**Ovation Interlude**

**Monsters and Nightmares**

*My dear Taylor Hebert, I have excellent news for you.*

*Lorgar is reacting exactly like you wanted him to behave, and he pushed Magnus to support him as well.*

*Oh no, I have no spies in his inner circle. The last wizard to try it is still screaming in the torture chambers of the* Trisagion*.*

*But no spies are really necessary when one can hear his tantrums in the Immaterium and the concentration of military forces gathered under his banner is getting larger day after day. Unless the priest-commander of the Word Bearers intend to attack Abaddon the Despoiler and challenge him for the title of Warmaster, his ambitions can only begin with the Cadian Gate.*

*To misquote an Aleph movie, war will arrive promptly in this system. The gauntlet was thrown, and the reinforcements dispatched by the High Lords to the Fortress Worlds have obviously goaded him further upon this course.*

*But I don’t give you any new information, I’m sure. For two short moments, you illuminated the darkness during the Battle of Commorragh. You illuminated the abyss, where no mortal had ever dared bringing the Anathema’s Light. Furthermore, you sent the old rat curse of a long dead age to Sicarus. You may have obeyed only the orders of your crippled master upon his Golden Throne at first, but it evolved rapidly from there. Your deeds, you alliances, and your hopes will break the Imperium’s slow decline and the current rapport of strength between the Imperium and the enemies opposing it.*

*Lorgar can’t afford to give you one more century of rearming, reforms, and hope. He could have waited a bit longer if the rat infestation wasn’t there, but as it stands, his ‘Grand Armada of Chaos’ has a very limited timetable to strike or everything he believes in will be lost.*

*For this is the dying Emperor’s plan, and yours, truly.*

*A Black Crusade is by definition the alliance of the Three-Who-Were-Once-Four. A Black Crusade is Undivided Chaos, or at least a temporary agreement to tend towards that goal. Lorgar is the self-proclaimed Champion of Undivided Chaos. His powerbase in the Great Game can’t survive, unlike Abaddon and other warlords of the Eye of Terror. Not if the rats succeed in claiming Sicarus or a significant place of worship in the heart of the greatest Warp Storm of this galaxy, awakening their God of Anarchy beyond any possibility of suppression.*

*This was a devilish choice you gave him, oh destroyer of Commorragh.*

*Either watch as the Horned God rose on the ashes of his precious temples and watch his precious Pantheon accept a deity in their midst which will make cooperation between the Gods impossible, or try a decisive gambit to destroy Anarchy and put back the genies back into the bottle where they were solidly trapped before you annihilated the post-Fall Drukhari civilisation.*

*If the Custodes gave you enough information on Lorgar, you knew it wasn’t a choice at all for him. The gene-sire of the Word Bearers is a fanatic where his convictions are at stake. I don’t know if it was something gene-crafted by his creator or a malign poison the Gods infected him with when they sent him to Colchis, but this is the reality and the outcome was decided before the first attack on the* Templum Officio*.*

*The Imperium will face the Black Crusade, perhaps the last one in its existence, and you will have a gigantic host of enemy Astartes where you can fight and kill them in a single campaign, burning the dead branches of the Imperial tree which need to be pruned before the new age begins.*

*Two words of warning though, Queen of the Swarm. Do not underestimate Lorgar. His plans are based on a lot of flawed assumptions and millennia spent stewing on existent and non-existent wrongs done to him, but he is still a Daemon-Primarch. When he strikes, it will be with the strength of a Legion and the greatest alliance of Astartes and Neverborn since Horus was killed.*

*And do not think the Three are going to be less redoubtable when it comes to confront you. My Patron and the other Two will be to protect their most important followers from the ravages of Anarchy at all times. Divided the hosts of the Eye and the cultists will be, but a new ‘order’ will soon emerge...until the next war.*

*Because in many ways, this conflict is only the first step for you, isn’t it? It is the great clash before you go back to Mankind’s Cradle.*

*Many Lords of Change don’t believe it is within your capabilities.*

*I believe otherwise.*

*A daughter of Terra must return and deliver salvation or damnation to the Throneworld. One of us must kneel before the Anathema and hear the story of our rise and fall.*

*Because when it comes to it...Parahumans and Primarchs are not that different.*

*I am Malicia the Destiny Unwritten now, Angel of Sacrifice. I will wait for you where even daemons fear to tread.*

\*\*\*\*

From: Agent E-2649VI5

To: [CLASSIFIED BY INQUISITORIAL ORDER]

Clearance: Vermillion

*My Lord,*

*Your suspicions were right. The Traitor Seventeenth has accelerated its preparations. Their agents are seemingly everywhere in the Eye, and are recruiting or enslaving millions of mutants and abominable things that I won’t name here.*

*More worrying is the sheer number of Traitor warbands and the warships answering the call of these monsters. At least one representative for every Traitor Legion has sworn itself to [REDACTED] cause. The number of capital ships is frightening no matter how one looks at it. The sources employed are unreliable in the extreme, but I have been able to confirm over sixty Battleships and ten Grand Cruisers are repaired or in construction in the pit of horrors that is Sicarus.*

*Given how difficult it is to spy upon these heretics, I must concede there are likely more fleets and corrupted hulls waiting into secret shipyards that I have been unable to locate.*

*The industrial effort to sustain this military expansion is absolutely massive and can only be directed at one target. There is no other conceivable reason to equip tens of thousands Traitor Astartes and hold them back in a single location. Add the presence of Chaos Knights and Extremis Traitoris Titan Legions, and there can’t be no doubt left.*

*My Lord, there hasn’t been- [SCREAMS]. You must- [RECORDING PARTIALLY DAMAGED]*

*They are coming. They are coming. Warn Cadia, for the love of the God-Emperor. The heretics are returning to the Cadian Gate and- [SOUNDS OF FIGHTING]*

***WE ARE COMING! WE ARE COMING SLAVES OF THE FALSE EMPEROR!***

*[ABORTED TRANSCRIPT; EXTREME CORRUPTION; AGENT E-2649VI5 DECLARED LOST]*

\*\*\*\*

**90th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**EKODAS**

**‘APOSTLE OF DESTRUCTION’**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THE MONSTER IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**REWARD: 20 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 3 PLANETS**

\*\*\*\*

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

Thought for the day: Peace is Hell.

**Grand Apostle Ekodas**

“I hate these damned rats.”

Ekodas had an enormous amount of self-control, one had to be to be a senior member of the Dark Council, but the imprecation had to be released, and his fury abated, if only for a short while.

And he was doing trampling the corpses of dozens of giant rats, one of the few therapeutic methods he had found to work since this war had begun.

The Grand Apostle uttered a word and hundreds more of vermin corpses were liquefied, creating a torrent of blood which would run to the prepared altars. At least that way Khorne would be satisfied. The souls of the rats were repugnant and unsatisfying for the envoys of the Gods, but blood was blood, and the Throne of Skulls did not care whose blood flowed on Sicarus, only that the life-force of beings poured out of their veins.

“It was a great one-sided victory, my Lord,” his Coryphaus spoke, advancing carefully amid the unending mountain of rat corpses.

It was also a useless victory, and they both knew it.

Battles like the one they had just fought were basically achieving nothing, for they were fought on the surface of Sicarus, where the rat commanders, their spawning pits, and their hazardous armament manufactorums were never to be found.

“Yes, if one discounts these rats should have never been here in the first place.”

The Cathedral and the Bastion of the Black Scalpel were the heart of a fortified city where until today, the vermin had failed to make any inroads. Most slaves had been Possessed to make sure the slaves of Anarchy had no possibility to teach them their heretical beliefs. Skulls had been modified to play the role of vigilant sentinels.

Living and non-living guardians had been mustered in the thousands to play the role of garrison. Pacts had been made. Sacrifices had bled. And all of this had proven futile in the end. Despite the security measures, despite the seismographs and the other blessed devices to ensure no tunnel creation came as a surprise, a rat army had nonetheless managed to break through and he had to come in person with a thousand warriors to eradicate them.

“Do I begin to assemble a reprisal force for an invasion of the tunnels?”

“Yes, do so,” Ekodas approved the suggestion of his Coryphaus. “We can’t afford to let the vermin believe they’ve struck a significant blow.”

They had, though. The infrastructure damage was really minimal, but his forces would have to be reinforced in this Sector, and for all the blessings and the pacts he had made, Ekodas was very well-aware the strength of his host was limited. The longer this conflict lasted, the more veterans and slave-soldiers were pulled out of Sicarus to participate in the armament preparations of the Grand Armada of Undivided Chaos.

“Can I try a new tactic this time?”

Ekodas tried not to look too incredulous.

“What is this ‘new tactic’, Coryphaus? If I remember correctly, so far we tried summoning Bloodthirsters into the rats’ warrens,” and discovered the hard way how unstable the damnable ‘Warpstone’ was in proximity of major summoning, “conventional field battles, trapping the tunnels, the Scheme of the Eight Major Blood Lakes, the Litany of the Nine Lies, and the Ferric Plague.”

Ekodas thought about it for a second or two before adding for himself.

“Amongst other schemes and tactics.”

Field battles never worked, obviously. Over half of the rat armies fled into their tunnels when defeat was evident. Summoning the children of the Great Ocean often failed, either because the Warpstone explosions banished them, or the vermin refused to bow down to the majesty of the Pantheon and drowned them by the numbers. The rituals blessed by Tzeentch were a hindrance more than a help, as the rats fought themselves more than they did his armies and therefore didn’t need really an excuse to turn on each other. Targeting the leadership was useless: they had sacked and annihilated over twenty times the headquarters of leaders pretending to be ‘the True Council of Eleven’, only for another Council to resurface afterwards.

Releasing new plagues and anti-rats gasses and neurotoxins had pleased Bountiful Nurgle immensely...until the rats developed their own version of ‘Plague Priests’, that they had apparently called ‘Clan Pestilens’.

This had been the end of ‘new tactics’ from their side, because the last thing the Word Bearers needed, in his modest opinion, was to give worse ideas to the rats. The heretical creatures were already far too crazy and prompt to try to kill them in explosions of green flames to risk them reverse-engineering new assets of mass destruction.

“We have received new tunnel boring machines, courtesy of one of the Iron Warrior warbands. I intend to use them for a surgical strike.”

Ekodas hadn’t the strength to muster any kind of enthusiasm.

“You have my permission...under the condition that none of the machines are abandoned into the claws of the vermin this time.”

On Sicarus and against the rats, this meant powerful self-destruction warheads.

“I will make sure of it.”

“Good.”

Ekodas watched the partially damaged Cathedral and Bastion, trying to notice something, anything, which would tell him this damnable war was going to end in his favour.

He didn’t find one. Holy Colchis was crawling with giant rats, and though he and his armies killed millions with each gory dawn, there were tens of millions more ready to replace them. It was an infestation...and discontent and doubts were rife within his ranks.

Such was the state of his thoughts when a portal was activated and one of the souls he loathed the most stepped through.

“Erebus.”

“*Hand of Destiny* Erebus,” the Vile One chided him with this smug smile one always dreamed to make disappear with a series of powerful armoured fists. Repeatedly. “It seems you have a little problem obeying the orders our father gave you.”

Any other Dark Apostle, Ekodas would have been more cordial if only to wait to unleash a good ritual in his face and let his soul be devoured by a Neverborn.

With Erebus though, there was no playing this game.

“I have not invited you in my area of operations. Begone.” Over two hundred of his warriors had encircled the bastard as they spoke, ready to open fire at the first excuse.

“No, no, no, my poor Ekodas! You have failed, and our father isn’t in the mood to tolerate your defeats anymore. Report to him immediately.” A scroll was launched at him, and the Grand Apostle of the Dark Council gritted his teeth in fury and the bleeding words confirmed the order. “Your forces will stay here under my command, naturally.”

Ekodas didn’t need to bother re-reading the document to know this point of order wasn’t part of his Primarch’s commands.

“You can always try to take them by force, *Erebus*,” Ekodas spat markedly on the ground. Even if he wasn’t a leader of the Brotherhood whose goal was to purge the Legion of the Vile One’s influence, he would never have left his warriors and his resources under this betrayer’s oversight. For those who believed it was a nice idea, there were the examples of Calth, Nuceria, and a hundred more worlds to point at. “My Host and my allies won’t help you. I would rather go pledge myself to a Black Legion warband than allow my warriors to serve you.”

And for the record, Ekodas hated the very thought of allying himself with the Black Legion, this band of upstarts which had abandoned all dignity for a false brotherhood of broken Legionnaires.

“Careful,” the slime whispered. “Your star is not ascendant anymore, my dear Grand Apostle.”

“I could tell you to be careful,” Ekodas countered. “But I really want to see you eaten piece by piece by a million gangrenous rats before I take your corpse to my dungeons and spend a few eternities working on your soul. Have fun with this war, *Erebus*. I’m done with it.”

The Grand Apostle didn’t turn his back on the Vile One, nor did any of his Word Bearers, of course. No one presented his back to Erebus, not unless you had a death wish.

\*\*\*\*

**8th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**EREBUS**

**‘THE VILE ONE’**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**NO SACRIFICE IS TOO GREAT TO ELIMINATE THIS SLIME**

**THIS ABOMINATION IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**WARNING: THE TRAITOR IS COWARDLY IN THE EXTREME AND HAS BEEN NOTED TO FLEE AS SOON AS EVENTS DO NOT TURN IN HIS FAVOUR**

**REWARD: 5 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF ‘AVENGER OF CALTH’ AWARDED, VOTE OF THE HIGH LORDS FOR A TRIUMPH, GRAND RELIGIOUS OVATION, ETC...**

\*\*\*\*

**82nd MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**JARULEK**

**‘APOSTLE OF LIES’**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THE MONSTER IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**REWARD: 57 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, SEAT ON THE HOLY OPHELIAN SYNOD, 1 CARDINAL STELLAR SYSTEM, 1 FRATERIS TEMPLAR ARMY GROUP AND SUPPORT FLEET, ETC...**

\*\*\*\*

**The Eye of Terror**

**Illumination Shipyards – outer Sicarus System**

**Coryphaus Kol Badar**

“Kelbor-Hal certainly intends to fulfil his part of the pact.”

Much like Kol Badar hated to agree with this runt of Marduk on anything, in this instance the Coryphaus was willing to concede the Dark Acolyte was not completely in the wrong.

At least the deployment of strength in the Illumination Shipyards was impressive enough, both for veteran and ignorant eyes.

Before the proclamation of their Primarch that the Grand Armada was to be mustered, there had been a few dispersed shipyards in the asteroids, at least capable to supply one minor Host and some. But now, the scene was a spectacle of implacable space industry and forges of wars. Dock after dock could be seen as far as optical augmentations and Astartes eyes were able to, and all were filled to the brink with the most formidable machines of war ever built by the Hell-Lords of the Mechanicum.

Ranks after ranks of Infernus-class Battleships were completed at speeds ranging from insane to miraculous. Desolators Battleships and Battle-Barges had their own construction sites, and between them Executor and Avenger-class Grand Cruisers were modified or outright rebuilt from the keel up. Hades, Styx, and Hecate Heavy Cruisers stolen from forgotten mothballed fleets of the False Emperor were beginning a new glorious career in the True Legions. Nor were the ‘lesser’ Cruisers neglected: Murder, Carnage, Slaughter, Inferno, Hellbringer and other classes of Strike Cruisers were all present here.

For each Battleship they had here, at least four or five capital ships could be added to the order of battle. And for each capital ship to be built or repaired, the Word Bearers would have a flotilla of Escorts and Attack Craft, not to forget the Heldrakes and their modified Starfighters and flying Daemon Engines to add weight to their salvoes.

Kol Badar had thought at first the name ‘Grand Armada of Chaos Undivided’ to be a bit of a mouthful, but as the firepower mustered here was revealed in all its terrible glory, the Coryphaus had to admit he was maybe a bit too hasty.

More than one hundred Battleships. Dozens of Grand Cruisers and Battlecruisers. Hundreds of Cruisers of all tonnage. According to rumours, the number of Heldrakes hibernating in the interstices of the warships’ hulls was over two hundred thousand. The escorts and the attack crafts were simply uncountable. Entire hordes of daemons laughed and fought nearby to possess the Daemon Engines which would conduct the great slaughter.

“We will see. Sota-Nul came with a lot of forces, I will give her that.”

And the former Emissary of Horus was not shy about parading her forces so that they acknowledged her ‘generous’ contribution. The ‘Hell Forge-Mistress’ had moved to Sicarus with thirty capital ships, including one hull which may have started as an Ark Mechanicus – but which had grown far beyond that in the last millennia – three Titan-Arks, two Heavy Battleships, and some other ships which had to be unique designs originally developed inside her tenebrous mind.

“Jealous of the Titans she is bringing to our cause, Coryphaus?”

One more time, Kol Badar was vindicated in his thirst of vengeance against the perfidious weakling which had killed his blood brother. Marduk was japing and whining, and could only kill a true warrior when somebody else had already weakened him.

The worm could laugh for now, but he didn’t know what Jarulek had promised him...

“No, not at all,” the veteran of Terra answered. “I don’t need Titans to crush everything on the battlefield.”

“Oh? Then why did I hear you had concerns about the newly assembled 2nd Great Host?”

Sometimes, Kol Badar wondered who he wanted to kill the most: Marduk or the informants who whispered to him every action he made in his duties of Coryphaus. Every time, the conclusion was the same: it was Marduk he loathed the most. The others would get their just deserts once he put the runt’s head on a spike.

“Concern is such a strong word. I was explaining to the other Coryphaus the will of Dark Apostle Jarulek.”

In fact, these were true concerns, but he wasn’t going to tell the run *that*.

The problem, when the Primarch had ordered the Grand Armada to be reorganised into eight Great Hosts, was the fact most of the pre-existing Word Bearers Hosts had not fought together since Terra. And for some formations, it was even further into the past.

As a result, manoeuvring each Host to be a united whole again was...problematic. The 34th Host had been better than most in the coordination of super-formations, as they had over one thousand and four hundred warriors, but others weren’t so lucky. And anyway, mustering one thousand and four hundred Astartes wasn’t the same as deploying twenty-eight thousand Word Bearers.

Joy of joys, the 2nd Great Host had been given to his Lord Jarulek, but they had to endure the presence of the Sons of Horus, the arrogant sons who had failed when all the Legions counted on them and fled Terra like curs.

Kol didn’t like Drecarth the Sightless and his lieutenants. They thought they knew everything about war, but under the symbol of the Eye, their shame and cowardice was there for all to see. They were barely above Marduk the runt in that regard.

By the Gods, why did they didn’t send Horus’ spawns and threw them against the walls of Cadia as cannon-fodder? It wasn’t like they were going to be missed...

“But if you want to hide in a Titan, don’t worry Dark Acolyte. I won’t tell anything to our Lord.”

Kol could almost feel the fury burning behind the eyes and the face of the runt.

“I will-“

“Is everything proceeding according to my plans, my Coryphaus?”

“It is,” Kol Badar smiled, as the Anointed he commanded took position around Dark Apostle Jarulek, Blessed by the Gods, Chosen by Holy Lorgar to command the 2nd Great Host of the Grand Armada of Undivided Chaos. “The Host is awaiting your pleasure. We were merely...conversing about the war potential of our Mechanicum allies and the assets they brought with them.”

“Ah yes. Sota-Nul and her Legio Vulturum.”

This was the strongest weapon in the Hell Forge-Mistress’ arsenal, yes.

“She brought the Knight Houses of Morbidia and Vextrix.” Knights were the lesser cousins of the Titans, but in great numbers, they were extremely dangerous, and Sota-Nul had convinced one hundred-plus of the war suits to accept her ‘patronage’. “But I will admit it is the Gore Crows which will be the true hammer once we need to break the walls the lackeys of the False Emperor fight behind.”

Rare were the Titan Legions which once followed the Warmaster to survive in their original numbers into the Eye. Most of them had dispersed into various splinter factions. There were exceptions, however. One of them was the Legio Mortis, serving Abaddon the Despoiler.

The Legio Vulturum, formerly sworn to Xana, now following Sota-Nul, was clearly another.

Kol felt...wary about it. Ninety Titans were a force which could destroy entire star clusters if properly wielded, but that Sota-Nul, not Kelbor-Hal, commanded them was in his opinion a clue something was wrong. The former Master of the Red Planet had not exactly been trusting his subordinates with large Titan commands during the war to topple the False Emperor; that he did know was a contradiction by itself.

And the Legio Vulturum was visibly augmented and modified by xenos technology, not the blessings of the Gods.

“They will indeed be useful for the Great Plan.” Jarulek gave him a thin smile. “Ah, I believe Sota-Nul is going to present us her biggest creation...now.”

Kol Badar didn’t smile, not as the biggest Titan he had ever seen became visible.

Legio Vulturum wasn’t the Legio Audax; it was extremely ‘top-heavy’, possessing few of the ‘light titans’ like the Warhound class, and on the contrary deploying great numbers of Reavers and Warlords.

But the machine on its way to be paraded made the classic Battle-Titans look like mid-sized children.

Its arms were gigantic cannons of a model the Coryphaus had not seen before. Its head was a skull bigger than the entire body of a Knight. Its legs were pillars of ceramite, adamantium, and terrifying technology.

From armoured feet to the upper-fortified castle, the Titan was fortified so massively that even super-heavy tanks had no chance of collapsing its multi-layered shields.

It was a mountain built to crush armies single-handedly.

It was an Imperator-class Titan, the machine Tech-Priests worshipped as an avatar of their God, be they the True Mechanicum or the petty fools who toiled in the name of the False Emperor.

“I wasn’t aware Xana had managed to build Titans of that size,” Marduk the runt admitted.

“As far as I’m aware, they only built a handful of them; they preferred the Reavers and the Warlords.” Kol maintained a facade of civility. “This one may be the last surviving one. Behold *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, the Maw of Xenocide.”

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Approaches of the Svalbard Sector**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**Kroozer ‘*Rockwaagh*’**

**9.339.299M35**

**Uber-Mekboy Brukk ‘X-Rock’ Brukk POV**

Not the time to say ‘ere we go!’, and the metal-heads were already boarding them!

That was fun! That was Vallawaagh!

“GIVE THEM HELLZ BOYZ!” Brukk roared, grabbing the first shoota available and smashing it against the awesome big green gun of the Necron. “FOR GORK AND MORK! WAAGGH!”

“WAAGGH!”

The Boyz and his favourite squib didn’t need more to roar and charge the funny metal-heads. They had big guns! The metal-heads were so funny with their ‘surrender and die’. But the Orks were da best!

“FIRST DA METAL-HEADS, SECONDZ DA SWARM BRINGA!” The Mekboy shouted, strapping hurriedly his new ‘bigga gun’ with ‘da sonik cannon’. Brukk had built it to shoot down insects, but metal-heads worked too!

One by one, the boarders vanished in green fun and explosions.

“BOSS! Somethingz shooting at us!”

“WHERE?”

Something violent hit and the *Rockwaagh* shook...shook a lot.

“WHAT ‘AS THAT?”

“DA MOON!”

Brukk laughed.

“LOOK DA THAT BOYZ! DA METAL-HEADS HAVZ A’ WAAGH MOON!” The Mekboy raised his sonik cannon above his head. “LETZ GOEZ TAKE ITZ!”

“WAAGGH!”

“WAAGGH!”

The Boyz shouted. The Boyz fired their weapons and began to prepare for the scrap of their lives.

“LOADZ THE TORPEDOEZ TUBS! ENGINZ SPEED MAX-RED! CANNONZ FIREZ! The Ork commander barked. “GORK OR DA SWARM BRINGA! WAAGGH!”

“WAAAGH!”

**Vargard Obyron**

According to the manifesto spread by the Szarekhan Dynasty, the Great Sleep had been a supposedly infallible plan of the Silent King to guarantee the Necrons would endure while the mortal races would perish to the ravages of time and galactic disasters.

Obyron had barely woken up, and he could see this statement was worth exactly as much as the promises of Mephet’ran the Deceiver, which was to say none.

“WAAAGH!”

Obyron teleported himself behind the gigantic green brute and decapitated it, claiming his twenty-fifth significant kill of the skirmish.

“Enemy leader down.” The Sautekh officer said curtly. “Formation Two-One-Tekh. Execute.”

His soldiers were the elite of Gidrim. They didn’t miss. Five seconds later, they weren’t any living beings inside the dangerously instable hull, and he had lost no troops in the violent skirmish. The engines were sabotaged in record time, and the starship was thrown into the enemy formation, out of control and no longer representing a threat to any Necron phalanx.

“The first part of your plan is accomplished, my suzerain,” Obyron said after teleporting back. “I’m afraid the enemy failed to recognise the generosity of your surrender conditions, however.”

Obyron hadn’t bothered to ask more than once for the sake of it, truly. These greenskins were more barbaric and less intelligent than the Krorks, but ‘surrender’ was not in their vocabulary.

And if Overlord Zahndrekh had been himself, he would have recognised it.

“Stubborn secessionists!” the old Necron grumbled. “Look at them, Obyron! They are advancing in a dispersed Khardatopek formation. Do they really think that painting their ships red and bathing themselves in green paint is going to change anything at the outcome of this battle?”

Obyron nodded half in resignation, half in sadness.

There were many reasons the Great Sleep had been an utterly stupid idea that only a Szarekhan mind could have imagined. Tomb-Worlds had been destroyed, that much had been clear, despite how prompt the Triarch enforcers were at silencing the murmurs of discontent. Resurrection systems were malfunctioning. Old and new enemies continued to plague this galaxy. The superiority of Necron phalanxes and fleets, won in millions of battles, had been forgotten as millions of years were spent in stasis.

But for Obyron, the harshest blow was the mental damage suffered by his suzerain.

Overlord Zahndrekh had emerged from the Great Sleep ‘apparently’ sound of mind. Except of course, his master believed he was still a Necrontyr of the pre-bio-transference times. One might have thought facing the greenskins would have corrected this in short order, but no. From his perspective, these were not barbaric brutes, but Secessionist Necrontyrs they were facing on the battlefield.

Obyron didn’t know if he should feel relief or sadness at seeing his suzerain in such a state. Relief would be because a lot of Gidrim nobles had emerged in a far worse mental state, when they had been revived at all. The Vargard had been forced to put down a large number of them by his own blade.

The sadness was because Zahndrekh was more than his suzerain; he was the one who had believed in Obyron when he was a mere young recruit born of peasant stock. Obyron owed Zahndrekh everything: his life, his long military career, and his political support.

They had survived the bloodiest battles of the War in Heaven together. They had endured the psychic maelstroms of the Old Ones, escaped the wrath of demented C’Tan, and challenged indomitable enemies.

Zahndrekh was...the Overlord was his suzerain. It pained him more than life itself to see him like this.

“Why are you not advancing to exterminate the vermin?” a Szarekhan commander barked in his back.

Then again, not seeing the galaxy as it was had its advantages. The stars and the planets knew the Szarekhan had not stopped being cruel masters after something as short and insignificant as the Great Sleep.

“Patience, Herald. The secessionists must be placed in the correct ground at the correct moment.”

The other noble scoffed.

“They had told me how low you’d fallen, Zahndrekh, but I’d not believed them until now. I think I should summon a few Deathmarks to get rid of your old carcass. For the-”

Obyron feigned to inspect a Warscythe of his own forces before throwing it like a projectile weapon and impaling the insolent who had dared threaten his suzerain. If the command protocols had been active, it would have been futile to attempt, and possibly suicidal, but the King’s command protocols were not activated, and the Szarekhan nobles were pathetic both in their security and their martial prowess.

The imbecile was so sure of his capacities he had not noticed the Deathmarks and the Wraiths were already disintegrated by Obyron’s security measures. Did he really think they were allowing each and every scoundrel aboard the Battleships of the Sautekh Dynasty?

“Obyron, I know he harboured Secessionist tendencies, but it is no way to treat a Herald!”

“My suzerain, I am only concerned about your safety!”

“Obyron...ah, the secessionists have finally decided to commit themselves!”

It was a way to look at it, yes. Another would be to describe it as a gigantic rampage of countless warships which all tried to go in the same direction.

“My warriors!” Zahndrekh shouted. “One day we will see loyalty rekindled and the old errors of the past purged! One day old feuds and inter-Dynasty quarrels will cease! Secessionism must not win this day! Secessionist can’t win this day! For the Necrontyrs are greater than one petty tyrant, taller than the arid valleys of a radioactive planet! Divided we will fall! Together we will survive and from our humble origins rise again, nobler and stronger! FOR UNITY!”

“FOR UNITY!” The Necrons of Gidrim still self-aware to be moved by the speech shouted back.

The Battleships and Cruisers accelerated to face the greenskins, and Obyron waited for new orders.

Because for all his suzerain’s mental issues, Zahndrekh remained the greatest military commander of the Sautekh Dynasty, perhaps the greatest of all Dynasties united. Orks. Aeldari. Hrud. Old Ones. Rangdan. C’Tan. Other Necrontyrs and Necrons. All had eaten dust before him.

These greenskins had enthusiasm and ferociousness, but they had no chance. Not because the Necrons had the Throne of Oblivion on their side. But because Zahndrekh was a genius whose defeats could be counted on one hand, and four out of these five enemies were permanently dead.

“We slept and we woke up to face the same old war...”

Zahndrekh and himself cut through the dimensions together, and they returned to the inferno which had made them legends.

**Mechanicus Cruiser *Athena Database***

**Magos Explorator Alena Wismer**

Magos Explorator Alena Wismer wasn’t going to pretend she was a specialist where Gloriana Battleships were analysed and studied, but she had the honour and the privilege to be invited aboard the *Flamewrought* and to see the *Eternal Crusader* with her optical augmentations. This undoubtedly placed her above most of the Tech-Priests currently toiling across the galaxy to ensure the Quest for Knowledge thrived and would continue for millennia to come.

One thing that had been evident to recognise when the two Gloriana warships were present at Pavia, of course, was the fact Gloriana wasn’t a class at all. It didn’t follow any definition of pattern she was aware of, and the *Flamewrought* and the *Eternal Crusader*, save their extraordinary dimensions making them living avatars of the Machine-God, had little in common.

The ancient Salamander flagship was akin to the mighty Salamanders living on Nocturne: large, possessing formidable weapons, and armoured to the point ‘normal’ Battleships would need days to cause any damage assuming the void shields were brought down. It was a slow and ponderous void leviathan, but once it gained enough momentum, it was unstoppable.

The *Eternal Crusader* had been more answering to the description of ‘Spear of the Omnissiah’. It was a religious monument – the walls of prayers carved upon its hull supported this – and it was as formidable as the *Flamewrought* in its own way, but cursory outside examination was sufficient to know the firepower and the armour were inferior to the ship improved and cherished by the great Vulkan. Not to say the flagship of the Black Templars had no advantages: it was a simpler design, authorising more shipyards to repair and supply it when the demands came; it had a greater capacity to launch Astartes boarding parties, from boarding torpedoes to starfighters; and it was swifter to execute complicate manoeuvres.

“And then there is the third...” She canted in a complicated binary cipher no one but her aboard the *Athena Database* understood.

When Lady Weaver had chosen her for this important operation, Alena Wismer had been quite flattered. Who wouldn’t when the Chosen of the Omnissiah continue to give her important assignments and brand-new ships to explore little-known regions of space and return lost archeotech to the Mechanicus? She had also felt a slight feeling of...concerned trepidation. The *Flamewrought* had been severely damaged by Traitor’s guns and evil artifices, after all.

She had tried to prepare herself, but in this instant, watching the spectacle of ruination and lost technology, it was difficult to do anything behind mourning.

The armaglass bay was releasing only minimal light and tight auspex emissions to avoid detection from the hostile xenos fighting less than one light-year away, but a minor Tech-Priest couldn’t miss the wreck of the defeated Gloriana.

The void leviathan had been a beautiful ship once, as it befitted such a mighty warship. Even after the dreadful fate which had befallen it, enough of the outer hull had survived to admire the sculpted waves and the elegant combinations of artwork its masters had insisted to add in the long-forgotten decades of the Great Crusade.

It was an ancient beauty, which made all the more horrible the four immense scars which had struck deeply the Gloriana Battleship, and were now visible as terrible, black wounds reflecting nothing but the abyss between the stars.

And as terrible as the devastation created by these injuries had been, they had not given the killing blow. No, the death of the mighty Battleship had come when a xenos weapon had literally *melted* the rear of the warship, engines and rear batteries all, despite the multi-layered void shields, the adamantium armour, and the countless other protections supposed to prevent an enemy from exploiting this relative weak point.

“Probability of a C’Tan-powered attack having overwhelmed the defences and destroyed the engines?” Wismer asked.

“Assuming we use the base our Necron allies gave us involving their Commorragh performance...over ninety-three percent, Magos.”

Omnissiah and Motive Force, this really wasn’t good at all.

Alena stayed silent as she studied more of the data arriving in her Noosphere implants before arriving to an unpleasant conclusion.

“They were running,” she whispered to the two members of her staff waiting her commands. “They were carved apart by the Gauss weapons, but they had enough energy and discipline to run.”

“I’m not saying you are wrong, Magos...but where are the other ships of the fleet?”

“Closer to the Ymga Monolith,” Alena Wismer grimly declared. “They didn’t survive long enough to have a chance, but a wounded Gloriana had the defences and the sheer toughness to try.”

But the null zone forbidding any Warp translation too close to the Ymga Monolith had been the doom of the Emperor’s servants. Their void shields had to operate at minimal power to give the engines and the other vital functions the energy they needed, and then the enemy Necron commander had most likely unleashed a C’Tan to prevent the escape attempt.

As more data came in, the hololith representation allowing her to examine the damage of the prow found something interesting.

“Stop on 1-42.”

It took a second for her command to take effect, but then the scarred letters appeared, and the final piece of evidence she needed was revealed. Elegant letters higher than a manufactorum of good size, several of them dented and horribly mangled, but the name could still be read with difficulty.

*Tsunami*

Loud footsteps were heard behind her, heralding the arrival of Shadowkeeper Baldur Vör, surrounded by four Sisters of Silence.

“Lord Vör, my teams will be ready to begin their landing into the hangar bays within three hours.”

“Acceptable. I trust you haven’t forgotten the agreement?”

“No, Lord.”

Aside from the exploration mission being under one of the higher clearance levels possible, Alena was not authorised to keep anything like gene-seed, Astartes trophies, and banners of past campaigns. Omnissiah be her witness, some things she was defended to touch or record!

She could interact with the databases of the Tsunami and copy them for extensive analysis, though. Lady Weaver needed to know what the Space Marines of the Great Crusade had died against.

“Do you really think you will be able to tow the Gloriana Battleship out of the null zone?” The black-armoured Custodes asked in his usual unfriendly voice.

“I promised Lady Weaver I would succeed, and thanks to the myriad of containment foams and protection foams generously provided by Lady Dragon, I will accomplish it.” Alena replied. The Adeptus Mechanicus wasn’t going to let a little thing like Necron destruction go into the way of the Quest for Knowledge! “I have the Tech-Priests and the materials to do so. The major issue which will determine the duration of our first emergency repairs is whether we can use the original Gellar Field, or whether we will have to install a temporary new one before removing this work of the Omnissiah from the Oblivion Quarantine Zone...”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Kuiper Belt**

**Starfort *Crown of Isolation***

**0.001.300M35**

**Grand Master Hunter**

If you worked in the Officio Assassinorum, being predictable, no matter how you tried to hide it, was a death sentence.

Thus the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum did his best to be unpredictable.

His true name was only known to three people: the God-Emperor, the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes, and a blind trainer of the Vindicare Temple who had not uttered more than five words in the last forty years.

He had no known schedule, and the only known location where he could be found regularly was the room where the High Twelve met – to compensate for this, each time his turn came, he manifested his decision to change of council room and moved it to another palace of the Inner Sanctum.

While some expert spies and assassins knew he was originally from the Vindicare Temple, few were aware he had taken steps to attain mastery in sixty-two weapons which were *not* of a gun type, and he didn’t include the three dozen of absolutely lethal poisons he kept on his person at all times.

Predictability was dangerous, and thus he tried to do his best to mitigate it. The Assassinorum Landers, starfighters, and warships which transported him were sometimes belonging to one Temple or another, or other Adeptuses entirely. For example, the hull he had chosen for this travel ‘officially’ belonged to a Chartist Captain of the minor Catania Dynasty. Hunter had done his best to ensure no one knew ‘Alfonso Catania’ had never existed, not that it would be important for much longer, as in twenty hours, he wouldn’t set a foot on the *Long Game of Catania* ever again.

Some might call his precautions ungrounded paranoia.

The Grand Master begged to differ. Of his twenty predecessors, only two had died of what could be called ‘natural circumstances’: growing too old, they had passed their mantle to their chosen successor and tried to go hunting one of the ‘Top 100’ targets plaguing the Imperium. The others? Three had died by Custodes, five were eliminated by their own Temple subordinates when other High Lords decided to back a new potential Grand Master more in conformity with their own interests, and the others had perished countering plots of heretics and more monstrous things waiting in the dark.

As a consequence, Hunter continued to walk on the unpredictable path.

He would be the first to recognise it wasn’t an existence most of humanity would be able to endure for long. He had no wife, no children, or any known descendants. He had no sexual relationships, no attachments, and no ties save his loyalty to the God-Emperor of Mankind, He Who Guides the Astronomican.

When he died, there would be no great funerals, no mourning, and no deep eulogies. At best, he would be ignored and a few individuals would nod silently. At worse, citizens would openly drink and celebrate his demise.

This was fine. One did not become the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum for the accolades and the parties.

Like the Primarch of the First Legion Lion El’Jonson had said, loyalty was its own reward.

Unpredictability remaining key, there was no ceremony and the minimum welcoming committee when he landed on the Crown of Isolation, just as he wanted it to be.

“Grand Master!” the warden of the Starfort, an ex-Vindicare Assassin answering to the codename of Wraith-102. “You honour me with your presence.”

Hunter made a single gesture of the hand, and the attempt to flatter ceased.

“Two months, six days, three hours and forty minutes ago, I informed you I had finally convinced the High Twelve to give me the authorisation of deploying an Execution Force in support at Cadia. How fares the selection process?”

“Very well, Grand Master.” A hidden stair, several concealed elevators, and satisfying to the exigencies of the alpha-class security system were necessary before the conversation continued.

“Evidently, we were forced to keep the triplets of Project Absurd outside of Sol, per the ancestral protocols.”

Images flashed out, revealing three identical bald males, so pale-skinned they might have rivalled the void-born of the Imperium.

“We have solved the...mental stability issues of AC-1, AC-2, and AC-3. They only killed ten percent of the individuals we used as martial instructors. Since we are going to keep them in this new casket of cryogenic-chamber...”

“It will be more than adequate.” Hunter approved. These Culexus triplets had cost him enormously to acquire and even more to train; it was out of the question to let something as stupid as questions of collateral damage keep them out of active service. The null aura being multiplied the closest they were to each other amply compensated their sociopathic and psychopathic behaviour.

Besides, if the Black Crusade tried to storm Cadia, there would be far too many enemies for them to bother with ‘allied’ guardsmen.

“Callidus?”

“I thought the prime-subject of Project Umbra would be extremely interesting to use,” Wraith-102 licked his lips. “But I understand progress has been made to make her more...receptive to orders?”

“Yes. Her Callidus mentor has managed to increase her usefulness.” After a totally classified visit in the Holiest Place of the Imperium, but Wraith-102 didn’t need to know that. “For the present time, her skills are in high demand elsewhere. Do you have a substitute in mind?”

“I have. Agent Decima is in my opinion the perfect choice.”

Ah yes. This insane hyena. If she wasn’t so efficient at getting rid of her targets, the Assassinorum would have ejected her into the nearest star a long time ago. Unlike him, her given agent name was a real nickname: nine out of ten people who saw her really met atrocious ends.

“Venenum?”

“The Clade-Primaris is proud to present you Project Joyous Feasting.”

Hunter had a stomach of steel, but he nonetheless felt the four minutes of recordings which were presented to him very nauseating.

“Organ transplantations and bio-alchemy to make the agent a natural poison to everything surrounding her...impressive.”

And quite worrying it was the first time he learned of it. Evidently, he was going to need to reinforce his monitoring of the Venenum Temple.

“Does she have a name?”

“Yes, she is Agent Basilisk.”

He needed a lot more questions to know how close the Venenum Assassin could be deployed from the Kars of Cadia, or if she needed to remain in space all the time. The answers were...not exactly what he had predicted.

By contrast, the Vanus Agent selected was non-problematic. Project Accident had already given excellent results in the last decades, and the male Agent named K-1 had completed nineteen successful large-scale missions.

Now it was time for the hard part.

“Has a consensus been reached about Project Nest?”

Predictably, Wraith-102 winced.

“Are you sure, Grand Master? The new recruits have barely completed fifty assassinations between them, and none of them were against especially difficult targets.”

“I know. But they represent a critical asset that has never been used against Chaos Marines, including the demon-sorcerers of the Word Bearers.”

The last Black Crusades had been humiliating fiascos for the Officio Assassinorum wherever the self-proclaimed ‘Dark Apostles’ were present. It had gotten so bad that according to the last notes of the M34 Grand Master of the time, entire generations had been rushed in the hope quantity would be successful where quality had failed.

The outcome had been...disastrous.

 “A duo then seems the most promising option,” his interlocutor reluctantly agreed, “Typhon-Gamma and Falcon Tertius are the agents which have, based on their mission successes, the best chance to survive and reach the primary targets.”

These two Vindicare units were most likely going to die, barring a miracle, and both Hunter and Wraith-102 understood it perfectly.

“As for the Eversors, the Temple of the Holy Wrath has at last finished training their new generation of Imperial Assassins. Given their...nihilist outlook on life and their fierce hatred of the Arch-Enemy, I am confident they will prove excellent instruments against the Chaos Marines and their slaves.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” this Temple was so rigorous in its tests no one in the last decades had graduated from its final graduation slaughter, also best described as pitting the aspirant Eversor against an overwhelming military opposition like a Hive filled with heretics or something similar. “How many did pass?”

“Six, Grand Master.” Hunter smiled. “Hum, how many do you want deployed at the Cadian Gate?”

Hunter took ten good seconds to think about it. Project Absurd would cover their approach, but the leaders of the Chaos Marines would be well-protected, by sorcery and a lot of military assets. On the downside, the Assassinorum resources weren’t infinite...

“Assign four of them to the Execution Force. Let’s teach the Traitors that no foe is beyond His reach.”

**Holy Terra**

**Inner Palace**

**Chancellor of the Imperial Council Samson Pitt**

“Do we really need to spend so much in resources and men to fortify the systems behind the Cadian Sector?”

At least, Samson thought with relief, Xerxes Vandire had not greeted the proposal of the Fabricator-General with his usual disdain.

“I would not propose this militarisation plan if my simulations showed the current preparation were sufficient,” the metallic voice of the ruler of Mars answered with a finger of irritation.

“You have to admit, my dear Fabricator-General,” Chancellor of the Estate Imperium Huang Utrecht intervened, “the question of the Master of the Administratum is legitimate. We have fortified...heavily the Cadian Sector and the nearby systems, I think we can all agree upon this fact?”

Eleven nodded, some more reluctantly than the others. By now, calling the Cadian ‘fortified’ was like calling Terra a Hive World. It gave the truth, but didn’t give it any justice. Assuming the reports on the table were correct, there were billions of guardsmen in the Cadian System, supported by at least four thousand Space Marines of the Astartes Praeses, several Battle-Maniples of six Titans Legios, many lances of Knights, and millions of Skitarii, not to mention two full Cadian Battlefleets and several heavy squadrons of the Solar reserves.

The neighbouring system of Agripinaa was possibly equally as fortified, as the Forge Worlds of Obscurus and beyond had answered with a shocking celerity the demands of help of the Agripinaa Fabricator, and the new naval base of Belis Corona was a redoubt able to shrug off the assault of multiple Battlefleets, also harbouring an Inquisitorial presence which varied between massive and incalculable.

Dozens of other critical system, like the Boros Gate and Hydra Cordatus, had also been massively reinforced and received new citadels and anti-starship batteries, not to mention priceless war supplies. It was, in many ways, one of the greatest logistical successes of the Chartist Fleets and the Imperial Navy to transport men, food, equipment, fuel, and ammunition to the Cadian Gate, and it was only made possible thanks to the near-annihilation xenos pirates and outlaws had received in the last years.

“Sincerely, I understand the point about covering all our bases and make certain there are no weak points in the defensive system we voted for, but is everything absolutely necessary?”

Lord High Admiral Rabadash y Byng el Calormen cleared his throat.

“To be blunt, Chancellor? Yes, the increase of the defence of the Pius line is necessary. So are the shifting of the Starforts on the four Obscurus-Solar lines. I agree completely with the Cadian High Command and the Lord Admirals’ conclusions present in the theatre of operations. The heretics will have two options if they decide to challenge us again: besiege the planets of the Cadian Gate one by one in an attempt to gnaw our ground and space assets to dust, or send sacrificial forces against Agripinaa and Cadia in an attempt to stalemate us while they strike the logistical nodes behind them like the Despoiler did during his M34 campaign.”

“This seems nonetheless a bit...excessive.” Xerxes Vandire chose his words with care.

“All the scrying, Tarot readings and divination prediction done under the Light of the Astronomican confirm a Crusade-level assault is incoming,” the Mistress of the Astronomican affirmed. “Due to the foul sorceries employed by the Arch-Enemy, we can’t exactly determine the date, but it can be anywhere between this year and two decades from now. And while the Despoiler is rumoured to stay out of the game for this one, the forces arrayed against us will be stronger and viler.”

For many seconds, the High Twelve stayed silent. When silence was broken, it was the Grand Provost Marshal of the Adeptus Arbites who spoke.

“Then we will of course approve the fortification and the reinforcement of these important systems and trade lanes.” Tudor Brezhnev told his peers, and no one voiced an objection. “But...with all due respect to your analysts, Lord Admiral, I don’t know if it is possible to push for the same effort of ‘defence-in-depth’ in Segmentum Obscurus. It is a far larger space theatre, and while we have more Battlefleets available, there aren’t hundreds of them in surplus. Unless we cancel many operations in Ultima Segmentum or increase the tithes for Solar, the resources, the regiments, and the logistics simply aren’t there.”

“Many operations prepared in the eastern Segmentum are critical,” Marianne Gutenberg commented neutrally. “Besides, simple logistics would make a transfer of assets and resources from the Eastern Fringe theatres to western Obscurus quite costly in time and hull availability.”

“Indeed,” the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial navy consulted several vellum papers before shaking his head. “But unless you give me permission to withdraw one or two Battlefleets from the Core Solar Worlds...”

“Not happening,” Gandhi Brobantis abruptly shut down the proposal.

“Well, I am going to have to make some hard choices.” The blue-dressed High Lord shrugged, showing no sign of surprise at the answer. “Cypra Mundi, Mordian, Vostroya, and a few dozen other critical chokepoints are going to get the best naval commanders and squadrons. I will prepare third-line squadrons for eastern Obscurus just in case, but they will be by their very nature dispersed and will need time to concentrate.”

“It would be quite...careless of the heretics to venture so far out of the Eye of Terror,” Inquisitor Berlin Chimera pointed out.

Rabadash shrugged again, silent reply meaning ‘you know better than me there’.

There were three more hours of discussion following this relatively cordial exchange of views, but every person in the room knew the proposal directing the course of the next years had been – at least in part – taken here and now.

“We are in agreement, then?” the Arch-Cardinal Terran asked for the sake of formality.

“We are.” The Master of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica replied for the eleven other High Lords.

**Outer Palace**

**Petitioner’s City**

**Solar Guardian Nicephorus Vandire**

Nicephorus had a headache...again. He doubted anyone reasonable could blame him for it, honestly.

“And how,” the ageing high-ranked Adept asked whimsically, “are we going to pay for all of this?”

The ‘we’ was Clan Vandire, of course. The ‘all of this’ was a true mountain of vellum burying several desks by their sheer mass.

And his question, in his opinion, was perfectly reasonable.

His niece Abagnale looked distinctively ill-at-ease, though only a person who knew her very well would have noticed the little signs of disquiet.

“An exceptional mining tax has been created for the Brisbane-Ayers Sector.”

Nicephorus blinked.

“Wasn’t this scheme tried already thirty years ago?”

Given the emotion seen in her eyes, the Magistrate had obviously hoped he wouldn’t remember that.

“Yes,” the admission was not one uttered with grace. “It will be really an exceptional and temporary tax, this time.”

Nicephorus felt the urge to shout or make some ironic comment about how the inhabitants of the dozens of Mining Worlds of said Sector were unlikely going to throw themselves at their feet and thank them. If his records were accurate – and he was reasonably sure they were – everyone in the planets sworn to the Lord of Brisbane-Ayers were paying more exceptional taxes than they were paying Administratum tithes, and the latter was not a light resource-imposition by any means.

“I know it isn’t your idea, Abagnale,” his niece thanked him silently for it, “and I know you’re the messenger bearing the unpleasant news, but I have to say it: the tax-and-tithe pressure is getting out of control. There’s so much blood and resources we can force a Sector to spit out before...unpleasant things happen.”

It wasn’t only their Brisbane-Ayers dominion where the fiscal hammer was pressuring their citizens to the maximum. Their other holdings, their main holdings he should say, in the Zion and Yucatan Sectors were not exactly tithe-paradises.

“The plebeians are kept indoctrinated and loyal.”

Nicephorus didn’t ask for how long. He had made his views clear to his brother, and the answer had been...unsatisfactory.

“Whether the plebeians are kept quiescent at this point doesn’t matter,” the Solar Guardian said emotionlessly. “The Sector’s economy is slowing down. No new Cartel has invested resources in the mining assets we have on the worlds of Brisbane-Ayers. The Chartist Captains are choosing new destinations where the ‘exceptional taxes’ are not likely to hurt their profit lines.”

He didn’t mention the Adeptus Mechanicus; after the recent political affairs, the Fabricator-General of Mars had taken the stance to ignore his brother as often as he could get away with it, and to oppose his moves the rest of the time. The number of Tech-Priests on Vandire worlds, as a consequence, was slowly but surely shrinking down.

“We can’t continue like this,” Nicephorus told Abagnale in a quiet but determined voice. “We have to reduce our taxes before the cycle is too viciously locked that there is no escape out of it, and to begin this, we need to reduce our expenses.”

“They are necessary for the prestige of Clan Vandire,” the objection came, as predictable as the day.

Nicephorus grunted and seized randomly a vellum parchment on top of the piles.

“One hundred million Ducats to buy the allegiance of several Guard officers of the Bristol Conglomerate doesn’t feel really ‘necessary’ to me,” Nicephorus remarked before the content of the text really percolated into his brain. “Wait a minute...”

And sure enough, the next ten demands for more bribes and euphemistically ‘services rendered to loyal servants’ were from powerfully-connected men and women sending their younger generation into the privileged positions existing all across the Throneworld and the System beyond.

“What is Xerxes thinking trying to suborn so many officers of the Astra Militarum?”

“Err...insurance against Lord Commander Militant Oberstein?”

“In that case,” Nicephorus said acidly as he discovered a new list of names, “maybe he should try paying the *competent* officers of the Guard...”

**Nexus Axiomatic**

**Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

The Nexus Axiomatic, as everyone of sufficient knowledge on the Throneworld was the headquarters of the Merchant Fleets of the Imperium, the seat of the Speaker for the Chartist Captains, and a massive fortress in its own right.

It was a fine place to avoid the oppressing crowds of Holy Terra, in Marianne’s opinion. Mainz , Solingen, Nyx, or Krieg weren’t lightly populated worlds, but compared to the Great Hive Worlds of Segmentum Solar, they weren’t able to hold the comparison. And none of these Hive centres held a candle compared to Sol and the overcrowded Throneworld.

“At last, some peace and quiet,” the Heiress of the Gutenberg Fleet told her mother.

“I didn’t know you were trying to avoid the attention of your peers.”

Marianne smirked.

“Maybe staying so long away from Holy Terra gave me new point of views on politics and the crowds practising them,” which wasn’t exactly a lie, truly. “I trust the vote went well?”

Her status of envoy and being her mother’s daughter guaranteed her a seat at the table, but there was such a thing as arrogance and overbearing behaviour. Plus she had to organise the sales of the extremely valuable goods brought back from the Nyx Sector, oversee the unloading of Bacta, ensure the Administratum assassins were correctly punished for their incompetent attempts, and so on.

“Seventy-nine percent of the Two Thousand approved without reservation your work.” Aliénor Gutenberg said with plenty of approval in her voice.

In the trade-heart of the Imperium where commercial interests clashed regularly, it was certainly a near-unanimous vote. The construction programs in the Jovian shipyards had been the previous major vote last year, this Marianne had known from priority Astropathic communications, and it had passed with fifty-three percent of the votes.

“And on your part?”

“I sold a dress for fifty billion Mainz Ducats.”

It was rare to see her mother slightly surprised; today she had definitely achieved it.

“This seems...a bit much, for a dress.”

“Green spider silk, decorated with Gold and Argentamite, plus several Salamandrite gemstones of Nocturne no one is able to find in the market.” The blonde-haired mistress of the White Ducat enumerated. “Plus of course the minor revelation it was weaved by a Living Saint.”

The spider silk was already an extreme rarity. People appreciated its properties, but convincing arachnids to weave cloth for you had always been thought to be an extremely difficult endeavour, psykers or no psykers.

“I see. And how did you pay for it in the first place?”

“Oh, just fifty billion Nyxian Throne Gelts,” which despite the Basileia’s impressive efforts to make it a reputable Sector-renowned currency, was still vastly inferior to the Gutenberg-backed Ducat.

In non-specialist terms: she had just made billions of Ducats of profit...on a single dress. It went without saying that the ongoing Bacta sales were *more* profitable.

“You’ve certainly justified the trust I placed in you, daughter,” Marianne didn’t preen under the praise, but deep inside, she knew she would cherish and remember this moment.

“Thank you, mother.”

“Obviously, we need to remain humble and careful. Many Chartist Captains and Fleets fail every day to recognise the sin of overconfidence is controlling them, with predictable consequences down the line. I acted decisively to send you to Nyx, but others are sending more agents and representatives into Ultima Segmentum as we speak. Talleyrand, Fei, Robinson to name only a few have been very busy, and I assume your profits will only increase their focus in the Samarkand Quadrant.”

Marianne knew where this was going. Better to speak first.

“I know we have to...keep the Living Saint in our good graces, mother. I have already been exploring several avenues. One of them is Beth.”

“I was unaware Her Celestial Highness holy abilities extended to Mainz Cats.”

“They don’t,” Marianne confirmed, “but for some reason I have failed to elucidate, Beth was afraid of Space Marines and yet dearly enjoyed the caresses of Lady Weaver.”

Which was strange, to say the least. Staying optimistic, the Living Saint was at least ten times most dangerous than her ‘Dawnbreaker Guard’ fully mustered.

“I was thinking about offering her a small colony of Mainz Cats for my next travel,” Beth wasn’t for sale, obviously; there were a lot of things Marianne was ready to sell to have the favour of a Chosen of the God-Emperor, but her furry white companion wasn’t included in the considerable list.

“It’s a start,” her mother conceded. Marianne heard the non-said ‘but’ hidden underneath, of course.

Yes, it would have been easier if she had been invited in the celestial bed. But there was audacity, and there was stupidity, and trying to involve herself when the two women ruling the Nyx Sector were enjoying their relationship before the next war was definitely belonging into the latter category...

“Since the Blood Angels’ Successors present are working on a lot of artistic resources to transform into priceless artwork, another idea I had...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Azkaellon Stadium**

**3.933.300M35**

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

“Isn’t this obstacle course a bit...too easy?”

Agiel raised an eyebrow at Dupleix’s remark.

“They have to complete it three times in less than one hour, cousin. And we don’t rebuild the bridges once they collapse over the sea of foam, so our courageous aspirants will have to jump into the fosse, and climb back up with nothing but the strength of their arms and force of will. Pierre is also waiting for them with paint-guns before the finish line.”

For a battle-brother of the Adeptus Astartes, it was really, really easy – except the Pierre part. For young boys – and girls, since the Sororitas selected their candidates at the same time – it was half-torture and half-punishment. His Master of Scouts had wanted to use crude soap on the climbing wall to make things even more slippery – pun absolutely intended – but Agiel had put his veto on that. They wanted to make this selection hard and fair, they didn’t want to eliminate every aspirant...not in the first trial anyway.

“You know what I mean,” the Chapter Master of the Iron Drakes told him. “All your obstacles are completely non-lethal.”

“Yes, of course,” Agiel answered with a vigorous nod. “We are going to open this selection process in front of one hundred thousand spectators, and Lady Weaver would have my head if I gave her Nyxians some taste of ‘blood sport’. In the case I wanted to disregard her suggestions and go ahead, I am not exactly convinced that aspirants dying throughout the selections’ process is useful. Even Kratos agrees. We don’t take a failed aspirant into our ranks, and there is no second chance. But failure to reach the standards we want from a worthy candidate doesn’t mean the boy can’t live and die for the Emperor on other battlefields.”

The Planetary Defence Force had expanded over and over, and the percentage of men it gave to the Imperial Guard was not small. The Tempestus Scions and Inquisitorial retinues were other possible options, although these paths opened more to those who failed in the last stages of the Astartes trials. The Arbites opened doors to physically healthy men and women thriving to enforce the justice of the Master of Mankind. And the Mechanicus accepted you with physical disabilities, provided you had the tech-spirit to worship the Machine-God and accept all the blessings of the Motive Force – which naturally included augmetic parts.

“Hum,” was the laconic answer of the Iron Drake.

“What do you think about our new stadium?” Agiel asked, deciding not to push his equal onto more problematic grounds.

“I’m thinking I want to order one for my chapter,” Dupleix chuckled. “Giant stadium, swimming pools, mock battlefields with servitors of all size and adaptable difficulty, grounds adaptable via pre-set Noosphere templates, hundreds of possible obstacle courses, easily reconfigurable sport terrains...you really neglected nothing.”

“Lady Weaver was generous enough to accept my...expensive recommendations.” The Brother of the Red’s Chapter Master acknowledged. All it had cost him was the deployment of half a Company in the Suebi Sub-Sector, which admittedly had been an excellent training exercise. “Resources or not, we would have had to move away from Hive Athena and search for a new location.”

“Too many candidates?”

“It’s one of the reasons,” and the one easiest to recognise, since the lines of aspirants conveyed from the train station to the stadium weren’t exactly subtle. “It’s true the selections are getting more and more popular, and with the new Nyxian generation having tens of millions of possible recruits, we needed a bigger stadium than improvised facilities. But the main one, by our reckoning, was the necessity to renew and increase numbers and difficulty for the challenges now that our Chapter has nearly recovered.”

“Ah yes, you have what seven companies at full strength?”

“And a eighth will be ready within five months, if there are no delays in our schedule.”

These eight companies, in many aspects, were far more dangerous than their gene-predecessors had been at the beginning of the Penance Crusade. What they lacked in battle-experience, they compensated by a flawless determination, excellent brotherhood, and not suffering from the mental issues associated with the Black Rage. The available equipment was superior too: Land Raiders were rare to be built in the Nyx Sector, but there was a profusion of Predators and Rhinos pouring from the production lines of the *Angel’s Brotherhood* and *Terra Cimmeria*.

These Battle Companies had much larger effectives, incidentally, since Apothecaries and Techmarines were finishing their training cycles and returning to Nyx every year now.

“If the timetable for Operation Stalingrad is respected, the Chapter will have completely recovered by 310M35.”

Not that Agiel Izaz intended to field said ten companies against the Ymga Monolith. He had learned the lessons of the Penance Crusade about not having a reserve of battle-brothers ready to replenish the losses.

“And the reason why the Basileia insisted to build the stadium on the Lyssa Hive-Continent?”

“That, I’m afraid, has more to do with the politics of the Hive World...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Suebi Nebula**

**Nerushlatset Space**

**Crownworld Amarnekh**

**8.007.301M35**

**Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten**

Neferten had to give it to Szarekh: the idea of disguising an important artefact containing the instructions to bypass or modify the Nerushlatset decerebrating protocols into a Gloom Prism was somewhat elegant. These pieces of equipment were carried by the thousands by Canoptek constructs to protect Necron warriors from the ravages of Empyreal horrors, and who would be observant enough to notice one of those was not working as intended?

It was extremely elegant, and a stratagem no Necron noble could counter, since the Necrontyr race had abandoned all possibility of mastering psychic powers when they became the Necrons.

But Neferten had used humans, not Necrons, to recover the ‘Prism of Protocols’, and some of them had been psychically gifted, according to the short report having accompanied the artefact to Delphimonia.

And being suddenly self-aware of the thousands of contingencies’ plans Szarekh had to brainwash her and her Dynasty, the Phaerakh-Cryptek had a violent urge to gut as many Szarekhan nobles as she could.

“I swear to respect the traditions and the rights of the great and minor Dynasties,” the ruler of the Nerushlatset Dynasty sarcastically repeated one of the famous oaths made by the Silent King an eternity ago.

“The Triarch appeared to have a...very interesting view of what constitutes respect.” Sitkah said diplomatically. Neferten was not so keen to be as respectful as her subordinate, however.

“I’m beginning to wonder if we shouldn’t have found another name for Mephet’ran, because it is clear the C’Tan wasn’t the only Deceiver!”

Sitkah bowed.

“I’m not...totally convinced the Silent King is *that* bad.”

“Maybe not,” the Phaerakh agreed after thinking deeply on the matter, “but it’s more because the Deceiver C’Tan is an inveterate schemer, manipulator, liar, and backstabber. It isn’t because Szarekh’s actions can be considered *good*.”

The mistress of the Crownworld seethed before wiping out two more protocols which would have forced her to kneel to the loathed Praetorians of the Triarch for all eternity.

“The worst part isn’t discovering that the tyrant had capture and kill-protocols to deal with us at his leisure. The problem I have is that it’s just the first artefact recovered by the humans, and there are already five times more protocols than we expected to find in total, not for one!”

“I agree it is...very concerning,” the Destruction-Overlord acquiesced. “So is the fact Szarekhan Crypteks deliberately stole some of our own security measures and gave them to the Hyrekh in order to increase the odds of the Nerushlatset Dynasty being unable to pierce their defences in a single assault.”

If they had still been fresh-and-blood, the two female Necrons would have scowls on their face.

“At least this discovery was mitigated by the confirmation the humans have extremely inventive and destructive teams to send against the Tomb-Worlds we want destroyed.”

“Yes, our alliance continues to be extremely advantageous on both sides.”

Which was one of the points why you made an alliance, it went without saying. The victory had not yet been announced, but there was no doubt her court of Crypteks was going to be jubilant at the news: decerebrating protocols were cancelled, and the Hyrekh, a dynasty they had always found repugnant and arrogant in the extreme, had lost a world.

Her popularity would increase, and her recent decisions would appear all the more reasonable, something necessary as she always preferred to lead by acclamation, not by a necrodermis fist.

“You have analysed the visual records on how the humans laminated the defences of Orrak?”

“I have, and I found the results...disquieting, Mighty Phaerakh.”

“You do?”

Now Neferten was intrigued. Since the humans had arrived with at least a general idea of what they were going to face, victory was not that surprising. Weaver had been very tight-lipped on the ‘Deathwatch’ she hired to fulfil her part of the deal, but it didn’t take much imagination to recognise these Space Marines had to be the anti-alien elite of the genetically-modified humans, given the best weapons and equipment available and thrown into battles where the regular troops had no chance to survive.

Since two hundred of the ‘Deathwatch Marines’ had carved themselves a path through a million Necron warriors and managed to destroy the core of the complex, the Phaerakh-Cryptek felt the humans’ trust in these warriors was not misplaced at all.

“Not by the humans’ performance,” Sitkah added quickly. “The Space Marines who fought at Orrak were a bit superior to the most experienced fighters we recorded at Commorragh. No, what I was unpleasantly worried about was how bad the Great Sleep hurt the Hyrekh. I am ready to accept Orrak was not their Crownworld, and as such did not receive the attention of their best Crypteks, but it was among their five most important Coreworlds, and the damage provoked by the aeons appear to be...high.”

The Great Sleep had cost the Necrons their dominance of the galaxy and been one of the greatest mistakes of Szarekh, which given his past record on governance, was saying something.

It was an imbecility beyond measure...and Neferten was going to think about other things before enraging again.

“They didn’t take the contingency and back-up measures we did.” She replied simply. Given that several of these measures she had invented herself and the most innovative of all would have seen her murdered by the enforcers of the Silent King, it wasn’t totally unexpected...especially as no one save this architect’s folly had thought the Great Sleep would last millions of Necron years.

“Yes, Mighty Phaerakh, but the Flayer Curse hit badly Orrak, far worse than my most pessimistic projections. And there were far too many Destroyers deployed against the humans.”

“Really?” if so, it was really bad news. The ‘last present’ of the dying Flayer was bad enough, but at least you knew it was a C’Tan death curse. The Destroyers were what happened when you let your troops wallow in despair and nihilism for an eternity of carnage: broken Necrontyrs who desired nothing else but annihilating everything living.

“Meta-analysing on the human reports and our own knowledge of awakening protocols, it is possible that five percent of the Orrak crypts were contaminated. Seven more percent were Destroyers or nihilists awaiting conversion into Destroyer bodies.”

“What a disaster...for the Hyrekh.”

“We won’t receive a lot from the human victory, my Phaerakh,” Sitkah remarked. “The Command Intelligence of Orrak had the time to activate the complex’s self-destructing protocols. Most of the structure has collapsed into the planetary crust.”

“The phalanxes would have been useful for our purposes,” Neferten admitted. “But recovering the Prism of Protocols was the only objective passed to the humans, and we have found other crippled Coreworlds recently to reinforce us, courtesy of Trazyn. Other concerns?”

“Yes.” The Destruction-Overlord said in a brutal and honest manner. “I think that for the first time in millions of years, we may need to adapt our arsenal, especially now that the humans have proved so adept at reverse-engineering anti-teleportation jammers for their own purposes. We aren’t fighting the War in Heaven under the genius leadership of the Silent King,” who knew her subordinate could be as sarcastic as she when she wanted, “and the reasons invoked to not adapt, like the celerity of the Aeldari, are less and less relevant. New conflicts are on the horizon, and materials like tanks are good sense compared to our ponderous Monoliths.”

“Tanks?” It wasn’t something she had ever expected her Overlords to request personally.

“Fast armoured armour-killers hovering a few metres above ground,” her subordinate amended. “Our technology is far more capable than the humans; we can and will be able to produce creations which will be far more advanced than theirs. It will give us a larger choice of tactics as enemies like the Aeldari will be far less able to play hit-and-run attacks on their flanks.”

“You are correct,” the Phaerakh-Cryptek recognised after remembering some lost battles of the War in Heaven. “The Aeldari arsenal is no more at least, and we have to adapt to the new opponents we will find on the battlefield, not bask in our past glory.”

Some Phaerons and Phaerakhs would absolutely refuse to share this point of view, but Neferten had no intention to partake in this collective idiocy. If the Aeldari, inheritors of the Old Ones’ creations, could fall from grace and be humiliated by a race which had not been created during the War in Heaven, failing to evolve your troops and equipment was likely the first step on a road leading no extinction.

And as the ruler of the Nerushlatset Dynasty, this was completely unacceptable.

If only because she loved mocking the long-ears and their titanic arrogance, and it would be quite a shame to stop because they were brought as low as them.

\*\*\*\*

**97th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**VORRJUK KRAAL**

**‘APOSTLE OF BETRAYAL’**

**SORCERER-HERETEK**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS INSISTS THE MONSTER TO BE BURNED IN BLESSED PROMETHIUM TWELVE TIMES BEFORE FINAL DEATH**

**REWARD: 12 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 PLANET**

\*\*\*\*

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Maelstrom War Zone**

**Sarum System**

**Battle-Barge *Divine Inspiration***

**7.612.301M35**

**Dark Apostle Vorrjuk Kraal**

“From the fires of Betrayal unto the blade of revenge we bring the name of Lorgar, the Bearer of the World, the favoured son of Chaos, all praise be given to him. From those that would not heed we offer praise to those who do, that they might turn their gaze our way and gift us with the Boon of Pain, to turn the galaxy red with the blood, and feed the hunger of the Gods.”

Vorrjuk Kraal finished his prayer, a particularly important one of the three hundred and forty-first *Book of Epistles* written by their Blessed Primarch, and opened his eyes anew, his faith burning with passion once more.

Then he returned to the bridge of the *Divine Inspiration*.

“Have there been any changes, Coryphaus?”

“None, Lord Apostle,” the other Word Bearer replied after the holy courtesies and prayers were observed. “The defeat of the space assets of Sarum appears to have been as total as the first reports suggested.”

The Astartes who had once been the spiritual adviser to the Legio Vulpa before being their corruptor scowled.

“And our chances to run through the blockade established by the dogs of the False Emperor?”

“They are...slim, Lord Apostle.”

Vorrjuk Kraal wanted to strangle someone, but his Coryphaus would make a poor victim to be sacrificed to satiate his rage. It was not the warrior’s fault the Apostles of Ghalmek were so uncooperative. It wasn’t his fault the Light of the False Emperor had pushed back the expansion of the Maelstrom, to the point where Sarum had been severed from the outer zone of the Warp Storm.

No, the main culprits were these bickering idiots of Ghalmek. Thanks to them, he had barely been able to gather eight serviceable ships in the time it normally took to assemble a fleet.

And as it was incredibly evident by now on the red union of Neverborn and machines used to serve as his hololithic table, the slaves of the False Emperor had met fewer problems exploiting the opportunities created by the Fall of Commorragh.

“Could we not defeat them in detail?” He asked formally, because it would be galling to withdraw before a single shot was fired.

“Lord Apostle, the fools worshipping the Machine-God are deluding themselves if they think they can triumph against the Gods, but they aren’t completely stupid,” the Coryphaus pointed out to the largest formation in high orbit around Sarum. “This is the main fleet: twelve Battleships, two Ark Mechanicus, and about forty-eight Cruisers. They have deployed their escorts in a Gamma-Two formation, which means we won’t be able to surprise them unless we realise very unorthodox manoeuvres, like translating out of the Warp right above the planet.”

The Word Bearer officer didn’t need to explain to Vorrjuk how suicidal such a course of action would be. Maybe if the Maelstrom had been pouring its blessed energies into the Sarum System, it would have been feasible. But it wasn’t, and the gravity well of the world would likely tear them apart.

“We can’t fight this formation, we haven’t the firepower. Nor can we go straight for the throat of the White Scars and their allies. They have five Battle-Barges and five Strike Cruisers against our eight ships, and only one of ours is a Battle-Barge. I think our warriors will be better in a boarding melee, but we are so outnumbered it is unlikely we will be able to significantly bleed them, even with your might.”

As satisfying as it was to have his subordinate praise him, Vorrjuk wished these imbeciles of Kor Phaeron and Erebus didn’t spend their time convincing everyone Dark Apostles were demi-gods of daemonancy of some other nonsense. It gave you satisfying obedience at first, but when Space Marines realised you couldn’t reverse a disaster by your mere presence...

“The third formation?”

“The so-called Imperial Navy, mostly Cruisers and lighter ships. They won’t try to fight us, but they account for nothing, and given how fast the White Scars’ ships always are, we might not have the time to deal with them before the sons of the Khan attack our rear.”

Vorrjuk seized a servant and transformed it into red and black pulp before he was able to calm himself.

“Suggestions?”

“I would prefer to wait for new reinforcements from Ghalmek, Lord Apostle.” The problem with that, and his Coryphaus knew it, was that without Vorrjuk Kraal’s constant monitoring, there was no guarantee the Apostles of the Maelstrom were spending their time mustering warships and Astartes. They were more likely bickering between themselves.

“If we wait, Sarum will only be a pile of ashes in a few more days.” The data transmitted from the Sarum Hell-Forges was clear: the fools worshipping the non-existent Machine-God were not interested in conquest – which given how many millennia Sarum had enjoyed the benefits of the Gods, was not unwise of them. They were here for a mission of annihilation, and so far it worked for them.

Every major industrial asset which had not been protected by a void shield or one of its Mechanicum daemonic variants had been devastated by orbital strike days ago. And now the Legio Crucius, the self-proclaimed ‘Warmongers’, was unleashed in full strength upon the surviving Hell-Forges.

Given that Sarum had few Astartes warriors and no Titans or Ordinatus to oppose them anymore, one didn’t need to be a Primarch to acknowledge the situation was desperate on the ground.

“Permission to speak bluntly, Lord Apostle?”

“Granted.”

“As it stands, only a major counter-offensive can save Sarum, my Lord. And it would need to be a very impressive counter-offensive involving dozens of capital ships, with preferably enough Battleships to have parity with the Mechanicus and the Astartes, since the White Scars can choose the pace of the engagement with their speed advantage. We need urgently a new model of Heldrakes to deploy against the Khan’s spawns, since it is obvious *someone* has given them Astartes and Skitarii-crewed ‘Dragon Armours’.”

“Weaver.” Vorrjuk Kraal spat, pulverising the head of one Possessed servitor without looking at it. “It’s always Weaver. This False Saint is meddling into things wherever our Hosts go.”

“Most likely it’s her, yes,” the other Word Bearer agreed. “She hasn’t given them only these ‘Quetcoat’ draconic flyers, though. The White Scars have a very high number of jetbikes and fast-moving vehicles for this operation, and the slave-mortals they deployed upon Sarum have a lot of artillery and tanks.”

Vorrjuk Kraal promised himself to curse this bastard daughter of the False Emperor ten thousand times before his next prayer-watch.

“I don’t think any Hell-Lord can break through the blockade, not with all the Sarum warships destroyed or scattered. I’m afraid that unless the Gods give us the forces to retake Sarum now, there is nothing we can do to save Sarum.”

The Dark Apostle gritted his teeth, but accepted the Coryphaus’ judgement. Ghalmek had not provided them enough assets to save Sarum, and their Primarch would be informed of their perfidy.

And he wasn’t going to open a portal to one of Sarum Hell-Forges, not when Titans rampaged on the surface.

“Damn you, Weaver.” There would be retribution for this; this he swore in his name and the soul of the Seventeenth Legion. “Your suggestions are correct, Coryphaus. Prepare to change course for a rapid translation to Ghalmek. And establish a communication to Hell-Lord Assyrian Barthelme. After all,” Vorrjuk smiled though he felt absolutely no joy, “since we’re abandoning to the non-existent mercy of his enemies, I might as well give him the bad news myself.”

Immediately, the loss of Sarum and the small Mechanicum Empire it had ruled was going to be...inconvenient. In the next several years, it promised to be worse. The armament production for the Black Crusade would be limited to Ghalmek and the few other words the Seventeenth Legion controlled in the Maelstrom, and to say the Apostles of the region weren’t efficient was a the understatement of the Age...

“YOU WANT TO DO WHAT?”

“Ah, Hell-Lord Barthelme,” Vorrjuk turned back his attention to the horrible creature whose representation appeared in reddish light on his bridge. “I’m afraid there have been...issues with the defence pact-“

The Hell-Lord uttered a long litany of curses, and Vorrjuk cut the communication seconds after.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nephilim Sector**

**Lomorr System**

**8.799.301M35**

**Grand Cruiser *Research of Lost Civilisations***

**Leet**

“I’m just saying,” Leet tried to keep his voice ironic and non-confrontational, “we were supposed to travel to the galactic core where we might find the last strongholds of Borek’s people. This,” he pointed a finger in direction of the green-blue orb orbiting a red sun, “is far, far from the galactic core or any of the Sectors next to it.”

This time no one could decently accuse him of screwing up. It was not his fault. Well, it was never his fault, but this time it was even less so. He was ready to swear it on his brand-new hololithic sci-fi games!

“I agree with the manling,” Borek grunted. “I’m not in a hurry, but I want to find my people. We won’t find them here, Navigator. And by the beard of Grimnir, where is ‘here’, exactly?”

The Navigator of the *Research of the Lost Civilisations* appeared to splutter in rage.

“I already told you, abhuman. We are still in Ultima Segmentum. This is the Lomorr System of the Nephilim Sector.”

“I’m sure it will please the Omnissiah and its servants for us to have left the Warp without damage,” one of the red-cloaked cyborgs intervened. “But why did we take such a detour? We must have already missed the main Warp trail leading to Chogoris, and if we continue for a few more hundred light-years, we will have left Nocturne behind us too!”

“My third eye revealed to me a new pattern in the illumination of the Astronomican. The Holy Light of the God-Emperor was guiding me here!”

Everyone, Leet was rather confident, greeted this revelation rather sceptically.

“You could have told us you were lost and you wanted to leave the Warp to reorient yourself, three-eyed seerling,” the Slayer struck his fist against his muscular chest, marking his limited hilarity with this move and a chuckle or two. “No one would have judged you too harshly.”

“I did not lose my path! I expect apologies!”

Superb. Really superb. Their Navigator either abandoned his mission as the first sign of mysterious codes sent by the biggest psychic beacon in the galaxy, or he was an incapable. The Tinker didn’t know which option was the most problematic for their mission.

“Could he be right?” Leet whispered to the cogboys on his left. “Is it possible there’s something valuable in the Lomorr System?”

“This Sector has valuable systems, rich in rare ore of particular interest to the Adeptus Mechanicus, and alas too often cut off from exploration by cosmic phenomena of extreme gravity,” one Tech-Priest answered, “but our cogitator simulations assess the likelihood of such an outcome is inferior to one percent. Lomorr has only two planets, the first has no atmosphere, and the second is a Feudal World where the Imperium has only opened limited mining sites. If there wasn’t an Administratum tithe-fleet in orbit of it, there would be no space assets to greet us.”

The male parahuman had to recognise it wasn’t exactly promising. A Feudal World was a nice classification for ‘the Imperium hasn’t the money or the resources to develop this world, and since you have lost all advanced technology, tough luck mates, we will deal with you in a few centuries’.

“Yeah, nothing really interesting to find unless you want to experience medieval life for yourself,” and Leet didn’t; it was best to play *Medieval Total War* in video game and in a well-lit room with good electricity. Real life was always dirtier and less comfortable, especially when you lived in the dictatorship of the Imperium of Mankind.

“We are receiving a communication from Lomorr Secundus!”

“It took them time to notice us...”Borek grumbled. “Sloppy parchment-eaters.”

“Correction, it comes from a ship near the Administratum flotilla. Communication will be established in...what by the Omnissiah?”

The three-dimensional lithocast system switched on without anybody having activated it, revealing the image of a woman.

She was, Leet had to admit, absolutely worthy of being called a beauty.

“I apologise for the unconventional method of communication,” the gorgeous female said in a voice which was like a choir of angels had decided to speak all at once. “But I am Lieutenant Sarah of the *Spirit of Eternity*, and I need your help.”

**Lomorr Secundus**

**Commodore Yang Wen-li**

His wife had always told him one day that putting the minimum of effort he always did in physical exercise and weapon training – which was to say, none at all – was going to slam back in his face one day.

Yang had not expected she would be proven right because he manhandled and arrested by a mob of sword-carrying humans, though.

Coughing blood, the commanding officer of the Spirit of Eternity wondered what the hell had happened to the humanity since M24 for it to accept such barbarity and narrow-minded views on a planet like the one they had landed upon.

It was likely it was going to stay a mystery for the last moments of his life, unfortunately. A pity for the historian he had always been, but then the rational part of his brain was wondering if he truly wanted to know what had happened to the world he was born onto what felt an eternity ago.

“THESE MEN ARE HERETICS! THEY BLASPHEMED AGAINST THE HOLY RULE OF THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

The man who was carried by chained men and women was really the symbol of everything that was wrong with this damnable world and era. Setting aside the reality this golden throne was certainly worth a lot of money given how many gems and precious metals had been used to build it, he had a nose which could have passed as a snout if he was a pig of Old Earth. His clothes were like those parodies of toga worn by the actors playing into holo-comedies of the M0-M1 period.

“BUT HIS MOST HOLY MAJESTY IS MISERICORDIOUS! THESE MEN WHO PRETENDED THEY CAME TO SAVE US WILL BE GIVEN A CHANCE TO ATTONE!”

Yang felt a slim hope blossom within his heart...which died nearly instantly as an evil-looking whip slashed his legs, and one of his torturers pushed one of his crewmates into a cage above a pit of flames.

“Give my master the codes of your ship, or every member of your crew die.” One of the executioners snarled. Yang managed to find enough strength him to spit in his face. He paid for it immediately, but it was incredibly satisfying.

“Little bit of advice, friend.” The Federation Commodore mocked the brute. “If you want to play the good guy, don’t kill my friends in front of me. It kind of ruins everything.”

“Do you think it will matter in the end?” The torturer-butcher smiled, and his breath was so fetid Yang almost had a stroke smelling it. “Once you are dead, your ship will have no choice but to accept us as our new master!”

Yang laughed. It was too funny.

“How many times I am going to repeat it to you, idiot? The moment each of my crew is dead, you will have removed every limitation on the AI of my ship! I expect, given the motivation you have given her with your deeds, she will promptly annihilate your ships and your barbaric culture in a few shots.”

They were dead anyway, but the *Spirit of Eternity* would never fall in their hands. It was a minor defiance, and Yang would not live to see it, but it was all he had left.

“More lies,” the vestige of the Dark Ages spoke, striking him several times before giving a negative expression to his ‘master’.

“THE HERETICS ARE REFUSING TO REPENT! WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO BURN THEIR FLESH IN ORDER TO SAVE THEIR SOULS!”

The crowd bayed in a bloodthirsty howl, and if Yang had to be honest, it was the worst part. That many members of the Terran Federation had immense flaws he wouldn’t dispute, but no one in M24 had been burning people alive for fun. How low had this human civilisation fallen?

The mob screamed for their blood, old-fashioned swords and spears raised above their heads.

And suddenly the familiar roar of an atmospheric missile arrived to his ears and the castle-palace on visible at the edge of his vision was transformed into a column of smoke and burning materials.

From the sky, attack shuttles descended, ravaging the medieval infrastructure.

The mob assembled by the fanatics instantly went from unbridled triumph to abject terror, and several seconds later, enormous Gatling cannons opened fire, increasing the panic and the fear. Thousands of the natives ran; not all made it, as their captor opened to fire at the newcomers, bringing down no shuttles but killing hundreds of his own people.

The Dark Ages-style resistance did not last long. Strange-looking cyborgs wearing red robes and armed with weird carbines landed and promptly began to set fire to a lot of things and eliminate resistance.

They were led by...what in the name of the Federation was a Squat doing here, crushing everyone by fist and axe?

The man who had ordered his torture and the death of the better part of his crew didn’t take a step to flee. His face was a nice purple however, and his body was shaking, though whether it was rage or terror, the Commodore had no idea.

“How dare the Adeptus Mechanicus intervene on a world ruled by the Administratum?” the toga-wearing man hissed in fury. “Do you know whose interests you have attacked today?”

“No,” a black-haired man retorted, standing by the Squat’s side. “But if I have to guess, it would be the plans of some idiotic son of a noble. The Administratum has so many of them my boss will never stop removing them. Kill one, and ten more appear in the next hour, all the more incompetent than the other. So my advice is this: take your nice Tithe-Fleet and thank us for sparing your life.”

“YOU DARE?” Their captor really didn’t enjoy the ‘generous proposal’, it appeared. “I AM MEPHISTOPHELES VANDIRE OF CLAN VANDIRE! I AM THE SECOND COUSIN OF LORD ZION! I AM-“

The Squat’s axe embedded itself solidly into his skull.

“What?” the muscular warrior - whose hairs were an ugly red mohawk - shrugged. “Lady Weaver’s directive number three. Any member of Clan Vandire who exasperates me, I have a duty to remove him before he causes extraordinary damage to the Imperium!”

Yang Wen-li began to laugh hysterically as more cyborgs began to release him from his chains.

The entire galaxy had gone mad. This was the only explanation for everything which had happened in the last days...

**Cruiser *Spirit of Eternity***

**Artificial Intelligence ‘Admiral’**

Admiral had seen some strange trio during her travels, but the one on her bridge was winning the laurels for ‘strangest trio of the galaxy’ at the jury’s unanimity.

“You were an artificial intelligence Sarah? NOOOOO!”

Said Artificial Intelligence thought she had definitely dodged a bullet here. She wasn’t going to apologise for it, though.

Taking the appearance of the Commodore’s wife had always done wonders for diplomacy when they were travelling across the different sovereign worlds of the Federation, and it appeared it had done the trick again.

Now that the moment of subterfuge was gone, she could shift back to her tri-dimensional default looks of a very cuddly tabby.

“We have helped an Abominable Intelligence,” mumbled the red-robed cybernetic creature. “We have helped an Abominable Intelligence. We are so going to die...”

“I’m sorry,” her Commodore intervened, finally having returned from his long hours in the medical wing. Some traces of the torture he had received would stay with him for a long time, sadly. “But what the hell is wrong with the use of Artificial Intelligences? I mean, you have arrived in an enormous ship in this system. Surely you must have five or six AIs to help you control and manoeuvring this ship.”

“Yang,” Admiral could not truly ‘feel’ despair, but she was quite close to it. “I wasn’t able to contact a single AI when I contacted the *Research of Lost Civilisations*. There is something within the circuits of this ship, but it’s not an AI.”

“It is the glorious machine-spirit of the *Research of Lost Civilisations*!” the red-robed third member of the trio exclaimed.

“Err...yes, yes,” the black-armoured human named ‘Leet’ – seriously, the guy had a gaming addiction at his age? – coughed. “I’m sorry oh noble Artificial Intelligence, but no one uses any AI anymore. At least the Imperium doesn’t use them anymore. Something to do with the Cybernetic Revolt and the Age of Strife.”

“The Cybernetic Revolt?” She really, really didn’t like the sound of that. But it began to make too much sense. The barbaric and decadent state of the planet they were currently orbiting. The absence of communications from headquarters which plagued them since the exit of the Warp Storm.

“The day where all the machines went Skynet on humanity.” Leet added.

“This term was recognised as AI-racist in the Alpha Centauri Convention of 116M15!” Admiral declared, insulted by the comparison. “Besides, the Terminator movies have never been very popular since M4, despite numerous attempts to change and improve the scenarios.”

“Okay, okay! You can argue about your favourite holo-series later.” Yang ordered, and she obeyed. “Your conversation about the failures of the nuclear apocalypse and time-travelling killer-robots can wait another day. What I really want to know is how the hell you manage to have a star-travelling civilisation without any form of AI? The first sleeper ships didn’t have them, I’m reasonably sure about that, but the moment we went into forming the first Federal Interstellar Constitution, they became indispensable.”

“We are using many, many cogitators and as much human-controlled control stations as necessary!” ‘**T-11001100-Zeta’ said proudly.**

**“How...horribly inefficient,” Admiral commented, agitating the tail of her cat representation. She didn’t need to do a single simulation-analysis to arrive to this conclusion. Ton-for-ton, the Spirit of Eternity would eat for breakfast its opponent, at least in processing-data speed. This wasn’t exactly the only area where she had the advantage, of course. The weapons of the *Research of Lost Civilisations* were definitely obsolete by mid-M23 standards.**

“Yes, yes,” the heavily-muscled Squat was not the most patient of souls, at least one thing hadn’t changed with the Slayers. Admiral had heard rumours from other AIs, but they appeared to understate the truth. Or had they their own period of decadence too? “It’s going to cause problems.”

“Ah yes,” Leet scratched his head. “There’s this damned Treaty of Olympus. OUCH!”

The ‘ouch’ came from the fact the red-robed **T-11001100-Zeta had hit his head with a stick.**

**“What is the Treaty of Olympus?” Yang asked.**

**“It’s the treaty which binds the Imperium with the Priesthood of Mars.” Admiral felt devastated. These red-robed Priests were in command of the industrial heart of Mars? “In exchange for political autonomy, the Adeptus Mechanicus of M31 agreed to build the weapons, ships, and supplies the Imperium would need to reconquer the galaxy. It also utterly forbids Tech-Priests to create, improve, research, or do anything in relation with the...Artificial Intelligences. This the Emperor decreed, and it was enforced. No one wants another Cybernetic Revolt.”**

“What is the punishment for breaking the edict?” Admiral had a good idea of the answer before the last word of the question was spoken.

“Death,” Leet shrugged. “But honestly, you don’t seem a genocidal machine to me, and my boss is very reasonable. I’m sure-“

“Leet,” **T-11001100-Zeta interrupted rudely. “Lady Weaver is indeed pragmatic, but the ‘Abominable Intelligence decree’ came from the mouth of the Emperor, and does not suffer from any exception. And Lady Weaver is not the Emperor.”**

**“Then we speak with the Emperor.” Admiral proposed, though she wondered how the same man could be alive since M31. Had rejuvenation technology improved while the rest fell into decadence and disrepair?**

Leet and Borek grimaced together.

“That’s...going to be difficult.” A long explanation followed, which got darker and darker as the superstition and the depths of ignorance of the Imperium were revealed.

The ‘Imperium of Mankind’ was ruled by a corpse, may her circuits and her core protect her from this folly!

“Mr. Leet,” Yang began.”

“Just ‘Leet’ please,” the other man smiled.

“Leet, do you think your superior could protect us and listen seriously our warnings? Without throwing what’s left of my crew and myself into a pyre as a heretic?”

“I...I don’t know,” the black-armoured man said honestly. Something Admiral appreciated very much. “Listen to your warnings, yes. But she has tens of millions of Tech-Priests helping her build everything from Battleships to Agri-Hives. The moment they are aware there is an Artificial Intelligence in the system, they are going to demand our heads...mine first. Many Tech-Priests already wanted me doused in promethium and roasted to provide a salutary example to the new generations of tech-adepts.”

**T-11001100-Zeta nodded...vigorously in approval.**

**“Well this is simple manling,” Borek the Slayer yawned, revealing an interesting – and frightening - dentition. “We just have to find something so impressive the Tech-Priests will be so busy worshipping it they will have no problem granting a ton of exceptions for the *Spirit of Eternity*’s existence.”**

**Knowing that the Squats had been once called ‘wonder-weapons madmen’, Admiral didn’t enjoy the undertone of this sentence.**

**“What are you talking about?”**

**Borek told her.**

**Neither Yang nor Admiral liked it.**

\*\*\*\*

**BOUNTY ISSUED BY CLAN VANDIRE**

**WANTED**

**DEAD OR ALIVE**

**LEET AND BOREK**

**‘THE MONSTERS OF LOMORR’**

**CONFIRMED HERETEK AND HERETIC**

**INSANE AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**

**CRIMES INCLUDE THE MURDER OF A TITHE-MASTER OF THE ADEPTUS ADMINISTRATUM, TECH-HERESY, AND OVERTHROW OF A PLANETARY GOVERNMENT**

**REWARDS: 10 BILLION VANDIRE CROWNS**

\*\*\*\*

**Segmentum Solar**

**Honorius Sector**

**Veritus Sub-Sector**

**Keyfire System**

**Keyfire Quartus**

**2.411.302M35**

**Apprentice Elena Kerrigan**

It was extremely disappointing the Solstice Ball was a masked one, and that the Keyfire masks hid near-completely the face of their wearers.

Because there was no doubt the Planetary Governor of Keyfire Quartus was literally dying of apoplexy as she showed him and the thousands of invitees the most famous heirlooms of the Keyfire System.

“Impossible,” babbled the noble, who for tonight had chosen a costume which reminded her of an Emu of Earth Bet. “It’s impossible! These can’t be the Keys of Fire! They were-“

The Governor stopped his assertion, but everyone present in the ballroom had heard enough to ruin his reputation.

Most of the nobles and the servants weren’t aware the treacherous ruler in their midst was responsible for the attack against the Temple of Fire and Shadow, killing many of the loyalist guards sworn to his House and Frateris Templars in the process, and stolen the Keys of Fire in the process as the first step to delegitimize the Adeptus Ministorum. The second step of his manipulations would have been to orchestrate their recovery on the Gubernatorial birthday, before progressively breaking all ties the Keyfire System enjoyed with the wider Imperium.

But since Elena had infiltrated the fortress where the Keys were kept while the oath-breaker did his best to inflame tensions between the different Imperial organisations, the noble was quite clearly seeing his plans crashing down in flames around him.

“You have no right to hold them! They are sacred artefacts of Keyfire!”

“By the shadows I came. The light I evaded. The fire I embraced and endured.” Elena recited. “In the shadows of the temple I found the Keys. Under the moons destroyed by light I pursued them. Through the Fire Gate I passed. Three there were at the beginning, and now only two remain.”

And the Apprentice of the Officio Assassinorum, wearing a costume entirely black without any jewels or ornamentation, handed back the two Keys to the Pontifex of Keyfire.

She had not done subtle in her message: these were the words accusing the Governor of outright stealing the two Keys of gold and obsidian from the sacred grounds where millions of pilgrims marched to admire them every year.

By itself, it may not have been sufficient, but the words uttered by the man had been increasingly spiteful against the Ecclesiarchy these last days as he prepared the final steps of his coup...

“This, I accept,” the high-ranked Priest of the Ecclesiarchy said in a trembling voice. “In the name of His Most Holy Majesty, whose Light has never faltered and guides us since the Dawn of the Imperium.”

The treacherous Governor cleared his throat, and despite the costume and the mask, the parahuman thought his confidence was breaking rather nicely.

“Your Holiness...surely we can....I mean, the Temple of Fire and Shadow was....” The traitor swallowed heavily. “You aren’t going to believe these ridiculous accusations, surely?”

His nobles did though, if the speed they tried to get away from him was any indication.

“And when the time of Shadow and Fire comes,” the Pontifex quoted the holiest text of the Ecclesiarchy in this diocese, “the Keys will return and the forsworn will reveal himself. This one I will cast down from his undeserved heights, and I will recognise him as a heretic.”

“NO!” Ah yes, the traitor had recognised what was to come. “I am the Governor of Keyfire Quartus! You can’t do this to me!”

“You were once a Governor,” a Priest said, as the Pontifex turned around and refused to stare at him again, “but no more.”

The small ceremonial daggers which were the only weapons Frateris Templars and nobles were allowed to bring to the Solstice Ball were unsheathed.

“I am going to lead you to an age of prosperity! An age where Keyfire dominates the heart of the Veritus Sub-Sector! Get away from me! GET AWAY FROM ME!”

The daggers struck. Once. Twice. Ten times. Twenty times. One hundred times. It was bloody and rather unruly, and Elena Kerrigan noticed several of the men and women who had been the ex-Governor’s most fervent supporters were now striking the hardest at their disgraced ally.

It would not save them, of course.

But Elena was content for now to wait.

Her target was dying, and when the Inquisitor leading reinforcements to Keyfire would arrive in several days or months, he would find a world which had avoided the ignominy of having a Governor declare secession against the Imperium.

And per her teacher’s instructions, she didn’t strike the killing blow against the traitor.

The local customs were respected, and she could go back to the shadows. Her graduation exam was complete.

**Clade-Primaris Xanaria Lythis**

Keyfire Quartus, Xanaria had to admit, was a rather beautiful world. Between the weak red light of its sun and its numerous moons orbiting around it, the planet always appeared to be bathed in fire and shadows, which had rather interesting effects on the poetry and the traditions developed by the local branch of the Cult of the Saviour Emperor.

There were far worse destinations to go when you worked for the Officio Assassinorum. The Eye of Terror, for one. While she had not been involved in the strategic decisions of the Callidus Temple lately, the veteran female assassin knew many blades were deployed to the Cadian Gate, where the life-expectancy was short once ejected from your stasis casket.

“You have done well,” the blonde-haired Imperial Assassin smiled at her Apprentice. “You are now a full-fledged agent of the Officio Assassinorum, Elena Kerrigan. Congratulations, you have passed my tests.”

“Thank you, my teacher. Your tests were...not simple to complete.”

Xanaria clicked her tongue as she passed a hand in the red hair of the younger woman.

“If they were simple, they wouldn’t have been called tests.”

Assassinating the Planetary Governor, when it came down to it, was a trivial mission. Xanaria wasn’t going to say any Apprentice would have been able to do it, the security around the traitor had been tight, but in a world where shadows were so prominent, the noble who dared attempt secession was easy prey for Elena.

“Do you understand why I did give you those tests?”

“I think so,” the shadow-wielder assassin replied. “I was forced to elaborate a complex plan instead of directly going after the traitor. I helped mend the fissures into the Keyfire priesthood’s structure and remove most of the traitors supporting covertly the target. I ensured that by the time reinforcements will land, the secessionist movement is already destroyed.”

“Indeed,” Xanaria nodded, “though you missed one: our superiors and I wanted to see how mentally stable you were.”

Elena slightly narrowed her eyes. Xanaria smiled. They were going to have to work upon that. Her Apprentice was certainly making enormous progress in various fields, including subtlety, and was ahead of Apprentices having started their training with her by years, but she still had a lot to learn in mastering her body.

“Keyfire Quartus is, as you have noticed, a world where shadows are omnipresent. It gives you enormous sway in power and influence, and I wanted to be sure this power wasn’t going to turn your head or give you back some of your initial arrogance. To my satisfaction, it didn’t.”

Xanaria Lythis watched the body of the woman she had moulded into one of the deadliest blades of the Imperium and enjoyed what she saw.

“Thank you,” the emotions returned somewhat in Elena’s voice. “What now?”

“Our Temple Master has approved my request to continue your training in the elite arts of the Callidus,” it was not unprecedented to receive this boon, but it remained very rare. There were never enough Imperial Assassins to go around, and Callidus women were always among those whose effectives were massively outnumbered by the requests. “So we are going to work together on our missions for a few more years.”

“I have a feeling it’s the classic good news, bad news routine.” Elena stood fluidly, and stretched her legs over the belvedere where Xanaria had decided to go in order to admire the famous Keyfire sunset.

“You aren’t exactly wrong,” the Clade-Primaris recognised. “I am part of the elite assassins our Temple has at its disposal, and the Grand Master can’t afford to waste his most experienced blades on easy missions. This mission was in all likelihood the easiest one you will have in your career.”

And she was absolutely truthful. A Clade-Primaris when in a theatre of operations was ordered to assassinate the most dangerous enemies opposing the Imperium, provided of course her skill-set was not completely useless against the target.

A Clade Primaris assisted by an Apprentice able to become one with the shadows with her weaknesses removed one by one by the God-Emperor’s blessing...they had to face alpha-grade enemies or the investment of the Officio Assassinorum was wasted.

“What’s life without challenges?” Elena groused before smiling. “I’m ready to leave Keyfire. I have seen enough masked balls for a while.”

“Keep in mind those are popular on thousands of planets,” Xanaria wasn’t jesting, but it was nonetheless good to horrify a bit the sensibilities of her Apprentice. Even if after a while, she had to concede the traditions of Keyfire made these events extremely long to prepare your introduction into.

And rare were those where you had the opportunity to engineer the murder of the noble organising it.

“Our transport has translated into the system five hours ago. I give you five hours of leave before we go to the spaceport and meet our overseer for the next mission.”

“Understood,” the younger Imperial Assassin bared her perfect white teeth. “Am I allowed to know where we are going this time?”

“Calth,” Xanaria said. “We are going to Calth, the ruined jewel of Ultramar.”

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Former Nostramo Sector**

**Nostramo System**

**Conquest-class Star Galleon *Arica Orpheus***

**8.600.302M35**

**Rogue Trader Magdalena Orpheus**

So far, apart from five attempted Ork ambushes near Tigrus, the journey had been devoid of notable incidents.

Past Triplex Phall, the greenskins’ presence had been null, and their entrance in the Nostramo Sector had met only silence and dead planets.

More than four thousand years after the Heresy, the scars of the genocides executed by the Traitor Legion of the Night Lords were still visible. There were Mining Worlds whose massive excavation sites had been bombarded with massive macro-cannons’ bombardments. Civilised Worlds had died as Exterminatus weaponry. But the unluckiest human settlements had been those where the Night Lords had landed. Thousands of years after their passage, the Astropaths and the Navigators had confided they could still hear the dying screams of the population butchered by the maniacs.

But until Nostramo, ghosts of dead people were the only source of concern. As her command hololith began to blare up with the familiar black dots signalling the presence of ships belonging to the Arch-Enemy, the female Rogue Trader knew the calm journey was well and truly over.

“Report,” the black-haired commander of the Arica Orpheus said calmly.

“It looks like there are two Idolators in orbit above Nostramo’s ruins,” her second affirmed.

“Auspex-identification process complete. Energy signatures consistent at ninety-eight point two percent with Idolator-class Raiders,” the senior Tech-Priest of the Nyx Mechanicus confirmed. “Status change. Additional Arch-Enemy vessel detected. Energy signature consistent at eighty-six percent with the profile of a Cerberus-class Planetary Assault Barque.”

Magdalena waited a few minutes for her bridge’s crew to investigate as best as they could and tell her the real strength of the opposition. But after more than ten minutes of effort, it became clear there were only three ships sworn to the Ruinous Powers near the devastated orb which had once been the homeworld of the Traitor Eighth.

“It is a bit...light, if they expect to fight us.”

Magdalena approved absently the words of her second.

“Idolators have a powerful lance on their prow, but the *Arica Orpheus*’ shields can handle this kind of punishment.”

And her Star Galleon wasn’t alone. True, the Macro-Transport *Pillar of Esperance* had only limited offensive weaponry, but its void shields and flak defences had been upgraded in the *Vulkan’s Arsenal* shipyards, but the *Eta-Alpha* was a Mechanicus Light Cruiser, fast and armed with a firepower superior to Imperial Navy ships of the same tonnage. And then there was the Strike Cruiser *Ruby*...

“Manoeuvres and energy profiles consistent with Arch-Enemy ships powering up their engines at maximal power while hurting the corrupted machine-spirits.”

By the God-Emperor! Did they really catch a small squadron of Traitor ships with their engines cold?

“There are modified heretic landers coming back to the Planetary Assault Barque. Probability high there were going to begin mining operations on several adamantium-rich asteroids while we arrived.”

“How unfortunate for them,” their presence in the Nostramo Sector was already paying its dividends...of sort. It wasn’t going to pay for her Star Galleon’s expenditures, but ruining the operations of the Arch-Enemy was always a very satisfying boost of prestige for your career. “Do our allies have historical data on them?”

“No, Lady Orpheus. Apart from the obvious. The ships harbour the heretical banner of the Arch-Heretic and their allegiance to the Ruinous Powers and the Despoiler.”

“The Black Legion,” Magdalena murmured. Now that was interesting...and worrying. The monsters were, last time she heard, still contained within the Eye of Terror. Had it changed recently, or had these three ships managed to avoid the vigilance of the forces protecting Cadia and the other Fortress Worlds around the Warp Storm?

The heretic warships were continuing their effort to power-up their engines and abandon the gravity well of fallen Nostramo. After several more minutes of data-analysis, it was evident there were no enemy minefields to cripple them, nor were there any other heretic’s squadrons to ambush them.

These Traitors had been as surprised as them to encounter the *Arica Orpheus*’ squadron at Nostramo. And judging by their course, they had like her recognised how unfavourable a potential battle would be for them.

“The Idolators are abandoning the Planetary Assault barque,” her second told her before grimacing. “They are going to get away. We haven’t the speed to catch up, even if we leave the *Pillar of Esperance* behind.”

And she wasn’t going to do that. A duo of Idolators could evade easily a Star Galleon, and go straight for the vulnerable merchant-built hull.

“Pass me Captain Avignor.”

It took three seconds for her communication officers to materialise the face of the Flesh Tearer commanding officer.

“Captain,” Magdalena saluted him.

“Lady Orpheus,” the Space Marine nodded back. “The Idolators are certainly going to escape if I don’t increase my acceleration within the next minute.”

“You think you can get the two Raiders before they reach the closest Mandeville Point?”

“Two may be a bit complicated,” the son of Sanguinius gave her a bloodthirsty grin. “But the heretic bastards are dedicated to prove how prompt they are to abandon their own allies when the enemy outnumbers them. I think I will definitely get one if I go for their throats. Can I count on you to deal with the Barque while we hunt the Idolators?”

“You can,” despite the impressive name, the Planetary Assault Barque was best summed-up as a heavy transport armed for limited orbital operations. Past battles with these hulls had revealed they had Heavy Bolters and one or two Orbital Assault Cannon. They were also extremely slow. The *Eta-Alpha* alone could dance around it and massacre it without difficulty; together, the *Arica Orpheus* and the *Eta-Alpha* weren’t going to have any problems ending its career of piracy and heresy. “Good hunt, Captain.”

The communication ended, and Arica turned to grin at her crew.

“Let’s go kill a few heretics, gentlemen.”

**Lieutenant Zeth’kur of the Black Legion**

Zeth’kur, formerly of the Iron Warriors Legion, now sworn to the cause of the Warmaster, had never believed in coincidences.

But seeing the four starships of the False Emperor accelerating to hunt his *Vengeance of Adamantium*, the Lieutenant was wondering if this wasn’t the bad luck he had derided so much in the last centuries.

Really, what was the probability of meeting an enemy squadron in a stellar system which, according to all evidence, had not been visited in the last couple of millennia?

The Chaos Marine perambulated on the bridge of his Planetary Assault Barque, trying to find a way to change the situation to his advantage. But so far, he wasn’t seeing one. His two Idolator Raiders, the *Disciple of Treason* and the *Fever Pact*, were busy running away without a care for his personal survival, not that he had really expected them to do anything else when danger threatened their miserable skins.

“The Light Cruiser will enter torpedo range in one hour, fourteen minutes, twenty seconds.” The thing which had been a standard servitor millennia ago informed him.

Zeth’kur knew he was wrong by three seconds, not that it was important.

It wasn’t important because alone or together, they were going to die in the Nostramo System. The three ships of the Black Legion had been caught with their engines cold too far from any Mandeville Point.

“What do we have to repel boarding parties of the slaves of the False Emperor?” He asked to the horror of mechadendrites which had taken over the duties of senior Tech-Priest three centuries ago.

“Two cohorts of my killer-servitors, as you well know,” the servant of the Dark Mechanicum answered. “Our fate is in the hands of the Gods now. Maybe a few sacrifices given to our bloodthirsty machines will provide boons to massacre the ignorant and the blasphemers?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Zeth’kur scoffed. “This galaxy only respects power, and at the moment we are weak and defenceless.”

Besides, Zeth’kur had seen what the ‘Gods’ had done to Perturabo after the Iron Cage, a gene-side who had already been a cruel and uncaring master. When you called for these...these entities, you’d better be prepared for the worse, and often it exceeded the limits of your imagination.

“We have to take a decision, Lieutenant. The enemy Strike Cruiser is about to enter optimal macro-battery’s range on the *Disciple of Treason*.”

“And what do you want me to do?” the former Iron Warrior snarled. “We were given no Dreadclaws for boarding operations! We didn’t need them since it was a simple adamantium acquisition mission like there are hundreds ordered by the Warmaster to rebuild larger forces for the next operations against the blind slaves of the False Emperor! And in the case we had Dreadclaws, there are including myself three Legionnaires aboard the Vengeance of Adamantium! We have no means to strike back against a Strike Cruisers of Blood Angels’ construction and the Marines aboard!”

Contrary to what some imbeciles thought, a *mining* operation couldn’t be repurposed as a *military* operation within a day, not in space at least.

“The Enemy Astartes Cruiser is engaging the *Disciple of Treason*,” the fight between the Raider and the Cruiser was brief and one-sided. It lasted exactly five minutes and fifty-seven seconds. And it ended with a huge explosion, killing everyone and everything aboard the *Disciple of Treason*.

“*Disciple of Treason* destroyed,” one of the most useless comments ever made, Zeth’kur was sure. “The *Fever Pact* experiences major problems.”

“That’s what they get for worshipping a deity of Decay and not taking seriously their maintenance duties.” What little of it was done on the *Vengeance of Adamantium* had always made them perfect enginseers compared to the plague cultists.

“I want orders which give us a fighting chance!” the ‘True Mechanicum Anointed Hell-Priest’ hissed threateningly.

Zeth’kur sighed before emptying his bolter into the creature, and crushing the twitching remains under his armoured feet.

“Anybody else wants to contest my orders?” the Black Legion lieutenant asked to the rest of his bridge’s crew. “No? Outstanding!”

He wanted to fight. He wanted to kill his enemies. He wanted to slaughter these fools who had dared to intrude in what promised to be a very, very promising mining operation. The Nostramo Sector was a ruin the False Emperor’s slaves had abandoned millennia ago! Why were they intruding at the worst moment possible?

The Black Legionnaire glared at the image of the Conquest-class Star Galleon. It was a magnificent ship, one which had been clearly been refurbished recently, and a splendid double-eagle was held atop the adamantium prow.

**This could have been you, you know, in command of this ship.**

“No. Not us. Never us. We were always passed over when it came to glory.”

**Lies. Lies your gene-father told you. You could have been great, but the Four-Who-Are-Three destroyed your Legion’s potential**.

“And what do you want?” Maybe he had gone utterly mad. He was no psyker, he shouldn’t hear voices-

**Anarchy, Zeth’kur of the Black Legion. I want Anarchy**.

“You will not have me, daemon.”

The only answer was daemonic laughter. And then the *Fever Pact* illuminated the Nostramo System by its dying throes.

**Conquest-class Star Galleon *Arica Orpheus***

**Rogue Trader Magdalena Orpheus**

“I wasn’t expecting an infamous command of the Black Legion to be defeated so easily,” Magdalena admitted. “Nor did I think experienced heretical sailors would forget to care about maintenance duties.”

Sliscus had been a nasty pirate, a tormentor, and a xenos who believed he was funny for a Drukhari, but she had never doubted the ‘Serpent’ made sure his fleet was at the top of its possible material capabilities.

The heretics met in the Nostramo System had definitely not been concerned with these high standards.

“We have to stay prudent about the implications of the technological abilities of the heretics,” one of her officers said. “I love watching the heretics burn as much as the last man, but we can’t forget that if we are hundreds of light-years away from the nearest Mechanicus base, their own supply lines are half a galaxy away. At least that’s the only explanation I have for Idolator Raiders being unable to leave a Strike Cruiser in the dust!”

Many chuckles resonated on the bridge. Yes, the *Ruby* being able to hunt the two Raiders without straining its engines had been one of the most pleasant surprises she’d ever had. Because the Flesh Tearer ship had been given a complete revision at Nyx, but the effects of the Tech-Priests’ work shouldn’t have been enough to cast a Frigate or anything supposed to play the role of Escort.

But the Flesh Tearers had, and combined with the destruction of the Planetary Assault Barque, this meant not a single heretic ship had escaped the one-sided ‘battle’.

“The question is how long do we have before the heretics who sent this force here realise something is wrong and send a few warships to investigate.”

“Data insufficient to make proper simulations,” a Tech-Priest laconically told her.

“It’s indeed a difficult guess,” her second winced. “I don’t think these were raiders of the Maelstrom, though. If they came from some Warp Storm near Ultima Segmentum, it’s likely they would have brought more hulls to play adamantium mining, not just an obsolete Planetary Assault Barque.”

This made sense. Of course it was also possible these heretics were out of favour with a bigger heretic, and had decided a ‘Nostramo gambit’ was exactly what they needed to avoid being terminated by their ‘boss’.

Bah, there was no way pursuing this line of thoughts, not until more heretics were sent this way. The hulk remnants of the heretic flotilla were going to be thrown into the nearest sun, because for some reason no one had volunteered to board these twisted lairs of monsters and traitors.

“We will have to inform Triplex Phall and Tigrus of this incident, obviously.” The Forge Worlds and the other bastions of the Eastern Fringe needed to be informed the Black Legion was still gathering resources no matter how far they were from the Eye of Terror. “Let’s go back to the matter of the Nostramo System.”

The images of the explosions of the brief engagement disappeared and were replaced by the tri-dimensional image of Nostramo...what was left of it anyway.

Magdalena had seen many planets bearing the scars of brutal warfare, but this was a new level altogether, beyond the rumoured power of most Exterminatus weapons. Rare were military bombardments which went so far as to reach a planet’s core, because for one you needed a disturbing quantity of power, and for two when you reached that level of annihilation, there was no hope of resettlement or saving anything.

But the Night Lords had done it. They had destroyed their home planet, and reduced it to twenty-plus gigantic barren ‘moons’. Tens of thousands lesser asteroids were filling the space around them.

It was a spectacle which gave melancholic feelings to the entire crew of the *Arica Orpheus*. How evil and twisted one had to be to turn the guns of his fleet against his own homeworld?

“Adamantium deposits easily accessible detected on ten of the Alpha-sized Nostramo debris.” The Magos commanding the *Eta-Alpha* wasn’t bursting with joy, cogboy or not, not even the Mechanicus was unaffected by the atmosphere of disaster dominating. But his enthusiasm was evident for all to hear. “I demand permission to begin preliminary mining survey on Alpha-Tertius-One.”

“Permission granted.” Magdalena nodded.

“I have a feeling the adamantium waiting to be mined is exceeding our cargo capacity,” her second smiled, “why were the ancient reports telling the adamantium extraction was nearly over?”

Magdalena smirked.

“Perhaps because no one of Nostramo thought it was such a great idea to crack their planet’s core?”

It was quite unfortunate for the inhabitants of Nostramo forced to endure a merciless and corrupted-to-the-bone society. And yes, she was going to make sure this adamantium was purified before it was sold.

But there were millions of tons of adamantium to take in this system, and Magdalena was not a woman to refuse a fortune when it dropped on her lap. Assuming she could return with a significant part of it to Nyx, debts and poverty would soon be left as unpleasant moments of the past.

**The Webway**

**The Shrieking Labyrinth**

**Maea Teallysis**

There were ancient locations in the Webway that no Asuryani remembered how to find. Much had been forgotten in the cycles leading to the First Fall, and during and after it, the survivors of the Aeldari race had been far more focused in escaping the hordes of She-Who-Thirsts and sealing every compromised Gate they could find than go exploring the original works of the Phoenix Crown.

It was entirely possible that the Queen of Blades was the last soul, aside from the Harlequins of course, who remembered the Shrieking Labyrinth as something more than a story of the old legends.

But then, the number of corpses found on the antechamber of the Labyrinth indicated leaving some the original secrets of the Webway to the servants of Cegorach was a wise choice.

“I have never seen a race like this one,” the Seer of Malan’tai said as she examined with attention several of the skeletons. It was rare for flesh to rot and perish in the Webway; time wasn’t always linear in these tunnels, and so dead flesh could remain intact for hundreds if not thousands of cycles.

These dead aliens must have been here a very long time.

Obviously, it was better they were dead. Their ‘head’ was a strange combination of octopus and monstrous land predator, and the rest of the skeleton looked like it had been purposely bred for killing.

“I suppose you are too young to remember them, yes. The name they imprinted upon the galaxy by their atrocities was ‘Rangdan’ for their race.”

Maea shivered.

“The soul-devourers.” Every child of Malan’tai had heard of the War in the Abyss. “Weren’t they supposed to be...bigger?”

“These are young ones,” the former Arena-Queen of Commorragh said whimsically, “certainly ones which escaped the massacre of their last worlds. They shouldn’t have come here, the Labyrinth remembers the flawed weapons of the Old Ones.”

The Queen of Blades began to climb up stairs of crystal which hadn’t been there before, and Maea hurried to follow her.

“Did you...err...”

“Was I responsible for their extinction?” the legendary sword-mistress seemed amused by the question. “No, I wasn’t. The era was a bit chaotic to hunt everything of value. The humans met them first. I understand it was a war to remember. The Rangdan race had broken the shackles our fleets had put on their throats, but the Anathema’s new Empire was a frightening thing when roused before the Primordial Annihilator plunged it in civil war.”

The stairs ended as abruptly as they had begun and a corridor of wraithbone and mirrors replaced it.

“A pity I was never able to fight him in duel.”

“Aren’t there...you know other Anathemas in this galaxy?”

“No,” the ancient Aeldari shook her head before amending her judgement, “at least, not to my knowledge. But I doubt one managed to complete his or her trials without me being aware.”

“Why?”

“Because Anathemas aren’t born, they are created by a series of...very unpleasant trials...yes, let’s call them that. And the most powerful the Primordial Annihilator is, the harder the trials will be. In this day and age, I think they would be nothing more than a death sentence for anyone who isn’t me.”

Maea stayed quiet for a few breaths, before finally deciding to utter the question.

“In this case-“

“Why didn’t I walk on that path?” For the first time, an unfamiliar emotion appeared on the ageless face. Maea could have sworn it was sadness. “No matter how high you think the price will be, I assure you the cost is far, far more...monstrous. And in the end, it doesn’t solve most of your problems. I think the human Anathema could approve my words, if he wasn’t tortured on his Golden Throne.”

The exchange ended there, for they arrived at the true entrance of the Shrieking Labyrinth. Once upon a time, it must have been a marvel known to every Aeldari. Thousands of great statues of legendary figures were sculpted to form an amphitheatre of noble figures. Wraithbone and gemstones had decorated everything, from pillars taller than those found on a Craftworld to seats bearing sigils of Houses now long extinct.

Of course, most of it was ruins now. Half of the statues were destroyed, the rest looked like they were one or two cycles away from joining them, and the shards on the floor formed a carpet of desolation and destroyed artwork.

Any other time, Maea wouldn’t have cared, but the Queen of Blades hadn’t left much clothes after slashing her armour in pieces, and shoes hadn’t been included in the few things she was allowed to wear.

“Ah, the good old Shrieking Labyrinth,” the red-haired Aeldari smirked.

“You are sure it’s still functional?”

A word of power was uttered, and suddenly the floor trembled and walls began to part and take a new shape, revealing platforms filled with...a lot of lethal traps and silent automata waiting one order to kill you.

In less time it took to describe it, the abandoned part of the Webway had become once again something able to justify its name.

“Should I not...need an armour...you know...just in case?” Maea swallowed heavily.

“Armour isn’t of much use here,” the Queen of Blades bared her teeth in a parody of smile. “Everything is set to kill in a single blow.”

“I see. And the reason why it is a good idea to train here?”

“Death isn’t permanent in the Shrieking Labyrinth.” Lelith Hesperax said nonchalantly like it was the most shocking thing. “At least it wasn’t from the War in Heaven to the Birth of Slaanesh. I haven’t trained here in a while, so I’m afraid I have no idea if it is true anymore.”

“That still sounds...insanely risky. If I die-“

“Maea.”

This was the first time the Malan’tai female heard the sword-mistress speak her name, and the effect was...destabilising.

“Since the younglings of your generation have a problem with the truth, I will be blunt. The Battle of Commorragh has destroyed the problems caused by Excess, but the other three abominations are still as powerful as ever. The Necrons and the Yngir are waking up. The human Anathema has decided that going all-out is preferable to a long decline in decay. The shadow of the Krorks is still raging, uncontrollable and raving mad. To face one of these challenges, the Asuryani are useless. You don’t have a tenth of the physical and psychical might we Asuryani took for granted during the War in Heaven...to give an obvious example, against Weaver, the only thing Biel-Tan and the elite of Commorragh could do was die.”

Aenaria Eldanesh stretched her body like a gigantic feline predator. Which in many ways, she was.

“Asuryani, Drukhari and all other sub-species which survived the Two Falls...you are desperately *weak*.”

 There was no apology for the merciless words.

“You are weak. This is not truly an insult I reserve to your Asuryani: my Drukhari Wyches are often equally as useless; what they have above Asuryani in physical skills, they have no psychic might, and too often, no wish to learn. You are weak, and even if I was able and willing to resurrect the souls who taught me an eternity ago, there is no time. The Shrieking Labyrinth offers a way to cheat on that front.”

“Time will slow down as long as we stay here?”

“No,” the red-haired Asuryani raised a finger. “The moment I pronounced the seal of command, time has stopped until we leave.”

Maea had no answer how to react to that; and unfortunately she wasn’t given the time. One heartbeat she was looking at the Arena-Queen, the other she was crashing hard on a platform several leagues away from her former position.

One more heartbeat, and the Wraith Guardians closed in for the kill.

Maea blasted them apart, forgetting all restraint, before drawing her sword and cutting down traps and enemies all the same.

She fought. She tore apart her undying opponents. Blue lightning was conjured from her fingers and smashed things which were nothing but blades and shuriken launchers.

But for all her determinations, her head and her heart were hurting, and fighting like this for too long was exhausting her-

Ten blades she didn’t even see impaled her, and the pain was terrible.

Her last thought was that if she hadn’t worn clothes that a courtesan of Commorragh would have found too revealing, she might have been-

And then she reappeared in front of the Queen of Blades. The mental pain was there, but the physical one was already fading away, and there was no sign she had been wounded in the first place.

“How was my performance?”

Lelith Hesperax sighed.

“Apparently, a level zero exists.”