

“Lion’s Den”

By Michael J. Jackson

Copyright © 1998 1999 2000 2001 Michael J. Jackson

All Rights Reserved

Some of the people, places and things referred to in this story are copyrighted by Games Workshop, Ltd.. I make no challenge to their ownership of their property, and am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Warhammer 40K universe. Thanks, GW!

The lifepod drifted through the flotsam of broken technology and bits of frozen human remains that were left over from the battle. Slowly tumbling with its beacon silenced and its hull burnt by the plasmas of weapons and exploding ships, the pod wandered alone through the clutter of useless wreckage and lost souls. Only the rocks and the myriad of infinitely sized bits of ships kept company with the little pod’s movement through space. The ambushing force had long departed and the Celestial Lions’ cruiser, the “*Lions’ Pride*”, and its lost escorts tumbled through Ork space as burning hulks and debris. The attackers responsible for the ambush had missed the lifepod during their calculated targeting of the Celestial Lion’s vessels and during their systematic and deadly search for survivors at the battle’s end. Overlooked by his enemies and the only living being left of the Lion’s delegation to Terra, Veteran Sergeant Mikal Simbara floated unconscious in the lifepod’s crew compartment. His body mortally wounded, Sergeant Simbara was lost in dreams of an agricultural world where he’d led his unit against an Ork incursion. He’d found the planet pleasant, and the human colonists genuinely happy to have the Marines to protect them. He had lost sixteen men from his company to the enemy, but the Celestial Lions had succeeded in totally annihilating the Ork force, and had spent a few weeks there on R&R before shipping back out. As he dreamt, his dying body was kept alive in self-induced suspended animation, in spite of the pod’s slowly failing life support system.

Hours later, a shadow cast by something between the local system’s sun and the pod fell across the slowly tumbling and apparently inert piece of battle debris, obscuring the view that Sergeant Simbara would have had through the pod’s view ports had he been conscious. He was no longer alone...

The mountain-sized rock seemed to drift in from some other part of the asteroid field that the battle had moved into near its end. That battle movement had been to the sorrow of both the human and traitor ships that had fallen victim to the drifting bits of world stuff as their shields failed during the battle. 14-kilometers long and 10-kilometers wide, the new addition to the debris field was unusual in its nearly uniform cylindrical shape, gently curving ends, and in the 2-kilometer wide cave or tunnel running through its center along its 14-kilometer length. Guided by its hunger and the processes that had sustained its existence for millennia, the leviathan moved methodically through the field, *feeding* on the asteroid field’s rocky occupants, including the debris left over from the violent battle fought days before.

Tractor beams guided rock, broken technology, and frozen biologics into the great 2-kilometer maw. Other tractor beams inside the maw sorted, categorized and shifted various bits of matter towards smaller openings, like mouths a half a kilometer wide, spaced around the inside of the tunnel running through the length of the leviathan. Surgically precise beams of energy carved the offerings into smaller bits, and those bits were drawn into the row of “mouths” spaced around the circumference of the tunnel. The leviathan seemed to feed contentedly and it eventually reached the area of the debris field where the lifepod was slowly tumbling and drifting. Tractor beams guided the lifepod into the great maw, along with thousands of tons of other debris and rock. Finer beams guided the pod and other technological debris into place for the energy beams. Sergeant Simbara drifted across the pod’s compartment, unconscious and unaware of his fate, his body sent drifting about by the pod’s movement. The energy beams fired and began to carve

the debris surrounding the pod into “bite-sized” pieces, but suddenly, as if interrupted by an unseen hand, the beams cut out. A tractor beam from further down the tunnel reached out and moved the pod containing Sergeant Simbara to another smaller “mouth”, beyond the ones ingesting the leviathan’s silent harvest. The pod moved through the mouth, into the leviathan’s interior, and darkness closed over it.

[Two years later...]

Simbara awoke with his senses alive with the memory of smoke and weapons fire, human screams and traitor war cries mixed with the deep outraged voices of battle-hardened Lions. The flat metallic salt taste of his own blood lingered in his mouth. His combat-hardened senses brought him to full consciousness, but three things stopped him from rolling off of the low slab that he found himself lying on and onto the ground into a defensive combat stance. The first was his surprise at the tree that he found himself looking up at. A tree that looked a lot like the Terran willow trees that millennia ago had been genetically enhanced to produce four times the natural concentration of acetylsalicylic acid for pain relief medicines. A great boon for low-tech agricultural planets, and a common feature of that planet where his last ground-side engagement had been fought.

The second thing was that the smoke and other battle-related memories had been replaced by a warm fresh breeze, shade dappled with a shifting leaf-bordered pattern of sunlit spots, and the sound of what had to be a small brook dancing over a stony bed. At this point Simbara began to think that he was either insane, imprisoned in some hellish torture machine in Commorragh, or that maybe he was dead and in Space Marine Paradise.

The third thing that kept him from moving, and this time captured his attention wholly, was the smiling face of a woman standing just off to his right. She was much shorter than his height of 2 meters, not quite 2 meters tall, and incredibly beautiful. She was dressed in a blue robe that shimmered as if made of flowing water, and her shoulders were covered with a cape the color of the leaves on the willow tree.

“Dead, “ Simbara sighed contentedly, “dead and definitely in Paradise.” Then he noticed several other things. One was that the smile on the woman’s face was a humorous one, and that her gaze was centered at a point somewhere in the vicinity of his abdomen. The other thing was the angry, chittering face of a 30-centimeter tall, furry, long-eared, and probably mammalian quadruped standing on his stomach and quite obviously angered by his presence.

“Well, Brother Oates,” Simbara reconsidered, “maybe Commorragh after all.”

The chittering abruptly ceased and the diminutive “drill sergeant” shook it’s head slowly side to side (the creature’s attitude and tone reminded Simbara of a certain rather loud drill instructor). It raised a remarkably human-like paw, pointed at Simbara’s face as if to say “I’ll be keeping an eye on you, so don’t screw up” and jumped down from Simbara’s stomach onto the closely cropped turf. It turned to chitter something at the woman, who nodded as if in agreement with the little sergeant, and it dropped to all fours and ran off over and beyond the brook that Simbara now saw for the first time. The brook seemed a bit strange at first and it took a moment for him to realize that, as it flowed off into the distance, the brook flowed *uphill*.

“Excuse me, milady, but am I dead, dreaming, or just getting to the really bad part of an torture-induced nightmare?”

Simbara addressed the woman as he attempted to sit up and turn to face her. That’s when he found that he couldn’t move. Well, more precisely, that he couldn’t move from the shoulders

down. He could move his head well enough to see around him, enough to see the small copse of willow trees where he and the woman kept company, but couldn't get the rest of his body to cooperate with his efforts to sit up. <Oh, just great,> he thought, <I'm finally with a really beautiful woman and I can't move a muscle. Brother Oates would really love this.>

"It's a restraining field and I apologize for keeping you immobile; but waking up a warrior can be a bit tricky at times." The woman had a pleasant voice, low and melodic. "I wanted to talk with you without having to worry about hurting you if things got out of hand."

Simbara's smile and the amused light in his eyes supported his thoughts as he voiced them.

"I'm not sure that you realize that hurting me would be a great deal harder for you than you might think."

"Oh?" Seeming to change the focus of the conversation, the woman said, "Do you see that rock over by the brook? The one with the lichen on the side that looks like a fish?" Simbara nodded. "Watch."

The woman kept her eyes on Simbara, raised her hand and pointed at the rock. A scarlet beam of energy the diameter of Simbara's forearm flashed out of the sky, and the rock vanished in a sudden expanding cloud of vapor, dust and dissipating energy.

"I can do that with just a thought," she said calmly as the displaced atmosphere rushed past her and into the void left by the rock's absence. The sudden breeze caused the folds of her robe to ripple as if a stone had been tossed into the brook, exposing the woman's sandaled feet before flowing back to cover them.

"You would just have time to think of your move before you would be struck down and gone; even with your enhanced Marine thought processes and altered physique. I would be disappointed, but I would be alive. *You*, however, would be both disappointed and very dead."

Simbara considered his next words carefully. Obviously the woman had the upper hand, and he would be wise to act and speak accordingly until he could learn more about the situation that he was dealing with. And he *would* be disappointed to join the rock. As it was, he felt strangely at peace and, well, content; and he was surprised to find that he wanted those feelings to last. That he had been just as at peace and content as a Space Marine crossed his mind, but this disparity did not seem to be bothering him a great deal.

"Well, since I am your 'guest', and at a disadvantage... I am Mikal Simbara, Veteran Sergeant, of the Celestial Lion's Chapter of the Emperor's Adeptus Astartes." and for a reason that he didn't quite understand, he added "...formally of the Pernulian Royal Guard, and at your service."

"I am Carina, Keeper of the Seventh Repository of Arconia. This vessel has been my home for the past three thousand years. I welcome you as my guest, and release you from the restraint field."

<Vessel?> Simbara remembered the brook flowing uphill. <Ah! Either artificial gravity, or enough rotational force to simulate it. We're in the habitat ring of the ship.>

Thank you for your courtesy, My Lady. Would it be proper to address you by title, or by your name?"

"Carina is fine," she smiled. "May I call you Mikal?"

Simbara sat up, stood and promptly sat down hard on the turf, landing mostly on his behind. An amused chittering from the trees floated across the clearing, and Carina rushed over to his side. "I'm sorry," she gasped, trying to hold in her laughter, "You were supposed to sit for a few moments first, then stand when you were ready. I am so sorry."

Simbara enjoyed the sound of laughter in her voice, and the smell of flowers that seemed to emanate from her, as she reached to offer him her hand. <Worth a bruised behind,> he thought, and as an afterthought, <I need to be mortally wounded and ejected from a dying ship more often.>

The Lady, for that is how he perceived her, led him out of the copse of willow trees and away from the brook. He marveled at the level of technology that had to be involved in maintaining this illusion of being planetside. Everywhere he looked he saw evidence of a carefully balanced ecology, perfectly suited to the volume of the habitat ring. He judged the width to be about 8 klicks, and from the curvature, at least 25 klicks in circumference. It was difficult to judge the height because of the clouds <Clouds! What a marvel!> he thought; but from the other dimensions he guessed that it was probably 2 or 3 klicks to the center of the ship. That would also explain the energy beam that took out the rock; the ship would undoubtedly have some sort of internal defense systems, and the "sky" would be the best place to put them. There didn't seem to be any residual effect from rotation, so he assumed that the gravity was maintained using gravitic technology.

As they walked away from the trees and across the closely cropped turf, he saw a few more of the little quadrupeds that he'd gotten his lecture from. Strangely enough, some appeared to be tending the various bits of landscaping. Others, some obviously young, seemed to be playing.

"Carina... My Lady, just what are those animals. I've never seen their like before."

"They're..." the Lady paused, "they're called... wolbits." She blushed, then got an amused look on her face, as if she thought that the answer that she'd given him was enormously funny. "They were developed using the genotypes from descendants of Terran animals, the wolverine and the rabbit. Both types of animals were part of our colony's original Terran animal embryo banks. The crossing was developed to give a combination of the wolverine's tenacity and strength with the rabbit's intelligence and grace. My father was very fond of ancient Terran animation techniques, an old form of entertainment, and he borrowed the name from something that he'd seen in old recordings.

Their natural intelligence was enhanced to the equivalent of a human child at approximately 12 years of age (at their age of 18 months), and they were imbued with the ability to operate and maintain rather sophisticated equipment. You probably noticed that Alpha had paws that were more like human hands than paws. (The supervisor wolbit, their leader, is always called "Alpha", another of my father's amusements.) They live for 30 years or so, and are quite able to service the needs of the Repository. They are incredibly loyal, and need only a moderate amount of supervision; but to tell the truth, they're also fun to have around."

She pointed to a group of young wolbits playing in a nearby field. "I believe that the current adult population in the Repository is something near to... 2500. Father designed them to naturally limit their reproduction to keep that number rather constant. By the way, don't ever place one in a position where they might perceive your presence as a threat; they have retractable claws in their 'hands' and can inflict some rather serious injuries."

"Was I in danger from... Alpha, when I woke to find him on my stomach earlier?" Simbara asked.

"No, he was just upset that your floater had settled in one of his flower beds." Carina smiled.

Simbara had noticed that they had left the vicinity of the trees and the brook altogether, and found that they were now on a path of fine gravel that led to what appeared to be a great cliff wall. He realized that what he was looking at was the "wall" of the habitat ring. It appeared to be literally covered with windows, balconies, and other openings and hatches.

"My Lady," he asked again, "Where are all of the others in your colony? I see only you, a few animals (a flying feathered creature happened to pass them on the wing at this moment), and the vegetation; no other humans."

A look of terrible longing and grief came over Carina's face for just the briefest moment, then she turned to him and said, "That's going to be a long story, and you might suffer it better over a meal. Would you like to join me for a late lunch?"

"Most certainly, My Lady. I would consider it an honor." Simbara was surprised to hear that he was using the idiom of Pernulia. It was a richer language than the religiously flavored rhetoric he and his fellow marines had used, yet still shared the same linguistic roots. It had been over 300 years since he left to join the Marines, and he hadn't used his people's own language in all of that time. This bothered him, but he couldn't quite focus on the reason why.

As first born, he was to have succeeded his father in leading the Pernulian Royal Guard, the PRG. But he had been blinded to his heritage by visions of serving the Emperor. A "friend", jealous of the Royal Princess' attentions towards Mikal, convinced him that joining the Emperor's honored Celestial Lion's space marine chapter was a better way to serve Pernulia's interests. Simbara had later suspected that he'd been goaded into volunteering to join the group of twenty-four nine to ten year old boys chosen for service. He would never forget the look of disappointment and grief on his father's face when he boarded the Celestial Lions' transport, on Pernulia during its first centennial run through the system. The last that he'd heard from his brother, Kern, who had succeeded their father as Commander of the PRG, was that the Imperium had decided that Pernulia was beautiful enough to be considered a paradise planet and that the Imperium was planning many changes for their world. At the time he'd thought that it was a good thing, but his brother had not agreed with him. He hadn't heard from his brother in a very long time, and he'd just assumed that his brother was long dead.

As he followed the Lady up to the "wall", he realized just how much this ship's habitat ring reminded him of home. Whatever had been done to him here, it was worth what it would cost him. He felt free from the constant mental conditioning that he'd endured as a Celestial Lion. He'd forgotten what it was like to be his own person, and it felt surprisingly good.

They entered a lift shaft near the base of the wall, its doors closed silently, and he felt the slight weight increase that told him that they were traveling upwards. Upward toward the center of the ship some two or three clicks above. Carina stood silent, looking out the nearly transparent doors of the lift to the broad vista of the habitat ring. Mikal felt both at peace and uneasy and a little bit confused as to why he could feel both ways at the same time. He flexed the fingers of his right hand unconsciously and had a sudden flash of memory. He remembered clutching at the edge of the life pod hatch trying to resist the pull of the escaping atmosphere so that he could reach the bridge hatch just meters away. He felt a cold anger as he remembered thinking that he would die without taking one of the ambushing traitors with him, and how the rending hull threw him and the life pod together and out into space. He remembered pulling himself into the pod and activating the self-seal and launch mechanism, trying to get the pod clear of what remained of the ship's bow, now just a flotsam of drifting wreckage, broken bodies and flaring energy. He also remembered looking at his right hand and seeing the missing fingers, the remaining thumb and the blood on the edge of the hatch and floating in small red globules in the atmosphere of the pod.

He came out of the memory and realized that he was not in the pod, but with the Lady in the lift. He lifted his right hand, and wondered silently at the complete set of fingers and thumb that flexed as naturally as if he'd been born with them. <They *have* done some work on me.> He looked at Carina, but she appeared to have not noticed his reverie. He looked at his arms and realized that most of his more serious scars were gone, and all of the insignificant ones had completely vanished. He reached up to examine his head and was shocked to find hair. <Hair? I haven't had hair for over two hundred years!> He also discovered that he could find no trace of his carapace, the Emperor's Ward. Was he still a Marine?

<Well> he thought. <I'm either drugged up to the eyeballs or hallucinating. I'll find out soon enough, though. At least I seem to be able to think clearly... sort of.> He was also extremely hungry, and was curious to see what fare the Lady had to offer.

The lift stopped, rotated and the doors opened onto a balcony that overlooked the habitat ring floor just over a klick below. Two new surprises awaited him here. The first was the unmistakable aroma of roast bison. Something that he'd not had since leaving home. <How could this be?> he thought. The second surprise stood up slowly from where he'd been sitting near the balcony railing. An older man in a dark purple jumpsuit, unadorned except for the cone and ring shaped insignia over the left breast pocket.

Carina turned to Mikal "Mikal, I'd like you to meet the reason for you being here. This is Merlin. Merlin, this is Mikal Simbara."

"Hello, Son. We've met before, quite intimately I might add, but this is the first time that you've been able to talk back." The old man's eye's twinkled with amusement. "How's it feel to be a *human* again?"

Simbara felt no danger from the old man so he took the man's extended hand and shook it. "It feels good, but I think that I'm not quite in control of this 'new' man. What's wrong with my memory, and why is my carapace gone?"

"Question, questions" replied Merlin with a casual air and a dismissing wave of his hand as he took his seat again. "Why don't we sit down to this feast, discuss your questions, hear Carina's story, and let me share a great deal more with you that you're not aware of...*before* the meal grows cold."

"Am I still a marine?" Mikal insisted.

"Oh, yes." Merlin replied. "You are very much a marine still, yet you have no idea just what you really *are*, my dear fellow. If you'll have a seat and share this meal, I might just introduce you to yourself." Merlin quipped with a grin.

"Who... *what* am I?" Mikal felt that he was on the verge of something that had almost as much significance to him as his religious faith had as a child. <How long had it been since I've thought of my childhood?> He accompanied Carina to her seat and helped her to be seated, turned to take his own seat and asked Merlin the question again. "What have I become, or rather, what have *you* made me into?" He felt no fear, but an intense, insatiable curiosity.

The old man turned to face Mikal as he found his chair and sat down to the meal. "You're a nightmare, Son. Either mankind's, or the Emperor's. You're nearly a god or the latest incarnation of the devil; but in either case, you're Carina's and this Repository's only hope for a future. Now... do you mind if we eat?"

Mikal sat down and stared at the old man in bewilderment. "I'm... what?"

"Later, Son. I haven't eaten since this morning, and you haven't had a meal in two years... a *decent* meal in over 300... so sit up, shut up, and fill up while it's hot." Merlin gave Mikal a big grin and then focused his attention on the table and its contents.

By this time, Mikal's senses had taken over from his questions, and the smells rising from the dishes on the table brought back a cavalcade of images from his childhood...

... of Mother cutting the meat on a five-year-old boy's plate into small pieces and the smell of her fragrance and a sense of her love as she bent over him...

... the fear and thrill of his first bison hunt with his father, and how he stood there in awe gazing at the magnificent animal instead of firing his power crossbow, and how his father just smiled as they allowed the animal to rejoin the herd...

... the grueling hard work of field dressing his first bison kill, and his father's reverence for the gift of life that the dead animal would provide for the family...

... the banquet that his father ordered prepared for Mikal's departure on the Marine transport scheduled for the next day, and how his father kept his own disappointment from spoiling Mikal's last evening with his family...

... that first godawful meal at Neophyte training ...

Mikal suddenly realized that he'd zoned out, and that Merlin was looking at him with that smile that intimated that he knew exactly what you were thinking, and that you couldn't hide it from him if you tried to. Carina was politely concentrating on her plate, but it was obvious that she'd also noticed his reverie.

"It's okay, Son. I was able to free up your long-term memories. You're going to be experiencing a lot of that for a while until you get your head together. That chemical soup that your insides had been swimming in for 300 plus years was engineered to keep you 'faithful' to the 'Imperial Way of Life' as well as enhance your fighting abilities and support your implants. Too bad that it sort of left you a bit short on "natural" personality." Merlin paused to place a well-done piece of bison into his mouth, and indicated with his utensil that Mikal should do the same.

Mikal did, and the savory repast became an adventure in taste and pleasure. He'd not had food like this in 300 years of service to the Imperium, and it was enough to cause thoughts of Marine Paradise to resurface in his mind.

The trio ate in silence for a short time, and Mikal began to notice the sounds of life and machinery about them. Subtle noises of the great vessel that they rode in were mixed with the sounds of the flying creatures out in the atmosphere of the habitat ring, as well as with the occasional grunts and barks of what he assumed to be the wolbits at "work", whatever that was. His hearing allowed him to pick up the rustle and scrap of things moving behind the room's walls, and the...

Mikal, Carina and Merlin were sitting on three sides of a five-sided table, all of them adjacent to each other and facing the balcony railing that overlooked the habitat ring. Mikal went into defensive mode. Without rising from a sitting position, he violently shoved the table three meters into the balcony railing where the impact sheared its legs, the table top sailing off into the air of the habitat ring. He simultaneously shoved his chair several meters in the direction from which he sensed the threat and whirled about, placing himself between Merlin and Carina and the threat. He found himself feeling very naked without his armor and weapons.

He'd heard the scrap of chitinous armor across the decking of a corridor that sounded as if it was on the other side of a door/hatch arrangement on the other side of the room from the lift. He *knew* what it was even without seeing it... a genesteal...

"End simulation," Merlin spoke softly into the air, and a soft chime sounded in the room.

"What? *What?* A simulation? It was a falsehood... a *lie?*" Mikal's system was rapidly dissipating the rush of combat readiness that had flowed through his system, but there was enough still circulating in his veins to give strength to his anger.

"You *faked* a genestealer? Why? I could have hurt... one ... of you..." Mikal's anger left him as swiftly as it had risen. Now that was different. When had he had ever come down from a combat high in just a matter of seconds?

"Merlin?" Mikal was no longer sure of what was happening to him, and wanted to hear some sort of answer from Merlin to explain what had just happened.

"You were in very critical shape when you were retrieved by the Ark's feeding cycle. Frankly, you were mostly dead. Not all dead," Merlin grinned "but close. Even with your implants and the protection that they offered, you were found in a life pod with only 15% of it's atmosphere present, and most of that was noxious fumes from the damage that the pod suffered."

They rearranged the room's furniture and ordered new beverages from the dispenser. After all three had regained their chairs, Merlin continued. "It's a long story. Carina's people were part of a religious group that was suffering quite a bit of persecution on Terra," Merlin paused "about 20,000 years ago..."

(This is the story of Carina's people, as Mikal heard it over the course the meal and the ensuing conversation that lasted for several hours afterward.)

The original Arconian colonists left Terra (Earth) near the middle of the "Dark Age of Technology", 19,000 years before the Present. They were dedicated to preserving their faith in their god, Adonai, and tired of the constant persecution on Terra and its nearby colonies. They undertook to establish their own colony in some far reach of space.

1500 couples were chosen establish the colony. Unlike so many other colonial efforts, this group took along a gift from the Terran Geographic Society. Most colony groups refused the TGS's offer, not wanting to make the volume/weight allowance for it. The gift was a complete history of Terra back to the beginning of recorded Terran history, including digital copies of all reference works in print, audio and audiovisual formats. The TGS's complete archive was contained in an STC auxiliary database and required the use of an STC in order to access the information. Only two other colonial efforts took this precious gift with them. One was lost in a warp storm; the other's fate is unknown.

Not believing in the use of the genetically altered Navigators, the colonists decided to take their journey the hard way. Most of them asleep in stasis, a few to crew their three ships, and all unaware of their fate, their ships encountered a warp anomaly. They were thrust over 70,000 light years from Terra into the eastern fringe of the galaxy, beyond their originally planned destination far from, yet closer to, Terra. Due to the effects of the warp anomaly, the journey took more than the few years that had been planned to cover the voyage to the colony's original destination. In all, the colonists experienced an actual time loss of nearly 14,000 years, though the relative time loss was actually just a little less than 1 year.

Far from Terra, and eventually discovering their loss of time, the gallant leaders of the colony looked for and found a suitable Terran-class world to colonize. The colonists named the world

"Arconia", after their expedition's name, "The Tri-Ark Exodus" (a little more colorful than "Expedition #7887-RPE-100356B120492D", as it was recorded in the Terran archives.)

Setting up an combined technical/agricultural society by making heavy use of their STC, the colonists were successful in establishing themselves in their new home. A great emphasis was maintained upon keeping the technologic level of their society at its peak. Eventually, a simple question to the STC about creating a backup of itself in the event of a disaster led to the creation of six "backup" STC's spaced about Arconia on it's several continents. A technician's tinkering with one of the STC's led to its developing sentience, something that was eventually done to three of the remaining STC's. Three were left intact as originally programmed for a number of years, and the remaining one was destroyed in a disastrous crash of a small orbiting space refinery. When the destroyed STC was replaced, the new STC and all of the remaining STC's were brought to sentient status.

The colony did well for almost 2000 years, experiencing the usual ups and downs of colonial growth. Due to the longevity of their life spans from their extensive use of nanotechnology (1000 years was not uncommon, marriage and procreation normally began at the age of 200 to 250), only 10 generations were born in this time, leading to a population of just over 750 million. Their steadfast continuation of their religious beliefs was carefully handed down from one generation to the next, along with their strict adherence to an excellent law code. They were able to create and maintain a society very much superior to the one left behind on Terra. However, as with all things, a crisis was suddenly thrust into their lives.

An Eldar Traveler, surprised to find a Terran colony so far from home, made a point of initiating contact with Arconia. The Eldar was amazed and concerned at the technical achievements of this world, noting with surprise that the colony's gravitic science was on a level with that of the Eldar's own people. The fact that there was an overabundance of STC technology available brought the Eldar to a decision to warn the world of its peril. Arconia could represent a hope for the human race if the Imperium continued down its destructive path, but this hope could also threaten Arconia itself.

The Eldar expressed his concerns to the planetary council of Arconia. He brought the colonists up to date on the Terran Empire, stressed that their scientific achievements were very much beyond what was currently state-of-the-art in the Imperium, and that Arconia was potentially a target for both exploitation and destruction. He stressed that the religious faith of most of the planetary population would condemn the entire world to cleansing by the Imperium's agents.

After several years of discussion, the planetary council decided (not unanimously, as later proved disastrous) that the wisest choice was to move the STC's into seven Repositories ("Arks") that would be constructed in orbit around Arconia. These were to be peopled with 1500 couples (in remembrance of the colony's original number), a total of 21,000 people, and were to be sent off on different vectors in order to preserve the knowledge and hope contained within them. An additional STC was constructed and placed into service on the planet, though without sentience.

Arconia's scientific community developed nanite "weapons" that could reduce either biological or inanimate technological matter down to the molecular level, leaving their remains virtually undetectable to an investigation. These were created as fail-safes should the Imperium locate Arconia. The technological level of the planet could be reduced to simple agriculture in a matter of months. The bionanites were fatal to humans, and surface animal and plant life. Suitable "antidote" nanite markers were developed to prevent the weapons from attacking the planetary population, as well as ones to protect low-tech agriculture-related implements, and non-genetically enhanced animals and plants. Very little had been done to genetically enhance the aquatic life on the planet, though Terran aquatic lifeforms had been introduced successfully over the years.

When the Repositories were ready, the STC's functioning and successfully running them and the crews onboard all but one of them, a civil disturbance broke out at one of the nanolabs working on the two nanite weapon systems. Both weapons were released before the antidote markers had been distributed and utilized by Arconia's people. The entire Arconian population, animal life, plant life and all technological traces of surface civilization were erased in a matter of months. Only several undersea cities and most of the aquatic life on the planet survived. The Repositories were forbidden to interfere for fears of the nanites spreading to them as well. One Repository, Carina's, was as yet unpeopled save for the embryo banks and Carina herself. The 1499 Arconian couples that were to be it's "crew", and Carina's fiancé, died along with the rest of Arconia's surface population.

Fearing accidental contamination, and not having access to their own surface-to-orbit transports, those still alive under the surface of Arconia's seas decided that they could not replace the lost crew for Carina's Repository. It was decided by both the repository leadership and the men and women now in charge on Arconia, that using the repository shuttles to help the survivors on the planet's surface would expose the repositories to the nanite infection. Grieving over the loss of their world, the Repositories undertook to carry out their original mission of protecting mankind's heritage and left Arconia's orbit. Carina, in her grief, was left to be caretaker of her repository alone. Nearly 3,000 years later, thirty-five years after an encounter that brought the promise of a dire threat to Carina's Repository, they found Veteran Sergeant Simbara's escape pod.

"Well, Son. That's the long and short of it, except for a few bits that I left for Carina to fill in if she desires to." At that moment, Merlin looked over at Carina and she nodded in affirmation of this statement. "And, for the bit that brings you into the picture."

Mikal had sat quietly through Merlin's story, only asking one or two questions whenever the technology Merlin told of on Arconia exceeded his understanding. Mikal was overwhelmed with the knowledge that there had been a human colony holding the greatest treasure sought by the Imperium. Not just one functioning STC, but *seven*, no, eight if you include the one lost on Arconia in the nanite disaster. Nanites, that was another thing that brought a sense of wonder to Mikal. Machines so minute that one could not see them unaided. Merlin had explained that even some of the technology used by the Imperium was either created by or maintained using nanite technology. Mikal had also had questions concerning the Arconian's faith in Adonai.

"Merlin, what of the faith that you spoke of on Arconia? The faith that drove them from the persecution on Terra to seek their own world? And what of the level of technology that the Arconian's enjoyed? It's not usual that a colony could reach such a high level of technology in so short a time, even with a fully functioning STC." Mikal looked at Merlin, hoping that at least one of the answers that he would get would confirm a faint hope within his own mind.

"Well, Son, it looks as if you've still got your wits about you. All of your questions to this point have been fairly intelligent ones about things that you knew nothing about. Now, you're asking questions that concern yourself, aren't you? I'll answer the technology question first, then I'll give you an answer for the *real* question that you asked." Merlin sat back in his chair, folded his hands across his middle, and sighed.

"It wasn't general knowledge, especially since the Terran Council was embarrassed to admit it publicly, but a lot of the greatest minds on Terra expressed some sort of faith in a god that was behind the universe as we knew it then. Seems that the more mankind studied the sciences, the more that it appeared that Someone was behind it all. Some of them held to the idea that there was a race older than all of the known races that set the rest of the younger races up through genetic manipulation, etc.. A few, like Carina's ancestors, were strong in their faith in Adonai rather than the growing faith in the man that later became known as the Emperor of mankind.

They believed that Adonai created the universe and all that's in it, including what they'd suspected were other universes besides our own."

"One of the backers of the original expedition to Arconia had spent most of his personal fortune on a program of "seeding" known space with small unmanned ships. Each contained just a cargo pod and a guidance system that could home in on Terran communication signals, even simple ones broadcast on carrier waves. The cargo pods contained the book of Adonai, lessons intended to teach the basics of faith in Adonai, and some audio visual aids to go along with the lessons. He must have sent out several tens of thousands before the council put a stop to his efforts. In the end, he invested the rest of his fortune in the colony effort. The man was also one of the leading minds in the study of warp technology."

At the mention of the seeding pods, Mikal's hope grew into something tangible.

"All told, of the original 1500 couples, 853 were scientists and engineers. Of the rest, nearly 330 were also of above average mental ability." Merlin laughed, "The scientific community had a fit when the colony roster was announced, and tried to get the Council to withdraw their approval of the expedition. They lost their petition, of course, since there was really nothing that the Council could do to stop the expedition from leaving."

Merlin paused, gathering his thoughts, and wondered whether he should tell Mikal the rest.

"Mikal, what do you know of the Emperor?"

Mikal wanted to pursue the subject of the pods, but answered Merlin's question. "Well, that he rules the Imperium, that he stands between Chaos and the rest of the universe, that he alone maintains the Astronomican, and that he is... that he is a god." Mikal felt extremely uncomfortable with saying this, but he wasn't sure if it was because he did not want to offend his present company, or because of his own growing doubts about the Emperor's divinity.

"Mikal, how would you feel if the Emperor was just a man? A very powerful ruler, but not a god?" Merlin was watching Mikal very closely.

Mikal heard Merlin, but instead of answering Merlin's question, found himself remembering bits of his childhood...

Going to services with his family, worship services. Of lessons taught at his mother's knee, of walks and hunting trips with his father where his father spoke of the wonder of creation and the hand of He who cared for it all. Mikal found himself perspiring as these thoughts warred with the indoctrination that he'd had in the Marines, and had had reinforced through constant psycho/chemical conditioning. Of his own conversion to his parent's faith, and a faint remembrance of the phrase "the Precious Seed", and how it had played such an important part in the services. <It can't be!> He thought. <It can't! How could this be? How could it possibly be?>

He unconsciously reached for the medallion that he'd worn around his neck for over 300 years, a gift from his mother when he'd left Pernulia. It was something that he'd never felt comfortable without. He didn't consider it a charm, like Brother Oates had always joked about it being, but couldn't seem to leave it behind when he went into combat either. He was surprised to find it there around his neck, in its accustomed place. How had it managed to stay with him through the attack and the subsequent events that had brought him here?

Unaware that he'd forgotten Carina and Merlin's presence, he pulled the medallion out of the soft brown tunic that he was wearing and looked at it closely. 300 years of wear had smoothed the engravings, but not so much that he couldn't still make out the phrase "Precious Seed" on one

side; though the other side had worn so smoothly that only the characters "hn 31" could be discerned.

He looked up at Merlin and then Carina, and asked, "What is this? Why am I remembering these things and why could I not remember them before? If my childhood faith is right, then all I have fought for... believed in... for 300 years is falsehood. If not, then all that you two stand for is false. What is the truth?" Mikal became more agitated as he spoke. "What has been done to me?"

With only a thought, Merlin silently activated the room's security features. He didn't want to use them, Lord knew, and he hoped that he wouldn't have to, but he had to make sure that the Repository and Carina would be safe. He didn't want to kill Mikal unless he had no other choice.

Mikal stood, and at two meters, towered over the others. He was freely perspiring by now, and a tremor could be seen in his arms and chest.

"Mikal," Merlin spoke softly and with a kind voice. "That medallion is the reason that I saved you. From its age, and what is left of the engraving, I made the assumption that in your past you'd come in contact with the teachings of Adonai. Probably in your childhood, but nevertheless, that you'd done more than just worn the medallion as a charm. I've had the opportunity to save other Marines but found that Imperial indoctrination always lead them to want to turn the Repository and Carina over to the Imperium. I was unable to convince them otherwise."

"You killed them." It wasn't a question, but a statement.

Merlin quietly answered, "Yes, I did." Looking directly at Mikal, he said, "I almost didn't even bother to revive *you* until I saw that medallion around your neck. Who gave it to you, by the way?"

"My mother" and Mikal felt an overwhelming sense of loss at that statement. The trembling in his arms and chest increased, and tears formed in his eyes.

Merlin knew that they only had a few minutes at most before Mikal's feelings overcame his control and that Mikal would need to have some space... well, a *lot* of space... and time to come to terms with his new systems, body chemistry and the growing war in his mind. So he stood slowly and said "Mikal, I did a lot more than just revive you when I found you. I needed to find someone to protect Carina and the Repository, and I've been running out of time. In less than one hundred years, I have to prove to someone that this Repository can be protected from the Imperium, or it will be destroyed." He paused. "I also need to find someone to care for Carina."

At this, Carina looked up in surprise.

"Oh, don't be so naïve, Carina. " Merlin said with his customary grin. "Did you really think that I'd let you go without a companion forever? Your father would come back from Adonai's palace and erase my primary memory core if I'd not thought of your needs."

Mikal was surprised by Merlin's statement, and he lost a little of his agitation as he looked over at Carina and wondered exactly what Merlin had planned for them together.

"You see, Mikal, I'm not human like you or Carina. I'm the Repository's caretaker; it's AI, an artificial intelligence. I'm an enhanced version of a Standard Template Construct computer system, though I prefer to be called Merlin. Carina's people are great lovers of the written word, and thanks to my TGS database, my brothers and I (or sisters, as the case may be) contain all of the known history and other publications of mankind. Carina's father read to her of the stories of King Arthur and his knights, and when Carina was cast off into the heavens alone with me, she

eventually chose the name for me. Hence my appearance, and the magician's hat and wand insignia on my uniform." He gestured toward the insignia, and Mikal could now see that it was a cone-shaped hat crossed with a wand or stick of some sort.

"When I revived you, as with the other Marines that I tried to save, your body was a mess of advanced and primitive genetic and cybernetic contraptions that needed that constant nearly toxic chemical bath to function. It was a long complicated procedure, but simply put, I replaced, repaired, and upgraded your systems and implants. I was able to implant nanotechnology to replace the primitive chemical bath, as well as repair the damage that your implants had suffered over the course of your life as a Marine. Thanks to someone that I've yet to tell you about, I was also able to bring all of your implants to near 100% of their capabilities. Where I couldn't repair, I replaced; and when I could, I made it better. You've already noticed that you appear to have lost your carapace. You actually do have something better to replace it, but it's no longer invasive to your body. You can still wear armor, but you'll communicate directly to its interface via your new implants. Actually, you can do a lot more than that, but you're going to need some training in order to utilize it properly."

Mikal stood still in wonder and in almost... *fear*... of what Merlin was telling him.

"When I said 'You're a nightmare, Son. Either mankind's, or the Emperor's...' I was in deadly earnest. I will explain later, but you now have a body that is as close to what your chapter's Primarch had, as when the Emperor helped to create him and his brothers. As Guilliman and the other Primarchs did... or do... have, you have your own mind. Unfortunately, you're going to have to work out the personal kinks yourself. That's what you're experiencing now. You're struggling between being yourself, and being what the Marines made you into. I can't fix this for you, but I can help you if you chose to survive the ordeal."

Mikal was struggling to understand what Merlin was telling him, struggling to control his thoughts and feelings, and felt as if he were losing both battles. What did Merlin mean about the Primarchs? Why was he feeling so much confusion? He felt as if his mind was going to explode into a thousand shards.

"What... can... I do?" Mikal struggled to get the words out, and stumbled away from Carina and Merlin holding his head between his hands. Then he fell to his knees, threw his head back and howled in anguish. "I AM MY FATHER'S SON! I WAS BORN TO BE LORD OF THE GUARD, TO CARRY ON MY FATHER'S LEGACY AND MY KING'S HONOR! What have I done to my life... and to my family?" Mikal's anguish turned to great sobs that wracked his body. Carina moved to reach him, but Merlin interposed himself and shook his head <no>.

"What did... they... do to me? I was loved and loved in return. I left them all in the past. My family, my friends, my world... all gone." Mikal's sobs grew quieter, but his shoulders still shook with his anguish. He turned to look at Merlin and Carina, "I do not regret the friendships and bonds that I formed with my Marine brothers, nor the honor that we gained protecting mankind from its enemies; but I was not allowed to be myself, to honor what I was raised to believe. As a Neophyte, as a *child*, I was forced to believe something against my will. If what I remember now is true, then I not only turned my back on my heritage, but on my faith. I may have traded truth for that which is only truth to those who are programmed to believe it."

"Yet," Mikal paused "In spite of seeing both sides of this, I am still torn by a desire to follow the Emperor and to worship him alone." Mikal rose from his knees and stood before them. Carina marveled that such a mountain of a man could stand there with tears streaming down his face, and yet still look so strong in spite of the tears and anguish. Merlin readied the security protocols that would strike Mikal down as he stood, knowing that this was closer than they'd ever come to success, and that he would forever regret Mikal's death.

"I need solitude. I need a place to either heal or to die. Would you grant me this?"

Merlin nodded and indicated the habitat ring beyond the balcony. "It's your's as long as you need it, Son. Just call for me if you need anything. Anything at all."

Mikal nodded, turned and entered the lift. The doors closed silently behind him, the lift rotated and started to descend.

Carina turned to Merlin with tears in her own eyes, and rested her head on his chest. Merlin patted her softly on the back, put his arms around her and gave her a gentle hug.

"Now, now, my Child. We both knew that, at best, he would still have to fight this battle on his own. Nothing that we can do for him now will find him the peace that he is seeking. Pray for him, Carina. I know that I am a machine, and that some may believe that we have no souls, but I will pray for him, too. Alpha and the others will watch out for him, as will I. Go, rest. I will wake you when things have been settled for Mikal."

Carina, wiped her tears with her hands, nodded with a weak smile and stepped back from Merlin. "Merlin? Were you really hoping to find someone to be my companion? Did my father tell you to do this for me?"

Merlin smiled kindly, "Yes, just before we lost his signal from Arconia (Carina's eyes reflected her grief at the mention of losing her father) he instructed me to make sure that your needs were always met. I meant no offense to you."

"None taken, dear Friend. I was just surprised by your confessing it to Mikal..." Carina smiled as she turned and stepped away from Merlin, "... without telling me first."

"Sleep well, my Lady." Merlin smiled at her and initiated the sequences that would release Carina's mind and allow her to reenter full stasis. As he did, Carina's holimage began to waver and dissolve into soft swirls of multi-colored energy. It would probably be some time before Mikal was ready to see her again, and Merlin wanted Carina to get some rest after two years of helping him work with Mikal's revival and recovery.

"Well, do I hang around in person, or do the disembodied voice thing?" Merlin asked himself as he activated the dining room's self-cleaning sequence, and watched with amusement as the little floor cleaning droids puzzled over what to do with the splinters and table legs left over from Mikal's remarkable destruction of the table.

"Hmmm... I think that I'll just keep an eye on Mikal through his environment." And at that, with a smile on his face, Merlin's body dissolved into the same energy swirls as Carina's had. But simultaneously in the habitat below, a small chestnut-furred animal appeared in one of the willow trees, chattered to itself, whisked it's tail about and scampered off as if it knew just where it was going.

Mikal struggled to hold himself together mentally as he rode the lift back down to the habitat surface. More than 300 years of Imperial indoctrination was warring in his mind with the memories and feelings of a frightened 10-year-old boy. Creating even more pain and confusion was that he was experiencing both personalities simultaneously, and both wanted to dominate him. The underlying matter of his childhood faith only increased the crisis.

Mikal stumbled off of the gravel path and onto the turf that ran for as far as he could see in both directions around the circumference of the habitat ring. In the distance, he could sense where it met wooded areas or other features that he couldn't make out clearly in his present state. Falling

to his knees he held his head in his hands and groaned as the tears came again. Even without the support of the chemical conditioning, the psychological indoctrination of over 300 years fought for control of his mind and feelings. Mikal's body shook as visions of Neophyte training flooded his mind with images of shipboard Marine trainers that had given the word "fear" a new meaning to the small group of Pernulian boys as they were transported to the Celestial Lions' training camp at the Celestial Lions' Fortress Monastery on Elysium IX. The beatings, the drugs, the stark living conditions of the Camp, all came back to him as if he were still running with his squad from one building to another trying to not be the last one to reach the next training exercise. Even the food was barely palatable, with meals sometimes consisting only of the enhanced gruel that became the main item in their diet. (Gruel that was also drugged, as was all that they ate and drank, the demand to prepare the boys for their coming implantation ceremonies taking precedence over concern for their health.) The constant homage to the Emperor, the classes that left no room for doubt that the Emperor was their god, and the chants, litanies and prayers that became the center of their lives drove all thought of home, family and self from their young minds. As the drugs began to take effect, all thought of anything outside of their training ceased to be of importance.

Out of the twenty-five boys chosen from Pernulia, two died during the voyage to the training world, and once there, only seven survived the harsh conditions, training and armed trials. Five more were deemed unacceptable for implantation, and were relegated to mental conditioning for Chapter serfdom. Only Mikal Simbara and Lar Oates remained to enter the chapter ranks as Initiates.

Mikal remembered the first of his implant ceremonies, and saw the memory as from the position of an observer. The prayers, the fasting and lying on the floor all night to seek the aid of the Emperor in the coming ordeal. The procession in the dark hours of the morning to the chambers of the apothecaries, and the smell of blood in the air as he walked through the heavy ironbound ancient doors into the room. He saw himself as the attendants removed his robe and the child that he was trembled at the coldness of the room's air... and at the tables of instruments waiting for his flesh. He remembered his fear, more that he would shame himself by crying out or weeping than of what he was about to endure. He looked about the room and saw the upright cylinders filled with fluid the color of thinned blood, the slowly circulating fluid bathing the first of the organs that would soon become part of his own body. He remembered the ritual bathing, the administration of the holy vapors, and then lost the rest of the memory just as he had in childhood.

Bits and pieces of memories spanning nearly ten years of training and organ implantation passed through his mind. Combat training, the other zygote implantation phases, drills, incantations, rites, simulations, litanies, psycho-chemical and alchemo indoctrination all returned to lend weight to his Marine-self's war to regain control of his mind. He remembered that by the time that he and Lar, and the few others who survived, had all reached their 17th or 18th year, they were finally found acceptable as Initiates and worthy to be accepted as Scouts of the Celestial Lions' Tenth Company.

Then came years of training and combat as they took part in the missions assigned to their company. Mikal and Lar excelled at their assigned tasks. Both of them became ready for the Emperor's Ward, the Black Carapace or armor interface, by their third year as Scouts. As any Marine, both took on the task of actual power armor training as a serious challenge, and Lar, now known as Brother Oates, exceeded Mikal's expertise with power armor by only a narrow margin. Both of them eventually excelled so expertly at battle training and actual combat, that they were advanced to Sergeant, and eventually earned the right to be accorded the rank of Veteran.

Brother Simbara received this rank first, after the Battle of Berunac. The Chapter had been ordered to assist in recovering a Forge World that had been attacked by Orks, and Simbara's squad was instrumental in keeping the Ork heavy support from reinforcing their forward positions

when the Chapter's first and Second Companies were retaking a key landing zone. The retaking of the landing zone allowed more of the Chapter's assets to make landfall, and turn the tide of the battle. Brother Oates wasn't far behind Simbara, and received his advancement shortly thereafter, after a similar tactic at the Battle at Three Rivers on Katorra.

Mikal then remembered the events that had brought him to this world ship, Lady Carina's ark, the Ambush.

The Celestial Lions had been involved in putting down an insurrection on Khattar. Five companies of the Celestial Lions had aided the forces of Inquisitor Apollyon in subduing the opposing planetary forces. As the campaign progressed it became increasingly clear to them that there was more to the revolt than had been initially believed. The priesthood of Khattar had been corrupted by Chaos and had fallen prey to Slaanesh. The priests had led the ruling castes into his depraved worship. However, within three months the Lions had defeated the rebellion, and with its leadership and followers eliminated, the Celestial Lions boarded their ships, ready for the journey back to their Fortress Monastery on Elysium IX.

As the Space Marine transports achieved high orbit, the Navy ships in the Inquisitor's force began bombarding Khattar, systematically obliterating every trace of life on the planet's surface. This horrified the Celestial Lions who immediately and thoroughly condemned Inquisitor Apollyon's actions. Their force commander, Captain Saul, attempted to halt the bombardment, but he was unable to convince the Inquisitor to refrain from wiping out the planet's population. The Celestial Lions were highly vocal in their condemnation of the Inquisitor's actions and began a series of highly profiled public criticisms of him and the entire Inquisition. A delegation of the Chapter's senior officers left for Terra to further plead their cause, but the *Lions' Pride* and its escorts failed to arrive.

Mikal could not know that even as he lay thinking, reports were being published and broadcast indicating that a freak warp storm had blown up around their vessel, sending it hundreds of light years off course and into Ork-held space. The wreckage of the *Lions' Pride* and its escort craft were just being discovered by Imperial forces when Mikal sat up on the floater to meet for the first time with the Lady Carina.

He knew the truth first hand, however, and cold anger coursed through his body as he remembered the *Lions' Pride* and its escorts being yanked out of warp space by the ambushing traitor forces. Somehow the *Lions' Pride's* navigator's mind had been compromised, and their force had been redirected and dumped out of the Warp and into Ork-held space for an ambush... and death.

He remembered the Voice. Not content to just eliminate his opposition, the Traitor had dared to taunt them as they tumbled out of the Warp and into the maelstrom of lance beams and missiles awaiting them. It had been voice of the person that the Lions had been on route to Terra to disclaim and denounce, the murderer of Khattar, Inquisitor Apollyon himself.

"So, you think to accuse and denounce the Inquisition, My Lord? Many have entertained just the thought of this treason and found themselves dying slow and horrible deaths for their heresies. Now, why should your whelps and their impotent Master live to beget more heresy? I say that you shall not."

The Lion's Master held onto the command chair's arms as he struggled to stay seated during the blasts and concussions of the attacking vessels weapons. They'd been totally unprepared for this sort of attack, and it was quickly proving to be their downfall and doom. No time to even dump emergency buoys or to get off a message to the Fortress back on Elysium IX. All of the astropaths were already dead or dying in any case.

As Mikal raced up the passage to the bridge to take his assigned defense position against boarders, he heard...

"You weren't content with wiping out the innocents on Khattar, Inquisitor? Now you act the fool again and ambush and kill loyal Imperial subjects for no reason other than your own pride and vanity. You will pay for this treason, Apollyon."

The Inquisitor watched the vid screen as more than a dozen of the *Lion's* bridge crew died from the massive damage suffered by the cruiser's command section. He watched as _____ lifted himself off of the deck, bleeding from a deep gash across his face and chest, and pulled himself closer to the vid screen.

"No, carrion. The Lions will hunt you down and exact payment for this treacherous act of cowardice. Even if we all die today, the legacy of our chapter will be to drag your detestable person before the Emperor and denounce your crimes against humanity and the Imperium." The Master slowly sank to the floor of the *Lions* bridge. "I swear it by the Emperor and by the Pride and Honor of the Celestial Lions."

Apollyon watched as the vid picture destabilized and went blank, then looked up to see the command section of the *Lions' Pride* superstructure explode away from the rest of the burning and fractured vessel. "No, you fool, no. Very soon there will not be any of your pitiful whelps left to bother me."

<Mikal is ejected with the lifepod and begins his ordeal of solitude.>

The Inquisitor turned to his command ship's captain, "Set course for the Armageddon Sector and have Chief Astropath Verizun contact the Warmaster for me. I have a 'suggestion' for him concerning the Celestial Lions deployment there. Contact Commander Ollison on the *Wolfsbane* and instruct him to continue to stand by beyond Elysium IX's elliptic plane for phase two of "Operation Bearded". He is to await my personal order to initiate before he acts. Also, take great care before we enter the warp to remove any indications that the *Lions' Pride* and it's escorts were attacked by anything other than a marauding Ork force." With a nod from the officer, Apollyon turned and left the bridge.

With a shock, Mikal suddenly realized that he was wet, actually soaked to the skin, and came out of his reverie enough to be surprised that he was no longer out in the open "plain" of the habitat, but in a sort of rain forest, and up to his waist in water.

"I must have wandered into this without..." Mikal spoke out loud to himself. He was tired, not from physical exertion; rather, he was weary from the mental battles that he was fighting in his mind. The sound of his own voice was out of place in this secluded grotto, and he found himself relaxing in response to the serenity of the place. It also seemed to be days later, probably 5 or 6 days by his internal reckoning. He was hungry, too.

<You know,> he thought <I really miss Brother Oates.> He and Lar had grown up raised in different societal circles, but found strength in each other during their training, and then later as Initiates and then Scouts with Tenth Company. While Mikal had to constantly maintain a dedication to his prayers and devotions, Lar seemed to be able to accept and devote himself to the Emperor's will without any effort. Lar became Mikal's anchor in his faith to the Emperor, and probably the closest thing to a friend that Mikal had in over 300 years. <I even miss his sense of humor,> Mikal thought, remembering Lar's propensity for laughing at the slightest bit of humor in any situation.

When Mikal had calmed enough, he removed his clothing and lowered himself into the water until just his head was above the surface of the grotto's pool. He allowed the tension in his body to release into the warm, no, actually hot water. Nearly hot enough to be fed by a hot spring. <Nice touch, Merlin.> Mikal thought. He remembered the hot pool in his family's house on the mountainside, and how they use to go there after a long day's hunt or ride in order to partake of the soothing waters of the hot spring that fed the pool. At this thought, as if summoned by a demon, Mikal felt the blood-frenzied personality of his Marine-self begin to surface once more. He willed himself to remain in the water and to feed the thoughts of his childhood for a few more moments. It was terribly difficult. He soon lost to his faith in the emperor god; but, for a few swift moments he was able to remember what it was like to think and believe before becoming a Marine. Mikal found himself starting to accept these things again, savoring them and accepting them as his reality, rather than what he'd been indoctrinated to believe as a Marine.

Over the course of the following months, Mikal found himself spending a more and more time each day immersed in what he'd lived as, before his life as a Marine. He still had experiences where he would lose track of the time and of where he was in the habitat, but as the months accumulated, Mikal found that he was able to think clearly for greater and greater lengths of time. He lived off of the "land", and found that there was no reason to go hungry while exploring the habitat's environment. He gradually learned the habitat's geography, and found that there were a myriad of fruits, nuts and berries available and when he desired protein, there were fish in the pools and streams. Occasionally, he would find small mammalian creatures that showed no sign of sentience like the wolbits, yet he did not kill, concerned that he might offend his hosts. At times and always unseen, the wolbits, or Merlin himself, would ensure that Mikal's basic needs were met. Merlin also kept a constant watch on Mikal's mental progress and vital signs, and closely monitored his unconscious adaptations to his "new" body.

Mikal wore just the durable brown tunic, loose similarly-colored trousers, and soft black calf length ship boots that he'd found himself wearing when he awakened in the willow grove with the Lady... with Carina. Over the lengthening months he slowly divested himself of over 300 years of what he began to believe were falsehood and lies. He suspected that part of this was due to Merlin's re-crafting of his body. This helped him to sort out his thoughts and feelings without being completely overwhelmed by his Marine conditioning. As it was in the end though, it was only Mikal's determination to find the truth in his mind, to restore his true self that gave him the strength to take advantage of the help that Merlin had given him. Mikal eventually won the dark battle and found the self that he had lost. In the process, too, his old childhood faith found him.

After nearly a year and a half on this pilgrimage, Mikal's solitude and the peace of his slowly restored inner self fostered a desire to speak to Merlin. One morning he found himself on the path to the lift, gazing up the wall of the habitat ring to where he thought they had dined on that fateful day. His thoughts turned to wondering how Carina was fairing, and if she would be pleased to see him again. If he could have looked behind him at that very moment, he would have seen a small furred animal scurry up a tree, pause to watch him for a moment, and then disappear into the branches. Mikal walked up to and entered the lift. He turned as the lift began to rise, and watched in silence as the habitat fell away beneath him.

"The Lion sleeps. When he awakens, mankind will know of his presence. His roar will bring peace and joy to his pride, it will wake the fear of death in his enemies, and its echo will trouble the sleep and dreams of the false god of Mankind." - Logos, Senior Scribe, LES
