**Sentinel Interlude**

**Escalation Preparations**

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**Craftworld Biel-Tan**

**8.613.289M35**

**Farseer Filgonilth Sirethmoren**

The Dome of Serenity was ancient, even by his race’s standards. It predated the creation of Biel-Tan, for his ancestors had used their influence, skills and power to transfer it from their great palace to the not-yet-completed Craftworld. It predated by the Fall by tens of thousands cycles, though the archives were sadly incomplete on the precise date and the name of the ancestor who had commissioned this great project.

Few artworks belonging to the noble lines of Biel-Tan could compare to the Dome. Gems of worlds long lost to the Enemy were displayed with the finest illusion-sculptures. Songs of happiness and joy resonated with the exquisite wraithbone. Star-paintings and impossible crystals coalesced to impossible heights.

Many younglings and greats elders had cried in passion before this work for thousands of cycles. It was a reminder of everything the Eldar race had mastered. It had been a light in the darkness when the Fall came.

It was just a forgotten remnant of the past, just like him.

When the Craftworld had started its long and endless journey across the stars, the Sirethmoren family had received thousands of poets and artists inside its halls, all wanting to present their greatest creations in the hope their legacy would be preserved for thousands of cycles, long after their spirit stones had been plunged into the Infinity Circuit.

Now?

Filgonilth was not sure there was a thousand eldar who had chosen the Path of the Poet in Biel-Tan halls. The same was true of the Path of the Sculptor or the Path of the Painter. The Path of the Artisan had seen its numbers crumble cycle after cycle, and soon there would be no one save a few wraithbone-singers and of course the war-artisans.

It was not the only Path which was on the edge of oblivion. The Path of Grief numbers had fallen hard after the last campaigns, the High Farseers obviously thinking more Aspect Warriors on the frontlines was better than having someone to mourn for your passing at the funeral rites. The Path of the Dreamer was almost as bad in that aspect, as the Exarchs wanted terrible blades to pursue their rebirth of the Empire, not dreamers and students of the past.

The Path of the Mariner had been entirely suborned to the Path of the Warrior. The colony and merchant ships had been replaced by threatening and weapon-brimming hulls to sustain the myriad of military expeditions Biel-Tan launched across the stars.

He could have continued for cycles and cycles. Paths broken and discarded in the name of efficiency and war, but it could have lasted endless cycles and he was not a youngling anymore. He had tried to continue on the Path of the Seer in the hope a thread could be found where his descendants broke this endless circle of bloodshed and violence.

He had not found one.

Filgonilth Sirethmoren had not found the thread he searched, and cycle after cycle he had been forced to redirect his energy finding solutions and desperate measures to stop problems some Seers, Farseers and Autarchs of Biel-Tan had created in their arrogance and their short-sighted views.

Protecting the Craftworld was increasingly difficult. In the last thousand cycles, twenty-seven major invasions of Biel-Tan had to be stopped by guile and force of arms. Only three had been executed by the Primordial Annihilator.

Their enemies were growing strong and Biel-Tan was weak. Yes, on the outside the galaxy knew their formidable hosts but few realised how many souls these endless wars had cost them. The green brutes and the humans could afford gigantic armies for their conquests. Eldar could not. The halls of Biel-Tan were empty. Filgonilth was the last of his distinguished line, and he was for his beloved Enneriya, his two sons and his daughter had never returned to the Craftworld after a ‘purge’ went dramatically wrong on a corrupted Maiden World – the consolation he had been able to save their spirit stones had been really hollow in the end.

And now he was the last survivor of his line, waiting under the Dome of Serenity, in a seat which should have gone to one of his five elder brothers...but they had also perished hundreds of cycles ago.

“You always look so pensieve, is it a Farseer obligation?”

“Jirkanith,” Filgonilth smiled, “how kind of you to remind me of my high and dignified behaviour.”

“Someone has to, no?”

Autarch Jirkanith Maloskilen jumped fluidly next to him. His friend had a few more scars to add to his copious collection, he noticed.

“I suppose,” he nodded with a large smile. “It has been too long. I was not aware you were back, otherwise I would have organised something...”

“I just came back from Ry’Tyr, at the Joint High Council demand,” the green eyes of the friend he had known from the time they were playing in the gardens together was melancholic. “This was really sudden, otherwise believe me old friend, I would have warned you of my return.”

“That I can believe,” the Farseer dramatically added after a moment, “you always enjoy drinking my oldest nectars.”

“That was only this time on Dyuliryth,” chuckled his friend. “You’re not going to let me forget it, aren’t you?”

“Of course not!”

Both laughed together and Filgonilth realised how badly he had missed it. How long had it been since he hadn’t laughed? He was rather sure the answer was ‘too long’...

Not stopping the bantering, the Autarch and the Farseer left the Dome of Serenity and marched for one of the many offices he was using.

“I suppose you’re going to return to war before this cycle is cycle is complete.”

Jirkanith’s lips tightened and his visage expressed many emotions before settling on disappointment.

“No, old friend. The High Farseers and the rest of the High Council have kept it under the veil of secrecy, but I have been relieved of my command.”

Filgonilth fears were reignited by this sentence. His friend was one of the best strategist-tactician Biel-Tan had available – the reason why unlike Filgonilth, he had never punished for his non-conformist opinion. If the High Council was really so far gone to remove one of his best from the frontlines, things were direr than the threads of Fate implied.

“I suppose the motive they gave for this removal was not the true one.”

Jirkanith Maloskilen smiled.

“On the last psy-recording I was given, there is a commendation and an affirmation I deserve some rest after my glorious victories of the last cycles.”

“Naturally,” only someone who was unaware of the manipulations of the High Farseers would believe it for a heartbeat or two.

“In private though, they have lambasted me for my tactics and my tolerance. I don’t attack fast enough. I don’t massacre enough Mon-keigh for the High Farseers’ taste. I am too prudent. I don’t believe in the Rebirth of our glorious Empire.”

The Autarch shook his head in resignation.

“I have done what I could to mitigate the excesses, but my replacement is a fire-soul, one of those who believe the sun is shining in the crystal excrements of the High Farseers and that all life is destined to be mud under our boots. We will be lucky if half of the host is alive when victory will be announced.”

More lives lost on the altar of Khaine, then. Young lives which had lived mere hundreds of cycles before being thrown in the inferno where the Bloody-Handed reigned and She-Who-Thirsts waited for a chance to swallow their souls.

“I wasn’t aware the situation was that bad,” but then how could he, when the powerhouses of the Craftworld had decided to keep him away from any major war. “We rely too much on our Farseers and our militarist attitude to solve every danger.”

And yes, he was aware of the irony that he, a Farseer, was advocating a decrease of his Path’s influence in the deciding circles.

“It is too late to evict them, my friend. They may have their flaws, but they thought to secure the loyalty of the next generation coming after them. New younglings who will know nothing but unending war against all the space-faring species of the galaxy, because we attack them first and only request talks when they have repulsed our first assaults.”

Jirkanith took a small golden necklace to observe it before sighing loudly.

“I was offered a possibility to save the honour of my family, of course.”

“Of course.”

The two old eldars exchanged dubitative glances. Farseer and Autarch, they had the dubious honour of being the last of their lines, their brothers, sisters, parents and relatives sacrificed in one of the countless wars began by Biel-Tan on Maiden Worlds no eldar had ever set foot since the Fall. After freeing worlds they hadn’t the first colonist to settle, ‘honour’ was a world which lost most of its signification.

“I was offered to lead a Twilight Spear against the humans.”

Filgonilth blinked in incomprehension. A Twilight Spear was the answer Biel-Tan had established when one of their scouting forces was beaten. Like many things imagined by the Exarchs today, it was crude and unimaginative. A larger force was mustered and every enemy who had partaken in the destruction of the first Asuryani group was to be thoroughly annihilated.

“It is just the...eighteenth we have to dispatch in the last hundred cycles?”

“Nineteenth. And this time it was a terrible defeat. The survivors consist in a heavily wounded Dire Avenger from a one hundred and twenty-four Crystal-Search Blade.”

The old Farseer whispered a prayer for all these souls which were now lost, never to return to the protecting embrace of their homes.

“Who was the Farseer in charge?

“Vyrion Kaeran.”

It was a name he unfortunately had not to make a lot of effort to remember.

“Him,” it took a lot of control to prevent anger and loathing from engulfing his thoughts.

“Yes, he was apparently searching for a Sword of Vaul and was murdered by a Champion of Pestilence controlling millions of corrupted insects.”

“Knowing this arrogant magorix, I prefer thinking he misled completely the threads of fate and charged in a new fight before evaluating properly what he was opposed and the nature of the object he searched.”

Swords of Vaul were by their very nature priceless heirlooms of Eldar history. Each blade the Craftworlds had recovered was in one of the most secure redoubts of their species...and as such it was unlikely humans of all races would have found one.

Unlikely, not impossible, but still.

Sword of Vaul or not, he had not need to use his powers to know the reaction of the High Farseers.

“I suppose the father and the brother of this incompetent found excellent excuses for this fresh disaster and used all promises and favours to convince the Council...and they also released some new Aspect Warriors to create this Twilight Spear.”

“If you weren’t a Farseer, old friend, I would recommend you for a Command Path,” Jirkanith raised the golden necklace in mock salute. “Yes, this is exactly what happened. I refused, naturally, but they had a few other Autarchs and High Farseer Manorith volunteered to lead the force.”

One of the Seventeen in person? They really intended to start a war...again. And they wanted to do it at a time when most of the Biel-Tan Tempest of Blades was fighting all over the galaxy. Twilight Spears were easy to cast, but were terribly difficult to recall in the best of cases.

“How many Aspect Warriors are we talking about here?”

“Between six and eight hundred, assuming the Kaeran promises are not dust in the wind.”

This would mean armoured support and certainly a few great warships to transport them.

“This is going to weaken our reserves once more,” and the he cast the runes, concentrating on the information he had just been aware of. Millions of threads began to unfurl under his guidance...but not for long. Suddenly he began to feel the threads disappear by the thousands.

This was not a Shadow Point. At least he didn’t think so. It was more a series of flashes and something repulsing the powers of the Ocean.

“I have difficulties seeing the outcome,” he admitted, stopping the threading of the fates. “Where was Kaeran killed?”

“Osuthanil.”

This was absolutely not what he wanted to hear.

“This is a region where many bases of the *Yngir*’s servants were found!”

“Are you sure?”

Filgonilth fixed his old friend with an intense expression.

“I can see you the appropriate constellations if you want, but I remember many worlds close to Osuthanil were functioning as command centres for the purges of the silver metal husks. Of course, most of these advanced bases didn’t survive the Fall...”

Suddenly, he feared the worst. This whole disaster engineered by Kaeran was a cloudy affair, and they had only the one of a wounded warrior for their information resource. They were close to Necron worlds, and the Primordial Annihilator may be at work.

“We must prevent the Twilight Spear from being sent.”

“Impossible,” Jirkanith countered. “The Kaeran family will never accept, we are both disgraced elders and letting the humans get away with the murder of one our forces would enrage beyond measure the ranks of the Aspect Warriors. Neither I nor you would avoid banishment if we tried to expose this in public.”

“Then I think it is time to...use our resting time to travel to new worlds and enjoy a few cycles of discovery. I’m sure the High Council will be thrilled to know we are not here to protest against their plans to erase everything the Asuryani should stand for...”

“When are we leaving?”

**Beyond the Light of the Astronomican**

**The Veiled Region**

**8.502.289M35**

**Missy Byron**

Vista had seen many weird events created by parahuman time powers. It was sort of unavoidable when you had Clockblocker in your team.

But the power of her teammate in the Wards had been limited by design. Clockblocker could freeze time, but he had to touch the object, the human or whatever target he had in mind. It didn’t matter if the contact had been made by feet, hand or the rest of his body. It didn’t matter if he wanted to freeze a bug or Leviathan. It worked. But it was ‘only’ freezing time, and for an indeterminate period between thirty seconds and ten minutes, with no control over the duration. It was great for manipulating the battlefield in combination with her space-manipulation powers, but it wasn’t a high-tier ability and he couldn’t do time loops.

That domain had been the specialty of Gray Boy, of the Slaughterhouse Nine. And since apparently the Fairy Queen had killed him, the threat of this monstrous power had been thought extinguished.

The PRT and the whole world had been wrong. Scion had time loop-powers...and now they saw the result from the observation bridge of Contessa’s warship.

The Moon exploded, destroyed by a series of golden explosions. It lasted a good ten minutes and in the last seconds, the satellite of the Earth unleashed was losing more and more of its integrity until asteroids and fragments were left.

And then it began again. Suddenly, the celestial aster was whole again and golden explosions resumed. And the cycle of destruction started again. The Moon was in an eternal time loop, breaking most laws of causality and physics, doomed to be destroyed hundreds of thousands times until, according to Contessa, the last shard of Scion the Murderer ran out.

Missy Byron, also known as the Ward Vista, would have loved to say Earth Bet had known a better fate than the Moon. She couldn’t.

As cruel as the time loop was, her planet of birth had been transformed into a world-spanning desert as Scion had dried the oceans and seas, ravaged cities and wiped out resistance to his mindless carnage.

It had only been five years since she woke up, but there was nothing left of Earth Bet but bad memories. Technically, it was possible to breath and the temperatures were not unbearable, according to the colossus standing behind her. But there was little water and leftovers of parahumans shards plagued air and earth. While she had been offered to go down and see with her own eyes, Earth was now a graveyard and billions had perished.

There was nothing left of her parents and her friends. The only recognisable things were the pyramids and a few monuments lucky enough to survive the holocaust done by Scion.

“So Scion managed to cross the dimensions and bring Earth Bet and the Moon in this reality in order to anchor its presence.”

“Indeed,” replied in an emotionless voice Contessa. “The entity didn’t survive the last fights, but by then too much damage had already been done. The Moon was stuck into a time-loop when he tried to imprison the Simurgh. As for Earth, he figured by the fiftieth hour, it was far simpler to remove every source of water than to kill every man, woman and children one by one.”

Vista had to bite her tongue and ask if this was really the best Cauldron could come up with. These guys had the ability to give powers and particularly powerful ones, at that. They had a lot of influence, enough to manipulate the Protectorate. And for all their actions, they had still been caught with their pants down, like Clockblocker would joke. That did not give her a good opinion of the Thinker and what her new goals were. Yes, they had saved her – she had seen the images of things that were by all descriptions demons and monsters – but she didn’t trust Cauldron at all.

How could one trust them when their motto seemed to be ‘doing the wrong things for the wrong reasons, ally with the wrong people and cause the wrong outcome’?

“Thanks to the courageous sacrifice of a strike team in a future which never will be, we have managed to stale the plans of the Demons of Change for the time being. Earth Bet is gone, but the Imperium lives and must be prepared to counter the plans of Chaos.”

Missy frowned and put her hero mask on to hide her disgust.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I like very much being a part of your plans.”

Judging by how the ‘Space Marines’ stood still next to her on the bridge, they certainly didn’t voice their opposition to the member of Cauldron a lot.

“Your parahumans are...”

“Yes, yes, we are invaluable, I listened to your speech the first time,” Missy did her best not to scowl. “But the truth remain I don’t trust you, I didn’t trust Cauldron when your existence was revealed in the first place and I am ready to bet the other parahumans which were displaced before the final apocalypse are not trusting you either.”

There was no hesitation, no emotion and no indignation in Contessa’s answer. For like the thousandth time, Vista wondered how much their powers had screwed mentally their owners. Personally, she felt like she had not changed at all since her trigger...but then she would think that, no? It was possible, as much as she didn’t want to admit it, that Contessa had always been a cold-hearted bitch. It was also possible her abilities had transformed her in this sort of killing machine invested in her mission.

“For better or for worse, you certainly agree the Imperium is the last bastion of stability in this galaxy.”

“Yes, because every other thing out there is worse!” retorted hotly the Ward of Brockton Bay. “Every advanced civilisation worth the name is using travel across Hell to go at faster-than-light speeds! Between the green idiots and the millennia-old horrors, anything created by humans can only be compared favourably but that don’t mean I want to serve entire organisations which make the Empire 66, Lung and Coil look like choir children!”

Missy shook her head in annoyance.

“The PRT had its faults, including being unwilling puppets of your organisation. But at least they tried to keep the peace and arrest criminals. The few things I’ve learned about the Imperium tell me quite clearly they don’t hesitate to wipe out civilisations when the commander of a ‘crusade’ feels a bit trigger-happy with his space cannons!”

And the least said about the figures leading said Empire, the better. Hitler was a crazy lunatic loon, but compared to certain important figures of the High Lords, the man was just eccentric.

“Why don’t you speak to the other parahumans and see if they agree with you?”

Vista fixed Contessa, trying in vain to guess what the woman was thinking. In the end, she renounced. Contessa was just presenting an inhuman front.

“Who will be present at this...reunion?”

“Dragon and Weaver – the latter you may remember her as Skitter – must already have arrived to the S-4697X5T4 System. Clockblocker and Leet are both on their way too. And in addition to you, I also keep Doormaker in stasis.”

Vista’s head burst in relief. Clockblocker and Dragon were more than fine; they unlike Contessa had proven they could act like true heroes. Skitter and Leet...the latter was a cosmic joke and the former was an insect warlord, but they weren’t Empire and could probably be reasoned. Lung or one of the big S-class supervillains would have been a total disaster...

There were still large zones of shadow which worried her.

“You said there were nine parahumans who had survived the destruction of Earth Bet. Unless I have forgotten how to count, that doesn’t make nine. And where the hell is the Simurgh, the Moon is getting pulverised but I don’t see a feather indicating she was there!”

Dragon, Skitter, Clockblocker, Leet, Contessa, Doormaker and her; the count was good for seven, not nine.

“Shadow Stalker has her own path to follow...and I fear the ninth has already fallen to Chaos. As for the Simurgh, we do not have any clue. She may have perished...”

“Or she is waiting in a nice planet for the opportunity of screwing with parahumans and non-parahumans, raising more monsters and pushing millions to madness.” It was the Simurgh; it was best to always prepare for the worst. Just ask the Swiss how it paid to underestimate that winged bitch.

“Let’s go to this S-thing System then...”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Solar Sector**

**Solar System**

**Holy Terra**

**0.380.290M35**

**Sophia Hess**

Training to become an elite assassin of the Officio Assassinorum was an unimaginable succession of suffering and hellish training.

There were many military and parahuman organisations on Earth bet which were famous for threatening their soldiers with exercises with real ammunition, shooting those who failed a session or leaving you naked in a freezing environment.

The Officio Assassinorum of the Imperium of Mankind began at this level of insanity and increased the pressure from there. On her first day, Sophia had completed an obstacle course where she could very well have lost her life, shadow powers or not. There had been flamethrowers and plasma wires every five metres, spikes and barbed wire had been covering the ground in generous quantities and after five minutes, the sadist operators began to pour an airborne toxin.

This had been the morning wake-up, so to speak. Afterwards, she had been told to climb a skyscraper covered in a sort of glass material. No, she hadn’t been granted any rope or the security essentials professional mountaineers took for granted. The authorised ‘help’ had been two daggers and that was it. Her lungs had been in fire when it was over, and the less said about her muscles, the better.

In the afternoon, she had taken her first drive lessons aboard a sort of flying shuttle-jet. The instructions had been limited to ‘you’re on your own’...and then she had been forced to do three laps in a labyrinth, pursued by missiles and fired upon by laser turrets. The driving lesson had ended with a monumental crash she had only survived by becoming intangible...and then her new teacher had placed her in a sort of torture cage, before teaching her the language of High Gothic.

The next days had come with more insane activities, trials and challenges. However, the ‘day’ part was a misnomer, really. Clade-Primaris Xanaria Lythis was not hesitating to unleash the hellish ‘morning alarm’ in the middle of the night and too often Sophia had collapsed in exhaustion after over seventeen or eighteen hours of non-stop strenuous obstacle courses and lessons.

By the tenth ‘day’, she had begun to lose count of the day-night cycle and the number of tests she had performed. Survival was all what mattered and the different environments taxed her muscles to the limit. Inside the Assassin temples, every type of landscape could be recreated and this offered a crazy number of possibilities to her murderous mentor. Carry a bag full of metal on your back and run in a swampy environment? Check. Transport half your weight in water across a desert? Check. Find your way in a maze similar to a warship corridors before hundreds of bombs went off? Check.

Worse, every trial, every order and every lesson had only two outcomes: failure – death – or success – which led to new trials and tests. It was not a game and the dangers weren’t simulated in the slightest. Sophia was the only apprentice Xanaria Lythis taught, but there were other Callidus instructors in the vast complex they called a Temple. And while her ‘professor’ generally began their sessions with no one else in sight, there were from time to time opportunities to see girls and young women try the same sessions she had just completed.

Most of the time, they died and while Sophia didn’t know them, their deaths were bloody enough to empty her stomach in the next seconds, with the terrible feeling it might have been her down there being impaled on blades or roasted in the burning pits.

At least, she had vomited or cried the first times. But session after session, it had no longer been the case.

Sophia wasn’t sure when she had first realised her mentor-master was changing her. Worse, the feeling she was changed had not horrified her at all. But it was like...there was something missing. In the sessions after this point she had not thought much of it, but it was when Xanaria had whispered to her she was a blade destined to eliminate the enemies of the God-Emperor that Shadow Stalker had understood how deeply the changes had affected her.

Sophia had heard the words and she had felt *good*.

It shouldn’t have been like that. She was Shadow Stalker. She was a predator, something redoubtable yes, but not something one wielded. She was her own mistress, she was a predator...and yet the words felt good, the prospect of facing great and dangerous enemies. Somehow, electricity wasn’t bothering her anymore. She had always been in excellent health but this new hell-training had given a body of pure muscle and her strength, her speed and the rest of her capacities were largely at the Olympic-level now.

They were changing her and she hadn’t found a single thing she could do against it. Since her sessions left too little time for propaganda and the like, she supposed they forced her to swallow their doctrine when she was unconscious – certain canticles she had recited after her first climbing and hot pursuits of the day had come out of nowhere. But it was so invasive, so good...and each time she said the words, it felt so right. For those that defy the Imperium, only the Emperor can judge your crimes. Only in death can you receive the Emperor’s judgement.

When she had said ‘yes’ to the fatidic question, she had thought about escaping at the first opportunity. But there was no exit which was not guarded by things able to vaporise you in a millisecond. Courtesy of her shadow powers, the defences now included big flashy lights. There would be no shadows to escape.

The alarm screamed and she jumped out of her small resting place before a second thrill had the time to sound. Shower, clothes and a green paste serving as breakfast were done in a couple of minutes and the moment she closed the door of the space serving as her quarters, Xanaria was waiting for her. Immediately, Sophia bent the knee, not wishing to endure another obstacle course for her lack of respect.

“Two minutes and twenty-nine seconds. Acceptable. Who are we, Apprentice?”

“We are the killing tool of the Imperium, Master. We live to honor the Callidus Temple and die to serve the Emperor.”

“What is to be Callidus?”

“To assume the shape of the accursed and deliver death from the purity within you – that is to be Callidus, Master.”

“Good, very good, rise Apprentice, and follow me.”

The pace the Clade-Primaris imposed today was rather slow – though Sophia was sure before she came here she should have sprinted to not be distanced.

Like most days, the visage of Xanaria had changed: her eyes were now a deep black and her hairs were long and black. She still had the skin-tight black uniform of the Assassinorum on her, however.

The room they entered after ten minutes was not one she had come before – at least not that she remembered. Unlike most of the temple, the walls were painted white and the equipment dispersed everywhere screamed medical facility. She wasn’t able to say how half of it functioned, but between the vials, the tubes of bright green liquid and the prosthesis, the role of this room was obvious.

“It seems we are quite a bit early,” without warning the traits of Lythis shifted back to one of the appearances she took to train her: blonde hairs in a braid, light blue eyes – the red lenses and the head-part of the uniform were not worn today – and she was quite a bit taller. “It will give us some time to discuss the hierarchy of the Temple. First, congratulations you aren’t any longer an Apprentice-neophyte.”

“Err...thanks,” she replied but inside she felt a bit of displeasure. Everything she had done until now was the training of a neophyte.

“Apprentice-neophytes are also called Apprentices of the Tenth Level, formally. As the name implies, there are ten levels in your Apprenticeship, with the tenth being the lowest and the first the highest. Once you are accepted as Apprentice of the First Level, your Master – me, in your case – can nominate you to the Grand Master at any moment to undertake the final trial: an official assassination mandated by the High Lords of Terra.

You are still far from this point, but you have climbed the first steps and you are now an Apprentice of the Ninth. And it leads us to a new trial today, one where genetics prime over skill and fortitude.”

This wasn’t reassuring at all. How did you manipulate genetics in your favour?

Like a queen of blades, Xanaria Lythis went to one of the containers and after taping a complicated code, drew a vial of black liquid and went back to show her the object.

“In this vial, there is a powerful drug the First Siress Callidus invented several thousand years ago. We call it Polymorphine. It is this drug which allows every Callidus Assassin to transform into a million different appearances and infiltrate the enemy ranks under a friendly appearance.”

The ability was not that much a surprise after everything she had observed in the Temple...so this drug gave the Imperial Assassins a powerful Changer-like power.

“What is the cost?”

“The cost, my Apprentice, is the simple truth that the majority of humanity doesn’t react well to this drug. And Callidus Assassins are Callidus Assassins because we have the Polymorphine. It is the heart of all our tactics, doctrine and assassination abilities. Whether you are charged to kill a Traitor Governor or a Space Marine, use of Polymorphine is paramount.”

Okay, now she felt anxiety.

“Men are by their hormonal balance and their lack of flexibility unable to cope with more than five transformations in their entire existence, which is why we are recruiting only girls. But if the failure rate of the men in the first generations was nearly one hundred percent, this doesn’t mean there can’t be complications.”

“Complications...Master?”

“Yes, complications. Approximately ten percent of the Tenth Level candidates develop lethal allergies to the Polymorphine after a dose is injected in their veins the first time. Another thirty percent have their bodies rejecting the drug between the second and the tenth dose. Ten percent more have their body break down before the end of the first year. It is why the procedures of the Callidus Temple are only second to the Culexus Temple. We often do not hesitate to make extensive manipulations in the genotype of entire planets to have the thousands of young girls we need. You are an exception in this regard, for you are quite a bit older than most recruits and do not come from one of our main recruitment sectors.”

This was crazy. She had no idea how many apprentices were killed in the trials she had survived, but it had to be a lot. She had no idea of the real numbers, but they had to be high, sixty-seventy percent easily. And now the Clade-Primaris was telling fifty percent of the best candidates were failing...because their very body failed them? This was more insane than the first trials added to each other...

“Traditionally, the first dose of Polymorphine is injected at the start of the Ninth Level...”

A door opened and two massive servants equipped in heavy black armours dragged a young red-haired woman by the arms. Judging by the countless places where her skin had turned blue and the dozens of wounds, it was almost a miracle she was breathing.

“I have decided this will be your first test for the Ninth Level,” declared Xanaria Lythis. “While some experienced assassins think they can keep their birth appearance for Temple affairs, my experience is totally against this sort of emotional weakness. We are Imperial Assassins and we use everything in our arsenal to eliminate our targets.”

The fingers which touched her lips and her cheeks were lukewarm, but the words conveyed with the touch were icing her to her very soul.

“You will abandon your first mortal shell. Together, we will forge your new one...when you will leave this room, you will have given everything to the Officio Assassinorum. Your looks, your body...and your name.”

The wounded girl – certain an apprentice given her muscles and her lack of regular Callidus uniform – regained consciousness and tried to escape the bounds of the armoured guards, but in pure loss. Bound and gagged, the red-haired girl was placed on a sort of operation table, unable to escape her fate.

“Sophia, remove your clothes.”

She obeyed before a thought of protestation came. The sort of black sportswear-uniform was abandoned on the cold floor as were her boots.

“Is the drug going to hurt?”

“Atrociously,” replied Xanaria. “Reshaping the human body is hardly something painless, and one never forgets the first times. Now concentrate. I want you to take the appearance of this failure. Assimilate all traits, study every detail of your enemy...and change!”

The bite of the vial-syringe entering contact with her blood brought her a gasp in the first couple of heartbeats.

This was nothing however compared to the ocean of agony which engulfed her five heartbeats later. This was like she had just been poured poison in her lungs, fire in her legs and each bone, muscle and organ in her body was hammered by a mad scientist.

The image of the red-haired girl’s body was in her head, but as bones and muscles shifted Sophia screamed in agony. She saw darkness, maybe she was hallucinating? There were tendrils of light, two vast...things...coursing with energy and so vast...

**[ADDITION]**

**[CHANGE]**

**[COMPLETION]**

There was a last spike of raw, unbelievable agony and then it stopped.

“Seven seconds, exceptional,” and for the first time in her training, Sophia heard the voice of Xanaria Lythis carry hints of respect in it. “There are several apprentices of the First Level slower than you, my apprentice.”

Sophia stood slowly, watching the changes the Polymorphine had given her body. Her black skin had disappeared like it had never existed, replaced by a white similar to the one exhibited by the Clade-Primaris. Her hairs were now a brilliant shade of red, and when she looked in one of the mirrors present in the room, her eyes were a nearly-transparent blue. Her breasts were a bit bigger and she was taller now, her muscles a bit more developed. She felt stronger, more in control.

“You have a last task to complete the change.”

A dagger was thrown in the air and she caught it without looking. What was her teacher implying? Then her eyes turned to the bound woman she had just turned into the perfect copy. Sophia hesitated.

“Who are we, apprentice?”

“We are the killing tools of the Imperium,” and her blade cut the throat of the failed apprentice. Blood flowed on the heavily beaten skin and the breaths of her victim grew erratic. The light in the pale blue eyes dimmed before vanishing.

A new appearance sealed in blood. She knew there was no return from this point. They had broken everything in her and now the only question was how long they would spend tempering the blade before they declared her ready.

A roll was placed in her hands. On it were thousands of names, some amusing, some awful and many which weren’t even for women. In eight heartbeats, she made her choice.

“This one.”

“An original choice,” Xanaria Lythis judged, “but one no one has taken until now. I give you half an hour to adapt to your new body before starting the next phase of your training. Your new clothes are here...”

This was not a Callidus skin-tight uniform, but was beginning to look like one, with the only non-black shade being a few green inscriptions and a brilliant ‘nine’. The cloth espoused her new unfamiliar body and she felt colder than ever.

“You are CA-608MQ17XL-9, Elena Kerrigan, Apprentice of the Ninth Level, Officio Assassinorum. The real training begins now.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Andes System**

**7.534.289M35**

**Tech-Priest Dragon Richter**

According to the psychological books she had read after several crazy debates on PHO, Dragon knew there were five stages of grief. The first step was denial, which was followed by anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

If some day they found a way to return to an Earth Bet which wasn’t ashes and dust, Dragon would publish an article to affirm it didn’t apply to parahumans.

Or at least, that it didn’t apply to Taylor Hebert.

The denial when she had announced the ruin of their homeworld had only lasted a few seconds – she had sufficient evidence and the insect-mistress apparently had respected her words enough to believe her sum-up of the post-Behemoth disaster. Of bargaining and depression, she hadn’t yet seen a single trace. For the moment Weaver was stuck to the status ‘full-blown rage’ and there was no sign she intended to change her mind about that any time soon.

You might think the next best thing to ten days was sufficient to calm down, but in the case you subscribed to this opinion, you hadn’t met the former warlord of Brockton Bay. Taylor Hebert had sworn to kill Scion six hundred and thirty-four times in her presence, and the rest of her death threats had been so inventive and nasty some of the soldiers standing in the vicinity were whistling in appreciation.

This was at moments like this Dragon thought the system of classification imagined by the PRT and the popular opinion about which powers were ‘useful’, ‘cool’ and ‘dangerous’ needed a deep reform. In her wrath, Weaver had extended temporarily her mastery’s range by nearly one hundred per cent and she had reports of insects behaving weirdly nearly two kilometres away all over the Guard transport ship.

Her new superior in the Mechanicus, Magos Desmerius Lankovar, had profusely congratulated her for carefully locking away the beetles and other dangerous nasty creatures before her first serious talks with Hebert. Insect-shaped humanoid faces buzzing and screaming were disturbing when you saw them, but hardly dangerous. Dragon had really no wish to discover what the warlord once known as Skitter could do in space, a very small area perfect to use her powers in vicious and devastating ways.

“At least you avoided alcohol,” Dragon said as the young woman had finished demolishing a training room with nothing bigger than a laspistol and a few dozen flies.

“I’m the daughter of a dockworker,” the reply was not long in coming from the middle of the war zone Taylor Hebert had transformed the training grounds into. “I saw enough friends of my father drunk to know alcohol solves nothing...and besides have you tried to drink what the Imperial call alcohol?”

The Tinker nodded, acknowledging the point. Wine and other grape-related beverages had not survived the millennia. Amasec and the other ‘alcoholic’ drinks might look like wine, beer or liquor if you didn’t glance too long, but they weren’t, not really. The ingredients used for their creation were mostly issued from the future-chemical industry and the taste...well Dragon was not the best judge but she was sure the Eastern Coast of North America would have risen in rebellion if their drinks had been replaced by their M35-equivalent. To call them disgusting was complimenting these drinks.

Taylor Hebert leant against the wall and most of the insects dispersed.

“Why are you here, Dragon?”

“Hmm...estimating how much damage the other Tech-Priests will need to restore it to its initial state?”

The chuckle she received in return was genuine, albeit a bit forced.

“No, I mean...why have you stayed with Lankovar? The moment they were many warships in orbit, you could have left...I know the Mechanicus is as far removed from ‘good’ and ‘heroism’ you can possibly dream...”

This was something she had thought a lot about, really. There were many reasons in the end to follow this course, ranging from the logical and pragmatic to the idealist.

“You are right, I could have escaped their vigilance. But my contribution with rebuilding the Karon Battle-Tank would have ensured a high bounty on my head. I don’t exactly enjoy the idea of being hunted across this galaxy, not when I haven’t the slightest idea to return to the one where we were born. I must also watch you over...the Simurgh alone knows what you will do if you don’t have someone to oversee your actions.”

“I am not that irresponsible...”protested Weaver. Dragon thought it was better to return a bland look and move on from there. “Speaking of the Simurgh, the Endbringers?”

“Behemoth and Leviathan were confirmed destroyed by Scion before I arrived in this dimension. I don’t know if the Simurgh received the same treatment. It’s entirely possible her annihilation was confirmed minutes later, she was never the most powerful of the Endbringers...”

“No, just the one obsessed with mind-games, with plans including huge parts of sadism, psychological warfare and eldritch horrors.” Taylor Hebert sighed while trying in pure loss to comb her black hairs. “Better to assume the Simurgh is alive. I won’t recognise she is dead until I see the corpse...just to be sure, you understand.”

Yes, with any other opponent, Dragon would have it called paranoia...but this was the Simurgh they were talking about.

“Anyway, I will be of this expedition for a couple of years, I think. The sudden all-out attack from the long-ears has proved the data-bases I was able to read had glaring black holes about the state of this universe. And for best or worse, the Mechanicus is one of the best options we have to one day travel back to a friendly M3-Earth which isn’t a dystopian nightmare.”

“Couldn’t you try to reform the Mechanicus by yourself? You were idolised by tens of thousands and recognised as the greatest Tinker of the world...”

Dragon tried not to look too please with herself at Weaver’s compliment.

“I think you severely underestimate the size of the problem, but I thank you for the vote of confidence.” She shook her head in a motion she didn’t require. “The Mechanicus has laws, traditions, institutions and codes against innovation and rapid change. It doesn’t matter right now whether they were established for right or wrong reasons; they are in place and to change them you need to be on top of the system. I am still years away from assimilating a significant percentage of the Imperium technological base and afterwards the tools in my possession would still need to be inadequate. Best case is, I would need to convince a Fabricator or a High Magos to let me rule his Forge-World in all but name...and I don’t think I can emphasize how loud the old red robes would scream if I ever propose that.”

“If changing the system from the inside isn’t possible...it would be best to start from scratch, no?”

Dragon had considered this scenario already. There was just a tiny problem with that.

“For this to work, I would need a planet with abundant mineral resources, and certainly the beginning of a workforce receptive to the idea of reform. A larger tech-base available wouldn’t hurt too. And colonising a planet is not cheap. In fact, buying the planet in the first place is not cheap. You might get one if you get to retire a Lord Commander Militant...in a century or two.”

The mistress of insects and arthropods of all kind grimaced.

“I won’t deny they are more inclined to give me medals when I kill their enemies than selling me planets at discount prices...”

An internal chronometer informed her ‘Tech-Priest Dragon Richter’ had to return to the *Magos Laurentis* for several meetings and other brainstorming sessions – which quite unofficially were boring as hell for an AI like her and there was no forum to moderate while they squabbled in the dark.

“Good! I must return on the cruiser, try to think about something else while I’m away. Like kissing this Asian top model you hired in your staff...you are so cute when you are watching her with dove eyes...”

Dragon had to avoid some rubble sent at her and left the training room in a hurry. Idly, she activated some servitors and looked if the twelve betting pools predicting the love life of Weaver were increasing their activity.

They were.

“I swear the Imperial can be worse than PHO when it comes to smut, conspiracies and star-corssed lover stories...”

**Beyond the Light of the Astronomican**

**Eastern Fringe**

**Solemnace World Engine**

**8.617.289M35**

**Cryptek Somatek the Patient**

Thievery had not been considered a grave crime when the Necrons had still been called Necrontyrs and hadn’t the slightest idea how strange and illogical the galaxy could be. Well, as long as you stole an artefact from your social caste and the object you had robbed was less than a twentieth of the dispossessed’s fortune, you might be able to get away with it.

Nobles were the exception. Overlords, Nemesors or any lesser member of the aristocracy were absolutely forbidden to steal the possessions of another noble. Whether you were a noble or not, if evidence existed you had stolen from the ruler caste, the punishment was death...and certain dynasties had invented methods to keep you in agony for a very long period of time.

Abandoning their sick and irradiated flesh had made stealing clearly an impossible task. When everyone was following the orders of the Overlord without the ability to disobey and said leaders considered thievery a honourless and sacrilegious deed, stealing was supposedly an extinct crime, a reminder how weak they had been before drinking the poisoned gift of the C’Tan.

But it seemed that in all great matters there were exceptions to the rule, and Trazyn the Infinite Collector was the one the Necrons had to accept in their ranks.

Lesser races and great thieves would steal sceptres, strange artefacts, swords, guns and minor treasures.

Trazyn the Infinite had during his last travel stolen an Ork Gargant.

Yes, a Gargant. The ultimate expression of violence for the greenskins. The war engine most galactic armies took a good look at and fled with their tail between their legs. That Gargant. And because stealing it was not sufficiently impressive, the Chief Archaeovist had decided to brink the owner of the massive machine – a Warboss of above-average size – and twenty thousand of its troops.

Had Somatek had not experienced thousands of similar situations since the process of bio-transference had made him immortal, he would have lashed out, but experience had made him realise Trazyn was Trazyn and there was no way to change his mind.

He would have just to transform eighty percent of these barbaric creatures into green paste, cut the head of the Warboss to prevent any escape attempt and cut the hearts of the runs and disable the most dangerous devices of the Gargant.

It was just a processing cycle like any other in the archives of Solemnace.

“We will move these orks on the new level and get rid of the ones which were collected sixty-one expeditions ago.”

“I obey, Cryptek.”

“And remove these horrors with twelve paws and the freezing breath. We got much better specimens seven expeditions ago.”

It was a never-ending quest, truly. The Solemnace galleries had never stopped expanding – the World Engine aside, Somatek had manipulated time and space to create over a dozen empty pocket dimensions. There were also the wormhole-type portals allowing the Solemnace Crypteks to access over twenty worlds where the collections had been hidden in deep underground bases. And despite this, there were always forced to make choices, removing artefacts, planetary-killer devices, warships, tanks, armies of young species and the like.

Their Overlord had promised several times the collection would not be modified when the signal came for the Necron race to rise again from eternal slumber and claim total dominance of the galaxy. Somatek had his doubts. He had seen too many carcasses of ruined Tomb-Worlds to believe the reawakening would be a painless affair.

“We will move the clown-pests two levels down and...”

The familiar alarm telling Somatek something had gone wrong sounded in the galleries.

“What has gone wrong this time?” The Cryptek grumbled in a morose tone. “I sincerely hope the barriers around the Krork section aren’t weakening...”

By the time he reached the command nexus, sufficient information had been sent to his data-banks for him to know it was one of the devices the Chief Archaeovist had activated recently outside of Solemnace.

“Lord Cryptek, the problem lies with the trans-dimensional connectors of the Nebula’s Shard. We have confirmation of a great number of eldar life-signatures killed. The emissions of the sword are formal, there is no error possible.”

“I understand.”

And he did. In the name of the Silent King, what sort of madness had taken the Infinite Collector to let a Sword of Vaul in the hands of a human? These hypocrites of Eldar Farseers were always searching for them, and thanks to their sorcery-precognition, thousands could converge at any moment on your position.

“What is happening around the Nebula’s Shard?”

The Chief Archaeovist had arrived, his purple cape and his decorations shining under the green artificial lights of the World Engine.

“Eldar signatures detected near the Nebula’s Shard, Lord Trazyn.” It was the same to say the sword had killed these arrogant creatures with long ears. It was a moment worth applauding. Anything bad which happened to the favourites of the Old Ones was good news for the Necron dynasties.

“Have they managed to recover it?”

“No, Chief Archaeovist. There was an attempt from an eldar to touch the Nebula’s Shard, but it stopped quickly and the sword is back in Weaver’s hands according to the latest data-flow.”

Somatek delivered his report and prayed his master was going to be reasonable. The next words listened to by his sensors lessened considerably his hopes.

“So the insect-controller has certainly gained valuable Eldar specimens for my collection. Excellent!”

A series of command was given to one of the many lesser artificial intelligences of Solemnace and a map representing the eastern half of the galaxy materialised in the centre of the command room.

“I want your best extrapolation on their future destination, Cryptek,” the Infinite Collector ordered.

Compared to most calculus, astronomy predictions and disaster preventions he had to solve on a day-per-day basis, this one was almost unworthy of his attention. But the Overlord had commanded, and he obeyed. To do anything else was impossible.

“If the information of the Nebula’s Shard is accurate, they must be close to the System their ignorant Empire has classified as S-4697X5T4.”

Then a new alert blared up, and Somatek slammed his instruments against the floor as the immense knowledge of the Necron explorers recognised the stellar data.

“And this system was one of ours before the Great Sleep, it appears. The fortress of Delphimonia...oh by the Void Dragon...”

Yes, yes he remembered precisely who exactly was in charge of this Tomb-World.

“Prepare the *Sublime Collection* for an emergency departure,” commanded Trazyn.

“Chief Archaeovist, may I remind you the Phaerakh of this world threatened to inflict a terrible vengeance on your collections if you tried to steal something from her...again?”

“But I will not journey to her fortress to acquire her relics...I go there to enlarge my collection of Eldar and human specimens!”

There were times Somatek was sure the C’Tan had deliberately made the Overlord utterly and completely mad just to see the Necron nobility scream in rage. As their eternal service continued, he was more and more concerned this theory was absolutely correct.

“Orders acknowledged, the Sublime Collection is being prepared for your new collecting-quest, Chief Archaeovist...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**7.616.289M35**

**Magos Desmerius Lankovar**

Desmerius Lankovar had returned to one of his main experimentation rooms five standard hours ago. The Warp was calm according to the Navigator, the Magos Laurentis was nearly twenty-three hours away from the translation back into reality and his Questor was competent enough to deal with the minor issues agitating the bridge’s crew of a warship.

Slowly, methodically, the senior Tech-Priest analysed the Necron crystal with five new mechadendrites he had himself developed from ancient archeotech. The results were...illuminating. What could at first sight be considered a pale emerald was in reality the equivalent of a mini fusion-reactor of incredible complexity and the Necrons had somehow found a way to add a sort of data-command combining machine-spirit and targeting-auspex.

And this crystal had been gained from the dismantled wreck of a basic infantry gun. It was extremely fascinating...and frustrating, for by all physic laws, this technology was purely and simply impossible. The conservation of energy law alone should have required fusion-devices three times bigger and...

The *Magos Laurentis* shook brutally, alarms began to scream and suddenly all the precautions he had taken in the last hours proved their worth as the crystal was immediately stored behind ten entire set of protections.

Lankovar ordered his three servitors to mount guard and activated his boosters before running to the bridge as the walls of metal shook and Tech-Priests of neighbouring labs locked their possessions. Before he was back on the bridge, a sensation crawled on his outer skin and the warship stopped shaking. At this moment, the Magos of Stygies VIII knew they had left the Warp.

“Questor, I hope you have a good reason for imposing us this emergency Warp-translation,” he voiced in binaric to Wismer as he arrived on the bridge.

“I think I have, Magos,” Mechadendrites pointed to a brilliant gravitic anomaly between them and the outer edge of the S-4697X5T4 System. “The Navigator detected in time this anomaly and I immediately agreed to leave the Warp before our ship and the rest of our expeditionary fleet were destroyed...”

“It has to be a Space Hulk, Magos,” emitted a junior Tech-Priest. “The mass and the gravitic anomalies alone are...”

“No it is not,” he cut his subordinate. It was a logical deduction, but in this case it was an error. An understandable error, but an error still.

And as the images began to arrive on the hololith, his worst simulations were revealed all too accurate. The object which had stopped their journey in the Warp was a massive orb of metal, and the insults arriving from the vox sections and the ugly decorations on it told him everything he needed to know.

“Begin to send astropathic calls for reinforcements. Inform the Imperial Guard and the Imperial Navy we have found how the orks invaded the Nyx Sector.”

First the eldar attack in the Andes System and now this? The probabilities were so infinitesimal...

“The Orks have managed to salvage one of their abominable Battle-moons...”

**Author’s note**: Note that if you think the next chapters are going to be a great moment of peace between humans and other species, you aren’t reading the good story (heavy grin). The problems are going to multiply for Taylor and Dragon, and the opposition is mobilising its forces...which considering parahuman powers may be a very, very bad decision. Shards thrive on conflict and Skitter was not feared in the fair city of Brockton bay because she surrendered at the first enemy met...

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment my writing:

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/