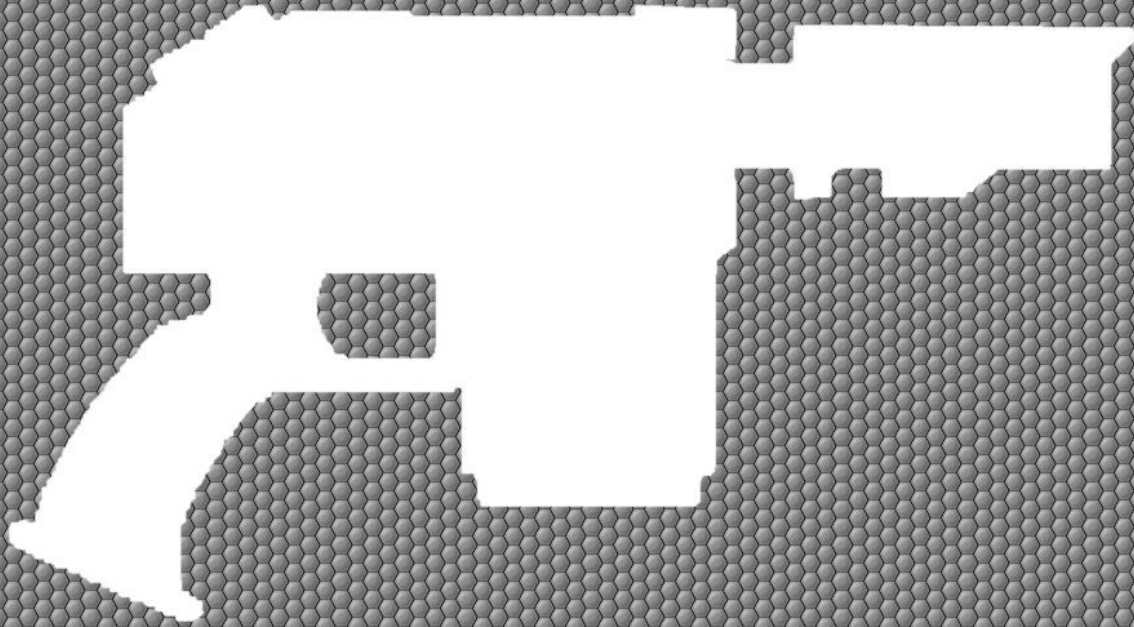


**HERO'S WELCOME**



**BY STEPHEN J DUTTON**

# **HERO'S WELCOME**

**By Stephen J Dutton BSc (hons) BEng (hons)**

For anyone who joins the Imperial Guard it is almost unheard of for them ever to see their home world again. However, when the parents and older brother of Prince Torien of Toltek all die in rapid succession he finds himself summoned back to the world of his birth to assume the role of king.

It does not take long for him to start questioning the circumstances around his relatives' deaths though and in addition to having to deal with the political aspirations of the planetary nobility and hostility to his return from sections of his own family he finds himself trying to uncover a conspiracy that could see him be the next to die.

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# 1.

"I have just come from the King's bed chamber." Victrus, Chief Minister of the King's Court announced to the small group of men gathered together in the meeting chamber of the Toltek royal palace in the capital city of Tula, "His Majesty is dead."

The other men exchanged worried looks. King Ramiro had been the planetary monarch for only a few weeks since the tragic deaths of both his parents in rapid succession and he had not even been formally crowned. All of the men knew that the death of a third member of the royal family and the second monarch in such a short space of time could have a disastrous effect on the moral of the planetary population.

"What will you tell the people?" one of the men asked. Although he had a similar tanned complexion that was near universal on Toltek his eyes featured tiny folds of skin on the inside corner that betrayed his off world origin. Adept Hom was the most senior member of the Imperial Administration on the planet and for roughly a century he had served as an intermediary between the planetary authorities and the wider Imperium.

"The truth to a certain degree adept." Victrus replied and another of the men present frowned.

"You'll tell the people that our king was a drug addict?" he said as Victrus sat down and the chief minister sighed.

"They will be told that the king had a fatal heart attack. The royal physicians did their best to repair the damage but were unsuccessful. The Adeptus Mechanicus confirmed that a bionic replacement was not viable and as such the King's life ceased this morning. There is no need for them to be told that His Majesty's heart attack was caused by his habitual use of a drug that is banned." he said, "Now there is the matter of succession. Since Ramiro was not married he had no offspring of his own. Therefore, the line of succession falls to his younger brother Ossian."

"Ossian is just a boy. Barely into his teens and the people have seen so little of him most probably couldn't pick him out if they saw him. Making him king will be a gift to the Democracy League." another of the men said.

"Princess Kaitlin will act as regent until he comes of age." Victrus said, "She may be a woman but she is known to the people and she will be able to act as a figurehead while this council prepares King Ossian for his role."

"Prince Ossian. He is not king yet chief minister." a man in military uniform commented.

"Do you deny his right to rule General Marquez? I'm not sure how the Imperium would view a military coup." Victrus responded.

"As long as this planet meets its obligations to the Imperium the nature of its government is irrelevant." Hom said, "Even a democracy of sorts, though quaint in this day and age, would be acceptable. Within limits of course. The people may be allowed to think that they have choices but they must never be allowed to chose a path that would threaten the Emperor's authority." then he paused before he continued, "However, the monarchy of the House of Alvarez has endured for ten thousand years since the days of the Great Crusade and it has proven its stability. Therefore, maintaining it would be considered preferable and any attempt to usurp power could result in a serious response."

"Astartes?" an elderly man asked and Hom smiled.

"Unlikely. Though Toltek is an important world in this region of space it is hardly so vital that Adeptus Astartes would be deployed to quell any problems. On the other hand a naval squadron could easily seize control of your orbital facilities while the Adeptus Arbites moved against the ringleaders of a revolution here on the surface." he said.

"But a woman? Even as a figurehead that is unheard of on Toltek. Other worlds may treat women as equal to men but as Adept Hom as said our system has served us well for ten thousand years. The nobles may suspect that Princess Kaitlin is trying to undermine it." the elderly man said.

"We have no other choice." Victrus said.

"That is not quite accurate chief minister." Hom said, "Ossian is not the true heir. Prince Torien is." General Marquez immediately snorted.

"Torien left Toltek twenty years ago with the Imperial Guard. I'd expect someone in your position to know what that means adept." he said.

Everyone sat around the table knew that service with the Imperial Guard meant that leaving the planet was a one way journey. The Imperium would move regiments from one war zone to another and sometimes a victorious regiment would be allowed to settle on a world that they had conquered for the Imperium but apart from small groups of guardsmen who would act as recruiting parties no-one who served would ever see their homeworld again.

"I know what weakening the government of Toltek could mean and so does the Administration." Hom replied, "Prince Torien is next in line of succession. He left to join the Imperial Guard only because he saw nothing for

him here on Toltek other than a life as a minor noble while his older brother became king. Now he is a war hero and popular with your people. His exploits in battle have been widely reported and because of this I began consulting with the Departamento Munitorum when it became clear that King Ramiro's condition was life threatening. They have agreed that the loss of one regiment of guardsmen is worth maintaining stability here. It is also thought that bringing back Prince Thorien and the Sixteenth Toltek Regiment will boost the popularity of the Imperial Guard. I commissioned a poll that suggested that voluntarily recruitment could be increased by thirty-seven percent if the regiment returned in triumph. Toltek would have its rightful king and your tradition of male primacy would be secure."

Now it was Victrus' turn to smile.

"How soon could he return?" he asked.

"The Sixteenth Regiment is currently in transit between operations. Their transport can be diverted within a week and travel to Toltek should take no more than two months assuming optimum conditions." Hom answered and Victrus nodded before he got to his feet and looked around the table.

"Then I move that this council declares Prince Torien as the true and rightful heir to the throne and that arrangements be made to crown him king upon his return." he said, "What do the rest of you say?"

Marquez was the next to get to his feet.

"Long live King Torien." he said clearly.

As an officer in the Imperial Guard, Torien had ridden in Aquila pattern landers many times though this was the first time that he had sat in the command throne located in the passenger compartment. On all his previous journeys aboard them he had sat in one of the more basic seats that were positioned either side of the compartment. These seats were currently occupied by four other individuals, only one of whom was also a native of Toltek and Torien looked at him.

"Are you laughing at me Colonel Barrera?" he said.

"I wouldn't think of it Your Majesty." Barrera replied and then Torien looked down at his own uniform again.

"Being promoted to general just doesn't feel right. I'm a captain." he said.

"You were a captain Your Majesty," one of the other passengers said. This man had lighter skin and wore the usual long black coat of the commissariat, the agents responsible for enforcing discipline among the Imperium's regular armed forces. Hearing this man who was not from Toltek addressing him by his new royal title seemed oddly strange to Torien. During his service being a prince had counted for nothing. All that mattered was his ability to follow orders and lead men into battle to kill the Emperor's enemies, "but we can hardly have a king having to salute a major or a colonel so appointing you as a general made perfect sense." "Let's face it, it would only have been a matter of time before you became a general anyway." the other lighter skinned man in the craft's passenger compartment said. He also wore a military uniform but the style and colour were radically different from the Toltek dress uniforms that Torien and Barrera wore. Sergeant Nathin Tanner was a native of the death world of Catachan and had served as a bodyguard to Torien for most of the time he had served with the Imperial Guard.

"In twenty years maybe. Assuming I wasn't killed first." Torien replied.

"Nevertheless Your Majesty, Sergeant Tanner's comment is accurate." the last of the passengers added. This was the only woman among the passengers although it was impossible to tell just by looking. Tara 18-4 Kappa was a tech priestess of the Adeptus Mechanicus and she had served long enough to have replaced all of the body parts visible under her red robes with machinery as well as adding a number of mechandrite tentacles. This included her vocal chords and her voice was instead generated electronically and did not sound remotely human, let alone female, "Your service record was impressive and if continued would have led to further promotion."

"Maybe but I don't feel like I earned it yet." Torien said before the intercom activated so that the Aquila's pilot could address his passengers.

"Two minutes to touch down." he announced.

"Well here we go." Torien said though he and the other passengers kept their safety harnesses fastened for the time being, waiting until they felt the lurch of the craft setting down on the ground.

The passengers all then released their harnesses and stood up, forming a line side by side in front of the main hatch at the rear of the craft before there was a hiss as it was released. The Aquila lander had set down on the palace landing pad instead of at the capital city's spaceport and Torien now got his first look at his family home in sixteen years. Although ornately decorated the royal palace had been designed to resist attack and it was an imposing structure. There were just a few obvious entry points and all of these were covered by firing points that allowed guards inside to shoot at anyone trying to force their way in. seeing this immediately brought back memories of the childhood Torien had spent here with his siblings.

Two rows of soldiers in dress uniforms stretched from the Aquila to the entrance to the palace and standing between them was Victrus along with Hom and General Marquez standing either side of him.

"Your Majesty, welcome home to Toltek. Your people have been eagerly awaiting your arrival." Victrus said.

"Victrus?" Torien said as he walked down the ramp from the Aquila, "Throne, it's good to see you again. Though you look older than I remember."

"It has been twenty years Your Majesty." Victrus pointed out and Torien frowned.

"Twenty?" he said.

"Time dilation from warp travel has resulted in the subjective time you experienced being shorter than the elapsed time in real space." Tara 18-4 Kappa reminded him.

"Of course. I never considered that." Torien said.

"I presume that you remember Adept Hom also." Vitrus said.

"Yes, although you don't seem to have aged that much in twenty years adept." Torien responded.

"Perhaps because I was already two hundred years old when you departed Your Majesty. I am fortunate enough to have access to rejuvenant treatments to slow the ageing process." Hom replied before Torien turned towards General Marquez.

"I don't believe that we've met before though." he said.

"General Marquez was a major in your father's armies when you left Your Majesty. Now he commands the planetary defence force." Victrus told him.

"It was an honour to serve the late king Your Majesty." Marquez said before briefly adding, "Both of them."

"Thank you. Now I suppose I should introduce my companions. Colonel Barrera commands the Sixteenth Regiment and he will be overseeing their deployment here. Commissar North is its regimental commissar and will also be staying on with it. Enginseer Tara Eighteen-Four Kappa is my technical advisor from the Adeptus Mechanicus and Sergeant Tanner is my personal bodyguard. Both of them will need quarters assigning in the palace." Torien said.

"I will provide you with a set of specifications." Tara 18-4 Kappa added.

"As Your Majesty wishes." Victrus said, bowing his head before Torien took on a more serious expression.

"Now perhaps you can tell me what happened here Victrus. The only news to reach me is that both of my parents as well as Ramiro are dead. How did that happen?" he asked.

"Perhaps we should discuss inside Your Majesty. There are certain details that have not been made public." Victrus answered and Torien nodded.

"Please lead the way." he said.

Walking between the two rows of soldiers standing at attention, Victrus led Torien and his party into the royal palace through the main entrance that was located close by. This brought them into a large hallway and Torien immediately ground to a halt as he saw his own face looking down at him from the opposite wall. This had been decorated with a finely detailed wooden panel that had been carved to show a military force being led by Torien with a sword raised high as he and his men charged forwards.

"Now that's impressive." Nathin said as he took in the carving. He noticed that there were depictions of Orks as corpses at the bottom of the carving along with the body of a man in the uniform of an officer of the Toltek 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment that also bore a resemblance to Torien and from this he guessed what the carving was depicting, "So is the battle that got you your promotion to company command? Where you took over from your uncle?" he added, glancing at Torien.

"It was commissioned by King Haddon as soon as we received the news." Victrus said, "It took two years to carve and there was a grand unveiling for nobility from around the planet. The population here has followed your exploits with interest Your Majesty."

"So I see." Torien said, "Though I wouldn't say that this was historically accurate."

"It was a glorious charge." Barrera said, "It steadied our lines and put the Orks on the back foot."

"Which is why the late king wanted it commemorated." Hom said, "He wanted to inspire the population by showing them how his own son had become a hero."

"And he also wanted to bathe in some of your supposed glory Torien." a female voice said from above them and Torien looked up to see a woman who appeared about his own age walking calmly down a flight of stairs towards them. The woman looked familiar to Torien but he could not quite place her until he remembered the time dilation that meant longer had passed here on Toltek than had passed for him while he had been travelling in the warp.

"Kaitlin." he said, smiling as he looked at his younger sister, "It's so good to see you again."

Kaitlin walked right up to Torien and he held out his arms to embrace her but before he could do this she suddenly scowled and drew back her hand before slapping him hard across the face.

"Your highness!" Victrus exclaimed in horror.

"What the hell Kaitlin?" Torien added before she slapped him a second time. She drew back her hand to land a third blow but before she could manage this Nathin intervened while the other Toltek just looked on in surprise, leaping forwards and wrapping his arms around her so that he pinned her arms to her sides.

"Let go of me!" she snapped, struggling to try and get free.

“Calm down there girl.” Nathin told her.

“Girl? I’m a princess of House Alvarez and I command you to get your hands off me.” Kaitlin yelled.

“Your Highness you must apologise to the King.” Victrus said.

“Apologise? Never!” Kaitlin shouted.

“Perhaps we should get her out of here.” Nathin suggested and Torien nodded.

“Take her to her quarters. I’ll speak to her later.” he said and Victrus then signalled to a female member of the palace staff who had been watching from the top of the stairs and appeared just as shocked as everyone else at what had happened.

“You girl! Escort Sergeant Tanner and Princess Kaitlin to the princess’s chamber.” he ordered.

“Yes my lord.” she replied and as Kaitlin continued to struggle Nathin lifted her off her feet and threw her over his shoulder before carrying her up the stairs.

“Your Majesty are you alright?” Victrus asked, turning to Torien.

“I’ll be fine.” he replied, rubbing his cheek where Kaitlin had hit him and then he pointed to the carving, “As you can see I’ve experienced far worse than a couple of slaps.”

“Your Majesty she must be punished.” Marquez said.

“General I’m not going to have it known that the first order I gave on my return was having my own sister flogged.” Torien replied.

“General Marquez has a point Your Majesty.” Commissar North added, “Her position is no excuse.”

“Maybe not but I’d like to find out exactly what she thought she was playing at. Sergeant Tanner can keep her out of the way for a couple of hours to give her the chance to calm down and then I’ll go and see what she has to say for herself.” Torien said.

“As Your Majesty wishes.” Victrus replied.

“So can you explain to me what’s been going on around here now?” Torien asked.

“Of course Your Majesty, but if you’d like to come to the throne room I need to introduce you to your siblings.” Victrus said.

“Siblings? Victrus Ramiro is dead and Kaitlin has just been sent to her room.” Torien said.

“Your Majesty, were you not told? You have another brother and sister. They were born after you left with the Imperial Guard.” Victrus said and Torien looked at Barrera and North.

“I didn’t know that. Did either of you know that?” he said.

“We didn’t exactly get a lot of news from home.” Barrera said.

“News about events on a regiment’s home world is not normally distributed. Bad news can negatively affect morale.” North added.

“And nobody thought to mention it when we were ordered to come back here?” Torien added.

“We thought you already knew Your Majesty. I am sorry that-” Victrus began.

“It doesn’t matter now Victrus. Adept Hom please take Coloenl Barrera, Commissar and Enginseer Tara Eighteen-four Kapa. I want arrangements making to bring the Sixteenth Regiment down to the surface. They’ll be taking over the defence of the palace. I intend to have them renamed as The King’s Regiment.”

“Your Majesty the Royal Guard-” Marquez began.

“General the Royal Guard may have loyally served my family for generations but the Sixteenth are hardened veterans. They are better trained, better equipped and more experienced than even the best of the Planetary Defence Force. I intend to implement a program for them to train our forces and Tara Eighteen-four Kappa will review their equipment. Your input will be important so you should join them as well.” Torien told him.

“As you wish Your Majesty.” Marquez responded and Torien turned to Victrus again.

“Let’s just do this.” he told the chief minister, “Have my brother and sister brought to the throne room and I’ll receive them there.”

The throne room was exactly how Torien remembered it from all those years ago when he had been a child. Even then the appearance had been old, maintained over the generations without any deviation. The room was large enough to double as a function room so that the king could address a large number of people in person while he sat on his throne. This throne was set against the wall at the far end as Torien entered, at the centre of a raised stage that also had five other ornate seats lined up either side of the King’s throne. From his time growing up in the palace Torien knew that these were intended for the King’s immediate family and there was one seat each for his father, mother, older brother Ramiro, sister Kaitlin and also the two younger siblings he had only discovered existed a few moments before.

“We haven’t had the opportunity to correct the seating yet Your Majesty. Things have been rather busy.” Victrus told him and Torien nodded.

“That’s okay. We have plenty of time to move a bit of furniture.” he replied before he stepped up onto the stage and approached the king’s throne, now his. Tradition demanded that no-one but the king was allowed to sit on this throne but Torien remembered being a child and playing with Ramiro and Kaitlin, the three of them daring one another to sit on it when they thought that they would not get caught. Sometimes they had

been of course and they had been scolded for their behaviour but it had never stopped the three siblings from continuing the game right up to the last night before Torien left Toltek with the Imperial Guard. Thinking of this he hesitated before sitting down.

"Is something wrong Your Majesty?" Victrus asked.

"No, nothing. It just feels strange to be sitting here without worrying about who's going to come into the room and find me." Torien answered as he sat down and rested his arms on the arms of the throne.

Victrus then bowed his head.

"Your Majesty." he said simply before he turned around and left the throne room. He did not go far though, waiting in the hallway outside until a servant came into view with two young people. The older one of these was a girl in her late teens who wore a formal dress while the second was a younger boy also in formal clothing, "Your Highnesses there you are." Victrus said to them, "Come quickly the king is waiting."

"But Ramiro was King and you told me he was dead." the young boy said and the girl looked down at him.

"No Ossian, this is the new King. He's our brother. The one who went away." she said.

"Never mind that now." Victrus said, "Come quickly. The king is waiting." Victrus ushered the children into the throne room, escorting them to a point immediately in front of the stage, "Your Majesty may I introduce His Highness Prince Ossian Alvarez and Her Highness Princess Samara Alvarez." as Victrus spoke their names Ossian bowed and Samara curtsied as they had both been taught then Victrus added, "Your Highnesses may I introduce His Majesty King Torien Alvarez."

Ossian then frowned, looking at Torien.

"Are you my brother?" he asked and Torien smiled.

"Yes Ossian, I'm your older brother. I left Toltek before you were born." he replied and then he stood up before jumping down from the stage and walking up to his siblings, "Now I'm back though."

"When Ramiro got sick Kaitlin told me I was supposed to be the King if he died. Why are you the King?" Ossian added.

"Because he's older. We talked about this." Samara said and Ossian stared at Torien for a few moments.

"Is that a las pistol?" Ossian added, when he saw the weapon holstered on Torien's belt and Torien nodded.

"Yes it is. I've carried this every day since I was given my commission." he said. Laser weapons were uncommon on Toltek and even the planetary defence force used projectile weapons as their standard infantry arms. What energy weapons existed on the planet were considered support weapons for the military or in the hands of wealthy private owners.

"What will happen to us now?" Samara asked, "Are we being sent away?"

"No of course not." Torien reassured her, "Father and Ramiro may be dead but we are still family and now it's my job to look after you just like they would have done. That means that you may come to me whenever you want for help. We're a family and families look out for one another."

"We don't need to request an audience first?" Samara said.

Torien remembered that when he was a child if he wanted to see either of his parents he needed to approach palace officials to arrange it. Luckily he had had Ramiro to go to as well and he and Kaitlin had both typically gone to their older brother for help and advice instead. Now though Torien wanted his siblings to be able to come to him directly.

"No. If I'm busy and can't be disturbed then there'll be someone there to tell you but I promise that I'll see you as soon as I possibly can." he told them, "We'll talk more at dinner. I've missed all of your lives up to now and I want to be able to get to know both of you properly. For now though I need to speak with Chief Minister Victrus. You may go."

Ossian then bowed again and Samara curtsied before they both exited the room, leaving Torien and Victrus alone. Torien followed his younger siblings to the doorway but rather than leave as well he pulled the large and ornate doors closed before turned back around to face his chief minister.

"Your Majesty?" Victrus said.

"There's no-one else around now Victrus." Torien said as he walked back towards him, "So how about you tell me what's been going on around here? All the details that haven't been made public. I want to know what happened to my parents and Ramiro."

Victrus sighed.

"It began with an accident Your Majesty." he said, "The driver of your father's official car lost control and the vehicle went off the road. The combination of the vehicle's weight and speed meant that it was able to crash through the safety barriers before falling down a steep drop. The force of the impact at the bottom was enough to kill your father and the other occupants of the car instantly."

"Was mother in the car with father?" Torien asked but Victrus shook his head.

"No Your Majesty. Your mother was here at the palace when your father was on his way to a meeting with Duke Vargas to discuss your older brother's wedding to his daughter." he said.

"My brother was engaged?" Torien commented and now Victrus nodded.

"Yes your Majesty. Duke Vargas arranged for his daughter Ursulla to marry your brother. In exchange the

Duke was offered to transfer a significant amount of land to the Royal Estate.” he explained.

“And what did Ramiro think of that?” Torien asked.

“He voiced no objections I knew of. I don’t really think he cared one way or another. Lady Ursulla Vargas is attractive and young. About the same age as Princess Kaitlin.” Victrus answered.

“I think I remember her. I don’t think she and Kaitlin were friends though.”

“No, your sister tolerated her when they were required to be at the same events. But they did not have much to do with one another.” Victrus said before he returned to the subject of how Torien’s parents had died, “The wedding had been agreed and discussions were underway about the exact time and place for the ceremony when King Haddon died. When the news was delivered to your mother she returned to her bed chamber and locked the door. Then about an hour later she leapt from the balcony and took her own life.”

Torien was startled by this news. Marriages among the nobility of Toltek were arranged for political or financial advantage but Torien remembered his parents genuinely caring about one another. However, he never thought of his mother as someone who would kill herself out of grief, especially when she still had four children to support her.

“What about Ramiro?” he said.

“I am sure that you remember how your older brother had a habit of seeking out entertainment in unsavoury places.” Victrus said nervously and Torien smiled at him.

“Yes, I remember that. He took me along with him a few times.” he said.

“Well he continued to do this after you left Toltek and at some point he began to use obscura among other narcotics and after your parents died he sought solace in these chemicals. Too many of them it seems.” Victrus said.

“He overdosed.” Torien commented.

“I’m afraid so Your Majesty. He suffered a heart attack as a result and was found in a comatose state before passing away two days later. The public were told that he had had a heart attack but not the reason behind it.” Victrus said.

“So no-one knows about my brother’s drug habit?” Torien asked.

“No. It was thought that such news would be too useful to your family’s enemies both inside and outside the nobility.” Victrus responded.

“The Democracy League?” Torien said.

“Yes your majesty. Their influence is still limited but it is stronger than it was when you left. They claim that the nobility is inherently corrupt and it was thought that news of your brother’s behaviour would strengthen that claim. It was also thought that placing your brother Ossian on the throne would strengthen opposition to the monarchy both inside and outside the nobility. The nobles would not want to deal with your sister Kaitlin as regent and having a boy king who was unable to take decisions for himself would make the monarchy look wasteful and out of touch, strengthening those who want it abolished further. On the other hand-”

“On the other I’m a war hero that you’ve been using for public relations for two decades from your point of view.” Torien interrupted.

“Yes Your Majesty. Luckily the Departmento Munitorum was receptive to the idea of having your regiment returned to Toltek. They think that the boost to public moral will also boost recruitment. We’ve never had any problems with meeting our tithe requirements but any increase would be welcomed.” Victrus said.

“And everyone’s happy.” Torien said, “Well at least everyone except Kaitlin. Can you explain why my sister decided that the first thing she wanted to do when I returned was hit me? I only remember us being close when we were children.”

“I agree Your Majesty. When you left Princess Kaitlin was very upset. In time of course she adjusted to your absence but she didn’t appear to be at all angry when it was announced that you would be returning to Toltek to take up the throne that is yours by right.” Victrus replied.

“Well then I guess that I’m just going to have to go and ask her for myself. Wish me luck.” Torien said.



## 2.

"The Royal Guard have never had the sort of heavy equipment that the Sixteenth has." Marquez said as he studied the dataslate that contained the full manifest of personnel and equipment for the Imperial Guard regiment still waiting in orbit aboard the massive transport ship that had brought them to Toltek, "We certainly don't have the facilities for charging lasgun power cells."

"Such equipment is part of the regiment's own order of battle general." Tara 18-4 Kappa said, "The specifications you have provided of the barracks occupied by the Royal Guard suggest that only limited reworking will be required. The heaviest vehicles will require new garages and servicing structures but those can be constructed in this area here." she added and she pointed to a map of Tula. The Royal Palace sat on the outskirts of the city, inland from the coast on the far side but close to the shore of a large lake that was surrounded by forest.

"Those forests have stood since the days of the Great Crusade. Public events are still held there to this day and the Royal Family use them for hunting." Marquez said, "You can't expect us to tear them down just to house tanks."

"From a logistical point of view the existence of such terrain is inefficient. Better to clear the area, release the lumber for basic construction elsewhere and repurpose the land." the tech priestess said.

"You'll have to excuse our representative from the Adeptus Mechincus general." Commissar North said, "They don't have the same appreciation for nature that the rest of us have."

"Nature is random and chaotic. Better to replace it with a more orderly system." Tara 18-4 Kappa added.

"See what I mean general?" North said.

"We can't clear the Royal Forest." Marquez said.

"I agree one hundred percent general." Barreca added, "What about this area here?" he continued and he pointed to another part of the map that was within the city limits themselves, "I seem to remember that it was a warehouse district for the docks that was getting rather run down. What is it used for now?"

"It's still full of warehouses though only about half of them are in use. They're owned by Duke Palomo." Hom answered, "He uses the losses from the empty ones as a write off against tax."

"Well then he can either sell some to the crown or the land can be leased from him." North said and Hom smiled.

"Adept Hom your expression suggests that you find something amusing." Tara 18-4 Kappa said.

"Oh I do. Every year that slippery fart Palomo tries to weasel out of paying his taxes by claiming on those losses. I've always suspected that he was exaggerating them but I was never able to prove it. Now I suppose he'll need to find a new excuse." Hom said and North frowned.

"The wilful evasion of Imperial taxes is a capital offence." he said, "At the very least he should spend the rest of his life in a penal battalion."

"Which is practically a death sentence given how many of them die in their first engagement." Barreca commented.

"Oh he never claimed anything against Imperial taxes, those he paid in full and on time." Hom said, "It was his local taxes he had a lot of deductions on. That meant that the Adeptus Arbites never took an interest and there was no formal audit of his accounts. I did raise the issue with King Haddon once or twice but he seemed content not to upset a nobleman that he may need for political support some day over something as simple as property taxes."

"Okay so we know where we'll be basing the men and their equipment." Barreca said, "Now what about bringing them down from the transport? Can the city spaceport handle the traffic?"

"Of course it can. The issue is just getting the workers to unload the equipment from the shuttles and then transfer it to ground haulers." Marquez said.

"They can't refuse." North said.

"It's not about refusal commissar." Marquez replied, "It's just that we don't get a constant flow of ships here so the dock labourers tend to be hired in advance as needed."

"The general is correct." Hom added, "Incoming vessels will transmit their manifests ahead of them so that the port authorities can arrange for workers and the Arbites can schedule an inspection. Then goods being exported on the ships when they depart will be loaded by those same workers before they take up other work. If you want to hire workers now then you need to pay them enough to make it worth their while to risk losing other longer term jobs. The full time dock staff that handles the day to day orbital and in system flights is less than a thousand men and servitors." he said.

"What about the guardsmen themselves? Aren't there enough of them aboard that transport that they can just unload all this gear themselves?" Marquez said.

"That may work on some planet where there is no spaceport general but here they need to know where everything is to go and how the local equipment works." Barreca replied.

"I shall contact the local labour guild." Hom said, "The sooner we start negotiations the sooner we can start bringing those troops down."

"We'll also need an advanced party to study the palace itself." Barreca said, "They can determine the most optimum deployment and the types of weapons to be issued."

It was then that the door to the office opened and Victrus entered the room.

"Chief minister." Hom said as he and Marquez started to get to their feet but he signalled for them to remain seated.

"What progress have you made?" he asked.

"Just the basics concerning bringing the troops down from orbit and billeting them for now." Marquez replied, "I have a manifest and the opinion is that space to house and maintain their vehicles can be obtained from the warehouses owned by Duke Palomo."

Victrus smiled when he heard this.

"Duke Palomo?" he commented, "I'd like to be present when the news is broken to him." he said.

"I'm sure that can be arranged chief minister." Marquez replied.

"I'll be bringing down an advanced unit from the regiment. Support personnel who can evaluate the palace interior and grounds." Barrera added, "Their job will be to assess the exact requirements of defending the palace."

"I still question the need for this change." Marquez said.

"I believe that the King's instructions were quite clear general." North commented.

"He knows where he stands with the men of the Sixteenth. He's fought alongside them after all." Barrera pointed out.

"The men of the Royal Guard won't be happy about this." Marquez said and North smiled.

"General, soldiers do not need to like the orders they are given. If necessary then perhaps I can deal with any malcontents. My authority extends to all soldiers subordinate to the Departamento Munitorum and that includes planetary defence forces." he said.

"Hopefully summary executions won't be necessary commissar. I'm sure that the Royal Guard will understand the King's thinking." Victrus said.

"Where is the King now?" Marquez asked.

"He's gone to see Princess Kaitlin. Hopefully he will be able to obtain a reasonable explanation for her behaviour." Victrus said.

Even though it had been more than a decade even from his point of view since he had last walked the hallways of the Royal Palace, Torien remembered them all precisely. The private chambers of the Royal Family themselves were located on the upper floors of the palace and Torien made his way up several flights of stairs to reach them. There were elevators that allowed less able members of the household to move between floors or for the transport of large objects but Torien preferred to take the stairs. Along the way he walked past numerous portraits of previous generations of the Royal Family and among them he saw some with his own image, though from when he was much younger than he was now. The newest picture featuring him was from when he was eighteen standard years old and wearing the uniform of the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment that he had just joined. Following these he saw pictures that were not familiar to him and it was easy to guess that they had been painted some time after he left. Although some of these were of his parents, Ramiro and Kaitlin there were also portraits of Samara and Ossian from shortly after they were born to how they had appeared when they were escorted into the throne room to be introduced to him.

Along the way he passed by several members of the household staff who were busy cleaning and maintaining the palace and they paused to bow or curtsy as he walked past, recognising him from the portraits despite the years that had passed since they were painted. Although he recalled his father often just walking on without responding to this Torien had spent his years in the Imperial Guard being saluted by subordinates and being expected to return these salutes so he nodded to each of them before continuing on his way towards Kaitlin's chamber.

Approaching the door to his sister's chamber he paused and knocked before entering.

"Come in." the familiar Catachan accented voice of Nathin called out from inside and Torien went inside.

The first person he saw was the palace servant who had guided and escorted Nathin here standing nervously close by the doorway before he spotted the big Catachan himself sat in a chair by the exit to the balcony. Then he heard an unintelligible muffled cry and turned around.

"Was this really necessary?" Torien then asked when he saw Kaitlin with her ankles tied together with a scarf, her wrists tied to the arms of the chair she had been sat in with two more while a final one had been used to gag her.

"She was making rather a lot of noise." Naithin answered, "I gave her the choice of being quiet or I'd shut her up myself. I'm sure you can guess how she reacted to that."

Torien sighed and looked at the servant.

"You can leave now." he told her.

"Your Majesty for two men to be in the princess's chamber-" she began.

"I'm the King and she is my sister. What are you suggesting?" Torien interrupted and the servant stared at him dumbfounded, "You may return to your duties." he added and the young woman hurried from the room.

Torien then walked over to Kaitlin and removed the scarf from her mouth while she just glared at him angrily,

"Kaitlin what's going on?" he asked.

"Oh is the King unhappy?" she responded.

"Kaitlin you just hit me in front of half a dozen people and I'd like to know why. We were always so close as children." Torien said.

"Close? You went away Torien." Kaitlin replied, "Don't you remember me begging you to take me with you before you left? Well that's because I knew that I was losing the person I was closest to in the entire universe. Even after you'd gone I accessed the planetary tracking system to watch the transport as it was heading for the Mandeville Point and pointed out how our defence ships could easily catch it if I was allowed to go with you but I was just told to be quiet. I cried every day until your ship entered the warp and for a long time after that as well. You left me here alone." and Torien frowned.

"What do you mean alone? Ramiro was still here. So were mother and father." he pointed out.

"Are you kidding me? I was twelve Torien. Ramiro didn't want a twelve year old girl tagging along when he was sneaking out of the palace to visit whorehouses or bars. Then when he got back he'd spend most of the day sleeping off the night before. Then Samara was born and mother spent all her time doting over her while telling me that I was old enough to take care of myself. Not that I was really allowed to do anything of course, according to tradition princesses are just supposed to wait for their fathers to pick them a husband and be happy with that and you know what father thought of tradition. It was everything to him. That's why he hardly even acknowledged me, not when he had Ramiro and then Ossian to make a fuss over. Of course he would lose his temper with Ramiro every time he found out what our older brother was doing in his spare time but he was still his son and heir so he was always forgiven. On the other hand if I ever tried to have a life outside the palace then he and mother would stop that. They couldn't risk anyone saying that I wasn't a virgin and losing the chance to marry me off. Of course father still bragged about you. After you were declared a hero he didn't waste any time at all in making sure that everyone knew about how he had raised you." Kaitlin said.

"None of that was my fault Kaitlin." Torien said, "Ramiro was the older brother so I have nothing waiting for me here on Toltek other than as some secondary noble managing some estate that didn't interest me.

Joining the Sixteenth Regiment was my way out of that, a chance to do something useful. I even tried writing to you when I could to tell you how much I missed you even though I knew the letters might not reach you."

"I got them. I didn't want to read them though so I threw them away." Kaitlin told him.

"Well I'm back now and I can assure you that I won't be leaving again. I love you Kaitlin, you're my sister and anyone who hurts you will pay for it I promise." Torien said before he reached down and undid the knot binding one of her wrists, "Now you can untie yourself and decide if you're going to join Samara, Ossian and me for dinner. I never even knew that they existed before today and we don't know one another at all. I think that you can help me get to know them and I'd appreciate that help. Alternately you can just stay in here and sulk. I've have some food sent up to you later." Torien then turned to Nathin and nodded, "Okay let's go." he said.

"Yes Your Majesty." Nathin replied, smiling as he stood up and the two men left the room while Kaitlin began to untie herself.

"So what do you think Nathin?" Torien asked as they were walking down the hallway outside Kaitlin's room and Nathin smiled again.

"She's feisty. I like that." he said, "Though she's not like you described."

"She's not like I remember. Obviously she's aged twenty years but I still remember the little girl who I spent almost every day with. She, Ramiro and I were really close. The kids of other nobles soon figured out that if any of them tried picking on her then Ramiro and I were going to come after them and if she was ever scared or upset she'd sleep in my room. Now I think that if she hadn't been tied to that chair then I think she'd have done anything to avoid being in the same room as me." Torien replied before a member of the palace staff called out.

"Excuse me Your Majesty!" a man shouted and Torien and Nathin both turned around.

"Yes?" he asked, waiting while the man bowed his head briefly.

"Your Majesty's personal belongings have just arrived at the palace. They've been sent to your suite." the man told him and Torien nodded.

"Thank you. We were just on our way there now." he said and the servant frowned.

"Your Majesty?" he said.

"My chambers. We were just heading there." Torien replied.

"But the King's suite is that way Your Majesty." the servant said nervously and he pointed towards a hallway that led off from the one Torien and Nathin were walking along. All of a sudden Torien realised that he had been instinctively walking towards the chamber he had occupied as a child. Now that he was the King he would be expected to occupy the palace's master suite that had previously belonged to his parents.

"Of course." he said, smiling at the servant, "Force of habit I'm afraid. Out of curiosity though, what are my old chambers being used for?" he asked.

"I believe that Prince Ossian occupies the chamber now Your Majesty." the servant answered and Torien nodded again.

"Thank you." he said, "That could have been embarrassing."

"Not as awkward as walking in on your other little sister," Nathin commented before the two men turned and started to walk in the correct direction.

"Thank you." Torien told the servant as they walked away and then he looked at Nathin, "Look I think I should go to my room alone. I'm still not sure how I feel about taking it over. Why don't you take a look around and familiarise yourself with the palace and its staff?"

"Sure. It'll be good to get the lay of the land." Nathin replied and as they reached a set of stairs that led downwards he turned to take them.

"Oh and Nathin?" Torien called out to him.

"Yes Your Kingship?" the Catachan responded.

"When it comes to my staff be careful how familiar you get. If any of my palace staff start popping out pale skinned, blond haired and blue eyed bastard children then I'll know who to blame." Torien said and Nathin grinned.

"Fair enough. You can count on me. Though I may want to know where those whorehouses your brother visited are. If they're good enough for a prince then they must be good." he replied.

When Torien reached the King's chambers he found several cases inside. These were military pattern and he recognised them as the ones he used to contain his belongings. Although he had recently been promoted to the rank of general he did not have the large quantity of personal luggage that officers of that rank typically carried from warzone to warzone. Having been a captain the amount of luggage that he was able to carry was far more limited and so there were only three moderately sized cases.

Rather than check his luggage Torien began by examining the room instead. Although it had been twenty years from the point of view of those inside the palace since he had last been here the room was still just how he had remembered it. His father's love of tradition had prevented him from undertaking any remodelling work beyond what was needed to preserve the room. It was obvious that the staff had been through the room though and when Torien started opening cupboards and drawers he discovered that all of them had been emptied to make room for his belongings such as they were. He knew that the amount of storage space in the room far exceeded what was needed for the contents of the cases but also that he would need to acquire much more clothing.

Returning to the cases he opened each one and lifted one of his uniforms from it. This was a set of combat fatigues that, despite him now being in the safety of the Royal Palace he thought could come in useful for hunting and so he carried them over to a set of drawers and put them inside. It was then that he noticed a mark on the floor close by where the polish of the wood had been scuffed by something. This was the sort of thing that had annoyed his father greatly and Torien guessed that the damage must have happened either after his death or he would have ordered it repaired immediately. Before he could think any more of it though he heard the sound of footsteps from behind him.

"Your Majesty?" one of the three servants who had just entered through the open doorway said when they saw Torien holding his uniform.

"Oh it's alright. Come on in." he told them, "I was just starting to unpack my things."

"But that is why we are here Your Majesty." the servant told him and Torien was suddenly reminded again of the difference between his new life as a king and the old one as a captain in the Imperial Guard. Even though they had hundreds of men under their command captains were still expected to carry out most personal tasks themselves while as a king he had servants to do almost everything for him.

"Of course I'm sorry. Something else that can be put down to habit." he said before he returned to the cases, "Although I think I should deal with this myself." he added as he dug deep into one to remove the chainsword that it contained. Although most of the weapons in the palace were kept in a central armoury there were also gun cabinets in a number of private chambers, including the King's and Torien took the powerful melee weapon to this. As with the more mundane cupboards the room's gun cabinet had been emptied prior to Torien's arrival so there was plenty of room inside for him to place the chainsword in it. Then he closed the door and locked it with the key that had been left in the lock and put this in his pocket, "There are some

spare power packs in there for the sword and my pistol.” he told the servants, “Just leave those on the bed and I’ll deal with them later. Everything else can be put wherever you think is appropriate.”

While the servants began to unpack his belongings Torien made his way out on the balcony from where he could look out over the city and for a moment he allowed himself to enjoy the view that he had not seen in many years. However, then he remembered how his mother had thrown herself from this balcony to her death and he instinctively looked down into the palace ground below, picturing his mother’s body lying in a pool of her own blood. With this thought still in his mind Torien retreated from the balcony and closed the doors behind him. The servants paused what they were doing in anticipation of receiving new orders and Torien looked at them.

“Carry on.” he said, “I think I’ll take a walk around the palace just to refresh myself with it.”

### 3.

While Torien was wandering around the palace he heard a chiming sound that he immediately recognised as the meal bell, indicating to members of the royal family that they should gather to eat and he immediately headed for the private dining room. Unlike the large function rooms where dozens or even hundreds of people could gather to eat this room was designed for far fewer people. Inside there was a long, narrow table that had a single chair at each end and four along each of the longer sides, providing more seating than was needed. For a moment Torien was about to sit on one of the longer sides before he again remembered that now he was king what was expected of him was different to when he had been a teenager and he sat down at the head of the table while he waited for his siblings to arrive.

Samara and Ossian soon came rushing in together but ground to a halt when they saw that Torien had got to the room first.

"Your majesty." Samara said as she curtsied and Ossian bowed.

"I think we can dispense with that here." he said. When he was younger he had found the constant formality even during supposedly more private moments somewhat overbearing and now that he was king he saw the opportunity to change this.

"Really?" Ossian said and Torien nodded, "Yes, just sit down and we'll wait to see if Kaitlin is joining us before we start."

"Yes Your-" Samara began.

"Torien." Torien interrupted, "We've been formally introduced and you can address me as 'Your Majesty' at public events but in private you can use my name. I am your brother after all and I'd rather have someone that I can talk to without all the bowing and deference."

The two younger royals then sat down opposite one another on the longer sides of the table before Kaitlin entered the dining room as well. She had changed her dress since Torien had last seen her and just as Samara had done she curtsied.

"Torien says we don't need to do that." Samara said before Kaitlin could speak.

"Oh really?" Kaitlin replied, looking at Torien, "Well if the King says so." and she then pulled out a chair beside Samara.

"Thank you for joining us by the way." Torien said and he picked up a small bell from the table that he rang, signalling to the serving staff waiting in the adjoining room that they could begin to serve dinner.

"Aren't we going to give benediction to The Emperor?" Ossian asked as a plate of food was being placed in front of him, "Father used to have us say benediction before every meal. Sometimes he'd have Cardinal Intrios lead us in it."

"Do you want to?" Torien asked.

"No." Samara exclaimed, "Especially not if Cardinal Intrios is going to be involved. All he does is go on about how I should take holy vows. He actually suggested that father arrange a marriage for me to someone in the Adeptus Ministorum. He said it would give the family more influence with sector authorities."

"He sounds worse than old Cardinal Knosvow." Torien said and then he looked at Kaitlin and added, "What happened to him?"

"He retired." she responded without further elaboration.

Torien then looked at the servants who had laid out the soup and were now lined up along the wall.

"Thank you. You may leave us. We'll call if we need anything." he told them and they bowed before leaving the room.

"Well I think this should be a good chance for us to get to know one another." Torien said before eating a mouthful of food. He hesitated for a moment, mentally comparing the quality of the palace food to the rations he had eaten for most meals in the Imperial Guard. Then he added, "Do you have any questions?"

"Why did you go away? Kaitlin said it was because you didn't like us." Ossian said and all of the siblings looked at Kaitlin while she calmly ate her meal.

"Not enough to either stay or take me with him." she commented.

"I was the second son." Torien said, "Ramiro would become King and I wanted to do something exciting. So I joined the Imperial Guard."

"Was it exciting?" Ossian said, "Being in the Imperial Guard. Was it exciting?"

Torien smiled as he thought about the best way to answer.

"Actually there were a lot of times it was rather dull. Between battles you'd spend a lot of time just practising basic tasks or dealing with petty issues." he said.

"Didn't you have servants to do those for you?" Samara said.

"My promotion to general only came after I was told that I was going to be King. I was only a captain for most of my tour." Torien pointed out, "Captains and lieutenants have a lot of basic tasks to carry out that can't be

delegated. Even in a battle things could be dull. You'd sit around waiting to be ordered into action just hearing the sounds of fighting from somewhere out of sight. That was the thing about Orks, you generally heard them well before you saw them. I heard rumours of some that would sneak up on you but all the ones I encountered couldn't keep quiet if their lives depended on it." he continued before he grinned again, "Which of course it often did. We'd be able to set up ambushes because we'd heard them coming towards us well in advance."

"I heard that Orks are all men and that that's why they keep attacking us. They need human women to produce their young so they kidnap them and rape them." Samara said, "Is that true?"

There was very little knowledge of alien species that was widely distributed in the Imperium. Aliens were largely considered to be a threat to humanity and so the population was taught little beyond hating and fearing them. However, here and there small pieces of information would be spread through rumour and gossip. Frequently the factual pieces of information would then be combined with false information to produce bizarre and random claims.

"You're going to be raped by an Ork!" Ossian suddenly exclaimed, staring at Samara.

"I am not!" Samara snapped back.

"Welcome to your informal dinner Your Majesty." Kaitlin commented, smiling at Torien.

"Orks have only one sex, that's true," Torien said, "but they reproduce themselves without any help from anyone else. It has something to do with fungal spores and they grow underground. My company was assigned a few times to dig up and burn some of their spawning grounds before they could hatch out." then he picked up a mushroom with his fork and held it up, "Some guardsmen would make comments about getting revenge on Orks by eating mushrooms." he said before he placed it in his mouth and began to chew.

"What about the battle where you became a hero?" Samara asked, "What happened there?"

"Yes do tell us how you became a hero." Kaitlin added sarcastically, "It's not like father told the story over and over again."

"Well from the looks of that carving in the main hall the official version is different to what really happened."

Torien said, "Especially where Uncle Daniel is concerned."

"Didn't he die a hero too?" Ossian said, "Father said that his brother died fighting an Ork warlord that stood twice his height."

Torien paused, considering exactly how he should respond to this. He knew that though his uncle had joined the Imperial Guard for similar reasons to Torien, to escape the monotony of life as the younger brother in the Royal Family his service record had left a great deal to be desired.

"Uncle Daniel was made a major and given command of the company I served in as a lieutenant," Torien began, "and we were in the first wave of troops to land in the war zone. Our mission was to secure one of the approaches to the landing zone that was to be used by our armoured forces. If we failed then the Orks could have overrun the landing zone before our tanks could be offloaded. The Orks knew this as well and they sent a large hoard at us, thousands of them charging right at us. When Uncle Daniel saw this he panicked and froze. We were asking him for orders but he couldn't decide what to do before the Orks started shooting at us. Orks are terrible marksmen but their weapons are very loud and intimidating if you aren't used to them and when the first shells landed close by Uncle Daniel broke and ran, leaving even his own command unit behind. The rest of the company was ready to follow him but that's when I used my squad's vox unit to order them to dig in and deploy heavy weapons. We certainly didn't charge headlong into the Ork horde, if we'd tried that then we'd have been ripped apart but our heavy weapons allowed us to thin out the horde while they were still hundreds of metres from our position. Some of them still managed to reach our lines though and I did have to make use of my chainsword but there weren't enough of them left to be a threat by that point."

Torien's siblings listened carefully to this and considered what he had to say.

"But what about Uncle Daniel? How did he die if he wasn't killed by an Ork warlord?" Ossian asked.

"Uncle Daniel made it as far as the landing zone, screaming about ten thousand Orks having overrun his men." Torien said, "Of course the troops in the landing zone tried to set up a defensive line but they quickly noticed that the Orks were nowhere to be seen and then a squad was sent to find out what was really happening. Of course they found us gathering up Ork corpses to be cremated so that they couldn't release the spores that would grow into more Orks and the other platoon commanders told the commissar that had been sent along with this squad what had really happened. By the time I returned to the landing zone when my company was relieved Uncle Daniel had been shot for cowardice."

"So he wasn't a hero then?" Ossian said and Torien shook his head.

"No, far from I'm afraid. Though given that father decided to craft a rather different narrative I think we should keep quiet on that subject. I think the less we talk about Uncle Daniel the better. If anyone else in the Sixteenth talks about him then I'm sure we can put it down to a miscommunication between the regiment and Toltek. It's not like sending messages either way was reliable. No-one told me about the pair of you before today." he said.

"Lies and cover ups?" Kaitlin commented, "Torien you're obviously adjusting to your new role very well. You're just like father."

Torien let this obvious insult pass and looked at Samara and Ossian.

"So what about you two? I've missed your entire lives until today so why don't you tell me something about you?" he said.

"What do you want to know?" Samara asked in return.

"I don't know. What are your hobbies? Or how are you doing with your lessons?" Torien said.

"You're wasting your time Torien. Samara is like every other daughter of the nobility. She stopped being educated once she'd been given just enough lessons that she could read and follow ancient traditions and any attempt to have a life of her own is crushed." Kaitlin said.

"Wasn't it like that when you were growing up here?" Ossian said.

"Sort of. Although you must remember that Kaitlin and I spent almost all our time together. Ramiro too, so Kaitlin was able to join us to have fun. Nobody questioned her spending time with her brothers, did they?" Torien said and he looked towards Kaitlin again but she remained silent.

"What did you do together?" Samara said.

"A lot of exploring. Largely of the forests by the palace but also inside the palace itself as well. We found ways into the old passages and tried to find out where they all went." Torien said and both Samara and Ossian looked at him with confused expressions on their faces, "What? Don't you know about the old passageways? Didn't anyone ever tell you?" he added and both of the younger siblings shook their heads. "Father and mother wouldn't want them playing in the passageways Torien." Kaitlin pointed out, "What do you think they would have said if they knew that we'd found ways in and out?"

"But you didn't tell them either? Or Ramiro?" Torien said.

"I never saw the point and Ramiro didn't want to risk them telling our parents about the way he was able to get in and out of the palace without being seen." Kaitlin told him.

"There are secret passages leading outside the palace?" Samara said in surprise.

"Yes, as far as I know they go all over the inside and right to the edge of the grounds. You could get-" Torien began before he suddenly stopped talking as a thought entered his mind. Before anyone could comment about the pause though Samara spoke up again.

"So that's how Ramiro got them into the palace." she said.

"Got who into the palace?" Torien said.

"His whores of course." Kaitlin replied.

"Ramiro brought three joy girls into the palace one night about four years ago." Samara said excitedly,

"Father found out and he was furious. He said that he'd have them flogged and ordered the palace guards to search for them. Ramiro got me to hide them in my room though because he knew that the guards wouldn't dare enter it."

"I told him 'no' when he asked to hide them in my room." Kaitlin commented.

"They slept on my floor while Ramiro and father argued about them." Samara continued, "Then the next day Ramiro smuggled them out of the palace and gave me a packet of lho sticks."

"You smoked lho sticks?" Torien said, not happy about the idea of his sister smoking since her mid teens. Although mild compared to the illegal narcotics that Ramiro had evidently indulged in, smoking lho sticks was still an unhealthy if common habit.

"I started one but it tasted disgusting so I threw them away." Samara answered and Torien smiled.

"Good for you." he said, "Personally I didn't find the smell of lho sticks on a woman's breath very appealing."

"I didn't think women smoked them." Ossian said.

"Oh yes, as many women as men use them I think. Outside the nobility anyway. In the guard it was considered an easy way of relaxing after a battle." Torien said.

"There are women in the Imperial Guard? What do they do?" Samara said.

"In Toltek regiments they are only allowed to serve in support roles and none of them are officers of course, that would require being part of the nobility. But they can be cooks, medics, administrative personnel or drivers." Torien said.

"Women can be drivers?" Samara commented.

"Yes, most guardsmen and women can drive." Torien said.

"Can you drive a Leman Russ tank?" Ossian said suddenly.

"A tank? I've never actually tried. I was in an infantry unit, not an armoured one. Although I did get the chance to drive a Chimera infantry fighting vehicle a few times and the controls aren't that different." Torien said, "Mostly I just drove light vehicles though."

"I'd like to drive a tank." Ossian said.

"Well you're a little small right now but in a few years you'll be large enough and I'm sure that we can arrange something. Our PDF may not have tanks right now but the Sixteenth has two armoured companies for



support and a few pictures of a young prince driving one makes for good public relations before our PDF can be equipped with them as well." Torien said.

"I wish I could drive. It seems like fun." Samara added.

"I don't see any reason why not." Torien said and Samara's eyes widened.

"Really?" she said.

"Yes, really. Tradition may be that noblewomen don't drive but there's no real reason why you shouldn't if you want to. Look, a unit from the Sixteenth is coming down from the transport tomorrow and they'll be bringing some light utility vehicles with them. One of those is ideal for you to learn in. Sergeant Tanner can teach you." Torien said. Then he looked at Kaitlin and added, "You too Kaitlin if you want."

"No thank you. I'm quite happy being driven by someone else." she replied.

"Well the offer remains open." Torien said, "I'd still like to know what you've been doing since I left though. You can't have spent twenty years just being angry at me."

"What else was there to do?" Kaitlin said.

"She had a boyfriend." Samara said.

"A boyfriend?" Torien said, well aware of how the Toltek nobility regarded the idea of its women having relationships outside of their arranged marriages. Kaitlin had already alluded to their parents acting to prevent her from having a relationship of her own. He also knew though that unmarried male members of the nobility frequently had illicit relationships, most often with commoners but also sometimes with women from the nobility where possible and Torien immediately suspected that one such young noble had attempted to get close to his sister. Of course such a relationship would bring with it great risk. The noble themselves could expect to be accused of treason for seducing a royal princess while their family would be disgraced. On the other hand from what he knew he was popular enough that he did not need to secure support through political marriages and allowing Kaitlin to choose her own husband could help repair their relationship, "Who was he?"

"Does it matter? He's gone." Kaitlin said.

"He was a rogue trader who visited Toltek ten years ago." Samara said, "Father ordered him to leave and never come back. He said that he'd have our defence ships shoot down his vessels if they did."

This new spoiled Toriens' plan in an instant. A rogue trader could travel anywhere they wanted within or even beyond the Imperium of Man so there was nothing that could force one to return to Toltek, especially if they had been threatened with having their ships destroyed if they dared so it was unlikely that the one Kaitlin had been interested would do so. Even if he did, after ten years Torien expected that this particular individual would have found someone else to be with instead. Although the idea of letting Kaitlin pick her own husband still appealed to him.

"Well hopefully we can find someone else that she likes." he said.

Following dinner Kaitlin returned to her room while Samara and Ossian joined Torien in the Royal Family's private lounge where they continued to talk about themselves. Torien had a dataslate that he had used for maintaining records in the Imperial Guard that also held a wide range of images and video clips that had been recorded during his service and he used these to help describe his experience. Ossian in particular enjoyed the recordings of military equipment in use. Although he had accompanied their father and brother Ramiro on a number of public events where they met members of Toltek's planetary defence force he had never seen any of their equipment in use, added to which the Imperial Guard could draw on a wider range of weapons than Toltek's military. Torien was still wearing his las pistol as well and both Samara and Ossian watched with interest as he demonstrated the process of dismantling and then reassembling the weapon. Had it not been so late in the day he would have happily taken his siblings outside so that they could fire it but this was something that he declared would instead be left for another day.

The three siblings continued to talk well into the night before they all went to bed, Samara especially excited about the prospect of learning to drive while Torien was more relaxed. Returning to what was now his bedroom he found that all of his belongings had been unpacked and he took some time to open the various drawers and wardrobes again to see where things had been put. Given the amount of storage space in the room compared with the sizes of the cases Torien had brought with him most of these remained empty and none were completely full. Evidently the servants had not considered any of the clothing Torien had brought with him as suitable for the role of a king and all of it had been placed in secondary locations while the spaces allotted for the clothing we would be expected to wear for his day to day appointments were still vacant. It appeared that the question of exactly where to put the armoured vest along with its carapace plate that he had been issued and this had simply been placed at the back of a large walk in closet, leant up against the wall. An ordinary clothes hanger would probably not bear the weight of the armour so Torien did not change this, resolving to obtain a more reinforced hanger first. The one change he did make though was where the spare power packs for his las pistol had been put. As he had instructed these had been left on the bed and he unlocked the gun cabinet to place them in the ammunition compartment. He paused before he

closed and locked the cabinet again, considering what weapons he would add to it. He of course had access to any of the weapons held in the Royal Armoury and a custom sporting weapon was an obvious choice. However, he also resolved to look into obtaining something more specialised from an Imperial stockpile. Now that he was officially a general there was every chance that he would be able to requisition a bolter or even a plasma pistol. He had tried both types of weapons out during his service but supplies of them had been limited in the 16<sup>th</sup> Toltek Regiment so he had had to make do with his las pistol instead. Torien did not remove his las pistol from its holster before closing and locking the gun cabinet though. Instead he kept the weapon on his hip as he walked over to a nearby chair that he picked up. He then carried this across the room to where he had discovered the scuff on the wooden floor earlier. He then set the chair down so that it covered the scuff and the back was placed directly against the wall behind it. Only then did he get ready for bed, placing his las pistol on the table beside the bed where it was within easy reach.

## 4.

The sun had already risen by the time an Imperial Navy shuttle landed at Tula's spaceport. The craft was designed for cargo rather than passengers and four of the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment's light utility vehicles were driven out of it as soon as the main cargo ramp was lowered. Although there were many possible configurations of these vehicles to allow them to be operated in a wide variety of environments these particular examples were all open topped and although they were not combat vehicles they all had a pintle mounted heavy stubber fixed to their roll bars that could be used for protection. These drove directly to the Royal Palace where they were quickly admitted and guided to the main garage located beneath the palace. In here there were numerous other vehicles, most of which were designed for use in urban environments only. Some were luxurious ground cars intended for carrying members of the Royal Family while others were more utilitarian and meant for use by protection officers escorting the former or by staff on errands. The Imperial Guard vehicles were even more basic than these though, being intended to be as reliable and easy to maintain as possible.

Colonel Barrera and Commissar North were both in the garage to meet the guardsmen and women who disembarked from the vehicles and then formed a line beside them while stood at attention.

"Advanced party ready for inspection colonel." the sergeant in charge of this group said, saluting Colonel Barrera.

"Very good sergeant. At ease." Barrera replied and the party stood in a more relaxed pose while he addressed them, "As you've been told your assignment here is to assess the security requirements of the Royal Palace. This will be a two part process. The first will involve liaising with the existing Royal Guard and finding out from them how they have been protecting the palace grounds. Secondly I want an independent survey of the perimeter and structure to determine what, if anything, needs to be changed. The Royal Guard have been competent enough but their equipment and training is radically different to ours so there are probably areas where we can improve things." Barrera then looked at North, "Anything to add commissar?" he asked.

"Yes." North replied before he looked at the line of soldiers and added, "As Colonel Barrera has already said the replacement of the Royal Guard by the Sixteenth Regiment is not because of any failing on their part. If I hear of any insult delivered to them by any of you I promise that you will regret it. It is also possible that members of the Royal Guard will have questions for you about your service in the Imperial Guard, especially concerning your equipment. If you are asked such questions then answer them. It is the King's plan that personnel not used to protect the palace and his family will be used to train the planetary defence force while they are being re-equipped and brought up to the standard of the Imperial Guard. Lastly remember that this is a palace and there are a large number of high ranking government officials working here in addition to members of the King's family. Unless you are told otherwise you should avoid all contact with these individuals. Treat them as you would your officers and remember that disrespect shown towards them will be treated just as seriously as disrespect to an officer would be."

North did not need to expand on this. Every enlisted soldier in the Imperial Guard knew that insubordination, especially when shown towards an officer was one of the many offences under Departmento Munitorum regulations that carried the death penalty and with a commissar in the building to carry it out, an execution could be carried out very quickly.

"Are there any questions?" Barrera then asked.

"What about our vehicles colonel?" the sergeant asked.

"The vehicles can be left here." Barrera answered, "You may need some for the perimeter survey but the others will be safe enough. One is also needed for another assignment to be carried out by Sergeant Tanner so make sure that the keys are in them. He's a Catachan so if he can't find a key then he'll probably just hot wire a vehicle anyway and if he does then the repair bill from the cog boys is coming out of your pay, all of you." he then waited a few moments, just in case there were any more questions but the troops remained silent, "Nothing more? Good. In that case you can get started. Your dataslates have floor plans of the palace on them. Only the Royal Family's private quarters are out of bounds to you and those have been specifically marked. All other areas of the palace are open and every one of them will need to be checked."

"Why don't you like Torien?" Samara asked Kaitlin while they both went up the main stairs once breakfast was finished, "People are saying that you hit him."

"I did. He deserves it." Kaitlin replied.

"But why?" Samara said.

"Because he's a jerk." Kaitlin said.

"Kaitlin you can't say that about the King." Samara said softly, looking around to see if any of the palace staff were close enough to have overheard the insult.

"Watch me Samara." Kaitlin said.

"But he seems really nice to me. Nicer than father. Isn't it true that you played together when you were little?" Samara said and Kaitlin sighed.

"Yes it's true and that's why you should listen to me Samara." she said, "It doesn't matter how friendly he is or how close to him you think you are he'll abandon you at the drop of a hat. He doesn't care about anyone but himself. Just you wait and you'll see for yourself but don't come crying to me when it happens."

As well as the throne room where the King would hold official audiences there was also an office where he could conduct his formal business and it was here that Torien went after breakfast, knowing that there would be a lot of work to be done to complete his transition to the position he had inherited. Unsurprisingly Victrus was already waiting for him with not only a dataslate but also a large number of hardcopy documents.

"Good morning Your Majesty. Ready for your first full day as king?" the chief minister asked as he bowed.

"We'll see." Torien responded as he sat down behind the large desk and he looked around, "I can't decide if this office looks smaller because I'm on this side of the desk now or because I was younger when I was standing on that side of the desk when I was summoned here by father."

"I'm sure you'll get used to it." Victrus said with a smile.

"So what is the first official duty of King Torien?" Torien said.

"We have several issues to be considered Your Majesty and you have two appointments." Victrus said.

"Who am I seeing today then?"

"Cardinal Intios is the palace priest. He wants to discuss his role within the palace under your reign and has some suggestions in that regard." Victrus said and Torien nodded.

"Okay, so who's the other one?" he asked.

"Duke Vargas Your Majesty." Victrus answered and Torien frowned for a moment.

"You mean the man whose daughter father arranged for Ramiro to marry?"

"Yes Your Majesty. Ursulla Vargas was due to marry your brother this autumn." Victrus said before he looked at the dataslate he was holding and continued, "Speaking of which there is the issue of your marriage."

"My marriage? Victrus I'm not even engaged. Or did father leave instructions for if I ever returned?" Torien said.

"No Your Majesty, your father could not have arranged a marriage for you and in any case as King you could cancel any marriage already arranged by a previous monarch. However, as King it is now your duty to marry and produce an heir. Normally of course your father would have arranged a marriage before you ascended to the throne but these are special circumstances and because of them you will have to choose your own bride."

"You mean I can choose someone that I actually want to spend the rest of my life with instead of someone I'm just told to?" Torien said with a smile, "How common that sounds."

"Indeed Your Majesty." Victrus replied, smiling back at Torien.

"So how soon am I to be married?" Torien asked.

"It would be best if you could be married before your official coronation Your Majesty. It always looks better to have a king and queen sit beside one another during the ceremony. Of course I suppose that Princess Kaitlin could fill in if necessary." Victrus responded.

"Kaitlin? Before I came back here I'd have agreed with you one hundred percent but her opinion of me seems so low that I wouldn't be surprised if she found a way to avoid being at the ceremony entirely." Torien said, "Oh well I suppose I have plenty of time to find someone."

"Yes Your Majesty. To make things easier though a gathering has been arranged. Officially it is to mark your return to Toltek but it will be attended by members of the nobility who will bring their eligible daughters with them. You may choose any of them that you want." Victrus said.

"And if none of them interest me?" Torien said.

"Then we will have to look further afield Your Majesty. It isn't possible to get every noble on Toltek into the palace so there will be other potential candidates for marriage. However, the lower down the ranks of the nobility you go the less they will be able to offer in return and of course to those who you reject."

"They may take it personally and start plotting against me." Torien interrupted, "Then it is fortunate that I have the finest regiment of troops in the system under my direct control isn't it?"

"Quite Your Majesty." Victrus said, "In the meantime though the event is scheduled for tomorrow night and there is a list of everyone who will be attending available for you."

Torien picked up a dataslate that was on his desk in front of him and looked at the table of contents shown on the screen. Near to the top of the entries was the guest list and Torien nodded.

"Yes, I see it." he said before there was a knock at the office door, "Come in." Torien called out and a member of the palace staff entered the room and bowed.

"Your Majesty, Duke Vargas and his daughter are here." he said.

"His daughter as well? Ramiro's fiance?" Torien said and Victrus nodded.

"Yes, Duke Vargas has four sons but only one daughter." he said.

"Show them in." Torien said and as the servant left the office again he and Victrus both got to their feet. A few moments later the servant returned and stood just inside the doorway.

"His Grace the Duke Lorenzo Vargas and Ursulla Vargas." he said before the duke and his daughter entered the office side by side, prompting Victrus to bow.

"Your Grace." he said before the duke bowed towards Torien and Ursulla curtsied.

"Your Majesty." he said, "It is an honour to meet with you. Thank you for agreeing to this audience."

"Duke Vargas. Please sit." Torien said and he indicated a vacant seat before he sat back down himself.

"Your Majesty I would like to introduce my daughter Ursulla. I don't know if you have been informed but she was engaged to the late King Ramiro."

"I was told about the arrangement, yes." Torien said and then he looked at Ursulla and added, "I am sorry for your loss."

"Thank you Your Majesty." the young woman replied and she bowed her head.

"Your Majesty our loss is clearly inferior to yours. King Ramiro was your brother after all and combined with the tragic loss of both of your parents-" the duke began.

"That's quite alright." Torien interrupted, "I left Toltek believing that I wouldn't see any of them again anyway. On the other hand your daughter expected him to be her husband. Now what brings you to your king other than to exchange condolences?"

"As has been mentioned she was engaged to your brother Your Majesty. The union was personally arranged by myself and your late father. Then King Ramiro continued with the engagement following King Haddon's death." Duke Vargas said, "I am here to propose that you now become engaged to Ursulla."

"Me?" Torien said in surprise.

"Of course Your Majesty." the duke said.

"Minister Victrus perhaps you should escort Ursulla Vargas to somewhere she can relax without listening to her father and myself discussing her future. Perhaps Kaitlin can entertain her." Torien said.

"As you command Your Majesty." Victrus said as he stood up and looked at Ursulla, "This way please Your Ladyship."

Without speaking Ursulla also got to her feet and she followed Victrus out of Torien's office, leaving her father alone with the King.

"Duke Vargas I have been told that there is an event planned for tomorrow night that is intended to allow other members of the nobility to present their daughters as prospective brides." Torien said.

"Yes Your Majesty and Ursulla and I will be in attendance. However, I thought it wise to speak with you beforehand to try and impress on you the wisdom in taking over your brother's engagement. I am sure that if your father were still with us then he would agree." Duke Vargas told him.

"As I understand it my father was interested in the land you were offering as a dowry for the marriage." Torien said.

"Yes Your Majesty. Of course I would be offering the same land to you in exchange for the wedding." the duke said with a smile, "The Duke Zavala is still the manager of the Royal Estates and he has conformed the value of the land."

"I'm sure that the gift of the land is very generous and would compliment the Royal Estates Duke Vargas, but as king it is my own choice who I marry and the position of queen is not for sale." Torien said.

"Your Majesty my gift of the land is not intended to be a bribe." Duke Vargas protested, "It is merely a means by which our unified families may also pool our resources for our combined advantage."

"In that case duke, you have my permission to begin negotiations with Chief Minister Victrus. Present your proposal to him for whatever joint ventures you wish and he can bring the best of them to me." Torien told him, "In the meantime you may present your daughter along with the other nobles tomorrow night."

The duke hesitated, obviously angry at having his deal rejected but unable to express this anger as he might do with a rival or subordinate. He knew that losing his temper with Torien would inevitably backfire. At the least he would be removed by the Royal Guard and any hope of arranging a marriage between his daughter and the King would be lost. In the worst case Torien may decide to make use of the las pistol he had holstered openly on his hip.

"Yes Your Majesty." he said, "If it meets with your approval I shall take my leave of you now."

"Certainly Duke Vargas. You are dismissed." Torien replied, making it clear that their meeting was being ended at his command.

The duke got to his feet and bowed to Torien before he walked out of the office, leaving the door open behind him. With no-one else to close it behind Duke Vargas, Torien got up and walked around his desk to close it himself. As he reached the doorway he looked out into the hallway outside first and he saw a woman in the uniform of a soldier of the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment making notes about the palace layout. Smiling he called out to her.

“Corporal Tellez, in here please.” he said.

“Yes Your Majesty.” the woman responded and she walked into the office.

Torien closed the door behind her leaving them alone in the office and as she turned to face him he embraced her and kissed her.

“I know it’s only been two days but I’ve missed you Meya.” he said.

“Your Majesty don’t. Please.” the woman replied and she pulled away from Torien.

“What’s wrong?” Torien asked.

“You’re king now. We can’t be together any more.” Meya said.

“Of course we can. I’m the King. My word is literally law.” Torien said.

“But only as long as the nobility continues to support you.”

“You were happy to be with me when we were serving in the Imperial Guard. We talked about getting married then and you didn’t have any objections to the idea.” Torien pointed out.

“That was different. You may have been a prince but nobody cared about that in the Imperial Guard. No one expected us to ever come back here to Toltek. Now we have tradition to follow and tradition is that members of the Royal Family only marry other members of the nobility, not a farmer’s daughter.” Meya said.

“Is this really what you want Meya?” Torien said and Meya hesitated.

“No of course not. I love you as much as you love me but I know that we can never be together, not now. The nobles will expect you to marry one of their daughters and they’ll revolt if you don’t.” she said and Torien smiled.

“You’re right of course.” he said, “In fact I’ve just had one duke in here trying to bribe me into marrying his daughter. I wouldn’t be surprised if I get more of them trying that at the gathering tomorrow night where I’m supposed to choose a potential bride.” Torien then opened the office door again, “You may continue with your work Corporal Tellez.”

“Yes Your Majesty.” Meya said again and given that she was wearing an Imperial Guard uniform instead of a formal dress she bowed her head rather than curtsied before she left the room and returned to her survey.

Torien closed the door behind Meya and returned to his desk before sitting back down heavily and sighing again as he considered the fact that becoming king had driven a wedge between him and the woman he loved. Then he leant forwards and activated the vox unit on his desk.

“Yes Your Majesty, what is your will?” the voice of a palace operator asked.

“Please locate Commissar North and send him to my office.” Torien said.

“Yes Your Majesty.” the operator replied before Torien shut off the vox and grabbed a sheet of headed paper and a pen before beginning to write.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the office door and North’s voice called out from the other side.

“Your Majesty, you requested my presence.” he said.

“Come in commissar.” Torien called out and North opened the door to enter the office.

“Your Majesty.” he said, standing in front of Torien’s desk.

“Commissar I have a special assignment for you. Something that I think you are uniquely qualified for.” Torien said as he finished writing and then he handed the sheet of paper to North.

The commissar took the paper and read the orders that he had been given. As a commissar he was responsible for ensuring that orders were followed to the letter but this did not stop him commenting on what he had just been handed.

“I’ll see that this is done immediately Your Majesty. Though I don’t think that it would be a challenge for your existing Royal Guard or even a civilian agent, especially considering that they would have superior local knowledge.” he said.

“I need this kept under wraps commissar.” Torien told him, “I’ve given you all the information you need to find the target and you have the authority to do what must be done. Take two men from the Sixteenth with you for support but those orders are not to be shown to anyone else not mentioned in them. I don’t want to risk word getting back to any members of the nobility until the operation is complete.”

“Yes Your Majesty. I’ll take two men from the survey and get started on it now.” North said before he turned to leave again and just as he was leaving the office Nathin came to the door.

“Ah Nathin, come on in.” Torien said when he saw him in the doorway.

“So what’s the leash up to now?” Nathin asked, looking over his shoulder to where North was walking down the hallway.

“Just a small assignment I’ve given him. For now I’m keeping the details quiet.” Torien replied.

“Fair enough, you are the King after all. How’s it going so far?”

“Kaitlin hates me and if you’d been here about ten minutes ago you’d have seen Meya dumping me.” Torien told him.

“Really? I thought you two were serious.” Nathin responded in surprise.

“So did I, but I also thought Kaitlin would have been happy to see me again.” Torien said, “Anyway, aren’t you supposed to be giving Samara a driving lesson about now?”

"Yeah, I was just on my way to that. I just wanted to check in first to see if you had any specific instructions." Nathin said.

"Not really, just try and teach her how to handle a vehicle." Torien said.

"So she's never tried this before?"

"No. This isn't Catachan where everyone has to learn to do as much as possible. Daughters of the nobility are expected to stay in the background and produce children, they don't take any active roll in their family's affairs unless absolutely necessary. Didn't you notice that all the women in the Sixteenth were enlisted?" Torien said.

"Yes but I never really believed that the whole idea of women being seen but not heard was taken so seriously that a princess wouldn't be allowed to drive a ground car." Nathin said.

"No, it never really made sense to me either but that was the way things were done. If I can make a few minor changes here and there though to make life better for my sisters then I will." Torien said.

"In that case I'll head off now." Nathin said and he turned to leave.

"Oh and if you see Enginseer Kappa tell her that I have something to ask her would you?" Torien added.

"Of course your kingship." Nathin replied.

Samara was already in the garage when Nathin arrived, standing close by the Imperial Guard vehicles while she waited.

"So you're Samara?" he said.

"Princess Samara, yes." she replied, "Aren't you going to bow?"

"I told your brother I wouldn't bow to him so what makes you think that I'll bow to you?" Nathin said, looking at the row of vehicles. One of these had already been taken by Commissar North but there were still three to choose from, "Okay we'll take this one. Get in." he added and he pointed to the nearest of the vehicles before getting in on the driver's side.

"I thought I was supposed to be driving." Samara said.

"And you will be princess but first I'm going to show you how it's done. I'll do a circuit of the lake and talk you through it. After than it's your turn. Okay?" Nathin said and Samara nodded.

"Okay." she said but then she just looked at Nathin as he started the vehicle's engine.

"Come on princess, get in." he told her and then he watched as she attempted to get into the vehicle with its high ground clearance while wearing her formal dress and high heeled shoes. Sighing he then leant towards her and reached out to grab her by the shoulder before pulling her into the vehicle's passenger seat, "Now strap in and let's roll out." he said before applying pressure to the gas pedal and the vehicle accelerated forwards.

Samara gasped when Nathin accelerated, unprepared for the vehicle to start moving so rapidly. Although she had been driven around for her entire life the chauffeurs of those vehicles had always driven carefully to avoid any distress to their passengers. On the other hand as Nathin drove out of the garage he performed several sharp manoeuvres before driving towards the road that ran around the lake beside the palace instead of to the front of the building and the gateway leading to the city. Once on this road Nathin's driving became more gentle. The vehicle was moving more quickly than when he had been manoeuvring in the garage but there was no need to make such sharp turns on the road and as they approached the bends necessary for it to follow the outline of the lake he slowed down. With each alteration he made to how the vehicle moved, whether in direction or speed, he described the process and reason to Samara.

"May I ask a question?" Samara said as she continued to watch how Nathin steered and changed speed.

"Sure princess. Is there something specific about what I'm doing you're not sure on?" Nathin replied.

"Actually I wanted to ask about my brother. The King." Samara said and Nathin smirked, "Why did you just do that?" Samara added.

"I found out your brother was a prince soon after we met but it doesn't feel right thinking of him as a king. He was a lot more understanding of enlisted men than many officers I've met that weren't even nobility. Catachans excepted of course. Our officers are picked by their men and pompous ones don't last long." Nathin said.

"That's what I want to know. How did you end up acting as my brother's bodyguard? You're from Catachan, not Toltek." Samara said.

"My regiment had gone in ahead of your brother's. We're the ones that surveyed the landing zones for how suitable they were for the Navy's lighters and how easy they were to protect. The problem was that when the Orks launched their counter attacks against the main invasion force we were caught ahead of the main lines. The Toltek Sixteenth Regiment was ordered to advance and cover our retreat but that came too late for my company. We were encircled and cut off. By the time your brother's company made it to our location we were out of ammo and fighting hand to hand with the Orks, just the way that they like it. Less than twenty of us were still fighting with more than twice that wounded and incapacitated so your brother could have just pulled his men back to safety to avoid risking them being overrun as well." Nathin explained.

"He didn't though, did he? Otherwise you wouldn't be here at all." Samara said.

"Exactly. He had all his heavy weapons deploy and start firing into the Orks to get their attention. That made a lot of them break off and charge towards the gun crews but when they did that they ran right into an ambush by most of your brother's rifle teams. Meanwhile he'd broken off a few squads equipped with flamers and they circled around the Orks before engaging them from another direction at point blank range. They broke through to where we were just about holding on thanks to his company's arrival and enabled us to extract ourselves along with our wounded. I watched your brother decapitate an Ork leader who was a hair's breadth away from cutting me in half with an axe. As well as that he saved forty-seven of us that day and Colonel Barrera pinned another medal on his chest to go with the one from the original battle where he held the approach to the landing site. Has he told you about that?" Nathin said and Samara nodded.

"Yes, he told us the real story last night. Not the one father told to make our uncle sound brave." she said.

"So you know about he panicked and ran at the first sight of a charging greenskin then?" Nathin commented and Samara nodded again.

"Yes, it wasn't like we were told. So after that you stayed with Torien as his bodyguard?" she said.

"Exactly. Me as his bodyguard and enough others to form a full squad that were used as scouts for the company. Your brother was smart enough to realise the value of that. Catachans are experts at finding their way around through difficult terrain."

"What's Catachan like?" Samara then asked after a short pause, "I've heard stories about it but are they true?"

"Well what have you heard?" Nathin replied.

"That everything there is deadly and no-one is allowed to visit." Samara said and Nathin smiled for a moment.

"Well you're part right. Catachan is a death world. The entire ecosystem is dangerous, even lifeforms that may seem benign can be deadly if mishandled. Apart from humans the only lifeforms that have been imported that have survived there are rats. They breed so fast and in such numbers that even the indigenous lifeforms can't kill them fast enough." Nathin said, "On the other hand people can visit, it's just that not many do. It's expensive even without the cost of interstellar travel. No-one who goes into the jungle without guides is going to come back and a fair few that do hire guides disappear as well. Too many visitors arrive with retinues of their own and fancy weapons that they think can make up for the knowledge possessed by Catachans and they all end up dead."

"If it's so dangerous then why do you stay there?" Samara said.

"Well I didn't. I got out and joined the Guard. The same thing goes for a lot of my people. Some leave because they choose to and others because they have to."

"Have to?" Samara commented.

"To survive on Catachan it's essential to be in good health and physically able. Anyone who is crippled will likely die quickly and put anyone trying to help them at risk so they move to the orbital stations instead. Catachan is surrounded by space stations. Some are military and others are for handling cargo."

"But why does anyone stay?"

"Because it's our home of course. Plus someone has to stay there to gather the resources that Catachan provides. The ecosystem may be deadly but it's full of things that are useful. Raw plants may be toxic but they can be rendered down for medicines and the same animal venoms that can kill you in moments can also be put to use. The Adeptus Mechanicus has dozens of space stations all of its own in orbit just for studying and processing what's gathered from the surface. Those cogboys may not like to admit it but humans are far better than servitors or robots for harvesting anything from the jungle." Nathin said before he brought the vehicle to a halt, "Okay this is it." he said.

"This is what?" Samara said and Nathin smiled.

"Now it's your turn. Swap seats." he told her.

When Victrus returned to Torien's office the two men began to discuss the arrangements for presenting Torien to the planet as it's new King. The first of these would be the event at which the nobility would present their daughters to him as potential brides and ideally Torien would find a woman there that he could marry. After that, ideally with his fiance beside him he would make an address to the people. This would be delivered from a balcony at the front of the palace to a crowd just beyond the perimeter fence. The speech would also be recorded and broadcast around the planet while Torien told the people of his intention to continue the wise rule of his father. Victrus told Torien that Ramiro had been supposed to deliver such a speech himself but had been able to delay it so long that he died without giving it. The third and final event would be the coronation itself where Torien would be formally crowned King. The men were getting to the end of the basic outline for these events when the servant who had announced the arrival of Duke Vargas entered again.

"Colonel Barreras is here Your Majesty." he said.



"Show him in." Torien replied and the servant bowed, exited the office and then returned again with the colonel.

"Colonel Darrien Barrera of the Toltek Sixteenth Regiment." he announced as the colonel walked into the room and approached Torien's desk.

"Your Majesty." he said, saluting.

"Colonel Barrera." Torien responded, returning the salute, "How is the survey going?"

"Slowly Your Majesty. I understand that you ordered Commissar North to take two men on another assignment." Barrera said.

"Yes, I realise that that may slow down the survey but there was something that needed to be done. If you want to bring more men down from the transport then you can but I'll accept a delay to the survey caused by the transfer of these two men." Torien said.

"Thank you Your Majesty." Barrera said before he held out a dataslate, "In the meantime this is why I came to see you. This is the information that you requested."

Torien took the dataslate and glanced at it, scrolling down the list of names that was the index of the data Barrera had compiled for him.

"Thank you colonel, this looks like exactly what I need." he said.

"If that's everything I'd like to get back to making arrangements for the regiment to be brought down from orbit. We're still trying to make the necessary arrangements with the dockworkers." Barrera said and Torien nodded.

"Of course, you may go colonel." he said and Barrera turned to leave.

"Important information Your Majesty?" Victrus commented, looking at the dataslate.

"Possibly, yes." Torien replied, "Look, can we pick the rest of this up later? There is something else I need to deal with, a personal matter."

"If that is your wish Your Majesty." Vitrus replied, bowing his head, "I will inform Cardinal Intios that your meeting will be rescheduled."

"Throne. I forgot about the priest." Torien said, "Oh well, I'm sure that there'll be plenty of other opportunities to meet with him. Let's adjourn."

## 5.

Nathin helped Samara adjust the driver's seat of the vehicle so that she could comfortably reach the controls before handing her the keys to start the engine.

"This has an automatic gearbox so you don't need to worry about changing gear. Just focus on pushing down on the smaller pedal to the right will push more promethium into the engine and make us go faster while the bigger pedal applies the brakes and will slow us down. Only use your right foot for both and don't press down too hard too fast." he said and Samara nodded.

Samara started the engine and then released the vehicle's hand brake. The vehicle promptly began to drift forwards very slowly and Samara pressed down on the gas pedal with her foot. This caused the vehicle to lurch forwards suddenly and Samara moved her foot to the brake, pushing down hard enough that the vehicle lurched again.

"Oops." she said, smiling nervously.

"Try taking your shoes off princess. Those heels might not be the best choice for driving." Nathin said.

Samara removed her shoes and handed them to Nathin before she tried again and this time the vehicle began to accelerate more gently.

"I'm doing it. I'm driving." Samara said excitedly as the vehicle continued to move along the road at a constant rate now.

"Yes you are. Now we're coming up to a bend so take your foot off the gas to slow down and think about steering. Remember keep both hands on the wheel and try not to be braking while we turn." Nathin said.

Samara did as she was told but she began to turn too soon and the vehicle drove off the road onto the dirt beside it. This was still relatively flat and the vehicle was easily capable of handling it but Samara squealed and reacted by turning the steering wheel sharply in the other direction to get back onto the road and she drove right across it, crossing the dirt lake shore that was on the other side and driving into the water. This created a huge spray of water before the vehicle came to a halt and Samara stared ahead with her mouth open.

"Throne." she said, "How do I reverse?" then she looked at the gear stick and moved it to the position labelled for reverse. Then she tried accelerating again but the vehicle did not move.

"Get your foot off the gas, you're just digging the wheels into the mud." Nathin told Samara.

"So how do we get out?" she asked.

"Easy." Nathin replied, "There's a winch at the front of the vehicle that has a hundred metre cable on it. Wrap that around one of the big trees back there on the other side of the road and then we just drag ourselves out."

Samara sighed.

"So do I need to do anything while you're doing that?" she said and Nathin smirked.

"I'm not the one who drove us into the lake princess." he said and her eyes widened.

"You mean I'm supposed to wade through the water in this dress?" she said.

"Well I doubt you're the sort of girl who would take it off and go wading in your underwear." Nathin said.

"No, I'm not."

"Then just be glad that you don't do your own laundry and I'll wait here while you're getting us out. Oh and put us in neutral before you get out just in case the vehicle suddenly shifts." Nathin told her.

Samara changed the vehicle's gear before she opened the vehicle door and looked at the surface of the water that was only just below the bottom of it. From this she determined that the water was no more than knee deep to her and she carefully put her feet into the water before sliding out of the vehicle. Keeping her hands on the vehicle to steady herself Samara cautiously moved around the front of the vehicle to where the winch drum was located, wincing as she looked down and saw that the bottom of her dress was being soaked in the muddy water of the lake. She saw the clip on the end of the cable attached to the side of the winch and unclipped it. However, when she then tried to pull a length of cable free she found it locked.

"I can't get the cable out." she called out while she continued to tug on the cable as hard as she could and Nathin looked down at the controls for the winch that were set between the driver and front passenger seats.

"The reel's locked. I'll release it." he replied and he unlocked the cable reel, allowing it to turn freely without engaging with the winch motor.

Unfortunately Samara continued to pull on the cable and as soon as it was released there was nothing to support her weight and she fell backwards, screaming as she landed in the water with a large 'splash.'

Nathin quickly opened his own door and leapt out of the vehicle, also landing in the water with a 'splash' before he waded around it as quickly as he could.

"Okay princess, up you get." he said and he pulled Samara back to her feet, "Are you okay?" he added and

she nodded, "Good. Then just get back in and don't touch a damned thing while I hook up the winch." Nathin told her.

Upon leaving his office Torien began to search for Kaitlin but when he noticed the bright red robes of Tara 18-4 Kappa.

"Enginseer." he called out and she turned towards him.

"Your Majesty." she replied in her usual buzzing tones, "I was just assessing the upgrades required to create a satisfactory data and power feed to my chambers."

"Of course enginseer. Whatever you need don't hesitate to ask." Torien said.

"There would be no benefit to delaying such a request." Tara commented.

"Of course not." Torien said, used to the way that tech priests tended to take statements literally. Then he looked around to make sure that there was no-one close enough to hear before he added quietly, "I have a favour to ask you though."

"I have been assigned to provide you with support. My standing orders are to carry out the tasks you request of me, either personally or through delegation to subordinate staff or servitors." the tech priestess replied.

"I want you to inspect the wreckage of my father's car. The one he was in when the accident that killed him happened. Look for anything that doesn't fit with a technical malfunction." Torien said, still checking to make sure that they were not being overheard by anyone else.

"Do you suspect sabotage Your Majesty?" Tara 18-4 Kappa asked.

"I don't know. Let's just say that I think that three deaths in the family in such a short span of time is far too convenient to anyone who may want to destabilise the monarchy. I want a full report delivered to me in person. Don't trust any of the palace staff or servitors." Torien said.

"I will carry out the inspection immediately. Where is the vehicle currently located?" Tara 18-4 Kappa said.

"There's a service compartment in the garage. The car is still there. Obviously Ramiro either never got the opportunity or was too occupied with poisoning himself to order it removed. I'd also like this kept quiet for now." Torien told her,

"That is understandable. If there is a conspiracy against you and your family then alerting them to an investigation would give them an advantage."

"Thank you. Please continue and report your findings only to me."

"Yes Your Majesty." Tara 18-4 Kappa said, bowing her head before she turned to leave.

"Wait enginseer." Torien said and she turned back towards him, "Have you seen Kaitlin? I need to talk to her."

"I believe she is located in the central courtyard Your Majesty." the tech priestess told him.

"Thank you." Torien said and then he turned to leave as well.

The internal courtyard was an area of the palace used as a private garden by the Toltek Royal Family where they could relax among the decorative vegetation without worrying about being observed from beyond the palace perimeter. As well as a place for relaxation it could also be used for official functions and a retracting roof meant that it could be used whatever the weather. As Torien approached the entrance to the courtyard he heard the sound of voices, one of which he recognised immediately as Kaitlin's while the other he realised was Ursulla Vargas who had obviously not left when Torien had ended his meeting with her father. From what he could hear the conversation appeared to be dominated by Kaitlin complaining about Torien's return to the planet and his efforts to build a relationship with his relatives.

"Kaitlin." he called out from the entrance, preferring to alert his sister to his presence as soon as possible rather than get as close as he could before announcing his presence.

"Yes Your Majesty?" Kaitlin replied with only thinly hidden disdain as Torien approached the two women.

Rather than respond to his sister though, Torien then looked at Ursulla and she curtsied to him.

"Your Majesty." she said.

"Ursulla your father has already left the palace." Torien told her.

"Yes Your Majesty, I remained to continue my conversation with Princess Kaitlin." Ursulla replied.

"Unfortunately I require my sister's assistance now Lady Ursulla. Can you summon transport or do you want a car and driver?" Torien said.

"I have a personal vox Your Majesty." Ursulla said and Torien nodded.

"Very good. It has been a pleasure to meet you but I'm afraid that I must cut our meeting short for now." he said.

"Of course Your Majesty. Until tomorrow night." Ursulla said and she curtsied again before she left the courtyard.

Torien and Kaitlin both waited for her to be gone before Kaitlin sighed.

"Throne she's dull." she said.

"So still not keen on your old classmate?" Torien commented.

“No. In fact I’d rather spend time around even you.” Kaitlin replied and Torien smiled.

“Why Kaitlin that is the nicest thing you’ve said to me since I got back.” he said and she frowned.

“Just tell me what you want Torien.” she said.

“Firstly I have a present for you Kaitlin.” Torien replied and he handed her the dataslate that Colonel Barrera had given him.

“A dataslate? A rather basic one as well.” Kaitlin said, looking at the device.

“It’s what’s on it that’s important Kaitlin.” Torien told her and she took the dataslate from him and looked at the screen to see the list of names on it.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“A list of officers in the Sixteenth Regiment. Specifically a list of all the unmarried officers in the regiment. Everyone of them a member of the nobility and this eligible as a husband.” Torien said and Kaitlin glared at him.

“You’re already planning on marrying me off?” she said.

“Kaitlin I’m trying to do something nice for you. The men on that list have shown themselves to be dependable. Now you can look at their full personnel files at your leisure and if any of them interest you I’ll appoint them as the head of your security detail and you can see if they’re someone you want me to arrange a marriage with for you. Assuming that they agree as well.” Torien said, “As king it’s now my responsibility to arrange the marriages of our family but I’d rather you picked the person and then I’ll approach their family. On the other hand if there is someone else that already interests you then I’ll find some role for them in the palace instead and-”

“No. There’s no-one among this planet’s pompous nobility that is the sort of person that I’d want to spend even an hour with, let alone the rest of my life.” Kaitlin interrupted.

“Then I suggest you take a look at that list. If you don’t like any of them then we can forget the whole thing. I’ll just pick a suitable officer for your security detail and you don’t need to do as much as say ‘hello’ to him.” Torien said and Kaitlin continued to stare at him.

“Okay, I’ll read the list.” she said and Torien smiled again.

“Thank you Kaitlin. Now there is something else, I need your help with something.” he said.

“What?” Kaitlin asked.

“Come with me. There’s something in my bedroom I need to show you.” Torien told her.

When Torien and Kaitlin reached Torien’s bedroom he closed the door behind them so that they could talk without being observed or overheard by anyone on the landing outside.

“It’s over here.” he said, walking towards the chair that he had moved to the wall and picked it up before moving it aside, “There, look.” he said and he pointed to the scuff mark on the polished wooden floor.

“What am I supposed to be looking at Torien?” Kaitlin asked.

“That mark. I remember father always making a point about getting even the slightest mark cleaned off the floor or walls as quickly as possible. He always said that-”

“That peasants and minor nobles pretending to be better than they are may put up with damaged homes but the Royal Family needs to be seen to be perfect.” Kaitlin interrupted, “Yes, I remember that too.”

“Okay so why wasn’t this mark fixed? If father had seen it even right before he left on the journey he died on then he would have ordered it polished over and that order would have been followed even after he died.” Torien said.

“Father died months ago Torien. That’s plenty of time for that mark to have been made. I wouldn’t be surprised if Ramiro fell over while drunk or high and made it.” Kaitlin replied.

“Yes but when we were talking at dinner last night we talked about the hidden passageways in the palace that we played in together as children with Ramiro. Kaitlin after I left did you and Ramiro explore them any further?” Torien asked.

“No, what would be the point? Like I said Ramiro lost interest in hanging around with me. He just used the passages for his whores and drugs. Anything not related to them didn’t interest him in the slightest.” Kaitlin answered.

“Well I think that someone else knows about the passageways.” Torien said, “None of us found any entrances in our rooms but what if there was one right here?” he added and he pointed to the wall in front of him. This prompted a frown from Kaitlin.

“What makes you think that there’s an entrance to the passageways in here at all? Let alone on that wall in particular?” she said.

“Because mother locked herself in this room and then fell to her death from that balcony right over there.” Torien told her and he pointed to the balcony that witnesses had seen his mother fall from, “Someone who knew about the passageways could have entered the room while she was alone and surprised her before pushing her from the balcony.” Torien explained and Kaitlin turned her head sharply to look at the balcony.

"That would mean that mother was murdered." she said.

"I know, I'm sorry." Torien replied, "I've also got Tara Eighteen-four Kappa looking at the wreckage of father's car to see if it was tampered with to cause the accident."

"You think father was murdered as well?" Kaitlin said in surprise.

"I think that someone who would murder mother wouldn't think twice about murdering father as well." Torien said.

"But why Torien?" Kaitlin asked and Torien sighed.

"There are two reasons I can think of. Either someone is trying to undermine or destroy the monarchy entirely or they are trying to seize control of it for themselves." he said.

"Ramiro knew about the passageways. He could have killed mother." Kaitlin said but Torien shook his head.

"No, I don't think that it was Ramiro." he said, "If he was impatient to be King then he may have plotted to kill father but he had no motive to murder mother as well unless she already knew something. The moment father died he became the King and had control of the monarchy. I think that it had to be someone from outside the core of the Royal Family. We may never know if Ramiro's overdose really was an accident or not but if he hadn't of died that way then I expect that a way would have been found to dispose of him as well. If I hadn't been brought back then I expect that you would have been the next target."

"Me?" Kaitlin exclaimed, "No. Why would anyone want to kill me?"

"For the same reason they killed mother. Because you'd be regent Kaitlin. Ossian would be the King but he's too young to rule on his own. The real power would lie with whoever was appointed as regent. In our family that would be either mother or you." Torien said and then he stepped closer to the wall before beginning to examine it. The entrances to the hidden passageways that he remembered had used hidden pressure switches rather than exposed but camouflaged levers that could be activated accidentally.

"Torien what are you doing?" Kaitlin said.

"Looking for a way in." Torien answered.

"But if there is a passageway behind that wall there could be someone inside waiting for us." Kaitlin said.

"That would make the manhunt easy." Torien commented before he paused and smiled as he felt something shift under his hand, "I think I've got it." he said, pushing down on the wall until he heard a 'click'.

Quickly he stepped backwards and drew his las pistol, pointing it towards the wall as a section about a metre wide swung outwards and there was a scraping sound as it dragged across the floor exactly where Torien had found the scratch.

"It can't be." Kaitlin said, "But that means everything you've said is true. There are people in the palace who are trying to kill us!"

"I've served more than a decade in the Imperial Guard and I've fought entire armies of aliens." Torien said, "I'm not so easy to kill."

"This is amazing!" Samara exclaimed as she turned to follow the road around the lake. The dress she still wore had been ruined by her fall into the water but this no longer bothered her, the excitement of learning to drive pushing any thoughts about it out of her mind. She and Nathin had already completed a full circuit around the lake and Samara was starting to become more confident in her handling of the vehicle. After just over an hour of practice she was able to handle acceleration, deceleration and basic steering but Nathin doubted that she would be able to handle driving in traffic yet. However, he still wanted to give her some more experience at manoeuvring around obstacles.

"Okay slow down and get off the road." he said and Samara frowned.

"What?" she said.

"Get off the road, into the trees and drive between them." Nathin said and Samara shrugged.

"Okay then." she said before she turned the vehicle sharply, swerving off the road and narrowly missing one of the trees right beside the road and causing Nathin to flinch, "So where to now?" she asked as she continued to swerve between the trees.

"Just keep going." Nathin told her, "Just slow down a bit."

"Torien no." Kaitlin said when Torien stepped through the secret doorway that he had just opened into the passageway on the other side.

"It's okay. I'm armed and there's no-one here anyway." Torien responded as he looked around. The doorway leading to his bedroom was at the end of the passageway so it extended in only one direction but Torien was more interested in what was in it immediately beyond the entrance rather than where it led. Despite the passageway seeing very little use it was clean inside there were no tracks left on the floor that would give any information about whoever had last used it. The only feature on the inside of the passageway that he could see was a lever that could be used to open the door, this being prominent rather than concealed like the pressure switch that was on the outside. Stepping back out of the passageway he then looked at the

inside of the door that had swung out into his bedroom, "I don't see any spy holes so at least no-one can have been watching me last night." he said.

"That's all you're worried about?" Kaitlin exclaimed, "Torien someone murdered our parents and possibly Ramiro as well and now they could be after us. Not to mention Samara and Ossian."

"Well Samara should be safe for now at least. She's with Nathin and any assassin who tries to get close to someone under his protection is going to have a very bad day. We should stick together now though and go and find Ossian. Do you know where he might be at this time of day?" Torien said.

"At school of course. He'll be there for another hour." Kaitlin said.

"Then he's probably safe as well. Not that I think he's in much danger as long as you and I are still alive. We have the advantage for now though. Whoever is behind this doesn't know that we're onto them and we have a lot of work to do before they figure that out, come on." Torien told her and he pushed the door to the passageway closed again.

"Where are we going Torien?" Kaitlin asked as they both left his bedroom.

"The administration offices. I need to speak with Colonel Barrera and Adept Hom. The sooner we can get a serious fighting force down from the transport the better." Torien told her.

"But we already have the Royal Guard for protection." Kaitlin said and Torien came to a halt right in front of her, forcing her to stop in the hallway as well. Then he looked around to make sure that they were alone before he spoke.

"Kaitlin whoever is behind all this must have support inside the palace and that could be in the Royal Guard itself. On the other hand we know that we can count on my men. If I can get a company down from orbit right away then they can take over here. That's more than four hundred experienced fighting men armed with weapons superior to most of those available here on Toltek." he told her.

"So we can't trust anyone?" Kaitlin said and Torien considered this for a moment.

"From what I've heard Chief Minister Victrus and Adept Hom were both instrumental in bringing me back to Toltek so I think we can count them out as suspects." he said.

"But surely General Marquez can be trusted as well. Even if some of his men have been corrupted he-" Kaitlin began.

"Think Kaitlin." Torien interrupted, "If I hadn't come back here and you were appointed regent in Ossian's name then who would be your most likely replacement if anything happened to you? Who better than the man whose troops protect the palace? Added to that all the security sweeps of the palace mean that the Royal Guard could have found a way into the old passageways before reporting the discovery right back to him. I'm not saying that he is involved in any of this but the likelihood of him profiting from anything happening to you has to make him a suspect and so far our only one."

"Your Majesty!" an unfamiliar voice called out and Torien turned to see a man in priest's robes hurrying along the hallway towards them.

"Cardinal Intios?" Torien asked quietly and Kaitlin nodded.

The priest was not a native of Toltek and had similar pale skin to Nathin rather than the more tanned complexion that the planet's native population generally had. He appeared to be about twice the age of Torien and Kaitlin though as a member of the Adeptus Ministorum it was possible that he would have access to life prolonging treatments that were available only from off world, in which case he could easily be between two and three hundred years old instead of about sixty or seventy.

"Your Majesty." the priest said again, bowing as he stood in front of the King, "Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Cardinal Intios, personal priest to the Royal Family."

"Yes, I have been told a little about you. I'm sorry that our meeting had to be cancelled." Torien said.

"But Your Majesty that is why I am here. There is an important matter concerning the Royal Family that I have to discuss with you." Intios said.

"Cardinal, the King is rather busy at the moment. Perhaps this would be better discussed at another time." Kaitlin suggested.

"Oh no Your Highness. This is important." Intios replied and Torien sighed.

"And what is so important that it can't wait until tomorrow cardinal?" he asked.

"It is your sister Princess Samara Your Majesty." Intios answered and Torien's eyes widened for a moment, fearing the worst.

"Has something happened to her? Sergeant Tanner was supposed to be with her." he said.

"Your Majesty as far as I know the princess is perfectly safe. However, we must discuss your intentions for her marriage." Intios said.

"Cardinal I'm sorry but I don't have time for this. I should also warn you that I will not be arranging any marriages for my family that the family members themselves do not approve of. Ossian and my sisters are not for sale and that is final." Torien said sternly before he stepped around the priest and took Kaitlin by her hand before leading her onwards.

"But Your Majesty-" Intios called out.

"You are dismissed cardinal." Torien called out without looking at the priest as he and Kaitlin continued to hurry towards the section of the palace where the administrative offices were located.

The administrative section of the palace had far more staff in it than the residential areas and these immediately stood aside, bowing or curtsying as soon as they saw the King and his sister rushing through the hallways.

"Is Adept Hom in his office?" Torien asked one of the palace staff as he and Kaitlin approached the door to Hom's office.

"Yes Your Majesty. He is in conference with General Marquez and Colonel Barrera." the servant replied and Torien and Kaitlin looked at one another, "Shall I announce you?" the servant added but Torien shook his head.

"No thank you. I'll be more spontaneous this time." he said before using his free hand to grab the door handle and open it.

"Your Majesty." Hom said as soon as Torien and Kaitlin entered his office and all three of the men present stood up, Hom bowing while the military officers snapped to attention and saluted instead.

"As you were." Torien replied while returning the salute and the three men sat down again.

Torien closed the office door behind himself and Kaitlin before they both sat down as well.

"To what do we owe this visit?" Hom asked.

"My sister and I were wondering what the current state of the operation to bring the Sixteenth down to the surface was adept." Torien answered calmly.

"Unfortunately Your Majesty there have been a number of complications in that regard." Hom replied.

"What sort of complications?" Torien said.

"It concerns the hiring of labourers to carry out the unloading of equipment Your Majesty." Hom said.

"A labour dispute basically." Barrera commented, "The labour unions are insisting on being able to analyse and inspect all material before it's loaded into the cargo lighters for what they're calling safety issues."

"They don't want to handle munitions without more information." General Marquez added.

"Why haven't they been given the Adeptus Mechanicus data?" Torien said.

"They have." Barrera said, "They're saying that it's too vague."

"Too vague? Throne, haven't they ever met a tech priest? Vague is not a word I'd use to describe any of them. If anything they'll insist on telling you the entire product history of a bag of bolts." Torien said, thinking of the times he had had conversations regarding the weapons issued to his troops with Tara 18-4 Kappa. Her responses had always been highly technical and from what he had heard from other officers her superiors could be even worse.

"I suspect that the union is trying to get more money out the government. Hazard pay." Marquez said.

"Technically I could approach the Adeptus Arbites and have them draft all the workers we need. The Sixteenth Regiment is still part of the Imperial Guard after all." Hom suggested.

"I recommend we do that Your Majesty." Marquez said, "Any refusal to follow an Imperial order would be treason. The Arbites can shoot the union organisers and we'll be done with the layabouts."

Torien knew that Hom was correct. Unloading the equipment of the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment could be made an Imperial issue, thus bypassing local bureaucracy but such action carried significant risks with it. He wanted the Imperial Guard troops on the surface as fast as possible but drafting labourers to carry out the necessary work could be a trap to trigger civil disorder that would occupy the Adeptus Arbites and leave Torien with only the Royal Guard that he now considered compromised for protection.

"No I don't think so." Torien responded, "I don't want to start my reign by employing forced labour and firing squads. If the unions want to inspect the munitions then let them but make sure that it's tech priests that they deal with rather than regular Imperial Guard personnel. Nobody calls a tech priest sloppy and gets away with it." then he turned to Barrera and added, "I do have a special order for you though colonel. May I have your dataslate?"

"Yes Your Majesty." Barrera responded and he handed his dataslate to Torien who took it and immediately began to type out an order that none of the others present could see before he handed the dataslate back to Colonel Barrera and the military officer read it right away.

"Are you certain about this Your Majesty?" he asked, frowning.

"Yes absolutely colonel." Torien said, "I think that you can be far more helpful in orbit with your men. Adept Hom and the Adeptus Mechanicus should be able to deal with the unions."

"By your command Your Majesty." Barrera responded and he got to his feet and saluted once more before leaving the office.

"Your Majesty might I enquire what orders you have just issued to Colonel Barrera? As his superior I-" Marquez began.

"As his superior you should recognise the need to keep vital information classified general." Torien interrupted as he too stood up and held out his hand to Kaitlin, "You may carry on gentlemen." he told them before he walked out of the room with his sister.

"What was all that about Torien?" Kaitlin whispered when they were in the hallway and heading back towards the residential area of the palace, "Why have you sent Colonel Barrera back to the transport ship? If he's one of the few people that we can trust then we need him down here with us, don't we?"

"We need someone we can rely on in orbit as well Kaitlin." Torien replied, "Trust me, Sergeant Tanner is more than capable of protecting us both but just in case perhaps you should stick closer to me from now on."

"Okay but remember that this is new to me Torien. I'm not a soldier who's cheated death for years. The thought of a murderer prowling the palace scares me." Kaitlin said.

Torien smiled when he heard this.

"Well when we were younger and you got scared you just slept in my bed with me. If you want-" he said.

"I don't think so Torien." Kaitlin interrupted, "For starters if we did that at our age then people would start rumours about how appropriate our relationship was. If you think rumours that you aren't a virgin are enough to ruin a female noble's chance of marriage just think about the consequences for either of us if the rumour was that we were committing incest. Secondly just in case you've forgotten it's your room that has the entrance to the passageways in it, not mine."

"Well in that case let's just act normal for now. Whoever is behind all of this doesn't know that we're onto them yet so let's try and keep it that way. Okay?" Torien said and Kaitlin nodded.

"So I'm to act normal then?" she said.

"Yes, perfectly normal."

"In that case Torien I'd like to say that I am glad to have you back home first." Kaitlin said as she glanced around the room they were in and noting the positions of several servants.

"First? Kaitlin what do-" Torien began before all of a sudden Kaitlin drew back her hand and slapped him across the face as hard as she could. Then as Torien staggered back with a stunned expression on his face she rushed away.

Torien rubbed his face as he stood up straight again and saw the horrified expressions on the faces of the nearby servants.

"It's okay." he told them, "You can get back to your work."

Torien then headed in the same direction Kaitlin had rushed towards the residential area. This route took him through the main hall and just as he was entering this he saw Nathin and Samara returning from her driving lesson.

"Throne. Samara what happened to you?" he asked when he saw his younger sister covered from head to toe in dirt from the lake and her clothing clearly ruined.

"Torien that was amazing. Thank you so much!" she exclaimed, rushing up to Torien and embracing him.

"Nathin, what happened?" Torien said, looking at the Catachan and noticing that the condition of his trousers made it appear that he had been wading in water as well.

"Princess Samara learned a valuable lesson about the difficulties of dealing with vehicles that have become stuck in difficult terrain." Nathin replied.

"I drove into the lake and we had to use the winch to get out. Can I have another lesson tomorrow?" Samara added.

"We'll see. Go and clean yourself up before dinner." Torien said.

"Thank you Torien." Samara replied before kissing him on the cheek and then hurrying up the nearby stairs.

"So how well did she really do?" Torien asked, looking at Nathin and the Catachan smiled at him.

"Do you remember that reconnaissance mission we were sent on behind enemy lines when we came across that Ork race track, or test track or whatever it was?" he said.

"You mean the one where they were racing around it and shooting at one another?" Torien replied and Nathin nodded.

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Yes, I remember it. What about it?" Torien said.

"Well I think I'd feel safer being driven by one of those Ork drivers. Now if you don't mind I have half the lake bed in my boots and I'd like to get rid of it." Nathin said.

"Nathin wait." Torien said as Nathin turned to leave.

"Something's wrong isn't it?" Nathin said when he turned back towards Torien.

"I'm pretty sure that my parents were murdered. Ramiro too." Torien told him and Nathin's eyes widened.

"Throne Torien. Why do you think that?" he asked.

"Because there's a secret passageway that leads into my room that was opened by someone after father died. I think that person pushed my mother from the balcony. I've got Engineer Kappa examining the wreckage of father's car now. If there's anything out of the ordinary with it then I know she'll be able to find it." Torien explained.

"What about your brother Ramiro?"

"Impossible to know probably. He took an overdose but who can say whether he took it of his own accord or someone tampered with whatever he was taking? If the investigation of the car comes back with anything I



might have Ramiro's body examined but that would require exhuming it and for the time being I'm trying to keep my investigation quiet." Torien said.

"I get it. So do you have any ideas about who could be responsible?" Nathin said.

"That depends. The intention could be to bring down the monarchy entirely, in which case there is a democracy movement that's existed for thousands of years. They've never used violence before which is why they're tolerated but I suppose that their ideals could have changed. The other option is that they're looking to take control of the monarchy instead. Killing mother removed the person who would have become regent for Ossian when Ramiro died. Without me returning that would have made Kaitlin the next target." Torien said.

"Okay so who would be the next regent for your kid brother?" Nathin said.

"I think General Marquez would have been a likely candidate but it could have been any one of a dozen or more members of the nobility. A lot depends on what a regent would do to cement control over the monarchy. They could arrange for a daughter of their own to be married to Ossian or a son could marry Samara before Ossian was then killed as well." Torien said.

"Right so who do you think we can trust and who already knows all this?"

"Kaitlin knows it all. She was there when I discovered the secret passageway. I think it's come as so much of a shock to her that she's even stopped hating me. She actually said she was glad I was back before she hit me again."

"Progress." Nathin commented.

"Yes. The only other person apart from Enginseer Kappa that I've let in on anything being out of the ordinary is Colonel Barrera and I've sent him back to the transport to take care of things up there."

"You're worried about sabotage?" Nathin asked.

"Possibly but I've given him other orders as well. Hopefully they won't be needed but if they are then we'll at least be ready. Commissar North isn't back yet but when he returns I'll let him in on this as well." Torien said and Nathin nodded.

"Yeah, I'll say this for leashes, they're like bloodhounds when it comes to carrying out criminal investigations." he said before Torien continued.

"I'm pretty sure that we can count on Chief Minister Victrus and Adept Hom as well. They were instrumental in bringing me back here and I doubt they'd have done that if they were just planning on having me killed as well. I was already out of the picture." he said, "I couldn't tell Adept Hom though because General Marquez was there. Hopefully I'll get the chance to speak to him and Minister Victrus soon. They can tell me if there was any opposition to bringing me back here. That could be an indication that someone was planning to make a play for power."

"Assuming that taking over the monarchy was their aim. If it was this democracy mob then they'd probably be planning on killing a lot more people anyway. Even without you and all your brothers and sisters there must be dozens of cousins who could take over. What's one more body?" Nathin said.

"What a cheerful thought." Torien said, "I want you to go to the palace armoury and pick out some weapons."

"Thinking that our las pistols aren't going to be enough?" Nathin said.

"Not for us. If someone is coming after my family then I want them all to be able to look after themselves in a crunch. Find weapons suitable for Kaitlin, Samara and Ossian. I want sporting guns that are also good for personal protection and smaller handguns than can be concealed easily. No-one must know exactly why we're arming them so we'll make it look like I've just decided to teach them all to shoot for relaxation." Torien told him.

"Are you going to tell Samara and Ossian what's going on then? Samara seems pretty bright for someone who wasn't allowed to stay in school and she asks a lot of questions." Nathin said.

"We'll teach them to protect themselves first then decide whether to tell them. I don't want them panicking if all of this comes to nothing and accidentally shooting servants who came to wake them up in the morning." Torien said.

"Right. Shotguns and stub pistols it is then. Is first thing tomorrow okay? I really do need to change these trousers before I go out tonight." Nathin said, pointing down at the muck on his trousers, "That fancy place you recommended was a bit wary of letting me in with a clean uniform on. Even with a royal warrant I doubt I'd get through the door like this."

"Yes they were rather particular about appearances. I remember my first time there. In fact it was quite literally my first time. The night before my thirteenth birthday Ramiro came to my room and told me to go with him for my birthday present. We sneaked out of the palace and he took me there." Torien said with a smile as he remembered one of the good times he had had with his older brother.

"So you became a teenager in the company of an expensive joy girl then?" Nathin said and Torien held up two fingers on one hand.

"Two of them. Both very talented and eager to please a young prince. Even if I was technically underage." he said and Nathin smiled.

"It must be good to be a prince." he said.

"It is too soon." one of the men in the darkened room said into the communication device.

"It doesn't matter. The King knows that his relatives did not die by accident. He doesn't have the proof yet but it's only a matter of time." the individual on the other end replied, the voice distorted to prevent identification.

"We'll be exposed if we strike now."

"No we won't. Trust me. I can get your man into the palace and into the passageways then it will all be up to him. In the meantime I want you to deal with that Catachan who hangs around him. The Royal Guard are largely for show but he knows what he's doing and the last thing we need is him coming after us."

"Very well. I'll send my man to you immediately. Tonight the King and his bodyguard will both die."

## 6.

“So tell me adept, what do you think of our new King?” Marquez asked when the two men were alone in Hom’s office.

“Your new king you mean general? As a member of the Administration I am technically subject to his rule.” Hom pointed out.

“If you say so adept. Though you must still have an opinion of him.” Marquez replied.

“He seems competent enough. Certainly he has made a good impression on the palace staff according to Chief Minister Victrus. He seems more relaxed than his father was and certainly easier to deal with than Ramiro.” Hom said and Marquez frowned, “You disagree general?” he added.

“King Haddon and King Ramiro at least respected the role played by the Royal Guard in protecting his family. King Torien is returning them to regular defence force duties.” Marquez said.

“Only because he is replacing them with his former Imperial Guard regiment general. Surely you can’t deny that they are the most capable troops on the planet right now. Or at least they will be once we can finally get them down here. Besides, I’d have thought you’ve have been glad to have them here. Once they start training your soldiers in the use of their equipment the Adeptus Mechanicus will be supplying the entire PDF with such weapons and armour. You’ll be left with a far more capable force than you have now.”

“Yes but who will lead them Adept Hom? Me, the man who had commanded this planet’s forces for more than a decade now or Colonel Barreras, the man that our new King obviously trusts far more than he trusts me.” Marquez said.

It had been a long drive for Commissar North and the two guardsmen accompanying him but they had finally reached their destination.

“So this is it then is it?” one of the soldiers asked and North double checked the address on the dataslate he had been given before looking at the farmhouse they were now parked outside.

“Yes, this is it. I double checked the local database to make sure that it was still correct. My orders were clear so let’s get a move on. He’ll probably be around the back somewhere.” he said and then he and the two guardsmen both got out of their vehicle. North had his bolt pistol and chainsword both on his belt while the guardsmen with him both picked up their lasguns from the internal mountings of the vehicle where they had been stored.

“Looks like there’s a path over there commissar.” one of them commented and he pointed to the side of the house where there was a gap between the side of the building and a nearby hedge beyond which the top of a larger structure could be seen.

“Okay, you come with me.” North told him and then he glanced at the second man and added, “You wait here with the vehicle. I doubt this will take long.”

North and the guardsman then both walked towards the gap and looked around the building. As expected they saw that beyond the hedge there was an area of open ground that had a large storage shed constructed about twenty metres away. There were no signs of life around either the house or shed though and North led the guardsmen towards the back of the house. As they got closer to this the two men saw that behind it there was row after row of bushes that were covered in bright red fruit. Here and there a labourer could be seen inspecting the plants for signs of infestation or disease while an older man with white hair discussed some aspect of the crop with another one of his workers.

“That is probably him.” North said and he and the guardsman began to walk towards him. As they approached the old man noticed them out of the corner of his eye and both he and the worker he was talking to looked towards them in surprise. The entire planet knew that Torien had returned with the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment but the few troops that had landed were supposed to be limited to the Royal Palace and for a commissar of all people to be here on this unremarkable farm was something that none of the staff had expected.

“May I help you sir?” the white haired man asked and as he spoke the nearby workers all looked up from their work, also surprised to see the commissar present at the farm.

“You are the tenant here?” North responded and the white haired man nodded.

“Yes sir. I operate the farm on behalf of Earl Vazquez.” he said.

“Then you are to come with us.” North told him.

“To where?” the old man said nervously and North held out his dataslate.

“King Torien had ordered you to appear before him at the Royal Palace.” North told him, “The King has an offer for you that I think you will find very interesting.”

Following an evening meal during which Samara dominated most of the conversation by talking not only about her day spent driving but also asking about Nathin Tanner, Torien returned to his room despite now

knowing about the hidden entrance to the passageway. The chair that he had moved was still positioned right up against the entrance so it could not be opened without moving it but he double checked it anyway after first locking the door. Rather than undress and change for bed he instead just placed his sidearm on the bedside table and taking his chainsword from the gun cabinet and placing this beside his bed as well before he lay down on the bed, turned out the lights and went to sleep.

He did not know how long he slept before he was woken up by a scraping sound and he turned his head towards the entrance to the hidden passageway and even in the darkness of the room he could see the chair moving as the door behind it was being pushed open.

Keeping his attention on the opening door Torien reached out and found his las pistol still exactly where he had left it. Picking it up he then pointed it towards the entrance to the hidden passageway and waited for a target to present itself. Torien knew that there were many ways that someone inside the passageway could try to kill him even without setting foot in his bedroom. They could fire a ranged weapon from inside the passageway but that would require the door to be opened wide enough for Torien to also see the assassin. On the other hand an explosive or gas based weapon could be simply tossed into the bedroom though if that were the assassin's plan Torien suspected that such a weapon would already have been thrown through the still widening gap between the hidden door and the wall surrounding it. All of a sudden the scraping sound stopped and Torien noticed a shadowy figure in the darkness as it began to emerge from the passageway, squeezing into the bedroom.

It was at this point that Torien fired and for a brief moment his bedroom was lit up by the flash of the laser. The mysterious figure was also illuminated but all that this revealed was that it appeared to be male and was clad from head to foot entirely in black making identification impossible. Torien's shot hit the figure in the shoulder but he did not fall despite letting out a startled gasp. This suggested to Torien that his would be assassin was wearing some kind of body armour. Despite this protection the assassin was obviously not counting on facing a target who was able to fight back and he retreated back into the passageway immediately.

Torien was not about to just let his would be killer escape and he scooped his chainsword up off the floor before leaping off the bed and rushing to the still open doorway to the hidden passageway. Pointing his las pistol through the opening he peered into the passageway just in case the assassin was lurking just inside in anticipation of Torien coming after him. However, the assassin had decided that fleeing entirely was the correct course of action and there was no sign of him at the end of the passageway. Happy that he was not about to be ambushed while most vulnerable Torien then squeezed his way through the gap and entered the passageway himself.

Once inside the passageway Torien pointed his las pistol along it and began to advance steadily. There were no lights inside the passageway but Torien's eyes were starting to adjust by this point and he could still see a fair distance ahead. The drawback was that if he fired his las pistol again his night vision would be ruined and Torien knew that his first shot would have to be a good one. Despite having spent many years as a child playing in the palace's secret passages he had never known about this one and he could not tell for certain where it would lead. On the other hand the assassin was familiar with it and could move quickly. However, this rapid movement produced loud footfalls that echoed along the passageway and enabled Torien to follow him easily.

All of a sudden Torien came to a point in the passageway where it had obviously been blocked by wooden planks that had been covered in plaster on the far side but had now been broken down. Stepping through the wrecked barrier Torien found himself in a passageway that extended either side of him and he looked down each of them, listening for the sound of the assassin. As he did so though he noticed that although it was too dark to make out any details there was paint on the wall. Even without being able to see the details of the paint Torien immediately knew what it was, remembering Kaitlin painting a picture of the pair of them along with Ramiro exploring the passageways and this told him exactly where he was. Then he heard the sound of someone running down a flight of stairs and he turned to follow these. Now aware of his approximate location within the palace Torien knew that the path that the assassin was taking would lead him into the lower service area where the garage was located. Whether he intended to try and commandeer a vehicle Torien did not know, but the garage was an obvious means of escape from the palace. Torien now broke into a run himself, racing towards the stairs and when he reached them he looked down to see a shaft of light appear as the assassin opened the door leading to the garage. Torien quickly aimed his las pistol down the stairs and fired again but the assassin was able to dive through the now open doorway without being hit. Torien raced down the stairs as quickly as possible and rushed out into the garage. However, just as he was exiting the passageway he noticed movement from beside him and he dived out of the way just in time to avoid the dagger that was thrust towards him. Rolling across the floor for several metres, Torien sat up and pointed his las pistol towards the assassin as the man charged towards him but before he could fire the masked killer kicked the weapon from his hand before lunging at him with his dagger again. Torien reacted to this attack quickly enough to be able to bring up his chainsword but he had not yet activated the motorised

blade and so instead of slicing his assailant's arm off at the elbow he was only able to knock the attack away. Moments later through there was the sound of a motor as Torien activated his chainsword and the blade began to spin rapidly.

"Surrender now." Torien ordered the man as he got to his feet and the pair faced off against one another.

"Death to the King." the assassin responded, his accent indicating that he was at least local to Tula.

Torien then struck again, thrusting his chainsword straight ahead in the hope of simply skewering the assassin but the masked man retreated out of reach before sidestepping so that he could get past Torien's deadly blade to counterattack. Torien was able to swing his chainsword to the side and knocked the man away but the hit was made with the covered back of the weapon instead of the jagged blade and although it prevented Torien from being stabbed it did not injure the assassin.

The masked man continued to come closer to Torien, getting within the reach of his chainsword and the two men grappled with one another, each using their free hand to grab their opponent's weapon hand to force it aside while they struck with their own. Torien remembered a move that he had seen Nathin use when involved in hand to hand combat with Orks on occasion and as the assassin's head came closer to his he headbutted the man as hard as he could. The impact of head against head momentarily stunned both men and they let go of their grips on one another before they both staggered backwards in a daze. For a moment Torien wondered how Nathin could have carried out such an attack against an Ork with their infamously thick skulls without splitting his own head wide open. He quickly returned his attention to his attacker though and he saw that the other man had also recovered from the headbutt. Both men studied one another cautiously watching for any signs of weakness in the other before all of a sudden the assassin dived forwards and rolled under Torien's chainsword. Torien reacted by simply kicking the man in his side before he could make use of his dagger and this sent him rolling away. In the process though the assassin's legs became tangled with Torien's and he too fell to the floor of the garage, dropping his chainsword as he landed.

When the assassin came to a halt he felt something beneath him and he realised that he had ended up on top of where Torien's las pistol had ended up. He grabbed hold of this as he got back to his feet and pointed it down at Torien while he was still on the floor.

"Now you die King!" he hissed but before he could pull the trigger a mechanical tendril wrapped itself around his throat tightly from behind and he was lifted up off his feet into the air. At the same time a second tendril wrapped itself around his wrist and tightened enough that he was forced to drop Torien's las pistol to the floor again.

"Your Majesty are you injured?" Tara 18-4 Kappa asked as she looked down at Torien while still holding the assassin off the floor where he clawed with his one free hand at the mechandrite she had wrapped around his throat.

"I'm fine thanks. That was some good timing." Torien replied as he got to his feet and walked over to where his las pistol had landed, "A few seconds later and I've have a hole in my head though."

"Four hundred and thirty milliseconds, plus or minus sixty milliseconds with a ninety percent degree of probability based on the expectation of an accurate shot." the tech priestess said and Torien smiled.

"For you that isn't very precise." he commented.

"Apologies Your Majesty. The data I have is limited. Do you want this subject terminated?" the tech priestess asked and Torien looked at the struggling assassin.

"No. I think Commissar North will be able to get some useful information out of him." he said before he looked at the wall mounted clock and saw that it was now well past midnight, "What are you doing down here at this time anyway engineseer?" he asked.

"Carrying out your orders Your Majesty. I had not completed my inspection of your late father's vehicle so remained here when the palace staff ceased work." Tara 18-4 Kappa answered and Torien smiled.

"Then I shall remember to thank Him on Earth for the dedication shown by the Martian Priesthood." he said but then he heard a subtle 'crunch' sound and for a moment he thought that Tara 18-4 Kappa had broken the assassin's neck. However, as he and the tech priestess looked at the man they heard a hissing sound and Tara 18-4 Kappa released her grip on the man, allowing him to drop to the floor.

The assassin still sounded as though he was choking though and when he coughed tiny droplets of blood were able to pass through the fabric of his mask. The assassin then let out a loud scream before he began to convulse uncontrollably.

"Your Majesty, I believe that he has activated some kind of suicide device. Most likely a toxin concealed within his mouth." Tara 18-4 Kappa said and Torien stared at her for a moment.

"Thank you for that information engineseer." he said.

"You are welcome Your Majesty." the tech priestess replied just as the assassin stopped moving and lay still at their feet, "All life signs have ceased. The subject is dead." she added.

"Aren't you going to stay a little longer?" the joy girl asked Nathin while he got dressed, "You could at least share a bottle of wine with me." she added when he looked at her lying naked on the bed they had shared.

"I don't think so." he said, smiling at her. Although he had not enquired about her age Nathin guessed that she was perhaps only a year or two older than Samara.

"Why not? Didn't I please you tonight?" the young woman asked.

"Oh yes, I was very pleased indeed but I have to pass on the wine."

"Why?"

"Well firstly because I'm Catachan and despite our reputation for rowdiness we don't drink a great deal of alcohol." Nathin told the joy girl and she frowned.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because on Catachan you have to stay alert. Getting intoxicated is likely to lead to getting killed." Nathin answered.

"And secondly?" the joy girl added and Nathin smiled again.

"Secondly I've seen how much you charge for bottles of wine and although I work for the King I'm not as rich as he is and I don't think my expense account will stretch that far." he said, "So are you working tomorrow night as well?" he added and the young woman nodded.

"In that case I may see you then. There's a big fancy do on at the palace though so I might not be able to make it for a third night in a row." Nathin said.

"I make house calls to my favoured clients." the joy girl said, smiling back at Nathin.

"Thanks for the offer but I'd rather not cause a royal scandal in my first week here." he said before he picked up the belt that had his las pistol and traditional Catachan fighting knife on before fastening it around his waist. Once this was in place he left the lavishly decorated room that he had spent the last few hours in and made his way towards the exit from the brothel, walking towards the two gaudy combat servitors located either side of the main doors where they could be called upon to prevent the wrong sort of individual from entering the premises or alternately to remove anyone who caused trouble after being admitted.

"Goodnight Sergeant Tanner." the older woman who ran the brothel called out to him as he walked through the hall, "I take it that Isabella was satisfying enough?"

"Indeed she was. I'll call ahead next time to see if she's available again." Nathin responded.

"I look forward to it Sergeant Tanner." the woman said as he walked between the motionless servitors and stepped out into the night air.

The walk back to the palace was about half an hour long but Nathin preferred that to waiting for a vehicle to be sent from the palace and he knew from his efforts the night before that many of the local civilian hire vehicles would be reluctant to take a passenger who was openly displaying a sidearm and large blade and so he began to walk, making a mental note that he really should ask Torien about borrowing one of the vehicles kept in the palace garage.

He had been walking for less than a block when he realised that he appeared to be being followed. Two men who had been standing close by the brothel when he exited it had started walking in the same direction as him almost straight away and now they had been joined by two others. Nathin suspected that the men had probably been waiting outside the brothel for one of its wealthy customers to emerge, most likely the worse for wear because of expensive drink so that they could follow them to a more secluded location and rob them. Of course they had no way of knowing that Nathin would not only be emerging perfectly sober but also that he would spot them almost immediately. On Catachan the ability to sense the approach of a predator was an essential survival trait and those blind to their surroundings did not live long on the surface.

Nathin had no intention of making attacking him easy for the men though and as he walked he took note of his surroundings, looking for somewhere that he could turn the tables on them. In order to try and lull them into a false sense of security he put on a slight stagger as he walked, acting as though he was drunk after downing more than half a bottle of overpriced wine while a joy girl just sipped at it so she would be sober for the next man she slept with. If the group of men following him had any ranged weapons then they would have used them as soon as there was no-one so Nathin suspected that if they were armed at all then it was with concealable melee weapons only.

Ahead of him Nathin saw a bridge over one of the waterways that passed through the city of Tula and he decided that this was the best place for him to spring his trap. When he reached the bridge he took hold of the barrier at the side and made it appear that he was using it for support. Then when he was about half way across he stopped and leant over the side, retching as if he was about to throw up. Just as he had expected this prompted the four men following him to suddenly increase their speed towards him, all running as fast as they could. This caused them to spread out rather than come at him in one larger group and as the first man reached him Nathin saw the glint of metal in his hand.

Nathin suddenly straightened up and turned to face the man, grabbing him by the wrist with one hand before he could make use of the knife he held and then grabbing hold of his collar as well. Nathin now saw that the man attacking him had a scarf covering most of his face but he stared wide eyed at the Catachan in surprise at having his attack blocked. Before the man could attempt to break free Nathin first slammed him into the barrier at the side of the bridge before flipping him over it and he fell screaming into the water below.

By this time the next man was almost on Nathin and he did not think that he had the time necessary to draw his las pistol and ready it for firing so instead he reached for his own knife. As he had expected the next masked man was within arm's reach before he had his Catachan blade out of its sheath and he swung his fist at his assailant. The man tried to retreat as he saw the punch coming but it still struck him in the face with a 'crunch' as his nose broke and he staggered backwards with his hands clasped over his face and blood pouring out from behind them.

The third man sidestepped around his bleeding comrade but by the time he reached Nathin the big Catachan already had his traditional knife in his hand and he thrust it at the man with enough force to skewer his abdomen completely. Nathin withdrew the blade and pushed the man away from him. This produced a spray of blood that splashed across Nathin and the man dropped his knife to clutch as his wound as he fell while Nathin turned to face the last of his attackers. This man had just witnessed his three comrades all quickly despatched by the big Catachan and stopped rather than charge Nathin while he continued to wield his knife. The problem with this decision was that it kept him far enough away from Nathin long enough for him to be able to draw his las pistol and take aim.

"Drop the knife and get down." Nathin ordered, staring at the man wielding the knife in front of him.

Rather than surrender or retreat though the man charged at Nathin and the Catachan fired a single shot. This hit the man in his chest and he collapsed on the spot without a sound, lying motionless on the ground in front of him.

Nathin then looked around at the other two men who had attacked him and he found that the man he had stabbed was now dead as well, a large pool of blood surrounding his corpse. On the other hand the man whose nose he had broken looked back up at Nathin in horror.

"Didn't you ever consider that not everyone you try and rob would be quite as helpless as they appear?"

Nathin said, aiming his weapon at the man as he spoke but the man just smiled back at him while his nose continued to bleed. Then he bit down on something and he began to cough, spitting up even more blood before he began to convulse wildly for a few seconds. After this he too became limp and still.

Nathin then walked over to the side of the bridge and looked down into the water below. Although it was dark he could hear the flow of the water and he knew that it was moving quite quickly. Unsurprisingly there was no sign of the man he had tossed over the side of the bridge though whether he had drowned or just been carried away by the current was a mystery.

There was one more thing that Nathin was curious about though and he holstered his weapons as he walked over to the body of the man he had shot and crouched down beside it. Taking a compact torch from his pocket he shone this into the dead man's mouth and began to poke at the teeth until he found one that he was able to make move. Grasping this between his thumb and forefinger Nathin pulled on it and as he had expected it came loose. Then he pressed the top of the tooth against the pavement by his foot until he heard a 'crack' at which point he lifted it up and in the light of his torch he saw the chemical stain that was left behind.

"Now what sort of muggers need suicide pills in their teeth?" he said to himself.

"Kaitlin open up it's Torien!" Torien yelled as he banged his fist on the locked door to his sister's bedroom and a few moments later she opened it slightly, peering at him through the gap.

"Torien what's going on? Do you know what time it is?" she said before noticing the woman in the Imperial Guard uniform standing behind him, "And who is she?"

"Corporal Tellez is here to protect you Kaitlin. An assassin just tried to get into my room and kill me in my sleep. Luckily that chair I placed in front of the door to the hidden passageway made almost as much noise as an excited Ork. Now open the door." Torien explained and Kaitlin's eyes widened.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she opened the door wider and Torien nodded.

"I'm fine. The assassin not so much. Enginseer Kappa was able to restrain him but he committed suicide before we could get any useful information out of him." he said as he and Meya Tellez entered Kaitlin's room. Then he turned to Meya, "Just stay here and make sure that nothing happens to my sister, okay?"

"Yes Your Majesty." she replied and Torien looked at Kaitlin instead.

"Okay just stay here with Meya. If there are any more assassins in the palace then I want to know that you're safe. I'm going to go and find Samara and Ossian and bring them here while the palace is searched. The Royal Guard are securing the building but I've summoned the Adeptus Arbites as well. They'll be here within the hour." he told her.

"I stay here." Kaitlin replied, nodding her head, "Take care Torien."

"Good." Torien said before he turned and left the room.

Kaitlin closed and locked the door behind Torien before she turned and looked at the woman he had left behind to protect her. She was obviously not a member of the nobility, no noble women from Toltek had joined the Imperial Guard and in any case she held a non-commissioned rank rather than being an officer. However, Kaitlin had noticed Torien's use of the woman's first name when he had addressed her directly.

“What are your orders Your Highness?” Meya asked and Kaitlin smiled. She intended to find out exactly why Torien had been so informal in the way he spoke to her. Although her brother seemed determined to do away with many of the established conventions of the monarchy she doubted that he had been in the habit of addressing the troops under his command in the Imperial Guard by their first names.

“I’m going to get dressed. You can wait here.” she told Meya, “After that you can tell me exactly what you and my brother mean to one another.”

“Your Majesty my men can carry out the search of the palace. We don’t need to wait for outside help.” the Royal Guard captain said to Torien in the throne room. For security Torien had gathered Kaitlin, Samara and Ossian in the room with him as well and there was an entire squad of Royal Guard present, all of them armed with rifles. Given that Adept Hom also resided within the palace he had also been roused from his bed and been brought to the throne room just in case any would-be assassins decided that he would make a valuable kill if no members of the Royal Family could be found and killed.

“Would your search be as efficient as the security that enabled an intruder not only to enter the palace building but to make it as far as the King’s bed chamber itself?” a stern sounding voice from the direction of the entrance to the throne room responded as a trio of men in black carapace armour entered. All three were armed with shotguns and their helmets bore the Imperial Aquila.

“Your Majesty may I present Marshal Neuer of the Adeptus Arbites.” Hom said. As fellow representatives of Imperial authorities the two men were familiar to one another.

“Thank you for attending us marshal.” Torien added.

“I only carry out my duty Your Majesty.” Neuer responded as he stood in front of Torien, “As King you are effectively the Imperial Governor of Toltek and an attempt on your life is an act of treason not only against the laws of your planet but also against the Emperor and the Imperium. I have brought fifty of my men to carry out the search but I would like to see the body of the assassin for myself.”

“The body is in the garage. Enginseer Tara eighteen-four Kappa is standing guard on it. The obvious ways in and out the palace are covered by men from the Royal Guard while I’ve deployed some of the Imperial troops who were surveying the palace are watching the hidden passageways that go beyond the perimeter.” Torien told the Arbites marshal.

“I was not aware of any hidden passageways Your Majesty.” Neuer said.

“None of us were marshal.” Hom replied.

“According to my family’s history the palace was first constructed as a garrison post by the Astartes legion that brought Toltek into compliance during the Great Crusade.” Torien said, “As part of their defence they made sure that they had ways of outflanking any invader. At some point the Astartes were called away and the palace was gifted to my ancestors. They had little use for these passageways and most of them fell into disuse while others were simply adapted into more conventional hallways. Unfortunately if there was ever a complete map of these passageways or how they were modified over the millennia it is long since lost. I can provide you with some details about their layout but your men will have to be alert for any that I don’t know about.”

“We have servo skulls with advanced auspex units Your Majesty.” Neuer said, “If there are any hidden voids in the palace that remain undetected then we will find them.”

“Excellent. Please commence your search marshal.” Torien told him and the Arbites marshal bowed his head again.

“Yes Your majesty.” he said and he then nodded at one of his subordinates.

“Yes sir.” the Arbites enforcer said before he and the third member of the Arbites in the throne room turned and strode back out of it.

“Is there something else marshal?” Torien asked.

“Yes Your Majesty.” Marshal Neuer answered, “I must inform you that my division has also received a report of an assault on one of your household staff. An off worlder named Sergeant Nathin Tanner.”

“Nathin? Is he okay?” Torien said as soon as he heard the name of his Catachan bodyguard.

“He is unharmed Your Majesty.” Neuer told him, “However, the same cannot be said for the men who attacked him. Three of them have been confirmed dead at the scene by my enforcers while a third who was thrown into the river is unaccounted for. Sergeant Tanner himself contacted the Arbites following the incident and two of my enforcers are with him now. He has been informed about the situation here at the palace and has requested to be allowed to return here.”

“Is there any reason why he shouldn’t?” Torien said.

“No Your Majesty. The last report I received was that my enforcers were waiting for local law enforcement to arrive to seal the crime scene for our analysis servitors. Once they arrive Sergeant Tanner will be escorted back to the palace.” Neuer said, “Now if there is nothing else I would like to inspect the body.”



Just as Torien had told Marshal Neuer the assassin's body was lying on the floor of the palace garage with Tara 18-4 Kappa standing guard.

"So this is the assassin." Neuer said, looking down at the body while a servo skull hovered just behind him.

"That is correct. I was present at the point of his self termination." the tech priestess responded.

"He killed himself?" Neuer asked.

"That is correct. A toxin of some kind was contained in a capsule located in his mouth. The subject was able to activate this before it was detected."

"One of the individuals who assaulted Sergeant Tanner also used a toxin capsule to commit suicide before he could be questioned and others were found by Sergeant Tanner in the mouths of those he killed himself."

"Then the sergeant is still alive? Was he injured in any way?" Tara 18-4 Kappa asked and Neuer nodded.

"He is unharmed. Evidently he was a superior combatant to the men who attacked him." he said before he reached out and removed the mask from the dead man at his feet, "Drone, scan and identify." he added with his finger on the audio control unit for the servo skull.

"Confirmed." the device responded in similar electronic tones to the speech of Tara 18-4 Kappa but more basic. Then as Neuer got back to his feet the servo skull descended to hover directly over the dead assassin. The machine then began to scan the body, a green light indicating the focusing of the auspex as the scan progressed. After the initial scan the light returned to the dead man's face and narrowed, focusing just on this area. Then several seconds later the light vanished and the servo skull ascended again, "Ident match found." it then said and Neuer smiled.

"Now we have a name." he said.

## 7.

“What happened here Torien?” Nathin asked when he walked back into the throne room where Torien and his siblings still waited. In addition to the numerous Adeptus Arbites enforcers present in the palace, Nathin could not help but notice that Torien had both his las pistol and chainsword with him on his belt. The Arbites enforcers who had brought Nathin to the palace had mentioned something about a security alert there but had been either unwilling or unable to go into any further details with him.

“I had a visitor. He tried to get in through the hidden door but I was ready for him.” Torien said.

“So you killed him?” Nathin commented.

“He killed himself.” Kaitlin responded before Torien could.

“I chased him as far as the garage when he was caught by Enginseer Kappa. He used poison on himself before we could get any information out of him though. I heard you had a similar experience.” Torien said and Nathin nodded.

“I think it was supposed to look like a mugging. Four men tried to jump me when I was on my way back here.” he replied, “I took out two and a third killed himself the same way as your guy did. Number four could be alive or dead for all I know. It depends on how good a swimmer he is.”

“But why is this happening?” Samara asked out loud from where she sat at the end of the room with Ossian in her arms.

“Torien thinks someone wants to take control of the throne.” Kaitlin told her younger sister.

“Actually now I think it’s more likely that they want to bring down the monarchy entirely.” Torien added,

“Maybe they could have passed off the attack on Sergeant Tanner as a robbery but the assassin sent to kill me had a knife and there’s no way it could have been disguised as an accidental or natural death like the deaths of our parents were.”

“I believe that you are correct Your Majesty.” Marshal Neuer announced as he and Tara 18-4 Kappa entered the throne room and then when they both came to a halt he added, “Our facial recognition cogitator was able to find a match for the man who attempted to kill you.”

“So he has a criminal record?” Kaitlin asked.

“Not exactly Your Highness.” Neuer said, “However, in addition to criminals the Adeptus Arbites also monitors various malcontent groups that could develop into criminal organisations in the future and the dead man was associated with such a group.”

“Which one marshal?” Torien asked.

“The Democracy League Your Majesty.” Neuer told him and Hom sighed.

“We hoped that by returning you to Toltek we would be able to undermine their activities.” he said, “Instead we seem to have emboldened them.”

“So how many people are there in this Democracy League?” Nathin said and Neuer looked at him.

“About thirty thousand active members planetwide.” he told him. Then he looked at Torien again and added, “I’ll issue orders to start a program of arrests immediately. We’ll start with the leadership and work our way down to the more minor activists.”

“Arrests? Not summary executions?” Hom said, aware that the Adeptus Arbites had the power to dispense summary justice and were far more likely to go down this route than waste resources on lengthy trials.

“Not this time adept.” Neuer said, “Our monitoring of the group has not been as extensive as it would have been for a group considered an immediate threat. We need to interrogate as many members as possible to determine its exact reach and strength.”

“How long do you anticipate this taking marshal?” Torien asked.

“The arrests should be completed in six to eight days Your Majesty.” Neuer answered, “Once those are complete we’ll move on to the interrogation stage which I anticipate being completed in another twelve weeks.”

“Why not begin interrogations immediately?” Ossian said.

“With respect Your Highness we cannot simply demand information at random.” Neuer responded to the young prince, “Our enforcers and servitors must first conduct searches of their homes and workplaces. Then we’ll have a basic idea of the role each suspect plays in their organisation and where they have been recently as well as who they may have met with. Once we have that information we’ll confront them with it.”

“I’m sure that your men know what they are doing marshal.” Torien said.

“Your Majesty if I may interject.” Tara 18-4 Kappa said and Torien turned to look at her.

“Yes enginseer?” he said.

“As I said when we spoke in the garage, I was there conducting my examination of the wreckage of the vehicle your father was travelling in when he died.” the tech priestess said, “In the process of this I discovered damage to the vehicles tyres and braking system that were not consistent with an accidental

crash. It is my conclusion that key components of the braking system were sabotaged to make rapid deceleration uncontrollable. This deceleration was then triggered by laying obstacles across the road that destroyed the vehicle's tyres. That was what caused the driver to lose control."

"I guess that makes it official." Nathin commented, "There is an organised plot to bring down your monarchy. I'd suggest sealing the palace, getting our troops down from the transport as quickly as possible and limiting your public appearances until the enforcers are done hanging people."

"Wait, father was murdered as well?" Samara exclaimed and Torien nodded.

"I'm sorry but it looks that way. I think that mother's death may have been murder as well. Maybe Ramiro's but I don't think that that can be proven." he explained.

"Your Majesty there is the expectation that you will be presenting yourself to the nobility tomorrow night."

Hom pointed out. Then he glanced at the timepiece on his wrist and added, "Sorry, tonight now."

"I concur with Sergeant Tanner Your Majesty." Marshal Neuer said.

"Thank you for your opinions gentlemen but I do not intend to cower in my palace. The event with the nobles will go ahead as planned. Commissar North should have returned by then and he can oversee the security arrangements." Torien said.

"Contact at Mandeville Point." one of the junior officers aboard the system defence monitor called out when a servitor under his command alerted him to the new arrival in system.

At about six hundred metres in length the system defence monitors that protected Toltek against threats from space were smaller than even the smallest of the Imperial Navy's warp capable destroyers but with their gun batteries and fixed mounted lances they were still sufficient to defeat most outlaw traffic that consisted only of retrofitted transport craft that possessed a bare minimum of offensive weaponry. If a more powerful enemy was to appear then either multiple monitors would be deployed in conjunction with one another to try and ward it off or alternatively the entire seven strong squadron of such craft would fall back to allow Toltek's more powerful fixed orbital defences to engage them while the crews of the monitors waited for a weakness that they could exploit. So far though the star system that Toltek was located in had not been invaded or attacked by any enemy that the defence monitors could not handle on their own since the days of the Great Crusade when an Astartes fleet arrived to bring the planet into the Imperium. This was not to say that the monitor's crews were complacent about their role though and each time a ship appeared at a Mandeville Point from the warp it would be scanned.

"Details? I need more than that if I'm going to summon the captain." the duty watch officer responded from his place in the command pulpit without looking up from his own console.

"Auspex readings indicate length approximately five point one kilometres. Mass around thirty megatonnes. She looks like a Conquest-class star galleon sir." the junior officer reported.

"Has she identified herself?" the duty officer asked.

"The beacon reads as the *Casket of Gold* sir." the junior officer said and the duty officer finally looked up.

"Confirm that ensign." he said sternly before picking up the intercom handset and lifting it to the side of his head, "Hostile contact. Captain to the bridge. All hands to action stations." he said into the handset, his voice being broadcast throughout the ship and warning klaxons began to sound.

"Hostile?" the junior officer said as the duty officer returned the handset to its cradle.

"Yes ensign, hostile." the duty officer said before looking at another duty station, "What's the status on our void shields?" he asked.

"Raising them now lieutenant." another of the bridge crew answered, "Full strength in forty-five seconds."

"Good. Ensign keep those auspexes locked on the target. If they start moving towards us I want to know immediately." the duty officer ordered before a set of doors at the back of the bridge slid open and the captain entered flanked by a pair of armsmen with shotguns.

"What's going on lieutenant?" he asked the duty officer as he walked up the steps to the command pulpit and took his place in his throne.

"Sir it's the *Casket of Gold*. She came through the Mandeville Point a few minutes ago." the duty officer said and the captain glared at him.

"Heading?" he said.

"Auspex what heading is that ship on?" the duty officer asked.

"Heading for Toltek orbit at one percent light speed. Decelerating at two gravities." the junior officer said.

"Helm stay with her but stay out of their weapons range." the captain ordered, "Signal Toltek and tell them that Rogue Trader Novus has defied King Haddon's order not to return."

Aboard the *Casket of Gold* the rogue trader Novus looked at the live footage of the system defence monitor from his throne in the command pulpit. Or at least the footage was as close to live as the vast distance between the two vessels would allow. In reality what he saw on the screen had taken place almost a minute

earlier. The angle of the image enabled him to see the engine flare that showed the vessel, tiny compared to his own, was shadowing the star galleon.

"Well they know we're here." he said to the figure lurking in the shadows behind him.

"It was to be expected Novus." the figure replied in a deep voice, "The only way to get your ship into orbit around Toltek without being detected would have been to first destroy Toltek's entire defence fleet."

"Yes and that would not only require military resources that your superiors have refused to commit to this operation but also mean destroying what could be a vital asset once the planet is mine."

"Yours Novus? I don't care how much influence you think your past relationship with Princess Kaitlin Alvarez gives you, without our network on the surface you would have nothing." the hidden figure told him.

"Yes and when I'm made king I'll make sure to show you my gratitude for that but-" Novus began before one of his officers spoke up.

"My lord there is an unexpected auspex contact in orbit around Toltek. The identification beacon shows it to be a vessel of the Imperial Navy." the man said.

"A warship here? The patrol schedule was supposed to leave the system clear for at least another year."

Novus said, concerned that his entry into the system would now be opposed by a warship with enough firepower to overwhelm his own vessel. Despite the riches he had poured into arming the *Casket of Gold* the star galleon was no match for a Navy cruiser, "Show me the ship." he ordered and the image on the screen he was looking at changed to show another vessel. Owing to the extreme magnification needed for photographing a ship in orbit around Toltek this image was less detailed than the one of the system defence monitor but it was still possible to make out the shape of the vessel, "That's not a cruiser." he said.

"No." the figure behind him, "It is the troop ship that brought King Torien back to his home planet."

"Torien? But Torien left Toltek years ago." Novus replied, "No-one returns from the Imperial Guard."

"According to our network King Torien has." the figure in the shadows said.

"Why wasn't I told about this? Our plan relied on Princess Kaitlin being regent." Novus said, "Plus that ship obviously didn't bring just one man back here."

"No. The entire Sixteenth Regiment has returned."

"An entire regiment of Imperial Guard? How are we supposed to deal with them?" Novus asked.

"Do not worry Novus." the figure said as the giant figure stepped out of the shadows with the helmet to his pale blue and green power armour that had a three headed hydra design on one of the shoulder pauldrons held under his arm, "Our network has ensured that the troops aboard that ship will not be available to the King when we arrive."

Novus frowned when he heard this, not entirely convinced of what his space marine ally had just told him. However, he knew better than to challenge someone who could quite literally tear him apart with his bare hands.

"Whatever you say Alpharius." he said.

"Does something not seem right about all this?" Nathin asked Torien as the two men stood in the doorway of one of the palace's bedrooms while one of the servo skulls brought by the Adeptus Arbites scanned the walls with its built in auspex, searching for any signs of hidden access points while two enforcers stood close by as well, partly there to act as additional protection to Torien but also ready to force their way into any hidden passageways that were discovered.

"You mean having someone sneak up on me while I sleep to try and kill me instead of bellowing a war cry and charging at me while they do it?" Torien replied.

"No I mean the sudden decision to attack openly. You were an officer, did you ever launch an attack that the Orks could see coming or did you do as much as you could to try and hide what you were up to?" Nathin said and Torien snorted.

"We hid everything as long as we could. Which when dealing with the Orks was pretty easy. Their intelligence gathering was almost non-existent." he said.

"Exactly. But stabbing you to death would be like telling an Ork horde exactly where you're about to attack. They'd all swarm to the area to fight you." Nathin pointed out and Torien considered this.

"Yes they would. But what other reason would there be for that man trying to get into my room with a weapon?" he said

"Ah now there you've got me. All I can say though is that the Emperor must have been smiling on you for you to have blocked that doorway." Nathin said, "Otherwise it would be your body that the enforcers would be carrying out of here."

"Yes, very lucky." Torien commented before one of the nearby enforcers approached him.

"This room is clear Your Majesty. You are free to use it while we're securing your own." the man told Torien.

"Thank you." he replied before the two enforcers and their servo skull departed.

The bedroom that Torien was going to use instead of his regular one until it could be secured had two single beds in it and he and Nathin looked at them both. The room was one intended for use by guests in the

palace not considered important enough to be given individual rooms. Most likely the children of visiting nobles since staff would be housed in the servants' quarters rather than the main residential section of the palace. The room had been chosen for just this reason, the second bed enabling Nathin to sleep in the same room. All of his siblings had already been returned to their own rooms since these had been confirmed to lack any secret entrances but all three were now protected by one of the Imperial Guard personnel from the survey team. Torien suspected that General Marquez would question why the Royal Guard had not been used for that role but Torien was still unsure of who among that body of troops he could rely on. As Marshal Neuer had pointed out his own would be assassin had been able to penetrate palace security while the Royal Guard were supposedly protecting it.

"So since you're King I guess you get the first pick of beds." Nathin commented.

"This one. It's closest." Torien said before he walked to the closest of the beds and placed his weapons on the floor beside it before lying down.

"Then I guess this one is mine." Nathin said, looking at the second bed, "Let's see if anyone's so keen to try and slice you open while I'm in the same room."

When Torien got up the next morning the Adeptus Arbites had all departed from the palace but when he looked out through a window he saw that there were still an increased number of members of the Royal Guard deployed to protect the palace.

"Thinking about whether or not you can trust them?" Nathin commented from behind him when he saw Torien pause by a window and look out at the soldiers.

"Most of them must be loyal." Torien replied, "If the Royal Guard was widely compromised then I think that my entire family would have already been butchered. On the other hand someone in the palace must be working with the people who want me dead."

"Have you thought any more about what I said last night?" Nathin asked.

"You mean about why was I attacked openly now?" Torien asked in response.

"Exactly. I still think it's too convenient." Nathin said before the two men saw Chief Minister Victrus and General Marquez approaching them.

"Your Majesty. I was glad to hear that you were unharmed after the events of last night." Victrus said as he and Marquez halted in front of Torien and bowed, "You should have contacted me. I would have returned to the palace immediately to assist you."

"Thank you for your concern minister but my family and I were all safe and there didn't seem to be any point in also disturbing you at home. Now is there something I can help you and General Marquez with?" Torien responded.

"Your Majesty we've received a message from one of our system defence monitors." Marquez said, "The *Casket of Gold* has entered the system."

Torien frowned and looked at Victrus.

"I don't recall that from my briefings yesterday. Is the name significant?" he asked.

"Apologies Your Majesty." Victrus replied, "The ship belongs to the Rogue Trader Novus. Your father banned him from this system."

"Is he the one I was told Kaitlin was rumoured to be involved with?" Torien said.

"So you've heard the rumour Your Majesty?" Victrus said, "Your father did his best to keep that information secret. The relationship was ended before Her Highness could be compromised but—"

"Samara told me at dinner on my first day." Torien interrupted.

"Your Majesty our forces need orders." Marquez said.

"Has Rogue Trader Novus attempted to make contact?" Torien said.

"No Your Majesty. Our ships have been attempting to establish a vox link but the transport is ignoring us." Marquez told him.

"That sounds like trouble to me." Nathin commented and Torien nodded.

"I agree." he said, "How long until the ship gets here?"

"Our current estimate is three days Your Majesty." Marquez said.

"Only three? It took a month for the transport that the Sixteenth used to get to and from the Mandeville Point." Torien commented.

"Yes but that ship is a troop transport running its drives for maximum efficiency. This vessel came into the system faster and is on a direct course using maximum deceleration." Marquez explained.

"Keep trying to contact them. They may have heard about my father's death and be hoping that the ban doesn't apply any more." Torien said.

"Your Majesty do you intend to rescind the ban?" Victrus said and Torien hesitated, unsure of what to say.

If his sister really had been attracted to the rogue trader then allowing her to pursue a relationship with him seemed reasonable. On the other hand all Torien currently knew about the man was that he was defying a royal order and refusing to establish communications with the authorities in the system. This second point

alone was enough to justify having the *Casket of Gold* shot down regardless of any Imperial Warrant of Trade.

"Do you know how heavily armed the ship is?" Torien asked.

"As far as we know the *Casket of Gold* carries a mix of gun and lance batteries, enough to easily overpower up to three or four of our monitors at once." Marquez said, "There is no evidence of torpedoes aboard the ship though."

Although as an Imperial Guard officer Torien knew little about void combat he understood that the lack of torpedo weapons meant that the *Casket of Gold* would need to get relatively close to Toltek if it was going to use its weapons against the planet or its orbital defences. On the other hand Toltek's orbital torpedo batteries could be fired at a target at much greater range and this gave him more options.

"Continue trying to establish contact." Torien said, "But if the ship gets within the orbit of our outermost moon without making contact then I want it destroyed."

"Yes Your Majesty, I'll issue the orders immediately." Marquez replied and he bowed again before turned and walking away.

"Is there something else chief minister?" Torien said, looking at Victrus.

"I am afraid that I have bad news concerning the situation with the labour unions Your Majesty." Victrus replied.

"Aren't they satisfied with the inspections they were offered?" Torien said.

"Now they are saying that they have no-one who is qualified to carry out such an inspection available for at least twelve days." Victrus told him.

"So we give them what they want and it's still not good enough." Torien said.

"Sounds to me like they're deliberately keeping our people aboard that transport." Nathin commented and Torien nodded in agreement.

"Yes it does." he said, "Minister Victrus what do you know about links between the Democracy League and the Labour Unions?"

"Nothing I'm afraid Your Majesty. Though I have heard that the Adeptus Arbites have already begun their operation to round up members of the Democracy League and so far the unions have not raised any objections." Victrus replied.

"Contact Marshal Neuer and see if he can offer any more information." Torien said, "In the meantime go along with what the unions are saying. If they say that they can start their inspection in twelve days then hold them to that. Ask for the names of their inspection party and pass them to the Adeptus Mechanicus. Then look into the people they've named. Try to either confirm that they aren't available for the twelve day time frame that they've given or find proof that they're stalling. If they are then confront them with it immediately. You don't need to refer back to me first."

"Yes Your Majesty. Now with your permission I shall continue with my work. Thanks to the new security concerns there is much to be done for tonight's gathering. I should also warn you that Cardinal Intios is anxious to meet with you and I think it would be wise to do it before tonight to avoid him approaching you in front of the nobles. You'll find him in the chapel if you want to see him now." Victrus said and he bowed.

"Of course you may carry on minister. I'll go and find out what Intios wants now. Though I have a suspicion that I already know" Torien replied, remembering what Samara had said over dinner on his first day back on Toltek.

"Oh great." Nathin muttered, "Priests."

"They are still demanding that we make contact Alpharius. They're threatening to open fire on us if we get too close to the planet." Novus said when his space marine ally entered the *Casket of Gold's* bridge

"Of course they are. What else did you expect?" the marine responded.

"I expected to find a planet with a boy king and a regent that we could control. Not a regiment of Imperial Guard and a planet on alert after your agents failed to assassinate the King." Novus said.

"An attempt was made on the King's life?" the marine said.

"Ah so there's something you don't know about is there?" Novus commented. Ever since the marine had come aboard the rogue trader's vessel he had been acting as if nothing happened on Toltek without him knowing about it. That had been part of the reason why Novus had agreed to go along with his plan for seizing control of the planet but as time had passed it had become ever more annoying and Novus now found it mildly amusing that his ally was ignorant of something.

"Yes and now we're picking up the vox traffic from the Adeptus Arbites. It looks like they're about to start rounding people up." Novus said and the marine smiled, "What's so amusing? We could be about to lose our people on the surface." Novus added.

"Our' people? They aren't your agents Novus, they belong to my legion."

"Your people then. Does your plan include having them all shot before you can land?"

“The plan includes a means to deflect attention from our cells by implicating other dissident groups. While the false emperor’s forces are distracted with them our own agents will continue to operate unimpeded. Continue on this course but reduce our deceleration.” the space marine said.

“We aren’t entering orbit?”

“Yes but your crew will have to use the planet’s gravity and atmosphere for and aerobraking manoeuvre. My men will still be able to deploy even at a higher approach velocity. All that matters is to get us close.” the space marine told him.

“But aerobraking? Do you know how dangerous that is in a vessel of this size? The *Casket of Gold* isn’t designed for atmospheric manoeuvring. One mistake and the entire ship will be ripped apart.” Novus said, concerned about the danger involved in taking his ship into the uppermost layers of a planetary atmosphere. “Then make sure your crew are sufficiently prepared for the manoeuvre. They will have plenty of time to practice and only one chance to get it right.” the marine said.

“And the demands for communication?” Novus asked.

“Continue to ignore them. This vessel is too powerful for their system defence ships to challenge and by the time we get close enough for their orbital defences to engage us they will already have been disabled.” the marine said but Novus frowned in uncertainty.

“Disabled? Surely any sabotage will alert them to trouble. Why not make contact and try to bluff our way through? This King Torien may be willing to just allow us into orbit and you can make your drop from there. If your craft really can defeat their auspexes then surely that would be the safest option.” he said.

“No. No communication.” the marine repeated, “Just one word spoken in error could expose the presence of my strike force aboard this ship. Better to have them alert but uncertain than able to predict our future moves because they know what is coming towards them.” the marine said.

“You’d better be right about this Alpharius.” Novus responded, “Because if you’re wrong then none of us is going to get out of this alive.”

## 8.

Although there had been priests of the Adeptus Ministorum assigned to the 16<sup>th</sup> Toltek Regiment just as there were with every other regiment of the Imperial Guard, Torien had had little contact with them outside of the formal sermons they delivered while before joining the Imperial Guard the services conducted by the official palace priests had been something that he and his siblings had done their best to avoid. Torien still knew exactly where the palace chapel was located though and it did not take him long to reach it.

"You can wait here by the door if you want." he said to Nathin as the two men entered but the Catachan shook his head.

"No chance. Not after last night. Who knows who could be hiding behind any of these panels?" he replied, looking towards one of the chapel's wall panels that had had Adeptus Arbites marking tape placed across it to indicate that one of their servo skulls had discovered an entrance to the palace's hidden passageways behind it, "Plus who knows if any of this lot helped that assassin get inside the palace?" he added, turning his attention to the handful of palace staff who were present to offer prayer to the Emperor.

"Okay but I know you don't think much of priests so just keep quiet." Torien said as he looked towards the front of the chapel where Intios and three lesser preachers were gathered together. Then he began to walk across the chapel towards Intios and Nathin followed, keeping one hand on his las pistol and the other on his knife. Some of the palace staff noticed Torien as he walked past them and reacted by bowing or curtsying to him and it was this reaction that caused the priests at the front of the chapel to realise that he was there.

"Ah Your Majesty. Welcome to my humble chapel" Intios said, a smile spreading across his face as he bowed.

"Your chapel? I thought it belonged to His Most Holy Imperial Majesty the God Emperor who sits on the Golden Throne of Terra." Nathin said smugly and the smile disappeared from Intios' face.

"Quite." he said, "We are all humble servants of Him on Earth."

"Some more humble than others though." Nathin added and Intios and his priests all glared at the Catachan.

"Cut it out." Torien whispered to Nathin before he smiled at Intios and added, "Don't take offence cardinal. My bodyguard's devotion to our Emperor knows few bounds and he never ceases to remind me of who we all really serve."

"Then he is most welcome here Your Majesty." Intios said, "I conduct daily services at sundown for all the palace staff if he wishes to attend."

"Unfortunately cardinal the current security situation requires he remain by my side." Torien said.

"Some other time then perhaps." Intios said.

"Sure. Maybe we can go out and burn some witches together." Nathin added with a smirk and Torien winced.

"Cardinal, there was something you wanted to discuss with me." he said, turning his attention back towards the priest.

"Of course Your Majesty. Perhaps this would be better discussed in my office." Intios said and he pointed towards a doorway located in the shadow of a stone column.

"As you wish cardinal." Torien said.

Cardinal Intios led Torien into the office that adjoined the main chapel though Nathin stepped through the doorway ahead of him to make sure that there was not an ambush waiting on the other side. Torien considered this somewhat over the top but said nothing. Looking around the office Torien was surprised that there were no obvious symbols of the Adeptus Ministorum anywhere on any of the walls or shelves and he frowned in confusion.

"I remember this office being covered in icons of the God Emperor." he said.

"Ah yes, my predecessor here thought differently to myself about the function of this office." Intios said.

"And what is your opinion cardinal?" Torien asked curiously.

"There is a chapel right through that door where I can give whatever public praise to the Emperor is needed Your Majesty. On the other hand in here I have other duties to carry out." Intios answered as the two men both sat down opposite one another.

"Of course cardinal. Now what do you wish to discuss with me?" Torien said.

"Your Majesty I am aware that with the unfortunate deaths of your parents and King Ramiro one of your many duties is now to arrange the marriages of your siblings." Intios began and Torien guessed what was coming next, "In my opinion your rule would be strengthened greatly by forging a closer alliance with the Adeptus Ministorum through the marriage of your sister Samara."

"Cardinal Intios I believe that you have raised this issue before." Torien said.

"Yes Your Majesty. King Haddon was considering the union before his accident-" Intios began.

"Murder." Nathin interrupted, "King Haddon was murdered."

"Your Majesty what is this story?" Intios said, his eyes widening.



"The evidence is that my parents' deaths were not accidents or suicide cardinal. Combined with the attempt on the lives of myself and my bodyguard last night it looks like there is a campaign to bring down my family's rule of this planet." Torien said.

"In that case Your Majesty what I have to suggest is all the more important. King Haddon failed to reach a decision on my suggestion while King Ramiro refused to even hear it and both of them met untimely ends. Princess Kaitlin was more receptive but she was not destined to rule as you are. It is a sign that my plan is ordained to take place." Intios said and Torien felt his anger rising.

"You are saying that my family died because they wouldn't let my sister marry some random priest?" he said.

"Not just any priest Your Majesty. I am the visible face of the Adeptus Ministorum on Toltek so for a union to truly be accepted by your people I should be the one that Samara is married to." Intios said and by this point Torien had heard enough. Although it was not unheard of for arranged marriages among the nobility to feature a considerable age gap Torien did not like the idea of marrying off his teenage sister to the old man in front of him.

"We're done here sergeant." he said as he stood back up.

"Yes Your Majesty." Nathin replied, looking at Intios and grinning at him.

"Your Majesty will you at least consider my offer? Surely you can see the benefit." Intios said.

"Right now Intios the only thing that I'm considering is how I can report to the sector arch-deacon how some jumped up cardinal managed to get himself placed in front of a firing squad." Torien responded just as Nathin opened the door leading back to the chapel and his clearly announced threat to execute Intios made everyone inside it turn their attention towards the doorway.

"Your Majesty please!" Intios called out after Torien while he and Nathin strode towards the exit from the chapel, "Consider what I have said. There is a divine plan at work."

Torien ignored this though and he left the chapel with Nathin without speaking another word.

"You okay Torien?" Nathin asked as soon as they were in the hallway outside and the chapel doors had closed behind them.

"Nathin that old grox herder just tried to use the deaths of my parents and Ramiro to further his fantasy of marrying my teenage sister!" Torien snapped back at him.

"Yes I heard that too and quite frankly I think you were pretty restrained back there. If he'd made a similar suggestion about my sister then he'd already be lacking the parts he needs to enjoy a wedding night." Nathin said, "Though his behaviour does raise some interesting questions."

"Such as?" Torien said.

"Such as how much influence does he have over his flock? If your father told him that he didn't want someone who was his own age as a son in law could he have convinced a royal mechanic to tamper with the brakes on a royal car? You saw the Arbites tape in the chapel so he could have know about the hidden passageways in the palace and used them to get into your mother's bedroom before pushing her from the balcony and he could have let an assassin into the palace disguised as a priest before showing him how to get to you while you slept. He had no idea that the hidden door in your bedroom would be blocked and that trying to open it would wake you up." Nathin said and Torien came to a sudden halt before looking back towards the chapel.

"You think he's the one behind this plot?" he said.

"Men have killed for less than the chance to get married to someone that they wouldn't have a chance with otherwise." Nathin pointed out.

"Maybe but he's a ministorum cardinal so we need proof before the Adeptus Arbites can haul him in for interrogation. For all we know he's just an asshole who can't see how offensive it is to exploit the deaths of my parents and brother for his own purposes. Either way he's gone though, I don't want that man in my palace a moment longer than it takes to get the Adeptus Ministorum to send a replacement." Torien said.

"Do you want me to grab a couple of guards and get rid of him now? Maybe help him down the stairs a few times?" Nathin suggested and Torien knew that by 'help him down the stairs' he meant to beat the priest before claiming that the injuries had been suffered by accident in a fall down stairs.

"No, there's a world of difference between telling the Adeptus Ministorum that one of their officials is no longer welcome in the palace to having one attacked. The last thing I need is a visit from the Adeptus Sororitas." Torien said, "I can bar him from the palace's residential area though. I'll let Chief Minister Victrus know when I next see him. For now though I want you to go to the armoury and pick out suitable weapons for Kaitlin and Samara. I'm going to find out exactly how much Kaitlin knew about this. That fool Intios said that she was receptive to his idea but she never said a thing to me."

In preparation for the event at which members of the nobility would present their daughters to Torien as potential brides Kaitlin looked at herself in the full length mirror in her bedroom to see what the dress she was trying on looked like on her when Torien knocked at the door.

"Kaitlin I need to speak with you." he said and she sighed.

"We'll continue with this later." she told the trio of handmaidens in the room before calling out, "Come in." and when Torien opened the door the handmaidens curtsied on their way out, "So do you like this dress?" Kaitlin asked after Torien entered the room.

"It looks wonderful Kaitlin but we have to talk." Torien said and Kaitlin sighed.

"This is going to be bad isn't it?" she said, "Have you found who's trying to kill us?"

"No, not yet. Though I just had a disturbing conversation with Cardinal Intios." Torien said.

"And what did the old priest have to say?" Kaitlin asked.

"He told us about his plan marry our little sister. As if that isn't bad enough he also told me that you had been receptive to the idea." Torien answered.

"And you believed him?" Kaitlin said, "Look Torien, he came to me the day after Ramiro took his overdose and we weren't sure if he was going to pull through or not. I didn't want to deal with him going on about I was going to need all the help I could get if I was named regent and that the church would make a powerful ally. I didn't tell you about it that first night because I was still mad at you for leaving me and also for having your Catachan brute tie me to my chair."

"Nathin Tanner is hardly a brute Kaitlin. Anyway I've decided that Cardinal Intios is no longer welcome in the palace and I'm going to tell the Ministorum to replace him." Torien said.

"You're going to go up against the priesthood?" Kaitlin exclaimed.

"I'm going to remind them of my authority as the Imperial Governor to select which members of the Ecclesiarchy are permitted in my household." Torien said.

"But are you sure that's wise right now? Tonight there are going to be more than a hundred nobles in the palace and ninety-nine of them are going to leave hating you for rejecting their precious daughters. Are you sure that annoying the Ecclesiarchy as well is a good idea?" Kaitlin said.

"Right now the opinions of the Ecclesiarchy are not what concerns me Kaitlin. The person who tried to kill me last night on the other hand does." Torien replied.

"Are the Adeptus Arbites handling that now though Torien?" Kaitlin asked.

"Yes but they can't be everywhere at once and there is the possibility that the evidence pointing towards the Democracy League may have been designed to distract the attention of the Arbites from the real culprits. Marshal Neuer has dedicated most of his resources to rounding them up and that's left only a small group available quickly if we need them here in the palace." Torien pointed out, "Added to which now we have something else to consider."

"What's that?" Kaitlin said.

"I've been told that the *Casket of Gold* has entered the system and is heading this way. I believe that you are familiar with the ship, or at least it's owner." Torien told her and her eyes widened for a moment.

"Novus is back? But father banned him from the system." she said.

"Well his ship is certainly back. Our monitors have identified it. For some reason the ship isn't responding to vox signals though. Kaitlin do you have any idea why he might be here?"

"How should I know Torien? Father kicked him off the planet for being too friendly to me and I haven't had any contact with him for a decade. Unlike you I don't think he even tried to write." Kaitlin said, "So what are you going to do about him?"

"Well I'm not entirely sure yet. For starters I don't know for certain that Novus is still in command of that ship. If someone else is in command then technically father's order no longer applies. Of course if that's the case then there's no reason why they shouldn't establish contact to demonstrate that. The same applies if Novus knows that father is dead and he thinks that the order died with him." Torien said.

"And has it? Ramiro never mentioned Novus after he left, even in the few moments that he was sober so that just leaves you. What do you think?" Kaitlin said.

"I've given the order to open fire on the ship when it comes within range of our orbital defences and that warning has been issued to it. On the other hand if they do make contact then I'll consider letting Novus land." Torien answered.

Novus spent most of his time aboard the *Casket of Gold* either on the bridge or in his private chambers and as such those were the most opulent and well kept sections of the ship. Other areas of the massive ship were kept functional but lacked the shine of those where Novus tended to be. This mattered little to the space marine force that was currently aboard the *Casket of Gold* though and they had taken over a section in the lower decks of the vessel close to a disused docking bay that they had also taken over for their craft and so when Novus was summoned to see them he was forced to travel through these utilitarian sections. Even though the marines had been aboard the *Casket of Gold* for several years now this was the first time that Novus had come to this part of the ship to meet with any of them but with a group of a dozen well armed bodyguards immediately behind him he still marched confidently towards the large hatchway that was flanked by a pair of the armoured giants with bolt guns held across their chests. The marines did not react as Novus and his bodyguards approached, resembling ceramite statues as they remained at their station.

"I am here to see Alpharius." Novus said as he stopped in front of them but neither of the giants responded, "I said that I-" Novus began.

"Your presence has been relayed to the captain." one of the marines interrupted without even looking down at Novus and the rogue trader frowned. He was used to having his crew react immediately to any order he gave and the fact that the marines did not consider him their superior riled him.

"I didn't catch your name." he said to the marine that had interrupted him.

"I am Alpharius." the marine replied and Novus frowned. He could tell from the voice that he was not addressing the marine commander that he had largely dealt with and was the only marine he knew by name.

"Your commander is Alpharius." he said.

"We are all Alpharius." the marine responded and he returned to looking straight ahead instead of down at Novus just as there was a 'hiss' when the door behind him slid open to reveal the marine officer that Novus knew as Alpharius.

"Novus, come in. Leave your guards here." he said.

The leader of Novus' bodyguards looked at the rogue trader and in turn he nodded back at the man.

"Stand down for now." he said, knowing that as well trained and equipped as the bodyguards were they would be of no use if the marines had lured him down here to kill him.

The marine commander then backed away from the doorway so that Novus could enter the room and the rogue trader walked past him. Inside the room where the marines had established their operations centre Novus saw the marines themselves all gathered around a hololithic display of the royal palace in Tula that had all of the various hidden passageways included.

"You have a full schematic of the palace." Novus commented.

"I was there when it was built. The Alpha Legion brought Teltok into compliance." the marine commander replied and it suddenly hit Novus how old these warriors were. The Great Crusade had taken place ten thousand years earlier and the marine commander at least was now claiming to have taken part in that campaign. Even the best of the life prolonging technologies available to Imperial citizens could not manage to keep a person alive for one thousand years subjectively and now the marine commander was saying that he had lived for ten times that amount of time.

Looking around further Novus saw numerous equipment cases of various sizes and designs. Some appeared to have been looted from Imperial forces while others had designs that Novus recognised as alien or were totally unknown to him. More interesting though was the creature that he could see lurking in a cage that was suspended from the ceiling of the chamber. This was totally hairless and its pale skin appeared human but the proportions and features of its body were totally wrong for a human being. Its head and torso were bloated and fused directly together without any hint of a neck while its arms and legs were stunted to the point of being vestigial. Even if the creature had not been confined in the cage Novus doubted that it would have been able to move about on its own. The creature stared back at Novus with its five eyes, two to the left of its flat nose and three to the right while grinning at him with its unnaturally wide mouth. The creature could have been something that had been engineered for some specific purpose but Novus also knew that even extreme mutations such as this could occur in humans either from birth as a result of genetic corruption or as a result of the gifts that could be bestowed on the servants of the great powers of the warp that Novus and the Alpha Legion marines served.

"Is this why you asked me to come down here? To see this?" he asked, turning his attention back towards the hololith.

"You were not invited Novus, you were commanded to come here. Do not confuse your role in this operation. You are here to get us to Toltek, nothing more." the marine commander responded sternly.

"Of course Alpharius. If that really is your name. Your man on the door claimed it was his." Novus said, "So why did you order me here?"

"I want your assessment of the area surrounding the palace Novus." the marine commander told him.

"Why not just ask our source on the ground? I haven't been there in years." Novus pointed out.

"Perhaps not but if our source on the ground is discovered or has a change of heart then asking them could mean sending my force into a trap so I am asking you instead." the marine commander said and Novus looked at the hololith again.

"Well your schematic looks accurate to me. I don't think that they done much in the way of reconstruction even after ten thousand years. Although the central courtyard has been modified. It's a garden now and there was a retractable roof system." he said.

"Describe this roof Novus." the marine commander said.

"There's nothing special about it. I think it was just glass with a metal frame." Novus told him.

"That could still impede our landing." one of the other marines said, "A drop pod's braking thrusters would destroy the glass but the vegetation beneath would be ignited and we'd be landing in an inferno."

"Land in the grounds and you'll be trying to force your way into the most fortified building on the planet." Novus commented, "I'd rate it as tougher than the Adeptus Arbites bastion in central Tula."

"I am aware of the strength of the building Novus." the marine commander said, "As I told you, I was there when it was built. However, no fortress, no matter how thick its walls can stand without adequate troops to defend it and our agents have made sure that the only force in the system that can challenge my men is trapped aboard their transport."

"Cardinal Initios are you an idiot?" Kaitlin said when she walked into the priest's office.

"Your Highness, I don't understand." Intios replied.

"I mean what do you think you're doing telling my brother that I was receptive to your desire to marry my sister?" Kaitlin said sternly, "You know that he's added you to the list of people who could be involved in the plot against him? He's already planning on contacting your arch deacon to have you removed. Frankly you're lucky that he hasn't already had you thrown out of the palace and where would that leave us then? All these years you've been my lifeline for getting messages out of here and news in that didn't have to go through my father. In return I listened when you told me what you wanted in return when we thought I was going to be regent and would have had the necessary power but now things have changed and you're putting everything at risk."

"Your Highness I offer my deepest apologies. Perhaps if I were to speak to the King again I could-" Intios began.

"Apologies may not be enough cardinal and there is no chance that I want you going anywhere near Torien again." Kaitlin interrupted, "There are still some of the Arbites in the palace you know cardinal. It would take just a word from Torien to have them drag you from here in chains to one of their interrogation cells so the best thing you can do now is just stay out of the way. The guests to the official presentation of Torien to the nobles will be arriving soon and I don't want you causing a scene by angering Torien again. Do you understand?"

"Yes Your Highness." Intios responded.

"Good. Now I need to go and change for this party where I'll be playing the role of interested sister in front of a lot of pompous bores here to try and sell their daughters." Kaitlin said as she turned to leave. Then when she reached the door and took hold of the handle she looked back over her shoulder, "Oh and cardinal?"

"Yes Your Highness?"

"The only way I'd consent to you marrying Samara is if she was spayed first. I'm not having her giving birth to children of yours that would then have a claim to the throne."

"Ready to meet your loyal subjects?" Nathin asked while Torien looked out of one of the palace windows into the grounds where luxury ground cars were being driven up to the palace so that their passengers could disembark right by the main entrance. From where he looked out of the palace Torien could just about see the steady procession of noblemen along with their wives and children moving from their cars and into the palace. As expected the vast majority of the children that had been brought with the nobles were daughters, though it was not accurate to describe them as children since they were all of adult age.

"I'm not sure I can be ready for this Nathin." Torien answered, "I attended a few formal functions when I was younger but of course I didn't have much of a role to play." he then stepped away from the window and picked up his tunic. For this event he was going to be wearing his military dress uniform, marked with his official rank of general and with the medals for bravery he had been awarded during his service with the Imperial Guard. After putting this on he then reached for the belt that carried both his las pistol and chainsword, "At least I'll be armed."

"So shooting them is an option?" Nathin said.

"Not for you, no. Probably not really for me either. Even though I'm the King I don't think that my reign would last long if I develop a reputation for randomly shooting nobles, no matter how annoying they are." Torien replied.

"What if they decide that if they slip a knife into you then they could take over?" Nathin said.

"If they try that then I'd expect you to disarm them so I can have them executed in much more drawn out manner than simply shooting or rapidly dismembering them. Now come on, let's get downstairs and meet the others." Torien told him.

The two men descended to the ground floor of the palace and made their way to a small private lounge. This featured a number of full length mirrors for anyone in the room to be able to double check their appearance before passing through a door on the far side of the room that led to one of the palace's larger function rooms. All of Torien's siblings were already present in the room with both Kaitlin and Samara wearing formal gowns while Ossian was dressed in a reproduction of a planetary defence force uniform though it lacked any rank markings or honours.

"Any idea how long until they'll be ready for us?" Torien asked.

“We were just told that Chief Minister Victrus would come and fetch us soon.” Ossian replied.

“Okay that sounds good.” Torien said before he turned to Nathin, “Perhaps you should go around the other way and double check the room is secure.” he added and the Catachan nodded.

“Good idea. I’ll be on the other side of the door.” he said before he left the room through the same door he and Torien had just entered through.

“So are we still going in in pairs?” Kaitlin asked and Torien smiled.

“I think so.” he said, “So are you willing to be seen publicly arm in arm with me or should I accompany Samara while you and Ossian go in together?”

“Don’t I get a say?” Samara commented.

“I’m older. People will expect me and Torien to be together.” Kaitlin reminded her before looking at Torien and adding, “I think I can stomach being beside you for a few minutes Torien. Even though I’m sure you’d rather that I was that corporal he is so fond of. Meya Tellez isn’t it?”

Torien frowned when he heard this.

“How did you know about Meya?” he said.

“You left her to guard me you dolt. We talked and she told me all about how you two were together for a long time but she didn’t think it was right to continue because she’s a commoner. If it means anything I’m sorry becoming king cost you her.” Kaitlin said.

“Thank you.” Torien said and he reached out to take her hand.

While Kaitlin moved to stand beside Torien, Samara and Ossian stood behind them with their arms also linked and they waited to be told that their guests were assembled and they were to enter the function room. This came just a few minutes later when Chief Minister Victrus entered through the door that led to the function room.

“Ah good, you’re all ready.” he said and Kaitlin smiled.

“Unlike Ramiro none of us had to sober up.” she responded and Victrus frowned for a moment.

“I’ll announce you now.” he told Torien.

“Wait, how do they seem to you?” Torien said before Victrus could leave and the chief minister hesitated.

“Like they’re trying too hard to be polite to one another when they’d all really rather be able to meet with you alone so they can be guaranteed your full attention.” he said.

“As is to be expected I suppose. Very well minister, you may announce us.” Torien said and Victrus bowed.

“Yes Your Majesty.” he said before he returned to the function room.

Inside the function room hundreds of members of Toltek’s nobility were now gathered together, all of them wearing coloured sashes that marked them out as being a duke, earl, count, baron or a family member of such a person. Even Victrus wore such a sash, coloured green to show that he was an earl.

“All clear minister.” Nathin said. In addition to the Catachan standing beside the door leading to the lounge there were members of the Royal Guard either side of the doorway and more of them at each of the other possible access points to the room, all of them with their rifles shouldered.

“Thank you sergeant.” Victrus responded before he looked across the room and took a deep breath, “My lords and ladies.” he called out and as soon as he spoke a hush fell across the room as all of the idle chatter ceased almost instantly and the gathered guests all turned to face him, “May I present His Majesty King Torien Alvarez and Her Highness Princess Kaitlin Alvarez.” Victrus announced and there was applause as Torien and Kaitlin entered the room with smiles on their faces, “His Highness Prince Ossian Alvarez and Her Highness Princess Samara.”

The four royal siblings stood in a row as the applause continued until Torien held up his hands for it to cease and the room fell quiet. Looking around Torien was able to recognise a few of the faces in the crowd from before he had left Toltek though now they were understandably older.

“Nobles of Toltek,” Torien announced, looking around the room rather than focusing in one direction in a way that could be considered a sign of favouritism towards the individuals standing where he faced, “I was not born to be your king but it is a role that I am proud to fill. From your point of view I have been away from the world of my birth in service of the Imperium but now I have returned and will dedicate myself to the service of Toltek and its people just as I did the Imperium. I thank you for your warm welcome and I hope to speak with each of you individually tonight but in the meantime I invite you all to enjoy the hospitality of my palace.”

Torien then glanced at Victrus and nodded. In turn Victrus signalled to the conductor of the small orchestra that was set up at the side of the room and they began to play. As soon as the music began to play Torien and Kaitlin walked forwards, the crowd parting to let them pass. Then when they reached the approximate centre of the room they turned to face one another and began to dance. Taking this as their cue the gathered nobles began to do the same.

“So aren’t you two going to join in?” Nathin asked, looking at Samara and Ossian. The two younger royal siblings remained at the side of the room and had stopped holding hands the moment that Torien had started speaking.

“Mother and father used to make us. Do you think Torien will?” Ossian asked and Nathin smiled.

"I doubt it. Unless it's important." he said.

"Good. I don't like dancing." Ossian replied.

"So what about you princess?" Nathin added.

"Do you dance?" Samara responded and Nathin looked at the dancing nobles, noticing that thanks to the imbalance between male and female guests there were a number of young women now waiting around the side of the room.

"Me? No." he told her, "There aren't any ballrooms like this on Catachan. Not even on the orbital stations and the Imperial Guard doesn't regard dancing as an important skill for infantrymen. I think most of us get killed before we have the chance to master a waltz."

When the music stopped everyone in the room applauded briefly and immediately those nobles who were closest to Torien gathered around him, beckoning for their daughters to join them. Annoyingly for Torien, Lorenzo Vargas had made sure to get close to him and Kaitlin while they danced and he had purposely danced with his daughter instead of his wife so he did not need to wait for her to join him when he approached the King.

Ah Your Majesty, you remember my daughter Ursulla?" he said.

"Of course." Torien replied, "It is a pleasure to see you again." he added even though it was not true.

"Perhaps you would do her the honour of giving her the next dance Your Majesty." the duke said. It was traditional at events such as this for dancers to change partners between each dance so Torien knew that he could not use Kaitlin as an excuse. However, he knew that he had another excuse available to him and he looked towards the door he had entered the room through. Seeing that Samara was still beside this door he held out a hand towards her, beckoning her to him. In return she smiled and started to make her way towards him.

"Unfortunately I have promised my sisters my first dances Duke Vargas. Later on though perhaps." he said as Samara took his hand.

"As you say Your Majesty." the duke responded, bowing his head.

Seeing that Torien had now acquired a new dance partner the band conductor signalled for the band members to begin playing again and the other nobles on the dance floor hurriedly found new partners of their own. Torien knew that this would instantly disrupt Lorenzo Vargas' plan to maintain a nearby position with his daughter to try to improve the chances of her being the next person that Torien would dance with since he too was obliged to change his partner to someone else and there was no one that Ursulla could dance with that would also want her to be the next woman Torien chose as a partner. If anything they would try to get her away from Torien so that their own relatives would stand a better chance of being the next dance partner. "Thanks for going along with this Samara." Torien whispered to his sister and then he glanced towards Duke Vargas who was now dancing with the wife of another nobleman.

Large sections of the royal palace were illuminated when the vehicle carrying Commissar North, the two guardsmen and the farmer drove up to the main gate. The soldier from the Royal Guard who approached the vehicle immediately recognised the commissar and he signalled for the barrier to be opened. The guardsman driving the vehicle immediately drove through, heading for the garage. This involved driving past the row of expensive luxury vehicles that had brought the various nobles to the palace and the drivers of these vehicle who had been talking to pass the time all turned to look at the utilitarian military vehicle as it sped past them before turning into the garage.

"Please come with us." North told the farmer as they disembarked from the vehicle.

"Yes sir." the farmer replied nervously and as North led the way from the garage the two guardsmen who had accompanied him remained behind the older man.

North led the others up from the garage to the main entrance hall where the carving that showed Torien's heroic action against the Orks dominated the room and the sound of music could be heard coming from nearby. North came to a halt and was about to turn to address the guardsmen and the farmer when Meya Tellez entered the hall as well with a dataslate in her hand and came to a sudden halt when she saw the older man.

"Dad?" she exclaimed.

"Meya!" he called out, a massive smile appearing on his face when he saw the daughter he had bid farewell to so many years ago.

Meya rushed across the room and embraced her father while North and the two guardsmen did nothing to stop her.

"Meya it's so good to see you again." Meya's father told her.

"I was planning on surprising you with a visit as soon as my survey here was done. What are you doing in the palace?" she asked her father.

"I don't know Meya. These men came to the farm and told me to come with them. It's an order from the

King." he told her and Meya turned to look at Commissar North.

"Sir, can you tell me what is going on?" Meya said.

"As you have been told it was an order from the King. That is enough corporal." North responded sternly. Despite Meya's long relationship with Torien while they both served in the Imperial Guard she and Commissar North were not very familiar with one another and as a relatively low ranking enlisted soldier North had no reason to justify anything to her. However, he was not vindictive enough to order her away, "You may remain with your father if you wish but remember your place."

North then walked away from the others and made his way into the function room where the formal function was taking place.

By this point in the night Torien had danced with five other young noblewomen though he had been able to avoid dancing with Ursulla Vargas so far. Now though there was a pause in the music and dancing for the guests to eat, drink and converse with one another. Largely this meant noblemen attempting to get the attention of Torien so that their daughters could be the next to dance with him. Torien replied politely to all of these without committing to anything immediately though. So far only his sisters had had anything to say to him while dancing that was not just bland agreement with whatever he said. Torien had spotted Duke Vargas lurking close by with his daughter and he guessed that the man was going to remind him of his earlier indication that he would dance with her. However, just as he was resigning himself to this he noticed the familiar uniform of an Imperial Guard commissar in the doorway. North was able to pick out Torien by his general's uniform and he made his way directly towards him, the bolt pistol and chainsword on his belt ensuring that anyone in his way moved out of it, including Duke Vargas and Ursulla. For North to enter unannounced was not normal and a number of the nobles began to mutter and whisper to one another about how disrespectful they thought it was.

"Your Majesty." he said, standing up straight in front of Torien.

"Commissar have you accomplished your task?" Torien replied.

"Yes Your Majesty. He is waiting in the main hall." North said and Torien smiled.

"Excellent work commissar and your timing is perfect. Please show him in." he ordered.

"Yes Your Majesty." North said before he turned and strode back out of the room.

"What's going on?" Kaitlin said as she, Samara and Ossian all moved closer to him, curious about why the event had just been interrupted in such a way.

"I'm just doing what needs to be done." Torien whispered back to her before North reappeared. Now though he was accompanied by Meya's father, Meya and the two guardsmen.

Meya and the guardsmen remained by the doorway while North and Meya's father walked towards Torien where Meya's father immediately bowed.

"Your Majesty. I am honoured." he said.

"Please stand up." Torien told him and he straightened up though he kept his eyes down rather than look directly at Torien, "You are Videll Tellez?" Torien asked.

"Yes Your Majesty." the older man answered.

"And I believe that you have maintained a farm for Earl Vazquez for the last thirty-two years." Torien continued and he glanced across the room to where the earl watched on as confused as everyone else in the room.

"I have Your Majesty."

"Very good. As I'm sure you know the crown has a large amount of farmland that has been overseen on our behalf by Duke Zavala's family." Torien said, "I have decided that I wish to replace the Zavala family with a professional farmer. Specifically you Videll Tellez. What do you say?"

"I am honoured Your Majesty." the old man said and Torien glanced towards the doorway where Meya stared at him with wide eyes, stunned at what he was doing.

"Your Majesty I must protest." Duke Zavala called out.

"I assure you that my decision is not based on any failing on your part my dear duke." Torien said.

"Nevertheless Your Majesty according to tradition such a role can only be filled by a nobleman." Duke Zavala said.

"Minister Victrus is that true?" Torien said, looking towards Victrus. He already knew that Duke Zavala was correct but in acting ignorant he hoped to hide his true motives for the appointment.

"It is Your Majesty. A royal appointment can only be made to a member of the nobility." Victrus replied.

"Very well." Torien said and he turned back towards Meya's father before he drew his chainsword and held it up in front of him. Then while the other nobles looked on in amazement he added, "This is the only sword I have to hand but it will have to do. Videll Tellez please kneel."

"Do it." North whispered into the man's ear and Meya's father did as he was told.

Torien then placed the inactive chainsword blade on one of the man's shoulders.

"Videll Tellez in the presence of these noble witnesses I dub you Baron Tellez and appoint you as the

overseer of the Royal Estates.” he said as he lifted the sword and moved it to the older man’s other shoulder. Then he returned the weapon to his belt, “Now rise Baron Tellez.”

Still unable to comprehend exactly what had happened the newly ennobled Baron Tellez got to his feet and bowed to Torien again.

“Your Majesty.” he said and Torien looked towards the doorway where Meya was looking on just as startled as her father.

“I believe that that is your daughter is it not Baron Tellez?” he said and Videl looked over his shoulder for a moment before he responded.

“It is Your Majesty. Meya.”

“Oh very clever Torien. I hope you know what you’re doing though.” Kaitlin whispered into his ear and he smiled.

“It’s good to be the King.” he whispered back before he called out, “Lady Meya Tellez please do come here and introduce yourself. Then perhaps you will do me the honour of giving me the next dance.”

Despite wearing a duty uniform instead of a dress one Meya did as Torien had said and she walked up to him and when he took her by the hand he lifted it to his mouth and kissed it, making his intentions clear to all of the gathered noblemen.



## 9.

"General may I have a word with you?" Ursulla Vargas asked General Marquez, "Privately."

"Of course my lady." Marquez responded and while the room's attention remained on Torien and Meya along with her father the pair left the room one after another so that not even the Royal Guard realised that their exits were connected.

Marquez waited just out of sight of the guards for Ursulla to follow him and as soon as he saw her approaching he beckoned her towards him.

"This way. We can talk in my office." he told her.

"Thank you general." Ursulla replied and the pair made their way to the administrative section of the palace. At this time of night this part of the palace was deserted and the pair were able to make their way to General Marquez's office unseen.

"Please take a seat Lady Vargas." Marquez said as he walked over to a cabinet and opened it to reveal the various alcoholic beverages that it contained, "May I offer you a drink?"

"No thank you general." Ursulla replied as he poured himself one.

"As you wish but don't hesitate to ask if you change your mind. Now what can I do for you?" Marquez said as he sat down behind his desk.

"General, my father had plans to have me marry King Torien. Though these seem to be in tatters now."

Ursulla said and Marquez nodded.

"Yes, it is common knowledge that your father has been hoping to repeat the arrangement he made with King Haddon regarding King Ramiro. Of course none of us expected that stunt with the farmer. I suppose I should have though, King Torien seems intent on replacing everything else with troops from the Imperial Guard so why not just marry one as well?" Marquez said.

"As it happens general I am relieved that my father won't be marrying me off to the King." Ursulla continued,

"On the other hand I understand that your son is unmarried."

"Yes he is. I didn't know that you had met him." Marquez replied and Ursulla nodded.

"We met one another at the opening of the Tula Central Art Gallery's last new season. He had just been promoted to major at the time and I found him most intriguing. He was telling me about his deployment to the southern garrison."

"He commands a coastal outpost. In fact he was among the last group of officers to be decorated by King Haddon for valour against the pirates operating in the area before the king died." Marquez said and Ursulla smiled.

"General I know that it is unusual for a woman of my station to ask this instead of my father but would you approve of your son and I being married?" she asked and Marquez paused to consider this. The Vargas family were wealthy and powerful. Added to which Duke Vargas had no sons and Ursulla was his eldest daughter and while she could not directly inherit the duke's title any son that she had could and Marquez liked the idea of his grandson becoming a duke. There was also a more personal advantage to having his son marry Ursulla Vargas that appealed to General Marquez though.

"An interesting idea." he said, "You know that my son was considering transferring his commission to one of the Imperial Guard regiments that will be raised in the new year?"

"No I did not general." Ursulla answered, "But I am willing to leave Toltek with him if that is required. I know that some of the officers of previous regiments took wives and children with them."

"Actually my son was considering leaving Toltek precisely because I had been unable to arrange a wife for him. On the other hand if you were to marry him then I wouldn't lose him to the Imperial Guard. Somehow I doubt that if he joined his regiment would ever return to Toltek like the King's has done." Marquez explained.

"Then do we have an agreement general? You could approach my father tonight. Ordinarily I expect that he would not entertain the idea of an engagement offer from a family that lacked our rank but with me there to support you I think that he could be convinced of the merits of the idea." Ursulla said and Marquez smiled.

"My lady I think we do and might I add that I would be proud to call you my daughter in law?" he said as he got back to his feet.

"Thank you general." Ursulla said and she extended her hand towards him, clearly expecting him to help her stand as well. Accordingly Marquez took Ursulla's hand and raised her up from her chair. The moment that she was standing right in front of him though she flicked the wrist of her other hand and a narrow spike snapped down from the sleeve of her dress. Marquez heard this lock into position and looked down at the blade in surprise just as Ursulla thrust it into his chest. The blade pierced him at the base of his sternum and was angled upwards into his heart where the toxin that it contained was released.

In an instant General Marquez's heart was paralysed and this quickly spread to his lungs as well, preventing him from calling out for help. Ursulla withdrew the blade and let go as the general collapsed, his eyes wide with panic in his last few moments of life while Ursulla just looked down at him and watched.

"Don't worry general," she said as she stared at him, "the dose was far bigger than what I was able to get into Ramiro. You'll be dead in a minute or two rather than lingering for days like he did."

With no pulse or respiration to check Ursulla watched the general's eyes carefully and waited for them to stop moving as an indication that he was finally dead before she crouched down beside him and began to go through his pockets. She searched these until she found his planetary defence force identity card before she reached into a pocket hidden in her dress and took out what looked like an identical card that she used to replace this in the general's pocket. The only difference between these was the data stored on the genuine card electronically. Unlike the visual appearance of the card this could not be duplicated and that was why Ursulla had been forced to go to such lengths to obtain it. Now that she had the genuine card in her possession she placed this into the concealed pocket and stood up again.

Making her way to the door she opened it just enough to be able to peer out into the hallway outside while also listening for any indication that there was someone who would see her leaving the office. Seeing and hearing nothing though she quickly slipped out of the office and closed the door behind her, leaving the body of General Marquez where it had landed to be discovered later.

Although she returned to the residential area of the palace Ursulla did not head back to the function room where the nobles were gathered. Instead she made her way towards the palace chapel and went inside. The main area of the chapel was empty but Ursulla walked to the door that led to Cardinal Intios' private office and knocked on the door, specifically knocking twice before a short pause after which she knocked once more. This simple code told Intios that it was her at the door and rather than call out he opened the door himself and beckoned her inside.

"Is it done?" he asked as he closed the door behind her and she nodded.

"Yes, the fool didn't suspect a thing and I was able to administer the toxin directly into his heart." Ursulla replied as she reached into her hidden pocket to remove the identity card, "This was on him just like we were told."

"Excellent." Intios said, smiling as he took the card.

"Do you think that that will really do what it is supposed to?" Ursulla asked.

"The secrets of the mechanicum are beyond me girl." Intios answered, "But I am assured that when presented to the right sort of cogitator engine it will give the operator control of the orbital defences for just long enough."

"What do you mean 'just long enough'?" Ursulla said.

"Supposedly this card on its own is not enough to keep control of the weapons. The individual crews will be able to override its effects but there will be a delay, a delay that will give the rightful rulers of this world just enough time to reach us." Intios said.

"And then we can finally sweep away the King and all the servants of the false Emperor." Ursulla said and she and Intios both smiled at one another.

"So were you always planning to make my father a nobleman Torien?" Meya asked as the pair danced and Torien smiled at her.

"I admit that it wasn't my original idea, no. I had thought that we'd simply get married and then your father could just move into the palace. Of course then you forced my hand and I needed to elevate him to the nobility so that you'd agree to resume our relationship." he replied before he looked to the side of the room where Meya's father was stood beside Chief Minister Victrus while other noblemen gathered around him. Though Vidal's clothing was not of the standard worn by the other noblemen a suitably coloured sash had been brought to him so that his rank was clearly shown.

"I'm surprised that those other men are showing so much attention to him though. I always thought the nobility tended to look down on anyone who wasn't born into to their exclusive club. Present dance partners excepted of course." Meya said.

"Meya almost everyone in this room has probably figured out that I intend to marry you and that means your father is about to become father in law to the King in addition to being responsible for thousands of square kilometres of prime farmland. That gives him direct power over a valuable planetary resource and almost direct access to me. Of course everyone wants to be his friend now. I wouldn't be surprised if some of them were asking about what brothers and sisters you have so they can try and arrange marriages with their own offspring." Torien said. Then he paused before adding, "With luck Victrus will be able to protect him from any of them who may try to take advantage of his inexperience of politics."

The music then ceased and the dancers applauded once more. Once again the nearby nobles moved to engage Torien in conversation, though this time some of them also introduced themselves to Meya. Just as the men speaking with her father were largely motivated by wanting to establish a close link to Torien, Meya

was also seen as a means to this end. Not long after the music stopped though Torien noticed an officer of the Royal Guard speaking with both Nathin and Commissar North. Nathin then broke away from the other two men and made his way through the crowd on the dance floor to Torien.

"We've got a problem." he whispered into Torien's ear.

"What sort of problem?" Torien responded.

"The sort of problem where there's yet another body in the palace." Nathin told him and Torien looked directly at him.

"Who?" he said.

"Perhaps we should discuss this somewhere more private than a dance floor." Nathin suggested and Torien nodded before turning to Meya.

"I'm sorry but there's an issue I have to attend to. I'll be back as soon as possible." he told her and she nodded.

"Sure. Go." she said, "I'll go and see if my dad needs any more help."

Torien, Nathin and Commissar North were escorted from the room by the Royal Guard officer to the administrative area of the palace, directly to General Marquez's office where a servant was being comforted by two more members of the Royal Guard.

"She found the body Your Majesty." the officer told Torien and the others.

"Let me see." Torien replied.

"Are you certain Your Majesty?" the officer asked.

"I was in the Imperial Guard and fought Orks. I've seen bodies ripped apart." Torien said.

"Of course Your Majesty I'm sorry-" the officer began, clearly embarrassed.

"That's okay lieutenant." Torien replied as he, Nathin and North all stepped around the officer and stood in the doorway of Marquez's office so that they could look inside.

Marquez was still lying where he had fallen, his dead eyes looking straight up at the ceiling.

"I think he left the dance some time after Commissar North arrived." Nathin commented as the three men then entered the room and crouched beside the body.

"I don't see any signs of a struggle and there's a drink on the table." North said, "If there hadn't already been so many deaths I'd have been asking if he could have come in here and just collapsed? Maybe he wasn't feeling well at the dance and came here to try and relax before collapsing."

"I suspect that that's what we're supposed to think happened." Torien said and he looked around the office.

"So who would want to kill a general?" Nathin asked.

"Someone who wanted to undermine the planetary defence force?" North suggested.

"Then why not just make it obvious that this was an assassination? Demonstrating that even the head of an army is vulnerable is morale sapping so there isn't really a point in making it look like an accident." Torien pointed out.

"So who else wasn't at the party when he left?" Nathin said, "I saw people coming and going almost constantly."

"It may not have even been one of the guests. It could easily have been a servant." Torien said before he looked at the Royal Guard officer standing who was now standing in the doorway, "Did the general keep his office locked?"

"I'm sorry I don't know." he replied.

"A pity. It might have helped narrow down whether Marquez was killed just so that the killer could gain access to this room." Torien said.

"You think that this could just be cover for a robbery?" Nathin said.

"It's certainly a possibility." North responded, "

"What are your orders Your Majesty?" the Royal Guard officer asked from the doorway.

"Inform the Adeptus Arbites. Marshal Neuer can have his people go over this room in as much detail as possible. If there is something missing maybe they'll be able to find out what it was." Torien answered.

The knocking at the door was rapid as the man who had arranged for the assassin to try and kill Torien approached it along the narrow hallway cautiously with a stub pistol in his hand. Although everything that could be done to divert the attention of the Adeptus Arbites towards the Democracy League had been done he knew that it was still possible that their enforcers could have traced the assassin back to him somehow.

"Who's there?" he called out as he got closer to the door.

"A true brother." the reply came and the man hurried the rest of the way to the door and opened it just far enough to see the young man in priest's robes standing outside, "Are you Ruben?" the priest added.

"Yes. Come inside quickly." Ruben responded and as soon as the priest was through the doorway he closed it again, "Now what do you want?"

"The cardinal told me to bring you this." the priest answered and he handed over a copy of the Lectio Divinitatus. This was a modern edition rather than the original that had been written more than ten thousand

years earlier before the Horus Heresy by the Primarch Lorgar Aurellian of the Word Bearers and Ruben smiled as he did every time he saw a copy of the book, wondering how the pious priests of the Adeptus Ministorum would react if they discovered that their holy text was authored by a traitor who had helped engineer the fall of Horus to chaos.

Tucking his pistol into his belt, Ruben took the book and examined the cover closely, locating the split in the rigid coating that allowed him to pry it apart and remove the identity card from inside.

“Thank the cardinal for this gift and assure him that it will be put to good use.” Ruben told the young priest and then he opened the door for him to leave. The young man nodded in response and then darted out into the night. As soon as he was gone Ruben closed the door again and locked it before he walked back along the hallway into the room at the back of the building.

As soon as he entered the room another man looked up at him from the chair he was confined to. The man had no arms or legs of his own, only rough stumps midway down his thighs and at one shoulder while the other arm had been replaced by a crude augmetic. The tattoos visible on what was left of his body indicated that he had once been a part of the Adeptus Mechanicus but his brief career with them had been cut short when he had quite literally been cast out for his heretical attempts at innovation and research into forbidden areas of technology. Luckily for him none of the organs that were essential to keeping him alive had been replaced by augmetics when his fellow tech priests had ripped all of them from his body and thrown what was left into the gutter.

In front of the former tech priest there was a work bench that was covered in electronic equipment that the former tech priest was adjusting with his artificial arm.

“Here Zeta.” Ruben said, “Is this what you wanted?”

“Yes, exactly.” the tech priest answered, smiling, “I should be able to disrupt the orbital defences just long enough to let the *Casket of Gold* through so Alpharius and his men can make their drop.”

“You can make the connection in time?” Ruben asked.

“Of course. The system now is the same as it was before the Mechanicus expelled me. I’ll be in before sunrise. The key is to jam the machine spirit at just the right moment. Too soon and the weapon crews will be able to separate their weapons from the spirit’s oversight. Too late and they’ll already have firing solutions and be able to shoot down the *Casket of Gold*. You should tell them that we have it.”

“I’ll go and see the choir now.” Ruben said before he turned away, leaving the former tech priest to connect General Marquez’s identity card to his equipment while he left the room again. In the hallway he opened a door that led to a flight of stairs that led down into a cellar. There was light already coming from the cellar and this allowed Ruben to see the arcane symbols that were painted on the steps beneath his feet as well as the wall beside him and the ceiling above. Descending the steps, Ruben felt a tingling on his skin from the raw psychic power that was being amplified by the sigils that covered every available surface. He knew that the purpose of the symbols was twofold. Firstly they served to focus the power of what was contained in the cellar while also protecting it from being discovered by any of the Imperium’s psykers should there be any on Toltek. At the bottom of the stairs Ruben turned to face the centre of the underground chamber and here he saw the source of the light that filled the cellar.

A lone figure floated half a metre above the floor, directly above an eight pointed star that had been painted there. Designs similar to the painted symbols in the cellar had been cut into the figure’s flesh and these glowed brightly enough to illuminate the entire room. The brightness of this light made it difficult to see the figure clearly and it was impossible to tell even if it was

“Why do you disturb us tiny creature?” the figure asked, somehow speaking with multiple voices, both male and female, at the same time and demonstrating why it was known as the choir.

“I have information for Alpharius.” Ruben replied, “I need you to communicate it to the *Casket of Gold*.”

The choir let out several strange tones as if multiple people were loudly producing musical notes at the same time before responding.

“Speak insignificant being.” it said.

“We have obtained the key to the orbital defences.” Ruben said, “Zeta is connecting it to his equipment now. We are ready for further orders.”

Aboard the *Casket of Gold* the bloated creature in the cage located in the alpha Legion’s command centre suddenly let out a deep humming sound and the marine commander approached it, standing directly in front of the cage.

“Speak.” he ordered.

“We have obtained the key to the orbital defences.” the creature said, not only repeating Ruben’s words but speaking in his voice as well, “Zeta is connecting it to his equipment now. We are ready for further orders.”

“Alert the brotherhood to begin their diversions.” the marine commander said, “Draw as many of the planetary defence forces away from the palace as possible to clear the way for our assault. You will be told when to shut down the defences.”

"Your message is sent lord commander." the creature said in a deep voice, "The choir sings it now."  
"Very good. That is all." the marine commander said before he turned and walked away from the creature in the cage, knowing that the psychic link between it and the planet bound choir would carry his words to his servants on Toltek instantly and in a manner that the Imperial forces there would not be able to detect. He made his way to the console that was still projecting the hololith of the royal palace where two more marines were present, both of them with the rank markings of sergeants on their armour.  
"Everything is proceeding according to plan my lord." one of the sergeants said.  
"No, not quite. King Torien still presents us with an obstacle. He has become suspicious of events here and if he is able to rally sufficient forces to him then he could threaten us. The palace was supposed to be defended only by ceremonial troops with no experience beyond a policing role. Now they have leadership and that is dangerous."  
"Another attempt on his life could be made but that would risk turning the defence force's attention towards the palace again." one of the sergeants commented.  
"That depends on the timing." the commander replied, "If our agents in the palace strike at him as we begin our landing it will be too late for them to recall the troops that have been drawn out of the city and it will prevent him from rallying and taking command of the troops he has left."  
"That is a small window of opportunity my lord." the other sergeant pointed out, "Are you certain that our agents are capable of such precise timing?"  
"Perhaps. They are well motivated to succeed after all and that is sure to focus their attention on the objective." the commander replied and then he looked back towards the creature in the cage, "I have an addition to my message. Tell our contacts on the surface that when our landing begins I want the King assassinated. He must not be allowed to rally his troops around him."  
"The choir has received your message lord commander." the creature in the cage replied as soon as the orders had been communicated to Toltek.

Leaving the Royal Guardsmen to secure General Marquez's office until the Adeptus Arbites could arrive Torien, Nathin and Commissar North headed back to the function hall where the guests continued to dance, dine and drink and they stopped at the doorway where two more soldiers still stood as an honour guard.  
"Did you see General Marquez leave the event?" North asked one of the men.  
"Yes sir." he answered, "The general went by about an hour ago."  
"An hour is a lot of time." Nathin commented.  
"Was anyone else with him when he left?" Torien added, nodding in agreement.  
"No Your Majesty. The general was alone." the guard replied.  
"That would have been too easy." Nathin said.  
"And we've got no way of knowing whether someone followed him to his office after he left or if they were waiting for him when he got there." North added.  
"Or how many there were." Torien said, "Commissar I'd like you to co-ordinate a review of the palace staff. Find out exactly who is on the grounds and has left in the last hour. That's information the Adeptus Arbites are going to want. Don't just take names from entry and exit logs though. Check to see who is actually here. The Arbites supposedly found all the entrances to the various hidden passageways in the palace but I'm not willing to bet that they didn't miss one or two that the killer may know about. Oh and get word to Colonel Barrera. I'll be promoting him to general now. He'll be the new chief of staff of the planetary defence force."  
"Yes Your Majesty, I'll get right on it." North responded before he turned and walked away, heading for the security office.  
"What about you?" Nathin asked, looking at Torien.  
"Despite all that's happened I have one very important task to carry out before this night draws to a close." he replied before he returned to the room filled with nobles.  
Torien began by gathering his siblings together, interrupting the dance to have them accompany him towards the side of the room where the newly ennobled Baron Tellez was still stood with Chief Minister Victrus and speaking with other nobles who were keen to become associated with him.  
"Baron Tellez how are you finding the evening?" Torien asked.  
"Somewhat overwhelming Your Majesty." he replied before he looked down at himself, "Plus I really don't think I'm dressed for the occasion."  
"Don't worry about that baron. However, there is something that I need to ask of you." Torien said.  
"Yes Your Majesty. Ask anything." Vidal said, nodding his head.  
"Where is your daughter Meya?" Torien asked.  
"Dancing with Count Alfaro." Victrus said and Torien looked around.  
"Ah yes I see her. Could you bring her here please baron?" he said.  
"Yes Your Majesty." Vidal said before he called out to his daughter, "Meya dear, could you come here please? The King has something to say."

“I’m sorry.” Meya said to Count Alfaro but he just smiled and bowed as they separated and she walked to where her father was standing with Torien and his family. Meanwhile the dancing had stopped, all of the nobles knew what was to come and although most were at least disappointed that they were not the ones being asked to summon their offspring they did not want to miss what they knew was about to happen. “Baron Tellez,” Torien said clearly when Meya was standing beside her father, “as King of Toltek it is my duty to find a suitable woman to serve beside me as Queen and I would be honoured if you would permit your daughter Meya to marry me.”

Vidal just stared at Torien with a startled look on his face. As someone who had been born and raised as a commoner he was not used to the idea of arranged marriages and he was unsure of how to respond. Fortunately though the offer of marriage to Meya from Torien was a surprise to him Meya herself had known that it would happen from the moment he was made a baron.

“Say yes.” she whispered to him.

“Yes?” Vidal said and Torien took Meya by the hand before kissing her.

“My lords and ladies.” Victrus called out to the crowd, “It gives me great pleasure to announce the engagement of His Majesty King Torien Alvarez to the Lady Meya Tellez.”

Most of the crowd then applauded politely but further away Duke Vargas scowled as he clapped his hands together.

“Picking a commoner as a bride. This spits on ten thousand years of tradition.” he said quietly to his daughter.

“Oh don’t worry father.” she responded, “I’m sure that our dear King Torien will face his reckoning before too long.”

“Of course my dear Ursulla. I’m sure you are correct. The nobility will not stand for this behaviour in the longer term.” the duke said and his scowl turned into a smile.

The gathering ended soon after the announcement of Torien and Meya’s engagement, with the nobles being collected from the front door by their drivers. As the Vargas family vehicle was driving towards the main gate a member of the Royal Guard signalled for their driver to stop.

“What’s going on?” the duke said, already annoyed that his attempts to arrange a marriage between Torien and Ursulla had failed. Moments later though an armoured vehicle with prominent Adeptus Arbites markings drove past them towards the palace.

Ursulla realised that this meant General Marquez’s body had been discovered and for a moment she thought that they would not be allowed to leave. However, as soon as the armoured vehicle had passed by the guard stepped aside and waved them onwards.

“We’re clear to go now sir.” the driver said.

“Then do it. We’ve already wasted enough time here tonight.” Duke Vargas ordered him.

“Yes sir.” the driver responded as he accelerated and Ursulla smiled as they passed between the gateposts, knowing that she had escaped the palace.

The data issued to the Adeptus Arbites unit gave them names, locations and images of the members of the Democracy League that they were to arrest. For centuries the organisation had been regarded as subversive at a local planetary level but there had been no indication that it posed a threat to the integrity of the Imperium so the Adeptus Arbites had gone no further than gathering intelligence. Although this meant that they had not carried out any arrests previously the Adeptus Arbites now had a significant amount of information regarding their membership and operations. The enforcer squad arrived at one of the Democracy League’s provincial offices located far from the capital city of Tula in a pair of wheeled armoured vehicles. Lighter than the tracked Rhino or Repressor armoured personnel carriers they had access to if needed these transports still provided total protection against small arms while avoiding damaging the roads they travelled on and these were driven right up to the front of the building before the enforcers they carried disembarked quickly and rushed towards the door.

Although the enforcers had come prepared to use their shotguns to blast the door off its hinges in order to gain entry to the office if necessary the first of them found the front door unlocked and he simply opened it, pushing it as wide open as he could before bursting into the office.

“Adeptus Arbites! Everyone raise their hands where we can see them.” he yelled, using the vox system built into his helmet to amplify his voice as the startled occupants of the office looked up at the armoured figures in black stormed through the now open doorway.

“Nobody resist. Do exactly as they order.” an older man towards the back of the office told the other occupants and he lifted his hands up above his head.

The others in the office copied this and as the enforcers spread out. Some of the enforcers began to restrain the activists in the office while the rest moved from the front office into the back rooms and started to search the rest of the building for more people to be arrested. Some of the activists in the office tried to find out why

they were suddenly being raided, asking what laws they were supposed to have broken but the enforcers responded only with instructions to keep quiet and not resist before they were dragged towards the front door to be loaded into the transports outside. It was just as the doors to the transport were being open that there was a sudden squealing sound as an old and battered cargo vehicle came to a rapid halt nearby and the side door was thrown open so that several masked individuals could leap out.

“Death to the King!” one yelled as he raised an improvised incendiary with its fuse lit above his head, “Death to the Emperor! Power to the people!” he continued and then before any of the enforcers could bring their weapons to bear on him he hurled the incendiary at the transport.

The crude weapon burst open and spread burning promethium across the side of the transport as well as over some of the enforcers. Meanwhile the remaining masked figures opened fire with an assortment of simple firearms, mainly stub pistols but one of them had a shotgun similar to the ones carried by the enforcers. They rushed forwards as they fired and grabbed hold of the startled and disorientated Democracy League activists before pulling them back towards their own transport and bundling them inside.

“What’s going on? Who are you people?” said the man who had ordered his fellow activists not to resist the Arbites raid just as the transport’s door was slammed shut again and the vehicle accelerated away from the office with the sounds of shotgun impacts being heard against the back.

“We’re getting you out of there.” one of the masked men replied.

“But don’t you know what you’ve done? You’ve turned us all into fugitives.” the man protested.

“Exactly and now that you’re among the most wanted people on the planet we don’t need you any more.” the masked man said as he drew a knife and plunged it into the activist’s heart.

## 10.

“Well if it isn’t the happy bride to be. I never got the chance to congratulate you last night.” Nathin commented the next morning when Meya arrived at the palace armoury after spending the night with Torien and having breakfast with him and his siblings. Although the room had a permanent security detail from the Royal Guard assigned to it there were no guards actually inside the armoury itself.

The walls of the armoury were largely lined with racks for assorted long guns, both rifles and shotguns while there were also cabinets for pistols and ammunition.

“Thank you Sergeant Tanner.” she replied.

“That’s a new look for you by the way. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in anything other than a guard uniform of some sort.” Nathin commented, looking at the dress Meya now wore instead of her uniform.

“Yes now I’m a lady I apparently have to dress the part. I don’t know where this dress came from but the palace staff brought me about a dozen to chose from. They found dad a suit too.” Meya said and Nathin grinned.

“They offered me a fancy uniform too but I turned them down. So what brings you down here? Don’t you have your service las pistol?” he said and Meya nodded.

“Yes but Torien asked me to join you in instructing Kaitlin, Samara and Ossian in using a weapon.” she told him.

“Yeah, I get the feeling that adjusting the stances of Kaitlin and Samara would be considered scandalous if I did it. On the other hand you can adjust them however you need to.” Nathin said.

“Actually I think that Samara might actually enjoy having you adjust her position. She keeps asking about you at meals. This morning she was asking if Torien was going to reward you with a title like he did my father. What exactly did you do for her to do that?” Meya asked.

“Fished her out of a lake and taught her just enough skill at handling a vehicle to make her a menace on a public road.” Nathin answered and Meya laughed, “Can you image me as a noble though. I’m pretty sure that Kaitlin would be furious if that happened. Apparently she described me as a brute.” Nathin added.

“No, she’s not quite what I was expecting when Torien first told me about her.” Meya commented.

“Did you know that she hit Torien when she first saw him?”

“Yes, he did mention that. At least she’s calmed down enough that she isn’t attacking him any more. Giving her a weapon and teaching her how to use it would be a pretty bad idea if she was.” Meya said, “So what weapons have you picked?” she added and Nathin pointed to a row of short barrelled revolvers laid out on a bench, “Unfortunately your planet doesn’t have suitable las weapons or I’d have picked them. These are the closest I could find. If a revolver doesn’t fire you can just pull the trigger again to move on to the next round. Automatics need clearing and I’d rather not be teaching stoppage drills as well as safe handling, loading, aiming and firing.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me. Do you want to sign out those guns and I’ll get the ammunition? Kaitlin, Samara and Ossian will probably be waiting for us already.” Meya replied.

While Meya had gone to the armoury after breakfast Torien had gone to his office as usual and he found Marshal Neuer waiting there with Chief Minister Victrus and Adept Hom.

“Ah Marshal Neuer. How is your operation proceeding?” Torien asked.

“We’re still in the process of rounding up members of the Democracy League Your Majesty. To begin with these passed off without incident but in the past few hours I’ve started receiving reports of violence. My enforcers have been ambushed and agitators have fermented mobs to block our passage.” the Arbites officer replied.

“Your Majesty we may need to deploy units of the planetary defence force in support of the Arbites.” Hom added and Torien sighed. Using military force against the population was not something he wanted his reign to be remembered as having started with. A purge by the Adeptus Arbites was bad enough already.

“Make the arrangements for the marshal’s men to be able to make use of military forces if necessary chief minister.” he said reluctantly, looking at Victrus. Then he turned to Neuer and added, “Will that do marshal?”

“Yes Your Majesty. Thank you. In another matter I also have some news about the death of General Marquez to give you.”

“And what is that marshal?” Torien said and Neuer looked at the dataslate he held for reference.

“The examination servitor determined that the cause of death was a sudden coronary failure. His heart just stopped. There was no sign of disease or underlying health issues that would have caused this though. Nor were there any of the skin marks that would normally be associated with the use of an electrical weapon such as a power maul so a chemical analysis was conducted instead. This revealed the presence of a paralysing agent in his bloodstream in addition to a low level of alcohol that was consistent with the drinks



being served at the function he was attending. The overall level of the paralytic was too low to have been ingested so a search was conducted for the point at which it was injected into him. This was located in the front of his chest below the sternum and angled up into his heart. Unfortunately the nature of the wound doesn't give us any clues about the killer. Someone as tall as the general could also have aimed an attack upwards if they were close enough."

"It didn't look like his clothing was damaged." Torien pointed out and Neuer shook his head.

"No Your Majesty, it wouldn't have. The wound in his chest indicated that the device used to inject the toxin was long and needle thin. The wound and damage to his clothing was only detected under close examination. The weapon was narrow enough that it didn't cause any external bleeding that would give away the location of the wound."

"So we're looking for someone with a giant needle?" Torien said.

"In a way, yes Your Majesty and that may make the killer easier to trace." Neuer replied.

"How?" Torien asked.

"A weapon like the one used cannot be manufactured here on Toltek. The metallurgy required is beyond the local industry. The weapon must have been imported from off world, possibly from a xenos source." Neuer said.

"From a rogue trader perhaps?" Torien suggested.

"Possibly, yes Your Majesty."

"And the only rouge trader to have visited Toltek in a thousand years is Novus, the same rouge trader whose vessel is now approaching our planet again while refusing to make contact." Victrus said.

"That's far too convenient for my liking. What's the status of our defences?" Torien said.

"Standing by Your Majesty. The defence monitor that first detected the rogue trader's vessel is still trailing it while the others are maintaining orbit above us. Our orbital defences will be fully manned by the time that the rogue trader enters effective firing range." Victrus answered.

"Good. Now have there been any developments about getting the Sixteenth Regiment down here?" Torien asked and Victrus and Hom exchanged glances, "I take it that means 'no'." Torien added.

"The labour union sent representatives to the transport ship to inspect the munitions." Hom replied,

"Unfortunately they claimed that they weren't stored safely for offloading and now they're in a stand off with the Adeptus Mechanicus who have said they are perfectly safe. Which they are of course."

"The unions aren't backing down to the Mechanicus?" Torien commented, knowing that the amount of power wielded by the tech priests of Mars meant that defying them was incredibly risky. Their near total control over technology meant that they could withhold the supply and support for most machinery and servitors.

"No Your Majesty." Victrus said, "Frankly their behaviour is incredibly unusual."

"Can we find out why?" Torien said.

"Your Majesty our intelligence has indicated that the Democracy League has been trying to recruit from many of the unions and professional associations on the planet." Marshal Neuer told him, "I assure you that if the Adeptus Arbites does find a link then we'll bring this issue to a rapid halt."

There was an area of the palace grounds that had been set aside for target shooting using shotguns fired at small discs launched into the air by a catapult and it was here that Nathin set up his improvised target range. The targets themselves were simple sheets of white paper with a black circle about the size of an adult's head drawn on and coloured in.

"These are your targets," he told Kaitlin, Samara and Ossian who had just watched him set up the simple frames on which these were mounted, "and these are the weapons you'll be using." he added as he then walked over to the bench where the three short barrelled revolvers were laid out in a row with their cylinders open, "Now before we start I just want to go over a couple of points about these. They may be primitive but they are deadly so make sure you know where they are pointing. Only point them at something or someone you want to shoot and always assume that they're loaded. Now I'm going to demonstrate what I'm going to teach you to do so watch carefully."

Nathin then loaded rounds into the cylinder of one of the revolvers before closing it. Then he gripped the revolver with both hands and aimed the weapon towards the target directly ahead of him. He then pulled the trigger six times in rapid succession, putting all six into the black circle. Each time he pulled the trigger the loud 'crack' produced by the revolver made the three royal siblings jump and Ossian clamped his hands over his ears, "There you go. Six rounds in about three seconds put into a single target. That would stop a charging Ork and trust me, putting down a human is far easier than that."

"Why can't we use las pistols like yours?" Ossian said as he uncovered his ears.

"Yes, that would be preferable. Las weapons have no moving parts and no noticeable recoil but unfortunately your armoury doesn't have any in it so for now these are what you have." Nathin said as he emptied the spent casings from the revolver and then placed the open weapon back on the bench, "Now it's your turn." The royal siblings then all stepped up to the bench and nervously picked up the weapons laid out for them.

“What about ear protectors?” Kaitlin asked, “I’ve seen people using this area a lot and they always wore ear protection.”

“Not this time princess.” Nathin replied, “You won’t be wearing ear defenders if you need to use these to protect yourself so you’d better get used to the noise now.”

“Here you go Ruben.” Zeta said when Ruben entered the room, pointing his remaining arm at a screen, “We’ve got reports coming in of our operatives’ actions stirring up trouble for the Arbites.

“And how are they going?” Ruben asked.

“Very well it seems and all it has taken is a few thrown rocks to trigger a response from the enforcers that then escalates into a riot or the odd incendiary bomb.” Zeta asked, “Our people have also been shouting pro-democracy and anti-monarchist or imperial slogans at the same time, making sure it looks like it’s supporters of the Democracy League that are causing all the trouble. Some have also been able to grab actual league members out from under the claws of the Arbites to make their attacks look like rescue operations.”

“I don’t know if I like the sound of that. The enforcers are going to do everything they can to hunt them down.” Ruben commented and the usually stoic former tech priest cracked a smile.

“Don’t worry about them Ruben. Our people are disposing of them as soon as they’re out of sight of the Arbites. Then they destroy the bodies and there’s nothing for the enforcers to find.” he said, “You can assure our contact in the palace that the operation is going perfectly to plan.”

The passengers in the back of the transport vehicle felt it begin to decelerate while they were wrapping bodies of members of the Democracy League for disposal and one of them turned towards the driver.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“The road is blocked. Looks like an accident.” the driver replied while keeping her eyes on the road ahead where several badly damaged vehicles could be seen.

“Are there enforcers?” the man in the back said.

“Yes but they’re just locals. No Arbites.” the driver said.

“Then let’s just wait,” the other man replied.

“If you say so.” the driver commented just as she brought the transport to a halt behind the vehicle in front of them.

While she waited for the road to be cleared the transport’s driver watched the police officers attending to the accident and she noticed that they kept looking along the queue of vehicles that had built up. At first it looked as if they were just keeping an eye on how much traffic had built up but then she noticed that whenever they looked along the queue they seemed to be looking directly at the transport she was sitting in.

“Hey, I think that those enforcers are taking an interest in us.” she said, glancing over her shoulder.

“Let me see.” the man she had spoken to earlier responded and he climbed into the passenger seat to look for himself.

On the road ahead he could see the vehicles that had collided with one another and just beyond them a rescue vehicle that had brought the crew trying to release the victims from the wreckage. There were several local enforcers in sight, all of them wearing the lightweight body armour that was standard for their role but the man noticed that rather than just being armed with stub pistols on their belts some of them had retrieved the shotguns and autoguns kept in their vehicles as well. This amount of firepower was far beyond what was needed just for keeping control of traffic after an accident.

“What do you think?” the driver commented, looking at the man now sat beside her.

“They’ve made us.” he said, “The Arbites must have been able to log our registration and a description of the transport.”

“So what do we do now? We’re outnumbered and they’ve got autoguns.” the driver said and the man looked to the side of the road, studying the terrain. The ground either side of the road had been cleared to give room for vehicles that may go out of control and come off it to be able to slow down without hitting anything while beyond that there was dense jungle.

“We’re going to have to make a run for it.” the man said, “We only need to make it to the treeline and the enforcers won’t follow.”

“What about the transport though? We can’t let the enforcers get hold of it.” the driver said, knowing that the vehicle would be filled with evidence that could be gathered to identify the occupants.

“We’ll burn it.” the man replied and he climbed out of his seat and back into the rear compartment of the transport.

The driver followed the man, leaving the front of the transport empty. One of the nearby enforcers noticed this and he and another enforcer began to make their way along the line of traffic, finally deciding to investigate the vehicle.

All of a sudden the side door of the transport was thrown open and the occupants all leapt out with masks covering their faces and weapons in their hands. Some of the masked occupants immediately turned and

opened fire on the approaching enforcers, hitting both of them. At the same time the man who had given the order to abandon the transport hurled an incendiary that he had brought with him back through the open doorway and when this broke open inside it turned the inside of the vehicle into an inferno.

“Go! Head for the trees!” he yelled and the rest of his group began to run.

The enforcers reacted to this by drawing their weapons and taking aim at the fleeing group but the flames from the transport had triggered panic among the occupants of other nearby vehicles and unable to move their own road cars out of the way they began to disembark as well to put as much distance between themselves and the fire as possible. The enforcers shouted for these panicked motorists to get down to clear their line of fire but they were more concerned with getting away from the flames, preventing the enforcers from shooting at the fleeing figures.

On the other hand the former occupants of the transport continued to use their weapons, shooting towards the enforcers as they ran towards the treeline. These shots were poorly aimed though and none of them hit anyone, whether an enforcer or motorist. In return one of the enforcers armed with an autogun saw that he finally had a clear shot and took it, shooting one of the fleeing figures in the back.

“Leave him!” the group’s leader snapped when another member slowed to try and help their fallen comrade. Leaving the shot man face down on the ground meant that the rest of the group could continue to run as fast as they could towards the treeline and it took just seconds for them to reach it. They did not stop here though and they continued to run through the undergrowth.

Behind them most of the enforcers rushed to the treeline before they came to a stop and peered into the jungle, hoping that the fleeing group would still be visible. However, by this point they were deep enough into the undergrowth that they had disappeared from view and the enforcers had no choice but to abandon their pursuit, not being trained for jungle tracking. The rest of the enforcers, along with some members of the rescue team that had responded to the accident rushed to the burning transport with portable firefighting equipment to try and extinguish the flames.

The focused use of extinguishers quickly filled the transport with fire suppressing gas and the flames died away. Walking up to the open side door of the transport the enforcers then looked inside and their attention was immediately drawn to the large packages at the back of the vehicle. Suspecting from the shape what these contained, one of the enforcers then climbed into the transport and ripped open one of the packages at the end to reveal the charred corpse inside.

As soon as Novus entered the bridge and stood in his command pulpit one of his officers walked from the helm control stations to stand directly in front of it.

“My lord at our current rate of deceleration we will enter orbit in nine and a half hours.” he said, looking up at the rogue trader, “However, the engineers recommend that we increase our deceleration to maximum and steer off by two degrees. Our approach speed will be-”

“I am aware of our approach speed lieutenant.” Novus interrupted.

“But my lord our speed and heading will take us into the upper atmosphere. In that case damage to the ship is inevitable even if our void shields hold.” the officer protested.

“Only the lower decks will be at risk and the spine should hold. Now maintain course and deceleration. The helm will carry out an aerobraking manoeuvre before ascending to low orbit beneath the planetary defences” Novus ordered.

“My lord-” the officer began again but this time he was interrupted by the thunderous discharge of a weapon and his torso burst apart from the inside. All around the bridge officers and crew turned and stared in horror at the mess of blood and limbs that was all that remained of the lieutenant leaving only the servitors still focused on their duty stations.

At the back of the bridge the space marine commander had just entered and he had his bolt pistol in his hand, now lowered to his side again after firing a single mass reactive round into the unfortunate bridge officer. Without speaking the armoured marine walked up into the command pulpit and stood beside Novus.

“My force is ready. Is everything prepared with your ship?” he asked.

“Yes Alpharius. We’ll enter orbit in nine and a half hours. You can commence your drop in nine.” Novus answered.

“Good. There must be no delays to that schedule. Our allies on the surface will be told to co-ordinate their actions to that time frame. From that point it is set, do you understand Novus?” the marine said, looking down at the bridge crew rather than at the rogue trader.

“Yes.” Novus said, nodding nervously, “I understand.”

“Good. I have demonstrated how you should deal with any dissent now unless you want to leave the remains as a warning to the rest of your crew I suggest you have one of your servitors clean them away.” the marine said before he returned his pistol to its holster and calmly exited the bridge again.

From the bridge the marine commander returned to the section of the Casket of Gold where his forces were housed. Being in the lower decks this was one of the areas of the ship that was at risk of suffering serious

hull breaches when the massive transport ship carried out its risky aerobraking manoeuvre. This did not concern the trans human warrior though. By the time the manoeuvre was carried out he and his men would be long gone.

The creature in the cage was another matter though. It would be left behind when the Alpha Legion marines launched their assault but the commander did not intend to abandon it to die. This was not for any reason of sentiment though, the commander wanted to be able to make further use of the creature and that required its survival. Therefore, when he entered his command centre he walked straight to the cage and opened it.

"You release me?" the creature said.

"Physically. Not from our bargain." the marine commander told it.

"You wish me to send another message?" the creature asked.

"Yes. I need to communicate with our agent on Toltek one last time before we commence the assault. Link to the choir." the marine commander said.

The creature paused, its eyes flickering open and closed rapidly as it reached out through the warp to the corresponding creature on the surface of Toltek.

Ruben was stood behind the counter of the hardware store he used as a cover for his operation when he felt a sudden pain in his skull and he winced.

"Keep an eye on things. I have an important call to make." he told an assistant who was talking to a customer and the other man just nodded before returning to his task. Meanwhile Ruben walked into the back of the building, passing through the storeroom and into the section where he lived. From there he made his way down into the cellar where the choir still floated, "You wanted me?" he said.

"Alpharius calls to you." the choir said in its multitude of voices.

"Of course he does. What does he require?" Ruben asked.

"The time approaches. What is the state of your forces?" the choir said.

"Carrying out your orders, drawing the Arbites and planetary defence force away from Tula while framing the Democracy League." Ruben said.

"You need to call them back to Tula now. They need to be in the city in nine hours to support our landing." the choir said, "Are you ready to shut down the orbital defences?"

"Yes. Zeta has established a link to the cogitators that co-ordinate the defences. He estimates that the time window during which he will be able to block the orbital defences from operating will be between eight and ten minutes." Ruben said.

"That is enough. Now go and get ready. The next time we speak will be in person so make sure that you do not disappoint me." the choir said.

"Yes my lord." Ruben replied before he headed back up the stairs and to the room where Zeta sat with his equipment.

"You have orders?" the former tech priest said as he looked over his shoulder and Ruben nodded.

"Yes. Spread the word to our people that they have eight hours to just stop what they're doing and get back here." Ruben told him.

"Then it's on for tonight?" Zeta said and Ruben nodded again.

"Yes at long last. The Alpha Legion will assault the palace and we just need to keep what's left of the Arbites and city enforcers busy." he said.

"I'll send your message but there's something that you need to know about." Zeta said and Ruben frowned, anxious that nothing should go wrong now that they were so close to achieving what had been years in the planning.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The vehicle being used by one of our cells was tagged by the Arbites and they passed the registration on to the local enforcers who spotted it. Our people bailed out and ran." Zeta said.

"Do we know what the enforcers got?" Ruben said, worried that there could have been something left in the vehicle that would lead the Adeptus Arbites straight to his door.

"Our people set fire to the van but they didn't hang around long enough to find out how effective it was. Most of them got away but one was hit." Zeta told him.

"Killed?" Ruben said, knowing that the Adeptus Arbites would have no qualms about torturing an injured man and that nine hours was more than enough for them to get information out of someone.

"Yes. All the Arbites will get is a body but who knows how much that will tell them. I've never been able to get into any of their cogitators. Their purity seals are too strong for any machine curse I have." Zeta said.

"Get in touch with the survivors anyway. Tell them to try and get back here the same as the other cells but make sure that they aren't followed." Ruben said and Zeta reached out for his vox.

"Consider it done." he said.

Torien stood by the window in his office and looked out to where his siblings were being taught to use simple firearms while Victrus and Hom sat beside his desk.

"A final decision is going to be needed about engaging the *Casket of Gold*." Victrus said.

"How close are they now?" Torien asked, turning away from the window.

"The ship is expected to pass by in less than ten hours." Victrus told him and he frowned.

"Pass by?" Torien commented.

"Yes Your Majesty. The vessel's deceleration means that it will be travelling too fast to enter orbit safely." Victrus said.

"Assuming that it is allowed to get that close." Hom added.

"My orders stand. Keep trying to establish contact but if that fails then I want that ship destroyed before it can either enter orbit or pass by and do whatever they have planned." Torien said before the personal vox unit that Hom had with him sounded and he looked at the device.

"It's Marshal Neuer." he said.

"This could be important. You'd better answer it." Torien told him and Nom activated the vox, setting it so that everyone in the room could hear what was being said.

"Yes marshal?" Hom asked.

"Are you with the King?" Neuer asked and Hom glanced towards Torien.

"Yes. I'm with King Torien and Chief Minister Victrus. They can both hear you." Hom told him.

"Excellent. Your Majesty we have an issue with our operation to round up the Democracy League." Neuer said.

"What sort of issue marshal? I thought that the PDF were supposed to be assisting you if they were needed." Torien said.

"Yes Your Majesty. Military units are on standby but so far we haven't made use of them. The issue concerns a chance discovery by local enforcers. They located a vehicle used in one of the attacks on my men and attempted to approach it. The occupants realised that they'd been discovered and abandoned the vehicle, setting fire to it in the process. Most of them escaped but one was shot and killed." Neuer explained.

"Have you been able to identify the body?" Victrus asked.

"Not yet chief minister. The significant part of the find isn't that body though. When the fire in the transport was extinguished more bodies were discovered inside it. The bodies were wrapped and the injuries showed that they didn't die in the fire. So far we haven't identified the bodies exactly but all of them were restrained using Adeptus Arbites handcuffs, some of which had been marked up by the enforcers they were issued to and from that we linked them to one of the units that was attacked during an anti-Democracy League raid during which all the arrested activists were taken." Neuer answered.

"So they took the activists from your men but instead of freeing them, they killed them. Is that what you're saying marshal?" Torien said.

"Yes Your Majesty, that's exactly what it looks like." Neuer said.

"Then it seems reasonable that the information that led us to suspect the Democracy League in the first place was intended to distract us." Torien said.

"That is my assessment as well Your Majesty. However, for the time being I would like to continue with our operation against the Democracy League." Neuer said.

"You're going to keep on rounding up innocent people?" Victrus commented, frowning in disapproval.

"Yes chief minister that's exactly what I'd like to do." Neuer said, "If we do anything else then the real culprits will realise that we're on to them. However, I will slow down the operation so that I can double the size of my units. Half the men will carry out the raid and the other half will act as a screening unit to deal with any further attacks on them. The individuals that we arrest will be detained for the time being but not subject to any interrogation unless we have specific intelligence of any criminal or heretical activity on their part. In the meantime I suggest that you be ready to recall the planetary defence force."

"Recall?" Adept Hom said, "We've only just mobilised them to support you."

"No the marshal is right adept." Torien said as he walked over to his desk and leant on it, "Someone sent an assassin that we could connect to the Democracy League so that we'd focus our attention on them. Then when Marshal Neuer began his operation to round up the league's members someone staged attacks that were intended to look like rescue operations when in fact they were just killing the people they took with the result that we start to deploy military units to back up the Arbites. Whoever is responsible for this is drawing our forces away from the capital."

"Right as a vessel the size of a capital ship is due to pass by the planet." Victrus added.

"Exactly." Torien replied, "Gentlemen I think that we're facing an invasion."

"But our orbital defences will shoot down that ship before it reaches orbit." Hom said.

"That's a rogue trader vessel adept." Torien pointed out, "Who knows what sort of xenos technology they have aboard that could interfere with our defences?"

Nathin and Meya stood back and watched as Kaitlin, Samara and Ossian all fired their revolvers at their assigned targets again. Although all three of the royal siblings were able to load and fire the weapons without help their accuracy was still questionable.

"What do you think sergeant?" Meya said.

"I think that most Catachans can shoot better by the age of ten." Nathin replied, "Kaitlin's still missing about one shot in three and she's the best of them."

"Maybe they'd do better with weapons that could be used single action." Meya suggested. The revolvers that Nathin had picked from the palace armoury all lacked an external hammer that would allow them to be manually cocked and fired with a light trigger pull. Instead the first part of the trigger pull was required to move the hammer back and cock the weapon. This required a much heavier trigger pull and was a hindrance to accurate shooting.

"Perhaps but I wanted something that was easy to draw and fire, not something that they'd get stuck in a holster because it caught on their fancy clothes." Nathin explained, "I just hope by giving them weapons we aren't going to give them an over inflated idea of how well they can protect themselves."

"The way Torien explained it to me these weapons are going to be for use as a last resort only. Besides, just firing one is going to attract the attention of everyone in that wing of the palace even if they can barely hit a stationary target ten metres away." Meya said before Samara lowered her weapon and looked around.

"Sergeant Tanner could you show me what I'm doing wrong?" she asked and Meya smiled as she looked at Nathin again.

"So should I come with you as your chaperone?" she said.

"I think that would be a good idea, yes." Nathin replied and the pair of them walked towards Samara to help her.

"What's wrong?" Nathin asked and Samara pointed at her target where more than half of the bullet holes were outside the central circular target area.

"I just can't get my shots in the middle. When I think I'm shooting too far in one direction I try aiming in the other but my shots still don't go where they are supposed to."

"Don't aim off. Just keep focused on the centre of the target no matter what. Just try to get all your shots in the same place and then we'll worry about adjusting your aim. Okay?" Nathin said and Samara nodded.

"I really hope Torien is right about this being a last resort." Meya commented as they stepped back from Samara.

"Well it looks like he's here for a status report." Nathin said when he noticed Torien coming out of the palace towards them and both he and Meya turned towards him.

"So how's it going?" Torien asked when he reached them.

"About as well as can be expected for people who had never fired a weapon before and now have had only four hours practice." Nathin replied.

"They can at least draw, fire and reload safely." Meya added.

"Hopefully that will be enough." Torien said before he suddenly added, "Follow me." and he beckoned Nathin and Meya to move further from his siblings while they continued to practice their use of the weapons.

"Something's happened hasn't it?" Meya said.

"Yes, I think that the rogue trader ship approaching is planning to launch an invasion." Torien replied.

"With just one ship?" Nathin commented.

"That ship could have a hundred thousand troops aboard." Torien pointed out, "But their strategy seems to be based around drawing our forces away from Tula."

"So how long do we have?" Meya asked.

"About nine hours." Torien answered.

"Can the PDF get here in that time?" Nathin said.

"Unlikely. The palace is well fortified though and the same goes for the Arbites precinct and Mechanicus generatorium. We should be able to hold out until reinforcements arrive." Torien said.

"Are you going to issue any sort of warning to the population?" Meya said but Torien shook his head.

"No. I don't want to tip off our enemies to exactly how much we know, or at least think we know. Marshal Neuer's enforcers are still rounding up members of the democracy league to preserve the illusion that we're still holding them responsible for the attempt on my life." he said, "For the time being my interest is in making sure that we're ready when things start to happen."

"I also want to adjust our investment in-" Duke Vargas said to one of his business subordinates when all of a sudden the communication link was cut off and the screen went blank except for a message that simply read 'Machine Link Interruption', "What do I pay those tech priests for?" he said angrily, considering the vast sums of money he paid to the Adeptus Mechanicus to maintain his communication system. He then took his portable communication device from his pocket only to find that it was unable to connect to the city's civil communication network and he frowned. Getting up from his seat he made his way to the door of his home

office with the intention of locating a member of the household staff he could send for technical assistance. However, when he stepped onto the landing outside the room and looked down the wide stairs into the large hall below he saw that the main door was wide open while the body of one of his servants was lying in a pool of blood.

It was obvious to the duke that his home was being invaded, despite the considerable security that was present and his first instinct was to call out for guards but then it occurred to him that perhaps the intruders would be closer than his staff. He knew that his office door was thick and durable though and he decided to return to it so that he could lock himself in. With any luck this would allow him to wait out the attack on his home in safety. Of course this would do nothing for any of his staff but they were all easily replaced while his family were not currently at home. However, when he turned around he found Ursulla now standing in front of him.

"Ursulla? Why aren't you with your mother?" he said in surprise but Ursulla just smiled at him.

"Because father dear I had to come back to let these men through our security perimeter. They need to use our house." she said.

"Use our house? Ursulla what are you talking about?" Duke Vargas replied and then he gasped when he heard movement from the hall and he looked down the stairs to see that two men armed with crude autoguns had appeared there, "Quickly Ursulla, we must get into my office." he exclaimed and he began to move forwards only for his daughter to block his path, "Out of my way!" he snapped but then he felt something sharp thrust into his stomach and he looked down to see the knife that his daughter had just stabbed him with.

"Yes father, we need the house." she said, staring him directly in the face as he looked up at her again, "We just don't need you." and then as she withdrew the blade she pushed her father down the stairs. The duke came to a halt at the feet of the armed men in the hallway and one of them kicked the dying man before looking up the stairs at Ursulla.

"The staff are dealt with." he said.

"Good." Ursulla replied, "Send word that it is safe to gather here now and unload the transport. I want all the weapons ready to be issued by the time our brothers and sisters arrive."

There was not much room in Ruben's building and cult members were present in every room except the cellar where the choir remained, though it was now silent. On the other hand there were sounds of chanting coming from several rooms as cultists preyed to the powers they worshipped.

After letting the last group into the building and directing them to some of the increasingly limited free space Ruben made his way to the room where Zeta sat. Only a handful of other cultists were present here, all of them holding relatively high rank among those who had gathered in the building and they all monitored the information being shown on the former tech priest's displays.

"Everyone is here now. We can move as soon as the time comes." he said.

"We may have a problem." Zeta said and Ruben frowned.

"What do you mean?" he replied.

"I mean that things aren't happening the way they're supposed to." Zeta said, "The Arbites have changed tactics and the PDF aren't getting involved."

"I thought you said that units had been mobilised?" Ruben said.

"I did. Almost the entire division was ordered to move out but before they could actually be deployed with the Arbites it looks like they were ordered to pull back again." Zeta told him.

"So we're back to square one then." Ruben commented.

"No, worse." Zeta said, "They've been told to pull back but not to stand down. That means the PDF's troops are on alert."

"How soon could they get here?" Ruben asked.

"Not immediately. The closest unit is still about sixty kilometres outside Tula. Assuming that they are called in as soon as we move they could be in the city in an hour or two. After that the next closest is more than twice as far." Zeta answered.

"And we can't do anything to jam their vox communications?" Ruben added.

"No. We need to keep vox channels open if you want me to be able to access the cogitators aboard the orbital defences." Zeta reminded him.

"We were never supposed to fight the PDF. There are too many of them and they're too well armed for us to handle. Do you think the Alpha Legion can achieve their aims in time to get them to stand down?" Ruben said.

"Well I guess that we'll find out, won't we?" Zeta said.

# 11.

Five squads of Alpha Legion marines were lined up with their equipment when their commander entered the bay in which they were stored. This chamber had been modified to permit the vehicles to launch in a rapid salvo. The occupants of each pod had no control over them once launched, the landing point programmed into them while they were still aboard their carrier and the drop pods' own machine spirits would guide them to the surface. This was a significant force of trans human warriors, worth many times their number of ordinary human soldiers, even without the weapons and powered armour that were superior to the basic weapons and armour issued to the Imperial Guard and especially Toltek's planetary defence force. Their limited numbers remained an issue though. No matter how effective they were the marines could not be in two places at once and this meant that the cultists already on the surface of Toltek still had a significant role to play in the planned attack.

"All troops are present and correct commander." the marines' second in command reported.

"Very good. Now board your transports. We are approaching Toltek and it will soon be time to begin our attack to reclaim the world that was once ours." the commander said, "Our target remains the royal palace. This must be seized as rapidly as possible while our cultist allies lay siege to the servants of the false Emperor." the commander ordered and the marines all clambered aboard the open drop pods, stowing their weapons and securing the harnesses that would keep the marines in place as their drop pods plummeted from space towards the planet below. Once this was achieved the leaders of each squad sealed the pods, the hatches in the bases of the pods contracting.

The commander also climbed into one of the drop pods, securing himself alongside one of the squads under his command and the squad leader sealed the hatch beneath them.

"Connect me to the *Casket of Gold's* bridge." the commander said and the squad leader nodded his head once.

"Vox connected commander." he said.

"Novus." the commander said into the vox.

"Alpharius. Are your men prepared?" Novus responded from his command pulpit on the bridge.

"They are. How long until we are in range?" the marine commander told him.

"Less than an hour now. Our auspexes have already picked up the long range sweeps from Toltek's orbital defences and the other system defence vessels have been detected in high orbit." Novus said.

"I am turning release control over to you Novus." the marine commander said, "Deploy us the moment we are in launch position and adjust course to enter low orbit immediately after."

"Of course, but what if the orbital defences are still active?" Novus asked.

"They won't be. Just concentrate on carrying out your duty and leave the rest to my men." the marine commander said sternly.

Knowing that the *Casket of Gold* was just a few hours distant from Toltek, Torien summoned Tara 18-4 Kappa to his office along with Chief Minister Victrus, Adept Hom, Marshal Neuer and Commissar North. Along with Nathin these individuals all entered Torien's office together while a pair of Royal Guard remained outside. The only other person present was Meya, partially because Torien considered her position with the logistical division of the Imperial Guard as giving her knowledge of running a military campaign that might be useful and also because he wanted to be sure of her safety.

"Enginseer, can you show us the position of the *Casket of Gold*?" Torien asked as everyone apart from the tech priestess sat down.

"Affirmative Your Majesty." she responded at the same time as she activated the hololithic projector built into her augmetic systems. The image she projected over Torien's desk had a sphere at the centre that represented Toltek while the orbital defences were shown close around it. Further away though there was a smaller globe representing Toltek's single small moon and only slightly further away a pulsing light that indicated the position of the *Casket of Gold*.

"How soon before they are in range of our defences?" Neuer asked.

"Seven hundred and nine seconds." the tech priestess answered.

"I take it that there has been no communication?" Hom said.

"None." Minister Victrus replied, shaking his head.

"In addition to our attempts at establishing a vox link the crew of the approaching vessel will have detected the auspex sweeps for our weapons." Tara 18-4 Kappa added.

"So our defences ready to fire?" Torien said and Victrus nodded.

"Yes Your Majesty. They have received your orders and are ready to execute them without any further instruction." he said.



Aboard the space station positioned to block the approach of the *Casket of Gold* towards Toltek the command staff monitor the transport closely. At the communication station a servitor continually tried to establish contact with the ship without success.

Multiple displays showed either images of the rogue trader's vessel or maps that indicated its position relative to both the space station and Toltek and some of these indicated the effective range of the orbital defences.

"Twenty seconds until firing range lord." one of the command staff reported and the station's commander turned to his deputy.

"They're still moving too fast to enter orbit properly. The same goes for launching shuttles, they'd burn all their fuel trying to slow down enough to attempt atmospheric entry. I wonder what they're up to?" he said.

"Perhaps a strike run?" his deputy suggested.

"If that's it then they've miscalculated massively. That ship can't possibly be carrying enough weapons to inflict serious damage without taking far worse from us." the commander replied.

"Vessel in firing range now my lord." the junior officer announced and the station commander sighed.

"Oh well here we go." he said and he reached for the station's internal vox system, "Weapons free. Fire for effect."

"They're about to fire." Zeta told Ruben and the other man frowned.

"Then what are you waiting for? Shut them down." he said.

"I'm doing it already. Believe me they're in for the shock of their lives." the former tech priest responded.

"Why aren't we firing?" the space station commander demanded as he looked around at the displays that showed none of the weapons aboard the space station or any of the other orbiting defence platforms had opened fire on the *Casket of Gold*.

"There's an error in the cogitator systems my lord. All fire control is down." a junior officer responded, the panic in his voice obvious, "We can't fire."

"Void warfare isn't exactly my speciality but shouldn't they have fired by now?" Nathin commented as he watched the representation of the *Casket of Gold* continue its advance towards Toltek while the planet's orbital defences remained inactive.

"Chief minister?" Torien asked while Victrus lifted his personal vox to his ear. However, it was Tara 18-4 Kappa that responded first.

"There is a rogue presence in the noosphere Your Majesty." she said, "Scrap code is overwhelming the defence cogitators."

"Does the Mechanicus know?" Hom said.

"Of course. The scrap code is easy to detect and its source is being hunted." Tara 18-4 Kappa said.

"I'll have a strike team assembled. As soon as you have the location-" Neuer began but the tech priestess did not let him finish.

"The use of machine curses and scrap code is the jurisdiction of the Adeptus Mechanicus." she interrupted, "A unit of Tech Guard are already being prepared."

"Can the code be removed or overridden?" North asked.

"Given time, yes. However, it is likely that the *Casket of Gold* will already have passed us by at that point." Tara 18-4 Kappa answered.

"Then whatever they're here to do, they're going to do it soon." Torien said.

"Deploying now." Novus announced over the vox and the Alpha Legion marines all felt their drop pods lurch suddenly as they were released, dropping from beneath the *Casket of Gold* into space.

As soon as the tiny assault craft were clear of the massive transport their corrupted machine spirits rapidly determined their locations related to their target and aligned themselves towards it. The momentum they already possessed after being deployed from the rogue trader's transport meant that the drop pods' courses were already taking them towards Toltek but it was not enough to just land on some random point on the surface and their steering thrusters fired to achieve this.

Inside the drop pods the armour of the marine commander and his squad leaders fed them data about their progress. Automated alarms warned them that the auspexes linked to the planet's orbital defences were scanning them but the disruption to the weapons' targeting systems caused by Zeta's machine curse protected the pods from being destroyed along with their passengers.

"Six minutes to landing." the marine commander told his men.

"What are those?" Neuer said when the hololithic display showed five more objects emerge from the Casket of Gold, "Torpedoes?"

"They aren't moving fast enough to be torpedoes." North replied. Although he had been assigned as a commissar to an Imperial Guard unit instead of an Imperial Navy vessel he still had some basic knowledge of void combat.

"And the ship is moving too fast to launch shuttles with any chance of them being able to rendezvous with anything." Adept Hom added.

"They aren't shuttles or torpedoes." Torien said as he suddenly realised what they were facing, "They're drop pods. Astartes drop pods."

"Astartes?" Hom exclaimed, "But why would the Imperial Regent send Astartes against us?"

"I don't think they're loyal to the Imperium adept." Torien responded, "I think they serve something else entirely."

"Your Majesty we have to alert all of our forces immediately." North said and Torien nodded.

"Do it." he said, "Royal Guard, PDF and enforcers. Everyone needs to know. Chief Minister Victrus I want those pods tracked all the way down. The moment we know where they land I want a strike force prepared."

"There could be fifty Astartes in those pods." Nathin pointed out, "Do you know what that many could do to your troops?"

"Yes I do so initially I want our forces ordered not to engage unless they are defending a vital point that the marines assault or they outnumber the marines by at least twenty-to-one." Torien said. Then he looked at Tara 18-4 Kappa and added, "Do we still have contact with the orbital facilities?"

"Yes Your Majesty." she replied, "A continuous link is required to maintain the scrap code that is disrupting our defences. Shutting it down would release our orbital weapons."

"Good. I need to talk to the transport carrying the Sixteenth immediately." Torien said.

The Vargas family home was now occupied by hundreds of men and women armed with the weapons that their cult had been able to amass over the years. Many of these were sporting weapons that had been quietly stockpiled along with their ammunition but there were also a number of military weapons that had been acquired from PDF stockpiles. Once the building and its grounds had been secured the cultists had turned their attention to the desecration of the dead, hanging the corpses from outside walls, trees or ornaments before slicing them open so that their internal organs came spilling out. Unconcerned by any of this, Ursulla was stood at the top of the stairs and looking down into the hallway when one of the cultists under her command hurried up the stairs towards her.

"They're on their way." he told her.

"Then that's our signal to go." she said, "Tell everyone to get moving."

The cultists all began to leave the house, heading for the multiple vehicles that had been prepared for them. These were a mix of luxury vehicles taken from the family garage but most of the cultists would be riding in more mundane transports that had been brought here for that purpose.

Ursulla knew that there would other groups of cultists elsewhere in Tula that would also be mobilising for battle. Some like hers had specific targets they were to attack and try to take control of while others had simply been ordered to create as much random trouble for the authorities as they could.

"Your vehicle awaits my lady." a cultist stood beside the large vehicle that had normally been used by her father while travelling. The cultist was wearing the uniform of one of the Vargas family's chauffeurs and the other cultists who would be sharing the vehicle also wore fine clothing taken from the Vargas home. The intention was to try and make it appear that they were all members of the nobility on their way to an event of some sort so that they would not look out of place in the vehicle if they were seen.

Although Toltek's Royal Guard practised to defend the palace against attack they had rarely been called upon to deal with anything more serious than individual intruders in the more than ten thousand years since the world had been brought to compliance during the Great Crusade. Now though they moved quickly, putting on armour and reporting to the armoury to be issued with autoguns. In addition to these basic weapons a small number of heavy stubbers and grenade launchers were available for support but these were few in number. Although it was not yet known exactly where the marines would land the possibility that they would seek to seize control of the Royal Palace first was very high.

"Hold the palace itself." North told the Royal Guard sternly as soon as they had been armed. He knew that regular human troops stood little chance against marines in the open but the thick walls of the palace would help even the odds. In addition to the Royal Guard there were still the small number of Imperial Guard troops who had been brought in to survey the palace defences present. Most of these were armed with lasguns but their sergeant carried a las pistol and chainsword instead.

"Commissar, where do you want us to deploy?" the sergeant asked when his unit rushed up to North.

"Join the Royal Guard at the main entrance but be ready to redeploy." North told him. He knew that the main

entrance represented an obvious target for any attacker but if the marines were able to breach the palace defences anywhere then the Imperial Guard troops represented the best chance of stopping them. "Commissar North do you read me?" Torien's voice then said over the microbead headset that North wore. "Yes Your Majesty," he responded. "Commissar what's the state of our defences?" Torien asked. "I've just ordered the survey unit from the Sixteenth to join the Royal Guard by the main entrance. Most of the Royal Guard themselves have been armed and are deploying to protect the palace." North answered. "Good. Auspex projections have the drop pods heading for Tula. We can only assume that we're their target." Torien told him.

Torien's office had become an impromptu command post with a map of the city now being projected by Tara 18-4 Kappa above his desk while several vox units had been brought in to enable those present to contact the various authorities in the city. As they studied the map and discussed the defence of the city though they were interrupted by the sound of a distant explosion. "They can't be here already." Victrus said as everyone looked towards the window that looked out over the city and saw a plume of smoke rising up in the distance. "Negative. The drop pods have yet to penetrate the stratosphere. The source of the explosion is here on the surface." Tara 18-4 Kappa replied. "Your Majesty there are reports of attacks across the city." Marshal Neuer said as he listened to the message from his vox, "Enforcer stations and utility hubs are coming under fire." "Their agents on the surface. The same ones that killed my parents and Ramiro." Torien commented. "They're trying to distract us." Nathin added and Torien nodded in agreement. "Yes I agree. They want us to spread our forces thinly to defend every potential target." he said. "Most of my enforcers are still outside the city but I can perhaps spare two assault teams." Neuer said. "No." Torien replied, "Your men need to protect your precinct house. Let the city enforcers deal with these attacks until the PDF can arrive to reinforce them." then he turned to Tara 18-4 Kappa and added, "What about tracing the machine curse that's jamming our defences?" "The source has been identified Your Majesty. Two squads of tertiary rated Tech Guard have been deployed along with a pair of tech priests with orders to neutralise the source." she responded. "What about the generatorum's defences?" Hom asked. "They will not be significantly compromised." Tara 18-4 Kappa said, "All battle servitors and Skitarii are still on station. They are adequate to protect the facility." the tech priestess then paused for a moment before she added, "The drop pods have now entered the atmosphere. Estimated time till impact is four point three minutes." "What about the *Casket of Gold*?" Victrus said. "Its course also indicates that it will enter the atmosphere." Tara 18-4 Kappa answered. "But a ship like that can't land. It's far too big." Hom said. "It does not need to land adept." the tech priestess replied, "The vessel appears to be attempting to perform an aerobraking manoeuvre. If the crew are successful then they will be able to enter an orbit low enough that engaging the vessel will risk significant damage to the planetary surface if it is destroyed." "So we can't fire on them even if we can get our defences back on line?" Nathin said. "That is correct sergeant." Tara 18-4 Kappa said. "The transport isn't our primary problem anyway. Those marines about to land on my lawn are." Torien said, "I need to speak with the Sixteenth's transport now."

The Alpha Legion marines' armour provided them with the remaining distance to their target and this number fell rapidly as the pods plummeted through the atmosphere. Apart from the occasional firing of a thruster to compensate for the drift caused by atmospheric conditions they came down in a state of freefall. With Toltek's defensive strategy being concentrated in keeping enemies out of the planet's atmosphere entire there was no surface to air weapons fire as the pods dropped so all five pods fell without coming under attack. Only at the last moment did their main engines fire, slowing the vehicles enough that they avoided being destroyed on impact with the ground. Then as soon as they landed the sides of the pods burst open and the marines inside charged out.

Almost immediately the marines came under fire from the palace and bullets struck their armour repeatedly. However, the solid projectiles fired by the Royal Guard's weapons were unable to penetrate the thick ceramite of the marines' powered armour and they shrugged off the attacks as they charged towards the palace.

"Terus your squad is to come with me. Everyone else should proceed to the main entrance for a more direct assault. Keep the Royal guard occupied while I lead a force into the tunnels." the commander ordered.

The troop transport that had returned the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment to Toltek had vast hangar decks filled with numerous different types of auxiliary craft. Among these were shuttles designed to carry companies of troops directly into battle. Unlike the general transport shuttles these did not need to land at a spaceport to be offloaded, instead they could land almost anywhere and rapidly unload their contents without large work crews. Variants of these carried armoured vehicles instead of just infantry and craft of both types had already been filled with the regiment's troops and armour in anticipation of rapid deployment.

"Are we ready?" Barrera asked the pilot of the shuttle he was in the flight deck of, surrounded by the crew. "Yes general. All craft are reporting loaded and ready." the pilot responded, using Barrera's newly announced rank.

"Then commence drop immediately." Barrera ordered and the pilot activated the vox link that would connect him with the transport's bridge.

"Sixteenth to bridge we are ready to deploy." he said.

"Confirmed Sixteenth. Standby for bay opening." the voice of one of the bridge officers responded and through the viewports at the front of the shuttle's flight deck Barrera saw the hangar doors open to space.

"Launch sequence starting." one of the shuttle crew announced, "Deployment in five. Four. Three. Two. One."

In unison the six large shuttles that carried the six companies that made up the 16<sup>th</sup> Toltek Regiment were catapulted out of the hangar deck by a powerful electromagnetic field and their pilots steered the craft towards the planet below. Unlike the drop pods used by the Alpha Legion these shuttles were fully steerable by their flight crews and they quickly started on courses that would take them to various points on the outskirts of Tula.

"Course locked in for the Royal Forest general." the pilot of Barrera's told him. As the most senior officer in the regiment Barrera had assigned himself to the infantry company that would be deployed directly to the Royal Palace while the other five would surround the rest of the capital before moving in, trapping all of the enemy forces in the city.

The convoy of vehicles being led by Ursulla Vargas stopped a block away from the Adeptus Arbites precinct house and the cultists disembarked.

"Their defences have been activated." one of the other cultists told Ursulla and she nodded.

"That's to be expected." she replied, "Are we ready?"

"Yes my lady." the cultist replied.

"Good, show me." Ursulla said and the pair of them walked over to a compact transport vehicle that rather than being used to transport cultists and their weapons was filled with several large chemical drums. The engine of this was still running and a servitor had been seated in the driver's seat.

"Has the servitor been programmed?" Ursulla asked.

"Yes my lady." one of the nearby cultists answered, "It will accelerate directly towards the precinct house as rapidly as possible."

"Then get this vehicle moving." Ursulla said.

The cultists backed away from the transport, giving it a clear run along the street ahead of them.

"Begin." one of them told the servitor sat inside the vehicle and without responding the cyborg drove the van forwards, constantly accelerating.

As soon as the vehicle came into view from the Adeptus Arbites precinct the automated gun turrets mounted on the outside of the heavily armoured structure turned to track it.

"Attention driver this is a restricted area, bring your vehicle to a halt immediately." a voice boomed out from speakers set into the wall close to the turrets but the servitor paid no attention to the warning and instead continuing to accelerate even though the transport was already moving faster than the maximum permitted in the city. Two of the heavy bolter turrets opened fire on the transport, riddling it with mass reactive shells that exploded after they penetrated the vehicle's lightweight skin. The transport exploded almost immediately as one of the bolter shells pierced one of the drums it was carrying and a huge ball of flame headed up into the sky while what little remained of the transport came to a rapid halt. The contents of the chemical drums were spread around the wreckage and the viscous fluid burned intensely, creating a thick cloud of smoke.

This was exactly what the cultists led by Ursulla had been waiting for.

"Okay let's move." Ursulla called out and the cultists charged towards the wrecked transport, using the cloud of smoke to hide their advance from the auspexes that guided the automated turrets. This allowed them to get close enough to start hurling explosives at the precinct house, specifically targeting the turrets and large armoured doorway designed to allow vehicles to enter and leave the building.

One of the bombs landed directly on top of a turret right before it exploded and the blast triggered a secondary explosion from within the magazine. This left a small but usable hole in the side of the precinct and a group of cultists rushed towards it, several of them carrying lengths of ladder that they could use to scale the wall up to the level of the turret. The surviving turret turned to target these cultists and opened fire,

sending a stream of projectiles towards them. Several of the cultists were hit by this fire and their bodies exploded from the inside when the bolter rounds detonated inside them. However, enough of them reached the precinct wall where they were beneath the maximum depression of the turret and they quickly got to work putting their assault ladder together.

The first cultist to scale the ladder took with him another explosive device that he hurled into the hole left by the destruction of the automated turret. This was not specifically intended to cause any further damage, only to disorientate anyone immediately inside the building before he leapt through it.

"It's clear!" he called out as he looked around before waiting for more cultists to follow him.

This delay gave the Arbites enforcers time to muster their defence though and at the same time as the next cultist began climbing through the hole left by the destruction of the turret there was the booming of a shotgun and the first cultist fell backwards. The man climbing through the hole fired the auto pistol he was armed with, spraying projectiles down the hallway but the enforcer that he hit did nothing more than stagger as his carapace armour deflected the hail of bullets.

The generatorium that was the source of all the power in Tula was just as heavily fortified as the Adeptus Arbites precinct house and it doubled as the headquarters of the Adeptus Mechanicus on the planet. The nature of the tech priests resident at the generatorium meant that they saw no need to issue any warnings to strangers approaching their shrine and the moment their auspexes detected the first vehicle approaching they opened fire, destroying the road car in an instant. This triggered confusion in the other drivers who suddenly swerved while the weapons protecting the building continued to fire on them.

Disembarking from their vehicles the cultists advanced on foot and returned fire despite their weapons being unable to damage the generatorium's defences from the range they were at. Some of the cultists began to prepare a vehicle to create a smoke screen similar to the one used at the Adeptus Arbites precinct but as they were doing this several doors opened in the generatorium and the forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus came marching out in perfect step.

The hooded Skitarii formed themselves into a line side by side while small arms fire bounced off their armoured cybernetic bodies before they raised their galvanic rifles. These weapons appeared to be even more primitive than the weapons carried by the cultists, looking like complicated flintlocks but the secret of their effectiveness lay in the ammunition they fired. These were not only frighteningly accurate but inflicted incredible damage to their targets and it made little difference whether it was being fired at a person or a lightweight vehicle. This volley of fire cut through the cultists with lethal efficiency and more than a dozen of them fell dead in an instant while several of the now stationary vehicles behind them had large holes punched through them, causing two to burst into flames when the rounds penetrated engines or fuel tanks. The cultists had brought along some more powerful weapons in the form of heavy stubbers and they hurried set up these weapons where they could fire at the line of Skitarii. The rounds fired by these weapons were far more powerful than the smaller rounds fired by the cultists' small arms and even the armour of the Skitarii could not guarantee protection.

After two of the Skitarii squad fell the others began to fall back, picking up the dropped weapons and dragging their injured comrades along with them. This was not out of any form of sentiment though, instead the Adeptus Mechanicus would not abandon valuable technology to an enemy if it could help it. While the Skitarii were falling back though a number of servitors were deploying on the building's roof. Each of these had been modified to have a heavy weapon in place of one arm and the mindless cyborgs began firing at the cultists, adding their considerable firepower to that of the building's fixed defences.

Aboard the *Casket of Gold* alarms sounded as the hull was breached in multiple locations. Designed only for use in the vacuum of space, the hull was not intended to resist the stress of atmospheric friction and large sections of the lower decks had been torn open.

"How much longer?" Novus demanded.

"Orbital velocity achieved my lord." the officer overseeing the vessel's helm responded.

"Then what are you waiting for?" Novus snapped, "Get us back into space, "I want an orbital position established that puts us right above Tula. I don't want anyone getting any ideas about shooting us down when they get control of their orbital defences back again."

While the Adeptus Mechanicus's most effective forces were protecting the generatorium two Rhinos filled with reserve units of Tech Guard headed for the source of the scrap code that had been used to disable the orbital defences. Although these troops were part of the Adeptus Mechanicus they lacked significant cybernetic enhancement and were armed with shotguns rather than any of the more advanced weapons used by the Skitarii. On the other hand each Rhino also carried a tech priest in powered armour and armed with a variety of advanced ranged and close combat weapons built into their bodies.

The two armoured vehicles came to a halt outside the hardware store Ruben used as his base of operations and the soldiers inside rapidly disembarked. Two shotgun blasts from one of the Tech Guard blew the hinges from the front door and one of the tech priests strode through into the store while a servo skull flew ahead of him. This device was linked directly to the tech priest and he sent it through the doorway at the back of the store into the rear of building to scout the way ahead.

"Enforcers! They've found us!" Ruben exclaimed from beside Zeta when they heard the sound of the shotgun blasts and he reached for the gun he had on his hip.

"No it's not enforcers." Zeta responded as he called up footage from a surveillance camera that had been installed to monitor the street at the front of the building and this showed the armoured vehicles with prominent Adeptus Mechanicus markings, "You'll need more than that stubber."

Ruben nodded and left his sidearm in its holster before he hurried to a corner of the room where an autogun was propped up. The weapon was currently empty but there was a table nearby that had numerous magazines piled up on it. Among the standard straight and curved magazines there were also a handful of drums filled with large numbers of cartridges and Ruben inserted one of these into the weapon before chambering a round. Then he picked up a spare drum and took it along with the rifle to the doorway that was ajar.

Peering through the gap between the door and frame he was just in time to see the servo skull float past at the end of the hallway outside. Ruben knew that this meant the Adeptus Mechanicus forces would not be far behind and he stepped back before shouldering his rifle so that the muzzle poked out through the doorway. Next to appear were two members of the Tech Guard who advanced with their shotguns held at the ready and they followed the servo skull past the end of the hall before another pair of tech appeared and turned towards Ruben. Ruben did not hesitate when he saw this and he opened fire with the autogun set to fully automatic. The drum magazine enabled Ruben to fire a sustained burst that would have emptied an ordinary magazine and this burst cut down both of the approaching Tech Guard. One of the Tech Guard to have previously passed by the end of the hall rushed back and fired his shotgun towards Ruben but he just ducked back as the shotgun pellets blew splinters from the door and frame. Then he fired another rapid burst of rounds that punched through the lightweight wall that the Tech Guard was using for cover and he cried out in pain despite his body armour stopping the bullets that hit him.

The next figures to appear in the hallway were not the lightly armed and armoured Tech Guard though, instead the two tech priests strode into view and both aimed their weapons towards Ruben before firing at the same time. Ruben ducked when he saw the weapons pointing at him but he still flinched as the powerful energy blasts blew large holes in the door and showered him with fragments. The two tech priests continued to advance with more of their troops behind them. The tech priests communicated with them in binary cant to co-ordinate their actions and both of them fired their ranged weapons again while preparing the heavy power axes they carried at the same time.

The ranged weapons destroyed what remained of the door and Ruben fired his autogun again, emptying the drum magazine at the tech priests. The bullets bounced off the powered armour protecting the tech priests and they did not even flinch as they continued to advance. Then while Ruben was fumbling with his spare ammunition drum as he attempted to reload one of the tech priests lashed out with a mechandrite and used it to seize the weapon, pulling it from Ruben's grip. Then the second tech priest followed this up by bring his power axe down on Ruben, cutting him in half.

The tech priests then stepped through the doorway and stood side by side as they studied the equipment in the room, taking note of which pieces could have been obtained on the open market and which had been stolen from the Adeptus Mechanicus. Among all this equipment they also saw Zeta sitting in his chair.

"Orram four-ninty-six Zeta you were excommunicated for tech heresy. You were supposed to have died." one of the tech priests said and Zeta began to laugh.

"Well I didn't die, did I? I survived and now I've doomed you all. The Alpha Legion brought this world to compliance in the Great Crusade and now they'll do the same again." he called out.

"Your assessment is inaccurate. The Ommissiah protects. Your sentence is death." the second tech priest said as he pointed one of his weapons towards the crippled man and there was a brilliant flash of light as it discharged. The energy blast burned through Zeta's body, killing him instantly and what remained of him rolled off his now badly damaged chair. Ignoring the corpses in the room the two tech priests turned their attention to the equipment.

"There is a connection to the orbital facilities." the first tech priest said.

"I have located the scrap code source. Terminating transmission now." the other added as he shut down the disruption of the orbital defences before there was a scream from elsewhere in the building.

The two tech priests immediately turned around and marched out of the room to investigate the scream while the members of the Tech Guard reported their status. The tech priests tracked the scream to the doorway leading to the steps down to the cellar and there were already four of the Tech Guard waiting in the hallway at the top.

“There’s something down there.” one of them said.

“We will investigate. Remain here.” a tech priest responded and they both went through the doorway. The markings on the walls and steps indicated the nature of the contents of the cellar and they prepared their weapons again.

As they descended the tech priests saw the rough form of the choir floating in the centre of the room at the bottom and they opened fire without hesitation, using all of their ranged weapons simultaneously. All of the attacks struck an invisible psychic barrier that surrounded the choir though and the creature itself let out an ear splitting screech. The tech priests were unaffected by this noise though, simply adjusting the implants that had replaced their ears to tune it out while they continued to advance on the choir.

As soon as they came within arms’ reach of the choir the tech priests both swung their power axes, one only slightly after the other. When the first energy blade struck the psychic shield around the choir it was brought to an instant halt and the tech priest strained to try and force his weapon through it. The result of this was that more of the shield’s energy became concentrated on that exact spot and when the second power axe blade struck the shield it passed through into the choir.

The moment that the power axe blade made contact with the choir’s physical form its energy field discharged into the being and it split open, releasing the unnatural power that coursed through it. This produced a massive explosion and both tech priests were hurled backwards, smashing into the walls of the cellar with enough force to crack open their powered armour and shatter the bodies within. The strange sigils marked on the cellar walls, floor and ceiling did nothing to contain the explosion and a blast of psychic flames incinerated the Tech Guard troopers waiting at the top of the stairs before spreading out to fill the entire building, shattering windows and blowing the remaining doors from their hinges.

## 12.

"Reports are coming in that the building that was the source of the machine curse used against our defences has been destroyed in an explosion Your Majesty." Tara 18-4 Kappa said.

"Do we have control of the orbital weapons again?" Victrus asked.

"Affirmative." the tech priestess answered, "Efforts to override the machine curse were already well underway but full centralised control has now been re-established."

"That doesn't help us much now though does it?" Torien commented and he looked out of the office window to where the outline of the *Casket of Gold* was now visible as a shadowy shape through the clouds, "If we shoot that ship down Tula will be destroyed by the debris."

"Our own ships are mustering troops for a boarding action Your Majesty. However, it will take several hours to gather enough armsmen and void hardened combat servitors from the stations to be able to secure a ship of that size.

"What about down here?" Hom said, "What's our position on the ground?"

The Arbites precinct house is surrounded but holding out. The only successful penetration of the walls is contained for the time being." Marshal Neuer replied.

"The generatorium has also been assaulted but remains in our hands. The attacking forces seem content to maintain a siege rather than attempting to penetrate the complex." Tara 18-4 Kappa added.

"I don't blame them." Nathin commented, "I wouldn't want to mess with servitors in hand to hand combat. I've seen those things crush Ork skulls. Throne knows what they could do to a human being."

"That only leaves the palace itself." Torien said and he looked at North.

"We remain secure for the time being as well Your Majesty." the commissar told him, "As expected the enemy are concentrating their assault on the main doors and we have men positioned there with the heaviest weapons we have available. So far we haven't been able to confirm a single enemy loss but they seem to be pinned down."

"You don't seem too happy about that commissar." Victrus said as he listened to the tone in which North delivered his report.

"No chief minister I'm not." North responded, "Astartes don't fight this way. They could easily lay down a mix of smoke and very accurate covering fire to get an assault force right up to our door and blast a hole in it big enough to drive a main battle tank through but they've opted just to take cover and trade fire with our forces."

"Perhaps they weren't expecting such resistance." Neuer suggested, "We've got reports from enforcer units around Tula that local groups of traitors have also deployed on the main highways in and out of the city, the exact routes that our PDF forces will need to use to get back here. If the King hadn't ordered those forces withheld from supporting my assault teams then those traitors wouldn't need to worry about PDF reinforcements and they could have joined the assault on the palace."

"Even so everything we know about Astartes, whether loyal or renegade indicates that they would not simply dig into a static position when they could do far more damage by advancing." North said and then he looked at Torien and added, "Your Majesty they must have something else planned."

"How long until the Sixteenth lands?" Torien said.

"Current estimated time until landing is seventeen minutes Your Majesty." Meya answered having been monitoring the descent of the regiment's landing craft, "Their assault landers have already completed their de-orbiting burns and are on their glide approach."

"Your Majesty it should be noted that the presence of the *Casket of Gold* in orbit above us gives any suitable weapons that the vessel possesses the opportunity to engage the Sixteenth Regiment's assault landers while they are on approach." Tara 18-4 Kappa added.

"So they could get shot out of the sky before they even land." Nathin said.

"That is a possibility Sergeant Tanner, yes." the tech priestess said, "On the other hand the window of vulnerability will be small. Perhaps small enough that, lacking the superior response time of an Adeptus Mechanicus crew the assault landers will pass out their firing arcs and range before they can be engaged."

"Well let's hope they can." Torien said, "I for one will feel a lot happier when I see General Barrera and his men engaging the enemy before they can get inside."

"You are prepared?" Intios asked the trio of hooded priests lined up in front of him. Elsewhere in the chapel all of the other Adeptus Ministorum personnel lay dead along with the two members of the Royal Guard who had been deployed in the Ministorum chapel to keep watch over the entrance to the palace's secret passageways located there, killed by Initos and the three men who now stood before him. Despite having murdered all of the priests who still worshipped the Emperor instead of the Ruinous Powers of the warp,



Intios and his subordinates still retained the symbols of the Adeptus Ministorum so they looked as if they too remained loyal.

“Yes magister.” the three men said in unison and Intios grinned.

“Good.” he said before he pointed to one of the men, “You will come with me. The time has come and I will have what is mine.” then he looked at the other two men and added, “You two must open the way for our liberators.”

“Yes magister.” one of the two men replied before both of them turned and rushed towards the hidden passageway entrance, ripping away the Arbites tape marking the entrance and then opening it before heading inside.

“What do you need of me magister?” the final priest asked.

“We just need to wait. We will know when the time has come to act.” Intios told him.

Inside the passageway the two priests moved as quickly as they could in the darkness with lanterns to light their way. They were already familiar enough with the layout of the tunnels that they did not need a map and they made their way to part of the network where there was a heavy door with a large wheel mounted in the centre. While one man kept watch just in case any of the Royal Guard had been sent into the passageways the other turned the wheel to produce a loud ‘clunk’ before he stepped back. Moments later the door swung open towards the two priests and there on the other side stood the Alpha Legion commander along with one of the squads that made up his assault force. Unlike the priests with their lanterns, the marines had no need for light sources in the passageways, instead the autosenses of their armour combined with their genetically enhanced vision enabled them to see with perfect clarity even in the darkness.

“Most noble lords we welcome you.” one of the priests said as both men dropped to their knees while the marines stepped through the open doorway.

“How are the palace guards deployed?” the commander said looking down at the two men.

“Vantage points around the palace that overlook the grounds lord, along with a sizeable force protecting the main entrance. We can guide you-” one of the priests began.

“We need no guidance priest.” the marine commander interrupted, “I had memorised these passageways ten thousand years before you were born. Just tell us which parts of the palace the King is located in.”

“He is in his office in the administrative section my lord.” one of the priests told him.

“Very good.” the marine commander said before he and his men marched past the kneeling priests.

“My lord what do you require of us?” one of the priests called out after the marines but they did not bother to respond.

Word of the fighting in Tula had been spread to the planetary population along with a warning to stay clear while the Planetary Defence Force put down the uprising using every means possible and the roads into the city were deserted as a result. This made it easy for the column of Planetary Defence Force vehicles to make their way towards the city without having to fight their way through traffic. On the other hand it also meant that the cultists lying in wait had a clear line of fire when they saw the column approaching.

The column was lead by a pair of light armoured cars, the only armoured vehicles included while the rest were a variety of transport trucks and light utility vehicles to carry an infantry company and all of their equipment.

The waiting cultists were armed with a pair of auto cannons, although their supply of ammunition for these was limited. Despite this limitation though they were the only weapons they possessed that had a reasonable chance of penetrating the armoured car’s hulls and the gunners opened fire together, each of them targeting a different vehicle.

Both armoured cars were hit and one of them exploded when a round penetrated its ammunition storage. On the other hand the second armoured car suffered hits to one of its wheels and the engine compartment. This blew off the wheel entirely and shattered the engine, bringing the armoured car to an immediate halt but did not destroy it. This allowed the crew of the vehicle to return fire with their own auto cannon, targeting the weapon that had just fired at them and the cultists crewing it were ripped apart by the powerful rounds.

At the same time the infantry company in the vehicles behind the armoured car began to disembark and spread out either side of the road before advancing. This prompted the other cultists to open fire with their rifles and the PDF troops immediately took cover before returning fire while the surviving armoured car continued to use its auto cannon to support them.

The marines came to a halt at a junction in the passageway and the commander checked both directions.

“Terus, take one of your men to seize the King. With him in custody we can force the surrender of the local forces. If it becomes likely that he will escape then you should kill him. If King Torien won’t issue a surrender order then we will find someone else who will.” the commander said and the squad sergeant nodded.

“Yes commander.” he said and he beckoned for another marine to follow him as he headed off down one of the passageways ahead.

"The rest of you come with me." the commander ordered, "We will deal with the troops guarding the main entrance."

"Traitor forces are engaging our PDF." Victrus announced as soon as he received the report of the ambush on the outskirts of the city.

"How strong are they?" Torien asked.

"Reports indicate that they have limited heavy weaponry but they are dug in." Victrus answered, "Our commanders are confident that they'll be able to overcome—"

Before he could finish, Victrus was interrupted by bursts of automatic fire along with two much louder shots.

"Those shots came from inside the palace." Neuer said when he heard this.

"And it was bolt fire." Nathin added and North nodded in agreement, both of them knowing that the only bolt weapon in the palace was supposed to be the sidearm that the commissar carried.

"The Astartes have broken in." Torien said as he drew his las pistol, "Come on, we'll have to deal with them."

"Your Majesty you can't." Victrus protested.

"Watch me." Torien responded.

"Torien he's right." Nathin told him and then he looked at North and added, "The leash and I can handle this."

"I should come too sergeant." Neuer commented and he reached for the helmet and shotgun that were on Torien's desk.

"Okay then, let's go." Nathin said before he led the other two men from the office. On his way out he paused just long enough to speak to the pair of Royal Guard troops standing outside, now holding their rifles at the ready and looking down the hallway in the direction that the gunfire had come from, "Get inside." he told them, "If anything that isn't one of us comes through that door empty your magazines into it."

With their weapons held ready Nathin, North and Neuer headed towards the sounds of screaming and weapons fire coming from within the palace. All of a sudden a member of the palace staff came running around a corner in front of them but before he was fully around it there was a sound like thunder as a bolt round struck him and blew his torso apart from the inside.

"Cover!" Neuer snapped and he, Nathin and North all took cover among the decorations and alcoves that lined the hallway.

Seconds later the first of the two traitor marines appeared and without hesitating for a moment he fired his shotgun at the armoured giant, racking the weapon's slide as rapidly as he could between each shot. The experienced Adeptus Arbites officer was able to fire three rounds, all of which hit the marine but none of the projectiles found a weak point in the giant's armour and he did not even stagger. Instead he just raised the bolt gun he carried and fired back at Neuer. Even though the marine fired instinctively rather than taking time to aim carefully his shot hit Neuer square in his chest. Unlike the Royal Guard he had encountered so far though the Arbites marshal was protected by full carapace armour rather than just flak armour and the plate that protected his chest was almost as effective as powered armour. Rather than piercing this and exploding inside as it was designed to, the bolt round detonated on impact. This cracked the armour plate and Neuer dropped his shotgun as he fell back clutching his chest.

Nathin fired his las pistol at the marine as rapidly as the weapon would cycle. He knew that he stood little chance of penetrating the thick ceramite that made up the marine's powered armour but he also knew that there were specific weak points. The most obvious of these were the eye lenses so Nathin aimed for the marine's head, however although he was able to score several hits they were only against the armoured sections of the helmet and he did nothing but scorch it.

Commissar North also fired at the marine with his bolt pistol and several of the mass reactive rounds exploded against his chest plate without penetrating it. The damage these inflicted was enough for the marine to turn his attention to the commissar though and the muzzle of his bolt gun turned towards North. Seeing his opportunity Nathin drew his traditional Catachan fighting knife and he leapt towards the marine. Seeing this, the marine turned back towards Nathin without firing at North but even with his enhanced reactions he was unable to point his weapon at Nathin before the Catachan got within arm's reach and he plunged his knife into the soft neck joint of the marine's armour. The blade passed all the way through the marine's throat and he froze in place for a moment. Nathin then twisted his knife, widening the wound before he pulled it free again. This prompted a large spray of blood from both sides of the marine's neck and even his engineered physiology was unable to do anything about this. A smaller wound would have clotted in seconds but the wound to the marine's throat was too severe and he fell to the floor with a crash and lay still as blood pooled around his body.

"Where's the other one?" North said but the other marine had retreated out of sight.

"Probably looking for easier targets." Nathin replied before they heard a groaning sound and looked around.

"Marshal." North said when they saw the Arbites officer getting back to his feet.

"I'll be fine. The Emperor protects." Neuer said.

"The Emperor and a nice thick piece of ceramite." Nathin commented.

"Quite." Neuer responded and he looked down at the body of the marine, "You got one, good."  
"Two would have been better. Are you okay to come with us?" North said.  
"I have a score to settle." Neuer replied as he bent down to pick up his shotgun and he checked the weapon.

"Why are you back here?" Intios asked when the two priests he had sent to let the Alpha Legion marines into the palace returned to the chapel.

"The commander dismissed us magister. He said that they needed no guides to find their way around the palace." one of the priests answered.

"Very well. In that case you can come with me as well." Intios said, "If the Alpha Legion are here then the Royal Guard will soon be too busy to notice us."

Terus had not hesitated to abandon the other marine. A key part of Alpha Legion doctrine had always been the use of diversionary tactics and simultaneous attacks on different fronts to confuse an enemy and prevent them from using their full force to resist attack but now that he was operating on his own he was more cautious about his advance. Like the Alpha Legion commander, Terus was familiar enough with the layout of the palace to know that there was an alternate route that he could take to reach the King's office. This was slightly longer but he hoped that it would be as strongly defended as the more direct route had proved to be. When he reached the hallway where the King's office was located he could tell by the door itself which office belonged to the King. This was larger than any of the others and more ornately decorated. The decorations had been added after Toltek had been brought to compliance and the Alpha Legion had left the planet as they moved on to their next target but the size was a result of the office having originally been intended for use by an Astartes officer rather than the human serfs who would have used the other offices here.

The marine strode towards the office door with his bolter aimed straight at it. When he reached the door he delivered a single strong kick to where the two halves met. This had sufficient power to smash the door open in an instant and everyone inside the office turned towards the doorway in surprise.

It took the two Royal Guard soldiers just a second to come to their senses and both of them opened fire just as they had been told to do, emptying the magazines of their autoguns on the weapons' fully automatic settings. Despite the volume of fire that the two soldiers were able to produce Terus was left completely unharmed and he responded with just two shots that killed each man in turn before he turned towards Torien. "King Torien you will surrender to me." he said sternly but Torien had other ideas.

"Everyone down!" he yelled as he raised his las pistol and fired the weapon at the marine defiantly. Hom and Victrus both threw themselves to the floor as Torien fired but Tara 18-4 Kappa remained standing and instead drew her own las pistol and joined in firing at the renegade marine.

Unwilling to risk killing Torien and also seeing the tech priestess as a greater threat Terus turned towards Tara 18-4 Kappa and fired his bolt gun again. However, her armour was just as effective as his own and although she flinched slightly under the impact and detonation of the rounds. Terus then heard a sudden roar of a motor and he spun back towards Torien to see that he had drawn and engaged his chainsword while advancing towards the marine. Torien promptly swung the motorised blade at Terus, aiming for his neck. However, the Alpha Legion marine was able to sidestep out of the way enough that the blade instead struck his thickly armoured pauldron and the curved shape caused it to slide off with a shower of sparks.

Terus used his arm to knock the chainsword aside before Torien could make a second attack but as he did so he suddenly felt something coil around it tightly and when he looked down at the limb he saw that Tara 18-4 Kappa had wrapped one of her mechandrites around his wrist.

Taking advantage of this Torien took a single step back and then swung his chainsword at the marine's other arm, aiming for the bolt gun he held. The rapidly moving blade hit the weapon towards the back and it fell from Terus' grasp with pieces of the receiver and mechanism falling from it. The chainsword blade continued its downward path though and it struck Terus' wrist at the joint between the armoured gauntlet and forearm armour. Here it was able to pass between the ceramite and there was a spray of blood as Terus' hand was sliced off and he roared in a mix of pain and anger.

Torien then placed the muzzle of his las pistol directly against one of the eyepieces set into Terus' helmet and smiled at him for a moment before pulling the trigger. The beam easily melted the eyepiece and the burned into the marine's head. Even the enhanced physiology of a marine could not survive this injury and he collapsed in a heap.

"An Astartes. Your Majesty you killed an Astartes." Victrus said in amazement as he got back to his feet.

"Not fast enough for them though." Torien replied, looking at the remains of the two guards." Torien replied before he looked at Tara 18-4 Kappa and smiled, "I had some help minister. Thank you engineseer."

"You are most welcome Your Majesty." she replied before there was the sound of footfalls and Nathin, North and Neuer appeared in the doorway.

"You nailed him." Nathin said, looking down at the dead marine, "There was another but we were able to bring him down. Just about anyway."

"It was Sergeant Tanner that struck the killing blow." Neuer added, "Unfortunately I was unable to render much assistance."

It was then that there was more gunfire from within the palace, including the distinctive sound of bolt fire. "Astartes are in the palace! They're attacking the main entrance from the inside." the voice of one of the soldiers guarding the main entrance to the palace said over the vox.

"Obviously there were more than just this guy and his friend." Nathin said.

"They must be trying to open the doors for the soldiers outside." Torien said.

"It's the most heavily defended part of the palace." North pointed out, "General Barrera and the Sixteenth will be here soon. They can deal with the marines outside the palace and reinforce the entrance."

"Maybe but there could be more infiltrators going after my family." Torien said, "We need to secure them."

"I'll send guards to-" Victrus began.

"No." Torien said, "Leave the Royal Guard at their posts. I'll go and get Kaitlin. Nathin I want you to fetch Samara and Commissar North can get Ossian. Bring them all back here."

"Torien you can't." Meya protested.

"Your Majesty perhaps I should go while you stay here to co-ordinate our defence." Neuer suggested but Torien shook his head.

"No marshal. I should go. You can take over until we get back." he said.

"In that case perhaps you should take this." Neuer said to Nathin and he tossed the Catachan his shotgun.

"Thanks. I'll put it to good use." he replied as he caught it with one hand.

Intios and the other priests left the chapel together and walked calmly through the palace, ignoring the sounds of gunfire coming from the main entrance. Occasionally members of the palace staff or Royal Guard rushed past them, avoiding but otherwise ignoring the presence of the priests. They made their way towards the rooms occupied by the members of the Royal family themselves and walked up to Samara's bedroom door where Intios just looked at one of the other priests and nodded. That man then stepped forwards and knocked on the bedroom door.

"Princess Samara, it's the Royal Guard. Open the door." he said.

"Okay I'm coming." Samara responded from the other side of the door and moments later there was the sound of a lock being undone before it was opened.

Peering out onto the landing Samara saw that the men standing outside her bedroom were priests rather than Royal Guard and recognised Intios she tried to slam the door shut again but the priest standing right outside it shoved the door as well and then pushed it open wide enough for him to step into the room.

As the priests rushed into her bedroom Samara ran towards her bedside table. Although she had been instructed to keep the compact revolver she had been given locked away she had removed it from the secure cabinet in the room and loaded it when she heard the first sounds of fighting from outside. Grabbing hold of the weapon she spun around to face the priests again and pointed her gun towards them. Despite the instruction given to Samara and Torien's other siblings in using their weapons Intios and the priests had not considered the possibility that she would be armed and they suddenly hesitated.

Samara pulled the trigger of her revolver and fired a single shot towards the priests and one of them staggered as he was hit in his arm, crying out in pain. The closest priest then leapt forwards and ripped the revolver from Samara's grip.

"Get off me!" she screamed as he and the third priest then grabbed hold of her.

"Be quiet girl." Intios replied, walking up to her and looking her straight in the face, "We are here to take you somewhere safe. Somewhere that I can take care of you." he then stroked the side of Samara's face and she suddenly turned her head so that she could bite his hand as hard as she could. Intios screamed as he pulled his hand back and then snarled, "Obviously you need a muzzle." he said before he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and while the priests held Samara steady he forced this into her mouth before ripping the chord from a robe that hung nearby and using this to secure it, "Bring her." he then told the priests.

Torien, Nathin and North all ran from the office to the residential section of the palace and up the nearest set of stairs. The main stairs were located just inside the main entrance so they used a staircase further from the fighting.

"We split up here." Torien said at the top of the stairs, "We'll meet back in my office."

The three men then hurried in different directions, making their way towards the bedrooms occupied by Torien's siblings. North was the first to reach his destination and he found the door unlocked. Rushing into the room with his bolt pistol in his hand he found Ossian staring out of the window.

"Your Highness you should get away from the window." North told him.

"Why are space marines attacking us?" Ossian asked as he did as he was told.

"They are renegades Your Highness and some of them are already inside the palace. You need to come with me. The King wants you taken to his office." North replied and the young prince nodded.

When Nathin reached Samara's bedroom he found the door wide open and looking inside he saw that it was empty. Worryingly he saw that although there was no sign of Samara there was a patch of blood on the carpet and he looked down at the floor of the hallway. Seeing another spot of blood on the floor not far away he headed in that direction, hoping that the blood was not Samara's.

"Kaitlin. Kaitlin are you there? Open the door." Torien said, knocking on Kaitlin's bedroom door and she unlocked it to let him in.

"Torien what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be commanding the guards?" she asked as he dashed into the room.

"Kaitlin there are Astartes in the palace. I killed one and Nathin another I needed to make sure that you were okay. Now come with me." Torien told her before there was a roaring sound from outside the palace and Torien ran to the balcony and looked up into the sky just in time to see a landing ship zoom over the palace.

"Torien what's that?" Kaitlin said and Torien smiled.

"Salvation." he replied.

The landing ship hit the ground and skidded along it, crashing through the trees of the woodland that the palace backed onto before it finally came to a halt. As soon as this happened the soldiers inside released their safety harnesses without needing to be told and hatches burst open at multiple places.

As they charged out of the craft the Imperial Guard troops opened fire on the Alpha Legion troops attacking the palace. The marines had of course seen the landing ship before it landed and half of them had already turned their attention towards it. This meant that the Imperial Guard came under fire as soon as they emerged from their landing craft and a number of them were cut down by bolter fire before they had even reached the bottom of the ramps leading from the ship to the ground. On the other hand the lasguns carried by the Imperial Guard were largely ineffective against the powered armour worn by the marines and despite the massive barrage of firepower they could deliver between them not one of the marines was killed or injured severely enough to take them out of the fight. However, the main intention of this fire was to focus the attention of the marines on the company's riflemen while their heavy weapon teams began setting up their weapons. These were a mix of anti-infantry and anti-armour weapons but all of them were deployed by the Imperial Guard company and aimed towards the marine lines when General Barrera came down a ramp from the landing ship and joined the company commander.

"What's our status captain?" he asked.

"All personnel in position general. The last of our heavy weapon teams has just checked in. They're all ready to go." the company commander answered and Barrera smiled.

"Make it rain captain. Make it rain." he ordered.

## 13.

There was another patch of blood every few metres and Nathin followed these as far as the servants' quarters before they vanished. However, he then heard the sound of a gunshot that he recognised as coming from a revolver of the type that he had taught Samara to use. Nathin broke into a sprint and ran towards the sound of the gunshot.

Rushing around a corner he saw the body of one of the palace staff lying in a pool of blood on the floor while there was another large patch of blood on the wall. At the far end of the corridor he saw a huddle of priests and as they hurried away he saw that they had Samara with them.

"Stop right there!" he called out as he brought Neuer's shotgun to his shoulder.

The injured priest turned towards Nathin and he saw that the man had Samara's revolver in his hand moments before it fired. The combination of the weapon's low accuracy at anything other than point blank range and the poor skill of the priest meant that the bullet went wide but Nathin still took cover behind the corner he had just rounded before a second shot was fired. While the injured priest remained in place with the gun pointing in Nathin's direction Intios and the other two men continued to drag Samara away.

Another shot from the revolver embedded itself in the wall close to Nathin before he leant around the corner and returned fire. The blast from the shotgun only clipped the already injured priest and he screamed as he fell before firing again. By random chance the bullet headed straight for Nathin but rather than hitting the Catachan it hit the shotgun he was holding and he winced as the force of the impact knocked it from his hands. He reached down to retrieve the weapon but saw that the side of the gun now had a hole where the bullet had hit it. The body of the weapon was distorted around the edge of the hole, bent inwards by the force of the impact and Nathin could see that this damage would prevent the shotgun from working. Leaving the now useless weapon on the floor he instead drew his las pistol and fired two shots in rapid succession at the injured priest and he dropped the revolver as he slumped sideways.

Nathin then broke into a run again, leaping over the body of the priest as he ran in the direction that Intios and the other priests had taken Samara.

"Secure her. I will take her now." Intios told the two remaining priests as they dragged the terrified Samara into his quarters and while they dragged her to the bed he locked the door behind them. Their robes were secured with rope belts and the priests used one of these to bind Samara's wrists to the top of the bed above her head while Intios also removed his belt so that her ankles could be tied to the other end, pulling her legs apart, "You have been promised to me Samara. We are destined to be together." Intios said as he then drew a knife and began to cut away Samara's clothing, starting between her ankles and making his way all the way up to her neck. However, just as he ripped away her clothing and she let out a muffled scream there was a pounding from the other side of the door as Nathin tried to force it open.

The two subordinate priests hurried to the door just as there was the sound of a las weapon being discharged and with each shot a hole was burned in the door around the lock. After several such holes had been created Nathin delivered a strong kick to the door that finally broke it open. Then as he stepped through the now open doorway he shot one of the priests between the eyes without hesitation. The second priest lunged at Nathin, aiming for his outstretched arm and he knocked the las pistol from his grip.

In response to this Nathin simply turned and headbutted the man. This stunned the priest and Nathin grabbed hold of the man and spun him around, pulling him close enough that he could wrap an arm around his neck before using his other hand to simply snap the priest's neck.

This left Nathin facing only Intios while Samara struggled to try and get free. Intios raised his knife and grinned at Nathin.

"I have the power of the true gods with me!" he hissed and Nathin smiled as he drew his Catachan blade again. Then he suddenly leapt forwards and thrust the knife blade into Intios just below his ribcage before the priest could react.

"Yeah, well I've got a bigger knife." he said as Intios dropped his knife and coughed up blood before Nathin pushed him to the floor.

Though serious the wound to Intios was not immediately fatal and so Nathin kicked the priest's knife out of his reach before he dashed to the bed that Samara was still tied to. Reaching down he grabbed the bedsheets and tossed them across Samara to cover her up before using his knife to cut through the rope that bound her wrists. The moment her hands were free she ripped the gag from her own mouth and then wrapped her arms around Nathin.

"You saved me! You saved me!" she exclaimed.

The sight of a landing ship initially cheered the cultists deployed to block the return of the planetary defence force units to Tula. They were not in contact with the Casket of Gold and their assumption was that the ship carried more reinforcements for them. However, it was not long before there was the sound of powerful engines and numerous tracked vehicles drove into view across country rather than along the road that was occupied by the PDF transports. Most of these were Chimera infantry fighting vehicles but there were also several Leman Russ main battle tanks among them.

These vehicles opened fire as soon as their gunners sighted the cultists and their lines were raked with fire from rapid firing multilasers and huge explosions from the battle cannons of the tanks. The cultists could do nothing in return, their auto cannons were out of ammunition and in any case even these weapons would have been unable to penetrate the armour of the Leman Russ tanks.

The sight of dozens of armoured vehicles advancing towards them while all of their fire simply bounced off their thick frontal armour was too much for the cultists and they abandoned their positions. At first it was just a handful that ran but the panic easily spread and soon all of the cultists were in a full on rout. Having abandoned their defensive positions though left the fleeing cultists dangerously exposed and rather than reaching the relative safety of Tula's built up areas they were simply gunned down by the advancing PDF troops and Imperial Guard armour.

Torien was still smiling when he turned away from the window but his smile vanished when he saw Kaitlin pointing her revolver straight at him.

"Kaitlin what are you doing? Put the gun down." he said and she scowled at him.

"What am I doing? How do you have the nerve to ask that Torien? I'm just want what's mine. Novus and those marines out there are just a means to do it." she said angrily.

"What's yours? Kaitlin does being regent mean that much to you?"

"Regent? Torien I'm going to be Queen! After all these years of being ignored and overlooked by this family I'll be the one giving the orders. Alpharius will see to that." Kaitlin said.

"Kaitlin my regiment have just landed. Those traitor marines are about to be overwhelmed."

"Not if they are ordered to stand down by the planet's new monarch." Kaitlin said, "Now drop the gun and the sword Torien. You should have stayed on your battlefields, you were never meant to be king."

"And you were never meant to be queen, Kaitlin." Torien replied as he slowly crouched down to set his weapons on the floor. However, as he began to get back to his feet he unexpectedly hurled himself at his sister and slammed into her. He gripped Kaitlin's hand tightly and pushed the revolver aside just as Kaitlin squeezed the trigger and fired a bullet into a nearby wall.

The force of Torien slamming into her knocked Kaitlin to the floor and Torien landed on top of her. This gave him the opportunity to pull the revolver from her hand and throw it across the room. Kaitlin responded by striking Torien repeatedly and as rapidly as she could with both hands. Having fought Orks in hand to hand combat Torien had experienced far worse blows in his life and he was able to ignore them while he held Kaitlin down with one hand and then clamped the other over her face to cover her nose and mouth. Kaitlin's eyes widened and she let out a muffled cry as she struggled to breathe. Her blows against Torien continued but the effort from this only served to use up what little oxygen she had left in her lungs and both the strength and speed of her attacks became steadily less before her eyes rolled up in their sockets and she lost consciousness.

Torien released his grip on his sister slowly, just in case she was not quite as helpless as she seemed to be. Satisfied that she was indeed unconscious though he got up and began to search for something that he could use to tie her up before she regained consciousness.

Although they were now trapped between two forces the Alpha Legion marines knew that they were superior on a man for man basis. However, this was not enough for them to overcome the problems facing them. As well as being heavily outnumbered the Royal Guard were protected by the thick palace walls while the newly arrived Imperial Guard 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment now had their heavy weapons deployed and had begun firing them. Heavy automatic fire from heavy bolters and auto cannons tore into the marines and even their thick ceramite armour was not enough to guarantee protection against these weapons. In addition to these weapons the Imperial Guard also had mortars that were used to land explosive rounds among the marines. These were less effective than the automatic weapons but they still helped to disrupt the efforts of the Alpha Legion to organise a counter attack. The most effective heavy weapons in the Imperial Guard armoury against the marines though were their anti-armour weapons, a mix of las cannons and missile launchers. Even a single hit from one of these weapons was enough to kill an Astartes but their low rate of fire limited the casualties they could inflict on the Alpha Legion. The Imperial Guard also had a number of plasma and melta guns that could penetrate powered armour but these were much shorter ranged and rather than risk advancing on the marines General Barrera had his men hold position as soon as they were clear of the

landing ship. From here their longer ranged heavy weapons could still be used effectively while their lasguns could be used for more opportunistic fire in large volleys.

Inside the palace the Alpha Legion commander was receiving constant updates from the marines attacking the main entrance from the outside and it was clear that their position was untenable. They were reporting inflicting some losses on the newly arrived Imperial Guard company but the rate at which they were achieving this was not good enough. Five guardsmen were falling for every marine lost but at that rate the Alpha Legion force would be wiped out before the Imperial Guard were defeated.

The only solution was to get the marines inside the palace and for that the Alpha Legion commander and his remaining men, seven of them now while the eighth lay dead behind him a victim of a fluke shot would need to get past the Royal Guard force ahead of them to force open the palace doors.

The Royal Guard, along with the handful of Imperial Guard troops supporting them were deployed all around the main entrance hall to protect the doors while the marines were all in a single hallway. This limited the number of marines that could fire on the palace's defenders at once and the commander knew that there was only one way that he could get his entire unit into the fray at the same time.

"We must charge them." he said as he slung his bolter and instead drew his bolt pistol and power sword.

Around him the other marines did the same, swapping their long range weapons for a pistol and blade, "Forward!" the commander then yelled even though the vox built into his helmet would pick up a mere whisper and the eight heavily armoured warriors charged into the large hall ahead of them.

The defending human troops all opened fire as the marines charged and the massive amount of fire at close range was enough to bring down another of them. Among the massed volleys of autoguns there were also the handful laser blasts from the Imperial Guard troops stationed among the Royal Guard defenders. These were located on an upper landing beside a series of narrow windows that they had initially been using to fire out into the palace grounds at the main force of Alpha Legion.

"You two, take the landing." the marine commander ordered, picking two of the other marines and the pair turned towards the nearby staircase and began to rush up it. The staircase had been originally designed by Alpha Legion engineers during the Great Crusade and it was strong enough to support the weight of both marines charging up it at the same time. However, the Imperial Guard sergeant immediately realised the danger of letting the marines get to the top of the stairs and he knew exactly what he needed to do about it. "Keep firing." he told his men before he darted towards the top of the staircase, reaching it ahead of the two marines. Then he activated his chainsword and dropped to his knees before plunging the blade into the top of the stairs. This produced an ear-piercing screeching sound as the motorised blade cut through the structure of the stairs. The outer wooden casing of the staircase splintered instantly but there were sparks as the blade then dug into the reinforced metal core. Seeing this the two marines both knew what the Imperial Guard sergeant was intending and they fired their bolt pistols at him. Both rounds struck the sergeant and he was killed instantly as the rounds punched through his flak armour before exploding. The damage to the staircase had already been done though and the metal core was sufficiently weakened that it gave way under the weight of the two heavily armoured giants and they came crashing down with it. Though the fall was insufficient on its own to severely injure the marines it did leave them tangled in the wreckage of the stairs and as they were struggling to free themselves one of the Royal Guardsmen armed with a grenade launcher took aim and fired at them using armour piercing krak rounds.

"Fire in the hole!" he yelled as he fired the first round. This struck one of the marine's thick shoulder pauldrons and detonated on impact. The shaped charge blew a fist sized hole even through the thick ceramite of the pauldron and the blast not only ripped off his arm at the shoulder but also sent fragments into his chest cavity, destroying his hearts and lungs.

The second marine that was still trapped among the wreckage turned the bolt pistol that he had been able to hang on to towards the grenadier but before he could fire a blast from a lasgun struck an already damaged part of his armour and burned through it into the warrior.

While the two marines had been scaling the stairs the Alpha Legion commander had charged directly at the palace's main door and swung his power sword at the lock. The energised blade effortlessly sliced through the lock and the commander dropped both his weapons so that he could grab the heavy doors with both hands and pry them open. However, as he pulled the doors open and looked outside what he saw horrified him. Most of the marines in the main force outside were dead and the last few pockets of survivors were now cut off from one another by Imperial Guard troops who were now advancing towards the palace. The marine commander then turned to look at a squad that was positioned at the forefront of the advancing force. This was barely fifty metres away from the palace doors and marked out with the regimental standard of the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment.

"Plasma gunner!" Barrera yelled when he saw the marine standing in the doorway, "Target ahead. Fire!"

The plasma gun armed guardsman immediately dropped to his knees and took aim before firing the weapon. A brilliant beam of white light erupted from the muzzle of the plasma gun and struck the marine commander



in his chest. Even the ceramite of his powered armour could not withstand the powerful energy beam that burned all the way through him, producing an explosion as the back mounted power supply for his armour was destroyed. Even this was not enough to kill the Alpha Legion commander outright though and he lay on the floor just inside the main doors unable to move.

Outside the palace Barrera continued to lead the bulk of the Imperial Guard company towards the now open doors while the four remaining Alpha Legion marines inside found themselves surrounded. Their mission had clearly failed but surrender was not an option they would consider so the only choices they had left to them were to attempt to either escape or simply take as many of their opponents with them as they could.

"Fall back to the tunnels." the most senior of the remaining marines told the others and they began to retreat towards the tunnel entrance that they had used to get as close to the palace entrance as possible. This meant crossing the large hall again though and as they fell back another marine fell under the combined weight of fire from the mix of Royal Guard and Imperial Guard still alive to protect it. The other three were able to reach the hallway on the other side though and they picked up their pace as they hurried down it.

At about the same time as the last three marines were heading down the hallway Barrera and the lead units of the Imperial Guard company outside reached the main entrance to the palace. The first thing that Barrera saw was what remained of the Alpha Legion commander lying in the doorway and he could tell that the warrior was still alive. Barrera knew that even a badly injured marine could be a dangerous opponent and he did not want to risk leaving such an opponent alive. Instead he activated the blade of his power sword and then smiled as he decapitated the already crippled marine with a single stroke.

"Where are the others?" he called out.

"That way sir." one of the Imperial Guard on the upper landing responding and he pointed towards the hallway that the marines had retreated down. This was marked by a significant amount of damage from small arms fire but Barrera wanted to be certain before he led his men on a wild goose chase.

"With me." he ordered the guardsmen behind him and he led them after the retreating marines.

The assaults on both the Adeptus Arbites precinct house and Adeptus Mechanicus generatorium had become sieges that showed no signs of ending. The cultists attacking both structures were unable to penetrate the buildings' defences but they were too numerous for the defenders to be able to drive them off. This did not concern the cultists though, they had expected to have to wait for reinforcements from the Alpha Legion and for this reason Ursulla and her troops were not initially concerned when they heard the sound of engines from behind them. However, when Ursulla looked around she was horrified to see a platoon of Imperial Guard Chimeras heading down the road towards the cultists. The lead vehicle opened fire with its hull and turret mounted weapons, ripping cultists and their lightweight vehicles apart.

Ursulla quickly ducked around the corner of a building, only now realising that the landing craft she had seen in the sky had not been bringing reinforcements for her but for the planetary government instead and she considered trying to run. However, as she watched several other cultists try this she saw them mercilessly gunned down by the Imperial Guard soldiers who were now in the process of bailing out of their Chimeras but then another idea struck her and she tossed her pistol aside. Then she broke into a run and headed towards the Imperial Guard instead of away from them.

"Emperor be praised!" she cried out as she held up her hands and ran towards a squad of guardsmen, "These heretics murdered my family and kidnapped me! I'm Ursulla Vargas, daughter of-" but before she could continue a guardsman standing right in front of her just snarled at her and plunged his bayonet into her stomach and twisted it before withdrawing it. Ursulla grabbed at her abdomen as she fell, desperate to try and stop her internal organs from falling out through the massive wound while in her last few seconds of life the Imperial Guard advanced past her without acknowledging her presence any further.

The last three Alpha Legion marines knew that their only hope for survival was to get out of the palace and lose themselves in the wilderness of Toltek. They could hear the sounds of Barrera and his troops following them in the hidden passageways and they headed for the way that they had entered the palace as quickly as they could. This took them back through the heavy door that Intios' priests had opened for them and they ran down the long passageway that would take them out into the palace grounds. However, it was only as they rushed out of the far end that they realised their mistake.

Torien knew exactly where the tunnel came out, having used it when he was younger to get in and out of the palace with Ramiro and Kaitlin and that information had been passed on to Barrera and the Imperial Guard. With the company's heavy weapons being useless for room to room fighting inside the palace the gunners had remained outside and deployed to prevent anyone from escaping, including through the tunnel.

"Open fire!" the officer commanding the more than twenty heavy weapon teams yelled at the top of his voice when the marines appeared and almost in unison they opened fire.

"My lord we've lost contact with everyone on the surface." one of the bridge officers aboard the *Casket of Gold* reported and Novus' eyes widened.

"What about the planetary defences?" he asked.

"Scanning us but not engaging my lord." another officer responded, "The system defence vessels are matching our orbit though. Their pattern indicates that they intend to dock and deploy boarding parties."

"Do they have the numbers?" Novus said.

"Ordinarily no my lord, but they have all recently docked with the orbital stations. They could have taken on enough armymen and servitors to overwhelm us." the officer told him.

"Helm get us out of here. Maximum engine power. I want our void shield concentrated to aft. Be ready to translate to the warp as soon as we can. I don't care about the effect on Toltek if we enter too close, just get us away from this system while we can."

The *Casket of Gold's* engines fired to take the ship out of orbit and it began to head away from Toltek. As soon as it passed between the orbital weapon platforms they opened fire and the ship rocked under the barrage.

"Void shields weakening my lord." a bridge officer called out.

"We can still make it. Keep going." Novus ordered before he became aware of something floating down from the ceiling where there were numerous vents for the air processing and distribution system and when he spun around and looked up he saw the creature that the Alpha Legion commander had kept caged.

"No Novus, you will not escape." the creature said.

"Guards! Destroy that thing!" Novus yelled and the armymen on the bridge rushed to his defence, firing their shotguns at the floating creature above them. However, its body was protected by an invisible barrier and not one of the shotgun blasts was able to break through this.

The creature dived towards Novus and lashed out at him with a clawed hand, ripping open his throat. Then as the rouge trader fell to the floor of his command pulpit the creature rose back up towards the vents and disappeared.

In the meantime Toltek's orbital defences continued to fire on the *Casket of Gold* and the ship rocked again under the impact of a volley of lance battery fire.

"Void shields collapsing!" one of the bridge crew exclaimed even though Novus was dead and there was a brief pause before one of the other officers responded.

"Abandon ship! Get to the saviour pods!" he yelled but before anyone could act on the instruction another volley of lance fire hit the *Casket of Gold* and the transport ship was destroyed in an instant as its main reactor was breached.

"Your Majesty where is Princess Kaitlin?" Victrus asked when Torien returned to his office.

"She wouldn't leave her quarters. I made sure that she was secure though." Torien replied and then he stared at Samara for a moment when he noticed that she was wearing a bloodstained priest's robe, "Then he turned to his advisors and added, "What's our situation?"

"The palace is secure Your Majesty." Hom replied, "General Barrera's men dealt with the Astartes."

"There was a single survivor Your Majesty." Tara 18-4 Kappa added, "His injuries forced him into self imposed suspended animation. The Adeptus Mechanicus will take custody of him until he can be turned over to the Inquisition for interrogation."

"Most of the rest of the city is also under our control Your Majesty." Marshal Neuer said, "The Sixteenth Regiment gave us the overwhelming numbers and firepower we needed to wipe out most of the traitors. A few escaped of course but they will be found and brought to justice. My enforcers will see to that."

"That just leaves the *Casket of Gold*." Torien said and he looked out of the window to see that the transport was no longer visible in the sky, "Where is she?"

"In pieces burning in space Your Majesty. The ship attempted to withdraw and was engaged by our orbital defences." Victrus told him.

"I think that means we've won." Nathin added.

# EPILOGUE.

When Kaitlin's eyes snapped open she found herself in her bedchamber, sat in a chair that faced the balcony. Ahead of her she could see Torien along with Meya, Nathin, Samara, Ossian and Tara 18-4 Kappa. "Consciousness has been restored Your Majesty." the tech priestess said.

Kaitlin tried to turn her head to look more directly at the other people in her bedroom but she instead found that she was unable to make any voluntary movements. Her first instinct was that she had been bound to the chair but she could not feel any sort of restraint holding her down. She attempted to call out that she was paralysed but all this achieved was for her to discover that she was also unable to speak.

"So it works then?" Torien asked, glancing at the tech priestess before looking back at Kaitlin.

"Affirmative Your Majesty. All neural links have been established and controls are stable." Tara 18-4 Kappa told him, "All functions have been routed to this dataslate for now. Duplicate control devices may be created if necessary."

"So which one just makes her wet herself?" Samara said as she reached out for the dataslate. However, before she could take hold of it Torien reached out with his own hand to grab hers.

"Not now Samara. There'll be the chance for that when the time comes. Right now our sister needs to be informed of exactly what has happened to her." he said and then he let go of Samara before walking closer to Kaitlin and staring straight down at her, "You see Kaitlin," he continued, "you've left us with a big problem. Your actions have the capacity to cause such a scandal that it would tarnish the entire monarchy for years, possibly forever. Treason is of course punishable by death but simply having you quietly executed didn't feel right given that you are a member of the family while just locking you away in a cell for the rest of your life probably would not be regarded as a sufficient punishment given the magnitude of your crimes either and there was some consideration for handing you over to the Adeptus Ministorum to be turned into an arco-flagellant but that would involve too many outsiders and I wanted everything dealt with more quietly. Luckily your involvement in the attack is almost unknown outside this room, not even the Adeptus Arbites suspect you. They think that Intios was behind the plot and luckily for all of us Tara Eighteen-Four Kappa was able to not only spirit him away to be interrogated by the Adeptus Mechanicus instead of the Arbites but she also came up with a suitably severe punishment for you that avoids having to have you killed or any public exposure."

"The mechanism is the same as used on a number of servitor classes." Tara 18-4 Kappa added, "Once attached to the brainstem of the subject it routes motor control through a cogitator. Under normal circumstances this cogitator would include a full set of motive directives to enable the unit to carry out its necessary tasks. However, the unit that has been implanted in you has been modified to allow for direct control from the dataslate. Functions may be enabled or inhibited at will."

"Basically speaking dear sister you no longer have control over your body." Torien continued, "What you can and cannot do will be controlled entirely from that dataslate and for you that isn't going to be pleasant. You see in order to avoid a scandal we have already told the planet that you were critically injured during the assault by the traitors you helped bring to this world and right now the people are waiting to hear whether or not you will even survive. Of course we'll wheel you out in public soon enough but the news will be that although you survived your injuries have left you physically and mentally crippled. The public will see us caring for you of course, making sure that you are still a part of this family even though you tried to have us all killed-

"Or raped." Samara interrupted, glaring angrily at Kaitlin.

"Quite. Kaitlin, Samara is understandably angry about what you and the cardinal had planned for her." Torien said, "Getting back to the matter at hand though you will continue to be a public part of the family, for the time being at least. There will be a few appearances at which all you can do is sit in a chair and drool while we are your loving family who haven't given up on you. The first of these will be mine and Meya's wedding and then my coronation."

"Then I'm getting married too." Samara said, interrupting again and she reached out to take Nathin's hand and smiled.

"I'm a duke now and an officer too. Colonel Tanner. Can you believe that?" Nathin commented.

"Yes Kaitlin it's true." Torien added, "After the way Nathin saw our sister I could hardly do anything other than arrange a wedding. If rumours about the incident got out then Samara would be humiliated. All those public appearances will inevitably be cut short though when you become too overwhelmed or, as Samara prefers, soil yourself but eventually even those limited appearances will end and it will be announced that you will remain in the palace under the care of your doctors while they do their best to improve your condition. Privately of course you'll spend most of your time as you are now, sat in this room silent and immobile with just your own thoughts for company though you will be allowed to eat with us to prevent the servants noticing

anything amiss. You won't be feeding yourself of course but you will be given enough self control to chew and swallow what you are spoon fed. Later on you might be allowed to speak or even move one arm enough to feed yourself but that will be a long time from now. In the meantime I hope that you will be able to use all the time available to you to consider how all this could have gone. You could have just accepted your place in our society and lived in a life of luxury instead of murdering our parents and Ramiro. Even after that you could have got away with it if you'd just stopped. I gave you the chance to do things that noblewomen are normally prevented from doing purely down to tradition and to chose your own husband rather than be bargained away but you chose to continue with your treasonous scheme in the belief that you would be Queen instead of Meya."

"A role I look forward to undertaking." Meya commented, "I'm just so sorry you won't be able to be my maid of honour at our wedding. At least Samara will be available."

"I still think you should execute her. She killed mother and father and Ramiro." Ossian said and Torien smiled.

"As you can see Kaitlin our younger siblings have both taken rather harsh stances on what should be done with you. I think that is a reaction to the way you had so little to do with them they were growing up. Who knows, if you had then maybe you'd have had more loyalty to our family and none of this would have happened. On the other hand I still remember the little girl I spent so much time with. You, me and Ramiro always looking out for one another and I think that you were right when you said that I abandoned you. I should have taken you with me when I joined the Imperial Guard. I think you'd have enjoyed the life out there away from the royal court." Torien said and then he paused before he added, "And because of all that despite everything you've done I still love you little sister." Torien then leant forwards and kissed Kaitlin on her forehead before standing up straight again and looking at the others, "Okay let's go." he told them and then they all left the room, leaving Kaitlin alone in her chair and desperately trying to just scream.