**Muster 6.1**

**Forging the Future**

*By 290M35, to say the economy and the military of the Hive World of Nyx struck fear in the hearts of their rivals and enemies would have been a great lie. Nyx was a Hive World of two hundred and fifty-four billion humans, the records all agreed on this. But two years ago over a hundred regiments had been routed in a single battle on Fagus by the greenskins, a disaster even the Imperial propaganda didn’t manage to hide from the public for more than a few days. The life-expectancy of the average Nyx guardsman was calculated to be 20.4 hours, and given how many regiments were destined for garrison duty and rear-line occupation forces, it was not exactly a morale-raiser.*

*Meagre consolation, the Menelaus dynasty had never been a real believer in general conscription and large permanent PDF forces. Before the death of the last Heir of this incompetent line, the percentage of Nyxians under arms was at 0.507%, and the Planetary Defence Force, nobility private guards included, stood approximately at four hundred and forty-one million.*

*If that year an Administratum tithe-master had voiced an idea to compare Nyx and the Hive of World of Zion, seat of power of the Vandire Clan, it is incredibly he would have been laughed at for days.*

*Capital of the Zion Sector in the Core of Segmentum Solar, the planet boasted an overall population of four hundred and seventy-eight billion souls, and its primary tithe was more than six times greater than the world-fiefdom of the Lady Basileia. The PDF regiments of Zion were the next best thing to three billion and five hundred million strong. Zion was a vital system interconnected with dozens of worlds of similar value in Segmentum Solar. Nyx, by contrast, was an anonymous Capital Sector in the middle of hundreds of unremarkable Sectors somewhere in the south-eastern regions of Ultima Segmentum.*

*This was what the numbers at first sight suggested. But while Nyx at the end of 290M35 was far from exceptional in the eyes of the Departmento Munitorum, it was getting more powerful day after day. The confiscations and punishments administered to the Nyx nobility and the reforms had divided by four the total systemic debt of the Hive World, decreasing it to 3.1 trillion Throne Gelts. By 291M35, budget equilibrium was reached, and between the military reforms and the more sensible production methods, 39.2% of the Lady-Saint spending was in military-related programs.*

*Zion had far more outstanding debts, internal and external. In the same currency, the systemic debt of the homeworld of Clan Vandire was of 917.8 trillion Throne Gelts. Of course, the Solar Hive World had far more resources, clients, and favours to draw from in case they met any problems or economic difficulties. But seats in the Senatorum Imperialis – even lower ones – were not noted to be cheap and affordable to the first petitioner. Zion’s economy was more and more devoted to the ambitions of its ruling family, and as the war against the greenskins ended in the Nyx Sector, the Zion one was spending 67.3% in military construction, equipment, tithes, and bribes of diverse types. The deficit per year was in the vicinity of 11%.*

*This should have raised some alarms and deep concerns from the overseers of the Zion Sector. But the majority of the Tithe-masters, Procurators, Prefects and other Adepts were bought and paid for by the Vandire Clan. Accusations disappeared before they arrived to an Arbites Precinct-Fortress. Opponents were murdered in public or found themselves bound for Penal colonies.*

*It didn’t change the fact that between 290M35 and 350M35, the ability of Zion to muster and equip forces took a sharp downturn. In these sixty years, the Core-Solar Hive World had to face twenty-seven major rebellions in its secondary Hives, and the Sector as a whole hardly knew peace, when each creation of taxes made the situation explode in laser and shrapnel. The Nyx System, in the mean time, had not to face a significant insurrection.*

*Thus the two Hive Worlds followed different courses in this third century of the 35th millennium. Xerxes Vandire, Secretary Minister of the Departmento Exacta was the favourite candidate to become the next Lord of the Adeptus Administratum. And at the time, whatever the official hyper-scrolls said, the Vandire patriarch was the Zion Sector Lord, with several hundred other planets and two more full Sectors taking orders from him. This was very good news for Clan Vandire, although the Imperial subjects of Zion could be forgiven to wonder where the taxes they paid were going.*

*Neither Nyx nor Zion knew it in 290M35, but the choices they made for their society would become quite critical sixty years down the line...*

Extract from *Tithes and Crusades* by Christian Cicero, 999M36.

“*Faith and motivation are critical for our guardsmen. But if we do not give them carapace armour and a working lasgun, they are not going to last long against the greenskins*,” attributed to Lady-Saint Taylor Hebert, Basileia of Nyx, 289M35.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Athena**

**7.747.290M35**

Thought for the day: A small mind is easily filled with faith.

**Private Xavier Sebas**

Xavier was not the only one to groan when the strident morning alarm woke them up.

No, contrary to what the Sergeants barked, it was not pleasant to be forced to leave your couch at four in the morning. And they had gone to sleep at ten minutes before eleven in the evening last night, after mounting guard and fulfilling ten thousand tiring duties. Yesterday, it was Governor’s Day. Today, it was Mechanicus Day. The cogboys hadn’t been able to arrive in time for Governor’s Day, so for some reason nobody had explained to the 392nd PDF Infantry, the Martians must have their day of parade too.

The whole company hurried up to wash and make sure their uniforms were as perfect as possible. They had been chosen this month for garrison and bodyguard duty into the spire, and according to their officers, this meant ‘your appearance has to be more impeccable than impeccable, Private!’

Xavier liked the looks of the new uniform. They had the blue-black carapace armour, the new lasgun, the sealed helmet with temperature regulation and plenty of things which had once upon a time been reserved to the Nyx Purebloods and the other noble guards. Plus they were authorised to wear the silver bee above their hearts. It was a great honour, and one his parents had constantly told him would never happen. But it had arrived! They were no longer patrolling and told to terrorise the Lover Hives into submission.

They were granted a rapid breakfast in the form of rations, before the Captain gave them their assignments for this day of celebrations and stern-unyielding vigilance. It was the Lieutenant’s words, not his.

“Aster, Xavier...” the Lieutenant read a list of some thirty names before stopping, “and Jan, you’re on detached bodyguard duty with me today. Follow me, and don’t get lost. The security teams have already begun their work, and they don’t need a lost Whiteshield in the middle of their preparations.”

They did not run, but it was close. The Lieutenant had decided for a fast pace to wake them up. All around them, the corridors of the fortress where they had their living quarters were waking up. They heard plenty of groans, shouts and protestations before passing the gates and reaching a macro-elevator. They had to share it with a dozen Tech-Priests, but the cogboys buzzed and made weird moves with their metal things for the two minutes they spent with them. After that they continued marching.

The decoration began to shift from the grey and austere military looks to soft carpets, paintings and the men and women they were meeting were all dressed like they were already on parade...except they were servants.

They arrived at their destination after twenty minutes, the night soldiers – PDF from the Nyx 874th Reconnaissance – formally transferred the custody of whoever they were supposed to protect to them, and they took position on each side of the corridor.

“Who are we guarding, Lieutenant?” demanded Aster after long minutes of silence.

“Valentin Seignelas, Baron of Seignelas-Essex,” their officer whispered after checking if there was noise to indicate their charge had heard it and telling wordlessly he was in for a world of trouble.

“A noble,” someone spoke with disgust, and Xavier nodded in approval. Bloody useless nobles. They had done nothing for centuries and millennia, but they were always so satisfied with themselves, telling everyone it was the will of the God-Emperor it was His Will they were at the top and everyone else at the bottom. But now He had sent His Saint, and their speeches had revealed to be huge lies.

“No, he’s The Noble,” replied the Lieutenant, and despite his voice being a murmur, you could hear the capital letters. “He’s been the Controller General of Finances of the Basileia a couple months ago, and his fellows have already nicknamed it the Tax-Traitor. So whatever you say about him, don’t say it in public where the Astartes and the Ministers can hear you.”

Xavier was not convinced, by the vox he knew the others weren’t convinced to, but if the Basileia had nominated the man to the position...

The loud bells of the nearby churches were tolling for the first time of the day at six when the door opened for the first time. The Lieutenant entered, bowed, and returned to his previous sentry position.

Five minutes later, the door opened a second time, and the man they had the duty to protect on their oaths left the room where he must have been sleeping after Governor’s Day.

Xavier had thought the nobles only came in two categories: those who were obese and those who were sick from birth because cousins had married together for a thousand years.

But this Baron was not that. He was taller than Xavier and the Lieutenant; Valentin de Something-Something had to be 1m80 or 1m82. The ‘highborn’ was broad-shouldered and manifestly was doing some sportive activity because the muscles could be seen under his dark blue clothes. The older man wore a blue wig and above his heart had a golden brooch which was shaped like a butterfly.

That was all. There was no powdered face, no hands with dozens of rings, and no military medals proclaiming triumphs that had not taken place.

In a few words, this noble was not typical of his class.

The observations had to be stopped there, because the Controller General told a few words to the Lieutenant and they quickly left the place by the main gate before marching up the street and entering a new big palace. There were huge placards indicating they were in front of the ‘Controller General Department and Regulation Building’. And the signs were not shy in telling the purpose of this palace. It was the imposition, regulation, collection and oversight of taxes.

Somehow, Xavier wasn’t able say he had much confidence in the Baron after knowing this. The noble was the great tax collector of Nyx. Why did the Saint trust this noble while he was collecting her money?

“Ladies and gentlemen, we can begin our duties in the name of the Lady Basileia and the Mighty God-Emperor. There will be an exceptional three hours of break to watch the Mechanicus parade in the afternoon. All signs to manifest your support between the alliance of Holy Terra and Blessed Mars are welcome. That will be all.”

The Controller General had merely paused for two minutes, saluting a few of his subordinates and servants, and then he climbed two series of stairs, the Lieutenant and ten men preceding him per his instructions.

The hall they entered was something Xavier had never seen before too.

There were screens and machines everywhere, with dozens of people looking like accountants walking between them, making queries, noting things on their data-slates, and resuming their walk. And apart from a small cohort of guards, they didn’t even bow or appear to notice when the Baron entered this palace-office.

The noble barely took the time to get rid of his blue vest on a chair before beginning to run all over the place, giving complicated instructions to every person in his way.

“The ceramite licenses of this transport have not been paid! Contact the Euboea spaceport!”

“The Marquis of Great Biscay has paid two million less than he owes the Treasury. We must rectify this!”

“Kindly inform the Mauritius Cartel they must respect the new procedures. And at the next infraction, I will inform the Arbites myself.”

The Baron was like one of these drug-addicts you found everywhere in the Lower Hive before last year...except he was twice as excited and he had no drugs in his blood. He was too...confident and intelligent for that.

Seeing him run from one end of the hall to another was like watching one of the musicians they had seen yesterday. What were they called again? It was orchestra master or something like that, except this noble was doing it for taxes and money. The blue-wigged man seemed to understand everything, and to anticipate the most unlikely news.

And he was doing it at a moment when millions of people were celebrating and partying. It was...humbling.

“I wonder where he got the painting,” Aster said in a burst of vox communication.

“The painting?”

The PDF private made a discrete sign in the direction of the abandoned chair close to the stairs. It had to be the Controller General’s, and the same had to be true of the desk. But in over twenty minutes, the Baron had not gone in this direction once.

As they were supposed to patrol over the room, Xavier moved a bit further on the right than what truly necessary and indeed there was a painting on the wall behind the desk. It was almost hidden by piles of data-repositories and shelves, but once he was in front of the desk there was no way to miss it.

The painting was beautiful. The colours were so brilliant, so pure. It was representing a crowd surrounding a woman in golden armour and several Angels of Death, and Xavier knew for sure this was the Basileia has she had stood over one year ago. The title, painted in golden letters, was the *Saint’s Landing*.

“Maybe this noble isn’t that bad...”

**Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix**

The ceremonies and the parades had been long and worthy of the Martian Twelfth Fleet. It deserved to be mentioned. These days, most of the Planetary Governors who were not tied to the Adeptus Mechanicus in some way were reluctant to offer planet-wide celebrations to the representatives of Blessed Mars.

Unfortunately, it also meant the negotiations had been shortened to their bare minimum, and when the polite request to gather again tomorrow had been spoken, the evening had ceded its place to the night. Flesh-and-bone beings needed their hours of sleep, even if the Magi and Archmagi didn’t.

Still, it had been far from a common and unproductive day. Marvel of marvels, the entire delegation had been able to see and pray in front of a Holy Standard Construct Database, and Gastaph acknowledged it was unlikely he would see a second one in his life.

His command staff and himself had been able to scan and observe the first sacred technology of the Dark Age as it had emerged, anointed in sacred oils, from the forges of the Mechanicus. These were events which had been recorded and would never be forgotten.

There had been revelations too. In fact, those were the very reason why he and his direct superior Explorator Primus Camus-Nero Storm were in the same room two hours and a half before the sun rose again over Hive Athena of Nyx.

“We have to participate in the Pavia Liberation Campaign.”

The commanding officer of the Twelfth Fleet nodded, having not expected any other decision.

“I arrived to the same logical decision, Explorator-Primus. However, I must admit I have my reservations at our best lead on the Quest For Knowledge being an abominable thieving-xenos.”

“The Omnissiah and its servants will punish this odious creature in due time.” The personal envoy of the Fabricator-General replied while agitating his mechadendrites in irritation. “No matter the outcome, we must go to Pavia. If the ‘Necron’ says the truth, if it truly knows where we can find more semi-intact STC databases, Blessed Mars must recover them. We hardly can let other Forge Worlds take the lead in this Quest. If the xenos is lying, we will use the gathered fleet to punish this ‘Trazyn’ and extract from its abominable skull the secrets of the green-lit technology they have showed in the Battle of the Death Star.”

The Explorator-Primus did not voice aloud that the Moirae Schism had severely wounded the Adeptus Mechanicus in a time of secession and uncertainty, but Gastaph heard it nonetheless.

“The Fabricator-General’s orders were asking for Twelfth Fleet to return to Mars in triumph with the STC database. Do you wish to propose amendments to them?”

Camus-Nero Storm canted a negative song through the Noosphere.

“I do not. While I admit I am tempted to participate myself to this Quest, the Fabricator-General’s commands must not be countermanded lightly, and we need this STC database in security in the Temple of All Knowledge next year and our Artisans exploiting the marvels of sacred technology. Thanks to this cretin-ignoramus of Syracuse-M-Lambda-9999, dozens of template-copies must have already reached Forge Worlds in Ultima Segmentum and beyond. We need the sacred knowledge if we do not wish to be outperformed and out-produced by Ryza, Phaeton, Gryphonne IV and other vassal Forges.”

The anger when the name of the Magos was uttered was not feigned, and Gastaph Hediatrix did not say a word in his defence. True, Syracuse-M-Lambda-9999 had been playing into a diplomatic, technologic and military minefield with no forces of its own to enforce the Martian edicts, but the Magos had chosen on his own to impose his name to the other Explorators of Mars already present in-Sector.

It went without saying that his stupidity had made sure he would never be promoted further in the hierarchy of the Adeptus Mechanicus. When Twelfth Fleet began its long journey back to Mars, Syracuse-M-Lambda-9999 would be aboard the *El Dorado*. And unless Gastaph had misunderstood the promises of the Explorator-Primus, the Magos would be detached to the exploration teams of the Librarius Omnis as soon as they reached their home.

The designs of the Omnissiah were mysterious, and maybe Syracuse-M-Lambda-9999 would be one of the few hundred survivors who managed to escape the ancient defences, automatons and firewalls randomly attacking the Explorator companies.

“Besides,” Camus-Nero Storm continued, “I have one hundred percent certainty the politicians of Holy Terra are screaming at this very moment because the Fabricator-General dared sending away one of the great Battlefleets defending Sol without demanding their opinion.”

Both high-ranked Mechanicus Priests exchanged a glance of disgust. It was indeed something the member of the Senatorum Imperialis would say. And if by a miracle of the Omnissiah they didn’t voice it, they had millions of useless subordinates to scream in their stead.

It was utter non-sense, of course. If the stellar system had not been named Sol, it was true the departure of Twelfth Fleet – four Arks Mechanicus, twelve Battleships, twenty-four first-rank Cruisers and ninety-six less escorts – would have represented an unbearable loss of firepower. But this was the Sol System, and there were at all times tens of thousands of warships defending Holy Terra and Blessed Mars. And it was not counting the millions of fixed defences, the secret programs everyone knew stood ready to stop a potential Arch-Traitor or an Arch-Heretek...

“This is an unprecedented situation,” the Explorator-Primus canted. “And yet we will have to act fast. If you agree with it, I will propose to the Fabricator-General for you to be transferred from the Twelfth Fleet to the Twenty-Fourth.”

“I was not aware we had a Twenty-Fourth Fleet,” Gastaph answered carefully.

“Until two minutes ago, we hadn’t.”

Oh. It reassured him his memory had not forgotten something important, at least.

“I apologise at the risk of sounding blunt and illogical Explorator-Primus, but why should I accept the command of a fleet which is no doubt going to be a Noosphere Titan and in reality barely stronger than a weak Explorator Fleet? Once we will return the STC to Mars, we will be heroes and acclaimed by the other Archmagi, our names forever enshrined on the forge-altars of Olympus Mons. Stepping down from Twelfth Fleet would already be a significant demotion, but taking command of a non-existent fleet...”

He must have made his point pretty much clear, because Camus-Nero Storm was far more conciliatory a few seconds after his cant.

“I did not wish you to go with a non-existent fleet! You would have your Ark Mechanicus the *El Dorado*, supported by two other battleships from Twelfth Fleet, the Emperor-class *Cerberus Engine*, and the Apocalypse-class *Furnace of the Machine*. It would also have a squadron of twelve first-class battle-line cruisers.”

It was better than a non-existent fleet, true, but it was still a significant decrease of firepower. Something of his thoughts must have filtered on the Noosphere, because his superior continued in a more frenetic cant.

“You will be of course generously compensated for your efforts away from Blessed Mars. Since Syracuse-M-Lambda-9999 has no longer his place here, a seat is open to this ‘Mechanicus Council’ of Nyx, and it is yours if you want it. The Omnissiah knows we need a reliable Voice of Mars by the Chosen’s side. You will have a decree from the Fabricator-General placing you in overall command of all Mechanicus forces participating in the Pavia Liberation Campaign. And obviously you will be granted recruiting rights for the time period before the military campaign’s start.”

“It is enticing,” he conceded. Arguing the contrary to his superior would have been insulting, to be honest. “But you know like I do that my ability to gather large numbers of Magi depends on the potential gains this campaign can offer them...”

The majority of his muster had to be done at Mars; every ship waiting for his return at Nyx would be theoretically under his command, but they would not be trained to Mars standards and have other allegiances.

“In this instance, I can’t give assurances at this hour. We need first to negotiate with the Chosen-Basileia. I think the classic mining acquisition rights and template analyses will be granted, but negotiations will need to be done, and treaties will have to be signed.”

The cant-discussion shifted from the military preparations to more normal – and political – concerns.

“Cog and sacred oils, I would have preferred the Holy STC to be found in a Sector where the Ecclesiarchy was less powerful.”

“It could have been worse, Explorator-Primus. The nearby Sector, Atlantis I believe, has armies and fleets answering directly to the Ecclesiarchy. Nyx has a few planets governed by the ignorant and tech-less priests, but it is hardly under their rule.”

“Give firm orders to the representative you will choose to speak in your name until your return.” Camus-Nero Storm showed an impression the Archmagos Prime interpreted as a grimace. “Omnissiah’s blessings, how I wished we had a Forge World of our own to bolster our influence and spread the glory and the teachings of the Machine-God in this Sector.”

Gastaph Hediatrix shared somewhat the deception of his superior, but in a way it made things easier. A Nyx Forge World, so far from Mars, would have trained and attracted Tech-Priests and Magi with levels of independence similar to those of Triplex-Phall or Zhao-Arkkad. They may not have relinquished the STC database without Twelfth Fleet being forced to use its cannons.

It was simulations and hypotheses, clearly. The sole Forge World which had existed was a ruin quarantined by the Inquisition, and it was going to take centuries or millennia before it was resettled.

“I will do my best, but unless the Fabricator-General wishes to amend my list, the gifts we have in our hulls will not allow us to purchase a planet. And the Nyx Sector as a whole has not the will to build a Forge World for Mars, if the Noosphere records are true.”

As much as it galled him to admit it, the highest-ranking Tech-Priests on Nyx were probably right too. The Nyx System had a lot of potential, and as long as Lady Weaver, Basileia of Nyx, was its Governor in the name of the Omnissiah-Emperor, it had all the strengths of a Forge World and few of the drawbacks – they were limited to paying the usual tithe of a Hive World.

“Now for the next major issue. It is vital we manage to buy one of these ‘Dragon Armours’ that have recently begun production. Agripinaa and several other Forge Worlds of Obscurus never stop complaining about the inferiority of our flyers against the Heldrakes.”

The cant of the Explorator-Primus turned sardonic.

“I prefer this more conventional solution against the wonder-weapon Cawl had proposed the Parliament twenty standard years ago.”

Ah yes, this incident had provoked a lot of technological quarrels and doctrine feuds in Mars and the Forge Worlds of the Inner Core. Thanks the Omnissiah, Archmagos Dominus Belisarius Cawl had then left Blessed Mars for a Quest in Segmentum Pacificus with two Arks Mechanicus and five battleships, and the tensions had decreased with his departure. A travel he had not returned from for the time being, and prayers were canted ten thousand times per day at Olympus Mons for this state of affairs to continue. Gastaph Hediatrix had a momentary moment of panic seeing one of his battleships in orbit of Nyx, but it appeared the Basileia had purchased one from the Quayran shipyards where Cawl had operated decades ago. What a relief.

“I think the Fabricator-General will be *devastated* by Cawl’s disappointment,” the commander of Twelfth Fleet replied humorously. Like dozens of Tech-Priests chosen to ascend to the highest ranking duty of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Fabricator-General Xaerophrys Esvikom had to repeal the legal and technological challenges from Cawl and his supporters.

The Radical Archmagos was not doing it every time a new Fabricator-General was chosen, but he had done it sufficiently across the centuries for his actions to be no longer a surprise, and it had almost become a tradition to see if the Dominus Dominatus was going to leave his vaults or come back from another successful technology-quest in time to demand the title of Magos Mechanicus.

“Quite. Cawl aside, I think the Amphitrite hydro-plant is also something we will need to assimilate in priority for our most valuable and defended outposts...”

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

It had taken her a long time to admit it deep inside, but there was such a thing as too many gifts.

The Sanguinala had brought enough presents to occupy quite a few buildings, warehouses and places, and Governor’s Day had not helped at all. And now even the Mechanicus was joining in, though at least for them it was a reward for the discovery of the STC Athena database and them carrying it away to Mars.

On the other hand, the Mechanicus’ offerings were...massive. How big? The answer began with 13.5 metres in length and 6.3 metres of height, and ended with 316 tonnes of weight. It was a super-heavy vehicle freshly painted in red and gold every tank commander dreamed to drive.

On its right flank in bright gold letters the name *Machine’s Loyalty* was written in an elegant Gothic style.

It was a Baneblade Super-Heavy Tank, Mars Alpha-Alpha-Sigma Pattern.

“If I understood correctly half of Lankovar and Archmagos Hediatrix explained to me, it’s a specialised command version the Forge-Masters of Mars often ‘gift’ to particularly renowned Lord Militants and Crusade commanders where valuable archeotech had been rediscovered,” Taylor said to Gavreel and Gamaliel, who were examining with her the formidable war machine.

The fact this was just the opening gift while Lord Generals and far higher officers than her had often to beg the Mechanicus on their knees for one was a hint how valuable the Explorator-Primus and his second considered the STC database.

“It’s a beautiful tank,” the black-armoured Astartes acknowledged.

“I’m more impressed by the command post and the communications-suite,” the Herald of Sanguinius commented. “The interior layout of the Land Raider is slightly superior, but the technology employed by Mars to build this super-heavy machine more than compensates.”

“So I can use it safely as a command vehicle?”

“Unless you want something bigger, like a Titan...” the Blood Angel laughed.

The insect-mistress rolled her eyes before shaking her head. It was not like the Baneblade was a small and minor engine of war. Something bigger would also be slower and more cumbersome.

“We will accept this gift.” She had of course to repeat several times to the hundreds of Tech-Priests and Magi as they descended the platform where the Baneblade was exhibited for the greater pleasure of tank-addicts, a group which obviously included all the Techmarines of her Dawnbreaker Guard.

Despite seeing it well before the two Astartes, she wasn’t able to identify immediately the curious devices the Mechanicus had moved on the second platform-podium.

“Gavreel, do you know what this object does?”

“I think it is a teleportarium,” Gamaliel intervened as they approached the strange circular device. “I am not familiar with the pattern, but the slight odour of ozone is familiar.”

“Indeed,” Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix abandoned his conversation with another Magos and turned around to face her little group. “It is one of the last teleportariums from the Lightning-Pattern Mars forged in 420M31.”

M31. Since it was that old, this meant its value was between ‘priceless’ and ‘how many planets do you want to buy in exchange of one?’

After receiving the technical information – it could apparently teleport fifty-plus Space Marines or the double of that number in human bodies at the same time – they followed the Martian Archmagos to the third platform.

It was easier to say what the third present was. They were large, but these were clearly traditional books protected by several stasis fields. Although ‘a collection of books’ would be more accurate, as they were over thirty of them.

“This is a 029M32 copy of the *Codex Astartes* written by the esteemed Primarch Roboute Guilliman, and several tactical and strategic works of past Imperial Fists’ Successor Chapters the Adeptus Mechanicus has gathered in past centuries.”

She took a step forwards.

“I have heard of the Codex Astartes. But I was not expecting the paper-format to be so...big.”

“Only these four books are the *Codex* as the Primarch wrote it,” the Archmagos Prime pointed out four works, which naturally were the biggest of the collection. They had to be approximately one metre long and a quarter of a metre thick. “The rest are several Chapter Masters’ treaties and later additions demanded by exceptional circumstances.”

Taylor tried very hard not to grimace. The Primarchs were venerated like demi-gods in the Imperium of the 35th millennium. Of course, plenty of Space Marines were against this worship, but still the words of a Primarch were considered higher than most sermons and prayers. Analyses and treatises on them were normal. ‘Additions demanded by exceptional circumstances’ was tantamount to say there had been wars where the *Codex Astartes* and the valour of the Adeptus Astartes had not been enough to turn the tide of a conflict.

“I accept this generous gift,” she was certainly not going to read it in one or ten days, but having the support all Chapters were in theory supposed to conform to could not hurt, given how many Space Marines were already based in the Nyx System.

The insect mistress made a small sign of hand to her Astartes escort to withdraw to the edge of the platform. It was more for show than not be overheard; the Space Marines had the capabilities to hear a lot of things while you were certain they were out of earring’s range.

“As your kind gift is speaking of Space Marines, I wondered if I could speak with you about the subject of Techmarines too.”

“Most certainly, Lady Basileia,” Gastaph Hediatrix replied very politely. “Logically, I would have been surprised if you had not done so. Mars trains all the aspirants desiring to learn the teachings of the Omnissiah and the Machine-Spirits, and you have Astartes Chapters in your Sectors whose status is...questionable at best.”

Taylor gave him a thin smile. ‘Questionable’ was an understatement, and they knew it perfectly well.

For the Iron Drakes, there was no problem. The Chapter had its own accords signed with the Mechanicus and was Codex-compliant, whatever conditions it implied. The Dawnbreaker Guard was an Honour Guard and had its Techmarines. It was the two other Chapters which were the problem.

The former Alpha Legionnaires had lost all their Techmarines before the Battle of the Death Star, and given their status oscillating between ‘Renegade’ and ‘Traitor’ before the trial, they certainly had not been in official contact with the Mechanicus.

“I’m not well-versed on the details,” she admitted, though it was a bit dishonest. She had talked several times with the Techmarines sworn to her about what their duties entailed.

“I will keep the explanations simple, Lady Basileia. The training of an aspirant to become an ordained Techmarine last between thirty and thirty-five standard years. The great data-lore the aspirant Frater Astrotechnicus must understand, commit to memory, and assimilate the lore of the Machine God. Then they must prove they have mastered the most difficult reparations, maintenance rituals, and healing cant-hymns.”

It was always strange to hear the Mechanicus Magi and Archmagi to speak of science like it was a religion. Unlike Leet though, she wasn’t going to tell to them rudely they were living a dangerous fantasy. Besides, this galaxy was sufficiently crazy she wasn’t sure at all they were utterly in the wrong.

But the training of the aspirants for more than thirty years explained in part why some Space Marines had contacted her to insist upon the Techmarine training. It was not something which could be solved in a year or two.

“What is the standard contract for an Adeptus Astartes Chapter?”

“There is not a ‘standard contract’ per se,” the Mechanicus representative replied. “As an aspirant swears oaths to his Chapter first and the Mechanicus second, every Chapter has different policies where Techmarines are concerned.” The sound which came out from the metallic mouth was the equivalent of a shrug. “The Iron Hands and their Successors have the highest numbers of aspirants on the Blessed soil of Mars. The First Founding Chapter which provides the lowest numbers is the Salamanders.”

“The Blood Angels?”

“I have not the precise number, but their contract must ask for their strength to be maintained at forty Techmarines permanently.”

“And in exchange?” The Tech-Priests prided themselves on logic, and they were not going to train Space Marines and teach them a lot of technological ‘secrets’ for free.

“We ask for several Forge Worlds to be protected in priority by the Chapter should they come under attack. The representatives of Archmagos rank and above have the privilege to request an audience every century to a Chapter Master. Negotiations can be entered for Honour Guards and the like. There are plenty of existing conditions.”

This was technology and politics mixed to the highest degree, and the worst part was that it didn’t surprise her at all.

“The Heracles Wardens have no more Techmarines, and the Brothers of the Red have only six survivors.” This was for the formalities, Taylor was sure Gastaph Hediatrix had found the information in the Noosphere in less than ten seconds. “Some members of my Honour Guard are helping when their duties do not call them elsewhere, but they are in need of reinforcements. What are your suggestions, Archmagos?”

“The Heracles Wardens are under Inquisition-enforced restrictions, correct?”

“Correct.”

The Martian Tech-Priest buzzed something unintelligible before speaking in Low Gothic.

“Provided the negotiations in the next days prove successful and said Chapters have worthy aspirants ready to be trained, the Adeptus Mechanicus will be ready to accept ten aspirants per Chapter for their re-introduction in the great service of the Machine God. Given the circumstances, Twelfth Fleet will exceptionally transport them back to Mars. Further acceptance of aspirants will be negotiated point per point with negotiating teams and tech-law experts.”

The Basileia descended the third platform-podium behind Gastaph Hediatrix, allowing her to watch for several seconds with her own eyes the numerous mechadendrites crawling on the back of the Archmagos. Interestingly, while many Magi and Archmagi she had met had metallic appendages which could be qualified as either military or civilians – weapons and data-acquisition for example – the commander of Twelfth Fleet seemed to belong to neither. His dozen artificial mechadendrites appeared to have been built for polyvalent duties, guaranteeing he would not excel in a given situation, but neither would he fail abysmally.

It was uncommon, and given how every Mechanicus Tech-Priest was forged by his experiences, the Lady of Nyx was a bit curious how Hediatrix had arrived to this sort of tech-philosophy.

The presentation of the gifts continued. For the fourth one, the Explorator Primus and his staff were present in person, taking a brief respite from the negotiations with her Council, and presented to her an Oath of Assistance. Like the name implied, she could call the assistance of the Mechanicus of Mars should their help be required, be it military, economic or diplomatic, and in the name of the Fabricator-General the Tech-Priests would be oath-bound to answer it three times per century.

The fifth was gift was more something for the Heracles Warden than her; it was called an Android XL-15-GX, a relatively recent and technologically advanced encryption and deciphering machine.

The sixth was far more useful for her. It was a Termite Burrowing Vehicle, the *Tactical Burrower*. Her expression must have betrayed her intentions and the combinations she played with her insects, because her Honour Guard had worried expressions on their faces.

It was followed by a Kastelan-X10 Robot, the *03-Maccabeus*, and a relic of the Great Crusade, the Rapier Laser Destroyer *Golden Slayer*. And if anyone wondered, yes the Tech-Priests had painted it in gold before landing on Nyx.

The next presents were more interesting for someone like Dragon or a senior Archmagos of the Mechanicus of Nyx. The Macrocarid Explorator Heavy Vehicle *Sandwalker* was something Lankovar might appreciate for his travels. The Atomantic Shield Generator was something a Tinker would love to analyse.

The eleventh gift was small, no bigger than her hand. But the template-copy was insanely valuable, for it contained the schematics of the Volkite Caliver, and if the Dawnbreaker Guards thought she had not seen their mischievous glances, they were wrong.

As for the twelfth boon granted by Mars...

“It is my greatest pleasure,” Explorator Primus Camus-Nero Storm was back, and his voice boomed without effort over the cants of the Mechanicus assembly, “to reward Lady Taylor Hebert, Basileia of Nyx, Saint of the Omnissiah-Emperor, a Vote.”

The crowd went instantly silent and when the high-ranking Mechanicus representative touched her, he placed a miniscule golden cog on the Angel’s Tear above her heart. That he didn’t touch the Star of Terra said a lot about his dexterity.

“For your generosity, your valour, and your dedication to the Quest For Knowledge, Fabricator-General Xaerophrys Esvikom grants you one Honorary Vote in the Parliament of Mars.”

Fortunately, the Planetary Governor managed to close her mouth in time before asking if the Explorator-Primus was really serious. Unlike the Senatorum Imperialis of Holy Terra, the Parliament of Mars wasn’t in the habit of inviting non-Mechanicus. Hells, if Arithmancia Sultan had told her the truth, the last ‘Honorary Member’ they had accepted outside their own ranks was the Primarch of the Iron Hands, and he had been dead when the motion passed.

The other ‘Honorary figure’ was the Emperor, and it was more because the Mechanicus considered Him the Omnissiah.

“I...I humbly accept.”

Evidently, one vote was not that much – there were about four hundred and fifty thousand votes overall – but the deed was...well, not unprecedented but surely extremely rare.

“May the Machine God illuminates your path and the Machine-Spirits leads you on more successful Quests.”

“Ave Imperator!”

And once again, she had tens of thousands of red robes bowing profusely to her.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Ramilies Starfort *Angel’s Brotherhood***

**7.899.290M35**

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

Viewed from the main observation bay, it was a spectacle you didn’t see every day.

The four Arks Mechanicus lit their engines at the same instant, creating a pyrotechnic picture of martial projection and unfailing order.

They were great and mighty, these Arks. Each one was at least twelve kilometres-long, surpassing the battleship *Enterprise* despite its impressive dimensions, and in each of their hulls, the Mechanicus had poured projects and blueprints so valuable that each Shipmaster’s nomination was the result of centuries-old elimination processes.

Twelve seconds later, twelve battleships, twenty four cruisers and ninety-six escorts imitated their larger cousins. In a minute, it was like the Emperor had decided to bring a thousand new comets in the system of Nyx.

“Here they go,” the Chapter Master of the Brothers of the Red said aloud. “They didn’t stay long, these prestigious visitors.”

“They will come back in five years,” answered the Basileia, taking a sip of her tea cup before replying. “Some of them, anyway. And while Twelfth Fleet has only stayed in orbit of Nyx Tertius for fifty standard days, there are plenty of Martian Magi and Archmagi who have remained behind. The negotiators, the explorators, and the Biologis experts have added their numbers to the growing Nyx Mechanicus.”

Unlike him, the young woman had remained seated on her chair next to watch Mars’ fleet leaving. This was not due to a lack of fascination or rudeness, but rather exhaustion: four hours ago, the Dawnbreaker Guard and she had used the brand-new training facilities of the Angel’s Brotherhood for a particularly harsh session of physical conditioning. Although it wasn’t exactly visible from the appearance she was presenting to the outside world. But then, her red void-armour and a red cloak hid most of her body today.

“Yes, I was told many negotiations were continuing even as the Explorator-Primus and the Archmagos Prime made their preparations to leave Nyx.”

The Sector Lady finished drinking from her cup of tea, her eyes not wavering away from the massive Mechanicus fleet slipping away into the void.

“I have unfortunately become aware that in politics, negotiations take a long, long time. And between the ceremonies and all the first-class issues we had to deal with, no I am not surprised the negotiations have not ended in fifty days.”

Agiel Izaz watched away for a second or two as the young woman who was the sole other presence in the bay - aside from the Dawnbreaker Guard, of course – approached again with a new silver platter with refreshments and delivered a kiss on the lips of the Basileia.

“I understand you want to increase the difficulty of your Recruitment Trials for the next Sanguinala,” the Lady Nyx declared after emptying a new cup of tea.

“I do. Last year brought a generation of exceptional candidates, but to say the truth, we were pressed by time and we were forced to adapt and forego certain tests. This year, I would prefer to organise ten days of trials and competitions, the last day being of course the Day of Valour.”

“Hum.” As usual when Lady Taylor Hebert was speaking of very serious matters, it was difficult to guess what she was thinking. “I presume you have something of a plan to propose?”

“Yes,” he handed her a data-chip and let her read for the next fifteen minutes. The Basileia was a fast reader for a non-Astartes, but even she needed time to peruse all the propositions.

“Your new plan sounds coherent, though I pity the poor teenagers who will try these trials. I don’t think we subject the adult recruits of the Guard to one-third of this hell-training.” Lady Weaver said as her eyes once more rose from the lecture of his plan. “You have my approval. Check it with security and the Biologis teams of last year. You want worthy aspirants ultimately, not broken bodies.”

“It will be done.”

“Speaking of worthy aspirants, how many aspirants have you been able to keep from last year?”

“We have one hundred and seventy-four aspirants left from the previous Sanguinala. It is better by ten percent of our most optimistic predictions; the absence of the Black Rage and the support of the gene-labs of the Mechanicus have really done the implantation processes more efficient and less risky. Five days ago, all of them had passed Phase 6 and the implantation of the Catalepsean Node. The hypnotherapy and the advanced tactical training sessions have begun. It is not a stone-carved deadline, but I think in three years the first Brothers of the Red born from Nyx will be ready to be armed.”

This time a brief smile of pride lit her visage. This warmed his two hearts, for while there were officially of equivalent ranks, Agiel Izaz knew what he had been given by the Basileia of Nyx, and it included by the gigantic Ramilies Starfort they were currently calmly occupying.

“I see. Congratulations are in order, then.” The Lady Nyx diverted once again her attention to the stars. “When you have a firm number on the aspirants of the first Nyx-born generation who will be elevated as Scouts of your 10th Company, please warn me. I will arrange a visit of the Athena Armoury for everyone.”

“We have a surplus of battle-armours, my Lady.”

The Basileia made a fake-snobbish expression which would have almost made an inbred aristocrat proud.

“It will not be said the Basileia is stingy and avaricious!” After a few instants of chuckling, the parahuman became more serious. “Besides, the Artisans in my service have already produced one hundred and forty-five Mark VII Astartes Armour. I must know if they have done a good job with the funds and the resources allocated to them.”

Agiel heavily suspected they had. The Mechanicus was very fond of her, and the golden cog on her chest was an evident sign of the favour of Mars. As long as she was reasonable, the Tech-Priests were not going to cause her trouble.

And besides, he was not going to refuse brand-new power armours. He had a surplus of them in the Chapter’s armoury, that much was true, but all of them were more than two hundred years old, and plenty were in dire need of spare parts and dozens had already given to Mechanicus Artisans for heavy maintenance and reparations.

“We have also ten of our most technologically-inclined aspirants to Mars, as I’m sure you are aware. I am still debating with my officers how many we will accept in the end...”

“Go for the maximum,” Lady Weaver advised, noticing his very short expression of surprise. “Yes, I read Chapter 73 pertaining to the Techmarines’ rules. Guilliman authorised up to one hundred Techmarines in a single Chapter. I say try to reach the maximum number of Techmarines allowed in a Chapter.”

“It is not that simple, my Lady. There are...political concerns as well. Battle-brothers who are trained on Mars have divided loyalties. And a different temperament than other aspirants recently recognised as full-fledged battle-brothers. They tend to gain several Mechanicus traits like lack of emotions and brotherhood...”

His interlocutor dismissed the objection with a wave of her hand and a cup of tea.

“Then return them on the proper path.” He was told in a tone that was more implacable than a blade. “They are your brothers, and Isley told me that for all its faults, the Alpha Legion of old tried to reintegrate the Techmarines it received back with long training sessions on the emotional side of things. Try it. I believe it will make your Chapter stronger in the long-term.”

“I have a last objection, if you will allow me.”

The smile and the nod accompanied were granted immediately.

“The quota of one hundred Techmarines – and Apothecaries, if we want to boost their numbers too – was written black on write in the original Codex Astartes written by the Primarch of the Ultramarines. But there have been...amendments suggested by the High Lords of Terra since. I think the Carey Prerogative of 189M33 comes to mind. The august Masters of the Senatorum Imperialis don’t like it very much when a chapter tries to go way over the thousand Astartes-mark.”

The reaction of the Basileia limited itself to one eyebrow rising and a twisting of her lips.

“How kind of them. But there’s an ancient saying of Earth which has survived the millennia. *Dura lex, sed lex*. The words of the Primarch have not been rescinded. Therefore they are the law.”

Agiel Izaz was impressed by the justification the young woman had found. Quoting one of the favourite slogans in High Gothic of the Adeptus Arbites to deny a Prerogative of the Senatorum Imperialis – and one which had been promoted by the Adeptus Administratum, if his memory didn’t fail him – was the kind of argument which made you either a legend or a traitor.

“Many important men will not thank you for voicing this argument and supporting the Adeptus Astartes as a whole...”

She did not let him continue his plea.

“I have other reasons. Some of them are more selfish and do not include your Chapter.”

It was not hard to see where she was going.

“If we are already increasing our Techmarine and Apothecary quotas, it will be harder to deny it to the Heracles Wardens when their own restrictions will be lifted.”

The Basileia didn’t open her mouth to tell him he was wrong.

“The core of the idea was Dragon’s.” The parahuman revealed. “She thinks that for the elite force the Space Marines are supposed to be, your technological and medical strength is critically under-strength. And I agree.”

“It is not that bad...”

The young woman snickered and looked at him like he had made an excellent joke.

“Chapter Master Agiel Izaz, half a percent of the Nyxian population are serving me in a military job, and it takes over twenty percent of said population to give them the equipment, the ammunition and the supplies they must have to reach a battlefield and have a chance of victory. I have read thirty Chapters of the Codex Astartes, and I can tell already the minimum figures and the warning hints the Primarch Guilliman wrote over four thousand years ago have been deliberately ignored. When a Primarch speaks of minimal numbers, these are minimal numbers, not nominal or maximal. Low Gothic is not that complicated to learn.”

Yes, it was a common reaction for the non-Astartes who bothered to begin word-per-word the writings of the Thirteenth Legion.

“We are the shield and the sword of the Emperor, we are not His judges.” They were not created to fight the political battles of the Imperium. They had seen very well what happened when Astartes tried it: Terra in ruins and the Imperium on the edge of annihilation. “When the High Lords of Terra speak of a single voice, we must obey.”

If only because century after century, the High Lords had collared some evil and vicious dogs to kill those who didn’t.

“It’s a sad state of affairs.” He wasn’t going to disagree with that. Knowing likely how sensitive the subject was, Lady Weaver changed it. “Your quartermaster told me you were interested by the acquisition of two Gladius-class frigates?”

“Yes, while our Strike Cruisers are perfect for the transport of a Company, there are times where their presence on a battlefield is a waste of firepower which will be missed on another. Unfortunately, our lighter units had to be scrapped or were lost during our Penance Crusade.”

“I will have to consult to Archmagos Sultan tomorrow but it seems to me...”

Astartes had no mind for the administrative duties and war-plan programs, but fortunately, they had found people who were really, really good at it.

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

Triplex Phall had agreed to sell a Ramilies Starfort in exchange of a STC template-copy, and they had done their upmost to deliver a state-of-the-art fortress.

Gavreel had seen cities floating in space in the past, but they were paltry flies compared to the size and the splendour of a Ramilies. That the Brothers of the Red had already begun to mark their territory with splendid statues, paintings and tapestries didn’t hurt.

Tiny drawback, the very size of the *Angel’s Brotherhood* required a great deal of manpower. So at the moment, they were Tech-Priests and non-Tech-Priests running everywhere to accommodate it to the taste and the noble purpose of an Astartes Chapter’s headquarters.

“Once the Mars fleet will have made its Warp-Transition and Chapter Master Izaz will be satisfied by the progression of the works, the Starfort will be towed in orbit of Ruby’s Harvest.”

“Some would say it is a strange choice,” Jeremiah Isley told him as they made an inspection of the lower levels of the *Angel’s Brotherhood*.

Gavreel shrugged in return.

“I was not involved in the decision, but I was told the reasoning and I agree with it. Nyx itself is constantly updating its defences since our arrival, and a Starfort in the middle of these changes is more a hindrance than a boon. The older fortresses are moved to Luke’s Mine. The Mining World deserves some defences, but as the Basileia owns more and more mining exploitation rights outside this system, it is not as vital as it was in the past. Nyx Quintus, Saint Clare’s Stand, is not under our responsibility to defend, not until the Cardinal agrees to rescind its status of Ecclesiarchy planet. And Blue Anchorage of course is a Navy base. Moving a Ramilies Starfort there would be tantamount to admit we don’t trust the blue-collared officers in charge.”

Obviously, there were many tensions between the Imperial Navy and the government of Nyx, but there was really no need to inflame them for a more than questionable strategic action.

“The Starfort will orbit Ruby’s Harvest. It will reassure its inhabitants and prove them Nyx values their existence and their work. It will reassure people that the independence of the Adeptus Astartes is not at risk.” Appearances in politics were sometimes more useful than the truth. “And it will multiply by ten the firepower this world has to defend itself. The previous Governor of Nyx really left this world as defenceless as he could.”

It was a mistake so grave Gavreel would have gladly demanded to be part of the firing squads charged to execute the imbeciles who had taken these idiotic decisions. Ruby’s Harvest and its two moons, even after the latest effort of Lady Taylor Hebert, were still by large the major supplier of food supplies the Hive World of Nyx used on day-per-day basis. The capital world had just too many people, was too much polluted, and had not enough time under the new administration to change this state of affairs. Therefore it was not hard to argue that if a smart enemy invaded the Nyx System, he wouldn’t strike first the Navy shipyards or try to break the growing lethal defence grid of Nyx. No, the enemy would attack Ruby’s Harvest first and starve the populations of the other planets, trying to bring a social collapse before a military one.

“I understand the logic,” replied a bit too stiffly the former Harrowmaster. “But in my opinion, Ruby’s Harvest is well-covered by the Mechanicus stations between Quartus and Quintus, and if a potential enemy truly wants to starve us, it is not that complicated to burn a world.”

“It is your opinion, Chapter Master,” he said as they visited several hangars where brand-new machines and Mechanicus devices were brought in, escorted by dozens of Skitarii. “But I don’t think our Lady shares it. Or if she shares it, it’s likely she think that right now there’s nothing we could do. In the end, given the resources and the funds we have currently access to, there isn’t a lot we can do against an enemy which would bring a fleet like the Martian Twelfth to the battlefield. The *Enterprise* is just one battleship, and Battlefleet Nyx has only conducted its first post-war war game eleven days ago.”

“And what is her opinion on the Codex Astartes?” If a Space Marine could show anxiety, the Chapter Master of the Heracles Wardens would have been a nice example.

Ultimately, Gavreel could not resist taunting him.

“The Lady Nyx is of the opinion Lord Guilliman’s books are a masterwork of organisation, military law and tactical recommendations.”

The blue-red Space Marine growled in annoyance.

Estimating the punishment had lasted long enough, Gavreel adopted a more serious tone.

“There’s no denying that fact, cousin. That said, while it is a fine work, Lady Weaver thinks, and I share her perspective, that the *Codex Astartes* is at the same time a great source of strength and a fatal weakness. The Legions badly needed a set of rules after the Heresy, and as the Primarchs disappeared one after another, the guidance of the Codex was both a source of stability and prevented any ambitious Chapter Master from increasing his numbers out of proportion without entering in rebellion.”

“There are the Black Templars,” Isley countered.

“From what the Brothers of the Red and the Dawnbreaker Guard have to say, the zealot-crusaders rarely fight in formations stronger than four or five companies. They are in effect more like a dozen Chapters with the same colours and the same...beliefs.”

This was against the rules, but since no one had dared voiced a complaint to the High Lords, Gavreel wasn’t going to be the one to raise his voice in protestation as long as the Black Templars waged war in the God-Emperor’s name.

“The general order of the day is not to refuse to adhere to the Codex. We are on the contrary going to enforce certain of Guilliman’s writings which shouldn’t have been discarded like they were. It is the Basileia’s intention that by the end of the century there will be a cadre of Apothecaries and Techmarines brought to post-Scouring strength.”

“And the Apothecaries’ aspirants will be recruited via all these clinics and hospitals Lady Nyx has invested into?”

Whatever could be said about the gene-line of the Twentieth Legion, they were certainly not stupid or unobservant.

“Yes, though all are genuine health-restoring facilities. I think the Ecclesiarchy has formally created a similar order of sisters to fulfil the same goals on Saint Clare’s Stand.”

“It is human’s nature to exploit popular moves.” And if that wasn’t a cynical answer, the former Dark Angel didn’t know what it was.

“It isn’t that bad. They are trying to ‘lease’ Lady Weaver’s prestige, but since their edicts aren’t technically under her rule and most senior Priests refuse to spend proportionally a quarter of the health budget Nyx does, their policy will look self-serving, and there are plenty of people who travel every year between the two planets. Was there anything you wanted to ask?”

“There is a rumour a new armament program is in the works...”

“Consider it confirmed. Lady Dragon has closed two obsolete manufactorums last week. For some reason, the factory owners were selling third-rate boots to the black market and at the same time were busy pretending their production lines were down for extensive maintenance. They have been arrested by the Arbites, and now their assets are seized. It will take a couple of months, but the two reorganised manufactorums will mass-produce the template of Volkite Caliver we obtained from Mars. Over seventy percent will be destined to the Astartes Chapters of the Sector, since we are the only warriors able to use one without injury. The rest will go to equip some specific armoured vehicles, I suppose.”

“And the new jump packs?”

“The Magi and Archmagi have met more problems in their attempts to boost it. Our ancestors had not Space Marines in mind when they were building their best tools, and while the comprehension of the Mechanicus where Dark Age technology is involved increases, they are still in the process of filling the blanks in their archives...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Athena**

**7.920.290M35**

**Minister of Justice Missy Byron**

The government of Nyx, like a lot of things, had considerably expanded in the last year. Long gone was the time when the parahumans were monopolising the seats. Missy didn’t regret it. A Hive World was running on an ocean of bureaucracy and ridiculous procedures, and the more sworn-in personnel to deal with it, the better in her opinion. Officially and unofficially, there were eighteen people who had the right to sit at the Ministerial table with Taylor Hebert, counting Ministers, Secretaries, Masters and Directors.

In a few seconds, there would be seventeen.

“I want my Ministers to project an image of competence and reliability, Mr. Byzas Polios,” the insect-mistress declared in the icy voice she used when someone had screwed up by the numbers. “Arriving drunk at a meeting with a representative of Lionheart is not what I pay you for. Effective immediately, you are fired.”

The blonde-haired man had entered the room wearing a nice black suit and a regretful expression on his face. He was of average height, but had a large nose and a long beard.

Now he bowed largely, not going so far as to bend the knee in front of Taylor, but still an imploring behaviour.

“Please, Lady Basileia. I humbly ask from you a second chance.”

“This was your second chance,” the Planetary Governor of Nyx retorted bluntly. “I gave you a second chance when you failed to welcome an important envoy from the Atlantis Sector. No doubt you were busy drinking every bottle of amasec in your reserves while your subordinates were doing your job in your name.”

“Your Holiness!” The soon to be ex-Minister exclaimed.

“What? If you had a professional bone in your body, you would never have dared showing up in public like you did. You are very, very lucky the Lionheart emissary has a sense of humour and was ready to...ignore your deplorable behaviour. Your performance of the last month is completely unsuitable for one of my Ministers.”

“I have...alcohol issues, I admit it. But I am going to follow a cure. I will get better.”

His imploring face turned to the rest of the assembly, but it was not a lucky day for him. Not counting herself, only three members of the government were here today. It was not exceptional; all the Ministers worked like fanatics to prove they deserved the confidence Weaver had invested in them, and the Nyx System was a very big place.

The Controller General of Finances, Valentin Seignelas, Baron of Seignelas-Essex, glanced at Byzas Polios and showed only disgust. With his impeccable clothes and wig, it had likely never occurred to the noble to commit the major faux-pas of arriving drunk at a diplomatic meeting.

Theodore Kaplan, former Head-Director of Manufactorum Sextant-Omega and now Intendant of Economic Affairs, was giving a more friendly expression, but it was more a ‘you failed, you must assume the consequences’ look.

As for Serge Halieus, the small but extremely muscular Master of Agriculture, he barked a laugh before whispering something under his breath about drunkards and promises.

“Perhaps. But it only incites me to not keep you in my service. If you are in need of healing, you aren’t able to successfully complete your duties. By courtesy of the good work you did in the first couple of months, I will pay you one tenth of your income for the next year. If you are really willing to fight against your alcohol addiction, you will do what is necessary.”

Judging by the fury burning in his eyes, Missy was less than convinced he was going to do that. Internally, she sighed. As much as she didn’t like it, she was going to have to send a few Investigators to see that the blonde-haired man did not do something stupid.

Byzas Polios bowed and then was escorted away by a Space Marine of the Dawnbreaker Guard. And so the fifth Minister of the Foreign Affairs in two years was dismissed in disgrace.

“Forgive me for stating the obvious, Lady Basileia...” Theodore Kaplan began, “but with the Sanguinala so close, a new Minister of Affairs will have to be quickly chosen.”

“I know,” the black-gold haired parahuman answered in a more conversational tone. “I have some ideas to replace him, but no outstanding candidate in mind. If you have one, send me a memo, I am open to suggestions.”

It was definitely a first, though admittedly the Foreign Affairs were a special case. In most domains, be they mining, agriculture, industry or the navy, removing the nobles from their positions of power had led to major improvements. But when you were the Minister of the Foreign Affairs, you had to deal with foreign nobles, and not the ‘hear their ridiculous stories why they were not guilty’ like in her case.

“But that can wait until tomorrow. Have the rioting gangs of Underhive Romulus been dealt with, Missy?”

“They have,” she answered before grimacing. “But they were frankly more equipped with PDF weapons than we thought. We had to bring a full battalion of Arbites and two regiments of PDF to fully suppress them, and the damage was extensive. I have already transmitted the preliminary reports to the Tech-Priests and the hive-experts, they will in all likelihood have a full sum-up of the situation by week’s end. On a different but related note, I have new drug regulations to suggest.”

The riot had begun because a few gang leaders had thought it was smart to import some new exotic drug from off-world. It wasn’t, and not just because three injections of this substance were one hundred percent guaranteed to kill you.

“I will contact Yann Scipio to inform him the laws on drugs and forbidden substances must be revised...again.” Missy nodded. Yann Scipio, former lawyer and new Master of Laws, had the difficult duty of exploring the mess that the Menelaus dynasty had left where laws were concerned and to create a Code from the half-disastrous mumblings of lazy nobles. At first, it was her Ministry who had supervised the work, but five months ago the Council had decided unanimously to create a new position to rectify this problem. There were only so many hours during a single day, and the precedents and the intricacies of certain Nyxian laws were utterly incomprehensible to her. “Let’s hope that with the new laws on weapons’ ownership and our stamping on corruption and venality in the Planetary Defence Force, this incident will not have a repeat this year.”

Finally, the former supervillain more or less everyone in the Nyx System considered a Saint marched to her seat.

“Now that the unscheduled issues are temporarily solved, I think we can go back to the order of the day. Intendant Kaplan, you have the numbers?”

“Yes, my Lady,” the thin dark-skinned man answered. “However I’m afraid we were only able to establish a comprehensive picture on this Hive-Continent. My agents are still at work on the other two, and we will try our utmost to have the results before the end of this year.”

“All right,” Weaver told her subordinate. “Tell me what you have.”

“At the end of 288M35, the real average unemployment rate in the Moira Hives was approximately of 27.3%. As ex-Governor Menelaus always favoured his seat of power and three of his dearest friends were on the same continent as him, it is likely this continent was in a better state economically than its two counterparts.”

The Baron chose this moment to intervene.

“Obviously, during that year at least two-thirds of the nobles were not working or if they were, it was in a position the Governor had given them like ‘Grand Master of the Ballroom’ or ‘Seneschal of the Pureblood Guard’. Between the new infrastructure and industrial programs, the 72-working hours and the new hospitals, productivity has never been higher and unemployment is constantly on decline.”

“Indeed. Lady Basileia, we should be able to pass under 23% of unemployment in a few days, and according to our previsions, the industrial plans of Lady Dragon and the rest of the development efforts should decrease it further next year.”

“This is very good news.” The Basileia gave her key finance advisors a satisfied smile. “A decrease of the unemployment rate of over 4% will be regarded as a first promising improvement. How much has the production increased from last year?”

“Only 2.6%, Lady Basileia,” Valentin Seignelas spoke. “But the official numbers of the previous administration are highly suspicious and the Nyxian industry is right now continuing a great modernisation plan. Ninety percent of the most urgent issues plaguing the trade of Nyx have been resolved one way or another. Growth predictions for next year will likely be around 3.7%, depending on the Mechanicus and the Administratum priorities.”

“And the bad news?”

“My fellow nobles still refuse to acknowledge the unavoidable and begin to do something useful with their lives,” the Baron of Seignelas-Essex admitted. “Some have also begun to conspire against you.”

“Oh dear,” the predatory smiles of Taylor Hebert could be really scary when she wanted. “Dragon is so going to be disappointed she lost our bet...”

**Princess-Magister Zoe XIX Attica**

The Water Opera had always been considered an oddity among the Nyxian Operas. First of all, and most damning in the eyes of the great nobility, its construction had not been ordered by the Menelaus King of Kings of the time.

It was against the privileges of the nobility of Nyx, of course. Unfortunately, two hundred and thirty years ago, the woman who had dared challenge Alexandros IV Menelaus that way was not part of the Nyxian nobility. Or to be more accurate, she wasn’t part of it anymore. The Great Duchess Cheshire had lived a life of less-than-common adventures, and in one of them she had acquired a Warrant of Trade. Combined to her prodigious fortune, this had been enough to build and arm a small flotilla and continue to fund and participate in more outrageous explorations of the Eastern Fringe.

Following one of her many triumphant returns – and according the gossips, to give a lesson to the King of Kings who had once been her lover – Olivia Cheshire had decided to rebuild entirely one-third of Floor 62 on Hive Athena according to her tastes. All the Attica records of the time agreed that the incident had nearly sparked a civil war. Given that the ex-Great Duchess had half of a Battlefleet in orbit and several companies of elite mercenaries in her service, the outcome would have been...interesting, to say the least. It certainly explained why Alexandros IV had unfortunately four days later gone to his bed and never woke up.

His eldest son Naxos XXIII had succeeded him to the Governorship, and the crisis had been averted.

The Menelaus Dynasty however had not been willing to forgive and forget. Five years later, mere hours after Lady Olivia Cheshire had departed for another one of her dangerous explorations, Lord Nyx had unofficially made known that every noble who wanted to watch an opera in this unauthorised location could expect a rise of his tithes in the coming months. The few Counts and Dukes who had tried to see if he was bluffing had rapidly been bankrupted and a couple had even been executed.

No doubt it could have gotten ugly and violent when the female Rogue Trader came back. Except...Olivia Cheshire had never come back. Whether it was because she had found another wealthy planet to govern, lost her ship in a battle against insurmountable odds, or another sinister outcome, the Rogue Trader had never returned. And since all her decorations and constructions had cost billions of Throne Gelts across Nyx, it had not been long before her stewards and treasurers were forced to sell one by one her mansions, palaces, and private gardens.

After one hundred years, and despite the written orders of their mistress, the last Cheshire men and women who had stayed to their posts acknowledged the unavoidable and sold the Water Opera along with everything that had escaped the forty or fifty auction waves.

Interestingly enough, the Menelaus had refused to prove they weren’t a petty and jealous band of arrogant bastards. The edict of the then-King of Kings had decreased the value of the Water Opera to one-tenth of its real value, and the auction had never taken place; the Lord Nyx – certainly Naxos XV, had gifted it to his favourite the Prince-Magister Romulus.

Zoe supposed that the chroniclers of the period had not been too shocked that the new master had instantly started to use the ex-opera as an aquatic headquarters for his harem and a place of debauchery when he visited the Capital Hive. The Romulus sons, grandsons and extensive family had not been shy repeating the story over and over to every person they wanted to invite in the Water Opera. To make things more amusing from their point of view, they had kept the name and something like three-quarters of the architecture.

One hundred and twenty-five standard years later, eighty percent of the Romulus line had burned in the pyres lit by the Inquisition, and suddenly the laughing had stopped. Days later, the Basileia had been crowned, and then the Romulus survivors had realised their problems had just been about to begin.

Today there wasn’t a single noble left of the ‘prestigious’ Romulus line. Those who had survived the long purges, the Arbites trials, the confiscations, the repayment of the delayed taxes, and the harsh punishments had lost their privileges, their possessions, their wealth, and the Water Opera – though she was sure the latter had been a minor priority when they were too busy wondering if the next evening was going to see them arrested and sent to a Penal Legion.

After a brief period of waiting, it had been put on sale at the same value fallen Prince-Magister Romulus had purchased it – administrative error, no doubt – and Zoe had decided to purchase it.

It was relatively cheap for its location, she needed somewhere to relax when she visited Hive Athena, and once the erotic and idiotic decoration was quickly broken apart or sold away, the architects and workers she had hired had not taken long to transform it into a respectable flowery residence.

The Princess-Magister was proud in particular of the park which had once welcomed the opera’s spectators: five marble fountains were cooling the atmosphere with fresh water and over a hundred different species of flowers had been introduced and provided free perfume she often used on her robes. The difficult times were over for House Attica, but they had lasted so many years it was by now a second nature for her.

“Many courtesans thought you were going to reopen the opera when you bought the property, your Highness,” said her invitee for today, the Duke of Grey Spire.

“I thought about it,” Zoe replied honestly. “But my servants, as do yours I think, were quick to inform me that the opera system is in crisis.”

And yes, George Josephus, Duke of Grey Spire, should know it better than anyone. He had been the director of three of them in the name of the Menelaus dynasty before 289M35.

“The Lady Basileia is not a generous patron of the arts,” the aristocrat grumbled in his black beard.

“You are unfair. She has opened one school of painting and one school of sculpture this year. And between the laying of the foundations of the Hagia Sanguinala and the renovation of several churches, it’s hard to say she is not interested in art.”

Zoe had given a modest sum to one of the churches in the middle-levels of the Hive to see the efforts the Space Marines and their Lady had worked upon in private. It was breath-taking, and she had a large collection of artwork inherited from past generations of previous Attica Prince-Magisters.

“She is still letting the opera world of Nyx fall apart.”

The Princess-Magister wondered how someone could be so blind. The ‘industry’ of the Nyxian operas had worked extremely well because the Menelaus Governors were sinking fortunes into their constructions and the spectacles played inside. Zoe had not the real figures in the capital Hive and across the Moira Hive-Continent, but she would be really surprised if there were less than five thousand operas under the previous Governor’s reign. Naturally, as only nobles, upper-class cartel heads and senior priests had the money to watch one, they had not been really popular among the common population. The masses preferred the theatres. It was of course incredibly more plebeian and involved less art and less music, but it was also far less expensive.

The decision of the Basileia after the Sanguinala of 289M35 to allow theatre companies to play on the scene of the Royal Opera had been the equivalent of a shot in the head in the middle of a calamitous period.

About half of the favourites of Naxos XXVIII Menelaus who had lived on the opera subventions had suddenly been told the new Nyxian government was willing to sell them the operas it didn’t want to keep. The other half had already been sent to the Penal Legions or fired, obviously.

“One might argue she is not responsible of sponsoring the Nyxian culture across the Imperium.” Even if the young Saint was doing a very good job of it. The robes in spider silk never sold under the billion-mark, and the cooking with insects and crustaceans had taken a life of its own.

“Well, she should be! She sold me three operas and I can’t sell a third of the seats when my companies are playing! She cut the subventions the moment I signed my name on the contract!”

The Duke really should have studied the actions of the Saint-Basileia better. The investment Menelaus and his family had poured out in the court had shifted from an ocean to a trickle.

It was not, contrary to the accusations the disgraced surviving nobles said, that the new female ruler was avaricious. Valeria IV Corinth, new Princess-Magister, had received the position of Headmistress of the Fencing Academy and a yearly income of two million Throne Gelts in exchange of not returning to her practises of outlaw. The Ministers and other members of her government were also well-paid, largely over one hundred million per year. The Count of Low Chong, who had taken the reins as Head of the Royal Opera, was well-liked and well-paid for his job.

But that was the thing. The titles and positions given by the Basileia’s throne were jobs. They did not involve throwing away Throne Gelts from morning to evening in ridiculously expensive festivities.

“Perhaps you should have insisted that said subventions were written on the contract, then.”

“Ha! Easy to say!” Yes, and if he had asked, at least it might have cleared his eyes long enough to not sign the official documentation. The Duke of Grey Spire’s expression became angrier. “She is threatening everything we Nyxians hold dear.”

Zoe did not roll her eyes, but it wasn’t for a lack of envy.

“She is threatening everything the high and the middle nobility, along with the Menelaus supporters, held dear. It is not the same thing. Should there be a referendum or another electoral process in one week, I doubt Lady Weaver would win less than ninety-five percent of the vote.”

And the Princess-Magister didn’t really know where the five percent of the ‘no’ votes would come from. The disgraced nobility and its allies would not gather one percent of the total voices...

“If we gather all the remaining Honour Guards, we have a chance!”

Ah, here it was. The plot was coming out of the shadows. How boring and predictable.

“I believe you have drunk too much cheap alcohol. My Attica Adamantium Spears have roughly two hundred thousand men, and they have been constantly haemorrhaging manpower these last months. For a surprising reason, the PDF was suddenly far more popular than serving than a Princess-Magister’s employ.”

There were other factors, clearly. The better pay, the truth the common trooper was now highly regarded by the Planetary Governor, the edicts proclaiming the Nyx Purebloods and their lesser counterparts would not have access to the best equipment. The avalanche had been start to slow, but once it had begun...

The supreme commander of the Attica Adamantium Spears consoled herself that at least it had been a neat method to see who was truly loyal to her House and who wasn’t. She had even been able to cut down costs in the process, raise the pay of those who remained and benefit politically from the support of the new Minister of War.

“I am not alone. I have powerful friends.”

“Friends like the Marquis of Victory Ridge and the Great Duke of Xing-Song?” She didn’t wait an answer to continue. “Between you three, you may have fifty thousand men, and they are half as good as the Nyx Purebloods were.”

And since it may have taken a few minutes for veteran regiments to kill the ‘Menelaus elite’, it was anything but a commendation.

“You are well-informed,” the Duke of Grey Spire said narrowing his eyes.

“No, I’ve just been informed one hour ago of this fact by the Lady Basileia’s envoy.”

George Josephus became livid, and his hands trembled, though Zoe didn’t know if it was in fear or rage.

“You lie. My men outside the Water Opera would have seen him leave.”

She just smirked in return.

“Who said he had left?”

Her interlocutor turned his head fast enough to see the red-armoured Space Marine emerge from behind the marble pillar where he had listened to the entire conversation.

“May I present Battle-Brother Rahab of the Dawnbreaker Guard?” Zoe said sweetly, probably enjoying more the situation than she should.

“I have plenty of men waiting outside!” the Duke babbled. “If I give the signal, they will storm this place to save me.”

The red giant didn’t laugh or snicker, but the rumble which left the vox-casters was a good indicator how unimpressed he was.

“Champion Kratos is outside and must have asked by now your troops to surrender.” And even George Josephus was not stupid enough to believe his troops could fight their way through the Basileia’s Champion.

“I have friends, powerful friends!”

This was just sad, in the end. Two troopers in the colour of the Fay 20th arrived, saluted the Space Marine and she, and dragged away the sobbing aristocrat.

“Maybe a few days in the cactus labour battalions will teach him a modicum of humility before his trial.” Rahab declared, before immediately returning to his original mission. “Have you reached a decision?”

“I have. Tell the Lady-Basileia that I am accepting all her conditions and accept humbly the title and the duties of Minister of Foreign Affairs.”

**Abbess-Crusader Theodora Gaius**

Theodora was watching young adorable Alice eating her second piece of pancake when he entered the church.

Internally, she sighed. Was there no location where one could find some peace and quiet without being interrupted by work?

No, that her refuge was particularly quiet, of course. The Church of Saint Claire’s Mercy was right now filled with young children joyously eating, drinking and of course shouting at everything they found marvellous.

And there was a lot to marvel at. A third of the Dawnbreaker Guard had decided to renovate the religious edifice four or five months ago, and the Basileia had made her own modest contribution by adding a few paintings and tapestries – protected by stasis-fields, but still – of the Menelaus galleries. The vaulted ceiling had been repainted, showing a majestic figure of the God-Emperor, and the broken and damaged stained glass panels had all been replaced by brilliant and new models.

The children they brought once per week after the masses loved it. They liked it nearly as much as they loved the pancakes and the cookies.

The Abbess-Crusader smiled at the young eight-year old girl. Healthy and full of smiles, clothed in bright blue clothes, one would almost not believe the lovely child was an orphan who had spent half of her lives in dark streets a few levels above the Underhive. A PDF regiment had arrested the gang dominating the hab-block were she was trying to survive, and a Captain had taken pity and offered a meal and an exit from begging and poverty, leading her to one of the new ‘Weaver’s orphanages’ and then ultimately to a new Cartel-born family who could no longer have children of their own.

Alice was a bright child, and Theodora wondered what path she would choose once she grew to adulthood. With the old order of Nyx disintegrating and assailed by the new, many things which would have been impossible for a former orphan were no longer near-impossible.

Still, even Alice ran away to play games with other children as Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor sat on her right. Smart child.

“You are not an easy person to find these days, Abbess,” the member of the Holy Inquisition began as a greeting.

“You exaggerate, Lord Inquisitor. My schedule is not kept secret, and whether in orbit or inside this Hive, as long as I am accomplishing my duties, I am surrounded by thousands of Frateris Templars and local Troopers. It’s when I am off-duty that my presence is not remarked.”

Theodora Gaius paused a few seconds, and the silence was more than filled with the laughter and the excited voices of dozens of children

“Is there a particular reason you wanted to find me today, Lord?”

“I have. About thirty high-ranked priests of Hive Romulus have been arrested a couple of hours ago. They had apparently decided to support an armed uprising of several nobles.”

It should have surprised her, but it really didn’t. Many well-connected men and women in theory charged to spread the worship of the God-Emperor were more interested by enlarging their influence networks and taking for their own accounts the religious donations.

“We knew the last doctrine and financial reforms of the Ecclesiarchy were going to be...unpopular among the upper clergy.”

They had also been incredibly necessary if they wanted to keep the support of the Saint-Basileia.

On this her Minister of Religious Affairs, the redoubtable Cyril Nestorius, had been perfectly clear.

The Ecclesiarchy was an Adeptus of the Imperium, not an organisation created to make profits of religious donations, influence secular non-religious matters, bribe aristocrats and powerful players, or don diamonds and emeralds on their robes when the majority of their assembly was in tattered clothes.

Needless to say, the message had been received extremely well in the middle and lower clergy, where the donations too often vanished before they saw the glint of them and where a thousand Throne Gelts were a luxury unimaginable.

A large minority of the upper clergy, on the other hand, was seething in anger, and Theodora was fairly sure it would have been a majority if she and the Cardinal had not removed the worst of the corruption one year ago.

The Inquisitor’s reply was preceded by a sound vaguely resembling a snort.

“’Unpopular’. Yes, it is a way to look at it. I have infiltrated a few Acolytes in some circles, and their last reports were that some of the arrested had financial and doctrine support from the Shrine World of Claire 47. Something about recognising the supremacy of Saint Claire over our current Basileia-General, I believe.”

The supreme commander of the Frateris Templar in the Nyx Sector grimaced. It was not good, not good at all.

“And I suppose the priests of Hive Romulus have left plenty of written evidence around for the Arbites to confirm their suspicions?”

The expression on the Lord Inquisitor’s face was sufficient to understand the culprits had been as efficient as conspirators as they had been good priests for the last years.

It was going to have...unpleasant political repercussions. Cardinal Prescott Lumen had until now refrained his hand off Claire 47, due to the rebuilding efforts and the extensive surveys of the Faith in the Sector now that the ork threat had been crushed.

But if several high-ranked Archbishops and Bishops of the Shrine World had been brainless enough to intervene in the capital of the Nyx Sector, the intervention was going to be a necessity and a high-ranked priority.

“I will inform the Cardinal immediately, and we will propose an internal resolution of the affairs at the next Religious Council in five days.”

Because if the senior conspirators on Claire 47 were allowed to rise in rebellion, this was going to be Matapan again, and Theodora had watched enough vid-casts of this particular affair to want to avoid a repeat of this ‘campaign’. Lady Taylor Hebert had rid the entire world of its former administration and replaced it with one she could trust. It did not take much imagination what she would do the priests of a Shrine World, which to make things more one-sided, was on her doorstep.

The Ecclesiarchy would be quite lucky after such an incident if the system was not transferred to the direct governance of Nyx, and while Theodora could close her eyes on the formidable loss of donations and status it represented, her former superiors in the Atlantis Sector and the nearby Sectors would no doubt see things with a different eye. After all, some of them were as corrupt as the former religious and civilian administration of Nyx.

“I suppose the Holy Ordo has its suggestions to communicate us...” because expecting the Inquisition to stay idle in such a situation would take an amazing sense of naivety and lack of intelligence.

“You suppose correctly. First, I suggest Claire 47’s ruling priesthood prepare a generous donation for Lady Weaver’s orphanages and hospitals. The political issues will require a subtler touch...”

Yes, it was never a good day when the Inquisition was trying to find you when you were off-duty.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx VI**

**7.932.290M35**

**Lord Admiral Danvers Alexandros**

In war time, the duties of a Lord Admiral of the Imperial Navy were many and dangerous. There never were enough line ships to protect every planet correctly, and too often the Battlefleet was arriving in a system to acknowledge the fact the battle had been lost or won weeks if not months ago.

In peace time, things should be simpler. They weren’t. Damaged ships had to be repaired. Crippled ships had to be somehow brought back into serviceable condition. Lost ships had to be replaced. The manpower of the millions of men and women who were wearing the blue of His Most Holy Majesty’s Navy had to be used as best as was humanly possible. Maintenance and overhaul operations had to be directed the best he could to not leave Battlefleet Nyx with glaring weaknesses in its order of battle. Patrols had to be organised and the charts across the stars updated to the post-war situation.

And of course, he had to do it within the budget Kar Duniash had generously given him.

A budget which, needless to say, was not meeting any definition of ‘generous’ he was aware of.

“Ah, if only our Lords and Masters of Kar Duniash could send some money in our direction...”

To begin with, Danvers would not be there in the late evening, mere hours before the official opening of this year’s Sanguinala, in a conference room searching how best to divide his very limited budget. 290M35 had been, for all its victory proclamations, still been a year of war for the Nyx Sector. Administratively, it meant a war-time budget. But 291M35 was officially a year of peace, and the budget was about to decrease in consequence. He had protested and sent priority Astropathic calls to Kar Duniash...and he had been ignored. The budget cut was about to strike, decreasing Battlefleet Nyx’s cash resources by one point five percent. And if the rumours his few allies in the committees of Segmentum Command had told him the truth, 292M35 was going to be worse from a financial perspective.

It was going to hurt. During the war, seventy percent of his total budget was coming from Kar Duniash and sources outside the Nyx Sector, the rest provided by the local Governors. These cuts were going to return Battlefleet Nyx to a peace-time budget before they had been able to truly recoup their losses. This reminded him a recent speech of the Basileia and one of her expressions...’winning the peace’, was it?

For the time being, Kar Duniash was not helping them winning the peace. Danvers Alexandros knew he was not the best strategist or tactician of Navy, he was also keenly aware the Nyx Sector was by its importance of a low priority, but Segmentum Command and higher authorities were really, really not helping boosting the influence and the popularity in the Sector.

The arrival of Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer interrupted his pessimistic thoughts on the budget.

“I was not expecting you so soon, Max. May I assume your presence here is good news?”

The Cypra Mundi-born officer nodded back, and this was a relief.

“I was able to contact Lady Taylor Hebert before she left for the Sanguinala ceremonies and explain to her the Navy’s preoccupations. The Saint-Basileia proved...receptive to our current problems. She obviously didn’t promise to fund the Battlefleet from her personal funds, but she was willing to make a few suggestions and guarantees, should we in turn make some concessions of our own.”

“Obviously,” the Lord Admiral agreed. “Should I prepare for the screams which are going to be heard once a few of our most conservative subordinates hear of them?”

“I think you have a good hour before Rear-Admiral Alava y Leon and Rear-Admiral Lorenzo-Andrew de Bahia storm your conference room.”

Danvers Alexandros winced. Due to the enormous casualties and the multiple redeployments of Battlefleet Nyx, Alava y Leon and Lorenzo-Andrew de Bahia were the senior Rear-Admirals present at Blue Anchorage. And they were hardly the most fervent supporters of the new Lady Nyx.

Certainly, this state of affairs had been unavoidable in the short and middle-term. The Basileia, from all evidence and trusted information, had not been born noble and could care less about the genealogy of someone as long as said person took a lasgun and stood with her on the battlefield. The terrible purges she had inflicted to the Nyxian nobility had only emphasized this point. Should the greenskins come back tomorrow and the order for general mobilisation be given, it was likely thousands of nobles would charge to the next recruiting station rather than face accusations of cowardice and wasting the public funds in time of war.

The two Rear-Admirals, on the other hand, were pure-blooded scions of two enemy dynasties of Kar Duniash. They hated each other, but they hated even more the prospect of some outsiders rising to the top of the hierarchy.

And to make things worse from a communication perspective, the new First Naval Secretary was Wolfgang Bach...in other names a young man without any Navy connections who had humiliated academically several of their peers while he was attending the Academy of Kar Duniash.

It was good none of the two Rear-Admirals had a battle-squadron to command, because otherwise Danvers was half-convinced they would have tried to do something stupid, Mechanicus armada in orbit around Nyx or not.

“Formidable,” he replied unenthusiastically. “Let’s get down with it, then. What are the Basileia’s suggestions?”

It was going to be interesting, if nothing else. Naxos Menelaus had been an utter moron, and unable to understand the difference between a destroyer and a monitor unless one seized him and plunged his head first into the Warp engines. His successor was far more interested in naval affairs and pleasant. To compensate, she was also a hundred times more intelligent.

“To begin with, she want your support to repeal Act 44-AC-3TF-081M32, the so-called Rogue Trader ban.”

Ah yes, this one was quite infamous. Two hundred years ago, a Lord Menelaus had conspired with one of his predecessors to ban the Rogue Traders and everyone associated with them from the Nyx System. That way, it took two signatures, not just one, to repeal the Act. It was one of the hundreds of petty acts the Lords of Nyx had indulged into when they were at the height of their power and wealth.

“I do not see any difficulties with this point. Repealing this Act can only boost trade and the attractiveness of the Sector. But we will have to wait for Rogue Traders and more merchants to visit again the Sector.” And as the war still raged in neighbouring Sectors, it was going to take a while to erase the damage this Act had cause to trade. By this law, no Nyxian-born or Nyxian inhabitant could become a Rogue Trader, and anyone owning a Warrant of Trade could not use the shipyards the industrial facilities of Nyx Tertius. The last female Rogue Trader had really, really made the Menelaus afraid, and led them to take imbecilic reactions.

“I suppose she has managed to obtain a Warrant of Trade of Mars?”

“She did not say it in these exact terms, but I know that in the general terms negotiated with certain Martian Archmagi, the building of an Ambition-class Cruiser in the Ring of Iron was agreed to. Reading between the lines, I think that Wolfgang Bach at least will get a Warrant of Trade and resign from his current position when said warship will arrive at Nyx, which should be in a decade.”

The grey-white haired Admiral clicked his fingers.

“One Warrant of Trade does not represent a danger, and the laws of the Imperium tolerate them as long as they behave in Imperial space,” it was not a position all Admirals followed, but Danvers was not going to fight the local Sector Lady on minor and unimportant frivolities. “What are the Lady’s next proposals?”

The lips of Max von Schafer twitched in a parody of smile.

“Lady Weaver proposes to increase her participation in the funding of the Aeronautica Imperialis...under conditions.”

Yes, having a smart Governor was far more dangerous than having a moron in command. At least with the moron, you knew the conspiracies and the political plots were going to comically fail before coming into contact with a little thing called ‘reality’.

“What type of reforms are we talking about? And how much percentage of the total funding is she willing to pay?”

“I’m going to answer the second question first, if you don’t mind Lord Admiral.” Von Schafer consulted his data-slate for a few seconds, before continuing. “The 290M35 participation of the Nyx Government in the funding of our Aeronautica assets and related spending was at twenty percent, two percent better than last year. The Saint-Basileia is willing to increase it to thirty percent.”

Danvers Alexandros was incredibly tempted just to say ‘yes’ right there. Ten percent might not seem a lot, but when starfighters, atmospheric fighters, bombers and flyers of dozens of classes were concerned, it was a bill of several billions which was at stake.

But knowing the Heroine of Brockton, it was not going to be free.

“And the ‘suggestions’ in exchange?”

The Vice-Admiral shrugged.

“It was focused on three points. The first, and in several ways the more important, is a serious reform of the Aeronautica Academy we have in the south of the Dolos Hive-Continent. Lady Weaver wants a meritocratic system of exams, a harsh training of two years minimum, and at least five hundred hours on a flying machine before being declared good for the service among other things.”

“I will have to read the file fully before agreeing to a decision.” Was it pertinent? Yes, it was. Too many times in the 280s, the training of the aspirant pilots had been rushed and tens of thousands had perished against the orks. The Lord Admiral was willing to give up a lot of things in order to have a return to a situation where the Aeronautica didn’t serve as practise targets for the greenskins.

“The second is an increase of the Mechanicus effectives we take aboard our warships...”

“And it was not yesterday when the Ecclesiarchy was demanding the very same thing...” Danvers remarked in a voice which wanted to be conversational.

“And the third is the abolition of the system of impressment and the press gangs,” he didn’t ask if it was a joke. The neutral expression harboured by von Schafer was answer in itself.

And in a way, he was not surprised. Lady Taylor Hebert was building herself a reputation of champion of the people, be they merchants, poor workers, or Whiteshield-guardsmen. Press gangs were the antithesis of what the Basileia believed in.

“On this one, we will have to respectfully decline, Vice-Admiral.” Danvers Alexandros, Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Nyx, replied. “Unless, of course, Lady Nyx is going to tell me she’s able to find the two or so million conscripts we need when the first shot of war is fired and the merchant ships flee like orks before shampoo.”

“She is willing to test a new system which was implemented during the early Great Crusade. The Lady-Saint called it the ‘naval inscription’.”

Despite his natural reluctance, he was intrigued.

“What is the principle of this...naval inscription?”

“It is basically trying to push the available ship crewmen and merchant warrant officers to volunteer by themselves. Lady Weaver and her Naval Secretaries think a census of all Nyxians working in the starship industry must be conducted, and one year out of five, they must serve in the Navy. In exchange, there will be fiscal exemptions, improved medical assistance, and a reformation of the general system of pensions.”

Danvers grimaced, and it wasn’t because the idea wasn’t good. It was imaginative, clever, and may very well be affordable to boot. But it faced a massive problem.

“And the odds of several hundreds of my officers not launching an insurrection if I declare I’m willing to test the new system on a limited scale?”

Max von Schafer didn’t reply. He didn’t need to. This ‘naval inscription’ would be seen by the majority of the Captains and the officers ranked above them as an unbearable intervention from a Planetary Governor into the properly ordered world of the Imperial Navy.

“No, you will, politely of course, refuse this ‘suggestion’. I can’t afford the political and influence cost of it, and I’m sure you don’t either. The rest of the proposals are however sound in principle, and should somewhat ease the strain of our budget.”

On this the hololith compiling the numbers he needed were formal.

“Are they alternate proposals we might give to Lady Weaver to...?”

The door of the conference room was opened violently and Rear-Admiral Alava y Leon and Rear-Admiral Lorenzo-Andrew de Bahia stormed in, only to stop when they saw Vice-Admiral Max von Schafer was still present and fixing them with a cold glare.

Never mind. He had an idea what Lady Nyx and the First Naval Secretary might consider an overture of peace.

“Correct me if I’m wrong Vice-Admiral, but has Flotilla Lion-3 not requested naval expertise to patrol the Txacopec System against a possible return of the orks?”

His interlocutor didn’t smile or bare of his teeth, but the light in his eyes told Danvers that Max von Schafer understood perfectly the possibilities offered by this rude attitude.

“Yes they are, Lord Admiral. And I wanted one or two Rear-Admirals to be in command of this delicate patrol...”

The anger on Alava and Lorenzo-Andrew’s faces were frozen in astonishment and horror. He pressed a button, and the expressions were immortalised forever for his personal collection. It would be good for a laugh or two every time the weight of his duties was too heavy on his shoulders.

“Congratulations, Rear-Admirals...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Forge-Temple Fafnir**

**7.954.290M35**

**Magos-Draco Dragon Richter**

Once she had seen the Baneblade *Machine’s Loyalty*, Dragon had lost most of her last illusions about the Cataphract Super-Heavy Tank. Yes, the military forces of the Imperial Guard recruited in the Nyx Sector needed a heavy tank to dominate the battlefield against the armoured monstrosities the orks and other species loved to build.

It wasn’t a reason to build something, which if she had to be blunt, sucked in every military aspect a sane soldier wanted to see in a tank.

“My assistants have already found a nickname for them,” she informed Taylor. “They call them the LSTs.”

“I think I understand the reference, yes. They are Large and Slow Targets.” The other parahuman touched the metal of the outer shielding before cursing under her breath. “I have not the money to buy you a template-copy of the Baneblade-hull.”

The Magos-Draco –which had to be one of the most ironic titles she had ever earned – made a large and unnecessary sigh.

“I wasn’t expecting you to. The designs of super-heavy tanks, or should I say, valuable super-heavy tanks, are so expensive we might call the prices on the market hellish.”

“And the Cataphract is not one of them, wonderful,” the insect-mistress ended with a large hand wave of discontent. “How bad is it?”

“I think the answer is ‘at least the armour of a super-heavy tank can resist a lot’.” Third-tier or not, there was no denying the Imperium built its tanks and most of its machine park extremely resistant to the array of potential enemy weapons. The influence of fighting the orks and other belligerent non-human species for several thousand years was certainly at play there, no doubt. “In looks, the Cataphract resembles very much an oversized Panzer VI ‘Bengal Tiger’ like the ones the Nazis used in World War Two. Unfortunately like the Panzer VI, the Cataphract requires a lot of heavy maintenance, and the number of breakdowns in a hundred kilometres is...not good. Worse, as the nickname implies, it is extremely slow. The Baneblade won’t win any sprint medal, but its reliability and its ability to operate in any environment and weather makes its top speed of twenty-five kilometres per hour almost acceptable. The Cataphract can’t go faster than eighteen kilometres per hour...and that’s when everything works fine. The main gun is also unsatisfactory. I was almost tempted to replace it by a duo of Russ Battle-Cannons. And of course, its engine consumes too much fuel and tends to overheat every time it is pushed a bit at one hundred percent.”

This was it for the most glaring drawbacks of the Cataphract Super-Heavy Tank.

“Okay. The Patton, Nyx and Fay officers have the same opinion as yours. What do you need to make the Cataphract an acceptable tank?”

“Earth is a souvenir we must fight for.” It was the code-word they had agreed to when they wanted to discuss topics the overwhelming majority of the Imperium would surely disapprove.

Instantly, the three Catachan Queen-ants on the outskirts of the hangar began to shine and the vox and Noosphere connections disintegrated in a loud buzz of static. While it had not been the original intention of this project, there was no denying the golden ants were scrambling communications efficiently when they were used at full power. Of course by repercussion, the golden aura surrounding Taylor Hebert grew brighter and more visible for a normal human eye.

The Astartes of the Dawnbreaker Guard in the mean time proceeded to evacuate, politely, but firmly, the few Tech-Priests authorised to enter this highly-secure hangar of Forge-Temple Fafnir.

“In its current state, the Cataphract is worthless and a death trap. To be sure, the firepower of its cannon is considerable, but it fires too slowly. And of course it is only marginally more mobile and agile than a standard bunker. If we want this machine to be useful, I will need to be creative, and it means replacing this tank from turret to engine.”

The insect-mistress which had become by default her nominal boss stoically raised an eyebrow.

“Of course. And how many tech-Priests will be in the crowd which will storm the gates with the cogs and the hammers?”

Dragon snickered.

“Oh, not that many. Three or four millions, give it or take. I’m sure there are a few Tech-Priests on this planet which have an urge to innovate.”

Taylor gave her a thin smile.

“If you see nothing wrong with it, I would like to avoid a major revolt from the Mechanicus enclaves.” There was a second or two of silence as the young parahuman was bathed in light. “I suppose you have already digitally thought about all the modifications you wanted to give the Cataphract.”

“Yes, I have. First, the Cataphract would be redesigned to accept the advanced alloys and coolants Nyx has now at its disposal. Secondly, I have extracted from ancient Noosphere archive a fast-firing lascannon, upgraded it with 35th technology, and I built officially one for the defence of your Hive. I called it with my usual modesty the Dragon-Pattern Smaug Battle-Lascannon.”

“Just with this name, I am shaking in my boots.” The Basileia rolled her eyes.

“There’s no need to be vexing,” Dragon answered in a falsely-offended tone. “It weights twenty-eight tons, can fire shells of one hundred and seventy kilograms and the calibre is of two hundred and thirty-three point seven millimetres.”

“Are you sure it’s a tank gun?” the General in half-pay asked dubitatively. “Its characteristics sound to me more like a sea-faring battleship’s gun...oh never mind. Tell me the other modifications you have in mind.”

“I have retrieved many war and civilian designs from the STC negotiations and the Nyx ancient tech-enclaves. I have studied over six thousand different templates of powerplants and engines, and I think I can do better than this obsolete V16 the Cataphract is forced to use. I want to incorporate a new V22 Multi-Fuel Powerplant. The new Cataphract should get a top speed of above fifty kilometres per hour.”

She gave a short sum-up of the secondary weapons and the redesign of the interior she intended to make – most of them based on the new Baneblade Taylor had been given as a present.

“That’s good enough for me. Now tell me your plan to evade the scrutiny of the other Tech-Priests.”

“My opinion is that what they don’t know can’t anger them. I would build the factories in another system, certainly Bahamut or Patton.”

The answer was uttered immediately.

“No.”

Yes, she had been afraid of that reaction.

“It is the simplest option available to us.” The Tinker spoke neutrally.

“It is also a very risky one, politically and militarily. Dragon, we aren’t speaking of vox-casters or tractors here. We’re speaking about super-heavy tanks. Think of the damage they could cause if an ambitious noble who has decided to lie low for the time being manages to overtake the line of production while I’m outside the Nyx Sector.”

The Magos-Draco wanted to say the insect-mistress she was too pessimistic. Unfortunately, it was a very good point.

“Until I return from the upcoming campaign and we have the political capital and the physical means to enforce a wide-scale economic reform of the Sector, moving outside Nyx critical manufactorums and production lines is a risk I don’t think we can afford to take.”

“I can’t say you’re wrong. But I can’t hide Cataphract construction in plain sight!”

Taylor Hebert didn’t reply for long seconds, her eyes watching something that wasn’t vehicles or spare tank parts. What exactly she was gazing at, was a mystery. Her range of insect-control had skyrocketed since she had the golden Queen-ants under her control...

“Why not?” Weaver asked. “The Aegean Cartel is a beast to control as a single monolithic entity, and by Nyxian law, I can create and divide Nyx-based mega-corporations without asking for anyone’s opinion. Let’s say I propose one of those most competent Heads frequently asking for independent industrial branches, like Elbert Rhine or Jennifer Lyle, to lead their own cartel. I keep a controlling share of fifty-one percent, and we say everyone we have received a foreign order of two hundred ‘new’ Cataphracts and ten thousand Jaghatai Khan Battle-Tanks. The Tech-Priests you assign to their factories are by a strange coincidence all those heavily supporting the unity of a ‘Nyxian Mechanicus’ and pro-reformists. And if my forces begin to order a few more for Operation Caribbean, well surely it’s because their performances have been remarkable...”

That...that could work. It was audacious and incredibly outrageous in every respect, but it could work.

“I only see two problems. First, we will have to delay the arrival of new tanks for certain Guard regiments. I work fast, but the repurposing of already existing tank manufactorums will take a couple of months. And really, if we want to make a true Cartel to cover our tracks, we will need to give them a few real contracts. Chimeras and Salamanders armoured vehicles’ orders would be a good beginning.”

“And the second?”

“If we begin to produce new tanks in mass, we will have to pay the adequate Munitorum tithe. You know, to convince them we are not in the process of a rebellion build-up or confiscating perfectly workable tanks from frontline formations.”

The light of the Queen-ants diminished and the young woman shook her head.

“Fine, it might give us some publicity in the end. And after we return from Operation Caribbean, the outcome will be settled one way or another. If the new tanks are highly regarded by the Guard, they will scream for more. If they are a failure, we will repurpose our factories and build Leman Russ in their place.”

They left the hanger where the ‘old’ Cataphract tanks were stored, and instantly the Space Marines formed in a dispersed escort which challenged every potential assassin to die under their blades.

“How are the rest of your projects faring?”

“Rather well, all things considered. The Forge-Temple around us is forty percent operational, and most of the Tech-Priests and resources are already there, so it should not be long before we meet the preliminary goals we fixed two years ago.”

As they marched on a bridge above the production lines of the Larkine lasgun, which had been ritually activated a week ago with much cants and ‘sacred oils’, Dragon gave a rapid sum-up of the last month’s important topics.

The Astartes of the Brothers of the Red, the Heracles Wardens and obviously the Dawnbreaker Guard which were going to participate in the prepared military campaign were all going to have the possibility of adding a Volkite Caliver, a Masamune Power Katana, and several other devastating toys to their weapons’ arsenal. The Apothecaries would also have their own Bacta supply to heal their battle-brothers, the ‘Blue Bacta’, though Librarians and every Astartes having dormant or minor psyker powers were forbidden to use it.

Advanced vox-emitters were produced by the tens of thousands, and the stocks of tractors and agricultural-purposed machines were going to be shipped in vast amounts across the Sector and beyond.

“And the Dragon Armours?”

Dragon tried very hard not to look too satisfied with herself.

“The Forge-Worlds delegates are tripling their price offers to be at the top of client list. In fact, between the funds of the first sales and the Mars official endorsement, the Master of Logistics and I are studying very seriously the possibility of building one full orbital-forge dedicated to their production.”

Taylor rolled her shoulders.

“Bring the plans to the next Council. We will discuss it and eventually approve them. I don’t expect much opposition, given the huge profits at stake.”

“I have received another proposition from Ryza, incidentally. Their Fabricator is extremely interested by the Nyx-class, but would be even more willing to pay the concept of a Dragon Armour conceived for void supremacy.”

“And in the next seconds, you are going to open the big doors I see two hundred metres north and tell me ‘oh lovely Basileia, it just happens I have a big, big prototype which just happens to have the skills and the performances my colleagues of Ryza want.”

Dragon stuck her tongue out at the Lady of Nyx and pouted.

“You’re no fun. I had prepared a long and formidable speech...”

The great security gates opened, before the first Tech-Priests and the Space Marines, giving them their first opportunity to see the long and graceful Dragon Armour immobile in the heart of her working hall.

Unlike the Nyx-class, she had not imposed a weight limit or even much of a length and width upper redline. As much as she wished otherwise, eighty tonnes was not something that could survive very long in a space battle. The Enemy had monstrous Heldrakes of stupendous sizes to fight the human starfighters and starships in fleet engagements.

The result was this new Armour. It incorporated no really innovative weaponry or exceptionally radical doctrine. She had ‘merely’ increased the Nyx-class five times, giving it a length of thirty-five metres and a total weight (with weapons) of approximately six hundred and fifty tonnes.

“Behold the Ancalagon-class Dragon Armour...”

And Weaver jokingly replied.

“Praise the Omnissiah, for we are living in an age of Dragons...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Outer Approaches of the Eleos System**

**Battleship *Standard Template Construct***

**7.999.290M35**

**Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar**

For the Departmento Munitorum, the Imperial Navy and the Imperial Guard, Operation Caribbean – the official military codename for the Pavia Liberation – would begin in five years and two days.

In a logical way, these powerful organisations of the Imperium weren’t wrong. The real military actions wouldn’t begin until the *Enterprise*, Mars’ Twenty-Fourth Fleet and all the associated forces left Nyx in five years.

But a military campaign wasn’t just moving Force X from Point A to Point B. It required a truly humongous quantity of information. The composition of the atmosphere of the planet you wanted to invade, for example. After all, it didn’t do a General any good if he or she landed ten million troops to overwhelm one hundred thousand heretics if the heretics had been vaccinated against a unique disease or if there was a gas in the air which killed human lungs in less than five months.

The same was true for the Admirals, evidently. A naval commander could muster the greatest armada since the Great Crusade in one location, but if the muster point happened to be in the middle of an asteroid belt, the military campaign was going to end here and there.

All of this was perfectly logical and rational.

At the same time, force was to admit that the information the multitude of organisations the Imperium seemed to delight in creating century after century had no reliable information whatsoever on the Pavia System.

The Brothers of the Red had tried to gather a maximum of battle-data during their Penance Crusade, but they were Astartes, not analysts, and anyway they had never gotten closer from the target-system than fifty light-years. As such, what was left of the M30 archives of the Adeptus Astartes was the best information the Imperium had on Pavia’s star and its surroundings, because the Administratum vaults supposed to store these files had not survived M34. What exactly had happened to them was likely an interesting story, and Desmerius felt he was going to delegate two of his subordinates at his return to Nyx just for the potential aquisition of particularly damning evidence, but ultimately the truth remained no one knew anything valuable.

The ‘revelation’ that Pavia was a pirate haven didn’t count.

Beginning a military campaign knowing nothing about your potential enemies, the planet and the stellar surroundings which were the target, or the time needed to reach it by Warp-travel was undoubtedly a recipe for a military disaster.

It didn’t stop certain Crusade commanders from attempting it, of course.

But as he affirmed in simple words, just because certain people wished to initiate logistical and exploratory catastrophes with millions of men was no reason to do it with their far more limited manpower.

The Basileia, intelligent woman that she was, had completely agreed with his reasoning.

But Weaver had also pointed out to him the dangers of reconnaissance so far ahead of the Caribbean main battle-forces.

Obviously, there was a high likelihood that should one of their scouts was captured, the pirates and whatever xenos and heretic support they had available would flee Pavia.

A frustrating outcome, but not exactly one going against the goals of Operation Caribbean.

On the other hand, it was entirely possible that if the pirates realised the Twenty-Fourth was coming to raze their sedentary installations and massacre their ships, they would fortify Pavia as best as they could and call for reinforcements. Piracy was not exactly the most friendly-inspiring profession, but when the hangman came to collect, they had a tendency to band together.

As a result, Lady Taylor Hebert and the Mechanicus Council had agreed the scouting and the building of the supply chain they would use to go to Pavia had to remain under an important level of secrecy. While the name Pavia had been uttered several times in negotiations, it had been rapidly restricted to the higher echelon of the different organisations which were going to be involved in the fighting.

And of those mere thousands, only a couple of hundred knew of the First Nyx Exploration Fleet’s deployment – the Magi and Tech-Priests crewing these ships were obviously not included in these numbers.

If they did their job well, the fame they gained would be inexistent. Promotions would be earned, but success in this sub-operation – codenamed Operation Puerto Rico for an island of Terra – was scouting the target and the enemy remaining staying clueless about their presence.

Precautions had been taken, of course. Every starship chosen for these long three years away from Nyx was optimised from stealth and minimal advanced emissions. His Forge World of Stygies VIII, heavily motivated by the discovery of the Athena STC database, had given away many, many secrets of shrouding void shields and furtive technologies’ data-copies.

The First Nyx Exploration Fleet was definitely on the small side, obviously. Secret remained paramount in the Pavia region until their united fleet translated out of the Warp.

But since its purpose was not to fight, one cruiser, two light cruisers, four frigates and twelve destroyers would have to be enough. They were accompanies by forty-plus supply and depot ships lightly armed.

Even assembling this small force without alarming the hundreds of spies the Heracles Wardens and the Nyx counter-intelligence services found every week had been difficult. They had to create fake digital trails, and many of the destroyers he saw with his augmetics right now were in theory assigned to several exploration research teams assigned to the search of the *Death Star*’s home base. One of the frigate and the two cruisers were ‘officially’ racing towards as part of the galactic north as part of a Nyx exploration group. This one wasn’t real either, but even the Inquisition was not aware of it. The Magos commanding this force had received his sealed orders from the Basileia’s hands. It wouldn’t do for the rosette-bearers to know members of the Mechanicus wanted to rediscover the Isstvan System.

Yes, the plans of Lady Weaver were extremely ambitious. And Desmerius Lankovar was proud to be in her service, though his part in Operation Puerto Rico was limited to watch the Exploration Fleet’s muster here in the middle of nowhere away from enemy and allied spies. His high responsibilities did not allow him to leave Nyx for more than a week without a lot of people beginning to ask interesting questions.

Bah, at least he had managed to put his chosen candidate in command of the exploratory fleet.

“Are you ready Alena?” He spoke to his former second-in-command and Questor, now Magos Explorator Alena Wismer, commanding officer of the First Nyx Exploration Fleet.

“We are ready, Archmagos. We will accomplish our mission with all due diligence, by the Omnissiah’s will.”

“I never doubted it, Magos. May the Machine-God and the Motive Force watch over your fleet and bless your enterprise. Archmagos Lankovar, out.”

One by one, the drives of the starships were lit and the small fleet accelerated, leaving his flagship and its escorts alone in the outer void, several light-years away from Eleos’ star.

“In five years, it will be our turn...”

And then it would be the time to justify the name he had chosen for his new flagship. Many had thought that he would rename it the *Magos Laurentis II*...but the *Standard Template Construct* was the sole and only choice in his mind.

The Omnissiah had made His Will limpid in the Battle of the Death Star, and Desmerius Lankovar would not fail Him.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Atlas Graveyard Sub-Sector**

**Matapan System**

**Matapan V**

**7.001.291M35**

**Hasdrubal Macquarie**

Mere minutes ago, Matapan had entered a new year. In the village of Lug, two thousand souls-strong, this event was celebrated by the Day of the Sun – only foreigners called it the Day of Renewal. And since for once the rain had stopped and the day was half-blue, half-grey with some warmth, every family had organised with its neighbours and prepared the wooden tables, the amasec bottles and the best holy days food they had in the cellars.

Usually, it wouldn’t have been much here. Lug was small, and half of the harvest was disappearing into the huge wagon the Baron’s inspectors were bringing twice per month by the Monford road.

But last year everything had changed. The Planetary Governor had mumbled some nonsense about secession on the vox, sent letters to Lug and every village nearby they needed to send young men to the capital to die for his big head.

Hasdrubal had been twenty. He had volunteered to protect his younger brother – Alvin had just passed eighteen, so the recruiters would have chosen the cadet above the eldest – and been thrown into a train for Sylvesteropolis. When he thought about it, and he preferred not these days – in the darkness and with hundreds of young men just like him, he had fully expected to die.

But they never did fight. Their train was stopped seventy kilometres away from the capital, and Hasdrubal Macquarie would remember forever the moment they had been ejected by grim soldiers from the train and forced to form a line.

Then the giant had come.

It had been like in the sermons of Father Coryx. Taller than two men added together, the Angel of Death had stepped forwards. Hasdrubal and all the men present had known deep inside their heads and their guts they never had a chance. This giant was the proof the Emperor was against the Governor, and what could you do against this magnificence and such large weapons? The Angel had told them the Governor was a traitor against the God-Emperor and that his Lady was going to punish him for his rebellion.

As they had not taken arms against the God-Emperor, the red-armoured giant had announced, they were forgiven under the condition they returned to their farms and proved loyal for the rest of their lives.

Hasdrubal was not stupid, and neither were the four hundred-plus recruits with him. They had all bowed before the Angel and sworn they would be loyal. Two weeks later, he was back to the familial farm and life had returned.

If he had to confess, Hasdrubal had not expected much from the rest of the year. The Governor had lost his head or got some horrible death for his disloyalty, and life had continued like it had always had at Lug.

Whether the high noble of Sylvesteropolis was a Beagle or a Mac-thing, the countryside and Lug had nothing to expect but the *coca* and the *iris*, the hated tax-tithes on the Matapan rice.

It was what his father and the ancients had repeated lengthily in the village’s councils anyway.

But the ancients and his father had been wrong. Life had not returned like it had been before the ‘short secession’.

The first change had been religious. Five months ago, several soldiers in dark green uniforms had arrived and arrested Father Coryx. From the short speech the foreign officer had given, Coryx had been a signatory of some traitorous foreign-preacher and signed documents of heretical nature. Nobody had mourned the local church head save a few old women. Some of his sermons were interesting, the Angels of Death and the glorious miracles of the God-Emperor came to mind – but at other times he was too fond of shouting that they had to be dumb, accept meekly to give large donations to his church, and that the sun was shining out of the backside of the Governor. His replacement, Father Jin, was ten times more popular than the previous Father.

Three weeks after a cogboy had arrived, and he had not come with his metallic-things empty: he – or it – was riding a large agri-tractor and a second was towed with the main machine.

Five weeks later, the coca tax-tithe had been cancelled by edit of the Administrator-General, in the name of Lady Taylor Hebert.

Everyone had danced for two days when they had realised it was not a joke or a noble’s trick. Baron Tichu had not been happy, oh no, but when he had tried to collect his due in the village of Oman-on-Isere, the PDF had come to arrest him, and he had never returned from the capital. Since then, life was far better. They had only to give out one-quarter of the harvest instead of half. And the cogboy, that everyone had taken to take ‘Tech-Tractor One’ because his real name was too complicated, had said that if the harvests stayed this way for one year or two, he would bring one or two more tractors and some other cogboys with spare parts and knowledge.

So when Father Jin called everyone for the First Prayer, Hasdrubal Macquarie prostrated himself in direction of the sun, and prayed sincerely the God-Emperor. The young man thanked lengthily the Master of Mankind for sending His Saint to Matapan and showing how much He loved them.

“The Emperor Protects!” He shouted with the rest of the village.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Station Zeta-Nu-Zeta-000111000**

**7.132.291M35**

**Leet**

Since he had arrived on the station, Leet had rarely used his alarm clock for its namesake function. Station Zeta-Nu-Zeta-000111000 had the same day/night cycle as the Hive World of Nyx, and the artificial lights and the holo-decorations were illuminating the rooms, the hangars, the halls and the diverse storage facilities in consequence.

Besides, why wake up early in the morning when he could Tinker at every hour of the day? On this space station there were no Asians or Nazi madmen waiting at one corner to beat you down. There was no need to pay or search for the materials he used, although to be fair the majority were forcefully recycled at the end of the day.

Obviously, sometimes he needed to activate his alarm clock to wake up early in the morning. Mainly when Dragon and her assistants came for one of her monthly visit/inspections and complained how many tens of thousands of Throne Gelts he was exploding.

However, Leet was sure he had not prepared said alarm clock last evening.

And in the unlikely scenario he had and he forgot it, the second Tinker of Nyx would never have set the morning alarm for six o’clock.

“Oh, come on...” the video game fanatic grumbled as a loud and powerful blast of heavy metal arrived to his ears. “It’s too early...”

His hand automatically went to stop the alarm clock, but his finger hit nothing.

A moment later, unfortunately, something definitely hit him.

Before he had the opportunity to do a single move of self-defence or protest, his mattress was levitated by the application of several metallic things, and Leet found himself on the ground with his pillow.

“You are going to regret this! I am your station commander!”

There were five or six Tech-Priests in his bedroom, and if it was a joke it was not a funny one. But to his sheer stupefaction, his words didn’t cause to pause for a single second.

His sleepwear was torn apart, he was thrown for one full minute under an icy shower before being dragged in front of a wardrobe. Dozens of mechadendrites forced him to don the ugly things the cogboys gave to their metallic slave-servitors.

“When I will contact your superior, you are going to be demoted and punished!”

He received a shock stick between the legs in retaliation.

“Sentience is the basest form of Intellect. The Fifth Universal Law triumphs once more.”

He had not the seconds to tell them all the good he thought of their ‘Universal laws’ and ‘Machine prayers’ – which was very little.

Their visit to the lunch hall did not last one minute, and during half of it they demanded he ate this disgusting nutrient paste instead of a proper breakfast. Like he was going to poison himself!

More worrying was the evidence over twenty other Tech-Priests had watched him be roughly handled by the rebellious cogboys, and not one had made a move to intervene.

It was not a joke or something the head-toasters had bet on when they were playing with their live-connectors. It was a general mutiny.

Leet was deeply regretting the absence of Über, more than ever. His friend would have known what to do. Über would have proposed something to mitigate the disastrous problems of his powers. Über would have had ideas to force the Adeptus Mechanicus to back off and let him experiment in peace. Maybe his best and loyal partner-in-crime would have even found an angle to convince Skitter to let them have a Hive filled with video games.

“You are not going to get away with this. When Dragon or the Basileia know what you’ve done, you are going to be in a world of trouble.”

“Life is Directed Motion. So the First Law has proclaimed, so it shall be.”

They dragged him to hangar-section 4-K. It had changed a lot since he had entered it four or five days ago. Someone was going to say it was not difficult, because there had been a rupture of green coolant. But there was no security foam, no coolant avalanche or broken electro-tech devices anymore.

There was a big Faustus Interceptor in the middle of the hangar, one which looked like it had seen better days.

And there were also plenty of basic tools.

“Your task for this day,” a Martian cogboy told him with the kind of slow and condescending tone generally used for naughty children, “will be to start the repair of this noble and proper Faustus Interceptor per the knowledge officially sanctioned by the Omnissiah and the Cult Mechanicus. Do you understand?”

“I refuse!” Leet shouted. “I did not damage this Starfighter and I have other projects today. Find someone else, and now apologise. If you...”

A mechadendrite slapped him on the cheek.

“Intellect is the Understanding of Knowledge. Fourth Universal Law, praise the Omnissiah for He understands All.”

Leet grabbed a hammer. It was by instinct, and he had no idea what to do with it...and they instantly fell upon him with furious buzzing.

“You do not respect the blessed tools of the Machine-God!”

“I have seen hereteks show more respect to their creations than he!”

“Should we open the section to the void in ten hours and let the Omnissiah judge him for his abominable transgressions?”

Leet didn’t believe his ears. They were thinking about killing him! Of course he knew he was not the cogboys’ best friend – this honour belonged to Taylor Hebert for discovering their so-precious STC – but he had no idea they were ready to eliminate him!

“You have erred gravely, Tinker Leet,” and to his shock, it was the highest and long-serving cogboy which had emerged from behind the starfighter. “But the Glorious Omnissiah is merciful. You are going to learn to respect the blessed machines and repair them completely according to their perfect STC production templates. You will listen to our warnings, and stop causing deaths in the ranks of the loyal servants of the Omnissiah. And maybe, maybe, if you follow the proper path of the Motive Force and the Machine-God, we will let you Tinker with carefully selected components one hour per day.”

These cogboys were utterly barmy. It must be the fumes or the coolants which had wiped out a good part of their brains.

But they were surrounding him, and while they had no lethal weapons like a plasma gun or a grenade to threaten him with, they were over twenty of them in this section, and he was alone with nothing to defend himself.

Leet tried to calm himself. Whatever craziness had contaminated these Tech-Priests, the ones outside the station were not in it. Dragon would not tolerate that, never. So he just had to survive until the end of the day, rush towards his personal communications’ room and sound the alert.

And then he would take great pleasure to reserve a punishment of his own to these mutineers.

“Are you ready to listen to the true instructions of the God-Machine?”

“Yes, I am,” Leet had not to feign his reluctance and his disgust. If he became happy and friendly in one minute, they were going to think something was afoot. “Let’s begin the reparations you aren’t able to do.”

This bout of insolence was rewarded by a spray of foam and four minor electric shocks.

“The Spirit is the Spark of Life and you will not insult the Adeptus Mechanicus of Mars! The Second Law is Above the Flesh!”

This was going to be a very, very long day...

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“I’m sorry Dragon, the Tech-Priests have done *what*?”

Taylor had been returning from a very interesting visit to the gene-labs when the Tinker intercepted her. Since her official schedule had allowed for one hour of spare time before receiving some important farmers from Ruby’s Harvest, she had moved to one of the empty courtrooms next to her ‘throne hall’, wondering if they had been a chance in production methods of a particularly important discovery.

The news, apparently, were about a very different issue.

“The Tech-Priests of **Station** Zeta-Nu-Zeta-000111000 have finally snapped and mutinied against Leet a week ago. I was a bit busy these last days, so I did not check the updates on the station as I usually do. Imagine my surprise this morning when I watched our innovation-breaking Tinker being ruled around like a disobedient menial-apprentice by all the Tech-Priests he is supposed to command.”

Taylor could not help it. She giggled loudly, and judging by the noise in the vicinity made by her Astartes and Fay bodyguards, she wasn’t the only one to find it funny.

“Oh, I needed that.” The Basileia replied when she had finished laughing after half a minute. “So they are using him as their errant boy. They haven’t tortured or caused him physical harm?”

Dragon shrugged noncommittally.

“No, they haven’t tortured him. They weren’t exactly gentle the first two days, though. He was foamed several times, and these electric-sticks they have to discipline them must not be pleasant in the quantities he has received.”

The insect-mistress wished she was surprised, but a good look at the casualties’ figures of the last year aboard Station ‘Danger-Prototype-Central’ was reason enough for the Tech-Priests involved in this operation to get...a bit peeved.

“Why did you learn of this only after a week?” She asked reasonably, now that most of the hilarity was gone. “Since Leet is always provoking explosions of disasters by the series, I know we have a Magos and about thirty overseers to oversee the station from afar. They have direct vid-links, secure vox-casters and advanced spy devices. And it doesn’t look like the sort of event you can’t notice.”

“They were too busy laughing at the new situation to contact me,” the Tinker replied with a disabused expression. “Technically, they didn’t go against their orders: as long as Leet doesn’t provoke some disaster or is injured, they do not need to contact me or their immediate superiors.”

In Low Gothic, this meant Leet had sufficiently annoyed them that they had deliberately decided to not relay the information of what was happening in the corridors and the labs of this station.

“Okay, much as I want to punish them, I suppose that since they respected their directives and instructions, it would be counter-productive to punish or demote them.”

Besides, where would she send them? ‘Leet duty’ was something to frighten the Tech-Priests with, according to the Mechanicus Council. It was not a reward or a holiday for exceptional service in your technological duties.

“I suppose you sent the orders to get Leet out of here and stop this hilarious experiment.” Taylor tried to think about the impact of this. She was certainly going to give a few slaps on the wrist of these mutineers for the form and transfer them to a less exposed posting. Maybe on Wuhan, let them be Governor Cao and his nobles’ problem...

“I did not.”

For the second time in the debate, she felt real surprise. Raising her eyebrows, the Lady of Nyx gave her Minister of Industry a dubitative expression.

“I didn’t know you were a sadist, Dragon.”

The protest was instantaneous.

“I am not a sadist! Even if I must admit I made a killing on the new pop-corn brand I introduced last month.”

To her right, Kratos abandoned the legendary dignity of the Space Marines and burst into laughter. And he was not the only Astartes to succumb to hilarity, merely the first.

“I am so glad to hear this,” if the Magos-Draco didn’t notice her sarcasm, there was no hope for her. “But I’m a bit concerned about Leet himself. After all, by your own admissions, he has tried to contact other persons and it didn’t work. In my opinion, Leet will sooner or later arrive to the conclusion that he needs to escape the station by his own means or he will snap one day. Either way, I foresee a big explosion and a mini-nova replacing the lab-station in the short-term future.”

“I thought about it too.” Of course she had before asking for a moment of her free time. “It will be extremely difficult to escape the station by his own means. The Tech-Priests have removed from his quarters mostly everything that could be used for Tinkering. All day they are making him repair several machines and forcing him to recite cant-prayers and Universal laws of the Machine-God. The one hour of Tinkering he is granted every day is done with very restricted materials and in heavily monitored conditions. If they don’t like what Leet tries to create, he is snapped out of it in mere seconds. And for the moment, it works Taylor. Since they...snapped, there hasn’t been a single explosion inside the station.”

The former warlord of Brockton Bay imagined a circle of tech-Priests celebrating around a panel ‘7 days without explosions’. Yes, she could understand the...benefits of keeping the new status quo.

“He could still snap.”

“That’s why my orders, assuming you approve, are to send a complete team of our best mental health professionals, which will work on him in addition to his current...’duties’.”

“We tried that, a year ago.”

“We tried that and we allowed Leet to walk away the moment he refused to participate further in these sessions.” Dragon corrected. “Now, I’m all for free will and letting someone make his choices, but Leet has not adapted like we did to life in the Imperium and until a week ago, he was continuing on his self-destroying course. We have a chance to turn this around, and play the good old strategy of the carrot and the stick.”

This sounded...logical, but she saw a little problem with it.

“The stick is obviously keeping the Tech-Priests on the station ‘supervising’ him and keeping him away from expensive catastrophes and disasters in series. But we don’t have a carrot.”

The red-robed Tinker grimaced.

“I was thinking...you have a lot of empty properties confiscated from treacherous nobles. Do you think you could tolerate a large one to be used as a video game facility?”

“I could.” Not at Hive Athena, she was not crazy. But with the punishments given to tens of thousands of nobles, places, conference centres and luxury residences were not right now something she lacked. “But you haven’t told me why I should. I mean, I appreciate knowing Leet is going to stop blow up stuff and be supervised by people who don’t want to be blown apart, but let’s face it, Leet is not my friend, and the benefits he gives Nyx by his simple presence are approximately zero. When Dennis told me he wanted to open a costume shop and sell Sanguinala clothes a few months ago, I said yes because it was a funny idea and he works hard to catch up with fleet knowledge and boost his powers. I don’t want to be a tyrant, but in order to be rewards there must be some successes and achievements. You didn’t manage to copy his demon-banisher or the holy grenade, and this is the only good contributions coming from him I am aware of.”

“About that...I communicated with the Tech-Priests and told them to...test him. I wanted to see if his powers were as unreliable once they had been...motivated to follow a certain path and had absorbed new knowledge.”

When the famous Tinker began to speak in riddles, despite the fact most of her bodyguards were sworn to silence and were unlikely to tell anyone even the smallest secret, it was either going to be really good or really bad.

“And?”

“I think he gave me a good head start on Special Project 73 Codename Long Lance.”

No wonder Dragon had been so careful with her words. Her ‘Special Projects’ were something that only the parahumans on Nyx – Contessa and Leet not included – were aware of, and even then, Clockblocker had not been given all the information.

In simple words, Dragon had made a list of all the inventions that would be able to save the Imperium from its current state of tyranny, decline, Warp-corruption and etc...

This was the ‘Special Project List’, of which there only existed one digital data-slate, and it was in one of the most secure vaults she owned.

Special Project 1 Codename Skywalker was inventing a reliable Faster-Than-Light interstellar travel method which did not use the Warp.

There were five hundred of these projects, and their place in the list was determined by their importance, with Special Project 1 being the most important research ever, and Special Project 500 the –relatively – least valuable.

Special Project 73 Codename Long Lance was, if she remembered well, involving Antimatter and its practical applications.

Obviously, given the Mechanicus’ ideas of innovation, most of these Special Projects were still at the hypothetical stage. But if Leet was beginning to be reliable enough to give a head start on them...

Taylor sighed.

“How big a video game facility are we talking about?”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Athena**

**7.139.291M35**

**Chancellor Friar Achelieux**

The last three centuries had not been good for House Achelieux.

No, it was inexact. The last two hundred and ninety-four years had not been good for House Achelieux. This was what happened when the beloved Novator of a House died and his unworthy son inherited his title.

A Novator of the Navis Nobilite, especially one ruling over a Navigator House, had to be powerful, ambitious, cunning, and gifted in playing the games of politics and trade.

Eusebio Achelieux had been powerful, oh yes. Unfortunately, the power imbued in his third eye and the rest of his body had been more compensated by his total lack of intelligence. The Novator had been ambitious, extremely so. A cunning Navigator, however, would not have tried to bribe four times a man in a row which refused to take part in the illegal trade of some xenos artefacts. Eusebio had failed in every way which mattered. Navigators had a prime-status in the Imperium of Mankind, but they were not invulnerable, and threatening an Inquisitor in disguise was not something that tended to increase your life-expectancy. Eusebio had learned it to his sorrow for a few seconds, before the Inquisitor blew his head apart with a Mauler bolt pistol.

A rule of seventy-plus years had ended on that fateful day, and from then on it had been a spiral of treasons, lost contracts and major defeats. Starships defending their interests in Segmentum Solar had been seized or disappeared without a trace. Politicians one by one failed to answer their calls. Trade agreements were renegotiated to the House’s detriment.

Even the historical contract giving the Navigator duties of Battlefleet Pluto to House Achelieux had been lost eighty-three years ago.

House Achelieux was still a Magisterial House, like five thousand others on the sacred soil of Holy Terra. The problem was that while for millennia they had been leading contenders in the Paternova’s election, they were now at the bottom of the ladder, and their opponents had not ceased their assaults, enjoying very much to see them brought so low.

His presence here was evidence enough House Achelieux was becoming irrelevant.

Had they received a polite request for a skilled Navigator in the Nyx Sector one thousand standard years ago, House Achelieux would have answered, of course. But the emissary would have likely been a lesser diplomat every Navigator had his employ. They would not have sent a real Navigator until the final negotiations were about to end and it was time to affix the great Achelieux seal on the contract tying Navigators and client. They would never have sent one of the four Chancellors of the House so far from Terra for a minor contract.

Nyx wasn’t worth it. This Sector was too far from the extremely profitable Warp arteries of Ultima Segmentum. The half-valuable trade exchanges stopped at Samarkand in this Quadrant, and Nyx was more than two hundred light-years south of it, in a region where ork problems were frequent and totally out of control.

But the times were hard, and House Achelieux had to search for every opportunity which might be able to restore some of the lost prestige and glory. The Achelieux Palace in the Navigator’s Quarter was dark, dusty, and half-deserted these days. All the members of House Achelieux having the skill and the power to guide a ship through the Warp were away trying to win back some influence, wealth and resources, but it was not easy. House Ferraci and House Belisarius were for once united in something, and their goal was to cripple them until they had no choice but to go Nomadic and cease to be a factor in the Magisterial houses’ spheres.

“The Houses having contracts in the Sector are already here, clearly,” his distant cousin Nathaniel informed him as their starship was acknowledged by the different patrols of the Nyx SDF and the Imperial Navy. “House Orion for the Nomadic Navigators, House Boyle and Curtis for the Beggars.”

“Do not call them Beggars. Call them Shrouded Houses. It is not prudent to mock their status right now. We may join their ranks in a few years.”

The young man tried to open his mouth in protest, but the fire in Friar’s eyes must have been sufficiently impressive, because Nathaniel closed his mouth and did not start a rant on the inferior gene-lines of the impoverished scions of the Navis Nobilite.

Deciding it was the perfect opportunity to see if his student remembered something of his lessons, the Chancellor opened with the first question every Navigator had to keep in mind.

“What is the balance of Navigator power in this Sector?”

“House Orion, status Nomadic-Obscurus, is the most powerful Navigator House in the Nyx Sector according to our most recent evaluations. They own extensive and primary contracts with the local Cartels, Merchant Fleet, and Battlefleet Nyx and by 288M35, approximately seventy-six percent of the Warp-capable starships in the Nyx Sector were crewed by an Orion Navigator. These are the most valuable contracts and space agreements however, and they have left only scraps for House Boyle and Curtis. House Boyle is Shrouded-Lambda, and owns twelve percent of the contracts, with large investments in Agri-Worlds. House Curtis guides ten percent of the Warp-capable starships available, and they face major difficulties to stay solvent. All of them have recently suffered from significant losses as the greenskins attacked everything in their range.”

“Good, you have not forgotten anything...as far as we aware of.”

The smile of Nathaniel disappeared as fast as it had materialised.

“We must move cautiously but decisively in this Sector. I am sure House Visscher and its agents have already sold all the astropathic data they have to Ferraci or Belisarius, and we have maybe two or three years before they arrive to steal our contracts.”

“Would they really try to, Chancellor?” his distant cousin asked inquisitively. “I know they have done it everywhere in Segmentum Solar, but we are far from Terra and the long-established Warp routes. And the contract which made us come here is not that interesting for them. We can divert a Navigator Primaris and three Secundus because they stole hundreds of contracts from us. But have they the numbers to agree to a contract like this one and fulfil all their obligations?”

“It is an excellent question...alas my orders are clear, and so are yours. We need all the agreements and resources we can earn, and while two billion Throne Gelts per year is not an impressive sum, we can make it fructify away from our enemies. We will not let our opponents ridicule us again!”

“Yes, Chancellor!”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Petersburg System**

**Petersburg II**

**7.140.291M35**

**Major Tanya Sevrev**

Choosing the location where the Guard forces of Operation Caribbean were going to be trained had been anything but simple.

The Departmento Munitorum, as per its abysmal norms, had instantly started to voice the most ridiculous excuses, and when they had exhausted these ones, they had tried religious, dynasty, financial and security concerns.

The Ecclesiarchy had wanted the training of the ‘holy chosen’ to be done on a Cardinal World to increase their own prestige and better indoctrinate officers and Whiteshields to their political agenda.

Worse, several Governors and nobles of dubious loyalty had tried to claim the ‘honour’ of welcoming these troops on their own soil. Tanya was still trying to figure if they were trying to rally the Guard regiments to their treasonous conspiracies or if they had an overabundance of potential rebels who were going to launch violent uprising in the short-term future.

In the end, miracle of inefficiency, they had to consider the planets of the Nyx Sector one by one. The Nyx System had been discarded almost from the start, evidently. It would have been a political nightmare. Wuhan, Claire 47, Fay, Smilodon, Lionheart, Atlas, Matapan and Theta had also been quickly eliminated.

It had taken months of threats and hair-tearing debates, but the Guard had finally its mustering ground.

They were going to train the new Guard recruits at Petersburg.

The post-ork invasion Industrial World met all the criteria, really. It had a reliable Governor – a retired Guard Colonel who had some blood ties to the pre-war nobility. The system from a strategic perspective was close enough from other important loyalist nodes to be reinforced or evacuated if the order was given. The ravages the greenskins had caused to the environment and the cities was such that the war exercises the mustering forces were going to practise was not going to destroy anything important. The presence of guardsmen would ease the work of the cleaning-up companies in eliminating the damned ork-spores. And it was isolated enough that the High Command was able to control who was authorised to participate and watch the training and who wasn’t.

So yes, Petersburg was probably the best choice for a training operation of great magnitude.

But whatever the reasons, the Major didn’t feel any enthusiasm setting a foot on this world again. Too many men and women of Fay had died in these mazes of trenches, these plains, and these promethium-polluted industrial sprawls for her to feel any joy about it.

Fortunately this was not her duty. As highest representative of the Fay 20th, Tanya had just come to verify the logistical chain was functioning correctly and officially giving up the 9th Company for live-fire training. In a few days, she would return to Nyx.

The rest of the Guard forces on the abandoned battlefields of Petersburg, on the other hand, would have to obey Lord Commissar Zuhev.

“Colonel Dolos and the Nyx 3005th Mechanised Infantry are being transported to the surface as we speak, Commissar,” Tanya announced to the heavily-scarred and threatening man. For all the horrors they had faced in several campaigns, the Major was not crazy enough to pretend Zuhev didn’t scare her anymore.

“Then the muster has officially begun.” Zuhev answered back, as the first shuttles and orbital transports began to illuminate the grey sky. “One regiment and ten thousand men ready to serve.”

And it would be the first of many, they both knew it.

Army Group Caribbean was not strong enough to deserve the ‘Crusade’ title, but assuming Lady Weaver and every man and woman in the logistics did their job, it was going to become an extremely powerful formation.

The Army Group had been earmarked to receive three field armies, organised into six Corps. Overall, this was twenty-four military Divisions and one hundred forty-four Regiments which were going to be trained and prepared for the future Operation Caribbean.

If everything went according to the mobilisation plans, Lady Weaver would command approximately one million and four hundred thousand frontline guardsmen.

This didn’t include the rear-line staffs, the auxiliaries, and the depot-controllers. Nor did it say anything about the army of Mechanicus Skitarii which had been promised by Mars and the other Forge Worlds, the companies of Astartes, and the hundreds of thousands crewmen serving on the warships of His Most Holy Majesty’s Navy.

This was not – officially or unofficially – a Crusade.

But no Admiral or General having the tiniest ember of ambition inside his heart and his lungs would have refused this command.

“I will make sure these Whiteshields are proper guardsmen by the end of the year.”

The Lord Commissar’s promise echoed in the windy air and Tanya almost pitied the poor men and women who had volunteered for what Lady Weaver and Dragon had dubbed ‘hell-training’.

Almost.

The galaxy was full of horrors, and if the guardsmen and guardswomen in the ranks weren’t prepared to storm the Eye of Terror itself at their superior’s command, it was better not to leave their comfortable homes.

Because if the history of the Fay 20th had revealed something, it was that the forces under Lady Weaver were always in the middle of the storm when a war had to be fought.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx III**

**Hive Athena**

**7.165.291M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“The more I’m forced to deal with them, the more I’m really beginning to hate the bureaucrats of the Departmento Munitorum.”

In public, she would of course loudly praise the cooperation between the organisation which was supposed to recruit new regiments, transport them to the war theatres, train them, and adequately provision them with ammunition, food, uniforms, and everything one needed to wage a months-long conflict.

In private with only the Dawnbreaker Guard, Taylor could afford to be honest. The Departmento Munitorum was bloated and useless, an organisation which was every day failing in its duties.

Yes, mustering millions of men across the stars was a very difficult job. Yes, feeding hundreds of thousands men who came from dozens of planets was not a trivial challenge. But that’s why the Departmento Munitorum existed in the first place, no? Since the dawn of the Imperium, the Munitorum had grabbed more and more responsibilities until no real alternative existed and their reign over war logistics was supreme.

Once it was done, who cared if they did their jobs properly?

“May I assume there’s more bad news coming this way, my Lady?” Seraph Gamaliel like always, a ray of sunshine in the middle of a grey day.

“You can safely say that.” The parahuman told him before turning towards Gavreel, who was waiting next to the golden-armoured Herald of Sanguinius. “It seems our operation has ruffled some feathers a few Sectors away. Some high-ranked Adepts have decided it was completely unconscionable for us to have Nyx officers in command of Army Group Caribbean.”

“Err...my Lady, you are in command of Army Group Caribbean. Or you will be, in four-plus years, when we officially begin the military campaign.”

Taylor read a second time her data-slate to confirm she had not been struck by hallucinations. Nope, she wasn’t.

“If they haven’t sent me the priority message destined to another General,” which had already happened twice by the way, “they really don’t like the fact I am in command in the first place. No doubt they saw the amount of troops we were able to muster and were in the process of debating among themselves the name of the imbecile they were going to reward with the command.”

It was possible she was doing them a disservice. Unfortunately, she didn’t think so. Much as she wished she was joking, over forty superior Guard officers in the Nyx Sector who had directly been directly appointed by the Munitorum had been court-martialled and executed by firing squad last year. And it had not been for petty insults or smuggling goods on the black market.

“Since I am mustering the Army Group in surplus of the tithe obligations and removing me is tantamount to cancel the deployment outright, they have invoked a long series of Imperial decrees and precedents. In practise, I have full authority to choose and evict every guardsman and guardswoman from simple trooper to the Brigadier-Generals. But the Munitorum will have uncontested power over the appointments of the Lieutenant-Generals, the Marshals, and the Major-Generals.”

For the record, it was the nominations of respectively the field armies’ commanders, the corps’ commanders, and the division commanders.

The retort from the blue-eyed Blood Angel came in the next two seconds.

“This is one of the most stupid prerogatives I’ve ever heard.”

Gavreel imitated him as soon as the first judgement had been delivered.

“They really can’t watch a campaign preparation from afar without trying to screw it over, don’t they?”

This rhetorical question had more truth in it than it should have when one was speaking of what was for all intent and purposes the greatest war bureaucratic apparatus in existence – the orks had no concept of logistics and thus couldn’t rival it.

There was an immemorial joke repeated for centuries by the officers and the veterans of the Imperial Guard. The Departmento Munitorum would find the good option in their competence domain, but only after having exhausted all the others. And it was polite not to ask how much time it would take the bureaucrats to arrive to this point.

“I will have to convene another Council of war for tomorrow. Aside from this...unsound demand, it seems my superiors and the Munitorum bureaucrats have more demands in store where the Nyx Sector.”

“What sort of demands?”

“Demands like a full tithe, because obviously now that we have vanquished the orks and are willing to muster an Army Group, then surely it means we are in enough good shape to deliver a full tithe for the greater good of the Imperium.”

The word Gavreel uttered in response was best not repeated in front of young children.

“For Nyx alone a full tithe is a little bit above forty-four million guardsmen.” Gamaliel commented more calmly. “For the Nyx Sector as a whole, it will likely be over one hundred million soldiers. They don’t need that many soldiers to fight the greenskins in the Samarkand Quadrant. And asking it to planets which have just finished fighting xenos is not exactly a measure I would qualify of strategically intelligent.”

The Herald of Sanguinius didn’t voice it, but his visage didn’t leave any doubt he had also recognised the act for what it truly was: a dagger striking Nyx while they had their back turned. The Munitorum had waited for all the regiments of Army Group Caribbean to be formally created and the recruitment to begin on a hundred different planets before delivering this costly demand.

Maybe it was just incompetence. The Munitorum was hardly filled with the kind of people you wanted directing a war effort.

But the coincidence in this instance was too big.

“Gamaliel, arrange a meeting with one of the Inquisitorial representatives tomorrow. I think it’s time I explain my...suspicions to the Holy Inquisition. The actions of the Departmento Munitorum have not impressed me so far, but lately certain of their moves are just stupid. It’s almost as if they want Planetary Governors to rise in rebellion against them.”

“You will still have to pay the full tithe, my Lady.”

“Oh, I will pay it.” The insect-mistress said grimly. “Really, I will certainly have to pay more than my share, because after earmarking some of the best regiments for our little anti-pirate suppression, several planets of the Sector won’t be able to pay their tithes in full, and I will have to step in at one point or another. Returning to the first ‘demand’, how long in your opinion will the Munitorum takes to send us the officers we need?”

“That entirely depends how much they want to screw with our operations,” Gavreel declared. “If it’s a simple coincidence, I think we can expect them in one or two years. But if there’s really a deliberate policy to disrupt this campaign and want to cause the maximum of damage, the superior officers will only arrive mere days before the final mustering date. And they will in all likelihood not give us the elite of the elite.”

“I’m afraid Gavreel is right,” Gamaliel agreed. “I’m sure they will try at least in appearance to preserve some illusion of competence. In general, they try to assign a full staff of disgraced Crusade officers and pretend they do the men and the local authorities a favour.”

“Then we will have to disappoint them.” For the high nobility save a few exceptions, she was a constant reminder of their failures. Why not extend it to the Munitorum? “I will prepare a message for Lord Commissar Zuhev and our senior instructors at Petersburg tomorrow. We will have to increase the duties and the contingency plans for our Brigadier-Generals.”

The two Space Marines rapidly left the room as she stood up to relay the decisions taken, and four Dawnbreaker Guards replaced them as she left the office.

“Do you intend to leave the Spire this evening my Lady?”

“I don’t know...are there any good theatre plays tonight?”

“I will check, my Lady,” the Angel Sanguine answered.

“Please do so. In the mean time, I’m going to take a long shower. The arrival of the Munitorum messages forced me to work just after my sport hours. They have not the common sense to arrive at midday, these bureaucrats...”

The walk was short compared to most of the travels she had done earlier today; there was no need to take an elevator, an indoor vehicle or these sorts of mini-trains the Mechanicus installed when they renovated vast sections of the Hive-Floors.

It still took her ten minutes at a fast pace. One thing Taylor was certain now, was that she was never going to become fat; with the number of kilometres she walked every day, not including her sword-fighting or martial arts sessions, fitness was not difficult to achieve.

Battle-Brothers Thermoses and Richard stood guard before the great doors, thus she didn’t bother to ask if they had been any security problem. A salute and some idle chatter to verify nothing was abnormal, and she rushed in the part of the Hive she used for showering and water games.

Her surprise was thus pretty much total when she stormed out of her cloakroom to realise that contrary to her orders, the middle-sized swimming pool/Roman bath near the entrance had been filled since yesterday, and that Wei was clearly waiting on the lower marble stairs wearing absolutely no clothes, no towel, or anything to hide her body.

In milliseconds, she must have been red like a tomato and of course her girlfriend did not make things easier as she hopped towards her.

“You said...”

“I changed my mind. This bath looks perfect and I blackmailed your Honour Guard. We won’t be bothered.”

Their lips joined, and soon they were in the water, embracing and kissing furiously each other.

Needless to say, they never left the Spire that evening.

**Author’s note**: