**Decision 5.1**

**Shadow of Unity**

*War.*

*This is a state of affairs the Imperium is intimately familiar with. The vast realm of united humanity we know today was first forged in the fires of the Great Crusade. A lot of Compliances weren’t achieved in blood and brutal conquest, but when the diplomats failed, the Astartes Legions entered the battlefield and ensured defeat was a likely outcome for the other side.*

*It was a galactic war the like the stars had rarely seen in the last hundreds of thousand years, and the prize was the galaxy itself.*

*We know what happened next. Two hundred years of war against xenos, human and eldritch foes, an age of prosperity and renewal about to begin, only to be snatched away when the favourite son of the Emperor decided that after all, he preferred very much it was him sitting on the throne of Terra.*

*An era of civil strife and lost hopes was started the day the Arch-Traitor betrayed humanity.*

*Trillions of men, women and children died. Planets burned. Huge banks of knowledge were lost. Technologies merged with the demonic and wrecked carnage which by all rights should be impossible.*

*It was war. It was unending. And it was the dreadful legacy the Second Imperium, the one which had to cope with the internment of the Emperor on the Golden Throne, was given by the Traitors.*

*But...is it really true?*

*Humanity has always fought countless wars throughout its existence. Well before walking on the moon was thought to be possible, millions of men died in trenches under the fire of thousands and thousands of guns. It was brutal and entire generations were crippled by this carnage.*

*And yet decades after, humanity was marching forwards again. There were new wars, even more terrible, yes. But despite the obstacles, despite the madmen lost in their insane delusions, technology became more and more advanced, people rebuilt the destroyed cities and our homeworld began to look at the stars.*

*And if it was true in M2 and M3, I see no reason why it shouldn’t be true in M35.*

*Yes, the Imperium is at war on so many fronts that even the Departmento Munitorum is unable to count the sheer number of war zones. Yes, many, many times Imperial infrastructure is devastated and what is left once victory is proclaimed are ashes and ruins.*

*I don’t think it is a fatality. For all that the vid-casts repeat that we are at war everywhere, there are thousands of planets which are never seeing more than the occasional skirmish, and this at intervals of several centuries.*

*So no, I don’t think the problem is war. I think the problem of the Imperium is that too often, it fails to win the peace. I dare not debate all the reasons why this happens. Bad leadership, corruption, inter-services quarrels and ignorance of local customs are only some of the high-profile issues which plague humanity before the last lasgun is silent.*

*Peace.*

*It is such a nice and hopeful word.*

*Too often the Imperium and its inner politics make a mockery of the name. And when the next war arrives, the regiments are suddenly very aware they’re fighting with fewer tanks, fewer bombers and fewer men than they could gather in the previous hostilities. It is not because they are less courageous, more defeatist or whatever nonsense certain high-level Adepts will voice by the intermediary of their mouthpieces. It is because instead of winning the peace and making their charges stronger, they were more concerned plundering the local economy and spreading their influence to ensure their dynasty would sit their fat backsides on gilded thrones for the next hundred centuries.*

*Humanity can’t afford that. We can’t afford that anymore. We have to win the peace and prepare for the real enemies before the clarions of war will call us to arms once more.*

*Peace needs to be treasured, but it is not an excuse to forget duty and responsibility. I am going to make sure the billions humans of this Sector remember that, even if it is the last thing I ever do.*

*I am Weaver. I am a General of the Imperium. And I say we have lost enough time in useless squabbles since the Great Heresy.*

Extract from Archive A-2347-J-527, secured in the Fafnir-Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by Lady Taylor Hebert between 294M35 and 296M35. The necessary level of accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**S-4697X5T4 System**

**7.673.289M35**

Thought for the day: The end justifies the means.

**Major General Taylor Hebert**

For one she had been allowed to forget a fundamental truth of this damned galaxy.

There was no victory without sacrifice. There was no triumph without losses in blood and mountain of corpses. The Battle of the *Death Star* – it was obviously too late to change the name as it had spread across the assembled fleets and the entire Sector – had not cost that much compared to the potential disaster it could have been and the strength of the xenos and demonic opposition.

But saying the price had been cheaper did not mean the casualties list were small.

The Fay 20th had been gutted.

Yesterday, she had naively thought the three Captains present when a Blood Angel in the angel-like golden-armour of the Sanguinary Guard had bent the knee to her were to be the representatives of this momentous event.

She had been dead wrong. These three Captains were the only three superior officers below her to have survived the desperate battle against the Chaos forces in the hull of the *Magos Laurentis* before the chief monster was banished out of this reality. Granted three of out ten Company commanders had perished in the successive battles against the orks before their escape from the battle-moon.

But she had appointed replacements for these losses...only for said replacements to die against the blades of the demons. Just for that, she felt only disgust and hate towards these ‘Ruinous Powers’. Monsters, abominations and demons, yes they were that, but above all else the Chaotic beings were cowards.

They had attacked like vultures when the Guard regiments were exhausted by dozens of hours of tiring battles, and unlike the orks, they did not rush towards the chokepoints where the resistance was strongest. No, these demons had poured in the improvised infirmaries and healing sections, spreading madness and reducing tough veterans to gibbering madmen before a shot was fired.

“How many guardsmen and guardswomen are left in our order of battle?” The newly-promoted Major General forced herself to ask.

Captain Sachaev Eldyev did not even bother to look at his data-slate.

“As we speak, the regiment has one thousand, three hundred and nine active guardsmen and guardswomen, General. Of these surviving veterans, fifteen percent are injured, but thanks to Mechanicus augmetics and other services secured, they will make full recoveries within six months and eventually return to their posts. Eleven percent, however, are expected to survive but short of...more divine intervention...they will not be able to take back their places in the ranks. There are limits to Mechanicus augmentation and brain damage, and according to several Magi and Archmagi, a lot of our troopers have found them.”

Taylor closed her eyes for a second and turned her head away. At this moment she did not want the Captains to see her pain. So many dead. So many young boys and girls just a few older than her. The STC was worth it, the security of the Sector was worth it, but it was still people who had talked with her, trusted her to lead them to victory...and they had died nonetheless, against threats nothing else short of an Endbringer on Earth Bet could compare.

“How many soldiers does this regiment will be able to use as a training cadre today?” The insect-controller demanded.

“We will have around nine hundred and sixty-nine guards tomorrow.”

Seen with these numbers, the ‘gutted’ word was incredibly appropriate. At their departure of Andes, the Fay 20th had been at full strength. This was the next best thing to five thousand and three hundred men and women.

Four out of five had died in the Battle of the Death Star, and the fact they had not died for nothing was a cold comfort every time she looked at the million of debris dispersed across the entire system.

Taylor had the urge to sigh...but no, she couldn’t show weakness...it would have to wait until she was back in her quarters. Tears and curse would do no good for now. The Fay 20th had to be rebuilt...she couldn’t abandon the regiment when it was lying wounded. Colonel Larkine had died for his soldiers, and not caring about the veterans would spit on his sacrifice and the million-plus dead of this massive space battle.

“All right. I am going to define a few short-term priorities. Tanya, you are the First Captain by virtue of seniority. Unless you don’t want it, the rank and the prerogatives of Major are yours.”

The muscled blonde-haired officer nodded vigorously in approval.

“I will be honoured to be your second-in-command, General.”

Taylor couldn’t help but smile at this enthusiasm.

“I think you will regret it in a few hours...Major. My first orders...I need ten Captains for ten Companies. I have only two since your recent promotion. I know it is going to be difficult; we lost most of the material files with the Magos Laurentis, but I’m told the Tech-Priest saved the electronic recordings. See what you can do, I want a list of candidates for the eight vacant Captains seats and the fourteen Lieutenants officer billets.”

“Yes, General,”

Taylor turned to Victor Tovar, Captain of the 8th Company.

“Your duty is going to be considerably less joyous, I’m afraid, Captain.” Her voice could not help but convey her sympathy. “I need you to contact Fay and contact the families and the relatives our fallen left behind. For their sacrifice, the least we can do is to pay the pensions they are due...”

“Yes, General.” Victor answered stoically.

“I will contact Governor Dalten myself for the reinforcements’ requests.” The former superior of Tanya Sevrev had likely not imagined how much she would need to spend on the Fay 20th when they began their travel to Wuhan. “We are certainly going to depart for Nyx in a few days, so it’s likely we will make much of the rebuilding there. Which brings me to my next point, Captain Eldyev.”

“Yes, General?”

Taylor didn’t know if she had entirely managed to hide her grimace. For all it had been joked that green recruits gained ranks by jumping in dead men’s boots, it was really uncomfortable and weird to be called a General when some white-haired elderly officers were three ranks below you in the Guard’s hierarchy.

“I don’t know if I will keep the Fay 20th as a Mechanised Infantry Regiment, but before I go to the Mechanicus bargaining for new weapons, I need to know what we have left. I know most of the Chimeras and the heavy weapons were abandoned at the end of the battle.”

And sadly she couldn’t object. When you had prizes like Astartes equipment, an authentic STC, Astartes tanks, a hoard of archeotech samples, Mechanicus databases and various expensive technology, the Chimeras were always going to come last in the order of priorities.

“But I want to know in five days what we formally own apart from the regimental’s colours.”

“Yes, General,” Sachaev saluted and as she saluted in return, the three Captains walked slowly to their new duties, leaving Taylor alone with the last senior figure of the regiment to have survived the carnage of the *Death Star*.

Though she would never it admit to anyone, there was something reassuring to see Commissar Zuhev standing in his new Lord Commissar uniform. Ironically, her promotion to Major-General had by some obscure rules and regulations of the Munitorum automatically ensured his own promotion. Some guards had whispered to her in private it was rumoured he had been proposed the Commissar-General rank and refused...but until she had confirmation officially, she was going to treat it as the rumour it was.

Obviously, the promotion was entirely deserved. If one did not count the Astartes or the parahumans who fought aboard the Magos Laurentis, Zuhev was the human who could boast having killed the greatest number of Chaos Astartes. His chainsword in one hand and a plasma pistol in the other, the Commissar had rallied five times the 4th Company after the death of its Captain before decimating the monsters. His duel with a Traitor Champion was already the stuff of legend, and aside from this particularly impressive victory Zuhev had killed eleven other giant berserkers.

“Rebuilding the regiment will be a delicate affair,” exceptionally, the remark had been made in an almost neutral voice. “The veterans will be reluctant to mix with the inexperienced recruits.”

“I know,” Taylor answered. “I don’t expect it to be easy, and the loss of equipment hurts, no matter what the official reports say.”

Figuring she might as well test one of her ideas in front of the Commissar, the parahuman explained the idea she had this morning.

“I’m staying prudent until I sign any sign of accord with the Mechanicus, but I know for certain there was a new template of power armour in the STC. I was thinking about making the Fay 20th a Heavy Infantry Regiment.”

To her relief, Zuhev did not instantly say it was impossible or contrary to regulations. His expression was a bit thoughtful, however.

“I suppose that if the Mechanicus is ready to support the effort, you will be able to do it,” the Lord Commissar said at last. “But I will advise you to be prudent. I don’t know the exact numbers, but I am certain ninety-nine point nine percent of the Imperial Guard have to rely on flak and carapace armours in battle today. Even the planets like Cadia who are prized above all others by the High Lords are rarely getting that sort of ‘gifts’. If you make the transition to power armour for your entire regiment, you will attract a lot of attention and the Segmentum authorities will expect from you the performance of an elite regiment when you deploy to another warzone.”

“Thank you for the warning,” it would have been too simple otherwise, really. “The status of the other three regiments?”

“The Andes Artillery was savaged during the fighting aboard the Magos Laurentis,” Zuhev declared in a brisk tone. “They fought with distinction on the battle-moon, but in the corridors of a warship, they could not use their cannons and it cost them. They are down to seven hundred men, but they have still a good training cadre. I will support a full rebuilding of their regiment.”

Taylor wrote the numbers of effective survivors and wounded on her data-slate before continuing.

“The Ulm soldiers?”

“In normal circumstances, I would ask reinforcements to be sent.” It was evident for her there was a massive ‘but’ coming. “But the problem remains a lot of Ulm soldiers were stranded on this swamp-world for many years, and if we ask reinforcements, the Administratum is going to cause the problems.”

“The cowards and incompetent companies we left on third-rate patrols behind us.”

“Yes. If there is a formal demand of reinforcements, the Scribes and other authorities of the Munitorum are going to wonder why we don’t use these guards. A trooper is very much like one another, after all.” The Commissar didn’t do sarcasm, but it was the first time Taylor heard something approaching it in his voice. “There is also the problem that Ulm is definitely not in this part of the Segmentum. I don’t know where the planet is, but it is not in the nearby four Sectors and high-priority or not, restoring a forgotten supply chain of men and horses will be incredibly costly, inefficient and of course long. It might be years before you are able to have an Ulm regiment at full strength. And once you have it will be unclear if they will be useful. The Ulm horses didn’t seem to handle well your swarm skills when we fought the long-ears.”

“Your suggestion?” She asked after a few seconds of analyse and not finding a flaw in this reasoning.

“Formally disband the regiment after giving them full honours and send back the colours to their home planet.” The Lord Commissar told her. “Keep the competent elements of the Ulm 2nd who wish to stay here, either as armed retainers or auxiliaries of the Fay 20th. There are seven hundred and fifty of them, the move will be approved.”

“And the Wuhanese?”

This time Zuhev’s face twisted with an angry expression.

“The performance of most of this regiment was abysmally low,” the heavily-scarred veteran growled. “Yes, yes I know one of their troopers saved your life,” the admission was given before she could say anything, “but the fact is, three-quarters of the problem we had on the battle-moon were caused by poor Wuhanese battle-performance. Some of their problems were not their fault. They are an infantry regiment, their mobility is of course inferior to a mechanised one. But their poor training, low morale, disastrous leadership and sub-par shooting skills...we can’t afford such weak links in an army group. Give the honours to the individuals who deserved it by their sacrifice, and then disband them. There were the largest regiment in the Lankovar squadron, and yet now they are the smallest with barely three hundred effectives. Three hundred when they had more than then thousand before the battle!”

On this one she couldn’t disagree. They might have to use a word stronger than ‘gutted’ for the Wuhanese...

“I agree with you on several points...especially the losses they took. And I’m not in the mood to rebuild this regiment with so few competent guards.” With the ardour and the fighting spirit her regiment had shown, she was sure the best commanders and fighters – with a good dose of luck – had survived the battle. Unfortunately, a lot of Wuhanese had not survived by charging in the demonic horse and killing everything in their way. There were already several charges of cowardice and non-assistance laid at their floor. “See if there are sergeants and corporals we can trust as auxiliaries and the like. I’m willing to give a chance to those who fight. The others...we will give them their pensions and send them back to Wuhan if they aren’t accused of anything.”

“It will be done,” Zuhev assured her. “Now I must also speak of the requests for Commissariat reinforcements in theS-4697X5T4 System...”

“Brockton,” Taylor cut him.

“General?”

“I am tired of hearing this series of letters and numerals every time we want to speak of this system. When we finish this meeting, I will make a request to change this system’s name to Brockton.”

“Your home city?” Zuhev demanded politely. “Is it not a bit too hasty to give its name to a former war zone?”

Taylor smirked.

“Oh no, I think it is incredibly appropriate...”

**Magos-Draco Dragon Richter**

For those who believed the different organisations of the Imperium of Mankind worked well together, the scene on the large hangar-sized reception room would have killed most of their hopes. Oh, they were not screams, loud insults or any sign of violence. The flesh and mechanical bodies of the different representatives were too old and high-ranked for the meeting to devolve into a fist match.

But there was a lot of tension in the recycled air, and you didn’t have to be a genius to see that the delegations were all tightening their ranks and not mixing with each other. The red robes of the Mechanicus stayed with the other Mechanicus high-ranked Tech-Priests. She and Lankovar were very much the only exceptions allowed, standing next to Fay, Andes and Ulm guardsmen.

No one raised his or her voice in anger, but when you heard the conversations between Inquisitorial acolytes and priests of the Ecclesiarchy, there were some things like ‘cordiality’, ‘friendship’ and ‘respect’ missing. The talks between Mechanicus Magos and Curators of the Adeptus Administratum were so cold hell might freeze over and while half of the insinuations passed over her head, Dragon understood enough to know they were not going to work with each other if they were given another choice. Overall, this gave a nice picture why the Imperium had so many internal problems.

Yes, she was now aware of the massive problem caused by Chaos thanks to the battle and her promotion. Yes, there were excellent reasons to be careful and have an organisation watching the moves of the rulers and the population of the Imperium.

Unfortunately, whoever had contributed to make the Imperium like this had missed the human factor. There was not really a single Empire in this room; there were several major kingdoms all theoretically marching under the banner of the double-headed eagle and the light of the God-Emperor.

Clearly, the ‘unity’ was *very* theoretical.

Administratum, Mechanicus, Imperial Navy, Imperial Guard, Inquisition, and Ecclesiarchy: the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages must have been uncomplicated compared to the...byzantine structure the Imperium tolerated at its highest levels.

As a result, when she saw a discreet arrow of flies indicating to her the direction of the exit, Dragon made her escape in less than twenty seconds.

Waiting outside and surrounded by three giant beetles, several guards in void-sealed armours, five Skitarii and a dozen armoured Astartes, Taylor Hebert was leaning against the wall in her new Major-General uniform. Though to her credit, except the tear-like ruby on her chest and the stars on her shoulder pads, the uniform was mostly unchanged...only the Ultima Honorifica could be seen on the place reserved for military awards.

“They are waiting for you, and fair warning: they are not happy...each Adeptus branch is here save the Space Marines, and they are ready to trample each other if it gives them the means to fulfil their ambitions.”

“Why am I not surprised?” the insect-mistress asked while raising her eyes to the dark ceiling. “Give me the name of the big players, please. I don’t want to say ‘you there’ or ‘you the big one with the red mechadendrites’.”

Dragon repressed a giggle. Yes, this might be...awkward. Though they would ignore it for the time being – most of the people in this room were considering a Saint unlike her – it was best to avoid the unpleasantness. In politics, the players tended to remember their grudges for a very long time.

“The leader of the Adeptus Administratum is Tithe-Master Varys Hyson. He’s the pot-bellied man with the red-yellow robes.”

“Bald, looks like he is going to explode if he inflates a bit more?”

“That is not a bad description,” the Tinker recognised. “For the Navy, the great officers around are in increasing order of importance: Vice-Admiral Vortigern von Drenthe the Eighth, you already met him at Wuhan, Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer of Cypra Mundi, Admiral Benjamin von Ruyter representing the interests of Kar Duniash and Lord Admiral Danvers Alexandros, senior naval commander of the Nyx Sector. They are not difficult to recognise in their brilliant blue uniforms.”

“Von Schafer has a large scar and a bionic eye, Von Ruyter has this large extravagant blue hat and the Lord Admiral is bald and his chest is covered in so many medals he can give me a challenge in decorations and polished metals?”

Sometimes, it was really unfair to see the abilities of reconnaissance granted by insects when you were not even in the same room.

“Yes, these are the ones.” Dragon feigned to not have heard the snort of the guardsmen and the Astartes. “For the Ecclesiarchy, the senior representatives are Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius and Cardinal Prescott Lumen. Theodora is the white-haired woman in white-gold armour and the Cardinal is the tallest non-augmented man of the assembly.”

This was not an exaggeration: the Ecclesiarchy ruler of the local diocese had to be around two meters and ten centimetres.

“I think you already spoke yesterday with the three Guard officers who matter: Lord General Militant Klaus Bach, Marshal Neal Skoeldir-Talion and Lord General Philip Ziegler.” Receiving the nod she expected, the parahuman continued. “The Inquisition has a lot of acolytes and junior Inquisitors, but the people to watch out for are Contessa, Lord Inquisitor Rex and Lady Inquisitor Harper.”

“Impossible to miss them, those two,” it was a very accurate sentence. The Lord and the Lady Inquisitor had of course remarkable clothes and armours, a lot of weapons and devices on their person to make sure anyone who tried to harm them would regret it quickly. But what was more impressive were their eyes. Some called them the mirror of the soul, and if this was accurate in their case, it meant they had seen far too much in their lives. Maybe it was the gaze they had all showed when they battled the demons.

“As for the Mechanicus...there are far too many I’m afraid to detail them all. Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan of Ryza is the one with about a hundred mechadendrites. You already met Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies of course, he was your healer. Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund is from Tigrus, with a silver mask. She is the one who has supervised so far most of the STC preliminary studies and has been chosen to present the findings today. Archmagos Dominus Desmerius Lankovar is of course present and on your side... shall I continue?”

The newly-promoted Major General looked at the door in the opposite direction like it was salvation incarnate.

“They just invited the representatives of the major Forge-Worlds arrived in this system, right?” This was more plea than a question.

“Yes. Mars has only a lowly Magos for the moment, Syracuse-M-Lambda-9999, but the other Mechanicus forces in the region have at least Archmagos or the equivalent to speak for them. Metalica, Triplex Phall, Voss Prime, Megyre, Accatran, Estaban VII, Gryphonne IV, Glasgow IV, Helios, Verica VII, Arcetri, Straxos, Solemnium...and they keep coming.”

Lankovar had warned them a STC was going to attract a lot of Mechanicus warships, but honestly Dragon was beginning to think the sheer ‘technology rush’ which had been created was simply insane. There were thousands of starships now plundering the debris field created by the ork hulks and the battle-moon, and for all the risks and the fact there was potentially nothing more to find, more were coming to investigate and make ‘acquisitions’.

“Great,” there was no loud sigh but the single word was an adequate substitute. “I suppose I better make my entrance before the talks break out.”

The next seconds were a musical horror as the great doors opened and every organisation tried to sound the clarions or whatever instruments they had at their disposal. Given that the Mechanicus, to quote a prominent example, had an idea of musical perfection able to wake up dead men from their graves, the melange was particularly hurtful for the ears.

It was not done instantly, but as they advanced in the room, all the dignitaries in the room bent the knee – and this was for the high-ranked ones, they were many who literally prostrated themselves on the floor. Taylor did not say outwardly, but a general stiffening of the teenager’s back told her she was far from amused. Well, to be honest she would be too in her place. One time with Astartes was an honour. Twice, it could be good for the ego. Three times and more, it stopped being funny.

“Rise,” the insect-mistress commanded once she had crossed two-thirds of the room and turned to look at the entire assembly instead of seating herself on the luxurious throne. “Rise, everyone,” she was forced to repeat as few obeyed her words.

It was really only when she was seated that everyone stood up and coalesced in a new order, naturally facing the ‘Saint’. Fine, ‘new order’ might be a bit pushing it. The great factions were still there. From the point of view of the escort surrounding the throne-seat –which she was part of – the Mechanicus red robes were on the extreme left, with the Imperial Guard to their right, followed by the Adeptus Administratum, the Inquisition in the middle, the Imperial Navy and the Ecclesiarchy to the far right. Somehow, Dragon was ready to bet these positions were not random at all.

“This conference was requested by the Holy Ordos of His Holy Majesty Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Rex,” Taylor announced in a calm voice which resonated in the vast and silent hall-room. “I think every man and woman in this room knows the reason of this meeting and the events which made it possible...I don’t intend to recite them and we will begin directly to speak of the issues asked by the different branches of the Adeptus Terra. Lord Inquisitor, you have the floor.”

“Thank you, Major General,” Dragon honestly didn’t know how old the Inquisitor was – the Imperium could afford to keep alive its leaders centuries if they were valuable. But though the man had grey-white hairs, no one would have believed him weak and feeble. His arms were those of a veteran soldier and his body was not betraying an inch of weakness. The Lord Inquisitor was not massive...but he gave an aura of destruction and inexorability in one. “I indeed demanded this conference, for I am concerned about the STC you and your forces found during the great battle of the Brockton System.”

And just like this, Dragon knew the name proposed a few hours ago, had been officially adopted.

“STC are extremely valuable, and represent great examples of technology. But the Inquisition is particularly worried at the idea of letting this discovery unexploited. Many templates in previous centuries...”

“These are ridiculous insinuations,” the Martian Magos answering to the weird name of Syracuse-M-Lambda-9999 brutally interrupted him. “The Adeptus Mechanicus thrives to improve humanity’s understanding of technology...”

“Oh, please!” Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius didn’t roll her eyes, but she was not far from that point. “Several times in M33 the Ecclesiarchy was involved in purges where the Martian Priesthood recovered valuable information on the Dark Age of Technology. Yet for all the promises and the accords signed, the templates disappeared and were never seen again. Are we supposed to believe they are useful while they are taking dust into one of your vaults?”

This was the opening shot and the listeners didn’t disappoint. In half a minute, the assembly was shouting at each other, the biggest chorus of screams coming from the Mechanicus-Ecclesiarchy ‘debate’.

At least no one was resorting to physical violence. Yet.

When it became evident no one, not even the Inquisitors, was able to stop the enthusiast exchange of ideas, the three beetles all stood like a human would and used their mandibles to produce an absolutely horrifying shrieking sound. The conversations went out.

“Time is precious.” The parahuman controlling the massive black-armoured insects declared. The underlying message ‘don’t waste mine’ was perfectly heard. “Continue, Lord Inquisitor.”

“Thank you, Major General. As I was saying the Inquisition wish to strengthen the Imperium and this is not possible if the templates will stay examined for millennia by Mechanicus tech-archivists.”

A mechadendrite went in the air and hundreds of eyes, natural and augmetic, turned towards Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan.

“The Mechanicus is the only organisation able to study these holy relics per the Treaty of Olympus.” If glares could kill, the Lord Inquisitor would have already lost his head.

A hand went in the air and Cardinal Prescott Lumen stepped forwards, a regal attitude echoing each and every one of his moves.

“My dear Archmagos, no one in this room will deny the existence of the Treaty of Olympus,” the Cardinal’s voice was smooth and enticing, “it is one of the cornerstones of the Imperium. My memory simply fails to remember where the words of the Divine Emperor tell us only the Mechanicus is able to study Standard Template Constructs and the print-outs created from them.”

The Ryza Archmagos agitated her mechadendrites in frustration but did not answer back. The Martian Magos close to her was a bit more vocal.

“You would deny the Temple of All-Knowledge its due?”

“God-Emperor and all the Saints, no!” The Cardinal’s outraged expression was too authentic to be authentic. “By all means, the Ecclesiarchy will not oppose the return of the original Standard Template Construct to the red sands of Mars and the Blessed Sol System. I merely affirm there are no laws against the creation of template copies from the legacy of the Ancients. And there are also no laws against different organisations studying the print-outs outside the Adeptus Mechanicus.”

“This is not a wise attitude, Cardinal,” there were certain people Dragon had a modicum of respect for in this room. Tithe-Master Varus Hyson was not one of them. “The Ecclesiarchy has neither the ability nor the secular preoccupations to take care of most blessed technology. The Adeptus Administratum and the Adeptus Mechanicus will give the weapons and the product of their studies when they will be needed, precipitation is the enemy of order...”

Nearly all the navy and guard personnel had very disgusted expressions hearing that. For that matter, not all the Mechanicus Archmagi looked pleased. And this was completely ignoring how Taylor’s fists had tightened for a second or two before briefly returning to a false posture of calm.

“And when will that great moment come, Tithe-Master?” Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer inquired politely. “I don’t think it is an Imperial secret to affirm our troops have definitely inferior equipment to the one our ancestors wielded during the Great Crusade.”

The next twenty minutes were...a long list of recriminations exchanged in false-civil voices. It was instructive, at least. Certain individuals of the Adeptus Mechanicus were making common cause with the Administratum against the Ecclesiarchy, while a majority of the Guard, Navy and the Inquisition wanted to use the knowledge to bolster the forces under their jurisdiction.

The critical moment came when one of the subordinates of the Tithe-Master, obviously not realising where the real power was in the room, tried to claim his Administratum Master was to be given the right to pack the first STC copy the Mechanicus had just created and let him go to Terra. Trust his noble and disinterested intentions. Truly.

The answer came quickly and was short.

“No.” Taylor’s voice made the scribe – or whatever rank the man really was – half-jump in fright, a sight which brought more than a few chuckles. “This copy is mine...”

“With all due respect, Major General...”

“With all due respect, Tithe-Master, this Standard Template Construct copy is mine.”

“The legality of these actions...” the blade-claw of the first beetle stopped mere millimetres away from the throat of Varus Hyson.

“It. Is. Mine.” There were instants it was easy to remember why Skitter had been more or less the uncontested ruler of Brockton Bay. “I discovered it. I fought for it. I bled for it. And my regiment with the assistance of Archmagos Lankovar sacrificed much for it. Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund, I was told you had worked on a preliminary report?”

The Tithe-Master withdrew but not fast enough for anyone to not see he had...bladder control problems, judging by the odour and the colour taken by his pants.

Most of the participants were more focused on the fact the Artisan Magos handed a very bulky box to Weaver – Dragon recognised a specialised data-slate. The preliminary reading had not to be long in length, for Taylor Hebert’s eyes returned in less than a minute to the red robe of Lydia-Beta Rosamund.

This was making an interesting scene. Taylor Hebert was in black and grey uniform, flanked by two enormous black insects, and facing a Magos which had transformed her body in sort of silver-black humanoid sculpture.

“This was...informative, thank you Magos Artisan. You confirm the twelve usable templates for the next year?”

“Correct, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” the Mechanicus tech-expert replied, “should you give your authorisation, we will try to reassemble correctly the parcelled and broken data, but there is no denying the studies are going to need thousands of hours.”

“I see,” Taylor narrowed her eyes before taking a more offensive position on her seat-throne. “Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies, please step forwards.”

The senior Tech-Priest of Dantris III emerged from the mass of his fellow Archmagi, his seemingly normal human body one of the four or five exceptions in the Mechanicus crowd. Since she was one of the rare persons to be aware of the deal agreed with the Arch-Genetor, Dragon had a good idea of what was coming.

“Arch-Genetor, per the agreement done in my name, I can confirm one of the near-complete templates discovered in the Standard Template Construct has Biologis applications. According to the information given by the good Artisan Magos, it is an advanced rejuvenation treatment template, combining anti-thanatosic and phoenicius injections. Do you intent to acquire such a template?”

“I do, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

“By the storms of the Sun, you can’t...” the Captain of the Imperial Navy who had uttered the words found himself facing a column of hornets and rapidly shut his mouth.

“I await your proposal, Arch-Genetor.”

The Biologis expert didn’t bother giving any attention to a quarter of the audience staring open-mouthed before beginning to bargain.

“In exchange of a full copy of this Template, the Forge-World of Dantris III is ready to place at your disposal fifty thousand Tech-Priests specialised in Biologis techniques, a Primaris-grade functional gene-lab...”

Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies had by all evidence come well-prepared in the case a Biologis Template was included in the template list.

Of course, bargaining was bargaining, and though Taylor Hebert was young, having a father in the Dockworker’s Association of Brockton had given her some bargaining skills. Plus obviously she must have talked to Lankovar while she had a few minutes of free time.

The entire negotiation took somewhere around an hour and ten minutes. When it ended, the Arch-Genetor was formally to be granted the first solo-copy of the ninety-five percent complete rejuvenation template – Dragon would suggest the name Hebe for the Greek Goddess of Youth later. In exchange, wherever Taylor decided to settle or wage war, the Forge-World of Dantris III would detach seventy thousand Tech-Priests with at least five hundred Biologis Tech-Priests elites. A fully functional Primaris-grade gene-lab would be built and operating at her orders. For one hundred years the Arch-Genetor would provide medical supplies for the regiments commanded by the new Major General. Three minor templates print-out owned by the Mechanicus would be transferred to her custody. One major clinic would be opened on the planet of her choice. Twelve thousand Skitarii would be granted as a protection force. And the last, but certainly not least, Dantris III was oath-bound to give her two or more of every arthropod specimen for every new breed they ever discovered in this galaxy; naturally there were to be restrictions, the new insect breed had to be untainted and be transportable out of its home system.

By the time the official-looking parchments were opened and the formal pens brought in front, Dragon could tell this was going to be the end of order in a few minutes.

She was right. The moment the Arch-Genetor bowed and said “thank you, Chosen of the Omnissiah”, a new cacophony erupted from a thousand voices, each wishing to be the ones to negotiate a template...and this time here and there fists struck flesh and mechadendrites slammed potential rivals.

“I don’t think the negotiations are over for today...” She heard Weaver whisper to Gavreel Forcas.

“Indeed,” the Space Marine grunted. “Indeed.”

**Major General Taylor Hebert**

“I still think your naming conventions could be better,” Dragon said.

“You are just jealous you’re not able to name the templates yourself, Dragon,” Taylor decided that being a mature soldier of the Imperium, she was not going to stick her tongue out and taunt the Tinker.

“Perhaps...”

“It’s not like we will have no opportunities to put new names forwards.” By common accord, it had been decided that for a template to be given a name, the Mechanicus had to be able to use it in its present state.

For the five complete templates, it was not a problem. So she had gone ahead and given them the names she wanted. The Power Armour template would be called the Angel’s Tear. The Bolt Pistol one was given the name Fay. The Lasgun template would be known to the soldiers of the Guard as the Larkine H-1 Pattern. The Water Distillation Plant template had been more difficult, but in the end she had settled on Vista’s suggestion and called it Amphitrite. For the analyser of poisons and venoms, Clockblocker’s proposal had carried the day and thus the Mongoose template was officially born.

The near-complete templates had been more difficult to decide on. The schematics and production methods were intact, but the documentation and manual’s users had holes. By decreasing order of completion, there was a sort of Katana Power Sword, the rejuvenation treatment, an alloy called Argentamite which apparently had been used in the early days of the Great Crusade to forge Selenite void-mail armours and of course, a starship the Tech-Priests had been prompt to describe as a ‘Star Forge-Galleon’.

At least it had been a welcome relief to choose names in near-complete silence after the various delegations screamed and threatened each other to no avail.

Ultimately, the Katana would be the Masamune template, the Rejuvenation data was Hebe, the Argentamite was Moonlight and the Forge-Galleon – and God she had no idea the Magi of the Mechanicus could look crazy like that – was the Arsenal.

Below that were the partially complete templates, and the last ones which were usable on the spot. Not all were, in fact. The servo-owl template was functional –codename Minerva – as were the Bio-dome and the automated tea-maker machine – respectively designated Haven and Tea. The rest weren’t. Apparently, this wasn’t a problem for the model of photon grenade, the Imperium had already something like this available for its Arbites, but the plasma gun and the power shield would be extremely useful when/if they were completed.

The incomplete templates coming after thus weren’t going to be traded, named or exploited for the moment. Not only the essential of the documentation and user-guides were missing, the schematics themselves were incomplete or fragmented. In utility, they varied from ‘priceless’ to ‘we already have this’. In no particular order, there was the Chimera armoured transport template, a model of Inferno pistol, the armourglass alloy, a Predator tank armed with a graviton cannon, a teleport homer and the vortex torpedo – it had to be destructive because two Inquisitors had started to scream louder than their Acolytes the second after that.

More damaged than that, the descriptions were incomplete and anyway everyone was in agreement it would probably take longer than her entire remaining life to recover the full database. It was interesting, but that was all. The long list of ‘objects you can’t use with so little data’ were: a power spear, a sort of quantum device, an advanced cogitator, an unknown planetary strike fighter, an advanced translator, a cruiser which was probably a Lunar, the Leman Russ tank, a void shield, a life-support system, a vox-jamming device, an auspex, a jump-pack, an orbital transport flyer, an air purifier, a hololith display, a missile silo, a defence bunker and a sort of crystal. All had been put in the categories ‘very damaged’ or ‘fragmented so badly we haven’t any idea what the real function of these things are’.

“I really hope the majority of the influential Tech-Priests and the Inquisition will be calmer tomorrow.”

“You can make them wait one more day...” Dragon proposed. “The trial of the Alpha Legionnaires begins in fifteen standard hours. Wait until the first of trial is over and let the wiser heads take back control from the terrible hot-heads.”

“Will it work?” she asked in a dubitative tone, “the Martial Magos seemed to cordially hate me the moment I negotiated with the Arch-Genetor...”

“I think it will,” sometimes Taylor envied how the Tinker most of the time managed to maintain an expression of serenity on her face. “For all his howls, Syracuse-M-Lambda-9999 is a lowly Magos and if the Archmagi present feel he will make sure they return to their Forge-Worlds empty-handed, he is going to be removed from the next negotiation turn. Mars or not, STCs are sufficiently rare for the Fabricators to tolerate a lot of exceptions...”

Their discussion was diverted to more mundane matters, as Clockblocker, Vista and Leet arrived together in the small room they were currently occupying. They were just getting seated when Contessa of Cauldron entered, two grey-armoured in tow.

“Good you are here. There is much to talk about and to decide.”

“Yes, there is,” and for the first time, Taylor felt a bit intimidated by the video game-themed tinker as he placed a gun on the table, one which hissed and seemed to be burning with acid. “I heard you were content to spread chaos and let Brockton Bay collapse into a third-rate slum for your little experiments. Why should we listen to a single word of your lies, oh Cauldron Inquisitor?”

“There are bigger things at stake...” for the first time the strange Thinker looked frustrated and somewhat confused.

“No, there isn’t!” Vista vehemently cut her. “I followed you because you promised to reunite the parahumans of Earth Bet in this dimension, but I can’t say I trust you.”

“I completely agree,” Taylor Hebert acknowledged. “If you were behind Coil and half of the problems we were forced to handle at Brockton, you are certainly not fit to command of one of my reconnaissance platoons, never mind giving sound advice.”

She bit her lip before continuing.

“I may not have done a lot of good as a villain, but I was constantly reacting and fighting to other villains’ and heroes’ attacks. What’s your excuse, Inquisitor?”

“So you are letting your grudges take priority over the future of humanity...”

It was lucky for the woman she had promised to let her insects stay outside this room as long her life wasn’t in danger. The woman rubbed her the wrong way, like Alexandria.

So she changed tactics.

“Your words are worth nothing.” Apparently saying that had not been anticipated by Contessa. “Look at us in this room. We are, not counting you, five parahumans. We all Triggered, gaining supernatural powers because we were under mental and physical pressure no one wants to experience. You believe we are the hope for the humanity of this galaxy? Even if we lived ten thousand years and weren’t broken, we will never achieve enough to matter. If salvation comes for humanity, it must emerge from millions, billions, trillions of souls. It must come from competent leadership. The different Imperial organisations must learn to work with each other.

I don’t care how much influence and how many supporters you have, Contessa or whatever you true name is. You used the Inquisition methods well before you came to this galaxy. I want the same answer as Leet? Were you behind the fact my home was the gang paradise of the Eastern Coast? Is it thanks to you our life was a series of disasters with a battle against an Endbringer to boot?”

There was no expression on the woman’s face, but there didn’t need to be. She should have felt rage, anger, loathing...but overall all she had in her heart at this instant was disappointment. A great conspiracy like the one Cauldron had organised should have been...well, more efficient, more dynamic, more...more everything. They had manipulated everyone and in the end, all for nothing.

“I see. I will follow my own way.”

“The path you want to take won’t work,” Contessa warned her.

“Maybe. But at least I will keep my humanity and whatever morals I was not forced to throw away to survive.”

**Harrowmaster Jeremiah Isley**

The ignorant population of the Imperium of Mankind was encouraged to believe the Space Marines, the Great Astartes created by the Emperor, were perfect and thus there were no reasons to create a framework of laws and rules for them.

In reality, events like the Horus Heresy were breaking a bit this trend. Still, Space Marine trials were almost non-existent for the thousands of years the Imperium had existed. There were reasons for that, of course, but none included the absolute purity of the Chapters created by the Thirteenth Primarch.

The first, and in general the more damning, was that Space Marines when they were accused of something tended to be accused of consorting with the Ruinous Powers, Chaos, the mutants and whatever infernal-eldritch entities existed beyond the veil of reality.

Whether the accusation was true or not, the Astartes were in general wary of marching to their doom in front of a tribunal, and most figured it was better to rebel and thread on the path of the renegade and the traitor rather than being on the receiving end of the executioner’s blade.

The second was the ugly reality that in a lot of cases, Inquisitors and Space Marines appointed by Terra hunted the guilty before you could shout ‘trial’.

There were other motives pushing for a ‘no-trial’, nevertheless. By the very nature of their missions, Space Marines accumulated a mountain of evidence on certain Imperial leaders and organisations. When the time came for the purge, it was out of the question for the Administratum and their allies to authorise a fair session of justice. After all, any Astartes could open his mouth and reveal the shady dealings of several Governors and their illegal accords. That wouldn’t be good at all for the ambitions and the careers of those manipulating the affair behind the scenes.

Moreover, if the Space Marine didn’t want to be judged, there weren’t many forces save the Inquisition and other Space Marines to ensure he stayed a prisoner before a trial was convened. And if the transhuman warrior was really Chaos-tainted, a trial was obviously a waste of time and a high risk; better to execute the source of contagion before he tried bringing demons and other nasty surprises into reality.

Add to this that whether they were judged guilty or not, the people accused by the Inquisition were not free to contest the verdicts and the trials’ notes were not available to the public, and Jeremiah Isley felt certain the trial-to-come was going to be a major event in Imperial history.

Honesty forced him to admit he would really, really prefer to be among the spectators instead of participating in this momentous event in the position of the accused.

The tribunal room was somewhere in the upper bridges of the Battle-Barge *Sigismund*, one of the most redoubtable warships owned by the Black Templars, Eternal Crusaders of the Imperium and fanatics by any standard employed.

It was a location breathing a bleak atmosphere. The walls were cold, only engraved here and there with text which looked like religious prayers. The seats, the tables and most of the furniture were in a black metal. The seats were thus prodigiously uncomfortable. The only decorations worthy of mention were the banners behind the still-empty judge’s seat. They were ten of them.

The Black Templars massive flag was in the centre, that much had been expected from the start. In the days following the battle, the ferocious sons of Dorn had insisted that in order to hold the court’s impartiality, no Space Marine having participated in the Battle of the Death Star was to be among the judges, disqualifying the Brothers of the Red warriors in one move.

The court was still overwhelmingly composed of descendants of the Ninth Legion. Blood Angels, Red Wings, Angels Encarmine, Exsanguinators, Flesh Tearers, Charnel Guard, and Blood Drinkers banners were there. Not that it was too much of a surprise. In the seats reserved to the spectators, the red armours were uncountable. Jeremiah had counted elements of over thirty different Chapters and there might be more, for the emblems of the red tears, golden chalice and golden wings were present in every variation.

Returning to the judges, the Black Templars were not the only sons of the Praetorian, there was also the Death Strike of Nihilas.

As for the tenth banner, the former Harrowmaster recognised it as the Chapter colours of the Iron Drakes...he had no idea which Primarch they were descended from or the reasons of their presence there.

At first view, this trial was a good thing. The judges were ten Space Marines, there were no Inquisitors involved in the process. The Administratum, Arbites and Commissariat were absent too. But while they were absent among the judges, there were dozens of acolytes, professional assassins and the like watching them at this very moment. They were indeed so many that with a few exceptions – soldiers of the Imperial Guard, Mechanicus Tech-Priests and Navy officers – the Inquisitorial agents were taking half of the spectators’ seats.

As he and his officers were all wearing simple blue robes devoid of any ornament, they were all feeling very vulnerable. None were manacled or in chains – the company of red-clad Astartes and Templars pointing their bolters at their back made the bindings superfluous – but they really missed their armours and their weapons.

The doors opened, accused and spectators stood to attention, and the judges came one by one to take their seats. It was a beautiful procession, and yet Jeremiah felt...regret. Before their eyes, they had the very symbol of what the Traitor Primarchs had unleashed in their folly: the time of the Legions was long gone, and while the Chapters were obviously united in purpose, only a blind man could have missed the different shades of colour, the myriad of cultures, the alteration of the Baal scripts and the skin subtle gene-modifications of the sons of Sanguinius. Captain Benlio of the Blood Angels was the first judge to be called, rapidly followed by Captain Talio of the Angels Encarmine, Captain Boreas of the Exsanguinators, Captain Aquenis of the Death Strike, Captain Suralanar of the Charnel Guard, and Captain Tyranus of the Flesh Tearers. They were the Angels of Death, the victors of ten thousand battlefields...and yet they were only shining in a pale light compared to the other judges. The vox-casters announced one by one their names: Chapter Master Olivares of the Blood Drinkers, Chapter Master Julianael of the Red Wings and Chapter Master Dupleix of the Iron Drakes. Then the senior judge came, clad in black and white armour which was so big it had to be an enlarged version of a Tactical Dreadnought Armour of the Great Crusade.

This was Marshal Markward of the Black Templars, and one look was enough for Jeremiah Isley to know that, should it be a Black Templars decision, his Legionnaires and he would never leave this room with their heads attached to their shoulders.

“This tribunal is now in session.” The commanding officer of the Black Templar spoke with a voice no one not under Lho-sticks could have qualified of friendly and amicable. “May the God-Emperor’s vision shine on us, may His Will illuminate us...”

Wow. Jeremiah had known the Black Templars venerated the Emperor as a God, of course, but he had not believed their delusion had gotten that bad after all these centuries. With his monk-like appearance and his prayers, the Marshal could have passed for a Preacher of the Ecclesiarchy if not for all his bulk.

The other judges and the non-Templars Astartes not in full armour all were trying to stay quiet, but on many angelic faces, there was consternation and disapproval. The Blood Angels loved the Emperor and respected him as an incredible powerful being and their Primarch’s father; but they did not consider him a God. A benefactor, yes. A Lord worthy to follow until the end, yes. But not a God. Never a God. Too many, like the Alpha Legion, remembered His Will. The Emperor had in uncountable events affirmed he was not a God. Why would Space Marines, his own gene-grandsons, believe the contrary?

“Sons of Alpharius, Legionnaires of the Twentieth Legion, you stand accused before this court of the following crimes: rebellion against the authority of the God-Emperor, treason most foul, conspiracy to overthrow the Imperium of Mankind, conspiracy to murder servants of the God-Emperor, destruction of loyal planets, mass slaughter of Imperial soldiers, ambushing loyal Adepts of the Golden Throne, fighting under false colours, destroying Imperial archives, conspiracy to destroy Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes...”

The list of accusations continued over and over for a good quarter of an hour. The Harrowmaster had almost the urge to roll his eyes. By the likes of it, the Black Templar had seized the first Imperial law book at his disposal and started to compile anything they might be accused of. This was hypocrisy at its finest, really: how kind of Markward to accuse them of ‘terrible devastation unleashed on innocent menials’ when by all accounts the Black Templars were known to purge entire cities at the first sign of mutation and defiance to tyranny.

Unfortunately, insulting the chief judge was not likely to result in an acquittal and so he stayed silent, as did Phocron and the rest of the highest-ranked Legionaries by his side.

“How do you plead?” asked the Flesh Tearers’ judge, who looked relieved this unending tirade was over.

“Guilty for fighting under false colours, Judge,” it would be hard to pretend otherwise when they had done it hundreds of times from Pacificus to Ultima, “not guilty for all the other accusations.”

“Your plea is noted,” the Iron Drakes’ Chapter Master spoke after a large nod.

“Yes, yes,” Marshal Markward seemed angry Alpha Legion Astartes had the gall to deny their culpability in his own domain. “I note that in the preliminary data you delivered to this tribunal without coercion you admitted your forces destroyed over fifty Cathedrals of the Adeptus Ministorum. If this is not a crime against the God-Emperor and His Imperium, I don’t know what it is!”

Isley took a moment to count of five before opening his mouth to reply. In some way, the religious aspect was inconvenient...in another way, it could not have been better. It all depended in the end how many Astartes in this tribunal were interested in swallowing the Ecclesiarchy’s lies.

“With due respect, Marshal, I am Jeremiah Isley, loyal servant of the Emperor. And last time I heard His Will, the destruction of cultists’ lairs was absolutely acceptable. Especially if the leaders hiding in said religious bastions were venerating the Ruinous Powers in secret.”

The Black Templar looked like he had suddenly been struck by a tank shell, and this was the Blood Drinker Chapter Master who answered.

“This was the position of the Imperium during the Great Crusade, Harrowmaster. This is no longer the case.”

“Really? I hope you will forgive me, Chapter Master, but while I was not at Monarchia during the Great Crusade, I remember rather vividly the Word Bearers being thoroughly humiliated because they spread His worship instead of spreading the Imperial Truth.”

“You dare blasphemy...”

“I dare, Black Templar. My forces were several times lost in the Warp for centuries, but I paid regular attention to the official edicts coming from Terra. The Emperor never changed his position on religion before his internment on the Golden Throne. Neither did Lord Malcador nor the Primarch Roboute Guilliman. I thus affirm the destruction of churches and cathedrals is not a crime...and I did not order this destruction because I was offended by the gargoyles and this ridiculous Gothic style. We went after the cathedrals because Chaos cultists had infiltrated them and their leaders were recruiting heretics right and left for their treacherous projects.”

“You still caused great damage and loss of lives to the Ecclesiarchy possessions.” The Captain of the Death Strike noted.

“We did, but as far our anti-cultists operations are concerned, the ranks of the Adeptus Ministorum are generally not open and tolerant towards the Adeptus Astartes. Whether under our own colours or not, it is extremely difficult to open investigations and neutralise the traitors without resorting to conventional assault...not to mention tainted relics must be disposed by flame in the aftermath.”

“Very well,” the Blood Angels’ Captain intervened before the Black Templar launched a furious diatribe, though everyone knew the matter had not been dropped, merely delayed. “Your defence has been heard and written for this tribunal’s records. Setting aside your actions against the religious monuments of Perm-Paris, this court wishes to hear the actions you have taken against your fallen brothers of the Twentieth Legion...”

That would be easier to explain, yes. Sharing the defeat he had handed Voldorius was always good for a laugh...

**Major General Taylor Hebert**

If being beautiful was a crime, the golden-armoured paragon before her would have been enemy number one. Taylor wished she was joking, but the Sanguinary Guard next to her was that beautiful. Unlike the other Blood Angels, Seraph Gamaliel was not armoured in red but in gold, and with or without helmet, he was really perfect in looks. He was an angel, one armoured in gold, with white feathers crafted around his jump pack and exquisite – and lethal – silver weapons.

Dragon had told her that overall, parahumans were more resistant than the average Imperium man or woman to the ‘transhuman dread’ surrounding the Space Marines, but whatever ‘aura’ was shining around the Sanguinary Guard, it was one she was feeling in her heart and in her head...and unlike many Fay guardsmen of her escort, she had not been reduced to a babbling fan-girl. So far. It was always possible the Blood Angels had more surprises in store for her.

Currently they were walking in one of the gallery-halls of the Battle-Barge *Europae*. Okay, the golden Blood Angel was walking. She was riding her transport-beetle at a slow pace. While she was mostly healed, the Arch-Genetor and his subordinates had commended her to not do anything strenuous, and walking the two kilometres-long alley in the heart of the Battle-Barge and returning back to the Thunderhawk waiting for her was tiring, especially if you had to follow the pace of someone twice your height.

The walls of the Europae, much like those of the Opera Exitium, were a marvel to behold. Paintings, tapestries, frescoes, mosaics: the Blood Angels and their descendants had definitely done their utmost to feel at home on their massive battleships.

Many scenes represented were moments of the life of the Primarch Sanguinius or great victory battles of the Blood Angels, but they were not the entirety of the art collection. Many times, there were stars and planets painted with an inhuman precision. There were peaceful landscapes and smiling groups of humans celebrating some joyous event.

Undoubtedly there had been thousands or tens of thousands to contribute to this massive art gallery. Undoubtedly the Blood Angels had thousands of years to create this. And yet, for all this acknowledgement in her head, it was still beautiful enough to convince you to shed tears at the emotions and the strength poured in this artwork.

“The Smyrna Assembly,” the Seraph gently pointed out as a painting protected by an iridescent stasis field. The painting was huge; at a guess, it had to be twenty metres long and three metres high. “One of the paintings the Iterators copied hundreds of times before the Ullanor Triumph. It became considerably less popular once the Heresy began.”

At the risk of repeating herself for the thousandth time...it was awe-inducing. The painted had done a masterful job to represent with precision and talent the visages of the participants. There were hundreds of Space Marines and humans, but it was the two great figures which attracted the greatest attention. One was Sanguinius, of course. It was evident why people of the Imperium to this day loved him. Seraph Gamaliel was above Gavreel and every angel in presence and charisma, but the mere appearance of the Primarch was surpassing him...

“Who is the other Primarch?” It had to be one of the Nine Traitors, for she had never seen his portrait before today. It was a pity, because while he was not up to the Master of the Ninth Legion, he was elegance and grace personified. Silver long hairs, golden eyes, purple and gold armour, all Kings and Emperors wished they could be half that attractive.

“He was the Master of the Third Legion, the Emperor’s Children. We don’t speak his name.”

There was pain and the regret in the Seraph’s voice, and Taylor knew at that moment the Third and the Ninth Legions had been very close. Even four thousand years later, Space Marines were feeling the scars of the Great Betrayal.

For several seconds, they resumed their progression in silence – she had not even noticed they had unconsciously stopped - before the Blood Angels spoke again.

“I must admit I had other reasons to invite you today.”

There was so much...apology, friendship and nobility in the tone Taylor was unable to feel a twinge of resentment.

“I would never have guessed,” the commanding officer of the Fay 20th chuckled, rapidly followed by the Blood Angel. “The Angel’s Ruby Tear or the trial?”

“The former,” the golden-clad Astartes replied, “though we will have to speak of the latter too. What do you know about the Blood Angels?”

“You were the Ninth Legion before the Second Founding, your Primarch was Sanguinius and he died facing the Arch-Traitor at the Siege of Terra. Your homeworld is Baal, deep north in Ultima Segmentum. Your specialties are high-drop assault, deep strikes into enemy’s stronghold and aerial warfare. I’m guessing there is far more to say?”

There was. For the next hour, Seraph Gamaliel gave her a short version of the Blood Angels’ history, including the ‘twin curses’ which had wounded and crippled their ranks so many times since the Heresy.

Suddenly, the vision she had been granted before fighting the Angel’s Bane was making far more sense and the Sanguinary Guard didn’t naysay her when she explained what had happened in her own words.

Black Rage. Red Thirst.

How were they coping with this? How were they living with this burden? Trigger events were horrible things and Taylor was very much aware the mental and physical damage left every parahuman...injured on some level. But this...these flaws were horrible and grew stronger over time, not weaker.

“Now the Black Rage has been temporarily banished thanks to your actions,” the Blood Angel finished. “There is much we ignore, but most of our Librarians confirmed us the protection is now tied to you.”

“It’s...not good. I intend to live a long life, but I am not immortal. Nobody...save maybe the Emperor...is immortal.”

“I won’t deny this is not the cause of...much apprehension among our battle-brothers.” The Seraph smiled. “But you managed to give the abomination the defeat he deserved, something only our Father achieved in his time. We are confident you will live a long time...and this situation is infinitely better than the one we were forced to endure before your victory. You gave us hope, and we will never forget it.”

She sent a questioning expression at the Astartes after the ‘thank-you’ sentence.

“We are in the process of creating a Honour Guard for you,” Gamaliel told her, “for all your skills with insects and the blessings of the Emperor, there are many terrors in the galaxy and the servants of the Ruinous Powers, sooner or later, will come back to try to end your life. It will not be said the Sons of Sanguinius will let you fight alone these enemies.”

“Err...I am honoured, Seraph. How many Astartes are we speaking about?”

“One for every Chapter you saved from the Black Rage. So far, thirty-three of Descendants of the Blood have answered the call.”

Thirty-three. Having seen the sheer amount of killing a force of Astartes could do on a battlefield, she was certainly not going to refuse that help.

“Thank you,” the parahuman girl murmured.

“It’s our Chapter which must thank you, not the reverse,” the Blood Angel chuckled before returning to a more serious expression. “I won’t pretend there aren’t political considerations at work, both for our Chapter, the Adeptus Astartes as a whole and the relationships between different Imperial organisations. While we Astartes are a bit dubious with every topic touching Saints, your exploit makes Sainthood proclamation unavoidable in the long-term. We can’t and won’t stay away from the events you will be at the heart of.”

The Astartes finger tickled the black carapace of the beetle.

“The Brothers of the Red may decide to follow you on their own volition. They will speak to you in a few days on the subject, I suspect. Whether or not they do, the Dawnbreaker Guard will go with you.”

Taylor looked at him in askance. For the name to be already chosen it had to have a symbolic significance.

“Dawnbreaker?”

“It seemed appropriate.” Gamaliel answered cryptically. It would be something to ask later to Gavreel or another Space Marine not in the know, then. “And now I’m afraid we must speak of the ongoing trial. The Alpha Legion is doing their very best to enrage the Black Templars, and I’m afraid that if we want to arrive at a bloodless conclusion, your opinion will be necessary...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Brockton System**

**7.694.289M35**

**Harrowmaster Jeremiah Isley**

The last fifty-four Alpha Legion Space Marines marched in the tribunal room for the fifth and last time in a long column, with Ancient Pierre ending the progression. Over the last days they had never been called together, whether they were to hear witness reports or answer the questions of their judges, but clearly today it was no longer the case.

And it could only mean one thing. One way or another, their trial was going to be over today.

Some part of him felt very glad it was. No matter the outcome, ending this justice procedure could only be a good thing. Astartes weren’t made for this kind of thing. Or at least the Twentieth Legion wasn’t. Their place was maybe not always on the battlefield bolter in hand, but tribunals were way outside their area of expertise.

The exchanges had been ugly. Isley and his officers had thought they were prepared for it, but they weren’t, not truly. The Blood Angels and their successor Chapters had respected their oaths and maintained a face of impartiality in public with most of their fellow judges, but the Black Templars had largely compensated for the others.

His initial impression had been right: Marshal Markward wanted them dead, and was not exactly bothered by the truth or hypocrisy when it came to accomplish this goal. Since the Black Templar had often gone far beyond what was acceptable in public, it had several times widened the gap between Markward and the Ninth Legion descendants. That was for the plus side. On the negative side, seeing dozen of accusations rejected because the Black Templars committed far more heinous actions without a shadow of remorse had not improved the mood of the fanatic.

It took five minutes for everyone to find his place and at last the judges entered. Acolytes and guardsmen placed themselves in front of the judges and then pointed the swords waiting on the tables in their direction.

Many of his men hissed or swore quietly under their breath. The verdict was guilty, then. It was anything but a surprise, to be honest. Now the great question was what charges had stuck. Judging by the glare several Black Templars sent them, the answer from the crusaders’ point of view was ‘not enough’ but this left a lot of leeway to work with.

“Astartes of the Twentieth Legion,” Chapter Master Olivares of the Blood Drinkers thundered in the suddenly dead silent tribunal. “This court has reached a verdict. Are you ready to hear it?”

“We do,” fifty-five voices chorused as one.

“Then in the light of the Emperor of Mankind, know that you are recognised guilty of the following accusations: fighting under false colours, murder of civilians and soldiers of His Most Holy Majesty, destruction of public property, successive renegade actions engaged without regard for proper authority, utter disregard of the Codex Astartes, and robbery of war materials.”

The blue-eyed Astartes stayed silent for long seconds before resuming his speech.

“It is the belief of this tribunal, at eight against one, one neutral, that your actions, while reprehensible, do not deserve the death sentence the Emperor demands for Traitor Astartes.”

Jeremiah kept his emotionless face, but he knew by the smiles and certain expressions of joy several subordinates – the Venerable Dreadnought Pierre came to mind – many Alpha Legionaries had been a bit more expressive.

“This tribunal is inclined to be merciful, but your sins can not and will not be unpunished.” This time it was the turn of the Red Wings Chapter Master to take the relay of the Blood Drinkers. “The Adeptus Astartes must try to present a visage of protector to the Imperium of Mankind, and your actions, save those in the Battle of the Death Star, are falling short of these ideals.

By a majority vote of nine against one, the following edicts have been decided.

First, it is the will of this tribunal the name of the Alpha Legion doesn’t survive outside these doors. The actions of the Hydra have brought fear, suspicion, chaos and division to the Imperium. When you will leave these doors, it will be as the Heracles Wardens.”

It hurt deep, and the fact they had expected it long ago did not attenuate the pain.

“Secondly, for a period of no less than two centuries, your forces will be under the strict supervision of a triumvirate including the Dawnbreaker Guard, the Inquisition, and a company of the Iron Drakes. If at any moment, two out of three council members of this overseer council decide you are acting against the interests of the Imperium, your lives will be forfeit.”

The formation of a supervising force over their heads was sound. Though the mention of the Dawnbreaker Guard was unexpected...like many Astartes elite formations, it had been disbanded during the Second Founding.

“Thirdly, it is the will of this council your recruitment will be handled by other Space Marines Chapters for a period of no less than two hundred years. Gene-seed testing will be enforced to the highest standard. For the next two hundred years, your numbers will not, under any circumstance, be authorised to be superior to five hundred.”

This was going to play hell with their favourite offensive tactics and homogeneity, but given their diminished situation, even four hundred Space Marines was a considerable improvement.

“Fourthly, the Heracles Wardens will, for a period of no less than three hundred years, contribute at least five warriors to the service of organisations under Inquisitorial supervision.”

That one, he would be lying if he enjoyed obeying it. But alas, he could see the logic. The Inquisition probably had demanded it as a condition for their support and having elements versed in the tactics of the Alpha Legion.

“Fifthly, the armoury of the new Heracles Wardens will be supervised by the triumvirate of the Dawnbreaker Guard, the Inquisition and the Iron Drakes. Possession of a Battle-Barge or any capital ship heavier than a light cruiser will not be authorised. Tanks, gunships, transports and every type of Astartes fighting land and air vehicles will be decided by your supervising council.”

The Harrowmaster felt a bit amused by the sheer amount of precautions their judges estimated necessary to keep an eye on them. Granted, the surviving Astartes were good, but they had no psykers and were unlikely to pull something spectacular if their recruits were all indoctrinated to be suspicious of them.

“Sixthly, the Librarians and Techmarines recruitment will not begin for a period twenty years, and past that date the training, selection methods and doctrine will be established by other Space Marine Chapters.”

Just as he was thinking about it...they were really going to have to fight smart, for the next twenty years.

“Seventhly and last point, while the next two hundred years are not technically a Penance Crusade, the deployments of the Heracles Wardens not under Inquisitorial control will be all decided by a council of ten watchers, three for the Dawnbreaker Guard, three for the Inquisition, three for the Iron Drakes and one for Lady Weaver or her representative. Do you accept these restrictions?”

Since the alternative was execution in the next hour, the choice wasn’t that difficult.

“We do.”

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Rex**

To say that organising the dinner had been expensive was like saying there were a bit of overpopulation on Holy Terra. The five-course dinner was light and eaten in less than two standard hours, but none of the sea food and the vegetables had come from the local Sector. The dessert alone, with its citrus and the cream, was something most Governors hadn’t the connections to acquire.

Odysseus dearly wished arranging such a dinner was not necessary, but alas the Inquisition was not all powerful so far from Segmentum Solar, and the idiots which had once called themselves the ‘Ordo Nyx’ had badly damaged the reputation of the Inquisition by proxy.

In theory, he could have shot all the screaming Tech-Priests, arrested half of the Space Marines present and started the interrogations of all the people who had seen the agents of the Ruinous Powers materialise into reality. He could also have seized the STC and placed it on a starship bound for the Inquisitorial headquarters.

This was the theory. In reality, the Inquisition power depended very much on the different Imperial organisations to agree his authority superseded theirs, something they were definitely not agreeing upon. If he tried something like this, it was likely that the Mars fleet which was on its way would be called back to Mars, but not before it sterilised whatever Inquisition assets they were able to find. Not to mention the Fabricator-General of the Mechanicus might declare his independence in the aftermath and begin a civil war they could not afford in a thousand years.

A lighter hand was required. The Inquisition needed to rebuild its influence and powerbase in the region.

Thus the reason he had ‘invited’ Cardinal Prescott Lumen and Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius to this dinner.

“My compliments to your cook,” the ruler of the diocese said once his plate was empty. “If he one day desires to leave your service, I will gladly hire him before the day is out.”

“I will transmit the compliments,” Odysseus told his interlocutor magnanimously. “But I must warn you my cooks are my greatest assets and I will fight to the death to keep them...”

“I wonder how many wars started like this?”

“Too many.”

“Too many.”

The two men smiled to each other before their stern faces were once more fixed in place.

“I think the situation developing is not necessarily advantageous where the interests of the Imperium are concerned.” Odysseus chose his words carefully. “The victory won in this very system was a glorious one, to be sure, but we must be careful not to waste it in old feuds and privileges concerns.”

“I agree...on principle.” The Lord Inquisitor dearly wished the Cardinal had not added the last two words.

“The Standard Template Construct is not leaving anyone indifferent,” he commented neutrally.

“How could it not be?” the tall man demanded in a rhetorical tone. “Perhaps if we discovered this kind of technological prize every holy day, it would go nearly unnoticed...but it does not happen every century and there is no reason to pretend otherwise.

And in the interests of frankness and honesty, I will not pretend the position of the Martian Magos is not...angering some of my councillors and spiritual subordinates. I am well aware the Adeptus Ministorum is a young organisation compared to certain other branches of His Most Holy Majesty’s Dominion, but we have too often been forced to stand aside when Magi and Archmagi pillage through entire Sectors, rush back to their Forge-Worlds when they have found something important, and leave us the ruins and kilometres-deep excavations without so much as a single Gelt of compensation.”

Odysseus Rex wished he could tell the Cardinal to stop being dramatic. Sadly, the Mechanicus was too often that bad when archeotech and STC-related materials were concerned.

“I agree the Mechanicus can act...irrationally, wherever they feel their interests are endangered. Whether their concerns are real or not are frequently brushed aside because too often, few non-Mechanicus organisations have the influence to oppose them, covertly or not. I can admit that in all honesty, the Inquisition can’t afford endangering the flow of weapons, vehicles and starships produced by every Forge-World. But these Forge-Worlds are not united, and I know for certain the writ of Mars is not appreciated by many factions thousands of light-years away from the Red Planet.”

“And what do you propose, Inquisitor?” Theodora Gaius asked in a voice of steel.

“I propose we establish a limit from the start on how many template copies will exist.”

The two high-ranked members of the Church looked at each other for a moment before nodding slowly.

“Yes...” Cardinal Prescott Lumen said carefully. “I suppose it makes sense. At the moment, the Mechanicus Tech-Priests are standing true behind their Martian representative because they hope they will be allowed to purchase all the templates when their superiors arrive. But if they know for sure it won’t be the case...”

“How do you intend to achieve this, Lord Inquisitor?” the Abbess-Crusader wondered.

“Quite easily, I assure you. Twelve is the holy number of the Cult Mechanicus, and by a happy coincidence, there are twelve templates which are exploitable. I might have made one or two suggestions copying it more than twelve times would be an insult to the Omnissiah, and there are Magi by the thousands who have no interest in dispersing too much the database found on the battle-moon.”

Ryza and Stygies VIII had been promised copies, and they were not the most sharing and benevolent types.

“Twelve copies of twelve templates, then,” the Cardinal mused while holding his crystal glass in his right hand. “Minus one template of course for the Arch-Genetor of Dantris III. As Mars will take the original STC, this will be one full copy for them. I heard Stygies VIII and Ryza were promised the usable templates for their participation in the battle...this will not leave a lot of copies for anyone not affiliated with the Mechanicus, Lord Inquisitor.”

Odysseus supposed the Ecclesiarchy Cardinal would not have been human if he had not made that remark.

“I suppose it will not,” the elderly Inquisitor agreed. “That said, most of these copies will have at best the twelve templates, and some are not complete at all. The real prizes will be the full copies and the Standard Template Construct itself. Since we have already established Mars will get the latter, it leaves only the former and only one person is guaranteed to have it.

“The Saint,” Theodora murmured.

Odysseus would have preferred if she had answered by ‘the Major General’, no matter how accurate it was.

The Inquisition had, unfortunately, the hard and terrible duty to bury real history under a mountain of lies to preserve the integrity of the Imperium. As such, Inquisitors of the previous millennia were some of the most knowledgeable humans about the Living Saints of the God-Emperor.

The Ecclesiarchy loved them. The Inquisition had more mixed feelings.

A Living Saint was by his or her nature anathema to the Ruinous Powers, and thus could not be corrupted by the demons and the heretics.

It didn’t mean they were particularly benevolent characters. The most precise definition of a Living Saint was: a pious and mighty warrior of the Imperium who, at a time of great danger, had been granted an infinitesimal part of the God-Emperor’s powers and pure aura to lead the forces of humanity against the traitor, the demon, the mutant and the heretic.

That was all. Living Saints could be resurrected but not necessarily. They could be slain and come back, and sometimes they did not. But what was confirmed was that True Saints were given an aspect of the God-Emperor’s and it amplified the exiting traits of personality of the human soul it touched.

When the aspect was kindness and the human had been a humble Priest, it was massive asset for the Imperium Wars of Faith and whatever actions the Saint chose to push for.

When the aspect was wrath and the ‘chosen’ had not been a model of sainthood beforehand, it was obviously less so.

“I know you are not as trusty as we are in her Sainthood, Lord Inquisitor,” Theodora Gaius explained like she had read his thoughts, “but I have seen her as she visits the wounded every day, and I believe she is a True Saint. There is no denying she has been touched by His Power and she defeated a Great Enemy where the strength of the Adeptus Astartes was found wanting.”

Personally, Odysseus Rex found it encouraging too, if not for the same reasons. That the young woman everyone had taken to call ‘Saint Weaver’ or ‘Lady Weaver’ when he was not supposed to be around visited the wounded and the dying proved she cared about the fate of the lowborn troopers fighting for the Imperium and remembered their sacrifices. Too many officers at the top of the hierarchy forgot that point while climbing up the ranks. And too many ‘holy leaders’ tended to proclaim ‘they will dine with the Emperor tonight’ after losing tens of thousands in a bloody stalemate.

“I am afraid it is my duty to be...inquisitive and mistrustful, my dear Abbess.” He replied in a half-sincere apology.

“As it should be,” Prescott Lumen approved. “Still, going back to your plans, I’m afraid this integral copy of the STC database will not stay eternally in the Nyx Sector. I will not insult the men and women living in my diocese, but I know we haven’t much to offer to a Saint who is as the moment we speak gathering an extensive honour guard of Space Marines.”

“Not even your support should she wish to become Lady Nyx?”

To their credit, neither the Cardinal nor the Abbess-Crusader stared at him open-mouthed in disbelief.

“Ah.” The single word was out before the representative of the Ecclesiarch could reassert his adamantium-strong control. “Yes, this could be a good incentive. I suppose the fact Nyx Quintus is one of my Cardinal Worlds played a role in your invitation?”

“That and the enclaves the Ecclesiarchy owns on the majority of the capital system’s planets, even if your influence on Nyx Tertius is not what it was before Naxos Menelaus ascended to the Governorship.”

The Abbess-Crusader left her chair to whisper in the Cardinal’s ear. As much as he wished to know the details of their conversation, a curious piece of archeotech hidden behind a golden Aquila was preventing him from reading on their lips.

A couple of minutes later, Theodora Gaius left the room and Prescott Lumen sounded a minuscule golden bell and two of his assistants rushed to bring him his cloak and his sceptre. Once they left the room, the Cardinal gave his answer.

“I agree with your proposal, under the condition the Saint gives her approval. The Ecclesiarchy won’t try to push her on this empty seat if she is reluctant. Forcing someone to take a duty they do not want has always unpleasant consequences, and when the candidate has been given a blessing few in this galaxy are granted, this could be a disaster.”

“Of course,” the Cardinal was more astute than many, many priests he had ever met until now. “I will await her answer.”

Lumen nodded and left in long strides few non-Astartes could have matched, his half-dozen followers who at waited at the door running to follow on his steps. The scene brought a tired smile on his lips...a smile which disappeared instantly as one data-slate was placed before him.

It took him three minutes to read the information, and one to amend the judgement he had made a few days ago.

“It looks like sparing your miserable life was a mistake, Nostradamus Vandire...”

**Author’s note**: a model of cooperation, friendship and trust, the Imperium is not...

There will be more action next chapter, as the trial of the Alpha Legion is over and the negotiations are entering a new and more dangerous phase. There also will be time to discover the Nyx System, capital of the namesake Sector. And of course there will be manipulations, plots and plans from diverse actors...

Thanks for all the reviews, the likes and the support!

The other links for the Weaver Option if you want to support or comment my writing:

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Alternate History page: www .alternatehistory forum/ threads/ the-weaver-option-a-warhammer-40000-crossover.395904/

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