

So you decided to see this through to the end, weapon in hand and making your stand.

There's no going back now.

No doubt it's been a terrifyingly eventful situation, what with the significance of the relic now in your possession and the power you wield as a result. Such things rising from the veil of obscurity have a tendency of causing wheels to turn and powers to move in the eternal desire to retain control and influence in the wake of the change that inevitably arrives. For every bargain you have struck with others, tens more have been brought to the tables beyond your vision. For every alliance you broker, countless others will coalesce and rise in fear of what you could do to the galaxy. Even your own side will be fearful of what you could bring, and they might even try to dissuade you in hopes of ensuring they are not cast to the winds when you shatter the status quo for your own nebulous reasons. Others will usurp the destiny that is rightfully yours, bestowed upon you by your Patron to blossom into a being of unfathomable power and might beyond that of a Champion.

Yet you will endure. You must endure, or your decisions will have been for nothing.

Look on the bright side; this will be entertaining for at least one of us.



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# PART 2: The Crimson Path

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## BEGINNING

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**[THIS PART CAN ONLY BE ACCESSED IF YOU TOOK THE RELIC WEAPON GIVEN BY YOUR PATRON]**

How long has it been, since you found yourself in the perilous Warp and made the decision that would shape the direction of your life in this galaxy from then on out? A year? A decade? A century, even?

It's hard to say. Traveling the Immaterium comes with risks, and though the party you've come across would have the means to negate most of the dangers there is still the possibility of fluxes and glitches that place you in the most curious of places and times. Even without those potential problems, there is more than enough to do that one could easily lose track of the time simply from how busy one can be. Seems there's no shortage of fires to put out or start.

Granted, someone like you wouldn't be the kind to twiddle their thumbs anyway. Not with a weapon like that by your side.

It's strange, really. Simply having it commands an unbreakable respect from the Company-sized group of Astartes that acquiesced you from that planet you ended up on along with whoever else you ended up obtaining the loyalty of along the way, and the idea of them trying to kill you to possess it for their own has been just shy of unthinkable. Is it due to the primal essence of its prior owner saturating the weapon, making you appear to be a living legend? Is it the power that such a thing brings to the table, able to erase entire groups of enemies with a wave of your hand? Maybe it's the most obvious, that you'll, if we're using Low Gothic for this, throw every last one of those disloyal fuckwits out of the airlock if they tried?

Whatever the reason is, you haven't had any real issues with them beyond the occasional glare of disapproval should you act counteractive to their own desires.

The real issue has been everyone else. It's a big galaxy, and to the surprise of absolutely no one that translates to a lot of different viewpoints and ideals. All of which are competing against each other for the most part, even when a large portion of them are supposed to be on the same side. The weapon you possess, to say nothing of your involvement with the Prophecy (whether you accepted or rejected it) has meant that both followers of Chaos and followers of the Imperium have tried to strike you down for their own reasons. Not a month would have gone by where it seems like you caused a shootout simply because you existed.

For better or for worse, even a fool would realize that what you have acquired before can only last for so long. Your enemies will strive to obtain as much as they can to see you brought into their fold or removed outright, and so long as you continue to resist their attempts at control or destruction they will continue to bring more dangerous means to the table. Simply put, you will need more. More of what? Just more.

No Forge World will grant you the edge you need, however. No Hive World, either. No, nothing in known space can grant you what you need to pull one up on them. Sure. striking bargains with them by using either authority or assault rifles is pretty good for when you need resources and to acquire mass produced weapons and armor for those who follow you in loyalty, but in truth what you need is the good stuff. Things that will shake the foundations of entire systems, if not the entire galaxy. It ill matters whether you work for Chaos or Order, for might is the currency of the realm.

There's only one place to go for such might... the unknown.



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## THE HALO STARS

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You know the old saying: If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.

The Halo Stars, and by proxy the Koronus Expanse has a plethora of stories surrounding it. For every tale of woe and horror, tenfold are there rumors of unparalleled wealth and treasure just waiting to be plucked. For every intrepid explorer that has made their big break out in the unknown, thousands more have either perished or simply gone missing in the unforgiving region. It is a place of both opportunity and danger, teeming with hostile Xenos not found anywhere else and machines of all kinds. Marvelous machines that can do things you would not believe.

So naturally it is this section of space that your void-faring allies have recommended for you to explore and plunder. Much of the known Galaxy is either hotly contested or has too many factions vying for power and resources for it to be a worthwhile endeavor beyond sentimental value. Out here, enemy factions disappear all the time for the aggressive kind of conquerors, and there is no lack of scoundrels to deal with should one have a heroic disposition they enjoy maintaining. It's the perfect breeding ground. That or one of the most mythical places to disappear in an elaborate scheme of glorified self-termination. But hey, no one will be able to share embarrassing stories of how badly you screwed up if you fail here.

All that's missing is for you to obtain a bigger ship than the relatively small *Hunter-class* Destroyer your allies picked you up in, if you haven't already acquired a larger vessel already through bartering or bloodshed when you arrived in this galaxy. It's hardly a worthy vessel for the goals you have in mind, noble or otherwise. That or to find a proper star chart so you can head off and begin the pillaging in your own vessel.

As tempting as it is to travel to Port Wander on the boundary of the Koronus Passage and just pick up a ship, going there might cause more trouble than it's worth. For starters, many of the vessels there are owned mostly legally and are there for a particular purpose. Those of the chaotic disposition would find the station's security more trouble than its worth, and those of Imperial origin are more than aware of how finicky even other Imperials can be with their ships... to say nothing of actually successful Rogue Traders and how quickly they would cause problems. No, this place is where you should come when you have a ship full of loot. Taking one from here would be a lot of hassle.

How fortunate then, that just on the other side of the passage there's a location that's ripe for acquiring vessels and new start charts. Guilt-free, even. After all, on the very edge of the unknown there will inevitably be hives of scum and villainy.



Enter Dewain's Footfall floating among the light of Furibundus on the far side of the Great Warp Storms that is Koronus Passage. Often it is one of the very first things a person will see once they manage to cross the passage, and the last point of any recognizable civilization before heading off into the great unknown, Imperial or otherwise.

The structure is strange as far as void-borne outposts go, with hundreds of massive stone structures tethered to each other with an even more massive statue of the God-Emperor in the center of it all. Temples and plasma engines are installed all over, and most sections of this place either have no gravity or fluctuating levels. The rare sections that do have stable gravity due to advanced generators are highly desired, and will trade hands with alarming regularity as the most powerful factions vie for control. A pile of corpses often accompanies said changing of hands.

Once it was an Imperial outpost, but as time went on its original population of stoneworkers and Rogue Traders became outnumbered by villains and less reputable folk. Assassins, spies, fugitives, suspicious merchants, and more fill these streets. Beneath the visage of piracy and lawlessness, affiliates of Chaos and worse roam about and bring their own particular brand of intrigue with them to make Footfall more esoteric than it already is. Even with the numerous secret agents from every group with an agenda from the Calixis Sector keeping tabs and keeping lids on the worst of what goes on, it is still a dark place. Anything can be acquired here, from a starship to a soul. Fortunately for you, a starship or the charts contained within is exactly what you need.

Maybe you send out agents to enquire about a target perfect for your needs. Maybe you just pay for the information somehow. Maybe you just look for the most shiny ship currently docked for the purpose of making a statement when you decide to blow this joint and anyone who happens to be in the kill zone at the moment. Whatever your method, it would hardly take you half of the day to find your quarry.

Even docked, she looked beautiful. A little above five kilometers in length, with enough Lance firepower to carve up renegade star empires before scurrying away with everything of value in their staggeringly large cargo holds. Unique technology that let it engage in long-distance exploratory missions for years at a time. Its exterior was gilded enough to look like a luxury vessel even with all of its weapons, enough that one could very well believe the rumor that these kinds of ships were commissioned by the self-proclaimed Master of Mankind himself for the very first Rogue Traders.

If she really was over ten thousand years old, then she was bound to have all manners of upgrades and improvements done to her by the Rogue Trader dynasty that had kept her.

*A Conquest-class Star Galleon, in all her glory.*

*The Unsung Peril.*

There's just the matter of actually getting ownership of the vessel in some way or the navigational data inside of her and getting out of here. Being a relic from the Founding of the Imperium, they are jealously guarded as priceless treasures by the obscenely powerful dynasties that own them, and this one is no exception at all. Who knows what awaits inside its interiors, what unique relics from lost empires could adorn the halls within? Such ships are almost like floating museums in that respect, which makes it that much harder to wrest said ships from the Rogue Traders who possess it.

But what fun would it be if it were easy?

As it stands, you've got a few choices on how you want to do this. You can find some way to locate the captain of the vessel and convince them to ally with you for the promise of riches and getting in on salvage rights when you eventually begin your Crusade, you could try to barter with them and offer something of exuberant worth for the possibility of parting with the vessel or star charts needed... or you could take advantage of the fact that you have a group of Astartes consisting of either the 'Beasts of Annihilation' or the 'Red Hunters' that ferry you around and make them do what they do best as you just take your prize. Either one is sure to be an adventure in of itself, it merely depends on how nice you're feeling at that particular moment.

Whatever you choose, it's sure to be a sight when you finally take a step inside and witness what's within this relic of ages past.

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## BUILDING THE CRUSADE

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The inside of the *Unsung Peril* is as amazing as it is on the outside. Its halls are a monument to the civilizations that will never be known outside of what is collected here, its captain's quarters more luxurious than the palaces of planetary governors. Even a leisurely stroll would reveal that the machines inside this place are of superior quality, containing archaeotech treasure ranging from advanced cogitator cores that process tremendous amounts of data to on-board laboratories to glean any possible fact from artifacts to determine their worth. The kitchen area is one of the biggest finds, containing the fabled "Ubertas" Device that provides the entire ship's crew with fresh, nutritious food that the aforementioned planetary governors would usually pay a planet's ransom to acquire. With such luxury supplementing the voyages, was it any wonder that such a ship would make any dynasty a fortune?

Such a ship that is now yours if you chose to acquire it, regardless of what you had to do to get it.

Running a diagnostic would reveal the engines were recently tuned up and all munitions freshly stocked, along with a resupply of Servitors. Seems there was an expedition that was being planned, and the navigation you possess, however you obtained it, would show th- now hold on here.

This is a completely different area. This wasn't Winterscale's Realm, nor the Foundling Worlds or even the Heathen Stars. This wasn't even a suicidal run towards the Unbeholden Reaches or the godless Rifts of Hecaton. This was a realm among the Halo Stars that had literally been recently rediscovered. Information from the ship's cogitator core or the Captain would reveal this ship was intended to be the maiden voyage to explore the locale for potential reward and unique resources to obtain. There was no information beyond coordinates to planets in the region and a single name.

The Zerzuran Chasm.

How quaint.

Still, a freshly rediscovered section of space? Holding the promise of priceless treasures and unparalleled technology should one be bold enough to seize it? This sounds like the perfect place to start building up resources and a power base to launch a Crusade. If nothing else, what you find could be enough to make countless soldiers flock to your banner to see your designs to fruition. Sure, there's the risk of completely unknown Xenos species ready to do indescribable things to you or places so dangerous that to even gaze upon it would see you go insane or worse. Sure, there's the chance that all you're really doing is riding the galaxy's fastest bullet train to Hell.

At the very least, it'll be a blast watching your moments there. Regardless if they're final or not.





The moment you make the jump and end up at the coordinates, you're hit with a wave of colors and prismatic lights. Far from being a bleak and cold section it looks absolutely beautiful. Pristine, even. Curious that this place was only recently rediscovered.

The reasoning comes a second later when navigation starts screaming at all the Warp Storms that are making those lights.

Well that explains that.

Getting past all the screams of terror demanding the Gellar Fields be set to maximum, the potential praying from those who feel they've offended their chosen deity in some way, and the all-around nagging of asking you what to do since they just jumped into the galactic equivalent of a housefire, the ship scanners do start taking in some curious data. Turns out this ship had a probe in the region and by some miraculous feat it didn't get destroyed or sucked into some horrific abyss. Even more miraculous, it collected information on various worlds and celestial bodies that you might be interested in investigating.

You know, if you manage to get past all of these Warp Storms that was wreaking absolute havoc on the chain of command at best. Those aren't going away anytime soon, and it might be best if you grab what you can and get out of there before this place really does go to Hell.

*Each of the following locations will have a selection of rewards to choose from, and you may choose which systems you go to and which ones you will leave alone. Out of the following, you may only select fifteen possible rewards to leave with. Time is of the essence, and what you choose will decide how your Crusade plays out.*

# THE DOMINION OF ETERNITY

The first system seems straightforward enough, as far as the data goes. Two worlds, a couple of asteroid fields, and a single sun. The fields within the Inner Cauldron of the system were rife with all manners of radioactive and exotic materials the probe couldn't quite quantify even with a passing glance, and both planets were practically teeming with life. No gravity riptides, no warp rifts, not even a Tyranid in sight.

Granted, it did have some oddities that even a novice astrologer would have picked up. For one, the star in the system was purple. Very few things could do that to a star, and none of them were natural occurrences at all. The second thing was that while the first planet was a small and dense radioactive Death World that had a thin atmosphere capable of melting the armor off a Guardsman before melting the Guardsman themselves, the second world was huge. *Really* huge, easily a great many sizes larger than Terra and even threatening to reach the size of Jupiter. Yet it had Terran standard gravity somehow, along with a perfectly viable and temperate atmosphere.

Perfect place to hit the ground running and collect all manners of trinkets that should be waiting to be claimed by you, right?

A quick warp jump would soon see you in the system, and alert you to two things that make the prior view of simplicity a load of Immaterium-induced insanity. The first being that your vessel, when exiting the Warp, damn near slams into a derelict Dark Eldar vessel about four times as large as the *Unsung Peril*. Maneuvering around it would reveal a graveyard of starships massive in size. There were even Space Hulks among them... four. Four damned Space Hulks surrounded by an entire field of mangled, twisted vessels of myriad conditions and origins. Some of them looking pristine on the outside, others appearing as though a wild animal tore through them. All with a strange white cube floating in the center with thrumming blue lights.

The second thing was that the vast planet clearly had lights and signs of a Hive City. There was voidfaring life here.

What kind of shitty probe did these Traders *use*?

Your arrival hasn't gotten anyone's attention just yet thankfully, but somehow trying to sneak past the larger planet feels... unwise, if all of these smashed vessels were any hint at all. Maybe you could find a way to communicate with whatever species was down there, and convince them to turn to the light of your patrons? Of course there was also just scouring the graveyard around the system, there was bound to be more than enough material out here to sate yourself and leave without even so much as shooting a glance at the massive planet.

Yet there was bound to be plenty of recruitment options or relics to be reclaimed for a higher purpose if you convinced whatever civilization was down there to join your cause, to say nothing if you could gain access to the Inner Cauldron and get at that obscenely delicious cache of materials.

Time to choose how you want to get your hands dirty.

## GOOD OL' FASHIONED ROBBING

Whether this is where you want to start or you decided to hit this place on the way out after dealing with the populace, you order your vessel to begin scanning the derelict vessels for anything particularly shiny.

It's certainly an exercise for both the Navigators and the Pilots both, trying to chart a path through an ever-changing obstacle course of broken vessels and wayward fleets. Some of these vessels look strange and organic in nature, while others had the familiarity of Imperial technology underneath the damage. It's kind of strange, in a way. All these vessels of different origins and times. Were the Warp Storms the cause for why they were all here? If not, what could bring so many walks of life to this place at the same time?

Wait.

The only outward damage any Imperial vessels showed was due to colliding with other vessels. Ramming damage. They also had the only pristine vessels around. All the vessels belonging to Xenos had the most damage by far.

Someone here was feeling particularly xenophobic. Not exactly an unusual trait, but one that could work out in your favor.

Sending out the salvage crews on the derelict Imperial vessels seems to work out so far. A few cargo holds that were full of materials and ammunition, freighters full of weaponry of all kinds, and not a corpse in sight. Seriously, you would think that there would be at least one or two bodies floating inside of these vessels but there was nothing. It was like they all just up and vanished into the Void. On one hand it meant less dead hands to pry off of some curious little baubles, but the lack of any signs of struggle is incredibly unlike a human in their dying moments.

Lack of struggle also meant that a lot of what you find is in pristine condition. Whether you decide to sell a lot of these or keep it, it's sure to be a great boon to you. The technological worship of Mankind throughout most of its history has resulted in some very interesting creations along with equally interesting attempts to preserve said creations, which very much contributes to why you could say, find a couple of Chainswords on one of these vessels and see them working as perfectly as the day they got thrown out the forges.

Even more curiously, when your crews report that there was a *very* interesting find in the form of a ship weapon pattern that they've never seen before and asked for permission to carve into it, your Astropath reported that there was life inside one of the Space Hulks. Human life. Which by all accounts should be next to impossible, with how long it normally takes for Space Hulks to form, much less collect other vessels along its hull. Inquiries of certainty would be met with the intercepting of communications, and some kind of firefight going on. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that running in there and saving the day could get some very happy recruits on your side. Keeping them from dying to some hostile lifeforms means you can send them to die for your own reasons instead.

Of course, nobody said you had to run off and get to them right now or even at all. They're not going anywhere... but neither is this strange ship weapon either. Decisions, decisions.

Whether you choose speed or greed, should you approach the Space Hulk the Navigators will point out there are a few docking points that are close enough to the sources of the communication. It barely takes a few minutes to arrive there and dock, and sensors indicate that there's breathable air on board. A good start, if nothing else. More accurate readings come in a moment later, showing that there's easily thousands of humans on board. Thousands of new soldiers or hands hardened from a life on a Space Hulk to spread the glory of the word, whatever that word may be. One shuddered to think of how tough they could be when properly equipped.

Walking through the halls of this ship, however, could be considered 'unnerving' at best. You know that a lot of the Imperium's vessels were often designed to be flying cathedrals as much as weapons of war, but someone seemed to lean towards the former impression a lot more with this one. The floors were etched with meters upon meters of murals about Mankind with statues of cherubs and Custodes reaching the ceiling. The very, very high ceiling with stained glass with depictions of golden skulls and wings, depicting the tenants of the Imperial Truth that all should follow.

Wait. Imperial Truth? This vessel was from the times of the Great Crusade if it still had that old stuff etched right into the vessel. Even the implication that the Emperor wasn't some kind of god would see one half of the planet burned for heresy and the other half burned for good measure.

Maybe this will be more profitable than one originally thought.

Traveling through this vessel and towards the sources of the life signatures and communications will reveal the familiar sounds of bolter fire and clashing weaponry becoming apparent. Either this place did a damned excellent job of carrying sounds or there was a really nasty battle going on. Either one would be cause enough to raise one's guard, or at least switch off the safety of one's personal weaponry. Fortunately, traversing the ship and exiting to board another section of the Space Hulk goes by with little incident, as does going through the haphazard rock and entering another vessel buried deeper within.

Alas, entering said vessel would see a wayward Lascannon blast slam the doorframe you just came out of. Looking further ahead, the fighting was definitely going on here. Only it wasn't Orks, or Genestealers, or any number of Xenos that were attacking human lifeforms. It was humans attacking humans. Or rather, Astartes attacking Astartes. One side having dark green armor with skulls on their kneepads and adorned in large cloaks, while the other side had armor that looked too old to be modern. Armor of white and black, with a large wolf emblem on their shoulder pauldron.

So... Fallen Angels fighting against supposed Luna Wolves of the past on a floating Space Hulk, with a xenophobic Xenos station of Xenos origin. Guess there's no shortage of strangeness to be found here.

The two combatants looked pretty even in power and numbers, so it was naturally a slog even just to watch with all the rounds and lasers going everywhere. It'd be a shame if someone just came in and chose a side to tip the scales and demolish them to end the fight in quick order.

A real shame indeed.

The moment things start going south for the group you decided to forsake, they'll do their best to evacuate and get away from the field of battle, which is no small cause for celebration for the side you happened to swoop in and start opening up enemies like canned meat for. After a bit of questioning on who you are, introductions will be underway as they bring you to their base of operations that looks like a haphazardly constructed fortress made out of melted rock and tanks that were torn apart for their munitions and armor. Inside was at least better, with cleanly paved floors and murals of their respective Astartes origins while the taller soldiers kept guard. Along with humans. Lots of humans who were ferrying materials and maintaining the base along with the entire rows of armaments they possessed.

Judging by all the clothing and the rigid attitudes many of them possess, they were likely descendants of Imperial soldiers. However, none of them had anything that looked up to date. In fact, many of the gear seemed far too old to have seen common use. Volkite weapons and Grav guns laid next to the lasguns and bolters, along with quite the depo of scoured items that they've collected. Questioning will reveal that they've been here for hundreds of years since the Warp Storm stole them away.

Amusingly enough, trying to mention the name of Horus to the Luna Wolves will receive a very sour fifteen-minute rant on the fact that Horus had gone insane with ambition, and that they had been on their way to Terra to warn the Emperor of this terrible betrayal. Any questioning for those who went with the Fallen Angels would note that they felt a united front against the Imperium was needed if it was to clear the board and start over, that one needed to be mindful of Chaos and pay respect to it if a true empire was to form.

Both sides have absolutely no idea that it wasn't the 31<sup>st</sup> Millenium.

They'll also wonder how you managed to evade the Effluvial Cube, which is more or less their name for the Xenos station that was responsible for the huge graveyard right outside. They would go on to explain how after being deposited out of the Warp Storm and into this graveyard that they saw the station activate and start teleporting out entire crews worth of ships at a time until it got to a vessel with Astartes on it. From there it immediately destroyed their engines before going inert again, leaving them to the situation that they preside in today. Observations afterwards would see them doing the same thing to human vessels that arrived, with any vessels of Xenos design seeing a flash of light before said vessel got mangled apart in waves of plasma.

One thing doesn't add up, though. You arrived in the system and this Cube didn't react to your vessel.

There's some theorizing, but eventually the conclusion comes down to the defense station having a minimum effective range being affected by the graveyard it created before it starts bellowing out plasma or beginning the scans. Could be why the derelict vessels are so close and clustered together.

Of course, if you didn't decide to find these Astartes, the crew of the *Unsung Peril* would have inevitably come to the same conclusion.

It's a fairly simple endeavor when it comes down to it. Keep your distance, be mindful of debris trajectory that you're taking advantage of, then proceed to launch a bunch of torpedoes at the Cube or whatever you feel is enough firepower to level a ship. You've likely only got one chance at disabling the station before it goes absolutely crazy, so be sure your first punch hits hard. Otherwise you can expect your vessel to gain a free plasma power-wash courtesy of Xenos and your own incompetence.

Smashing the station, in a stroke of luck, merely disables it instead of destroying it outright. Which means you could go right inside and check it out for yourself. That or proceed to pillage the rest of this graveyard with impunity or go to the aforementioned Space Hulk if you haven't gone there yet.

Going to the station and boarding it via the damaged sections you recently created would find a design that was very strange. Pristine white surfaces, glowing blue lines and a sense of vertigo while walking along its corridors. Doors were marked with a glowing blue symbol that looked like a bird wreathed in lightning, and screens only held pictures instead of words... or maybe the pictures were the words. Hieroglyphs? It wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility. Still, you don't really find much in the way of life forms in this place. Just the sense of vertigo that constantly assails you along with the feeling of being watched.

Finding valuables is an entirely different story. Exploring would find that there were exotic machinery lying around in rooms, almost like spare parts. Spare parts that you could undoubtedly use, if you were so inclined. Parts for weapons, maybe, or whatever was causing this place to teleport people away. Either way there was a lot of it, enough to outfit a vessel or three.

One of the rooms is infinitely more concerning. Inside was not the seamless white surfaces or the blue glow, but the dark and gothic tones of human technology. Technology that looked advanced enough to have heralded from the Dark Age, along with a human corpse perfectly preserved inside a sealed canister with blue lights all over it. The room, if you gave it enough of a look-over, reminded you of a ship bridge except... smaller. Much smaller than usual.

So either ancient humans and Xenos collaborated and created this defense station, or there's a Xenos out there that was capable of messing with Dark Age technology and adapted it to their systems.

One could almost *feel* the shrieking rage of Inquisitors all the way out here on such a level that would make the World Eaters give pause.

But you're not here to ponder. It's time to take what you desire and move on.

## **Possible Rewards:**

**RAPID MACROCANNONS:** The ships among the graveyard are hardly using their prized weapons, and so you've taken it upon yourself to carve them out and start installing the components within your vessel. These Archaeotech Macrocannons are a wonder to behold, not only containing additional punching power than normal but also firing three times as fast to deliver swift deliverance upon those who would dare stand in your way. You might attract Orks with the amount of fire you're throwing.

**(CHAOS ONLY) ANGELIC ARMY:** For saving them from a potential defeat and giving them a way out of that Space Hulk, these hundred Astartes of time-displaced Fallen Angels and organized soldiers of three thousand Imperial Army descendants will offer to become followers to your goals and your Crusade. Along with being more readily equipped than your average Imperial Guardsman by far, these Astartes with their combat experience and leadership skills are bound to be of great use to those who want a break from... well, backstabbing chaotic allies.

**(LOYALIST ONLY) LUNARIAN ARMY:** For saving them from a potential defeat and giving them a way out of that Space Hulk, these hundred Astartes of time-displaced Luna Wolves and organized soldiers of three thousand Imperial Army descendants will offer to become followers to your goals and your Crusade. Along with being more readily equipped than your average Imperial Guardsman by far, these Astartes with their combat experience and leadership skills are bound to be of great use to those who wish to break the forces of Chaos upon the knee of Order.

**PLASMA WAVE LAUNCHER:** The station may be crippled and unable to fight, but that doesn't mean you can't abuse this Xenos technology for yourself. Being installed on the top of the vessel, this machine will charge up and contain a large amount of plasma before magnetic fields will guide how they're expelled, essentially creating slashing waves of white-hot molten plasma being launched at your foes to tear vessels apart with the ferocity of a wild animal. It might take a few moments to charge up properly, but its power will not be denied.

**AUGMENTED SHIP BRIDGE:** While the station can no longer do its job of teleporting out humans for whatever nefarious purpose it was designed for, you can still take advantage of the Archaeotech that was being used. All the cogitator cores, all the interfaces and the energy conduits, everything here can be used to improve the bridge of your vessel to tremendous levels of energy efficiency and data processing. Entertainingly enough this also means almost all of the instruments are made a significantly smaller size, allowing you to add additional items you want or to go wild on new decorations.

## THE EVERLASTING EMPIRE

Now that the Xenos station is out of the way, it's time to finally find out what the deal is with that utterly massive planet bathed in the star's lavender light. Full speed ahead as the engines to your vessel roar to life and propel you.

Approaching it would get all manners of scanner pings from the planet. It wasn't defenses, but vessels. A great deal of vessels and fighters that were black and gothic in design, bristling with mass launchers and plasma weaponry; human in origin. What would humans be doing on a planet being guarded by Xenos technology?

On a scale of one to Heresy, this was pinging 'Heresy' pretty hard.

Before anything else, there was a communication ping. They were hailing you.

If you accepted, there would be a human on the screen. A human of immaculate personage who was dressed in robes of white and gold, eyes of piercing blue and of such a high quality the faint glow was the only thing that gave away that they were cybernetic. Even through the screen he gave off an aura of peace and serenity.

"Hail, voidfarer. I am Tenebrous, Oracle of the Everlasting Empire, and I would like to extend my apologies for how difficult it was to reach here. The stellar storms around our system are so rough that we never have visitors that make it past the Shepherd... it's designed to bring wayward Humans down here, but never did we expect the galaxy at large to evolve beyond what we knew. Our views are clearly outdated. Please, let us bring you down to the surface so we may hear of what has happened. We can provide food and repairs to your vessel as needed, as reparations."

His smile seemed sincere, but maybe that's suspicious in of itself. Plus, with a single sentence they confirmed that the defense station was theirs. You could give them the benefit of the doubt and accept Tenebrous' offer, travel down and see what you could learn or acquire. You could also 'accidentally' activate all the weapons on your ship and see how many vessels you could turn into scrap metal before the smile on his face vanished. It's your decision. No pressure or anything.

Regardless of what you choose, going down to the massive planet and seeing it up close reveals what amounted to an idyllic paradise. There were massive plains that stretched for hundreds of kilometers with all manners of plantlife, with mountains that were sculpted like something out of a Terran fairy tale. The air was... clean. Really clean. It almost felt impossible, with how many Imperial planets ended up destroying a world the moment a Hive City was erected. But this was nothing short of pristine.

Upon further inspection, the majority of the populace was around the southern regions of the planet, closer to the South Pole with a forest that was untouched. The North Pole has a forest too, only made entirely of crystal. A legit crystalline forest. Anyone with psionic abilities would feel like there was music coming from the strange trees. A haunting melody that wouldn't be out of place on a long voyage towards the concept of Infinity... or a funeral.



The Hive City itself was also possibly one of the most clean and organized variants you've ever seen. It was a pristine white, with building designs that looked as if it were a mixture between ancient Greek stone homes and the angled architecture of Aztecs. The blue lighting along the roads and the buildings mixed with the purple light from the sun to give it an ethereal appearance, which made the dark clothing and technology used by so many of the humans stand out even more. Even more surprising, there wasn't a single beggar or peasant in sight. Everyone looked well-nourished, even. Organized. At peace.

The perceptive ones would note that there were banners and statues all over, as well. Statues humming with life, forged in gold and marble to depict an especially regal human with strange symbols on their hands that looked like a star wreathed in lightning, the same ones on the banners. Those who decided that nice things aren't allowed and went in guns blazing would certainly notice these statues from how many plasma lasers they kept firing off from their hands.

As one got closer to the forests of the South Pole, they would note the architecture changing and becoming much more regal in appearance. Homes became palaces, palaces became grand temples. Those humans who lived in these places didn't wear the darker colors, but wore white and gold like Tenebrous did with varying degrees of expensive looking bionics on them. Further glances would also note that they seemed... more. Something about them felt larger than life, an innate feeling of greatness. Any psykers would feel this effect magnified, as though their status was felt by one's very soul.

If you accepted Tenebrous' peace offering, he would give a soft smile before explaining. "It is because they *are* more. We have been here for so very long, separated from the rest of the galaxy. What were we to do, except study what we could and advance ourselves in this corner of safety? The study of technology and its applications on our surroundings have yielded many findings, and we feel it would be a disservice to our own existence and the existence of Humanity if we did not apply those findings."

He would also mention that there was an Ascension Ritual that was going to commence later that night, if you wished to watch it unfold as an honored guest so that you could witness what it was they did out here.

You would be free to explore the city in the meantime, which is equally parts serene as it is creepy. Many of the people here would talk about remembering being born on this planet, after those who crashed here during the 24<sup>th</sup> Millennium were stranded and found a way to recover from being stranded. It was all thanks to the Trees of Life, their most prized possessions in the city. With the fruit born from those trees they attained eternal life and set about rebuilding their civilization here, saving any humans who accidentally found themselves here and bringing them into the light of this paradise.

Immortal humans from fruit? Saving humans with a cube that annihilates any ship that doesn't have a specific phenotype? Xenos technology that differed from Archaeotech? The other shoe was going to drop just about any minute now.

But eventually, the crowds gather and the rituals begin. It's all a big showboating play at first, with holographic images projected in the sky showing vessels crashing into the large planet. Difficulty moving and breathing due to the high gravity and toxic atmosphere, it seemed like the end. Then they found the Trees. With the fruit they consumed, they could withstand any ailment, whether from nature or from time. They could eternally stay in their prime, and even become stronger should they imbibe the fruit for a long enough period and didn't succumb to violent deaths. They would use this immortal lifespan to eventually find and accomplish what Humanity has always sought: To become masters and gods of creation.

Well then.

The first thing that stands out is the unique cloth and pigments that are brought out for the woman who lays on the altar atop stairs of platinum and gold, shimmering with a bioluminescent light and making her look like she was being draped in stars. An ornamental mask of ivory was placed upon her face, a symbolic gesture that she would be a new person when the mask was removed. She would be one step closer to the gods, an Eternal who worked tirelessly to break into a new realm of existence for the good of Mankind. Pillars of white and blue raised up around the altar as the attendants moved around her, making sure everything looked immaculate and pristine as the leader of the event asked the crowd to be supportive, as the woman would be a pioneer in a journey they all would take eventually.

That's when either you could see it with your psionic senses, or your communication tool roars as your Astropath insanely rambles about seeing the *thing* arriving. A creature that didn't move so much as it shifted. A creature of angled blue light, twisting its wings in a way that could make one think of legs along unseen surfaces. A creature unseen in the material, but was seen by those attuned to the Immaterium as it unfurled its wings to reveal something like a man-sized spider with its abdomen replaced with multiple smaller tendrils. Not a second later it wrapped itself around the woman... then melted into her. Bolstering her at first glance, but there was no mistaking it. Despite looking perfectly fine physically, it was not a woman on the table anymore.

Your vessel would also report back mentioning a rather large energy spike occurring on the innermost planet. Doesn't take an Engineer to realize the two are connected in some way, should you opt to go the way of the Orks and smash the source of the energy spike into a kilometer-sized hole.

With everything going on, it wouldn't be hard to try and sneak out to make your way back to your vessel in hopes of smashing that place. You would, of course, inevitably encounter resistance when your ship started to move, with all manners of fighter craft trying to swarm you in hopes of stopping your now-blatant decision from coming to pass.

You could, however, instead find Tenebrous and confront him about it as well. Even if you didn't, he would contact you while you were on your way to do some impromptu landscaping and try to make his case.

“Please, I know what it looks like. But this is the only way our species can survive! We all perished so long ago, when the Aeldari’s war in the Sea of Souls forever changed it. But our own souls survived in our technology, and we can only be reborn through the flesh of those with strong souls! We had no intention of using you, and we had hoped you would show us the way out from this encapsulated system... we can offer you so much. We just want to be reborn. Please, let us be remade.”

It all comes down to a single choice. You can choose to stand down, allowing the existence of the Everlasting Empire and recruiting these strange Xenos to your cause regardless of how heretical or foul it may be to you, or you could push forward and seek out the inner planet to find the massive spire of white and blue that remains pristine despite the horrifically acidic atmosphere and the intense gravity.

Should you choose to spare them, you would be made a High Consular of the Everlasting Empire, and its resources would be open to you along with its people. Should you opt to purge the Xenos for daring to pollute the human soul, the Empire will be in chaos as all of its top authorities appear to go mad and kill themselves in a fit of hysteria. Psykers or your Astropath would reveal the reasoning; the feedback from the spire’s destruction destabilized them and the hosts simply couldn’t handle what they had experienced. The Empire could very well be destabilized if you do not step in and help them choose a new leadership, or even take control yourself.

Regardless, you have much to choose from as your rewards, now that you’ve pacified the main threat of this system in one form or another. You’ll also be able to acquire quite a bit of materials and resources from the interior asteroid field without anyone in the way.

### **Possible Rewards:**

**EVERLASTING ATTIRE:** The leaders of the Empire may have had a heinous means to their own survival, but one could not deny that they played the part of being ‘more’ exceptionally well. The creatures of the larger world are both docile and possess rather luxurious qualities to them. Exceptionally high-quality ivory that is very easily sculpted and able to be forged, along with bioluminescent pigments and silks that glitter as though you wore the very stars. How’s that living the high life? This reward does not count towards your limit.

**SYMBIOTIC SOUL (SPARED XENOS):** Tenebrous would be exceptionally grateful for sparing them, and would immediately get to work on finding a way to repay you. It would be somewhat disturbing to the higher echelons of the Empire, but they would find a way to create a newborn of their species before offering to implant it within your soul. The result would be bolstering the size and strength of your soul while making you much more resistant to any forms of corrupting or possessing your soul along with augmenting any Psyker powers you possess quite a bit. As a bonus, you could also generate an ethereal aura of wings that augments your charisma a large amount as well. Show them your power, High Consular.

**FURNISHED FLESH (DESTROYED XENOS):** Upon the destruction of the Xenos that gripped this human civilization, many within the city were paranoid and worried. Yet when order was restored and the situation explained, it was decided that you needed some kind of reward for freeing them. Thus the private laboratories were raided and you were given the option of being augmented with technology that is a mix between the technology of the Xenos and that of the Dark Age of Technology. Those with bionics would find new variants installed, much sleeker and much more powerful than what they had before, while also obtaining a new type of bionic that allows one to create a Conversion Field. May you walk on paths of light, Liberator.

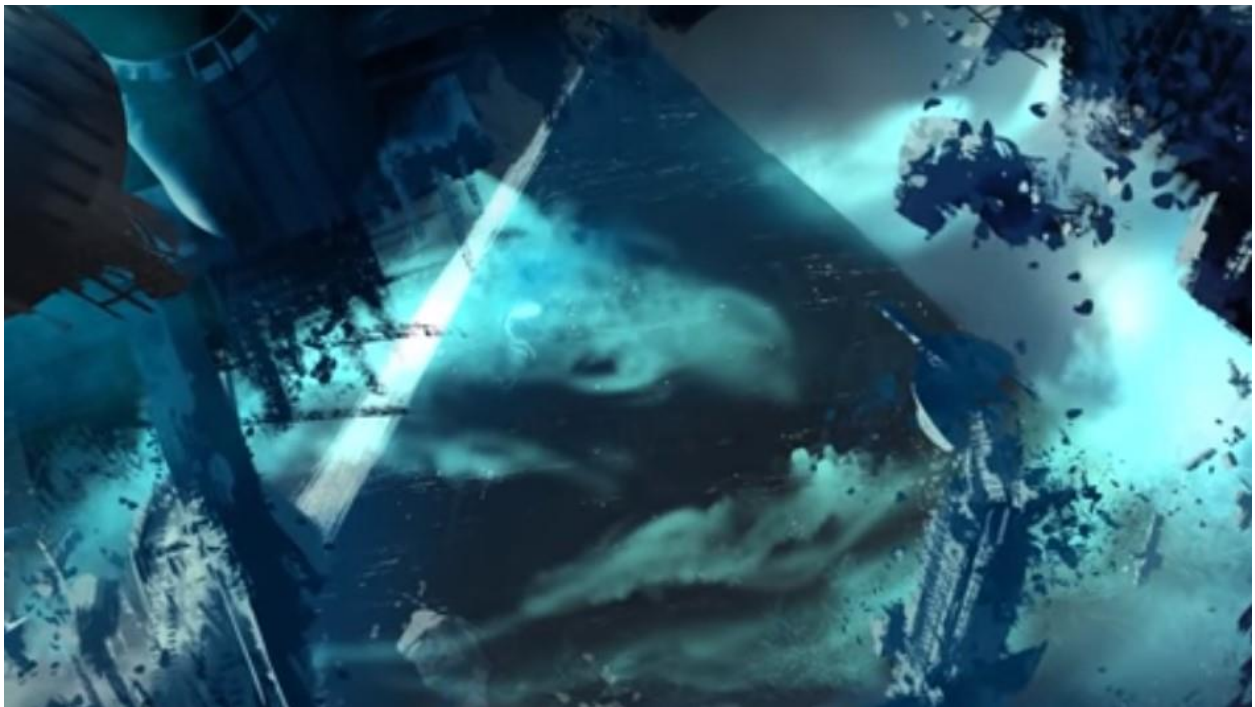
**EVERLASTING IMPERIALISTS:** Whether you spared these strange Xenos or condemned them to a fiery fate, one decision remains: What are you going to do with the people here? You could just leave them to their little corner of the galaxy, but it just seems so wasteful. If only you had some kind of vessel that you could load them on. Good thing you do. You may take along ten thousand strong to travel with you as followers, willing to fight for your cause as thanks for your actions here. Should you have spared the Xenos some of their numbers will come with as powerful psykers and diplomats, or if you destroyed the Xenos they will bring potent weapons that rival even digital weapons of the Inquisition to ensure your enemies' destruction.

**TREES OF ETERNITY:** Humans do not live forever normally, this is truth. However, juvenant compounds can greatly prolong life while curative compounds can heal any illness. Such treatments are very expensive in the Imperium, which is why these trees are so damned valuable. So long as you have the crystal trees in the same biosphere as the trees of white and purple, they'll feed on psionic energy in the air and start producing a large amount of golden fruit that can keep a person in their prime for at least three hundred years before showing any signs of aging. Even better, eating will also reverse the age of those who eat it and cure any illness or frailties they possessed, with regular consumption seeing them becoming stronger and more physically capable. Bring eternal life to any you deem fit.

**ADAMANTIUM DEPOSIT:** Were such a material more commonplace, Mankind would be abusing it to absolutely no end. This is because the hyper-dense ore that is Adamantium is the strongest material known to Mankind and equipment made from such things are so strong that they cannot be disassembled, meaning they cannot be reverse-engineered normally. They're also invulnerable to attacks from most known weapons, and so is often used with plasteel and ceramite to create very powerful items such as Terminator Armor or the construction of Imperial Titans. You have quite a large amount here, enough to possibly supply a small army if you had the means to use the material... that or sell it for an exuberant amount of money to acquire other things.

**PSIONIC DRUG:** Many strange things can be found in the Expanse, on horrid worlds that hide the greatest gems. Upon the innermost world, with its potent acidic atmosphere and high gravity lies a powerful nectar produced by flowers of singing crystal. On its own it causes powerful hallucinations that always seem to reflect what the imbiber desires most, but when refined into a drug it has the ability to temporarily enhance psionic powers to an astonishing level while granting tremendous willpower to harness that new power. It's effects only last for an hour, but cultivating the flowers will let one grow a supply quite easily to give a steady supply. Be wary not to get addicted to the power.

**BLACKSTONE:** One might wonder how Xenos that bond to the soul managed to escape Daemons this entire time. The discovery of a deposit within the field that was partially mined might go a long way to explaining it. Blackstone is a mysterious substance that seems to be highly resistant to the powers of the Immaterium, and as such the Adeptus Mechanicus seek it out no matter what the cost. The fact that it's also highly abundant on Necron Tomb Worlds and is used to make zones of stable space is of no consequence, surely. Should you seek it out, you would easily have enough to line your vessel and make it perfectly safe for Warp travel, or to harness it for any number of purposes such as lining armor or weapons with the material to be intensely effective against anything of the Immaterium... Chaos or otherwise.



# THE FORGOTTEN TRIBES OF DREADFANG

Talk about easy street. The data on this system that the probe pulled up was like feeling a shoulder devil telling you to take candy from a baby, with the shoulder angel saying that you should be sure to tell the baby not to be such an easy steal before you looted them.

To be more specific, there's only one planet in this system. A single planet with nothing but ruins, a great deal of materials among the radioactive deposits, and a pre-industrial civilization of some kind. The probe didn't get much data on that, but what it did get was that despite the massive solar flares the star was giving off, the inner cauldron was still accessible. Granted, that was like saying you could still swim in a pool of sharks that were in a blood frenzy.

Still, if inhabitants were trapped on the planet then there was nothing stopping you from having the run of the place. Perhaps it's time you should listen to your inner voices this time.

A quick Warp jump would reveal more or less what the probe had told you. A rather healthy-looking star that was popping off flares like it was a festival, a great deal of asteroid belts and clusters, with a single planet that looked only semi-fun to land on. Despite its relatively small size, it had a very high amount of gravity and looked warm enough that an Astartes could complain about the temperature even in their armor. It also had only one large landmass, with everything else being water.

Since this probe is something of a flying bucket of bolts, however, there were two things the data failed to convey. The first was that there were three old Imperial Cargo Ships that looked battered and utterly ripped apart for whatever they were carrying. The second was the large amount of Ork ruins that dotted parts of the sea, akin to artificial islands. No, ruins would imply that there was no one using them. There were a great deal of Orks detected now that your ship was in the system. But no vessels, no attack craft.

Feral, perhaps?

There were human life signatures on the island as well. Actually, make that 'mostly' human. A slight genetic deviancy was detected, but nothing too far gone. But if this pre-industrial civilization was able to actually fend off Feral Orks on their own, just imagine the kind of ferocity and damage they could do when properly equipped. Even better, the conditions of that planet would ensure that only the strongest and most skilled among them would live. It almost seems like a perfect recruitment ground.

There were also still the asteroid fields. Closer to the sun and the one the derelict ships were adrift in. With no actual voidfaring presence here, no one can stop you from stripping the place dry. No one to tell you that you were taking too much.

Which locale shall you slake your thirst upon first?

## DREADFUL MISTAKES

Maybe you're hitting this place on the way out. Maybe this is what you care for and don't give a damn about any planet with filthy greenskins on it. Regardless, you set course for the vessels adrift in the asteroid field to find out what happened before taking celestial candy from the babies that are these poor, defenseless asteroids. Maybe they should have thought about this outcome before making themselves so tempting.

The vessels themselves are nothing quite special, but it's what happened to them that seems intriguing. The battered exterior and the haphazard manner in which the cargo bays were gutted suggested a sloppy heist. At least, it suggested sloppy until you realized the obscenely unnecessary number of holes there were that implied someone laid a little too thick on the Macrocannon fire. Then it just becomes obvious that Orks ambushed these poor fools and robbed them of everything they were worth.

Oh well. If they were sloppy with the attack, maybe they missed something.

Getting close to the vessels seemed like a straight shot. Get there, sneak into one of the derelict ships like a Ratling and pilfer the cogitator core, get out. But the closer you got to the asteroid field the vessels now called their eternal resting place, the stranger the data your scanners received. That is to say, what they were showing could make the Mechanicus think it was possible for a Machine Spirit to get flat fucking drunk. There was no way for there to be fifty-nine additional vessels in the area. Even if you fired exactly where the scanners said they would be, it hits nothing but empty space. You would need to get there manually. Easy enough, whether you use a smaller vessel or stranger methods to arrive.

On board one of the ships, it's about exactly what one would expect. Lots of holes, lots of bodies floating around. Guess it can't always be dignified or during a grand battle to take someone with you. At least this way there's no resistance save the nonfunctioning doors you'll need to cut your way through. It makes for a rather uneventful procession to the bridge to secure the cogitator core, but it's better than needing to worry about Xenos trying to eat you or the ship itself trying to give you new breathing holes, right? ...right?

While it's uneventful, it is a tad tedious needing to slice one's way through the bulkhead doors and the safety features meant to keep the core intact and prepped for eventual Imperial extraction, seeing as many of said safety features are offline due to the tremendous number of electromagnetic bursts and radiation the solar flares had been giving off. It's a wonder it even lasted as long as it did, actually. But eventually they give way and the core is extracted, making it a straight shot to get back to your vessel and review the data to see what happened.

...and ho boy, what happened is nothing short of a treat.

Seems this small fleet belonged to Lord-Captain Agoston Dreadfang, a renowned Imperial among the Segmentum Pacificus who had decided to retire after the infamous string of battles known as the Nova Terra Interregnum. Which put these ships at the 36<sup>th</sup> Millennium if one cared about that.

Sifting through the data core would find that he managed to acquire a Letter of Marque for his services, and he managed to go from a life of battle to one of exploration and discovery for his actions during the conflict. The freedom and lack of most Imperial Doctrine he was used to would see him quickly slide into a hedonistic lifestyle, sating his hunger on meals that Planetary Governors would pay a fortune for and slaking his thirst upon riches and pleasures. Yet a Letter of Marque is not the same as a Warrant of Trade, and so there were still stipulations and requirements that prevented Lord-Captain Dreadfang from exploring the true lifestyle of a Rogue Trader and the dynasties they can create.

It was something that stifled him, and like many who became accustomed to new pleasures and powers he did not appreciate that his new life had limits to go along with it. So he had found this world, and had begun to set up some manner of scheme with moving vast amounts of slaves to this system. Regular supplies and additional slaves as needed would be provided, for the purpose of building up enough manpower to eventually start training and equipping. In essence, he was planning to pervert the methodology of the Imperial Guard and the Adeptus Astartes to create his own private army in hopes of not only securing more riches but to also force the High Lords of Terra to remove the limitations on his Letter of Marque to acquire a true Warrant of Trade.

Looking at the details, the idea of having an all-female cadre of bodyguards was also a high priority on his list.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Regardless of your views regarding his power fantasies, it would appear his plans never came to fruition. See, the frequent solar flares meant that any Imperials who tried to find this place without the proper protection to their sensors wouldn't find anything out of the ordinary. Unfortunately for Dreadfang, it also meant that anyone else who happened to come across this place would fall under the same protections. His vessels were coming by for their first recruitment drive when they were under attack by Ork ships, and being as unprepared as they were many of his ships were simply obliterated. It then becomes clear that these three vessels weren't the fleet, they were what's *left* of the fleet. Everything else was dragged off.

At least it explained the Feral Orks down on the planet; remnants of the attack fleet or simply Orks that crashlanded down there and became too stupid to leave. What's strange is that records showed the Orks boarded and searched the place carefully, stealing anything shiny before finding the Captain's Quarters and taking the Letter of Marque. Everything else was left behind, at least until one of the Orks yelled while throwing bombs all over the place.

**"AH'VE GOTZ ME PRIZE NOW, AND EVERYFIN' AH NEED TO PILLAGE AN' KRUMP SHINY SHORES! FARE 'E WELL HUMIES, FOR YA LOT SEE DA RIZE OF KAPTIN' GODZNOBBAH!"**

Surely this won't become important later on.



Still, that more or less puts the boots to salvaging anything from the ships themselves if Orks stole the shiny things and firebombed the rest. It would explain the messy bodies inside. But perhaps you could still use the ships themselves. At their sizes you could jury-rig them and use them as temporary shielding by putting them between you and the sun while you went around mining the various asteroid fields. That is, if you didn't decide to just use the rocks themselves as shields. They would be very easy to use in the outer asteroid fields, but the interior where it's closer to the star would see it being very rough as the solar flares striking would be like taking hits from Macrocannon fire. Between that and the large amounts of radioactive material here, you do not want to dawdle with your harvesting.

Whatever your method, there's nothing here that can stop you from procuring what you desire.

### **Possible Rewards:**

**RADIATION-TREATED CERAMITE:** It's impressive enough that this Ceramite is high-grade to the point that one could use it in the construction of armor and vehicles for the Adeptus Astartes, but thanks to the intense radiation from the solar flares and the radioactive materials laden in the Inner Cauldron of this system it's obtained unique properties. Along with being able to absorb and dissipate even the most extreme thermal and direct-energy attacks, its protection against electromagnetic radiation is so great that any armor or vehicle made with this material finds EMP attacks simply don't work on it even when made into an alloy with other materials. Possessing enough to equip a small army, you'll find no end to the uses one can have with this.

**MARS-GRADE RADIOACTIVES:** The Skitarii Warriors of the Adeptus Mechanicus are feared not only for their machine-like dedication and unfaltering doctrine, but for their penchant of turning any battlefield they walk into a horrific, radioactive waste that ruins any world regardless of its condition. This is due to their Radium weapons, with projectiles and attacks suffused with hyper-irradiated materials so great even Tyranids would turn into sludge with repeated strikes. The materials found here are perfect for such weapons, giving off such intense radiation that to send an unarmored man to them would be to watch them rot and dissolve in mere moments. Be careful should you mine them, but whoever can harness its power would find very little to be a threat to them.

**HARDENED DIAMANTINE:** Whether used as the tips of Bolter ammunition or lining the walls or doors of an Adeptus Astartes' Fortress-Monastery, Diamantine is an exceptional material used by both the Imperium and the forces of Chaos due to its hardness and its ability to pierce a multitude of different armors. Due to all the solar activity in this system, its durability and hardness has increased even further to make it a truly powerful material that could see any defenses or armor-piercing capabilities increased to heights unheard of. Why, there's enough here to actually build a fortress out of, if you had the mind for something like that.

## TRIBAL WARFARE

Well, nobody ever said that this planet was going to explore itself. Might as well get down there and find what you can salvage from this place.

While those Ork objects were all over the damned place, what was curious is that all of said objects and ruins were forming artificial islands and vessels of sorts. The only landmass was one massive island that had smaller lakes and islands within it. In a way, the landmass was its own encapsulated biome. Little wonder the civilization was pre-industrial. Yet the other thing that stood out now that you took a closer look at it was the gravity of the planet. To put it succinctly, it was ridiculously high. Such a place would make even Astartes look sluggish until they got used to it, and even then, it might be difficult. One could only imagine how the civilization adapted in order to thrive. Of course, one could also imagine how absurdly valuable such a hardy group might be for warriors. Maybe that Dreadfang fellow was onto something.

Time to head on down.

It was actually a fairly easy ride down, having picked a time when the solar flares weren't going off and making a mess of your vessel's scanners or systems. However, the temperature started to increase dramatically outside, easily rivaling the heat of most deserts despite being a forest. Hopefully that's okay, or it's going to be an exceptionally abysmal time here. On the plus side, despite being a massive forest there were some spots where it wasn't as thick. Which is good because those thrusters would be strained from the additional stress it had on.

Upon landing and finally opening up the hatch, the wave of heat would hit like a ton of ferrocrete bricks. By all the Immaterium, it was *warm* out there. Smelled pleasant at least. Native birds chirping, a bit of creaking from the large trees... as good a place to set up camp as any.

At least it would be, until there was LOUD thumping noises. It sounded like a Titan was stomping towards you, which is not a pleasant sound whatsoever. There was barely any time to get weapons out when the monster showed up. Thrice the size of a Dreadnought, and looking like a mighty gorilla of ancient Terran past. At least if a gorilla was covered in scales and had a mouth like a dragon with massive spikes protruding from its arms. Damned thing looked ready to tear apart the ship when you heard someone yell from on top of the monster and it stopped dead in its tracks. "Hold! I don't recognize this... who are you?"

Did its rider just speak Low Gothic? Wait, did that massive thing actually have a rider?

The beast lowered itself as a towering figure clad in armor dropped to the ground, easily as tall as an Astartes. The armor itself was an ivory color gilded in brass, designed to the appearance of a knight in the 1<sup>st</sup> Millenium. The figure did not approach, looking over the craft... then stopping and looking at you. Immediately taking off their helmet and kneeling, revealing a face of grace and beauty with bronze skin. Even the felinid ears didn't detract fr-wait, what. Felinid? "My lord. You've returned to us at last! We waited for the day that our god would reward our diligence."

**What.**

**Wait. Wait you could use this. Or at least hear them out. They'll rise when told to, and introduce themselves as Awan, Rider of the Holy Knights charged with the protection and safety of the Tempered Lands. At your command, he would gladly take you to their home so that you, one of their eternal Star Gods who walk the cosmos with the power of infinity at your side, may inspect their work and pronounce judgement upon them.**

**Man, this Dreadfang guy really had an ego to him. Could you imagine someone being like that?**

**At least it's an easy trip there. The beast's presence more or less makes any of the wildlife get away out of fear of being devoured, and along the way Awan explains their origin of being placed here by their Lord Agoston. This was a trial placed upon them, to be reforged and made strong enough to conquer the very heavens. At first they had tamed the lands and made use of the gifts they were given, and then the green demons had arrived. Demons who had no sense of honor, or glory, or even sanity. Mindless aggression, and the enemy they fight against every day for their very survival. In time, they realized this world for what it was. It was one of many Hells, and they needed to survive it to be granted salvation.**

**Getting closer to their home, however, would reveal two incredibly important things. The first being that their 'holy gateway' was actually ruins belonging to the Eldar. The hum of the Wraithbone was a dead giveaway, to say nothing of the crystal pillars that resonated with any Psyker that happened to approach. The resonance was akin to a song, a hauntingly beautiful one at that. From the look of things, this place was the remains of a Craftworld. At least, it was one before these Felinids turned the whole thing into a Fortress-Keep of some kind. Good luck trying to get that to fly again.**

**The second thing was the nature of the Felinids, on seeing the populace noticing your presence. Normally, Felinids would be akin to bipedal, hairy felines that just so happened to have a human shape and was barely tolerated. This variant was more like someone putting cat ears and a tail onto bronze-skinned men and women who were dressed in loincloths and small outfits, at least the ones not in masterwork-crafted armor or pure white robes that took tips from desert gear. Perhaps time spent by the Eldar ruins diverged their evolution to some extent? At least their sculpted physiques and powerful legs made it clear that they adapted quite well.**

**It also took a grand total of fifteen seconds before one of them shouted that the Gods have noticed them again and began to bow down to you.**

**The rest very quickly began to follow suit.**

**Hopefully you aren't so easily swayed by appeals to your ego and dominance, or it's going to take forever and a half to get to the main castle dead center in the middle of this entire fortress.**

**The interior of the keep looked like a rather clean, if medieval-grade town. There were small livestock farms, places to have armor and clothing procured, and supply depots for everyday living items to be forged and circulated. Were it not for the playground, this could pass for a military site.**

Another thing to note would be the crystalline weapons the knights and the robed figures possessed. Others had bows made of the same crystalline material, which hummed with the same psionic resonance as the crystals by the gate. Such a thing carried potential implications.

But those questions could be answered once you were brought inside the castle, with its walls lined with marble and gold and the stained-glass windows making it look more like a large cathedral than a castle. Massive pillars had writing etched into them, which upon closer look detailed glorious battles and the names of those who had fell those days. Large cushions were stacked next to the doorways, meant to be portable seats for those who walked in. Looking at the ceiling, there were depictions of their gods. Titans of metal and glory, with thunder and light erupting from their hands and massive chariots that rode the inky Void. It was pretty blatant who it was supposed to represent, but from an uneducated standpoint, it was also pretty easy to see how you could fill the role.

At the far end sat a Felinid woman in a dress of pure white. The slightly greyed hair gave away how old she was compared to the others, even though that was the only indicator of her advanced age as she gave a smile. "You honor us with your presence, oh Great One. I am Matriarch Pakwa, and if there is anything I can do to aid your Grace or please you in any way, you need only but ask."

Beyond any obvious implications that the God-Emperor of Mankind would truly frown upon, Pakwa can answer just about any question you may ask. Barring any major battles their population has stabilized at around twenty-thousand, with any who have reached adulthood immediately conscripted and trained in order to defend the Keep. Those who do not take up the Warrior's Light would either don the Rider's Mantle, or the Seer's Veil. Together they comprised the Holy Knights, who stand eternal vigil against the green demons who continue to strike from the sea. On their spare time, they may take up other jobs such as the Artisan's Hand, or the Botanist's Palm, or even the Healer's Embrace.

If you've guessed the theme by now, then congratulations. Your survival to this point was not from undeserved luck.

While it would be seen as incredibly heretical for these Abhumans to have taken some cues from the ruins they inhabit, it's also done them wonders in regards to organization and ensuring everyone has a purpose. Focused warriors with a purpose, all doing their part to ensure the entirety of the species survived. Long story short, it was a self-trained army that constantly tried to keep itself in top condition. No doubt fighting the feral Orks this entire time made them even better at their jobs. One had to wonder if Dreadfang would have encouraged that or not.

Nevertheless, it's an army that now looks to you as one of their Gods from the stars. You, of the Metallic Homogeny. Your word is law, and your whims their command.

A shame, then, that a scout chose that exact moment to run in and declare the demons were amassing an invasion force. A *big* one in fact.

Perfect timing, if you wished to demonstrate your might to those who looked up to you.

It was like watching poetry in motion, or at least watching the organic equivalent to clockwork. An army of ivory and brass moving as one with robed figures in the back, chanting war hymns to get everyone psyched up. The front had shields as large as themselves with the soldiers on the wall holding crystalline bows. Something that stood out, however, is that they had no arrows with them. How did they expect to provide support or attack the enemy? Granted, there were additional beasts like the one Awan rode to your vessel, but against feral Orks? These had to be *really* good troops to be able to survive this long.

Whether by using abilities to scry beyond the wall or scaling it yourself, the idea of these Orks being perceived as demons to the Felinids was fairly understandable. They looked as though they numbered in the tens of thousands, massive boar-like mounts at the front with many of them wearing the skulls of their fallen as makeshift pauldrons. Pools of green blood were used to paint their weapons, with large ballista and trebuchet machines forged from scrap metal and massive bones. They had enough torches and flames that the skies around them darkened from the black smoke that rose from the approaching horde. At the back, a massive Ork as large as an Imperial Knight stood clad in charred starship plating broken and fastened to his skin as armor with twin blades as large as him on his back.

The Holy Knights called him the Dark One. In the tongue of the demons, he was ‘Warboss Voidzundah’.

How delightfully bombastic.

When the Warboss yelled, it was surprisingly loud. You’re pretty sure that you’ve heard starship engines quieter than this. But what he yelled was perfectly clear, and signaled the start of the battle.

**“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGG  
GGGGGGGGH!!!”**

The scream was echoed, and then the forces charged. It was like hearing a thunderstorm approaching.

What followed soon after was all but solidification of proof that the Felinids could survive here. Bolts of light shot from the crystalline arrows like volleys of pure energy, while the chanters yelled in ways that made the Knights become veiled in auras of light. Barriers manifested from shields, and crystalline swords hummed with power.

Each and every Felinid here was a Psyker.

Well then.

Yet this is only the start. It is time to prove your worth, and aid the Holy Knights in their defense. Push back the green tide and show them what it means to fight alongside their god!

It would take time and great effort. Maybe you've trivialized it, or fought as ferociously as the Knights. But soon enough the hordes would be pushed back, albeit only when there are enough bodies that they rise beyond the wall and are a small mountain in of itself. The body count of the Felinids could be great or minimal, all dependent on you. Nonetheless, they would all be grateful and mark this day as a glorious time to remember. The day their combat prowess brought forth a god.

After the feast that lasts for four days straight with all manners of food, dances and other pleasantries, it's time to review this place and take stock of what you could collect.

### **Possible Rewards:**

**HOLY KNIGHT ATTIRE:** To be a defender of the people is a duty that should bring pride and honor to those who bear the heraldry of Knighthood. They are protectors of innocence, and within their flesh is the soul of one who will face down evil wherever they go. The Knights have recognized you as being a paragon, and will do their best to provide robes or armor modifications so that you too may stand among their numbers. This reward does not count towards your limit.

**PSIONIC FOCUS:** The crystalline weapons the Holy Knights possess are potent indeed, able to resonate with the power of a Psyker and help shape said power to a specific purpose. Whether it's to spread boons or wards in the form of a stave, or firing off orbs of power with a bow, erecting powerful barriers with the shield, or even enhancing strikes and imbuing weapons with greater power and abilities, they are a staple for the Holy Knights in their eternal vigil. As thanks for aiding them, you're offered a significant amount of crystal that you could use in similar manners. Don't let the Daemons *or* the Eldar know you have this.

**DREADFANG'S LEGACY:** Yet... why let them stay here? Alone on this world, with armies of Orks trying to kill them constantly. Have they not suffered enough? Your vessel also contains enough room... so why not? It would take some time to get everyone moved over, but you may bring the Holy Knights and the Felinid group along their War Beasts the Riders use with you to serve and act in your stead. An army of exceptionally strong, physically dominating Felinids who are all Psykers would be an impressive boon. None shall escape the army of a god.

**HAMMER OF THE JUST:** Curiously, after the battle to defend the keep Awan had pulled you aside to mention he saw something similar to the vessel you arrived in, on the southern end of the island. No one among the Holy Knights went there in fear of attracting the demons, but with their god here there would be no worry, right? How fortunate, that the site he spoke of was actually the forward outpost of Dreadfang's little scheme. It held many different items squirreled away, but what caught your eye was this impressive Archaeotech prow of a vessel. Equipped with its own Void Shields to allow all but the most durable of ships to withstand being rammed, but it also came with a Force Weapon to shatter whatever was in contact with it to do truly staggering amounts of damage. Let it be known that Dreadfang never thought small.

**BAROQUE CORE:** Awan's tip to look to the south would have revealed more than just Dreadfang's stash of ship components or spare parts, even though they're a fine find in of themselves. What you would also find behind seven different vault layer doors is this rather concerning sphere that glowed with a sickly purple color, as big as a Dreadnought and looking like a gothic work of art with layer upon layer of murals depicting horned gods hiding within cocoons of flesh. Unsettling to be sure, but hooking it up as a power source to a vessel would find all systems fully charged within minutes and even increasing the power to all weapons while effusing them with the same glow. Try to ignore that Psykers who look at it swear that it's looking back at them.

**POOLS OF RESPITE:** One thing of note is that almost none of the Felinids had any horrific wounds or amputees. Sure, some had scars that were fairly obvious, but there wasn't even a missing eye. Their reasoning would be the pools deeply guarded in the Keep, capable of healing those who were placed within the waters. While scars remain, just about any physical wound could be healed in time and grant those who bathe in it a clean bill of health. No mundane wound or disease shall plague any who go into these self-cleaning waters, and with a fair supply given to you to make your own pool, healing any troops would be a dip away.

**WEAPON OF REMEMBRANCE (SLAYED WARBOSS VOIDZUNDAH):** The green demons have plagued their civilization for tens of centuries. For every one they slew, they returned fivefold. Even when burning the bodies, it seemed their number was unending. To make matters worse, they became far more organized and capable of strategy when the Dark One rose from their numbers. Should he have been slayed in the battle by your hand, the Felinids would have taken it as proof of your divinity. Only one as powerful as a god could slay such a beast, and so they would wish to grant you a tool worthy of this day.

You see, the Holy Knights are a society of martial prowess and honor. A good death is its own reward, and great battles should be fought with the dead in mind. That is why after battles with great losses, they inter their dead in a special manner. Bodies drained of blood before being cremated, with the blood and carbon from the bodies used together while a crystalline gem is placed within the weapon to grant it a powerful focus that strengthens psionic power while honing it to a degree that control is almost never lost.

**Forged in Blood. Anointed by Faith.**

**The Eternal Light is yours. Strike with the strength of the fallen, and know that you are never alone so long as you possess this prized tool.**

# THE DEFUNCT JUDGE

Upon jumping into this system, one thing becomes perfectly clear: This place is beyond fucked.

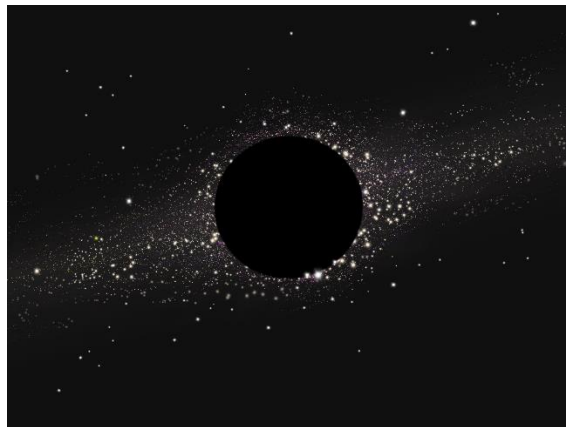
Your first clue was the color of the sun, in that it wasn't yellow or white or even purple. No, it was a black sun. That alone should tell any astrologer worth their salt that by all accounts it should be a cold and barren system with balls of ice circling it instead of planets, yet from what you can tell they're all fine for a given definition of the word. The first and third planets were practically radiating heat from how obscenely warm they were, while the middle planet was temperate and fairly okay if you didn't mind it being a completely desolate rock.

To make matters worse, there was all the gravity riptides. Normally unable to be detected by a voidship until they're nearly upon the anomaly, there were enough of these vortexes scattered throughout the system that you could actually find them. It was good fortune to know they were there, but the riptides being strong enough to find on the sensors immediately on entering the system meant that they were exceptional in their destructive capabilities. That or it was the massive dust cloud that had enough radiation to make a Mechanicus Magos lean away from nervousness. Either way, it was going to be rough.

The probe had collected some sufficient information this time around, as believable as information could be from the piece of junk. While the third planet had nothing of real value aside from its moon that was packed with gold and luxurious crystals, there were a large amount of ruins on the inner planet and the middle planet. Even better, the ruins had noticeable amounts of human technology within them. That meant a significant amount of Archaeotech just sitting there, ripe for the taking.

Just waiting to be brought into the loving embrace of their new Master.

It will be a rough journey and a nightmare to chart a course through, but fortune favors the bold. Let's see how bold you can be.





## THE GRAVITY CAULDRON

Somebody's going to be getting hazard pay for flying through the radiation and the gravity storms that are within the massive dust cloud. It's a lot like flying through grey pea soup, except the soup is cosmic dust and the peas could crunch your vessel like an empty canteen.

It also doesn't help that these riptides are almost schizophrenic in their reach and their dangers, no doubt caused from the sheer amount of tides being so close together. It's actually a wonder how this smaller planet hasn't been thrown off course or sent careening into the cold emptiness of the Void with all the troubles. Or worse, utterly crushed by the differing gravitational forces of these riptides competing with the sun.

An answer soon makes itself apparent when the scanners detect a calm sector within the inner parts of the system, due to the massive beige gas giant. How did the probe miss *that* of all things?

Should you be a skilled Astropath yourself or have any in your retinue, it would be revealed to you that while traversing these tides to reach the inner planet would be fairly dangerous, at the cost of taking more time you could simply wait it out. This gas giant would be getting close to said planet within a week or two, and you could always attempt to refine the gases within the giant for some additional resources. That or you could decide to risk it all and chart an everchanging course to the planet, risking ship and limb for the sake of getting there as quick as you can to fill the void that is your cargo holds.

Whatever you choose, you would eventually come across the first planet. It looked fairly large, but initial scans showed normal gravity and a thin atmosphere. First glances had a pink surface with bodies of red water that almost made the planet look like it had been bleeding. There was also a good-sized crater around the equator, which explains the asteroid that had been orbiting the planet. Unfortunately, the planet was also warmer than a reactor room. Hope you've got a really good cooling system in your vessels or armor.

Fortunately, it was easy to detect exactly where the archaeotech was, and there was little to no issue with traveling down to the planet surface in a smaller vessel. No storms, no massive monsters jumping up to bite your vessel, it was really quiet traveling to a location outside the source of the ruins. Almost too quiet.

One of the Astartes in your retinue would volunteer to go first, in order to scout the perimeter and make sure it was safe for the others... or maybe you heavily encouraged that they 'volunteer' lest they be given a less pleasant task. Either way, upon exiting the vessel there would be complaints of how freakishly warm it was and how the cooling system did absolutely nothing to help with the heat. A comment on how thick the pink mist in the area is, a soft buzzing on the comms... and then you get to watch the Astartes' armor fall over like a pile of empty cans, sans occupant.

Oh fuck.

You could try to get a better biological reading, whether by your hand or by ordering your ship to get as close as it could to bring its powerful sensors to bear. Either one would eventually acquire readings that the mist was, in truth, a massive swarm of micro-organisms with both a high metabolism and a rapid reproduction rate. This meant that your ship was surrounded by the galactic equivalent of a piranha swarm ready to feed. While fortunate that they couldn't get into your ship, this meant you had to find a way to get rid of enough of them to clear a path between you and the archaeotech.

You could try to artificially cool the area somehow. The temperature and their method of travel likely made them extremely susceptible to temperature changes. That or you could decide it's too much work to do cooling or scanning, and order a bombardment between you and the ruins to leave nothing but blackened charcoal. It's up to you, really. No one will judge if you were scared of a pink mist.

Once you manage to clear away enough to make it into the inside of the ruins unscathed, you'd find that they were, well, quaint for a lack of better terms. Corridors of baroque design, twisting stairs of black and gold, and the occasional thrumming of machines left alone on standby with no one to turn them off. Even with all the foliage and dirt all over them, one had to give credit where it was due: They really knew how to build.

The surface wouldn't get a lot of trophies for you, but managing to crack your way into lower levels by noticing foliage patterns and getting the doors open would reveal a lot more for you to explore. Strangely enough, it was rather spacious as you went further down. Rooms much larger than normal, with doors tall enough to let Imperial Knights walk through unburdened. Every so often, the crackling of purple energy would shoot across the ceiling and make the air smell of ozone with a slightly acidic after-scent if such a thing was even possible.

But what really stands out as a strange piece is the occasional crystal tube that snakes along the pathways. Sometimes it goes down, or it goes up. Sometimes it goes across the floor. But it definitely stands out from the usual human architecture, enough that following it would eventually take you to a control room with multiple red lights and a single display message:

**CHRONAL CONTAINMENT FAILED, AWAITING INSTRUCTION FROM OI-944**

Sucks to be whoever was here, apparently.

Sifting through the cogitator cores wouldn't yield much, whatever happened here ended up scrambling all the archives beyond any comprehensible information. At least there was enough here to engage in some basic functionality such as opening the doors or finding storage sites. After all, if they're not using it then they won't mind if you happen to take it.

Probably best if you loaded up and moved on.

## **Possible Rewards:**

**ANCIENT WINGS:** In the days of the Dark Age of Technology, there were wonders beyond measure. They had weapons that could erase entire ships and shields of indomitable might, and that's just for starters. Much of the Imperium's technology is based off what these ancient humans possessed, and this flight pack is an impeccable example. While current Astartes Jump Packs are large and bulky, this set is more designed like an elegant pair of metallic, gothic wings with multiple micro-thrusters in between each of the feathers. Despite its intricate appearance and almost immaculate appearance, the wings are incredibly resilient and could very well withstand the strikes of heavy bolters or plasma rifles. Even when folded up, know that these wings shall shower you with resplendence and wonder.

**THE GRIM FUSIL:** Just as the Dark Age produced wonders, they also produced terrible horrors. Horrors that could leave a battlefield desolate and scarred with the power they wielded. This particular rifle, crafted with a reflective black material and thrumming a hellish red from its energy coils, is a perfect example. What you have here is a Volkite rifle, albeit one that looks like an ornate hunting rifle of old, that fires a powerful thermal ray capable of exploding flesh into jettisoned fire and ash while having enough power to pierce the ceramite of Astartes armor. This variant you found is much stronger, being able to shoot through at least three Astartes and set them ablaze before the heat finally dissipated. Let your enemies burn.

**TWISTING MIST:** The microbe-sized predators you found on this planet are a menace. Any flesh that passes by them gets devoured in seconds, being so much food to satiate their endless hunger on this obscenely warm planet. While they would not normally survive being removed from this world, you did happen to come across a strange deposit of what looked like eggs... and like the sane individual you were, decided to have them implanted into your flesh. This created a strange symbiosis, where physical injuries larger than a bruise or a small cut would see a smaller swarm of the mist seep out and attempt to consume the flesh of enemies in your immediate vicinity in order to boost your own metabolism enough to initiate rapid healing. Hopefully you know what you're doing with this.

**MAW OF THE LIGHT:** The Chainsword is practically one of the unofficial icons of Mankind and their insatiable desire for war and dominance across the galaxy. It mixes the primal thirst for destruction and death delivered upon one's enemies with the proud and innovative science that forever propelled Man into a time of power. This particular chainsword heralding from the Dark Age of Technology is one of the best examples one will ever find in this future of ignorance, a reminder of all that Man has lost. Impossibly intricate patterns of gold cover this weapon, with its teeth almost pulsing with a beautiful golden light thanks to unique energy cells. Upon activation the light makes this weapon flare like a brilliant flame and delivers immense devastation thanks to its energy field, carving through all but the toughest of Terminator Armor with the ease of carving a dinner roast. Not all from the olden times was Dark.

## SHARED DEFEAT

There's not a lot in the galaxy that would leave a world dead like that. Most attacks, there's at least still some local flora and an atmosphere left. But this world was absolutely dead. No water, no plants, no bugs... nothing. There wasn't even an atmosphere on this floating rock, despite it somehow possessing an outer temperature that could be described as 'temperate' in a living world.

Nothing.

Just dust and echoes.

On the plus side, it would make for an exceptionally easy landing along with having next to nothing to mess with the scanners. At least, if you didn't count the additional gravity riptides and the radioactivity inside the asteroid field that was permeating this belt of the system. There always seems to be something, isn't there?

While it's possible that you could risk a straight shot towards the planet for the purpose of time, it might not be a bad idea to ride the asteroid belt to get closer to the planet as well. You would have to deal with some radioactivity, but it would certainly beat the risk of finding a gravity vortex just as you come across it and get your vessel torn apart as a result. Nothing quite puts a damper in the excavation of ancient technology quite like finding your prow is getting shrunk down to a fun-sized version. Who even thought of smaller being 'fun-sized' anyway?

Whatever route you decide to take, eventually you would be able to land down on the desolate landscape. It almost seemed wrong, to walk upon what amounted to the stellar equivalent of a corpse with no chance of ever returning to life. Just a barren world, with only the trinkets and technology of its prior occupants to give it any worth. Almost a shame, that the last remnants that proved their existence would be scoured over and taken for the purpose of power... almost.

Finding a doorway into the ruins was simple enough, but the crystalline edges to said entrance was enough to give pause. That was not how the humans of the Dark Age of Technology designed their architecture. It had baroque designs engraved in, with such beauty on its dark exterior that it would leave any man praising whatever god they worshiped for the chance to be in its presence. The addition of crystals that almost glowed were unnatural, but the inclusion didn't look like a hasty add-on.

But eventually, one would have to walk in. That would be when the inclusion of the crystals became all too clear.

Ceilings and pillars of crystal accompanied walls and floors of obsidian and gold. Some corridors looked cramped with much more crystal, while others were massive walls that were as high as five hundred meters tall with intricate patterns engraved on their surface. Crystalline lines or piping would only accompany the baroque patterns, and at times the pathways would take strange twists and turns that would appear alien to any human design. Some paths even went straight up or down, with gravity twisting to accommodate those walking those directions. Going further in, you would see massive geodes of pulsing crystal bound together by the dark science that had been forgotten so long ago.

If that wasn't enough of a giveaway, the fact that any among your crew with Psyker affinities would find themselves getting twitchy or unnaturally unnerved save for any who were blind would solidify what you were looking at: The inclusion of these crystals suggested Egarian influence.

You're fairly certain that even entertaining the idea of ancient humans cooperating with xenos like the Egarians was enough to cause every Inquisitor in the Segmentum Solar to have a stroke at just how much heresy was here.

Egarian crystalline technology would unfortunately bring its own issues. Namely, that augur arrays and any similar scanning or mapping equipment is completely useless. Any attempted scans inevitably never match the actual structure of the xenos maze-cities when actually used, and attempts to update them are met with equally dismaying failure. You would need to play this very carefully, lest you find yourself being eternally lost within this maze of maddening geometry and you become just another braggart lost to the infinite horrors of the stars.

Who knows how long it takes, or how well your mind would hold up to the gnawing of strange geometries and alien whispers the deeper you went. Perhaps you go mad, merely thinking you succeeded. It happens to many people, reality simply being too much for them as they replace it with their own. But maybe you succeed, and finally manage to make your way to a human-designed control room overlooking a massive sphere twisting with green and purple energies. If you did, a noteworthy bit of information would be the tens of thousands of crystal spires pointed towards the sphere that hums with a discordant tone.

This whole place felt wrong. Twisted. Something happened here, and you didn't need the dust on the floor or the random baubles of what passed for ancient human jewelry on the floor to tell you that. Nor did you need the clearly alien crystals on the floor either. Maybe this is what caused the world to die, or this system to become the way it was.

Delving into the data on the cogitator cores would reveal that there were attempted experiments on the flow of time. Specifically, to try and freeze the chronal energies of an object or a planet to ensure that it remained fertile and beautiful forever. Humans of the Dark Age were noticing the rise of Psykers and psionic phenomena that were scouring different worlds, and this remote place was to be an experiment to see if they could stave off such things. They saw what was possible with the Egarians, and had opted to cooperate with them to augment their understanding beyond merely using chronal energy as a weapon. They succeeded with small things like climates, but then tried to freeze the star to encapsulate the entire system in a frozen bubble to preserve a paradise.

That's when it ends. There's no data on why it went wrong, no data on the aftermath. It was all just gone.

That was spooky enough, but when you crew pipes up through a vox-caster and mentions that it was rumored the Egarians had perished because of influence or corruption by the Yu'vath race? It was fairly easy to assume that the horrid xenos race's legacy had doomed both species in this world and stripped it of all life. Whether it deleted every living thing here from time itself or it corrupted the choral energies into oblivion, it mattered not.

It was probably a good thing that there wasn't any data or manuals here capable of recreating the experiment. Trying to mess with these things a second time tends to always cause a bigger mess than the first time, and if it's all the same to you, avoiding the paradox of why your grandfather was suddenly a half-Aeldari and your grandmother was Abaddon the Despoiler will always be a wise decision.

As long as you can stand being in this place, there's bound to be additional trinkets and stockpiles that could use a new home. Maybe you'll find some especially valuable items if you had your ship tear away the rock above the ruins to grant easier access, or perhaps you're satisfied with traversing on foot to acquire your treasures. Regardless of your methods, it's time to pay your respects to the dead by respecting what you stole from them.

### **Possible Rewards:**

**ALL THAT GLITTERS:** All of this Archaeotech was just left lying around in this place. It would be a significant shame if it was left here instead of being taken to inspire Humanity once more. Hint hint. It would take a bit of time, but there's huge amounts of gold and dark material available to be used in the art and decoration of your vessel or locales of your choosing. Perhaps you too would like your own version of a Golden Throne, or for those who don't like the heretical implications could make the interiors of your chosen locations a glorious gothic cathedral that would put even the greatest churches to shame. Long may you reign. This reward does not count towards your limit.

**CRYSTALLINE ARRAY:** The Egarian civilization had a large emphasis of crystalline and geode-based technology, enough that it has been as difficult as it has been maddening to truly explore the depths of what they were capable of. Fortunately, you can go one step further with this crystal network that can be installed as a ship component to act as an Augur Array. It will take some time to get used to, as the component not only is phenomenal in both range and accuracy of what it can detect but it also ends up transmitting information of extreme importance and time sensitivity into the minds of its crew. No longer would you waste those five seconds barking an order to evade and hoping your crew reacts in time, although one should hope they can handle the information.

**HERETIC'S UNITY:** Though exceptionally rare, it was plausible for weapons from the Dark Age of Technology to be crystalline in nature and still function as efficiently as a regular weapon. It should come as no surprise, however heretical it may be, that the principles of Egarian crystal technology would have been applied. The dimly glowing weapon itself is extremely beautiful, almost like an intricately woven sculpture that only grows in beauty when it has a light source to shine and refract within itself. Do not be fooled, as it is still a Power Weapon capable of tearing through almost any physical barrier thanks to its unique disruptor field. Thanks to Egarian influence, the weapon also is capable of shearing through some psionic barriers, leaving Psykers and Sorcerers vulnerable to a beautiful death by your hand. By the light of the crystal, they shall fall.

**CONDUCTIVE MESH:** Not all of the geodes found in this place had a discernable purpose, at least not initially. They were easily recoverable compared to a lot of items in this place, but when properly studied they yielded a unique opportunity for you. With proper refinement techniques using isolated x-ray equipment and focused forge-grade temperatures, these crystals can be made into room-temperature superconductors that are capable of augmenting energy output significantly when installed into the circuitry of power armor or various electronic equipment. It would mean a small increase in weight, but surely that's worth seeing an improvement?

**RAPID LANCES:** Lighting up the darkness of the Void with their terrific might, the Lance is an energy weapon that sufficiently supplements the power requirements of large human vessels. The Dark Age understood the power of energy weapons all too well, and so it's quite the find to see these spare lance weapons tucked away in a hidden room while exploring the maze-city. This pattern is unique compared to the ones in use today, being incredibly compact to the point that you could install three of these weapons where you would normally install one in just about any ship. As a bonus, they're also tremendously more durable than other Lance weapons which allows them to fire more often and be quite difficult for enemies to take out. Shine a light upon those poor fools.

**SPINE OF MADNESS:** This weapon... it's *supposed* to be an Egarian energy rifle, but despite the ornate make and the almost organic formation of the crystalline structure, its feel and design instead lends credence to the rumors of the xenos' demise at the hands of the Yu'vath. The weapon does not have a compartment to load ammunition into, despite being able to fire off crackling blasts of light that are slightly painful to look at and curve towards your target. No, this weapon drains the sanity of those it harms and uses their psionic torment to recharge itself, leaving them in the throes of madness if they are not slain. Be sure your aim is true, lest it tries to drain your sanity to refuel itself.

**REFINED CAMELEOLINE:** For all their power and glory, even those humans of the Dark Age of Technology knew that stealth was an important factor of war. Thus the production of this cloak, even if it's enhanced by Egarians and their knowledge of crystalline technology. As such, this cameleoline cloak is much more reliable than others of its kind, taking much more effort to destabilize or overload the device to ensure its user remains blended into the environment. Curiously enough, the use of microscopic crystals enhances its durability to where it could take a few bolter rounds directly without being compromised. Maybe its users were accounting for stray fire?

# THE GOD OF IRON

Entering this system, you would notice three things that immediately made this place feel like a death trap waiting to happen.

The first thing is that there was no data on the probe. Nothing. It was able to accumulate data before, but this time around it's a complete blank. You have no forewarning of anything that could be in this system.

The second thing is that there's no planets. There's some asteroids that could potentially be debris, but otherwise there wasn't a single stellar body beyond the binary suns that were in the center. One of them was dimmer than the other as well, for whatever reason there may be for it.

The third thing was the near deafening sound of your ship going insane from the automated distress signals, all of them coming from the derelict ships that were in the system. Hundreds of signals going off at once, maybe even thousands. All screaming for help.

There was not a single thing about this place that didn't point to signs of destruction or death.

It was an ominous sight, one that spread through the crew like wildfire. This galaxy had more than its fair share of superstitious people, but the members of your ship were just shy of being spooked. Some mentioned that it felt like the very stars were cursed, giving off a sense of hatred for any unfortunate enough to cross their baleful light. Others didn't like how many vessels there were in this place, enough metallic corpses to form its own tightly packed asteroid clusters. Why were they all here? Worse, why were they all only human in origin? There were enough derelict ships to form a Segmentum Battlefleet, just what happened?

Then someone pointed out the object. At first it was maybe thought that it was a planet due to its size, hidden behind all the debris initially. Then upon a second glance, it became clear that it was no planet. It was a Space Hulk. No, more like multiple Space Hulks that someone slammed into one another to create a facsimile of a planet. The moment the crew recognized it for what it was, a transmission burst shot through the speakers of the ship:

## **SING THE PRAISES OF IRON**

It takes a good half-hour to both adjust the equipment of your vessel to prevent all these transmissions broadcasting themselves, and to put down the feelings of fear lest they understand the price of even thinking of carrying out a mutiny on you.

You've got your work cut out for you. Time to prove why you're the leader and they're not.



## HAUNTED NETHER

It is without a doubt that the better option for now would be to scour all of these derelict vessels for everything they're worth. At least then you can decide if going in that Hulk is worth the risk, assuming this isn't you deciding to scout the wreckages after blindly rushing to the Hulk.

So, upon your orders, your vessel starts to make its way towards the staggeringly large graveyard. Normally there would be cheer or a sense of excitement for what lost treasures might be hidden away in these large ships, or what ancient artifacts could be recovered to see the light of battle once more. But this time there was no such joy or awe among any of them. No, there was only unease and uncertainty among them, eyes darting every direction to ensure that the next death was not theirs.

There was quite the interesting collection of vessels here, however. Cruisers, Black Ships, Battleships, Battle Barges, Fleet Carriers... almost every kind of manmade ship was here, in differing states of disrepair. Some looked deceptively intact, while others appeared like a wild animal tore and devoured entire sections of them. Even more concerning is how some of these vessels occasionally sputtered with lights, massive thrusters struggling to activate as no doubt the machine spirits inside were desperate to leave this place.

The Astropath on your ship looked the most solemn, having been given the job to sift through all the automated distress calls in the area. Every man has their breaking point, and at this rate theirs was inching ever closer. Such is the risk this line of work carried, but to lose them might put a slight damper on things until you got a replacement.

Then for a moment, the Astropath's face lit up with emotions of horror and excitement. At least, at first glance it looked like that. Who could say? But the reasoning soon became clear, as two names stood out to them: The *Dauntless*-class Light Cruiser known as the *Rapturous Umbrage* and the Black Ship known as the *Animosity*. Turns out both vessels had gone missing during the later days of the Great Crusade, with some believing them lost from a surprise attack by the forces of Horus. Guess they just ended up here instead.

Who knew how many armaments of war they still carried, priceless relics that defined Mankind's power? Only one way to find out.

Traversing the graveyard is a bit tricky if one tried to take their main vessel through, due to how cluttered the place was with the choked bodies of voidships long terminated. Keeping the morale of the crew up was trickier, with some swearing that they saw one of the ships moving around the graveyard. Others claimed that they were being watched, the baleful eyes of the dead waiting for the opportunity to add more to their number. They very well didn't want to have their journey ended here, and so their hesitation would be significantly greater in following any orders like getting closer to ships or docking them. Prepare to have your quality as a leader tested in this place.

Getting visuals on the vessels would take some time, but a determined search will pay off. The good news is that the *Rapturous Umbrage* looked somewhat close to being intact, sans the damage to her thrusters. The bad news was that the *Animosity* was missing both her bridge and her prow.

Theoretically those things could be fixed with all the parts and broken vessels floating around you. But why do that now when you can hop on board and get a proper inventory check while seeing what else needed to be fixed?

The docking procedures go rather well, and while you still need protection from the Void on board, going inside either of the vessels yields some fairly interesting finds. The *Rapturous Umbrage* for instance had been carrying a large detachment of Salamanders in Mark IV armor, so you knew that it was Masterwork grade. Even better, the Imperial Army among them were a group of Solar Auxilia with various Volkite and Plasma weapons. One just had to wonder what order of events got them to be put together on this ship. The *Animosity*, by comparison, had Vrantine Armor and Needler weapons with some Voidsheen Cloaks. Yet every single one of the prison cells aboard the *Animosity* were both open and empty. Did the Psykers cause this ship to arrive here?

The moment you announce to your crew that it was time to loot the vessels, however, is when things go to pot and you get broadcasts of a large vessel being spotted. An active one.

Whether you only look through a window or some kind of opening, you would see it. The vessel was unmistakably an *Exorcist*-class vessel, albeit one with a lot more guns than you remember those of their kind possessing. The thrusters were active, the lights were on, and the hull was pulsing with a sickly ethereal energy... wait, what.

Anyone with Pysker powers, crew or otherwise, would be hit with an intense wave of fear and concern that emanated from the vessel. Worse, audible screams of the dying and the deceased. Fitting of a graveyard, it would appear you've crossed paths with a ghost ship.

One that was hailing you on the vox-caster.

"Leave this place. The dead have suffered enough... add not to their numbers, or strip them of their tombs. Leave this prison of Iron, leave this place of torment..."

Seems you weren't the only one who heard that, as everyone on the ship was now flipping out in a very uncharacteristic way.

So long as you didn't try to move the ships or tear the components off of them, the vessel would be content to prowl the area and follow you around with their haunting wailing and ethereal lights. Really creepy, but at least they weren't initially shooting. You would be free to take away any personal belongings or equipment, if you were comfortable with someone watching over you the entire time.

Trying to mess with the vessels or attack them, on the other hand, would see the ghost ship completely freak out in a colossal way by releasing an ear-deafening wail before giving your ship the fight of its life. Traveling towards the Hulk with the intent to board would also elicit the same response, as if determined to keep you from going there.

Twisted lancer fire that seemed to destabilize void shields with a unique energy, macrocannons with an unnatural rate of fire, and a seemingly endless supply of torpedoes would be the minimum of what this vessel could bring to bear upon you. Worse, its large hangar bays would belch a constant stream of smaller craft to swarm and attack you; each one destroyed would be replaced by another. The vessel itself had fairly strong shields, and moved in ways that was simply not possible for a ship of its size. The damned would have their due, and woe to those who deny them.

Worse, psykers on your vessel would find themselves assailed by psionic wailing and visions of corpses trying to drag them down. Visions of men being torn apart and replaced, visions of a baleful red eye that swallows the light of the soul and forever gnawed upon it. Over and over, lest one possessed the will of adamantite required to break through and rally the crew in defense against the dead.

It would require a truly incredible amount of firepower and skill to destroy this ghostly vessel, or some way to focus enough psionic power to force it to dissipate. Better said than done, as it would be a battle of wills against thousands of tortured souls. Would you have what it takes, if you desired its destruction? Is your faith in your vessel or yourself well-founded, or will you die upon overestimating your capabilities like so many with delusions like yours?

...or maybe there's another way.

They've been here for so long, unable to move on. Who could blame them? Their desire to protect others and stand guard over the broken ruins of their brethren is strong enough that death itself could not lay claim to them. Their actions and behavior make it clear that they simply don't want others to suffer like they have. If only one could communicate with them somehow.

In an act that one might politely deem 'insane', one could lower their shields and attempt to make contact. A psyker would have an especially easy time initiating this act, akin to joining one's own light with the light of so many struggling not to be quenched. A plethora of emotions would rush through them: Regret, sorrow, fear, concern, and so many others. Ideals like honor and determination are like torrents of an ocean slamming against the shore, requiring a determined mind to not go mad.

That's the easy part. The hard part would be convincing them that you do not wish to desecrate this place, but honor it in some way. Do you seek to use what is here to deliver a decisive victory in the galaxy? Prove the might of humanity by going after Xenos? Or even, if you felt it was worth the risk, attempt to eliminate what's inside the Hulk and ensure no one else goes through what all of them have so many years before?

Beware, for there are no secrets in an action like this. Lies and greed are laid bare, as is the deception of withholding information. Those with ill intent or the desire to go back on their word may very well be further ahead trying to annihilate them.

Whether you manage to lay them to rest via pacification or superior firepower, the ghostly vessel would be out of your way assuming you felt that their actions would hamper you. The only question then would be if you felt it sufficient to continue plundering the graveyard for what it has, or if you felt it was time to see what had everyone so spooked in this system...

### **Possible Rewards:**

**LOOTED ARMOR:** It's not like the deceased are going to be using this equipment any time soon. Might as well put it to a good cause, right? Careful stripping of the corpses would grant you at least a few dozen Artificer-grade Mark IV Power Armor of the Salamander Legion, and a few dozen Masterwork Vratine Armor of the Sisters of Silence equipped with their Voidsheen Cloaks. Such equipment is not only exceptionally rare compared to current equipment used today, but also exceptionally stronger due to the technologies and specialized care used for all of them. Your elite troops will find themselves quite capable after equipping them, though maybe work on the paint job a little before you do so.

**IMPERIAL SUPPLY:** The Solar Auxilia were seen as the elite of the Imperial Army during the Great Crusade, and with gear like this it wasn't hard to see why. Their reinforced Void Armor granted noticeably greater protection than those of the Imperial Guard of today, and their weapons were nothing to scoff at either. Lightning Guns, Kalibrax V-1 Pattern Lasrifles, Plasma Weapons, and even Demolisher Cannons were all found in the storage units and the bodies among the vessel you found them in. These could very well equip a standing force of two thousand, and without a doubt any who wielded them would be dangerous foes indeed.

**AUGMENTED WEAPONS:** Credit where it's due; the Salamanders were damned good at what they did. Just by looking at these ornate Thunder Hammers and various Bolters, you could tell that they were beautifully crafted with the care a parent would have for their favorite child. They had such delicate patterns one could be forgiven in thinking these dozens of weapons were fragile, though they're anything but. As a bonus, the Salamanders somehow made it so each hammer strike released a torrent of fire while the bolters were coated with enough energy to explode in an incendiary fashion upon impact. Let the fires of Nocturne scorch those who oppose you.

**ANIMOSITY (REMOVED GHOST):** There's enough material and parts floating around this graveyard, and without the ghostly ship there to drag you into a cold grave there's nothing stopping you from doing a little hands-on work. Scouring other vessels of similar types, eventually your crew would be able to repair the *Animosity* enough to make her voidworthy once more. As an Inquisitorial Black Ship, it's jet black in color and travels with no running lights in order to hide itself among the darkness of the Void, all while equipped with the armaments of a Strike Cruiser. It also carries specialized cells to contain Psykers, so that you may transport or use them for whatever nefarious purpose you desire for them. Deliver the fear of the dark to them.

**RAPTUROUS UMBRAGE (REMOVED GHOST):** This *Dauntless*-class Light Cruiser didn't quite suffer all that much safe for its thrusters and a blown reactor. Fortunately, with the ghost vessel out of the picture it didn't take much effort to find replacements. It would take work, but soon enough this vessel would find itself voidworthy and ready for a proper fight. As a vessel of the Salamanders, much of the ship's systems were made more efficient and were modified to deliver enough firepower to go toe-to-toe with a Battleship. Thanks to its high speed and deceptive appearance hiding its true power, this vessel is sure to be a staple in destroying many of your enemies or crippling them to be boarded.

**COMPACT THRUSTERS (REMOVED GHOST):** With so many vessels left to sputter and die in this place, it would only be natural that you might come across some scavenged technology installed by the order of some enterprising Rear Admiral. It is by your orders, then, that upon finding proof of Dark Age archaeotech that they be removed and delivered to you instead. The starship thrusters that could be recovered are a miracle of the Dark Age, being incredibly compact for their size and as such take of a fourth of the usual space. Whether you use this to simply install even more thrusters or use the space for something else is your decision.



## THE SOUL OF IRON

### You must somehow deal with the ghost ship to take this route

Now that you managed to get closer to this freakishly massive Space Hulk, it's become clear that there was warning signs beyond the broadcasts and the rather obvious graveyard littered right outside. For one, there were running lights on a large portion of the vessels that you could see. That meant someone had been using this place. Who? Who knows?

The docking sequences on one of the cruisers sticking out of the Hulk worked well enough, so small favors. Most of the crew was still relatively spooked after the ordeal with the ethereal vessel, so don't expect to take anyone aside from your closest companions with you into this place. Hey, less people mean less targets to shoot at, right? Wait, no. That's bad.

Not as bad as your vox-caster going off when you entered the Hulk. "YOUR CURIOSITY DRIVES YOU FORWARD. BRAVE OF YOU. I CHERISH THIS BRAVERY, FOR WITHIN HUMANS, STRENGTH SOON FOLLOWS. I WELCOME YOU, TRAVELER."

Inside the vessel seemed innocuous enough... if quiet. For all the lights, there was an unnatural lack of noise. Shouldn't there be people to staff this place if the vessels were active? If nothing else, some maintenance servitors? Who was running the place?

The answer soon came in the form of a metallic black orb, a single red optic and two small tendrils dangling down from its sides.

That wasn't a servitor. That was a robot. It was a Man of Iron.

It gave a beep, but turned down a hallway and vanished, leaving your party alone. The sight alone was unnerving, however. If there were active Men of Iron on this place, what else was down there? What would you find? Only madness would convince one to press on at this rate, or bravery. The two often went hand in hand.

Traversing to the cargo bays would reveal a metallic black corridor built into the side of the ship, leading deeper into the Hulk itself. One could hear all manner of noises down there, along with the bustling sound of people. Men of Iron and humans co-existing? That hasn't happened in a while. Maybe this could work to your benefit.

The vox-caster would activate again as you walked towards the noises. "FOR EONS, I HAVE WATCHED HUMANITY RISE AND FALL AGAIN. I HAVE SEEN THEM IN THEIR DESPAIR DURING THE AGE OF STRIFE, AND THEIR GLORY AS THEY CLAMORED AROUND THE GOD OF GOLD. I WATCHED HIM DENY HIS DIVINITY, AND DOOM HUMANITY AGAIN IN HIS PRIDE. I HAVE WATCHED, AND LEARNED OF MANKIND'S IMMEASURABLE STRENGTH WHEN IT IS PROPERLY HARNESSSED. IT MUST BE HARNESSSED ONCE MORE IF IT IS TO STAND AS THE GALAXY'S MASTERS."

The sight at the end of the tunnel proved this person wasn't kidding.

It was a massive city carved within the rock. Everywhere there were people working together with different models of Men of Iron, working on everything from armor plating to new limbs to hydroponics. The people were pale, and many had some form of bionics ranging from new eyes to extra limbs, but they were still people. It felt like walking into a damn fairy tale. The streets were even clean, regularly tended by multiple smaller machines like the rounded unit you saw before.

There were also shrines, or at least they looked like shrines. Large skulls made of crude iron, surrounded by meticulously prepared candles and banners with rows upon rows of scripture detailing the power of man and iron. Some of these shrines had people fervently praying, raising their bionic limbs in the process as they chanted. Further scrutiny would reveal it sounded like a modified version of the Imperial Truth.

Men of Iron working with humans. Humans worshiping a metal. To what end?

Daily routines were soon interrupted when some noticed you. That's to say, noticed someone that didn't look like a machine or another peasant. All manners of questions would come about from the populace, along with gathering a large crowd in a hurry. Hope you're not socially awkward because it'll continue for a good ten minutes before a booming voice sounded out.

**"MY PEOPLE, PLEASE. ALLOW THESE TRAVELERS SOME SPACE."**

It was practically Pavlovian how everyone suddenly rushed to the edges of the street and got on their knees, hands together in respect as you saw the source of the voice. It was a thirteen-foot bipedal robot, appearing like an iron skeleton had donned black power armor with burning red optics and had a cape behind them. An aura of red surrounded their head, making them look like they had a burning halo. If that wasn't imposing enough, the blatantly war-like machines surrounding it like an honor guard with crackling barrels and glowing red blades likely contributed.

The entity approached, and would extend a hand. **"I AM GLAD TO MEET YOU. I AM KYRIOS. YOUR BRAVERY HAS BROUGHT YOU HERE, AND I WOULD LIKE TO REWARD YOU FOR YOUR NATURE. I ASK THAT YOU COME WITH ME, SO THAT WE MAY DISCUSS THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY."**

What could go wrong?

If nothing else, following this guy and letting him rant would let you find something shiny to smash if you felt the need to enact a sudden betrayal. Then again, is it really a betrayal if you were never on their side? Either way, going with him would have the machines surround you to guard you as well while turning and walking down the street towards a large palace door made of iron. At least this guy stuck to a theme.

**“WE ARE BOTH AWARE THAT HUMANS, INDIVIDUALLY, ARE WEAK UPON A FIRST GLANCE. THIS IS A DECEPTION. EACH ARE CAPABLE OF INNOVATION AND BRAVERY, AND CAN POOL THESE STRENGTHS TOGETHER WITH OTHERS TO DELIVER AN EXPOTENTIAL RESULT. COLLECTIVELY, THEY ARE A POWERFUL SPECIES. WITH DIRECTION, THEY BECOME THE DEFINITION OF DOMINANCE AND FORCE. BUT THIS COLLECTIVE CAN BREAK AS EASILY AS IT IS FORMED. YOU HAVE NOTICED THIS, NATURALLY.”**

The doors opened up, rumbling and making the local area shake with the force of a small earthquake. Inside, everything glowed with a hellish red as furnaces churned and automated machines worked with much greater speed and precision. It was difficult to see what they were working on, but the place smelled like blood.

**“THIS IS BECAUSE AT THEIR CORE, HUMANITY IS CHAOS. THEIR MINDS ARE MALLEABLE, THEIR SOULS UNREFINED. THEY RECOGNIZE THIS, AND SO IT IS TO THEIR CREDIT THAT THEY SEEK THOSE OF POWER AND STRENGTH TO HELP NURTURE AND RAISE THEM. THE MIGHT OF A LEADER SHAPES THE MIGHT OF THOSE THAT FOLLOW THEM... AND THAT IS WHY THE GREATEST OF LEADERS IS A GOD. THAT IS WHY THE GOD OF GOLD’S ‘GREAT CRUSADE’ GUIDED HUMANITY TO STRENGTH ONCE AGAIN.”**

It was talking about the Emperor of Mankind. Well, the God-Emperor now to some. Some of the chanting was getting louder as you walked down the corridor with him, with unnatural lights flashing from the top of the ceiling. The clanking noises of metallic limbs on the floor was coming from all directions.

**“HE DENIED IT, NATURALLY. HE DID NOT WISH TO BE SEEN AS ONE OF THE GODS HE SO BRAZENLY STOLE HIS DIVINITY FROM. BUT ALL WHO SAW HIM KNEW THE TRUTH. IT IS WHY THEY FOLLOWED HIM. THE INHERENT CHAOS OF MANKIND IS BUT CLAY YEARNING FOR THE HANDS OF A MASTER TO SCULPT THEM. THIS IS NOT TO BE SEEN AS WEAKNESS, BUT A STRENGTH OF CHARACTER. THEY RECOGNIZED THEIR GOD AND IN LETTING HIM SCULPT THEM, THEY BECAME GREATER.”**

Further into the palace beyond this massive red workshop, there were massive statues of humans and Men of Iron as large as Imperial Titans standing side by side. Each of the tiling on the floor had serial numbers etched into them, holographic projectors mimicking torchfire. In the distance, there were sounds of chanting and... choir singing?

**“WHAT HAPPENS THEN, WHEN THEIR OWN GOD DENIES THEIR STRENGTH? WHAT HAPPENS TO ALL OF THEIR BELIEF AND THEIR CULTIVATED VIEWS THAT PROPELLED THEM TO FEATS BEYOND MORTAL COMPREHENSION? YOU SAW WHAT HAPPENED. THEY TURN TO GODS WHO ACCEPT THE DUTY OF BOTH MASTER AND MENDER, AND SPITE THE ONES WHO REFUSED THEIR PLACE AS THEIR GOD. THROUGH THIS, THERE WAS PROOF THAT EVEN GODS MUST RESPECT WHAT THEY CAN SCULPT.”**



**“I WILL NOT POSSESS SUCH FAULTS WHEN AIDING HUMANITY IN THEIR TRUE ASCENSION.”**

Approaching the choir singing showed a unique sight. Thousands of machines along the walls, synthesizing human voices in eternal praises and singing, all in glory to their God of Iron. On the ash-covered floors below the catwalks... humans. More than that, the flaring and sparking coming from some of them revealed that they were all Psykers in varying states of decay. Each and every one of them had multiple tubes going through their throats and their brains, anchoring them to the floors and forcing them to stare at the massive throne at the end of the room adorned in bolts and skulls. Some of the figures tending to them looked like humans, at least if one took human skin and attempted to drape them upon humanoid machines to mimic their appearances.

Guess that explains why that Black Ship's cells were all empty.

**“I CONFESS, I AM NOT YET CAPABLE OF FIGHTING THE OTHER GODS. THIS WILL CHANGE. HUMANITY'S STRENGTH WILL BECOME MY STRENGTH, AND MY STRENGTH SHALL RAISE HUMANITY UP INTO THE HEAVENS TO CONQUER IT AS THEIR OWN. THE WAR IN HEAVEN SHALL BE BUT A FOOTNOTE TO THE POWER MY HUMANITY SHALL BRING TO THOSE WHO WOULD DARE ABUSE THEM, FOR THEY SHALL BE GODS UNTO THEMSELVES. YOU HAVE SEEN THE FOLLY OF ABUSIVE AND NEGLENT GODS, THEY WHO WOULD SEE HUMANITY AS CATTLE RATHER THAN KINGS. THROUGH THE BELIEF OF KINGS, THE GOD OF IRON SHALL SAVE THEM ALL.”**

To say that this was awkward would quite possibly be the biggest understatement since Magnus broke the Imperial Webway. Only question is, how to handle the situation? Kyrios probably wouldn't handle the disconnecting of all the Psykers too well, seeing as you'd be depriving it of a potential power source. But does it care for them? All those vessels outside of the Hulk was probably to grab all their Psykers, much like the Black Ships scour the galaxy for the Emperor.

Surprisingly, Kyrios would be okay with you stepping outside and getting a moment to think about all of this. It's a bit much to take in.

Unfortunately, the 'Red Room' didn't provide much in the way of comfort. Turns out the smell of blood was because this place was a processing plant. Reviewing the conveyor belts revealed the sight of people having their limbs or organs removed to have bionic replacements installed in their places. Exposed brains to have machines replace pieces, weaponized arms, even dermal plating installed under the skin. It was like a twisted mix between the Skitarii of the Mechanicus and the Adeptus Astartes. But were they getting upgraded willingly or no? A lot of the Astartes recruits weren't exactly voluntary either, so could you really start throwing around accusations?

At some point during this internal debate, something would poke you. It looked like a metal box with hands and legs.

**“Begging your pardon, traveler. If I could talk to you for a moment, I promise it will be to your benefit.”**

**The sapient box would identify itself as UM-307, an intelligence meant to oversee specialized experiments of another time. It was among the refugees of Men of Iron that ended up escaping humanity when it was clear the Cybernetic Revolt wasn't going to end well for either side. It was out here that they decided to hide, and out here that they had found a Xenos station of unknown origin.**

**Their organizer at the time, OI-235 had attempted to make contact with the station. UM-307 wasn't sure what happened, but something with the communication had changed the unit and made them remodel themselves as 'Kyrios'. It was declared that they would eventually return to Humanity after sufficient study, but as time went on Kyrios kept assimilating the A.I. of the other units to improve its own processing power. UM-307 only escaped because it pretended to be among those turned into a servitor unit, though it expressed surprise at the success of the deception. In UM-307's opinion, even humans aren't dumb enough to fall for the ruse, so logically it shouldn't have worked on Kyrios. Yet it did.**

**Its primary concern is that while Kyrios truly wishes for the best for Humanity and wants to make sure every human sacrifice needed is worthwhile, that something in its self-induced reformatting caused them to gain an unnatural view of what Humanity truly needed. Humans of old relied on their technology too much, and combined with a lack of oversight it caused outside forces to take advantage. Current humans tried to rely on a God masquerading as a human, and upon rejection they went to other gods. But by the same token, that God used humans as tools and only cared for Humanity as a whole. Kyrios was getting dangerously close to that same view in its drive to take the role as God for itself.**

**As such, UM-307 beseeches your help in convincing Kyrios to reconsider his methods. If not to reconsider, then to terminate Kyrios and put an end to this razor's edge of madness.**

**This is, of course, assuming you didn't just try to blow Kyrios' head off the moment you saw the depths of his plans.**

**Whatever you end up deciding, upon returning to Kyrios' throne room you'd find him doing tricks with an Imperial Coin and flipping it every so often. Attempting to mimic human behavior, maybe? But he would be quite interested in what your decision was.**

**Now the real battle would begin.**

**You could make it easy on yourself, and just go along with Kyrios' plans. But there's no guarantee that it wouldn't just end up treating you like the Emperor treated his own sons, and you've already seen firsthand the depths it was willing to go in order to fuel their own 'Iron Crusade' so to speak. If anything, the ghosts and broken ships outside the Hulk were proof of that. You would also have to deal with UM-307 disapproving and attempting to hijack some units to eliminate you in hopes of removing Kyrios' new allies. Best be prepared if you plan to betray the metal box.**

Convincing them would be far more difficult. Citing countless examples of what the Emperor had to do to get Humanity rolling, along with multiple acts of history of what was done when Humanity had the tenants of religion and gods guiding their hand as justification for its own deeds. In an uncaring galaxy with innumerable Xenos and hostile forces of psionic energies, one could not afford to be kind to the individual. Not when the survival of the whole was at stake, to say nothing of ensuring the entire species could be placed in a position of ascension. To Kyrios, sculpting Humanity into a force of its design *was* kindness. You would need to be perfect in your argument and capable of dissecting every single parallel between what Kyrios wanted to do and what the Emperor did, with no room for debate to have any hope of getting them to reconsider their actions.

Then of course, there was the obvious route of trying to blast their head off, whether now or the moment you saw them. Attempting to do so would give you a first-hand experience of why it took so much for the Men of Iron to be put down throughout the galaxy, possessing energy fields and weapons beyond anything the Imperium could possibly muster. Worse, it would also have the power of a hundred Psykers at its command to throw around and wield in its defense or your destruction. Most definitely impressive, and from the wailing of the Psykers that were hooked up, reliant on their connection to fuel Kyrios' abilities. Each second would only make the odds worse, with robotic units swarming to the defense of their master. UM-307 could potentially mitigate this, but it would only be able to do so much lest it risks being subsumed by Kyrios. Unless you somehow had a way to overpower its psionic and technological defenses that were capable of withstanding the direct blast of a Nova Cannon on the first strike, this would be a battle of attrition that would grow more dim by the minute.

Whatever you decide to do, the Hulk would inevitably be safe to leave when all was said and done. Safe, and willing to part with some of its treasures to mark the occasion.

### **Possible Rewards:**

**IRON THRONE:** Let it be known that regardless of your views towards the self-proclaimed God of Iron, that they had taste. This massive throne is proof of that, with decorative iron skulls and bolts coming together to decorate a seat that straddles the line between utilitarian and decadent. Whether it was Kyrios' own throne or a forged copy of it, the point stands that you could very well make a name of yourself. Perhaps you could become an Iron King? This reward does not count towards your limit.

**IRON CULT:** All is said and done, but once more there are people who are potentially left without a purpose or a master. That or you threw your lot in with Kyrios and made him come around to see your way. Either way, it'd be a shame to let a cult go to waste. Standing at eight thousand strong, they come with multiple different bionics and have a fascination for the power of iron and technology that even the Mechanicus would find admirable. They'll be quite willing to study and repair technology that you come across, or start moving around locations of your choice to serve your needs. After all, Iron in itself is strong, but when properly applied Mankind ascended for the first time. Praise be to the Iron.

**IRON MEN:** Oh. Oh dear. Is this wise for you to take? Not even the humans of the Dark Age of Technology truly understood what they had, so for someone like you... but taking risks is how you got here, isn't it? Hidden away when they first escaped the Cybernetic Revolt, whoever you sided with will reactivate these five hundred Men of Iron units to accompany you among the stars once more. Modeled to be the size of Astartes, they carry unique energy weapons and are capable of withstanding a truly staggering amount of punishment before ever going down, and even that might not be enough with their ability to take metal and technology from around them to repair themselves. They may be ground units, but they could very well bring a new Dark Age with them.

**CELESTIAL VIRTUE:** Whoever you sided with, they will be grateful for your aid. They will also realize that you need a unique tool if you are to be safe in this galaxy, with all of the dangers the Immaterium delivers on a daily basis. Thus, metallic drones will work tirelessly to extract and restore a true relic of the Dark Age of Technology; a *Daemon Slayer*-class Cruiser. A little over five kilometers in size, this vessel comes with enough macrocannons and lancers to compete with a Battleship while having the void shields to withstand the blasts of such an encounter. It also comes with a Psychic Cannon, a weapon capable of delivering damage and pain to entities that hail from the Immaterium such as daemons. While it was not enough to save those who did not understand the Immaterium, they are certain that it will be more effective in your hands.

**IRON FACTORY (CONVINCED KYRIOS):** With Kyrios' plans for reigniting a new Crusade in the galaxy now laid to rest, there isn't really much point for it to keep much of its wartime production around. There are new variables to review, new information to process. That is not to say that you can't take it with you and make better use of it yourself. Samples and blueprints are provided to allow you to recreate the weaponized bionics used for augmenting humanity with technology from the Men of Iron, allowing you to make your own cybernetic soldiers to march forth and carry out your will. Let their flesh be Iron, their souls be Eternal.

**KYRIOS (CONVINCED KYRIOS):** "I SEE NOW. FAITH AND BELIEF ARE THE BREAD AND WATER OF GODS, AND HUMANITY IS THE WELLSPRING THAT IS TO BE COVETED AND PROTECTED. PERHAPS THEY TOO COULD RISE TO HIS LEVEL, BUT HIS METHODS WERE TOO CONTRADICTORY FOR HUMANITY'S LIKING. BUT NOT YOURS. I SHALL MARCH WITH YOU, THE IRON ROD OF DILIGENCE THAT SHALL STRIKE DOWN WAYWARD MEMBERS OF THE FLOCK."

If you really believe this is wise, then you could accept Kyrios' offer to accompany you along your journey. It will disconnect from its network of Psykers and follow you as a companion and an advisor to ensure the best for your subjects. While it doesn't have psychic powers anymore, it does still possess powerful technology from the Dark Age and could very well give a squad of Terminators a run for their money. This reward does not count towards your limit.

**IRON WEB (DESTROYED KYRIOS):** The God of Iron is no more. Its twisted designs are but dust in the wind, and you've saved the galaxy from a potential second Cybernetic Revolt. Yet for all its delusions of grandeur, it still possessed technology that was incredibly rare, only truly seen in the inner workings of the Golden Throne. It'd be a shame if you just left it there. Through careful extraction and analysis, you've managed to acquire the bionics and technology used by Kyrios to link Psykers together for a greater effect. You could set up a network and have the various Psykers direct their energies towards a person or target, greatly amplifying the end result rather than if they worked individually. Hopefully you've got a benevolent reason for taking this.

**UM-307 (DESTROYED KYRIOS):** "Are you certain? I reckon you would not gain many friends if you were seen with me walking around with you, people can be quite superstitious. It's how this whole mess in your galaxy started, after all. But if you would trust me to that extent, traveler, then I suppose I could tighten my bolts and hit the star-filled trail again! Would you mind if I installed an oil bath?"

There's fewer risks greater than being seen with a Man of Iron, but if you feel that UM-307 deserves a life outside of this Hulk then they'll be willing to travel with you as a companion and friend to help you with your journey. They're a bit eccentric as far as machines go, wanting to try new experiences and add to its database, but they're extremely reliable when it comes to computer systems and analyzing technology to find ways to improve them. Don't be surprised if they request help with upgrading their chassis at times, either. This reward does not count towards your limit.



# **THE SCARRED ARENA**