

# THE GAIUS WAR

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*"It is the 41st Millennium. For more than a hundred centuries The Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.*

*Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the Warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst his soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.*

*To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruelest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for **in the grim dark future there is only war**. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods."*

- Warhammer 40,000

**"Alright, tell me a story..."**

- Lawrence "The Spider" Baker

## PROLOGUE: FIRST CONTACT

Gaius Prime hung in the void, deceptively beautiful and silent amidst the starry sky. It had been inhabited by peaceful colonists and agri-workers for hundreds of years, quietly contributing to the wider imperium, unassuming and cooperative in a galaxy rife with conflict and chaos. Not once had its populous risen in rebellion, and the Imperial Creed was easily enforced among the docile citizenry. Useful, easily defended, and nestled in one of the most prosperous sectors of Imperial space, it was seen as a model world.

Perhaps that's why it came as such a shock when Gaius abruptly cut off all communications and ceased the offering of the proper tithes. Within the space of a few days, it had seemingly fallen completely out of the Imperium. Nothing from its last transmissions hinted at what could have happened, but the loss of Gaius' resources was deemed unacceptable by High Command, and the Astartes Ultra were dispatched to deal with the situation.

Brother Artemis, Captain among the Ultramarines Chapter, wasn't at all pleased with being assigned to this duty. Standing with his feet wide and his hands clasped behind his back, he looked out the viewport of *Wrath of Calth's* command bridge and kept running the facts through his head over and over. Cut off communications, no tithes, no past issues... as disturbing as that was, he couldn't quite find an explanation for why the Adeptus Astartes would be needed to investigate. If it was a simple insurrection (not impossible, every world had at least one in their history at some point) then the Astra Militarum would be more than enough to put them down. There was even the possibility that there was some kind of technological issue, or some celestial interference... In which case a single Techpriest of Mars could have the matter resolved in a matter of a few months.

Artemis had command of a hundred of the Emperor's Angels of Death, strength enough to overthrow entire systems or dismantle a minor xenos empire. If he ever saw a bigger misuse of force, he didn't know when it was.

"I sense you don't appreciate your duty at this time, my Captain," said a voice behind Artemis. He instantly knew it was Epistolary Magnus, a Librarian with an uncanny knack for all things telepathic.

"Epistolary, I've asked you before. Stay out of my head," Artemis growled.

"I think that psychic abilities aren't really necessary to see what's going on in *your* head," came another voice, "you've never been one to be subtle about frustration."

Artemis finally turned around. The new voice was one that he gladly welcomed; Chaplain Castor. The black-armoured warrior was arguably the greatest fighter on board, the most fiery

speaker, the best acquainted with the Emperor's will... and Artemis' dearest, oldest friend. It had been under Castor's tutelage that Artemis had learned all he knew of the Astartes form of war.

"What, you think there is much to be done here? Hundreds of worlds go dark every day, Chaplain, as you likely know much better than I. Why is this worth our time?" Artemis asked. Despite his frustrations, he honestly wished to know.

"Sometimes we are most desperately needed in the least expected places or circumstances, Captain. Many worlds fall out of contact every day, as you say, but not all of them are due to harmless causes. Often the most dangerous threats we have ever faced have emerged after an Imperial world fell without warning. Tyran was one such case, and the resulting conflict has left our own Chapter with scars that even now have not fully healed. I saw it firsthand." Castor replied. As ever his tone was even and steady, revealing a mind that was thorough in its thoughts.

Artemis nodded. "Very well. Assemble some squads for an investigative mission, designation Speartip Artemis. We deploy in one standard hour."

"Sir, Speartip Artemis? You're going down there yourself?" Magnus asked.

"Of course," Artemis replied, allowing himself a cocky grin, "If it's nothing, then I've only wasted my own time. If it's a valid threat, I'd like to be the first one to introduce them to the might of the Ultramarines."

"If I may, Captain," Castor cut in, "I'd like to accompany you in an advisory role."

"As if I'd have it any other way, old man," Artemis chuckled. Already he could feel the anticipation of glorious battle rising within him, a familiar fire that others seemed to gravitate towards. As the two expedition leaders left the bridge, Artemis turned to give final instructions to Magnus. "You are in command here until I return. Man the communications systems, and... keep my brother from making any rash decisions, will you?"

"As you will it, it shall be done," Magnus replied, bowing his head.

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Five standard hours later, on the surface of Gaius Prime, Artemis, Castor, and over ten other marines knelt in the dust, hands fastened behind their backs by arcane binds. Behind each one loomed a Necron Deathmark, and the muzzle of a Synaptic Disintegrator pressed against the back of their heads. Smoke rose in huge columns on all sides, billowing from vehicle wrecks across the freshly blasted warzone.

Artemis ground his teeth as he watched, through the corner of his eye, stiff and emotionless Necron warriors casting his slain battle-brothers into heaps with detached effectiveness. Noble and well-trained warriors languished in those macabre piles, their eyes staring up at the cloudless skies, their bodies riddled and pierced by burns.

“What would you have us do with these, my lord? Shall we add them to the rest?” asked one of the Necrons, one that had a single eye in the centre of its face and nervously clasped a silver staff.

It addressed the hulking leader of the Necrons, an Overlord that had descended from a hovering platform to pace in front of the prisoners. Artemis’ eyes followed its footsteps, unable to raise his eyes to get a good look at it without risking his Deathmark pulling the trigger.

The pacing lord finally stopped. When it spoke, its voice was deep and warped, as though rippling through the morass of dark history. “Dear brother, you fail to see opportunity. These fleshy beasts have crawled through space as fast as they could aboard their primitive vessels, eager to be among the first to volunteer their labours in our glorious age of reclamation. Would you turn down their offer?”

The lord stepped towards Artemis and, with the base of its scythe-like weapon, lifted his chin to look the Captain in the eyes. Proud and fiery even in defeat, Artemis took in every detail of his newest adversary’s features. Deep, dark sockets housed the green embers serving as the thing’s eyes, and the silvery skull-mask stretched up into a regal crest-like crown. Every aspect of the lord’s countenance radiated contempt and monarchical arrogance.

“You are a leader among these vermin. I know the bearing of one in a position of command, even among the mongrel races of mortals. Will you order your followers to serve me? Speak, your new master demands it,” the lord said.

“We serve only the Master of Mankind, the God-Emperor,” Artemis spat, every word dripping with defiance.

“For now,” the lord retorted, almost nonchalant. He looked back at his second in command. “Have them taken to a secure location, and begin breaking them.”

Suddenly, a vox-channel transmission started to play, the sound emerging from the nearest heap of Astartes corpses.

“Speartip Artemis, this is Epistolary Magnus. Surface signal lost. Immediate Status report. Confirm? Speartip Artemis, Status Report! Confirm?” Magnus was speaking in the short, brisk speech patterns that were often used to make the auto-log of reports easier aboard *Wrath of Calth*.

The lord signaled to a nearby Necron Immortal, which reached into the charnel heap and wrenched the vox-transmitter free of a Marine's Power Armour before handing it to its master. The hated foe regarded the device for a moment, as though amused, before bringing it close to its face.

"Your race offends me," it said, tone biting and harsh even through the metallic distortion. "You thought your filth on my world had gone unnoticed? Long have I slumbered, but no more. It is time to awake and reclaim that which was falsely taken. It is time to subjugate that which is weak." From subjugation, obedience. Through obedience, order. Nephritis is mine. Your leaders are mine. Come and join them. I have an empire to reclaim... and slaves are needed for this effort."

With that, the lord crushed the device in its metallic claw. Seeming pleased with itself, the xenos looked at its legion with pride. "We shall let the galaxy know: Sekhmet Ra has returned!"

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Aboard *Wrath of Catlh*, Apollo gripped a rail with both hands as he listened to the transmission for the third time. "We have to retrieve them," he said.

Magnus shook his head. "Obviously this is a trap, and the xenos are baiting it with the lives of Castor and Artemis. What we need to do is form a plan--"

"I have a plan," Apollo replied, his brother's fire flashing in his eyes. "I will enter this trap, allow them to spring it, and then shatter it utterly."

Magnus regarded the hot-headed Marine for a moment, before allowing a wry grin. "I believe you. Preparations for Steel Rain begin in ten standard minutes."

## CHAPTER 1: STEEL RAIN

++915.M41 ++

The Blue Sun was setting over the mountains to the northeast, tinging the sky with its cool rays of light. A breeze picked up, causing the trees around Artemis' orchard to sway slightly and rattle their leaves. Their fruit were yet to grow in, scarcely more than tender green bulbs on the tips of the branches. The harvest of the sweet produce was still a month away at least.

But Apollo knew he would not be there to see it.

He leaned on the marble railing that overlooked the verdant scene, taking it all in. The smell of moist grass, the sense of cool air passing through his hair. Artemis had excellent taste, and built his home on Iax, the glorious garden world of Ultramar fame. It was said that Guilliman himself had visited in ancient years, delighting in its beauty. Now that its twin, Prandium, was lost, no world in hundreds of light years could be its rival.

But both Apollo and his twin brother, Artemis, knew that such rest could not last. The Galaxy was still wracked with war. Apollo heard booted footsteps behind him, in the familiar tempo of his brother's brisk pace.

"Apollo, are you ready?" Artemis asked.

"As I'll ever be. I'm not sure that any man at rest goes eagerly back into the fray. The Astra Militarum gave us 'shore leave of an indefinite length' for our efforts, after all. Why end it?" Apollo replied, turning from the glorious sunset.

Artemis laughed. "Dear brother, you'll be ending your vacation because we don't split up! You were hot on my heels since the moment I entered this galaxy, and you're not likely to give up following me around."

"And what of you, then, oh so mighty Artemis? Becoming an Angel of Death? Do you have such a need to 'be somebody'?" Apollo shot back. His tone was playful, but the imploring was still evident.

Artemis crossed his arms. "You've heard the rumors of Black Reach. There are bigger things than trying to 'be somebody', brother."

"Like what?"

Massive power armored boots thumped across the room inside the house. Both brothers started when they saw the distinctive form of an Astartes within, flanked by blue-robed serfs that bore books and seals. The Astartes carried his skull-formed helm in the crook of his elbow.

"Courage, and Honor," replied the giant. "You will learn, young man."

Apollo was going on 45 standard years, but still got the distinct impression that he was indeed young in the Marine's mighty company.

"I am Chaplain Castor," the marine went on, "here to retrieve you. Our transport awaits. Do you have any wavering thoughts?"

"None, my lord," replied both brothers, "The Emperor protect and preserve us."

Castor grinned. "We'll make Ultramarines out of you yet."

++ 976.M41 ++

On the other side of the reinforced bronze door, a chant could be heard.

*"Artemis! Artemis! Artemis! Artemis!"*

Sergeant Artemis shifted his weight, and made sure his Eviscerator was out of the way. It was no small feat, with how massive its blade was.

"I hope they don't wear out my name," he muttered. The whispering Ecclesiarch Priest that was affixing purity seals to his armor made no reply.

"What can you expect, the crowds love stories of solitary heroes cleaving armored vehicles in two," suggested Apollo, who stood with the rest of the squad behind their sergeant.

Apollo looked at his brother with faint amusement. The others in Assault Squad Artemis were battle-brothers, to be sure, and those that had survived their recent battle against the renegade 13th were arrayed in honor behind them, but only blood-brothers could see certain things.

Artemis was resolute, but not comfortable. He was a natural-born leader, but disliked accolades. Even in the Astra Militarum, Artemis would fearlessly lead men from the front amidst chaos and bloodshed, but hated medal ceremonies earned from those very actions. It was as though he feared the medal's pin more than the revving blade of a Khornate Chainaxe.

Apollo had worries of his own.

"Brother Artemis," he whispered, once the priest had stepped away. "What will happen now, once you've been made a Company Captain?"

"Same as ever, Brother, I serve the Emperor. The capacity may change, but the goal endures. Only in death does duty end." After a pause, Artemis seemingly decided to say more. "Don't worry, I've decided to appoint you as a Veteran Assault Sergeant assigned to my Battle Company. Even if we're occasionally split for crusades, you'll be at my side more often than not."

Apollo's hearts beat faster. He was to become a sergeant! Among Astartes Veterans no less! The pain of having Artemis assigned elsewhere shrank somewhat. *Emperor be praised, I will not falter.*

Artemis chuckled a bit. "Brother Apollo, your eyes have a bit of fire in them. Beware that hubris doesn't overthrow you."

There was a silence then, broken only by the chanting outside. Artemis looked back at his men. "Remember always," he said, "Courage and Honor."

Then the brass doors eased open, letting bright daylight flood into the annex where the squad had been waiting. The sound blasted them, a joyful exultation from the crowds of pilgrims who had come to Macragge for the chance to witness a young Astartes rise to become Captain.

*"Artemis! Artemis! Artemis! Artemis!"*

++ 999.M41 ++

"Artemis!" Shouted Apollo.

Green lightning flashed all around, lifting sections of earth from Gaius Prime's surface. A Skyshield Landing Pad was at Apollo's back, with a squad of Devastators overlooking the bloodshed on the brown fields.

It was indeed a bloodbath. Marines were being laid open with every devastating salvo of the accursed gauss weaponry. The undead abominations of the Nephritai Dynasty remorselessly trod over the flayed corpses of honourable servants of the Emperor, seemingly impervious to any attack.

Over the chaotic scene, Apollo could hear a metallic voice of command. *"You. Will. Die."*

Apollo watched as Sekhmet Ra, flanked by his emotionless consort of Lychguard, brought his Warscythe down on Epistolary Nero Magnus. The Librarian was cast into the muck. His Centurions withdrew, preserving their invaluable wargear.

But there was a window of opportunity, sergeant Apollo could see it. A pair of Immortals were trying to move their captives, dragging them out of the captured bastion. Castor and Artemis, both alive!

"Apollo to remaining squads! I have visual contact on primary objective! Moving to intercept, give me covering fire!"

"Affirmative," he heard over the vox bead in his ear, "Emperor speed your descent."

Apollo came thundering out of the air like a meteor, smashing clean through the second Ghost Ark he'd encountered since the battle's commencement. The vehicle's living metal hull gave way before the fury of his striking Eviscerator and its core detonated, casting blinding light on all around him.

Bolter rounds laid out the Immortals, leaving the huddled forms of their captives behind. Apollo was rushing the last few meters to their side, but it was looking to be too late; Sekhmet Ra and his Guard were bearing down on the broken forms of Artemis and Castor.

"Devastators! Priority one! Concentrate fire on the enemy commander, repeat, concentrate fire!" He prayed that his voice would be heard and heeded in this disorder.

Just then, the air around the Lychguard seemed to bend and compress. In seconds, their previously impervious bodies crumpled like foil, reduced to unrecognisable balls of scrap.

Sekhmet himself stood alone in the attack, even as the stones under his feet crumbled into fine dust before the graviton onslaught. Some form of invisible barrier strained to protect the insidious lord, but it finally gave way.

"Nooooooooooooo-!" He roared, before collapsing in on himself. There was a green flash, like a spark of green flame that was swiftly extinguished.

"Yes!" Apollo cried, "Target destroyed, Emperor be praised! We've done it!"

Thunk. The impact was almost missed in the uproar.

Apollo looked down, and saw the curved bayonet of a Warrior's Flayer embedded in his stomach.

The Power Armour had been weakened by constant Gauss fire, and finally gave way to the simple metal blade like overcooked clay. Blood began to seep from his wound. Apollo fell numb to the ground. His Eviscerator, still faintly glowing red from recently gutting so many metal constructs, tumbled over a nearby barricade out of reach.

The Warrior watched dispassionately as the marine feebly crawled away, finally propping his back against the wall of the captured bastion. Castor was to his right, Artemis to his left.

Then a final salvo of fire eradicated the remaining Necrons. The battle was over, just like that, with the skyfleet reinforcements arriving en masse. Stormraven Omega's ramp opened with a hiss, and the few survivors were rushing to aid their fallen leaders.

Artemis strained his neck to turn, taking in the face of his twin brother. A trickle of blood escaped the corner of Apollo's mouth, and his breathing was ragged. The broad blade had struck a lot of major organs, it seemed.

Artemis coughed. "What were you doing, brother?" He wheezed, "Why so brash? Don't say you wanted to 'be somebody'..."

Apollo weakly turned to look back at his brother. His fiery eyes were fading fast.

"Courage and Honor, Artemis. Courage and honor."

## CHAPTER 2: SPEARTIP ADVANCE

"Can he stand?" Chaplain Castor asked, looking the young Apollo up and down with concern. He had no doubt that the thick-skulled young Marine would live (few Marines would die to a wound so paltry as a blade to the abdomen), but an injury might slow them down, and they were in need of haste.

Artemis turned to his twin and slapped his shoulder pad. "Well? Still alive?"

"I'm fine!" Apollo wheezed, waving his hand as though to smack Castor's concern out of the air. Castor could tell that, below the surface of the newly welded plate, Apollo still hurt, but the worse damage was likely to his pride. The other Assault Marines accompanying the two heroic leaders simply kept moving.

The Ultramarines were all marching, forming a wide front and maintaining a disciplined pace. Their numbers bolstered by the men that Apollo and Magnus had brought as reinforcements, Castor and Artemis had decided that their next step was to establish a headquarters from which to work out a plan for the wider war. Intelligence from the skyfleet, under the command of the wounded Epistolary Magnus, indicated that there was an abandoned fortification to the Southeast. Stormraven Omega claimed that no Necrons had been stationed as sentries. It was their best bet for having any kind of staging grounds, and with luck there would be munitions and other much needed supplies.

The only problem was the Necron forces directly in their path.

"Tactical Squad Veritas, do you have visual confirmation of xenos presence? Over," Castor asked over the vox-channels.

"Yes, Chaplain. Several squads in position to counter the offensive. At least two matching units designated "Praetorians", as well as some "Immortals". It's a highly elite force sir, over."

*The thrice-damned xenos seemingly have the entire planet teeming with their forces,* Castor thought.

"We have to break through with a charge," Artemis said, "by the Emperor's grace, we can push on to the other side."

Castor looked at Artemis incredulously. "Artemis, you're starting to sound like a son of Russ, rather than Guilliman. The Codex Astartes councils that one must strike the enemy based upon their weaknesses, not their strengths. I have faced Praetorians before, and they are not to be taken lightly at close quarters. Tactical Dreadnought armour is little defence against their staffs, and they can swiftly outmanoeuvre careless soldiers with short-ranged teleportation shunts."

Artemis' jaw tensed at his mentor's words. Castor knew the Captain had a higher authority than himself, but he also knew that deep down Artemis often relied on the Chaplain's experienced council. Castor had no desire to overturn the hot-blooded young Marine's position or deny his orders, but still offered what insights he could.

"What should we do, then?" Artemis asked.

Castor mentally took stock for a moment before speaking. "We must keep casualties to a minimum as we get through the lines, or we may not be able to properly garrison the fortress. A heavy bombardment from our devastators on each flank may thin their ranks enough for bolter rounds to open gaps in their deployment. From there, we can slip through."

"Seems reasonable enough," Artemis agreed, visibly swallowing his martial pride. Castor watched him idly rev his Eviscerator.

"My lord Captain," Castor finally said, still not breaking his stride, "We will still need to keep the Praetorians busy. Do you think you and your men can hold them at bay long enough for the others to punch through?"

"Such is my strong suit," Artemis laughed, before he and his Assault Marines thundered into the air on fiery contrails.

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On the gauss scorched surface of a Skyshield landing pad, Artemis and Apollo stood back to back. All around them lay the torn remains of the other Assault Marines, and some others had tumbled from the pad to make a tactical retreat after sustaining too much damage. In every direction, Praetorians swung their long-hafted Rods of Covenant, superheated blades hissing as they passed through the air.

"The Emperor's gaze is upon us this day, Artemis," Apollo said. Even with his back turned, Artemis could tell that his blood-brother was grinning.

"Then we will fight such a battle as to be worthy of his notice," Artemis replied. After a pause, he continued. "On lax, the harvest is ripe this time of year, isn't it?"

"That's true, brother," Apollo replied, "and one day we may be blessed to see our peaceful home once more. Today, however, we reap a very different harvest in its defence."

With that, they began to lay about themselves with terrifying speed and skill, displaying a mastery of their signature weapons that few could match. Despite the loss of some of their battle

brothers, the twins were fighting without a sign of weariness. Every time a Praetorian hazarded a jab, one brother parried and the other riposted, driving the xenos back. They spun round, a blur of activity, constantly switching places and striking a new foe. More than once, Artemis' iron halo field flared, taking the impact of an attack meant for his brother.

Below on the ground, Tactical Marines were rushing past at full speed. Already, many of them had escaped the battlefield and continued on towards the objective. The time bought by the brothers' assault was buying precious time for the others to reach safety. The knowledge that their struggle got ever more of their brothers through drove the twins to fight ever harder.

For certain, the harvest was great.

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Gauss fire flickered in thick streams after the Marines that followed Chaplain Castor. Occasionally one of the shots would find a mark, burning away ceramite or flesh in an instant.

"Onward!" Castor urged, "We are nearly out of range! The Emperor's protective hand is over you! Doubt not, for you know no fear! Such were the words of our mighty Lord!"

He stopped with a jerk when he heard an agonised scream over the vox-channel. "Artemis?! What happened?"

"My leg," came the reply, "Punched clean through, just like you said they could. Apollo's hurt too, we've been pushed from the Skyshield pad..."

Concern made Castor's blood run cold. "Captain, you are too high priority to risk yourself further. Please, you've done your part, fall back and find another way around. The Emperor has more need of you..."

There was silence before Artemis responded. "Of course, we'll rendezvous with you and the others at the fortress. Continue to lead the rest onwards to the objective, over."

"As you command, Captain. Go with the Emperor's guidance, and Guilliman's wisdom."

The same instant that Apollo and Artemis' jump pack contrails streaked up through the sky, the Praetorians emerged from shimmering folds in realspace, stalking towards the rearguard Marines with ominous footsteps. The twins had caused many casualties in their ranks, but there remained more than enough to carve the Astartes apart. Desperate bolter fire ricocheted from the undead warriors' metal forms.

Castor paused in his retreat. He was about to see several of the Emperor's chosen carved apart before his very eyes, sacrificed to allow the others to complete their goal. This was the stated role of a rearguard when such rushes were close fought, but... Castor's mind filled with passages of the Codex Astartes, all urging strategically sound action. He knew that making emotion-driven decisions was dangerous and potentially endangered the larger campaign... and yet, his feet had stopped carrying him away.

Suddenly the thoughts of the Codex were subsumed by one single impression, one that held a dozen memories: times when Castor might have died, if not for a certain young, impetuous Assault Marine risking all for the sake of his allies... his brothers.

Castor's feet began to move once more, carrying him *towards* the melee. His Crozius lifted high over his head, his voice booming litanies of fury and divine retribution, Castor was amid the Praetorians before they were even fully aware of his presence. Each swing of his weapon shattered a Necron ribcage or destabilised a power core, each blast of his bolt pistol sent mass-reactive shells point blank into a xenos mask. One or two Necrons were fully knocked off their feet by the force of his assault. His Rosarius blazed with each attack made in return, not once letting them touch the sacred black surface of his armour.

Energised by this peerless warrior coming to their aid, the marines redoubled their efforts, throwing back the Praetorians, beating them to pieces.

Finally the xenos filth turned to run, and the Marines sent disciplined bursts of bolter fire after them until every enemy was out of sight. Then Castor walked with the Marines, careful to set a pace that even the most heavily wounded soldier could match.

When at last they passed through the creaking gate of the fortress, Castor parted with the Marines he had saved, but called over one that had fought most ferociously of all.

"Your faith is strong, Astartes. What is your name?" Castor asked.

"Berritus, my lord Chaplain," he replied.

"Well, Berritus, I have need of a fighter such as you," Castor said, "Your talents lie in the crucible of close combat, I believe, and the coming days may feature much of that for me. Will you accompany my personal squad into battle?"

"Of course, sir. I am yours to command, and will fight at your side without falter, even into a Trygon's den. If not for you, my battle-brothers and I would not be among the living..."

“In a Chapter, we are all brothers, Berritus,” Castor replied. “Brothers must preserve one another, for we are all equal in the Emperor’s gaze. This is a noble lesson, and it took a Marine much younger than myself to teach it to me.”

## CHAPTER 3: STAND OR DIE

"What is the report on supplies?" Artemis asked, finally diverting his attention from the preparations on the fortress gate. A Tactical Marine carrying a data slate reviewed the information before responding.

"According to preliminary review, there's not much ammunition available, at least for our heavier weaponry. The PDF assigned to Gaius used up most of the munitions before being overrun in this position. We do, however, have secure communications arrays available, meaning we can coordinate reinforcements from the skyfleet and *Wrath of Calth*."

"If it comes to a sustained assault, the Heavy Bolter emplacements will run dry very quickly," Castor said. The Chaplain had been following Artemis and his squad around the compound, giving orders and receiving reports for the last hour.

"It will have to last long enough for help to arrive," Artemis replied. "Have Marines manning each of the guns, we will not leave that asset to chance. We don't know if their machine spirits are intact. I want our Devastator squads atop the wall, make sure they have clear view of the killing grounds. And Castor... I want you in command of bombardments from *Wrath of Calth*. Keep pounding any incoming xenos into dust until they regret ever coming to face us."

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"Stand fast!" Castor ordered, viewing the siege from his vantage point atop the rampart to the left of the gate. Standing some ten meters above the Gaius sands, he could make out the half-seen shapes of xenos constructs weaving between shattered defense lines outside the fort. Squinting to see through the rain and relying on the extra sensitive sensory equipment in his skull-faced helmet, he gave directions to *Wrath of Calth*. Within moments, the darkness was split by lance battery fire from far above the clouds, starkly illuminating the killing fields as several Wraiths flew apart in molten fragments.

Vast ranks of Warriors shuffled up the road towards their reinforced gate, flanked by fast-moving Canoptek constructs. Everywhere, rain-slicked necrodermis marched inexorably towards the fortress walls.

"Strike now! Drive back these xenos usurpers!" Castor roared, and in answer the Heavy Bolter emplacements roared their reply. Mass-reactive shells rained down into the assembled ranks of Necron terrors. Though the firepower struggled to effectively damage the ancient armour of their enemies, it filled the night with bright flashing light to illuminate the approaching horde. Aided by the constant stream of muzzle flashes, the Marines atop the wall began to let loose with pinpoint firepower.

Still they came on. Buzzing xenos jetbike units zoomed over the killing fields at terrifying speeds, letting loose with tesla fire and causing Marines to fall convulsing from the walls. Still they came on. Lance battery fire rained down on their ranks, striking Canoptek Spyderys with the Emperor's own fury. Still they came on.

"They're reaching the wall!" came a cry from the right wall, a desperate warning from Devastator squad Thavian, just before a torrent of gauss fire ripped into them. Key heavy weapons specialists fell with burnt out helmets and ruined armour, two of them tumbling fully from the ramparts. Only one remained, pressing his back to the crenellations.

"Artemis! Beware!" Castor shouted down to the courtyard, "Wraiths are just outside the gate! No, don't jump over," he warned, spotting the flare of jump-packs below, "Remain inside! We need as many men defending the walls as we can get!"

A burst of green light blazed into existence behind the wall, and Castor whirled to see Sekhmet Ra himself standing inside the defences beside his Royal Guard. A Wraith phased through the fortress walls to join its master, and with that the right flank was truly breached. Flamers and bolters bathed the xenos with fire, but they were largely unimpressed. Castor cursed to himself, but did not abandon his post, instead continuing to coordinate orbital fire as instructed.

"Assault squad! Intercept the intruders!" he ordered, and his personal unit of assault marines rushed into the fight. Castor hoped that it would be enough.

+++

"Brace for impact, Marines," Artemis said, readying his own Eviscerator, standing side-by-side with Apollo. He could hear the monstrosities hissing and chittering just outside the gate, their metallic carapaces clattering and rubbing against one another. At any moment, they would begin hammering at the door.

Then, without warning, a Wraith phased through the gate. Artemis almost failed to see the attack, it began and ended in the space it took a lightning strike to momentarily blind his vision. One of his Marines was scooped bodily from the ground and dragged back through the gate to the other side, phasing through the plasteel surface with the Wraith. Even as agonised screams and cracking armour could be heard on the other side of the gate, heavy impacts began to rain on the defence's surface.

"Get behind me, all of you!" Artemis barked as he strode forward, bracing a shoulder against the inside of the gate. Once or twice it threatened to swing ajar, but Artemis slammed it closed with an echoing clang. Over and over, the flickering Wraiths hissed through the gate to strike, but Artemis stepped forward to intercept them each time, shielding his battle-brothers from harm with parries of his Eviscerator, the field of his Iron Halo, and his own body. In turn, the

Marines struck back at the Wraiths, occasionally finding purchase in their fast moving forms before they could slither back to safety beyond the gate.

Seconds drew out to minutes, then hours, as the gruelling stalemate ground on. Artemis grit his teeth in frustration as yet more of his attacks failed to land any telling blows on the slippery xenos machines, but held his ground. His damaged leg burned, demanding proper treatment that he could not give it, compounded by several freshly made wounds given by the Xenos creatures. Still he held his ground, bracing the door against more impacts. They would not enter this way.

+++

Castor grimaced at the sight of Sekhmet casually decapitating both of his Assault Sergeants with a single sweep of his scythe. The squad had all been either killed or driven to cover within the fortress. The Wraith that accompanied the xenos commander was wreaking havoc among the heavy bolter gunners as well. Only Castor and a single Marine remained unengaged atop the battlements on the left flank; the fort was on the brink of disaster.

"*Wrath of Calth*, I am sending you new firing directives! Fire on these coordinates, danger close, confirm!" Castor barked into his uplink.

"My lord, these coordinates are inside the fortress, are you-"

"I said confirm!"

"... aye sir!"

An instant later, another bombardment hammered down from the heavens, rocking the fortress wall below Castor's feet with its impact. The explosion vaporized the Wraith that had passed the walls, along with the Marine that had been struggling to escape its grasp. Sekhmet and his Guard reeled from the impact, withdrawing to shelter beneath the eaves of the wall, which glowed red hot from the proximity of the superheated fire.

Most miraculously, Castor spotted the skyfleet, led by Stormraven Omega, illuminated briefly by the fires of *Calth's* onslaught. Castor allowed himself a sigh of relief. The battle outside the walls would be resolved by the reinforcements, leaving him free to intervene and prevent further losses of his men.

"The Emperor is with us this day!" he shouted, hurling himself from the battlements to land within the walls. "Let us strike the head from the serpent! Courage and Honour!"

Artemis, Apollo and all the remaining Assault Marines saw the example of their beloved Chaplain, and rallied to his side, leaving the last Wraith headless on the earth. Together the tide of power-armoured fury swept to the left flank where Sekhmet and his Guard stood, rattled and damaged. Standing on the rim of the crater left by Castor's last bombardment, the mighty heroes and villains eyed one another.

"I have come for you now, to further display the glory of my Dynasty," said Sekhmet.

"Yet you will go back to your graves in dishonour," Artemis retorted, stepping forward to face the foe he hated. Castor knew him too well though, and could see when he winced with each fresh step.

"No, my Captain," Castor said, "I cannot bear to see you face such a dangerous foe in this condition. Allow me to take your place."

Artemis briefly considered, then nodded his assent. Sekhmet chuckled, evidently amused.

His amusement did not last long. Castor suddenly seemed to be a blur, stepping inside the reach of Sekhmet's blade, whirling his Crozius with bone-cracking speed. Sekhmet tried to avoid the blows, but Castor's feints made the lord second guess himself, leaving him directly in the path of several devastating impacts. Before the more cumbersome Overlord could even ready his scythe, the Crozius connected with his silver kneecap and uppercutted him in the chin, sending Sekhmet tumbling ingloriously into the dust on his back.

"Guards! Defend your master!" Sekhmet ordered, desperation creeping into his voice. His two remaining Lychguard stepped forward, raising their blades to strike at Castor.

"Xenos treachery!" Apollo roared. In a flash, the xenos had been hacked apart in an avalanche of revving chainblades. For several moments after the last limb ceased twitching, Apollo continued to batter the bits with blade.

"Enough, young one," Castor said, "Hot-bloodedness doesn't befit a son of Guilliman as well as a clear mind."

"They were going to resort to craven trickery!" Apollo replied.

"Such is their way, and the way of all who deny the Emperor's light," Castor intoned. When Apollo looked somewhat crestfallen, Castor placed a reassuring hand on his pauldron. "Thank you, though. The intervention was helpful."

As Apollo's smile returned, another Marine approached with the recovered communications array interface. "My lords, the channels are being swamped with anomalous signals, all playing the same message."

"Likely our old friend once again. Let us hear," Artemis ordered.

"This harvest was but the beginning, humans," Sekhmet's voice warned, hissing from static through the device. "You may have delayed your deaths with your crude weapons and aircraft, but they won't save you. Your kind is weak. You are fools, inferior. You think you can destroy us? We are legion. We are immortal. It has been an age since someone has damaged my form, and for that affront I will exact such horrors on you that those who merely whisper my name in the future will know that it means death to mankind! The Vault will be unleashed, and the power of a god comes with it."

"In addition," the Marine continued, "we've received word from the 102nd Rangers, who have been fighting a running campaign against the Necrons for some time now. They say that the city of Catania has been overrun, and that there is some kind of new weapon in play."

"What kind of weapon?" Artemis asked.

"Unknown. But they say they have a plan, sir."

Artemis grinned at that, the hot bravado shining in his eyes again. "We'll be sure to see this plan through, if its a good one."

## CHAPTER 4: THE MARTYR

Chaplain Castor took in the battlefield with his analytical gaze. Some had whispered during his centuries of service that Castor had inherited an especially large portion of Roboute's own tactical acumen, and perhaps that was not far from the truth. Others claimed that the greater part of his mind's power came not from genetic chance, but from ceaseless and diligent practice.

Whatever the case, Castor only needed a few seconds to know that the battle for Catania was near lost.

The proud sons of Ultramar still fought hard, meting out as much punishment as they received, but ultimately the ancient xenos would prevail. Castor had met them often enough before to know that a straight fight like this could only end in one way, especially now that the Wraiths had made contact with the Imperial lines. He fingered the activation rune on his helmet's vox bead.

"All units deploy from transports at once! We need to bring as much firepower to bear on the enemy as possible! Maintain fire discipline, don't let up for even a moment!" He commanded. Turning then to his personal guard of assault marines, some of whom had been given field promotions after the previous battle, he raised his Crozius, its golden cap gleaming in the twilight sun. "Courage and Honour!" he cried.

"Courage and Honour!" his squad roared back, and they plunged headlong into a shambling phalanx of Necron bodies, in the shadow of the mysterious obelisk that sat brooding in the midst of a blasted ruin.

+++

Captain Artemis always felt most alive whilst flying free amidst white clouds. Feeling the thrill of acceleration from his rumbling jump-pack, the atmosphere condensing in tiny droplets on his face... it was a reminder of what he had gained by surrendering all he was to the Emperor's Legions.

Looking down, Artemis could see the green and scarlet flashes of exchanged firepower. The battle had been joined in the city's centre, and a huge Necron construct glinted at the focal point of the bloodshed. Peering closer, he could make out the tiny forms of a regal entourage towards the rear of the Necron forces. Artemis knew those warriors: the Royal Court of Sekhmet Ra himself. At last, the serpent's head was exposed, and prepared for decapitation. Perhaps this time it would be permanent.

"After me," Artemis ordered his jump marines.

"As ever, Battle-Brother," Apollo replied.

Down they swept, the Angels of Death. With a boom that shattered what few stained glass windows remained in a nearby Sanctum, Artemis and his squad impacted the earth, raising a cloud of dust. Their Chainswords revved to life, their Bolt Pistols spat fire. As they closed the few remaining meters between them and Sekhmet, the Overlord saw them over his shoulder.

"Ah, the leader of the rabble! I was almost disappointed to not see you leading them, though I imagined you wouldn't be left out for long," the xenos drawled, impossibly conversational in the face of twenty furious superhumans bearing down on him. His Lychguard formed up in front of him, and bore the brunt of the marines' assault.

In an instant, two of the silvery beings were reduced to tiny scraps. The rest held firm, scarcely flinching as six foot long chainblades crashed into living metal shields.

Artemis shoved the guards aside with the sheer force of his assault, before drawing himself up to his full height. "Sekhmet Ra, you are the cause of untold suffering, and doubtless plan to cause more. I challenge you to single combat, if you dare face the God Emperor's fury."

Sekhmet's expressionless mask of a face regarded the Captain for a moment. "I accept, of course," he replied, then abruptly swung his huge scythe around in a glittering arc. The impact of it caused Artemis' Iron Halo to flare white hot as it absorbed the brunt of the blow, but even so the green blade sheared away part of the Captain's armour.

Artemis ignored the blaring alarms within his suit, throwing himself bodily at the Overlord. His trusty Eviscerator came down, dead on target...

... Then passed harmlessly through the Overlord's body as though it were smoke.

"Wha-?" Artemis gaped, before Sekhmet's all-too-solid fist cracked against his face. "Treachery! I should have known you have no honour!" Artemis roared, ignoring the way his face stung from the blow.

"A mouse cannot shame a king, no matter how furiously it squeaks," Sekhmet replied, gripping his scythe in both metallic claws. The two joined battle once more, two titans locked together in the chaos of war.

+++

"Status report!" Castor roared through his vox-bead, "What is the status of the payload?!" All he got in response was static at first, each of the marine channels going dead one by one, or

being drowned out by the screams of the dying. Then someone patched themselves onto the channel.

“Roger that, my lord Space Marine, I have eyes on the payload,” the man said, his voice sharp and clear despite the Low Gothic accent, “I got myself a nice little perch here, perfect for pickin’ off the fellows with the staffs. They have these helpful glowin’ orbs in their foreheads, see-”

“Who is this?!” Castor demanded, even as he knocked a Necron’s silver skull clear of its shoulders.

“Er, well, my name wouldn’t matter much to a Marine like yourself, I’m just a sniper from the 102nd Gaius Airbor- er, Rangers, milord. Colonel Ramone is down, the enemy has a hold of the payload, a few meters to the East of your position. Be advised, you have little support left, those Wraiths are doing a number on your Devastators.”

“Acknowledged,” Castor replied, his heart growing heavy, “Maintain your fire support, guardsman, I am going to retrieve the payload.” With that, his squad sprinted off in the direction of the makeshift bomb. If this day was to end with so much Ultramarine blood spilt, he could at least ensure that the Necron weapon was eliminated. He did not allow himself to consider how close this was going to be.

The sleeping horror was now directly over their heads, almost black as it was silhouetted against the sun.

+++

Across the battlefield, Artemis was at his limit. Sweat beaded on his brow as he brought his blade around for blow after blow, growling from exasperation as his blows connected but did little noticeable damage. Though parts of the Overlord’s cloak and armour showed signs of wear, nothing essential seemed hurt. In comparison, Artemis’ armour was slick and red from his own blood.

Around him, the fight was going little better. His marines, hand-chosen for this mission, could not bring any of the guards low. In turn, the Lychguard lopped off heads and arms with ease, the hyperphase swords making clean slices through power armour. Apollo fought like a lion, making Artemis grin with pride, despite the impenetrable defence faced by them both.

“You cannot win this, human,” Sekhmet taunted, “You lack the conviction.”

“The Emperor protects, and guides our every blow,” Artemis retorted, “I serve Him in faith, and for that He grants me strength to destroy the enemies of Man.” He hazarded another swing with his blade, but that accursed scythe deflected it once again.

"Precisely my point," the Overlord gloated, "You mortals and your gods. You are servants to them, slaves to deities of all kinds. In aeons before your slime-slicked ancestors crawled from the morass of biological gruel, we caused that the gods should serve *US*. Behold, and die."

Sekhmet turned away, and slammed the base of his scythe into the ground. There was what seemed to be a tremor in the earth below, and Artemis saw the Obelisk begin to split apart.

+++

Castor gripped his crozius tightly and dove for nearby cover. The Obelisk, which had so far done little over the course of the battle, began to rise from the ground, trailing dirt. The surface of the machine began to shift, moving almost unnaturally; it was like watching a crashing ocean wave in reverse, or thousands of tumblers unlocking at once. Cracks appeared and then widened, organic and mechanical at once, like the maw of some colossal machine-beast. Tiny silver beetles scuttled over it in rivers, peeling parts back and repairing elsewhere. As the thing opened, the gaps seemed to be covered by a thin skein of force, a membrane of concentrated power.

Then the membrane burst, and the Vault was unlocked.

Howling winds rattled Castor, like thousands of invisible fingers clutching at his armour and threatening to lift him bodily into the air. Every mote of dust nearby was swept away in the unleashed gust, even great tiles and stones peeling up from the floor to rattle and roll away from the opening. Castor, standing directly beneath this newly unbound abomination, looked up at it and saw into its core. There, at the epicentre of the sudden onslaught, Castor saw Death. It was raw power given form, blasphemously humanoid, and its slightest gesture caused mortal perception to bend. All of creation and un-creation seemed to unfold to Castor's eyes, as though he were witnessing firsthand the roiling inner workings of a star. The Vault itself ravaged the battlefield, neon lightning bolts flashing through the darkening light of day.

But that Thing at the centre looked down, directly into Castor's eyes, and the Chaplain immediately was made to understand: It wanted him. All that Castor was, down to his bones and soul, the C'tan hungered for it. It reached out a hand, and the fractal edge of its power set to work on Castor. The aged Chaplain could feel death rushing towards him... but then the C'tan roared in frustration. Evidently the attack put too many Necrons at risk, and so the Vault contained the Star-God's assault.

Chaplain Castor came back to himself, and tore his gaze away from the blazing light show above him. Suddenly the payload was all that mattered to him. The C'tan had to be stopped.

"Stall those Wraiths for as long as you can," he ordered his men, "I'll get the bomb."

"Brother Chaplain, are you certain of this?" sergeant Berritus asked, but there was no time for Castor to explain his motives. Instead he waved the Marines away, and they obeyed as they always had. Castor did not give himself the luxury of watching them enter the fray. All his energy now would now be spent getting that bomb where it needed to be.

+++

Artemis could not help but gawk at the Vault. Such a thing was beyond even his bravado. He was brought out of the trance by the metallic voice of Sekhmet.

"Do you see now, worm?" the Necron said, "There was never any hope for you, ever since your pathetic band of fighters decided to stand against the might of the Nephritai Dynasty."

"There is always hope, while even one defender of Ultramar stands!" Artemis shouted back, before driving his Eviscerator straight through the Lord's abdomen. He was pleasantly surprised to feel the metal resist, then give way under the shredding teeth of the blade, the attack making a satisfying grinding noise in Sekhmet's inner workings. Judging by the Overlord's reaction, he was just as surprised. With a warped roar of pained fury, he threw Artemis to the dirt. Artemis felt his jump pack crack as he landed on it.

Still thundering the electronic warcry, Sekhmet wrenched the Eviscerator out of his own body, and plunged it one-handed through Artemis' already damaged leg, pinning the Captain in place. The shock of the pain threatened to make Artemis black out.

"Noooo!" Apollo roared, now the last of Artemis' guard, loyal as ever to his brother. He charged recklessly towards the Overlord, ignoring the guards... but Sekhmet saw him coming, and brought his warscythe around with spiteful finality.

The blade plunged into and through Apollo's body, nearly rending him in two. The abruptness of it was horrific, and Apollo's destroyed form tumbled to the dirt.

"Fools. Children. Insects. You are nothing to me," Sekhmet snarled, though his voice now broke in and out of focus. He took an unsteady step towards Artemis, and pulled the Eviscerator from the Captain's leg before tossing atop the heap that was Apollo. "Your emperor is nothing to me. Flee to your holes in the ground. Come back to attack once more. It matters not. For your actions this day, I will root you out and burn you to the last."

At that, the Overlord turned away and strode into the shade of the Vault.

Artemis raised himself, shivering and broken, and limped over to Apollo. With shock, he found his brother still alive, if only just. Strapping both of their weapons to his own back, Artemis grabbed his brother by both wrists and started to drag him away, their pace painfully slow. He

tried to ignore the unnatural angles that Apollos limp legs dragged in, and the gaping wound left by the scythe's cruel stroke.

"Come in all transports, this is Artemis," the Captain wheezed over the vox-bead.

"Speak Captain, we hear you."

"Come retrieve us. This fight is over. Get any survivors you can find."

"My lord, there are few remain--"

"Retrieve them! We will need all we can get."

+++

Chaplain Castor was crushing the few remaining Warriors that clung feebly to the Thermal Bomb's casing when a familiar voice came over the master vox channel.

"Brother Captain Artemis to Alpha Battle Group, Mission Objective is compromised, all forces fall back to evacuation ships immediately!" The desperation in the young Captain's voice was clear enough to the old Chaplain's ears. Hefting the payload over his shoulder, Castor took in the now abandoned battlefield. His own assault squad was reduced to one single sergeant, faithful Berritus, who valiantly stood against the Wraiths who tried in vain to carve him apart. Castor met his gaze, and the two exchanged a nod. Finally the Chaplain answered.

"Negative, my lord. I must move the fusion device closer," He said.

He expected resistance, and the young Captain did not disappoint. "We are out of time! Move back to Stormraven Omega, NOW! You get back here chaplain, or I'll come and drag you out!"

Castor allowed himself a sigh. "No, Artemis. The future of this chapter rests on your shoulders, not mine." He thought back on the day he had gone to the fair garden world of Iax to retrieve the two impetuous youths who now commanded so much respect in the Chapter. Their meeting had been peaceful. Fate had always known their parting would not.

"Castor get back here you old fool!" Artemis shouted, but Castor scarcely heard over the Tomb Spyder that skittered over a ruin wall, barring his progress. He beat upon it until it rolled onto its back, lifeless, with its metal legs curled into a ball.

"Ultramar can ill-afford to wage a war on two fronts of the galaxy," Castor retorted, "The Eye stirs, and we will soon be mobilised in defence of Terra." He paused to shatter an Immortal

that stubbornly tried to slow Castor down. "We must make a stand this day. We must stop this empire from rearing its head and casting the Eastern Fringe in shadow. I am old, and my work is nearly done."

Exhaustion, a feeling that he had suppressed for over a hundred years, finally rushed over him. He let the payload clatter to the ground at his feet, within sight of the Vault. The ethereal green lights of the alien machine danced across the ruins of the city, overturning a Razorback even as it reeled to escape. Castor hoped that was close enough.

"I am proud of you. Goodbye, old friend."

Then all was light, and heat.

+++

In the hold of Stormraven Omega, Artemis felt numb, propped up against the cold wall. He was dimly aware of someone screaming, before realising it was him. He placed a hand over his face, struggling to regain control. It had all gone wrong. He was Captain, it was his own responsibility, his own fault... The man who had always been there, from the day of Artemis' induction, was gone. Artemis forced himself to turn back to the gurney on which his brother lay.

"I've rarely seen such catastrophic damage done to an Astartes that did not kill him," said the Apothecary, "He's held together by scraps of the Black Carapace and some of the heavier circuitry of his suit, but not much. His legs are barely attached. We might be able to heal him, but only if he can hold onto life until we do so. Even so it will be unlikely. Perhaps I should recover the geneseed-"

"No, not yet. He's a stubborn one," Artemis said, "I doubt that he'll let go of life anytime soon, while two of his atoms remain attached to each other."

As if on cue, Apollo awoke with a start.

"God Emperor, it hurts! The fiend, I'll... Where..?"

"Relax little brother, the battle is over."

"I can't feel my legs, am I... will I die?"

"They say you'll absolutely make a complete recovery," Artemis lied, "But you'll need plenty of rest."

"The battle, what happened? Did the xenos fall? Is Gaius secure?" Apollo asked.

“The battle went ill, Apollo. Castor... he is lost to us. There remains one battle, which will decide our fates. You cannot fight at my side, not like this. This is now *my* fight, one that I must win, for Castor’s sake. If I fail... ” Artemis stopped himself. The thought was too painful.

Apollo’s face was grim. “Courage and Honour.”

“Courage and Honour,” Artemis replied, clasping Apollo’s arm with his. The Apothecary respectfully averted his gaze when he spotted the moisture in his Captain’s eyes.

## CHAPTER 5: TO CLAIM AN EMPIRE

A red sun was setting directly ahead, glaring and hot in Stormraven Omega's cockpit viewport. It cast stark shadows across the transport hold, streaks of orange and black over burnished steel. Outside, the view was breathtaking, like a vision of ethereal Paradise. Within, deep in the mind of Captain Artemis, it was the fires of judgement.

The marines that stood with him were unwavering in their loyalty, unquestioning towards his authority, but there was a danger in the Captain's eye that had not been there before. His brow was furrowed, casting his eyes in shadow, but they could still be dimly seen by the flickering light that seemed to emanate from within. Before, that light seemed full of heat and bravado. Now it was a cold light, like the glinting steel of a freshly tempered blade, filled with the promise of murderous intent. Artemis gripped the hilt of his Eviscerator, the blade downwards and resting on the hold's floor, and his head was bowed over it as though in fervent prayer.

"We are approaching the target, Brother-Captain," reported the pilot, dutiful and curt.

Artemis lifted his head, his jaw set into a look of determined focus. His marines snapped to attention at the motion, ready for his slightest signal. He looked them over, then addressed the pilot. "Open a vox channel to all members of the strike force. I would speak to them." There was a click, and the line was active.

"In the city of Catania, I failed an old friend. But I will not let his name be forgotten. I will not let his death go unavenged," Artemis began, his tone even, despite a burden of emotion just under the surface, stifled by his discipline. "We have found the xenos staging point for this war, and we believe their Tombworld to be nested beneath the very sands outside Catania.

"I have ordered the armament of our sky fleets and our remaining forces here on the ground." As though to punctuate his statement, whole wings of heavily armed aircraft swooped into formation behind Stormraven Omega. Artemis' voice grew more fierce, a flicker of his old bravado returning.

"We may be few in number, but we are the Astartes, the Ultramarines! We shall know no fear in the face of the Daemon, the heretic or the xenos! We are the Emperor's divine justice, we are his Angels of Death, and we shall win back this world for Macragge, the Primarch, and for Castor! Ultramarines! Courage, and honour!"

At that, Artemis could hear the Marines all through the strike force let out a cheer. Every remaining battle-ready Ultramarine under his command roared in anticipation for the war to come, stomping power-armoured boots, thumping fists to their chests, rattling their weapons above their heads... and Artemis' hearts flared hot with pride. These were *his* men, entrusted to him. They

were his deadly weapons that could reach much farther than his own blade, and his brothers that came from a hundred distinct worlds.

The door of the Stormraven's hold opened, and Artemis led his squad out into the clouds. Suddenly there was quiet, just for a moment, as he and the Assault Marines felt freefall take them plummeting towards enemy below. The fire in Artemis' eyes had returned, but it was now focussed as the plunging point of a blade.

"Sekhmet," He murmured, and then activated the jets of his jetpack, thundering downwards like a lightning bolt.

+++

"My lord Sekhmet," murmured Osiris Ra, nervously clutching his Staff of Light as he edged closer to the hulking Overlord. Sekhmet had grown vastly more powerful over the course of this war, now seemingly impenetrable. In his shadow, Osiris seemed spindly and fragile by comparison.

"What is so important that you must divert my attention from my time of triumph?" Sekhmet growled, not turning away from the eldritch green plinth before him. His metal fingertips clicked a stiff staccato over the runed surface, each tap commencing the awakening protocols for another full phalanx of undying warriors. Soon legions of Necrons would be overrunning the surface in their thousands. The darkened depths of the tomb around them slowly stirred to life.

"The usurper-warriors, they approach for yet another attack. It seems their morale was not so crushed as you had thought, brother of mine."

The tapping stopped.

"Is that so?" Sekhmet asked. Still he did not turn.

Uneasy with the silence, Osiris continued with his report. "We read several of their primitive aircraft and transports approaching the tomb nexus on the surface. It seems they have found the Eternity Gates we are going to use to emerge with our forces."

There was a stony silence before Sekhmet responded. "Deal with them."

"What?"

"By now, we know their methods, particularly those of their leader. Intercept him, eliminate him, then mop up the rest in their confusion."

"My lord Sekhmet, the leader is well armed armoured... Are you certain my Deathmarks will be capable of dealing with him? They may only slow him down," Osiris hissed, wringing his staff.

Sekhmet turned around, glowering at his brother. "Either way, it is of small concern to me."

+++

The surface of Gaius' desert, within sight of burning Catania, had become a scene from glorious legend. An expertly timed and placed wall of drop pods stood between the Ultramarines and the tomb nexus provided cover to a disciplined line of Astartes and their Razorback transports, which hammered at the nexus with concentrated lascannon blasts, heavy bolters shells, and graviton waves. The orchestration of the initial attack, as laid out by Artemis, was flawless from conception to execution.

In the midst of it all stood Epistolary Magnus, the psyker standing between his trusted Centurion companions. Lighting sparked from his fingers as he wrenched open the forcefields of the rightmost Monolith, allowing heavy firepower to pass through and strike unimpeded. Each time the living metal structures attempted to lash out with Particle Whips or gauss fire, the targeted Marines ducked behind their drop pods, shielding themselves with the makeshift defences. The Marine lines flashed in the fading light of the day, muzzle flare reflecting off the glossy hulls of the tomb nexus.

From the lines emerged grim squads of Assault Marines, headed directly for the yawning Eternity Gates in each of the two monoliths. In each of the advancing squads, a Marine carried a potent payload: makeshift fusion bombs. They were not so massive as the device that had left Catania as a smoking crater, but if delivered through those gates they would prove more than powerful enough to collapse the Tombworld's structures from within.

One of the Marines entrusted with a fusion bomb, brother-sergeant Berritus, was the very selfsame assault sergeant that had stood immovable in the face of a skittering horde of Canoptek Wraiths so that Castor could deliver his fateful bomb. When the mission had been described by Captain Artemis, Berritus was the first to step forward for the perilous duty of delivering one of the bombs. He had seen some reflection of fate in it, and could not fail to take the opportunity to follow in his beloved Chaplain's footsteps.

As his squad approached the monolith on the left flank, Berritus noticed that the arcane door shimmered and spat sparks as it disgorged a mass of Praetorians. The shimmering warriors formed a wall between the Astartes and their goal, readying their Rods of Covenant in an intimidating line of blades that could sear clean through Terminator armour. Berritus and his squad revved their chainswords, bracing themselves for a desperate brawl.

Then the sky flashed neon green. The orange-tinged clouds cleared, as though burnt away by intense heat.

Looking to where the force seemed to come from, Berritus let out a snarl of sacred hate. The Tesseract Vault loomed vast and silver over the Gaius sands. What was worse, the Horror within had seen Berritus and what he carried. Already, he could feel the dread weight of its attention upon him, stretching him thin across an axis he couldn't begin to comprehend.

"Take the bomb! Take it!" Berritus shouted, desperately waving the fusion bomb. One of the other Marines stretched out his hand to receive it, catching it by the edge of its casing.

Berritus allowed himself a sigh of relief, just before his bones splintered and wrenched free of his armour, and his flesh scattered on the wind as cinders.

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"Epistolary Magnus, this is Battle Barge *Wrath of Calth*. We, ah, have received the promised reinforcements, a frigate arriving in low orbit. Evidently the aid is inside a single drop pod. Please advise."

Magnus ducked back behind the scorched edge of his drop pod, narrowly avoiding being crushed beneath the bulk of a Centurion who fell headless behind him. "*Wrath of Calth*, please repeat, it sounded as though you said they sent us a single drop pod? Over."

"Affirmative, Epistolary."

Magnus looked over to the left flank, where over a dozen brave Marines clashed with Praetorians under the shadow of the Vault. In the distance, closing with unnerving speed, a horde of skittering Canoptek constructs slithered across the sands towards the frenetic melee. Overhead, Nightscythes swooped low over the battlefield to project their passenger squads into the fray, squads of Necron Immortals firing streaks of gauss fire even before they had fully materialised. The psyker felt a knot form in the pit of his stomach; not fear, but certainly disappointment that such measly reinforcements could be spared them in this hour of need.

"Acknowledged," he said, "Deploy immediately to this battle grid."

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Artemis and his men broke through the cloud cover with the sky fleet, just as an unmarked drop pod streaked through their number towards the battle below, near enough to cause the assault marines to waver in its slipstream. Artemis only had time to feel the first ripples of

confusion at this unexpected aid, however, because a billowing river of shadow flowed over him and his men. For an instant all Artemis could see was darkness as he felt an inexorable current take hold of him, dragging him far off course from where he had planned to go.

As suddenly as it had begun, the shadow passed, withdrawing itself in a sinister flutter. Artemis looked around in confusion, for a moment completely bereft of his bearings. He and his men were completely in the wrong place, on the opposite side of the tomb nexus from the rest of his forces. A few meters away, a cloud of shadow coalesced into skeletal forms.

Artemis readied his Eviscerator, steeling himself for the fight to come, when an unfamiliar voice rang out over the battlefield, echoing from sandstone pillars and rattling the air with its authoritative force. Despite having never heard this new speaker before, his tone... it seemed to resonate within Artemis, within his very soul. The battle seemed to go still at the sound of that voice, which rumbled with royal majesty. Artemis dared to turn away from his foe long enough to squint at the far off source. He could make out the shape of what seemed to be some huge Astartes.

"Your time in this galaxy has already come and gone. Your empires fell because you did not have the fortitude to sustain them," the voice said. "Your shackled remnants of a Star-God mock the very sands of this world, as does your xenos presence here! I have returned to see my Father's vision fulfilled! Let me begin by showing you what a TRUE God of War can do!"

All across the battlefield, vox channels filled with exclamations of all kinds: some of fear, saying there was xenos trickery at play, others pious and filled with joyous emotion. Still others anxiously asked for confirmation, for visual proof or testimony. In every Ultramarine ear, echoing in every mouth and on every tongue, the message was the same, until it was undeniable.

*Lord Guilliman lives. He fights among us.*

Artemis could not help but sense all trepidation and doubt fall away from him, leaving only vengeance and righteous fury in their place. The Captain's gaze fell on Osiris Ra, who stood in the middle of his Deathmark assassins. The terror of Artemis' ire struck them like a wave of physical force. To their left, Stormraven Omega blasted a Triarch Stalker to pieces with a single gloriously placed shot, illuminating the scene with a ghastly plume of pale flame.

"XENOS!" Artemis roared.

"Open fire! Kill them! *Kill them!*" shrieked Osiris.

The ambush had been well planned, and flawlessly executed. The Deathmarks had effortlessly decapitated many other armies' command structures over the millennia, honing their

assassin's craft over countless battlefields and numberless coups. Yet there was something different in this moment.

A Marine fell clutching at his face as the neural pathways in his head burned away, but there was not a single one who flinched at the fusillade. At their head, ignoring the pain of a recently ruined leg, Artemis pounded across the sands.

"Face me, xenos! Craven master of assassins, if I cannot kill you, then I shall teach you pain!" Artemis challenged, but Osiris turned and began to scuttle away, attempting to cover his escape with a blinding flash of light. Enraged, Artemis and his squad laid about themselves with Chainsword blades and Bolt Pistol rounds. The Captain himself slaughtered his way through the Deathmarks, coming within striking distance of Osiris, shouting Sekhmet's name with every swing of his weapon.

Just as Osiris broke free of the melee, Artemis' power armoured glove gripped the Cryptek's segmented metal tail, crunching Necrodermis between his fingers. Grim satisfaction flowed through Artemis as he wrenched the Necron leader off its feet and through the dust, until he towered over the defeated xenos.

"An eye for an eye," Artemis intoned, "the blood of one brother for another's."

With that, he revved his Eviscerator up to full speed and raised it over his head, its two meter long blade a blur of metal teeth. The wind of its whirring teeth rustled his hair, and the cold light of hate shone dangerously in his eyes once more. The enemy raised an arm to shield itself from the coming blow.

"Don't-" Osiris pleaded, plaintive and quiet.

Then the blade came crashing down, metal shrieking on metal as the whirring teeth mulched the silvery mask that formed Osiris' face. At least, it was likely the metal shrieking, though it very well may have been Osiris' tormented cries. The high-pitched whine of razor-sharp points shearing through the Necrodermis made every hair on Artemis' arms stand on end, but the blow clove through his adversary. First the head, then the neck, shoulders, chest, and finally pelvis were rendered into unrecognisable scrap by the irresistible cutting of his Eviscerator, its tank-carving blade making a mockery of even the advanced xenos armour.

At last satisfied that the enemy was not going to reform from the fragments, Artemis took stock of the situation. Afar off, he saw a punishing barrage of fire from the sky fleet wipe out a phalanx of Praetorians, leaving only pockmarked earth and silvery flakes in their place.

In other places, the battle went poorly. Already, the Necrons were adjusting to the reinforcements, neon green lightning arcing across the skies and forcing the Ultramarine aircraft

into evasive manoeuvres simply to stay intact. On the ground, a flood of Canoptek forces rushed over the struggling tactical squads, threatening to overthrow them in a carpet of bodies. The rush to plant the fusion bombs had utterly stalled, each Marine embroiled in a fight to survive against undying foes. What was more, the Tesseract Vault still cast its dread shadow over Gaius...

Artemis' grip tightened on his Eviscerator. Even if he had to cut every last Necron down himself, it mattered not. This was the day of his redemption, and a memorial to Castor's greatness. Eventually Sekhmet would face him, and then he would destroy him.

"Let us go," he commanded, "The battle is not yet won, they need us."

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Every Ultramarine that could spare a moment stared in silent awe at the spectacle taking place on the left flank.

The Vault had retreated from the battlefield, drifting ever farther away towards the horizon... but after it thundered Guilliman. The Horror at the Vault's center writhed and recoiled from the oncoming opponent, straining at its restraints, sending lightning lashing out in all directions. Still, on strode Guilliman, a massive flaming sword in his grip.

Finally the Primarch reached the massive machine and set about himself. Grabbing ahold of the massive floating fortress with the mighty Hand of Dominion, Guilliman wrenched the Vault out of the air, impossibly causing one of its corners to drag through the sands, digging a great gouge out of the desert. The C'tan attempted to lash out at its tormentor, but Guilliman's personal shields simply flared bright in answer.

Climbing into the centre of the dragging Vault's superstructure, bracing himself against shifting masses of living metal and tides of repair scarabs, Guilliman's flaming sword carved great chunks out of the machine, causing molten metal to flow like fresh lava across the ground. Finally the Primarch reached into the containment field at the centre of the machine, ignoring the blaring protests of eldritch enslavement protocols, and gripped the the C'tan around the neck with the Hand of Dominion. Despite incredible strain, and the very metal of that relic glove being eroded in the presence of such sheer undiluted power, the Star-God came free from the machine's restraints. For a breathless moment, nothing but air separated the flesh-and-blood face of the Primarch and the sixty-five million year old visage of a being that had drained away stars and living souls.

Then the flaming sword flashed around in a great arch, and removed the C'tan's head from its shoulders.

Guilliman leapt down from the Vault, having wrought total devastation upon it. From the stump of the Horror's neck streamed plasma and flame, energy unrestrained, that arched around back upon itself like a solar flare. The impossible engine of war began to collapse in on itself, even as the unleashed forces attempted to fling its fragments across miles of Gaius' surface. Guilliman gripped the corner that dragged in the sand and heaved, allowing the momentum and anti-grav drives in the machine to carry it up and away from the battlefield.

Finally the entire super-weapon detonated in a blinding explosion. An exultant cheer went up from the Ultramarines, who still clung on despite the flood of enemies, and a shudder passed through the Necron ranks.

Sensing the peril of their situation, the Necron offensive redoubled their efforts, killing dozens more heroes with each passing moment. Even Epistolary Magnus found himself buried under the press of bodies, pinned in the overlapping wreckage of Razorbacks and drop pods. Less and less could the bark of Bolters be heard, replaced by the crackle-hiss of Gauss and Tesla fire.

On the right flank, the fusion bomb was hurled into the open Eternity Gate at last, clattering away into unknowable depths, hopefully emerging somewhere in the Tombworld below among endless rows of awakening Necron warriors.

On the left, the fusion bomb rolled from the lifeless hands of a Tactical Marine. Hissing Wraiths and merciless Praetorians swept on, pressing the Ultramarines back one step at a time. Soon the bomb was lost amidst piles of corpses from both sides. The key to Gaius' future lay unattended in the dust.

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"We have to close off this Eternity Gate!" Artemis commanded. His personal squad rushed to his side, thrusters humming as they went, and made a semicircle around their master. The Monolith on the left flank was still almost unscathed by the bombardments it had suffered up to that point, reaping an ever higher tally in Ultramarines with every flash of its particle whip.

A near-constant stream of Necron reinforcements emerged from the Monolith's gate, joining the battle outside as quickly as the Ultramarines could destroy the ones already upon them. The battle was quickly devolving into one of attrition, and Artemis knew that the Astartes could not hope to match the Necrons with his depleted Company.

Artemis' Eviscerator swiped and hammered at the hardened living metal surface, pulling away great chunks to expose more delicate processes within. Only once the light of the Monolith's weapons flickered and died did he allow himself to stop, catching his breath. The vehicle's superstructure finally began to sag and crumple, leaning towards one side. Fires started to flicker

and hiss inside, and Artemis had to shield his eyes from a shower of green sparks. With that, the flow of xenos reinforcements was halted.

"The bomb!" Artemis called over his vox-bead, "Where's the location of the second bomb? I am in position to deliver, over."

"The last known location was near the door, my lord!" Came a reply, nearly lost in the roar of battle on the other end. Artemis could make out an explosion in the background just as another Razorback burst into flame across the battlefield. "Squad Terminus last had it, before being overrun in the counterassault, over- Aaugh!" More bolter fire could be heard.

Then a familiar, mechanical voice boomed from behind Artemis. "Tut, tut. So destructive towards that which you cannot understand."

Artemis immediately felt adrenaline fill his veins, and all weariness fell from him as he turned to face his enemy. Sekhmet Ra stood there, flanked by five of his Royal Guard, more intimidating and grand than ever before. When the two warlords' gazes locked, Sekhmet tipped his head to one side.

"Come to me, slave. Your master is here to punish you."

Artemis raised his Eviscerator in mock salute. "You forged me on the anvil of hate, alien and now your reckoning is at hand," he snarled.

"This time, I will finish what I started," Sekhmet replied.

"For the honour of Castor, I will have your head! Die, alien!" Artemis cried, bounding forward to meet his nemesis.

The impetus of the Marine charge gave the Ultramarines the advantage for a moment, throwing some of the Guards off their feet. Astartes blades flashed and revved, striking true, occasionally landing a telling blow on Necrodermis bodies past their shields.

In the centre of it all, Sekhmet and Artemis duelled like figures of myth. Each impact of Eviscerator and Warscythe caused the air to quake. Where once Artemis was outmatched by the Overlord's prowess and lethal arsenal, he now fought with peerless skill, withstanding or deflecting every attack. Every time the Warscythe came around in a glittering arc, its path was interrupted or avoided. In turn, the Eviscerator seemed to pass clean through Sekhmet with no resistance, causing no damage.

The cold light was back in Artemis' eyes, which followed each step and shift in Sekhmet's stance, calculating where each new strike would come from, finding each opening he could

exploit. Overconfidence and fury had cost Artemis dearly, now icy hate honed the tactical mind he had inherited from his Primarch. The savagery of his counterattacks never diminished, even when they seemed as effective as trying to cut smoke.

When Sekhmet finally landed a blow on Artemis, plunging the wicked point of his scythe into Artemis' shoulder pad and shredding the ceramite like tissue, the Captain was driven heavily to one knee. He barely deflected the next blow, waving his blade to catch the Warscythe's haft. As Sekhmet recovered, Artemis forced himself back to his feet, driving the pain into the back of his mind.

"You'll need to do more than that to finish me, xenos fiend," He taunted, "and long before you do, I'll have broken your body to splinters. Castor shall be avenged!"

Sekhmet looked to his one remaining Lychguard, who was dispatching the last of Artemis' companions. "Very well. We will tip things more in my favour."

"Hardly a surprise, craven lord. I'll smite you both."

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Sekhmet felt aggravation growing ever larger in the pit where his heart once was. He knew, on some level, that he was letting himself grow sloppy, but the obstinate usurper before him was taking far too long to slay. The millennia of experience that informed his fighting style, augmented by the optimisation protocols in his mind, gave him assurance that victory was inevitable. How, then, was this insect, this *slave*, still fighting? Worse yet, this slave was almost unscathed, while Sekhmet knew that it was only a matter of time before his own phase shifter incorrectly synchronised and allowed that brutal weapon to carve him apart.

Even as his one remaining Guard hacked away, each blow clanging ineffectually against the mortal's armour, there was no sign of distraction in those hate filled eyes. Sekhmet was a stranger to fear, having been undying for millions of years. Even as the fight started to turn against him, fear never entered the old Overlord's mind, nor pain or tiredness. Such things were for mortals, and had no place in the existence of a Necron. There was, however, doubt: even as he continued to swing his Warscythe, Sekhmet began to wonder if it wouldn't be better to retreat and regroup. The data that flowed through the parallel processors of his mind told him that the rest of the battle, though still wavering on the brink of loss or victory, was proving very costly. Already the attackers had caused several setbacks for the wider campaign he planned. The majority of his remaining forces were Canoptek constructs, their primitive and animalistic instincts urging them to kill and drive away the intruders, but not thinking of higher objectives. Though Sekhmet's legions were vast, the majority still slumbered below.

His thoughts were interrupted by the primitive creature's weapon grinding a scar into his chest plate. The damage was light, considering he had seen similar weapons shatter entire warmachines, but Sekhmet's pride stung at the sight of it.

"This has gone on long enough," Sekhmet hissed, gripping his scythe tighter. "Your assault is proving a bigger nuisance than I expected, and you will pay for it dearly."

Instead of wrath, as Sekhmet was expecting, the adversary's face filled with what his processors recognised as awe. This was anomalous. Realising that he was not what had caught the slave's attention, Sekhmet turned around.

Resplendent in ornate armour, towering over even the Overlord, was another of the humans warriors. Sekhmet's disgust for the upstart creatures was shaken to the foundations at the sight of this being. In one hand, this lord (for undoubtedly this was a lord among the humans) carried a fiery blade so long that not even Sekhmet would have been capable of lifting it. His eyes blazed white in the dying light of day. Victory over this newcomer was impossible, Sekhmet knew that. He'd already witnessed the destruction of the Tesseract Vault.

"Your cowardice in the face of an honourable challenge marks a feeble ruler," the giant said, his voice booming. With a contemptuous swipe of his massive glove, this massive human struck Sekhmet's last Lychguard aside, sending it tumbling helplessly through the air. "Now, know the Emperor's judgement," he continued, and then plunged the flaming sword towards Sekhmet.

Beset on both sides by determined, highly skilled opponents, Sekhmet struggled to block or nullify every attack. He could scarcely strike at one opponent before the other caused him to leap aside or whirl back to parry. The struggle was brief, frantic, and brutal. Sekhmet finally decided that escape was his best option...

... Then the burning blade found its mark, plunging into his abdomen.

Pain. Desperation. Fear. Suddenly, Sekhmet remembered them all. The red flames ate hungrily at his physical body, fusing his joints with their heat. Power cells in his body glowed and popped, fire burnt away at his facial mask, but that was merely damage. The pain, the real pain, the deep pain, scorched at what remained of his soul. The fire seared him down to his very *self*, his *being*, and threatened to devour him entirely. Within his own mind, Sekhmet scrambled for an escape like a beast trapped in a box with an out of control blaze. The sensation plunged him back through the aeons to the day he'd given up his body. He could almost feel the flesh and bone body he'd left behind, the claustrophobic darkness inside that Soul Engine on the day of Biotransference, and the instant and profound burning he passed through within that Star-God built machine.

Sekhmet dropped his weapon and strove to put out the fire. His one thought was to escape the pain, escape the fear, escape the Soul Engine, escape his skin... Until he came back to himself, suffering a horrible sense of suffocation as he tried to gasp air into lungs he no longer had. The flames clung to him, and the burning blade had pinned him in place. He looked up, directly into the face of Artemis.

"In the Emperor's name, and for the memory of Castor," the Captain declared, and then swept his blade around in an arc, removing Sekhmet's head.

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For a moment, Artemis allowed himself to watch the silvery skull roll away, clattering over the parched earth. The satisfaction of achieving vengeance didn't remove the ache of loss, but it did make it bearable. The Captain only then dared to look upon his Primarch fully for the first time. Roboute, living and breathing, magnificent in every way, pried his sword blade loose from the half-molten remains of Sekhmet. Artemis had stood in the Primarch's presence within the majestic Temple of Hera, had gazed in wonder upon his master's features, wondering what that vast mind contained, but this was altogether different. When Guilliman's eyes met Artemis', the latter stiffened.

"Finish this, Captain," Guilliman flatly stated, "I will watch over you."

Artemis nodded, then fired his jump pack once more. Once in the air, it was far simpler to find the abandoned fusion bomb despite the bodies lying thick upon the ground. Not afar off, the last of the Ultramarine squads fought desperately against the encroaching hordes of Wraith and Scarab machines. Though lacking any kind of leadership or goal beyond spitefully killing as many Marines as they could, the fighting was desperate and deadly.

Swallowing his desire to swoop in and defend his men, Artemis scooped up the fusion bomb, sprinted the last few meters to the Eternity Gate, and chucked it inside. The door flickered, then went black.

Far, far below, Artemis could hear the first detonations. As though caught in a quake, parts of the land heaved and overturned, while other parts sagged down into yawning sinkholes. Steam and smoke hissed off of newly formed cracks in the ground, and the entire continent seemed to groan in protest beneath their feet. The remaining Canoptek constructs immediately phased through the earth, driven by protocols to attempt repairs despite the catastrophic damage, presumably drawn directly into the obliteration taking place below. Other Necron forces phased out, vanishing in flashes of green light. Soon all that remained were the Ultramarine survivors.

Every Marine that could struggle to their feet gathered, emerging from the gloom of war to stand in a half-circle around Artemis. He looked them over, taking in every detail he could.

There were Devastators who had abandoned their Grav Cannons to fight with fist and knife against swarms of stabbing beetles, and Tactical Marines who had battered their way through Wraiths with the butts of their empty bolters.

Some were missing parts of their armour, or even limbs. One of the brothers was missing an arm and a leg on one side, each ending in a cauterised stump, but limped to join the others all the same, held up by one of his companions. Magnus, who had been trampled and crushed, leaned heavily on his splintered staff. Many of them still carried splintered bits of necrodermis and wiring in their hands, from having resorted to tearing their adversaries apart with their bare hands. All of them bore signs of gauss fire, blackened cracks running in criss-cross patterns over bright blue livery.

Despite their wounds, each of them stood at attention before their captain and saluted.

Artemis fought to contain his pride. These were his men, his battle-brothers. In their eyes he saw unquestioning loyalty burning brightly. They had followed him into the jaws of death, and fought like heroes. Finally he saluted back, pressing his fist to his chest. "Courage and Honour, Marines. We are victorious this day!"

The cheer went up. *Emperor be praised!* some cried. *Courage and Honour! Glory to Macragge!* others added. More than one simply raised a fist and roared *Artemis! Artemis!*

All went quiet at once when massive footfalls approached. All knelt as best they could, bowing their head in fealty to Roboute Guilliman, despite the Primarch attempting to stop the more grievously wounded from further straining themselves.

None bowed lower than Artemis, who placed his battered weapon at his lord's feet and stared at the sands.

"My Lord..." He searched for the right words, choosing them with care. "Your return is a miracle and blessing of the Emperor. Yet, I am shamed by my failure before you. Nearly an entire Company slain under my command, and-" In spite of himself, Artemis' voice caught in his throat. "... Castor. I would have failed, if not for you."

Under Chaplain Castor's long-suffering tutelage, Artemis could recall many times where his rash decisions and hunger for glory had led to moments of foolishness. At those times, Castor had seemed like a father, one who gave council and demanded improvement. At those times, Artemis could sense his own youth more strongly than ever, feeling as though he were a brash child. Now, in the gaze of one of the God-Emperor's own heirs, he saw himself as small as an insect.

"Would you have? Was it not you who slew their warlord and set the device to destroy their tombworld beneath the sands of Gaius? Was it not you, *my son*, who have stood against a

xenos empire when all others have failed?" Guilliman replied. His tone was understanding, echoing the patriarchal forms of Castor, and Artemis raised his eyes from the dirt.

In those bright, godlike eyes, Artemis saw only compassion and acceptance. Immediately Artemis knew that he was Guilliman's to command, forever more. Castor had believed in the young Captain, watched him grow to become a mighty warrior, and sealed his teachings with his own death. Now the fully grown Artemis internally determined that his potential would be unleashed upon Guilliman's enemies for all time, until the day he met death as Castor had: with Courage and Honour.

"War is a balance between victory and loss, Artemis." Guilliman continued. "The art is to know how much loss is acceptable for the end to justify the means. But this is no time for philosophy. We have work to do."

Artemis stood, taking up his weapon once more. "Work, my lord?"

"Yes my son. Your Company will be rebuilt, your Astartes re-armed and mobilised. We march to Terra... and you shall do so at my side."

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Aboard a heavily cloaked Tombship, the few remaining Necrons of Nephritis saw to their repairs. Many thousands of the Dynasty's warriors had been utterly obliterated in the blast below the world's surface, their personality subroutines impossible to recover after such absolute physical damage. Others had remained, trapped undying in the absolute dark, pinned by the unimaginable pressure of tectonic plates.

Sekhmet glared at his hands. They quivered and shook, the fingers twitching without his willing them to. The thought of his defeat galled him, but what was worse, his own mind betrayed him. His body shuddered and glitched, and he had no way to stop it. Not even his own body obeyed, even though it was physically in good condition.

"My lord, I have seen to the repairs of your form as best I can, but the reanimation matrix is damaged, the protocols are not functioning. You may not recover..." Osiris intoned, honestly assessing the situation. Sekhmet glared at him, and his brother cowered away as if struck. "I have no other tools at my disposal," he explained, before turning away in despair. "The Nephritis Tombworld, shattered... our legions crushed within the very city designed to keep them safe..." He hung his head. "All is lost," he finished, sounding utterly forlorn.

Sekhmet went back to glaring at his rebellious hands. They still shook.

Perhaps it was the pain. Even after being placed into a new form, the pain had followed him. It ached endlessly, maddeningly. It was as though those fires in his soul had left it blackened and blistered. Sekhmet shuddered at the thought of the pain. Even the ghost of its memory made him recoil.

*Artemis*, he thought. That was the name they had for their leader. The mortal will pay for his stubbornness. Sekhmet clenched his hands into fists, imagining the sensation of crushing the Captain's skull between his fingers. The imagined revenge was satisfying enough to almost stave off the ghost pain for a moment. Almost.

"We underestimated these aliens, brother. Their steel comes from within. A slave race that has grown fat on its own conquest. Their reach across the stars in our absence has made them strong..." He mused aloud, "but make no mistake. While slaves may rise against their masters, they are still slaves. Their time will come to an end. Nephritis was not the only tombworld in the Nephriti dynasty, only the first to rise. Now we will awaken an empire that has slept too long."

Still clenching his fists, Sekhmet looked out the viewport towards the stars, mentally counting the legions he had hidden among them in ages past. As the number grew ever higher, he began to laugh.

END

**Author's Addendum:** *Hey there Team, I just wanted to briefly thank Lawrence and the others on Tabletop Tactics for their amazing work on the channel, as well as letting me make this little contribution to the amazing Narrative Campaign they've created. I wrote this due to how inspired I was after one of the Battle Reports, and apparently it was good enough that Lawrence wanted more. The goal was to flesh out some of the relationships and context of the story, while incorporating (hopefully) every scrap of the story as it unfolded from the collaborative efforts of the Spider, B-Bone, Chef, and the Dice Gods (Glory be, Random is Their Number). It's been an amazing journey, and the result is a real testament of the love that 40k players have for this setting. All of you are a true class act. Thank you for reading, and I completely recommend subscribing to support these guys: I haven't regretted it once.*

*May the Emperor bless (except you heretics out there), and may you always mark your enemies for death!*

