**Ovation 9.1**

**Deus Ex Mechanicus**

*The majority of the Nyxians in age to live through the immediate post-Commorragh era was prompt to name the late years of the 290s and the beginning of the 300s the ‘Auramite Age’. Little did they know that their children and grandchildren would speak of giving the same name to different decades of the 35th millennium.*

*All things considered, I prefer the term ‘Auramite Age’ to ‘the Prelude to Operation Stalingrad’. I think Taylor prefers it that way too. For all the military successes won by the forces of the Nyx Sector on the battlefield and the enthusiasm they generated across the galaxy, I have never forgotten that every battle, every piece of archeotech, and every boon were too often conquered atop a mountain of corpses from courageous and loyal men and women.*

*The Battle of Commorragh brought immense benefits to the Nyx Sector. And the worst part was that it cost at the same time so much to Army Group Caribbean and yet so little to the Imperium. I knew it before the first ship departed through the Warp for Pavia, the hulls and the regiments mustered for the anti-pirate hunt were insignificant compared to certain Crusades and wide-scale operations launched on the Eastern Fringe. By the theory of the twelfth-dimensional equations, the military tithe sent to Tigrus was far, far more powerful than the Army Group, at least where its ground component was concerned. But so many of these men and women were known to us, we had seen them walk in the streets of Nyx, dance with certain Ladies, and salute the crowds before boarding their transport which would transport them across the stars. Knowing they had been cut down by the Eldar, for all the theoretical risks, was a pain which never truly healed, and would return back with a vengeance during Operation Stalingrad.*

*Sometimes, I just wish Taylor had not this damnable luck following her everywhere. It can’t be only the power of the Emperor gifted to her. The old Chinese curse ‘may you live in interesting times’ is so perfect to describe her it failed to be funny after Commorragh and many comments of Missy on the question.*

*Commorragh. Even decades after Captain-General Anubis Excelsor placed the flag of the Matapan 1st in front of the Eternity Gate, I don’t think that I’ve been able to reflect how much it changed things.*

*People will rightfully remember the dozens of Ovation ceremonies celebrated for the Basileia, the living, and the dead. Or they will marvel at the Gaius Mausoleum, Cyrene Versailles’ successful attempt at resurrecting the Taj Mahal and the Terracotta Army, and add their prayers to the ones uttered by billions of pilgrims.*

*In my draconic opinion, it was the opportunity to remember so many ancient technologies thought out of humanity’s reach which was the greatest triumph of the expeditionary force. The space elevator, to give one of the most visible templates, was still something the Mechanicus Tech-Priests when they were commissioned to, but in reality their creations were inferior and crude versions of the human engineers who had worked on this project millennia ago. This wasn’t by incompetence or by malice. The metallic men and women I am charged to oversee – even if sometimes the verb ‘babysit’ describes the problems better – just lacked the comprehension of certain scientific and industrial processes, because the ancients left no traces of it. Therefore before Commorragh, the ancient space elevators having survived the Age of Strife, the Great Crusade, and the Horus Heresy had better continue working to their usual performance, because the Adepts of Mars wouldn’t be able to repair them perfectly if they failed. Finding the STC template of this gateway to the stars broke many limits which had chained worlds bound to Terra and Mars. Numerous alloys could be mass-produced again. Malfunctioning elevators returned to peak performance. New titanic projects of engineer could be authorised every year. And the number of accidents fell massively month after month.*

*And yes, as Dennis sufficiently teased me, this victory gave me a promotion and the time to tinker on new Dragon Armours with a budget that anyone humble could only call fantastic. Salamanders, White Scars, and their Successors instantly gained my favours. They had recognised the greatness of the draconic machine, and I never forgot it. Some engines may have more acceleration, some jetbikes might evade enemy fire more swiftly, and some Knights have more firepower at their disposal, but a Dragon Armour concentrates dozens of qualities and gives out none of the weaknesses.*

*Of course, even during these times of Ovations and parties, there were more problems piling up.*

*At the top of them were the Noosphere bureaucratic data-reports, an insidious threat I was not able to appreciate the full magnitude until it was too late...*

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“*The problem, to be bluntly honest, is that we need more information than a list of names and some spatial coordinates. We have Necron Dynasties’ names like Atun, Mephrit, Thebekh, Maynarkh, Charnovokh, Sautekh, Hyrekh, Nihilakh, Sarnekh, Thokt and their equivalent of glyph-banners and general appearance. But this isn’t enough. The firepower a World Engine and its ground-based garrisons is capable of overwhelming in short order a Battlefleet and the greatest defences emplaced to protect critical worlds. Going after a Necron Tomb-World and failing to destroy it in less than a few days would be synonym of disaster, and not just for planet where the metallic xenos are lying dormant. If the Imperium leaves the attacked Dynasty the time, nothing save Him on Earth would be able to protect the local Sector from the sheer amount of destruction unleashed by the Necrons*.” Extract of a conversation between Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach and Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal, 296M35.

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“*When I said I wanted an unlimited budget for my pet projects Taylor, I did not expect you to take me so literally*.” Magos-Draco Dogma Dragon Richter to Basileia Taylor Hebert, late 296M35.

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“*There are some politicians who will affirm we were resting for a decade. Let them. In truth, the new campaign began to be prepared before the forces of Operation Caribbean dispersed across the galaxy*.” General Groener addressing several officers of the Nyx regiments, 310M35.

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“*Yes Missy, you’ve point has been made. Now stop bringing me these ‘I told you so’ sculptures. It’s not funny anymore*.” Basileia Taylor Hebert during one of her Council of Ministers, 297M35.

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Transmitted: Holy Terra

Received: Astropath-Ultima ‘Mirabilis’

Destination: Kar Duniash

Mission time: 1.243.296M35

Telepathic Duct: SA-TT-1012101012

Reference: [CLASSIFIED]

Author: Fabricator Locum Decimus Osmium-Five-1111

Priority: Vermillion

*Chosen of the Omnissiah*,

*The final votes and deliberations about the future Thirteenth Founding have ended, and the news are excellent, with each of the twelve new Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes will receive the war assets and the genetic facilities their Founding deserves. Unfortunately, given the rapport of strength in the Senatorum Imperialis, the Adeptus Mechanicus was unable to sway a majority of the High Twelve into authorising a new Successor Chapter of the Blood Angels. The presence of every chapter descended from the Ninth Legion into your Dawnbreaker Guard proved a political drawback and only patience will allow us to abate the illogical obstacles on this path.*

*Out of the twelve new Chapters, eleven are nothing for you to worry about, although the choice of privileging the Ultramarines’ gene-line again so fast after the Twelfth Founding is raising some queries in Mars’ forges and Jupiter’s shipyards. The Magma Spiders, the Fists of Roma, and your yet-unnamed Successor of the gene-seed recovered will be based on the Nyx Sector, charged to defend the southern frontier of Ultima Segmentum, and the Eastern Fringe if the situation in this direction worsens. The Death Spectres – Raven Guard gene-line - and the Ebon Knights – Dark Angels’ gene-line - have been chosen to defend the Imperium against the threat coming from the Extremis-level region known as the ‘Ghoul Stars’. The Solar Hawks is a Chapter of White Scars’ Successor which has accepted the noble duty of reinforcing the defences existing north-west of Medusa in Segmentum Obscurus.*

*The four Successors to the Lord of Macragge’s legacy are the Thunder Barons, the Cerulean Guard, the Praetor Watch, and the Blue Panthers. For the present time, these Chapters have been assigned to reinforcing several war zones in Segmentum Pacificus, where the collapse of Nova-Terra demands a firm cog to restore productivity and loyalty.*

*The only Successor Chapter of the Iron Hands, the Angels of Iron, will be deployed in western Segmentum Tempestus to secure former space lanes which until recently were made unusable by Eldar pirates.*

*As for the twelfth chapter, we ignore everything about it save its name: the Exorcists. The Holy Inquisition blocked every investigation and query to learn the gene-line used to forge the new Astartes, their homeworld’s location and every other information regularly communicated to our Forge World in order to give the best adapted weapons to a Space Marine Chapter. All assistance to help us understanding this mystery – the Inquisitorial Representative went so far as to declare the servitors sent to deliver the supplies would suffer complete erasure of data-banks – will be welcomed.*

*To return to the status of your Space Marine Chapters, as you so logically pointed out, it is mechanically advantageous the Magma Spiders are given the priority in warships and infrastructure building. Logically, the Fists of Roma and the other Chapter will need several years to be built to operational strength before needing starships and the most expensive assets anyway.*

*Glory to the Omnissiah and may the Quest for Knowledge be once more in your favour.*

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“*No, the planetary government of Nyx isn’t using the hololithic game ‘Call of Duty’ to boost massively the recruitment rates of the Imperial Guard and the Planetary Defence Forces. No, we aren’t using more propaganda than the rules given in File BB-5. And no, the rumours of our next game being a potential source of recruits for the Inquisition and the Assassinorum are just that, rumours*.” Extract from a conversation between an angry noble and Lady Missy Byron, 296M35.

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**Ultima Segmentum**

**Acacia Sub-Sector**

**Pavia System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**1.250.296M35 (Approximately three hundred and thirty hours after the Mark of Commorragh)**

Thought for the day: The industrious may escape death.

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

“I had not truly understood how many archeotech weapons and relics the Adeptus Mechanicus had managed to recover from Commorragh,” Master of Siege Saul Agamemnon said as he re-read the data on his data-slate, his tanned near-black skin and his dark green eyes accenting his serious expression.

“When the Skitarii squads and their Tech-Priests realised how many ancient weapons and precious metals and resources they could retake from the Commorragh’s vaults, their raiding knew no end,” Taylor replied without raising her eyes from the documents she was busy affixing her seal to. “The biggest surprise in this affair was that the Tech-Priests of Gryphonne IV were the worst, not that the Adepts of Mars pillaged so many vaults.”

The worst offenders had been punished severely after the battle. Like she had repeated endlessly before the bloodshed started at Pavia, the black-haired General could accept the Mechanicus attempted to save precious archeotech, but not at the cost of weakening the defensive lines or withdrawing military support when more important goals were achievable.

“Tech-Priests will always stay Tech-Priests,” Epistolary Forman of the Emperor’s Swords agreed immediately. “At least they are happy with you for the abundance of archeotech, my Lady.”

“Yes, and they continue to debate endlessly on the divide of the spoils.”

And like for the arguments said before, there wasn’t much surprise about that. The Guard’s saying about two Tech-Priests quarrelling for a rusted cog was maybe a bit exaggerated, but it had been created from serious incidents. And there was more than a rusted bolt. Thanks to her excellent memory – which she had a feeling was becoming better and better as Commorragh was over and the golden wings shone on her back – the newly promoted Lady General had the complete list, and it was impressive. By category of weapons, the Mechanicus had salvaged from the Dark City’s utter destruction over ninety thousand projectile samples, fourteen thousand-plus missile and ordnance archeotech, one hundred and sixty thousand lasguns and variants, twenty-six thousand plasma guns, forty-five thousand flamers and the list went on and on.

And these were the firm numbers confirmed that the Mechanicus negotiated and bargained with Astartes supervising them. Despite her best efforts, the commander of Army Group Caribbean was sadly certain some ‘interesting pieces’ had disappeared in the secret vaults of the red robes the moment there wasn’t one of her insects to keep them honest.

At least Lankovar and the other subordinates acting in Nyx’s name had been able to secure sixteen Volkite relics and many plasma and exotic technology. Dragon and the rest of the Mechanicus Council were going to have fun studying and experimenting for the next decade with all the data and archeotech she was bringing back. As long the debates didn’t spiral into violence and the most dangerous toys had been relinquished to Inquisitorial and Custodes’ representatives, this would be good enough for her.

If only this didn’t generate so many data-slates and other bureaucratic nonsense, this would truly be a perfect world.

“My Lady, forgive me, but Ancient Pierre and Lieutenant-General Paul Dundee await your pleasure in the waiting room,” Sergeant Wilbert Loris of the Iron Drakes informed her returning from his patrol.

A look at the ruby-gold clock of her working office in the Enterprise, and Taylor groaned realising that one more time and despite her best shot at it, the boring and unattractive part of her Guard duties wasn’t going to be finished in time.

“Escort them in.”

Thankfully for one of her visitors, the *Enterprise*’s inner plans had been built large, and as such the large war machine in the colour of the Heracles Wardens could come here without smashing everything in its way, as long as the Astartes surviving in the Dreadnought’s sarcophagus was careful. The Space Marines present and herself obviously heard him coming long before he came into view.

Pierre had obviously not much changed; save the change of emblem to reflect his current service in the Dawnbreaker Guard, a Dreadnought was a Dreadnought. The appearance of the Indigan officer was more altered: the 7th Division had ‘convinced’ several Drukhari to relinquish in their custody several old human armours, and the Australian-looking man wore one, a rather spectacular work of emerald and sapphire decorated by the dozens of medals the newly promoted Lieutenant-General had won.

The customary greetings and offer for refreshments were quickly expedited, the non-Dreadnought was given a chair, and Taylor could give the reason she had summoned the light brown-haired officer here.

“Your performance in the Port of Lost Souls and the other battlefields of Commorragh was excellent, General, and I have read your recommendations on the anti-xenos training warfare you proposed with the greatest attention.” This was not hyperbolic congratulations or useless flattery; Paul Dundee was really one of the officers having made the smallest amount of mistakes during Operation Caribbean, and while the 7th Division’s losses had been severe, they had been caught twice in full demonic onslaughts and dozens of times on open ground by Eldar ambushes, managing to fight their way through and inflict crippling casualties on their enemies every time. “I can assure you many will be adopted. Unfortunately, while I would love to give you the duties of a senior training officer for the Nyx replacements awaiting instruction, I have need of you elsewhere.”

“I understand, Lady General.” And the calm and slightly amused voice was an excellent indicator the former Major-General had seen it coming. “Indiga?”

Was she really that predictable? Taylor banished the thought from her head a few seconds after it burst in. In the end, this was cutting the time on the explanations and she wasn’t going to complain.

“Yes, Indiga.” The ruler of the Nyx Sector confirmed. “As the latest cataclysm proved, my swarm while powerful can be reinforced by new breeds from all over the galaxy. And since one of my best officers was born on this world, I thought I might as well use his contacts to provide me more weapons in my arsenal.”

“I appreciate the confidence you’ve invested in me,” and behind the smirk, Taylor could feel the Indigan officer was really honoured by the recognition she had given where his military skills and talents were involved. “And I’m willing to return to my homeworld. However, I will need several accreditation letters for the current Governor.”

A grimace appeared on Paul’s face, just as her Fay butler was placing in front of him a glass of his favourite amasec.

“While you are certainly the first person I know to have the power of controlling a large swarm of insects, General, there have been many attempts by intrepid Rogue Traders to capture and transport to other worlds the famous super-predators of Indigan. Most of the time, these attempts ended in tragedy, and after a few more disastrous incidents, new laws were passed to forbid the capture and exportation of the breeds which make our homeworld famous. Now if a hunting-addict Governor or another big name wants to kill a hyperraptor or a pyre-porcupine, he must come to Indiga and hunt himself or herself.”

“I’m sure hunting tourism must be booming,” Taylor could not help but give her interlocutor a thin smile.

“Before I left on the Guard transports, I understand it had become a very profitable part of our planetary economy,” Dundee smirked. “Of course, the experts we provide always insist our tourists pay first before going hunting.”

Six years ago, Taylor would have been left with her mouth wide opened and likely been aghast for several minutes that there were people ready to travel thousands of light-years to satisfy their hunting hobby. Now, it wasn’t something that deserved more than the raise of an eyebrow.

Besides, the ‘tourists’ were certainly nobles for more than ninety-nine percent of them, so if a few were devoured, this would hardly result in an efficiency loss for the Imperium.

“You will have the letters and the authorisations signed at the highest level,” the Baroness of Pavia promised. “A couple of Astropaths will be sent with you, just in case the Governor or certain politicians decide to be difficult.”

“This should be more than sufficient,” Paul Dundee nodded. “Now I must clarify a point. Do you want me to hunt and capture psychic insects, or should I exclude them from the list of targets?”

This Taylor hadn’t expected, though in hindsight, given how many failures the Menelaus Dynasty had buried deep in the hope no one would find about them, knowing it had happened on another planet was a sad confirmation there wasn’t exactly a limit to human idiocy.

“The Governor at the origin of this mess imported psychic breeds?” the Basileia asked just to be sure she hadn’t a hearing problem.

“Lady Constantine Principa Argoy, may her soul rot in the darkest pits of Commorragh, wanted the greatest and most complete zoo of the Imperium,” behind the veneer of amusement, it didn’t take a genius to know the Lieutenant-General was not amused by the ambition of Argoy. “So yes, it involved psychic species. And while the Praefects of the time launched a gigantic hunting campaign after the Judgement’s earthquake, they have proven impossible to eradicate.”

Taylor paused a few seconds to consider her options. Until now, her only psychic insects were Lisa the Giant Moth and the Catachan Ants. Both served critical needs. The former allowed her to use what could be described as psychic purification with the Emperor’s Light and the transmutation of Noctilith into Aethergold. The latter were relays for her swarm, extending her already huge range to greater distances, and providing the priceless Bacta.

These two breeds were her greatest assets. But it had been dangerous to make the Queen-ant submit to her will, and a lot of preparations needed to be made every time they were to be transported or studied.

A large part of her mind wanted to say it was too dangerous, that even with the greatest safety measures imagined or recovered by the Mechanicus, there was no need to increase the lethality of her swarm and the assets she could wield on the battlefield.

The other part of her brain told her she was stupid and that her enemies after Commorragh would be out for her blood for long, with a good idea of what she could deploy into a war zone. Nocturne’s insects, while individually powerful, would not overturn a Commorragh-level disaster. But the psychic breeds of Indiga, coordinated with her power, just might provide an insurmountable advantage and destroy heretics and demons before they had the opportunity to inflict tens of thousands casualties to the Guard and ravage her swarm again.

“The psychic insects and arthropods are included on your list of hunt-and-capture list, provided of course you can transport them safely according to the regulations the Tech-Priests have for you.”

The eyes of the Indigan man narrowed thoughtfully at ‘arthropod’. Interesting, it wasn’t exactly a secret in Hive Athena that breeds of crabs and other species of crustaceans answered to her will, but the rumours hadn’t had the time to spread to the ears of the Munitorum-selected officers.

“Pierre you will go with him.” The Lady General spoke to the Dreadnought for the first time of the meeting.

“WITH PLEASURE, LADY WEAVER!

“As a member of the Dawnbreaker Guard, you will be an additional insurance the mission of the good Lieutenant-General is taken seriously. But your main mission will be to assess the danger and the aptitudes of the insects and arthropods of the wildlife of Indiga. Kill as many of the species as you want to have an opinion upon them, I give you a veto vote to exert if a species or several are unsuitable for my swarm.”

“I WILL NOT DISAPPOINTING YOU. THE INDIGAN INSECTS WILL BE THOROUGHLY TESTED.”

Nodding and cringing a bit at the sheer massacre of fauna which was able to occur, Taylor stopped watching the Dreadnought, wishing that he could stop wearing one of the numerous pirate hats ‘requisitioned’ at Pavia and Commorragh. Alas, even Isley had not discovered where the pieces of cloths were hidden when they weren’t worn.

“Pick between two hundred and four hundred veterans who have been declared untainted by the Inquisition after meeting Lisa,” the insect-mistress commanded her Guard subordinate. “The five thousand Tech-Priests and the Grand Cruiser of Stygies VIII which will be your transport to Indiga before your return to Nyx have already been pledged by the Mechanicus.”

“Plenty of firepower for the hunting operations I have in mind,” the Indigan officer assured her. “Will that be all, Lady General?”

“Not quite,” Taylor hesitated, before deciding the move was not illegal and preparing for the future, much like the gathering of new insects. “When you meet the highest planetary authorities of your world, please raise the possibility with them of providing a new Army Group for a future campaign.”

“I can certainly transmit the message,” the Lieutenant-General told her. “I don’t know if the reaction will be positive or negative, I have been away for too long, and I was hardly living in that kind of circles to begin with.”

This was more or less what was expected given how long guardsmen fought away from the planet they had been born unto. Taylor would just have to hope the Administratum and the Munitorum had not had a heavy hand around Indiga. At least for the Dundee-Pierre’s mission, the Lady General would have an answer rather quickly: Indiga’s Sector was in a straight line between Pavia and Nyx, so in less than a year, provided the Warp wasn’t too turbulent, there would be answers one way or another.

“CAN I USE MY FUNDS TO BUY AUTHENTIC INDIGAN HATS?”

Taylor did not facepalm, groan or express her contrariety, but God it was hard.

“Don’t push your luck, Pierre, if you don’t want to return to a stasis vault.” Though at least it would be a way to avoid a fateful meeting one of her Astropaths had warned her about a few hours ago.

And this meeting, the first of a long series, ended there. General Groener would be next, presenting his conclusions about the logistics of Operation Caribbean in his personal of Quartermaster-General of her brand-new staff. Then there would be Commissar Zuhev, with he and she had having to decide who would be the first Director or the new Nyxian Schola Progenium, the process of recruiting and training many new Commissars, and the coordination with the incoming Catachan ‘trainers’. And there were all the others.

Suddenly having a good memory of the endless list of things awaiting to pounce on her was more discouraging than anything...and more data-slates and other forms of paperwork continued to arrive.

“Bureaucracy sucks all the fun of power and privileges,” the Basileia of Nyx said gravely to her Dawnbreaker Guards. By a strange coincidence, none of them disagreed, though a few of the transhumans had the gall to chuckle.

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach**

The Saint was watching the stars projected on the walls of the bridge when they entered. But then again, when a small army of insects answered the data-slates in your stead, conversed with several Tech-Priests and gave new orders to the various guardsmen several metres away, Wolfgang figured one could enjoy the view of the Pavia Systems and the other stellar phenomena.

Evidently, their walk in the chamber that was the heart of the Enterprise was anticipated long before the first foot touched ground inside, and the Lady General turned to watch them approach long before they had passed the last wall of Space Marines guarding her. Or was it the contrary? While it was true there were many instances during the Battle of Commorragh where Lady Weaver had survived thanks to the intervention of Space Marines – one of the two deaths suffered by the Dawnbreaker Guard was a direct consequence of it – the Basileia of Nyx had also saved many, many times the lives of her bodyguards.

Maybe it was a symbiotic relationship, like the one the Imperial Army and the Legions had been supposed to entertain before the Great Treason. If so, Wolfgang knew it was going to make a lot of politicians very unhappy.

“Ah, Wolfgang. Perfectly on time. How is the Grand Cruiser *Golden Sword*?” Today the Baroness of Pavia was in a red armour, which for all the splendour and the magnificence did not look inferior to the one she had fought the Battle of Commorragh with.

“It is a promising exploratory ship, my Lady.” The new Rogue Trader thanked his benefactor deep inside once more. For all her astronomical gains, Lady Weaver had abandoned her claims on a lot of money when she sold the Grand Cruiser to him. “There are of course plenty of issues to tackle, but they will be solved in time. I have however decided to rename it *Pavian Victory*. Hopefully, the name will inspire a new crew to erase the shame of having served a treacherous Rogue Trader for several decades.”

This wasn’t the first ship of the Rogue Traders which found itself renamed. The Orion-class Star Clipper *Law of Profit* was now the *Law of Nyx*, and the Ambition-class Cruiser *Manifest Destiny* would begin a new and more respectable career as the *Ovation Destiny*.

Together these three warships formed a very powerful squadron, and once the other Ambition-class built by the shipyards of Mars arrived, Wolfgang knew he would have an armada surpassing in size many local Navy flotillas. This was all thanks to the patronage of the Basileia, of course. Without her help, Wolfgang would not have been taken seriously had he tried to make a move for the command of a Star Clipper, ever mind a Cruiser. By the hierarchy of the Imperial Navy, the ex-First Secretary was after all an Ensign in half-pay, and one who had not found a warship to complete his Academy graduation.

“Yes, hopefully,” the Lady General’s eyes looked at the two Navy officers accompanying him. “Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal. Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto. You have kicked a hornet’s nest of politics when you pushed to be transferred to Battlefleet Nyx.”

“And I regret nothing, your Celestial Highness,” the young Admiral – Reuenthal was merely forty-five, and looked as young as himself – bowed so low it was impressive he didn’t lose his equilibrium.

“No, I don’t suppose you don’t. Rear-Admiral?”

The Basileia had told him in confidence that for a woman having a M32 ‘Japanese’ name, Fujiko Yamamoto didn’t have the traits associated with ‘Japanese’ people. Wolfgang could certainly agree with that. Middle-aged, red hair, blue-eyed, thin but with an extremely developed pair of breasts, the Rear-Admiral was a striking woman in looks, but had nothing in common with the looks of Wuhanese and other women sharing this type across the Nyx Sector.

“Your Celestial Highness is certainly aware that my future at Kar Duniash and other Segmentum fortresses is heavily compromised,” Fujiko Yamamoto spoke with assurance, but there was a weakness in her voice. “I am the highest officer to have survived of what was Augustus von Kisher’s command. No blame has fallen on my shoulders, but unless I and the other officers found quickly a Battlefleet to welcome us, my career is over.”

“And you think Battlefleet Nyx is your anchor of survival in the rising political storm.” The Rear-Admiral nodded silently. “Your performance in the cataclysmic final battle of the Port of Lost Souls was above the acceptable His Holy Majesty demands of his officers, according to all the naval experts I have spoken with. And I won’t deny you were dealt a bad hand when being placed under Kisher’s command. These ‘Fast Battleships’ were a disaster-in-waiting.”

The young Rogue Trader could only grimace internally. While the long investigation launched immediately by the Mechanicus was far from over – it was likely going to take years, really – Archmagos Sagami and Cawl had each on their own published long and coherent analyses that at least three major plasma conduits had been emplaced near compartments where they definitely shouldn’t have been. Devoid of capital-grade armour and too close from certain ammunition stores, the *Invincible* and its consorts were one reaction in chain away from death.

In the end, it wasn’t a surprise so many Fast Battleships were lost. The surprise was more there was one which managed to stay intact in the fires of war.

“There is one point however that I think that is particularly interesting and that you haven’t mentioned so far,” Wolfgang raised an eyebrow. If it was the case, he had missed it too. “You were born from one of the Houses of the Samarkand Sector regularly sending its heirs and heiresses to Kar Duniash.”

“It has been a long time I haven’t returned home,” Fujiko Yamamoto confessed. “I am seventy-two now, your Celestial Highness. If these are contacts among the Zaibatsu you require, I am not the woman you need.”

“Your honesty goes to your credit, Rear-Admiral,” Wolfgang noticed easily Lady Weaver didn’t look a single second disappointed. “But you misunderstand my intentions. The Samarkand Sector ignored me for years, as most of its Houses were feuding with each other, and they limited themselves to sending me envoys with no power to their stations when I wanted to discuss industrial expansion with them, and by their fault there was a Munitorum tithe levied at the worst moment possible. I want to send a message to Samarkand their days of being the privileged interlocutor of Kar Duniash are truly over. What I want to know is if you’re willing to help me do it.”

“Yes, your Celestial Highness,” the Yamamoto Zaibatsu mustn’t have sponsored the career of their female Admiral very hard, Wolfgang mused. Not with her being a Rear-Admiral at the age of seventy when she had the talent to command a Battlefleet, and not with the devoted expression she gave to the black-haired Lady General. “The *Champion of Kar Duniash*, the *Domination’s Pride*, and the *Lion* will join Battlefleet Nyx and will carry out the duties you want them to accomplish.”

“In this case prepare these three warships for a Warp travel to the Nyx Sector.” The smile disappeared when the insect-mistress spoke to the other Navy officer on the bridge. “Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal. You are talented, that much is undeniable. Your naval tactics have proved their worth at Commorragh and during many naval battles you fought before this year. When I asked Bakka to give me a list of their most brilliant commanders, you were at the top.”

Golden energy danced around red armours, but the expression of Lady Nyx didn’t soften.

“What I seriously fail to understand, is how an experienced Battlefleet commander like you can behave like an evil grox around women.” Ah. Yes, in hindsight, Wolfgang should have known it had already arrived to her ears.

“With due respect...”

“Yes, Admiral, I know what you are going to say. Guard and Navy aren’t in the same chain of command, and even if they were, what you do in your personal life isn’t any concern of mine.”

At this moment, the golden pressure increased, and all the transhumans, Skitarii and humans on the bridge could verify that yes, in front of them truly stood the Saint of the God-Emperor who on his command, had charged into Commorragh and delivered death to billions of long-ears.

“All of this is true. But I want to trust the commanders I place in important positions completely and without reservation. For all my powers, I cannot afford looking behind me every minute. And right now, Admiral von Reuenthal, the fact you use your sexual partners like one use handkerchiefs does not exactly encourage me to trust you unconditionally. So let me clear, Admiral. I will accept you in Battlefleet Nyx, but I want improvements in your lifestyle and no more complaints and rumours coming to my ears. Because I can swear to you, once deeds have reached a certain threshold, I give no second chance and the officers who fail to uphold the standards of His Most Holy Majesty’s Navy will have all eternity to explain themselves to him. Am I clear?”

Oskar von Reuenthal must have nerves of steel, because there wasn’t even a flicker of fear and shaking in his limbs when he answered.

“Yes, your Celestial Highness. You have made yourself totally clear on the subject.”

“Excellent,” sometimes, Wolfgang wondered why the Emperor hadn’t given powers to control felines or carnivorous fishes to His Living Saint. In hindsight, the answer was all too evident. The insect-mistress was already too versatile and powerful with her swarm. “Now your report on the capital warships which are going to be transferred to Nyx.”

The golden power diminished, and everyone could breathe more easily.

“My Victory-class flagship, the *Son of Victory*, is ready to depart the moment to give the order. The Emperor-class *Aquila Eternal* is also Warp-capable again, as the Ryza enginseers have beaten their records to repair the battle-damage. The Retribution-class *Crusade of Defiance* is not ready, and I fear there’s no way its engines will be declared fit for duty in less than three standard weeks. As for the Cruisers...”

**Pavia**

**Shadow Warden Kalyan Gowtham**

Kalyan had stayed in the shadows while the woman he had sworn to protect worked on the immense pillar of white marble.

It was not a sight, the Legionnaire recognised, you saw every day unless you lived next to someone having the capacity of controlling insects. Thousands of termites and ants were working like a small army of builders, carving stone with a precision the average sculptor of the Great Crusade would have died to possess. Even the coterie of artists the Emperor’s Children were keeping close to them would have found no work with this work.

The son of Corax amended his thoughts a moment later. No, while this wasn’t completely wrong, it wasn’t totally accurate either. Sculptures and other artistic creations of the Third Legion had always been flamboyant for lack of any other adjective, and this decades before treachery replaced trust and brotherhood.

The first stone – metaphorically and literally – Taylor Hebert had emplaced her was simple and modest. The Aquila at the top looked like it was about to fly, but it had not been painted in gold. The marble stayed as it was, and he had heard the insect-mistress order the architects regularly presenting their plans for the Fountain of Light be commanded to not modify in any way the inscription and the double-headed bird.

Kalyan hadn’t known personally any Custodes, but he thought the words now carved forever in the white stone would please them. At the light of the Aethergold Crystal, the Sunworms and the lone Catachan Queen-ant, the Lady General had brought with her, the letters would stand in High and Low Gothic.

**HE PROTECTS**

**BECAUSE SACRIFICE FOR MANKIND IS HONOUR**

**HE EXPECTS**

**BECAUSE HUMANITY MUST BE FREE**

**HE FIGHTS**

**BECAUSE LOYALTY IS ITS OWN REWARD**

**HERE RESTS THE INDOMITABLE SPIRIT OF CONSTANTIN VALDOR**

**CAPTAIN-GENERAL OF THE ADEPTUS CUSTODES**

**STRANGER, IF YOU TURN TO YOUR HEART TOWARDS TERRA**

**YOU KNOW HE WAITS BY HIS SIDE**

Kalyan felt the inspiration from many Primarch’s speeches made during the Great Crusade. But then it wasn’t going to raise eyebrows, since Lady Weaver had access to several libraries of the Blood, which for all their holes, were more accurate than the ‘history’ the Imperium tried to force the people of the Imperium to swallow.

But with this inscription, hope remained. The ideals they had fought for were not totally forgotten. Oppression, in all its forms, could be broken. The legacy of Deliverance could be reawakened from the shadows. And maybe, just maybe, the new lights which began to burn after Commorragh’s destruction could lead Corax himself to return one day.

Their father had survived Isstvan V and the Drop Site Massacre. The Raven Guard had survived the Heresy, for all the terrible sacrifices and daunting barricades trying to drown them into a sea of damnation and betrayal. And Dorn and the Khan still lives. If two Primarchs could withstand everything the Webway threw at them, their own gene-sire could survive legions of the Arch-Enemy and return.

The Nineteenth Legion had perished, but the fight would continue. It would, as long as a single Raven Guard Astartes remained alive.

With the arrival of dawn, the sculpture effort ended and the insects left the site. Kalyan Gowtham and the other battle-brothers of the Dawnbreaker Guard left the heart of the newly-created city of Constantinople into several columns, and they were sorely needed, for several tens of thousands of pilgrims and Imperial citizens had come to see the Baroness of this Shrine World a last time before she left the planet and the system.

Somehow, before they boarded the Thunderhawk, the Shadow Warden instinctively knew they would not come back to Pavia before a very long time.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**3.270.296M35**

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

“Cathar-4-Fredrick was seen praying twelve times the Omnissiah after he learned how the Basileia attacked the Eldar with underground assaults.” The Master of Destruction was rarely sarcastic, but today the irony in his words could not be mistaken for anything else. “Expect a large project of underground railway using the Ambulls of Lady Weaver to arrive by the Noosphere before the week is over.”

“As far as projects go, this one sounds actually rather logical,” Dragon pointed out as they walked in the section of the Fafnir Forge-Temple where the Archmagos of Estaban VII was conducting his experiments. “For all our discussions about spaceport, orbital elevators and other great infrastructure projects, ground transport on Nyx III’s surface needs a growing number of railways, train engines, and wagons.”

It was why when the time had come to make the ‘purchase list’ to Ryza, Estaban, Mars, Lucius, and many other Forge Worlds known to produce the best train engines and superior railway systems, her orders had not been what any reasonable person would have described as *small*.

“I agree, but Ambulls can’t be servo-controlled without some going rogue and spreading across the planet,” the Master of Destruction nodded sadly, indicating this wasn’t exactly a new idea for the Adeptus Mechanicus. “Lady Weaver will have to stay in control of the Ambulls for the majority of the time, and for underground railways of the size Cathar-4-Fredrick wants, my humblest estimations are of hundreds of kilometres of railways, and we will have to dig deep, otherwise potential orbital bombardments always cause catastrophic damage to the railway network in the first minutes.

“I suppose the final decision will stay with Lady Weaver in the end, then.” The newly promoted Lady Dogma, one rank short of Prime Hermeticon, answered. “One way or another, we will have to expand the railway system, and significantly. The current transport capacity is already filled at ninety-five percent, and with the reforms and the expansion which are sure to follow, this capacity needs to be increased several times, not decreased.”

“Indeed.” Stefan Delta-Septimus canted a long and complex binaric code, and gates large enough to let pass small Titans opened in front of them, revealing several lines of tanks waiting like they were due to be inspected. Which was not far from the truth, now that Dragon thought about it.

“You haven’t been idle.” Dragon commented. The last reports had mentioned one or two pattern-variants developed from the original chassis of the Khan Battle Tank, yet the first line of armoured vehicles was including eight different Khan tanks, and there were the super-heavies Cataphract waiting behind.

“By the Omnissiah, how could I be when servants of Him fought and won so many praises in His name?” asked rhetorically the Tech-Priests of Estaban VII. “But ultimately, the challenges of engineering proved fewer in number and in magnitude than my first reports indicated. Behold the Khan Commorragh, Khan Annihilator, Khan Conqueror, Khan Eradicator, Khan Executioner, Khan Exterminator, Khan Punisher, and Khan Vanquisher.”

Dragon nodded respectfully for the industrial achievement. She had been willing to begin the project herself, but other preoccupations and priorities had taken precedence over it, and after all Stefan Delta-Septimus was the Master of Destruction, and war machines were both his prerogatives and specialty.

Obviously, it didn’t take a Magos or even a Tech-Priest to realise that the Council member had modified Nyx-pattern Jaghatai Khan Battle Tank’s hulls to accept the armaments which equipped the different ‘classes’ of the Leman Russ.

And the Khan Commorragh was obviously the ‘normal’ Khan Battle Tank, though after interrogating the cogitators at distance, Dragon smiled because all her recommendations, especially the ones which had been deadlocked in the last years, had been added and fully integrated into the new schematics and databases.

“This is very impressive work. I suppose all of these tanks are able to achieve the same speed and mobility performances as the Khans which fought the Battle of Commorragh?”

“Of course,” assured her the Master of Destruction. “In fact, I have managed to obtain superior performances in this area with the Khan Conqueror and the Khan Annihilator. And my subordinates are ready to deliver you and the rest of the Council a sufficient number of models for further testing. The problems now, as I’m sure you are aware, are of industrial and efficiency nature.”

This was definitely true. As much as having plenty of Khan tanks was satisfying for her ego, neither Taylor nor the other Guard officers would look at them with smiles and satisfaction if the armoured regiments had small packets of every variants with no true specialty.

“The lines where we produce the ‘normal’ Khans can be rapidly retooled to produce the Commorragh variant.” A rapid calculus and simulation in the Noosphere databases of tank manufactorums confirmed her words. “But even with several obsolete Leman Russ lines closing to be modernised and placed in the orbital forges, I can’t in good conscience launch the production of eight new models.”

“The Khan Exterminator and the Khan Punisher are intended to serve the same purpose, that of infantry hunter vehicle,” Stefan Delta-Septimus noted, pointing his mechadendrites at the tanks respectively armed with a twin-linked Autocannon and a Punisher Gatling Cannon.

Dragon couldn’t help but wince at the ammunition figures these machines would have consumed at Commorragh, but really, a specialised tank to scythe down hordes of Orks and fast enough to evade the greenskins’ ramshackle machines was necessary.

“I’m in favour of the Exterminator. It can be used in a limited anti-air role if the circumstances demand it, and it is far longer-ranged than the Punisher.”

“And the crews of the latter tend to manifest a behaviour their commanders refer as ‘trigger-happy’.” The Archmagos Reductor confirmed. “The Exterminator it is.”

“What are the costs of production for each Khan model?” Dragon asked. The numbers which lit in the Noosphere almost made her curse. “Are the numbers correct for the Executioner and the Vanquisher?”

“I’m afraid so,” Stefan Delta-Septimus said apologetically. “Ryza and Tigrus’ help comes with a price. We haven’t yet the expertise among our average Tech-Priests to mass produce Plasma Destroyers, the Vanquisher Cannons are directly imported from the Eastern Fringe. Logically, the situation may change in the next months.”

“As long as it doesn’t, keep the Khan Executioner and the Khan Vanquisher in storage.” Dragon shook her head. Not only these two variants required a very different production line, especially the Executioner and its energy armament, but they needed different alloys and armour inclination. Unlike the Exterminator, the enginseers on the battlefield would have to keep very different spare parts to repair the problems of this Battle Tank. “I’m not very happy about the performance of the Conqueror, though.”

“Its accuracy and speed are superior to the Khan Commorragh.”

“But it requires the tank crew to engage are far closer range, and even then the explosive shells are less destructive than what the vehicles sent to Commorragh were able to do. Moreover, the accuracy of the standard Jaghatai Khan is far superior to the Leman Russ at middle and long range. I prefer the Khan Annihilator. It doesn’t sacrifice the range advantage, and it is easier to resupply.”

Several more attempts were made to overturn this judgement, but the more the Master of Destruction explained, the more Dragon felt her convictions solidify. The ‘Kahn Commorragh’ could be the standard armoured platform of the tank crews, with the Annihilator providing an alternative on war zones where constant resupply was all but impossible, and the Exterminator would play the role both of scout and anti-infantry chaser. If the circumstances changed, there might be possibilities for the Executioner and the Vanquisher, but for now these last two were far too expensive to be mass-produced.

“The Khan Eradicator?” It was the only Khan model which had not been discussed, and it was armed with a small but extremely devastating Nova Cannon.

“From what I read from your reports, it is expensive, but extremely useful against fortified obstacles.” Within reason, of course. This tank wasn’t going to bring down a Hive’s walls alone, nor bring low the void shields protecting critical installations. But barricades, bunkers, armoured vehicles and plenty of worthwhile targets would not resist its fire. And thanks to new schematics and data coming from other Forge Worlds, the Nova shells were now far more stable, and the risk of accidents had been impressively low during the field tests.

“It is. And it has been noted that while its armament is vulnerable in urban warfare, it excels on jungle-covered worlds and the great majority of the battlefields where the environment can be easily destroyed.”

Since the Khan was supposed to avoid urban warfare – the Battle of Commorragh notwithstanding, this was one more point in favour. Dragon nodded and approved the mass production of the Khan Eradicator, though the numbers would be very inferior to the Khan Commorragh.

“Between the tithes’ requisitions and the reforms, this year will be a year of transition, but we should be able to produce one million Jaghatai Khan Battle Tanks next year,” and yes, Dragon was well aware of the irony of having given this name before a Primarch confirmed the Great Khan was still alive somewhere in the Eldar Webway. “But it will be the Master of Enginseers and the Master of Metallurgy and Mining who will confirm or amend these numbers. The Cataphracts?”

The super-heavy tanks were impressive, standing there, no matter that their engines were cold. One was of course the original Cataphract, renamed ‘Cataphract Commorragh’ and its destructor Smaug Lascannon. Unlike the original Khan, this new version was extremely close to the vehicles sent with Operation Caribbean forces, having only received minor improvements in cogitator processing and a superior alloy for the manufacture of several parts.

From left to right were the Cataphract Commorragh, the Cataphract Hammer, the Cataphract Sword, the Cataphract Blade, the Cataphract Storm, and the Cataphract Siege. Unlike with the Khans, price was not exactly a problem. The non-Commorragh versions were a bit more expensive than the original model, but it was all relative in this case; a super-heavy tank was going to cost a lot no matter the purity of your intentions.

Some problems, however, transcended the tonnage.

“The Sword and Hammer variants are both anti-Titan machines,” or anti super-heavy armour, when it came to it. “I know we can produce excellent Magma Cannons since Archmagos Metallurgicus Unity-Victor Omega-Manville’s reported his success on this front last year. But I’d not heard we could produce Volcano Cannons.” These were to be sure formidable weapons, but only a handful of Forge Worlds had the means to produce them. And it was not something the Horus Heresy could be blamed, though it had certainly not helped: Volcano Cannons were belonging to the Titan armament category, and very sophisticated technology.

“It could change soon, with the Fabricator General’s support of Lady Weaver.”

“I am reasonably confident it will, but with Legio Defensor in dire need to be rebuilt, Alamo will need all the Volcano Cannons available. And like I said before, bringing two anti-Titan super-heavy tanks is the opposite of efficiency.”

Thus the Cataphract Hammer and its Magma Cannon were chosen for mass production, though it hadn’t the same meaning as it had for the Khan variants. Plenty of manufactorum were yet to be completed in orbit, and the ones which had been built here or elsewhere had to suffer some minor but vital modifications to improve productivity, worker’s productivity, and training of new Tech-Priests. If thirty thousand super-heavy tanks were declared good for service in the Guard on 297M35, Dragon would accept it as an acceptable outcome.

The Cataphract Blade was eliminated for the same reason as the Khan Executioner; while the Plasma Blastgun would no doubt be extremely impressive to explain to the enemies of humanity the meaning of the word ‘terror’, buying it by the dozens from Ryza was extremely expensive, and building it for the moment required Plasma-specialised Artisans Dragon had great need of elsewhere.

The Cataphract Storm was tentatively approved, under the condition the anti-infantry Vulcan Mega-Bolter’s firing rate was resolved before any attempt to implement the manufactorum modifications necessary for its production. The Tinker parahuman signed far more easily onto the Cataphract Siege, the Stormsword Siege Cannon having proved extremely reliable during the field tests.

All in all, these were three Cataphracts definitely approved, and one tentative; the Master of Destruction’s work had indeed been anything but idle, and this wasn’t counting the new Khans.

“Due to the information and the technology discoveries of Commorragh, I have also thought about launching a new project for a Cataphract variant armed with a Volkite Carronade,” the Archmagos Reductor confessed.

Dragon didn’t react outwardly, though inside, she was very pleased. It was often hard to convince some of her colleagues to try new ideas – with the proper security measures, she wasn’t crazy to ignore the risks caused by Chaos corruption. The new Lady Magos Dogma had arrived at this conclusion soon after receiving the information how much Volkite schematics and data they had received from the Salamanders and the Obsidian Chariot’s discovery.

“I had been thinking myself something similar for our tanks,” Dragon admitted, “for the Khan line, I abandoned the idea, the Carronade would need to be down-sized to an unacceptable degree and the HL 310 V12 Multi-Fuel will never been able to deliver the minimum output for a Volkite weapon. But the Cataphract hull should be able to handle the stress, though field testing remains the only way to be certain.”

“So I will be granted your permission and the resources to proceed?”

“You will. Obviously, I request you wait before all the data and schematics are safely recorded in our databases before truly beginning the project. But yes, this new Cataphract-variant has my attention. The codename it will be presented to the Council will be...Obsidian.”

Honestly, all the resources Stefan Delta-Septimus demanded were nothing compared to the ‘present list’ of Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan, the Mistress of Ships. With more and more industry placed in spatial manufactorums armoured to resist capital nuclear detonations, the orbital elevators, the creation of multiple shipyards which would one day possibly be linked until they formed an orbital ring in all but name, the new orbital forges powered by the Izanagi STC and its new model of fusion reactor...well, there was no such thing as an unlimited budget. But these days, both Sultan and certain other Archmagi working to expand the industry of Nyx had effectively near-unlimited funds, resources, and tech-power to accomplish their goals.

“I suppose it is out of the question to take the new project of ‘Dragon Dreadnought’ for myself?”

“You suppose correctly,” the Master of Destruction had asked politely and not tried very hard, so it elicited no stern answer from her. But yes, the Astartes-crewed Dragon Armour and the Dreadnought pilot-crewed Dragon Armour projects were her babies, and woe befell those who tried to steal it.

“I understand and with this, I wish to petition the Council for a replacement of the Basilisk artillery piece, since we have recently acquired the pattern of the Mars-Solar pattern Basilisk and numerous other artillery prototypes from lesser Forges.”

“The Basilisk? By the Motive Force, why? The Earthshaker cannons likely killed more Eldar than the swarm Lady Weaver unleashed against the xenos!” And at the risk of saying something everyone knew, Taylor had killed millions of long-ears by the lowest estimations.

“Yes, it did,” the Master of Destruction agreed. “But it was against a xenos species which thought rushing half-naked on a battlefield was a good idea, and most of their armoured formations, bunkers and fortifications, for all their ridiculously low numbers and tactical stupidity, caused us enormous problems when we had not the advantage in tactics and insects.”

“The Eldar had the numbers,” but as the Estaban VII Tech-Priest released a torrent of data on their private Noosphere exchange channel, Dragon was forced to amend her judgement. The 132mm shells of the Earthshaker Cannons had done the job, but it was too often because Taylor had imitated the World War 2 Soviet Union and beaten old records of how many artillery pieces you could emplace per kilometre.

“I see your point. But since we have already the Mars-Solar pattern Basilisk’s schematics, wouldn’t it be preferable to produce it instead? It offers more advanced targeting arrays, overhead cover, and ten percent more firepower than the regular Basilisk.”

“It would be enough if we spoke about an ordinary Guard regiment,” immediately disagreed the Archmagos Reductor. “But after the sheer apocalypse unleashed at Commorragh, I believe it’s best to not mass-produce new equipment in half-measures.”

Well, Dragon had been complaining for several years about how reluctant to innovate the Priesthood of Mars was. She wasn’t going to preach the exact opposite view now.

“Your idea?”

“I have studied numerous databases purchased from Archmagos Belisarius Cawl, and I believe a self-propelled artillery piece with a gun of 175mm will give us long-range supremacy against any enemy which might dare to challenge the armies of the Basileia.”

Stefan Delta-Septimus had maybe not a final project for this final artillery piece, but he had not come to her with nothing. The reasoning and his arguments were good, and he had also accounted for an automatic ammunition resupply vehicle, with auto-loading technology and advanced cogitators. In fact, it looked a lot like certain advanced artillery models Dragon had seen on Earth Aleph’s military documentaries once.

“I don’t want to imagine the challenge of logistics it will take to modify the existing manufacturing artillery production lines,” Dragon sighed. “But you are definitely right about the need to have absolute artillery supremacy on the battlefield. The next opposition will most likely than not have Great Crusade-issued equipment, certainly corrupted by the Ruinous Powers. We must be ready, and artillery is one of the Guard’s strengths. I will support this project at the Council. Do you have a name for it?”

“Thunder.”

Dragon had to concede it was very appropriate.

**The Warp**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Chancellor Friar Achelieux**

When a Navigator’s nose began to bleed, it was a very bad sign. The fact that this dreaded symptom had begun fifteen minutes and twenty seconds ago on Rafael’s face wasn’t exactly reassuring Friar.

After the first storm had engulfed the Enterprise and almost knocked Nathaniel, forcing Friar to replace him for several hours and some, the Chancellor of House Achelieux had caressed the hope this first terrible assault on the Empyrean on the Gellar Shields was a serious but isolated incident.

“Do you need to rest?” Friar asked as his second cousin gritted his teeth and more colours which had no names in the Materium flashed around the chamber.

“I can hold...for ten more minutes,” the young Navigator articulated with a mix of pride and exhaustion the older Navigator was all too familiar.

“Ten minutes and not one more,” he said severely. “Miguel has finished his preparations, and I don’t want to see you collapse from exhaustion,” leaving aside what happened when for a few seconds there was no Navigator at the helm, it had really not been that long since they translated out of Pavia.

“Understood...Chancellor...these storms, I can feel the malevolence from them...”

“Some entities serving the Arch-Enemy have taken umbrage of Commorragh’s destruction,” Friar didn’t voice the fact it might really be the Chaos Gods themselves who were trying to breach the Gellar Fields of the *Enterprise*. He needed the Navigators available aboard to be focused and defiant, not afraid.

Besides, with their third eye, all of the Navigators who had taken the helm so far had seen the uncountable waves of horrors the Sea of Souls was creating to break the great Battleship. Like him, they knew what the price of failure would mean in this instance.

“Be sure to replace him at the first sign of weakness,” the Achelieux Chancellor murmured to Miguel. “If the crystal of Aethergold vacillates again, your emissaries run to Lady Weaver and use the replacement.”

It was a true benediction to have this kind of artefacts shining with His light aboard to help them, and now that they really needed them, Friar wasn’t going to institute rationing where these priceless psychic items were concerned. Without them, reliable navigation through the hellish dimension would be near-impossible at the moment: for all his experience, the oldest of the Navigators present had never seen such storms and gigantic daemonic legions be assembled to strike at a single ship. And there had been so little warning before the first onslaught...

This was nowhere near the relative calm which had existed when the warships of Operation Caribbean had sailed to Pavia. And the storms which had raged after the beginning of the attack against Commorragh were really weak breezes compared to the hurricane of hatred and malice focused on the *Enterprise*.

There were many things which wanted Lady Weaver dead in the depths of the Empyrean. In a way it was reassuring, since it betrayed the fact these daemons and all servants of the Ruinous Powers of what the Living Saint might do to them again if given the chance. On the other hand, when you were caught in the middle of this storm, it was difficult to find a lot of other positive factors to this dangerous predicament.

Of course, the moment he left the room where Rafael was still sometimes gasping in pain, one of his many servants arrived, bearing a message from the only person among the crew and the passengers he couldn’t decently ignore.

One order to find him if something unexpected happened to Rafael or any of the other Achelieux Navigators, and Friar went on his way, escorted by several men-at-arms. Of course, many had to be left behind at several security nodes. The Space Marines of the Dawnbreaker Guard rarely allowed sizeable military companies to approach their mistress, and most of these exceptions belonged to the Guard.

Lady Weaver and the Imperial Fist serving as her protector were contemplating the hololithic schematics of a very tall dome-covered monument when he entered.

“You did not have to come so fast, Chancellor.” The golden-winged woman said in an amused tone before returning to a more serious expression. “Archmagos Sagami has informed me the pressure is considerable on the Gellar Fields, on the order of seventy percent of their maximum power.”

“The Empyrean is in fury, yes.” The Chancellor acknowledged. “I won’t say we are caught in a permanent Warp Storm, because we are still following one of the main paths leading us to Nyx, but we are targeted by several vicious and evil entities. As a result, I fear we are badly trailing behind the entire fleet, and unless the attacks abate, this Battleship will arrive in last position to Nyx.”

“But you are confident we will still be able to keep our course.”

“Due to the power of Aethergold, yes we are,” in this case Friar spoke for all the Navigators save Nathaniel who was still recovering. “To our third eye, this psychic crystal ‘sings’ to us the position of the Astronomican and we are able to continue guiding the *Enterprise* through the Warp.”

“I’m glad to hear it, and I’m sure the rest of the *Enterprise*’s crew will be too.”

Friar nodded before continuing.

“I know the reserves of Aethergold don’t allow this move for the time being, but I will petition you in the future to have at least one of these crystals installed on the most vital starships. This should drastically decrease the odds of a starship being lost in the Warp.”

“And I will seriously consider it,” Taylor Hebert caressed one of the huge spiders which was weaving a large banner to her right. “The mining of Noctilith hasn’t even begun, and everyone wants Aethergold. I can only hope the Mechanicus Forge Worlds will be able to find worlds rich of this resource which weren’t claimed by the Necrons.”

The black eyes looked directly at his, and Friar was quite glad his third eye and his other senses were largely muted because the presence of the Emperor’s was extremely potent, so close to her.

He didn’t turn his gaze away, though. House Achelieux had tied their fortune and their future to the destiny of Her Celestial Highness Lady General Taylor Hebert, and a few moments of temporary strange sensations were a very small price to pay for the woman who had won them one hundred Navigator Maps and one hundred Astrogation Databases. The fact his signature existed on a contract promising one hundred Achelieux Navigators for the sum of sixty billion Nyxian Throne Gelts was just the Auramite coin on top of the cake.

“I see you are consulting the schematics of a new monument,” Friar changed the subject in a lighter tone. “Is it the ‘Arena of Blades’ so many people have been spreading rumours about?”

“No, not really,” the young woman rolled her eyes and let the beetles posed on her shoulders fly away. “I’ve transmitted certain instructions to the senior Architects we have of Nyx, but so far there are no definite plans for the large stadium of bloodshed the Queen of Blades wants. It doesn’t help that I had never considered building one before Commorragh; so far, all the arenas I was in presence of, I closed them or I forced their owners to use them for other purposes.”

The Chancellor was not going to naysay this last sentence. During his stay on Nyx Tertius, there had been many illegal underground arenas closed, and generally their owners weren’t treated gently by the Arbites, especially if the beings fighting on the sand of the arenas were humans.

“No, this is part of the project I will commission to honour the memory of Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius and all the soldiers who perished during the Battle of Commorragh. I intend to call it the Gaius Mausoleum, and the plans are based on the souvenirs I have of an ancient Terran mausoleum called the Taj Mahal.”

Friar studied the dimensions provided by the numbers dancing around the walls, which would be another work of art if the architects managed to concretise the projects of their employer.

“Where do you intend to build it, if I may be so bold?”

“For the moment, the plan is to use the Shrine World of Claire 47.” There was a vindictive smile which appeared for a couple seconds on the Basileia’s lips. “There are far too many cathedrals on this planet who aren’t receiving more than a handful of visitors per year, and too many of the last fifty Pontifexes have spent the pilgrim’s donations on vanity projects. This Mausoleum, on the other hand, will be built in memory of people who gave everything to the Emperor and the Imperium. They faced abominations by the thousands and participated in the slaying of Excess. They are far more deserving of being recognised than men plotting and conspiring while they dine on the pilgrims’ resources.”

Friar was quite glad he had not invested a single Throne Gelt on Ministorum projects so far, because it looked like that the Shrine World was going to experience several reforms, and the radical changes would be accompanied by a purge of the problematic elements among the leadership of the Ecclesiarchy.

“This is going to be quite spectacular.”

“It will be.” The voice of the Living Saint was more melancholic than triumphant. “Unlike the original Taj Mahal, there will be stone statues sculpted to represent the heroes of Commorragh dispersed all over the parks and gardens. And all will be looking in the direction of the Mausoleum’s heart.”

“Like an army guarding a beloved commander in death,” Friar approved. “I hope I will live long enough to see the project completed.”

“I do not intend to make a monument the size of the Sanguinala, Chancellor, and Nyx architects had already stores plenty of tons of white marble. When the possibility was discussed before Pavia, my Chief Architect was confident it would take less than four decades to complete it...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx V**

**3.290.296M35**

**Cardinal Prescott Lumen**

The Cardinal of the Nyxian diocese snorted when the younger Deacon finished reading the message.

“At least I am sure this is truly Tapendra and not an imposter the guardsmen have arrested.”

“Your Eminence, the list of crimes he is accused of is bad enough, the arrogance-“

“Oh, Tapendra is going to be burned alive for his crimes,” Prescott didn’t like subjecting anyone to this execution method, but unfortunately the former Pontifex Mundi of Iris’ Vision had gone too far and served very badly the God-Emperor. “The only real question is if we judge him before or after Lady Weaver’s return.”

The Deacon’s stormy expression made it clear which option was his favourite.

“In my humble opinion Your Eminence, judging this treacherous slime after the Basileia’s return would weaken your authority. Yes, Her Celestial Highness is your ecclesiastic superior now, but it is not a valid reason to overturn decades of precedents. According to his last message, Pontifex Primus Tapendra Shanmuga still believes he is above the laws of the God-Emperor. It’s past time we show him he isn’t. We can postpone his execution long enough to organise a meeting with him and Lady Weaver, I’m eager to see how it will fare for him, but we must proclaim to the whole Sector that his crimes will not be tolerated.”

It was a coherent response to this issue. There were drawbacks which would emerge in due time from this, but Eugeniusz was right, the judgement of Tapendra Shanmuga would cause more problems if it was delayed than not.

It wasn’t like the evidence of his crimes was slim. For the greatest part of three decades, the Pontifex Primus of Iris’ Vision had used his position to extract a disturbingly large amount of resources from the Cardinal World he had the charge of, preventing any possibility that the population could take the first steps towards the status of Civilised World.

It was always horrible when a Governor abused his position, but Tapendra Shanmuga had gone further and falsified practically every record, and bribed the Menelaus inspectors to look the other way. Judging by the first records of the administrators of the other worlds of the Iris System, there weren’t two billion living on this planet, the number was closer to three billion and nine hundred million. The ‘Shanmuga Palace’ was a monstrosity which would have been considered an aberration on far richer world like Megara or Iris’ Shield, and the contrast was sickening with the millions the man had maintained in conditions of extreme poverty.

Yes, the classification of Iris’ Vision was a Feudal World, but your duty was to make sure this state of affairs lasted few years, it was not your duty to let your subjects live in squalor and a feudal lifestyle!

Worse, the very fact the difference between the theoretical and the real levels of population and the wealth accumulated discovered when the Guard had dragged Tapendra in chains to a transport bound for Nyx must have begun long before him. And since the recently dismissed senior member of the Adeptus Ministorum was born on Vijayanagara like three of his predecessors, Prescott had a good idea how the rot had settled.

Many times before Lady Weaver’s elevation the shepherd of the Nyxian diocese had decided the influence of Atlantis in the region was far too high and would lead to plenty of riots and insurrection if nothing was done. He had not expected to be proven right like this.

“I can only hope Zygmunt is going to be able to restore some of the faith which should be the norm on one of our Cardinal Worlds,” former Pontifex Mundi of Saint Clare’s Stand directly under himself, Zygmunt Kankowski was one of the rising stars of the new generation of Priests. “I know the hospitals and the great infrastructure projects are going to help, but these people have lived decades under the fist of Tapendra, obeying to each and every whim of his.”

It was something which had led to the treacherous Pontifex’s complete failure, ultimately. It was all very well to find excuses mutter apologies that your planet was unable to contribute military to anything important, but when you were ruling like a cruel King your populace, Pontifex or not, you needed a big army and the economy of Iris’ Vision had not left much spare money around. Thus when Tapendra Shanmuga had declared his intention to overwhelm the illegitimate regime of the two other Iris worlds, and that in order to do this, a great mobilisation of the ‘Holy Army of Iris’ Light’ was to begin, the population had begun to manifest its displeasure. Fortunately, spies of Iris’ Shield inside Shanmuga’s court had relayed the intentions of the Pontifex to the other planets, and before a week was out, Iris’ Vision leadership was arrested and a complete new hierarchy would be in charge.

“I am going to wait Zygmunt’s first reports,” Prescott Lumen continued unhappily, “but I’m already preparing for the worst. Given how ‘feudal’ these imbeciles wanted their subjects to be, we may have no choice but to request the assistance of the Mechanicus.”

Eugeniusz grimaced unhappily. The relationships between the Tech-Priests of the Mechanicus and the Ecclesiarchy were far better than anyone would have dreamed of a decade ago, but they weren’t to the point a Cardinal or another senior Priest would love to invite the red cogboys on one of their planets and let them gloat over the dirty laundry of the Ministorum’s poor governance.

“I would prefer we avoid this, your Eminence.” The red-haired Deacon said after a few breaths of hesitation. “Due to the recent astropathic communications from Ophelia, I know the effort to rebuild Iris’ Vision is not a problem, but the Mechanicus is going to make us pay for this, and I’m not speaking of material resources.”

Prescott acknowledged the warning. Unfortunately, the more he read about the state of Iris’ Vision, the more he was aghast. Lady Taylor Hebert’s first answers had been courteous but not very happy about the kind of shenanigans Tapendra Shanmuga had been able to do without the Ecclesiarchy being aware of it. And the Basileia had been extremely blunt to deplore the waste of manpower represented by keeping more than three billion Imperial citizens in a ‘neo-medieval state making a mockery of the Imperial Creed’, to use her own words. Prescott didn’t know if Iris’ Vision was destined to become a Civilised, Industrial, Hive, or Agri-World in the future, but he knew that if he wanted to keep this planet as a Cardinal World, half-measures were not going to be the solution.

“I know. At least for the moment, the other parts of the diocese which aren’t in the Suebi Sub-Sector are far more productive and have the approval of Her Celestial Highness. Upelluri is in good hands with Pontifex Wanjiru Kenyatta, and Claire 47’s priesthood is finally on a path to restore its prestige with Pontifex Krystyna Banaszak.”

It had taken far too many arrests and executions for his taste where the Shrine World was concerned, but his envoys from Saint Clare’s Stand had finally the upper hand and were purging both Atlantis and the non-conformist Chapel-Masters and Pontifexes. Claire 47 had already ceased being a sinkhole of donations, something Prescott had almost resigned himself to never see in his lifetime.

“Yes, your Eminence. Of course, it leaves the Suebi Sub-Sector.”

The tall Cardinal’s mood was less triumphant than it had been before this sentence. From an outside perspective, receiving an additional six worlds out of a total of nine planets was an extremely generous gift for any diocese.

But any Cardinal having a brain between his two ears knew that this ‘gift’ had placed him on the black list of the Atlantis Cardinal, who had certainly not enjoyed being told his westernmost Sub-Sector was no longer his to administer. The Lemuria System, wealthiest node inside the Suebi Nebula was going to be a problem, he just had to re-listen the astropathic message sent by Hierophant – the name the Atlantis hierarchy had found for its Sub-Sector rulers - Hewendu Indushekhar to be aware that the Priests might profess their undying loyalty for now, but the daggers were going to be unsheathed soon.

“I think the worlds of the Parthia-Hibernia trail can be bastions of the Faith and very loyal servants of Lady Weaver in a matter of years,” only the worlds of Hibernia and Ajusco were Cardinal Worlds among those four, but all the Planetary Governors and Pontifexes Mundi were on their way to swear their vows in person, and had already provided plenty of information, which at first sight looked like the genuine administration reports. “I fear however the Antioch-Drakkar trail will be on the receiving end of a military intervention not long after the return of Commorragh’s survivors.”

“My concerns were more political, your Eminence,” Eugeniusz Podlesnik was showing its relative inexperience here. “Surely after the hammering Her Celestial Highness has delivered to the vile xenos, the Hierophant and his allies will realise that any kind of military action can only result in a one-sided massacre!”

No, not so much inexperience than a lack of familiarity with the behaviour of certain members of the Atlantis diocese.

And just as this thought arrived in his mind, one of the young men he used as a liaison with Adeptus Astra Telepathica entered his office, delivered a roll of vellum stamped with the colour reserved to priority communications of senior Ministorum Priests, and left without word.

Prescott had always been a fast reader, and it took him less than a minute before arriving to the end, a moment he announced by closing his eyes and praying the God-Emperor to give him strength.

“Your Eminence?”

“It appears the reasons why so few Frateris Templar were available for deployment when Operation Caribbean’s call for arms rang were not only founded on political pettiness, Eugeniusz. For three years, the soldiers of the Atlantis diocese have fought a rebellion of former penal workers on the Cardinal World of Sparta. And so far, after three years of debacles and military disasters, the Frateris Templars are no closer to crushing the rebels than they were at the start of their campaign.”

It was a humiliation, and the reality that the various Pontifexes answering to the Hierophant must have been actively suppressing the news and the rumours stemming from it was an unholy disgrace.

“I don’t see a way it could be worse.”

“I do.” But Prescott had the unfair advantage of having read the message. “When the orders of Ophelia came that the Suebi Sub-Sector was now in Nyx’s diocese, my counterpart of Atlantis decided to ‘forget’ there was a military campaign in the first place, and stopped the supply and reinforcements’ efforts. This means that we have now Pontifex-Crusader Ousadevi screaming for help, twenty million Frateris Templars trapped on an Ice World with atrocious winter weather and a rebellion approaching two billion former penal prisoners with little love for the Imperium or His Most Holy Majesty’s Ecclesiarchy.”

And he had thought the Iris’ Vision disaster was bad.

**Suebi Nebula**

**Nerushlatset Space**

**Coreworld Amarnekh**

**Approximately 8.300.296M35**

**Phaerakh-Cryptek Neferten**

“Glorious Phaerakh, this is against tradition!”

Neferten had wondered for hundreds of years if removing the nobles defending military and political opinions defending the opposite of the choices she made was the best path for her Dynasty. To her greatest regret, the Phaerakh-Cryptek had come to the conclusion that removing a few critics to gain some measure of ephemeral satisfaction was counter-productive.

A good Phaerakh – or Phaeron – recognised that for all the resistance and the terrible immortality the biotransference had granted them, the Necrons had not gained omniscience when they prostrated themselves in front of the C’Tan. The ruler of a Dynasty could make mistakes, although many Phaerons had made it a capital crime for their subordinates to voice it. And if no voice was rising from her Overlords and her Cryptek’s ranks when she made a disastrous error, it was a near-certainty the defeat would be repeated a second time, and it would likely have worse consequences as the enemy had learned to exploit the flaw while the Necrons would stay stagnant and immobile. Many old and prestigious Dynasties had been rendered extinct during the War, validating this opinion.

This was not to say Neferten was ready to let every critic pass. The supreme commander of the Nerushlatset armies was willing to tolerate constructive criticism and had made this clear the moment the War had begun against the gigantic amphibians and their endless coalition of psychic puppets. Many Crypteks and Immortals had been elevated above their peers when they accumulated the victories and her hereditary ‘geniuses masters of war’ were limping back home with their forces in tatters.

Yes, critic was fine as long as there were arguments to explain why you thought it was a bad idea...and how you wanted to solve the situation. The problem was the Nemesor bowing a respectable distance away from her throne had not given her any explanation.

“Yes, and?”

Her subordinate seemed surprised by her reaction. Where was this idiot coming from? She consulted in a hurry the planetary core of Amarnekh, and obtained the answer. One of the ancient city-masters she had been forced to accept in her nobility when the Old Ones had unleashed the Krorks and every Necron, no matter how pitiful or tactically inept, had been terribly needed on the frontlines.

It was one of the rare times the Szarekhan emissaries had not kept their usual arrogance when ordering the new deployments. The souvenir made Neferten shiver before she banished it in her deepest engrams.

“If you do not trust the humans to respect their word, why is the Crownworld left with minimal defences?”

“I trust the humans,” it wasn’t really true; the Phaerakh trusted Weaver to know that a war against her Dynasty was something the newly golden-winged human would not win without dozens of planets burned to the ground, a military and a support base in ruins, and both Necrons and humans fatally weakened, vulnerable preys to their many enemies. Moreover, unlike plenty of non-human races, Neferten shared many goals with the Imperium of the humans: ensuring the Eldar did not rise as a major power again, destroying the debased descendants of the Krorks wherever they grew too aggressive and violent, and making sure the barriers separating reality from non-reality were not breached like they had been before the War in Heaven. “But trust into a newly signed alliance doesn’t mean Delphimonia isn’t vulnerable to other threats. The Crownworld is the only aster in our possession which is not in the Nebula. Making its defences impregnable would require the presence of a World Engine, and this would be an evident violation of the treaty. Not stationing a World Engine would make our shipyards and our war machines unacceptably vulnerable in the case the greenskins return to avenge the destruction of their war-moon or the long-ears want to punish us for the destruction of Commorragh.”

The strategic advantages of moving everything which made her Crownworld a Crownworld to Amarnekh were evident, and they had begun well before she left for Pavia with one of her World Engines.

“Aside from tradition, have you anything more critical to base your arguments upon?”

“The edicts of the Silent King were-“

Anger overwhelmed reason in her consciousness and before she had the time to master herself, the Phaerakh-Cryptek was castigating the Nemesor.

“If the Silent King was here and told you to throw yourself into a star, would you obey?” She snapped. “It was bad enough we had to obey his insane idea of ‘Great Sleep’! Do you want to test more of the Szarekhan whips upon your back?”

The Nerushlatset Dynasty had voiced their concerns every time. Neferten had seen not long after her own rise to Phaerakh how the politics of the Triarchs and the highest Dynasties were utterly removed from reality. It wasn’t enough for the Phaerons around the Silent King and his two Speakers for the Dynasties to have conquered the stars in their name; the Dynasties had to be to their beck and call.

Neferten had been ignored. The Nerushlatset had been ignored. Never had she been granted an audience with Szarekh or anyone high-ranked among his Dynasty. There had been only arrogant Nemesors and after that the first Necrons, giving her a choice between submission and annihilation. She had been young in these days, and the new metallic bodies had seemed invulnerable. She had let them drag her to the furnaces. It was a decision she was still regretting millions of years later.

“Fortunately for you, I am in need of a patrol commander guarding the Kadatek vaults for the next...oh I don’t know, four hundred Amarnekh years,” which were five point one standard years for a human, the Phaerakh had calculated. “You have just volunteered for this duty. Congratulations, Nemesor.”

“This is not tradition! This is not his-“

Her guards removed him from her presence before she had the time to change her mind and expedite his molecular disintegration.

Once alone, Neferten took a few seconds to contemplate the great objects now decorating her quarters, and the rising numbers of her Dynasty. The Silent King – or at least his envoys since no Triarch had ever visited one of her fortresses while she was alive – would not have tolerated this, not at all. A second-tier Dynasty rebuilding its armies, pillaging the inactive worlds of the so-mighty Horth Dynasty, and allying with a ‘lesser species’ without asking for the permission of their ‘betters’? The warmongering Maynarkh Dynasty would have already been sent against her to wipe out starships and worlds!

The familiar codes of a teleportation arrived on the throne’s commands, and Neferten authorised them when she acknowledged them as Destruction-Overlord Sitkah, which among her court had been able to add ‘Drukharikiller’ to her list of victory-titles.

“You were right, my Phaerakh,” the younger commander began as Neferten made clear the usual ceremonies of obedience and respect could wait another year. “The possibilities were already infinitesimal, but the advanced simulations of Artificial Intelligence A-1 confirmed it. It is absolutely impossible for the humans to have failed to store notable Noctilith reserves without enemy interference. Their ‘Imperium’ has too many planets, and their ‘Mechanicus’ mines too heavily for them to not have discovered several important deposits in four thousand years of theirs. And the ruler of their Imperium was aware of his Aethergold-creating powers, making the acquisition of Noctilith a priority atop many other material resources.”

“The abominations created by the fault of the Old Ones.”

“This was also my first reaction,” Sitkah agreed. “But now that our first ships have returned from their explorations, I fear the Aeldari sub-species have not been shy attacking the humans too.”

Neferten was building a strategic assessment from these revelations and she didn’t like what she learned.

“And our most powerful telescopes confirm the Szarekhan Pylon Line is the most damaged where it is closest to the former heart of the Aeldari Empire?”

“Yes.”

At this moment, the logical order which should have been uttered was ‘replace these Pylons’.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t. The Nerushlatset Dynasty had made its fame by promoting brilliant commanders and its Cryptek made many older Dynasties grit their necrodermis teeth in jealousy. But the Pylons had been cutting-edge technology the Void Dragon had ordered at the end of the War in Heaven, and only the Szarekhan Overlords had been trusted with the secrets of its production, maintenance, and anti-Warp efficiency. Neferten and any non-Szarekhan Necron over the rank of Nemesor had been given the codes to activate a Pylon Nexus, but this was all the ‘confidences’ Szarekh had made to the Phaerons and Phaerakhs.

Between Delphimonia, Amarnekh and her principal Coreworlds, Neferten had only fifteen Pylons –one per world – and the research how to replicate them had just begun. It did not help that so little Noctilith was left in her vaults; they had been forced to hand out everything before the Great Sleep.

“We have less time than I thought when our forces arrived at Pavia.” Most of the Aeldari and their descendants were dead now, so the problems coming from their direction should be limited, but if the empyreal abominations tried to breach again the veil and make a variant of the Enslaver Doom, they had to be stopped.

“The good point is that so far, the humans appear to take Noctilith mining seriously,” Sitkah noted. “More than forty mining ships have arrived in the last rotation around the fourth planet of the ‘Brockton System’ and they are accompanied by more ‘Mechanicus’ transports. Ideally, if they can handle the lava-plesiosaurs and have adequate harvesting-machines, their first ton of Noctilith will be mined before half of one of our years.”

“This is slow,” alas, compared to Necron technology, only the Aeldari, Krork and several Old Ones could really compare, and the humans had never had the help of psychic amphibians to burn the evolutionary steps. “But if it’s the best they can do, our plans must be adjusted in consequence.”

“We could...gain several years, at least for the Noctilith. We weren’t trusted for this duty but-“

“No, Destruction-Overlord. I need better data and we need to finish our current expansion program. The kind of adventuring you are proposing would be ill-advised at the best of times, and I doubt the humans would jump in joy at the idea.”

Neferten shook her head before asking another question that promised not to improve the tapestry of misery the galaxy was soaked into.

“Where is Orikan?”

**The Warp**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

Lesson one where Inquisitors were concerned: never forget that for all the nice appearance these men and women were able to project in public, there were Inquisitors. They had a mandate to protect the Imperium and humanity from eldritch horrors, demons, xenos, and everything which might threaten the millions of planets the military garrisoned, and if one world had to burn or suffer a purge of billions to save ten others, the Inquisitors would do it. Some of them would do it regretfully, but the planet would still be on the receiving end of a genocide, either by Exterminatus or a more conventional war.

Inquisitor Pedro de Moray was the perfect example of this. The red-haired servant of the Imperium had humour, was aware of the bureaucratic realities, and was known to speak with many guardsmen regularly on many varied non-Inquisitorial issues.

As the insect-mistress was introduced into the compartment the Inquisition had taken for itself aboard her Battleship, said Inquisitor was busy dissecting one of the aliens called ‘Stryxis’, and judging by the evidence, the alien was still alive as Pedro de Moray studied the inside of its body.

“What are you goals with these xenos?” Taylor asked to Lady Inquisitor Rafaela Harper as they passed on a metallic bridge giving them a complete view of the hall where dozens of Stryxis were gutted under the blades and the surgical instruments of the Inquisition.

“You aren’t convinced like many gamblers we are doing it because we want to have fun?”

Taylor managed to snort, despite the disgust she felt at contemplating a scene like this.

“Please, Lady Inquisitor. If you wanted to torture these xenos, you could have used them as Excess’ bait during the fighting at Zel’harst or Utar’ragh. There was no need to waste space aboard our transports and resources to keep them alive. And I know that you are a practical woman. You wouldn’t have saved them just for the fun of torturing them.”

“You’re right,” the female representative of the Ordo Xenos replied. “We didn’t save them just for the pleasure of torturing them, though with the countless headaches these untrustworthy creatures have caused in the last centuries I can’t say I am sorry to see them writhing in pain.”

This was something that even years later, the former warlord of Brockton Bay was not appreciative in the least. Torture and cruel punishments were law in the Imperium, and everyone in a position of authority found it normal, which forced Taylor in numerous occasions to align her judgements on the positions of the Inquisition and the Ecclesiarchy, otherwise people would begin to whisper behind her back she was too lenient, taking too many liberties with the Lex Imperialis, and begin to investigate paths to make her orders null and void the moment she had her back turned.

The Imperium was living in a cruel galaxy, and since the Inquisition and every existing Adeptus had not the manpower to monitor every citizen out of a population of tens of billions, the punishment for crimes falling under the definition of heresy and high treason had to be so horrible that the aspirant criminals shivered in fear and stepped back from a life of crime before any law-breaking was committed.

Both as a Basileia and a Lady General, Taylor was not sure she believed this was the best way to keep a star empire like the Imperium functioning. Unfortunately, there were plenty of past examples in the Nyx Sector alone that when this doctrine wasn’t employed, the rule of the Imperium was faltering. And so death sentences by being plunged into a pyre or a pool of acid remained the reality. Because a single Chaos cultist at the wrong job could do major damage, and unfortunately there would always be an idiot among billions who would believe he could outthink demons and stay his own master until the galaxy was his to command.

“So far, the studies haven’t made any outstanding discovery, but we are just at the beginning of the experiments.”

The Governor of the Nyx Sector frowned because her silent inquiry of what the Inquisitors hoped to acquire from the Stryxis had hit a large wall, and she knew enough about Lady Inquisitor Harper to know insisting would bring nothing new on the table. Leaving the ‘Stryxis’ room, they arrived in front of a large cell with an aquatic environment. Interestingly, Taylor began to feel beings she could control out there, even if it was faint. The psychic machines generating a sort of green shield between them and the cells were certainly responsible for the ‘muting’ part.

“Brachyura,” commented the Lady Inquisitor. “The first species we wanted to present you. Can you control them?”

“Yes.”

The insect-mistress came two steps closer to the shield, still keeping a respectable distance away from it, but it was best because the xenos inside this aquatic cell were really tiny.

Visually, a Brachyura had the central body of a crab, except the crabs were not reaching the size of a middle-sized dog, and they hadn’t some twenty legs looking like the ‘legs’ of a sea spider either. The crustaceans’ carapace and legs were an elegant combination of light brown and yellow.

And as she...focused, for lack of a better world, her will on one of the Brachyura, the parahuman entered contact with the mind of a really intelligent creature, and there was much curiosity and fear coming from it. They were also impressively complex plans of mechanical devices in this mind, no doubt the reason the Inquisition was so interested in them. Taylor sent a wave of emotional calm, before retreating and closing the connection.

“What did you see?” Rafaela Harper asked as her eyes turned away from the large cell containing the Brachyura.

“Intelligence and mechanical plans,” Taylor answered, seeing no reason for deception. “I’m not a Tech-Priest, so I will need further confirmation, but I think they were powering their habitats at the bottom of their oceans with some sort of plasma technology. Is it the reason you saved them at Commorragh?”

“Yes,” her interlocutor admitted. “We don’t know where the Brachyura’s homeworld is; all the individuals we have found until now were slaves of the Drukhari. But several times we have had plenty of evidence that their limbs are incredibly dexterous beneath this crude looks and they are really adept at developing new plasma technology and the projects the long-ears wanted to accomplish.”

“In this case, I will need to commission the Magi of the Mechanicus for a translator allowing us to understand their language.” She could take control of them, they had nowhere near the ability to keep her out like the first Catachan-queen did, but unless she controlled them for the rest of their lives, this would create immense problems. Intelligent beings, as a rule, didn’t like being Mastered. “How many of them do you have in custody?”

“Counting the thirty-plus you see there, four hundred and sixty-nine were saved from Commorragh.”

The rest of the conversation about these crabs-spiders was spent deciding where to put them, and for the moment the answer was they were staying at Nyx. The Mechanicus could easily build an aquatic living environment also serving as a luxurious prison here, and there were plenty of empty zones reorganised by Dragon which could be used to hide their presence.

After a few seconds watching the Brachyura conducting their usual community activities, Taylor and the Lady Inquisitor went to the next huge cell.

Here, the outcome couldn’t be described as ‘good’. Rafaela Harper had just the time to say ‘Akvrani’ before an alien combining the bodies of a very large wasp and an octopus went smashing against the barrier. It had no effect on the protection, but the fact five other xenos went smashing against it in the next seconds proved this was no coincidence.

And she couldn’t control them, certain because the part of their body containing their brain was octopus-like.

“You say these xenos are called Akvrani?”

The Inquisitor nodded.

“A particularly vicious breed of xenos the Imperium met during the Great Crusade in Segmentum Obscurus.”

“If their hostility is any indication, the meeting of the Legions and these xenos ended in violence.”

“Evidently, though the records we have of that time are far from complete,” Rafaela Harper grimaced. “I will be honest; I suspect the Legion which made the Compliance of what was going to become the Askellon Sector and crushed the Akvrani was the Night Lords.”

Taylor imitated immediately the Nyx Conclave’s member. All the Traitor Legions had a reputation, but those the Night Lords had made in millennia past was enough to give you nightmares. The most positive way to describe them was to call them ‘Astartes pirates’. It was best to avoid thinking about the worst things they did to the people who had the bad luck to fall into their claws.

“Well, I can’t control them.” The tentacles and the other limbs hinted this was a species capable of producing advanced tools, but there were no clues about what type of technology they applied it too.

“A pity. They had the capacity before the Imperium met them to mass-produce grenades and other explosive devices shredding the toughest materials known to Mankind.”

And obviously the Inquisition, like the Mechanicus, would dearly want to have the weapons and to replicate this kind of technological ability.

“If I can’t control them, you will have difficulties forcing them to cooperate. I don’t think they are anything like the Rashan or the Brachyura.”

“They will reveal their secrets,” and the emotionless promise convinced that this was an Inquisitorial promise. “Willingly or unwillingly, but they will do it.”

The third cell Taylor was led to was easily the strangest experience she had so far. To begin with, the xenos inside it greeted her in Low Gothic.

“Hello human-full-of-meat!”

 “Err...hello?”

There was something strangely disturbing about a mouth opening and closing on the body of something looking like a gigantic red slug.

“We want to establish Peace-relations with you!”

Okay...what in the name of this cursed galaxy were these xenos smoking? Peace?

“The Naiads are an extremely peace-loving civilisation,” Rafaela Harper interjected seeing her disbelief. “The Imperium generally ignores them when they send their ‘diplomats’ outside their homeworld. They seem to believe the only thing of value is peace.”

“Of course!” the slug-Naiad vigorously agitated its enormous mass – it had to be close to one and a half metres long. “Peace is blessed! Peace avoids environmental damage and strife! Peace allows us to thrive and multiply! Praise be Peace!”

Taylor wanted to tell the xenos its vision of the galaxy wouldn’t work in a galaxy where the Orks – to name just one of the worst problems – lived and breathed for war, but really, this xenos had been enslaved at Commorragh: part of its red scarred skin made that clear.

“You continue to believe in peace after all the Eldar have done to you?”

“The Eldar will know the value of Peace once we teach their children how to productive contributors to Peace!”

Taylor fought to remain a normal expression, when inside she was laughing. Seriously, this was...refreshing to meet a xenos species which thought of nothing but Peace, but why had the Lady Inquisitor thought she could be of use when meeting this representative?

Alas, there was no answer from Rafaela Harper this time. They departed after saluting the ‘Peace-lobbying’ Naiad, and went to the fourth cell.

This time there was no question she could control the xenos: the being in front of her was essentially a giant blue plant bug with four additional limbs.

“An Uluméathic,” the whisper arrived to hear ears at the same time Taylor was pushing through the mind of the creature and taking control of it and the four other xenos present in the cell. It was easier than with the Brachyura, despite the Uluméathic specimens trying their best to keep her out of their memories.

It was absolutely disgusting. It looked like the Uluméathic had already conquered five other intelligent species after they had managed to reach the stars, and so far, each and every one of these xenos civilisations had died, devoured by the Uluméathic armies when they touched ground of the new world they assimilated into their Empire. The best translation for what happened was ‘feasting-triumph’.

And most damning of all...

“They ate the population of a small human colony before being captured by the Drukhari.”

“Your control over them?” The Lady Inquisitor was anything but surprise, so the Ordo Xenos had most likely entertained suspicions about the perpetrators of the crime for a long time.

“Total.” Taylor knew what was going to follow, but frankly after feeling the joy the Uluméathic of this group had felt when they slaughtered humans before the skies darkened and the dark weapons of the Eldar destroyed their armies, she wasn’t going to feel any compassion for them. Even the reason the Uluméathic had let themselves be captured so easily by the Inquisition was to try an infiltration and an internal onslaught.

“The coordinates of their homeworld then if you please.”

Weaver gave them. One of the Uluméathic was the equivalent of a galaxy cartographer, and there were several stars in the Eastern Fringe she had already once or twice as a point of reference. Not that it mattered much, because with a few beetles and spiders, she was easily able to reproduce the maps the xenos had kept safe inside its brain.

“Your assistance was appreciated. The Conclave will...deal with the problem caused by the Uluméathic League.”

The xenos hadn’t the same vision humanity did of a league, then, because from the Uluméathic memories, their nation had appeared like an Empire where the rule of the strongest prevailed in all circumstances.

“I doubt you will be able to take control of our last guests, but any insight you may have is welcome. The species you are about to see is called the Axlo, and the psychic monstrosity called the Cacodominus wanted to exterminate them to the last before the Black Templars destroyed it. So far, we have no idea what pushed this abomination to such genocidal extremities. The Axlo are not psychic, did not represent a threat to it, and while they were a star-faring species, they had only three colonised worlds for them when the Cacodominus unleashed its Chaos Knights upon them.”

The Axlo the Inquisition had transported aboard the Enterprise were not disappointing, the Lady Inquisitor had made clear they didn’t know why anyone would want their destruction, but...Taylor was not trembling in fear or really worried for the future of humanity. In appearance, they looked like a species mixing the characteristics of a lizard and a cat in grey colour. The body had the feline elegance, but it was covered in scales, and one long observation confirmed the Axlo adults had fangs and claws no bigger and more dangerous than the teeth and nails possessed by a human adult.

Taylor tried to push more of her skills, either the golden aura or her insect-controlling abilities, but she felt nothing psychic or anti-psychic from the Axlo. After five minutes of complete failure, she had to admit defeat. And the Axlo didn’t appear to speak Low Gothic, or any language an human mouth could speak.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t see anything out of the norm. The Axlo are a perfectly normal species with no psychic talent or any particular asset that might warrant destroying them.”

The Cacodominus’ motives, assuming they had not been based on sheer madness, would likely stay a mystery until the stars grew cold.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

***Vulkan’s Arsenal* Shipyard**

**3.360.296M35**

**Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan**

“The construction plan will be designated Commorragh’s Fall, and is activated right now. Its main goal is to provide a sufficient number of escorts to the Imperial Navy. The supply lines must be adequately patrolled and the mining and cargo transports arrive to Nyx without a scratch to their paint. Starting today, thirty Nyx-patter Cobra-class Destroyers and twenty Nyx-pattern Hoplite-class Destroyers will begin to be assembled and sanctified, per the Chosen of the Omnissiah’s will.”

“This is impressive,” acknowledged Cathar-4-Fredrick of Metalica. “You expanded the Centauri-class docks from thirty-five to fifty in less than five years to make such a plan possible.”

“Indeed. It was done in prevision of a great success being won in the Pavia System. But as you well know, the Mechanicus simulations have been recognised as completely inadequate when the Basileia is involved. Logically, *Vulkan’s Arsenal* should be expanded, but this is where the problems of modifying an existing sub-par structure begin to cause problems to my schedule,” the Mistress of Ships and Shipyards explained. “The necessity of adding Emperor-class and Jupiter-class docks is now primordial, but *Vulkan’s Arsenal* can’t handle these modifications right now. Not without stopping all the armament projects and the new constructions, stopping half of our current trade transiting by it, and certainly plenty of other problems the Council would discover in the following months.”

Logically, such a plan would have been unacceptable for the capital of an Imperial Sector. It was even more unthinkable for the Sector of the Victor of Commorragh.

“So we are going to build an entirely new shipyard, with the possibility of making it the base of a future orbital ring around Nyx.” The Magister of Enginseers emitted a long cant of frustration. “Archmagos Prime, I am as devoted as you are to the Omnissiah, but do you really think we will be able to work according to the...optimistic schedule you have given to Magos Dragon?”

“Yes,” Arithmancia Sultan replied, not a single doubt in her voice or her blessed cogitating cranial components. “This shipyard will be built in a decade. And the schedule is not optimistic, it is based on holy algorithmic results and my long experience in the shipyards of Ryza. Thanks to the Fabricator-General and Lady Weaver, we will receive over two hundred million Tech-Priests and workers before this standard year ends. I may be forced to delay the expansion of Vulkan’s Arsenal and other projects while we built this great work, and I may be forced to divert several coteries from going to Alamo, but this shipyard will be completed in time.”

“This unnamed shipyard...”

“It is not official, but Lady Weaver wished us to consider if *Ferrus’ Revenge* would be an appropriate name.”

In Arithmancia’s opinion, it was. Not only it used one of the most pro-Mechanicus Primarch’s names, it was also sending plenty of messages to Mars and Terra’s enemies. The massacre of Isstvan V had begun to be repaid. The Imperium had not abandoned the idea of mastering great infrastructure projects – had not Ferrus Manus’ homeworld a great orbital structure, the most Holy Telstarax, orbiting around it?

The Ferrus’ Revenge was not an orbital ring, yet, but it would certainly outsize and outperform every shipyard in the Nyx, pardon the Samarkand Quadrant. Once it would be completed, it would have:

24 Emperor-class dry docks

12 Jupiter-class dry docks

12 Saturn-class dry docks

48 Mars-class dry docks

48 Luna-class dry docks

12 Mercury-class dry docks

12 Centauri-class dry docks

12 Auxiliary-class dry docks

That was just for the ship-building infrastructure, there were also defences to erect. Due to the names of the enemies Lady Weaver was happy to cut into several parts, Arithmancia’s had emplaced a lot of lances and macro-cannon batteries. Simulations predicted it would be enough to deter an assault of any force less powerful than twelve intact Battleships and twenty-four Cruisers.

“Yes, a fitting name,” the Master of Enginseers confirmed. “But I seem to remember a Council where you affirmed to the Minister of Industry you were going to build more shipyards...”

“Smaller ones and they don’t compare to *Ferrus’ Revenge*. The *Jaghatai’s Celerity* shipyard will be a purpose-built Rogue Trader shipyard, and I will only furbish each dockyard for each hull the four Rogue Traders own. And the *Dorn’s Will* shipyard will build and repair Astartes warships.”

“This is going to be a cog’s headache for me to find all the Enginseers you need.” Cathar-4-Fredrick complained.

“Nonsense.” The Archmagos Prime born on Ryza hadn’t let any obstacles bar stop her victories and achievements, and it wasn’t going to begin now. “Between the Pacificus tithe and the contributions of the Tempestus and Ultima Forge Worlds, we are going to receive upwards to three billion Tech-Priests and loyal servants of the Omnissiah in the next three years. I can assure you we are going to find that there isn’t enough work to content everyone!”

“If you say so,” the High Magos-Enginseer snapped in an unhappy binary cant before making report on activities where her contribution was required. “The last shifting of the Nyxian industry on the orbital forges is forty-two percent complete and my Enginseers are on schedule. Expansion of the Navy’s facilities around Nyx Sextus is twenty percent complete. Plans for the installation of the Macro-Forge on Alamo are seventy percent complete. The training for the production of the Jovian auto-loading weapons is ninety percent done, and replacements of the pre-290M35 damaged parts of the ancient industrial stations has been successfully completed. I will detail during the next Council my proposals to improve the quality of the components available to your shipyards.”

This was very good, very promising, praise the Omnissiah. Nyx was slowly but surely elevating itself technologically to the holy level where great Forge Worlds had risen.

“I want your support when the time comes that I will lead the efforts to study and decipher the *Skyline* template.”

“Out of the question,” Arithmancia replied politely. The template which had received the codename *Skyline* was the blessed Olbia Space Elevator, manufactured by the Trade Star-Cartel of Neptune during the Age of Technology. From the preliminary data she had received, it wasn’t the best schematics ever conceived for a Space Elevator, the Martian Ring of Iron had some more advanced in all characteristics, but it was one they were going to be able to mass-produce and easily maintain and repair, which was admittedly several times more useful.

“You will already have the *Comet* template.”

“No, this mining ship will belong to Unity-Victor Omega-Manville’s department, not mine.” Admittedly she was going to see these ships arrive in her docks sooner or later, but first the Master of Metallurgy and Mining was going to have numerous hours to exploit everything useful from it. “And before you ask for it, the *Red Dawn* template of the fusion reactor will likely go to High Magos Thomson Siemens.”

“What was the template Lady Weaver promised you, then?”

“Why don’t you ask the Regent or the Minister of Industry?”

Arithmancia was many things, but she was not going to be boastful when the prize was a ship-mounted electromagnetic gun ready to be studied and produced in her own foundries...

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**S-42XXAKDRK21W Exploration Zone**

**7.379.296M35**

**Gloriana-class Battleship *Eternal Crusader***

**Chapter Master Flavius Sextus Jovius**

“Yes, Chapter Master. It’s the space region where the Destroyer *Wheel of Determination* was ordered to patrol.”

“Then it is here we will find the Craftworld of the long-ears.”

“Chapter Master?” The Admiral sounded astonished, which made Flavius wonder if his tactical performances were as good as the reports implied. “I’m not denying the evidence, but surely it would be really...audacious, even for these warmongering xenos, to destroy our warship after an emergency astropathic cry for help has been sent.”

“Yes, it would be,” High Marshal Gerlach Barbarossa smiled ravenously. “Unless there is something the Destroyer would have reported if there was time for second astropathic message.”

“Biel-Tan,” grumbled a Captain of the Crimson Fists.

“Biel-Tan,” approved the commander of the Chapter which had once been known as the Seventh Legion. “The *Wheel of Determination* must have evaded the mobile fleet of the xenos long enough after the first call to see the Craftworld on the long-range auspexes.”

It was a pity the officer who had accomplished was most certainly dead along with this crew. The Imperial Navy needed men of that calibre to face the multitude of threats trying constantly to attack the Imperium.

It was too bad for this Destroyer’s crew, but even in death, they had accomplished their duty. The sons of Dorn had the confirmation the Tarot and all their other sources of information were accurate: the Craftworld was truly hiding in this deserted space between dangerous nebulas and millions of gigantic asteroids.

This wasn’t a stupid location to hide your home; that much Flavius Sextus Jovius was ready to give to the long-ears. The natural obstacles made augurs, auspexes, and every time of sensor far shorter-ranged than they should be in space, and the Eldar fleets were particularly fearsome when they were allowed to play a game of skirmishes and feigned retreats.

But today most of the traditional advantages belonged to the Imperium. And the Imperial Fists were going to do what they did best: unite in a formidable weapon of war, and bring down those who believed they could threaten human worlds in all impunity.

“We could try a double envelopment,” tried one of the high officers of the Frateris Templar.

“No. It is a good idea, but it will take too long. Our tactics are going to be as unsubtle as possible. We must seize the Eldar by the throat, and this means an attack straight to the heart. Here is we are going to do...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Fafnir Library**

**3.420.296M35**

**Minister of Justice Missy Byron**

In many aspects, Dragon did not live like a dragon at all. The piles of precious metals the government of Nyx transferred to her forges were used immediately in her forges, and the Tinker didn’t sleep on a mountain of gold...but really, Dragon didn’t sleep much these days, having the smallest rest requirements of all the parahumans living on Nyx.

The Fafnir Library was in many ways one of the rare exceptions to this rule. Inside its halls, Dragon had stored the precious books her duties and her resources allowed her to acquire. There was no corrupted text or other form of chaotic corruption invited in, not with dozens of psychic alarms ready to shriek if someone tried to introduce a book of such forbidden origin. But the hundreds of manuscripts, vellum rolls and other written masterworks of humanity would nonetheless not meet the Inquisition’s approval if they knew the library existed in the first place.

The decoration had improved a lot since Missy’s last visit. Dragon had clearly commissioned several draconic-themed statues, including a very large one where a Space Marine riding a massive dragon raised his sword as if to prepare himself before a final charge. Many expensive red carpets and oil paintings had also been brought in. The technological devices of the library must have cost a fortune too. Between the stasis fields protecting half of the shelves and the greatest artworks, the hololithic projectors, and the small army of modified automated systems, there were Tech-Priests’ lairs which were far less mechanically wealthy.

Alas, she wasn’t here to admire the newest trend in draconic decoration.

“I can’t say I like this information, Dragon.”

“I am not exactly thrilled by it either.” The Minister of Industry of Nyx replied, reading a book older than both of them by several millennia. “But the...information source my subordinates picked up at Isstvan confirmed it. The former Third Legion, from the very beginning, was recruited from the nobility of what had to be the M30-M31 equivalent of Europe by direct order of the Emperor. That gave the Imperium a force of transhumans which could serve in the positions of diplomats, bodyguards, elite army, and paragons of art and the finest things humanity should aspire for.”

“They fell far.” There was not much information available about the Traitor Legions – the overwhelming majority of the Imperium’s population had little idea there were Traitor Legions in the first place for obvious reasons – but all of the Nine – now close to Eight – Legions were parodies of their Great Crusade splendour. “We will have to wait for Taylor to return and the genetic compatibility tests to be completed, but I doubt Taylor will ever consider tithing the Nyxian or Wuhanese nobility for full-scale recruitment.”

The two Hive Worlds of the Nyx Sector were the most populated worlds under the Basileia’s aegis, and this had resulted of course in them in the largest number of nobles. Even important Sub-Sector capitals like Atlas or Theta had not that many nobles, for all their predatory tactics and accumulation of riches.

If they were really to recruit from a population’s nobility in the long-term, only Nyx and Wuhan had really the numbers to avoid problematic consequences.

Wuhan was completely unsuitable. Aside from the fact none of the parahumans would trust most Wuhanese nobles to not abuse the privileges which would come from the proximity of an Adeptus Astartes, the Emperor’s Children had fallen to Slaanesh in the first place. Establishing them on a world where the Governor and his closest friends had just been assassinated by Slaaneshi cultists hidden in their own ranks was courting disaster. There were already too many political problems to be settled on this world, and a future Governor to be named.

And Nyx was already falling into the recruitment sphere of the Brothers of the Red. Asking for them to share a world with a new Chapter when the young Chapter hadn’t proved itself while the sons of Sanguinius bled at the Battle of the Death Star, Pavia, and Commorragh...it would be wrong. Wrong and insulting.

“Let’s see the good side,” Dragon smirked. “Given how many mountains of thanks we’re receiving from Bahamut, Portsmouth, and Smilodon now that they’ve been confirmed as Astartes’ bases, if one of our worlds is predisposed to the Third Legion’s gene-seed without using nobles as a recruitment pool, I don’t think we will have many difficulties in the upcoming negotiations.”

“Yes,” for once she had wondered if the screams of joy of certain planets could be heard across the interplanetary void separating them. “This is the main problem I see coming if no worlds of the Moros Sub-Sector reveal themselves fit to welcome this Space Marine Chapter. All the other Sub-Sectors will have at least one group of ‘giant protectors’ to call for help, but from Omsk to Wuhan, there are no Space Marines.”

In several aspects, it wasn’t too bad. Fay troops were beginning to build themselves a solid reputation, there would still be a Naval base at Wuhan, and Knight walkers would be available to defend the Sub-Sector, not to mention the Inquisitorial facilities prepared at Kolskov.

But there were politics to keep in mind, and what politicians of the Moros Sub-Sector would care was they had no Space Marines to break the xenos or any type of enemies trying to invade the Nyx sector again in the future.

“The Suebi Sub-Sector has also no Chapter of Astartes to defend itself.”

“Judging by the job their ‘Hierophant’ has done these last decades, I think half of the worlds there don’t deserve one,” Missy retorted darkly.

“Missy, most of the people living there can’t pay the price because their leaders are criminally incompetent.”

“I know! I know! But you have to admit, the temptation is great to do exactly that. And they’re not just criminally incompetent, Dragon. They’re venal, corrupt, tyrannical, and their despotic rule weakens the rule of the Imperium year after year. At some point, the worse a regime gets, the more there’s only the gun pointed at your head and religion to keep men and women away from insurrection. I’m not saying they have to equal our successes, but look at Nyx! Unemployment is in free fall, we have managed to strangle a super-inflation push in the cradle, and the living condition of the average Nyxian family is getting better and better everywhere!”

This was not counting the astronomical records of people volunteering to work in the PDF, the Guard, the Mechanicus, the Templar Sororitas and most of the organisations having done their duty in Operation Caribbean.

“The Suebi Sub-Sector did not have us.”

“It didn’t have a lot of important people which made easier for us to reform Nyx,” the Regent of Nyx – until the legitimate owner came back, of course – whispered. “Anyway, we are going to have to put the fear of the God-Emperor in certain rulers there. And there’s a rebellion to break.”

“And it will certainly have to be you who will have to crush it.”

Missy nodded. With the billions of Tech-Priests incoming, the mountain of great infrastructure projects, and the millions of things keeping her attention, Dragon couldn’t leave Nyx at that time. Maybe in a decade when things had calmed down, but not now. Taylor was still travelling back and the Enterprise was certainly going to need several months of reparation before it could be included in any military operation. Dennis would be busy with his new private fleet, and his powers didn’t allow him to be an army-killer by himself, unfortunately. Contessa had disappeared, while judging by the evidence, Doormaker was certainly dead. And Leet was thoroughly unsuitable.

“The Spartan Rebellion,” the young woman deadpanned. “I dread in advance the kind of jokes certain of our friends and associates are going to make.”

“Don’t worry, there are more than three hundred rebels on the field,” Dragon answered in a dignified pose which presaged nothing good. “And since Sparta is a very cold planet, I rather doubt the opposition will consist of half-naked warriors with bronze shields and spears guarding a mountainous pass.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Svalbard Sector**

**Tigrus System**

**Tigrus**

**6.444.296M35**

**Private David Gosdan**

David thought the Tech-Priest in front of them could have taken lessons in speeches’ redaction before trying to ‘motivate’ them.

“Your mission, guardsmen, should you decide to accept it, is to escort this Leman Russ Vanquisher along the production line and ensure it is properly armed to fight the enemies of the Omnissiah. As always, should you fail, it is likely the orks will eat your corpses and this manufactorum will be lost. You have three seconds to present your objections. None? Excellent, proceed!”

David, like most of the guardsmen of the Fay 29th present, thought the order was anything but simple. Some greenskins had arrived from nowhere, and now the manufactorum they were supposed to defend was a scene of war and flames.

“You heard the cogboys!” screamed the Colonel. “Escort the Leman Russ Vanquisher! Kill every Ork you see. Charge! For the God-Emperor! For Lady Weaver!”

“FOR THE GOD-EMPEROR!”

They charged. They were plenty of Orks trying to assault the hulls where the Leman Russ tanks were build, but they were far less terrifying than the nest of mechadendrites, the strange robots of the Mechanicus, and far less intimidating than the Commissars.

The Guard regiment opened fire, delivering a coordinated fire of lasers which killed half of the xenos. Entire stocks of las-cells were emptied, and then the greenskins appeared to understand only one thing would provide them victory that day.

“WAAAAAAAGGGGHH!”

From all over the manufactorum halls, they came. Arms filled with mechanical parts and weapons stolen from Tigrus, the Orks were ugly and had this crazy looks in the eyes. But they weren’t as big as the training pict-casts the officers had shown them months ago, and the Fay 29th answered the challenge.

“BAYONET WALL! STOP THEM!”

Green blood poured everywhere, and David felt his arms were going to break when an ork two heads taller than himself impaled itself on his weapon, and yet tried to bite him as a disgusting torrent of pus and blood left its body.

But David Gosdan held. Because a guardsman had to hold the line, and as he held, another guardsman adjusted his lasgun behind him and shot the greenskin repeatedly in the head.

The monster died. The mass of monsters died. One by one, their surroundings were a scene of dead greenskins and bloodied but triumphant humans.

“Good work!” barked the Tech-Priest who was crouched next to the engines of one of his Leman Russ Vanquisher. “Leave a half-company to help my assistants dispose of the xenos in the incinerators, then choose one of the Leman Russ Vanquishers to escort! Time is of the mechanical essence!”

David Gosdan and most of the 3rd Company were assigned to one such armoured vehicle to protect before news came in the Wuhanese regiment supposed to cover the southern approaches had been routed, and now they would have to escort and pilot the tanks too, despite having received no training to do so.

“I hope Governor Dalten will tell the Saint to shoot these incompetent Wuhanese nobles!” commented their Lieutenant before they charged again in another machine’s atelier and began to kill more Orks.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Approaches of Nyx VI**

**Ark Mechanicus *Iron Revenant***

**3.510.296M35**

**Tech-Priest Rho-36**

Rho-36 had thought he would like his visit to the Nyx System. Setting aside little things like a gigantic STC database, the planets and the infrastructure orbiting the white star called Sapphire-Sun by the Nyxians were worthy of study. Comparing the data obtained from tithe-reports of 280M35, his analyses made clear a lot of assets, be they SDF ships, transports, Mechanicus relic hulls, foundries, and mega space-farms had not been there a decade ago.

This was a system in full industrial expansion, with thousands of workers and Tech-Priests arriving every day to add their own expertise and efforts to this immense technological enterprise.

The last word almost gave him the urge to chuckle. Yes, maybe the Saint of the Omnissiah-Emperor had the right idea when she chose the name of her flagship.

And then his master repeated impatiently his order, and Rho-36’s amusement disappeared faster than you could say ‘Great Cog’.

“Master, I have a feeling this is a very, very bad idea.”

Someone had to say it, and Alpha Primus had once again fled seconds ago when he wasn’t looking. Where was the courage of the Astartes, seriously?

“Rho, we have already done this...five times in real conditions.”

“And it failed once, great Archmagos.” The Adeptus Mechanicus of Mars was still in ignorance of what exactly had happened that day, but neither Rho-36 nor anyone employed among Cawl’s many servants was likely to forget that disaster, and those who would come after them in a few centuries and would gain the clearance to consult the databases would not forget it either. “If it goes wrong in a system like this...”

The Basileia would likely pursue Cawl into the Intergalactic Void in vengeance. And that was likely the best scenario the Master of the *Iron Revenant* could hope for. At some point, even the seal of Lord Commander of the Imperium Roboute Guilliman was insufficient, especially opposed to the holy wrath of an endless swarm.

“It will not fail. The conditions are optimal, and Nyx Secundus will be perfect for this experiment. All we need is to replicate the Enigma impulsion-matrixes and generate enough power.”

More than ever, Rho-36 wished the *Enterprise* translated right at this moment in the system. Or failing this miracle, the Ark Mechanicus *El Dorado* or another important Mechanicus flagship would be appreciated. With an important emissary of the Fabricator-General present, maybe his Master would not have the audacity to prepare what he had in mind for months.

But while many ships having survived Commorragh had arrived to Nyx, the Battleships had been dispersed by the Warp in fury and it would take weeks, maybe months for the major hulls to emerge from the Sea of Souls. It was dubious either Lady Weaver or Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix had warned their subordinates of Nyx of the content of a certain conversation and how to prevent his Master from doing something he had not the authorisation for. The Victor of Commorragh and her lieutenants believed Cawl was bound directly for the Neptunia System. By the time astropathic communications could contact the Enterprise, there was a high chance Lady Weaver would be at the Mandeville Point outside Nyx Sextus.

And by then it would be too late.

“The Fabricator-General himself was the precursor of this technology during the War of the Beast. Therefore it is not forbidden.”

“Master, I don’t think most of the Archmagi gathered here were born during the War of the Beast.”

“It’s their problem, not mine. Now enough with that whining. I want the platforms and the matrixes ready for preliminary deployment in two standard days.”

“Yes, Master.”

**Nyx III**

**3.520.296M35**

**Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund**

Lydia-Beta Rosamund was angry. She had come to this informal meeting of the Mechanicus Council thinking the hour taken on her tight schedule would be used to optimise the new wave reinforcements about to be sent to help her Forge World of birth, but instead all the Master of the Magisterium and the Master of the Skitarii had in their apparatuses and cogitators could be summed-up in one world: Cawl.

“We should arrest him,” Archmagos-Malagra Montcalm Iota-1 repeated for what had to be the twentieth time in less than ten minutes. “He and his radical faction are up to no good, orbiting around Nyx Sextus.”

“There is no evidence to back up your claims,” Alpha-Archmagos Epsilon-10 Blue-Crimson retorted. “And for all the respect I have for you Archmagos-Malagra, I am not going to dispatch thousands of Skitarii to arrest one of the most senior Archmagi of Mars without incontrovertible evidence or Lady Weaver’s orders. His Ark Mechanicus *Iron Revenant* and the other capital ships are by Mechanicus law his sovereign territory.”

“We are going to regret it if we don’t act now!”

The Gryphonne IV-born Master of Skitarii murmured something in an enciphered cant which was no doubt not terribly polite, before turning his attention towards her.

“What is the situation in War Zone Tigrus?”

“The Ork onslaught has been delayed and their reinforcements have finally stopped coming,” the Mistress of Artisans reported. “So far and thanks to the Guard tithe the Svalbard Sector received, the High Command of Tigrus has been able to counter-attack and limit the conquest of the greenskins to one large beachhead. One Fellblade and two Vanquisher production lines were in danger for several hours, but Fay, Harbin, and Kolaev troops have been able to destroy the Ork raiders. Legio Solaria has destroyed eight Gargants at the cost of two Warhounds and one Reaver. Five standard hours ago, the casualty estimates of the greenskins were rising above three hundred million, and this includes sixty percent of their fleet.”

“But you still need reinforcements,” of all her eleven peers of the Council, Archmagos-Malagra Montcalm Iota-1 was evidently the one Lydia-Beta disliked the most. Like Dragon had commented once, the Master of the Magisterium was a ‘condescending and ultra-conservative jerk’. Alas, Lady Weaver had a privileged relationship with Accatran for their expertise in Space Marine’s equipment construction, and Montcalm Iota-1 was one of the prices the Forge World aligned with the Blood Angels had demanded for the Nyx-advantageous partnership.

“Master of the Magisterium,” Alpha-Archmagos Epsilon-10 Blue-Crimson canted, “the Svalbard Sector is attacked by a WAAGH which is stronger than the one Nyx endured, if we don’t count the battle-moon destroyed at Brockton. This is the kind of Extremis-level threat few Forge Worlds can fight on their own, and I find the Mistress of Artisans’ concerns for her Forge World perfectly understandable. The Fellblade and Vanquisher tanks ordered a few years ago have all arrived as logically promised. Tigrus’ Tech-Priests upheld their contracts and prayers. Are we going to abandon them when any other Forge World a member of our Council call home might need similar assistance in the next years or decades?”

“Lady Weaver has already sent the Lamenters to the Svalbard Sector.”

“And so far, we have no Astropath confirming they have arrived on the frontlines,” which wasn’t surprising, as even a swift Warp travel from Pavia to Tigrus was still measured in standard months, not days. “I suppose I could make available a couple of millions Skitarii, provided the transports are available. They need the battle-experience, and logically the return of the databases from Commorragh will only marginally improve the performance of my command in anti-ork operations.”

“And if the millions of Orks which have disappeared somewhere along the Eastern Fringe are striking another important industrial Forge World?”

“Then we will help this Forge, provided they are as true to their word as Tigrus was,” Epsilon-10 Blue-Crimson declared calmly. “Was this supposed to be a difficult query?”

Archmagi were rarely suffocating of rage, but Montcalm Iota-1 seemed extremely ready to learn. Ignoring superbly the anger of his colleague, the Gryphonne Alpha-Archmagos changed the subject.

“I understand you have finished your selection of Artisans for the study and first-crafting of the *Lightsaber* template.”

“Yes, one hundred and forty-four Artisans of twenty-four different Forge Worlds have been selected for this project.” It had not been a small ordeal; everyone among the Nyx priesthood wanted to see and work upon the new prime copies the warships were bringing back to Nyx. “The resources delivered are at a satisfying level, and we are only awaiting the return of the Chosen of the Omnissiah to begin.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Chernobog Sector**

**Catachan System**

**Catachan’s Orbit**

**5.600.296M35**

**Major-General Jack ‘Death’ Schwarz**

Billions of guardsmen, Jack knew, were saying to the family they left behind they would come back.

It was not always a lie. There were truly Army Groups or Crusade armies sent back to their homeworlds if the Lord Militant in charge had an idea how to lead his troops to victory. What Generals and Admirals rarely mentioned was that when accounting for Warp travel, the soldiers too often returned to the homes they had departed from and met the grandchildren of their brothers and sisters.

But at least these guardsmen returned home.

Catachan guardsmen – and guardswomen – didn’t.

Thousands of kilometres above the green-and-blue orb where he was born was the closest Jack Schwarz and any Catachan who had gone off-world could return to Catachan. The moment you took a transport and went through the Munitorum’s decontamination procedures, your body stopped evolving. The toxins saturating the air didn’t.

Landing again on Catachan would result in his death in less than one hour, unless he decided to wear a void-sealed integral power armour...which was not exactly the kind of equipment a Catachan liked to live into.

“Home looks like so peaceful, seen like this.” The Major-General wasn’t someone to discourse on beauty and all sort of idiocies, but Catachan from above was truly beautiful, so pure, so much greenness separated by narrow seas and serpentine large rivers.

“Our green hell,” Colonel Sean Caiman chuckled.

“Yes, our green hell.” It was the planet which killed so many sons and daughters before they were in age to walk. Even Cadia wasn’t that savage teaching its children how the galaxy worked. On Catachan, survival was truly never something one could take for granted. “Any outstanding changes I should be aware of?”

“The ants have sculpted a statue of our new Living Saint,” the other veteran informed him. “And no, I’m not joking.”

“Really? You’re sure it is Her?”

The ants were intelligent, but why would they sculpt a statue of a human who had never set a foot on Catachan?

“According to the scouts who ventured close enough to inspect it, the colonies added a pair of wings recently to the statue, so yes I am certain.” Sean grimaced. “Whatever the Saint did to the ants, it sure as the Golden Throne didn’t make them less aggressive. Sergeant June lost five aspirants in an ambush, and several thousand ants of their warrior caste pursued them for three days.”

Well, now this made Jack wanted to meet his new boss immediately.

“We’re going to Nyx, so we will be able to ask the question why ants decided on this ‘honour’. Speaking of which?”

“You arrived far sooner than expected from the Throneworld,” the commanding officer of the Catachan 95th, the famous ‘Water-drakes’, was quick to disabuse him of any hope he might have on the subject. “The thousand boys and girls I was promised to bring the regiment back to strength are decontaminated right now, but I have three companies still deployed on Samar.”

“Samar? It’s quite close to the Maelstrom.”

Sean Caiman nodded.

“Ryza and an alliance of Forge Worlds have been really busy destroying outpost after outpost of hereteks, pirates, and heretics during the last five years. No one made any confidence to us, but it’s obvious they are going all out to reach Sarum and destroy the Hell Forges of the Arch-Enemy.”

Good for the cogboys if they managed to do it. Jack Schwarz had begun his career fighting on a world against metallic horrors which shouldn’t exist, and the faster these things were turned into scrap, the better for everyone.

“Four months before your regiment is gathered here, then?”

“It’s the Munitorum, Jack. Count five or six months.”

“Not this time. I have a seal of Paul Oberstein that my priorities are the Munitorum’s priority.”

“That will help,” Sean nodded. “We will have to put the fear of the Catachan warriors into the skulls of the scribes, but it will help. Four months, and we should have a regiment between nine and ten thousand boys and girls.”

“Good, because after that the real part of the training will begin.”

And the two Catachan officers began to laugh at the future misery of the unaware boys and girls about to meet the infamous standard Catachan expected for their average private.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**3.690.296M35**

**Minister of Justice Missy Byron**

Being the Regent of Nyx had been easy before Commorragh, despite the mountains of paperwork trying to bury her office in data-containers and useless files every day.

Now that the Battle of Commorragh was recognised by the galaxy as a whole, it was definitely not easy anymore. The galaxy seemed to have recognised Taylor Hebert wasn’t going to disappear into a black hole anytime soon, and that they may as well try to play the game as long as she lived.

So not only there was more paperwork – including the cumbersome and inefficient Administratum vellum – these days it seemed every Governor of the Sector wanted something from Nyx’s forges, a political favour, or the confirmation they were doing a fine job in the name of the ‘Living Saint’.

A lot of them she answered by indirect sentences telling them to wait for the legitimate Basileia to return. The men and women ruling the one hundred-plus worlds of the Sector had failed to address most of these issues before Operation Caribbean was planned, they might as well wait a few days.

On the other hand, there were many things which couldn’t be handled that way. So she was spending hour after hour of boring meetings and long audiences, and it was boring. Boring!

And there wasn’t any action on Nyx to be found. As the first rumours of Pavia and Commorragh – especially the astronomical xenos kill-count – had spread thorough the Hives, the few gangs which had managed to avoid purges, Arbites raids, and Inquisitorial attention had by a common accord decided to become ‘model citizens’, depriving her from worthwhile punching balls and opportunities to break the monotony of her days.

Missy could still train with the lethal assassin-robots of the Mechanicum, but it wasn’t the same thing.

She wanted action. Damn it, everyone but Dragon and she had been involved, and the Mistress of Dragons – unofficial Nyxian nickname – was involved in so many military projects her quota of explosions was far more than adequate.

The young Shaker wanted a stop to this endless series of inauguration of bio-domes, Amphitrite water distillation plants, and new habitation zones. It was good to give the citizens of the Imperium good living conditions and non-toxic things to eat and drink, but it wasn’t for her.

Fortunately, she had the operation on Sparta to look forwards to. Normally, Missy shouldn’t be involved in this at all: her only links to an Adeptus were to the Arbites – and wasn’t it a morale-crusher to know the Big High Lord controlling this organisation was an arrogant idiot, more interested by his political plots than looking in the mirror and seeing the reflection of a complete jerk?

But the Frateris Templars had failed, and judging by the Astropaths sent in emergency with the first supply transports to the Penal World at war, the Adeptus Ministorum was not going to find the forces in the Suebi-Sector to regain the upper hand.

Asking the Adeptus Mechanicus to send the Skitarii would just cause a nuclear detonation to the political status quo. The Guard forces were needed at Tigrus, Iris, and Wuhan among many other theatres.

The Arbites’ mandate would be a nice way to solve the problem...after wasn’t the military violence simply the result of former prisoners having decided the judicial system of the Imperium wasn’t for them?

The Hierophant and his Pontifexes were likely going to have a heart attack when they heard how she proposed to solve the Suebi Sub-Sector, but in her opinion, it was grand time they received a good punishment for their dictatorial rule.

“Lady Regent? Priority transmissions from Nyx Sextus’ command. Numerous capital warships from Operation Caribbean have exited the Warp.”

“At last!” The parahuman grumbled before giving a totally insincere smile and saying a ‘good, very good!’ which must have fooled no one.

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**3.695.296M35**

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

Taylor knew that in theory, a Living Saint was supposed to maintain an image of utter confidence at all times. She nonetheless sighed in relief like half of the bridge when they exited the Warp to find themselves in the Nyx System.

“Warp translation complete. We have drifted away by forty thousand kilometres from our targeted coordinates.”

On a ground campaign, this would have been a monumental mistake. In space and with the Warp conditions they had met to return from Pavia, the Lady General was not going to reprimand anyone.

“You can deactivate the Gellar Fields, Archmagos. Return the crew to their usual watch and set a slow course to Nyx. I want to know the percentage of warships which have preceded us here.”

The panels and stations on the *Enterprise*’s bridge were shining reassuring colours, including the parts monitoring the now inactive Gellar Fields, but Taylor was not under illusion the fleet had gotten away intact and undamaged. Two Achelieux Navigators had collapsed in exhaustion during this agitated journey, and many warships had already been under temporary repairs.

“Ninety-one percent of the ships answer our challenges with the correct codes,” the Quayran-born Archmagos answered after several seconds. “But there are several other starships which are towed to Nyx Sextus and we have two more Warp translations fifty thousand kilometres away. It seems we aren’t the last ship to arrive.”

Taylor nodded before the walls lit to show the Nyx System and the myriad of starships limping back home. Thankfully, all the major capital ships seemed to be there, though certain were going to be good for months if not years of major repairs. The scars left by Commorragh were now reopened as the navigation into the Warp had been too open. Even the Enterprise, for all its toughness and luck, was in dire need of reparations for several armament sections, new personnel, and plenty of auspexes’ systems battered into oblivion by the Eldar attacks.

“I think our arrival has been noticed,” Gavreel pointed out as suddenly the communications’ array received a torrent of message of congratulations, thanks and ecstatic screams.

“No, you think?”

The High Lords had not agreed to give her a triumph, but it was a guard of honor of dozens of starships which was hastily rushing to welcome the *Enterprise* and the warships closest to it. Many of them were Mechanicus hulls, though the Navy’s complement was anything but small.

“I notice the pict-casts you gave us for study have suffered some modifications,” Huscarl Diamantis began as more and more information arrived on the hololith. “There are five new docks on the Nyx Sextus’ Navy facilities which were not there when you left.”

“I had approved several expansion projects from Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan,” Taylor replied quietly to her Dawnbreaker Guard. “I see she has been very busy in my absence. There are five more solar-powered stations, two mega-farms, and several mining facilities which were still drawings on the plans when we mustered for Pavia.”

These weren’t the only changes, evidently. There were massive transports from different Forge Worlds, and given their size and the identification codes they boasted, this meant several of the orders and technology transfers agreed after the Battle of the Death Star had finally arrived. And as the minutes passed and the Enterprise’s augurs were able to give her an idea what was happening in the inner system, it was evident the storm of activities and projects weren’t limited to Nyx Sextus or Nyx Quintus.

But maybe this was because she had been away for several months. When you woke up every day with the list of projects accomplished and the progress of those ongoing, it was difficult to have the before/after pict-cast of an entire system.

“Isn’t this system-building not proceeding a bit too fast?” the Forgefather of the Salamanders wondered out loud.

“In many ways, yes,” Taylor whispered so only the Space Marines and a few senior Tech-Priests could hear it. “Dragon and most of the Mechanicus Council had coherent plans, you know. Shipyards-building over the next centuries, seizing contract after contract usually destined for the Samarkand Sector until we were in position to dictate terms to most of the Quadrant, investments in several high-profile Chartist fleets among many other things.”

All of these plans had to...not being scrapped, it would be unfair to tell that, but they needed to be extensively modified.

“But we live in an unsafe galaxy, and we can’t afford a slow and prudent development. Commorragh has made sure the enemies of the Imperium have turned their eyes in our direction, and the abominations and their servants won’t forget what we’ve done.”

The Ruinous Powers would be idiots to.

A large core of officers and veteran troops, including Space Marines, Skitarii, Guardsmen, and Navy sailors had survived Commorragh, along with plenty of data on what could hurt Chaos under all its forms.

“We will need a competent Lord Admiral to rule over this,” Techmarine Renaldo of the Blood Drinkers said.

“I understand the selection process has already begun at Kar Duniash,” Taylor wished she could have had a voice in this, but given how swiftly certain factions having supported von Kisher had disappeared from the political arenas, it was best not to step on too many toes. The High Lord of the Imperial Navy was already not a great admirer of her exploits, and she needed to stay in good term with the Segmentum authorities. “But it isn’t the only high position I will need someone competent for.”

The Regency of one of the Tharsis Forges was going to be especially disputed, of this there was zero doubt. There were something like two hundred-plus forges in the Tharsis Quadrant of Mars – it was where the name had come from – and the greatest of all was obviously the titanic Olympus Mons, property of the Fabricator-General and siege of the Martian Parliament.

Obviously the Forge she had obtained was less valuable than that: but the Labeatis Forge, as it was called still delivered an impressive quantity of highly advanced machines and technology to other Forge Worlds and other planets every year.

“Millions of pilgrims have already rushed here,” the black-haired commander wished Gamaliel was exaggerating, but indeed it appeared hundreds of ships filled to the brink with pilgrims had translated into the Nyx System for the last days. And unlike the Tech-Priests’ Magi and Archmagi which could be trusted to have hulls and environmental systems in excellent condition, a large percentage of these starships was...let’s just say she would never choose to travel in the Warp with one of those. Most seemed to really, really need major repairs, and not just in the Gellar Fields or the engines.

“Yes.” It was going to be horrible, but realistically, there was not the shadow of a chance in a million to stop it now. Maybe if there hadn’t been Commorragh, she could have stayed a normal Sector Lady...but this slim hope was completely dashed now. There were astropathic and vox-messages coming from millions of voices, and it looked like they had transports, be they Gubernatorial envoys, or improvised pilgrim ships from all over the Quadrant and beyond. There were already immense crowds gathering on Nyx and every inhabited planet, and the numbers placed the pilgrim’s effectives from off-world over three million.

“Err...my Lady?” Techmarine Dyson approached with Techmarine Silveira of the Death Knights.

“Yes?”

“There are strange emissions next to Nyx Sextus, specifically around Cawl’s squadron.”

Taylor turned immediately her head away from the storm of cheering and congratulations raging across the Nyx System.

“Cawl is here? He was supposed to be at Neptunia!”

“He is here,” Battle-Brother Thomas Theisman of the White Templars confirmed. “Or at least his ships are. They are orbiting around the moon of Nyx Sextus Tertius. There are a lot of strange emissions, I don’t know-“

“I do.” Taylor closed her eyes for a few seconds. Surely even a Radical Archmagos was not sufficiently crazy to do this in front of tens of thousands ships and witnesses. Surely...

Oh, who was she kidding. Cawl loved proving he was above the other Tech-Priests and ‘limits’ were something he distorted all the time.

“Establish me a priority communication with the *Iron Revenant*. I have-“

There was an immense flash on the hololith.

It took much to surprise her these days. After one Ork moon, one Space Hulk and a World Engine, Taylor had grown used to the gigantic size of many Starforts and other mega-sized constructs. The Blackstone Fortress *Will of Eternity* had just been the cherry on the cake.

One more time she was proven wrong.

The moon of Nyx Sextus Tertius, a mass of rocks and ice slightly heavier and larger than Earth’s Moon, had disappeared.

Seconds later, several men and women fainted on the bridge, and many who didn’t gibbered incoherently.

Seconds later, and the hololithic brutally changed around Nyx Secundus.

Before today, Luke’s Mine had one moon: it was Luke’s Vigil, where the main Departmento Munitorum’s depot of Nyx was built in all its glory of inefficiency and bureaucratic complexity.

Now it had two.

“By the Golden Throne, he has-“

The words failed Emperor’s Champion Sigenandus of the Black Templars, which mustn’t happen every day. The rest of the *Enterprise*’s bridge – and certainly the rest of the Battleship and the fleet – was in a similar state of shock.

“Yes, Archmagos Dominus Belisarius Cawl has just teleported one of the moons of Nyx Sextus to Nyx Secundus.”

After she had expressively told him not to.

The Basileia didn’t know if she was supposed to facepalm, scream, or sigh. Already she could hear the Mechanicus Priesthood beginning to generate loud shrieks of outrage across the entire Nyx System.

“Puriel.”

“Yes my Lady?”

“Take eleven other Dawnbreaker Guards with you, and arrest Archmagos Cawl.” The Lady General sighed heavily. “I want him alive and in a state to confess.”

“It will be my greatest pleasure.”

***Vulkan’s Arsenal* Shipyard**

**Magos-Draco Dogma Dragon Richter**

“He has teleported a moon! He has teleported a moon!”

Any other time, Dragon would have quite a laugh at the shocked cant of Archmagos-Malagra Montcalm Iota-1.

But for this particular event, it was particularly justified.

Dragon had heard humanity had lost a lot of technology since the Great Crusade, and these losses were minor and irrelevant compared to the abyssal disasters of the Age of Strife.

There weren’t many surviving records in the possession of the Adeptus Mechanicus of the era which had before the Warp Storms made safe FTL travel an utopia, but the few Mars had safeguarded and spread across its dominions displayed an image of humanity altering planets, moons, and even entire stellar systems as if they were Gods.

This wasn’t an exaggeration: there were too many proofs of macro-stellar projects engineered by Mankind, which now were displayed as derelict ruins instead of the jewels of technology they had been intended to be.

But this was a long over era. The Mechanicus had tried its best to recover the most important relics of that era, but a good look at most of the Forge Worlds was enough to tell you it was an incomplete work which had likely millennia to go, and that was from an optimistic point of view.

It had held true until today and a certain Archmagos decided to teleport one moon across most of the Nyx System.

“I don’t think it is teleportation technically speaking,” High Magos Thomson Siemens corrected once he had finished gaping like a fish. “There was no Warp activity, no alert from any Warp breach or any kind of psychic phenomenon activated to move Nyx Sextus Tertius. Based on the readings, I think it was some kind of highly-advanced gravitic tunnel propelling the moon from one end of the system to another.”

“Your theory has merit,” Lexico Arcanus Fowl Opt-6A2-Tertius acknowledged. “But where in the holy name of the Omnissiah did Cawl find such a technology?”

“On Mars, most likely,” Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan replied grimly. “There have always been persistent rumours that the War of the Beast saw macro-teleportation technology be employed to save several important Forge Worlds from the greenskins.”

“I thought that these experiments were discontinued due to the high level of collateral damage they caused,” Archmagos Reductor Stefan Delta-Septimus canted thoughtfully. “This was decades ago, but I seem to remember a system where a ‘teleportation’ of this magnitude destroyed three or four planets.”

The Master of Destruction looked at the various data-terminals analysing the data coming from all over the system, but aside from the gravitic alterations of Nyx Sextus losing a moon and Nyx Secundus gaining one, nothing had been destroyed. A few transport captains close to Luke’s Mine may have had a heart attack as a moon materialised with little warning, but Cawl had well-calculated his titanic stunt: no transports, mining extractors or other space assets had been destroyed, and the orbital and ground infrastructure of the Mining World, reinforced in the last years, was enduring this new gravitic intrusion without any notable destruction.

“I just want to know what possessed Cawl to try...that!”

“I think that’s the easiest part,” Dragon began. “These moons had a thin atmosphere, but the freezing temperatures made them completely unsuitable for colonisation by any living organism. But if you get rid of the cold, there are enormous quantities of ice on these moons, which can become liquid water in orbit around Nyx Secundus.”

“True,” conceded the Master of Mining and Metallurgy Unity-Victor Omega-Manville, “but given the brutal environmental changes the moon of Nyx Sextus Tertius is going to experience, it’s still going to be years minimally before we can settle unaugmented humans on the surface.”

“Unless,” Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies said smugly, having followed thought similar to Dragon’s, “this is no colonisation project for humans. You are quite right the moon will not be suitable for human colonisation, but for a species used to Death World conditions, this moon will be perfect.”

“The Catachan Ants,” grunted High Magos Thomson Siemens. “Of course. The Basileia will be close enough to protect the moon or suppress an insect insurrection, and the production of Bacta will not be vulnerable to a lightning raid from inimical parties unless our enemies want to expend their lives in the process.”

“This changes a lot of things, indeed.” The Master of Healing nodded calmly. “I suppose I could emplace a fortified lab upon the moon with an orbital elevator, and leave the rest of the moon to the ants. Depending on the willingness of Lady Weaver, we could easily multiply by twelve the Bacta production before the end of the year.”

This wasn’t as spectacular as the sentence implied, since according to the latest reports, twenty cubic metres of Red Bacta and one cubic metre of Blue Bacta were produced every month during the year 295M35, one cubic metre representing approximately one hundred thousand vials of life-saving medicine.

The Master of the Magisterium was still in ‘very angry mode’, however.

“CAWL MUST BE PUNISHED!” The Archmagos of Anvillus shouted, his self-control extremely notable by its absence.

“This is not your decision to make,” Lydia-Beta Rosamund interrupted his rant in an icy tone. “This system belongs to Lady Weaver in the name of the Emperor, and the Chosen of the Omnissiah is the highest representative of the Martian Parliament here. The life of the Radical is in her hands.”

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar**

Archmagos Belisarius Cawl was escorted in the officer’s reception hall of the *Enterprise* in a silence only broken by the loud footsteps of the Space Marines escorting him.

The Master of Exploration wished the gravity of the instant would have inspired Cawl to present a penitent or mortified attitude, but this was too much to ask. Instead, the Radical of Radicals literally radiated his smugness into the Noosphere.

The only concession to his pride was the bow he made to Lady Weaver, and even then Desmerius had a feeling that if the Archmagos had found a loophole to avoid it, he would have tried to exploit it.

“Archmagos Belisarius Cawl,” the golden-winged woman’s eyes flashed dangerously, omitting the dozens of titles her interlocutor had achieved over the last millennium. “Do you have a hearing problem?”

“No, Lady Weaver.” Cawl answered decisively.

“Really?” The sarcasm was so evident in the insect-mistress’ voice one could have cut mechadendrites with it. “Because I seem to remember a conversation between you and I where I expressly forbid you to teleport any planetoid falling into my governance!”

“Technically, the moon of Nyx Sextus Tertius wasn’t under your jurisdiction,” began in an innocent tone Cawl and Lankovar braced for the explosion sure to come. “It was owned by the Duke-“

“I know very well who owned that moon, ARCHMAGOS!” The last word had been almost screamed, and thousands of insects formed a miniature swarm next to the throne of the Basileia. “I also know that unless the Administratum and the nobility of Nyx have changed a lot, there is no possible way you could have purchased this satellite of Nyx Sextus before my return. But in your stunt, you are very lucky. The family owning the moon has decided to sell it to my person and to not press charges against you, in exchange of certain economic deals. So there will be no consequence from the Adeptus Administratum or any other branches of the Adeptus Terra.”

“Thank you, Lady Weaver.” Desmerius was impressed by the celerity events could happen where Taylor was concerned. Normally, it should have taken weeks to arrive to such a deal, not hours. The Master of Exploration supposed being a Living Saint, a Sector Lady, and a quadrillionaire could remove most of the obstacles on your path.

“Let there be no misunderstanding, Archmagos Cawl. By some miracle of the Machine-God, not a single life was lost in your insane ‘moon transfer’. No starship was destroyed, and though certain facilities on Nyx Secundus crumbled as the gravity was altered, most of them were old mining sites emptied long ago. I don’t know how much of this relied on competence and how much on luck, but know that if there had been men and women killed because of your unauthorised deed, you would have paid the price, even if I had to go prostrating myself in front of the Fabricator-General to obtain justice.”

The pressure of the golden aura was intensifying by the second, and each word rang with **Sacrifice** and **Truth**, not that Desmerius Lankovar would have been inclined to doubt this was a false-promise.

“I understand.”

“Yes, I think you can,” mercilessly continued the Peer of Terra. “Now since obviously you can’t be trusted to hold your oral promises, I understand the Mechanicus Council has a lot of data-slates and other bureaucratic forms to go through with you. You ignored tens of thousands of legal precedents and used a technology no Tech-Priest or citizen of the Imperium had ever used in living memory. The Adeptus Mechanicus and the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition are going to study your devices very, very seriously and assure me there are no heretek machines and other proscribed technologies used to teleport Nyx Sextus Tertius.”

“There won’t be cause for concern. The technology was adapted from a special series of gravitic experiments ordered by the Fabricator-General, that I repurposed and re-engineered for my own goals. Every part, every cogitator and part aboard the platforms and matrixes employed to teleport the moon are pure human technology.”

“So you say,” Lady Weaver told completely unimpressed, though it was hard to judge what she was thinking behind an emotionless face. “I think I will await the verdict of the Nyx Mechanicus Council before forging my own opinion on what constitutes techno-heresy and what isn’t. Now for your punishment.”

To say there was silence in the seconds after would be a lie. Hundreds of Tech-Priests clamoured for Cawl’s head, or at the very least stripping him from his Archmagos status. There were also cants of mind-wiping, ripping the implants out of someone’s flesh, conversion into a servitor.

“I would remiss in mentioning I have a mandate and a seal to justify my actions,” Cawl being Cawl, of course, could not help but unleash a new storm of shriek-cants and insults developed during the millennia of existence of the binaric language. The Archmagos advanced until he was one foot away from the insect-mistress and a shrouding device made impossible for any save Lady Weaver and her Space Marines to see what was presented. Neither Desmerius nor anyone else in the room knew what Cawl had let Taylor Hebert see, but apparently it was sufficient to prevent more punishments from being thrown on his head for his impertinence.

“The Nyx Mechanicus and the Inquisition will study your devices no matter what. You have gone way over the limits, and as a punishment the...ten million-plus forms of the administrative nightmare you landed on my lap are yours to complete before any of the affairs you decided to visit Nyx can be completed. Once you depart for Neptunia, you will be under extensive surveillance, you will terraform the four planets of this system, and under no circumstance are you to teleport any moon or proceed to any stellar, planetoid or moon alteration and transfer without my authorisation AND a majority of the Nyx Mechanicus Council. Am I clear?”

“Yes, yes you made yourself very clear. I will obey you will.”

“See that you do. Because next time, I will throw you in a pit with millions of my spiders and you will have all eternity to wonder about the perils of interpreting incorrectly my decisions.”

**The Eye of Terror**

**Sicarus**

**Dark Haven Bastion**

**Captain Kraas Theomor**

On Sicarus, the ‘good’ news was always outnumbered by the bad. Today was no exception to this rule.

“A glorious victory, Captain!” The new Dark Apprentice who had been assigned to him exclaimed. “You must have killed one hundred thousand of the heretical rats in a single battle!”

It was certainly true, and perhaps it was understating if anything the sheer number of corpses he and the company-strong force defending the Bastion of Dark Haven had rendered the giant rats into. The approaches of the fortress were literally covered in mountains of corpses, and the mortal forces under his command were busy burning the xenos in large pyres at the moment. His first reports had told one hundred thousand rats had been annihilated, but the more the disposal of the corpses progressed, the more it appeared his estimates of the enemy casualties were far too light.

“A victory which came at too high a cost,” Kraas replied, creating a look of incomprehension on the Apprentice’s face ‘decorated’ with the words of their Primarch.

“You told me you had three Legionnaires wounded and all of them would recover soon.”

In Kraas’ opinion, it was too high a cost too, given how long it had taken him to train these new Astartes to something approaching the level of competence shown during by the Great Crusade, but there was more immediate concern.

“We were forced to use roughly eight out of ten of our ammunition stockpiles to repel this assault,” the former Coryphaus newly returned to Captain rank reminded the inexperienced fool. “With so little explosive shells and proper depots available, I can’t properly launch a counter-raid and destroy the vermin in its lairs.”

And this meant that sooner or later – probably the former having fought ten times against the rats now – the upstart xenos worshipping an heretical travesty of a God would be back.

“I am a loyal son of Lorgar, and I stand ready to obey his orders. But if I must descend into the warrens, I need the specialised burrowing machines and important stocks of ammunition I requested three battles ago.”

Since those had never come, Kraas and the other Bastion Captains defending the northern approaches of the most important Necropolises-Cathedrals were forced to stay on the defensive and endure assault after assault of the rats, sallying only when the furry pests brought their damned unstable green bombs and other crazy contraptions.

“There are...” It was clear the Dark Apprentice was choosing his words carefully. “There have been industrial modifications, as demanded by the needs of the Great Armament and the orders of our Infallible Primarch.”

The Captain of the Seventeenth Legion would like the sound of this when the Night Lords began to profess a doctrine of peace and love for the mortals they preyed upon.

“And in practical terms this means?”

“Most of the heavy industry and the critical production lines are moved out in the orbital belts, along with billions of slaves. This is the will of our Primarch and the Pantheon approves.”

Kraas took only a few seconds to remove the thin veil of lies, and acknowledge the true reason this had been done: not in terms of efficiency, but to prevent more slaves from being swayed away from the worship of the Primordial Truth. At last the Dark Council had realised there were too many millions of mortals who had rallied the vermin, and the solution found was to make sure humans and xenos weren’t able to come in contact anymore.

“A wise decision from our Primarch, no doubt,” Kraas couldn’t say anything else needless to say. He was once again a Captain, but if what he truly felt at this moment arrived to the ears of a Dark Apostle, his death would come after an eternity of torments and not before Neverborn feasted several times upon his soul. “But this doesn’t solve my ammunition problem.”

“Do not concern yourself about this trifling matters,” when Dark Apprentices said that about logistics and ammunition consumption, Kraas Theomor wondered how much lower the Legion could fall. “There have been recent arrivals of Dark Mechanicum Magi to increase the productivity of our Forges. The campaign of Grand Apostle Ekodas will end in triumphant victory!”

“Assuredly.”

The problem with the rats is that you could win the most glorious and one-sided battles of existence, but no matter how fast you were, there were always hundreds escaping into their never-cursed-enough tunnels where no Astartes could follow.

And they always returned with larger forces.

This was worse than dealing with greenskins, and the lack of concern from the Council at their inability to truly remove the vermin disease contaminating Sicarus’ soil didn’t feel the Captain with much confidence wherever ‘triumphal victory’ was boasted about.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**3.710.296M35**

**Rogue Trader Dennis Peters**

Of course, within ten seconds of him landing on Nyx, Missy was here embracing him.

“So...Lord Rogue Trader Peters?”

Dennis groaned. Obviously, this was the first thing in the other Ward’s mind.

“You knew it was coming.” Commorragh had advanced the schedule and given him a small but powerful squadron when he expected a single ship, but the Warrant of trade itself wasn’t a surprise.

“Let me have my fun,” the other ex-member of the Wards said with a stern expression before she watched the women coming behind him and a large smile presaging nothing good arrived on her face. “And you’ve become a real womaniser along the way, I see. I knew Wolfgang’s influence would influence you one day.”

“Your friend didn’t sleep with me,” ex-Rogue Trader and Captain Olivia Cheshire was quick to deny.

“Though no lack of trying,” whispered his new Seneschal next to her sending the blue-haired women a half-threatening, half-amused glare.

It was, clearly, the wrong to say in front of Missy. The ‘Minister of Justice’ had only received Taylor’s astropathic messages, and Dennis was sure the insect-mistress had not elaborated much on his relationships.

“Oh? Now I want to hear all the details.” Sometimes, the Shaker could be more frightening than a Basileia or a demon, but it was a bit too late to interpose himself. For several minutes, Missy ‘borrowed’ Gabriela and Olivia, leaving him to discuss the weather and several naval projects with SDF officers.

This ‘interrogation’ ended when a Guard Colonel politely informed them it was time, and both Dennis and Missy went into the same aircar to descend to the southern Gates of Hive Athena. Even with the priority their vehicle was granted, the travel took maybe twice the time it would have taken on a normal day.

Dennis knew in his mind that ‘Hive’ in Low Gothic never truly reflected how many human beings lived on Nyx. It was a far easier name to utter than ‘thousands of square kilometres-spread megalopolis built on hundreds of urban levels’, but it didn’t do it justice.

There had been several moments, mainly on the Sanguinala, where you were forced to truly acknowledge how many billions people lived on the same planet, and it was humbling to think that by the standards of the Imperium and for all the investments the parahumans had attracted to it, it was not a highly-populated Hive World.

But today there was an Ovation. And outside of the walls of Hive Athena, it seemed like all the Nyxians had come, waiting in an unending and majestic crowd for their ruler. Even with the aircar giving them a view beyond what most spectators were given, there seemed to be no end on the horizon to the human tide. Many pilgrims and citizens able to afford the privilege had come the moment the Enterprise had emerged from the Warp, and the few days taken for the Battleship and its escorts to answer the honours of the starships on space had ensured the crowds were absolutely uncountable.

And it was just some percentage of the men, women and children watching. In every Hive and major settlement, the Mechanicus had arranged live retransmissions, and thousands of vid-casts would be replicated to give the other planets of the Sector a differed hololithic broadcast of the Ovation.

Dennis wasn’t going to say it was worth fighting across Commorragh, they had not gone through Hell for an Ovation, but the decorators and the organisers Missy had hired for the occasion had spent fortunes to make sure this would be memorable. There were golden and silver banners everywhere, and though Dragon was not anywhere in view, the time-stopping parahuman could see her touch in several banners of dragons and Space Marines. Tens of thousands of Planetary Defence troopers were waiting in two neat columns, therefore protecting the honour alley the forces of Commorragh would use to enter Hive Athena. Great effigies to the glory of the Emperor and Taylor had been prepared, and everything was breathing exaltation and celebrations.

“Ah, right on schedule,” Missy said as a loud golden bell rang and shouts began to echo, as several Guard orbital landers decelerated and a choreography of Aeronautica fighters accompanied them a few seconds before reaccelerating and leaving colourful dye into the sky.

And suddenly the silver and the red recently summoned went away to be replaced by shining gold. Dennis smiled as Missy for once stayed with her mouth open, because yes, for a few seconds, it seemed like the sky was burning in golden light. Acclamations of joy and applauses thundered however past the surprise, and they went even louder as a familiar gigantic moth descended from the high altitude the Mechanicum specialised transport has released her into the lower atmosphere.

“I suppose Taylor mentioned Lisa.”

“She failed to mention a few details,” the young woman who was about to relinquish the Regency of Nyx in a few minutes snorted.

Like at Pavia, the Mothra-type insect had the public in adoration before her, the rain of gold released by her wings and the ‘holy radiance’ shrouding her body like a halo.

The golden podium serving as a landing platform wasn’t missed. Not that it was ever but a small possibility, with vast quantities of sugar and fruits awaiting the good pleasure of the diva-Moth.

The thunder of applauses was phenomenal, and yet it was beaten mere seconds after, when the Dawnbreaker Guard and Taylor descended in power armour from the golden sky, without having taken the bother to use Thunderhawks or any transport. The Space Marines used their jet packs and other heavy equipment to slow down their descent, and Taylor...well, now that she had golden wings, the ruler of Nyx could truly *fly*.

The roar of approval when billions saw her could not wake up the dead, but it was a good try.

There was so much noise that in the years to come, the definition of ‘worldly powerful applause’ would be employed by certain flatterers.

The Ovation had truly begun, and the long day and night of festivities could begin.

**Lady General Taylor Hebert**

If the ceremony to welcome her had been a triumph, Taylor would have been given the right to wear the Imperial Laurels, which were more or less the laurels of the Roman Empire the Imperium painted in gold and adapted to the taste of the Terran times when the Great Crusade was fought across the galaxy.

Of course, if this had been a triumph, Taylor should have climbed atop a ‘Triumph vehicle’, generally a super-heavy vehicle specially built for the event, and the events of the day would have followed a protocol which was as ancient as it was ill-advised to modify less you wanted to attract the anger of certain traditionalist and ultra-conservative Adepts.

To begin with, only the participants of Operation Caribbean would have had the right to be involved in the large parade, the Space Marines would have had to take a subordinate role, the forces of each Adeptus were to be kept strictly separated, no civilian would have the permission to come aboard her transport...the exact number of rules would take years to properly establish, and there was a rumour a minor Adeptus existed on the Throneworld specifically to regulate the Triumphs.

If it truly existed, this group of bureaucrats shouldn’t be very busy: there had not been a triumph this decade, and with the Battle of Commorragh being refused one, it was likely the most powerful members of the Senatorum Imperialis were going to wait for a while before rewarding a war commander with one.

“I have never seen the people being so happy,” Cyrene Versailles commented as the vehicle they were parading upon was surrounded by millions of people. Thank the technology for advanced shields and sound-dampeners, otherwise they wouldn’t be able to have a proper conversation. “Of course I had never had the pleasure of having Ecclesiarchy envoys tell me I had now an unlimited budget to work on the monuments you ordered.”

The young woman raised an eyebrow at that. Both Cyrene and she knew how long the former ‘Blessed Lady’ had worked for diverse clients in the last millennia, so a ‘never before’ coming from her was near-extraordinary.

“Times are changing.” And it was probably the understatement of the decade. “I don’t intend to spend every Throne Gelt coming from Ophelia’s coffers on monuments to the Battles of Pavia and Commorragh, but since we are going to have millions of pilgrims visiting this Sector, I think it’s better to let see them other pilgrimage sites in order to avoid a repetition of the Terran queues here on Nyx.”

“I approve,” the Architect replied, “though I think you are extremely optimistic about managing the problem given your fantastic popularity these days.”

“Maybe it will decrease a bit over time,” Taylor sighed as the older woman regarded her like she had grown a second head. “And maybe not.”

The closest she was coming to the Gates of Hive Athena, the higher the density of the crowd, which was screaming, shouting, rising symbols of the Dawnbreaker Guard, the fleur-de-lys of the Ecclesiarchy, or makeshift aquila of the Imperium. Fortunately, there were millions of PDF men and women on duty to make sure the security measures were at least half-respected.

And each gesture of the hand she made in their direction was greeted by thunderous roars of approval, cheers beyond counting, and a genuine sensation of faith in her which was both exhilarating and terrifying for obvious reasons.

“The Custodes had an answer to your question, by the way.”

“Oh?” The simple word might seem innocent, but the tone wasn’t.

“Yes. The reason the Perfect City of Monarchia was razed was because behind a veneer of Emperor-worshipping in the city, the religious authorities of Khur were in league with the Ruinous Powers.”

Several emotions fought on the face of the immortal woman, before resignation won out.

“Of course,” the lips articulated with difficulty, “how stupid we all were in these days. I presume the...mistake was acknowledged before the end of the Heresy?”

“Yes, it was. I was not allowed to read for long a certain ultra-classified document, but by all accounts, His Majesty realised after the Drop Site Massacre that his belief the actions of the Word Bearers were only treasonous by giving a cover to the cultists of the Arch-Enemy was in error.”

Cyrene wasn’t stupid. She knew the implications of what was hinted here.

“Many of the Space Marines were already agents of the Ruinous Powers long before the Traitor Primarch went on the path of damnation.”

“Yes. In hindsight, the Emperor should have massacred the Seventeenth Legion in front of the ruins of Monarchia, or at least assessed the loyalties of the Legionnaires one by one, no matter how consuming it would have proved.”

The action that day had been utterly counter-productive, they both knew it, even if the divine status of the Emperor this millennium made it impossible to say out loud when Inquisitors and Ecclesiarchy Priests were so close to them.

“Was the Seventeenth always predestined to fall?”

“No,” Taylor answered immediately. “If there’s something the monsters of the Warp love to pretend, it’s that everything was always predestined to happen like it does. But it’s a lie. They want us to believe they are omnipotent, but Commorragh has proven beyond doubt they aren’t invincible. And at the end of the road, they will get what they deserve.”

The Three and the Aspect of Chaos would pay for every dream of humanity they had brutally murdered since humanity existed.

“The future, whatever their slaves believe, doesn’t belong to the Ruinous Powers.”

**Alice Gaius**

Alice hadn’t any idea who had had the idea to sell Rashan stuffed toys, but there were selling very well. There were three different models: the ‘baby Rashan’, thirty centimetres-tall, the ‘apprentice Rashan’, sixty centimetres-tall, and then the ‘real Rashan’, a one metre and forty-five centimetres-tall ‘titan plush’ which seemingly had every children in sight crying when they wanted their parents to buy them one.

Xenos shouldn’t be this adorable. They just shouldn’t. The parade of several hundreds of the true black-and-white breathing non-humans between two companies of Space Marines had generated a large gathering around the stalls selling the toys.

At least there was some normalcy in the Ovation. Thousands of banners taken from the enemy were thrown into specifically prepared pyres, and everyone applauded after the vox-nets informed them many of those had been made using the flayed skins of slaves of Commorragh.

After several minutes of thousands of Skitarii and a lone Warhound Titan parading, Alice saw the first ‘Eldar’ the forces of the Living Saint had annihilated at Commorragh.

Her first reaction was one of disgust. The Rashan, at least, were quite obviously non-humans and their general appearance and behaviour had little things in common with the humans of the Imperium. But the ‘Eldar’ were humanoid, and though their visages were wrong, it was like someone had tried to alter the blessed template of Mankind with long ears, long faces, long legs...plenty of long things.

It was even worse the longest the teenage girl looked at the xenos. There was something deeply, completely wrong with these chained prisoners. It wasn’t the corpse-like skin or the long skins. It was in the eyes and the way they looked at the crowds.

The vox-casters and the public-address plates proclaimed the crimes of the abominable lifeforms, but Alice didn’t need them to know that if the xenos had been free of their movements, they would have tried their best to kill thousands or millions of men, women, and children, and likely laughed all the way.

These ‘Eldar’ were just *wrong*. They were feeling terribly, completely, *wrong*.

The insults and the expressions of anger shown by everyone who surrounded her proved it wasn’t just her imagination. And when more ‘mercenaries’ xenos of Commorragh were paraded afterwards, the reactions weren’t as extreme.

Yes, there had been something truly horrible with the Eldar. Lady Weaver was worthy of billions of praises for having exterminated their horrible kind.

“Treasure! Treasure!”

The cry went everywhere, and new vehicles advanced in a large column, showing to all gigantic cargo-haulers filled with jewels and ingots of metal Alice had never seen before, presented side by side with blessed archeotech and relics of the first centuries of Imperium’s creation.

The information digital-boards slowly revealed the content to the spectators: rubies, sapphires, iridium, zirconium, ancient plasma guns, precious reliquaries, chalices of auramite, and many, many things she was unable to properly remember as the cheering was too loud even with earmuffs.

And then as the evening began, the parade alley lit up and hundreds of golden fireworks were fired, along with other shapes symbolising dragons, guardsmen, Space Marines and the symbols of the God-Emperor.

Alice cried. It was just too beautiful.

“PRAISE LADY WEAVER! AVE IMPERATOR!”

“AVE IMPERATOR! LONG LIVE HER CELESTIAL HIGHNESS!”

“DEATH TO THE ELDAR!”

**Segmentum Tempestus**

**Craftworld Biel-Tan**

**8.720.296M35**

**Supreme Exarch Naelis Caradhris**

The end wouldn’t be long in coming now.

The Phoenix Lords, all those the Craftworld had Temples at least, had come and gone, taking with them thousands of artisans and non-fighters, and recalling those they felt had not disgraced themselves in their eyes. Asurmen, Baharroth, Fuegan, Karandras, Drastanta and Amon Harakht had come after the memorable visit of Jain Zar, and with each visit, the halls of Biel-Tan became emptier.

The new Supreme Exarch – his predecessor had chosen to fall upon his blade rather than facing the wrath of Fuegan – gritted his teeth at the thought. Empty. Yes, the Phoenix Lords had sent thousands of warriors and non-warriors away from the Craftworld, but Naelis had walked under many domes and across many gardens there last micro-cycles. And as much as he wanted to blame some strangers for the numerous disasters, the flaw didn’t come from the outside.

Biel-Tan had been dying long before Commorragh. Conveniently, there wasn’t time or resources for conducting a proper investigation of how bad it had been, but the last of the Caradhris knew it would have caused him more nightmares if he had the tapestry of reality pushed in front of him.

It was highly likely that at least one out of ten halls had been devoid of any Asuryani families before Commorragh, and by ‘devoid’, he meant ‘no one had inhabited in the last ten Biel-Tan cycles’.

Their martial fervour, their magnificent attempts to make their name of ‘Rebirth of the Ancient Days’ the truth, all it had done was exhausting the resources and the generations born after the First Fall. Obviously at the start the impression was that they soared...when in reality the collapse had been here all along. The Exodite colonies searching for their protection after attacks of the Arch-Enemy and other Craftworld refugees brought temporarily the numbers up, but every cycle the effectives had been enduring a long decline.

The Primordial Annihilator must have laughed a lot at their pitiful attempts of conquest.

Because when the time to assess the scale of the disaster came, what did their Craftworld truly hold?

Biel-Tan, before the Second Fall, had claims enforced at the edge of their weapons over four hundred and fifty-one stars.

For an Asuryani, it was mere heartbeats after the Second Fall, but already the Mon-keigh had murdered or expelled every single Asuryani life from thirty of the worlds Biel-Tan had protected for aeons from the rapacity of the ignorant younger races. And it was only the beginning.

Because when it came down to it, the ugly truth was the Maiden Worlds reconquered from those hands unworthy to have a glance at the perfection of Isha’s sacred creations couldn’t stand without Biel-Tan’s armies and fleets. Their populations were in the low thousands, easy prey when reinforcements didn’t arrive in time.

And these reinforcements didn’t exist anymore. There were still a few expeditionary forces with the colours and the burning valour of Biel-Tan, but they were fighting desperate conflicts, many of the facets of the Tempest of Blades unable to retreat as their Webway Gates had been destroyed. Commorragh had destroyed a horrifying amount of lives and assets, there was no denying this, but one of the greatest disasters had come after and would likely never be examined properly.

By the fault of the Monster of the Swarm, the Biel-Tan armies were now locked into a thousand battles of attrition, bleeding their arms and every part of the whole structure’s body when the heart of the Asuryani needed them the most.

Naelis Caradhris didn’t need a Farseer to know all was lost.

He didn’t need the whining of several Exarchs and Autarchs who had suddenly grown leery of provoking the Mon-keigh to realise that yes, going to Commorragh had been equivalent to shooting themselves in the heart and then pouring poison over it. But unlike too many of these hypocrites, the Supreme Exarch and Protector of Biel-Tan had at least enough honour to realise he had not opened his voice against Machdavar. He had done nothing to prevent the disaster. He was guilty. He hated the Mon-keigh. And nothing would change that.

Naelis Caradhris was an Asuryani of Biel-Tan, and he was going to die as one, not hiding under his bed and crying at the errors of some stupid narcissistic thread-weavers who had been forced to admit their attempts at manipulating the future had utterly failed.

“WARP RIFTS OPENING! WARP RIFT OPENINGS! DISTANCE FOUR HUNDRED THOUSAND KILOMETRES! DISTANCE FOUR HUNDRED THOUSAND KILOMETRES!”

“SUPREME EXARCH! THE MON-KEIGH ARE BRING THEIR WHOLE FLEET ON THE RIGHT FLANK OF OUR PATROLS!”

There wasn’t enough time to give an order.

The Battleship *Audacious Superiority* fired all its batteries, but they were ineffective on the prow of the gigantic...super-juggernaut the Mon-keigh had leading their armada.

The answer was a hurricane of light and explosions, and Naelis felt the entire crew of the *Audacious Superiority* die in the blink of an eye. Five of its escorts managed to survive the first brutal hammering, but not for long. There were thousands, no, tens of thousands of warships coming straight for the Craftworld, and the fleet had no space to manoeuvre unless they desired to abandon Biel-Tan.

For the first time, Naelis Caradhris truly understood how the Drukhari had felt when the invasion of Commorragh put their backs against their own walls before the execution bolt.

“Release all our reserves, and launch the last Cruisers in formation Falcon-Whirlwind.”

“Are you insane?” shouted a Farseer. “They won’t even slow down the enemy for one hundred heartbeats!”

“No,” the Supreme Exarch admitted. “But they will die well. And it’s the only thing left to us now.”

More Warp Rifts continued to open. More Mon-keigh warships came through. More millions of tons of weapons and armour directed by a single will to destroy Biel-Tan from the annals of Asuryani history.

Even if Commorragh had never happened, the Biel-Tan fleet would likely not have been able to stop them.

They were too many of them.

“The Battleship *Lance of Perfect Beauty* is fighting Mon-keigh boarding parties!”

“Frigate *Crystal Dream* is gone! There is a gap between the two escort flotillas!”

“Abort the attack! Abort the attack! The enemy has-“

There was nothing to salvage from this disaster. The fleet was pounded into oblivion from every direction, and as more and more enemy reinforcements were summoned, it was obvious the ‘battle’ would last fewer heartbeats than in his worst nightmares.

“Supreme Exarch...”

“I never thought it would end like this. Give the final orders to our Mariners and go assemble what’s left of our forces.”

One more Asuryani Battleship was reduced to an irradiated wreck.

“Let us show them how the children of Asuryan fight.”

**Gloriana Battleship Eternal Crusader**

**High Marshal Gerlach Barbarossa**

Before Commorragh, Gerlach would have been among the battle-brothers inside the hundred-plus Assault Rams launched towards the planet-sized xenos Craftworld.

But this was after Commorragh, and the High Marshal of the Black Templars had to admit her Celestial Highness had brought a lot of good points when they discussed how to organise inter-army coordination.

When forces of the Imperial Navy, Ecclesiarchy, Adeptus Mechanicus and Adeptus Astartes had never fought together before and never properly established protocols for doing so, the high commanders of such a force were more important overseeing the battle as a whole than charging in the melee. It was obviously less satisfying, but on this day there were plenty of chainswords and other blades to make sure his absence from the frontlines would have grave effects on the outcome of the battle.

“The enemy fleet is reacting like a wounded beast,” the Captain of the Knights of Dorn present on his bridge commented. “The few Battleships they have left are throwing against us their Frigates and Destroyers to give them time to reform.”

“Then we will just have to break them again and again, until they are utterly broken,” Gerlach replied. “Tell the Red Templars’ Battle-Barges this is their moment to break the xenos. Nova Cannons’ bombardment. Now!”

Unfortunately, the main ship-killer weapons of the sons of Dorn were a league behind the batteries installed on Adeptus Mechanicus, especially in accuracy.

But when two Nova Cannons, several hundreds of torpedo-launchers and many, many macro-cannons unleashed a storm of lasers, capital-grade ammunition and the God-Emperor’s righteous fury onto such a small space zone, accuracy was definitely a secondary factor.

The screen of the long-ears wasn’t brutalised. It was annihilated, more than fifty hulls vanishing in an extremely satisfying display of brilliant explosions and catastrophic rupture of hulls.

“Their fleet is broken in half, High Marshal!” the Sable Swords’ Captain informed him triumphantly. “Seventy-two percent of the enemy’s order of battle has been destroyed.”

“Outstanding, continue the bombardment.” The Black Templars rarely, extremely rarely, gave any measure of mercy to their enemies. The Biel-Tan Eldar were not worthy of being recognised as honourable foes. For too long the petitions of the Adeptus Astartes to attack this lair of pirates and perfidious long-ears had been postponed over the centuries, sometimes by the intervention of the High Lords themselves. But today there was nothing to save the Eldar from the holy judgement they so rightfully deserved.

“Status of the boarding teams?”

“So far, resistance is extremely light in the corridors of the Craftworld,” the Soul Drinker’s representative looked as if he didn’t believe the words of the report between his hands. “The Executioners announce a kill-count of some twenty thousand xenos, and the other assault companies have similar numbers of xenos corpses to report.”

This was...mildly concerning.

“Could they be trying to bait us into prepared kill-zones?”

“I don’t think so, High Marshal,” the other Astartes shook his head. “It looks like many Craftworld’s sections have been abandoned by the Eldar for decades if not centuries. That or the Eldar have made quite a job in several standard weeks to make their lair look like as neglected as possible, with dust and everything.”

“This may be one of the many drawbacks suffered by this Craftworld,” the Crimson Fist’s Captain serving as his chief of staff said.

“Explain.”

“We have long wondered why Biel-Tan of all the Craftworlds of the entire Eldar species was so special. What allowed them to ignore the casualties we inflicted to them and begin new campaigns mere days after the last ones were completed. Many Chapter Masters over the last centuries supposed this was because this Craftworld had a larger population to recruit from, therefore granting them the ability to recruit larger armies and maintain larger fleets than the other xenos’ bases.” The Space Marine in dark blue smiled slightly. “Except we were wrong. We will have to request the Inquisition to be able to translate some of the xenos’ archives, but so far, the answer to their war campaigns seem to simply have been an extreme level of militarisation of their entire society. We aren’t destroying Biel-tan today, High Marshal; Lady Weaver did this when she destroyed them at Commorragh. We are merely finishing the survivors who weren’t there to receive their judgement inside the Port of Lost Souls.”

Gerlach Barbarossa kept presenting a calm face, though as he remembered several conversations his Marshals and himself had had with the Saint, the point raised by the Crimson Fist was disagreeably putting into the light how the Black Templars were never resting in their Eternal Crusade.

“I tend to agree with your opinion. You have my permission to find the resources to confirm or correct it with the Inquisition Acolytes which will soon land on Biel-Tan.”

New explosions lit his hololithic console and the High Marshal of the Black Templars smiled when one of the last Eldar Battleships succumbed to the concentrated fire of four Battle-Barges.

“It won’t be long now. Prepare all Strike Cruisers to kill the engines of the Craftworld.”

**Craftworld Biel-Tan**

**Supreme Exarch Naelis Caradhris**

Naelis Caradhris knew what defeat tasted like; Exarch or not, Farseer or not, you rarely got to an exalted rank like his without having to retreat in shame at least as many times as you had fingers during thousands of cycles of battles.

But rarely had defeat stung like this. The last fleet of Biel-Tan, a fleet which had been sixteen Battleships strong before the Mon-keigh arrived, should have been able to bleed considerably any attacker.

Instead it had been grounded to space dust with horrifying ease, inflicting only desultory damage. Some part of his brain insisted the overwhelming numbers of the Mon-keigh were to blame for the swiftness of the debacle, but the other part whispered it wasn’t the complete truth.

The Mon-keigh must have analysed the data they got from fighting the forces send under High Farseer Machdavar at Commorragh, and then proceeded from learning the lessons they were to take from the bloodbath. Biel-Tan defenders had been able to learn nothing, since no one had returned from the Second Fall.

“The Guardian Defenders need help in the Dome of Red Song! They need reinforcements immediately, all the Fire Dragons are dead!”

“They are in our shipyards! We are sabotaging the psychic focuses to delay them!”

“Close these Gates! Close these Gates before all is lost!”

“What the hell was that? The Avatar of Khaine is gone! Retreat! Retreat to the higher levels!”

Disaster. It was utter disaster, and every strategy he ordered was countered effortlessly. The fleet had died inflicting only minor casualties in return, and the battle in the very halls of Biel-Tan was as humiliating.

It was shameful to admit, but so far the battlefield was not conferring any advantage to the Guardians and the Aspect Warriors under his command. They were too used fighting outside the Craftworld; no one had really made any plans and studied the labyrinth of corridors and ancient parks where no one lived anymore.

“Why don’t we open several sections to the void?” asked petulantly a yellow-clad Farseer.

“Because each and every one of the Mon-keigh is encased in void-protective armour with magnetic technology beneath his feet.” Naelis told the idiot in the appropriate tone. “The Mon-keigh have brought their elites and champions with the best their brutish technology is able to produce.”

“There are weapons which could turn the tide...”

“Yes, there are. And by my command, I ordered all of them destroyed when this assault began.”

“Why in the name of Khaine would you do that?”

The worst part was that the Farseer was really honest in his outrage...Merciful Isha, had they really fallen so low these last cycles?

“For one, the Mon-keigh have also several nasty weapons in their vaults. I would prefer not giving them the excuse to unleash them, now that Commorragh has proven beyond doubt how many they have available. For two, while the Enemy won’t accept our surrender, that doesn’t mean they will kill us if we saturate the halls of our Craftworld with the ancient weapons. They may just get annoyed enough to deliver us to the abominations that are the *Necrons*.”

To say the truth, Naelis couldn’t understand why Alaitoc hadn’t intervened so far. After hundreds of cycles telling them the Yngir’s slaves were the greatest threat of this galaxy, they were staying idle on the sidelines?

“To the Hall of Communion, warriors,” Naelis Caradhris ordered. “We will make our last stand to protect the Infinity Circuit.”

The last walk through the superb avenues of his home brought only sadness and shame, as screams and explosions were heard in the distance. Biel-Tan had been sailing before the First Fall, being one of the Great Craftworlds to have left the Empire long before She-Who-Thirsts was born. To know all of this was going to be pillaged, burned and destroyed by a barbaric race having not the intelligence to appreciate his beauty, it filled Naelis with self-loathing.

And then there was the Infinity Circuit, the very souls of their ancestors and their predecessors. In the Hall of Communion, it took the shape of an immense complex structure of crystal and wraithbone, bathed in green and blue lights. Normally only a few spirit stones should have shone through the crystalline walls, but as the last Asuryani of his escort advanced towards it, it was radiant like a star, as the souls of Biel-Tan were forced to abandon the matrixes-conduits to take refuge here.

The Supreme Exarch wished he could have sent away the Infinity Circuit. Anything was better than the desecration and the torments the memories and the souls of their predecessors would endure at the hands of the Mon-keigh, and that was if the upstart beasts didn’t try to destroy it and deliver them to the Primordial Annihilator.

But it was impossible. The Infinity Circuit, no matter how spread out were the souls of their people in its matrix-arteries, was the heart, the spine and the lungs of Biel-Tan. Biel-Tan had been built around it; its removal would deprive the Craftworld of all energy and integrity, and more importantly for their current predicament, it was the work of hundreds of cycles, assuming it could be done at all.

Even if Naelis Caradhris had given the order and not be shot by outraged Asuryani on the spot, there would never have been enough time.

“We are the blood of Asuryan. We have seen the death of uncountable lesser races. We are the descendants of the Victors of the War in Heaven. We have reconquered an Empire, for all its briefness and dim light. We have failed, but Biel-Tan will continue to live as long as a single warrior of this Craftworld continues to resist and dream of erasing the damage done to the Aeldari. May our blades sing true in that darkest of days!”

“REVENGE AND GLORY! MAY OUR BLADES SING TRUE!”

An inferno of explosions arrived to their ears. Guardians came running for their very lives, and many fell before having the slightest opportunity to take cover.

“FOR BIEL-TAN!”

Naelis Caradhris charged the enemy coming to defile the Hall of Communion. But the huge Mon-keigh in black avoided all the projectiles of his shuriken rifle, and from nowhere an enormous blade impaled him, held by a large fist of yellow.

“For Dorn and for Taylor Hebert.”

There were the last words the Supreme Exarch heard before he died.

**Chapter Master Flavius Sextus Jovius**

Biel-Tan was lying in ruins before him, and it had only taken thirty standard hours to achieve it.

“I will insist during the after-battle meeting that every Chapter Master having participated to this battle must record the tactics and methods employed to break the long-ears,” Flavius spoke to Ruy Guzman of the Crimson Fists.

“I concur,” the other Chapter Master answered. “But I will advise to properly write black on write this wasn’t a typical engagement against the Eldar. Most of the fleet we destroyed here was understrength after its losses at Commorragh. Not to mention that for all the sections of the Craftworld abandoned, there are at least several million xenos missing.”

“Their witches certainly told them we were coming,” High Marshal Gerlach Barbarossa spoke as they descended what had certainly been stairs fit for a Planetary Governor before the battle. Now of course, the impacts of bolter ammunition and the other consequences of the furious fighting had left ugly marks and like the surrounding park and fountains, the stairs were a spectacle of collapsed glory. “Good riddance.”

“I would have expected more of a statement you would pursue them to the Eastern Fringe,” the Crimson Fist Chapter Master told the High Marshal.

Gerlach Barbarossa snorted loudly.

“I will if they give me a reason to. Presently, their Craftworld has properly paid for the help the long-ears gave to their friends of Commorragh. Their shipyards will no longer build any warship. They will no longer rest within these halls planning for new campaigns against the Imperium. They are less than a nuisance for us. But...should they decide to muster in great numbers again...the Black Templars have not began the war against these xenos, but I can guarantee you brothers we will end it in a very thorough xenocide.”

“A most interesting declaration,” Lord Inquisitor Shokaku intervened in the conversation and the three Space Marines stopped a few metres away from him. It wasn’t just a mark of respect; the Lord Inquisitor was quite close from the gigantic crystal structure near which some Eldar leaders had chosen to die to defend, and it radiated a lot of psychic energy. “But I think the Imperium won’t need the Black Templars to deal with the minor threat of the Biel-Tan survivors. Not when we have *this* in our possession.”

“What is *this*, Lord Inquisitor?” Flavius wasn’t a psyker or possessed any gifts which might be recognised as such, but he could feel the intense psychic power emanating from the structure, and if there was any doubt about it, the presence of several dozen psykers and Space Marine Librarians chanting around it their rituals of protection removed it in a second.

“*This*, Chapter Master,” the black-cloaked man said with a smile which was honestly disturbing to see on his scarred jaw, “is what I call a ‘Soul Core’, the very heart of the Craftworld your forces have destroyed militarily. In it, millions of spirit stones of deceased Eldar slumber. With this, the Eldar are capable to move a planet-sized vessel, provide millions of their people more energy than they know what to do with, and raise esoteric shields which protect them against the Ruinous Powers.”

“What would happen if it is destroyed?” Gerlach Barbarossa asked.

“No one knows, I’m afraid,” the Inquisitor smiled before their expression surprised. “I am entirely serious, Lords. Before Commorragh, all these souls would have devoured by the creatures of Chaotic Excess. Now that Lady Weaver has ruined many rules I and many of my colleagues considered fundamental, we are very much in the process of searching through experimentation the new ones.”

Lord Shokaku coughed.

“I would naturally prefer you do not disseminate this outside these halls without great necessity.”

“Yes, Lord Inquisitor.” Flavius replied for the three Chapter Masters. “What do you intend to do with the ‘Soul Core’?”

The smile on the man’s austere and scarred face was larger this time.

“We are going to make some...structural changes to Biel-Tan to extract it. In fact, I would be very surprised if we have not to cut the craft in half to seize our prize. Once this is done, we will throw the carcass of the Craftworld into the nearby star. I suggest that if you want to store artefacts and valuable relics for the Nyx Conclave and the Living Saint you do it before my operations go underway. Afterwards I will request an escort to the Adeptus Astartes to protect me while I put the Soul Core in security.”

“The Imperial Fists will return to Phalanx and Sol once our affairs here are concluded.” The Chapter Master of the Imperial Fists warned.

“Good. It just so happens that the Inquisitorial facilities where I want to deliver this psychic prize are quite close to Saturn...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Atlas Sub-Sector**

**Polar System**

**Polar**

**6.800.296M35**

**Brigadier-General Tao Shujia**

Tao had been really unhappy about how vague his new orders had been, but it was only when their transport left the Warp behind them and their final destination was revealed that he realised he hadn’t been unhappy enough.

“Polar. They sent us to Polar.”

Polar. One of the two Death Worlds of the Atlas Sub-Sector, and unfortunately, not the one who had received the honour of having a new Chapter of Space Marines protect the world, and train new recruit from its population.

The hours their old transport took to reach the orbit gave his staff the time to find much needed information, but there were no additional motives which might raise his spirits. Polar. Death World, average temperatures close to zero in the equatorial zone, well below this as soon as you moved out of it. It had a population of fifty-six millions and a system of government proclaiming itself to be a Clanic Confederation. The Planetary Governor was named the Voice of the Clans. The main exports were some iron ore and a few precious gems dug from deep mines, heavy furs from the dangerous fauna which managed to thrive on the surface, and ice for those people avid to drink some water free of any pollutant substance.

It was, in a few words, one of the worst backwaters of the Nyx Sector. The fact that this bunch of neo-barbarians had earned the right to send two small Reconnaissance Regiments to Commorragh was just adding insult to the injury to worthy nobles who should have amazed the Sector by their prowess of arms.

When their Lander touched ground in the spaceport, the first impression Tao had of Polar was a terrible sensation of *freezing*. By the love of the God-Emperor, had this people even heard of promethium heating?

Fortunately, for all its greyness and undecorated walls, there were still a consequent number of aquila and symbols of the Imperium, proof there were truly on a world where the rule of His Most Divine Majesty was enforced.

And there were a consequent number of people walking out of the orbital-to-ground shuttles which had allowed them to reach safely the icy planet.

Tao Shujia wondered why he and so many other people had been sent here. The orders had carried the signature of General Groener, but had not said anything else about the goals of his mission in this unimportant frozen world.

Fortunately, a Commissar was advancing in his direction, and...wait, was the woman in the summer variant clothes of the Commissariat?

Before the Brigadier-General had even a second to react from this surprise, one man in the newcomer column had already opened his mouth.

“You there! Do you know who I am? I am Adept Senioris Gulliver Nixon of the Departmento Munitorum! I have been kidnapped by Space Marines, assaulted by Imperial guardsmen and locked in a prison unfit of someone of my rank! I demand a transport to send me back to Samarkand IMMEDIATELY! OUCH!”

The ‘OUCH!’ part was spoken when the female Commissar punched him. Tao knew that the woman had not used even half of her strength, but for a civilian which may not have endured a single hour of physical exercise in the last decade, it was enough to threw him on his backside and several of the men surrounded him accompanied him in his fall.

“You were an Adept,” the Commissar replied with an extremely happy expression everyone sane should avoid bringing upon the visage of a representative of the Commissariat. “You were judged at Samarkand in absentia two standard days after the Battle Commorragh. The charges of gross incompetence, financial extortion, blackmail and several dozen other accusations were mentioned, I believe.”

“A scandal,” muttered the ex-Adept of the Munitorum.

“Yes,” immediately agreed the Commissar, which rang a lot of alarms in Tao’s head. “I believe, and Lady Weaver agreed in her message to me, plenty of your colleagues sold you to avoid responsibility for their own crimes.”

The smile disappeared and the glare of a Commissar returned, delivered by pale blue eyes where only unending duty to the Imperium could be seen burning.

“But your crimes are sufficient to warrant the death penalty ten times, Gulliver Nixon,” the blonde-haired woman continued. “Yet Her Celestial Highness the Basileia is merciful.”

The blue eyes watched the entire crowd, maybe one thousand men and women, gathered in the spaceport of Polar.

“Except the Wuhanese guardsmen present on my right, all of you have been condemned to death. Thankfully for you, the Living Saint does not believe in wasting warm bodies as long as there’s some utility in you which does not involve a rope or a las-shot. So...congratulations, I suppose. You are the first recruits of the Polar 1st Penal Legion, new specialists of suicidal operations in winter warfare!”

“NO!” And to his stupor, Tao recognised the man who had just shouted. It was his cousin, Lord-Magnate Rongchun Shujia! By the God-Emperor, what was the Lord of their House doing here in such vulgar garments instead of their Hive’s Spire? “I REFUSE! OUR TRIALS WERE A SHAM AND THE PRIVILIEGES OF THE NOBILITY WERE TRAMPLED! MY WORD WAS DISREGARDED! MY LAWYERS WERE BLACKMAILED AT EVERY TURN! WHO DO YOU THINK-“

BLAM!

The move of the Commissar was fast, elegant, efficient and extremely accurate. Rongchun was in the middle of the crowd, but one second he was shouting accusations, the other the laser caught him in his right leg.

The body of the former Lord-Magnate fell with a loud thumb on the icy floor, accompanied by his screams. The accusations stopped in a couple of seconds, replaced by a silence where terror reigned, with only the screams of pain of Rongchun to accompany it.

“I am Commissar-Colonel Elina Järvinen, and Her Celestial Highness has given me the mission to see who among you is redeemable and who isn’t. She gave me the right of death and life over all of you, no exception. I will not hesitate to terminate you the moment your usefulness comes to an end.”

The crazy woman smiled, and Tao Shujia shivered.

“The casualty rate allowed for this little recruitment seminary is around ninety-five percent and in case you think death is easier than life in a Penal Legion...think again. Men and women who fail to respect orders, annoy me, or manifest some of the criminal tendencies which led them on Polar will be dragged on the ice fields and abandoned to the hunger of the Megabears. Winter is approaching, so they’re particularly hungry...and these ‘noble’ predators are capable of keeping their meat alive for hours while they feast upon it.”

Tao Shujia wondered what he had done wrong in his life to deserve this, and failed utterly to grasp the answer.

It wasn’t possible. There had to be a mistake. There had to be...

“If you want to enlist in the Polar 1st Penal Legion of the Blizzard Clans, three steps forward!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**3.820.296M35**

**Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies**

“I intend to name the moon Formicarium. Unless you have an objection?”

“I do not,” Hark-Alpha Dipodies replied. “Since we intend to ‘farm’ the Bacta of the Catachan ants, it is a perfectly appropriate name.”

And logically, the Master of Healing didn’t care very much about the name of the moon or the nicknames the Nyxians found for it as long as his funding for the special Bacta production facilities on it was approved. And since the Chosen of the Omnissiah approved his plans, from the largest void shields to his usage of the Agri-Hive template, objections were clearly unnecessary.

“Bacta production figures are of course difficult to predict at the moment, as the transportation of Queen-ants and the other ‘castes’ they rule over has just begun, but I hope to have at least sixty cubic metres of Red Bacta by the end of the year. The first plants and animals serving as prey to the ants are acclimating well to their new environment these last three days; should it change I will of course inform you immediately.”

“Good,” the Basileia approved once she had consulted several columns of data. “Be sure to not neglect the production of Blue Bacta, however. There are negotiations between my emissaries and representatives of other Adeptus Astartes, and I want to know how much Bacta we will be able to divide between the different gene-lines of Space Marines.”

Hark-Alpha conceded the point; for all their small numbers, it was simply unconscionable to deprive the Adeptus Astartes of a healing asset cutting short the time they required to return to the battlefield.

“Which brings me to our next point, Lady Weaver. Since obviously our new facilities on Formicarium will have all the space we need, do we transfer the Astartes gene-seed operations there?”

This time he didn’t receive an answer in the next five seconds, a rare instance, but understandable given the importance of the decision.

“No,” the Governor of Nyx said at last. “Or at least not yet. It will take time for the defences of Formicarium to be operational, and for all the talent of the Heracles Wardens and our security services, I am unwilling to bet on perfect achievements in that regard. For now, secrecy and the harshest security protocols available will continue to be our best defences against our enemies.”

“As you wish,” the Master of Healing bowed, “but I have to warn you it may delay the progenoid cultivation of the Emperor’s Children when we find a suitable planet of recruitment.”

“Your choice of words, unfortunately, gives me the impression we aren’t really close to a breakthrough in that regard,” the Chosen of the Omnissiah pointed out.

“We are not, sadly,” confirmed the Arch-Genetor. “It is most frustrating. The male population of Portsmouth has an average seventy-ninth percent of compatibility with the blood of the Primarch Rogal Dorn, which given that the world is home to two point nine billion humans and the other possibility offered by the Theta Marches, is amply sufficient for Astartes recruitment. The compatibility is at fifty-four percent on average for the Brothers of the Red in this very system. The Magma Spiders, the Heracles Wardens, the Black Templars, and the Iron Drakes have all at least compatibility levels higher than fifty percent with the homeworlds gene-stock they were assigned to. The gene-seed of the Emperor’s Children is...I hesitate assign a human trait to the work of the Omnissiah-Emperor, but if I did it would be ‘prickly’.”

“Some obstacles must be overcome when this very gene-line has been unused for four millennia, to the best of my knowledge.” The Basileia summoned a few insects to send away several wavers of metal requisitions. “I wanted to place this new Chapter in the Moros Sub-Sector. Has anything changed on that front since your last report?”

“It has not,” Hark-Alpha Dipodies informed her regretfully, “the nobility of the Wuhanese System is the only notable population where the compatibility with the gene-seed markers of the Third Legion is higher than ten percent. And I concur with your opinion that spiritually and physically, these potential aspirants are clearly unsuitable for Astartes recruitment.”

There had been thousands of nobles executed and tens of thousands had lost every asset they owned as the Adeptus Arbites condemned them to billions of Throne Gelts of fine. As much as psycho-indoctrination allowed to erase some moral shortcomings, it couldn’t replace everything without making the new Space Marine a child in a transhuman body.

“Right. What are our options?”

“I have already used the opportunity provided by the last weeks to contact the delegations of the Parthia, Ajusco, Goa and Hibernia which are present to swear their oaths to you. I am particularly interested by Goa, since it is a Death World originally founded by Vijayanagara.”

“Meaning that if Goa has high levels of compatibility with the Third’s gene-seed, we could simply order population transfers from the Mining World to the Death World.”

“Indeed,” at times like this, Hark-Alpha rejoiced to not be under the orders of a Governor who needed to be explained things twelve times before holy understanding was miraculously summoned, “some technological and infrastructure improvements would have to be diverted to Goa if the compatibility tests are positive, however.”

“I think we can worry about that later, if this planet is truly a potential recruiting ground for the Chapter destined to erase the shame of the Emperor’s Children treachery.” Lady Weaver grimaced. “I will need to deal with Lemuria and Vijayanagara within this decade anyway. Are there other major problems concerning the Space Marines?”

“No,” the Master of Healing and Genetics was prompt to reassure the Chosen of the Omnissiah. “In fact, there are excellent news for the Heracles Wardens: twenty-five out of twenty-eight aspirants have successfully lived through the final implantation stages, and while I have my doubts with one, the others are in excellent health. These new recruits won’t have the experience of the veterans around Chapter Master Isley, but this will help alleviate their numerical shortage...”

**Pontifex-Crusader Vishwa Ousadevi**

Vishwa had never imagined meeting a Living Saint in his life. The fact he had now this holy opportunity and it was to report a massive disaster along swearing his vows was making his heart burn in shame.

Not that it was likely going to be a problem for much longer. As the supreme commander of the Frateris Templars ordered to crush the prisoners’ insurrection on Sparta, Her Celestial Highness was well within her authority to take his head and impale it on top of the Hive’s walls to make her statement about failure explicit.

Therefore the Pontifex-Crusader couldn’t say he appreciated very much his walk throughout the palace of Nyx where his audience was going to take place. Oh, these were nice surroundings: the walls had obviously been restored not long ago, there were large banners and statues of guardsmen mounting various species of insects, which was incredibly original and appropriate given who owned this world. But the companies of armed guardsmen patrolling and deployed in parade formations were as many reminders how much he had failed the Cult of the Saviour Emperor, the Living Saint, the Ecclesiarch and the God-Emperor, and not necessarily in that particular order.

His arrival in the audience room was announced by a herald, but that was the only common point it had with the formal meetings at Lemuria and Vijayanagara. The red carpet was obviously free for him to walk upon, but there were Space Marines everywhere, and for each of the Angels of Death present, there were five or six insects, some bigger than the Emperor’s Finest.

On a small throne of gold Her Celestial Highness awaited. It was contrary to the protocol, but Vishwa Ousadevi rapidly fell to his knees while he was still close to fifty metres away from her presence. There was an intense pressure in the air which made him feel weak and unworthy, unless it was the raw power coursing through the great golden wings and the beautiful silver-crafted armour which were too much for him.

Vishwa prostrated himself. He could not do anything else, for this was a Chosen-messenger of His Most Divine Majesty, and he felt insignificant and undutiful merely looking at Her.

“Rise, Pontifex-Crusader.”

Somehow, enough strength returned to his body to allow him to obey the command.

“Your Celestial Highness, I beg for your forgiveness,” he managed to speak without blabbering like a fool.

“Why?” The question had come in a calm and assured voice, and the eyes filled with power looked at him with an expression which could have been qualified of curious. “It is my understanding you weren’t in charge of the Penal World of Sparta when the prisoners’ revolt overthrew the established order. In fact, you weren’t in a radius of fifty light-years near it. Blaming you for this would be frankly stupid, I think. Moreover, you aren’t the officer or the administrator who had the bright idea to store some military depots on this planet of the Suebi Sub-Sector. You had no part in the organisation of the force which was commanded to restore the rule of the God-Emperor on Sparta. You weren’t even the highest-ranked commander of the theatre three years ago; unless you falsified the records, you were sixth in command and played no role in the first catastrophic offensives.”

Vishwa grimaced at the reminder of the first bloodbaths they had been on the receiving end of during that year. They had reconquered the Saint Pius’ Spaceport, but by the Golden Throne, the price had been nauseating; by the time the first large Landers were descending safely into the atmosphere, there were more dead Templars than survivors in the force which had assaulted the rebels-held defences.

“I could blame you, I suppose, for the considerable casualties’ list you made with your own offensives, but it would be extremely unfair to do so. I think, and all the military personnel having given me their opinion agree, Sparta is not exactly the ground to make sophisticated flanking attacks and other mastery applications of the Tactica Imperialis. You had too little drop forces or siege engines to truly exploit your superiority, and your orders from Lemuria and Atlantis were to press on, regardless of the losses. Knowing this political situation and how narrow the axis of progression can truly be, you certainly acted to the best of your capabilities.”

“Thank you, your Celestial Highness.” It was a far, far better acknowledgement he would have ever received at Lemuria. The Hierophant would likely have begun a rambling of several hours how he had failed the God-Emperor before ordering his execution.

“Don’t mistake my words,” the Living Saint warned. “You certainly acted to the best of your capabilities, but your military performance can’t be qualified of good by any means. The frontal attacks were certainly one of your only options, but several times they failed to be exploited correctly when your Frateris Templars’ discipline broke in an orgy of pillage, rape and slaughter. By the very battle-data your envoys gave my General Staff to analyse, there were at least five times where your assaults could have created a breach leading to a total collapse of the enemy front. One time can be attributed to a mistake, twice is a coincidence; over it, it is certainly evidence you are not able to coordinate your Army Group. What were your military experiences leading such a large group of men before this campaign?”

“Err...”The Pontifex-Crusader heavily swallowed. “Your Celestial Highness, this was my first military experience since I swore my vows of Frateris Templar at Vijayanagara.”

For an instant, the golden power soared and almost forced him to his knees. And then suddenly it was over, leaving him to catch his breath. He kept his head bowed. His courage wasn’t that great to allow him to watch a Living Saint in the eyes anymore.

“I see.” The voice of the silver-armoured avatar of the God-Emperor was *not* filled with satisfaction. “Very well. At this point, changing of Pontifex-Crusader would certainly crush morale among your troops so you will stay in command of the Ecclesiarchy forces involved in this campaign. But you will not stay in supreme command of this theatre. I am going to send reinforcements along with hundreds of siege-specialised machines for your forces, accompanied by new commanders. This rebellion of criminals and felons has been allowed for too long to fester; it deprived me of large Frateris effectives at Commorragh, and I’m sure the reports of social agitation in half of the Suebi Sub-Sector lie in part due to the failure of ending fast and decisively this disaster. I want Sparta be brought back to Imperial rule before the end of next year.”

Pontifex-Crusader Vishwa Ousadevi did his best not to gape at the impossible order.

“Our path is blocked by the Saint Keeler’s Fortress, your Celestial Highness. And after that there will still be many redoubts to breach, and the long winter of Sparta is lasting the equivalent of two standard years. I’m not sure my forces can do it, even with their supply lines restored and adequate reinforcements.”

This time the Living Saint outright snorted.

“I believe in this room there are several people who have made their duty of defending and taking fortresses from the enemy...”

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“Where is Leet?” Taylor asked as she fell on the golden couch one Atlas Duke had gifted to her. Like most of the furniture coming from this system, it was extravagantly decorated, but it was so comfortable the decorative drawbacks could be tolerated. Glancing at the empty space in front of her, the Basileia decided not to protest the fact Missy had ‘stolen’ again her glass of wine.

“He’s at Cartel Hive, busy trying to convince the Tech-Priests manufacturing his video games’ simulators to begin a series of Assassin Creed.” Dennis told her. “You know, since Call of Duty was such a big success there.”

The young Lady Nyx nodded. For all her misgivings, it seemed the video game industry had met some success among the good society of Nyx, and since Cartel Hive had such a disproportionate amount of nobles involved in trade and industrial production before her arrival, this meant a golden youth which could accept high prices to satisfy their favourite hobbies.

“Dragon?”

“Assassin Creed is completely unacceptable, obviously,” the Tinker joyously affirmed. Under the luminous globes of the Renaissance-themed living room, her red robe was scintillating like she was clothed with true draconic scales. “The Mechanicus Council had no problems with Call of Duty and neither did the other Adeptuses, but if we try to release a game where the goal is to murder illegally important rulers of a society, even a non-Imperial one, we’d better prepare for some loud screams and mass protestations. I will make sure to bury the project as soon as possible, don’t worry. Realistically, I was more of a mind supporting some game about tank warfare or aircraft battles. I have also studied the possibility of a SimCity administration game.”

“I see how these could benefit Nyx,” the black-haired Governor said, taking another glass and pouring herself a juice with the taste of pineapple. “Just keep him out of the magic themes or anything which could raise some questions on xenos issues.”

No, Taylor had no problem with Super Mario or the Zelda series, never mind Final Fantasy or Star Wars, but if they were released like they were played on Earth Aleph or Earth Bet, there would be serious political earthquakes. The Imperial version Call of Duty saw a guardsman fight on a few dozen missions across the battlefields of the Nyx Sector, until the fateful campaign at the Battle of the Death Star, and as she understood it, there had been many adaptations of real-life events to avoid any possible Inquisitorial and Administratum protests.

“Certainly. It will take time anyway to decide on the most promising projects. Morkys is the brain behind the tank game, by way.”

“Really?” The Enginseer had disappeared from her surroundings the moment the Battle of Commorragh was over, and she had wondered where he went.

“Really,” confirmed Dragon. “Of course, it’s Magos Arcturus Morkys now. He had decided to take a more tranquil job away from the frontlines, and his propositions for the simulators and implant-learning coding are rather good considering how new he is on the field.”

“Well, good for him. If you see him, send him my congratulations,” after the Battle of Commorragh, the Basileia was not going to blame if certain survivors wished to pursue other military career paths, and it was always good to see people getting the promotions they deserved. Tanya Sevrev had been promoted to Brigadier-General, why would the Tech-Priests assigned to her Army Group would be any different? Always assuming the man or the woman was competent, evidently. “But coming back to Leet?”

Dragon shrugged.

“Unless you have changed your opinion on the subject, Leet will leave Nyx in less than two years. We can always delay and re-delay until he’s gone. By the point he will return, the video game industry as we want to push it will be solidly entrenched. The region of space where the Squat worlds were colonised is in the Galactic Core, and it will take him several years at the very least to reach them.”

“I can reassure you, I’ve not changed of opinion on the subject,” she had been almost ready to, when she had heard how awful Borek singing was, but Leet’s continual complaints and his most unpleasant behaviour had carried the day in the end. “The potential of an alliance with a technologic-gifted population of genetically-modified humans is far more important than the well-being of Leet, especially when the moment we aren’t looking over him, he seems to take pleasure spreading mayhem and disaster in his wake. I would prefer to have him here for your projects, but since oaths have to be upheld, Astropaths and secure Mechanicus communications will have to suffice.”

Dragon nodded, with a gesture indicating she was not fully on-board with this, but that she understood the reasoning. This proved to the Basileia that the Magos Dogma was a far better person than she was. If there was any sense of justice in this galaxy, Dragon should have been the Living Saint...

“Speaking of projects, there’s one which has raised its head and we may be forced to analyse its potential sooner than later,” the red Tinker began. “A new model of Astartes power armour.”

“Is it really necessary?” asked Missy, having finished drinking wine in a too cheerful manner. “The Space Marines tore apart the Eldar and the demons despite being outnumbered ten thousand to one!”

“I am not worried about the Eldar,” Dragon said darkly. “I am worried about the *Necrons*.”

This brought an end to the smiles immediately.

“Whether the High Lords want to admit it or not in public, it is the Space Marines’ job to eradicate the worst threats against humanity in this galaxy. With a few exceptions, it works rather well on average campaigns, and the Chapters can always muster again in Legion-sized formations if it doesn’t work. But if we want to go against the problematic Necron Dynasties and their weapons ignoring the laws of physics, we need to improve the Astartes arsenal; otherwise the casualties are going to be monstrous.”

Taylor wanted to say Dragon was too pessimistic, but she had seen the vid-casts of Necron assaults during their return travel to Nyx. The average infantry weapon wielded by a Necron could eviscerate a Battle Tank, and expecting a Space Marine Chapter to fight millions of them on the enemy’s battleground of choice was a recipe for a catastrophic defeat.

“You’re right. What do you have in mind?”

“Incorporation of Argentamite, an ion shield integrated to the power source, reinforced protections for the neck, the chest, and several augmented servo-msucles. There are simulation ongoing to decide whether a Volkite rifle is practical or not.”

This was certainly radical and something able to increase the lethality of the Space Marine to new levels.

“Won’t it make the power armour too heavy?”

“Not if we use the technological bounty of the Battle of Commorragh.”

“*Red Dawn* and *Knight*, then.” The Fusion Reactor and the many schematics and secrets contained within the data of the Percival Siege-Breaker were all she could think of capable to improve the performance of Astartes power armour. *Nile* was focused on the tractors of the Apis-pattern. *Argus* was essentially a better version of the existing strategiums. *Brunhilda* was the template for the superiority fighter but adapting it to power armour would certainly be very complicated. *Lightsaber* and *Farm Tower* had nothing to do with it, being an energy blade and a Agri-Hive. *Comet* was a Mining ship, *Skyline* an Orbital Elevator, *Beer* wasto produce...beer, and the *Heimdall* force-field and the *Railgun* Franklin X-3 electromagnetic gun had to be integrated in more important infrastructure and hulls respectively.

“Yes.”

Taylor drank another glass of fruit juice – Missy had finished the Fay wine, damn her treacherous Vizier – before deciding on the course to follow.

“All right, you can go ahead. But be sure to involve the Space Marines of all the Chapters we have here...and please try to not make it too expensive. I know I can send the bill to the Mechanicus, but if the armour is superior to the regular Mark VIII, we will soon have hundreds of thousands transhumans here ordering one.”

“No promise,” Dragon smiled before rising up from her chair and lighting up the hololithic device on a map of the Nyx Sector.

An enlarged Nyx Sector, since it now included the Suebi Sub-Sector and the ruined northern frontier which had been largely ignored by Atlantis and Nyx for the last couple of centuries. As a result, the Smilodon Sub-Sector had four more planets to administrate, all categorised as Frontier Worlds: R-19ND3054, C21JDOD, H-B73HGH1T, and X-48XX3X42X. Frankly, these worlds were useless right now, having been fought over for centuries before the Imperium or someone else had decided no one would get these worlds and utterly ruined the environment. If there were one million humans living in total for all these Frontier Worlds, it would be downright miraculous. The Suebi Sub-Sector was easily worth a hundred times their value in tithes, population and resources, but it was essentially divided into two different paths of navigation.

The ‘southern trail’ was not that prosperous, but it was loyal, with the Civilised World of Parthia, the Agri-World of Ajusco, the Death World of Goa, and the Industrial World of Hibernia. On the other hand, the ‘northern trail’ had the Civilised World of Antioch, the Penal World of Sparta, the Paradise World of Lemuria as a Sub-Sector Capital, the Mining World of Vijayanagara in the same system as Lemuria, and the Agri-World of Drakkar, and the less said about their loyalties, the better for everyone.

“I wish I could go to Lemuria and explain to certain religious authorities how repulsive I find their ‘donation tactics’,” the Basileia admitted to the three other parahumans. “But the *Enterprise* needs repairs and maintenance, and when it will be operating at one hundred percent capability once more, there are other worlds I need to go to.”

“Wuhan,” Dennis said.

“It is one destination among many yes,” there were other worlds on her list. Iris’ Vision, Smilodon, the Atlas Sub-Sector and plenty of other worlds where she had to make sure the plans for the future weren’t resulting in disasters or trampling the lives of millions of people. Wuhan was going to take priority over them though, since there was a Governor to crown and an economy to put into order. “As soon as the Sanguinala is over and the *Enterprise* is repaired, I will leave for Wuhan.”

Her eyes turned into the direction of Missy, who was grinning a lot.

“Zoe Attica is going to play the diplomat at Parthia and the other compliant worlds, receiving the projects and investments the local Governors have in mind. You, Missy, will be in charge of the ‘northern trail’, beginning with Sparta.”

“Judge Byron reporting to duty, your Celestial Highness,” Taylor rolled her eyes, because yes, Missy had managed somehow to convince the Arbites to let her try the standard exam, and at the general surprise, the Shaker had obtained excellent scores and could be now called ‘Judge’.

“Of course, Dragon will take your place as Regent should I leave while you’re absent,” without surprise, Missy didn’t look that unhappy about it.

“I will survive my descent in the order of succession, I think.”

“No doubt,” and avoiding the mountains of vellum documents and data-stacks’ piles had to be a factor in this. “You will be my personal Imperial Legate in the Suebi Sub-Sector, invested with my full authority where Mechanicus and Ecclesiarchy privileges are concerned.”

The latter was especially important, given the number of Cardinal Worlds the Ministorum legally possessed.

“Go to Sparta first and crush the rebellion, it is the top priority. Afterwards, you can do what you desire...”

“I will get rid of the Hierophant for you, don’t worry.”

The winged parahuman rolled her shoulders.

“Do a good enough job, and I will consider asking the Custodes to deliver the Falchion-class Battleship they are preparing in the Terran shipyards into your custody.”

“Now that’s really unfair,” Dennis pouted. “I don’t have a Battleship, me! Is it because I’m not a girl?”

“You have a Grand Cruiser and a small fleet,” the Basileia replied reasonably. “And Dragon hasn’t a Battleship either and she is not complaining!”

Said Tinker chose this moment to cough.

“Now that you’re mentioning it, I will need a flagship if I’m to play a role in your later adventures...”

“Traitor,” Taylor whispered, knowing the draconic heroine was hearing her perfectly, before speaking louder. “Pass me the treasure box.”

Dragon complied with a smirk, and Taylor was able to open it and savour the stunned expression of Missy when the contents were revealed.

“This is?”

“The very first Lightsaber? Yes, it is.”

Dragon had done a good job on the weapon look: apart from the engraved aquila on the hilt, the weapon truly looked like one of the lightsabers of the Star Wars movies, the main difference coming from the far longer hilt, which was the length of a long dagger.

Unlike the toys the movie actors were playing with, however, this was a very real and dangerous weapon. Something verified an instant later as the Shaker activated the weapon and a green blade of energy materialised, bisecting a vase in two. Not a great loss, that one.

“Judge Byron, are you ready to restore peace and justice in the galaxy?”

The younger parahuman fixed her with a sardonic expression.

“This was lame.”

Taylor was going to retort that Vista had not been that critical when the words ‘I told you so’ appeared in the form of cakes, fireworks, neon paintings and gifts when the security of the upper levels of Hive Athena was breached once more.

This time it took the form of one of the Eldar clowns running inside while simultaneously avoiding the strikes of the Space Marines.

“A Present from the Queen of Blades and Master Cegorach for the Aeldari Empress!” the ‘Harlequin’ Eldar announced, before activating a sort of flashy device and throwing directly in her face one of the half-naked female Drukhari of Commorragh decorated like she was a Christmas present, ribbon on the head and red packaging included.

Fortunately, Gamaliel intercepted the xenos ‘package’ before it struck her, but the xenos profited from the overture to jump through the window, something that should have been impossible given the resistance of armaglass and the other metallic protections waiting behind it.

“Never hesitate to ask again for Harlequin Webway Deliveries!” were the last words Taylor and everyone heard from the clown. Several Astartes rushed outside, but deep down, everyone knew it was likely a futile endeavour.

“First Trazyn, then the clowns.” Kratos commented. “It is never dull when you’re around, My Lady.”

**Author’s note**: Little anecdote, if you think using a Harlequin to transport messages or assets of importance across the galaxy, do not. Wars have been declared for less.

The Ovation Arc has begun. I tried to make the chapter smaller than the immediate updates which preceded it, but I’m still at 40 000 words. This story has grown so much...

Ah well. Taylor has returned to Nyx, but as you could see, the war is never far from her preoccupations and those of Nyx. Though for the moment, the new Living Saint isn’t on the frontlines. How long this will stay true remains to be seen...

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

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

TV Tropes: tvtropes pmwiki/ / FanFic/ TheWeaverOption