**Ovation 9.2**

**Old and New Heroes**

*If the new security measures put in place after the intrusion of Trazyn the Infinite had let some people believe the Spire and the most defended Levels of Hive Athena were inviolable, the Harlequin ‘delivery’ was prompt to strangle these hopes.*

*Granted, according to the testimony of the Emissary of the Queen of Blades Veth’va Xorl, the Harlequins did not have the ability to infiltrate a company or a battalion into a Hive. The Eldar clowns had no Webway Gate to open, and no warship anywhere having already bypassed the system’s defences. This forced the ‘messenger’ of the xenos to rely upon an ancient artefact called the Thief’s Whisper. Assuming the young Drukhari had understood correctly some explanations of her superior and that there was no deception involved, this xenos creation allows its owner plus one life to create temporary tunnels similar to Webway pathways between the Materium and the Immaterium. And unlike many other infiltration methods, it is absolutely undetectable by the psychic and non-psychic methods available to the best-equipped Adeptuses of the Imperium.*

*Naturally, like every artefact, it has huge weaknesses. I mentioned above that it can’t be used by more than two beings at the same time, and there is apparently a certain ceiling of psychic power which will not allow too powerful Eldar to use it as a transportation method. The Thief’s Whisper also needs to recharge for the equivalent of fifty of our years between activations.*

*Yet there was no denying that it was a formidable psychic tool to breach our security measures, and one we had no prepared counter-measures for.*

*Several new great surveillance machines were ordered in the Martian Forges, but it was quite clear for everyone that our capabilities were arriving to their limits. At some point, more security measures become utterly counterproductive, both for working conditions and the peace of mind of the very people they are supposed to safeguard.*

*Meagre consolation, some lessons were remembered from this incident. Like the point it is far easier to go on the offensive against some xenos species than it is to guard everything you care about...*

Extract from Archive C-0105-S-224, 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 level of accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

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*The most dangerous threat posed by the Harlequins to the beloved Imperium of His Most Holy Majesty is that we don’t know in advance if their deeds will help Mankind on one of the myriad of battlefronts or provoke a disaster spectacular enough to be mentioned in front of the Senatorum Imperialis.*

*Despite having records of their interventions inside Imperial space for uncountable millennia, my colleagues of the Ordo Xenos who volunteered to investigate and haven’t in the meanwhile disappeared in the Webway are no closer to the truth than our founders were.*

*These clowns are simply too unpredictable and it is this very skill which causes mountains if not planets of turmoil.*

*Clearly, when a Drukhari raider ship arrives in an inhabited system, its intentions do not take a Lord Militant to elucidate. If the defenders fail in their duties, thousands of men, women, and children will be enslaved and tortured, assuming the long-ears don’t want to commit genocide in the first place.*

*Those xenos who live in the moon-sized Craftworlds are more mysterious, but ultimately, everything they do is to the benefit of their arrogant community, the only question is when this will benefit them. Being longer-lived than a ten times rejuvenated Adept, their ‘Farseers’ can afford to elaborate strategies which will take centuries to be truly felt.*

*The corsair fleets are somewhere between the two, often privileging plunder, rare minerals, artworks, and slaves. On the other hand, there are plenty of battles where they have unleashed attacks on inhabited planets to prevent successful offensives against Eldar-owned assets.*

*The Harlequin forces do not work in such a transparent manner. One day, a group might assassinate an experienced Lord Admiral, the other they will save the very Battlefleet they have deprived of a leader from certain doom against the greenskins.*

*As much as I don’t think this is a very professional opinion to have, I think the only motives these multi-coloured xenos killers have for sure are a willingness to amuse themselves and terrorise the galaxy with their jokes...*

Extract from Inquisitorial file LK11-5247HH9153, dictated on the order of Lady Inquisitor [REDACTED], 200M34.

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*All these mentions about winning the peace between the Battle of the Death Star and Operation Caribbean seem really naive, in hindsight.*

*Well, naive is maybe the wrong world. Taking advantage of the years of peace to improve the technological and industrial powerbase is more important than ever for the Hive World of Nyx, for the Sector, and for the Imperium as a whole. It’s just that now that I am recognised as a Living Saint and the Sector Lady of a space region which isn’t a backwater anymore, the political and the administration decisions which fall upon my lap are without common measure with the ones I was facing before the Caribbean fleet set the Port of Lost Souls aflame.*

*Deep in my heart, I know it is not so much the Imperium which has changed than my popularity. Before I left for Pavia, it was a rare month where I had a Planetary Governor of the Nyx Sector or one of his most influential ministers visiting me; now that I have received an Ovation for this victory, there hasn’t been a single week where prestigious Adepts, Governors, Ecclesiarchy Pontifexes, and other power-makers in the Quadrant haven’t been announced.*

*As long as my name remained ‘only’ associated with the destruction of an Ork Battle-Moon and a ‘minor’ status of Saint protected by the Dawnbreaker Guard, the number of pilgrims coming in this Sector were certainly far easier to miss than the cohorts of Mechanicus Tech-Priests.*

*I take some pride in it, since it means the people I have chosen to delegate my authority and my own policies must do something good for billions of humans to be applauded like this.*

*On the other hand, it is still a bit frightening to see these crowds of millions gathering in front of my gates.*

*There are millions of men, women, and children out there, and they worship me.*

*The more that I think about it, the more I am worried by it. Millions, maybe tens of millions of people, are travelling for decades in hulls barely resisting the assaults of the infernal Sea of Souls, often dying to give their grand-grand-grandchildren a few seconds of golden light before more years of hardship and poverty.*

*I wish I could save everyone, when I see their exhausted hands, their gaunt faces, and their frail bodies.*

*But I can’t.*

*I can only hope that victory after victory, peace after peace, we will destroy the problems threatening the Imperium. And one day, maybe, its citizens will be saved...*

Extract from Archive A-0530-P-384, secured in the Fafnir Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by Her Celestial Highness the Basileia Taylor Hebert between 297M35 and 310M35. The necessary level of accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx III**

**3.853.296M35**

Thought for the day: Faith. Honour. Vigilance.

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

The first thought which came to Odysseus’ mind as he set foot outside his personal Aquila Lander was that some of his colleagues had definitely been right. Wherever the Imperial Fists went, they were building walls. Their workforce today was quite unusual if you weren’t familiar with the Nyx Sector, however. It wasn’t every day you saw an Astartes shout orders indifferently to humans, ants, termites, a few Ambulls, and some insects Odysseus ignored utterly everything about, beginning with their names.

The Lord Inquisitor spent quite a few seconds watching his surroundings.

The features dominating everything were of course the mountains encircling the valley he had arrived to, and the completed Biodome occupying a third of the space. The latter was not taller than the former, but it was still a gigantic structure, and according to his informants it had taken the next best thing as two years to build.

But now that the Battle of Commorragh had brought many, many changes, the reason-to-be of the Biodome had changed, a massive form flying inside it made that obviously clear.

As a result of these planning modifications, the entire valley was a construction site. From the human workers who brought trees and plants to the engines of the Mechanicus fortifying some key positions of the valley, the effort had to be measured easily in the tens of millions of Gelts, even if the insects didn’t need to be paid.

It felt at the same time strangely modern and yet similar to a second-rate Agri-World. The inefficient mining which had been the norm in the region had been stopped and most traces of it were removed as he spoke, and it was replaced by a few thousand extensive buildings which from a distance could appear all wood-like.

A railway was bursting into existence with a large train station nearly one kilometre away from the Biodome. Odysseus was quite unsure where this transportation line was going to, since the high mountains made trains and other ground machines quite impractical in the region.

But one could grant it to the Basileia, she didn’t do things halfway.

And it was only one of the many, many sites which were built anew all over the surface of Nyx Tertius, though this one benefitted from the presence of the insect-mistress and the Space Marines.

Odysseus stopped sightseeing and marched with his escort of twenty towards the incomplete wall the sons of Dorn were busy working upon at a brisk pace.

Naturally, before they had been able to progress more than one hundred metres, they were intercepted by a member of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

It was a superb feat of leaving anyone in the dark about your presence: the olive-coloured Space Marine had stayed in the shadow of several piles of materials seemingly waiting on the right side of the road, and only when he moved was the illusion dispelled.

The member of the Nyx Conclave had been briefed by his colleagues on the Chapters present on Nyx, and was able to recognise a favourite of the Emperor’s Warbringers, one of the many Successors of the Imperial Fists having given one of their own to the Dawnbreaker Guard. This warrior was called Vilanova, unless he remembered wrong the reports of the Ordo Astartes.

“Lord Inquisitor,” the olive-armoured giant nodded once for courtesy. “I wasn’t told to expect you for an audience today.”

“The urgent affairs I had to deal with post-Commorragh have been dealt with,” Odysseus said to the member of the Saint’s Honour Guard. “I have several subjects I must speak with Her Celestial Highness.”

“Hmm.” The helmet didn’t turn in the direction of the Biodome, and the blue-tinted armaglass of the helmet’s visors stayed focused on him and his escort. “Our Lady has a few unallocated minutes this afternoon. Your escort stays here, I will accompany you myself.”

His bodyguards didn’t like that, of course, but Odysseus gave a few short orders and they took a few steps back. The aged Lord Inquisitor then followed the Space Marine; fortunately it seemed the olive-armoured protector was in no mood to hurry and if the walk pace was fast for Odysseus, it didn’t require him to run to stay next to his guide.

“Did you choose this site because of its isolated location?” He asked as the Space Marine didn’t seem inclined to begin the conversation.

“It played a part,” Space Marines were not supposed to be evasive, but this one seemed to have mastered the basics. “As I’m sure you are aware, these natural obstacles, once properly fortified and manned, are extremely difficult to take.”

“And the defences in the mountains have Imperial guardsmen as garrison.”

The brand-new carapace armours and the heavy armament left few other options.

“The Nyx 10th Siege Infantry,” the Emperor’s Warbringers’ Marine told him emotionlessly, “‘the Gravediggers’ lost thirty-eight out of fifty thousand men at Commorragh. Several companies are using these mountains as recovery bases before being once more called to serve.”

And that was all Odysseus was able to obtain from the Space Marine, though the scenes a few metres away from them were impressive enough to compensate for the lack of conversation. It was like someone had kicked an ant-hill, figuratively and literally: foundations of walls were dug faster than it should be physically possible, entire rows of trees and flowers were planted into the brown soil of Nyx, and everywhere there was an energetic profusion of work, beginning with the Astartes, but not ending with them, far from it.

It was already far, far from what the average person expected on a Hive World – despite the construction work, it had not escaped Odysseus that at no moment he had felt the need to use a rebreather apparatus – and it was just the beginning, as they entered the Biodome.

What struck first was the sheer odour of nature. Trees, flowers, plants, and animals all produced their own scent, and there had been already some existing sensation in the valley. But here it was magnified beyond what he was used to.

This was not a jungle spreading everywhere, but there was so much greenness, so much life, so many fruit trees and legumes everywhere it was honestly quite disturbing even for his experienced eyes.

It was far warmer inside than it was outside, obviously. And in the next songs, the powerful song Rafaela had recounted in her war story arrived to his ear, luminescent and joyous.

This was quite a scenery. It was also one he was sure a lot of nobles would have paid a fortune to have in their possession for their free time.

They climbed regular white steps, and finally after a short ascension, Odysseus saw the Basileia.

Lady Taylor Hebert wasn’t alone on the small artificial hill where a marble platform had been brought in. For as many Space Marines had been busy working outside, there were plenty of them mounting guard here too.

But the greatest presence aside from the Living Saint was the gigantic moth, which was singing, eating, and agitating wings of light, creating almost visible pulses across the fabric of reality.

The Victor of Commorragh, at the moment, was caressing her massive head. No word was spoken, but there was a communication of some sort between mistress and insect, that much could be safely said.

And then the Titan-sized insect took flight again, travelling to another section of the Biodome.

“Lisa don’t like you very much, Lord Inquisitor,” the young woman commented as the Moth was no longer nearby. “I advise picking a few fruits below and offering them to her if you want to be in her good graces.”

“No offence, Lady Weaver, but I doubt I will have the opportunity to come here regularly, and as long as this moth serves her purpose, currying favour with her is not something I feel the need to spend hours upon.”

The ruler of the Nyx System could control this Titan-sized moth and create Aethergold with it; as far as Odysseus was concerned, his intervention in this was neither necessary nor his pertinent at this point. Besides, he was a Lord Inquisitor, and he had his pride. Being the fruit-provider of a gigantic megalomaniac insect was not how he wanted to be remembered as by his colleagues.

“You have made quite an investment here for this large insect companion.”

“An investment which will bring a lot of money in time.”

This made the veteran of the Ordo Malleus raise an eyebrow.

“The Aethergold of course will give you an immense amount of resources and favours the moment a flux of Noctilith arrives here regularly,” Odysseus declared, “but the owner of this Biodome will hardly win money by herself.”

“That’s where you are wrong, lord Inquisitor,” the Basileia politely corrected him, “this Biodome is only the first of several we are going to build here, and one of those will be a stadium where we will present Lisa to the public and empower different objects with her radiance in front of thousands of pilgrims. We are going to draw out immense crowds.”

Odysseus saw quite a few problems with this optimistic scenario. Space for one.

“Quite a lot of this valley’s existing ground is already taken.”

“Yes, which is why certain environments will be carved in separate valleys linked by immense subterranean corridors where Lisa will be able to fly unimpeded,” the insect-mistress revealed. “We will even build a bunker-Biodome inside a mountain soon, that way if anyone tries to invade Nyx, Lisa and quite a few sensitive assets in the region will survive anything short of a lengthy orbital bombardment and an Exterminatus.”

As he had thought before, Lady Weaver was truly doing nothing halfway.

“Digging these tunnels and making sure they don’t collapse is going to take you years.”

“Not really,” the counter was immediate. “I have Ambulls and other species digging very fast.”

Odysseus had seen the Ambulls outside, yes. But this was absolutely not...by the love of the God-Emperor, how many Ambulls was she going to use to make this project viable? The railway systems would also need to be underground, if the mountains were still in the way, and that required more insects...

After an instant of reflexion, the Lord Inquisitor decided this knowledge was not something he felt keen to burden his memories with.

It was time to speak of the very reason he had made the travel in person for, anyway.

“The Emissary of the Queen of Blades has arrived, and your security has been breached.”

Had it been anyone else, he would have added ‘again’.

“Yes,” spiders danced around the trees and the aura surrounding the Living Saint flashed dangerously. “I hate those Eldar clowns.”

“A feeling, I thing, which is shared by most of the sapient and sentient species of this galaxy,” Odysseus Tor drily replied. “I presume you’ve stepped up your security?”

“Chapter Master Isley is on it, and Dragon has ordered many expensive things from Mars,” the black-haired Governor replied, “but we’re arriving to a point the gains on this field are more and more limited. Unless I’m willing to stay all my life in a warded bunker, surrounded only billions of insects, and give my orders via twelve times-ciphered communications, we can’t be sure that the long-ears won’t find something to bypass our defences.”

“I understand the feeling, but your death would be a grave loss for the Imperium.”

“I know, but if some xenos manages to land on Nyx for an attempt assassination, I doubt it will be the Eldar.” The Basileia’s eyes narrowed. “The sons of Dorn and the allied forces which went with them have broken Biel-Tan and shown the long-ears what happens when the wrath of the Imperium is unleashed. They will understand the message, or more Craftworlds will burn.”

As about two-thirds of the Space Marines vigorously nodded after the last sentence, Odysseus was sure the Eldar would pay in blood for their transgressions indeed.

“The Emissary?”

“Veth’va Xorl, a Wych of lesser rank of the Cult of Blades. I’ve placed her in one of the palaces we are never using. As long as she stays reasonable, I will give her upper-class amenities and comfort, much as I would prefer to decapitate her and send her corpse to the incinerators.”

Odysseus approved. As much as the Eldar of the Drukhari variety had to be killed as soon as possible in most cases, for this one an exception could be made...as long as the Queen of Blades remained alive, of course.

“Do you intend to build something similar for the Arena the monster ordered you to prepare?

“Oh no,” for the first time of their conversation, Lady Weaver was incredibly amused. “With the amount of destruction this living hurricane can unleash in a couple of seconds, I certainly don’t want the Queen of Blades anywhere near Hive Athena. I have used some of Rakarth’s bounty to buy the schematics of some types of space stations, and we have added to this several decommissioned Starforts. The Arena will be a void structure in its own right; the latter we will use for the raw materials, the former as inspiration for the Arena internal plans. And once the entire edifice is complete, it will most likely be moved beyond the orbit of Nyx Quintus. That way if she manages to blast it apart, the number of casualties will be kept to a minimum.”

As a contingency, the Lord Inquisitor had to admit it was not bad at all. There was more to discuss, evidently. There always was, when the planetary ruler made as many plans and investments as the recognised Living Saint. The emplacements and the subsidies for more Inquisitorial bases was just one of the many subjects he had to bargain personally in the name of the Conclave.

After two hours, the Lord of the Ordo Malleus bid farewell and went back on his steps to leave the Biodome. One hundred steps before the exit, he was forced to stop.

This was what happened when the Titan-moth was between you and your objective.

The gigantic insect sang, and flapped her wings in a miniature tempest of light.

“What is she saying?” He asked to the olive-armoured Astartes by his side.

Never had a Space Marine been so close to snicker in his presence.

“If I have to guess Lord, I would say it’s ‘feed me sugar or fruit, or else’.”

Of course it was.

**The Warp**

The truths about the nature of daemons were few and far between. One was that one of these empyreal entities, no matter its nature, was part of a greater abomination’s power and will. It could be a servant of Khorne, Tzeentch, and Nurgle, or one of the creatures which had somehow managed to survive while their ‘God’ was murdered, like recently Slaanesh had been.

A second truth was the hatred all living beings had for the inhabitants of the material universe. Daemons were certainly varying in sentience depending on the power they had been granted, but feeling powerful and raw emotions was not beyond their known abilities.

Daemons desired piercing the veil and feasting on the souls of the innocent, corrupting unblemished flesh, and tearing apart the foundations of Order. At their heart, they were all servants of the Primordial Annihilator, and seeing anything stand according to stable and principled laws was enraging them.

The daemons hated those who challenged the will of their Gods.

The legions trying to pierce the veil in the Nyx System had long left that emotion behind them.

Now they were truly incandescent with fury and loathing. The sheer amount of destructive emotions concentrated in a single point of the Veil protecting the Materium would have beaten several records of malevolence if the daemons were prompt to organise them.

In all answer, the song of the moth arrived to them again, and a new large orb of pure Anathema energy was hurled at them.

It was not the Astronomican’s brilliance and the tide of destruction which always accompanied it, but several thousands of daemons were disintegrated and the shreds of their essence were dispersed across the Sea of Souls, where other daemons feasted on them.

For a second or an eternity, the infernal tide dispersed and plunged deeper into the Immaterium, wishing to avoid the utter annihilation visited upon their fellow servants.

More came back a second or an eternity after. Again and again, the wrath of the Ruinous Powers tried to collapse the Veil separating the humans from the demonic.

But the barriers were too strong.

The light was too brilliant and terrible.

The moth and her mistress burned too brightly.

And yet the daemons hurled themselves forwards between each wave of light.

Their hatred, their loathing, and their will to destroy everything pure and hopeful...it was endless.

They could do nothing else, for if Chaos admitted for a second the possibility of coexistence, it would already be an admission of defeat.

And so like it had been done with the Astronomican several eternities ago, more daemonic legions assaulted this small halo of brilliance, despite a behaviour which was suicidal from the beginning to end.

In their rage many called for mortal psykers to rise and help them materialise into reality.

The summoning didn’t work. Fewer and fewer cultists were listening to their calls, and fewer tried to do something about this.

The planet they were coveting was shining brighter.

The Veil was getting brighter and tougher.

Over eight million curses were uttered against the damnable moth which continued to sing in joy and light. Easily ten times more that number were shrieked and screamed for the human who had dared creating it and using as a weapon against her.

“**DEATH TO WEAVER! DEATH TO THE ANATHEMA! HATE! HATE! HATE**!”

Light engulfed many of them and ended plenty of the abominations.

The War between Light and Darkness continued, and legions of immaterial monsters continued to rage.

They were utterly furious.

They were also completely powerless.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx III**

**3.862.296M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

There were several pragmatic reasons why Planetary Governors rarely travelled outside their home system. One of them, evidently, was the danger posed by the Warp.

Taylor somehow doubted that the history books mentioned one of the more infamous problems was in reality the high likelihood of one Governor murdering the other.

“Apologise, or I will meet you on-“

The parahuman woman used one of her largest spiders to make an innocent rattle.

First Duke Cristoforo Mocenigo’s face reddened, and he chose wisely to not finish this sentence.

Taylor had to turn next to the other Governor in her reception room.

“This was out of line, Marshal-Governor.”

“My apologies, your Celestial Highness.”

Taylor had to fight the urge to strangle the Governor of Megara. The apologies were supposed to be for the Governor of Atlas Tertius, not she!

Sometimes, the Basileia of Nyx wished she could thrown the problematic children – for all they were in their sixties, both men had a tendency to behave like young teenagers – into one of her vaults, ‘lose’ the key, and come back a week later to remove the bodies.

Unfortunately, it would likely provoke an informal war between the two planets these men ruled.

“As far as I am concerned, the regiments your worlds provided for Operation Caribbean have both performed in an exemplary manner,” no matter how much certain aspects of the Megaran and Atlasian societies were offending her morals, there was no denying the men – and for Megara, the women – of these military formations had fought bravely and deserved the medals and the other rewards she had given them. “And your point about comparing their efficiency is dubious, First Duke. The three Megaran regiments were all Artillery, while your own were respectively Line Infantry, Hunter-Killer, and Anti-Air. The Fay and Nyxian regiments don’t try to make competitions between the Chimeras-equipped companies and the Leman Russ crews!”

The two men nodded, but Taylor had the depressing feeling that no matter how corrects her arguments proved to be, it was a futile endeavour to mend the differences between those two Governors, and that in hindsight she should have separated their audiences by several weeks, not try to welcome them together.

“Now that is said, let’s go back to more important subjects. First Duke, you wanted to make a request.”

“Yes, your Celestial Highness,” the superb voice of one of the three Atlas Planetary Governors arrived to her ears. In appearance, he was also attractive. Unlike many nobles on Nyx or elsewhere, Cristoforo Mocenigo obviously did his best to keep himself in shape. There were muscles under his crimson clothes, and the black beard was both thin and extremely elegant.

Alas for him, most of the reports she had read implied the First Duke was elegant because a lot of his days were spent hunting and enjoying various sportive activities on Atlas Secundus, far away from the duties of his own planet.

“The discoveries of archeotech your noble regiments being quite extensive, I humbly ask for several of the new Mining Ships to be commissioned in the service of Atlas Tertius once the Tech-Priests give their approval to mass production.”

Well, fortunately this plea was easy to answer to.

“Denied.” And she didn’t have to consult her files via her insects waiting in the other room either.

“Your Celestial Highness?” Cristoforo was visibly shocked by the answer.

Wait, he had seriously expected her to agree?

“First Duke, unless you have falsified your tithe-records of the last years, your orbital facilities are not conceived to handle a single Mining Ship delivering the bounty of metals and water of the asteroid belts to your orbital storage platforms. You also lack the highly valuable starships’ crews to man these Mining Ships, the technical traditions to replace the Tech-Priests building the foundries and the manufactorums we have at Nyx.”

“But...you gave them to the clansmen of Bahamut!” Ah, this was what it was about. But since he had asked...

“’Giving’ is I think a very generous way to present it, First Duke. While it is true millions of Throne Gelts and large technical expertise was provided to improve the infrastructure of Bahamut, part of the costs and the boons have been provided as a joint effort of the Adeptus Mechanicus and my personal Cartel. But it wasn’t free. The citizens of Bahamut have accepted changes to several of their laws, amended several mining customs, and their tithing obligations will rise progressively in the next years.”

With her insects, Taylor didn’t need to look the man straight in his brown eyes to know he had visibly flinched.

“Of course, if Atlas is willing to reform to shift its economy from deep ground mining to orbital operations, I will be glad to help.”

The First Duke reddened again, before shaking his head violently and rising from the red couch he had been sitting upon.

“No, no! It won’t be necessary, your Celestial Highness!” And the Governor of Atlas Tertius rushed out of the reception room like the defunct hordes of Excess were in pursuit.

Taylor sighed theatrically before drinking some apple juice from her crystal glass.

“It’s a pity. His planet has a lot of inhabitants, a few reforms and it could be really productive...”

“With due respect, your Celestial Highness, I think the First Duke has no doubt of this. His main fear is that he wouldn’t be the First Duke by the time your industrial and societal reforms are over.”

Marshal-Governor Charles Aldringen’s eyes met hers unflinchingly.

“If you will forgive me to say so, the three Dukes of Atlas are deathly afraid of being on the receiving end of a purge like the one you enforced in this very system. They know the fate you have in mind for the surviving Wuhanese aristocracy is not one which involves golden medals and masked balls. Anything that allows them to keep their power and to keep your influence limited on their planets is attractive in their eyes.”

“As I said a pity,” Taylor allowed the young-looking Megaran Governor in his flamboyant amethyst governor to see her smile. “Especially as I had no intention to purge them.”

“I...err...your past actions...”

“Don’t support that, I know. And in the interest of being honest with you, yes, I am going to purge Wuhan like I purged Nyx. Planetary Governors and the highborn class they support have duties to the God-Emperor, Marshal, and incompetence in dealing with heresy and failing to provide competent guardsmen for the Guard is not something I appreciate. But unlike Atlas, Nyx and Wuhan have extremely large populations and influential middle-classes which are ready to jump in and reform their society if given the chance. Atlas Tertius has barely eight and a half billion inhabitants, and a super-majority of these men and women are serfs.”

In the Atlas System, there was no middle-ground. You were born a serf, or you were born a noble.

And the divide between these two social classes was immense.

Serfs, as their name strongly implied, had no right to own lands, a house, or anything better than a few mining tools and some possessions fabricated by their families. Serfs, unless they were recruited for a Munitorum tithe, couldn’t possess weapons of any kind.

The Atlas nobility didn’t really use its authority to be cruel over their subjects, since they knew very well who would need to come up with a shortfall of the tithes, but life in the mining complexes of Atlas Tertius was dangerous, exhausting, and the serfs rarely reached forty years old.

Both as a Basileia and a heroine, she wished to change this state of affairs. But there wasn’t a miraculous solution in this instance. The three Atlas Governors were all respecting the vows they swore to the Imperium, and this audience with Cristoforo Mocenigo was only the last of several where the Atlasian had refused to negotiate.

As much as increasing the life-expectancy of the serfs and economic reforms were tempting, the First Duke and his associated weren’t ready to risk weakening their society.

“Understood,” the beardless and vigorous brown-haired Megaran said after a moment. “In this case, what would be the price to pay for the production rights of one of the ‘beers’ you have found the template of?”

Her ministers had not warned about this possibility. It seemed that for all his militarist dictatorship tendencies, Charles Aldringen was able to quickly adapt.

“As I am sure you are aware, there are now tens of millions of pilgrims in this very system.”

“I am aware, yes.”

“Most obviously, they make their pilgrimage here,” which unfortunately, meant seeing the pilgrims wanted to see her and come as close as possible to her, “and depart in the weeks or the months after. But there are some who are unwilling or unable to continue the journey, and yet can still be of utility to the Imperium and the God-Emperor. If you help at least two hundred thousand of them find a new home on your Civilised World, you will have your ‘authentic Megaran beer’, though the Biologis Magi will of course regularly make inspections to ensure the sanctity of the formula is preserved.”

“Is that all?”

“You will also provide some of your most talented officers for training exchanges between the Megaran and the Nyxian PDF. In return, your men will have the right to keep this...visible amethyst parade uniform they seem to adore so much for a reason which escapes me.”

There were a few more economic concessions she wanted, trying to turn Megara into a society a bit less ‘die-hard militarist’, but these were essentially it. After Atlas had declared its unwillingness to negotiate for the short-term future, it was all the more important to have rulers interested in ruling with her.

“I have no problem with your conditions.” The Marshal-Governor raised his own crystal glass in salute. “To the future, your Celestial Highness!”

“To the future.”

**Zaibatsu Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault**

Gordian wasn’t used to wait for someone. More than thirty years ago, it had already been complicated for him to not see people running to accomplish his desires, and at that time the highborn of Samarkand had been ‘only’ a Zaibatsu-Presumptive among many.

Then again, Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault wasn’t used to leave his seat of power either. Lord Samarkand could order him to, but the ageing Master of the Samarkand Sector by the will of the God-Emperor had not manifested the will to do so apart from the moment Gordian had to renew his oaths. Several of his cousins were representing his interests in the Zaibatsu Councils and the various trade conglomerates based in the Samarkand, and it worked fine, like it had worked for his father and his grandfather before him. Why change something when it was clearly fine the way it was?

Gordian watched the large painting decorating a good half of the opposite wall’s waiting room. The *Imperium Resurgent*, it was called. On it Frateris Templars fought side-by-side with Astartes and Imperial guardsmen, under the benevolent gaze of the Primarch Rogal Dorn. The latter point should have been an allegory, as was the halo of light surrounded a flying angel crushing the xenos hordes.

It wasn’t, and it explained why he had been forced to take one of his fastest transports in person for Nyx.

And for the last seven standard days, Gordian had been forced to wait.

The apologies and excuses had been impeccable. The palace hosting his delegation was worthy of a man of his station, and the food was excellent.

But he was a Zaibatsu of Samarkand, and it had been child’s play to know that two Planetary Governors had been received in person by Lady Weaver the day before, and the ‘Marshal-General’ and the ‘First Duke’ weren’t, according to the local gossip, particularly favoured by the Living Saint reigning over the Hive World.

No, Gordian could recognise the implicit message: House von Mitsubishi-Dassault had made Her Celestial Highness wait for several years before taking her seriously; now they could very well wait for several days when the Nyxian economy was ascendant.

The Administrator-General of the Cloud System didn’t like that. The Heirs and Heiresses-Presumptive he had brought with him to Nyx didn’t like that either, and most of his courtiers and advisors had urged him to begin preparing several economic fines for the Nyx Sector.

Gordian wasn’t going to follow this kind of stupid advice, God-Emperor be praised.

It was true that theoretically, the authority he owned over the Nyx Sector in the name of Lord Crassus of Samarkand authorised him to do this, but the repercussions would be ugly if Nyx refused and went over his head to contest his decisions.

The place of a Quadrant in administrative duties was long-enshrined by M33 edicts, but nothing said in the *Lex Imperialis* that Kar Duniash was to accept Samarkand’s merchant-princes were in the right at all times. And right at this moment, with the victory of Commorragh in everyone’s ears, the ruler of Nyx was far more valuable from an economic and military perspective than his House.

It wasn’t something he had fully accepted before seeing the sheer size of the investments which were poured into the orbital industry of the Nyx System. The foundries, manufactorums, weather satellites, and the other advanced orbital devices were already surpassing the majority of the space infrastructure he personally owned, and one look could tell that in terms of shipyards, the Cloud System’s superiority wasn’t going to continue existing for long.

“Lady Weaver is going to receive you, Lord Zaibatsu,” Gordian nodded at the red-armoured woman who had spoken. If he had been in his main residence on Flamingo, he would have made a few compliments about her beauty, but he wasn’t in his home.

And besides, the red armour with shiny silver insignia and fleur-de-lys indicated this woman was one of the new ‘Templar Sororitas’ the information networks were so gleeful about. Clad in power armour like she was, the Ecclesiarchy veteran could likely pulverise his bones without even drawing a weapon.

This reminded him, as he left the waiting room and the painting of *Imperium Resurgent* behind him, that the Samarkand Sector and his House had already lost what limited religious dominance support they had enjoyed after fierce negotiations with the Adeptus Ministorum.

The arrival in the throne room was impressive, that much he was forced to admit as the throne of Nyx came into view. Two columns of Space Marines stood vigilant, their immense armours provoking a feeling of dread inside him in spite of the fact they remained perfectly immobile. Not better was the small army of insects leaning against the walls.

At first, Gordian thought they were very realistic statues, but for all their immobility, the massive beetles, hornets, centipedes, spiders, and ants were breathing, slightly twitching...well, proving they were truly made of chitin and blood.

But the most striking presence in the throne room was unquestionably the Living Saint herself.

The Governor of the Flamingo Paradise World could feel the golden power of the God-Emperor emanating from her while he was still several hundreds of metres away from her, and past a certain point, advancing was more and more difficult.

And while Gordian was perfectly willing to acknowledge his body was not the one of the prime athlete had been in his prime to attract all the Ladies in his bed and he loved too much high-quality food, his body of Zaibatsu was in good health compared to several of his noble competitors.

It was not a question of physical strength, today. It was a question of will and faith.

And as much as it was painful to acknowledge, he wasn’t strong enough to really climb the steps of the throne.

Gordian wasn’t even determined enough to keep staring at the young woman in silver-coloured armour watching him emotionlessly. The massive auramite wings were providing enough light to make the comparison with a miniature sun possible. Silver and gold radiance, with some touches of ruby and crimson, like the massive ruby carried around the neck by the Living Saint.

Everything coursed with divine power, radiance, and the authority of the Master of Mankind.

Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault for once considered himself perfectly happy to not vacillate or collapse onto the soft red carpet his foots had been threading for several minutes.

“Your Celestial Highness,” the Samarkand highborn hated how his voice sounded hesitant, and even more to address the Lady Nyx by a title which screamed his inferiority across an entire Sector.

“Lord Zaibatsu Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault,” the black-haired Basileia of the Nyx Sector answered back. She didn’t even bother making the presence of bowing or slightly inclining her head. “Your arrival to Nyx was an unexpected surprise.”

“I am sure it was,” Gordian didn’t even bother contesting the lie; he was sure the ambitious swamp-viper he was forced to call the Pontifex of Flamingo had alerted Weaver via Astropath the moment he had boarded his transport. Unless it was one of his thirty-five sons and thirty-eight daughters. The Battle of Commorragh and the announcement of the Ecclesiarch there was a new Living Saint in the Quadrant had sufficiently shaken his powerbase many souls were now eying more eagerly his ruling seat. “I requested this audience because of the recent increase in your tithes...and some discrepancies in their repartition.”

“The increase of the Nyxian tithes is directly linked to the development and the industrial reforms following the production and licensing of many excellent technological templates approved by the Adeptus Mechanicus.” The Basileia replied levelly, her eyes and her face remaining emotionless. “As for the discrepancies you mention, they are simply normal given the new situation of several Nyxian heavy transports being available to transport the tithe to Samarkand directly. The Sector has recovered enough from the war against the greenskins to satisfy some of the obligations owed to the Administratum.”

“It is against the conventions signed by recent Nyx administrations and the House of von Mitsubishi-Dassault.”

This time he managed to make the Living Saint’s lips twitch. Alas as the next seconds proved, it was not a good thing at all.

“A good thing I wasn’t involved in the decisions of the administrations which came before my ascension.”

“This is dangerous talk,” he was forced to utter as the golden aura, far from decreasing, was gaining in potency, and to his shame, Gordian was sweating.

“I will remind you Nostradamus Vandire was arrested by the Holy Inquisition, and I found several of your Heir-Presumptives’ seals on the documents allowing this scum to invite himself to the Nyx Sector. Given the crass incompetence and short-sightedness such a move imply, do not speak of me lightly of danger, Lord Zaibatsu.”

“If you are feeling wronged, they are legal means-“

“Please don’t take me for an imbecile, Zaibatsu,” the ‘Lord’ had suddenly disappeared, and Gordian sorely missed its existence. “I have no intention to waste decades of legal disputes when the majority of the Samarkand courts will rule in *your* favour like mine would rule in *my* favour if I was to ask them.”

This was not how he had wanted this audience to proceed, and he was far, far from used to having no cards to force a disobedient vassal to return to better feelings.

“Very well. But there have been many treaties at least fifty-one percent of the tithe-ships from the Departmento Munitorum and the Administratum amongst other tithing obligations, must be transported inside the hulls of one of the Zaibatsu Houses of Samarkand. This was the agreement House von Mitsubishi-Dassault and House Menelaus renewed centuries after centuries, like their predecessors before him. And you are bound by it.”

“You are essentially correct,” the fact the approval came so promptly made him even more suspicious, if it was possible. “But for this year, the percentage of Nyxian-owned hulls transporting tithes and other goods to the Samarkand Sector is somewhere between fifteen and sixteen percent. It’s well below the limits of the tithe-accords Nyx is bound to.”

Gordian had the urge to scream that every Nyxian ship which didn’t use a Conveyor of his House was resulting in an astounding financial loss. The Zaibatsu ships who were dedicated to the tithe-ships were granted a percentage of the total value of the cargo once it was delivered safely to the Administratum and Munitorum inspectors. This was a small percentage, always below one percent, but given the average sum represented by millions of tons of metals and weapons, even a tiny fraction of a single shipment represented more money certain officers earned in their entire lives.

“This is violating the spirit of the accords, if not their wording.”

“And Samarkand ordering an important military tithe with zero warning with absolutely no political defence from your part was also violating the spirit of your obligations, and half of the wording.”

Only a lifetime of political manoeuvring allowed the Zaibatsu not to wince ostensibly.

“Certain errors may have been committed by unworthy scions and representatives,” it was always easier to deflect the blame unto others, “but the system is working.”

“It is working for Samarkand. Not so much for the other Sectors when they have to fight millions of Orks and their own tithe-masters as soon as they can divert their attention from the ongoing wars.”

Gordian made a few more remarks, which were immediately countered, and he knew the upper hand in these negotiations didn’t belong to him. The woman in front of him evidently had no inclination to let the economic domination of Samarkand continue within the frontiers of her own Sector.

There were still two cards in his sleeves at his disposal.

“I am not without influence at Samarkand and my House has plenty of businesses among the different Sectors of the Quadrant. If our Houses were tied together in marriage, you could benefit from our financial reach. I have many sons and daughters-”

“No.” There was no hesitation, no invitation to develop, and no interest.

“You are unmarried,” the Zaibatsu pointed out.

“So are you,” Gordian believed he heard a Space Marine cough behind him, but it had to be his imagination. “And unlike me, it didn’t stop you from siring dozens of sons and daughters.”

“We are one of the most prestigious Houses of the Samarkand Quadrant!”

“And I’ve received some union proposals from as far as Holy Terra. Your point?”

At this point, Gordian really, really wished all his advisors, financial experts and solicitors had been allowed to come with him in the throne room.

But no help materialised. He was alone, and he was really, really beginning to worry about the problems the new governance of Nyx was going to cause to his personal rule.

“Now let’s speak of the emergency promethium taxes you imposed a decade ago...”

In hindsight, the wait for the audience had been the easy part...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Argoy Sector**

**Indiga System**

**Indiga**

**5.876.296M35**

**Lieutenant-General Paul Dundee**

Paul had never seen an attempt to bring down a pack of ultraraptors with a heavy flamer.

Assuming of course that the weapon the tech-Priests had mounted on the right arm of the Dreadnought leading their expedition was a ‘normal heavy flamer’, of which he had his doubts.

Normal heavy flamers unleashed a lot of fire, but the inferno which had devoured the vicious reptiles was something else.

“Good news...” It wouldn’t do to show he was too impressed, damn it! “Good news these ultraraptors won’t be a problem for other hunters of Indiga.”

“BAD NEWS: I WON’T BE ABLE TO TAKE TROPHIES FROM THEM.”

“Evidently,” from head to tail, the aggressive fauna had been more carbonised than burnt. The Indigan officer looked at its surroundings and saw it was empty. For the third time of the day, their quarry had used one of their fire-fights to escape in the confusion. “The foxeetle fled again.”

The Lieutenant-General had known this species was truly cunning and its illusions had misled entire generations of Indigan hunters, but it was truly getting ridiculous! Two hundred hunters, forty Tech-Priests, one Dreadnought, and they weren’t able to capture even a single specimen.

“We have only a couple of hours of light left, General,” one of his fellow Indigan hunters he had hired for a few weeks informed him. “I think we’d better stop the hunt for today. Our last pursuit has led us quite away from Fort Drake.”

“If we stop here, we won’t be able to capture a foxeetle before it is time to return to space.”

“General, I don’t think we will be able to capture a foxeetle, no matter how long we track one.” The Indigan hunter blasted an ultraraptor’s corpse which had escaped the flamer of the Ancient. “These are cunning beasts, and we lack battle-psykers to break their illusions. In these forests, they have all the advantages, good equipment or not.”

This was all very good, but it wasn’t entirely Paul’s decision. For all the nominal orders placing him in command, it was the Stygies VIII’s Magos that had descended with them on Indiga which called the shots, since he provided the transport and the near-totality of the cages, neutralisation devices, stasis fields, and highly-advanced technology.

“Magos, your opinion?”

“The odds of catching a foxeetle alive within twenty-four hours have decreased to 0.02%,” the four mechadendrite-armed cogboy enunciated in an entirely mechanical tone. “The specimens of Gladiator Spiders will have to suffice. Likelihood of Lady Weaver being satisfied by the arachnids: 63.7%.”

If the Tech-Priest said so, who was he to naysay him?

“Acknowledged. Hunters, we begin to take the return path to Fort Drake. Pierre, you are in the rear-guard this time.”

“IF THE ULTRARAPTORS SEEK VENGEANCE, THEY WILL FIND ME ON THEIR PATH,” the Dreadnought swore.

“Do you really think Her Celestial Highness will be impressed?” One of the Nyxian veterans he had taken with him from Pavia asked, a less-than-amused expression on his face. “I mean, we haven’t gone after several of the biggest bugs on this continent...”

“We would need an Army Group to have a chance of success for the bigger specimens,” Paul Dundee wished he was joking, but certain insect species were dreaded hunter-killers for a reason. “And we can’t even capture them alive for the good Magos. The shuttles we have are too small for them.”

For the record, several of these ground-to-orbit transports had been used to ferry vehicles the size of Baneblades and other super-heavy tanks during the Battle of Commorragh and after.

“And besides, Lady Weaver didn’t insist upon giant insects.” Maybe because the Living Saint had already quite a few in her living arsenal, with the promise of more to come. According to the rumours the Mechanicus insect-experts had allowed to spread, the Salamanders of Nocturne were sending their monstrous Scorpiads to Nyx, and the Blood Angels had finally managed to capture one of their infamous Baal Scorpions to offer as a princely gift. “Indiga will provide insect quality, we leave size to others.”

Paul had promised several psychic breeds, and he had held true to his promise. The Beacon-fly had been one of the first species to be stocked aboard the Grand Cruiser, and they had thousands of them. Like many insects of Indiga, its main strength relied on vast numbers. A single ‘flash’ of the fly was painful for the eyes, but you recovered in a few minutes. When the Beacon-flies came into their tens of thousands however, permanent blindness from the psychic flashes was extremely likely, and this made them a particularly redoubtable asset.

The same could be said about the Cryo-crabs. The mini ice ray these pests could emit was a nuisance when one targeted you with it, but when there were thousands of them...well, it was best fire the heavy artillery or a plasma gun like Pierre did.

Aside from this, the large party of hunters had been able to acquire many Sonic-crickets, acid-spitting Black Wasps, Pyre-locusts, and of course the aforementioned Gladiator Spider, who used their terrible spider silk like gladiators of the Commorragh arenas to capture their prey, with about as much mercy for the victim caught in their webs.

“Everyone remembers the big specimens,” another Indigan hunter replied unconvinced.

“And they are useful for Her Celestial Highness, I won’t say anything against it. But there are tens of thousands species inside her swarm, and the Titan transports aren’t unlimited...”

“ULTRARAPTORS! I CONGRATULATE YOU FOR YOUR COURAGE!”

“Is he always so loud?”

“Young man, you don’t know half of the story...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Svalbard Sector**

**Tigrus System**

**Tigrus**

**6.878.296M35**

**Chapter Master Michael Yarhibol**

If there was one thing to be granted about the Orks, it was that they were always going to receive reinforcements while a battle raged.

Today was providing no exception to this millennia-old rule.

“This Space Hulk is thirty-one kilometres-long, as far as our best augurs can tell us,” the Master of the Fleet announced grimly. “And if the energy emissions we can detect are accurate, this thing has enough firepower to equal the *Eternal Crusader*.”

Michael Yarhibol watched the hololithic images of the monstrous Ork ‘innovation’. It was no effort at all to focus his hatred upon this insult to all the works of the Emperor.

“The likelihood of the Ork Warboss our Tigrus allies have been seeking for months is here?”

“Very high, I think,” the Sanguinary High Priest of the Lamenters answered. “The green beasts’ brains don’t function logically, but they are noted to love big and ugly things. This modified Space Hulk qualifies, in my opinion.”

“How long do we have until the Hulk and its huge prow-mounted cannon are in range of Tigrus’ main forges?”

“Assuming their acceleration remains regular, which is...improbable, to say the least,” the Master of the Fleet grimaced, “we have roughly four hours. Certainly less, if the mad Ork which cobbled the engines to the Hulk decides its command doesn’t need to arrive in a single piece at the end of its journey.”

And once the four hours were gone, Tigrus would burn. Many species would flinch at the idea of using any Nova Cannon or equivalent weapon against an important planet, but whoever had met the greenskins – which was the same as fighting the Orks – couldn’t doubt it would be employed, and more than once.

“We have fifty of our battle-brothers fighting side by side with the Tech-Priests and the Guard on the ground,” the Master of the Rites thundered. “Do we give the recall order?”

“No,” Michael said after estimating the delay it would represent. “Our battle-brothers from the *Sanguinem Fulminata* are restoring great honour to the Chapter by helping in the assault against the Ork beachhead. And it would take too long to recall them; this would not leave us any margin for the operation I have in mind.”

“You’re thinking about a boarding action,” the Sanguinary High Priest said out loud. It was an affirmation, not a question.

“Yes,” the Chapter Master of the newly christened Lamenters confirmed to his highest-ranked battle-brothers. “The *Red Blade* is going to do its best to destroy the engines of this monstrosity, and our Strike Cruisers will kill the Cruisers and the other escorts of this abominable xenos creation. But to give the killing blow while remaining outside the greenskins’ guns is going to take several days at least. We can’t afford to wait that long. And if I remember correctly, in Space Marines, there is the word ‘Space’, no?”

Everyone on the bridge smiled at his poor attempt at humour.

“This is going to cost us, Chapter Master. Our boarding torpedoes are all operational, but the number of Ork warriors awaiting us on this hulk promises to be in the hundreds of thousands...”

“You can say millions,” the Master of the Fleet spoke. “For as much as the Navy loves to pack humans in tight quarters, they are nothing compared to what an Ork Warboss does.”

“Speaking of the Navy and our allies...”

“Their fleet is repositioning itself, but they are still fighting against the remnants of the first invasion force. I doubt they will be in position to intervene one way or another today.”

“It’s decided, then.” Not that he had ever hesitated on the strategy to employ. “Our arrival in this system at this very moment is clearly a sign of the Emperor.” His Saint had already given the order, so this final act of guidance was not impossible at all. “We are in position to intercept the Ork fleet, and end this WAAGH before it inflicts more wounds to the Svalbard Sector and the Imperium of His Majesty. We are going to board this Space Hulk, and explain to this Ork that Tigrus belongs to the Emperor. Woe to any who challenge humanity’s right to rule the stars!”

“Remove the head, and the beasts will fight each other to annihilation,” approved a Captain.

“For the Blood and Redemption,” murmured the High Chaplain.

“For Sanguinius, Lady Weaver, and the Emperor!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Messenia**

**3.900.296M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The advantages of hosting a meeting in one of her palaces of Hive Messenia included the more modest size of the ‘throne rooms’, the absence of crowds of millions looking for each and every one of her moves, and the fact the nobles who had given the artistic trends had chosen a more modest theme – modest for Nyxians nobles, it went without saying – which involved plenty of Megaran-imported amethysts and Atlasian-imported gems like sapphires and diamonds.

The drawback, as proved once more in this instance, was the reality too often her ‘guests’ arrived before her. Her inter-Hive travels demanded more and more security protocols, and the bigger her Dawnbreaker Guard was growing, the less inclined to accept her dictates the Space Marines seem to be.

“Good morning,” Taylor told to the four Rogue Traders awaiting her in the salon Dragon had qualified of ‘sapphire rococo’ when she had visited it before Operation Caribbean.

“Good morning, your Celestial Highness,” the two young men and the two older women replied before taking their seats in a semi-circle around her couch-throne embroidered in gold and silver.

“I have gathered you today because yesterday evening, we received the expected Astropathic communications from Mars. The two Ambition-class Cruisers, dozens of Hoplite-class Destroyers, and many others flotillas transporting costly equipment and technology have left the Ring of Iron and are on their way to Nyx. If they held their initial schedule, they should have left Sol at the moment we’re speaking.”

“That’s very good news,” Wolfgang began. Today the new Rogue Trader had chosen to wear an uniform which looked like exactly like the clothes of a Navy Admiral, except the shade was a far darker blue and the many insignia and battle-commendations were shining gold and silver in colour. “Of course, we can only hope their travel will be a bit less...agitated than our return from Pavia.”

“Indeed,” though since the flotillas and the ships hadn’t a Living Saint or anyone directly ‘blessed’ by the Emperor aboard, they shouldn’t attract the kind of unwanted attention Taylor did on a regular basis. “For now, I am basing all of your schedules on the assumption the Martian detachment and allied hulls will make safe travel and complete this journey in approximately one standard year. Since the needs for proper maintenance, refuelling, and other necessary inspections must be added, the preliminary date for your expeditions’ departure is 500.298M35. Whether you want to advance it or delay it is left at your discretion.”

“I think I will depart much sooner than that,” Magdalena Orpheus spoke. Apart from the style her black hair weren’t flowing on her face to hide her scar, the descendant of Arica Orpheus had chosen similar clothes than the one she wore during her trial to answer her summon today. “My Star Galleon is ready, and the two Destroyers I use as Escorts have been repaired and refuelled. If you give the order, I can leave right after the Day of Renewal.”

“Are you certain? The Eastern Fringe right now isn’t exactly a calm and peaceful theatre.”

“I am.” There was no hesitation in her blue eyes.

“If it’s your decision...Gavreel give her the paperwork,” her black-armoured sword-protector advanced and gave the woman a container of data-slates. Magdalena winced under the weight, and posed it at her feet in the next ten seconds. “The goals of your expedition haven’t changed. The Archmagi of Tigrus await several thousand tons of machines and spare parts they have paid for; once you have unloaded this cargo, you will be on your own. Triplex Phall has signed a few repair agreements to welcome you if you need a safe harbour given the...rapidly evolving military conditions in the Eastern Fringe.”

Let unsaid was that the ‘help’ would not be free, but the woman in front of her was experimented enough to know this.

“Thank you, my Lady. I assure you I will do my best to investigate the fallen Nostramo Sector and the surrounding space expanses for adamantium resources and other vital metals.”

“I have no doubt you will.”

Hopefully this should bring great wealth and provide a first survey of what was left in this region since the Great Crusade. After the carnage of the Heresy, everything north of Triplex Phall had been abandoned, as the Imperium lacked the ability to rebuild. And once the economy had finally begun to recover, new colony projects had taken priority.

The exit salutes were made, and Magdalena Orpheus left the salon.

“Is it also your desire to advance your departure date, Lady Salvia?” Taylor turned towards the other Rogue Trader, who few would have recognised as the Rogue Trader Alyena Sinblade. The new version of her had still violet hair, but her attire was a more respectable and conservative Renaissance ensemble, with a conservative black robe hiding most of her body. It had also been her decision to rename herself Rogue Trader Amanda Salvia.

“No, your Celestial Highness,” the older Lady replied, an unbreakable devotion of fanatic burning in her eyes. “My flagship isn’t ready, and several of the archeotech and artisan-work I must transport to Baal are far from complete in the Tech-Priests’ forges. I think the Wasp will be ready to sail before the preliminary date you have indicated, but a few months are the most optimistic gain I am willing to consider for now. Unless it is your wish I sail anyway?”

“No,” Taylor quickly shook her head negatively. “I have negotiated plenty of valuable goods with the Blood Angels and their Successor Chapters, I am not going to send you with half a cargo and come back with half of the assets promised. I can wait one year; it is better your deliveries have everything the Astartes of the Blood asked for.”

It would also increase the possibility of having some Bacta to send to Baal and the Sanguinary Guards. Some Brothers of the Red would have to be detached to guard the precious substance. ‘Amanda’ was now unable to betray her of her own will, but this kind of bounty could very well attract pirates.

After receiving her own pile of data-slates, the second female Rogue Trader left.

“Dennis. Have there been any changes in your studies of the Flamewrought’s databases?”

“Yes,” the other parahuman smiled before answering. Unlike Wolfgang who had opted for the Navy blue, Dennis retained a white uniform quite similar to the Navy of Earth Bet. “The Eighteenth Legion conquered a few worlds during the Great Crusade that the Administratum has apparently lost track of since. One of them is very promising. It was a Volcanic World the Astartes discovered named New Etna, and its metallic resources were judged quite valuable for the war machine of the Great Crusade.”

Dennis gave her a data-slate with some basic information, and reading it Taylor immediately felt her eyes widen in shock. This planet wasn’t as valuable as Nocturne, but if she gave that sort of data to the Mechanicus, there would be no problems convincing a few hundred Magi sailing directly to these coordinates and mining the hell of it.

“What the hell happened to make the Administratum lose track of this world?” The Basileia she was had sadly discovered you could only limit the damage represented by billions of bureaucrats working together, but in general worlds lost in the data-transits were poor and failed to give anything valuable to the Imperium.

The world of ‘New Etna’ was different from them. It should have been an incredibly valuable Industrial World by now, or failing that, a Mining World delivering millions of tons of highly-sought metals to the nearest Forge World.

“That’s the problem. We don’t know. The *Flamewrought* is the only ship of the Salamanders left to have the spatial coordinates, and before you asked, I sent a message to the Inquisition to see if it was in a restricted or quarantined zone. It isn’t. As far as the Salamanders or every historian know, this system simply vanished several years after the Heresy.”

“Weird,” the black-haired and golden-winged insect-mistress reacted. “I suppose you want to investigate once you will have visited Nocturne?”

“This is the plan my Seneschal and I made so far,” Dennis nodded. “We will send one or two ships your way with a Mechanicus escort for all the gifts the Salamanders have for you, and then we will travel to the coordinates. Since it’s in southern Segmentum Tempestus, we might use Gryphonne IV as a supply base before the true discovery effort begins.”

“I approve...for now,” the Lady of the Nyx Sector turned towards the Dawnbreaker Guards waiting on her left. “I am going to send a few inquiries to several Space Marine Chapters of the closest Sectors. I really don’t like the idea of valuable worlds like this one vanishing for no reason.”

“We can’t forget that early M31 was a...chaotic period, my Lady,” Wolfgang reminded her. “After the Scouring, plenty of planets were left shells of their former selves. It’s entirely possible a Battlefleet commander bombed this planet until it was utterly lifeless, and failed to inform the nearby authorities before he or she was ambushed.”

“Like Terrathens vanished from living memory?”

“I admit the circumstances are strangely similar,” the blonde-haired man agreed. “However Terrathens was settled during the Age of Strife. New Etna is a far more recent attempt.”

“I can’t deny that,” and it made the former far more valuable, which was why Wolfgang had far more Mechanicus assets ‘helping’ him. “Have you managed to form a consensus with the Magi Explorators?”

“Not quite, I’m afraid,” the young Rogue Trader admitted, “Everybody agrees establishing an outpost and some naval repairing facilities on the world of Kars Zagros is a good idea, since it is for one light-year inside the Astronomican illumination zone, but anything more is the subject of...vigorous discussions. The space beyond the Frontier Worlds of this part of the Eastern Fringe is known to swallow entire Expeditionary Fleets whole, and leave few survivors. Therefore there are a lot of different methods everyone wants to attempt.”

“Make sure they don’t bicker for an entire year. I don’t like intervening in Mechanicus internal affairs, but the prize at the end of the trail is too important to jeopardise it by internal conflicts.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

**Nyx II**

**Brigadier-General Tom Cameron**

When Tom raised his head, the two moons were still there. It was a view he really didn’t think he would be able to watch without a sense of shock. Things like moons weren’t supposed to be teleported across an entire system. Their orbited a single planet, and that was that. To learn an Archmagos could break the celestial laws...

“Admiring the miracles of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Brigadier?” Brigadier-General Julian Genesis asked.

“Among other things, yes,” the officer born in the Patton System replied to his Bahamuter counterpart. “Don’t let the cogboys hear that, though. I think several of those who have just landed consider Archmagos Cawl an unrepentant heretic.”

“I am not paid to say what is tech-heresy and what isn’t,” the dark-skinned and bulky commander said whimsically, “but according to the rumours, he’s definitely unrepentant.”

“Really? I mean, I know there were heavy fines involved for the deaths and the material destructions he caused on this very planet.”

“And if the whispers from the High Command are true, Her Celestial Highness unveiled a lot of sanctions and punishments specifically for him, therefore creating a precedent on moon and other planetary teleportation.” Julian Genesis shrugged, touching by reflex the little insignia of a flaming spider above his heart. “I won’t deny this is not a light punishment, but Cawl owns several planets and major Forges, if the rumours are true. He’s certainly more afraid of truly angering again Her Celestial Highness than paying the double of the fines his bank accounts have been hit with.”

“Formidable, truly formidable,” Tom Cameron murmured. But then the higher the cogboys climbed in their hierarchy, the crazier they became. It was one of those unofficial rules that no one in the Guard whispered too high when there were red robes in the vicinity, but it didn’t mean it wasn’t true. “And I suppose the pilgrims haven’t vacated Hill 5-4?”

“They’re still there,” the Bahamuter-born guardsman smiled, something that announced undoubtedly stranger news. “But apparently calling them pilgrims is no longer appropriate, apparently. They have decided to build a church on it, and they call themselves the Cult of the Saint of the Two Moons.”

“You are joking.”

“I assure you, I am not.”

Tom had the urge to curse or do something violent in the next minutes.

“Have they heard this hill is as close it is possible to get from the artillery testing grounds without trespassing on military property?”

“I’m sure a few reasonable heads may have considered it, especially after the Megarans and the Nyxians played with their new Basilisks last week.” Julian paused. “But ultimately, their faith must have been the deciding factor.”

“I doubt their ‘church’ is going to resist for longer than a few days, especially if they build cheap.” The recently promoted Brigadier-General shook his head, incredulous at the nonsense leading to this situation. “Maybe once it will have collapsed once, they will reconsider their choices and return to the Hive World.”

“And maybe they will join the Cult of the Spiders.”

Tom sent an angry glare at his fellow Brigadier-General, veteran like him of the armoured engagements fought in the dark realms of Commorragh.

“Please don’t joke about that. I don’t know how these madmen bribed the Biologis teams into releasing a Helspider into their custody, and I by the Golden Throne don’t want to be there when the power of Lady Weaver will stop making this arachnid monster tame and controllable.”

With His Holiness the Ecclesiarch in person announcing Lady Weaver was a true Living Saint – not that there was much doubt left on the matter – every cult and religion worshipping Her Celestial Highness were legal, as long as they followed the tenets of the Cult of the Saviour Emperor.

For plenty of communities, the reactions were filled with fervour, but remained eminently reasonable. The Cult of the Spiders was what happened when things didn’t stay that way.

These religious practitioners seemed to believe that wherever the Basileia stayed, once she had controlled a spider to accomplish her will, the spider was the equivalent of a vox and a servo-skull for the Living Saint permanently. As such, they tried to buy plenty of ancient spiders to be closer spiritually to the Saint...and as he had said previously, their biggest acquisition was, of course, a Helspider.

“The Txacopec cavalry seems to manage just fine.”

“The Txacopec cavalry is about as sane as the Cult of the Spiders, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s a retired guardsman from their regiment who has given them the idea.”

At least this particular brand of madness wasn’t on Nyx Secundus. The majority of the companies of the Txacopec regiment had been sent rebuild their numbers back on their homeworld...without the Helspiders.

“Shall we see what sort of Cataphracts and new blood the Departmento Munitorum has ready for us?”

“Yes,” Tom Cameron felt far better discussing about a military subject, especially when it involved his favourite tanks. “Let’s speak about the new equipment we have been granted the privilege to test.”

**Nyx VI’s High Orbit**

**Battleship *Admiral Mecklenburg***

**Lord Admiral Danvers Alexandros**

Most of his career, Danvers had spent it fighting tooth and nail for every Throne Gelt of his military budget and adding more capital ships to his Battlefleet.

The God-Emperor loved irony; there was no other possible explanation for being granted his wishes when he was about to retire from the Navy.

“You could last a few more decades, with a good rejuvenation like the one they offer in the clinics of Hive Athena,” Max von Schafer pointed out as he had guessed his thoughts, not that he really needed to with the expression of envy which surely had to be on Danvers’ face.

“Ha! I appreciate the vote of confidence, but you all know I’m not destined to stay Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Nyx, Admiral.” The ageing Navy officer shook his head with non-feigned regret. “Don’t take me wrong, I intend to accept the offer of rejuvenation the Basileia presented to me last month. It’s also possible I will take her up on the position of Second Naval Secretary she proposed. But Battlefleet Nyx needs someone more skilled than I am, both to play the game of politics and prepare for the great battles of the future.”

Besides, several duels had already been fought to first blood at Kar Duniash, and Danvers Alexandros was not brave enough to tell Lord High Admiral Reinhart von Lohengramm that really, all these struggles and politicking had been useless because he was going to keep his job a few more decades.

“Has the name of your replacement been announced?”

“Not officially no, but according to several old friends eager to have some good blackmail material, it should be Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller.”

“Müller...” Schafer touched one of the scars on his jaw in contemplation. “Any relation with the Admiral victorious at the Battle of the Adamantium Wall?”

“He is the same Admiral, unless there’s two of the same name in the Navy.”

The newly promoted Admiral born on Cypra Mundi chuckled.

“I think it’s unlikely. The family name isn’t one I remember from one of the great naval dynasties of Kar Duniash.”

For a few minutes, the two Navy representatives stayed silent, admiring the long lines of warships manoeuvring in neat lines to return to their berths in the orbital shipyards of Nyx Sextus. No matter how long you sailed through the void, there always was something near-miraculous at watching the might of humanity’s armada displayed like that before your eyes. Battleships were surrounded by Frigates and Destroyers; Battlecruisers were preceded by Light Cruisers. The numbers of torpedo tubes, Nova Canons, and macro-batteries were simply overwhelming.

And it was just the beginning of the build-up which would make Battlefleet Nyx a first-rate Battlefleet renowned across the Imperium. Already escort ships were arriving by entire flotilla; it wouldn’t be long before more Cruisers and Battleships arrived to inflate the firepower of the warships the Navy had in the Sector.

“For now, I do not intend to proceed to any more changes than what was already decided,” Danvers wasn’t going to shake the ship, so to speak, mere months away from retirement. “Vice-Admiral Alex Cazerne will stay in command of the Atlas Sub-Sector, and the same is true for Vice-Admiral Edwin Fisher in the Smilodon Trench.”

Those two had arrived to their current positions after many ‘proud officers’ retired in protest after Lady Weaver became Lady Nyx, and they had done sufficiently well his replacement may very well confirm them and grant them a promotion.

“The Theta captains aren’t going to be very pleased Kar Duniash designated Admiral Hauptmann to command the Marches’ Sub-Sector squadrons, however.”

“I know, but with Vice-Admiral Flint dying in his bed three months ago, I had no one with the rank and experience to replace him without creating outrage and more problems.”

The soon-to-be-retired Lord Admiral could only hope that Jacob von Hauptmann knew the true minefield he was about to sail into.

“Which leaves Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal to take the position of Vice-Admiral von Drenthe next year.”

“Yes,” really there hadn’t been a large amount of options available to him: it was either von Schafer, or it was von Reuenthal. With the industrial and infrastructure expansions ordered by the victorious Lady Nyx, Wuhan and the other worlds it held authority over were an Admiral’s station. Since Danvers had a preference for von Schafer playing the unofficial role of expert with his replacement, Reuenthal would have the Moros Sub-Sector. “And until we have a complete view of the situation, Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto will be the senior Navy officer in the Suebi Sub-Sector.”

“Her performance was remarkable at Commorragh,” the man who had been terribly wounded in the same battle said, “but I don’t think Kar Duniash is going to be fine leaving her in command there. Not without a major victory to her list of accomplishments, and all the naval transports and warships around Sparta are accounted for.”

“I agree completely, but this is not going to be something that is in my hands.” It would be the privilege of the new Lord Admiral chosen by Kar Duniash. And this lucky ‘Chosen officer’ would also have the ‘blessing’ to explain his policy and his decisions to a Living Saint backed by the coffers and the religious authority of the Adeptus Ministorum, and the enthusiast tech-worship of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Speaking of which...

“What is happening with the *Lion*?”

Schafer grimaced.

“The Magi swarming it are using it to demonstrate ‘how not to build a Battleship’, I believe.”

“That bad?”

“Let’s just say after reading one of the most coherent reports written in proper Gothic, I am really relieved I never used one of these disasters as my personal flagship. There are safer occupations in the Imperial Navy. Like being assigned to a fire ship near the Eye of Terror.”

“An interesting comparison...” Danvers Alexandros grimaced. “How do you intend to use it, assuming the Mechanicus relinquish it?”

“Training ship, with interdiction to send it anywhere near the frontlines,” Max von Schafer answered with all celerity.

“I suppose this is the end of this ‘Fast Battleship’ idea, then.”

“The concept doesn’t seem completely dead for a few Magi and Captains,” the Cypra Mundi-born veteran disagreed. “But it will be likely decades before we even see a completed prototype. Von Kisher’s haste to build this class was an egregious mistake; the shipbuilders of Nyx won’t want to repeat it, not when we lose hundreds of thousands souls when one is blowing apart...”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

**Cathedral of Endless Darkness**

**Indomitable-Captain Qel Greatsbark**

“Victory is ours-ours!” Qel screamed. “RING THE SCREAMING BELL! PRAISE MALAL!”

“PRAISE ANARCHY! PRAISE MALAL!”

Chained to one of the tanks the brute-things called a ‘wet doggy’ for some reason Qel didn’t care about, the Screaming Bell shone and tolled, the holy alloy and the warpstone fused into a receptacle of Blessed Anarchy.

On and on, the Bell tolled.

And the Grand Western Skaven Army of the Dark Pits attacked.

Qel pushed several of his most useless servants before him in the melee. There weren’t too many brute-things on the battlefield, but better not to take any risk before reporting his glorious and total victory to the Council of Eleven, yes-yes!

“MALAL IS WITH US-US!”

“FANGS AND ANARCHY!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE GODS-GODS!”

“MALAL WILLS IT-IT!”

Kamiskaven of Clan Ozai descended from the skies of Skavenblight to crush the heretics, and Qel shot with peerless accuracy before stabbing a man-thing bearing the heretic’s ugly markings.

“ATTACK-ATTACK!”

His irritation returned as he saw three potential usurper Captains shout the same order at the moment he did. Fangs and tails! Qel was really going to bring the power of Malal upon their insolent heads!

“I AM THE INDOMITABLE-CAPTAIN! MIGHTY I AM!” The supreme commander of the Greatsbark army squeaked while pushing the incompetent Stormvermins in the way of the long blades the enemy man-things had. “ONE COIN-FUR FOR THE WARRIOR DESTROYING THE SPIRE-SPIRE!”

Enthusiast war-cries engulfed everything save the tolling of the Screaming Bell, and the assault continued.

They were winning! His plan of genius was working! Qel was the greatest warlord of the Skaven, the most favoured of Malal! Praise Anarchy, his ascension to the Council was certain now!

The cathedral shook. The bloodied stairs shook. The dark rocks shook.

“What was that-that?” The Indomitable-Captain squeaked. “Why have our big guns-guns stopped firing?”

Qel suddenly felt very-very cold. His heart was beating faster-faster.

And his eyes watched the skies, he saw the heavens which belonged to Malal turn red, blue, and green.

“The Brute-things have made one of their rituals, Anarchy save us-us! RETREAT! RETREAT!”

A lighting of red struck the spire of the lair of the brute-things. Before Qel could squeak once more, it became a raging red storm, before turning into a red heresy-thing wielding a colossal axe bigger than the Screaming Bell.

It was not alone. Joining it was something feathered blue looking like these impossible-to-eat birds the Council had ordered to kill-kill! And when the green storm struck, a big thing of pus and disease was laughing and wielding a big-big tentacle!

“**WITNESS THE MIGHT OF THE THREEFOLD ABOMINATUM**!”

Qel Greatsbark squeaked in horror, and promptly voided his bowels.

“YOU! SAVE THE SCREAMING BELL-BELL! I WILL GO-GO AND INFORM THE COUNCIL!”

The Indomitable Captain didn’t wait to see if his orders were obeyed. This was only a minor reversal, yes-yes. There would be other-other days of great wins-wins. For now it was best to scurry-scurry.

“Not my fault-fault,” Qel affirmed as a torrent of his best troops followed him to avoid the rampage of the huge heresy-thing. “Not my plan-plan. I will turn this around! Anarchy will come back-back! We will be great-great!’

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Argos**

**3.933.296M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

The Ecclesiarchy had had a lot of flaws before she became the Basileia. One thing Taylor couldn’t deny was that they hired very good choirs of singers. Even if most of the songs were religious and were sung in High Gothic, there was a powerful sense of majesty to hear the men and the women voice hymns after hymn in the Cathedral of the Martyrs in the heart of Hive Argos.

And on the first day of the Sanguinala, the golden-winged parahuman knew the selection of the choirs was particularly disputed. The fact it was a holy day gave it a significant amount of prestige, but there was also the fact that instead of singing some ten minutes-long religious and immemorial tunes, the best choirs could show their talent for several hours if they managed to justify the trust the senior Priest of the Cathedral had shown in them.

Obviously, Taylor had only announced she would be here to attend this mass a couple of days ago. She knew the Chapel-Masters and the Pontifexes considered it a priceless honour to receive her, and that way all the preparations were complete, the mass was the same it would have been had she been not there, save a notable exception: the hundreds of thousands of Nyxians and foreign pilgrims which had assembled outside the Cathedral’s doors.

The Cathedral of Martyrs was a huge and ostentatious Gothic building built with an audience of tens of thousands in mind, but there was no way it could receive all the men, women, and children who wanted to enter.

To enter and watch her. The black-haired Lady General wasn’t naive enough to believe the crowds had gathered for the simple pleasure of praying at the feet of the marble statue of Sanguinius she had recently offered to the religious priesthood of Hive Argos.

“I could build several walls with this manpower,” Huscarl Diamantis whispered as the choir finished its song and the applause of the audience became thunderous.

“Cousin, I don’t think our Lady is very interested in building fortifications today,” Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr mildly admonished the Imperial Fist.

“She should be,” the expert wall-builder grunted. “The defences of this Hive are truly pathetic.”

“All in good time,” Taylor whispered, turning her head and giving a raise of her eyebrows to the Imperial Fist. “All in good time. While my insects do not need to be paid, quality materials and metals for top-grade fortifications are far from cheap.”

“I thought the budget of this Hive World was unlimited,” Death Speaker – the name the Executioners gave to their Chaplains – Rivera said in a tone oscillating between joke and complaint.

“Nothing is unlimited in this imperfect galaxy save perhaps the expansion of the universe and the stupidity of the Eldar,” Taylor commented absently as a new Chapel-Master began a sermon pushing for love between each human and diligence of religious worship. “And there are plenty of issues which must be deal with before military defensive spending.”

“Such as?” One thing you could say for the Imperial Fists and their Successors, they were stubborn and didn’t stop until they had the answer they wanted.

“Such as the measures I did order during my last council of Ministers when you were busy completing the last defences of Lisa’s Dome.” The Basileia answered, giving a pointed look to the discomforted son of Dorn, as a reminder to not be too absorbed in his architectural hobby next time. “According to all the information tax collectors and urban planners have compiled in the last three years, we are in the middle of a baby boom and the population increase for this Hive World and most of the surrounding system is going to erase the scars left by the successive military musters raised to fight the Orks.”

In practise, using this population boost wasn’t going to be that easy. An Agri-Hive and a brand-new spaceport were already planned for, but it may not be totally enough to give enough employment to the new generation which would come into adulthood in the next decades. And there were also going to be the education reforms. Apprenticeships’ schools, tech-learning, orphanages filled with orphans attracted by a safe home and edible food...the list of the projects wasn’t endless, but it was titanic in size.

“But now that the construction of all the infrastructure around Lisa’s Dome is on schedule and has all the manpower it requires, my priorities are to make the air of this planet breathable and moderately unpolluted.”

“The mega-cactuses are good for something, after all,” Kratos mumbled.

“Mega-cactuses, oxygen-firs, titan-oaks and several other trees are going to be seeded on several decontaminated plains and areas devoid of human settlement.” The south of the Dolos Hive-Continent – thousands of kilometres away from her current location in Hive Argos – was a prime candidate for the creation of some of these forests. And as a lot of industry was shifted in high orbit or on the different Lagrange points, the environmental damage done to Nyx Tertius had never been so low.

The Amphitrite distillation plants were all on schedule, with well over two hundred built so far, and several teams of Magi Biologis were working with algae and other ‘natural’ methods of water-purification to restore the cleanliness of the Nyxian Ocean, though this one was going to be a long and arduous process.

“I want to have a world which is worth defending, Diamantis,” the recognised Living Saint explained. “It is very good to be protected both on the ground and in space from the enemies which wish us harm, but it won’t do us much good if in a few millennia, we’re as polluted as some of the Hive Worlds of Segmentum Solar.”

For all the distance separating Nyx from the heart of the Imperium, there were plenty of horror stories concerning these orbs of pollution and obscene overcrowding, and with the millions of pilgrims arriving here, there were new ones heard every month if you had the ears willing to listen to these despairing voices.

“I may have new suggestions then, if it is your decision.”

“By all means,” Taylor told the Imperial Fist. “I will read them after the Sanguinala is over. I will warn you, their implementation may be delayed until our return from Wuhan.”

The sermon ended in a thunderous amount of applause, and Taylor left the voluminous throne which had been prepared for her in the Basileia’s lodge.

It was the Sanguinala, and the people of Hive Argos had not seen her in person inside their Hive since she had returned from Pavia.

It was the Sanguinala and as she arrived in front of the Cathedral’s gates, the crowd which greeted her had been multiplied by three or four since her arrival.

It was exhilarating to see all these smiling faces. It was also giving her a hint of fear, that she might fall them one day.

They had faith. The Nyxians and all these pilgrims had faith in her. An ocean of humanity believed in her, and while she couldn’t explain it, Taylor felt sure at this moment the wings and the golden aura were powered by this incredible religious fervour.

The Basileia could only hope it would be enough to face the challenges awaiting them in the years to come.

“AVE IMPERATOR! HAIL THE BASILEIA! HAIL HER CELESTIAL HIGNESS!”

**Hagia Sanguinala**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

Having spent several months in the catacombs of Caliban, Gavreel was confident the Lion and most of the senior commanders of the Astartes would not have approved the decoration of the Hagia Sanguinala’s sepulchre.

The monuments the First Legion had built on its main recruitment world could be summed-up in a single word: austere. Morael of the Angel Guard had even joked hearing his descriptions that the Dark Angels had invented the Gothic style before it became the norm across the Imperium.

But now that the moment was to make a choice, Gavreel had to say he preferred the splendid decorations of the Dawnbreaker Guard and the Nyxian artists to the dark mausoleums where the Legionnaires of the First Legion had been buried.

If the lights were artificial and by no means powerful enough to replace sunlight in the catacombs, their Lady had insisted that the light of dawn was to illuminate the level once per day, and an ingenious system of mirrors and advanced technology had been imagined by the architects to obey the command.

And the effect was breathtaking.

As the first rays of the Sapphire-Sun arrived above the eastern mountains, the sarcophaguses of Jonas and Aslan began to appear to his transhuman eyes like teas of crystal and blood.

By Sanguinius’ feathers, it was beautiful.

Gavreel, for the first time in years, felt the need to cry.

Lady Weaver had given dozens of the biggest rubies seized from Sliscus’ treasury, and the result was a marvel by itself. As the sun touched each jewel, it was like a Primarch’s fingers were touching the immobile Space Marines. With the transparent stasis field and the last rites provided by Techmarines and Apothecaries, it looked like the two dead Dawnbreaker Guard were merely sleeping.

The moment did not last, alas. Soon enough the sun continued its course, illuminating briefly the paintings, the sculptures, the numerous illuminations to ensure the catacombs never knew true darkness.

Silently, all the members of the Dawnbreaker Guard raised the golden chalices in their hands.

One by one, they came in front of the fallen Templar of Blood Librarian and the Angel of Defiance Sergeant.

One by one, they saluted and emptied the blood in the chalice.

Oaths had been kept, and duty waited for no one.

One by one, they left the catacombs, knowing that one day, the life they had chosen would lead them back here.

Gavreel could think of worse fates.

Dawn, after all, came every day. And the same was true for hope.

Jonas and Aslan had given their lives, and in time others would join them. Because there were causes greater than a hundred or a thousand Space Marines. As long as Taylor Hebert lived, the enemies of their gene-lines would know nothing but fear.

**Lisa’s Dome**

**Alice Gaius**

Alice tried very hard to hide her exhaustion when the transport hatch opened and the familiar order arrived to her ears.

“RUN!”

There was no time to lament herself on the fate of her poor legs, unfortunately. They ran. The first thing which had been impressed upon them when the Sanguinala Games began was that the judges spoke with the voice of the God-Emperor. Refusing to comply with their instructions was ground for instant disqualification.

Fortunately, the road they had to race upon here looked and felt brand-new devoid of any irregularities. Compared to some of the trials they had completed before this very moment, it was almost easy.

As all the roads converged to a massive golden gate in construction, there was little doubt to where they were supposed to go. It gave Alice the will to continue, because she felt her endurance decreasing with each stride. And many boys were overtaking her. The young teenager clenched her jaw and tried to not burn out her last reserves.

At last, the order to stop and form lines came. Astartes and Games’ assistants barked, removing boys and girls who for one reason or another had failed their demanding expectations.

And all the surviving participants were faced by a line of Space Marines.

Despite the tiredness, despite the long hours of physical trials, Alice couldn’t help but feel awe at the sheer presence the Emperor’s Angels presented. They were clad in massive red armours, and while not one had a weapon in their hands, there was absolutely not a shadow of doubt a single one of these warriors would be capable to kill them all if this was their decision.

The line only included Brothers of the Red, though Alice noticed from the corner of her eyes there were also a couple of famous Black Templars and Iron Drakes watching them.

“Aspirants!” One of the Brothers of the Red Marines took a step forwards and his voice boomed across their ranks without effort. “I am Battle-Brother Radelleon. I will oversee the ninth trial of the Sanguinala Games. You are to be commended to have completed the eight which came before it.”

The red helmet slightly moved, as if to detect the slightness weakness in them.

“As any of you must have understood so far, we have significantly altered the order of the Games and brought new trials into existence. For the first Game, you had to complete a ten kilometres-long obstacle course.”

As if they could forget this ‘memorable’ event. Alice had prepared hard and she had no problem running, but this ‘obstacle course’ had been a torture by itself. They had crawled in no less than ten pits of mud and disgusting substances. They had climbed by hand immense walls. They had done plenty of things Alice had no wish to repeat, and it had been only the first Game.

“For the second Game, you had to prove your adaptation skills by completing a biathlon circuit.”

And while Alice had no idea who had sponsored this, the man or the woman was definitely a sadist. No one among the participant had ever done something like ‘roller-skiing’, and the penalties when your paint-rifle missed a single target were forcing you to do two supplementary laps, aggravating exhaustion in a sport which was definitely neither easy nor relaxing.

The Space Marine recapitulated the other Games, which had been difficult in their own ways. The wrestling tournament was hard, and the orientation race in the middle of the night in the lower levels of a Hive had been...well, disorientating. Next they had been strapped to simulators with – according to the instructors – most of the commands and systems of a starfighter seat. The goal for this one had been simply to stay alive when facing waves after waves of enemy until the Space Marines were satisfied by their resilience.

After that, they had been tested on their adaptation skills again as they were introduced to what the Brothers of the Red called a ‘biking race’, which involved climbing up and down a mountain with two wheels-contraptions. The more classic trials of fencing and weight throwing had followed.

“The Ninth Game is unlike any other, for you will compete against time itself, but also indirectly against your fellow participants. Behind me stands Lisa’s Dome.”

The whisper of a melody was heard, and Alice and all the other participants knew immediately what resided in the huge Biodome they had never seen before.

So that was where the giant moth had been moved to after the Ovation.

“For those of you who were not present on Lady Weaver’s return or are slow to understand, yes, this Biodome is the home of the great purifier-moth called Lisa. Personally I think it is evidence itself, but striking this great agent of Lady Weaver will is grounds for instant elimination, assuming Lisa doesn’t choose to retaliate.”

Yes, Alice had to agree it would be very stupid. Not only was the moth a holy agent of a Living Saint and the Basileia would destroy the potential career of any trying to hurt one of her mounts, the very act of striking something bigger than Knight walkers when you had your bare hands and the moth could kill you by landing upon your body was...idiotic.

“What you may not be aware, however, is that this moth has quite an appetite, and loves new fruits and delicacies. For today, Her Celestial Highness has commanded Lisa to only eat the first sample of fruit, sugar, pastry, or honey which has been presented to her.”

Alice Gaius could see where it was going.

“By great chance, however, our Tech-Priests have been kind enough to list you all the foods this gourmet insect had swallowed since this morning, and new cargoes of fruit have arrived from Nyx Quartus and beyond. Between these, you should have all the information you need to provide a meal to Lisa. And you will need to, if you want to complete this Ninth Game. Several of our battle-brothers are following the mistress of the Dome, and will record your achievements.”

Wait a minute...oh by the Golden Throne. Not only they had to find the best food for Lisa, they also had to track her wherever she moved. This was...this was promising to be a big challenge...

“Next restrictions, in order to make the Game more interesting.” By this point, Alice was almost sure this was this Astartes who had engineered the biathlon and the bike racing. He had the sadist personality for it. “You only can take a fruit per person inside the Dome. If it isn’t one the noble moth accepts, you will have to return here and try with another. You have only four hours to convince Lisa to accept your gift. And of course you can’t steal the edible objects your fellow participants have. While you are in competition with each other to find the best food for our Lady’s moth, it is an indirect competition. There will be no violence between the aspirants.”

The Space Marine didn’t tell them it was grounds for instant disqualification, but he didn’t need to.

“LET THE MOTH GAME...BEGIN!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx**

**Fay System**

**Fay**

**5.951.296M35**

**Brigadier-General Tanya Sevrev**

Civilians from Nyx and Fay had not a lot of points in common. Their devotion towards the new Living Saint of the Nyx Sector set aside, the Hive World and the Civilised World were hardly close neighbours.

But when it came to partying on the Day of Victory of the Sanguinala, it didn’t matter which culture the soldiers and the civilians belonged to, there were no issues with partying vigorously in the streets and every location opened to the festivities.

“I think the average worker is going to have difficulties travelling to his workplace tomorrow morning,” the veteran of the Fay 20th smirked as from the observation balcony several people looked like they didn’t really remember their own names.

“I think the overseers and the industrialists will be tolerant...exceptionally,” her former superior and now the Governor of the Civilised World answered. “This Sanguinala was as much the holy week’s celebrations as it was a feast to celebrate the Victory of Commorragh. I authorised an increase of the budget after the astropathic news arrived, and I’m sure I wasn’t the only one.”

“Assuredly,” Tanya feigned to approve gravely. “There are rumours even the so-noble rulers of Atlas decided to raise a few toasts to the Basileia.”

“They must really have tried to get dead drunk after that,” Ilvyna Dalten chuckled, and the other blonde-haired woman followed suit. The Atlasian nobles had stopped their legal attempts to contest how Lady Nyx exerted her authority over trade and core prerogatives over the Sector, but unless you were somewhere far, far away from all civilisation for over a decade, it was impossible to ignore the Basileia and the rulers of Atlas’ political views were extremely incompatible.

“You sold them the wine?”

“I wish I did,” Ilvyna sighed. “Alas, while the reputation our vineyards have managed to gain in the last couple of years is excellent for the Sector as a whole, it doesn’t extend to Atlas. These stellar ‘paragons of nobility’ are spitting on anything which isn’t Atlasian amasec.”

“I am not surprised. Nothing has really filtered of Lady Weaver’s last negotiations with Atlas, but...well, the Governor of Megara and she made several economic announcements, and I know for sure a certain First Duke was present at that audience.”

“Interesting,” Ilvyna smiled. “I had heard similar rumours.” The light promising unpleasant things for the Atlasian nobles rapidly disappeared in her eyes. “On the other hand, financial investments or not, the Atlas System is still going to be a significant player in the Sector’s affairs for the next decades.”

“Even with all the industrial reforms, the Tech-Priests’ gatherings, and the new objectives recently negotiated?”

Tanya was of course only lightly associated with economic affairs at the highest level; so far after their return from Pavia, her only moves had been to buy lands on Fay and a nice private hostel in the upper levels of Hive Athena. But what she had seen on Fay so far was incredibly impressive: a small shipyard coupled with cargo platforms, mining extraction on the rise in the asteroid belt, plenty of brand-new roads and cities, plans to add more, and this was without counting the renovations to several parts of the capital and the introduction of several machines and installations coming from STC discoveries and Mechanicus transfers.

“We are making great progress, but don’t forget that the system of Atlas has three inhabited planets, and if their numbers can be trusted, this grants them a population of seventeen billion as a whole. If we don’t count the worlds recently annexed in the Suebi Sub-Sector, the only systems which are surpassing by far Atlas in industry and population are Nyx and Wuhan. Theta, Iris, and Calypso have three inhabited planets, but for different reasons they fail to give two-thirds of the tithes Atlas’ Dukes give to the Administratum.”

“You’re right,” Tanya was forced to concede, “but Theta’s Grand Solicitor, for one, met with Lady Weaver and accepted her conditions. Isn’t it possible that as more and more Tech-Priests and valuable personnel spread over the Sector, the gap between Atlas and other systems will soon be erased?”

“Maybe,” her former superior was not convinced, the Brigadier-General could see it clearly. “They are certainly going to fall behind in productivity per head; that much I won’t dispute. But a lot of their population consists of serfs owning little else but their own lives and the clothes on their back. And unlike Byukur and Menelaus, they haven’t made the mistake of insulting and downgrading most of their armed forces for a small private guard.”

Tanya could have added the Nyxian Ministers weren’t exactly eager to go on the warpath as long as the tithes were paid, but there was no need to. Unless First Duke Cristoforo Mocenigo or one of his friends committed a major mistake like beginning to worship the Ruinous Powers, it was likely this unpleasant state of affairs was going to continue.

“How long do you intend to stay?” Ilvyna asked, hinting the subject of certain Atlasian issues was closed.

“At least two months. I left two companies of the 20th at Hive Athena with Colonel Tovar, but all the veteran regiments really need to rebuild their strength now before any serious action can be considered.”

Commorragh had been an immense victory, but a lot of Fay blood had been shed to achieve it. Like all the other regiments which had participated, too many friends and companions had lost their lives to not feel a bit melancholic.

“I also need to confirm you aren’t against the idea of building a nice ‘Grand Reliquary’ on your world.”

This time Ilvyna outright laughed.

“Our Pontifex and his assistants haven’t stopped pestering me last year I needed to ‘donate’ enough funds for the new Cathedral they wanted to build in the south. It will be my pleasure to refuse them, and to allocate plenty of Throne Gelts to this grand project.”

The blonde-haired Governor raised an ironic eyebrow.

“I sense an attempt to partially divert the torrent of pilgrims this way, however.”

“I can’t possibly answer this half-treacherous declaration.” The Guard veteran virtuously replied.

“Obviously,” Ilvyna nodded like it was the wisest thing in the world. “And on a different subject, has a certain proposition been made between two young women of high rank?”

“No,” Tanya shook her head in feigned horror. “But I have a feeling it shouldn’t be too long now. Most of the Governors and their relatives are making marriage proposals to one or the other since they have returned from Commorragh. It’s only a question of time before one snaps and proposes.”

The Brigadier-General maintained an expression of perfect innocence before opening her sizeable carnet.

“Do you want to join the betting pool, Governor?”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Theta Marches Sub-Sector**

**Portsmouth System**

**Portsmouth**

**5.956.296M35**

**Chapter Master Felix Sulla**

“It will do.”

Felix didn’t need to be a good reader of human expressions to know his interlocutor was surprised.

“Forgive me Lord...but...”

“I am hasty in my judgement? I assure you, I am not.”

Felix had served as Captain of the 3rd Company for four decades. His official title among his brothers had been ‘Bastion of Defiance’, and like all his predecessors before him, he had tried his utmost to be worthy of the name the Primarch had bestowed upon them: the Sentinels of Terra.

Now that his new mission had been approved by his gene-sire, the former Imperial Fist was not going to fail in his duties, and hastiness was not something he was going to be accused of.

But the new Chapter supposed he was going to have to explain his choice, as boring and distasteful the prospect was. To be how had Lady Weaver called it...diplomatic?

“To build a new Fortress-Monastery, there are certain criteria which always come into account, Hegemon,” the veteran Astartes explained to the Governor of Portsmouth, who for some farcical historic reason, was called the ‘Hegemon of the Free Waters’ - often shortened to ‘Hegemon’. “Most of them the defensibility of the landscape we build upon. On this aspect, the site is near perfect, as we are blocked from the north and the west by high mountains few armies can cross without trying to raze them with gigantic terraformation engines or orbital bombardment. Southwards of this position there is the Danish Ocean, and with a minimum of defences, the threat of an amphibious operation coming from it will be minimal.”

“I understand,” the silver-haired man answered. By the Fist, this hairstyle and the hat were truly ridiculous, especially as Felix knew the man had received a rejuvenation five years ago. “Based on the rumours which spread from the Magma Spiders and the Iron Drakes choices, I would have thought, Lord, you would build your Fortress-Monastery far closer to my capital or on the other side of planet.”

This was admittedly a good point, especially for a non-military leader.

“My fellow Chapter Masters have their own traditions and priorities,” the Chapter Master of the Fists of Roma told Hegemon Leonardo Martim. “Some of them I share, some of them I don’t caution. The closeness of a capital so close to a Fortress-Monastery is not one I advise. I want to believe Portsmouth will not be a besieged world for millennia to come. This is an outcome every Fist of Roma will strive for. But reality rarely conforms to the Fists’ wishes, and there are enemies who are not shy about bombarding heavily a planet if they think they can crush all resistance in a few hours. Therefore I, as a Chapter Master and a son of Dorn, will not offer potential invaders an easy concentration of civilian and military assets to eliminate in a single strike.”

There were also several tactical points he wasn’t going to tell the Governor of Portsmouth. First, that even with the extremely advanced technology the Mechanicus was willing to share, the capital of Portsmouth was far too spread over the countryside to install a conventional energy shield protecting the entirety of its surface. Secondly, the Imperial Fists had enough dark memories of the Siege of Terra and countless other catastrophes to know that the closer you placed your Fortress-Monasteries from a city, the bigger the wave of refugees were when panic reigned and the authorities’ order collapsed.

“The White Mountains provide great defensive and training grounds for our Chapter. There are enough lands here for us to not disturb anyone, and there are plenty of sources of water.”

Yes, this was a good place to build a fortress. The purity of the snow high up in the mountains was giving him some good feelings about Portsmouth. The wind was cold, but not freezing. This planet was not Inwit to be certain, but it could in time become a proper base for their Chapter.

“I presume you wish to return to the Capital?”

Felix stopped watching the mountains and the defences and the plans he had for the new fortress he and his brothers were going to build here were temporarily placed on hiatus.

“Yes,” the new Chapter Master declared. “I want to see the sons of Portsmouth who want to join our ranks.”

And he wanted to tell them in person that the first obstacle on their path would be to travel to Mount Ruivo, the second highest big hill mere hundreds of metres away from here.

Since the aspirants were approximately two hundred and thirty kilometres away from this point, this would provide a proper challenge.

Felix Sulla respected the ‘Sanguinala Games’ of the Brothers of the Red and thought the idea had merit to recruit boys who would one day be the backbone of an Adeptus Astartes Chapter, but this wasn’t the way of the sons of Dorn.

“You will be impressed, I assure you. The announcement was incredibly popular and I think over half of the teenagers of Portsmouth City tried to volunteer...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Suebi Sub-Sector**

**Sparta System**

**High Orbit over Sparta**

**Frateris Command Cruiser *Grace of Lemuria***

**5.999.296M35**

**Judge Missy Byron**

When Missy had seen the preliminary data accumulated on Sparta, her first thought had been that the basic Administratum category of ‘Ice World’ could sum-up most of the things said about this world.

And now that she was in orbit over it, the Minister of Justice of Nyx had all the confirmation Sparta was a lot of things, and it didn’t involve being a good colonisation prospect for humanity.

It was beautiful if you loved massive balls of ice, and maybe one day when peace had returned to the galaxy it could serve as a winter sports’ resort.

Even with a lot of optimism however, Missy didn’t see that happening on her lifetime.

“When do you want to launch your offensive, Lady Byron?” asked Pontifex-Crusader Vishwa Ousadevi.

“As soon as military feasible,” the young parahuman immediately replied. “Practically, the time your railway system will need to transport the Nyx 1st and the Mechanicus tanks to their advanced positions on the frontlines in front of Keeler’s Fortress.”

“Isn’t it proceeding too fast?” A Confessor of the Ecclesiarchy spoke without having been invited, and Missy gritted her teeth at being imposed ‘religious help’ in a military headquarters when these men were clearly nothing of the sort.

Fortunately, she wasn’t the only one to be unamused by the presence of so many idiots.

“Be quiet.” Chapter Master Agiel Izaz of the Brothers of the Red said coldly. “Your incompetence has already been noted, don’t aggravate your case.”

All whispers and ongoing grumbled protestations stopped in one second.

“In case some people wish to wait, let me remind you there is a colossal blizzard raging several thousand kilometres north-west of the frontlines. Assuming the weather predictions are correct, there is less than two weeks before it reaches the Crystal Peaks Mountains. After that, Sparta’s winter will turn the world into a frozen hell where only Space Marines and void-sealed armours will be able to operate with some efficiency.”

“But you have these-“

Missy clicked her fingers, and a Commissar dragged one of the Ecclesiarchy representatives unwilling to shout his mouth out of the room.

“The next person who interrupts me without asking permission to, I will send him or personally to Sparta via the closest airlock,” the Shaker promised. “Now as I was saying, we can’t afford to wait. We have two fortresses to storm if we want to bring the rebels to their knees.”

“There are three fortresses! Don’t you-“

Missy clicked her fingers, and one of her Arbites assistants ‘escorted’ the loudmouth out of the room. It seemed that proving she wasn’t bluffing was going to demand a few summary executions, then.

“There are only two fortresses to be concerned about, Keeler’s Fortress and the Cardinal Kunar’s. Once those two are back in Imperial hands, we will be easily able to deprive the rebels of the Shankar Promethium Plant and cut the energy production supply of the enemy.”

Missy turned to the lone Magos representing the Adeptus Mechanicus.

“Data on the ground will need to be collected and analysed,” the cyborg-cogboy said. “But the pipelines and railways are intact as far as Outpost XZ-5 several kilometres east of Viveh. Assuming destruction is minimal save at the two rebel-held fortresses, the Mechanicus will be able to repair the installations in a matter of weeks. Then we will improve them, I swear it on the name of the Omnissiah.”

There were some angry expressions in the assistance, but Missy really didn’t care. Promethium mining and extraction procedures, when they weren’t significantly Mechanicus-automated, were true nightmares for the humans working on them. There was a reason Taylor had invested so many expensive technologic assets into improving the living conditions of the workers, and it wasn’t just to make herself more popular.

As horrible as the working conditions had been on Nyx, unfortunately, they hadn’t held a candle against the pre-revolt penal system of Sparta. On Nyx after all, the workers had been badly paid and by no means treated gently, but they had still been free men. The men and women sent to the ice orb had not this chance.

“Whether the rebels have the promethium industry available or not, they won’t surrender,” the Pontifex-Crusader warned her.

“Maybe not,” Missy agreed. “But without any promethium to warm themselves, their supply lines in disarray and their moral shot down to hell, they won’t survive long.”

“They have Mushroom Haven,” Vishwa Ousadevi countered. “They will still have some food to avoid starvation.”

Missy threw a look at the little green dot at the end of the lines of fortresses and penal facilities the Ecclesiarchy had built on Sparta. Again one more mistake the Adeptus Ministorum of Atlantis had committed.

Penal Worlds were not supposed to be independent militarily or economically, for obvious reasons. The risk of prisoners taking control was non-trivial at the best of times, and the last thing the Imperium wanted was to confront heavy defences when the moment came to retake the world.

The imbeciles of Atlantis had not listened to any of the Munitorum envoys and other Imperial experts sent to change their mind, and here was the result. Sparta combined a line of fortresses impossible to flank by the means the Frateris Templars had at their disposal, a spaceport – which had to be retaken with a mountain of loyalist corpses – and last but not least, a promethium power plant and underground mushroom harvesting facilities.

“True, but they will need to devote more of their limited resources to keep Mushroom Haven functioning,” and the ex-prisoners had to keep millions working in these underground facilities, because they had never been automated or conceived to be easy to operate in the first place. “Not that it really matters, in the end. I am going to deal with them...permanently.”

And she wouldn’t lose a lot of sleep in the process. The criminals sent by the Ministorum to Sparta were hardly the kind of people you wanted to reintegrate in a civilised society. Her credentials among the Adeptus Arbites had been enough to give Missy access to the figures, and there were grim. Over seventy percent of the prisoners prior to the revolt were accused of crimes varying from numerous murders to rape, when it wasn’t active participation in insurrection cells or membership in forbidden cults.

Somehow, she didn’t think it was the ‘thought criminals’ demanding democratic reforms who had emerged on top after the successful insurrection.

“Still, I suppose we will give the rebels of the...what are they calling themselves again?”

“The Communist Revolutionary Syndicate for the Spartan’s People,” informed her pleasantly Agiel Izaz.

Communists. On Sparta. If there was something good on this galaxy, Leet would only learn of it in a few decades.

Missy had thought this bad idea had died with Earth Bet, but it seemed she was going to have to dirty her hands to convince everyone this nauseating political idea was not tolerated.

“Yes, I am going to give this ‘Revolutionary Syndicate’ a chance to lay down their arms and surrender before our offensive begins. Those who are carrying arms can go to the Penal Legions, we always need more expendable cannon fodder in the Eastern Fringe. Those who stayed cultivating mushrooms will likely be transported to a secure Agri-World where they will live and die providing new harvests to the Imperium.”

Vishwa Ousadevi’s dark-skinned face was best described as very unconvinced.

“I can vox these terms, but do not expect them to answer by anything save insults and heretical speeches.”

“Oh, you won’t have to do that, Pontifex-Crusade. My new secretary is going to take care of it. Isn’t that right, Mr. Bear?”

And if the expressions of the Frateris Templars had been angry when she informed them of the Mechanicus participation, it was a child’s tantrum compared to their reactions when they saw her lovely black-and-white furry ‘secretary’ enter.

It was difficult to mistake him for anything than a Rashan, evidently.

“HERESY! SHE IS NOT WHAT SHE PRETENDS TO BE! TEMPLARS, ARREST THESE HERETICS!”

“Chapter Master, I think we are going to use a lot of airlocks before descending on Sparta.”

“YOU HAVEN’T THE RIGHT TO LET A XENOS LIVE ON THIS HOLY SHIP!”

“I am the Law. I have every right.”

Taylor had asked her to remove the biggest problems against her rule in the Suebi Sub-Sector, and it was best to begin here and now. The *Grace of Lemuria* should never have been built like it was in the first place; it was bad enough this Lunar hull had only a third of the firepower the Navy took for granted, but was it really to have baths and toilets decorated in gold, and the equivalent of a yearly tithe in precious metals and luxury items for decoration and parties?

“The *Codex Astartes* completely supports this action, Judge.” The red-armoured Astartes told her solemnly as several platoons of the Nyx 1st stormed in and began to arrest many Frateris Templars and Priests.

“Really?” a Scout waiting behind him sounded very surprised.

“I believe the passage refers as dealing with the infiltrators and the incompetent officers in your order of battle before you confront the real enemy.” Agiel Izaz smiled, and this was the expression of a predator having found his prey. “Sometimes we of the Blood listen to the wisdom of the Ultramarines...”

**Sparta**

**Fortress of the People – ex-Saint Keeler’s Fortress**

**Citizen-General of the Revolution and the People Morgantia Zapata**

“The Enemies of the People have asked for our surrender again, Citizen-General.”

Morgantia Zapata had a good laugh at that. Would the lackeys of the Corpse-God ever truly learn true Spartans had sworn to never kneel again?

“The Enemies of the People are so stupid they can’t help themselves. Ask the Promethium Citizen-Director of the People if he can spare a few heads to be delivered to the corpse-worshippers.”

“Right away, Citizen-General!”

In this case, the demand for heads was literal: Morgantia was going to take great pleasure in sending the decapitated heads of the Enemies of the People to their masters.

“Stupidity of the Enemies of the People aside,” the People’s Delegate to the Committee of Defence Affairs grinned before returning to seriousness. “Their forces seemed to have been heavily reinforced.”

On that point, the People’s Delegate was completely right. The Fortress of the People guarded the only pass allowing an easy crossing of the People’s Crystal Peaks, and with the elevation the fifty metres-tall walls granted them, there was no way to miss the endless rotation of the mag-trains between the spaceport and the camps of Treachery and Oppression.

“Yes, but I doubt it will do them any good.”

The last enemy assaults against his command had been bloody failures, and he saw no reason today was going to be any different. None of the People’s scouts deployed to observe the enemy’s movements had noticed heavy concentrations of artillery or sizeable fortress-crusher walkers.

The brave citizen-soldiers of his vanguard had reported a worrying amount of tanks and enemies in power armour, but what good was it doing to do to the Oppressors when they couldn’t approach the Fortress of the People’s walls without being slaughtered by its mighty guns?

“To be honest, Citizen-General, I think we are quite lucky today. The Citizen-Director in the Promethium extraction mines was beginning to worry about a certain deficit in thousands of hands to provide us the liquid of the People’s Oppressors. With this assault coming, once again the People’s Army will be granted the opportunity to capture and turn the Enemies of the People to more productive actions.”

“You are completely confident about repelling the oncoming assault then, Citizen-General?”

“Citizen-Delegate, at the risk of sounding arrogant, the only question is how many waves of attack the Oppressors’ infantry will launch at us before realising their men have no chance to breach the People’s walls. The People’s efforts have repaired the damage the last assaults did, and the stocks of ammunitions are plentiful. The geography of Sparta means every flanking effort is going to be on foot and easily blocked, and the People’s guns are better trained and longer-ranged. The People’s victory is certain.”

No, there was no problem about this assault. Though Morgantia wished the Committees weren’t going to ask too many questions about the ones which would come after that once the oncoming winter was over.

So far, there was no problem with ammunition, but the real problem was the maintenance of the field guns. The majority of the spare parts for them had been stocked at the spaceport, and both technicians and parts had been blasted apart when the loathed corpse-worshippers had retaken it.

This wasn’t the only problem, of course. While he was too loyal to the People and the Committees to ask if there were issues, the number of mushroom rations delivered to the Fortress of the People had decreased again six days ago, and it had failed to return to normal levels as he was explaining the situation to the Citizen’s Delegate.

“The People’s Committees will be pleased to hear the survival of the Revolution is not at risk for this season.”

“As long as I am alive, the only way the Oppressors’ attack-mastiffs will pass these gates is dead or in chains, Citizen’s Delegate. The blood and the lives of the People built this Fortress, the blood and the lives of the Oppressors will be spent by the billions trying to conquer it!”

It didn’t matter if the guns broke or the Hosts of Tyranny and Oppression came by the billions on this world. Morgantia had lost four brothers on Sparta in the promethium mines. Four brothers executed like chattel because they were too wounded to continue working in the dark pits of the false-priests. He was the last now of his family, and he would not kneel, surrender, or show any form of weakness to the Enemies of the People. He would die first, but before he was going to send millions of them to the corpse-god they loved so much.

“If you give me a few minutes, I am sure I can write a message for the Defence Committee-“

Citizen-General Morgantia Zapata stopped talking, as his eyes were witness of something impossible.

The People’s Crystal Peaks were tall mountains of snow, ice and millions of tons of stones and iron ore. There were so imposing even the Oppressors who had ordered the People to build the railway line and the Fortresses had used this pass and several others to link the People’s Spaceport and the Mushroom Haven of the People.

The Enemies’ artillery had tried to unleash a few avalanches by shooting at some sections of the Peaks, but it had quickly proven fruitless.

These mountains were older than the Oppressors, and would likely last several millennia. By then the Revolution would be triumphant.

But under his very eyes, the closest northern peak was distorting, stretching impossibly.

“What...what in the name of the People?”

The fortress began to shake. The mountains themselves were shaking. The peak was contorting, distorting, stretching impossibly in shape no peak or natural landscape should take.

Morgantia should know, he had been a member of the Cartographer’s Guild before being arrested by the Oppressors.

But while his eyes insisted it couldn’t happen, a good third of the upper mountain was ripped apart from its stone foundations, and began to levitate. And it rose higher and higher by the second.

The Citizen-General’s mind screamed it was impossible, that there was no way it could happen.

It had to be a nightmare! It had to be!

But the impossible mountain was moving, slowly but surely, in the direction of his fortress! No, the Fortress of the People! It was the Fortress of the People! It was going to stand! The nightmare was going to end!

The unruly snowy mountain arrived on top of them, casting an immense shadow, and depriving them of the weak Spartan sun of the People.

And then it was like whatever’s abominable power had allowed this failed, and an entire mountain fell on them.

Citizen-General Morgantia Zapata, former criminal of Atlantis accused of three murders, two rapes, and numerous acts of arsons and pillage against Ecclesiarchy properties, former penal prisoner of Sparta, traitor to the Imperium of Mankind, began to scream like a possessed man.

And then he, like the five hundred thousand soldiers of the fortress he had defended against the Frateris Templars, died pulverised.

**Scout Phanuel**

Space Marines didn’t know fear. Phanuel hadn’t known it since he became part of the Chapter of the Brothers of the Red, so of course he had assumed the old adage was true.

Besides, if Commorragh had not been enough to give him fear, there was no way his two transhuman hearts and the psycho-indoctrination in his brain would allow him to experience the feeling again, right?

These thoughts, obviously, had been before Missy Byron, Judge of the Adeptus Arbites, Minister of Justice of Nyx, dropped an entire mountain on the rebel fortress.

Yes. An entire mountain. She had dropped an entire mountain on the rebels.

It took him about ten seconds for the veteran scout – after Commorragh, all the survivors were by definition veterans – to realise he was gaping like someone out of air.

Phanuel closed his mouth.

Missy Byron had dropped an entire mountain on the rebels. Alone. Unsupported.

Phanuel had believed Lady Weaver was the most dangerous parahuman alive, but now with the benefit of hindsight...

“Praise the Omnissiah and the parahumans!” Of course the Tech-Priest was the first to regain some measure of reason and thinking ability, for a certain definition of it. A glance at the high officers of the Frateris Templars showed there were nowhere near able to shake off the effect of having assisted to the destruction of the fortress which had stopped their offensives for the last years.

By the time the friend of Lady Weaver returned to their position, the shock had begun to dissipate a bit.

“I suppose it is a good thing we didn’t intend to use the Saint Keeler’s Fortress,” the voice of their Chapter Master sounded...almost resigned. “I suppose you have interesting targets in mind, Lady-Judge?”

“Yes, Lord Izaz. While I’m flattening the pass to ensure all our vehicle columns can go on the offensive, it would be perfect if you and one or two companies of the Nyx 1st could go after the Shankar Promethium Plant. I know you will need to land a few kilometres away to avoid the anti-air guns, but all of your effectives will be in power armour, and I think that as the rebels fail to vox-contact their doomed fortress, panic is going to spread in.”

“The Promethium Plant will be back in Imperial hands by sunset, Lady-Judge.” All of the Space Marines present saluted Missy Byron by striking their fist against their power armours before walking at a sound pace towards the Thunderhawks.

“What are you waiting for?” the voice of the fortress-crusher resonated. “The Mechanicus, the Space Marines and the Guard are preparing their forces for a lightning offensive! Why are the Frateris Templars standing idle?”

“YOU DESTROYED A FORTRESS!” a Frateris Templar shrieked incoherently.

“Yes and? If you want to serve the Basileia, Templar officers shouldn’t let small details like that go in the way of your duties!”