**Ovation 9.3**

**Return to Wuhan**

*Every person in a position of authority must be careful about gifts and the unintended consequences they can create. Failing to understand that can lead to very unpleasant outcomes. One of the biggest and most infamous examples illustrating my point is unquestionably the Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector.*

*There is no doubt the Ecclesiarchy intended their gift to be a true reward for the destruction of Commorragh. Unfortunately, due to the vastly decentralised nature of the Imperium, the sheer incompetence of Ministry officials, and the lamentable behaviour of the Lemurian Hierophant and his idiotic followers, the Suebi theatre in the 297-299M35 period was far more approaching the description of ‘poisoned chalice’ than ‘excellent planetary addition to a sovereign Sector’.*

*Due to its very spatial configuration across the Nebula, the Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector was, for all intent and purposes, two different sub-realms which just happened to be ruled from the same location, which was the Hierophant’s palace on Lemuria. As such, Missy and the Nyxian emissaries who were sent to deal with the huge problems plaguing it faced two very different problems.*

*The ‘southern’ trail, ranging from Parthia to Hibernia, was loyal and true to the Imperium, but suffered from a combination of ruinous economic tithes and a distinct lack of industrial contributions from foreign actors. Evidently, chasing away the Cartels which refused to pledge full and undivided allegiance to the Atlantis Cardinal and the Adeptus Ministorum had some ugly effects, and the economic ones were only the most visible of the list.*

*The ‘northern’ trail, by contrast, was far wealthier. The average Imperial citizen rarely saw a handful of Throne Gelts from it, as the upper priesthood of the Ministorum had monopolised the wealth and the valuable resources of these worlds for centuries. And if they were too many malcontents in the streets, well, this was why Sparta existed in the first place: the Penal World was going to be the grave of the worst insurgents and troublemakers of the Suebi Sub-Sector – though plenty of criminals and opponents to the rule of Atlantis were also sent there.*

*Despite some pathetic propaganda attempts on Lemuria to blame everything on other parties, a quick analysis of the situation showed that the change of Sector wasn’t to blame for the woes of the planets from Antioch to Drakkar. The iron-fisted rule imposed by Lemuria had worked for decades, but as the tithes became more and more unbearable, all the powder keg needed to blow up was a spark.*

*Fortunately for the Hierophant and his cronies, the Sparta Rebellion and its survival for three long and atrocious years were far away from the eyes of the public they wanted to brainwash into believing they were infallible. Unfortunately for them, the abandonment of the Frateris Templar forces on the ground, the disruption of supplies, the need to find other prisons to keep their criminals away from law-abiding workers...all of it generated a lot of bureaucratic evidence. Details of what happened on the Ice World were supposed to be kept secret, but people always gossiped. Even the Mechanicus does it – although Tech-Priests do their damn best to pretend the contrary – and whisper after whisper, the people of Lemuria and Vijayanagara began to form their own opinion about what was happening in the neighbouring systems. The official transfer of status of Sparta from Cardinal-Penal to Mining World couldn’t be silenced, however. By that point, it was only a question of how bad things were going to unravel in the Lemuria System, not if or when it was going to explode.*

*The Hierophant and the trusted subordinates he shared his wealth must have thought themselves astonishingly lucky when agitation in the Drakkar System convinced Missy to bypass Vijayanagara and Lemuria altogether. In reality, it was only avoiding a problem to jump into a largest pit of pain...*

Extract from Archive C-0110-S-246, secured in the Fafnir Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by then Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter between 297M35 and 310M35. The necessary accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

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*Contrary to the prevalent fear of most Inquisitors, we have now amassed enough evidence to indicate that a large majority of the Necron worlds were not heavily defended before they went into near-eternal suspended animation and disappeared from the annals of their enemies’ galactic history.*

*Why is it not as reassuring as it sounds?*

*The first reason is the problem of time. By the Nerushlatset Dynasty own admissions, the ‘Great Sleep’ of the Necrons was never supposed to last the millions of standard years it did. Therefore if one of the complexes where the Necrons were waiting was sabotaged, suffered technological malfunctions, or simply was on the receiving end of entropy and environmental conditions able to erode the walls and the protections of the redoubts, said metallic automatons would soon be reduced to miserable wrecks and interesting archaeologist relics for the Mechanicus.*

*In other words, the worlds of the Necrons which failed to defend enough their complexes were already destroyed thousands of years before the Great Crusade was even the shadow of a project in His Most Divine Majesty’s mind.*

*The second problem is the definition we ascribe to ‘lightly defended’. For Necron Overlords, the domains which aren’t protected by World Engines, the extensive orbital grids of their Crownworld, a full Battlefleet, or some other massive military installation, is not heavily fortified. It is not an illogical view to have, since these impressive weapons and defensive assets are indeed several orders of magnitude more powerful than anything the Necrons of a ‘Fringeworld’ could count upon to fight back tides of greenskins or other enemies. But from the aspect of any attacker, the firepower available to the xenos colonies we would call ‘backwater outposts’ in our blessed Imperium, is nothing short of terror-inspiring.*

*The weakest and most isolated Necron Nemesors have limited resources to defend their domains. That much can’t be denied. But these xenos commanders also don’t have a single civilian in their ranks, and that translates in them being able to arm and unleash one hundred percent of their population on the battlefield, supported by millions of Canoptek elements, aerial-superiority machines capable to decimate the Aeronautica air wings, and artillery pieces shrugging off days of lengthy bombardment before silencing regiments in one shot.*

*This is why, Acolytes, if you are ever convinced you have discovered a Tomb World, you call your Master...or the closest Adeptus Astartes Chapter. It is not the moment to be brave and stupid. It is entirely possible the ruins will contain only a couple of long-crippled xenos hulks. But it is not impossible either it will be a new* [REDACTED].

Extract from Inquisitorial file [REDACTED], dictated on the order of [CLASSIFIED, INSUFFICIENT CLEARANCE], on the eve of [REDACTED].

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“That the Necrons called what we knew as the Ymga Monolith the Throne of Oblivion is all you need to know to realise how cursed this location is.” Anonymous Inquisitor in a speech made approximately in 325M36.

“All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.” J.R.R Tolkien, M2.

“Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake.” Napoléon Bonaparte, M2.

**Suebi Nebula**

**Nerushlatset Space**

**Crownworld Amarnekh**

**Approximately 8.115.297M35**

Thought for the day: The foolish man puts his trust in luck; the wise man puts his trust in the Emperor.

**Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten**

“The humans have found WHAT?”

Neferten rarely asked for her vassals and senior Overlords to repeat a sentence. This time, she made an exception to her own rules.

“Lady Weaver sent us the approximate coordinates of the Throne of Oblivion, Great Phaerakh,” Destruction-Overlord Sitkah said dutifully for the second time.

The ruler of the Nerushlatset Dynasty accessed her most secure memories and verified thrice by herself. The spatial data, unfortunately, was completely correct.

“How did they even manage to locate this dark pit in the first place?”

“Reading between the lines the report Lady Weaver sent us...it is likely the humans captured an ancient Aeldari database before destroying Commorragh.” Sitkah paused. “That or they tried to assault it centuries ago, and they’ve just realised our species built this thing from the very beginning.”

“The former is a likelier possibility than the latter,” the Phaerakh commented. “The report is about shipments of Noctilith, yes? The moment the voluminous deliveries were placed into the Throne’s vaults, I doubt anything the humans have available in monitoring technology would be able to pierce the Cryptek chrono-shrouds.”

That and anyone who had tried to attack the Oblivion Throne during the War in Heaven had met a final and atrocious end. Krorks, Aeldari, Hrud, and even a few things no Phaeron liked to reminisce about...they had all been slaughtered.

“You have clearly studied the data the humans have sent,” Neferten abandoned these dark thoughts to interrogate Sitkah. “Your opinion?”

“Unless the Silent King kept this node active for far longer than the other Dynasties,” the Destruction-Overlord began, “the Noctilith that over sixty Dynasties were forced to offer in tribute to the Szarekhan Overlords must indeed have been stored there. We continue to search, of course, but these stocks weren’t used to build the early Pylon Network or transported to other vital strongholds. They must still be there in the dimensional vaults of the inner sanctum.”

“They may as well be two or three galaxies away, then, Mighty Phaerakh,” Overlord Kamosekh the Prudent intervened. Neferten felt a surge of irritation, in her surprise she had forgotten to dismiss him. “Yes, the quantity of Noctilith stored by order of the Silent King will be found there. But there’s absolutely no feasible way the young race of the humans will be able to breach the outer defences of Oblivion.”

“I don’t know,” Sitkah answered back, “I’m sure the Drukhari were dreaming the same thing about Commorragh, and looked what happened to them.”

“The circumstances are completely different, young one,” the ancient Overlord – so ancient he had been old when she was crowned Phaerakh, in fact, “yes, the humans, with our help, managed to destroy Commorragh. But the *Drukhari* were only decadent shadows of the threat the Aeldari warriors were. I fought against the Aeldari from the very battles to the moment we cornered them in their last redoubts. I killed thousands of them. And I can tell you, if the Aeldari had still been alive, this invasion would have been utterly slaughtered in the Port of Lost Souls. Under no possible scenario the ancient Phoenix Princes would have allowed us to send so many Battleships into the vital sections of the Webway.”

“True,” Neferten confirmed before the exchange turned more heated. “But if the Aeldari had been alive, they wouldn’t have tolerated the interstellar empire of the humans either. We will not divert from the subject at hand, however. We were speaking about the Throne of Oblivion.”

“That we won’t be able to assault, directly or indirectly, Mighty Phaerakh,” Kamosekh declared. “The protocols of the Silent King prevent us from attacking the worlds of the other Dynasties, I dare say the same protections are also present there and some more honourless engram-decerebrating traps besides,” at that point, the fact Kamosekh was one of her rare Overlords to not have any Cryptek skills shone through. “The humans will have to fight through the three Replicator Forges alone, without our support. I don’t know how they can possibly survive these outer defences if the Triarch Praetorians do the smart thing and activate the Dolmen Gates. Fighting the Sautekh is already complicated enough when their Phaeron does the intelligent thing and places one of his best commanders in charge, if they can replicate their Battleships at will, the battle can’t be won.”

“The technology of the Replicator Forges is hardly flawless,” Sitkah immediately disagreed. “My Phaerakh, the humans have proved they are not entirely unskilled in the art of sabotage-“

“Completely against our code of honour,” the other Overlord gritted his Necrodermis teeth.

“And they have their own strengths, despite having minds and bodies of flesh,” the female Cryptek-Overlord finished, glaring at Kamosekh. “They may be able to do the impossible a second time.”

“And it’s also possible they won’t,” the Overlord nicknamed ‘the Prudent’ replied darkly. “In the improbable case the young race deal with the Sautekh and the Replicator Forges - which would be quite a feat, I’m sure you are aware, there is a Solar Harvester mounting guard, escorted by a reinforced fleet. I don’t know the name of the Dynasty which was forced to give out these assets, but I don’t think it was one of fourth or fifth rank. This means at least fifteen more battleships and uncountable phalanxes, all equipped with the latest teleportation technologies the Szarekhan Crypteks stole from their inventors before the Great Sleep. That is the outer defences; there’s no way to know what is awaiting beyond this, for none of the nobles who aren’t part of the Szarekhan Dynasty have been invited inside.”

Sometimes Kamosekh was far too pessimistic for his own good. He was also a great believer in the theory that as long as a Necron had invented something, other races wouldn’t be able to do something able to counter it.

Nevertheless, the Overlord had been entire truthful about the sheer devastation the defences of the Oblivion Throne could unleash against an unsuspecting invader. There was a reason no one had been able to go past the outer defences before the Great Sleep.

“Your description is fairly accurate as far as our ancient information on Szarekh’s vanity projects are concerned.” And even the arrogant male pretending to be their Holy Saviour had not constructed most of the planetary-sized infrastructure for this one. Half of the work of what was going to be one of the most defended locations in the galaxy had been conceived by the unholy alliance of the Void Dragon and the Nightbringer. “But it also represents an opportunity for us. While the Oblivion Throne is not on the list of targets I gave to Lady Weaver, Mandragora is.”

If the humans forced the Szarekhan Dynasty to come defend the Throne as they surely would – arrogant bastards always preferred someone else to pay the price of broken Necrodermis bodies and warships crippled – they would have to take them from somewhere.

And if they took as many phalanxes as they could from the Sautekh Crownworld...

“It is pure folly,” mumbled Kamosekh. “And the Silent King will be aware of our betrayal.”

Neferten had a hard time not scoffing at that one. Despite uncountable evidence to the contrary, the ‘old guard’ of Overlords and Nemesors often persisted seeing in Szarekh an infallible genius, all because his neural-matrix was bigger than every other Necron.

Moreover, if – admittedly, it was a big hypothetical outcome – if the humans managed to break the Szarekhan grasp on the Oblivion Throne, the Replicator Forges, the very molecular-hyperalchemical devices would belong to the Nerushlatset Dynasty with all the strategic consequences it implied.

“All of this purely speculative for now, Overlord,” this wasn’t the kind of operation which could be decided on a whim or even days of debate. “But it is certainly an interesting report. Overlord, you are dismissed.”

The ruler of the Nerushlatset phalanxes waited for her conservative subordinate to be out of the assembly halls where she was preparing several of the new improved Necrodermis shells, before addressing Sitkah again.

“I am going to need to send two messages,” the Phaerakh-Cryptek said to her vassal. “The first will be for Weaver. I want to meet her face-to-face, preferably within the year.”

“Yes, my Phaerakh. And the second?”

“The second will be for Trazyn. If we try something against the Sautekh Dynasty, it is vital to neutralise one of their greatest assets before the first shot is fired.”

It was bad enough that the average Sautekh Overlord was a bloodthirsty warmonger with tens of thousands of battles of experience, but if they were forewarned of what was going to happen, this entire campaign would be an absolute disaster from start to end.

“Tell him to go after Orikan the Diviner.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

***Vulkan’s Arsenal* Shipyard**

**3.121.297M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

One of the many good points about being Planetary Governor was that you hadn’t to ask yourself every time you pushed a door if you had the budget to pay yourself something in the shop or commercial quarter you were living.

And thanks her luck for that, because if she wasn’t wealthy beyond her wildest dreams, the list of prices in this VIP lodge aboard the *Vulkan’s Arsenal* shipyard would have made her grit her teeth. Fortunately, she had the price to pay their absurdly expensive services, and the location offered her the opportunity to speak with Dragon without the risk of being overheard, as the personnel had forestalled her desire of privacy by placing several jamming devices around their table.

It was far from the only expensive thing which was mentioned in their conversation, as the Basileia of Nyx finished reading the list of requests for military and non-military projects Dragon had handed her a few minutes ago.

“And here I thought the Mechanicus had cold feet about innovation,” the insect-mistress huffed when the last paragraph recorded on the data-slate ended.

“We’re not speaking about something as heretical as ‘innovation’, perish the thought,” Dragon immediately showed an offended stance which would have made any aristocrat proud. “The Tech-Priests of the blessed Adeptus Mechanicus are going to study and analyse a multitude of sacred templates from thousands of Forges, and determine which one is the most appropriate to be put into mass production. And if afterwards some modifications are required...initiative and technological dedication are important.”

To Taylor’s ears, that sounded a lot like innovation, but if the Tech-Priests preferred to avoid the name and continue their researches using both past and present knowledge, she wasn’t going to spend thousands of hours going to change their mind for an extremely limited gain.

“Yes, yes. You’re still asking for a lot in terms of budget and resources, Dragon.”

“You didn’t need an hour to sign the budget presented by Groener and Schwarz.”

“That’s unfair,” the golden-winged parahuman snorted. “I followed their requests and the needs of the Guard in the Sector at every step of the procedure. Something I didn’t do with the Mechanicus Council.”

It was infuriating to always repeat herself on the subject, but as ‘fun’ as it was to watch new weapons and lines of production take shape in the Artisans workshops, there were only a limited number of hours in the day, and Living Saint or no Living Saint, she couldn’t be everywhere at once.

“By our very nature, the projects of the Adeptus Mechanicus are anything but cheap,” Dragon countered reasonably, disdaining the biscuits and the warm beverages in front of her. “And the Artisans and all my researchers are going to need years for these projects, Taylor. I can’t guarantee right now that some will be halfway completed when there will be a need to call the guardsmen to war for a major campaign. I think it’s better to begin the projects with a full budget now. It will prevent a lot of doomed hopes in the future.”

“Fine but...a Hover-Tank? A Hover-Transport?” I think even Mars and Ryza aren’t producing enough grav-plates per year to build an armoured division of them!”

The Imperium had lost a lot of technology in the pyres of the Heresy, but Hover-type technology had never been truly widespread in the first place when the Emperor was walking among humanity.

“Assuredly, this one is a bit of a long shot,” the red-robed Tinker acknowledged. “The priority is on the White Scars-commissioned Jetbike project.”

The young Planetary Governor had an urge to slam her head against the table. Alas, all it would likely do was creating a painful headache and give a large sum to repair the damaged object.

“And the rocket-launchers which evidently do not look at all like modern Katioucha?” the Lady of Nyx asked for the sake of her curiosity.

“The Manticore launchers are immensely destructive, but their price is completely prohibitive. Unless you find a STC every ten years, their numbers will never exceed a thousand in a full Crusade. We need something filling the role that every Industrial World will be able to produce the ammunition for.”

To this the Lady General of the Guard had no counter. Manticore missiles could erase a brigade from a battlefield like it was nothing, but the sheer cost of a single missile was bleeding both the Munitorum and Nyx’s funds.

“Okay, you win. You and your subordinates will be able to work on all these Volkite, plasma, teleportation and shields projects...but I want results.” Not that she was truly fearful about that, but best to keep a little pressure on the Tech-Priests. “Was there anything we had to discuss before my departure for Wuhan?”

There shouldn’t be normally; the request for the naval construction program of the next decades had been dispatched to the Navy, Archmagos Sultan, and all other interested parties. But there were so many things unfolding that she had likely missed one where the Mechanicus was concerned.

“As a matter of fact, there is. I have talked a lot with the other members of the Council, and I think it would be a new idea to increase significantly its size. The Masters and Mistresses have too much to oversee and check now that we’ve extended their areas of operations, the projects, and the scope of our ambitions.”

“Ah,” to be honest, this wasn’t something she had thought much about...mainly because none of the senior Archmagi and Magi had mentioned the necessity to her. “How much of an increase we’re speaking about?”

“Ideally, I would go for a new Council of thirty-six.”

“Thirty –six?” The insect-mistress had thought about twenty-four maximum. “It’s not for the sake of increasing and giving more representation to some loudmouths, is it?”

“No,” the draconic-themed Minister of Industry was prompt to reassure her. “Like you, I’m all for avoiding political problems when it is possible. This increase is done because otherwise, the existing Masters will be overwhelmed by the work they need to do inside and outside the Nyx System. Running around can be tolerated during exceptional emergencies, but not for normal affairs.”

“Examples?”

“We need a Master of Titans, a Master of Noctilith, and likely a Master of Bacta.”

And if there was a need for a Master of Titans at Alamo, there would be also a ‘Master of Forges’ in the same system. The former Penal World’s allegiance was to the Adeptus Mechanicus, but it would obey the laws and the directives of the Council of Nyx, especially if there were enough Archmagi rotating between the two planets.

“I am willing to approve as long as there’s some preliminary testing beforehand. You know, to ensure this really increases the efficiency and doesn’t cause tensions.” The Basileia emptied her cup of tea. “And all the positions must be necessary, I won’t accept thirty-six council members just because it’s a multiple of twelve.”

“That goes without saying.”

“And if there’s a new ‘Master of Bacta’, he will need to be involved in the births of the new larva. We’re going to keep their raising slow for now, I want to be there when the new ‘Lisa’ goes into her chrysalis, but it’s best to make sure we have an extensive staff to care about our so-precious moths.”

“Not to mention finding adequate locations to host them,” Dragon couldn’t help but tell her. “Giant Moths are expensive.”

Taylor groaned.

“Come on, a flight of moths is adorable!”

“Not when the one we have eat more than a field army...”

**Hive Aquila**

**First Lieutenant Freya Brasidas**

By convention and good sense, Freya shouldn’t look like an officer covered in medals. Being rewarded with the Lion of Terra for her aerial victories during the Battle of Commorragh had at least given her this privilege.

But if there was one thing above she wasn’t gifted in, it was to refuse her father when he made one of his ‘suggestions’. Freya was a bit ashamed to say it, but she hadn’t dared challenging his decisions in a while...maybe not ever, if she had to stay truthful.

And so here she was, in her parade blue uniform of the Aeronautica Imperialis, giving credence to the reality that yes, past a certain point, there was such a thing as too many medals. The fact that Nils, who unlike her had not been granted the Lion of Terra, was looking as ridiculous as he was helped a bit, but not that much.

The eldest daughter of the Brasidas line tried to maintain a smiling face and not to show her boredom. This was rule number one of politics as usual; on that point even your Planetary Governor being a Living Saint had changed *that*. Unfair? Not really. Fair was fair, there was fewer of these boring occasions now, and when they happened it was for far better reasons.

But once the head cogboy had presented the first prototype of the Brunhilda superiority fighter and given a very short speech about the important role the Mechanicus – and Lady Weaver, of course – intended it to play in the future, the excitement for the evening was over. Lady Nyx wasn’t going to honour them of their presence; not with the Regency system once again officialised and the *Enterprise* sailing past Nyx Quartus a couple of hours ago.

All was left was networking, except for the reality there were a lot of cogboys everywhere, and Freya wasn’t speaking their secret ‘binaric’ language.

As for coming closer to the chief exhibit at the centre of the room, it was difficult. Not because the Tech-Priests were unwilling to let anyone touch the result of their efforts, but due to the concentration of her father’s friends and other nobles around it. Freya had stopped wondering a while ago why they did that. After all, it was likely these *civilians* didn’t understand the differences between a Thunderhawk and a Thunderbolt and-

Freya froze as a crystal glass containing cold water was placed in her hand, and eyes the perfect shade of blue stared at her.

“Thank you for the glass,” the First Lieutenant said, trying her best to not sound desperate at finding an avenue of escape. Unfortunately, with so many spectators and officers around, it was a bit difficult to move without crushing someone’s feet.

“You’re more than welcome, Lieutenant Brasidas, is it?” As if her name wasn’t placed above her panel of medals. And as if her interlocutor had not memorised most of the attendees’ list a few hours ago. “You look like you needed it after speaking with so many Counts and Barons.”

“I will survive,” the young noblewoman recently named instructor at the Aeronautica Academy replied before drinking the water. There was no taste of poisons, stimulants or aphrodisiacs as she had thought; trying to alter the judgement or assassinate someone when so many cogboys were present would be the height of folly. “Are you here to admire the first Brunhilda prototype?”

This would explain at least why the daughter of one of the High Twelve of the Senatorum Imperialis was here and not part of the huge escort of ships trying to follow as discreetly as possible the Battleship of Her Celestial Highness.

“Of course not,” Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg didn’t snort or made any insulting gesture; but there was still something in her behaviour and her stance which screamed Freya was below her...and the Nyxian noblewoman didn’t like it. “I came here to see if it was possible to buy the prototype the Tech-Priests would create after this one.”

Freya had a hard time not gaping like an unprepared dancer of the Great Game. Buying an atmospheric fighter or a starfighter wasn’t exactly impossible for men or women of good breeding; not if you had a few millions of Throne Gelts you didn’t know how to spend and as long as you didn’t expect the manufactorums to give you the first-grade ammunition and the weapons the Imperial Navy and the Aeronautica Imperialis reserved for themselves. But these were for mass-produced hulls which had been in service for centuries. It wasn’t for the prototype of a recently rediscovered STC template placed under the holy protection of a Living Saint. Even if it was the second prototype, not the first, it would certainly cost the equivalent of a huge ransom.

“And what did they say?”

A smile was all the answer Freya received. Not even inclined to brag at moments like this? The moment there was an opportunity to flee she was taking it, no matter how hasty it may appear to the eyes of outsiders.

“Why are you interested in this prototype in the first place? I doubt you can pilot it...” The Terran looked fit for duty, but in her impeccable white uniform of a Chartist officer, decorated with diamonds and other priceless objects of jewellery, Freya rather doubted the other woman was the type to risk her life in a cockpit instead of sending a flight of replaceable agents in her stead.

“Am I? You know, despite a more predatory look than its cousin the Xiphon Interceptor, the Brunhilda seems to place less stress on its pilot and as such does not require heavy augmentation or a transhuman constitution.” A new smile arrived on the pale lips. “Or maybe I’m just trying to show my faith into the industrial rise of Nyx, unlike certain narrow-sighted Houses.”

The Heiress of the Brasidas didn’t know if she needed to be disgusted or envious. Envious because the Terran noblewoman was able to see ancient relics of five thousand years ago when she wanted. Disgusted at the insinuation her House wasn’t financially supportive of the Basileia’s reforms in the orbital industry and the brand-new fusion reactors and thousands of technological devices.

“It will fail, you know,” the blonde-haired Nyxian said in an almost inaudible whisper. “She won’t trust you, and the Tech-Priests will listen to her.”

“Unlike the previous nobility of this proud Hive World,” the murmur was so low Freya had to focus all her senses not mistaking the words, “I am not careless to block the path leading to Her ascension.”

The pilot in her was relieved the ordeal was over as Marianne Gutenberg turned to engage the conversation with a scale-looking red robe. The noblewoman in her was grimacing.

Thank the God-Emperor there was only one of her on Nyx.

**Hive Athena**

**Emissary of the Queen of Blades Veth’va Xorl**

This cycle would be remembered as perfect. The sky was radiant and the emotions were a joy to experience.

The Monster of the Swarm had departed the planet, and Veth’va made sure to praise Atharti once more. There were still likely legions of insects not far from the rooms she had been given, but at least the armoured bugs weren’t right in front of her door, informing the Monster of her each and every move she made!

This made this assignment a bit more tolerable. Not a lot, but then every little bit counted, and knowing that she would not be drowned into a sea of insects and devoured from the inside was an excellent morale improvement.

The young Wych of the Cult of Blades shivered imperceptibly. Unlike most of the average Wych in service of the Queen, Veth’va had been part of the light garrison ordered to defend the Arena while the Cult was away hunting big prey, and as such she had been in excellent position to see the black waves of insects surging to break the walls of Commorragh.

From that point onwards, the black-haired Drukhari had known they were enemies they shouldn’t have made, and the Monster of the Swarm was definitely one. The humans could give her prestigious titles and sing her praises by the tens of billions, Veth’va knew the human appearance was just a disguise to hide the implacable machine of death and destruction which had utterly annihilated dozens of sub-realms. The news the owner of the swarm legions had not only engaged in a fight with their Queen and survived for several hundreds of heartbeats had only cemented this opinion.

Prey and predators, no one survived the Queen – especially when she was fighting an opponent half-seriously.

‘Weaver’ – or whatever name she was using – was something else. Something unnatural and terrifyingly deadly. Something it was best to stay away from, and the safe distance was likely measured in thousands of stars. There was a difference between fighting a single Helspider in an arena, and keeping a few million as war auxiliaries.

The quarter-cycle the Queen had announced she would be the one to be the Emissary to the Monster had been one of the worst of her life, unquestionably, and if it was not the worst, it was because this sixth-cursed Harlequin throwing her to the Monster and being surrounded by a cohort of enemies was taking first place.

If her path once again met this clown, Veth’va swore she would flay him, drop him tied and bound into a pool filled with tiny carnivorous fishes, before sending him the biggest fleshy parts to Cegorach one package at a time. She had not enjoyed the travel, and she had loathed the ‘delivery method’!

The young Wych hissed a curse and looked away from the false-window showing her the outside. By the ashes of the Dark City, she didn’t like this assignment. This was a human world, with all the pollution, the lack of respect towards her species, and the measures keeping her in a cage.

“This mission can’t end soon enough...”

But while the Monster of the Swarm wasn’t there, the mission wasn’t about bugs, centipedes, or Helspiders. It was about building the new Arena of Blades for her Queen, and the Drukhari harbouring one of the new blood-red soul stones on her chest knew that if she failed in this, being devoured by insects would be the least of her problems.

And so Veth’va Xorl returned to the three-dimensional plans the human architects had delivered to her this morning, and the black-haired warrior began the arduous project of resistant assessment and aesthetic judgement.

She really, really should have known better when she opened her mouth to demand an end to boredom a night rotation before the Eversprings Gate opened and the devastation of the Second Fall was unleashed against their race...

**Forge-Temple Fafnir**

**Lady Dogma Dragon Richter**

If Astartes Power Armour Prototype XO1 could be summed-up in one word, there was a good chance ‘ugly’ would win the contest.

Seeing no use to waste money on a painting which wasn’t going to survive the first test, the Artisans in charge of this project had chosen a dirty grey to spray upon the outer plating.

It wasn’t limiting itself to the colour, though. What had originally been a Mark VII Aquila Power Armour – also known as Mark VII Imperator sometimes – had received additional planting above the neck joints, the lower chest, the fists, and the upper legs. This series of changes had forced the Nyx Mechanicus enginseers to build a new helmet, and the less that could be said was that under no circumstances the men and the women who had participated in this engineering problem would win artistic congratulations from the sons of Baal. The helmet was halfway between a gargoyle and the ‘plague doctor’ the Mark VI was.

But of course this was not the end of the modifications. One had to add the issue it wasn’t an Astartes hiding behind the armour, but a huge combat servitor the Mechanicus used for tasks like this, provoking several...ungainly alterations. Last but not least, there was the monumental outsized backpack which had added itself to the air reserves, the solar panels, the cell charger, and the cell chargers amongst many other things.

It gave a very ugly look to the Prototype XO1, close to being ridiculous and given how slow the servitor took to advance in the middle of the testing ground, a good engineer could also argue it was impractical too. The heavy servitor – close to ninety percent mechanical parts and ten percent flesh this one – could lift the same loads as an Astartes, and run at half the speed of one of the regular battle-brothers.

But it was a prototype, and agility and speed were not what it had been prepared for.

“Fire,” Archmagos Reductor Stefan Delta-Septimus ordered, and a millisecond later, the twelve robots facing Armour X01 acknowledged the order and unleashed against the immobile servitor a combination of Volkite, Plasma, Laser, and shells which could have largely given pause to an armoured company.

But when the command to cease fire was given after twenty-four seconds of explosions, smoke and debris, the experimental Power Armour still stood where it was, undaunted. The reason why it was so easy to see despite the smoke and the damage caused to the testing room, lay into the blue ‘halo’ the *Heimdall* Psy-tech Force-Field was manifesting.

Not a single hit had been made. The dirty grey paint had not a single scratch upon it. Granted, it was hardly a proper battlefield simulation, but if it had been a Space Marine inside the armour and the enemy was truly trying to kill him, there would have been a murderous retaliation for the devastation unleashed against him.

Unfortunately, six more seconds after the automatons had stopped their assault, the energy shield flickered a lot for three or four seconds, before outright vanishing, and that was a flaw which wasn’t part of the demonstration.

“It’s a sub-optimal outcome,” High Magos Thomson Siemens canted, trying as best as he could to keep annoyance outside his metallic throat. “Post-battle matrix-resonance? Insufficient compensation of energetic output? Insufficient purity of our metals and alloys?”

The last question did not please Dragon at all.

“I thought the assumption behind all the major projects was to provide the best technological parts we can afford to build,” the Tinker spoke coldly.

“And it was done,” the Master of Electro-Life assured her. “But the best parts Nyx can build right now aren’t the same as the best the Ancients could build several millennia ago. We are still trying to catch up with their miracles, Lady Magos Dogma.”

Well, this was a sobering reminder how far they still had to go. On the good side, they were progressing. The shield of Prototype X01 had functioned correctly for twenty-four seconds, and for the issued raised by this newly discovered flaw, there had been no internal problems like an explosion of vital electronic parts, a rupture of the air reserves, and other damage which would have transformed its user into bloody paste.

“I understand.” Which was a far cry from saying she liked it, obviously. “Sensors?”

“Except the force-field, all systems are operational and functioning at the expected levels.”

“A not-so-unsatisfying outcome, I believe,” the Master of Destruction declared.

“I’m not sure I completely share your optimism, Archmagos. The weight of Prototype X01 is such that if the *Heimdall* Force-Field isn’t active, the enemy will have absolutely no difficulty pinning it down. I am willing to acknowledge it will cause a lot of damage before its ultimate destruction, but the moment it is pinned down, the armour’s destruction is one hundred percent guaranteed.”

“For a first prototype, it has its promises,” disagreed Thomson Siemens of Voss Prime. “Evidently, our subordinates in charge of this project are years short of developing a battlefield-operable power armour. But I have seen far worse beginnings, praise the Laws of the Machine-God.”

“And in the mean time, we have also the testing of Prototype X02 in the other block. This one received a more conventional ion shield, and I think you will be pleasantly surprised by the technical challenges we have solved...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector**

**Parthia System**

**Parthia**

**5.150.297M35**

**Princess-Magister Zoe XIX Attica**

After a few weeks of Parthia, Zoe had begun to suspect while the Menelaus Dynasty had ceased to send important members of its peerage outside the Nyx System.

Contrary to what the tales of intrepid adventurers and boldly step where no one of your homeworld had stepped before, the reality was often far more boring, and this was when it was not harmful to your health.

The Nyxian Foreign Minister had discovered plenty of things by landing on Parthia, evidently. The first was that, unfortunately, anything bigger than a swimming pool which also happened to have waves was making her very seasick. The Parthians and her personal medicae personnel had tried plenty of cures, some traditional, some ‘tailored’ for her, but nothing had worked. To make things better, she was not at her best when the temperatures were too warm.

On any Hive World she was aware of, it wasn’t a problem. On Parthia, where the oceans covered eighty-nine percent of the planet – why the locals continued to call them ‘seas’, she had no idea – and the temperatures in three seasons out of four were rarely passing under thirty Celsius degrees, it was leaving her exhausted most of the time. The orange-red haired woman could only hope Ajusco would be less taxing on her health.

“I hope you are feeling better, Minister,” Prince of the Seas and the Deserts Mykerinos said politely as she finished drinking the ‘medicine’ who had been brought by her assistant. “It would be quite...problematic and vexing for the first diplomat we receive in my lifetime to be so inconvenienced by our seas and weather conditions.”

“I am getting better,” it would have been a bit better if her face wasn’t so pale but she was back on land, and this was a good start. “But I am afraid that no matter how desirous I was to adapt to Parthia, Parthia is too much for me. I have finally realised that for all my desires to be a provincial Lady, I am a Hive-girl through and through.”

And lands on Parthia were not only scarce with two large islands-continents, they were anything but valuable. The coastal plains like the one they were present currently at hosted a few major cities with a few millions of inhabitants, but they were the exception, not the rule. The majority of people on Parthia were living aboard gigantic cruise ships which were at the same time fisheries, algae-harvesters, and water-maker provider.

That Parthia Harbour, the city of white buildings she was hosted into, was the capital had more to do with the need of an administrative chokepoint close to the sole and only starport of the planet than the belief of the Parthians life was better on land. The last census of the population a decade ago had given a number of one billion and eight hundred million, but if there were more than three hundred million on the two land masses, Zoe would eat her files.

“Ah yes, the Hives,” the white-haired ruler of Parthia declared with a minor dose of irony. “My advisors almost didn’t believe me when I returned from Nyx. I’m afraid that for all the prowess of construction they represent, we Parthians are...uncomfortable about these huge starscraper mega-cities. It isn’t natural for a world to have so many cities and so few seas.”

Zoe didn’t answer back this comment; it was a very well-spread opinion among the people of Ocean Worlds who had the opportunity to travel to other non-water-dominated planets.

“And some people think it’s unnatural to have so much salty water,” herself for one, and the ‘benefit’ of not visiting during the storm season had not saved her from sea sickness. “But enough about me. You and your government had requests concerning tithes.”

“Yes,” the old man nodded, Zoe trying not to be too bothered that at ninety-nine years-old, she was the eldest of the two...but unlike herself, the Planetary Governor had refused all offers of rejuvenation and youth-giving procedures offered from Lemuria, or more recently, from Nyx. “A reduction of thirty percent, to be precise. Lemuria is bleeding us in tithes!”

Zoe tried to not grimace inside the privacy of her thoughts. It was good the seventy-plus sunny-tanned man had not tried to make a proposition like that to the Adeptus Administratum tithe-masters. Planetary Governors and member of a ruler’s family had been on the receiving end of ‘tragic accidents’ for less.

“Lemuria has not really any choice in this. Part of your production of algae and fishes, along with the grain and the eggs of Ajusco, are needed to feed the Hibernian manufactorum workers.” The Industrial world of this trail had many advantages, but its freezing temperatures did not allow the local government much leeway to harvest abundant food. “Lady Weaver is willing to support your government with a reduction of five percent now that Sparta doesn’t need to be fed, and we will remove the latest series of ‘custom taxes’ the Hierophant imposed on your world.”

“Five percent isn’t enough.” The local Prince who according to the rumours, was ruling over ten thousand fishing boats, protested. “The Administratum demands too much!”

“Governor,” Zoe countered immediately. “For all your complaints, Parthia has been extremely lucky so far.”

“Lucky?” The old-looking noble definitely shouted the word.

“Yes, lucky,” the Princess-Magister kept her calm. “You weren’t involved in any war against the greenskins in the last decade; your world had not to pay the Munitorum tithe in living memory.”

“Of course not! We are fishers, not warriors!”

Zoe had an urge to laugh before this display of naivety. As if it had stopped Munitorum and Imperial Guard delegations before from emptying a planet of a generation of young men and women.

“I would suggest you make sure your PDF is still up to its limited number of duties, then.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No,” Truly the conversation wasn’t going in the direction she wanted it to. “It is a warning. Guard and Munitorum inspectors will travel across the Nyx Sector soon and check numbers, equipment, and training of the Planetary Defence Forces. After several disasters which could have been avoided easily if the PDF officers had trained their men correctly, Her Celestial Highness is eager to avoid problems in the long-term.”

“And to have more bodies to fight her wars.”

“For once, I will let this comment pass unchallenged,” the black-eyed Nyxian woman told the Planetary Governor, “I only want you to consider this: if Lady Weaver had not stopped the *Death Star* in the Brockton System, there are two Warp trails it could have followed. One was leading deeper into the Nyx Sector. The other would have brought the xenos directly to Antioch or Parthia.”

Given what she had seen of the system before taking a shuttle to go enjoying sea sickness, that was to say, almost no orbital industry and a few satellites, the Orks would have slaughtered everything and everyone in their path.

At last, the ‘Prince of the Seas and Deserts’ blanched, apparently having not understood the doom which had been on his doorstop before now. Sometimes, diplomats truly needed to mention the lasguns before mentioning the Sanguinala presents.

“Her Celestial Highness is disposed to help the people of Parthia in their every day’s life. Fusion reactors, Amphitrite hydro-plants, mega-cactuses, and other technological boons can be yours at low-interest loans.”

“And what does the Basileia wants in return?” It would be a bit too much for the reservations to disappear in the space of fingers she supposed.

“Loyalty...and a lot of the arid lands far from the sea,” the last part had not been asked in her briefings, but since the deserts were near guarantees to have important resources easily converted in promethium...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Alamo System**

**Alamo**

**3.157.297M35**

**Grand Princeps Surena Ctesiphon**

For everything of great importance, Surena made a point of watching it through the ‘eyes’ of *Ilium Scutum*. It wasn’t just because the auspexes and the hundreds of other different sensor-reading devices of his God-Engine were far better than mere mortal eyes. It wasn’t only because merging with the ancient machine-spirit was akin to become a God and see the world as such. It was more due to the known fact that memories like those were near-eidetic, literally imprinted in his brain until the God-Emperor would be satisfied with his service, and summon his soul in front of the Golden Throne.

Alas, these days it wasn’t possible. The mighty *Ilium Scutum* was repaired aboard the extensive workshops of *The Last Command*, thousands of kilometres above his head, and there was far too much to do to wait for the momentous moment when the damage of the Battle of Commorragh would be declared erased.

The aerial ‘observation-barge’ – he understood it had been a nobility air-yacht before being seized and repurposed – he was currently aboard would have to serve as a substitute.

“As you can see,” the Magos next to him continued to speak in an archaic form of Low Gothic, “the Chosen of the Omnissiah’s tools sent to us have been employed to maximal efficiency. The schedule-simulations will be respected in the imparted delays. The Fortress of the Two Wings will be ninety-three percent operational in five years.”

“And the Forges?” The Grand Princeps asked. It wasn’t his main preoccupation and he was not in the chain of command for this project, but a lot of the spare parts, the weapons, and everything a Titan Legion needed to march to war would be produced by the Forges of Alamo in construction.

“Forge Alpha will be fifty percent operational and reach Hive-level production in approximately eight years,” the representative of the Mechanicus reluctantly informed him. “The Council is hopeful the schedule will be accelerated, but as many of the Tech-Priests destined to work in this system have yet to reach the Nyx Sector, the tech-power is for the moment significantly limited.”

Seeing the very yellowish earth of the former Penal World being remodelled by the might of thousands of geo-engines, ancient mines reopened, mountains hollowed, and structures rising from the ground day after day, it was difficult to believe the resources of the Adeptus Mechanicus were ‘limited’ by any definition of the world. The defences already installed were not light; once the first armament manufactorums and the major orbital foundries were brought on line, the military infrastructure of Alamo would be best described as colossal.

But since the lack of humour of the Tech-Priests was infamously legendary, Surena Ctesiphon didn’t try to convince his mechadendrite-user interlocutor that it was an exaggeration.

“Eight years is long, but hardly unreasonable,” the survivor of Commorragh pointed out. “Many of the God-Engines under my command have repairs time of over a decade.”

The Artisans and the thousands of other helpers available were already there, doing what they could, but there were no repair parts for Titans anywhere near Nyx save those Legio Defensor and the Archmagi of Mars had brought with them.

“True art can’t be rushed when it comes to the wrathful and glorious avatars of the Machine-God,” the Magos declared pompously.

For all his loyalty to the Red Planet, the Grand Princeps was not ready to accept every assertion coming out from a cant-vox. Many God-Engines of Legio Defensor were ancient, extremely ancient, and since their Forge World had been turned into radioactive ashes by the Arch-Traitor’s fell servants, the prime-knowledge to build and repair them.

Thankfully or not so thankfully, of the forty Titans having survived to hear the Hour of the Emperor’s Judgement had illuminated the galaxy and inflicted grievous injuries to the Traitors, twenty-two were newer models: his eighteen Warhounds and four out of the eleven Reavers. Those were far easier to repair, and the schedule given by the Martian Magi in charge of them agreed with this: all of them would be operational within five years.

For the six Warlords, the seven remaining Reavers, the three small Rapiers, and of course the three Mirage God-Engines, the headaches were far bigger.

“I am not saying otherwise,” Surena said politely, “I am just...unsatisfied at the unfortunate reality that if Lady Weaver launches a campaign during the next decade, I will be only able to provide a token force for Her Celestial Highness’ goals.”

And since all the Princeps and commanders of the Legio had sworn eternal loyalty to the Living Saint, failing to support her properly wasn’t acceptable at all.

“Yes, it is inconvenient.” Another understatement typical of high-ranked Tech-Priests. “But there are going to be God-Engines reinforcing you soon.”

They were reinforcements, yes. If the Magos had the clearance to compile this list – he may very well not have it – he would have noticed every God-Engine given to the newly-authorised Forge World was of the Warhound class.

Surena Ctesiphon wasn’t going to refuse them, oh no. Five confirmed Warhounds were five Titans any Princeps of the Legio Defensor worth his rank couldn’t in good conscience refuse. But there was also denying that it forced his Princeps and himself to work with a lighter battleline of God-Engines battle after battle.

“There are. We are already conducting the first batteries of tests to select worthy aspirants at Candle, Eris, and Smilodon...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Cruiser *Holy Wind***

**3.162.297M35**

**Vice-Admiral Vortigern von Drenthe the Eighth**

One second, there was nothing on the auspexes.

The second after, the familiar tear into reality created by a Warp translation opened into the spatial zone of the Mandeville Point, allowing the *Enterprise* to complete its journey to the Wuhan System.

For all the exhaustion it took upon his physical reserves to stay so many hours on the main bridge, Vortigern von Drenthe didn’t think for a single second to go to his quarters and rest.

It wasn’t every day a Battleship visited his station, and it was the first time the *Enterprise* was coming to the Sub-Sector Capital. Tiredness and discomfort could be acknowledged and discarded for a while. Especially as one watched the screen of warships and transports forming around the eleven kilometres-long capital warship as it began to accelerate towards Wuhan Secundus.

Security measures forced Navy Captains, Archmagi, Frateris officers, and other masters of starships to stay far away from the Basileia’s flagship as it translated or navigated into the Immaterium, but once it was back into reality, the only minimal distances were those prescribed by the codes of spatial navigation.

The ageing Vice-Admiral didn’t think there were so many hulls following the most powerful Lords Admiral of Kar Duniash when they made their inspections.

“How many visitors do we have now?” Vortigern asked the Lieutenant in charge of the long-range augurs.

“Six hundred and thirty-four, Admiral,” the answer arrived in less than ten seconds, “including one Ark Mechanicus, three Battleships – not counting the Enterprise – four Battlecruisers, five heavy Cruisers, twenty-nine Cruisers, fifty-seven Frigates...”

Naturally, once the younger Navy officer had finished speaking, the situation report was obsolete again. There were more starships arriving from every direction. Mechanicus Destroyers flanked red-black bulky transports. Brilliant cathedrals of the Ecclesiarchy led and ordered columns of pilgrim ships. Navy squadrons surrounded Guard transports and fuel mega-tankers.

It was a very good thing this armada was on their side, the Vice-Admiral of the von Drenthe line mused. If this Crusade-sized fleet hadn’t been friendly, it wasn’t the naval strength at his disposal which would have been able to stop them.

His squadron had grown by leap and bounds over the last five years – just as he was about to retire, what an irony! – but he had no Battleships. Something his replacement apparently wouldn’t have to endure.

“Admiral, between fifty and sixty ships are separating from the Enterprise and setting a course for Wuhan Tertius.”

“It seems,” Vortigern observed after two minutes and the hulls showed no intention to return into the formation, “Her Celestial Highness had her own plans for this Mining World.”

“But Admiral,” one of his many Lieutenants spoke, “shouldn’t the authorities of Wuhan Secundus sign up on whatever the Nyxian Cartels and the Adeptus Mechanicus intend to do here?”

The Vice-Admiral didn’t have to open his mouth to tell the naive youngster how stupid this sentence sounded.

“Her Celestial Highness is the owner of Wuhan Tertius in every way which matters,” the insult ‘idiot’ or ‘moron’ wasn’t uttered at the price of a considerable effort of will. “The Wuhan-Cao Cartel, the Hubei Cartel, and the Shanxi United Shipping Company...they’re all in the process of being broken, and reformed according to the will of the Living Saint. And besides, who is she going to ask the permission to? The Lord-Magnates are a rare commodity to be found these days...”

And it was likely going to be worse in the next hours, judging by the military assets the Victor of Commorragh had judged good to accompany the *Enterprise*. The Vice-Admiral didn’t know the new Living Saint enough to speculate on her goals and methods, but you didn’t invite an Iron Drake Strike Cruiser just to parade them around and receive cheers from the crowd. The Guard transports were also a strong hint that the Sector Lady had moderately enjoyed hearing how many heretics were hiding under the beds of the Wuhanese nobility.

Said aristocrats had been relatively spared, given the unforgivable treachery the assassination attempt of a Planetary Governor and his fellow Hive-rulers represented on an Imperial planet. Vortigern didn’t need to be as good as the von Lohengramm lineage as naval strategists to know a purge was a near-inevitability.

“A lot of people are going to be unhappy,” his second-in-command was smiling like his favourite holo-vid – the one where starfighter pilots so many heretic planes that even propaganda was complaining about the unrealistic plot. “I’m betting on *at least* fifty Penal Legions created in the first month.”

“Sucker’s bet,” a black-bearded Warrant Officer immediately retorted. “It will be at least one hundred Penal Legions, and over fifty percent will be Underhive gangs.”

“No! It will be one hundred and fifty. I will bet three hundred Thrones...”

Vortigern von Drenthe the Eighth sighed. His retirement couldn’t come fast enough...this insanity was certainly reeking of indiscipline and terribly contagious.

**Wuhan II**

**Hive Chao-Lai**

**Seneschal-Consort Wei Cao**

As long as they had been in orbit above Wuhan, the differences between the moment she had left so many years ago and now were impossible to miss. There were plenty of SDF monitors which had been built to replace the losses incurred by the fault of the two ‘false-Inquisitors’. Several mega-farms were in construction next to important shipyards and mining processing facilities. New Cartels had sprung up from the ruin of the old ones.

Overall, the system was far more prosperous than it had been during her teenage years.

And then they landed, and for all the bombastic crowds, the perfect propaganda vids were simply unable to maintain the illusion.

Hive Chao-Lai was...exactly the same, with a decade of ageing to add to the already existing problems. It was so familiar, and yet so difficult to watch. After walking so many times in the main Hive-streets of Hive Athena, Wei knew she had unconsciously accepted the Nyxian reforms as *normal*. The idea of expanding shopping malls and different manufactorums powered by solar energy which had been surprising at first, was barely worth commenting about these days.

But when there was none of these modernised buildings or improved infrastructure in sight, it was honestly shocking.

The only common point to be found between Nyx and Wuhan, was the extreme shouts of adulation expressed by the ecstatic crowd.

“WEAVER! WEAVER!”

“THE LIVING SAINT FOR GOVERNOR!”

“WE WANT HER CELESTIAL HIGHNESS!”

“So much for my popularity,” the Wuhanese-born woman said, trying not to laugh, as poor Taylor next to her had closed her eyes and appeared to count to one hundred and calm herself. “I have a feeling I may not be the favourite candidate that the Imperial citizens desire on the throne...”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” Her black-haired paramour failed to throw any humour into her voice. “How many do you think are aware that it is forbidden to be the Governor of two different stellar systems?”

“In the lower millions, I think,” in other words, an extremely tiny percentage of men and women, given that the total Wuhanese population was over one hundred and thirty billion. “But since you’re a Living Saint, the Wuhanese may simply think you can do whatever you want, and the rest of the High Lords will kneel and approve everything your seal is imprinted upon. Pavia may not have helped in that regard.”

“THE LIVING SAINT!”

“VICTORY AND HOLINESS!”

“PRAISE THE SAINT!”

The golden-winged heroine had to force herself to smile, before saluting the millions if not billions of spectators, and giving a nod to the long columns of Nyxians waiting with boxes filled with miniature Aquila plush. Seconds later, as Wei and the Basileia took their seat on their armoured parade vehicle, the assistants were beginning to hand the animals of synth-cotton to delighted children.

By that point, the sound level was a bit more reasonable, though Wei kept her earmuffs close.

“So far, except our combined popularity, Wuhan hasn’t changed that much,” the insect-mistress said as the Dawnbreaker Guard and the rest of their protectors stood as sentinels around them. “Glad to see your palaces again?”

“Not really,” Wei easily admitted. “Once you have seen a sky relatively lightly polluted,” she was realistic, Nyx was hardly free of industrial problems and rebreather masks in certain areas were absolutely needed if you fancied surviving until the next Sanguinala, “the dense fog over the spaceport was a really cold pulse-shower. Even if our rank allowed us means to travel without rebreather strapped on our faces, it’s really unattractive and depressing.”

“The Biologis teams I sent ahead have a mountain of work awaiting them,” the ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’ indirectly agreed. “We can still cancel everything, you know.”

“And leave a perfectly administrator or a Guard officer enjoy the fruits of unpopularity my rejection would cause? I am not a very clever population you know but to me, that screams ‘imminent insurrection...”

“I didn’t make any promise about the subject of our visit,” Taylor raised a not-so-innocent eyebrow.

“And you think it would matter to the billions who want you to solve their problems?”

The parahuman ruling over the Nyx System grimaced.

“I just hope that for all their hopes, they realise it’s going to take a lot of work and several decades before Wuhan is no longer in crisis mode. I didn’t have the time to search the reasons for it, but it is evident your Hive World is far more polluted than mine was when I took the reins, despite having fewer inhabitants.”

“Past a certain point, I guess the lack of oceans has far more compensated the environmental damage one hundred billion additional souls you have at Nyx,” Wei answered back with one of her old arguments, “and besides that, I think humanity’s landing on my homeworld was far more ancient by several millennia. There are a lot of old structures and ruined Hives in the wastes and half-buried under the industrial sprawls.” It was one of the many reasons the Necron tomb had been able to stay unnoticed for so long. “If only the pollution was the only problem we had to deal with.”

“Yes, if only.” Her black-haired paramour smiled thinly. “Before we can even think about environment, food production and the industrial tithes are going to be the high priorities. Then there is the dire need of transforming the cannon-fodder of the PDF into something the other guardsmen won’t laugh at when comes the time to launch a new military campaign. We need to conduct a planetary inspection to discover which parts of the macro-infrastructure are at risk of collapsing under its own weight, hunting heretics...”

“It’s going to be a lot of ‘fun’, I can already see the army of bureaucrats besieging my royal office...” Wei groaned theatrically.

“Don’t worry, they are more annoying than dangerous...I think. Just settle on the name you want to substitute the title of ‘Planetary Governor’ before the coronation ceremony. It would be a bit hilarious to see your new subjects wait as you choose from a kilometre-long list...”

They both chuckled for a few seconds, their first real laugh of the day.

“Speaking of bureaucracy...”

Her paramour returned to deadly seriousness.

“The favours the Adeptus Astra Telepathica owes me were enough to confirm the Black Ship which took your young cousin Mei reached Holy Terra roughly three years ago. The vellum trail past that point is...a labyrinth of problems. The ‘psyker administration’ isn’t the Administratum, but they are receiving thousands of Black Ships every day. And unfortunately, past the first culls where they kill the ones tainted by the Ruinous Powers, there is a web of bureaucratic paralysis coating everything. I think she’s still alive, unfortunately it’s all I can tell you right now.”

“It’s already a lot. Thank you.”

“Anything for my favourite Consort...” the insect-mistress ordered the dozens of insects included in the parade to take amusing stances for the great entertainment of the children. “And honestly, I think it would be incredibly amusing to see your cousin carbonise the graves of your father and several relatives just by staring at it.”

“You have a horrible, horrible sense of humour,” Wei deadpanned.

“Anything for my favourite Consort...”

“Repeat that for a third time, and I’m really going to begin you’re ready to invite other women into our majestic bed...”

“I also happen to have large cargos of red paint ready to be used within the hour.”

“I regret nothing!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**3.184.297M35**

**Chapter Master Jeremiah Isley**

Giving honest advice to a legitimate Minister of a Hive World wasn’t something Jeremiah had thought would ever happen in his long life – this business on Malacca a few centuries ago didn’t count – but here he was.

“I suggest,” the Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens said to the Director of Hives and Special Projects, “that you don’t send these amendments to the Basileia.”

“Why?” asked the brown-haired man, who answered to the name of Zephyr Belos. “The Ceres project doesn’t need the monumental walls and the absurd level of fortifications the initial plans call for! Setting aside the inefficiency of several levels, the concerns about an enemy assaulting this Agri-Hive are entirely ridiculous! A void shield and basic walls are more than enough to hold until Her Celestial Highness arrives and crushes any foolish invader!”

The former Alpha Legionnaire knew it wasn’t going to take long before some measure of overconfidence found its way to the head of several mortal leaders, but it hadn’t really taken long in this case. Of course, few worlds were confronted to the scenario of having a Living Saint as a ruler. And fewer he suspected – the information was very scarce on this front if you didn’t rely on propaganda – had likely won conflicts as significant as the Battle of Commorragh.

“Your arguments are filled with overconfidence, Director.” The Space Marine politely informed him. “Lady Weaver is ruling over Nyx, that much is true, but any theoretical enemy dangerous enough to land in force on Nyxian soil is going to have a plan to make sure they are able to delay her vengeful swarm counterattack. And the defences of a Hive, even a modern one, will take years to implement. It is not something that can be changed once the enemy translates out of the Warp.”

Jeremiah Isley could see the temptation. The version of the Agri-Hive template which had been chosen a few months ago was aesthetic and easy to like. But leaving it in its current defenceless configuration was just asking for trouble. And if he didn’t say so right now, the Dawnbreaker Guard, in particular the sons of Dorn, were not going to waste time sending back an astropathic message screaming how foolish the ‘amendments’ were.

It was too bad for the artists and amateurs of non-military infrastructure, but the era was still not right to authorise such vital projects to be built near-defenceless. Maybe in a long, long time war would be a long unpleasant dream, but the galaxy was very far from reaching this state of peace.

“And the railway improvement and expansion?” Zephyr Belos continued, showing at least a quality of stubbornness which had most likely convinced Taylor Hebert to hire him.

“I have no objection against it,” the mobility of goods and men was in most cases something to be encouraged. “Though Minister Dragon is likely going to push for several of these lines to be built by Ambulls deep underground.”

Nevertheless, the project had chosen the south-western part of the Moira continent to revitalise the economy and lower the unemployment rate, and if it didn’t do it, Jeremiah didn’t know what it was going to take. The new Agri-Hive Ceres would have the ancient Hive Romulus north of its location, and the equally new Giraffe Spaceport south of it. In fact, the presence of the latter was one of the many reasons Isley was not ready to remove anything from the defensive plans of Huscarl Diamantis. Spaceports were always major targets of the Enemy, be it xenos, traitor, or something even worse.

“Whether they are underground or not, there are railways,” the Director of Hive and Special Projects was prompt to accept the point and discard it in the space of a single sentence, “but if I really have to go with this plan of not increasing the agriculture capacity as Minister Halieus wants, many cartel investors, bankers, and other important merchants will want a second Agri-Hive.”

“A second Agri-Hive?” Jeremiah wasn’t often surprised, but this proposal definitely achieved it. “Isn’t it...extremely premature? Hive Ceres will provide the food for over twenty billions mouths, if the simulations and the template-data are validated.”

“Yes, but while Cartels investing in agriculture and farming will be able to sell enormous amounts of spare parts and specialised agri-tech to maintain Ceres at peak efficiency, it largely decreases the interest of investing billions of Thrones Gelts if they know only one of the kind is going to be built in the end.”

“Other Agri-Hives are going to be built across the Sector,” the Heracles Warden pointed out.

“Yes, but we have to leave significant percentages of this market in the hands of local industry magnates,” Zephyr did not even pause to rethink about his argument. “The construction of Agri-Hive outside Nyx is going to be extremely valuable, of this have no doubt. But it is not going to be as valuable for them as an Agri-Hive on this very system.”

Sometimes, Jeremiah was extremely disappointed at everything which proved the rapaciousness and the greed of the Imperial elites. This was assuredly one of these days.

One might think that building one Agri-Hive, the Giraffe Spaceport on Moira, the Cygnus Spaceport on Dolos, and several other massive Biodomes, planting forests of cactuses and trees, plus a legion worth of other infrastructure projects, would have been enough for a century of mortal ambition.

Evidently, it wasn’t.

“For this proposal, you will definitely have to inform the Basileia,” the Chapter Master said in a deadly serious tone. “I know there are...heavy political issues with the building of the Agri-Hives.”

Adding them to worlds already recognised as Agri-Worlds was no problem at all. Constructing them on Civilised Worlds was already a very different move altogether. And for the Hive Worlds...food independence was always the big problem of this type of Imperial planets, and something that the Administratum and other Adeptuses loved to have to threaten a non-compliant Governor when the thought of rebellion unavoidably reached its treacherous head.

One Agri-Hive would raise a few eyebrows, but had been justified as a food reserve and ultimately, was far inferior to the real needs of the hundreds of billions of Nyxians. Two Agri-Worlds would raise a lot of eyebrows and bring plenty of inquisitive questions...assuming they stayed at two, because afterwards, there would the temptation to build more.

“I will.”

“Good, now what I truly come for was for a joint facility where I can train my too-energetic aspirants...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan II**

**Hive Chao-Lai**

**3.195.297M35**

**Sister Alice Gaius**

The Basileia looked magnificent even she closed her eyes and took a nap for a few seconds. Of course, the golden wings on her back and the divine aura surrounding her were not for nothing in this.

Since being sworn into the ranks of the Templar Sororitas, Alice had been informed that the rumours were true: the wings were permanent: no matter if Her Celestial Highness was conscious or not, the symbols of the God-Emperor’s favour were illuminating the Lady of Nyx.

Then a bell rang in the distance, and the Basileia’s black irises were visible again. The chairs where several Guard officers of the Fay 20th and a few Nyxians veterans had been waiting upon were abandoned to the Wuhanese personnel hired for the event. And Alice, following her sisters of the Order of the Silver Rose, entered the halls where the ceremonies of the Gubernatorial Enthronement were going to take place.

Compared to the silence and the calm which had been their companion for the last hours, their entry was obviously a shock. The music was loud. The murmur of conversations had long become something more as tens of thousands voices commented about their arrival. It was like the Sanguinala Games in the heart of Hive Athena, except today the immense crowds were assembled into over-decorated palaces.

There were gold and silver decorations everywhere. Imperial flags were in the hands of thousands of banner-bearers. A larger-than-life red carpet had been unrolled on a distance which was so long it had to be over two kilometres. Long lines of PDF infantry, Guard officers, and at irregular intervals immobile Space Marines were ensuring the civilians and the other members of the audience were staying where they had been supposed to.

Alice tried to watch the men and the women as best as she could, but they were so many...

Despite all their hours playing with their helmet’s recording tech-abilities, she and her sisters needed a lot more time to be familiar with their power armours...which made her wonder at the miraculous ability of Her Celestial Highness to switch armours and tech-clothes at will and thrive into them.

The halls – or did it count as a single throne hall, Alice had no idea – subtly changed in decoration and tone. The typical Wuhanese profusion of gold decreased and was progressively altered with large angelic banners and sculptures. The blood red of the Blood Angels, the Imperial purple, the Argentamite symbols of victories and many, many jewels gave a more diverse and vibrant rainbow range of colours in what was an exceptional event.

The Living Saint they had all sworn to serve climbed the last steps leading to the throne alone. Alice was so moved by the spectacle of the woman protected by the Angel’s Tear and her purple-silver cloak of spider silk that she realised several seconds later she had automatically took position with her sisters on the right of the blue-red Dreadnought wearing what looked to be a mix between a kepi and a beret.

There was more music; loud music which was so loud it might be called ‘thunderous’ or ‘earth-shaking’. Her eyes searched for any threat, but the Wuhanese nobles she was facing had decided to behave in an irreproachable manner. Regular vox communications relayed that a few unruly sires had already been arrested at the outer checkpoints, and were on their way to enjoy the hospitality of the cells owned by the Adeptus Arbites.

Then the future Governor of Wuhan arrived. Alice had never seen the Seneschal-Consort wearing armour, but at that moment, she wished she could don any military equipment and stay so impeccable and perfect. Her cuirass was an immaculate Ultramarine blue, with other paler shade of blues being represented on the armoured legs and the arms. Her cloak was blood-red and decorated with an immense golden aquila. Her head was without any jewellery and symbol of status.

Wei Cao kneeled at last. She was a step away from the final elevation of the hall, not two metres away from the tall Herald of Sanguinius and the massive Imperial Fist guarding the steps leading to their Lady.

“The Governor of Wuhan Secundus is dead.” The voice of Lady Weaver forced the thousands of whispers to cease instantly. “Now that the traitors and heretics have been punished as they deserve, I have need of a new Planetary Governor to govern justly and wisely this Hive World. Lady Wei Cao, the men, women and children of Wuhan Secundus have nominated your name when the choice of Planetary Governor was asked of them. Are you willing to assume this charge, in the name of the God-Emperor of Holy Terra, and the High Lords speaking in His Name?

“I do,” the weight of several billion breaths of relief coursed in the halls and the esplanades in the next seconds.

“Do you swear to deliver the tithes and the other obligations the Adeptuses of His Most Holy Imperium demand of Wuhan Secundus?”

“I do.”

Of course, there were many more questions asked, and the young Templar Sororitas didn’t bother listening to most of them. Past the first seconds of silence, many nobles and the rest of spectators were cheering loudly, when they weren’t applauding, and it was hell keeping an eye on everyone. Alice was really going to have to ask to the Legate how she managed to catch the misbehaving troopers among whole regiments...

“I do.”

“Then rise, Regina Wei Cao, Planetary of Governor of Wuhan Secundus.”

Her poor ears had thought she had heard ‘loud’ before. This was nothing compared to the apocalyptic cheers which drowned the music and everything else in the throne hall.

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“Isn’t the bureaucratic charge increasing while we’re not looking at it?” Wei asked as Gavreel and several members of their staff entered, bringing new data-slates and a very large pile of vellum documents.

“Now that you mention it, yes, my dear Regina,” her Seneschal-Consort – and new ruler of the Hive World of Wuhan Secundus – stuck out her tongue, a move which didn’t make her less seductive as she had changed into a blue robe from her ceremonial armour but the Argentamite diadem Taylor had posed on her head was still there. “There is too much paperwork. You know what you have to do if it is an inconvenience...”

“Cut the heads of everyone who brings me these damned piles of garbage?”

The black-armoured Space Marine and the assistants froze and tried to make themselves tiny and insignificant – a futile endeavour, especially for the transhuman warrior.

“Not a day as a Planetary Governor, and already the first tyrannical orders are spoken,” the Lady of Nyx observed in a tearful tone. “Wuhan is doomed.”

“Not everyone has the gifts of the God-Emperor to deal with paperwork,” the Regina sniffed haughtily as Gavreel and their other subordinates decided to escape, having obviously decided discretion was the better part of valour.

“As heretical as it might sound, I’m not sure the talents of His Most Divine Majesty were of a bureaucratic nature,” Taylor took the time to drink a glass of water as thousands of eyes read about the disastrous state of Hive infrastructure and the massive levels of simmering violence the previous Governors had been willing to tolerate. “You don’t hear many tales about his legendary deeds in the fields of writing everything in triplicate and solving the taxation problems of Terra.”

Really, when people spoke of things the Master of Mankind had affixed his seal onto, the examples were more about the first Warrants of Trade signed after the Unification Wars of the Throneworld, the Treaty of Olympus which still bound today Mechanicus and Imperium, and other documents of great importance. But were they about paperwork or peripherally related to it? No.

“Nah, He wouldn’t do that,” Wei replied, sounding more serene than she about this issue. “He is the God-Emperor, and Guilliman is his son. Surely anyone who can sire such a good administrator has to know the legendary secrets allowing oneself to deal with efficiently and quickly with paperwork.”

If it was true, then the Emperor was truly worthy of worship. Taylor could deal it faster than the average ruler, and despite a thousand auxiliaries, it didn’t make it a pleasant part of her duties.

“Paperwork aside, the situation is worse than I imagined the deeper you go into the Hives.” It wasn’t the ‘interesting situations’ provoked by an Inquisitorial civil war or the massacres an army of Necrons could unleash, but it was far from good if you loved peace and calm, it was better to travel elsewhere. “Hive Chen-Jin is the worst.”

“What did you expect? When the Inquisitors arrested everyone associated with the nobles struck down by the Death of Excess, about ten percent of the aristocrats emptied their accounts and descended there to avoid the punishments of the Arbites. And since a problem is never arriving alone, this resulted in a lot of PDF soldiers and enforcers not being paid. I’m ready to bet ten billion Throne Gelts they have prepared one thousand conspiracies to return to power at the moment we speak.”

“I’m not taking the bet,” and not just because betting that amount of money was simply insane, no matter how wealthy she was. “Several assassination attempts our security forces foiled today were suspiciously well-prepared, like they were familiar with the secrets of Hive Chao-Lai’s Spire...”

“My family always invited the most treacherous snakes to party,” Wei remarked lightly. “You want to care of them personally?”

The good point when the local Governor was your Consort was that it didn’t take long for her to guess correctly what your thoughts were.

“I’m not saying I will arrive to suppress rebellious plots in one day or two,” it had taken far longer at Nyx, and her Hive World had far more military and judicial forces ready to intervene, “but I certainly can bring back enough order and rid us of most seditious elements. Hopefully, it will give us months to find the biggest problems and correct them, before starting the real series of reforms.”

“Military reforms,” the Regina of Wuhan smiled carnivorously.

“That goes without saying,” Taylor said sarcastically. “Unless you’re completely fine knowing your guardsmen are a joke Sector-wide and beyond.”

“Oh no, it’s just I had a nasty idea to light some fires under comatose officers.”

“And this idea is?”

“I know you’ve brought several of the Nocturnan Scorpiads and the Baalite Scorpions in the Enterprise’s insect compartments. What do you say about testing their efficiency on an urban environment without having to wait for your next major campaign?”

“You’re a horrible person,” the golden-winged parahuman complained before sighing loudly.

“I’m not hearing a ‘no’ anywhere...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Atlas Sub-Sector**

**Bahamut System**

**Bahamut**

**3.202.297M35**

**Chapter Master William Castor**

“How did your meeting with the Fire Champion go, brother?”

“Surprisingly well, all things considered,” Chapter Master William Castor answered. “The completion of the first magma canals and the inauguration of the cisterns may have something to do with it.”

“There is more good news.”

“Oh?”

“We have found considerable deposits of Titanium, Molybdenum, and Scandium in Sector A-2,” Bergidrake Osacar said smugly. Unlike the other Magma Spiders who had kept the dark green paint of their former Legion, the Master of the Forges had chosen a bright red colour – to the point some Bahamuter civilians had confused him for a son of Sanguinius at first. Only the great spider encircled by flames on his pauldron allowed the inhabitants of the Death World to realise their mistake. “If the extraction machines currently unloaded are respecting their specifications, I will be able to oversee the start of its mining in twenty-two days.”

“It is very good indeed,” William recognised. “Will the transportation of the ore meet significant problems?”

“Not when the first Bahamut trains are operational,” the Mars-trained Space Marine assured him. “At least, as long as it is only question to reach Magma City. Sending everything in orbit in the quantities we desire will be obviously more difficult as long as the orbital elevator isn’t in service.”

“I’ve spoken with the Magi, and they’re doing their best.” The emissaries of the Cult Mechanicus were certainly competent and hard-working, although unfortunately they weren’t the very best available; those distinguished elites were busy training and supervising tens of thousands of red robes at Nyx itself where two other orbital elevators were in construction. “It certainly won’t be completed this year, but assuming a moderate degree of optimism, it should be ready for 298M35.”

“It can’t come fast enough,” Bergidrake grunted. “Don’t take me wrong, I know our new homeworld was more or less ignored for anything which didn’t involve mining rare metals, but this lack of structures capable to support orbital-atmospheric liaisons is incredibly frustrating to deal with. I had hoped...

“That since we were five thousand later, multi-layered spaceports, teleportariums, and other great technological marvels would have become the norm?” the Chapter Master finished gently. “I understand. I dearly wished it was so when we learned we were far into the future.”

It had been, if he was to be honest with himself, the second greatest disappointment of his life after Commorragh. No, it was the third, in fact. The crippled state of the Emperor and their father remaining missing were number one and two.

The treachery of Horus and his evil henchmen had been defeated in the end, but humanity had not finished paying the cost of it, and there were more than four thousand Terran years after the Siege of Terra.

Too much had been destroyed. It was in part why they had decided the Fortress-Monastery in construction on the horizon would be named Magma City. Many Salamanders Legionnaires had been trained in this highly-prestigious Martian Forge before everything went to hell and brothers betrayed brothers. The old Magma City was no more, but far away from Terra, and with the STC technology put at their disposal, the Magma Spiders may in time rebuild something greater than what had been laid low by the Arch-Traitor and his hordes.

“Anyway I have sent the agreed astropathic messages to Wuhan and Nyx to confirm the joint training we have established with the Fire Champion and the Bahamut Magma Forces is progressing very well.”

“Their super-armoured vehicles are certainly above Guards standards,” the Master of the Forges acknowledged, “and while the ferrorabbits are no lava-plesiosaurs, they provide a great source of moving targets. The main problem is that there aren’t enough soldiers mobilised at the moment.”

“True. Alas for now, the infrastructure expansion is taking utmost priority.” Magma City and its orbital elevator had to be completed. The shipyards of Bahamut had to be ready to receive the oncoming Battle-Barges and Strike Cruisers Nocturne and Mars had promised to them. And while the population was rapidly increasing, it was still very, very far from reaching the arbitrary threshold of one hundred million inhabitants – not surprising since at the beginning of the year, they were under twenty million. “What are you thinking about, brother?”

“More Flamers, Volkite weaponry, and Plasma guns.”

Why wasn’t he surprised?

“I will see what I can do, but like us, Nyx is the middle of a huge industrial reorganisation. The Plasma guns may be easier, since Lady Weaver has an excellent relationship with Ryza...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan II**

**Hive Chen-Jin**

**3.316.297M35**

**Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

The first time Marianne had been allowed to speak with the Living Saint had been an opportunity to see the glory and the benefits of leaving a woman imbued with the power of the God-Emperor rule over a Sector.

It was in a way logical to see the less pleasant aspect of her rule shortly before her second audience with Lady Taylor Hebert, Living Saint and Victor of Commorragh.

And since today, architect of the crushing triumph where most of the rebellious parties sponsored by the last Chen nobles had been forced to surrender.

The streets and the manufactorums of this level were in a pitiful state. Some of it came from the decay and sheer neglect of decades where the maintenance funds had been pilfered away by greedy imbeciles. The rest was the damage done destroying the core elements of the insurrection.

There were big holes into the walls, and a lot of debris of ferrocrete and ceramite everywhere. Armaglass had been shattered. Bullets of autoguns, empty las-cells, and blackened things which had been incendiaries or something equally destructive littered the ground.

It was not pretty, and it was going to cost millions of Throne Gelts.

But it was very likely the unsuccessful rebels didn’t care. The biggest avenue of the hab-block was a torrent of former nobles, PDF deserters, hive-gangers, corrupt Guilders, hired killers, death cultists, and some others less reputable ‘professionals’ it was best not to dwell upon in polite society.

They were enough of them for a great military parade, Marianne was sure.

But it was not a parade. It was a procession of the guilty and the traitors. Elevator delivery after elevator delivery, men and women were sent upwards, extracted from the dark battlefields at the base of Hive Chen-Jin or deeper than that, and forced to walk on a road which would lead them outside of the large walls.

They weren’t collared with explosive devices, these men and women. A large majority had their hands tied, but it was mostly for the sake of appearances. Save a few exceptions, it was visible all fight had left them. The Gutenberg Heiress had already noticed former nobles of lesser Houses sworn to Chen, Han, Zhou march among their numbers, their expensive clothes attracting all attention in the midst of a sea of stained azure uniforms, hive-ganger makeshift armours, and uglier equipment. There was no arrogance fuelling their eyes and their expressions.

It was evident these men and women had believed to be part of a resistance movement. It was also extremely clear the defeat had been so terrible they didn’t believe a single second anymore their chances of victory had existed in the first place.

Sometimes a flicker of insanity arrived to the head of one of the rebels, of course. One times out of ten approximately, it was even enough to convince him or her ego not everything was lost. That if he or she escaped, the booing crowd agonising them of insults on the manufactorum roofs and the chain of production platforms would change their tune. That resistance was not dead.

Each time a single step was made past the two red lines painted on the ferrocrete, the gigantic spiders on the right and the huge scorpions on the left were reacting instantly and the demise of the rebel was quick to come, though not necessarily painless. The stinger of the armoured living-rams and the mandibles of the arachnids didn’t necessarily dealt a lethal blow for their first strike.

The message was simple: trying to escape the fate Her Celestial Highness had in mind for you wasn’t going to do you any favours. Marianne completely approved.

It took over two hours for all the prisoners to pass through. In this sector alone, it meant slightly over sixty thousand men and women. As a new Regina decree had been published that the formations would be twelve thousand-strong, this meant five new Penal Legions bound to be transferred into orbit and delivered to the Departmento Munitorum.

Some bureaucrats were going to sing the praises of Lady Weaver for the rest of the year. Military campaigns across the galaxy always could use more gun-fodder than they had available.

It took thirty more minutes before being allowed to be close to the Chosen of the God-Emperor. This time, unlike the first, the Vicequeen of the Gutenberg Chartist Fleet felt considerably underdressed for the audience.

The Living Saint was a vision of gold, silver, and ruby, and even the minor quantity of ashes and debris onto her armour were unable to tarnish her beauty. Her angel-shaped helmet was held between her hands, though with the number of shields protecting her and the many, many Space Marines at every chokepoint and in position to intercept shell and projectiles, it wasn’t exactly a belief in her own invincibility. And there were the golden wings, of course. They shone of an incredible light, like they were a second dawn by themselves, and it was accented as several Space Marines’ gold paint reflected the light.

Her white uniform seemed barely enough to merit an under-note, by comparison.

“Your Celestial Highness,” the commanding officer of the *White Ducat* bowed.

“Your Excellency,” the Basileia replied with a nod. “You were quite busy around Nyx.”

Marianne had a lot of arguments ready, since she had not exactly tried to be discreet and her interlocutor had a few million potential informants to inform her of what she had been doing since the Ball of the Emperor’s Ascension.

But since the Living Saint was more amused than anything...

“I am. May I be one of the first persons to congratulate you into defeating this rebellion?”

“You may,” the golden-winged mistress of spiders and scorpions answered. “However...the masterminds behind the entire conspiracy were laughably incompetent and completely unprepared to face me. It’s like they didn’t bother reading any pict-news or any report from Nyx. It was a really underwhelming rebellion, all things said.”

“It did a lot of collateral damage.” The broken hab-walls and ransacked warehouses were indicative of some noticeable destruction.

“The infrastructure can and will be repaired.” The black-haired Living Saint said in a tone used to be obeyed. “There are plenty of unemployed Wuhanese who will jump at the chance of gaining a legitimate job with good pay, and the accounts and the palaces of the treasonous nobles are seized as we speak, providing plenty of funds for the reconstruction and the improvement of Hive Chen-Jin.”

When the rumours had said the Lady of Nyx was mercilessly efficient, they hadn’t been joking.

“It had to be done,” the Victor of Commorragh continued with an expression which showed she had not enjoyed the battles and the problems met in this Hive. “I lost years of potential expansion thanks to Hongfeng Cao, I am done humouring their threats and their resistance now.”

And with her Seneschal-Consort being the Planetary Governor of Wuhan Secundus – or the Regina, it was faster to say – Lady Weaver had her hands free to get rid of the inefficient and rebellious men and women opposing her.

That they were so many in the first place proved that Wuhan had really been a source of headaches in dire need to be cleaned by fire.

“You will need new blood to create a leadership which can do its job without a catastrophe every decade,” the Gutenberg Heiress declared confidently.

“Are you volunteering for a seat in the Wuhanese Parliament, your Excellency?”

The trap was tempting...but Marianne had not risen so high by accepting this kind of unsatisfactory gains.

“Perish the thought,” the blonde woman harboured a half-pious expression. “I just wanted to let you know that the Chartist Fleets are ready to transport thousands of competent administrators and other qualified personnel to the Nyx Sector if you express this desire.”

“And here I thought you were trying to sell me hundreds of Merchant Charters...”

It was intended as a joke, Marianne knew it, all the Astartes around it knew it, but humour and opportunity weren’t forced to be antagonistic.

“I can do that too,” the Vicequeen informed the Living Saint. “As your Sector is recovering from recent internal and external trouble, your active percentage of Charters is ever-closer to one hundred. As a duly-appointed representative of the Speaker for the Chartist Captains, I can provide plenty of Charters. Seven thousand and two hundred Fleet Charters and one thousand and one hundred Hereditary Charters is an insufficient number for a Sector governed by your radiance.”

It wasn’t the full strategic view of the merchant marine in the Nyx Sector, really. The Living Saint before her commanded hundreds of Mechanicus transports and other Adeptus-owned hulls, authorising her to use far more Warp-capable ships than these harsh numbers suggested. Yet they were Adeptus-owned hulls, in the end, and what was borrowed for a few years could be taken away again.

The golden-winged Saint wasn’t offended by her comments. In fact, she began to chuckle as Marianne paused to catch her breath.

“I have a feeling that if I named you as one of my Ministers, it would be like adding promethium in an ocean of fire.”

Well, Marianne couldn’t vouch for the veracity of *that*. More the pity.

“But since you’ve started so eloquently, your Excellency, please continue.”

The Governor of Solingen knew she had to thread lightly now. It was both an invitation...and a possible door closed in her face if she said the wrong words or the truth wasn’t to the liking of the Living Saint.

“You need a powerful Merchant Navy at your service, your Celestial Highness. Unfortunately, by the fault of your predecessor, the pool of voidborn manpower is extremely limited. As are the number of Navigator Houses residing in your Hive World and the surrounding stellar systems. The measures you have taken towards Rogue Traders and SDF crews are steps in the right direction, but every time you launch an important Crusade outside your frontiers, this short-sized reserve will be emptied in short order. Honestly, what you need is a fresh influx of a couple of million void-faring merchants ready to ally themselves with your Nyxian Merchant Houses. Given a few tax incentives for the first decades of settlement, the expansion of voidborn effectives will be particularly notable, and you will be able to crew the fleets you want, be they military or merchant.”

“A couple of million,” the eyebrows were raised and the tone was slightly sceptical. It was not completely unwarranted, given that many merchant ships had a crew inferior to two hundred to save costs in the hydroponics and air-purifying sections. “This is not a small number.”

“The Gutenberg Chartist Fleet is three millions ships-strong,” automatically replied Marianne. “This is not a small number.” And there were Chartist Fleets, both allied and inimical to their interests which were more numerous than the Gutenberg’s. She was not going to inform the Living Saint of this fact today, though.

A Space Marine coughed loudly. The black eyes of his mistress didn’t even blink.

“Have you ever heard of the Hive World of Krieg?”

**Hive Chao-Lai**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“Krieg?” Wei repeated the noun which had once meant ‘war’ in the German language. “No, I can’t say I know a planet going by this name.”

“I didn’t either.” Taylor confessed before lighting the hololith in her Consort’s room and pointing at a region of western Segmentum Tempestus almost right on the frontier with Segmentum Solar. “It’s not surprising, though. The Uhulis Sector is hardly next door, and away from the trade lanes the Chartists of Ultima use.”

“In such a strategic position, the Hive World is a near-perfect node to trade between half a dozen Forge Worlds of Tempestus and the main markets of Segmentum Solar,” Wei commented thoughtfully. “Assuming they have a good Warp-lane to send starships into Segmentum Solar, of course.”

“They have one,” Taylor confirmed, “it isn’t a trail as ancient or as prestigious as the Ophelia-Necromunda one, but it leads deep into the Mainz Sector.”

“And the Mainz Sector is ruled *de jure* and *de facto* by the Gutenberg Chartist Captains,” the Regina of Wuhan smiled. “They didn’t leave anything to chance, did they?”

Obviously, there was no need to ask who the ‘they’ were...

“Would you if the opportunity presented itself? The Krieg-Mainz trade junction is maybe not the most frequented path of the Imperium, but any trail allowing merchants, military hulls, and all Warp-capable vessels to sail into or exit Segmentum Solar is an adamantium mine by itself. It’s easily one million star-faring hulls per standard year, with all the wealth it implies.”

The insect-mistress of Nyx wasn’t a mercantile specialist, but she could see all too clearly some of the advantages. Ships in need of maintenance would use the repair shipyards of Krieg or Mainz. Immense cargo-containers could be manufactured nearby and sold in orbit of the planets, or loaned if this was the Chartists’ desire. Minimal custom taxes could be applied on the most common goods, with the certainty that the benefits would outweigh the tiny costs, since there were so many hulls travelling back and forth.

“And they have the advantage of not being in direct competition with us,” the elegant Wuhanese woman added as the hololith switched from a normal view of the galaxy to showing the main merchant lanes used by the Ultima Chartists and the Administratum to reach Solar. “Rising power or not, the Nyx Sector will never be able to overshadow them.”

“Yes.”

“I suppose that leaves the drawbacks of the bargain.”

The Basileia flexed mentally her wings and rolled her shoulders.

“The first problems going with accepting the bargain are evident: we will have a lot of Krieg voidborn and plenty of other civilians playing in our backyard. I know our own Cartel Heads and Merchant power-makers are ruthless, but the Kriegers have been in this cutthroat business since early M33. Keeping them in line isn’t going to be simple.”

“On the contrary,” Wei retorted, “you just have to bind them by marriage into the existing line.”

The parahuman flinched and tried not to gape.

“There would be at least a couple of million men and women. Not all would be marriageable or want to be, but...”

“Sorry, I wanted to say: hundreds of thousands of marriages.” The smile of her Seneschal-Consort – now a Planetary Governor in her own right – had grown far wider, if you could believe it.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

There were moments like this when Taylor Hebert acknowledged she was not paid *enough* to deal with the mountain of Imperium-generated problems arriving on her doorstep each day.

“The other problem is that as payment to play the intermediaries, the daughter of the Speaker for the Chartist Captains is very much interested in negotiating a contract for a percentage of our Aethergold and Bacta to be delivered to the Throneworld.”

This time Wei grimaced, seeing like her the heart of the problem.

“A percentage? Damn. You didn’t manage to agree upon a fixed numbers of tons or cubic metres?”

The golden-winged veteran of Commorragh rolled her eyes.

“Wei, the other side isn’t completely stupid you know. One or two inquiries must have been largely sufficient to discover we’re just at the very beginning of increasing our stocks in Noctilith and Bacta. Fixing a threshold of tonnage when you haven’t the faintest clue how high the mass production is going to rise would be idiotic. And the High Lord didn’t send us an idiot.”

“Point taken.” Wei nodded, pressing a rune-dial on the command panel and materialising the ‘freighter’ of the Gutenberg Chartist Fleet, which had likely enough firepower to be a match for any Lunar-class Cruiser. “She isn’t afraid of her actions being seen as an attempt to establish a monopoly?”

“The percentage we made a lot of *hypothetical* debates about would be a long-term contract between the Speaker for the Chartist Captains and me.” Taylor groaned. “*Hypothetically*, I think there would be a set period, maybe one or two decades, where the Gutenberg Fleet would be the Chartist House chosen to transport the Bacta and the Aethergold to Holy Terra, and then they would auction it to the other important Chartist Fleets of the Imperium.”

The prestige won in influence and wealth of the first auction alone would be likely sufficient to cement Speaker Aliénor Gutenberg as one of the greatest High Lords having ever held the title, and definitely secure her Chartist Fleet’s future until M35 ended. Even should a Gutenberg fail to become the next Speaker for whatever reason, it was the kind of coup – and contract – no one was going to forget, because the contract would still be there.

For some reason, Taylor didn’t think the Chartist parties were going to be very interested in setting a time-limit to it.

“I imagine the gains Gutenberg proposed in return for a contract of that magnitude weren’t cheap.”

“They aren’t.” Ten thousand Charters to begin with, and the blonde emissary was even open to the possibility of creating Hereditary Free Charters, which technically, were only one or two levels removed from the power and renown of the Rogue Trader’s Warrant of Trade.

“And Krieg? What do they want in exchange of their voluntary participation?”

“That’s the biggest problem. They want to participate...militarily.”

“Excuse me? Haven’t they heard of something called the Munitorum tithe?”

Taylor laughed.

“Oh yes, they have. The problem is that the Munitorum doesn’t want them anymore.”

A lot of emotions appeared on the face of her Consort. In the end, confusion won.

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

“The Administratum tithe of Krieg is extremely valuable for the Imperium,” as a trade hub and a favoured ally of the Gutenberg faction, if it wasn’t the end of the galaxy was at hand. “And the Kriegers have an astronomical weapon of all kinds ready to arm anyone who has the Gelts to buy them. But their traditions and their...heavily-oriented mercantilist culture, shall we say, have resulted in attitudes and behaviours which are completely at odds with the duties one expects from Guard officers. I have decided to ask above my head for the records, because I’m sure it is going to make a lot of amusing reading.”

“Sure, if you love learning from military disasters...”

“You don’t call yourself the ‘Krieg Trade Korps of the Mercantilist Autocrats’ and hope for the best.”

“Krieg Trade Korps? Who by the Golden Throne chose a name like that for guardsmen?”

**Hive Shujia**

**Arch-Cardinal Winston Marlborough**

One point which was too often underestimated in tales and legends was how energetic Living Saints could be. Winston had been on the move for three full days at the surface of Wuhan, and he had barely managed to catch up. Hives Chao-Lai, Chen-Jin and now Shujia for the seats of power; Guangzhou, Shenyang, and Chengdu for the main industrial sprawls; all visited in less than ten days, potential rebellions strangled before they could be registered as something more than a mere nuisance.

It was making him glad in a way that he was ‘only’ the Arch-Cardinal visiting a part of his Ultima Arch-Diocese, and not the Emissary-Cardinal or whatever title the Ecclesiarch would choose for the man – or the woman – chosen to be a permanent representative next to Lady Weaver.

Winston had received youth-giving treatment and rejuvenation less than thirty years ago, but he didn’t feel young enough to follow this extremely fast pace of action.

The scribes following Her Celestial Highness certainly felt the same way, if their exhausted faces were any indication.

“These cisterns are too small and their maintenance is deplorable! The Guild in charge of this Sector must be fined!”

New data-slates were hastily filled with imperious orders.

“The PDF garrison is twenty minutes late as of the patrol schedule they gave this morning! Send the message that if I don’t see them at the next barrack without a plausible reason explaining why they’re nowhere in sight, a new Penal Legion will accept new volunteers by the end of the day!”

Rolls of blank vellum found themselves covered in ink and other writing resources.

“There are security norms for the tech-conveyors, and it is obvious they have been ignored! Find which Cartel was in charge of this level and fine them, then bring tech-experts to clean the mess!”

The Arch-Cardinal had seen the same thing happen with the Regina of Wuhan at Hive Chao-Lai earlier in the day, but the whirlwind of activity was far more massive and impressive with the Living Saint. It was because the Basileia was divine of course, but in this instance, the frenzy of tens of thousands of insects escorting the scribes, transporting building materials, arresting incompetent individuals, and sometimes even directing Space Marines towards problems to solve was just amazing.

Entire armies of spiders were running everywhere, spreading vast quantities of webs to quarantine hab-blocks under investigation, while others disappeared to give the local workers new location to pour their efforts into. Scorpions were leading patrols of PDF forces, Templar Sororitas, Astartes, Skitarii, and practically every armed force which would be called a standard military force on a Hive World. Arbites patrolled the streets, giving praises to the men and the women who stayed true to their oaths, and punishing the lazy and the crooks.

It didn’t seem very ordered at first glance, but once the situation was properly studied in mind and spirit, it showed a remarkable degree of organisation and discipline. The Shujia domains had become a staunch hive of insect and human activity, and Winston felt he could be forgiven for the unintentional pun going with it.

“Your Celestial Highness,” Winston only walked the last steps when the last wave of scribes and petitioners left – though it felt wrong to call the latter that, as several of the middle-class overseers had looked like a spider had dragged them out of their bed to convince them to answer their summons

“Your High Eminence,” the golden-winged Chosen of the God-Emperor saluted him. “You arrived earlier than I expected.”

“Really? I think that compared to Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg, I am a bit late.”

The manipulative woman had tricked him into believing she would wait the return of the Saint, when in reality nothing was further than the truth. It had taken him a day to return to his ship, and more hours than he felt comfortable to deal with arriving to the Mandeville Point and travelling to the Moros Sub-Sector.

“I didn’t see her *that* long ago,” the black eyes of the Basileia grew thoughtful. “I was quite busy helping my Regina deal with her inheritance.”

“If you forgive me the presumption, your Celestial Highness, isn’t it-“

“-a waste of my time to return Wuhan to something approaching lawful order? I don’t think so. By coming here and participating in the renewal of a Hive World, the foundations are prepared for reforms and a better, more respectable and enjoyable life for all Imperial citizens. As quality of life increases and the souls of the Imperium experience true happiness, as they know the God-Emperor smiles upon them, the ugly temptation to turn to heresy is curtailed.”

Winston nodded thoughtfully. Plenty of young and optimistic Priests often publically supported these views as they began to preach. It wasn’t against the Cult of the Saviour Emperor’s main doctrine, but it was also a position incredibly difficult to defend when the times were hard and the military effort to fight against the xenos consumed an entire society.

“To be the shepherds of good, not the religious enforcers of the Cathedrals,” the older man murmured.

“Exactly. If we give the opportunity to every citizen of a good life under the condition they work diligently for it, we prevent Decay and Despair from taking hold in their hearts. If they have strong feelings of friendship and unity in their hive-communities, they will be less inclined to attempt miniature warfare and shed innocent blood. If the wealth of the massive projects is invested responsibly and is used to help the life of the population as a whole, not just a few Spire-born aristocrats, they will still be wealthy people, but the poison of Excess will be killed before it can cause more damage.”

“You did immense damage to Excess at Commorragh,” Winston was a bit curious why the fell power was included when it was an annihilated shadow of what it had been.

“Yes. And I have no wish to allow it to resurrect itself. What the xenos did it to birth it must be the first and only time a race will succeed in creating an abomination of decadence, hedonism, and murder.”

There was no place for compromise in these words, and the Arch-Cardinal acknowledged the implicit treat: the Angel of Commorragh would not let humanity fall into this pit of damnation. Billions of men and women would be sent to their deaths before Excess would be able to crawl out of the darkness of non-existence.

“You didn’t speak about Change.”

“No,” the Living Saint gravely agreed. “I didn’t. I think...for this one only true goodness and vigilance can hold the walls. Good Change isn’t a problem by itself. I don’t see it as one anyway. But ambition must be kept in check. Change just for the sake of changing must be stopped before it leads to disaster.”

“Admirable words,” and Winston meant it; the speech was really heartfelt and could serve as a warning how it was important to stay vigilant, to never lose sight they were servants of the God-Emperor, may the Astronomican shine forever. “I have a few questions about the practicalities of it, nevertheless.”

“Donations will stay donations as I said in one of my speeches. Religious devotion mustn’t transform itself into exploitation.”

Winston stayed with his mouth open quite a few seconds before closing.

“Are you sure you aren’t a mind reader, your Celestial Highness?”

“No,” the envoy of the Ecclesiarch was given a superb smile, “but while I thank your subordinates to feed biscuits to some of my beetles, please let them know that discussing your projects in front of them tend to let me know everything in advance. Including the fact some of them were partisans to flagellate themselves to gain my attention...”

There were going to be plenty of demotions once this audience was over. Winston would make sure of it, even if it was the last edict he ever wrote...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector**

**Drakkar System**

**Drakkar**

**6.339.297M35**

**Pontifex-Governor Tangaroa Piripi**

“The ways of the salmon are impenetrable.”

Tangaroa gritted his teeth and readjusted his warm cloak, which, praise the mighty God-Emperor, had not been made using any fishes.

“Enough of this foolishness!” Never had he been so glad that like his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather, he had been sent to receive the best education of the Sub-Sector in the halls of the Lemurian Theological Schools.

“The ways of the salmon are impenetrable.”

Normally, this level of disrespect was something he should be able to reward with a firing squad or a rope and a broken neck. And he would throw a memorable party afterwards too. There were many people who infuriated him across the archipelagos of his homeworld, but none as much as Kahurangi Winiata.

Sometimes, Tangaroa wondered if the dark-haired brute had been elevated to his rank of Salmon-Questor by the Council of Free Captains just to spite him. Everyone knew he and this brainless troublemaker had a *history*.

But the idea was absolutely ridiculous, when he thought deeper about it. With the positions of Grox-Questor and Moss-Questor, the duties of Salmon-Questor were the most important positions one of the Drakkar population could reach while clinging stubbornly upon their primitive superstitions.

“Drakkar is a Cardinal World and an Agri-World governed in the name of His Most Divine Majesty, the God-Emperor of Mankind. Failing to pay your tithes is treason and will be published as such.”

This time he obtained a reaction. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the one he wanted. A mere flicker of an emotion in the corner of a black eye was all he was able to observe.

At least the speech got some modification.

“We have already paid the tithe. Praise the ways of the Great Fisher, Master of the Bountiful Seas.”

“No, you haven’t!” The gall of this impertinent brute was astounding! “You delivered two megatons of salmon flesh, one megaton of moss, and three megatons of grox! These were the quantities of the tithe for last year!”

“The ways of the salmon are impenetrable.”

Tangaroa Piripi tried not to sweat or to show he was furious. Deep inside, he was raging like one of the greatest hurricanes often striking the coasts of Hebrides Island.

Increasing the size of the yearly tithe had not been his idea. It had come directly from his masters while he was taking...a well-earned sabbatical holiday in his private resort of Paradise, an inherited property which had been for five hundred years the property of the Piripi Pontifexes. It was a holy gift of the Hierophants which had always been very enjoyed by his predecessors and himself.

At the time he had received the instructions, it had seemed a good idea. The salmon were the bigger fishes to ever have swam into the oceans of Drakkar, and their placidity and their rate of reproduction meant there were always a lot more dying of old age than the quantities being carved apart to be devoured by Lemurian or Vijayanagaran mouths. The moss used in ointments and medicines always reappeared after a year, and even if they killed all the grox present on the biggest islands, the edible beasts would infest said lands like they’d never left it a season after!

Now that it was facing the ‘rebellion’ of the entirety of the Drakkar salmon-masters, moss-gatherers, and grox-guardians, the idea was...considerably less brilliant than the enthusiastic acceptance of the terms.

“I am your Planetary Governor, and a direct representative of the Adeptus Ministorum. If you refuse to obey my commands, you are acting against the will of the God-Emperor Himself!”

And if the brute incriminated himself, maybe, just maybe, he could give the order to the two Frateris Templars behind him to shoot the Salmon-Questor and the rest of the Captains would bow to his will...

“While the ways of the salmon are impenetrable, we know enough to acknowledge you do not speak for the Great Fisher, Master of Mankind and the Bountiful Seas.”

Finally! The words of heresy he had been awaiting for all day.

“Frateris Templars! You have your orders!”

But no lasgun was fired.

Tangaroa Piripi turned his head...and froze, as the men he had brought with him were surrounded by at least half a dozen brutes in the service of Winiata.

Worse, these were *armed* brutes, and not the kind of equipment his troops had ever reported missing. Chainaxes, enormous guns that the sheer weight of should discourage anyone to wield them with one hand, and a few dangerous-looking electro-harpoons.

The Pontifex-Governor wasn’t happy to see them at all. The Drakkar Raiders had been disarmed once they were properly ‘convinced’ to take their Right of Founding so many centuries ago, and the Hierophants, praise be their wisdom and their visionary ideas, had continually enforced these edicts.

More treason. More heresy. Truly the barbarians were incapable of understanding anything but the threat of overwhelming force.

“You are quite lucky to not have killed any official of the true and legitimate Imperial authorities on this world,” the Lemurian-educated man said, hiding his fear under defiance. “A representative of the Living Saint is on her way. If your rebellion hasn’t ceased by the time she lands, I won’t be able to help you.”

“While the ways of the salmon are impenetrable,” Kahurangi Winiata replied, “neither I nor any man, woman, and child of Drakkar can remember when a Piripi helped us. We will be at the spaceport to welcome the foreigner.”

Perfect! The Frateris Templars who had stayed here after the departure of the two divisions three years ago would enjoy shooting them on sight once the Saint’s messenger learned the depths of their perfidy and how they broke the God-Emperor’s sacred order.

**Judge Missy Byron**

An enormous advantage Drakkar had over Sparta was that the temperatures were definitely more bearable for humans.

On the downside, the Agri-World wasn’t exactly a tropical destination either. The current temperature as they left the spaceport was fifteen degree Celsius with a cold breeze freshening everything. It was fine as long as you were walking, but when staying immobile, it was far less so. And while political considerations required her to don her green power armour today, the Shaker parahuman wouldn’t have been optimistic enough to wear T-Shirts and other summer clothes.

Then Missy left the spaceport and as the unpleasant odours hit her, she was very happy to have left Teddy in orbit. The sense of smell of the Rashan was far more developed than the one of a human – something humanity compensated by having a better eyesight – and right now, she had the urge to gag or do something undiplomatic as unpleasant odour after unpleasant odour assaulted her noses.

The culprits were not difficult to find. A long line of men from the population of Drakkar waited behind the welcoming committee of the Ecclesiarchy and the Frateris Templar. In their hands they held metallic chains allowing them to control several groxes.

Oh, and they were also wearing nothing but loincloths. Missy would deny it until her last breath, but the muscles...ah, they had brushed their skins with fish-based oil.

Yes, the combination of the land animals and the sea food was...unique.

The young woman was going to concede it was better than being welcomed with laser and explosive ordnance, but not by much.

“Lady Byron! I profusely apologise for this insulting welcome!”

In the last couple of years, Missy had met a lot of Planetary Governors. Most of them when the victory of Commorragh became known to the Nyx Sector at large, and suddenly the rulers were incredibly interested in bowing and prostrating themselves before Taylor. In this amount of time, she had learned appearances could be deceptive, and that until you hadn’t set a foot on the planet and learned at least the basics of the local population’s culture, it was difficult to form a permanent judgement without it biting a vital part of your body in return.

To be clear, the Arbites Judge knew very little about the situation on Drakkar. Lemuria and all possible sources of information in the Suebi Sub-Sector had been extremely reluctant to deliver the data asked of them.

But here, it was not hard to see something wrong.

First, there was an enormous gap between the formation of Frateris Templar guarding the Planetary Governor – who answered to the name of Pontifex-Governor Tangaroa Piripi – and the civilian population of the Agri-World.

A couple of metres would have denoted respect. But today, the distance separating civilians from soldiers was far closer to twenty or thirty metres, and they had placed themselves to let the wind carry their smell, making the insult very deliberate.

Secondly, the Drakkar...err...she didn’t even know how the local population called itself, something to remedy as soon as possible. Anyway, the civilian population of Drakkar, or at least the men and women present, shared a few physical particularities. They were pale-skinned – certainly due to the planet’s small warm seasons and the lack of sun for several standard months. They were heavily tattooed with blue and green inks replicating impressive fishes onto their skins. And they were tall and heavily muscled, to the point Missy had keeping thinking about not staring very hard at these superb abs and other evidence of masculinity. Not that the women were bad per say, but Missy would leave them to others, sorry Taylor.

The Planetary Governor, by contrast, shared a few facial traits, like the jaw, the hair...but nothing else. His skin was tanned like he had spent several years out in a sunny place which wasn’t available to the rest of the population. Given the private and very ostentatious yacht-transport she had seen in orbit, it was likely not far off the mark. Tangaroa Piripi was thin, almost effeminate, and if he had muscles, his Ecclesiarchy robes hid them well.

Missy steeled her mind. It was entirely possible she saw too much when there were other good explanations.

There had been words like ‘rebellion’ and ‘active disobedience to Imperial rule’ thrown around. Maybe the problems weren’t the Pontifex-Governor’s fault.

“The smell is unpleasant, but I will survive,” she smiled coldly after a few more seconds of silence. “This is one of the actions of disobedience mentioned in the astropathic messages?”

“Yes!” the man beamed, and Missy fought hard not to shiver. The man wasn’t that bad-looking...but she really, really didn’t like how he looked at her. “They have been at it for the better part of forty standard days! It is becoming impossible to put them back to work!”

Ah yes. With all the issues created by the Noctilith discovery in the Spartan ice fields – which were not considerable, but every kilogram was extremely useful and one the enemies of humanity had not – the victorious Judge had nearly forgotten that to mount the anti-rebel army of Frateris Templars, several worlds of the Sub-Sector had seen their Frateris Templars’ garrisons stripped from them. Drakkar was among these planets which had been required to ‘volunteer’ to send said religious fanatics. The companies inside and outside the spaceport had to be a large percentage of what was military available for the Agri-World.

It wasn’t much, when the total population of Drakkar was five hundred million.

“But there have been no deaths? No violence of any sort?” If it happened, certain laws of the Lex Imperialis took precedence, and Missy would be forced to at least to present a few scapegoats to the Adeptus Arbites.

“No,” the Pontifex-Governor gloomily and very reluctantly told her. It didn’t take more than a couple of seconds that the man was behaving like he was sorry it had not come to that. “These disobedient workers are...peacefully in rebellion. Their greatest crime is a refusal to pay the Imperial tithe the God-Emperor asks of them.”

Which was bad enough, by the tenets of the *Lex Imperialis*.

Refusal to pay the tithe always met with vicious reprisal from the Adeptus Terra, including but not limited to the execution of the Governor and all his family, astronomical fines levied on the planet for ten generations, execution of all rebel groups and decimation of the population, and settlement of new workers to take the jobs of those who had betrayed the confidence the Imperium had placed its faith into.

It was extremely harsh, and it could go from there to monstrous quickly. But the tithe was one of the foundations of the Imperium.

Still, there was something in the back of her mind...Missy asked for one of the data-slates she had allowed one of her Nyxian assistants and went on the data column after column. And yes, there was something deeply wrong.

“If they haven’t paid their tithes, why are the transports contracted to ferry the two million megatons of salmon to Lemuria not present in high orbit? The *White Harvest*, the *Icy Bounty*, the *Caspian Fisher*...these hulls weren’t visible to my ship’s augurs.”

“Err...” The Pontifex-Governor tried to make an unconvincing sign of the Aquila, all the while beginning to sweat and muttering something unintelligible to sweat under his breath.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you just said.” Her worst suspicions were beginning to be confirmed, however.

“I said...they paid the tithe quantities asked of them last year. The tithe this year was significantly higher, but they sent the same quantities of fishes, moss, and grox meat.”

Well, that explained everything. No wonder Tangaroa Piripi had tried to keep Nyx in the dark.

“I see. Tell me, Pontifex-Crusader. Did you bother reading the astropathic messages sent by Her Celestial Highness?”

“I did.”

“Yes, you did, the hololithic-logs I have in my possession confirm it. So tell me, repeat high and loud what the Article 2 of the new decrees sent by Basileia Taylor Hebert on the first fraction of 297M35 demanded of the Planetary Governors of the Nyx Sector.”

“I...I don’t know.”

The man was lying, and he was doing it so badly even his men didn’t believe him. This included the white-armoured Frateris Templars, who had once stood as bodyguards next to him, and were now doing a fine job of trying to increase the distance between him and them.

“Let me refresh your memories, then. No tithe status will be altered, be it decreased, increased, or the nature of goods outright modified, without the express command of Her Celestial Highness.”

Missy shrugged.

“The Administratum tithe-masters are above this decree, naturally.” It wouldn’t do to anger the tax-collectors. “But the Administratum didn’t contact you.”

“I...I had to act! The tithe delivered to Lemuria was far too small compared to the wealth of this Agri-World!”

There was only one reaction that she could make when someone uttered that.

Her right fist took him in the jaw. Given that she was in a power armour, and he had no protection whatsoever, the damage was not pretty to look at.

“There are ancient protocols to determine the value of the Imperial Tithe.” The Shaker felt no amusement anymore. “They are sorely in the hands of the Administratum, though the Lady of the Sector disposes of a certain influence to intercede in a world’s favour or not. You, Pontifex-Governor, certainly don’t have any power to decide how large the tithe needs to be. Stand up.”

The white-robed ‘holy man’ continued to cry and moan in pain, plenty of unintelligible things agitating his lips.

“Stand up!” She barked, and at last the man slowly tried to return to his pompous attitude, though the large mark she had left on him was going to leave a large bruise...assuming she chose to spare him.

“No more lies. No more dissimulation. How high was the tithe-increase you asked of these *loyal Imperial citizens*?”

“Thirty...thirty percent.”

Thirty percent. By everything which was holy, it was a minor miracle the population had not gone into a rampage and executed this imbecile along with his entire administration.

“Who told you to increase the tithe?

“I acted of my own volition!” Even by not owning a lie-detecting device, the expression of the injured Pontifex gave it away. Hopefully, he would have left incriminating evidence in his personal quarters. Not that Missy really needed it, of course. The smell of the fishes and the grox stank less than the manipulations and plots of the Hierophant of Lemuria.

Anyway, it solved nicely the situation.

By his own words, Tangaroa Piripi had committed treason.

Breathing loudly, the Judge deactivated the mag-protections around her holster and drew her lightsaber.

“By the authority vested in me by the Her Celestial Highness Taylor Hebert, Lady of Nyx, acting in the name of the God-Emperor, I, Judge Missy Byron, judge Pontifex-Crusader Tangaroa Piripi guilty of high treason against the Imperium of Mankind. The punishment is death.”

The green blade materialised into existence, certainly provoking awe among the spectators...and terror on the traitor’s face.

“Templars!” the word had certainly been intended as a shout, but it was more heard as a panicked squeak. “Templars, save me!”

Not a single soldier of the Ecclesiarchy moved.

She executed a single strike, and the head of the former master of the Agri-World was separated from his shoulders.

**Salmon-Questor Kahurangi Winiata**

“I knew these bastards of Piripi wanted to have their heads rise, but ha, ha, ha!”

“Shut up, Ari,” Kahurangi ordered his brother. “There are moments to laugh, and it isn’t now!”

He was not going to cry at the fate of Tangaroa. The Lemurian-trained Pontifex had received what he deserved, and if given the chance, Kahurangi would have loved to wield the blade himself.

But the situation demanded to stay calm and careful. They heard via the vox-broadcasters the conversation of Piripi and the Saint’s envoy, and the Drakkar fishers and grox-farmers had cheered when it became obvious the increase of the tithe had been confirmed to be totally illegal.

That didn’t mean they had been recognised as innocent and they were free to return to their ships – for those who lived and worked on them – or to the other jobs proud men did.

This terrible green blade which looked like a plasma fire given sword’s shape had decapitated the Pontifex-Governor. It could do the same to their bodies if its owner desired it.

Thus when the call arrived the Saint’s envoy desired speaking with their leader, Kahurangi Winiata walked towards the woman, and did not dance or celebrated the death of their former Governor by pissing upon his corpse. He kept his calm. He was serious – as much as he could anyway. The ancients of the Council had named him to the useless position of Salmon-Questor because they wanted to annoy the Piripi Pontifex and his large family who shamed the blood of Drakkar by their very existence.

Kahurangi was a good warrior, and in general, he was one of the best electro-harpoon wielders of his tribe. Somehow though, he didn’t think the green-armoured woman in front of him was an opponent in his league. She was thin, but not like Tangaroa Piripi. There was a...danger surrounding her. Or maybe it was just the way her troops in dark armours waited behind her like they were only necessary by the mop-up.

“Do you speak for the population of Drakkar?” The brown-haired young woman didn’t waste any time.

Kahurangi was prompt to shake his head negatively.

“No, but I can relay your words to the Council of Captains.”

Eyes as hard as plasteel stared at him before softening.

“Good enough. As I’m sure you’ve heard, the increasing of the tithe was illegal. Therefore there was no rebellion and every action and law passed by Tangaroa Piripi since he decided to violate the *Lex Imperialis* is therefore null and void. If the men and women of Drakkar decide to return to their work and provide the same tithe that they’ve always delivered these last decades, everything will be forgiven.”

Kahurangi had hoped for the best, but...he had not expected that.

“This is a very...attractive offer, Lady.” The fisher swallowed. “But the next Pontifex-Governor may feel the ‘forgive and forget’ thing is heretical and try to ignore your words.”

“I am not going to leave the system of Pontifex-Governors in place,” the ‘Judge’ retorted bluntly to his astonished face. “This traitor broke the laws, but he could have only done it with his administration supporting it. And anyone stupid enough to think a rise of thirty percent of the tithe without any forewarning or tithe-census is the correct move deserves to be shot. I don’t know yet if I’m going to execute the relatives of the Pontifex-Governor, or I’m just going to send them back to Nyx and let Her Celestial Highness deal with them, but I can assure you they won’t be available to rule this world anymore.”

The explosion of cheers and applauses which followed may have been heard everywhere on Hebrides.

“In this case...” Kahurangi bowed formally. “Thank you. Several members of the Council of Captains will come to Hebrides as soon as the waves and the God-Emperor allow in order to renew their oaths.”

“It’s good to hear.” The green-armoured woman smiled. “On our side, I am going to order the replacement of the Frateris Templars and these useless Lemurian Priests. I am not sure who will be chosen, but we will likely deploy a Nyxian regiment for the protection of the spaceport and the capital. The Priests will most likely be chosen by Cardinal Prescott now that Lemuria has revealed itself to be totally unsuitable. On your side...if you have a method to choose a popular leader, I suggest you exert it in the next days. I want a new Planetary-Governor to be chosen before my departure.”

Kahurangi Winiata stayed with his mouth wide open for several seconds before closing it, as more furious claps and victorious cheers echoed everywhere.

**Judge Missy Byron**

“I will never understand humans.”

“Don’t worry, Teddy.” Missy caressed her favourite Rashan’s head before taking a new piece of salted grox on the improvised barbecue which had been installed next on the Blue Hebrides’ beach. “I think most of the time humans are unable to understand themselves. I mean, boys can’t understand girls. And girls don’t really understand boys either.”

Otherwise she would have already found the perfect boyfriend.

“That’s certainly why the God humans have chosen to worship walked among us and was a human,” the Shaker continued after serving herself a half-glass of this strong beverage served by the Drakkar men. “It takes a human deity to understand the humans.”

Or not so much, in that case. The poor Master of Mankind had insisted over and over that he wasn’t to be worshipped...and look what had happened the moment he wasn’t there to smack heads around.

“I still fail to understand where the logic is in their actions,” the Rashan shook his head before swallowing the moss the civilians had agreed to share with him. “They didn’t want to pay more than their due with one tithe, but they request friend Weaver gives them another?”

“Well, the Administratum tithe is very different than the Munitorum tithe, Teddy. One demands they pay a high level of their production of salmon flesh, moss, and grox meat. The other is all about soldiers.”

The female parahuman bit out in a second piece of meat before developing her point.

“This isn’t exactly a normal Agri-World. The people here saw their settlement of the planet as a humiliation. I haven’t been able to read a lot of history books since the treason investigations took most of our time, but I’ve no doubt their ancestors were battle-hardened guardsmen. They lived for war. A lot of the traditions they kept from generation to generation were tales of old glory on far-away battlefields. As they saw it, the Ecclesiarchy insulted them by trying to make farmers of them and disarming them of their ancestral weapons.”

It would have been already a questionable move at the best of times, but the worst part was how unsuccessful the Ecclesiarchy had been. The heroine was not of a nature to question every report sent her way, but when seconds after the general amnesties were made official men and women began to parade with antique autoguns and old gatling-type weapons, it was rather obvious the disarmament had been a bit ineffective.

“But there aren’t that many of them,” Teddy protested. “Each ‘Hive’ of Nyx has more population than them, and they will still have to pay the first tithe. Will friend Weaver accept? Their weapons are old, and I saw no location to produce them here...”

“These are good points,” she acknowledged. “And the answer is...I don’t know. Taylor will certainly be impressed by their spirit, their self-control, and their magnificent abs.”

The black-and-white Rashan huffed after the third ‘quality’ was mentioned.

“But yes, they have little industry to speak of, and most of what exists is shelters against the weather storms and repair facilities for their ships.” Most of them which were as old as the personal weapons of the Drakkar warriors. Munitorum tithe or no Munitorum tithe, a certain level of investment into the civilian Sector was likely going to be necessary in the short-term future.

Not that Missy anticipated big problems on that front. Now that Drakkar had lost its status of Cardinal World and was going to get a proper Planetary Governor working for the benefits of its inhabitants, the obstacles for Chartist ships and Cartel negotiators to come in this region of Suebi were going to be drastically diminished.

“No logic,” groused Teddy one more time. “Where are we going once the Governor will be chosen? Lemuria?”

“Yes,” Missy nodded. “Though given the pile of incriminatory evidence I’ve found in the Piripi Governor’s Palace, there’s a high chance other highly-powerful men and women are going to act against the Hierophant and his allies.”

Taylor had assured her she could command a reasonable amount of military assets from Nyx and that she would be the top authority on the northern trail. So far, so good. But there was one organisation which was absolutely not subordinated to her, and if the rumours she had found in the papers were true...

“These Lemurian Priests aren’t very intelligent.” Teddy commented before salivating on a new plate of moss. “Praise the Great Lotus we have friend Weaver’s will to remove them before they cause more harm and injustice.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Exorcist-class Grand Cruiser *Pavian Victory***

**3.377.297M35**

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach**

The problem with the young Tech-Priests, Wolfgang had quickly discovered, was not that they had no new ideas. The problem was that they had too many plans for this unfortunate galaxy, and if the Archmagi and Magi supposed to monitor them weren’t careful, either the Exploration Fleets would jump in the closest black hole, or they would succumb to the first tech-heresy they discovered.

As such his audiences with Tech-Priests, to his rising consternation, weren’t so much about trying to implement new things as it was to rein in the most enthusiastic troublemakers.

“No.”

“But the Warp Hulks are troves of ancient technology!”

“And the dangers posed by them are anything but light.” The young Rogue Trader replied, refraining from slamming the head and the mechadendrites of his interlocutor against the surface of his table until he listened to reason. “The Warp Hulks, if we meet any, will have their fate decided on a case per case basis. Assuming it is a small one and the opposition is projected to be minimal, I may give my support to a fast raid to acquire more archeotech. But if it is a large one or it is already taken over by xenos, the assistance of Space Marines will be sorely needed before a single foot land on these nests of corruption and enemies of Mankind.”

Tech-Priests being Priests – something that came to his mind countless times these last days – the debate didn’t stop there and it took him more than two hours to convince the representative of the Mechanicus that there were laws that even a Rogue Trader couldn’t close his eyes upon, and even if those didn’t exist, the wrath of Lady Weaver wasn’t something to lightly consider.

It was thus with a certain relief Wolfgang watched the tech-delegation leaving his bridge before he permitted a sigh to pass his lips. Truly there were certain days it was very tempting to ask Lady Taylor Hebert how in the name of the God-Emperor she was managing to find STC templates with such regular frequency.

Being a ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’ was not entirely devoid of drawbacks, but it was something that allowed her to wield a sum of political and military power which made sure the cogboys were staying quiet most of the time. Since this was an imperfect society, this was nearly a miracle by itself.

The Terrathens may achieve the very important goals everyone prayed to, and he would be part of the legend. Or they would not. Wolfgang could only hope it was going to be the former, not the latter.

“Beyond the Light, death or glory...”

The blonde-haired veteran of Commorragh watched the stars the bridge’s bay allowed him to observe at his leisure before a few seconds later, his stomach began to growl, his thought pattern interrupting itself. With a no small amount of surprise, he realised he had missed his last two meals, running from important meeting to urgent meeting.

The next minutes were thus spent watching the fabulous view offered by the high orbit of Nyx and the myriad of ships, shuttles, shipyards, and every space object moving around while eating the sandwich he had prepared for lunch. It was choreography after choreography of ceramite, adamantium, plasteel, and grand decorations, minimal in the case of the fuel tankers owned by the Weaver Cartel and the austere Magi, sublime in the case of the Brothers of the Red, and from gleaming to outrageous for the Ecclesiarchy hulls.

If the rumours were true, the Mistress of Ships had invested into a new command headquarters which allowed her to triple the communications network and allowed her Archmagi and Magi to oversee and control the trade and exchange flux. Seeing the incredibly small – though near-null might be more appropriate – number of accidents was giving credit to the whispers and unconfirmed information.

The Master of the *Pavian Victory* had finished devouring his second sandwich when the familiar pneumatic hiss announcing that the doors leading to the bridge were opening arrived to his ears.

“Wonderful,” the day had been so long he didn’t even hide his exhaustion. He didn’t immediately turn his head to see who was the bearer of bad news, as he was busy pouring himself a new glass water from a crystal jug which according to the experts, was a two thousand years-old treasure stolen by Kalmar. Since the legitimate owners had long disappeared from the annals of history, Wolfgang had been allowed to keep it...like most of the table service of the Pavian victory. “What is the problem this time, and how much is it going to cost me to solve it?”

The footsteps were far quicker than usual, and before he was able to free his hands, others’ were on his shoulders.

“Two very interesting questions,” purred against his right ear a feminine voice he hadn’t heard in years. “So we are problems after all...”

“Julia?” Wolfgang asked incredulously before the caress on his shoulders turned into an implacable grip.

“Look at him dear sister,” a young woman in a traditional but very elegant blue uniform of the Imperial Navy came into view as his glass was abandoned on the table. “He remembers us after all.”

“Adriana,” Wolfgang said. “I can explain everything.”

“It’s ‘I can explain everything, Lieutenant Commander’,” the twin who had neutralised him effortlessly murmured in his ear.

“Congratulation for your promotion, Lieutenant Commander,” the trapped Rogue Trader said hastily. He didn’t want to be brutalised, thank you very much!

“Why thank you,” Julia von Lohengramm purred, her voice as usual sublime...but then Wolfgang had become very knowledgeable in super-predators of all kind since his arrival at Nyx, and many were quite beautiful. “I am the CO of the Cobra Destroyer *Surprise*. Adriana commands the *Nightingale*, also a Destroyer.”

Wolfgang almost anticipated the ‘but’ which was about to follow.

“Imagine our surprise,” Adriana von Lohengramm spoke, her eyes inspecting her blue nails as one of her hands passed into her blonde braid, “that a famous Rogue Trader formerly of the Imperial Navy wasn’t there to welcome us as befit our status when we arrived a couple of days ago.”

“A famous bandit who stole our virginities,” Julia said threateningly, proving once more why she had received some of the best grade in several martial arts taught at the Kar Duniash Academy.

“A bandit we had to convince our father not to send assassins against, when he became aware of our torrid night,” Ariana continued.

“Poor Wolfgang ignored us, now that he has become a roguish Rogue Trader,” Julia’s voice took the accents of sadness before discarding the tremolos and returning to an imperious tone. “I hope you have a good excuse for your poor, poor behaviour, *upstart plebeian*.”

“I am not anymore in the Nay command loop, I resigned my Naval Secretary seat months ago!” the young man protested immediately before the blue nails on his shoulders dug further into his flesh and drew blood. “And I spent the last days running from Mechanicus gathering to Mechanicus gathering!”

“Do you hear that, my dear twin?” Adriana spoke softly, her eyes shining with mischievousness. “It sounds to me...he tries to say *he was too busy to see us*.”

“I heard it,” Wolfgang could not see Julia’s lips, but he could feel her amusement. “Fair’s be fair, his Nyxian conquests assured us they haven’t seen him at all these last months.”

“Of course the fact he had these conquests in the first place is clearly a bad sign,” Adriana added evilly. “And a lot of them were blondes, in case you haven’t noticed.”

There were moments, Wolfgang knew, where women were the most threatening species of the entire galaxy, and nothing, not the Drukhari, not the Orks, not the Eldar, could simply compare to the danger they channelled. And so he stayed silent. Only the God-Emperor’s intervention could save him now.

“I noticed. Do you think it’s because he was so satisfied with the night he spent with us he tried to see if all blondes could satisfy him, or it was an attempt to mock us when we would unavoidably catch him for his crimes?”

“My crimes?” He regretted instantly the lapse in control which had led to him uttering the two words.

“Well, the little party you invited yourself to was for noble men and women of high lineage,” Adriana counted on her fingers. “There’s the amasec you threw to the face of an Admiral’s son, I think...”

“You asked me to!”

“You took our virginities, obviously,” Wolfgang rolled his eyes hard, but didn’t protest. How terribly reluctant the twins had been...

“And you left the hotel without bothering with a single ‘goodbye’.”

“In my defence,” the Rogue Trader had to defend his honour on his one, “the company of von Lohengramm’s armsmen who was storming the place was very threatening.”

“What has happened to ‘Courage and Honour’?” Julia teased.

“I have never pretended to be born on Macragge...”

“It is a very unconvincing argument, I think,” Adriana stopped watching her sister manhandle him, and approached...he realised too late blue and gold manacles had been hidden from his sight and were now binding his wrists.

“I completely agree, my dear twin. He must be punished.”

Wolfgang felt his heart beat faster. What did they-

“His private quarters on this Grand Cruiser are worthy of our rank, and we have given leave to the crew working on the nearby compartments for the next six hours. It is plenty of time to punish this bandit of Rogue Trader for his impertinence.”

“Don’t resist, Wolfgang,” Julia purred again, “or the other Rogue Traders and the Basileia will receive plenty of blackmailing information on your Academy years...”

Adriana’s lips met his, and then they promptly dragged him towards his quarters...and his ultimate fate.

**Mechanicus Research Station *Entropy of the Quest***

**Leet**

Leet sneezed.

“Something both terrible and wonderful must have happened,” the Tinker declared, after ensuring that his surroundings weren’t able to melt into a lake of acid, explode, be set on fire, or the three outcomes at the same time.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t the time to go to a hololithic device and ask if somewhere in the system, someone had a problem. Five seconds after he had spoken, a mechadendrite was whizzing through the air and only his long experience allowed him to evade it and avoid being hit...again.

“Focus, Menial Leet. You still have two hours before the end of your working day. Unless, of course, you wish to renounce your video game privileges for the evening?”

There really had to be a hell for Tech-Priests like those, the parahuman thought, before returning to his attempts at creating again what the cogboys called a ‘magnetic containment flask’, which was apparently one of the most important parts of the typical plasma guns built by the Imperium.

Of all the red robes chosen to monitor and punish him, **T-11001100-Zeta was one of the worst. Worse, by a series of ‘coincidences’ which reeked of some deep conspiracy, Dragon had seen fit to promote him to the rank of Omicron-Alpha Tech-Priest, and the cyborg had taken it as the sign he was doing a good job and his behaviour was perfectly appropriate.**

**Just for that, Leet had decided that the first ‘target’ in the epic, most epic game of *Assassin Creed: Imperium*, would have the appearance and the mannerisms of T-11001100-Zeta. He may not be able to reveal the true name, there were limits, but everyone who mattered would know that justice had been accomplished.**

**“No, I don’t.”**

As much as he didn’t want to admit it out loud, the threat of losing his precious video games was working, damn these futurist servants of Skynet!

“But it would be quicker if I used my-“

“NO!” shouted another cyborg, drawing a gun which had been hidden underneath his red robe. “No Tinker abilities in use! You will learn properly to build the magnetic containment flask, and with the proper machine-prayers! Only when you will have mastered this skill will you be authorised to experiment on instable models!”

“Wait a minute...it has never been a question of instability in the session of tomorrow! What are you-“

“Ah, Manling! Just the courageous blood-oath companion I was searching!”

All thoughts of damaged flasks or imperfect equipment fled Leet’s mind faster than a greenskin running to war. The Slayer was here. This was apocalyptic bad, enough to make his estimation of ‘miserable day’ from ‘oh God, I am so going to be near-dead when it ends’.

Not improving his morale was that as Borek marched terribly fast in his direction like a guided missile hunting its prey, the smell arriving to his nose was incredibly powerful. Now, the Duardin – or the Squat, depending the audience – weren’t exactly maniacal on the hygiene, but such a powerful stench meant his ‘partner’ had emptied a few barrels of beer.

And when Leet said ‘beer’, the Tinker wasn’t speaking about the liquids Weaver had sold the recipes and the gene-coded plants to several Civilised Worlds. It was the ultra-condensed alcoholic ‘beer’ that was served to the Space Marines, you know, just to allow them the possibility of become inebriated. Normally, no unaugmented human, save perhaps the Basileia of Nyx but she hadn’t tried, could even consider drinking a cup of the stuff and remaining somehow lucid.

You did...things, when you were under the sway of this ‘ultra-beer’. Things you regretted a lot the moment you were sober enough to think with your brain and not feel like an anvil had been dropped on your head.

But there was worse. While most of the living beings of this galaxy were destroyed by the power of alcohol in mere seconds, it appeared to have an invigorating effect on Borek, who regularly proclaimed he had some of his best ideas savouring the contents of his tankard.

“My working day isn’t over, Borek.”

“Actually,” the traitor **T-11001100-Zeta intervened, “Leet has worked diligently today, and as such can be dispensed of his last two hours.”**

**“Good!” the fierce supporter of video games had not even the time to protest; before his brain could compute what was happening, the fingers of the Duardin had already seized his arm and he was dragged vigorously towards the exit. “Good! I have found a new test-weapon, and I want to see if it suits your fighting style!”**

**Leet did his best not to sob or cry. ‘Testing’ new weapons generally resulted in him having the opportunity to learn how to not kill himself with something extremely sharp for ten minutes, and the rest of an hour consisting of his ‘trainer’ beating him like their Lady and Mistress had kicked the lives out of the Drukhari.**

**“This time I will only use my fists, I promise!”**

**Leet whimpered.**

**Fafnir Forge-Temple**

**Ancient Rylanor**

“Are you sure, Venerable Ancient?”

The worst part wasn’t the respect in the female Magi’s voice. The worst part was the Alpha Legionnaire trying to hide his laugh as a cough.

“Yes, I am certain, Lady Dragon. And please while we are in private, just call me Rylanor. Venerable Ancient makes me feel older than I already am.”

‘Venerable Ancient’ was a non-feigned mark of respect, but every time it was uttered, it reminded him that for thousands of years, he had been buried in the catacombs of Isstvan III. Buried and unable to do anything against the traitors who had deliberately trampled and destroyed everything the Third Legion once stood for.

“And stop smiling, Marine of the Twentieth, or we will see if your kind can swim in the Mechanicus Forges.”

“We are the Heracles Wardens now!”

“You will always be the Twentieth to me,” especially since they had Pierre in their ranks. If they had all been filled with unknown faces, he may have not been riled them this way, but since everything he did was going to arrive one way or another to the other Dreadnought...

“While I think your reasoning can hold with the Heracles Warden, as they are to my best knowledge the only ‘true Successor’ of the Alpha Legion,” Dragon Richter spoke politely, “please keep in mind that what is true for them is not necessarily valid for the descendants of the Nine Legions which stayed true.”

“Yes, I’ve studied the archives available and seen how much many Chapters diverged from their parent Legion.” The Black Templars, to quote the most obvious example, had really dodged a vortex torpedo of significant weigh when their Primarch decided to save his brother the Khan instead of coming back. Surely Sigismund had not approved what he was creating? Unfortunately, Rylanor had not exactly been close with the Astartes who was to become the first High Marshal of these God-Emperor worshippers.

The God-Emperor. The very name felt incredibly wrong. The nascent Imperium had been the driving force for atheism and scientific reasoning. The Emperor had denied his divinity more times than he could remember. The forces of the Twenty Legions had been fighting to give Mankind a future where superstition and falsehoods like those were incinerated.

To arrive in a future like this one reeked of the divagations this eternally damned motherless bastard of Lorgar had spread before Monarchia. At the first opportunity he had, Rylanor was going to have a little ‘confession time’ with this traitor. If the luck of the battlefield favoured him, he would even ask him how good were his ‘new abomination-gods’ before roasting his face and tearing him apart piece by piece.

“I had a lot of time to think since my arrival on Nyx,” granted a lot of what he had thought before they injected him this neural-regenerating ‘Bacta’ was really not that reasonable or coherent. Many deeds had to be done, but running across the galaxy in the hope he would find this gutless traitor daring to call himself ‘the Eternal’ was not going to revive his battle-brothers. “And while I can definitely be in error, I reflected on the past history of the Emperor’s Children, and I think the root of the problem came at the very beginning.”

“When your Primarch was discovered on Chemos, you mean?” asked the Alpha-, the Heracles Warden.

“No, I mean from the very beginning,” Rylanor sent a huff through the device broadcasting his voice. “Or at least the day when the cursed Selenar unleashed the Blight against our gene-seed reserves. We...because I do not think I was exempt of it...we...we were too prideful. We were perfectionists, and we thought it was a good thing.”

“Pardon me Lord Rylanor, but Astartes are all perfectionists, given how tight their operations plans are in order to achieve victory against insurmountable odds.”

“Yes and no,” the Contemptor-Cortus Dreadnought answered. “All Legions had perfectionist and arrogance problems, that much can’t be argued against,” and he would be very, very surprised if it wasn’t the reason most of the Sixteenth Legion had been corrupted before the first shot of the Isstvan III massacre was fired. “But we were already arrogant and perfectionists on an entirely different level. We were the scions of Old Europa. Oh yes, we had lost against His Majesty, but our parents had managed to inflict quite masterful defeats upon his normal armies before the Thunder Warriors forced them to surrender. We called ourselves the Emperor’s Children. But not once, not really, we thought very much about brotherhood.”

Seeing how the blue-red Space Marine was nodding, he understood the point he was trying to make.

“Every Legionnaire thought himself loyal beyond question,” the gene-descendant of the Hydra said carefully. “And when the shield cracked, there wasn’t a new cuirass underneath to unite the Third.”

“We lived by perfection,” Rylanor bitterly chuckled. “And we died by perfection. I can blame our gene-sire for aggravating the problem, but this needless quest had begun long before he took command. ‘Only by imperfection can we fail him’, eh. In the end...”

“In the end?”

“We weren’t perfect,” the Terran-born Astartes interred in the Contemptor admitted. “And even if we somehow reached it, it would do more harm than good. Perfection is the enemy of humanity. What does wait at the top of the mountain when there are no more challenges to be conquered?”

For the Third Legion, the answer had been decadence, hedonism, and a titanic failure to question the abyss the Phoenician was about to throw them into.

“This is why I am not that saddened to see no single world in this Sector has high levels of compatibility with our gene-seed. Let us recruit from diverse horizons, and then forge a true brotherhood of Space Marines which may be able to erase the atrocities of the Naga and his servants.”

Since the Emperor had decided he was going to be for the second of time the Master of Rites of the Third, it was only fitting to remember what had failed the Legion and do his utmost not to repeat it.

“You will still need a homeworld,” Lady Magos Dogma Dragon spoke gently, “unless it is your intention to be a fleet-based Chapter?”

“No, having no real anchor with humanity would cause a lot of undesirable effects.” Because their lineages told them they were above the masses, and Fulgrim had not exactly burned to put an end to this state of affairs. “I understand I have two Sub-Sectors to choose from?”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**0.471.297M35**

**Lord Commander Militant Paul von Oberstein**

One of the many good points about the immensity of the Imperial Palace was that it destroyed the very concept of coincidence.

When the Inner Palace alone was bigger than ninety-nine percent Hives of the Imperium, when the Outer Palace was a lesson of gigantism by itself, and when the vaults, corridors, plazas, chambers, and fastnesses were inhabited by tens of billions of souls, you didn’t find someone unless you were actively searching for him or her.

This was why when one of the High Twelve of the Senatorum Imperialis found you when you were busy giving a little exercise to your lazy mastiff, Paul von Oberstein didn’t need a second to recognise the monumental lie.

Not that he would say so to the man’s face. High Lord or not, the Imperium had a long history proving no one was truly beyond the reach of the Holy Inquisition when its agents wanted your death.

“You and Vandire are causing me countless headaches,” Berlin Chimera started the conversation bluntly as their respective protection teams took position while Paul was keeping Pilou from trying to jump on the Inquisitorial Representative. As amusing as the sight would be, Paul didn’t think Berlin would thank him for being covered in mastiff’s saliva.

“I apologise for the inconvenience,” the Lord Commander Militant said loudly and let ten seconds pass before muttering in a lower voice. “But as long as he tries to intervene in my affairs, this arrogant and pampered bureaucrat is going to be opposed...opposed vigorously, I should say.”

“Be reasonable.” Had it been anyone else, the black-haired commander of the Imperial Guard would have told him politely or impolitely to throw himself – or herself – from the Walls of the Palace and stop bothering him. His interlocutor being an Inquisitor, his speech had to be adapted.

“I am reasonable. I don’t try to explain to this imbecile how an administration must be organised to function properly, despite all the evidence pointing that a grox in his seat would do a better work. So if he stops intervening in the affairs of the Astra Militarum, I will be quite happy to ignore him.”

The ancient Lucifer Black guardsman didn’t voice that unlike the billions of scribes and useless administrators present on the Throneworld, the millions of flag officers working in the strategiums were fighting an eternal war against a multitude of horrors on a million fronts. Too often the odds were stacked against these men by the fault of some new – or old – Warp abomination, a xenos species possessing the ability to decimate regiments in mere hours. He really, really didn’t need the Administratum to intervene and make everything worse, as they always did once their limited brains tried to implement their ‘fantastic ideas’.

“The Adeptus Administratum was to be the senior service by the will of the God-Emperor.”

“And if Malcador the Hero was here to render judgement today, he would exterminate at least half of the highest-ranked Adepts in the first minutes of his new tenure,” the Lord Commander Militant refused to be cowed by some dusty manuscripts that had been utterly turned against the very purpose of the first rulings done in His Name. “The Imperium as it stands today is more and more working in spite of the Administratum’s efforts to sabotage it, not because the scribes do a good job.”

“I understand why Vandire hates you so much,” if a real emotion burned inside the Lord Inquisitor, it was hidden well under a rockcrete-like stance.

“The feeling is absolutely mutual, I assure you.”

Berlin Chimera sighed. Like everything significant done by the Inquisitorial Representative, there were perhaps a hundred motives for making that sound, and none of them included anything involving mere mortal exhaustion.

“Would it have been so much a sacrifice to place his creature as Lady Weaver’s chief of staff?”

“Yes,” he replied as bluntly as the tall Inquisitor.

“The lackey would not have survived long.”

“Probably not enough to work a single day in office,” Paul agreed. “And this incompetent would have been lucky to not be on the receiving end of some harsh execution.”

“Why then?”

“Many reasons,” the Lord Commander Militant replied. “The most obvious from a strategic perspective is the time that would have been lost. I can compensate for a lot of things. Men, lasguns, artillery shells, transports; all of this and trillions of objects can be produced and sent to the frontlines. But when time is lost, it is gone forever. Since sending anyone to Nyx involves a minimal travel time of roughly one standard year, sending an imbecile to the victor of Commorragh would result in one more year being lost. I refuse to waste one of my most efficient Lady General’s preparations in such a crass manner.”

“Cadia is not under siege.”

Paul von Oberstein caressed the head of Pilou.

“It is not under attack...yet. You and I both know there is going to be a reaction for the victory of Commorragh. The servants of the Enemy can’t give us centuries of relative peace now that the Eldar’s ears have been severed and Biel-Tan is gone. We have a few more years, but I don’t think we will be granted more than three decades. And the storm will break, the Guard will be tested like it never has been in the last centuries.”

“All reasons to maintain at least a facade of unity.”

The commander of the largest army of the galaxy gave the Lord Inquisitor an incredulous stare.

“My Lord, I will thank you to not take me for an idiot. If you want unity, why did the Arch-Terran Cardinal and the Paternal Envoy were allowed to have such a public...debate, last year? Why are the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy and the Speaker for the Chartist Captains hosting their private soirées to ensure they are conflicting with each other? Why is Utrecht among the High Twelve in the first place?”

The last point had always been particularly galling for the Astra Militarum as a whole, and generated plenty of resentment. In trillions of wars, the Imperial Guard was the first and only solution the Imperium had to win victory. The Imperial navy was stretched too thin across hundreds of thousands of light-years. The Mechanicus armies were too small, and the Frateris Templar refused to defend anything which didn’t fall under the Ecclesiarch’s ownership. The Space Marines had, despite their lethal capabilities, not the ability to fight massive attrition campaigns unless they were authorised to fight together.

The Guard held the line, and too many times, they were rewarded by a lot of monuments...and nothing changed, being excluded from the highest sphere of power.

“So to give you another argument why I refused, I was not going to jeopardise my relation with one of my most important subordinates because Vandire wants to play his games.”

Vandire and his court of prejudice and obsolescence could scream loudly and curse him, Paul wouldn’t change his mind, and he had the Fabricator-General’s staunch support on this point. The Tech-Priests loved the idea of new archeotech, and enjoyed even more – assuming it was humanly possible – the idea of leaving in the dust the Adeptus Administratum.

“May I ask then, who was the officer you chose as the Living Saint’s chief of staff?”

Had it been anyone not a High Lord, Paul would have been certain the information had not arrived to Berlin Chimera’s spies. However, the stern-faced Lord Inquisitor was one of the High Twelve, and acquiring sensitive information was his job. There was a tiny chance Berlin Chimera – a name which had little value, since it was one of fifty identities the Guard was aware of concerning him – was in the dark.

Paul would neither bet his mastiff nor anything important on it.

“General Nikolai Rokossovsky of the Vostroyan Firstborn.”

It took less than one minute for his interlocutor to find the exploits associated with the name.

“Xerxes Vandire is going to hate it.”

“A happy coincidence, I am sure.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan**

**Hive Chao-Lai**

**3.503.297M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Sometimes, Taylor thought the Administratum was trying to avenge itself from her numerous reforms by burying her under mountains of vellum and various documents of bureaucracy.

Fortunately after a few minutes of logical brainstorming, the recognised Living Saint acknowledged how unlikely it was.

No matter what she did, the Administratum was *always* trying to bury her under mountains of paperwork.

Therefore there were really no incentives against continuing her current pace of reforms. If they tried to be their obstructionist-selves in all circumstances, she was hardly going to be subtle and comprehensive before ramming her vision of a new Imperium through her throat.

Still, it was a lot of paperwork. Unfortunately, there was no way around it. Wei’s ascension to the Governorship of Wuhan meant their respective positions had to be clarified. In other words, on each other’s world, the primacy of one’s command had to be confirmed. On Wuhanese soil, the insect-mistress would be the Basileia-Consort and Wei the Regina, though her Living Saint status ensured her religious authority stood over those of a ‘mere’ Planetary Governor.

On Nyxian soil, of course, she was the Basileia and Wei the Regina-Consort. When absent from Wuhan, her girlfriend would name a Regent able to exert some of her executive power, the legislative one remaining in the hands of the new Wuhanese Parliament – which despite some remarks from prude conservatives, was certainly not a democratic institution.

Many problems hadn’t been solved. There remained a lot of discordant voices, for example, opposing the hypothetic case that Wei and she left the Nyx Sector at the same time. As long as they stayed inside its frontiers, the sheer number of Astropaths available to their duo made sure that any Regent – Dragon playing this role at Nyx, nowadays – was more relaying her orders than truly ruling on his own. The potential of two Regencies at the same time, however, was displeasing a lot of Adepts and influential person. To these arguments the whispers of securing her dynasty’s future and a lot of marriages often arrived to her ears.

This already considerable bureaucratic mass would have been a significant issue in its own right, but of course the Suebi Sub-Sector was piling trouble after trouble to it. Missy had removed the status of Cardinal Worlds from two planets, and while it was the correct decision, the Hierophant was screaming bloody murder and several conservative Priests had stopped singing her praises. Plus there were sending more files and voluminous protests her way, of course.

“I hope it’s not another pile of vellum,” the Basileia groaned as the Emperor’s Champion of her Dawnbreaker Guard returned into her Wuhanese office. Fortunately, the Black Templar’s hands were empty, joy of joys.

Her relief didn’t last long.

“Lady Rafaela Harper and...guests, my Lady,” Sigenandus said, as the eighteen Astartes protecting her abandoned their own struggle against the paperwork and became again the vigilant bodyguards they had sworn to be.

And there were a lot of reasons to be vigilant.

Rafaela Harper had not come armed for war, wearing only dignified black clothes supported by a black cloak, but she was a Lady Inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos. Inquisitors did not arrive to this high position by being inoffensive.

Right behind her a male figure half-hidden behind a black hood became visible. What could be seen of his visage was a mask of scars, and Taylor wondered for a second if the man had been a prisoner of the long-ears. An Inquisitorial rosette was chained to his left arm.

Last but not least, were three tall Space Marines, armoured and painted in the very colour of night from helmet to boot.

She had rarely seen the symbol on their pauldrons before now except when it was painted on departing Astartes, but there was no mistaking them for anything else than members of the ‘famous’ Deathwatch.

“Lady Rafaela,” Taylor saluted, “and...guests?”

“And guests,” the Lady Inquisitor replied. The message was clear: the ‘guests’ were not going to give her or anyone on Wuhan their identity.

“I see.” That presaged nothing good. “While I appreciate the interlude between the burdens of paperwork, I presume you have a reason to come without an appointment?”

“Yes,” there was no apology and no remorse, but the Lady Nyx had not expected any. “The reasons why the Ork assault against the Svalbard Sector was below most tacticians’ estimations appears to have been solved. We have a name: Arrgard the Defiler.”

“Ugly name for an ugly beast,” the golden-winged woman murmured as the Lady Inquisitor handed a data-slate to Techmarine Renaldo, and after the usual prayers to the machine-spirits and the security checks, a large vision of...something ugly was projected in three dimensions.

It was utterly chaotic and devoid of any beauty and symmetry. It was constructed by a species which had never cared about discipline, productivity rules, and even the laws of physics.

It was a gargantuan shipyard, and if the Orks hadn’t built it, the result would have likely already imploded or exploded.

But it stood there, like a disgusting green wound into the face of reality. The recording had been obviously taken by a long-range augur at maximum distance of operability, but the distance was largely enough to distinguish the tens of thousands hulls and what had to be an unprecedented number of greenskins mustering for war.

“How were they able to gather in such numbers after the losses they’ve taken in the Svalbard Sector? The defenders of Tigrus slaughtered tens of millions of them, and other forces in the Eastern Fringe have also impressive tally-counts of Ork heads.”

“The onslaught against Tigrus was only the first war cry of the Orks,” the anonymous Inquisitor declared, as the three Deathwatch Marines stood like silent statues behind him. “This is the second green tide.”

“Why haven’t they already departed?” the parahuman asked. “I would have imagined Tigrus would be sufficient to slake their war-lust.”

And if that many crazy xenos had thrown themselves against the defences of the Eastern Forge World, it was highly likely Tigrus would have fallen before the arrival of the Lamenters.

“Because Tigrus doesn’t interest them anymore. Their chosen target...it’s you.”

The commanding officer of the forces having destroyed Commorragh narrowed her eyes in contemplation.

Of course.

The Orks had ‘heard’ about the annihilation of the Dark City. All this psychic tumult of carnage and military devastation had excited them.

“They call you ‘Da Swarm Bringa’, and I think their intentions are...not that complicated.”

No, they were never complicated with the Orks. Once the Ork Warboss would give the word, an armada which knew nothing about self-preservation and subtlety would charge straight towards Nyx.

“To counter this, the Inquisition has a plan to destroy this abomination of a shipyard and slay the Warboss in its lair. But we need more Space Marines.”

The answer to this was really simple.

“No.” She didn’t even need to consult the numbers. “No, I’m sorry, Inquisitor, but I don’t have anything to send.”

“This is vital,” the man – she was reasonably sure this was a man, insisted.

“I am aware,” Taylor said politely. “And if I had either Space Marines or trained forces to send, I would deploy them in a hurry to support you. Unfortunately, the pool of available elite forces these days is rather empty. To ensure the survivability of Tigrus and its neighbours, I have sent approximately one hundred and five million guardsmen, between the frontline and support regiments. More than two millions Skitarii have gone with them. I sent the Lamenters to fight and find redemption, and the Iron Drakes have sent one of their Battle-Companies to suppress an Ork infestation near the Svalbard Sector too. Many Frateris Templars that I didn’t want to keep as garrison troops have also been deployed in this war. I am not going to find excuses; it’s just that after Commorragh, most of the Nyxian Munitorum tithe has been entirely absorbed by this conflict, and much wealth continues to be absorbed by it as we speak.”

Fortunately, with the war on Tigrus being nearly over – the mop-ups operation had begun – ammunition was going to flow to the deployed regiments and the lifeline established by her manufactorums would be no longer necessary in a few months.

Assuming the Orks didn’t send the second wave into the fray, of course.

“This is...regrettable.”

“Yes, though I find more regrettable the fact plenty of Sectors which have not been at war in the last centuries have contributed absolutely nothing to the defence of the Eastern Fringe when Nyx and several major Mechanicus bastions have bled lives, war material, and resources to wipe out these beasts. For the sake of curiosity, where is this ‘Defiler’?”

The ugly shipyard was replaced by a star map on the hololith, and the Basileia tried not to grit her teeth at how relatively close this monstrosity was from Tigrus. Still, this detailed map was familiar...

Too familiar, she realised after a few seconds.

It was familiar because the Core Crystal had showed her the same part of the galaxy when it had sent her the coordinates of the ‘Ymga Monolith’.

But there wasn’t enough time. No matter how well the planned meeting with Neferten went, there just wasn’t enough time. Her troops weren’t ready. Too many veteran regiments were dispersed stamping out anti-Imperial rebellions into the Samarkand Quadrant, and the others, those available in a week or two, were in dire need or rebuilding, and if not, retraining. There weren’t any Space Marines available in the numbers optimal for a war of this importance.

“I...I may have a solution to deal with Arrgard. But I need to check information from an external source. How long do you think we have before the Orks decide to launch their WAAGH?”

“Unfortunately,” the anonymous Inquisitor lips twisted into a parody of smile, “I’m afraid the only way to know that is to ask the xenos. Precognition scrying suggests we have until the end of the year. I certainly won’t trust anything after that.”

**Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr**

“The behaviour of this Deathwatch Marine worries me,” the Raven Guard had never been noted to be fond of long speeches before revealing what they wanted, and Kalyan Gowtham wasn’t the exception to this rule. “Twice in five days he has visited Hive Asao, and it wasn’t to visit the sections where the Wuhanese poured ferrocrete into the Necrons’ tunnels.”

Vulkan N’Varr was grateful they were in one of the most secure rest rooms reserved to the Dawnbreaker Guard. Granted there were Inquisitors in orbit. Security, informational or otherwise, was far from guaranteed.

“It is possible he’s checking that no Necron grave-engines have spread everywhere,” Epistolary Ramon Nino tried to present an optimistic scenario. “After the sheer incompetence shown by two Inquisitors and most of the Wuhanese military forces, I wouldn’t blame him to not trust the reports coming from certain parties.”

“EXCEPT HE HASN’T TRIED TO SCOUT THE UNDERHIVE,” the Dreadnought of the Dawnbreaker Guard was prompt to counter the argument. “ALL SIGNS TEND TO CONFIRM HE WENT TO THE LOCATION WHERE OUR LADY AND GAVREEL FOUGHT TOGETHER.”

“It could be a coincidence.”

“A coincidence?” Kalyan said in a voice which could be best described as unconvinced. “These structures are so big that being in the same hab-block is something defying the Mechanicus simulations and the psychic precognitions. And this Deathwatch warrior is a son of the Lion. Forget the coincidences, cousin.”

“Kalyan is right, I’m afraid,” the Salamander Forgefather acknowledged. “I don’t know a lot about the Chapter of the Angels of Redemption, but what little has been recorded about them is very unflattering. They are prompt to abandon any military deployment without giving warning, and if there’s someone they feel obeying, it’s their Chapter Master, not the High Lords of Terra.”

“SECRETS UPON SECRETS, AND SECRETS BORN OF SECRETS,” Pierre agreed, his pirate hat firmly in place atop his metallic carcass. “THE FIRST LEGION IS THE MOST SECRETIVE LEGION TO HAVE EVER EXISTED.”

Ramon Nino laughed.

“I seem to remember that little is known about a certain Twentieth Legion, cousin. At least with the First, we knew where their homeworld stood, and their doctrine and chief officers could be recognised without problem.”

“OUR HOMEWORLD HAS ALWAYS BEEN IN OUR HEARTS. TO BELIEVE ANYTHING ELSE WOULD BE DELUSIONAL AND INSULTING.”

“Alpha Legion secrecy aside,” the Shadow Warden returned to the heart of the problem, “I admit I don’t know why this Angel of Redemption is really investigating Hive Asao. If he’s really after Gavreel, the level of access he has via Inquisition channels is sufficient to obtain a complete order of battle of the current and past Dawnbreaker Guard. Furthermore, I doubt very much there are intact cogitator databases of the battle which our Lady fought years ago remaining.”

“YES. THERE ARE FEW SERVO-SKULLS AND MONITORING DEVICES BELOW THE INDUSTRIAL RECYCLING LEVELS. AND MOST OF THE RESTRUCTION EFFORT WAS DONE ABOVE THE LEVELS INVESTIGATED.”

Any other day, Vulkan N’Varr would have left the Astartes of the Deathwatch alone, much like the other two black-armoured veterans had been informed they were rooms and training facilities at their disposal if they wished.

But this Marine was an Angel of Redemption, and since the Salamanders had paid the price for trusting these oath-breakers over three centuries ago, the Forgefather was not going to turn his back and ignore the actions of this xenos-hunter. It was possible the son of the Lion was harbouring only noble intentions. But the son of Nocturne wasn’t convinced at all this was the case.

“Unless our Lady has contradictory orders for you this evening, continue to monitor the Angel of Redemption, Kalyan.”

“With pleasure,” the Shadow Warden acquiesced.

“I COULD HANDLE THE SURVEILLANCE PHASE.”

“Last time we unleashed you into a Hive, you rode a Scorpiad and killed so many rebels there wasn’t enough of them left to form a Penal Legion,” the Forgefather replied severely. “I know you can be discreet when you want...but when times come to fight, you are worse than the Flesh Tearers.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Neptunia System**

**Ark Mechanicus *Iron Revenant***

**3.525.297M35**

**Archmagos Dominatus Dominus Belisarius Cawl**

“Isn’t it a bit too much, Master, to give a minor xenos species an entire planet?”

Belisarius didn’t stop analysing the data-flow of the ongoing water extraction realised by his machines, but that didn’t prevent him from an answer. An elite Archmagos could very well do two things at the same time, after all.

“Rho, Rho!” The senior Mechanicus Tech-Priest that many had taken to call ‘The Radical’ in the Nyx Sector exclaimed. “’Too much’ is for narrow-minded people, and this system was devoid of any human survivors when the Warp Storm dissipated. What do you think Lady Weaver should do? Wait for the Administratum bureaucrats to wake up and send a colonisation fleet in two or three centuries?”

Assuming there weren’t more Administratum screw-ups happening, it went without saying. Paperwork was the bane of everyone, as his recent punishment had proved, and why the Administratum refused to use cyber-wafers or any of the most modern data-keeping storage methods was beyond him.

Belisarius Cawl could bet without being risk of losing a single Throne Gelt that somewhere in the Archive Worlds, there were hundreds of colonisation projects awaiting in the darkness someone to save them from dust and insect-eating vellum.

Lesson one, two, and three of the great colonisation endeavours: don’t trust the Administratum in anything of importance. If you want to do something, do it yourself.

“And besides, the Civilised World of Neptunia Prime was not terribly valuable when it was part of the Imperium. The easily accessible important metal deposits were all mined in M30. If the traitor berserkers hadn’t attacked, it is likely it would have been turned into an Agri-World in a few centuries.”

Despite its name, Neptunia Prime was merely Neptunia Primus, the closest planet to orbit the yellow star of Neptunia. The few official documents saved from the harsh era of the Horus Heresy had not hidden that the capital had been transferred to Oceania – Neptunia Secundus – the moment the latter had reached a population of five million inhabitants.

For humans used to the heavily-regulated temperatures aboard starships, Neptunia Prime had been a bit too warm, and the climate a bit too wet and as several ancient files had admitted, too *tropical* and prompt to cover your skin with irritating insect bites.

So much for the reputation of hardiness certain Terran Rogue Traders had been content to spread as soon as they left humanity’s homeworld.

“Anyway the planet is Lady Weaver’s to do as she pleases,” the ancient Archmagos said to one of his most precious subordinates and partners-in-science. “And if this is a Xenos Protectorate she wants, it’s a Xenos Protectorate she will have.”

Since it gave her both the service of furry xenos experts in repairing all sorts of low-key technology, the Malta Starfort currently staying half a million kilometres away, and the assurance the xenos were kept under watch close to her power seat, the bargain wasn’t that one-sided.

“They have decided to call the planet ‘Lotus Haven’,” Rho-36 complained.

“Do you want a reminder how many stupid names my esteemed colleagues have managed to put into official charts?” Belisarius admonished Rho as the light indicating twenty percent of the water contained by the comet the *Iron Revenant* was mining began to burn a bright green. “And it’s only a translation from their language. I’m certain it sounds far better in a tongue which isn’t Low Gothic. How far ahead are we from the agreed timetable?”

“Two months ahead, Master,” Rho-36 replied. “Eight more months to arrive to Stage C and the Rashan-formation procedures can be left to the Nyxian Archmagi. Thirty-one years before the xenos can land and colonise the planet.”

“Acceptable,” he could have cut it by one more year, but the delays with this damned vellum mountains had delayed his arrival at Neptunia far longer than he had envisioned in the first place. “But Neptunia Prime – or Lotus Haven, as we should call it – is only one of out of four planets to restore.”

And in many ways, it was the simplest to handle, as it had the smallest water reserves to rebuild and required a relatively small number of specialised engines now that the Inquisition had thrown the Chaos piles of bones and skulls into a nearby star and the purification of the planet had been accomplished and recognised as such by the Ecclesiarchy.

The other three planets had been respectively a remarkable Ocean Hive World, a Forge World, and an Agri-World, known to the new Imperium as Oceania, Poseidonia, and Demetaria.

These mad brutes addicted to the abominations of slaughter and blood had ruined them beyond any possibility of recovery. It had been a heavy blow to the Imperium. Entire expeditions of the Mechanicus had landed on the ruins of the Poseidonia Forge World in particular, but there had been nothing to save. All metal and alloys had to be purified, recycled, and purified before the Inquisition was satisfied, and nothing really valuable had survived the heretical destruction and the long years of atrocious neglect and corruption which came after.

“Will Lady Weaver keep the old names of these planets?”

“Unlikely,” the science-believer Archmagos snorted. “Now that the reclamation operations on Poseidonia have been officially terminated, the goal is to make Neptunia Tertius an Agri-World of importance.”

Belisarius could understand the logic: with how much food the nearby Nyx System was consuming on a daily basis, it paid to have a contingency solution on hand, even if it wasn’t orbiting around the same star.

“Neptunia Quartus is most likely going to end up as an Industrial World once the atmosphere is restored and every major problem is dealt with. Unfortunately, the weather-control and the macro-scale infrastructure our predecessors used to sustain their civilisation on this planet are for now beyond my capabilities. Growing the usual vegetables and cereals on a world which will be half-covered in ice would be a monumental waste. It has important deposits of platinum ore and other strategic metals.”

“Yes, Master...and Neptunia Secundus?”

“Assuming it goes well, it will become famous as the first example of an entirely new category of worlds,” and he, Belisarius Cawl, would be recognised as the tech-architect who had made it possible. “It will be a Moth World.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Atlas Sub-Sector**

**Atlas Graveyard System**

**Light Cruiser *Benediction of the Machine-Spirit***

**3.532.297M35**

**Magos 10-Highland-Zeta**

“An unfortunate series of low-odds probabilities engineered into cataclysm,” 10-Highland-Zeta affirmed. “This was what created the countless disasters which struck against the humans who attempted to colonise this very system.”

“You’re saying this was bad luck?”

The Magos repeated twelve times his favourite machine-prayer.

He had nothing against humans not belonging to the Adeptus Mechanicus, but for some reason these Atlasian representatives were forcing to contemplate emotions he usually discarded by reflex.

“If you want to use such a profane and illogical superstitious term, yes,” no respectable Tech-Priest would use the words in a Noosphere file, evidently. “It was bad luck.”

“Nine colonisation attempts failed into the Atlas Graveyard these last three millennia! Three times asteroids slammed into the planet, twice a plague broke out aboard our ships, and each of the four last attempts saw more unique issues cause thousands of deaths! And all you have to say is ‘bad luck’!”

Yes, these ‘envoys of the First Dukes’ were really beginning to annoy him to the edge of his mechadendrites. This meeting couldn’t end fast enough. Then he would try his best to stay outside this Sub-Sector for over a standard decade. The new Forge World of Alamo had broadcast an intense desire for trained Logis, and 10-Highland-Zeta was willing to at least try his chance in the hiring trials.

“My apologies, envoy. I should have said ‘bad luck’ and ‘incompetence’.” By the Omnissiah, one of the first things any colonisation attempt should see to was verifying no asteroid or any celestial object bigger than a medium-sized satellite was in a collision trajectory with the planet you intended to settle! It was no witchery or heresy to say that! “The system labelled as the ‘Atlas Graveyard’ has a very unstable asteroid belt that past mining attempts have further destabilised, resulting in a large number of asteroids being on long-term collision courses with the single planet of this system. There is also the little-known fact your primitive satellites were not modernised to properly detect iridium-rich rocks, as this system possesses in abundance.”

Far from thanking him for these explanations, the men and women wearing ostentatious and ridiculous clothes – who had the idea to wear these ‘zebra-pattern robes’, honestly, some of these nobles had no taste – they glared at him harder. Praise the Machine-God and His Laws for protecting him from these illogical ideas.

“And the plagues? Surely you also have an explanation for them, Magos?”

“Your ships weren’t properly subjected to the twelfth-blessed rites given to Mankind by the loyal servants of the Omnissiah. Especially the rites of proper maintenance in the hydroponics’ sections.” He could only hope this kind of problem had long been rectified in the Atlas-owned hulls. Two precautions were worth more than one, he was going to write a report about it to the Council of Nyx. Diseases weren’t staying inoffensive because you weren’t travelling through the Warp. “And the numbers of Medicae available to fight against a pandemic of this lethality, obviously, were absolutely insufficient.”

The medicine’s supplies had not included the proper vaccines either. Which was completely illogical: 10-Highland-Zeta had been assured by Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies in person that serums and vaccines to stop the propagation of this virus were manufactured at Wuhan, Nyx, and Theta...and this long before the Chosen of the Omnissiah arrived.

“And the ninth failure? How do you explain this?”

“If you have an illogical relationship with a person of the opposite sex, don’t let your wife alone on the command deck? Basic security recommends-“

“GET OUT!”

The Magos was quite offended by this order.

“This is my ship, and there’s no need to be so rude...” Really the analysis and the study of the system had been exalting, but it was tiring dealing with these nobles. “Since the asteroids have proved to be particularly rich in iridium ore, would you accept writing a mining contract and send it to Nyx?”

As the delegation immediately stormed out of his bridge, the Magos supposed the answer to this question was a definite ‘no’.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Grand Cruiser *Ebon Drake***

**3.551.297M35**

**Seneschal Gabriela Jordan**

“What are the Custodes?”

Gabriela raised a surprised eyebrow as Dennis arrived in the map room they had recently renovated aboard the *Ebon Drake*, formerly known as the Grand Cruiser *First Antiquity*.

“Don’t you mean ‘who are they’?”

“I mean ‘what’,” said her lover in a voice betraying his exhaustion. “They are transhumans, I already knew it. But I have spent enough time around the Magma Spiders and other Space Marines to know they smile, they laugh, they drink, and they can feel sadness. For all their martial conditioning, they’re still humans. The Custodes...they don’t negotiate, they don’t laugh, and they ignore the very sense of the word ‘take a break’. They forced us to spend close to seven hours explaining everything we were studying from the databases of the *Flamewrought*.”

That was interesting. And she repeated it aloud.

“Why?”

“Because the Gloriana has officially been welcome in the Sol System a few days ago,” the ex-assassin informed Dennis. “The announcement arrived via Astropath while you were meeting them.”

Her orange-haired Rogue Trader didn’t need a long time to arrive to the same conclusions as she did.

“So they’re not confident acceding the original databases now that Salamanders and the Tech-Priests of Mars are making common cause, aren’t they?”

“This is what their actions suggest, yes,” Gabriela handed a glass to the holder of one of the precious Warrants of Trade and filled it with water. “I suppose they weren’t interested in the coordinates of past Salamander-made conquests?”

“No,” Dennis recognised after satisfying his thirst. “I think they’re more after old data which was given to the sons of Vulkan when the *Flamewrought* entered active service.”

“That does not make any sense,” the former Captain of the Alamo Penal Legion said thoughtfully. “All top-secret information which went into the *Flamewrought* would have been placed there by His Divine Majesty or his Custodes...”

But maybe it has been lost in the centuries after, a little voice whispered in her brain.

“The Heresy,” the more one dug into past history, the more often one always returned to the darkest period of human history. There had been dangerous enemies of xenos origin before and after, they were other horrors which consumed millions of worlds, but never in five millennia Mankind had come so close to damnation, and it had been by returning humanity’s own champions against the very civilisation and sovereign they had sworn to defend.

“It always seems that way.” Dennis agreed, before returning to his first question. “What are the Custodes?”

“To be honest, I am not really sure. Assassinorum training does not include forcing an Apprentice how to fight one, and unlike millions of possible enemies, the Officio teaches us to never go against them.”

“Really?”

“Really,” the former Callidus confirmed without a trace of humour in her voice. “High Lords have come and fallen when they betrayed the Imperium. Space Marine Chapter Masters have received piercing ammunition into their skulls when they believed themselves untouchable. Archmagi have suddenly been cut from their technological protections and eliminated quietly. But no loyal assassin goes after the Custodes. They are His. Trying to kill one is the same as challenging His Will.”

Dennis didn’t say a word, but his amused face said all.

“And the last time there was an ‘incident’ with them, rumour is a few hundred took upon them to decimate the Officio’s ranks and present the head of the Grand Master at the next session of the Senatorum Imperialis.” She added reluctantly. “It was well before my time, so I’m not sure how much truth there is on the subject.”

“But you think there’s some truth to it.”

“Oh yes. The weakest of the Ten Thousand is thought to be strong enough to handle between three and five average Space Marines. As for the strongest...well, there’s a reason they are still as perfect in appearance when they leave the battlefield as when they entered it. When more than one hundred Custodes go to war, the chroniclers of Holy Terra announcing a victory isn’t entirely due to overconfidence and arrogance.”

The new Seneschal of House Peters smiled.

“Aside from confirming the Custodes were very interested in old information, did it give you opportunities for our future deployment?”

“I would not qualify them of opportunities, but the Custodes have promised to deliver us in the coming days a list of ships that if recovered, would be of immense help to the Imperium’s technological recovery. Of course, some of them have been lost for millennia.”

“Starships containing STC databases?”

“Along with other critical hulls which fled the core colonies of humanity when the Age of Strife began. Unfortunately, the Custodes have only their names and their vaguest tonnage characteristics.”

Gabriela grimaced. Knowing how immense the unexplored corners of the galaxy were, and how many detritus and wrecks were accumulated in Space Hulks and space graveyards, the old proverb of finding a specific object into a Terran Hive came to mind.

“I suppose we will have to keep both eyes open and regularly ask the Mechanicus to see if there are not unexpected translations in the regions we visit. Now, since I noticed you employed the ‘us’, does it means Wolfgang isn’t imprisoned anymore in his quarters aboard the *Pavian Victory*?”

“Ah yes, he has been ‘freed’,” Dennis chuckled, “for a man regularly ‘imprisoned’ these last nights, he looks rather healthy...and he stopped visiting certain palaces of Hive Athena where he had his habits.”

“These twins’ efficiency is rather remarkable,” Gabriela smirked. “I wonder if I should go to them and ask for their secrets, they seem to have a talent to place their stakes on the man they want...”

“Err...”

She didn’t need any secrets from women of Kar Duniash, of course. Her training in seduction as a Callidus had been far more thorough than any nobility tutoring, and the years after had only increased her ‘experience’ in the subject.

“You’re blushing adorably, oh Great Rogue Trader. Now lose your clothes, the day has been long, and I think we both need to think about more pleasant things than humourless transhumans.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

Ah the satisfaction of having a well-trained lover. The Officio Assassinorum never offered these perks to its agents.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan II**

**Hive Shujia**

**3.588.297M35**

**Shadow Warden Kalyan Gowtham**

Kalyan was beginning to think he had been in error about the goals of the Astartes showing the Chapter emblem of the Angels of Redemption.

What had been anomalies of movements inside Hive Asao may ultimately be nothing of the sort. The black-armoured Successor of the First Legion had simply moved from antiquities’ cache to museums, and vice-versa.

Fortunately for his wounded ego, none of the rest of the Dawnbreaker Marines involved in this affair had realised this, so he would likely avoid the jokes about the ravens being all-knowing.

But he couldn’t believe he had missed that many museum collections had been transferred from Hive Asao to Hive Shujia after the massive fiasco engineered by two Inquisitors which almost led to the release of a C’Tan in the middle of a population of billions.

It was unnerving to have missed this. It would have to be corrected soon.

Unfortunately, as he continued to walk in the shadows and follow the Deathwatch veteran, it meant he had no idea what sort of treasure a son of the Lion might seek. The former collections of the Lord-Magnates – with all the nobles assassinated, executed, or sent to the Penal Legions, there was an enormous likelihood these museum exhibits belonged to their Lady now – were huge and had been accumulated over several centuries when it wasn’t a couple of millennium.

Without consulting rapidly the museum manifesto, there was no point even speculating what might interest a Successor Chapter of the Dark Angels in these deserted halls.

One sure was thing it wasn’t priceless paintings of the M34 Wuhanese style, and it wasn’t the dinosaur bones of Goa either: the Angel of Redemption had walked through these museum wings, and utterly ignored their contents.

Wherever the other Space Marine had chosen to go today, it wasn’t easy to follow without being noticed. Kalyan didn’t know if the gene-seed of the Lion could ‘taste’ his shadows, or that the presence of other Space Marines was increasing the natural paranoia of the member of the Deathwatch, but his target was watchful and ever-distrustful.

Several detours, the Shadow Warden was sure, had only been made to check if there weren’t any spies monitoring his moves.

Alas for the Dark Angels and their Successors, their attempts in the domains of the shadows were not sufficient to compensate their complete lack of experience in the field. His quarry was not a novice, but it was evident he had never fought with a Raven Guard or one of Corax’s sons.

Fortunately, the veteran of Isstvan V was patient and there was no hurry. It was five hours before the other Space Marine stopped, but he was still in position to watch when it happened.

And...Kalyan was forced to admit he didn’t know what the object *was*.

It looked like one of those miniature archeotech boxes the nobility was so eager to own, whether it was to place spying devices, a mirror, clocks, or other things that might be useful to aristocrats.

However, this one looked extremely flat and appeared to contain a compass.

Except in general, compass had one needle pointing towards the north, otherwise they wouldn’t be very useful. This object, on the other hand, had three big needles and a fourth extremely thin, surrounded by what appeared to be a certain number of esoteric glyphs.

It was aside from this, generating no feeling or dread or any sign this was anything but a failed compass. There were no psychic resonances, or sign proscribed materials had been used to build it.

It was also probably an object which had been commissioned by the First Legion, as the decorations encircling the compass where a hooded figure holding a broadsword in its hands. This was one of the most famous symbols of the sons of the Lion.

Kalyan was a bit disappointed though that the Astartes had simply not outright gone to their Lady and simply told her he wanted the object. If the First Legion had once built it, then it belonged to them and the museum piece would be released in the custody of the Dark Angels and their Successors. Lady Weaver wasn’t going to keep in her vaults an archeotech object she ignored the very existence a few seconds ago, and at a wild guess, that no Dawnbreaker Guard knew the very first thing about.

Far from these considerations, the Angel of Redemption smashed the armaglass protecting the false-compass from dust and potential thieves.

Immediately, an alarm began to blare in the distance. The black-armoured Astartes showed no sign of caring about the potential repercussions and his fist went to seize the object...only to be brutally stopped by another black fist.

“Now, now. Have you not learnt that stealing is dishonourable?”

Kalyan Gowtham wasn’t easily surprised. But in this case, he was. He had not felt anything. He had not heard anything. And yet, grasping the fist of the Deathwatch Marine, was another black-armoured Astartes, except this one was wearing no aquila or sign of Imperial allegiance, but a long white cloak with hood which had seen better days, given how tattered it was.

The Shadow Warden knew instantly it was not any Space Marine who was supposed to be present on Wuhan. Silently, he sent the agreed alert to the Dawnbreaker Guard of another potential enemy having infiltrated the planet. Better safe than sorry.

The mysterious newcomer and the Angel of Redemption stared at each other for what felt like eternity.

Finally the latter hissed a single word.

“*Cypher*.”

The two transhumans exploded into violence. At first, Kalyan thought the Marine opposing the Angel of Redemption was going to draw the huge sword on his back.

But he did not. His hand was around a Plasma Pistol so fast it looked like sorcery, and while his opponent had the time to draw his own power sword, it didn’t do him any favour.

Two shots; it was all it took. Two shots and the veteran of the Deathwatch fell, one gaping hole in each of his knees.

Kalyan winced. Without Bacta, even Apothecaries would struggle to return a battle-brother to active duty status after such injuries.

“The Alethiometer is a dangerous object,” the transhuman who had just vanquished a veteran Space Marine like it was nothing chided his defeated opponent. “And it has a far higher calling than being used as a toy of your Interrogators.”

“Afraid the prisoners we took at Nova-Terra will tell us your nasty secrets, Fallen?”

“No.” And for some reason, the denial sounded sincere.

The Plasma Pistol slightly raised up to point at the Angel’s head.

Kalyan plunged into the shadows, and one second later, punched out the plasma weapon before it could end the life of the son of the Lion.

It was the only thing which went to plan, however. The Plasma Pistol was thrown aside, but the other strike he had tried to carve the throat of the mysterious cloaked figure had been avoided largely.

The veteran of the Great Crusade was immediately on the defensive as a series of blows hammered his Lightning Claws. Incredibly, his enemy used his bare fists shrouded in some strange force-field... and nothing more. For the first time, Kalyan realised there was something far faster than him...and then a punch which should be impossible to even the elite of most Legions sent him flying and smashing through several museum glasses.

“Raven Guard,” the unnatural opponent commented as Kalyan ignored the pain and tried to stand up. “I should have known. Well, that will make everything simpler.”

“Kill him cousin!” the Angel of Redemption shouted. “Take the head of this traitor!”

“Neither he nor you have the skills to achieve that, I can assure you,” the Space Marine said as it was the most natural thing in the world. “You are a member of the Dawnbreaker Guard, aren’t you?”

“You know I am,” the Shadow Warden replied.

The black-armoured transhuman slightly inclined his head.

“Tell your mistress I am borrowing the Alethiometer for a while. I need to question some clowns, and it is the only reliable manner I have found which does not include torture and challenge of riddles.” There was pressure in the air, and suddenly the Plasma Pistol was back in its owner’s hand. The Astartes was a psyker, just their luck...

“In exchange, I offer two warnings. First, she mustn’t go to the Ymga Monolith before He informs her of what really happened there during the Great Crusade. Going blind would result in a lot of deaths, including hers, for no gain whatsoever.”

“And the second?” That the newcomer was aware of that when most conversations about the subject were so secret and discussed in highly secure locations was nothing short of frightening.

“Beware the Word Bearers. The Seventeenth will unleash everything they have to extinguish the light.”

The Alethiometer in his left hand, the Plasma Pistol in his right, the hooded Astartes ran outside the room like all the demons of the Warp were in pursuit.

He was not seen by unaugmented, augmented, or transhuman eyes on Wuhan again.

**Hive Chao-Lai**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“In your opinion Gamaliel, when is the sworn member of the Angels of Redemption Chapter going to answer my invitation?

“I think,” the Herald of Sanguinius replied with a thin smile, “the answer to that question is somewhere around ‘in a few centuries’ and ‘never’.”

Yes. The insect-mistress had a feeling it was likely going to be like that.

“Even after handing out enough Bacta for him to recover?”

“Yes,” Vulkan N’Varr told her. “Even after that. I think it will have a positive effect on your relationships with the Ordo Xenos, though. They don’t have to spend thousands of hours to replace one of their veterans, and they have been given direct evidence how good your miraculous substance his at healing Space Marines.”

“I concur.” Captain Cerulean Cuzco added. “We are likely going to see an emissary acting in the name of the Deathwatch Fortresses, likely a duo of a Watch-Captain and an Inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos, land on Nyx in the next months.”

“I will listen politely to their demands when that time comes,” and likely agree to put them on the list of people who were trusty enough to have Blue Bacta. You could say a lot of things about the Deathwatch, but the Imperium really needed them to handle the most dangerous threats. These Space Marines weren’t going to be wasted against living beings like the Rashans or the Naiads; their duty was more to exterminate things as dangerous as the Orks or the Necrons. “I believe, however, that the subject of the discussion was the Angel of Redemption Astartes who has retreated to the Inquisitorial Cruiser waiting in orbit.”

“I COULD GO AND ASK HIM A FEW QUESTIONS.”

“Pierre,” the Basileia of Nyx sighed. “I do not doubt you are good, but we don’t know how many Space Marines are staying on that ship, and if there is a single clue you or anyone in my service went aboard this Cruiser without Inquisitorial permission, it would make the term ‘diplomatic incident’ look like a joke. I am powerful, but I am not going to risk creating tensions with the Inquisition over the secrets of the First Legion. Especially when he doesn’t have the ‘Alethiometer’ he came to steal in the first place.”

“What is this artefact exactly?” Captain Rhodes of the Knights Hospitallers asked turning towards Gavreel. “And what was it doing here in the first place?”

“It was something several Librarians were known to go everywhere, protected by powerful esoteric protections,” in the wake of the latest incident, Taylor, with the consent of her black-armoured swordsman, had decided to discard the last pretences around the ‘Dark Warden’, at least for the Dawnbreaker Guard, and where he was coming from. Lies could only hurt the ties between dozens of Space Marines all coming from different Chapters, and arriving to the wrong conclusions would only destroy the unity of her Honour Guard faster. “I honestly didn’t even know the name of the device before today. I just thought it was an object helping them controlling their powers or noticing anyone using psyker powers.”

“Which it does not, if its name describes its true function,” Prognosticator Sergei Bourne grunted. “Alethiometer translated from High Gothic would mean this device’s purpose is to learn the truth. How is it possible when Kalyan confirmed the device was obviously psychically inactive for thousands of years, I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“We could trace back its past history and learn how it came to be transported to this museum.”

“A good idea, T’klis,” the golden-winged ruler agreed. “The problem is that from the first investigations of the men and women I’ve thrown on this object’s moves, it appears it was exchanged between the different Houses of Hive Shujia so many times its true origins are almost forgotten. It doesn’t help that aside its age, no one thought it was intrinsically valuable. No Wuhanese managed to discover how it was supposed to function, and most nobles who possessed it assumed it had none.”

“And this...Cypher?” Kratos asked with visible interest. The Flesh Tearer had been extremely interested by how easily the mysterious figure had beaten both a Deathwatch veteran and Kalyan.

“The title went along with the role of being the keeper of secrets and traditions inside the First Legion,” Gavreel revealed. “I am not especially versed in the ancient history of Caliban, but I think it existed long before our Primarch landed on the Death World. As for the man under the hood, I’m afraid I will be of no help here. The men who are elevated to the position are always known as ‘Cypher’, and never reveal their identities to anyone save the Lion. I think Luther would have murdered the previous holder who was loyal to our gene-sire, before giving the title to one of his cronies, but I never saw him regularly, and most of his official appearances were hundreds of metres away from us. The only thing I am sure is that he was always part of the upper command of Caliban.”

“Crony or not,” Kalyan remarked, “he’s a dangerous warrior, and he possesses an above-average psyker talent. I am good, and the Angel of Redemption was a paranoid veteran. Yet he managed to beat us like we were nothing, and if he had really wanted to kill us, he could have done it.”

“He’s also suspiciously well-informed,” Emperor’s Champion Sigenandus growled. “Why isn’t there a bounty upon his head?”

“Most likely because the Dark Angels and their Successors have been erasing all traces of his existence each time they manage to track him down,” Sanguinary Priest Galen of the Red Seraphs said glumly. “I find particularly...interesting that our tight-lipped Angel of Redemption was aware of recent events on the other side of the galaxy while we have only vague reports discussed on the floor of the Senatorum Imperialis.”

“We should be very careful,” Gamaliel advised, and the Blood Angel wasn’t smiling anymore as he looked at her. “Anny accusations the Dark Angels and their Successors could have spent the latest four thousand years hunting their own battle-brothers *as a Legion* could raise some unpleasant questions.”

“It would begin a civil war, you mean,” Death Speaker Ribera snorted. “The High Lords can tolerate grudgingly dozens of Chapters working together when the threat of the enemy is so large that a few Space Marine Chapters have no chance on their own. But the edicts of Lord Roboute Guilliman stand. The Second Founding’s very purpose was to disband the Legions and ensure no one, not even a Loyal son of the Emperor, had the power to threaten the foundations of the Imperium like the Arch-Traitor did. If the First Legion really decided to go against the Codex from the very beginning...”

Yes, there would be civil war. Taylor had not a perfect view of the uncountable number of Space Marines dispersed across the galaxy – it was likely no one save maybe the Emperor did – but the reputation of the Ultramarines suggested that they, for one, would not tolerate the ‘innovations’ the Dark Angels had decided to apply as soon as the back of the Thirteenth Primarch was turned.

It was probably a civil war the Codex-loyal Chapters would win handily. But she had no idea how many Chapters were descended from the Lion, and a single one alone going against the Imperium was a catastrophe. An entire gene-line going rogue would leave huge holes in Mankind’s defensive lines, not to mention the propaganda disaster.

“For the moment...for the moment I ask of you to limit spreading this secret to only the brothers you absolutely trust,” the female parahuman told her Dawnbreaker Guard. “We have little evidence, save the word of an Astartes whose motivations can be described as very shady. I prefer to...think about the issue at length before making any move. If the Dark Angels or any representatives of their Successor Chapters approach me, it always will be time to reconsider my options.”

“AND CYPHER? HE SEEMS TO KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE YMGA MONOLITH.”

Taylor closed her eyes for a few seconds before reopening them and looking directly at the sole son of Corax present in her quarters.

“Do you think he was bluffing, Kalyan?”

“I don’t think so, my Lady.” The Raven Guard Legionnaire said curtly before grimacing. “Judging by his skills and his talents, it’s entirely possible this Astartes may have been a survivor of whatever happened in this campaign no one remembers.”

This was worrisome. The Space Marine in question could be a Traitor, but his presence at Wuhan hinted at a lifespan of thousands of years, and surely the Emperor and the Custodes had to have known his identity if he was one of the survivors of a failed attack against the Monolith.

“Gamaliel, go inform Archmagos Sagami I am going to need the *Enterprise*.”

“We are going to meet the Necrons?” Diamantis asked for the form.

“Yes. Neferten is willing to meet me, and recent events have proved the earliest date available is necessary.” She was going to go at it without Wei; her Consort had to secure her powerbase at Wuhan for a few more months before leaving the planet could be considered reasonable. “I don’t think we will be able to do more than prepare a few contingency plans for the next two to three years, but it’s vital to get rid of the warmongering xenos. And if we push the forces of Arrgard to attack the Ymga Monolith, we might kill two birds with one stone. This armada of greenskins will be removed as a threat without a single guardsman or Navy spaceman lost, and we will have an idea what the Necrons can endure and the power of the weapons at their disposal.”

“AND CYPHER?”

Taylor hesitated for a few seconds before gritting her teeth. He had stolen from her, and in the end this was all the excuse she needed.

“I will contact the relevant Adeptus and place a bounty on his head. Two hundred million Throne Gelts for now, and alive only. I don’t think it will be enough to catch him, but at least we may know where and when he reappears to complicate the life of the sons of the Lion.”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

**Skavenblight Tunnels**

**High Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster the Unstoppable**

The High Arch-Warlord didn’t like-enjoy a lot of big-big things about Clan Skyre. Their prices-expenses for their big-big machines were teeth-gnawing. Their furs were burned and not as mighty-mighty as his, but they walked-scurried about like they were high Clan chiefs! They believed-said that they were better-better than Clan Verminus! And they didn’t belong to the Great and Mighty Clan Verminus! Unacceptable! The future belonged to him and Clan Verminus! Praise Malal!

Aside from these big-huge flaws, the other reason he hated-loathed Quoterkit Warpfur was his proven-known legendary skill to bring back-back plenty of bad news-news. The Arch-Spark Conqueror loved-enjoyed the victory of ruining his days, and that-that couldn’t be forgiven-forgotten!

“The brute-things have moved their important-vital shipyards out of the range of our super-Bufasqueaks and V11V-rockets.”

“All I hear are failures-defeats while the Council was promised victories-triumphs, yes-yes! You should-should fall in the pits and give your seat to someone great! Someone more-more deserving than you!”

“Clan Skyre is building the arsenal of Anarchy!” The Arch Spark-Conqueror squeaked-shrieked. “When the flag will be raised in triumph over the brute-things’ command-control citadel, the sigil and the device will be built by Clan Skyre!”

“Are you denying-contesting Clan Verminus’ immense-great contribution to the war-war effort?” Scrachit Barbbuster asked as green lightning exploded in the distance and his tunnel allowed him to be surrounded by scores of his fiercest claws.

“No-no!” the leader of Clan Skyre grinned. “I just need-need more resources!”

“The other-remaining clans sent you one million man-things and vermin-things to build new forge-pits in the Skull-Claw Deep Tunnels!” the Unstoppable energetically protested. “More-more will anger-annoy the Council!”

“Las-tails and farsqueakers must be produced-built in addition to the Doom-cannons and the Tunnel-Battleships. I have also-also invented a more powerful Warpfire Thrower and a Butcher-flamer! We scratch our claws the Dazzling Doom Drill will be ready-tested in a few cycles-cycles!”

“The Clans will need-need them, yes-yes,” High Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster jumped before giving an evil-dark glare as Deathmistress Mikaelatch Shadowdagger came out of the shadows. “The brute-things have protected their big-big docks and steel-forging stuff by sending them into the asteroid belt. They have been joined by more brute-things. They are up-up to something annoying-dangerous.”

“Unpleasant-bad,” Scrachit said, “but the fronts take priority! I have forty million Clanrats fighting-winning on a thousand battlefields and one million of my best-best Stormclaws to help-support them!”

The black-furred female shook her head.

“Yes-yes, the fronts take priority! I wanted to know-discover if your forces-armies could mount-launch a diversion before my ninja-claws boarded-hid into their sky-space transports.”

“And what-what are they going to do once they reach-arrive in the lair of the brute-things?” the Arch-Warlord provocatively sniffed. “In the home tunnels, we can scurry and fight-kill well! If your claws find important-great things, they can’t do-do much on their own!”

“Not if they steal-acquire one of the red-black ‘Tech-Priests’ of the heretical brute-things!”

The Arch Spark-Conqueror’s eyes immediately shone with maniacal satisfaction.

“You could achieve-succeed in this mission? Truly-truly?”

“Truly-truly,” the female leader of Clan Eshin replied, caressing her black fur and smiling under her black hood. “Assuming I can count-rely on a big distraction, yes-yes.”

“What is in it-it for the Great Clan Verminus?” High Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster the Unstoppable asked-wondered, his curiosity tickled.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nihilakh Crownworld Gheden**

**Approximately 9.600.297M35**

**Chief Archaeovist Trazyn the Infinite**

Trazyn hadn’t liked visiting Gheden before Szarekh ordered the Great Sleep. His first cousin, also known as Phaeron Krispekh by most of the Necron Dynasties, had always been jealous of his collections, and as such took great pleasures summoning him to one of his magnificent fortress-palaces, which were filled to profusion with the treasures of ten thousand extinct civilisations.

This wealth, it had to be mentioned, was protected by some of the most dangerous security systems ever conceived by Necron Crypteks.

In this regard, Krispekh and Neferten had a lot of points in common. The former had gone so far to program the head of the Oracle, the last of the Yyth Seers that the Nihilakh Dynasty had defeated and captured, to warn him personally and rouse immediately his phalanxes the moment a vision of Trazyn requisitioning an artefact was made.

As if things couldn’t be more irritating, his position of Acting-Triarch offered far less preferential treatment and privileges than it did at the courts of other Dynasties. Krispekh may have been the one who nominated him to replace the two destroyed Triarchs, but his first cousin had held no illusion about the Silent King accepting as his peer – which was, as events had proven, totally correct – and therefore the privileges he had obtained as Acting-Triarch from the Nihilakh Dynasty had been close to zero. Trazyn still was their fourteenth most powerful Overlord, but his status had not improved and access to certain interesting objects he coveted was denied to him.

More than once this last year, the Archaeovist of Solemnace had thought about unleashing Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver, on Gheden. It was true his good friend would demand a non-insignificant portion of the treasures, and Neferten would be sure to demand her share too – he honestly didn’t know if the Crownworld was on her list of prime targets – but a lot of the Nihilakh wealth would be his at last, and with Krispekh out of the game, Trazyn would become the Phaeron and finally be able to rise the Nihilakh armies to truly do something useful, like collecting the Drukhari fleeing to Exodite worlds across the galaxy.

The principal obstacle to this golden age of collection was the fact the Nihilakh Crypteks were good, they could give a lot of lessons to the first-rate Dynasties, but they were not up to the standards Neferten expected from her court, despite being significantly larger in effectives.

To say in one sentence what a few courts would spend an eternity laughing about, they made mistakes.

Now, if they had been awake for the last million of years, it would have been a simpleton’s game to correct the flaws.

But as too many Dynasties were going to discover assuming their Artificial Intelligences one day were able to reawaken them, the Great Sleep had lasted million of years, and the smallest mistakes had resulted in catastrophic consequences.

For Gheden, this series of technological failures had resulted in a fault in the dimensional stabiliser array. The good news for the Nihilakh was that aside from a few minutes every stellar rotation, the Crownworld was a dimensional fortress by itself, impossible to attack.

The bad news, of course, was that the dimensional stabiliser array hadn’t been repaired. And when the next disaster happened, the seat of power of Krispekh would be either sent to another dimension – possibly the Empyrean Sea – with all the unpleasant horrors waiting eagerly to ‘welcome’ it, or it would outright begin to implode.

Either way, Trazyn planned to be far, far from Gheden when it happened. And evidently, it added one more reason why he didn’t like visiting the Nihilakh world.

This didn’t mean the acting-Triarch failed to examine with a keen eye the treasures presented to him as he descended deeper in the planetary crust of Gheden. Much like he had imagined the Solemnace galleries, the Artificial Intelligence in charge of the Gheden defences ensured that every visit was unique whether it was the first or the ten millionth times you landed on Gheden.

Therefore the survivor of the War in Heaven was able to observe the *Magnanimity of Krispekh*, a monumental sculptural reproduction of the Nihilakh court as it stood during the Battle of the Poison Sea...in platinum. And it went without saying his first cousin had decided to ignore his contributions, seeing that he wasn’t represented everywhere. Ah, how petty and prone to mortal grudges the Nihilakh nobles remained.

However, the *Magnanimity of Krispekh* denoted a worrying affliction of his Nihilakh peers to abandon the preservation of those galaxy historic artefacts and replace it by an artistic glorification of themselves. Trazyn would have to ask his Crypteks a few pointed questions once he returned to Solemnace. He, clearly, remained as devoted to the noble duty of enlarging his collection as he had been in his first days, and since he had never obeyed the order to go into the Great Sleep, the Infinite Collector was as clever and charming as he had ever been. How the Nihilakh nobles would be when they were reawakened was a mystery for the moment...

Trazyn was two halls away from the Oracle Chamber when a column of lightning struck the ground where he should have walked if he had not stopped when his detection systems warned him.

Trazyn had found the Necron he wanted to meet.

“Orikan, my dear friend!”

“I AM NOT YOUR FRIEND!” the Sautekh Cryptek roared, trying – and failing – to destroy his current body with the *Staff of the Tomorrow*. As always, it failed.

“My dear rival?”

“YOU DARE!”

Two tapestries showing the Nihilakh protecting their holdings from the Mephrit Dynasty were incinerated.

“Please stop this vandalism immediately,” these treasures were not his, of course, but Trazyn didn’t tolerate such acts of careless and wanton destruction.

“Or what? I am the Great Cryptek of the Sautekh Orikan the Diviner! I have foreseen the Doom of the Old Ones, the betrayal of the C’Tan, the pacts the Silent King made with them since the beginning of the War in Heaven! I have seen the mysteries of the origin and the end! And you...a mere collector...an illuminated parvenu...dare to meddle in my grand plan for the future...”

“So Commorragh shattered a few of your plans,” the Chief Archaeovist spoke as a mountain of gold was turned into acid. “A minor contrariety for you, I’m certain.”

“A MINOR CONTRARIETY! YOU DESTROYED A MILLION YEARS OF PREPARATIONS!”

This...this was really impressive. Even when the Stormlord had used Orikan as a footrest to teach him a lesson or two about humility, Trazyn didn’t think he had ever heard the Cryptek lose his self-control that badly.

“Despite my natural modesty, I want to say you also need to congratulate Taylor Hebert, Phaerakh Neferten, and a few other parties.” The Nihilakh Overlord played with his Empathic Obliterator. “Though I am really surprised you didn’t try to go back in time and use your ‘peerless chronomancy’ to change the outcome if you were so displeased by it.”

The attacks stopped. Orikan watched him with the same eyes the Krorks of his collection had for him. Why did no one was able to recognise the sheer magnificence of his project?

“Ah, you tried.” The limbs of the Diviner twitched. “By professional curiosity, how many times did you attempt to change the past before activating your hyperdimensional beamer and recognising your failure?”

“I. HAVE. NOT. FAILED!”

Each word was screamed like it was one of vital importance.

“Apologies, my dear enemy,” the Chief Archaeovist was maybe a bit too satisfied at seeing the Cryptek’s plans in ruins. “It’s just that while you indeed foresaw the Empyreal abomination created by the Aeldari, you failed to predict its end and the destruction of Commorragh.”

And like a small rock beginning an avalanche, the predictions became less and less accurate. Trazyn was rather sure the place the humans called ‘Tigrus’ should have fallen to the debased descendants of the Krorks now. Biel-Tan, where his expeditionary force had been able to gain many important treasures, was not scheduled to fall before seven millennia.

“You think it is over? You think that I, the astromancer who did warn you about the betrayal of the C’Tan, can’t erase the consequences of your manipulations?”

“My dear Orikan,” Trazyn inserted a theatrical sigh. “While I will admit you are an elite chronomancer, perhaps the greatest the Necrons have ever had in our long history, it didn’t take a Cryptek to know the bargains of the Deceiver stank of death and slavery. Plenty of Overlords and Phaerons like myself knew the biotransference was something to be avoided at all costs.”

“Then why didn’t you raise your voices against it?”

“Because,” it was easy to remember why no one enjoyed the presence of Orikan, “unlike you, most of the important Necrontyrs who disagreed with Szarekh had already been banished from court by that point! The unfortunate effect of telling him that declaring war to the Old Ones and the entirety of the galaxy was a stupidity beyond imagination, and being proven right!”

Trazyn made his Mindschackle scarabs swirl in the palm of his right hand.

“You were among those who supported the War in Heaven in the first place, and then locked yourself into your library and astrology lab! We outside had to deal with the destruction of our collections and utter defeat!”

“I was seeing what the Wars of Secession did to our race! The Necrontyr had to be reunited in a single Empire!”

“Then...congratulations, Orikan,” Trazyn replied bitterly. “You indeed united our race. Of course, it lasted just the time for us to be humiliated militarily and brought to our knees. And I think the identity of the Grand Unifier left to be desired.”

The Szarekhan Overlords had always craved the power to impose their will upon the other Dynasties. Giving them the leadership...had been something many, many Phaerons and Phaerakhs had regretted.

“You have no right to criticise my choices, *traitor*,” the Sautekh Cryptek spat the words.

“Which definition of traitor are you referring to?” Consequence of an endless history of dynastic struggles, there were tens of thousands of ways to commit treason...and as many ways to be exonerated from these accusations. Obviously, this made the old law codes...complicated. “Because if it’s sabotaging your predictions, it isn’t against-“

“Stop playing with words! I accuse you of betraying the Silent King. Of revealing the coordinates of our worlds to enemies of our race! Of allying with lesser races to pillage Crownworlds and Coreworlds! Of providing help to these barbaric parasites calling themselves an Empire in order to steal phalanxes and fleets for yourself! Of ignoring the commands of the Silent King and waking up millions of Necrons according to your wishes, not his! Of conspiring against the Triarch to ensure the Great Sleep broke the minds of billions of Necrons!”

“Yes, yes,” Trazyn said in a bored voice. He knew what was going to happen next. “Tell me the time and hour I must present myself on Mandragora. I’m sure my solicitors can have fun destroying your ridiculous accusations in front of several Overlords for the next millennia.”

“I don’t care about the courts!” And the loathing in the metallic voice of Orikan gave Trazyn pause. “I have seen what you and this traitor Phaerakh stupid enough to believe herself a Cryptek have planned with the mortal flesh-bags! I have seen how you intend to supplant the loyal Dynasties! And I have taken steps to ensure you are all going to be annihilated for this!”

Any other day, the Chief Archaeovist would have laughed at the use of the ‘loyal’ before ‘Dynasties’. Today however he didn’t feel like laughing.

“I have informed the commanders of the Throne of Oblivion of your perfidy and the plans you schemed against Szarekh. They are not happy. In fact, I may have suggested they come visiting with their engine of cosmic destruction. You know how they love keeping in line the upstart Dynasties and Overlords believing themselves above their station.”

Trazyn felt rarely inside his engrams things that could be compared to his Necrontyr emotions. In this instant though, he felt terror. The Throne of Oblivion. For all the defences of Solemnace, if this horror arrived in range of his World Engine, his collections would be disintegrated and the work of aeons reduced to cosmic detritus in mere seconds.

“It won’t matter how massive your collections are. It won’t matter how clever your arguments will be. You can try to run. You can try to flee. But you will fail. Heed my words: Solemnace, Delphimonia, Nyx, and all the world who have dared allying themselves in defiance of the Silent King will die! I, Orikan the Diviner, have predicted it, and so it will happen, may the stars be my witness!”

Then terror turned to hated. How dare this Cryptek judge him. How dare this miserable chronomancer proclaim his collections and himself were going to die.

Trazyn had survived the War in Heaven. He had survived the unpredictable behaviour of the Deceiver.

The Throne of Oblivion was not going to be his end.

“Acting-Triarch Command Protocol!” the Infinite Collector exclaimed. “Protocol Altaereatekh One-One-Five! Protocol Gretoratek Four-One-Five! Protocol Qanor Zero-Zero-Zero!”

Orikan tried to active his hyperdimensional beamer and his other chronomancer weapons, but too late. His body powered down, and in less time it took to say it, the ‘Great Cryptek’ could use about as much intelligence as the mindless ranks of infantry waiting in the stasis chambers of Gheden.

“Congratulations, *Diviner*,” the Necron who had fought the Queen of Blades several times and lived to tell the tale told his enemy informed his enemy. There were plenty of Crypteks immune to these protocols, but no Phaeron or Phaerakh had apparently felt Orikan deserved to be protected from them. “You managed to make me break my oath. I had sworn to never control again a Necron like this, it reminds me too much of the Deceiver to be comfortable.”

But as the old proverb said, necessity overrode all oaths.

“Now repeat to me everything you have done lately. I want to know how much work I am going to have to do to erase your perfidy.”

Several hours later, Trazyn was back aboard the *Sublime Collection*, a mindless Diviner secured in his most protected vaults, and he directed his assistants to calculate a straight course to the Nyx Sector.

He had to warn Weaver and Neferten.

Oblivion was coming.

**Author’s note**: And on this not-so-cheerful note, Ovation 9-3 ends.

There will be two more chapters in the Ovation Arc: the 9-4 chapter (possible titles: the Throne of Oblivion, Operation Stalingrad, War for Oblivion) and the Interlude (probable title: Monsters and Nightmares).

Hope health is fine for everyone and Happy New Year!

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

P a treon: ww w. p a treon Antony444

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

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption