This isn’t a teaser – 06 May 2024

**Legacy Interlude**

**Hell Garden**

*Hell Garden.*

*Of all military operations of the First Age, this is certainly one of the campaigns shrouded the most in an aura of mystery on Nyx.*

*There is no Weaverian Marvel dedicated to it, though the names of the fallen, both Nyxian and non-Nyxian, are carved forever on the third floor of the Hagia Sanguinala.*

*Evidently, part of the reason why it stayed as close to a near-anonymous war was the relatively low number of troops engaged in the conflict. And most of the human veterans were Catachan Jungle Fighters, who are not exactly known for their prose and the quality of their memoirs.*

*In addition to these points, a lot of the information was classified by Her Celestial Highness herself, and it remained so until Hive Fleet Behemoth ushered the Tyranid Wars.*

*One must also point out that although three Stars of Terra were earned, all of them were given posthumously to the heroic guardsmen.*

*And last but not least, it was Catachan.*

*Operation Hell Garden was in the third century of M35, millennia ago, and it remains to this day the only moment an Imperial force truly tried what one can qualify of ‘invasion’ where this infamous Death World is concerned.*

*And for good reason.*

*Though all the reports written after conceded the logic of the operation was sound, the after-battle reports of the surviving Space Marines and the Adjutant-Spiders mean grim reading.*

*Worst of all, even today, the Swarm of Her Celestial Highness is forced to acknowledge that the rapid reaction of the Imperium after the end of the operations in the Eastern Fringe took the Tyranids by surprise.*

*There was no counterpart to the ‘Zoanlord’ ready to annihilate armies, tides of billions of Hormagaunts, or the insidious poison of the Genestealer infiltrators.*

*Unfortunately, this didn’t mean the Hive Mind of the Endless Devourer was defenceless.*

*And the strategists had missed a very dangerous problem.*

*On the battlefields of the world that had still been called Ardium then, the regiments of Nyx, Fay, and hundreds of other famous recruitment worlds had learned to their sorrow how dangerous it was for your health when Behemoth unleashed its unrelenting offensive power.*

*No one, sadly, had thought to predict what it would mean if a Tyranid Hive Fleet turned its malevolent instincts to a defensive strategy.*

*The answers would be horrifying, both by the numbers of casualties they generated, and by the implications they brought into the minds of every senior military commander of Mankind.*

*Now with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear Operation Hell Garden was the first encounter between the Imperium and Hive Fleet Python.*

*And it was indeed a hellish experience none of the protagonists would remember fondly for as long as they lived.*

Extract from *Bloody Hell – the First and Last Invasion of Catachan*, by retired Admiral Roxana Brasidas-Groener, 900M41.

**Catachan System**

**High Orbit over Catachan**

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Pax Imperium***

**5.503.313M35**

Thought for the day: Her will be done.

**Sister Kyra**

There were things the harsh training regimen had tried to prepare for.

Unfortunately, Kyra was sure trying to comfort one of the Adjutant-Spiders of Her Celestial Highness was not one of them.

“What was wrong with the title I chose?” Adjutant-Colonel Bellona sobbed. “It is a perfectly fine name! I didn’t have the time to send it to the Webmistress, but I’m sure she would have approved!”

The young battle-sister of the Order of the Silver Rose begged silently for help. Alas, all the older girls smirked and didn’t intervene. What had happened to the bonds of sisterhood?

Suddenly, just because she was the youngest oath-sworn warrior-

This would not be forgotten.

Of course, this also meant that for the next ten minutes, Kyra had to apologise again and again.

Because the Catachan officers and some other ‘ruffians’ had dared renaming the work of the Adjutant-Spider by the offending name of *Codex Tyranids*.

“They aren’t able to recognise the greatness the Webmistress imbued in me!” Bellona mourned again before doing the human equivalent of changing the subject. “Please, I want some good news, any good news!”

“Err...” Kyra looked at her new data-slate. “We have possible Space Marine reinforcements incoming?”

“Oh?” The sorrow disappeared, replaced by excited curiosity. “How far away are they?”

“One standard month, I’m afraid, Adjutant-Colonel. One company-strong.”

“That’s too far away,” was the immediate and predictable reply. “The enemy knows we are there, and we have everything we need for the assault, since the latest weapon shipment from Ryza has been distributed to the troops two days ago. We can’t afford to wait for a month. Please send a message to...what is the name of the Chapter wishing to answer the call to arms, Sister Kyra?”

“The Blood Ravens,” the young woman answered before frowning. “I am not familiar with the name.”

“Neither I am,” Bellona shook her large head. And from the expressions of all the Sororitas present, it was evident everyone shared the same perplexity. “They certainly aren’t of the Blood, the Webmistress made sure we can recognise the colours and the sigils of every Chapter of the Beloved Sanguinius’ line! And I don’t think they were signatories of the Conference of Macragge. I could be mistaken, of course. I wasn’t here, and the Space Marines have not been my focus. Theresa! Access to my console, please!”

Obviously there was a small moment of rush to the devices installed nearby, which was over in a minute.

After that, it was just a question of time before the small spiders unlocked the highly-secure database reserved to the Adjutant-Colonel. A few more seconds and-

“Has someone placed Trazyn’s thefts in the wrong location?”

The question out of Bellona’s mouth made her raise both eyebrows in astonishment. If there was something everyone took great pride in when it came to serve Her Celestial Highness, it was to make as few mistakes as possible and-

“How in the name of Holy Bacta did they manage to steal a Fra’al Battlecruiser?”

What?

“And they used it as a Q-Ship to board and steal more xenos hulls! Oh, I bet the Inquisition loved that.”

What?

“They also earned five Penance Crusades in the last two millennia,” Bellona read aloud. “I’ve never heard of a single Chapter earning so many black marks and not being purged by the High Lords...save the High Lords, of course.”

“It could be a corruption of the data, as you said, Adjutant-Colonel,” Claire intervened. “The Inquisition can be tolerant of some...eccentricities when it is the Adeptus Astartes doing them, but there are limits.”

“I shall hope so, because it is said here,” an accusatory leg was pointed at the hololithic screen, “that these thieves stole a *Battle-Barge* of the Marines Malevolent, and a Lady Inquisitor sent them away with a ‘well-done’ message! I mean, which Chapter would be so mentally crippled as to name itself the *Marines Malevolent*! Even the Traitor Marines have far better sense than that!”

And this was the Adjutant-Spider who had thought using a variant of the Uplifting Primer’s name was a good idea for her book speaking...

“Anyway,” Bellona sighed loudly. “I suppose we can always accept the help. If the Tyranids are all dead before they arrive, I will apologise for the fact their services are not needed, and the Adeptus Mechanicus will offer them a few weapons, along with the gratitude of the Webmistress for their dedication.”

There was more frenetic tapping. No further remarks came out, however.

And as always, the elder sisters were of no help at all.

Kyra had to clear her throat...again.

“I suppose this means there is no reason to change the schedule of Operation Hell garden, Adjutant-Colonel?”

“No reason at all,” the answer came promptly and unflinchingly. “We localised the ancient crater where the World Spirit of Catachan is almost certainly hidden. And all the Space Marines deployed on the world below agree that the aggression levels of the fauna and the flora skyrocket the closer we push in this direction. On the subject of good news, Adjutant-Captain Kali had rallied many colonies of spiders to our cause. We are ready to execute the Webmistress’ orders.”

This was the positive view, yes. Yet there had been disappointments. Wherever the few Adjutant-Spiders went on Catachan, there was no denying the ant colonies fled like they were facing an invasion of the Arch-Enemy. Actually, would the insects of this Death World flee a daemonic invasion in the first place? Something to ponder at later.

“The approach still represents a...significant amount of risk,” Claire said in the names of everyone present.

“One must take risks when the Webmistress demands we do her utmost for her!” Bellona told them joyously. “And I have long analysed the threat represented by the Tyranids! We are going to surprised them by an insertion right on their doorstep! The variant ‘Toad’ has no precedent in Imperial history, and this will bring them on the defensive from the very beginning!”

Kyra saluted, trying to not let excitation take too much of her. This was it, then her first battle!

“Oh, and Sister Kyra?”

“Yes, Adjutant-Colonel!”

“Please inform the good Rear-Admiral I will be a bit late for the tea today...”

Yes, many of her sisters laughed. The young battle-sister swore there would be retribution one way or another before this campaign was over!

**Beyond the last star of the Eastern Fringe – the Galactic Void**

If the Hive Mind had been able to gather half of the resources expended on the world where the Golden Prey had prevented it from satisfying its hunger, victory would have been certain.

It was inconvenient that those resources did not exist.

This pantry-world had been acknowledged as critically important.

It was, after all, the only one where the Hive Mind knew for certain that the Golden Prey was aware of one of their scout’s existence.

There was never any question a counter-attack would come.

It was a pity the hive-vanguard’s presence was weak.

The Bio-Ship of the first expedition had underestimated some species of Prey, and it had crashed violently on the pantry-world.

The destruction created by this event had been assuredly sub-optimal for the Hive Mind’s plans.

By the time contact had been made to investigate if the Golden Prey was known to the synapse unit, the number of assets could be counted with one claw and spare.

Measures had been taken to remedy to it, but the process had been incredibly slow. After being left alone so long on its own, the synapse unit had grown stagnant, content to devour pitiful quantities of biomass and to pour its hunger into the gestalt-construct’s core.

It was an imperfect tool.

But it was the only one the Hive Mind had, and sending a replacement was not possible.

It would have to do.

Still, it was inconvenient.

The Hive Mind had to assign an entire Relay-Moon to take control of the synapse unit, and the entire process had taken more time than efficiency called for.

And then the lesser prey serving the Golden Prey had come, far faster than it had ever been estimated feasible.

This was not a major setback, for the Hive Mind was now aware that this all-too-cunning prey had greater faster-than-light deployment capabilities than initially thought of.

A cold intellect would always prefer losing as few assets as possible when discovering capacities of utmost importance, and the Hive Mind’s intelligence was very cold indeed.

It was still one more inconvenience the Hive Mind could have done without.

The reorganisation around the synapse unit was incomplete.

There was only one Brood Nest active, and its ability to create more than the most basic assets was negligible.

They would not be match for the prey armies, though the first screening indicated the Golden Prey was not present in person.

It had taken some calculations, but the Hive Mind had decided to offer the prey the battle it seemed to seek on this pantry-world.

While the assets were small compared to the far greater resources expended against the Golden Prey, the choice of this particular Relay-Moon to give orders had proven a strong advantage, for the Norn-units merged into it had evolved and mastered their hunger. On the offensive, they would not have been as strong as the Fleet which was on its way to devour this galaxy the pantry-world was part of.

But the circumstances were perfect to test the lesser organisms gravitating around the Golden Prey.

Yes, a defensive mindset had its use here, and it would be supported by the influence the synapse unit had over the gestalt-construct.

The calculations did not ascertain the Hive Mind would emerge victorious from the struggle.

But the lesser prey had settled this world. If the vigour it had defended the other one from the ancient asset’s assault was any inclination, the pantry would not be destroyed to deny the Hive Mind its due.

If the hunger was stopped once more, neither the Relay-Moon nor the Hive Mind would lose anything important.

Yes, the strategy was as efficient as the limited assets allowed for.

Much would be learned from this new battle with the lesser preys.

And if the organisms devoured resulted in a significant loss of capability for the Golden Prey, so much for the better.

The Hive Mind had been taught a very painful lesson, in addition to being denied.

It was going to be incredibly satisfying two types of hunger at the same time.

The Hive Mind readied its assets and waited for the preys to make the first move.

**Catachan System**

**Catachan**

**Somewhere in the Green Hell**

**5.504.313M35**

**Sergeant Javier Cortazar**

Contrary to what one might imagine, the Catachan guardsmen had a rich vocabulary to describe the different parts of their planet.

And like many Death Worlds, the reference points were the Redoubts, which were the closer thing you had to a safe haven on Catachan. The further away you were from one, the greater dangers you were likely to face.

The difference between Catachan and other Death Worlds of the Imperium, of course, was how fast the survivability chances dropped when you left a Redoubt. Modern artillery being modern artillery, on plenty of planets settled in the name of the Emperor, there were men and women who lived a couple of kilometres away from the great walls of a fortress without selling away their lives. The ‘safe zone’ was often close to twenty kilometres of radius, though it applied mostly to the less dangerous categories of ‘Death World’.

In this verdant wilderness the Jungle Fighters called home, anything beyond a kilometre of a Redoubt was best translated as ‘Green Hell’.

Simple deduction could tell you that the aforementioned ‘Hell’ of course covered most of the planet.

And Sergeant Javier Cortazar of the Raptors Space Marine Chapter had not been surprised that some local cants evocated the idea of travelling alone there as a particularly audacious form of suicide.

This was for reckless adventurers who tried to reach points twenty kilometres away from a Redoubt, mind you.

Javier had pushed far further than that; as the warships in orbit were able to calculate his coordinates with precision, he was some two hundred and ninety-seven kilometres away from the closest Catachan settlement.

Some bureaucrat idiots – the galaxy was filled with them, alas – had complained to Lady Weaver some months ago how it was possible in the first place that the Catachan garrisons had not noticed a Tyranid presence on their homeworld.

The Victor of Commorragh and Macragge had been perfectly right to lambast them and retort that it would have been way more surprising if the Catachan jungle-experts had been able to report the sign of a Tyranid presence in the first place.

The new communication relay installed in his Mark IX’s helmets buzzed, and the voice of his Captain arrived to his ears a second after that.

“Almost in position, brother?”

“’Almost’ is the key word,” Javier grunted, striking one of the big yellow-black snakes which had tried to attack from behind. Fortunately, the brand-new Nyx-pattern Power Sword severed the beast effortlessly, and his armour boot made sure the head was appropriately dealt with. “I am more and more convinced the pace of the offensive the Spiders want is deliberately optimistic.”

“I feel the same.” There was a pause. “The Mark IX?”

“The shields are down, permanently, as I feared. They have not been built in mind to deal with permanent attacks coming every minute.” Javier snorted. “This might be for the best. They were drawing too much power and the outcome wasn’t satisfying.”

“We can’t help but count the days separating us from the arrival of the Mark X, eh?”

The Raptors Sergeant had to slaughter a series of Strangleplants by blade and then send one of his last Bolter Shells inside a Venus Mantrap’s maw before saying one more word.

“With each footstep, I become more and more convinced the appropriate armour to deal with this Death World is a hover-tank with the firepower to incinerate entire square kilometres of jungle, brother.”

A chuckled was heard on the other end of the communication relay.

“I’m afraid that if Nyx or another Imperial world has armoured vehicles like the one you want, they are currently not selling them to any Chapter. And I see you are in position now.”

“Yes. I have a superb sight on a glorious piece of Green Hell.”

Some of his brothers may have even appreciated the beauty offered by the fangs, claws, and spikes of Catachan.

Javier had arrived on the ridge giving him a view of a massive valley flanked from north and south by moderately elevated peaks.

It was a landscape of lush green colours, and the roars of carnivorous predators – assuming *anything* wasn’t carnivorous here – accompanied with every step.

“The records were right. There must have been a Redoubt here built at some point not long after the first settlers arrived.”

Of course, by now, the Redoubt’s whole structure had been devoured by the jungle.

“Poor bastards,” his Captain voiced. “The Tyranids, you think?”

“I don’t think so, although maybe indirectly? The wildlife seems unusually aggressive in the last hour?”

“You have the coordinates?”

“I’m sending them. I’m playing it with a big margin: roughly three kilometres east of the Redoubt’s ruins. That should provide the army enough margin if something goes wrong.”

“Coordinates received and acknowledged, brother.” Javier had only to wait for ten seconds before the announcement which was in many ways the opening stage of Hell Garden arrived. “The Mechanicus Cruiser is launching the BX-T torpedo.”

In a void battle, the outcome would have required several minutes of patience.

Here, with the fleet in high orbit, the explosion arrived a second after ‘torpedo’ was uttered.

It was an enormous airburst explosion, several metres above the highest trees of the valley that for some long-forsaken reason, the Catachan had nicknamed ‘Devil’s Den’. And no, according to satellite imagery, the quantity of Catachan Devils here was not superior to any other region of the Death World.

Plenty of Flesh Tearers would clearly have been disappointed by the lack of devastation.

There was a small zone where the trees, plants, and animals had been blasted away, but things like that were erased by the jungle in ten minutes.

But razing the valley by orbital fire was far from the plan’s intention.

The purple smog that was now spreading was the true attack; the torpedo launched from a Cruiser’s tube had just been means of delivery.

And the effect was impressive.

In the distance, several croaking sounds resonated.

And the valley’s jungle began to fall silent.

The thunderous roars vacillated, the hisses of the myriads of snakes betrayed something like fear before ending.

The purple smog spread.

And the croaking symphony increased in potency, with thousands of ‘singers’ joining the ‘song’.

“The Toads are reacting as expected, Captain.” He said formally.

To be honest, Javier didn’t know who had this vicious idea of spreading Barking Toad pheromones over a single concentrated area, but he approved it with all his two hearts.

Because now, you had the equivalent of a small army of Greater and Lesser Barking Toads, the most dreaded animals of Catachan, all converging on the zone the Mechanicus ordnance had saturated with pheromones.

Understandably, all the fauna of the valley tried to flee this unanticipated migration, understanding what was to come.

One single Great Barking Toad could liquefy anything within a one-kilometre radius, and there were now hundreds, maybe thousands converging on a single location.

“I am taking cover in a cave nearby.” The place had most likely a drake or something equally nasty hiding in it, but it was better to ensure one more layer of protection, even if according to Mechanicus cogitators, he should be well outside the blast zone. “I recommend sending the second torpedo in ten seconds.”

“Recommendation sent...and accepted. Good luck, brother.”

“Who needs luck when the toads are providing a natural Exterminatus?”

Javier’s Power Sword was plunged into the neck of a Mountain Drake of a Catachan when the entire world became white behind him.

**Catachan System**

**High Orbit over Catachan**

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Pax Imperium***

**5.504.313M35**

**Adjutant-Colonel Bellona**

“Ha! Ha! It worked! It worked!”

The Mechanicus Archmagos on her screen bowed.

“It is as you said, Adjutant-Colonel. The unconventional attack has resulted in a level of destruction that is not unlike one generated by decades of war, or by the glorious ordnance of the Exterminatus.”

“Radius?” she asked. Professionalism came before gleeful satisfaction.

“The auspexes estimate an imperfect circle of eight kilometres of radius. The mountains on the north and the south of the valley have attenuated the effects of the blast in these two cardinal directions.”

“Excellent! The variant ‘Toad’ has proven extremely effective! Praise the Webmistress!”

“I still recommend to execute it two more times, Adjutant-Colonel.”

“Really?”

“It is probable we missed quite a few Barking Toads of the Devil’s Den valley the first time. And we have produced six BX-T torpedoes in the last few days. A surfeit of prudence will not be a hindrance to the Chosen of the Omnissiah’s plans.”

Bellona thought about the idea for several seconds, concerted with two of her sisters, and decided the point may be overly cautious, but it wasn’t wrong.

“You have my permission to proceed, Archmagos. I give you four more minutes to deploy the pheromones for two more ‘Toad-blasts’, as the Jungle Fighters have already nicknamed them.”

The baby Ogryns were certainly as strong physically as they lacked originality in their naming conventions.

“I leave you to your duties, Archmagos. On my side, I am going to be very busy with Chapter Master Yarhibol and General Schwarz coordinating the first wave. We have our landing zone, and we deploy in twenty minutes!”

“You will have-“

At first, Bellona thought the representative of the Tech-Priests had a problem with his hololithic imagery, for he seemed to have frozen.

But no, everything was working fine on both hands.

So why-

“Adjutant-Colonel,” the red-robed cogboy told her, and his voice was shaken. “We are detecting a lot of energy signatures on Catachan that weren’t here before.”

“By a lot, you mean a few dozens?”

“Three, not four thousand, and they are rising...some are generating more energy than Theta-pattern Imperial cities?”

Bellona froze.

“What?”

**Beyond the last star of the Eastern Fringe – the Galactic Void**

It seemed the Prey’s resourcefulness shown during the battle against the ancient asset was the norm, not an exception.

It was cunning, the Hive Mind acknowledged.

The toxic amphibian lifeforms of the pantry-world had been a source of interest for eventual assimilation. The toxicity of the explosion obviously caused a loss of precious biomass, but the affected zone did not stay dangerous for long, and the effect the amphibians had on the rest of the untouched biomass were incredibly useful.

The prey had realised that, and used it to destroy the unfavourable environment where it would endure significant losses before facing directly the Hive Mind.

Guessing the strategy of the Prey directing the will of the meat-assets did not require a lot of forethought.

What it had done once, it could do several times. The limits of such a brutal yet effective strategy were the number of amphibians nearby and the supply of projectiles the fleet in orbit had at its disposal.

The Hive Mind arrived rapidly to the conclusion that there was an unacceptable risk the synapse unit and the other assets would be annihilated long before this unplanned bombardment ceased.

This was extremely inconvenient.

Nothing was learned of the tactics of the Prey that way, and the goal of inflicting significant losses to the Golden Prey’s assets was out of reach since the lesser organisms would not deploy somewhere the Hive Mind’s local assets could strike at them.

The bombardment had to stop.

This was beyond the capabilities of the Hive Mind, but the gestalt-construct linked to the pantry-world was not so limited.

It carried a high amount of risk. The gestalt-construct had a Guardian. Though it had slept for longer than the first synapse unit survived on the pantry-world, the Relay-Moon could not calculate precisely how much agitation would result in the Guardian’s awakening.

The Hive Mind weighed the advantages and the drawbacks coldly and hungrily.

The decision was made.

The fleet above the pantry-world had to be disorganised.

The gestalt-construct had to be pushed to activate all its anti-orbital defences.

It would be imperfect, for the Hive Mind wouldn’t have control of them.

But perfect solutions, with the limited resources the Hive Mind had at its disposal on this world, were not feasible at all.

**Catachan System**

**High Orbit over Catachan**

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Pax Imperium***

**5.504.313M35**

**Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto**

“By the Golden Throne! What are those things?”

The satellites of the cogboys had been unusually focused on the tumulus which had been at some point a human Redoubt – it had been almost invisible as the vegetation had swallowed it whole, but now that the Toads had sterilized everything, the relief was revealed to everyone.

It wasn’t something she had a lot of seconds to marvel at.

Why?

Well, it gave everyone a prime view of the giant flower which was digging itself out of the earth.

It was a gigantic thing: easily the size of an entire Hive hab-block.

It had long blue roots and when the entire process was over, a giant flower of pink and green opened as if to greet the sun of the Catachan System. In a recess of mind, the thought came it looked a lot like the ‘Heliosa’ some artists of Hive Athena had commissioned in attempts to impress Lady Weaver.

Of course, normal flowers didn’t generate such tremendous energies. Nor they did provoke seismic anomalies and plenty of other extremely worrying signs.

“Raise the shields,” Fujiko ordered.

“Admiral?”

“Full power to the Void Shields!” she barked imperiously. “I don’t know what form it will take, but this is a reaction to our attack! The fleet is to pour all the power you can into the Void Shields, defensive measures are to be engaged! Our priority is to defend the transports!”

One by one, the Captains obeyed. Some of them clearly took their time, and it brought an expression of disgust on her face.

Lax. Despite her warnings, many officers had been lax and overconfident, certain this was an easy mission that couldn’t possibly in any way threaten their ships and crews as long as the quarantine procedures were properly followed.

“Enemy fire! Enemy fire coming from the giant flowers! Ionisation...God-Emperor, those are giant plasma batteries in all but name!”

And in stationary high orbit with only minimal warning time, her fleet couldn’t possibly evade.

The delay of reaction was too short, and the same was true of the distance of engagement.

Explosions began to lit the atmosphere of the Death World.

“Six hits! Shields to ninety-seven percent, Admiral!”

There were many sounds of relief.

Fujiko didn’t share in the slightest this emotion. Three percent for a Battlecruiser of the Mars-class was largely above *thirty percent* for a Destroyer.

And as the thousands of signatures representing hostile flowers clearly indicated, enemy fire had way more than six shots. So-

“Critical damage on the Warrior-class *Red Rider*!”

Plenty of new officers had been given command of the new Destroyers recently completed by the Nyxian shipyards. Fujiko didn’t know if this one had been incompetent or had yet to train his crew to competent standards, but he paid for it, as his Void Shields had clearly not been raised in time.

And the Navy was going to lose the Destroyer. Already it was ravaged by explosions, and there were escape pods pouring out of several sections.

Fujiko winced, before checking on the rest of the fleet. So far at least, no transports had been destroyed. This was the good news. The bad news was that some had shields at twenty percent after this onslaught.

Her lips tightened.

It was said no plan survived contact with the enemy, and once again the old military saying had proved true.

The Rear-Admiral breathed out, and then punched a button.

A second later, the arachnid’s head she wanted to see appeared on her command display.

“Adjutant-Colonel Bellona. My fleet can’t endure the kind of orbital fire we’ve just been targeted by for long. If the enemy was human or some other technological-advanced xenos, I would suggest we destroy the anti-orbital batteries one by one. But here they are far too many of them, and if we destroy them, I feat the enemy will grow new ones anyway.”

The action dictated by the events was simple. That didn’t mean it wasn’t going to leave an atrocious taste in her mouth, because she knew very well how many people were going to die from it.

“I suggest you deploy all the forces at your disposal on Catachan immediately. My fleet will try to neutralise all the anti-orbital flowers while you make your descent, but after that we will have to leave this exposed position. We will try to provide you as much reconnaissance and supply capacity as feasible, of course, but I’m afraid the original plan has just been scrapped.”

To her relief, the Adjutant-Spider didn’t scream or show any kind of displeasure. The behaviour, as much as the frenetic moves of Lady Weaver’s arachnid lieutenant betrayed, did indicate the confidence of Bellona had been shaken.

“I agree totally with your conclusions, Admiral.” The golden spider made a very human-like nod. “But you can’t make orbital strikes on the giant flower of Devil’s Den. It’s right in the middle of the landing zone. Our Space Marines and the special units will have to neutralise it the hard way.”

And if the enemy had anticipated their reaction, it was going to be a nightmare to do so.

“I will deploy with the second wave myself, Admiral. If we don’t see each other again, I suppose I can tell you I will regret the tea ceremonies. May the blessings of the Webmistress be upon us all!”

“And I will pray the God-Emperor for your survival and victory, Adjutant-Colonel. You look like you are going to need it.”

**Catachan**

**‘Heliosa Flower’ – anti-orbital Plasma Battery of Catachan**

**5.506.313M35**

**Captain Hekamiah**

Hekamiah didn’t know what the most infuriating part of the affair was.

That he had spent several hours firing everything he could at a giant flower?

That said flower had literally endured the assault without bothering doing anything but spraying his forces with some acid-loaded spores?

Or was it that the whole giant thing had been neutralised by a few Ambulls burrowing under it under the command of an Adjutant-Spider?

“This is Agent Renegade,” the giant arachnid pointed one of her armoured legs at a no-less gigantic Catachan Ant. Unlike several the Lamenter Space Marines had seen so far, this one was not golden at all. “The information she brought us was critical to stop the fire of this Heliosa Flower.”

“How?” the Captain asked.

“It’s rather simple, you see,” the servant of Lady Weaver said in a somewhat smug tone. “The main tube is regenerating too rapidly to be damaged permanently, but there’s a womb solidly protected in the depths, and that’s where the Heliosa Flower is taking commands from. Thanks to Agent Renegade, we were able to jam the orders originating from the World Spirit, and replace it by a ‘cease fire’ of our own!”

“This is impressive. And can you give it other orders?”

“Ah, no,” the agitation of the Adjutant-Spider could have been embarrassment, though perhaps he was looking for things that didn’t exist. “We’re really learning as it is?”

There was a sound akin to a mass of rocks all released from a rock all at once, and about half a kilometre away on his left, a vast section of ground collapsed, and a huge arachnid column poured out.

“Ah, here comes our new sisters, who recognised the truth of Adjutant-Captain Kali’s words! It is better to serve the Webmistress today than stay in the darkness forever! Am I right Agent Renegade?”

Hekamiah didn’t speak ant-dialect, and the clicking of the Catachan insect made him glad he didn’t.

“Per the sake of my curiosity, what kind of boons did your ‘Renegade’ defector gain upon swearing you allegiance?”

“Oh, nothing too expensive,” the arachnid answered as more and more of her brethren arrived and the Thunderhawks returned to land more Space Marines on Catachan. “She wants to guard the Heliosa Flower to make sure we don’t abuse the power of the planet for ill-conceived reasons. And once we leave, Agent Renegade wants to rule over an Ant Hive of the Webmistress!”

That sounded like very big concessions to the Lamenters Captain, but it was something for Lady Weaver to judge not him.

“Agent Renegade has brought excellent arguments to the negotiation table,” the golden spider continued as if trying to dissipate her doubts. “For now, she is the only member of an insect caste spread across Catachan who has taken the sacred duty of remembering and feeding the Heliosa Flowers. This makes her contribution invaluable if we are one day to harvest the boons of these natural anti-orbital batteries!”

What? No, Hekamiah must have misheard the last part-

“Imagine it, Captain!” The Adjutant-Spider continued enthusiastically, confirming his worst fears and proving that no, it had not been him a hallucination of his. “No need to protect the Agri-Worlds of the Imperium with enormous and cumbersome silos! We just place a few colonies of Catachan ants, supervised by your humble Adjutant-servant here, and the flowers are lying in wait, enjoying the sun and the water, until the right moment comes. Just imagine the extraordinary possibility it offers, Captain!”

Oh, Hekamiah could see the possibilities it offered, all right.

The first salvoes o the ‘Heliosa flowers’ had been more than sufficient to kill two Destroyers, damage several more warships, and strategically, to force the Imperial Squadron to leave high orbit. It had been that or facing a relentless amount of orbital fire which simply couldn’t be stopped.

Worse, when they were closed, the flowers had a petal that protected the ‘plasma generator’ so well that it could stop Thunderhawk guns and other aerial bombardment. Nothing but the fire of capital warships had been able to destroy them, and their roots had an absurd rate of regeneration.

The thought of this system of defence becoming a rule and not an exception across the galaxy...

Hekamiah shuddered.

Space Marines didn’t know fear, he repeated to himself.

They didn’t experience fear.

What he was feeling...what just extreme concern, and the ugly certainty that some things had forever changed today.

**Imperial Landing Zone**

**5.507.313M35**

**Sister Kyra**

There were so many disturbing things about Catachan that Kyra begged her head to not think about it too much, lest she go insane prematurely.

To begin with, how was it possible that grass was already covering the Landing Zone?

The area had received a Toad-made Exterminatus several hours ago!

There should be nothing growing there at all!

You know, aside from the starscraper-sized flower behind them.

A flower which also happened to have anti-voidship capabilities, shoot plasma, and somehow, the Adjutant-Spiders had scrambled the control the planet had over it.

This was...Kyra was going to need minutes to be used to *that*.

At least her orders were simple.

She was to protect Adjutant-Colonel Bellona, with her life, if needed to be.

That the Swarm was spreading seeds of Nyxian fruit trees and flowers as an ‘offering’ for Catachan over the entirety of the Landing Zone was, fortunately, not her problem.

That the Catachan guardsmen who had just arrived to reinforce them were not equipped with any kind of advanced armour was, you guess it, not her problem.

“Ah, General Sharp! You are right on time!”

“Adjutant-Colonel,” like all of his men and women, the General was making the nickname ‘Baby Ogryn’ a reality for looks, muscles, and plenty of other things. “No one said it out loud, but I suppose we have the Tyranids to thank for the change of the plan?”

“Indeed,” the Adjutant-Spider grumbled. “I seem to have underestimated the influence they held over the planet’s defences. Though to my regret, I didn’t imagine Catachan had weapons like that to deploy in the first place! None of the reports mentioned something like that!”

The Catachan officer shrugged.

“We saw some flowers a fraction of this size taking down Drakebats to eat them, but in all history, if one of our Jungle Fighters saw one of the anti-orbital flowers emerge, he didn’t manage to spread the word out before being devoured.”

Now that they were all rushing towards one of the rare structures the Mechanicus had been able to send them, Kyra realised how young General Sharp truly was. In fact, all the Catachan soldiers here looked way younger than the ones that had been acting as trainers or elite forces in the Nyx Sector.

“I can’t say I enjoy hearing this after being so surprised by these ‘Heliosa Flowers’,” Bellona said bluntly. “And it is playing hell with some of my contingencies. Before the first shot was fired, it was agreed that we would ask for more Jungle Fighters from other Catachan Redoubts if the Tyranids threw some unforeseen threats at this army. Now I am told this is impossible.”

“The other Generals have far bigger problem than Hell Garden,” Sharp confirmed. “I learned from the messages relayed by the Pax Imperium that an immense army of Catachan Ants is besieging the Wall Redoubt. They are holding, but they certainly can’t send several regiments your way. And given the use Lady Weaver has for the ants-“

“It is certainly an attempt to make us spread our forces too thinly,” Bellona finished. “The Tyranids wants us to force to react to every distraction they send to the other redoubts.”

“Exactly,” the Catachan General told the Adjutant-Colonel. “And an airlift is the best solution to bring thousands of our Jungle Fighters in a timely manner without risking catastrophic casualties. As long as the anti-orbital flowers won’t have calmed down, this will be an incredibly risky affair.”

No one around chose to comment that the skies were on fire, and that countless aircraft were in the air expending missiles and shells to make sure the Landing Zone was relatively safe.

“If it is the best we will have, then we will have to win with it,” Bellona spoke philosophically as they entered the newly built command centre and went to surround the hololithic device the cogboys had just switched on. “Thank you, Magos. The situation is not too bad for now. I wish we could have cleared more parts of the Catachan jungles to increase our pace of advance, but we were still able to land most of the forces assigned to Hell Garden a mere twenty-two kilometres away from the Crater, where we think the Tyranids have built their principal base.”

“Twenty-two kilometres on Catachan is not the same thing as twenty-two kilometres from the world you come from,” the General warned the Adjutant-Colonel.

“I believe I have been severely corrected on my optimism, yes. But it is still twenty-two kilometres. This is a very slim defensive depth. If you were the enemy commander, would you have left us land without trying a vigorous counterattack, General?”

“No. I would have tried to push you further away. And my artillery would already have placed your Landing Zone under continuous bombardment from my heavy guns.” The grim-faced officer expression became even more severe. “You think the Tyranids don’t have enough artillery to bring to the party?”

“Or the guns weren’t ready and they are preparing them as we speak,” Bellona answered, proving that yes, her optimism had been definitely curbed by the recent surprises. “In either case, it is vital we push eastwards as fast as possible. Our new sisters are securing the flanks, slaying all the snakes and other troublemakers they find. But it is from the east the Tyranids will come, the geography of Devil’s Den Valley does not authorise the fancy tactics of other battlefields. And if they want to bleed us, they have a perfect natural obstacle four kilometres away from where we are.”

“Ah yes,” another Catachan officer grimaced. “The Acherax River.”

**Eastern bank of the Acherax River**

**5.518.313M35**

**Jungle Fighter Veteran Jan ‘Gator’ Murk**

“HA! HA! HA! I killed two Swamp Mambas! We’ve run into Blood Wasps the size of Bombers! I eviscerated a tank-sized Grox! And it is just one hour past dawn! I love my job!”

“You’re all damn insane, crazy Catachan bastards!”

Jan glanced at his brother, who shrugged. The man in Power Armour was a Nyxian, and as everyone knew, the Nyxians had a need to feel a bit protected by their Living Saint. They weren’t as touch as the Jungle Fighters.

“We have more jumping lizards coming this way, and the plants are trying to grow more Spitting Cactus!”

“Oh, do they?” Jan bared his teeth. “How unfortunate...for them. GRENADES!”

The explosions promptly devastated the jungles, as the artillery resumed the bombardment.

Flamers roared, and the new Plasma Guns killed the beasts as fast as they came.

“Do our reinforcements want an invitation? We’re holding this beachhead since yesterday!”

“The army is walking as fast as a Spinebore Leech when removed from its Spore Tree!”

“More killing men! Less talking!”

“Aye, Captain!” Jan stopped using the Plasma Gun – poor thing needed a few minutes of cooling anyway – and went on to use Devil’s Claw to kill a few more snakes.

“Spiders are bringing more ammunition boxes for us!”

A cheer went through many throats. As much as their non-Catachan ‘partners’ were slow and cumbersome, the way their spiders had ‘allied’ with the local arachnids was something no one was going to argue against anymore.

Not when their silk-made bridge was the very reason all the regiment had been able to secure the beachhead on the other side of the river with only two wounded.

“We can always find a use for more shells, aren’t we?”

“Demolition Charges, one kilometre, all ready!”

“Send them back to the Green Hell!”

BOOOM!

Jan had to admit, it was a nice fire show, and it cut down plenty of Strangleplants. They would see further away and-

“WAAAAGGGGHHHH!”

“Oh, great,” the Jungle Fighter plenty of his brothers loved to call Gator because he had tripped on a huge saurian and had to kill it instead of the shark he wanted to be tattooed for. “We were only missing the brutes for the party to be entertaining!”

“They’re coming by the river!”

Of course they did.

“Must I do everything myself?” the Captain roared. “Three platoons of Plasma Weapons with me! And if you dare letting a greenskin get you, I will bring you back from the dead myself and then strangle you personally!”

Jan Murk gave a look on the right, and sure enough, there were three big rafts crawling with greenskins descending the Acherax River.

“WAAAGGGHHH!”

“Where did they come from, those ones? There hasn’t been an invasion in a long while.”

“Survivors of an invasion before our time, no? I mean, look at them, Gator! They aren’t exactly looking like the greenskins the other guardsmen are telling tales about.”

It was true that the Orks there were true primitives. They had even tried to imitate their tattoos and the camouflage paint of the Jungle Fighters!

Which proved their idiocy, of course, since painting yourself black and green on a freaking big river was not going to be of any help.

Bone clubs, fancy trinkets, helmets made of the skulls of Catachan beasts, and several were riding swimming beats along their rafts.

These Orks had survived Catachan...until them.

“FIRE! CATACHAN IS OURS!”

“WAAAAAGGGHHH!”

The shells began to impact the dams, and the Barracudas reared their ugly heads, joining the bloodbath.

The Acherax River began to turn red, again, and the arrows of the Orks fell too short to be more worth than a good laugh or two.

“Come on, it’s too easy!”

“Gator, I bet I can kill twenty more greenskins than you! Two rations of Amasec!”

“Prepare to lose them! Me, I say I will have-“

“TYRANIDS! TYRANIDS INCOMING!”

They came out of the jungle with barely ten seconds of warning.

And all eyes widened as everything in their way died.

It was no herd or mindless formation.

Instead, what came over them was a true army.

The monsters were divided into three ‘waves’, and their chitinous carapaces were a dark green, quite unlike the black-red beasts they had been told to be wary about. The bellies, legs, claws and pincers were white, though.

Their natural weapons were so big you knew instinctively you didn’t want them to arrive at close-quarters and play the Devil’s Dance.

“FIRE! TAKE YOUR PLASMA GUNS AGAIN AND FIRE WITH EVERYTHING YOU HAVE!”

The artillery thunderously echoed the order, and shells rained down.

The blue streaks of energy slammed into the now-revealed enemy.

“Now that’s going to teach them a lesson they won’t forget! HA!”

“They aren’t dying! They are taking the punishment!”

“WHAT?”

This was just-

They were pouring several companies worth of firepower here! And there was an Artillery Regiment on the Landing Zone specially assigned to support them!

Everything died, up to Devils and Giant Vein Worms!

“FIRE! FIRE EVERYTHING YOU HAVE!”

This was a shield of dark green and white.

This was a storm of unrelenting violence, and acid sprays began to bombard their defences. Many Jungle Fighters screamed in agony and were unable to continue firing.

The Artillery hammered them.

Oh, God-Emperor, it was magnificent.

And the Tyranids just kept coming, their bodies resisting something that would have buried trenches and destroyed entire companies on another world.

Suddenly, Jan Murk and every Catachan Jungle Fighter understood why the High Command had been so afraid of Tyranids they were ready to come to Catachan and deal with the problem.

“USE THE FLAMERS, AND READY YOUR DEVIL’S FANGS! THEY WANT TO FEAST UPON US! THEY WILL LEARN WHY WE ARE NAMED JUNGLE FIGHTERS!”

“THE ONE WHO HAS NOT SLAIN TEN SNAKES BEFORE HE IS TENTH IS A COWARD!”

“WWAAAAAAAAGGHHHH!”

The Tyranids screamed, and the sound seemed to swallow everything else.

“IF IT WALKS, WE CAN KILL IT!”

And now was the time to make sure the boast stayed truth.

**Acherax Beachhead**

**5.519.313M35**

**Captain Lecabel**

Battle-brothers of the Lamenters were not prone to hating something or someone easily.

Captain Lecabel was really beginning to hate the Tyranids and Catachan. At the moment, the verdict was still out if he hated the planet more than the xenos, or the reverse.

“And now it is raining, as if things couldn’t get worse.” Predictably, the words were said by killing a blue-tattooed greenskin while his Bolter was firing at the green-white Tyranids.

Unfortunately and frustratingly, the projectiles managed to down only a single Hormagaunt, while the other xenos survived.

“KILL THE DEVOURER! FOR THOSE WE CHERISH!”

It was a very good thing he had a new Power Katana in his hands. Several of his battle-brothers had already seen their Chainswords’ teeth break against the diamond-hard exoskeleton of the Tyranids.

“Tough bastards,” a Chaplain of the Raptors who had decided to join them in the relief of the Catachan soldiers, “and those are only the infantry units we saw in the final phases of the Battle of Macragge. Thank the Golden Throne they don’t have Carnifexes here!”

Lecabel was too busy decapitating Hormagaunt after Hormagaunt, and then launching the third into the river, where predictably greenskins and the local fauna proceeded to rip it apart.

This was one of the lessons of Catachan: there was always something ready to eat you, from the flowers to the apex predators.

His fists painted in gold holding the artisanal-made weapon of the *Masamune*, the Captains of the Lamenters searched with his eyes new enemies.

He didn’t found them, at least when it came to the Tyranids.

The Termagant survivors were fleeing through the trees as far as they could now that their last assault has been repelled.

“Cunning xenos,” he voiced out loud, before emptying his last Bolter shots on a few Ork heads. “They struck, they bled us, they forced us to lose time, and now that their purpose is fulfilled, they fade back into the Green Hell.”

“They used a two headed-snake formation,” one of the Catachan fighters who was still standing spat, before stabbing ferociously several Tyranid corpses. “I think their main goal was to destroy the bridge all along.”

If so, the good news was they had failed. The silk of the spider-made artwork had suffered some damage, clearly, but the spiders the Adjutants had promptly called ‘Silk Architects allies’ were already at work repairing the damage.

And they were working fast.

These arachnids were way smaller than the titanic specimens of Hellspiders and other representatives that had come by the order of the Shield of Angels, but they were only a head below a non-Catachan guardsman in height.

No one would have called these spiders beautiful: their leg joints were a vivid orange, and the big abdomens had their black hair striped with a fluorescent green.

But only a fool would deny their usefulness when it came to logistics: without them, the Imperial columns wouldn’t have been able to reach the Acherax River in large numbers.

Something that may or may not have been a good thing, as the hundreds of corpses of the Catachan Jungle Fighters spread everywhere indicated.

“Behemoth was all about all-offense,” he told both for his battle-brothers and the other veterans of this hard-fought skirmish. “But the colours of the Tyranids’ carapace do not belong to Behemoth. Is it possible we are fighting a Tyranid sub-species bred to fight on Death Worlds?”

“I certainly hope not,” one battle-brother of the Brothers of the Red replied. “Because if it is the case, we are going to take high casualties everywhere before cornering them in their lair...if they have a single one.”

“I can’t deny the theoretical is sound, Captain.” The Chaplain spoke. “They sprung without warning, kept busy our advance guard and our rear-guard, and then sent an overwhelming force against the bridge while we were still reeling from the assault.”

The rain increased in potency with each word.

Soon, it was not ‘heavy rain’ anymore, it was a deluge.

“This whole disaster has at least made clear we need more bridges.” He finally commented while gritting his teeth.

“And we have full confirmation the Tyranids are here, waiting for us in considerable numbers.”

“Yes,” Lecabel waited for a few seconds. “Do you think my request for a mass incendiary bombardment will be approved at last?”

“I don’t know, I admit...we may need for this rain to stop. And I would advise for us to cross the bridge, brother. Rivers like this one have an unpleasant frequency to flood on Jungle Worlds, and Catachan is already hellish as it is.”

“True.” The next words felt like acid on his mouth, and it seemed the humidity was draining his strength and his will. “Pursuit would be futile. We can’t see forty metres away now.”

And then there were shrieking alarms resonating and the Catachan reinforcements which had followed them to the Acherax River cursing loudly.

“Angelic wings guide us, what now?”

“Lord Captain!” A local Colonel ran and saluted quickly. “It seems that all this agitation in Devil’s Den has riled up some Drakebats. We would appreciate some anti-aerial support to shoot them down.”

The day couldn’t get any better, could it?

Lecabel had killed a few of these enormous winged reptiles nesting in the upper canopy of Catachan’s jungles. And yes, they were as big as Ogryns, if not more. These were ambush predators, but when they were too many in a single area, they definitely could prove a grave threat for anyone.

“How much is ‘some’?”

Something that could have been described as amusement flashed on the Colonel’s fight.

“Thousands, at least, Lord Captain, and they come from the north, divided into two spearheads. One is going to fly over the Acherax, and the other is going for-“

“The Landing Zone,” Lecabel sighed after finishing the sentence.

This was official: he really hated Catachan.

**Catachan**

**‘Heliosa Flower’ – anti-orbital Plasma Battery of Catachan**

**5.520.313M35**

**Tempestus Scion Rijah**

A simple garrison mission, they said.

This will be as easy as gardening, they said.

Right now, discipline punishment, Rijah wanted to strangle the officers who had dared utter such stupidities.

Yeah, it was gardening.

Gardening with carnivorous plants, that was!

All around the so-called ‘Heliosa Battery’, for some reason that only this eternally-cursed planet knew, there were a multitude of carnivorous trees and flowers trying to grow from the ashes of the ‘Toad Exterminatus’!

And guess which sustenance these death flowers and trees had in mind?

“I hate Catachan!” Rijah snarled, unknowingly repeating what thousands of mouths had already said out loud in the last twenty-four hours.

“Less complaints, more cutting!” a grizzled Catachan veteran ordered. “Is it what the finest of the Imperium can do? My grandmother is using these flowers for her cooking in her old age!”

“His grandmother,” someone muttered on a secure vox-frequency, “likely can beat us in an arm wrestling contest...”

“And they don’t even have proper armour...”

This was the biggest difference and an easy way to make a difference between who was born in this Hell and who wasn’t, Rijah had to admit.

Of course, like everyone else, the thirty-years-old Tempestus Scion had been extensively repeated at every point of the pre-battle process that if they thought imitating the Jungle Fighters was a good idea, they’d better think again.

The air of Catachan could support life; that much was evident to any person with a brain.

But it was an air so filled with toxins that you had to be a life-form born on Catachan to not die in the next twenty-four hours as your lungs and your breathing system progressively – or abruptly – succumbed to the poisonous spores and everything else generated by the vegetation.

How bad was it?

Well, the Catachan Warriors who had left to serve in the Imperial Guard and were now back home for Hell Garden had been forced to don sealed armours too, because their immunity to the toxins wasn’t sufficient anymore.

Damn this planet.

Damn the gardening.

Rijah slashed and killed more young Venus Mantraps.

Damn these flowers. The Catachan men said that if you gave it the time to grow, the biggest Mantraps could swallow a tank.

Of course, neither the Jungle Fighters nor the rest of the Catachan flora generally gave these monstrous flowers the time to grow that large-

“I hate gardening!” One of his partners told him via the vox. “And I hate this rain.”

“It’s not even a rain anymore, it’s an unending flooding. Rumours say the command camp of the Mechanicus had to be placed in sort of an Ordinatus chassis to make sure it didn’t drown.”

“This is a damn green hell, that’s what it is. I hope that when the signal to withdraw back to orbit will be given, order will come to spread a ‘Toad Exterminatus’ to the entire planet.”

“Well, it can’t get worse-“

“Shut up!” Ten different voices immediately barked on the same frequency.

It could always get worse on Catachan.

The last days had proven that beyond doubt, from the moment this titanic flower dug itself outside the ground, to the mass attack of the Catachan Devils a few hours ago. You fought, you rested when it was your turn out of the line, you ate what rations were available, and you returned to the frontline, wherever it happened to be.

And that was often frighteningly close to wherever you slept.

“The flood is decreasing in intensity.”

“I think I’m beginning to see a ray of sun!”

It was like a switch had been turned off, and the downpour ceased within thirty seconds.

According to the information provided by his helmet, the temperature change was brutal, and humidity levels made him wonder how the hell the Catachan madmen nearby weren’t sweating to death.

“There are still clouds to the north, but I suppose-“

“These are no clouds! THIS IS NOT A CLOUD! CALL THE ADJUTANT-SPIDER! TELL HER WE NEED TO ACTIVATE ALL ANTI-AIR DEFENCES NOW!”

“HYPER-AUSPEXES SAY THERE ARE TEN OF THOUSANDS OF DRAKEBATS! AND MORE ARE COMING FROM THE JUNGLE NORTH OF THE MOUNTAINS!”

Catachan was up to kill them. Catachan delighted in killing them.

Rijah had known it in the first hour since had step foot on this never-cursed-enough Death World, and here came on more proof.

Predictably, one of the big arachnids stormed out of the tunnels, surrounded by an entire cohort of smaller ones.

“For the record, I am authorising Agent Renegade to implement Contingency Solar!”

“Are you sure?” a black-armoured Space Marine seemed to appear out of nowhere. “I seem to remember you telling the Lamenters you didn’t have a lot of control over the command centre of the flower...”

“If you see another solution, I’m eager to hear it!” the armoured spider replied peevishly to the Angel of the Emperor. “There are more Drakebats coming than what our Hydra guns have in store for today! Do you want to have a functional Landing Zone for the next day?”

To this, the Space Marine had clearly no answer, or at least none he was willing to give in presence of Tempestus Scions and Catachan Jungle Fighters.

“Agent Renegade has authorisation to proceed, per the authority granted to me by my beloved sister Bellona. Open the petals. Transmit coordinates.”

All the while the cloud grew closer...of course as it grew near, the Imperial guns shouted their fury for everyone to hear.

And they claimed many, many beasts, making sure a rain of carcasses dropped over the jungle’s canopy.

But there were too many of the flying reptiles.

It was like an army was on the march, except this one was born to fly, and for countless worlds, it was more apex predators than they ever would see in their entire lives.

And then it was like a blue-coloured dawn came.

There was a flash. A beacon was lit.

It was nothing but the prelude to a pyre which could consume Jungle and Sky alike.

“Unleash the firepower of this fully functional Heliosa Battery, Agent Renegade. FIRE!”

Rijah turned his head away, for it was like the guns of a Battleship had decided to fire up incredibly close to them.

“Oh, Golden Throne...”

There had been a gigantic cloud of Drakebats coming for them.

There were now two smaller ones, and they were separated by an enormous gap.

It might have to do with the cascade of blood and corpses falling all over Catachan, with countless predators fleeing the battle of the Landing Zone to feed ‘elsewhere’.

“Oh, Webmistress, we thank you for your blessings,” the Adjutant-Spider prayed loudly. “We are not worthy of your magnificence and your Administration wisdom.”

“There are still many Drakebats left,” the black-armoured Space Marine noted.

“Oh, I have not forgotten them!” The tone of the Adjutant-Spider remained quite metallic, but you could hear the smugness and the satisfaction from where Rijah stood. “FIRE AGAIN!”

**About one kilometre east of the Acherax River**

**5.522.313M35**

**General Vincent Sharp**

“Now *that* is going to be a problem.”

It was bad enough when it was a Jungle Fighter who said it.

When it was a living legend telling it to you, you knew you were in a world of hurt.

“I thought the men were joking when they told me the Tyranids had a diamond-tough exoskeleton.” General Jack ‘Death’ Schwarz spoke idly, ignoring how he had just carved bit by bit the green-white Hormagaunt to learn the secrets of its body.

“I’m sure everyone would have preferred a joke, General.” Vincent deferred to him, of course. Not only Schwarz had an enormous seniority above him, he had sailed across the stars to kill a lot of things that weren’t supposed to be slain by a single guardsman. “And that’s only half of the problem.”

“The cunning,” the black-armoured legend muttered. “We knew the Tyranids’ devouring intelligence was frighteningly intelligent, of course. Millions died in the Macragge System for the lesson to be hammered in our skulls. But this was always a sort of...force of nature. Behemoth was an elemental storm of destruction.”

“The battering ram which overwhelmed the guardsmen by raw ferocity and sheer numbers,” Sharp said after clearing his throat.

When reading the highly-classified reports from Nyx, there had always been the shadow of doubt that the officers had panicked and exaggerated the scale of the threat.

Now he knew for sure that they hadn’t.

“Yes. This Tyranid breed, however, is showing us a formidable array of skills and tactics in the jungles. And so far, it does so only using Hormagaunts and Termagaunts.”

“It is possible they only have the way to breed these two sub-species in significant numbers.”

Jack Schwarz snorted.

“I will be happy to divert you of your yearly pay if you’re willing to gamble it, Sharp! Tell me more about the tactics they employed.”

“First they launched the initial assault with a classical two-headed snake. Then they used the ‘Strangler-Mantrap’, the boys of the One Hundredth were decimated before reaching the Acherax. Several Colonels report we also have imitations of the Devil’s Due. And of course they’re trying the ‘Barking Toad Push’ as revenge for what we did by our opening bombardment.”

It pained him to admit it, but the Tyranids had proven far better than many of his regiments. The elite Jungle Fighters had handed them a few defeats, but the Tyranids were not stupid: every skirmish lost against a superior foe resulted in their retreat, and they went to attack far more vulnerable targets.

“In fact, the men are whispering that the tactics are quite similar-“

“To a Glutton Python?”

Vincent Sharp grimaced. Of course Death had noticed it, probably well before he did.

“Yes, General. Exactly like a Glutton Python.” He spat over the Tyranid corpse, right as rain once again reappeared over the Flamer-created clearing. “There’s also the incredible levels of aggression the valley is straining under. The Drakebats should never have tried to cross a mountain barrier to attack us, yet they did. And I’m willing to cut my hand that there shouldn’t have been a tribe of bone-crushing greenskins in the first place, either.”

Naturally, it had attracted others, and plenty of Ork spores had spread. More were undoubtedly born as they spoke, courtesy of the Flamers and the other incendiary ammunition being unable to burn everything that needed to be incinerated.

“Reinforcements are on their way. Thorn Redoubt committed fifty thousand, and we have twenty thousand more from my own Redoubt. I think we will get one hundred thousand from the others. The High Command acknowledges we can’t leave this threat to fortify here or anywhere on Catachan. But we’re taking an awful toll of casualties for so-far minor advances, and this is with something like seventy-five thousand big arachnids of all species protecting our flanks.”

This was, if anything, underestimating the contribution of the Adjutant-Spider commanders, since there were other ‘logistical spiders’ transporting night and day the food, water, ammunition, and the other vital stuff all the troops committed needed to stay alive one more hour.

For now, they were still able to advance.

But it was a slow and bloody offensive.

And as the ‘Drakebats Clouds’ had proven, it would take very little to change the half-success into a bloody disaster.

“The Tyranids fight like the Glutton Python.” Jack ‘Death’ Schwarz said coldly. “While I don’t describe to the theory they are limited to Hormagaunts and Termagaunts, it can’t be denied they must have some true limitations, otherwise we would be busy fighting for our very lives around the Landing Zone. The Tyranids want to devour us all; if they had the strength to crush us in one blow, they would have taken it by now.”

“They must have a reserve in or around the crater ready to be committed, but I agree with you.”

He didn’t add the ‘and?’ out loud, but his face must ask for it silently.

“We have been fumbling in the dark, trying to beat this...this Python at its own game. It can’t work. Plenty of our troops were not born on Catachan, and of those who are, many don’t have the time to acquire the skills, not in such short order. We need to stop that game while we have the strength. We are the Behemoth, both in artillery and other resources. It is time we act like it.”

“This is not going to be pretty.” Using the Jungle Fighters like a battering ram was going to leave a mountain of corpses, and while plenty would be Tyranids or reptiles, many would belong to Catachan warriors.

“I know. But with the Heliosa flowers returning underground for the most part and the Drakebats out of the way, I think we can afford a short orbital bombardment followed by an aerial-launched of incendiaries.”

“And then we attack.” Vincent nodded. “How long?”

“Two hours.” The General who had taken up the name of Death answered. “We’re pushing one more kilometre eastwards this time.”

**Imperial Landing Zone**

**5.549.313M35**

**Sister Kyra**

Kyra couldn’t ever remember be so tired, and the God-Emperor knew her Nyxian teachers had forced her to beyond her limits a year ago before accepting her oaths.

But this had been ‘beyond her limits’.

Now, on Catachan, you were so used to ignore them that the red line was kilometres behind you, assuming it wasn’t further than that.

She was exhausted.

They were all exhausted; on her way back to the giant mobile command post, the young Sororitas had seen her fair share of Catachan Jungle Fighters collapse in exhaustion.

And this was on the Landing Zone, a place where the danger levels were described as ‘tolerable’.

Outside of it, it was hell, pure hell.

“Adjutant-Colonel,” she saluted with a sloppiness that would have seen her smacked around by her old teachers. “The Chapter Master presents his respects, and say the final Tyranid counter-attack faded. They’ve left four hundred Hormagaunts and Termagaunts dead on the field before fading back into the jungle.”

“This is very good news,” Bellona affirmed, the armoured spider turning her head to watch her with most of her attention. “I’ve just finished speaking with my sisters; the positions behind him are as secure as they can possibly be. And the intensity of the flanking diversions is decreasing. For the last twenty-four hours, we’ve been able to consolidate and burn at an excellent pace. The eighteen-kilometres-long supply line is holding strong, and two more colonies of Alchemist Spider and Far-Seeing Widows have arrived to partake in the blessings of the Webmistress.”

The legs of the Adjutant-Spider trembled, clear sign that Her Celestial Highness’ servant was exhausted as she.

The enthusiasm was also mostly gone.

Eighteen of kilometres of advance were an impressive distance for an offensive on Catachan, but it had taken...fifteen or sixteen days, she was pretty sure this was fifteen, but it was late-

No. It had to be fifteen. But one more day or no, it didn’t count the bloody count of dead and wounded which were evacuated each night by Lander. Some arrived in time to the Hospital Ship in space, which along with the rest of the fleet now did its best to stay away from the Heliosa plasma anti-orbital fire.

Some even managed to recover and return, courtesy of Bacta, mechanical augmentation, and medicinal miracles.

Many didn’t.

“This campaign is a slaughterhouse.” Bellona remarked bluntly. “Theresa and Claire?”

“The Hospitallers say they are going to recover...” Kyra coughed. As exhausted as she was, she had definitely noticed there had been nothing said about *when* they would return to duty. In all likelihood, they may need some of the finicky procedures Nyxian clinics had developed to recover fully. “The ‘Tyranid Tenth Day Offensive’ failed in its objectives thanks to them.”

That the key objectives had been to eliminate all the Adjutant-Spiders was obvious to everyone.

But the sheer ferocity of this attack had been so bad that over forty Ambulls and ten Space Marines of the Lamenters had perished in ten minutes, and the arachnids had died in the low thousands.

The attack had been repelled, yes, but the Helspiders playing the role of bodyguards had had to be engaged in mass at close-quarters, and the Imperial counter-attack had to commit all its reserves to prevent both its officers and supply lines from being decapitated.

The Tyranid had seen a single weak point that they had not perceived, and this had been just a gigantic day of butchery.

Kyra shook her head and pushed the dark thoughts away. There would be time later to cry...assuming the army was going to survive said battle.

“The Jungle Fighters’ reinforcements are finally able to reach the front in significant numbers by the air bridge. Python’s strike has missed our throat. Adjutant-Colonel.”

“At the price of too many veteran soldiers and allies.” Bellona replied grimly. “I will have to demand twelve times the forgiveness of the Webmistress for everything.”

“It is not your fault, Adjutant-Colonel. And save the God-Emperor and Her Celestial Highness, nobody could have done a far better job!”

“I don’t share your optimism, Kyra...but I suppose I will wait for the Webmistress to judge me when I kneel in front of her and beg for her forgiveness. I was too arrogant, too confident in my own cleverness. I forgot that the Tyranids were clever too.”

Something was mumbled about ‘asymmetrical warfare’ and ‘Tyranid soup’ for a few seconds.

Kyra chose to stay silent. The Adjutant-Spider had done her utmost, as had every man and woman of the expedition. Her Celestial Highness would forgive her; that was never in doubt. The question was how long Bellona would need to forgive herself.

“I can listen to their psychic hunger. It is very different from Behemoth. They still want to devour us, yes, but here, it is something leashed, patient. The predator mentality is chained, ordered to serve a far greater and different purpose.”

Despite everything she had seen and fought in the last days, Kyra shivered. Fortunately, her Power Armour – which had lost both colours and decorations in the last days – hid her reaction.

Yes, the Tyranids must have a greater strategic purpose for the diamond-tough creatures they spawned here than just garrisoning a tiny part of Catachan, and wasn’t it a horrible thought?

“But this will be something for my sisters waiting in the Nyx Sector to analyse later. I have regularly updated all my best theories and the Tyranid stratagems of this campaign. Whatever the Tyranids may think, I feel we have learned an immense quantity of information about them, far more than what they learned about us.”

“I pray Her Celestial Highness and the God-Emperor you are right, Adjutant-Colonel,” Kyra said while making the sign of Aquila.

“So I am,” the golden arachnid said as smaller insects did their best to repair the damage of her armour. “Whichever psychic creature is in command of this Python army, it fights very smartly with diminished resources, and every metre of ground we conquer is paid in blood.”

Bellona gave a silent command, and the hololithic displayed changed.

Instead of the entire Devil’s Den Valley, the images changed to show the ‘Devil’s Crater’, as everyone now called it.

“With our mortars now perfectly in range to bombard the approaches of the Crater,” the Adjutant-Colonel mused. “And our heavy artillery is now fed enough reconnaissance imagery to strike when and where we want.”

The Mechanicus-made device zoomed further, in order to focus on the left flank of Devil’s Crater.

“Unfortunately, the Tyranids have not grown any stupider in the last hours, and they have fortified around this big hill here. It makes sure we can’t achieve a successful flanking attack like they attempted themselves five days ago. This gives them an excellent redoubt of their own, with superior firing positions. As long as we can’t dislodge them, a direct assault towards the Crater can only end in disaster.”

“They must be burrowed deep, Adjutant-Colonel.” The Tyranids had had both the time and the motivation to fortify themselves in fifteen days.

“The Ambull probes report that they aren’t, surprisingly.”

“Then it is a trap,” Kyra replied without hesitation. “It always was a trap, with the Python Tyranids.”

“Yes, it is. This is why I am going to pulverise them with artillery first before a single Catachan Jungle Fighter launches the assault.”

“And the Space Marines?”

“They have taken too many losses, and we see the end of our Blue Bacta stockpile. Save the strike force of Chapter Master Yarhibol, I want them to prepare for whatever awaits us *inside* Devil’s Crater and beneath it.”

There was more grumbling and-

“I really hate Catachan, Webmistress be my witness.”

**Approaches of the ‘Devil’s Crater’**

**5.551.313M35**

**Colonel Wilson ‘Strike’ Rock**

The artillery thundered over and over, and with every hundred of shells, you could see the hills north and north-west of the crater get pulverised one by one.

“The spiders are really going big this morning,” one of his men chuckled while distributing Lho-sticks. “The men from Thorn Redoubt say there are smoked Tyranids everywhere.”

“Be careful,” Wilson told him.

“About what...Colonel?”

“The Lho-sticks,” he added, trying to not sigh. “The Nyxian Commissars don’t like seeing troopers have one.”

“Next you will tell us they don’t want us to have sex or enjoy the fine things of life, Colonel.” Plenty of his regiments’ longest-serving men and women laughed. Wilson didn’t. “Wait, you are serious?”

“I am.”

“Sweet Devil’s spawns, what is wrong with them? Fortunately there are separate chains of command...or I might begin to think we need to ‘lose’ a few of them in the Green Hell.”

“I wouldn’t advise it with *those* Commissars.” The Jungle Fighter Colonel tied once again his red bandana around his head, before emptying his metallic jug of Amasec. “They have survived fifteen days here, and with all the fighting they’ve done, they aren’t exactly Whiteshields.”

“Right, right, Colonel, we will be *on our best behaviour*.”

“I will believe it when I will see it, hard fists of the Sweat Redoubt.”

Laughter answered him, a hilarity which quickly decreased as a new column of spiders approached. ‘Silk Architects’, the non-Catachan named them, but the orange joints and the green back arachnids had long been known as ‘Threefold Tarantula’ by the regiments of the Jungle.

For all the news given by the High Command, there was something that put him ill-at-ease at the idea the spiders who tried to eat you if you tried to enter their territory were now carrying ammunition and food between the Landing Zone and the frontline.

There were plenty of rumours, though nobody seemed to know for sure why the Tarantulas had submitted so easily. Some in High Command said the bigger Adjutants had psychic powers which forced the Catachan species to obey no matter the order. Others were convinced the Tarantulas wanted to get off-world and settle somewhere else, and had negotiated hard with the newcomers to be given some sort of land prize when victory would be won.

“We haven’t sees the Tyranids in a few hours, I guess.”

“They’re like us, boys. The xenos are keeping their heads down as long as artillery pummels everything on the hills and around them. They will get us out of their trenches when they won’t be at risk of exploding immediately.”

And this wouldn’t be long now. The number of shells falling down per minute was decreasing, sure as the rain was coming soon to drown more of this part of the Green Hell.

Logistics were at a premium thanks to the arachnids and the cogboys, but nobody could ferry millions of shells every hour to sustain that kind of bombardment. And assuming you managed somehow to do it, you would still need to repair the damage of your barrels at some point.

“Alex, run; we have to warn the others. Signal is going to be given in ten to twelve minutes, and I want us to be the first there. The men of the Twenty-Seventh say Old Death himself has come to see the battlefield. If we can be the one to take the hill-“

It was then the ground shook under his feet. Hard.

Colonel Wilson ‘Strike’ Rock bared his teeth in a parody of smile.

“Who gambled here for an earthquake today? Nobody? Right, we have one here-“

“Colonel! I don’t think it is an earthquake! The hill! Something is destroying from the inside!”

Green Hell damn it...

“That must be one of those ‘Heliosa’ flowers.” A few curses went through his teeth in the next few seconds. “Okay. It appears Catachan didn’t like being bombarded with too much artillery.”

The roar was so powerful that the officer nicknamed ‘Strike’ sweated when he heard it.

It was something which easily defeated the thunder of the artillery and the screams of the Imperial Guard.

“Colonel...I don’t think it’s an earthquake...or a plasma-spitting flower...”

The first thing they could see was a giant claw.

Wilson had seen the old propaganda vids of the Titans. This limb could have served as one ‘arm’ for them.

It was dark green.

And when a second claw dug itself out of the hill, every Catachan warrior worth the name knew what the artillery bombardment had woken up.

“’Devil’s Den Valley...of course.”

“Colonel! That...I think I took too many Lho-sticks...”

“No, you didn’t.”

“This is impossible! The biggest Fiddler ever seen in the last millennium was forty-three metres long!”

“Yes, the biggest Fiddler ever seen by human eyes...but this one may have slept for far longer...and we forgot about it.”

The hill exploded. There was no other way to describe it.

Segmented sections of armoured chitin surged forwards.

Most of the Catachan Jungle Fighters fell silent.

What was there to say?

It was bigger than one of the fearsome Knights some legends of Catachan had fought with on long-distant Death Worlds.

It was one of the most feared symbols of Catachan.

It was a Titan woken from its slumber, and unquestionably the reason why there had been so few tunnels found in this direction.

It was a brutal killing machine, and the Lord of this Valley.

It was a titanic-sized Catachan Devil.

And they had mightily angered it.

**Imperial Landing Zone**

**5.551.313M35**

**Adjutant-Colonel Bellona**

“There are really days when besides the smile of the Webmistress, I wonder why I bother waking up...”

Complaining was, of course, definitely a defence mechanism to mask other feelings right now.

The Adjutant-Colonel could definitely feel the volcano-hot wrath of the monster which had just shattered so many of her plans.

Catachan Devil.

Weren’t they supposed to be somewhere thirty-metres long when fully grown?

The Jungle Fighters’ lore appeared very, very incorrect in this case.

A million calculus and thoughts played out in her head.

Along with a certainty.

Bellona couldn’t control this monster.

The Webmistress could have, of course.

But the Webmistress was not here, and Bellona hadn’t a tenth of her sheer brilliance and power.

It had already been difficult enough to command young ones; the species was naturally allergic to all forms of order and good administration.

This wasn’t a young Devil; it wasn’t even an extraordinary long-lived one.

It was the equivalent of Tyrannosaurus Rex for Chaos Titans; something above and beyond the most redoubtable specimens one usually encountered on a battlefield.

“Were the Tyranids aware of its presence and did they bait us into waking it up?”

In hindsight, the answer was particularly depressing.

The Ambulls hadn’t found the usual tunnels for a fortified position. The way the Hormagaunts had ceded ground in the last few hours. The relative scarcity of enemy artillery on the Crater’s flanks.

Yes, the enemy had baited her. And she had fallen for it.

“Adjutant-Colonel,” a Jungle Fighter of her command post grunted, his presence being made necessary as several Vipers had tried a sneak attack several minutes ago. “I recommend withdrawing the vanguard troops to the morning’s trenches.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, please!” Bellona reacted in disgust. “Do you want them to be caught into the open by *that*?”

There had been no model established to calculate how good the senses of centuries-old Catachan Devil were, but the beast was a giant of its kind. If the guardsmen were coming out of their hideouts, they were as good as dead.

“The Space Marines are begging for the honour to charge and claim the Devil’s head.”

“I bet they are,” the Adjutant-Colonel answered sarcastically as the wisdom of her sisters flowed into her and gave her comfort. “But no, I have to decline. Their Power Swords and the blessed Katanas the Webmistress gave them would take too long to do the job and cause them incredible casualties. It is like asking a guardsman to cut up a Baneblade with a molecular-cutting knife!”

It could work, technically, but it was going to take you an entire day, and the enemy wasn’t going to stand still.

“No. We had contingencies ready, no? The Webmistress herself approved them! Tell a Warrior-class Destroyer I want a pin-point Railgun orbital strike on the titan-sized Devil. Then we teleport Asset W on the surface.”

“Err...Adjutant-Colonel?”

“Yes, I’m aware we are way too exhausted to control properly Asset W. But between its natural aggressiveness and the Devil’s own ferocious nature, we don’t need to exert much administration oversight. Well? What are you fighting for? The Catachan Devil is shrugging off the effects of its beauty sleep, but it is not going to wait for hours-long deliberations to be complete!”

**Approaches of the ‘Devil’s Crater’**

**Battle-Brother Goya**

His battle-brothers were still wondering which approach was the least likely to result in annihilation when the first counter-attack of Lady Weaver’s arachnid servants arrived.

Goya had to acknowledge it from his sniper position; the Adjutant-Spiders worked *fast*. They weren’t exactly brilliant or unconventional strategists like the Angel of the Emperor, but their hesitations were measured in micro-seconds, and when committed, they struck *hard*.

Like now.

Thunder roared from the heavens as an electromagnetic-launched shell hit Catachan like a warhammer wielded by the Master of Mankind.

There was no finesse, no subtlety, and little warning.

The titan-beast roaring its defiance at the top of the ruined hill didn’t even realise what was about to hit it before the Destroyer fired.

The explosion was colossal.

Light and smoke abruptly blinded everything, and Goya plunged into the hole he had prepared for contingencies like that one.

He spared one thought for the guardsmen of the advanced positions, hoping that they had dug deep enough.

And then the shockwave hit.

“To say we’ve had to resort to that against a Catachan beast, and not the Tyranids...”

The inferno quickly died out in the next few minutes.

The entire area north-west of Devil’s Crater had been razed utterly, it went without saying.

Most of the high trees inside the Crater had been pulverised too, incidentally.

“I suppose it’s far better than to ask us to charge that damn thing...”

In a perfect world, Goya would have shot the titanic Catachan Devil at long-range. Eyes were supposed to be a weak point in the chitin of these beasts, after all.

The problem was that this long-lived Devil was armoured everywhere, and this included the joints and the other locations which should have been weaknesses for the lesser specimens it had once belonged to.

“Report! Does anyone see the Devil?”

“No, Captain.” He cleared his throat. “There is too much smoke...wait...oh, by the wings of our father!”

The Catachan Devil was still moving.

How was it still moving?

Goya felt something unpleasant forcing his two hearts to beat faster.

Abundant green blood flowed out of several wounds. The beast had been hurt.

But as he watched, the injuries were already healing.

And suddenly the weird stripes visible everywhere on the chitinous armour took an entire meaning entirely.

They were not stripes at all; they were *scars*.

The Catachan Devil had thousands, maybe tens of thousands of scars.

This was the apex predator of Catachan, and they had-

“Captain, the Railgun had just managed to anger the Devil. I must regretfully inform you that I don’t think Railguns can do the job.”

And unfortunately, the predictable idea of ‘using something bigger’ to take out the Catachan Devil was likely going to kill them all, no matter how deep they dug into Catachan’s soil.

The announcement which was given across every frequency was not the one he expected to hear.

“Adjutant-Command is about to deploy Asset W. Teleportation incoming! Don’t intervene!”

The Raptors sniper had just the time to blink before the familiar disorientation sensation and the pungent ozone smell arrived, no matter that his Mark VII was sealed.

The light must have illuminated everything for miles to end.

And when it ended, a new colossus had joined the battlefield.

“So that’s why they needed some analogues to the Titan void transports...”

Goya had not walked into the ruins of Ardium or Macragge. He had heard the rumours like every battle-brother of the Adeptus Astartes, however. And while visiting Nyx, he had watched the Titan-Moths and even been allowed to pet one.

He knew insects obeying the Victor of Commorragh could be really huge.

The titanic Worm which had been teleported onto the battlefield was indeed huge.

It was a titan of its kind.

It was just tall enough for when rising its ‘head-maw’ in defiance, to arrive to the level of the head of the Catachan Devil.

For a second like lasted like an eternity, the two super-predators watched each other, as if aware all a life of struggle and unending war had led them to this moment.

The pale yellow colossus of another world against the green-black titan-beast of Catachan.

There was no roar, no screech of challenge.

The two apex monsters attacked each other, and Catachan itself shook as their battle began.

**Advanced Camp of the Catachan Jungle Fighters**

**5.553.313M35**

**General Jack ‘Death’ Schwarz**

Order has been given to withdraw to the secondary lines once it was clear the fight was not going to be over in a few minutes.

Ironically, the Tyranids seemed to have adopted the same approach.

And the animals and plants which had the ability to flee did imitate them.

No one wanted to be close when two alpha predators like that fought for supremacy.

The Giant Worm against the Alpha Devil.

Jack really wondered where Lady Weaver had found the former. If the Living Saint had ‘found’ it in the first place, of course. The Titan-Moths had been created from several different species, in order to be perfectly attuned to their mistress. It was entirely possible the worms had been bred using similar methods – minus the ability to generate Aethergold, of course.

“Let them fight, eh?” Sharp drawled next to him.

“You want to disrupt their fight? Go ahead.”

“No, I think I will pass.” The younger General grimaced. “It is almost over.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

The two titan-beasts had formidable regeneration capabilities, which had allowed them to recover from wounds that would have killed most living organisms of this galaxy. In fact, it was entirely possible there were plenty of Titans which would have perished in the first minutes of this monster duel, their metallic armours unable to stand against the ferocity fuelling the two predators.

But everything had a limit.

The Giant Worm’s flanks were so badly mangled it was impossible to say how many wounds it had taken in the last hours.

The Alpha Devil’s green blood had never stopped flowing since the Railgun had pummelled it before its main opponent arrived.

The two apex monsters of Catachan were moving at a fraction of the speed they had begun this fight.

The contest of ferocity was over.

Now it was a series of hit-and-evade phases, each ‘duellist’ preparing for the death blow.

And in that kind of fight, as much as Jack Schwarz wanted to pretend the contrary, the Giant Worm was simply not as good as the Alpha Devil.

The long creature had no true counter for the enormous pincers that had grown on the front legs of its nemesis.

It had nonetheless been a terribly long fight.

Ferocity had been the order of the day for several hours.

Giant maw against razor claws and bony hooks.

In addition to this, of course, the two beasts had the sheer weight as an additional weapon.

Plenty of times one of the two had tried to crush the other by sheer brutality and exploding all its internal organs, wherever they were to be found.

It had left more marks.

But it hadn’t worked.

The Catachan General wondered if there was something else in the two beasts’ heads that did not think about killing the foe in front of it.

Probably not.

“Here they come...”

Everyone with the instincts of a veteran felt it.

They charged.

Catachan shook under the weight of these flesh-born Titans.

There was a dolorous amount of shrieking at this distance.

And then it ended.

The massive claws of the old Catachan Devil were impaled into a point right next to the Giant Worm’s head, while at the same time, the huge maw had closed up on plenty of legs and a part of the chitinous green-black body.

But the latter was not a death blow, while the former most assuredly was.

The claws pushed and struck, and the Giant Worm at last fell, severed in two parts.

Its maw never opened up again, nevertheless; the Catachan Devil had to cut its own body to escape the last attempt of its foe to take the mutual kill.

But cut itself it did, like some of the Vipers that were caught into the traps of the Jungle Fighters.

And once it was freed, it plunged again its main weapons of destruction into its enemy, and roared in triumph.

This was a roar, many observers would later swear around drinks, had been heard everywhere on Catachan.

“It seems the strategy of the Adjutant-Spiders was good, but not good enough. We should evacuate the zone, and prepare the orbital strikes. The Devil is wounded-“

“Wait.”

The Alpha carved apart a small section of its vanquished enemy, and the maw plunged into its flesh. Whatever it found, however, did not much please it.

There was a new roar, and then the Devil went on to ignore the massive carcass.

“General?”

“Don’t you remember? The older the Devil, the more picky they are with their foods. And this one is very old indeed.”

“Yes, General, but I don’t think that applies when a beast is on death’s door.”

“Evidently it does...and I’m not sure the beast is as close to dying as you think. Some of its wounds have stopped bleeding.” Thank the Lady of Nyx for these new drones, they really allowed them to monitor the battlefield by several better orders of magnitude than before.

The Great Devil roared again, and the jungle did not dare move or make a single whimper which could be mistaken as a challenge.

There was loud rumble, and then the ancient super-predator turned up and began to march north, ignoring the devastation, corpse of Giant Worm, and the shocked Imperial army assembled next to the Crater.

“Next time we are told to invade some place Devil’s Den Valley, let’s not pretend it was superstition from the first settlers.” The only man of Catachan to have earned the nickname ‘Death’ in his generation laughed.

“Yes, General!”

“And call me the closest Adjutant-Spider. Now that the Old Devil is moving away, we can prepare the final assault against the Tyranids.”

**Beyond the last star of the Eastern Fringe – the Galactic Void**

This had been...unexpected.

The Hive Mind had been aware of the Titan slumbering near the Crater, of course. The latest defensive strategy had involved the lesser preys waking it up and enduring its fury, after all.

But it had been thought this ancient not-prey would inflict far greater devastation than it did before succumbing or retreating from its domain. The lesser golden preys’ reaction had been cunning; they had decided to sacrifice one of their Titans to defang the trap the Hive Mind had prepared for them, preserving the core of their assets.

The Hive Mind had hoped the battle against the Titan would win them several days, and inflict great losses upon the warships orbiting around the pantry-world, as they tried to support their assets on the ground. It was something the flower-guardians would have made them paid dearly for.

Now this tactic had failed.

And with it, the access to the Brood Nest and the Hatchery Chamber was open to the lesser preys.

Already, the Hive Mind could sense the approach of several burrowing prey units deploying cautiously.

It was logical.

Where a far more limited prey species would have been forced into an attritional fight underground, this prey was going to bypass as many fixed bastions of the Hive Mind, leaving the choice between starved encirclement and slow annihilation.

It was extremely inconvenient.

And there was one more dilemma the Hive Mind had to solve.

The awakening of the Titan of the jungles had given the Hive Mind to compensate for the significant losses taken by its assets in the course of this long series of ambushes and bleeding.

But now the Guardian was stirring.

The Hive Mind would try to calm the gestalt-construct so it would stay unconscious; it had no interest in opening a second front when it was already struggling to win on the first one.

And while much knowledge had been learned from the actions of the lesser preys, it was not yet enough to justify the energy expended by the Relay-Moon.

The temporary loss of intelligence about the pantry-world was going to be already problematic for the next campaigns against this lesser prey.

Cold logic demanded in return that everything was known about the eight-legged golden prey and the other assets assaulting the Crater.

Thankfully, there were still options.

As long as the Guardian failed to intervene in this battle.

If it did-

If it did, the Hive Mind would lose all its ability to oversee and command this battle, for everything from the Hatchery to the Prey’s Landing Zone would cease to exist.

And it would be extremely inconvenient for the Hive Mind indeed.

**Catachan System**

**Catachan**

**The tunnels near the Hatchery**

**5.556.313M35**

**Txacopec Hell-Rider Tlacael**

When Tlacael had been given the opportunity to be part of this campaign by an Adjutant-Spider, he had been overjoyed and accepted immediately.

He was going to ride a Helspider again and kill plenty of enemies! This was going to be such fun!

At the time, nobody had told him the whole blood war was going to be fought on Catachan itself.

Obviously.

At first, like a proper Hell-Rider, he had shrugged off the matter.

So what? The Jungle Fighters believed they were the holy gift of the Emperor to Mankind, but nobody was that good.

Catachan was going to learn the word ‘defeat’, same as all the traitors, heretics and xenos who tried to stand against the Lady.

Tlacael admitted it had been a bit too arrogant of him.

Catachan had punished them.

Catachan continued to fight and try to kill them.

And it never bloody stopped fighting!

“Okay,” he admitted as one more time, the giant tunnel they were progressing into opened to reveal one more underground river. “That’s not funny anymore.”

“I agree...you heathen of Txacopec.”

“At least I don’t have a disgusting serf-owner overlord of Atlas as my relatives!” he told his second – though all of it was unofficial, and ‘only accepted to compensate the losses of officers taken during Hell Garden’, per a spider’s words.

“We don’t choose, alas, our family, *honorary* Lieutenant.”

“That we don’t,” Tlacael agreed before returning to the more important point. “You think our Scorpions can cross?”

“No. Hell no. It’s going to be dangerous as it is *for us*, and we don’t have a problem with water.”

“That’s...not good.”

“Tell me about it. I still think High Command should have committed them earlier and not so late into the campaign.”

“They apparently were some problems during Warp travel, plenty of the Scorpiads and the other big beasties challenged each other and caused havoc in the transports they were in.” He shrugged. “Or so the rumour mill said.”

And thus the few Hell-Riders like him had discovered very, very late that as much as the guardsmen loved to hate Catachan, their bad feelings were really minor compared to the instinctive loathing the scorpion-like species of the Swarm had for the Death World.

“We have to try.”

“And if there’s one more river?”

Plenty of sighs were heard in the vox and from Catachan ‘advisors’ in their columns.

“The Silk Architects will soon be here.”

“They said that two hours ago.” Tlacael of Txacopec shook his head. “It’s taking too long. We have to keep the pressure on the Tyranids. It’s been ten minutes since we didn’t kill one.”

“Well,” another veteran of Macragge and the Ymga Monolith cleared his throat, “they may be running short of troops.”

Scores of men scoffed at that.

“You have to excuse Scar here, honorary Lieutenant,” a Nyxian gave a friendly poke on the shoulders of the man who had just spoken. “He’s from Theta, they’re a bit slow to learn how things go on operations like that.”

“He’s all forgiven,” he retorted happily.

“Hey!”

Plenty of guardsmen chuckled.

“But seriously...we haven’t yet reached anything which could be a facility where the Python commanders breed and train their troops.”

“We haven’t found it on the surface for sure.”

“It’s going to be here, underground.”

“Yes. And you can bet that in the last day, they did everything they could to boost again their numbers. So we have to keep pushing and corner them in a place they can’t afford to lose.”

“Easy to say, more difficult to achieve...I don’t think the Scorpions can pass that kind of obstacle without silk bridges.”

“Then we let them, and we press on.”

Minutes later, everyone knew this decision had been the correct one.

For there was another river.

And then another.

They had known the Tyranids must have built something huge under Devil’s Crater to protect themselves from satellites and Mechanicus fancy toys, but this was completely insane!

The tunnels were bigger than some Hive-galleries he had seen when they had to wait months for deployment in the Sector’s capital.

It was like there was an entire world under the surface.

The more they pressed upon, the more it felt like you could throw an army of thousands of Helspiders here – assuming you could bring them in the first place.

It wasn’t just a big cavern.

It was...it was more.

“How did the Tyranids build something so big without the Jungle Fighters finding out?”

“I...look out, the flowers and everything...they are different. They’re growing on top of sort of ruins?”

“There was something here before?”

Someone far more cleverer than him may have the answers; he hadn’t them.

And at last they caught up with the Tyranids, some two hundred of them forming a wall of dark green and barring the entrance into another chamber.

“Bring out the big guns!” He roared.

In all the skirmishes they’d fought, everyone had learned the best thing you could achieve with a lasgun against a Tyranid of Python was to make it laugh to death – and no, it had never happened, but one could dream.

If you wanted them dead, you used the heavy power, as much as you could. Grav-guns were ideal, but Ryza cogboys had only a handful of them. Most of the time, it was Plasma, Melta, or Volkite, whichever you had on hand, and supported by the Bolters of the elite units.

It had almost become a tradition by that point...and so was the Tyranid answer of ‘hit-and-run’. Unlike the black-red beasts of Behemoth, Python Gaunts never tried to fight the long battles. They struck and they disappeared into the jungles...or since a few hours, into the tunnels.

But these ones didn’t.

They shrieked and hissed, and they stood firm, living wall of fangs, super-tough skeletons, and claws.

Many good insects paid the price to fight them at close-quarters, and so were a few of the brashest Catachan reinforcements, who had not yet learned it was suicide to go push a Devil’s Fang into the armour of these monsters.

But the outcome was never in doubt.

It took them a lot of time, but all the Tyranids died in the end.

“VICTORY! VICTORY FOR THE LADY!”

“FOR CATACHAN, SURVIVE THE GREEN HELL!

“They are proper steps below! I think we’ve broken through and are near their command centre!”

They incinerated as best as they could the fallen, and the column advanced.

It took several hundred of metres for his instincts to alert him something was wrong.

The lights were dimmed.

It should have been the norm, but this maze of tunnels was in reality excellent for fighting because there were quantities of fluorescent mushrooms – they were all poisoned or could expel poison gas if you got too close to them, but they provided plenty of light.

And here it was no longer the case.

They were plunged into the shadow and-

“Fireworks’ fuses,” he ordered, “NOW!”

They were not for fireworks, of course, but-

“Oh, Golden Throne.”

The darkness vanished, to reveal the horror.

They had stepped into an immense cavern, so big they didn’t see the end of it.

But that was not the worst.

The worst was all the big translucent red eggs which were sprawled...everywhere.

And since the eggs were indeed translucent, you could see the dark forms waiting into it.

These were clearly-

“The abominations led us directly into a Blackback Viper’s Hatchery!” a Jungle Fighter veteran screamed. “GET OUT OF HERE! GET OUT OF HERE NOW!”

They tried to follow the suggestion.

They really tried.

But the ‘mothers’ of the Hatchery attacked first.