and the Emperor might show his mercy upon- From inside the smoking doorway two grenades spun, each hitting the far wall of the hallway before ricocheting in either direction. They were the same grenades from Jaggs other trip-wire.

He grabbed Razin and ran full speed back into the room they had just emerged from. Jagg took Razin to the ground and the man grunted with the force of hitting the floor.

WHUMP, WHUMP.

The explosion from the twin grenades sent shrapnel spinning forth in a deadly spray, which luckily stayed within the hall. Jagg rolled off of the commissar and pointed the muzzle of his weapon at the entryway. The damaged wooden door fell off its last hinge with a splintering crack then rocked back to lie at an off angle while streamers of smoke rose from its ruined surface.

Razin came to his feet and backed up. He kept his weapon trained on the same doorway as Jagg. He reached a hand back, and when he felt the shell hole in the façade of the building, he turned. Swiftly the commissar leaned out the window, weapon at the ready. A moment later he was gone, leaving Jagg entirely alone.

You three dead yet? a voice came from the hallway, muffled by a rebreather kit.

He needed decent cover! There was none, the room had been emptied. Cursing Razin, Jagg sprawled on the floor and kept his weapon leveled. If they threw in a grenade, his only choice would be to jump on it or out the window. There was simply nowhere to hide.

Not yet. How about you two? Jagg yelled.

Not a chance. Is it just you in there? the same voice replied.

Jagg stalled, he could think of nothing else to do that would be useful. A full company, tight fit though.

Jagg heard garbled laughter followed by two quick las-shots in succession. Silence.

Jagg listened. Nothing.

Are you two dead now?

They are, Razin said as he poked his head into the room. Raous is in my ear, a moment, trooper Jagg. Razin vanished once again.

He shakily stood up and holstered his laspistol. He maneuvered his way through the entryway, having to step over the smoking door. The hall itself was riddled with damage from the force of the grenades and decorated with a pile of bodies in Death Korps uniforms. They were torn up, their uniforms and flesh made ragged by the explosions. Razin stood amongst it all, his dark uniform caked with dust.

The commissar holstered his laspistol and slammed his hands together, Weve got them now!

Sir?

Raous managed to slip into the back of the military transport. Weve got them. His smile became wide and feral.

Was the Major driving? Jagg asked and he absently nudged one of the dead men with his boot. The fellow obediently remained a corpse.

What? No, dont be foolish. But the driver has panicked and is driving away. Hell be leading us right to the Major, and if the Emperor wills it, anyone else connected to this treachery, Razin spat. The commissar hurried towards the elevator, Come on. Time to see where this leads.

XII

Cleaning House

After negotiations with the Jendrite delegation had concluded, Hartwin returned to the makeshift depot which had, in only a few short hours since his orders were set down, become a major staging ground. Tanks, troops and supplies piled atop one another as preparations were made for the coming of the other Death Korps regiments.

The night had been spent having a fine dinner with the lower officers and sharing company with Marena von Adlers cold stare. He had deftly ignored and then avoided her, appointing his aide von Gaul to manage the royal. It didnt pay to anger one of her station, but he had a war to win, and a command to clean up. She was starting to get in the way of sensible action.

The drive to Kynder in a borrowed Chimera of the 76th was rocky but swift. Hartwins headquarters had been set up at the heavily reinforced starport. Upon arriving, he was hardly surprised to see his senior advisers, loyal bodyguard, and Lord Commissar Thrack.

Lord Commissar Thrack was from Kriegs finest schola and his blood was rivaled only by that of Marena von Adler. He was impressive in his black stormcoat, wearing a vest laced in silve, and resting his considerable girth on a walking stick with a bronzed miniature skull for a grip. A monocle rested in one eye; it was an old tradition more for display than improvement in sight.

Soon as Hartwin neared his personal staff the questions began. His bodyguards, along with von Gaul, were quick to remind him of the importance of his safety. Liaisons with the Astropaths had news about three more regiments from Krieg,

and their estimated arrival time. Three weeks. A hundred questions were asked and while the Field-Marshal strode towards a giant hanger, modified into a command post he answered them in quick fire fashion. Marena von Adler glided along silently, her annoyance palpable.

Upon entering the hanger he moved to a repair station, that had been converted into a meeting hall. A hundred more questions were asked, orders signed, and in good time he had von Gaul carrying out the more mundane tasks of his life. When the flurry of men left, Hartwin found himself alone with von Adler, Lord Commissar Thrack and two bodyguards who dutifully moved to bar the doorway from any further visitors. The Field-Marshal was happy to be amongst men he could trust, Marena excluded.

Keeping secrets are we? Thrack said and his cane noisily tapped on the rockrete floor. The large man peered at Hartwin through his monocle.

Trying to handle my army before you do. It has nothing to do with keeping secrets. he took a seat.

Hmmph! Commissar Razins reports indicate a rather tangled web. But I see a solution.

He narrowed his eyes and tapped the table with his finger, Two days. Your man said he could handle this in two days. I have one left before you go rounding up everyone and anyone and shooting them.

The burly commissar laughed. And you still have it. One day and then if Commissar Razin hasnt done it the new way, we go to the old way. But that wasnt what I was meaning, Hartwin.

They had known each other a long time, long enough to be on a first name basis. Hartwin had Thrack looking over his shoulder while he was just a Regimental commander. Upon entering High Command at Krieg, it was upon his insistence that Thrack remain attached to his command to ensure loyalty. They both earned a promotion that day. He felt a moment of guilt. That viper Razin was right; he should have gone straight to the Commissariat.

Alright, Im listening.

The large man beamed a smile. Finally. You have to stop acting like you're a Grosse-Kapitän. This army is too big for you to personally peer into anything and everything. It is time for you to delegate anything that distracts you from your purpose. Winning this war! The large man rounded the table and came alongside Marena von Adler who was smiling and nodding in agreement.

He sighed and nodded his head. You are right, Lord Commissar. I have become distracted. Between you, myself and Lady von Adler; I've hardly acted the general. Riding about on horseback!

Negotiating with traitors, Thrack mused and adjusted his glittering monocle.

Poorly at that, von Adler added. She looked around the room a moment then smiled, Perhaps we can try again, get them-

Commissar Thrack cleared his throat, drowning out Marena. Before she could throw him a haughty look the black-clad man tapped his cane.

And running about with a cousin of the new Kaiserina thus putting her in danger. Hartwin, I'm disappointed. If our dear von Adler is harmed, this army and war is done for. The outrage of it all!

Marena opened her mouth, I can take-

Commissar Thrack bowed over her, You can take yourself to the upper levels of this command post. Your meddling has led to the war effort being harmed. We should be out there killing orks not having tea with traitors to Him on Earth. And whoever is trying to assassinate you is still out there. An even better reason to confine you to your quarters. We are here to win a war, not see an army eat itself up over you. Guards.

The soldiers turned and moved towards Marena. They dared not touch her, but stood close, hemming her in. Hartwin was about to object, but then, decided not to. Let her be taken out of the picture. Thrack was right. The old stalwart usually was!

Do you have any idea who I am? the woman hissed.

Of course I do! We had several nice lunches together during transit. I also know

that the Kaiserina wants us to win. You aren't helping at the moment. Please, don't make a scene. Commissar Thrack waved his hand and the guards gently guided Marena from the room without laying a hand upon her.

She did not resist, but whispered as she left the chamber, My cousin will hear of this! I am the liaison to the Kaiserina, I go where I please!

Then be pleased to go to your quarters. Good day, my lady. Thrack nodded to the guards to carry on.

When they were finally alone Hartwin shook his head, Did you just end both our collective careers?

Hah! Only if we lose this war and if we do well be dead. Let the brat stew. She's nothing but trouble and her lineage has you scared. Thrack laughed as Hartwin's brow furrowed at the implication of a small woman scaring him. Time to delegate, Field-Marshal, what needs to be done so that you can go play at being general. Not diplomat, spymaster, mounted hero.

You are relentless as you are fat.

True, true. So what needs to be done?

He stood and gave an exasperated sigh. The plot to kill the von Adler has to be uncovered without the whole army suffering for it. I need the men to fight, not turn on one another in suspicion. I need this done quietly.

Consider it done. Razin will have it wrapped up, I can guarantee that. The men will fight well enough, it was what we commissars do best. The man slid his considerable weight into a chair which creaked in protest.

I gave the rebels an ultimatum; fight for me or I gas the whole region. He peered across the table at his long time shadow.

Gas the region. They have shown their disloyalty and will do so again the moment they can put you in a position of weakness. Imagine if they come with demands once you are fully committed with the orks? What will you do then? Best handle this now. And though he recommended the deaths of perhaps thousands of people the Lord Commissar still smiled. He was jovial even in his

tone.

Civilians?

If they are in areas we control I'm sure we have a few rebreathers to spare. We'll keep them functioning; as long as they work and behave. As for all those farmers in the countryside? Potential foes. Gas the lot and the survivors will wisely keep quiet.

Hartwin laughed without mirth. You seem to have it all figured out? What about the off-world problems? Marena von Adler spoke not only of dissent with the Kaiserina, but also with the fact we are a true army now, not to mention the profits someone is losing thanks to this conflict. He stood and tilted his head and smiled lightly as he said, Have plans for that as well?

With a grin as large as himself the Lord Commissar nodded. Frick them. We have a war to win. That is all that matters. The orks are here, we are here, and that's that.

It isn't that easy, it's more complex now. Hartwin shook his head and paced.

The monocle tracked him as he moved. Why is it more complex? What's different?

He looked up. What's different? How am I to handle off-world political enemies? What am I supposed to do about bloody royal squabbles?

Nothing. That's someone else's problem. You are a Man of Krieg. Someone made you forget it. The big man jerked his head in the direction Marena von Adler had been escorted.

He paled. Truly? he reflected and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Doubt was gnawing at him. Doubt about his every deed and action. No, not every action. Shooting ten civilians for every man he lost to the Jendrites? That felt right. Threatening to gas the citizenry? He didn't hesitate or regret it. He didn't doubt the need to throw everything at the newly arrived ork war boss. The things that were new made him doubt. Negotiation, politics and intrigue.

Marena had talked about how the First Army of the Death Korps needed to

behave differently, how it had to try new ways. But then, what made them the Death Korps? What were they without the traditional methods?

Would you like me to shoot you, Hartwin? Id like to try my hand at being Field-Marshal-Lord Commissar Thrack. Very impressive title if I do say so myself. The big man tapped his cane.

He stared at him and offered a small smile. No, Lord Commissar. I think you have reminded me of my duty and who I am. I am prepared to earn redemption for Krieg in the ways we always have.

No second chances, Thrack whispered and planted his hands upon his walking stick.

Better a world burn than fall, Hartwin replied. He stared at Thrack a long moment then left the room.

In his parade ground voice Field-Marshal Hartwin Reiniger bellowed to the startled staff, I want chem loaded on our flyers! Get the word out. Full kit, rebreathers, hostile environment! I want this place looking like home! Im going to the bloody front!

He was a General of Krieg, by the Throne, time the world knew it.

XIII

Choking Skies

Razin had taken the wheel of his apparently indestructible transport again. Jagg rested in the back. Razin remained in contact with Kellen Raous via microbead, giving him only parts of the conversation.

Look around.

I dont care if you might be seen. I cant find you if all you can describe is the interior of a covered transport.

Landmarks.

Very funny. Other than grass!

The conversation went on for some time and Jagg felt his back grow sore again and a burn in his nose. The events were catching up with him and though he tried to stay awake, his eyes slid shut. Dimly he saw the city of Kynder pass by, followed by the darkness of Jendra IV's grassy countryside.

The transport came to a halt much later and woke Jagg up. He was startled. It was day. Groggily he shielded his eyes from the fiery orange sun as it rose and shed its warmth and light.

Where are we? he rubbed his eyes and added, Commissar, sir.

Razin looked pale as ever, but heavy bags were under his eyes. Though he looked weary, he showed no sign of it in the way he hopped out of the vehicle. The Commissar shrugged. Outside Kynder. Raous directed us down a road that leads into areas of no concern to the army. A good place for traitors to hide!

Meaning places we don't control? Jagg drew his laspistol and looked around. He was getting to hate the sight of grass. There could be rebel Jendrites anywhere.

Yes, trooper. Raous is still in the back of the transport, but he's been keeping tabs for us. Not far ahead the road dips.

He looked but as far as he could tell the gravel strewn path continued on in a straight even line into the infinity of the horizon. What's there, Commissar sir? he inquired.

An unofficial encampment. About fifteen men if Raous isn't too far off the mark. Razin drew his laspistol and crouched low. He veered into the cover of the grass.

Jagg followed. Death Korps?

Yes, and all von Saunders' lot as well. Your early suspicions are becoming more and more likely, trooper Jagg. Razin crept through the reeds of grass at a slow but steady pace.

Is Major K there? Did Raous hear his name used? He followed after Razin. Reeds shivered as they pressed through them and the accursed little black insects

began to bite and buzz in anger at being disturbed.

Razin glanced back to Jagg, Yes. He spoke with the driver. Addressed as Major Knobloch. Mean anything to you?

He shook his head, No, maybe. Something the Field-Marshal said. Is it, von Knobloch?

The viperous eyes narrowed. What does it matter? Come on and lets get a better look, trooper.

Razin was about to continue moving when Jagg reached out, it was dangerous to touch the commissar, but he did so anyways. He whirled about, but by then Jagg was speaking quickly, Sir! Its important. Your microbead? You are in communication with people back at Kynder?

I can be. Not that it concerns you. If this is a waste of time, youll regret it. I whipped your back already; I can find other places to flay. Razin shot Jagg a stern look.

Motive, Commissar sir. The Field-Marshal said lady von Adler let slip people were less than delighted at our new Kaiserina. And the assassin was after her in particular. Jagg looked at Razin intently, who stared back coldly. The wind rustled the reeds of golden grass.

Perhaps. This will take a moment. Ive not checked in since we were at the depot. Sit down. Razin laid flat in the grass and began to whisper into his microbead while his free hand made channel adjustments.

Jagg kept his weapon ready and crouched low. All he could see was grass, bugs and above a clear and beautiful blue sky. Ahead there was supposedly an outpost and he thought he could hear voices being carried aloft, perhaps an engine murmur as well.

Yes, Major Knobloch. Hes the one. I need to know something. Is he noble or not? Razin tilted his head and listened to the reply. So, von Knobloch. Fine. Proceeding.

They began to move again, but Razins hand shot up and Jagg halted. The

Commissars face twisted up, What?!

Jagg jerked back, What is it?

Razin waved his hand at Jagg to be silent and tilted his head. Lord Commissar, I have the encampment ahead of me. I can handle this. A pause ensued. Fifteen men. Given me the rest of the day and I can get the Major. We are on the verge of unraveling this!

Jagg crawled closer to Razin and tried to listen in, but the microbead was firmly in his pale ear. He was stuck once more hearing only one side of the conversation.

Hes going to do what now? Lord Commissar, I have a man in the encampment, Im here with another. Undetected. He stressed the word. We wont get a chance like this again let me act! Razin pursed his lips, then seethed, Understood, out. He tore off his microbead in evident frustration.

Jagg licked his lips, wondered if he should say anything, and chose silence instead.

Were leaving. We need to start heading to Kynder. Air transport will pick us up in an hour on the road. Razin reattached the microbead, adjusted small controls with his fingers and whispered, Trooper, Raous. Were leaving. You want to stay behind, by all means. Otherwise, follow that road till you reach my transport, good luck, out.

Jagg frowned and shook his head. Commissar sir, we cant just leave Raous. We need to help him get out of there. And why are we leaving? I dont understand.

The man grunted. Orders from the Lord Commissar himself. This mission is over. Dont worry about Raous, he was slick enough to get into their camp, hell get out. Well wait for him by the transport. Well then have to hurry. And I do mean hurry!

He was perplexed. They had spent days tracking down the assassins master, and having done so, were now just leaving? His mind raced. It made no sense, none at all. Everything had been for nothing; their torture at the hands of the Jendrites, the questioning and execution of Vledenovic, the firefight in the Sunny Respite.

Commissar, sir lets- he began.

He holstered his weapon and shook his head no. Believe, trooper, I want to. But no. This is Commissariat jurisdiction, and if the Lord Commissar his bloody self says its over. He has his reasons. Blast it all if I know them! Come, we need to move.

They worked their way back to the black transport and Jagg mulled over the possible reasons why they would be ordered back from the brink of success. As he lounged against Razins transport he kept his eyes on the road, hoping to catch sight of Raous. Much to his relief his companion emerged from the grass and waved with his gloved hand. He jogged over.

Whats going on? Kellen Raous asked. For a man who had spent a night surrounded by the enemy, he had a bright look in his eye and a smile on his face.

Mission over. Lord Commissar Thrack personally has made that clear. Hes thankful we didnt start shooting before he could warn us off. But that doesnt matter now. Razin pointed up, Our air transport is arriving in the hour. Theyll be looking for us and Id like to be far away from those traitors. Razin shot a slit-eyed look to the road leading to the encampment.

Jagg tried one more time. Commissar sir, we cant let traitors live in our midst. Its a core belief, is it not? Did not one traitor turn our world into slag? It cant end here with themthem He fought for the right words. He didnt want their efforts to be wasted and he had learned firsthand the damage a traitor could do. Bunderson had nearly killed him back on Krieg.

Its over, Jagg. For now. I am as much a Man of Krieg as you are. We stop, but we dont forget. No more debate. Razin took control of the transport and he glumly complied. Raous shrugged as he entered the vehicle.

The Commissar drove like a madman kicking up dust and rock. The roar of flyer engines came from overhead soon after. Jagg glanced up and had to shield his eyes from the sun to see. High in the air four flyers were passing by leaving behind contrails of rich brown smoke.

Razin halted the transport and pointed ahead. A pair of Vulture transport flyers

were heading towards them, so low as to flatten the grass. One of the flyers halted a hundred yards off and settled down amongst the reeds. The other flew down the road, over their heads, and beyond towards the forsaken encampment. All three of them stared and Jagg felt a twist in his stomach. Why were the conspirators getting air transport?

Kellen Raous had the same thought and said over the sound of the flyers polluting the sky above and the Vulture waiting for them, Execution team?

Razins grim look told them both that such wasnt the case. The Commissar left the transport and stroked its hood once. Without a word he jogged towards the waiting Vulture. Jagg and Kellen Raous followed keeping their heads low against the exhaust blast.

The cargo door of the Vulture was open and a masked crewman assisted them into the interior. It was noisy and smelled of promethium and other mechanical unguents. Hastily the crewman slid shut the door when they entered, but the noise hardly diminished.

Razin pulled rebreather masks from a locker bolted to the floor by one of the interior benches. He handed them out, and began to don his mask.

Whats this? Kellen Raous asked.

Rebreather masks. Has it been that long since youve worn one? The Field-Marshal is gassing everything he can.

By the time Jagg and Kellen Raous had attached their rebreathers, the poisons of Krieg, fashioned over hundreds of years of their own civil war, began to settle on the land of Jendra IV. A brown haze wafted like a fog over the landscape. Insects fell out of the sky and the quiet buzzing that had plagued the region, halted. Golden crops turned sickly yellow and rapidly curled as the life was choked out of them. Left behind were mounds of rotting vegetation and wet earth beneath. Meanwhile, Jendrites clutched at their throats and painfully coughed out their last. Some tore out their own eyes and tongues. No one died swiftly without assistance. Those in the PDF were lucky, they shot themselves, Colonel Churnev and Major Kaspar included.

He saw the world through the tinted goggles of his mask. The rubber sealed to his features and the filter made chugging noises with each breath he took. Heat quickly built up inside the mask and the air tasted stale. With their microbeads in place, communication was possible, but Razin had nothing to say. He sat, still, with his hands upon his knees, his features and eyes hidden behind the placid molding of the rebreather. Kellen Raous tried to ask some questions but a silent tilt of Razins head ended that.

They landed at the Kynder starport in a sea of activity. Men ran about, all wearing masks. A thick noxious cloud obscured long range vision and as Jagg left the Vulture he could see the grass of the plains had wilted into stringy brown rot. A mechanic lay dead on the slab, contorted in an unnatural position, his rebreather mask half-torn off. He had heard tales of the things failing. No one bothered to move the corpse, they just worked around it.

Trooper Jagg, Raous. Follow me. Razins voice buzzed in his ear. He nodded and followed in the wake of the commissar, whose black stormcoat flared out with his swift steps. They walked across the busy slab and towards a hanger that had been converted into some form of command post. He could see dishes, antennae and a soldiers coming to and from the place in clockwork fashion.

Inside the hanger rooms corridors of flakboard had been arranged. None of Jendra IV had been designed with gas warfare in mind and he saw people sealing windows, doors and setting up portable ventilator systems to clean out any tainted air. The decision to use the poisons must have been a swift one. They passed through a few doorways and passed guards who spoke to Razin over the microbead. Eventually they entered a portion of the converted multi-story hanger where masks werent needed. Into a waiting room they walked and Razin gave the signal that they were to remove their rebreathers. Jagg savored the cool air immediately as it washed over his features.

I need to arrange full kit for you. Word on the bead is that we are starting off with the mild poisons today and will escalate each day. It will give us time to ensure our troops have no skin exposed and loyal civilians are provided for. Razin looked at the pair, The work we did is not to be shared. I told you its over, but only for now. Dont give anything away. You both understand?

They nodded, though Jagg in truth understood very little. He cleared his throat and asked, But what now, Commissar sir?

Im going to find out and go see. Wait here and speak to no one. Razin left through a secure door.

Jagg and Raous talked quietly amongst themselves, but beyond cursing their bad luck and running through a hundred different scenarios as to who was out to kill von Adler, they had little to share. It had been some time before Razin returned, carrying bundles of equipment.

The commissar handed full kit out to each man. He offered a cold smile. The war is on. Orbitals are blasting the ocean into vapor, gas is falling from the sky and the 76th is already engaged with the orks. Its going to be a true Krieg-style slog. Lovely! Except one of you wont be going.

Jagg and Kellen Raous glanced at one another then back at the black-clad man.

Trooper, Kellen Raous. Razin stepped up to the soldier, Your finger.

Raous flinched, he had it seemed, for a time forgotten Ivean had cut off his trigger finger. A vital tool a soldier was in need of if he were to fight.

Im going to appoint you as my aide. Youll learn to drive, read better-er and make my recaf the way I like it. Its either that or an augmetic hand for you and the front lines with Jagg. Razin gave Jagg a look then shrugged, And a glorious death at some point.

Raous was stunned but he quickly spoke up saying, Thank you, Commissar sir! So Ill not be getting killed like Jagg here? Raous offered a friendly smile his friends way.

No, you wont get killed like him. Commissars usually shoot their aides. It isnt glorious in the least. We have two days travel, if the roads arent locked up, before we reach the front. That will give us plenty of time to take down the latest ork war boss. Razin began to put his full kit on and Jagg and Kellen followed suit. We get three days to accomplish that.

He asked, Then what, Commissar sir? as he slid the rebreather on.

Through the microbead Razin responded with, Then the continent gets invaded by sea. I havent heard a plan for that yet. But worry not. We are Men of Krieg!

The orks wore yellow, because their new war boss liked the color. Yellow painted armor, yellow banners and even yellow streaks of face paint adorned the growing mob of greenskins. The new war boss was good. He had arrived by the sea, with teeth plated in gold, to make a real show of things and promised more boys would be on the way. It was going to be a good fight.

The orks had created an encampment of rubble, dung and mounds of earth near the beach. Massive beached barges constructed from all manner of items were being stripped down by wiry gretchin. The scavenged parts were to be turned into more interesting stuff; rockets, flyers, shooters, flamers, walking cans and trucks, lots of trucks. The mekboys were even constructing something special for the humans. They were a diggy lot, the humans, and the mekboys knew just the thing for it.

The oceans surf rushed along the beach and in the distance, far out to sea, the shadowy outline of jumbled together barges could be seen. Their engines sent up plumes of inky smoke into the sky and one amongst them listed heavily as it took on water. The sky above opened up and the air turned a dark shade of crimson. Heat washed across the ork encampment and a moment later pillars of super-heated energy struck from the heavens into the sea. Two of the barges were turned into blackened silhouettes and then vaporized in spectacular fashion. The listing barge was struck by the shockwave of the orbital fire and capsized, flinging green, screaming figures hundreds of feet into the air before they splashed into the boiling waters below.

Gradually the sky returned to an azure blue and the heat wafted away on the sea breeze. Steam rose from the ocean where the gigantic orbital beams had struck and debris burned in the surf. Thousands of ork boys floated in the ocean, their bodies radiating putrid smoke a moment, before they sank. Thousands had died. Hundreds had not. They began to swim. This made the encampment laugh. More reinforcement had arrived.

The road from Kynder to the front had jammed rather quickly and Jagg had to endure long periods of wait. Commissar Razin and his newly appointed aide, Kellen Raous, had left the starport by means of a Vulture. More privileges of the Black Coat. There had been no room for him on the over-stuffed flyer and so he had to make do with other means of transportation.

He lounged in the back of a covered supply hauler, nestled amongst ammo crates bound for the 76th. He wore his full combat attire and rested a new lasgun across his knees. The journey was supposed to take two days, according to Razin's estimate. It ended taking up three due to the conditions of the roads. While tanks could risk driving through the slop that had once been Jendras grassy countryside, the haulers had a tendency to get rapidly bogged down and disabled in a mass of the now seaweed like plant matter. And so he had to sweat in his gear, and wait through numerous traffic-jams.

He slept in the back of the hauler, and due to the poisons in the air had to use an internal rubber hose to relieve himself of urine. Any other body functions had to be carried out in portable latrines that were sealed to the environment. While the poisons in the air wouldn't kill if they touched exposed skin, they would cause redness and an insufferable itching. Breathing the polluted air of course would have been fatal. Eating and drinking thus had to take place in portable sealed tents with ventilators. Accidents happened and he had stared hard-eyed out the back of the hauler at a plastic tent on the side of the busy road. A pile of Men of Krieg were inside, twisted, their dead hands still clutching at their throats.

Early on the third day the hauler broke down, and Jagg was left to walk the rest of the distance to the front lines. He heard the steady drum beat of artillery and ahead could see a brown vaporous cloud obscuring the horizon. At times gas shells would explode in the air, and send down filthy smoke at the distant enemy. He heard a crunching as he walked and looked down. Dead insects carpeted the area.

The front was a maze of trenches, construction vehicles, and soldiers. Most men had microbeads, and he was able to get directions back to the 76th. They were placed, in the dead center of the lines. They had been the first to arrive and the trenches snaked out on either side of their position. Heavy tanks from the 11th were dotted behind the lines and obscured by earthen ramparts, decorated with

razorwire. Their turrets tracked left to right and from time to time a heavy gun would thunder and send a cloud of dust up from the recoil.

He was still new to the 76th, and in rebreather masks he couldn't recognize anyone.

Where is Taubover? Jagg asked a passing soldier, who paused, tilted his head and pointed.

He followed the vague directions and made his way through eleven foot deep trenches, complete with firing steps. Men sat huddled on benches, while watchful sentries stood upon the steps, their lasguns nestled amongst sandbags. Microbead transmissions buzzed in his ear, but nothing of use to him. He fiddled with the controls of the short-range communication device.

Keep it moving, I want piles of bags.

It was Taubover's voice. Jagg jogged further down the trench, and pressed himself tight against the flakboard walls as other soldiers made their way to and fro. He saw three men assisting one another moving sandbags from the trench floor to the trench lip eleven feet up. A man in sergeant stripes watched, while the final member of the section tended to a large vox unit. It was Section Four.

He slowly wandered up and the men stopped working.

Taubover turned and his masked head tilted. What? he said in a less than pleasant voice.

Returning to duty, Sergeant.

Laughter greeted Jagg and even Taubover seemed taken aback. The old soldier was quick to recover and pointed to the bags, Welcome back, trooper Jagg. Replace Sheer and Lufsen there. You're a soldier, but still new to the section. And younger than those two broken-down slags.

Callum, who was on the firing steps, shook Jagg's hand and said in excited tones, Heard you were captured.

Sheer stepped aside for Jagg to take his place. He sat on a bench and rested a

hand atop his heavy stubber. Heard you were dead.

Heard you were tortured then killed, the stop-gap medicus Lufsen chipped in.

Speaking of dead. Where is trooper Raous? He dead? Taubover asked nonchalantly.

Worse. Promoted, he replied.

The men groaned. Taubover shook his head in annoyance and his voice crackled a moment over the microbead before clearing up. Our ten man section has six men left. Im running out of expendables. Jagg, you are under orders not to die.

Yes, Sergeant. He started to heave bags of sand up to Callums waiting hands. He had been on an amazing, if painful, journey. And he couldnt share a thing. He felt hollow. Everything had been a waste. He couldnt even share a story with his comrades. Silently he worked and the banter of the section revolved around the usual. Food, drink and women. Thoughts of his wife, pregnant wife he corrected himself, flitted through his head. Had Klara met with his mother as planned? Did she give up smoking lho sticks like she promised? Did she still have breasts that-

Cant believe they gassed everyone, Callum sighed as they worked.

Wish they had done it sooner, he responded. The two masked and goggled men stared at one another a moment.

Nobody told you to stop working. Sergeant Taubover ended any moral debate on the issue.

Before the last sand bag was up he heard a sound from outside the trench. It wasnt a sound, it was many sounds. Snorts? As he heard it, the whole trench line must have as well and began scurrying about. Men leapt up the firing steps and Jagg heard bolt-actions cocking and lasguns powering up. The order to make ready came from Leutnant von Zietdel over the microbead.

What is that? he asked and dropped the bag of sand he was about to hand to Callum. Callum offered his hand and helped Jagg up the firing steps. He unslung his lasgun and nestled it between overlapping sandbags.

Oh, right. You havent seen them yet. Its quite a thing, Callum said and nudged Jagg as they stood side by side. Callum assisted Sheer up the steps and helped position the heavy stubber. Boxes of ammo were already open and scattered about the steps for easy use. Callum was swift to start feeding the voraciously hungry weapon.

I have command on the line, Sergeant. Greig called out from the base of the trench. He huddled over his vox unit protectively, wires attached directly from it to his rebreather kit. Right down the middle again! Its us.

You heard Grieg. Get ready! Oh, and welcome back, trooper Jagg! Taubover took up a firing position and the snorting noise grew louder.

Outside the trench was a wasteland of rotted grass, packs of deathly earth, and giant shell craters. Beyond was an earthen barricade festooned with yellow banners, which fluttered raggedly in the poisoned wind.

From their own makeshift trenches lumbering Orks clad in ramshackle armor, donning yellow face paint emerged. And they were sneezing.

XIV

Gold Teeth

His first reaction was to laugh. The green brutes lumbered from their lines, axes held high, slug throwers barking up a storm, sneezing all the while. Like wet dogs, the orks shook their heads with every powerful sneeze, but in no way did their advance falter.

The earth shook, and dust fell from the flakboard reinforcements of the trench wall. He heard the screaming of shells overhead, fired by artillery guns miles behind the lines. White phosphorous clouds burst in the air and contrails of deadly poison fell atop the charging orks. Through his greasy goggles he saw some orks drop and fall, grasping at their faces, while others simply sneezed and stomped on through the gas. Yellow seemed to be the motif of the beasts, for what reasons Jagg could not know. Yellow face paint, yellow armor, and a few had yellow flags literally nailed to them. The human mind confused him oft enough, no telling what occurred within the xenos to pick one color over

another.

Fire! came Taubovers command over the microphone. Jagg was ready for a fight. Days inside the back of the transport had given him a severe case of the confines. He had fought orks before. Fought them, eye to eye, nose to nose. Fought them and survived. He told himself he could face them again.

Crack. Crack. Crack.

His lasrifles spat out precise shots. In return poorly aimed slug fire from the advancing orks pelted the sandbags around him. Other rounds embedded into the packed up earth or went high over the heads of the Men of Krieg. As always was the case a few rounds were lucky. Or rather they were distinctly unlucky for whoever managed to catch them. His vision was limited, but he saw just at the edge of his goggled periphery, a Death Korpsman reel back and fall off the firing steps, to land several feet below.

Sheers heavy stubber joined the symphony of weapons fire and Callum kept hold of the ammunition belts, feeding them from the box into the receiver of the needy Mr. Heavy. Rattling bursts of bullets sent distant orks toppling, as Sheer took his time, choosing individual orks to receive the gift of a dozen heavy rounds or more.

Jagg fired off an entire cell and ducked behind the safety of the reinforced trench. With practiced motions he removed the spent cell and tossed it to the bottom of the trench. From his tunic he produced a fresh one. While he was reloading the half-buried tanks behind the trench line boomed out. The 11th armored tore huge holes into the ork advance, sending earth, smoke and hunks of ork into the deadly sky. By the time he re-manned his position the orks were close enough to make out further details. Red beady eyes, open bellowing mouths, and wriggling noses as the beasts sneezed out stringy mucus, tainted by the poisons which hung heavy in the air.

The ork charge fell apart one hundred yards before reaching the trench line. Another volley of gas shells exploded over their heads and the surviving beasts turned and fled, sneezing the whole while. Jagg placed a few rounds into the backs of the large creatures, but failed to kill any before they were obscured by sickly white smoke. Glittering bolts danced from the trench line into the wafting

haze.

Cease fire! Taubover shouted. The sergeant peered up over the lip of the trench and propped his lasgun up against his knee. Gradually the crackling shots of lasgun fire and deep droning of the heavy stubbers ceased along the trench. Wind hissed across the pockmarked land and the thick clouds of poison were blown into a fine mist that slowly faded as sky and earth absorbed it. A few orks were still moving, but aimed shots from the trench lines sharp shooters put an end to their struggles.

A high pitched sound drew Jaggs attention up. Three Lightning class flyers shot by at low level. They burst across no mans land at a quick rate, their engines glowing hot like coals. The flyers banked and dusted the enemy entrenchments with brown gas from large canister pods under their wings. Trails of tracer fire leapt up at the flyers but were slow in tracking the vehicles as they thundered past and didnt manage to score a hit. After dropping their choking cargo the Lighting Fighters banked back towards friendly lines to the awaiting cheers of the Men of Krieg.

Don't know why they cheer, theyve nothing to cheer about. Even the ones that drop dead get up later, Lufsen said.

"We done?" Sheer asked.

Taubover stared at the gas-obscured horizon and nodded. Were done. Fifth?

Sheer unhitched his heavy stubber from the mounting on the trench lip and descended the steps. Sixth time theyve come like that today, he said as he set the weapon down and produced a variety of stained cloths from his tunic, with which to clean it.

Jagg climbed down the firing steps and sat on the nearest bench. Callum joined him. All along the trench line Men of Krieg took respite. With the environment as toxic as it was, eating and drinking were out of the question, so instead general chatter broke out.

Callum and Jagg were no exception. They just keep charging us like that. Youd think theyd give up. Today weve been hit six times. The day before, the right

flank got hit eleven. Callum gestured in the direction of where the days prior assaults had struck.

Any breaks in our line? Jagg inquired. He knew enough about orks to consider them insanely brave and straightforward. Headlong charges were their preferred method of fighting, which suited the dig and hold Men of Krieg just fine. But the multiple attacks made him wonder if there was something deeper to the greenskin mind than the obvious. Any idea what they are up to?

Callum shook his masked head. His shoulders shrugged and he said, No breaks and no idea. So bad luck, eh? Raous got promoted?

To be an aide to Commissar Razin no less, he smirked.

Real bad luck! What in the name of Terra were you two up to for so long?

He wanted to just fess up and say, failing to foil a conspiracy but instead sighed and said, We were captured by Jendrites, not good. They cut off Raous trigger finger. Razin made an easy offer. Work for him or get a clumsy augmetic hand and be here with us. Easy choice. He checked his lasgun over for dirt or grime. His stomach rumbled reminding him of a more immediate concern. Hey, how do they feed us? They have confined areas set up? Ive not had a decent meal or drink in days. Not since the delicious meal of the Sunny Respite in fact.

We hold here most the day then get taken rearward while Second Platoon takes over for the night. You can eat, drink, sh*t. But always keep your rebreather close. Doesnt take much to let the gas slip in. Callum yawned through his mask and tended to his own lasgun. I even sleep with my mask on my chest just in case. Not that you can sleep much. Artillery barrages all night and then there is Gold Teeth music.

He raised a brow beneath the mask plastered to his face. He shook his head more dramatically to get the point across.

Whos Gold Teeth?

Ork war boss, Taubover interrupted. He is a big fricker, in Nob armor painted as yellow as the sun. I saw him once wandering about bashing his own for failing to meet up to whatever counts as ork standards. The fricker set up, what I guess one

could call; the ork version of psychological warfare. Taubover remained on watch and pointed out towards the ork defenses which were wreathed in the brown poisons dropped by the flyers. There, there and there, theyve set up voxes. They play music during the night. Mostly orks chanting in their crude language. Awful racket.

When they arent sneezing, Sheer offered as he worked off the barrel of his weapon.

True. Ah! I knew it. They arent giving us long this time. Up men. Taubover took better cover behind the trench. Sheer swiftly exchanged barrels from a sack he carried with him and returned to his position. The trenches were re-manned before the orders to do so came in over the microbead from von Zietdel.

Jagg could see orks starting to make their way across the churned up field once more. He fought. And as it was before the Men of Krieg beat the orks back. They outdid the right flank by sunset. When Second Platoon came to relieve them, an exhausted Jagg had assisted in repelling thirteen ork assaults, not including the six he missed early in the day. Not one alien reached their lines and for that Jagg profusely thanked the Emperor. When darkness fell the First Army of Krieg had been engaged with the orks for five days. They had two left to topple Gold Teeth, before the entire continent was invaded.

Jagg ate with the entire platoon in a sealed tent behind the main trench line. It wasn't Jendrite food, but instead the high energy protein soups of Krieg. Everyone agreed it was delicious. He sat at the table with his own section and other men he was just starting to recognize from the other sections. During their meal von Zietdel wandered by. He waited for everyone to finish before he stood up upon one of the tables, idly knocking aside a few empty bowls of soup with his knee high and glossy-black boots.

The room quieted and the commanding officer of First Platoon smiled. Uhm hello. Well, yes. Good show today men! We've beaten back the orks for five days now, inflicting what intelligence describes as massive casualties. The room broke out into a cheer and von Zietdel had to wave his hands to get the tent quiet again. We haven't much time to win this one though. I just received fresh orders from Hauptman Ostriker. We're to have at the orks tomorrow. The whole brigade will be going. Our platoon will be at the fore. Ten minute artillery barrage then over the top we go. The room went deathly silent. Unaware, or perhaps uncaring, of the reaction the Leutnant continued, Yes, well then. I just wanted you all to be ready for that. I won't send you off where I won't go, so I'll be with you. I have a new laspistol. Silver polish. Quite nice. He stood awkwardly atop the table. The thin moustache on his lip moved as von Zietdel awaited a response, and when none came he cleared his throat and said, So let's have us a hooray!

A dull monotonous Hooray came from the men. Satisfied, the Leutnant stepped off the table and wandered off.

Should be interesting, Callum offered.

Tauber turned his attention their way and said, Something like that. Listen up you two, since you've not had to do something like this before. Wait for a whistle blow. It will come in over all the microbeads. Follow me up and over the top. Stay low, and spread out a bit. Our own artillery may forget to stop firing and no point having one random shell kill all of us. He finished his soup and pushed the bowl away. The flinty eyes of the sergeant raked over Callum and Jagg. This is the important part. At the last fifty yards we need to gather up. If we are to punch through we need numbers to do it. The whole line will gather up like a bayonet thrust. Go with the flow of things. Got it?

Yes, Sergeant they responded.

Sergeant? Why cant we use the Chimeras? Or get some Gorgons to take us across. Jagg frowned trying to think why an army, with all their technological wonders, was going to run directly at ork entrenchments. It seemed to him to make as much tactical sense as the futile ork attacks on their trenches just hours before.

Value, Lufsen droned.

Value?

Tauber nodded, Tanks are valuable, we are not. The army can toss us at the orks and if we all die the army will survive just fine without us. If command throws in all their tanks in, and its a bad call, then thats it. Were done for. You thought you were special, Trooper Jagg?

No, Sergeant. He looked back down to his bowl of soup. He wasnt feeling particularly hungry anymore.

Thats right. Remember that and youll live. The moment you think anyone in command values you, youll be in for a letdown. Generally a fatal one.

The rest of the evening was disquieting. He could hardly sleep. He felt a growing tension about the days planned push and occasional nighttime artillery barrages made him open his eyes and reach for his rebreather. Worst of all, ork bellows and chants sang through the night, intermitted by tremendous sneezes. Jagg had no idea what they were saying, but imagined it had something to do with their impending deaths.

An hour before dawn Taubover shook Jagg awake. He jerked back at the sight of the masked sergeant looming over him. There had been no cots set up and so he had slept in the corner of a large sealed tent, using his greatcoat as a pillow. Wearily, he rose and noted men putting on their equipment. With no further prompting he did the same, making himself ready.

Ditch the coats, gloves, and non-essentials, too hot. Command has stopped with the nastiest of stuff. Your skin will be fine. Go in with just a mask. Taubovers voice was muffled by his rebreather. He walked off, but said over his shoulder, Youll need your bayonet.

He dressed as instructed and belted Razins issued laspistol to his waist. He fell in with the rest of section four just as every artillery piece the Death Korps had at their disposal sounded off. The tent shook and Jagg felt the very pressure in the air change as explosive shells larger than a man were hurled at the ork lines. Seconds later explosions boomed and thundered in a truly titanic fashion.

Emperors teeth! he exclaimed and several other soldiers had similar oaths. Even the earth itself was shuddering and he could see dust and discarded gear rattling on the floor of the tent. He followed Taubover and the rest out. Without the microbead in his ear he wouldnt have been able to hear a thing. The barrage roared through the sky and pulverized the ork defenses. Blasts of earth and smoke rose continually into the air and he almost lost his footing, so intense was the shelling.

Taubover led them back to their original positions. Second platoon had set up ladders and the weary men were sitting on the benches. They had been up all night, but would get little rest. They would launch their attack on the heels of First platoon.

Fix, bayonets, Taubover ordered.

They were crammed in the trench and movement was no easy feat. He jostled and shoved till he could slide the dark sharpened steel onto the end of his lasgun. Several soldiers were raiding ammo boxes, and he did the same, scavenging from an open locker, several power cells and two stick grenades, which he tucked into his belt.

Two minutes, Taubovers voice crackled.

He felt tension mounting and the crowded men shifted uneasily on their feet. A few shook hands, some even hugged, or knocked helmets. Jagg gave a nod to Callum. At the one minute mark the artillery was still coming down hard and with the continual impacts of the shells, dust simply poured off of the flakboard walls. He had a dim fear that the whole trench would collapse in on itself. The thought of being buried alive hovered in his mind. At thirty seconds he saw something he would never forget for the rest of his life.

Leutnant von Zietdel, wore his finest, a charcoal gray officers uniform with red epaulettes. His helmet was adorned with the ceremonial spike and he had in his hand, a brand new silver laspistol. He confidently climbed up the ladder and right out of the trench. With artillery shells passing overhead the commanding officer of Second Platoon turned to look down at the men in the trenches. Smoke rippled around him and his voice came over the microbead of every man under his command. He was singing. Krieg, Land of our Fathers.

In his ear he heard through the microbead the voices of every nearby soldier taking up the song.

He stared dumbstruck at the man, standing exposed to enemy fire and any errant shells. Jagg owed von Zietdel his life, but never considered the man more than strange and mad. His opinion changed then and there. Leutnant von Zietdel was strange, stark raving mad and brave beyond words. Jagg began to sing. He sang with his commander for thirty seconds at which point the recorded sound of a whistle blew. The shelling stopped, and the men surged forth, the built up tension boiling over.

He hardly remembered climbing up the ladder before he was running across uneven ground, lasgun in hand. Ahead he could see nothing but craters, shattered corpses and pillars of smoke from the terrible rain the Men of Krieg had brought down upon the xenos heads. He yelled. It was a natural thing he supposed and it helped relieve the tension. Around him men began to scatter, and he quickly lost sight of anyone he could call a companion. Everyone looked the same, except for von Zietdel, who with pistol in the air spurred the charge onwards.

He wondered for only the tiniest of moments if the artillery had killed every

green beast. Through the descending cloud of smoke he could see sparkling flashes indicating such a hope was not to be. The orks were opening up.

A soldier to his left reared back, puffs of blood riddling his chest as he flung his lasgun aside. Jaggs natural instinct was to find cover and he crouched low, seeking out some crater hole to hide in.

Before he could dive into a crater, a hand gripped his shoulder and shoved him forward. He had to take several long-legged leaps before he regained his footing on the churned up lifeless earth.

Dont stop, Taubovers voice growled in Jaggs ear through the microbead.

Without looking back the young soldier charged headlong towards the obscuring smoke. He could hear through his rebreather hood the sounds of slugs whistling past. He wanted to shoot, to do something other than just run madly at the enemy who he could not see. Jaggs had seen over a dozen ork assaults fail and doing what the Orks had been doing for days struck him as absolutely insane. Where were the tanks? Where were the Chimera transports? There were none, just a tide of men storming forward. A tide of expendable men.

He glanced behind him and could see the entire center heaving forwards, von Gotslieb was throwing everything he had in. There was only one thing to do now. Keep going forward.

A green, torn up hand, burst from the mud and grabbed Jaggs booted foot. His forward momentum was suddenly arrested and he fell heavily to the pulverized earth. He gritted his teeth as he felt the hand tighten upon his boot. Looking back, he could see an ork, slathered with mud, sit up. Yellow face paint still decorated its oversized head and it was missing one arm. The creature slowly turned its head and looked at him, its expression seemed confused. It then looked at its own hand clutching Jaggs foot. The dull mind of the half-dead thing must have come to a conclusion. It roared and began to haul him towards it.

He raised his rifle, but before he could fire, two passing Men of Krieg paused, long enough to ram their bayonets into the orks face. The beast bellowed and for a moment forgot him. He was able to yank his boot free and stumble to his feet. No one paused to shoot the thing. He wasnt sure why, but decided to do what the

rest of the men were. He started to run. He heard the angry howls of the ork, but the greenskin, probably due to severe damage, could do no more than lean up and swipe ineffectually with its one remaining arm. Jagg left the beast behind. Keep going forward.

His boots pounded into the earth and he ducked his head low, as if that would somehow speed up his progress. Over the microbead he heard the panting von Zietdel, All sections, on me! At them my boys! At them!

Orks were crawling out of their distant entrenchments. They were not going to sit idly by and receive the shock of the 76th, they were going to meet the Men of Krieg head on. The orks were sneezing and screaming. Most bore wounds that should have been fatal. Limbless orks, orks with shrapnel the size of dinner plates in their heads, orks with their entrails hanging out, charged uttering alien war cries. He paused to bring up his weapon and take aim. He fired a single shot and the bolt passed into the belly of an ork, who seemed none the worse for wear for it. Jagg leveled another shot, but soldiers were running past him in a growing tide, firing from the hip. He let out his own war cry and remembered. Keep going forward.

Soldiers veered and he followed, he had no idea who was near him, or where his own section was. He could see Leutnant von Zietdel, however. The officer was brandishing his pistol at the lip of what constituted for an ork entrenchment. Artillery had done a good job of burying their line, but not all of it. Zietdel fired his pistol, time and again into the trench, where Jagg could make out the tops of green heads. Keep going forward.

An ork climbed from the entrenchment and pulled from its back, a two handed club with rusted nails protruding from it. With bestial fury the lumbering creature swept its weapon. A Death Korpsman tried to deflect with his lasgun, but the weapon shattered and the man crumpled. Another speared the ork in the leg. The creature twisted its torso and brought the club down on the helmet of his attacker. The helmet shattered and the rebreather mask popped off, along with a flow of blood, brain and bone. Sensing the threat, charging soldiers stormed towards the enraged ork. Lasrounds pelted the monster but it continued advancing swatting two men a dozen feet back with its wide blows.

Another guardsman ducked under the broad sweeps of the club and thrust his

bayonet into the orks side. The creature lurched, rearing back its blood drenched club to deliver a blow. Another soldier stabbed his weapon into the orks shoulder then another charged into the things chest, firing his weapon even as he drove the steel blade in. He found himself rushing wildly towards the greenskin. Chop-Range was a foolish place to be, but orders from up on high had demanded it. He rammed his blade up under the jaw of the creature, having to press his own body against a fellow soldier to do so. More and more Death Korpsmen thrust and stabbed at the ork, which finally fell to its knees. He and at least five others stuck their bayonets into the alien, over and over till at last it fell back with a gurgling groan. Without a pause to exult in their victory the men ran up to the lip of the ork trench. Keep moving forward.

He followed the rushing men and as soldiers leapt into the remains of the ork line, he did the same. He landed heavily on something uneven and unstable. The exertion of crossing the no mans land caught up with him. His wounded back burned again and his lungs felt as if he had been breathing in the noxious air without a rebreather. He leaned against a shattered earthen wall and caught his breath. Men of Krieg were spilling into the trench and moving horizontally both directions, clambering over places where the ork defenses had collapsed under piles of earth. Dead orks were simply everywhere and Jagg noted with some amusement, he was standing atop one. He moved, at a steady jog down the trench. The report of lasgun fire echoed and a few slug throwers as well. The ork trench wasnt deep, but it was deep enough to block Jags view of what was going on outside of it. Again nowhere to go, but down the trench. Keep going forward.

Thats it, well done lads. Good boys. Hold up. We have them reeling now. Man your positions, use bodies if you have to see up over the top. Second Platoon will be here in a bit! Rest of the brigade will be on either flank. Weve done it! Von Zietdels command came into Jags ear.

Sergeant, Taubover? Jagg asked into his microbead, but there was no response. Either Taubover was dead, not listening to him, or was too far away. Unsure what to do, he waited, hesitantly looking about, until a soldier nudged him.

Help me with this body, itll make a good firing step.

Jagg didnt recognize the voice. He assisted the man, and together they stuffed a

dead ork against the wall of the freshly claimed trench. They, along with the rest of the platoon, took up firing positions. He could see ork tents, construction yards, bodies and what looked like a road leading to a looming, shadowy, mountain. The smoke from the artillery strike still obscured details and he had to hastily wipe his goggles clear. Mountain?

Jagg looked again, not recalling Jendra IV having any major mountains. The planet was a ball of grass, dips, small hills and shallow oceans. Sure enough, through the wafting smoke, Jagg could see a mountain. But since when did mountains move?

The earth started to rattle and this time it wasn't from the Death Korps heavy guns. The mountain rumbled and emerged through the pale smoke like a primordial god. It was massive. It was towering. It was the definition of awesome. The construct was made from piles of wood, armored plates, and buildings that had been welded together and in some cases tied by chains to the hull of the thing. Skeletal iron protrusions jutted out from the ork creation and from them chain links, the size of a man, dangled, leading to spiked, iron balls, the size of tanks. The base of the machine, if it could be called that, was curved and wooden, with titanic treads added to it.

The earth was flattened in its slow, inevitable, trundling path. A hundred exhaust ports puffed out black plumes of smoke.

By the Emperor! It's one of their damned barges. They put bloody tracks on the thing! the soldier next to him said, awestruck. No one even bothered to fire at it and he heard through his microbead nearby soldiers muttering prayers and words of total astonishment.

At the top of the monstrous vehicle a large colorful tent swayed. Seated upon a throne of junk, with levers leading to control boxes in either hand, sat an ork so big that he could make him out despite the distance and its elevated position. The ork wore an armored suit of brilliant yellow. The creature somehow sensed Jagg staring, for he was sure it looked directly at him. It smiled exposing its mouth for all to see.

Gold Teeth, he whispered.

Decisions

The command post bustled with activity. A hasty tent had been thrown up, with a few sandbags to provide protection from any long range fire the greenskins manned. Aides ran about, tacticians poured over maps on tables, while a host of officers hooked into high-powered voxes gave reports and passed down commands. As the battle intensified so did the chatter and movement within the command post, until it became a frenzy of barked orders and curt questions.

Hartwin removed the mag-optics from his goggled eyes and handed them to his aide. I do believe we've been tricked, he said dumbly. Even without the mag-optics he could see the titanic boat driving towards them. In moments it would reach the ork lines he had managed to capture. After that, it would roll right up the middle smashing von Gotsliebs First Kompanie before the rest of the regiment could do anything about it. Not that they had the weapons to do much, even if they could reposition in time.

The Field-Marshal had set up his command post atop a gentle rise behind the trenches. He could see quite clearly that his center wasn't the only place in trouble. Ork trucks, laden with bellowing, sneezing, greenskins, were pressing his right and left flanks. The mad vehicles drove at insane rates of speed, and more than a few flipped as they attempted to jump craters. Their crew and passengers were flung into the earth with bone-shattering force. What would kill a man did not kill an ork though. After each spectacular wreck, orks picked themselves up and continued the charge on foot. More than a few, Hartwin imagined, were laughing.

Kapitän von Gotslieb is sorely pressed, my Field-Marshal! He's got nothing left. He has the ork center, but not for long, there are only two platoons facing that thing and the rest of his regiment is under pressure by orks on foot! an officer shouted in excitement as he listened to a large vox that was receiving desperate calls for assistance.

Ork transports are crossing our left and right, my Field-Marshal! another vox operator reported.

Ork construct is reaching the captured lines. Kapitän von Gotslieb is asking for support! Orders, sir? yet another.

He felt a rising panic, a fear the likes he had not known before. He was moments away from letting the entire army down. He had lost battles in his career, but never a war. Options were few. Orks were breaching his left and right trench line and his center was spent in taking the ork positions. He still had von Schild's tanks, but where to use them? Leave them in the center, to hammer at the ork construct, or draw them back to try and stem the tide of orks on his flanks? Men in masks huddled around him, asking for orders and as he remained silent their panic grew. He didn't have to see the bulky form of Lord Commissar Thrack, to know that he was being closely examined. No second chances. He had to play the role of a general; a general of Krieg in all its remorseless glory.

Abandon the center. Get the 11th out of their embankments. I want von Schild to hurl back those damnable trucks! Hartwin gripped the mag-optics from von Gaul and gazed at his center line. First and Second Platoon were about to be overrun, and there was nothing to be done about it.

Coordinate artillery, and the Imperial Navy flyers. Every gun we got, bring that construct down. I want the sky to fall down upon that ork crawler!

Hartwin's aide spoke quietly, on a secure microbead channel, We have two platoons from the 76th facing the construct, not to mention the rest of the regiment on either flank of it. Von Gotslieb will want time to save his men.

Hartwin shook his head no.

Grosse-Kapitän von Gotslieb wants to speak directly to you, my Field-Marshal, a vox-operator said nervously.

Put him through. Hartwin heard his microbead crackle.

Field-Marshal?! I just threw my boys into the ork center. I've taken it! You can't reward their glory with artillery! My whole regiment is engaged! the commander of the 76th sounded ragged and wild.

No one is important. I will not lose this war to an ork counter-strike. Pull your men back, and reinforce the flanks. We win! Here. Now. Today. Hartwin made a

chopping motion with his hand and the vox-operator duly cut the communication link. The 76th had taken a beating ever since it arrived on Jendra IV, and now it would have to take yet another, from their own men. Such was war.

Flyers inbound, artillery coordinated. Battery commanders are asking for confirmation, Field-Marshal, one of the vox-officers said.

Confirmed.

The command post shook and he heard the familiar sound of gigantic ordinance streaking overhead. Artillery started to rain down in a wide pattern along the center of the battlefield, striking the construct, captured ork lines, no mans land, and he knew, his own men. The two platoons of the 76th First Kompanie were going to be wiped out, he was sure of it.

A shadow loomed over his shoulder and he turned to come face to face with the masked form of the Lord Commissar.

Reports say the ork war boss is steering that contraption. Typical. If the artillery doesnt bring it down, perhaps something more subtle? the political officer offered.

Hartwin nodded, it would be good insurance. If the barrage of explosive death didnt obliterate construct and war boss alike, perhaps a snipers round might come in useful. I have most of von Saunders lot stalling ork landings along the western shores, days away. We have any of his Jägers here? Some sharpshooters will do just as well as a Basilisk shell.

The cane tapped and the Lord Commissar laughed over the microbead. He nodded, It just so happens that I brought a few with me from Kynder. Just in case!

Good! Who? How many? Hartwin asked.

Major von Knobloch and fifteen crack shots, Thrack replied.

Excellent. Time to delegate eh? Tell the Major the good news. I want him at the center, to take out that war boss soon as the steel rain stops falling. And while theyre at it, see if they can rescue whatever is left of First and Second Platoon.

Poor bast*rds. Its the least I can do for Kapitän von Gotslieb.

Ill see to this one personally, my Field-Marshal. You keep those flanks held, and Ill eliminate the threat to our cause in the middle. Lord Commissar Thrack tapped his cane again. He turned and wandered off to collect his men.

Hartwin felt his fear ebb. They might just do it. They might turn Gold Teeths counter-attack into his last. Victory was just an artillery shell or sniper round away.

XVI

Betrayals

What do we do? Jagg asked, his heart raced, his eyes were wide and he was breathing quickly through the rebreather.

No idea. The man next to him shook his head and repeated, No idea.

The crawling barge was getting closer to the captured trench and the poorly built walls, already weakened by artillery fire, began to cave in. He heard a desperate scream to his left, but by the time he looked, all he saw was a mound of earth, and bayonets jutting up from it. The blades moved, ever so slightly. Horror stricken he started to run towards them. Being buried alive was no way for a Man of Krieg to die.

A squeal sounded in his ear and the microbead came to life. The signal was clear, and must have been amplified by a powerful vox. Grosse-Kapitän von Gotsliebs words rang loudly. The man spoke slowly, clearly and in somber tones. First Platoon, Second Platoon. Command is bringing down the hammer from the sky. Right on you. Get back to our lines; dont look back, dont pause, run. The Emperor protects. The microbead squealed once more and went silent. It was every man for himself. He abandoned any ideas of unburying his comrades.

The first shell passed overhead and pierced the crawling barge. Wood splinters showered outwards and orks within the construct tumbled out, falling great distances before bouncing off the hull of the machine, or impaling themselves on randomly placed metal stanchions. In response the rusted, metal arms of the crawling barge began to move and the massive wrecking balls started to sway

and sweep in erratic patterns. He saw one of the mammoth iron balls hit the earth and take a great gouge out of it, flinging up rotted Jendrite vegetation. Another ball miraculously swung up and struck the side of an artillery shell, it passed high into the air and exploded with a dull boom. As if the incoming artillery storm, and ork wreking balls werent bad enough, from hatches dotting the machine, orks began shooting.

He slung his lasgun over his back, gripped the lip of the trench with two hands, and vaulted out. He ran and alongside him panicked Death Korpsmen scurried. This was no retreat, it was a total route. The pressure in the air changed and shrieking whistles sounded all around as the storm of metal began to drop. Explosions rocked the landscape once again. He knew there was only one thing to do. How ironic he thought; run back.

A shell detonated overhead and hunks of shrapnel spat forth, slicing a man into three distinct pieces. Others nearby were embedded with metal, they fell screaming. He ran past them. There was nothing he could do for them. Run back.

More shells started to land and kick up plumes of dirt and debris. He felt shockwaves buffet against him and his rebreather was nearly torn off. In desperation he clung to his own mask, but could see several others were not so lucky. They had fallen and their masks had torn free. They thrashed madly and struggled to re-don their masks, coughing and sputtering the whole time. Some were lucky. Others spasmed and died. A few were able to get their masks on, just in time to be blown apart by the next shell. Run back!

He kept a tight hold of his rebreather and saw nothing ahead of him except plumes of earth, smoke and the running figures of men. He was exhausted from their earlier charge, and found his legs boiling while his lungs were struggling with each breath. But fear drove him on. Something was in his path? Jagg almost laughed. It was the one armed ork, still sweeping out with a clawed hand at the Men of Krieg as they dashed by. He made a wide circuit around the creature, when suddenly there was silence. It was no natural silence at all. Just an instant cessation of high explosive sounds. He slowed his movement in confusion.

A shockwave sent him tumbling forward and tore holes in his clothing. He never heard the shell as it detonated behind him.

When he first met her, Jagg didnt consider his wife Klara to be beautiful. After their coupling and hurried conversations, his vision of her had altered. It had been weeks since their hasty three days of pre-arranged courtship. He recalled every curve, every dimple, every lock of short dark hair, with fondness. He missed her smell, her wit, her hungry eyes. Finding her staring at him was unexpected to say the least. A pleasant surprise given his last memory was of fearfully running through a barrage of artillery while being chased by a boat on treads.

She sat on a chair that had been turned backwards. Her legs were planted suggestively on either side of it. Her smile was sly and she wore the only garments he had ever seen her in; black shirt, with faded gray coveralls over that. Idly she drew a lho stick to her lips and the end of it burned like a lasround. Her arms rested lazily atop the back of the chair as she regarded him.

He was curious as to why he was lying face down. The room they were in was inky black, and a spotlight, whose source he couldnt guess, shone down upon them. He peered at Klara. It was hard to see past the chair, but he was sure her waist was gently swelled. She had his child.

You said youd give those up, Jagg said, and his voice echoed in the room.

Her brow raised and her smile widened. She exhaled, and puffs of white rolled from her lips, Youre the one who is quitting, she said in soft, and yet slightly mocking, tones.

Leaning up he said, What?! I dont smoke. I couldnt get the hang of it, remember? His head felt like it was swimming.

Her eyes rolled and she drew on the lho stick, it audibly sizzled. Klara plucked it from her lips and flicked it at Jagg. It bounced nicely off his neck, burning him.

Get up.

He winced and felt the sting of the lit lho stick. He brushed his throat and stared quizzically at his wife. What are you on about?

Get up.

He grunted. He placed his hands flat upon the ground and stood up. It took more energy than he expected and he instantly felt dizzy. He wobbled a moment then held out his hands to steady his balance. Happy?

Keep moving.

He frowned at Klara. He took two steps towards her and placed his hands atop hers. He leaned in close, close enough to smell her. Femininity mixed with the acrid vapors of lho. Happy? He didnt mean to sound cross, not that it mattered. She smiled lazily up at him.

Yes. She exhaled and a gout of smoke struck Jagg full in the face.

He shook his head and when the smoke cleared he found himself in a familiar place. He instantly longed for the strange black room. Jagg was leaning on a hunk of metal, which was jutting out of the shattered landscape. He felt a pain in his neck and raised a hand to his throat. Pulling his gloved fingers away he looked at them and then sighed. Blood. Fumbling, he could feel something in his neck, but he dared not remove it. Whatever it was, was thankfully small. Shrapnel, he figured.

He turned and his eyes swept the field. Smoke rolled in lazy clouds along the ground and black smoke blotted out the sun. The crawling barge was burning. The whole top of the thing roared like a funeral pyre and massive holes decorating it spewed out sickly smoke into the sky. The machine was still moving, its iron treads grinding the earth flat in its wake, one ball and chain dragging furrows in the earth. The other had been snapped off and he could see it half buried in the ground. Beyond he made out a trail of destruction behind the barge, and could tell that the things path was curving. It was listing heavily from the damage it had taken. With no one controlling it, the thing would slowly circle, over and over. Orks could be seen hanging out the windows, dead.

An engine roar overhead drew Jaggs attention and several Imperial Lightning fighters darted across the heavens, spraying thousands of rounds of glowing cannon fire into the crawling barge. They strafed swiftly and peeled up and into the clouds of black smoke. Nothing returned their fire. He stumbled and returned his attention to his more immediate surroundings.

He was in no mans land, and using the ork war-machine as a landmark, roughly knew which way to walk to return to the safety of the Krieg lines. He could see remnants of First and Second platoon. Dead men, parts of dead men. He felt for his lasgun, but during the barrage it had fallen off. His sidearm, the pistol Razin had issued him, was still safely in its holster. He drew the weapon and moved through the uneven landscape, on ungainly feet. His vision swam at times and he couldnt hear very well. There was a high pitched whine in his ear that wouldnt quit. The microbead fizzled at times and he thought he could detect voices, but nothing was clear enough to make sense of. How long had he been out?

Crack! Crack!

The sound was distinct. Light caliber rounds, too soft to be the crude slug throwers of the orks. The sound came from the direction of the crawling barge. Billowing black smoke hid whatever was going on. But if there were Men of Krieg in danger, Jagg wanted to help. Now that his own men had the decency to stop dropping multi-ton shells atop his head, it seemed the right time. He darted over mounds of earth and skirted around craters. He tried not to look at the severed hands and limbless torsos he came across. He feared he might find a decapitated head that he recognized.

Crack!

The sound was much closer.

He ran, and hopped over a piece of burning wood that had fallen from the ork machine. The ground shuddered as the crawler refused to die, its form continuing to traverse the field. A man emerged from the smoke, sprinting. He ran four steps.

Crack!

The soldier collapsed and let out a pained cry that reached Jaggs microbead. Other voices came in as well on the unsecure channel.

Drop him. No survivors from this area.

The next shot from the unseen assailants struck the fallen mans helmet. His head twisted and he went still. Jagg immediately went prone and stared at the corpse.

His goggles limited his vision, but he decided to play still, play dead, rather than sweep and try and make sense of what was going on.

Two men, in uniforms of the Death Korps, strode through the wispy haze. Each held a small bolt-action, identical to the type he had seen on the would-be assassin of Lady von Adler. One soldier knelt by the corpse and checked his ident-tags.

Who we looking for exactly? the kneeling one asked and turned his masked face up to his companion.

The commissar, and two troopers are top priority. Jagg, and Raous. We get lucky? the other said.

The kneeling soldier shook his head and rose. The two shrugged and began to patrol towards him. Jagg tried to control his breathing and his hand subconsciously tightened on his laspistol. The pair came closer and closer and one pointed at him. He held a breath.

Another one, you check it out. Ill get the next one. The soldier speaking remained and panned his head side to side to make up for his vision-limiting goggles. The other walked lazily towards Jagg, his hands were gripped on his bolt-action, ready to level the weapon at a moments notice. The soldier stood by him and for a moment he feared he was about to be shot in the back. Instead, a booted foot rolled him over. He made not a sound and moved with the motion, resting his hand, lasgun still held, on his chest. He shut his eyes, knowing that at close range the other could see through his goggles. A hand fumbled at his neck and yanked off the ident-tag.

Damn tags broken. Looks like a piece of it went into this frickers neck.

Well, use your knife and dig it out. Ill do the next one, I told you.

Even if it is just a mass of wet pulp?

Yeah, even if its squashed. Hurry up, I want to get out of here.

He heard the soldier fumble, he assumed for a blade with which to dig out the bit of shrapnel Jagg now knew to be a hunk of his own ident-tag. He cracked

opened his eyes. The soldier was kneeling over him, head bowed as he reached for a hilt at his waist. Jagg leveled his pistol and fired once.

The bolt hit the top of the mans head, he fell onto his side without a word. The sound of the lasbolt was enough to alert the other soldier who brought up his bolt-action. Thinking quickly Jagg called out into the microbead that they had left unsecured.

Im behind you, you idiot. Put your hands up, traitor. He played dead the entire time and to his relief the fellow hesitated. Slowly he began to turn. Wasting no time Jagg dropped his pistol and grabbed the bolt-action of the corpse. Still seated, he brought the weapon up to his shoulder pulling the stock up tight. Just as Sergeant Hauster told him, he took a breath, let it out, and pulled the trigger.

Crack!

The recoil was hardly noticeable and the soldier staggered. He wobbled on his feet then pitched forward into the earth. Jagg retrieved his sidearm, holstered it, and worked the lever of the bolt action, to use as his primary weapon. Swiftly he used one hand to search the dead man next to him. With expert motions he stole his canteen and ration-card. A quick glance at the yellowed card made his stomach turn. 52nd Jäger Regiment. Jagg looked for ident-tags, and found none. A quick inspection of the back of the mans neck revealed the numbers had been burned off and destroyed by scar tissue. Even without the ration-card, Jagg knew who was hunting him. Somewhere out there Major Knobloch and his remaining sharpshooters were hunting. Razin had said he would not forget the case. Did Razin count on the Major thinking the same thing?

Snyder, Vogel, what was that again? You say something? the voice came in clear into his ear. Was someone else close enough for him to receive their unguarded signal? He looked for cover and bolted for a shell hole. He slid down the soft sandy interior and clutched his newly acquired bolt-action close to his heaving chest.

The microbead spoke again. The voice was cool, collected and refined, Snyder, Vogel, this is Major Knobloch, report. There was a moment of silence followed by another command, All units, someone is listening in, change to frequency epsilon.

Turning slowly he low crawled his way to the lip of the shell hole. He saw little besides other craters, the burning ork crawler and bodies. To his surprise the voice of Major Knobloch came into his ear again.

Can everyone hear me?

A chorus of Yes, sir resounded in Jaggs ear. Their signal wasnt unguarded; something had gone wrong, or rather, terribly right, with his microbead. He blamed/thanked the artillery barrage which had sent him into the dirt and a pleasant dream world with Klara and somehow in the process given him an edge over the enemy.

Continue with your mission. Rendezvous- Major Knoblochs command was cut short by the sound of the ork barge crawling its last. A loud pop sent shivers up the machine, as if it were alive and catching a chill. Steam vomited from the seams of the wood and the burning machine came to a halt. The sounds of treads, gears and rumbling stopped. Something inside the machine clattered and clanged.

Rendezvous in front of that ork thing, out.

Jagg, for the first time in his life, sorely missed Commissar Razin. Razin would know what to do, who to call. Razin would have a plan to take on the traitorous Major and his men. Jagg, for all his efforts, could come up with only two options. Sneak back to his lines, or fight. He wished the decision was an easy one. It was only after a reflective moment that he made his way towards the fore of the blazing crawler. His hunters would be expecting him to make his way back to friendly lines, not to attack.

The sharp reports of the small caliber rifles echoed. The snipers were having an easy time picking off the survivors of the platoon. Was anyone left alive from section four he wondered. Were Razin and Raous still alive he thought. He didnt recall them being sent in on the charge. Then again, he didnt recall them not being sent. Everything had happened so fast and his mind struggled to make sense of things.

Ahead was a shape, half buried in the earth, moving. He leveled his weapon a moment, then stopped himself from firing. It had to be one of the 76th. He

dashed towards the figure. It was a Man of Krieg, squirming his way out of the dirt. He froze upon seeing Jagg. At first he was going to call out to him, assure him he was friendly. But then realized that would reveal his position. His broken microbead was a double-edged sword. He tapped his ear and shook his head no. Then cautiously he approached the man, as one might a wounded and wild animal. He made no sudden movements while setting his rifle down. He helped to dig away the dirt from the fellow soldier.

Who are you? the unknown soldier croaked.

Jagg tapped his ear again.

I know your microbead is broken, I can hear you though through the mask, who are you? the man growled.

He paused then drew in the dirt crude letters. His reading and writing skills were not the best but would have to do.

ME 4 SEKTIUN

TRATORS FRM 52 REG KILL US

I ON THUR MIKROBED

The man pondered Jaggs writing and then his masked head nodded. He spoke quietly, I got you. I saw two men drop a group of stunned survivors as I was digging myself out. Didnt know what to make of it, so I played dead. Lets see if I can raise anyone on my bead. The unknown man brushed dirt off himself and adjusted his microbead. He spoke softly, listened awhile then shook his head no. Have a plan?

Jagg wrote again in the dirt.

FOLLW

KILL 52

SHULD BE 13 SHARPSHOT

He added an arrow in the direction of where the Major would be.

Thirteen? There's two of us, he said with open skepticism.

He shrugged in response and picked up his rifle. He looked down at his the soldier as the fellow rose shakily to his feet. The soldier looked around for a weapon, and finding none, Jagg gave him his side arm.

Lead the way, Silent, he offered and followed Jagg across the rough ground, pistol in hand.

Smoke lingered everywhere and vision was hampered by it. He counted this as a small blessing. He didn't want to engage sharpshooting Jägers at long range. He could still feel two stick grenades in his belt and drew one, handing it off to the unknown soldier at his side.

Silent, the unknown soldier asked, You do know this is a bad idea?

Jagg paused, looked at the man, then nodded. It was a bad idea, but the alternative was running away and getting shot in the back. He gave a thumbs up. The unknown soldier tilted his head, shrugged and did the same. Good. They were all on board with the plan, bad as it was.

Towards the inferno they moved, till Jagg felt the heat and heard the crackle of the flames. The bow of the barge jutted through the haze of smoke and beneath it he could see three figures. One wore the black coat of a Commissar.

Sh*t. Jagg said in surprise.

The unknown soldier gripped him by the shoulder as he spoke, and Jaggs eyes widened. They both dropped to the ground, just as the three figures looked around. The Commissar was a large man with a cane, he stood by doing nothing, apparently unperturbed by Jaggs curse in his ear. One masked soldier drew a pistol, and wore a decorated uniform. The other soldier, already armed with a rifle began to scan.

Over his microbead Jagg heard a jovial voice, Are you still listening in on us? You are nearby aren't you! I heard that loud and clear. Not exactly the way to greet a Lord Commissar. Step forth, in the name of the Emperor.

The unknown soldier jostled Jagg and drew swiftly in the dirt as they hid from the sight of the trio.

HE IN MY BEAD

THEY HEAR ALL

He restrained letting loose another a curse. Communication, except by rudimentary dirt-drawings was out of the question. The range was too far to use grenades or pistols; leaving Jagg with his bolt-action to square off against the sharpshooter. Options were, as always, few. He laid flat and propped his bolt-action up. While taking aim on the scanning soldier he curled his finger around the trigger. The distance was moderate but Jagg was used to shooting hordes of orks, where missing wasn't possible. The wind blew gently, twirling fingers of smoke in the air. The scanning soldier halted. He could see his weapon raising. There was no time to waste. He aimed, held a breath and squeezed the trigger with the tip of his finger.

Crack!

He missed. The Jäger saw Jagg clearly and took his time in aiming. He worked the bolt, expended the casing, but knew he would be too late to reload. The soldier at his side began to fire the laspistol, but the shots went far and wide. He had the next round readied and tensed up, waiting for the enemy bullet to strike him in the head. Well, he dimly thought, it really was a bad plan.

The high pitched buzzing of a heavy stubber sounded behind him. A hundred rounds flew past and puffs of smoke danced about the Jäger who jerked uncontrollably. The sharpshooter spiraled in the air and landed on the ground, blood streaming from his many bullet wounds.

He looked behind him, at the lip of an elevated crater, a heavy stubber shifted to fix on the Commissar and officer. A soldier manned the weapon and an ammo carrier dutifully was at his side with a single belt of ammo left. Out from the crater a man in black strode. He limped slightly with a laspistol clutched firmly in his hand. Another soldier followed him out from the crater, with one hand concealed in a distinct black glove.

Commissar Razin, the affable voice of the Lord Commissar said over the bead.

Lord Commissar Thrack. Shall we have a meeting? Razin responded, his voice equally clear in Jaggs ear. The sinister fellow had plenty of com clearances. Had he been able to hear everything? It seemed likely.

He stood up as Razin neared. Commissar sir, there are still men out there. We are being hunted.

Razin raised his other hand to silence Jagg and said, I know. I read your, he tilted his head, Enlightening letters not far back. Come on, its been handled.

He and the unknown soldier followed the limping Razin. The man following the Commissar from the crater nudged Jagg, and through the goggles he could see it was Kellen Raous. They gave one another a quick pat on the shoulder. The four of them approached the Major and Lord Commissar.

Lord Commissar Thracks rebreather was black as Razins but his uniform was far more elaborate. He had no weapon drawn, unlike Major Knobloch, whose pistol was leveled at the advancing party.

Razin moved swiftly, raising his arm faster than Jaggs eye could follow. A single lasround sang out. Major Knoblochs left goggle emitted smoke and his weapon dropped from nerveless fingers, he collapsed in a heap, a hole smoking had burst out the back of his helmet.

Rather unnecessary, Thrack sighed as the Major collapsed at his feet. The rotund Lord Commissar tapped his cane to the ground, I have, lets see, twelve, rather good shots, out there still. You may want to reconsider making a request of your superior.

Actually, I dont think you have any left. Jagg, how many did you drop? Razin glanced his way.

Uhh, two, Commissar sir.

The remnants of First and Second platoon killed eleven under my command. Trooper Sheer got that one, and I got the Major. So, Lord Commissar I dont plan on reconsidering. Razin turned his weapon on the man.

Thrack shrugged, How did you manage that? If you dont mind me asking.

When you called me off the mission, my paranoia acted up. I had those traitors. They were mine! You called it off. You sent in a flyer to pick them up, rather than bomb them. When I saw the artillery falling on our own heads, I had a sense you might be trying to tie up loose ends. Razin stepped closer.

Not quite. The artillery was all the Field-Marshals idea. Hes a good fellow, when his head is on straight. Made the right call. Thrack pointed with his cane at the burning hulk of the machine behind him. The execution of the 76ths First and Second Platoon, alas, my idea. For the good of Krieg and the army.

Jagg couldnt help but interrupt, Good of the army? Are you mad? he raised his rifle, Let me shoot him, Commissar sir.

Razins hand rested on the barrel of the offending weapon and lowered it. No. It doesnt work like that. Go on, Lord Commissar.

The large man nodded, Thank you. Where was I?

Explaining why you were going to kill off two whole platoons to cover up the death of three men who knew too much. Razin prodded.

Thrack nodded. Ah yes. You have Lady von Adler to blame. She made her new ideas quite clear to myself and the command staff on the way over to this waste of a planet. All politics and intrigue that one. Actually the whole family is that way. I do believe our new Kaiserina took the throne under, shall we say, less than honorable circumstances?

Razin shrugged stepping yet closer to his superior officer, weapon still at the ready. Righting a wrong? You sent your lapdogs to murder the Kaiserinas liaison?

Nonsense! I could care less who Krieg's hereditary ruler is. I care about the army and that it performs. She jeopardized that. She wanted a softer army. An army that would be more socially acceptable amongst the galactic elite. She used every bit of charm in her little body to wrap Field-Marshal von Reiniger up in her notions of a new army. A weak army. We arent like the other legions of the Imperium. We are the Death Korps, fighting for redemption of our world. We

dont save people, we damn them.

Some armies are akin to a scalpel used in surgery, or in some cases a saw to remove a limb. Were the bullet to the head. It is who we are. Who we must be! If we are not, then we have forgotten our heritage. Negotiation? Profit concerns? Social acceptability?! What does that mean to us! the mans voice boomed.

Razin lowered his weapon, and holstered it. Nothing.

Lord Commissar Thrack nodded in agreement. Nothing. She tried to make the army weak and so I borrowed some loyal men from von Saunder who thought the same. It was by my orders that she was to be eliminated.

Jagg blinked. He clutched his bolt-action and stepped to the side, so as to cover both men in black. Did you end up succeeding?

The portly man turned his attentions to him. No! Didnt need to. Her advice put von Reiniger in a string of uncomfortable positions. Her charm wore off, and with a little prodding by myself, I had her confined to quarters. Im not murderous! he laughed.

Jagg raised his bolt-action. Really now?

No, trooper Jagg. Razin warned.

Hes a traitor. Jagg curled his finger around the trigger. To his shock the Lord Commissar strode up and planted his chest up against the muzzle of the weapon.

My boy, Im anything but. I am responsible for the morale and discipline of this army. That woman was going to un-make us. If she had her way, wed have orks ripping our throats out and Jendrites planting bombs under our beds. Instead, look! The rebels are dead, choked to death as they should be. The orks? Thwarted, for the moment. The war goes on. Where in have I done wrong? he spread one hand wide.

How about the trying to kill me part.

Covering my tracks, so that Lady von Adler could not deduce anything and use her political clout to have me replaced. By assassination or whatever other

method she prefers. You are, trooper Jagg?

He nodded.

Thanks to you, my first attempt failed. Now she and von Reiniger think there are traitors in our midst. Shes deluded as to who though. So warped by politics is that one, she is convinced that either someone wants revenge for her cousins ascension, he raised a single finger, Or some powerful company out a few credits wants her dead, he raised another, Or that some distant lord is upset that shes using their preferred tool, the Death Korps, he raised yet another finger. Which leads us to Thrack turned his back on Jagg and wandered in front of the collection of soldiers. The next step. What do we do?

Razin planted his hands upon his hips. I believe you are already pondering a solution, Lord Commissar?

The big man nodded. I am. Fifteen traitors attempted to kill Lady von Adler because of her cousins ascension. Poor, dead, Major Knobloch could not stand the Kaiserina rising by such treachery. He saw the attachment of Lady von Adler as a corrupting influence and took matters into his own hands. He died out here, fighting the ork war boss, before proper justice could be meted out. Case closed; and so damned sensitive no one will want to touch it again. Not the Field-Marshal, not Lady von Alder and certainly nobody back on Krieg. Problems that are dead and buried, tend to stay that way.

Jagg sighed, Why do I think you thought all this out in advance.

The Lord Commissar shrugged, Because I did. Im just as paranoid as young Razin here. I like to plan and plot for every angle. I do my job well. You really do think too much for a soldier, trooper Jagg. If you did less thinking, youd be far happier and none of this would have occurred. Not that I blame you. All of us, in this, were doing our duty to Krieg. All in our own way.

Razin turned and began to walk towards the lines, Lets get out of here. We have wounded to tend to. Razin glanced at the triumphant Thrack. How do I know you wont try to kill us later? Dont be offended by my paranoia acting up again.

The man tapped his cane into the earth. Jagg and the rest backed away from him,

closing ranks about Razin. Thrack spread his hands wide, Ha! You dont. But I have no reason to terminate you. You are all loyal, and if you keep quiet I will be pleased. And if you get any strange ideas, such as shooting a Lord Commissar, you better hope no one says a word. While a Majors death is hardly likely to get investigated, especially when a Lord Commissar says not to, Thrack tapped his chest and continued, The death of a Lord Commissar is going to bring much, well deserved attention. Especially if he is laid low by a friendly bullet or lasbolt. Besides, can you honestly call me a traitor?

Silence.

Thought not. I am, a Man of Krieg and shall be to my dying day.

The front of the burning crawler shuddered. A massive cargo ramp door opened from the bow and crushed Lord Commissar Thrack flat. Stomping down the ramp charged an ork in brightly painted Nob armor, with gold plated teeth.

The gargantuan beast was missing some of its face, the left side having been eaten away by flames, revealing blackened bones, stark against the sharpened and glittering teeth of gold. The red eyes of the creature blazed as it let out a howl, broken by a sneeze.

Jagg was frozen. He barely registered the Lord Commissars death, before Gold Teeth was crashing towards him, swinging his oversized fists. For a creature of such size, it moved swiftly and was lumbering past him in moments. One fist collided with his helmet and sent him sprawling into darkness.

Jagg was in the black room once more. Klara sat on the reversed chair and drew idly on a lho stick. Her brown eyes seemed genuinely surprised at seeing him. She puffed out a waft of white and whispered, Back already? You really need to-

Get up! Get up! it wasnt her voice.

He blinked, the soldiers whose name he didnt know was helping him to his feet. Heavy stubber fire chattered madly and a few rounds ricocheted nearby. He could see the back of the yellow hulking frame of the ork war boss. Sparks danced as rounds deflected off of its armor. Razin was running away, firing sporadically, and ineffectually, at the creature as he fled. Jagg could see Raous slumped on the ground, head lolling in a dazed fashion. Things began to get dark and he felt his knees weaken. The adrenaline didnt quite work.

No you dont, the unknown soldier growled and shook Jagg till his head cleared and his fuzzy vision returned.

The young man felt like throwing up, but knew that doing so in a rebreather mask could actually be fatal. He looked around for his rifle absently. Either it had been flung far away, or blended in too well with the poisoned ground to be found.

He shook his head once more, but everything refused to focus correctly. Artillery blasts and a knock to the skull by an ork war boss had surely done some serious damage. He looked at the back of the enraged beast, and drew his only weapon. A stick grenade.

The man who had helped Jagg to his feet used his borrowed laspistol to fire

useless shots into the armored spine of the rampaging greenskin. Jagg ran towards it shouting, waving his arms, and in general, making a total fool of himself. He could see Sheer at the lip of the crater spray rounds into Gold Teeth, and the ammo bearer, who Jagg hoped was Callum, run out of Mr. Heavys feed. Gold Teeth was almost upon them.

He grabbed a clump of dirt with his free hand and threw it with all his might at the back of the orks skull. The clod exploded; a direct hit. Gold Teeth turned around. Jagg swore it raised a brow at him.

You forgot to kill me! he screamed at the beast.

The unknown soldier stood by Jaggs side and said, Oh sh*t, kid, your head must be busted. I should have left you in the dirt. He raised his laspistol and fired. The bolt struck one of the gold plated teeth and deflected. The ork war boss raised its arms and stampeded towards the pair. He had suitably reminded it of an unfinished task.

His vision began to dim again. He swore he heard Klaras voice in his ear teasing him. He blinked several times. He had a plan. Didnt he? What was it? He looked at his hand and saw the grenade. He primed it, while the unknown soldier expended the rest of the power cell from the laspistol. Not willing to face an ork unarmed he dove to the side. Jagg stood his ground, facing the looming xenos alone.

The ork stomped closer and closer, its nose wriggled.

Jagg threw his grenade just as the orks mouth opened wide as it inhaled to sneeze. The grenade slammed into its open maw and the back of its throat. A muted cough, burbled from its throat and the creature raised its hands to its own meaty neck. The grenades detonation, whumped, the orks eyes popped and then its entire head exploded with a tremendous boom. Meat, skull, and golden teeth scattered. Headless, but still charging, the walking corpse took two more steps, then plowed into the earth. Its shattered neck sunk into the churned up ground an inch away from Jaggs boots. The wind blew. He knelt and plucked a golden tooth from the ground. The others rushed to do the same.

The Emperor protects, Razin whispered through the microbead.

They walked back towards their lines, what few survivors that were left. The infantry charge, artillery strike, and Major von Knoblocks men had done tremendous harm. First Platoon simply didnt exist.

At their own trench lines, Razin guided men down the ladders, asking for names. Jagg waited with him, and watched as ghostly shapes emerged from the smoke. He hardly knew his own platoon, so young and fresh was he. But he knew his section and he waited tentatively for them. Callum and Sheer loitered nearby and Kellen Raous hovered close to the Commissar. The sun began to sink while the clouds went from black and white, to shimmering red and gold. As time passed, Jaggs spirits dwindled. Lufsen, Grieg and the veteran sergeant Taubover had not returned.

From the smoke a soldier emerged, staggering as he walked. His clothing was tattered and in his arms he held a figure, whose arm hung limply to the side. Jagg and the rest rushed towards what would be the last survivor from First Platoon.

Taubover jerked, as hands tried to assist him. The men backed off, Razin included.

Leutnant von Zietdel is dead, Taubover said, the emotion raw and barely restrained.

Jagg hung his head low and then looked out to the darkening sky and the hellish field of no mans land. He wondered what had happened to the stop-gap medic Lufsen or the vox-man Grieg. He never did find out, only that they would not be returning.

XVII

The Costs of War

Hartwin watched his flanks hold. On the left and right, the orkish attempt to breach his trenches with trucks bearing greenskins had failed. Grosse-Kapitän von Schild had earned his ration-card. Through the mag-optics Hartwin could see Rag-Na-Rok siege armor leading squadrons of Lemman Rus battle tanks into the orks. By nightfall he expected the beasts to be driven into the sea. The center was another matter.

He shifted his view and saw through the smoke, the burning pillar that was once Gold Teeths personal conveyance. The flames danced hundreds of feet in the air as the structure burned like a torch. He doubted it would go out anytime soon. Through the smoke clouding the field, the Field-Marshal made out clumps of soldiers returning to their lines. Men arm in arm, supporting one another as they made it to safety. The casualty list would be massive, he had no doubt.

Any confirmations? Is that xenos war chief dead? He glanced back at the team of vox-officers who shook their masked heads, no.

Its dead, Field-Marshal. Commissar Razin, limped into the command post and presented a walking stick to Hartwin. It was that of Lord Commissar Thrack.

His heart sank. He knew what it meant. He set the mag-optics aside and took the offered walking stick. I had known him a long time. He set me straight. Kept me straight. He looked up to the black rebreather and tinted goggles of Commissar Razin. The Field-Marshal asked, How?

After your artillery and air strikes brought down the ork war machine, Lord Commissar Thrack rallied the survivors of First and Second Platoon. He died leading the charge, while the rest of the 76th made good its withdrawal. Razins tone was blunt and to the point.

And Gold Tee- the ork war boss? Dead? You said it is confirmed?

Razin held out his gloved hand and produced a single golden tooth. The commissar waited till the Field-Marshal had the trophy in hand and turned slowly, Compliments from a trooper. One man brought that thing down. Ive never seen such, stupidity. He challenged it, then threw a grenade into its mouth.

He examined the long, sharp tooth of gold. The death of Thrack still sat heavy with him, but Razins tale caught his eye. He looked up to the retreating form of the black-clad man. By the Throne! One man? Who?

I believe you know him, my Field-Marshal. Trooper Jagg. Razin left the command post.

The next two days were in a word, glorious. Without their leader the orks suddenly lost drive and direction. Hartwin never understood how the creatures communicated, how greenskins far away sensed their leader was dead and turned on themselves. He thanked the Emperor that the xenos were so cursed with the defect. Their numbers, if not kept scattered and fighting amongst themselves, were simply unstoppable. The First Army of Krieg had driven the orks into the sea, and by use of orbital bombardment and air strike, limited the effectiveness of the ork landings on the western shores. After four days, the ork barges stopped coming. The first continent had been all but secured.

Hartwin sat in his office in Kynder, within a ventilated room. His chemical wargear hung on a post and his tunic was unbuttoned at the throat. The continent was secure, but the war was not over. In a few moments, some of the worst parts of his job were to come. As the Field-Marshal expected, a knocking came at his door.

Enter.

Von Gotslieb, haggard and pale, entered. The Kapitän of the 76th and his battered regiment had been pulled back to Kynder to lick its wounds. The tallies had finally come in. The officer stood at attention.

He offered a seat, Please. Sit. Your regiment earned glory and redemption in the name of Krieg. He ignored the hard stare von Gotslieb gave him as he sat. I must hear what the costs are. I must know, how fares your regiment?

Von Gotslieb rubbed his jaw and shook his head before affixing his eyes upon the general. I have heavy losses to report. My regiment was barely past half strength when we arrived. Now all this.

Your losses.

Of course, my Field-Marshal. First battalion is under fifty percent. They held my flanks while Second did the big push. Major Stekman is dead. Hauptman Ostriker, in the medicae. Most my line officers are dead or wounded. First Kompanies two platoons have been effectively eradicated. I have a handful of operational tanks, my storm troopers and flyers are in good working order. Of

the roughly six hundred men I brought to this blighted pile of grass, I have two hundred men who can fight and another two hundred in recovery.

The Field-Marshal leaned far back in his seat. It was worse than he had expected. The under-strength regiment had done more than its fair share of the fighting. It was a painful thing to lose men, more so when you knew your own actions directly led to it. That was war.

He hated Jendra IV just as much as von Gotslieb did. He felt pain, guilt and loss. But Hartwin said none of these thoughts out loud. He had a war to win, and costs to absorb; weakness before the Grosse-Kapitän of any sort was unacceptable. Thracks lessons were still with him even if the Lord Commissar was gone.

Your regiment cannot perform any useful duties in this war, Grosse-Kapitän.

Von Gotslieb took a breath, but he forestalled him with a raised hand. What is left of the 76th is going back to Krieg. Ill get you a proper refit. There is something else too. You have earned much glory for our world. Much redemption, for past deeds...sins. I think it is best you handle a particular task. One that deals with past sins.

The commander shifted in his seat but said nothing. He took that as consent. Someone tried to assassinate Marena von Adler.

What?! When? the Kapitän bolted from his seat.

Weeks ago. It has been handled. But the issue is delicate. Beyond delicate. The attempt was perpetrated by rogue elements from the First Army.

By the Throne! Who? Why? Von Gotsliebs eyes bulged at the shocking news.

Traitors. A particular sin that seems to haunt our people. They have been dealt with, rest assured, but I need her escorted back home. She isnt happy about it. He turned on his most charming of smiles. It is important you keep her safe. She will be displeased about leaving and may fuss. But this is a warzone, one that will only get worse in the years to come. It is for her safety. He watched as von Gotslieb slowly took his seat once more.

A strange honor. You must tell me more, my Field-Marshal. The plot?

He shook his head, You know enough, my good man. The issue is, as I said, beyond delicate.

My Field-Marshal, Marena von Adler is a representative from the Kaiserina. Sending her back- will it not- I mean- to be frank. Is that wise?

He shook his head and let out a long breath as he spoke, No, no it is not wise. But if she comes to harm it shall be far worse. Give the Kaiserina my personal apologies and explanations. If she wishes, she may have me recalled. Hartwin knew that the Kaiserina would do no such thing, not unless he was losing the war and he had vowed that such would not happen. Even if Jendra IV had to burn. Marena had to go, her presence could undermine everything. A womans place was on Krieg.

Von Gotslieb sighed, If it is your wish, though I must say, I dont like the thought of meeting the Kaiserina and giving her the news that her personal liaison has been sent home.

You are doing Krieg and this army a great service, know that. Have Commissar Razin and anyone else he deems necessary, watch over our royal guest. Hell handle all the un-pleasantries involved. He is familiar, as Commissars tend to be, on the whole matter. The Majesty, in high orbit, has volunteered to return you to Krieg. Hartwin nodded and looked down to some data slates he had to go over. A thought came to him as von Gotslieb rose to depart, Oh, that trooper who blew the head off the ork war boss?

Gold Teeth?

He smiled and absently fingered the necklace that held the tooth of the creature, Yes. Such bravery should not go unpunished. Would you mind appointing him to Commissar Razin as an aide?

The regimental commander managed a weak smile. Punished indeed! Commissar Razin has had to administer corporal punishment to that trooper.

All the easier for the Commissar to do so again if it is warranted. Give the fellow my best. Hartwin nodded. It would be better if everyone connected to the issue of Marena, left with her.

Von Gotslieb clicked his heels, offered a curt bow, and departed.

XVIII

Fall

The majority of First Platoon remained in the no mans land just off the coast. There would be no burials for them. There were only a handful of living men left; some sections having been eliminated to the last. Jagg counted his own section lucky. Two casualties. He had offered to make inquiries, to try and get specifics, but Taubover refused. The sergeant had grown inward and silent. There were as many fresh recruits in his section as there were veterans now. He and Sheer were the last. The grassy, and now poisoned, fields of Jendra IV had taken the lives of Klyst, Grieg, and Lufsen.

Jagg felt Leutnant von Zietdels loss profoundly. He had been one of the few bodies recovered that could be actually buried. Or rather, stored. In a sealed coffin, made from the cut up hull of a burnt out tank, the officer had been interred. He would be going back to Krieg at Grosse-Kapitän von Gotsliebs insistence. The coffin had been guarded day and night by the survivors of First Platoon, and the Leutnants death had in a strange way bound the survivors together. He had visited that coffin, placing his hand upon it to wish the quirky Leutnant a good journey home.

He watched as the First Army scattered about the continent, to rebuff any ork landings, while his own shattered regiment remained in Kynder. The poisons weakened, and the masks were no longer needed, but always kept close. He was satisfied to find the population of the city was compliant and suitably fearful. Once, when he was collecting a few supplies he swore he saw Katya. But the small woman turned and hurriedly walked away the moment he made eye contact. Jagg didnt follow. If it was her, he could tell by the quick look into her wide gaze that she was broken. And that pleased him immensely.

Summer was fading and Fall was approaching. There would be no crops to harvest. The fields would rot from the effects of gas or remain untended and rot regardless. Food would be scarce and somewhere money was being lost. He didnt care. He went about his duties till word came that the regiment would be going home to refit itself. It was then that Razin approached him as he was

loitering with his section on the starport slab.

The Commissar wore his usual somber garb and his features had thinned out, while permanent dark circles rested under his sharp gaze. Kellen Raous, in the black attire of a Commissars aide, followed behind, smiling cheerily, in contrast to Razin.

Trooper, Jagg.

Jagg saluted, Commissar, sir.

Razins lips twitched once. I regret to inform you, that you have been appointed to me as my aide. We will be leaving ahead of the Regiment to escort a certain lady you know, to the Majesty.

Jagg blinked in surprise. He fumbled for words and blurted out, Ive done nothing wrong.

Raous laughed while Razin cocked his head to the side.

He shook his head. Things still didnt quite focus right since he took a knock to the skull courtesy of Gold Teeth. I mean, Commissar, sir, my section. They need me.

Razin looked past Jags shoulder at Callum, Sheer and the distant Taubover. The sharp eyes flitted back to Jagg and he said, There isnt much of a regiment left. It will have new people, new officers. The section you know wont exist. And Im not asking. This comes from the Field-Marshal. Lucky you. Say your good byes and meet us at landing pad seven. Be ready to shine shoes and learn the art of scaring people. Razin didnt wait for a response and stalked off. Kellen Raous shrugged and offered a wave to Callum before departing with him.

Jagg seethed. It wasnt fair. Few things were, but it seemed an injustice for the Field-Marshal to take him away. But one did not argue with generals. He walked over to the remains of section four.

They are taking me away, with Razin.

Callum stood up concern entered his voice, To be shot?

Jagg sighed, Worse, promoted.

Everyone groaned. The men stood. Sheer shook Jaggs hand. Callum became teary eyed and hugged him.

Well still see you? Callum asked.

He felt emotion rising. Callum and he had trained together. They had stood in their underwear on Kriegs slab, their feet bleeding. Callum had been a sanctimonious ass, but an ass that had saved him from a Five, Six, Five. He considered him an idealist and a friend. He hoped to the Emperor that he would see him again, and told him as much.

Taubover was showing his age when came to see him off. Wrinkles had formed in his face, and his hair had frosted over in places. He grabbed Jaggs ear. You spend less than a month with us. In that time you see off ork attacks, get tangled up with politics the likes Ill never understand. Your name is known by Commissar and Field-Marshal alike. You do know, the man smiled gently and whispered, You are totally fricked.

Yes, Sergeant. Jagg offered his hand. They shook. Youll watch out for Callum, Sergeant?

The older man grunted, Im getting tired. I think Ill have him watch out for me for a few weeks. Go on. Get the hell out of here. Youre destined for trouble.

He stepped back and looked at the faces of the men he had grown to truly trust. Just now, and only just now, he felt as if they were family. And now he was leaving. Jagg gave Callum a nod, then trotted off to meet up with Commissar Razin, blinking away tears.

Marena von Alder sat in the plush chair of the Aquila lander and sipped chilled wine that tasted too dry. She had removed her Death Korps uniform to don something more fitting a cousin of the Kaiserina, never mind that she was a virtual prisoner of her own people. She kept her anger to herself, and as she had been taught, kept her features placid and unreadable. The Commissar across from her was typical of his breed. Vicious. Yet in his own way handsome. He could have been called striking, if only he soaked up some more of Jendra IV's sun and gotten some sleep, and perhaps if he removed all the black garb and skull motifs he wore. All in all, he would make a fine jailer.

The Commissars aides couldnt help but staring at her, Marena thought with a mental laugh. They had likely never sat in seats so comfortable nor in company so refined. The two men looked strange. They didnt fit in with all the luxury. She knew them both, however. They had been common soldier-trash at the time of their initial meeting. Now, they were uncommon soldier-trash.

Jagg seemed to have been recovering from whatever damage had been done to his back and, she smiled inwardly, testicles. He wore a new black tunic, and shifted uncomfortably in it. His narrowed eyes never watched her for long, quickly moving down. His subservience pleased her.

The other she had a sense was mad. Like Jagg, Raous wore a black tunic, but seemed comfortable in the role of a Commissars aide. He smiled at Marena, and even attempted to make light conversation. Which revolved around poorly told jokes and clever insights about everyone he had ever met. He was positive and upbeat, and at times he would stare at her, with a small smile, as if to say, I know what you are really thinking. She disliked him, only out of paranoia.

It was going to be a long journey to Krieg and the Kaiserina would want a full report. The First Army was about to win Jendra IV, and in the process annihilate itself in the realm of politics. Leave it to the men to see only one side of a war. No matter, Marena thought, the women would get them out of trouble subtly and quietly, as always.

Sub-Sector Lord Trajean, supreme master of Segmentum Tempestus, defender of Bakka, ever-foe of Hive Fleet Leviathan's splinters, water bringer of Tallarn, and his most holy and blessed Cathedral builder of Valedor, not to mention his most noble hereditary lord of Hiveworld Gladius, was not quite sure what to make of the men bowing before him.

The uniformed fellows were incredibly cultured, but not a one of them bore any names of hereditary importance. They did however own a dozen mega-corporations under his jurisdiction, each a faultless tithe payer. They had been wasting much of his time in introductions and humble begging for forgiveness. They droned on and on and Trajean sighed audibly when they finally had something of importance to say.

Jendra IV has thus, fallen. It is no longer in Imperial hands, One of the men in the green uniforms said with a pleasant smile on his face. Come to think of it, Trajean thought, they all had pleasant smiles.

I dont see how you can say that. The First Army of Krieg, which by the by I created, reports victory. They are still beating the orks back. Id hardly call the world, fallen, Trajean responded as he lounged in his hovering dais.

Another one of the uniformed men bowed low. We do not mean to correct, but-

Trajean groaned, But what?

But, the planet will not export food for this solar year. Or pay its tithes. Starvation in terms of produce and wealth will be a result. A world that does not produce is fallen, the man finished.

Trajean rubbed his chin in thought. The army, what he mentally called his army, was doing quite well. A few rough spots, but reports indicated victory would be theirs. But the idea of a loss of profit wasnt sitting well with Trajean. Like any good sub-sector lord, he wanted it both ways. He looked to the corporate men.

My Arm- rather, the First Army of Krieg is fighting admirably. I will not hear that denied. The world has NOT fallen. But,

The corporate men looked up expectantly.

Trajean continued, But, you may send representatives from your company to oversee the world. To see that it is producing once more. Come the solar year, I want things looking bright on both the war front, but also on the economic. Oh, what the blazes was the name of your company again? So hard when you dont have a noble sponsor.

The eldest of the assembly dipped his head, We are from the Xanthris Corporation. We are responsible for distribution of Jendras produce, the manufacture of the dias you sit gloriously upon and other technologies that have fascinated the Munitorium and Tech Priests of Mars alike. We are grateful, very grateful, that you have given us permission to restore Jendra IV to production. We will do so with efficiency and speed. Thank you, again.

Trajean patted his floating dais, No. Thank you!

Somewhere, somewhere hidden, an Eldar Farseer could not help but smile at the turn of events.