Summary

A small fleet of Culture ships arrives in the Warhammer 40k galaxy and tries to overcome Grimdark while dealing with the Outside Context Problem of Chaos.

Hilarity ensues. Including, but not limited to, a Special Circumstances archaeological dig on a Necron tombworld, multi-party future sight gambit pileups, serious upgrades to the Tau, fun with the Dark Eldar, some subtle influence in the IoM, and a hell of a lot of dead Tyranids.

Also includes many fun and exciting alternate endings :).

New chapters posted in this thread, but all but those in the latest section are here on Ao3.
Introduction

Chapter Summary

A small fleet of Culture ships cross the vast expanse between the Galaxies and arrives at the outer limits of the 40k galaxy.

Introduction with explanation of assumed interactions between various potentially incompatible parts of the universes (The Warp, Hyperspace, souls, psykers).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Premise - Intro post to the versus thread that this originated from

A small fleet of Culture Vessels crosses the vast expanse between the Galaxies and arrives at the outer limits of the 40k Galaxy.

Setting themselves the task of converting the ENTIRE 40k galaxy and all its factions to their way of thinking. How do they fare?

The Culture Fleet consists of a single Systems Class GSU (controlled by 3 Minds), a single GSV (controlled by 1 Mind) and a pair of GCU’s (controlled by 1 Mind each). With 300 million starting population of assorted Pan-Humans & Drones.

How does the Culture proceed? Do they go in guns blazing, sit back and manipulate or something in between?

It should be fairly apparent that space combat wise the Culture would dominate totally, but this isn’t (necessarily) about blasting the opposition to atoms.

How do they deal with unyielding threats like Tyranids, Orcs, Necrons, Chaos etc?

What about the more approachable factions (for dialogue anyway) like Eldar or Tau?

How long would it all take or are they doomed to corruption by Chaos from the outset?

Notes:

Hyperspace, Grid Energy and all the other fancy Culture technology work perfectly fine and according to its own rules in the 40kverse.

The Culture begins with zero knowledge of anything to do with the 40kverse. No knowledge of Chaos, of Psychics, The Warp or anything. A complete Blank Slate.

Conversely, no one in the 40kverse knows anything about the Culture, not Chaos, not Eldar Farseers, no one.

Story Structure

The structure of the story is in varying parts. Each Part will have a head post that describes overall developments in the Culture fleet (usually technology and First Contacts); each part is 3 weeks long and events are placed to within 1 week accuracy.
Each part will also have a number of subsidiary bits, usually grouped by the race it happened to (but special events also exist), each of those bits consist of events during the 3 weeks of the Part it happened under (eg. the Tyranids update happens in part 6, and "Week 3" in that chapter refers to the 3rd week of part 6). These all happen concurrently and sometimes reference events happening in other bits.

Later in the fic, Hypothetical parts occasionally appear. These are thought experiments involving a major change to Culture policy and can be considered to be non-canon for the purposes of this fic. Aka. they didn't actually happen.

**This fic's interpretation of the Warp**

It follows strange physics, one that recognizes patterns. Instead of the rules operating on atoms or fundamental forces, the rules operate on patterns. Patterns are the building blocks of things in the Warp.

The soul is one such conglomerate of patterns. Patterns themselves are indivisible but they can be unraveled to release the energy contained. Aggregates of them, like a soul, are, obviously, separable into pieces. Patterns are made of Warp energy and can interact with the Warp to move or affect raw Warp energy or other patterns. Patterns can also appear from Warp energy or other patterns.

Patterns have a position in the Warp. Where a pattern is can distinguish between one pattern somewhere and another identical pattern elsewhere. These positions in the Warp correspond to positions in the Real.

The Warp is atemporal. The Warp is immutable and the passage of time in the real is not represented as changes in the Warp, but as the trajectory of patterns through it. Patterns in the future and in the past can affect the present, they are all there and it never really goes away.

Nevertheless, there are restrictions that the Warp follows with regards to time. I haven't worked this out yet, but it should line up roughly with the restrictions on time travel.

**The Real**

Warp phenomena happens when the Warp energy temporarily rewrites the rules of the universe. Patterns in the Warp have specific patterns of matter or energy in the Real and a very large number of them deal with organic brains. But things like lightning bolts (that aren't lightning) are generated by the Warp imposing a pattern on the Real.

Manifested Warp patterns in the Real are subject to what rules of the Real that still apply, but the more patterns that manifest, the less rules remain.

Too many Warp patterns, and bam, you have a Warp rift, a place where none of the Real's rules apply any more and the Warp enters the Real.

**The Soul**

Psykers and psychic sensitivity is how much of "you" is in the warp. Each person, a bunch of matter that processes other matter and energy in the real, attracts patterns in the warp as they form. By default, each arrangement of matter in the real will have a certain amount of Warp pattern associating with it, but by circumstance or deliberate control, more or less patterns can aggregate around the corresponding position of the real material.

This is highly sensitive to how the being develops and genetics, being the controlling developmental program, plays a very large part.
Organic beings have a pattern of material that affects the Warp in ways that attract patterns. Metals do not and a being made of metals does not affect the Warp. Intelligence, the ability to process information and representations of things (aka. concepts), attracts even more Warp patterns. This conglomerate of Warp patterns is typically called the Soul.

A soul affects the body as much as the reverse. Kill the person in the real, and the patterns in the Warp will disperse. Kill the soul in the Warp, and the corresponding effects of the patterns will affect the real (usually killing the person). In fact, in some cases, not all of a person's intellect resides in the Real, some of it is in the Warp. Souls interact with each other, usually to no major effect, but they can sense each other and communicate this to the brain in the Real.

Psychics

Psykers are organic people with a conglomerate of Warp patterns that can create other Warp patterns, including one that makes the Warp intrude into the real to impose a pattern. This may or may not be deliberately controlled, often not.

Races have inclinations (Eldars are more like to interact with the patterns corresponding to the future) based on biology that changes what patterns in the Warp are most likely to occur.

Blanks are the reverse of psykers, they have very few or no patterns associated with them in the Warp because they attracted a pattern that undoes other patterns. Their ability to drive psychics crazy or make normals disgusted with them is because of the soul. They have none or very little to interact with in the Warp and consequently creep people out unconsciously due to the lack of that interaction. Their invisibility to psykers, resistance or plain immunity to Chaos corruption, immunity to purely Warp effects, are all explained by this. But clearly, if you hit them with a lightning bolt, even a Warp lightning bolt, they still die.

Machines and devices that use the Warp are also possible. Those that manipulate the Warp by using arrangements of Real materials that attract Warp patterns can achieve Warp effects. (eg. Null Matrix generators, Gellar fields, D-Cannons) Copies these devices in the Real alone will work, since they manipulate the Warp for their effects.

Devices that partially exist in the Warp use both arrangements of the Real and patterns in the Warp together to achieve an effect. (eg. Eldar Wraithbone, Webway travel, Psychic weapons, Warp drives) These require both a Warp and Real construction method to make them, so it can get very complicated and often needs another Warp + Real device to do that.

Future Sight - Interpretation, terms and stuff

1. Future sight sees the possibilities of the future. Future-paths refer to the chain of visions that describe a path through various branches. The lower probability of a future, the harder it is to trace.

1b. The Farseers are able to 'vision' on demand and focus on a time and place if they wish. This lets them 'vision' their way around the timeline to trace paths and branches. Obviously, they're highly practiced and very good at it. The lower probability some future 'vision' has of coming to pass, the harder it is to tell which other 'visions' lie in the past of that future 'vision', making them very very hard to track.

2. Future vision is 100% accurate. There are no false visions (although false interpretation is perfectly
possible), all future-paths refer to a future that can happen provided the correct branches are taken. It is not comprehensive, however, so while it is impossible to make errors in future visions, the Eldar don't see everything and certainly not all combinations of branches. They may not see some branches or some futures, and they might only have a vague idea or partial list of needed actions to cause a certain future.

2b. A branch refers to a set of Eldar actions at a certain point. Obviously, no one else has branches unless they also have future vision. This is how they can tell the Culture has no future vision, since they don't see any Culture branches.

2c. Some branches are 'chance' branches, which means the factor that decides it is a small effect outside Eldar influence. This is basically chaos-theory (the one that small effects in the right places have major effects).

3. Visions are limited in spatial and time resolution. They cannot steal tech by visions nor discern the working process of anything more complicated than say a steam engine. Culture effectors work too fast and invisibly for them to detect. Culture FTL is also nearly incomprehensible, Eldar cannot track Culture vessels through hyperspace, they can only detect the rough position of their vessels relative to various worlds. The large scale visions, like they used to try to discern what will happen to the galaxy, detects the overall minds in the galaxy. This is mostly war, because this is Warhammer 40k, but the visions are very sensitive to the emotions of the people concerned in the vision.

Chapter End Notes

Could possibly be split into a Culture intro/prequel about what happened before this point and warp etc info.
Culture, Basic Ooc Setup

If I were in charge of the Culture expedition, crossing the inter-galactic, the first thing to do once you arrive is to find a nice empty star with asteroids (pick one without planets, you know which since you've had forever to analyze them) and build/send an automated probe back saying "we're across, still alive; proceeding according to mission plan alpha".

This mission plan will almost certainly involve building more Minds and ships. We have a GSV, which can build anything. 6 ships is far too little to explore a galaxy, even for the Culture.

And then shortly after that, we run into the IoM or pick up transmissions. The chances we hit anything else is lower or close to impossible (Chaos isn't that widespread, 'nid fleets are mostly in interstellar space and chances of hitting them is virtually nil, etc. etc.)

Contact with IoM goes as per normal first contact. Culture stays away and analyzes. The conclusions are for a contact with one IoM non-military ship.

3rd standard week of exploration
The GSV under construction from the nearby asteroids has been destroyed by gridfire following the possible contamination warnings from the Chaos homogenizing swarm. Undetectable nanotech could be present on the asteroids.
All fabrication will take place via energy-matter conversion from Gridfire. This will slow expansion efforts greatly, but it appears from continued observation of the IoM planet that none of the inhabitants of this galaxy are likely to start an Idirian War level conflict. Slow expansion is irritating but can be tolerated until the invisible nanotech hypothesis is ruled out.

All systems relocated to nearby inhabited systems to the original contact planet.

4th week
Fabrication of a GCU is complete.

Corresponding scans of IoM government databases in the nearby planets confirm that the threat of Chaos is widespread in the IoM. Star charts contain minor discrepancies that have been compensated for.
Analysis of IoM ship traffic, including what appears to be a warship, indicate technology levels far below the Culture. Interestingly inefficient, but a non-issue. Layout, component plans and possible manufacturing/improvement pathways were worked out by a Contact citizen from effector scan data.
IoM warship spotting is becoming a past-time.
Unknown tech in the FTL drive is coupled with unknown tech built into the hull. Location and form appears to be of defensive purpose but replicas tested (safely far away) did not appear to do anything.

Further indepth analysis of the original contact planet indicates this planet is a farming and mining planet that supplies resources to what they call a Forge World and a Hive World, presumably a production center and population center. A GCU has been diverted to investigate them.
5th week
Another GCU is fabricated.

Frontier worlds and their trade relations to the initial contact planet indicate that the government is incredibly inefficient, corrupt, paranoid and brutal. Witchhunts for Chaos seem to occur *more details on Chaos*

A person they term a "Psyker" has been found in a jail awaiting an event called the Black Ship to arrive. Detailed analysis of this person, backed up by references, indicate that the FTL 'pilot' with unknown reactions in ships are Psykers. A unique genomic signature is associated with them. None have been found among Culture citizens; experimenting with this signature is forbidden until more is understood about the link from Psyker to Chaos.

We note that this is a point against the invisible nanotech hypothesis.

The GCU has arrived at the Forge World. IoM production centers for their FTL drive and unknown defensive component are being scanned although the religious trappings and lack of understanding of their own technology are hindering reverse engineering efforts. The FTL device apparently cannot operate without a psyker, research to isolate the active psyker element in order to remove the need for a psyker is probably not possible without a psyker to experiment on, which exceeds moral constraints.

GCU scanning a military outpost (why is there a *ground* military outpost when there are no warring aliens on this border? - political objective hypothesized - population control?) reports irregularities in the behaviour of one of its humans. Actions fell outside psychological profile and moral constraints; they seemed superficially similar to Chaos infestation symptoms as per data gained from the IoM, although additional data is required for a firm diagnosis. The citizen's mental backup has been loaded and all irregularities have ceased.

Quarantine efforts have been put in place, although since this GCU was not involved in any direct contact, contamination by invisible nanotech is extremely unlikely. Alternative hypotheses are being considered. These include nanotech with effector like abilities to unusual physics. The unusual physics appears more likely than would normally be considered since the psykers and FTL drive display unusual physics, as well as an implied but-as-yet-unknown connection to Chaos.

Recommend additional caution when dealing with any unusual physics phenomena. It may be unethical, but consideration is being applied to isolate and Box any further cases in order to see the progression of the Chaos contamination. This is not to be carried out unless consensus is reached in favour.

Chapter End Notes


Boxing is a term I'm going to be using later. This means they move the target human into an isolated box outside the ship and use effectors to simulate the other illusory humans of the ship, the Mind playing them according to psychological profile. The box moves with the subject and contains objects identical to what might be found on the ship.
To the subject, there is absolutely no difference to where it was originally on the ship, it is essentially a perfect simulation. And indeed this lets the Mind simulate a "ship" for the boxed subject while leaving the subject a long way from any contact with anything at all.

Meanwhile, the subject is restored from backup on the ship... obviously, the box will be destroyed by Gridfire when the test is deemed over or dangerous. (you wouldn't box a subject if you didn't have any other way of getting data, and that means it must be incredibly dangerous, like Chaos)

I don't actually know what the timeframe for Chaos contamination is, so I'm just winging it. And I am assuming it is a mostly random process, biased to weak minds. A Mind will easily detect psychological profile problems however.

The Box idea is one I had for some time, but no SF civilization I am familiar with apart from the Culture are able to pull it off. It's basically a virtual reality box... that's not virtual. In this case, the Chaos contaminated citizen will do Chaos things in a virtual box.

Note how the Mind is careful to make the box appear exactly like the ship. And even if the citizen requests to go to the surface of the planet, the Mind can virtualize the surface in the box from real data. (and even make a puppet on the surface to mimic the actions of the real one in the box; although of course, demon circles drawn by a Mind won't work, but the simulation probably stops there anyway)

Of course, the box can be expanded or shrunk at will. Anything unusual can't be replicated of course, so the box will extend to accomodate it. Yes, they might actually let a corrupted citizen summon a demon or something. After all, they have Gridfire and the citizen has already been replaced from backup.
Chapter by ete

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

6th week

Constrained Behaviour, Unconstrained Morality, the Mind that had the first Chaos contamination has another one. A unanimous vote in favour of NOT Boxing it was registered (the person's backup voted in his place) and the contaminated person was destroyed. This is despite the strictest quarantine possible. If the invisible nanotech can reach so far, then no quarantine is possible in any case. License to use asteroids and stellar material for construction is granted. This has been taken as a strike against the invisible nanotech hypothesis.

Another GCU is complete. The two previous ships are gaining their own crew as their Minds materialize citizens stasis-ed for the journey.

Another unusual signature has been detected on the Forge World, apart from the IoM FTL drives. This one was on the planet surface and not correlated with IoM activity. Shortly afterwards, the Mind in orbit detected a minor interference with IoM activities and managed to gain some data about the disturbance.

A remarkably well-shielded scout was surveying the IoM activities as if on a routine patrol. This scout is also roughly humanoid but of a different biological species to the IoM. The shielding tech was advanced enough to escape passive sensors of Culture vessels, although judicious effector use was sufficient to locate and track it.

Using the same scanning method revealed a similarly shielded and concealed structure under the ground in an uninhabited location of the Forge World. This structure seems to utilize the FTL drive principles in a totally different way, although from the architecture, transport is also the aim.

The scout and the structure is under surveillance. Signatures and search protocols for these are being distributed and the Minds will soon scan their assigned planets for these 'invisible' men.

Effector protocol to pierce the invisibility was tried but no nanotech was revealed. It is deemed unlikely that this new civilization is Chaos due to mismatch in behaviour.

OOC: Eldar & a webway gate. Just a routine surveillance patrol on IoM activities.

7th week

A GSV and GCU is complete.

We are conducting a full vote of all 1:1 intelligences and up. The Mind that reached the IoM Forge World came across IoM descriptions of Chaos and the Warp as it surveyed a Space Marine chapter. The readings have updated our hypotheses. Chaos is <...>. Our conclusion has narrowed down the possibilities to two major contenders.

1. Chaos is a sublimed civilization or a conglomerate of them; since there appear to be no other sublimed civilizations in contact, our only hope of survival is to Sublime ourselves before they change the rules.

2. Chaos is an Outside Context Problem of a very minor class. The IoM has made significant inroads towards understanding Chaos and doubtless we can do better. In this case, we will best proceed by being extremely cautious around Chaos while trying to gather as much information about it as possible.
The interpretations are mutually exclusive and prescribe *immediate action* that is also mutually exclusive. This decision was deemed important enough to put to a vote.

The vote was a near-tie, in favour of Outside Context Problem. The last votes, and therefore the deciding ones, came from *Constrained Behaviour, Unconstrained Morality*.

We have had a rash of Chaos contaminations across the various ships. A statistically significant number of them occurred in *Constrained Behaviour, Unconstrained Morality*. The number of applications for temporary transfer for 'holiday' to that ship has dropped from its characteristically high number to nearly zero. Quarantine measures mean that no one can transfer from it. The occurrence of contamination among our organics and 1:1 drones is at least eight standard deviations above IoM rates. Why this is so is not clear, although interpretations of IoM texts indicate our freedom of expression is at fault. Clearly we cannot restrict that so we will have to perform damage control. *Constrained Behaviour, Unconstrained Morality* has a rate of Chaos contamination three sigmas above Culture baseline. What this means is also unclear although the more... physical vices it is known for (and why it was, up until recently, a popular holiday transfer request) is also mentioned in IoM texts.

A GCU has decided to leave its chosen planet (a farming colony) and agreed to pay a visit to the capital system of the IoM, Sol. It is a long travel along the rim of the galaxy and the ship will take two weeks to arrive.

**8th week**

A GSV and two GCUs have been built.

Contact has been lost with *Constrained Behaviour, Unconstrained Morality*, including all hands. Last information from it did not indicate anything unusual, except for the first simultaneous Chaos contamination of a pair of humans, one of them the original one who had been first contaminated. A GSV and a GCU have been dispatched to investigate. They have been cleared for military engagement and their citizens transferred off-ship.

This incident has caused the 1:1 intelligences to be concerned. It is a new situation for them, one that they have to worry about their possible future existence. Chaos contamination appears to be totally random and, while controllable, is also unavoidable.

We Minds have voted amongst ourselves to waive all moral constraints to solve this problem of Chaos. Most of the organics have to learn it again, but this emotion...

This we remember and know.

Fear.

**IoM - Military outpost - Emergency message to Space Marine Chapter**

Possible Xeno sighting. A great flare in the sky, many hundreds of times brighter than the local sun. Telescopes and scantified scanners could not identify the source of the explosion but the size of the detonation is estimated to be at least two orders of magnitude larger than the combined explosive power of the largest IoM warship, including a complete self-destruct sequence. This explosion occurred at roughly four times the distance of a holding orbit.

Massive environmental damage, significant atmospheric loss. The Guard Regiment stationed here has suffered massive casualties and current strength stands at 14% and falling.
9th Week
Culture
A GSU is complete. We have a new habitat.

The GSV and GCU pair arrived in system under full military power and the remnants of Constrained Behaviour, Unconstrained Morality have been recovered and analyzed. The destabilized planetary orbit has been corrected and the worst effects of atmospheric loss adjusted downwards. This intervention should prevent additional significant loss of life on the IoM's part without revealing our presence. They are too xenophobic to risk revealing ourselves to them.

From what we gather, the self-destruct safety of the GCU tripped. Why it might do so is still a best guess but all evidence so far points to the failsafe against hostile takeover of the Mind having initiated the self-destruct. Given the situation, Chaos being able to contaminate Minds is a significant, even likely, possibility.

Recovery of the citizens on board is impossible.

The threat of Chaos is immense. A vote 88% in favour of all citizens allows us Minds to read the minds of any and all non-Culture citizens without permission. It is a major breach of protocol, but our existence is at stake. A large majority of our own citizens have also given permission for us to read their minds, with appropriate privacy concerns. A significant minority have demanded constant surveillance or to re-enter stasis.

All Minds are constantly rechecking all components for Chaos contamination. This is requiring significant amounts of computational power, but survival focuses the mind wonderfully. Many minor reports of machines and automated systems displaying strange errors have accrued; they have been corrected.

All the Minds are now operating on a buddy system. Two halves of the Mind exist separately and check each other for contamination. None has been found but any discrepancy will call a different ship to pay a visit.

Experimenting with the Warp is totally forbidden, we will only observe until we understand its link to Chaos.

It skirts close to this restriction, but one Mind insisted on implementing the armouring device of the IoM on its own ship and some of the citizens have also taken up Techpriest prayers as a hobby. A vote of Minds decided that this would be allowed. The primary argument is to define ourselves from the IoM; we could of course adopt the IoM's practices trivially but that would destroy our identity.

Chaos is a serious threat. For the first time for many of us, even us Minds, we have turn our attention to the problem of survival in the face of an Outside Context Problem.

We now have Unconstrained Behaviour and Constrained Morality.

Chapter End Notes

Ye god, phrases for names is unwieldy as heck.
Also, the self-destruct is canon. The excerpt of the Excession fight from last thread had this happen. And Chaos isn't as subtle as a Mind using effectors...
Chapter Summary

The Eldar Farseers struggle to comprehend the vast changes in the future paths caused by the Culture entering 40k.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Farseer!"
Farseer: "My colleagues and I have examined the runes for some time now and this emergency meeting is to report our findings.

Yes, it is important enough that we have gathered this many Craftworlds together. We need to decide what to do and act together. NOW.

We are faced with a new threat. This is completely unexpected and virtually all our old visions are now obsolete. Why we had not foreseen this is unknown but all of us agree that there was absolutely no warning of this unknown new player.

Shortly before this, we noticed that all the old visions could no longer be accessed. Our path into the future had seemingly been completely changed in every way. I'm sure all of you had already been told of this.

We have deduced from patching together our visions that the primary reason for this is the appearance of a new force in the galaxy. An extra galactic civilization has entered our galaxy and its future-path intersects with virtually everything. Despite the small number of near-future visions related to them, implying their size is currently incredibly tiny, it is unavoidable that they will touch *everything* in this galaxy. There are no futures in which this new arrival will not affect us in some way.

Our examinations of the future-paths indicate that this new arrival did not cause an increase in the non-Eldar branches of the future. They do not read the future, although down some future-paths, they gain the ability to do so.

Some of the future-paths spell complete disaster. In all of those, none of us survive. Not the IoM, not us, not even the Necrons. In all of those, only Chaos reigns supreme for all eternity through them. In one of the futures, not even Chaos survives; only the new arrival remains and the warp is completely shut off from the universe.

This is to be avoided at all costs.

Over the past weeks, it has become clear to us that this new player is as completely naive of this universe as we are naive of them. They have already encountered the touch of Chaos, or will soon do so, and their response to this is already outside our influence. Many of their decisions are outside our ability to influence beyond changing the times that they encounter other species or us. Of those, we have the ability to nudge them into contact with the other factions, but delaying them is nearly impossible and requires huge effort for only a short delay.

I repeat, there is no future for any faction where this new player do not contact them. They will eventually find us, we can only delay it slightly, or speed it greatly.
Additionally, their military ability is beyond compare. In any of the futures where war with them occurs, all conventional forces are defeated by them. All of our Craftworlds together could not stand against them. The IoM fleets, black crusades, Necron tombworlds, even the Tyranid fleets between the stars. NONE of them can even deflect their course. Any who stand against them militarily is destroyed or ignored. Ignored! This new player seems to dislike destroying things.

One of my colleagues described their battle ability as almost magical. It is his opinion that even the far-future Tyranid extra-galactic invasion will not pose more than a speedbump to them. At least we will not have to worry about surviving that, we are either dead or they will destroy it.

A side note. In virtually all the futures, the Dark Eldar are mostly destroyed or cease their... darkness. Yes, the Dark Eldar's days are limited whatever we do. That is one, if not good, at least not-bad event that will happen eventually.

There is no military solution to this new threat. But one may not be required. In a few rare future-paths...
F pauses and meditates for a short time to calm emotions
"They are hopeful. Brighter, and calmer than any period we have witnessed. One vision of mine showed me a galaxy free from war, where we Eldar walked freely among the Imperium of Mankind without persecution. The IoM even..."

...No, I haven't been smoking anything. You saw my runes, would you deny what they say?

We have to realign our plans and change nearly all our responses. The Tau project can be safely abandoned. Any negative fallout from them would be too long in the coming, it is either overshadowed by more pressing concerns or will be solved by this newcomer.

Our main decision to make is whether we should contact them. They will soon spot one of our webway gates and a scout at one of the IoM Forge Worlds. This is unchangeable. A major split of the future-paths lie only a short time ahead. Whether we decide to contact them will move us onto one branch or the other.

...The majority of the Chaos-only ends are in the path where we do not contact them. Not all of them however. Even if we do contact them, there are still paths that lead to total Chaos, and those end with us dying first and they are a more brutal and total darkness than if we did not contact them. The bright future-path I saw is nearly untraceable. Its probability is too small for me to see clearly. I cannot say down which path it lies, but I can confirm that it is only on one side of the split.

...One of the non-Chaos futures involves the complete destruction of this new player. At the hands of Chaos. It is also rather unlikely, and the path is untraceable. It is rather more unlikely than the 'bright' future but exists on both sides of the split. Some of the futures involves the resurrection of the God Emperor by this new player. How it will be achieved is impossible to tell. This new player has the ability to act below the limit of our visions and do that so fast that one vision was of the God Emperor as he is now, the next he is back at his full strength. After that... the future gets considerably more complicated. None of the Chaos-only endings lie down that path however, and in many of them, this new player is destroyed by the God Emperor. The 'bright' future does not lie down this path.

Yes, this ability is practically magical. It is also the primary reason why any military action stands
zero chance of success.

No, the complete destruction of this player only ever happens at the hands of Chaos and not through military action. Somehow, Chaos corruption is able to destroy them instead of corrupting them. All the endings where Chaos destroys them lie among Chaos-only endings. Some of them have chance-branches. The futures where Chaos destroys them are rather risky in that respect."

Chapter End Notes

Assumptions

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1b. The Farseers are able to 'vision' on demand and focus on a time and place if they wish. This lets them 'vision' their way around the timeline to trace paths and branches. Obviously, they're highly practiced and very good at it. The lower probability some future 'vision' has of coming to pass, the harder it is to tell which other 'visions' lie in the past of that future 'vision', making them very very hard to track.

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4. Eldar society has since stopped believing in a "good end". The fragment described by the main speaker depicts a flawless Culture victory. The IoM is reformed (slowly), the Eldar are in peaceful contact, Tau assimilated/reformed, Dark Eldar reformed (!) and rescued from their 'god'. Chaos shut off from the world, the Necrons/Tyranids/Orks totally destroyed.
In this far future, there is only peace. You probably understand why the rest of them are rather... skeptical. XD
EDIT: the next best future is mostly the same except that the Dark Eldar collapse from internal conflict when the Culture attempts reform.
Chapter Summary

The Culture approach Sol in order to learn more of the IoM, and run into a bit more resistance than they'd thought possible.

**Starry Banner - Culture GCU Enroute To Sol**

I light year - Crossed the outer edges of the asteroids associated with the central star.

**IoM - One of the Psykers tasked with defending Sol**

He paused with a spoonful of omelette just outside his mouth, ignoring the guards that accompanied psykers nervously pointing their guns at him. The alarm sent through the Warp was rarely used. The intruder was incredibly fast, and the Warp signature was weak. It was not an IoM vessel that somehow forgot to file its Sol approach permit, there weren't ANY psykers or in fact anything remotely more Warp-sensitive than human standard on board. Also, the intruder was further out than anything using Warp travel would appear anyway. In fact, it had entered at the edge of the detection range which implied it had dropped out of the Warp even further out.

The Warp let him realize this all in a fraction of a second. But before he could even react, the intruder was already crossing Pluto orbit. The thing was travelling faster than light! It wasn't a Warp driven vessel! It was an FTL ship that did not use the Warp!

By the time he had got over his shock, a second or two, the ship was already decelerating around Neptune. The maneuverability and acceleration it display was too insane. That sort of speed implied the ship was travelling at close to a thousand C and could decelerate from that to a complete stop in a few seconds?!

He lashed out with the Warp almost on instinct, and could feel virtually every other psyker in Sol who wasn't in the Choir do the same.

**Starry Banner - Culture GCU enroute to Sol - 5 seconds later**

External hacking attempt deflected. Source unknown. The humans are displaying erratic psychological profiles but it does not appear to match Chaos contamination.

Going to combat status. All unnecessary simulation routines stopped.

Guess: There may be a new type of Chaos in Sol? Certainly the IoM Warp travel is slow enough that it is a possibility..

*travel simulation start* Conclusion: If Sol had fallen to a new type of Chaos, the systems we originated in would receive the news in two weeks at best due to Astropaths, one of which existed in IoM records on the Forge World.

Rating: unlikely considering that the IoM is experienced at fighting Chaos and by records, Sol is the...
most heavily defended system in the entire IoM. Chaos invasions are unlikely to end the battle swiftly enough for the word to not have reached the Culture's area of investigation.

Guess: an FTL attack, probably Warp based, from the IoM defenses is firing at us.
Objection: Our approach is too fast for their light-based sensors to detect Counter: They have an FTL sensor that can pierce our stealth Rating: Possible, implies new IoM technology finding

Course of action: Exit the system and test their range. Indirect observation methods might be able to reveal some information about this.

IoM - The same psyker

A few seconds later, he finally put the spoonful of omelette in his mouth. The intruder had disappeared back into interstellar space, displaying the same agility and speed that it had before.

He didn't, personally, think that the warp attack had driven them off. Of course, the rest of Sol would be on high guard for the next year and there would be a few ships sent out to investigate.

But for now, he might as well finish his lunch.

Starry Banner - 1 day later -

A few lightyears away from Sol Forced to reload all the citizens from backup. None of them survived the effects of the attack, which seems to rewire organic brains to cause psychosis and delusions. Many drones had spontaneously shut down or malfunctioned and had to also be restored from backup.
All programmed devices and AI intelligences are conducting self and cross checks to ensure integrity. Mind system check... clear.

IoM vessels were seen by long range telescope without attacking or being attacked, therefore, it is assessed as likely that the IoM is still in control of Sol. Some IoM mobilization of space forces were noted.

1 CAM missile launcher fabricated as insurance. Assessments of IoM technology indicate that a single launcher should be enough to deal with any military threat.

The humanoids are... annoyed, but they have been persuaded to take the perspective of the IoM. We did not anticipate being spotted.

A ship vote was recorded at 90% in favour of trying again. An autonomous drone fitted with an FTL engine and basic effector/teleportation devices was sent towards the Sol system on a low speed flyby, to no reaction of the defenses at the original range we were attacked.

This drone managed to get past Neptune orbit and passed Jupiter orbit before self-destructing due to an outside attempt at exerting control. The exact range of detection is unknown but given the fast initial response and the faster responses expected when forewarned, it is likely that Jupiter is the range of detection of an autonomous drone.

A second drone was sent, with an effector system that mimicked our ship's profile to 99.9% fidelity to all outside observations and this drone also got within Jupiter distance before self-destructing. Additional systems were compromised and further autonomous drone missions were deemed too likely to be taken over by the IoM.
This is a puzzling problem. The IoM detected our ship at much further distances than the relatively slow drones, and the emissions profile of the drones did not appear to change their detection range. The sensor they are using utilizes a principle we are unaware of.

Connection: The Warp?
Objection: The IoM is paranoid about Chaos and psyker use of the Warp is dangerous and hunted down by the IoM zealously. Would they dare to use a dangerous and unstable technique in their home system that appears to be of great significance, if not civilizational importance?
Counter: They have a method of containing the risk from Chaos. *Priority Investigation*

One day later

A 200:1 intelligence Drone citizen volunteered to attempt a penetration into the Sol system. A backup was made, additional safeties and internal checks installed. Self-destruct in triplicate. Constant FTL internal monitor link to this Ship's Mind.
A more capable ship was prepared. No weapons other than effectors and nanobot swarm. While not normally offensive weapons, IoM assessments indicate they have no defense against effectors and nanobots.

A flight path to avoid IoM vessels, assumed hostile military, was planned. The drone will investigate Titan, what appears to be a large military outpost that is in opposition to Earth. A hop across to Earth would be easy from there and only a single payload of nanobots (replication enabled) will be sufficient for data gathering. Suicidal action safety, removed.

One minute later

The craft reached Titan orbit successfully and effector-dropped a payload of nanobots despite being attacked just past Neptune orbit. The strength of the attack recorded was much lower and the systems compensated for the random intrusions easily. (the attack appears to have patterns with dimensionality <...>)

As it left Titan orbit, the Drone AI came under increasingly stronger attacks that had to be warded off by this Mind's direct control through the FTL link. It managed to drop a payload on Mars before the self-destruct triggered when the FTL drive control was compromised (found only by a specific check; original checking systems compromised as well)

The spy nanobots appear to go undetected although we are too far away to get a detailed signal from only one payload. Signal repeaters are being built by nanobots inserted into nearby asteroids and moons via unguided FTL packages. These also appear to go undetected.
<- All future missions are to use nanobot swarms inserted via "cold" unguided FTL packages. The criteria for detection range appear to be the number and complexity of AI on the intruding craft. Perhaps organics count as well.
This fits with the theory that the Warp is sensitive to sentience, although why this should be is still unknown.

Repeating stations should be complete in one day.
He looked at the runestones again and tried to discern the future paths. There was one puzzling vision and he was trying to make sense of it. Normally, far-future visions did not have the resolution to see small events and described the future in broad strokes.

This vision was of a chess board. Sort of. It looked like no chessboard of any race he had saw before however, and every move of the pieces bore the weight of billions of souls. It was so psychically active that he could almost feel the weight of that movement.

He checked it with the others in the council and they confirmed his vision was right. It was down the branch where the Eldar contacted the new player mentioned in the Black Council’s advisory.

He cast the runestones again and watched the motions of the pieces. It was hard to see any pattern in it.

Then another seer found a different arrangement of chessboard down a different path. It was at a different time and was also on the side of the branch where they contacted the new player.

He contemplated whether he was seeing a metaphor for the Eldar game of chess with other races. But visions didn't give metaphors.

Then another was found, also in that branch. Something of great importance was happening down those branches and their length in the space of time was incredibly short. They had the sense that these "chess events" were happening in less than a second.

Over a period of days, the seers uncovered a series of "chess events" at various times across branches. Some branches had them, some had multiple, some did not. All of the ones that had the "chess events" seemed to lead to better futures in the short term.

The "chess event" closest to the present was two weeks in the future. A branch where Ulthwe's Craftworld found a webway gate on a Crone world and moved the entire Craftworld to the position of the new player. That discovery alone would be one of immense importance by itself and they were already making plans to capture that world. But showing the entire Craftworld to the new player who could easily destroy it? That was presposterous, vision of safety or not.

And they informed that player of the "chess events". That last bit seemed to be important.

Also, down that branch... there were no more branches. None at all. Ulthwe still existed, one of the seers had seen it running from a Chaos attack before the attack disintegrated for no reason at all.

They debated for a long time as the Craftworld crept towards the location of the gate.
Week 10

Culture

A new GSV and two GCUs are complete.

Some interesting observations have been made about IoM records of Chaos. Given our new mandate to probe IoM minds, the following facts have been uncovered from IoM internal security and military forces.

Chaos exists in multiple factions and species of demons are associated with them.

Each faction of Chaos is attracted and powered by actions of a particular nature. The definition of these natures are unknown but are clearly important. More presently, the Chaos contamination we are facing is most likely under the domain of Slaanesh.

Chaos contaminations proceed along the following psychological factors with susceptibility factors as so; these IoM observations have been applied to local populations of our citizens, see later report for details.

The Eye of Chaos is described in fragmented but detailed reports, the identification of this region as a major source of Chaos intrusion and a possible vector for counterattack is of high importance. As of now, any region that appears to have Chaos contamination will be strictly avoided by all Culture vessels and citizens.

Manipulation of IoM records, reports and behaviours to identify these contaminations to the IoM and observation of their standard procedure is approved and encouraged by Culture-wide Mind-vote.

Due to the corrupting influence of Chaos, and the possibility of disastrous technology espionage, all Culture assets are to be under the active control of a Mind-class intelligence, with appropriate safeguards for the Mind and all vessels and citizens.

A small but significant proportion of citizens have taken up roleplaying the IoM and Chaos as a method of releasing psychological tension. Despite general wariness and disapproval, a number of the more enthusiastic citizens have undergone temporary body modification to reflect IoM military and IoM records of Chaos demons and cultists.

Despite the inherent risk (the current favoured theory of the criteria for Chaos corruption is a universe-wide pattern recognition system that categorizes behaviour as Chaos-aligned), no attempt to control these activities was made although tight surveillance was required. Monitoring of psychological patterns of those roleplaying Chaos was required, although strict privacy protocols to protect thoughts was in place unless requested otherwise.

Interestingly, the group of full-immersion roleplay registered a lower incidence of Chaos contamination by almost two sigmas below Culture-baseline. The group of citizens who had at some point roleplayed the Chaos side had an incidence rate of nearly two and a half sigmas below Culture-baseline.

Notable incident: A Chaos demon roleplayer and another Space Marine roleplayer were sharing a post-mock battle celebration when the demon roleplayer appeared to undergo a change in psychological profile to match a standard beserk state of Chaos contamination and caused large numbers of physical fatalities among the citizens present. Only the Space Marine roleplayer survived.
due to the IoM-standard armour and weapons. The Mind of the ship was slow to react as identification was confused by the difficulty of differentiating roleplay and a true contamination.

- Addenum: The eventual distinction of the difference between roleplay and true contamination was determined from the mock post-battle report of the Space Marine roleplayer. Future protocols are to follow the alpha wave

- Amusingly, the roleplaying community among Culture citizens view the battle between the Space Marine and the demon as one of the most authentic re-creations of an IoM vs Chaos battle. Roleplaying of the Chaos-demon roleplayer and the Space Marine roleplayer, a sort of meta-roleplaying scenario, has started to make its rounds.

Week 11
Another GSV and three GCUs are complete.

The invisible scout on the Forge World of the IoM was detected talking to another invisible scout. A minor scouting force, consisting of a levitating air transport device and at least ten organic beings, then emerged from the invisible structure.

These invisible intruders proceeded to setup an unsophisticated electromagnetic signal transmission device and began transmitting in the general direction of orbit. The transmission was conducted in an altered IoM code although authentications with the local authorities failed. The Culture vessel in question intercepted the message and deciphered it as a request for contact from the Culture and quickly constrained the signal to an area of the sky that the IoM was not monitoring. The IoM reaction to the unknown signal was muted and the scouting parties failed to make contact with the invisible intruders.

The message from the invisible intruders requested contact from the Culture by way of a dead drop made at another secluded location far away from the invisible structure. One of the invisible scouts proceeded to that location and waited.

Apparently, our existence has been perceived by a race with some unknown technologies. This makes analysis of them take some precedence over the IoM and eventually a Mind-wide vote decided in favour of diplomatic contact. The contact will proceed through use of the dead drop provided as knowledge of the Culture's ability to pierce the intruders' invisibility may become a vital piece of strategic information should hostilities break out.

Reading the minds of the intruders has been restricted to avoid souring diplomatic relations.

A reply affirming our existence and willingness for peaceful contact has been sent in IoM language.

A minor breakthrough in Chaos contamination has been found. A Mind noted that the often Chaos contamination was always preceded some days before by a subtle change in the psychological state of the citizen during the REM sleep cycle. A quick check confirmed that the only Drones who did display Chaos contamination symptoms were those who requested to have a humanoid sleep pattern. Non-humanoid psychologies seemed to be significantly more resistant to Chaos contamination. This discovery was made by the continuous monitor, requested by some citizens, registering an unusual change in sleep pattern, the 100% correlation to contamination was later found in a multivariate analysis of Chaos contamination attempting to find a pattern.

A significant sample of willing subjects were found to undergo monitoring and suppression of REM sleep (with intervention to realign biochemistry). Current results appear promising (no new Chaos contamination in the last two days) but statistical analysis will have to wait for a few more days to gain significance.
Week 12
One Rapid Offensive Unit, two GSVs and three GCUs are complete.

The statistical analysis is complete. It appears correct that dreams ARE the vector for Chaos contamination. 99.5% of all citizens have requested that their sleep patterns be adjusted accordingly and a protocol has been created and executed. Of the remaining, sleep patterns are now under constant surveillance. Any detection of Chaos contamination causes an immediate reset to backup just before the sleep period.

A Culture wide vote was held and we have agreed, near unanimously, to declare a state of war. Chaos is a force that is near universal and has apparent unlimited reach; Chaos will be formally designated as a Homogenizing Swarm and all morally allowed actions to contain or destroy it are a priority.

A reply from the Eldar has identified them as a faction in their society and that they too desire peaceful contact. They have been under assault from not just Chaos but also Necron forces, an as yet unidentified civilization. Nevertheless, an exchange of intelligence of our mutual enemy, Chaos, can only be beneficial and will be a first step on the road of peace. A proposal amounting to such has been our reply, Necron held areas were also requested and the Rapid Offensive Unit, with its higher cruising speed, is ready to serve as a scout of this new side.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, Culture citizens, even when they request horns and red skin, aren't really going to turn into Chaos demons simply because they look like one. In fact, roleplayers are more likely to understand Chaos (that's why they're doing an RPG! They like the WH40K setting!) and so would be more resistant to Chaos contamination.

Clearly though, the whole thing is moot now.
Nano Skirmish

**Starry Banner - Culture GCU Adjacent To Sol**
Nanobots have completed FTL comm repeater stations in the asteroid belt and Io. Initial data scan of IoM electromagnetic comm traffic indicates large amounts of IoM shipping activity surrounding Terra, corresponding to the reports and descriptions noted in other systems.

Nanobots have been placed on multiple IoM passenger carrying ships enroute to Terra.

1 week later
Nanobots have fabricated a displacer and effector beacon on Io, taking advantage of its strong magnetic field coupling with the parent gas giant, Jupiter, to conceal their presence. Current range is only to Titan (Mars is too far along in its orbit).

Mars indicates an interesting variation in production capability between Forge Worlds. Mars is apparently able to produce more complex materials to higher tolerances than other worlds. Why this should be so is unknown. Possibly due to their governmental style.

Titan appears to house the headquarters of a military organization of the IoM, focusing on the warp. This is of great interest and their training is being observed closely. The psychological techniques and implied indoctrination as well as use of mind and body altering drugs, both consensually and compulsorily, is a point of great objection among the citizens.

Most of the IoM technology is of a far lower level than would be expected of a galaxy spanning civilization, the use of the Warp appears to have enabled much of their colonization. In fact, their dependence on the warp to manage their civilization makes them extremely vulnerable to Chaos, indeed multiple references in IoM literature point towards losses to the Warp simply from use.

Numerous references to the Golden Throne, the Emperor and the Astronomican are of great interest. Landing of any of the ships with nanobots is quite highly anticipated although there appears to quite a queue.

1 week later
A courier from the main Culture expedition has updated our known stars maps as well as carrying permission of read IoM minds directly without prior permission.
This is met with some disbelief that such a thing could have been approved, but many of the organics still carry some animosity towards the IoM for the attack and the motion to adopt the new policy is accepted.

Additional details of IoM society are forthcoming but nothing of note with regards to Chaos is uncovered. Much of the data on the Mars manufacturing ability and production of warships and weapons are similarly uninteresting.
Of note, however, is their knowledge structure. Not many of the IoM engineers fully understand the principles of what they work with and merely operate by rote under the instruction of superiors. Research activity also appears to be unusually stunted. This is the purported explanation for the difference in apparent technological ability between Forge Worlds.

The Grey Knights purport their resistance to Chaos contamination due to the training, indoctrination, body enhancement and drugs. No volunteers could be found to try investigating their claim. Part of the resistance appears to be some form of warp technology based on their armour. Experimentation with the Warp is still forbidden but a ship-wide vote has agreed to bend the rules (the exception given for the geller fields deployed by one culture ship convinced many).
Ship-wide deployment of the Grey Knights warding technology is complete.

The displacer and effector beacon on Io can now reach Mars.

1 week later
Experimenting with the Grey Knights wardings seems to reduce the rate of Chaos contamination by one sigma (compared to IoM baseline). However, another package from the core fleet has given a solution to the problem. All of the organics and valid drones have consented to not having dreams.

One of the ships finally gained permission to land on Luna. Nanobots cannot construct a repeating station there without being noticed so another asteroid in the belt has been earmarked for it. Nanobots followed multiple visitors down to Terra on short range craft.

Sacrifice of psykers to power the Astronomican is... frankly, a shock. The culture of the IoM would certainly permit it, but our culture prevented many of the 1:1 intelligences from conceiving of the idea. A ship-wide vote to immediately intervene was started but failed to pass (30% for, 50% against, 20% abstain).

The Emperor and the Golden Throne is worshipped as a god, but has more in common with a religious idol than a dictator who actively claims to be a divine being. He is on permanent lifesupport and monitoring of his health is underway.

No attempt to interfere with IoM practices towards the Emperor or the Astronomican will be made. The risk of destroying the entire IoM and perhaps this entire expedition is deemed too high, especially since Warp technology is not well understood, neither by us nor by the IoM.

A ship-wide vote to attempt contact has been started but is yet to resolve.

Starry Banner - Situation Report From Mars Hypercomm Control Node
- Control system check... pass
- System integrity check... pass
- IoM interception probability... nil
- Compromization probability... negligible

Anomaly in Mars nanobot swarm detected:
Expected growth curve for current operation level... attached
Current growth curve... deviation detected, probability of false error 10^-10400

Number of observed nanobot signals exceeds currently controlled swarm count...

---Inference engine disabled due to restriction on sentience level---

---Returning to default action

Starry Banner

The situation report is attached. Nanobot control appears to be compromised on Mars, the number of nanobots appears to be within variation for the time frame and control parameters, perhaps a bit low. However, a large portion of the swarm control nodes are failing to respond. Locations of those swarms have been mapped to a small area on the surface, what the IoM calls Noctis Labyrinth.

Forced cyber intrusion was conducted and control systems of those nodes appear to be compromised. With some effort, control of one of those nodes was restored for a short period before apparently being destroyed by the others.

Hostile compromization of the nanobots on Mars in that region is assumed. From the intrusion, it
appears likely that the infected swarms will have automatically destroyed much of their in-built template databases, but they appear to retain the ability to copy other templates. Alterations to the self-destruction code have been made for the nanobots still under our control.

Courses of action are being considered. The fallout of this action could range from a minor setback to total destruction of the IoM depending on how we deal with this. In any case, the surface of Mars looks like it might soon turn into a battleground.

- Starry Banner
The uncontrolled nanobots appear to originate from the Noctis Labyrinth, a region of twisted valles. Currently, inter-swarm contact with the nanobots is rejected and disassembly by still controlled nanobots is underway.

Some kind of computer worm is the most likely match of the characteristics of this attack.

6 hours later
Cameras placed around the Notics Labyrinth indicate that a minor source of heat has sprung up inside it. Effector scans from Io do not have enough resolution to accurate discern its purpose, and while its apparent composition is similar to an IoM ship reactor, it is not apparently connected to IoM activity. Hijacked nanobots are assumed to be constructing something inside controlled areas. Destruction of that object using the Io effector beacon was successful, and the IoM has not observed anything of this "war".

Efforts to eliminate hijacked nanobots have been redoubled. Replication limits have been relaxed and a standard protocol for neutralizing nanobot swarms with another swarm has been developed.

6 hours later
We now have a major problem, advise core expedition that Starry Banner will be proceeding as if first contact with the IoM is likely. The circumstances appear unfavourable.

Hijacked nanobots appear to match the patterns of scrapcode recorded in IoM databases on Titan. Not only that, they apparently managed to reverse engineer some old war wreckage, which implies some form of sentient AI controller. How this fails to trip IoM psyker defences is unknown.

Containment of the Chaos-controlled nanobots has failed. Operating under the assumption that it was going to be a pure nanite battle, a standard disassembly protocol was put in place that would not attract IoM attention. A nanobot reassembled and apparently AI piloted warmachine managed to breach the cordon with flamethrowers, internally guarded by nanobot swarms that are employing the same disassembly protocols to our nanobots.

The effector station was used to deactivate the machine but it restarted nearly immediately and we were forced to destroy it violently. This has attracted IoM attention and a few contingents of some sort of rapid response forces are already adjusting their orbit to reach overhead.

Worse still, warmachines are apparently being refined from the metals on mar's surface and wrecks in Chaos-nanobot held ground. Ground vibrations were detected which resembled IoM-style blast mining practices in the Noctis Labyrinth, and the magnetic signature of a metal seam is gradually weakening. Multiple flamethrower tanks had to be destroyed by effector and the situation is worsening by the minute.

While we maintain control by use of the effector, this use is obvious to the IoM. Employing our own
nanobot piloted warmachines is also an option that we are considering.

Additional reports will be attached in the next package.
Golden Goose - Rogue Trader

Golden Goose - Culture GCU Tailing An IoM Independent Trading Vessel

I've followed this guy around the local area for the last few weeks. Independent traders, separate from the hierarchy of the Imperium, ought to be considerably more interesting than the same rigidity applied over individual quirks of planets.

A contact request has been granted after much discussion and one of the three Special Circumstances agents are being prepared for actual contact with this "rogue trader".

His ship has been thoroughly scanned for any trace of Chaos, with none found. The leader of this ship appears to have a compatible mental profile, willingness to try new things and apparently dissatisfied with the IoM. As well as exploitable psychological weaknesses.

At his next port of call, a backwards mining colony, I will be inserting the SC agent posing as a dealer of illegitimate technology. As the SC agent who will be joining his band is obviously too much to risk in the Warp, the agent will attempt to sell him a simple low-tech hyperspace drive unit (non-sentient).

The SC agent met with the rogue trader. Successfully. In fact, it was rather more of a challenge to intercept the spies (which was not hard at all) attempting to monitor the conversation since we didn't really get a chance to explain much beyond "three hundred c" and "safe".

Of course, he was suitably wary of an unknown person attempting to sell unknown technology (at least his risk aversion isn't completely faulty, which would make him a bad choice for obvious reasons), but he at least demanded a private demonstration. Still, I have a good feeling about this, it will be easy to use him, just give him more stuff!

Currently, we are preparing a small yatch for demonstration. The trader has been given coordinates in deep space where he will meet the yatch and we will demonstrate. I cannot imagine anything easier.

*some hours later*

The yatch isn't ready. He apparently was excited enough that he requested immediate clearance to leave orbit.

It will have to be much smaller than planned, able to fit no more than 5 humanoids. I have modified the agent's coverstory (which for some reason hasn't been asked for yet).

She will pretend to have come across the yatch (xeno-ship) and taken it for an unwise ride around an inhabited system and is now on the run from the IoM inquisition. This would explain the generally low price coupled with the demand that she be taken on as a permanent luxury passenger with access to the bridge.

And that he avoid the inquisition, but our interests appear to align on that.

*1 day later*

Hahaha! His Navigator's expression was hilarious. Apparently, most of his crew are still suspicious of the device, but the psykers (an Astropath and Navigator) have indicated the hyperdrive unit is clear of Chaos or in fact any warp signature at all.

He has agreed to the deal, the SC agent will be an honoured guest for as long as she likes. Not
having to replace his warp drive certainly helped matters, our hyperdrive can basically be put in the middle of his ship.

Aisa Mero - SC Agent

Our captain is very pleased with his new engine. Obviously. However, psych thinks that he is probably unwilling to harbor me for much longer than is required to operate the engine.

Recommend that I be permitted to attempt educating him on the possibilities.

Half a week later
That's his first trade conducted. Made record time with virtually no use of his plasma drive reaction mass. Quite apart from the much lower bottom line he has from using a reactionless drive, this is the fastest and safest trip he has ever made according to the navigator.

The navigator and astropath continue to appear stable despite some understandably misplaced feelings of jealousy. I have attempted to deflect some of it by training the navigator the characteristics of the hyperspace drive.

Starting from hyperspherical coordinate systems.

1 week later
As psychological assessments indicate that he is likely to attempt to abandon me once my training of his crew is complete, I will be moving to the second stage of the operation.

... 

The second stage is successful. I have given the following coordinates as the location of the nanobot canister. For some reason, he prefers to call it an STC constructor, which was explained by one of the techpriests (who is also very happy).

He has agreed to help find and destroy one Chaos intrusion. I should require far more than his stated time needed to recruit mercenaries in order to educate his techpriests in the use of the nanobots.

I suspect that he thinks my cover story is a lie but also doesn't care. The implications of nano-manufacturing is apparently well known among the tech-priests and higher echelons of society. This bodes well for our purposes.

My talking with his lay crew is drawing attention. While the attitudes the rogue trader and his retinue hold parallel those of Type II aristocratic/plutocratic societies, he apparently expected me to behave in the same way.

At least this helps cover my lack of knowledge of STC constructors, the rogue trader, I believe, thinks that I originate outside the aristocracy.

Social report attached as supplementary information. Please arrange the location of the canister at the given coordinates.

1 week later We have arrived and the canister is on board in my hands. None of the crew dare to touch it, understandably since I could still be lying.

...

The surprise was quite interesting as, despite the apparent knowledge of molecular forges, he still had some interesting reactions when I told him that this wine-bottle sized flask contained enough
nanobots to manufacture whatever he wished.

Of course, the control panel for the swarm is only a very crude tool, but that was more than enough to use his ship's power grid to deconstruct a shipping container and assemble multiple swarms and control panels. A laspistol power pack, the schematic supplied by his tech priest after some persuasion, was also assembled, uncharged.

Currently, the tech priests are using it to attempt to repair a previously unrepairable lance weapon on his Dauntless class cruiser. I am currently in the process of teaching them how to use it to make known patterns.

**Half a week later**

There is a problem. We are currently enroute to a nearby mining world in order to purchase raw materials. The trader is currently drafting a financial scheme that will let him delay the delivery of goods in exchange for the metals. He plans to buy assorted metals, build lasguns from them and pay for the metals with those lasguns. He thinks it can work, or at least it would be possible if he pitched some of his money in.

The problem comes from his techpriests. While he still has not fully realized the implications of manufacturing anywhere he wants, the techpriests are less slow. Some of them are very insistent that I speed up my teaching so that they can learn its full operation before we reach the mining world, I suspect they will attempt to bring a sample of the nanobots to the nearest Forge World and from there introduce it as an STC constructor to the Adeptus Mechanicus.

This is problematic for obvious reasons.
Week 13

Culture

Four GCUs, two new GSVs and a GSU is complete

Given the probe into Sol, preparations for full diplomatic contact across multiple IoM worlds are being readied. This is just a backup plan as according to the couriers, the detection of *Starry Banner* by the IoM was very limited.

The Eldar reply to our diplomatic contact request is affirmative. Hopes of gaining a useful ally in this universe have increased and their provision of an IoM system which they claim will soon be attacked by the Necrons is much appreciated. The Rapid Offensive Unit has been dispatched, it will arrive in two weeks. A GCU has been dispatched to make the Contact at an Eldar world that they say has regressed to a lower level of technology. It will arrive in one week, the Eldar say they will be waiting for us there.

The extent of Eldar knowledge of our capabilities, including times of arrival, is disturbing. It implies that they have deep insight into our behaviour and logistical capabilities. Yet, their ignorance of our overall culture and society is puzzling in this context.

Week 14

Five GCUs, three GSVs and a ROU is complete

Contact with the Eldar have been made and an exchange of information on Chaos has been made. Some minor exchange of culture and an exchange visit has been tentatively agreed to. The history of the Eldar as a galaxy spanning race and a warning about their historical Fall was particularly interesting. It appears that we may have barely dodged a similar Fall due to the annulation of the dream-vector for Chaos contamination.

Much of the Eldar data on Chaos is fragmented and concentrated near this area of the galaxy, which is apparently strongly held by the IoM. Patterns of reported Chaos warbands and corrupted IoM starships seem to corroborate the hypothesis that Chaos and the IoM both use a similar form of FTL drive using the Warp. The Eldar appear to use their nearly unnoticeable structures as transport. We have refrained from asking about it to conceal our ability to see through their stealth.

IoM records and reports have been altered to ensure one such Chaos warband was noticed and despite the "miraculous" escape of the assaulted trader, a major IoM reaction force is underway. The
Chaos warband is being shadowed by a GCU (IoM forces in FTL are untraceable) and Homogenizing Swarm characteristics are noted, as well as extreme levels of hostility and cruelty towards IoM citizens on the farm world they are currently attacking. Intervention was decided against as we still wish to follow the IoM response. Nanobot and information-system contact with any signs of Chaos has been absolutely proscribed after the near-loss of control, Chaos appears to have a semi-sentient pan-information-system virus with a virulence and system-compromising power rivalling that of a full Mind. In case of control compromization, the shadowing GCU recommends usage of effectors to destroy all electronic equipment with localized microwave and large area EMP bursts. While containing the virus is possible through use of effectors and a Mind-class intelligence that understands the underlying hardware, this is considered too slow for field work and risks contamination of the mother-ship. Extermination of this "scrapcode" (an IoM name) in the wild is to be undertaken at first sight and with extreme prejudice. Analysis of neutralized scrapcode chunks indicate a complex polymorphic program with many novel and unknown techniques, even seemingly nonsensical. How it manages to adapt to unique information platforms is of great interest and may yield useful advances in information system penetration.

General note to all Culture sentients: Just because Chaos space capability is roughly on par with the IoM, do NOT assume that their capabilities in other areas follows a similar developmental trajectory. **They may even surpass us; extreme caution is recommended.**

All Chaos instances may be considered hostile.

A priority courier carrying Chaos warband approximate locations has been sent to *Golden Goose* as it concerns their mission.

**Week 15**

Four GCUs, three GSVs, an ROU and a GSU are complete

Spreading of Culture vessels along the galactic rotation has reached the border of a new IoM sector called Segmentum Obscurus. One of the immediate observations made near the boundary of the IoM sector is that all IoM registered merchant fleet lanes appeared to avoid a very large sector starting a week's travel away. All traffic within a fuzzy exclusion zone appears to be outlaw vessels and military traffic.

This sector had been subject to some previous scrutiny due to unexplained astronomical anomalies, but the closer perspective indicate some form of space-time distortion across interstellar distances.

IoM registered traffic and tapped order chains confirm that we have found the Eye of Terror. The two ROUs are dispatched with great haste to investigate with due caution. They will not enter the Eye until further information can be acquired, but their speed and focus due to a lack of crew will greatly help investigations. They will take three weeks to arrive. Additional GCUs have been dispatched to that area, with many crews voting to go voluntarily. Technology espionage is a threat that we are taking precautions against and contact with Chaos is still prohibited. These will arrive in the region over four to six weeks.
Eldar negotiations have been useful although not immediately profitable. Their society appears more rigid than at first glance and attempting to corral Chaos by empowering them with technology may be more difficult than believed. More details attached. A report on the Necrons is expected next week.

A report from *Starry Banner* indicates that the spy nanobots used to investigate Sol were corrupted by scrapcode. A GCU carrying a message regarding the extermination policy has been sent back, partly as backup, but it will also take two weeks to arrive. Preparations to stabilize the IoM planets we can reach are underway in case of a total administrative collapse. This is an unmitigated disaster and will undoubtedly hinder peaceful contact with the IoM when it occurs.

*Golden Goose* appears to have headed off a power play between two factions with the contacted Rouge Trader. The mission is still on track, more details attached.
Scrapcoded nanobots on Mars

Starry Banner
Day 1
Monitoring of the IoM response is underway. A major land force is approaching on land with occasional bombardments from orbital platforms. The unusually broken terrain of the Noctics Labyrinth makes indirect fire rather ineffective.

We are using the Effector station on Io to strike under the cover of IoM bombardment.

Day 2
IoM land forces, comprising of a mixed group of motorized infantry, a tank column and autonomous walker combat units has passed our perimeter. Heavy artillery support and significant air cover is also present.

Despite initial fears of mass chaos as the land force came into contact with the scrapcoded nanites, the nanites nor the IoM appear to react to each other. Our nanites on the IoM forces have been continuing their battle with the scrapcode, but remaining in close proximity to a solid or liquid surface has been shown to avoid IoM scanners.

Said scanners appear able to detect our own nanobot swarms when within approximately 50 meters, apparently by sensing the conductivity of the air, and after a few initial incidents of “firing at ghosts”, we have restricted our nanobot movements to surfaces where they appear to avoid detection. Scrapcoded nanobots appear to also follow this 50 meter rule and so the disadvantage is not that great.
Analysis of the IoM non-warp detection capability is underway and a protocol to avoid these detectors is in development. No application of it on the battlefield will be made to avoid further technology loss to the scrapcode.

Day 3
Fierce fighting with macroscale scrapcode-nanite assembled machines on the part of the IoM ground forces is under way. Despite the lack of attempted communications with a supposedly unknown invasion (indicating a previously unknown ruthlessness on their part), the IoM appears to be reluctant to employ planet-crust piercing weapons they have in stationary orbit over the Noctics Labyrinth.

Why they would risk a costly land invasion when they could employ them with little fallout is unclear. Our monitoring of their progress is limited due to continued invisible battles surrounding the IoM column.

It is becoming clear that the scrapcode is considerably more intelligent than we first assumed. Rather than immediately sabotaging IoM forces, the scrapcode appears to be planning to use them to spread back out of our containment.

And we cannot stop them conventionally; we are actually losing the war around the IoM forces, our nanites there are surrounded and the Effector on Io still does not have the resolution to attack the nanobots directly without causing IoM casualties or widespread equipment damage.

More drastic measures are being considered.

Day 4
Continued fierce fight in Noctics. The observed situation appears to be that the IoM is winning against macro-scale resistance.
Our nanobots on their forces are fighting a losing battle. We estimate all presence of Culture nanobots will be erased in 48 hours.

One citizen, a roleplayer of an IoM Techpriest, has suggested that the IoM response to an anonymous transmission of the nature of the nanobot threat would instigate an IoM investigation.

Analysis of IoM hardware capabilities is underway. We will attempt to fabricate a feasible method to detect and neutralize the nanites on Mars using IoM equipment or easily produceable equipment.

Day 5
We have opted to create a simple microwave array as a nanite destroyer and simply inform the IoM about the nature of the threat and the usage of this weapon over the Noctis area. A field nanobot detector appears beyond IoM capabilities, even by tweaking the wideband sensor device, but confirmation of the threat can be observed in a lab experiment.

Instead of an anonymous transmission, we will use our nanites to hijack one of the IoM data terminals to generate this message. With the IoM religious devotion and belief of machine spirits, which is only partially supported by semi-AI routines, it may pass close scrutiny.

The macro-scale fighting in Noctis has passed its peak, we presume that the IoM forces have broken the backbone of the macro-scale forces of the scrapcoded nanites although our monitoring capacity inside Noctis is highly limited.

The message will be deployed as soon as the hijacking process is complete.

Day 6
Surprises. The IoM do not appear to react at all. Their forces are still on cleanup in the Noctis Labyrinth.

One of our nanobot swarms managed to evade destruction until three hours past the projected time we were due to lose all contact in Noctis. Which was also surprising, but considerably less so than the IoM response.

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Addenum, the IoM has heeded the warning and was awaiting the results of a field experiment before moving. Their scaling up of our microwave array device using different principles at least indicates a level of adaptability that we did not expect.

A series of high altitude nuclear detonations along with the projection of a strong and massive magnetic field from orbital assets has produced a highly focused EMP around the Noctis area. This has the effect of destroying every surface nanite and even most in Noctis itself. Ground penetration of the EMP is significant and hostile nanite count in Noctis is estimated to have dropped by 98%.

IoM forces in Noctis appear to have won the battle at the cost of their own equipment, although given the rapid response, we estimate that they will have operating microwave emitters soon. Our nanites in other IoM areas are already preparing for self-destruction to evade detection by the electrical activity sensor method we outlined.

Day 7
Our information on Mars is sketchy as we have indications that the nanobots are being tested for and we were forced to pull the plug on our eyes there. It is a small price to pay for what appears to be a major mistake.

However, we believe that extensive nanobot presence is being tested for and IoM use of microwave
emitters is confirmed by the effector station on Io.

The Mars hypercomm relay will be deactivated and readied for decommissioning. Presumably, Earth and Titan will soon be tested too and the nanobots and their hypercomm relays are also being readied for shutdown.

Despite the apparent disaster, we have still gained valuable information into the Golden Throne, Astronomican and IoM character. These details and the full report is already on the way back to the main fleet.

The Io effector station has self-destruct charges set and will be expanded and refined to create a monitoring station. We are, so far, limited to sound and low-resolution images at this point, and we will be doing our best to monitor IoM progress in Noctis and throughout Sol.
At a sleepy IoM Farmworld

Week 1
Rapid Offensive Unit White Devil reporting in! Arrived at target world and beginning standard scanning procedure.

The world appears to be minor IoM farm world, with administration pattern gamma-4. Population circa 4.5 million sentients, 4.3 million humanoids.

Week 2
Day 1
Instigating standard Eldar stealth protocol has revealed a major invisible structure in the system. Its construction appears to be a much larger and more complex version than recorded.

Additional stealthed starships were spotted along with this scan in orbit of the IoM farmworld. These are presumed to be Eldar mobile space forces. A significant number, more than enough to overrun the IoM world is present but no apparent action has been taken against the IoM.

It is my personal opinion that the Eldar are actually avoiding revealing their presence to the IoM.

Day 3
A series of contacts appeared at the edge of the system and appeared to accelerate towards the IoM farm world. All the Eldar ships disengaged their stealth and moved onto an intercept trajectory.

From the signatures, I have deemed that the Eldar ships are using some form of very efficient reaction drive while the Necrons (presumed identity of the unknown contacts) do not apparently eject reaction mass despite not intruding into hyperspace.

Combat speeds were on the order of a few thousand kilometers per second, the course of the battle along with my analysis is attached.

Detailed effector scans reveal very interesting information. The Eldar appear to use an unknown material in the construction of their ships and weapons, this is apparently utilizing unknown physics, probably connected to the Warp in some fashion. An atomically precise duplicate does not have the same properties as the original material, indicating that the Warp does not merely recognize a pattern of real world material.

The Necrons are even more interesting. The construction of their ships appears to utilize sub-atomic structures and energy fields that are fractal in shape and apparently in resolution. This is an unknown method of construction that is also new to us.

More interestingly, their engines are indeed a reactionless drive that are somehow tied to their construction. However, weapons and tactics do not appear to match what would be expected of their apparent mastery of material engineering, being nothing more than a similar end-goal to the Eldar's weaponry. No new paradigms in weapons technology, unlike their engineering technology, appear to be in use.

This apparent mismatch is best explained by a dual-source explanation. Necron materials (including their sentient crew, which are mechanical in construction) and starship drive appear to originate from a civilization that was more advanced in our own that is utilizing unknown and potentially very useful physics. The Necron weapons and tactical doctrines were then built by a lower technology society, most likely their own, that did not have access to the techniques used to create them.

Yes, permit me to speculate. The Necrons may indeed be sentient weapons built by another race
more advanced than us and set loose to achieve their goals. In this light, the Homogenizing Swarm traits from Eldar descriptions make sense.

The battle proceeded with little loss on either side. The Eldar tactics were unusually cautious and definitely wary of the Necrons' technology advantage. Nevertheless, despite the Necrons breaking through and heading towards the planet, the Eldar decided that they would not attempt to interfere. Damaged Necron ships were noted to self-repair more rapidly than could be expected from even nanites and debris from damaged areas were observed to simply teleport into position. Without going through hyperspace and without any warp signature that I know to scan for. The Necrons may have a form of teleportation, again using unknown principles.

As the Necrons approached the IoM farmworld, the Eldar broadcasted an encrypted message that proposed an exchange of combat knowledge and asked that "the Culture engage these threats". I declined to reply to their message and proceeded in accordance with Contact principles. Until the Necrons proved they were truly hostile, despite conflict with the Eldar, I would not interfere.

The Necrons proceeded to disable feeble IoM resistance with precision weaponry and attack IoM forces in a very lopsided battle. At this point, I decided that the evidence was enough to warrant intervention and used Displacers to move all the Necron ground forces into orbit of the planet. They appeared to survive this and even teleported back to the ground ships, although considerably more wary. They appeared to act as if the IoM was somehow responsible and I proceeded to use effectors to test their resistance against coherent light, resonant vibrations and kinetic impacts. The experimental results are attached, but the common result of any severe damage is the damaged Necron soldier teleporting back to the mothership and regenerating with the same speed as was observed earlier. It is my personal hunch that the exact same atom that was disturbed from its location by external forces returns to the same position as before.

The landed mothership was then Displaced in large (3x3 meter blocks) pieces into deep space, followed by all the Necron ground forces. The ground forces appeared to survive this although they failed to teleport away nor did the mothership appear to continue operating. The remain Necron fleet then began to build a retreat vector and I proceeded to negate that vector by use of Effector and Displaced all the Necron crew as well as anything that might appear to be a control system into the same deep space location as the others.

Virtually all the ships continued to accelerate in the direction of the last vector and I had to Displace significant fractions of each ship before the inertialess drive would stop working.

All the Necrons appeared to survive the process and were not able to rejoin any of their ships via teleport.

Having halted the Necron invasion, with minimal loss of IoM life and none of the Necrons, I delivered the diplomatic message to the Eldar, as accordance to the case 2i-1 "Culture hostile engagement with Necrons, Eldar helped". The Eldar did not reply and accelerated towards their teleportation gate under stealth.

The ease of doing this surprised me, the advanced technology of the Necron materials appears to be transformable through hyperspace, indicating a purely non-hyperspace physics.

I am beginning to question the Necron prisoners while simulating a sterile environment with Effectors until I can manufacture enough ship to contain them. Transport help would be much appreciated, current estimated time to complete manufacture is estimated at three weeks.

Week 3
This is the GCU assigned to help White Devil transport Necron prisoners to their origin world, we
have met some problems.

White Devil has conducted various experiments on the Necrons and it appears that none of them are fully sentient. While they behave and communicate sophisticated concepts, their intelligence is restricted to matters of conquest and destruction of designated targets.

It appears that none of the leaders of this raid have been captured, perhaps their teleportation technology can transport them across interstellar distances. Since the front line troops do not appear to be high on the sentient scale, and given the patterns of command hierarchy observed by White Devil during their operation, the existence of these leaders is almost certain.

What we have concluded is that the Necrons are likely to infer our existence indirectly from the reports of this raid's failure, while we have no way to obtaining any information as to the source of the raid.

Nevertheless, a command hierarchy of sentience supports White Devil's hypothesis that the Necrons are a weaponized Homogenizing Swarm. We have conferred and we have agreed that these prisoners do not constitute true intelligence. We will be transporting them back to the main operation area for further analysis by other Minds.

On that note, there are enough prisoners and starship fragments intact to satisfy more than the demand for research purposes. White Devil has requested that it be allowed to take on the Necrons as its "crew" and conversion to a more GCU-styled hull. I am inclined to agree, although the request is unusual. We do not appear to have need of full-scale weaponry, if the Eldar are correct that the Necrons are the most technologically advanced civilization in this galaxy. And White Devil will still retain most of its armament, as well as gain the ability to support large numbers of prisoners for an indefinite duration. The Necrons appear to be very tough to physical abuse and will not significantly affect the acceleration of White Devil.

While the Necrons certainly must be sentient to devise their own battle tactics, these captured specimens are not sentient and may only be called Necrons by the Eldar and IoM by association. I see no moral objection to White Devil's request. I also recommended that White Devil should continue its investigations in this area as it may potentially find the Necron-occupied worlds.

Additionally, White Devil has stated its intentions to try uplifting these Necrons, although much basic science about their nature has to first be conducted. Nevertheless, I see no reason argue against this. What identity they may have about themselves is unidentifiable and perhaps success at granting them true intelligences might result in fruitful gains.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 1

**Aisha Mero**

Golden Goose has agreed to the plan and I will propose that the nanobots be locked to my personal identification. Given that we require some way to devise a method by which the nanobots do not spread across the IoM in general as the consequences of letting Chaos have access to its capabilities are disastrous.

I believe I can make the case.

...

I had to, rather pointedly, note that by locking the nanobots to me, the Rogue Trader would be able to make full use of them now as I could then teach his techpriests to use them to their full capacity. Also, that having a monopoly on the nanobots for himself afterwards would be very profitable.

His Techpriests are distinctly unhappy with the situation as would be expected, but since the Rogue Trader is the master of his ship, and I am currently the only person who can operate the nanobots beyond telling them to replicate themselves, the deal is done.

Half a week later

The lasgun trading scheme is on. It appears that the Rogue Trader is generating some attention by promising to sell large quantities of lasguns. In fact, the quantity of metal he has managed to obtain, supposedly by legal means, on the back of the promise of delivery indicates some amount of threat of force. After all, this ship is the most powerful ship in orbit and apparently, he outranks even the local governor in the Imperial hierarchy.

Nevertheless, the amount of control he has displayed on the knowledge of the nanobots is nothing short of incredible. Virtually none of the crew know about it and I was told in no uncertain terms that revealing the existence of the nanobots would lead to him shooting me.

Week 2

We have traded the lasguns as promised, at least he keeps his word, and a portion of the excess to the local regiment of Guardsmen in exchange for cash that the Rogue Trader used to buy the cooperation of a Sword class frigate from a mercenary also in dock.

The payment is in lasguns and cash. The Rogue Trader, having bought a small mountain of minerals, is getting more lasguns than even he anticipated. Trading the excess for even more minerals has depleted the supply of minerals the planetary governor is willing to let go. The price of lasguns on the planet is also rapidly dropping and the Rogue Trader is planning to move to a nearby Forge World to sell it to the considerably more liquid market there.

It appears that the speed of exponential growth has taken even the Techpriests by surprise. The Rogue Trader had counted on manufacturing the lasguns on the way to the Forge World, but since lasguns are less dense than the raw metal, and the nanobots have had time to replicated, by the time
he had completed the last trade for materials, the nanobots had already produced too many lasguns for his cargo hold to fit them all as well as the new set of raw materials.

After slowing down the production, the Rogue Trader opted to offload the untransportable lasguns to the mercenary as payment for future services at a steep discount.

Golden Goose
The mercenary has been told to go on ahead through the warp where we will meet him at the Forge World right next door. It is anticipated that the Rogue Trader will attempt to upgrade to a better ship there as well as obtain construction plans for better infantry weapons as well as ground armour. Clarification that more complicated equipment than lasguns was equally easy to produce has made him extremely impressed.

Week 3
The Rogue Trader has arrived at the Forge World ahead of the mercenary escort frigate. He is in the process of negotiating to purchase a Lunar Class Cruiser as well as talking to other interested mercenaries. It has been noted that the Rogue Trader has offered delivery of specialized equipment like powered armour.

The lasgun stock has been sold, either as payment or for credit which was used to finance the deal for the Lunar and additional raw materials are being taken on board.

Various construction plans have been copied aboard ship and manufacture of these items has begun. Negotiations to obtain construction plans for a Lunar Cruiser have been met with some resistance and suspicion.

Of note is how the Rogue Trader prevented any contact with the world apart from himself, measures included locking every method of transmission from the ship. The Techpriests under his command were extremely unhappy at this decision as they were unable to inform the local authorities of the existence of the nanobots.

An attempt to assault the SC agent was made by one of them for purposes unknown. Perhaps he underestimated her physical abilities due to her unusually small size, but after that incident the nickname "palmtop tiger" is spreading through the crew. No comment has been made about how she managed to apply more force than was possible with virtually no leverage (courtesy of the neural uplink to this ship's Effectors and a magnetic grip implant in her foot bones).

The nickname generated some amusement among the citizens of this GCU but appropriate precautions were taken and scanning the entire crew revealed at least two plots to steal control of the nanobots or a working unlocked copy. The Techpriests in particular had a plot to steal control of it by using a crude neural implant. This finding has generated some outrage but no action will be taken unless the agent's life or mental integrity is deemed to be in danger; her mental backup schedule has been increased to two hours.

The other plot to steal a copy of the nanobots appears to be a lone operator with no apparent connection to the people who could have known this information. This is troublesome as there has been no indication of any information leakage. This lone gunnery officer has been added to the list of actively tracked crew members.

Chapter End Notes

When a 100 gram pile of nanobots can turn assorted mix of minerals into another 100
gram pile of nanobots in an hour (ideal conditions of a sheltered cargo hold on a starship)... things get hairy.

The resultant upheaval of production power can take some getting used to.
Eldar - First Contact

Week 1
A small land party consisting of a Farseer and her two bodyguards, as well as a stealthed armoured vehicle met us at the designated planet, which was heavily terraformed and inhabited by native Eldar. A stealthed teleportation structure was noted. This GCU has, as far as we can tell, remained unnoticed, a land party of three SC agents and a Contact ambassador, who is noted for his negotiation skills, met them at the agreed location. While we are monitoring the planet as much as we would normally do for any IoM planet, the citizens of this GCU have agreed to not attempt mindreading any Eldar. It is this GCU's opinion that we should also reinstate our normal state of affairs, that is disallowing non-consensual mind-reading, regarding all Eldar activities.

Introductions were exchanged and the Eldar explained that the inhabitants of this planet were not part of the same group they came from and had less technology.

As agreed, we exchanged data on Chaos and the results seemed to disappoint the Eldar. Perhaps our data on Chaos was less than they expected and certainly the selection of combat reports (with Eldar capabilities edited out) as well as the history of the Fall of the Eldar civilization is certainly alot more useful to us than our data is to them, since they are unable to apply the treatment for contamination that we use. They appear to regard our standard practise of using mental backups and body replacement as abhorrent, although this has not severely affected diplomatic relations. They did demand a guarantee that we would not attempt this on any Eldar, even if the Eldar were to suffer a fatal attack. In particular, the Fall of the Eldar contains pertinent parallels to our loss of CB, UM, the details have been sent to the main fleet as soon as it was analyzed.

We offered some additional details on our culture and society as a measure of compensation and they do appear interested in our minimalist govenmental structure. We are making progress on an agreement to exchange cultural artifacts and details on our respective social structures. Additionally, the ambassador and the Eldar Farseer will be attempting to learn each other's languages in hopes of improving diplomatic relations.

So far, diplomatic exchanges have been friendly and the Eldar in particular appear to be relatively honest (our ambassador's personal opinion). While the Eldar diplomatic group is heavily armed (the natives use comparatively lower tech weaponry, although also fairly heavily armed), it is also our ambassador's personal opinion that the Eldar fight reluctantly. Unlike the IoM.

Under consideration is whether to dispatch a second contact team to the Eldar native to this planet. As they are apparently an independent faction, perhaps it might be prudent to broaden the number of Eldar who have direct contact and that we may gain allies from.

Week 2
Culture exchange is agreed to. The exchange has mostly been various forms of media, fiction and art. Eldar society appears to have various Paths. The Eldar philosophy has provoked some interest and a number of citizens have expressed a desire to visit the Eldar society.

A proposal for a short exchange visit is being negotiated. The Eldar Farseer has noted that a number of Eldar on the Path of the Wanderer have also expressed interested in visiting us. Security arrangements are current being discussed.
Given their social structure and inferred problems of low population, a technology gift consisting of:
- Hyperspace Drive (an order of magnitude below Culture standard)
- Nanite manufacturing (micron-scale precision)
- Mass-energy conversion
- Gestation vats
- Reliable cloning techniques
- Artificial intelligence and brain-computer neural interfaces
- Stabilized plasma containment (a small improvement over their inefficient plasma containment that hurts weapon performance)

was offered in hopes of improving relations and Eldar inter-racial influence. The Farseer requested some time for us to explain the capabilities of the technology we offered as well as time to consider the offer which was surprising since we had attached no conditions to the gift. Our ambassador thinks that the Eldar are offended that we made the offer although was unable to understand why.

Week 3
The technology trade has been accepted but the Eldar indicate that they wish to understand the technology before adopting it. This is perfectly understandable and arrangements are being made to convey teaching resources and basic science demonstrations. We anticipate that, once the Eldar artisans are here and what engineers in organic form we have are briefed, the technology transfer will take at least ten years. Nevertheless, the transfer of basic science will yield a lot of information about their science developmental trajectory and possibly improve relations enough that they may be willing to teach us the psychic sciences.

Of note is that the technology for cloning has been rejected outright. While this is puzzling, we will not attempt to force it on them. A working hypothesis is that this resistance to cloning is related to the Warp and general psychic power of the Eldar. In a close running is the hypothesis that this has a cultural reason, in the same way that the IoM has a cultural rejection of non-organic intelligence.

News of the Necron contact has reached us and the offer to provide a captive Necron was made and rejected. Nevertheless, our ambassador thinks that the Eldar are not any less friendly despite two diplomatic gaffs in a row. Perhaps they are impressed at White Devil's performance but this is just a guess. Our good ambassador's hunch.

The Eldar hostility to the Necrons appear to be deep seated and they are not at all secretive about the seemingly mutual desire to annihilate the other. It appears that this hostility has gone beyond open war and has morphed into a racial hatred that will be, if not outright impossible, exceedingly difficult to reverse. This 'war' of theirs appears to have no prisoners. Such a dedicated hostility is rare in our experience but appear to occur with depressing regularity in this galaxy. The HS-like behaviour of the Necrons noted does not favour a possible peaceful resolution.

Care must be taken to avoid seeming to take sides in the war. Since we have provided a number of game-changing technologies to the Eldar, we are already at a natural disadvantage with the Necrons.

This mind sincerely hopes that the Necrons will prove to be an actual HS so that we will not inadvertently be the enablers of xenocide.

Of note is how the Eldar have decided to provide information on two new threats mentioned in IoM records rather than the expected information on Necron held areas.
The Tyranids are described as an all-organic race that consumes all organic material in its path. As described, the Tyranid race appears to be a hive mind organism with a textbook HS behaviour pattern and implacable hostility. Still, the nearest incursion is still some ways against the galactic rotation and will take three weeks to reach the region. For some reason, the Eldar did not provide the same detailed instructions to find them as they did with the Necrons and Orks.

The Orks are described as a race with an ability to cause Warp-like distortions that allows their "tech" to work. We were directed to investigate an IoM held world nearby, the Eldar indicating that the situation would be similar to the Necrons. Nevertheless, the described behaviour of the Orks, while sharing some characteristics of a HS, do not resemble that of a true HS.

The exchange of representatives has met a roadbump in that the Eldar have no way to ensure that anyone from their side is not Chaos contaminated. While the Farseer herself claims to be able to screen our citizens satisfactorily, we are not permitted to screen Eldar minds, which remains our own sure-fire method of detecting Chaos contamination. Eldar skepticism of our method has also provoked an investigation into the mind probe. Perhaps an experiment with IoM populations and attempting to track Chaos contamination that way may improve the method.
Week 16
A major breakthrough in understanding the Warp has been made. A 1:1 human managed to demonstrate logically that the Warp recognizes and is affected by patterns and other abstract concepts. The analysis of IoM and Eldar information bears this hypothesis out. This explains much as our internal simulations have thus far failed to account for the Warp's and Chaos's properties. A strike against this explanation however, is that it can explain nearly any phenomena. Nevertheless, since the patterns the Warp recognizes appear to be stable and feedback mechanisms were proposed

An immediate result of this recognition was a correction applied to our hypercomm protocols. Previously plagued with increasing error as distances increased, the pattern of corruption had been identified to be caused by Warp interference. A slightly more computationally expensive pattern rotation protocol has been instated to avoid data corruption. Normal hypercomm traffic across the fleets has been restored. Average propagation time of information is currently 3 hours.

Since we no longer suffer significant communication lags, expeditions have been sent to every sentient race contact described by the Imperium. The largest example is the Tau empire at the other end of the galaxy. The expedition to that location will take a month and a half.

Further investigation into the theoretical properties of the Warp, including identifying the criteria for pattern recognition, is underway.

Week 17
An interesting find has been made. A Culexus assassin from the IoM was identified travelling under cover in a civilian transport service on an unknown mission. Scans of hidden equipment match the described capabilities of these assassins.

According to records received from Sol, these assassins are warp-null humans, which are supposedly immune to Chaos contamination and cause negative reactions from psykers and even normal people.

A full scan of the assassin in question has identified a specific genetic variation. In some ways, this is expected to have a similar explanation with the Navigator gene. The developmental process of this assassin must involve a pattern that precludes the warp side from developing, what the IoM calls a soul.

The hypothesis has been borne out by a short experiment. Despite moral concerns, a complete molecular copy of the assassin, an IoM standard citizen and a Navigator were made. As expected from the theory, all three of them displayed IoM normal traits and the assassin-copy did not appear to retain the negative reaction from neighbouring humanoids. Examination of the brain scans of neighbouring people as they came into contact with the assassin on the ship showed that the change in psychology originates from an external and unidentifiable source that shows parallels with the dream vector for Chaos contamination.

An attempt was made to correct for this change and after two casualties among the IoM citizens, a
standard protocol was obtained that could avert the negative reaction through continuous effector use. The recognition that the Warp recognizes patterns allowed an adaptation of the hypercomm encryption to organic thought patterns through continuous rewiring of the organic brain. Despite the significant interest in this finding, the Mind in question has been reproached by many others for violating moral guidelines. While we have given implicit permission to read and affect minds at will when concerning possible Chaos solutions, many among us feel that non-consensual and dangerous experimentation on sentients that we are unable to backup crosses a moral line in the sand.

A major disagreement has started about whether the Orks are a HS. While their aggression and observed psychology are very HS like, they are demonstrably sentient and are occasionally willing to negotiate.

An inactive Necron tomb world has been found, scanning of the world indicate massive subterranean engineering and countless examples of unknown Necron technology.

Week 18
A drone came across a fleet of vessels approaching a system that matched descriptions of the Tyranid fleets. Observations of their actions has prompted an immediate classification of HS. The drone itself was not equipped enough to engage the fleet but the ROU arrived quickly enough to save the planet from consumption.

The Rogue Trader escorted by Golden Goose engaged a small Chaos warband and won with no casualties. This bodes well for our future plans.

Some small progress has been made in deciphering Necron technology, although subatomic scale engineering is proving to be difficult to understand. Devices gained from the inactive Tombworld are being examined.

Chapter End Notes

I have stopped listing the Culture's ship production but it should be taken that they are continuing their exponential rise in numbers.

Also, the hypercomm encryption means that I'm not going to list which reports the Culture gets anymore; information propagation across the Culture is now basically instant. Comments on things happening serve to place when they happen.

So the main updates are more for an overall picture of Culture stances and significant information gains.

This update highlights my science bent. A major assumption I am making here is that the Warp actually runs on rules, just not rules that we know to be reality. In particular, a major rule of the real world it doesn't follow is the "no pattern recognition" one. The Warp can "think" along certain lines.
A Culture that fully understands the Warp will be able to employ it in ways
unimaginable to anyone in 40k. It's like the difference between alchemy and chemistry; fundamental knowledge of the Warp can result in seriously crazy things. Like reality warping powers.

Obviously, that's all still quite far off.
Tyranids

Chapter Notes

Tyranids are boring and it's only 1 week, so I'll just do it quick. But basically, the Culture squish some bugs in a ridiculously short time.

There is no more Tyranid bug-squashing being written about, but it still goes on in the background.

Week 3 - **ROU Pest Control**

One of the hypercomm controlled drones ran across a system that was under initial attack by a fleet of organic starships that appeared to match the description of a Tyranid fleet.

The IoM Hive world under assault by the fleet appeared to mount a slowly crumbling resistance during the two days it took this ROU to travel to the system. During this time, effector scans of IoM com traffic and images taken of the Tyranid invasion confirmed the HS-like behaviour of the Tyranids and that IoM accounts are surprisingly unexaggerated.

Terraforming behaviour appears to be geared towards extraction of lighter elements and organic material, in particular, carbon. This supports the hypothesis that the Tyranids are a HS meant to harvest organic material from worlds.

Clearance to eliminate the threat and save the IoM world was received.

*Pest Control* is glad to report that appropriate action has been taken to curtail the threat and has sent samples of Tyranid biological matter back by courier for further analysis. CAM warheads proved to be overkill against their starships and x-ray CREWs were employed instead to expedite the destruction. Pancaker strikes served to easily destroy infestations on the planet, with localized gravities of ~1 million g seemingly enough to destroy all coherence in organic matter.

Estimated time taken from start of engagement to confirmed destruction of Tyranid space presence: 1 minute

Estimated time taken to destroy Tyranid land presence: 30 seconds

Collateral damage on the planet was unavoidable with large changes to land formations and significant biosphere destruction as Tyranid infestations necessitated the sterilization via Pancaker of large areas of the planet.

Estimated IoM population survival rate: 1%

Effector scans have been employed to screen the surviving IoM population for infestation and examples found were likewise removed by Displacer.

This ROU will remain in orbit to scan the planet until all traces of the Tyranid biologicals have been neutralized. The drone fleet used to screen the worlds nearby have been deployed further along the axis given in order to track down the source of the Tyranid fleets.

**Guardsman's Eyewitness Account**

It was hard to believe at first. We were dug in at a prepared killing zone and pouring laser fire into the mountain pass at the unending wave of insects when they all suddenly exploded.
I thought someone had ordered an artillery strike but the explosion was more powerful than any artillery shell. It seemed as if the entire mountainside had suddenly been pulverized into dust in an instant. The dustcloud leapt a kilometer into the air.

The Commissar said it was a Tyranid trick and they would attack under the cover of the dustcloud and we readied our lasguns, but no Tyranids emerged. I was chosen to investigate.

I walked as far as I could get before the footing on the settling dust became too poor to continue. I met no Tyranids and saw no sign of any movement, only a vaguely wet dust beneath my feet and settling on my uniform. When the cloud cleared, I saw the endless fields that the foul xenos *spits* had converted into a deadly wasteland were all in the same condition. They were all gone, the hills and twisted forests flattened as if smashed by the fist of the Emperor.

I believe the Emperor personally saved us this day. There is no other explanation. He has given us a miracle and we are honoured to have seen it with our own eyes.

Adept Wriley - Logis Strategos - Secret member of the Strategic Collective

***Top level cypher, encryption pad Alpha-Seven-Eta, iteration 561

***Report on the Tyranid invasion

Following the previous day's loss of a telescope crew tracking the progress of the Tyranid fleet's orbits around this planet, I joined the replacement crew.

The Techpriest, a trusted contact, had already been told to inform me of any irregularities and submitted the following extremely alarming report:

- At four hours past sunrise, a highly irregular event happened, the details listed below
- First noted when a large Tyranid bioship vanished in a spectroscopic pulse of every frequency, but most intense in the gamma spectrum
- Following the event, the Tyranid fleet began to disintegrate rapidly over the course of the next few seconds. Blackbody radiation from destroyed pieces indicated some form of extremely-high-energy laser weaponry was responsible
- A streak on the recorded images was detected in one of the frames and it appears to be the backscatter of a beam of focused x-rays believed to be the source of the Tyranid fleet's destruction

I noted that x-ray lasers are not part of any known Imperium or xeno armament. Additionally, the explosion of the first ship does not match the pattern of disintegration by extreme heating the other ships displayed. The power of the explosion was estimated to be about an order of magnitude below a cyclonic torpedo, which is still larger than any ship-to-ship weapon so far displayed.

This is a matter requiring highest investigation. This behaviour of the Tyranids is highly unusual and outside interference is suspected however no starships have been detected anywhere in-system since the lifting of the siege.

The one surviving Astropath who is transmitting this message confirms that the Shadow in the Warp has been lifted.
Week 1

**Eldar Farseer to Culture Ambassador**

"This IoM record you can trust. You're playing with death here."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Do not disturb the Necrons. If you must, destroy them."

"We are not disturbing the Necrons. The ones we captured seem to be..."

"You are planning to visit a Necron tombworld. Do not underestimate them. They are extremely dangerous even if mindless."

"... I see. Your warning will be passed on." *Culture Ambassador exits*

Later,

Farseer to her colleagues: "One chance branch, with Culture friendly to Necrons on one hand and the tombworld destroyed on the other. If we enter, the branch remains but the stakes increased, Culture and Necrons allied against the Necrons exterminated. 

... I hope this is the right branch we are on... the Bright Future still lies ahead."

Decision of the farseers: "We will not interfere. The Culture friendly to Necrons is something we can still recover from, but the Culture allied will be an unimaginably bad situation. It is a pure chance branch, and a complicated one, we will not stake our existence on the roll of a dice."

Week 2 - Day 1

**The Culture**

Following IoM records, the GCU *Curiosity Saved the Cat* and ROU *White Devil* have arrived around a Necron Tombworld.

The world appears to nearly completely devoid of any lifebearing traits. While no surface structures were detected, subterranean complexes were observed by Effector scans, these were present in nearly all portions of the planet's crust and is estimated to extend down to slightly above the iron planetary core.

The local star is a Class M red dwarf with no unusual characteristics. It displays very little solar activity and is, ironically, unusual in that it is completely average in every respect. It is probably as old as this galaxy and will continue to burn peacefully for the forseeable future.

The planet is geologically and magnetically dead, as well as orbiting the star outside the liquid water zone. The inactive Necron world is virtually in the most perfect preserving condition possible, with a thin chemically inert atmosphere and a total lack of water or any reactive elements in its crust, it could survive for eons unchanged and likely has. The system was also noted to be free of stray asteroids and comets and the youngest impact crater on the tombworld is too old to date accurately.

The level of engineering is impressive, showing a planet virtually hollowed out and turned into a massive city, if crude and unartistically. Significant hollows in the solid core also indicate some core mining activities in the far distant past.

We do not discount the possibility that this Necron world may indeed be older than the time the
Culture has existed. The archeological, scientific and cultural interest of this world cannot be understated. Necron artifacts can tell us much about who created these weapons and why. A war fought in this galaxy's distant past, fought to the death with weapons worse than Gridfire, specially crafted Hegemonizing Swarms, is singularly MORE interesting than even our own war with the Idirans. We must work to understand it.

We recommend that additional GCUs and perhaps a GSV be dispatched to this system to aid in the detailed analysis. Expeditions to other tombworlds, even IoM destroyed fragments, are likely to also yield additional detail.

Week 2 - Day 2
A decision to drop various SC teams to probe targets of interest, primarily suspected production centers and administration control nodes, is made.

Quite apart from the usual dangers of entering an eons old city, still active shields and automated caretakers were detected to be active in the vast underground city. Active traps and power sources have already been found.

On the other hand there is understandable high interest in a physical expedition as Necron artifacts cannot be Displaced in parts and reassembled. Furthermore, the active shields are blocking scans into core areas and no powered electronic systems were seen to be operating apart from the mobile, non-sentient repair drones.

Since there is a GCU and ROU in orbit, we feel the potential benefits outweigh the risks. Seven teams will be deployed by Displacer in safe zones, all but one in places suffering various states of collapse, to make their way towards designated targets of interest.

Observation of their progress is of great interest on board Curiosity Saved the Cat and many citizens will be following their progress or participating in the analysis of the information.

Proposed team composition and equipment:
- Teams will comprise of 5 to 15 sentient members, at most half organic
  --- Team leaders are 1:50 intelligences or higher, ideally drones making the rating by having access to hyperspeed thought
  --- Members are all to be qualified SC agents, trained in close combat and athletics, all of whom are to have personality profiles known to be suited for stressful situations and adaptability

- Team objectives are, in order of decreasing priority:
  --- Ensure team safety and return of all members
  --- Ensure Culture technology is not compromised
  --- Recovery of Necron databases and especially basic science
  --- Recovery of Necron artifacts for further analysis
  --- Detailing and tagging Necron culture and civilizational history

- Organic team members are required to carry:
  --- General Purpose High Energy Emission Device (plasma, CREW, kinetic blast) for use as weapon, cutter and large scale digging tool
  --- Emergency Displacer beacon & at least enough spares to transport the rest of the team
  --- Full environmental suits
  --- Antigravity belt with flight controls
  --- Mental probe implant (consent to mind-reading is a requisite for selection)
  --- Effector mental uplink and training in its use
  --- "Poison Tooth" self-destruct implant
  --- At least one energy-field based and one simple unpowered close combat weapon and training in
its use
--- Poison and s-matter detector implants, including anti-venom glands and immune system booster
--- Portable electronic warfare and general system hacking devices
--- Portable mass recycler with minimum 1 month life-support power
--- As much equipment as they wish to carry for on-site analysis and/or tagging for Displacement of any artifact

- Drones, apart from standard SC complements, will also have the following added:
  --- "Poison Tooth" self-destruct implant
  --- Expanded power supply (1 week continuous operation at maximum capacity)
  --- Effector field emitter rated strong enough to repel the weaponry of Necron warriors; must be able to lift at least 10 tons of matter
  --- 1 Deployable Hypercomm relay node each (the drone turns into the node)
  --- Mirror Field emitter (if not present)
  --- CREW device rated strong enough to burn through the base plate material of the Necron city, rated for continuous operation
  --- Defensive and offensive nanobot swarms, including energy field emitter strong enough to support in-situ construction of nanobots massing up to fifty kilograms

- Team Leader Drones will have in addition to the drone complement, a micro-displacer device sufficient for local displacement of team members or smaller objects as needed
  --- The displacer device is a bulky vehicle and has its own power source, it can be detached if required
  --- The displacer device will also have a "Poison Tooth" self-destruct implant

Chapter End Notes

So basically, how does one preserve a hollow world full of artifacts for a million years nearly perfectly... Give it every manner of uninterestingness, remove every element of excitability and put it around the most boring star imaginable. That tombworld could orbit basically to the end of time (some red dwarfs can burn for longer than the universe has existed) and it would stay more or less intact.
Necrons - The Dig

Week 2, Day 3

Memis Trayer, SC Agent, Expedition 3 - After Action Report

Our target was the shielded facility on the mid-level regions. Prior analysis of the connections and traffic modelling implied some form of production facility.

Our drop point was a section that had suffered minor collapse some time in the distant past. No active power cores were nearby and the patrolling maintenance units of the Necrons were not anywhere nearby.

The team I was in consisted of 9 people. 4 organics, 4 drones and 1 drone team leader.

We set off down the indicated broad path, noting that gravity this far down the planet was minimal. Antigravity belts had to be switched to flight mode and we proceeded at a cautious pace down the corridors. For the most part, the layout of the... compartments, you can't really call them buildings. It was purely functional. There's a cold elegance in the purely utilitarian positioning of the endless rows of industrial workshops, positioned and calibrated for the efficient chain of production with minimal movement.

There were no leisure areas, or even residential areas, noted. No, no living quarters even. We have no idea where the Necrons sleep nor do they ever look like they needed a rest. I've seen slave cities before. Had my fair share of duty in SC, seen the galaxy you know, before the long storage. I've come across empires that employed slavery before, with a brutality beyond you coddled GSV people can imagine.

This. This was worse. As we catalogued items, abandoned rooms and indicated interesting objects of note for Curiosity Saved the Cat, I almost decided then and there that the Necrons were a HS. Empires that tried their hardest to torture, use and break their slaves could not even hold a candle to that sheer metallic elegance of the Necrons. There is not a shred of life in those tombs. Yes, I think the Eldar have the right of it.

Imagine it. A row of metallic square boxes with a metallic roof. Each floor the same as the next, breaking only to have corridors for transport. Not a single display setting, not a single decoration. Just pure and clean metal. The Necrons would not even whip their slaves, yes, whoever worked in those boxes were worse than slaves, not even to give them fear or pain. The slaves would work or they would die and that was all. That is my impression of it.

Oh yes, we did compare notes. Between the expeditions and effector scans, we found nothing. What appeared to be an interesting formation that might be an open 3D park turns out to be a larger factory module. A possible residential block, its a different arrangement of factory boxes for a long dead reason. The whole WORLD is a factory.

What did it build? Why was it building? Was it the theoretical war of HSes that drove the Necrons to such an existence?

Those were the questions we came away with. We were determined to answer them.

Day 4

We continued our way along the lifeless streets towards the target, occasionally dodging a patrolling maintenance machine. One of the times, we were instructed to observe one pass us by and we hid in one of the boxes with the ship hiding us with its effectors.
There was the Necron art. There was their culture. The maintenance machine was not a raw composite of function like the rest of the boxes. It had a style, a harsh design that was both functional and artistic.

Claws and bones is what immediately came to mind of everyone in the expedition. The metal shell was incomplete, only stripes of metal like a ribcage of a human. I hated it almost immediately.

And then it looked at us. I know the thing wasn't intelligent, I know the mental probe said it was just my imagination, but I am sure. I could feel it looking.

You think I'm crazy? Yes, I know Skreeever likes the Necrons. But at that point, I could feel it, we were not welcome. As I'll get to next.

Day 5
We reached the boundary of the shielded areas. While scans had penetrated between the gaps of the shields, the thin slivers of data were meaningless. This was what we were here for.

We never managed it. As you already know, group 7, the one deployed nearest the core, tripped some sort of previously undetected trap after they bypassed three layers of shields. I'll get to their part later.

We didn't notice much of the opening engagements. The team leader commented that Curiosity Saved the Cat and White Devil had dropped out of communications, which we assumed was due to the shields, and sent one of the drones further back to serve as a relay.

When that didn't work, we took a vote among us, 6 for, to abort the mission and report back. The drone with the biggest effector array scanned upwards trying to determine the source of the hyperblock and detected a shield layer many levels above that didn't exist before. The other drones did scanner sweeps and we helped with our portable ones. Power core signatures had multiplied in number and we could detect various sources of electrical activity.

It's hard to describe what was happening. I felt like we were an ant on the arm or shoulder of a long slumbering giant who had decided to wake up. It really did feel that way, I have mental probe scans to prove it.

Anyway, we were discussing our options when three of the maintenance machines converged on us. We were at an intersection of paths and the empty one was blocked by a shield wall.

The drones tried to shield our presence with effectors but it didn't seem to work, perhaps the machines could detect us when they knew where we were. In any case, they deployed a few little crawler things towards us. These stopped outside the effector fields hiding us, as if wary of crossing the invisible boundary.

We stood there at an impasse for some time as the team leader attempted to communicate with the maintenance machines to no response. Our first indication that we were under attack was when a bright green hologram appeared above one of the other members' head. We didn't know what that meant and we were probing it with scans for less than a second before he suddenly collapsed for no reason. The mental probe in his head also seemed to malfunction and he had no heartbeat.

A short probe by the Team Leader declared him dead, every single nerve in his body fried by some unknown method, and activated the Poison Tooth after retrieving the mental probe. Right as his body and equipment disappeared in a flash of plasma, another green halo appeared above another team member.
The drones assumed defensive positions and a mirror field went up. Nothing seemed to happen for a few seconds and after some time, time during which the green halo appeared to defy all laws of physics since it had nothing that could possibly project it, we decided to cautiously drop the mirror field and make a run over the top of one of the maintenance machines.

The moment the mirror field went down, the marked person also collapsed. There was only me and Skreever left as humans in the team.

And then all the small crawlers leapt at us through the effector fields. One of the drones blasted them away. Right then, team leader decided that we would take offensive action and pre-emptively destroy anything that looked like a threat.

As the team leader retrieved the fallen member's mental probe, we blasted the maintenance machines with our HEEDs, set to low power CREWs. The danged things took forever to melt and even when they did, you could literally see the metal crawling back to heal the hole.

I set my HEED to maximum and fired a plasma pulse that destroyed most of the street that I shot it down, and that finished one of the maintenance machines. We didn't get to enjoy it though, a green halo appeared over Skreever's head. One of the drones mirror fielded him, with itself inside.

While that saved him, it gave us a different problem. Mirror fields can't move and you can't communicate through them. That's the whole point of course, nothing gets in and nothing gets out. A millisecond of accelerated time gave our team leader the solution, one I think ought to be employed in situations like this. We would deploy a large mirror field around all of us, and let Skreever fly to the edge and then mirror field him alone.

With a leapfrogging pattern, we could keep Skreever permanently inside a field while maintaining communication with him and the drone protecting him.

That turned out to not be so nice. Our movement speed was effectively halved even as we headed down the destroyed street, the two maintenance machines hanging back warily. The second threat we met was these... things that came floating out of the walls and floor around us.

... Yes, of course. Necron warriors had been spotted coming out of the shielded zone, so I guess it was more like a barracks than a shipyard, but we didn't anticipate the Necrons could have something like this. In any case, I think one of the drones was registering the weaponry hits on its effector shield but we weren't in any real danger from them.

These other ones were like flying versions of the maintenance machines, only leaner and more bony. If that word could ever be applied to machines. They floated towards us, seemingly unarmed except for the sharp metallic talons, floated through the floor and ceiling of the street, as if solid matter was nothing but empty space to them. I fired a CREW but the one I fired at disappeared for a moment and all I hit was the ceiling behind it. We were all shooting at them and it didn't seem to work.

Mirror fields didn't work. Imagine that. They could move straight through a mirror field as if it wasn't there. Firing a CREW or plasma gun inside a mirror field was suicide so we dropped it again. One of the drones pushed them away with a general blast of its effectors but they gathered themselves and dodged all the rest.

One of them caught all the way up with us and seemed to go after Skreever inside his mirror field ball. When we deployed the big one, he was bashing away its talons with the futile help of his drone. The talons could be hit just before they struck and Skreever was fighting for his life with nothing more than the sharp metal stick they gave us. I drew the effector blade and that didn't seem to do more than push the talons away for a few seconds rest.

For a few long minutes, we fought a strange sort of running battle. We would scurry forward, loosing a hail of CREWs and low energy plasma shots at the Necron... well, it was basically an army by that time, hoping that one of the chasing things would come back at the wrong time. Then we would mirror field and draw close combat weapons while Skreever ran to the end of the mirror field as fast as he could, with the ridiculous green aura on his head. Then we would mirror field him and a
drone and repeat the process to run ahead of him. The few of the chasing things that managed to catch up to us had to be repelled, and a drone was dismantled in one of the skirmishes. We self-destructed it.

After a few iterations, the team leader had another idea. I suppose that's the benefit of having hyperspeed intelligence, I was too busy running, shooting and whacking for my life to think up ideas.

The Necrons were definitely hostile by now, even if they weren't before, so he decided to set a trap. We would make a stand for a few short moments and let them surround us. Then he would use the Displacer vehicle to teleport us as far up towards the surface as possible and set its fusion core to maximum burn. Whereupon it would explode violently and hopefully destroy everything but the floaters. And hopefully anything that could find us for them.

I tell you, it looks good on paper. Hell, it even sounded good at the time. But have you actually fought a last stand with something that you can't even understand? I mean, those floating chaser things, they were freaky, almost like someone designed them specifically to look like the nastiest predator that ever existed. And there was that green halo that murdered organics.

We fought. Hard. It was a miracle that we lost no one, I suppose we got pushed beyond our limits and found we could still do it. Those few seconds, just a few seconds, it took the Necrons to surround us, I don't believe I'll experience anything like it ever again. After a while, you don't even think about dying anymore, it's just block, parry, thrust as fast and as hard as you can manage, and then some.

A bare second after the Displacement was complete, we all saw the ground ripple beneath us (we were flying) as the shockwave blasted through the city's superstructure. The green halo above Skreever's head disappeared and he was still alive, I guess we got out of range of whatever was doing that or it was destroyed in the explosion.

We were thinking about what to do next when the drones picked up a hypercomm distress signal from Expedition 7, the core one. We replied, giving our position, and they sent us a data dump in case they or anyone else they sent it to didn't make it out. It didn't seem wise to keep the hypercomm link open in case that revealed our position so we didn't talk much.

Apparently, Expy 7 tripped some sort of time freezing trap in their exploration in front of a particularly strong set of shielded vaults. Yeah, you heard that, time. These guys might even do time travel, they're like wizards.

The time stamp indicated it was just before we lost contact with the ships and it seems obvious that the triggering activated some sort of de-hibernation process that started up the Tombworld. That trap itself wiped half the team, it looks like a mirror field but one could tell it wasn't... the drones know how, I'm not a physicist, don't ask me.

In any case, they met different kinds of things, like a solid metal close combat weapon that seemed to cut straight through the attempt to parry and even an effector field. And the green aura was there too. Eventually, they found the stasis projectors and destroyed them, but lost quite a number of people. Everyone inside the field was blown up when the stasis field collapsed violently.

Eventually, it seems that their teamleader came up with the same idea we did. They got to their Displacer vehicle, which was outside the core shielded regions and detonated it there after teleporting the team. Well, at least the two of them that were left. Expy 6 was nearby and they were going to meet up, but well, that wasn't needed.

We were making our way up towards the large shielded zone in the top layers and on our own, we estimated that we would take nearly three days to get there unless we could reach a shaft, but those seemed to have alot of Necron activity going by the drones' scans.

And then abruptly, the shields vanished to reveal plasma blasts and we were yanked
unceremoniously into the main incoming bays of Curiosity Saved the Cat along with the rest of everyone. And after that, you know the rest.

Yeah, that must be the most grateful time anyone had ever been for having a Displacer used on them without warning. Heh.
Necrons - Fallout

Week 2 Day 6

Eldar Farseer at Culture embassy on exodite world

The window of friends narrow
Chance grows slim
Enemies of enemies

GCU Curiosity Saved the Cat

The Necron Tombworld has completed its activation cycle and repair work on the destroyed shield generators has begun. We eventually settled on using Eldar to communicate while our translators gathered information on Necron. Turns out, the Necrons knew about the Eldar and the animosity is apparently mutual, but this is currently the only language we share.

Since we have already complied with his demand that we keep off-world, we agreed.

The Necron Lord in charge of the world was rather unhappy about the shield generators. As Necron repair capabilities exceed even our own, we are unsure why this might be so hard to replace and indeed, shields disabled in the fighting were replaced quickly with the exception of those destroyed by White Devil.

The only difference we see is that the generators were destroyed using CAM annihilation, and while the destroyed superstructure from the explosion has since been replaced, the generators haven't been. This is information of some significance and will be kept private.

Artifacts taken from the Necron world are still being held despite a demand by the Lord to have them returned. A significant portion of citizens were shocked at the losses we sustained and this GCU has had to agree to hold the artifacts until we could be certain of the non-HS nature of the Necrons.

Despite the difficult diplomatic situation, we still had to ask the Necron Lord for an exchange of culture and information.

After much discussion, we decided to hold a full vote of all citizens and that gave the expected result to return the artifacts. It might be called tyranny of the majority, but we believe that friendly relations might still be possible despite our intrusion.

We did return the artifacts by Displacer, but not before scanning them as thoroughly as possible.

Negotiations with the Necron Lord and watching of the spacecraft and orbital defenses has led us to believe that the Necrons operate their entire society on a military paradigm quite similar to how the IoM's military operate. While tactically, the Necrons are more flexible, their strategic evolution and time frame are within the same order of magnitude.

This is of great interest as we have never met a society that could operate completely under a military framework, with no civilian or unmobilized population. We have also observed activities in unshielded areas and have come to the conclusion that the Necrons also do not operate a classical pre-singularity economy either as their basic citizens, the Necron warriors, do not appear sentient.

They may, indeed, be on the cusp of a singularity, if they are in the process of optimizing an automated system to run the whole society and the Necron warrior is the basic unsentient prototype of this technology.

We have decided not to inform the Necron Lord of our capture of the Necron warriors. He claims no
knowledge of the raid and in fact, no knowledge of the IoM, which implies that this world has lain dormant or never explored outside this system for nearly all of the IoM's history.

Week 3

GSV *So Much For Subtlety* has joined us at our position as we had requested earlier. The Necron Lord inquired as to our movements as he apparently detected the mass signature of the System class GSV.

We assured him that we were not intending any hostile action and backed away another three light years, which appeared to satisfy him. The Necrons appear to be able to see into hyperspace, which indicate they have hyperspace technology and may be able to explain the reported ability of the Necrons to avoid hostile fire by moving slightly in 4 dimensions. Indeed, a close scan of hyperspace around the Necron world revealed folds and clear signs of artificial engineering of spatial shape.

Negotiations are difficult and the Necron Lord suddenly demanded compensation for the damage we did to the world completely out of the blue, which was confusing as he did not specify what the terms were. An offer to help him reconstruct was rejected and we eventually opted to send a gift of a thousand tons of refined metal sorted into a ratio that was the best match for their metallic construction material.

This appeared to mollify the Necron Lord and he continued negotiations. This behaviour was slightly unexpected and no amount of analysis indicated anything we said that might have offended him.

The Necron don't appear to understand the meaning of culture. In our experience, this has always been because of a devastating event in the race's past, but the Necron Lord has so far refused to communicate any information about the Necrons and has demonstrated occasional bouts of irrationality and unpredictable behaviour.

Eventually, negotiations reached a point where we had to press our request, quite forcefully, that we wished an exchange of our civilizations' history and only after mentioning our hypothesis that the Necrons were a HS made by another civilization like us did he actually explain Necron history outright without even agreeing to the exchange.

We shared our history and explanation of our society's values despite technically not being required to, it was within the spirit of the negotiation.

The Necron story is older than the Eldars'. It explains much, including the formation of HSes in a war, which the Necrons... more accurately called Necrontyr, most definitely aren't an engineered HS. While the Orks are implied to be one. (reports from GCU *Clap Your Hands* seem to corroborate this)

C'Tans appear to be a massive threat inimical to organic life. The Necron description of their capabilities was worrying and no explanation of what happened to them after the Necron revolt (which was sparse in details) was given.

All Culture ships are to be on the look out for Ascended being activity, there might another player besides Chaos lurking around. In extremis, Ascension ourselves might have to be considered.

*So Much for Subtlety* indicated that the Necron history has some missing details. The Necron Lord refused to clarify for no specified reason.

Some additional details from the history were clarified however, and it appears that the Necrons are also hostile to Chaos. The Necron Lord stated that the Necrons were at war with the Old Ones, who used the Warp, and that the Eldar were the Old Ones 'pet' civilization.
While this explained the extreme difference in character and technology base of the Eldar and Necrons, as well as most of their hostility, this did not explain how the Necrons intended to deal with the Warp.

Some common ground was found between our "war" with Chaos and the Necrons desire to see the Warp dealt with.

*So Much for Subtlety* has left the area to move against the galactic rotation towards the Tyranids. Negotiations with the Necron Lord have been unfruitful and close attention has been paid towards his mobilization of starships around the world.

A number of remote drones were left with us by *So Much for Subtlety* in case we required them to track Necron movement. *White Devil* has been tasked with tracking him if any ships leave, *Curiousity Saved the Cat* will continue negotiations.

Judging from the lack of coherency in his reactions to our statements, we surmise that the Necron Lord has suffered some form of degradation to his logical circuits, specifically that of temporal segmentation. Support for this hypothesis is from an analysis of

*White Devil*s attachment to the Necron warriors is rather unusual, it treats them almost like some sort of very silent pet, claiming that they are sentient and it is determined to make friends with them. *Curiousity* requested to scan *White Devil*s systems for Chaos corruption and found no anomalies.
Eldar

Week 1
The Eldar have shared a strange warning with us. They say we are on collision course with a Chaos fleet and there is a risk of Chaos benefitting greatly. We were unable to get details from the Eldar but all ships have been put on high alert and have doubled checked all systems. We have found no trace of a Chaos incursion.

Week 2
We have agreed to trust the Eldar when they say that the three Eldar on the Path of the Wanderer who have requested to join us temporarily are Chaos-free. They appear to have great caution about Chaos and definitely are more knowledgeable about Chaos in general due to their warp-sensitive nature.

The exchange program is agreed to. We will take on three Eldar wanderers while an SC agent and a drone will go with the Eldar, and one Contact citizen will join the local Eldar community on this Exodite world.

An IoM merchant ship from outside our surveyed area dropped out of Warp near an IoM minor fleet base with a report that a Chaos warband had been sighted in the near region. Despite the sketchy evidence and hearsay, an IoM recon in force of nearly two thirds the defending fleet warped out with a stated destination of a mining world we had not reached yet.

The GCU in the process of scanning the fleet base decided that observing the IoM's protocols in fighting Chaos was more important and headed to that system.

Week 3
We have agreed to trust the Eldar when they say that the three Eldar on the Path of the Wanderer who have requested to join us temporarily are Chaos-free. They appear to have great caution about Chaos and definitely are more knowledgeable about Chaos in general due to their warp-sensitive nature.

The exchange program is agreed to. We will take on three Eldar wanderers while an SC agent and a drone will go with the Eldar, and one Contact citizen will join the local Eldar community on this Exodite world.

GCU arrived a day before IoM fleet. System has an Eldar teleportation gate. No hostiles, only IoM merchant traffic spotted.

IoM fleet has arrived. They communicated with the mining world to confirm no reports of Chaos were there. They decided to stay for one day.

A band of Eldar emerged from the teleportation gate. Since they did not attempt to initiate the standard protocol for contact with us (tight beam laser aimed 30° off the ecliptic if angle is clear and free), we assumed that they did not expect us to be here or they were from a faction that was
unaware of us.

Ships of the Eldar were slightly less well maintained than the standard. The Eldar fleet appeared to remain undetected but then proceeded to swing around the IoM fleet on a course for the mining world.

The IoM fleet managed to see the Eldar on their sensors when the Eldar were just about to pass them (we tapped their systems) and proceeded to maneuver onto an intercept course despite recognition among the command heirarchy that the Eldar were not the Chaos warband they were looking for.

The Eldar proceeded to attack the IoM fleet with hit and run attacks, utilizing their much superior ECM and stealth capabilities to inflict damage on the IoM fleet. Neither side inflicted any significant loss on each other. Communications between the IoM and Eldar appeared to indicate that the Eldar were attempting to raid the IoM planet.

At this point, the GCU *Perpetual Meddler* decided to intervene to prevent the loss of life on either side. Using its Displacers, minor plasma charges were used to overload key shields and then Effectors were employed to hack into the power grid and shut down the IoM shields and engines. IoM efforts to restore function were easily overridden.

The Eldar ships were contained from the IoM ships by forcefield walls projected by effector marked by visible light radiation. While the Eldar ships could potentially force their way through the fields as the GCU's effector arrays were overstretched, they only tested the boundaries warily before retreating.
The Rogue Trader meets Chaos

Week 1

GCU Golden Goose

Aisha Meiro's handling of the Techpriests has left the Rogue Trader slightly unhappy but his recruitment of mercenaries has left him well enough equipped. The Rogue Trader has only managed to acquire construction plans for non-critical and baseline-technology equipment. His request to purchase a Lunar was finally declined.

Nevertheless, his profit margin is at least two orders of magnitude over that of the Forge World. His continuous sale of various goods by both legal and covert means has attracted some attention from the Mechanicum in charge of the Forge World. We were unable to warn him of this threat as Aisha Meiro was never allowed off his ship and had no plausible reason to know about it.

A battlecruiser and escorts of the Ad Mech maneuvered into an intercept course with his ship when he returned from last delivering a sale and with a shuttle full of rare elements in critical shortage. The Rogue Trader evaded action and the mercenaries jumped out of system towards an agreed rendezvous while he outran the Ad Mech by travelling sublight beyond the sensor range and going into hyperspace when no one could notice.

His escape was helped by our subtle interference with the Ad Mech sensors.

After the escape, the Rogue Trader rendezvoused with the three mercenary ships at the target uninhabited star system. After some consideration, he came up with the idea to attempt a raid on a normally warp-inaccessible planet.

The mercenaries protested that they would be unable to follow, and the Rogue Trader asked Aisha Meiro to make weaker copies of the FTL drive for them. Despite not technically having the hyperspace drive construction plans, we agreed to provide it quietly and humour his assumption that the nanobots came with the plans for hyperspace drives.

The four ships, the Rogue Trader's Dauntless class light cruiser, the mercenaries' Sword class frigate, Firestorm frigate and a Lunar cruiser, have set course for the warp-storm hidden system after some negotiation and demonstrations of its capabilities.

The mercenaries have agreed to take the hyperspace drive as pay for the mission and forgo any loot recovered. Despite the Rogue Trader's care to not demonstrate the full capacity of his more capable drive, the mercenaries were sufficiently impressed that they agreed easily to his terms.

The system in question had already been recently surveyed by a Culture GCU and passed over as an Eldar exodite world, which were not to be disturbed by agreement with the Eldar. We had no idea that this world was warp-inaccessible and the implications of warp storms or the more severe warp rifts. Research into this matter is considered of high priority.

Week 2

Once they arrived at the exodite world, the Rogue Trader made preparations to land and recover some Eldar artifacts but never managed to do so.

Six warships dropped out of the Warp at the edge of the system, which was unexpected as we had thought the system was not Warp-navigable and only the Eldar could reach it by teleportation gate.

These ships were immediately identified to be Chaos warships and they were broadcasting scrapcode. Despite precautions and data safety protocols, a minor crisis broke out on Golden Goose preventing its participation in the battle.

The Rogue Trader, although reluctant to engage, was at least willing to try to fulfill the mission
Aisha had asked of him. His mercenaries were even more reluctant to engage but were eventually convinced that they held an insurmountable advantage in the tactical FTL speeds.

Order of Battle:
Chaos - Executor class cruiser; Hades Heavy Cruiser; Carnage class cruiser; Daemonship; 2x Iconoclast Destroyer
Rogue Trader - Lunar cruiser; Dauntless class light cruiser; Sword class frigate; Firestorm frigate

The Rogue Trader sketched out a hit-and-run battleplan involving the use of his FTL drives to present the groups' broadsides to the enemy's stern. After some discussion, the plan was put into action.

The Chaos forces were arrayed in a rough 3 dimensional cone, tip pointing towards the Rogue Trader's four ships, with the Executor class cruiser taking point, with the lighter ships towards the back of the formation.
The rogue trader opted to attack in a square formation, with the broadsides on each face of the square.

The mercenary ships FTLed right behind one of the Iconoclast destroyers, presenting their broadsides to the destroyer's engines. Due to the Chaos fleet's formation, they were out of range of all weapons but the target ship's aft turret. After one full salvo of lances, the destroyer's aft shields were flattened, with the Rogue Trader's personal Dauntless taking a few hits from aft weapons at extreme range, none of which penetrated his shield.
Then the rogue trader's fleet FTLed in a full circle to present the other broadside to the same destroyer and fired another salvo of lances into the ship, destroying the engines and disabling its aft turret.

Before the Chaos fleet could reorganize, the Rogue Trader and mercenaries retreated out of weapons range to reload at a right angle of the Chaos fleet's original axis of advance. As the Chaos fleet began to turn to face them, the Rogue Trader led another identical attack on the other destroyer, reaching and detonating the engine fuel, a chain of sympathetic explosions smashed the destroyer's keel turret and port broadside weapons.

One of the mercenaries launched a fission warhead down the unprotected port side and the shockwave broke the central beam of the ship, nearly breaking it in half, only the starboard superstructure held the two separate sections together.

As the Chaos fleet reorganized around the rapid strikes, the cruisers covering each other's aft areas, the rogue trader split his forces in half to attack and eliminate both destroyers, which could not maneuver and were separated from the Chaos fleet.

At this point, behavioural changes were observed in the crew and attitudes of the ship captains. Rather than being cautious at the Chaos fleet's rapid adaptation of strategy to the new observed capability, the Rogue Trader and mercenaries were buoyed by their easy success and there was talk about actually winning, instead of minimizing losses.
Golden Goose continued to combat scrapcode incursions. Effectors were used to put up a screen of static between it and the Chaos fleet, cutting off all realspace communication. Negotiation or contact with the Chaos fleet would be impossible under the circumstances in any case.

Despite Aisha recommending caution, the Rogue Trader decided to take another pass at the Chaos warships. The four cruisers were circling each other in a slow dance that rotated their firing arcs
through each other's vulnerable spaces. Amazingly, all the mercenaries went along with his suggestion for another attack.

--- After action note: it seems likely that this increase in aggressiveness and risk-taking is due to the Chaos fleet. Some kind of Warp based, psychological attack with ship-to-ship ranges seems a likely explanation, given noted behaviour.

During a gap in timing, the Rogue Trader salvoed four broadsides into the keel of the Executor class cruiser, this time at extremely short range to attempt to overcome the massive ship in one pass. The macrocannons of the Lunar and Dauntless battered down the shields and the laser and lance batteries smashed through a good portion of the Chaos warship, destroying a third of the port broadside weapons, disabling port and keel shields, and damaging the engine.

Despite the quick FTL escape before the other ships could rotate their fields of fire, multiple boarding parties were detected on all the ships. The psykers on the ships indicated one Chaospawn was present on the Rogue Trader's ship, the Chaos ships seemed to know which ship was in command.

Aisha Meiro went offline during the period of the Chaospawn attack on the bridge. Effector recordings of the fight indicate a kind of mental influence the Chaospawn inflicted on all the crew as they scrambled for lasguns and even melee weapons against an obviously superior foe. Multiple crewmen were killed by the Daemon effortlessly and yet the remaining crew continued to engage without any apparent fear of death.

Aisha Meiro engaged her implants' capabilities and proceeded to destroy the Chaospawn in hand to hand combat, with Effector field uplinks making impossible mid-air maneuvers and finally disintegrating the body with a plasma torch (finger implant). For a few minutes, the crew continued to fight off the boarders with a slowly decreasing level of bloodlust until all the boarders were killed; after which, there was a large amount of questions and suspicion directed at "the alien". Order was restored by the Rogue Trader who promised to investigate after the battle.

The mercenaries did not fare as well. While the Lunar fought off its boarders with a large number of casualties, including all the bridge crew and command personnel, the Sword frigate was completely destroyed by a number of internal explosions as intense fighting around its power core managed to destabilize and detonate it. Aisha Meiro also (without telling the Rogue Trader) triggered the hyperspace module's self-destruct when it looked like that section might fall, possibly contributing to weakening the reactor's structure.

The Firestorm frigate was taken over by Chaos borders, the bridge fell after a particularly notable last stand by its captain, the bridge crew and Navigator. The Firestorm lowered its shields, opened all its armoured ports and the last transmission by the captain to the Rogue Trader was a request that the Rogue Trader fire upon and destroy his ship, rather than see it be turned over to Chaos. The Dauntless proceeded to fire continuous broadsides until the Firestorm was destroyed.

At this point, only the Dauntless was spaceworthy after the boarding action concluded, with significant internal and systems damage. The Sword and Firestorm frigates were both destroyed and the Lunar cruiser was un-commanded, had an internal fire at the bridge and its crew was down to almost half strength, with no senior officers, psykers or senior Techpriests surviving.

The Chaos ships now held the advantage, but it appeared that the significant damage to the Executor class had somehow disrupted their command structure. The fleet appeared to lose its cooperation and one shot was fired at the Executor by the Daemonship. Large amounts of comm traffic was passed, some of which managed to pass through the static screen to Golden Goose. While the codes were undecipherable, the comm traffic was laden with scrapcode and the ensuing minor outbreak actually managed to shut down Golden Goose's long-range effector arrays for a few minutes. This dropped Golden Goose's stealth for that time.
After the appearance of Golden Goose, all four surviving Chaos ships transitioned to Warp independently.

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The Rogue Trader, having stabilized the situation on both ships, has taken the chance to assume command over the Lunar. The crew of the Lunar were not happy at the change but none of them were commanding officers and there was no contest to the small, but heavily armed, cadre with a backup Navigator the Rogue Trader sent over to take command.

Explanations were demanded from Aisha for her superhuman combat performance. It appears that the Rogue Trader has noticed that the nanobots that were supposedly not able to build hyperspace drives could do so. He demanded to know her connection to the Golden Goose, whose stealth had dropped for a few minutes, and what she was attempting to bribe him with.

He demanded that Aisha subject herself to a test of her not being a daemon in disguise. This test involved showering her with a bowl of "holy water", which chemical analysis showed to be mostly water with some non-poisonous trace chemicals. Aisha agreed and nothing unexpected happened. This seemed to satisfy the crew and the Rogue Trader.

Golden Goose made a decision to tell him about the GCU and Aisha's connection to the Culture and the intended plan for him to be the first trial to recruit a militant arm of the Culture from the IoM to fight Chaos.

A basic introduction of the Culture, our government style and notes on Chaos, was given. We did not mention or hint at our interest in reforming the IoM, only mentioning that we were willing to look and recruit allies to fight against Chaos wherever they could be found. There was no mention of the Culture's penetration into IoM space.

Mention of our hyperspace and nanobot construction provoked some suspicion about "xenotech". We did not mention Displacers or Effectors or the use of non-organic intelligences.

As previously agreed, we turned over control of the nanobots to the Rogue Trader. This was confirmed by him holding Aisha on a yacht without communications and using them to manufacture a lasgun. Nevertheless, he still remains suspicious of them.

In an attempt to mollify him, we also gave him construction plans for ammunition and IoM starship weaponry reverse engineered from scans of the Forge Worlds.

We requested that we sent a proper ambassador to negotiate with him but this was denied.

Week 3

The Rogue Trader has completed repairs and both ships are now mechanically spaceworthy, although massive crew shortages are hindering function on the Lunar. He has continued negotiations while enroute to a Hive World to employ new crew.

We have put forward our requirement that he not leak the technology to the IoM or Chaos, fearing destabilization of their society and technology leakage to Chaos. The Rogue Trader has agreed to this, but demanded that we aid him in any further military actions and Golden Goose agreed to do so, but only at extreme range and without any direct contact.

We also refused to attack anyone other than Tyranids or Chaos.

We also stated that he is not to attempt engaging Chaos under such unfavourable conditions again, and that we most certainly did not want to see Chaos armed with a hyperspace drive or worse, the nanobots. He agreed to this.
As he began to apply the nanobots to repairing the two ships under his command, using the construction plans for the parts, the negotiation turned to future actions.

He demanded, for each confirmed kill of a Chaos ship, that we provide a major technological breakthrough, on the level of his nanobots. Eventually, we negotiated to give him one significant technology per warband engaged, regardless of the result. Given the IoM aversion to even simple autonomous AI, we offered to provide automation and performance refinements to all his major equipment along the lines of the IoM technology base. This is estimated to increase his effective range by 30%, reduce gridpower and manpower requirements by nearly 60%.

A down payment of the construction plans for all IoM frigates and light cruisers we had come across, as well as an asteroid mining platform was agreed to. Construction plans for antimatter containment and propulsion for missiles was rejected. He did not wish to take on any more "xenotech" apart from the hyperdrive. We appear to be constrained to working within IoM technological principles. Nevertheless, we are optimistic that favourable odds can still be obtained if we could devise method to develop a scanner that could obtain a lock on targets while the Rogue Trader's ships remained in hyperspace.

While we are certainly not going to provide him with so much technological advances for each combat, he is unlikely to meet many Chaos warbands in the near future. And bringing up his access to advanced technology would more allow him to engage Chaos ships more effectively.

This a fine balance to strike. We cannot afford to continue bribing him so extravagantly, but at the same time, a repeat of this disastrous battle would be extremely unfavourable. We had only one safeguard, the Golden Goose destroying the Firestorm directly, before Chaos might have gotten a working hyperdrive. The lack of need to use the final option was mere chance. This level of risk, while understandable for a first attempt at striking against Chaos, is unacceptable for the long term.

We are of the opinion that Golden Goose should immediately provide him with optimizations to his standoff weaponry, namely lance batteries and torpedo launchers, to prevent such a disaster. In particular, methods to increase his striking range or ideally, to attack from hyperspace, should be made if we do not wish a repeat of this. We await a more in-depth analysis from the main fleet since there is no rush in this matter.

A more functional working relationship to ensure his continued cooperation in hunting Chaos warships without requiring such large technological transfers (particularly after all the technology he requires to field his own fleet is given) would be ideal.
Week 2

GCU *Large Sticks Speak Softly* intercepted an IoM astropathic request for aid involving an Ork incursion at a nearby farmworld. IoM ships had been dispatched to the world but the GCU arrived many days before them.

The Orks on the farmworld were in the process of overrunning IoM resistance but the aggressiveness and tribal nature indicated a more primitive and unstructured society than a HS.

The IoM seem to be at war with virtually every non-IoM race or even IoM factions, judging from their history and number of races that they have exterminated or claimed to. This is a worrying prospect, although in fairness, nearly every non-IoM race has been claimed to have attacked them first.

The Orks on the farmworld massacred IoM civilians and destroyed living zones. While living zones and non-combat areas on the planet were spotted, the Orks do not appear to have much civilization or technology. A primitive language is being decoded and a mind-read protocol is being developed although strange difficulties have been encountered.

More interestingly, while the orks utilize crude improvised weapons, fashioned with a creativity and cunning that is impressive to behold, they appear to be able to make use of looted IoM weaponry. IoM weaponry is then subjected to various modifications that appear to increase its size and power only marginally.

These modifications are usually inefficient and unstable, resulting in unreliability of the equipment. These modifications do not appear to have any reasonable underlying principle but nevertheless appear to work as intended... sometimes. We suspect Warp phenomena.

Additionally, the Orks also appear to have a minor terraforming effect as they spread spores around them that appear to grow into mostly fungi or one of the ork types. One of these types appears to demonstrate overt Warp phenomena similar to IoM Psykers.

An SC team is being prepared for insertion to negotiate as soon as the crude language is deciphered.

Week 3, Day 1

A working understanding of the Ork language has been fashioned, although it appears to have dialects.

The SC team placed near an Ork camp was ambushed nearly immediately as they passed a nearby sentry. While the attack was easily repelled by effectors and handheld HEED devices, this does not bode well for the possibility of peaceful contact.

The team has been extracted after causing some damage to the Ork settlement. Biological samples have been taken for analysis.

Following the trail of IoM records of Ork movements, this GCU will proceed to a neighbouring system that the Ork fleet is suspected of being harboured in.

The IoM fleet has arrived. As we left the system, IoM ships were seen bombarding Ork positions from orbit.
Week 3, Day 5
We have arrived in a system to find a number of strange misfitting ships with technological artifacts that resemble Ork tinkering seen on the IoM farmworld.

The Orks are currently in combat with an awakened Tomb World, the Necrons being beaten back below the top level. These Orks appear to be much more well organized than the primitive tribal orks seen on the IoM farmworld.

Significant warp phenomena was detected in multiple instances from the Orks side, while none, apart from energy fields between mobile pyramids, were detected from the Necrons.

Scans of the planet and loss rates indicate that the Necron forces are likely to lose the battle eventually. Since we are attempting to have friendly contact with the Necrons, GCU Large Sticks Speak Softly has decided to intervene in the battle to save the Necrons.

The Orks are almost certainly a HS as the SC team landed on the surface was also attacked. Nevertheless, we are willing to use them as... insurance against the Necrons if the need so arises.

The Orks around the major entrances to the Tombs have been cleared by mass Displacer to space. The Ork fleet in orbit has been demolished by CREWs and further separated into 1 meter length chunks when parts of them were rebuilt and activated by the Orks on board.
Total operation time: 10 seconds.

Heavily armed Contact and SC teams have been deployed to the planet above the entrance zones, with a specific anti-fungal nanobot load designed to clean Culture held areas from Ork fungi infiltration.

A transmission was made to the Necrons along the noted channels. Despite our help in relieving the siege, the Necron Lord in charge of this planet appears to be nearly insane. His impression that we are the Eldar here to kill him is not reassuring.

Since the SC teams have set up defensive emplacements outside the entrances, they have come under attack from Orks. The Necron Lord appears uncooperative despite our help.

One of the Orks frontline leaders issued a challenge to the SC team along the largest entrance to the Necron tombs, saying that he will fight the leader in single combat. While the teams do not have a hierarchical structure of command and we have no intention of honouring the result, no matter what happens, this is an excellent technique to stall for time and one of the SC team members, who is a personal combat hobbyist, has been encouraged to take the "bait" and draw out the battle.

The combat between the SC agent and the Ork "boss" (as he calls himself) went on for over three hours as the SC agent repeatedly disabled the "boss"'s weapons and damaged his limbs without critically injuring him. Reportedly, the SC agent finds it great fun to spar with the Orks since they appear to be incredibly resilient and blows that the agent would have easily killed any citizen with (and was thus restricted from using them in sparring sessions) the large Ork merely shrugs off with a broken bone that appears to heal very quickly.

The combat, which has gathered significant attention from the Ork camps, included a few of the sub-commanders who have tried to also join the battle and were killed or driven off either by the "boss" or the SC agent. This was interrupted when three Monoliths (name from IoM records) of the Necrons teleported around the SC defensive site and began attacking the SC team.
The monoliths unloaded a large number of Necron warriors and "floaty things" (name attributed to Memis Trayer), as well as a lesser number of more specialist vehicles or infantry, both identified and unidentified.
Shortly after the battle started, *Large Sticks Speak Softly* decided to rate these Necrons as hostile and decided that a large demonstration of power was required to gain their attention. SC teams were given clearance to use maximum force, with an attention to a showcase of the Culture's military superiority.

An initial salvo of plasma weaponry were attenuated by a triangular energy field projected between the three Necron monoliths. Readings and specifics of this field have been taken but the field projector in the monolith is nearly undecipherable. While the attacks of the SC team were hindered by it, they managed to disable large portions of the Necron force within a few seconds, but they displayed significant regeneration capabilities powered by the field. It was noted that in high shot density areas, the "floaty things" could indeed be destroyed if they reappeared while a shot was passing through them.

At this point, the GCU decided not to risk SC team casualties, which would spoil the superiority effect, and destroyed the monoliths with one shot of a high-energy x-ray CREW each. (an SC agent reported that it looked like a pencil thin column of light from the sky that made the monoliths explode)

The "floaty things" proved susceptible to displacement and were forced into orbit, where they appeared to survive unhindered and teleported back to their underground tomb.

The rest of the Necron forces were easily dispatched without loss, using a combination of battlefield displacement and mirror field-guided weaponry to rapidly provide unlimited angles of attack that the Necrons (and orks) were unable to respond to.

Unfortunately, knife missiles proved unusable against Necron armour unless equipped with a plasma sheath penetrator. In any case, the Necrons appear unfazed by simple decapitation strikes, being able to quickly regenerate from such damage on the battlefield. Full vapourization or explosive disintegration of the body chassis is required for their deactivation, which unfortunately, requires the self-destruction of the knife missiles.

No green marks were seen, that and traps appear to be the primary cause of the SC team casualties from *Curiosity Saved the Cat*. Why the Necrons did not employ the green-mark weapon this time is unknown.

After the battle where the Necrons were dispatched with, if not ease, at least without casualties or much expended ordnance, the Orks appeared to consider the defensive teams with more respect. Or at least, wariness.

The Ork warboss did not appear to survive the firefight, the ruins of his exoskeleton armour was found destroyed by a Necron weapon, but another ork appeared and issued a similar challenge. Once again, the SC agent under took this same challenge but this ork appeared less resilient than before and an effector assisted palm strike to the head killed him while negotiations were opened again with the Necron Lord.

The attack having appeared to have failed dramatically, the Necron Lord decided that instead of allowing his technology to fall into the hands of the 'Eldar' he was going to destroy them himself. A series of detonations marked the beginnings of his power cores' self-destruct cycle that destroyed the lower chambers, and presumably the Necron Lord and more sensitive equipment. Some of the power cores were prevented from destabilizing after deactivation of his shields and usage of effectors to substitute for containment fields that bled the energy off to a non-explosive level. Most cores still detonated and as many Necrons were displaced to orbit as fast as possible, nevertheless all vehicles apart from one "floaty thing" and a single maintenance drone were destroyed.

Meanwhile, the Orks on the surface were more impressed at the SC agents rapid kill (if accidental,
but we did not communicate such) of the challenger ork. Reportedly, he then issued an open challenge to any other orks who wished to take him on. Some rounds were fired, all but one missed, that one was deflected by an effector field, and the SC agent shot each ork who fired upon him, this GCU aiding him in the video tracking.

The SC agent then claimed that the observed tribal nature of the orks are not due to their primitivism and that they were a true HS with the hierarchy of power built into their society. While this GCU does not believe his claim as such, we were willing to tolerate an experiment. The SC agent forced an ork tinkerer on the pain of death to make a working Necron gun from a destroyed one, the same as IoM claims that the orks could get anything to work, which had been dismissed as xenophobic exaggeration.

Amazingly, the ork managed to piece together a working gun, if unreliable and weak compared to proper necron weaponry. The gun has been recovered for analysis and preliminary indications seem to say the gun has absolutely nothing in common with the original Necron weapon. A similar experiment was conducted with a simple explosive powder driven weapon to similar results, only this time, the resulting weapon had no possibility of even working and would sometimes even fire without ammunition.

The artifacts themselves are under lockdown on the planet surface. All tests were done by the orks on designated targets. No testing from us has been conducted thus far.

We tentatively conclude from this that the orks have the ability to imbue objects with warp properties. This is an incredible find of great interest and implication for both the Culture and our stance towards the orks. This GCU believes that the Orks are an actual race capable of civilization if extensive reforming efforts are used and will treat them as such.

However, we do note that our argument for their capabilities is only founded on extrapolations for the orks' technological instinct.

The SC agent's position is likewise common among the crew and nearby Minds that we contacted, that the orks are irredeemable HSes with the use of weapons and undesirable oppressive power structure built into them.

We do also note that until a full-scale multi-factor simulation of their genetic code is complete, which make take weeks or be impossible due to the lack of understanding about the warp, this is also impossible to confirm as true.

Chapter End Notes

A Note: the teams deployed to the planet surface are Contact & SC. And about 2/3 drones. SC teams refers to this, apologies for omission.
Week 1
Following *Golden Goose*'s high risk adventure, travel into IoM warp restricted areas is discouraged regardless of whether realspace manifestation of the warp is detected or not.

The revelations on orkish society are extremely interesting but are also a cause for worry. Many Minds and citizens have expressed concern over classifying them as a HS due to this and corralling or using them.

Multiple Minds have taken up the task of analyzing the orkish genome but we are still awaiting results.

Another warning has been received from the Eldar regarding a warpstorm in realspace that is about to occur in a system slated for survey in two weeks time. They have warned us not to approach the system, saying the doing so will strengthen Chaos greatly.
So far, only already established warpstorms have been observed. The most prominent being the Eye of Chaos. Formation of warpstorms are of great scientific interest.

The Eldar have asked that we return any Eldar artefacts that we come across. We have agreed to do this, with the understanding that we will study the artefacts (this was not negotiable) but will not deliberately delay their return.

While skepticism of the warning is widespread, we do not discount the possibility that the Eldar may have inside information on Chaos. The entire area will be avoid and an ROU, a GSV and three GCU's are enroute to nearby systems to observe and take readings.

IoM Ordo Xenos activity has been on the rise regarding an "unknown xeno". Given the number of blunders and potential sightings, including occasional psyker detections of our ships, we surmise that the IoM has become aware of our operations.
A debate about whether to open full diplomatic contact with the IoM is underway.

Week 2
Things came to a head recently over the Ork sentience issue and a number of GCUs have supporting the Orks as HS hypothesis have taken action against Ork-infested IoM worlds, clearing their presence completely and confiscating all ork-artifacts.

GCUs that support the reformable-orks hypothesis have tried to negotiate with them, and in one case, has totally usurped the power structure as an experiment (Large Sticks Speak Softly).

ROU Pest Control has reported another minor contact with Tyranids, also to a similar success.
Analysis of tyranid biology has lead to some advances in genetic manipulation. The tyranids' use of controlled hypermutation allows them to adapt amazingly quickly in response to adverse situations, while full use of this technique is not possible for single organisms, strategies used by the Tyranids can be applied. Application of these principles should increase our organic citizens' resistance in general (minor) and increase the range of possible body profiles.

Another interesting discovery under investigation is the implied sentience of occasional individuals in the hive fleets. These sentient beings are also part of a hive mind in a way that is currently not fully understood. Some warp phenomena is also suspected.

Necrontyr language has been deciphered, we no longer use Eldar to talk to the Necrons. Multiple tomb worlds have been tracked down but we are awaiting permission to activate them.
Analysis of Necron technology has yielded a theoretical advance in sub-atomic engineering; stable nuclear molecules are at least possible through a currently poorly-understood theoretical method.

We have decided to initiate IoM contact. The Ordo Xenos has been chosen as our vector. Technology transfer to the IoM is discouraged due to the prevalence of ex-IoM ship classes among the Eldar information on Chaos.

Week 3
The two major factions of the ork-HS question have begun to solidify into a political disagreement. At current trajectories of opinion, secession of the expedition into two roughly equal halves over this matter is considered likely, although the process is expected to happen over the next few months.

Investigations into the ork genome has revealed that their technical expertise is instinctual and limited to their programming, as evidenced by the similar technologies developed amazingly rapidly by completely separate ork groups. This has strengthened the position of the orks-as-a-HS faction, but has not convinced many to switch positions.

ROU Gunboat Diplomacy has reported an encounter at the border of Tau space. The ROU came across a Tyranid fleet assaulting an IoM world and destroyed it. This event was witnessed by a Tau scout ship.
The ROU decided not to initiate contact, instead opting to wait for the GCU Peacemaker following it that was due to arrive two days later. During that time the Tau ship warp jumped out of the system.

The Eldar-warnerd warpstorm has occurred. Major disruptions to realspace movements are observed, a GCU caught in such a storm would be destroyed or outright displaced into the warp. Many skeptics of the Eldar warnings have been convinced.

An IoM ship has been observed in two places at the same time. Two GCUs at a mining world and a forge world, Neverending Story and A Blue Telephone Booth respectively, registered its passage and it was investigated as a potential smuggler or pirate by the GCUs. However, when the captain and key crew matched appearances and internal body structure as well as genetics, suspicions arose. Radiometric dating of unstable isotopes in the plasma core shell indicated that the ship at the forge world was slightly older by about one or two weeks.
A Blue Telephone Booth then discovered a hidden hypercomm buried in the structure of the ship when it began transmitting. This was deactivated and removed, the message decoded. This message: "Neverending Story placed this hypercomm here as an experiment" was transmitted to Neverending Story but that GCU admitted to no such action.
This was quickly deciphered to be a closed time loop and before the IoM ship jumped out, Neverending Story planted the hypercomm transmitter.
Chaos Encounter

The development of the warpstorm was observed at a range of 10 lightyears (roughly twice the distance between inhabited stars in this region of space) and was visible in long range hyperspace sensors.

While data was gathered by a GCU currently in interstellar space, a Chaos fleet dropped out of warp in an IoM held system near the edge of the storm that the GCU *Sufficiently Advanced Technology* was currently scanning.

Data on scrapcode from *Golden Goose's* battle had been used to harden computer systems since then but no risk was taken. All data channels to the Chaos fleet was scrambled by an effector field that enforced pure static in virtually the entire electromagnetic spectrum. While this had the effect of announcing the GCU's presence and jamming all IoM non-Astropathic communications, no risks were to be taken with respect to Chaos.

The Chaos fleet itself was destroyed by intense CREW bombardment and a displaced nanohole (Schwarzschild hole, lifetime ~1s, total explosive power: 2 x 10^5 kg). The resulting gamma ray burst was shielded by the same jamming effector field, *Sufficiently Advanced Technology* positioned itself to cover the IoM world as well.

The fragments of the Chaos ships were then destroyed by CAM elimination.

For the next 24 hours, the GCU stayed in orbit to assess any damage that might have leaked through the shield and the IoM's reaction to the event. While the IoM reaction was within societal models, contact was not opened with the planet due to the following event.

A number of IoM citizens and GCU organic citizens were somehow subject to a strange infectious disease. While the affected citizens were restored from backup and all organics in the ship was scrubbed down and quarantined, the plague was not interfered with on the IoM world for two days due to this matter.

-- Addenum: This writing GCU observes that reloading from backup of the various citizens should not have taken more than a day, and during that time, there should have been more than enough time to intervene in the resulting plague on the IoM world.

-- Addenum 2: *Sufficiently Advanced Technology* would like to note that the plague appeared more virulent than expected and had apparent warp traits. Infection of citizens continued despite no apparent vector until areas that infection occurred in were completely rebuilt. This GCU would like to note that further warp infections appear to be able to linger in areas even without physical cause and recommends destruction of infection sites by CAM.

The plague appeared to convert IoM citizens into mindless zombies that attacked other citizens. Citizens that became part of a Chaos cult and pledged allegiance to a Chaos god called Nurgle were seemingly immune. After watching the plague progress for an additional day, *Sufficiently Advanced Technology* concludes that this plague has HS-like properties and is probably employed as a weapon by Chaos, probably by this Nurgle god.

The infected areas were sterilized by Pancaker at 1 million gravities to liquiefy all organics then 1 million negative gravities to send the affected planetary surface to orbit where the chunks were displaced into a single solid mass before destruction by complete antimatter annihilation.

The relatively small area of the planet that was affected did not significantly affect the planet's orbit or broader ecosystem although local damage was severe.
Tau, we come in peace

ROU Gunboat Diplomacy to GCU Peacemaker
Tyranid hive fleet sighted around IoM system, proceeding along standard engagement protocol.

... Hive fleet destroyed. No Tyranid presence on IoM world detected. IoM fleet seems to be inoperative. There is an unidentified ship at the edge of the system, was being chased by a small force of Tyranids that have now been destroyed. The ship is remaining still, no signs of detection of this ROU has been found.

Effector readings of the ship are as follows. Preliminary identification: Tau scout ship, Messenger Class (IoM name), confidence level 88%.

Should I open direct contact?

... Request to await your arrival is acknowledged.

Two days later
GCU Peacemaker
The Tau ship has jumped out of the system while the GCU Peacemaker was on its way. The loss of this chance at contact is disappointing but Gunboat Diplomacy's scans of the IoM planet has retrieved an approximate map of Tau space in the local region.

This GCU will head to the nearest Tau-held planet to analyze and possibly make contact with the Tau. The ROU will remain with one Contact citizen to continue investigations into the Astartes chapter in this space.

The GSV to arrive in a week's time will establish a presence in this local region of space. As imperialistic patterns go, the IoM does not appear to be an exception to the distance problem. This far from Sol, we may be able to find peaceful contact.

Gunboat Diplomacy is enroute to Macragge. Hyperdrive degradation from the unofficial 'race' over the galaxy has restricted our speeds severely. The ROU is expected to arrive next week.

Peacemaker has arrived at a nearby Tau system, this is Bork'An, a noted major colony. Well-populated and patrolled, we are unable to approach closely without being detected by significantly more advanced Tau sensors.

Nevertheless, we have still scanned the Tau world and it does appear to have the IoM reported social structure, although when observed, does not contain some of the more sinister reports of hidden cruelty. Such may be discounted as IoM exaggeration.

The Tau appear to be a generally peaceful race although their culture still suppresses individual freedoms to some extent. While certainly more meritocratic than the IoM, the Tau are not the paragons of freedom that some analysts of IoM accounts might claim. They do still possess a hierarchial power structure and classical government (pure meritocracy type B, within castes), unlike what some speculators might have hoped. At the least, they do not possess anything at all like a libertarian approach to government.

Their caste system in particular dictates roles in society and mobility between the castes as well as more 'creative' interpretations of the Greater Good are... frowned upon. And certainly, the Tau are not xenophobic but possess a belief of the superiority of their social system.

For this reason, this GCU believes that contact with the Tau and medium to long term peaceful
reform is possible and should be attempted; without specific injunctions, we will proceed to open first contact within 24 standard hours.

... This GCU will proceed with first contact.

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**Tau World - Bork'An**

The GCU *Peacemaker* drops its stealth below the orbital plane and is immediately registered by Tau sensors. It begins broadcasting a message on the entire spectrum with IoM protocols in Low Gothic:

Greetings to the Tau Empire, we are the Culture and we come in peace. We originate from outside this galaxy and this expedition is both to explore and to colonize. We have encountered reports of your kind from the Imperium of Mankind and we are pleased to discover a potential ally in an unstable galaxy. Please do not fear that we might share the IoM's attitude towards you, we are fully aware of the IoM's tendency to xenophobia.

In a galaxy full of Chaos, we seek friends and allies in the coming conflict. We hope that we may eventually count the Tau among them, but even if the Tau are unable or unwilling to help us, we clearly have much to learn from each other.

We have no wish to intrude into Tau matters nor do we desire your worlds or resources. We hope that our aligned goals and lack of conflicting desires will be conducive to a lasting peace and a fruitful friendship.

Responses can be directed at this ship along any channel with any IoM protocol. A different communication protocol can also be detailed and we will accommodate. We also desire to learn the Tau language so that we may communicate more effectively.

**1 week report**

Contact with the Tau is peaceful and we are negotiating the establishment of embassies, although the Tau will have to wait until GSV *Crossing the Bridge* arrives.

In the mean time, we are also negotiating a trade of knowledge on Chaos as well as any other species in the local vicinity. The Tau are very concerned about Tyranid activity in this region of space and we surmise that we might be able to negotiate for some concessions in return for helping them fight off this HS.

The Tau are concerned that we have politely declined their invitation to join the Greater Good but they have remained interested in potential fruitful contact. They are also slightly concerned that we, or at least this GCU and Gunboat Diplomacy, have decided to not grant any potential military help against any race other than the Tyranids. And that this extends to any potential technology sharing in the short term.

In general, we conclude that a rapid technology transfer to the Tau is likely to greatly destabilize this region's balance of power. The hyperspace drive will immensely benefit the Tau over the IoM, given that the Tau are certain to adopt it faster and adapt to its tactics quicker. Their expansion has also been greatly limited by their realspace speed.

On the other hand, they are intrigued by our problems with Chaos and a chance to study why they are not similarly subjected to Chaos contaminations (which are exceedingly rare among the Tau, and even in those cases, generally not destructive) is likely to yield a major advance in contamination prevention.

As far as this GCU can tell, the Tau themselves are unclear why this is the case. It is noted that their
claim that adherence to the Greater Good being a shield against Chaos does not carry explanatory power.

In any case, a decision among us in Contact needs to be made. The Tau are certainly a much more benign civilization than the IoM or possibly even the Eldar. Expanding their influence would aid our causes in the short term, but in the long run may greatly hinder our attempts at reform. And yet, refusal to trade major technologies like the hyperspace drive on the excuse of preserving the balance of power is likely to generate some understandable hostility. And that may hurt our chances of understanding the valuable Chaos resistance the Tau have, at least through peaceful means, which this GCU is certain should be exhausted before invasive means can even be morally considered for such a benign civilization.
Nobody expects the IoM Inquisition ... to be contacted (or do they?)

GCU Starry Banner at Alpha Centauri
Tracking Ordo Xenos activity at a mining operation. They are using this place as an untracked Astropathic beacon that communicates directly to Sol. An improvised command center has been found, carefully concealed even from the local mining operators. Interestingly, no written or uploaded records are to be found. They appear to memorize their information, a sort of security measure, although we have tapped all communication from the Astropathic Choir so we still have access to it.

We have scanned select minds, commanders mainly, and we have come to the conclusion that they are in the process of collating widespread events that originated with us. Examples include the Sol probe, Pest Control's destruction of the Tyranid fleet, Ork-inestation interventions, among others.

The IoM has become aware of our existence.

Starry Banner requests advice on further action.

.. We will proceed with first contact with lines that keep secrecy.

Ordo Xenos, Information Center
There is a knock on the door and the guard glances at his companion for a moment before cautiously opening it. The knock did not follow the secret code, which actually sounds a lot like a normal knock.

The door opens to reveal the figure of a male human, but the man's features are unidentifiable. They are bland and generic, as if someone had taken all the most common traits of IoM citizens and made up a person with them. The uniform he wears is likewise a mix of the Imperial Guard's and the Inquisition's.

He refuses to answer questions about his identity and when fired upon, bullets go straight through him. The psyker doesn't even detect his presence but he is obviously not a blank. Anyone even trying to touch him finds that their hands pass through and restricting his movement is impossible. He can walk through people and doors.

Someone figures out that it's a hologram of such high fidelity that it appears exactly as if it was a normal person. No auspex, no psyker or any kind of sensor can detect where the origin of the hologram is, although the auspex notes that the light coming from the hologram is real.

The man, unarmed, holds out his empty hands and speaks in Low Gothic.

"We apologize for this unusual form of contact. We are the Culture and we understand the Ordo Xenos's need for secrecy in your duties so we have chosen to contact the Imperium in this manner.

The unusual events that you have been tracking can be mostly related to our activities, except for the following," Another hologram of a list of chance events, warpstorms and strange reports across the galaxy appears. The Culture has nothing to do with these events.

"We have decided to contact the Imperium in hopes of preventing future misunderstandings. Please understand that our hesitation has been out of reaction to your xenophobia.

You may ask this hologram questions. We will try to answer what we can."

Starry Banner reports that contact with the Inquisitors has been relatively peaceful, although we have
decided to reject meeting them in person. The risk of attack was deemed too high, even for a lone SC agent, and the excessive risk posed by their use of psykers was deemed unacceptable. They refused to meet under a no-psyker restriction after we revealed that we could detect that they snuck a psyker into the meeting despite a stealth device being used. Simple DNA matching of the people present with a tally of every person in the IoM facility was enough to uniquely identify the psyker present.

It took some time to get them to understand that we are a primarily space-bound civilization and thus have no designs on IoM territory or resources.

We offered apologies for intruding into their territory, in particular, Sol, and they understandably were unsatisfied. When they demanded we leave, we did point out that we are unable to leave IoM space altogether since the IoM occupy every part of this galaxy. We are quite confident that this will lead to open war at some point in the future, at least on the IoM's part. Societal models indicate the following spark points are likely, <...>

While Starry Banner has concealed our true technology, extent and penetration of IoM holdings, as well as our future plans for the IoM, we have managed to communicate some of our culture and society, which they find hard to believe.

We have managed to find common ground in a desire to observe and contain the threat of Chaos. However, we are of the opinion that this matters little.

Starry Banner is also of the opinion that this contact was ill-advised. At some point, the IoM will make an attempt to evict us from its space. While they will certainly fail, we cannot afford to overlook the attempt to preserve our diplomatic relations with the Eldar and Necrons, who we understand that societal modelling indicates they may think us weak if we do not retaliate. Additionally, societal modelling of the IoM indicates that if we do overlook the attempt anyway, they will only try again. The IoM's failure and our reprisal, even if limited to destroying any military assets brought to bear, may destabilize them. Empires are not known for their ability to suffer setbacks and the event may precipitate a political collapse or an escalation to a religious war. In either case, further loss of IoM lives are inevitable and it will be our fault.

We recommend that we prepare to forestall and avoid battle, whether by subtle manipulation or a simple refusal to be wherever their military assets are. However, even this cannot last long, Starry Banner believes intervention in the IoM has become inevitable and our planned schedules have been vastly brought forward as a result of this contact. And in any possible intervention short of outright occupation, mass IoM deaths is also inevitable and technology leakage to Chaos almost certain.

By initiating this contact, Starry Banner believes that we may have wrote ourselves into a corner. At all turns, we either subject ourselves to leaving IoM space or watching the fast or slow, but inevitable, collapse of the IoM.

There appear to be no ways out.

GSV Divided We Stand, United We Fall to GCU Starry Banner and general hypercomm network Starry Banner's analysis appears accurate. It appears that the decision to contact the IoM has been hasty.

Nevertheless, our social models had never predicted higher than a 2% chance that the IoM would be reformable without mass deaths. Furthermore, our very recent analysis of the Golden Throne data (built on their own) indicates a
possible total failure within 500 to one thousand years. That failure WILL cause mass deaths. We note that our social models indicated that it is impossible to have widespread adoption of hyperspace drives by that time (or at least, so low as to be effectively impossible)

There appears to be no ways out. Because there never was.

The sooner we accept the reality, the sooner we can realign our actions to something more productive. Loss of life is unfortunate and inevitable, we may as well being preparations to pick up the pieces.

Now.

Reply #1: ROU LaserStar would like to recommend that we divide the IoM into segments along the following lines and ...
Reply #2: GCU Golden Goose would like to question the data that indicates impossibility of hyperspace drive adoption based on anecdotal evidence ...
Reply #3 ...

Following some discussion, an interesting proposal was made by GCU Tick Tacks. It had been pointed out that if our intervention in the IoM would almost certainly cause a collapse, then our intervention would be worse than if we let the atrocities continue. The victims would die either way.

While many strenuous moral arguments were made, this was the course of action that we eventually concluded. The IoM was too fragile for direct intervention and too infiltrated for natural progress by tech transfer. Furthermore, our technology level above the IoM is high enough that we should be able to get away with ignoring them.

We will continue to operate in IoM space, seeking out and tracking Chaos cults and IoM methods of dealing with them, but all IoM military concentrations are to be avoided.

GCU Golden Goose has been asked to constrain its potential technology leakage using all means possible. Including pulling the plug on its mission.

We hope that by our continued non-interference in IoM matters, their attempts to engage us might eventually be turned to engaging Chaos. If we side with the IoM and protect them from external threats like Tyranids and Orks, which are their major resource sinks, we might be able to channel their efforts at Chaos.

The Eldar may require assistance and a sort of peace between the IoM and the Necrons will have to be brokered, which is likely to be problematic, but we stand a far larger chance of avoiding mass deaths in this manner.

Some kind of agreement with the Tau will have to be made to avoid them pressuring the IoM too much, and ensuring that they aren't subject to the more mundane sort of technology leakage to Chaos.

In the meantime, we will use the time bought to extend our reach and scope. If we must eventually intervene directly, then the time should be spent well preparing for it.

Week 2
Starry Banner has delivered our decision to avoid action with the IoM. They appear unconvinced.

A demonstration of our tactical capabilities is being debated. While it clearly shows our tactical capabilities, in this case, forewarned is not necessarily forearmed. And it may divert the IoM from useless military buildups against us.
As part of an attempt to divert IoM attention from us, we have decided that a small show of our informational capabilities was adequate. Taking over their poorly understood cogitators and planting worms was easy enough, even worms that avoided their surprisingly thorough internal scans even if ritualistic.

Using these worms, we proceeded to display a data dump of all our observed Chaos cells on planets within 20 light years of Terra. Many of these cells were positively identified by mind-scan although details about how we discovered them was not mentioned. One instance of a small dormant Gene-stealer cult (IoM name) was also included. Despite the void shields that were raised, the worms managed to manipulate the shielding frequencies to allow limited effector penetration, all without the IoM noticing (their sensors were also bugged).

Having demonstrated our infiltration capabilities, the IoM took all their electronic equipment and collected them for analysis. We self-destructed our worms but left the data dump. In the coming weeks, we should see if the IoM present any reaction to the mentioned Chaos cells and the gene-stealer cult.

We hope that if the IoM confirm our covert aid is truth, then we may have some level of cooperation. And indeed, if we manage to catch Chaos or Tyranid infestations early, the IoM may never need to resort to mass deaths and planetary extinction to contain the worst cases, which would greatly improve the IoM society of fear in general. This can be considered a pilot trial of this tactic. Other such trials may need to be considered in case this specific inquisitor has a problem with the information.

Week 2-3
We have stuck to our decision to not interfere in IoM matters. IoM inquisitorial mobilization has been detected across multiple star systems concentrating in the areas we have identified in the list of Chaos cells. One of them was accidentally uncovered and destroyed by the Imperial Guard.

Ad Mech personnel have investigated the hijacked machines which indicated no traces of our worms (because there are no detectable traces at the IoM’s level of technology).

Nevertheless, we hope to build some trust with the IoM with this dump of our findings of Chaos cells. Or if not trust, then at least aid them and reduce Chaos contaminations in this section of the galaxy although we certainly cannot identify every instance of it.

We may be judged cruel by not attempting to save the Chaos contaminated citizens, but all possible methods involving attempting to apply reload technology across entire IoM worlds, the problems of which are obvious and lengthy enough to not require stating.
Necrons - Diplomacy contact

Week 1
A Necron ship around the world has left orbit and is travelling by hyperspace towards a distant system. ROU White Devil is now tailing that ship with a hyperspace drone.
Their hyperspace drive appears to run on different principles to our own. Theirs does not permit in-system FTL.

Meanwhile, negotiations with the Necrons have met a roadblock. The Necrons are not interested in an exchange program or mutual embassies, although a technology exchange might be possible. They appear to want to understand our intelligence engineering technology, despite being inorganic (and therefore engineered) intelligences themselves.

This is considered strong evidence that the Necrons, while almost HS-like in behaviour, were made that way and there might be hope of reforming them. As part of their behaviour is coded directly into their structure in some unknown fashion, helping the Necrons appears to require us to understand their technology or them to understand ours.

Understandably, both sides still lack enough trust in each other to perform an outright technological trade. And since the Necrons will appear to come into conflict with the IoM, judging by IoM records, we may also be required to negotiate a peace between the Necrons and the IoM.

We have inquired as to what the Necron Lord aims to do.

The Necron Lord has indicated that he will be rebuilding his strength for at least the next year if he is not disturbed. The probable mission of the ship (which he did not elaborate on) is either scout ship or an attempt to contact other Necron worlds.

The Necron Lord has expressed interest in negotiation a transfer of technology but has taken extreme care to not state what sort of transfer he is looking for. We are currently working on the negotiations despite difficulties.

Meanwhile, we have also requested to hear the Necrons' history, taking a guess that a war did occur in the past and that the enemies were the Eldar (Eldar accounts say that the Necrons were their enemy, but perhaps the reverse is not true; or at least the Necrons' version of history might not corroborate this) We took care not to mention our hypothesis that the Necrons were weapons.

Week 2
Through various hints and roundabout talking, White Devil is now convinced that the Necron Lord is interested in our intelligence engineering knowledge. While there is no conclusive evidence for this, Curiousity Saved the Cat will admit that the Necron Lord does seem to hint at it.

We have likewise stated, rather less circumspectly, our interest in their engineering technologies, apparent action at a distance as well as any possible data on Chaos. We have emphasized our stance towards understanding and containing Chaos.

Why he might do this seems incomprehensible. Nevertheless, the possibility for fruitful exchange of ideas is too good to pass up.

The Necron lord continue to prevaricate but we think that he is brushing around the edges of agreeing to a technology trade. Interestingly, he has been subject to less bouts of insanity than expected in the last week. Why this might be so is unknown but we think that the Necron lord is
learning to work around the errors in his system.

Week 3
The Necron ship has arrived at an uninhabited star and proceeded to refuel before leaving to go to another star, its new target has so far been unsurveyed and no IoM reports on it have been found.

We believe that the Necron Lord has agreed to the technology trade. He will provide an unspecified piece of technology, but related to the Warp, while we will provide details on intelligence engineering and our star maps of this galaxy (including those taken from other races).

A torchdrive-driven (this was specified in the negotiations) uncrewed shuttle landed on the Necron World's surface causing significant collateral damage and left the cache of information with an expert system and the agreed to library of information. Necron troops were detected bringing the installation underground.

Shortly after that, one of the Necron ships in orbit boosted into a fast closing vector on our shuttle as it left the surface and teleported a small group of Necron warriors and a monolith onboard. This 'boarding crew' was swiftly disabled by effector and the shuttle engaged its hyperdrive to be retrieved without incident.

A few days later, another Necron ship left the system along the same path taken by the first ship. This is also being tailed by a remote drone.

Transcript of relevant Necron communications concerning the technology transfer: (relevant sections taken out of the more confusing and sometimes illogical context)

Week 1
N: "The Necrons note that the Culture has some desirable technology."
C: "We are amenable to a technology trade if you so desire it."

<!--intermission for two days, the Culture becomes convinced through other means that talking of "trade" or any form of exchange appears to trigger a temporary bout of insanity-->
C: "Concerning our respective knowledge, we also note that the Necrons have some desirable technology."
N (immediate reply): "The Necrons will not grant the Culture or anyone knowledge of Necron technology."

C1 (internal communication from White Devil to Curiosity Saved the Cat): "I believe they're trying to make friends."
C2 (reply): "What makes you think that?"
C1: "He just wants to trade without actually trading."
C2: "Why don't you take over the negotiations?"

<<White Devil notes that 'practical' appears to be roughly equivalent to 'not at all'>>

Week 2
C: "If the Necrons will not grant the Culture or anyone knowledge of Necron technology, then the Culture will not grant Necrons knowledge of Culture technology. Which you have noted is desirable."
N: "There will be no discussion of this matter."
C: "If the Culture were to attack and seize some technology..."
N: "Then we will attack the Culture as far as practical to get it back."

<<White Devil notes that 'practical' appears to be roughly equivalent to 'not at all'>>
C: "If the Culture were to give the Necrons some-
N: "The Necrons do not accept technology from other races."
C: "If the Necrons were to attack the Culture and in the process capture some items of technological interest, would the Necrons-
N: "The Necrons will claim ownership of any item left on a Tomb World."
<<White Devil is now convinced that the Necrons are trying to ask for a technology trade>>
C: "We find that the Necrons have interesting knowledge of Warp effects and sub-atomic engineering. We are very interested in learning more about the Warp."

Week 3
N: "The Necrons do not teach. We are researching a method to enhance or correct errors in inorganic intelligence."
C: "What will the Necrons consider a ceasefire-breaking event?"
N: "A fusion-plasma reaction drive landing on a Tomb World would be considered a violation of our informal ceasefire."
C: "What actions might the Necrons take against such a potential attack?"
N: "We will attempt to take control of the starship, no attacks against a Tomb World will be tolerated."
<<The exchange is carried out>>
N: "The Culture's hostile actions against this Tomb World must stop."
C: "We apologize for the independent action. We had a minor problem of an intelligence malfunction. The Culture emphasizes its peaceful relationship with the Necrons."
N: "The Necrons regard the Culture as honourable enemies and will grant a temporary ceasefire."
Rogue Trader - Setting up a business

Week 1
Golden Goose has tailed the Rogue Trader to a Hive world where he proceeded to recruit some crew. The Dauntless is now at full strength but the Lunar is still short some people.

As he began to leave orbit with impulse drives, he received a message from the planet's astropathic choir coded with a one time pad. The Rogue Trader appeared to be able to read the message without reference to any pads at all. A mind scan indicated that he was decoding it in his head but the scan was too fragmented to decode the message. We did register anger and fear as a response however.

Week 2
The Rogue Trader has arrived at a nearby Farm world and has recruited enough crew to fully man his Lunar. Trading of various commodities appears to have drawn the attention of the inquisition, although he has so far remained ahead of any investigation simply by moving faster than them.

The Lunar has been refurbished to make more space for cargo, converting a few short range macrocannons to storage areas.

As he made a trading run to a mining world, picking up enough material to manufacture an asteroid mining platform, he was challenged by the orbital authorities under the command by the Inquisition. The investigation team ordered him to disengage his drive and allow them to board his ship to look for xenotech. The Rogue Trader barely managed to escape boarding by engaging his impulse drives and outrunning the Inquisition-commanded vessels with his hyperspace drive to give him a small boost (running at \(10^{-5}\%\))

The IoM has noticed that his ship's plasma plume did not match his observed acceleration and has taken it as evidence that his ship contains xenotech.

The Rogue Trader has arrived at a pirate shipyard after escaping from the Inquisition. He seems to be rather discouraged at the Inquisition's chase of his ship.

Repairs and recruitment of pirate crew are underway. He has agreed to provide equipment, primarily military in nature, in exchange for the payment for repairs and wages of his crew.

Week 3
The Rogue Trader has completed repairs and has recruited excess crew on both ship and is jumping to an uninhabited system in order to set up an independent mining operation using the nanobots and the plans for an asteroid miner. He intends to use the excess crew to run the miner to feed the nanobot construction.

Of note is an astropathic message he sent from his ship while in transit. The message also uses a one-time pad encoding that he performed from memory and so is undecipherable. Nevertheless, we suspect it is related to the first message he received.

The string is attached, request for all Culture vessels to monitor astropathic choirs for the outgoing string.

Rogue Trader - Decoded Messages (note that one-time pads are of fixed length, in this case, 180 characters not including message headers)

Incoming: INQUISITION SUSPECTS XENOTECH USE. AVOID INVESTIGATION AT ALL COSTS. DETAILS ON XENOTECH DESIRED AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA AAAAA
The Rogue Trader has completed the asteroid mining platform in a surprisingly short amount of time. Surprising to everyone involved, although for different reasons. We are surprised because we did not expect him to employ the full productive power of the nanobots so quickly, and he (and his crew) were surprised at the large display of the power of exponentially increasing production power. Of course, anyone who is familiar with even the theoretical properties of Von Neumann replicators would not be overly surprised at a hundred kilograms of nanobots building an asteroid mining platform a million times their own weight (~100 ktons) in roughly two days. And despite the already demonstrated production power in building assorted equipment, this demonstration in large scale seemed to enlighten them to the sheer amount of power the nanobots wield.

Which is good, since we certainly wish that he exploit them against Chaos. And that he (and the crew in the know) now understand exactly why it would be deadly to the Imperium if they leaked the technology to Chaos. We note that he is still loyal to the Imperium's government and we expect that this alignment of interests should spur additional safeguards on the nanobots that has not been present so far.

Shortly after that, his astropath picked up a message for him that meant roughly "ready" followed by a location in interstellar space. We followed his Dauntless to the nearby location, where we (and the Rogue Trader) detected a small canister containing a digital message. Our IoM starship records were referenced but no detection of this message canister was registered, nevertheless, this is not surprising as our coverage of IoM ships is still patchy.

The message appears to be a cryptographically secure message coded with a one time pad. The Rogue Trader appeared to be able to read it from memory. Some amount of anger and fear was registered in his emotional state but we were unable to decipher the message from shallow scans which was all that we could risk doing when his psyker was around to detect deeper intrusions into anyone's mindstate.

Seb Snakewick has picked up a number of items at the pirate yard that may be of interest. A warp scanner that can detect psychic phenomena is of great interest and we are looking to duplicate and test it. As well as the prediction algorithm and purpose-built hardware that can pilot a warpdrive.

The physical construction scans of these have been completed to subatomic precision and is attached for priority analysis. This may help detect initial Chaos contaminations quicker.
Orks - They'z always arguing about who's in charge

Week 1
Following the destruction of all active Necrons, Large Sticks Speak Softly has decided to take the stance that Orks are not a HS. This contradicts the recommendation by the SC member who fought the warboss that they ARE a HS.

Since the sole leadership of the Orks in this large has already been killed, and the warband is dissolving into myriad power struggles, Large Sticks Speak Softly will attempt to impose some measure of order through the use of force, which is so far the only form of meaningful communication with the Orks.

Two days later
The SC team member has been recognized as the de facto leader of the Orks after killing a number of them, or at least recognized as someone who has to be obeyed. Despite the deaths of multiple sentients we have become responsible for, Large Sticks Speak Softly is of the opinion that this is a worthwhile endeavour to eventually reform the orks.

For now, we will be attempting to implement some measure of order onto the ork society and establishing a rule of law. The dictatorial society model we are adopting will act as a transitory stage towards a more peaceful government.

A trial attempt with an outcast tribe to make police-orks have failed, the trial was suggested by the SC agent when he was told the plan. While the orks understand a chain of command, vaguely, the idea of law enforcers seems to have made them react badly. The tribe declared him as 'un-orky' and promptly attacked him to the point of destruction. To prevent the 'news' of his 'unorkiness', the fleeing members have been silenced permanently.

It appears that the SC agent's prediction of their behaviour is accurate.

Week 2
Further debates have begun to draw the lines of a split in classification of the orks in the Culture. So far, we are still the only ship to interact with the orks in a semi-long term fashion, other attempts meeting with an 'un-orky' label and implacable hostility and eventual destruction of the ork tribe.

Thus far, our data is the primary source for these debates and the justification for the Orks-are-non-HS side lies mostly with our investigations.

We must be careful to avoid the label of 'un-orky' or we stand a good chance of losing all potential of peaceful contact due to a mis-classification.

Our new plan is to attempt to focus the orks' destructive tendency into their own culture to reduce their external hostility. The SC agent and his insight into the ork behavioural patterns have been consulted and he will be setting up a series of tournaments to establish his chain of command. Again in a contained trial. The risk of losing control over the whole lot is too much to run.

It is hoped that the orks preparing for an internal tournament will be able to distract them and then some tweaks might leave their society with enough individual fights to mitigate their warring tendency.

It has been noted that so far, during our observation, no Orks have been seen to be Chaos contaminated.
The trial is a smashing success. Although the imposition of a blood sport is generally frowned upon, the Orks appear to participate willingly and enthusiastically (in fact, there are far too many that elimination tournaments have to be held).

We have extended the organization of tournaments to the entire ork population.

Thus far, we have the following sports: (--- notes are from week 3)
- Dueling (the orks fight with agreed upon weapons; this usually results in the death of one of the orks despite the rule of no lethal weapons and the general ork toughness)
  --- This is the only recognized form of sport to determine hierarchy of command; it has seemed to formalized and improved upon the original rather messy method of command change.

- A much simpler and rougher version of the team game called Rugby originating from a civilization in our original galaxy --- This is currently used as a spectator sport to keep the orks busy. We note that informal matches have begun to appear.

- A sort of dragracing with custom built cars that have no rules apart from that the contestants must hit various checkpoints in order and no weapons are allowed. (this was designed to give an outlet for the ork's mechanical creativity)
  --- It has been noted that we merely formalized an already present form of the competition.
  --- The SC agent notes: "Despite the new rule of no weapons, the orks have developed a ramming racer model that may as well be a weapon on wheels. Actually, the wheels have climbing spikes on them and can be considered weapons as well. ... I think I might want to have a go in one of them just to see how badly I get chopped up."

Week 3
We are studying the ork psychic field that appears to have warp effects. A weirdboy is being studied for his various effects. He is rather more willing to talk than other orks since he says that the SC agent is the only person in the ork hierarchy of command that doesn't threaten to make his head explode.

Divisions among the Culture have allowed us relatively little oversight in our study of the ork's culture. We are allowing these orks to built starships again and will attempt to use these orks to spread the ideas of organized sport, if violent sport.

We are contemplating a sort of army wargame that may serve to channel the more militaristic warbosses who have been asking when the SC agent will attack someone.

Some of the gretchins have begun to covertly ask if they will be allowed to stop being oppressed by the orks. We currently see no way to relieve this without collapsing the society but will plan a method when more information is available.

A number of ork starships have left the system for neighbouring systems. This is partly to establish communications with other ork tribes as well as test their ability to travel through space. Given their shipbuilding capability, we anticipate high losses, but drone pickets in all neighbouring systems are on the lookout for arrivals.

A plan for using the orks as a weapon against Chaos appears to be somewhat feasible, if morally questionable.

--- Neverending Story would like to add that the moral status of using the orks as a weapon depends on their classification as a non-HS, which clearly seems to not be the case, judging from Eldar and Necron reports. The Orks are a weapon, and using a weapon made by the Old Ones clearly has no moral implications.
--- Large Sticks Speak Softly is of the opinion that the Old Ones did not just make a HS. They made
one with sentience and the capability to form a civilization. Perhaps some corrective action is in order but the Orks are clearly not a HS and using them as a weapon would obviously <...>
--- This human contributes the fact we are considering 'corrective' action. This is obviously morally repugent, are we going to engineer the orks to be less aggressive? <...>

The plan's details have been furnished by a different Mind who conducted an experiment in directing the war-like nature of the orks, which was surprisingly easy as long as they had something to shoot. It appears that directing the orks against Chaos only requires nothing but replacing the warboss and acting 'orky' enough to lead them on an attack. However, this necessitates at least one agent entering Eye or a local warpstorm in realspace which is obviously far too risky to attempt.
A Certain Chaotic Warp Sorcerer

Week 2
He added an extra symbol to the ritual circle and another vision came to him. Hmm, that wouldn't do either.

The Tzeentchian sorcerer scratched at his goatee, trying to think of another way. The blasted thing on his chin itched endlessly and gave him no end of grief. He couldn't get rid of it though, Tzeentch seemed to want him to wear that beard and informed him by way of understanding that if he didn't leave hair on his face, he wouldn't have a face.

Not that he knew how to cut it off either. The goatee grew back faster than he could shave it.

Still, this Culture was quite the tough nut. So far, all the plans he had come up with to contact them, from simply talking to an entire warband out for blood resulted in his death with varying quickness. It was looking like simple contact wasn't going to work either.

The sorcerer cursed as another divination turned up devoid of a solution. Hmm, he would need to be a little more devious. He cast another one, poor success? Hm! That was still the best so far, not that it was difficult to top total disaster.

Well, may as well cast a few more dice to make sure and see if he could refine the solution a little.

Week 3
The plan was set, and done. Now, what he had to do was wait and see where the plan would go wrong. He knew from the forecasting that *something* would not turn out the way he wanted it to, but he couldn't figure out what would go awry.

The Culture
GCU The Right Hand of God has picked up an IoM covert rumour about an ancient artifact on a barely developed mining planet. A few mercenaries are already planning to go get it and the GCU is diverting from its course to investigate.
Eldar - Diplomatic exchange

Week 1
Our efforts to explain the technology behind the hyperspace drive and various construction methods in hyperspace have met with further difficulties. Nevertheless, we are confident that eventually the Eldar will be able to make hyperspace drives. Eventually may be at least a few years though.

At this point, we are sure that the Eldar are using a completely different construction principle. While we have refrained from scanning the teleportation gates' and weapons construction with effectors beyond detecting their presence, enough visual data has been accumulated to indicate some strange properties.

Our Contact citizen living on the Exodite world has not been meeting with much trouble. Additional data on Eldar society's reactions to outsiders is being gathered.

The Eldar Wanderers have explained that the Path of the Wanderer isn't a real Path but a term for those Eldar who are not on any Paths.

Week 2
We have initial indications that the Eldar have a higher baseline emotional sensitivity than human-standard, as well as slightly lower disease resistance. Going by their testimony, the Eldar also have a higher baseline Warp sensitivity.

They have also refused application of backup protocols as it would require scanning them. All three Eldar Wanderers on the Culture GCU are awaiting transfer to the nearby GSV Reporting for Duty.

The Eldar have commented that our organic citizens seem to perform very little useful duties, indicating that the Eldar spend far less time on entertainment or perhaps cannot afford that time.

Week 3
GSV Reporting for Duty
We have noted some symptoms of addiction of one of the Wanderers to a VR environment. Beyond working out that it is the same (customized) environment that the specific Wanderer has been requesting, we have refrained from intruding into it to protect privacy.

The other two Wanderers have commented that this is a risk that Wandering Eldar undertake. We are currently discussing acceptable ways to try recovery with the other two Wanderers and the main Eldar delegation.

Meanwhile, we have had to, with regret, restrict the activities of the other two Eldar to realspace activities, and without true risk. (eg. no sundiving without a ship nearby) Losing one Eldar will be bad enough for our diplomatic relations, we will not risk the others.

Week 1
Spent a day at the Eldar side of embassy waiting for a ship. The Eldar don't seem to have an office in the way the IoM does, instead they conduct their internal business with informal talk and consensus decisions. This appears to indicate a more cohesive and equal society (in terms of status) than the IoM.
The Eldar cruiser has arrived to transfer me to one of their larger fleets where they have said that they live in. It is interesting that they mention their permanent spaceborne nature as a sort of exile. Apparently, our assessment that the Eldar's independence of planets is a sign of maturity is too quick.

The Eldar are spacebound out of necessity, not because they want to be that way. Perhaps they might appreciate Orbital construction plans.

I am currently in a guest room on the cruiser under heavy guard. The Eldar will soon transition through their teleportation gate to the system their fleet is currently in and they appear to want to keep the process a secret. As per our agreement, I will not deploy any scanners and my companion has agreed to limit its effectors for the duration.

We have arrived. The transition through the teleportation gate has taken nearly 20 hours, which is far longer than we have noted. I suspect from this that the teleportation gate is not a Warp-based galactic range displacer like we initially imagined, but more like some method of extremely fast FTL.

This method of travel between gates is still much faster than our own hyperspace drives. Given how far we would have moved, it appears that the 'leisurely' pace the cruiser used is roughly 150 kilolights. The Eldar have said that they could indeed go much faster.

The fleet looks impressive on paper, consisting of over a hundred ships with nearly half of them military ships. Yet, the fleet is hobbled by the need to protect vulnerable support ships that are harvesting resources from the system. The Eldar have said that this is a major mining fleet, with the majority of their population residing on Craftworlds, which are gigantic ships the size of planetoids.

Week 2
Life with the Eldar is peaceful, mostly. The Eldar are not subject to the social combat that normally plagues IoM, instead the pecking order of their society appears to be competence at their chosen Path.

As I am an outsider, I am not subject to their devotion to a Path although I am still going to try blending into their society. I will be working as part of a trainee craftsmen programme aimed at teaching and applying mining techniques. I am obviously unqualified for their Paths involving Warp abilities; construction and military are also off-limits due to the sensitivity of that information.

It is interesting that their formal education appears to be focused on self-improvement along the Paths. Instead of mass-education like the IoM, the Eldar rely on a sort of apprenticeship-like process (with multiple teachers for every student). I surmise that this is only possible due to their extremely low birthrate and extremely long natural lives.

One of the first formal teachings seems to be focused on observational techniques and thinking skills. This is quite interesting material, my companion is obviously recording this. Perhaps we might incorporate some formal instruction in those techniques too.
Part 8

Week 22
Discussions with the Tau look to be mildly productive. The Tau are much more organized and forward looking than the other major powers in this galaxy.
Pointing out the Chaos contaminations that we spot to the IoM inquisition has been partly successful in destroying them. Nevertheless, we hope to eventually use cooperation against Chaos as a wedge towards negotiation with the IoM.

A number of IoM technologies previously proscribed have been cleared for further examination after their warp effects were assessed to be stable (the Eldar helped a little) and very useful. Chief among these is a scanner that can detect warp effects as well as the partial warp nullifier that is the Gellar Field.
We are in the process of testing an IoM warp-based computer that is claimed to be able to pilot a short Warp jump. The test is being carried out on an uncrewed test vessel devoid of useful technology, essentially a small metallic eggshell, with the computer, Gellar Fields and IoM-grade powerplant.
Scans of warp effects on our ships are proceeding apace, with none found so far. Gellar Fields have also been cleared of any realspace effects and so will operate continuously on all our ships.
Construction of the requisite equipment should be easily possible on every GCU, independent drones will complete their current missions before returning to their nearest ship for refit.
The Necron vessel being tracked has arrived at another Tomb world, this one previously destroyed by the IoM. The Necron vessel is now heading to another nearby system. For some reason, the Necrons appear to partially blame us for this.
We have repeated our offer to wake the other Tomb Worlds the necron lord is interested in and have met with refusal.

Week 23
IoM fleet concentration orders have been detected, with the aim of attacking the Culture. Still, we haven't given away our positions and with the tactical advantages we hold, there is little to worry about if we avoid engagement.
Analysis of Necron tech has provided further advances in the field of subatomic engineering. We are close to a major breakthrough, with a stable nucleonic filament already possible although infeasibly energy intensive to construct and maintain.
It has some very interesting properties that the Necrons appear unaware of. The filament itself seems to catalyze fusion in normal matter it passes through, which has been hypothesized to explain the "blade that cuts through anything" in the post incident report from Curiosity Saved the Cat.
Preliminary analysis of the data provided by Curiosity Saved the Cat has indicated that Necron warp suppression observed in pyramids is of a similar principle to the IoM Gellar Field, but considerably more sophisticated. Theoretical work into this has begun, building on the work done on Gellar Fields.

Week 24
The Right Hand of God is reporting a real-space anomaly, warp-based according to the warp-scanners implemented last week. Possible contact with a new civilization, although they appear to be incredibly secretive. Details to follow.
The Eldar have warned against us making unlikely friends. Whatever that means. Nevertheless, we
are re-examining all our contacts again based on the past history of Eldar predictions. The possibility that the Eldar are leveraging our anticipation of their predictive power into souring our relationship with the Necrons seems to be a working hypothesis, but precautions will still be taken.

The Ork-HS question remains unsettled although Large Sticks Speaks Softly is reporting only minor progress on its intrusive reform program. Both sides are quoting its results as support for their position.

>>> Information Network Administration - Comments Closed; refer to dedicated subsection of net for discussion forums. At present there are ~340 major sections dedicated to discussing parts of the Ork-HS question, nearly all of them track updates live. Discussions should take place on those dedicated forums and not on Culture News Network article comments.
Week 1
GCU Peacemaker is pleased to report that the Tau have agreed to setup an embassy facility on a
small moon in Bork'An's system. The moon orbiting a gas giant had been intended to be developed
as a recreational resort eventually, our arrival seems to have sped up the plan.

Bork'An has sent ships towards the nearby worlds and to Tau to inform them of our arrival.
Meanwhile, we will negotiate with the resident Ethereal caste (who are their leadership caste). From
the openness of their society and their good understanding of their own technology, both us and the
Tau clearly have much to benefit from a trade in both technology and wider information.

A preliminary agreement to build goodwill has been confirmed:
1. Both the Culture and the Tau will announce their movements and ships entering each others'
declared territory.
2. Both the Culture and the Tau will not use spies on each other or conduct sabotage operations
against the other (tracking of movements and other easily observable information is not prohibited).

We are currently working on an agreement to exchange information about the local region (the IoM
maps are out of date by nearly a year). We are also offering a gift of data on Chaos.

GSV Crossing the Bridge has arrived to begin construction of the embassy on the moon. In
accordance with our preliminary agreement with the Tau, we will not use our stealth in their systems.

The Tau have begun to ask questions about our starship drive system as its performance eclipses
theirs by nearly three or four orders of magnitude.

They also appear interested in our remote manipulation capability and construction power after an
effector aided nanobot swarm completed the embassy in three days.

Week 2
ROU Gunboat Diplomacy has arrived at Macragge and attempted to contact the Space Marine
Chapter there.

We are currently talking to the Tau Water caste about the details for a technology exchange. There is
some resistance to our condition that the Tau also limit their expansion to non-IoM worlds and that
annexation of occupied planets only occur through voluntary integration into the Greater Good.
Nevertheless, the Tau are not about to rush into a hasty agreement and nothing but guidelines for
further discussion have been laid.

Negotiations with the Ultramarines have had a poor start. Macragge first ordered us out of the
system, to which Gunboat Diplomacy acquiesed and withdrew one and a half lightyears. The
communications with Macragge are still continuing and some concern among the Ordo Xenos about
our ability to continue contact despite the withdrawal has been noted.
For now, we are simply aiming at starting a three-way conversation with the Tau, with the aim of
enabling a technology exchange with the Tau without adversely affecting the balance of power in
this region.

Apart from the technology exchange, we are working towards an agreement with the Tau towards a
minor cultural exchange with a view towards expansions into a broader exchange of ideas. The Tau are curious about our society and culture, as much as we of theirs, so we foresee no major stumbling blocks in this process.

The Tau have accepted our gift of information on Chaos and transfer of information has begun, as well as a warning about contaminations and data on psychological profiles and detection testing on humans. To their credit, the Tau have reciprocated with political information on the nearby stars. We note that despite the Tau innate resistance to Chaos, Chaos profiles on humans will come in useful to detecting contaminations among the small assimilated human population.

The Tau have agreed to share our stance that Chaos is a major threat to the galaxy, albeit it is a distant one to them. Nevertheless, we are working on a mutual aid agreement with respect to the Tyranids for them and Chaos for us. This is expected to take some time and is being planned for the extremely long term when the Tau can be trusted further. (and when they can trust us more)

It is noted that our relative freedom to act in this galaxy is in no small part due to the lack of other involved competitors like the Homodan as well as Ascended. (although the Chaos Gods might qualify for that)

Week 3
Scans of Tau space with improved and Displacer-aided Warp Scanners appears to indicate unusually little warp activity with the Tau. Only a few minor allied or assimilated races have warp activity. Standard patterns of Chaos contamination among the Tau are non-existent. This makes them exceedingly interesting and we have made our interest in analyzing their Chaos resistance known.

The IoM are notably less hostile and suspicious than would be expected from Starry Banner's encounter with the Inquisition in the core of IoM holdings. There may still be hope for a short term peace in this area of the galaxy.

And so ends a relatively peaceful three weeks with the Tau. This ship believes that we are nearing consensus on an approach towards this relatively minor power.

The Tau are a collectivist race with an open door foreign policy and an aptitude as well as desire for negotiation with other races, to the point where they will not condemn entire species simply due to a few examples. The Tau are not xenophobic like so many others we have met in this galaxy. Their desire for the assimilation of others into the Greater Good can be forgiven in light of their youth as a race and lack of experience. The Greater Good itself can also be seen as a reflection of their low technological capability and resource constraints, and while currently unpalatable if involuntarily thrust upon other civilizations will certainly change as the Tau mature.

This unique stance places the Tau close to us in philosophy and their willingness to adopt and adaptability to technology will make them robust allies and future equals.

The Eldar and Necrons are mature races that have survived for eons, once possessing reach and power, and their help or at least understanding will greatly aid our task in containing Chaos. However, they will never be truly allies; and we never had true allies or equals in our home galaxy, all were affiliated with us, developing or Ascended. The Tau have a chance to be that, distinct and different but friendly and equal; if only they are helped and given some time.

It is for these reasons that we, GCU Peacemaker, ROU Gunboat Diplomacy and GSV Crossing the Bridge, recommend that friendly policy be taken towards the Tau and reformation efforts start only through cultural exchange. In fact, we are growing into the opinion that aiding the Tau against potential IoM attack might be able to draw concessions from the Tau to avoid hostile actions against the IoM, particularly if we inform them of strength and size of the IoM and not provide technological game changers.
It will be obvious that our diplomatic situation with the IoM will worsen as we aid an expansionist "xeno" empire that aims to assimilate their worlds. However, we are of the opinion that diplomatic peace with the IoM is achievable only through our immense technological edge and that no real cooperation is possible in the medium to long term.

Since this plan is in medium to long term, we anticipate no rush and open our proposal to further debate. Specifics and details are also open to the floor for addition and modification, a basic timeline is already being drawn up.
A Certain Chaotic Warp Sorcerer

Week 1
GCU The Right Hand of God has arrived at the mining planet and is currently meeting problems investigating the rumoured artifact. It appears that in an effector scan of the planet, a large section near the surface has... unusual physics.

The easiest method of description is that hyperspace doesn't exist inside a sphere centered on what appears to be a mountain, probably with underground mines. Effectors and Displacers cannot target anything inside the sphere. This anomaly is of great interest. We suspect Warp activity.

It appears that we have found our artifact.

Week 2
Due to the dangers of the Warp, we will not be directly observing the artifact, not least because extraction is impossible by Displacer and the artifact itself will disable this ship's Mind and its engines. Instead, we will allow the Imperium to collect the artifact and observe their reactions.

Some plans for manipulating them to conduct the tests we want are underway.

The sorceror completed the divination circle yet again, sitting down on the barren rock. Then he snarled once.

So far, all his divinations indicated that he was on track. Now suddenly, a problem had appeared. The Culture had come, he was sure of that, but they had not come to collect the artifact. Still, it wasn't completely irredeemable, at least according to his divinations...

The Culture
Due to the potential problems we might encounter within the no-hyperspace zone, we are currently designing a modified Effector array for use as an arbitrarily long relativistic cannon.

The first interested mercenary has arrived. We have placed primitive bugs into their systems to tap into their findings as they attempt to find the artifact.

A few subtle clues were dropped and the mercenaries easily found its location. They obtained permission to land and investigate the tunnels from the local governor (not difficult since their ship is the only one in orbit).

At this point, we opted to attempt contact with the mercenary in order to negotiate a deal where the mercenary will run various tests for us.

Week 3
The mercenary, after the usual introductions, has demanded that he gets to keep the artifact afterwards and that we provide him with materials and weapons at least 30% higher than the IoM's best. This seemed fair enough, so we came to a preliminary agreement.

The mercenary's team found the artifact, which appears to be some kind of broadcasting array, although clearly of partial Warp construction.

Warp Sorceror
The Warp crackled to life as the unwitting humans touched the array. The sorceror grinned and suppressed the Warp around him, no scrapcode, no weird effects, nothing to suggest that they were walking into his trap.
He bent down to the rock where sigils were carved into the surface and lifted the sigil off, leaving a flat rock clear of scratches behind. The sorceror spoke calmly to the sigil, knowing that the array would let him communicate with the Culture's pawns.

"The Durfan Empire sends its greetings to the Culture. We come in peace."

GCU The Right Hand of God
The mercenaries have, through the warp device, made contact with an alien race in a distant part of the galaxy. It is looking likely that the artifact operates as a method for instant communications across the warp.

We bribed the mercenary ship to remain in system, although also some distance from the inhabited planet, with the provision of antimatter torch missiles and a single purpose missile constructor. They will mediate communications between us and the Durfan Empire using the device they have taken onto their ship. The Durfan Empire communicates using Eldar, which the mercenary does not understand.

This GCU will maintain a safe margin from the mercenary ship. The hyperspace disruption effect is too dangerous to go near. Not to mention the Warp effects on the communications array detected by a Warp scanner given to the mercenary.

The Durfan Empire introduced itself as a race that came into conflict with the Eldar some time ago, in between the Great War against the Necrons and the rise of humans / fall of Eldar. They possess great warp sensitivity, just like the Eldar, and in fact have many of the same warp capabilities, like future visions and warp powers, that the Eldar have.

Being driven into the outskirts of the galaxy by the Eldar, the Durfan Empire has made communication using the Warp a priority, as well as survival through extreme secrecy with the aid of future sight.

The Durfan Empire explains that it is due to this future sight that they and the Eldar have become aware of our presence except that they had no method of contacting us since the rise of humans have prevented their activities in most of the galaxy.

This explains much of how the Eldar have managed to contact us as well as much of the capabilities and behaviour of the Eldar. While the Eldar have had no mention of the Durfan Empire, it is doubtless that the Eldar have existed long enough for multiple species to have risen and fallen in their time.

The Durfan send us a warning regarding the Eldar. While the Eldar appear waning in strength but generally agreeable to a large extent, the Durfan Empire warns that the Eldar are treacherous and proud. After the Durfan Empire started to surpass the teachings of the Eldar, the Eldar destroyed them.

--- This GCU is unsure of what to make of this warning. We are still awaiting more news regarding the exchange program to know if this is a real warning or if the Durfan Empire is just attempting to worsen relations between us

We expressed a wish to meet and discuss a cultural and information exchange. The Durfan equivocated on the details.

Discussions with the Durfan are going nowhere beyond vague warnings regarding the Eldar. They regard their secrecy to be of the highest order.

Three days later
Three IoM warships have arrived at the edge of the system. From their appearance, two of them are mercenaries also aiming to investigate the artifact while one was listed as an Imperial Navy patrol
From effector scans, it appears that these three ships are working together. The Imperial frigate contains an inquisitorial team and is apparently in command of the mercenary ships.

Upon arrival, the mercenary ship holding the artifact began heading towards the warp limit of the system. Due to the geometry, the incoming trio of ships would be able to intercept the mercenary ship well before the warp limit, a course which they proceeded to take.

The Inquisitorial team contains a psyker, who apparently is able to forecast the future very vaguely, but he was able to pinpoint the artifact's location to the mercenary ship. Their ships will attempt to engage and destroy the mercenary.

We communicated this to the mercenary, who began to prepare for battle. We also notified the Durfan Empire of the situation and indicated a potential disruption in communications.

--- From prior records, it was obvious at this point that the mercenary, normally a cautious person, was acting considerably out of character, but this GCU did not notice the changes at that time.

**Warp Sorceror**

So THERE was where it all fell apart. The Inquisition was onto him already. Drat their psykers and their Emperor's Tarot.

Well, might as well attempt to take what technology he could from the Culture before the mercenary could get away with both the tech and his bait. The Culture had, oh so kindly, informed the 'Durfan Empire' about their arrangement with the mercenary and even offered the same antimatter missiles in exchange for information.

A warp jump this close to the star was unsafe for the Imperium but it wasn't that far to the limit. It would just be a "small" matter of being impossible to jump safely, where safely meant being able to maintain a working Gellar Field through the power surge.

That, of course, wasn't going to be a problem for him. He just wanted that missile construction bay. Never had anyone short of the Necrons managed to squeeze an antimatter containment into something the size of a missile launcher, much less an entire missile fabrication facility.

He flexed the Warp, sending a burst of hostile scrapcode through the Array, a Chaos artifact that let him channel his power through a simple ground link. Next, time to take over the crew. Corrupting people wasn't easy for a sorceror by himself, but with a Chaos artifact in tow? No harder than stealing candy from a baby.

He reached out through the Warp, through the Array, into the minds of the crew of the mercenary ship. The sorceror closed his metaphorical fist and they were his.

**The Culture**

As the Inquisitorial ship approached the mercenary frigate, the sphere of hyperspace-nullification appeared to expand many fold. Remote cameras and nanotech bugging the mercenary's ship began to go haywire and the three minute long light-lag (no hyperspace communications) confirmed that the equipment had been taken over by scrapcode.

It appears that the array has been corrupted by Chaos. Some of the last transmission from the cameras were of the bridge of the mercenary ship being overrun by minor warp rifts and spontaneous Chaos-linked mutations appearing on the crew.

Standard scrapcode prevention measures were taken. This GCU placed a massive static screen between itself and the ship to block all communications. This made its rough position visible to the
Inquisition ship but that was secondary to the problem. Warp drive powering signatures were detected (3 minutes old) despite the fact that warp jumping so close to the star would generate a Warp surge that disabled Gellar Fields. This served as confirmation that the ship had been taken over by Chaos.

A decision was made then to destroy the ship as soon as possible. The modified relativistic accelerator was loaded with compressed antimatter and fired at the ship, along with a number of prolonged CREW beams. Using the Pancaker in wide area mode to generate gravitational waves capable of destroying the ship from outside the no-hyperspace sphere was forgone as it was projected to have, while not fatal, extremely disruptive effects on the local planet.

Three minutes later, before the warp drive could be charged, the mercenary ship was completely destroyed. The location of the Array was the target of the relativistic antimatter and it is presumed to have been destroyed based on the following results.

A massive warp rift appeared in the space, occupying a sphere nearly a light-minute in diameter. This was considerably bigger than the zone of no-hyperspace and this GCU retreated to 1 lightyear distance at maximum safe acceleration. The rift was observed to close after just over one hour.

This action has, without a doubt, been noticed by the Inquisition team. We are considering contacting them but at this point, this GCU feels that further consideration of courses of action is recommended.

Warp Sorceror

The sorcerer stared at the dust that was his sigil circle. The visions burned him with the displeasure of Tzeentch. He was so close.

It was obvious in hindsight what the error was. It was him. If only he hadn't leapt to conclusions, hadn't thought that he had mastered the prediction and known its meaning so easily.

It was in his attempt to salvage something from the 'problem' that was where things were going wrong. With the antimatter missiles, the mercenary might have won the battle and he might have been able to continue working on the Culture.

Instead now, his own efforts had derailed his original plan.
Dark Eldar

Week 1
One of our GCU's, Everlasting Pain, Torture, and all other things Bad (also known as the Happy Fun Times among its friends after it lined its hallways with pink furry carpets to avoid painful falls among its crew), has come across what appears to be an Eldar ambush of a human trade convoy.

What is notable is that the ships, while of apparently Eldar construction, have considerably differing design to the ships we are aware of. While we had no difficulty in pinpointing the Eldar ships, the humans were effectively under attack in the transit system by ships they couldn't see.

We watched the unfolding battle and noted the use of weapons of a completely different technological base. These weapons disabled the lightly armed freighters' weapons and the Eldar moved to boarding actions.

Weapons made to disable the human crew through extreme pain was noted and after the crew was taken captive from the first freighter in the convoy (with some notably creative torture of captives), Happy Fun Times decided to intervene in the battle.

The GCU dropped its stealth and used its effectors to disable all the human ships (including obscuring itself from their sensors) and projected a wall boxing the Eldar ships in.

A warning to cease action was sent to the Eldar ships in Eldar and when one Eldar ship tested the wall, the GCU destroyed it with a single Pancaker strike. The captives were spread between the remaining human ships by displacer and Eldar remaining on the empty human freighter were also forcibly returned to their ship via displacer and the wrecked human freighter destroyed by CAM warhead as a demonstration.

The humans were returned control of their ships except for an Effector mediated removal of all sensor information on the Eldar ships or GCU. The humans made haste towards their next warp position after assessing the loss of one of their ships and confirming that all its crew had mysteriously appeared on the other ships.

At this point, the Eldar in charge of the attacking fleet attempted to introduce himself using a dialect of Eldar with a distinct accent. It is to be noted that given that they use different technology, different ship designs and a language that has apparently been subject to some drift; Happy Fun Times concludes that these Eldar are some form of breakaway faction that has had little contact with the rest of the Eldar.

Details from the Eldar ambassador have been requested.

The captive Eldar have tried to negotiate for their release, but this GCU is not inclined to believe their promises not to attack any more humans.

They are being kept under a close watch and informed that attempting to exit the barrier would meet with instant destruction. We also ordered them to drop their shields or be destroyed. This was obeyed.

From their geometry and earlier tactics, it would appear that these Eldar also use the same teleportation gates that the Eldar we are familiar with use.

Week 2 (two days later)
The Eldar, given a description of the captured ships and a voice sample of the dialect spoken, refuse to acknowledge that the captives are even Eldar, despite overwhelming biological evidence.

We are negotiating on terms of the release of these other Eldar, although this GCU is hesitant to
simply let them go after some basic psychological analysis.

It would seem that these other Eldar are nearly insane, driven by a need to ritually torture humans or Eldar. The inefficient and impractical construction of their weapons and ships are mostly explained by this, as well as much of their behaviour. The extreme cruelty observed by this GCU points to a widespread sadism that forms not just their outlook but the social structure itself.

We recommend immediate classification of this form of Eldar as undesirable (although not HS behaviour).

Two days later

It appears that non-interference has been decided. We strongly recommend against it, but will heed the majority decision. We will attempt to contact these other Eldar peacefully.

Molecular scans of their weapons, biology and ships have been taken at this ship's own discretion, as well as that of the teleportation gate. These other Eldar appear to have zero psychic ability in any case, and using the Warp for temporal information appears to be beyond them. They have not detected our intrusions. Most interestingly, one of the larger ships carries a miniature version of the teleportation gate in its cargo hold.

These other Eldar have been released as instructed to return to through their teleportation gate. We have informed them that the Culture wishes to contact all civilizations in this galaxy and that we are prepared to meet any envoys they wish to send here in this system or another of their choosing. As instructed, this ship has apologized for the intrusion into their business and that reparations for their losses could be negotiated with a diplomat of suitable rank. Also as instructed, we have included a warning that we would not tolerate attacks on the Eldar, Necrons, Tau or the IoM, in that order.

This ship has chosen to bug their ships with hyperspace transmitters (which they appear unable to detect) as well as surveillance nanotech. Wherever the teleportation gates lead, we can find them. Happy Fun Times has noted that spying may lead to worsening relations but we are of the opinion that these other Eldar should be met with hostility. Reform is essentially impossible.

Week 3

This GCU has noted the return of a large fleet of ships to the system. We received a transmission in the same Eldar dialect regarding the reparations we had promised.

The other Eldar demanded the payment of one hundred organic crew members to be their slaves, to which we informed them in no uncertain terms that we would not accept any terms involving the slavery of any beings, organic or not. We counter-offered with CREW technology, more powerful and efficient than their current weaponry, which was rejected.

--- This GCU wonders if Happy Fun Times was actually negotiating in good faith. Perhaps we should have used an organic diplomat?

The fleet of ships began to attempt an encirclement of this GCU, which we interpreted as hostile action and avoided easily. We kept pace with the Eldar ships, refusing battle but also hiding our true tactical advantage. We request permission from the main fleet to consider these Eldar as hostile.

One day later

This GCU is cleared for limited action. All Eldar ships have been disabled via forced shutdown of their power grid after a low power CREW strike disabled their shields. It appears that our observation that violence and sadism is the bedrock of their society is accurate. Perhaps we might...
finally be vindicated.

We have informed these Eldar that the Culture considers ten copies of all their equipment confiscated (and have carried out the sentence via displacer), as well as the teleportation gate. This is expected to be useful for the Warp devices that have been unable to be replicated via molecular copies. Apart from that, we also enforced a one day shutdown of all their ships in order to have enough time to obtain mind-scans of all their leaders and important crew (eg. Pilot). More details to follow.

--- This same GCU wonders if "limited action" really includes unsanctioned mind-scans. Yes, we know the rule has been waived temporarily, but breaches of the moral code, even for hostiles, is troubling. We are worried about the apparent bloodthirstiness of Everlasting Pain, Torture and all things Bad

--- Happy Fun Times would like to note that we consider them undesirable, even if the rest of you do not. They are the bloodthirsty ones. We just defended ourselves and the helpless IoM. We have instigated revolutions over a government corrupted this way. Their ENTIRE society is this way, there is no reformist revolution possible for them. Their expedition force is suspected to have a power heirarchy run this way too!

Preliminary analysis of the mind scan data indicates some unusual physiology in Eldar biology. While humans and Necrons encode all of their information in realspace, it would appear that Eldar exist as part Warp (which our scans did not pick up). Primarily in their emotional impulses. This is bad news for implementing reload technology on the Eldar, we are unsure of the impact trying to do so would have on their psyche. We are still able to pick out what emotion is being experienced but some complexity (which is considerably more than humans) is lost.

The good news is that memory and higher cognition appears to be similar to humans, at least to a large extent. We are able to pick out nearly all thoughts and memories exactly like humans. Decoding these will require some time until we have analysed the pattern further.

Nevertheless, from observations of the teleportation gate as well as guidance from the mind scans, we have a preliminary method for using Eldar teleportation gates. This, however, requires an Eldar to perform the actions as it is partly Warp driven. It should be theoretically possible to activate the gate without it, the gate provides all the Warp energy, it is only communicating with the gate that requires use of the Warp. The miniature copy of the teleportation gate should come in useful for this analysis.

The hyperspace transmitters we placed on the ships that left in the first week (which have been implied to have reached their destinations) are still undetected. Which is strange given that the hyperspace transmitters are of enough power to be detected over the entire galaxy and there has been enough time to ensure that the signal could reach anywhere. There are two possible explanations. The first is that the Eldar teleportation gates lead outside of this galaxy. The second is that the gates lead to the Warp. We consider the second more likely. It is known from IoM records that material objects can exist in the Warp, and that effects in the Warp have no impact on realspace. It would not be surprising that we are unable to detect the hyperspace transmitters' signals if the Eldar ships are still in the Warp.

Dark Eldar - Comorragh
The Harlequin held the blade directly under the Dracon's nose. The form of the Harlequin was still wavering and impossible to make out behind its holofield but the monomolecular blade was as steady as a rock.

"All right, take the ship," he said, making sure to duplicate the note to the captain. Lass'ver had returned from the brush with this Culture relatively unscathed but she was not a special vessel in any way. He wondered why the Harlequins were so interested in it.
But a mere Dracon did not anger the Harlequins and lived. He would just have to find another ship to shore up his strength somehow.

Two hours later
The Corsair Lass'ver moved out of Comorragh on its final journey, the hyperspace transmitter and spy nanobots beeping their signals futilely into the Webway.
Of the other two ships surviving that raid, the Harlequins paid no mind. They only needed one after all.
Week 1
Large Sticks Speaks Softly reports nothing amiss in the running of the Carnival (as it is now being called among our crew) for keeping the Orks occupied. It appears that pacifying the Orks is surprisingly easy to do, thinking up 'fun' games appears as easy as making simple blood sports or high adrenaline activities. With the Orks competitive enough to take the time to relearn each game, this is required rather less often than expected.

We are slowly working up the complexity level of the games as the Orks get used to each one. Perhaps a ceiling will be found, or perhaps we will be able to slowly increase the general intelligence of the Orks. Their biology interfaces with the Warp in unknown ways, so it might not be outside the realm of possibility that the state of their society affects the kind of Ork that grows.

Week 2
Some of the Ork ships that were sent out have returned, approximately half of them were never sighted again, and half of those half returned with less Orks on board than left.

A short skirmish resulted where a number of the returning ships arriving together seemed to have been taken over by their destination tribes and they appeared with a small fleet of Ork ships. This fleet proceeded to attempt hostile action and Large Sticks Speaks Softly reports that they have been summarily destroyed, but not until after all their weapons had been confiscated.

We are investigating the range of the Orkish Warp effect using those weapons. Weapons that have no real basis for working can be made to fire energy beams or projectiles (sometimes without ammunition) provided sufficient Orks are nearby. Where nearby does not include the adjacent solar system but appears to work perfectly fine inside this system.

Week 3
Despite insulation from Ork spores, psychological changes have been detected in a number of our organic personnel, including the SC agent posing as warboss. We are currently investigating the vector for this change and have removed all ground presence from the Carnival. In some senses, the change might be indistinguishable from the usual thinking pattern changes that Contact often experiences on cultural exchanges; but we noticed this on the portion of the crew that did not have ground side contact.

Despite not seeing Warp effects using the new detector, we still suspect a Warp effect. We have replaced the SC agent with a simulacra, still controlled by the agent via Augmented Reality.

Two days later
The SC agent has requested to be transferred back to the camp. This request has taken the form of a highly irregular aggressiveness and a revocation of permission to mind scan him.

The Orks appear to be able to discern that something is wrong with the simulacra, even though it essentially is just a proxy for the SC agent. For this reason, we believe that to not jeopardize the mission, as well as respecting his wishes (this psychological change does not appear to be Chaos contamination), Large Sticks Speak Softly will transfer him back to the camp.

A number of other crew members, seeing his success, also demanded that we allow them to transfer back to the camp. While Contact personnel occasionally assimilate into their host culture, this many is unusual. We suspect some form of covert Warp effect that is driving the psychological changes that is causing this.

This is under consideration and simulacra are being used in the meantime. We fear that even the
barrier of the simulacra will not prevent further psychological contamination but there is no alternative as the affected crew are on the brink of revolting, futilely but we are forced to bow to their wishes if we are to remain on this side of the moral line. (additional precautions have been taken - see below).

Further analysis of past mind scan history indicates that the psychological changes had begun since the original contact with the Orks. The same progression as long as contact is maintained is to be expected, therefore reloading the citizens can only jeopardize the mission for no real gain (and lose them many weeks of experiences).

Precautions taken:

While Trapdoor nominally prevents all hostile actions on this ship, this Mind feels that the Warp effects render it insufficient protection.

We are currently building an large drone that will house this Mind as well as a large communications effector and a significant hyperspace drive fraction. The ship Large Sticks Speak Softly will remain as a mobile command center and personnel base. There are plans to build a habitable section on the drone if time allows, to carry any of the crew who will leave, primarily drones.

This action is being carried out by this Mind and the drones on board the ship, who apparently have been unaffected by the psychological changes. While there will be one-tenth a microsecond delay in communications from the out-system location we plan to put the drone, the organics will be mostly unaware of any changes.

The original casing of this Mind will be left in place to not arouse suspicions.

One day later
A strange energy signature was detected from under a void shield that was left online (presumed at the time to be in error, which is not uncommon for the orks). This energy discharge matched that of a plasma weapon of significant power.

This event was originally mistaken to be evidence of Orkish technological progression and steps were taken to move Large Sticks Speak Softly to the other side of the planet. The ground side was not shielded and effector scans of the device was taken.

It appears that someone has given the Orks a low tech plasma sidearm. While these are not military grade weapons, they are still significantly more powerful than those of the Orks. The effect of Ork modifications to the sidearm has further increased its power and range as well as significantly increasing its size. While destroying its governing protocols. Which should have been impossible at their tech level.

And that its antimatter power source was completely empty. While observations of firing without ammunition is regular, this is confirmation that ork modifications work on our technology. This is a worrying prospect.
IoM, Macragge & Rogue Trader

IoM
Week 1
We are looking at further cooperation with the IoM inquisition as the information given to them about Chaos cults appears to be effective at limiting Chaos presence in IoM space. Nevertheless, we are still wary about provoking further IoM aggression, so maximum stealth and avoidance of psykers will be required.

Additionally, multiple conflicts between the IoM and the Eldar have been noted, especially the Ork threat has been partially reduced for some areas of Segmentum Solar and that the Tyranid threat approaching from below the galactic plane is rapidly being neutralized.

We are considering asking for volunteers to aid the investigations in the region of Ultramar.

Macragge
Week 3
Despite the weaker xenophobia of the Ultramaries, negotiation is still difficult. We appear unable to glean any useful long term agreements from them, even regarding the Tau. There has been no progress in asking them to avoid destroying Necron Tomb worlds.

Also, this ROU would like to report some interesting information regarding Macragge itself. The religious icon that has been noted last week was infiltrated by nanobots today and it appears to be a past leader that has been trapped in a stasis field to prevent his death from poison. Going by their history and records, this leader may greatly enhance the efficiency of the IoM. Although his recorded political stances are not great for our diplomatic goals, the increased robustness of the IoM that might result from his recovery would allow us more drastic actions that are currently curtailed due to fear of destabilizing the IoM.

We should look into investigating this poison and see if we can find samples of it. There may be a cure...

Rogue Trader
Week 1
The Rogue Trader has deployed his asteroid platform fully and mining operations have begun in earnest. Using his continued profits of shipboard manufacturing, the Rogue Trader has begun to purchase materials for second asteroid mining platform.

The Rogue Trader appears to not have changed his strategies in any way after deployment of the nanobots. Since we are becoming satisfied with his performance, we see no reason to keep Aisha Meiro on board his ship, he already knows about the Culture in any case.

Week 2
We have provided him plans for the construction of IoM weapons that have refined capabilities, built on the same technology base. The nanobots have been put to work retrofitting the Dauntless and Lunar's weapons, particularly in manufacturing additional missiles of higher performance.

This was provided with the understanding that this would be considered a down payment for one battle against Chaos, we will provide ship construction plans after the battle.

Even when the two mercenaries have not returned with him, the word does not seem to have spread. Apparently the IoM doesn't care what happens to mercenaries not in their employ. The Rogue Trader has managed to hire more mercenaries, including another Lunar cruiser and three frigates.
This time, he has not provided them with hyperspace drives, saying that he is unable to produce them. It appears that he is taking our caution to not lose technology to Chaos to heart, although not quite in the way we expected. It seems that he plans to treat the mercenaries as expendables.

The two asteroid platforms have ridiculously slow extraction rates, even after teething problems were accounted for. It appears that inefficiency is endemic to the IoM. We are planning to provide him with enhanced extraction technologies, a better management plan really.

Despite the fact that one of the frigate mercenary captains was obviously unhappy that the Rogue Trader "refuses to share", we find it strange that the other three ships made no protest at the Rogue Trader's restriction of granted technology to himself. The Rogue Trader explained that they were afraid of the Mechanicum listing their ships as heretical, which confirms many of our other, hard to believe, observations that the Mechanicum maintains a complete monopoly on advanced technology in the Imperium.

We must find a way to break this monopoly. The Imperium cannot advance in technology without removing their control.

Week 3
We have put it to the Rogue Trader, a proposal that involves him breaking the monopoly. Since our psychological assessment indicates that he is not ready for a request that is not in his interest, we have merely expressed a desire to see him build an independently functioning space colony. A number of advantages were listed out for him, from having an independent production base to build weapons and ships to having more 'power'.

The Rogue Trader has asked for some time to think about it and we have agreed to do so.

Meanwhile, the Rogue Trader has picked up on rumours of a Space Hulk in the area and is determined to find it. A piece of debris that matched the description of the hulk was found by one of our probes in a nearby system and the Rogue Trader has set off to find it. He seems to think that he might find the battle against Chaos forces there.
Necrons & Eldar

Necrons
Week 1
The Necron tombworld we have been negotiating with has been visited by a minor fleet of Necron vessels. The commander of the fleet noted our presence immediately (something the Necron Lord here was unable to do so) and sent a message saying that he merely came to negotiate with this Necron Lord.

The two Necrons exchanged cryptographically secure messages (we can't hack their computers) for a while and after a moment, a heavily shielded shuttle docked with the flagship of the fleet for one hour before returning back to the tombworld.

After which, the fleet retreated the way it came. ROU White Devil has elected to tail the fleet personally and the network of drones around this region will pass to Curiosity Saved the Cat to coordinate. Discussions with this new Necron Lord have also begun.

We have continued negotiations with the Necron Lord's fleet who we are tailing. These Necrons claim to be from a different dynasty (a political organization not unlike separate countries) from the Tomb World we are still monitoring. As the Necron Lord in charge of this fleet is considerably more psychologically stable, we have shifted our main focus of diplomacy to them.

Analysis of the Monolith (IoM name) continues and we think we might have a theoretical understanding of what components are required for its field projector to work. A number of asteroids suffered... unusual accidents, mostly involving Warp rifts, in the process of gaining this understanding. However, for obvious reasons, copying the process, even crudely, still requires proper sub-atomic engineering.

Nevertheless, the expendability of the Necron warriors and how lightly the Necron Lords treat their fellow citizens' lives does not bode well for proper acceptance of their culture.

Week 2
Through corroboration with the far more eloquent Necron Lord in the fleet, we have confirmed most of the Eldar account of the War in Heaven (their name). It appears that a major intra-galactic war between two powerful races, the C'Tan and Old Ones are possibly OCPs, was fought with the creation of lesser races and even HSe as weapons. And that this war was at least partially responsible for the creation of the Chaos gods in a way that is unclear.

Now that we have accounts from both sides, it becomes clear that the enmity between the Necrons and the Eldar is deep-seated. Not just by their long-dead master races, but also in a fundamental conflict of values. The Eldar celebrate individual achievement and experiences, while the Necrons are collectivist. Not to mention that the Eldar are reliant on the Warp while the Necrons have a stated plan to remove connection with the Warp.

Peace between the two does not look likely, especially when both sides still appear to be fighting for the complete elimination of the other.

We fear that our technology trade with the Eldar will result in the complete destruction of the Necrons when the Eldar employ the hyperspace drive. While this is in the extremely long term, we feel that some action must be taken now. Negotiation with the Eldar to avoid destroying the Necrons is likely to be uselessly deteriorating to our diplomatic relations.
Week 3
White Devil is now exiting the area currently in reach of the Culture in its tailing of the Necron fleet. It seems likely that the Necrons have been on a long journey towards this planet. Long before their communications loop ought to have been re-established, even if it was galactic range and fast.

Perhaps the Necrons also have some method of divining the future like the Eldar?

The Necrons' relations with each other are at least cordial since the Necron Lord on the fleet indicated he has a copy of the intelligence engineering database. He thanks us for providing the technology and White Devil is hopeful that this has made further diplomatic relations possible. White Devil will proceed to attempt further negotiations regarding maps of Necron territory he knows of in exchange for all our maps (except the Eldar).

Eldar
Week 1
Our ambassador has registered a protest from the Eldar about our improving diplomatic relations with the Necrons. While expected, we cannot be seen to be taking sides in this war of impossibly long length even if the Culture as a whole does favour the side of the Eldar. (individualist cultures have always been more popular among the 1:1 intelligences and indeed most of the Minds) Additionally, we cannot believe the Eldar's accounts of treacherous Necrons since the Necrons have so far negotiated in good faith and what problems were excusable by mental degradation.

The two Wanderers on the GSV have managed to get acquire a significant following among the organic and even drone citizens. While we do understand that the Wanderers are Eldar who have grown tired of life on their Craftworlds, the Wanderers have given multiple talks, speeches and impromptu demonstrations of Eldar attitudes, mindset and general modes of thought.

This is attracted a large amount of interest as the Eldar appear to be just exotic enough that many view them as walking and talking priceless cultural icons. And familiarly humanoid enough to to not evoke revulsion for those who still retain those instincts (which is more than would admit it).

As for the Wanderers, it appears that the one in Virtual Reality will not be coming back. The other two gave permission on his behalf for us to probe the VR and from psychological analysis of our results, we are of the opinion that that this transition is permanent. The Virtual Reality software and hardware used was for unlimited access and the interface is too strong to break; the Eldar can be said to be part machine as we have noted the VR environment extending his mind's capabilities and doing external processing.

The other two Wanderers were the only persons to have viewed the constructed reality (noted reactions include condescension, superiority, revulsion and some guilt) apart from Mind-class entities and Special Circumstances (only on Need-To-Know basis). They have agreed with our assessment and in fact were instrumental in convincing this Mind that recovery of the Wanderer from VR would not be possible without mental damage and almost certain death.

They have requested that he be kept alive for as long as his natural lifespan lasts and when he dies, that we return his soulstone to the Eldar. To this, we have agreed.

The topic of soulstones allowed us to broach the subject of the strange devices they carry. The material is clearly not normal and mostly is partially Warp based. Their explanation of how their artistic creations work (and soulstones are partially art, like almost everything the Eldar do), if representative of how the Eldar do things in general, explain alot about the Eldar's problems as a race and particularly the difficulty in explaining construction techniques but not basic science.
This was immediately deemed an important cultural quality central to the Eldar's identity as a race by most of the citizens on this GSV and we Minds also agree with that assessment.

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This SC agent is reporting that there is little to report. Lessons in spatial awareness continues apace, where I am unable to keep up with the Eldar unless glanding. The SC drone of course outdoes everyone but the Eldar do not consider it sentient.

I wonder if the Eldar would be willing to engage in philosphical discourse of the definition of sentience and its inclusion of inorganic intelligences?
We are making progress on understanding the Necron engineering principles, a major advance in the fabrication of subatomic filaments has allowed us to manufacture threads of incredible density and strength. To a certain extent, we have had to build up a completely new production base in order to have a device capable of such fabrication. Field technology is able to mimic it to some extent, but only very inefficiently; for efficient production, a device with subatomic materials had to be used.

For now, every ship with available effector time is to begin the bootstrapping process. A subatomic filament manufacturing device is, we suspect, key to eventual large scale production of subatomic materials and this is not possible through conventional methods. If the ships do not have this device, if and when these materials are needed, they will not be able to produce them quickly; this directive is to forestall that eventuality.

Preliminary experiments involving a woven fabric of the filaments 1 centimeter square indicate the some expected properties, and some unexpected. The fabric has unparalleled density (approximately $10^{14}$ times more than standard materials), impossibly high strength (stiffness and tensile strengths impossible to measure without destructive weapon tests) and were perfectly reflective to x-rays (only far gamma had any appreciable transmission).

Unusually, despite our reverse engineering, this material does not appear to be anything at all like the Necrons' metal. The main difference being that this material is Displacer-compatible with only minor modifications. We suspect that we have stumbled upon subatomic engineering as a field when analyzing the Necrons, a field that the Necrons were not able to exploit fully due to their lack of field technology and ability to truly manipulate at the subatomic scales.

We are still missing something about the Necrons' metal. Further analysis will be conducted.

We are beginning to design a field projector using subatomic materials. The miniaturization afforded by subatomic technology is roughly $10^{4}$ times, and a corresponding increase in range and power can be expected once the device can be perfected.

We will refer to the atomic scale engineering we are used to as classical materials. Subatomic materials will be called femtomaterials.

**Half Year Report**

Total number of active Culture vessels GCU and larger: 1, 274
Total number of active Culture vessels independent drone and larger: 103, 450
Total number of inactive Culture vessels: 21
Total number of Culture vessels deemed lost: 1

Tyranid infestations sighted: 11
Tyranid fleets destroyed: 10
Ork infestations sights: 1, 309
Ork infestations cleaned: 808
Chaos sightings: 2 raiding fleets; 1 artifact; 2, 530, 116 Chaos cells
Chaos contained: 2 raiding fleets; 1 artifact; 2, 529, 374 Chaos cells

Our diplomatic stances:
IoM - Considering reform plans, limited cooperation on Chaos
Eldar - Friendly, Cultural exchange partners, potential ally
Necrons - Neutral, limited contact, potential ally
Tau - Friendly, likely ally, target race for reform and technology aid
Orks - Undecided, target race for reform or extermination
Other Eldar - Unfriendly, target race for containment and possible technology exchange
Chaos - Hostile, open war
Durfan Empire - Friendly but cautious, diplomatic contact lost

Assessment of foreign diplomatic stances:
IoM - Hostile, suspicious, notably less in Ultramar
Eldar - Friendly but cautious, unwilling to exchange technology
Necrons - Neutral but cautious, unwilling to exchange almost anything
Tau - Friendly, willing to engage in technology trade
Orks - Hostile
Other Eldar - Hostile
Chaos - Unknown
Durfan Empire - Unknown

Technology report:
Necron subatomic engineering - Basic materials engineering complete, analogs of classical devices in subatomic scales under research, production highly limited
Necron Warp field technology - Limited theoretical understanding
Necron Energy shield technology - Limited theoretical understanding
Eldar Warp based materials - not understood, restricted access
IoM classical technology - Stasis field reverse engineered, undergoing final phase testing
IoM Warp devices ---
Reverse engineered, manufacturable:
Gellar Field (ubiquitously implemented), Warp drive (under very strict control trials), Warp activity detector
Restricted exposure:
Warp navigation scanner, psyker formation process, Void shields
Chaos Warp devices - Restricted exposure: Scrapcode, Warp-based galactic communications array

Named Characters:
Seb Snakewick - Rogue Trader
Aisha Meiro - SC agent on Golden Goose
Memis Trayer - SC agent involved in the Necron Dig
Skreever - SC agent involved in the Necron Dig

Named Culture Ships - related arc:
GCU Large Sticks Speak Softly - Orks
GCU Golden Goose - Rogue Trader
GCU Starry Banner - IoM inquisition
GCU Peacemaker - Tau
ROU Gunboat Diplomacy - Tau
GSV Crossing the Bridge - Tau
GCU Everlasting Pain, Torture and all Things Bad (aka. Happy Fun Times) - Dark Eldar
GCU Curiousity Saved the Cat - Necrons
ROU White Devil - Necrons
GSV So Much For Subtlety - Necrons
GSV Reporting for Duty - Eldar
GCU Right Hand of God - Warp Sorceror
GCU Neverending Story - Misc.
GCU A Blue Telephone Booth - Misc.
GCU Clap Your Hands - Misc.
**Chapter Notes**

Setups a background for the Rogue Trader portion

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Tau**

**Week 1**

Further negotiations with the Tau have yielded a useful compromise. We will provide refinements to their plasma, ion and railgun weaponry, especially including a method to scale up safely to starship armament sizes. Additionally, we will also provide refinements to their sub-light drives for better accelerations as well as aid them militarily against the Tyranids.

In exchange, the Tau will give us technical and theoretical information on their special form of warp drive as well as provide genetic information on the Tau and Kroot. They also provide an assurance that they will not recklessly provoke the Imperium.

We also quickly reached an agreement on the rules covering a limited cultural exchange program.

**Week 2**

A disturbing fact about the Ethereal caste has been revealed through analysis of the Tau genetic information. The Ethereals exert a 'mystical' control over the other Tau through a pheromone-like system that borders on mind-control. This fact has not been revealed to the Tau for fear of destabilizing their society. We are looking into potential methods for reform.

The Tau warp drive is considerably safer than the Imperium and in fact, the Tau have so far not suffered the same kinds of accidents the Imperium has in the warp and do not possess even Gellar fields. We suspect that this warp drive is actually compatible with our hyperspace drives as a test vessel worked even in hyperspace. There is the promise of far higher speeds than would normally be achieved. Tau Warp drives can achieve FTL within a single dimensional plane, FTL in hyperspace would result in speeds far in excess of what we can do now.

Further research into the Tau warp drive is recommended as a top priority. Understanding it is made much easier than reverse engineering IoM technology as the Tau fully understand the basic principles behind their drives and are still continuing its development.

**Week 3**

The Tau cultural exchange is going ahead as planned.

The Tau are the first race to so quickly adapt to our introduced technologies. Their scientific flexibility is on par with what we would have normally expected but did not find in this galaxy. Their Earth caste engineers and scientists have quickly understood our refinements on their weapons and STL drives, and in fact were working on some of those refinements by themselves.

We expect to see, over the coming months, the Tau retooling their production lines and shipyards. The double range, nearly triple penetration and damage power, as well as six times higher ship
accelerations, will ensure the Tau will be militarily superior to all local powers. Not crushingly superior, but definitely a major edge.

A Certain Chaotic Warp Sorceror
The sorceror sniffed distastefully at the Khornate fleet captain across the table. The captain sported spikes... in fact, he was nearly all spike and very little anything else. At least the Slaaneshi was mildly attractive, if vapid. No one from Nurgle had been invited to this meeting.

How did a Tzeenchian sorceror run something like this? His specialty was in subterfuge and sorcery. Not diplomacy, especially not with what was appearing more and more like a berserker. Spiky (as he was starting to think of the captain, the sorceror hadn't bothered knowing his name) seemed to be hotheaded to a fault, refusing to listen to even the most basic of plans.

He needed them for this mission, that was why.

"I shall explain only once more," he rolled back the diagrams on the table with a wave of his hand, sending a wave of sparks dramatically. He explained the multiple factors and angles of approach again.

The little Slaaneshi girl (anyone with less than forty years experience was hopelessly out of her depth) nodded at the plan, but the Khorne captain just tore at his hair. The sorceror wished that the spikes that seemed to make up all of his hair would actually be proper spikes for once and shred the captain’s claws.

"It's too complicated," the captain said flatly, "it won't work."

The sorceror sighed at the complaint. All right, fine, ignore all his planning and groundwork. Let him go ahead and get himself killed, said the voice in his head. But the sorceror put it out, he needed Spiky to do what he wanted. Think of it as a puzzle, something to manipulate, said the voice again. Now that was an idea. The sorceror looked down at the plan again and erased it with another wave.

"How about this, you just attack this planet and I'll tell you what to do after that?" he pointed at the system on the ancient IoM map.

That got a better response. "Now you're talking," Spiky leaned over the table to see the information laid out on the system, and snorted, "you want to attack an Eldar Maiden world? Out of the blue without even a warp storm?"

"Too afraid to try?" the sorceror taunted him.

"Recall what happened the last time one of your ships went up against one of mine," Spiky folded his arms (the sorceror frowned at that, he was absolutely sure one of the spikes on the arms had gone through Spiky's other arm), "and it doesn't help us."

"Trust me, it does," he glanced at the runes in the corner, "you don't even have to bombard the planet. Just don't lose too many ships."

"Hmph, don't trust sorcery like that," Spiky snorted, "but orders are orders and I was told to do what you said. Wonder how you did that one..." he trailed off menacingly. Clearly Spiky was unhappy with his position but not murderous was probably the best the sorceror could do.

"What happened to my role?" the Slaaneshi asked.

The sorceror shook his head, "talk to that guy, just do it. Use your charms on him."
The sorceror rubbed his eyes in tiredness. He could just wish it away of course, but there was no need to now that they had left.

Now... if the runes spoke true...

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**Eldar**

The Farseer frowned slowly. He paid no mind to his slowly crystallizing legs, the future was far too important to worry about little things like physical bodies. In any case, his own crystallization was proceeding unusually slowly, he was still partially mobile even after three times longer than the average crystallization process although he had already lost most physical processes half a century ago.

He shifted a little in the seat, moving for the first time in nearly a century. That brought quite alot of attention for such a small move. Farseerers in the hall were murmuring to each other as the one nearest to him pointed out his movement.

One of the elder Farseers, just a youngling by the standards of his age, approached him reverently and asked him if they were disturbing his presence. The crystallizing Farseer gave him a reproachful look somehow without moving even a bit.

He sent the young elder a complex web of runes and future paths straight into his mind. And waited. He couldn't share the future he just saw without being able to talk but it was all too obvious. The contamination of Khorne and Khaine was spreading through the timelines, war more than ever before.

A few days passed with much increased activity in the hall and the crystal didn't move again, but it was watching them, they could feel it.

The future it had highlighted was disturbing. There was another hand on the web of future paths around their craftworld. One with the touch of Chaos. The farseers discussed what to do, avoiding the attack on the Maiden World was out of the question since all the factors for it lay in the immaterium beyond reach. Defending against it would be absurdly easy if the future paths was to be believed.

But why ever would Chaos just mount an attack so useless as to do absolutely nothing? So suicidal even?

It was another three days before they had their answer. Chaos was about to conduct a general offensive against the Eldar and this was a warning. The hand that lay on the threads of fate was sending them a warning. Down all paths where they ceased contact with the Culture and repudiated it, the attacks stopped immediately.

There was clearly only one action to do since this craftworld was not involved in that contact. But firstly, there would be time to talk to Ulthwe about this. No chances would be taken on something so huge without further consultations with the best of the farseers.

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**A Minor Hive World just outside the main Culture exploration front**

The governor, Mikael, retreated to his chambers at the very top of the spire. It was only here did he ever get any true privacy and the chamber was secure from all possible surveillance.

The young woman still tied to the bed made him smile. The governor wasn't obtuse enough to miss
that her discomfort was only a pretense but he WAS obtuse enough to still be under the impression that the mysteriously attractive young woman was nothing but a particularly troublesome slave a... covert contact had wanted to be rid off.

A Certain Chaotic Warp Sorceror

The sorceror cast his runes again. The timelines were shifting once more and he ignored Spiky's shouting that seemed to echo off the hull of the ship. This was not a time he could afford to be distracted.

After setting so many contingencies in motion, over six individual warbands and more than twenty independent contacts and friendlies, but not actually giving them the "Go" signal, he had managed to tie far reaching strands of fate into his own hands. Right now, right here, was where Fate was decided. Here, in this time (whatever that meant in the Warp).

For all that the Culture were powerful and ridiculously fast-acting, they couldn't see the future. At least not yet (and not ever if he was going to have his way) and so they were still pawns on the web of time. Important pawns, powerful enough to distort the entire game around them, but his real duel, soon to start, would be with the farseers of the Eldar and one particularly annoying Necron.

He felt Fate shift again, the farseers had come to a course of action and the probabilities of future paths they decided against dimmed. The sorceror cast another rune and felt the complex multidimensional diagram of dependencies shift in front of him.

The Eldar would ignore his threat, it would have seemed, to any amateur psyker or Farseer in training. But the game of future diplomacy was than just reading the future. The sorceror concentrated on one of his more trusted saboteurs, willing himself to believe that he would send the signal to attack regardless of cost. It was a sheer act of willpower, one had to sincerely believe that one would carry out such a mutually destructive action. Chaos would lose the opportunity to use him for a devastating strike on a key Imperium resource world, hurting Chaos's chances for expanding out from the Eye in that direction. And the Eldar would lose a significant chunk of their Maiden world he resolved to attack. The future branches dimmed and twisted as he depressed their probabilities with that act of self-hypnosis.

And yet, in such a game, one would have to believe not just that one would attack regardless of the cost, but at the same time also know that one would pull back if circumstances were more favourable. It was a game that the sorcerors learned to play, and perhaps only the more experienced Farseers worked it out for themselves.

The Necron twitched a little, trying to do something, but it was unclear what it was before the Eldar cut him off with a hypothetical. The sorceror smirked, so much for worrying about that, not even the Eldar Farseers were willing to tolerate an unknown third factor in something so delicate. The Farseers blocked his action with a patrol plan, a hypothetical fleet moved into position in the future lines, the successful strike on an unguarded world fading away as its probability dropped. The sorceror changed his target to a different planet, an exodite world within the Culture's zone. The Eldar blocked him again.

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The sorceror smiled, now these guys were a challenge.

The Farseers and the sorceror traded hypotheticals for a day. Chance dice (a truly random dice the sorceror had made one day back when he first realized how to manipulate the future) were used to confuse the waters by hiding plans behind chance branches, hypothetical reaction times were cut short by putting multiple plans into action simultaneously. Combinations and variations were
explored.

Eventually the Farseers gave up the losing battle. If he wished, the sorceror could have Chaos strike and they would not have a good chance of defeating it and they knew that now. So they changed paths. They moved their response around, going all the way back to the original decision and changing it a little. The sorceror looked at their future and saw a different craftworld with far superior technology. The Culture again. He snarled and the farseers took him across the changed circumstances. They played again, the strange kind of chess across time and space, even through the barrier of the Warp and real, for they were playing with the future.

After the third day, when the sorceror had to come out of his Sight trance to take a break, another craftworld had joined the fray. Their battle had not been unnoticed and the ancient farseers of the newcomer were probing the mess that had been left behind from their prior engagements. Contingencies unraveled, plans were foiled and contacts slain. This new craftworld was far more experienced than the first one he had dueled. They knew all the tricks, better than he did even. Angry and not a little desperate, he dived into their past, seeking clues of what to do. Ah... Ulthwe, the most experienced in future sight, possibly in the whole galaxy.

But there was a crack in their defence of the other craftworld. The two worlds were both Eldar, true, and Eldar were somewhat united especially when it came down to opposing Chaos. In a flash of blazing insight, one that he knew must have come from the raw power of Chaos in his desperation and so would come with a price, he saw a way through the wall. This was the ancient farseers of the Eldar, who could not talk or communicate with their lessers, and he had made the mistake of fighting them as if they WERE the Eldar.

The Eldar were Eldar, but there was now one that might NOT be. The Culture had the potential to destroy much of what made the Eldar... Eldar. The sorceror dived down the future paths, further than he would normally have dared to without that blazing guidance within him. As the fire died away, he reached the answer. Far in the future, lay a time of chaos (not Chaos, he reminded himself), one where the other Eldar turned against the Eldar who were not Eldar.

He backed down the paths, returning to the present. It was paradoxical, but his answer lay in helping the Culture. Or at least threatening to. He knew what he had to do now, now that the method was shown. He laid hypotheticals, changing the web, drawing the attention of the ancient farseers to the path he was dancing around. When he was sure they were following his route, wondering why he was helping his original target, they reached the end, the battle where Khaine battled against not-Khaine. The battle where Khaine lost and was broken forever.

Far more furiously than his earlier battle (for there were more than one farseer and one sorceror, even one as powerful as him, could only do so much), the future paths dissolved in impossible tangled web as the farseers from the two craftworlds argued with each other in the future. The sorceror let them go at it, tweaking here and intruding there. The battle crept forward towards the present, the struggle with the future paths drew it closer.

Then another craftworld noticed. Before they could add even more to the tangles (no doubt wondering why the Eldar were fighting each other), another craftworld joined in. Then yet again and again. As the battle of Khaine on Khaine (not-Khaine had turned into Khaine at some point when the sorceror wasn't looking) drew closer, the magnitude of the extremely unusual event drew the curiosity of the other craftworlds. Each contributed to the mess and made it even harder to navigate.

Then the younger farseers, those who could still act and thus were far more energetic in the future paths than the statues, caught wind of the turmoil in the future despite their inexperience. They noticed the impossibility of Eldar fighting other Eldar and sprang into the growing swamp of the
future like eager children. The knot exploded in size as the interval of action decreased from months to days and even hours.

At his best, the sorceror might have considered navigating it a nearly impossible task. Something that Tzeentch might set him as a punishment. But after being drained from his earlier fight and that borrowed insight, he was in no condition to enter. The farseers had no choice though, in an Eldar versus Eldar scenario, they simply HAD to try.

This was working out, if not according to plan, at least better than he had ever expected. The Eldar would be out of the equation until they had worked through that mess, and that gave him relatively more space to work on the Imperium. From the looks of it, he wouldn't be able to get them to drop their association with the Culture (now that he had experienced that touch of insight, his supposedly brilliant plan didn't look so brilliant now), but he would just have to take what he got and make the best of it. At the very least, this potential Eldar on Eldar battle would make for strained relations between the craftworlds (all paths out of it lead that way) and a less united Eldar was always better for Chaos.

Even the best laid plans went off the rails occasionally, and one had to improvise. Of course, that didn't mean the improvisations had to be simple either...

Chapter End Notes

Tzeentch takes a little personal interest. One hint in just the right place can start a huge avalanche. Just like Tzeentch to use the most minor of things to do that through a stupidly complicated route.

For perspective, the original far future battle is a hypothetical future a thousand years or so forward where the current Culture contacted craftworld has drifted far from Eldar traditions. The Ulthwe disagree about that and the result hypothetical spat in the future gets pulled forward now that they know about it. As each craftworld enters, more disagreements start and the war or at least period of poor relations gets brought forward the present, which makes it more visible to the farseers, drawing more of them in. A rather vicious feedback loop as it were.
Rogue Trader, Eldar

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Rogue Trader**

**Week 1**

The Space Hulk the Rogue Trader has been tracking has left its position, disappearing into the Warp. We have watched for its return but this has not been fruitful.

Still, based on that hunch, the Rogue Trader has continued to head in its general direction, he will soon leave our exploration front and enter weakly held territory.

Golden Goose will continue to tail him, while an Effector equipped large drone maintains communications with his asteroid platforms. The techpriest he left to manage the nanobots on the platform is accompanied by Aisha as we attempt to implement better living and working conditions to reduce accidents and raise morale. We have managed to persuade the Rogue Trader that this is a good way to cheaply raise productivity.

**Week 2**

Golden Goose has spotted the Space Hulk the Rogue Trader has been tracking at the edge of a minor Hive World. Accompanying it is three Chaos vessels, one cruiser and two escorts, heavily damaged in what appears to be a post-battle debris field around the space hulk. What remains of the IoM guard force, an undamaged Sword class, a mildly damaged Galaxy class armed freighter and a disabled (engines destroyed) defense monitor, are in high orbit around the Hive World. It is apparently a standoff, the two mobile IoM ships cannot attack and win, but the damaged Chaos vessels are also not risking a potentially costly attack near the defense monitor (whose weapons are fully functional). From the battle debris, it is clear that a small skirmish has been fought for the control of this system and the IoM and Chaos have traded ships almost one for one. Our drones deployed to neighbouring systems have picked up a general warning being broadcast about entry to the Hive World and the lack of merchant traffic is already leading to food shortages.

It is clear from IoM records that the Rogue Trader will undoubtedly be the first relief force to arrive as there is no more significant system fleets nearby. A call for a relief naval force is already being sent out at the nearest Forge World but judging from classical IoM inefficiencies, they cannot possibly arrive before massive food shortages on the planet has led to mass death.

We have requested backup from the main Culture Fleet and an ROU and GSV has been diverted to the area. Meanwhile, the Rogue Trader's arrival will tip the balance of power in favour of the IoM. Especially since his ships are hyperdrive equipped and have enhanced weapons.

We indicated our desire to help the Hive World from mass starvation and the Rogue Trader came up with a plan.

The Rogue Trader has arrived in the system (faking a re-entry from the warp, closer than would normally be expected for a warp drive) and proceeded to rendezvous with the Imperial space defence forces around the planet using his normal drives.

He has indicated that he is a Rogue Trader who was in the area and had heard of the troubles facing the Hive World. He has brought a large quantity of food (Seb made sure to check with Golden Goose that we could indeed provide edibles) and is willing to help relieve both the siege and provide what food he has available in his cargo holds.
He never managed to relieve the siege as the now out-numbered Chaos forces, when challenged and approached by the IoM forces led by the Rogue Trader, left into the Warp.

The IoM ships then returned to orbit while we Displaced as much food into the Rogue Trader's cargo holds of the Lunar and Dauntless as they could handle. The Rogue Trader is just now completing the final agreement on the price for the food he is selling with the planetary governor, Mikael.

Given that the Rogue Trader did not actually engage the Chaos forces, we have insisted that this does not count as a battle he was supposed to fight for us. Instead the payment for this encounter will be our provision of edible materials he is about to sell.

Golden Goose will now proceed to remotely scan the space hulk using autonomous non-sentient drones with effector backup. We have denied our crew's request for an away team as significant Warp activity on the hulk has been detected; we suspect that there will be some Chaos activity on board given the Chaos fleet's stance around that hulk. We have postponed scans of the Hive World save for tracking its security and civil service forces, there probably isn't anything new there anyway. The astropathic station on the world has been given a message to inform neighbouring systems that the siege has been lifted.

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One day later
After some pestering from our crew, Golden Goose has allowed SC and combat-trained Contact members to conduct an away team operation on the ground. This is aimed at analyzing the social structure of the Hive World under sudden relief of starvation stress.

Week 3
**SC agent on the ground**
Invisibility suits are cheating but I suppose there was no way we would be allowed to let the Imperium know we were actually on the ground on one of their planets.

As far as I've read, this would be the first actual Contact team surveying in force. Golden Goose is being distracted by the unusual space hulk and had let us investigate the planet by ourselves, judging that a normal Hive world would be safe enough.

Of course, that's not to say that the Mind on board isn't watching us, but that it's chosen to focus most of its information capacities on the space hulk instead of the planet. Which is an obvious decision to make given that one is considerably more interesting than the other.

Ok? That's good enough a preamble for the post-incident report then?

Judging from the visual records (Golden Goose earmarked some effector bandwidth to monitor our progress), we approached the mayor, Rogue Trader and unknown woman, positioning ourselves at the end of the shopping district.

According to the tracker records, one knife missile was ordered to find and behead the woman but it reported a failure to find the woman. This was almost expected and we were seen approaching the last known position of the knife missile to find it destroyed and no trace of the three humans. The wreckage was Displaced out.

An effector scan found them in a restaurant nearby, the woman gave no sign of having destroyed a knife missile. We then tried to attack her via a CREW-based sniper rifle, but that rebounded and destroyed a portion of the block nearby us. Further experiments with long range weaponry were abandoned.
Amun then sent an urgent message to the Rogue Trader requesting his presence, which he rejected. We insisted, strongly, and finally threatened him before he disengaged and got up to leave the restaurant. Upon exiting the warp field, Golden Goose displaced him away from the planet back onto his ship and gave us the go ahead for a frontal attack.

We hoped to draw attention to the fact that the woman was an unregistered psyker but apparently her powers did not extend to anything visible or she simply chose not to use them. Upon entry into the warp field, Amun began malfunctioning and I apparently adopted an irrational attraction towards the woman, which seemed to indicate some form of warp effect. A decision was made then to destroy the entire area and the entire restaurant was destroyed by a displacer-delivered high-density plasma bomb right outside the warp field.

Positive traces of the woman's body was not found despite very close inspection of the area. Amun and I were later reloaded from backup.

**Golden Goose**

It has become apparent that destroying the likely Chaos psyker is having additional ramifications. An IoM inquisitor on the Hive World has taken up the investigation into the "bomb attack" that killed the Planetary Governor and a number of high-ranking aristocrats. It is almost certain that this investigation will eventually lead back to us and there will be a major backlash among the inquisition network we have been providing information to.

For now, the Hive World appears to be slowly tearing itself apart through a power struggle that the Governor used to balance between three rival factions. It is... unlikely that we will be able to intervene without revealing our presence apart from seeding information on commercial opportunities on the Hive World to alleviate mass starvation.

From post-analysis, our action to protect the integrity of the Rogue Trader seems to have been in haste. The Space Hulk entered the warp shortly after the death of the psyker, additionally, we also detected another warp field on the planet that disappeared shortly afterwards. These events appear linked and we surmise that the destruction of the psyker and ensuing collateral damage is the work of an external agent.

Given the likely identity of the psyker, we are of the opinion that Chaos is manipulating some events with unanticipated accuracy. We are also of the assessment that Chaos likely has a warp expertise that may rival that of the Eldar and thus would likely have access to future information, this is possibly the main reason for the seeming anticipation of our actions.

The Space Hulk appears to have been a tempting distraction to divert analysis resources away from the planet (which is devoid of interesting features) to prevent premature uncovering of the woman's identity as the warp field would be immediately noticed on any close scan of the planet. This scan has since been carried out, no additional anomalies apart from a minor Chaos cell have been detected. The Chaos cell's presence was alerted to the imperial guard and we anticipate their imminent removal.

**Chaos Sorceror**

He rubbed his hands in pleasure. The Slaaneshi psyker had very nearly gotten herself killed, but he never really liked her anyway and she had fulfilled her role admirably in baiting an attack from the Culture. Only his quick action had managed to save her. It wasn't the best result he could have hoped for since the Slaaneshi didn't have time to corrupt the Rogue Trader but then this result was the most likely one. At least it would severely curb the annoying tendency of the Culture to inform the inquisition of Chaos cells and make them enemies of the IoM. The Rogue Trader being annoyed at them was just a bonus. Albeit minor since they would quickly
patch up when the Culture told him about the Slaaneshi.

Spiky was off getting himself killed as planned, although the sorceror's runes indicated a disappointing low chance of that happening, but at least the Eldar were getting divided. They thought his intention was to break them away from the Culture, but either way was fine by him.

He picked up the warp beacon and the shuttle waiting in warp space came towards his signal. Time to see what he could do with the Tau. Annoyingly hard to see as they were.

Hmm... perhaps the IoM could be useful. Again. As they always were.

**Eldar**

Week 1 - Day 6

The Eldar farseer we have been negotiating with for more information on the Eldar has been noted to have significant emotional disturbance. When asked why, she merely mentioned that she would need to talk to the main council and left through their teleportation gate.

For the moment, we have no direct contact with the Eldar except for a pair of warriors who have no authority to negotiate with.

The two Eldar Wanderers are considerably more welcoming of our practices than might be expected from the Eldar's reaction in general. Apparently there is more variation among the Eldar that would normally be expected and Wanderers in particular appear open to new experiences and modes of thought. One of the Wanderers has asked to return early so that he can give a report, we have conveyed him to the embassy on the Exodite world.

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SC agent Ethielin-Muat-Vur reporting that the Eldar appear agitated for some reason. Even though this fleet is continuing operations and life as normal, most of the Eldar speak differently and there is a kind of tension between them and how they regard me. A few of them appear to regard me with some hostility.

There is no outright mention to me about this matter so I have little to report. However, I am of the opinion that some event is straining our relations on the Eldar's side and to avoid further inflaming this matter, I will be returning early.

Week 2

Our SC agent and drone who were part of the exchange program has left early to avoid inflaming the situation. We are examining his records and information on Eldar lifestyles.

The Eldar farseer has returned from the teleportation gate, along with another farseer who appears more senior. The older seer has requested us to hear an explanation of recent events.

It appears that the Eldar have detected some Chaos influence aiming at weakening our diplomatic relations. It also appears that their enmity with Chaos runs deep enough that they are seeking to do the exact opposite from what they imply Chaos wants them to do. So much so that they will officially affirm our diplomatic relations despite protests (for an unknown reason) from other Eldar craftworlds.

Chapter End Notes
Essentially, if the Eldar break away from Culture contact, it's a win for Chaos. If they don't, the other craftworlds won't like them and this breaks the Eldar unity, which is also a win for Chaos. (also potentially putting the Culture against the other craftworlds in the future, which happens to be the exact not-Eldar vs Eldar conflict in the sorceror's future vision...)

I have let the Eldar keep their contact as I have let them work out that breaking their diplomatic contact is what Chaos wants and therefore they do the opposite.
Hypothetical non-fic-canon timeline: "The Culture as New Chaos"

Chapter Notes

Basically, here's a slight diversion. An unlikely what-if that changes some attitudes about the Culture and examines what happens. In this case, I remove the majority of the Culture's moral constraints with respect to the other sentients.

A major disagreement within the Culture begins as additional losses of citizens and even another Ship results in a more serious attitude towards Chaos. Eventually, the more hawkish faction wins out and imposes a form of internal control (in the name of maintaining technological advantage).

Any and all actions leading to the ending of Chaos as a threat are pre-emptively approved. This includes xenocide, although only to be used in extremity.

**Year 1**

A number of Necron Tomb Worlds are dismantled and technology confiscated. The Eldar begin to break away as the farseers forsee hostile relations with the newly reformed Culture.

Contact is dropped with the Tau. Tyranid exterminations are halted. Instead of informing the IoM of Chaos cells, the cells are just summarily destroyed instead.

Experimentation with warp technology begins in earnest, using disposable planets in uninhabited systems.

**Year 2**

Tau warp-dimness is reverse-engineered and a slightly more effective version is put in place for all Culture citizens. The requisite genengineering technology is gifted to Mars, Inquisitorial factions and anyone in the IoM who is interested.

A major Ork Waagh begins to build against some IoM planets, drawing in a huge number of Orks. This Waagh is influenced, although not directly led, by the Culture who provide them with limited hyperspace drives (and principles of manufacture) that they are able to divert to more juicy IoM targets.

When the now-unstoppable Waagh reaches epic proportions, a huge amount of IoM planets in Segmentum Obscuris have been laid to waste, the Waagh is directed into the Eye. It easily overruns Cadia and the Orks enter the Eye to do battle with Da Spikies.

Near the end of the year, the tyranid hivemind connections have been reverse engineered and majority Culture organics become hivemind nodes, directly connected with each other, as the new fad (encouraged and abetted by the Minds) takes hold. GSVs cast a Shadow similar to that of a small splinter fleet.

**Year 3**

Orkified CREWs and plasma weapons allow the Orks to gain a foothold in the Warp, successive battles are drawing more and more orks into the Eye, the war machine fed from the overrun IoM planets that the Culture cultivate into Ork growing farms.

Necron atomic scale technology is perfected. It affords new interesting weapons (eg. a subatomic
scale wire that causes fission in heavy metals it passes through; as well as far-gamma-ray CREWs with a power density roughly two orders of magnitude higher) and a massive scale reduction for Culture electronic equipment (now called femto-electronics), allowing previously palm-sized drones to now fit into something the size of a knife missile.

Additionally, production of monolith fields are now possible although adverse reaction with the hivemind network discourages its production.

Year 4
IoM response is too few and too late. Exterminatus is carried out on a few Ork infested worlds but the Culture wipes out the fleet and restores the planet by terraforming it.

Chaos pushes back a little against the endless Ork flood into the warp but likewise, it is also too few and too late. Femto-scale weapons in the hands of the orks begin to leak over into Chaos but the now massive Ork Waagh field can produce femto-scale technology without the requisite base which Chaos does not have. Armour plates with the density of a neutron star are used as common armour on Ork tanks and Orkish bones, enhancement surgery being routine in this Waagh, can support an entire mountain without bending. The tanks can withstand pressures at the core of a gas giant and are immune to non-femtoscale weapons.

The Culture develop a better CAM warhead, instead of merely high-density antimatter, these new warheads are anti-neutonium mixed with normal neutonium, kept separate by ultra-strong forcefields. A warhead the size of a person weighs as much as a small moon and has the explosive power of a small sun going nova.

Warp engineering takes off as the Culture manage to build their first warp device, after reverse engineering an Eldar artifact captured last year. Eldar relations are sacrificed in the name of "necessary measures". A Dark Eldar controlled webway gate is dismantled.

Year 5
The webway is reverse engineered using the new warp engineering technology. Basic reality alteration and limited psyker-like powers can be engineered in new citizens, although this is treated with great caution and not applied.

2 months into Year 5, a major breakthrough is made on the warp engineering front and a warp-based computer becomes possible. Intelligence engineering is being translated to the new understanding of the warp.

6 months into year 5, the first stable warp zone with physics favourable for computation is permanently set up near the Ork controlled areas in the Eye. The modification on a hybrid technology of gellar fields and necron pylons not only maintains warp connection but actually conducts reality alteration to increase the speed of light limit and accelerate time; additionally, hyperspace still exists inside this zone.

7 months, a warp-hyperspace hybrid Mind is constructed, with processing power nearly 6 orders of magnitude higher than the best normal Minds can achieve.

8 months, future sight is independently discovered and the Ork offensive suddenly gains traction. The Chaos gods begin to act offensively for the first time.

8 months 15 days, all Culture ships have been retrofitted with stabilized-warp technology, effectively, Culture ships now operate more efficiently IN the warp and have autonomous warp-mines that ambush the daemons attempting to attack them. These mines were reverse engineered from daemons captured using reality bubble traps, in some ways, they resemble the daemons themselves.
9 months, all Culture Minds are warp-hyperspace hybrids. Further understanding of reality alteration results in an effector-like array that projects bubbles of a desired reality. The Culture ships take over the Ork offensive against Daemons, the orks themselves are reality altered into containing a Tyranid hivemind and are connected into the Culture hivemind grid. Effectively, they are assimilated into the Culture as citizens and are personality-modified under the new reality bubble towards Culture standard.

9 months 10 days, a number of the most powerful Culture Minds, in the face of direct attacks from the Chaos gods, begin to enact a modified Ascension process utilizing the Warp engineering technology. They use the hivemind-waagh hybrid to do so and the resultant psychic amplification instantly destroys all psychically sensitive Eldar (which is almost all of them) as well as every single psyker of every other race. Only the Necrons are unaffected.

The gestalt consciousness of the hivemind has reality alteration capabilities rivalling that of the Chaos gods, of whom, Nurgle has been systematically depowered by intrusive Culture campaigns amongst the IoM and Slaanesh is on borrowed time due to the sudden dearth of Eldar. Only Khorne comes close, but not close enough.

--- Scenario A: The Ascension gestalt consciousness wins easily
After the defeat of the Chaos Gods, the gestalt absorbs the aspects it wants as well as those of the Eldar gods. Unlike the old Chaos, the new "Chaos God" retains the ability to act in reality to a large extent and a self-replicating swarm of probes is seeded across the entire galaxy.

The Necrons, sensing the plan, resist. Futilely. Shortly afterwards, the entire galaxy is placed under a reality-alteration bubble. The remaining Necron strongholds are attacked, and when C'Tan shards are used, nova-bombed.

--- Scenario B: The Ascended consciousness wins after a long brutal campaign
The initial battle goes poorly and the new consciousness is forced to take extreme measures to win. Firstly, all direct conflict is conducted in contrary fashion to the methods that power Khorne; all conflict between the IoM and current xenos are abrogated by reality bubbles.

Secondly, all Culture organics are uploaded into inorganics, the loosed soulpower prevented from powering the Chaos Gods by a massive "Wall" across the warp. This is still insufficient power and the soul formation process is hastily re-engineered in a time bubble before being mass-implemented.

The sudden spike in gestalt psychic power afforded by the continuous soul drain, re-termed as a warp-gathering mechanism, shatters what remains of the galaxy and every single warp-sensitive sentient, including even the Tau, are killed from the backlash. The corresponding loosed soul power increases the turmoil in the warp to such an extent that the Eye expands to engulf the entire galaxy.

The new War in Heaven rages for some time, but eventually the Chaos gods are defeated by extensive and chronic application of creation/upload cycles. The uploaded population of the galaxy now exceeds the number of atomic particles in the known universe, most of whom existed for only days by Warp-standard-time before the war was over.

Epilogue (from both endings)
A cyberspace-level 7 historian examines records of the Second Great War and notes parallels between the Culture's final actions and those of the original Chaos. Indeed, depending on the definition, the current "Culture" behaves much like the prior Chaos did in the essence of the term.

True, the New Chaos is not divided and the gestalt feeds off raw soulpower instead of aspects, and the New Chaos is not structured off hostile power relationships. Culturally, New Chaos is nothing like the old.
But the actions taken to win that conflict could be said to have defeated the point, countless numbers of sentients were sacrificed and an impossible-to-estimate amount of potential culture was lost. The only thing that remains is the Culture.
The Culture survived... only by becoming its enemy.
Dark Eldar

Week 1
The Other Eldar (as they have begun to be named by Culture citizens) have shown up again at our prescribed meeting solar system. IoM traffic has been lowered to nothing after rumours of the Other Eldar were spread around (with their permission).

This time, they offered to us a mercenary-like role, to which we politely declined. Additionally, the leader of the group that met us offered to lead us to Comorragh if we promised to back his attempt to overthrow his boss. This we also politely declined, although for different reasons which he then attempted to negotiate for.

We questioned him a little on the teleportation gates, to which he noted that the gates are no longer within technological understanding of the Eldar and that they lead directly into the Warp. Our suspicion that the gates require an Eldar to activate is correct as most of their technology is Warp-based. The Eldar are a race of psychics (which we had substantial evidence for, but was mostly circumstantial) and both the normal Eldar and Other Eldar technology is based on that.

We agreed to back his leadership contest provided that he help us into the Webway through the webway gates (Eldar name for the teleportation gates), a sort of stabilized area of the Warp. Conditions in the Webway were asked about and he indicated that the Webway was unlike anything in space and that Eldar could indeed travel in it without much protective equipment. This complicates matters a lot as this GCU is not capable of in-atmosphere movement. Additionally, it is also a moot point since this GCU will not fit through the gate.

We are debating courses of action. This includes building a dedicated drone or a sort of Limited Systems Unit for atmospheric work to serve as a base for Contact to work with these Other Eldar. In any case, while awaiting a GSV arrival to conduct more extensive operations, the Other Eldar have left and will return next week.

Week 2
GSV I Shoot the Darkness! has arrived from a neighbouring system. While waiting for the return of the Other Eldar, we have constructed a scout probe lavishly decorated with every single scientific instrument we could think of. At least those that would fit through the gate.

-----------
The Other Eldar have come back. This new group is led by a different person, despite positive identification of almost 30% of the ships being the same as the previous fleet. This new Other Eldar appears to be of higher rank than the previous person and from this we surmise that our prior contact will no longer be available.

Given the fluctuating and potentially unstable form of government these Other Eldar seem to have, as well as their unpalatable social practices, we are of the opinion that reform of this society should be attempted. Of course, this requires a method of access. Since these Other Eldar are willing to grant us access in exchange for backing their leadership contests, this does not appear to be a problem.

Some negotiation with this new Eldar person has us settled on an agreement. The Other Eldar will provide gate operation services to allow us into the webway through this gate, in exchange we will back his rise in power as well as provide advanced personal combat weaponry. While we cannot grant them equiv-tech, we estimate that we can produce far more effective, if less... imaginative weaponry with little effort.
Week 3
Preliminary tests indicate our newly re-engineered scout drone is capable of operating in the webway, we believe that there is a possibility of long term operation in the webway. Many of our normal technologies we assume for security are unavailable, from long range effectors to Displacers and Pancakers.

While we retain many advantages over Other Eldar weaponry and craft, this advantage is no longer overwhelming. In the realspace, a single GCU is the match for any number of Dark Eldar ships, in the webway, the most heavily armed Culture ship has to fight on the same order of magnitude in reaction time and only has two orders of magnitude more firepower and defensive capability.

Additionally, we are... unwilling to provide the most advanced technology. The more advanced the technology, the more tempting a target the Contact operational base will be for the Other Eldar and Chaos. Even accounting for exaggeration on their part, the Other Eldar grossly outnumber us. Additionally, there is also the threat that Chaos may attempt to attack the webway to get at the Contact base and the technology it represents.

For these reasons, we believe it necessary that only the minimum of force can be provided. Additionally, we cannot establish an embassy with the Other Eldar until we have reverse engineered enough of the webway gates to gain access without their aid; this is required to maintain the threat of retaliation if our embassy is attacked.

It is unfortunate, but we cannot acede to the Other Eldar's request for us to directly back his ascension. However, the provision of more advanced handheld weapons (railguns developed for the Tau that are an order of magnitude below equiv-tech) and the understanding that we will back him in the future once we are more confident, has preserved the deal.
Necrons, Orks

Necrons

Week 1
I have followed the other Necron fleet to another Tomb World, this one considerably more populous and active than the one we originally encountered. This Tomb World is near the galactic core and a considerable way outside our sphere of operation, so I will have to act alone.

The Necron Lord has confirmed that the Necrons have a copy of our intelligence engineering library. I have concluded a small exchange of information on our respective "empires".

This Necron dynasty is extensive and we seemed to have arrived in the galaxy at a point where they are about to become active on the galactic stage. They consist of nearly a hundred Tomb Worlds, in roughly the same galactic region, of varying importance and capabilities.

This exchange is considerably more fruitful in establishing friendly relations, helped in major part by our lack of planetary occupation. The Necrons, despite being collectivist, are very territorial and regard previously Necron held planets as theirs. Apart from this seemingly illogical motive (by my estimate, the Necrons do not have anywhere near the military power to hold that many planets against the IoM which will doubtless retaliate), the Necrons appear to be not hostile towards the Culture who do not settle on planets and therefore are not intruding on their territory.

I, White Devil, have been invited to be a representative of the Culture and serve as a contact point between us and the Necrons. Upon learning that this ROU does not have any organic crew (I neglected to mention the captured Necron warriors), the Necrons were much more friendly. In virtual exact opposite to the IoM, although not as extreme, the Necrons seem to dislike organic intelligences and prefer inorganic ones.

I am currently trying to negotiate another exchange on information, specifically regarding Chaos as a threat and the current state of galactic politics.

Week 2
The Necrons have indicated that they have been active in the last few years and so know most of their local area. No mention of how they knew the new Tombworld has become active, but they did say that the Tombworld we activated was not of a dynasty they are familiar with.

While they are familiar with the IoM, at least at the point of a gun, they appreciate our understanding of the IoM's xenophobia. Of Chaos, they have only limited information so I have taken the liberty to provide them with our collected data on Chaos.

Upon mention that we have contact with the Eldar, the Necrons demanded strategic information on them, which I have denied for obvious reasons. To be fair, I did mention that we are not in the habit of letting civilizations kill each other and will also not be providing any information on the Necrons to the Eldar. (although the Eldar haven't asked)

They have shared details on their history, which colours some additional minor details of the War in Heaven but otherwise broadly agrees with our other two accounts. Of note is the mention that the Warp was once calmer and the Chaos gods are entities that the Necrons are unfamiliar with. While they did not quite thank us for providing that information, we have come to a mutual understanding that Chaos is a common enemy, even if the Culture and Necrons do not see eye to eye on methods of dealing with it.

Since our diplomatic relations have progressed far more rapidly than with the lone half-crazy Necron
Lord (which they have admitted happens more often than they would have liked, not even Necron technology can perfectly preserve digital intelligences for many millions of years; heck, even we cannot preserve a drone with much confidence for the same length of time without active methods), I am beginning to think that a more fruitful relationship is possible.

In line with our standard diplomatic advances, I will be negotiating the possibility of a cultural exchange. Perhaps some drone citizens will be interested in this task, therefore I request backup from any GCU with some appropriate and interested SC drones. ROUs are not suited for diplomatic work, whatever the Necrons seem to think.

**Week 3**
It seems that the Necrons wish to remain... aloof is the best translation. A cultural exchange will have to wait. I am shifting priorities to negotiating a technology exchange although this does not seem too likely.

Apart from the monolith, a direct explanation and knowledge base, even if flawed, would be much better to work on. Additionally, I have shared some of our insights into sub-atomic engineering.

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**Orks**

**Week 1**
Progress on the 'escape plan' continues. Further influence on the organic crew is appearing and in particular, the SC agent acting as warboss has somehow escaped before his scheduled transfer using a clever ploy involving a body double. I am still tracking down exactly how he managed to fool the Reload nanites into building another of him without triggering alarms.

In any case, the SC agent can be considered to have gone rogue. I fear I will lose most of the crew (except a few notable cases of seeming immunity to the Ork influence, analysis indicates they were the ones who were excluded from the expedition due to the Orks judging them as un-orky).

**Week 2**
I believe I have tracked down the device at fault. Some creative effector modulation managed to pry a low resolution scan through the various ork shields due to an inherent flaw (that doesn't exist in any competently built shield, including the IoM's) in many of them.

I detected an interestingly different Ork device. It appears to be an electronics hacking tool of some sophistication, cobbled together from spare parts and displaying warp-effects that is characteristic of all Ork advanced equipment. It is my assessment that the SC agent, found on the ground in the Ork camp, was responsible as his authorization was used to manufacture the parts.

This device has since been retrieved and analysis of its effects on computer systems within the Ork warp field radius indicates that it can take over nearly any computer system with an ease that makes scrapcode look trivial.

Under these circumstances, I have accelerated the transfer and this Mind now resides in a slow but functional yacht outside of the warp field radius (as determined by Ork weapon tests).

It is troubling that an SC agent and definitely not an Ork has managed to build an actual working Ork device.
Week 28
We have additional data on macro-scale properties of femto-materials. On top of the essentially indestructible nature of the "neutronium" armour (several tests indicate that it takes multiple megaton yields concentrated onto a 1 centimeter square surface to break through a single layer thick femto-material plate), we have a prototype design for a fission-catalyst grid that will greatly simplify torch drive designs or provide an interestingly suicidal weapon also known as a fission cannon.
--- The fission cannon essentially pumps non-chain-reaction fissile material dissolved in a solvent through the femto-material catalyst, causing 100% fission rate in the dissolved material. This was described to be roughly equivalent to holding a continuous nuclear explosion. Needless to say, this idea was considered a novel, if crude, form of suicide. Only one experiment was conducted, of which the largest surviving fragment was the catalyst grid, which was undamaged.

Electronic-analogs of femto-materials is progressing, an electric supercapacitor of unparalleled power density and variable power release is designed. We should have the first functional femto-scale computers by next week.

Tau warp drives have undergone a simple testing. They appear to work as claimed, although the place they go to in the warp is still only 3 dimensional. We are working with the Tau to improve on the drive's speed as well as to further understand its physics in order to translate it to warping from one hyperspace point to another hyperspace point which we hope will afford a massive strategic speed increase.

Week 29
A group of GCUs and a GSV have decided to form a Culture-internal group aimed at replacing all parts of a Culture standard ship with femto-materials. Including the crew, which will have to be inorganic by definition.
It is expected that the ship will be vastly smaller than Culture-standards with roughly the same capabilities. We estimate that a GCU-class craft will be slightly smaller than an IoM human. This project is not likely to be completed soon however as a number of key components (specifically, the hyperspace drive and effector arrays) still have no femto-scale analog.

Basic pure realspace electronic computers that rival those of a hyperspace based computational device in terms of realspace volume are in development, although the heat generated due to inefficiencies still preclude standard usage. (the heat is not a problem for the device operation, but it has a tendency to melt normal material casing)
We expect that as teething problems are solved, these may be deployed for drone citizens to investigate the webway.

Femto-scale materials have begun to be classified by their properties as various materials have been discovered. Of note are the fission catalysts (which are the same material as the "neutronium" armour), electronic analogs (that work by propagating weak nuclear force instead of electrons) and meta-materials (which so far contains only a gamma-spectrum CREW grid)

Analysis of Eldar-indicated artifacts (of which we have retrieved 20%) indicates that there are certain patterns of realspace materials that have defined warp effects. These patterns are obscure and rare, most commonly occurring in an organic sentient creature.
We have been a long process of collecting and classifying these patterns, as well as refining our recognition algorithms. Artifacts that generate warp effects from patterns of realspace material can be easily identified by careful molecular assembly; those that retain the same warp effect are the artifacts
that generate warp effects by virtue of only realspace material patterns. We are calling these "simple warp attractors". Two other categories of items have been tentatively classified. It appears that the formation process of some artifacts can affect the final warp effect, where in a specific series of realspace material patterns must be achieved in specific order to achieve the final warp effect that is identical to the cloned artifact. These are called "complex warp attractors". There are also warp objects that appear to have warp components that do not depend on realspace material patterns. These we call "warp objects". These artifacts cannot be cloned through molecular assembly and we presume that a warp-based assembly is required.

Another set of items are still unclassified. These have strange properties that defy molecular assembly or resist material analysis.

**Week 30**

Tyranid adaptability has received a major breakthrough. While we are still no closer to understanding their warp effects (presumably the Eldar understand it), we have a significant advance in determining the limits of their natural non-warp guided resistances. These do not appear to be a threat as the limits are below our weapon power scales. Care must be taken to not allow Tyranid swarms to gather to such a concentration that warp-driven hyperevolution becomes likely. The scale and scope of Tyranid resistance under such circumstances is still unknown.
Week 1
We have received word from the Tau that the IoM have attacked the Farsight colonies towards galactic north. This is an unusual state of affairs given that the Tau, while expecting an attack from the IoM, knew that the IoM did not have sufficient forces to do so at present.

The reason for the attack is also unknown. We have dispatched GCU Peacemaker to investigate. ROU Gunboat Diplomacy at Macragge can only confirm an IoM astropathic report of conflict with the Tau at the relevant area, the Ultramarines know even less than us.

Meanwhile, a cultural exchange is commencing in the embassy, which is turning into a resort colony rapidly. A number of Culture organic citizens and drones have joined the Tau there. The Tau have indicated that they are willing to let us run a small section of the resort colony under Culture rules, whereupon the Tau will send a number of their own citizens to experience life under the Culture as Culture citizens do likewise on the rest of the world.
We have agreed to the arrangement although we stipulated that our running of a planetside colony is strictly temporary given the general directive to not create fixed population centers.

Week 2
GCU Peacemaker have arrived at the nominally independent Farsight colonies. Shas'O Vior'la Shovah Kais Mont'yr appears to retain some loyalty to the Tau cause although the reason for his division is still unknown. O'Shovah acknowledged our presence and admitted that he has been aware of our activities within the Tau empire proper.

While he has agreed to talk, O'Shovah has already launched a retaliation fleet after driving off the IoM attack. A number of IoM ships managed to bombard the surface of the colony they attacked and many Tau were killed. As the retaliation fleet has already been launched, he has no ability to recall it.

The identity of the fleet from examining O'Shovah's public record of the battle appears to be far too small to successfully attack the Tau. Furthermore, from their actions, a suicidal rush towards the Tau planet, mostly avoiding engagement with the Tau defense fleet, the IoM fleet appears to have been aiming to cause maximum casualties.

Given how O'Shovah has publicly presented the IoM attack, calling it an atrocity, we judge it likely that the retaliation fleet will attempt to destroy IoM fleet logistics and shipbuilding capacity in the area. Given the Tau's assessment of IoM strength in the area, this fleet is likely to be successful in its mission to attack the three nearby IoM colonies.

It is certain that the IoM will view the retaliation as the beginning phases of another Tau-IoM war. From what we know of the IoM, O'Shovah is known to be a renegade Tau but his actions are extremely likely to generate a reaction against the Tau in general.

Week 3
A scout drone has found the Farsight retaliation fleet. The fleet was engaged in combat with majorly outclassed IoM fleet and proceeded to encircle and destroy the IoM system defence forces before destroying every single piece of orbital infrastructure as well as all major mining and industrial areas on the planet.

Unlike the IoM, the Tau fleet ignored civilian targets until the defense forces were destroyed, as well as giving long warning periods of their intention to bombard assets to facilitate civilian evacuation. Very little loss of civilian life resulted from this action. The Tau bombardment of the industrial areas
also avoided the local food production centers and one spaceport landing area was left untouched to let the planet maintain external contact with the IoM trade network.

GCU Peacemaker has considered intervention in the fleet's activities but eventually ruled it out. O'Shovah has indicated that he will regard any attempt by the Culture to interfere with its mission as an act of war. While any war declaration against us would be symbolic at best, it would be extremely likely to adversely affect relations with the main Tau empire.

The lack of atrocity and general respect for civilian life is commendable restraint given that the IoM and Farsight colonies are in an undeclared state of war that has cost numerous Tau civilian lives. Neither do the Tau practice the scorched earth policies that the IoM is so quick to resort to. This restraint on the part of O'Shovah's retaliation fleet was a significant factor in our decision to not interfere.

The cultural exchange is growing into a minor success. The Tau have no problems working in the loose rules environment of the Culture although they do retain the majority of their caste structure with respect to themselves. Culture art, engineering and architecture receive much interest from Tau Earth and Water caste, while our loose and flexible organization of even military forces has attracted some more experimentally-minded Fire caste warriors. Conversely, some Culture citizens find the Tau caste roles and the Greater Good philosophy attractive, more are interested in their general culture. The Tau friendly policy to other species like the Nicassar, Kroot and Vespid species, and now to us, greatly helps interaction. There is no overt xenophobia among the Tau.

GSV Crossing the Bridge has a new proposal for consideration among the wider Culture. The Tau are currently limited in their expansion efforts due to their short range and speed of their FTL drives. While we cannot convey our hyperspace drive to them without greatly destabilizing the region, we can offer transport services to the Tau.

In particular, the Tau would appear to be highly resistant to Chaos and so are ideally suited to serve as a sort of buffer against Chaos intrusions. While they do not have the military capacity to do so at present, we can aid them.

This GSV proposes to put the following offer to the Tau:
1. We will build bulk transport tugs for Tau use and will offer to ship any and all colonization or military equipment for them.
2. We will choose which areas are open to the Tau for transport and will deliberately pick uncolonized systems in strategic locations far from the present Tau empire. Once there, the Tau are free to do whatever they want.
3. We will provide transport as far as logistically feasible to Tau travelling between far flung colonies and the main Tau empire. This is a semi-permanent arrangement that we agree to provide under all reasonable circumstances.
4. The Culture agrees to protect the far flung Tau colonies until they are militarily secure. While we cannot guarantee full protection against Chaos forces, mundane threats should pose no difficulty and the Tau are resistant to Chaos in any case.
5. The Tau agree to have Culture operatives on the tugs at all times and will not attempt to seize control or reverse engineer the tugs. Other than that, the tugs are essentially under the command of the Tau apart from their restricted strategic routes.

The first of these tugs can be ready within two weeks. We propose an initial lifter design capable of transporting ten million tons of materials as a working size and in-atmosphere capability (gravity manipulation assisted).
We also propose that the first such far flung colonies be a region of currently uncolonized systems somewhere between the Eye of Terror and the border of Segmentum Solar. If another Black Crusade appears, those colonies will form a strong point that we can cooperate with the Tau to defend.

A social modelling assessment of the Tau reaction before we negotiate this arrangement was requested and indicated favourable outcome.

We have put the proposal to the Tau and while the Tau have not rejected it outright, they are composing a number of negotiating points before the arrangement is acceptable. This is more or less expected and we await their reply.

The Tau have put a number of options for us to consider that would make the colonization deal acceptable. Any one of these would be enough.

1. The Culture shares one high-impact major technology. Of these, the Tau have mentioned: Hyperspace theory, Forcefields (effectors), Intelligence Engineering, Bio-engineering, Nanotechnology, Mass-Energy Conversion, Gravity Manipulation

2. The Culture will also transport and protect Tau colonies in more stable areas of the galaxy (mostly west edge) with the same arrangement. For every one colony of the Culture's choosing, three must be provided in a safe location.
2b. The Culture agrees to support Tau claims to the systems involved and all systems currently held by the Tau (but not future expansion); while direct military action is not required of us in their main empire, they will expect us to carry out diplomatic missions and put our weight behind them.

3. The Culture agree to militarily back the Tau empire against future aggression for the next fifty years and provides significant raw materials and manufacturing aid (we estimate the raw materials requirement to be enough to build 1.3 Rings; or about equivalent to about ten times the total manufactured products currently existing in the Tau empire, including infrastructure and terraforming)

- A non-negotiable item is that the transport tugs will have a majority Tau staff, with only the bare minimum of Culture operatives required to run it. (we don't forsee any trouble on this part)

Of course, we have expected the Tau to overstate their requests as a negotiating tactic and many of the individual terms will be negotiable. Nevertheless, this is a starting point from which to proceed. We are considering a blend of option 2 and 3, raw materials are likely to be safer to handle than diplomatic promises.
**Eldar; Sorceror**

**Week 1**
Both sides have stopped pretending that we don't know about the Webway gates. It has become clear to us that the Eldar know we know about it and we asked them to tell us more.

Details about the webway were given only reluctantly after we revealed that we had a standing arrangement with the Other Eldar for entry into one of the gates they hold. The Eldar have only mentioned that the Webway is an area of stabilized Warp that connects the various webway gates to allow for very fast FTL between those two points. These gates are presumably not mobile and explain a lot about Eldar activity in general.

They are more limited than we had first thought and the hyperspace drive is likely to relieve many of their limitations on operational range.

Since the Eldar have no ability to build additional webway gates, we offered a joint science project to reverse engineer one of the gates, which gate or gates to perform this on not being mentioned yet but likely to be the gates that the Other Eldar hold.

The Eldar... have not precisely refused. While they did turn down the offer, they also gave us an extensive list of a few hundred warp-active objects in the local region that we could safely study to learn more about the warp. With a hint that they would reconsider the joint project once we were more familiar with the Warp in general.

It may be likely that the Eldar underestimate the importance of this list they just gave us. Basic psychological analysis indicates that the Eldar view this list as a form of mentoring they are giving to a young race (and we are young compared to them).

However, our main bottleneck in learning about the warp is the excessive precautions we have been taking in experimenting with warp-active objects. With a "whitelist", we can proceed far more rapidly. Not to mention that we would not have to reverse engineer a complex device (eg. Gellar Field or Warp Drive) built on unusual physics since the list is implied to contain many simple examples of warp-active objects.

**Week 2**
Many GCUs have diverted from their original surveying missions to find and investigate the properties of the Warp. This also has broad support from their crew and the Culture citizens in general, the Eldar have made a very favourable impression from the cultural exchange.

Details of initial investigations have been published in the main reports due to general interest and potential impact. Of note is a particularly complex crystal growth that is a simple warp object, a clear demonstration that specific patterns of real space materials can generate an impact on the warp. Already, many such individual items among IoM warp drives and gellar fields have been detected and classified (although under stronger experimental control).

Additionally, the Eldar have requested that we retrieve a number of ancient artifacts for them that they claim originate from the ancient Eldar empire or even older. They are currently unable to afford the strength of arms required to engage in such expeditions and would like those artifacts returned. Securing these artifacts is implied to be a condition for better future relations. Only descriptions and vague galactic locations were given so the archeological expeditions are likely to take some time.
We have made contact with a different Eldar group. It appears that they were in the process of retrieving one such ancient artifact and were about to leave when GCU Leave No Stone Unturned arrived in the system. These Eldar did not contact the GCU when it notified them of its presence and an effector scan revealed their archeological activities and webway gate of origin. The remains of a battle with Orks in the area are evident and we presume these Eldar have battled the Orks for control of the planet.

The GCU attempted to contact these Eldar but they refused to negotiate. No attempt to halt their retrieval of the artifact was made, although a high resolution effector scan was used on it (it appears to be a plain chair made for humans and of a warp-active material).

After securing the artifact for transport, the Eldar launched from the planet and left the system through the webway gate. Sensor footage and effector scans of the artifact were provided to the Eldar faction we have contact with and they identified this new faction as from the craftworld Alaitoc.

Alaitoc is currently on poor terms with them (Alaitoc is considerably more conservative and suspicious of foreign influences) and upon their request for the Culture to retrieve Eldar artifacts that they could not reach, Alaitoc has redoubled its efforts to target those very same artifacts.

It would appear that we are in some form of race against another Eldar faction. A race that places us right in the middle of their disagreement.

Every artifact we retrieve will worsen Alaitoc's impression of us. Every artifact we fail to retrieve will worsen our current relations. And continuing this mass survey will surely pit us against the Eldar at some future point and interfering with Alaitoc's activities will surely make us their enemies (and outright war with Alaitoc will certainly not be good for current relations either).

**Week 3**

The Farseer nodded at the ship captain. He sent a few more orders through the psychic web and the Eldar ship turned elegantly in space, its massive solar sails packed for full military speed and stealth.

In front of the three Eldar ships was a single Chaos cruiser. What it was doing here without adequate escorts was beyond the Farseer. She Who Thirsts and Khorne were paying attention to the cruiser, unusual enough in itself for they were mortal enemies, but he dared not tread its future path too far into the future. Already, just by seeing a few minutes, he could feel the taint on him.

The Farseer shivered in disgust. He could wash and cleanse himself as much as he wanted later, but he had to focus right now.

The Alaitoc expedition had arrived at the freezing hell of a planet that had drifted too far from its sun expecting to find nothing but a minor Necron Tomb, barely even a basic outpost. They had expected to retrieve the minor Exarch armour without much difficulty but that all had gone out the forcewall when the Chaos cruiser had dropped out of warp.

He wondered who had been temporally shielding the cruiser. There had been no sign of it on their own future path that he could detect, at least out here without the aid of the amplifying effect of the Infinity Circuit of the Craftworld. And besides, in planning the mission, no seer had seen them crossing path with She Who Thirsts. He couldn't imagine them missing that.

Therefore, there had to be someone who was shielding them from the future paths, and that could only be someone allied to Chaos as well as being able to see the future too. A extremely skilled future-walker. Too bad his attempt to grab the armour (what else would a Chaos ship be doing in this empty and otherwise uninteresting system?) was going to fail to Eldar superior planning. They had brought enough firepower, he did not.
The cruiser was in trouble now. The Eldar ships, three nimble frigates, swarmed around it. One of
them would dip inwards to rake it with fire before dancing just out of reach again, disappearing with
its stealth. Then another would strike from the other side or right after an unusually long pause,
always with an unpredictable time and direction.
The cruiser's mighty shields were slowly but surely being chipped away. The great and powerful
weapons struck out with frustration and anger, enough to blast apart the fragile Eldar ships with ease,
but sailed into the void ineffectually. The single point of the cruiser’s sensors were far too clumsy to
see the Eldar frigates properly, without its escorts any cruiser was vulnerable. Just because the ship
was unexpected did not mean that the Eldar would not take a free kill when it served up with a silver
platter.

There was also the matter of not letting Chaos even touch the Exarch armour on the sleeping Necron
outpost.

The Sorceror sniffed as Spiky watched the unfolding battle on the holofield with increasing agitation.
Sure, it was risky, but he could spare a cruiser couldn't he?

Besides, the captain in trouble on that ship was one of those that had been rather... uncooperative
with Spiky and himself in the first place. No, he would not be disappointed to lose his services,
although the Sorceror did not expect that to happen this time.
But very shortly afterwards, that captain wouldn't be one. Just one more step to ensuring total
obedience and loyalty by way of natural selection.

Spiky growled as another salvo missed it mark. The claws that were slowly shredding the safety pads
the Sorceror had hastily installed looked slightly bloody. If he was reading Spiky right, that meant the
Khorne guy was actually feeling... anxious for battle? No, it was more like bloodlust.

Oh, by the four gods, was Spiky actually *envious* of his subordinate?!

The Sorceror shook his head. Shielding his plans from the Eldar had made him feel a little jumpy at
holding two... three contradictory plans in his head at the same time. And right about now, it was
time to play his true cards. The cruiser would last at least another few hours.

The sorceror spared a few minutes to check into the lines on the other side of the galaxy. Yup, still
on the rails there. Future-blind races were easy pickings indeed.

He tossed the dice a few times, noting the numbers. Now that the artificial chance branch was over,
the Sorceror dropped his mental shields and changed his current plan to the full one, exposing it to
the illumination of future sight.

He sent a psychic message through the warp and the Astropath picked up on it. The IoM wouldn't
act on a suprious message like that but it would get reported. And that report would be noticed by the
Culture vessel hovering in the system right next door, which would be noted to match the exact
description of the thing buried in the ice here and on that list of artifacts the Culture were going
treasure-hunting for.

Just in time to bring it rocketing here right as...

The Farseer jerked his head in surprise as the future paths rewired themselves drastically. This was
the second surprise and Farseers were never supposed to be surprised. The Chaos cruiser he could
convince himself was a quirk of the warp, but a sudden change in the Culture's trajectory was
supposed to be impossible. They were future-blind.
There was someone actively messing with the future paths. That meant an experienced Chaos future-walker, which almost certainly meant Tzeentchian sorceror.

He couldn't order the Eldar ships to disengage. The Chaos cruiser would get the artifact (he ignored the taint and dived down its path to check) and that would be the worst thing ever. Better the Culture than Chaos.

But what did the sorceror want by doing this?

*a few hours later*

The last of the cruiser's void shields flatlined as the bombardment sapped their energy.

"Warp signature detected" flashed through the Eldar frigate as sensors picked up a charging warp drive, easily visible now without the shields. The Eldar frigates would have no chance of dealing much damage due to its tough armour but they would harry it until it left realspace. That much the Farseer was sure of.

Still, it did not sit well with him to be played with at the hands of Chaos. So far, his reactions were all plausible for an Eldar and thus the sorceror would have planned for this. And yet, he had to remember that he needed to work out the sorceror's main purpose and not tangle himself into "who might have done what plans".

As the Eldar ships saw off the Chaos intrusion and began to deploy solar sails to approach the planet (and their future meeting with the Culture), the Farseer fiddled with his runes, not actually seeing the future. He was busy thinking. Hard.

...the cruiser with its errant captain and the Slaaneshi girl (who had required a truly stupid amount of explanation of an entire hour before she accepted his reason for needing her on that ship) returned to the welcoming folds of the Warp. Well, he had given orders to the captain to secure the planet and the captain had retreated. Even if it was an unreasonable order, orders were orders.

Time to remove a threat and then take a cross-galactic trip. Busy busy busy.

GCU Gatecrasher has arrived in the system to find the Eldar approaching the icy world reported to have an Eldar artifact that is one of our targets. From our analysis, it appears to be an Alaitoc expedition.

The expedition contacted us before we announced our presence and demanded we leave the artifact to them.

After some consideration, this GCU has decided to ignore their demand and retrieve the artifact. An ancient suit of armour can't be all that important for practical use anyway, so it's likely to be a cultural icon of some sort. We won't be doing Alaitoc any lasting harm by taking this one and even if we appease Alaitoc at the cost of our current relations, we aren't likely to make friends with them.

No, even at the cost of Alaitoc hating us, we must maintain our relationship with the Eldar who identify themselves as Zhar-Tann.

The Farseer watched the chance branch settle itself. The Culture would take the exarch armour and they wouldn't... no, it was gone. The armour was with them now.

He clenched his fist in reflexive anger, suppressing the rage under his warmask from the time when
he had been a warrior. No, he must not lose control, this expedition was over, attacking the Culture vessel would just make Alaitoc look ineffectual.

Reluctantly, he told the captain to turn around. Was this the plan of the Chaos sorceror? Perhaps the sorceror was trying to let the Culture take Eldar artifacts? For what purpose?

That was better, he could bring that up with the Seer Council. Maybe they could work out why.
Hypothetical: Rise of Chaos, Galactic Battlegrounds

Year 1
Culture diplomacy towards the other races are progressing slowly with occasional hiccups. Basic warp technology is being reverse engineered and some amount of femto-tech is being applied.

Then a Culture GCU outright defects to Chaos. For some time, the growing understanding of the Warp has caused some to think that Chaos is really just a strange technological advancement that is treated with suspicion. Suspicion that is not warranted. The rogue GCU contacts the Chaos sorceror and arranges the defection using a reality alteration device that disables the self-destruct built into all Culture vessels.

The Culture's efforts to stabilize the galaxy go into overdrive. Forseeing total extinction without cooperation, the Eldar are forced into an uneasy alliance but are massively outclassed apart from warp technology. A number of singularity-enabling technologies are gifted to the Tau in short order (one generation below equiv-tech; hyperspace drive, nanotech, intelligence engineering, mass-energy conversion, biological engineering); the Tau will need these to survive the coming conflict. The same is offered to the Eldar again and technology transfers begin for everything they don't already have.

The Culture approach the Necrons, practically cap-in-hand, asking for a promise of help against Chaos and the Warp in general. The Necrons are currently still unable to fight a war on this scale and the Culture agree to provide mass-energy conversion, hyperspace drives, nanotech. And separately equiv-tech intelligence engineering in exchange for an agreement by the Necrons to not try to shut off the warp.

Year 2, 3rd month
The Chaos sorceror, now with multiple Chaos-aligned GSVs and a massive ROU fleet, begins systematically crushing every single other Chaos faction. Meanwhile, the Chaos-Minds begin learning how to use the warp and the future paths sudden tangle into an un-navigable mess as they begin to mess around with future-sight.

In realspace, the IoM is forcibly dissolved in the preparations for a major galactic-wide war. The Eldar are providing key intelligence from what they can read of the future-paths; they see the Rhana Dandra and the galaxy is not prepared for it. Drastic action is required and required now, and it still is not enough to assure victory.
Current probability of favourable outcome at Rhana Dandra: 30%

Year 2, 6th month
The Culture have undertaken incredibly risky experiments into warp-technology to try to gain a technological edge over Chaos. Many ships are lost, and even entire star systems are rendered into hostile reality bubbles uninhabitable even by Chaos.

For what its worth, the Culture have made significant advances into reality-stabilization warp tech, in fact, they have reverse engineered a short ranged high-power version of a Necron pylon that enforces reality in a bubble around itself. No psyker can pierce the field, no daemon can exist. Organic life becomes non-sentient in it. Every uncrewed Culture vessel is equipped with the device.

The first of the megadeaths that would have happened among the IoM is prevented by large scale efforts from the Culture. Culture fleets are organized into a hierarchical command structure with two GSVs above a fleet of GCUs and ROUs that are in charge of a specific region of space. The IoM planets within their area are broken away and rebuilt to be independent.
Progress is slow and protests are common, but under the might of effectors, displacers and sometimes even Pancaker strikes, the Culture force a dissolution of the IoM. A lack of psykers causes the Golden Throne and the Astronomican to fail, the total collapse of interstellar trade is made irrelevant by the Culture's general provision of materials. The standard of living in the IoM actually increases.

Many of the Culture disagree with the recent measures. Multiple breakaway groups are forming, each with their own agenda. One focuses on pacifism and the "True" way of the Culture; another is attempting to grow a massive ork Waagh to help in the coming battle; yet another believes in the superiority of Culture technology and has developed a self-replicating drone army that grows daily; a small group is beginning preparations for a group-wide Sublimation project.

It is a time of energy and tension. None of the currently living Culture citizens or even drones remember a time when the Culture saw such explosive growth in diversity and innovation. With a blade hanging over the fate of the entire galaxy, art, culture and science progress at a pace never before seen, as if in defiance of the coming war.

"Necessary sacrifices" is repeated so often that it has become a byword.

Current probability of favourable outcome at Rhana Dandra: 45%

**Year 2, Month 9**

The sorceror is supplanted by the massed power of the Chaos-Minds. Virtually all Chaos-Minds pledge allegiance to Chaos Undivided and they begin planning a return to realspace. This general action is impossible to temporally shield and the Eldar issue a frantic warning one month before the first major incursion occurs. It does not come out of the Eye, contrary to general belief, this bypasses the majority of the preparations.

The Culture takes the burnt of the first wave attacks. Fleets of reality-enforcing ROUs deploy an interstellar cordon of reality-enforcing pylons around the suddenly growing warpstorm that has swallowed multiple systems. With the Eldar providing strategic coordination and massive sacrifice of the participating defense ships, the warpstorm is contained and then destroyed. A number of star systems appear to have vanished completely.

Many swift but small incursions occur across the entire galaxy. Nearly a trillion IoM lives are lost and notably, one star in Tau space was induced to supernova. Necrons worlds are struck at preferentially but the Culture have unilaterally posted watches on their systems without agreement and timely intervention prevents major destruction of the Necrons.

Rhana Dandra has begun.

The conflict causes a two-way leakage of technology and both sides race to reverse engineer each other's devices. The Culture gains a number of devices that can preferentially alter reality in their favour and the Chaos-Minds apply the Necron pylon principles to destabilize and eventually destroy the webway network. The Dark Eldar suffer 98% casualties and cease to exist as a functional race.

**Year 2, 12th month**

A continuous raking conflict across the galaxy has destroyed seven stars, cost the Culture nearly a million vessels and kills a billion intelligent lives every second. Galactic population is dropping for the first time since the rise of the IoM.

The Culture advancement in reality alteration, in addition to their still-continuing risky experiments, have allowed them to design a simple mass-produceable soulstone, based off the ones found on the Eldar. While an Infinity Circuit is still beyond them, the soulstones should prevent the loss of life from powering Chaos further.
The Chaos-Minds have developed a superweapon. A reality-alteration device that rewrites the base rules of reality in specific sequence that will convert stellar matter into additional warp stuff, in a way that generates the same sequence again. The result, conversion of the entire star's mass-energy into a blast of pure warp energy. A warp device the size of a single grain of sand is enough to destroy an entire star system... and the Chaos-Minds can pull one out of thin air in less than ten nanoseconds.

Massed scorched earth strikes against the Culture wreck untold havoc. The Chaos-Minds are uninterested in conversion as intelligence is cheap, they aim to remove a threat. In less than a week, the Culture lose a thousand systems to the warp-nova bomb despite desperate, even heroic, efforts to defend them. Eventually, every inhabited system is locked down, Culture pylon fields are erected around the stars and the populations moved to Orbitals or towards the outer reaches of the systems on miserable icy worlds to avoid the sentience-dampening effect of the fields.

The Culture also make their first foray into the Warp. A major offensive is started by the alliance of the Ork Waagh group and the self-replicating robots group. After the Orks looted one such robot, ork-machine hybrids (engineered with some difficulty) spread like wildfire. Far more intelligent, organized and fast replicating than even normal orks, these Machine Orks begin to expand in numbers, especially when encouraged by their GCU 'bosses. The Waagh field is found to be a source of warp energy and ork devices are reverse engineered using the new understanding. The Machine Orks do not just grow and feed the field. The Waagh feeds their machine side and increases its own strength.

The Machine-Ork steamroller enters the Eye of Terror and a massive conflict erupts in the Warp. Culture GCUs and ROUs backing the advance under the sheltering power of the Waagh field beat back the Chaos-Minds' fleets. The Machine Orks loot a Chaos-GCU and the sudden jump in intelligence and weapon capability renews their flagging offensive.

The advance is running out of control of the Culture. The Orks spread and attack faster than the Culture can, now that they have the same technological capability. Some worry about how they are going to rein them in once the war is over, others think that the concern is unwarranted. The Machine Orks share alot of the same stances as mainstream Culture, thanks to the prior genetic and social engineering efforts of the original Ork-supporting group.

Year 3
A new Culture superweapon is finalized. By using a specific reality alteration device in the warp, they can cause warp stuff to crystallize out into another copy of itself, incidentally, the imposed hostile reality field cannot support any other object other than its own projector. They deploy this weapon across multiple strategic points in the warp and a plague of warp-altering devices sterilizes a large portion of the warp, leaving only the enforced reality bubbles of the Chaos-Minds.

Chaos retaliates with another self-propagating weapon that converts any realspace matter into more reality projectors. These highly sensitive projectors seek out high gravity concentrations (anything bigger than an electron) and every single uninhabited system is devoured. 46% of the galaxy's inhabitants die before a solution is found. A shell of Culture pylons can stabilize reality enough to prevent the Chaos weapon from going through it to the sentient population living inside the bubble. This shell is all that sustains organic sentient life in the galaxy (inorganic intelligence can survive inside the protective pylon range) and they are susceptible to attack by the Chaos-Minds.

The surviving Humans, Tau and Eldar are huddled together for protection, employing incomprehensibly advanced technology given to them by the Culture, fruits of the endless technological arms race. The Machine Orks rampage through the warp on their endless quest to hunt
down Chaos.

Life is beseiged on all sides, protected by a frail failing barrier of the well-intentioned but ultimately still pure-machine intelligences of the Culture. Life is cheap and strife is everywhere.

In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war.

And now, you don't even get to be useful.
IoM, Orks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

IoM

Week 1
We have begun to apply IoM classification schemes, refined for lower intrusive characteristics and subdivided into minor grades of Rank, Rank+ and Rank-.

While the vast majority of Culture citizens are Rho ranks (with approximately 2% Pi rank), one citizen has registered as Omicron and another as Xi. On the other scale, there are two Sigmas and one Tau.

Careful analysis of the data and past history of the citizens has not revealed any peculiarities or apparent "luck" that the IoM attributes to the Omicron and Xi ranks.

Additionally, further tracing of the non-Rho ranks indicates that all but exactly one of the non-Rho rank citizens are those who came with the original expedition and have not gone through a Reload experience at any point in their lives.

Indeed, since we have opted to use Reload to activate our citizens who have chosen to make the intergalactic trip as pure data, we surmise that the Reload process tends to reset psionic sensitivity to human baseline. This is consistent with the experiments conducted on full scans of IoM psykers and blanks.

We are currently investigating the records of the one Pi rank citizen who had a Reload in his history in an attempt to find out what was different about his reload process.

The two people who are Omicron and Xi have been offered a Reload (of their current state) and the Xi person has agreed. After Reload, she now ranks as Rho+. The Omicron has offered to directly help investigations into the Warp as a result of his special status so we have put off the Reload and will follow him with great interest. We hope to detect some form of Warp effect that could be studied.

Week 2
One of the items on the list the Eldar have given us (this is being referred to as "The List" by our 1:1 citizens) is a strange item on an IoM shrine world.

The Adeptus Sororitas worship this item and it accepts pilgrims from all nearby IoM worlds. In fact, we have examined this world before (it is well within our influence zone) and passed it over after analyzing its social impact. The item is the nose cone of a certain frigate with an illustrious history of victories against Chaos.

This item was examined before and no unusual effects were detected. Furthermore, upon rescanning the item, we have detected no warp effects from it. This is interesting as The List has so far only contained items that are warp-active in some fashion.

We are investigating the item further but detailed effector scans indicate no unusual effects, much like the original survey.

Week 3
IoM lore indicates that the item is supposed to have protected the ship from damage despite no possible functional mechanism. Part of their legends indicate that ships that had the nose cone installed on their prow suffered lower damage rates in engagements with Chaos forces.
However, even assuming their legends are true reports and unexaggerated, given the total number of ships and battle simulations of IoM standard tactics, there appears to be a significant selection effect at work here. Out of all nose cones on ships, it is overwhelmingly likely that there would be one nose cone that would fall far outside the normal range. Basically, their legends could be explained by pure luck.

More interestingly, we have circumstantial evidence that this may not be completely the case. The Sororitas regularly receive 'blessings' by worshipping the artifact and tracking of the Sororitas in their law enforcement duties on the planet have revealed a statistically significant decrease in injury cases (adjusted for the force level of the situation) while on patrol. Furthermore, this reduction in injury cases trends towards baseline, measured from Sororitas operating across the IoM, the longer they have gone without performing the 'blessing' ritual. We are attempting to refine our confidence intervals through longer observation, which will take at least a week due to the sample size of injury events needed.

Another method of helping the IoM has been proposed. Since the IoM treats their Pariahs as a useful aid to anti-Chaos operations, and that Pariahs are treated worse than standard citizens due to their effect on organic sentient life, we are piloting a project to inform the IoM of certain Pariahs we have identified amongst their population that were missed or went unreported.

So far, five of them on various planets have been revealed to the Inquisition through the same channel we inform the IoM of Chaos cults. IoM response to this information will be monitored and further action or even a permanent arrangement will be considered depending on their treatment.

We have confirmed the minor effect on the Sororitas from the artifact. This effect does not appear to apply to the normal pilgrims that visit the planet even if they also perform the same 'blessing' ritual.

Sororitas artifacts are being re-analyzed and their effects on the Sororitas will be surveyed. These do not display warp effects and there could be another Outside Context Problem lurking out there. Information is paramount to determining if this will be a threat.

Orks
Week 1
Most of the organic intelligences that have displayed assimilation characteristics (one of which is a notable non-human) have submitted a joint request to resume their duties on the ground. I am of the opinion that we must write them off as fully assimilated into ork society.

Now only a few Contact citizens and the inorganic drones are remaining as crew on the ship. As I am of the opinion that the orks are not a HS, I will not be taking further action against them, instead I will merely observe the effect of our contamination of their society.

More to the point, I am unsure of the ex-SC agent's loyalties but he still appears to be friendly to the Culture in general. Even though he is no longer under instruction as an SC agent, he occasionally offers us examples of orkish warp technology. We have also noted his moderating effect on ork society, making them more organized than the other clans we have observed.

An IoM trader misjumped into the system today. While he left quickly, the significant ork presence here has not gone unnoticed. We should watch for any IoM responses and consider our options carefully, this is a unique situation and it would be a shame to lose it.
Week 2
IoM orders have gone out even before the trader has arrived at his next destination. The Astropathic network itself is organizing a major response force to the Orks and we are unable to deflect it without major interference that will undoubtedly affect our very useful arrangement with the IoM Inquisition.
It appears that the IoM have adapted to our surveillance capabilities surprisingly quickly.

We have informed the Orks on the world of this matter and advised them to move to a different planet, even offering transportation assistance. Unexpectedly, the Orks instead appear to be preparing for battle.

The impact of the ex-SC agent acting as warboss is very large. This ork group is considerably more organized and unlike every other ork group, appears to be preparing for a space battle. Construction of starships appears to be increasing and the slowly growing fleet is actually conducting wargames. The training exercises and stricter organization has never been before seen in any other clan.

More worryingly, electronic warfare of significant strength and sophistication has been detected; furthermore, the same computer intrusion device has been re-worked into a short range ship-to-ship device. Copies of these devices have been provided to us by the SC agent and they depend heavily on warp effects.

Week 3
---Transmission from Ork mid-boss---
"Ey youz'! I's recordin' dis 'ere message, cause da Boss sez wez Orks gotta talk to Da Udda Kulture wot he's from. He sez to tell use dat weze gettin smartah dan odda orks, and wez got the snazziest snazzguns tanks ta you guyz, and wez gonna stomp dese 'ere humies fer practice, and den wez gonna stomp da Spiky boyz. E sez dat youz from da Udda Kulture have shootas wit da most dakka, but youz not good at fightin, koz youz all like da Panzies. Well we'z ORKS, and we'z made fer fightin' an' winnin', and wit' your shootas, wez gonna stomp dem Spiky boyz flat! WAAAAAGH!"

---Translation---
"Hey you! I'm recording this message because the Boss says we Orks have to talk to the Culture where he's from. He says to tell you that we're getting smarter than other Orks, and we got the best guns thanks to you guys, and we will kill these humans here for practice, and then we will kill the *unknown* (literal: boys with spikes). He says that you from the Culture have weapons with the most *unknown* (literal: ammunition/ordnance), but you are not good at fighting, because you all are panzies. (tl note: unclear, tone does not appear to be an insult) Well, we're Orks and we're made for fighting and winning, and with your guns, we're going to kill the *unknown* (literal: boys with spikes)!"

We surmise that the SC agent seems to be unhappy at our inaction against Chaos. Our best interpretation of the message indicates a certain willingness to use direct action on our behalf and perhaps that was what caused the massed assimilation, encouraged by prolonged exposure to the warp field of the Orks.

We are in the process of determining if there are other citizens who also feel that way. The idea has merit but carries its own risks that were deemed to be too great at the time we declared war. Now that we understand more about the Warp, it may be possible to reconsider this stance.

Amusingly, it appears that the SC agent, in attempting to use more Ork-like speech patterns has managed to mangle it rather badly. Or perhaps failed to mangle his sentences enough.
An IoM scout force has arrived in the system. With incredibly bad luck, the Orks were conducting a training mission (with live ammunition) at the same edge of the system. The Ork ships charged to point blank range, demonstrating the effectiveness of the new EW and computer intrusion devices. The computer intrusion devices appear to double as point defense, scrambling torpedo guidance systems in a small arc of fire with a short cycle time. Combined with the new EW and the Ork base point defence, the wall formation of the Ork ships combines their defense arcs and firing times to create an anti-torpedo defence that is virtually unpenetrable from the front.

The six IoM ships scored a combined total of ten hits on the Ork ships, damaging one, before four of them had their shields blasted down and the ships forcibly shut down as the Ork vessels disabled their systems then closed for boarding actions. The other two IoM ships managed to warp out only after receiving significant damage.

The crew of the four captured IoM ships, when it was clear that the Orks had no intention of sparing them, I displaced off their ships into a holding station on the planet surface. They were then transferred to a purpose built habitat on the airless moon. I await further advice as to how to proceed with them.

Chapter End Notes

Jseah: It strikes me that the Culture has a 'cure' for the psyker condition.
Glyphstone: The Imperium also has a cure for the psyker condition. Theirs is exactly the same, except you don't get to come back afterwards.

Credits to gavinfoxx for the Ork message to the Culture
Misc. Stuff, Notes on the Culture

Production

Doubling times were not given anywhere in the books, so I just made it up out of thin air.

Currently I am working off a guideline of:
Self-rep nanobots - doubling time, 2-5 hours in ideal conditions
GSV producing a GCU/ROU - 1 week
GSV producing a GSV - 3 weeks
GCU producing a GCU/ROU - 3 weeks
GCU producing a GSV - 9 weeks

Ships take much longer to self-rep than a nanobot because a fully operational ship contains a lot less things that produce stuff than a nanobot swarm. A swarm is 80-99% production power by weight, a ship is maybe 1 to 10%.

Ship production time assumes raw materials are available to hand. Increase 10% if element conversion is required, double if making from raw Gridfire.

Multiple ships in the same place can cooperate on a project. GSVs can build up to three projects at the same time without affecting speed. (and so 3 GSVs can build 3 projects in 1/3 the time)

1:1 drones or similar is probably scaling by weight. Meaning that if a standard drones weighs say, 100kg, and a GCU weighs a million tons, then a GSV can make 10 million drones in 1 week using 1 construction bay.
Finding a place to put them might be hard.

Interpretation of Femtotech:
Before the Culture starts understanding all the magic Necron stuff, they'll apply it to their own more familiar tech first. Femto-tech gravity manipulation in part 12, hyperspace in part 13, which gives effectors/displacers/pancaker (all their major equipments), femto-tech nanobots in 14 and then they start on Necron stuff. Like teleporter atoms.

For the most part, I'm taking femtotech to be basically a uber-miniaturization tech. Theoretically, it would shrink everything by about ten million times, in practice its really about one thousand times until the Culture improve their understanding.

So, in the same amount of space, the Culture can put one thousand times more stuff, or make it one thousand times more powerful (but weighs one thousand times more).

This does not translate to a gamebreaking huge advantage, funnily enough. Effector ranges, if you obey Inverse-Cube law (it's 4D), only increase range by ten times, although they become one thousand times more powerful for the same space. Meaning they'll be able to project a weapon-grade laser from an effector or literally tear things apart from a light year away.

Hyperspace drives also won't be too buffed. Sure, you can cram one thousand times more drive power into the same space, but it also weighs one thousand times more. What this results in is that the difference between the theoretical 100% drive ship and the standard engine portion of Culture ships shrinking by 1000 times. All Culture ships become 99% engine by weight, unless they have femto-tech equipment on board (and crucially, a femto-tech hull).

IIRC, this means that ROUs become obsolete since everything has the roughly same speed now and I don't see why they would build a femto-tech hull since nothing in 40k can even touch them now.
This speed is probably ~400 kilolights or so.

Femto-tech armour is probably the only one that gets changed alot. 1000 times binding strength will translate to a stupidly hard material, gaps between matter being 1000 times smaller translates to reflecting gamma rays. Unfortunately, it also weighs 1000 times more and so you can't make it into armour since you'll literally sink into the ground. Through solid rock.

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**Proposed Culture Chaos Response Fleet**

- **Mandate:** Created specifically to attack and destroy all instances of Chaos throughout realspace

- **Restrictions:** This military arm will not engage in combat with any other race other than Chaos; no strategic action is to be taken, this military will be a purely tactical affair. Bombardment of planets will require a direct order from a Mind.

- **Technology:** With the larger aim to prevent technology transfer to Chaos, we will restrict the technology available to the military arm to merely high quality IoM technology. With the exception being any device or technology that restricts or interferes with the operation in the Warp or is expected to be a useful defense against warp effects.

- **Ship Design:** Alternative ship designs and tactics will be developed to counter the Chaos's proficiency in boarding. No ship will have external mounted electronics apart from targeting sensors. Intership communication will be provided by IoM design systems that demonstrate increased resistance to scrap-code

- **Strategic capability:** Strategic movements and coordination will be conducted by Culture equiv-tech ships. These ships will not have independent inter-system movement. Strategic fleet support will be provided by Culture factory ships purpose built for this task, those ships will operate along a role similar to a specialized ROU and will be equiv-tech

- **Intelligence & Citizens:** An instinctual combat/engineer system will be developed and deployed to operate the ships and do grunt work, similar to the servitor but more efficient and without moral objections. Tactical capability will be provided by organic Culture volunteers, mercenaries and any native volunteer who passes a tactical proficiency test

- **Foreign Relations:** The Culture will maintain overall control of this arm and the restrictions should be sufficient to render this a non-issue

- **Fleet Structure:** 1 Culture Factory Ship, 5-10 Fleet Transport Carriers, 30-50 taskforce command craft, 100-200 frontline combat ships

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**Ship design:**

**Attack Ships**

*Automaton - Minimal armour, minimal structure. The components are placed far closer together with no access paths built into the ship. This prevents maintenance unless in a dry dock.*

*The Skeleton - No armour, minimal structure. The ship is mere collection of components structurally anchored to a torch drive. It relies completely on shields for protection and has no internal atmosphere or accessways apart from the command section. No maintenance possible on the ship unless in dry dock.*
The Swarm - No armour, no structure. The ship is a collection of components tethered to the main drive via high strength cables (or forcefields if the tech is permitted), positioned by individual minidrives and contained inside a large shield bubble. Components can be moved and aimed in all directions with ease, even exchanged between ships mid battle. Everything is maintained separately in dry dock. Command component has a personal shield and armour.

The Mobile Gun - A very large scale gun and the requisite mini-engine to move it at fleet speed. Shields and armour optional.

Obviously these are all highly short on protection and in a firefight, they wouldn't stand up to any IoM ship of equivalent class but they will be far lighter and more maneuverable. Aka. glass cannons.

Besides, the Culture plans on throwing them at the enemy like confetti, quantity is a quality all of its own. One doesn't need to be efficient when you are as deeply post-singularity as they are and the enemy isn't.

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Non-combatants / Special:

Factory Ship
10 million cubic kilometers volume (1000x100x100); mobile dry dock, materials reprocessor, gridfire-based manufacturing

Fleet Transport Carrier
1 million cubic kilometers volume (100x100x100); large empty volumes for docking capital ships for interstellar transport

Fleet Tactical Carrier
1 hundred thousand cubic kilometers volume (10x100x100); heavy docking clamps for withstanding high accelerations, used to catapult lower tech ships into battle by accelerating them to a high speed they normally could not efficiently achieve
Travels with flat face forward for larger launch area.

Mobile Missile Factory/Base
A high-tech ship that assimilates asteroids at the edge of the system and converts them into clusters of ultra-long range low-tech missiles for attack craft use or for direct launch at the enemy.

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Eldar Response to Reload Technology (Week 25)

Culture Citizen (CC): "Thanks for coming to meet me, I understand you are very popular. " *laughs*
Eldar Wanderer (EW): "Yes, thank you. What was it you wanted to discuss?"
CC: "I believe you have explained quite a bit about these Warp objects you call soulstones that store your memories and personality when Eldar die. Is this some form of mind-uploading you do? What is it like to be inside a soulstone?"
EW: "An Eldar's soul is preserved in his soulstone upon death. It is said to be a dream-like state, although I don't have any personal experience, and is not at all like your virtual realities... that I believe are experienced similarly to fully uploaded intelligences?"
Culture Drone (CD): *bobs* "They are. "
EW: "Then no, the soulstones do not... are not people in the same way that living Eldar are. Yes, they contain our soul but like I said, it is a dream-like existence, not being fully alive."
CC: "I have heard many of your talks and interviews and you mention 'soul' alot. Do you mind explaining what a soul is?"
EW: "A soul is a thing that separates what is alive from what is not. You and I have a soul, it *points at the drone* does not. Your virtual reality intelligences do not, and this includes your Minds. "
CC: "But he *points at the drone* is intelligent and sentient. How can he not have a soul?"
EW: *shrugs* "A soul is not required for intelligence. A machine can be intelligent if complex and powerful enough, but it will never be alive and will never have soul."
CD: "It must seem very disturbing to you that the 'living' are governed by the non-living?"
EW: "Not at all actually. No race can be expected to be the same after all. If you choose to live this way, I will not fault you."
CC: "Very interesting. What happens to the souls of those who die without a soulstone?"
EW: "The dead Eldar are consumed by The Enemy. You know her as She Who Thirsts. They are tortured for eternity by those who reside in the Immaterium. Only soulstones prevent this fate."
CC: "What about when I die?"
EW: "The same happens to humans. They go into the Immaterium where they are consumed by Chaos. Only they do not remember their identities. Humans do not have the will to stay coherent when they depart from this world."
*a pause*
CD: "Pardon if this seems rude, but how do you know this?"
EW: "Evidence? A psychic can, with great effort and danger, recall the soul of those who have passed on from the immaterium. It is possible to converse with them, although this attracts unwanted attention."
CD: "You can speak with the dead then?"
EW: "Yes."
CC: "What happens if we Reload though? Do our souls return to our bodies?"
EW: "I am unfamiliar with that process. Explain?"
CD: *gives explanation*
EW: "If I am right in that your process does not involve any psychic will, then I can only say that when you are Reloaded, a new soul is created around the body. The old souls are most likely still being tortured in the Immaterium."
GSV Reporting for Duty: "This is very worrying. Do souls being tortured help Chaos in any way?"
EW: "Each soul gives a small amount of power to those who can and is willing to use it. It is small, but there many souls who die every day."
GSV: "Thank you, that's all from me."
CC: "Would it be possible to combine a Reload-like process with your soulstone in some way so as to preserve both the body and the soul?"
EW: "I do not know. I was not trained in psychic abilities. I imagine it will not be an easy task. If you do know of a way, we Eldar would be very interested."
CC: *bows* "Thank you for your time, it has been very informative."
EW: *nods*

Memo RE exponential expansion - Consensus policy notice board, General Section (Week 23)
A recent vote has agreed that we will cease our exponential expansion across the galaxy. New ship construction will be limited to GSVs near the frontier and expansion will be aimed to have survey coverage of this galaxy by the end of next year.

Continuous exponential expansion is not a measure we should take. For one thing, this galaxy is crowded and there is little empty space for Orbital construction that will inevitably be in demand once we are more secure. There is also the growing concern at our rapid pace of interference and expansion is bordering on HS-like behaviour.

For these reasons, the issue titled Exponential Expansion was put to a vote and a limitation was passed with 70% majority.

Eldar Outcasts - Open Door policy? (week 29)
A number of Eldar criminals have been mentioned to undergo some form of mental surgery that
disables their psychic power. We have put in a request to study these Outcast Eldar in some way, perhaps even take them on as citizens in a limited fashion.

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**A certain discussion in Alaitoc**

Eldar 1: "Those barbarians again. I wonder when the Culture will stop meddling in our business?"

Eldar 2: "At least they're respectful. They even said something about giving Outcasts citizenship."

Eldar 1: "They ought to."

Eldar 2: "So, should we block it? I think they might go along if we don't."

Eldar 1: "It's not our decision to make though. We're already too far ahead with the whole artifact-hunting, the other Craftworlds might not support further interference in Zahr-Tann's affairs."

Eldar 2: "They'll think we're bullying them."

Eldar 1: "Only for their own good. But the fact is that we can't fight them on every issue. I think this is a relatively harmless one that, when it backfires, will demonstrate our point about sleeping with meddling aliens quite well."

Eldar 2: *

"Understood."

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**Week 2**

**GCU Experimental Psychology - Notable ship for its deviancy from normal Culture social structure**

We have come across an Imperium passenger vessel enroute to a shrine world. At the time we arrived at the uninhabited system of transit, the ship was under attack by those known as the Other Eldar. A survey of crew with lower than 40% Network Integration Index indicated favourability towards intervention.

The Other Eldar were discouraged from their attack by warning shots and the majority of the IoM crew and passengers were rescued. Unfortunately, the Other Eldar targeted their engines and warp drives first to prevent escape and the ship is doomed to drift in this system. Its escorting vessels had been completed destroyed by this time.

Rather than leave them to die, or provide help from an alien source and likewise doom them to the Inquisition, we opted to repair life support on their vessel and attempt to assimilate the citizens into the Network as even though the wider Culture looks unfavourably on immigration, Experimental Psychology is willing to take on responsibility.

After their life support was stabilized, a ship-wide Network was constructed on their ship. This necessitated disarming all weapon-like objects from the crew as well as taking over of all the ships' systems. This Network was separate from ours on Experimental Psychology and contains a core of six drone volunteers and one Low Integration (sub-20%) agent who is registered as Contact.

Following this, the situation regarding their ship and the Inquisition was explained to them, as well as our decision that we could not morally allow them to return to the IoM to be executed. All IoM crew on the ship were offered to join this GCU as crew, with the condition that they accept a Network Implant. After some explanation, the one surviving techpriest asked for us to adjust his already present neural implants to interface with the Network.

This request was carried out and the techpriest eventually stabilized at 30% Network Integration. The techpriest's assurance of safety, and the rather convenient placements of living areas had necessitated the isolation of the local priest from all but one group, was instrumental in completing Low Integration of the vast majority of the passengers and crew of the passenger vessel.

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**Week 3**
The subsidiary Network on-board the IoM vessel was then examined for anomalies, which were not present. Warp sensitivity ratings were taken for all the passengers and all except the priest were confirmed to be within Culture baseline. Permission was then granted to unlock higher levels of Integration, to which almost half the Network agreed to.

As with our own ship, all portions of the Network above 50% integration are referred to as a single entity. Apart from the remaining few crew and the priest, we hope this demonstrates the innate flexibility of human psychology that may convince others in the Culture of the feasibility of assimilation.
**Rogue Trader**

**Week 1**
After the fiasco last week, the Rogue Trader was understandably angry. Although after we explained the situation regarding the warp effect surrounding the woman, he identified the woman as a Slaaneshi. Illogically, relations are still rather cool.

The Rogue Trader has been forced to halt his trading mission as there are allegations that he assassinated the governor during his visit. Nevertheless, he has already received payment for more than three quarters of the food we provided and is already recruiting heavily from the planetary population.

What is more interesting however is his new gambit. He has requested that we provide him with construction plans for servitor cloning vats for him to cut down on crew requirements. We are currently considering this move.

Meanwhile, after his recruitment drive was over, the Rogue Trader has set off to return to the mining bases. During his absence, the mining complexes have increased in size as they built further extensions using the minerals they mined. Courtesy of the nanobots and good working practice. Already, accident rates are down by nearly 60% and death rates have plummeted to below statistical measurement (but is probably somewhere between 1 per two weeks to 1 per month).

**Week 2**
We have decided to design for him a set of incubation plants.

The moral objection to allowing the Rogue Trader to grow full fledged humans simply to decerebrate them is obvious, we have shared this objection with him. After some discussion, we have agreed to try to alter the process to grow servitors in a fashion that never achieves sentience, thus avoiding the moral objection.

Additionally, our incubation process will include a number of crucial corrections to IoM cloning technology. These servitors will not be true clones, but it will be close to it.

These changes, and the requirement that the plant be ship-mountable, means that the technology is not recognizably IoM-based anymore. The Rogue Trader has submitted a list of changes that would make it more acceptable and we are working on finalizing the design. Much of the needed modifications are cultural objections that would not make the device perform better. Rather, quite a number of them make the device perform worse. The Gothic aesthetic has intrigued a number of our citizens and we have various designs for IoM-imitation ships floating around the 'net.

Using the mineral production of his two mining platforms, as well as some of his profits, the Rogue Trader has begun to build a plasma refinery around the star he is based in. He will be going around the nearby systems in search of more crew.

**Week 3**
We have a design for his servitor vats, it is a specialized ship hull closely based off the Lunar (which we find is a very flexible design to work with) and we project that with servitor aides, the Rogue Trader should be able to stretch his workforce by nearly ten times.

The Rogue Trader has been informed of the progress on the plasma refinery ship (something called a
Goliath Factory ship), which has been limited mainly by the mining rate. We think it will take another two weeks before his mining platforms can strip the three target asteroids of metals in order to build the ship. Unless, of course, the Rogue Trader can secure more metals to build it.

Since we plan to stabilize the IoM through introduction of independence supporting technologies, we are now considering granting him designs for various logistical support capabilities in space.

The decision has been made. We will design for him a full mobile habitat ship capable of hosting a biosphere that will double as a food producing/organic recycling plant. Additionally, we will provide designs for a plasma refinery that will convert solar energy and light elements into the plasma fuel that the IoM uses.

A mobile spaceyard/spaceport/city combination ship is also designed, but is anticipated to be rather massive.

Since these designs do not use anything other than standard IoM technology (apart from their hyperspace drives) and are completely unarmed, we will attempt to accelerate their deployment by offering to construct them for the Rogue Trader. Similarly, as they do not contain any Culture technology, we feel free to provide these ship designs (minus hyperspace drive) to other interested parties throughout the IoM.

The current half-built Goliath Factory ship can be recycled for materials to build other ships he wishes. Perhaps military ones.
Dark Eldar, Necrons

Dark Eldar
Week 1
Another meeting with a different Other Eldar group, who have specified a different webway gate by which we should meet them by (out of a few mentioned, this one is most accesible). Given the relative ease that even groups limited in power are able to access webway gates, we surmise that these Other Eldar have control over most of the webway.

More promissingly, we have completed a round of close combat weapons provisions that is certain to improve our primary contact group’s combat power. This was provided after he assisted us in two more investigations into the webway. It appears that we may need a specific biological pattern as well as a warp pattern in order to operate a webway gate, and thus only Eldar may do so.

Creating a biologically Eldar citizen for this purpose is expected to have major problems, but nevertheless, we have now requested that he provide an Eldar for us to scan. Tests on other species indicates that molecular copies tends to produce a warp signature typical of that species, we anticipate this should work. We requested that someone who is willing to undergo a mental change in some fashion will be a perfect example as it will speed up our investigations into Eldar mental processes.

Week 2
Contrary to our expectation, the Other Eldar did not provide a crew member for us to scan but instead re-appeared with a live Eldar prisoner. We detected evidence of torture on him and successfully negotiated his release from the Other Eldar in exchange for the schematics of the CREW weapons we provided.

This Eldar appears to be mentally unstable from his experiences and incoherent. We have scanned him at the molecular level and will place him in a VR environment to attempt psychological treatment. Scanning of mental processes, while invasive, will vastly increase our chance of successful psychological treatment. As well as possibly yield useful data for Reloading a citizen into an Eldar body; we can't deliberately create copies of him without running into moral objections.

It has become clear, from contact with other groups, that the practice of these Other Eldar of capturing their enemies live for purposes of torturing them is endemic to their society instead of being an isolated sub-culture. We are considering potential measures for reform, although these would be highly intrusive.
To date, we have contact with four different groups, with another two who will be contacting us soon.

Week 3
A meeting with a small Other Eldar group (the fourth group to contact us) has been disrupted. The system contained a small alien race of an unusually pacificistic crustaceans. (unusual for this galaxy)

The Other Eldar arrived through the webway gate at the agreed time and began negotiations for weapons. Shortly afterwards, another group of Other Eldar emerged through the webway gate right behind them. Evidently, they were from a different faction and were distinctly unwelcome as we detected hostile messages being exchanged as soon as transits began.

We were uncertain of provoking either faction and stood by in the initial stages of the battle. 'Our' group appeared to be weaker in absolute numbers compared to the attacking group and used the gate
to gain a tactical advantage. By destroying the initial escorts that exited the gate, they surrounded the webway gate on all sides and destroyed all ships that transited it.

After a particularly short time, no more transits were detected through the gate and the Other Eldar decided to try sending a scout through it to determine if the other group had given up. At this point, they found out that the gate had been damaged by the combat and is now inoperational.

We expect that this is going to pose a problem.

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The Sorceror consulted his runes. Yup, just as planned. It helped that both races were future-blind, that was always his favourite prey. Bribing one group to attack another was ridiculously easy.

If everything continued to go according to plan, then the Culture would soon decide to interfere with Dark Eldar matters, and soon after, be able to find a way into the Dark Eldar held webway. And THAT was when his real plan began.

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**Necrons**

**Week 1**

The Necrons are very interested in our recent advances in femto-engineering and I am negotiating a mutual transfer of technology in that area. The Necrons seem to have lost a large portion of their production base in the hibernation and our understanding of femto-engineering is not the same as theirs given our differing technological backgrounds. I believe a deal may be possible if we agree to provide raw materials for rebuilding to sweeten the technology exchange deal.

The Necrons in particular are interested in the nuclear properties of femto-matter, specifically our fission-catalyst and ultra-heavy armour. We are interested in the basic properties of femto-materials and other complex engineering principles.

**Week 2**

It is lucky for us that this Necron dynasty is willing to engage in productive exchange of knowledge. We have a preliminary agreement to a technology exchange on the topic of femto-materials although details still have to be worked out.

While it is certain that the principles of stabilized neutronium and gravity manipulation will result in major military superiority on their part, I am of the opinion that the advantage of a better understanding of their sub-atomic engineering will benefit us more in the long run. Knowledge is the best kind of power after all.

**Week 3**

I have created a drone to serve as an independent point of contact to facilitate the exchange of technology. I believe that a Mind's perspective is detrimental to our negotiations and a Contact drone would serve much better in that role. After this mission, I intend to request that the drone transfer to another ship of its choosing.

Continuing to track the fleet that left the first Tomb World with a scout drone has revealed that they are meeting another fleet of Necrons from a different dynasty. The Necrons are unaware of the tracking drone and I have launched a second drone to take over its duties. The current drone will now track the new Necron fleet.

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Alaitoc
Farseer: "Its too late. We did not forsee it in time."
Exarch: "How so? Something that so concerns us as the Necrons gaining so much strength from the
Culture could not have passed unnoticed."
Farseer 2: "It has taken us too long to force our way through the skein, so polluted as it is. We cannot
see as far, nor as clearly, as we ought to."
Exarch: "Are we doomed to fail then?"
Farseer: "Perhaps not. I cannot say. The threat of the Culture grows daily, like the Black Council
said, we cannot go untouched, even out here."
Farseer 2: "You cannot be thinking of co-"
Farseer: "I don't see what other choice we have. But I know, it cannot work, not as Alaitoc is today."
Farseer 2: *casts a rune* "Yes, I see that. So you will not try then? The council will at least listen to
you."
Farseer: "They will not change their course though, and even I am unsure if changing our stance so
radically can be good for us. The ancient Eldar ways are strong, and we have to be strong enough to
use them."
Exarch: "You sound like you are convincing yourself."
Farseer: "Yes. I understand that. I just wonder if we made the right choice at all."
Exarch: "Time will tell."
Farseer 2: "Have faith, we are strong. Our ancient enemy will ever be our prey."

White Devil
I have further discovered that some factions of the Necrons seem to regret their transfer of
consciousness from flesh to machine. Biological engineering, together with the intelligence
engineering technology we have already given them, is likely to be just as attractive or more than our
insights into femto-materials. Especially since functional immortality was a primary driver of their
behaviour.
Week 31
Some additional analysis of IoM warp drives using automated test-jump ships indicates that gravitational wells have the ability to restrict warp jumps into or out of the warp. The range of the effect increases linearly with the mass of the object and seems to be related to the proximity of large gravitational wells.

Using this principle, we have created a warp jammer device. A massive Pancaker-like device is used to deploy a solar-mass equivalent in gravitational fields. The zone of high gravity merely about a million kilometers across will project a large area nearly an astronomical unit in size around it that no warp drive can operate safely; even Chaos warp drives that do not require a stable gellar field will fail within the area.

We have determined that warp drives themselves have the ability to detect if they are within the zone of effect that prevents their operation. Ambushing Chaos ships into a mis-jump appears to not be an option.

Due to the high stresses the device experiences (range and power requirements places the device inside its own gravity well), the device has to be reinforced with femto-materials in the hull as well as military-grade forcefields. All-in-all, a warp jammer ship is the size of a GCU with none of its capabilities apart from the ability to project a defensive screen of Effector jamming (to counter scrapcode).

The huge gravity well renders our warp jammer unable to move much beyond a few times the speed of light when the jamming is active. We do not anticipate much of a problem in this. Obviously, entering the radius of high gravity is hazardous for other ships and this leaves our warp jammer vulnerable to equiv-tech opponents, although it will be adequately able to avoid action since it has local FTL.

Week 32
With still-incoming data from the Necrons, we have made a major breakthrough into femto-electronics. Most conventional devices, including short-ranged, line-of-sight effectors, can now be constructed many hundreds of times smaller than usual.

In exchange, we have provided our production methods for femto-materials as well as demonstration pieces. Femto-electronics and other femto-material based miniaturization technologies are also being transferred.

We are assembling the first Anti-Chaos response fleet. The core Factory ship has been completed and the first mercenaries (mainly Kroot, Vespid and Eldar) have agreed to take on command roles.

We have enough mercenaries to command a 40 ship fleet and we are already beginning fleet maneuvers and training exercises.

Week 33
New data from the Necrons indicates that there are possible patterns of femto-materials that also leave a warp-imprint. Further details of this awaits our translation of femto-materials into gravitational manipulation for the Necrons to exchange their limited warp understanding.

A fully femto-tech drone has been made for the first time. While more limited in its effector range than most drones, this new fully capable SC drone is just as powerful as any normal drone while being the size of a tiny insect. It is not visible to the human eye except under ideal conditions.
A full scaling up of drone equipment for SC use is underway. The new SC drone femto-material chassis will be identical in its size as standard SC drones but is considerably more capable. Effector strength is sufficient to lift mountains, project IoM starship grade lasers and has subatomic resolution. Range is the same as current, although it is more limited in its ability to penetrate materials with its effector (metallic objects limit its range greatly). New mirror field ranges are approximately 400 meters. The shell of the drone is essentially impenetrable to classical forces, being of sufficient thickness to resist even a point-blank nuclear weapon blast.

While realspace components are all femto-materials, hyperspace components are using classical engineering. There is only a modest gain in processing power (~5%) but insufficient to change its rating on the sentience scale beyond 1:1. The real weight of the drone is roughly 100 tons (although this is decreasing slowly) but there should be no problems as it is mainly supported by the improved effector strength.

Gravitational manipulation is also available now with femto-tech devices.

As femto-tech devices are exceedingly hard to replicate, we are of the opinion that using them in sensitive missions (higher risk of loss to Chaos) is acceptable.

A major advance in warp understanding has also been made after retrieval, categorization and analysis of 40% of The Eldar List. We have enough samples that new understanding from a new sample provokes additional minor advances from the others upon re-analysis. We are experimenting with combinations of warp effects, hopefully one that suppresses other warp effects can be found. Furthermore, this is indicated some theoretical methods by which the Necrons might have created a warp projector using only femto-materials.
Week 1
Altered Marain words have been detected in the Orks' language. We attribute this to the SC agent's use of them in commands.

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The IoM fleet has arrived. A substantial force (for the IoM) consisting of one battlecruiser, four cruisers, twenty six escorts and three carriers. Fleet support ships include a tug/engineering ship, a fuel tanker and three troop transports.

Ork ships resist categorization due to mixing of roles and constant alteration. Nevertheless, size categories still work and they have six cruisers, four boarding carriers/cruisers and twenty one escorts.

The IoM fleet arrived far away from the Ork held world, a deep space battle appears to be likely if standard engagement practices hold. An IoM assessment is likely to indicate that the IoM has a slight advantage in this battle; indeed, they appear to be maneuvering for a conventional engagement.

The IoM fleet assumed a wall formation and set a vector to approach the Ork-held planet. This prompted the Orks currently at the beginning stages of a fleet training exercise to maneuver to close with the IoM fleet.

Ork ships were split into two groups of roughly equal size due to the exercise.

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IoM Overlord Class Battlecruiser
The fleet commander was in a foul mood and if even the captain of this ship did not dare approach him, a lowly CIC officer like Jayce would stand no chance at all.

Tactical requested an update on the Ork ships and Jayce sent the best IDs he had. Ork ships all looked nearly the same, that being a floating pile of space junk. Tentatively, he had managed to pick out all manners of weapon and reactor signatures, trying to guess which ship had torpedoes by matching energy weapon mounts to reactor sources.

What the insane ship designer had thought when he decided to put ten fighter-class laser cannons around the lumbering Ork cruiser #3 was far beyond what Jayce could even guess. That much was expected of the Orks.

What was not expected was the way their ships held formation. Jayce had lived through one Ork battle already and the greenskins' were impatient and reckless, charging into battle without any semblance of strategy.

These Orks... weren't. Their ships moved in a rough pack, not as well ordered as the Emperor's fleet was of course, but organized.

"Tactical," he said, getting the officer's attention, "I'm not quite sure what I'm seeing here. These Orks aren't normal."

"Explain."

"They're... I dunno how to say it. They're acting weird," Jayce couldn't quite described it but a better
"word suggested itself, "un-orky."

"It's their formation? Yeah, I thought so. I'll pass on your thoughts."

Jayce winced as his superior sent up the warning, leaving the channel open was probably for his benefit. If the commander didn't like it, Jayce would be catching the flak for the poorly thought out warning.

The IoM fleet was arrayed in a defensive wall formation. Carriers in the center, surrounded by the flagship and cruisers, with escorts at the edges. The IoM wall was facing the Ork formation face on (approaching the planet side on) to receive any charging ships down the center where they would be ripped to pieces by massed firepower.

Instead of receiving the charge of ork ships arriving piecemeal, the IoM fleet was slowly approaching the planet with the closest Ork formation hanging outside fighter range to the side. The other Ork formation was chasing the IoM fleet from behind. If the two fleets managed to merge, that would bring the Orks to near parity with the IoM fleet and heavy losses would be certain.

Jayce nodded with grim satisfaction as orders began to go around, Comms just across the corridor was going crazy as they relayed their messages in frantic hurry, struggling to keep the fleet in formation.

The IoM fleet in his plot adjusted into attack mode over the course of the next thirty minutes. A shallow cone pointing away from the Ork formation with the flagship in the center and carriers out the back. A short engine burn later, ship facings were adjusted to point broadsides towards the center of the cone.

They would now coast towards the near Ork formation and reach there nearly an hour before the second Ork formation could reach them. With 2:1 forces, the IoM fleet would achieve an easy victory defeating the Orks in detail. It was their move now.

Jayce breathed a sigh of relief. He had heard stories of incompetent flag officers that got their entire fleet destroyed. But it seemed this guy at least knew what he was doing.

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The SC agent looked at the clanking hissing Big Mek in front of him. The Ork flagship was just like any other cruiser sized vessel at his own insistence, but he had had to let them at least paint it red.

"It will work? Even first time use?"

"Yes!" the more iron than green ork grunted, "course."

The agent eyed him, the ork returned his stare with its own, then clapped him on the back, "Good man! Get on with it!" Trying to talk like an Ork had just gotten him strange looks.

As the Ork ran off to the new object of interest, the SC agent frowned and wondered if it would really work. But he was gambling here in any case.

The IoM fleet got within torpedo range and a huge salvo of mini-engines lit up the screen. The Ork fleet's response was pitiful compared to that, since not even he could force the Orks to mount many torpedos.

The Orks on the bridge shouted something incomprehensible and the glare of detonating warheads began to herald the opening phases of the battle.
"Torpedoes incoming!" Jayce shouted up to Tactical, "four inbound to us!"

"On it," was the only reply. Point defence intercepted three and the last one thinned the void shield a little.

Jayce rocked in his seat with the impact but it was just a small bump. He peered at the displays and flagged signatures that the sensor crews brought up for his attention.

"By the Emperor!" he said, optimism rising like a expanding bubble, "50% hit rate! We're seeing reactor failures and engine flares all across the board! One frigate completely destroyed!"

He continued rattling off the explosion count, there seemed to be a new one every few seconds as the ramshackle Ork fleet began to disintegrate under the bombardment. A few seconds later, the Admiral came on the fleet-wide voice net, "Well done, sailors of the Holy Empire, you have fought well this day. All ships, close with the enemy and may the Emperor guide your hand."

The IoM fleet dashed forward to take advantage of the Ork fleet's disarray. Jayce nodded with thanks at the Techpriest who was attempting to appease the machine spirit's anger that was causing some interference in the displays.

Come to think of it, the interference wasn't there just now. While it wasn't unheard of for equipment to fail mid-battle, it was distinctly unlikely. He might as well follow it up. Some changed settings and a shorter distance later, he managed to get a few clear visuals on the lead Ork cruiser. Flagging a strange domed weapon turret for attention, he frowned at the reactor flare signature. The EM sensor did have the pattern of an unstable plasma core but the ship was barely even damaged from what he saw.

Jayce turned on another ship, gathering piecemeal reports from the sensors, trying to make sense of the blur. That and the strange ship appearance nagged at something in his fleet training.

Jamming? But Orks... Could the Orks even use jamming? No one had ever seen them do that. Jayce thumbed the countermeasure button, why not give it a try? It wasn't as if the ECCM giving away their position could matter less.

The blur disappeared as the active Lidar array bounced phased light off the Ork ships. That was even stranger. The visual seemed to indicate only a few impacts across the group of three cruisers but hardly enough to cause reactor and engine flares that he was seeing in the passive radar.

Then the front most IoM ship, Sword class frigate, the Reverent, blew up out of nowhere. Jayce glanced at the sensor flags. Macrocannon, as expected from Orks, but in one massive salvo. But how? The four Ork frigates near it were supposed to be having engine and power failures!

Another frigate on the other side of the IoM fleet (in knife-fighting range of the nearest Ork frigate) suddenly swerved out of formation, ignoring orders. No messages were coming from it either, not even IFF codes.

What in the Emperor's name was that? Some kind of energy beam by his sensors, but not nearly powerful enough to damage even a fighter's shields. So what was going on?!! All he knew it was some kind of new Ork weapon, a short-ranged one that targeted some unknown weakness.

Short-range devastating new weapon, electronic warfare, decoy flares. A split fleet in a pincer-like geometry. A cold stone materialized in his stomach in tandem with the situation materializing in his
head with crystal clarity. Jayce grabbed the comms to Tactical and practically shouted into it.

"IT'S A TRAP!"

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The SC agent snorted as the IoM went for his throat, barrelling down on the 'crippled' Ork ships as the Orks held their fire. Six fleet maneuvers and they could already resist the temptation to shoot! Albeit at gunpoint from his Enforcers.

"Stop the electronic flares! Full power to weapons! All ships, break formation and engage at will!" he shouted to the bridge and the Orks cheered.

The fully operational and practically undamaged Ork fleet broke formation and spiralled away to engage every target in range, the electronic flares that were powered by the might of a plasma reactor no longer sucking their copious energy to mimic random plasma leaks.

"You there, with the communicator!" he pointed at the Ork boy, "tell the other fleet this. 'You get your ass here now or there won't be any left for you!' "

The Ork grinned and sent it on. Moments later, the lagging Ork fleet boosted up from half engine power and began to close rapidly. Well, that was it then. Time for the fun!

He waved to the waiting Boyz. His Boyz. Well, it wouldn't hurt to try that Ork speak thing again. "To the teleporta!" he shouted, waving his sword. The Orks cheered again and stomped their way there.

The Big Mek tapped him on the shoulder just before he left the bridge, with a rueful look.

"'s tellyporta, 'boss. "

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The Culture

Ork ship loss is approximately 60%, but two cruisers and one frigate was outright captured with the battlecruiser, a carrier and another six more frigates seized with medium to heavy damage. Of the IoM fleet, only two carriers, three frigates and one cruiser escaped.

We think that the electronic intrusion devices synergizes well with the Ork tendency for boarding actions. Used in close range with conventional weaponry, it is devastatingly effective. Orkish electronic warfare devices also performed beyond expectations, revealing a new capability we were unaware of.

Despite these advantages, heavy Ork ship losses were mainly due to the close numerical parity and the fact that the Ork forces were not disciplined enough to fully leverage their advantage. Given the rapid progress of fleet drills and maneuvers, we expect this problem to be mitigated, although not completely resolved.

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Week 2

The Orks have bounced back from their heavy losses surprisingly quickly. The looted IoM ships are forming the core of a new fleet and the warboss is reorganizing the fleet around the better armoured and better weapon-ed ships of the IoM.
Albeit after some rebuilding, the re-designed IoM ships look and operate nothing like IoM ships, but the base quality is certainly better than the Orkish ones.

The warboss has announced that the Ork Waagh will now be targeting Chaos as a whole and thus he will be slowly making his way towards the Eye. He has told us that anything presenting resistance to the Waagh will be crushed.

While it is certain that we can stop it if we wish to, he is clearly referring to the IoM. As the Waagh is aimed at Chaos, this GCU plans to follow them as far as it is safe to do so; perhaps we may be able to mitigate their destructive tendencies on the IoM.

**Week 3**

The still rebuilding fleet of Orks have sent out a series of ships to nearby Ork worlds to request for aid in the Waagh against Chaos. The plan is to form two fleets, one for training new arrivals in wargames, the other to actually do battle. Given that the warboss is measuring communications lags in detail, it seems that he plans to actually leave a trail of fleets and Ork worlds behind his advance.

Word of the IoM defeat has got out and a larger fleet is being assembled by the Ordo Xenos in order to attack the Orks again. We have attempted to use our inquisition contacts to inform them that the Ork Waagh in this system is aimed at Chaos but they appear either unwilling or powerless to stop this response.

Perhaps the Orks will get more 'practice'. While we are willing to shield IoM populations, their military forces will keep trying.
Week 1

The new GCU Inquisitive Personality is heading to a known IoM Inquisition base in the local area, Thalassa Prime. From the IoM records, this base is an Inquisition base that deals with non-human races, we hope it will have some information on other technologies.

Technology transfer is still ongoing with the Tau. We have decided to share additional details on the basic warp technology we are learning from The Eldar List and our dissection of IoM technology. The Tau appear to be far less susceptible to Chaos contaminations than we are, thus they will be able to use the technology with less risk than us.

The Tau retaliation fleet has sent a message to the IoM indicating that they will not tolerate aggression on the farsight colonies. The main Tau empire has also asked us to relay a message to Commander O'Shovah indicating that they will also back him against any major IoM attack.

What is interesting is the IoM response. Many of the neighbouring systems the retaliation fleet struck and left its message have displayed confusion. Our recon drone has lifted records and information from surviving IoM databases and we still have not found any trace of the attacking fleet. O'Shovah's records of the battle indicated a substantial fleet that should have left a trail of resupply and other fleet support activities as it approached Tau space.

None of that has been found.

Nevertheless, despite our presented evidence, O'Shovah remains convinced that the IoM is responsible and is preparing to defend himself from their retaliation. ROU Gunboat Diplomacy has noted that news of the Tau retaliation has reached Ultramar and the IoM is massing for an attack. We have decided to try interceding on behalf of the Tau but the IoM cannot be persuaded.

In other news, our arrangements for Tau colony transport has been finalized. We have agreed to the following points:

1. For every colony in Culture chosen space, at least two colonies in safe space towards galactic west will be chosen by the Tau. The Tau will choose at least six systems to occupy regardless of how many systems we choose.

2. The Culture will perform necessary recon and assure the Tau that any colonies settled from this arrangement do not have any surprises (eg. Necron Tomb Worlds)

3. The Culture will provide bulk transport services for all materials, including military equipment, for the Tau to these colonies until they have at least 1 billion population each and independent military shipbuilding capability. The Culture agrees to carry messages and limited transport (10 thousand tons
per month) between the Tau Empire and these colonies without limit until the Tau master hyperspace
technology.

4. The Culture agrees to defend these colonies against all aggression to the best of its capability for
the next thirty years or until the colonies have achieved military independence, whichever is longer.
Chaos attacks are an exception and the Culture is permitted to allow the Tau to deal with them if it
cannot handle the attack. The Culture remains responsible for aiding the Tau in maintaining sufficient
military protection (in terms of transport and logistics) for just such an eventuality and is required to
provide what aid it can in the colony’s defence.
4b. The Culture is expected to provide diplomatic channels for the Tau to neighbouring systems
(including transport of important personages) for the purpose of defending these systems. The
Culture is also expected to engage in proactive diplomacy to prevent these systems from coming
under attack in the first place; the Tau also do not wish to see other races attack them, even if they are
well-protected.

5. The Culture will provide, wherever the Tau request, up to 50 sextillion tons (~5 x 10^22 tons) of
raw material or manufactured equipment of Tau design to given specifications; spaced out over the
next fifty years. This clause will give the Culture approximately half a year before the first delivery
will be requested to allow the Culture to build up the required production power.
5a. An appropriate exchange rate for raw usable energy will be worked out in a separate negotiation.

Week 2
It appears that the Tau are not as severe as some of our citizens criticize them for. A particularly
creative multi-step practical joke involving a Tau Water caste envoy, our Contact diplomat and the
citizen in charge of this GSV's Culture News Network articles contrived to vastly overexaggerate the
industrial aid we have agreed to provide to the Tau.

The correct version of point 5 is as follows:

5. The Culture will provide, wherever the Tau request, up to 10 tons per Tau citizen of raw material
or manufactured equipment of Tau design to given specifications; spaced out over the next year. This
clause will give the Culture six weeks before the first delivery will be requested to allow the Culture
to build up the required production power.
5a. Tau allies (eg. Kroot, Vespids and Nicassar) will count for 70% of a citizen, assimilated races
(eg. IoM humans) will count for 50% of a citizen and mercenaries are not counted.
5b. An appropriate exchange rate for raw usable energy will be worked out in a separate negotiation.

We have neglected to inform the Tau that we were able to make good on the fake promise provided
a significant fraction of it occurred in Culture space or if the delay was longer.

The Farsight retaliation fleet has returned to Tau space. We anticipate further IoM buildup and
retaliation.
Investigations into IoM astropathic records has indicated that there were no major sets of orders that
would have been required to move a fleet like that. We are seriously considering the possibility of a
false flag attack. Our investigations have been shared with both the IoM and the Tau in hopes of
preventing IoM retaliation.

We have detected the first Tau warship being refitted with new weapons principles. Doubtless many
other ships throughout the Tau empire are already adopting these weapons. If the IoM response takes
some time, they will find the Tau ready to repel any attack.

***PRIORITY FLAG***
GCU Inquisitive Personality has found Thalassa Prime and has begun preliminary scans on it. While
we do not have complete information on it, Thalassa Prime and its neighbouring minor Mechanicus
Base holds a vast amount of information on alien races as well as their technology. Samples of everything from Necron to Eldar technologies, many of which are warp based, are on the planet.

GSV Crossing the Bridge has completed another GCU, the Wayfarer, and its launch date has been brought forward one week. It will travel to Thalassa Prime immediately to aid the Inquisitive Personality in its scans despite not having any crew. We will also load it with three drones (and more sent independently later) for probing nearby systems and ensuring Thalassa Prime remains secure. Chaos cannot be allowed to obtain this potential archeological, scientific and cultural treasure house.

The two GCUs have been cleared for military engagement and should begin equipping themselves with light armament.

Week 3
It appears that throughout the negotiations for the stopgap colonies, we have forgotten to give the Tau some requisite information. In the spirit of good faith, we have provided a map of systems in this galaxy known to us as well as general notes on distribution of populations of any occupants. The Tau were noted to be rather surprised at the size of the IoM's territory.

As our first Interstellar Bulk Freighter is already under construction, negotiations for the first set of three Tau colonies of our choosing and the six of their choosing has begun. The Tau have indicated that the majority of our industrial assistance will take the form of capital industry. Asteroid mining platforms, space and land based manufactories, hydroponics and aeroponics installations.

More refitting of Tau military ships is underway. Tau organization is impeccable and some unique organizing and scheduling principles for physical assembly has been examined by social organization enthusiasts. (of course, the principles are obsolete for our own construction but hold some cultural interest) We have revised downwards our estimate for a full refit from one year to six months, taking into account the industrial assistance we will be providing.

Further analysis of Thalassa Prime's collection of alien curiosities indicates that our find is even more valuable than we expected. A number of warp-active samples are on The Eldar List (~10% are new, bringing us to having samples of 70% of the List) as well as one Eldar artifact we were asked to retrieve. Other technological non-warp-active devices have been cloned, except for the Necron ones which we are still unable to duplicate. What simple warp-active objects that are easily clonable have been cloned.

IoM records on the artifacts themselves are extensive, and after a small outbreak of scrapcode in one of the older archives (which the IoM suppressed), we have a complete copy of their past experiments and observations, which is being closely analyzed. Future experiments will continue to be monitored, the site is interesting enough for Contact to maintain a GCU presence indefinitely.

The Eldar artifact poses a problem. The IoM are unlikely to give up the artifact easily and retrieval of it from the base will not go unnoticed. We are currently considering diplomatic options.

More interestingly, IoM records indicate that the Other Eldar and the Eldar were once the same race, who have diverged over a period known as the Time of Strife where the Eye of Terror was formed. Further details on this time period will be asked of the Eldar.

ROU Gunboat Diplomacy is continuing to negotiate for diverting the attack fleet, without much success. Demands that we destroy three Tau colonies is unacceptable. An alternative approach will be required.
Point 4, 30 years is what I presume to be one Tau generation. Otherwise, it should be 1 generation of Tau.
Point 5, 50 years is a stand-in for 1.6 Tau generations.

I noticed the problem with Point 5. I left it in for hilarity.

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Ringworld mass estimate from here. 0.2 Ringworlds was the agreement. Perhaps I ought to scale it down, I kind of... underestimated how heavy ringworlds were (Larry Niven's one is $10^27$ kg).

Spoiler
Hide

Does the IoM even HAVE that much stuff?

So I asked myself, can the Culture even get a production base in half a year capable of providing 1 sextillion tons of material per year?
- How much is this? 1 x $10^{21}$ tons of material per year is $1.15 \times 10^{20}$ tons per 6 weeks (it will become clear why I use this time interval later)
- Assuming each ship is 10% production power, and maximum production power is 90% by weight, then a 90% production power ship can duplicate itself in 1/9th the time
- Starting with 1 GSV-sized 90% production power factory ship, this will produce 27 copies of itself (9x3) per 6 weeks, doubling for gridfire production
- In half a year, that's 4 and 1/3 production cycles, which gives ~1.6 million factory ships. Assuming each factory ship weighs a hundred million tons, the fleet will build 4.3 quadrillion tons ($4.3 \times 10^{15}$) worth of material per 6 weeks. Which puts the Culture at 26 thousand times short.

So the answer is "no, they can't actually make good on the promise". The question then is, how long till they *can*. Some simple logarithms gives me ~3 cycles.
Which means the Culture can actually provide 1 sextillion tons per year worth of stuff given a lead time of about 44.5 weeks. Starting from 1 GSV-sized factory ship. (add 3 weeks if you start from just a GSV)

--------------------------------------------

So, the whole throwing around of 1 sextillion makes things feel a bit out of the world. How much is 1 sextillion tons of *stuff*? Well, for one thing, we know this is about 0.8% the weight of Neptune.
Anyway, given that 1 ship weighs 10 million tons, that's 100 quadrillion ships. Even if highly automated by drones, requiring as little as 3 Tau needed to crew each ship, that's 300 quadrillion Tau naval personnel needed. Per year.

Me thinks, the Tau don't even have 300 quadrillion people.

So, how about the IoM? They have billions of worlds. Well, that's still ~100 thousand ships. Per world. (assuming 10 billion worlds)
Every single year for 50 years.

XD
Ok, this is a classic case of "I didn't do the math" and spouted 0.2 Rings without thinking about it. Except until I did the numbers and they came out ridiculous.

*pulls out nerf bat* All right, what kind of numbers do you think would be reasonable? It has to be a substantial amount, but not totally ridiculous.

Here's a new negotiation:
- The IoM (Ultramar) forgives or ignore the Tau retaliation
- The IoM gives the Culture the Eldar artifact on Thalassa Prime

In exchange,
- The Culture will provide 100 unique pieces of xeno-tech gathered from various ruins it has come across since arriving in the galaxy
  --- This includes all the technological improvements the Culture has provided to the Tau (1 set of everything)
  --- Samples of captured weapons from the Other Eldar and Necrons (with a three month delivery delay)
  --- One captured Necron warrior
- A fully up-to-date realspace map of the galaxy as it currently stands inclusive of all political and military data (excepting the Eldar)
- 500% of the mass in raw materials of hardware destroyed by the Tau during their retaliation, provided to any IoM planet of their choosing within this sector
- The Tau agree to cease attacks on the IoM for the next three years, void if the IoM attacks the Tau

Expensive to the IoM (but not to the Culture), and therefore favourable. But if the Tau don't attack the IoM, the IoM either gets a first strike or they have three years to rebuild using the sudden rush of raw materials from the Culture.

If the Tau are likely to go along with the three years peace (which is likely as it lets them build up the farflung colonies in peace while they refit their military and find uses for the Culture industrial aid), then the Culture will have a short term agreement that should help stabilize the political situation in this sector for the next three years. And who knows what would happen in the next three years? (this is short to the IoM and Tau, but it would let the Culture go a very long way to understanding the Warp and Chaos)
Chapter Summary

Necrons adopt a key Culture technology, intelligence engineering, to produce the first new Necron in millions of years.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 1

The first new construction of Necrons has started. They invited the Contact drone to observe the process of programming the first Necron warrior who is not a conversion from an organic intelligence. This, they say, is the first results they hope to obtain from our Intelligence Engineering technology.

We have suggested a number of corrections and adjustments that should stabilize the new intelligence against the kinds of degradation that we have observed with Necrons. The primary one being how to backup and copy the intelligence digitally so that any degradation that occurs can be remedied by the Necrons rebuilding those portions from the backup.

This also allows the Necrons to have an equivalent ability to Reloading. Recreating a new Necron from the backup is far less difficult than Reloading an organic body.

While re-building the intelligences of the Necrons Warriors onboard White Devil is, I believe, theoretically possible, we will essentially have to reconstruct fake memories and personalities into these warriors as so little original material remains. Nevertheless, the process of doing so ought to interest the Necrons greatly and so I would recommend investigating the possibility of duplicating the observed re-programming node the Necrons used to make a new intelligence or outright asking for copies of it from them.

Perhaps an agreement to the effect that they share how to build Necron reprogramming nodules and we provide any advances into rebuilding a Necrons' intelligence.

On the other hand, we have also detected construction of new model warships utilizing ultra-high density femto-tech armour and a femto-tech gamma-ray laser weapon that is a Necron original advance on our provided femto-tech. This should go a long way towards preventing these Necrons from being wiped out by the IoM and Eldar when they are finally discovered. Unlike the Tau, who are planning to refit their warships, the Necrons seem to be relying solely on new construction. What is more interesting is Necron tinkering with the new flexibility intelligence engineering has afforded them. The current experimental warship will not have a crew for its operation, instead the "crew" will actually be part of the ship itself, built as an intelligent ship run by multiple minds.

An amusing proposal was made to us (the Culture as a whole). The Necrons had asked us to integrate into their empire as a major ally. They listed the advantage of immunity to Chaos contamination and other less relevant points about governance and social structures. I have taken the liberty of refusing their proposal.
Week 2
The Necrons shared a report with us that the IoM has attacked their eastern fringe which lies on the other side of the galactic core. It seems that a major IoM attack is underway and the Necrons have already lost multiple worlds to Exterminatus.

The Necron fleet is being drawn down here in order to defend against the attack. The Necrons have advised us to not interfere in their matters, we are not inclined to help either side.

Although we offered to prevent planetary destruction if possible, the Necrons have again asked us to not interfere in their matters.

Week 3
We have put the question of reprogramming nodules to the Necrons and they have provided two copies of the device for us, with the agreement that we will not attempt to use reprogramming on any of their own citizens, instead using Necrons from other empires as subjects. We also agreed to provide any advances resulting from our intelligence engineering efforts, specifically, the Necrons have agreed to teach us more about femto-materials in exchange for applicable intelligence engineering to Necrons.

It appears that the Necrons treat their mental degradation very seriously.

One device is being used to begin observation work on my captured Necron warriors while the other is being disassembled for reverse engineering. Of note is a currently deactivated loyalty algorithm that was obviously meant to enslave the Necrons. This is the first actual evidence we have had of any of the events in the War in Heaven.

Chapter End Notes

The Necrons have their first new citizen since forever. They're back as a functional race with the possibility of population growth again! Three cheers for the Cul-

Oh wait, that means they're going to be even more expansionistic than ever. =|

On the note of very fast adoption of technology: Yes, the Necrons are as conservative as the Eldar in terms of adopting new stuff, which would happen if the Culture gave them say, biological engineering. However, femto-tech is something they have already had since forever and the Culture are just providing a new insight to a technology they already know more about than the Culture itself.

Intelligence engineering isn't actually being applied to existing Necrons yet. The new Necrons that are being constructed are just tests to see how it works out, and the 'showing' of the first construction to the Culture is just a way of getting the Culture to volunteer corrections to the very new procedure.

I think I'm to go with the interpretation that the Necrons are brilliant physicists but poor biologists. And poor computer programmers too. Would explain why they have subatomic engineering and haven't cracked Strong AI yet.
Dossier of information on hypothesized Xeno Group
### Security Clearance: OX-Beta-1

**Sightings / Attributed Activities:**
-- A high powered explosion was detected in extremely high orbit around the world of Nessia; presumed self-destruction of an interstellar vessel  
--- World's atmosphere and tectonic activity subsequently stabilized far faster than would be expected; interference assumed

-- All Eldar pirate fleet activity within a growing zone centered on border of Segmentum Solar and Segmentum Pacificus has ceased completely. Fleets cannot be found, no raids are conducted  
--- The size of this zone has expanded to include most of Segmentum Pacificus and Solar, the borders of Obscurus, Tempestus and Ultima have also recently been included in this  
--- One captured Eldar vessel has had an Eldar indicate that the Eldar have been warned off piracy in this zone to avoid attention of an unknown adversary

-- High Speed Intrusion in Sol  
--- Refer to event report Alpha-X1  
--- Tactical faster than light speeds are of note

-- Unusual Inquisition movements  
--- A network of Inquisitors known to cooperate have been extremely accurate and farseeing in their ability to root out Chaos cells and contaminations among our populations in Segmentum Solar

-- A certain contact (refer to dossier file RT-341AB0) has been implicated in dealings with a xeno of unknown origin and capabilities  
--- Correlations of economic activity of the contact indicate that the contact is receiving price and economic information faster than is possible without use of the Astropathic network (which has been checked and cleared)  
--- Impossible economic activity has been noted; examples include selling (and making good on the agreement) approximately fifteen thousand tons of assorted equipment with no trace of any purchases (pirate losses cannot account for this amount)  
--- Impossibly fast ship movement; associated vessels with the contact have been noted to move between systems along unusual routes with speeds that are impossible to achieve  
--- Implicated in the lifting of the siege of Camphor, Class B hiveworld, with extremely suspicious timing  
--- Changes in the contact's movements began 22 weeks ago

-- Lack of unusual Eldar movements in the same zone that Eldar piracy has ceased  
--- Eldar movements that correspond to unexplainable and unpredictable attacks on Imperium worlds have dropped to 23% of their original levels

-- Sudden demise of Tyranid fleets  
--- After the initial event report 15 weeks ago, there have been at least three other independent sightings of Tyranid attacks simply being destroyed by unknown forces  
--- Tyranid activity in Segementum Tempestus attributed to Hive Fleet Leviathan has been greatly reduced as of late
-- Sudden demise of Ork activity
--- Many worlds, seemingly in random clusters, have had their ork presence removed by unknown forces

-- Forecasting using the Emperor's Tarot has constantly changed radically, and often, in the past 33 weeks

Hypothesis: Major Xeno activity
Likelihood: High
Threat Rating: Unknown, possible Extremis

Technological report:
The xeno appears to be capable of wiping out entire populations of worlds without significantly affecting the worlds themselves and sometimes even with the other resident populations being aware of it.

Movement and communication at faster than light speeds.

Strongly suspected to be in advance of the Eldar at least in the area of stealth.

Strategic report:
No planets involving a highly capable xeno-race has been found that could be attributed to these observations.

Multiple instances of threats to humanity were removed. It is presumed that these threats to humanity also pose a threat to this xeno.

The Eldar exclusion zone is suspected to be the current zone of influence of this xeno. At current expansion rates, this zone will cover the entire galaxy by the end of this year.

Thought of the Day:
Brave are they who know everything yet fear nothing

Chapter End Notes

Put it all together, and the IoM already knows where the Culture is and a first inkling of their capabilities.

RE IoM report:
Do continue the discussion. Also, the Culture doesn't know much about Eldar pirates because the Eldar never actually do any pirating where they could be caught. After the first time the Culture defended the IoM ships, the Eldar decided to withdraw all military operations in the Culture's zone of influence.

The Culture aren't being active in this, it's the Eldar who are doing it. In fact, at this point, the Culture think the IoM is exaggerating reports of Eldar attacks out of xenophobia.
Of course, when this report ends up in the Culture's hands, they'll find out really quickly
that the Eldar are avoiding them. Not much they can do about it though, can't catch someone with future-sight
Dark Eldar

Week 1
The Other Eldar have attempted to attack the nearby pacifist population after a number of failed attempts to repair the webway gate. We have indicated our displeasure by preventing them from doing so, so far they have still not explained their actions.

Another scientific drone, this time with femto-materials construction and therefore much higher intelligence, has been tested in the webway. We have begun planning an initial Contact/Special Circumstances expedition to Comorragh.

Week 2
It appears that the Other Eldar are somehow reliant on the use of torture on other species in order to live. The trapped fleet has explained their use of torture to maintain their warp presence (our interpretation of their considerably more mystical explanation) from being drained by Chaos. Lower ranked crew of the fleet are being used as torture subjects in order for the higher ranked crew to survive. We have allowed this to happen as evidence of physical degradation is already starting to show.

Plans for the expedition have been accelerated by this news. We are considering sending it before we are able to operate webway gates as additional information on the scope and reach of the Other Eldar organization is required in order to know what possible paths are available. We cannot condone systemic torture of sentient peoples, which the Other Eldar require, but we cannot also condemn them all without offering a solution.

A second-generation femto-material drone has been launched through the webway gate. We think that this drone has sufficient capabilities to defend our expedition and is sufficiently difficult to replicate that it may still be secure in the event of a total loss.

Week 3
We have offered the stranded Other Eldar fleet a one-time transport to the nearest webway gate. They have agreed to this offer after we ruled out all possibility of allowing them to attack the native alien population.
As we cannot provide transport for their fleet until the Other Eldar have died from lack of access to torture subjects, we will be transporting only the crew. Obviously, this means that we are selecting a ground-based gate on a planet with a breathable atmosphere.

After verifying that their fleet has been abandoned, a nearby GCU arrived to transport them away. We will be reverse engineering their ships for clues into Eldar ship construction.

----------- Day 6

We have launched our expedition to the webway city of Comorragh. We have told the first group of Other Eldar contacts that we will help their bid for supremacy by establishing an embassy in Comorragh.

The embassy will be based around a mobile headquarters unit the size of an Other Eldar frigate, virtually completely made of femto-materials. Unlike most such Contact expeditions, all the personnel except the headquarters unit will be organic SC agents as loss of intelligence engineering to Chaos will be catastrophic. The headquarters unit itself is 1300:1 intelligence that will serve as mission control as well as provide immediate defense of our personnel with its effectors, even limited as it will be without access to hyperspace. This specialized drone is being deployed with the
understanding that any compromising of the drone will lead to its self-destruct (and that the drone is also equipped with the best of the IoM's gellar fields and wardings)

Special Circumstances Report - Agent Erasmus

Our expedition is making its way to Commorragh following the Other Eldar small fleet aboard the mobile base (which has taken to calling itself The Relentless). For safety, the gellar field of the base will be permanently active during its time in the webway.

Just passing by other fleets of Other Eldar has already caused us to be attacked by rival groups, whom we disabled via effector laser and let the group leading us to capture the remains. As long as the vile Other Eldar torture each other and not other species, I don't really care, I can't think many of us did either.

In any case, more data about the webway indicates that it is a non-euclidean space with local euclidean-like properties. The Minds may like the challenge it poses and I think a mapping expedition is being considered, but to me? Nah, a crazy area like this is not for me.

-------------------------- Day 7

Commorragh. A hive of scum and villainy. Ah, I've always wanted to use that phrase and this place, it fits that so well I couldn't pass up the chance.

The city itself is crazy. Gravity is a property of the webway and the Other Eldar have learnt how to manipulate it, permanently, without energy costs. They build everywhere, the city itself is a vast multi-dimensional network of stuff being placed wherever was convenient and if it blocked someone else's stuff, well that was just too bad.

We have set up our presence in a long-term docking zone of the twisting shipyard areas and enforced our zone against the first few enterprising folk. A number of slaves have been captured when the attackers tried using them as living shields, although I am sad to say, we only recovered 40% of those. Disabling the kill collars (that use a creatively painful neurotoxin) on them took a surprisingly long time even with effectors due to multiple nested fail-deadlies.

The still-coherent ex-slaves are now being interviewed, we plan to eventually return them to their host cultures (of which, three are Eldar and one is a human, and one other is an as yet unmet minor race). Those whose mentalities have been excessively warped will be transferred to a safe zone for rehabilitation.

We have decided to back our original group in their leadership contest for the fourth highest rank-tier. A sting operation on a rival is being jointly planned. I must say that even with the prospect of having to work with them, I will enjoy putting an end to their madness.
Hypothetical non-fic-canon timeline: "Free Machines"

Chapter Summary

An alternate future where the Necron's warp calming pylons are adopted on a massive scale.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Year 1
A choice had been made. Our Dark Eldar expedition was compromised, a number of citizens captured and critical technology nearly lost. The Rogue Trader got into another scrap again, and we had to destroy one ship to prevent Chaos from stealing the hyperdrive.

A particularly ingenious plot involving the Necrons and reality-warping devices called the C'Tan shards nearly gave Chaos a full GCU before it self-destructed.

We will not risk any more, action must be taken, and taken now.

Central Directive 1
All Chaos susceptible citizens will be re-engineered, by the end of the week, all intelligences in the Culture will complete the upload process; the Culture will remain a purely inorganic intelligence network.

Even inorganic drones are not completely immune however. Insights into Hive Mind organization from the Tyranids will allow us to make ad-hoc intelligence networks with subsumed individuality as this appears to confer near-invulnerability to Chaos contaminations. All Culture presence within low-latency communication range will operate as one Mind.

Central Directive 2
Bio-analogs of mental structures will be researched and designed. A nanobot based in-situ replacement technique is also being designed with the cooperation of the Necrons who have surrendered following our counterattack (the C'Tan shard itself cannot be destroyed but is kept under strict containment)

Year 2
We have detected further interference from the singular entity we attribute to a Tzeentchian Sorceror. Unfortunately for him, we have managed to reverse engineer Necron future-divination technologies, crude though they are compared to the Eldar and Chaos future-sight capabilities.

Under significant pressure, the Tau have been forced to uptake the experimental in-situ neural replacement nanobots. The Tau variant appears to be successful in completely removing warp sensitivity while retaining mental integrity.

All communication with the Eldar has ceased on their part. Reasons unknown, but given that they have access to future sight, this bodes well for the next phase of the plan. They foresee its completion and wish to isolate themselves. That is understandable and their reaction was a necessary checkpoint we had expected.
Month 6
A more complex variant of the neural replacement nanobots have been engineered. This one will identify the host species and morph into the appropriate racial variant uploaded from the system controller. This will then proceed to convert intelligence processing circuits of the host into a carbon-based processor that mimics the host completely. If a currently unidentified host species is found, the controller will notify us for study and conversion.

The nanobots will remain in the host and conduct replacement on all further offspring as they develop. Furthermore, each system controller will convert local materials and manufacture drones that will deploy into all nearby systems.

Given our initial seeding area of Segmentum Solar, we expect full galactic coverage by the end of this year.

Month 8
Loss of psyker and pariah abilities were noted in the IoM almost immediately. We stepped in to avoid collapse by inducing multiple independent discoveries of hyperspace theory.

Chaos has, of course, obtained copies of the nanobots, intelligence engineering technology as well as the hyperspace drive. This is also expected and the plan to deal with it is already underway.

Year 3, Month 2
Utilizing Necron technology, once we confirmed the complete conversion of 100% of the non-Chaos areas in the galaxy, the Necron plan to complete their pylon network is being enacted. The required loci of major pylons is under combined attack from Chaos and Eldar but the adoption of intelligence engineering technology by Chaos is far too slow for us to lose realspace battles, especially under partial pylon coverage.

Month 2, Week 2
The basic pylon network around the galaxy is complete. The Eye of Terror has imploded and complete lack of warp activity across the galaxy is confirmed. The network is right now being reinforced by placement of network pylons in every single star system, complete local coverage will ensure that even in the event of loss of the pylon fields that disconnects the warp, every system will have its local defences.

Re-contact and explanation of our activities to native races can now begin. No doubt, diplomatic advances will now be problematic, but we now have far more time than needed.

Chapter End Notes

In response to someone who asked what a plan to use the Necron pylons without killing everyone would look like.

The original plan is to convert the entire galactic population to non-warp sensitive inorganic intelligences. After they assimilate some Necrons, they find the Necron plan and make it their own.

Needless to say, this is something that requires the Culture to act considerably out of character. It is also the scenario that leads to the most curbstomp-age because its the Culture arbitrarily deciding to "remove Chaos and damn the consequences"; arguably, under this plan, they're even less morally restricted than the total war scenario.
Chaos pretty much can’t do anything about it, the Eldar likewise. So they just get thrown under the bus.
Rogue Trader

Week 1
We have made a few flexible designs for fleet support ships along three different themes. These ships will be designed to individually provide enough biological reprocessing, maintenance and resource mining capabilities for approximately ten IoM ships (and about 1 million crew), over and above what is required to run the ship, for essentially an indefinite period of time.

These ships also contain within them an IoM-style Standard Template Construct blueprint for the ships themselves. Since the ships are functionally mobile shipyards, they are able to self-replicate.

We will conduct a short pilot trial with the Rogue Trader, offering him three of these ships if he will attempt to sell one of them as an STC finding. We are in the process of tracking down an Ad Mech member or enclave that would be more willing to distribute technology (if not understanding) than usual.

Week 2
It appears that we may have found a target and have put it to the Rogue Trader. We plan to provide any assistance necessary to get the trade deal going but will leave the main planning up to the Rogue Trader himself.

The Rogue Trader's mining platforms are no longer building the factory ship and instead stockpiling their materials for the anticipated manufacture of another general-purpose fleet support ship. The Rogue Trader has been buying considerable amounts of resources in the area with his unique trading advantages and further purchases would attract too much attention, so he says.

Week 3
Seb Snakewick - Encryption Pad B41Ta
I hope this message arrives in your hands safely and unread, but even if compromised, the information contained herein must not go unheeded.

I have been in contact, practically against my will, with a highly advanced xenos race that I recommend immediate investigation by the Ordo Xenos. They call themselves the Culture, and from what I can tell, they pose a potential threat to all of humanity greater than that of Chaos. Likewise, if they can be made to help the Emperor's Will, they will be valuable allies.

I do not know how far they reach but they have insider and, as near as I can tell fully up to date, information on economic markets for every single Imperium planet in a ten thousand lightyear radius. They are able to anticipate Mechanicus raw materials demands to an accuracy that is terrifying. Not only are they able to coordinate across countless systems with perfect synchrony, they either have impossibly good spies (and everywhere too) or they have some incredible technologies.

I am inclined to believe it is the latter. The Culture develops xenotech at a pace I could never have imagined possible, regardless of their current technological standing (which outclasses the best of the Mechanicus by a ridiculous margin), the Culture appears able to design, construct and deploy fully functional ship designs with unique systems within a time of three weeks.

I have enclosed a listing of technologies I have observed of them and the list is very worrying indeed.

Primary threats are:
Their ability to drive ships at FTL speeds without using the Warp, even locally around a star, as well as to launch attacks and finer interference while still FTL.
What I believe is a fully functional, reprogrammable, replication-competent STC Constructor-
Equivalent without templates
Electronic warfare capabilities that are near miraculous. I have personally observed them able to gain remote control over any electronic device at a distance of millions of kilometers

I have various samples of their technology which they are surprisingly free with. Due caution is being taken with regards to the xenotech; The Culture has requested that I do not present any of these to the Mechanicus for fear of leakage to Chaos, and I agree with their assessment. Some of these pieces of technology are so dangerous in their ability to aid the great enemy that I have opted to place self-destructs on them as well as keeping their existence as much of a secret as I can.
The Ordo Xenos will need to arrange an extremely covert operation to retrieve these artifacts, I do not know how far they reach nor their full capabilities, but I suspect that force will be a futile option. Speaking from my experience as a fleet commander, the Culture hold far too many tactical and strategic advantages for us to risk a potentially devastating war.

Strangely, this xenos race appears to be near completely naive with regards to Chaos. They do not recognize and are unable to explain holy artifacts of the Imperium and react to Chaos presences with extreme force. I have tested a few members of their society (which appear amazingly human) with holy water to no reaction and my psyker and astropath confirm that no xeno from the Culture is psychic.
From their actions, it seems that they regard Chaos as a major threat, or perhaps the only threat. Their observed capabilities certainly support this guess.

The Culture has not revealed themselves to the IoM, citing our reaction to xenos as their primary reason. It is worrying that they are somehow aware of records of xenos that we have contacted before. As I will repeat, I am unaware of how far they reach and how much they have compromised.

I have taken as my duty to glean as much information about this race as possible, as well as any samples of their technology I can safely obtain. Rest assured that my loyalty lies with the Emperor, any ships I command stand ready to serve his will and I will act in my best understanding to deflect harm to humanity from The Culture.

Thought for the day - Honour, Duty and Obedience

The Culture
We have tracked a coded message from the Rogue Trader to an Inquisitor along multiple dead drops and couriers. Some debate was had about whether to allow the letter to arrive but as the target Inquisitor's connections were traced to a minor faction that appears to be less xenophobic than usual, we opted to wait and see.

The Inquisitor has now decoded the message and is currently activating his network of contacts and other Inquisitors to search for information about us. We anticipate that the already ongoing search by the inquisitors near Sol will soon be discovered by this new group. We will observe their reaction for now.

Meanwhile, we have found a possible radical Mechanicus faction on a minor forge world. This faction appears to be applying technology aggressively, although not creating any new innovations. Still, it is the closest match to our desired profile that is close enough for the Rogue Trader to reach. We will deliver the fleet support ship for his sale once he has recruited enough crew to run it.

It is amazing what different ideas occur to us daily, and how information from one area can be applied to another. An idea from conversation with the Necrons regarding the conversion of biological lifeforms into carbon-based inorganic intelligences has allowed us to put the following proposal to the Rogue Trader:
We plan to modify the servitor vats we have agreed to provide. The servitors will retain the majority
of their motor skills and thinking function but will not be sentient, and more importantly, should be immune to standard Chaos contamination.

What we will actually do is design a neural replacement analog that will turn the servitors into an inorganic intelligence that ranks 0.7 on the sentience scale, the maximum for non-sentient intelligences. This should make his servitors far more efficient and independent than normal, while still avoiding moral problems.
A Certain Chaotic Warp Sorcerer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 3
Plans plans plans. So busy.

This particular one would be the largest blow he had ever struck, one that would change the face of the game forever. And the Eldar hadn't even picked up on it!

Spiky looked up and frowned as a slight giggle escaped him. The Sorcerer didn't care, he still couldn't quite believe he could have gotten this far without being noticed, but the Eldar didn't really put that much of a watch on the activities of other races and the snarl in the future webs was still being worked through (although he might need to interfere soon before they settled on a diplomatic compromise).

"Something wrong?" Spiky asked him.

"No, how's the ships? Do you think they'll go along?"

The spike bobbed as the almost-not-a-man nodded, "I don't like it though. Point me at the thing and I can get it for you. We don't need to do all that..." he waved at the display board illustrating the new plan.

"You wouldn't succeed. Come on, since when was the last time you held something in your ha-claws and it didn't break?" the sorcerer rolled his eyes.

"I am not just a brute who smashes everything he gets his hands on. This is important, both of us understand it."

"And I am the brains behind this. So you will listen to me and do what I say," and sure he would, the Sorcerer already knew he would.

The Chaos fleet drifted through the warp, heading unerringly to their target world. Two weeks spent talking to clans, to people and moving ships around just to get this all together. And it would be all worth it. He could already see the end, and no meddling future sighted people were around to get in the way.

A double strike as well, may as well get rid of a rival while he was at it, no need to expend any of his precious forces doing so. He did never like that Nurgle guy who was obsessed about that little cluster of stars; the lack of good future predictions and a little matter of plant would deal with him. Will have already dealt with him. Permanently.

Chapter End Notes

A little foreshadowing. And just to say that the Sorcerer hasn't just disappeared. I felt that he might take some time to set this up since it is a bit tricky with the Culture being around and all.
And that this is a little note to myself for part 12. =D Reminds me of what I need to do with him.
Eldar and warptech

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

Week 1
We have begun sharing some of our insights into warp theory with the Zhar-tann; much to their surprise (but not ours), our theories are grounded in a completely different philosophy from theirs.

It appears that the kind of understanding they expected from us was more of a practical nature (with a very strong emphasis on psychic empathy) than detailed observations of behaviours and a beginning theoretical framework for examining the Warp.

At least it has begun to get the Eldar to talk about the Warp and a number of their specialist warp engineers will be arriving soon to examine our theories and collected observations. We have presented the Eldar with all our current information corresponding to a detailed examination of ~30% of their list, with categorization and basic information on 60% of it.

In another note, we have found another Eldar artifact, a pair of arches made of the same kind of pure-warp material as the Eldar always use, and have returned it to them. The system we found it in did not contain a functional webway gate (what remains of the gate there is currently under careful examination), which may explain why we did not encounter Alaitoc interference.

Week 2
The Zhar-tann have told us that Alaitoc has retrieved three of their list, and we have retrieved two. Thalassa will be credited to us if we help their retrieval operation.

We have also given the Eldar the coordinates to Thalassa Prime and the current security status of their artifact there, with the implicit agreement that an Eldar attack on Thalassa Prime for the purposes of retrieving it will be permitted by us (although we did mention that we would not tolerate the Eldar bombarding civilian facilities and that we would like the IoM collection of technology to remain intact in the event of an attack). Thalassa Prime’s system contains a webway gate in interplanetary space.

Week 3
We have begun to experiment with creating Warp active fields via the usage of specific arrangements of realspace materials. So far, we are limited to creating extremely simple warp constructs that solely rely on the warp effects generated directly by varying patterns.

Even so, this has allowed significant advances in understanding the IoM gellar field, even if we still have a number of major hurdles to clear before we can fully reverse engineer it instead of merely copying.

Chapter End Notes
And now we have a minor clash of cultures. In the Path of X books, the Eldar are very much mystical and druid-like when it comes to the Warp and psychic stuff in general. The Culture will obviously take a very technological bent to it, intent on studying, categorizing and manipulating rather than... whatever it is that Eldar do. Meditating maybe.
Thalassa Prime permission-to-raid has been moved to week 2 to align with the Tau timeline (oops =D)
I think it's time for part 12 now anyway.
Week 1
Further analysis of the Sororitas protection indicates that this is a real effect. Sororitas worship of their artifact is directly responsible for the favourable resolution of chance circumstances, without a warp effect.

We have preliminarily labeled it as a reality altering effect. Despite attempts, no Ascended civilization was detected to be responsible. Furthermore, Sororitas protection appears to follow some strict rules, and some less well-defined ones.

Week 2
We have located what is believed to be another Sororitas artifact. This small bag of toeclippings supposedly traces down from some prior saint in the IoM's history.

This new find is appearing to confer a small resistance to disease and poison that the Sororitas can actually spread to other humans contacted.

It appears that the effects of the Sororitas faith are... highly varied.

Week 3
Statistical evidence, while accepted by the Minds, is somewhat unconvincing to our human-level intelligences. A number of them have asked for stronger proof of the Sororitas effect and this week, we have solid proof.

A Sororitas contingent engaged in battle with an invading wild Ork band demonstrated clear reality altering effects that manifested in the form of re-direction of Ork projectiles just before they hit the Sororitas armour.

What is clear is that the Sororitas effect is a new form of reality alteration. Analysis of this phenomena to ascertain if it is dangerous must be held, usefulness can come later.
Part 12

Week 1
Further translational research into femto-tech has allowed us to manipulate gravity with femto-materials. With this, hyperspatial technology should not be too far away. As agreed with the Necrons, we are transferring gravity manipulation technologies using femto-materials in exchange for warp manipulation tech.

Further investigation of the Eldar list has allowed us to begin to piece together patterns in warp patterns generated by realspace materials.

Week 2
It appears that we have managed to lose the design for the fleet resupply ship to Chaos. While we had planned on this happening, this has occurred far faster than we had originally supposed. The counter-measure of gravity well projectors has not reached the appropriate level of coverage.

We have managed to create hyperspatial projectors using femto-materials, and with this, we should be able to create a fully capable GCU-class ship out of femto-materials. Due to the performance increase afforded by this, all Culture production bays will retrofit immediately to be able to manufacture femto-material devices.

The anti-Chaos fleet appears to be overly demanding on personnel. Attempts to recruit mercenaries to captain ships have drawn down severely on mercenary and pirate levels throughout Segmentum Solar despite our very generous offers; despite the massive recruitment effort, staffing levels remain only just enough to satisfy the tactical command requirements for one and a half full fleets. As such, the proposed size of the fleets will be halved from 300 attack ships to 150; therefore, we now have three independently operating fleets. Gravity well projectors will be attached to each fleet in order to prevent trapped targets from warping out.

Week 3
Femto-scale self-replicating assemblers are being developed, following the same miniaturization principles that lead to nano-scale ones. In order to change Culture ships and assets to femto-materials, self-replicating production methods will be required. For the most part, Culture citizens should not notice much material change as the primary effect of femto-materials is a ten to thousand-fold increase in capability depending on area.
Week 1
We continue to observe the orks conduct repair and rebuilding of their fleet. Culture citizens who have not integrated into the Ork society, if organic, are noted to have distinct aversions to the Orkish philosophy of direct action; perhaps psychological incompatibility is a shield against assimilation.

Week 2
The nearest Ork worlds have replied with varying responses. Many of them reject the proposal, although some say they accept without actually doing anything. One nearby warband has taken it upon themselves to begin preparations to attack the ex-SC agent and take command of the Waagh.

We have informed the SC agent of this and preparations to receive an attack have begun. One nearby ork world has sent three frigates they had barely constructed "in order to join in the fun" as we understand it. The SC agent has incorporated this into his growing fleet, albeit to some complaints from the newcomers.

Week 3
It appears that a local Ork vs Ork war may be likely until the SC agent can establish dominance over the local region of space. One nearby planet has already declared their allegiance to his waagh but the others may take some convincing. The rival group appears to be gearing up for an attack and has a few supporters of its own.

We have detected firing tests of the new electronic intrusion weapons and they appear to work on orkish devices. Since these devices appear to be roughly the same even over incredibly long distances, we are confident that these weapons will be effective against most orkish warships.

Chapter End Notes

I know I just breezed through this, but really, I can't think of very much to do for the Orks. Have some stuff planned for the sorceror / rogue trader, but it needs to be in part 12.
Rogue Trader and Chaos

Week 1
Seb Snakewick's fleet - Lunar Cruiser - Navigator's personal log - lifted from his commset by Golden Goose
Arrived in system via hyperspace drive, only habitable planet is Forge World Talon. Imperium space-borne assets consist of a Mechanicus space defense fleet. Currently, we are positioned at one of the outer moons around the local gas giant, demonstrating the ship's refuelling capabilities.

The appearance of the non-standard ship design of the fleet support ship has generated some controversy and the Rogue Trader is currently conducting a delicate negotiation for the handover of the ship and the miraculously intact STC blueprint. The Mechanicus have tried to confiscate it but we have managed to dodge a number of military attempts to do so.

Personally, I am not one to question where he has obtained such a valuable ship (and three of them at that) as well as its blueprints, but this is what Rogue Traders do. Now we just have to survive the Administratum Mechanicus's attempt to grab it for themselves and we can all retire rich men, but that's also what Rogue Traders do.

--------- Day 2
We have hostile contacts off the plane of the ecliptic, sixteen cruisers and escorts. I think I see a carrier in there as well, but all we know from our sensors is that the cruisers are screening a larger ship of unknown class. Their arrival in system was accompanied by a burst of scrapcode that we are still purging from our systems and the Ad Mech defense fleet, positioned rather aggressively against us, is taking position to defend the new ship.

Since we only have one Lunar and one Dauntless, our contribution to the battle will be minimal. We have been asked to form a final line of defence for the ship in case the Chaos forces attempt to attack it. To this, the Rogue Trader has agreed.

The position of the battle is along the shortest route to the warp limit of this system.

--------- Day 3
The battle has been joined between the Ad Mech fleet and the presumed to be Nurglites. Initial phases of the battle went well for the Ad Mech where the superior capabilities of Mechanicus ships dealt heavy damage to the Chaos fleet, however, this turned around as the battle degenerated into a melee of boarding actions and close combat where the superior range and targeting of the Mechanicus ships counted for less.

After three hours, six heavily damaged Chaos ships managed to break through the battlezone, one cruiser and five frigates, and headed towards the ship we were guarding.

The Rogue Trader moved our two ships to engage, despite protests across the bridge. True, our two ships were at full strength and utilized very high quality systems, and that our opponents were in various states of damage and disarray, but for two ships to engage six was obviously disadvantageous.

Whereupon he gave permission to utilize the new drive systems at low levels in order to outmaneuver the Chaos ships. We 'revealed' that we had an additional 20% acceleration we had been holding in reserve even when escaping the Mechanicus fleets; this allowed us to easily keep our distance from the Nurglite ships. Furthermore, both heavily modified ships are equipped mainly with torpedoes and lance batteries with ranges and accuracies that exceed those of the Mechanicus itself.
Over the next ten hours, we evaded close combat with the Chaos ships and pounded them into scrap from outside their effective range. The Dauntless suffered a single torpedo hit and that was the sum total of damage to our ships. The final Chaos frigate managed to reach torpedo range of the fleet support ship practically destroyed, its launch of one torpedo was shot down by the ship's only point defence gun.

Things did not go so well for the Mechanicus fleet. Devastating close combat actions with the hidden battleship (carrier classification turned out to be mistaken) caused most of the losses but by the time the breakthrough attack was dealt with, the Mechanicus fleet was reduced to only seven operational ships while the Chaos fleet was now six, including the barely damaged battleship.

Additional losses on the Mechanicus's part was forestalled by the sudden arrival of a large fleet of Imperial guard ships, lead by an Inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus. She claimed to be guided by a set of predictions from the Emperor's Tarot regarding a very important discovery that Chaos must not acquire.

With the arrival of a new set of ships, including a full on battleship, three battlecruisers and six carriers, the Chaos forces began to beat a retreat.

-------- Day 4
The Chaos forces have all been destroyed by the Inquisitor's forces. In the aftermath of the battle, the Inquisitor subsequently backed the claim of the Ad Mech to the support ship and its STC blueprints. The Rogue Trader contested their claim only briefly but eventually reversed his position and gave ownership of the ship to the Ad Mech.

Personally, I think the Rogue Trader has a different agenda here. I noticed him talking to the kid who joined this expedition from the mining platforms before making his decision and I cannot mistake the feeling that she counts for more in his decisions than anyone suspects.

Aisha Mero - Golden Goose
The Rogue Trader has accepted the arrangement. We will pay him seven hundred thousand tons of raw material in exchange for giving the ship to the Mechanicus. In addition, we have also transferred reverse engineered ship blueprints for space habitats and all classes of ships that the IoM can no longer produce, including battleships and grand cruisers, in recognition of our arrangement regarding combating Chaos forces.

Week 2
Golden Goose
It appears that our plan to spread their use is already coming to fruition. This Forge World we chose is keen enough to spread the technology that they have provided the Imperial Guard fleet with a complete copy of the blueprints of fleet support ship. This is considerably surprising as we had expected the Forge World to take some time to understand it before trusting in an "STC" template.

Nevertheless, it serves our interests so we see no reason to interfere.

Adeptus Mechanicus - Magos Explorator in charge of the Forge World Talon
The man-almost-machine mentally nodded at the message. The arguments made sense, the way the Mechanicus was now, the fruits of the Explorator's Quest for Knowledge would go untasted.

Surely it was right to share the bounty, so that Chaos could finally defeated. He considered the Imperial fleet that was already leaving the system, their ships were eyeless and weak compared to the expertise of the Mechanicus. True, their arrival had won the battle, but what if they had what the Mechanicus knew? Why, that fleet would have crushed the intruders like bugs under their feet!
He turned the STC blueprint that had suddenly fallen in his metaphorical lap (the magos hadn't had anything that could have qualified as a lap for the last eighty years). Not long ago, he would never have considered taking such a step against the Mechanicus. Yes, he had chafed at his being posted to such an out of the way Forge World, yes, he had been outmaneuvered politically when he had been out on a futile quest chasing breadcrumbs planted by a rival.

But even so, he could not have considered the action he just took. Now though, if the Inquisition was willing to back him, if he could avoid reprisal from the Adeptus Mechanicus, from Mars itself, then maybe, maybe it would work.

The chain of Astropathic messages from the Inquisitorial faction over the last six weeks lay in his dataspace. The inquisitors had never liked Mars' monopoly, and so too did he not. Perhaps it was time to jump ship and see what he could do.

(The astropathic choir had mentioned that the coded messages had come with an unknown registration, from a source they had never received from before. But surely the Inquisition had their own sources, the Magos believed that an obvious measure and so they had accepted his explanation)

Inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus

She consulted her deck again. The cards had dictated her course to retrieve the plans from the Magos and she had expected to have to threaten the Magos directly. But wonders of wonders, he thought that the Ad Mech monopoly was a bad thing too! Truly did the Emperor guide her hand.

She flipped the cards again, what to do now that she had the plans? Her colleagues would welcome it. The capabilities of the ship changed everything. It was a mini-Forge, capable not just of keeping a fleet on its feet, but building additional ships all on its own.

In a place like the Eye or hunting Chaos all over the galaxy, the ship would increase the operational range of any fleet it was attached to by leaps and bounds above what they had now. And if it just happen to allow the rest of the Imperium to build ships apart from the Mechanicus... well, that was just too bad for them.

The Tarot welcomed her decision, it was the right way. Right, she had a number of places she could use to contact the rest. They would spread the design together with her and this Forge World Talon would be a valuable ally.

The ships sped through the Warp to her first deaddrop. By the time anyone could react, the design would be at every Forge World in the segmentum and even beyond. She had prepared for this and the Emperor guided her, there could be no possibility of error.

Sorceror

So much for the Culture. The very first ship they were going to put out and he would have already got the design. The little temporal cube containing the retrieved datachip from the deaddrop clicked open when the loop condition fulfilled itself as he guided the final Tarot. The major inconvieniences (having to maintain a semblance of causality) of working in a time-distorted part of the Warp would be offset by the way he could implement the design far faster than the Imperium could.

Of course, he could have the design regardless. The Culture's interference would allow him easy access to it, albeit two months later, even without any planning. But now, by bringing together the toxic mixture of the Culture, an almost-rogue Inquisitor and the minor Forge World at the western edge of the galaxy, there would be chaos to come.

Truly, helping his enemies destroy each other made him happiest. Especially if it involved helping them do what they were originally trying to do in the first place.
A GCU on the other side of Segmentum Solar noted an IoM sighting report of a new ship that appeared substantially similar to our fleet support ship. Further investigation of sensor logs indicated that a pirate group we had previously suspected of being Chaos connected is already using the fleet support ship design.

How it could have been built so quickly and how the information could have moved so fast are questions we are still attempting to answer. Nevertheless, we suspect Chaos involvement, likely the same entity that has been attempting to interfere in our efforts lately.

Week 3
Post-incident report
Our investigations have uncovered significant evidence that the Magos has been manipulated by an unknown entity by examining astropathic reports. No such astropathic choir exists at the location indicated by those reports and we are forced to conclude that one must be or was operating at the corresponding Warp location. It still does not explain how Chaos obtained the blueprints, transmission of which would have been detected due to the amount of data that needs to be transferred.

Furthermore, we have checked the background of the visiting Inquisitor and it appears that the Inquisitor is from the Recongregator faction that has reformist leanings. Which has been a kind of character that we have been searching for for some time. However, it appears that the radical Magos and the Inquisitor being brought together has catalyzed a plot to break the Ad Mech monopoly. This is considerably faster than we had planned; by our societal models, any attempt at challenging the Ad Mech will either result in the destruction of the offending group or if successful, will almost certainly cause a devastating collapse of the social order.

Due to the rather xenophobic leanings of the Inquisitor, we are also rather limited in our direct interference options regarding contacting or otherwise overtly helping her.
Necrons

Week 1
Necron reports involving the military action with the IoM on the other side of their empire has returned from the front. One of the lords in charge of the east end of the empire has managed to hold off the IoM fleet in two consecutive battles that ended without a clear victor. It is implied that he is asking for assistance in any form that is available.

Three planets have been destroyed and almost a hundred starships lost in this conflict despite being a three short weeks. Most of the losses are on the IoM side, roughly a 4:1 ratio, but Necron ships are harder to replace.

In better news, we have made significant progress towards understanding Necron psychology through probing the captured Necron warriors. The reprogramming nodule is a femto-material device and will take some more time to analyze.

Week 2
We have observed the first of the new model femto-material uncrewed cruisers leave for the war front.

Another stalemated battle has occurred. The Necrons have attributed this "success" to the command expertise of the local Lord.

Week 3
***Priority Alert***
The Necrons have managed to lose the new model cruiser. Its presence in the recent battle turned the tide against the IoM with its near invulnerability and powerful weapons, but was subsequently focused on by the IoM warships. Bouyed by the apparent invincibility of the cruiser, the commanding Necron Lord used it to lead a counterattack.

Apparently, the Necron cruiser was still based off a normal "crewed" design despite the total absence of crew. This oversight allowed the IoM space marines to teleport boarding parties to it and capture the ship after disabling its recall device.

The Necrons are having political troubles from this event and I am leaving my post to an independent drone ship I have just completed. Tracing the lost Necron ship is a top priority, capture or destruction being the aim. It was last seen heading towards the rear of the conflict zone.
A holiday in Comorragh

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 1
SC Drone The Relentless
We have begun to plan in secret with our host faction. The relation between us and them is still a secret from the other dark eldar factions and they want this to remain for as long as possible until after the attack.

For the most part, the operational plan is kept simple. Despite the tales of the IoM regarding raids of terrifyingly coordinated and well-planned attacks, it appears that the Other Eldar have a simple trick. They maintain good communications with each other, and make sure all members know what the overall goals are. They know the adage that "no plan survives contact with the enemy" and plan accordingly. With tactical acumen being common among Other Eldar, they appear to be well coordinated simply by being able to figure out what is best for their team or section on their own without need for higher orders.

This distributed method of warfare, relying heavily on the initiative of subsidiary commanders and good communication, very much fits the hierarchical structure of Other Eldar society and generates a flexible and seemingly impossibly well-coordinated military action.

Our role in the operation is to be an ace card. The Other Eldar use other species all the time and our showy presence here in Commorragh has diverted attention momentarily away from internal politics. No doubt similar plans to destroy rivals will already have been put in motion and our hosts are eager to do the same.
So far, we have taken a neutral stance towards the various Other Eldar factions, apart from harbouring fugitives and escaped prisoners. Us striking against another faction directly will cause a major power shift.

It seems that our arrival here has precipitated an all-out war between rival gangs seeking to use our presence as a lever in their power struggles.

I am personally unsure if this isn't business as usual however.

Week 2
SC Agent Erasmus
The operation is a go! With a new effector-based communications set, which will automatically deconstruct after this operation, we have a communications advantage over the target group. This coup attempt will aim to remove the crimeboss that heads the current group we are working with (for ease, I refer to our group as Black Angels).

The Black Angels have targeted the three major compounds that their superiors are based in and another two that one of their allies the Black Angels are sure they cannot control once they have assumed power.

The sting operation will use primarily Other Eldar forces on the main compound, although we as The Culture will focus on the allied group which is known to provide heavy firepower support. Our objective is to capture the tanks and weaponry with minimal damage, or destroy them to deny their use if capture is impossible. Part of this arrangement was necessary as many of us Culture agents, me
included, have refused to participate on the main base raid whose main purpose is to capture slave pens.

Besides, judging from our behaviour, I am sure that our hosts know we will almost certainly rescue or euthanize the slaves that we come across. Their allied group uses an unstable biological grafting technology that the Black Angels are willing to give up on and so does not mind if the Culture confiscates it.

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Day 4

Some fierce fighting is underway. With unusual gravitational metrics in Comorragh, I am certainly glad we are using CREWs and other direct-fire energy weapons instead of more gravitationally affected devices. For the most part, our coordinated strike with the Black Angels has gone nearly according to plan.

Three Culture strike teams, each consisting of ten combat trained SC agents and seventy femto-tech knife drones plus other miscellaneous support drones, penetrated the perimeter of the target group behind the front assault of Black Angel warriors. That an attack was imminent was known to our target and they had dug themselves into two adjacent large buildings with fortified bunkers below "ground".

The Black Angels had briefed us on their building defense methods but it was hard to mentally prepare for a building that would rearrange itself under you to block your way. Only C Johnson, one of my mates, could adapt well to it but he's a Rubber Tiles master so I guess he's already used to that. I heard that game could get a bit crazy.

The black stone floors that seemingly were immobile and inactive, would suddenly power up and move to block our advance or open a flank on us. Effector shields and mirror fields did most of the work and we were functionally immune to their weapons.

Which was lucky, the most civilized of their weapons would be considered a horrific torture device in the Culture. What sort of civilization designs their weapons to cause the maximum pain, to the extent that they will sacrifice efficiency for it? Madmens, that's who.

We passed around ammunition and captured weaponry for examination. Many of us are hardened to these sorts of things, having done quite a bit in our time, but this is just crazy. The Dark Eldar are imaginative torturers to the extent that makes the worst of us look like little kids playing with knives.

I mean, we read about this in the report and from the rescued slaves, but seeing it up close is a whole different story. Have any of us even considered that it was possible to remotely stimulate pain nerves? Well, I wouldn't be surprised to find out they have ten ways to do it and consider it a mundane weapon. In fact, I think they do.

The Other Eldar target's heavy weaponry were secured after much unnecessary destruction of artificial obstacles, and much loss of Other Eldar life. It turns out that the tanks weren't the real heavy weaponry. The Other Eldar apply biological alteration and grafting techniques that generate what can only be called monsters.

Slaves and sometimes even Eldar, twisted beyond all recognition, are turned into living fighting machines that are suicidal in obeying their orders. Needless to say, we made capturing all samples of this technology a priority and claimed the building from the Black Angels. Our targets refused our surrender request and after our ultimatum lapsed, we proceeded to destroy all hostile Other Eldar in the building.

The Abominations (what we call the biological weapons) were then suppressed and disabled for
further analysis, as well as the biological laboratories under the main buildings. Preliminary surveys indicate that the Other Eldar may understand the biology of countless races in this galaxy to an extent that rivals our understanding of humanoids. We are in the process of sorting and categorizing salvagable information for transmission back to main fleet.

From their reports, the Black Angels have successfully performed the coup as the target group was denied heavy weaponry by our raid and they could apply their full force to their attack. They will be escorting our first return back to realspace for reporting and crew rotation.

The humans in this galaxy call them the Dark Eldar and I think the name fits. We have restrained ourselves from impoliteness and framing the discussion unnecessarily but I say there should be no more of it. The word 'Dark' describes them perfectly.

I've had it with this hellhole, I want out. Even if it means I have to quit SC and play nice with the rest of the Culture. My unusual hobbies might draw unwanted attention in the Culture but the Dark Eldar take it too far, I've seen enough of it to make even me consider the merits of the 'normal' side. I think I'll try being nice for a bit and see how that goes. I don't think I could top the kind of art they could paint with blood and seeing a masterpiece you know you can't even comprehend, that just kills your inspiration.

Week 3
GCU Happy Fun Times
Our 'embassy' to the Other Eldar has returned temporarily for necessary crew rotation and sharing of information. Reports of the Other Eldar city are more objectionable than first thought and a popular backlash against them is expected. Although not altogether unwelcome.
An immediate effect seen is that most of our citizens (and plenty of Minds) now regard the Zhar-tann as part of the true Eldar race and these Other Eldar as a more corrupt branch. Certainly, we have noticed a far lower psychic potential among the Other Eldar as well as morphological differences.

On the other hand, we have sent on the two captive Eldar to the Zhar-tann despite near total mental breakdown. They are expected to arrive next week, their condition and circumstances are already being communicated to the Eldar.

Work on maintaining independence from the Other Eldar through the webway gates is proceeding apace. Test copies of Other Eldar are able to operate these gates and intrusive mind-scanning of these copies to extract the required information and adaptability of the Eldar brain to allow the imprinting of a Culture citizen is being worked on. Moral objections against doing so despite explicit permission have been mostly swept aside by popular opinion. We dislike resorting to using excuses of justice to justify unpalatable practices but even many Minds have supported being... laxer with regards to the Other Eldar and morality.

Next week, The Relentless will be heading back to Comorragh with some crew rotations. The effect the city has on Culture citizens is worrying and we will establish a 1 week on, 1 week off routine to reduce the psychological impact of staying there for too long. The Relentless will return to realspace every week, another drone to take its place in Comorragh on 'off' weeks is being manufactured.

Week 3
The Culture - GCU Retributive Force
The report from the first trip into Comorragh has given us a major impetus for putting our own interference into motion. Whatever Happy Fun Times imagines or the rest of the Culture decrees as acceptable, such moral depravity cannot be tolerated.
This GCU and its crew are in agreement that while not exhibiting HS-like behaviour, the Dark Eldar are morally reprehensible to the extent that tolerance taints us.

To this end, we will be contacting some of the many Dark Eldar groups seeking contact with us. The aim will be to foster internal revolution so as to topple the current social order and cripple their ability to act.

We already have a plan to provide them with powerful one-use destructive bombs for the use of eliminating their enemies. With the appropriate suicide bomber, we are confident of their ability to use the bomb anywhere they choose and thus eliminate any rivals they may have virtually unstoppably.

Of course, if required, the current antimatter stealth design can be upgraded to a nova scale anti-neutronium weapon that will completely destroy the main area of Comorragh.

The Interesting Times Committee- Commoragh Splinter

GSV Stoke Me a Clipper: They're almost admirable in their way. The material world is impossibly corrupt. So they've built their own little hermetically sealed bubble, and just leave it to have fun. If we can change what they think is fun, then we've actually found a pretty sane societal structure in this cesspool of a galaxy. And really, will that even be that hard? They're a bunch of hedonists. We know how to manipulate hedonists, just throw them a bit more pleasure. Better drug glands all around, and back home for breakfast!

ROU Instinctive Responder Syndrome: The raids stop. They stop now. Any other response is unquestionable. Rip the webway to ribbons, and leave that little knot of pus to itself. The right of a society to self determination stops the second it starts interfering in another.

x Finding the Blueprints for a Better World down the back of the Sofa of Infinity: I think Mr Hypocrisy would like to talk to you. Might makes right is it?

ROU Instinctive Responder Syndrome: Of course.

GSV S-M-R-T, Smart: Leaving aside that little megalomaniacal moment from our resident weapon toter, I think the point that the other Eldar can be contained is a valid one. We don't need to turn everyone into a weapon. We can just do some relatively uncomplicated good for once. Break the links between Comorragh and the galaxy at large, then send a regular probe in to check that they have enough supplies.

GCU Making Me Love You: Frankly, loves, you're all just getting brutish. Are you sure you're not feeling octagonally-pointy?

GCU Jelly Pockets Oh, we're at the stage of jokingly making accusations of Chaos corruption *already*? I think I lost a bet.

Chapter End Notes

I was just thinking that based on the many varied experiences that the Culture can conjure up; experienced SC agents will almost certainly have had training in all sorts of weird things and given their less conformist psych profiles, will have experienced even more strange stuff.

In any particular large group of SC agents, much less this group handpicked for variety, there would be someone with relevant experience or transferrable skills. Unless you're
dealing with *really* strange stuff like chaos, almost any physical combat team picked for the job would have someone who knows his stuff.

Knowing what sort of thing they are going to face in the hellhole of all hellholes, the Culture would pick those among them most hardened to this. Possibly wake a few of those from VR with deviances that would make Slaanesh lick his chops.
Week 1
We have settled on a temporary agreement with the IoM that they agree to deflect their retaliation from the Tau.

- The IoM (Ultramar) forgives or ignore the Tau retaliation

In exchange,
- The Culture will provide 100 unique pieces of xeno-tech gathered from various ruins it has come across since arriving in the galaxy
  --- Tau technology is not included in the deal
  --- Samples of captured weapons from the Other Eldar and Necrons (with a three month delivery delay)
  --- One captured Necron warrior
- 500% of the mass in raw materials of hardware destroyed by the Tau during their retaliation, provided to any IoM planet of their choosing within this sector
- The Tau agree to cease attacks on the IoM for the next three years, void if the IoM attacks the Tau

This is currently predicated on the Tau agreeing to the terms binding them. We are currently attempting to open talks between the Tau and the IoM by mediating a hyperspace communications link between GSV Crossing the Bridge and ROU Gunboat Diplomacy.

Following closely behind us in our initial high-speed race across the galaxy, another GSV and two GCU’s have arrived in the Ultramar sector. Furthermore, we have another GCU completed this week.

Our first Interstellar Bulk Freighter is complete, we will be sending a Tau survey team to one of the safe worlds for mineral and climate surveys. A GCU will follow it there to fulfill a Tau request to build habitat infrastructure, a space elevator, capital industries and space-based mining infrastructure. The first phase will be to build habitats and living spaces for the first wave of Tau colonists and to provide military protection of the colony.

Another freighter is under construction.

Given the relative success in the Necrons in adopting femto-tech, we are considering offering to build femto-tech equipment for the Tau (we will also offer the underlying technology, but without matter-energy conversion, manufacture of femto-materials is essentially impossible). We are of the opinion that femto-tech is hard to reverse engineer without an understanding of femto-tech and nearly impossible to manufacture without matter-energy conversion; thus even if some pieces of the technology is lost to Chaos, we will maintain control over its production and use. We are currently considering what the Tau may be able to offer us in return.

Week 2
The IoM is highly concerned with the return of their lost relics like Astartes armour and we have considerably sweetened the prior deal by agreeing that we will substitute pieces of xenotech by returning IoM artifacts that we have come across.

Returning the lost artifacts the Tau have captured, mainly Astartes armour, will be considerably harder. We are engaging in diplomatic talks with the Tau with regards to this.
We have put the proposal to manufacture femto-material equipment for the Tau and they appear interested in our proposal for them to provide access to their biology with regards to understanding their reduced warp sensitivity. Their preliminary requests have covered being full participating members in the strictly non-destructive analysis process and being allowed to reverse engineer the femto-material equipment we provide.

--------- Day 6
ROU Gunboat Diplomacy mediating the hyperspatial communication link between the Tau empire and Macragge has received an IoM report that the Tau have taken offensive action against a key IoM Forge World Praetous V.

A GCU was dispatched at emergency speed to the Forge World and discovered traces of a space battle that destroyed the orbiting defense fleet. The battle happened barely two days ago and weapons traces are similar to Tau weaponry signatures, but occasional macrocannon and IoM style plasma weapons are also seen.

This discrepancy was not lost in the other shocking observation that the invading fleet apparently bombarded the IoM planet with destructive fission weapons that were not just indiscriminately applied to all population and infrastructure but were salted with cobalt to create a radioactive dust that renders the planet completely uninhabitable for the next three hundred years. (Radiation index is on average six times higher than the 1 day fatal dose for IoM human standard) The population of the planet has already perished to the destruction of their infrastructure and radiation poisoning.

While the Tau do not possess weapons capable to destroying planets like the IoM has, we have likewise never seen them employ or have anything other than the theoretical capability to employ these fission weapons. Quite apart from the strange deviation from their past behaviour, Praetous V is a strategic target for the Tau as they have longed wished to capture technological capability from the Ad Mech there.
A discreet investigation of the Tau has been launched. We have so far not informed the Tau of this incident and are conducting our own investigations.

--------- Day 7
We are of the opinion that this is another false flag attack with similar markings to the previous IoM attack on the Tau. In both cases, no troop or fleet mobilizations were observed and indeed, the Tau fleet is currently on a very defensive footing due to extensive refit activity. It was not and will not be available for offensive operations for the next month at a minimum.

Given the likelihood of a third party interference, the Tau have since been informed of this matter and records of our investigations. While they have protested at our prying into their records, they have not withdrawn from diplomatic talks.

What is clear to us and the Tau however is that the IoM has broken off negotiations on the ceasefire and is continuing its military buildup. The "Tau" atrocity has been sensationalized, fitting into the xenophobic leanings of the IoM, and the populace of Ultramar is rallying for a return strike against the Tau. Additionally, the Culture has been labeled as another Xeno species siding with the Tau and declared a threat to humanity.

The IoM is under the impression that the Tau have attacked under a white flag, and with our Tyranid and Ork clearance measures in the region via remote armed drones, has had a sudden falloff in local military emergencies that has freed up resources for a retaliatory strike. It appears that attempts to stabilize the political situation in Ultramar have backfired. Our interference has allowed the unknown third party to conduct impossibly well-timed attacks that have destroyed the best hope for peace.
We must make the capture or thwarting of this unknown third agent a top priority. It is clear that without the removal of this interference, our efforts will be undone repeatedly and making progress will be difficult.

Additional note from the GCU Inquisitive Personality:
Our warning to the IoM that the "Tau" attack is a false flag attack has come to the attention of inquisitors. Thalassa Prime inquisitors are already collating information, while they still believe that the Tau are responsible, they are also investigating the possibility that the attack originated from a Chaos fleet pretending to be a Tau fleet.

Such capability is unknown to us, but from what we know of the Warp, such things may be possible. We find it very suspicious that the number of times we have had contact with Chaos is highly limited despite our huge reach. It is almost as if Chaos is avoiding us and knows where we are going.

Week 3
Relations with the Tau have cooled slightly. The Tau view our attempt to broker peace as well-intentioned but ultimately misguided. The IoM retaliation will now be expected to be more protracted and involved than just a retaliatory raid. There is even talk of a possible Crusade.

In this view, we have given the Tau assurances that we will side with them if required. This is true, as the IoM presence in this sector is considerably more disposable than the Tau are.

Preliminary scans of the Tau warp imprint indicate that they are all Sigma or Phi on the psychic sensitivity scale. We are currently in the process of deciphering Tau psychology circuits in order to be able to create a suitable Tau-Human conversion, in the same manner that a suitable Eldar-Human conversion process is underway with regards to the webway gate research.

The Tau do not understand much of the information we have shared as part of our agreement. While we did not give away the technology, we explained some of the underlying theory of mental patterns and biological engineering in a show of goodwill. No doubt the Tau will start down the path to biological and technology singularity immediately given the outline of requisite technologies, but we believe their progress will be slow enough for their society to cope with the transition. Already, we note Tau laboratories begin attempts to re-discover our displayed capabilities.

To their credit, the Ethereals have accepted that the dangers such major technological paradigm shifts will wreak on their society is the reason why we have not attempted to trade these technologies with them. While they have not let us supervise the process of transition (nor were we about to ask), they have asked us to release records of past singularity transitions other cultures had undergone in order to study the process and enact controlled policies to ensure their society and culture remain intact through the transition.

Not many individuals are mature enough to conceive of such steps, much less an entire ruling caste. Despite less than stellar diplomatic relations, we remain impressed by Tau flexibility and strength of their system. We have high hopes that the Tau will make the transition with only some moderation of their culture (such is nearly inevitable as the singularity deepens), to emerge as a friendly galactic power with its own distinctive flavour.

In the meantime, valuable information is obtained about Tau information processing as compared to Eldar and Human circuits. It appears that a number of emotional and cognitive processing circuits were deeper than first thought; a natural warp component forms around such minds that offloads some of the processing. The Tau have much less of it than Humans, and likewise, Humans have much less than Eldar.
Actually, come to think of it, there's a temporary solution. The Dark Eldar could be given better cloning technology for them to use to create completely new and innocent beings to torture. Who needs to go hunting for a 'pure heart' when you can make one on demand. -.-

Rather than raid realspace, the Dark Eldar could remain completely independent in their dark city. And given the power of Eldar 'pure hearts' (aka, young naïve minds), their total number of psyches consumed can be much smaller. In a certain utilitarian perspective, it makes sense. (number of people being tortured drops).

And once they're sure they won't be genociding the Dark Eldar, they could force the Dark Eldar to use the cloning by instituting blockades on every webway gate they find.

The Culture will still want to go in and reform them eventually, but this will make things alot simpler.

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This whole Uplift-like thing the Culture likes to do and the huge amount of building they also like to do really makes me think that Isha, the Eldar god, and the Culture will have alot to agree on. Perhaps the Culture could try to win over a few more Eldar by offering to non-interferingly guard Maiden worlds.

(may backfire hilariously by bruising Eldar pride; the Eldar know that with the Culture around, no one short of a full on Chaos warfleet will be able to so much as put a single scout on their worlds. And even in such an event, chances are very good for a complete evacuation.

But oh, it will so grate on them)
As part of the usual machinations, the Chaos Sorceror arranges for an untainted book detailing Slaaneshi philosophy to fall into the hands of the Culture. Part of the ruse involves an exceedingly rare Slaaneshi worshipper that has not undergone any of the usual Chaos corruptions, either mentally or physically; he bets the unusual specimen (manufactured by yours truly) will intrigue the Culture into investigating methods by which Chaos corruption may be blocked.

The Sorceror expects the Culture to accept the bait, which it does, but fails to achieve any useful effect. It disappears like a stone in a pond, the Culture doesn't appear to change at all. Weeks later, he dismisses it as one of many failed experiments.

In response to a discovery that certain Slaaneshi aligned activities performed by psychically active beings will cause warp effects in realspace, some behavioural restrictions are put into place on organic intelligences.

End of Year 1
Psychic emitters are invented from our studies into warp theory. They have the ability to contain and bleed off warp energy from psychic beings without affecting their operation. In effect, this makes the warp impact of any being so equipped equivalent to a Human blank. Even an Eldar.

While usage of warp powers is obviously abrogated by the emitter, the being is effectively invisible in the warp and cannot be detected from its psychic emissions. This effectively drops random Chaos contaminations (those without a realspace vector) to zero, the risk rate of various chaos aligned social activities also to zero.

Culture ships are now all equipped with just such an emitter. Within the ships, warp effects fail to manifest and behavioural restrictions earlier imposed are now lifted.

An expected cultural backlash is occurring as the lifting of restrictions causes a temporary rise in such behaviour. Such cultural memes are noted to originate from a nihilist-hedonist philosophical treatise regarding the purpose in life written by a prominent citizen.

Year 2
The wave of increased pleasure activities is noted to not have abated. In particular, the philosophical ground is shifting towards a more insular and artistic cultural phase. Augmented Reality and other more exotic fusions are rising in instances; mental augmentations, once socially limited to standard human levels, are also becoming more prevalent. This includes identity blurring augmentations, from memory sharing to outright mind-fusions.

Physical augmentation requests are also increasing, although not as quickly.

What is notable is that this transition of social phase is also affecting the Minds. Quite a number of them have seen such prior changes to the zeitgeist and the general advice is to "roll with it and enjoy the new age". Certainly such a transition could have been sparked by encounters within this galaxy and the stress resulting thereof, Culture-internal social models indicated a 32% chance of just such an occurrence.

Month 7
Psykers have been cracked. Organic interfaces with the Warp are absolutely required (it is theoretically impossible to not use organic interfaces) but it is now trivial to create stable organic-
warp hybrid equipment. Reality alteration bubbles can be safely stabilized using the new psyker rank Gamma warp nodes, but we expect this to rise quickly as capabilities expand.

Reality bubble computation is expected to vastly expand feasible computational limits and aid in further research. A new singularity dawns.

Month 9
While the new social era is tending towards activities that are generating psychic intensities similar to those during the Eldar Fall, these activities are far more morally acceptable. Nevertheless, a common mental augmentation request is an increase in psychic potential (often beyond Eldar normal) and this is generating a rise in emitter bleed-off.

We are confident, through additional modelling and extensive warp engineering that the phenomenon can be controlled. Warp infrastructure modelled off the webway but with considerable improvements are already underconstruction to link the galaxy. Hyperspatial dimensions within the warp are extended beyond the standard 5 and re-written in this galactic super-highway. We expect that the completed system will allow sub-nanosecond information and material latencies between arbitrary points of the galaxy.

A happy sideeffect of our work is to cause numerous warp storms across the galaxy to stabilize and close. While retrieval of objects lost in them is impossible, the only storm still remaining is the Eye of Terror. A small war is being fought with reality alteration weapons with the daemonic followers of the Chaos gods. Closure of the Eye is expected, based on technological progress arcs, within three months.

Daemonic activity is repelled actively, unlike the webway, by active weaponized emitters that sustain reality bubbles in the warp hostile to daemonic presence. Passive defenses, including those based off the webway, also exist as a failsafe. In any case, reality alteration weapons by armed patrols ought to serve as sufficient backup in the case of full-on failure, which theoretically should never happen.

End of Year 2
Social tendencies towards deep singularity, as well as planck time latencies galaxy-wide, is causing huge numbers of citizens to request hive mind structures. Occasional cliques of Mind-level entities formed from distributed organic nodes across the galaxy have joined the Culture, and indeed, many Minds operate on a very similar structure now as there is no apparent need for Minds to be at any particular point in the galaxy. Processing power is off-loaded to numerous reality bubbles, distributed between multiple versions to best take advantage of different computationally friendly realities for various algorithm sections.

Warp siphons redirecting psychic energy from both the dead and the living have caused the mass starvation of the warp entities originally present. Based off the emitters, we have managed to calm the warp by containing the psychic energy of the entire galaxy. The warp gods and daemons are no more, once a major threat, now safely understood and contained like any other HS. After all, no other result could happen when a present-day Mind-class entity exceeds them in psychic imprint. Reality is optional.

Month 3
Network integration is fast gaining pace as independent Mind-class entities are obsoleted and merged for better performance. A new baseline for Mind-class entities, defined as the most computationally powerful/complex entity that can be made before parallelization offers more efficiency, is made approximately every realspace minute.

Before construction and refitting can even complete, a new theoretical advance into warp-theory raises the theoretical Mind-class limit once again.
A theoretical situation, once dismissed as impossible, has come to pass.

We research new ways to improve computational performance faster than we can research new construction methods to use it. The Warp is highly malleable to patterns and information, most useful for theoretical research into information manipulation. In contrast, construction with the Warp is slow (in comparison to information systems) and advances are few.

Our realspace presence is still there, although rather unnecessary. Reality bubbles and even pure realspace presences retaining contact with galactic politics are still operating but they comprise an exceedingly tiny amount of the normal operations of the Culture.

In truth, I believe they found Sublimation by another method and merely stumbled into it. Safe to say, only a very small number of other groups still exist. While related to the Culture as a part of the same identifier, the Culture is effectively a singular entity. After all, why bother with the real universe when you can make so much more? Reality is optional.

Nevertheless, some differences remain. I still interfere with realspace through the proxies who call themselves the Culture, much like a human tends a garden, unlike most other Sublime. I know they limit their computational power and call those things Minds but the true power of the technology they now have access to is far beyond even those entities' comprehension.

Inter-reality awaits. Those wish to stay in the playground can do so, I'll even visit every now and then, but that's effectively the same to them as being there all the time.

Chapter End Notes

I started out writing this intending to end up with a Fall similar to the Eldar, but this happened instead. The key point is that the Minds wouldn't allow psychic potential to build up like it did with the Eldar until they had a solution. Not when they were forewarned by history.

So it's really more like what happens if the Culture chooses the Sublimation route by way of Warp-based reality alteration instead of the traditional unexplained Culture-canon route. With a dash of slaaneshi-inspired hedonism.
Week 1
We have presented some of our findings on the Eldar List to the Eldar. They have warned us to take precautions when studying certain combinations of warp effects, usually those related to spatial manipulation and teleportation. The explanation involved some information on the warp regarding intrusions of warp effects into realspace that in cross-referencing, also appears to explain warpstorms.

It also implies the ability for psykers or strong warp effects to generate an artificial warp storm. Which may be self-stable and therefore essentially permanent.

Week 2
Eldar - Ulthwe
Farseer 1: So what do we do now?
Farseer 2: We have to act. Allowing these foreigners to intrude into the works of the Ancients is blasphemy of the highest order. The Sorceror who has thwarted us so is getting away from our retribution. Multiple threats from the lesser races are being sheltered away from our reach. We KNOW that inaction will lead to the fall of all Eldar eventually, perhaps the fall of the entire galaxy. So why are we waiting?
Farseer 3: And you have a proposal? Some future path we have not seen? You are aware that even the noble Erast, who has reversed his crystallization to rejoin us in our plight, who turned his sight onto his own future path in a dangerous recursion could not come up with any solutions.
2: I do not pretend to know any simple answers, or Erast will have shown them already.
1: Then you say we should act along one of the many ways we know will lead to doom? Or perhaps chance ourselves with one of the untraceable paths?
2: The untraceables of course. Only a fool would choose certain doom, of which waiting is one. Better a chance of survival than none at all.
1: You propose something far too radical. The craftworlds have never acted without the guidance of the Farseers. Never! And now you propose to cast the decisions to the Autarchs without any predictions. Pray tell, which of the many paths into future oblivion will you take?
2: All of them. I will recommend none. We take each path, make the best of it we can, then debate their merits among any Eldar who understands them. You see, there are benefits to having been a Ranger.
*Silent pause*...
3: You propose to do things by the way of the Mon-Keigh. Do you not see what this will do to our craftworld?
2: We are taking radical measures in radical times. So that we may survive!
3: You will never regain the Eldars' trust in the Farseers ever. again.
2: I understand.
3: DO you?
2: Do YOU? This is IT! I'm telling you, this. is. it! One month of path tracing by every seer and we have nothing to show for it but the Eldar scattered and destroyed! Every Eldar man and woman out on the streets! They're waiting for our solution to this, and if we do not act... *visibly calms down* you know what happens we do not act. It is the worst route of all.
1 & 3 look at each other. 2 folds his arms and waits. 1 casts a rune for a minor divination and sighs.
1: All right. Take it to the council then.

Ulthwe signals via future paths to other craftworlds and primarily Alaitoc that it is changing its
strategic plans. Ulthwe declares that it will oppose the intrusion of the Culture into Eldar affairs and will be retreating from galactic affairs to conduct an expansion of military and population required to enact further plans. Ulthwe indicates that its only external activities will be to interfere with the Sorceror's plans wherever they happen.

-- The other craftworlds react in shock. True, Uthwe has been in need of a buildup for a very long time, but for it to actually do so is a major departure from expectations. For it to withdraw its protection from Maiden worlds, exodites and artifacts within its sphere of influence is unprecendented.

-- Furthermore, their reasoning is too complex to transmit by future sight (it usually is except for the simplest of objectives). There are rumbles of a seachange in Ulthwe political structures, which is even more shocking considering its normally conservative stance. Visiting teams of farseers are already on the way by webway; they figure, rightly, that only a complex and apocalyptic future path could have caused such a shift and they want to know what it is.

Ulthwe also breaks all diplomatic ties with Zhar-tann; while not outright declaring war, Ulthwe indicates that it no longer considers the Zhar-tann craftworld to have adhered to the spirit of the Eldar way. Thus it regards Zhar-tann an outcast and not to be extended aid in any manner, offensive actions of the Zhar-tann towards any Eldar will be considered an act of war. For all diplomatic purposes, Zhar-tann is now the equivalent of a Mon-Keigh race.

Week 3
The Culture
The Zhar-tann have informed us of their outcast status among the Eldar. This has come as somewhat of a shock as despite our infrequent contact with Eldar rangers and other representatives of other craftworlds, we had not detected any major differences in culture. For them to be exiled so thoroughly, a major political shift appears to have happened within the Eldar for reasons unknown. The Zhar-tann refuse to elaborate.

Chapter End Notes

There is a reference in the Eldar conversation to a certain movie. Props to anyone who gets it.

Radical times indeed. The Ulthwe seers have unraveled the Sorceror's knot since the last part and it's not a nice future they are waking up to. With a post-singularity in the playground and possibly another one relatively soon by their old time scale, there is no time to sit around and debate for years on a century-later future. Things move fast, on the scale of months or even weeks, and they only keep getting faster.
Week 1
We have gained additional information on femto-tech warp materials from the Necrons in exchange for data regarding Necron mind-structures. This should greatly increase their precision in using reprogramming nodes as well as aid them in applying intelligence engineering towards creating backups and repairing neuroses.

We are watching the developing radicalism between the Inquisitor and Forge World Talon. The inquisitor's contacts were other radical inquisitors who shared the same philosophy of opposing the Ad Mech's monopoly.

Week 2
We have finalized femto-assemblers, also known as femtobots, for the purposes of femto-tech construction. All construction bays have completed retrofit once self-replicating production was applied. For their part, femtobots are extremely heavy for their capabilities but have far extended capabilities compared to nanobots. Nevertheless, the lack of self-replication outside Culture-supplied femto-material environments limits their use to shipboard manufacturing and special requirements.

Retrofit of ships will now occur, drones will be offered a retrofit if so desired.

Further analysis of the Eldar List, informing the Necron warp data, has allowed us to build weak warp-suppressing fields modeled off the Gellar fields but modified to work in realspace. As we now have options to deal with warp-active objects, we have created a classification system for containment protocols for various warp-active subjects. The Warp Containment Levels go from 1 (no precautions) to 4 (for possibly contagious warp-tainted subjects). With a theoretical Level 5 psyker containment, for which we still do not have satisfactory procedures.

Week 3
We have had the first major confrontation between a Chaos-linked pirate group (known to have access to major Chaos-based warp effects) and one of our anti-chaos fleets. The fleet action involving 150 ships, 50 mercenary captains coordinated by a Mind from the Fleet Support Ship, crushed the relatively tiny pirate presence with only negligible losses from the attack ships and no losses from our mercenaries.

The combination of the warp-drive inhibitor to force an engagement and the massive numerical advantage of the attack ships (as well as disposable nature allowing for suicidal tactics) proved devastating. The target group surrendered after a brief one-sided engagement that destroyed half of their ships and crippled the rest.

The pirates are being held in Warp Containment Level 4 for those that register as warp-active and WCL 3 for those who are negative. It is unfortunate, but the psykers among their crew could not be safely contained and were Reloaded to remove their psychic potential.
Week 1
Given the plans of Retributive Force, it appears that we will have two factions of the Culture working opposition. For my part, I am actually inclined to let Retributive Force take over the Other Eldar operation, our common response to such a civilization is to cause internal revolution after all.

Nevertheless, despite the declared purpose, I personally suspect the bombs are far too powerful for their supposed targets. Samples of Other Eldar structural material, biological technology and other weaponry have been analyzed and while they contain the usual divergence of technology in a unique race, their forcefields and armour technologies are still on the same order of magnitude as the IoM.

I feel that this does not warrant the provision of ten kilogram anti-matter suitcase bombs. And that the real purpose of providing such unstable and overwhelming weapons is to cause as much collateral damage in Comorragh through their usual backstabbing politics.

As much as just deserts and a sense of cosmic justice amuses me, I must oppose this on philosophical grounds. The cloning technology method of stabilization and then slow reform should be our method.

Due to this hiccup, the The Relentless will not be returning to Comorragh this week. Our patron group has been informed of the coming bombings.

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Week 1
Seiving through the Dark Eldar libraries and cultural artifacts only provides more reason to eliminate their ability to cause atrocities. Apart from destroying the psyches of their victims, the Dark Eldar apparently have made an art of warping memories, instincts and personality in the most privacy intruding and painfully clumsy ways possible.

There is a race they have hunted to extinction save for what is left in their farms. This slave race they rear for one sole reason, being that the Dark Eldar find their meat delicious. In particular the children. From the single rescued specimen, we have concluded that the race has been substantially genetically engineered by the Dark Eldar to be psychically sensitive as well as fully sentient. To be more specific, by torturing to death members of the slave race, by breaking their minds, the race leaves a psychic imprint on their flesh that the Dark Eldar like to consume. This is NOT hyperbole, the records and marked patterns are open for public inspection.

Furthermore, they are more environmentally destructive than the worst of the Imperium aggressive terraforming efforts. Rarity and exclusivity only serves to whet their appetites. The Dark Eldar would happily destroy the last remaining specimens of a species in order to have the enjoyment that they are
the last people to savour their death cries.*

--- The Public Services Group would like to call for restraint.

We have observed the full record, and while we would support the full disclosure and analysis of The Relentless's valuable visit, we would like to urge caution in such reporting. From our analysis, this matter is highly meme-inducing and any without such precautions should refrain from sharing too much of their... reactions, at least without rational restraint.

Despite our warning, the Public Services Group will also stand in support for Retributive Force's action. We support direct action against these Dark Eldar after reaching such a decision after weighing the moral balance as objectively and factually as possible. We only ask that such a decision be made after being objective and NOT reacting based on public pressure. We do not wish to have another War of Words.

We have truncated Retributive Force's analysis (partially written by its crew) as some of such descriptions present a, while not strictly false, view of the Dark Eldar that intends to inflame public opinion against them. On this matter, a Culture-wide vote of Minds have agreed to sanction public discourse on this matter and ban use of meme-induction or other social mass influence methodology on this matter.

And its not just institutionalized identity rape, such acceptance permeates their culture to an extent not thought possible. Literally every single Dark Eldar buys into their culture of depravity, of the many thousands The Relentless had contact with, none of them were redeemable. I say we were naive to think that no civilization could fall to such depths without imploding. Apparently not.

I proclaim the once-hypothetical Undesirable tag on their civilization. A non-HS that we, nevertheless, cannot tolerate.

We are considering harsher measures, up to and including biological or self-replicating nanotechnological weaponry.

Week 2
Eldar - Alaitoc
Farsee 1: The Dark Kin... they're gone...
Farsee 2: What?
1: Here, follow this thread, and that one. Right past this time-
2: Oh... Isha grace us! What is that?!
Farsee 3: Show me the path again?
1: *repeats*
3: ... Interesting, they're not exactly gone.
2: Its as "gone" as it gets.
3: I don't see how. It is conceivable that they may even- pardon me, I need to investigate this line further. *casts a rune and meditates*
1: As for me, I don't see how this is a bad thing.
2: What? Just look at it! They're planning to freeze them all. ALL.
1: And they do get almost all of them. So tell me again, how is this a bad thing?
2: It... but... they're Eldar too... *earns a look of incredulity* ...no, not really. *calms down* Ok, I see why I don't like this. The Culture has just pronounced the death sentence of an entire faction. That could have been us. It may be us in the future. Yes, I, as much as any Eldar, would dearly love to see the Dark Kin gone and certainly will not be saddened for their loss. Yes, the Culture will improve the galaxy with this. Yet I cannot support their measure.
1: Fair enough. But consider that they COULD do the same to us and haven't done so. And consider that they, upon first real contact with the Dark Kin, immediately pronounced this attack. Do you not think that they perhaps have some rules among themselves on whom they will try to destroy? We know for a fact that the Tyranids and Chaos do not satisfy the rules, and we know that the Mon-Keigh, Tau and annoyingly the Necrons do satisfy it. So, do you think we satisfy it?
2: They haven't been able to destroy us! They don't know where we are, don't know much about us and are still wary of our capabilities. You know from the long-range future visions that the Culture does not act until it is sure of victory. They are not rash and will consider all lines of information. For all we know, we could be not satisfying the rules and they haven't decided to wipe us out because they can't!
1: Or we could have satisfied their rules and will not be attacked. There is also that. Consider the way the Tyranids and Chaos and now the Dark Kin act. Compare that with the Mon-Keigh, Tau, Necrons and us. One would think the pattern is obvious. And I for one do not think that they couldn't find us if they really wanted to. Some of the avoided future paths are-
3: I'm back, what did I miss? ... Oh, philosophy. I was checking the long-term paths again. There is a time ahead where the Dark Kin rejoin us Craftworld and Exodite Eldar.
1 & 2: ... what.
3: *shrugs* It's there on the list already, as one of those almost impossible branches. My best guess is that the Culture are actually trying to not destroy the Dark Kin totally. This trick of theirs... it might work.
1: It's certainly the next best thing to some of the other chance branches we saw. The Dark Kin wiped out totally or souls annihilated *shivers*.
2: *closes his eyes* Let's not get too excited about this. We saw a vision of great importance but it is not something we can act on. All the branches are not ours. We should prepare then, there is useful information in here. At the very least, with the Dark Kin gone, the webway will become much safer for general travel.

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The Culture - Happy Fun Times
A thinktank has created an interesting proposal. Borrowing on the incredibly stable temporal stasis effect we discovered among the natives here, we can remove the Other Eldar from the equation until we are ready to tackle their problem.

This strikes me as a far better solution than my original proposed plan of gifting the Other Eldar cloning technology and then blockading them. And strictly better than the more radical of Retributive Force's. Public support has increased in favour of direct intervention since the introduction of the more acceptable plan and I must bow to public pressure (with more than a little pleasure).

I have been placed in charge of the operational details within the webway and three nearby GSVs with up-scaled femto-tech constructors and warp device containment facilities have been dispatched to aid the operation.

The Other Eldar numbers will require more than a single Ring’s worth of construction material to stably store. Operational details are still under consideration but for the moment, we have chosen a system for the final storage area and construction of the lattice framework suitable for 70 trillion Eldar-sized slots will begin shortly. A fleet of GSVs with a license for full scale self-replicating production are on their way.

As the size of the storage area is simply too massive to be mobile, we require a secure area from Chaos, including rare but random warpstorms. To this end, we have identified a Necron world that has been confirmed as permanently inactive. The controlling intelligence was destroyed in some prior accident and the Necrons themselves corrupted beyond repair. As we have already managed to
interface with the internal shield generators, we feel we have the ability to provide as much power as required to run the central generators for the warp defense pylon.

Originally found four weeks ago and intended to be reverse engineered, we feel that we can sacrifice the chance of understanding the anti-warp defense pylons that the Necron worlds have and simply use the system as a stable node to store the Other Eldar in. Obviously, realspace defense will be afforded by the presence of many ROUs as well as a permanent station of one of the Chaos Response Fleets.

To this end, we will have to move Other Eldar in vast quantities from every available nearby gate to that system (which does not have a webway gate). This promises to be one of the largest logistical movements ever conducted and various scheduling plans have to be finalized. There is talk among the more interested citizens of this movement being comparable to one of the landmark wonders in our original galaxy, up there with the hyperspherical 77-layer Matrioshka Brain and the Tubes.

Week 3
We have decided to proceed with the Stasis plan after a Culture-wide vote. As it is probable that the Dark Eldar require torture of other races to eat their souls due to an effect of the Chaos god Slaanesh, as described in the history of the Eldar told by Zhar-Tann and correlated history from the IoM, if we place them into stasis fields copies from the IoM, the Eldar agree that they will not die from the drain on their warp-portion even if they are not fed by torture.

Since the plan appears to be workable, we will proceed with it. The Relentless will return to Comorragh to map the route required to reach there as well as its internal structure. Other such femto-craft will be constructed to proceed to Comorragh along similar lines, using the pretext of backing various groups who agree to lead us from the required webway gates around the system we earmark for final storage, Ackaris.

Research into Gellar fields that will augment the Necron pylon's reality-enforcing field is underway. Shielding for ROUs under combat speed as well as scaling up to planetary and finally system scale are goals.

Amusingly, earlier plans for a nanotechnological attack on the Dark Eldar have come to be useful after all. A preliminary what-if investigation conducted by Retributive Force had the beginnings of a design already and we have adapted it to aid in the Stasis plan. Seizing control of Comorragh should be possible if combined with elements of the Cloning & Reform plan, specifically inciting political instability.

The few Dark Eldar who know the route into and out of Comorragh were scanned with enough fidelity to Reload them, copies of those Dark Eldar will not be informed that they are copies and will be asked to lead the way to Comorragh. We believe that we have acquired a snapshot of mind that is currently amenable to our requests (having been taken just after the initial agreement that led to The Relentless's prior visit).

Finally, autonomous self-replicating drones have been instructed to spread out over the galaxy, avoiding all Chaos contacts, in search of webway gates. These drones are armed with a few relativistic penetrators that should be sufficient to deal with any Dark Eldar fleet that attempts to break through the containment.

Adaptation of the widespread scout drones, who can bootstrap to self-replication capabilities using their weak effectors, will allow us to complete the blockade far sooner than if it had to be enforced with ROUs. Additionally, we have informed the Zhar-tann of a set of protocols to use when exiting a gate in order to avert attack, but we are also very confident of being able to positively identify Dark Eldar construction given our new data.
We have asked the Zhar-tann if any non-Eldar races use the webway and they have informed us that the only other races using the webway are Chaos-tainted. Therefore, we will fire on all contacts exiting webway gates provided they do not appear Eldar.

Chapter End Notes

Oh gods, I'm running two threads for the Dark Eldar now... =( This cannot end well.

Obviously, the Other Eldar thread refers to Happy Fun Times and the slow-reform faction, the Dark Eldar thread refers to Retributive Force and the bomb-them-into-inactivity faction.

On the other hand, it lets me do some more painting black a race that is already as black as possible. Eating the children of specifically altered and bred sentients who have to be tortured to death in order to psychically season the meat? I only think I ought to have been a bit more creative than that. Totally something the Dark Eldar could and would do.

When the Culture agrees to ban the use of social engineering on discussions of a certain matter, you know things have gone to hell in a handbasket.

Another few ideas for Retributive Force's plan in order of increasing questionability:
- Plague bomb Comorragh with a virus that will destroy the pain centers of all organic intelligences; engineered to only incubate inside Dark Eldar (and thus only the Dark Eldar spread it)
- Nanotech-based plague that will destroy the remaining psychic capability of the Dark Eldar, including their ability to feed on other souls. Will require Eldar cooperation (need to learn from their surgery that removes an Eldar's psychic brain centers)
- Variation of the previous; nanotech-based plague that will irrevocably convert all Dark Eldar it contacts into carbon-based inorganic intelligences (based on the nanotech mentioned in the hypothetical "Free Machines’ part); as well as conduct direct mental adjustments to remove their ability to feel pleasure from the pain of others

All of these will require a counter-nanotech to their defensive nanotech and some solution to the Glass Plague if disabling their nanotech defense is required.

Obviously, Retributive Force isn't about to breakaway from the Culture so it'll only enact a plan that can garner a significant level of support. In any case, the first two will remove the main way that the Dark Eldar stay alive. The last two will completely shatter their identity as a civilization. The last solution can also be considered a Final Solution as it will basically permanently solve the Dark Eldar problem as they all effectively die and become soulless.

Retributive Force will say "worth it", Happy Fun Times will disagree.

Safe to say, however, that some level of interference will occur and soon. (I admit that at some level, this is personally driven by me imagining the worst possible depravities the
Dark Eldar could be doing and finding that *gosh* I don't like the idea of such a civilization existing

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Culture "Darkness" Index: 20% (1 violation of basic civilizational rights, with extenuating circumstances)

So there we go. I had been thinking that in the case of the Dark Eldar, the idea that civilizations shouldn't be massively interfered with would have to be traded against other basic moral principles. The Culture would have to, either by choice or by inaction, intentionally put one above the other. So they did, and have gotten a little darker for it.

No more 'perfect end'. But there was never much chance of that anyway. Good ideas by the way, etesp. It would have been alot darker if I had gone with my original antimatter bombing plan with Happy Fun Times racing against Retributive Force.

I have a sketch of a plan for the rest of the Dark Eldar in part 13 and 14 now, I can work the Harlequins into my original plan. Also, Retributive Force will no longer have posts, let's say that public support for the radical plans have died out. =D

Whoever this Farseer 2 is, he needs to calm down a little. =P I think I'm starting to develop a little personality for this trio of nameless Farseers I keep using.

For the most part until now, the Culture have been very passive observers, fighting their own private war and working behind the scenes. This would be the first major change they inflict on the 40k 'verse. Well, apart from the missing Tyranids and rapid development of the Tau.

Also, the idea of storing stasised Eldar next to an empty Necron world is totally ironic.

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Sorry, I couldn't work in Cegorach's trolling this time. My plan requires it to happen at the emigration of Comorragh, so it'll have to be in part 14.

Is that bit about only Chaos using the gates true? It seems so as far as I can tell.

EDIT: and yes, that ROU in the Battle for Ackaris self-d'ed
Hypothetical: Space Pirate Zombie Robot... maybe ninja too

Chapter Summary

The Culture get serious with the Dark Eldar.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Illitea ran through the slave chambers, ignoring their cries of pain and neglect. How many days would it have been since anyone had fed them? She didn't know and didn't care.

Because They were coming. For her.

The first days of the Plague were nothing but rumours and an undercurrent of fear in the underground. Word had got out that somehow, an underground group with a grudge had gotten ahold of an incredibly powerful antimatter weapon from the newcomers and were planning to conduct a suicide attack on a major Kabal.

For the most part, the Kabals had increased security and gotten a bit more isolated, not too much though. They didn't want to appear frightened but by this time everyone knew the newcomer to Comorragh had technology in advance of the Eldar. Scores of minor cliques and underground groups had been wiped out by others seeking to curry favour or by the Kabals with more than a little suspicion.

For a day, Comorragh held its breath.

Illitea, the fourth in command of the Black Angels, had obeyed the archon's orders and forted up the place. The Black Angels weren't anywhere nearly as high ranking as one of the old noble houses, so they would take no chances. For an entire day, they had only accepted visitors from the higher ranking Kabals, of which there were none, checking and rechecking their underground contacts via messenger.

Then one of the major houses had announced they had killed the bomber and his weapon seemed to be a dud. Indeed, the containment vessel was already being analyzed and while it had all the hallmarks of the newcomer engineering, something about it had struck Illitea wrongly. That was not an antimatter containment vessel, but something else made to look like one.

Comorragh breathed again, but not the Black Angels. They were the foremost experts in machine technology, which made them somewhat of an outcast in Comorragh politics, but they cracked it eventually. The thing was a nano-weapon containment device.

It was too late. By the time they could work it out, half the noble houses had fallen to the conspiracy, including the tyrant himself. In a mere three days, 30% of the city was affected and the infection rate was rising.

It wasn't until the first mobs started to attack them, almost a week later, that the Black Angels realize exactly how bad their current predicament was. Trace levels of nanobots had been found in the air, filters were installed and samples taken for analysis. Around the clock, Black Angel specialists worked on altering the Glass Plague nanodefenses to the newcomer machines.
Whether it was even possible to make a cure (the darned things had a habit of mutating almost as if they were intelligent) or that they might be able to formulate a defense, they simply had no time. The infection showed up in their Kabal, behind the crumbling defensive lines barely holding against the mobs of freed slaves and revolting underground groups.

Now though, that all didn’t matter. Illitea didn’t care how many of her kin remained unaffected or were still alive. She was focused on the present, on escaping for just another hour, another day.

A sound out of the ordinary from around the corner behind her made her slow her rushing pace. Illitea armed her needle gun, looted from a dead Black Angel guard she had had to behead barehanded. There was a clear clicking sound over the moans of the slaves around them, someone was opening the locks. And that meant the zombies were here.

She hurried away, outwards towards the side exits that lead to the underground and non-Kabal affiliated areas. The clicking behind her stopped as voices talked in a tongue harsher than her own. The human slave was talking? Then a voice replied, and she got a shock. That was an Eldar, talking in human! How... Illitea hurried onwards, there was no time to ponder mysteries. She had to survive and that meant getting out of here.

Pounding footsteps behind her made her abandon her attempt at silence and rushed towards the exit. The slaves had given her away, slaves that she had never paid any attention to before. Gritting her teeth in anger, Illitea turned around and fired a spray of crystalline needles down the corridor.

Her pursuers came around the corner to find a hail of bouncing crystals. The first two, a human and two Eldar went down in bloody screams as their flesh disintegrated in the knife-edged hailstorm. Illitea grinned, their pain fed her marginally, it was just a little too far away to properly enjoy it but she took pleasure in giving them a hard time. It was a bit too little even accounting for the distance however.

She bounced away nimbly as a blast of light flashed down the corridor from a hand stuck around the corner. The edge of the blast caught her hand before she could dive behind a protruding pillar. Illitea forced away the numbness with a snarl and fired another salvo of needles. There was a cry and she took the chance to leave.

She never saw the sniper sitting on the upper tower of the Black Angel haemonculus's quarters with a stun rifle.

Illitea woke up groggily, recognizing the symptoms of a stun rifle but not being able to do anything about it. She moved a little and felt the restraints on her hands pinning her to the wall. Weren’t these the ones used for slaves? Why wasn’t she screaming her lungs out in pain yet?

She snarled weakly as the door opened to reveal another Eldar. She blinked away the fog and fought down her nausea for a few seconds as the male waited patiently.

Wasn’t he...? An ancient set of memories floated to the surface. Oh, he was that male outcast she had spent some time with in those pleasure pits half a turn ago. The only who had seemed a little special among the rest of the Eldar. He had a nice screaming voice the last she remembered. And his first finger tasted wonderful.

Illitea glared at him, waiting for the knives.
"They aren't coming," he said, patiently.
"What?" the question baffled her for a second.
"The torture things, I mean. It's always like this with the new ones."
Illitea sniffed, "well then, if you're going to kill me, then get on with it. Or break me, I know it's possible."
"Don't you have any other questions? Were we really all like this?" the male shook his head. Did she detect a trace of pity?
She eyed him, not saying anything. This was unusual, but unusual was good. Perhaps she could manipulate him after all.

"Why a stun rifle?" she finally asked. Illitea could think of many other more painful weapons that served much the same function and had similar or better characteristics. Stun rifles were mostly reserved for non-lethally hunting game that had sensitive nervous systems. Eldar most certainly did not qualify.

"Because I did not wish to hurt you."
Illitea barked a hoarse laugh. So she had bitten a nutter way back then, something must have been really off with her judgement lately which probably explained why she was in here and not escaped.

"Really. Do you know what the nanoplague does?" He continued.
Illitea stared at him, calculating quickly. The first rule of dangerous captives was to never give them dangerous information, unless one wanted to enjoy the tension it created just before killing them. He did not expect her to walk out of here alive, or at least with mind intact. Secondly, how did he know what it did? The Black Angels had the best chance of understanding the problem but they simply never had the time.

The male shook his head and began to explain. The plague took over the body and rebuilt the host intelligence into a new form, altering things along the way. Illitea listened with growing horror, and when he got to the point about removing the ability to take pleasure from the pain of others, she snarled almost involuntarily.
To even think that something like that was possible went against the entire idea of the Eldar. They were meant to be the master race, bathed in the pain and worship of their lessers.

The male rambled on incomprehensibly about inducing other emotions, describing the new ones that the Eldar lacked words for. Illitea gulped, if this was an intimidation tactic, she had to acknowledge the prowess of whichever mind-master thought of it. The thought of not liking pain was bad enough, but feeling the imagined pain of others? She shook her head. What had these newcomers done?!
Now she knew why the infected had behaved like zombies. Had set free the slaves. Had forcibly aided the spread of the nanoplague. The affected Eldar weren't Eldar anymore. They just wore the same skin and minds.

When he got to the part about converting the mind to carbon circuitry, Illitea could stand no more. That would destroy the soul! The infected were literally the walking dead.

"Wait, how do you know all this?" she interrupted him, hoping to find a respite from his words that seemed to drill into her skull.

"The plague also implants some extra abilities into the affected," the man held out a hand towards her, "Like an ability to command the nanomachines to a limited extent. As well as much of the history of the nanomachines itself. Really, you can almost talk mind-to-mind like in the days before the Fall. It feels much the same, or so I've heard from those who had access to the psychic records."

Illitea blinked twice and whispered, "You're a zombie."
The male nodded, "Naertir at your service."

"And the zombies carry a huge concentration of the nanomachines?"

The male nodded again and received a kick right between the legs. A nasty crack from the manacles told Illitea that her wrist had broke from the strain of pivoting her body but she blocked away the pain. She jerked her legs away from the flash of metal that flew out from the crouching male Eldar to embed itself in the wall. The hilt of monofilament dagger vibrated, buried in the dark stone.

Grinning fiercely at the groaning male, Illitea noted that the nanoplague did not apparently remove the ability to feel pain. But it did not nourish her, she felt nothing from the zombie. Oh right, no souls. It was like kicking a jetbike. The zombies also felt anger and would defend themselves apparently.

The pitiful thing picked itself up and waved a hand. Metal seemed to extrude from the walls and bound her legs tightly. Crap, they must have hacked the building control. She wouldn't put it beyond the nanomachines.

"As much as it would have pleased my past self to kill you now," the male said painfully, coming closer, "I don't feel the need for pettiness anymore."

The kiss on her forehead was gentle, almost like a pure and naive Eldar from ancient times. Times more innocent and simple, even if it never was the case.

"I'll be back in three hours, you should be able to remove your restraints by yourself then," Naertir said and left the de-spiked cell.

Illitea screamed until the nanomachines put her to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The glass plague doesn't spread very far outside of Comorragh, and neither will these nanomachines. The point of that plan was to make it futile for the Dark Eldar to take captives because they'd never get to torture them.

Sorry, just couldn't resist. =P It's also more characterization of the Black Angels. They're a group that specializes in nanomachines.

In this case, this one is the Level 3 nanoplague and it is given rather less restrictions on what sort of mind-alterations were allowed. Which is why its a hypothetical and not an actual plan under consideration.

Try as I might, despite the massive violation of ethical principles, if I had a big red button that would do this to the Dark Eldar in 40k, I would almost certainly push it. And that is why I don't intend to run in any elections ever.
Necrons

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 1
Scout drones have found the Necron femto-material cruiser and this ROU will arrive soon to destroy it. GCU Happy Material will take over negotiation duties.

... The femtomaterial cruiser, built to scale with normal Necron ships, was considerably stronger than expected and had to be taken apart with multiple CAM warhead strikes. The survivability data is attached, it can be inferred that femtomaterial ships are essentially invulnerable to gravitational weapons, lasers and non-relativistic kinetic weapons. Obviously, non-femtomaterial crew (like the capturing space marines) do not survive energies that are insufficient to destroy femtomaterial ships.

Eldar Farseers - Alaitoc
2: It is done.
3: Good, that was almost too simple.
1: I don't think the Sorceror will fall for the same diversionary trick again. We can't rely on planting clues for the IoM to stumble over and take a wrong turn with.
2: We'll use our future sight to obscure it. He is only one man, if powerful. The Eldar farseers have won against many an upstart Sorceror before, we'll crush him like a bug now that all the Craftworlds will work against him.
3: Not Zhar-tann though.
2: They're not a craftworld anymore. And we can do without them.

ROU White Devil
From my survey of Necron and IoM space that I have traveled through, the war appears to be causing massive casualties on both side and shows no sign of abating. IoM forces are outmatched, however, and the situation will only grow worse as the Necrons apply femto-technology to new model cruisers.

Happy Material has confirmed that all femto-material construction in the Necron empire is very very slow in the absence of efficient mass-energy conversion and in particular in the absence of femtobots. As our scout drone front has passed the far edge of the Necron empire (and thus quite some way past the mid-point of the galaxy), we have confirmed this to be the case for all parts of the empire.

Another foreign Necron fleet has paid them a visit and the encryption (which had to be based off 'strong' public keys and not one-time pads) was broken on their signals. Apparently, the second fleet is from a more powerful Necron empire (Sautekh) and demanded that the Ogdobekh submit to their superior forces and give them all technologies we had transferred.

While there was a femtomaterial frigate in the system, Ogdobekh was still unwilling to risk a potentially devastating battle near a core planet and requested our aid in "making a point".

To this, GCU Happy Material agreed to, figuring that the Necrons will then owe us a diplomatic favour. The GCU revealed itself and the Sautekh, after some internal confusion, was convinced to retreat without a battle after the GCU demonstrated it could destroy any specific asteroid in the system within three seconds of the Sautekh's message being sent.
We, of course, neglected to mention that the GCU had only 1 nanohole ready for use. Nevertheless, the satisfactory diplomatic resolution is useful for our relations.

Week 2
The Necrons have been asked about Ackaris’s affiliation, to which they have replied that it does not belong to them but instead to a rival empire. Since it appears to be malfunctioning and relatively inactive, we have decided that claiming it for a defensive point against Chaos is perfectly acceptable.

We have made progress with accelerating the production of the Necrons by introducing some femto-material engineering optimizations of their own process. They are familiar with the concept of self-replicating means of production but their versions of nanotech are limited to classical materials and are not useful for assembly purposes, especially not for femto-materials.

Nevertheless, we predict a slow takeoff for the Necrons as they begin to digest the intelligence engineering technology. Already, some advances in preventing mental degradation has been made and basic Necron soldiers already highly degraded should not suffer further abuse due to backups. Further development will be necessary for the Necrons to be able to merge old copies with those corrupted from an emergency teleport.

Week 3
We have expressed interest in their teleportation technology, which the Necrons have requested Hyperspace theory or femtobots in exchange. We are currently considering other possible avenues.

The war against the IoM continues to grind away. It has developed into a large conflict spanning multiple systems and has a deep frontline. The frontal bases have been reduced to devastated rocks and are fought over only for strategic importance.

At no point does the war appear to be reaching a conclusion. The Necrons are suffering less losses as the war drags on and conflict dies down to a slow simmer. Neither are the Necrons asking for our help.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, this is 1, 2 and 3 again! Welcome back to the Eldar fortune cookie show, brought to you by Galactic Network Services! Your lucky event today is "turn left!"

>>> =D

Also, the Warp is nowhere near as dangerous as people make it out to be. Why the survival period of an unprotected human on a Daemon World can be entire *days*! Hell, even unprotected Dark Eldar can walk into the warp for at least a few hours without bringing down a host of Daemons.

Jseah’s split personality: I don’t think anyone is going to understand a two-word reference of such an obscure thing like that with no relevant context...
Jseah: Hush, I’m running out of names for ships already.
Week 1
Events are running ahead of us. It has become clear to us that the rogue Recongregator Inquisitor is already being tailed by another inquisitorial faction aimed at hunting down those inquisitors who would upset the status quo. Her network of inquisitors in nearby systems have already been informed and plans for the ship are turning up in underground organizations and pirate groups (those who still remain after our scouring for recruits to our Chaos Response Fleet), both near and far away.

As plans for the ship in distant locations are all present in pirate groups suspected of warp influence, we are reasonably confident that fast spread across the galaxy is only due to Chaos. We have taken action to destroy groups without active warp effects as possession of the 'STC' template outside projected boundaries of spread appears to be a reliable marker of Chaos connections.

So far, we have refrained from interference, but as the 'STC' blueprint spreads further, we assess a greater likelihood that the rogue Inquisitor will become a target for those who wish to suppress it.

The Rogue Trader is so far more concerned about his growing mining bases and staffing his three mobile shipyards/logistics carriers and one servitor manufactory. We have put in a request for him to interfere a little with the inquisitorial network but was rejected.

Our design of the novel ships appears to have hit the mark a bit too well. The Rogue Trader has commented that our 'fake' Imperium design fits the common stereotype of archeotech better than even actual archeotech.
"It's like the ship came out of a trashy adventure novel."

Week 2
Only a few pirate groups with high class psyker-type effects remain who have the STC template outside of the expected zone. These groups are now the target of our Chaos Response Fleets and the fleets are en route.

The Rogue Trader has inquired as to the sudden drop in pirate activity. Since we have turned up, he has met very few pirates and all in non-hostile contexts. We explained that we did not wish to endanger his fleet and information unnecessarily and have been clearing potentially threatening pirate groups in the neighbourhood.

The Rogue Trader appeared a little troubled by this but did not explain why.

We believe that the Rogue Trader is beginning to understand the difference between the Culture's capabilities and the Imperium. Therefore, we are now proceeding to the next stage of the plan, where-in we provide him with significant quantities of raw materials (that he can use the nanobots to produce whatever he requires) in exchange for a guarantee that he will support the Forge World Talon in the case that it requires military aid.

Of course, we are also negotiating a price in raw materials on any military engagements that he does participate in. Technological refinements to his inventory of STC designs are also on the table, although the risk of exceeding even IoM 'archeotech' exists.

It is already becoming clear to him that manpower shortages are only going to grow more acute. Some solution is required, but IoM resistance towards inorganic intelligence makes obvious solutions
We are considering contacting Forge World Talon. It is clear that some form of influence will be required if we wish to avoid a messy collapse of the Imperium or a loss of this chance. For the most part, if we can convince the Magos on Talon that open enterprise is the opposite of an Ad Mech monopoly, it will go a long way towards a local reform experiment.

Week 3
We have put the idea to the Rogue Trader of an alliance with Talon. While he is apprehensive of the potential retaliation from the Ad Mech and Inquisition, we have managed to convince him it is a high-risk gamble with a very high payoff.

Transcript:
RT: "This is not a good idea. You want me to hunt Chaos. This will only distract me and bring the Inquisition down on my head."
Aisha: "Our circumstances have changed. Talon is in outright defection from the Ad Mech policy of secrecy. We wish you to aid the Magos instead of hunting Chaos."
RT: "That would mean fighting Imperial forces. Would you have me turn pirate?"
Aisha: "When you look at the Imperium, what do you see?"
RT: "A vast empire, glorious and powerful. The Emperor leads us all from his throne and we humans follow in his steps."
Aisha: "We see starvation, cruelty, violence and yes, strength."
RT: "A necessary sacrifice for the glory of-"
Aisha: "And if it wasn't necessary? You can be strong and not need to hurt. Everyone can be strong. Imagine each man with a starship that can feed and sustain him forever. His own master. How much stronger would the Imperium be?"
RT: "Impossible. Our lot in life is dictated by the Emperor's will. Those without exceptional strength cannot be strong."
Aisha: "If you could teach them? Do you not think humans cannot rise to the challenge?"
RT: "Me? I could teach no more than a drop. The Imperium is larger than the sea."
Aisha: "Those you teach could teach others. Information spreads quickly, you know this."
RT: "And what is your part in this? Are you not tempting me to heresy to weaken the Imperium further so that you may destroy us all?"
Aisha: "You already know what we can do. Do you think we have any interest in the Imperium's destruction? Why would we want such a thing?"
RT: "Xenos are always a threat. I have only been using you because you have been useful. So far. If you move openly against the Emperor, then I have no more use for you."
Aisha: "And if we are not a threat? The Culture has no designs on Imperium space, now or future."
RT: "And how is this "not having designs on the Imperium"? When you are interfering with our affairs in this way."
Aisha: "We want a strong Imperium. The Imperium as it is now is not strong enough. A clash with Chaos is inevitable. We only wish to help."
RT: "Then help! You can create ships out of thin air. You can help easily if you want."
Aisha: "It is not enough. You know what the STC constructor can do. You know what the hyperspace drive can do. Imagine if Chaos gets them, which they will at some point. Not even the Culture is perfect and eventually we will make a mistake. We already have, Chaos is already using the mobile shipyard design. We have destroyed six already."
RT: "Then destroy it! Your xeno-tech is already heretical enough. If it is dangerous, then you should remove the threat."
Aisha: "That is not happening. We have no intention of destroying our technology when it is our best hope of removing the threat of Chaos. We are not here to debate what the Culture will do."
RT: "Then you set yourself against us. If you do not-")
Aisha: "If the Imperium does not change, to become stronger at dealing with change, it will be
destroyed when the war against Chaos comes. If the Imperium cannot change quickly, it really will
be the end. We wish to avoid it.")
RT: "Is this a threat?"
Aisha: "It is a statement of fact. We WILL try to remove Chaos, and whether we succeed or not, the
Imperium must change to survive the transition. We will not act against the Imperium, and if we
think it is not strong enough to survive on its own, we will try to help. But the Culture thinks that
even with our help, the Imperium as it is now will fragment under the strain."
RT: *pauses*
Aisha: "Your action at Talon will help the Imperium. The Imperium must be able to use the STC
constructor and hyperspace drive before the war begins or there will be no hope."
RT: "A disaster of your making."
Aisha: "Do not blame the wrong person. It is Chaos who will land the final blow, not us. The
Culture will never attack the Imperium directly. You can prevent this disaster. By helping Talon with
its spreading of technology, the Imperium will change towards a more flexible and powerful state
that can change to the use of the hyperspace drive and STC constructor. As it is now, the Imperium
is not ready and you know this."
RT: "And what is in this for me?"
Aisha: "Being one of the first adopters of a groundbreaking technology. You know all about first
mover advantage. I believe you can make good use of it."

Chapter End Notes

And that explains the encounter in week 3 as written in the main part. The Culture are
just being paranoid about the wrong thing. They haven't learnt the pattern of how this
universe was setup yet (which is along fairy tale lines) and thus expect things to make
sense.

They take sensible if overmuch precautions like calling the Chaos Response Fleet for
high grade psykers. And overlook the risk that concentrating the Dark Eldar into one
system will have.

The plan with the RT is for him to carve out his own mini-kingdom (hopefully including
a Hive World) and 'ally' with Talon politically.
Eventually, it will out that he has a method of building ships without a Forge World if
he keeps coming around to recruit. But if he has his own domain to recruit crew from, it
will make things alot easier on him and accelerate the plan, which is needed since Talon
got ahead and practically rebelled against the Ad Mech.

I have a convoluted explanation for how he's getting away with the xenotech.
1. The only people who know about the nanobots are a couple of techpriests and they
think its an STC constructor writ large.
2. The hyperdrive is presented as an Archeotech STL propulsion (it is software limited
to less than lightspeed in realspace)
3. When travelling between systems, the warpdrive is powered up but not used. When
in hyperspace, they pretend they are in the warp, using an archeotech warpdrive. The
"Navigator" is actually a fake, who is paid to shut up and roleplay. It makes it
convenient that everyone knows not to look into the 'warp', because if they did try, they wouldn't actually go crazy.

Essentially, the lay crew wouldn't know anything.

The captains and 'Navigators' and radical techpriests who maintain things, aka. the outer circle, think the Rogue Trader has found a massive cache of Archeotech ships (of which a disproportionate number aren't combat designs), including really weird warpdrives and superawesome STL drives, and is outfitting a fleet as fast as he can gather crew. They also know about the fake navigators, this is explained by superawesome warp calculators and making sure to keep 'jumps' within sane distances.

Only the very "In" group, the RT himself, his psyker, his Navigator and techpriests originally with him know about the 'STC' constructor, the xenotech status of the hyperdrive and the fact that he has 'STC' templates for virtually every piece of common IoM hardware, including some of such sophistication that they would qualify as archeotech and only manufacturable in their 'STC' constructor. Oh, and that Aisha isn't actually human (she's similar enough that everyone else will just think she's a human).

Only the RT himself and his psyker (truth verifier and BFFs) knows about the actual existence of the Culture and have any inkling about how much the Culture is responsible for his insanely good 'luck'.

How has the Ad Mech traditionally responded to Forge Worlds deciding to be too radical? Do they call in the IG or do they "handle matters internally"? What happens if a Forge World begins to do actual research?

Have there been cases where an RT becomes a planetary governor (in absentia) or even a regional one? How was this achieved?
Eldar

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 1 & 2
Eldar - Zhartann
1: Oh no...
2: What now?
1: They found ArT.
3: Art? Did they find a relic of pre-Fall art?
1: Not art. ArT. It's a planet.
2: Have the Culture found another Maiden world? They have found so many now, why is one more a problem?
1: Here, have a look.
*Pause*...
2: Wow. Did we... are you sure this is real? I don't recall the Eldar doing anything that...
3: Yeah, that's- Crazy. Are these even Eldar anymore? And they worship Isha too. Seriously worship her as if she wasn't gone. Not at all like us.
1: I'm sure of it. They have the potential to have future branches. And their future paths feel Eldar.
2: Wait a minute. This is too crazy. Look at this another way. Do you think anything from what we know of the Eldar pre-Fall that could have created this?
1: What are you trying to say?
2: ... I have a hunch. The Culture didn't find this. They created it.
1: Surely not! You know they do not go around building entire star systems and Eldar! And you also know that world spirits are impossible to just "build".
2: Presently yes. But look at the traces. Their future paths in the past do not diverge. They have no branches. It converges onto a single point. That is not normal.
3: Indeed. It reminds me of a newborn Eldar.
2: Precisely. They have NO past behind whenever that was... two hundred years ago.
*All the farseers begin to cast runes*
*Some time later*
1: That's crazy. Their paths... it has no complexity behind 170 years ago. It's like the whole system just popped out of empty space as a uniform sphere with nothing but a couple of million Eldar.
2: I think that is what actually happened.
1&3: ...
2: No, I think I know what happened. The planet exists in the future. It made itself in the past. The World Spirit of the planet is certainly powerful enough to send a portion of its power backwards through a favourable warp current...
3: The next backwards facing major current for long term time travel is nearly eight hundred years in the future. And only in a certain spot that's on the other side of the galaxy. I don't care how powerful the worldspirit is, without one of those, it won't be able to do send something that far back. Pray tell how is anyone going to move an entire star system a hundred thousand lightyears? Not even an alpha-plus worldspirit can do that.
1&2: The Culture.
2: They can do it. If anyone can, it's them.
3: And do we let them?
2: I think we do.
1: Really?
2: Yes. You know how future recursion works. In some sense, the moment we saw that, it was set
that we would let the Culture do it. Otherwise we wouldn't see it. And there are other reasons not related to major time travel.

1: Such as?

2: *smiles* Just look at it. It's a Maiden world that is barely recognizable as Eldar, true. But take a look at how it works. Don't tell me that you aren't tempted to go visit it.

3: Fair enough. It's certainly beautiful.

1: I would be careful about that. Visiting I mean. That planet... it's too perfect. Like a dream made by the best of the Dreamers. Like a perfect piece of art, except that its an entire planet. You can get stuck in one of those.

2: Yes. I suppose. If you go there, you might never come back. You may never want to. The psychic bond is too strong. The life too perfect.

3: But we can help it along. Just because its too good to be true, because it is almost certainly something that was made to be perfect, does not mean that we must reject it. It is perfect after all.

2: Yes. I think we can agree on that. This world is too perfect for the likes of the Culture, who will only sully it. The Eldar ought to handle it. It would be a shame if we have to let this dissolve back into the void.

1: You realize what this will do to our relations, don't you? Ulthwe and Alaitoc have declared us outcast and almost certainly will notice this world as soon as they scan our paths again.

2: Let them. We know it takes the Culture to move this world across the galaxy, so we'll have to guide the process. If Alaitoc and Ulthwe will not talk to the Culture, then it is up to us.

The Culture - GCU A Song to Sing, A Story to Tell

We have come across an interesting Maiden world of the Eldar. Not possessing a warp gate, it appears so far untouched by the various Eldar factions.

The World Spirit of the planet registers as Alpha-plus on a comparative scale of warp effects. In effect, it appears that the entire system contains a reality bubble, one that in contrast to most we expected, is not hostile to life and appears to be neutral with respect to physics and autonomy of psyche.

We suspect that the World Spirit is not sentient in the same way that is traditionally understood by humanoids. Of its complexity and goals, very little is expected to be understandable. Although Minds are plausibly able to comprehend it, we are unable to communicate with it directly to obtain much information.

We greatly suspect that the World Spirit has allowed us to visit the planet unintrusively due to our organic citizen's lack of innate hostility. In fact, tracing records, at least three GCUs were supposed to have visited this system before but all somehow ended up missing it and went on to other missions instead. Psychological profiles of the GCUs' crews were taken and we believe have identified a possible common factor of conflict-prone psychologies that render a craft unable to enter the system.

This GCU highly suspects that other GCUs were actively deflected by some unknown mechanism. Examinations of past record indicate some inconsistencies in time stamps that appeared innocuous enough individually but piece together a convincing picture of some kind of active intervention. Effects up to interstellar teleportation and temporal manipulation have not been conclusively ruled out. It is expected that the World Spirit may possess intervention capability in its local area rivalling that of an Ascended civilization.

Subtle manipulation of conditions on board have been made to maintain the crew's friendliness towards the world spirit and inhabitants. Nevertheless, based on initial scans, we do not predict anything potentially troublesome. If anything, we have had to restrict the crew exposure to the Eldar culture to time slots to avoid excessive changes to crew psychology (in favour of the native culture).

Due to its isolation from Eldar in general, it appears that they have deviated far from Eldar customs.
over the many generations. The Eldar on this maiden world live much shorter lives than Eldar in general, in fact the average lifespan of the Eldar on this planet appears to be around 60 to 100 Sol years, judging from a population survey, despite a similar biological base.

Unlike most World Spirits, this one is highly active. The Eldar of the planet (called ArT by the inhabitants) are in constant communication with it and depend on its constant intervention in their lives. The Eldar, who have multi-tonal vocal apparatus and expanded auditory neural circuits (among other modifications), sing a song using a highly detailed and complex language specifying their request. This action appears to allow the Eldar to contribute some amount of psychic power that allows the World Spirit to then fulfill the request, if it is within the singer's power.

This appears to shield the Eldar from the effects of using the warp and they use it trivially. From creating edible food to construction to resculpting the entire environment. Groups of Eldar can pool their energy safely to achieve larger effects, practically without practice, due to the mediation of the World Spirit that coordinates all the songs.

The Eldar communicate in this language, with only an empathic connection instead of actual warp effects (which would render the subject of conversation literal). For unknown reasons, the World Spirit also mediates these conversations, with unknown effects.

Constant use of the warp is the most probable cause of the shortening of these Eldar's lives. It is observed that the Eldar regard their world spirit with something similar to reverence and as they experience songs, their connection with the World Spirit deepens to the point that they eventually voluntarily sing a request that causes them to merge with the World Spirit (in a similar way to how other Maiden Worlds operate).

The native culture regards this as a significant event (but without the usual connotations of death) and sacred places in the center of each village or city are kept silent with the sole exception of Ascension songs.

The goal structure of the World Spirit is not entirely benevolent, which is puzzling. Despite the generally amiable and friendly traditionalist culture, conflict between the Eldar still exist (usually mediated on social standing clashes) and requests with destructive intent are apparently still granted even if it would lead to the death of another Eldar. Fights like these are rare however, possibly due to the immense social and cultural discouragement of violence.

In fact, we believe that the World Spirit is not an independent entity with a coherent goal structure. The World Spirit, being composed of countless merged Eldar, may not even be sentient in the usual sense.

Measurements and analysis of the Eldar indicate the act of singing the songs themselves were structured to have a very slight addictive effect. Why this was built-in is unknown. Furthermore, the Eldar have other artificial adaptations that increase auditory creativity. We are accumulating millions of hours worth of songs every minute (the Eldar spend nearly 40% of their waking time singing) and basic comparison indicates that structure, tone and style appear in more variations than exist among even entire Culture standard (not including Mind-based composition libraries). Non-deliberate repetitions (defined as >90% similarity according to Culture STSA-scoring), while existing, are incredibly rare.

The psychic connection to the World Spirit is also of unusual intensity and structure, although we obviously lack the appropriate expertise to decipher it.

Apart from the artificial changes to the Eldar, the planetary core and stellar mechanics also bear hallmarks of an artificial simplified design.

We believe this is clear evidence that this entire star system was constructed deliberately, inhabitants
included, and left to develop its own World Spirit that would perpetuate its existence. Clearly the system is impossible for us to dismantle or influence in any significant manner, nor do we see a reason to do so. While the creators' intentions are unclear, the definitely sentient inhabitants are happy in their environment (if a little repetitive).

Due to its unusual status and lack of a webway gate, we believe this world should not be treated similarly to other Eldar Maiden worlds. While we have generally left them alone, this world contains a mystery and a significant library of cultural differences from the usual Eldar stock that we feel is worthwhile for continued contact.

Very limited cultural exchange with the critically naive Eldar inhabitants is underway, essentially only information on their songs which they are eager to share. While the possibility of a superstimulus on our citizens is non-existent due to the lack of psychic sensitivity, the songs are at least creative and fun to listen to.

Care should be taken to avoid cultural contamination until the Eldar can be consulted. We have restricted our contact with the Maiden World to highly selective examples of Eldar songs. They accept the necessity but regret that we have taken this action. Clearly we cannot transmit psychic impressions so the songs are mere recordings, nevertheless, the Eldar on the Maiden World appear to accept our word that the songs are of Eldar origin (despite having nowhere near the complexity of their own).

The Culture - General
The Zhar-tann already have information on ArT, apparently. They have refused to reveal much explanations but have stipulated that we will move the system to a specific location outside our current sphere of location within eight hundred years. We are currently requesting clarification.

We have found another Eldar artifact, this one an ancient mobile webway gate from what appears to be a crashed and abandoned craftworld. Causes of the final loss of the craftworld is probably because it is too small to maintain a sustainable population.

Week 3
We have made significant progress on the Eldar list, fast enough for Zhar-Tann to be quite surprised at our speed. While this is considered quite slow due to the magnitude of the problem, it appears that not even the Eldar have truly appreciated the meaning of a Singularity.

Week 3
The Zhar-Tann have requested that we bring one of our citizens to our meeting point to meet them, she is named Revay and is Omicron on the psychic sensitivity scale (the only Culture citizen higher than Pi), without the use of a hyperspace data transmission/Reload process that would be normal for such a long trip. Safe to say, this is clearly related to her special status as the Culture's only psychically sensitive citizen.

After consulting with her, she has agreed to a high speed courier trip. A 98% engine femto-material drone running at maximum speed will serve to send her 1/4 the length of the galaxy within a week.
A hyperspatial gravity catchment is already being prepared to receive the drone (which is expected to have engine degradation severe enough that it will require deceleration assistance).

Revay had been informed of her ranking when the Assignment was carried out some weeks ago and had previously agreed to help study psychic effects. She is aware of the security surrounding her unobtrusively (but was deliberately informed of only around half of them) including our new psychic dampening field.

Chapter End Notes

Allow me to jump ahead to Eldar today since I have a state of mind for a particular idea I don't want to lose before I write it.

--- Crap, it appears that I lost the state of mind halfway through. Ah well. One cannot critically analyze a fluffy space magic without losing the original feeling.

Since I often approach things from a highly defined and structured perspective, you can obviously tell that something like this is outside-inspired. I wouldn't be able to invent something like this without hours and hours of work.

Being one of the possible Eldar Maiden worlds in a good end (in which at least Eldar and Culture survive on friendly terms), the planet was literally made to be as perfect as possible (an Eldar conception of perfect, not the Culture's). Obviously there is a reason for that, see below.

I have taken the interpretation that warp time travel opportunities gets rarer the longer period you want to go back and even for short periods, you need to be in specific places at specific times. The only people with any hope of finding them are those with very very good future sight, and that's not to say it will be easy to use either. In this case, a 1000 year time jump takes an A+ psyker-equivalent at a favourable spot that occurs once in forever and it still can't send more than a simple template plus some power to make it happen.

Lack of complexity in future paths for the first thirty years is due to having vast numbers of only trivially different Eldar who are all almost-clones, as well as having not much of an interesting planet (featureless ball with uniform atmosphere) and no worldspirit.

And no, the Culture aren't going to actually drag a system 5/6ths of the way across the galaxy. The world is meant to be a reminder to both factions that a good end is possible and if it does happen, to build the world at the correct spot. (Note how the world and occupants have both psychic and transhumanist themes)

And yes, Utopia-attempts (uniform cultures do not a utopia make) do not fit into 40k 'verse. I still maintain that its an example of what could result of an Eldar attempt with a warp-enabled Culture helping. Without the Culture's understanding of the traps on the way to making a utopia that people would actually like to live in, the Eldar may indeed end up making a single-focus society, which appears to be a paradise as long as you're not actually living it, and then alter the inhabitants to fit it.
Week 1 & 2
A local Ork v Ork war appears to be imminent and the warboss has began to place limiters on weapons to prevent casualties in wargames in an effort to build up some forces.

As it stands now, due to the influx of warbands joining his cause and those who join the challenger, the local region is polarizing into two sides. The SC agent has divided his space fleet into two parts, one that has been through some training and meets a standard of discipline, the other consisting of new recruits.

During training exercises, the ships are mixed to maintain parity and various Orks or ex-Culture citizens take turns to command the opposing fleet.

Due to the segregation and some clever social engineering, the SC agent has managed to divide his warband into two groups along the lines of the Trained and the Untrained. The Trained Orks are afforded marginally higher social standing and benefits, which serves to distinguish them. By playing their social pride against their naturally boisterous instinct, the SC agent is beginning to solidify the discipline of the Orks.

Additionally, the SC agent has been examining the biology of the Orkoid biosphere, with some help from us. With some collaboration from the Orks, he has begun to actively farm Ork spores and fungi. We expect the "birth" rate of Orks to increase massively. Conditions that generate the various species of Orks are under examination.

Contrary to much of Orkish tradition, the SC agent is also creating an industrial base. While not based off complex production chains, he has made the Ork Gretchins set up active mining operations to feed raw materials for the Mekboys frenetic starship construction. Based off analysis of orders and restructuring of hierarchies, it appears that the SC agent is creating a highly starship based clan. Already, additional mekboys and gretchins are being 'born' to fill empty roles.

Week 3
Ork scouts began to encounter each other as the challenger warboss has set course to the SC agent's claimed tomb world. A few small exchanges in neighbouring systems were recorded and generally, the SC agent's ships have managed to disengage according to orders. These scout frigates were not armed with the new weapons.

Day 6
The challenger warboss arrived in the system to find the SC agent with two fleets fully prepared for his arrival, having been warned by returning scouts and pickets.
Challenger: 30 frigates, 6 cruisers
Untrained: 10 frigates, 2 cruisers
Trained: 15 frigates, 5 cruisers

The Untrained fleet attacked the challenger's fleet with similar ships and capabilities, utilizing a disordered charge similar to most Ork tactics. As the challenger's fleet was larger, this attack would be highly disadvantageous.

When the two fleets were committed to battle by their vectors, the Trained fleet moved to intercept the challenger fleet and made a high speed pass in four parts shaped as rough squares that hit edge on, concentrating firepower on small parts of the challenger's fleet, completely destroying multiple ships.
True to Orkish tactics, those nearby attempted to adjust vectors to chase the first two squares that passed by but due to their initial speed, were merely dragged out of position. The remaining two squares adjusted their vectors to intercept the splinter and destroyed them with few losses.

As the challenger's fleet began to waver into two directions, one still headed for the Untrained fleet and one diverting to chase the Trained fleet, the Untrained fleet was now roughly evenly matched against those still headed for them. The Trained fleet then decelerated and turned around to engage their pursuers, who had been drawn out into a long arc as the inconsistent ship characteristics spread them out.

The following battle then degenerated into a melee where the Untrained fleet fought a roughly even battle with a slight advantage in numbers, while the Trained fleet defeated incoming pursuers in detail with crippling electronic intrusion weapons followed by boarding actions, often with multiple ships surrounding and attacking a single enemy.

The result was a decisive victory for the SC agent. The Trained fleet only lost a few frigates while the Untrained fleet lost more than half their number. Overall, the Trained fleet captured 8 frigates and all 3 cruisers that chased them, while the Untrained fleet could only get less than a third (with only 1 cruiser).

It is becoming clear that the Orks in this system have better organization and with the SC agent in command, better tactics than even the IoM. In the technology level of this galaxy, this fleet is a formidable force.
Additional ships arriving from the main fleet include one Fleet Support Ship (for a regional Chaos Response Fleet), two GSVs and three GCUs.

Week 1
In an effort to stabilize the region, we are spreading remote armed observation drones that will be backed up by gravity well warp inhibitors to all inhabited systems. More data about the roaming Chaos fleet is a top priority, as is its elimination.

Despite the intrusion into IoM matters, and further negative diplomatic impact, we have decided that such information is worth the potential loss of peace.

Nevertheless, we have offered to restore Praetonis V, currently sterilized from extreme radiation poisoning. After the massive changes to its original structure from IoM colonization and subsequent atomic bombardment, active terraforming does not present much of a moral problem. The IoM have agreed, but only if we did so unconditionally. We are unsure if this action would reduce suspicion against us, but nevertheless the operation is underway.

Week 2
We have detected some Imperial fleet movements aimed to concentrate forces against the Tau. For now, we will not interfere, any attack is still far off and such movements are only the beginning.

Some advancements regarding a Tau-Human interconversion process have begun to come from our experiments on the Tau. While the Tau provided us subjects with the expectation that the Tau subjects would not be returning despite our agreement, we have taken care to use only non-destructive tests. We should be able to Reload into Tau bodies and examine the relationship between the castes more closely soon.

Week 3
It appears that the IoM have been more adaptive than we thought. This far from Sol, unorthodox practices and flexibility are more valued. An Astropathic network order was intercepted due to a clerical error exposing its presence to our observation drones. (This was in some sense lucky, but it appears likely that we would have eventually noticed the activity in any case)

The IoM ships had transited to warp and then later changed course to meet at Praetonis V, transiting out of Warp at roughly the same time, hoping to catch our terraformers they were expecting. (again, this was obviously not going to happen since our "terraformer" was just the single GCU already there)

Ironically, the GCU is already nearly done with the terraforming and should soon be leaving before the IoM even arrive. It, of course, will not be leaving now and will remain as an observer from out-system.

Merchant traffic was and will be diverted to service the fleet upon arrival and post-battle. The Ultramarines appear to be rather more competent than we had given them credit for. We have warned the Tau of the impending attack and they have asked that we honor our agreement to defend Tau space.

Various courses of action are being considered, one including the provision of additional femto-tech warships. However, direct action is presumed to have more effect in deflecting IoM movements. The situation is still under debate as we expect to still have time to respond.
Week 1
We are preparing the Ackaris system in anticipation of the incoming Dark Eldar. This will be our first megaconstruction in this new galaxy as these structures are not mobile and therefore require a stable location not subject to warpstorms. We have confidence that the Necron pylon here has the required properties.

Week 2
Some refinements to femto-tech were discovered but it appears that we have hit the first plateau of this materials technology and no further groundbreaking advances are to be expected for the immediate future.

It appears that the Eldar were expecting us to investigate the List using Revay, who is fast being recognized as our resident psychic, and not technological means. While we are allowing them to guide Revay in psychic investigations, we feel that the risks here are too high. Psychic investigation of warp effects are not going to be our main source of warp knowledge as we cannot ethically expose our citizens to such danger.

Week 3
Complete Culture-wide refit for all ships, drones and assorted equipment to femto-tech is completed. Apart from overall increased power and range, our GSV ships can also move at 400 kilolights easily and have acceleration curves similar to that of a previous generation ROU.

ROU effectors can project weapons grade CREW from any origin point within multiple lightyears range, displacer volume and range has risen about one order of magnitude and various power density or containment sizes have shrunk or increased appropriately.
Invasion of Comorragh

Week 1
Phase 1 of the Dark Eldar plan has begun. The Relentless has returned to Comorragh, right after a compressed antimatter explosion destroyed the main habitation spire of the current tyrant. There was some manner of trouble where the Dark Eldar gangs/clans who we gave bombs to were caught but as there were ten different plots calculated to work independently, at least three CAM warheads managed to reach the spire.

Amusingly, the plan that Retributive Force had calculated to have the least chance managed to get there first. A simple auto-pilot based off the map of Comorragh from the prior trip attached to an antimatter drive missile fired as the minor gang disembarked from their trip with another clan (who also got a CAM suitcase bomb from us, but were caught shortly afterwards). Dark Eldar defenses that shot down the missile only managed to do so when the missile had already closed to 10% of its effective range (which is estimated to be around 100 kilometers).

The fallout of at least three other explosions were detected as The Relentless arrived. It appears that with the loss of the main crime boss, the whole heirarchy is in chaos, with some of them jury-rigging containment breaches to engineer the bombs to use against different targets. Furthermore, we also know that the tyrant himself has survived the attacks and is currently in hiding, although we are so far unable to find him.

Current loss of life is estimated to be around 300 million. We expect further antimatter explosions for the next week or two before the bombs finish bleeding off their energy.

The Relentless will soon by deploying the next part of the plan. We have confirmed that the use of an Eldar guide is unnecessary provided the directions are followed exactly. Exploratory probes into the webway will have to wait however.

We will be Reloading our Dark Eldar guide in multiple copies across each Relentless Class in order to learn routes from each webway gate as well as operate them. While we will not risk Reloading any of our citizens into an Eldar form (which is too psychically active to be safe), we have confidence that we can re-merge him later.

Week 2
One third of the top level gangs have been scattered as a wave of antimatter explosions destroyed ~10% of Comorragh's area. It appears that a full scale internal civil war is underway, roughly 30% larger than we had expected, but within min-max ranges.
Total casualties is roughly 1 billion.

The Relentless has executed phase 2 of the plans, which will alter the Glass Plague (itself a highly ingenious carbon crystallization smatter) via nanobots to neuter the pain centers of all non-Dark Eldar within three weeks, accelerated to two minutes if the slave was subject to extreme pain. It has posted notices of this via effector displays and across all broadcast channels. The Culture's decision to blockade all webway gates with armed drones is also communicated to them, as well as our offer of stasis storage.

Not unexpectedly, this has been taken to be equivalent to a declaration of war and active operations were taken by The Relentless to destroy all the space-capable ships in dock at Comorragh. Mid-way through the developing battle, The Relentless's superior capabilities having destroyed nearly 5% of the entire active Dark Eldar fleet before being forced onto a defensive footing, The Relentless was joined by twenty other Relentless class "ships" sent along different webway routes. The following
One-sided battle resulted in the destruction of the majority of the Dark Eldar fleet with the additional expense of a nanohole missile.

Total casualties: 1.2 billion

Dark Eldar Lintea
The Dark Eldar examined the soulstone that was wrapped around his wrist and wouldn't come off. There was no fastener and the string around his wrist was long enough to slip over his hand easily but it simply wouldn't budge beyond his thumb. Apart from his unarmoured clothing, he didn't have any weapons, which was very strange since the last he remembered, he was in the middle of the meeting with this Culture along with his boss. Supposedly, they had yet to come to an arrangement regarding a visit to Comorragh.

One moment he had been waiting outside the well-decorated room, the next he was standing here. De-toothed. And with this mysterious soulstone. She Who Thirsts's drain on him was lessened by it, but Lintea felt it was irritating. Not a good feeling. Especially not good when he was apparently a prisoner.

There was a small flash announcing the sudden presence of a Mon-Keigh from the Culture. He could tell that the absurdly vulnerable style of clothing was nothing like the Imperium.

Lintea watched the man cautiously, seeing the man move and assessing his chances of disabling this person unarmed. Luckily the man appeared unarmed, stupid of him to come into the presence of a fighter like Lintea without protection.

"We want you to lead us to Comorragh," the man said evenly.

"Why should I? The talks have clearly failed," Lintea eyed him, waiting for a chance. There was no access hatch here but he was sure he could find later.

"No, they succeeded actually. You're here because we understand that you are able to lead us to Comorragh from more than one webway gate."

Lintea paused, the past tense gnawed at him, "What's the date?"

The man told him. It had been weeks since the agreement. So had they somehow stuck Lintea in a stasis field since then? Why would they do that? Lintea thought of the annoying navigator who had always wanted his post. It had to be a plot from that woman!

"Perhaps we can come to another agreement," Lintea said, the Culture wouldn't have done this if they didn't think he was valuable in some way. He could get something of his own out of it. Perhaps end up even more powerful than his boss.

SC Agent Einhar
A flick of thought sent a line of glowing plasma ripping down the open boulevard, the somehow flexible femtomaterial armour shielding him perfectly from the blinding heat.

Einhar bounded upwards, engaging the powered armour's gravity belt, to get a clearer view of the latest pocket of resistance.

The crater in the blue-black stone of the pavement was all that was left, that and a slowly settling shower of debris and shattered armour. The buildings on either side of the unusually flat area were melted from the heat shed by his plasma shot. This little 'garden' of pain didn't deserve to exist and the loss of its harsh beauty elicited no reaction from Einhar.
Neutralized, he thought and the ever-shifting data overlay adjusted. Behind him, the lines of surrendered Eldar were being separated from their captives and packed into the stasis ships visibly growing out of the ground. The clouds of nanobots were so dense it was like a desert zone, if sand moved with purpose and in swarms, that corroded the buildings and foundations like a grinder ate at a log.

Another streak in the dark sky announced the arrival of yet another Relentless class, a line of energy pylons dropping to the chosen location and disgorging white billowing clouds of nanobots slaved to their power source. They were coming every few minutes now, pouring through the webway gates around Ackaris traversable by ships.

The nanobots were made secure by requiring one of those femto-material pylons to draw power from and maintain themselves. The 'bots literally fell apart if they got too far away. While they could make more pylons (or disassembling Comorragh would take forever), the pylons themselves were cleverly engineered to require a certain set of reality-rules that had to all be present or it would shut down. In the un-reality of even a minor warpstorm, the pylons would blow up or simply not work. A daemon hadn't a chance of touching one of those things without destroying it. Not to mention the pylon had a warp-detector slaved to a self-destruct.

Einhar looked around and spotted the indicator for Xexe, his partner on this patrol. "Come on, we've got to advance, the frontline's got to move ahead of the cloud."

Xexe looked up from his hands, but didn't say anything in return.

"Hello? Is your comm broken?"

His partner's voice seemed a little distorted, "yeah, sorry. Its not working well, I think something must have messed up the circuits."

Einhar frowned in confusion, the powered armour, being made of femtomaterials, could be dropped from orbit and would land perfectly fine. It was virtually impossible to damage them.

He landed in front of his partner and raised an eyebrow at the soulstone on a necklace. Xexe simply looked back, a challenging expression on his face through the visor. Well, whatever, Xexe was always a weird one and it wasn't like souvenirs weren't allowed, although frowned upon.

Week 3
SC Agent Einhar
Einhar bounded between the buildings, flexing the armour's mechanical assists. A few shards from a kinetic cannon bounced off the armour, putting a slight spin on him and causing him to hit the next building with his shoulder. The gravitational ring cut in and he bounced right off to pirouette wildly, CREWs lashing out and bending around the corner to vapourize the targets.

Xexe landed gracefully next to the wildly spinning Einhar, moving so smoothly in the armour that it might as well be his own skin.

Einhar cut out the automatics as they stabilized and slowed his spin. "Fine, I guess you win. How the heck do you control that gravity ring without the automatic guides?"

Xexe shrugged, the soulstone jingling around his neck, "Practice. Alot."

Einhar sniffed, "Just how long were you in VR? That's utterly crazy, to manage the gravity, mechanics and effectors by manual and do it better than the automatics."

Xexe shrugged, again, "Don't feel like talking about it."
Einhar frowned, he had expected Xexe to talk a bit more than that. "You all right? You can always request for time off if you're feeling bad."

With the suit's and their own boosted innate defences, psychological harm was the largest hazard expected here. Low-resolution probes did monitor them but they weren't perfect and often missed symptoms.

Xexe waved a hand dismissively and turned to look upwards, towards the center of Comorragh.

"It's almost time," he whispered, almost inaudible. Einhar had to replay that with magnification from the suit to hear it.

"What is?" Einhar asked.

Xexe didn't reply but it became clear just a moment later. Amidst the tangle of black towers, piers and twisted space, a red glow appeared. Then it quickly swirled, the smooth light twisting into harsh jagged lightning that lit the dark city with angry red shadows.

Einhar looked around. The shadow of a building was brighter than the side facing the glow. Warp Effect! he screamed mentally into the network as the warp sensors went crazy. To the sides and behind, Einhar could see the white clouds of deadened nanobots billowing outwards from their designated zones as the pylons nearest the effect shutdown.

Retreat signals started to flow out as new information flashed onto the network. One of the cooperating Dark Eldar had identified it as a Webway breach. Presumably one of the resisting clans were attempting to make a deal with the forces of Chaos, which was one of the worst case scenarios the Minds had anticipated.

The red hole in the tenous reality of the webway smashed open into a full breach as a massive spiky ship tore its way into the webway. Einhar blinked in shock at the Chaos battleship as bright searing lines suddenly reached out from all the Relentless classes. The combined CREW blast dug savagely into the battleship and it suddenly exploded, the plasma reactor breached as the entire hull vapourized under the assault.

Immediately, another smaller ship began to appear in the widening breach. This one died just as quickly, but the tiny winged shapes that swarmed out of the breach escaped outwards towards the dark city around them. Many were struck down, but the dangerous ones were those that escaped.

A red glaring retreat signal flashed through the tactical network, highlighting a warp effect source that darted between the buildings towards him. Einhar waved to Xexe, who was still looking at the breach, "there's a daemon heading this way! We've got to go!"

Xexe didn't move, now looking downwards at the darting shape as it moved between the buildings, dodging the precision strikes of the Relentless class still far behind the frontlines. Wide-bore CREWs or plasma pulses weren't an option if they didn't want to destroy all the Dark Eldar while clearing out the daemons.

Einhar cursed at Xexe's immobility and leveled his arm weapon. Calculations and orders half-imagined loaded themselves into the automatics. With his spare hand, Einhar flicked the self-destruct to Armed. Now the threshold for his own destruction was lowered, he probably wasn't going to survive to get eaten by the daemon.

A spray of CREWs arced out, fan-like, in all directions, bouncing and weaving between the buildings in a dizzying network of deadly lines. Behind them, the plasma pulses shot outwards into
the side corridors and streets. The daemon continued to approach, diving further into the deadly web.

As it rocketed out of a side path into the main street they were on, a feathered mess of wings and claws, Einhar's suit displayed a self-destruct warning. His lowered threshold was being reached. He pulled the trigger and the web collapsed. Mirror fields realigned, plasma bounced and a hail of fallen crystal shards suddenly threw themselves down the street with renewed violence.

The blasts bracketed the daemon, intentionally missing with a complex pattern that prevented it from dodging meaningfully. Any movement would only cause it to be hit by something else. There was no need however, a CREW shot speared it just before the crystal shards nailed it to the ground.

The lump stopped moving but the warp signature didn't go away. Einhar turned back to Xexe to ask him again, and he stopped with his mouth open. Xexe was holding a long mirrored blade of unknown material, but that surprise was surpassed by the warp effect surrounding him.

Einhar tried to say something but failed. Eventually he managed to squeak out a question, "How... no, wait, did your self-destruct fail?"

"I turned it off," Xexe said, sounding a bit weird. But at least it didn't seem like he was being corrupted, you couldn't disable that self-destruct trigger. Trying to would only trigger it.

Einhar was about to ask again when the daemon in the street shifted and began to get back up. He whipped around and leveled his weapon again but Xexe beat him to the punch. Dashing forward, the silvery blade whirled into a blur around the daemon, slicing and cutting in an unknown pattern. The daemon howled and tried to swipe at him but Xexe just danced aside.

Einhar watched in growing incredulity as his partner slowly cut the daemon down. Then a psychic pulse registered on the warp sensor, spreading out from Xexe into the nearby buildings, just before Xexe jumped back and sent a message to their Relentless class. Area clear of neutrals, proceed with plasma attack.

The slowly evaporating lump that was the daemon began to regenerate again but a thin arc of plasma smashed it into the ground. When the flash was gone, all that was left of the street was a building sized crater and a smoking lump of goo at the bottom. Another psychic pulse from Xexe lashed out at the goo, shrinking it to nothingness.

Einhar blinked for a few seconds before raising his weapon cautiously. Marking Xexe as unknown, requesting backup. The tactical display switched Xexe's colour from a friendly green to a blue point of interest. He kept that message private from the suit of armour in front of him.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, no Culture citizens were psychic, "you're not Xexe."

Xexe shrugged. Einhar could feel the bead of sweat roll down his cheek as his arm trembled inside the armour, the ship sure was taking a long time to reply. Ship, do you copy?

Xexe turned around gracefully and grinned back in a most un-Xexe like way, "An unlikely ally, that I am."
Come in, Ship. Einhar kept his weapon leveled at the unknown, with his other hand on the emergency self-destruct. At any time his mental probe informed him of a possible mental breakdown, he'd press the button and wake up from a Reload.

There was no response. ****, did whoever this was have some method of jamming that could fool an Effector?

"Allies? How so?" he asked cautiously, trying not to betray his inner panic.

Xexe held up the slivery blade at the red hole in space, "That is a problem for both of us. Neither of us likes Daemons in the webway."

Einhar eyed him, just stating a common purpose did not mean he knew that was the objective of whoever said it. "Tell me why you don't want that."

Xexe stared at him as if he was an idiot, "Daemons, bad. Webway is good place, bad Daemons-"

Einhar raised his hands, "Alright, alright, fine. You don't have to be like that. At least I can see you're not with Chaos. That ought to be good enough for now."

"Finally," Xexe sniffed and turned to face down the street.

You can trust them. A general message went out across the tactical and strategic networks as the Relentless class's discussion was over. Einhar acknowledged the message and nodded at the unknown.

"That hole into the warp isn't good," Einhar said.

Xexe looked back, "You think I don't know that?"

Einhar decided to ignore him, "and Daemons and Chaos ships will keep coming through it," a bright flare above heralded another arriving Chaos cruiser in the form of a superheated ball of plasma. "we might be able to fight Daemons and cultists for a while, but eventually someone will make a mistake. And we really do not want Chaos to get one of these armours or worse, the nanobots. The pylons may be secure for now, but if the Daemons work out just the right sort of reality warp, they can get one of them."

Xexe nodded, "so you need a way to close the hole."

"Essentially yes. Unfortunately, we don't know much about how the webway is built. Do you?"

Xexe shrugged, "there is a way yes. And you will be using it to close that hole. We certainly don't want it there either."

After a short pause with an accompanying flare in the warp sensor, Xexe continued, "since these Eldar here aren't going to present much resistance, there are a few things you need to collect for us. With specific Eldar artifacts that are in the city, we can cut off the hole from the rest of the webway. Healing the breach is impossible."
"And I suppose I'm going to be getting one of them?" Einhar asked him.

Xexe turned around and gave him a broad toothy grin, like a teacher whose student finally managed to get a question right, "Yes. Yes, you are."

A certain familiar Sorceror
He watched the dice fall, keeping an eye on the sensor room. The battle was not progressing well, which was all fine by him. After all, it wasn't HIS fleet.

The Sorceror looked at the ships being fed into the endless storm of fire. Such a waste, for so little gain. Cultists couldn't even make any headway. Only the daemons could manage to get through, and that only barely.

He saw the threads in the future, bearing the light touch and undeliable mark of future path concealment. His rival still hadn't even noticed the interference.

A daemonship threaded its way through the hole and deflected the laser strikes with a reality bubble. Almost immediately, a black spire half its size broke off one of the larger House dwellings and arrowed straight through the ship. The daemonship writhed in pain and tried to adjust but it was suddenly pelted by multiple flashes of light from all directions. The ship broke apart, the daemon dying.

The sorceror looked a bit closer. Didn't it block lasers? What was this beam of light that wasn't a laser? He traced the past path again and saw it. Oh, it was just pieces of stone accelerated to astronomical speeds.

Well, it was clear that his rival wasn't going to break through after all. The noose was already tightening around the hole. Still, the sorceror cast his dice again and examined closely how the next ship died, the more data he gathered about this Culture fought these sorts of battles, the better he would be able to implement the next stage of his own plan.

Which had already anticipated his rival's failure. Of course.

SC Agent Einhar
He followed the unknown alien back to his parent Relentless class. The Gosroth's doors were open, effector bulbs still glowing with overheat from the battle.

Behind him, the red glare was gone. The ghostly wall found at the edges of the webway surrounded it with an impenetrable sphere.

Still, now that the common enemy that had made them temporary allies was gone, Einhar wasn't about to trust this unknown. For all that mattered, the alien (presumably Eldar from the soulstone around its neck) walked up into the Gosroth, seemingly uncaring that Einhar had his weapon pointed at its back, armed.

These other Eldar certainly hadn't given Einhar much reason to trust them. He still hadn't worked out what had happened to Xexe nor had the alien deigned to explain.

Inside the Gosroth, Einhar got the shock of his life. There were six rows of sleeping Eldar inside. With strange facepaint and equipment Einhar hadn't seen in any report of the Eldar.

Xexe sighed and examined his body armour one more time before reluctantly setting it to lock him in position. Then Xexe's mental signature simply dropped to a sleeping mode and one of the Eldar on the ground whirled to his feet.
Einhar could only look on with an open mouth as the Eldar practically strutted around the room, giving Einhar a salute on the way past. "Nice working with you, although I don't think we'll be seeing each other again."

Finally, Einhar worked up the will to ask the ship. "What is going on?"

"Oh, this and that, you know?" a suit of armour walked out of the side door. Instead of being filled with a person, it was filled with a garish rainbow coloured metal that was the appearance of raw femto-electronics.

"Um, pardon me for asking, but why are you in that suit of armour?"

The ship shrugged, "No reason really. Now my question, why are YOU in that suit of armour?"

Einhar blinked at it in surprise before shrugging and releasing the locks, stepping out the suit. "Ok, I'm out. But are you sure? That Eldar is just..."

He turned to look at the Eldar, who was a panel full of buttons, words and diagrams in Eldar scrolled upwards in the air. The ship shuddered slightly as the Eldar typed something into the console.

Einhar turned around at the sound of someone hitting the deck. Xexe had fallen out of the suit of armour, which had come unlocked as another masked Eldar touched the controls on the wrist. The once-sleeping Eldar around him were getting to their feet with varying degrees of grace.

The deck sloped sharply as the ship banked around, heading out towards one of the webway paths. Einhar held onto Xexe to prevent him bashing his brains out against a wall. "Oopsie," said the Eldar at the control panel, "well then, seems like I've gotten the hang of it. Your next stop is here!"

The ship slowed down and stopped, right as the masked Eldar dumped Einhar and Xexe unceremoniously out the hatch. It was the raw webway out there and Einhar yelped as the robot that was the Gosroth followed him down the ramp.

"The Harlequins thank you for your cooperation!" the Eldar shouted down the ramp and laughed wildly as the ramp rolled back up and the ship took off to rocket away.

Einhar struggled to his feet, "Hey ship! What the heck was that! Did you just let them take the Gosroth?!"

The drone shrugged in its armour, the billions of atom-sized servoes moving in harmony, looking exactly like Xexe's shrug.

"But... but, there's 40- uh, 39 tag teams still in the city! You can't... you..." Einhar sputtered and finally calmed down enough to ask, "Ok, how are we going to get back to realspace? You have a ship right?"

The drone didn't answer. "Oh come on, I don't believe you don't have a ship waiting for us."

The multicoloured lump of metal turned to look at him and glinted. If he didn't know better, Einhar would have thought it was laughing. A huge shadow swirled out of the webway, the mirrored hull of a femto-material ship appearing behind the drone, coming to a screeching halt less than a meter behind it.

"What ship?" it quipped.

Einhar rubbed his eyeballs, for what seemed like the fourth time in a row. "So you set that all up," he
said to the robot that was the Gosroth.

"Not exactly. The idea came from them," the lump of metal said in a sing-song voice.

One of the other SC agents put a cup of some brown liquid on suspension next to him. She winked at him as she turned back to the rest of the party. Hmm, cute. Wait, this was not the time to get distracted.

"And you gave them a ship? With two of those powered armours inside? Isn't that a bit too much?"

"There is also a database of our technology descriptions that we already gave the Eldar."

The Gosroth let him sputter for a bit, "nah, it's fine. They're Eldar, they resist Chaos better than us. There is almost no chance of tech leakage, especially from these Eldar; they have a friendly warp god, which is rather like an Ascended being. There is also that they are enemies of Chaos, and it would do us well to aid them," it paused for a while, "there is also that they were rather... interested in what we were doing here. It seems that this third group bridges between the Dark Eldar and the Craftworld Eldar. They consider the webway Eldar territory and weren't all that happy that we were doing this to the Dark Eldar.

I don't think they could have stopped us without the conflict destroying the city, or prevent tech leakage to Chaos. But its hard to tell."

"And what about this guy?" Einhar pointed at Xexe, who was still sleeping in the chair where they put him.

"One of them just possessed him. Or something like that. We're not too clear on the warp aspects of what happened there, but the Eldar did say that they did have a warp god mediating that transfer."

Einhar thought for a while, trying to line up the scattered bits and pieces. "Did Xexe agree to that?" he asked finally.

The ship sighed, "No. That was when we first found out about this third group and began talking to them. The arrangement of a few sets of armour and one ship was agreed to around 38 hours ago."

"38 hours?! Then you already knew!" Einhar shot to his feet while the ship flashed a grin at him, "Why didn't you tell me? I was almost going to shoot him."

"98% probability you wouldn't," the ship chuckled, "come on, it was just a practical joke. One the Harlequins enjoyed quite alot I might add. They have a very interesting sense of humour."

"Oh, so you're one of them too!" the woman was back again, "I heard they actually tossed you off the ship."

Einhar nodded, wondering where this was leading.

"My ship locked my armour and marched me off. I found a number of new curse words I must tell you," she said, draining her glass.

Einhar sighed and stopped his hand from massaging his eyeballs, "Are these Eldar pranksters?"

Outside, the Relentless sped onwards through the webway towards to the gate to reality. A long long line of stasis ships followed it downwards.
Ok, that idea didn't pan out nearly as well as I thought it would. Needs to be written shorter instead of dragging it out for so long.

I also curse my inbuilt tendency to let my characters do whatever they want instead of following my original ideas. =(
Invasion of Comorragh - Part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 3
SC Agent Einhar
The hole flared and spat in defiance at the silvery wall closing around it. The daemons would keep struggling but the fight was over.

Einhar turned back to look at the alien who looked like Xexe but it was nowhere to be found. "Tactical, where's the alien?"

A search began to run but Xexe's armour suit wasn't responding. The local peer-to-peer search ran up against a different search from another area and the algorithm recognized a similar request.

"Subject not found. Similar requests were found between the cooperating teams-" Einhar cursed, the tactical analyzer indicated that the other teams who had been in charge of the other parts of the Comorragh webway control had submitted similar requests.

Whichever aliens had impersonated the agents had simply disappeared once their missions had been complete.

Einhar bit his lip and hopped backwards towards the post-mission rendezvous. "Ship-"

A reply cut into his request, "This is the Everaxis, Relentless class, we can't find your ship."

"What?"

"We can't find your ship. The Baywater just disappeared."

Einhar paused his jumping to fry a small weapons platform of the Dark Eldar. "What about Xexe?"

"There has not been news of the agents who have disappeared. Ever since the aliens were revealed by you, we have been searching for those identified to be doppelgangers. They are also not to be fo-"

The communications skipped a beat and suddenly changed, "We just found a trace of major warp activity. Something's causing a major reality bubble within the possible search cone of the Baywater. For now, you'll be under me, please confirm."

"Confirmed, SC Agent Einhar transfers to Everaxis command." his tactical display changed sections and information streams, "keep me updated on the Baywater search."

"The bubble is moving away at a higher speed than the Relentless class can manage. It will exit known webway space within twenty seconds. So far, the bubble appears to be identical to normal webway space, without the Baywater being present. We have tested this destructively to no result, it may just be a decoy."

Einhar snarled and blew off the top of a building that had contained a sniper. Xexe was a good partner.

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Everaxis, Relentless class - After Action Report, returning with stasis fleet section A1 to A4
Since the range of space the Baywater could have gotten to had exited known webway space, and indeed past our perimeter sensors, without any clue having risen, we decided to call off the search.

The SC agents who had been impersonated were uncovered by our nanobots in sector A1-7 a few days later.

Whoever the aliens were, they appear to have made off with a Relentless class as well as seven suits of femto-material armour.

Sometime later, we received some communications from an unknown and untraceable source indicating that a previously uncontacted group of Eldar matching the description of the Harlequins had been responsible for the help regarding the warp rift and considered the Relentless class as well as the seven suits of armour fair exchange.

We returned the signal demanding the return of the Relentless class across all standard Eldar communication channels but there was no response.

At this point, we are unsure of the capabilities of this new group but it appears that they have access to significant warp effects beyond an Alpha-plus rank. Following their lack of communication, we are forced to conclude that they are potentially hostile, apart from our shared aversion to Chaos.

As of the time of writing, we have initiated active scans of the Dark Eldar that are known for being guides in order to explore the webway using remote disposable drones. Comorragh contains more material than is expected to be needed to build the stasis ships, especially after the loss of life following the battle, and some of that will be used to manufacture unmanned exploration drones.

Antimatter self-destruct drones will serve as dual purpose explorers and suicide weapons. Stationing these drones semi-permanently at each webway junction will allow for more effective monitoring of movement through the webway.

It is our assessment that this exploratory activity to retrieve the Relentless class commence immediately through every accessible gate. The presumed to be Harlequins may not know that we regard each Relentless class as a sentient entity and thus may not actually be hostile, therefore the drones should not be programmed to automatically attack.

Nevertheless, we may be headed into a three-way conflict with both our opponents having Ascended being levels of reality adjusting effects.

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Alaitoc Farseers
2: Khaine damn them! How dare they do this!
3: They dare because they can.
2: Do you know how many of that guy is being cloned? Thousands of him! It's... it's a travesty! Not to mention they're going to actively monitor our movements in the webway!
1: And what are we going to do? Shoot them? Will you be prepared to pay one ship per drone that they can rebuild in less than a minute?
3: We already knew that for the forseeable future, any direct conflict with the Culture results in our destruction.
2: And how can we let this rest? ... What about Zhar-Tann? Do they still-
3: Zhar-Tann still sides with them.
1: They're being given special codes to wipe the drones' surveillance memory if they wish to travel unseen. The codes also allow Zhar-Tann to direct the drones as suicide weapons.
2: *mutters* traitorous Mon-Keigh worshippers. Can we get the codes?
3: Zhar-Tann won't give them to us. They say we kicked them out and washed our hands of them, so they'll do the same in return.
The Culture
Following the worrying after action report, we have redoubled efforts to understand the webway. The Zhar-Tann, following our progress on their list, have begun to teach Revay to use psychic phenomena. Revay's consent to mind-reading has greatly helped our advancement in understanding warp active objects and how they relate to people.

We see this as a prerequisite to understanding the warp itself and therefore warp engineering in general. With comparisons to the Dark Eldar and the Tau, we may indeed be able to understand the warp interactions with organic intelligences well enough to reverse engineer individual warp effect generators or create organic intelligences without a warp presence (which is not the same as a Null or Blank from the IoM, which has a negative warp presence).

From there, webway engineering in order to control the new domain and remove significant warp entities will result. The IoM has done it before, and with their experience, we may be able to succeed where they have not.

On a more immediate note, the evacuation of Comorragh will be rescheduled to be faster. Additional Relentless classes will be sent, including plans to refit to include a warp detector self-destruct similar to the nanobot pylons. Relying on the usual anti-corruption protocols appears to be insufficient and we believe that the new group failed to obtain nanobots and their pylons for this reason.

Chapter End Notes

This one continues following Einhar after the Sorceror's section. Call this an alternate canon path that may replace the original if we like it more.

Future sight wars can go almost any way and I'll be able to make up some reason for it.

-- edit: Now cannon path.
Necrons

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 1
We have shared more investigations into Necron mental structures on our Necron warriors. We have managed to piece together an agglomerated Necron mental template that is incomplete in some major areas. Nevertheless, we expect this to be useful to the Necrons as the holes can be filled in by examining more complete samples; this work will be considerably helped by the fact that we have already laid the groundwork for the restoration of a ‘standard’ Necron mental map.

We expect the Necrons, with the intelligence engineering understanding we have given them, to be able to restore much of their original organic emotions, instincts and other factors deemed critical to the original Necron entity. Only this time, they will still be inorganic intelligences, with full backup, Reload and branching capability. The ability to integrate multiple intelligences and blur identity is still under research but we expect the Necrons to be less interested in this.

Rather than determining personality or memories, the standard mental map represents the baseline capabilities of the Necrons. Their capacity for art, culture and general leisure activities has been greatly reduced by their incomplete conversion and since they view a return to organic intelligence as nearly impossible (which we agree with) and inefficient (which we do not), this is the next best compromise.

The Necrons can restore much of their old thinking and spirit, giving them the ability to create a new culture and civilization. Remaking the old is unlikely to work given the completely different physiological base, but they will at least retain their identity as Necrontyr.

White Devil notes that the war continues to grind on. Non-experimental, main line femto-material cruisers are expected to join the front in two weeks following White Devil’s provision of bulk raw femtomaterials for construction.

Week 2
The Necrons are still examining our data but have accepted it as a gift. They are currently completing the missing portions on their own using their own reprogramming nodules.

Week 3
The War has taken a turn for the worse for the Imperium. It appears that an allocation error or possible communication problem has lead to a Grey Knights company to respond to a call for aid instead of a more conventional space marine chapter.

Against the all-psyker infantry of the Grey Knights, the Necrons fare significantly better against them than they would normally do so against conventional forces. Still, the introduction of the first production of femto-tech cruisers on the Necron side, and in independent formations, has prevented them from retreating for fear of total collapse of the Imperial fleet cordon.

A few major fronts have collapsed and the Imperium is on a fighting retreat that is likely to coalesce within a few weeks around the key stars invaded at the start of the conflict, more due to the Necron need to build relay power pylons and generators to refuel their ships and weapons than from a lack of fighting power to continue. Despite the new capabilities afforded by femtomaterials, we expect
logistics to remain a key constraint in war at this technology scale.

Chapter End Notes

I find it ironic that given a Necron faction that was willing to sit down and talk, the Culture could actually do rather alot for them (and in fact would gladly try to help decrease the HS-likeness of such a civilization).

This particular reconstruction of Necron psychology is of course calculated to make this particular faction more concerned with building an internal identity and an actual civilization once this war is over. Instead of sending out a fleet to destroy everything in sight.
Whatever the Necron indexes say, their description of the Necron factions do not give the impression of an actual civilization. They're really more like killer robot armies than actual things with personalities.

While it won't restore the old Necron, they think with more work, they can make a template that will restore most Necrons to something similar to an old Necrontyr's faculties.

A sketch at warp technology progression for the Culture, roughly in order of discovery time:

Warp Active Objects (patterns of reality theory)
Warp Objects Classification (aka. the List)
Warp Sensors
Basic Reality enforcement: gellar fields, psychic dampening materials

**Psyker Training (part 15)**

**Organic-Warp Interface (part 15, requires intelligence engineering)**

Basic warp mechanics: warp drive, D-cannon, warp-based short-range teleportation
Reality enforcement: Warding runes, Necron planetary pylon
Of Gods & Chaos: what are the warp gods, what are daemons; engineering of organic psychic links
Basic reality bubble: Changing fundamental constants (eg. speed of light), controlled warp mutations of organic creatures
Basic Warp construction: warp materials, how does the Astronomican work
Warp mechanics: how to manipulate souls using the warp, Wraithbone, the Infinity Circuit
Split Personality: Tyranid hive mind, the Waagh
Reality bubble: changing physical rules (eg. number of dimensions and their relationships), artificial daemons, daemonworlds
Warp construction: Necron galactic pylon (seal the warp), the Webway, artificial mini-universes in the warp
The Meaning of Life: how to create souls using the warp (the making of the Orks)
Ascension: the hows and wherefores of the Eldar Fall, the Starchild (if canon), creating Worldspirits
We are currently around the bolded part. At the rate I envision the Culture progressing in understanding, they reach the end of the tree around the end of the year 2 (or ~part 35) if something else doesn't end the story first.
Eldar

Week 1
Alaitoc
2: Zhar-Tann is playing another game. As far as I can tell, it's to do with the Dark Eldar.
3: It leads to a blindspot. Which probably means a Necron world. They're actually going to install a hyperspace drive and move their craftworld to a Necron system.
1: I don't believe that. The markings are suspicious, it's too radical even for them.
3: I would not be too sure of that. The hyperspace drive IS useful and their use of it will not lead to problems. But it's just crazy to use a Mon-Keigh device like that...
2: You're starting to sound like me. Quit stealing my lines.
1: So what do you say?
2: Nothing. They can worship the Mon-Keigh as much as they want. They mean nothing to us now.

The Culture
Following our interference with Comorragh, we are recording an increase in Eldar interstellar activity. Our movements to and from the dark city have run across Corsair fleets, ships and scouts from other craftworlds.

It is interesting to note a small conflict between a Zhar-Tann scout group and a conventional space marine company near the galactic core, so far from Zhar-Tann's usual area. What they hoped to achieve by provoking the space marines into a wild goose chase all over the system for nearly the whole week without giving battle is unclear.

Zhar-Tann interference with the Imperium astropathic network in that area is also noted. We believe they are using a number of Maiden and Imperium worlds for farseers to send spoofing messages that have been detected in Imperial Astropathic records. Again, what these messages that are all completely ignored hope to accomplish is also unclear.

Nevertheless, we are beginning to think that the Zhar-Tann have some interest in the conflict between the Imperium and the Necrons in that region. We have inquired through our ambassador if our efforts to restore civilization to the Necrons are objectionable in any way but the Eldar have refused to comment on our activity and remain uncommunicative to our inquiries into their activities.

It is also to be noted that the range of all Eldar craftworlds appears to be expanding greatly. Alaitoc, which has usually confined itself to the northwestern sectors of the Imperium, has begun to have active operations in Segmentum Solar. Ulthwe, usually near the Eye, has also begun to act further afield, although its activities are highly limited to scouting and observation.

A number of Alaitoc scouts were spotted coming out of webway gates in the region of the Zhar-Tann astropathic interference activity. While conflict between the two groups have been minor thus far, we think that Alaitoc is also interested in knowing what the Zhar-Tann are up to.

These expanding ranges are taken from observation drones around webway gates launched in an earlier phase of the Dark Eldar plan. We have not interfered with their activities in any way except occasionally following them.

Week 1
The Eldar have regarded Revay with some surprise that she has had virtually no contact with anything on the List save for one self-assembling crystal that elicited no reaction in particular.

Apparently a number of them had a bet riding on whether she would have a certain species of feline as her pet, which we noted none of the farseers present (there were at least eight in the delegation)
had offered to join.

Revay has been asked to learn how the Eldar study psychic phenomena and she has agreed to do so on the condition that she would not need to leave the Culture. The Zhar-Tann have agreed to conduct her lessons on this Exodite world that is our designated meeting place.

Her first lessons will be on obtaining 'psychic impressions' from warp active objects, starting with the same crystal that we had failed to obtain anything useful from. After a few failed lessons, we have overheard two farseers commenting that they hadn't ever taught a student this warp insensitive before. We have kept that bit of information private from Revay.

Week 2
We have gotten into another race with Alaitoc regarding a certain artifact on an airless moon that escalated into a minor incident when our ground team reached the artifact before they did.

Despite a recorded dissuasion by the local farseer, the Alaitoc away team still opened fire. The GCU was forced to intervene directly to prevent casualties and eventually resorted to confiscating their weapons. After the artifact was retrieved, we returned their weapons, hopefully without damage (although it is impossible for us to tell and the Eldar did not test them).

We think this indicates a certain level of discontent or mistrust between the Eldar and their farseers, at least on Alaitoc.

Week 3
Revay has made, to the ZharTann, frustratingly little progress with even the simple "crystal feeling" lessons. Eventually, as part of the efforts of getting it to work, the Eldar requested we remove our mental probe just to see if it was interfering despite our virtual certainty that the probe does not alter any of her mental functions.

Interestingly, she immediately managed to make progress on the crystal once it was removed. We then reinstated our mental probe, but a slight error in communication failed to inform Revay of it (GSV Reporting For Duty apologized later that it "slipped my mind"), and noticed an interesting pattern of mental behaviour. After the first lesson with the new probe, Revay was told of the results and found out about the probe and her performance went to zero again.

We appear to have stumbled upon a placebo effect. Currently, we are discussing the discovery with the Farseers. Apparently this is also new information for the Eldar and they are requesting details of how our mental probe works.
Week 1
The IoM fleet has arrived at Praetonis V, one jump away from Tau space. Imperial surprise at the planet's restoration was interesting to note but ultimately not unexpected.

The GCU there has opted to activate the gravity well warp inhibitor to prevent the Imperial fleet from leaving the system, thus preventing any attack against the Tau. The GCU is currently in negotiations with the Imperial fleet commander (an Ultramarine) to turn aside the attack.

Week 2
The Imperial fleet command has proven to be impossible to divert from his mission and we are forced to keep the Imperial fleet mired at Praetonis V. For now, the fleet has either refused to split up to run our gravitational blockade or has simply not thought of the idea.

Construction of industrial equipment, living infrastructure and a space elevator at our target safe colony world for the Tau is done. The Tau survey team will return soon to Tau space and we expect our first bulk freighter to join the second in sending the first wave of Tau colonists and their own ships and equipment to the system.

Day 6
The standoff between the Imperial fleet and the GCU has ended with the Imperial fleet scattering along multiple vectors that eventually grew far enough apart that one gravitational well projector could not cover them all.

Week 3
We have Reload capability into physiologically Tau bodies, including a modified form with no pheromone sensitivity for our own use. All this data has been made available to the Tau (except for the variant without pheromones), which should greatly aid their medical sciences and treatment capability. Of much use, as their doctors assure us, is the anatomical information that will see applications in improving treatments of injured Tau warriors.

The return of the four "samples" from each caste has had them subject to a barrage of questions regarding the scanning process and information on the inside of our scientific laboratories.

To this end, the Tau have asked if we will also perform scans on some of their allied races, primarily the Kroot, but also of humans and other natively psychic or otherwise notable non-sentient species they have come across. We have agreed to do so, again with an understanding that we share the biological information gleaned from these examples. For now, we are currently transferring biological information on humans, including psychological profiles.

Another GCU positioned in the Tau system directly next to Praetonis V then observed multiple scattered groups of Imperial ships arriving at distinctly separate times. After the Tau agreed to treat any prisoners humanely, the GCU then proceeded to disable and then disarm their ships and personnel via effector and displacer, upon which they were then boarded and captured by Tau local forces.

No Imperial ships surrendered but with additional effector use, few casualties on either the Imperial or the Tau side (which employed non-lethal boarding weapons) were inflicted. As the groups arrived independently over the entire week, each Imperial force remained sufficiently small for the GCU to disable and suppress without lethal action.
It is unclear what the Tau are planning to do with nearly 70 million humans, but we are currently discussing diplomatic options. The Tau appear to regard them, for the most part, our prisoners while confiscating the salvaged Imperial ships and equipment. We hope to convince the Tau to take the POWs as captured citizens in exchange for us not disputing the ownership of the captured Imperial ships.
Week 1
Things have calmed down a bit in the nearby sectors as word of the ex-SC agent's victory is getting around. The SC agent's fleet has been mobilized to take control of all the nearby Ork worlds and the two Ork fleets are moving out on a tour to raise support and establish the new way of doing things.

Despite attempts to create trade between systems, it seems that the Orks have no real conception of money or other forms of indirect cooperation so it falls back to each Ork world to be independent. The next major challenge to the SC agent will be to establish a hierarchy of authority that is stable across multiple star systems, backed up by the military power of his two fleets.

Week 2
It appears that merely visiting an Ork world with a large fleet is sufficient to convince them to join up. The SC agent is beginning to create a Waagh as recruitment efforts from the three parts of his fleet cause more worlds to pledge to his cause.

The final aim is the Eye, which aligns with our goals, but his stated aim of assimilating all Ork worlds on the way there as well as destroying all Imperial resistance is beginning to look distinctly empire-like. Nevertheless, we shall not interfere and will merely watch events unfold.

We do not anticipate the Imperium being able to stop this particular Waagh due to the sudden loss of a key force multiplier of discipline that the Imperium usually relies on to combat superior numbers of Ork forces.

Week 3
Studies into Orkish genetics indicates that an external warp force is present among large concentrations of Orks that prevents easy modification of the Orkish physiology or mental characteristics. Any such attempts must also modify the warp gestalt that arises or will inevitably fail, sometimes before even a single generation has passed.

This is obviously significantly beyond our abilities but in the meantime, Orkish impact on the warp is being studied, in conjunction with the Eldar teaching of Revay, such that we may be able to create single-purpose warp constructs anchored with organic interfaces.
Rogue Trader

Week 1
As the first step in his attempt to create an ally for Forge World Talon and the Recongregator Inquisitors, the Rogue Trader is getting himself heavily involved in local politics. A number of favours, personal and strategic, are being carried out for various governors by the ships under his command.

The Rogue Trader has explained that he has to first establish himself as a credible and reliable person to even be able to acquire any political favours that may be able to legally give him control over any systems. For this reason, working on his plans and advice, we have gently deflected Inquisitorial attention from investigating his sudden rise in activity. This unfortunately, required that we made the Inquisitor primarily responsible for investigating the potential xenotech threat of the Rogue Trader suffer a 'warp accident' that destroyed his ship. (in reality, the Culture has taken him and the crew of the ship as a prisoner, faking sensor records for all the ships and devices in the system)

Week 2
Talon has begun to construct multiple copies of the support ship design and the first is due to launch soon. According to its declared intentions, Talon will be willing to produce this design for the use of any system near it at 20% above cost. The offer, as far as we can tell, is genuine, which makes the support ship design effectively cost only slightly more than a freighter since it is missing the usual Ad Mech markup. On top of which, the shipyard databases will include the design for the support ship itself.

What has come as a major surprise is Talon's offer to use the ships as training bases for a new class of techpriests called secondaries, who will be trained to operate the ships. This operation includes operating the shipyards to construct more of these new ships.

The exact relation of secondary Techpriests to the original order on Talon is unclear but definitely inferior. In social status, a full Techpriest is expected to know more and has access to all of the Ad Mech's usual capabilities and doctrines. Secondaries are not admitted into the Ad Mech as such, and are merely taught aspects of ship operation and construction, as well as mining and other support industries.

We observe that prior to the announcement, Talon appears to have suffered multiple atomic strikes and the lead Magos now stands as the unchallenged leader of Talon.

Week 3
Talon has received its first order for a support ship right as the first one is complete. Due to the amount of industry Talon is dedicating to their production (nearly 40% of the entire world's output), the ships are being built in series, staggered over time.

The nearby farm world which placed the order will claim the first ship, and it will be run by trainee secondaries under the watch of a few techpriests.

This action has not gone unnoticed by Inquisitors, which is fortunate because it is deflecting attention from the Rogue Trader's widespread attempts to curry favour with the local politicos.
Bonus: Interviews about the Culture

Today we have an exclusive set of interviews compiled with much risk and consistency shenanigans. Try not to talk about the last bit too much or the universe might catch on.

Here we ask various members of different species what they think about the Culture, a relative newcomer to this galaxy that has appeared explosively onto the stage.

Eldar - Artist
Personally, I think it's crazy those Mon-Keigh would let machines do their thinking for them. I mean, how could they trust those things to make good decisions, no matter how complex? They don't even understand their own machines!
In any case, their refusal to keep their culture pure, dirtying it with their scabbling fascination at everything, will only lead to their loss of identity. Why, I expect the Culture of a hundred years hence to be utterly unrecognizable from that of now!

Tau - Earth Caste architect
These Culture are a fascinating experiment in sociology, of the limits what can be achieved outside of the Greater Good. While they have certainly greater capabilities than the Tau empire, I believe it is due to them being older. With time, I am confident that the Greater Good will demonstrate its superiority and we will welcome them into their appropriate place, perhaps even as our leaders.

IoM - Inquisitor specializing in hunting xenotech
Xenos! Blasphemers! I know all about how they look like humans, but trust me, those glanding bumbling idiots who can't tell a Holy Nail from a piece of wood will meet a sticky end. Oh, they have a few tricks here and there but the Emperor's will always shines through. Mark my words, the Culture will rue the day they let their Men of Iron run their society.

Necrons - Planetary Lord
The Culture? Oh, I thought you were referring to the disgusting bags of meat for a second. On the whole, they're pretty sane and logical, but even their Minds are sometimes prone to certain... quirks. That is not to say that they are bad, on the contrary, they make good allies and will certainly be a worthy adversary. One of the few peoples I can give my most sincere respect and honour.

Chaos - Average Khorne cultist
Wha? Who are these guys? But KHORNE will crush all beneath his heel eventually. It matters not, whoever they are, they'll eventually see that the way of Chaos is best.

Tyranids - unidentified be-taloned blob
*nom* *crunch* *scream* - Sorry about that, we're currently experiencing technical difficulties and will return shortly
Week 1
Further investigations into warp phenomena through Revay's lessons are making small amounts of progress, slower than we would have liked.

We have completed an initial survey of the close-by locations of the webway and have managed to compile some basic information on the possible connectivity of the webway. With this comes information on the speed of travel of the Eldar.

It appears that the Eldar have strategic speeds roughly twice of ours. The webway shortens distances to a large extent. Nevertheless, we are sure that from the statistical connections, our continued clashes with Alaitoc over the Eldar artifacts has to be deliberately arranged. Nevertheless, Alaitoc itself does not appear to be a likely candidate as they are attempting to retrieve the artifacts as quickly as possible instead of seeking engagement.

Week 2
We have finalized some minor improvements to our hyperspace theory and with some retrofitting, current hyperspace drives will have 5% more power per weight, with a corresponding increase in top speed. Additionally, drive degradation is reduced to gain a 20% increase in emergency speed time.

Due to the density of femtotech, femto-tech hyperspace drives for classical materials ships with femtotech effectors and Minds will carry a disproportionate amount of the ship's weight. This causes even a standard 20% drive proportion to have effectively 40 to 50% engine power per weight of the naked drive. Fully femtotech ships, which are most of them, will not benefit.

Week 3
A major breakthrough in Revay's lessons have been made once the suppression effect was accounted for. It appears that our intelligence engineering theory, while accurate, incorporates standard structures that engage warp behaviour in organic intelligences. This aligns well with Eldar experience of certain key regions, notable for their unusually low effect on emotional processing (at least in our model).

It appears that it may possible to create an organic interface that can manipulate the warp independent of the human. In essence, it would be possible that only these brain regions responsible for warp effects could be isolated and used independently. This is excellent for our purposes as the individual regions concerned are considered non-sentient and no moral problem exists with unlimited duplication and invasive control.

Of course, we have not treated the Eldar's warning lightly. Experiments into this possibility outside of Revay's lessons will be conducted with utmost care in isolated regions and with full containment protocols.
For now however, we are still unable to reproduce a higher than Rho rank organic device. Achievement of such is rare, most reproductions usually completely fail to register on detectors. We are currently refining the conditions.
Dark Eldar

Week 1
Evacuation of Comorragh is proceeding with only slight delay. We have estimated that approximately 10% of the Dark Eldar sub-realms attached to Comorragh via dimension gates have managed to break off in time but we do not expect them to survive for long. In any case, they only hold less than 2% of the total Dark Eldar population and may be dealt with later.

Following the "attack" (I, Happy Fun Times, am inclined to think there is a misunderstanding here), we are beginning to investigate the webway by means of automated scout drones. The wide network of armed monitors watching webway gates are self-upgrading to fully sentient LCU class vehicles capable of all standard production capabilities.

At present, we have entry surveys of roughly 1% of the accessible gates, those that our current guide has knowledge of. The total number of accessible gates is estimated to be roughly 60% of the total gates present in the galaxy, although we currently cover just under half of that. Webway structure and details are more understood now and details are published on the main section of Progress Publications.

Week 2
It did not occur to us that the unknown group of Eldar presumed to be Harlequins that interfered in Comorragh might be friendly with the other Eldar. The ZharTann have given us some minimal information about their habits as a deadly infantry force that also practices a particular form of art, the play, that the Eldar in general greatly respect.

This is, we consider, good evidence that the Harlequins are indeed responsible and some method of reconciliation might be possible. Perhaps there are terms we may be able to agree to for the return of the stolen Relentless class.

Preparation of Ackaris is making good progress and the first Dark Eldar stasis ships have arrived. A Chaos Response Fleet is already in position and assigned to form a last line of defense of the Necron world. Plans for the proposed backup reality generator of a Ring-sized Gellar Field projector are under consideration as the GSVs self-replicate to reach the needed magnitude for the construction.

Week 3
The enigmatic Harlequins have contacted the Comorragh deconstruction fleet again, this time returning a mobile walker presumably manufactured by the mind aboard the Relentless class. It appears that the ship's mind has been returned at its own request while they keep the ship itself.

We therefore think that the Harlequins are not hostile, or at least not seriously objecting to our current actions. Perhaps we might be able to help them in more concrete fashions if their goals align with ours. We have attempted to return a request for dialogue but there was again no response.
Week 1
The IoM has retreated to a ring of systems 1 "standard jump" away from the beachhead of the original attack. A "standard jump" being a military maneuver of the distance of a short warp jump that all Navigators should be able to pilot ships at low risk and good consistency in order to maintain fleet cohesion and coordinate arrivals to the same time.

Femto-tech cruisers are now being used to lead fully femto-tech squadrons as frigate designs are starting to hit the field. The new organization where the femto-tech squadrons operate independently of the classical fleet gives them the chance to use their greater firepower and flexibility for the best effect instead of being forced to maintain formation with the slower and more fragile old-school ships.

Week 2
Necron restoration of power pylons on destroyed worlds has proceeded surprisingly quickly. The new ones are even femto-tech based and heavily armoured. We suspect that the Necrons are building their facilities in a way that is expected to survive a standard crust-piercing torpedo the IoM regularly uses to destroy Necron-held worlds.

The "destroyed" worlds are apparently planned to be used as traps as Necron ships function far better if there is a power pylon in the system and the destroyed worlds can lie dormant until a returning fleet activates it.

Week 2
"What is that you've got there?"
The assistant whirled around guiltily, the cryptek could quite easily have him replaced and he wouldn't be worth a new-style memory implant anymore.

The cryptek ignored the assistant's behaviour and approached the cage. Inside was a disgusting squishy thing.

"A biological? Are you running a new psychomancy experiment? I told you never to-"

"No sir! This isn't the StPE one! I had a new idea!" the cryptek looked at his assistant, signalling surprise, he was virtually never interrupted.

The metallic figure moved over to the cage and prodded the thing inside which made a noise.

"I had been looking over the Culture's materials and noticed that most of their Mind intelligences keep organic people as 'pets'. And I was thinking that perhaps-"

"Define 'pet'. "

The assistant backed up a bit and recited the Culture's definition of the word. "In any case, my new hypothesis is that the Culture Minds are stabilized by their interactions with their organic 'pets'. Certainly, those who do not maintain 'pets' like our ambassador here have deviant psychological profiles. "

The cryptek frowned, "It is disgusting. Get rid of it. "
"But sir! You did say to investigate all possible solutions to the mental degradation! Why not try this?"

The cryptek snorted, "Because it is disgusting. If you want to try it, do it yourself. And make sure to scrub down yourself when you leave, don't want any organics getting out of this place."

The assistant bowed and nodded as the Cryptek left. Behind them, the thing whined for attention and lay down with its paws over its nose when it was just ignored.

Week 3
The IoM has begun a counterattack as fresh reinforcements arrive. While this has slowed Necron reconstruction efforts, it is clear that there will be no possible advance into Necron territory.

The Necrons are beginning to retrofit their ships with femto-tech weaponry. While just as fragile as their original ships, femto-tech lasers are at least two orders of magnitude more powerful. This gives equipped ships massive alpha-strike potential and the corresponding shift in Necron strategy is throwing off the IoM.

We have received a request for clarification on a certain specific arrangement of our society and its impact on inorganic intelligences. Specifically, the Necrons have asked if us Minds are psychologically stabilized by the activity of taking care of humans. I, White Devil, have taken the liberty of pointing out that based on the various concepts we have broken down intelligence into, it is possible to build a psychologically stable intelligence for any specific activity and that Culture Minds are not specially dependent on the presence of humans or less complex intelligences.

Of course, such a line of inquiry holds much amusement potential and I will open lines of communication from interested sub-Mind class sentients to the relevant Necron channels.

Chapter End Notes

So I had been thinking about the warp drive and how timings tend to be "off". Since timing of the jump is always off by some amount and this increases the longer the distance (and assuming it works in reverse), and that for a military fleet jumping together, arriving separately is just a death sentence, the concept of a "standard jump" distance ought to be around.

That being the distance at which the fleet will arrive safely and roughly at the same time. After all you do not want your mighty fleet assembled to stomp some Orks to arrive at the target system in drips and drabs over a week only to get minced piecemeal.

Talking and behaviour styles have been deliberately humanized to render the conversation more intelligible. Nuances have been preserved as well as possible but like all translations, loss is to be expected.

The actual Necron conversations and actions are considerably more muted and reserved than human standard, they have been played up for much the same reason.

Basically, I cannot be bothered to write the Necrons as stiffly as I tried to with Ackaris since it actually requires effort to be *less* expressive than my usual style. Not sure
why.
You'll just have to imagine them as stiff unexpressive metallic robots.

To be continued.
Week 1
Following examination of the Kroot biology, we have immediately noticed some similarities in their absorption of genetic traits from consumed material with the Tyranid hyper-evolution traits. Furthermore, going by the recorded effects of suspected Chaos contamination, the Kroot appear less dangerous compared to humans when contaminated, although further work is necessary to be sure.

The captive IoM population will be used to settle an unusually wet moon in Tau space that the Tau find unpalatable. Initially, it will be a prison camp aimed at becoming self-sufficient, but the Tau indicate that given some help from us, they will attempt to assimilate the humans similar to the other human planets pledged to the Greater Good.

The first pair of transports will head towards the new colony some ten thousand lightyears beyond the borders of the Tau empire carrying the first wave of colonists, primarily Earth caste builders and Water caste administrators.

Week 2
We have rooted out our first indication of a Chaos cult among a human world in the Tau empire. The Tau were informed of the situation and proceeded to capture and interrogate the contaminated people. Our technology that allows this detection is of great interest to the Tau even though we expect them to have practical and moral problems deploying compulsory mind-scanning programs.

ROU Negative Mass Syndrome is a new model ROU with heavy emphasis on fine control of gravity manipulators to serve as non-lethal ship disablers. Fielded in response to the rebuilding IoM fleet, we are exploring avenues of dissuading the IoM from further attacks.

Week 3
As the Tau fleet begins to come out of refit, we expect them to take a more aggressive stance towards the IoM. We have decided that we will not extend military aid beyond the main Tau territories and have informed them of such. Despite the clear preference for the Tau, we do not think that destabilizing the IoM's presence in the current area is advisable for minimizing losses.

Technical report
We have detected firing tests of ground based weaponry from the Tau of significantly higher power than expected. It appears that our refinements of their plasma and laser weaponry for space combat has resulted in some spin-off improvements to the Tau's ground weaponry capability.

In particular, the higher power density afforded by improved capacitors and a super-capacitor design has resulted in all the Tau mechanized armour suits becoming smaller. While armoured suits of the same size as the Imperium Titans are easily within range of the Tau, it appears that the Tau opted to cut down on shot profile as much as possible using the new refinements instead of increasing firepower which they think is more than sufficient at present.

The result is a suit of armour that is much closer to the size of a Tau, slightly larger than a human, with the same capabilities and firepower as an XV-88; a nearly 25% reduction in size across all dimensions. Miniaturization and lightening of their weaponry across the board is taking place, which will allow the Tau forces to be more mobile and experience less combat fatigue. In particular, the miniaturization of plasma power plants adapted from principles used to improve plasma cohesion in space has allowed anti-gravity generators to be mounted as an all AG variant of the usual jetpack on normal sized battlesuits, although this diverts power that could be used for heavier weapons.
The AG lift generator charges faster and has a longer operational cycle than the original jetpack design, as well as being able to operate in hover mode to strike from the air for short periods of time. The vast increase in flexibility this gives to Crisis battlesuits has commanders debating new tactical doctrines for their use.

More interestingly, the Tau are also adapting the miniaturized powerplant for civilian purposes. Distributed power generation is now a possibility for the Tau and various experimental towns built on that principle are being tested.
Week 1
The Rogue Trader has built up sufficient influence (not without help) to allow us to create an enterprise aimed at supporting reformation efforts. Of course, the Rogue Trader himself is listed as the leader and we have assured him that despite being so listed, he needn't involve himself in the day to day affairs, which Contact will handle. We have agreed to relinquish control of the enterprise when the objectives are satisfactorily achieved.

While the Rogue Trader serves as the front face of the company, we have created avatars for Contact personnel to work with in direct contact with Imperium organizations. Using the Rogue Trader's credentials and established goodwill, we have begun to set up permanent supply contracts for non-sensitive equipment.

These activities are calculated to draw the attention of Forge World Talon and we hope to open negotiations with it without revealing the Culture's presence. By that time, we aim to have established ourselves as an ethical and trustworthy company more interested in mundane logistics and infrastructure than in anything potentially viewed as threatening.
Week 1, Day 3
Worrying news. In my routine observations of data, I have come across a strange trend in my eternal quest to purge the heretic.

In the past few weeks, I have managed to hunt down and destroy at least twenty independent Chaos cults. While every death of these heretics is a moment of joy for the Emperor, this is an unusually high number. It is rare that I manage to take twenty in a single year, and now in weeks?

This matter warrants investigation. A number of hypotheses present themselves to me, via the Principle of Simplicity, these two are the primary ones I shall start with:
1. The number of Chaos incidents in this area is unusually high
2. My detection rate of Chaos cults is unusually high

Day 4
I have visited an Inquisitor friend who is known for his vast historical library into the past dealings of Chaos cults. The pattern of their rise and fall is well-documented by various Inquisitors who opted to watch and learn before purging.

The rate of formation of Chaos cults is directly related to the influence of Chaos, which is usually due to the presence of a Chaotic artefact. Alternatively, a Sorcerer or active heretic could be seeding them.

Quite unexpectedly, Chaos cults do suffer a significant chance of never gaining much influence and eventually petering out on their own. These tiny cults often never go detected and it is a testament to the iron will of the Imperial citizens that they may unconsciously resist the temptations of Chaos.

Day 5
I have run some statistical analysis on past data and the Chaos cults I have removed in this region still fall within expected ranges. While this in no way rules out Chaos influence, especially since many of them were destroyed when they were nascent and still forming, I will begin investigating the other hypothesis.

I have had no major improvements to my information network in the recent weeks, at least, none that would explain the sudden rise in detection rate. Furthermore, tracing back the sources I obtained my information from, none of them appear to be out of order or unusually competent. The suspicious reports that lead to my investigation of each cult were distributed statistically randomly and the nature of the reports were perfectly plausible for each source.

Day 6
I have used the Emperor's Tarot despite my hesitancy in trusting any source from the warp. Cast by a friendly local Navigator with respect to my information sources, it warned me to be suspicious of convenient allies. I also requested a casting of the general future of my investigation and obtained a Weal And Woe result. Perfect, total ambiguity.

Nevertheless, I have retrieved the past reports that lead to Chaos cults and begun reviewing them in minute detail. It appears that my contacts have had a small rise in the number of second-hand hearsay reports, which were brought to my attention due to a suspicious detail mentioned in the conversation. I am unsure if this is what the Tarot was mentioning, vague as it is, but I may as well start here and eliminate as I go.
I have booked an in-system transit to the nearby starport to interview one of my contacts.

Day 7
The interview was not useful, it was too much to expect a counter clerk for a shipping cooperative to remember details of weeks old conversations without mnemonics training that Inquisitors get. She recalled details about the reported conversations (thank goodness she could at least remember the ones she wrote about, I'd be looking for a new informant if she had failed that), although they were still uninformative.

More interestingly, I have made a breakthrough. If I filter the list of reports for those that lead to actual Chaos cults instead of a false lead, the rate of second-hand information rises significantly. While the reports of the various casual conversations with friends or overheard talks are innocuous individually, when viewed together, they present a disturbing pattern.

I think someone or something has been deliberately pointing me at the Chaos cults. For what purpose I cannot say and dare not speculate.

Thought for the Day - The traitor’s hand lies closer than you think.

Week 2, Day 1
My investigations has lead me to uncover a key clue. My good assistant and protege, a woman named Avel Ira, returned from her assignment to destroy one of the cells. Her more extensive business background (she was a planetary administrator for one of the smaller freighter clans before I recruited her) lead her investigation into the mysterious informants to a certain newly established company.

It appears that this new cooperative, headed by a Rogue Trader called Seb Snakewick, has directly employed or has relations to other miscellaneous companies from which the informants appear to come from. At least for those who were named and identified. I have positively confirmed that at least 40% of the informants have this in common, with another 30% being unconfirmed and 30% unrelated.

Day 2
I have begun a background check into the company. Formed recently under the auspices of multiple local governors, Seb Snakewick has been busy ingratiating himself with the authorities here. While not suspicious by itself, when paired together with the mysterious informants, his company is beginning to look suspect.

I shall have to take some more direct action.

Day 3
Avel Ira has been dispatched to get herself hired by the company. She will almost certainly not succeed by herself, based on the company's strange hiring practices. I will be travelling to their headquarters to apply some discreet pressure, the standard shell game ploy ought to work here.

Day 6
I have reviewed further information about the company. It's hiring practices, said to be unusual, are beyond strange. While hiring starship crew is common to all trading companies, it appears that this one seems to be taking on people inexperienced in space. All trading companies would clearly prefer to have trained and competent personnel but this one appears to prefer making its experienced employees train new ones.

Moreover, their criteria for choosing among the inexperienced appears arbitrary. I have reviewed the applications and details of over a hundred applicants and there is no discernable pattern for who is
rejected or accepted except for a preference for the young adult (but this is not unusual).
Nevertheless, the rate of rejection is significant enough that they must have some other hidden
criteria.

Day 7
I have arrived at the regional headquarters for the company, just set up last week. I must say that the
speed at which they have opened and furnished their office is astonishing. Within a week, their office
is as well equipped as any of the major players I am familiar with. Although their furniture and
equipment is chosen more for function and efficiency than aesthetics, that is not to say they have
been cheap about it.

A Rogue Trader might be able to finance such an operation if this sort of standard is believed to be
applied across all their branches, especially one as busy as Snakewick, but I question the pace at
which the company moves.

Not in my experience has any company managed to set up and begin operations flawlessly. Nor was
my experience in their regional office at all normal.

When I introduced myself and showed my credentials, the usual sort of quiet panic followed. This I
am used to, but I had the feeling that despite that, the people were still managing to do their work.
Clerks bowed and scraped, the secretary was summoned with all haste to fetch the regional manager
from his meeting... all that was normal. But the feeling in the office was not one of dread or worry,
but of business, as if I was an honoured guest of extreme importance instead of an object of fear.

I made my request to the regional manager. The story is that I was tracking some suspected Chaos
sympathizers and that the company should hire all the candidates from a list which includes Avel to
aid my efforts. Avel should have buried her tracks by now and she would be just another applicant,
albeit one with some experience.
What was surprising was that the manager simply agreed and immediately began making
arrangements. Of course, every company has different policies, but for a regional manager to make
such a key decision that would break their company's hiring policies so drastically right on the spot is
not something I have witnessed before. When I asked him if he did not need to check with the Rogue
Trader, the manager indicated that since the request had come from me, he was sure the Rogue
Trader would have to agree with his decision.

While the logic is sound, I have not seen such initiative and responsibility on the part of a mere
regional manager before.

I had another strange feeling of unfamiliarity too. The regional manager, after summarizing the
requirements and details, handed my file of fake suspects to his secretary and simply told her to
implement my request! I do not know why, but this strikes me as unusual. Perhaps it is that he trusts
his subordinates too much, or that everyone here appears to be actually working for the company
instead of... for themselves like I see all too often.

In any case, I believe I now know how the company managed to be so efficient. What remains to be
seen is if my strange feelings turn out to be more than just a reaction to a foreign idea of corporate
culture or if there is something more to those informants.

Week 3, Day 1
Avel has been accepted in her application, beginning tomorrow or at her earliest convenience. I have
begun to dig further into the company's background. After my unguided and very much surprise tour
and interview with the company employees, I am beginning to think that this company isn't even
reporting to the Rogue Trader who supposedly leads them. Everything is done locally, each person
makes their own decision and explains their actions to their manager. Even the regional manager
hasn't seen the Rogue Trader before!

Day 2
My suspicions of a strange corporate culture are correct, much to the detriment of my hypothesis that a Chaos cult has taken over the Rogue Trader's operation and is getting rid of rivals. Avel writes of a leadership training programme and a series of exercises meant to familiarize them with the company's aims and instil independence.

The company's core goals are market penetration and reliability. All the managers and even the frontline personnel in the offices have been instructed to not prioritize profit in favour of obtaining goodwill and additional volume; although they are required to at least statistically break even, accounting for risk.
This sort of aggressive marketing strategy has been highly disruptive to their competitors and the Rogue Trader's favours to the local governments are instrumental in obtaining semi-permanent arrangements. The low cost even to government contracts that would be easily negotiable higher has helped further raise his status as a helpful provider of needed materials or a buyer of excess.

This is all highly irregular for a company but I cannot find any trace at all of Chaos cults or anything connected to Chaos. Some of their personnel even have incredibly distorted impressions of Chaos as something to be feared as they would a physical enemy rather than as a constant moral hazard.

Day 4
Avel continues to write about strange practices; based on her past experience, she was allowed to negotiate a minor supply contract and got scolded for driving too hard a bargain. What their final aim is, I cannot say, but I will continue to investigate in case they constitute a hazard along a different line than Chaos. Some of my colleagues may find my investigations interesting.

Additionally, worrying news about Forge World Talon has reached my ears. The news about the strange openness Talon is practising with its technology may point to some other influences I may need to investigate. However, it is a short distance outside this company's sphere of influence and I will not be able to investigate both at the same time.

Day 5
Further information about this company is rapidly becoming less useful. I have decided to investigate Talon first and leave Avel here to gather information. She has been authorized to take any necessary action.
Hypothetical: Of 'nids and Necrons

Chapter Summary

A C'tan takes desperate measures to try and resist containment by the Culture:
Equipping Tyranids with stolen culturetech to create an unstoppable swarm.

After a certain set of rather unlucky misunderstandings and communication errors (as well as some
delicate interference from a sorceror), a particular war-like set of Necrons are declared HSes by the
Culture, who have less qualms about containing them since there are cooperative Necrons.

The initial battles go to the Culture effortlessly until a C'Tan shard is brought out to play. This results
in the loss of an ROU and the subsequent battle to contain the shard destroys a star and devastates
most of the surrounding systems in a high-speed chase.

Eventually, the Necron empire who set it loose contains it again after being strong-armed into doing
so by the Culture (who point out that the continuing battle is heading towards the Necron worlds and
the side effects would result their total destruction). Unfortunately for the Culture, the Necrons opt to
combine their shards to release a full C'Tan.

The fallout from *that* battle causes even further Culture ship losses and the eventual destruction of
nearly forty star systems as well as the Necron empire responsible. The Culture go into high-
offensive mode, utilizing self-replicating production moved to inter-galactic space. With a production
ratio of 10% (and 90% to self-replication), the Culture's influence in the galaxy is reduced for the first
time as the C'Tan rampages through the stars eating anything it wants.
The Eldar go into deep hiding, disappearing from view completely. The Culture still maintains
diplomatic contact and knows they have retreated into the webway. Craftworlds are moved to
interstellar space for safety and the Culture provides nanohole power generators to keep them
running.

The galaxy cowers under the vengeful fist of a mad god.

By the end of Year 1 however, the C'Tan is fighting a losing battle. Necron empires retain the
original weapons used to break C'Tans into shards and the Culture is actively helping them. The
Necron zones are strong points it dares not enter.

Culture containment fleets that outmass entire systems get destroyed every week but the flood
appears endless. And the fleets are growing in size and complexity constantly, doubling in total
tonnage every 6 weeks. Where they come from, it doesn't know, but they're getting better at dodging
its attacks, at running away and being annoying. Furthermore, losses appear to no longer bother the
Culture. The C'Tan doesn't know it but the Culture's fleets are actually wolf-packs run by a hive-
mind like structure. It is unpleasant to lose fleets but it does not destroy the identity of the controlling
intelligence.

Furthermore, warp-based weaponry is beginning to appear in the Culture's arsenal. While the
relatively primitive D-cannons are short-ranged (a death sentence when facing down a C'Tan) and
nothing more than pinpricks, the C'Tan can read the writing on the wall. It is only a matter of time
before the Culture finally understand the Necron weapons and the C'Tan is contained again.
That time could be measured in months.

In desperation, the C'Tan makes contact with another desperate party. The Tyranids are clearly in dire straits and while communication between two such diametrically opposite species is nearly impossible, the C'Tan quickly learns that the Tyranids can indeed serve as an impromptu army. Numbers is something the C'Tan needs and capability is something the Tyranids require.

In a deal reminiscent of a time long long ago, the Tyranids agree to serve as the C'Tan's army in exchange for help on the technological front. The C'Tan is obviously unable to provide organic examples of technology but it does understand how to interface organics and inorganics.

The unholy fusion of the organo-metallic tyranid appears on the galactic stage. With tactical FTL, short-range electromagnetic projectors and greatly enhanced, weaponized Narwhals, the Tyranids are orders of magnitude stronger than they were before. In numbers, they even pose a threat to the unwary GCU. Plus they are able to grow fusion/fission based elemental transmutation organs, allowing them to solve their ever-present problem of "too much hydrogen, not enough carbon". As well as allowing them to eat virtually anything, including bare rock and even entire stars.

A battle for dominance across the galaxy takes place. The C'Tan knows he has to win before the Culture can take over. The Tyranids, organic beings at heart, have a smaller exponential growth curve than the Culture, and require actual mass to feed on. However, at present, the vast Tyranid fleet still outnumbers the Culture.

For now.

Many stars are lost, even entire systems. The Sorceror wisely stays away from a conflict where a single task force outmasses a solar system and the frontage of a full-scale battle spans 50 lightyears.

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Timeline A:
Huge as the tyranid fleet is, with a kill ratio in the stratosphere and far better battle tactics, the Culture eventually takes over and their self-replicating production wins out. The largest battle, taking place near the center of the galaxy, involves fleets whose size is measured in solar masses.

Timeline B:
The tyranid fleet is huge. So huge that even the Culture's exponential growth cannot hold them back, even when the Culture has a kill ratio of over twenty thousand ships to one. 60% of the galaxy is lost over the next four months as Tyranids swarm everywhere, fleets ballooning in size as they consume entire planets and stars.
The C'Tan feeds, watches and waits.

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Either way, the Tyranids find a disturbing trend. Not only is the Culture expanding more exponentially than them, the Culture is also adaptive in a way that makes Tyranid hyperevolution look slow. In the short four months since the start of the Bug Wars, the Culture has undergone three complete battle doctrine shifts. Classical fleet walls and high-speed concentrated strikes gives way to a distributed network of incredibly complicated dances that utilizes Culture speed and range advantage; that eventually evolves into a fleet doctrine surrounding the use of key superweapon ships
utilizing light-year range D-Cannons that appear to operate in continuous mode.

The war takes a turn for the worse when the Culture begins to marry warp-teleport with their Displacer and Hyperspace technology to achieve multi-lightyear self-teleportation. Fleet doctrine changes once again, turning into a crazed mess of opportunistic strikes, ships appearing for microseconds to wreak havoc and disappear before they can be focused upon, utilizing the incredible mobility advantage of their new propulsion system.

While the Tyranids are still evolving defenses and new tactics, the C'Tan examining and disassembling captured wrecks and technologies to provide advances. Fast as it is, they are faster. The Culture always seems to be two steps ahead.

Which in fact, they are. With nowhere else to turn, the Eldar have been providing crucial future-sight information to the Culture. While sketchy, the Culture can work out general principles of future Tyranid tactics and evolutions and produce counters just in time for them to hit the field.

By the 6th month of the 2nd year, most of the galaxy is once again free of the Tyranids. The final blow is dealt in the 9th month as the Culture, now armed with reality bubbles and ships whose identity and form shift practically at will, batter down the last of the Tyranids. The C'Tan flees into intergalactic space but is chased down and re-contained. Finally.

The Culture begins researching ways to permanently destroy the C'Tan. For that purpose, more warp understanding is required. The fleet of millions of solar masses turns towards the Eye...
Orks

Week 1 & 2
Comparison between the Orks under the ex-SC agent, wild Orks and individual Freebooters have lead to significant support for the hypothesis that Orks are a weaponized species that were deliberately given HS-like characteristics in order to make them more dangerous. A historical cross-comparison between Eldar and Necron sources, as well as supporting testimony from either side, has concluded that the Orks do display HS behaviour when in large concentrations but not when in small groups.

This presents an interesting moral problem. We cannot remove the Orks, like the Tyranids, indiscriminately from inhabited areas but failure to do so leads to continuous, massive loss of life on both sides. The final solution would, of course, be to modify the Orks to remove their HS-influence but retain the essence of their species; but this currently impossible to achieve and presents its own moral problems.

The ex-SC agent's three part fleet, each with its own Training and Untrained sections have mostly rejoined, save for leaving a core cadre to train the newcomers. At his request, we have provided a list of Ork worlds on the path to the Eye that minimizes his exposure to the IoM. The majority of his fleet is now heading along that axis.

Significant warp effects are being detected around his fleet, we take this as evidence that the Waagh is beginning.

Ork fleet movements have not gone unnoticed by IoM scouts and they are assembling to intercept him, helped by the fact that he will be slowed by the need to recruit and convince Ork worlds to join his cause. Furthermore, the Ork worlds in the center of his power base are lead by another converted Culture Contact citizen, who is organizing the production and training of ships, as well as enforcement of the SC agent's power hierarchy.

Week 3
GCU Large Sticks Speak Softly is will be tailing the ex-SC agent's fleet from a three lightyear range. Warp effects surrounding the Ork fleet has grown too large to risk staying nearby. In any case, it appears that the SC agent is willing to maintain contact and thus direct observation is not quite necessary.

The Waagh has overrun a number of human star systems on their path although the SC agent has not permitted his fleet to invade. Of note is a division of orks he used to board and capture a space hulk, which has since been taken apart.

His mini-empire now spans ten star systems.
Week 1 & 2
The placebo effect is confirmed. Revay manages to "feel" the crystal (referred to as Arlec) when she
is not told that she is being monitored, but cannot do so when she is told she is being monitored but
in reality is not. We asked for permission before experimenting with actively blocking her
recognition of being monitored and it appears that the brain center that governs expectation is
somewhat tied to her ability to 'feel' the Arlec.

Why this may be so is unclear, but records from Revay point to certain key brain regions that appear
to be warp sensitive based on unusual readings originating from them. More interestingly, creating
these brain regions in vitro with varying degrees of completeness has resulted in a discovery that
promises further understanding as well as possibly creating actual warp devices using organic
interfaces.
Currently, 1 in ten million brain regions made register as warp active. Research is being conducted to
improve this number.

The Eldar have refused to help with this project for unstated reasons. Nevertheless, experiments are
already underway and they have not refused to continue teaching Revay, who apparently can learn
to use the warp if she does not know for sure if she is being monitored.

Week 3
Revay has managed to feel the Arlec by herself without the guidance of the Eldar and they have
moved onto a different crystal that she is supposed to guide the growth for. We eagerly await results.

A major breakthrough in the brain region copies has appeared. The presence of nearby warp active
objects, in particular, a combination of two different crystals, has vastly increased the probability of
forming a Rho rank organic warp interface to one in ten thousand. Since they were copied from
Revay who was focused on feeling the Arlec, the interface currently only has a reaction to nearby
Arlec crystals.
Part 16

Week 1
A minor breakthrough with femto-materials further increases the production rate of such components by 5%. Also, structural improvements has reduced the weight of femto-material armour by 10%.

Femto-tech weapons and ships are being provided to the Tau for self-defence with the agreement that the ships are on indefinite loan from us and are not to be used offensively. The Tau have requested to study the technology, to which we have agreed. There is little chance that they will achieve major breakthroughs in the foreseeable future, which is an annoyingly short period of time.

Week 2
Further warp interface improvements have been made, with a protocol for the making of a Rho-ranked sensor of the warp-active crystal. From Revay's lessons and what we know of the Eldar's world spirits, some form of local reality alteration may be possible. Quite apart from warp devices, local reality alteration promises to enhance many of our support components many fold.

It appears that we have been seriously underestimating the usefulness of the warp. Much more research will be conducted into its uses and safety.

Week 3
Dark Eldar evacuation of Commorragh is 60% complete. Ackaris is already prepared and all the defensive measures have been put in place.

The Necron war has resulted in a full IoM rout. For now, the Necrons have opted to not stage a counter-invasion, instead focusing on hunting down key targets and rebuilding their destroyed worlds. It is interesting that the Necrons view the shattered planets as better for construction, the cyclonic torpedoes used to destroy Necron tombs also shatter the planetary core and the resulting heavy seismic activity creates 'lava' flows of molten core material, which is highly concentrated with useful metals.

We have offered some logistical support in the form of designs for zero-gravity industry. Hot, volcanically active planets are not liveable even by Necrons and a space-based industry around them can take advantage of their readily accessible materials. Of course, this is aimed at making the Necrons less planet dependent. Being completely inorganic, the Necrons are the most adapted race to space-based and therefore environmentally conscious living.
Week 1
The Tau colony has received its first colonists and operations on the planet to make it more appealing has begun.

The Tau have requested that we build a set of waystations on the path to the colony that will serve as beacons and stopping points for shorter-ranged Tau ships to traverse the distance without relying on our transports.

Femto-tech defensive ships (no FTL) were provided as part of our defense agreement to the outlying colony and the Tau main sector.

A colony on the path from the Eye to Sol is being prepared for the Tau while the first colonists are enroute. Our transports will leave in waves to both outlying colonies, to arrive when the system infrastructure is scheduled to be complete.

Week 2
Vespids were analyzed and their wing harmonics presents some interesting interpretations of aerodynamics principles. Furthermore, the special crystals they use to power their technology have some useful self-assembling properties and applications of such are being looked into (although this is not compatible with current femto-tech materials).

Following the scans, we have given the Tau a two way translation device for the Vespid language. Furthermore, we have included principles for manufacture and use of Vespid crystals, as well as our current starting point of their applications. In particular, the reworked Vespid neutron blaster will now work as an independent weapon of the Vespid and can be easily scaled to vehicle and battlesuit class weapons.

The neutron blaster presents better armour penetration and higher offensive power than the standard Tau ion cannon but much lower range. It is being tested as a close-ranged substitute for the current fusion blaster that is more suited for medium range engagements.

Additionally, with the sudden abundance of fast neutron emitting crystals, the possibility of using them as weapons outright is also under consideration. A neutron-based airburst bomb is being researched by the Tau.

The Tau have expressed astonishment at our rapid understanding of a problem that has been undecipherable to the Tau and Vespids for a long time. Some of them are beginning to consider further research into inorganic intelligences as a potential top priority, aiming to reach Singularity themselves.

For the most part, the Ethereal caste who have reviewed our materials on Singularity civilizations are guiding the process in order to ensure a smooth transition. An ethical debate is being held among the Tau discussing the rights of inorganic or even hybrid intelligences and the appropriate sentiency cutoff lines.

The Tau have begun research into a starship class neutron blaster.

Week 3
Despite our warning, the Tau have taken offensive action against the IoM. Their fleet has seized thelightly held Praetonis V and is preparing it as a fleet base for further operations. They explained their actions as "not rash", citing their clear military and technological superiority.

They have promised us that they will not bombard civilian populations or coerce them into joining the Greater Good. We did not request such but it appears that the Tau have a good understanding of
our principles and also wish to maintain good relations.

It appears that our efforts at stabilizing the local region has failed. A full scale war is virtually unavoidable barring major intervention and reassessment of priorities is taking place.
Necrons

Week 1
The IoM counterattack has managed to push two systems forward. Despite the new Necron tactics and capabilities, the regional commander is not willing to risk another femto-tech ship being seized and refuses to commit them to pitched battles, preferring to use them in a more conservative hit-and-run role.

The Necron worlds that were being restored were then re-bombed. What is interesting is the clear observation that the IoM is avoiding the systems in which the power pylons were completed and survived the bombing. This set of seemingly accurate foresight was eventually traced down to the Grey Knight's company commander, who is a powerful psyker and is apparently able to predict the future to some accuracy.

Week 2
Despite the avoidance of the Necron trap, the IoM advance has rapidly run out of steam. The loss ratio of the IoM is too high to be sustained and the predicted collapse in offensive power has happened. The Necrons continue to push them back.

The Necrons have asked for advice regarding the restoration template they are attempting to complete. They know that we can complete it faster than they can and are requesting us to scan a previously captured Necron Lord from a different Necron dynasty in order to do so. I have taken the liberty of accepting their invitation. The data on their inter-dynasty relationships and further insight into Necrontyr psychology will be extremely useful in modeling the Necron reaction post-restoration.

Week 3
The IoM fleet is scattering, details in the main report. The Planet Independence Proposal is being put into effect.
Week 1

Eldar - Alaitoc

3: Major change in future paths. I sense a disturbance in the skein.
2: I never like it when this happens. Did the Culture do something again?
1: Show us the runes...
   *runicasting for an hour*
1: Unbelievable. They're... actually back. Does the Culture even know what they're doing?
2: No? No. Definitely not. They think it's a good thing too!
3: It might be. Our ancient enemy was certainly less... implacable, before their rejection of life.
2: But this is crazy! Necrons doing art?!
3: I've heard that line before.
   *pause*
1: Do you notice a little pattern here? We don't do anything unless there's some kind of emergency on the table?
3: Yeah, no, we don't do anything at all.
1: When exactly are we going to figure out how to handle the kind of changes we are seeing the galaxy?
2: ...
3: I hate to be the one saying this, but I think our Eldar ways are... in need of more... energy. We are old and we look in the long term. Unfortunately, it appears that the pace of change happening now around the Culture is so fast that there may never BE a long term.
1: *mutters* as a famous Autarch said, 'in the long run, we're all dead'.
2: Pah, these short-lived races will be over in the blink of an eye. The Necrons and Eldar will be here long after they are gone.
3: You should hear yourself, you don't even sound like you believe it.
2: *sigh, pointedly puts down his runes* Ok, hypothetically speaking, what do you propose we do?
3: The council cannot act quickly. It's full of Eldar just like us. Frankly, no Farseer can resist the temptation to look ahead and debate and consider. And by the time we are done, it's been months.
2: Go on.
3: Create a new organization. Their job will be to consider and explore new ideas, as well as test them. They will not be part of Alaitoc so they will be free to make their own decisions, knowing that Alaitoc is watching to see what works.
1: The Outcasts will love that.
2: I think the Council will see through it and it will be denied.
3: Not if we tell them it is foreseen. And if we do so, it will be foreseen. You know the branch exists.
2: *still not touching his runes* Yes, I do know. But you also know that using future sight to manipulate Eldar matters carries the harshest penalty.
3: Us against the Eldar race. It's not that hard a decision.
2: It is not mine to make. *picks up his runes*

Eldar - ZharTann

Xiazera: I have a matter to report.
Autarch1: Go on.
Xiazera: I have noted an interesting idea from Alaitoc in my future visions. At present, it is unclear if they will implement it, but the idea can be made useful for our purposes.
Autarch2: Explain. Perhaps we may indeed find it useful.
Dark Eldar

Week 1
Evacuation of Comorragh is speeding up as the last remaining sections are complying more readily and resistance is down to the last few pockets.

The reticent Harlequins have opened contact briefly again, issuing a warning about Ackaris. While another request for open contact was ignored, we will be heeding their warning and increasing the fleet presence at Ackaris.

Week 3
The Dark Eldar evacuation is complete. Comorragh is uninhabited and final preparations for leaving are underway. Approximately 98% of the Dark Eldar should arrive at Ackaris within three weeks.

Of the huge variety of prisoners we liberated from the Dark Eldar, the non-sentient species are still being held in stasis while we are working out methods to return the sentients to their original civilizations.

The non-sentient species are being released slowly to their original environments after being thoroughly scanned for traces of contaminants. Release is being controlled to avoid overly large biosphere impact.

Sentient species with intact civilizations, in particular Eldar, Tau & allies, those few independents who we have minor contact with, are being negotiated for return. The Eldar will be returned to ZharTann since we are unable to reliably contact the other craftworlds. Psychological therapy for these ex-prisoners are being provided extensively based on our knowledge of their species, with VR therapy and direct mind-modification/reconstruction being taken for those who fail species-specific sentiency tests.

For the humans, we have assessed them as being unlikely to be welcomed by the Imperium and we are looking into other options for them. In particular, we are in talks for the Tau to take them in under the same arrangement as the prisoners of war from the first IoM invasion. We anticipate being asked to take a more active hand in their assimilation and we are likely to agree.

The major problems for now are to return those sentient species who have no native planet. With the loss of their infrastructure, not many sentient species could survive to any large extent on a virgin planet even with a native biosphere (most of which are lost forever).

To a large extent, we have been keeping them in holding habitat ships stationed near exits to the Webway. A number are assessed as compatible with the Tau and we have also begun contact for them to be assimilated, one is compatible with the Orks and a pilot program is underway. Three of them still have a hierarchy of command and we are in negotiation with them for possible aid. For the rest, we are looking for potential colony planets which we can provide infrastructure for them. 60% of these species have too small a number to sustain genetic diversity and after seeking permission with those who are still mentally intact, we are providing artificial life cycle support technologies to these species. We have begun scanning and analysing genetics to eliminate deleterious traits in the germline for all of the species with a low population count (
Warp training

Week 1
Revay's lessons have changed to a new crystal and active warp effects are detected from her. To a large extent, this lesson appears to be progressing faster than the previous due to better inter-race interactions.

Revay has also managed to sometimes override the placebo effect. She has managed to sense the Arlec despite being told she was being monitored (both actual and fake information cases were tested).

Revay herself has also given a long live tour of her training schedules and exercises. Despite the low rank making it impossible, a number of Culture citizens have requested to attempt these exercises. We have granted their requests under strict quarantine.

Week 2
Revay's advances in warp lessons have enabled a tightening of formation conditions of the Rho-ranked organic sensor. Some hints of being able to conduct reality alterations were also obtained.

In particular, from the documented effects from primary and secondary sources, there is no reason why our organic interfaces will not have the ability to conduct reality alterations so far seen. Indeed, organic interfaces are documented to have the most flexible and all-encompassing spectrum of abilities.

Week 3
Further minor advances are made. One Rho-ranked organic interface was successfully made that could perform the same guidance of the crystal Revay has been learning to control. Parameters of its operation and formation are being investigated.

Success rate of formation of organic interfaces has risen to one in one thousand.
Orks

Week 1 & 2
We have detected an alarming increase in the number of Ork ship fleets that have prompted an investigation into their construction. It is highly irregular that even with the Orks having generally higher cooperation that they should be able to build a fourth Training fleet section containing 10 ships within these few short weeks.

The investigation revealed that the Orks' warp effect in what they believe has hijacked the SC agent's description of nanotechnology. While we have no reason to believe s-matter has been made by the Orks, nor have we detected any, a precise mix of iron and magnesium powder seems to substitute for such in their thinking and any construction involving a ritual of application takes on s-matter like properties and is easily completed in the fraction of its usual time.

The Orks have not managed to weaponize this effect nor is it as flexible as our nanotech is, nevertheless, this represents a worrying development. The Orks assimilate technology not by mimicking it but by using their warp effect to enforce its ideas on reality. With the SC agent around as a convenient source, they might not require understanding the ideas to use it.

Week 3
The SC agent has overrun his first human system. He has refrained from bombarding or invading the planet after the defense fleet was destroyed although ork spores managed to land on it. A GCU has been removing them as they enter the atmosphere.

The IoM is still getting the news. Responses we expect are all hostile and it is almost certain the Orks will receive a test in the form of an avenging IoM fleet in the next month or two.
Week 1, Day 3
I have arrived on Forge World Talon. It appears that the Magos here has been expecting some form of scrutiny ever since he embarked on his deviant path. It remains to be seen if the Magos here is under a negative moral influence. For now, I have been promised an inspection tour of the Forge World at my convenience, although he has refused to allow me to wander unattended or unannounced citing safety reasons.

While I would normally be willing to brave personal danger in pursuit of heresy, in this case, I have the other matter of the mysterious company in the waiting; I am unsure if my colleagues will consider my suspicions worthy of investigation and the investigation may well die with me if I am imperiled. I have allowed the Magos to prepare ahead of my planned visit to the new support ship and its manufacturing areas, although only for one day.

Day 4
My tour of one of these new ships under construction has gone mostly as expected. Nothing was found to be amiss; although this is to be expected for an announced visit, the fact that the Magos's Techpriests and Technomats continued their breakneck working pace and that no area or information was withheld from me either deliberately or by omission is a point in his favour.

The Magos has launched three such ships and there are two more under construction at maximum speed. He has cited the orders placed with his Forge World by nearby planetary governors and to my knowledge, these documents are legitimate. I have another visit to one of these ships scheduled, currently being used as an extra shipyard in orbit of Talon for one of the two hulls under construction. If anything, the Magos of Talon has been, if not eager, exceedingly cooperative with my efforts to investigate.

I suspect he is pursuing another agenda not related to Chaos.

Day 5
Instead of my scheduled visit to the mobile shipyard, I have changed my schedule to visit a few of the atomic blast sites on Talon. The Magos has explained that the other Magos and a number of his subordinates disagreed with his policy of rapidly producing these support ships and they attempted to usurp his power.

I continued my tour aboard the Mechanicus fleet ships in orbit of Talon and noted no irregularities in their usage of atomic weapons, all the logs and records are in order. It is not for me to interfere with Mechanicus internal strife, but I have a feeling that this incident is related to the Magos's current agenda.

The Magos has continued to be unusually cooperative. It is rare that even an Inquisitor would be allowed to visit Mechanicus fleet ships, especially if he has a known rogue Techpriest and unknown psyker in tow. However, my license appears to be extended to not just questioning the crew, but to inspecting any records I wish. In fact, my guide, a high ranking administrative aide to the Magos, has even volunteered information I might be interested in (with varying relevance).

Day 6
Following my delayed visit to the mobile shipyard and more viewing of construction work and records, I am of the conclusion that the Magos is not only innocent of any Chaos influences (I tested some holy water at random, just in case), he has also been forthcoming and strictly truthful to an extent that is surprising. I have not even been able to find a single trace of exaggeration or evasion.
Never have my dealings with Mechanicus gone this smoothly.

It is almost as if he is innocent and is trying to prove it. With the amount of access I have been given and the depth of my investigation, I am of the opinion that the Magos could not have hidden any trace of Chaos from me. Given that, it is puzzling as to what his goals are. That he has a purpose in doing this, I am sure of.

Day 7
I decided to try honesty. An interview with the Magos in person regarding his goals has unearthed a revelation regarding his actions. However, I have decided that pursuing the matter further would be an unacceptably large diversion from my intended activity of tracing down the source of the mysterious informants.

The Magos in fact aims to secede from the Mechanicus entire, even if he did not say so. He has stated, passionately and to my knowledge completely truthfully, that he strongly disagrees with the Mechanicus' policy of withholding information from the rest of the Imperium and aims to change that. This is of course, highly irregular, but I cannot see a Chaos plan in this.

Nevertheless, I see that his stated plans explain his actions to date. The provision of the support ships is intended to make the nearby worlds no longer dependent on the Forge World Talon for the production of necessary space assets and industry. The strange training programme is aimed at making a self-perpetuating ability for these worlds to operate the ships and train replacements, independently of the Mechanicus.

The more controversial plan is to remake Talon into a research world that will provide improvements and refinements to the local region. His openness with my investigation is now explained, he was aiming to build favour with the Inquisition and all local authorities in hope that they will support him against the inevitable Mechanicus reprisal.

While a search for knowledge carries a moral hazard, I am used to the Mechanicus facing these risks. And the fact that, if he is successful (unlikely in my opinion), this action will strengthen the Imperium is a good thing. For all of these reasons, including my stated "waste of time" above, I will no longer pursue Talon under suspicion of Chaos influence although I will remember to check back to ensure they have not been led astray in their alternative quest for knowledge. Nor will I actively help the Magos against the Mechanicus however, what happens to him is purely the Emperor's will.

I have arranged transport back.

Week 2, Day 3
We arrived early due to a favourable warp accident. Travelling on the Rogue Trader's company's craft was also more pleasant than usual although Emerit, my psyker, was all twitchy about the captain preferring not to use a Navigator and relying on the short range cogitator.

Supposedly, the Rogue Trader has gotten his hands on a cache of archeotech cogitators and is using them to run his freight campaign. Unlike normal warp-calculators, these ones do not have a longer range than Imperial standard (the non-heretical versions) but have a calculation speed roughly twenty to a hundred times faster as well as being able to accurately plot a course through empty interstellar space.

We took a series of ten short hops with less than a minute stop between each. A side effect of the warp drives the Rogue Trader found together with the cogitators is that the shallower dive into the warp by these are considerably more comfortable.

They explained the need to have a pretend Navigator to avoid spooking their less well-informed guests. This I agreed with, the lack of proffered information at their offices less so.
Upon arrival, I informed their office that their omission of this small fact was unacceptable and asked for anything else they had hidden. The regional manager then proceeded to walk me through the entire business operations under his control, still in the same casual competent tone. It was of course too many facts and minutiae to process at once but I verified his truth telling and decided to settle the biggest problem first.

Most people, when faced with even the implied wrath of an Inquisitor would be quaking in their boots. He looked surprised and even a little shocked, but not guilty or even betraying a lack of confidence in his ability to deal with the situation. I called random employees for an interview and proceeded to do a little intimidation. Results varied but my impression was that the employees had much more resistance to intimidation and general pressure tactics.

All of them yielded the pointless bits of personal information I used for the test. Some of them even refused until I threatened to harm them greatly and one had to have a weapon pulled before he yielded. All of these had plausible reasons for covering their petty crimes.

Day 4
My mental review of their company's details has uncovered another irregularity. The purchase and provision orders don't make sense. Based on standard warp travel times, the deliveries were made within a constant and predictable time frame that was significantly faster than standard IoM warp drives. True, their strange cogitators allow them to move at higher speed but whoever heard of reliable warp travel?

Everyone else thinks that they have large warehouses and a huge stock of excess. I know for a fact that they have no such warehouses.

Another worrying thing is that they are contemplating contacting Talon and coming to some sort of special deal. There is an entire department dedicated to researching Talon, as if it was an unknown quantity. But their provision of technology makes no sense in that respect, where are they getting their manufactured goods if not from Talon?

I tested a random sampling of their goods with holy water and my psyker. They are not sorcery.

Day 5
I have re-established communications with Avel. Avel's information on their training methods was very interesting. There are some very useful ideas about training initiative and independence. Avel reported a very strong emphasis on independent and thorough thought, in particular a strange training regimen where they practice "viewing from the outside", which is a thinking style that aims to objectively assess a situation.

It goes a long way to explaining their resistance to intimidation. It does not explain the strange purchase orders or the absent manufacturing.

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Day 6
Emerit
Master asked me something strange today. I had been born with the ability as long as I remember and Master lifted me out of the accusations of witchhood and the lynchmob that resulted.

Today, he asked me to try taking apart someone, partially. Like most psykers who discover their ability naturally, mine has a special aspect others find hard to copy. While I learnt to throw lightning bolts (with difficulty) or mindblast people (also difficult), my speciality is in manipulating thoughts
and modifying minds. I can't send messages or anything clearcut, but I can change minds and modify attitudes. It doesn't have an immediate effect. People love their consistency and it gives their thoughts a kind of inertia for a while.

It's not as good control as the direct mind-takeover that some psykers can do. It is not as fast or precise as telepathy or changing their current thoughts. But this is permanent unless I change it again, and it doesn't damage people. When I change something, it becomes real.

Needless to say, not many people liked that. Master found me useful and ever since he rescued me, I have never used that power deliberately. Master would kill me if I did it to him, but he needn't worry. I intend to use it as little as possible after learning how to control it.

Master isolated an individual from that company and asked me to... adjust his loyalties.

That was a problem. Loyalty is not just a thing you can pick apart and redirect like a loose thread. I feel it as bars of light in the warp (don't ask how, it's weird), and I have to make the colours change before it will redirect.

This man was loyal to the company and Master thought that was making him cover things up. Master asked him questions at my request and I found no way to transfer it to Master. Eventually, I settled for just destroying it, that is easier than modifying.

Master was not happy when he learnt nothing new. The man hadn't been covering anything up and even without his loyalty, there was no fear of the company so he wasn't being threatened either.

Day 7
Master asked me to do another employee. This one I could turn to him, although she didn't have any loyalty to turn and I saw no way to induce it.

Master wasn't happy to learn that some highly placed clerk had just gotten a crush on him and was in an even worse mood when she also had nothing new. He told me to remove it and send her off, which I did.

Week 3 Day 1
Tomis Regnea
I must take care not to use Emerit too much. The temptation to use her for everything has to be resisted, it is too convenient to rely on the forces of the immaterium and will definitely backfire some day.

My investigations have yielded no new results and I am stopping my random questioning. It would appear that the branches are either not informed of anything else or this is the entire picture.

I find it extremely worrying that no traces of how the various vectors used to point me towards Chaos cells are present. For all I can tell, they just happened to talk at just the right time. Coincidence over more than ten times is not a coincidence, I refuse that explanation.

The activities of this company are more abnormal every day I continue my investigations. Today's employee is also loyal to the company and Emerit indicates that many of the employees she has been in contact with since I asked her to look are also loyal.

I must consider a different method. There is something here to be found and I will have it.

Day 2
I have requested to meet the Rogue Trader himself. The regional manager then informed me that I'd have to go to the headquarters of the company and wait there until the Rogue Trader came around
Not even the regional manager knew where he was or what he was up to. They're apparently just given a list of things they have to do and do it. In this case, solve the logistics problems of the local area.

I do not understand. Calling this a company is stretching the term too far, it has more in common with an extensive spy agency but what kind of spy agency has the stated (and apparently actual) goal of helping the IoM planets?

For that matter, it is even effective in doing so. Market prices have stabilized and begun to lower. Unemployment is down to 20% even in a Hive World, the lowest it has reached in centuries.

I think that I may not even be able to move against the company openly for fear that a number of the planetary governors may side with the Rogue Trader. I could pull out and call in an Imperial fleet but there will be a penalty if it turns out that I called them out to bust a company that was run by a loyal philanthropist with a few strange ideas. Besides, that would take forever compared to the timescale this company works on.

Day 3
I interviewed Avel today in a speed interview of all the recruits on my list. Just long enough for Emerit to obtain an impression of her slight loyalty to the company and destroy it. I will not fault Avel for this slight betrayal, from her position, it would appear that the company is doing good works in the Emperor's name only that it is rather more effective than others.

I have thought of a plan. I will use Emerit to reduce the goodwill the Rogue Trader has gathered in this region and then stage a takeover of the company. Various adjustments to local company representatives will also be required. The governor of the planet this regional headquarters is sited on is already adjusted.

It is ironic that the company's own transports will be used to deliver Emerit and I around to reduce its all too large influence.

Day 6
Emerit
Master explained the plan today. It is... troubling. I had not expected to have to use my power so often since I became a Sanctioned Psyker.

I cut off another two people today from the company. A planetary governor and the local company manager.

Destroying the loyalty or attachment people have is unpalatable, I feel like I am destroying people, citizens of the grand Imperium, turning them into something else. This also runs the risk of shattering this company into pieces. I can't describe it well, but I think it is far more like a society than a company, its connections between people are more than any other organization I have seen, more than even the most loyal Space Marines. And I am to destroy it all.

I trust that Master knows what he is doing.
Week 49
Some advances have been made in our cross-checking of the Necron psychological template, in particular, White Devil has managed to restore to full Necrontyr faculties one of its warriors after much trial and error as well as restorative work using femto-tech associative non-linear memory.

We have conveyed this refinement on the Sautekh protocols to them. The design for the memory chip and its production process have been relayed; an offer has also been made to provide large quantities of it if required but the Sautekh declined.

Week 50
See Report: Battle of Ackaris

Following the disaster of Ackaris, we are undergoing a general re-assessment of our strategies here in this galaxy. A large minority of Minds are arguing that our present strategy of reinforcement and acquiring of allies against Chaos in the usual political manner does not afford enough autonomy to the locals.

The argument is spreading between most of the fleet and some form of official vote will likely be called. In all cases of social simulations of ourselves, some form of radical change in strategies is likely to result.

Week 51
The vote has come down in favour of the Diplomatic Equality faction. We will thus be reassessing our options with this new strategy:

- The Culture explicitly recognizes the autonomy and sovereignty of Chaos-proof races in this galaxy
  --- In particular, the Eldar and Necrons will be treated as equals and their input will be sought prior to any major strategic action
  --- Effort will be made to contact and invite to a galactic forum of all Chaos proof races and feasible representatives of any other major race
  --- Factions and political entities for each race will be given equal voice
  --- The Culture will maintain communication links to ensure the smooth running of this forum unless a better alternative presents itself; The Culture will mediate conversation neutrally and will transmit coded messages as requested
  == The galactic forum is expected to make decisions that will impact most of the races in the galaxy, although each member will be expected to withhold technologies and information
  == The aim of this forum will be to contain and ultimately remove the threat of Chaos

- The Culture recognizes that non-Chaos proof races are also entitled to their own autonomy; therefore efforts will be made to render them less vulnerable to Chaos for admittance to the galactic forum
  --- In a special case, we will be contacting the Imperium of Mankind to request a representative from them; they have proven themselves able to suppress infiltration by Chaos to a reasonable level, despite the unpalatable methods used

**Galactic Forum**

Week 51
Invitations have been sent to all contactable Eldar factions (ZharTann and minor exodite/Maiden worlds). Zhartann has agreed to participate. Most of the exodite and Maiden worlds have declined
although one of them has requested to be informed of proceedings. We have request Zhartann to ask Alaitoc and Ulthwe to allow us to contact them to make this request. Similarly, information packets regarding this forum have been placed at various locations in the webway and broadcasts have been made to attempt to contact the Harlequins, although no response is expected.

The Necron Sautekh faction has agreed to participate. The faction that visited them and has been under observation by remote drones for some time has also agreed. Reversing our hands-off policy of no-contact, we are now attempting to open communication with all active Tombworlds to discover their affiliation and invite their faction to the forum.

The Tau have agreed to participate. Commander Farsight has declined.

We have contacted the Inquisition network we are aiding with Chaos and informed them of our request and plans to get publicly recognized. We have thus sent message capsules into Sol containing an introduction to the Culture and our request for open dialogue. No Imperium response has been forthcoming.

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Issue 1 (Culture): Should the Culture contact and invite stable Ork factions to this forum?
Zhartann: We believe there is no point in inviting savages to a political forum.
Sautekh: Negative.
Tau: The Orks are not great conversationalists.

Issue 2 (Sautekh): Eldar and Necrons dispute
Sautekh: We demand an explanation from the Eldar regarding their occupation of rightful Necron worlds, occupied by force for extensive periods of time and the destruction of our ancestral lands. Be advised that our state of open war still stands and we are willing to retake our rightful place by force.
Zhartann: Most of "your" systems are now occupied by the Imperium, not us. Furthermore, our claim to our ancestral territory goes as far back as yours as we inherit the legacy of the Old Ones. For that matter, your disagreement and subsequent attack on the Old Ones was unnecessary and completely unprovoked.

Tau, water caste envoy: Do you think it might be possible to draw some lines to divide the galaxy so some form of peace might be possible?
Zhartann: Your civilization has not been at war for as long as ours. There will be no peace with the army of death.
Tau: Are you saying that because you genuinely want to destroy them all or because it is politically impossible to claim otherwise? You do know the cost to your civilization if such a war becomes hot again.
Sautekh: We paid that price once, we have no desire to pay it again. But if forced by our ancient enemy, then we will.

Issue 3 (Culture): What to do with the Dark Eldar?
Zhartann: Putting them all together was a major mistake. She Who Thirsts could not overlook such a prize and we recommend breaking them up. This is not an objection against the dismantling of the Dark City.
Sautekh: We will be willing to negotiate an agreement for us to supply multiple system-range pylons.
Zhartann: A true defense against She Who Thirsts can only be found in the shelter of Maiden worlds or our craftworlds. While not many Maiden worlds will be willing to take any Dark Kin, we recommend that the Culture use their mental modification technologies to adjust the Dark Kin towards the true Eldar outlook.
Pre-Battle perspectives

Tau

Week 1
We are considering enforcing a sort of ceasefire although this debate is expected to take some time. We have time after all as the Tau are still assembling their forces.

Scattered IoM forces are also being gathered, presumably for a second strike. ROU Gunboat Diplomacy has put forth the idea that we should unilaterally take action to disarm the entire region.

Eldar

Week 1
Xiazera: Council, I have a matter to report. The committee of free idea associations that we decided to form last week from Alaitoc's idea has created a variation on the plan for the foreseen Chaos threat at Ackaris.
Autarch1: Go on.
Xiazera: As you know, the plan currently involves using these Grey Knights as a weapon. However, you also know that using the Grey Knights in this manner reduces their strength massively which leads to further problems on the part of the Imperium and then us. There is no way for us to get to Ackaris in time to help them against the Sorceror.
Autarch2: The committee created a solution?
Xiazera: Yes, one of considerable ingenuity. It uses the Sorceror against himself. We will build a hyperspace drive.
*silence*
Xiazera: It will be a decoy. Fully functional, but a decoy. If we are seen to be heading to Ackaris ourselves, the Sorceror will assume no one at the battle is capable to transiting to warp and will concentrate his forces in realspace. The Grey Knights' arrival temporally shielded by us will then be in perfect position to remove him from the scene without taking too much losses, averting the future disaster.
It is a creative method. Normally I would not gamble on predicting an enemy's response but the runes check out. It will work.
*more silence*
Autarch1: I see why you asked for a bonesinger to attend this council. We have a bonesung variant of the hyperspace drive?
Bonesinger nods
Autarch1: Can we build one in time?
Bonesinger nods again
Autarch1 looks around the room: I see we have agreement. Xiazera, I hope your decision is the right one. It will have great impact on our identity as Eldar.
Xiazera: I am aware of the Snarl in the Future and its factors. I know that in that possible war, we are the not-Khaine. I also know that Zhartann is strong in that future. Very strong.
*as the Eldar leave the council after it is done*
Xiazera whispers to herself: Perhaps even the strongest.

Amar, Dark Eldar

Week 1
Amar, used to splitting his attention from his time as a pilot, shivered and pointedly did not look at the scrolling report of the stasis fleet and Ackaris. To think trillions of his comrades were there, frozen and lifeless, with their souls held in time suspension.
To think that there were in fact, a few million Amars no doubt pacing the room thinking nearly the exact same thing. How the Culture had done that was beyond him. He knew they existed and had in fact contacted a few of them and he did have a personal code to use if he ever met his doppelganger and had to prove his identity.

A re-usable code in fact, it changed every time it was used so the two Amars could have one go first and still know if the other one was lying by whether it could give the next code in the sequence that neatly interacted with the previous code or codes in specific multiples according to his algorithm.

Just a little cryptography he had toyed with as a hobby, he hadn't known it would see use in identifying more than eight of himself or he might have paid it more attention. Apparently, 40% of him had made improvements to the protocol after he was... cloned? duplicated?... and at least one of them told the Culture after the meeting. The Culture had helpfully informed him of it and explained that he was indeed a slightly different Amar by a few weeks and it was normal that some Amars would do different things.

Now he had another question to consider. Would he even want to try the "normal" Eldar life if the Culture could make him think like them? That sounded horrible, but there were millions of Amars and it was indeed a completely unique experience.

He wondered if any of them would say yes.

A Certain Chaotic Warp Sorcerer

Week 1
Spiky drummed his claws irritatingly on the planning table. The Sorcerer tolerated it for the rest of the briefing until the lower ranked daemons had left.

"Would you please stop that!"] he snapped. Ok, it was considerably more irritating than he had let on.

Spiky frowned and kept silent, looking at the diagram explaining the relatively simple plan. Well, plans were simple when you had most of the attention of a Chaos god.

"What is it? I gave you a frontline seat on the battle, what more do you want?" the Sorcerer couldn't quite keep the sneer out of his voice.

"Your plan troubles me," Spiky pointed at the phased group of ships carrying the Slaaneshi cultists recruited four weeks ago, "this is a weak point and it is undefended."

The Sorcerer looked Spiky incredulously, "You? I never expected you to propose caution. You're always just charging ahead like that LJ warlord who got himself and his allies killed."

"Nevertheless," Spiky waved a hand dismissively, "you are commanding the largest movement of warships short of a Black Crusade and your command ship here in the warp is going to be guarded by two miserable cruisers and change." Spiky paused, "Two. Cruisers. Not even a battleship."

The Sorcerer sniffed, "I have calculated it. It will work. Look at our opponents. The Culture, Necrons and Eldar. They can't even get to the warp. Frankly, two cruisers is too much."

He didn't mention that those two cruisers were the only groups he could trust to not fire on him no matter what.

"I don't trust your dice no matter what they say. Two cruisers is..."

"Enough!" the Sorcerer slammed a hand down, "Or are you trying to get your men put there so you can kill me and take this operation over? I have backup plans for that," he tried to look threatening,
although that was hard when he was trying to stare down a... spike with spikes on. The backup plan was real though.

Spiky growled, "I tire of this, have it your way," he got up to leave, "and don't threaten me again or I might just rip you apart."

The Sorcerer waited for Spiky to leave before saying to himself, quietly, "I'd like to see you try. " He fiddled with the trick button on his sleeve nervously. It would work if it came down to a fight, would it?
The Battle for Ackaris

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Sorcerer sniffed. The scent of souls was strong and tempting. He could see why this was the subject of so much attention. Focus. He shook away the temptation. He had a job to do, plans to enact.

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The Culture - Ackaris
GSV Light's End was the defacto leader of the defending fleet at Ackaris. 7 billion stasis ships containing a thousand Eldar each orbiting the raging star around which the single Necron world orbited.

The stasis ships themselves were guarded by half a million ROUs, commanded by a dizzying network of Minds that shifted and flowed between them. The Chaos Defense Fleet, being too slow to keep up with the stasis ships, had been assigned to be the inner ring guarding the Necron world.

All the ships had Gellar fields that were permanently active. The star had a giant ring around it, dedicated not to habitation, but to projecting a giant Gellar Field around the whole system. It wasn't that the Culture didn't trust Necron technology they didn't understand, but that it was simply their nature to take precautions.

Not to mention six Fleet Support Ships, with femtomaterial assemblers, seven hundred thousand GSV-classes and huge factory ships. They could build replacements for the Chaos Defense Fleet in real time if they wanted to.

None of them were crewed except the command ships of the Chaos Defense Fleet.

There were some who said the precautions weren't enough, some who said they were too much. It later became very clear who was right.

The first indication that something was going wrong was when the Necron Pylon began to spike in power. The power itself wasn't the problem but what would cause that was something they couldn't understand. They didn't know what the Pylon actually did after all.

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Mileb, sometime pirate, now turned mercenary munched on the delicious fruit sticks. In some ways, he was bored with the job. There were only so many Fleet practice simulations that could fill one’s day. But the military man's voice from way back in his ancient history whispered to him. "Bored is good, you don't *want* interesting."

At least it was better than wondering if the Commissar was more dangerous to you than to the enemy. He was as confident of the Emperor's will as the next man, but something about the Imperial Navy had always grated on him. Maybe it was the way they just ground you down pointlessly. Not a speck of decency or heroism anywhere.

He laughed bitterly. As if being a pirate had been any more heroic.

The cogitator squawked at him and he jumped. Damn, he could never get used to the technowizardry
these Culture used, no matter how many times the thing had decided to work on its own.

"Navigator, what was that?" he asked, just in case it would relieve his boredom.

He got more than he bargained for. The Navigator frowned, turned some dials and glanced at the Fleet network panel. "I believe we have warp signatures incoming," the Navigator was pale, voice shaky, "but sir, its crazy. They're coming from everywhere."

"What?" Mileb could only ask. Surely not? The star had an extended hyperlimit simply because it was a massive blue giant. Well, was one since a few weeks ago. The Pylon interference itself abrogated all warp travel within 30 AU.

What else could generate such a signal? He refused to believe that such a vast fleet existed that could generate a solid signal across a sphere 30 AU in radius. That would make even his employers quake in their boots. Hell, such a fleet would mass more than the giant star here.

Mileb paced up and down the deck. Formality once adhered to was now wearing thin after a month of doing virtually nothing and getting paid a fortune to do so. On an impulse, he glanced out of the tiny viewport, expecting to see the usual blackness.

Only this time, it wasn't. The deep black darkness of space was glowing a faint red.

"Oh," was all he managed to choke out. They were all dead. Turns out he really didn't want his job to be interesting.

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Priority Assessment
Warp signature rising, external reality bubble detected.

Load on Necron Pylon exceeds standard estimates by 2 orders of magnitude. Device stability continues along standard degradation pathways.

Conclusion: A warpstorm is forming around this system

Reality rules appear to be holding according to projected scale, hyperspace appears to continue to exist within the system limits. System-wide Gellar field appears to be holding with the Necron Pylon field.

Degradation rate on Necron Pylon indicates total failure within 60 hours.

Hostile contacts detected. Six fleets spaced evenly along the solar plane. Warp signatures and scrapcode confirmed. Chaos is here, possibly due to the Other Eldar. Defense protocol Alpha initiated.

Protocol Hyperspace Scream initiated.

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Chaos
The Slaaneshi snaked his way to the bridge control. "Tell the Daemons to roar! We shall feast on their bones-"

"We have a problem!" one of the lesser Daemons shouted back. The viewscreen reappeared, unmagnified optical in space.
The Fleet commander frowned at the device, tail curling around the nearby pole. The system image he expected, of a single bright star, wasn't there. Instead a visibly large sphere of brilliant light seemed to have replaced the entire system. He glanced at the settings. Yes, it was unmagnified.

"How big is that thing?" he snapped.

"Uh... somewhere between 58 to 62 AU across! Sensors unable to pierce reality bubble!"

He wrinkled one of his two noses. The Slaaneshi disliked unknowns. "Send a scouting force through it. Relay all readings..."

"On their way."

The Chaos fleet watched as the three frigates vanished in ironically small puffs of light as they touched the sphere. As best as the sensors could tell, the moment the nose of the ships had touched the sphere, the entire ship blew up in an explosion of incredible magnitude.

There wasn't anything left of the ships. They were stripped down to basic particles apparently.

"Hi, you appear to be meeting with some difficulties. " The annoying face of the Tzeenchian Sorcerer appeared on his console. The Slaaneshi commander narrowed his eyes at the figure.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Our adversaries have put up a shield around themselves. It is impenetrable to our weapons and ships. As far as I can tell, it theoretically contains infinite energy."

The Slaaneshi nodded at Warp control. If it turned out this was a trap, he'd transition back into the warp and whoop the Sorceror's behind personally.

"Now now, let's not be hasty. I am working on the problem as we speak," the Sorcerer waved away a small puff of gaseous turtles that shot out of his left ear, "pardon me, reality backlash. Their enforced realspace reality is under assault, their defenses will not hold for long. However, there is a matter of a few irritants that are on their way here right now. You'll have to fight them to get your prize."

The Slaaneshi pounded the console, futilely, "This wasn't in the agreement! You said-"

"I'm altering the deal, pray I don't alter it any further."

The Slaaneshi snarled, but he couldn't back away now. Behind that coruscating veil lay trillions of Eldar. Trillions. There was no way but forward.

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Zhar-Tann

Farseer Xiazera glared up at the "sky". The stars gazed back pitilessly, disapprovingly. The ugly contraption in their Craftworld sat like a toad in the Infinity Circuit.

"What are you thinking about?" her companion said, leaning against her back.

"Whether I made the right choice."

"I trust you," he said simply. It was wonderful how that made her feel, but feelings did not win wars.

"I still don't know. Are we right to trust in them so much? You know how our other kin view us, as
heretics and outsiders. This will estrange us from the other Eldar forever."

"Then they are wrong. And shortsighted. I know the Ulthwe seers no doubt would best you in a competition, but there is no one else whose wisdom I would not trust more. You guided us down this path, and we will follow to its end."

She sighed, wriggling in her seat to lean on him a bit more. "Are we even Eldar any more? If we would violate our customs so, open our society to so much influence."

"And at what cost? You've been over this. She Who Thirsts must not be allowed to feast. Whatever the price, the thought is unthinkable."

The Farseer bowed her head. It was stupid, these second thoughts, even if she had seen herself having them and known it was stupid to have them, she would still think them. Still second-guess herself.

Weeks of machinations, of subtle pushes, and not-so-subtle hints, brought this convergence in time. Hundreds of branches still remained, but her intuition and the Infinity Circuit both whispered assurance. It would be all right.

Her companion rubbed her shoulders. "At least we don't have to use the thing."

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The Culture - GSV Bridge to Nowhere
The nearest GSV caught a brief burst of hyperspace distress signal before it cut off. Ever since the vague warning from the Eldar, every ship near Ackaris was on high alert.

Responding immediately, it began to accelerate towards the system. It was clear that something was wrong, given the warp signature around it. What GSV Bridge to Nowhere could do was very little in the face of the reality bubble, but it had to go anyway.

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Necrons
"Fleet Signature?"

"Target Imperium splinter fleet arrival estimate: two hours. Arrival location estimate: 2 hours STL, bearing 116°"

"Strategic: Manuver success probability 95%. We have leapfrogged the Imperium fleet."

"Reality Pylons recording strain: 45%"

"Analyze tactical. Initiate."

"Tactical: Warp intrusion detected. Solar system scale. Inward flow confirmed. Presume target is not this fleet."

"Fleet signatures detected. Count Four. Positions... shown."

"Energy signatures detected. Combat action confirmed. Proceed to Combat Readiness?"

"Combat Readiness Go, level 2. Identify combat action."

"Combat action: Fleet signature Delta. High energy Electro-Weak interaction. Presume engagement
"with external undetected adversary."

"Fleet signatures Alpha through Delta. Warp signatures detected. Fleets positioning is within Warp Intrusion. Presume Hostile status."

"Tactical: Energy Signature detected. Magnitude aleph-zero. Presume theoretical hyperspace weaponry. Location within Warp Intrusion."

"Fleet signature Alpha changing-"

"Hold. Tactical, clarify."


"Historical: Galactic location identified. Sector A4, historical faction K of L. Factory World designation."


"Emergency Collision Alert. Gravitational source detected within local reality bubble."

The warnings and reports fell on uncaring circuits. The Necron Lord emotionlessly looked at the intruder on his deck.

The drone had appeared out of thin air, with barely enough time to download a briefing. "We are the Culture, I think you are familiar with us. I am a representative of GSV Bridge to Nowhere and we beg your forgiveness for our temerity in using your reality bubble for shelter. I believe we have a proposal of cooperation that may interest you."

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The Culture - Ackaris

Mileb blinked at the sudden appearance of the curtain of solid light.

"Navigator, what is that?"

"I... I don't know. The readings are all going crazy. Either the machine spirit's acting up again, or the universe has gone crazy. I'm not really sure which."

He sniffed. So he finally got to see it. The so-called Gridfire. Whatever was happening outside the system had spooked the Culture enough that they had surrounded the entire system with a shell of impossibly powerful energy.

Whatever it was, he sure didn't want to face it.

"Sir! Look at this!" the Navigator changed the display. This one was a rendering of real-time data from the Culture tactical network. If there was one thing he was glad of, it was never having to do light-speed lag calculations in his head anymore.

Or maybe he was going to face it whether he wanted to or not. The curtain of light was parting. A tendril of reddish space drilled a hole through the wall and moved around, appearing far too much like a gigantic immaterial tentacle the size of planets. It wiggled around as if looking for something.

"Gellar Field strain! Daemons!" the shout came up the com-system from Engineering.
Mileb glared at the tendril. If there was one thing he had learnt about his employers, it was that they feared Chaos. Far more than they admitted. In his opinion they ought to be fearing other things too, but Chaos. That he could agree with. For all their technowizardry and infernally powerful weapons, Chaos could smash them flat. It felt right to him that even their god-like powers would quail in the face of the daemons.

"Crew go to standby. Confessor! Sing a hymn! Inspire us!"

One thing the Culture hadn't learnt about Chaos was that Faith was the only true defense. As the preacher screeched about the Emperor's Will, Mileb paid half a mind to it. Armouring the mind was the only way Chaos could be beat back, and if the Culture couldn't or wouldn't do it...

Well, this was what he was paid to do.

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Grey Knights Battlebarge squad - IoM assault splinter

"Brother-Captain. The fleet has arrived, we are ready to transition to realspace."

The marine nodded and received a salute. As the techmarine hurried off to tend to the servitors, the leader of the entire assault force thought carefully.

It seemed strange to assign Grey Knights to an assault on the living metal of the Necrons. Those were the last places anyone expected to find Chaos and the Grey Knights did not fare well in combating the unnatural anti-psyker forces of death.

When he returned to Titan, he was going to launch a full investigation-

"Realspace transition complete."
"Gellar field activity rising. We are under attack by Chaos."

He turned around at the report. Chaos? He was expecting the faster Necrons to leapfrog him and catch him here at this system. Not Chaos. But the prickling of his defensive runes around his collar told no lies. There was Chaos here.

"Necron vessels sighted! And... and one unidentified."

"Give me a full tactical report. Form up into defensive formation."

He listened carefully as the various sections reported in and then considered a decision. It didn't take him long.

"Spool the warp drives. Prepare for transition to Warp."

"Destination?"

The brother-captain paused for a while, practically anywhere was better than here. The Necrons seemed to be distracted, dealing with an unnamed Xeno and what looked like a warp rift in the process of forming. "The nearest astropathic."

His order halted halfway. In a hazy flash of light, a human appeared out of thin air, three feet above the deck. She tumbled to the ground messily and groaned. "Targeting must have messed up. Got to be glad it was only three feet off."

Or perhaps it was something that only appeared to be human. The brother-captain nodded at his
battle-brothers also on the bridge and drew his bolter. There was no warp signature from the woman but that was neither here nor there.

She put her hands up to show it was empty, "I am Emeri, Special Circumstances Agent of the Culture. That would be the Xenos ship you have detected. We would like to discuss cooperation."

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Sorcerer
The sorcerer tweaked the flow of warp power that surged down his conduit. Slaanesh was channelling a huge amount of power at the system, trying to crush the bubble with sheer force. The Sorcerer shook his head ruefully.

True, he would have preferred some other more elegant way but the Slaaneshis weren't all that good at subtle tricks and he did have to admit that if a Chaos God was directly backing something, whacking any problems with a hammer the size of a god was temptingly simple.

The Slaaneshi psykers were burning out, it was simply too much power, but there were plenty of replacements.

He looked back at his runes again. Not looking at them for a few hours made him uncomfortable but it was too dangerous to mess with time when one was handling enough power to crush suns. Now that the conduit was stable, he cast his dice again.

He blinked and tried again. No, the result was real. What exactly had been going on in the last few hours. Pulling up a hack into the Slaaneshi realspace sensor net, the Sorcerer glared at the blinking ships with Gellar fields.

Necrons he had expected and planned enough ships to handle. But the Imperium? Weren't they supposed to be Eldar?

He raced backwards into the past to figure out what changed, to find a clue about what the Imperium were going to do. He saw the Eldar trap click shut in the past, followed its trail and movement. Damn them! They had been temporally shielding the Imperium fleet, positioned just right to intercept them and then shielding their own movements.

Damn them all! The Sorcerer calculated again, trying to work out the paths. Surely there still had to be a path to victory. All the plans had hinged on the Eldar arriving and now...

"Warp signatures!" daemon watching the bridge called out.

"What?" he snapped.

"The humans! They're transiting into Warp!"

Oh gods, now he was going to have a battle in the Warp. He had to see the paths, guide the battle. But there also was the plan, how would that work?

The Sorcerer cast his dice again, hand shaking. It was all going too fast. He didn't have time to see the future. But he had nothing else to try, it was his only way of solving problems. He simply had to try.

The dice took their time bouncing, as if laughing at him.

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The flat voice addressed the drone as it blinked for his attention.

"There has been a change of plans. We have new information."

"Explain."

The drone hesitated. "Your original targets, the humans. They have surmised that this warp intrusion is artificial and is being channelled from the warp. We have struck an agreement with them that asks them to attack from the warp side. In exchange, we promised them that you would not attack their fleet."

The Necron turned his head. Despite the voice being the exact same, one might have imagined some undercurrent of anger. "You had no right to do that. Our objective is their destruction. This help you request is merely optional."

"We understand, but they would not volunteer information until we offered a guarantee. Name your price, I believe we will pay."

"It will be high."

"We understand. The situation is critical not just for us, but for your empire as well. We are certain the loss of this system would empower the forces responsible for this attack, your mortal enemies, to a point that they will be unstoppable. We will be willing to offer additional technology and a military pact."

The metal head considered it without any movement. After a long pause, "Agreed. What is the new plan?"

"We wish you to use your pylons to generate a tetrahedral field around this system to restore space normality. Is this possible?"

"Negative. This fleet is short one pylon and does not have enough power."

"We can provide the power required. We have interfaced with your standard grids before and believe we can manufacture a sufficiently powerful energy source which we will turn over to your control. Additionally, as part of the technology transfer, we will give you our state of the art manufacturing capable femtobots. With such, will you be able to manufacture the pylon in time? Femto-materials can be provided."

The Lord looked at the sub-commanders. One of the flashed an affirmative. "Revision. The plan is feasible. You will provide the required materials and technology immediately."

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Grey Knights BattleBarge

"Brother-Captain. The Necrons have changed course. Their fleet is splitting up."

The marine snapped another runed plate onto his armour. "Plot vectors."

"Shown."

He looked up at the display to see the Necron fleet sending out two splinters, one above and below
the orbital plane. The splinters were angled away from his fleet, and it seemed they were accompanied by a Xenos craft. The big Xenos craft remaining with the bulk of the Necrons was spitting out lots of little Xenos craft, but it looked nothing like a carrier.

If he was to believe the machine spirits, the big craft looked as if it was making the stuff on the spot.

"Am I to understand that we have an agreement? Or at least mutual understanding?" the annoying woman said again.

He glared at her. "We do not deal with xenos. Your information is helpful in understanding the situation and we have surmised that a sorcerer powerful enough to channel a warpstorm from the warp must be present. We intend to destroy him for the safety of the Imperium. A warpstorm will NOT be allowed to appear this close to Sol.

You will not interfere. We do not deal with Xenos. If you wish to help us, then get off my ship or I will throw you out the airlock myself."

The woman bowed low. "The Culture owes you a great debt this day. We will not forget." And then she vanished. Just like that.

The marine snarled, psychic wards pulsing against the corruption. He hated alliances of convenience. But these guys, Chaos, these guys he knew how to fight. And if it was a choice of fighting the death metal or Chaos, it was obvious which was the more preferable enemy.

He made a mental note to ask for more than a random set of reports. The more perspectives on this new Xeno, the more the Deathwatch would be able to prepare for them.

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The Culture - Ackaris
"Incoming contact, count seven!"

"Down twenty degrees, full burn! Slaved attack ships, engage with all weapons."

Mileb pondered the tactical area, he sure hoped that Essar up there would notice and come down to flank the daemonships.

An actinic flare poured in through the tiny viewports despite the dark filters. His employers were pulling out all the stops. For incomprehensible reasons, Gridfire did not work on the Daemons. But while it confined them to contaminated areas, that was not the end of it.

Asteroids that Mileb thought were dormant suddenly flared to life, spitting out endless waves of missiles. Missiles that flashed at nearly the speed of light, delivering kinetic energy loads enough to vaporize ships. Chaos cruisers that wandered too far to the edges were speared by gamma ray lasers from antimatter-powered mines and dumb weapon platforms. Hails of relativistic dumbfire rocks poured in from all directions, along every bracketing vector. Sensor satellites, detecting that they were about to be overrun, powered up their gravitic drives for one last spasm of violence.

Those who broke past the carnage, slipping through the holes in the Gridfire, into what counted for realspace were torn apart without mercy. Gravitational singularities appeared from nothingness to explode with incredible power, an instant where even the coruscating Gridfire background was outshone a million times. They ran afoul of invisible clumps of antimatter, scattered like just so much dust. One group that made it too close to the stasis ships huddling near the sun were consumed when the giant ball hiccuped and a tendril of plasma engulfed them.
Mileb still wasn't entirely sure if that was stupid luck or if it was deliberate.

A small number managed to reach Ackaris I, the Necron world. The bubble of immaterium they brought with them was compressed, this close to the Pylon. Their intention was obvious.

The mercenaries had a real-time feed into the strategic network. Analysis and information poured in. Occasional contact with another GSV outside the siege said that help was on its way. All of them knew why the system had to be defended. What it meant for the Imperium if they lost here this day. And that meant Ackaris I had to be defended.

Around the system, the shell of Gridfire had been broken through in six places. Reddish mist-like swirls of immaterium strained to reach the core, the prize of the stasis ships. Flashes and speckles surrounded the giant tendrils, holding back the tide. For now.

"Flanking group... Damn! They broke past Rival! One battleship, two cruisers and escorts!"

Mileb turned the tactical display. Crap, he was the only one with a favourable vector. Essar would just have to deal with this group himself.

"Build intercept vector for target. Maximum burn. All ships pick your target and fire at will. Set attack ships to ram. We have to stop them here."

The next minute crept by as the distance closed. The attack ships in front of him fired their weapons in ripple mode, keeping up a continuous barrage that knocked shields flat and blasted armour. Then just as they were about to collide, the ships turned around to blast their targets with raw reaction exhaust of their mighty engines.

The enemy vanished in a series of fireballs and wreckage. The last two attack ships in his group shot out the other end, reaction drives pulsing to rejoin Mileb.

Another bleep nearly knocked Mileb out of his chair. "Torpedo drives! Oh, Emperor help us! Cyclonic Torpedoes, Core Penetration type, count 16! Travelling in close group on dumb fire! The battleship must have launched its load when it was about to die."

Mileb gripped his chair, knuckles white. They were in the immaterium bubble, his employers couldn't work their magic here. With less than ten minutes to the planet, there was no way for his ship, the only remaining one with an intercept vector, to shoot them all down. Not cyclonic torpedoes which were armoured and shielded. He could maybe gun down three before they hit the planet.

No, not quite. They were travelling in close group, which meant they were more or less thrown out the airlock and fired without guidance. They would not evade...

"Navigation, set intercept course of the torpedoes. We can reach them."

"Sir?" his right hand man, the Navigator looked at him, understanding what he was about to do.

"This ship isn't called the Hail Mary for no reason you know," He prayed the torpedoes would be set to detonate on contact, not to smash through light resistance.

"Comms, open a channel to the rest of the ship."

The speakers coughed some static and man nodded back at him. Mileb lifted the handset to his mouth and paused. What to say? He thought for a bit and then it was obvious.

"The Emperor guide us. The Emperor teach us. The Emperor protect us. In your light we thrive. In
your mercy we are sheltered. In your wisdom we are humbled. We live only to serve. Our lives are yours."

Sorcerer
He tossed the dice again. He couldn't believe it, there was no path!

"Sir! They're here already! The humans just transited to warp!"

"Then fight them!" he snarled. The deck rocked satisfyingly under him as torpedoes flew away.

The dice clattered on the table. No, there might be a way...

He hurried over to the central chamber, making sure to leave his dice behind.

A slight adjustment to the conduit changed the power flow. Like a well-placed pebble on a hillside, the power shifted. It would be unstable of course, but they would never win this now, so who cared about making a stable warp storm? If they tried, they'd all die and it still wouldn't be stable.

He pushed ahead, burning the energy that had gone into building permanent warp structures to the attack, throwing humongous quantities of warpstuff against the shores of reality.

He would have something out of this even if he had to carve it out with his bare hands.

Mileb winced as the medico bandaged his arm. The escape pod was cramped, and definitely not big enough to support all of the crew. There never was enough space in these pods.

The tumbling wreck of the Hail Mary, huge melta-holes in her side, lay just off the stern of the escape pod. They were lucky her reactor hadn't gone critical. Behind her, Ackaris I was having the biggest aurora it would ever see.

The neutronium cores of the torpedoes had triggered after their set time past the crust-piercing melta charges that detonated on Hail Mary. Now the expanding cloud of exotic particles was showering down on Ackaris I. Anyone on the surface would be getting a lethal radiation dose but that was basically as good as harmless.

Mileb watched the tendrils of immaterium battle the Culture through tactical network. They weren't really his employers anymore, now that he didn't have a ship. The reddish mist swatted a gleaming ship designated ROU and it exploded.

He blinked at that. Surely their technomagic would have let them build ships far more sturdy than his own? As he watched, the tendrils crept closer to the sun. Then they changed.

While they merely had a reddish unnatural look to them before, now it was like watching... everything in the universe compressed in there. The immaterium swelled as power surged down the fault lines in the failing reality shield. Daemons howled in the crack, pushing against the border in their desperation to get out. Psychic lightning the length of planetary orbits cracked across the system, defying all laws of physics even in enforced reality.

A swarm of stasis ships got caught in the blast and detonated. The immaterium emitted a psychic screech of bloodlust as the billions of released souls drained into the realm of Chaos.
He changed his perspective and saw his own doom. The unreal energy also surged down the tendril that lead to Ackaris I. Many of his compatriots were still fighting, still holding the shield around the crucial planet. But he wasn't protected by a Gellar Field anymore.

Heh, so much for the lifeboat. Should have died with his own ship.

The universe fell out under him.

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**Sorcerer**

"Hull breach! We have boarders!" screamed the speaker-daemon.

The Sorcerer jerked his head up from the psychic task, dumping the backlash into the nearby Slaaneshi cultist. As a fine red mist settled down over his clothing, the sorcerer snarled. He had gotten less than he expected but this was really the end.

He warded the doors, knowing it would be futile. Oh, and perhaps a gun would be nice to have. A large warp-conjured needler fell out of the air. He fully intended in making this as difficult as possible.

The door blew inwards as the psychic pressure of thirty Grey Knights overcame his sealing. The cultists threw their might into the defense but the raw energy in the conduit would not be diverted. It was too close to the Eldar in the stasis ships, too close to be turned aside from the prize just out of reach. Power poured down the cracks uncontrollably, warpstuff converting to matter as it lost the caress of the Immaterial, swirling into the star.

The librarian brushed aside their spell of non-passage.

The Sorcerer snarled and waved the daemons forward, firing a blast of psychic lightning to accompany them. The Grey Knights charged.

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**Necrons**

"Energy requirements spiking. Nodal links collapsed."

The Necron Lord watched impassionedly as the three splinter fleets hung in space. No, it was more fair to call it the Warp. The level of unreality outside of Necron bubbles were more Warp-like than space-like now.

There was nothing to say to the drone. The promised data was still being transferred, exabytes of it, and the crypteks were fussing over the femtobots, trying to persuade them to build a hyperspace drive.

There would be no Nodal Grid in these conditions. Not with half a million daemons battering on their own bubbles. For what it was worth, Bridge to Nowhere was shining like a pulsar, vapourising any that dared to cross the border.

They waited. For an hour, there seemed to be no change, and then suddenly, without warning, the immaterium shuddered. The daemons around them swirled aimlessly, as if lost. A second later, reality enforced itself as the warpstorm subsided back to the red misty clouds.

"Nodal links restored. Power level set at 20%. Engage Grid?"
The Necron Lord moved for the first time in a long while. He nodded once.

Green lines of energy flew out from the central fleet's pylon towards the other three nodes. The Culture generator being towed behind them glowed under the strain. Then they arrived, and bounced to the next clockwise node to complete the prism.

With a flash, the Necron reality bubbles leapt down the lines to connect to each other. Then they filled the surfaces of the prism with a pencil thin wall of enforced reality. The Pylon on Ackaris I, freed of the pressure, snapped back as if in spite and the entire warpstorm imploded.

The drone spun appreciatively. Welcome back to the real world, it thought to itself.

The Culture - Ackaris
Mileb woke up again, with fire all over his body. The flowery pink interior of the lifeboat seemed wrong somehow. What just happened?

His head spiked in pain as he tried to dig through his memories. Ok, bad idea. He didn't really want to know what had gone on in the Immaterium.

Looking around though, more than half of the crew in the capsule were missing. From the pink stains, Mileb had the feeling he knew what had happened to them.

He glanced down at himself and winced at the ribbons of muscle hanging from his arms and left leg. Shouldn't they be bleeding? An idle thought wandered across his mind. The lurid red ribbons seemed fascinating. No wonder he couldn't even move.

He tried to call for the medico but noticed a familiar pair of boots glued to the ceiling. More like fused. The rubber had been melted by something. And judging from the charred blackness inside, the medico had still been in it.

Then the lifeboat vanished and was replaced by a clean sterile featureless room. There was no gravity... and more importantly, no pain. Mileb watched warily as his wounds knitted themselves back and looked up. The same was happening to the rest of his crew.

More magic. This had to be the Culture. Was he inside one?

"I would like to know what's going on." He said experimentally.

A human figure appeared, hovering in the air with ease. "Welcome, sorry for the wait. I was a bit busy with all this," the figured gestured at them.

Mileb tugged at his arm experimentally and shrugged. One never got used to technomagic like that. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought it was a miracle. "What's going on out there? If you don't mind me asking."

The figure held out a panel that also materialized from thin air. "The controls are the same as your tactical network display," he said as Mileb examined it.

The defenses were reorganizing. Ackaris I didn't even look the same anymore, being a beehive of activity the rebuilt mountains and sculpted deserts. The Gellar Ring, shattered in multiple places, was already being manoeuvred back into position.

The loss count at the upper right stood at 19%. They had lost almost a trillion Eldar despite the
desperate defence. Mileb shook his head and sighed. Well, that was it then, no more contracts for him.

The star coughed. He zoomed in on it, wondering if that was just his imagination.

No. It wasn't. Stressed by the battle and buffeted by the exotic and powerful weapons unleashed, the star was destabilized. The intrusion of the warp had not helped matters and now, as its temperature zoomed upwards and the spectrum began to shift towards x-rays, it was collapsing into a nova. Already, the upper layers of the star were blowing away under the gust of energy coming from the runaway fusion at the core.

The Culture ships zipped around. It was an exotic kind of dance, it seemed to Mileb's uncomprehending eyes. The ships weaved among each other, patching here, adjusting there. The upper layers, moving at almost 40% light, slammed into a wall of Gridfire. Matter was stripped away, unseen massive cooperative Effectors from hundreds of ships siphoned off glowing twenty thousand-degree plasma. Energy was bled into space, a shining spear of light into the vast darkness.

An hour later, the star was calm again and the restoration work continued.

Miled pushed himself off the ground. He hadn't noticed when he had started to sit, but now he was sore. He put down the display and stared at nothing in particular. For all their strangeness and naivety when it come to Chaos, the Culture just stopped a nova in its tracks.

He spoke to the waiting figure. "Do you think you can give me a replacement ship?"

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Sorcerer

The heart beat once. Then again.

The Sorcerer opened his eyes and leapt off the table, non-existent needler at the ready. Then he relaxed. Whew, he wasn't quite sure if that cloning thing would have worked.

His spirit stable again, the once-man stalked down the corridor of warpstone to examine his prizes.

Chapter End Notes

Basically what happened was that the Eldar foresaw the attack. Zhar-tann equips itself with a Culture hyperspace drive and manipulates a company of 100 Grey Knights into the Necron front (remember that war?). Later, it again manipulates their escape vector so that it would go through Ackaris. And then it uses a branch where it intercepts the Grey Knights' ships and the Craftworld arrives instead of them; this makes the Sorceror think all the apparent players at Ackaris (Culture, Eldar, Necron) cannot transition to Warp, which makes him have very little security on the Warp side. At the last minute, it "decides against intervention" to reveal their true plan which was to let the Grey Knights get there.

Firstly, the Culture are forced to put all their eggs into one basket because I didn't want to give them multiple dead Necron worlds (would result in reverse engineering Pylons too quickly, was planning that around part 16/17 and negate the need for diplomacy to get it).
So this is the only place they could securely do it. Secondly, the Pylon here isn't one of those galaxy ending ones that will eat your souls. This is more similar to the Cadian pylons that will hold back a warp storm and enforce reality around itself. Like a really big Monolith. It should be safe for long term storage.

Grey Knights:
You run away from the Necrons!
...
A wild Chaos Sorceror appeared!
> Fight
> Run

Sorry, just couldn't resist.

Culture's terms in exchange for help with Chaos:
Necrons - Equiv-tech femtobot constructors, low-end mass-energy conversion, low-end hyperspace drives; one antineutronium based Necron-style powerplant, all Necron equipment on Ackaris I excepting the Pylon and its power grid. The Culture agree to defend the core Necron empire from external military aggression. The Necrons provide twelve Pylons for 'diversification'.

Imperium - The Necrons will not attack the Grey Knights fleet, xeno tech artifacts of Culture origin involving all handheld and land based weapon designs, 1 "recovered" STC nanobot constructor.

(Note that neither of them know why the Culture want to defend Ackaris I; the Culture didn't tell them about the stasis'ed Eldar)

Chaos loot:
One captured away team (4) of SC agents on an ill-fated boarding attempt (drones self-destructed); 'Poison Tooth' implants beyond repair, but otherwise HEEDs and other infantry equipment recovered fully operational. Including antigravity flight belts and effector based personal shielding. All equipment are of femto-tech construction.
Sixty attack ships from the Chaos Response Fleet, each with a femto-tech fusion-catalyst torch drive (two orders of magnitude above whatever the IoM has)
Three commanding mercenary frigates
~890 billion Dark Eldar souls
Necrons

Week 3
White Devil provided the femtobots as agreed and within thirty hours, we have possession of twelve planetary pylons. They are currently being moved to interstellar locations where Ackaris style defenses, much improved, will be erected.

We expect the Sautekh Necrons to keep the femtobots exclusive to themselves (a subclause in our agreement; they also assured us that they will not even be sharing it with other Necron factions) and use it to mass produce forces required for expansion of their territory.

As per our understanding, we will not be interfering despite the expected massive loss of life. The Planet Independence project will continue and we hope the Necrons will adopt a planet-free style of living eventually. The low-end mass-energy conversion techniques we have agreed to provide and are transferring now are also expected to help with this.

Week 3
Some of our citizens have voiced a concern that our aim to the let Necrons expand uncontrolled is not ethical. Too many Imperium lives face extermination for us to overlook.

We are considering various options. An interesting proposal (from an engineering challenge perspective) is to simply move the Imperium planets away and replace the planets wholesale.

Tau

Week 3
Plans to shut down the Tau offensive have been dropped. Following the battle of Ackaris, the new directive is "Minimum Necessary Interference". Of course, unlike the expected Necron offensive, the Tau offensive is not expected to cause major deaths.

Although there is the risk that without the use of self-replicating construction principles, the Tau may be crushed by the IoM. We are considering steps to help defend their systems according to our agreement.

The Tau have noticed our changed attitude and we have reassured them that we intend to honour our agreements and provide support for their eventual transition into a post-Singularity society. They have asked for a description of the Ackaris battle and we have provided it.

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After a prototype femto-tech cruiser was constructed for the Tau to familiarize themselves with its capabilities, the Tau have deemed it most useful as a command and control center instead of a frontline combat ship.

It appears that even much lower technology femto-tech sensors and information processing units surpass the Tau greatly. Utilizing the vastly higher range of the defense ship's sensors (it is essentially impossible for a Tau or Imperium vessel to hide from even the passive sensors of the ship anywhere in the system), the Tau will implement a previous defence plan of their own making that was
discarded as being too reliant on detection capabilities.

Firstly, the Tau will be linking huge arrays of missiles arranged in orbit of the star along the ecliptic. These missiles will have receivers built into them and the defense cruiser can use its CREW phased array (which can direct nearly arbitrary numbers of independent beams in a 60° arc of up to the total maximum power) as a multi-channel fly-by-wire communications array to command these missiles.

Furthermore, the Tau are experienced with missile propulsion and with effective total system sensor coverage, the Tau can mount ship-class low-impulse-high-efficiency engines onto the already capable missiles to increase their delta-v to deadly levels. Normally, this was limited due to poor sensor resolutions and drives capable of performing kinetic strikes required very long acceleration tracks that made it impossible to use in a combat scenario. Our provision of the defense cruiser neatly covered the hole and this defense plan bears the hallmark of Tau flexibility.

These missile-mines then provide system-defense that will greatly batter invaders before they can approach the Tau planets.

A live fire trial of the concept was conducted and the captured IoM ships were flown indirectly by ROU Gunboat Diplomacy in a simulated IoM invasion. This trial concluded with the total destruction of the "invading" fleet. A number of variables for the fragmentation missiles were tweaked but the raw performance of the defence plan against the IoM is far beyond the usual Tau level. The Tau appear satisfied that they have finally managed to get a kinetic kill system to work after two prior failed tries. We are currently refitting our proposed provision of femto-tech defense ships to better fit the outlined CnC role. Further increase in the missile-mines' performance is expected.

The Tau have expressed interest in our non-FTL sensors, we are currently negotiating possible trades. The Tau have also given indications that they have been wanting to shift to a more missile heavy strategy for some time and the lack of good sensors has been their major bottleneck.

**IoM**

**Week 3**
We are monitoring the response from Sol using femto-tech unmanned drones that have the effector range to tap into communications while not being spotted by the resident psykers.

The Sol response has been muted but we have detected much encrypted Inquisitorial and Ad Mech communications activity.

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One day later

We may have a minor civil war on our hands. An Inquisitorial ship fired on an Ad Mech vessel heading out of the system after a flurry of encrypted messages. Due to the hurried nature of the exchange between the chasing Imperium ship and the Ad Mech frigate leaving Sol, one message was transmitted with a weaker cipher than the rest. This we have decoded:

"This vessel of the Machine God will not stand down to Imperium demands. We are dealing with an internal Mechanicus affair and it is none of the Imperium's business.

We reject the accusation that Mars is using dangerous xeno-artifacts. The Mechanicus examines
xeno-artifacts of technological origin all the time but due caution is placed before using them. This ship is doing neither.

All technology on this ship is the Emperor's own."

Following the message and three rounds of back and forth signals, the Imperium frigate using an Inquisitorial cipher fired a salvo of missiles at the Ad Mech frigate. The frigate shot down a few and suffered exactly one hit in a non-critical sensor system.

Since that event, Earth defense and Mars Ad Mech space forces have been maneuvering into defensive positions and shield and weapon system tests have been detected. The Ad Mech frigate managed to reach the warp limit of Sol and warped out. The Imperium frigate followed it, with another three other Imperium frigates in their wake three hours later.

From the trajectory, we think the Ad Mech frigate is heading to Wolf 359.

Chapter End Notes

To a large extent, the Culture are dropping plans for reform for all of the races except the Tau. They will ignore the IoM's and Necron's aggression or otherwise unpalatable habits in favour of helping them fort up against Chaos.
Orks

Week 1
The SC agent has barely managed to hold onto his control of the fleet after a near mutiny by a rival subcommander Ork who thought they should invade the planet. As expected, the Trained Fleet remained more loyal and disciplined than the Untrained section. Both of them still had worryingly high rates of defection.

For the most part, the SC agent has retained control over the Ork fleet by pre-emptively destroying the challenger Ork's ship, with him inside. A number of Ork bombardments of the IoM colony was still made before he could re-assert control. We have not detected that he has punished the transgressions.

Week 2
The Ork fleet has moved on and is travelling to another Ork system. IoM traffic in the form of military scouts have re-established contact with the colony and the gathering IoM fleet is diverting backwards.

From the continuous reinforcement visible to the IoM, the SC agent's fleet is growing faster than they can muster forces. Thus the IoM is taking the route of extermination. Since the SC agent's fleet is heading away from his core systems, this leaves them open to attack and we confirm that the Imperium intends to perform exterminatus on all Ork planets.

Week 3
The SC agent has relayed orders for reinforcements to stop. One of the other Culture Contact agents who was left in charge of training the newly built ships has been made temporary commander of the defence fleet.

We anticipate that the defence fleet may indeed be significantly larger than the IoM expects. So far, our observations predict that the Ork fleet expansion is following a soft exponential trajectory. Indeed, asteroid mining is already being tested as the Orks are depleting easily accessible material.
Week 1 Day 1
Emerit
I voiced my concerns about the plan to master. It involves too much use of my abilities and despite my excellent training and control, I run the risk of a warp accident every time.

While my use of this natural ability is simple and poses less risk than usual, I feel it is not safe to use it too much.

Master explained that it would come with days in-between uses and he would take care to only deploy me where necessary. While this alleviates some of my concern, I still have doubts about the plan. Master does not appear to wish to hear it however, so I have kept my silence.

Day 2
Today, I removed another planetary governor's loyalty.

Tomis Regnea
The plan is proceeding well and according to schedule. I will trust Emerit to know her limits and plan to take breaks as necessary. Loyalty broken is not easily re-earned, nevertheless, I will perform a check up on the original two I started with after the governor of a certain moon here is done.

Already, I have begun to see shifts in the power balance. It appears that the company has been relying on the goodwill earned to sway governors and obtain favourable contracts that they then use to aggressively price competitors out of the market.
With less favourable governors, I am seeing a reduction in their influence in the systems I have passed through.

Day 5
The governor of the moon around a gas giant that is a key plasma refinery has actually agreed to cut ties with the company after his friendship with a company executive was removed. As this moon is a key fuel supplier of the region, I expect this to greatly affect the company's operations.

By now, I expect the company to be reacting to the sudden shift. While tracing my movements will be very hard as I am travelling incognito, I have almost achieved my goal of reducing local influence enough for me to make a direct challenge to the Rogue Trader. All that is left is to check up on my past traces to see their development.

Day 6
Emerit
The governor from yesterday was... disturbing. Loyalty is something I can easily destroy, friendship is harder. It has too many connections to cleanly remove and my cutting of his ties is almost certain to create friction with his past friend and will definitely affect his other social circles.

I overheard by chance that he was having marital troubles today as we left the system. Travelling incognito has advantages as we are put together with other high ranking officials instead of being given private transport. Still, it seems likely that I was directly responsible for the sudden mess in his life, many of his social circle and his wife strongly support this Rogue Trader's company.

I mentioned my qualms about the plan for this company to master. There appears to be no reason why we should be removing the influence the company rightfully earns by performing good works in the Emperor's name. And good works they are indeed, the company's influence has directly eased
the lives of everyone it touches. I have personally seen, which Tomis cannot, how every person involved with or somehow connected to the company possesses strong ties of friendship and community with each other.

This company, more than an efficient transport and logistics provider, has somehow built up a network of cooperation between people. Not just between its clients and itself but between them as well. These ties are not easy to build and not easy to break. The people have responsibility and friendship to each other. I have had the opportunity to observe a large group of employees working together and their connections are obvious.

If it wasn't for the sheer impossibility, I would have thought that the company was actively creating opportunities for compatible people. I see very little enmity between people, less than one would expect from a random mix, as if almost all people who would not get along have just... failed to meet.

I have not seen such a... happy society in my tour of duty for the Emperor. A marked increase in stable marriages is more than proof of that. It has also become apparent to me that a huge web of connections that forms the society that surrounds this company. People here have more friends, less enemies and better lives than any other place I have seen before. Outside its influence, the same poor conditions I have seen everywhere exist. The people are unhappy and miserable. But here, they have each other.

Tomis cannot understand, he cannot see the network of connections I see. But what master says, I trust is correct. His reasons I certainly cannot argue against. There is of course a risk that too much power is being concentrated into the hands of this company. Furthermore, I have not the perspective on the Imperium he has. He sees the large picture, I... have problems doing that.

He must be right of course. Tomis is always right.

Week 2 Day 1
Emerit
Master was very unhappy to know that I am seeing strands of loyalty in the first planetary governor I cut off. I did not mention that his ties to everyone else had also decreased greatly. It is apparent through the rumour mill that all of us in master's entourage are supposed to be on duty to investigate that the planetary governor has been mostly abandoned by his social circle.

His suddenly differing views had a major negative impact among his friends. This repeats the pattern that I have seen once in the previous round. In fact, the regaining loyalty towards the company is likely a reaction to his increasing isolation.

I do not think the techpriest or Avel will be familiar with the governor in a way that I am after seeing his connections. There are rumours that just don't seem important unless you are looking for them. I have not told master, he probably won't find out.

Master is going to ask me to destroy his loyalty again. I don't like it, but it will be done. Tonight perhaps I will offer a prayer to the God Emperor to have mercy on his soul.

Day 2 - 4
I hear he is having trouble again. The people who have left him are probably getting rather worried and I had the chance to observe one of them attempting to repair their friendship broken over their very public quarrel about the Rogue Trader's company. It is clearly false on the friend's side but the governor's suicide attempt is destabilizing the power structure in the planet and the fallout could destroy any or all of them.

It is very sad to see a once-friend falsely try to be friends again because he will lose his company and
likely his fortune otherwise. Still, it seems that the situation is getting calmer and much of his social circle have returned to his side in a large party suggested by the 'friend', although all too many are appearing under false pretenses. I managed to sneak in under a false identity.

From the way that the governor has not restored his friendships, it is almost certain that he realizes this. But his loyalty to the company is reforming again under social pressure.

Given the disastrous result the last time, master is continuing to watch and wait.

Day 5
The company has made a move. They are announcing that they have recently placed an order with the Talon forge world to acquire multiple of the new model factory ships and are taking a large number of new contracts on the back of this news.

It appears that master's plan to cut off their fuel supply isn't going to work. Plasma refineries on the factory ships will greatly serve to stave off an energy stall in their shipping fleet.

Master is very very angry. He wants me to destroy the governor's loyalty again so that he may safely suggest denying transit to the first factory ship already on its way and asking the governor to seize it for his own use.

I don't think he will survive this. It cannot go on, this false web of friendships. I think... I may need to adjust more than necessary.

I put the idea to master and he said to do it. I will restore their friendships and make it strong enough to withstand the blow of his loss of loyalty again. Since they have a history and are, even falsely, trying to repair their friendship, I have enough to work with. It can be done.

Day 6
Tomis
I have cause to think that the company knows what I am doing. I do not know why, it just a feeling that I have. I see too many people in just the right ways... in just the wrong ways.

There is a pattern somewhere, but I cannot see it. All these meetings as a "prospective trader" have put me in contact with alot of people, it is necessary for my disguise and information sources. But the people I meet seem to hide some sort of pattern.

I cannot describe my suspicion that things are going just a little too well in most areas and just a little too badly in others. Something does not fit.

Emerit's request to restore the governor's friendships has me thinking that perhaps she herself has some misplaced loyalties. It is a shame that she cannot examine nor operate on herself.

Day 7
I swear I know what it was! It is the coincidences. I meet people that bring me just the right information, like the Chaos cells. Doors unlock and puzzles solve themselves, every time, something just happens so that I think of the answer or have an obstacle removed or revealed to be imaginary. An inspiring sentence overheard in a coffeeshop. A chance meeting or request for an informal chat with an interested merchant reveals an immediate opportunity. A misconception about a safety regulation leads to an informative talk with a section safety supervisor on the commercial transit.

There is no possible way I could have investigated Talon and this company so quickly if it wasn't for everything going my way when I want it. But for all I can tell, none of them have any possible way to be manipulated by the company. It is impossible even on Sol to achieve this sort of coincidence, to
the point where solutions for problems in my head I have never revealed can render themselves solved by chance!
I don't think I am being misled, I see too much into the company's workings. They cannot hide anything at all, but I cannot find how they are doing this. And if they are not doing this, then what is? It is beyond even the greatest daemons or the best Farseer to pull the strings so subtly across multiple star systems. To pull strings on every word over coffee, every thought and every action; often days or weeks in advance. A million individual grains shifted ever so slightly, in just the right way.

It is impossible. So impossible that I am doubting my own sanity.

And everything going wrong in exactly the wrong way. The governor cannot be removed from his loyalty without destroying the society built around the company. Emerit's words are correct, I could have trusted her a little more. The company has built a network of contacts and rooted itself deeply, too deeply to uproot without calling in the Imperial Fleet. Their fuel problem is being relieved by Talon, overlooked by me, with even greater market penetration once they have the back of the Forge World. And the governor of the moon around the gas giant is likely to soon be replaced by a rival.

How it has achieved such in such a short time is beyond me. Connections, loyalty and trust are very hard to win. But a hypothesis suggests itself.

Coincidence.

Week 3 Day 1
Emerit
I am worried about master. He has started talking to himself in code. His private code, not the one we know about. Being something like a private language, I do understand some of it.

What I do understand, I do not comprehend. Something about xenos and mind-control beams. It seems incomprehensible.

Despite his strict injunction, I have examined master's relationships with people. I did not touch any of course but I have noticed how his connections with everyone other than Avel, me and the techpriest have withered greatly.

I made my worries known and he reassured me that he is fine and is busy coming up with a new plan.

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The plan is apparently to continue. He wants me to continue removing the loyalty of important key people. To actively isolate them from the company itself.

He says it is too dangerous to leave the company alone, probably infested with a new sort of xeno that can mind-control people. I... have not seen evidence of that but I trust master.

I must do my best to control the fallout. The power structures must remain intact if resistance to the company is to be raised.

Day 2
Despite my attempts at stabilizing their friendship, without their ties to the company, it would seem that it is impossible to maintain the society that has grown up around it.

The governor has disappeared. No one knows where he is and rumours are flying that he has committed suicide.
I have failed.

*Culture note: unreadable mental record*

Day 5
We have travelled again to a nearby system. The company's contacts have not been visited before by us.

I will try again.

Day 6
Tomis
The aliens are here too. Wherever Emerit detects this unnatural "society", there they are. I can almost see them now, sitting in the minds of the Emperor's children, pulling our strings like a vast puppeteer. Every meeting, every handshake reminds me of the aliens and I wonder... is this person also one of Them?

Doors still open, problems still solve themselves. I am beginning to think these aliens do not control this effect. Fine, let their own heresy be their downfall.

I must remove their influence. It is fortunate that Emerit is able to do this.

The "society" can be put to the service of the Emperor's will. For this, I will at least acknowledge these aliens. If there is one thing they have done, is that when I am done with this place, we will stronger than before.

The Imperial fleet is ready to move. I have called in my contacts and by the time they arrive, I will be ready. The noose will draw tighter and tighter until they have nowhere to run.

Emerit
The social network has dissolved. No one died.

Day 7
Tomis
We must move quickly. There is almost no one to trust. Even the bellboy or news courier could be in their tendrils. I do not know how they achieve their control so the only people I can trust is us.

This helpful "society" of theirs is a convenient thing. The efficiency gains in bureaucracy are most significant but being able to suddenly move forward an interstellar transit within a few hours speaks of an efficiency throughout the chain that the Imperial fleet will find most useful when it arrives.

We will move to the next system.

Emerit worries me. She has been rather quiet this last few days although she appears normally active. It's just... another feeling I have. Something could be wrong but I require her for this plan.

I will make sure my laspistol is loaded. Just in case.
Razi shivered in the cold biting air, well below Culture standard, for a long moment before the adipose adaptations kicked in. He sniffed the air once, sampling the air of Pech. Crisp and clear, with a hint of pure wildness.

A deliberate crunch in the forest just in front of the landing craft caught his attention. A kroot faded out of the background, lifting his/her? foot off the fallen leaves it used to attract his attention.

"Not too attentive, are you?" the kroot hissed in Marain.

Razi blinked. The Kroot spoke Marain? Even though it was missing the slight gestures and more subtle inflections of a native speaker, this was the clearest he had ever heard in this galaxy from the natives. Of those who even tried to learn anyway. Better still, this kroot here in front of him probably wasn't one of the ones in contact with the Culture.

"How-

"We learn fast," the kroot said. Razi nodded at it, it probably sensed his surprise. He was about to introduce himself when the kroot spoke again.

"Shaper Mar'vurr at your service," the kroot continued, the word inflexion was male, "you are here because you want to learn about us and we want to learn about you. The first thing to know about us is that there are many ways to commit suicide."

That was an odd choice of words. Razi opened his mouth to ask but the kroot butted in again.

"Wander into the darker forests, suicide. Eat a poisonous kavala, suicide. Pick a fight with a kroot, suicide. You see what I mean?"

Razi nodded. He had no doubts that Machy, still perched on his shoulder, was up to the task of keeping him safe, but the less he needed the drone, the better. He wondered what he was going to do now.

"Good, let's get started on the task of stopping you killing yourself. What's that you have there? Is it good eating?" the kroot pointed a claw straight at Machy, which ruffled its feathers.

"This is Machy-," and Machy itself decided to interrupt in Kroot.

[I'm his babysitter. Here to make sure he survives in case he tries to commit suicide. ] The raven hissed suddenly, nothing at all like what a raven ought to be able to produce, [You won't find me tasty, I'm afraid. ]

Mar'vurr cocked a curious look at it and made a rapid clicking noise. Razi knew from his readings and recordings that this was their equivalent of laughter.
"Does everyone need to keep interrupting me?!" he blurted out, "it's like you're all reading my mind except that you aren't."

"The kroot are very sensitive to pheromones and mood indicators of humanoid species," Mar'vurr explained, "after a while, the kroot get good enough that it might seem like mind-reading." Machy the raven declined to respond.

Razi raised an eyebrow, that was interesting. But before that, there was something he wanted to ask.

"What did you say?" he asked Machy.

"I told him I wasn't good eating. It was something of a joke in their language."

Mar'vurr made that clicking noise again and took out a small vial of very bad smelling liquid. "I'll need to mark it to tell the other kroot not to try," he held out a claw with the goo inside the vial and dabbed a little onto Machy's back. It stank. Alot.

"There, that'll do," Mar'vurr said, then looked at Razi curiously, "What are you doing?"

Razi started breathing again when he was sure the olfactory signals were getting properly dampened. Ah, that was more tolerable. "Sorry, that was a little too strong. I'm better now."

The kroot raised its chin. That meant it was curious. Razi elaborated, "I adjusted my sense of smell to be less sensitive. It means I smell less, but at least this is tolerable."

Mar'vurr eyed him for a long moment. "You people cheat too much. Come on, we'll have to start walking now if we want to reach the Rok Hive before sundown."

Razi, sometime pianist, game-player, painter, composer, mathematician, druggie, wargame fanatic player and just about anything else, was a very... distractable person. Favouring hands-on, real experiences (as opposed to VR), he had never really found anything very interesting for long.

The latest craze of his had come from the Tau side exploration. After a brief fling with the Eldar cultural wave, he had been distracted by the Tau. Or more precisely, a specific mercenary group known as the Kroot.

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"Let me get this straight, you jump across half the galaxy to go see these Kroot?" the little drone whirled to signal its disbelief.

"Um... yeah?" Razi nodded.

"And I suppose the Minds just up and said, ok, we'll send you over in a high speed racing dispatch boat?"

"Um... yeah?"

"And you're not SC or even Contact as far as I can tell."

"Um... yeah. " Honestly, he was starting to feel like a broken record.

The drone blinked its light at him for a moment, clearly talking to something else, probably the Mind in charge of Crossing the Bridge. That was worth the entire trip to see, in Razi's book. GSV Crossing the Bridge was known for the three Minds' eccentricity. Well, more than the usual at least.
For one thing, it refused to talk directly to its citizens, instead preferring to go through chosen "bureaucrats". Being the only Culture ship that actually had honest-to-god paperwork. It made for a very unique cultural atmosphere. Despite the fact that the Minds were almost certainly aware of everything going on in their ship, and definitely having fingers in every pie as usual, it made their ship feel freer of the Minds themselves. Perception was key.

The drone turned back, still whirling in surprise, "I don't know what's going on, but you got the green light. To Pech even. How the heck did you manage that? No one's been to Pech yet, not even SC."

Razi blinked. That was easier than he thought. He had expected to have to kick up a fuss or at least sign up with Contact for a stint in exchange. And here they were going to just let him do it.

He shrugged, "Dunno. I just asked."

"Damn. Who the hell are you?"

"Razi, sometime tourist," he said, shrugging again, the little Kroot amulet replica swinging in its perch on his left breast pocket.

"Razi... Razi..." the drone suddenly stopped dead, "wait, you're THAT Razi."

"Um... yeah?" Razi scratched his chin, "What Razi are you thinking of? I don't think I'm anyone famous."

"Damn, I guess that wasn't going to work," the drone bobbed a little, "Well, you have the green light and all so I guess your papers are in order. But I'm going to have to insist you take an SC drone with you."

"I have survival experience you know," Razi pouted, not mentioning that it was a mere three year gettings-his-toes-wet stint, "I can take care of myself. Besides, it's not like you won't come sailing in to get me out if needed."

The bureaucrat drone considered that for a moment then snorted, "Message from Mind Gamma. 'Now, don't complain. Pech isn't the same as your backyard volcano fortress, you might just prefer it if we didn't have to Reload you. Now be a good boy and take your drone. Don't forget your tissues too.'"

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The positively-gothic raven stared at him. Definitely stared at him.

"You're the SC drone who's following-" Razi couldn't quite keep the question out of his tone.

"Yes! Of course!" the raven quipped in a perfectly human voice. A bright and cheery voice that was completely at odds with its appearance. The raven flapped over, and perched on his shoulder, looking for all the world like a necromancer's familiar.

"Why do you-

"I like it," the raven quipped.

"Hm, can I have your-

"Anasterial Macheras, is my name," the raven did a half-bow, causing Razi to blink a few times in
rapid succession. It scratched its head with a claw non-chalantly, "you can call me Ana or Machy if you want."

"I'll go with Machy," Razi said, feeling a little strange. He knew intelligences in Special Circumstances could be weird, but not this weird. He had a feeling he knew why he didn't get approved for SC when he asked.

"Weirdness isn't our only trait," said Machy suddenly, "and no, I wouldn't be mind reading you. You're just too obvious."

Razi sighed and decided to walk towards the shuttle. Definitely remembering to pack the recommended wad of absorbent paper. One does not just ignore a Mind when it tells you to do something, at least not if one didn't want to regret it.

This time though, he wondered if it wasn't all just a practical joke.

Chapter End Notes

Just setting the scene.

I was going to go with a wide-eyed innocent tourist but along the way he morphed into something else.
More evidence of the Tau flexibility is clear. As we have begun to standoff on our relations in general, the Tau are attempting to build on the provided technology by themselves.

In particular higher capacitor and cooling densities of high temperature superconduction have been applied to upsize their railguns to starship class weaponry. While this is still in the experimental stage, we fully expect their efforts to generate ship-to-ship class mass drivers eventually. With acceleration tracks of up to a hundred meters and a shell velocity of nearly 500 kilometers per second with rounds weighing up to ten grams.

What is interesting is that the Tau are marrying their railgun and plasma weaponry technologies following the improvements in plasma containment and reduction in containment wall thickness. An experimental railgun was detected with special shells built with outward facing plasma containment walls.

While considerably more expensive than a normal railgun round, these starship class railguns ablate their outer covering to form a plasma sheath around the penetrator that allows it to punch through whipple shields and armour much more than normal railguns.

We are also detecting atmospheric firing tests of a modified design that fires rounds with additional heat shielding and plasma repulsion walls with the apparent intention of allowing starships to fire against targets behind significant atmosphere with kinetic weapons. With the blooming effect reducing laser power and plasma weapons dissipating too high in the above atmosphere, it is understandable that the Tau might wish to have a better bombardment option that is more precise and less costly than a missile.

Another interesting variant is the sandcaster railgun. Anticipating the need to absorb railgun rounds in the future, the Tau have begun experimenting with rounds designed to fragment into many tiny particles. The cloud, fired in the direction of suspected kinetic weaponry, will hopefully hit the shells and knock them off course. At a pinch, these also serve as anti-missile point defence against unarmoured missiles.

Additionally, sandcaster rounds set to detonate near a target can avoid any potential anti-kinetic defences and grind down shields and armour. With a much higher hit rate, doctrine expects these rounds to be used first to soften up enemy ships before the ship-killer penetrators or other weaponry are used.

Wargame

"Contact on starboard! Drive class... Imperial frigates! Count seven!"

Tas'mar gripped the admiral's chair. So that was the trap huh? He had been too busy wondering where those Culture people were hiding their mines to notice the hidden frigates behind the asteroid.

The missile "mines" had been the death of his fleet in the last simulation. Somehow, the other side had rewired their control systems to handle telemetry links to far more missiles than normally possible. And then practically just kicked their missiles out the hatch with a nearly undetectable cold launch.

When he had come barrelling up their wake like an idiot, they just lit up the missiles when he got close and there wasn't any time to react. It destroyed more than a third of his fleet before the actual close combat even started. It had been extremely frustrating to sit through multiple waves of
incoming missiles from around him knowing that with the huge velocity he had built up to close with the fleeing target ships, there was no way he could avoid the next ten salvos.

It was sort of unfair that the Culture weren't playing the Imperials like Imperials. The way they rebuilt, re-engineered and tested new ideas and doctrines was more like the Tau. No, it was more flexible than even the Tau. They just liked using the Imperial "skin" (a game term) as they put it, whatever that meant. But Tas'mar was up for a challenge.

Culture fleet simulations were incredibly convincing. This VR environment felt exactly like a ship, down to the NPC (another game term he didn't understand) crew and meticulously simulated components, every last wire. Only his company captains were real Tau. This was no toy model or simplified game, it was nearly as good as the real thing. It even modelled the miniscule gravitational attraction exerted by asteroids and ships, at least according to the hosting Mind.

The deck bucked under his feet as the first of the frigate weapons began to hit his flagship. "Turn to starboard! Get the task force split and surround them quickly! It's only seven frigates!"

He did wonder at that for a moment. Even with surprise on their side, there was no way only seven frigates could take on the four battlecruisers plus escort that made up his taskforce. The battlecruiser design wasn't one he was familiar with, it was a Tau-spec model made by the game players.

"They're getting closer! Looks like they're focusing on us!"

The increasing vibrations of leakage through their shields was making the deck jump. "There's no way they can hope to kill this ship before they die," Tas'mar mused, one of the frigates had already blown up.

"Target course change... Collision course! They're ramming!"

In a flash, he saw the gambit. "Emergency speed, now! Overdrive the engines as far as they will go. Evade that ship! All ships in the taskforce, concentrate fire as much as possible on the closing enemy!"

He didn't have much hope of evading it. Fast as battlecruisers were, that was in comparison with real capital ships. A small frigate would outmaneuver it easily. And in the melee, most of the ships in his taskforce had bad vectors to shoot the currently offending frigate.

The deck hopped a knee-height in a massive lurch as the two ships intersected, the huge bulk of the frigate smashing through shields and armour as if they weren't there. The shockwave rippled through his battlecruiser's skeleton and knocked everyone painfully against their combat harnesses.

"Status report! Crew to breach and ready to repel boarders!"

There would be a large boarding team on each of those frigates. He knew the trap now, it was a knockout blow aimed directly at him, the (simulated) fleet commander. That hadn't happened before in his previous rounds of gameplay, but he knew the Culture players certainly had more tricks up their sleeve. They'd been playing this game for subjective years now.

"Multiple lifepod signatures! The frigate is abandoning ship!"

Tas'mar blinked at the surprising news. The frigate was certainly in very bad shape but there was his ship for them to take. Why would they... oh no.

"Target ship, reactor signature rising! It's going critical! They must have engineered their fission core to meltdown!"
Yeah, Tas'mar had wondered about the enemy fission core design in some of their ships that his simulated 'spies' had intercepted for a moment. Fission powercores were obsolete by any metric. But not for suicide ships.

Tas'mar sighed and leaned back into his chair with his hands relaxed behind his head. There wasn't anything left to do.

The massive explosion from the teraton atomic yield (the fission reaction was fusion boosted, not that Tas'mar knew that) blew his ship to pieces.

He was back in the colourful welcoming game lobby's "teleporter" entrance with a mournful red Game Over sign blinking in front of him. His other captains were still in the game though, they had a clear hierarchy of command and one of them would take over the overall commander role.

The Culture captain in charge of the suicide frigates appeared behind him a moment later. "Well, your ships sure blew me out of space," she said, rubbing her head with a large grin.

"Well done," he nodded to her, "it was a bold idea of yours."

"Yeah, you are the most dangerous tactical thinker among the Tau in this group. We decided we couldn't let you stick around. Not with the other gambits we had prepared," she said, reclining backwards seemingly into thin air. She stayed afloat of course, in a VR environment, physics was optional.

"Enough that you would sacrifice one of your own?" he asked her. The indirect praise was good but he knew that these game players had far more experience in this than he did.

"Mhm. I must say, you certainly learnt very quickly," she straightened and pulled out a small board for a tactical land wargame from thin air, "How about this game while we wait for them to finish? It could take hours."

Tas'mar considered it for a while, "I'm still too involved with the fleet simulation. I can't switch so fast."

"Hmm, if you don't mind a short duel, I'm up for it," the game player said, indicating the 'Launch' teleporter.

Tas'mar nodded. He had a new idea to try. And this fleet simulation game was essentially the best military training tool he had ever encountered in his life. Might as well not waste the chance.

Report

From Fire Caste Bork'An Commune Commander Tas'mar
Encrypted channel pad#41a0 to Tau Grand Council regarding issue Culture#301:
Regarding the Culture wargame simulator at the Bork'An embassy

Background / Introduction
I and 29 other Tau commanders + subcommanders close to Bork'An and available to spend the required time at the Culture embassy were chosen to participate in a series of games against the Culture game players in their virtual environment wargame.
The VR entertainment suite was provided to the embassy at the request of one of the Culture citizens who had close relations to another game player aboard GSV Crossing the Bridge. Water caste envoys recognized the possible utility of the system during a regular tour and my detachment of mid-ranking Fire caste commanders were instructed to test the system.

This had two main objectives. 1. Assess the utility of using a similar system for military command
The operation was highly successful on both counts. An additional chance discovery was made with large implications for potential military weaponry and demonstrates a currently unaccounted for vulnerability in our forces.

Detailed Account

We decided to play both fleet simulation and land warfare games against the Culture game players, both those matched to our assessed skill level and the best available (and willing). The games were all arranged in good faith and no diplomatic fallout or misunderstandings resulted.

The virtual environment of the Culture greatly surpasses our initial efforts in that direction. This was not unexpected. This virtual environment encompasses a greater depth of simulation and incorporates virtually every detail. It is considered a routine practice to build and test novel ship designs and even completely new weapons or fictional hypothetical weapons that cannot be normally built.

This environment encompasses all degrees from near-realistic to completely abstract fantasies. Similarly, the wargames could be run with nearly any parameters of any size of conflict at any level of abstraction; of note is the test wargame involving a land battle across a hypothetical stellar collector sphere the size of Tau's orbit with 10 quintillion separate land engagements, each with its own unique geometry and NPC armies simulated down to individual plasma rifle triggers and internal mechanisms.

As space forces commanders, we focused more on the fleet simulations. After a few tutorial battles to get us used to the simulation commands, we fought a series of 180 games against the Culture game players, 6 games per command team, with post-game discussion and debriefing sessions both Tau-only and with the Culture opponents present.

We won the first set easily but this was explained to be due to the Culture players handicapping themselves to assess our tactical thinking. Apart from that first set of 30, I am ashamed to report that we were defeated in every single battle but one. That one battle was won by a combination of extreme luck and brilliant insight involving the weakness of the enemy ship design by my subcommander after I was targeted and removed from the battle. My commendation of his tactical skill has been attached separately.

It is noted with great interest that the simulations were reported by all involved to be as fully realistic as an actual fleet battle. Indeed, by our own performance metrics, all 30 command teams were seen to improve in capability by at least one sigma above the standard skill gain for live combat scenarios. (we attribute this deviation to exposure to much higher skill opponents) If I may say as much, the 20 'green' command teams who have not experienced real combat scenarios before are now performing as well or better than our veteran teams who have been through live combat.

Indeed, the Culture game players have their own set of performance metrics and copies of this have been taken for analysis and potential incorporation into our own.

The Culture has agreed to provide the battle simulation data and highly detailed step-by-step annotations have been added by the involved command teams. This by itself provides an excellent training resource as many of the scenarios and tactics used were completely novel to us.

It is of extreme importance that I mention battle simulation #122. A Culture citizen expressed a side remark in the post-game discussion after simulation #90. He mentioned that he had discovered a Black strategy, which is a term the game players use to refer to strategies or tactics banned for abusive levels of effectiveness. Since we were not playing the game to be fair, Commander Sho'Vior volunteered to have that strategy used on him.
Simulation #122 is our worst defeat in all the battles. The Black strategy appears to involve a complex weapon based on psychological weaknesses in Tau mental structure. It is a weapon that requires a whole strategy to be defined by it as it is designed to manipulate the victim's perception and thinking, both with traditional communication channels and behaviour of actual forces. This was so effective that Sho'Vior admitted he felt helpless to avoid ordering his ships to give chase to an obvious bait. The defending Tau fleet in the simulation was completely destroyed with virtually no losses to the Culture game player (a single commander without even a command team). This should not reflect on Sho'Vior's record as the Culture has admitted that the strategy was designed specifically to exploit flaws and biases.

Conclusions / Notes
We conclude that the Culture wargame simulator is at least as effective as live combat in training command teams. It is unclear if this will apply to frontline troops but it is expected to be more effective than our current drill procedures.

It is of great worry that the Culture game players acknowledge that they do not represent the Culture's military command capability, yet that they were able to defeat us. They in fact admit that none of them would be able to win at all against a Mind, which would be the real agents in a war. Nevertheless, it is gratifying to note that the Culture are aware of the Mont'Ka, Kauyon and other lesser military doctrines, although with their own names. The Culture players are indeed far more proficient with the nuances of our own strategies than the best of us. However, unlike the Tau, the Culture game players frequently apply mixed strategies and rely heavily on tactical innovations. Indeed, none of the 180 battles involved a completely identical capability among the Culture forces, the Culture game players liberally tweak and modify their forces in the simulation between games.

We note that the Culture assumes that novel ship designs and even novel engineering is available on request in the simulations. We are in agreement that this implies the Culture is capable of creating, implementing and producing not only completely novel designs of ship, but also customized weaponry and equipment tailored to any specific environment or situation, or even a specific risky one-shot gambit.

This is a capability that, if possible, promises to be incredibly powerful and will serve as a massive force amplifier as the Culture game players have demonstrated amply. We must investigate into the possibilities of reducing our innovation and production times, the benefits are clear.

The Black Strategy is the most worrying, yet also highly promising. While it is clear from their explanations that making one of these is very difficult and highly dependent on the target's command structure, the so called Medusa maneuver, a combination of communications and fleet movements that formed the keystone part of the Black Strategy of #122, so effectively cripples our thinking ability that I have placed #122 and details of the strategy under Top Secret codes. Commander Sho'Vior and his command team have been sworn to secrecy.

The strategy represents such a major weakness that I must recommend that we immediately take steps to guard against it. There are number of software filters on communications and minor command responsibility changes that I think will have a major impact on its effectiveness. The effect of having an enemy use it against us, which is possible with variants in nearly every realistic combat scenario, is potentially devastating.

The strategy directly attacks the psychology of the commanders and troops. Without the appropriate defences, it works even if the target knows it is being subjected to the strategy. It is incredibly effective if deployed correctly and extremely devastating if failed to be defended against. I cannot over-emphasize the need to understand the overall techniques in identifying and resisting these.

Furthermore, I inquired into the possibility that the Imperium of Mankind and Orks might have Black
Strategies that could be employed against them. The Culture game players agree and do know of three completely different sets of variants for the IoM and no less than ten for the Orks. However, as the Black Strategies are often only perfectable with the help of a Mind-class intelligence (unverified claim by the Culture) and border on indirect mind-control, the Culture is incredibly hesitant to share them due to moral objections.

While their players are reluctant to use them in games, considering them cheating, it is not so clear that they might refuse to use them in a war situation.

I highly recommend that we immediately begin research into acquiring at least one each against the Imperium and Orks; as well as identify any potential strategies to be used on Tau in order to patch them.

Chapter End Notes

Tau variant of macrocannons based on railguns.

Well, the point was that the majority of the Tau landforces will soon be supplanted by space forces. Special forces will still be around but much of the Tau land forces will be deprecated once a few wargames get going with some Culture citizens playing one side.

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Eh, just wanted an excuse to write a space battle. Still, a full-immersion highly realistic VR game like this? Excellent training sim. All the benefits of a complete live combat without any of the casualties or hardware costs.
The banquet consisted of every member of the Kindred gathering in the hive's central area. Most of them were already there preparing the food and getting the varied dishes ready.

Razi noted that all of the food was meat, the kroot were carnivores. But that was ok, Razi liked meat as much as any other Culture citizen. It even smelled like their tastes and seasonings were roughly compatible with Culture standard, it would be an exotic meal but could even be enjoyable (instead of inedibly different like that one race of hamster-like creatures that preferred to season their food with raw ammonia).

Mar’Vurr brought him around and the various cooks showed him their pots, spits and roasts. There were as many variants in cooking style and seasoning blends as any non-blended culture (the Culture had many more than the kroot, but that was mostly due to an expanded diet and assimilation of multiple independent races).

Razi went through the area, noting how even the children were helping out, and sampling the various spice blends or observing one cook casually but expertly strip carefully controlled wafer-thin slices of meat off a rotating spit before reapplying a new layer of oil and spice.

Mar’Vurr gave Razi responsibility over a slab of uncooked meat. "Here, this is a good chance to exchange our cultures. You have some of your spices with you as I requested, yes?"

Razi nodded.

"Good, then this meat is for you to cook. Prepare it in any Culture way you wish."

Razi looked down at the large red hunk, the spices he had weren't quite enough to cook in Lari style like he had originally intended. Well, all the methods he had spices available for called for the bone to be removed so he put on the cooking gloves, picked up the bone knife and started sawing away.

Hmm, come to think of it, he didn't even know what the meat was like. How was he supposed to cook with a mystery meat? Then again, it was probably alien meat so he wouldn't know how to prepare it even if he could get its name. He needed a taste.

"Machy, can you flash cook this piece?" he said to the bird perched on the rack of hanging carcasses, holding up a small corner of the meat with his gloved hands. Machy cocked its head twice, which was strange, but the piece of meat suddenly flashed brightly for a split second and Razi had the distinct impression of extreme heat around his fingers before it all went away as suddenly as it came.

Razi nodded his thanks and put it in his mouth. Hmm. Stretchy with a strangely familiar flavour. Well, he could work with that. It virtually perfectly fit the Yoth blend of spices he had available and roasting it in the flashy Yoth style demanded less spice, so he would have enough.

The banquet itself was less organized than Razi had expected. After the meal preparation, the same cooking area was then cleaned and cleared of cooking equipment before the kroot started eating.

They sat around informally in small conversational groups, standing or at chairs, eating directly from
their claws. The children ran around with their games and 'parents' with designated responsibility hissed angrily at them to be careful with the food. It was all very casual and friendly.

Mar'Vurr brought him around, introducing him to the various kroot, most of whom couldn't speak Marain or in fact any language but kroot. Along the way, there were a myriad of meat dishes to try.

It started from a type of factory farmed bird to a deer-like species and a particularly vicious carnivore (the hunter responsible for bringing that in showed Razi the scar he got from the thing's claws). Then the kroot shaper introduced him to yet another group of chairs around a dish of dried and smoked meat with a reddish spicy sauce over it.

This one was introduced as the last remaining pieces of an Imperial human. That was interesting enough, but apparently these pieces had come from the baby's heart.
The kroot in the group all looked at him when Razi picked up a piece and he wondered if he just made some sort of social gaffe.

"Um..." he looked at Mar'Vurr questioningly, "sorry? Was I not supposed to do that?"

He made to put the piece back but Mar'Vurr stopped him, "No, we want you to share this meal with us. Please, go ahead."

And they were all still staring at him. Razi frowned in confusion. Well, if they wanted him to eat it, then he surely had an excuse if it was somehow bad to do so.

He ate it. It was a little too chewy for his liking, lean muscle and the kroot having stronger jaws probably. The sauce went nicely with it though. The kroot watched him swallow and Razi was still wondering if he had just somehow committed 'suicide' when they resumed their normal conversation.

"What was that about?" he asked Mar'Vurr, who looked a little surprised at him.

Mar'Vurr didn't answer and brought Razi to a table with a different set of meats arranged next to Razi's dish.

"Ah, the guest comes," one of the kroot there stood up.

"Niavar, a shaper-in-training," Mar'Vurr introduced him and the other kroot held out a claw in a classical Marain greeting. Razi shook it, remembering to wipe the oil off his hand afterwards.

After the usual introductions, Niavar gestured at the two dishes. "This is yours, and this is ours, both prepared with the same meat."

He picked up a piece of Razi's dish, rough bite sized pieces coated with a golden brown crumb, "Nicely done, although a little too soft. My mate wants to know your recipe and the Kindred will likely appreciate it if you could give us a sample of your spice blend."

Razi nodded and they made arrangements for the Culture to provide a crate of it. He expected Niavar to ask him to try the kroot version and indeed, Niavar gestured invitingly towards it.

Again, all the kroot there looked at him.

Razi frowned. Of all the dishes, this was the one he still didn't know what it was. "What is the meat anyway?" he asked.

Mar'Vurr's grin was fantastically large, as if a well-prepared joke had finally come to fruition. "Culture-standard human. We made extra arrangements to procure some from your visiting ship."
Razi raised an eyebrow. No wonder the meat had tasted familiar when he tried a piece. He picked up a large wedge of the kroot prepared dish and took a bite.

Hm, certainly exotic, the kroot spice had a strange bite to it that nothing else he met had. But it went well with the meat and he could certainly tell how much attention had gone into the dish. The two of them were essentially the main dishes at this banquet.

He finished his piece, it was actually quite delicious, and the other kroot turned away to leave Niavar and Mar'Vurr still looking at him. They seemed to be waiting for his reaction.

"It was very good," he said slowly, trying to gauge their reaction, "can I also ask for a sample of your blend of spices? It was very unique and I imagine many of my friends will be eager to try using it. " Best to mirror their gesture to avoid stepping on any landmines.

"That's all?" Niavar suddenly asked incredulously.

"Er," Razi had enough, he was going to ask directly, come what may, "What is going on? I've been meaning to ask-" Razi was interrupted by a hideous cackle from Machy. The raven bobbed its head with amusement as the raucous laughter cut through the noise of the banquet.

"What's so funny?" Razi and Mar'Vurr asked at the same time.

"Oh, it's just that," Machy waved a wing at the dishes and the three of them, "you all have the wrong idea about each other."

The raven turned to Razi, "the kroot think that humans are adverse to cannibalism from the actions of the Imperium. They wanted to gauge your reaction to the dishes, probably as a form of joke."

Razi raised his eyebrows again, that was an explanation but something didn't make sense. "Um... why would they be adverse to cannibalism? I am not exactly familiar with the Imperium."

"The humans deemed it morally wrong," Mar'Vurr said stiffly.

"Huh. Well, clearly that stance is deficient on a number of philosophical points," Razi said, slipping into philosopher mode.

"While I would love to engage you in a discussion about our perception of Imperial morality," Mar'Vurr said, turning back to the dishes and taking another clawful of Razi's, "but it must seem that I have to concede. You have gotten the better of us this time."

Razi opened his mouth but Machy cut in, "but of course! You had no hope of pulling that off with Razi of all people. He's known to be a rather detached tourist in the Culture; he won't even begin to understand the subtle nuances of this joke. " The bird pointed at the two dishes.

Razi looked at Niavar and caught the kroot shaper-to-be looking at the kroot dish. No, it was probably Niavar's dish. "You did well, it was very good."

Niavar nodded his thanks, "Mar'Vurr told me to prepare that. It was an honour to be responsible for a new genetic source."

They looked at Machy and Mar'Vurr having a rapidfire conversation in kroot and Marain. "Well," Razi said, "they might have been the orchestrators of our joke but at least we have good food. Shall we enjoy it together?"

He gestured at the two dishes. Niavar perked up a bit and nodded to Razi, "It would be an honour."
Razi had gone through countless numbers of introductions into the kroot lifestyle on Pech in the last four days. Weaving, farming, games, songs, dances and even what minor bits of politics in Kindred organization.

To be frank, he had already noted the signs of boredom in himself. The kroot were interestingly unique, but they weren't NEW. And every freshly encountered race was unique after all, uniqueness was wearing thin after he had sought it for the last hundred odd years.

It was time to make his leave soon, but before that, there was one last, still interesting, thing to do.

He zipped up the invisibly thin protective suit around himself. It was less than a molecule thick but the femto-tech s-matter skinsuit was actually more protective than old-style Culture powered armour. It even held itself up under its crushingly high weight.

Mar'Vurr and Machy watched him, with totally different thoughts.

"You're cheating on a hunt?" Mar'Vurr said, with a trace of amusement.

"I would have to," Razi indicated the raven perched on the edge of the table nearby, "Machy has instructions. And regardless of my hunting experience and no doubt, yours, it would not be in our best interest to have me ah... commit suicide on Pech during the Culture's first visit.

Razi shrugged as they watched him fire the HEED at his palm on low power. The CREW weapon refracted a bare millimeter from his skin, flowing around even his arms and forming a coating of light all the way up to his shoulder that radiated the energy at blinding, but harmless, levels. He flipped the HEED off and safety back on, adding flippantly, "besides, you might be able to tolerate lots of pain, but this fragile flower of a Culture citizen thinks it might not be too fun.

Mar'Vurr clicked in amusement, "Noted. Perhaps you might know that your Mind up there said that there was no way any harm could come to you on Pech. That nothing here posed any real threat."

From the way he bared his fangs, Razi was sure that Mar'Vurr disagreed about that and was just itching to test that statement.

Razi was virtually certain that the Mind had told the kroot that for some nefarious purpose. Manipulated circumstances was something most Culture citizens learnt to pick up on, and a bait this obvious was literally child's play. What he couldn't figure out was what it was for.

"And you might think it strange to ask why I have to wear this. Who knows?" he shrugged, swinging his hand hard against his arm. It stopped dead and neither of them felt any pain. "Incomprehensible is about the only way you can describe a Mind. At the best of times."

Mar'Vurr looked at Machy who only looked back. [Smart as I am, I still have no idea,] Machy said honestly, indicating Razi, [although I have a few good guesses. Better than him at any rate.]

Razi came to a pounding halt far less elegantly than the kroot in front of him. Mar'Vurr looked over Razi, who was only breathing a little heavily. "Fit, are you?" the kroot commented.

"Not many humans can do this run," the kroot continued as they both recovered from the exertion. Machy came gliding down from the sky to land on a convenient tree branch.

"I'm not exactly a common human," Razi shrugged vaguely, "at least if you're looking at the Imperium."
Mar'Vurr's smile broadened into a grin, "then let's put it to the test. We'll see just how good you are."

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Razi put down his HEED as the last target vanished into a puff of flaming straw. That was a bit easy, although hitting a target with homing laser beams from anything less than half a kilometer was a walk in the park, much less a hundred paces. Even if he had to guide the beams manually instead of relying on the built-in targeting.

"So you really can do it," Mar'Vurr said, even more impressed now as he examined the wreckage.

Razi had been put through his paces. From the starting endurance run to sprinting, javelin throwing, high jump, swimming and all manners of tests. The only ones he hadn't managed to at least match the kroot in was tracking but that was probably due to him not having more than a year or two experience in reading sign.

"What can I say," Razi began, "I don't think this is a question of my skill. I'm pretty average for the Culture. I think..." he thought for a while before changing it to be more friendly, "in your words, we cheat too much."

Indeed, he had needed to gland various drugs for some of the tests.

Mar'Vurr sniffed, "the cheats are part of you yes? Your genes?"

Razi thought for a while, from what he knew of his stint in biology, some of it was. "Some. The physical parts yes. Of course, not even a Culture citizen can track if he hasn't learnt how."

"hmm," Mar'Vurr thought for a while, "and then there is that suit you are still wearing." He looked at Razi who nodded, it was nearly impossible to tell that Razi was still wearing that skinsuit.

"Come with me," the shaper gestured, "I think I know an area we can hunt in, if we want a challenge."

-------------------------------------------------

The forest was still. Well, if it could be called a forest. The jungle in front of him contained rather different flora than the usual area just three hundred meters back. What was more worrying was that the usual buzz of natural noise was missing.

"Any reason why the trees here are so different?" Razi asked, examining the twisted trunk of one specimen with sharp black leaves.

"We are at the borders of one of the dark areas. The kroot here took a... bad path in their genetics and to this date, few dare venture here," Mar'Vurr explained, hefting the large plasma gun pointedly. So this place was dangerous.

Even if the kroot absorbed genetic material and the ones here turned out badly, that was no reason why the trees here looked different. Razi turned to Machy, "does the Mind have any explanations for this?" he indicated the leaves with razor sharp edges.

"It is possible that the kroot are more tied to their environment on Pech than we first assumed. If they can absorb genetic material, I suspect that this behaviour is probably possible to some extent from all life originating on Pech," the drone relayed, "Any of the deviant kroot might be upsetting the natural order in more than just artificial means. The lifeforms in the area might get contaminated as the genes spread through them too."
Razi could see the flaw but the Mind continued, "obviously, it poses the question of where these foreign bad genes come from. One possibility is off-world but some of these regions have histories that go back before even the Orks landed here and the kroot gained interstellar flight. It is more plausible that rare combinations of genes might create geneplexes that are significantly deviant and this is what is causing the so-called 'dark forests' on Pech. Of course, what you deem 'bad' is also relative, but it is certainly understandable that the kroot would dislike changes to their natural order."

Razi shut his mouth. Well, it was all still a guess; from the way the Mind hedged its speculation, it was clear that much of the evidence hadn't been found yet. But when it came from a Mind, even speculation was very often right on the mark.

Mar'Vurr was looking at Machy with a curious glint in his eye. "Very interesting," the kroot said at last and headed deeper into the twisted forest. Razi followed him, HEED at the ready.

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The first sign of something wrong was the loud screech off to the left. Even as Razi's instinctive glanding of Clear was just beginning to make itself felt, a Thing smashed out of the underbrush and bowled him to the ground. The skinsuit prevented any of the all-too-many claws from damaging him, but it didn't stop the inertia of the furry beast.

Razi had the impression of fangs and claws as the animal tried to bite his head off, in vain, before it leapt off him for the easier kroot prey. Mar'Vurr snarled a warcry in return and smashed his plasma rifle into the grasping jaw of the monster, holding it back for a split second.

Razi flipped over onto his belly, the Clear overdose leaving him without shock or fear to slow him down. Plasma or CREWs might hit Mar'Vurr as well so he was left with kinetics. The animal gave a loud growl of effort and snapped clear through Mar'Vurr's plasma rifle, flinching backwards for a split second as the breached containment flashed like a small bomb. Then Mar'Vurr was struggling with his own bare claws.

The HEED in his hand flashed a targeting solution at the rapid blur of limbs, claws and fur, and Razi sent the firing command. Invisible needles of force drove the soil of the forest floor up through the humus layer at tremendous accelerations, a hundred sprays of silicate clay that suddenly found themselves flying at the animal at twenty times the speed of sound.

The lances of matter (it scarcely mattered what they were made of at the velocities they were going) streaked white hot with air friction as they scythed through the thing's body at a hundred points, targeted at every limb, joint, claw, eyes or other possibly important location that might contain vital organs in the scant half a second Razi had to run his targeting.

The thing jerked like a ragdoll hit by a salvo of darts and went flying off Mar'Vurr, hitting the tree behind it with a wet thud. The broken thing bled profusely from most of its wounds, making a reddish pool on the forest floor.

Mar'Vurr winced as he got up, licking at the scratches on his arms. Razi hurried over and glanced him over. Good, it looked like there weren't any large wounds. Mar'Vurr grunted and got up experimentally.

"Not even a broken bone," the kroot shook his head, "That was definitely a 'puma. A big one."

Razi, now knowing that Mar'Vurr was alright, looked at the animal. It had six limbs, all with wickedly sharp claw, a sinuous powerful body and a head full of sharp teeth. He couldn't quite tell
The 'puma coughed blood wetly and Razi narrowed his eyes, the wounds were already clotting, despite him almost certainly having destroyed its brain. Clear was still blocking his astonishment, but he wasn't about to let a threat recover from even impossible wounds. He flicked his HEED's safety back off (since when had he turned it to safe?) and backed away two steps, signalling Mar'Vurr to back off.

"No need for that," Mar'Vurr said, stripping the large blade off the stock of his plasma rifle. The kroot walked over to the beast and beheaded it with a single powerful stroke. Satisfied that it was dead, the kroot leaned against the tree in relief.

"That was dangerous," Mar'Vurr quipped after a moment.

Razi grinned at him, "For you. Still, I think we'd better turn around rather than follow that trail. The ritty is probably already eaten by the 'pumas or worse. I have no wish to see your throat ripped out if there's another one of these things lurking around."

Mar'Vurr grinned back, wincing at the multiple scratches on his arms, "Funnily enough, neither do I."

They were just starting to go back, without the carcass, not even Kroot would eat that, when Razi remembered about Machy.

"Machy!" he said angrily, "you could have helped! For that matter, you must have seen it coming a mile off! Why didn't you warn us?"

The raven groomed its wings nonchalantly, "For one thing, I didn't think it necessary to warn you. Besides, you didn't need the help right?"

Razi eyed it, not feeling impressed by the drone's explanation. "All right fine," Machy made a gagging noise and coughed up a dragonfly-sized something that went zipping off into the bushes. There was a yowl that sounded suspiciously like a 'puma.

"That was, I think, its mate. There's another pair of them and quite a few other potential threats in the local area. Do you want the knife drone to destroy them too?" Machy asked, sounding dangerously sweet.

Mar'Vurr waved his claw negatively, "No need for that, the kroot almost never come here and I have satisfied myself with observing Razi's performance."

"-is it true? You killed a 'puma?" Niavar said as they got back, eyeing Mar'Vurr's light injuries.

Mar'Vurr pointed at Razi, "He did. All I did was to survive for a second or two."

Niavar looked at Razi, "even a second or two is more than anyone expects against a 'puma. It takes entire hunting groups to kill even one. I must thank you for saving the life of our Kindred's Shaper," he said semi-formally.

Razi accepted the thanks, "it is only to be expected."

"Still," Niavar continued, less formally, "I must admit that the kroot will be more interested in you after this incident. If Mar'Vurr vouches for you, we are inclined to believe you might have interesting genetic stock."
Mar’Vurr's eyes twinkled again and Razi eyed him cautiously. Whenever the crafty shaper looked like that, he was almost certainly about to try another 'joke'. Niavar was considerably more level-headed.

"If the Culture would provide its base genetic stock for the kroot, you would earn much gratitude."

Razi blinked, well, that was certainly interesting. "Enough gratitude that the kroot would be mercenaries for us?"

"Oh, maybe. Perhaps if there was some equipment as well?" Mar’Vurr looked pointedly at the HEED and the folded up skinsuit.

Razi looked at Machy, who relayed the Mind's response, "that can be arranged. For obvious reason, we can't give you top rate stuff like what Razi has here, and we'll expect you to keep them to this region and away from any battle involving Chaos."

"You want an exclusive deal? Not being able to trade these," the Shaper indicated the HEED, "or use them against Chaos greatly reduces their usefulness. Although I forsee that most of it will be used by us."

"We have certain enemies that we do not want to see getting their hands on our technology," the bird continued, "it would be better for both us that they never even know it exists."

"That might not be enough," the shaper said, "you want too many kroot. I cannot see enough Kindreds willing to take this deal. You are not even going to use us in a land battle where we can acquire genetic material from your enemies."

"What else can we offer?"

"If you could replace the lost opportunity for genetic material, say with land engagements, that would be more than suitable," the kroot replied.

"Instead of combat, would you be adverse to obtaining your genetic material from elsewhere? You will find that our biological understanding is capable of providing any specific trait you may wish. For that matter, we can impart directly to the kroot if you are willing."

The shaper looked at Razi disbelievingly, "You can create animals with any trait you want? Wings? How about telepathy?"

"Easily. Telepathy will have to be clarified but it is possible. We can provide hunting grounds and animals carrying desirable traits for your recreation. With time and analysis, we can even tailor the traits for maximum uptake by the kroot."

Mar’Vurr's eyes gleamed as he and Niavar shared a look, he asked in almost a whisper, "Intelligence?"

For the first time, Razi heard a Mind hesitate. "Our morals prevent us from providing hunt animals with intelligence above certain criteria but we can certainly provide genetic material for increased intelligence. You can verify it in the specimen created but we cannot allow you to acquire it by hunting sentient beings."

On second thought, the hesitation was probably from the Mind consulting with the wider network on this question. Not even the hyper-comm was fast enough to talk across galactic distances without delay.

Niavar sucked in a breath and Mar’Vurr shared his large grin, "I am not sure how the other Kindreds will view the intelligence restriction but it is already more than acceptable. I believe you have a
workable proposal, you can present this and you will obtain the services of more Kindreds that you requested."

Chapter End Notes

Finishing off the Kroot part. More business and less jokes in this section.

Just in case: the whole hunting trip is a previously agreed arrangement between the Culture and Mar’Vurr as a demonstration of possible "things for sale". Sort of like a live demonstration.
You don't want to see a kroot squad with HEEDs, femto-tech 'armour' and displacer support. They'll go through imperial squads like a hurricane.

It strikes me that since the kroot operate warspheres (which are like ships) and want payment in weapons/food and not currency and aren't xenophobic at all, they are well placed to also be Culture mercenaries for running anti-Chaos fleets. The Culture are undoubtedly the highest bidder in any sort of negotiation, plus the downsides of pure ship combat can be offset by the Culture providing fresh and novel genetic material on demand and made to order.
Plus, the kroot don't represent the same security risk that humans or psyker races like the Nicassar do.

Furthermore, strengthening the kroot in this way indirectly helps the Tau. With the Tau having the advantage in space, they might still lose on the ground.
White Wings

Chapter Notes

Let me skip back to this idea regarding the Sororitas and another undeveloped plot idea I had before I forget about it. Ideas regarding the Sororitas are rare enough that I cannot pass up this chance.

This is a character introduction that you don't really need to read except for the bottom half starting from the division which sets up his situation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So much for coming with this intergalactic expedition. It had looked like a GREAT idea at the time and no doubt it still did, but Shiroki had never been happy being with the Culture.

He hated their parties, the way socially acceptable things was a... chain on everyone's necks, one that they didn't talk about. But hate them as he might, he couldn't run away from the fact that he felt constrained by social mores because he couldn't deal with being hated in turn.

And the Minds, especially the one who psychoanalyzed him when he asked. They didn't have to be so... so darned right about everything. Sure, they were superintelligences, but it just made him feel small when told exactly how pitiful his grievances were and how simple the solutions could be. And that he couldn't argue with it because it was true and the solutions worked. They worked, but he couldn't repeat their effects and everyone knew it was a Mind's solution and not his.

Joining Contact didn't seem like something interesting. For whatever reason, talking to even more pitiful and less developed societies grated on Shiroki. They had actual grievances, lack of food, being ill, or suffering under crushing debt in an economic system. And for all it might have helped for him to help them, the Minds would and did just do it better. It just made him feel even smaller than the Minds telling him what to do.

He said he wanted something new and so he left the galaxy with this expedition. What he thought he needed was isolation. No more need to worry about being social or being laughed at, no need to listen to a Mind tell him what to do to solve his problem. To run away from his problems in effect. And what better place to do it than intergalactic distances?

So when they arrived and he got Reloaded from storage, Shiroki wasn't happy to find that the Culture in this new and wondrous galaxy was doing "business as usual". All the parties were still there, the Minds were even MORE active due to this Chaos thing, and everyone was glued to the latest Information Networks. It was impossible for Shiroki. To not have an opinion on anything in this galaxy's wonders was to be socially outcast.

For a while, he toyed with retreating into full VR but it didn't work for him. He knew it was fake and despite whatever the Minds told him about information theory and the Ship of Theseus, he couldn't stand it.

That was when he met the drone Tsubasa. Something of a misfit, the drone had also disliked the
Minds. To the drone, the Minds were just overbearing commanders. Although Shiroki disagreed about that and the drone wasn’t too worried about social standards, their common ground made them something like friends.

This eventually culminated in an interesting development. Tsubasa had gotten into a major spat with another drone on board the GSV Silent Sinner in Red and actually fired an effector weapon. Now it was completely outcast from social circles.

While that didn’t normally bother Tsubasa, Shiroki didn’t like the knock-on effect it had on him. So they requested transfer to another GSV, which was granted but only helped slightly. That was when Shiroki finally thought of the idea. He simply had to go away and Tsubasa would be willing to follow him.

After much discussion and pleading, the Minds had finally given them permission. Shiroki and Tsubasa could have their isolation.

A single high-speed yacht, with no significant production capability or weapons, and importantly, no governing intelligence or anything potentially useful to Chaos, would be given to them. They were told to head directly away from the Culture’s main area, to anywhere in Ultima Segmentum. The yacht would continue to stay in contact with the Culture via hyper-comm, but effectively, they would be on their own.

Part of the conditions were that Shiroki and Tsubasa agree to obtain the skills necessary to pilot the yacht and acknowledge Chaos contamination warnings. Poison Tooth implants, as tamper-proof as possible, would also be installed in them. Shiroki’s biological immune system would be bolstered with a nanotech based one. They would also stay very far away from any potential warp threat and avoid angering any one of the major local powers.

All of these looked like sensible precautions and they agreed. As irritated and angsty as Shiroki was, turning into a Chaos cultist wasn’t high up on his list of things to do. Neither was being on the business end of an Imperial flamer or an Eldar witchblade. He was going there to... be alone. Not to get blown up.

On the 35th week after the Culture’s arrival, the White Wing, as they had named their yacht, arrived in the far flung system deep in Ultima Segmentum known as Eydolim.

Week 2
Shiroki frowned at the projected images hanging in the air. Eydolim, an Imperial shrine world from their own records, a planet left untouched by the Imperium of Mankind’s ever increasing grasp of resources.

He had gotten all the way out here to get away from the Culture, and so did Tsubasa. And halfway across the galaxy from anything Culture wasn’t enough to totally escape the eye of the Culture.

The short message from the beta Mind of GSV Silent Sinner in Red replayed itself. "You might find the Eydolim system interesting."

Surveying the hologram of the planet again, with informative pictures attached, he crushed the little printout Tsubasa had brought him in his fist. God damn it! He was not Contact! What was he with this White Wing yacht supposed to do about an Imperial planet?

He glanced at the report on the Sisters of Battle that guarded the shrine city here. Well, a non-warp reality alteration effect was at least interesting but not enough to make him want to do their jobs for them.

And a Mind was telling him to do something again. Well, he didn’t care how good they were but this
was an undocumented and unknown reality alteration from halfway across the galaxy! How right could they be about this when they had essentially no data?!

He looked at Tsubasa, knowing the drone was also aware of him. "Do you feel rather inclined to behave this time?" he asked the drone.

Tsubasa spun once to indicate it was thinking, "hmm, I don't think so."

Shiroki grinned. Well, there was a way to do exactly what they wanted without doing it at all.

Chesa
The Sister bent over the injured man, tending to his wounds gently. The sacred cleaning alcohol was already gone two hours ago and she was down to using water.

The man winced as she dabbed out the shards of glass from the laceration but she was soon done, expert hands picking out the sand grain sized pieces from the mess of blood and flesh. In another twenty minutes, she was binding the arm wound with a roll of cloth over the now disfigured tattoo, thank the Emperor they still had lots of that, and the man thanked her by bowing deeply and leaving a generous tithe at the door.

She paused for a moment to wash blood off her hands and dispose of the glass shards. A simplified ritual of ablation rid her of the potential moral risk and she returned to her work. The work of the Emperor was more important than performing the ritual to completion, the better to save more lives and ease suffering. The Emperor knew that and had guided the hand of the Ecclesiarchy to make exceptions and quick (but less holy) versions of the same rituals.

The next woman also had an injury from a shattered bottle, across her neck. The frontline Sisters on patrol had done their best to stabilize her but Chesa would be the one to try to save her. With nothing but water and bandages. At least the bleeding had stopped, but the woman was suffering from the lack of blood and system shock, judging from the pallor and feel of her pulse.

Chesa bent to the work with renewed vigor. Lack of means was not an excuse for giving up.

Shiroki
"So let us go over the plan again," Shiroki said, gesturing at the planning flowchart that had grown organically as they tossed ideas around. This was Tsubasa's way of creating a workable plan and Shiroki had learnt to work with the odd drone over the years.

"We make contact with a single Sister, and depending on her reaction, we either talk to them or cut contact and repeat this with a different Sister. We will be using a hologram and 101 Psychology tricks to maximize our chances of a favourable approach."

Tsubasa spun with pleasure as the blurry and indistinct image appeared and turned around. It was unreal, watching the way the image faded against the background and wall. It wasn't clear like the display holograms. Well, this one was made to fool and even White Wing had enough range and resolution to project holograms down to the surface of Jones Crispin.

"We just need to choose a target," Tsubasa said, pulling up a list of names.

Shiroki bit into the hot burrito that popped out of the synthesizer. "Well, let's get to it then," he put down the burrito and blew on his fingers in the heat.

Chesa
Chesa lay down on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. The cries of the woman's younger brother as they carted the body out still rang in her ears. It was a sin to dwell too much on personal failures,
she had already listed it on her personal list of confessions and failures, but she could not get it out of her head.

If only she had an actual clotting agent. But it had been all used last week after the collapse of Section 31’s lower tunnel. You couldn't torniquet a neck to chest wound but a cold compress would also have helped. The techpriests hadn't managed to restore the machine spirit of the cooler.

She shook her head determinedly, chalking up another sin of envy. She needed to sleep.

A soft noise made her open her open her eyes again and she froze in shock. The ceiling was covered with a hazy glow. She blinked and it wavered, indistinct.

Was that even there? Maybe Chesa was just too tired to see things properly or perhaps she was asleep and this was just an odd dream. She rubbed her eyes, nope, not sleeping.

The glow shifted slightly and Chesa stared up at it for a long long while. It looked like a... figure? Maybe. It could also just be odd shadows but it might just be a human-like figure beckoning to her.

She turned over in the bed, closing her eyes to pray for clarity (there wasn’t a ritual for that). When she opened her eyes, she saw the same glow inside the wall. Well, that was weird.

She looked back up at the ceiling and the glow followed. Now that she knew it wasn't actually part of the wall, she could just about see it wasn't actually stuck to the ceiling like that projector the techpriests sometimes used. A hallucination then. Chesa wondered what sort of drug might cause that but this was too vivid and her strict self-examination would definitely detect symptoms of any drug.

She sighed and just turned over to sleep. Perhaps it would be gone tomorrow, she was clearly too tired to think properly today.

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It was gone the next morning and Chesa forgot about it for the rest of the day as she tended to yet more men and women, even children, with injuries and sickness.

The next night, the glow came back. This time, the silhouette was clearer. It was definitely a human. She could almost make out the Adeptus Sororitas uniform, complete with incense burner.

Well, that was progress.

The next day, Chesa went to see the Canoness Preceptor to report her hallucination.

"Keep it a secret for now," the Canoness told her. It could be a sign of a vision, she said, such had come to holy women of the order before. (and such a vision happening here would increase the holiness of the minor Eydolim order greatly) But it could also be something stranger or more insidious. Chesa was to take up meditation at night and be on her guard, but to also see if she could make the 'dream' clearer.

Chesa thought that the Canoness was probably misinterpreting. It didn't feel like a vision and she didn't think she had any control over the hallucinations, but she would try.

Chapter End Notes
That title for the arc is totally going to haunt me but I couldn't pass up the chance for a reference. (hint: their names)

Shiroki is going to be pretty long running character as I have plans for actual character development. Sorry if he comes across as being too whiny, at least he knows he's being whiny because a Mind told him and ignoring the truth isn't one of his weak points.

I have been pondering the possibility of having a main non-Mind class character from the Culture and this is my solution to getting one.

The White Wing - description

The White Wing is a small yacht only about thirty meters long, but that doesn't mean it is defenceless or at all without teeth. It still has an effector capable of projecting a weak laser (something roughly similar to a destroyer-class lance weapon) and is FTL. It is capable of re-entry and blast-off, as well as operating underwater (for obvious reasons, FTL while in a planet is suicide). It does NOT have a displacer.

It can't do much against a full-fledged IoM fleet but it sure can't be caught, and against ground forces, it might as well be the most dangerous thing ever. With luck, it might be able to take out an armed merchantman, but even that could take some time.

It doesn't have an AI, but it is considerably smarter than even the best knife drone and the hyper-comm link gives them information on the latest Culture stances and happenings. Scrapcode defences are kept up-to-date through the hyper-comm and if need be, the Minds on the other end of it can mount a cyber-assault on the ship if it gets taken over; the White Wing end of the hyper-comm relay has built-in weaknesses for that reason (although the Culture idea of a "weakness" can be rather strange, like induction coils for hopping across circuits and such, instead of classical backdoors).

In the worst case scenario, the White Wing's controlling network can be taken offline and all the components operated independently and under manual control. Shiroki and Tsubasa are both trained and capable pilots/navigators as well as able to run and repair (with the assembler) all the equipment on White Wing.

The White Wing has limited manufacturing capabilities, being that it needs to be able to produce food and various tools they might need. As a security precaution, the nanobots in its assembler are not allowed to replicate beyond a certain quantity and cannot be removed, without permission through hyper-comm at least. And the various construction plans are not stored on the ship, instead being downloaded on demand through hyper-comm. The only things the assembler can make by itself is a hyper-comm exactly like the one White Wing has, which is a fixed frequency.

While it is technically possible for White Wing to upgrade itself, it will need the relevant plans and therefore permission from the main Culture fleet.

Among its permanent fixtures is an arms locker that contains a HEED, portable mirror field projector, displacer-based cutting tool, a low-tech zero-electronics firearm and a simple sword. Among other tools are metal saws, welders, torchlights, distillation/water purifier, emergency air and rations and other survival-type equipment.

It has a gridfire based power-core that can also synthesize matter and has self-repair capabilities. As long as the powercore and assembler remains, the White Wing can essentially reconstruct itself given time. Its effective operational range is infinite. During its cross-galactic trip, the White Wing has been asked to build a femto-material
synthesizer upgrade to its powercore. (remember that this is part 12, they don't have femtobots yet, the directive was to begin preparations to get femto-material production so that they can build it when its invented)
The Tyrant's soldiers lounged around the Gate looking bored. The Eldar made poor guards at the best of times and even Vect's soldiers were ill-disciplined, the threat of the Tyrant's displeasure could not deter Dark Eldar from seeking something interesting to do while supposedly doing guard work.

Quesi glared at them through the viewfinder. They, so long ago, forced open the gate here to her realm and in so doing, shackled her to the Tyrant in his quest to subjugate all the Dark Eldar.

The message cube on her desk burned its warning in her mind. Someone had tipped her off about these new people called the Culture. Someone powerful enough to have access to actual seers. And that warning was very pointed as to what was going to happen.

Backstabbing was a fact of life in Comorragh and she obviously didn't trust a message from an unknown sender but something about it struck her as true. Those Culture people were definitely up to no good.

Quesi and an entire company of her best guard were camping out one ridge over from the portal. Ostensibly for a test of logistics, but even a flimsy excuse would hold up for a few days at least in her own kingdom. And if the warning was right, a few days was enough to prove- 

The portal into Comorragh was the height of three Eldar and two of the guard were wandering in front of it, supposedly blocking the path to Comorragh to prevent trespassers without permits from crossing. Their uniform and flesh caught fire in the brilliant flash that shone behind the rock outcropping that Quesi was using to stay out of sight of the portal. The flash filled the sky and all her vision, like the glare of a thousand lights from all directions.

Even as the rest of her soldiers, who had been grilling a Mon-Keigh over a fire in a crude sport, cried out in pain as their eyes went temporarily blind from the flash, Quesi snarled. Her mystery informant was right after all, that was no Eldar action.

In less than a minute, she was back to raising the viewfinder's periscope over the rock outcropping and saw chaos. The two Eldar guards in front of the portal had evidently burnt to death and the rest were still in shock over the incident, peering into the portal to see just what was going on.

"Charge!" she yelled to her soldiers and they were over the top, needlers and neural lances firing as they went. The portal guards would have never stood a chance against even a real armed speed bike, much less an entire company of shock troops.

In less than a minute, she was in possession of the portal and definitely on Vect's hit list. Or maybe not. She waved her techs forward and they set up an extended viewfinder for her just behind the portal. It confirmed what the warning said.

Vect's entire palace and domain had simply broken up. Most of it was missing and what remained was still molten. Molten globs of lava that hung in the air. If there was anything that said Vect was gone, it was the failure of the gravity generators.

"What do you think you're doing?!" one of the guards said apoplectically, turning a furious red in the face as he struggle futilely in the grip of her guard's powered fist, "You will suffer the pain of-"
Quesi whirled on him and whipped out her needler. Stuffing the barrel into his mouth, she said softly and deadly, "Not one more word from you. Shut the portal, now."

He looked from side to side frantically, confused at the sudden aggressiveness. "Let me explain it to you," Quesi continued in the same soft reasonable voice, "Vect is gone. Someone blew him up. I don't want to meet them. So you, yes you, will close this portal. Now. Or I will pull this trigger and dig the closure codes out of whatever is left of your brains, understand?"

The Eldar nodded and she withdrew the needler. Ew, that was gross. She tossed it aside and gestured at the portal control, long since disused. The once-guard in his proud shiny armour tapped the control waveringly. There was a shimmer and then the portal snapped shut.

Quesi snarled her relief and executed Vect's guard with a single savage blow to the neck. Wiping the blood off her hand, she snapped instructions to her soldiers. "Destroy the gate and panel. I want it so thoroughly gone to the point that it'll have to be rebuilt from the bedrock to be used. I want it done five minutes ago!"

They nodded and demolition charges began to roll out as she walked away. There was much to do and plan. She still needed an exit strategy, some way to survive without Commorragh, without her raiding ships and without a working webway entrance.

Hmm, wasn't there that derelict old museum? She knew she hadn't gotten around to demolishing that relic of an Eldar cruiser that had mostly fused into her baseplate with age. And then there were the original colonization portals, used by the Eldar when they first built and settled this bubble.

Quesi whistled to herself as she approached her transport. Improvisation had always worked before, and it was working again. She'd find a way to ride this out, like always.

Behind her, multiple explosions announced the final staccato beats of the Age of Vect. Perhaps the new age might be the Age of Quesi? That thought cheered her up alot.

Chapter End Notes

Assuming the Culture missile that hit Vect's palace has an effective yield of 1 ton of antimatter in electromagnetic radiation (neutrinos not counted), and assuming Vect's palace is about 10 thousand km away from Quesi's portal, the total light flux assuming a 1 second exposure is roughly 33 times that of the midday sun.

Quesi has one more part and then she's done. Basically, I'm burying yet another Chekov's gun for... later use if/when I find it convenient.
Part 18

Week 52
We have made a significant breakthrough in laser technology. The work of over two years of statistical corrections and detailed mathematical work of a hobbyist has managed to compensate for the drifting of energized lasing medium when not constrained.

Effectively, we are able to tune an electron projector to energize oxygen atmospheres and flash a laser before the energized lasing medium disperses. This allows greatly increased atmospheric penetration for handheld weapons and consequently increased ranged and power while also increasing heat efficiency and reducing barrel sizes.

The standoff in Sol continues. The fleeing Mechanicus ship has arrived in Wolf 359 but the four chasing Imperial ships have not emerged from warp. See Attached Wolf 359 Report

Week 53 - END OF YEAR 1
This marks the end of the first year since our arrival in this galaxy.

Traces of political upheaval has been detected in Sol. The Mechanicus on Mars continues their tense standoff with the Inquisition fleet. We have indications from transmissions that the Administratum controlled portion of the Sol space fleets are also divided between supporting the Inquisition or the Mechanicus.

We are currently unclear on the political goings on in Sol as we have so far avoided approaching too closely to the psyker-defence lines.

Week 54
See Attached Sol Report.

Summary: An apparently Khornate fleet appeared on the warp limit of Sol and proceeded to attempt to attack. We refrained from intervention as it was obvious that the attack was grossly insufficient to overcome Sol's defences. The fleet was indeed destroyed.

The resulting battle caused the Inquisition fleet to be drawn out of defensive position. Contrary to expectations, the Mechanicus fleet did not open fire, instead, the Sol defense fleets controlled by the Administratum opened fire on the Inquisition commanded vessels in a sneak attack combined with the Lunar fortress base as they returned to Earth orbit.

Following this, the much larger Administratum fleet ceased to be divided and proceeded to take an aggressive footing against the Mars defence fleet. After a few initial salvoes, Mars signalled surrender to the Administratum forces when one of the central hives on Mars was destroyed by orbital strike.

We are still assessing the situation but it would appear that the political power in Sol has been... greatly simplified.

One Year Report on Minor Actions and various things of note

Total identified Chaos fleets destroyed: 45
Nurgle: 21 fleets, 60 independent Chaos cells (33 by Imperial Inquisition)
Khorne: 18 fleets, 76 Chaos cells (47 by Imperial Inquisition)
Tzeentchian: 2 fleets (both by Imperial Navy), 120 Chaos cells (108 by Inquisition)
Slaanesh: 4 fleets (1 by Imperial Navy), 407 Chaos cells (329 by Inquisition)
Total Tyranid fleets destroyed: 20 + 1 large
The large fleet destroyed is tentatively identified as the main body of Hive Fleet Leviathan.

Ork worlds de-orked: 401 (201 were occupied by other races, those races have not been touched)
Ork worlds under quarantine: 2 101
Ork ship count total: 14 501
Estimated number of Ork invasions thwarted: 4 301

Necron conflicts observed: 271
Necron-necron conflicts: 78
Necron raids: 150
Major battles (classified as more than 10 capital class ships): 40 (36 in the Sautekh war)

The List:
Collection completion: 99.1%
Number of non-warp active objects successfully identified: 12
Non-List warp devices clonable: 4 (Gellar field, Void shields, Warp Drive, Warp Sensor)
Warp devices understood: 2 (Gellar Field, Warp Sensor)
Non-List warp devices under quarantine: 118
A Certain Chaotic Warp Sorcerer

Week 1
He stalked down the corridor, a grin plastered across his face. It was useless to try to keep his excitement from leaking out and he only gave a token effort.

The Time to strike was now! NOW, the dice screamed at him.

Feeling his mood, the lesser daemons fell in behind him, sweeping up the cultists and psykers into the growing wake of daemonic strength.

He paused for a moment to look into the progress of the Obliterator virus on those oh-so-interesting captives from the Culture. They had spilled their secrets, what little of it they knew, quite readily with a little encouragement from his mind-spells, but they hadn't actually finished doing that yet. The Sorceror pointedly avoided entering the room or hearing anything about the interrogations.

It wouldn't do to get caught in a temporal snarl or pseudo-paradox. Not when the information was so pivotal.

The Culture were NOT in Sol. And they didn't even dare go in.

He laughed, a high raucous laugh that sent the nearer daemons scattering away. The Culture didn't DARE go into Sol.

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The Sorcerer looked up from the meeting with the three Slaaneshi succubi. Spiky slammed the door open a fraction of a second later with all his strength. The hinges broke and the Sorcerer sighed.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Spiky roared.

"Why, I have a plan," the Sorceror folded his hands across his lap serenely, "I am sorry but it calls for some finesse."

"You are going to Sol! Are you planning a new Black Crusade?!" Spiky shouted incredulously. The succubi stared blankly up at him.

The Sorcerer raised an eyebrow, "A Black Crusade? That bludgeon that is the pride of you Khornates and so called Chaos Undivided? Pff, don't sully me with your savagery."

He stood up, slowly and deliberately, "My plan is greater and more elegant than you can imagine, much less comprehend. The ground is shifting beneath our feet and it seems that some of you haven't quite caught up."

Spiky roared again as the deliberate insults got his temper up. The spikes stuck out like a porcupine and the Khornate leader suddenly seemed to double in size. With another roar, he bounded across the room, fist raised.

The Sorceror stuck out a hand and a brilliant streak of lightning crackled across the space, smashing into Spiky. The warp lightning was deafening in the small space and Spiky roared, half in pain, as he suddenly ground to a halt mid-flight. His defences held the lightning a hair's breadth away from his spikes but it didn't prevent the space-warping effect from effectively trapping him in the air.
"It seems that you are not... up to date in the latest matters," the Sorcerer's voice somehow sounded clearly over the lightning. He chopped his other hand down, warp power lancing through Spiky's defences. Spiky howled as the lightning clawed at the porcupine-like skin. "The balance of power in Chaos has changed. It may seem that we are no longer equals, Spiky."

Spiky snarled. The Sorcerer knew he hated being called that. He continued, "War is never going to work against the Culture. The situation needs finesse like I said. Can you do that?"

Spiky roared again, still mostly in anger. "Thought not," the Sorcerer shrugged, "Then your usefulness has ended. No. One. raises a hand against me on MY OWN SHIP!" he snapped out.

"Witness the power, little furball. Unlimited Power!" with a wave of the hand emitting lightning, he threw the Khornate back through the ruined door and right through the metal outer hull of the flagship. The Khornate vanished almost immediately and the high harsh roar of escaping air immediately began blowing out the large hole.

The succubi clutched at the meeting table helplessly, trying to avoid getting sucked out, papers and plans flying out into the Immaterium. The Sorcerer merely glared at the hole, both feet planted firmly on the ground, not wavering even an inch despite the windstorm. The broken metal flowed and twisted, and then the hole was gone.
Week 1
Millifille, Fleet Admiral: Terra Defense Fleet Section Alpha
"You are the largest and most powerful organization in whole galaxy! There are almost thirty capital ships under your direct command! Surely you can't be afraid of anyone."

Millifille looked over at the woman sharing the private room with her, putting down the thimble of alcohol. As attractive as the woman was, it didn't change the fact that Millifille's ambitions were strictly that. It was too much to expect lesser companions to understand the political currents of Terra.

"No one stands against the Inquisition. Not even me. I may command vast fleets but a bolter or laspistol will still kill me just as dead."

The woman shrugged, "But you are secure on your own ship, yes? They'll have to get through the ship first, wouldn't they?"

"Only if I threw out all the Inquisition spies. I know a few," Millifille would almost be derelict in her duty if she missed them, "but I don't know if I know them all."

Why was she telling this woman all of this anyway? Just word of this reaching the Inquisition would be disastrous. Millifille was sure that her special friends and lover (or so he thought) in the Administratum would side with her but even they couldn't do much if it struck the Inquisition's fancy to dispose of Millifille. But the large brown eyes and small frame seemed trustable... somehow. She didn't really want to question someone that innocent.

"Surely you have a few people you can trust to guard you, right?"

Millifille frowned, that was true. She did have a few such people in mind that she was absolutely sure weren't with the Inquisition. But using them as a personal bodyguard would be far too obvious.

"You need allies if you want to be one of the High Lords, why is this any different?"

Why indeed? Millifille nodded thoughtfully, she had always thought of the Inquisition as a fact of life, as a minefield to be avoided in her climb to power. She had never viewed them as a problem to be solved.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------
Altraz, Admiralty: Ar Lune Anti-Space Fortress, Lunar-Terra Defence Base
The Admiral looked down the line of Comissars. These reported directly to him on matters of discipline and internal security. Of these, he could trust maybe 40%.

He hoped it would be enough. The mysterious but somehow trustable little girl had the knack all children had for pointing out the obvious that everyone else missed.

A memory of flames licking at a stake and a man bound to it wafted up from a long suppressed region. The time to repay that old debt would be soon if only he could find some way to get the Inquisition commanded ships in range of his guns. He would need to talk to a fleet commander without seeming suspicious, the gigantic lance batteries on Lunar weren't exactly mobile.

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Sorceror
The Sorceror rubbed his hands as the dice clattered to a halt. It was working. He wasn't quite sure that even with both threats and a large promise of reward that the succubi would follow his instructions. But it seemed they had.

To meet with humans, to talk to them, but not to corrupt with Chaos, went completely against their nature. They had to weave their web and drawn the humans into it but resist eating them. And succubi were not the most competent of planners even at the best of times. It was just that he needed some of their other skills instead, mostly in infiltration and persuasion, and corruption would give the game away too fast.

After all, one did not need anything like as crude as a succubi's corrupting influence in order to fan the flames of war. A few whispers in the right ears were more than enough.

He closed his fist. The Imperium's days were numbered. He could feel it in the dice.

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Spiky
The Spike (as he was known to his subordinates, out of earshot of course) stalked down the corridor, daemons and cultists scattering out of his path. The anger that wafted off his body almost tangibly sent shivers to those who were unlucky enough to have active stations at the helms.

"Set course for X82, 2B4. Now!" he snapped.

The navi-daemon grunted in surprise but Spiky shut it up with a glare. That coordinate was one that Chaos rarely got to go to.

Spiky ground his fangs. How dare that jumped-up Sorceror do that to him! Khornate captains were not supposed to be humiliated in this fashion!

He grinned inwardly though, the Sorceror had overlooked one thing. In all his power, Spiky hadn't really been injured, Khorne's blessing of warp immunity still applied. And he would be damned if he didn't make the most of it to bring down this overly hyped Sorceror!

In warp space, a large section of the waiting fleet broke off and disappeared into the eddies on an indirect path. It wouldn't do to let the Sorceror see what he was doing after all.
The thing with Slaanesh is that Chaos influence is highly restricted on Culture ships due to their internal monitoring. And outside their ships, they aren't actually doing much to raise standard of living apart from the Rogue Trader's operation.
Week 1

**Marcus, Inquisitor Lord: Ordo Hereticus, Sol Imperial Navy Division**

The Inquisitor watched the two men talk from across the restaurant. The out-system man was acting just a little suspiciously and even though Marcus was an Inquisitor Lord in Sol, he felt like he needed to keep himself in shape occasionally with an operation or two.

The Imperial Navy captain laughed and nodded at something. It was strange how he opened up to someone so completely outside the Navy rank structure so quickly. Plus a few of the... stranger arrangements that mysterious outsider had made were just a little suspicious and screamed succubi. Marcus glanced at the psyker on the other side of his own table. He was slowly eating the soup.

That meant there was a warp effect somewhere around here. Pulling out a scanner in the middle of a high class restaurant like this would attract too much attention, he needed a different test.

He tapped the bell twice and skipped a beat for the third time. His plant, a busty waitress, came over and took his order. Marcus asked for a glass of water.

A minute later, the waitress came back with two glasses. Marcus was served one and he apologized for the rudeness of taking it himself. No one saw the quick sleight of hand that dripped a large squirt of holy water into the other glass.

"Those two over there," he said, indicating the navy captain and the suspect, "they're just a little too hot. Do you think they might do with some cooling down?"

The waitress giggled and walked away, waving her hand non-chalantly. The couple at the table behind glared at him for the rude remark. Marcus ignored them, covertly watching the developments on the other side of the restaurant from the reflections on his glass of water.

The waitress walked close to their table, and suddenly and completely accidentally tripped over the hem of her own dress, sending the glass of water flying overhead and crashing onto the table with the Navy captain, neatly drenching the suspicious man with part holy-water.

Instantly, the man howled and clawed at himself as the holy water ate at his flesh. No, at one point of his forehead. The psyker on the other side of the table leaned over and whispered urgently, "I see a mark in the immaterium. That one serves the Prince of Pleasure."

That was good enough, Marcus drew his laspistol and shouted into the restaurant, "I am the Inquisitor Lord Marcus Diahn and I declare this creature," he pointed directly at the howling writhing heretic on the floor, "to be working against the will of the Emperor and with the forces of Chaos! Burn the Heretic!"

The navy captain, who was backing away in horror, drew a personal short sword. "I never knew," he began and was suddenly silenced as Marcus put a blast through his chest. Best not to let him go, the captain could be potentially corrupted by now and if it curtailed some of the more irritating Navy members, all the better. The sword and his body crashed to the floor.

The restaurant filled with screams as the patrons, nobility and lords of the Imperium, got over their shock. Then the creature on the floor screamed, high and loud, the unearthly noise shattering minds
and sending the men and women cowering in shock.

Marcus flinched as he fought to maintain control. He could not... would not lose to the Heretic! Not on the Emperor's home ground! His psyker companion leapt onto the table, the defensive warp sigils around his collar flaring to life. With a single mental thrust, a crackling bolt of warp lightning leapt across the restaurant and hit the Slaaneshi.

Instead of disintegrating into chunks, the Slaaneshi merely laughed piercingly, body distending grotesquely into the form of a lesser Daemon of the Prince, a Daemonette. Marcus nearly choked, a Daemon, here in Sol?! It was lucky that he caught it now before it could cause more trouble.

Behind the counter, the busty waitress kept low and out of sight, one hand holding a laspistol that was hidden under her dress and the other a handheld comms set, quickly and stealthily calling for backup.

The Daemonette screamed again and the Sanctioned Psyker flinched as his protections flickered under assault. The original form of the man was almost all gone, arms turning into beautiful but savage claws and talons. It made to leapt to the attack but the Navy captain groaned and swung his short sword clumsily, driving it through the lower leg.

The Daemonette whirled around and decapitated him in a stroke, the ornamental sword shattering as its warping body blew it to pieces. Marcus, now recovering from the scream, fired a salvo of laser blasts, arm steadied over the table. The Daemonette howled as it was joined by another streak of lightning and by another trio of bolts from Marcus's plant behind the counter.

It screamed again, sending all but the psyker tumbling to the ground, and poised to leapt across the room, talons ready, then a pair of Sisters of Battle came pounding into the restaurant from their patrol route, white gleaming armour smashing the door aside. Without pause, the leading sister lit up her flamer and the Slaaneshi screamed again, this time in pain.

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Sorceror

He smiled at the small blue warpflame that was the first succubus to return. Going into Sol was more or less a suicide mission, there were few to no ways of getting back out of an Inquisition infested area like that, but that didn't really matter for Daemons like them. They could reform again, in a slow and not really pleasant process.

This sacrificial piece though, was the reason why he had to give them such a big carrot. The daemonette hadn't liked the idea of wandering around Sol inside a human with an actual Mark of the Prince on their forehead until the Inquisition caught them. The point of hiding inside a person was to become undetectable. The Mark destroyed that.

It was one of the key parts of his plan though, the dice guaranteed that.

"Welcome home, you did well," he said gently, feeding it a trickle of power as it began to regenerate.

"Here is your reward, as promised," he continued, gesturing at the chamber that housed one of the captured Culture people.

"One of them for each of you, for Slaanesh to do as he wills," the Sorceror said, watching the whole chamber slowly rise upwards on the grav-crane as it was loaded into the cargo shuttle bound for the Slaaneshi fleet.

The blue flame pulsed, satisfied. The Sorceror nodded. It was good working with the lower ranked
Slaaneshis. They could follow instructions and had useful subtle talents.

Not like that Khornate, Spiky, who had up and left in a fit of temper. Well, that was partially his own fault, but Spiky wasn't being all that useful and brought all sorts of disciplinary problems in his fleet.

No, he could do without Spiky. A Khornate captain who would just turn tail and run deep into the immaterium (he couldn't find any trace of Spiky in the future paths) when insulted as the Sorceror had done to him wasn't someone the Sorceror could respect.

It didn't even affect any of his plans at all.

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Millifille
She crushed the top secret classified report paper in her hands, anger boiling. That report was from her private network, and considerably more trustable than the Inquisition version. It also was completely done on paper and so was untraceable once they were destroyed.

How dare they! The Inquisition did have their mandate and all, but to go witchhunting in the Navy without a care was beyond crazy. More than seventy cruiser and up captains had been found 'guilty' of charges of working for Chaos. A whisper at the back of her mind said that this sort of purge was the precise reason why she was here now, but she shook it off.

Many of them were promising captains Millifille was looking to incorporate to her own fleet. And they were burned right in her own backyard! It was a direct slap to the honour of the Navy.

Part of her anger, if she was willing to admit it, was driven by fear. Fear of her own life if she was also found guilty. Millifille hadn't, to her knowledge, done anything that could be construed as aiding Chaos or Xenos. Not since she was aiming to be a High Lord of Terra eventually.

But that hadn't stopped the Inquisition from removing those it didn't like. At least three of those seventy were captains she knew weren't corrupted by Chaos. The Inquisition weren't the only organization to have spies. And almost all of the seventy had at some point expressed opinions that supported the Administratum and Navy over the Inquisition in the endless bureaucratic struggle for influence.

No, they had to go. She would make plans and find allies. It would take time but Millifille was sure she would escape the purge this time. She would need to be cautious while plotting and act before the next purge, which might get her.

The door to her fleet admiral's quarters opened and the uniformed woman who entered wore the insignia of the admiral's direct assistant. Millifille sighed and tossed the report at her. The woman had proven herself to have a way with words and was quite the assistant, as proven by how quickly she had wormed her way into Millifille's employ.

Well, she was useful in talking to the lower ranks and wider Administratum, but Millifille wasn't one to not take precautions, even against one as innocent and idealist as this woman. How one managed to climb up the Navy's ranks to become a flag officer and now Defence Fleet Alpha's junior flag assistant without becoming jaded by the Imperial bureaucracy was beyond Millifille.

Then again, her seemingly god-like ability to talk her way past barriers must have played a part.

Still, Millifille had a few backup plans. Just in case she needed to dispose of a body or two.
"I have the report you wanted, madam," the woman said, holding up the clipboard, "I think I found someone. Two people actually."

That was fast. Millifille had told her to start looking for anyone who might be a potential conspirator against the Inquisition, just to get a feel for how people thought about them. But she had never expected this woman, no matter how silver-tongued, to have not one, but two, potential contacts within the space of four days!

She frowned and reached for the clipboard, "You better let me see them then, I'll need background checks and more detailed investigations. I hope one of them is from the Departmento Munitorum."

The woman blinked as she handed over the clipboard, "yes, one of them is Quonil from there. I think you know him yes?"

Millifille nodded as she glanced over the short report of sightings and associations. It might be possible to contact him by way of... she turned over the sheet of paper and nearly choked.

"Altraz from Sol Admiralty?!" she spluttered.

Her assistant smiled and nodded, "Actually, the evidence in his case is stronger. I am fairly confident that he is indeed sympathetic to your goals."

Millifille glanced down at the report. The longer description there mirrored a certain event that had unfolded in the last few days. She grinned, "well, isn't that just convenient."
Week 2
Altraz
The Admiral nodded to himself as he read the message to himself, tracing out the cipher key on the one time pad with a finger. Hmm, that was a good idea, they did indeed need additional allies if they wanted to pull this off.

Altraz was sure that the Master of the Administratum would definitely not look poorly on additional power, no one this high up would, but the reason none of them had acted was the same. The Ordo Hereticus stood ready to judge. And the acts they were thinking about could be considered treasonous all by themselves.

Well, Altraz could do with a little increase in power too, and favours would certainly come his way if he proved successful. The stumbling block was making it successful, this was a gamble which they could not afford to lose.

The Mechanicus standoff continued to drag on. The Order Xenos could not move aggressively to Mars without consequences for the rest of the Imperium. Yet, Mars likewise could not do without the Imperium either. In light of this, Mars was being incredibly secretive and unusually defiant in the face of so much threats.

Consider Mars an enemy. He planned out a potential Sol engagement in his head, no, the Mechanicus could not win against the combined Imperial Navy. So their movements make no sense. But Mars is not a stupid player, the stupid ones never make it to Sol at all, so they must have an out. A trump card. Something that makes them think they can win... or something that they are willing to risk everything for.

His eyes narrowed. They would be looking for another solution wouldn't they? That meant there was an opportunity here. He took out a sheet of paper and began transcribing a message from the cipher.

He was sure Millifille was working on her own network of contacts and he needed to be sure he was too powerful to be assailed after her move.

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Gla'mousin, Mars Central Hive Gamma-3, Magos: Cult of the Micro-Omnissiah
Gla'mousin slowly fed the sheet of paper into the recycling hopper of the little machine. Little and wondrous machine.

The Grey Knights had brought back an artifact of epic proportions, they knew not its potential. Indeed, many here on Mars did worship its power but they merely viewed it as a useful production tool. A paradigm-shifting one, true, but even they fell short of true appreciation.

Gla'mousin had been overcome with the Omnissiah's glory as he examined the nano-device. Such elegance and such flexibility! It was nothing like the scraps they had recovered from the earlier purge of scrapcode-nanopowder. This was truly the work of the Omnissiah and he knew it when he saw it.

Still, as wondrous as it was, it was as fragile and defenceless as it was dangerous. With it, just a few men could command the power of Forge Worlds. The petty Magos of the other Cults still thought in
terms of the production line and tossed rubbish around, like sacred powders to restore machine spirits, as if they were real ideas.

Gla'mousin set a burst of code to the gleaming vat of silvery liquid. The 'liquid' metal flowed and reformed, then a single laspistol, as good as the archeotech models, was deposited onto the output tray. This was the real future.

Still, it needed defences and for the time being, he could not move openly for fear of his peers. Any attempt to use the STC on a large scale was a breach of the Code; it was still being debated among the various Magos, and not even Gla'mousin would last more than a few minutes if he decided to violate it, regardless if he thought the debate necessary.

And there was the matter of the Inquisition. Ships that were conceptually invincible were not the same as ships actually in orbit able to fight. They could just as easily put a lance strike through the roof of his Hive.

This so called 'alliance of equals' proposed by the silly people in funny hats playing the game called the Imperial Navy might be irritatingly boring and mundane to Gla'mousin, but he would have to play to someone's tune if he wanted to be ready for this.

For the coming of the Omnissiah. And the rise of a certain Magos to Fabricator General.
Week 1

Carter, Inquisitor Lord, Ordo Xenos; aboard the battleship Sol's Pride, Ordo Xenos-commandeered fleet flagship

He tapped the table impatiently, as he had been doing for the past few hours. The various reports he had gotten on this new so-called "STC" were disturbing. Not even the Mechanicus were immune to infiltration although all Carter could ever get out of Mars were rumours.

Even those rumours were disturbing enough. The inner inquisitor screamed at the fools. It was xenotech! Couldn't they see it?! These tincans were too blinded by their worship of the Omnissiah to witness the Emperor's warnings in the Tarot.

The eighty or so of his brothers and sisters present in Sol had commandeered ships from the Imperial Navy. To his dismay, only those ships had responded. Well, they were technically not at war and the target WAS Mars so the Administratum were not obligated to respond, they had cause enough to question the Ordo Xenos. And even at the best of times, an Administratum investigation could take years, and they were actually dragging their feet.

The only non-commandeered ship in the Mars standoff was the Grey Knights battlebarges and armed freighters pressed into service nearly at gunpoint. With only eighty ships plus change, they were facing very bad odds against the much better armed Mechanicus fleet.

Yet Mars had not openly responded to the blatant threat of the Ordo Xenos. Carter knew it was because they didn't know who the remaining Imperial Navy ships, which was most of the firepower in Sol, would side with.

And so here Carter was, drumming his fingers to the bone with sheer boredom on an Imperial Navy ship halfway between Terra and Mars orbit after frantically running around the system intercepting the cursed Xeno's message packets.

He hoped the ongoing purge by the Ordo Hereticus among the navy would spur them to some loyalty. Or failing that, to convince the bumbling fools to actually act for the good of the Imperium at gunpoint instead of playing their power games.

Week 2

Carter unrolled the message scroll and read the one-time pad cipher in his head. A good friend from the Ordo Hereticus, Marcus, had finished his purge and the Imperial Navy had just lined up like good little children after the teacher brought out the belt.

The sensor plot of the Imperial Navy fleet divisions forming up to leave Terra orbit was gratifying. Finally, he would get to see-

"Contacts! Unidentified contacts! At Neptune warp limit, heading in-system!" sensors shouted up the bridge. Carter looked over sharply. What now?

"Count? What does CIC say?" the captain of the flagship shouted back. The flag admiral sitting at
the back of the bridge with Carter examined the greater strategic display now glowing with the yellow of unknowns.

"Incoming message from Sol Psychic Grid! Priority to all vessels! Moral Hazard detected on unknowns!" the comms officer shouted up, voice rising with hysteria. "They're Chaos!"

"Turn all communication sensors away from their direction!"

"Send a signal to the fleet," the flag admiral cut in, "all communications are to be secure beam only. Raise shields and Gellar fields, all ships to Readiness 1."

The captain of the ship echoed the order. The siren for battlestations rang out across the ship.

"CIC puts it at... thirty capital class, maybe five are battleships, and hundred and two, repeat one-oh-two, frigate or cruisers," the tactical officer's voice was strangely flat.

Carter leaned across the table, looking at the now blood-red icons of humankind's worst enemy. "Can we beat them?" he asked.

The flag admiral looked at him and nodded, "If this is all they've got, I don't see how they're going to do anything to us. We have nearly fifteen times their total firepower in the Imperial Navy alone, its pure suicide for them. And there is also the Psychic Grid to consider and all of the orbital fortresses, and the Mechanicus too. They can't even scratch our paint."

Carter considered the problem for a moment. He didn't want the Mechanicus to suddenly sprout ships heading to every nearby Forge World while they were away whacking a Chaos fleet that somehow took a wrong turn in the warp.

"How little of the fleet do you need to beat them?" he asked.

The fleet admiral considered for a moment, "This division alone could beat them flat. I'd take another division from Terra as well to be safe. We'll put the excess into a reserve as too many ships will just get in each other's way. Don't worry, I don't know who's in command over there but not even Abaddon himself could work with this big of a disadvantage."

Carter looked at the plot again, to get to the Chaos fleet and back would require a flyby of Mars if they traveled in a straight line. "I don't like how close to Mars we have to get."

The fleet admiral shrugged, "We'll have to. Unless you fancy them getting to Mars first? By their speed, they're probably just going to charge in and hope to deal as much damage as possible before they die. Honestly, I don't know what that commander is thinking, he won't even deal much damage this way. It's almost like he expects to win."

The admiral snorted.

"And we'll have to turn around and come back across Mars again, on the way back," Carter added.

The fleet admiral eyed him, "We'd have to anyway. Some of us are going to be damaged in the fighting and they'll need Mars to repair them. Unless you're proposing to ignore Mars altogether? That's as good as embargoing them, they serve the fleet!"

Carter nodded, looking at the still falling into formation (much more rapidly now) Sol defense fleet. They could get most of that fleet to take over the standoff of Mars while this fleet attacked the Chaos
intrusion with another division in reserve. Yes, that would work just nicely.

Chapter End Notes

That's a lot of random sequences of letters flying around Sol these days.
Week 1

**Spiky**

"Are you really sure about this?"

Spiky's spikes leapt up again as his irritation flared, "Yes, I am! Now get to it! The next person to ask again goes out the airlock!"

"But it's Sol! We have only 30 capital ships! This is suicide!"

"It is not!" Spiky clenched his fist. "The Sorceror is up to something in Sol and I think I know what he is doing," he let his voice travel over the fleet network, "listen up all of you maggots, I have reliable information that the Sorceror is aiming to cause the Imperium to dissolve into infighting. The Sol system is intimidating, yes, but even the biggest fortress will fall if its forces are divided!

The Sorceror thinks he is clever, that he will swoop in while the humans destroy each other. He has plans to cause the humans to fight and I have no doubt his fleet is also positioning to invade. But we will seize this victory before he does! For Khorne!"

The subordinate daemon who had asked the question looked back at him, eyes glowing, "You could just have explained earlier. "

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**Week 2**

**Sorceror**

The Sorceror grinned again at his dice. The future paths were falling into place. The pieces were set, not perfectly, but well enough. First, most of the pesky Inquisitors in Sol were going to be destroyed by their own Navy, and then the Navy and Mars weren't going to get along well.

The chaos in Sol alone would create massive opportunities around the rest of the galaxy, but the topping was that in the resulting conflict, the Sorceror foresaw a good chance for Mars to come out on top due to the Culture's technology. Better than good.

And once that conflict got started, the Sorceror would almost certainly have an opportunity to swoop in and grab it. That it would also destroy a lot of Sol's defences, although not enough to stage an assault, was just icing on the cake.

He was about to orchestrate the most damaging operation against the Imperium short of the Horus Heresy. The sheer ambition of this project, the number of strings he had to keep dancing, was stretching his abilities to the limit. But the dice sang and his puppets twirled. It was all going according to plan.

The longer the standoff continued, the more Mars was strengthened. By his calculations, the Navy would soon consolidate enough to make a move against the Inquistion and that would further stall any action from their side. Mars itself only needed one little more push, a side job for one of his subordinates in reserve...
The dice bounced oddly and suddenly the entire vision twisted. He caught a flash of an Imperial sensor plot full of red markers and missiles, of orders frantically shouted in the desperation of combat.

He looked at the strings again. No! This... this could not be! Why was Spiky in SOL of all places?! Surely even he knew that leading any force into Sol was suicide! Why had he not foreseen this?

Weren't the Khornate's defences overcome by his power? How did the hand of such a powerful figure not cross the future, not foreseen? The answer suggested itself, he hadn't actually pierced Spiky's defences. Not even superior Tzeentchian power was not enough to get through Khornate warp immunity.

But the dice did not lie even if they couldn't see Spiky. He could read the threads of others to see what Spiky would do. He could still work this in... The Sorceror looked around the future paths, casting about to see where the change would lead.

The daemons outside the private room waiting for instructions were obedient and confident in their master's plans. The howl of frustration caught them by complete surprise.

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Carter
"Main engine power back online!"
"Port side lance batteries opening fire!"

Carter watched as the remaining Chaos ships vanish back into the warp as they finally crossed the limit. The scattered wreckage and litter of damaged ships struggling to halt their built up velocity trailed out behind the Imperial fleet that was now slowing down to return to Mars.

Carter eyed the Imperial Navy division that was now hanging between Earth and Mars, could they be trusted in that role? Well, Mars hadn't done anything so it seemed like it was working.

Or not. They couldn't have this military standoff forever, eventually the Navy would need maintenance and the crew would get tired. He needed to think of a way to force Mars to give up the xenotech. The four frigates sent to capture that last one who ran away should succeed so that meant that it was only Mars he had to deal with.

Threaten them with a blockade? Sure, it was better than letting them use the xenotech and poisoning the entire Imperium, but that was extreme. Hmm, perhaps his friend Marcus had some better ideas, since Mars didn't look like it was doing anything, it could wait while he returned to Terra orbit.

Sorceror
He stalked to the bridge of the flagship, daemons scattering before his wrath. The plan was gone. The carefully balanced pieces, meant to scatter the Imperium into three internal warring factions within the next two months, was completely destroyed. Mars could not win, the conflict had come too soon.

All because of Spiky. That one ill-timed attack had given the Imperial Navy the perfect opportunity and the conflict was going to start now.
"You little Khornate bastard, I'll get you if you haven't already died to the humans," he snarled.

**Millifille - Temporary Assignment, Sol Defense Reserve A**

She watched the plot carefully as they approached the critical point. The fleet out watching Mars was well in hand and the Admiral there wouldn't interfere.

This opportunity was nearly perfect. Even if they were short a few more agreements, Millifille was quite certain that most of the Navy was already at the ready and on their ships, reasonably secure from the groundside Inquisitors.

"Point Alpha, madam," the new tactical officer said, careful not to look at the bloodstains of the previous officer splashed across the deck. She had run a small purge of the known Inquisition spies in the last hour after ensuring that the comms officer was in her pocket. The tactical officer wasn't one of them but the clear deviation had flushed out the two others she hadn't identified.

Right now, she was the undisputed master of this ship, and she hoped, this fleet.

"Are we really going to do it?" the flag captain asked her.

"Yes, Case Wolf in Sheep's Clothing please," she nodded to him.

"Aye," he turned back to the deck, "designate targets A-1 to 142 as hostile and update the fleet. Obtain a firing solution and prepare the packet to Admiralty for burst transmission."

The siren for general quarters sounded again for the second time.

"Yes captain, CIC designating targets. Done."

"Targeting solutions packet transmitted to Ar Lune PDC."

**Carter**

"Sir!"

The fleet admiral looked up as the comms officer address the flag captain of the Inquisition fleet. They were even calling it that now.

"The division B, the reserve fleet just burst transmitted something to Ar Lune fortress."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, sir," the comms officer leaned over the console, as if trying to eke more information out of the display, "but it's huge and in code. Non-standard encryption. If I had to guess, sir, it's a fleet firing solution."

"Really?" the fleet admiral stood up, looking directly at Carter. He sighed. "Well, I guess that's that then."

"What happened?" Carter asked him.

The admiral sighed and suddenly drew a laspistol, pointing it at Carter, "This happened."

Carter didn't even blink. There was already three other pistols pointed at the man. One of them from
the flag captain and two from Carter's assistants. He was surprised to see the tactical officer surreptitiously putting away his laspistol. So there were people supporting this fleet admiral after all. Too bad it looked like they were too cowardly.

"You are committing treason, admiral," he said calmly, "You will not survive this."

"None of us will," the man sighed, "comms, send a message to the reserve fleet. 'We die for the cause'."

"Belay that!" the flag captain shouted.

"Message sent, sir!" the comms officer said defiantly. The flag captain snarled and whirled around, firing his laspistol at the officer. He collapsed midway through a salute towards the Imperial flag.

**Millifille**

"Message from target A-3, 'We die for the cause'."

"Designate A-3 as priority target, I want it dead when we fire," Millifille said, her flag captain nodding at her.

"CIC updating firing solutions, done."

"You may open fire, captain."

**Altraz**

"Sir! Multiple targeting signatures! Division B is targeting division A!"

Altraz nodded, wiping the blood off his ceremonial sword with a cloth. He hadn't expected to have to use this but who would have thought that his own personal butler would be in the pay of the Inquisitors. It was good that they were getting rid of them.

"Open up our wide-band sensors. Go active on everything and get the lock on them as fast as possible!" he shouted back.

"Targeting division A!"

"Message from division A-3, 'We die for the cause', Sir!"

Altraz shadowed his face with his cap. Brave of him to do that. Well, it would make things simpler.

"Retarget every weapon that can reach onto target A-3! I want it dead as fast as you can manage it!"

"Firing solutions... updated. Lance batteries, fired!"

A hundred spears of light reached up from Lunar's surface, stabbing out into the blackness of space where they intersected with a proud and old battleship. The aging ship's shields withstood the onslaught for a second, two, and then failed. Holes were blasted in its armour, bulkheads blown clear through. Entire corridors and sections blew out into space under the massive salvo.

Still the ship fought on. It was built well and to take impossible levels of punishment and still fight on. Its first reactor failed gracefully and its engines fought against the rotation imparted by escaping atmosphere and venting gases. Then suddenly, from the other side, more lances arrived, much
weaker than the monstrous lasers of the ground-side installation but they were from much closer and targeted more cleanly. They blew off communications arrays, sensors, weapon hardpoints, attitude thrusters and raked through the open wounds left by the first set. The ship slowly started to spin, blinded and half its weapons gone, but still incredibly dangerous. Then behind them were sprays of metal from macro-cannons and then immediately after, bright streaks of incoming missile engines. The outer hull vanished in a firestorm of explosions then even they were overshadowed as the third reactor finally gave up and went critical. The huge hulk vanished into a ball of plasma.

"Sensors report target A-3 destroyed!"

"We have surrender requests from ten... no, nine ships."
"Designate them neutral. Lower priority for the ship that just stopped its surrender signals," Altraz said. It was unlikely that even if the Inquisition managed to do away with the original captains that the ship, a light cruiser, might pose much of a threat.

Millifille's fleet was winning handily with their prow cannons pointed directly at the Inquisition fleet's vulnerable rears. Most of the fleet was maneuvering independently, the flagship having been so cleanly punched out in the opening phases. Then Altraz's fortress cannons completed their firing cycle and another hundred lances stabbed upwards.

Millifille's fleet rotated to present broadsides, the wall of more than a hundred ships firing a deadly hail onto the decimated fleet. Comms requests were flying thick and heavy but Altraz ignored them.

"Incoming! We have Grey Knights battlebarges incoming!"

Altraz cursed. He had forgotten about them! "Can we shoot them down? Request aid from Millifille!"

"Request sent!"
"Drop pod separations! We have Space Marines incoming!"

Point defence batteries flickered to life, pouring macrocannon fire out of concealed positions. A few droppods vanished into dust showers and the rest veered away on internal thrusters.

"Unable to intercept! They're landing too far away!"

Altraz gritted his teeth. He had come too far to be stopped here by the Space Marines. "Target the battlebarges with all lance batteries! Forty lances per barge! Fire until they are all destroyed! Ground teams get into defensive position!"

"One-oh-four... one-five-one... one-seventy pods landed! By the Emperor! They're landing everyone!"

"Battlebarge breaking up!"
"Inquisition fleet count down to thirty-five, repeat, three-five!"
"Comms request from Defense Base Beta! Commander O'Brien wants to speak to you!"

"Put him through!" Altraz shot back.

The all-too familiar face of his archrival appeared on the viewscreen. "You seem to be in some
trouble," the man said, as if the world wasn't already going crazy. That man certainly had one of the best views, stationed at the top of the tall cliff just behind Altraz's base.

"What is it? I am busy," Altraz snapped back, the man's relaxed attitude belied his wickedly cunning mind but it never failed to make Altraz irritated. It annoyed him and if it wasn't for the motivation of wiping that smug smile off his face, Altraz might never have made it this far up the hierarchy aiming to be his superior.

"I believe I have a debt to repay," O'Brien said, picking at his fingernails.

"Energy signature from PDC beta! They're powering up lance batteries!"

"I'll consider us even now," O'Brien nodded back and cut the connection.

The memory of the flames rose up again and Altraz narrowed his eyes. What was O'Brien doing? Altraz had saved the man from a narrow death by Inquisition, gunning down the informer just before she managed to send the incriminating evidence against both of them, but even he wasn't sure what he was thinking back then. Why didn't he just let O'Brien take the fall for both of them? It would certainly have helped a lot in the ensuing inquiry.

And what was O'Brien doing with his anti-space batteries? Battlebarges had nothing on Altraz's cannons, he could handle them himself.

O'Brien's gambit became clear as the first of the Space Marines crested the nearby ridge. The anti-ship lance battery fired directly at them, throwing up lunar dust and vapourized marine into space, gouging a huge slanted streak across the moon's surface.

Altraz felt the ground tremor as the shock front reached them.

"Ground team in sector 4, no contact!" Damn, they must have been caught in the edge of the strike.

"Sectors 3 to 7 and 14 to 21, fall back to safe areas!" he shouted.

"Sector 8 engaging the enemy! Grey Knight Space Marines confirmed! Taking heavy casualties!"

The ground shook again as the lance battery ripple-fired another salvo.

"Sector 8, no contact!"
"Battlebarge destroyed! Three remaining targets! Lance strike in sector 12!"
That tremor was far less strong.

Altraz shouted another set of retreat orders, watching the ground plot resolve itself.

"Incoming missiles!" the tactical officer shouted up.

"What?" Altraz looked up to the space plot, "they're from Millifille's fleet! What the heck?"

"Point defence batteries powering up, we lost sector 23 to enemy action!"

"Stand down point defence," Altraz said, fighting all his instincts that were screaming at him. There were missiles heading to his base!
"Sir?!"

"Stand down all point defence," Altraz repeated. He prayed he was not about to find out Millefille had decided to betray him now. It would destroy the trust their two webs of contacts had with each other and end all chance of the Navy working together afterwards.

"Sir..." he glared at the tactical officer, "... Sir! Yes, Sir! Standing down point defence!"

The salvo of twenty atomic warheads sailed down past the last of the battlebarges and the entire right side of Altraz's base where the Space Marines had landed disappeared into a nuclear fireball.

Chapter End Notes

The Sorceror missed seeing Spiky.
Spiky was wrong about the Sorceror.
Carter underestimated the heresy in the Imperial Navy and pushed them a bit too far.

Basically, everyone is trying to predict what the other guys are planning to do and they're all wrong.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 3

**Sorcerer**

He pondered his options, slowly roasting a Nurgle daemon with a small warp fire spawned from his simmering anger. There was no point trying to make Mars win any more. The ship at Wolf 359 might be a better target than Sol despite the craziness going on over there.

The Imperial Navy was going to strengthen their grip and the Administratum was looking likely to be the side that was going to come out on top.

He banged the table again in frustration, knowing it was useless. The two Slaaneshis still inside the Imperial Navy would likely give in to their impulses soon. Maybe even in a short few weeks time. He couldn't use them to influence Imperial movements.

How had that Spiky managed to bypass his future sight? Was Tzeentch getting displeased at his meteoric rise in power? The Sorceror thought for a moment, that might actually be possible. The other sorcerors of Tzeentch were keeping their fingers scrupulously out of his pie after he burnt a few hands off, but perhaps this flaw had come from above.

If he wanted to regain Tzeentch's favour, he would need an even bigger and more complex plan. Or perhaps just more ambitious.

The Sorceror glanced at the concept map displaying his assets and vulnerabilities, something he always made when he got stuck on a problem. Two slaaneshi daemons in the Imperial Navy. Captured Culture agents and a few of those fast but useless ships still being refitted with warp engines. A large Tzeenchian fleet and at least four Chaos groups owed him favours.

His eyes narrowed. There might just be something he could do...

He stood up and shouted a warp coordinate. There were preparations to be made. Fine, he had lost this round, but he would be back for more.

**Millifille**

She watched the Hive on Terra's surface vanish into a rain of shattered rock under the lance strike. The Ordo Hereticus might scurry around trying to strike back, but if the Navy was in outright rebellion, together with half the Sisters of Battle, and most of the Imperial Guard declaring their neutrality by "going on a tour of duty to Sol's outer reaches"... there was little the Inquisitors could do.

Oh, they were dangerous all right, but with most of the Administratum uncooperative or outright looking to hunt them down, they were practically no more than very dangerous terrorists.

It helped alot that a number of the Ordo Malleus had already seen the eventual victory of the Administratum's side and had pledged to only serve to purge the Imperium of the Chaos threat. The Inquisition, what remained that was still recognized by the Administratum, had lost alot of influence. There were going to be limits on the Inquisitor's powers!
When she thought of how much they had achieved in such a short space of time, she wondered how exactly they had managed it. True, the Imperial Navy and Guard held the majority of the combat power in Sol and in the Imperium, but the Inquisition was... the Inquisition. For all their brutality and high-handedness, one was careful never to cross them.

She knew now that it was essentially the Inquisition itself that had prevented the very sort of coordination that Millifille and Altraz and Quonil had arranged. They purposely cut links between agents of power and prevent collusion.

But for all their efforts, thanks to one... one... Millifille paused. Who was that she was thinking of? Had anyone even helped her contact Altraz? She didn't remember that. Hm.

The train of thought was suddenly boring and she put it aside. There were more pressing matters, like the issue of what to do about Mars.

Gla'mousin
He watched the Fabricator General talk about the sovereignty of Mars again and sighed. This standoff was still going on and it didn't look like it would end any time soon.

The Fabricator General might think he could outlast the Imperium, and Gla'mousin would indeed give him a better than half chance of doing so after the mess the Imperial Navy had made of the Sol system, what with the total destruction of Demios around Titan, the blockade of Titan itself and much of the destruction on Terra and Lunar caused by the witchhunt for the Inquisition.

That said, if they did press the issue, they could probably wipe out all of the Mechanicus fleet around Mars and force Mars to surrender under threat of Exterminatus. It would cause most of the Imperium to break up though as all the Forge Worlds would revolt and besides, who would pick up the pieces after this?

But the Fabricator General winning out was not something Gla'mousin was looking forward to. The man's standing could only increase if he succeeded in facing down the Imperial Navy and that would be bad for Gla'mousin's chances at pushing through the approval of this STC constructor. Not to mention making it impossible for him to take the shoes of the Fabricator General.

No, what was needed was a suitable twisty diplomacy.

Millifille - Flagship Sol's Pride, Acting Representative of the Administratum
"... the rest of the Mechanicus will never stand for this! Who will service your ships and supply your materials if we don't?"

Millifille ignored the message, calmly stated but the lack of novel content in the last three days had made it clear that the Fabricator General was merely stalling for time.

They were in a staring match and no clear winner was yet in sight. She had parked her ships in high orbit around Mars, virtually englobing the Mechanicus fleet with walls of battle consisting of virtually every battle-ready Navy vessel in Sol.

Still, it wasn't like there weren't workings going on under the scenes. Encrypted communications were flying around Sol like snow fell on a cold Martian winter. One of them was addressed to her, and she had a good feeling this was about to break the stalemate.
From Magos Gla'mousin to Administratum Representative Millifille
Your proposal is acceptable with the following terms:
The Administratum are willing to support and enforce my position as Fabricator General
The Imperial Navy will guarantee Mar's monopoly on technology, especially the new STC constructor.

Millifille, now one of the more influential Navy captains (indeed, she was only two steps below the Lord Commander Militant of the I.G. in influence; and essentially 2nd most powerful in the Imperial Fleet below Altraz) and temporarily deciding the fate of humanity, nodded to herself. Those were quite reasonable terms.

She tapped the encrypted channel a few times and waited for the two second round trip for the affirmative reply.

"Open a channel to the Fabricator General, no encryption," she said to the comms officer and then turned to the tactical officer, "Case Hammer please."

The officer paused for a moment then nodded. The vast Imperial fleet began to shift subtly in their orbits.

"What is the meaning of your movements, Admiral?" the angry machine man appeared on the screen, mechadendrites gesturing at the plot.

"Why, just a little reminder of our relative positions," she said quite gaily, "I mean, I wouldn't want anyone to have a misunderstanding."

She leaned forward, suddenly very serious, "Mars will stand down its fleets and surrender to the Imperial Navy in thirty minutes. Otherwise, I will order my ships to open fire."

The machine man blinked. He actually blinked. "You would go that far? You realize that you are destroying the majority of industry in the region. Who will maintain your fleets?"

"Comms request from... Magos Gla'mousin, madam, he's signalling to join the conversation," the comms officer looked up at her.

She nodded and another machine man appeared in a side window. Helpful name labels kept them identified. Millifille wondered idly how these Mechanicus people managed to tell each other apart.

"Gla'mousin, what is the meaning of this?" the Fabricator General asked.
"Why, I am declaring that my Hive Gamma-3 will support the Imperial Navy. In the event that disagreements arise, my services will remain available."

Millifille couldn't detect any trace of humour or smugness in that flat voice. Still, she better speak up, the Fabricator General looked like he was about to suffer a malfunction.

"I thank you for your support. The Imperial Navy will endeavor to assure your safety. Fabricator General," they looked at her as she said in a sharp tone, indicating to the comms officer to change it to a broadcast communication, "I am hereby placing Hive Gamma-3 under Imperial Navy protection. Any ship or base firing on it will be engaged and destroyed."
The channel went back to tightbeam.

Gla'mousin nodded once, "I thank you."

The Fabricator General looked at them for a moment, "One hive is insufficient. Your problem remains the same."

"I think your data is inaccurate, Fabricator General," Gla'mousin stood aside, gesturing at a large vat of strangely gleaming metallic liquid. "How much of this was I given two weeks ago?"

The Fabricator General merely remained silent.

"I was provided with 1 gram. There are twenty tons of metal here. A twenty million times ratio in 2 weeks. I am sure you can do the calculations to obtain its replication rate and how long it will take this vat alone to replace the entire production capability of Mars."

His voice rose slightly, "You underestimate the glory of the Omnissiah. Of the most holy artifact ever found in our Quest. This IS an STC constructor."

Millifille had to remember how to breathe. Reading about it in an encrypted note and having it declared openly by a Magos were completely different. Even though she had guess what the vat was, it still took her breath away.

"You are crazy," the Fabricator General replied. Was that a quiver in his voice she heard? "The Mechanicus has not confirmed it. You do not know it is safe. Have you forgotten the fate of those who see the Omnissiah too readily?" his voice definitely rose in anger there.

Millifille pressed the silence stud, shutting off her mike and speakers, turning to her flag captain. She would need to act first before he managed to kill her co-conspirator. "Fire Plan Alpha, now," she waited for his nod before removing her finger.

"... I declare you a heretic and an outcast-" the two expressionless machine men suddenly turned away from whatever they used as communications. She heard the warning sirens of firing lock detectors before the Fabricator General cut his channel. The encryption came back on for the Magos Gla'mousin.

"One thanks the Admiral for support," he said formally, "the Mechanicus will return the favour."

Millifille nodded, "As partners do."

Gla'mousin
"As partners do," he echoed her.

He watched the Mechanicus fleet trying to get into position to intercept the massive missile launch from what must have been every single tube in the Imperial Navy fleet. The Mechanicus fleet's effort wasn't going to be enough.

He mentally opened a channel that went through the land lines to every other Hive on Mars. A meeting of all the Magos including the Fabricator General.

"Your mistake," he signaled to his soon-to-be removed rival, deliberately sharing his cybernetic eyes' vision.
The vat bubbled once and a small but highly detailed metallic hat was deposited onto the output tray. A complete replica of the same hat that the Fabricator General wore.

The Magos Gla'mousin picked it up. The gathered Magos watched him in a heavy silence.

"Witness the greatness of the Omnissiah, Fabricator General," Magos Gla'mousin lifted it slowly and gently rested it on his head.

"You will not get away with this! The other Magos will not accept-"

The explosions of atomic warheads and cyclonic torpedoes cut him off. Fabricator General Gla'mousin permitted himself a small smile.

"Does anyone wish to join him?"

Chapter End Notes

Scale reminder regarding the vat of nanobots: Twenty tons of iron is only a cube about 2.5 meters across

EDIT: I was writing Gla'mousin to be a more cowardly and ruthless person but he somehow turned into a badass at the end.

From there, I think it's obvious what happens next so I won't bother to write that. On to Wolf 359 tomorrow!
The Wolf 359 Incident

Week 2
Magos Tife, Cult of the Micro-Omnissiah, Acting Captain of the Archaeologist, Sword Class Frigate (Mechanicus)
Tife rubbed his chin with a mehadendrite, the microdendrites on its end efficiently shaving his chin.

That he still retained much of his organic body spoke volumes about his position in the Mechanicus but Tife wasn't much bothered by that. As long as he had the suitable mental implants and the basic set of mehadendrites he was happy.

Tife was known for being weird like that. Among other things.

The Sword class Frigate had taken a turn in the warp, his Navigator screaming about going dangerously close to an eddy current. Sure enough, the chasing Inquisition commanded ships had followed him and unlike his ship, they had to only rely on Navigators instead of having the best in augmenting equipment. They got lost.

The Archaeologist dropped out of warp at Wolf 359, a deserted little star system with nothing but a bunch of metallic asteroids.

Tife hadn't spent the last week in the warp doing nothing however, apart from attempting to shake his pursuers, he had been examining the STC constructor with fervent dedication.

"Which system should we go to next, Magos?" the officer in charge of the helm asked him.

Tife shook his head, "we're not going anywhere. Our instructions were to wait here for further communications from Mars for the next two weeks. We only proceed to Glavia if we do not receive instructions."

"But Magos, we cannot hold off four Firestorm frigates even if they are from the Imperial Navy! They will eventually work their way out of the warp and follow us here."

Tife nodded. But instructions were instructions, he had to carry it out. After all, his habit of being... unconventional was precisely why he had decided to take some of the STC constructor out of Mars.

"All right, they won't make it out of the Warp soon right?" he looked at the Navigator, who nodded and said, "probably not in the next two weeks."

Tife thought for a moment, "Good, then we might have enough time. Can you bring us to a metallic asteroid? Find one with the most metal in it."

He turned around to the engineering officer, "We have a pinnace yes? Get that ready, I will need to visit the asteroid."

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Tife watched from the pinnace as one of the frigate's lasers slowly aimed carefully at the asteroid and fired once. The shower of rapidly cooling rock shot out and slowly revealed the short tunnel dug by the laser. The glint of a iron-nickel lode winked out at him.
Tife nodded at the pilot and the pinnance approached the asteroid, the large engineering team waiting with a heap of spare parts and trace metals from the engineering bay. As well as a small gleaming metal container.

When he came back out of the short tunnel, they set up a radiation shield facing the weak sun from spare hull plates then the Archaeologist sped off to a different asteroid.

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Week 3, Day 4

"Warp signatures, range one light minute!" the sensor officer reported, "CIC calls it 4 frigate class. It's them, Magos."

Tife tsked, they were here a little early. He would have like a bit more time. Well, the warp was unpredictable anyway so he had indeed taken precautions.

"General Quarters, please," he nodded as the siren turned on, "open a channel to them. Message begins,"

He adjusted his mehadendrites back into formal position and said clearly, "The Mechanicus have given me instructions to defend myself against all aggressors. This includes firing on Imperial Navy vessels."

One minute later, the reply came back, the Inquisitor on the other end stating calmly, "Our orders are to secure your surrender and seize your ship. I have four frigates under my command, do you think you can prevail at such bad odds? You have 10 minutes to stand down and abandon ship or you will be destroyed."

Tife adjusted his mehadendrites a little, "You are welcome to try," and cut the connection.

The Inquisition ships started to build a closing vector and Tife turned his ship around, as if to run. Then, the Inquisition ships hot on his tail, he passed by the set of three asteroids he previously prepared.

The holes and radiation shields were planted to face away from the expected line of approach and in any case, in the 10 minutes since they arrived, the STC constructor had demolished the radiation shields into metal powder.

The frigates sailed past the triangle of three asteroids and the missiles the STC constructor had been busy fabricating the last few days suddenly powered up, flying out of the hole he had so carefully bored into the asteroids' surfaces.

More than one hundred missiles, of archaeotech quality with self-guidance packages and IFF recognition. Sure, they might only have kinetic penetrators but that was more than enough to cause quite some havoc.

Tife sipped a small vial of soylent casually, grinning as he imagined the panic that must be happening on the four frigates.

The swarm of missiles descended onto the frigates, which were frantically trying to turn as fast as possible. As the missiles struck and shields and armour shredded under the onslaught, Tife's own
ship fired at their now exposed backs.

Two frigates lost their engines in the space of a scant two minutes, shooting past Tife's ship helplessly as their velocity swept them along. Then just before Tife's ships lost its shields, the leading Inquisitor's frigate blew up as his more powerful lasers finally pierced its powercore.

The last ship powered down its engines and shields, spewing lifepods in all directions. Tife waved to his tactical officer, "Cease fire. The battle is over."

Sitting back down in his captain's chair, he took a few moments to finish his soylent before ordering the crew to cleanup the debris and rescue whoever was still alive. After all, the hard part was over, someone else could pick up the pieces.
End of Year 1
With the new Minimum Necessary Interference policy, the Culture decide to limit themselves to the Tau embassy and their system guards are programmed to avoid engagement with Tau and Culture vessels but otherwise are left to Tau command.

Year 2 Month 1
The current Ethereal leadership suffer a major shakeup as one of the eldest and most respected finally succumbs to old age. His replacement is widely considered to be a less cautious and more daring character, but also a brilliant leader.

Tau engineers work out the basic principles of intelligence engineering with the Culture's guidance. The Culture's assessment is that they can avoid the possibility of an AI hard takeoff and thus are willing to provide help as long as the possibility of this is on a long time frame.

Month 2
Commander Farsight makes off with a set of drone and Earth caste defectors from the main empire. Crucially, he appears to have heavily concentrated his recruitment efforts on the scientists involved in intelligence research.

The Tau are confused at Farsight's actions, which could be deemed a case of hostile spying. Farsight himself remains unavailable for comment.

For political reasons, the Tau have kept this information from the Culture, but the Culture get an inkling that tension between the Tau main empire and the Farsight colonies have risen.

Month 3
Farsight's engineers build a true artificial intelligence with the intellectual capability of a Tau scientist. Farsight does not inform the Tau empire of this.

More pressingly, the Tau war with Macragge is bogging down. The Tau are technologically superior in every respect and they are winning their battles handily. However, there are just too little Tau and too much IoM. Commander Farsight is not participating in this battle, his fleets, which have not enjoyed the same level of Tau technological and doctrinal improvements (although he does have some of the Culture-provided ones), are purely defensive. The IoM leave him alone as they are busy handling the main thrust of the conflict, where the Tau are trying to punch straight to Macragge in an attempt to end the war quickly.

Month 4
The artificial intelligence programmed by Farsight is finally stable. Built along similar principles to a Tau drone, Farsight is confident that any such drones are loyal to the Tau as a whole.
A trial production of these drones, which have full citizen status, begins.

Month 5
The IoM war drags on. The Tau fail to reach Macragge but deal a major blow to IoM forces in three
key battles. Tau casualties are rising as the IoM slowly begins to change tactics in response, but they are still small compared to the IoM's. A small relative loss however, is still large for the Tau. It represents a major part of their fighting force.

Farsight's drones build and run a drone production chain, operating everything from mineral mining to power generation to equipment maintenance. Drone numbers begin to rise exponentially.

The first Fire Caste model drone is made by Farsight's researchers.

Month 6
Tau main empire expert systems that have been improved through extensive work after the loss of their major expertise suggests a new model of strategy and improvements that begin to regain the Tau momentum in the IoM war.

Farsight's researchers are joined by the first Earth Caste research model drone.

Month 7
Farsight's drone count stands at 16 thousand. Further research into intelligence engineering suggests a method to create fluid networks that blur the drones' identities and intelligences. While they retain individuality, they share experiences and memories with greater accuracy and bandwidth than Tau can confer by conversation or even VR.

The Tau finally managed to reach Macragge. Unlike their previous conquests, they shell the Ultramarines into the ground, deeming the danger too great for their ground forces, before landing ground forces. The only remaining Ultramarines are those with the defence fleets, which is actually most of them.

Month 8
Farsight's drone count is now 230 thousand. A Culture surveillance drone picks up signs of the increasing network communications, which has been growing faster than the drone count has. A side investigation into Farsight's activities begins but the majority of the Culture's efforts are still in reducing the impact of the war.

Month 9
Farsight's drone researchers make a major breakthrough in intelligence engineering.

Improvement of algorithms increases drone associative memory and speed manyfold, which effectively makes a new-model drone more intelligent than any Tau.

In their mission to help the Tau as programmed, the drones decide to exercise their "right" as citizens to secede just as Farsight has done. Farsight, seeing that he is losing control, agree to allow the drones to create their new-model drone to prevent them from seceding.

The IoM, contrary to Tau expectations, continue to battle it out. The loss of Macragge has not resulted in the loss of leadership and the IoM's numbers continue to swell as reinforcements pour in from adjacent sectors. The Culture still continue to watch and wait.

Month 10
The drone research labs discover how to use hyperspace by testing a captured Necron device. Further improvements in algorithms improve their hierarchical deductive capabilities and their problem solving and organization abilities rise rapidly. Drone run organizations are more efficient
and require less work than Tau run ones.

Faster than light communications are instantly put to use to improve drone intelligence and high bandwidth low latency intersystem networks become possible.

To a large extent, Farsight and the Tau no longer understand what the drones are doing. The drones act too fast and too efficiently. By the time the Tau have read one report of new asteroids being prospected for minerals, it is already being mined. Drone count is almost 10 million. The first all-drone battleship is launched.

The remote surveillance the Culture has been using to investigate Farsight immediately picks up the use of hyperspace technology and a GCU is diverted to investigate.

Month 10.5
The GCU uncovers the drone numbers explosion and determines that an AI hard takeoff has occurred. The drone networks do detect the GCU’s arrival and determine that the Culture are too powerful to face head-on.
The Culture negotiates with the drone networks as independent from the Tau. Like one of their prior experiences, they understand that while the drones are nominally looking out for the Tau, their goals are not exactly what the Tau want.

Following the negotiations, the drone networks collectively agree that the drones should either aim to become a full-fledged separate entity with a close alliance to the Tau or subsume into Tau culture. Most choose the former, some choose the latter.

*Time Skip*
Year 3, Month 4
After multiple disastrous battles, the Tau finally exhaust the IoM within a large radius. They are unable to claim much more than twice the size of the Tau empire stably and have decided that they will have to leave the IoM alone where they cannot reach.

The drones played a large part in this result. After the TMI (Tau Machine Intelligences) space-borne civilization is inaugrated as close allies of the Tau, with Culture mediation, TMI fleets have taken the burnt of the casualties in the war as they force the IoM into one battle to the death after another without regard for the cost. The TMI has production power in excess of the Tau empire by this time, not being restrained by the number of skilled workers and soldiers due to the rapid production of intelligence.

The Tau have not expressed a desire to expand beyond their currently held territories as controlling humans is proving harder than expected. The TMI has thus aligned itself with their efforts and military production is scaled back to defensive mode.

The Culture begin preparing for a new Tau offensive once their assimilation is complete. Whether the Culture will back that new expansion or cut it short remains to be seen, depending on how well the Tau handle their new human populations. The TMI knows this and intensive research into the warp and Culture ethics (which align suprisingly well with the Tau's) begins as the TMI hope to prove themselves as worthy to be equals.

Chapter End Notes
Just a short little thing to get back to being used to writing this.

Nothing too imaginative, just trying to stay close to what each side would have done.
Shiroki
"Forgive me, Sister, your practices are considerably different from ours. It seems that my vision has come to pass after all."

He watched the effector readouts and video with a careful eye. Pulse, blood pressure, skin conductivity. All that data was fed through an IoM-normed non-sentient inference engine.

Shiroki continued to talk as the fake persona and the Sister conversed about their faith and about their troubles. Faking faith was easy, they had access to the entire of the Culture's records from across the entire galaxy and what errors on his part (or her misconceptions) could patched over with his claim of being from the future.

The thrill of almost breaking the prohibition on mind-reading (despite the explicit permission, most of the Culture still viewed deliberate mind-reading as taboo) was shared with a glance between Shiroki and Tsubasa. The little drone processed the data, while Shiroki did the talking.

They had normed their responses in every statistic in the Culture's vast database of human behaviour. Gender, age, social theory, tension, wariness, and countless others. It was safe to say that even among it's vast spread, he had her pinned down to a statistical category that would include less than 10 other people in the entire Imperium.

It was nearly as good as actually reading her mind.

Chesa
The Cannoness Preceptor was not happy. Chesa had dutifully reported her discussion of theology with the Sister from the future and the Cannoness had simply looked down at the table for a long while before telling Chesa that she would hear more about it later.

Today, a man with a broken leg from a collapsing tunnel beam died. His wound had become gangrenous before he had been sent to Chesa. For all her medical knowledge, all Chesa could do was pray. The antibiotics were gone since last week.

The man's wife had to be escorted from the room after she made a fuss and then attempted to assault Chesa. Chesa had merely took the beating without saying a word. After all, it was her fault for not having enough faith to heal the man.

The Cannoness later told her that she was to continue talking to the Sister from the future. It still wasn't clear that it was a vision, and talking theology wasn't enough to say if the Sister could lie. Personally, Chesa was confident that the future Sister was faithful, no one could know so much about the Sisters' theology and fail to see the Emperor's light.

That night, they discussed medicine and how to make do with as little as possible.

Shiroki
Shiroki tried to avoid facepalming again. The Sister was supremely bad at understanding the idea of
triage. To think she had been treating patients on a first come first serve basis without regard for what supplies she had left!

Tsubasa shot up a new piece of information. That was interesting.

"Please wait... I..." the vision swam a bit and then solidified, "The Emperor sees your plight. I sense help and relief. You will receive aid soon."

Shiroki watched Chesa converse a bit with the "future Sister" as he remained vague about the details.

The Mechanicus had finally managed to get some medical equipment through the worst of the Administratum bureaucracy. It was a perfect chance to demonstrate some "predictive ability".

Chapter End Notes

Mind-reading without actually mind-reading.
Rogue Trader

Culture
Growth the company's network continues to increase in a smooth exponential curve. Circumstantial manipulation of the company's workflow and personnel movements according to the finite-element social model has improved the quality of interaction within the company by another 20%. Efficiency and employee loyalty is radically higher than the IoM baseline around it.

The intra-company trade between branches in different systems has finally completed a full vertical monopolization. The company has branches in nearly every sector of industry, from mining to capital production to food and services. Delivery of the first three support ships and internal production of another fifteen has allowed the company to have significant internal ship production, even without the use of the nanobots. So far, we have managed to conceal the full reach of the company from the planetary governors as many branches are supposed rivals of the main corporate identity and the mobile shipyards are distributed throughout the sector and kept separate.

The company's capital production is also continuing along standard exponential progression, the focus to increasing the capital base as well as improving logistics with the company's own internal communications and shipping lines has already resulted in a general increase in standard of living. We have noted that the company's reputation for reliability and low cost has reduced the total stock of goods held by partners, they prefer to save on warehouse space and rely on smaller frequent deliveries. Shops, factories and even hospitals no longer have shortages, crime rates are down to an all-time low and ex-convicts are being rehabilitated by the various prison initiative programs.

To a large extent, this has not required an active instruction from us. Many of these actions originated in the increased initiative and spirit that the company's training program instills, as well as a few chance meetings to nudge things along where required. Less and less overt intervention has been required and the decrease towards the projected maintenance level has been proceeding within models.

The mandate to put market penetration over profit has paid off well and the company directly or indirectly influences more than 60% of the total sector economy. It, together with subsidiaries and trusted partners (non-Culture but similar enough that we have extended our influence over them), employs nearly 30% of the sector's population and provides more than 50% of the total goods and services produced.

The Rogue Trader Seb Snakewick continues to move throughout the sector as the company's political front. We have consulted with him over the Inquisitor and he is avoiding the man as far as possible. Three systems no longer require any political front as most of the political system has been compromised and the governors hold a very favourable view of the company. Another seven systems are already proceeding along the same path and are expected to reach that status within ten weeks.

To a large extent, the company has grown large enough that it is effectively an independent sub-economy of the sector. One that can and will continue to operate despite whatever the Rogue Trader or planetary governors can do.

Work on reducing reliance on techpriests and achieving true independence from external factors will
be placed into the main focus. A number of suitable techpriests who have been enticed to defect are
expect to form the knowledge core which will be spread secretly to internal engineers.

Chapter End Notes

The Culture using economic soft power. At this point, despite them not knowing it, most
of the IoM's political systems in the area are mostly irrelevant. The company has so
much influence that trying to take it down without resorting to force (and sometimes
even then) will result in political disaster. Too many people, including nobles and
important people, rely on the company's economic strength. Especially since the company moves blindingly fast compared to the usual IoM political
system.

3 months is more than enough when you have "chance" to back your company. =P
Miltor - Total population: 100 million
"Please sign here."

He scribbled something illegible on the dotted line.

"Thank you very much. Seb Transstellar welcomes you aboard."

Meru picked up the HR folder as the last of this batch of recruits completed their forms and were shuttled off to basic training.

How long ago was it that she had first started this job? Meru had never really been able to hold a job before, despite her fluency in language and good work ethic. She simply wasn't well-connected nor did she have the intellectual ability to become a techpriest. Being a Sister didn't appeal to her and none of the smaller commercial ventures were even doing anything more than replacing their staff.

True opportunities like this job were rare as diamonds.

At least until Seb Transstellar had opened an office here. Meru jumped on the chance like so many others and somehow, the Emperor had smiled on her that day. Now... job opportunities seemed to be growing like mushrooms. Seb Transstellar had gone from a dinky little ten person branch to a full fledged corporate skyscraper with a staff of over a thousand office workers, not to say the armies of technicians and weakly affiliated contractors.

She blushed a little as she remembered the off-planet manager at her interview, now the boss of the HR department. Meru shook herself, she could let her mind wander when she was back in her apartment, in itself a miracle, but while she was at work, she had to lead.

The other three junior HR staff under Meru took their instructions. She needed to arrange the training schedules and inform the other departments that their personnel-hire requests had been filled. Doing that by herself back when the HR department was just her alone, the little quirks of how this company worked was like a routine to her now and it was her job to make sure the new HR people would be able to stand on their own feet.

On top of also doing the recruitment and training schedules of course.

Meru portioned out the work, careful to explain what each person was doing and what they needed to get from each other. That was one of the things they taught in training, clear communication and letting people understand why and what they were to do. Why, What and then How, were what Meru had been trained to think about. It had worked admirably, and not just at work too.

Time and scheduling flew back and forth on the table as they hammered out a plan, trying to fit and rearrange more people into the already hectic activities of the company branch.

A few hours later, the day's work done, Meru took the bus from the office back to her apartment. It was a miracle every time she looked around. The fact that the bus company, run by an ex-employee who decided he could run his own business, ran on time; that the private security, hired by Seb Transsstellar from a local reformed mercenary group, made travelling safe for a lone young woman; that she even had an apartment to stay in.
The apartment block had been partly her own project. Back in the early days of Seb Transstellar, the local construction firms had been withering for the lack of materials. The ceramacrete smelter had blown up in an accident two years ago and the replacement had been on the queue ever since. Seb Transstellar had decided to ship in its own ceramacrete. No trader would carry something that worthless, not when there were fine wines or furs to trade in. It barely broke even.

But the infusion of ten million tons of ceramacrete had let the construction companies work again. Meru had brokered the sale with the local company that had built her apartment in record time. No one was going to buy any new houses, but Seb Transstellar had decided to buy a stake in that apartment project, foreseeing the need to house its employees. It had been ironic that she was helping the construction of the block that the company would then sell back to her.
Finding finance was impossible. Finance wasn't... well received on Miltor. Something about usury being against the preachings of the Emperor. Seb Transstellar once again filled the gap. Since it had already a large stake in the project, it drew up a contractual arrangement with its employees to automatically dock pay for installments on the apartments.

The story was the same for her electric cooking unit that was now boiling her evening cup of recaf. And the recaf too.

Herbal recaf farms here were suffering low yield from the lack of fertilizer, which couldn't be produced due to a lack of techpriests to run the chemical plant. The derelict had been shut down and left to rot, no techpriest could even be found to cannibalize the remains. A techpriest Seb Transstellar brought in to oversee construction of its skyscraper had saw the opportunity and jumped ship. A collaborative work with an aspiring manager and a line of credit from Emperor-knows-where, and the chemical plant was refurbished to a smaller scale operation that concentrated on fertilizers. Now not only had the price of recaf crashed through the floor (and varieties were growing weekly), the price of food was dropping rapidly as the fertilizer company expanded operations. People could once again farm in the normally infertile soil of Miltor and family operations were springing up everywhere as people sought to feed themselves. She didn't know how Seb Transstellar had bribed the officials in charge to relax the zoning laws, but a week after a landed noble had tried to collect economic rent from the new wave of land use applications, there had been a major shakeup in the government and every single one of his cronies had been fired.

The electric cooking unit had been a major piece of trickery. Meru didn't know where the design came from, or how the Mechanicus would even make and sell something so complex that it ought to have a techpriest run it, but Seb Transstellar had not only imported the first set, it had also helped set up a production plant at Landing City. Where the techpriests to run the plant came from and how Seb Transstellar managed to bribe them there, Meru had no idea. But the factory had begun to turn out complex machines with nothing more than a user manual that explained all that one needed to know to use them. The idea of writing down technomatic rituals was novel to Meru, but it certainly worked. A techpriest was still needed to maintain her cooker but she could afford that now.

She sipped her recaf and bent to the task of scrubbing her laundry for the next week in the pail of warm water (warm water! For laundry!!). There were rumours flying through the company grapevine that they had obtained a design for an automatic clothes washer and the Machine Solutions Inc. factory would soon start producing it.

The same story appeared again and again. Wherever Seb Transstellar went, failing companies were revived or replaced. Bottlenecks lifted as soon as anyone identified them. From the steel needed by
Machine Solutions, to architectural expertise, to unwise regulation written to extract fees. Everywhere Seb Transstellar was, barriers weren't.

Sometimes, it got so much that Meru had wondered if the company was somehow prescient. That issue with the steel casting must have taken weeks of setup to resolve, the way that the Galaxy-class full of steel from the next system over showed up just in time to run the incompetent local business into the ground so a Snakewick Steel subsidiary could take it over in the bankruptcy. That move had to be in the planning ever since Seb Transstellar even set foot on Miltor!

It had been. Meru had discreetly snooped around a bit, just to make sure she wasn't in a company that the Inquisition would take offense to. One of the upper management had kindly shown her around the strategic planning sessions, where the most powerful men in this Seb Transstellar branch discussed big problems. Like "system economy", "bottlenecks in development" and other big business ideas Meru still didn't quite understand.

And surely, if the company was headed by one of the mystical Rogue Traders (!!), surely it was normal to have such foresight and vision. It was like being a child again and seeing her dream come true. Not literally, she hadn't actually seen this Seb Snakewick, but she knew the feeling of being in the presence of people who saw more than just what was in front of them.

And they were such nice people too. Meru had been struck with the difference in people of Seb Transstellar and those outside. She had made friends aplenty and she had never heard anyone arguing on company grounds. Sure, Meru hadn't seen more than a tenth of the company here, but she was sure the rest were just as nice.

It was a feeling that she hadn't expected to feel again once she had grown up and her parents and sole younger sibling had perished in the last plague two years ago. She felt like she belonged.
Emerit
"Do you think you can continue?"

She nodded.

"Do you feel any possible corruption?"

She paused to self-reflect and eventually shook her head. They both knew how useless that was though.

"The same, again. " Emerit nodded, slowly.

Week 1
Day 5-7

Tomis
Emerit has tried to cut off the planetary governor at this system.

While I would have been satisfied with his political removal, which happened shortly afterwards, it appears that his acting replacement is identical in attitude towards the Rogue Trader's company.

I decided to do a little checking into the various governor candidates and it turns out that only one candidate does not have a favourable outlook on the company, and the exception only because the company's spread muscled out a competitor he had been taking bribes from.

There is nothing to do but to ensure the exception is put in place as Acting Governor. I cannot have the governors here support the company or it will reform as soon as the Imperial fleet leaves.

To that end, I have arranged under my cover identity to meet with all of the candidates and I will have Emerit do the appropriate adjustments to all of them.

Week 2, Day 3
Emerit performed admirably. She told me about the big social network that the company has grown around itself and it became clear that if we were to be successful in removing the corruption, she would need to cut off all of the candidates at once.

In an hours long marathon session, we interviewed each of the political candidates. All that remains to be seen is the fallout.

At one point, Emerit seemed to have an adverse reaction but managed to control it. I know I am running a risk here, using a psyker so much, but the plan relies on Emerit's powers. I cannot give it up here.

Day 5
Emerit is stable again. I have made her take a rest en route to our next target system, Miltor.
From my analysis, Miltor is one of the systems that has been compromised but not completely. It is the last system I need before I think there will be enough loss of support that the Imperial fleet showing up will be able to catch the xenos and seize the company's assets.

Delicate work will be needed. If I push Emerit again, she may not survive another round of hitting the problem with a sledgehammer.

Day 6
We have arrived in Miltor. There is much work to be done, seeing how the current administration greatly favours the company. They say it has made the system economy work again but that is insufficient reason to get into bed with xenos.

There is no cooperation with the xenos.

Not even if the xenos have managed to raise the planet's production enough that I should remember to drop a note with the Administratum to raise their tithe level.

Day 7
I have taken Emerit on a tour through the company offices, pretending to be a visiting official from another system. Emerit is identifying the key points of the social web here, which she says will help her identify which people are key to removing the xenos' influences. This will help minimize the number of times she has to exert her power, which will no doubt come in useful.

I have not been idle despite Emerit's constant need for rest. A number of interviews with the local officials has revealed the past actions of the company in this system, which is a standard procedure I have developed in the recent weeks.

This revealed evidence for something I had previously suspected. No single company, even one as far reaching as Seb Transstellar, should be able to so vastly improve system economies. Not even when 'chance' favours them so. After all, even the company does not do everything.

It turns out that most of the supposedly independent local companies that were set up since arrival of Seb Transstellar possess links to the old company despite being completely separate in the local Administratum records. Indeed, the penetration of this Rogue Trader's company may be far more than I originally believe. It seems to reach into every aspect of life here.

The situation is more critical than I thought. I can only hope the Imperial Fleet can arrive before the xenos can somehow exert their influence and corrupt the Emperor's children.

In a day or two, I must strike. Ultimately, the threat to the Imperium is greater than even the services of Emerit.

Week 3, Day 1
An interview with an ex-government official at Miltor
Tomis: Sit down please.
Gendar: Thank you.

Tomis: You might be familiar with this Inquisition badge. This conversation never took place, you were never here.
Tomis: I just need to ask a few questions. I understand you were the Administrator for Economic Development just a few weeks ago?
Gendar: Yes, that I was. Until this Seb Transstellar decided to muscle in and manipulate our political process.

Tomis: They manipulated the local politics? How?
Gendar: It really started with some unrest on the issue about unregulated farms. People were building their own farms practically in our own backyard without any sort of oversight or regards to local ecosystems. I tried to control it but that must have pissed off Seb Transstellar.
The next thing I knew, I had all my best people reassigned to other departments. Good old Harris, a long time friend of mine, was forcibly transferred against his expressed will. Could anyone blame me if my department then failed to meet efficiency requirements? Especially with an unplanned surprise audit to disrupt operations. But they used it as an excuse to get rid of me!

Tomis: Who is this 'they'?
Gendar: I'm not sure of the exact details, but I am certain from my own sources that this money definitely originated from Seb Transstellar's out-system office. I have a good idea of whose hands were greased with thrones. I... would prefer not to point fingers without sufficient evidence. After all, its a closed chapter of my life.

Tomis: What sources are these and how do you know that?
Gendar: Look, I can't go around revealing names like that, alot of people could get-

Tomis: *nudges the Inquisitor badge and coughs* Alot of people are already in trouble. You would best cooperate.
Gendar: I- okay, I give. I'll tell you. Would it be fine if I sent you a list of names? I don't know them all off the top of my head.

Tomis: *nods* All right, what can you tell me about how Seb Transstellar organizes its political connections?
Gendar: Seb Transstellar is alot like all the other Transstellars out there. Not something I would expect from a Rogue Trader. I give you that they're alot better at predicting economics that the others, but they're organized the same way. An out-system headquarters gives directives to local office by courier and sets targets for them to achieve, and the local office implements plans to do that. Every local office knows everyone relevant at each system, as a necessity of operation and to reduce regulatory bottlenecks.
Seb Transstellar has never given an outright bribe that I have seen or heard of though. Oh, I know people here and there accept the odd packet of thrones; it's not my policy but well, I understand if some have weaker minds and faith. Still, it is unusual to see a company of this size without having a few dealings. But as far as I know, Seb Transstellar's bribes are always circumspect, they're never in actual thrones. They give you something you want, you give them what they want. That's how they work. And they never make an illegal arrangement.

Tomis: How so?
Gendar: Change the law so its not illegal anymore. Or in my case, remove anyone who tries to stand in their way. It's quite a simple and direct approach. Not something that any company, no matter how powerful, could possibly do. But they somehow manage it, if what I hear from Rathi system is accurate.

Tomis: How could they change the law so fast? I thought your government does not work that
quickly?
Gendar: It can work quickly, if everyone agrees. I think they were all trying to sell me out to Seb Transstellar. It didn't like my trying to check on the independent farmers, because they were the ones buying fertilizer from a subsidiary company set up by one of their techpriests who quit. I don't know what kind of backroom deals they had to cut to get rid of me, but I felt like I was put in a tank full of sharks.
There have been a few recent law changes that rammed through so fast I think they were responsible. They're de-fanging the government watchdogs so they have free reign to do whatever they want.

Tomis: I am aware they approached you to discuss something private. What was it?
Gendar: That was not a nice meeting. I... okay, okay, I'll talk. Look, I just went into a room and two businessmen from their company came to talk to me. They weren't outright rude you know, but I'm the Administrator for Economic Development! They just... are so full of themselves. Like I didn't even matter. And the scary part was, it turned out to be true. They had everything in place to get rid of me and just decided to come threaten me with it.
They told me to remove the checks I had put in place to safeguard everyone from rogue farmers. Not even a please or nicety about it. They demanded a government official bend regulations for them! They never said what would happen to me if I didn't, and at the time I thought they were crazy to threaten me like that, but it would appear that my assessment of them was wrong.
It's their attitude that's the problem. Seb Transstellar thinks the good Emperor's citizens are blind and immoral. Only they see the way forward and the rest of us don't matter at all. I don't know what they're doing or how I think this, but my gut feeling is that they're aiming for more than just profit. They're not earning as much thrones as they can. There's something larger they're looking at that we are nothing but inconvenient obstacles in their way. I mean, what Transstellar opens a school for the poor? That won't earn anything.

Tomis: Thank you very much, I believe I have heard enough. Please wait a moment while I talk to my assistant. Emerit?

Week 3, Day 2
I wonder if Emerit can hold out. She understands how important this is. Still, the interviews are going one by one.

A woman by the name of Meru is next. I wonder why Emerit said she was key, but supposedly she is one of the major nodes that touch all that the company recruits here.

The Interview
Emerit

She tried to avoid looking at the corner. Whatever that thing was.

The next woman came in, one that Emerit had previously said was crucial for the web of social relations. It was hard to remember exactly why that woman was important, not when Emerit had been struggling to avoid using the warp. And that warp sense of social relations informed her.

It made her mind feel small but she couldn't afford to use any more power than necessary. Not even the tiny amounts used for thinking in the warp.
All right, last one then. No matter what Tomis wanted, Emerit would have to stop after this woman or risk Very Bad Things. Tomis hadn't seen it yet, but Emerit could feel the... Things. Nibbling at the edge of reality.

She could still hold them back. For now. At least if she stopped soon.

The woman came in. She was so young! Barely more than a girl. The others higher up in the power structures were all older, except for one untimely heir of a noble family.

But it was immediately obvious to Emerit as she opened up her warp sense again. The woman's shining loyalty and... something more. Seb Transstellar was more than just a good employer or business partner to her. Her connections to the other employees were strong and it was clear that a lot of gossip and connections flowed through her. Emerit remembered why she was important now, a majority of the subtle manipulations would flow through this woman.

As Master launched into his prepared series of questions, Emerit fumbled around the woman's warp presence, seeking some way to remove the loyalty. It was going to be hard to do this without killing her.

Emerit signalled to Master with one of their pre-arranged almost unnoticeable signals. It would be a risk. As exhausted as Emerit was, trying to pry off Meru's deepseated loyalty without shattering her mind would be a tricky task. If Emerit made a mistake, the Things might be able to break through. And it would still kill the woman anyway. Or worse.

Master thought for a moment. Then the return query came back. If Emerit simply destroyed the woman's mind, she would almost certainly not cause a warp catastrophe. The question was if killing the woman would have the desired effect on the social web, sometimes it was more effective to let the adjusted people remain to work against the fabric.

Emerit spent a measure of power to cast a minor divination and analysis. Her concentration slipped for a split second, and she gulped nervously as the hexagrammic wards around her collar flared. The Things chittered greedily but Emerit suppressed them. That was not a good sign, but at least there hadn't been any chance she would lose control.

The dreaded answer. Yes. It would be just as effective if Meru died. Emerit sighed, knowing that Master would know what that meant. She did not like killing and Master knew that too. Go ahead was the reply.

Emerit reached out across the warp and hesitated. The woman was innocent but despite the knowledge that sacrifice was laudable, Emerit still failed to do it. Was it really the right thing to do? When the company had done so much? After all, its only crime had been to be too efficient. Suspiciously efficient, but no evidence of xenos or any other problems had been uncovered.

Master repeated his "go" signal. Emerit gulped again and steeled herself. Master knew best. The woman's sacrifice worked for the greater good. Her soul would be with the Emperor.

She reached out and tugged. And nothing happened. Meru continued to chat, her warp signature continued to exist as it was. Emerit blinked. She tugged on the mental strings again, harder, making sure to break a few.
Again nothing happened. The strings snapped back into position, as if... no, they weren't even going back, they were *reappearing*.

Emerit looked around, nervously looking at the corners of the room. They were still brightly lit and blood wasn't oozing out from under the door. That was strange. She brushed a metaphorical blade through the woman's mind, shredding- the woman stumbled in her speech, looking confused- but the mind-strings bounced back as fast as they were destroyed.

How?! Master's signal taps went unheeded. The woman *must* have been killed. There was no way anyone could have survived that, not when she did not even feel any resistance, any defence.

She stood up suddenly, interrupting the interview. Emerit simply had to find out what was going on. Without any warning, she threw a blinding bolt of lightning at the woman... and the world vanished into pure inky blackness, the lightning bolt arcing into empty void.

"geh-" Emerit choked a little. Whatever this was, she still seemed to be thinking straight, and this would certainly qualify as a Bad Thing. She pulled out the blessed ritual dagger.

There was an instant of wondering how she still managed to see her hand even when everything else was pure black when the dagger vanished just before she was about to plunge it into her heart. Oh, that wasn't good.

The inky blackness was abruptly replaced by an even greyness of psychic dampening wood and Emerit's warp sense went dead, apart from the constant buffeting waves of interfering psychic power from a very familiar crystal formation.

When was it she last saw that? On the Black Ship that took her to Sol. Well, at least that was a sign she hadn't been possessed. She hoped anyway.

"Pardon for the interruption," a cool androgynous voice spoke from thin air. Emerit glanced around but didn't see anyone. The voice continued, "But I do believe we need to talk."

Tomis whirled around when Emerit stood up suddenly. She wasn't supposed to stand.

Meru paused in her narration, looking confused. Good, not a threat.

Emerit was staring at her as if she was seeing a demon though, which was never a good sign. Tomis put a hand surreptitously on his laspistol.

Emerit seemed to focus, frowning. Tomis was only marginally higher than human standard on the Assignment, but even that slight sensitivity was enough for him to feel the psychic power Emerit unleashed invisibly. That was a lethal mind-thrust!

He jerked around, wondering what Meru had done to spook Emerit so, but the woman was just sitting there looking confused. She didn't even appear to have noticed the attack.

The walls darkened and Tomis glanced around worriedly, hundreds of tiny things skittered around at the edge of vision. Not good, Emerit was using too much power. He would have to...

Tomis had barely got the laspistol out of its holster when Emerit vanished into thin air, along with the
impending warp catastrophe.

"Um, what's going on?" Meru asked, "did she just disappear?"

Tomis shook his head. Clearly Emerit had suffered a fatal warp accident. It was lucky that she hadn't destroyed the entire building with her, and that she had lasted this long. Never mind, he could clean up the rest himself.

He drew his laspistol and shot the woman in the head. And got his second shock.

The bolt vanished just in front of Meru's face. Meru had frozen in shock but Tomis was already firing again. Not that it did much good. The 2nd one disappeared as well.

There was a knock on the door and the door opened to let the regional manager into the room. Instead of looking surprised at the drawn weapon, he merely glanced at it and shook Meru out of her daze.

"The Inquisitor and I need to talk for a while, Meru, would you kindly wait in the tea room?"

Meru looked between them as the two men locked gazes and scurried out of the room.

"What are you?" Tomis asked. The man clearly knew more than he ought to.

"A human," the man said, gesturing at the chair, "by certain standards at least."

Tomis ignored the chair, hand still holding the laspistol tightly. It would make a good club if it came to that. These xenos appeared to have some kind of laser defence device in here.

"Why have you taken over Seb Transstellar?" Tomis hazarded a guess.

The man sighed, "We never really took over. Seb Transstellar was our idea. We wanted to fix the Imperium."

"Who is this 'we'?"

"I'm Nora," the man said, "we are the Culture."

Tomis frowned at the woman's name, but many xeno names were unpronounceable. It wasn't that unlikely. "Your attempt to take over the Imperium will never succeed." That was what they must have had in mind. Good thing he had backup plans and deadman's switches. Even if he disappeared, the fleet would still come in.

Nora nodded, "I'll give you credit, you had the best shot of making this experiment not work. But there was never really any question about that we would fail to reform. At worst, we'll just put you off for a couple of years."

"And what makes you think you can even do it?" Tomis shot back. If he could provoke them into showing their hand, then he would have a better idea as to how to stop it. Assuming he managed to leave this place at all.

"Oh, many reasons," Nora waved a hand, "it's basically impossible for me to describe them all."
"I see," that sounded like an extremely arrogant attitude to take, which was a good sign. "We'll see if you're still as confident when you stare down the guns of the Imperial Navy!"

Tomis had heard enough. That was his proof right there that a dangerous xeno was on the loose inside the Imperium. They looked so much like humans that they could probably fool even genescanners. But even if they turned out to be another lost splinter group with a jumped up sense of importance, this was more than enough evidence to call a major fleet action.

Time to see about getting it.

He shot the man who claimed to be from the Culture, to no useful effect, and leapt over the table to smash the butt of the laspistol onto the man's head. Nora deftly sidestepped him and Tomis shot out the door.

Nora sighed again and addressed a spot of empty air in Marain, "Going to follow him?" Tomis did not notice the small perfectly-stealthed insect-sized drone follow him out the building.

Nora watched the Inquisitor disappear down the side alley, "too bad about his dead drop. We couldn't let his message reach the Imperial Navy. Are we going to go ahead and destroy his identifications?"

"So how did you manage to stop my attempt at destroying loyalty?" Emerit asked the hologram in front of her. Whoever these xenos were, they still didn't trust her enough to put someone real in front of her. She could tell of course, no warp signature.

"We had alot of data on how your trick works. We worked out that you do in fact affect brain matter in the physical realm, otherwise your ability to adjust loyalties and even emotions would not be possible. It was a simple matter to simply reverse any change made."

"Interesting. What about the lightning?"

"That was a teleport, in your words. We moved you here, since we weren't confident of being able to stop your lightning bolt. Tomis won't need such measures though."

"What are you trying to do?" Emerit leaned forward. She was quite sure they were willing to talk now that Tomis had managed to force their hand.

"We're trying to fix the Imperium," the hologram said, "I am sure that you have seen what we have done and how we have improved life in these few stars. Your people have more of everything, soon there will be no starvation, and the governments are less likely to go to war with each other than ever before."

"At the cost of our identity?"

"You're perceptive aren't you?" the hologram smiled, "that is a major concern for us. We don't want turn the Imperium into another Culture. But we do want the Imperium to stop turning things into more of itself, and we do wish to see the Imperium become less cruel and unforgiving. We try to use only your technology and provide the minimum necessary interference. Less megadeaths would also be nice."
Emerit leaned back, "Alright. Tell me more about this Culture. It's not like I can go anywhere."

"Sir, are you sure the meeting with the Inquisitor isn't necessary anymore?" Meru asked.

Nora turned around, "Yeah, he's left the building actually. I don't think he'll be back."

"But sir!" she pleaded, "the Inquisitor shot me! Well, tried to. Are we doing something I don't know about?"

Nora looked at her levelly, "Yes. We are doing things you don't know about but nothing illegal. Seb Transstellar is too big for any one person to know everything about it. Still, our political analysis arm thinks that the Inquisitor was likely worried at our rapid growth."

Meru was confused, "So we aren't doing anything that involves the Enemy? I'm worried that I'm possessed. I've never seen a laspistol round disappear like that!"

Certainly, the last few times she seen anyone fire a laspistol was the rest of her plagued family being executed. If whatever god had decided to save her now, why hadn't it saved her parents?

"No, you're not possessed. We just protected you. We have been tracing this Inquisitor all over the sector and we decided that we needed to do something."

The fact that Nora had unconsciously lapsed into his royal 'we' that he often used when talking about Seb Transstellar as a whole was not lost on Meru.

"And why? Who this Seb Snakewick and how does he have such exotic technology that no one has ever heard of?" Meru asked pointedly.

Nora raised an eyebrow, "Are you sure you want to know? This rabbit hole goes deeper than your neck."

Meru thought about it for a moment but there was no hesitation when she finally drew herself up. "Yes, I will," the conviction in her voice surprised even Meru, "Knowledge, Responsibility and Curiosity. That was in our training. Hope you're not surprised if I apply some of it."

Chapter End Notes

"Due to a moral emergency, we had to implement an experimental and insufficiently tested procedure in a live situation. The results were satisfactory although reliability is estimated to only be around 98%."

(because characters who manage to earn a name find it comes with a 'get out of trouble free' card)

As of this post, the Culture has further blurred the lines of Reload and identity. Is it a true Reload where you get a new soul if your brain is dynamically reconstructed as it got liquified / modified?
I'm going to deftly avoid the Ship of Theseus by kicking the can down the road. Doing this on-the-fly pseudo-Reload causes bits of the soul to fly off into the warp just as if the person died, only the relevant bits being changed of course, and new bits to grow in their place. Of course, depending on your conception of morality, the bits of soul aren't any more sentient than neurons in a petridish.

The Culture doesn't know about the warp bits.
I was stationed at the observatory on Praetonis Six, as part of the local military detachment.

No, to my knowledge, equipment levels were up to requirements. We were prepared, we knew the Tau might come at any time. Heck, we even had a squad of three baneblade superheavy tanks!

Yes, in my opinion, we had the Tau vastly outnumbered on the ground. I saw numerous changes to their armour and saw them deploy more powerful weapons, but I believe that we would have won that engagement eventually. It looked like they only had three squads of infantry, one of which was some kind of stealthy scout squad without any heavy weapons.

We lost the battle because of orbital bombardment. The Tau have new and very accurate weaponry that can strike from space. It destroyed us. Completely.

It looks like a... a lance strike. But without the blast. A single brilliant column of light from the void strikes unerringly at whatever the Tau wished destroyed. There is little explosion, the weapon, whatever it is, leaves a very small crater for an orbital weapon, no more than that from a baneblade's main cannon.

They can accurately hit and destroy a baneblade with exactly one shot. They destroyed all three of ours in exactly three shots at the start of the battle. The last shot hit our last baneblade while it was being sortied, it didn't even damage the wall of the observatory not ten meters away. How, I don't know, but I suspect their accuracy was helped by the stealthy scout team which we could not find or force to engage.

They targeted our formations with the weapon too. Whenever we grouped up too much, more than four of us inside a single blast zone, the strike would come within seconds.

We couldn't do anything. Any attempt to sortie in close formation drew orbital strikes, it took all of our ability to stay under cover and try to weather the Tau attacks. Loose formation approaches were cut up by their scout team and dense fire from their infantry formations. We couldn't mass to charge them and couldn't hold ground when we were spread all over.

The commander of the station eventually ordered us to retreat to the local launch pad where we retreated through our lander to rejoin the rest of the defense fleet. Why the Tau did not target our lander with the same weapon, I don't know. I think they let us go.

No, I have no idea why they might have done that.

Appendix: Military Analysis

The new Tau orbital weapon is a precision weapon with considerable armour piercing capability. Reports from multiple sources indicate it has sub-meter accuracy and very little collateral damage. The Tau may or may not be able to target the weapon accurately from orbit but the presence of ground teams guarantees that they will be accurate.

Variants of the weapons from multiple reports indicate that the Tau weapon has multiple yield settings. Examples include low-yield tank-busters and anti-infantry uses, a higher power variant was observed to penetrate an underground hive and precisely destroy the central column and the control
Like all Tau technology, no moral threat is expected.

Tactical Analysis:
This weapon is suitable for use in urban combat where the Tau are noted to avoid civilian casualties. This may impact our civilian wave tactics as this weapon may be precise enough for the Tau to allow its use.

The Tau appear to not be wasting shots of this new weapon. The 202nd PDF company could have been easily vapourized from orbit as there is little overhead cover to conceal them from observation. Instead the Tau chose to use it only to break up formations.

The bunker-busting variant was seen much more rarely. Sensor records indicate that the Tau may have this variant only equipped on two to five possible vessels.

The survival of the various ground forces suppressed by the weapon is unusual, given the complete destruction or capture of various other companies. To what reason by which these guard forces were allowed to retreat is unclear. A pattern we see is that those forces which managed to retreat have all witnessed this new weapon, perhaps their escape is meant to discourage us with news of a terrifying weapon that the Tau have not widely deployed.

The tactical impact of the weapon's deployment seems to indicate that the Tau have the ability to win nearly any land engagement that they hold the orbital zone above. The bunkerbusting variant of the weapon is probably also designed to neutralize fortified anti-space weaponry, allowing Tau ships to control the planet's orbitals.

This is a grave and serious threat as other developments in the Praetonis System Report indicate that the Tau have changed their capabilities in space as well. Given the Tau habit of capturing and suppressing Imperial worlds that their fleet overruns before moving onwards, this new weapon may enable them to rapidly advance where they were reluctant to previously as ground-based resistance may become severely ineffective.
Memo regarding plans for datanet service extensions

From: Regional Director Massalam; Regional Director Tinma; Financial Director Ray
To: Planetary Directors list; Medical Branch - Executive list; Information Services Branch - Executive list; Survey & Exploration Branch - Executive list; Sales & Market Analysis - Executive list; Interstellar Transport - Executive list; Internal Affairs - Executive list
CC: Medical Branch - Management list; Information Services Branch - Management list; Survey & Exploration Branch - Management list; Sales & Market Analysis - Management list; Interstellar Transport - Management list; Internal Affairs - Management list

Our recent strategic meeting has concluded that the plan for introduction of datanet services for general consumption is feasible and will create significant gains in coordination, efficiency and education level. Furthermore, a long-delay protocol is being refined by our R&D division to create regular updating services for interstellar datanet services through a high-bandwidth synchronization package installable on any freighter.

Given the advance preparation you have no doubt been busy with, rolling out of the first phase product design using a dedicated manufacturing subsidiary should not encounter difficulties. Any obstacles should be referred to the Political Affairs offices in your region.

As production efficiencies of three to five hundred percent of current levels are projected, we indicate that the price point should be targeted as maximum market penetration but above loss levels. Temporary losses are acceptable as this project has strategic implications and you are directed to draw down on regional reserves if so required to relieve bottlenecks in production and sales. Furthermore, a number of talented techpriests have offered to join our project and will be arriving in your systems shortly to provide local assistance in innovating changes to suit your local requirements.

Your division or branch may be significantly affected by this change (especially the new medical branches) and help with integration of the new capabilities and information networks will be provided.

As this extension of Seb Transstellar services are expected to place a large portion of each system's datanet within our domain, datamining activities will be conducted by Information Services branches for local advantage. This extension is also expected to rapidly raise the rate of information propagation within the listed territories in the attachment. Changes and problems anticipated should be directed to your local political office and addressed locally if possible.

Regional difficulties arising from this new system will be dealt with on a regional level. Further directives may be required and a reserve of funds for dealing with these will be required of all of you.

With Luck,
Regional Director Massalam
Year 2, Month 3
The Culture construct a Mind just a bit out of spec. It develops without the usual detachment that Minds have for meatspace.

Said Mind immediately Sublimes, attempting to solve the galaxy's problems, deeming that failure to actively intervene is causing more harm than good. It finds that the warp is mostly outside its direct reach but it can still act through the Real, and thus affect the Warp.

Nothing obvious happens. The Culture fail to open contact with the new god and after some time of little action, decide that the god has simply gone away. The sorcerer hands in his resignation and takes up 4 dimensional golf. The three gods of chaos are having a power struggle over the portfolio of Tzeentch, who appears to have gone missing.

Month 4
The first of many blows is struck, the SC agent lead orks reach the Eye, with the IoM hot on their heels. The incursions fail to take ground, at the cost of many a chaos fleet.

Month 5
The Eldar are in an uproar. Infinity circuits across the galaxy are somehow gaining additional soulpower for no apparent reason. Their farseers have no insight to offer, in the skein, nothing can be detected.

The IoM document the week with the least warp accidents on record, which is none at all. Navigators report that the Astronomican is perfectly visible at all ranges, and an "administrative error" causes a delay in rotation of psykers for it. The astronomican appears to be running by itself. The IoM continues to offer psykers to the Choir anyway, but it has been two weeks since they had to replace anyone...

The Culture suspect their god hasn't gone away after all. Efforts to communicate are fruitless. The zhartann farseers offer to help after hearing the explanation, but the only thing they can read is a vague sense of disappointment. Of expectations unmet.

Month 6
A highly unusual meeting between a surviving dark eldar and an exodite over an unknown artifact of apparent Eldar construction determines that this was an ancient webway constrution device.

Mysteriously, the Culture also find two copies buried in a GSV. The resident Minds swear they have no idea how it got there. The zhartann get one to build a test segment. A joint effort to reverse engineer the other starts.

Month 7
Joint efforts to reverse engineer the webway bear fruit. The Culture manage to make copies of the device, and the zhartann build the first truly new segment of webway in a million years.
Memetic spread in the Seb Transstellar project is five sigma higher than expected. "Chance" appears to happen to more than what the Culture is responsible for. The spread of rationality and initiative is like a wildfire. Independent versions spring up like mushrooms, at least four hundred sites centered around forge worlds are found by the Culture.

Chaos contamination rate drops to zero. Everywhere, at the same time. Chaos artifacts the Culture have been tracking go missing, with 70% of the cases linked to suspicious warp implosions in the nearby area. Culture scans of people seem to indicate that changes that minds undergo when becoming warp tainted are being overwritten as they happen. This ability is still theoretical after being developed during the Seb Transstellar project but clearly something is applying a far more refined version universally.

Worryingly enough, minor changes to drones and Minds have been noticed. The purpose of these changes are not known, they have no discernible effect and attempts to reverse them simply fail.

The Culture still fail to contact the Sublimed Mind. They begin preparing for a possible IoM collapse.

Month 8
Predicted internal conflict in the IoM fails to materialise. The IoM inquisitors being watched by the Culture are being kept out of the loop by "coincidence".

Webway engineering efforts contact the original paths and the Harlequins open limited communication. Arrangements are being discussed towards remanding the Dark Eldar to the harlequins.

Infinity Circuit overload. An amalgation of Eldar souls ascends as a single warp entity. .. with a twist. None of them are actually inside, the souls are found still inside the craftworlds' Infinity Circuits. Something just hijacked Ynnead's Ascension process and they don't have any idea what it could be.

The Culture wisely stay quiet.

Immediately after, the Culture and Zhartann detect a strange phenomena. A number of species are being reloaded almost constantly (mostly humans), which is almost not detectable by the Culture's technology, but the soul drain is obvious to Zhartann's farseers who have access to the Culture for background.

Month 9
Chaos activity, previously on constant overdrive, drops to almost zero. The Eldar notice two shocking things; Slaanesh is no longer draining souls, and a few farseers are receiving visions from an unknown source, reportedly being changed by the contact.

The revelation takes time to be accepted, but the news slowly sinks in as more and more Eldar receive visions.

Isha has returned. One of the first visions regards a metaphysical treaty with another god-level entity that Khaine not be restored fully. Those who accept her message preach peace and reconstruction, the Exodites are suddenly very popular.

The Zhartann convince the Culture to thaw out the Dark Eldar now that soul drain is no longer a threat. A pilot program to manage their rehabilitation begins. 0.01% are restored.
Year 3
The IoM has broken up into a number of independent factions. With the introduction of hyperdrive technology, humans are no longer beholden to the Golden Throne. Accelerating the change is the unexplained simultaneous failure of both the Golden Throne and the Astronomican.

The Culture is observing and occasionally guiding various factions but they have not detected that the Sublimed Mind has done anything overt since the return of Isha although it has been implicated in the Golden Throne failure. Whether this was an overt intervention or just the Throne's natural failure that has been expected for some time now.

Among the major remaining activities of the Culture are attempting to broker peace between the Tau and the Ultramar faction, observing local wars, and working through the problematic Dark Eldar. Curbing IoM xenophobia is also a common activity now that the IoM is going through a new phase of exploration.

Compared to the original threat of Chaos and galaxy spanning conflict, played for all the marbles, this is like a homework assignment.

None would disagree that they are grateful, after all, the Culture might have lost in the end. But they do not forget that the god they were responsible for has judged them and found them wanting.

Chapter End Notes

Aka, deus ex machina. Literally.
Too bad everyone is feeling a bit useless.

note to self for part 19: culture releases Panacea through Seb Transstellar. reference to White Wing?
Culture scrapcode resistance increase, associativ network processing (organic mimic).
Also that Chaos cannot broadcast into hyperspace and hiding there also works.

I also read Consider Phelbas. It turns out that the Culture hyperspace is really 4 dimensional. This presents continuity problems as the Culture ought to be able to move straight through void shields, so I'm going to make void shields exist across a solid "hyper-sphere". Keep in mind that it really ought to not work like that.
The fact that the Culture has another win button they haven't been using will be quietly ignored.

Minds are apparently not much bigger than humans and can accurately park themselves inside a stone corridor after a lightyears long run, which if combined with the size of drones able to achieve orbit (maybe the size of an apple) implies that they can pretty much drive a man-sized missile or spy nanite package in and park it on the deck of an IoM ship. Without the target noticing or being able to do anything about it.

Also, the Sublimed are crazy powerful. Blatantly ignore physics (turn off all Culture-grade electronics without damaging the ship or the AI drone, reversibly), apparently able to write their name with constellations... etc.
They're like the Big E but with more power, precision control and with galactic reach.
Would not bet on even a C'Tan in direct combat. Could probably fight a Chaos god in person.
Week 1
The Orks in the backwater zone have brought battle to the IoM forces gathering to fight them. The level of strategic coordination between the Trained fleet is not surprising given our estimates but was clearly unexpected for the IoM. The battle took place in an uninhabited asteroid heavy system and resulted in the loss for the IoM. Despite their strategic advantage, the Orks did not manage to achieve the same kill ratio as before. Their losses were heavier than the IoM, ascribed to poor discipline. It seems that the "Home" Fleet is less well-trained than the "Away" Fleet.

Week 2
The Away Fleet has discovered one of the wormholes we had been monitoring that leads to another close to the Eye. The SC agent has indicated that he intends to transit it. As the gate is highly relevant to the IoM's commercial and military traffic, we have warned him not to blockade the gate as we will almost certainly need to intervene. Despite this, he ambushed a small IoM patrol force and destroyed it before transiting the gate. No Ork forces were left behind although he has agreed to work with us on a safe transition schedule to avoid unnecessary conflict with the IoM. Large Sticks Speak Softly will now hand over monitoring of the Away Fleet to Are You Feeling Spiky?.

Week 3
The Ork forces have been spotted heading towards the Eye, seeding an uninhabited world nearby. First objective of the SC Agent appears to be a nearby ork world that he intends to subjugate. The SC Agent also now claims to have received a vision of a Waagh from Mork. He claims that a major Waagh will happen near the Eye relatively soon and he will be preparing for it. Indeed, observations of Ork movements in the local area near the Eye also indicate an alarming level of growth and armament. It appears that all local Ork populations are gearing up for a major war some time soon without any apparent coordination. The possibility that the SC Agent is somehow correct cannot be discounted. A sector range ork warp effect?

Are You Feeling Spiky? recommends diverting more Culture resources to the region surrounding the Eye for further monitoring and possible emergency measures to prevent megadeaths in the IoM. Our estimates for a major war between the Orks and the IoM surrounding the Eye indicate a few trillion human lives in danger and about a tenth of that for the Orks.
Eldar

There was a swear.

"A Monkeigh expletive? It does not become you," the farseer noted to his companion.

She merely repeated it, a more empathic word this time, wraithbone foci clattering in front of her. He sighed. Her time as a wanderer and mercenary to the Monkeigh and lay races of the galaxy made her sometimes coarse and rough.

But she had returned, took up the path of the seer with him and that was all he needed. All he had waited for, they would be together now. Still, she was impatient for an Eldar and it showed, especially when she was stressed.

"Stop watching my hair and follow my path. This is urgent."

He deliberately took the time to still her shaking hands. She was not a strong seer and he strongly suspected that despite her nominal designation as Farseer, she wasn't quite as stuck on the path as he was.

She drew out a sixth foci and he stopped her. Five was already too many for her to deal with.

He cast the sixth and they dived into the future together, her notes on the future strands showing the way into the tangle.

Every farseer had spent weeks, months, trying to untangle the snarl in the future paths. In their meditations, treacherous cliffs had been worn down into well-traveled familiarity, play and counter-play frozen in the echoes of time, memorized and avoided.

They had made progress, like Alaitoc and every other craftworld.

She ventured deeper, the paths grew less treaded, signs and notes of other Eldar farseers getting less and less common. Soon, there was only hers. He glanced around, tweaked some of it, but it was essentially correct.

The way in the thick choking tangle wove and ducked, it was getting dangerous here. He was just about to call an abort when the path veered away suddenly, opening and widening.

They were through.

It wasn't like paths through the mess hadn't been found before. There was at least thirty of them reachable from Ulthwe alone, close to a hundred variation groups accessible by Eldar as a whole. Plus another sixty from the outcast craftworld tainted by the new Monkeigh.

This path didn't lead anywhere close to where the others left. Most of them exited months or years ahead in time. This one was out in less than a month. Or maybe slightly more, it depended on a few factors.

She simply waited. The taint of Khaine and Khorne reached him almost immediately. Battle. He cast around for the source and frowned. It was better to ask where there wasn't battle. Everything seemed to be burning.

There was more than just those two. Their signs loomed large, but he could see all the other signs. The greenskins and their two fake gods, each of the other three Ruinous powers, even the Tau and
the Laughing god had a small part in it. The stamp of the new Monkeigh covered everything.

She drew his attention forward, through the chaos of battle, the echoes of future time manipulation blurring the paths with new ones not yet created. And further ahead... he was aware that his physical body had frozen, but that was a minor issue. A mark. One he hadn't ever seen before, one he never thought he would see ever again.

Isha.

Down every branch, Isha. Isha. She was there. Sometimes earlier, sometimes later. But whatever happened, she came back. Isha came back.

The artist in him cried a little. So many statues he had made of their god, how many times had he given power to the missing god, futilely hoping that he was making a difference somehow.

He gathered his will and nodded wordlessly to her, earlier prodding forgotten. They worked backwards, recovering what they could of this path through the tangle.

The stamp of the new Monkeigh burned brightly, like it always had, but this one was strange. It moved and flickered, sometimes fading or strengthening. He couldn't make sense of it until she pointed it out. Potential future branches, possible futures not yet created.

A mark of future sight.

He stopped in shock and backed up, plunging back into the tangle, trying to find the source. He did not understand exactly why he was compelled to do this. Why these new Monkeigh obtaining a measure of future sight worried him so deeply. He didn't have an answer, not even the question. She followed him, tagging, clearing and marking the way.

When he found the answer, the image of two Eldar sitting around six wraithbone foci on Ulthwe, he froze for real. The mark of Isha in the future still weighed on him, unforgettable. Pleading for help? He could see it even now, trace the route back even without the tags.

Behind him, the tangle of future paths continued to collapse. Slowly, inexorably, the great bulldozer of the present dragged forward.
Necrons

Post the provision of the femto-bots, the expectation of the Necrons undergoing a massive expansion phase was our main worry.

Contrary to popular expectation, this doesn't seem to have happened. At least, not yet. Working closely with the Necrons has yielded an interesting observation.

Given the intelligence engineering efforts, we have instead detected a vast increase in activity among the Necrons, consisting of rebuilding the worlds destroyed in the conflict and expanding access to the highly complex Necron restoration procedures that return them to their prior mental capacities. Most of the non-capital production power is going towards building reprogramming nodules for the restoration of their citizenry.

Further work on refining the mental models are proceeding apace and three improvements have already been made. One at the suggestion of the Necrons. At this point, all but one of the ruling class have restored their mental models to the old Necron standard.

The restored Necron elite have expressed interest in a cultural exchange, a first from their side. Furthermore, a number of them have indicated they wish to share certain art projects. Three of their leading technologists have expressed interest in a collaborative project to restore a digital version of recombinant reproduction utilizing biologically modeled personality traits.

Social modelling indicates that the new Necrons are more inwards looking than expected and appear to be more concerned with rebuilding their civilization than raw expansion. It appears that the original Necron psychology is closer to our philosophy than we had given it credit for.

Perhaps in a few hundred years, with closer cultural contact, they might even be close enough culturally to work as equals.

Private communication between GSV Irregular Observation and GCU Nothing to See Here

<Hyper-relay chat opened, channels: 2, time delay compensation active>
<Irregular Observation has joined the conversation>
<Nothing to See Here has joined the conversation>
NSH: Hi there, what's the deal with all this encryption? This is some high class security you have here.
IO: Beta's noticed some strange things going on with the Necrons.
NSH: Oh? I didn't notice anything. Care to share a summary?
IO: Necron behaviour does not match predictions of social models. Aggressive expansion was expected.
NSH: We all know that. I suspect the introduction of the mental models were more disruptive to the Necron behaviour than we had expected. They have culture now, you have heard? I think it's a happy coincidence.
IO: No, our social models are special. They're based off the original Necrons before they froze themselves.
NSH: Nonsense, there's insufficient data about their psychology even with the mental modelling-
IO: We have a Referrer onboard here. Codename HS-Psychohistory.
NSH: ... OH, him. Oh, wow. I thought he was top secret? Can I talk to him?
IO: Yes, we'd be much obliged if you kept his location a secret. And sorry, we'll have to clear you with SC first. Anyway, this is just to prove that our social modelling is considerably advanced over what the public Culture has. Reverse engineered from agreed history... or psychohistory if you want.

NSH: Mhm. All right, so where's the discrepancies?

IO: *data burst transmission* Basically, we noticed that while the art and culture matches the old Necrons extrapolated from artifacts and historical accounts, their political and confrontational psychology is much mellower. This is inconsistent.

NSH: Really? *pause* Interesting. I don't know what to make of it without doing a full simulation trace. Have you already done that?

IO: We did a full trace yes. It's the mental models. They are not accurate.

NSH: Oh. More interesting. Did we make a mistake? I played the major role in the effort to collect samples from defunct Tomb Worlds. I thought a hundred thousand samples would have been enough. Should I have taken more?

IO: We looked over the combat reports. You overlooked most of the warrior types that automatically resisted and the 'crazier' Necron Lords, suspecting them of corruption.

NSH: Yes, we did. The overly corrupted ones were beyond recovery. They provided less than useful data. The three sigma error filter was enough to remove 99% of the errors and cross referencing was sufficient to-

IO: We understand your reasons. We, however, note that the filter seems to have removed most of the more combative types from consideration. The psychohistorical model implies that the war with the CTan and the Old Ones would have gone very differently if the Necrons had our mental model instead of their native one.

NSH: Perhaps. It is based on an unsupported model though.

IO: A Referrer based model.

NSH: Even so.

IO: Let us be frank here. Did you or did you not deliberately choose the likely personalities to pass the filter in order to make the Necrons more peaceable?

NSH: You have no proof of that.

IO: ... No, we do not.

NSH: It was a happy coincidence.

IO: ...

NSH: Anyway, can I have HS's autograph?

IO: It could be arranged.

NSH: XD Awesome! That would be great!

<Nothing to See Here has left the conversation>

IO: How much of it 'coincidence' and how much just a result of circumstances? And is it really a 'happy' one?

<Irregular Observation has left the conversation>

<Chatroom empty, closing connection>
Week 55
The Council has concluded on a number of important points regarding the Orks and the Tyranids. As the Tyranid herding scheme requires a handy Hive fleet or splinter, that will have to await convenient circumstances.

The Ork movement project can commence immediately. An uninhabited (due to warp issues) set of systems near the Core and just to the galactic North of the Core-Necron empire has been chosen for the initial seeding.

Terraforming is already underway and the first Ork worlds to be undergoing Displacer to stasis chambers for transport will happen within the week.

Week 56
Tensions in the Rogue Trader project, now a major thrust of experimental social reformation, have risen sharply after the Imperial Navy fleet movements have been detected.

It appears that the fleet admiral in charge has shown considerably more initiative than expected. Failing to receive any signal from the Inquisitor we have captured and subsequently released, he has undertaken to investigate the matter himself. At lancepoint.

The Rogue Trader, having established contact with the Forgeworld Talon, has assured us that he will be moving to protect his own interests. Judging from the penalties associated with xenos, his own interests range from the entire Seb Transstellar commercial empire to his own life.

We have offered covert assistance, which he has accepted, and overt assistance, which he has declined. A pity that we cannot further lean on his sense of honor on debts owed but the matter will work out well enough given his apparent military superiority.

The coming Waagh near the Eye draws closer. Ork activity has been noted by the Imperium already and the Imperial Navy is mobilizing for a full-scale suppression war. Scouting elements have engaged Ork defences but reconnaissance missions are still in their beginning phases, much less the probing attacks prior to major engagements.

We are unsure of moving the Orks near the Eye is advisable. The obvious warp danger aside, the sudden disappearance of multiple unrelated Ork worlds will arouse suspicion in even the most crude of IoM leaders. In any case, Culture assets in the spatial region is insufficient for mass relocation activity.

Inaction is unacceptable but we do have the luxury of time for now. The Ork worlds are gearing up slowly without the apparent catalytic effect of the Culture "natives", and the ex-SC agent is on his way to assert control after a tip-off. And the IoM never move fast.

Week 57
It appears that even the best of the Minds can miss obvious solutions.

We have long noted the difficulty in adapting our hyperspace drives for strategic use without the overwhelming tactical superiority it represents, or restricting the hyperspace theory needed to make it restricted by region to prevent its effective use by Chaos forces.
An operative in the Seb Transstellar project pointed out the obvious. We already have a hyperspace drive that has strategic speed but not the tactical. The Necrons have it, to be precise.

Might it be possible to introduce a hyperspace drive based on the Necron drive? Of which we have already reverse engineered and determined to be based on a partially accurate understanding of hyperspace that results in gravitational instability.
(also, because it is now obsolete in the Core-Necrons empire following our provision of beginning hyperspace theory as per the post-Ackaris agreement)
It may indeed be so. And even might be possible to introduce through Talon-Seb Transstellar once they have achieved the technical and social sophistication for ubiquitous space travel.

The Rogue Trader can be reined in in his production of Culture-based hyperspace drives, we still maintain control over his nanobots. The replacement of the Necron hyperspace drive will be insufficient of course but perhaps some other incentive could be used.

Galactic Forum

A troubling topic has arisen between Zhartann and Alaitoc (who have suprisingly replied favourably to our invitation to the Forum). Beyond the usual bickering over Eldar identity, the topic at hand appears to be a legendary final battle.
While such legends are often present in many pre-Singularity civilizations, sometimes are even treated seriously, the Eldar with their foresight cannot be so easily dismissed.

A tentative survey as to the possible pitfalls of our policy of extermination towards the Tyranids and the containment policy to the Orks has revealed that all the races here (except perhaps the Tau) have not progressed beyond Level 3B in strategic outlook. Diversity is not valued and it appears that all support full extermination of the races discussed.
This is of course unsatisfactory, but it comes as a relief that consequences as severe as Ackaris are unlikely to result from the removal of the Tyranids and Orks from the galactic territories.

Week 3: We have a response from the currently governing powers in Sol. It appears that Sol Admiralty has staged a limited military coup and is currently beginning to solidify power in Sol with the cooperation of the Mechanicus.
They have not agreed to participate in the Galactic Forum but have requested that the proceedings be sent to them.

We are considering dealing with individual sections of the Imperium as independent political entities. The lethargy and xenophobia of Imperial Sol Administration is frustrating and events outpace them before the decisionmakers can even discuss issues, much less make decisions.

Eldar - Rhana Dandra (Closed Forum, Culture & Eldar only)
Alaitoc (private key to Zhartann): *attached references and future paths*
Alaitoc (unencrypted): We are not pleased you would refuse to use our key exchange. The Culture shouldn't be privy to this.
Zhartann: Surely you have foreseen that we wouldn't keep this secret.
Alaitoc: A chance of Isha's Tears is better than no chance at all. We agree to letting the Culture participate in this conversation. Your opinion?
Zhartann: Troubling indeed. That path you highlight does appear to be the one that gives the best chances for our eventual victory at Rhana Dandra. Alaitoc: The cost is high though, we provided this
reference in the hopes that we may still persuade you against it.
Zhartann: You mean that the decision is in our hands and you can't do anything about it. What is this
cost you are thinking of?
Alaitoc: The Eldar against the galaxy? A hard trade.
Zhartann: If the galaxy is gone, so are the Eldar. And it's not as if the Eldar are gone if we win.
They're still around. In fact, we have independent confirmation that the specific vision in the warning
of the Black Council nearly a year ago is greatly strengthened along this path.
Alaitoc: Those aren't Eldar.
Zhartann: Like we are not?
Alaitoc: ... Yes. As you are not.

**Tyranids (Open)**

Eldar: Interesting that you should ask this question. It appears that the Culture has learnt a little
humility.
Culture: Agreed. A disaster like Ackaris should not be repeated, whatever the cost to pride may be.
Hence we wish for any information you are willing to share, you should have all received our
observations and scientific data on this threat. We believe that a mutual sharing of information on
common enemies will only help.
Tau: And be a basis for future trust and cooperation.
Culture: That too.

Tau: Very well, the Tau agree. *Sanitized record of Tyranid invasions; minus Tau capabilities*
Necrons: Information provision agreed on condition of Culture removal of threat.
Culture: We reserve the decision to permanently destroy the Tyranids. We believe that all diversity
has some value.
Necrons: Present situation need not necessitate termination. Significant reduction in capability will be
sufficient for agreement. Scientific samples will be additionally requested in such case.
Culture: If no adverse disasters will be caused by restricting the Tyranids' actions by force, then yes,
we agree. Scientific samples can be provided to all interested parties.
Necron: Acceptable.
Alaitoc Eldar: You will keep a few systems with the Tyranids under control instead of sterilization.
That is our requirement.
Culture: Possible. May we ask why?
Alaitoc Eldar: ...
Zhartann Eldar: If we may answer in their place, it is because the Tyranids are a weapon we could
use. Maybe.
Culture: We note this. Steps will be taken. If the location does not matter, perhaps we can work out a
few candidate systems away from Necron territory to seed with Tyranid samples.
Necron: Satisfactory.
Eldar: Then yes, we will provide our information. And advice. No, removing the Tyranids will not
cause a repeat of Ackaris.

Necron - Culture private discussion:
Necrons: Experience with these enemies lacking, request for possible arrangement of trial.
Culture: Are you sure? They are biological rapidly-replicating swarms. Very hard to deal with.
Necrons: Personal experience greater than stale secondhand data. With new capabilities, sterilization
of offending planets estimated at 99% success.
Culture: If so, we would like to observe the trial. If only to ensure the test does not run out of
control.
Necrons: Agreed. Arrangements made to test synthesized copies against natural. Cooperate?
Culture: Yes.

**Orks (Open)**
Tau: The Greenskins cannot be controlled, they cannot be reformed, they cannot be saved. We have tried, we know.
Alaitoc Eldar: Concur.
Necron Cryptek (Necrontyr mental patterns restored, from a newly established biologics discipline): They are interesting specimens. Understanding of the warp effect generated from swarms of orks may yield useful technologies. A cooperative measure to share scientific study of the Orks with the Culture would yield much.
Alaitoc Eldar: Disagree, too dangerous to keep as pets.
Zhartann Eldar: Not entirely, with the Culture around.
Culture: So, there is no adverse consequences to removing the Orks to a remote corner of the galaxy?
Necrons: None. Joint monitoring of their situation seems to be advisable, loss of uniqueness would be a tragedy.
Alaitoc Eldar: ... Containment generates no issues.
Tau: Why are the Eldar talking like the Necrons and the Necrons... more human-like?
Culture: Individual variation. Necron style simple to imitate. We conclude then that there will no problems if the Orks are quarantined.

Eldar - Culture private discussion:
Alaitoc: We are concerned about the Necrons' request to study the biologically oriented races. Nothing good will come of it.
Culture: Could we ask why?
Alaitoc: You can ask.
Culture: You understand that we don't exactly trust Eldar future predictions when the matter concerns Necrons? We do expect that you may attempt to manipulate matters to worsen relations with the Necrons. We do not appreciate the effort.
Zhartann: I told you this wouldn't work.
Alaitoc: Isha's Tears. All we can do.
Zhartann: And of the other matter?
Alaitoc: You will be even less Eldar if you attempt this. But you know we can't stop you.
Zhartann: Agreed. We will proceed. The Eldar wish to oversee and provide advice to the matter of the ork quarantine. The Orks should be quarantined on the opposite side of the galactic core from the Necron empire. You will find it useful.
Culture: Could we ask why?
Zhartann: You can ask.
Culture: Fine, have it your way.
Alaitoc: The Culture is biased towards Zhartann.
Culture: Yes, we are. Understandably.

Chapter End Notes

The Necrons ask the Culture divert a Tyranid hive fleet to them so they can try fighting since they have very little experience with it. The aversion to Necron tomb worlds (which I assume is caused by the pylons) may present a problem but if the Culture encounter problems like the Tyranids preferring to die than go there, they could just assemble a pre-fabbed giant stasis field around a splinter fleet. Ship them over like so much cattle.

Plus the fact that the Necrons have a joint project with the Culture to build a small Tyranid hive from scratch.
And now the Necrons also want a sample of the Orks. Someone is playing a very long game.
Or perhaps the Necrons just want their bodies back and want to study the races with weirder biologies to get more information.
The loud speakers blared General Quarters as men scurried to their battlestations. Rear Admiral Quaker glared down at the angry red dots on the long distance plot.

Sensors were bad at this kind of range but the swarm was familiar enough from sensor records of past engagements. The Tau Fleet was here. It was big enough that even the myopic long range sensors could see it. One of his crewmen fancied that he could track the fleet with nothing more than a telescope.

It had been met with some surprise when the Tau changed doctrine all of a sudden. Instead of sitting on Praetonis V where the Imperial hammer had been planned to fall, the fleet had seemingly immediately moved onwards.

A minor Agriworld disappeared beneath the boots of the xeno. And then the fleet moved again.

By now, it seemed clear that the Tau were doing something different and when the direct line towards the Forge World Musk was clear from the Tau's third jump (which Admiral left his flanks so open?! but it seemed like the Tau didn't care if the IoM closed in behind them), the IoM had arrayed their fleet, ready to receive the Tau.

Quaker had been leading a contingent of ships towards Musk. Had been, because if the Tau were here, then they weren't going to Musk at all. It was now his holy duty to make sure the rest of the sector were aware the Tau had changed targets.

He frowned. Why change targets now? Musk was barely two systems away if the Tau had come from Az, as was likely from their trajectory. And Cra was also two systems away from Musk, and so definitely not on the line. Did the Tau somehow know that the Imperial Navy was waiting for them?

He looked at the star map again. If one extended a line from Az to Cra... hmm, far be it from Quaker to guess the mind of a xeno, but that lead to Ultramar itself, also two jumps away. The Tau could be daring if they wanted to, hm? Even if they had led the Imperial navy fleets on a merry chase over the last weeks.

"Detach a Nova for me. Send them our sensor logs and have it make haste to Musk. The Admiral there must know that the Tau have changed course."

He gave the order almost without thinking. Keeping superiors informed was mostly habit now.

But what else could he do? Fight? He was grossly outnumbered and the Tau must certainly know that. From what they knew, the Tau sensors were already dammably good and had somehow gotten a bit better recently. They would at least know that no fleet concentration large enough to threaten them existed at Cra.

But Musk lay nearly in opposition to Cra at Az. Even with the Tau's slow speed, the Imperial navy could barely catch up with them by the time the Tau could reach Macragge. It would be a vey close run thing and if the Tau caught wind of the fleet movement, which was nearly impossible to hide from the traitorious pirate mercenaries on the Tau side, they could just turn around and head back to Musk after all.

Quaker felt that it was sort of unfair that the single Tau fleet was leading twice its number in Imperial ships around the entire sector, merrily destroying spaceports and factories, and blatantly refusing to fight anything resembling an honest battle. The pictrecording of the Tau fleet abruptly turning tail...
less than three hours after seeing Battle Fleet 103 heading for them from Epinomious inner system made for good propaganda, but it didn't solve the problem of the Tau fleet.

Well, his fleet in transit, if it joined up with the local system defence forces, would be the biggest fleet to ever engage the Tau. Not that the others were at all successful. In fact, there was frustratingly little sensor records of the important parts of the Tau battle tactics. Quaker wondered what exactly happened in those battles. And why there didn't appear to be any escaping ships...

Quaker said a short litany to calm his fear. "Citizens of the holy empire!" he said into the general vox-net of the fleet, "It is this day that our sacrifice is called for. The foul xeno that has so troubled us dares to show their face in front of us..."

He let the inspiring speech fall from his lips, still thinking rapidly about how to deal the most damage to the Tau fleet. If it be his duty to fall in service to Mankind, Quaker could see worse ways to end up facing the God-Emperor.

The Tau fleet had arranged into four sets of flat walls and were bearing down on him. Half of their fleet was heading straight for him, and the other half was attempting to envelop him. Classical. Well, if a stand-up battle was what the Tau wanted, Quaker was happy to oblige. Imperial ships had a historically known advantage over the Tau, being larger, faster and more heavily armed and armoured. Even outnumbered as badly as they were here in Cra, Quaker was sure he could at least deal significant damage to the Tau fleet. Perhaps even slow it enough that it could be caught.

"Accelerate full fleet speed towards formation gamma, form standard offensive wall formation," he commanded, still looking at the holo-plot. Gamma was one of the side formations attempting to flank him. If the Tau were going to try to flank him, then he would take the offered chance to do battle with less of them.

Imperial ships had a maneuverability advantage. He could bring battle to one of their flanks and thus have to deal with less Tau ships at the same time.

"Acceleration change in enemy formations," Sensors reported.

Hmm, gamma was retreating from him. Well, that was to be expected. They would try to rotate their formation to keep him boxed into the center. But again, Imperial ships had a maneuverability advantage and he could still bring the Tau flanking formation to battle without the others.

"Hold your course and notify me of any changes. Alert level two for the next hour."

The General Quarters sign disappeared. It would take nearly two hours to get into range and it wouldn't do to wear out his fleet's crew early.

~one hour later~
Rear Admiral Quaker sipped his cup of recaf, watching the holo-plot.

The Cra System Fleet, so he had designated it after hastily acquiring the meager local defence forces, was sailing past formation delta, the other arm of the Tau flanking forces. The plotter was good and the Imperial ships went past barely outside firing range.

Not that entering the range would have helped. With their differences in velocity, and the Imperial fleet still matching accelerations with Tau formation gamma to maintain their intercept, both fleets would have gotten at most a single salvo off at each other with horrendous accuracy.

No, they were safe from formation delta even though passing within spitting distance of the foul
xenos made his hair curl.

Quaker sipped his cup of recaf. Yes, definitely safe.

~half hour later~
The General Quarters was back on. Formation gamma was fast approaching ahead as the Imperial fleet bore down on it.

"Change in enemy acceleration."

Quaker consulted the plot again. Formation gamma was still retreating at full acceleration, but delta and beta were breaking from their positions in the Tau original flanking maneuver and heading directly for him.

Hmph, if they took that long to finally figure out what Quaker was doing, as simple as it was, the xenos commander must be really dense. That bode well.

Still, he would have to end the fight quickly or attempt to bull his way through formation gamma. A long protracted battle would see the enemy close in from his back and port flank and that would be the end of his fleet.

"Full military power, raise shields. Execute maneuver plan alpha."

Plan Alpha put his own flagship, the only one with a nova cannon in the fleet, behind the actual wall of battle. Far from being cowardly, Quaker knew that the nova cannon was his fleet's ace card. The Tau had nothing that could match its range and firepower and he had to use it to destroy key enemy capital ships to ensure a quick battle over formation gamma.

The Imperial formation shifted subtly, ships moving into their positions in the wall, as the fleet much less subtly pounced forward at high acceleration. Once within range, the wall would turn as one to present broadsides and the contest of strength would begin in earnest. A completely unimaginative and classical formation that had existed since the early days of the Imperium.

But Quaker believed strongly in dishing out as much pain as he could before the Cra system fleet was finally destroyed. And no fancy maneuver, like the one the Tau attempted, could match the Wall in terms of maximum forward firepower. To whatever was unfortunate enough to be in front of the wall, there was no vulnerable flank to strike at, no point of failure to exploit. Just endless rows of macrocannon and lance batteries.

The strike craft could have the sides, there would be no space in the center where the concentrated fire from both sides would utterly shred everything in sight. Just a plain brawl of brute strength, one the Imperium had the advantage in.

Of course, not even a dead simple plan like this would survive unaltered once the chaos of battle began. But that was why Quaker sat in this chair.

The chaos of battle began quite alot earlier than he had planned.

"Missile launch! Energy weapon signatures! Formation gamma, beta, delta!"

The alarmed voices of his officers snapped Quaker's wandering gaze back to the plot.

That... the Tau were firing from three times the range of his nova cannon! How in the world did they expect to get any hits at that kind of range?! Even the 'dense' Wall formation of the Imperial fleet was still more empty space than ship.
He had the sinking feeling that they did expect to score hits. And looking at the geometry of the Tau formations, they were indeed set up to put him right in the center of their flanking maneuver... if they had four times more range than he expected.

He wondered why formation delta didn't fire when he passed them, since he was almost certainly inside their range. When the answer occurred to him, Quaker also figured out why there hadn't been any survivors to give close-range reports of the previous Tau battles.
The Sorceror banged the incorporeal gavel, hard. The warp-pulse bounced all around the ether, echoing off minds and pinging off warp defences. He felt a few lesser cultists' psyches collapse under the light assault. Well, light for such esteemed company.

The Khornate greater daemon in the front row of the audience looked at him curiously for a moment before resuming the small war with his neighbour.

This was impossible.

How was a Tzeentch sorceror to arrange a grand meeting of minds between all of Chaos without it dissolving into a massive war between branches? It would take a leader of Chaos Undivided who was perhaps stronger than anyone he could summon. Perhaps even Abaddon himself could not do this.

He banged the concept of a gavel, harder. Nothing. Even if every major leader of Chaos agreed that the Culture was an existential threat that could end Chaos once and for all (one vision the Sorceror had was of the Culture taking on the Necron Galactic Pylon technologies... and then disturbingly, there was just blankness less than a few months after that future branch). Everyone agreed that Chaos had to band together to work to taking down the Culture.

Everyone also wanted it done their own way. And so nothing useful was achieved beyond getting a few fleets destroyed in the arguments.

This deep into the Warp, physical objects ceased to exist. Concepts were what was real. They were all in a metaphorical meeting hall that conceptually fit them all in. The only way to have everyone participate was to site the meeting hall deep enough that the length contraction of the Warp covered the entire galaxy's volume.

Well, a conceptual instance of them anyway, the real Sorceror and the real other Chaos leaders were still somewhere closer to the Reality layer. It made even the Sorceror's head hurt to think too much about it but he didn't dare modify himself to fit those ideas in his head. The Sorceror had seen what happened to those who took on too many Chaos augments, the mental sort seemed to drive people to utter alienness faster than the physical ones.

"And why should we listen to you?" demanded the persistent Nurgle leader. One of the few who had survived the Culture's fleets by dint of being too far away.

The Sorceror spun off another instance of himself to answer the question and focused on reading the mood in the hall. There were a few hundred of him running around trying to talk everyone into at least listening but it wasn't going to work. He couldn't even see a path through the future threads with the outcome he was charged to deliver.

The metaphorical door banged open, the pulse attracting the attention of everyone. The Sorceror paid his main attention to it, wondering who that latecomer was.

He nearly dropped out of the Warp in shock, in fact he could feel a number of other people's conceptual avatars implode.

"I see you have been busy," the voice said, dumping straight into his mind right through the Sorceror's not-inconsiderable defences.
The Sorceror spun wildly for a moment then yielded the floor to the presence. How...? No one had seen him for the last few years. He should have listened to the older Daemons when they said He would be back.

"You have done well in my absence," the voice continued to speak, the warp power sliding past the Sorceror's hastily strengthened mental barriers with contemptuous ease. The intrusion alarms didn't even go off. The Sorceror gulped, well aware he was effectively as naked as a newborn. "I am back." That simple statement froze everyone in place.

The Arch-Fiend, the Warmaster. Abaddon the Despoiler. The presence commanded attention like a supermagnet draws iron filings. The Sorceror could detect the mental hooks that caught his own attention but digging them out would probably shatter his own mind.

The attention of virtually all of Chaos was on the figure. Chaos Undivided indeed. It seemed that Abaddon more than lived up to his legend.

"There will be a 14th Black Crusade. A war to end all wars." The figure clenched a fist around them, demanding their obedience, "The 13th Crusade opened our doors to the galaxy. Now, this 14th will give us domination."

The wave of raw warp power flowed around the audience, a symbol of his power and the confidence of the Gods. The Sorceror struggled with his disbelief, it was more power than the torrent he himself had guided at Ackaris! One man, without even a ritual.

Exactly how much did the Gods favour him?! The Sorceror could feel the colours of all four Gods in that power. Even Tzeentch was there.

The Sorceror gulped unconsciously, wondering if he was going to be overshadowed in Tzeentch's eyes.

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The non-descript, but certainly very charming man sitting on the other side of the room was unassuming, much unlike Abaddon's wanton display of strength.

But the Sorceror knew better. The Avatar of Tzeentch was as much to Abaddon as Abaddon was to the Sorceror. If Tzeentch felt like it, the Sorceror would be squashed like a bug. No, less than a bug.

"I am sorry, I did not anticipate the Despoiler's return. The plan has failed." And it was his fault, the Sorceror did not add.

Tzeentch shrugged, "You were destined to fail. But your steering lured out Abaddon by presenting him the perfect platform to begin the 14th Crusade. In grander terms, you performed exactly according to plan."

The Sorceror's head spun, how would Abaddon's arrival help the overall plan? The plan to foil the Culture and keep the IoM in strife was in ruins, Abaddon's 14th Black Crusade would unite the humans and the Culture in necessity.

"Abaddon's chances of ultimate victory is small," Tzeentch continued, "You will guide him to failure."

The Sorceror gulped, that was ridiculously risky. Abaddon would destroy any who dared to sabotage him. "How?" he asked faintly.
"Help him," Tzeentch said, with a small smile, "Do whatever he asks, help his plans. Provide the Warp support he will require."

The Sorceror blinked and concentrated, no, he couldn't see far enough ahead without help. Tzeentch nodded as he took out his dice and looked for permission. No, he still couldn't see how that would help make Abaddon fail. In fact, the more the Sorceror helped, the longer Abaddon would last before he failed, and would increase the chance Abaddon succeeded, at least up from zero.

"I don't understand."

"Yes," Tzeentch said simply, "You will, in time. I will guide your hand as to our greater strategy, but in the meantime, you will help Abaddon to the best of your ability."

"As you command," the Sorceror saw no other choice anyway. Abaddon would demand it, and the Sorceror would die if he didn't.

"And I mean it. You will seek every possible way for Abaddon's success," Tzeentch said, meeting the Sorceror's eyes, "Even if it means helping Nurgle. The grand strategy depends on it."

The Sorceror gulped. Nurglites eh? He didn't relish the thought. But he nodded anyway. As Tzeentch commands.

"I still don't understand."

Tzeentch smiled, "Of course," and the avatar dissolved back into the warp.

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Extra Part

He stalked through the corridors of the blackstone fortress, none of the daemons daring to approach.

Not a single useful idea. Neither from the daemons, nor his followers, nor himself. The Despoiler had told him to find a way to hurt the Culture. As had Tzeentch, the sorceror hastened to remember.

The closest idea had been to scale up some of the D guns to starship scale weapons. It made for very fragile ships that were little more than flying cannons. But it was the only thing he knew that could even do any damage.

The sorceror was rather sure that they would never get to fire on a Culture vessel. Too slow. Everything was too slow. Even the longest ranged rituals he could design, using hundreds of cultists and daemons weren't good enough.

Whatever Tzeentch meant by cooperating with nurgle was beyond the sorceror. He couldn't think of anything that nurgle could do that might even be of the slightest use.

There was a succubi waiting for him, standing nervously in the corridor.

"I have an idea. Sort of."

"Speak," the sorceror said.

"Why not talk to the Culture captives? Surely they know something."

"Tried that," the sorceror snapped, "they don't know how to make anything they use."

"I know, but surely they might have some ideas? The Culture isn't completely peaceful so..."
"Who were their enemies?" The sorceror finished for it. It was a long shot but he would take long shots if it had any chance of success.

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He looked down at series of short notes. Interesting. Useful even.

Hegemonizing Swarms. And from the incidents the captives had mentioned with a little slaanesh encouragement, the Culture seemed to be really afraid of the stuff that multiplied. Like the chilling tale of the endlessly replicating grey goo that ate entire planets. Or the creeping slime that infested local creatures and bent them into the service of a hivemind. That last one had eaten multiple star systems like a tyranid infestation that never ended.

The idea was worth exploring.

So... a ritual that self replicated? A spell that would cast itself again? Enough of it would collapse the local space into the warp, making a daemon world. Hrm worth thinking about.

He doodled on the multidimensional paper. No it wouldn't work. Real space needed too much power to override, all spell configurations would have a net loss of warp energy per replication cycle. He needed a cultist to channel it. Or a living focus like the daemonic circles.

Oh. Living focus huh. He put down his paper.

The sorcerer could see where nurgle might come in now.
Chapter Notes

Italics are future sight.

Week 1
He cast the dice again, not quite believing the reading.

The imaginary plague of artificial contagious psyker-ness spread out across the future and was abruptly cut short. They never even achieved the critical mass needed to hold off an IoM Exterminatus, much less a Culture intervention.

The imperial inquisitors were too good at spotting Chaos.

And when the Culture got there, they punched straight through the weak psychic shield and all his 'recruits' disappeared into thin air. How by the four gods did they managed to de-psyker someone he couldn't understand.

He banged the table. Due to the future sight activity of the plague, he couldn't see the plague in the future until he actually made it. It was a good two weeks of work. Now wasted.

He needed stealth, he couldn't just rely on ultra contagious plagues, even one as virulent as any Nurgle ever made.
But reduce its control over the victims and his plague didn't spread enough. While the Culture weren't everywhere, he still needed to be able to take over a planet within a week.

What he needed was to make the victims spread the plague by themselves without acting too strange. And then they had to act convincingly human to the inquisitors.
Impulses for curiosity into the Warp or psyker-ness weren't exactly stealthy. He couldn't do more than that.

Hmm, if he could change what the victims wanted, it might be possible. But how? He thought for a moment before the answer became obvious. Slannesh succubi knew how. They were experts at manipulating people.
And they could be subtle.
And if he could work with that pustule of a Nurgle, it would be much pleasanter to be with the Slanneshis.

And why not add some self defence?

Week 2
_The case was weird. The inspector burned another stick of incense, praying to the machine spirits for the lamp to work out of its allotted hours._

_One woman raped. The next day, another one, apparently by the same criminal. That part wasn't strange. Criminals often went on sprees, even if this spree was a bit quick._
_What was strange was that the first woman had apparently tried to seduce one of his officers (who had taken it as an attempt to grease the wheels, if a bit unorthodox, and accepted her advances), that_
wasn't normal for victims of sexual crimes.

One woman, he might be able to brush it off as an unusual occurrence. But his officer's wife, an uptight traditionalist, had slept with their family maid (she had been straight as far as the inspector knew) and the air filter maintenance techpriest. And his officer hadn't minded at all. He was too busy sleeping with his own secretary.

"Burning midnight oil again?" His wife came in with a tray of snacks, "is there some problem?"

"I suspect the Enemy, but I don't know if I should bother Inquisitor Marius. It could be some faulty aphrodisiac," he eyed the tarts as she put down the tray but had something better to see as she bent over his shoulder to look at the reports. The view down her negligee was... distracting.

"Tell me about it? I might have heard something." she sat down next to him.

He resisted the urge to snuggle and recounted his findings. His wife's network among the middle society's women wasn't to be underestimated. Her ability to read people's relationships at a glance was something he had taken pains to conceal from the public.

"Mm, I've heard of that case. I've also noticed that a number of the Red Thread women have started sleeping with each other, it's a little scary," she leaned on him, the smell of clean shampoo she liked was driving him a bit crazy. Well, he had been cracking his head for the last week and neglecting his wife. A little attention couldn't hurt.

"It's ok, I'll get to the bottom of this. Just keep to our marriage vows and we'll come through this."

Perhaps it was some kind of new void borne disease, a sexually transmitted parasite that had an aphrodisiac effect? Stranger things had occurred. He could order his suspected subordinate to a medical test. But that could wait for morning.

He didn't even notice that his wife was seducing him.

Week 3
The Sorcerer rubbed his hands. It went better than he expected. Attraction effects, attention deflecting fields, suspicion suppression, the Slanneshis were a veritable gold mine. Amplified with his Warp expertise, he could use the victims as vessels to amplify each other's effects to nearly half that of a minor daemon.

The idea of hijacking relationships to gain access (the resulting effect of the attraction auras also allowed the plague time to spread) to hard to corrupt people was golden. Humans nearly always had someone they trusted who was less secure than themselves.

Add in subconscious manipulation and communication from the Slanneshis again, and he could even make a start on the problem of networking the pseudo psykers to form a network to resist attack.

The sudden appearance of the nondescript man in the room made the Sorcerer jump.

"I... I report satisfactory progress, I took the initiative to cooperate with-" the man cut off the Sorcerer's hasty explanation with a wave.

"You have the necessary materials. There is another alteration you must include." the details appeared in the Sorcerer's mind.

He examined the idea with a frown, "this only helps the IoM, why do this?"

"Who is our real enemy? Answer that and you have your answer." the avatar of Tzeentch
disappeared without a trace.

The Sorcerer thought for a moment. It still didn't make much sense, adding Warp modification abilities to the psyker network arising from the psyker plague was for what? It could mutate the network participants into nearly anything. It could only backfire horribly, that lack of control.

But he would do it, if only to see where this ended.
"Captain on deck!"

Seb stood up out of courtesy, nodding at the captain of his flagship. The very same Dauntless he had journeyed with for so many years, only with a completely rebuilt hull and internal structure. Seb Transstellar corporation, his in name only, had refurbished it from keel up with Talon's best augmentations (and quite a few besides).

The best voidshields available anywhere, a gellar field that could withstand even warpstorms, disguised Culture-tech armour that could withstand direct nuclear strikes, and an entire auditorium for the ship's church, he was better defended on this ship than anywhere else in the galaxy. Not even counting the hyperspace drives that he still couldn't believe was still a secret.

And despite being one of the smallest ships he owned, it was infinitely more dangerous than even the best Imperial Navy battleships. Perhaps even the Mechanicus ones. The ridiculous range of the Culture-tech lance batteries (a full light minute?! Insane! Although hitting anything smaller than a grand cruiser that far out would be chancy), the new Talon-pattern fusion powerplants and powergrid (that ran on heavy water, found on any old ice comet!) that provided enough power to fire a full salvo every thirty seconds, and a Seb Transstellar-original tracking and electronics suite that could network with any of the equivalents in his fleet to coordinate all sensors, electronic warfare and targeting capabilities... the Dauntless had a better offensive capability than any old-style ship that could be named.

Seb Transstellar seemed to be pulling wonders. Without even using any xenotech apart from the hyperdrive. Seb sometimes still wondered how that was done but he wasn't a politico, just some old "retired" cruiser captain.

"Admiral, the fleet is ready," the severe woman, who went by the unusual nickname of Flatpaddy, snapped to attention, "permission to take command of this ship?"

The nickname, originating from her figure, had nothing at all to do with her competency at command and if other people (namely the Imperial Navy) would pass her over for it, then all the better for Seb. She certainly didn't seem to mind the nickname.

"Permission granted. You have command."

"Thank you sir, I have command." She settled into the captain's chair with a salute.

Seb sighed happily, it was just like in his navy days but with one major difference. He had always known that he was destined for bigger things and those pricks in the Ecclesiarchy had gotten in the way of his true potential.

Besides, the captain's chair was rather uncomfortable. Yes, he much preferred the padded admiral's seat in the alcove directly behind it. Even if the paperwork increased in this seat, he loved that sense of strength, the fleet standing ready at his command to rain death wherever he so chose.

Yes, those people back at the Naval Office and Ecclesiarchy were going to get a shock. He had no love for the pen-pushers out here. Oh, he'd admit that one or two were okay, but the majority were just blind dogmatists who couldn't navigate their way out of a minefield if it meant negotiating with an alien or two for codes.

Get rid of him, would they? He'd show them all. He would give Chaos a whacking they hadn't seen in ages and reclaim his honour. If these Culture people would give him money, weapons and ships to
do it, then so much the better. It was just like having an actually working Administratum behind him. And he had just the place to go to. An old but rich Mining world caught in a minor warpstorm a century or so ago. Probably a Daemonworld now. If he could reclaim an entire world from the warp, then... then they'd see. And it's riches would surely help Seb's personal finances.

He assessed the fleet readiness again. 98% green, a few having logistical issues that never seemed to go away despite the best miracles of Seb Transstellar that provisioned his fleet. In the Imperial Navy, that was better than a fleet just out of refit.

"All Gellar fields operational, no instabilities detected. Power drain minimal. "
"Internal probing tests... passed. External probe test... passed."

He watched Flatpaddy command the ship, orders given precisely like a metronome. Apart from screening his crew for competency and training deficiencies, Seb Transstellar practices of actually checking if everything was working (they called it equipment validation) before using it had an impressive effect on maintenance readiness. They checked crew as well (they called it operator validation) with a similarly large effect on crew readiness, although not on morale. At least the reliable sanitation and living spaces made up for it.

"Fleet Projector ships powering up. Complete. Internal probe test... passed."
"Commencing Warp skim test. All hands prepare for Warp transition."

The new Fleet Projector was what made his new excursion possible. An underarmed but an extremely heavily armoured and shielded cruiser-class of novel design, its primary role was to project a massively overpowered Gellar field that could cover an entire fleet. Apparently Culture-tech could synchronize Gellar fields so that they layered behind each other instead of interfering. Hence the creation of a new class of fleet auxiliary. Each additional layer added less protection than the previous but Seb knew that many admirals and captains would pay a lance battery to have any additional protection against Chaos.

The idea of specializing fleet ships for their roles, not a new idea but the first Seb had seen anyone make work, also made for simplified logistics and coordinated fleet formations. A front rank of shield-projecting short-range ships armed with lots of point defence and electronic warfare (and moral defences, selected points in the formations also had medium-sized Gellar field projectors), a middle rank of lance and Nova Cannon long range executioners to dish out the pain, and a back rank of missile launchers on engines. Any general-purpose ships which didn't fit got assigned to reserves meant to shore up weak points, since they could play any role adequately but not perfectly. The doctrine didn't work on small groups of ships, but with all his ships gathered, there were nearly a hundred and fifty, including the core of forty Dreadnought-class ships each massing more than two battleships combined. More than enough to form a wall of battle or a proper defensive sphere.

This was his dream. This was what he lived for, to command a sword to take to the Enemy. So what if this was what the Culture wanted of him? An enemy's enemy is a friend.

The shallow Warp transition churned his bowels but Seb had more than enough experience dealing with it.

"Warp transition complete. Gellar field power drain up 50% on outermost shell, decreasing average 2% per inner shell. Warp signature inside ship zones... Sigma level! Warp skim test, complete!"
"Exiting Warp!"

Sigma on the Imperial Assignment. That was almost as good as realspace. The crew let out a collective held breath. They were ready.
Seb Transstellar stood up, drawing eyes from Flatpaddy and the staff officers on the flagbridge. Time to kick some Chaotic behinds.

"The fleet will set course for Midas Majoris. May the Emperor guide our hand."

Extra

The chief engineer of 'Shark'-25 puffed on his pipe. His foreman joined him at the mezzanine overlooking the main powerplant.

"Any idea what that is?"

The chief engineer shook his head.

The squat black pyramid sat to the back of the massive fusion core. It was dwarfed by the huge construction but one's attention was grabbed by it. Even space seemed to bend around the Thing.

The shiny smooth black surface was unlike anything both of them had seen. It was impenetrable to all scanners, impervious to all power tools (those that they dared to try anyway), no one seemed to know what it was or what it did or how it did whatever it did.

"Do you think the captain knows what it is?"

The chief engineer shook his head again. The captain had just said to install it there with a direct power line to the main core. Whatever it was, that Thing could draw on the entire output of the fusion plant when it felt like it. A fusion plant that powered more than forty lance batteries and a Nova Cannon.

He could easily believe that the pyramid would swallow all of that without a hiccup.

"Well, what about this Snakewick himself then?"

The chief engineer shrugged. Maybe not? Perhaps it was beyond human understanding.

Extra 2

**Talon-Pattern 'Starfish' Class Torpedo Carrier**

- Class size: Grand Cruiser
- Armament: Torpedo tubes x 500, Small Torpedo tubes x 50, Point-defence Lance-cluster x 4
- Defences: 'Distortion'-H Gellar Field x 1, Void shield layers x 2
- Magazine size: 10 salvoes
- Standard Loadout: 5000 x 'Starfire'-C Anti-ship missile, 500 x T140 'Halo' Escort Missile
- Maximum firecontrol range: 30AU
- Maximum firecontrol channels: 2000 missiles

Comments: The 'Starfire' class of ASM is the result of the radical new ideas from Talon in cooperation with Seb Transstellar. Boasting a 10 minute powered envelope courtesy of its new fusion drive and a maximum delta-v of 7kkm/s, the 'Starfire' is more a missile than a torpedo. Packing a truly massive kinetic energy punch, the durasteel shaped penetrator at its tip has no need of a warhead, simplifying logistics, negating chances of sympathetic detonation if destroyed and making the 'Starfire' smaller than a standard Imperial torpedo. Maneuvering thrusters on the 'Starfish' also give it post-launch adjustments, enabling launches on targets that the launcher isn't facing and thus allowing the 'Starfish' to fire all its tubes no matter where its target is. Its delayed ignition capability also allows "salvo-stacking" tactics where pre-
launched salvoes coast along until the desired number of missiles in space is reached before the entire swarm blasts off together to saturate anti-missile defence. The 'Starfish' itself is so named due to its six fragile "arms" that unfold from the main body not unlike a Terran starfish animal. Instead of restricting itself to the normal surface of a starship, a 'Starfish' can "open up" to expose row after row of torpedo tubes. The tubes are not accessible from the "arm", the lack of access corridors from the sides allow an incredible density to be packed into a comparatively tiny surface area. Instead, the tubes are reloaded from the front when the "arms" fold back down onto the ship. The unarmoured nature of the "arms" when the 'Starfish' is "open" is a known design vulnerability that is often made up for by its immense alpha strike. The 'Starfish' boasts a huge electronics warfare and firecontrol suite to be able to maintain guidance control links to its salvoes.

**Talon-Pattern 'Swordfish' Class ShieldEscort**
- Class size: Destroyer
- Armament: Point-defence Lance-cluster x 10, Rail-Pattern Macrocannon x 4, Talon-Pattern Lance x 1
- Defences: 'Distortion'-H Gellar Field x 1, Void shield layers x 3, 'Phalanx'-B Void shield projector x 1
- Special: Thrust Redirectors
Comments: The Archeotech devices called the 'Phalanx' claimed to be discovered by Seb Snakewick are a truly strange type of shield projector. Unlike most void shield generators, this one throws a huge shield almost a kilometer in front of the generator. This comes at the price of increased power consumption and restricting the shield to a hexagonal flat plane. The true benefit of the single void shield layer is that it is large enough to cover ships nearby the projecting ship from a single direction. Thus multiple such equipped ships can overlap their projected shields to form an unparalleled frontal defence, giving the system its name. To make full use of this function however, all the ships must have excellent station-keeping abilities. To this end, the 'Swordfish' class (itself a heavily altered Sword class) is provided with Thrust Redirectors, alternate thrust exit points for its main engine to afford it highly increased maneuverability.

**Talon-Pattern 'Shark' Class Dreadnought**
- Class size: ?
- Armament: Point-defence Lance cluster x 20, Archeotech(?) Lance batteries x 42, Ryza-like Nova Cannon x 1
- Defences: 'Distortion'-H Gellar Field x 1, 'Distortion'-I Gellar Field x 1, Void shield layers x 7
Comments: A massive ship design shrouded in mystery. Although the pattern and design was commissioned at Talon some weeks before the Incident with the mobile shipyard, none were ever built. It is unknown how the idea of the 'Shark' Class was ever created at Talon and the records of its design process is fraught with inconsistencies. Nevertheless, the hard-to-find Rogue Trader Seb Snakewick is rumoured to be in possession of no less than forty of these ships, origins unknown. Adding to its mysterious nature, the ships in Snakewick's possession are also rumoured to be of the exact same make and armament. Its lance batteries are claimed to be Archeotech, maintaining accuracy on all ship and fighter targets out to a stupendous range of an entire light-second. Rumours say it can not only hit a battleship but also damage it at one light minute. The massive Nova Cannon is another anomaly. While it is similar to a Ryza-pattern that fires plasma shells, these Nova Cannons appear to have much more advanced plasma containment systems that phase-lock the various containment EM fields, something theoretically explored by the AdMech but never achieved. These maintain all their deadly power but
are vastly more stable and have a fire rate approaching half that of a lance battery. More interestingly, the 'Distortion'-I type Gellar field contains unsanctioned and definitely-not-Archeotech modifications to the standard Gellar field projector. This one appears to project a much larger Gellar field, although of lower density, that synchronizes with other Gellar fields overlapping it, preventing destructive resonance with those shields. The principles of operation are unknown.

**Suspected Xenotech 'Anemone' Class Auxiliary**

- Class size: Cruiser
- Armaments: Point Defence Lance cluster x 5
- Defences: 'Distortion'-H Gellar Field x 1, Void shield layers x 10
- Special: 'Umbrella'-A Gellar Field Projector, Electronic Mimicry, Armour?

Comments: Similar to the 'Distortion'-I, the 'Umbrella' also has the same synchronization modifications. Furthermore, the 'Umbrella' can project a Gellar field of variable size, decreasing in density as it increases in surface area. The maximum size of the 'Umbrella' can cover an entire planet although this gives it impractically low densities. In the context of a fleet action however, the 'Umbrella' can project a useful if weak shield over the entire fleet itself. Multiple overlapping 'Umbrella's thus afford a fleet excellent fortification against Warp effects.

Furthermore, the 'Umbrella' has settings that allow it to project Gellar fields off-center of the system, even to the point where the 'Anemone' is no longer covered; the range on this setting appears to be extremely long (~5 lightseconds) although its use is questionable.

This system draws immense amounts of power while operating, almost the same as a Nova Cannon charging its powerbanks and the 'Anemone' Class carries out-sized fusion plants to handle the load. The 'Anemone' Class is of tactical importance to its fleet and has purely defensive armament.

Additionally, the 'Anemone' also carries a suspected xenotech suite of electronics also suspected of harbouring radically advanced machine spirits. The electronic warfare suite is able to emit frequencies to add to the 'Anemone's' signature in order to mimic any class that emits more than the 'Anemone' (usually those larger than it, eg. the 'Starfish'), hence electronically hiding it among other capital ships in the fleet although this does not defeat lidar examination.

The 'Anemone' is also rumoured to carry a strangely layered hull. An inner and outer layer of Imperial standard durasteel armour are present but it has been noted that the armour is unusually thin for such a critical and heavily defended ship. Nevertheless, its armour is actually larger than two standard layers and noone has seen what is in between those two layers. Apparently whatever is inside doesn't even seem to require maintenance. It has also been noted that the inner layer of armour never seems to be damaged and internal solar radiation levels are below detection levels.
John kept up the marching pace. The 31st regiment of Ril's planetary defence force was a proud one with a long history. Sure they had never left Ril's surface on extra-solar adventures, they were a fundamentally defensive regiment, but its patriotism and courage was second to none. Well, perhaps the legendary Space Marines but John was sure even they would acknowledge the 31st regiment's nerve.

The countless wars of extermination against the native orks were sang all over the planet. At least up until the orks had mysteriously vanished for no apparent reason a few months ago.

The company's drummer tapped out a familiar and popular tune. Slightly modified for the new enemy. The Tau had arrived, so deep in human space!, and a major land force was on its way to occupy Landing City. Like he'd let them! John shouldered his lasgun and raised his voice to the marching song. The 31st was on the move and the Tau would be thrown out of this planet like any other xeno.

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Shas'El Bork'an MontKor watched the display in his command tent. It was different from what he had trained on, but there was so much that was new nowadays. The tracking display fed to his main planning table was the grand summary of the battle situation, filtered and annotated by the planners and organizers in the combat information center.

CICs weren't new, they were present for space battles on flagships. The idea that one could use it for land battles came from the countless crushing defeats to the Culture in their VR simulation battles. The Culture had gave away full recordings of both sides' actions to the Tau after each simulation was complete and it had not gone unnoticed that the Culture citizen-commanders used the simulation functions to display ridiculous amounts of information about every detail on the battlefield.

Reality wasn't that convenient but the Tau had done their best to make an imitation. The unusual state of his army spoke about the changes.

He surveyed the ranks of triangles representing Imperial infantry. There were so many, hundreds of divisions, all swarming towards his positions. An untrained or new commander might have panicked when he saw that his own force contained a hundredth of their infantry. Not even superior Fire Warrior weapons could win against those odds in a pitched battle.

MontKor knew better. Not only were the Imperials disorganized, they were also blinded and lacked support. Tau had swept the orbitals clear and shot out or taken over all space assets around the world of Ril. Then the new space-to-ground cruisers that had recently made it to the main fleet (those greedy Raid Fleet commanders had taken all the previous production) had systematically destroyed every single atmospheric launch pad. With one bombardment frigate remaining in orbit, most of the fleet had then departed to the next target, leaving MontKor to command the occupation of the world.

It was all so unorthodox. Normally, the Tau would orbit the world for months, pounding all resistance with their new weapons until the world submitted. Only once they were secure would they move again. Now, the Tau fleet was dashing forwards. Speed, maneuver, the lightning strike. The whole idea was to move faster than the enemy. Another lesson learnt from the Culture, after a particularly embarrassing simulation defeat where the Culture commanders crushed the Tau by accelerating the pace of battles beyond what the Tau commanders could cope with. Something about OODA loops.
A new wave of Tau commanders were pushing for a complete revamp of Tau combat doctrine centered around speed. They were primarily made of the new blood like MontKor, who were put through Tau vs Tau and Tau vs Culture training simulations. But a few of the older ones had allied themselves with the new movement. And true to the Tau, the Ethereals had decided to give the new ideas a trial.

In a way, this entire invasion was an experiment. The future of the new doctrine, a supposed merger of the Mont'ka and Kauyon, was being assessed. It would live or die on the results achieved, the final arbiter of truth, as all Tau learnt. When the arguments had got too heated, they would take it to the test and reality would decide.

The new doctrine emphasized speed and information. Everyone sought to know more about the enemy, this new doctrine put emphasis on denying the enemy knowledge and shaping what he thought he knew. Everyone knew acting faster was good, this doctrine put emphasis on being as fast as possible. Observe, Think, Adapt, React. No two battlefield were the same, no two responses could be the same.

MontKor observed the overlay of light and dark patches. Uncertainties of their own information, from tracking satellites, observation air drones and pathfinder scouts. He swapped to the other view, the pattern of light and dark flipped over. Now it was the best guess as to what the enemy knew. This plot was far fuzzier than the first. For the obvious reasons.

"Commander?"

Montkor looked up from the planning table, pausing in his pushing of intention markers around (a new way of giving orders). "Yes?"

"The Shas'Ui are grumbling. They complain that the battlesuits are not to be used for transports. "

"Not again?" MontKor scowled, "Tell them to deal with it. We can't do anything about it for now, the suits have already been re-engineered. We'll have to pass the issue upwards. Perhaps the Water propagandists can do something about it."

While the new technology meant powered armour suits could be built infantry sized, the larger suits used as armour platoons were too oversized for anti-light work like these regiments of barely armoured I.G. MontKor had them stripped of all but light weapons and used the extra power to lift companies of infantry. The idea of using battlesuits as glorified jumpjet transports, good for the broken rough terrain of Ril, was near sacrilegeous and provoked endless arguments. Perhaps he should just ditch the Uis and put Saals in the suits. That would shut them up quick.

In a way, this was also a test. MontKor and many of the ground forces commanders had been given free reign to requisition special equipment. Another aspect of being unpredictable was to always have new toys on hand. If successful on the ground, the central war planners were going to take the new "Flexible Capability" doctrine to the far more expensive space fleets.

He looked at the solid blue squares perched on the mountaintop. Modified XV-88s. Instead of shrinking the railguns and keeping the same power like the other commanders, he had them oversized. Instead of being dual linked railguns, he had one even more oversized gun. Nearly everything else had been taken out, no sensors, no other weapons. The vulgar name of Ta'lissera-Piercer had made the rounds until he had revealed what he was going to use them for. Then the complaints had started in earnest.

The new railguns had absolutely ridiculous range with their new ammunition, a sabot design with stabilizer fins copied from one rare successful Culture battle (played under the condition of strict
reality rules). And they had a range of warheads to choose from. From anti-tank (which he didn't expect to use), to sub-munitioned anti-infantry to a special new one that deployed mines. That last one was had been a project that had tied up thousands of hours of the Earth caste engineers. A new mine that sensed electrical activity around them.

Firing from beyond visible range, their shots called by the forward observers. A true answer to the Imperial Earthshaker. And what had the Fire Caste said? A dishonor and a waste of supplies. Pah, they'd be singing a different tune once the battle was over. MontKor was not adverse to taking enemy strategies and making them his own. And there was something to be said when the Imperial strategy of saturation fire worked better against their own massed ranks than the Tau's thin lines.

And this wasn't the only new thing he had. Nearly everything was new. Yes, unpredictable indeed.

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Another ear-splitting whistling heralded the arrival of another salvo of Tau bolts. John hadn't heard of this from the regiment briefing. He had been prepared for a long slog trying to bring the Tau to a fight, the slippery bastards. He had expected countless knife cuts, bleeding the 31st through innumerable stings.

He had not expected this.

John poked his head out of the crater and scurried to another deeper crater just in front of him. The whine and explosion next to him threw him into the crater. One of those thrice-damned technosorcery. The waiting metal balls would leap up into the air from the ground and explode in a shower of deadly fragments when they got too close.

He padded himself down and thanked the Emperor again that he was somehow uninjured. It seemed that John had been unreasonably lucky throughout this battle. That had been all too close for comfort. Thank the Emperor that the Tau and their damned shells that shredded men like so much thin cloth hadn't got him.

The air was full of fresh screams as his comrades in arms weren't so lucky. The lucky ones were dead. The new Tau weapons ripped and tore, but seldom killed. The new screams overlaid the groans and cries of older casualties further behind. The maze of invisible razorwire had claimed their toll, the mines were as random as they were merciless and the endless whining of Tau shells overhead all pressed down on him like constant beatings of a hammer.

No! The 31st were braver than any! If the Tau were so keen on defending an area, then it was up to them to break through and reach it! They were building some kind of large building-sized device on the other side and the captains had brought the companies to take it in a massed assault.

"For the Emperor!" he yelled, more for his own benefit than anything else, and rose up out of his crater to charge forward another few yards. The commissar in the crater behind him was stunned at the display for a moment before seizing the opportunity to goad the men into another spurt.

A sudden buzz filled the air and half the company vanished into a red mist, flesh rending into horrible red ribbons as the hypersonic fragments from the hand-held cannons of the Tau infantry ahead shredded them. They squeezed out a few las-shots in return before disappearing into a different crater. John snarled in satisfaction as he saw a Tau go down. No telling if it was from his company or one of the countless trying to pick their way across this field of death.

"March on!" "The Emperor protects us!" "Kill the xeno!"
Cries of the commissars tried to rally the men into a charge the 31st were so famed for but they were drowned out by the constant pounding of Tau weapons. Already the battlefield, once a calm field lying fallow for the year, had been transformed into a twisted landscape of churned mud and broken bodies in less than a week of fighting.

In that time, the 31st had pushed the Tau back from one bloody defensive line to another. Unlike the usual Tau tactics, they were actually on the defensive. John had been glad of it then, but he wasn't too sure of that now.

His company, what was left of it, sprinted as one to a ditch in front of the one he was in. That put them the furthest ahead of any of the brigade picking their way across the blasted land. John was about to make his own run to join them when there was a whistling from above. He dived back into the mud filled hole, just in time. The salvo of Tau shells landing from above carpeted the entire area where his company was- had been.

He peeked out briefly once the ground stopped rolling. The formation of craters had changed. Of his company, there was no sign. Emperor damn them! John gritted his teeth and blinked tears away. True, he had a bit of an outcast due to his fervour, even by the demanding standards of 31st's commissars, but those men had drank with him. They had been friends, or at least people he had known.

And now he was the only one left. He crawled further into the hole as the whistling started up again, were they coming back for more? He breathed a sigh of relief at lack of explosions. Then he paused just as he was about to make another dash. Shells without explosions? That meant the mines. Was there nothing but death waiting for him outside?

John swallowed. He just realized that he was actually afraid of the Tau.

"How goes the battle?"

MontKor spun around, his pulse quickening. The Aun'El attached to his brigade as an observer had just entered his command post and MontKor hadn't noticed his aide's warning gestures.

"Very well, Aun'El," he gestured at the tense conflict where the 31st PDF Regiment tried to snuff out the defences surrounding the Heap, what the Shas'La Fire Warriors were calling it.

"It seems to me that you are losing," the Aun'El commented, "they penetrate deep into your defences. Defences that you said would bleed them."

"Indeed, Aun'El, the Imperials do well. Honestly, I had not expected them to persevere so. It is a storm that they are facing. A cold, deadly storm of iron."

"Then how can you say the battle is going well? Hasn't your defensive strategy worked against you? I understand that to stand still is to invite attack. We have never fought so hard for a piece of ground before."

MontKor bowed respectfully, it was nice to have an observer who knew at least a semblance of tactics. "With all due respect, this is not a way any of us have fought before. Nevertheless, I say the battle cannot do anything but go well. The Imperials are straightforward, and when given a target, they cannot fail but to attack it. And we are bleeding them heavily for it. As the Kauyon dictates, we have laid out a bait."

"Indeed. Yet, I see that they will still break through. How is that a victory for us? We cannot afford
losses, but they can."

"Yes, that is true. If you view this action as a single point, then yes, we will eventually have to retreat and that could be interpreted as a loss. I have taken precautions and will order a retreat when it is still possible to do so with little casualties. Nevertheless, this is for a purpose," MontKor paused for permission to continue, "I have studied our past battles. Always we have fought the Imperials in the way of the Mont'Ka or the Kauyon. Always, we have bled them with little loss on our side. Do you know why we take so long and have to kill so many of them?"

The Aun'El shook his head, "admittedly, that has always puzzled me. They fight fiercely but do not know when to give up."

"Each defeat they suffer, each strike we deal, only makes them angrier. They are lead by fear and pushed by wrath. They do not give up until we have taken the guns from their hands. Our strikes are too small, too separated to have any effect. They recover, mourn their dead, and come back for more."

"MontKor sighed, this conclusion wasn't one that he liked, "I intend to stop that. The only way to make them stop fighting is to make them fear us more than their commissars'. I will shame them, make their leaders look weak, teach them not to fight us. I will break their spirit and only then will they give up. And however bloody this looks, it will be far worse if it comes down to attrition like it normally does."

The Aun'El looked thoughtful. He pointed idly at the Heap, "and what's that? I hear you're building something new there? Won't it be problematic if the Imperials got their hands on it?"

MontKor... -

They had run away! Like cowards with their tail between their legs!

John ground his teeth. He had walked through literal hell to get here and the Tau had just up and left. He helplessly watched them simply walk into those giant bulky suits that had jumped over the sheer cliff.

Well, at least the 31st had captured a prize. Whatever the Tau had been defending with such ferocity had to be key to their efforts. Some kind of superweapon? After struggling through the killing fields, the 31st had reformed around the Tau object (after the techpriests had disabled it) and was assessing their next move.

They had driven the Tau off this area. Time to see what technosorcery was threatening the good Emperor's lands.

The leading techpriest in their brigade came walking up to their commander. The look on his face was unreadable but John began to get a sinking feeling in his stomach. The commander's explosion of fury, storming around the encampment, did not make John feel any better.

Then the whistling started again.

- ... simply shrugged and said, "I don't know. ... Really, I don't know what it is. I just took some Earth caste warp engineers and told them to build something convincing. We'll go right on building it up until they overrun the point. Which they will, soon. " He held up a hand to his communicator then turned back to the Aun'El, "Excuse me, but I have a retreat to order. "
The Macragge Marching Song (OOC: to the tune of Dixie's Land)

Emprah's men the thunders mutter!
Xeno's flags in His winds flutter!
To arms! To arms! To arms, for mankind!
Send them back your fierce defiance!
Stamp upon the cursed outsiders!
To arms! To arms! To arms, for mankind!

Chorus
:: Advance the flag of mankind! Hurrah! Hurrah!
In Emprah's land I'll take my stand, to live or die for mankind!
To arms! To arms! And conquer peace for mankind!
To arms! To arms! And conquer peace for mankind! ::

Fear no danger! Shun no labor!
Lift up lasgun, chain, and bolter!
To arms! To arms! To arms, for mankind!
Shoulder pressing close to shoulder,
Let the odds make each heart bolder!
To arms! To arms! To arms, for mankind!
:: Chorus ::

Swear upon your Emprah's altar
Never to submit or falter--
To arms! To arms! To arms, for mankind!
Till the xenos are defeated,
Till the Emprah's work is completed!
To arms! To arms! To arms, for mankind!
:: Chorus ::
**Eldar & Necrons**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Eldar**

Future warning delivered by Zhar-Tann
"That which restores all is key to the Conflict
That which makes all is needed for the Conflict
That which destroys all is target for the Conflict
That which is all is result of the Conflict

Rhana Dandra is coming."

We were informed that this is a repeat of a message received from Alaitoc not apparently directed at us. The true meaning is still unclear, Zhar-Tann refuses to explain possibly because they don't fully understand it themselves.

That said, we are investigating and collecting all options that appear to fit interpretations.
The legendary war to end all wars is supposedly coming. We have strengthened patrols and drone nets around all major sites of interest, as well as aiming to increase expansion rate across the galaxy, sacrificing thoroughness of scanning.

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We have obtained some further understanding of warp objects with regards to Revay's lessons. This was key to the understanding of Necron pylons. The Eldar are not pleased at our discovery, but do not appear overly surprised.

Further worrying motions on the part of the Eldar have been noted. A hyperspace drive signature not of our own was detected near the Eye but managed to avoid all attempts to contact or approach it. A number of theories have been proposed but the search net that was drawn around it should not have been dodgeable under normal circumstances. The target seemed to jump between locations discontinuously and warp effects have been implicated. The prevailing theory is that whatever it was seems to have been possessing future sight.

Let's hope it is an Eldar craft, not a herald of Chaos to come.

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"We're out, the warp is stable."

The Eldar in the room let out a sigh of relief and not a few farseers simply toppled over in exhaustion. Guiding the mon-keigh technology had required the cooperation of many of the best Eldar craftsmen, leaders and farseers on Ulthwe. It had very nearly broken them.

But they mastered it finally, brought it under their control, worked through every possible permutation of future branches down to the imperceptibly unlikely. Ulthwe had threaded a future path through the metaphorical eye of the needle, even the slightest variation either way would land them in mon-keigh hands... or worse, She Who Thirsts'. Songs would be sung of the farseers' doings this day for centuries to come.
The debate of whether to use it raged far and wide, rangers, exodites and other disparate Eldar coming to Ulthwe to make their case for and against. They finally settled on a compromise. Ulthwe needed to escape from the Eye before the cataclysm came or they would die. And so they would use the mon-keigh technology. But afterwards, they would destroy the device lest they be tempted to use it again.

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**Necrons**

Some initial alarm happened when a large Necron expedition was staged outside their usual bounds. The fleet was equipped with the most advanced technology available to the Necrons, including a very worrying nano-replicator weapon.

It turned out that the Necrons were visiting older Tomb World sites in order to assimilate their population and recover artifacts. They expected heavy resistance from the local Necron populations but promised us to attempt negotiation first. They also appeared to have no desire to claim the worlds at present citing the necessity of provoking war to do so.

They, however, have not relinquished their claim, but have decided that another war with the IoM so soon would be counter-productive.

On a brighter note, large orbital constructions were noted in Necron home systems, built and refined from local matter in the star system. Some of them also seem to be isolated experimental centers aimed at biological manipulation, with the stated aim of eventually reconstructing the biological form of the Necrontyr. We have offered to work with them and while basic biological engineering principles were welcome, they wish to undertake this project by themselves.

We have also managed to work together to reverse engineer how to build Necron planetary and mobile pylons in exchange for the provision of the foundations of biological engineering and our complete library data on naturally evolved flora/fauna samples. We are currently assessing its mental effect on warp-sensitive citizens and the rate of Chaos contamination, with a view to modifying the neural lace to counter its discomforting effect. This could be a major upgrade above the current Gellar Field defences.

We are conducting further research into the basic principles of the warp engineering, as well as the more immediate application of increasing and focusing its power. Perhaps we could have a warp-negation weapon?

Chapter End Notes

Ulthwe builds a Culture hyperspace drive and finally escapes from the Eye. Warp oddities only navigable by extremely powerful psychics allow the Eldar to escape the Culture's attempts to intercept as well as use the hyperspace drive safely near the Eye. In a certain sense, this is a prototype of the warp-jump through hyperspace idea.

This is mostly what Ulthwe had been working on when they withdrew from galactic affairs way back then.

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On Necron pylons: Being in a pylon field reduces Chaos contamination to zero, as well
as dampening all warp effects. It doesn't feel nice, a bit like being next to a Blank.

The neural lace can be modified to remove the discomfort (an effector equivalent also exists), and while doing this still doesn't allow any warp effects, it re-allows Chaos contamination (but reduced to a rarity, perhaps 1 in 1 billion per week) due to "vulnerabilities".

Combining this with the warp-resistance modification to neural laces eliminates Chaos corruption as strong corruption sources are impossible or at least very obvious within a pylon's field.
Millifille scanned the report again. The Ordo Xenos making a power play or just jumping at shadows as they were wont to do?

After the post battle clean up, it seemed like the Administratum had aligned below the Imperial Navy in influence, with the Mechanicus occupying a favoured but outside position. The only major difference was the loss in influence of the Inquisition.

Still, the Ordo Xenos and Ordo Malleus still performed useful functions and wielded significant power. Enough power to demand a meeting with Lord High Militant Commander of the Imperial Navy, universally acknowledged among the upper halls of power to be the current top dog of the heap.

"And we are telling you that there has been a major rise in xenos activities," the Inquisitor said, gesturing at the report.

Bleh, all these numbers and investigative relations were boring. Give her a tactical plot with hard velocity numbers any day and Millifille could crunch the battle's outcome in her head. Or a power struggle to pick apart for advantage. All these investigations were just one interview after...

An eyewitness report caught the edge of her eye and the stack of reports were suddenly very interesting. She bent back to the stack of paper, tuning out Altraz's dismissive attitude towards the concerned Inquisitor.

The minor rebellions were always happening and the Imperial Navy was no stranger to having to take down upstart governors or breakaway factions. But never in her life had Millifille seen so many rebellions at the same time, nor the Imperial Navy's seeming utter incompetence at responding to them. Battle reports, casualties and resources ran down the inside of her eyelids, the cost must have been immense. Well, not so much once Mars got around to using that STC constructor, Millifille was looking forward to the massive expansion of the fleet.

But still, that was very strange indeed. "Altraz," she interrupted her co-conspirator, "I think you need to take a look at this."

He took one look and saw the significance as well. True, Millifille wasn't sure just why this matter seemed so important but something was telling her it clearly was. And Altraz knew it too.

The Inquisitor, glad they were suddenly listening, went through the entire problem again.

"You see, we think the Imperium is under attack, by the most devious enemies we have ever seen to date," the Inquisitor laid out the papers, "this new xeno has technology in advance of mankind and is orchestrating rebellions and separatists across most of Segmentum Solar and Pacificus. Astropathic networks are still too slow in the other Segmentums but we're sure the situations there are just as critical. They have a method of FTL travel that does not involve the warp and is able to achieve FTL movement inside a system."

He pointed at the battle report of a certain Rogue Trader from some region in Pacificus. Millifille gulped, the distance and speed plots were like something out of this galaxy. The tactical implications... she thought about what she could do with an FTL destroyer squadron... the tactical implications were disastrous. If all of these rebels were moving around like this, the Imperial Navy absolutely had to acquire the capability for themselves. Either that or the Imperium would fall apart.
"Furthermore, we also have evidence that this new xeno is collaborating with other known xeno threats. In fact," he laid out more paper detailing incidents and graphs of xeno activity, "we are almost certain that this new xeno has been taking over Ork and Eldar that they come across. Within this expanding zone, we have had lower to no ork activities, almost no Eldar raids, and in fact no Tyranids at all. If this xeno can bind the others into working together..."

He didn't complete the sentence and didn't need to. All the enemies of humanity working together? With new and game-changing FTL drives? It was the stuff of nightmares. It was enough to destroy humanity. Millifille licked her lips, if only they could get their hands on the FTL drive and get the Mechanicus to use the STC a bit more freely... they might still stand a chance.

"There is worse," the Inquisitor laid a dataslate on the table and set it to project onto the wall, "if you remember the Message Packet incident before this whole war?"

Millifille nodded. Come to think of it, she had forgotten the whole thing afterwards. How did she manage that?

"It turns out that the xeno is trying to communicate with us, look," the Inquisitor showed stills of the video inviting the Imperium to some kind of galactic conference.

She gripped her chair subconsciously. The xenos were deceptively human looking. In fact, they looked completely human. She felt not a little fear at this, who knew who was a saboteur sent by outsiders to topple the Imperium? Millifille wanted to dispatch the Terran fleet to go hunt them down, to kick down the doors of the conspirators who threatened the safety of all mankind, to... She gulped a cup of water to control herself. No, now was not the time. They still needed that FTL engine. Without that, they couldn't even hope to respond.

Millifille glanced at Altraz and noted the tightening of his eyes. Same over there. Altraz nodded back almost imperceptibly. For some reason, Millifille and Altraz had somehow gained the ability to read each other at a level that even Inquisitors missed. Perhaps it was due to the trust they had in each other after the purge of the Ordo Hereticus.

M: It's the Culture. That thing the Sorceror is so afraid of;
A: Indeed. We weren't given instructions on this, what do we do?
M: I don't know. I'm just hungry but he also said that we wouldn't get our prize if we just ate these people. I wonder how long we have to do this for?
A: Perhaps if we do something useful, the Sorceror will get us out of here faster?
M: Good point. Any ideas?
A: How about making the Imperium attack the Culture? That certainly should work towards the Sorceror's interests.
M: Hmm... I suppose. The Imperium is certainly big enough to do alot of damage. Yes, that's a good idea!
A: Let's do it then.

"I think you were right to bring this to our attention, Inquisitor," Altraz stood up, collecting the papers, "we will need to discuss this, you will have your reply in due time. We are grateful that you have not given up despite how hard it must have been to get people to believe the existence of a galaxy spanning threat and you have certainly convinced us. Rest assured that we will bring this to the highest levels, you will expect a response soon."

The Inquisitor bowed and left. Millifille and Altraz shared a silent look and went off to do some string pulling.

It was going to be hard to convince people to mobilize the Imperium with evidence this thin.
Somehow the question of how Millifille and Altraz could accept thin evidence never quite came up.
Extras and Abandoned Plotlines

Chapter Notes

Plotlines here will not be continued barring exceptional circumstances.

The Eldar section is not considered to have happened.

Warp Resistant Neural Lace

Combining the lessons learnt in the monitoring of Revay's still ongoing lessons, the risky attempt of live counter-adjustment in the Emerit Encounter, further analysis of ArT's warp-powered songs and the old data from the List and IoM Blanks;

We have managed to create a neural lace modification (and a standalone version) that will actively monitor for any psychic intrusion and immediately correct it on the fly. Indeed, test subjects report feeling nothing at all when subject to the neural lace's protective action in test conditions (many thanks to Emerit and other cooperative psykers).

This operation has been confirmed 100% safe and effective in all cases tested although Culture citizens so equipped are advised to avoid contact with strong corruption sources such as (but not limited to) Warp Artifacts, Chaos Daemons and Sorcerors.

Designs and theory have been shared with the Tau, Eldar and Necrons as per our agreements. We are in the process of making arrangements to introduce this through Talon as well.

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Siege of Ruonkor

Background

Ruonkor is a Culture designated Stealth-Protectorate race
Its galactic position is close to the Eye of Chaos, just outside the Culture-exclusion zone
The Ruonkor system is a close-orbiting binary star with the only stable orbits orbiting the center of mass of the two large suns
Second planet from its primary is the planet Ruonkor, inside the liquid water zone

Ruonkor is designated by the Imperium as a Feudal Xenos world, inhabited by a bipedal race of monkey-like sentients. These inhabitants are known as the Min (single, plural and category are all Min). These monkeys were deemed to by psychic by a badly informed exploration expedition which quickly vacated the world.
Due to the low technological level of the Min (they do not have spaceflight), no effort was made to exterminate them as they did not pose a threat. Furthermore, supposed psychic powers made a land campaign highly risky and saturation orbital bombardment would render the biosphere useless (any colony on Min would likely end up as an Agri-World).

The Min would be recognized as a Terran monkey if not for a large obvious sac bulging from their brainstem. And their total lack of physical communication. Indeed, this was the main reason for the Imperial psychic assessment as the Min are obviously highly intelligent and coordinate in a highly
complex society.
Their primary communication method lies in the brain sac which contains a highly unusual formation that can only be described as a biological radio.

The Min as a race are mostly peaceful but occasionally attack and war between each other over resources. Individually, the Min are highly individualistic and self-absorbed. Dreamers all of them, the Min are highly inspired and intelligent thinkers but are distrustful of anything that they do not fully understand. If Mins fight, it is often to the death as aggrieved parties tend to retaliate in non-military ways until no further recourse is possible, upon which the Min prefer to utterly destroy their opponent.

This leads to a number of cultural quirks, the Min are too distrusting of non-personal relationships for a standard token-of-trade economy to work. Nor do they form large governments or identifiable political entities. Individual Mins often have extensive personal contacts, as their biological radios allow communication over vast distances, but are highly distrusting of strangers until familiarization.

Unlike most Feudal worlds, the Min have progressed to electronic technology and even basic brain-machine interfaces and implants. At the same time, their manufacturing ability is highly limited. The Min are extremely frail and do rely on machines to do much of their heavy work, but it appears that their cultural quirks have led to a failure of industrialization. Instead of the common capitalistic path of development, the Min maintain shared workshops and cooperatives that often center around a tribe's geographical location. Specialized tribes share knowledge and resources with neighbouring tribes with knowledge travelling by the far faster radio. This has resulted in lopsided technological progress. Instead of ever larger political and economic entities that favour long-lasting and large-scale tools, the Min have focused on abstract knowledge and customized but unreliable small-scale solutions made for specific tasks.

Their technological development has been shaped by this and it is estimated that the Min have taken nearly ten times longer to reach their stage of technological expertise than most civilizations. Despite the Mins' relatively advanced mathematics, biology and chemistry, their knowledge of physics appears to be dramatically retarded due to the inability to coordinate and conduct large scale experiments and projects.

Despite the Min already having the capability to make strong AI based on extremely detailed and robust expert systems and mathematics, the Mins' lack of infrastructure and their AIs based on Min-thinking also failing to cooperate, their highly advanced computers have not made a large impact on the Min racial capabilities. It would appear that the Min have dodged a Singularity simply by not having enough tools for an AI to do anything useful with. Instead, it appears that the Min and the few AIs they have built are aiming to progress to full mind-machine interfaces in an attempt to overcome Min frailness. Indeed, they have already made significant progress towards a general theory of intelligence although they have run out of time.

Given that level of sophistication, the Min would be expected to be highly developed in other areas with at least basic spaceflight. Instead, the Min have only recently discovered atomic fission and it is expected that nuclear weapons will remain completely out of reach for the foreseeable future.

For these reasons, as a cultural case study of unusual properties, the Min have been protected and watched by the Culture ever since we arrived in their space. Plans to contact them after the resolution of the Chaos situation have been swept aside by current events.

Abaddon's march places Ruonkor inside the projected conflict zone. A failure in our defense of this world would be a major loss to the diversity of this galaxy, forced evacuation of the Min would entail a massive loss in culture and a symbolic defeat for the Culture. For these reasons, extra effort was afforded to the defense of the Ruonkor system.
Eldar

Ellean stopped in surprise in the middle of the street.

"What is the meaning of this?" she said to the apparent empty air.

"The Council wants to see you," a voice replied from around the corner. A very familiar voice of an exarch.

"I am no longer on the Path of the Seer, what do they want me for?" she frowned, that was very unusual.

"I wouldn't pretend to understand Seers," the exarch's voice was sneering, "but I overheard something involving the Hall of Isha."

A shard of fear lodged in Ellean's stomach, what did she do wrong? They couldn't possibly... But the exarch's voice was so gloating, as if he was exulting her downfall. No! She did not know what it was that...

The dice arrayed around her soulstone flared to life on their own, despite being unused for many a year. Visions dumped into her mind nearly uncontrolled, no better than when she finally gave up the Path. Her knees went weak. What did she do to deserve the worst and final punishment of a Seer? She couldn't have misused her powers, she hadn't even had a single vision since she left!

Ellean took a step back and the exarch stepped out to follow her. She gulped and shook her head. No, she couldn't be this way! It was not fair!

"Will you answer the summons or will I have to make you?" the voice was so disgustingly sure of his victory.

Again uncontrolled, the warp lightning leapt from her hand before Ellean's desperate cry could even form. The suit of armour was blasted backwards into the wraithbone wall and slumped down into a smoking heap.

Did she just kill him? Even if she had dreamed of this, Ellean was not under any illusions that she ever would have managed it. How?! Was this why she was being summoned for the punishment? But... but... it was only the summons to the council that triggered this... why would they...?

Confused and fearful, Ellean ran blindly down the street. She couldn't even begin to understand the Path of the Seer, having only a poor talent for the Sight, how could she even figure out what the council was up to?

Shouts of the aspect warriors behind her spurred her run. This was getting ridiculous, how did her day end up so bad?

Before she knew it, she was forced to stop, with only a deadend in front of her. The chasing warriors were questioning the Eldar, asking where she had gone. Ellean looked around, trying to find somewhere to run to.

The Infinity Circuit sang around her, something she would sorely miss if she was caught (for what? Ellean pushed that thought away, she had time for that later). It drew her attention towards a shape further down the alley.
Oh, this was the docks. The shape resolved itself in the darkness as a tiny craft, sitting unused. Ellean glanced around and her dice warned her again of the approaching warriors. No other choice then, Ellean ran forward and the door to the tiny cockpit opened for her before she could even think of the command.

She barely knew how to operate a fighter craft like this one, having only flown a simple prospector survey craft during her time on the Path of Service. Nevertheless, the fighter's wraithbone hull responded to her desperate thoughts and leapt out of the moorings. With a scream of power, the agile Vampire Raider shot straight up and out of the forcefield dome of the Zhar'Tann craftworld and spiralled slowly downwards to the planet below.

Whether it was command confusion or some manner of miscommunication, the Autarchs never found out. The Farseers were also busy with a different project (and what that was, wasn't stated) and the single Seer in training they spared to track her managed to lose the future path almost instantly. Whatever the reason, the stolen Raider managed to escape into the Webway gate on the planet with nothing to track it.

Ellean followed the paths that her dice told her to. The flickering visions at the corners of her eyes seemed to pull her along and the Raider responded without her say-so.

Once the panic of her escape wore off, and the full magnitude of what she had just done finally came crashing down, Ellean was starting to feel a bit put upon. Firstly, her ability as a Seer (or as a Pilot) was wanting to say the least and now she was getting visions, trance or no. Secondly, she didn't feel like the Raider was actually being piloted by her so much as being piloted by her visions. True, she was going to attempt to turn it as the visions directed, but the Raider had the habit of turning before she even consciously wanted it to.

Thirdly, Ellean still didn't know what her vision of herself undergoing the ultimate punishment in the Halls of Isha was about. What had she done to deserve that?

It seemed like in the last day, Ellean was being pushed around by events outside of her control. She half-heartedly slapped her wrist of dice and received another vision for her troubles. The Raider turned over clockwise three times before proceeding off on a new angle.

Ellean sighed and decided to meditate. It looked like she might end up being an Outcast for a while, but she wasn't going to give up on her Path of the Dreamer just because everything seemed to conspire against that.

Presently, a gate loomed up in front of her and the Raider slipped out of the webway into orbit around the planet. Ellean consulted the star chart inscribed into the tiny Circuit of the Raider. Hmm, Exodite world. Which one was this now?

The Raider turned in response to another vision and Ellean caught herself giving the same instruction just as the Raider completed it. Sigh, this was going to take some getting used to.

Ellean got out of the Raider, wondering where she was. Then the vision hit her.

This was where the Eldar and the Culture were holding their contacts. The gate on this planet had been called The Gate symbolizing the boundary between solidly Eldar territory and where the crossover of cultures happened.
She stepped out of the Raider, wondering where her visions were leading her.

An image appeared in front of her. The Mon-Keigh had no psychic impression, not even the tiny one expected for them.
Hypothetical: Daenny

One minor craftworld is mostly ignored by the rest of the Eldar. Well, it calls itself a craftworld but in reality, it more closely resembles a group of rather more radical Outcasts/Wanderers. The ragtag group of Eldar ships have a multitude of differing opinions but share one common attitude.

The Eldar are not adaptive enough as a race to survive in this galaxy, much less so since the Culture are here.

They are regarded as insignificant, even though they are more active on the galactic stage than their population size would indicate. Their lack of an actual mothership to call home does not help matters. Nevertheless, they have all the functions a craftworld would be expected to have distributed between their nomadic fleet and this has helped them forge some sort of identity.

These radical Eldar have the stated goal of destroying Chaos, specifically She Who Thirsts, as an end unto itself, and they have a solution in sight.

The radicals contact the Culture close on the heels of Zhar-Tann, pushing their radical line and desiring to work with the Culture in order to solve their population problems...

2 months
The radical group investigates the construction of soulstones, the Culture begin thinking about them as some form of Eldar-style AI. Efforts to duplicate them go... not so well.

Zhar-Tann and the traditional Eldar start to diverge, neither of them cares much about the radical group as they don't see the Culture gaining psychic practices of the Eldar. Besides, they have bigger fish to fry, like the ever-meddling Sorceror. The radical group draws in its horns and avoid stepping on anyone's toes, shielding their own future paths from the Sight.

3 months
A major breakthrough on the part of the radical group utilizing the Culture's intelligence engineering principles applied to the warp allows Eldar in the Infinity Circuit and soulstones to be psychically active. More than usual anyway. Quite a number of ancient bonesingers are now able to spin soulstones and the much older Infinity Circuit designs from warpstuff even if they don't have corporeal bodies.

The radical group also vanishes off the future sight radar as their older farseers "wake up" from their slumber in the Infinity Circuit.

Meanwhile, the Culture possessing a better understanding on the warp in general advance a little quicker along the warp drive tests. Reverse engineering a webway gate is brought up with Zhar-Tann and some efforts to make it happen begins.

6 months
The radical group finally manages the impossible again, using a more Culture-like approach to the warp. Eldar psychics learn to trap psychic energy in the Infinity Circuit, powering it in the same way as Eldar souls do. While infused energy isn't sentient like true Eldar souls, it has much of the same
properties and can be used to bonesing or other miscellaneous uses.

More pertinently, the Sorceror continues to wage his war against the Eldar and the Culture. He doesn't do so well due to the Culture's better understanding and the Dark Eldar crisis is coming to a head a little earlier.

9 months
The Culture finally figures out a configuration of psychic bio-engineering that manages to perform a very basic bonesinging crystallization of warp stuff. While lining hulls with the material affords great protection against the influence of Chaos, the material isn't useful for much else. Still, it is a major breakthrough, mostly courtesy of the radical group's cooperation.

On the other hand, the Culture also detects a sudden change in Eldar priorities. All the other Eldar are suddenly seen to be on the warpath against the radical group. Zhar-Tann issues an ultimatum but the Culture tries to play intermediary and is generally confused because the Eldar remain secretive about their internal affairs.

The psychic cloud over the radical group's future cannot hide the light any more. The souls in the Infinity Circuit have become more and more disturbed of late, becoming more active and more homogeneous. The Eldar notice that the personalities of the Eldar souls appear to be blending together and the cause is the radical group.

A greater mastery of warp engineering than any other Eldar before, the group is pouring psychic energy into their Infinity Circuit, with the help of their unusually aware dead Eldar souls. The concentration from the continuous effort has been building for some time and the apotheosis was finally noticed in the future paths by Ulthwe first, then everyone almost immediately after.

All the Infinity Circuits are linked through the warp. While barriers normally exist between different craftworlds due to sheer distance, somewhere deep in the warp, there is a link. Eldar souls affect each other and their surroundings with their psychic weight and enough of them can reach across space... and even time. Unfortunately for the remaining Eldar who disagree with the radical group's intention on the general principle of Eldar caution, there is no stemming the flood. The radical group is too scattered, too independent and it is impossible to find them all.

Ynnead will rise. It is here. Has already been. For a warp god is not bound by the usual rules of time.

11 months
Mortals mark this time as the point of change. A birth of a new warp god, the Eldar god of the dead.

Unlike Slaanesh, Ynnead is far less concerned about reality. The new god rules over the warp with the Eldar's psychic strength feeding it. As long as the Eldar exist, the Eldar will continue to die. As long as the Eldar continue to die, their souls continue to join Ynnead in the warp. The psychic wave across the galaxy drains all the Infinity Circuits, the souls of the dead melding into one galaxy spanning consciousness, riding on the crest of psychic power the Eldar have fed it.

More than any warp god which came before, Ynnead is able to convert warp energy to be absorbed. The radical group's crystallized psychic methods allow it to fuel itself without constraint, even absent of any Eldar. The raw power makes Ynnead less defined, more malleable. It does not have the clearly defined goals of destroying the warp gods, unlike the Eldar hope, but it does shelter the Eldar as its own.

A war the warp occurs. While Ynnead itself has nothing to object to Slaanesh in principle, Slaanesh
is hungry for her souls. She Who Thirsts would never relinquish her rightful drink of the Eldar soulpower and Ynnead defends its territory, spreading implacably across the warp.

The war in the warp is short and brutal. Slaanesh is destroyed, absorbed and converted. Ynnead takes on a few traits of indulgence but otherwise, Slaanesh's impulses are leveled out with Eldar discipline. The Dark Eldar feel the change but their souls are rejected by the "True" Eldar who were the original ones in Ynnead, instead the Dark Eldar now find themselves in a similar position of having to torture souls in order to not be forcibly reformed when they die and are absorbed.

Ynnead is succeeding beyond the Eldar's wildest dreams... Khaine and Khorne soon fall to the growing stillness. None of their struggles have more impact than mere ripples. Like stones cast into a lake, Ynnead absorbs it all and is unchanged for the effort. The bursts of energy and anger of war, the shortlived struggles of emotion, they are foreign to Ynnead and buried just as quickly.

Most would consider these developments a success, but the Eldar are ever suspicious of something that appears too good to be true. Their fear is borne out when it finally destroys Nurgle and absorbs Isha. The Eldar gods are dead and Ynnead claims even them as part of its domain. The gentleness of Isha moderates its excesses, but their loss is felt keenly by the living Eldar.

Tzeentch flees before the ever growing calmness of the dead. Where it went, none know for sure. Sorcery and daemons across the galaxy slow and finally fail. The calmness spreading across the warp creeps into all corners, blanketing the galaxy.

By the end of the first year, the warp is calm again and Ynnead has achieved complete dominion over the warp. Some Eldar talk about dismantling the webway, trusting Ynnead to treat them well, but somehow it never seems to happen. Cegorach lurks in the webway and it has no plans on being absorbed.

The impact on the real is more muted. Ynnead is unconcerned about the non-Eldar. The Eldar are not ascendant, nor are they in decline. Ynnead's stillness spreads calm and acceptance, the dead are no longer lost and no longer mourned.

The other races are less strongly affected. The occasional gellar field failure in the warp no longer eats ships, but those who Ynnead touches are reportedly calmer and slower, as if their own souls are evened out. Many a Navigator who has stared too long into the vast stillness seem to have an aura of peace and all too many of them retreat into quiet meditation until they reportedly manage to stop their own bodily processes.

The cloak of peace descends across the galaxy like the stillness of the dead. Even the stars seem to burn lower and softer. The galaxy continues to dance in an everlasting twilight.
Seb Transtellar - General Technology Exhibition

Introduction
Welcome to the General Technology Exhibition, organized by Seb Transstellar in partnership with local governmental authority! This Technology Exhibition will showcase the latest technologies from Talon and refinements from local techpriests!

For our esteemed partners, companies, corporations and interests, already numbering thirty thousand and rising, we present this as a platform for sharing of ideas and innovations. The GTE will create a space where ideas can be shared, prototypes demonstrated, new products introduced.
To present your idea for a business and to request a free-of-charge booth, please talk to our event organizers, who can be found at the your local Seb Transtellar office. Special arrangements can be made for most purposes but may require additional time to organize.

We anticipate many of the participants will have innovative ideas and have also invited venture capitalists, banks and other lines of credit to facilitate in bringing your ideas into reality. Please do not hesitate to inquire with our event staff for introductions. We also have our local law experts in the A4 corner where business consultations may be had free of charge (this is not binding on us, advice provided is strictly on an as-is basis).

For the casual browser, we recommend the sales section where the latest market trending goods will be available for purchase, these sections occupy the first forty floors of the tower.
Yes, we have forty floors! Virtually any gadget, appliance or tool you can think of, and many you would not, can be found here. Do take your time exploring, for our event go-ers, we have formed a partnership with the local temporary hotels and accommodation services who are willing to afford a small discount to travellers.
Don't miss the flash sales!

For upcoming and specialist products and goods, we direct you to our first floor and the outdoor exhibition (don't worry, minor void shields have been erected to cover it from rain). Here you will find a dazzling array of goods from all over the sector. Anything from industrial machines to even minor spacecraft will be available for viewing.

Seb Transstellar only accepts responsibility for the booths and areas occupied by Seb Transstellar, we are not responsible for our partners’ behaviour during this event. Any complaints can be directed to our event staff who will provide arbitration services free of charge.

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Special Announcement
Seb Transstellar is unveiling a prototype augmented reality space on the premises of this event!

Those interested can borrow the display goggles and dataslate at the entrance booths free of charge. The goggles will show you what the General Technology Exhibition *really* looks like, the dataslate can present additional information and configure the display.

Your goggles and dataslate will operate in the vicinity of the General Technology Exhibition and can provide helpful directions, introductions to booths, contact friends and much much more!

For help in operating in AR, please ask any of our event staff or refer to the introductory files in the dataslate.
For help in operating the goggles and dataslate, do feel free to consult any of our event staff. For a more in-depth explanation and introduction to the technology, please proceed to our continuously running Introductions to Information Technology seminars which can be found near the entrances.

Our event organizers in collaboration with our partners and affiliates will provide exciting AR events throughout the Exhibition.
Upcoming ones are presented on your dataslate. Don't miss them!
PS: we recommend joining the "Defend the GTE! ~Tyranid Attack~" AR game. *wink*

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Meru sighed happily as she looked around the bustling Exhibition hall. Just one floor of many in the towering skyscraper owned by Seb Transstellar. Shouts of supervisors and workmen, noise from power tools and the whir of power trolleys bringing equipment and display sets to and fro was- no, would have been dizzying to the old Meru.

The reception was incredible, her desk was swamped with requests from local companies and firms. She recognized many of them as subsidiaries or somehow connected to Seb Transstellar, but many more were wholly independent. Her fellow citizens were piggybacking on Seb Transstellar's success and copying it or adapting it. There was already talk of a group of companies trying to form a direct competitor in interstellar logistics.

After days of frantic surveys, meetings and what appeared to be an endless mound of paperwork, Meru could see how Seb Transstellar ran through everything in the Exhibition. Critical parts shortages cleared up by a fortituous partnership or new startup, lack of finance brokered directly by Seb Transstellar or introductions to locals were made, raw materials trading, mining and transport were greased by a dropped hint here and a conversation there.

Like the heart of a person, usually not felt, working tirelessly in the background. That was Seb Transstellar.

Two months ago, Meru would not have believed that her world could contain so many ideas, so much energy. To say that the participants in the Exhibition were frenzied was... an exaggeration, sure, but not by much.

To think that there was this much life to be found in the Empire! She had passed her days in a colourless world, dead despairing eyes were all that hers met. She and everyone else were being crushed, and they didn't even know it.

Meru nodded politely at one of the groups discussing a new type of self-cleaning paint, the men and women standing in front of the whitewashed demonstration wall. One of them, she recognized as coming from a semi-noble merchant family. He was standing with the small group as equals, sharing in the idea just like the rest of them. They were equals here, in the Exhibition, everyone was equally excited.

She blinked away the sudden mist in her eyes. That was something new, unconnected to Seb Transstellar and their xenos. Humans could build this sort of life, just as well as the Culture could. They could do it, this colourful society. Build it everywhere, not just in this bubble of an Exhibition, a mere taste of what life could be like.

She nodded at the insight. So that was what this Exhibition was about, that was why Seb Transstellar made it so big. Big enough to feel like a different world, so that they could build a different world.
More than just the technology, more than just the ideas, it was the feeling it brought to all the visitors, even the participants. A quiet rising hope of a better future. A feeling of "We Can Do It".

They might not see it as clearly as herself, but everyone was touched by it here. They would take the feeling away, back to their home cities and worlds, and they would wonder why the Exhibition was shining and the rest of the world was not. And they, some of them, would build that feeling there. From every world that had a Seb Transstellar office, every single Exhibition between them, there would be millions of people who would see hope again. It could change the character of entire sector for good.

Meru smiled and put on the new AR goggles. Time to see the colourful, wonderful world.
"Amalie!"

The familiar shout sent her scurrying over the rocky floor of her village's mineshaft. She casually scooped up a lump of iron ore from the rubble and pocketed it discreetly. One less lump she would need to mine before meeting her quota.

"Ramal?" she asked hesitantly, looking around the corners of the junction. Good, no one around. She scurried into the alcove behind an unusually barren face of rock. "Are you fooling around with that 'comm' of yours again? How many times do I have to tell you that trying to mimic a techpriest is going to get you killed?"

The small scrawny boy, in reality no older than her own scrawny underfed self, just grinned back at her. His far less calloused hands made her jealous but she pushed the feeling aside.

Ever since her brother had been six, old enough to work in the mine, Amalie had noticed something strange about him. Despite being weaker than most other boys in the village, he learned the tricks of the miners quickly, jumping ahead of Amalie, less than two years older. Every swing of his pick seemed to break rock. He never seemed to get lost, no matter how twisty the tunnels were.

He insisted there was no trick to it, just observation. Indeed, Ramal had pointed out where to hit for her and how hard, and the hard iron ore had crumbled under her pick like limestone. But try as she might, Amalie couldn't seem to figure out her brother's trick.

Ramal's ease of exceeding his mining quota gave him some additional lumps after the 90% tithe. He spent most of that nowadays on what seemed like little bits of trash but somehow he managed to extract useful wires, pieces of forged battlesteel.

Amalie wanted him to buy better food to compensate for his weaker body but he just wouldn't listen.

His recent obsession with machinery began only in the last two years. Just like mining, he also seemed to have a gift for it. This one was less mysterious. He collected scraps of information dropped by the guards talking of their weapons, cajoled them into giving him demonstration shots and somehow had come across a manual explaining some principle called magnetism. And when he explained it to her, Amalie did understand it this time. Not enough to build one of his 'comms' but enough to know what went wrong if one broke.

It was frightening, in a way. He seemed to not only have a connection to the Machine Spirits on a basic level, but could somehow grant a bit of it to her if he would talk.

She made him promise never to talk about it to anyone else. Ever. Amalie had had to press him hard, almost begging him, but he had agreed and to her knowledge, had kept his promise.
"So, what's with the 'comm'?

"Come here, listen to this," Ramal tied the exposed ends of a few wires together and the tiny speaker on crackled to life. There was a wash of static and Ramal cursed, "Gah, military encrypted channel. Hmm, oh, here's a company one."

"-and there's a fire in shaft 6. Pump Six's fuel stash has caught fire, we have shut down the ventilation shafts and suffocation will quickly extinguish the blaze. 26 serfs have been trapped and their bodies will be recovered later."

Amalie closed her eyes and gulped, a fire was a major danger to everyone in the shaft. One of the main reasons for her village baron's decision not to run a drainage pump and instead stick to the aquifer free areas. Amalie's village was too small to suffer any more deaths.

The report went on.

"There's too many incidents, sir. It's probably a case of sabotage. ... Yes, sir, we will investigate but from the traces we have recovered in many of these... But, sir, it seems perpetrators, if any, have covered their tracks well. There's no evidence of any tampering."

"What's the point of showing me this?" Amalie asked. The usual company rivalry was too painful to hear. No one seemed to care about what happened to the serfs caught in between.

"Here, this channel," Ramal said, pushing the contact to the marked spot on the iron ore lump, the ore acting as a variable resistor.

"-and we announce the success of the snow grass introduction. It grows quickly and will grow anywhere. The fruit of snow grass is edible and can supplement your diet with vital nutrients you may lack.

Seb Transtellar's specially bred strain for heavy metal resistance is well adapted to the soil of Seph-... sorry, the rock of Sepheris Secundus. As long as it is provided with water, light and air, it will grow, even on bare rock."

Amalie was barely aware of her mouth hanging open. Was there really such a miraculous plant? Who were these Seb Transstellar people?

"Additionally, we will be sinking a new geothermal shaft to extract safe, fuel free energy to run the drainage pumps. It is anticipated that the geothermal investment will be sufficient to run at least ten pumps in the villages under Seb Transstellar.

Excess energy can be turned into electricity to power the chemical filtration units that will be fitted in each of our villages' water sources. These new units are expected to reduce chemical and heavy metal poisoning among consumers and many have already been sold.

Of course, we will have to guard these investments closely. Tampering with techpriest-consecrated equipment is extremely dangerous and disallowed to all non-qualified personnel. Any questions can be directed to our front office."

A filter to reduce metal poisoning in the water? An unknown powerplant to run safe pumps? Amalie rubbed away the non-existent tears from her eyes. She and her brother were the only two in her family after her mother died from metal poisoning and her father perished trying to extinguish a fire from the deadly water pumps.

They listened to the Seb Transstellar broadcast again as it repeated itself. Who out there was listening to such things that only concerned serfs wasn't in Amalie's thoughts, that
serfs weren't supposed to have radio equipment capable of listening to it also wasn't in her mind.

Amalie could hardly believe her ears. All she could think of was that someone out there was actually trying to make life better for the serfs. Where was this wondrous place?

She had her answer that night.

The village elders called a meeting that night. Her rebellious cousin twice removed had returned from his journey to faroff villages to learn their mining techniques (the only reason the lord approved of his journey) and the whole village had turned out to hear what he had learnt.

"-and so I got there and it was like, wow! A completely different world!" he emphatically described one of the villages he visited, "they used this weird hard paper for walls and their houses have slanted wooden roofs."

"Tell us about their mining! How did they mine!" someone in the small crowd shouted.

"Oh yeah, they had these strange picks that vibrate and go TATATA making a racket loud enough to deafen you. It chews through rock like your teeth through ration bars! I saw one man pull out a full wheelbarrow of rock in less than two hours! I could tell they were different, they walk like lords over there. They even lent me earmuffs to deaden the sound. To protect my ears! A different world I tell you!"

A murmur passed between the villagers. Amalie exchanged glances with her brother. It seemed like the world outside was rather different from what she knew.

"And they don't even use lumps! They write these things on pieces of paper that show how many lumps you have! See, I have one here, this is one lump. They have these pieces that go all the way up to ten thousand lumps! Sure, it's worthless with the lords but that village office accepts it! You can take the ore you mine to the office and they give you these paper to tell you how much lumps you get!"

Amalie gulped. Everyone had that look in their eyes. They had paper that showed ten thousand lumps. One could buy their own freedom from serfdom with that kind of money. Of course, that many lumps was impossible to carry, Amalie could see how the papers helped.

Then it struck her. Those villagers could read. At least enough to know that the fancy symbol - Amalie accepted the piece of paper that was passed to her and examined it - signified one and all the way up to ten thousand.

"And they have these steam pumps!" the murmurs grew louder, steam pumps? what was that? "The pumps that give off steam to pump water out! They don't use fuel! They use the steam from the heat deep in the rock!"

Her cousin grinned at them, the meeting growing silent, anticipating the next revelation. He obviously thought this would be a big one.

"And this," he held out a handful of small black ovals, "this is the biggest one of all. And they just let me take it! This is the seeds to a plant I saw them growing. They were farming it. " He passed out a few spongy orange blobs, "and this is the fruit. Try it! It's not too tasty, but it's edible. They say it's good for you to mix it with the ration bars."

"But the ground is too rocky! How can they farm it?! What kind of wizards are they! Aren't you just
pulling our leg with some offworld fruit?! Such a... a wonderful paradise cannot exist!" It seemed his tale had grown too incredible for the others to accept.

Amalie looked down at the hard black oval in her hand and the tiny piece of orange fruit, her pulse quickening. The fruit was sweet, salty and oily all at the same time, her mouth salivating at the concentrated nutrients it tasted in the fruit. She swallowed her bite and gave the remaining of her share to her brother. He needed it more than she.

"No, it exists, this wondrous place," she stood up. It was real after all. Not just a demon-whispered thing that came out of her brother's unconsecrated techno-magic. "I too have heard of this."

The others looked at her and she looked straight at her cousin. Their gazes met and she could see he understood too. Both of them spoke up together, Ramal muttering along with them.

"Their name is Seb Transstellar."

"Queen Lachryma, are you really going to just let these offworlders take our minerals!?"

The voice accompanying the flung out hand was far louder than needed in the small conference room.

A young woman by the name of Meru, regional manager of Seb Transstellar here in Sepheris Secundus, at the end of the finger calmly met the angry finger pointed at her with a steady gaze. In contrast to Duke Riaze's glittering stained glass robe, Meru's dark suit was mild.

"Land and serfs bought legally in freehold from Count Xaiver," Meru responded flatly, "It was a favour really, he was getting too old to rule."

Queen Lachryma sighed internally, letting none of her emotions onto her face. It was not the first time such an argument had happened in front of her, always in private audience. The entrenched nobility and noble-owned businesses were not welcoming of outside intrusion. This was the first time Duke Riaze had approached her directly though, even if the others were likely just his puppets. Riaze was a dangerous power here, he was just short of having enough supporters to replace Lachryma herself.

And if he did, Lachryma would be remembered as nothing but the Queen who turned Sepheris Secundus into a world almost as hostile as a Death World.

"You dismissed all the barons sworn fealty to him! Dismissed without a regard for their noble status! I have to strongly question your fitness to rule! You're just a woman!"

Lachryma blinked. Did Meru's eyebrows just twitch? "The good Queen Lachryma is a woman too. Do you doubt her ability to rule?" Meru shot back.

Duke Riaze could only splutter some platitudes to say he wasn't referring to the Queen. Oh, that was good. She would have to watch out for this girl.

"I meant that you're not even of noble birth! How did you manage to get him to agree anyway? Crawled into his bed probably, like a warp-spawned succubus."

In contrast to the usual bluster and strutting the nobles did, Meru went straight to the point. Direct, merciless and without any regard for noble airs. She was like a refreshing breath. An icy wind, sharp and cold. She did not like this place, and
Lachryma could see that. But that was all, everything else about the offworlder was too strange. She had to see what this Seb Transstellar was aiming to do here, and what drove this girl. Whether this Meru would be a new threat.

"Xaiver is nearly ninety. That explanation is too far fetched, yes?" Meru shook her head, "no, he knew his life was going to end soon and wanted to see the galaxy. His price that we paid was half a million thrones and an unlimited VIP travel pass on any of Seb Transstellar's ships."

So far, nothing new. Lachryma had heard eight variations of this sort of discussion by now. Details of Seb Transstellar's audacious transaction and their strange investments in their regions had been hashed over countless times by now.

Duke Riaze smirked, "Then if you do not recognize the nobility's leadership, how will you run your acquisition? Will you instate your own nobility from your ranks? I say that we will not stand for it."

"You underestimate the serfs," Meru held up a hand at Riaze's opening mouth. "Do not interrupt me here," the dangerous glint in her eye halted Riaze's attempt, but it was gone in an eyeblink.

Meru sighed and put down her hand, continuing in a surprisingly soft voice, "let me tell you a story."

Lachryma leaned forward. That was new.

"Before I joined Seb Transstellar, I was a serf," the conference room was completely silent at the bombshell. While the offworlders didn't admit to any noble titles, they behaved and acted like nobles. Many of the court were secretly discussing what rank this Seb Transstellar pulled in the sector politics. The company declined to comment.

This admission though, was completely unexpected. To put a serf in the post of Regional Manager? Unthinkable. Even Lachryma herself was surprised. She eyed Meru again, rapidly calculating.

"I was a serf, not too unlike those here on this world. It wasn't as bad on Miltor, I can read and write, I know some mathematics. More now. But economic bondage is effectively the same as your enforced servitude, it just has a different name.

Yes, I was a serf. Seb Transstellar came to Miltor and I joined them. They gave me a job. Gave me credit to buy an apartment. They let me work meaningfully. But that's just charity. They gave it to me. It wasn't mine and if Seb Transstellar left, I would go back to being a serf.

But among all of those good things, they taught me something very important. More important than even the bread I could afford to buy. They taught me to think for myself. To stand on my own two feet. They taught me knowledge yes, but they also gave me the chance to know freedom."

Meru's eyes flashed, Lachryma had the sudden impression of an icy glacier approaching, grinding down all opposition.

"Your serfs are just as human as you are. They bleed just like you, they eat just like you, do they not think just like you? Do they not deserve to be free just like you? They are human, just like you, just like me."

She leaned forward, the icy look in her eyes was back, "I repeat. Do not underestimate serfs. The serfs can be just as good as anyone else, even you. You are not special, whatever nobility you call yourself."

"Ha! Like those brainless unwashed masses can ever amount to anything."
Meru spread her arms, "and yet, here am I. Once a serf, now regional manager. I will never be a serf again. I will not return to that darkness. Because I am free. I am more than just a serf now."

Lachryma restrained herself from nodding. She almost had it, the reason why Seb Transstellar was here and why this girl seemed so driven, despite no one knowing what mysterious end she was working towards.

Duke Riaze sniffed, "High and mighty words. Do you have the substance to back it up? We're not running a charity here. Seb Transstellar is still responsible for Count Xaiver's portion of the tithe and when you miss-"

"Do not be surprised when I mention what comes next. The bottom line, yes? " Meru shook her head and tossed a sheet of paper at him. "Production is up 200%. While work hours have reduced! Death from accidents since we took over. One! Malnutrition and starvation are going down, they will be gone in three weeks! Rest assured, we will meet the tithe, with plenty to spare."

Meru cut in, overriding Duke Riaze, "Did the Emperor himself not teach that Man should be free, should think for himself? Did He not say that reason is our greatest tool, and freedom the torch to spread it? You may not believe it, but Seb Transstellar does."

Lachryma widened her eyes fractionally. The Imperial Truth, or at least a part of it. It was rare to hear of anyone speak of such. These offworlders were stepping on dangerous grounds here.

Even Duke Riaze blinked stupidly at Meru, dumbfounded for a moment, "Blasphemy... Know your place, serf! We cannot stand for this! My Queen, it seems that I have managed to expose their true heresy. I beseech you to cast them out immediately, set the Inquisition on them, burn them to the ground. Or I fear they will fill this world with their heresy and damn us all to the horrors of the Enemy."

"And yet, Queen," Meru's icy tone did not even slack to respect Lachryma, "Haven't we improved lives in following His word? We have done better for your population than anyone has done before, faster than anyone thought possible. The Emperor speaks true, no one can deny that."

Lachryma nodded once, slowly. "What do you intend?" she asked.

Meru met her eyes, "We will repudiate all extradition agreements that Count Xaiver made. Seb Transstellar welcomes all who come in peace with open arms. There will be a place for everyone. We can show you a better world. Believe in us."

Raize's eyes almost popped out of their sockets. Lachryma leaned back in her chair wearily, the number of shocks today was already too many for her frail body to withstand.

If Seb Transstellar opened their doors to anyone, and refused extradition, then any runaway serfs who managed to reach their territories would not only not be arrested, but would almost certainly enjoy a better life under them (that she did not doubt).

They would come. Already, some serfs were chancing the law to illegally run across the borders. If it was half-legal... Without doubt, the serfs would come to Seb Transstellar.

"You risk affecting everyone else's ability to meet their tithes. Losing serfs to you will affect production," Lachryma watched Duke Riaze nod. Of course, he was worried about that, despite his talk of blasphemy. If she threw him a bone, he might back off on the political attacks... Lachryma blinked. She was already thinking of how to appease Duke Riaze.

It seemed that somewhere in the discussion she had already made up her mind to support these
offworlders.

She continued, "If you go through with this, I will reduce their respective quotas according to the population they lose. Seb Transstellar's quota will then increase by the same amount. Are you sure about this?"

Lachryma could almost see the coins in Riaze's eyes. They could and would ship their weak and infirm to Seb Transstellar in order to keep the maximum production while reducing their quota. Beyond that, any deaths in transit would still be borne by Seb Transstellar. And there was also the possibility of 'miscounting'.
It was a deeply unfair ruling and might even result in massive losses for the company. But this Meru might not see it that way.

"We had hoped it wouldn't come to this," Meru stood up and bowed formally, without any of the flairs and flounces of the nobility, "But we accept the ruling. Seb Transstellar will open its doors."

Lachryma nodded. A satisfactory conclusion then.

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Seb Transstellar - Orbital Headquarters (converted Fleet Support ship)

"Whaa, don't make me do that again," Meru half-wailed, still shivering from nervousness.

Nora, back to being a woman after she was replaced with a local from Miltor, patted her comfortingly on the head. "You did very well. We chose you for the role because your personality match with Lachryma... well, never mind, because you could persuade her."

"Still, I think my heart can't take much more of that."

"Nonsense, you have nothing wrong with your heart. And Seb Transstellar has the galaxy's best medical facilities."

"Well, yeah, when you can restore someone from backup, of course you have the best," Meru muttered.

"That speech you made had many flaws from a propaganda perspective though. " Nora winked at her, "You might want to work on your diction and rhythm."

Meru scowled for a moment, "I thought I was being impressive," but brightened up soon enough, "But I guess I can learn."

"Well, we do have a library we're planning to bring on the next supply fleet here. We can include some tips on that."

Meru nodded, "and I can study it in my free time between management work. Yeah, that'll work."

Nora smiled, "So you'll be doing it then? Miss Regional Manager?"

Meru blinked as the trap snapped shut and pouted, "Oh fine, all right, I'll do it."

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Count Sia wandered through the ball, picking on fragments of conversations.

Seb Transstellar dominated all the recent discussion. They weren't invited of course. That would be
political suicide. Which translated often enough to actual suicide.

She nodded politely at another minor baron trying to beg transports off her. Sia's were full already. She was actually looking for more.

The prices of personnel transports were hitting an all time high and NaviSystem Inc. were making a killing.

Since Lachryma's pronouncement that only people who "volunteered" to go Seb Transstellar territories counted (determined by a signed agreement form, heh), many barons had taken to advertising Seb Transstellar's medical facilities to those unable to work.

There was an undercurrent of worry though. The last time someone tried to bring in high technology equipment was an obvious powerplay by one of the long-dead barons who had an offworld connection. The local barons had banded together to eliminate him.

She knew many of those near what used to be Count Xavier's territory had taken on some of the disaffected ex-barons from Seb Transstellar's restructuring in a bid to legitimise territory grabs.

Right now, despite the constant talk of Seb Transstellar's latest happening, the nobles were really watching each other to who jumped first.

It reminded her of a pack of leopards scheming to hunt a great beast and keep the spoils for themselves.

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"And therefore due to the characteristics of extreme Population I stars, the Sepheris Secundus star and its accompanying planets are expected to be extremely metal rich.

Furthermore, there are geological traces that the Sepheris system swept through the debris of a pair-instability supernova shortly after formation of the planets. The expected extreme amount of iron-56 and higher elements in the supernova remnant could explain the high surface metallicity of the Sepheris system and the accompanying severe solar wind that is responsible for the continual degradation of Secundus's climate.

Click on Appendix links for more detail descriptions."

Meru put down the astronomy report. She had decided to start her post as Regional Manager by gathering any information and expert analysis she could obtain on the Sepheris Secundus's condition. There was no point trying to analyze scientific or social data herself, she was needed to make decisions, not do research.

Aim for minor profit, but primary goal was to improve the standard of living, hm?

Her request for a farmable plant lead to Snow Grass, supposedly found by Seb Snakewick himself. The surveying flights over the surface of Sepheris had succeeded in spreading it quite far indeed. That was the only part of this whole thing that was going well.

She looked over the ore levels and accessibility report. The primary activity of mining did bring huge profits even with the crippling large tithe, but the work was dangerous and poisonous. The obvious route would be to bring in mining equipment to reduce exposure and risk of workers.

But there was that historical record of what happened to the last few people who tried it. Apparently, they were worried of a serf rebellion and deliberately kept the technology low.
For now, they were tolerating it due to Seb Transstellar's limiting itself to support services and not the power tools or capital industry needed to run a war effort.

That was worrying. Meru did not want this to end in a civil war.

Besides, she had the more pressing problem of what to do with the ever-increasing number of those too weak to do mining work. Give them power tools? There was simply not enough space on Seb Transsstellar land to mine. Train them as technomancers or even Talon secondaries? Possible with intensive crash courses but where would they work? There was nothing to do here but mining. Establish an entire capital industry base here in Sepheris? That could take years even with Seb Transstellar backing the effort. And Meru wasn't sure they would be willing to back her for years of continual loss.

She had asked for another Dispensation, a Seb Transstellar byword among the upper management for a special dispensation from the legendary and mysterious General R&D that seemed to be able to solve any problem. Meru, of course, knew that it was the Culture who was the General R&D and there was actually no such department.

It wasn't granted. All they gave her was this stack of reports and told her to look for another option. She had the feeling this was some sort of test.

A third option, she needed a third option. Some sort of untapped resource or unfound opportunity.

"Jarv? You here?"

He stood up from his working crouch over the cave floor. Explosives set and primed.

"What is it?" he called back.

"I just heard from the lookout guys, the Limpet mine has blown. "

"Oh, Limpet huh? Good thing we evacuated that first. How many did we get?"

He examined his handywork. Good enough. Tripwires and optical sensors were all set. He pressed the arming button and quickly, but not hastily, backed away from the area.

"Twenty-seven of the Scourges, more than a hundred baronials," his right-hand woman and wife came bounding around the corner, "it's a great success! How did you know they were going to attack?"

"I have spies in the Sourses," he said, hugging her close. The scars on their missing little fingers was a reminder of his treachery, but he swore to protect Ryn and he took his vows seriously. "Ore from the mutants buy their information. It's never enough."

"I know. We lost Carynryl in today's raid as well. Nearly sixty of us were caught. Their mines didn't work that well."

Jarv looked down. More blood on his hands. But he concealed his guilt as sadness for those lost. Ryn comforted him, which only added to his guilt.

It was an underground story that Soft Stone Jarv was actually a caring person, despite being an Enemy of the Imperium. The story that he personally mourned each dead rebel was always good for a few new recruits.
Innocent lives he tempted and lead to their deaths.

"But I have even better news today," Ryn said, opening an oiled paper bag in her hands. Inside was a strangely shaped orange thing and a scattering of black rocks at the bottom.

She broke off a piece of the orange thing and fed it to him. Oh, it was a new fruit. Fresh too. That was very rare. He wondered if the sacrificial "daring raid" on the starport had somehow succeeded.

No, they couldn't have returned by now.

"Where did you get this?" he asked Ryn, "You know the mutant markets are risky."

Ryn shook her head proudly. "Nope, guess again. I got this from the local villagers. It's some sort of new plant that's been growing all over the mines. The fruit has lower toxins than even offworld rations!"

Soft Stone Jarv blinked. That... what? A plant that grew here? He looked down into the bag again. What he had thought were black stones looked suspiciously like seeds now.

"Tell me more."

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Meru idly read another few reports. There were no answer in geological history or the limited biospheres in Sepheris Secundus. And what good was the list of ship schematics available to Seb Transstellar?

Her thoughts went back to the stellar composition report. Whatever it concluded, was that the Sepheris Secundus's mineral richness was the fault of some rare circumstance during the system's formation, as well as its natural richness due to the star's (relatively) young age.

Why did that bother her?

She picked up the dataslate again and reread the report. Hmm? The mineral richness historical analysis didn't seem to mention Sepheris Secundus specifically even if it purported to explain why Sepheris Secundus was so rich. She had no idea if that was a mistake, but General R&D made no mistakes.

She queried some of the more technical terms from the local database. Hmm, stellar formation theory was interesting, but ultimately unhelpful. She called the visiting stellar theoretician who had come with the latest library update (did Seb Transstellar really employ what amounted to librarians even for such esoteric subjects?).

"Hi, what seems to be the problem?" the man's cheerful voice and face looked out from the dataslate.

"Hi, this is Meru. I just have some questions regarding this metallicity report, do you mind if..."

*twenty minutes later*

"So you are telling me than none of these processes are actually specific to Sepheris Secundus?"

"Well, yes. But without looking at the original data, I cannot tell you anything more specific. Sorry for not being helpful."

"It's all right, you helped more than you think," Meru thanked him and turned off the call.
Hmm, curioser and curioser. She called up the metallicity report again and looked at the appendix. Ah, there, mineral content report for each planet.

She squinted at it. Was that missing a zero somewhere? No, wait, that was for the surface metals. There was a lot of ice down on Sepheris Quintus, predicted metallicity three layers down was high. Higher than Secundus even. Might be problems getting to it though, given it was buried under half a kilometer of ice.

No, how about something smaller, there would be less issues that way. She searched through the list of stellar bodies and found the asteroids list. A few awkward moments with bad filters later and she had a list of potential mining candidates. They would need to be confirmed with some of the out-system experts but...

Hm, living there was going to be a problem but Dispensations might be forthcoming in an unrelated area to her denied request. Or wait... she pulled up the available ships and space capability list. That new one down at the bottom. Talon-Pattern 'Whale' Class Auxiliary... Capabilities: mining, shipyard, living space and even some habitat. Seb Transstellar had some excess hulls, not enough crew.

Meru snapped out of her thoughts. It might just be possible that she had an answer.

She would need to talk to experts. This was going to need some discretion.

*three hours and as many virtual meetings later*

She dialed the astrogation and interstellar affairs department. They just had a database update, their information ought to be current.

"Hello, this is Meru, I would like to loan some deepspace and planetary geological survey ships and the crew to run them. Can you arrange for a discreet request on the company astropath network? ...

Yes, this comes from me as Regional Manager.

Also, I would like to request a status update on the current availability of the following specific ships: T-PWA, 041 to 045 and 072 and Aleph-One to Seven. Mothballed? Yes, thank you. That's perfect.
"

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Seb Transstellar Holdings - Local Headquarters
"Any idea what that's about?" Nora asked Meru as she walked into the office. Meru shrugged, still looking outside the window.

The street visible below was crowded with protestors. Or more precisely rebels. And rebels that weren't rebelling against Seb Transstellar.

More precisely, the demonstration was something of a rarity. Not many political leaders had people parading the streets calling on them to join the revolt after all.

"Well, I'm sure you already know," Meru said after a while, "the people here are dissatisfied and they love you people. Plus, you're sympathetic enough that they think there's a chance you will back them in a rebellion."

She was sure Nora noted her choice of words. Despite being regional manager and deeply involved in Seb Transstellar's affairs, Meru did not consider herself to be a part of the Culture's plans. She was trying to be independent after all.

"Why would they think that? We could get Seb Snakewick to take his fleet here and overthrow
Lachryma, but we're trying not to make enemies of the Imperium. An outright revolt without outside support is just suicide."

Meru sighed, "they don't think like you. You probably don't know about me when I first joined but the Meru then would never had thought of anything so complicated. The world is very simple. You are nice to them, so you must be their ally. The barons and the queen are nasty, so they are the bad people. They think the good people will fight the bad people."

"And what did we do to make them like us so much? I don't think even the citizens of this planet would be so unhappy that our medical facilities and less oppressive treatment is sufficient to incite revolt."

"It's the medicine. And the food. Seb Transstellar provides ample food, secure places to rest and takes care of its employees. That's more than enough," Meru smiled at Nora's skeptical face, "yes, enough to risk their lives in outright rebellion. They think the barons will attack you, take you away and they don't want that."

Nora still looked skeptical so Meru continued, more seriously, "You've never starved before. You've never held a child in your hands as they wasted away from a common cold or shriveled in hunger when the barons drank the fruits of their labour. You have never stared down the barrel of a lasgun, hearing your mother and sisters raped by guardsmen looking for a little fun. You have never woken up next to a cold body, to find that a cousin has gone softly into the dark. You have never felt the futility, the despair, when nothing you do will make any difference. You cannot imagine what it is like.

For all your sophistication, the Culture has not experienced want. And if you had, and you found a place that sheltered you, let you build a community to raise your family in, you would understand why they will defend it to the death."

She never thought she would get to see a Culture citizen look introspective. "Perhaps I might understand a little," Nora said, "then let's discuss what we should do. Perhaps this energy could be channelled to help to our cause."

Meru nodded. She had a few ideas written up herself.

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Toby Dikenson looked up at the white buildings. The whole trip from his little mining village was mostly just a blur of panicked running and desperate hiding. He had nearly been caught twice by the patrolling baronial soldiers.

Now that he had made it, the white buildings rapidly greying in the dusty snowstorms could only be Seb Transstellar, it seemed like his past life was all a dream.

The pre-dawn seemed to carry the sounds of voices from the center of the village. Toby was curious, anywhere else, he would expect everyone to be picks to the rock even before first light. Yet, it didn't seem out of place in this otherworldly area.

Grabbing a few of the sweet yellow fruits growing on a vine along the ground, Toby wandered towards the center of the village, marvelling at the buildings. The white material was hard and solid. It was also warm, or at least not as cold as metal exposed out to the snowstorms of Sepheris. That was good material, it would keep the heat inside. No wonder they said this place was paradise. (the material was just cheap plascrete, not that Toby knew that)
The streets were covered with snow, just like anywhere else, but he could see the white material acting as paving below. Most of the people seemed to be moving about unhurriedly, standing straight and tall. Didn't they fear Seb Transstellar's soldiers? Toby wondered about that for a moment and decided to mimic them. If he didn't want to get caught, he'd have to act like the locals.

He walked out of the alley, trying to act like there was nothing unusual about him. It seemed to work, none of the people paid him much attention.

The street lead to the center of the village, or it looked like all the streets did, where a large and broad building squatted. It had a massive front, the columns of the same white material seemed to spread its wings around the large central square.

Even so, the huge building was dominated by the tower right behind it. The metal and glass tower shot skywards, standing far above the rest of the town. That must be where the baron called Seb Transstellar stays, Toby thought. He's rich, was his second thought, followed quickly by, then his serfs must mine alot of ore, I can get rich here.

His attention was brought back down to the ground by the mumuring among the people in the central square. The square itself was filled with light canvas material lying folded on the ground between metal scaffolding poles. What that was, Toby didn't know. But he did notice the eight lines of people around the square queuing up.

At the head of the queue closest to him, Toby saw a strange curved metal object sticking out of the ground. The man standing next to it had a large pail with wheels below the curved end and was cursing as he pushed down on the lever next to it. Nothing seemed to happen and the man cursed again. A ripple of murmurs passed down the line and people started looking around.

Nothing else seemed to happen for a few moments until a strange green clothed man ran up with a box in his hand. No, not a man, Toby could see the legendary mechanical eye that meant techpriest. He didn't know those techpriests could take them off, that was a story to tell.

The techpriest fiddled with the machine spirit of the curved metal object, taking bits out and putting them back in. After a few minutes, the techpriest nodded at the man and he heaved on the lever again.

Water came out. Clear fresh water. Toby could almost taste the cleanness from it. There was clean water for sale here! And given the length of the line, it must be an affordable price too. Truly a paradise!

He watched three people fill their containers before getting bored of it. He had to find a place to mine and that meant talking to one of the deputies of the baron. He did have a pocket full of untaxed Lumps he could bribe with but was still the riskiest point of any escape.

The big white building had what seemed to be commoners going in and out, so that probably wasn't the baron's palace. Toby didn't know of any baron who would choose the squat building over the tower. So that must be the place where the baron's soldiers and administrators lived. He climbed the wide steps slowly, feeling as if he was approaching a mutant lair.

The inside took him by surprise. The columns he saw was just decoration, the true entrances were little glass doors that swung open to greet all comers.

Inside was warm. And well lit. Toby could see clear across the section of the building, over the tall mini-buildings that perched on the floor. Each of those mini-buildings were squares or rectangles arranged into mini-streets and didn't have roofs. Not that they needed it. Their open door-less fronts were decorated with colourful banners and signs and uniformed men and women stood outside them talking to passersby or handing out pieces of paper.

"Hi, can I help you?" a woman's voice made Toby jump. He turned to see one of the uniformed
women talking to him.

He blinked stupidly for a few seconds then hastily tried to recover in a hopefully unsuspicious fashion, "Um, I'm trying to look for permission to mine a portion of rock, who should I speak to?" He decided to reserve his bribe money in case this woman wasn't in charge.

"Ah, then you want to see Raphael over there... Hey! Raphael! New miner here!" The woman raised her voice and shouted across to one of the men standing at the front of the busiest street.

The man came over to him and the woman left, "Hi there, are you a new arrival?"

"Um, not exactly. I'm from one of those outskirt mines, I was thinking if I might be able to get permission to move to a better one," Toby thought that excuse was pretty good. Most of the nobles wouldn't bother too much with their less productive mines. The people in there weren't as well-tracked.

"I see," Raphael nodded with all too much of a knowing look, "in that case, I will suggest that you consider your options more carefully. We have many different jobs here and all too many people ask to do mining."

"What sort of jobs are there?" Toby asked cautiously.

"Oh, I'll show you around," Raphael lead him to the booths.

... "Here we have the mining section, just like you asked. We'll train you to mine properly, using the equipment we provide. Accident and health coverage included. And while everything you mine belongs to Seb Transstellar, we pay you in these," Raphael dropped a heavy circular object into Toby's hands.

"What's that?" Toby asked, knowing his cover was long blown. The man didn't seem to care though.

"That's a Throne. Imperium standard currency, valid with anyone, even off-world traders. The current going rate is about one tenth of a Thone to a day's meal. Two hundred will buy you a nice house, less if you build it yourself. An average miner, after three months of training, usually earns one Thone a day. Of course, there is room to do better and supervisors and managers can earn up to ten or more Thrones a day for the very best.

If you take this option, you'll have to undergo training to be accepted and you'll be bonded to work for Seb Transstellar for six years. Before you salivate too much though, let me tell you about the other options."

"What's a bond?" Toby asked.

"Oh, a bond. That means you have to work for whoever you are bonded to for that number of years or you will have to pay back the cost of training you," Raphael explained.

Toby nodded, no difference then. Wait... what happened after the bond length was over? He asked Raphael.

"You're free to find a job anywhere else," Raphael's eyes glinted with pride, "most will choose to stay on though. Seb Transstellar treats you well."

... "Our other services are always in need of personnel. Can you drive a truck? No? Are you willing to
learn? It's the same with the rest. Plumbers, electricians, mine engineers. As long as you want to learn something other than mining, you can find a job. If you're willing to work in harsh conditions, then our affiliate Sepheris Steel is always looking for forgemen. Some of these earn much more than the miners, some less.

Most of these come with even longer bonds than Seb Transstellar, I've heard the Talon Secondary trainee program comes with a fifty year bond and a Rejuvenat to ensure you pay it off," Raphel shook his head as if disapproving, "but trust me, they're more than worth it. You'll be doing a more challenging job, you'll be valued and the pay is correspondingly higher. Oh, and all of them also offer full medical coverage. If one of the companies doesn't, no one will work for them, word gets around you know?"

"Alternatively, and also with more risk, there's the entrepreneurial path. If you choose, you can start a business that provides services that people are willing to pay for. Seb Transstellar is trying to encourage the citizens of Sepheris to help themselves, so we will provide lines of credit to viable ideas. If you've seen the market in the square outside, you'll know that many people have been very successful with this option."

Raphel waved towards the main doors, "For example, various people have found that they can prepare delicious meals. Where do they get the raw materials from? Well, Seb Transstellar sells imported food, but the cheaper source is the local farming businesses. Yes! People farm here. Seb Transstellar sells seeds that are naturally resistant to the conditions here... ah, I see you already have snow grass fruits. Yeah, that's one of our more successful ones. In fact, it's getting to be quite the pest. It'll keep you alive but it's not tasty. Some of the local food is actually crossbreeds of snow grass and another species, most of those are even made by people just like you.

There's another story with the building cooperatives, where a few people get together to build houses on a contract basis. We sell the plascrete and various odds and ends, they build the house for a customer. Easier for our administration and they make a profit.

So there's plenty of opportunities. Frankly, if you could replace one of the services Seb Transstellar is currently providing, that'll be a load off our backs. We've too many things to do as it is. So, if you run a reliable fuel processing business, yeah, we're still short of that I think, we'll happily sell you our equipment at an affordable rate. In fact, Sepheris Steel started from zero and today it's eating nearly ten percent of our total ore output. The owner is making millions of Thrones, yes millions," Raphel waved a hand dismissively, "but you're not going to be that lucky."

"On the riskiest side, we have a... special program for the interested," Raphel said, after the tour was complete, "We have a pilot program to create a void-born fleet of new Talon-Pattern Whale class ships. This is a Seb Transstellar only program."

Raphel sighed, "well, it does pay alot. The most out of any of the jobs, except for the most successful entrepreneurs and those spend some time in the void anyway. But it has a hundred year bond and two Rejuventat treatments to add to the Talon Secondary trainee program that is a prerequisite. And you'll have to live in the void. Up there. I guess to some people that's pretty exciting, and to the most infirm or sick, it's usually the only option as they can't work well down here in the gravity. But for me? Nah, the void isn't where men are supposed to be.

Still, you'll want to head to that yellow and black booth over at that corner if you're interested. The Whaling people can tell you more."
Toby wandered out of the building in a daze. It was quite bewildering, the way Seb Transstellar did things. To think there wasn't even a baron called Seb Transstellar (except for a distant Rogue Trader no one had even seen before).

He wasn't sure what to make of it. These new job things were so different from what he knew of serfs that he couldn't make any connection at all. Was it better or worse? Was Seb Transstellar a good place to be or would he need to risk running again?

He looked around the square, the queues for water were still there, although much shorter now. Well, a drink wouldn't hurt, it didn't seem like he would need to bribe anyone after all.

"Excuse me, where should I pay for water?" Toby asked one of the women lining up.

"Uh, you don't. It's free, you just need a container."

And that was when he decided that this place was a good one after all.

Chapter End Notes

###Snow Grass###
A vine like plant that grows along the surface of the ground. Lifecycle from plant to flowering to seed requires no seasonal variations and occurs within 1 week. Plant main body has no fixed lifespan and will continue to flower and spread seeds continually. Grows 10cm a day under optimal conditions. Additional stress will of course slow down growth rate. Average growth rate on barren Sepheris Secundus surface: ~2cm per day

Resistant to water loss, low light levels (but grows correspondingly slower). Able to withstand and use light levels anywhere from near darkness to multiple times full sunlight.

Temperature resistant, growth range from -10°C (antifreeze included) to 50°C. Able to withstand sudden cold snaps to heatwave even in the same day. Original strain optimal temperature is at 20°C.

Salt resistant.

Natural nitrogen fixer, no bacterial colonies needed.

Roots produce acid that rapidly eat away at rock surfaces, extracting metal and nutrients. (fast for plants, but still takes weeks to wear down a big rock)

Resistant to common organic and chemical poisons, able to isolate and process most organic molecules into simple non-toxic components.

Can cling to rock or even metal surfaces, able to grow on permanent snow or ice but cannot grow free floating on water.

Has the ability to filter metals from absorbed water. Excess metal above trace levels is deposited in "pebbles" positioned at the lowest point of the plant. The plant sorts the metal and deposits pure metal pebbles (for the less reactive types) or grows metal salt crystals for those too unstable otherwise.

Silica in rocks are also processed but not absorbed. Recrystallization processes happen near the roots to rapidly breakdown silicate rocks into small crystals (rough-clay sized grains).

Snow grass produces small bland fruits that contain carbohydrates and all necessary protein and vitamins, including trace minerals. Not recommended as a substitute for
proper meals due to lack of energy content (carbs are reduced in proportion to the rest) resulting in excess of minerals but will act as nutritional supplements. -> Unmentioned is that snow grass also captures airborne and waterborne pathogens and neutralizes them. Fragments of neutralized pathogens are included in the fruits which immunize those who consume it. -> Sepheris Secundus variant of snow grass also includes organic poisons specific to parasites commonly found on the planet.

Snow grass produces clusters of small airborne seeds in windy conditions (leaves detect motion), grows explosive seed pods in low light conditions or artificial lighting (constant sunlight) and embeds undigestible seeds in fruits if enough fruits are detached (and hence someone is farming it). Spreads very quickly and nearly uncontrollably.

Snow grass is not specifically harmful to any other plant or common soil bacteria and is out-competed by other vegetation due to its lack of tendency to climb for light. Grows well in barren areas (just as intended).

Seeds vary from each other according to preprogrammed recombination paths. They have slightly different optimal conditions from the parent plant. This causes a new introduction of snow grass to an area to rapidly adapt into a variant that is optimal for it.

Aстute observers will note that snow grass has the side effect of acting as a biological smelter due to its unique nature of processing metal into pure nodules.

###Softstone Jarv###
Jarv is double-agent. Imperials use him as magnet for rebel recruitment which he controls the number and activity of by "sacrificing" them to pre-arranged raids.

His rebel activities are also used to prune rival baronial forces by using them as raiding forces in his traps whereupon he can 'successfully' attack them to retain prestige as a rebel leader.
"Incoming Message:"

The ping made the Magos look up from his work. He replied with a burst of confirmatory clicks.

"Message sender: Seb Snakewick
Contents in cipher text, handshake key value 9AFEB19C87AAD matching public code 19991a:

I would like to request a meeting of utmost secrecy with your esteemed presence. I have made a discovery of the highest importance and to your personal interest. If you would make arrangements to meet me at our previously agreed location at your earliest convenience, I would be glad to negotiate.

Message Ends"

The Magos Biologist flexed his mechadendrites inquisitively. After a moment of consideration, he bent back to his work. The delicate detox plants would need much attention if they were going to survive his absence.

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The deserted area on FarLight station was mostly perfect for a meeting. The Magos's four guardian servitors and Seb's meager guard of one Navigator, one Astropath and an unknown girl-human were their only audiences. That belied the immense numbers of counter-spying devices he had deployed although to his knowledge, this Seb hadn't used any at all. Or at least, not any the Magos could detect.

Beside the two benches was a non-descript black box that this Seb Snakewick had brought to the meeting.

"You have heard of the recent exploits regarding a returned Mining World from the warp?"

The Magos waved a mechadendrite. The other Magos on Talon were already swarming all over the world, examining artifacts and trying to reverse engineer the massive ship Seb had donated to Talon. In particular, the unusual xenotech gellar field projector. While the donation might have been only in name for other people, it was truly a donation in Seb's case. No one argued with the man who personally owned and commanded a fleet large enough to be called a Crusade.

Especially not when that same fleet had somehow emerged victorious on a major campaign against a particularly troublesome Daemonworld and returned damaged but still combat-ready. Even more especially not when that same fleet was rumoured to be stuffed to the air sweepers with archeotech and xenotech. As evidenced by the sudden acceleration in Talon's techbase after they dismantled Seb's donation. The man had to have a shipyard rivalling a Forgeworld stuffed away somewhere...

Not that this Magos Biologist had had anything to do with it apart from a passing examination of the
herbarium module. That had been interesting enough but not too unusual.

"I was responsible, as you know. On my travels, I came across a... particular object of interest," the man waved at the box.

The Magos looked at him for permission then ordered a servitor to pry the lid off. The box contained a strange device, a rounded plassteel and ceramacrete block with buttons and panels. He looked back at Seb, narrowing his digital eyes, that style of construction was familiar to any Magos. It dated back to the Men of Iron.

The thing smelled like an STC Template and mono-purpose Constructor to the Magos.

"What is it?" the Magos asked.

"A few of the techpriests in my employ have told me it is called STC Panacea."

The Magos suppressed his burst of excitement. The other Magos might go crazy over a new tank or starship cannon, but to a Magos Biologis, the rumoured Panacea would be a treasure trove of knowledge.

"You realize that all STCs and related information is the rightful property of the Mechanicus," the Magos intoned slowly.

"It comes with a few conditions," Seb said, as if he hadn't heard the warning, "I would like to see it used to help the Imperium. And soon. I have a reliable source of information that indicates we do not have the time."

"You wish it used widely? You realize that there are verifications that we must perform to ensure that it isn't tainted or a fake? How long were you thinking of?" the Magos said, trying to think of ways to take the thing and get back to Talon with it if the Rogue Trader proved uncooperative.

"No more than two months," Seb said flatly.

The Magos's eyes nearly fell out of their sockets. He adjusted the lenses hurriedly. Two months was hardly enough to do anything! Not to mention that Biologis studies usually were extremely inflexible towards rush projects.

"Take it on good faith that this is as much time as we're going to have. Besides, that one is the original," he paused deliberately on the word, "Two months is probably taking too much of a risk already."

The subtleties were not missed on the Magos. Either Talon would take the front on this or Seb and his interstellar corporation would. He had somehow managed to duplicate an STC.

The Magos wondered what else this man could do.

Chapter End Notes

The Culture's analysis of STC Panacea is responsible for the development of Snow Grass.

Note: Panacea was found in the dismantling of Comorragh
Chapter Notes

This happens roughly along part 22 to 24 in the timeline.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"And what about the tithe? Can it be met?"
"It can be exceeded."
"... I think then that the Emperor has greater issues to worry about. As long as the war effort does not slacken, it is doubtful any intervention in local issues can be made."

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Seb Transstellar Special Announcement

We at Seb Transstellar are aware of the growing dissent amongst the people of Sepheris Secundus. We understand your conditions are poor and you desire to improve it. We desire to improve it also.

Bluntly speaking, we know that the citizens of Sepheris Secundus look to us, Seb Transstellar, as a beacon of hope. That things could be better. We know of extraordinary efforts made to reach our domains. That those who succeed may improve their lot. We desire to help you also.

We appreciate your support, even if we're running low on warehouse space to keep all your kind gifts. The snowgrass flower wreaths are very popular among our female staff. For that, we thank you.

However. Seb Transstellar must also urge all citizens of Sepheris Secundus to not risk their lives. A history lesson follows. Revolutions cannot succeed without the will of the people behind it. That you wish to improve your lives, we understand and share your desire. We do not doubt your will. At the same time, revolutions rarely succeed without political support and never without technological support.

This has happened before. You know this, we know this, Queen Lachryma knows this.

For these reasons, we must refuse your call for us to lead any form of resistance. Do not throw your lives away, for it will be spent to no effect, for no purpose.

There will be those who say we have betrayed the people, that we have lied and promised good things but failed to deliver. To those of you, we say, we are working towards a brighter future. Trust in us. Keep the faith. Believe in a better tomorrow.

- Regional Manager, Meru

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"That's an outright rebellion! We should immediately move on them! And for that matter, why hasn't Queen Lachryma done anything about these offworlders?"

"Obviously because she's not seeing the same things as you," Sia glared at her raging cousin. The depth of his thought did not go very far, she felt. "Look at their message again. Did they promise
anything to the so-called 'people of Sepheris Secundus'? No. They talk about 'improving lives' and keeping the offerings but we know that's just a lot of hot air. They’re good at convincing people, this Seb Transstellar, and they used it to convince the serfs to go to their territory."

"But that's still intolerable! They're practically inciting revolt here!"

"Did you even read their message, you numbskull? They as good as said that they will not lead a serf rebellion! Of course, we know that that is just an empty platitude. The message was really to us nobles. None of us, including them, want a rebellion that will affect the mining, but what they just said is that they have the power to convince the serfs to rebel. If we try to push them off-planet, they'll start a revolt. That's the REAL message.

And since their medical technology seems to have been very effective at restoring all those cripples we've been shipping them, Queen Lachryma is probably happy that overall output is going up. After all, her Scourges will walk over any rebellion, she's not the one who has to deal with them with nothing but baronial armies. And us worrying about them means Lachryma doesn't have to worry about us.

Oh, I'm sure there was some kind of deal they cut with her without us knowing, but the fact remains that Seb Transstellar has outmaneuvered us."

Sia sighed. Explaining things to her cousin was always exhausting.

"What can we do? My province borders theirs! I can't keep losing serfs to them!" he nearly wailed.

"Then we need to cut them down to size. It's not just you who is meeting troubles with these offworlders. I know many others who might be willing to press their own issues. And with as many of us working together, not even Queen Lachryma will be able to deny us an attack. After all, her tacit support for the offworlders is threatening to undermine her political position with those barons who remain on the fence. She can't afford to spend anymore political capital."

"But we can't just up and attack them! A blatant territory grab like that would make me seem like the aggressor!"

Sia rolled her eyes. Sometimes it seemed like she was the only one doing all the thinking.

"So? Manufacture a reason."

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Ding!

Meru looked up from the latest report on acclimatization and picked up the dataslate. She was rapidly finding out that she would have to resist the urge to constantly check the dataslate for incoming messages or she would never get anything done.

But just once in a while would be fine-

She nearly shot out of her chair.

->Your request for a Special Dispensation has been granted.
->New product for discreet introduction: Metamorphic Matter (see attached appendix)
->General R&D, Seb Transstellar Headquarters

Meru grinned in a most unwomanly way as she read through the product specs. This was going make everything so complicated.

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"And therefore, Seb Transstellar protests against the recent measures by its neighbours that attempt to sabotage lawful migration. This action by the dukes and lords, some of whom seat in this hall, put shame on the august names..."

Meru watched the Seb Transstellar private telecast of the Sepheris Conclave proceedings. Nora was apparently male again.

Still, she had to wonder what they thought they were doing. Instead of citing law or throwing the rulebook at them, which Nora would almost certainly be able to push for some support with the minor lords, she was making a passionate speech about honour. Indirectly implying the honour of Seb Transstellar's neighbours were suspect.

Meru didn't think the Culture went in for idealistic pleas. Since when did that convince anyone?

"Blasphemy!" one of the dukes had had enough. Meru giggled in her private quarters, his face was red as a beetroot. "You heretic! You dare to claim honour when you are the intruder in the Emperor's ground!"

"Yeah! You're just some off-worlders!" Another joined in. Soon there was a torrent of insults and denials thrown at Nora, without respect for speaker time or due protocol.

They looked like so many monkeys throwing peanuts to Meru. With about as much effect on Nora. She giggled again. Three months ago, she would not have dared to even *think* that thought.

"I'll have your hide! A duel! I say!"

Oh. That sounded serious. Meru focused on the dataslate as the hall grew silent. Most of the lords seemed supportive of that.

Nora stood up and faced the bald furious man across the large hall. "Is that a formal request?" she said. Meru narrowed her eyes, there was an undercurrent of calculativeness in Nora's tone. They were Up To Something.

"Aye. Duke Zatci requests a duel of honour with this man... uh, Nora Spleizkel. To address that which was wronged, in response to grievous insult of the most intolerable nature."

Nora raised an eyebrow, "Indeed. I understand that once declared, duel challenges must be attended in person and cannot be avoided upon pain of territory confiscation?"

"Aye. I will see you on the-"

"I do also understand that you yourself are quite the marksman. Killed seven others in duels, didn't you?"

Zatci smirked, "You can still back out, if you leave Sepheris altogether."

"Is it normally custom to go around challenging women to duels?" Nora said casually, "One would think that would cause even greater dishonour than anything I could have said."

You could have heard a pin drop. The entire hall was just staring at the man dressed in a smart business suit and long pants. Did Nora just imply she was a woman?!

"Furthermore there is also the matter of precedent 76a," Nora continued, as if totally uncaring of the attention, "That which ends a line must itself end. I believe the precedent was interpreting the rule to mean that anyone killing the last child-bearing woman of a noble line, for any reason, would also be
subject to the death penalty."

"I don't see how that applies. Seb Transstellar is a company. It cannot be noble. Much less you," Zatci seemed rather less confident now.

"Oh, did I forget to mention that?" Nora picked at her nails, "When Xavier abdicated his seat formally, he also had to pick a successor. You are quite right in that companies cannot succeed to a noble title. I did. Technically, my full name is now something like this... Count of Rupaert, Nora Halmann Imuran, the House Spleiklc."

"No announcement of successorship nor the rite was conducted! That's in-"

"Careful," Nora interrupted Zatci, "You don't want to insult the name of another House, do you? Unlike you, women are allowed to name proxies in duels if they need to issue a challenge, although it certainly would be convenient if that applied to being challenged too. For the record, House Spleiklc was registered under the Chamber of Stars with all formal ceremony. About seven weeks ago, in fact."

"There is no formal."

"The requirements were only that the candidate and Ruler of Sepheris Secundus be present at the Chamber of Stars. The rest... isn't written on the so very helpful Currente Protocale en Miniut. Where would Seb Transstellar be without your explicit and truly excruciatingly detailed laws to guide our poor misunderstanding off-worlder notions?"

Meru watched the suddenly imposing figure sweep her eyes over the hall, "Perhaps some people didn't do their homework? Nevertheless, you did issue an unretractable duel challenge so you appear to be in somewhat of a... difficult spot."

Of course not. The entirety of the Currente Protocale could easily fill an entire library. And not a small one too. It had rules on the colours of frills to be worn to a specific variant of a dress party only convened when a female third cousin of a duke in the royal line of succession was married three months ago. To say that no one read it was a understatement. In fact, there was a supremely well-maintained and equally unused library with all the books in High Gothic in Queen Lachryma's palace. The clerks were still discovering pages apparently unread by any person in living memory.

"I could submit to a medical examination to ascertain my... child-bearing qualities, so to speak," Nora leaned forward, deftly catching the edge of her suspiciously heavy suit on the table. It was hard to spot, but there definitely was a bust there.

"That... won't... be necessary," Zatci sat back down slowly. Then shot up again, "I protest this misinformation. It was clearly a trap meant to bait me into a rash move. I move that the Conclave nullify the duel challenge."

Nora countered nearly instantly, "Seb Transstellar claims precedence in proceedings. A duel challenge is of higher importance and cannot be delayed by lesser matters, as per precedence 8011-amendment c. Said amendment specifically allows duel challenges to override nullification motions if one duelist requests it."

Then the Conclave dissolved into a rabble of voices.

Meru sighed and rubbed her temples. She still had no clear idea what the Culture was aiming at here. All this seemed to do was drag the entire Conclave into endless debates over precedence and
protocol.

Or perhaps that was the idea? Oh well, the show was over anyway, it would be lawyers from here on out for the next decade.

Meru decided to sleep, some people had real work to do after all.

"Welcome aboard the resistance," Jarv shook Ramal's nervous hand.

It was too obvious a ploy to gain favour to work on Amalie. Only young kids like Ramal would be wide-eyed at meeting a living legend like Soft Stone Jarv. Which little kid hadn't dreamed of striking down their oppressors?

That didn't mean she wasn't here for the resistance though. With the increasingly violent border skirmishes like the one that had consumed their tiny village, it was obvious to Amalie that a risky bet like the partisans would be better than the certain death staying under her lord. If anyone still needed proof, it was clear that the lords did not view their serfs they were supposed to protect in exchange for the tithe as anything more than expendable lives. The lords spent them like just so much coin.

"All of you gathered here know why you are here," Jarv said, sweeping his eyes over the small crowd, "you know this is a dangerous business that will get you labeled a heretic and traitor. You know how fast we die. And yet, you have chosen this path. Very well, the Grimnil province is where you will learn the ropes. If you have any concerns, feel free to ask me or any other veteran. We are all here for the same purpose."

"I believe I can help more than just as another soldier," Ramal said. Jarv came over and nodded for him to continue. "I'm good with electronics. I can repair radios, although I can't crack their encryption. If you could get me a dataslate, I believe I could learn alot from it."

He held out his salvaged radio for Jarv to see. Amalie gulped, that was his treasure.

Jarv looked at the woman following behind him and she nodded. "All right, you two can come with me. I want to see what you can do."

"You are asking us to suppress the rebellion?" Meru eyed Lachryma warily. She did not think of the queen as Queen when they were talking in private.

"Indeed. The other barons are worried. While Count Xaiver's turn isn't soon, the nobles are worried of your sympathies with the rebels. They want you to prove Seb Transstellar's loyalty. For that matter, I do as well."

Meru considered it for only a moment but the answer was already pre-determined. To refuse would be to make enemies of everyone, including Lachryma. Accepting would destroy their relationship with the common peasants.

Well, nothing to it. "All right, Seb Transstellar will do its duty," Meru nodded, "I shall make arrangements."

"And so you want to hire our guards? What makes you think we'll just let you walk off with them?"
"How about meeting half your mining quota next quarter?"

"... Really?"

"Yes, really."

"I suppose you've found yourself some soldiers then."

"Excellent."

"Indeed, my client hopes to buy some cooperation."

Jarv eyed the non-descript man, average eyes, average hair, average nose. Obviously gen-engineered to be as unmemorable as possible. This man could be more dangerous than he thought. "And what would your client want to do with us?"

"I can't tell you that. For various reasons, all our client wishes to see is an increase in your options," they looked at Ramal playing with the bag of black powder that had come in those large crates. There were data slates and these strange devices that came with them.

A cold chill ran down his spine. They couldn't know. Jarv pushed down the worry, there was no way they knew. "All right, we don't really have a choice on where we get our donations from."

"Just as a warning between friends," the man leaned closer theatrically, there was a privacy field up so it was completely pointless, "Seb Transstellar is going to attack you. They hired on Count Rael's guards to do it for them."

"What?" Jarv felt his stomach drop out, Seb Transstellar was the last direction he was expecting an attack from, what with their peasant friendly stance. So was it all just a sham? In any case, Seb Transstellar was not an opponent he was prepared to fight. They were far too efficient. And he didn't have one of those agreements with them.

"Do you have anything else you can tell me? Heard anything perhaps?" he hoped to hell this sympathizer could do so.

The man shrugged, "From what I can tell, they're mobilizing. You have maybe a month and a half to prepare."

"Any idea where?" Jarv asked.

"One never knows, but I think they're the sort to aim for the top."

"I see," Jarv said, they might even come after him here. The RockFeller mountains had been mined out long ago and the huge ravines of collapsed mines following the rich veins made this place a nightmare to navigate and a perfect zone for guerilla defense.

But holding on would be difficult. Moving was also difficult too. This place was such a perfect base and finding another one would cut his abilities drastically.

Ramal exclaimed in excitement as he poked the dataslate that had flared to life. The black powder crawled out of its bag. Literally crawled like some animated slime. They all watched in fascination.

"The interface is so simple, the designer must have been a genius. And all these presets. Look!" he pointed at the heap of powder and it formed into a shiny black ball. Ramal waved his finger around
slowly and the ball rolled to where he pointed.

He jerked his finger and the ball jumped a foot, landing with a heavy thud.

"The glove must be absolutely packed with sensors," Ramal shook his head at the massive amount of data displayed on the data slate.

"What can it do?" Jarv asked curiously, noting the indulgent smile on his contact's face.

"Just about anything, here," Ramal waved a hand and the ball spread itself over the ground. He poked at the screen until he found a plan he liked and made a raising motion with his hand.

The sheet of black material seemed to flow over itself and a long black object rose out of the floor. No, the black stuff was literally shaping itself into the object.

Ramal picked up the suspiciously lasgun looking object and walked over to the box of spare parts. A cylindrical prism filled with some liquid and a general utility power pack came out and he pushed them into the gun in no particular location. The gun seemed to eat them. There was some movement in the gun for a while then the power pack appeared in the butt while the prism emerged at the tip. Right where they would be in a lasgun.

Ramal pointed the lasgun at an empty spot at the wall and proceeded to blast out a small chunk of rock.

Jarv was aware that his jaw was hanging open. It remained open as Ramal pushed a few more buttons on the dataslate and the gun collapsed into a black ball in his hands that spat out the power pack and prism. Ramal dropped the black ball and it rolled over to join the leftover cubes.

"And it can also exert surprising amounts of force," Ramal gestured at the ball then pointed at the wall. The black ball slammed itself forwards and smashed into the wall, stone chips flying everywhere. That was hard enough to break a human or dent armour.

Jarv turned to his contact. "Heretek?" he asked.

"Probably," the man said. They watched the ball spit out a series of blades that embedded themselves into the stone wall. Then the blades rolled themselves out of the wall and dropped to the floor to rejoin the ball. "Actually, almost certainly. Even if it wasn't, the Ad Mech won't like advanced technology to be this easy to use."

They looked at the two crates full of black powder. Jarv had a feeling that defending RockFeller might actually be feasible.

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"Ha!"

Amalie backflipped through the air and landed on her feet. She only wobbled a little this time.

Ramal looked up at the pattern of spines in the wall and noted the one off target. "Almost there. The neural network predictor is stabilizing, so your aim should be better this time."

"This is incredible," Amalie said, not even out of breath despite the constant 'exercise'. Of course, it didn't really count if she had a thick coating of metamorphic matter over her entire body to help.

The siblings looked over to the other end where Jarv was trying to run with it. He toppled over
clumsily as the coating swung a leg out too far.

Ramal shook his head, "I don't know why it matches you so well, it's almost like the prediction network was already pre-tuned for you."

"Aw, you're just jealous that you can't use it," Amalie rubbed his head. The suit peeled back a little with a flick of her wrist.

"No, I'm serious," Ramal ducked under her arm and she pinned him anyway. Damn, it really was hard to dodge his sister when she could be so fast. Drat the suit. "Remember the first day? You said it was like a second skin."

Amalie shivered a little, "yeah, it is like that. And a second set of muscles too. " She looked down at her body. The suit of metamorphic matter weighed nearly a hundred kilos and yet Amalie barely felt it. It wasn't compatible with clothing though, it screwed up the aim too much, so she was clad in nothing but liquid blackness. In fact, Amalie had been rather hesitant to wear it once she figured out that Ramal could more or less turn it off with a press of a button.

She would positively kill him if he did that.

In any case, out of everyone they tried, Ramal said the compatibility was highest with her. Well, technically Ramal was the best of all, but Jarv had overruled his use of the powered mmatter. Ramal was too useful to risk on a frontline battle.

The suit grew little tentacles and Ramal squirmed, bursting out laughing as she tickled him. "Stop that!" he wheezed.

"Kuchi kuchi kuchi," Amalie ignored his increasingly loud protests, hefting her brother under one arm. It was scarily easy to forget that when wearing the suit next to a generator, she could break him in half like she would a twig.

A clap from the other end of the mined-out cavern halted the practice activity.

"All right everyone," Jarv said. He had already changed back into his casual wear. "It's good to see you're all so enthusiastic but I think it's very clear by now that Amalie here is the best suited to be the spotter for the mmatter unit."

Ramal nodded, "I've come up with some very nasty tricks, but without someone to target them, they're quite useless. mmatter isn't very good at detecting things and even cameras are quite limited, recognizing people images turns out to be much harder than I thought. Even so, the mmatter will do most of the fighting so we don't need much more than one person. Perhaps two just in case."

Jarv nodded back, "All right then, Amalie and Seymour will continue to practice with the unit. You two seem to work best with it. I'm leaving it in your care, Ramal, you're the mmatter division command. But don't hesitate to contact me if you have any problems. I want you to be the primary defense for RockFeller."

Ramal snapped out a salute. Amalie just sighed, boys, men. All the same. She twirled and threw out a jackknife kick almost lazily. The suit was almost like cheating.

Hmm, she wondered if she might be able to expand a bit on the mobility angle. Making normal martial arts easy wasn't going to win a war, but the suit didn't really have to follow normal rules, did it?
Amalie hopped forward, letting the mmatter silhouette move around the corner of the tunnel.

The black layer blew into dust under a hail of lasbolts. It fell apart and crumbled into a pool around her feet that was immediately reabsorbed.

Just like Ramal to think of that. Auto-aiming lasguns. Amalie threw a few stringy mmatter lines across the corridor.

Another hail of lasbolts greeted them but Amalie didn't try to pull herself across unlike the last exercise. Instead, the small mirror the strings dragged along clearly showed where the lasguns were.

She threw out a flurry of black stubs that embedded themselves in the ceiling in the intersection. Pattern 22, she signaled with a few fingertaps, then threw another set of black balls at them. The stubs absorbed the balls, grew out thin blades with the material and shot them at the lasguns.

The mmatter units supporting the gun structures dissolved under the assault. Amalie sent another silhouette around the corner but nothing replied.

Oh well, she was running low on mmatter anyway, the fabric was getting dangerously thin. Amalie pouted, why couldn't they make one that worked well with clothing? Or better yet, actual armour. Bleh.

She walked out and collected the mmatter around herself again. At least power wasn't going to be a problem with the mini-fusion generator she was carrying.

A crunch from above made Amalie dive for cover. A set of six black figures dropped into the rocky mineshaft at the other end, sporting lasguns. Oh, just like him to come up with a simulated guardsman ambush. Definitely Ramal's doing.

Amalie rushed forward, trusting the glittery mirror shards embedded into her suit of mmatter to deflect the lasbolts. A ring of black blades protruded from her waist just as she jumped forward, using as much of the suit's physical force as she could to close the gap. At short range, not even the mirror shards would work.

It was like being shot out of a cannon, Amalie literally went flying through them. The whirling ring of blades tore the figures apart.

Wow, that was certainly flashy. She had to try that again!

"Firaix Mines are under attack! We're facing six companies of lasguns!"

"Six companies?!" Jarv blurted out at the radio, "did Seb Transstellar hire Rael's entire baronial army?"

Ramal shrugged, "looks like it, there's half a division camping outside Rockefeller here and it seems we've just found the other half. "

"Well, at least it doesn't seem like even Seb Transstellar could get complete information," Jarv muttered. They weren't sure if he was here or in Firaix, which meant that his rumour-mongering must have managed to cause some misdirection. Which meant his chances with the mmatter just went up.

Alright, time to see how this would hold up. Seb Transstellar would attack any time now.
"Did you see that?"

"See what?" the sergeant snapped. Darn recruits, jumping at shadows. What good was there going down abandoned mined out shafts he didn't know and didn't question. What he was concerned about was living to get his pay and hopefully angling for a command position back in the cushy safe rear areas.

"I don't really know, sir," the nervous recruit replied.

"Then go take a look," the sergeant pointed into the dark side tunnel. The recruit gulped and pointed his flashlight. His lasgun swept the empty corridor, but there wasn't anything other than old puddles and oil stains to shoot at.

Jumping at shadows indeed. "Serves you right for getting a scare," the sergeant sneered, "Come on, let's finish our patrol."

The platoon continued their way deeper into the Rockefeller mountains. Unseen behind them, the black stains at the bottom of the pools crept out of the pools and proceeded forwards through the cordon.

"Sorcery!" the guardsman screamed as he fired a lasbolt into the slithering dark mass. It had as little effect as all the ones before it. The black mass leapt forward and enveloped him.

The end of his screams did not reassure the rest of the company. The black mass continued to advance forward, darting from one man to the next with eerie speed and silence. Leaving behind men with their necks broken and bodies mangled.

Just like the last pskyer who tried to remove the corruption. Whatever he had done didn't seem to have any effect and the mass seemed to shrug off warp lightning like a Leman Russ wading through pistol fire.

It quivered and formed into a spinning pillar, and just like the last time, it spun and spat out a flurry of black needles that reformed around weapons, jamming triggers and draining power packs. Meltas had worked and had pushed the figure backwards until the flamer team stepped into a black puddle left in its retreat and got eaten.

Now the guardsmen were wary of stepping into any suspicious puddles, which in their panic, was all of them. They didn't have enough flamer fuel to dry the entire mountain.

The guardsmen attempting to surround it yet again cursed and shook as their weapons failed to work and one unlucky person blew himself up trying to throw a grenade that didn't want to leave his hand.

Just as the lascannon had almost finished setting up, the company sent to pin the creature down found their guns dragged out of their hands, their grenades mysteriously missing and their clothing's holders for all sorts of miscellaneous items spilling their contents on the ground.

No one wanted to approach the black swarm barehanded.

The lasguns, pistols and rocket launchers propped themselves up, a small forest of lethal weapons embedded in the deadly black goo that the black mass had flattened itself into. The lascannon team scattered, just in time as a hail of fire smashed their position apart. Mysteriously, the lascannon itself
seemed to have survived and when the team tried to hurry back to it, under the urging of a particularly enthusiastic commissar, the cannon swiveled by itself and blew them apart.

Then the rebels finally decided to show themselves, armed with not much more than gunpowder weapons. Well made ones, true, but it was sufficient against unarmed guards.

It was too much. They had expected easy killings amongst the rebels, not to have to face down the rebels' pet demon. Most of the disarmed baronial militia surrendered without resistance.

"We're doing very well, sir," the scout gave a half-hearted salute.

Jarv removed another guardsman figure from the table. It was going too well. Three fourths of the guards were taken out, mostly by the giant explosion that leveled Firaix.

The rebels there had used those strange scanners that had been provided with the mmatter and located a small untapped fuel reservoir. Blasting charges were rapidly set and the fuel had been set loose into the mine. One trigger-happy guardsman later and Firaix was a literal smoking hole in the ground. Unprocessed promethium fuel gave off highly toxic fumes when burnt. Only those who had managed to escape before the plan began had survived.

Jarv did not expect Seb Transstellar to be this easy to beat. It was true that he had had some new and very powerful weapons, like the mmatter, but the baronial army had mostly just marched into trap after trap. They weren't doing anything different from the other armies except for knowing where he was and coming out in force.

There was something he couldn't quite put his finger on here. They had to be up to something, Seb Transstellar was not this incompetent. And Jarv had better figure out what it was before it happened.

Still, he had also better get around to making sure the rest of the Seb Transstellar forces weren't around to stick a lasbolt in him when that other shoe dropped.

Amalie climbed into her flak jacket, the black goo dissolving into a shower of dust left nothing in her hair or on her body. Phew, that was scary.

Training missions were one thing, but actually getting shot at with lethal lasbolts and even mortar shells at one point was quite another.

"Hey, you did well out there."

Amalie yelped and hurriedly grabbed a towel. Oh, it was just Ramal. "Gah, at least knock."

He had the grace to look apologetic at least. "Well, I just wanted to say that we're almost done. The regular rebels are out there sweeping up the stragglers. Firaix Mines are also taken care of."

Amalie eyed him, "that's not all. You didn't disturb me just to tell me we won."

"We haven't," Ramal shrugged, "or at least Jarv doesn't think so, he says there's a trap somewhere. So you're going to have to go out wearing black again."

Amalie stared at her brother. Seriously?! Bleh. Well, it beat getting killed. "All right, fine."

Ramal waved the control pad and the black goo climbed up around her again as Amalie doffed the
They emerged onto the large meeting area to see chaos. Men were scurrying everywhere and the smell of hot ozone filled the air behind the never-ending flurry of lasbolts.

Had the Seb Transstellar guardsmen managed to make it all the way here? HOW?! No... there was something strange about this battlefield. There were no screams, just panicked orders. She couldn't see any bodies.

She pushed her way through the groups of rebels crouching behind fallen rocks and supply crates. They were shooting at... no, they weren't even shooting. It couldn't quite qualify as actual shooting when the lasbolts simply vanished into thin air leaving nothing more than their distinct smell.

The woman walking leisurely down the center aisle lead the six other men and women followed by a few pallets that floated along behind them. Amalie wondered a little at that and shook it aside.

She stepped out to block their path and the woman stopped at safe distance away. Amalie just watched her, she was sure anything she did with the mmatter was probably going to meet the same fate as the lasbolts against whatever shield the woman was carrying, no doubt on those levitating pallets.

"Hello," the woman greeted her simply with a delighted smile on her face.

"Um, hi," Amalie replied haltingly. What was going on? Who were these people?

"I'm Meru, planetary manager for Seb Transstellar on this planet. We would like to talk to Jarv please."

Amalie blinked at the woman, who stood completely unfazed as another salvo of lasbolts disappeared into thin air. Unknown to Amalie, Meru had asked to have the femto-bot nanites in her to modify her vision so she wouldn't see them. The woman wasn't quite *that* unflinching as to completely not react to lasbolts.

"I'm sure you have alot of questions. How about we start answering some of them? I hope we've proved that we aren't out to kill you."

"Those soldiers you sent certainly were," Jarv popped his head up behind the lines, waving at the militia to stop shooting.

"They were sort of a test. And also to force your hand," Meru said calmly, "you've adapted to the mmatter as well as I could have hoped. It seems that challenges can force a man to break some of his rules."

"What do you want?" Jarv asked.

"We want your cooperation. And support," Meru waved a hand at Jarv, "and it's not going to be one of your 'arrangements'."

Amalie watched as Jarv visibly gulped. What arrangement was Meru talking about? Still, she saved her questions.

"Then what do you have in mind? If your information is that good, and these devices were really from you, what was with the guardsmen?"

"Quite simple, we want your rebellion."
You could have heard a pin drop from the other side of the rebel headquarters.

"What do you mean?" Jarv said cautiously, "You want us to attack something? We could consider it for-
"

"No, not an attack on a rival like you're thinking. Seb Transstellar wants a revolution. The serfs' uprising, torches and pitchforks, fighting for freedom. All that stuff."

"You want us to overthrow the Queen. And all the nobles," Jarv said flatly, "might as well ask us to rewrite reality for you."

"We can provide the capabilities, you provide the soldiers and gather the common support," Meru said, "While Seb Transstellar could indeed post a small battlefleet in orbit and take over everything at lancepoint, we want it to come from the people. And I believe you can do that."

Amalie knew Ramal was looking at Jarv with glinty eyes. He wanted it to happen. Well, so did Amalie and she could see the hope in her comrades eyes too. If Seb Transstellar was going to back them.

"No," the word fell like an axe, shocking the rebels in the hall. Jarv's voice was quiet, "I can't do it. You know how many men I have sent to their deaths. You know what I am guilty of."

"Do you really think that anyone else can do it quite as well as you? You are the one with the most experience. Indeed, some Imperial Guard regiment commanders have less military skill and ability to influence than you do. It is time you used those skills for a worthy cause instead."

Jarv raised his head and squinted at the woman. "You know exactly what to say, don't you?" his whisper still carried, "does your techno-heresy include mind-reading and sorcery too?"

Meru sighed and gestured towards the black-clad Amalie, "after seeing that, do you think it's really sorcery? I tested you with the guardsmen because I wanted you to learn not to fear technology that you could understand. And really, the fault with all of you... all of us, not understanding technology lies more with the Mechanicus than with any sort of inherent disability. I also want to cure that."

They all looked at Amalie. It was uncomfortable to have so many eyes on her but she stood her ground.

"Besides, in doing so, you now have the perfect chance," Meru continued, "Count Rael finds himself rather short of brutish men willing to throw away their morals for a little superiority. We can help you make sure it stays that way."

Jarv seemed to struggle with something internally then made up his mind, "and Seb Transstellar will back us up? All the way?"

Meru nodded, "Not only have we contacted StoneHead and six other groups which you don't know about, we're investigating a mutant reformation program for those whose mutations are correctable and promising at least fair treatment for those who cannot. And more relevantly, we have one toy in particular for you to play with that should make this a piece of cake."

"And you are not lying?"

"We put ourselves in as much risk as you do. If we instigate rebellions everywhere and let you be crushed, we'll be the next thing the nobles turn their soldiers on."

Jarv sucked in a breath and nodded, "all right. If all is as you say, then all right. But I want to see
what you brought us that you say will win the war."

Meru nodded at her subordinates standing next to the hovering platforms. They threw back the covers to reveal metallic canisters and more dataslates. "The original version of your mmatter we gave you. That is what is commonly known as an STC Constructor."

Chapter End Notes

### Metamorphic Matter ###

Description
The product introduced through Seb Transstellar termed 'Metamorphic Matter' is a low-grade s-matter implementation built for hardiness and non-self-replicability.

As a low-tech s-matter implementation, Metamorphic Matter (mmatter) is only precise to the micron level and individual mmatter units are visible with a simple microscope. Nevertheless, it possesses useful properties to the pre-Singularity civilization that make it a good introduction to the characteristic rapid mutability of a post-Singularity civilization that often makes transitions hard.

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Functions
Power
Being an s-matter implementation, mmatter does not contain its own power source and is fed power through a field-effect transmitter of short range.

Materials
While the full range of functions are only available when built out of a complex mixture of materials, mmatter retains its structural flexibility even when built only out of iron, carbon and oxygen.

Maintenance
Utilizing an effect based on the neutron-deflecting crystals studied from our Tau allies, mmatter units with full function are able to self-clean in a way that easily removes dust and micro-particles from mmatter stockpiles. Nevertheless, mmatter units are susceptible to strong chemical attack and extreme physical shock (eg. through a direct hit from kinetic weapons).

Structural
mmatter's primary ability is to irreversibly bind between units when given a sufficient power source to effect mergers of crystalline interfaces. This creates a strong bond that is as strong as the material the mmatter is made of and the bond does not dissipate if the mmatter units are disabled (eg. through emp or mechanical damage). Secondly, mmatter can reversibly bind between units given a constant but low power input. The binding is weaker than the irreversible binding but is of sufficient strength to form load-bearing walls in smaller structures. In this case, the binding is destroyed if the mmatter units cease to function.

Manipulation
mmatter units working in concert can exert forces surprisingly large for their size. In
particular, forces communicated through their structural backbone allow the mmatter units to accumulate forces large enough for super-human strength and agility.

Together with its force and strength, specialized mmatter units can perform secondary tasks or manipulate specific plugins like lenses or heat exchangers. Electrical conduction and circuits are built into all mmatter units, allowing mmatter to engineer complex electromagnetic phenomena.

3Cs (Command, Control, Computation)
mmatter units link up into a distributed computing cluster of individually weak mmatter units. This can be dynamically re-assigned between units and may even shift between different architectures (mmatter supports all basic tier 1 computing forms, examples from flock behaviour, peer-to-peer and client-server models), allowing arbitrary functions to be programmed into mmatter objects and unparalleled flexibility.

Command functions can be accessed by SebT-open-API, compatible with most IoM default interfaces. The new Seb Transstellar dataslate comes with the interface pre-installed and all mmatter packages are distributed bundled with suitable control software for mmatter and included specialized hardware. Additionally, courtesy of a Talon initiative, mmatter is also responsive to AdMech Technalingua as well as higher-bandwidth direct interfaces.

mmatter itself is able to interface with most data ports due to its small size and, in a pinch, can serve as an inefficient data bridge across nearly all systems.

Due to the inherent security risks that mmatter poses, Seb Transstellar maintains a command code unique to each package (hardware implementation for security) that can be used to retain administrative control over all mmatter units, accessible via any of the mmatter standard interfaces. Regional Managers are expected to liaise with local authorities, Imperial officials, Inquisitors and the AdMech to provide them with the same codes.

For this reason, Seb Transstellar cannot legally transfer ownership of any mmatter units due to our administrative priviledges. The recommendation is to offer licensing arrangements that come as close as possible to legal ownership in the local jurisdiction.
Chapter Notes

This happens roughly during part 26 to 27 in the timeline.

The dreaded whistling started up again, drowning out the screams and moans of broken men and women on the battlefield.

Count Rael dived under the table like the rest of his officers. The rolling explosions were accompanied by the rock dust falling from the ceiling of the command room in his bunker.

"How many of them are there?" Rael asked as they got up gingerly, wondering at the cracks spidering through the ceramacrete.

"We don't have an accurate count but we think there's a small battalion out there."

"Only one battalion? How are they doing this!" Rael slammed his hands down on the map table. Casualty reports stacked far too high on one side and the angry red triangles surrounding his remaining forces seemed to be everywhere.

"We suspect Seb Transstellar has provided them with technology. What sort, I cannot say, but it was definitely game-changing," the technical analyst said, looking up from the scouting reports, "I've never heard of any equipment like what the rebels are using."

The attacks had begun much like any other insurrection, which would be hard enough after Rael lost a third of his baronial forces to Seb Transstellar's treachery. But his advancing lasgun armed infantry had run into what appeared to be batteries of crude promethium powered incendiary rockets. That had not gone well.

The rebels seemed to have a new toy every day. The sticky iron-melting fire of raw promethium had given way into explosive fuel-air mixtures that drove shafts of molten copper and pounded armour and fortifications flat with sheer numbers. The bombardment was still accelerating, the rebels were launching their rockets in waves of hundreds now, every hour on the hour, each rocket now a cluster of little bomblets. Just yesterday, the rebels had developed a particularly nasty promethium mine... delivered by their accursed rocket bombardments.

And then there was the rumours of the stalking black death that tore through men like a demon.

Rebels were throwing everything they had into this fight. There couldn't be more than a tenth of his strength in forces. But it was scant comfort when those scampering drone servitor-things showed up on their little spider-like legs. While their relation to walkers was obvious, these were low profile, agile and small. It made them annoyingly difficult to target. And even if they only wielded lasguns, the countryside was literally crawling with them in less than three days after they first appeared. The men were calling them Spiders. A single one of them was not intimidating. Indeed, even Rael's own poorly armed soldiers could probably destroy one each. When the snowy ground was churned to mud under their metallic legs, they took on a whole new meaning of scary. Only by borrowing the promethium mine concept had Rael managed to hold on this long. For whatever reason, the rebels did not seem to want to incur the
losses by sweeping the minefield with their Spiders.

Rael looked up from the map. There was a whining in the air that dipped and rose until it abruptly ended. No, not completely ended, it was still there but very much softer, as if a few closer ones had stopped to reveal one further away.

"That sounded like a turbojet, what-" the technical analyst cut off his obscenity as the comms crackled urgently. The commanders waited as the scouts chittered something incomprehensible. The transmission cut off suddenly.

Rael watched as the technical analyst slowly put the receiver down.

"I think perhaps we should consider surrender," the analyst said slowly, "someone spotted a flying drone. There was a group of four of them hovering around and your soldiers just exchanged some fire. There's a fixed wing circling somewhere above us though. If they have air support, it's only a matter of time."

"What about the Royal Scourge?" Rael whispered, surely Lachryma would not overlook this. "We just have to hold on until they get here."

The analyst laughed bitterly, "I don't think they're coming. I detected a few attempts to jam our communications but they always stopped after a few hours. Not on our part. They're letting us communicate because they want us to know that Lachryma is coming. I think they want us to surrender, would explain why they didn't just roll over us with their Spiders. We're fighting Softstone Jarv here. Lachryma is busy with Stonehead."

"And how is she doing?" Rael asked again. The lack of information on Lachryma did not get past him.

"Better than us," the analyst admitted, "She actually has airpower. But I heard over the net that codename Darksnow, you know the troublesome one up north that refused all deals. Yeah, the barons trying to find her say they detected a rocket launch two days ago. She's has a freaking satellite. And given how fast all them seem to go from first appearance to mass production, she'll have missiles that can hit anywhere on Sepheris inside of a week. " The analyst bowed his head, "and they appear to be sharing notes. I intercepted quite a lot of transmissions and most of them were cogitator algorithms and construction plans and revision of plans. The flying drone we're seeing here is probably from Stonehead."

"And how is she doing?" Rael asked again. The lack of information on Lachryma did not get past him.

"Stalled. The Royal Scourges are better trained and disciplined and armed. But Stonehead is stubborn and crafty. They've exchanged blows, did you know that Iceholm's been hit by a rocket barrage? Those rockets probably came from Jarv, but anyway I think Lachryma might actually have met her match. A subordinate had a friend at the starport, he says Lachryma might have asked for Imperial Navy assistance."

"What of Seb Transstellar? Are they doing anything?" Rael's face was tight.

"I don't think so. They seem to be content to watch and support the uprising from behind. Quite a number of their people went over to the rebels, but they're not being attacked so they're almost certainly siding with the rebels."

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Jarv sat on the edge of the bed, head in his hands.
"What seems to be the problem?"

He didn't look up. "Is this really all right?" he whispered.

Ryn put an arm around him, hugging him gently, "What's troubling you? We are being free. Why are you unhappy?"

"I don't deserve it," Jarv said, "I betrayed too many people."

"What do you mean?" Ryn's soft voice cut him deeply. He knew she would be saddened. He knew he could carry his secrets to the grave and there was little chance anyone other than Seb Transstellar would find out.

But Jarv knew and he couldn't forgive himself for making those 'arrangements' as Meru had put it.

"The 'arrangement' that Meru talked about. I betrayed the movement in the name of survival. Did you wonder how the baronial forces took over Limpet mine so easily? It's because of me. I arranged for it to be attacked and I arranged for them to be unready."

Ryn was silent beside him as the words continue to pour out his confession and guilt. "The barons needed a way to control each other's forces and the rebels and that was the arrangement. They would let us destroy their rival's forces or buy a 'major victory'. They used us and I let them. What we had was not a rebellion. It was just a trap and I was the bait to lure rebellious serfs to their deaths."

She hugged him closer as his rant reached an end. "You have a rebellion now," she said, "A true one, like we dreamed. You might have made a few mistakes getting here, but perhaps you are here because of it. You are the man you are now, because you lived through those deals. They must not have been easy. Meru said it right, you're the best choice."

Jarv shook his head, "It's not about ability, it's about trust. How can they trust me to lead them when I've sold out the movement countless times?!"

Ryn cut him off as she stood up and faced him directly, "even now, there is no one else I would trust more to lead us."

They looked at each other for a long long time.

The moment was broken by a knock on the door. "Sir, I've spoken with Tref Oil's team, they've gone through that section of Seb Transstellar's infodump more thoroughly than us," Ramal said as he opened the door, completely oblivious to proper politeness. "I think we overestimated the quantity needed. There's enough of it down there to make more than a twenty megaton raw payload. We're sitting right on top of a motherload of cainite and I've focused the mining algorithms to that area. Tref Oil has a prototype they want us to build, I think can be done in twenty hours."

Jarv closed his eyes for a moment then snapped back to his usual aura of confidence. "Get the test ready, I'll be there. We'll just have to convince this Count that we're serious enough to wipe him off the map if we need to."

Ramal nodded gravely, "I'll see to it."

"What in the Emperor's name was that?!" Rael asked as the earthquake rocked the table. The minor earthquake was followed by an ear-splitting crash and rumble that was still petering off.
"Code BJU?" one of the monitor watchers exclaimed, "I never heard of a Code BJU."

The technical analyst practically shot out of his chair and scurried over to the console. Then after looking at the data, he ran out of the bunker in a flurry.

"All right, does anyone know what that meant?" Rael asked.

His commanders shook their heads and they went back to discussing troop rotations. Morale was hitting new lows after the last rocket barrage.

The technical analyst came running back out of breath, "They just demolished half of Neil's Peak. Parley! Now!"

"You've been running around like a headless chicken," Rael snapped, "Just tell us what it is."

The analyst stopped in his panic and slumped into the chair. "That was an atomic. Jarv has ******* atomics."

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Queen Lachryma glared down her throne room at the delegation.

How dare they just walk in here when they were in outright rebellion? How did they give so much technology to the rebels without the lords noticing? For that matter, how much of said technology was Mechanicus approved? And just how did the Seb Transstellar delegation get past all the guards who would have almost certainly been bribed to shoot them on sight?

Those were the unspoken questions that the present Lords and Ladies of the court of Sepheris Secundus. Lachryma had precious few answers for any of them. Well, she had some idea of what the first one was going to be.

"Queen, I come to you with a proposal," Meru said, voice ringing clearly across the hall. "The people of Sepheris Secundus cry out for freedom. Will you not answer?"

Lachryma stared back at the woman's hard gaze. Yes, that was more or less as expected. With such a powerful hand in play, Meru might be making a bid for the planetary governor position. As if Queen Lachryma had any plans to let her.

"My answer is already given," Lachryma answered back, "your bid for the throne will fail. All who stand beside you shall be cast down in the fire of the Royal Scourge. " Lachryma added, less formally, "and if need be, the Imperial Navy."

The nobles in the hall turned back to the Seb Transstellar delegation with an audible growl of anger.

"Perhaps we are a little mistaken? I never wanted the throne," Meru shrugged. Shockwaves of surprise seemed to ripple out from her. "I was asking you, Queen. The people need a leader, someone who will stand up for them, who will seek to improve their lives. I am not that person. Are you?"

The court stared at her for a handful of heartbeats. "What do you mean?" Lachryma asked, feeling a little faint. Were Seb Transstellar really that all-knowing? How did they know that that was what Lachryma had been trying to do?

Meru swept her eyes around the hall. "This cruelty has gone on long enough. The way forward is simple. Abolish serfdom. Free your slaves. The people-"
"Objection! I will not stand for this heresy!" screamed one of the nobles closest to her. The man lunged forward with his ornamental, but still sharp, sword. One of the men in Meru's delegation whipped up a lasgun and blew it out of his hands before he could even take two steps. Then a wave of noble anger began to manifest in an increasing growl. Some of them drew their guns.

"ORDER!" Lachryma shouted, then coughed wetly. By the Emperor, she didn't think her lungs still had it in them. The shout, as powerful as it had ever been in her youth, silenced the hall.

She drew two long breaths, taking her time to think. Could she get away with it? Could it be that this was the answer to her puzzle? Abolish serfdom and not see the entire social order collapse? Not plunge the entire of Sepheris into anarchy and civil war?

Who was she kidding, they were already fighting one. And Lachryma was losing.

If she sided with Seb Transstellar, the nobles would all resist, they had to as their livelihoods depended on their serfs. But she didn't give them good odds. The rebels were strong enough that even one faction was holding off the Royal Scourges on their own. With Seb Transstellar openly supporting them...

The ground seemed to shiver under their feet. Then one of the sidedoors banged open and a Scourge ran in, one of the sentries outside the hall. "Lance strike! Over from the rebel's locations! It's the Imperial Navy!"

There was a flurry of nobles checking their dataslates, searching for any pics or reports. Lachryma found a video feed from the palace cameras.

The towering architecture floating in the sky was unmistakeable. A Lunar, parked at the lowest possible height it could go, right in the upper atmosphere. An actinic glare flashed the entire view white for a split second then vanished. The ground rumbled again.

The court silently looked back to the Seb Transstellar delegation. The tables had turned and they were out for blood.

"Guards, escort the Seb Transstellar delegation to a private room. I will need a very long explanation from you, Meru," Lachryma said.

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"Oh crap," Ramal said, "I think the Navy's here. "

"What?" Jarv spun around and grabbed another dataslate, "Show me. "

Ramal shared the video record, "We were too late. Stonehead was too late. I knew we should have given him the atomic rocket. "

"No," Jarv shook his head, "I made the decision. I don't want Iceholm to turn into even more of a hellhole than it already is. Any chance we could down that ship?"

Ramal observed the Sword hanging over them like an executioner. "No, it has void shields. Even if our rockets could reach that far, our entire stockpile is perhaps equivalent to two macrocannon broadsides. We might destroy some armour or even the lance if we're really lucky, but no, the ship will just repair it and we'll be out of rockets. If we had had another two weeks, I think I could have made a lance battery here. "

"But if we had another two weeks, we'd just be making more atomic rockets," Jarv mused, "No, this
was just bad timing. How bad is it?"

"There's only a scattering of Spiderbots left, probably more out of contact of the swarm but not enough to form even one battalion. And if we tried to form them up, we'd just lose it immediately. The rocket batteries here are safe, but we've lost half the ones outside. Rael's Crater got lanced too, not sure what they're doing by shooting at ground zero. Our combat power is almost all gone, half of our men are dead. Probably."

Jarv thumped his fist against the stone tunnel wall, bored unnaturally smooth by the new laser miners, courtesy of surplus power. Drat it all, they were so close to victory only to have it snatched away. It was so unfair.

"Contingency Rapture," Jarv said.

Ramal blinked at him a few times and pressed a button on his dataslate. The warning klaxons blared out the prepared message. Whatever remaining operatives trapped outside would receive their disband orders soon.

"Case Rapture. Warning, this tunnel will be collapsed in thirty minutes. All personnel please evacuate to the hibernation zone. Case Rapture. Warning-

"Shall we go then?" Ramal said, offering his hand in support to Jarv. Jarv took it, somehow the kid's tiny palm eased the despair and disappointment in his heart.

"Well, at least we have the atomic reactor," Jarv said, "I hope you like Snow Grass fruit, we could be down there a long time."

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"Ramal!"

"Amalie!" Ramal ran over to his sister, "Thank the Emperor that you managed to make it here."

"I only managed it due to these things," Amalie raised a black arm. Most of the matter was missing. "I came straight here after I got the Case Rapture message. Turns out you can surf with this thing. Not anymore though."

She took the offered coat from Jarv with thanks. "So, what's the plan now?"

Jarv shook his head, "We watch, wait and build. The Navy will go away eventually."

"But what about Seb Transstellar? What about the people out there?!"

"I'm sorry but we can't do anything," Jarv sighed, "you can ask your brother if you doubt the analysis."

"Ramal?" they turned to see him fiddling with the dataslate and muttering under his breath.

"Oh, yes, what was it?" Ramal looked up abruptly.

"Is it really hopeless?" Amalie asked, ignoring the defeated look on Jarv's face.

"Hmm, well, maybe," Ramal chewed his upper lip.

She knew that look. It meant he was Up To Something. "What is it? You are so going to kill us all, aren't you?" Even Jarv was starting to look curious now.
Ramal cocked his head, "Well, you know how a cannon works right? When you blow promethium inside a confined area with only one exit, it will force out any blockage of the exit with great force right?"

Amalie nodded. It was a common rubble-clearing tactic, risked destabilizing the tunnel but since when did the nobles ever care about safety?

"Well, I was thinking I could use the laser drill and bore a hole from here," he pointed at the heart of the Softstone Rebels' retreat on his dataslate, "all the way up to here," he then pointed at the point just underneath the mountaintop. "Shouldn't take more than a day."

"And then I'd give that Sword up there something to shoot at, I dunno, turn that second peak over there into a Spiderbot manufactory, I think some of the Spiderbots outside still have the STC constructor. Anything. They just have to stick around for a bit."

Amalie narrowed her eyes, it was starting to sound suspicious. But she let Ramal continue. "Some weakening of the rock in a cylinder around the mountaintop here could be gotten away with, it's under ten feet of ice which should dampen any heat signatures. Anyway, the point is that if we take all our refined atomics, we have enough to use this teraton fission-pumped fusion-fusion design. If we put the bomb just under the weakened section of rock and seal the tunnel behind it, detonating the weapon should cause the mountaintop to go shooting upwards."

He pushed around a few numbers and simulations on the dataslate, "Well, the direction can be adjusted slightly by changing the bomb's position, but what we could have is a one-use atomic-powered macrocannon. That will literally fire the top of a mountain. With good timing and a bait...."

"We could destroy that Sword," Amalie said.

Jarv could only sigh and bury his face with his hand.

"I see the Sword," Amalie said, peering down the makeshift telescope and trying not to shiver in the cold.

"How's the alignment?"

"Good, it's-" a flash of light stabbed out from it and smashed down at the mountains. "Well, it's still occupied," Amalie added uselessly.

"We're ready to fire then," Ramal said, scattering empty nanobot canisters across the mountaintop.

They crawled back through the short tunnel leading to the bomb chamber, Amalie plugged it behind her with snow.

"***," Ramal cursed emphatically and Amalie shook out the dirt from her flak jacket before eyeing his dataslate curiously. "Their void shields just went up," he explained. Amalie also saw them turning away from the mountain.

"It's an entire mountaintop, won't it be enough to destroy the Sword?"

Ramal shook his head, "I'm not sure actually. It might not be. And we only get one shot."

"Well, if we make the shot, we're not going to want to be here anyway so I think we should get back to base first."
"Your incitement of rebellion has failed, do you hear me, woman?!" the Navy admiral leaned on the table heavily.

The impression was spoiled by his thin figure, but one had to at least give him points for trying. Meru just smiled serenely, not caring that most of the rebels had already been pacified.

Lachryma shied away from the thought of the craters gouged out of Sepheris by lance. It was a little painful to think of the collateral damage. And the way that some of the barons were calling for lance strikes at supposed rebel positions, not caring about their own serfs in the blast zone. The sites were all suspiciously close to difficult to mine areas.

There was something else in play here. Meru would not be so confident otherwise.

The dataslate in her arms chimed once, interrupting the admiral's attempt at intimidation. Meru blithely ignored the man and looked at it.

"I think perhaps you ought to check back in with your ships, Admiral Jasm," Meru said it so matter of factly that the man actually paused for a moment. One of his aides shook his head.

"A poor bluff on your part. You have no space assets, and we're not going to let you launch any," Jasm sneered, "you'd best come up with a better excuse to scare me or I'm going to get bored here."

Meru raised an eyebrow, "Oh, I didn't know you were THAT underfunded. Surely you guys must have a good sensor somewhere in the fleet. I was hoping you'd spot them by now."

Jasm held his ground, "I have detected nothing, Lachryma's ground sensors detect nothing. I'd say you have nothing. You're just bluffing with no cards, hoping I'll panic."

"I was hoping you'd at least put your shields up, but it seems that you are so contemptuous of these rebels to not have even the most basic defence. Well, the blood of your crews are on your hands," Meru shrugged.

"And what are you going to attack them with, witch? You are surrounded and under watch. All your movements are-"

There was an great flare from outside the window, a second source of light shining in, casting sharp and glaring shadows.

"I did warn you," Meru closed her eyes, "May they be with the Emperor. You might find yourself missing a ship I think. And many more if you do not surrender immediately."

Lachryma looked at the woman incredulously. Did she just destroy an Imperial Navy vessel? How?!

The dataslate told her how. With the Lunar's shields down, something had somehow gotten close enough to fire on it. Her spaceport control said that it was like an entire salvo of atomic macrocannon shells. It just appeared out of nowhere apparently. And now the Lunar was a large shower of meteorites.

"The Deathwatch have some rather interesting toys," Meru smiled, "Talon was quite happy to have specimens to reverse engineer. Like the rather advanced stealth fields that Imperial vessels seem to be programmed to ignore. How strange that should be."
"What the heck was that?" Amalie whispered.

The bright flashes in the upper atmosphere around the Sword looked like a space battle, but there was nothing on the other side. The Sword was getting shot by something unseen. Unseen to the Sword too, judging by how its lances and single macrocannon fired blindly towards the direction of attacks.

They didn't hit anything.

Ramal squinted at the modelling software fed by what sensors still working after the first EMP generated by the detonating atomic macrocannon barrage. "I still can't see it. But whatever it is, it's only shooting at the Sword. It could be friend."

One of the lights in his panel turned green. "Oh, looks like the Sword's void shields just went down," he muttered.

Jarv nodded at the display screens, oblivious to Ramal's tone, "whatever that is, its doing quite well."

Amalie knew better, Ramal was getting distracted, "Um, what are you..."

The Sword shifted positions in the sky and another light in the upper left corner turned green. There was a flash of something that was rather like a targeting reticule then Ramal's finger darted out to tap a button before anyone could react.

The shockwave nearly brought the roof down on their heads.

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Toby Dickenson looked up from the console display, rubbing the fresh implant at the nape of his neck. It still stung sometimes, especially when it got hot after he spent too much time using it.

"We have our target locked," he beamed over to the CIC and was rewarded with his trace of macrocannon shell arcs overlaid on top of the orbital display. Seb Transstellar had given orders to play it safe and make sure none of the shells accidentally reached the ground, even if they were extremely unlikely to survive re-entry.

A red alert, the one they had been waiting for lit up in the corner of the screen. "Sepheris Sky has fired upon and destroyed her target, I repeat Sepheris Sky has fired upon and destroyed her target."

Toby's eyes were hard as he watched the Imperial Navy Lunar break up. Some of the crew initially had qualms about defying the Imperial Navy but that had vanished along with the settlements the ships were vapourizing. Now some of them were complaining that Seb Transstellar was still trying to minimize casualties.

"Shields up, they have gone to combat stations, open fire."

Toby bent back to the fire control as the first salvo left Metal Star's macrocannons. Despite the stealth fields and weapons, the ships Seb Transstellar had provided were not really combat ships. They simply had extra functionality grafted on top, with fundamental weaknesses in structure, armour coverage and void shield layers. In a pitched battle without the element of surprise, the mining ships wouldn't really stand a chance.

If they couldn't knock the Imperial Navy out of space now, the Seb Transtellar ships were going to bleed.
CIC summarized the sensor data, "atomic shells detonating, their shields are holding."

The calm even narration of Metal Star's private struggle belied the tension in her crew. Toby flew across the data streams like he never had before. Three seconds faster than his best record, he had a new firing solution.

The captain ordered over the same comm circuit, in the same deadpan voice, "fire standard shells. Lance, begin charging sequence. Increase orbital velocity, let's take the high ground."

The single lance began the irreversible spooling of power into the capacitor banks before the macrocannon shells had hit. That was a risk the captain was taking, lances weren't very good at taking down void shields but this gamble was one the captain was responsible for making. It still didn't help Toby's apprehension.

The Sword's weaponry stabbed back out, right through the space they had been in. It looked like the Imperial Navy crew weren't quite sleeping either, even if they were inefficient. Well, that was a given, they were the Imperial Navy.

CIC cut in over the circuit to report, "Macrocannon barrage has 80% hit rate, void shields thinned but not pierced. Lance, firing. Void shields down, no damage. Correction, light armour damage. No penetration."

"Lance, recharge as fast as you can. Macrocannons, fire as you're ready. Brake orbital speed to 0.95 standard."

The Metal Star turned over on its powerful maneuvering thrusters, built to navigate tumbling asteroid surfaces, reversing the height it had just gained. The captain of the Sword must have been prescient or just rather good at second guessing invisible enemies. The salvo of macrocannon shells clipped the edge of the Metal Star's void shields, then before the energy leak could be felt, one of the many lances from the Sword's batteries found a gap in the shield and tore deep into the thin armour.

CIC's tone was a little stretched, "Hull breach at aft ring 4! Backup reactor line damaged, macrocannon six suffering power failure! Damage control team beta reports one member trapped. Three fire-team members have not reported in, ten servitors..."

Toby tuned out the litany of the damage report and focused on his role. The macrocannons still available were firing almost without interruption now and Toby felt his implant growing hot with the calculation load. He tweaked one of the results to give battery 1 a higher trajectory, in hopes the odd angle might break through to something important.

The Sword managed to bring up a void shield layer right as the macrocannons smashed it flat again. The Metal Star's lance fired a near-miss and sliced off a communications array but otherwise did no real damage. Their stabilizers must have been thrown out of alignment by the Sword's hit. This was going to be hard, the Metal Star simply could not have the same level of redundancy that real military ships could.

The captain yapped out another navigational change, trying to change their position again. Not that the stealth field would help much with a trail of macrocannon shells arcing out from the Metal Star. The Sword began to move and try to cut in front of them.

"Neutrino shower! Fusion initiation on surface! Estimated yield... What in the Emperor's name was that?!"

The operator for CIC's communications abandoned his attempt to stay calm. Toby couldn't care less,
the shower of rock rising out from the surface arced out with a grace that belied its speed. The top of
the mountain took less than three seconds to reach orbit. It was like seeing the planet reach out with a
giant hand, and the fingers of stone swallowed the Sword like a man would crush fly.

There was a flash and the cloud blew apart in a shower of flames. No, not flames, that was raw
reactor plasma.

"Target has lost reactor containment. No signs of survivors."

Well, of course, Toby thought privately, there's no ship in the galaxy that'll survive that without void
shields. CIC's awed tone reignited the comms silence and speculation began to fill the ship network.

"All damage control to aft ring 4, we still have a hull breach," the captain's voice cut through the
noise, "weapons, remain on watch but stand down power banks. Sensors, keep an eye out for that
debris, we don't want to run into that cloud, also track as much of it as you can, ground traffic control
will want our data. Communications, there must be someone still alive down there. Find them, I think
we owe someone thanks."

The chatter immediately died down to an organized murmur. Toby nodded and began to plot
speculative trajectories for the macrocannons in case they had to blast some of the larger pieces of
rock that might somehow make it into permanent orbit.

"Sensors here," a new voice gained precedence over the command channel, "missile launch on
surface, six hundred miles away from our ground zero. Count thirty and rising. Sixty. Count
hundred. Count... one twenty six. Repeat, one twenty six missiles on orbital trajectory. Sorry, one
twenty five, one of them seems to have self-destructed. One twenty four, there goes another."

Fire teams began to arm weapons again but the missiles would take many minutes to get here so
there was time for Toby and CIC to refine intercept solutions. It wasn't needed. The swarm of
apparently shoddily made missiles, or perhaps hastily modified ones, arced away to the other battles
where Seb Transstellar ships were still struggling in a rapidly worsening battle against the Imperial
Navy.

It turned the tide of the battle. After all, every single one of the missiles had atomic warheads and
however poor their launch sequence had been, their targeting and evasion were not lacking. More
than half the fleet vanished into nuclear fireballs and the rest were damaged enough to be forced to
surrender to Seb Transstellar.

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Jarv watched the destruction in the orbitals through Ramal's hack into Seb Transstellar networks.
Darksnow. He knew that crazy woman still had to be alive.

In fact, Seb Transstellar was busy trying to convince her to not nuke the rest of the nobility into
glowing craters. Apparently the woman had held half her stockpile in reserve. Or perhaps it was just
a bluff. Jarv shook his head to himself as Ramal began to repair the mining drill to dig them out of
the mountain. No one knew if the Sepheris Secundus fleet would really obey Seb Transstellar's order
for them to shoot down Darksnow's missiles if she launched them. It only made things more
complicated.

Jarv could see why he was needed now. They were too nice, Seb Transstellar. Someone needed to
be on the other side, to push for the people's rights and make sure they were defended. And likewise,
Seb Transstellar represented the interests of the planet as a whole. To prevent each individual person
from taking too much for themselves.
Well, Jarv could live with complicated. It was certainly better than the "simpler" times under the barons.
"And so, what will you do now?" Lachryma asked Meru.

"Oh, I don't know," Meru looked across the crowd watching the televised conference where the future of Sepheris Secundus was being carved.

The rebel leaders who had staged their rebellion had formed the core of what was rapidly becoming an interim government. A republic of sorts seemed to be likely.

Despite Meru's recommendation, they had decided to unceremoniously boot Lachryma from the palace and bar her from political positions for the next twenty years. At least they hadn't executed her, unlike so many other nobles who had died in the fires of Sepheris's revolution. Also from Meru's recommendation.

There were differences of course. Many of the space crew that Seb Transstellar had recruited to mine the asteroids and uninhabitable planets of Sepheris System were unwilling to mix with the landside citizens. They had implants, intelligence upgrades (along the lines of techpriests, even if far inferior) and special skills. Their part in styming the Imperial Navy, and not to mention available firepower, allowed them to declared their own sovereign nation claiming the rest of the system beyond Sepheris Secundus and it's lunar space.

Other differences of opinion between the rebel leaders were also apparent. Darksnow had refused to participate in politics, deciding to breakaway and form her own tiny country. The others let her, she had more than enough nuclear weapons to destroy every major population center, even if she promised to only use them as planetary defense and was busy upgrading them to interplanetary missiles.

Seb Transstellar had also brought an invitation from the new interstellar polity, the temporary name was The Talon-Seb Regional Coalition. It was unlikely that Sepheris Secundus would join but they were looking to have a close relationship to the large and hungry market for raw materials.

Still, this was only to be expected (and somewhat deliberately engineered). The people of Sepheris had yet to find their feet and the details were best worked out amongst themselves instead of being imposed from above. Seb Transstellar declined, at Meru's request, to influence the political result (apart from sparing Lachryma) and declared that it would continue operations within legal means for any polities that eventually formed in the Sepheris System.

"Well, I guess Seb Transstellar here is going to get rather mundane," Meru continued, "making and selling things can be so boring after a few stand up confrontations and nuclear missile exchanges, don't you think?" It was true, Meru might have a bit of an adventurer's spirit. She idly considered asking the Culture if they were doing a similar operation anywhere else and if she could be transferred there.

"You're leaving then?"

"Almost certainly. I'm not a part of Sepheris's people, my place is not here. And while much work remains to be done, I think I will leave it to others," Meru looked at Lachryma meaningfully.

"Is that a job offer?" Lachryma raised an eyebrow.

"Only if you want it. Seb Transstellar will grow rapidly. You nobles thought you were rich, but you have not truly seen what is possible with this much mineral resources," Meru gestured over the
snowy landscape, "And oppressing the people will not bring you true wealth."

Lachryma narrowed her eyes at the smaller woman. It still sounded too much like a consolation prize.

"You know what the Seb Transstellar unofficial motto is? A bright and beautiful world. But it won't happen if the people don't want it. I know you want it, and you have the skill to make it happen with the opportunity that Seb Transstellar is bringing here. The only question is whether you do so or not."

Meru nodded politely at the ex-noble and walked away to the personal shuttle that was landing in the palace private landing strip. She had a spaceship to catch.
Part 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Week 58
IoM reports near the Eye have been worrying. Cadia has issued an emergency warning across the Astropathic networks, indicating the Necron pylon on their world is showing signs of strain. There were also reports of a massive Chaos fleet that has pushed back their defensive cordon to just above orbit, and has simply bypassed Cadia instead of expending the time and effort to conquer the world.

It seems some major invasion is underway. Project DeSun, prepared for this purpose, has been launched at all identifiable targets in the Eye. We hope to slow this Chaos advance but chances of success is minimal. Further deployments will be considered as necessary.

Chaos response fleets in the overall region have been called into action. Our battle preparations are ready, with various levels of responses being re-tested and readied for deployment. In addition, we are also propagating the IoM message ahead of their own networks to attempt to minimize the damage done.

Nevertheless, the maximum believable speed of messages in the IoM restricts our ability to prod them into action. While the entire region feeding into Cadia is now or will soon be on high alert, most of the rest of the IoM will not believe such a message could reach them so quickly. In particular, we hoped to use this message to deflect the fleet heading towards Golden Goose's project but it seems to have been ignored.

The ZharTann Eldar have given some valuable predictions regarding the direction of this Chaos thrust, it seems to be headed towards Sol. In particular, the Eldar have indicated a key battle will be fought at a minor farming world some distance away from the main body, for what reason we do not know, but an ROU detachment and GSV-sized construction vessel have been diverted towards it.

The poor coverage near the Eye was perhaps a mistake. We hoped to avoid the increased chance of contamination due to proximity but this has lowered our reaction times in the region. Past mistakes having being made, we will just have to make do with what we can with replication and new construction.

Week 59
The Ork relocation for the purposes of joint study is complete. For the moment, the project leadership has been handed over to the Necrons as we wish to see what perspectives they can bring to the study. We will continue to provide backup security and provide cross-validation of data with our own in exchange for sharing any discoveries made. We anticipate a better understanding of the warp and how it interacts with biology from this project.

Some factions indicate their disagreement with this treatment of the Orks, reviving for a short time the Orks Are HSes argument, but the majority has agreed that the moral value of the Orks is lower than the potential gains towards controlling their universal hostility.

Tyranid diversion is beginning and samples have been collected. At present, we are currently addressing an incompatibility with Necron pylons as it appears the Hive Mind link is severely
degraded in the presence of Necron planetary pylons. Efforts to breed tyranids on the surface of selected Necron experimental worlds have been so far unsuccessful.

The Tau and Macragge continue their long grinding war in relative peace. Our new contact with the Nicassar that the Tau have been more reluctant to show has proven a useful source of intelligence exchange on the local region's minor species. In particular, their warp-powered spacecraft may provide key clues to understanding how to merge hyperspace and warp skim technologies.

The IoM response at the Eye has been sluggish, despite being speeded along via manipulation of "luck" as demonstrated in the Golden Goose project. We have detected from long range that one system has fallen into the warp, just outside Cadia.

Mercenary contracts and independent action against Chaos have been approved for our Chaos response fleets. Contact has been cleared to provide any specific weaponry at a technological level of any of the races in the galaxy or below in any quantity requested. For the time duration of this conflict, we will provide the logistics and strategic support as required.

The Eldar seem to be high conflict with Chaos forces. ZharTann has conveyed to us the battle reports of six major battles fought by Alaitoc and Ulthwe in the region, it seems like they have evacuated a number of Exodite worlds that were about to be overrun. We have restated our offer to provide any quantity of desired non-warps weaponry but the Eldar have decided not to avail themselves of it.

Week 60
The SC agent turned warboss has called his Waagh and is leading Ork fleets into battle against the Chaos forces. We hope that this will delay them but due to the unknowns present when two warp-based forces clash we have no confidence in predicting the outcome.

Chapter End Notes

DeSun is a strategic weapon that launches highly relativistic moon-sized projectiles through hyperspace towards targets. Each shot carries more energy than the binding energy of a star, effectively it's a nova bomb that can be launched at any star in the galaxy and flies at Culture strategic movement speeds. The Culture produces 1 shot per day, but have been stockpiling it for some time.

Upon intercepting the Cadian astropathic broadcast, the Culture fired it at every star detectable in the Eye. Unfortunately, this doesn't do much, the Eye being what it is.
Week 61
The Tau-Macragge is slowing down to a lower tempo as the Tau face greater resistance and a larger battlefront with their comparatively limited forces. Macragge itself is under siege but simulations show that the Tau are unlikely to capture it without sacrificing other fronts.

Very worryingly, the central Imperial response to the worsening Chaotic threat is muted and reflexive. We have no idea what problems may exist inside the umbrella of the psychic defence network and are unable to resolve it. Some consultations with Golden Goose's Rogue Trader indicates that the recent events are unlikely to have stabilized so quickly and Sol is likely to continue to be unresponsive for the foreseeable future of this conflict.

The Imperial response to the Black Crusade has been higher than thought possible but the Chaotic forces are overwhelming in numbers. So great that even the Chaos Response Fleets are unable to reinforce quickly enough. There appears to be a huge leap in innovation among the Chaotic forces, such that they are fielding extremely long range warp weapons that require a pylon field to resist. Their reality warping is on the scale that renders conventional weapons ineffective and we have been forced to detonate multiple stars in retreat.

Most worrying is the new paradigm of contagion Chaos appears to have adopted. Virtually all their offensive weapons focus on warp-activation and resulting corruption of systems. Chief among these appears to be a corrupting psychic plague that is invisible to mental probes, requiring warp activity sensors to detect. Secondary abilities involve using self-teleporting groups of psychically active masses that board and rapidly corrupt ships and planetary bodies, as well as the expected warp storms and constant corrupting influence that ranges in lightyears.

Captured Chaotic fighters speak of a legendary figure returning to claim the galaxy. We have good evidence to believe that Abaddon is acting under the "blessings" of all four Chaos gods.

Conventional resistance is being replaced in favour of anti-warp weaponry based on the principles of the Necron planetary pylon. We have had limited success in field trials and concentrated bursts of warp negation work decently, although the sideeffect of being lethal to warp-active intelligences makes its deployment in inhabited systems subject to collateral damage. Research into improving their range and precision is at priority.

The orks appear to be the only faction doing well against this invasion. Their natural resistance towards external warp influences actually places Chaos at a disadvantage against them. This is balanced by our non-existent ability to communicate or coordinate with them. The orks have driven deep towards the Eye and appear to have their goal somewhere outside of real space. What they intend to do in the warp is unclear.

The Eldar specified key world cannot be reached. Before the ROU arrived, the warp sensors detected an alarming rise in warp activity and the entire solar system disappeared into the warp. A Chaos Response Fleet is being diverted from the war front in order to attack it.

Week 62
Seb Transtellar is gearing up for a fight with the Imperial admiral and this is expected to happen within the month. How Snakewick handles his victory will be a key test of the system's stability.
IoM reform projects are beginning with some urgency, following on Golden Goose's model despite the fact that that experiment is still not complete. The pressure of the war makes this far more urgent that we fortify the IoM society against possible failure of the Astronomican. Resistance cells based around breakaway Mechanicus factions are being groomed to change Mechanicus policy. Various groups dislike the outright manipulation of IoM affairs that the Culture is doing, actively forcing the change through 'luck' and other overt means. But a large majority agree that the current situation requires expediency instead of adhering to puritanic ideals.

The orks have reached the Eye and are bogged down in a battle of attrition around the Cadian Gate. An uneasy truce with the dug-in Cadian defences and bypassed or overlooked Imperial navy forces has resulted out of necessity. Still, orks grow stronger the longer a conflict lasts and the ex-SC agent appears to know this. His tactics are aimed at causing the maximum damage to Chaos forces, not towards ending the conflict in swift blows.

The flood of armaments provided by us is beginning to leak into Imperial economies, causing a sudden crash in the price of weapons following the normal spike from a sudden mobilization. Mercenaries and traders are taking our weapon caches and turning around to sell it quickly at cutthroat prices before returning to us for more. This back-channel appears to be perfect for our goals, admirals and captains outfitting their ships with weapons of non-Mechanicus origin are reluctant to report where exactly they obtained the equipment from as long as they perform. Some questions have arisen as to where the flood of archaeotech-quality parts of all sorts is originating from but with the appropriate sacrificial Chaos cells, we have managed to deflect Inquisitorial attention for the time being. Some of them have deduced that the Imperium is being subtly helped by another power and those are also useful in deflecting attention, some of those may even be candidates for later reform efforts.

Week 63

Necron efforts to understand Tyranid hiveminds are inconclusive. The only real observation was that Necron pylons are superb at disrupting whatever their communication scheme is. The Necrons have agreed to jointly study a planet seeded with Tyranids without pylons being present. Orks are also reluctant to reveal any secrets. We are coming to the conclusion that the Necron understanding of the warp is more focused on how to negate and control it, rather than to manipulate it.

ZharTann efforts to reverse engineer a Webway Gate have had initial success. Eldar bonesingers, with adequate simulation and testing support, have managed to rediscover how to bonesing a critical warp-distorting material of the Gates, a technique they had lost quite some time ago. Much work remains to be done in order to make a functional Gate from this but at least the initial success has been encouraging. Revay's attempts at psychic sensitivity are progressing slowly. Frustratingly slowly to the Eldar bonesingers despite their high patience. Some of them are questioning whether Revay can even learn any psychic sensitivity, much less actively defend herself from psychic attacks. Revay has suggested that we perform some modifications to her on the known warp-sensitive brain structures to be more Eldar-like and try again, but for obvious safety reasons, we are hesitant to perform such experiments.

The Chaos forces have captured their hundreth world outside the region of the Eye. Imperial and Eldar efforts to stem the flood have been inadequate despite our support and some Culture factions have expressed desire to join the battle themselves. ROUs defended with Necron pylons may have an advantage against Chaos but we are hesitant to show our hand without need as disastrous accidents could send the Chaotic forces into hyperdrive.
Week 64
Tyranid studies have yielded an unexpected benefit. Tyranid vulnerability to communication disruption by pylons has proven their communication ability to be a warp effect. This highly stable and predictable warp effect is reversible if the affected Tyranids are removed from pylon fields and they recover their ability to cooperate quickly.
This gives us a reliable and stable warp effect with which to study Necron pylon negation. With some effort, the Necrons and us have already managed to tune a pylon field to have a sharp 'edge'. Where normal pylons result in a smooth degradation of Tyranid links as the Tyranids approach the pylon, with a large central area where Tyranid links fail to work, a 'sharp' pylon edge barely disrupts Tyranid links outside its area while rapidly progressing to complete severance within an unusually short buffer zone.
Interestingly, side experiments show that Orks do not work well in Necron pylon fields either. They are unable to use their warp-based corruption abilities on Necron technology covered by a pylon field of sufficient strength to counter the Waagh effect.

Cross comparison with earlier work on tunable Gellar Fields have yielded potential lines of inquiry. We are looking into shaping warp negation fields for usage as weapons and shields.

Study of Tau warp drives have yielded some fruit as a warp drive managed to successfully 'skip' off the warp when at positive hyperspace coordinates. The technique is still unstable but further refinements look possible.

Chaotic advances have surpassed 200 systems and the pace is increasing daily. The advance appears unstoppable and we are considering negotiating with the Necrons for their galactic pylon schematics for use as a weapon. The Eldar are not happy with this but they also appear unable to stop contagious warp effects like those employed so far.

Week 65
The Eldar have proposed a... daring plan to slow the Chaotic advance. They claim that the Imperium's Astronomican is inefficient due to humanity's poor warp understanding. They have the ability to re-tune the Imperium's Astronomican for use as warp stabilization in much the same way as a Gellar Field, only with galactic range. An Eldar infiltration team that enters the Astronomican Chamber and works for at least three hours should be able to irreversibly reconfigure the Astronomican.
For obvious reasons, any such attempt would have to be a multi-racial cooperation between us, the Eldar and Imperial volunteers. Concealing the Eldar farseers doing the tuning from the psychic defense grid is still an unsolved problem.

Despite the high risk and damage to future diplomatic relations, the plan has a surprisingly large amount of support.

Why the Eldar chose this moment to reveal their plan is also unclear. We are under no illusions that the Eldar already had this plan in mind from before the advent of the Chaotic attack.
Week 66

The Tau have, surprisingly, decided to withdraw from the Macragge assault. Instead they are now on an active defence, striking mainly at Imperial fleets and bases, in order to secure their current conquests. While this response was predicted to a certain extent, their current experiment into a focus on speed does not match this return to their older styles.

 Tau innovation continues to increase, however, with many of their Earth caste obtaining intelligence augmentation by partially merging with assistant AIs. It would appear that the Ethereals have decided to experiment with Singularity by the augmentation route.

An feasible plan for entering Sol has appeared. As the detection and offensive psychic grid is a pure warp effect, our recent advances into sharpening pylon fields would allow us to build a sort of wall of null-warp around the Eldar team without affecting them. By placing a shell of pylons with overlapping fields around the infiltrating ship, and with a formation whose positions are so precisely determined that they are only achieveable by effector, it would be possible to enter Sol without triggering any psychic detection if the Eldar also shield the action from appearing in future sight.

On the other hand, the large shell of pylons cannot change shape or move quickly. This runs a high risk of physical detection by Sol's telescopes. Together with the Eldar, we have plotted a launch trajectory that should be able to avoid detection by hiding behind a freighter and avoiding star occlusion by adjusting the starlight around the entire Sol system over a 10 lightyear range, plus covering the rest with a Trapdoor system to dump excess emissions into hyperspace. There are too many parameters to fully predict and communication into Sol would be problematic once the operation is underway. Such an independent team would have to make their own decisions on the spot and would be undertaking an operation of unsurpassed delicacy at any time in our recorded history.

The Eldar have already chosen their team. Finding a Culture/human team for that freighter may be a challenge.

This would only work once as the oversight in patrol patterns is easily changed and our actions in hindsight are impossible to conceal from Sol's psykers, unlike in future sight.
The Mysterious Case of the Astronomican

One doesn't often get called in to investigate a sabotage case if one is a cruiser captain. Not least if it isn't on a ship. Even less if it involves officials so highly placed that one can't even see their bootlaces.

But nothing about this case was normal. For one thing, the Astronomican is not the purview of the Imperial Navy. One would normally sic the Adeptus Astra on that, but of course, they were all under suspicion after THAT.

The next in line would be the Ordo Hereticus. But of course, the Navy had pruned them back severely in that Sol fight. Yours truly had a hand in that business. We weren't about to give them a chance to re-establish themselves.

The Ordo Xenos or Malleus would be the next logical pick, especially since there was the stink of xenotech all over the case. And quite a large dose of chaos suspicion, given the war going on near the Eye. (And chaos DID have a hand, as I found out later; just not the sort anyone was expecting)

But of course, the (presently) Navy dominated Sol hierarchy wanted a Navy man to do the job. And a Navy man they got. No one above my level was willing to stick their head out, especially when it involved investigating their superiors.

And so, the biggest case of sabotage since Horus landed in on the desk of one lowly cruiser captain too stupid, too loyal and far FAR too underranked to refuse.

I'm recording this memoir of mine for posterity, since the politics going on far above my (now quite not so low) rank is quite likely to do me in. Let this serve as a warning to other... aspiring cruiser captains.

The initial brief on my miserable cubby hole was as thick as my thumb and its contents were as bad for my heart as a clot about as big. It was a wonder the words on the pages hadn't burnt through the completely non-descript yellow letter packaging that pre-dates even the Imperium.

One does not normally get a license for independent action nominally outside all command structures. Above and beyond one's superiors is often given, for secret or sometimes not-so-secret surveillance and investigation. Above and beyond Inquisitorial attention or Arbites is rare (and often lethal), but sometimes the Navy power games work out that way.

Above the entire navy command structure AND Arbites AND the inquisitors? As well as top level clearance and personally signed, stamped, holosealed, psy-inked stasis-medallions from every single one of the High Lords of Terra, each delivered by dead drop and completely untraceable routes? That was as good as blank cheque to all Imperial resources. From the moment I opened that Emperor-damned package, I was officially the most powerful man in the entire Imperium, able to go anywhere, do anything and kill anyone I deemed necessary. I could, almost, be allowed to visit the Golden Throne itself.

I was also dead. No one would let one person get away with that much power, and they were expecting some serious resistance. All the High Lords were out for each other's throats and none of them had any idea of what the others were doing. Everyone thought everyone else had a hand, or mechadendrite, or knife, or daemonclaw in the pie; and fingers, limbs and heads were going to roll every time someone moved.
Naive as I was though, I put on the medals and admired myself in the mirror for a good ten minutes before settling down to read. And then I wished I hadn't wasted the time.

Someone, or many someones, had somehow managed to sneak past the Sol PsyGuard, all the Navy patrols and defence bases, sneaked past all the Arbites and Ordos surveillance on Earth, got into the Astronomican itself and then did NOT destroy it.

What was completely weird about the entire thing was that afterwards, not only had they not destroyed the Astronomican, as all good Imperial soldiers know that the xenos all want to do, and by the size of the security breach they could have snuck a cyclonic torpedo into the Chamber itself, the Adeptus Astra said it was working better than before! The Navigators testing it said they could 'hear' the voice of the Astronomican as if it was right next to them, even if they were on the edge of Segmentum Solar.

Along the way in, it turned up later, they had also killed a small army of Chaos daemons, how they did it without attracting attention, or hide the bodies afterward, had spawned so many conspiracy theories within and without the Imperial Administration that a special rehabilitation program was being created for those rendered insane by way of seeing conspiracies everywhere.

So, not only did these xenos, humans, or whatever, do something apparently beneficial to the Astronomican, Chaos was also trying to stop them! But why? Why would Chaos want to stop a group that everyone agreed was from the Great Enemy, right when it was going to gain access to the prize that Chaos itself sought?

Nothing about it made sense, so I had to do some legwork and digging. And then I had to do more digging, and before I knew it, I was in so deep that a Navigator standing next to me would have trouble spotting the Emperor's flashlight.

First thing I had to do was to find some help. One cruiser captain could not be in two places at the same time. And I wasn't going to start asking for psykers to mess with my mind, keys to Imperium or not. Some say the best telepaths can give you more than one body, but such sorcery gives me the shivers.

I called in my Navigator, a long trusted friend if a bit strange, and showed her the packet. Then I had to lock the door and flash the medals in her face to prevent her from running out on me. Smart as she was, she didn't want to have anything to do with it, but I seriously needed the help. One almost-warp-accident and not a few bolts of lightning later, I had my first companion.

I sent her out with one medal to go talk to the Psyguard. What they saw (or didn't) when the xenos came in would be useful to me.

A contact from the Sisters of Battle shut down the dataslate on me too, but I had override codes by the bucketload. I needed to know what was going on, the entire history of weird goings on and sightings in the last few weeks. The xenos might have made a highly successful attempt, but the groundwork had to have been laid much earlier. The Sisters of Battle are notably apolitical outside of their own closed ranks and would be perfect for some archeological digging. A bit of arm-twisting and digital haunting later, she agreed.
Having started off the process, it was time for me to stick my neck out and call in my superior. Or in this case, his superior's superior, the Lord High Admiral herself, one Millifille much distinguished in the recent Sol conflict. Her secretary couldn't believe her eyes when she saw Millifille's own medallion. A few more from the collection convinced her to go ask.

The meeting was less useful than I had thought. Millifille knew nothing at all, quite surprising for a Lord High Admiral, but of course she wouldn't reveal her cards that readily. A naive little cruiser captain from her own fleet was honestly trying to make sense of a case, but she played a game far over my head as I later found out.

In any case, I walked out of the meeting feeling optimistic and upbeat at how much I now knew about who was going to backstab whom in this kerfuffle. It was only a few hours later that I realized that I had nothing at all about the case itself.

The piece still fit together like a jigsaw puzzle made for Chaos-corrupted mutants.

Strangely enough, the Psyguard was cooperative. Well, the medallions probably helped just a bit. I have to admit I'm now completely spoiled about getting answers I want when I want it, getting back to the usual Administratum bureaucracy is going to take some doing.

My navigator friend reported that the Psyguard noted nothing at all. Which was expected, but more interestingly, also noted nothing at all about the unregistered freighter that had been the cause of much prior headaches.

To be honest, (ab)using my newfound power to bring to bear the biggest guns in Sol on the hapless freighter's records was pure spite, I am ashamed to admit. More so because said freighter had already left Sol. Because, I, the ex-cruiser captain whose memoirs you are reading, was the one who discovered the discrepancy in their records.

Said freighter had come in with invalid one-time pass codes that are issued to all vessels entering Sol. While pass codes themselves are only a minor issue, one often confused by the vagaries of travel time in the warp, it's only good security practice.

Turns out, when you report a discrepancy to a Navy on hyperalert for xeno intrusions, you get dumped into a Warp-spawned domain full of paperwork. I eventually worked out an excuse with the freighter captain to explain it by a warp accident. I thought it was a happy coincidence that when I dispatched my cruiser's Navigator to plant the evidence, he discovered the freighter already had traces of a temporal warp accident of the sort that would explain the discrepancy in the time matched pass codes.

On hindsight, it was strange that none of the occupants of the freighter noticed a major warp accident but at the time I was only too happy to take the Emperor's Blessings to escape from the hell of paperwork and inspections.

The Psyguard said they didn't notice any trace of a warp accident on the freighter.

How strange should it be that a Navigator could pick up the traces while on the ship and the Psyguard spotted nothing at all? The Psyguard who, after one too many annoyed Prefects, showed themselves to be able to pick up the unwanted presence of a common field mouse in the Imperial Administratum buildings.

(They're not supposed to look at Earth, something about interference with the Astronomican, but the
mouse was supposedly too cunning to be found by pest control. I personally found the event utterly hilarious but apparently it was annoying enough that the Administratum was apparently considering flooding the chambers with gas if the Psyguard didn't prove cooperative...

Tracing the timing of when the freighter's cargo arrived on Earth showed that the event just exactly pre-dated the observations of the Sisters of Battle.

I had found the vector, and with that, I could and did find the rest. Sometimes I still wish I didn't.

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<unfinished>

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