

Prologue: The Long-Awaited Broadcast

Silence. Only...silence. Those creatures who had lived in the shadows, who had once covered this place in webs and slime, were long dead. None of the natives had ventured near this part of their land in centuries. This was a place dominated by decay.

But there, at the heart of the Temple of Temedusc, there was movement. Slowly dust was dislodged from its resting place, moving for the first time in countless years. The floor of the circular room stopped rotating, rumbling to a halt. The sound echoed down the ancient corridor, bouncing from wall to wall before fading away into the usual hush.

The wild beasts which roamed the forest out there beyond the inner chambers of Temedusc, beyond the architecture of deities, had stopped their foraging and turned their heads towards the source of the unfamiliarity before scattering into the depths of nature. But it had ceased now, so they returned to their lives.

Suddenly they were running again. From the Temple was erupting a barrage of noise, deep and bellowing.

Inside the building itself was shaking, loosening yet further dust and in turn blocks from the walls and ceiling. The circular floor was rotating once more, faster than before and getting faster all the time. Had anyone been present they would have seen that that ground was actually comprised of multiple rings within one another, decreasing concentrically in size. In the centre of these rings was an archway, various symbols across its surface beginning to burn a bright scarlet, this upon a crumbling stone pedestal. Then, just as quickly as it had started, the rings locked into place. Thus came the second pause in so many moments, which too had to come to an end of its own. A pillar of light burst upwards from the pedestal and through the shaking stone ceiling. In an instant it disappeared, only to be replaced by a shattering of the air within the archway, translucent shards of space flying in all directions.

The animals leaped and bounded over the roots of what for them would be like trees, now both confused and terrified. On the one hand they could not go back because of the monstrous roaring, yet on the other ahead of them was something else, a lot of somethings. They were closing a circle around the Temple of Temedusc; soon the animals would have nowhere to go. These were the people of the Great Cities, of the Nations of Progress, and they were armed.

The chieftain led her legions towards the Temple, their spears and bows ready for blood. Visible through the forest's canopy a large metal object around the same size as the monument ahead was gradually descending, a beam of light connecting the constructs of earth and sky.

"Skrowur!" she cried, pointing with an extended claw at the object. "Zto-twee!"

From somewhere behind her catapults flung high into the air massive lumps of a mined mineral they'd discovered to be quite explosive. Two of the crude projectiles hit their marks, striking with fiery blossoms the weaker structural points that connected the separate sections of whatever it was overhead. It fractured. Cheers of jubilation filled the surrounding flora. It wasn't long however before they saw that part of the object, a shining dish, had begun to fall to the ground, to the Temple it had been hovering above.

"Pta foopur! Pta!" the chieftain yelled.

Seeing the danger, her people scattered in all directions. She sped away with them, the rushing air blowing the fur across her face, each hair hence pointed behind her.

Lord Stark Vingfamyn waddled as fast as he could down the black passageway, under the flickering torch brackets, a roll of paper in his hand. The paper itself was somewhat losing its integrity by this point, it having been clutched between the glutinous Lord's fingers since he'd received it aboard the previous Tower. At least he didn't have much further to go. Just one more corner.

Without slowing at the threshold he burst out onto the transparent floor and towards his own master Lord Gryal Repa. A formidable skeleton adorned with a midnight robe, Gryal was stood before a terminal at the centre of the room. Beneath it could be seen the closest parts of the Tuwerrettes' roofs, housed in secret within the retrofitted base of this Tower, the station pregnant with smaller versions soon intended for launch. Stark instinctively glanced down every few steps at the operation in progress below them, but it wasn't until he was right up to Gryal's side that he appreciated what especially was happening at this moment in particular. As part of the terminal's display a screen directed over the chasm magnified what was to be seen. Down the lengths of the Tuwerrettes squadrons of Rheyvarn fighter crafts were being loaded into their hangars along shadowy gangways, their Braknagh pilots following closely behind in tight formation.

He figured the silence that had greeted him since his arrival would continue if not acted upon by his good self, yet Stark was far too intimidated in the moment by the looming figure, a state of mind that was only exacerbated when the Supreme Lord opened his mouth to in fact after all speak first.

“To think that we are in a position to fulfil our mission, after all this time.”

Hearing these words in particular at least seemed to then allow Stark to find his voice again. Yes he was still very much disturbed where his superior was concerned, this following a certain revelation Mordrin had shown him, however the excitement of their plan’s progression was simply greater than such reservations once the matter was brought to his immediate attention.

“We are? You mean it’s arrived?”

“Yes. Khaonat’s Gambit was installed as soon as this was determined to be the point of incursion. Our imprisoned brother’s failure will now bring about our victory.”

Tapping on the controls Gryal activated a holographic projection before the two of them. It was of a ring-like construct, golden and with comparatively-small spheres covering its entire surface. In reality it was around a kilometre in diameter. The manner by which they would commandeer Earth’s functions so as to subsequently use it in their grander stratagem had seven hurdles to it, the restoration of the Gambit being one of them; these challenges had either been met along the way, would be finalised during the manoeuvre itself or in the Mancynn’s case had been supplanted by an alternate avenue to negate the unreliability there.

“In as good a condition as when it was last operational. The Entities really should have made sure of its destruction.”

“Do you remember? When it was last activated? It was so long ago, almost at the start of this all,” Stark’s nostalgia prompted him to ask.

The skeleton denied the notion swiftly yet forcefully. He had to. [REMOVED FOR SPOILERS]

Stark apparently didn’t pick up on any falsehood in Gryal’s words, instead continuing in his now-somewhat-confident tone, “If only this could have happened sooner.”

“We must remember that there have been setbacks, as well as the fact that it took time to both build and move the Tuwerrette components undetected. We must also recall the humans’ limitations. Even with the Naemods advancing things on the side, it is only now, at this exact moment, that they have been able to compile all their requisite contributions to the Apocalypse. The only factor left unaccounted for is the calibration details.”

Suddenly the sense of holding the paper in his hand returned to Stark’s brain. In that moment of excitement he might have presented the letter to Gryal a bit more forcefully than was wise.

Not satisfied that his bared fangs and piercing eyes were getting his displeasure across, Gryal spat, "What's this supposed to be? How long have we been past such antiquated methods of...Don't tell me you're falling into Mordrin's habits."

Having seen how Gryal had responded to their youngest brother's suspicions of his loyalty, Stark knew it wouldn't be advisable to express any sort of allegiance at this point.

"It's the results of the Bridge Satellite's tests. It's the calibrations we've been waiting for."

Gryal's expression, what there was of one on a skull, didn't know how to react to this news. While still glowering he seemed to conclude positively, taking the piece of paper with only one comment on how this could have been sent via a computer. The string of numbers written upon the sheet were quickly being inputted into the terminal.

"We lost the satellite though," Stark added, unsure of how this would be taken. "The natives attacked once it was low enough in the atmosphere, its Hexagon having a wider effect due to its interaction with the temporal field the whole system exists inside. The species may be young but they're already a coordinated..."

"What is it about this species that enthrals people so?" Gryal interrupted him. "First Petti speaks of their potential and now you're commending them as well. Their position in each universe might afford them some imagined status amongst lesser minds, but they have no right to concern ones such as us. Is that clear? Good. I don't want to hear any more of these people. Instead, tell me...What news is there of the boy?"

"It's all still inconclusive."

"I see. Just as this day was starting to look promising. But no matter. While his services would be of assistance, they are no longer required by the plan, so long as the Braknaghs do their job properly."

"But the Ykthea...Well, yes, anyway, I've been wondering about that." Stark hesitated but persevered nonetheless, "How are they meant to survive in the Alpha Realm without Hexagons or the Watch?"

Gryal shrugged at the question, "We've sent some down for brief periods before now. They have such incomplete existences, perhaps it takes time for reality to realise they're there to be poisoned by it. Or maybe their biological makeup just won't be affected at all."

On that indeterminate note Gryal went back to transmitting the input for the calibrators for a few seconds before the next thought struck him.

"What of the mining stations? I take it they have not been affected by the actions of your new favourite species."

"The temporal siphoning is still operating at peak efficiency. There'll be no need to delay our rendezvous with the Citadel once Earth has been dealt with."

“Then everything is as it should be. Our operatives down on the planet are in position, the ASAT weapons are primed and our troops are almost ready for launch. With this last broadcast to the Watch’s hulowin we re-open the Apocalypse.”

If this statement had been left as it was, Stark would have passed off his interpretation of it as a misunderstanding, yet as Gryal switched from inputting data to issuing the start-up sequence he realised his suspicion was correct.

“You mean you’re doing it now?”

“Indeed.”

“But...this is such an important moment, shouldn’t something be made of it? Shouldn’t the others be present at the very least?”

“I’m only opening it on our end. There can be no harm in that.”

Denying Stark the chance to give another thought on the matter, Gryal remotely activated the machine fitted all the way at the base of the Tower with one bony finger filled with a malicious fervour. All around trumpeting sirens blew as the enormous mechanisms encompassing them came to life. On the hologram the numerous spheres began to accelerate in multiple directions across the ring’s surface.

Almost completely unilluminated in the void of the Outer Region the lower sides of the Tower vibrated with the activity within them. Beneath the layers of blackest panels a myriad of energy conduits became inflamed under the heat of the fuel plummeting down them. These rivers of energy, the products of work in many different sections of the Tower, eventually linked into a semi-permeable membrane at the bottom of large container. At the same time this container, filled with excited plasma, was subject to an impact from a specially-grown mineral structure. The reaction between the two elements sparked the production of an unstable compound which, catalysed by the energy lattice, fractured into interconnected white branches, a sphere-like mesh bursting out into the openness below. Up above the plasma went dark, leaving this plummeting ball as the only source of light in its own vicinity. As it descended ever further towards the base of the Tower the surface of the sphere rippled, globules stretching out from the surface to form monstrous shapes before splashing back down into the central mass, the sound of contorting membrane like a low wail. When it had fallen almost as far as it was possible for it to go the sphere came upon a divider, slicing it into four equal sections, each tumbling into a smaller passage deviating from that point. It was here that their haphazard yet brief journeys came to an end. Suspended in the middle of the open end of the Tower, where the station’s transmission beam to the Alpha Realm would usually fire from, was the gold ring shown in Gryal’s hologram, held in place by these four power conduits and their respective transformers. With the input provided by the forged compound fragments, the small spheres lining the ring’s edge flowed around one another with an increasing amount of lightning strikes flashing between them. A single ear-splitting bellow burst forth from the ring as, on reaching

the critical energy level, the spheres discharged seemingly-endless streams of light out into the vastness of space, the cosmic threads unable to find the reciprocate ring they should have been locking onto. As it was, the southern pole of the Tower was lit up for anyone nearby to see, the destinationless wormhole entrance pouring its excess turbulence out into the Outer Region.

The sight of the Gambit's activation, even if it wasn't first hand, had Gryal swelling with his own self-exaggerated majesty. While there wasn't much chance that he could indeed spot it at this distance, the skeletal Lord nevertheless stepped away from the console to gaze down into the abyss below, at the base of which would be the incomplete wormhole. Worrying that somebody should be at the terminal whilst the operations below were in progress Stark took Gryal's place at it, not that he knew all of what he was doing. Gryal must have heard Stark move for he began giving him instructions without looking back to see.

"Verify the Tower's auto-pathing parameters."

"Wh...Do we need to be closer to the Alpha Realm to make the connection?"

Gryal's eyes flickered in dismay, "When we make the incursion the timeline will be altered, meaning new universes will be spawned to compensate. Now you might have somehow missed every other time such an event has transpired in the past, although I cannot truly believe that, but when this happens the relevant Towers must move out of the way. Usually I would have the Braknaghs run the relocation but as all of them are currently preparing within the Tuwerrettes the engines will have to operate under their own guidance. So please, check the parameters."

Slightly ashamed at his ignorance Stark felt himself turning inwards as he brought up the necessary programs on the terminal. There followed a spell of silence, save for the muffled taps of typing. For such a victorious scene it almost seemed inappropriate for there to be no momentous action or even musical score taking place. On the other hand the warning sirens that replaced the absence a few seconds later weren't exactly better.

The sudden shift in tone in the room had Gryal shooting to his full height, his countenance demanding an explanation of Stark that could only be sufficiently responded to by the activation of a second screen. This one was much larger, descending from the ceiling against the far wall, and displayed live footage from the Tower's external maintenance cameras instead of holographic representations. Upon it, visible in immense detail, was a starship, its hull greenish and covered in arrays. It was somewhat triangular in shape, except its sides were slightly curved and the rear corners were stretched out behind it. Atop its centre was the bridge, also triangular, while its prow sported a detachable craft shaped like the head of a trident, behind which could be seen two lines of rounded containers. It was immediately recognisable to the Lords as the Legacy, a ship acquired by their kin-turned-enemies the Entities.

“It’s scanning us,” Stark squeaked, reading the terminal in front of him. “This can’t be happening...The Entities will discover the Tuwerrettes for sure...We can’t do anything in time.”

“How little faith you have in our capabilities,” Gryal shook his head. “Besides, no, if there were Entities aboard that ship they would have hailed us by now. It would appear they’ve lost control of the Legacy once again. And they would have us call them gods with that level of incompetency.”

“But if no-one’s on board, why is it here?”

“Oh I don’t know, maybe it was all the excess energy being put out by the Gambit showing up on its sensors. It’s probably trying to determine if we are its creators.”

On the screen the Legacy appeared to be repositioning itself in relation to the Tower. Once apparently aligned the smaller craft undocked from the prow, commencing its own path towards the station. Having dispensed its module the rest of the Legacy veered off, moving beyond the view of the cameras.

“This won’t be good.”

Outside the Tower the hull of the Legacy was transforming. Sections of it were sliding over one another to make way for the collapsing bridge and arrays. The rear corners were telescoping inwards to make the overall ship thinner while panels up and down its sides were sliding open to reveal faster-than-light boosters. The new configuration primed, the Legacy shot off in a streak of distorted light.

As for the remaining vessel, it ploughed ever closer to the side of the Tower. Impact was not its intent however. Instead, when it was within range, the three prongs of the craft’s front fired from their tips multiple tethers, each headed by a harvest spike, each targeted a different specific point throughout the Tower’s mainframes.

Gryal almost felt personally violated to see these harpoons puncturing the side of his Tower. Whirling around, ridding him of the horrible sight, he vented his rage towards Stark with one intense command.

“Give me station-wide!”

Hearing the patterned clicks which hence signalled his being made audible to everyone in the Tower, Gryal wasted no time in letting his displeasure at the situation known.

“Isn’t anybody going to do something? Not all of you are in the Tuwerrettes! Stop this breach now!”

Fuming, Gryal went back to glaring at the screen, waiting to see the fruits of his subordinates’ hurried efforts. For a painful minute all he could see were the craft and its tethers leaching on the body of the station and the systems beneath the metal skin, but as soon as was possible for the remaining Braknagh workers (those who hadn’t boarded the Tuwerrettes) there then entered into the view of the cameras a small wave

of scout ships. With their basic blasters they pock-marked the intruder, scorching its hull and rippling the tethers, but that didn't seem to be stopping the onslaught.

In the room and throughout sections of the Tower power began to fluctuate, Stark then panting by means of reducing his panic minutely, "It's feeding on all our computers. It's downloading our data."

"From which sections?"

"All of them. It's taking everything. Everything we have."

The lights faded once more.

"Correction, it's *got* everything."

Out in the void, getting further and further away from the Tower every second, the Legacy received the tachyon pulse from its detached module. As soon as the signal was registered all the FTL boosters on one side slammed shut. The Legacy began to drift through the nothingness, turning about to face the way it'd come, threatening to tear itself apart under its own inertia. Once it was facing the Tower again all the boosters opened up and it sped off into the eternal night.

"Concentrate your fire!" Gryal yelled at the Braknagh pilots through the intercom again.

Whether because this was a smart idea or just because the Braknaghs were too afraid not to do as their master commanded, the scout ships began to focus all of their firepower on specific points along the tethers. This seemed to have a positive effect, with the tethers glowing red under the compiling blasts, but at that moment the Legacy shot back onto the scene, decelerating rapidly in the background of the screen. Its top facing the Tower, all the weapon turrets hidden amidst its re-emerging arrays ignited in unison. The lenses of the cameras and the metal plating around them lit up with the auras of the blasts, shaking violently with every impact. During this melee the tethers were retracting, the mysterious craft returning to the Legacy with the spoils of the raid in its computer banks.

Gryal let out an animalistic roar, summoning flames from the fluctuating energies between his bones, "You cannot let them get away!"

With the Legacy and its companion craft almost reattached the Braknagh pilots had to act quickly to stop them. Valuing victory over its peer's life, one of the rear Braknaghs fired into the lead one, the explosion propelling the burning scout ship into the Legacy, embedding it into the alien hull.

In another instant the combined vessels had vanished. There was no streak of FTL, no hyperspace shimmer, no activating cloak. It simply disappeared without a trace.

“Can we track that scout ship?” Gryal rasped, unable to take his eyes of the now-bare monitor.

Stark was already working on that, hence he was in a matter of seconds able to replace the live footage on the screen with a map of their local area in the Outer Region. On it were marked the adjacent Alpha Realm universes, their respective Towers and satellites plus, at the edge of a vacant quadrant, a pulsating dot.

“The Legacy has appeared a few hours back, near one of the dimensional folds,” he explained, not that it was necessary to do so.

“Petti’s nearer. Get him to intercept it. We can’t have the Entities picking that ship up before we do.”

Stark set to transmitting the order, although before he could finish composing the message he found himself being addressed once again.

“What damage did we just suffer?”

This question had Stark pausing. How would Gryal react to the summation being displayed in the corner of the terminal? Swallowing his reservations, Stark pressed forward with the answer, for he could not ignore his brother.

“The Gambit’s still active, but the support stations around some of the Tuwerrettes have become misaligned, if not completely severed. It’s nothing that can’t be fixed...”

Gryal took the failing sentence better than was expected, “We’ve come this far over so long a time, we can wait a little longer for repairs. The ideal beaureia wave hasn’t even reached this universe yet. At this point nothing can stop us from achieving our goals. The Apocalypse is ready to open.”