**Ovation 9.4**

**The Throne of Oblivion**

*A new war has begun.*

*Most of the galaxy isn’t aware of it for now.*

*The weapons which are firing and the lives lost have been restricted to places where few humans live. The deaths of the xenos and the other monsters have happened out of sight, and as the old proverb concluded, out of mind.*

*It won’t matter. War is coming nonetheless.*

*A part of me wants to blame the Necrons, and the fiend called Orikan the Diviner in particular.*

*The Cryptek, judging by the information we were given on him, has no redeeming qualities whatsoever. I could respect his dedication to maintaining the status quo if he was a prestigious noble of the Sautekh Dynasty. But he isn’t. Orikan is an outcast. And his self-professed loyalty to the Necron rigid hierarchy is very dubious as he was infamous for insulting and mocking the Phaerons and Phaerakhs before they transformed into metallic androids.*

*It is really, really easy to hate such a being. While punishments for someone’s betrayal are extremely common no matter the species you belong to, trying to punish one of your peers for something he might do is a frightening level of madness. Especially when the self-proclaimed Master of Chronomancy has admitted once imprisoned that his ‘predictions’ are falling extremely short of having a one hundred percent rate.*

*Orikan didn’t even envision his flesh-and-blood race losing the first war against the Old Ones, when a rapid analysis of each camp’s military capabilities should have been a clue or two his race was defeated before the first shot was fired.*

*Maybe we ruined his plans with the destruction of Commorragh. So what? I wasn’t personally present, but I have seen a sufficient numbers of picts and vids to acknowledge that the utter obliteration of the Dark City was one of the best things that could happen to this galaxy. Commorragh was a lair of evil built on the entrance of the very hells. Nothing good could have come from letting this cancer grow unchecked, and someone who is dissatisfied by it is an enemy of humanity.*

*After more hours of thinking though, I have arrived to the conclusion that like many of our enemies, Orikan had, impulsively, decided that there would be no peace between Humans and Necrons, not as long as he was able to do something about it. And while it is a more debatable hypothesis, I think this jealous individual is against the very concept of peace itself. When there is no negotiation possible with someone, when your first recourse is to convince bloodthirsty Dynasties to unleash a weapon bigger than* Terra Cimmeria *and* Phalanx *combined, when everything you do is destined to spread violence and distrust...you are a warmongering monster.*

*The real tragedy is that they don’t even realise the scale of the mental problems afflicting them. That if they continue in this path, they will be soon no difference between an Ork and a nihilist Necron commander save the colour of the skin and the material used to build the body.*

*Because in the end, what are these Necrons fighting for? Resources? Their technology and Necrodermis bodies allow them to synthesize and mine everything they may desire. Security? If they really stay on the defensive, armies and fleets of Necrons are the next best thing to invincible, protected by planetary shields the Tech-Priests salivate just by looking at them.*

*No, the reason the majority of the Necron Dynasties will want to conquer the galaxy if they are allowed to wake up is because they can, and they think it is their right to do so.*

*And so we will go to war again. Because when the proposed choices are death or eternal slavery, there is no option but to fight.*

*Even if our defeat is pre-ordered. Even if other enemies lurk in the shadows, impatient to size our gains and our advancements for themselves. Even if ancient civilisations empowered with near-divine technology failed where we propose to thread.*

*We go once again, as the Salamanders say, into the flames of battle.*

Extract from Archive N-4225-X-555, secured in the Fafnir Library Complex. This archive is one of several which were written by then Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter between 297M35 and 310M35. The necessary accreditation to read them is sapphire-black.

“Onto the anvil of war, brothers! Oblivion will not claim us!” Chapter Master Hezonn, [CLASSIFIED BY THE ORDER OF THE INQUISITION]

“*This war not because you feel threatened by younger races or because your honour has been trampled until you could take no more. This war has been started because you made a series of mistakes an eternity ago, and in your arrogance, you refuse the tiniest chance you could have been wrong. You want war? You will have it. But do not complain when your realm of metal and pride will turn to dust, and your deeds will ensure no peace will be possible when your enemies come to burn your worlds. Humanity is not a merciful foe*.” [REDACTED] to [REDACTED], [WARNING, INSUFFICIENT CLEARANCE], M35.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**The Golden Throne and the Oniric Realm**

**0.666.297M35**

Thought for the day: He who lives for nothing is nothing. He who dies for the Emperor is a hero.

**Captain-General Anubis Excelsor**

The scenery is different this time.

Of course, that doesn’t mean much where his liege is concerned.

The scenery has been different every time he has been invited here. At least this time there’s not a thunderstorm raging ahead. No, this time Anubis is in the middle of stars and planets. A gigantic representation of a galactic arm, one few hololithic devices built by humanity would be able to replicated with such precision.

For the Lord the Adeptus Custodes has been protecting for over four thousand standard years, this is nothing.

There are seconds of silence. Anubis uses them to assess which part of the galaxy is represented in this original manner. Knowing his liege like he does, it is unlikely to be unimportant.

“The Eastern Fringe,” he says at last.

“Indeed,” The Captain-General looks on his right, and He is here. Or He was already here, but his focus was elsewhere and thus his power remained invisible to his senses.

His appearance is very different from the one he presented the other times. This time there is no errant warden or mysterious protector, no figure sitting on a lonely throne. His liege is presenting himself as an ancient legionary of the pre-gunpowder era; a rectangular red shield painted with the golden double eagle is carried by his right arm, while tied to his belt is a short sword. His equipment is in piteous state, but there is no blood on him...save where the terrible wound in his chest is all too visible.

“I thought the situation at Tigrus and the surrounding Sector was more or less...contained.”

There was no true lasting victory against the horrors assailing regularly the Eastern Fringe. To be triumphant, the Astronomican would need to extend further than it had ever done in the age of the Great Crusade, and even if the reparations of the vital machines proceeded apace, their liege had been deeply wounded and likely wouldn’t be able to project his light to encompass these dark regions. Not without abandoning other Sectors to the darkness at least.

“Contained is maybe the wrong word,” the man the Imperium worships as the God-Emperor muses before raising a finger and instantly, several planets turned a sour green. “But it could have been handled with minimal forces. Now the situation has changed. The Ymga Monolith has been activated.”

Anubis Excelsor grimaces. The rank of Captain-General means being made aware of many, many unpleasant secrets. And some of them can give nightmares to transhumans, no matter their training and the protection offered by their liege’s gene-therapies.

“Weaver?” He asks.

“No, it is not her fault.” The Emperor is prompt to answer. “It seems that her treaty with the Necron Dynasty of the Nerushlatset and the destruction of Commorragh angered a lot one of the most arrogant awakened Necrons. This amateur believed the threads of the future were his to control and to manipulate.”

There is only one answer Anubis can give.

“Name him, and the Ten Thousand will bring his head to you.”

HI liege chuckles weakly.

“As...amusing and satisfying it would be to throw this creature into the Dark Cells and hiding the key in my most secure vaults...the Cryptek known as Orikan the Diviner has already been captured by the Arch-Thief Trazyn the Infinite.”

Anubis raises an eyebrow.

“Given the past history we have with this kleptomaniac xenos, I am not exactly going to jump in joy and declare the matter solved, your Majesty.”

The thin smile has already disappeared and the stern expression returns.

“In this instance, the goals of the thief and our interests align sufficiently I am willing to close my eyes upon his eccentricities. Trazyn will not let Orikan escape.”

And the commander of the Ten Thousand knows sufficiently his liege to bow and close this topic. The Emperor has seen the future and concluded it was the less risky path.

It is best to come back to the main problem at hand.

“The Ymga Monolith has been activated. Should we prepare ourselves to launch a pre-emptive attack and destroy it?”

“No. Weaver’s allies will delay the moment of confrontation and within the next decade, enough naval and ground firepower will be mustered to crack the defences of the Monolith.”

Anubis tries to sound not a bit doubtful...and he knows that in all likelihood he fails.

“My liege, the first time we try the tactic of overwhelming firepower against this xenos horror, we failed. Unless I have memory problems or the Last Report was doctored, the xenos defences *butchered the entire Second Legion*!”

Prompting one of the few instances in the early Imperial history where the Custodes made sure everything about an entire aspect of a military operation was erased by the records.

And when the dust finally settled, there was no choice but to erase the Second Legion and its Primarch too. Nobody had liked it, not the Emperor, not Valdor or Malcador, but there had been little choice. The Imperium could afford military defeats by then. It couldn’t afford the awful aftermath of that campaign becoming common knowledge.

“You will release the information we have to her.” His liege commands. “And she will soon have important information from the Necrons themselves. Weaver won’t begin the fighting as clueless as my Lost Son was.”

Anubis rarely argues with his creator and main charge, but here and now...

“With all the respect I have for your vision and your prescience, it is insanely risky.” The Captain-General flatly declares. “What happened to the Second could be repeated with the Ninth, and I don’t think I need to exaggerate when I say it would be an absolute cataclysm which would likely sunder the Imperium.”

Aside from his liege, Anubis can’t think of a figure more beloved than Sanguinius in today’s Imperium. The destruction of the Blood Angels might be one of the things the Imperium would not recover from in a thousand centuries.

“What happened to the Second can’t happen to the Ninth. I made sure of it. I can’t promise she will avoid severe military casualties, however.”

“Then why? I think that with two years of preparation and some judicious pressure upon the Navy, we could reactivate three dozen Battleships and plenty of special weapons. Let’s concentrate this in a single void fist and given the support of the five Blackstone Fortresses at our disposal...”

“It would certainly destroy the Ymga Monolith,” the Emperor agrees. “But there would be more problems born from this act of annihilation. And the billions of tons of Noctilith couldn’t play their role of bait anymore.”

Bait? But the insect-mistress of Nyx had not been under heavy pressure to launch an assault before the Monolith’s activation. Assuredly ‘billions of tons’ was more Noctilith everyone had seen in one’s life if you hadn’t set a foot on Cadia – those Pylons were off-limit for now, obviously, since no one knew the effect it would have on the Cadian Gate and the Eye of Terror if they were transformed into Aethergold.

But the Mechanicus has begun its own ‘investigations’ and now that they are actively looking for it...

“You intend to build a trap for the Traitor Legions waiting in the Eye.”

“I intend to build a new trap for every enemy which will try to oppose humanity’s rise.”

Anubis instinctively knows it is not going to be a pretty campaign. And the next words of his liege don’t negate this opinion.

“It is going to be a Crucible,” the Emperor whispers. “Millions upon millions of possibilities created by a specific event, so many neither I nor the parasites will be able to control the pace of the future campaign.”

In many ways, it sounds like the antithesis of a Shadowpoint, as everyone can watch the future unravelling, but the effect might be the same in the end.

“My liege...sometimes you worry me.”

The smile he is given back isn’t reassuring at all. It is the smile of tyrants and conquerors, of generals and admirals, of politicians and predators. It is the face of humanity when it is at the height of cleverness...and madness.

It is the face of humanity when their species is cornered and yet obstinately refuse to die.

The short sword is drawn from its scabbard and thrown into the stars, when it transforms into a gigantic regicide board.

“Step after step we will claw our way out of the oblivion our enemies have promised us. So let’s roll the dices again.”

A small golden figure moves in the distance.

Anubis sighs internally.

So ends their short-lived rest.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Brockton System**

**Neutral Space Station H-N-001**

**5.666.297M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Taylor had thought herself prepared for bad news when she had departed for the Brockton System and her meeting with Neferten.

Now, as Trazyn ended his delivery of bad news, the Basileia acknowledged she hadn’t been prepared enough for this level of bad news. On the other hand, ‘bad’ might not be adequate to describe the situation. ‘Awful’ might be more appropriate.

“Just for the sake of my personal curiosity, Phaerakh,” the young woman began, “how many of these monstrous planet-sized weapons do the Necron Dynasties have? Because while the...Throne of Oblivion will take utmost priority, I really don’t want to scream victory only to see another strategic weapon of systemic destruction enter this Sector.”

“Not many thankfully,” the mistress of the Nerushlatset Dynasty replied, “the World Engines and the Solar Harvesters were thought to be sufficient to handle anything short of the Blackstone Fortresses and the ‘Gods’ our enemies created to fight us. And most of the really important assets owned by every dynasty like the Celestial Orrery, the Twisted Catacomb, the Labyrinth of Thanotep, or the Stasis Docks of Seidon were not used offensively during the War in Heaven.”

Neferten stayed silent for several seconds before resuming her not-so-comforting speech.

“Most of what you did call ‘unique super-weapons’ were extremely expensive, both in resources and in the size of garrison which had to be detached to guard it. The Throne of Oblivion was one of course. There is also the *Song of Oblivion*, if it wasn’t destroyed when we turned against the C’Tan.”

“According to the rumours of the Nihilakh court, it survived but most of its crippled offensive armament was discarded and replaced by massive stasis crypts,” Trazyn intervened. “I wasn’t able to confirm if they were correct or not. And no, before you ask, I don’t know where Szarekh hid it.”

This day was really getting better and better. Yes, she was sarcastic. And it appeared the supreme rule of the Necrons had a great love for the ‘Oblivion’ theme. This was anything but great.

“As far as I was able to ascertain in the short period between the Humbling of the C’Tan and the Great Sleep, the other weapons used by the Silent King to fracture our former Gods were too damaged to be repaired. Therefore the only other unique weapon to be active must be the Star Reaper Engine *Hegemony*.”

“And what does it do?”

“Anything the Silent King wishes it to,” Trazyn’s answer was a disabused cackle. “It has cutting-edge technology above the Throne of Oblivion, more elite Crypteks than two first-rate Dynasties, enough phalanxes to conquer your Sector in less time it takes to say it, and likely enormous reserves of Noctilith and anti-Empyreal defences.” The thief-collector let his sceptre twirl at an impressive speed between his hands. “Of course, he took it with him into his much unlamented exile, so we don’t have to care about it.”

And thank whatever benevolent entities still existed for this good news.

“All right, my curiosity has been satisfied. Let’s return to the Throne of Oblivion and the weapons protecting it...what is a Solar Harvester, by the way?”

“It is a variant of a Star Harvester,” Neferten informed her, and for the first time, there was a hint of disdain in her voice. “Think of it as a huge long-range gun which drains for several minutes the energy of a star before unleashing it against a designated target.”

“No offence Phaerakh,” Taylor said in a calm tone, “but to my ears, that sounds really terrifying.”

“The destructive power of the gun is considerable,” the female Necron ruler conceded. Who knew that their race had gained such mastery in understatements? “But there are many drawbacks which made sure few Dynasties went on to build them. First above all, if they don’t stay extremely tactically close to a star, their firepower is inferior to one of our Battleships, which is particularly galling as they cost more in rare resources to build than a World Engine. They also can’t protect themselves when the energy-loading procedure is activated; their shields are inactive until the Harvester cannon fires. As you can likely imagine, the Aeldari of Old took a malign pleasure disintegrating dozens of them while the loading phase was seconds away from completion.”

“A purely offensive weapon which needs to be escorted at all times to play its role,” yes, Taylor wasn’t an Admiral, but she could see why the design hadn’t been popular. It made her remember all too well the ‘glass cannons’ called the Fast Battleships.

“Exactly,” Neferten confirmed. “No, dealing with a Solar Harvester isn’t a problem. The Replicator Forges are the main threat of the outer defences.”

For good reason. The ability to duplicate to the infinite your fleet was a terrifying ability, given how long and expensive the building of a single ship above Cruiser tonnage was. And the Necrons had three of them to protect the Ymga Monolith.

“I’m not trying to take the cowardly option, but I have to ask: is there any reasonable scenario where we could convince the commanders of this battlestation to stop the reactivation of their assets and this military campaign before it risks ravaging the entire Eastern Fringe? Surely the sub-commanders of the Silent King are not ready to risk their lives just on the word of a single Necron based on predictions of deeds which haven’t happened yet!”

Hells, if she went to the High Lords of Terra with such flimsy ‘evidence’ to begin a Crusade, most of the members would outright laugh at her before the end of her speech.

The equivalent of a long sigh was made by Neferten voice-apparatus.

“You are giving more intelligence and cleverness to the Szarekhan commanders than they deserve,” the Nerushlatset ruler spoke. “Do keep in mind that as far as they know this entire campaign against me or you promise to be what could be best described as ‘one-sided vermin extermination’. The protocol codes they have will be sufficient to cripple my Dynasty before the first gun is fired, and as for your human forces...they won’t be considered true opponents. They will look at your technological level and laugh. You have not the psychic mastery of the Aeldari, the entropy skills of the Hrud, the unnatural genetic creations of the Rangdan, or the monstrous strength of the Krorks. And besides, the Throne of Oblivion has never been seriously endangered.”

“The fact Orikan convinced them the Throne of Oblivion was necessary in the first place has probably to do with Neferten circumventing several protocols of the Great Sleep and my own continued disobedience,” Trazyn added his opinion on the issue at hand. “We annoyed them sufficiently in the past that they figure our initial successes may require more than an average eradication fleet. You are just collateral damage in this affair.”

“How gratifying,” the insect-mistress rolled her eyes. “I suppose it would be too much to ask of them to not torch my Sector when they move against you?”

“Oh, they will transform your planets into a gigantic field of orbital debris,” the Chief Archaeovist of Solemnace was prompt to ‘reassure’ her. “In the unlikely chance the Szarekhan commander is truly reluctant about risking his phalanxes on the word of Orikan – and he won’t be – his subordinates for the task will be Sautekh and maybe Mephrit for the Solar Harvester. These two dynasties have always been noted to be what you would qualify as expansionist, warmongering, and eager to destroy the civilisations of younger species until not even bacteria are left alive.”

Some days, the Planetary Governor of Nyx was really, really glad the Necron Dynasty she had on her Suebi frontier was the Nerushlatset, and not another one.

“And of course, if I wasn’t guilty, my Dynasty wouldn’t be awake but still plunged into the Great Sleep. The evidence of sending a diplomatic envoy would be enough to confirm all suspicions of treason.”

Somehow, the parahuman didn’t find it hard to believe she would hate to live under the rule of the Silent King and the Necron society as a whole.

“Thank you for the confirmation. Peace being closed to us, I suppose war is the only choice left to me. And it is a conflict best done outside of the frontiers of the Nyx Sector.”

She would have loved to say ‘us’, but if the Necrons of Neferten were neutralised before even coming into range – and that was likely one of the best possible scenarios – the Imperium was going to have to fight alone this one.

“I am not ready to fight a campaign of this magnitude,” no one was at such short notice, so it wasn’t like it was a betrayal of military secrets. “As a result, I propose again to divert the ‘Defiler’ Orks against the Ymga Monolith. Let our two enemies fight and bleed each other while we reinforce ourselves.”

“An excellent idea, my friend!” Trazyn was prompt to reply enthusiastically. The other Necron ruler was not so optimistic.

“I find a large number of flaws with that idea,” the Nerushlatset Phaerakh said. “While the descendants of the Krorks are certainly one of the few enemies which will not retreat or be cowed by the firepower of a Solar Harvester, the Sautekh reinforcements brought by Dolmen Gates, and the Throne of Oblivion itself, their ancestors tried and failed to achieve a lasting victory before. I don’t doubt this Ork muster is impressive from your perspective. This ‘Defiler’ greenskin has a lot of hulls and bodies available. But it won’t be enough to give us more than one or two of your years.”

To her surprise, it was Trazyn who answered before she had the time to think about a solution.

“Then we don’t push only this horde of greenskin against the Szarekhan, my dear.” The Chief Archaeovist switched on the hololithic table and coloured plenty of stars in green with his sceptre. “The ‘Defiler’ shipyard is hardly the only location where the greenskins are present these days. A few psychic beacons from our red-robed friends, some warning shots to rouse the beasts and convince them to follow us to the Throne of Oblivion, and we can fuel an inferno that will give even the favourites of Szarekh pause.”

“And then the Throne of Oblivion will use its faster-than-light drive to evade this greenskin horde,” Neferten replied, though there was a shadow of amusement in her voice...unless it was vindication. “They aren’t *that* stupid, you know. If they see a never-ending battle on the horizon, their Destroyers will be happy, but the Overlord and Nemesors certainly won’t. At some point, they’re going to prioritise the extermination of a treacherous Dynasty over the purge of violent descendants of the Krorks.”

“In that case, I’d better sabotage it, no?”

Taylor gaped at that, and she was feeling confident to say that Neferten, despite a metallic body, was doing the same.

“You can do that?”

“There are...hum...protocols for the Triarchs in every Szarekhan battlestation and warship,” the Chief Archaeovist cleared his throat. “I think I can approach the Throne from sufficiently close to send a few signals which will cause critical problems to its faster-than-light drive. The Szarekhan always protect heavily their command nodes, but the engineering sections have often glaring flaws.”

Taylor thought this strongly implied many Szarekhan worlds and assets had received the visit of Trazyn over tens of millions of years.

“Phaerakh?” The Basileia asked.

“It could work,” grudgingly conceded Neferten. “Assuming Trazyn succeeds and we use several of our squadrons in coordinated tactics, we can push billions of greenskins against the weapons of the Throne and whatever Szarekh’s commanders will bring to bear.”

The female Necron ruler clicked her fingers and the hololith changed to reveal the Ymga Monolith.

As always since she had seen it for the first time, Taylor felt a shiver of fear course thorough her body. This was a gigantic pyramidal structure bigger than Nyx itself, and far, far more fortified than anything the Imperium had ever built, including Terra during the Heresy, and the current defences of the Cadian Gate.

“But let there be no false-understanding,” Neferten stared at her. “This is only a delay. The greenskins may be numerous and strong, but unless they somehow manage to find and repair a reality-shattering weapon of the War in Heaven, they won’t be able to bring down the shields of the Throne of Oblivion.”

“They may be able to ram them and crash-land on the surface.” The black-haired parahuman objected.

“I won’t deny they certainly are stupid enough to try, but if you don’t bring enough firepower against the shields, the capital anti-air batteries are going to destroy the overwhelming majority before they land. And there will be millions of Necron warriors ready to welcome them upon their landing. The Orks are dangerous. But the Szarekhan phalanxes will regenerate and return to the fight faster than the greenskins can kill them. The Ork spores won’t be of any use. The Szarekhan have strict sterilisation protocols which have proven their efficiency against the proto-Orks in the past.”

The golden-winged guardswoman didn’t disagree. Unless the Orks had a battle-moon ready ram the Monolith with, it was going to be hell for them...though they were certainly going to give the Necrons new memories of total war.

“This is in part why this strategy is unsatisfactory to my mind,” Neferten continued. “Faced with such a threat, it is a certainty the Szarekhan commander will call at least one and possibly more elite Sautekh Overlords, making any future battles far more difficult. Not to mention that once the flaw in the systems of the faster-than-light drive’s defences has been discovered, the Crypteks aboard the Throne of Oblivion will do their best to erase this weakness and many others we would not have though to exploit. The battle against the Orks might be enough to distract them in the first years, but it won’t last long. So I ask you the question, Lady Weaver. Do you think these years of senseless carnage where the Szarekhan surround themselves with more and more Sautekh phalanxes are going to be worth it?”

Taylor didn’t hesitate.

“I do. If the Orks give us twelve standard years, I can build an entirely new generation of Cruisers and train them hard to first-rate Imperial Navy’s standards. I will also be able to convince some Lord Admirals to put out of mothball ancient Battleships and modernise them with brand-new Nova Cannons. That’s also twelve years of power armour and heavy guns production which will be available for our infantry amongst other things.”

“And I will use these years to...move plenty of secret collections to several of my hideouts,” Trazyn approved. “You see my dear? Everyone is winning.”

The Basileia really wished sometimes Trazyn didn’t mention arguments of that nature...but his usefulness in this case granted him a reprieve. It was exceptional, needless to say.

“If my calculus with your Imperial calendar is correct, this would place the launch of the operation on 310M35.” Taylor nodded. “Will you have resources to spend on the recovery of the artefacts mentioned in our treaty?”

“That should be feasible, provided the Orks react as we want them,” the Ordo Xenos would owe her one plus there were Bacta negotiations coming. “I am not going to make promises I can’t keep, but I should be able to deploy a few Space Marine recovery teams against Necron strongholds. How many of them will be sent and the rest of specifics will have to wait a bit, however.”

“Good, now for the possible Szarekhan and Sautekh military commanders who may be called to war.”

“If we’re lucky, they won’t decide to awaken the Stormlord,” Trazyn almost groaned.

“It won’t be Imotekh, I think,” Neferten said, “his performance against the Krorks was marked by several grave defeats. Unfortunately, the Sautekh Dynasty has an abundance of brilliant Generals and the absence of the Stormlord is not necessarily great news for us...”

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Stormseer Uriyangkhadai**

The hour was late when Uriyangkhadai came back to the bridge of the Enterprise. Unsurprisingly, Lady Weaver was still here. Bermudez, Catalan, and Glycerius were the sentinels standing vigilant around her, as the insect-mistress read the data the Necrons had given them earlier in the day.

It was a bit strange for the Stormseer. The relationship Taylor Hebert enjoyed with Wei Cao was usually seen with some amusement, but hardly something vital. But now that the new Governor of Wuhan wasn’t here, the Basileia seemed to revert to working at late hours.

As he closed the distance separating him from her, the Chogoris-born Space Marine noted her troubled experience. It was perhaps not as much the absence of her Consort than the dark news which had been revealed to her today which was responsible for this long evening of work.

“The Lamenters have received your message, my Lady.” The Stormseer spoke quietly as columns of figures and xenos schematics appeared and disappeared on the hololith. “Communication clarity was above average. Their Chapter Master should be informed as we speak and begin moving his warships in position.”

“The other astropathic communications?”

“Ongoing. You have given them quite a list of choirs to contact.”

In fact the number of messages which had been given was in general what was usually sent in ten or eleven days by the *Enterprise*’s mistress.

No one would ever say it wasn’t justified in this particular case, unfortunately.

“If I could send fewer messages...” the golden-winged Lady General began before breathing out heavily and not finishing her sentence.

“You do not need to justify yourself, my Lady.”

The look he was given back was not angry, it was merely...resigned.

“As long as the Ymga Monolith is out of sight and the initial plan works, you’re absolutely right I don’t. How long it is going to be true, I have no idea.” The parahuman shook her head. “Unbelievable. We destroy Commorragh, and some Necron Seer throws a fit and rush to tell his superiors how bad we are. Evidently, the psychic toads who governed the galaxy once upon a time were absolutely right to be wary of the Necrons.”

“We have an alliance with some of them.” Was their Lady thinking about-

“We have an alliance with Neferten and her dynasty, and Trazyn when his collecting interests are directly threatened,” the woman protected by the Dawnbreaker Guard said whimsically. “This alliance has proven extremely useful, and I have every intention to let it continue for as long as possible. But in the euphoria after Commorragh, I thought naively we may be able to extend it far and wide. This was a nice dream...but it will remain nothing more than in the domain of illusions and wishes. Two of the most important Necron Dynasties clearly want our death, despite us having not raised a single finger against their planets. How can you consider living in peace with them?”

Uriyangkhadai wasn’t sorry about the xenos revealing themselves as genocidal and duplicitous as Imperial propaganda always warned them to be, but he agreed it was a waste. The Necrons had many common enemies with humanity, the Eldar being the most prominent of this considerable list. And the metallic androids could live and thrive on worlds where the Imperium couldn’t colonise or build anything without losing millions of workers.

But the majority of the xenos were supremacist xenos. And in the end, there was only a single galaxy to rule over.

The insect-mistress yawned.

“You should consider going back to your quarters, my Lady. There are going to be a lot of tiring days ahead of you, the Emperor and the Imperium need you at peak efficiency.”

This wasn’t the Stormseer’s responsibility, but the psychically-gifted Space Marine couldn’t imagine a smaller force than a full tithe and two or three Battlefleets worth of firepower being gathered to destroy the Ymga Monolith. And this was more likely a vast underestimation of what was *truly* needed.

“In a few minutes,” Lady Weaver promised. “I’m just giving a glance at the data of the Ymga Monolith’s shields.”

A disgruntled expression escaped her lips.

“This, as you can properly imagine, isn’t good. Look at it and give me your opinion if you desire.”

It took a few seconds for the representative of the White Scars to decipher the organisation of Necron data translated into Low Gothic, but once he had a proper idea of it, it didn’t take long for him to arrive to unhappy conclusion.

“I am not a Techmarine of course, but I think that the only Imperial warships which can truly bring down these sections for sure are the Gloriana Battleships.”

Of which there were precious left nowadays.

“I agree,” the Basileia’s mouth twitched in a faint smile. “What an irony. I didn’t even search for it, but I may have found a lot of good reasons for the Fabricator-General to build more of these twenty kilometre-long hulls.”

Uriyangkhadai stayed silent, though if the time came, he would bring the idea of one of these formidable flagships to be used by his Chapter and their Successors. The Fifth legion had lost their only Gloriana during the Heresy, a lost which was still regretted by the Khans of Chogoris.

“You may need more alternatives than relying on a single ship.”

“There will be more alternatives brought into play,” the back-haired ruler of Nyx reassured him. “The Enterprise’s Nemesis-Hunter Cannon is not strong enough by itself to bring down these Necron shields, but it is incredibly accurate. If we retrofit enough Nova Cannon-armed Battleships with these guns, we will be able to concentrate our fire and achieve the same result a Gloriana would.”

This was admittedly not a bad point. He would need to speak with Hakkarainen of the Emperor’s Havoc to evaluate its feasibility.

“Still, you’re right. I’m counting a lot on a Gloriana being present on the order of battle,” the golden-winged Lady General acknowledged. “If the plan consisting to let the Orks and the Necron slaughter each other work, the *Flamewrought* will have finished its cycle of repairs in the Martian shipyards by then.”

“I would advise contacting the other Chapters having a Gloriana to see if they’re available,” the White Scar Stormseer advised. “I didn’t ask where the *Eternal Crusader* went after the destruction of Biel-Tan, but I’m sure Sigenandus can impress High Marshal Barbarossa upon the threat represented by this Monolith.”

“An excellent suggestion,” the woman they had all sworn to protect quickly approved. “Are there others we can use?”

“I think the flagship of the Dark Angels is still active,” Uriyangkhadai replied cautiously. “Of course, since it is part of their assault fleet, it is certainly busy in Segmentum Pacificus right now. And given what just happened at Wuhan...”

“They might not accept this suggestion with good grace, assuming they are in position to honour it” his interlocutor sighed.

“I will check the status of the other Gloriana hulls and inform you. It shouldn’t take long.” There had never been that many Gloriana Battleships in active service, and the Heresy had drastically decreased their numbers. “Though even if we can materially put out of mothball these capital ships and all, the question is what we can offer them in exchange to make up for the sheer danger of the Ymga Monolith. The Custodes were tight-lipped, but it was enough for several of us to remember there are two Legions which went missing at some point in history. And no offence my Lady, but you haven’t the battle-experience and the science of command of a Primarch.”

“Most assuredly,” Weaver didn’t disagree. “But I have several advantages over the hypothetical Primarch who fought the Monolith before. To begin with, unlike him I will know exactly what I’m up against for the outer defences, and for the inner ones, I am ready to bet it involves C’Tan shards. And I have already fought one in the past. Second and most crucial, Neferten has confirmed the Canoptek Scarabs the Necrons use so much will be controllable by my power. Apparently, the Necrontyrs weren’t the only ones to go through the process of bio-transference. The C’Tan put all the fauna of their homeworld and then other planets through these monstrous devices. As such, I can control these insects; they still have the vital energy of insect life-forms and my power recognises them as such.”

Yes, it could be a game-changer. At the very least, once the enemy realised what was happening, they would stop in a hurry using these insect-shaped auxiliaries against any human invaders.

“And we have something we can bargain with, in the end. There are at least four billion tons of Noctilith stored somewhere in this xenos bastion.”

Many of the bridge crew stopped whispering after hearing this revelation.

“If it is only resources Imperial representatives are after, I imagine there will be enough to satisfy everyone’s wildest dreams.” Taylor Hebert said softly.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector**

**Lemuria System**

**Lemuria**

**6.708.297M35**

**Inquisitor Henry-Charles III Severus**

Lemuria was definitely and without argument possible a breathtaking world.

The green-blue colour of the grass, the pink cherry trees, the sublime cascades of water; everything born from nature seemed to be created to feel peaceful.

The weather was just warm enough to walk in light clothes, but not enough to make you sweating. And the best part, according to the pilgrim and touristic guides, was that this highly pleasurable climate was lasting nine days out of ten for a standard year; there was a bad season when the temperatures dropped by ten degrees, but it lasted between twenty- and twenty-four local days.

If it the description had stopped there, Lemuria would have already been the jewel of the Suebi Sub-Sector, but there were the human marvels to take into account too. The Ecclesiarchy had built the Holy Crystal Mausoleum on this planet, and millions of pilgrims came every year to pray and admire the M32 stained armaglass, the altars of white marble, and the decoration consisting of some very rare gemstones and precious metals.

Of course, Lemuria didn’t cater only for the spiritual needs of pilgrims. If you wanted to hunt some animal in a private hunt specially tailored to your tastes, you could do it here. Hunting lodges, casinos, protected beaches, aquatic yachts, villas so large the term ‘palace’ was sometimes not sufficient to describe them...Lemuria had everything.

Fine, maybe not everything. The weather was too warm for winter sports, and there was a lack of mountains for the most extreme activities like diving in grav-chutes if you didn’t want to use an aircraft.

But overall, Lemuria was indeed justifying its reputation of Paradise World.

A pity this reputation was built on foundations of falsehood, centuries of political machinations, and untold corruption.

“And this,” the representative of the Ordo Navis explained to the officer standing next to him, “is I believe the swimming pool the Hierophant built for his mistresses.”

“One second, my Lord,” Colonel Atomos rasped in a guttural voice. The Colonel of the Nyx 12th Infantry had received grave wounds during the Battle of Commorragh, and though three injections of Bacta had managed to save his life, the injury received to his throat had been coated in a poison which continued to baffle the elite Magi Biologis of Lady Weaver. Atomos had survived where other men would have died after a long and painful agony – you could trust the Drukhari for that – but his voice would never be the same again...that is until the Tech-Priests of the Nyx Mechanicus invented some new treatment. Many cogboys enjoyed the challenge, he was told.

“Yes?”

“I am aware the Ecclesiarchy rules can be different Sector by Sector but...aren’t the Priests supposed to be celibate on Lemuria and the other Cardinal Worlds?”

“They are.” Henri-Charles III politely confirmed. “And yet by a series of completely innocent coincidences, you will notice every Hierophant to have been elevated this millennium had a name which was either Indushekhar or Singh.”

“Yes, it is a strange coincidence.” The humourless reply was unsurprising, though a little sad to hear. Ah, no matter. Henri-Charles III had not requested these veteran guardsmen for their conversational skills. “Isn’t this lake somewhat a bit too big for a swimming pool? We are barely seeing the other side from here!”

“Yes, it seems our dear Hierophant – or at least his predecessor who ordered the first stages of construction – was thinking big.”

There was no need to be a psyker to guess the disgust of the Nyxian guardsmen acting as his bodyguards. In some measure, the member of the Nyxian Conclave was sharing it. People had been bleeding and dying all over the Quadrant for the last decades, and the insurrection on Sparta had been raging for three entire years before it was crushed.

And during this era, the current Hierophant had been plotting, spending hundreds of days on his personal pleasure, and manipulating with other Priests the higher figures of the Suebi Sub-Sector. Even disregarding the spectacular outcome of Operation Caribbean, this wasn’t the kind of incompetence and treachery that could be tolerated.

“This is the problem with Paradise Worlds like this one, Colonel,” the Inquisitor wearing a grand blue uniform confided to Colonel Atomos. “They are marvellous in looks and comfort, they are rather secure from the outside, and you forget everything...beginning with your duties to His Most Holy Majesty.”

“And heretics have no difficulties infiltrating them,” a Captain of the Nyx 12th spoke as the familiar noise of firing weapons echoed in the distance.

“No,” acknowledged the Inquisitor of the Ordo Navis. “And when it comes to affairs like this, the greatest sin is *indolence*. It seems I have several years of work ahead of me to hunt the heretics and the traitors. Thank the God-Emperor, Cardinal Prescott is going to provide plenty of reliable Priests to compensate, and all of them have been Moth-tested beforehand.”

“I don’t doubt your judgement, my Lord, but didn’t the Hour of the Emperor’s Judgement kill every heretic of this system?” Atomos asked as several of his guardsmen returned from their visit into the Holy Crystal Mausoleum, dragging by the arms the ex-master of the pilgrim attraction.

“The Hour of the Emperor’s Judgement killed every traitor and heretic who had sworn his or her soul to Excess, Colonel,” since these guardsmen had outright fought against the daemons and spat in the eye of the abominations, Henri-Charles III Severus could very well explain it to the officers; these loyal veterans had been chosen because they could keep secrets. “Assuredly, the fact Lemuria is a Paradise World guarantees a majority of the heretics hiding under this pleasant facade were belonging to this decadent and immoral allegiance, but I fear it failed to rid us of the entire nest. Ah gentlemen, please carry him here.”

The low-born guardsmen regarded him warily – the Inquisition reputation remained formidable among the troops after their last interventions – but they saluted and obeyed.

And yes, it was important to stay polite. There was no urgency here, and thus no reason for bad manners. Henri-Charles III Severus was an Inquisitor; it didn’t mean he had to abandon the tenets of civilised behaviour if the situation didn’t demand it.

“Do you know who I am? Release me at once!”

Something a few people including his current ‘guest’ could take lessons to, clearly.

“Hierophant Hewendu Indushekhar,” The Inquisitor of the Ordo Navis spoke pleasantly, “thank you for having the good idea to join me on this pleasant summer morning.”

His Ecclesiarchal interlocutor fiercely glared at him before answering.

“I protest vehemently against this treatment. I am the Hierophant of Lemuria and my only superiors are the Cardinal of Nyx and Her Celestial Highness. I am protected by the divine law of His Most Holy Majesty!”

“No, you’re not. An Inquisitor is above your so-called divine right to rule.” The act of revealing his rosette after that made the hatred appear for an instant in the corner of the eyes of the ‘Holy Priest’.

“I thought the Living Saint had leashed you.”

“My dear Hierophant,” Henri-Charles III murmured, “while it is possible, possible I say, certain formal or informal accords were made between Her Celestial Highness the Basileia and several Inquisitors...”

He smiled before continuing in a darker and more dangerous tone.

“I am an Inquisitor, *Hierophant*.” The man calling himself Severus told him threateningly. “I serve the God-Emperor and the Imperium of Mankind, and I do not need warrants to do my duty.”

The preliminary politeness being over, the blue-clad Inquisitor opened the small box he had been able to acquire at Nyx, and held its tiny content in the palm of his hand before slamming it against the forehead of the Hierophant of Lemuria.

“WHAT ARE YOU...ARRRGGHHH!”

Henri-Charles III Severus had expected Hierophant Hewendu Indushekhar to be a traitor. His recent actions were sufficient to prove so, and so the shard of Aethergold he had been given before his departure from Nyx was supposed to burn him heavily.

But under his eyes, what happened was something else.

There was an internal blue tendril of sorcery which appeared to resist for a few seconds the golden light of the Aethergold. And then the blue illumination vanished and powerful golden flames engulfed the Hierophant.

The screams of the man, not of the heretic, rose in intensity, as everyone took a step back given the sheer power coming from the symbol of His Divine’s wrath.

“Praise the God-Emperor for he is the bane of all heretics,” the representative of the Holy Inquisition said forcefully. “Colonel Atomos!”

“My Lord?” The Nyxian saluted perfectly, a newly gained harshness in his gaze. Good, the man understood the problem.

“The culpability of the Hierophant being proved, I think we need to test his entire entourage. Take two companies and bring me the mistresses and the children, then the rest of the high-ranked Priests. We need to extirpate this heresy until the last root is found and burned.”

Henri-Charles III had not seen tested it before with his own eyes, but the Aethergold shard would be fine and ready for more ‘testing’ the moment the heretic was consumed utterly by the golden flames. Which looked to be soon; there wasn’t much left of him after thirty seconds of exposal.

“Yes, my Lord!”

“Remember, indolence and heresy must be purged if the Imperium is to return to its previous glory!”

**Lemuria System**

**Lemurian Shipyards**

**Judge Missy Byron**

“Well...we’re too late.”

Missy wasn’t going to repeat this affirmation in public, but given that there were in a rather ‘high-class’ section of the Lemurian Shipyards, one the former Governor had used to entertain ‘off-world clients’ – and no, she hadn’t asked what the locals meant by it – plus there was the protection of several jamming devices, her words shouldn’t make any pict-lines.

“What I don’t understand,” Teddy spoke after drinking a particular strong herbal drink, “is why friend-Weaver sent you here if she knew the Inquisition was going to deal with the problem of the Hierophant.”

“I asked myself the same question,” the Shaker parahuman admitted. And she had sent the same question via her personal Astropath to wherever Taylor was at the moment. Unfortunately, it seemed there was trouble on the horizon as the Astropathic conduits had long queues and many orders were taking priority over her inquiry. It could only be a coincidence, as the Inquisition didn’t have the cloud to keep Taylor in the dark, but it was inconvenient. “And I arrived to the conclusion the Inquisitors of Nyx must have discovered by themselves the Hierophant and his accomplices had been involved in heretical things. Once they acknowledged that, it was game over for Lemuria and Vijayanagara.”

Missy had to admit it was a sobering reminder of the power the Holy Inquisition could wield when it felt the Planetary Governor was about to turn traitor. One of the Nyxian regiments temporarily assigned to the Nyxian Conclave had descended on Lemuria, and the Inquisitor himself – one Missy had never seen before – had made an example of the Hierophant.

As if summoned by her thoughts, the vids of the ‘high-class bar’ where she and Teddy were drinking began to play again the ‘execution via Aethergold’ suffered by Hewendu Indushekhar.

Seeing it a second or a third time didn’t make it better, obviously. And no, Missy wasn’t going to cry for the man. He was a servant of the Ruinous Powers, and one who had done his best to make sure there was blood in the streets – or in the case of Drakkar, in the sea.

“Unlike us, they seem to keep the Ecclesiarchy in power in this system,” the Rashan said disapprovingly.

“Yes, but even if we had arrived first, it’s likely the planets of Lemuria and Vijayanagara would have stayed Cardinal Worlds, Teddy. Sparta wasn’t a problem; the insurrection and the weather had killed most of the prisoners, and as long as we didn’t tell the Pontifex-Crusader about the stones, there was really nothing worth staying around save the limited extraction and refinery of promethium.”

“But Drakkar was more important, no? It’s a lot of food they send every year to Lemuria!”

And her Rashan had discovered himself a taste for the moss the Drakkar-born citizens were harvesting as part of the Administratum tithe.

“It is, but whether Drakkar is a Cardinal Agri-World or an Administratum-overseen one, the food will still go to Vijayanagara.”

As tasty as the salmons fished by these muscular playboys were, the Lemurian Priesthood preferred more expensive food for their meals...or they had preferred their food that way, before Inquisitor Henri-Charles III Severus made his grand entrance in the Lemuria System.

One thing was sure, the man likely sent by Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor wasn’t playing around. Missy had only arrived forty-eight hours after him, but by now the blue-clad representative of the Inquisition had seized enough evidence to drag in chains dozens of Priests and of course execute the Hierophant and most of his immediate family, including eight more via Aethergold flames. The Pontifex-Governor of Vijayanagara had also been burned alive by order of the Cardinal of Nyx, and several of his key subordinates were in prison.

“We haven’t made a difference, then?”

“Oh no, we have made a very big difference. Now the next authorities designated to rule over Lemuria and Vijayanagara will have to give in return a fair price for these food supplies, be they in agri-technology or something else.”

The Judge in her doubted the new Priests sent by Nyx would acquiesce to everything the Drakkar-born wanted – weapon production was never easy to sell for an Agri-World – but it would considerably improve the life of the average grox-shepherd of salmon-fisher.

“But I think all the differences we could have made in this system are already ongoing. The Inquisitor certainly doesn’t need us to hunt the heretics of Lemuria, and the envoys sent by the Cardinal seem to have things well in hand on Vijayanagara.”

Missy was going to inform Taylor of the deplorable living conditions of the population on this Mining World if the Cardinal didn’t, however. Unlike Lemuria which was a paradise of green and blue waiting immaculate in the void, Vijayanagara was a red orb of dust and heavy metal extraction for the shipyards they were waiting into. And the more one dug, the more unpleasant revelations awaited the investigator. The pollution of the air was extreme. The violent dust tempests had convinced the original architects the cities had to be subterranean, and as such there were no Hives. But the population numbers were certainly worthy of a Hive World. The latest census had indicated a population of twenty-nine billion inhabitants, the great majority living in squalor. Rumours existed the Ecclesiarchy had intended a caste system, but the multitudes of Hierophant and Pontifex-Governors had decided to abandon that and as a result there were only the rulers – the noble Priests – and the ruled – the impoverished miners.

“Returning to filling these absurd Administratum forms?” Teddy groaned. “I pass my turn.”

“Hey you requisitioned this-“

“Lady Vista! Lady Vista!” one of her subordinates began to suddenly call her via her vox-comm. “Grave news! Demented cultists are attacking Dock C-6!”

“I’m on my way,” the parahuman replied curtly before turning towards her assistant. “The Emperor is with you today, Teddy. Paperwork duties cancelled!”

**Mars-class Battlecruiser *Champion of Kar Duniash***

**Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto**

Rear-Admiral Fujiko Yamamoto had not thought her life would be boring and devoid of military incidents after the inferno of Commorragh, but she had hoped for a couple of years of calm.

Evidently, she wasn’t going to have them.

“This pilgrim ship is obviously the transport the heretic cultists used to evade attention for as long as they did,” the former subordinate of Admiral von Kisher announced to her officers once the security team had finished drowning in containment foam the warrant officer who had been in communication with them. Where the Arch-Enemy was concerned, it was better not to take any risk. “Now that we have convincing evidence there are behind the violent uprising in the shipyards I want to know how in the name of the God-Emperor were they able to do it!”

“The security in the Lemurian shipyards is filled with holes, Admiral,” a Lieutenant of her staff replied hastily. “And we’re still short-handed to fix every flaw and issue which comes up. A small pilgrim ship coming from the Overhill Sector wasn’t really suspicious; there have been ten of them this year.”

“And now we have to wonder how many were filled with heretics,” another Lieutenant said grimly.

“Indeed,” the Samarkand-born Rear-Admiral agreed. “Clearly, it would be better to be in position to board it and present these heretics to the Inquisitor. I’m sure after what they’ve done, the Holy Inquisition will have plenty of questions and long sessions of vigorous interrogation in mind for them.”

The problem was that she may not be able to board the ship responsible for this crisis. Most of her armsmen had been sent onto the Lemurian shipyards to restore order and purge the heretics, and her squadron had been mostly immobile these last hours, while the false pilgrim ship registered as the *Pious Traveller* was running like hell towards the next Mandeville Point.

“Our Destroyers can intercept it,” her chief of staff assured her as two golden dots on the accelerated in pursuit of the black dot on the advanced hololith of the *Champion of Kar Duniash*. “But if they want to prevent it from having a chance to engage the Warp drives before the Mandeville Point, they will have to shoot their torpedoes at extreme range.”

Let unsaid was that while the gunners may target the engines of this lair of damnation and heretics, it was far more likely the *Pious Traveller* – or whatever true name was carved upon its treacherous hull – was going to be atomised by so many torpedoes.

“Does anyone see another possible way to neutralise the heretics?”

“Not really Admiral,” one of her astrogation officers took upon him to answer for her staff. “The *Achilles* and the *Hector* are excellent Destroyers, there’s a reason why we requested these two, but deploying them so soon with a short-staffed crew means they can’t really risk a boarding action, no matter how crippled this pilgrim ship.”

“And they had a few hundred personnel in permission on the Lemurian Shipyards before we ordered them to pursue the heretics,” added her chief of staff.

Fujiko thought over and over the situation, but it was like at Commorragh again – sometimes there were no good options, the dilemma was only between a varieties of poisons.

“Order our Destroyer’s Captains to launch their torpedoes as soon as they are in range,” the female Rear-Admiral commanded. “Be sure to emphasize to them that the priority is to make sure the *Pious Traveller* doesn’t escape. We can always summon a few Tech-Priests afterwards to see if it is possible to discover where the cultists and the traitors who rallied their banners came from.”

It wasn’t going to stop there, of course. The lax security measures of Lemuria and Vijayanagara had rendered unavoidable a purge of the Lemurian shipyards and the nearby planets. There were too many heretics found, and the number of supposed ‘loyal citizens’ found trafficking in forbidden substances and proscribed artefacts was absolutely sickening.

“How does our troop fare on the Lemurian shipyards fare?”

“Surprisingly, rather well, Admiral,” the commander of her armsmen assured her. “Many Nyxians on permission have rallied to the emissary of Lady Weaver, and it looks like the heretics are repelled towards Dock C-6 where the Pilgrim Traveller seeded its grains of heresy.”

The scarred veteran bared his teeth into a parody of smile.

“It looks like the traitors aren’t enjoying a lot their holidays on Lemuria.”

**Voice of Decay Lord Flu-Bringer of the Seventh Mutation**

“THE GROUND IS CONTORTING! THE GROUND AND THE WALLS ARE CONTORTING! PLEASE! PLEASE SAVE US GRANDFATHER!”

Flu-Bringer ended the vox communication before the screams were heard by each and every servant in proximity. There were ways to improve the moral of his faithful followers, and they didn’t include making them listening to their final pleas before they die.

“Dock C-7 is lost to us.”

“It’s this horrible xenos creature,” the Scythe-Prime, as his was usual habit, tried to deflect the blame. “It repaired all the defence turrets we had sabotaged!”

“I am not interested in cutting heads for this succession of failures,” the leader of the Cult of the Seventh Mutation said in a tone which had to sound jovial. He obviously didn’t say that at the rhythm the defeats were arriving, the Cult was going to be entirely destroyed if he punished every follower for their personal failings. “We serve the Lord of Decay, we are above the petty struggles of power of the Great Liar and the Bloody-Handed Maniac. What I want are scenarios to push back the blind slaves of the False Emperor.”

“We could try to send our last three shuttles to board another pilgrim ship and...operate a strategic withdrawal?” proposed the Pox-Master, a stout believer with a green arm where seven eyes saw everything.

“Defeatist!” the Scythe-Prime immediately answered.

“I’m sorry, do you have a solution to cripple soldiers fighting in sealed power armour?” the accused loyal soul retorted. “If we had someone blessed with more powerful talents or all our Plague-Bringers hadn’t been cut down by this maniac with the green blade of doom, I might try to concoct a virulent plagues the like which will make our enemies weep in beauty before so much magnificence of diseases!”

“Be quiet! It is only a matter of time before we kill the green blade-wielder! As for her horrible xenos pet, it won’t be able to escape the judgement of the Grandfather for long!”

“Strange,” the Mistress of Bubonic Infestation intervened, “I seem to remember the ‘horrible xenos pet’ led your forces right in the middle of a killing ground with Gatling Guns and electrified wire.”

“This was only a minor reversal!” The Scythe-Prime barked. “Now we have these unbelievers exactly where we want them!”

“Wait a minute...are you suggesting the slaves of the False Emperor sterilising Dock C-5 in fire is...part of your plan? Are you a cultist of Lies?”

“Apologise for this insult or my scythe will remove your head from your shoulders!”

“I will not apologise! No one but a brain-dead simpleton can contest the strategies of our Scythe-Prime are utterly disastrous!”

Flu-Bringer felt something spreading in the former Dock C-6. It was something which had nothing to do with the blessed fetid atmosphere they had brought to please the Grandfather. It was...abnormal. It was disorderly, but not the kind of agitation any of the Three were pleased to spread and bless humanity with.

“Enough, brothers and sisters! Remember who is the true enemy!”

“The enemy are the slaves of the False Emperor!”

“Quite so,” the cultist leaders agreed. “Now we must elaborate a new strategy-“

“No!” one of the lower-ranked plague officers erupted in outrage. “We must punish the Scythe-Prime for his failures!”

“In the name of Nurgle, you will stop this behaviour! I am blessed to speak with the voice of Decay and I say-”

“Damn you with your Decay and your plagues!” the cultist spluttered to the face of the Scythe-Prime and several other lesser chosen of the Grandfather. “I say we need a change of leadership, and I humbly propose my services-“

Three scythes struck him and the attempted treachery was rendered inexistent in a matter of seconds. The dark presence which had pushed like a bothersome fly into the shadows vanished again.

Flu-Bringer felt nonetheless troubled. It didn’t feel like the work of servants of Tzeentch and Khorne. And the False Emperor had no power, everyone knew that. What had been this malign influence?

“THEY ARE COMING! THE FLOOR IS DISTORTING AGAIN! THEY ARE COMING! GRANDFATHER! PLEASE SAVE US!”

These questions would have to wait for a while, unfortunately...assuming they won.

In hindsight, the ‘great dangers’ the Grandfather’s prophets had warned him against before coming here were far too great for the ‘great blessings’ they would be rewarded for at the end of the path...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector**

**Smilodon VIII**

**Fortress-Monastery *Holy Aquila***

**5.727.297M35**

**Marshal Helman Malberg**

Normally, there should have been a long ceremony to welcome the golden Thunderhawk and its owners, but the landing pad was still in construction, and the wind was violent today over the Far Western Peaks.

Therefore Helman had to make his greeting short.

“Your Celestial Highness,” the Black Templar Marshal bowed largely, “welcome to the *Holy Aquila*. The Fortress-Monastery is yours.”

“Thank your Marshal,” the Living Saint answered with a large smile, “lead the way.”

Without waiting any further, he and Lady Taylor Hebert’s Astartes escort, fifty of his battle-brothers forming an honour guard once the Sky Gate was passed and striking their fists on their armours in salute.

“I see you have received new warriors since your last report,” the Basileia of Nyx told him after saluting back.

“As of today, the Holy Aquila is defended by two hundred and seventy-two oath-sworn Space Marines, including two Castellans and myself.” Helman informed their benefactor. “There are also ten Techmarines and three Apothecaries which are on their way, as the High Marshal was courteous enough to approve my request for more support elements.”

From there their exchange went on the details of the fortress Tech-Priests and senior Sword Brethren were building around them. Helman wished he could present the Fortress-Monastery in a near-completed state, but this was years away, and to be honest no one had thought the Basileia would choose to visit them this year.

“Do you want me to prepare some refreshments?” the Black Templars commander asked as he finished showing Her Celestial Highness the rooms where the Neophytes and Initiates would train in the noble art of sword-fighting.

“No, that won’t be necessary, Marshal.” The golden-winged Chosen of the Emperor replied. “Count-Patrician Zoltan Cziffra is a good man, but I swear he tried to see if a Saint could drink barrel after barrel of amasec without drowning in it.”

“The good Planetary Governor was particularly ecstatic when your unexpected visit was announced,” Helman said politely. “I understand he will receive several brand-new trains and locomotives?”

“This was the official reason I gave him,” Helman didn’t react outwardly but internally, he began to assess what had possibly gone wrong in the galaxy. “In reality, I wanted to contact you and Dragon had the good idea to send this convoy right at the moment I wanted so for potential spies, it didn’t look like I desire to avoid the Count-Patrician and his Mining-Barons.”

Feeling the tour of the completed facilities had lasted long enough, the Marshal directed his prestigious guest and the other Space Marines towards the stone stairs which had been built to be the principal avenue towards the *Holy Aquila*’s Strategium.

“We are always at the disposal of Your Celestial Highness, of course,” Helman said formally, “may I know the primary purpose of this visit, then?”

“War,” was the unsurprising answer, “war is coming once again for us.”

“A new front has opened at Tigrus?”

“No, it is not Tigrus. It is a nearby Necron battlestation which has been activated. A few crazy xenos apparently think my alliance with the Nerushlatset Dynasty is against the nature of this galaxy, and have taken steps to remedy to it.”

“Remedy how?”

“They intend to destroy this entire Sector until there isn’t a single living being alive to witness the apocalypse they have unleashed. The Necron executioners want to kill everything, down to the last bacteria.”

Helman Malberg frowned and felt the familiar emotion of anger course through his vein. He was no stranger to the devastation caused by highly-intensive conflicts, but that kind of destruction was way over what the Black Templars inflicted to their enemies.

It was senseless. To achieve such a level of destruction meant each planet would be for all intents and purposes subjected to a thorough Exterminatus. There would be no new colonisation, no salvage operations, nothing.

“And these xenos are coming here.”

“I have taken steps to delay their arrival,” the Saint promised him, “and for now, the plan is to intercept their engines of destruction and other murderous assets outside the Nyx Sector. You have been witness of what some of the Necron Battleships were capable at Commorragh. The leaders of the faction who want us dead are far more dangerous than that.”

“What are we speaking exactly about, your Celestial Highness?” Like all Chapter Masters of the Adeptus Astartes having participated in the Ovation, Helman had been briefed on the ‘World Engines’ of the Necrons. And while these offensive planetoids were extremely tough engines of destruction, there were far from invulnerable. Casualties would be immense, yes, but several Chapters acting together could defeat this threat.

“We are speaking about the Ymga Monolith, that the Necrons call the Throne of Oblivion. It is a planet-sized pyramid which can replicate in less than a minute a Battleship provided the material resources are available. It has energy shields so powerful only the Gloriana Battleships and top-of-the-art bastions like Phalanx have a chance of bringing them down. Its escort fleet alone can torch a Sub-Sector and annihilate trillions of lives. We don’t have a full pict of the infantry numbers defending it, but they have to be in the billions of warriors, and the masters of this monstrosity can bring an endless tide of reinforcements via modified Webway portals.”

“God-Emperor preserves us,” Helman answered shocked. “This is a primary-grade threat on the level of a Black Crusade!”

“It is.”

“I will of course answer your call to arms against this xenos citadel, but the Black Templars alone can’t achieve victory there.” Maybe if the entire Chapter did what had never been done since the War of the Cacodominus and gathered all Crusade fleets under the High Marshal’s banner...but that would mean abandoning countless campaigns...

“I am not going to send you alone,” the Saint reacted promptly as she agitated her large wings. “But the Ymga Monolith is a treacherous battleground where your Chapter may be truly what is needed to defeat the Necron elite warriors. You see, the xenos have refined the Noctilith into something which is an extremely powerful repellent for the Warp. As such, the battlefield we will have to fight upon is a null-zone.”

“Yes,” the Marshal answered slowly, “in this regard our respect of the Edict of Nikea proves a considerable boon. In a null-zone, the psykers will be useless, but we have no psykers and as such we won’t be handicapped by their absence in our lines.” However, there was a problem the Saint may not have fully considered. “I have never heard of a null-zone having an area of effect so large however, your Celestial Highness. I am partial to battlefields where the enemy can’t use fell sorcery against us, but blocking the Warp on such a large scale has certainly secondary effects.”

The end of the walk to the Strategium ended in silence. It was only when the Living Saint and Helman had taken their seats around the hololith of the Strategium that the Basileia spoke again.

“The first stage of this operation, that I have called provisionally the Hunt for the Monolith, is to push as many Ork WAAGHs against the Necrons as materially possible, while the Nyx Sector and all Adeptuses forces we can possibly convince to join us will be united in a single force.”

The Ultramarines would certainly not agree with this strategy, Helman internally remarked with some light amusement. It went against a lot of tenets of the *Codex Astartes*.

“Optimistically, if the sabotage of the Monolith’s FTL drive, we may be granted twelve years of respite before launching our full-fledged assault against the Necrons. Therefore I came to you to know what kind of force you would be able to commit if the Black Templars have over a decade to rearm.”

Helman replayed the numbers he had been given yesterday in his head. At the time, they had been reassuring. Now, there were far less so.

“Per your instructions, we completed the tests of gene-seed compatibility twenty-days ago and began the first physical and mental trials of our aspirant-Neophytes immediately. There have been a couple of failures, but between the three main mining-cities of Smilodon Octavian, we were able to recruit six hundred and twenty aspirants.”

“Impressive,” the Saint congratulated him.

“Thank you, your Celestial Highness, but my oaths compel me to admit that given our exacting standards, the initial numbers are on average divided by two once the full trials are completed.”

“The standards?”

“We do not lower them lightly, and in this instance it would be a death sentence.”

The Saint watched him with a stony expression for several seconds before conceding the point.

“I suppose you will be able to only train a single generation of new Astartes in twelve years.”

“With the numbers available to me, I’m afraid this is true,” the Marshal acknowledged before elaborating. “Between the instant an aspirant begins his first trials and the moment a Neophyte is to be considered ready to swear his vows of Initiate battle-brother, on average ten years have passed. Each Neophyte also needs the guidance of his elders.”

And though he would push the maximum of his battle-brothers to take Neophytes under his wing, the truth was Helman’s effectives were limited.

“I will make new requests to High Marshal Barbarossa.” The veteran Astartes said. “They may find more good will if a message of your Celestial Highness accompanies my words.”

“Consider it approved. As is your shipbuilding request of five new Strike Cruisers.”

Helman had thought it would be approved...gradually. To have the request approved in block was quite unusual...but then the circumstances weren’t exactly normal, no?

“I’m sure you are aware of the contract signed with Count-Patrician Zoltan Cziffra, so assuming we really have twelve years we will have the production line able to deliver us a full complement of Rhinos and the Whirlwinds...”

The discussion lasted for another four hours without pause – he had to order refreshments at the end. Four hours to forge the still weakened Battle-Companies which had survived the Commorragh Crusade into what was coming to be the tip of an implacable sword destined to crush xenos and everything rising to oppose the will of the God-Emperor.

And when Lady Weaver departed, Helman Malberg knew one thing for sure.

The Living Saint would lead them to a war the stars themselves would remember.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Svalbard Sector**

**Tigrus System**

**Battle-Barge *Red Blade***

**5.781.297M35**

**Chapter Master Michael Yarhibol**

“I hope,” the Master of the Fleet said grimly, “it is not a case of Lady Weaver trying to claim a succession of victory for the sake of impressing Kar Duniash and Terra by her cleverness.”

“It is not,” the Master of Recruits replied before Michael could open his mouth to reprimand the Captain. “In fact, it looks to me Nyx and plenty of important officers are desperately short of firepower to deal with this immense threat. If there was another expendable species to throw against the walls of the Ymga Monolith, then those xenos would have been thrown too onto the pyres.”

“Well said,” the Chapter Master of the Lamenters approved. “Don’t misunderstand me, brothers. I’m not saying the strategy chosen by the Shield of the Blood is perfect, for it is not. Alas, we are a bit short of perfect strategies right now. The reports of the Deathwatch are formal: the greenskins are gathering at ‘Scrapzard Moardakka’and their numbers are legion. This alone would be a considerable threat to the Svalbard Sector, as both Skitarii and guardsmen have paid a heavy price in blood to repel the Ork invasions. But we can’t face the Orks while in our back, the threat of the Ymga Monolith is growing unchecked. The Navy High Command is about to redeploy one of its reserve Battlefleets in the region, but given the size of the xenos opposition, it is likely it will be too little, too late. As a consequence, the new strategy proposed is the best option we have.”

Many of his Captains nodded, but not all.

“I understand your point of view,” the Master of the Fleet began in a calmer tone, “but Lady Weaver is not the first high-ranked officer or representative of the Emperor to have this idea of using the Ork legendary Ork aggressiveness against other enemies of the Imperium. Inquisitors have tried before. Admirals have tried it before. By the Blood, we have tried it before! The problem is that for all our predecessors’ cleverness, it rarely works for long. Few things can hold the attention of an Ork invasion force for long. The brutes easily get bored, and most of the armies and fleets, including ours, can’t resist a full-out assault of billions of greenskins.”

“And yet,” the Sanguinary Priest countered, “the Ymga Monolith may very well be one of the few targets in this galaxy that can give the Orks a challenge. There are billions of Necron warriors there which will be rebuilt between each green wave. This xenos bastion projects a null-zone and as such is likely to imitate the effect thousands of Pariahs would have: enrage the powerful Orks to fight to the death, while decreasing the power of their crazy psykers.”

“If this doesn’t work, we will have one of the biggest WAAGH since M32 on the doorstep of Tigrus, certainly empowered by the looting of Necron weaponry.”

“I find it particularly interesting that you believe that the strategy failing implies the Orks will emerge victorious, brother,” the High Chaplain remarked. “Personally, having read the reports of what Lady Weaver’s Astropaths could send us on such short notice, I am more of the opinion the Orks will need to fight far more intelligently and ferociously than they did at Tigrus if they want to last one year, never mind several. This ‘Ymga Monolith’ is the kind of threat several Legions united to destroy.”

“Then why isn’t this ‘Monolith’ spoken along the Ullanor Crusade and the Rangdan Xenocides? Surely if this had been such a cataclysmic threat, His Majesty and other Legions would have been gathered to deal with it!”

“They may have been about to do so at the end of the Great Crusade,” Michael Yarhibol told the Captains of the Blood. “Many Field Armies and loyal Titan Legions were redeployed to the Eastern Fringe after the Ullanor Triumph. And while the Arch-Traitor used the pretext of an Ork threat to send the Thirteenth Legion where it couldn’t use its numerical superiority to stop his treason...no one among the High Lords or the High Command objected at the time. It was like they knew these forces were going to be necessary to deal with a major threat.”

The final outcome had been different, obviously. Though his forces had been severely damaged by the treachery at Calth and the baleful ‘Shadow Crusade’, Guilliman had been able to rally these dispersed forces and counter-attack, liberating much of Ultima Segmentum from the traitors’ grasp as he rushed to relieve the defenders of Terra.

But in hindsight, these forces had certainly not been built up to crush down half of the Imperial Army and Astartes Legions turning traitor, no matter how near-miraculous this decision had proven for the Loyalist strategic positions.

“You realise, Chapter Master, this is very dangerous speculation.”

“It is,” it wasn’t an admission to make. “And so we will end them until Lady Weaver gives us more facts to rely upon. What is not in question, however, are our orders. We have the coordinates of the Ork bases. We have the beacons to lure the greenskins where we want them, courtesy of the Tech-Priests of Tigrus. Our ships have been repaired, and our wounds mended. We have nine hundred and thirty-three battle-brothers ready to bleed and open the veins of our xenos enemies. Do we need anything more?”

“We don’t,” the Lamenters sitting around the command table of the Red Blade answered. “By the Blood of Sanguinius, Lady Weaver, and the Emperor!”

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Approaches of the Svalbard Sector**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**The Throne of Oblivion**

**9.800.297M35**

**Overlord Sobekhotep the Dust-Maker**

Sobekhotep was so angry that for the first time in millions of years, his herald reciting his tens of thousands of titles won in the War in Heaven could wait. Who knew he could feel emotions with so much clarity after the hardships of bio-transference and the Great Sleep? He might have thanked the origin of these precious emotions...if it didn’t make him so angry. If the emotions themselves weren’t rage, loathing, and a virulent desire to lay waste to everything.

“TRAAAAAAAZZZZYYYYYYNNNN!”

Sobekhotep was going to murder this parvenu of Nihilakh Overlord. But it wouldn’t be an easy death, oh no. Body by body, the upstart ‘Infinite’ would learn why the Szarekhan Dynasty was the most feared and respected Dynasty to have ever existed. His torments would last millions of years, and his death of engrams millions more. In the Silent King’s name, the Lord of the Throne of Oblivion would make of this death a symbol why you never, never try to oppose the rule of the Triarch, may he rule forever upon the Grand Empire of the Necrons.

“I am going to burn personally his Prismatic Galleries!”

“Yes, Overlord!” answered loyally Royal Warden Sihathor, most commonly known by his allies and enemies by his nickname of ‘the Impaler’. “I will personally impale the skulls of his servants while you accomplish the vengeance of the Szarekhan Dynasty!”

“It is not something as petty as *vengeance*,” Sobekhotep corrected his servant. “It is *justice*. The outlaw known as ‘Trazyn’ has forfeited by his criminal deeds his right to call himself a Necron. He has dared raising his hand against the sacred rule of the Szarekhan Dynasty. As per my royal authority and the codes invested in me by the Mighty Silent King, I declare him Secessionist. Per our sacred laws, the sentence is death for him and every Necron who dare obeys him! Cryptek! Prepare the Throne of Oblivion for the fastest star-course to reach Solemnace!”

“Hem, hem, hem.” By the lies of the Deceiver, how Sobekhotep hated this voice.

“What is this, Cryptek?” The Overlord who had gained the title of Dust-Maker for his ability to reduce Aeldari worlds to tiny particles had to restrain his anger, otherwise he was going to shoot the irritant tech-master and he would be forced to admit another one in his sacred presence.

“Hem, hem, hem. We can’t pursue the thief to Solemnace.”

“He’s not a thief! He’s a thief-secessionist! Use the proper terminology, Cryptek!”

“Hem, hem, hem. Yes. My apologies.” The tone of Master Cryptek Sneferka, self-proclaimed ‘Master of Despair’, was not apologetic at all. “We can’t pursue the thief-secessionist to Solemnace.”

“And why is that?” The Dust-Maker swore that if the answer was ‘the stars are not in the correct conjunction’, he would blast apart the Cryptek, Master or no Master, delay or no delay.

“Several reasons, but there are two above others,” Sneferka informed him. “First, we can’t locate Solemnace. The Celestial Arrays can’t locate the thief’s World Engine or any of his storage-worlds.”

“The thief-secessionist,” Sobekhotep automatically corrected, glaring at his inferior. “How is this possible?”

“The thief has been active for millions of our years, while we were all sleeping until recently,” Sneferka answered, once again ignoring his demands to conform himself to the proper court protocol. “My calculations are certain he used part of this time to find and get rid of the...contingency plans the Silent King had installed on Solemnace itself or nearby.”

“Which proves once again his treacherous deeds and his conspiracy against the sacred rule of the Szarekhan Dynasty!”

“Indeed, my mighty Overlord!” Sihathor the Impaler agreed. “Let’s go kill him.”

“Hem, hem, hem. First if you insist on technicalities, Trazyn of the Nihilakh is an Active-Triarch. So you can’t accuse him of treason, since your rank is inferior to him.”

This time his anger exploded and a blow of his personal weapon sent the ‘Royal Cryptek’ flying half-way through his throne room.

“HE IS NOT AN ACTING-TRIARCH!” the Overlord of the Throne of Oblivion shouted. “HE IS A PARVENU, AN UPSTART, AND A SECESSIONIST! OUR MIGHTY SILENT KING NEVER RECOGNISED HIM, AND ALL THE NOBLE DYNASTIES OF IMPORTANCE NEVER WILL!”

“Hem, hem, hem.” To his sorrow, Sneferka’s body was already near-repaired from the blow. “Which brings me to my second point. Until we Crypteks have repaired the damage to the Throne of Oblivion Star-eater Drive, this battlestation won’t go anywhere. Or if he we go somewhere, we will go slower than an Old One crawling without dais and saurian-carriers.”

“Then...REPAIR IT!”

“We are trying to do right now,” Sneferka snarked arrogantly. “It would be simpler of course if *someone* had not placed the vaults of our Voidmancers and Technomancers close to the warriors infected by the Flayer Curse.”

“There is no Flayer Curse.” This time Sobekhotep was forced to use his Overlord protocols to modify the memory of the Cryptek. His arrogance was becoming unbearable! “There are only weak Necrons which have been unable to summon the strength to wake up in a new age which will see the domination of the Szarekhan Dynasty!”

“Hem, hem, hem. *If* there is no Flayer Curse,” replied obediently Sneferka. “Can the missing Crypteks return to their duties? We have great need of them, it was their diligence which imagined and built the Star-eater Drive under the C’Tan-“

“Choose carefully your next words, Cryptek. The Star-eater Drive was invented by the incredible mind of our Saviour and Master, the Mighty Silent King himself. You were merely the assistants to build the glorious engines. And no, the Crypteks can’t return to their duties...not until they are more...cooperative.”

It wouldn’t happen until they were healed of this strange affliction which had led the stupid creatures to devolve into things raving for blood and flayed skin. And as long as they weren’t presenting signs of mental healing, they were confined to a zone protected by some of the most powerful containment devices ever imagined by the Szarekhan Dynasty.

“Hem, hem, hem. Unfortunately, it will result in delays, if I lack the genius and the assistants of the project to repair the Star-eater Drive. Things would get better obviously if I was given access to the Void Dragon’s shard or the Endless Swarm-“

“You know Cryptek that after the latest...skirmish with the lesser vermin, these two Shards are...unavailable!”

For the first time, the venomous and injurious remarks of Orikan didn’t seem so bad anymore. The Sautekh Cryptek was an abhorrent servant, but he at least produced results. Alas, even if the idea of hiring foreign talents was not so distasteful, there was also the minor problem of the ‘Arch-Cryptek’ not answering his communications anymore. Since the thief-secessionist had somehow found out about the activation of the Throne since the Sautekh Necron had fallen silent, the Szarekhan Overlord was going to assume it wasn’t a coincidence.

“Hem. Hem. Hem. Given the lack of competent hands, we might be able to solve these issues in twenty to thirty years.”

The Dust-Maker was patient, but the time demanded by the Cryptek was ridiculous.

“The first Dolmen Gate is ready for use and twenty Sautekh Crypteks are going to arrive soon,” it was a lie; they had not yet been summoned, but he would do it as soon as this meeting was over. “You have one year.”

“Hem, hem, hem. In that case, the reactivation of the Replicator Forges will take a lesser priority.”

“The Replicator Forges are not in your domain of competence!” The Overlord proclaimed, wondering why they did tolerate these puny and arrogant upstarts among his court.

“But they have Crypteks we need to repair the damaged engines and the...lack of maintenance the Artificial Intelligences assigned to certain issues.”

“You will stop protesting or I will replace you with other Crypteks!”

And it was at that moment the alarms of his throne hall began to shriek. In less time it took him to strike a blow of his hyperphase weapon, the walls shifted to reveal the command node it could alternatively serve as.

“Multiple Empyreal breaches detected at the limit of the anti-Empyreal field!” Royal Warden Sihathor exclaimed as his war duties demanded. “Over five thousand Empyreal breaches detected, Wise Overlord!”

“So the thief-secessionist was only the vanguard of the vermin assault...” the Lord of the Throne of Oblivion muttered.

“Hem, hem, hem. The profile of the energy signatures is inconsistent with-“

“SILENCE!” Sobekhotep roared. “The vermin ships are here. They want to perish by our guns? I will fulfil their miserable aspirations. Begin the firing cycle of the Solar Harvester. Maximum effort on the Canoptek reawakening efforts. Open all Dolmen gates, activation of all Replicator Forges.”

“Hem, hem, hem. Overlord, we have neither enough Crypteks nor resurrection helpers to-“

“Out of my sight.” Sobekhotep said icily.

“Overlord?”

“Out of my sight,” the Lord of the Throne of Oblivion repeated. “I am going to requisition Sautekh, Mephrit, and proper Szarekhan Crypteks from other worlds to make sure the Throne is fighting as per the capacities imagined by the Silent King. Go see to your new and extremely limited duties before I decide to put you into a second Great Sleep.”

“I obey.” And Royal Cryptek Sneferka teleported away.

“Make sure the reinforcements arriving from our Dolmen Gates give up their Crypteks for our purposes, Sihathor.”

“Yes, my Overlord. Do you wish to call to war the Nihilakh Dynasty too?”

“No,” the Dust-Maker deigned to shake his head at the excellent suggestion of his loyal servant. “As useful as the Nihilakh Crypteks could be, we don’t know how much...secessionist perversion they have been infected with.”

Phaeron Krispekh and his cousin had never entertained relationships that could be called *close*, but the thief-secessionist had been a favourite of the Nihilakh Phaeron’s first wife, mainly because he brought her some of the gemstones he stole from Aeldari. He would inform Krispekh of the secessionist’s treason once every enemy was safely reduced to dust and faint engram-memories.

“More Empyreal breaches!” one of his Nemesors announced. “Twelve thousand warships! No, thirteen thousand!”

And then a scream arrived to their first line of defence. It was a scream which shouldn’t have been heard, for the enemy was still far, far from entering their listening range.

It was a scream that Sobekhotep and his court knew very well, for it had for several hundred of years inspired the closest thing they could feel to fear while the most apocalyptic battles of the War in Heaven raged.

It was a roar of joy which promised to drown the galaxy into violence.

And as tens of thousands of warships charged the Throne of Oblivion, the battle-cry of the Krorks once again called billions of barbaric brutes to war.

“WAAAAAAAGGGHHHHHHHH!”

**Space Hulk *Defila is da Best and Moardakka*!**

**Warboss Arrgard ‘the Defiler’**

“I’z found Vallawaagh.”

It was not a remark which came easily to an Ork. Not since during the War of the Beast an entire fleet had crashed onto the planet the Imperium called Valhalla, starting an apocalyptic war which would last more than two hundred years and would created uncountable legends around both guardsmen and boyz’s bonfires.

But as the Ymga Monolith’s mobile fleet duplicated again and fired a barrage of Gauss weapons which exterminated two hundred-plus Ork warships, Arrgard the Defiler, who in other timeline would have been the destructor of Forge World Tigrus, had stars in the eyes like the billions of Ork warriors he had roused to war.

And then there was the tornado of celestial fire illuminating the battlefield. It was a pyre fit for Gork and Mork’s wrath. It was the Solar Harvester preparing to unleash its formidable armament against the WAAGH. But above all, it was the most beautiful beacon for thousands of Ork warbands.

And so Arrgard the Defiler bellowed.

“BOYZ!”

Silence came on the bridge of the *Defila is da Best and Moardakka!*

“Da says,” the Warboss of the Bad Moons shouted, “da best means of Attack is Defence, an’ de best means of Attack is da really, really Big ONE, with lot of Boys an’ dead big shooty things!”

Arrgard smiled largely, showing the biggest teeth which had allowed to purchase his favourite Hulk alone.

“Da Swarm Bringa iz going to be latez,” the Warboss exclaimed. “Zot we’re going toz stomp dat funz pyramidz and shoota ‘verything thatz movez!”

The giant greenskin raised his fist.

“We’re richz! We’re flashgits! Uvver clanz make way for da Bad Moons!”

His right fist slammer the biggest red button of the red bridge.

“GET ‘EM BOYZ! WAAAGGGGGH!”

“WAAAAAGGGHHHHHH!”

In less than five seconds, the Space Hulk brutally accelerated, to the point it temporarily equalled the engine push an Imperial Cruiser’s Tech-Priests would be able to risk in a dangerous battle.

“WWWAAAAAAAAAGGGHHH!”

The *Defila is da Best and Moardakka!* plunged into the inferno of war, and thousands of Ork warships followed it instinctively.

For this was Vallawaagh.

And if the Orks were to meet their doom, they would do it weapon in hand and screaming in joy.

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Battleship *Standard Template Construct***

**3.850.297M35**

**Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter**

Dragon rarely went beyond Obscure’s orbit – Nyx’s sole and only moon – to greet any of the new Tech-Priests recently arrived to Nyx. The Tinker often wished she could do so; there were countless tales of adventures, of technological experiences to listen to and many specialised classes of warships to study.

But travel times alone would guarantee her other duties fell to the way side, and since there were regularly thousands of Tech-Priests arriving and departing, it was not practical for any member of the Mechanicus Council to be so far away from her main powerbase. Though at least she knew what one of the seats of the new enlarged Council was going to consist of. It might not be very glamorous, but ‘Master of Recruits’ was a very indispensable field when a stellar system approached the Tech-Priest numbers of a small Forge-World.

That’s why Dragon had not left the Fafnir enclave when the Logic-class orbital macro-forges *Plasma is our Life-Blood* and *Triumph of the Machine-God* had arrived weeks ago. As impressive as these samples of Ryza industrial ingenuity were – and they were exceptional in many points – there were a lot of tasks to complete and oversee, and Dragon couldn’t be everywhere and guide everything. It looked like a monumental reorganisation on a systemic scale was after all enough to overwhelm even a Tinker Artificial Intelligence.

But today she had decided to make an exception, accepting to be the passenger of Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar for the event.

And the reason she had decided to bend slightly the rules for one day was absolutely massive.

Nyx was beginning to be used to macro-scale constructions in this day and age. Battleships of the Imperial Navy were beginning to be more and more common, the *Enterprise* was not exactly a small warship, and several Arks Mechanicus had begun to use the Nyx System as a regular harbour on their way to the Eastern Fringe and other Ultima Forge Worlds.

There was also the *Angel’s Brotherhood*, the mighty Ramilies Starfort of the Brothers of the Red, which had become a normal sight around the Agri-World of Ruby’s Harvest. And there were the massive shipyards, foundries, refineries, and every industrial orbital facility built in orbit of Nyx these last years.

All of this to say the world ruled by the ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’ had nothing to feel ashamed of where tech-marvels were concerned, unless the comparison threshold was Mars or Ryza.

Today, however, the experience was...humbling.

“Behold...*Terra Cimmeria*.”

Science-fiction authors of Earth Aleph and Earth Bet had imagined cities in space before the Golden Morning. For once, their ambitious dreams of humans thriving to do the impossible had fallen short of the reality.

The colossal mass which was towed before the large welcoming party of navy and Mechanicus ships was almost a category by itself.

It was heavily armed and protected, of course. But beneath the large cannons and the ultra-advanced defences, an experienced eye could rapidly assess that this was far from an entirely military purpose-built structure. There were too many docking bays, too many familiar accesses to feed the voracious industrial capacity hidden in its heart. That wasn’t to say this monumental battlestation couldn’t fight; on the contrary, Dragon would not fancy the chances of anything smaller than the *Enterprise* to survive a few minutes of its lances and plasma batteries’ salvoes. But the real wealth remained the priceless technology hidden underneath the surface.

This was *Terra Cimmeria*.

It was five times the size of the *Angel’s Brotherhood*, a true spatial titan which only bowed to the legendary *Phalanx* of the Imperial Fists and a few equally famous Starfort-Bastions of the Imperium.

Cawl had proclaimed it had taken two hundred years for him to build this project, and Dragon had no problem accepting his words now that she had his masterwork before her.

“Somehow,” Desmerius Lankovar said drily, “I can understand why the Fabricator-General of the time was a bit...worried when *Terra Cimmeria* began to be in its last stages of construction.”

Dragon silently approved. Setting aside the usual Mechanicus politics, Cawl using this fortress as his mobile headquarters across the galaxy would open the ‘delightful’ possibility of him browbeating all Martian and non-Martian Tech-Priests into submission by the mere appearance of his heaviest creation.

“I suppose one of the council members will be the ‘Master of Cimmeria’ or something like this?”

“’Or something like this’, yes” Dragon replied ironically. “Given that *Terra Cimmeria* belongs to our Lady per the accords she signed with Cawl, I am more partial to a title like ‘Castellan’, ‘Regent’, or ‘Warden’.”

“Yes, better not to inflate the ego of the Archmagos or Magos who will be chosen,” the Master of Exploration agreed. “I presume we are going to place a strong garrison of most reliable elements aboard.”

“You presume correctly. Four void-trained regiments are ready to take this role, and we will regularly rotate them with others to make sure their levels of loyalty and readiness are maintained to the maximum. Elite macroclades of Skitarii, a lance of Knight and of course a squad or two of Space Marines.”

“The Brothers of the Red?”

“Yes, to begin with. Once the Fists of Roma reach adequate numbers, they may play the senior role here.” Many sons of Dorn had long experience of manning and defending Imperial Starforts and other orbital defences. For the moment their presence had been limited to written and oral transfer of experience, since they were busy in the Theta Marches building up their strength, but give it a few decades and it was going to change.

The problem, of course, was the minor issue that they had not these decades before the next storm hit.

“We’re going to need *Terra Cimmeria* a lot in the next years,” the draconic Tinker said at last.

“So I’ve heard,” Desmerius Lankovar answered. “I’m already receiving on average one high-priority demand per day from Lady Weaver, and I’m not counting the recommendations or future preparations involving insects and Exploration Fleets. Despite having received more than forty thousand new Tech-Priests in the last year, I can assure you everyone is working extremely hard to meet the goals we are assigned.”

*Terra Cimmeria* continued to advance into the Nyx System, receiving millions of Noosphere message welcoming it in the name of the Tech-Priests forming the Nyxian Mechanicus. The twelve tugs tied to it looked like mosquitoes, despite each of them being the size of Heavy Cruisers.

“Do you still intend to start the service of the Volkite lines of production into *Terra Cimmeria* first?” Lankovar asked. “Now that we know the Necrons are undoubtedly going to be the greatest challenge we will soon be opposed to, Volkite weaponry is not fully suited to destroy the metallic xenos.”

“We have also the Orks to look forwards on our list of enemies,” Dragon remarked. “And all Space Marines agree the Volkite guns are incredibly useful to kill the greenskins and cripple the threat represented by their spores in a single shot.”

Dragon couldn’t confirm it – no one could save possibly the ruler of the Imperium – but it was entirely possible the Volkite technology had been invented as a solution to erase the Ork threat from the galaxy. Evidently, it had failed, but it remained a very lethal part of the human arsenal...assuming you had the knowledge and the tech-expertise to build them.

“Anyway there are also political advantages developing it while we are granted this opportunity.”

“When aren’t they?” the Stygies VIII-born Archmagos chuckled. “But yes, I suppose it has to do something with the fact no one else is really building significant Volkite guns in significant numbers?”

“It is one of the reasons,” Dragon said seriously. “Let’s be honest, Archmagos; so far most of our prestige and wealth is based on the prestige and the tech-exchanges of Lady Taylor Hebert’s discoveries. We will probably never forget it, and we can cherish it for it is unlikely we could have attracted the sum of resources and manpower we did, but now we have to prepare for the future, and Nyx and Alamo have to grow and surpass this inheritance.”

“And I’m sure having Volkite technology available in mass-production would help enormously the day-to-day negotiations with other Forge Worlds,” Lankovar said quietly. “Very well. As long as you have other projects ongoing to deal with the Necrons, I am not exactly preoccupied by your researches in the destructive field of Volkite technology.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, our Master of Destruction is...happily compiling all the methods he thinks which are worth exploiting against highly-resistant metallic bodies.”

Though sometimes, Dragon wondered if they shouldn’t have called him ‘Master of Explosions’. The Guard officers had reported the Tech-Priests’ ‘trials’ were making their artillery barrages and firing exercises look like paltry imitations – not the words they used, but the core of the subtext was there.

“Reassure me,” the Master of Exploration said as they returned to their sightseeing of Terra Cimmeria. “We aren’t going to place this thing in orbit of Nyx with the shipyards, aren’t we?”

Dragon laughed before sobering up after a few seconds.

“No we aren’t. Well, Archmagos Sultan tried to convince me by sending me complex astral-calculations that it was technically possible, but after much reflexion, I and the four other Council members present at this short meeting decided the tolerance margins were way too slim...and it would create enormous traffic jams in the future. We are going to place it at the Nyx Lagrange Point L5. That way it will be properly supported by the defences we built for the other research stations and the major industrial sites already present there.”

“Not to mention the squadron of Cruisers patrolling around.” Lankovar nodded. “What does it say though that even the Lagrange Points are beginning to be centres of industry stronger than several Industrial Worlds?”

“That we’re doing something right?”

**Nyx**

**Lisa’s Dome**

**Legate Galatea Dumas**

A young Galatea Dumas would have affirmed it was impossible for insects of any species to strut proudly.

The elder Galatea knew better now.

Lisa the Titan-Moth was strutting, and was somehow managing to spread the feeling Moths were born to be venerated while humans were pale imitators.

And yes, the Templar Sororitas had the conviction it was deliberate. If the great favourite of the Nyxian crowds desired to accomplish her ‘duties’, Lisa had only to fly into the stadium, land, do whatever she was asked to do, and fly away.

Instead the largest flying animal of Nyx was deliberately landing several hundred feet away from the platform where the Tech-Priests were positioned, and well...she strutted all the way, savouring several full minutes of cheers, the public acclaiming her, and everything which went with applause.

“I think she is a bit humbler when Her Celestial Highness is here,” Brunhilda affirmed as the ‘opera diva’ finally reached the red robes.

“Evidently,” another sister approved. “She knows who she can convince to bask into her luminous presence.”

And if you weren’t familiar with Lisa the Moth, Galatea was gentle enough to inform you that apart from Lisa’s mistress and the three other parahumans present on Nyx, no one managed to garner a lot of reverence from her. Even the Inquisitors who were known to appear from time to time near Lisa’s Dome were unable to obtain any preferential treatment. With the proud Titan-Moth, you paid the food toll, or you weren’t getting in her good graces.

“I would like to know where they did obtain this Noctilith, though,” Brunhilda told her, as the twenty-plus Tech-Priests between the Sororitas protection detail and Lisa chanted something unintelligible before opening a container which indeed contained a single, enormous ingot of the obsidian-coloured mineral.

Sign that the procedures had been respected, a large golden auramite aquila had been added on one side.

“I admit I don’t know.” The Legate of the Templar Sororitas was forced to admit. “Lady Weaver told me she would reveal to me and a few other Ecclesiarchal parties secrets about the Noctilith when she returned to Wuhan, and there seemed no need at the time since little Noctilith was available by then for transformation.”

Galatea had to admit she should have insisted a bit more, as cheers and exclamations came from the stands, a consequence of Lisa beginning to concentrate a stunning amount of psychic energy in her wings.

Plans, after all, changed. And when you lived in the Nyx System, plans could change fast...like it had happened recently.

Galatea didn’t know what new threat had been signalled to Her Celestial Highness’ senses when she made her tour of the Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector, but it must be a large one. In the last week, she had received piecemeal the final details on the new generation of Sororitas power armour, demands for more explanation as the military training demanded of every recruit, requisitions and build-up for the coming five years, along with several pleas for liaisons between Mechanicus and Ecclesiarchy departments where new and old warships’ repairs and maintenance were at stake.

“Maybe the Brockton Noctilith Mining’s schedule is in advance,” suggested one of the Sisters of her command cadre.

“Maybe,” though it didn’t seem very likely. The Skitarii and the Magma Spiders had, if the rumours could be trusted, a lot of ‘fun’ dealing with the enormous lava-plesiosaurs on the lava surface of that Death World.

Seconds later, Lisa fired her golden orb and for mortal eyes, it was like a miniature sun was born.

The holy process of transformation from Noctilith to Aethergold didn’t take long to complete, and after more magnificent radiance and more emanations of golden energy, the ingot was stabilised, and there wasn’t a single trace of obsidian colour anymore: the focus of the Tech-Priests was now pure golden in colour, and of course filled with holy purpose as per the God-Emperor and Her Celestial Highness’ plans.

“The very contact with it will be absolute death for heretics and corrupted monsters,” the elder of the Sororitas commented as the servants of the Mechanicus bowed before Lisa and the Titan-Moth preened and swaggered in front of the delirious crowd.

“LISA! LISA!”

“PRAISE THE MOTH! PRAISE THE LIVING SAINT!”

“FOR HER CELESTIAL HIGHNESS!”

“I’ve heard the Aethergold is lethal for the servants of darkness, but I didn’t see it outside the Battle of Commorragh.”

“For now few people have been able to use it in their day-to-day duties,” the de facto commander-in-chief of the Templar Sororitas and Legate of the Order of Silver Rose replied. “I know an Inquisitor has confirmed via the official channels using a small shard of it for anti-heretic purposes in the Suebi Sub-Sector.”

Along with very disturbing information about how corrupted and utterly undeserving of His Grace the religious authorities of Lemuria and the nearby system were.

Galatea had not been inclined to mend the relationships with the Atlantis Sector after the death of Abbess-Crusader Theodora and the reality the Cardinal of Atlantis had done his best to stab their expeditionary division in the back, but these latest revelations had been a step too far. The Templars Sororitas would have nothing to do with Atlantis and everything which could be tied with it, not until the other Sector was properly purified and new Cardinal expressed his or her sincere apologies for past behaviour.

Having a clue from her martyred superior how Atlantis politics worked, Galatea knew it was going to take several years at best...but she could wait. And her predecessors would wait too, if she didn’t live to see it. Let it not be said the servants of Her Celestial Highness had short memories.

“Let’s hope it is agonising for these black souls,” the young Sororitas who had discovered a STC template with holy help said. “I see a lot of red-yellow robes from the Church of the Three Insects today.”

“The Church of the Three Insects?” the Legate asked curiously. She had seen the red-yellow pilgrims and Priests before, but she had not believed there were really more than a local congregation worshipping Lisa.

“They are following a creed which is beginning to gain some popularity in Hive Athena,” the younger member of the Order of the Silver Rose informed her superior. “They believe each great discovery of a holy material by Her Celestial Saint is necessary linked with an insect. The Bacta is created by the Golden Ants. The Aethergold requires Lisa the Titan-Moth to attain its final holy transformation.”

“Yes, but unless I have forgotten to count, it is only two holy substances, and two insects.” Galatea mentioned, a bit amused by this ideal.

“Evidently, Legate,” Brunhilda smirked. “The Saint has won two great battles, the third insect and substance will be discovered during the third exploit of our liege, the one which is sure to come soon.”

The young Sororitas shrugged.

“At least this is what their creed says, I have faith, but half of their arguments are a bit wobbly...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Moros Sub-Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**3.897.297M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Taylor had expected news and ships to be there once she returned from the Smilodon Trench Sub-Sector. To her deep satisfaction, the former was very positive. Chapter Master Yarhibol reported that the greenskins of the Eastern Fringe had thrown their fleets against the Ymga Monolith, and for now it seemed there was no clear winner in sight, judging by the spectacular explosions seen light-years away and the green hyper-beams of energy illuminating the void.

This was good. No, this was excellent. Until now, she had high hopes it was going to work – many commanders had tried the same tactic to get rid of Orks in the last millennia, but it had been far from a sure thing.

But it worked. The Imperium and herself were going to be granted the years they needed to deal with the Ymga Monolith, all the while task forces would sterilise or purge the planets abandoned by the greenskins.

The Basileia had to remind herself that they had not bought twelve years with this move; the Lamenters and other Imperial forces would be sorely needed to throw more and more Orks against the Monolith. Taylor didn’t think the brutes could batter into impotence the Necron planet-sized pyramid, but there was nothing wrong with using the biggest hammer you could find, and judging by their behaviour, the Ork Warbosses weren’t exactly reluctant into going to war against it, null zone or no null zone.

The other pleasant surprise, as it happened, was the presence of the promised reinforcements from Kar Duniash. Three more battleships were there, accompanied by a dozen Lunar-class Cruisers, and of course the multitude of Destroyers, Frigates, and supply ships such colossal formations required.

“Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller and Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal are asking your permission to come aboard, my Lady,” Gamaliel told her.

“Permission granted,” Taylor answered before giving the Blood Angel a genuine smile. “Since we’re not in a hurry, give them the scenic route to the bridge.”

“As you wish,” after several years of sons of Sanguinius having hundreds of hours to paint, sculpt and do a lot of artistic deeds, the *Enterprise* was more and more worthy to be recognised as a gallery of art by virtue of the beauty many of his compartments boasted. She regularly repeated security and protection were the chief words, but somehow, the Astartes of the Blood, now joined by other lines, always found methods to leave their mark upon the walls, the ceilings and the multitude of compartments forming together her Battleship.

Incidentally, it also gave her plenty of time to finish this damnable paperwork. Who knew preparing for a second enormous military operation was generating so many forms?

And no, she didn’t manage to finish the last pile of intrusive bureaucratic documents when her two ‘invitees’ arrived on the bridge.

“Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller, Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal, my Lady,” the Forgefather of her Dawnbreaker Guard served as improvised herald for today.

“Lord Admiral, welcome to the Nyx Sector. Admiral, congratulations for your new position,” Reuenthal had in her absence taken the duties of von Drenthe the Eighth, who had retired after long decades in the Imperial Navy.

“Your Celestial Highness,” the two Navy officers saluted before taking the prepared seats directly facing her. This gave her a few seconds to observe the new Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Nyx.

At the very least, he looked like a proper officer – not that appearances were that important in a job where it was definitely the brains and not the body which counted. Yet Neidhart Müller would undoubtedly pass an exacting physical Guard obstacle course, given the muscles and the absence of fat revealed under his impeccable uniform, and evidently he had received a correct rejuvenation, as his eyes were old but his dark grey hair and his traits were those of a man in his early thirties.

“I am pleased to see you, Lord Admiral. And even more to see the *Dominus Astra* and the two other Battleships forming your Battleship Division. Three Battleships are always welcome to Nyx.”

“I am glad you appreciate our arrival, your Celestial Highness,” Neidhart Müller replied levelly, “though I was a bit surprised by the unusual state of alert of the Wuhanese squadrons. Must I place my warships under the same fast-reaction status?”

“No,” Taylor was prompt to answer. “As a matter of fact, I was going to send the order to decrease the alert level the moment this meeting was over, but if you desire to spread the command yourself, I am perfectly willing to let you delegate.”

“Should I assume this was a false alert?” Admiral Oskar von Reuenthal inquired.

“Oh no, the threat is very real,” Taylor taped her personal code on the control panel and the Ymga Monolith flashed again into existence, in all its horrid glory. She was happy to see none of the two Navy officers flinched, even when she showed the relative size with a Ramilies Starfort. “But we have diverted the Orks to let the xenos kill each other.”

“This might be only a temporary solution,” the Lord Admiral observed politely but resolutely. “Orks are not discouraged by the first obstacle they bash their skulls into, and if their xenos opponents survive, neither will they.”

“Oh, I am very well aware it is a temporary solution,” Taylor confided openly. “While I would love to be believe the threat which was revealed to me was exaggerated, the Ymga Monolith, as the original Imperial discoverers named it, is not something to be taken lightly, which is why billions of greenskins have been diverted to fight it instead of our limited assets. And yes, before you ask, this is the next military campaign I have in mind.”

“It certainly sounds like a formidable endeavour,” Neidhart Müller declared.

“’Formidable’ is accurate,” Taylor informed the veteran sailor of the Imperial Navy. “It has shields which will be able to shrug off anything lighter than the main cannon of a Gloriana or the concentrated fire of our Nova Cannons.”

“This is...impressive,” for the first time, the Lord Admiral took a graver expression. “How much energy do these xenos have to power such a defence?”

Hmm...the Basileia could see why the authorities of Kar Duniash had sent her this particular officer.

“We have not the designs of the inner defences, but if the xenos architects respected the security protocols of the World Engine, there are one thousand five hundred and fifteen fusion reactors inside the Monolith. It is also highly likely the Necrons would have added reserve batteries in form of the shards of fallen C’Tan, maybe as high as fifteen.”

“The importance of fifteen?” Reuenthal asked.

“It is their sacred number, much like twelve is for the Mechanicus and ten for the Ecclesiarchy,” Taylor explained. “From what I was told, it is not a prime number, but at some ‘higher levels of quantum resonance the energy transfers enter dimension-symbiosis’ or something like that...”

The bland expressions of her interlocutors were enough to know they hadn’t understood the principle more than she did.

“Anyway suffice to say the Ymga Monolith has, or will have soon if the Orks don’t succeed into obliterating it, a near-infinite energy supply, which is good for them, given the size and the drain their weapons must represent. Now I have not been in contact with Mars since I’ve discovered this, but this is going to change. However, much as I enjoy the comforting presence of the *Flamewrought* in our hypothetic order of battle, I do not intend to begin a large campaign with just a ‘Plan A’ and no contingencies.”

“I know Lord High Admiral von Lohengramm will give you a high priority for any request you make, your Celestial Highness,” Müller told her frankly, “but the Apocalypse and Victory classes are highly demanded every year, and the reorganisation following the annihilation of the Commorragh fleets has just begun. I’m not sure if it will be possible to deploy them together in one decade, so I hope you do not intend to see them arrive here soon.”

“I intend to fight the battle against this engine of woe in twelve years, no more, no less.”

“This is going to be...a large problem.” And the golden-winged parahuman had a clue or two the Lord Admiral was diplomatic.

“And if I decide to request ships of the mothballed fleets?”

“This...it might work,” the new commander of Battlefleet Nyx answered after some seconds spent furiously thinking. “I don’t know the exact status of the mothballed fleets, of course. It was not among the assignments I did in my career. I know from corridor chatter it is rumoured there are always ten to twelve Apocalypse Battleships in the reserve. But it is going to be expensive, your Celestial Highness, and we will have to find the crews ourselves.”

Expensive, she could deal with. Even ruinously expensive, for that matter. What good would it do if she didn’t use her wealth and everything burned around her? As expensive as taking out of mothball several Battleships was, it would be far cheaper than rebuilding the Nyx Sector if they let the Ymga Monolith come to them.

The Basileia of Nyx smiled.

“Money, resources, and manpower I am sure we can find if given sufficient motivation. And I am really motivated.”

Diamantis entered the bridge, followed by two other Space Marines, all carrying small mountains of data-slates.

“The Navy countdown for the next military operation begins here and now. Welcome aboard, gentlemen.”

**Wuhan**

**5.914.397M35**

**Lieutenant-General Magnus Lars**

Magnus Lars wasn’t easily impressed but the tight schedule the Lady General was following at all times was worthy of his deepest respect. Save the ‘free day’ Her Celestial Highness and the Regina had taken together three days ago, their commander hadn’t given to herself much spare time in seventy-two hours.

This morning was a perfect example of how ‘tight’ it was. Before meeting him, the Basileia had been meeting a sizeable number of Cartel businessmen, bankers, and retired officers. By itself, it wasn’t that impressive, but the meeting place was four kilometres away eastwards, the reunion hadn’t ended thirty minutes ago, and the Mordian Lieutenant-General had seen no aircar or motorised transport to convey the Lady Nyx and her formidable escort. Plus he felt comfortable betting there always was a strong crowd of pilgrims and other supplicants on her path, no matter how secret the itinerary was.

Ah, if only they had a few Tetrarchs like her at home. Magnus had never considered upturning the old order of Mordian, but he wondered how more pleasant the society of his world could be if their rulers, aside from being harsh, ruthless, and above all absolute in their power, could also gain a modicum of skill in planetary ruling.

Not that it mattered anymore. Magnus’ loyalty was to the Lady General now – though as in all things, there were words to be avoided as Her Celestial Highness’ was officially taking only half a commission these days. As commander of the 4th Division during the Battle of Commorragh, his performance had been good enough to be granted one of the new ‘re-training positions’ in the Nyx Sector and not be used as a glorified propaganda instrument like Major-General Anita de Waal.

He had even received the promotion he had abandoned to receive fifty years ago, though the Living Saint had warned him it was likely the first and last one Magnus would ever receive.

Lady Weaver could be really diplomatic or blunt depending on when it suited her mood, but she rarely tried to lie to you. Something Magnus enjoyed, after being dragged from miserable assignments to even more miserable assignments.

And you didn’t have to waste time after the salute and the – optional – congratulations for a good job.

“The reforms of the Wuhan PDF are continuing, Lady General.” The Mordian elderly officer thus informed his superior. “I estimate that now one hundred and ninety-two regiments have reached readiness levels that will be considered suitable for Guard’s garrison duties.”

“Improvements in mind?” the golden-winged leader asked him.

“To separate the weak links, I thought we could authorise a little war game against your insects, Lady General. Failing this, a squad or two of Astartes supported by one of the reinstated Fay regiments could be an excellent motivator.”

Training in the Guard was hard and hellish at the best of times; with the toys they could play thanks to Mechanicus support, it was best to make it even harder and more hellish. According to the old Mordian proverb, it was best to sweat and bleed during the training in order to stay immaculate when you went to war. Not that your uniform didn’t need a good patching when you did the latter, evidently. Mordian weren’t Custodes.

“Hum. I notice you have a smaller number of Artillery and Armoured Regiments than what the initial regiments called for.”

“Yes, Lady General. I have met some setbacks with them. Not the equipment, the Tech-Priests delivered everything on schedule, but I was forced to send to Nyx a certain number of...narrow-minded officers who didn’t want to adapt.”

“Ah.” A large spider passed, reading a pile of data-slates at a staggering speed. Having eight eyes was really an unfair advantage. “I see. More ‘blue-blooded career officers’?”

“Yes, I’m afraid. We are trying to locate them as fast as possible to make sure they don’t contaminate by their laziness and their incompetence the young generation of junior officers, but...we’re short-handed. As it is, I had to bring new blood from Toulon, Harbin, and Petersburg.”

The Mordian-born Lieutenant-General would have desired to add Fay officers to the list, these tough bastards believed resting while the Basileia fought the bureaucracy and all her enemies was a holy crime, but the ‘Catachan Training Master’ had other plans for them.

“I notice about fifty of those Wuhanese officers died in a tragic accident once they arrived on Nyx Secundus.”

“Yes, Lady General.” He tried to keep a straight face. “Major-General Schwarz presents his apologies for this unfortunate accident leading to a training ground being drowned in promethium.”

To his relief, Her Celestial Highness simply snorted.

“It’s the legendary Catachan humour, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid so, Lady General.” Magnus could do many things, but he wasn’t going to badmouth ‘Death’ Schwarz. True, the man was technically lower-ranked than him, but only a fool could miss his duties and his areas of responsibility were far, far higher than his. And, of course, that left the little problem that Schwarz could likely kill him bare-handed even if Magnus had a heavy gun to defend himself. “He’s thanking you for the flow of recruits, by the way. In his own words, there are a few gems in the mud.”

“High prize, knowing him,” the Basileia nodded. “I see you have requested a new doctrine for the Armoured Regiments, and that they go to the ‘all Leman Russ’ model?”

“Yes, Lady General. I tried to see what the Whiteshields could do with a few Khans on open ground, but unfortunately, I don’t think they have yet the initiative or the training to take advantage of the Khans’ mobility. And a lot of the Wuhanese fields are still only suited for Hive-type training. I believe it’s better to make them good Leman Russ’ tank crewmen as a first stage. To those who show a lot of promise, we can always push them to the stars and give them more advanced machines. The same thing is true for the Artillery Regiments, though here I believe something new has come which could help to compensate the novelty of arduous training.”

“You want some of the new Katyusha rocket launchers?” the implacable black eyes stared at him. “The first war game involving them has taken place...what, three days ago at Nyx?”

“But it has already shown much promise, in a tandem with the classic Basilisks,” Magnus replied. “And I’ve taken the liberty to consult a few Tech-Priests as for the industry they would require, and even with all the industrial issues Wuhan has to solve right now, the ‘Katyusha’ is largely within the means of the Wuhanese and with this weapon, lack of accuracy isn’t exactly a problem.”

In fact as he had read the report spread for the officers of his rank, Magnus had believed this was an idea of genius. Whether the enemy was primitive or technologically advanced, these rocket-launchers could be a deadly instrument provided enough of them were brought on the battlefield to shoot at the enemies of the God-Emperor.

After all, it didn’t matter that your heretical or xenos weaponry could laugh at conventional shells when rockets could reliably saturate an entire frontline all the while remaining sufficiently unpredictable to screw your counter-artillery fire.

“Your idea has merits. Prepare me a preliminary plan for in two days. I will invite a few Tech-Priests to discuss the feasibility or not of the plan. Now for your ‘insect game’ suggestion...”

**General Werner Groener**

The Wuhanese regiments who had ‘volunteered’ to play the war game were losing ground, save on the left wing, where they were close to routing.

This, Werner Groener knew, was a massive improvement over the performance of Commorragh and some previous battles.

Especially when the ‘opposition’ included the massively armoured Nocturnan Scorpiads and the Baalite Scorpions.

These huge insects were ‘recent’ additions, since they hadn’t been involved in the Battle of Commorragh, but their reputation was already growing by leaps and grounds.

It wasn’t difficult to find out why. The explosive ordnance of the Leman Russ Battle Tanks was insufficient to kill the adult scorpions in one blow, and if one of the so-called ‘vulnerable parts’ – which despite the name, weren’t exactly meeting any definition of soft and easy to stab – wasn’t hit, it was extremely possible the Scorpiad targeted would explain itself its disappointment to the gunners who had directed their fire in its direction.

So yes, all things considered, the fighting was doing well. Relatively.

The Basileia herself was commanding the swarm after all, and there were enough armoured juggernauts on the ground to knock out ten Armoured Regiments, and the defenders had only been provided three for today’s exercises.

“Ten more minutes, I think,” the golden-winged Lady General murmured. Her eyes were closed, but her Quartermaster-General knew appearances should absolutely not be trusted here. There was zero doubt that of all observers and participants, the Basileia had the best view of everything happening in the war game and around it. The flies, the hornets, and the wasps circling around the besieged troopers weren’t just for show, contrary to what an inexperienced commander may believe.

“They will have lost all the critical points by then,” Werner commented before nodding in agreement. “They are progressing well.”

“Yes,” Lady Weaver recognised, which for her, was a compliment. Of course, the Wuhanese regiments had been near-criminally unprepared a few years ago, but it was still an extremely significant improvement. “In your opinion, are these progresses enough?”

“I think that they will be able to hold the line if we are given a couple more years to build up the cadres,” Werner chose his words carefully. “When it comes down to it, no soldier is born incompetent and cowardly; most of the time, his performance on the battlefield is the mirror of past actions the moment he walks to the Guard recruiting office or the PDF garrison block. Now that we’re correcting the most glaring flaws and rebuilding from zero the training of the PDF officers, the warrant classes, and of course the teachings in the private’s ranks, there is no reason for the performance to be markedly inferior to those of other regiments. The companies assembled from veterans of Commorragh on other planets will have of course an advantage, but though the Wuhanese won’t be elite, they will do the job.”

“Let’s hope these years will be granted to them, then,” the ruler of Nyx watched the centre of the field, and sure enough moments later ten Baalite Scorpions charged the weakness in the trooper’s line, while three Ambulls attacked the rear-lines. Yet there was no collapse, despite the Wuhanese being almost broken and encircled. They kept their calm and tried to break out...emphasis on try, unfortunately.

“We can only pray it will be so,” the Cadian said before changing the subject. “General Moltke is unimpressed by the potential utility of the Katyusha and the new mortars you have unveiled at Nyx.”

“Really?” The Basileia for once seemed genuinely surprised...and amused. “I would have thought that after the unconditional endorsement I’ve received from Lieutenant-General Lars, Moltke would approve too.”

The Victor of Commorragh didn’t add ‘since they have the same homeworld’, but Werner heard it loud and clear.

“Both have had very different careers,” the older officer told his superior. “And General Moltke has faced a lot of greenskins through the years. I think her hate of rockets come from battles fought against the Ork threat.”

“I would have thought she would be eager to give the Ork a taste of what they have reaped for centuries,” the Sector Lady clicked her tongue loudly. “No matter. I will speak to her when I return to Wuhan to explain the reasons of my decision.”

The reunions, Werner had heard them many times, and shared the majority of them. The Deathstrike Missile Launcher was absurdly expensive, slow to build, and anyway more of an intercontinental strategic weapon than something destined for tactical use. The Manticore Battery was a multi-purpose missile platform, but once its limited number of projectiles was shot, it was a nightmare to reload, and the enemy rarely gave you the time and the means to do it. Plus it was very costly.

The ‘Katyusha’ rocket-launcher was an old solution to a modern problem, and Werner had no difficulty imagining the same wall of artillery which had been emplaced at Commorragh unleashing tens of thousands of rockets on unsuspecting enemies. Moreover, the ‘old technology’ made sure it would be ready years before any new projects were ready for mass production, and the Tech-Priests had declared there would be no logistical problems creating an artillery park of them, not when they had only to modify armoured trucks and make sure the rockets could be fired from them.

“Maybe it’s the name she doesn’t like,” the Cadian officer suggested drily before sobering up. “We will need more than these rocket-launchers and good training, though, to face these Necrons and win.”

The old adage that the more you complained during a practical war game, the less you bled on the battlefield was somewhat true, but the first reports on the Ymga Monolith they were able to see were terribly grim. The Necrons also believe on the concentration of firepower, and unlike them, the Imperial Guard required air to breathe to not die in the cold embrace of the void.

“Yes,” the Living Saint turned her head left. “I’m satisfied; you can sound the end of the war game.”

Somehow, Werner didn’t think it was a coincidence the Regina’s presence was announced five seconds later...

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Giraffe Spaceport**

**3.996.297M35**

**Cardinal Prescott Lumen**

Prescott could say if he was the first man or woman to receive an audience with the Basileia once she landed back onto Nyxian soil, but it would be a lie. Truly, he was not in the top ten or twenty. This honour belonged to the high-ranked Tech-Priests and the most important firm owners who had contributed to the construction of the Giraffe Orbital Elevator, first of its class to be inaugurated, and in Her Celestial Highness’ presence, no less.

The Cardinal of the Nyx Sector had to wait, a fact which didn’t annoy him, since he had unfortunately plenty of paperwork and duties to spend his time. It would have been an extremely easy word if he had only to formally consecrate the ground for the main cathedral of the new Spaceport, but his activities were far more diverse and tiring. Prescott Lumen had preached, he had visited the workers’ districts, he had overseen the funds for the charity work his diocese paid out of their own funds, and so on.

In between this extensive and busy schedule, the tall Cardinal had acknowledged he would have to think about training a successor soon. He was still in the prime of his age and rejuvenation treatments were anything but difficult to obtain given his exalted rank, but the rhythm of reforms and hierarchy upheavals couldn’t be handled by an old man.

Prescott had known since his seminary when he was a mere under-Priest that many Cardinals enjoyed staying in power until their flesh failed them and they were more swollen wrecks than loyal servants of the Golden Throne of Holy Terra. He had no intention to imitate them. Not that the risk existed, as long the Living Saint of Nyx was nearby. Save the elder Tech-Priests – whose age was difficult to determine at the best of times – Lady Taylor Hebert respected old age as long as you could prove you had the intelligence and the wisdom commonly associated with it. And if you couldn’t fulfil your duties, you were more often than not pushed towards the exit.

“Your Eminence,” the golden-winged woman greeted him as he entered the lavishly-decorated train which had been prepared for the travel of Lady Nyx to Hive Athena.

“Your Celestial Highness,” the Cardinal bowed deeply. “I was hoping we could have a discussion about recent issues in a certain Sub-Sector.”

“Recent issues involving the actions of an Inquisitor, one of my envoys, and plenty of purges of heretics and traitors?” The insect-mistress asked rhetorically while a spider handed him out a glass filled with his favourite amasec.

“Yes, I’m afraid.”

The ruler of the Nyx Sector’s expression was not pleasant and remained that way for several seconds.

“The Hierophant was quite lucky I wasn’t anywhere nearby, or I would have made absolutely sure his soul was shredded and destroyed piece by piece before he could inform his infernal patrons of his punishment. I have made my stance on the Ruinous Powers and those who serve them absolutely clear. To hear one managed to climb so far in the hierarchy of the Adeptus Ministorum didn’t fill me with joy.”

Prescott did his very best not to grimace. Admittedly, the evidence discovered by Inquisitor Severus had found documents indicating the Hierophant had only begun to contemplate forswearing his allegiance to the Imperium once it became clear that the Sparta Rebellion had been mercilessly crushed and his incompetence guaranteed things weren’t going to continue as usual. On the other hand, the fact there had been half a dozen cults on Lemuria – four dedicated to Excess, two to Change – was a mark so black it was going to take centuries of investigations before the matter could be safely considered closed.

“And of course the Inquisition actions are hardly without reproach, either.”

The Cardinal of Nyx winced internally. It had been an open question how much of the latest purges had successfully reached the Basileia’s ears.

“You aren’t terribly pleased with Inquisitor Severus’ actions, then?”

“I am not pleased with him at all,” the Victor of Commorragh answered, banishing the diplomatic talk and the pleasantries from her view. “I can understand his need to wipe the board clean where the Hierophant and his associates were considered; I don’t like killing children or approving their execution, but the Hierophant and his advisors were unrepentant heretics, and they weren’t exactly loyal even before they began scheming against my rule. But it isn’t a reason to go on a killing spree among the rest of the population either. And I’ve not liked at all he used my men to paint the streets red.”

The voice of the Living Saint could have frozen flames and stopped armies from firing their guns as it continued.

“I was quite fortunate my Minister was rapidly able to relay me what was happening once she emerged from decontamination procedures and the quarantine. Ten million people. He killed at least ten million men, women, and children out of a population of four hundred million!”

Prescott had not particularly wanted to defend Inquisitor Henry-Charles III Severus before this audience, and he didn’t want more to interpose himself between him and the Basileia’s wrath now.

Rumour was the Inquisitor had thought a well-spread purge was the solution and would put him in favour with the Basileia. If it was true, the Inquisitor had missed his target. The holy woman in front of him had ordered purges too, but she had never gone that far. Her ‘chief victims’ were the true heretics, the traitors, and most of them were limited to the ranks of the nobility.

There wasn’t a casualty list he could consult at his leisure of course, but he would be very surprised if Severus’ little killing spree at Lemuria and the first actions taken against Vijayanagara had not killed twice more Imperial citizens than the recent purges at Wuhan...and the crimes among the leadership had been as abominable and heretical as those of Lemuria.

“The next audience with Lord Inquisitor Tor is going to be *fun*,” the religious figure worshipped by billions of souls said bitterly before breathing loudly. “Evidently, it has led me to re-evaluate what I am going to do with the Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector. I will admit, your Eminence, that after the first reports on Sparta, I had the temptation to remove Lemuria, Vijayanagara, and Drakkar from the Nyxian Diocese.”

Prescott Lumen didn’t even present to be surprised. After the sheer incompetence shown at Sparta, the absence of Frateris Templar contribution from Atlantis, his religious superior would be a fool not to consider at least the possibility of it.

“Did something convince you to change your mind on this...problem?” He asked slowly.

“Some things,” the young woman said noncommittally, caressing the head of the biggest spider present in the train compartment. “First was the fact the Governors of Hibernia and Ajusco are doing very good work according to my Minister of Foreign Affairs. Second, you and the Priests of Nyx were not exactly responsible for this disastrous situation. The blame can be laid at the feet of the Cardinal of Atlantis and his subordinates. And third, Chapter Master Izaz was forced to put a bolter round into the head of the King of Antioch to signify him my displeasure.”

Prescott tried not to sound too surprised, because it was the first time he’d heard of that! Of course, the Brothers of the Red weren’t a force had any informants into, and Antioch was the only world of the ‘northern Suebi trail’ to not be under his personal authority...for all the good it had done in the Lemuria System anyway.

“I have other very important reforms and audiences to give in the coming days, and if I knew the mess Suebi was into, I would have annexed only the ‘southern trail’.” The Living Saint confessed. “I have already a lot of things to improve in the pre-Commorragh Sector; I really don’t want more problems to arrive to my attention. So I’m going to propose you a deal, your Eminence.”

“I’m all ears, your Celestial Highness.”

“Lemuria, Vijayanagara, and Antioch will be confirmed to be part of your diocese, beginning on the first day of two hundred and ninety-eight. But all positions of oversight and command once based at Lemuria will be dismantled, and if once again heresy takes root there or in any other world under your responsibility, I will formally return the planets to secular authority. I know you are not responsible for the current situation, so I’m going to give you and your subordinates the chance to correct and clean up the mess. But I don’t want to see again a justified butchery under Inquisitorial mandate.”

No alternative was uttered, but Prescott knew what would be done if he didn’t accept. One hint: it didn’t involve silk gloves.

“I accept your conditions, your Celestial Highness.”

“Good, your Eminence. Please have a series of plans ready to present at our next meeting.”

Yes, the upper priesthood of Nyx was not going to include old men by the end of this decade...

**Hive Athena**

**3.005.298M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

“The Sanguinala wasn’t the same without you,” Dragon remarked lightly as they descended the marble stairs.

“Oh?”

“Don’t take me wrong,” the Tinker said, “the public appreciated my cohort of pasteboard dragons burning the vile and monstrous heretics, but I think we all know who they wanted to see for the week-long Memory of Sanguinius.”

“A lot of revelations and the slow return to Nyx made sure I couldn’t be present,” the golden-winged parahuman shrugged. “I suppose they will have to be patient and until the Sanguinala coming this year. I am not beginning to invent new holy days just to satisfy their religious fervour.”

If she did that, soon nobody would work in the manufactorums and the industries. No one save the Tech-Priests, maybe. Working the great cogs and the machines was what fuelled their religious fervour.

“Anything that can’t wait before this ‘Grand Conference of Blue Bacta’ begins?”

“Yes, be careful with the Ultramarines’ representative,” the Minister of Industry replied. “The Fists and Blood delegations added to the Salamanders, the Raven Guard and the White Scars have a strong influence over the rest of the gene-lines present, but the sons of Guilliman have more Chapters on their side than all of them combined. And at the risk of informing you of the obvious, the Emissary doesn’t seem to be one of your greatest admirers.”

“Thank you,” the Basileia sighed. “I had hoped they would send me Thiel, but I suppose it was a bit too much to ask.”

“In my opinion, it’s because Thiel went back to Macragge we were sent this Emissary. We might have caused long-buried doctrinal issues to resurface.”

“Awesome,” Taylor allowed herself this sarcastic word before nodding. “All right. I will tell you at dinner how it went.”

The two parahumans then separated. Dragon was going to take an aircraft to the Giraffe Spaceport, where the Mechanicus was busy assembling the completed first stage of the White Scars’ military orders, while Taylor descended more marble stairs and entered the Conference Auditorium specially prepared for the event.

Escorted by the Dawnbreaker Guard, the Lady Nyx passed under two tall statues of Sanguinius and Dorn before the gates opened, revealing a decoration themed in the colours of the nine Loyal Legions, and many, many Space Marines.

Two hundred and ninety-three Space Marines, to be accurate, sworn Emissaries between themselves of two hundred and seventy-nine Chapters, though in practise, there weren’t that many different colours in the Auditorium. The Ultramarines, to quote the most obvious example, had only come with ten Marines and yet they represented their one hundred and forty-nine Successors, with only five Howling Griffons and five Silver Skulls by their side.

Still, it was eight out of nine loyal gene-lines represented, and Chapter Master Dupleix stood for the non-aligned warriors, Chapter Master Isley as his second.

“Loyal warriors of the Adeptus Astartes,” she began to speak still walking to her lectern. “I thank you for having accepted the invitation of Nyx.”

“Honour follows honour,” Captain Valerian Benlio replied loudly. The Captain of the 2nd Company was beginning to be a familiar sight. His Chapter Master had once again designated him to be the Emissary of the Blood Angels, a choice she had nothing to say against.

“Perhaps, but reality remains this is a dangerous galaxy, and I know the Adeptus Astartes is engaged as a whole on my campaigns. This is why I ordered the Magi Biologis to show you the result of their efforts and test on wounded warriors the evidence of the Bacta efficiency in the last weeks. Does anyone have remaining concerns regarding the use of Blue Bacta?”

There would always be one to raise some objection, and Taylor had thought before her conversation with Dragon that it would likely come from the Emissary of the Dark Angels. Captain Jungmann of the Angels of Absolution, pale hooded transhuman in bone-coloured armour, had been true to the reputation of mystery of the descendants of the First Legion. The humourless and grim Space Marine had come with the seal of the Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels, meaning he represented the Chapter of the First Founding and his own, but aside from that, little else was known.

But Dragon had been right. The first voice she heard belonged to Captain Cassius Bacurius, commanding officer of the Ultramarines 2nd Company.

“With due respect, Lady Taylor Hebert, you did not authorise us to test your Bacta on psychically-active subjects.”

There wasn’t much respect in his voice, the insect-mistress noted. And the content of his words was even more appalling. He had seen the vids of what happened to psykers, what did he expect to happen to Librarians? The psyker Space Marines were tougher than the average human gifted with psychic powers, but they couldn’t handle the massive internal shattering of their psychic energies.

“I am not in the habit to kill people, Space Marines or not, when the result is guaranteed to be death, Captain Bacurius,” the Basileia replied coldly, hoping her disapproval was clear. The more ruthless and amoral Tech-Priests assigned to Bacta production had acknowledged years ago it was useless to inject Bacta to psykers when the lethality was at a perfect one hundred percent.

There was always the lone psyker criminal they tested a new formula upon, but these experimentations had slowed down massively and would not re-increase, barring a new spectacular advance in this field.

Seriously, what had crawled under the Space Marine’s skin?

“And then there is your statement this is the reason Bacta won’t work on our Father and Primogenitor, Lord Commander of the Imperium and Primarch of the Thirteenth Legion, Lord Roboute Guilliman-“

“Oh by the skulls and bones of Cretacia!” the representative of the Flesh Tearers groaned. “None of this grox-shit, Ultramarine! You know as well as I do all the Primarchs are at least latent psykers!”

And just like that, most of the civility of the Bacta Conference was lost.

“Just because your Primarch had wings and psyker powers doesn’t mean all were the same!” another Ultramarine shouted by the side of his Captain.

Obviously, the forty-six Space Marines of the line of Sanguinius did not let this insult pass unanswered. And the Conference Auditorium soon became an arena of accusations and insults.

“ENOUGH!” the ten spiders she had given drums were given reason to use them far sooner than she wanted, but it did the job.

“Enough,” the Basileia repeated as silence came back, “Captain Bacurius, your words are out of line. There are dozens of gifted Magi and Arch-Magi who are searching for solutions to solve the weakness of Bacta, at Nyx and elsewhere. Several Adeptuses including the Mechanicus have invested the equivalent of billions of Throne Gelts in infrastructure and substance acquisitions to break this obstacle.”

“Of course they do,” the Ultramarine scoffed like he had not listened to a single word of what she said. “Once they have it, they will use it to dictate terms to the Adeptus Astartes and end edict after edict our independence!”

Taylor was a more gifted diplomat than she had ever dreamed of being once she arrived at Nyx, but even her younger self would have remarked the envoy of Macragge’s words were not destined to her. They were trying to convince the other Space Marines in the Auditorium.

To his credit, the Space Marine was eloquent, as he began a long series of arguments who hinted at both megalomaniac and absolutist ambitions on her part and those of the Forge Worlds supporting her.

If he had been a friend, she would have stopped him there and told him it was mistake to make these nasty overt or veiled accusations. But in mere minutes, the Ultramarine Captain had proved to be anything but a friendly acquaintance, and so she let him speak.

Minute after minute, he was digging his grave...metaphorically anyway. Captain Valerian Benlio of the Blood Angels, Captain Wrangle of the Imperial Fists, Chapter Master Dupleix, Chapter Master Isley, Shadow Captain Mladen of the Raven Guard, Captain Phoecus of the Salamanders, and Captain Bayan Olgei of the White Scars all looked at him with non-hidden hostility.

“And then there are your violations of the Codex. You insist-“

Okay, this had gone long enough.

“Extremely grave words, when your Primarch intended for the Codex to be more of a guide than a sacred text you worship from dawn to dusk.”

It was very undiplomatic, but then the Ultramarine monologue had not been presenting her actions under the light they deserved.

“You dare-“

“Yes, I dare.” Taylor interrupted him again. “I have always been a firm supporter of letting the Space Marines in this Sector and beyond to rule their own affairs, decide the degree they want to follow the Codex Astartes, and interact with each other. I have placed Blue Bacta at the disposal of many Chapters after Commorragh and in the months after that. And here you come, with accusations and recriminations. I expected better from a son of Guilliman. I expected better from you, *Captain*.”

A roll of parchment was unfurled by the Ultramarine’s hands, and Taylor knew the latest stage of this farce had arrived.

“Then by the powers vested in me by Chapter Master Cato Valens, Lord of Ultramar and Regent of Macragge, I declare no Ultramarine or any Loyal Successor Chapter of the Thirteenth Legion will be associated in any alliance or military operation with any force following the orders of the Basileia of Nyx. By the-“

“Are you insanely illogical?” the outburst had come from Iron Captain Raan of the Iron Fists, who in the absence of any Iron Hands Astartes, was the senior figure for the sons of Ferrus Manus. “You are breaking all ties with the woman who spoke with the Praetorian and defeated the Naga! You are-“

But the emotionless expression the Ultramarine Captain give him back proved that yes, the Ultramar-born Emissary was perfectly serious.

And in a slow but steady pace, Cassius Bacurius walked away, followed by the four other Ultramarines. Taylor replayed the first moments, but honestly didn’t know if things could have had a different outcome. The Howling Griffons and the Silver Skulls followed, albeit reluctance was plain on their faces.

“We will really have to investigate why they reacted in this manner,” Taylor murmured to Forgefather Vulkan N’Varr. “I have a feeling it’s related to Thiel’s return.”

“Yes, my Lady. But it is not going to be easy. The Salamanders and other loyal Chapters were allowed to use Macragge as a safe harbour before, and Bacurius has just severed these ancient treaties.”

There were plenty of whispers in the Space Marines’ ranks, but no other gene-line left the conference room. This was heart-warming and satisfying. Since the Ultramarines had left, and the Space Wolves had not bothered sending a High Emissary or any man or woman speaking for them – the only Astropathic message having found its way to Nyx had killed a psyker after he finished babbling about ‘Maleficarum’ – this was seven out of the nine Legions willing to approve any accord involving the Blue Bacta.

“Now that the time for objections has passed, I hope I am not going to be disclose a monumental secret by saying the enemies of the Imperium will consider every heretical and treacherous deed in their arsenal of malice and evil plots to seize Bacta.”

“I agree,” the hooded figure of Captain Jungmann declared after requesting to speak. “We know the Traitors always try to strike where they can hurt us the most, and destroying reserves of Bacta would be a severe blow to the Emperor’s cause. I presume you request the Bacta supplying fleets to be heavily protected and escorted, Lady Weaver.”

“Indeed,” the Dark Angels were mysterious and tight-lipped, but they were aware of military realities. “I won’t dictate anything to your Chapters, but I strongly suggest the Bacta storage facilities to not be transported in anything lighter than a Battle-Barge. And though it pains me to say it, it’s better to destroy existing Bacta vials than allow it to fall into the hands of the Arch-Enemy. The power distilled into the substance is death for those who had sold their souls to the Ruinous Powers, but I don’t want to give the traitors the opportunity to experiment on it.”

There were no negative remarks or replies. But then again, it was basic common sense.

“Next is the issue of the Strongholds where Bacta will be distributed to all Chapters.”

For the first time one of the five non-Space Marines audience stood and demanded permission to talk. While his features were hidden by a sort of shivering field, his Inquisitorial rosette was largely in evidence above his heart.

“The Ordos Xenos of the Holy Inquisition of His Divine Majesty and the Noble Assembly of the Deathwatch,” the capital letters were spoken with gravity, “humbly request the world of Talasa Prime be considered for this honour.”

Taylor had nothing against it. The Deathwatch was going to require Bacta for its operations, and as its primary headquarters – or at least its primary acknowledged headquarters – Talasa Prime was the obvious choice.

“The reputation of the Deathwatch is well-known to every loyal soul in this room,” Taylor assured the Inquisitor. Plus she wanted to use several of their strike forces against the Necrons so it was best to be in amicable terms with them. “Any objections?”

There was none, and Talasa Prime was officially approved.

The next choices of ‘Bacta Bases’ wouldn’t have been a surprise to any spectator possessing an average knowledge of Space Marine history. Baal was chosen for the Blood Angels; it controlled plenty of trade trails in northern Ultima Segmentum, and the martial reputation of the sons of Sanguinius guaranteed they would all die before they allowed the Arch-Enemy to take a single vial.

Nocturne was chosen to honour Vulkan. Taylor fully approved; that way it gave her an excuse to provide armaments and reinforcements to the home of the Salamanders, protecting the volcanic Webway Gate without rousing too much attention.

Deliverance, home of the Raven Guard, was chosen too. As was Chogoris, where the sons of Jaghatai Khan rode the wings like their father had millennia ago.

And when the Imperial Fists proposed Terra, or at least the heart of *Phalanx* orbiting above it, it met enthusiastic cheering from all sides.

Nyx was added almost as an afterthought seconds after. As the site of Bacta production itself, it had a guaranteed seat.

It was when the turn of the Iron gene-line came that the problem began.

“Medusa is unsuitable as the Iron Council has invoked the Fourth Sanction,” Taylor had no idea what it meant, and her insects asking the Tech-Priests outside the conference room provided no greater insight. “As per the convention, I propose Raikan, homeworld of the Red Talons.”

“Out of the question,” the Inquisitor spokesman objected. “The Red Talons are currently under investigation for letting Army Group Valhalla-Lunar be destroyed while they were present in the same system as them. And this Chapter don’t authorise visitors to land on Raikan. How do you want to distribute Bacta to other chapters when they tolerate no one but your gene-line there?”

This prompted a vigorous exchange between the sons of Ferrus and the two Inquisitors present. Sternac was proposed next, but the home of the Iron Lords was on the Eastern Fringe, nearly at the pre-Commorragh limit of the Astronomican’s illumination. Ultimately, it was Talus IV, homeworld of the Brazen Claws, which was chosen.

The sons of the Lion make the previous debate looks like an amicable exchange of views.

“No, the homeworld of the Angels of Redemption won’t be chosen!”

And the Inquisitor hadn’t even to manifest his disapproval, Salamanders and Black Templars’ representative did it for him. Allhallow, homeworld of the Angels of Absolution, was also proposed and rejected at the unanimity.

“What about Mortikah VII, Lady Weaver?” Jungmann proposed after several vociferous interruptions.

“I’ve heard of the planet, it is part of the few worlds who stayed loyal with Hydraphur in Segmentum Pacificus during this secession unpleasantness, isn’t it?”

“It is,” the bone-coloured robed Astartes promptly answered. “The loyalty of the Guardians of the Covenant to the Emperor to the legacy of the Emperor and our Primarch is absolute.”

Behind the doors, the members of the Dawnbreaker Guard she was able to question had no objections. The aforementioned Chapter had a strong monastic tradition, possibly even stronger than the Black Templars, but they answered promptly each and every summon from Terra and Segmentum Command, and their list of honours was extremely long.

“The Inquisition has no objection to this choice.” And neither has the other lines of Space Marines.

“Then Mortikah VII is approved.”

And now for the very, very difficult part.

“There are right now twelve cubic metres of Blue Bacta available, which are approximately one million and two hundred thousand healing vials. The distribution is-“

Her voice was entirely drowned by the voices of the Space Marines within two seconds.

The Basileia fought the urge to facepalm, and sighed theatrically for the benefit of those treacherous Dawnbreaker Guards laughing behind her back.

She was going to stay in this Conference Auditorium for a while.

**Vicequeen Marianne Gutenberg**

For all the drawbacks Nyx had as a world far from the halls of power of Holy Terra, Marianne was forced to acknowledge it could boast about significant advantages. There were far fewer people in the streets to begin with. Men and women, not to mention children, were generally happier. They moved with a sense of purpose, one the plebeian masses of the Throneworld lacked.

And if you had an exotic pet to give a walk, no one was going to jump in fright or cause you any problem...at least as long the ‘pet’ stayed behaved, of course. It was a logical consequence of Nyxians watching ants, spiders, scorpions, crabs, hornets, bees, and entire swarms of many, many insect species everyday in the main streets.

So Marianne could walk with Beth, her adorable Mainz Cat, and no one was giving her too much attention – though to be honest, there weren’t hundreds of thousands of Nyxians on this Hive Level. Floor 47 was the first level below the Spire, and this meant that while non-nobles could access it, the price of the goods was well above what the middle-classes wanted to pay for a painting, a pair of shoes, or an evening gown. Plus the streets where she was walking had not been rebuilt since the ascension of the Saint-Governor. There was a series of marble statues and a park at the centre of Floor 47, but unlike Floors 50 and 51, it had not that many gardens, relatively cheap markets, fountains, and attractions for children. No, Floor 47’s main attraction to fame was its shopping centre. And for the common Imperial citizen, it was assuredly unaffordable.

“We should make a favour to the...Beth, don’t try to do this again!” the Heiress of the Speaker for the Chartist Captains scolded her feline companion. Seriously, what dart had hit the Mainz Cat? She had been considerably trained to not rush ahead while trying to break her leash!

Two seconds later, loud footsteps resonated behind her, and as her armsmen stood to attention, Marianne caressed the belly fur of her companion in apology. The Mainz Cat had just smelled – or possibly heard – the arrival of a predator far more dangerous than herself.

A predator known as a Space Marine.

The company of Gutenberg Rifles protecting her at all times formed in an honour guard, but watching the giant advance without giving them more than a passing glance, Marianne could understand the reluctance of the High Lords of the Senatorum Imperialis to tolerate any Chapter close to the Imperial Palace.

The red-armoured Space Marine was alone, unsupported, and his only weapons were the massive bolter and the long curved blade respectively in their holster and scabbard. He wasn’t taking any threatening stance.

But Marianne was rather certain the one hundred-plus veterans around her would die in vain trying to delay him for more than several seconds.

“Lady Marianne Gutenberg,” the Astartes said calmly, “the Basileia *requests* your presence.” Then he threw a glance to Beth, and the hand she passed in her white fur to calm her. “Can you control your pet? Our Lady has taken her ants and spiders out today.”

“I control her...she is just...surprised. I did not think there were audiences today.”

“Plans change,” the Space Marine replied laconically. He was certainly one of the Sons of Sanguinius, though the symbol of his Chapter was hidden by the white feathers and the purple cloak donned upon his power armour.

The walk was not long to meet the Basileia. They crossed two streets, climbed one stairs, and endured the stoically and vigilant expressions of many Space Marines – her bodyguards had to stay behind with the giants – and she finally was introduced in presence of the Planetary Governor.

As the first Space Marine had warned her, there were a lot of spiders in the shopping centre. Most appeared to pay to her absolutely no attention, instead weaving silk and other clothing materials faster than any human or machine could, under the impressed expert’s eyes of the employees residing here.

Marianne had thought the Living Saint would be in the middle of her swarm, but instead she was found in an alcove in the back of the shopping hall, sitting on a comfortable armchair. Her expression was more thoughtful and tired than when they had met at Wuhan.

“Your Celestial Highness.”

“Your Excellency...and who is this beautiful white tiger?”

Marianne took one second to realise the Lady of the Nyx Sector was speaking about Beth.

“This is Beth, my favourite Mainz Cat.”

The Basileia seemed certainly perplexed.

“Long ago, ‘cats’ were certainly not that big...”

“Well, we might have imported her ancestors from off-world one millennium ago before beginning a genetic program to make them less aggressive and give them a beautiful fur.”

Fortunately for the coming negotiations, Beth was on her best behaviour and immediately went on her back, purring to invite the Victor of Commorragh to scratch her belly.

The Basileia snorted and then left her armchair to caress the Mainz Cat. Beth soon purred louder under the ‘holy caresses’.

“She’s gorgeous. Which species did you use as a template for the genetic program?”

“The Fenrisian Frostlion,” Marianne admitted, prompting the rise of an eyebrow on her interlocutor’s face.

“Fenrisian like the homeworld of the Space Wolves in northern Segmentum Solar?”

“I think it was once again placed in Segmentum Obscurus,” Marianne drily said. “The only thing the divisions of the Adeptus Administratum in Obscurus and Solar seem to agree upon these days is that they don’t want Fenris in their area of jurisdiction.”

“How surprising,” Lady Weaver’s reply matched her tone. “How did you manage to convince them to deliver you Fenrisian fauna?”

“We didn’t,” the blonde-haired woman admitted easily. “Every ten years, House Belisarius organises a spectacular auction in a station near Saturn. The presence of specific animals is never guaranteed, but the Navigators’ Seneschals often propose to sell several impressive Fenrisian specimens and goods from this infamous Death World. Before I began my journey across Ultima, I think a kraken’s bone and a pair of Fenrisian Elks were on sale.”

“Good to know,” and the Lady and mistress of the *White Ducat* knew instinctively she had given a new avenue by which the Basileia would try to discover if new lethal insects could be added to her already considerable collection. Beth purred as the caresses ceased, and the golden gloves began their dance into the white fur. “Now for business. I suppose you have heard my attempt to negotiate with the Ultramarines went...very poorly.”

“I heard plenty about it,” the Gutenberg Heiress gave her an apologetic smile. “If you want to find a positive note, take solace our latest Chartist Captain to try to involve himself in the trade-life of Macragge was returned to us with nothing but the clothes on his back.”

It had been thirty years ago, and the Gutenberg Chartist Fleet had not tried a second time.

“It must have been quite a scandal,” the black-haired Saint commented.

“Yes, but probably not for the reasons you imagine,” Marianne confessed. “Ten more Houses suffered the same problems before or after our Captain’s expulsion. It was marked as the beginning of a new rise of isolationism in Ultramar.”

“You mean this is regular?”

The Heiress of Aliénor Gutenberg nodded.

“I’m sure you are aware the Sovereign Realm of Ultramar is more a miniature Empire loosely connected to the Golden Throne than a proper Sector of the Imperium. It allows the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines, who is the Lord, Master, and Protector of thirteen worlds and highly influential in a few dozen others, to dictate his rules to the Chartist Fleets as he wishes. A century ago, relations were cordial and trade prospered. Today...I think ‘more complicated’ is a fair assessment of the situation.”

Beth in the mean time had decided that smelling like spiders or not, the Living Saint was her new favourite caress-partner, and was completely slumped against several boxes, pleading with her eyes and her paws for the saintly hands to give her more pleasure.

Too bad she hadn’t a holo-recorder in hand. This vid could sell for a fortune.

“As I am sure you have discovered by yourself, Chapter Master Cato Valens is not the most open-minded of the Ultramarines.”

“Yes, I have found out. And I find it...inconvenient. My next military operation might very well be fought into the Eastern Fringe.”

On the one hand, Marianne was sure a revelation like this one would delight many High Lords, who hoped the new Living Saint stayed far, far away from Holy Terra. On the other hand...

“Inconvenient might be too light a word. There are dozens of Ultramarine-descended Chapters in the Galactic East. It was where the Five Hundred Worlds of Ultramar existed.”

And for all the official disbandment of the Thirteenth Legion, the Ultramarines and their Successors remained a huge force of stability in the Eastern Fringe.

“That said, you are not to blame for the isolationist actions of a single Chapter Master, your Celestial Highness. And if the rumours are to be believed, you have a lot of Chapters vying for your attention.”

“The rumours may have a core of truth, though it’s always far more complicated than that.”

The golden halo surrounded both Mainz Cat and Living Saint, and the former seemed to appreciate it a lot.

“War is once again coming,” the golden-clothed insect-mistress told her in a low voice, but one which was not at risk to be misunderstood. “And since the ‘Ultramar Option’ is denied to me, I have decided I need to rely on those who are willing to provide their services.”

Marianne Gutenberg recognised the door opening for serious negotiations and kept her smile.

“The negotiations for the Red Bacta will begin in five days,” the Basileia revealed, “but the Blue Bacta negotiations ended yesterday and it has been decided a full fleet will transport Blue Bacta from Nyx to Terra and *Phalanx* once per year. The number of Space Marines per Chapter being limited and the availability of Battle-Barges even more so, I will require a Chartist contract at least for this journey.”

“Escorted by powerful Navy and Mechanicus warships, I suppose?” Her question received a nod of approval in return.

It was definitely a contract worth its weight in adamantium.

“How many Blue Bacta vials are we talking about?”

“Fifteen percent of Nyx production.”

If there were metals far more precious than adamantium...ah, dear.

“You are very generous with the Imperial Fists.”

“*Phalanx* will be both a Bacta storage facility and host a renovated Apothecarium for the Chapters meeting the conditions approved at the Conference. Most of them I expect will be sons of Rogal Dorn, but I think and hope other Chapters will use them and forge closer ties with the Fists.”

And the Space Marines would return to Terra, Marianne realised. Maybe not in a month or a year, maybe not even within a decade, but they would eventually return. To make this kind of proposal and the technology and medical investment the Basileia suggested meant there was likely not many of these ‘Bacta centres’ planned for the Imperium.

“You are going to make waves in proper Terran society without setting a foot in the Sol System. I completely approve. And as for the propositions I made?”

The golden-winged woman massaged Beth’s neck before giving her a determined look.

“Any Kriegers tithed to serve into the Guard will be trained by my guardsmen beforehand, it is non-negotiable.”

“Agreed.” Marianne didn’t really care about the sensibilities of the small ‘trade-military caste’, and the poor Governor had not to know the full truth, merely that his soldiers died well on foreign battlefields. Plus if her spies had done their job well, the new ‘trainers’ were likely going to be Catachan-born...

“House Achelieux will remain the prominent Navigator House of the Nyx Sector. House Scheherazade will be proposed several important contracts and rewarded Gelt for Gelt for any financial and military participation in my projects, but I won’t allow them to be the prime movers and shakers of the Navis Nobilite at Nyx and in the surrounding Sub-Sectors.”

“I see no objection to this, though I have to warn you, we don’t have anywhere near partial control of Scheherazade’s most...secretive actions.”

“Duly noted.” The younger woman who had managed to claw her way victory after victory to the rank of Lady General smiled before lifting up with inhuman strength the female Mainz Cat. “Now please give me the reasons why I must transport the Red Bacta and other precious goods inside Chartist hulls rather than those of the Ecclesiarchy.”

**Arch-Cardinal Winston Marlborough**

The good news, Winston knew, was that he had been summoned before the official ‘conference’ in three days. A conference, which, as everyone important knew, was more about Her Celestial Highness informing every Adeptus and representative of the distribution she had decided about Red Bacta.

Moreover, he wasn’t invited alone, which decreased even further the risk of a private humiliation. Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault, Zaibatsu of Samarkand, was hardly an ally or his best friend. Yet Lady Weaver had requested their presence together, and if anything, the Samarkand was the first surprised about it.

The gardens they were admitted into by a couple of Space Marines were truly a jewel of beauty. Fruits and vegetables grew everywhere, the sun illuminated adequately the Hive-level but not to the point his Ecclesiarchy clothes were making him sweat.

There were plenty of fountains and small irrigation canals flowing pure water to the flora, and dancing music warmed the atmosphere. Here and there servants were singing songs unfamiliar to his ear but not unpleasant to listen to.

The Living Saint was waiting for them on a seat facing one of the fountains. Unlike in all the religious ceremonies Winston had seen her be present this week, Lady Taylor Hebert did not wore golden clothes but easygoing blood-coloured trousers and shirts. Though the gold was still present, courtesy of her wings and the halo now illuminating her at all times.

The salutations were expedited at a speed which would have horrified a master of nobility protocol, and the Basileia stood, before plunging one of her hands into the water.

“The next decade is going to be decisive. The quality and the quantity of preparations made during these years are going to weigh massively in the balance when the next massive conflict begins.”

There was no hesitation and no doubt in the black eyes. And Winston, for all his past as a Frateris Templar officer, shivered because this was no small warning.

“I’m not going to pretend I am your equal in regard to military matters,” the Zaibatsu cleared his throat. “But I have still heard rumours of important military deployments around the Cadian Gate. Do you really believe the enemies of His Most Holy Majesty can break through?”

“Yes,” the Victor of Commorragh replied bluntly. “And I assure you every High Lord who has consulted the old archives know it too. To stop an enemy dead at Cadia, the enemy must try to storm Cadia and the nearby planets. If they try to run and translate as fast as possible towards the Obscurus rear-lines, it’s going to be difficult to catch them. And the Eye is far from my only concern.”

The Saint withdrew her hand from the fountain.

“I am preparing a new military campaign for the next decade,” the Basileia and Lady of the Nyx Sector continued to inform them bluntly. “I am going to muster millions of men for a campaign many would call impossible and outright suicidal. The effort is going to be colossal on the frontlines alone.”

Well, it was certainly as far as removed from the silver tongues of the Ophelian debates.

And he had to return bold arguments for bold arguments.

“As I’ve said before, your Celestial Highness, the Ecclesiarchy is prepared to support your actions. What are your desires?”

“Manpower,” the insect-mistress as she unfurled her golden wings. “To be accurate, military manpower, both void and ground-trained. I am going to increase progressively the cadre of elite officers and troops within the Nyx Sector, but even my strategists’ best estimates, we will be unable to have ready more than one hundred and fifty million guardsmen ready by 310M35. So I will need ex-Frateris Templars ready to accept Catachan-style hell training as soon as possible.”

“You do not desire they fight under the Ecclesiarchy’s banners?” Winston asked for the sake of formality.

“The women can be absorbed into the Order of Silver Rose if standards are met and of course they volunteer. I prefer the men to be part of an integrated force into the Imperial Guard. They will be as efficiently trained as my guardsmen and I will make no change to the structure...save a name replacement of the Ecclesiarchal ranks by the Guard ones, of course.”

The Arch-Cardinal believed her. If there was one thing the Saint couldn’t be accused of, it was to be unfair to the men and women who swore their lives to defend the rest of humanity.

“I believe you.” He said simply. “But if you demand millions of Ecclesiarchy-sworn troops to effectively disband the Frateris Templars, Your Celestial Highness must be aware there is going to be entrenched resistance at Ophelia and in key Shrine Worlds to these orders.”

“I know. This is why I intend to send twelve percent of the Red Bacta’s production of this year to Ophelia. For simplicity’s sake, assume the total production is of one hundred cubic metres – that’s ten million vials in all. You will receive as many as the Adeptus Mechanicus.”

His superior the Ecclesiarch would most likely have felt his head swoon at this, but Winston Marlborough wasn’t the Ecclesiarch or one of his allies.

“And how many the Chartist Fleets will receive, your Celestial Highness?”

“By themselves, the Chartist Fleets are only receiving the contract to transport twenty percent of the Red Bacta production to Holy Terra, with obligation to deliver to the Adeptus Terra ten percent of it.”

And it left them ten percent to auction and sell to what was the most influential market to all the Imperium. The Vicequeen of House Gutenberg was either going to be treated as the heroine of the year, or assassinated within the day.

“I keep twenty percent for Nyx,” the holy servant of the God-Emperor continued, “The Holy Inquisition will receive a classified percentage, the Astra Militarum will be provided ten percent – the Guard had trillions of men unable to return to the frontlines, I will not stand idle and leave this unbearable situation continue. The Adeptus Arbites holds the line too, and may be granted five or six percent. And if you accept, Lord Zaibatsu, I will place you in charge to transport the ten percent of stocks which will be delivered to Kar Duniash.”

Gordian von Mitsubishi-Dassault was not a Living Saint, but his eyes nearly shone pure gold when the statement was spoken.

Winston wasn’t going to say it was easy to blame him. The kind of contract this represented was not a monopoly, but it was easily measured in trillions of Throne Gelts...and it was a local monopoly, because neither Marianne Gutenberg nor the Basileia were going to sell ‘their’ Red Bacta anywhere near the Segmentum Fortress.

For that matter, the same was true of the Ecclesiarchy. Ophelia wasn’t exactly next door to Kar Duniash.

“What do you want?” the Samarkand noble asked in the voice of a man who knows both doom and salvation can await at the hands of the person holding the light in her hands.

The shot answer was: a lot. Trained personnel, new orders of supply ships, transfer of civilian experts ranging from fields like mining to agriculture.

And yet for all the sums demanded, it always stayed...reasonable. Winston had already noticed this trend for the last year. The demands could be, in fact should be, far higher if the Basileia wanted to ruthlessly exploit her advantages.

Still, it was likely only good news for the man next to him and possibly the Lord of the Samarkand Sector himself. The other thirty-eight Zaibatsu were likely going to lose a lot of status as the Sectors near Nyx realised Samarkand was unable to provide them Bacta, no matter how loud they shouted and how many ingots of strategic metals they wanted to place on the table.

It was at this moment Winston realised the...issue which had been placed into the percentages. The Inquisition had likely not asked for fewer Bacta vials than the Navy, so this meant ten percent for them. Small and unimportant charity organisations may be granted a half of a percent or something approaching.

But Lady Weaver had revealed to them where the one hundred percent of Red Bacta were going for the short-term future.

And nowhere had the Adeptus Administratum been mentioned.

The Arch-Cardinal politely cleared his throat.

“Forgive the memory of an old man, your Celestial Highness, but the ten percent of tithes you mentioned for the Throneworld...they are destined to the Adeptus Administratum aren’t they?”

“No, the contract is for the Chartist Fleets to transport it to the Adeptus Terra.”

Meaning the High Lords and the organisations they controlled as a whole, not just the Adeptus Administratum.

Oh by everything that was holy and damned in this galaxy. The Administratum was...not going to react well. And the High Lord...

“His henchmen really, really shouldn’t have tried to confiscate half a dozen of my merchant ships for ‘tithe-irregularities’ last year.” The Living Saint said in a very pleasant voice...and yet Winston was able to hear the bombardment of artillery shells underneath it.

The Living Saint would one day go to Holy Terra. And on the day she arrived, High Lord Xerxes Vandire would die.

“Now for the minimal order of battle of the Templar Sororitas...”

***Vulkan’s Arsenal* Shipyard**

**3.102.298M35**

**Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller**

Neidhart hadn’t admitted to anyone, but he had been slightly worried when accepting his assignment that when the Living Saint wanted something, he would be unable to say ‘no’.

Apparently, his concerns had been unwarranted. Most of her subordinates said it all the time.

“No, Chosen of the Omnissiah, it isn’t possible.”

Archmagos Arithmancia Sultan said for the third time of the meeting, respectfully but firmly. The enormous number of metallic appendages the Ryza-born female Tech-Priest used to connect to all sort of ‘interesting’ devices told quite clearly why her nickname was ‘Archmagos Mechadendrite’ among the Navy crew.

A nickname filled with respect, it went without saying. The Living Saint of Nyx had brought the holy archeotech, the funds, the vision, and invited millions of Tech-Priests, but it was Arithmancia Sultan who had put in order these resources and began a process which would likely end with Nyx as one of the largest and most efficient shipbuilding centres in the galaxy within a couple of centuries.

“*Ferrus’ Revenge* is twenty-six percent operational,” the Mistress of Ships declared. “The *Dorn’s Will* shipyard is approximately at twenty percent. For all the ‘forgiven’ Tech-Priests we receive in bulk every day, this imposes hard limitations, at least for this year and the one after that.”

“But the Giraffe Orbital Elevator is now fully operational. And the Cygnus Elevator will be inaugurated within the year,” the golden-winged ruler argued with Arithmancia Sultan.

“It will, but the logistics don’t resolve itself in a series of orders, as I’m sure you are aware.” The female Tech-Priest replied. “I am your dedicated servant, Chosen of the Omnissiah, but we can’t begin too many projects and industrial programs, no matter how pressing the need. Otherwise in an attempt to catch up on every technical challenge, we will arrive to nothing.”

“And there’s another point to consider, your Celestial Highness,” the Lord Admiral decided to intervene, judging it was opportune time to voice his doubts. “I love as much as every Admiral a large fleet to command and I admire the...audacity of your intentions and the contingency plans.”

“But?” the Living Saint asked with humour.

“But if you think mustering so many Battleships in a single formation is practically feasible, I am sorry to inform you it is not.” Neidhart spoke resolutely. “Since the vids relayed by the Chapter Master of the Lamenters show clearly the Necrons have Cruisers and deathly-efficient starfighters to use as escorts, we will need two to three Cruisers for every Battleship we deploy, and a minimum of five to ten lighters ships going from Light Cruisers to Destroyers. To repeat what you’ve told me during our first meeting, we can’t hope for the best against the Ymga Monolith. I say mustering the greatest number of Battleships since the Cacodominus War in a single engagement is already going to require an enormous number of hours in training manoeuvres and fleet exercises. But it has to remain feasible.”

As it was, it was already going to be a challenge, one the public would likely ignore for decades and that the historians would write books upon when everyone and everything – save the Saint and the God-Emperor, of course – would be dead and buried.

Neidhart Müller loved challenges. He wouldn’t have tried to go into the Navy with only the support of a grand-uncle Admiral and a near-ruined family if he didn’t. But he liked the challenges to have at least a small chance of being successful.

“The Lord Admiral brings very good points, Chosen of the Omnissiah,” Arithmancia Sultan supported him. “Besides, there are other things to take into account. For all the support the Quayran shipyards have agreed to give us and the favourable accords signed recently, we still have an enormous amount of work before any training and fleet exercises can begin. The data Phaerakh Neferten gave you can indeed be used to produce the jammers which will prevent Necron boarders from teleporting aboard our ships and slaughtering the crews at their leisure, but prototype production is barely over and we have to install them on every ship which will participate in this campaign. Then there are the limited numbers of Nemesis-Hunter Cannons available...”

“Did not Archmagos Cawl promise his full support?” The Basileia gave a very ironic smile to her subordinate.

“I trust Archmagos Cawl to have Radical Ideas and do things which will horrify trillions of Mechanicus minds,” ‘Lady Mechadendrite’ informed Lady Weaver. “I do not trust him on respecting a tight shipbuilding schedule, especially since he respects no law but his own.”

The Victor of Commorragh, Neidhart noted, didn’t protest or tell Archmagos Sultan she was wrong.

“All right,” the Living Saint nodded and the light in her eyes could be described best as ‘aggressively determined’. “You have made correct arguments and told me what we couldn’t do. Now tell me what the best order of battle is in your opinion.”

Well, Her Celestial Highness had asked.

“Twenty-four Battleships for the first combat group which will be ordered to fight its way across the Necron outer sphere and the Ork fleets,” the new Lord Admiral of Battlefleet Nyx declared. “This may be subject to change, but I would prefer eight divisions of three Battleships each. Each of our major line-ship, be it a command-type or a Nova Cannon-purposed warship, must be escorted by three Cruisers, preferably with one in three being an Astartes-manned Strike Cruiser to give more flexibility.”

“You want to be given command over twenty-four Strike Cruisers of the Adeptus Astartes in addition to the forces the Space Marines will commit?” The young Lady General didn’t ask him ‘are you crazy?’ but Neidhart knew her tone conveyed the message pretty well.

“In fact, I want only these Astartes assets in my battle-group in addition to those already mentioned,” the veteran of two dozen space battles revealed. “Given the preliminary goals discussed, I would prefer the core of this Battlefleet to be Navy-heavy. No offence Archmagos, but for all the extensive technology your ships are able to use, they aren’t always the most...cohesive formation.”

“No offence taken,” the Mistress of Ships replied. “And I agree the Lord Admiral has a point, Chosen of the Omnissiah. Many Astartes and Mechanicus commanders took...large liberties with the orders you gave them during the Battle of the Port of Lost Souls.”

“The same could be argued about certain Navy Admirals,” the golden-winged woman said neutrally.

Sometimes, Neidhart Müller really wished August von Kisher was still alive, just for the pleasure to strangle him to death with his own hands.

“The...precipitation which led to the summoning of the reinforcements from Commorragh led to less-than-stellar behaviour among our squadrons, that much can’t be denied,” the Lord Admiral grimaced internally. “But I am convinced the Navy squadrons mustered for this expedition will learn from the past and impress you by their performance and successes.”

Lady Taylor Hebert stared at him for several seconds before nodding in approval.

“I will hold you to your word, Lord Admiral.”The Living Saint said. “Before we go on establishing the list of Astropathic calls to obtain what is necessary are there any other issues that need to be discussed?”

“Yes, there is,” Archmagos Arithmancia Sultan started. “The technology employed by the Brunhilda starfighter has been noted as perfect by some of Ryza colleagues to revive a starfighter project which had been shamefully ignored by proper authorities during the Great Crusade due to petty politics. Now that the Xiphon project has more or less disappeared from the hololiths, and the political scene has changed, the decision of the Fabricator...”

**Hive Athena**

**3.157.298M35**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

There were many things which were changing regularly changing at Nyx, but the Heracles Warden’s ability to choose an entirely different road every time Taylor asked to meet one of them was not anywhere near the top of the list.

“I don’t know what the Chapter will be able to do save helping in throwing more Ork fleets against the Monolith,” Jeremiah Isley spoke after analysing the data handed to him for several minutes. “We’re infiltration specialists, and this xenos monstrosity is the next best thing to sneak into as long as its shields are powered up. Unless Trazyn the thief has the codes for deactivating these defences?”

“He swore in front of Neferten and myself the shields weren’t part of the things vulnerable to his Acting-Triarch protocols,” Taylor threw a file to one of her centipedes, which rushed out of her office to deliver it to Wei. “Since he proved so willing to pulverise the FTL drive of the Ymga Monolith, I don’t see any logical reason why he would lie on that point.”

“I don’t either,” Jeremiah shrugged. “Of course, I try very much to not think about what is in Trazyn’s metallic head. I think my sanity wouldn’t survive it.”

As Trazyn was one of the survivors of the War in Heaven, a war known to make the Heresy look like a pillow fight, it was far from an unreasonable stance to take.

“The first exhaustive reports of the Lamenters’ containment duty and the visual records are on their way to Nyx. I would appreciate nonetheless if you and a few of your veterans will be there to help my offers assigned to the data-analysis. I know Necrons are not your specialty, but the Heracles Wardens are noted to have a keen eye to notice what other people have missed.”

“I will be there,” Isley promised before rolling his massive shoulders and smiling. “I have forty Scouts to train in this System, and they’re very much in dire need of...*extensive instruction*.”

Why were the Chapter Masters surrounding her transforming into sadists when they trained their charges? Actually, Taylor was going to not pursue this question for too long, she feared what answer was waiting at the end of this path.

“Congratulations by the way,” the former Alpha Legion commander, “it seems your strategy is working. The Necrons of the Ymga Monolith are far too busy to repair their FTL drive, and the genocidal xenos are killing millions of greenskins that could have caused the Imperium plenty of headaches. Another great victory for the Living Saint.”

Taylor snorted.

“Be careful, or I will assign you with the Lamenters into quarantining these beasts.” Taylor smirked. “I’m told it is not an enjoyable duty.”

“I thought the greenskins were abandoning everything and rushing as fast as their scrap-ships can take them to assault the ‘Throne of Oblivion’?”

“They do. It’s part of the problem, really. Orks and proper spatial navigation are completely screwed up. Many ended up in the Svalbard Sector and had to be...properly motivated in changing their course.”

“I see.” Isley carefully replied. “However, I must wonder at your revelations, especially since the first Battlefleet which is rumoured to be in preliminary muster will not include us. I suppose a couple of my veterans can play snipers and eliminate the more problematic Ork Warbosses when the time comes. I also imagine you will need our expertise when several Deathwatch team wants to acquire our knowledge. But otherwise, I am somewhat in the dark.”

“There are other enemies which might try the ‘anti-Monolith operation’ to intervene against Nyx and our forces,” the golden-winged insect-mistress reminded the Chapter Master. “The twenty-four Battleships and the millions of guardsmen of Force A will be the sword I am going to show to the galaxy as a whole. There will be contingencies. I want you to be one of them.”

The Lord of the Heracles Warden took the glass of ‘ultra-beer’ proposed via spider-butler, before grimacing.

“This is going to be a new Commorragh all over again,” the Space Marine complained in good humour. “Fine, I will prepare my forces for what is going to be a war to remember. But I will request a few of these new starfighters for my pilots.”

“I wasn’t aware you were starfighter specialists,” Taylor half-asked, half-teased him.

“We are a gene-line of many talents,” Isley replied gravely.

“Of course you are,” Taylor said drily. “On a completely unrelated subject, I’ve received somewhat incomplete information from the Custodes. Are you willing to fill a few blanks?”

“That entirely depends on the type of information,” Isley replied in the same tone. “For all our pretensions of omniscience, I’m afraid there are plenty of secrets of this galaxy the Alpha Legion never was revealed...and many more we forgot in the flames of the Heresy.”

“The name of the Second Legion would be a good start.”

All amusement left Isley in less than one second.

“This is proscribed information.”

“The Custodes have left...temporarily the restrictions given the current circumstances. I was given some information on their tactics and the strategy they adopted during the first minutes of battle against the Necrons. But I know little else. And they were always mentioned in Custodes as ‘the Second Legion’.”

“There are...graves which shouldn’t be reopened,” Isley warned.

“The Ymga Monolith is unleashing death among the stars. The Orks are forcing it to unveil more and more star-shattering weapons. I think we are far beyond the opening of a grave, whether the Custodes admit it or not.”

“That much is true. But then...” Jeremiah Isley sighed again, and for once looked very much like he was feeling the weight of centuries passed. “Fine, ask your questions, my Lady.”

“Well as I said seconds ago, a name would be a nice beginning.”

“One of the names they were called during the great Crusade, and probably the most popular, was the Tsunami Sabres. Their war doctrine could be resumed in a one sentence: if you have lost a battle, you didn’t bring a fleet large enough to the battlefield...”

**Hive Romulus**

**3.161.298M35**

**Lord Inquisitor Odysseus Tor**

This was not a conversation Odysseus thought he would ever need to have, and with a Living Saint of the God-Emperor no less.

“Talasa Prima agrees your preliminary plans have merits, but they don’t have the number of Exterminatus weapons on hand you desire. Production will need to be increased.”

“Really? I mean, I know the Exterminatus stocks aren’t bottomless but the Inquisition has a high degree of oversight over these weapons and I think you would have seen a shortage coming decades ago.”

Like he said, not a conversation he wanted to have.

“If you had asked for a preliminary plan calling for the deployment of the ‘basic’ Exterminatus, there would be no problem,” Odysseus said. “But the two-stage Cyclonic Torpedoes and the Magna-Torpedoes are extremely expensive weapons which are not part of the standard planet obliteration protocols. As I’m sure Archmagos Cawl is demonstrating as we speak, a planet devastated in surface can eventually be recovered for the good of the Imperium. But once the Exterminatus begins to fracture the planetary crust, it is over. There won’t be any new colonisation effort or salvage operations.”

Odysseus stared at the young woman in front of him, watching as the night slowly descended on the upper levels of Hive Romulus. With the weakening light, Taylor Hebert’s light appeared to be growing more powerful by the second. Maybe it was an illusion. And maybe it wasn’t, the Inquisitor knew. The halo was certainly far more powerful than when she had returned from Commorragh.

“The one-stage Cyclonic Torpedo does the job it is required to for most of the xenos and non-xenos threats an Inquisitor is expected to face. The prospect of facing something where a ‘normal’ Exterminatus isn’t enough is...rare.”

“Unfortunately, throwing a one-stage Cyclonic Torpedo at a Necron planet would be more than useless,” the insect-mistress grimaced. “When the Phaerons and Phaerakhs were ordered to build deep, they took it very seriously. The facilities under Hive Asao were very close to the surface by their standards.”

And it hadn’t been discovered for millennia...officially.

“There are going to be questions, of course.”

The Basileia clicked her tongue before breathing out.

“To be clear and honest, I am willing to launch a campaign which will last as long as it needs to where the goal will be to obliterate the Ymga Monolith, also known by its creators as the Throne of Oblivion. Every Necron complex awakened and unwilling to tolerate Human-Necron peaceful relationships will be obliterated and consigned to oblivion. If the world has a human population or has colonisation possibilities for humanity, I will try to win this ground-based conflict the conventional way. But if the Necrons are too firmly entrenched or the world is hostile to all forms of war...” the golden-winged Lady General grimaced again, though the determination in her gaze didn’t waver.

“I agree the Necrons who awaken must be dealt with.” Odysseus began. “Unfortunately as you might suspect, the assets you require for your campaign across the Eastern Fringe are not in my hands but those of other Inquisitors, beginning with Talasa Prime and ending with other facilities you don’t have the clearance to know.”

The Lord Inquisitor cleared his throat.

“And while I’m not exactly pleased by how the Lemurian affair ended and I am willing to do a lot for you in private, ‘repaying a debt’ is not something I can use as a negotiation point.”

The Basileia closed her eyes for a second before reopening them and giving him an unpleased expression.

“You and I both very well there is only one thing important enough to convince them to release the Exterminatus weapons and the Deathwatch teams in significant numbers.”

A confirmation the ‘Blue Bacta’ and ‘Red Bacta’ negotiations had released under her authority some teams, but not enough for a major military campaign of this magnitude.

“Yes, I know.”

Aethergold.

No matter its shape or where it had been mined before, it was one of the most sought-for prizes for the Holy Inquisition given their line of work.

And since there was only one active Living Saint right now as far as the Ordo’s spies had discovered, only Taylor Hebert could provide it.

The black-haired ruler caressed the armoured head of the crab she had brought with her for this unofficial audience this evening. Then she drew a data-slate out of her pocket and taped a code before reading something on its screen.

“It goes without saying this conversation has never taken place.”

“I understand perfectly.”

The golden-winged Lady of the Nyx Sector inclined her head and watched him with a thoughtful expression.

“As far as everyone knows, the reason there hasn’t been official Aethergold negotiations aside from those with the representatives of the Adeptus Terra is that the mining of Brockton’s Noctilith has barely begun. This has the merit of being true...it’s not the complete truth, if your spies around Lisa’s Dome have done their job.”

“They have.”

Although with the Tech-Priests being very tight-lipped and closing ranks, the source of Noctilith hadn’t been discovered so far. It was not for a lack of trying by Zoe Zircon’s agents, but Dragon Richter and other Council members took their Noosphere and non-Noosphere security very, very seriously.

“I am willing to release ten kilograms, divided in ten ingots, into Inquisitorial custody. But I want to see the Exterminatus weapons and the Deathwatch teams with my own eyes, Lord Inquisitor.”

It was Odysseus’ turn to grimace.

“I don’t think the Deathwatch teams will be a massive problem, to be honest. Not with millions and possibly billions of greenskins throwing themselves against the guns of the Ymga Monolith. But the Exterminatus weapons...well, I don’t exactly know how they are produced myself, but I can tell you in confidence this isn’t exactly a simple process to manufacture their components and then assemble them.”

“So Talasa Prime might not be able to provide the weapons and other...special ‘assets’ in time...great, just great.” The Victor of Commorragh wasn’t enraged, but to call her pleased would have been a really bold lie.

“There is...another possibility.” Odysseus had avoided thinking much about it before, but he like Inquisitor had read the information about the ‘Throne of Oblivion’, and he was totally convinced this planet-sized Monolith had to be neutralised. The revelation there were billions of tons of Noctilith waiting in its core were just added incentive to launch the campaign as soon as materially possible. “Talasa Prime is not the only place where Exterminatus weapons are produced. I believe you were contacted once before and sworn to secret by some of their guardians in Solar.”

The young woman had a prodigious memory, but it took her twenty seconds before she asked a single word.

“Deimos?”

“Yes.” For many people, it would be saying already too much.

“They didn’t contact me to obtain Bacta.”

“It won’t be of any utility to anyone save the servants of the Holy Inquisition present in these secret facilities. Aethergold, on the other hand, they would definitely enjoy acquiring for their...arduous duties.”

All the while the black eyes of Lady Weaver were busy calculating, judging him.

“If I make this same proposal of ten kilograms of Aethergold to these mysterious parties, will the Deathwatch teams and the Exterminatus weapons be available?”

“Not knowing their precise needs and interest, I am forced to speculate,” the Lord of the Ordo Malleus replied. “But I am confident the answer is yes and yes. I will need to establish contact to be sure, unfortunately.”

There was two seconds of silence.

“Or we can ask the Custodes hiding one hundred and fifty metres away to do it for us, of course,” the insect-mistress said in an exasperated voice.

**Hive Ceres-in construction**

**3.174.298M35**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

“Some people are just unable to demand an audience the normal way,” Gamaliel noted as the massive Mechanicus Lander stabilise and finally stop on the improvised – read very improvised – shuttle landing zone surrounded by ants and spiders.

“Do you think it’s something which comes with age for non-Space Marines?” asked Captain Cerulean Cuzco of the Crimson Fists on their private vox-frequency.

“You mean the more they have waited for the arrival of someone like our Lady, the less they’re willing to wait their turn in the queue?” T’klis Rubix wondered for confirmation, his right hand tightened around the massive Volkite gun the Tech-Priests had given to him for testing.

“You are missing the most reasonable explanation, brothers,” Kratos intervened.

“And what is this explanation we have all missed?” Gavreel inquired politely.

“He was always like this, old age just made him worse.”

This was a really disturbing answer...and it was far too likely to be true to boot.

At least the Sergeant was unable to think about something invalidating the Flesh Tearer’s affirmation as the hatch of the Lander opened and Archmagos Belisarius Cawl emerged from it.

As always, the high-ranked Tech-Priest was a being fundamentally impossible to miss. Aside from the fact Cawl was likely one of the few Archmagi to not come with a small army as an escort wherever he went, the weapons and devices his mechadendrites connected the rest of his body to were extremely sophisticated and baffled even the Techmarines of the Dawnbreaker Guard.

“Archmagos Cawl,” Lady Weaver should probably be commended to not groan or sound exasperated. “Would it bother you to use the proper channels...and wait for your turn using the Elevators? I am trying to regulate the Orbital-to-Planet traffic, not deregulate it.”

“The proper channels always begin and with you,” the Radical answered unrepentantly. “And several of my informants have come up with new breakouts in addition to valuable archeotech waiting for me in my Martian Forge. Therefore I have come to ask you to grant me permission to leave.”

The Basileia’s glare was severe.

“And your work in the Neptunia System?”

“Oh, I’m going to leave all the assets and ships necessary for the completion of the project!” Cawl immediately answered. “My subordinates and your overseers have been delivered a minute-per-minute plan of everything they must do and plenty of contingencies to arrive to the result you want.”

The insect-mistress huffed before calling Techmarine Ximenes of the Night Swords and demanding him to contact some Tech-Priests in orbit to confirm his words. Surprisingly, this time Cawl had done exactly what he had voiced.

“As long as your part of the bargain is fulfilled, I have no reason to force you to remain in the Nyx Sector,” the golden-winged parahuman replied once the information arrived back to her ears. “Though I am surprised you don’t want to stay here, with the preparations for the coming campaign.”

“It’s exactly because of this coming campaign I want to return to Mars as fast as possible!” The old Martian Archmagos affirmed boisterously. “Your battles are going to have an enormous impact on the Eastern Fringe, this is a certainty. And this means one of my top secret projects may found utility bringing the Ultramarines on your side.”

The black-haired woman didn’t place her head in her hands and sob, but judging by her expression, Taylor Hebert must have felt a slight temptation.

“Archmagos Cawl,” the insect-mistress declared in the voice of someone having experienced the insanity of too many Tech-Priests, “the current leadership of the Ultramarines want nothing to do with me, and my involvement in their affairs has been what I could describe as ‘indirect’. Yet they prefer to ignore me. Give me a good argument why they aren’t going to blast apart your ship when you make one too many inconvenient demands to them.”

“I have-“

“It doesn’t matter what you have right now,” the Basileia interrupted him. “Your clearance levels may be higher than mine in a lot of fields, but Chapter Master Valens will know of your reputation and some of the more-than-questionable actions of your past exploration activities.”

“One might say you are...very disappointed in the Regent of Macragge,” the Archmagos did not abandon at the first obstacle, Gavreel could give it to him. “But the benefits-“

“Archmagos Cawl.” Lady Taylor Hebert repeated in a voice which sounded tired. “The clues you have given me were sufficient to have a good vision of what you probably intend. And while I have not discussed it at length with the trio of Custodes present...it won’t work.”

Neither the Astartes Sergeant nor the rest of the Dawnbreaker Guard missed how the Catachan ants and the ‘flashy’ flies around them had positioned themselves around, basking the area in flashes and a permanent glowing.

“Hypothetically speaking, my calculations are solid,” the Radical protested.

“Hypothetically, your calculations are not taking into account the nature of the being you are attempting to heal. Assuming a certain degree of confidence, I can trust you to have found the means to save the body. You may gain insights to save the spirit. But you can’t heal the soul in time.”

“To be honest, Lady Weaver, I was thinking *you* could solve this third issue while I solved the first two.”

The Lady Basileia shook her head in regret.

“I appreciate your confidence, Cawl, but I am not an Angel of Healing, despite all the rumours proclaiming the contrary. The Aspect I received from the Emperor begins and ends with **Sacrifice**. It’s my insects which are providing succour, I am only the intermediary.”

Taylor Hebert looked up to the grey sky over her head and her expression was melancholic.

“I am ready to pay the price for a lot of things, but here there’s nothing of value you have in your possession that can be possibly sacrificed. Assuming the Ultramarines let you and me try, and they won’t.”

“If you see no objection,” Cawl said in a more formal tone, “I still intend to pursue on this path and have the...projects ready by the time you begin your next campaign.”

The Lady General snorted.

“You don’t believe you need my permission for an audience, I am not going to object when I know it won’t do any good.” The young woman huffed. “Just keep a certain level of discretion. You won’t escape punishment if my Council is once again screaming for something you’ve done.”

Belisarius Cawl took his leave after this. And as the Martian Tech-Priest had promised, he wouldn’t be seen again for a decade.

**Giraffe Spaceport**

**3.182.298M35**

**Judge Missy Byron**

The Orbital Elevator was an impressive black ribbon when you approached it from the space side, but on the ground, it was even more impressive. When you were at its foot, it was like a black pillar leading to Heaven had been built by some divine entity.

By comparison, using it was really a disappointment. Inside the Orbital Elevator, you didn’t see anything and the ambiance was...austere. The Adeptus Mechanicus had built this device linking Nyx to the void stations in orbit around it, and Missy knew from experience even the Imperial Fists were not that bland in decorative taste unless they were ordered to be in their architectural schemes.

“I’m still surprised they didn’t try to paint in gold,” she told Dennis, who snorted.

“A few minor groups of pilgrims are still trying to gather enough money for that in the hope the Mechanicus will bow to their desires,” the Rogue Trader parahuman replied. “Most have recognised by now the futility of it. Buying the paint alone would be...err...a non-trivial challenge, I think.”

“True,” the female Shaker acknowledged seriously. “Which brings me to my point. Seriously, you let Taylor name it the ‘Giraffe Spaceport’? Dennis, what were you taking for drugs that day?”

“Hey! You know very well we are staying far away from these substances!” the red-haired time-stopper protested loudly.

“Okay, maybe I exaggerated a bit.” Of all the ‘vices’ their little group of parahumans had ever contemplated participating into, drugs had never been part of them. Dennis, Taylor, and she were from Brockton Bay, and they had all seen enough of the drug trade engineered by the various gangs to be tempted by it. And Dragon had no need for it. That said, the Tinker remained a non-minor fanatic when it came to purge drug smuggling and trade from her areas of responsibility, as she believed a drug-addict was a person who was unhappy working for her.

“Still, the Giraffe Spaceport?”

“Well, it is an animal with a long neck,” Dennis tried to present it in a dignified stance, perhaps helped by his splendid white uniform which looked a lot like the kind of attire US Admirals would have worn.

The young woman gave her fellow ex-Ward a very disappointed expression.

“It is an animal with a long neck...what kind of lame argument it is?” The Envoy to the Suebi Sector raised her voice in the second part of the sentence to mark her disapproval. “Please tell me she hasn’t planned to name the second Orbital Elevator ostrich or emu.”

“Oh she hasn’t. Taylor settled for ‘Cygnus Spaceport’.”

“That’s...better.” But it was definitely in support for the ‘long neck argument’. “You should have proposed better names, though.”

“Leet proposed Gundam Elevator, Grand Line, and a few other...questionable...propositions...so it could have been worse.”

Missy swept away the retort with the dignity it deserved, which was none.

“It was Leet who proposed them. Therefore they had to be ignored and expunged from the records.”

Dennis shrugged.

“It is her planet, in the end.” Dennis said philosophically.

“So next time she will sell you a ship bearing the name *Emu’s War*, you will accept it?”

“Well, it depends upon the tonnage of the ship and whether it is Warp-capable...”

Missy was not sure if strangling Clockblocker or facepalming was the correct course of action. Maybe both?

“You’re hopeless Mr. Rogue Trader.”

“I love you too Lady Judge.” Dennis smiled before giving her a hug. “So, how was the trip in the Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector?”

“To misquote a certain series, I went to strange new worlds. I found old and new civilisations. And I went boldly killing things that no parahuman had killed before!”

“Continue like this, and Taylor is really going to put you under quarantine again, if only to make sure you aren’t in contact with Leet...”

**Hive Athena**

**3.200.298M35**

**Ancient Rylanor**

The Astartes Mark VII Power Armour that was presented to him was exactly as he had demanded it; white from the helmet to the armoured feet, the only exception being the chest, where the aquila had been painted gold.

The left pauldron, where according to tradition and Codex the symbol of the Space Marine Chapter was supposed to be found, had been painted with a simple golden blade crossed with a golden lightning bolt.

This was all the decoration the armour had received, and in his opinion, it was more than enough.

If he had to train a Chapter again to be loyal soldiers of the Emperor, they wouldn’t strut in purple armour with long feathers and gain arrogance with their decorations.

“As I’m sure you realise, your Space Marines are going to need a fresh paint job after every battle,” Lady Weaver said on his right.

Rylanor snorted, a sound which sounded almost strange now that the Tech-Priests had modified his vox-casters to speak like a normal person. He would leave the exclamations and the bombastic tone to Pierre, the Throne knew the snake enjoyed it.

“I wasn’t born yesterday, Lady. And you didn’t bring your Imperial Fist for this conversation.”

“Touché,” the girl smiled.

“But yes, some paint jobs will be unavoidable,” the Ancient recognised after a couple of seconds. “Of course, unless you’re willing to take red or black colours, Space Marines will always need to clean and repaint their armours after anything more dangerous than a minutes-long skirmish. But the Blood Angels have gained the right to don the red thousands of times over. As for the black...”

Rylanor knew the Bacta had healed a lot of the mental wounds of the betrayal, but there was no way he would be able to don colours similar to the Iron Warriors without feeling disgusted. And that had been before learning what colour scheme the former First Captain of the Sons of Horus, Abaddon the Treacherous Despoiler, had chosen for his warband of oath-breakers and monsters.

“Yes, I understand.”

The former Master of Rites of the fallen Emperor’s Children grumbled before deciding to reveal another reason the golden-winged girl why he had chosen white. After all, if he couldn’t reveal secrets to her, who would he talk to? The Emperor?

“There’s another reason I chose white, actually. After the first assault of the traitors was pushed back on Isstvan III, the loyal members of the Sixteenth renamed themselves the Luna Wolves again and threw white paint over their armour once more, forsaking the name and the colours of the gutless bastard who had not the courage to look at them in the eyes as he betrayed them.”

“It was courageous.”

It had been. Countless times Rylanor had wished he was with them instead of being ordered to wait in the caverns as his brothers died one by one.

Alas, it had been more than four thousand years ago. Wishing it would not return him to that dreadful day.

“And do you have a Chapter’s name to go with those colours?”

“I have, and I decided to go back to the origins of the Great Crusade to choose it. When the Emperor began to unify humanity’s homeworld and destroy the horrors of the Long Night, he created the Thunder Warriors.”

“I’ve heard the name before,” the black-haired General murmured. “The Chapters of the Blood’s archives say they were to the Astartes what lone predators are to pack of wolves. They were also...flawed, genetically and mentally. They did not receive the training or the conditioning to deal with the abominations created by the Age of Strife.”

“Indeed,” Rylanor approved with satisfaction. “But you used a key word: flawed. And this description is the complete opposite of perfection. In fact, I think ‘imperfect transhumans’ sum-up best what they were.”

“Are you sure,” there was a hint of irony in the girl’s voice, Rylanor was sure, “that you don’t want to enrage the Naga and all the traitors left alive of the former Third Legion?”

“Maybe a little,” the Ancient Dreadnought agreed. “But the new White Thunderbolts will not be my personal revenge attempt. They will be greater than that. They will...rebuilt what has been torn down. And we will begin at Goa.”

“You have not chosen the easiest path.”

“No, but I feel this new Chapter must take an entirely new one. In hindsight, neither Chemos nor the worlds we took as recruitment bases were really challenges. The Primarch’s charisma disarmed nine-tenths of our enemies before a blade was drawn, and the rest of the ‘hurdles’ were pitiful. A world with dangerous fauna and flora, a population not inclined to trust any foreigner, and difficult environmental conditions sound like a proper challenge...and a nice warm-up before the big military campaign.”

The ruler of Nyx watched him with a patient expression.

“At the risk of pointing out the obvious, for the moment you are a Legion of One. Granted, there are plenty of aspirants waiting for you downstairs that were tested positive for gene-compatibility, but they have yet to pass a single trial of the long list you have shown me.”

“We will be ready,” Rylanor insisted. “Even if I have to drag them across the void myself.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Suebi Nebula Sub-Sector**

**Goa System**

**Goa**

**6.200.298M35**

**Minister of Foreign Affairs Zoe Attica**

When Zoe had first heard of it, the Minister of Foreign Affairs had wondered privately why the Basileia had agreed so readily to assemble a team of Tech-Priests in order of build a Basilisk and a Jaghatai Khan Battle-Tank manufactorum on Goa.

Given how untrustworthy the Governors of the ‘northern trail’ had proven, and how poor the ‘southern trail’ was, it seemed a sizeable industrial investment with absolutely no certainty of gain in return.

This internal questioning had lasted until she saw her first vid about the Crystal Ankylosaurs.

Though on many, many Death Worlds the top super-predator was carnivorous, on Goa this wasn’t the case.

Unfortunately, it was a meagre consolation for the population of Goa. Because while the Ankylosaurs were indeed herbivorous, a horde of them could cause a sheer amount of destruction few other carnivorous species would be able to match.

That was what happened when a species managed to reach size equalling in size the Knight walkers of House O’Hara.

And despite the ‘crystal’ name, the Ankylosaurs were anything but fragile. They were likely less armoured than a standard Baneblade, but their tails ended in a bludgeon shape and they were able to destroy walls and armour with it. The less said what they could do with the rest of their body, the better.

The Ankylosaurs were rather pretty from afar, with their blue-white crystalline coloration, yes. But a horde of them was always something to stay far, far away from.

It was why there were only two major permanent settlements on Goa, namely the capital of Ziggurat-Bastion and the lesser but equally as fortified city of Kars-Bastion.

Even today, several centuries after the first Vijayanagara political opponents were exiled and imprisoned there by their capricious rulers, five hundred out of seven hundred million inhabitants lived in these two citadels.

Because unlike Hibernia whose manufactorums were sprawled everywhere on icy plains, Ajusco and its agri-pyramids, or Parthia fishing fleets, Goa was a system where survival against the local wildlife was a continuous struggle.

Even now, as her visit tour led her across the inner walls of Ziggurat-Bastion, old anti-air guns were ‘discouraging’ a flight of pteranodons from flying over the outer defences.

“The more I see, the more I am impressed at the depths of courage and inventiveness your ancestors must have found in themselves to survive on this world, Marshal.”

Zoe wasn’t kidding. If Nyx had sent an expeditionary force here before the Basileia reformed the PDF and the Guard regiments recruited from it, it was likely they would have been lost with all hands. The Crystal Ankylosaurs were already bad enough by themselves, but most of the fauna was violently antagonistic to human life.

“Thank you Minister,” Marshal Gandhi replied with a thin smile, trying not to tower too much over – and completely failing in the process. The Survivor-Marshal of Ziggurat-Bastion – his complete title if one wanted to have an official ceremony – was a muscled giant that age had not rendered less formidable. “Though in our most honest moments, we acknowledge it was more inventiveness and desperation which allowed us to survive decade after decade.”

Yes, Lemuria had certainly not tried to deliver brand-new equipment to people they had exiled, and Hibernia, for all its willingness to sign agreements, had had tithes to pay to Atlantis, and a lot of its industrial output was civilian-purposed, not military.

“With the generous help from the Lady General, we will be able to hunt the Ankylosaurs which visit us every year without making it a suicidal task, at least around Ziggurat-bastion and Kars-Bastion. And of course for the first time in two centuries, we may be able to build new cities.”

Zoe nodded, though she confirmed for her later report the Governor always referring to Lady Weaver by her military title. It wasn’t exactly surprising – after the fate Lemuria had condemned their ancestors, the Priests had not lasted long when the Ankylosaurs had begun trampling the settlement-prisons of their ancestors.

And clearly, the Goan culture was extremely militarist. It wasn’t to the point of Cadia – Ajusco provided one or two food convoys per year, but the Death World hadn’t a dedicated single-purposed Agri-World or several to feed it – there were civilians within the walls of Ziggurat-Bastion who did not carry weapons or had been trained in their use.

But the majority of the Goans were conscripted as teenagers, given old lasguns, and told to man the walls against the hostile beasts and various threats.

“I wasn’t able to speak face-to-face with the Venerable Ancient Rylanor, but I know from Astropathic communication the Tech-Priests’ Logis predict four new cities may be realisable within the next forty years.”

“I will trust the cogboys’ predictions when the cities are built,” the Governor of Goa – and the supreme commander of its armed forces – blunted told her. “But with the weapons the Lady General has already sent and the manufactorums we will be able to protect outside the walls, we will have the tanks and the artillery to push the Ankylosaurs back to Calcutta’s Last Stand. Maybe if the Navy can spare us a few aircraft, we may be able to pursue to Raipur’s Pass.”

Zoe was not a military woman, but she could recognise a military hint when she heard one.

“I will see what I can do. But I can’t promise you them for the first couple of years. The Aeronautica and Navy wings were shredded during the long war against the greenskins, and the losses of Commorragh were particularly bad. The aircraft wings are in complete rebuilding as we speak. More tanks, artillery and hundreds of Tech-Priests to maintain them, Nyx can provide.”

“And we will remember it forever,” Gandhi swore as several of the pteranodons were visibly shot down by the anti-air batteries. “I can’t afford to deprive myself of the few aces and flyers we have now, but I think that with the correct incentives, some of our teenagers could volunteer to join one of yours ‘Aeronautica Academies’...”

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*Inquisitor Zircon,*

*You wished to be warned when the Chosen of the Omnissiah would announce via the official Noosphere channels the creation of the enlarged Mechanicus Council of Nyx; this was done minutes ago, Imperial calendar 3.312.298M35, a most auspicious date as I’m sure you will agree. The Voice of Mars and the other emissaries of the Fabricator-General having agreed, the nominations should all go ahead without meeting any opposition. The thirty-six Magi and Archmagi are listed below:*

*1-Minister of Industry and Public Works: Lady Magos Dogma Dragon Richter (Nyx)*

*2-Master of Exploration: Archmagos Desmerius Lankovar (Stygies VIII)*

*3-Master of Healing: Arch-Genetor Hark-Alpha Dipodies (Dantris III)*

*4-Master of Bacta: Archmagos Biologis Rob-Eta-Leo Osier (Megyre)*

*5-Mistress of Ships: Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan (Ryza)*

*6-Master of Enginseers: High Magos-Enginseer Cathar-4-Fredrick (Metalica)*

*7-Master of Logistics: Lexico Arcanus Fowl Opt-6A2-Tertius (Triplex Phall, Logis)*

*8-Mistress of Artisans: Artisan Magos Cybersmith Lydia-Beta Rosamund (Tigrus)*

*9-Master of Skitarii: Alpha-Archmagos Epsilon-10 Blue-Crimson (Gryphonne IV)*

*10-Master of Electro-Life: High Magos Thomson Siemens (Voss Prime)*

*11-Master of Destruction: Archmagos Reductor Stefan Delta-Septimus (Estaban VII)*

*12-Voice of Mars: Archmagos Prime Gastaph Hediatrix (Mars)*

*13-Master of Metallurgy and Mining: Archmagos Metallurgicus Unity-Victor Omega-Manville (Accatran)*

*14-Master of the Magisterium: Magos-Malagra Cadmium-1111 (Graia)*

*15-Master of the Alamo Forges: Archmagos Activator Neng-Pho Glass (Anvillus)*

*16-Castellan of Legio Defensor: Magos Ordinatos-Technicus Rand Numerica (Lucius)*

*17-Regent of Terra Cimmeria: Archmagos Concillium-Hesphestari Marius Gamma-Arx (Bronta-Median)*

*18- Warden-Student of the STC templates: Archmagos Esotericus Omega-010-Omega Berkelium (Palomar)*

*19-Master of Knights: Magos Myrimdex Ductilius-3 (Stryken Primus)*

*20-Master of Noctilith Mining: High Lachrimallus Zi-Ferric Zeta (Mezoa)*

*21-Master of Fortifications: Archmagos Dominus Tellurium-Alpha Binary (Agripinaa)*

*22-Mistress of Volkite: Magos Physic Wyvern-12 Draconis (Nyx)*

*23- Master of Wuhanese Projects: Prime Magos Hermeticon Modulus Modula (Hypnoth)*

*24- Master of Marches and First-Response Industrial Projects: Archmagos Prime I-Brass R-Tin (Incaladion)*

*25- Mistress of War Games: Archmagos Dominus Rhenia Thulium (Artemia Majoris)*

*26- Master of Aircraft: Magos Aeris Kappa-1-12 Data-El (Kiavahr)*

*27- Master of Teachings and Education: Magos Provender-Technicus Obsidian 1110001 Locke (Atanix Triumvirae)*

*28- Master of Trade-Tech and Spoils: Archmagos Mercury Xi-0000 (Phaeton)*

*29-Lord of the Arena of Blades: Archmagos Biologis Xenologis S-Beta Xenophon (Atar-Median)*

*30-Protector-Master of the Mechanicus Fleets: Archmagos Reductor Thermal-Meteor Pectoral (Ordana)*

*31- Regent of the Tharsis Forge: Archmagos Mu-Cerium (Anvillus)*

*32- Mistress of Cartography: Magos Iridia White (Solemnium)*

*33-Master of Gravitic Technology: Archmagos Esotericus Silicon Sigma-Upsilon (Incaladion)*

*34-Warden of the Nyxian Databanks: Magos Cordantor Neutron Hydro-Noctis (Samech)*

*35-Ambassador to the Rashans: Magos Agatha Selenium (Cyraxus II)*

*36-Ambassador to the Necrons: Archmagos Technicus Clepsydras Xu (Helios)*

*On an unrelated subject, you asked to be warned if the Chosen of the Omnissiah made a move to establish contact with different Titan Legions of the Collegia Titanica. I can confirm she has done so in public this morning for a yet undated military operation, and an Astropathic message has been sent to Mars likely at the same time.*

*I remain your obedient servant,*

*Agent X-Delta-Delta*

**Triangle Citadel**

**3.365.298M35**

**Brigadier-General Tanya Sevrev**

More than a decade ago, Tanya would have not even thought possible to be invited to a parade-inspection where two hundred super-heavy tanks were present.

First above all, because as an anonymous officer serving in the Fay 20th, backwater planet in the backwater Moros Sub-Sector, no one would have thought to invite a regiment of Fay guardsmen unless a Byukur heir was the ‘official’ commander. Praise the God-Emperor it had never been the case – they would have all died against the Orks given the talents of those who shared the blood of the long-dead ex-Governor.

Secondly, with all the ‘best’ armoured formations the King of Kings Menelaus had deployed on the frontlines, finding two hundred super-heavy tanks to organise a parade would have likely been the next best thing to impossible. And assuming they found them, it would have been a pathetic spectacle, as most of the ‘Menelaus-pattern’ as they were nicknamed were prone to regular mechanical problems forbidding them to advance faster than a dying centipede.

Fortunately, things had changed, both for the Guard and the Planetary Defence Forces, and nowhere it was more evident than it today.

Mustered on the battleground there were two hundred super-heavy Cataphracts of different variants, each which would have been able to eat the sorry toys of the Menelaus era for breakfast. They were also twelve Baneblades, purchased from Mars and other Forge Worlds. Four Banehammers accompanied them, and in other day they would have seized the public’s attention. Unfortunately for the crew of these formidable machines, there were outclassed by the four Tigrus-built Fellblades. The massive twin-linked Accelerator Cannons very threatening, Tanya had to admit.

A proud officer of Weaver’s Own would never hide behind such an armoured colossus when there were centipedes, scorpions, and beetles to do so, but the temptation was there.

And then there was *Nyxian Glaive*. It was the first Nyx-conceived super-heavy Fellglaive tank inspired from M31 Great Crusade databanks and the recovery of the archeotech-tank *Obsidian Chariot* built by the Primarch Vulkan. Rumour was it had cost more than a large company of Khans, but it was definitely worth the sight painted in Salamander-green on the parade ground of the Triangle Citadel.

Oh yes, all guardsmen present today had gone a long way since their clash with the orks on an abandoned pass in the middle of uninhabited mountains.

A younger Lieutenant Tanya Sevrev would have not imagined counting the Chimeras by the hundreds. The older Brigadier-General counted them, and marvelled at the sight of the brand-new Astartes-crewed Quetzalcoatl Dragon Armours dancing over their heads. The White Scars emissaries had received their new ‘mounts’ mere hours ago, and already their ‘hunt-masters’ were showing off.

Tanya wanted to blame them, but she would likely do the same if she had Dragon Armours to play with.

Though it looked like the development of the ‘Scarlet-pattern Dreadnought Dragon Armours’ was not ready to reveal the results of its research and adaptation of ancient STC technology. Not unless they had an invisible mode too.

The minutes passed and more troops went to stand guard over new devices and war machines. Most of the equipment wasn’t really new for the veterans of Commorragh, but the quantity and quality of it was. Carapace armours had been given to all the frontline regiments for Operation Caribbean, but everyone knew the Artillery Regiments had been granted flak armour instead; today quite evidently this issue had been acknowledged and remedied to.

There were one thousand and one things running about, and as a result the Fay guardswoman wasn’t bored a single second when the Valkyries and the other aircraft landed in the middle of the parade ground, disgorging several dozen of red-armoured guardsmen. Naturally, all attention focused on them.

If these men had walked instead of being ferried by air however, they would have attracted attention nonetheless. Their armours were red, with bronze-coloured cuirasses on the chest and golden epaulets protecting their shoulders. Every single one of them had a pelisse fur hat upon his head, which had to be mightily uncomfortable under the warm Nyxian weather.

Their weapons, on the other hand, forced the respect were their uniforms did not. The swords, the lasguns, and all the visible instruments of death were glistening under the sun, and as the servo-owls focused on the leading guardsmen, Tanya could see the grips and the handles of the weapons were marked by age and the polishing which could only come when someone or a lot of someone trained tens of thousands of hours with them.

So these were the famous Vostroyan Firstborn Officer specially recommended by the Lord Commander Militant of the Imperial Guard.

“General Nikolai Rokossovsky?” asked General Werner Groener, standing as representative for her Celestial Highness today. “Welcome to Nyx.”

**Lisa’s Dome**

**3.390.298M35**

**Sister Alice Gaius**

“I’m not one to complain, but why are we giving a private shower to Her Celestial Highness’ Moth when she has already her own bath-pool and a cascade?”

“Stop asking questions, Claire.”

“Yes, Claire, stop asking questions, are you saying you aren’t happy to care of Lisa’s needs?”

The young black-haired woman born in the merchant blocks of Cartel Hive opened her mouth to answer...and Lisa turned her head at that moment, giving her *the* look. The one proclaiming ‘I am an adorable insect, please tender to all my needs.’

“And if I am not?”

There were many pilgrims and Tech-Priests who weren’t confident that the Titan-Moth, for all her holy abilities and intelligence, wasn’t able to properly understand the nuances of the Low Gothic’s language.

Alice didn’t share their point of view.

“Claire, be careful...” the young Templar Sororitas took several step backs, taking great care to not stumbling on the watering hoses they used to give the majestic insect her shower.

“She can go showering under the cascade, really.”

Lisa watched the younger recruit of the Order of the Silver Rose for an instant, before lowering her head...and beginning to literally salivate over Claire’s head.

“Berk! That’s-“

Lisa began to shake herself, which given that her body had received for several minutes an impressive quantity of water, had the predictable effect to create a miniature rainfall for those Sororitas which hadn’t retreated fast enough.

Poor Claire looked like she had been caught in the middle of a tropical storm once she was dragged away. Fortunately, apart from her pride, she was uninjured.

Fortunately, Lisa’s retaliation was over, and the Moth soon abandoned her showering spot to go in the direction where containers filled with pineapple of Aglaea were stored.

“Why did Claire choose Moth-handling as her secondary assignment?” the bearer of the Gaius legacy whispered.

The first assignment of the Silver Roses was to go to war with the Saint, but outside of the harsh war games these days, only one hundred-plus Sisters remained as part of the Honour Guard protecting her.

Besides, once the Living Saint was walking and protected by Space Marines and her swarm, it would take a very large army to not die like all the xenos did when facing her.

“Claire the Black, Claire the Red, or Claire the Blonde?”

Alice rolled her eyes.

“Very funny, Helena.”

Granted, there were a lot of girls named Claire asking to be accepted among their ranks, and unavoidably, some succeeded the hard selection trials.

“We will see who’s funny in a decade when all the ‘Taylors’ arrive as recruits...”

The young Sister tried not to blanch or sound panicked. Until now, she had tried very hard not to think about the fact millions of newborn children had been given the same first name wherever they lived in Hive Attica, Euboea, or Athena.

But now that it was mentioned, yes, there were going to face an infernal situation in a few years...assuming they were still alive to see it, of course.

“We will deal with it when it comes,” Alice said bravely. “I suppose we will certainly use their last names to differentiate them. That or do what the Catachan do...”

“Give everyone horrible nicknames?”

“Pretty much,” there was an obvious downside: when you did this, everyone wanted to make you bite the dust, but the Jungle Fighters were good enough they could beat you with one hand behind their back...and yes, this was literal: Major-General Schwarz had expressly ordered his ‘hell-sergeants’ to ‘go easy’ on the ‘babies’.

Translation: they took only a few hours to recover from what the Catachan guardsmen referred as ‘light exercise’.

“But I think Claire the Black chose Moth-handling because she is able to make our painting tutors genuinely cry, and the stocks of marble aren’t infinite where the sculpture ateliers are concerned. She doesn’t have the ‘tech-gift’, given how she scared the toaster-cogboys, and she isn’t exactly space sailor-material. So...err...that left Moth-handling?”

“There’s still language study, historical research and...religious seminary, no?”

“Does Claire strike you as the girl who want to know to read a M33 prayer text when artillery shells are falling around us?”

“Now that you mention it...no,” Alice Gaius recognised. Claire ‘the Black’ was good, very good as soon as she had a gun or a blade in her hands, but the hours where Legate Dumas insisted they strengthened their faith in the God-Emperor and His Living Saint were not where her strengths lay. “It’s too bad for her, though. I think she could have been the Palatine of our group if she could find interest in the more...boring aspects of our duties.”

“Well, it is boring, as you said,” her friend and Sister told her. “And not everyone wants to be a Palatine or a Celestian.” Few ranks for the moment had been introduced in the Order of the Silver Rose. The Legate took the orders directly from the mouth of Her Celestial Highness, and relayed her orders to ten Celestial Sisters, although the nickname ‘Celestian’ had rapidly replaced it in the day-to-day conversations. And each Celestian had now ten Palatines to serve as her staff and command the companies of Sisters.

“I am aware of that and...oh, no! Lisa has smelled the Tech-Priests preparing the strawberries!”

“SISTERS!” Helena shouted. “WE HAVE A STRAWBERRY SITUATION! RUN!”

**Hive Athena**

**Grand Strategium**

**3.400.298M35**

**General Nikolai Rokossovsky**

Nikolai had the best hopes for his long stay on this world. The Strategiums were properly cooled, there were a lot of available drinks, and so far he hadn’t detected any sign of utter craziness in the people he was meeting.

Everything was fine...well, more than fine, it was not every day you met a Living Saint personally.

Nikolai had tried to prepare himself for the first time...and if he had to be honest with himself, he hadn’t been very successful. The golden wings and the halo of the God-Emperor surrounding her were so powerful it gave you the feeling you were so tiny and powerless.

After a few minutes, it went better. It helped that Her Celestial Highness was doing her best to not slam the full might of her divine power right onto his face. The Vostroyan General had seen it happen once so far, and the noble had not even been able to crawl away under her severe gaze afterwards.

“Right. Let’s begin by what I wasn’t satisfied reading the reports you and your subordinates wrote after Commorragh,” Nikolai began bluntly.

On the other side of the hololith, the Saint raised an eyebrow before smirking.

“Some people would ask me the permission to deliver me the bad news.”

“Bah!” He added a few...explicit expressions in Vostroyan after. It wasn’t like his new superior was familiar with the lesser dialects of his homeworld. “You have millions of pilgrims and flatterers to sing your praises. I don’t remember playing the part of these nullities was why you accepted my candidature.”

The saintly lips emitted a short giggle.

“True enough. Now since we’ve established giving you a diplomatic role is a lost cause, tell me what you found that is unbearable for your Vostroyan sensibilities.”

“Two things, Lady General,” Nikolai had at first begun with ‘your Celestial Highness’, but his superior in all aspects had insisted she preferred her military rank. “The first and most damageable is the insufficient effectives of the liaison officers, be they Aeronautica-Guard, Guard-Guard, or other scenarios. I admit, as long as you are in range and everything goes as you predict, you manage to make it work...by sheer strength of will and air-superiority insects if nothing else. But the moment you’re not in play anymore or the front grows too large, your forces lose at least nine and maybe as far as twelve percent of their coordination and tactical efficiency. Not to mention the numerous cases of friendly fire incidents.”

To his relief, the Victor of Commorragh simply nodded.

“Massive increase of liaison officers,” she said...before grimacing. “This isn’t exactly one of the things I can count on Major-General Schwarz to train the recruits, unfortunately. Not to mention the problems it may cause with the Adeptus Astartes. Many of their officers only accept to answer my suggestions.”

Nikolai would have been very surprised if the latter point didn’t exist. The Space Marines preserved jealously their independence and though they bowed to a Living Saint, they wouldn’t accept lightly orders from someone who in their eyes was unproven.

“We may forget the liaison for the Adeptus Astartes, but my point remains for the other liaison jobs.”

“And your points are accepted,” the ruler of the Hive World of Nyx said. “I’m afraid though since you have proposed it, you will have the honour to make it working.”

Well...he supposed there were worse problems to face. Like fighting a mutant spawn on a collapsing battlefield with only a broken sabre and a half-crippled platoon. He had really believed it was over for him that day.

“Second point, your armoured regiments are logistically well-thought out, but they have too many tanks for too few companies. In one word, there are not enough flexible.”

This time, he knew the point was far less well-received.

“We needed those tanks to break through at Commorragh!”

“No,” Nikolai immediately countered. “You needed more initiative from your Captains and Lieutenants commanding your armour, and you didn’t get it because most of your Colonels and top aces were permanently trying to amass the greatest armoured fist available before slamming it on the xenos’ fingers. I will admit that when you struck true, it was absolutely devastating. But several times your tank specialists were unable to execute flanking attacks, which despite the difficult terrain would have guaranteed an utter destruction of the forces arrayed in front of you. At the very least, you missed five or six times a complete encirclement of several Eldar armies.”

“Encirclement isn’t the alpha and the omega of military tactics,” the golden-winged servant of the God-Emperor said unconvinced.

“Oh absolutely,” Nikolai approved. “I’m glad you aren’t thinking like some Cadians who think about tactics from the moment they wake up to when they fall asleep. The true art of destroying an enemy passes by the annihilation of its logistics and war machine, and encirclement rarely does that by itself. But it is not a reason not to seize the opportunity unless you think the alternative will deal greater damage to your enemy. And while at some moments of the Battle of the Port of Lost Souls *not* encircling the Eldar forces was the correct decision, as hours passed there were critical moments where you should have finished them instead of allowing them to run.”

It had not changed anything in the end, but the fact one enemy failed to seize the opportunity didn’t mean a second one wouldn’t. Especially as the Battle of Commorragh didn’t go unnoticed by the galaxy at large.

“Flexibility is the name of the day if you want your companies to thrive at the tactical level, the divisions at the strategic one, and the army groups at the operational level.”

“It will demand a significant increase in junior officers.”

“It will.”

The black-eyed Lady General stayed immobile and emotionless for a few seconds before waving her hand.

“I give you one week to present me a first report of the modifications you want to adopt at every level. You have my permission to ‘borrow’ a few of the current officers currently awaiting their next assignment here or in the orbital garrisons to help you. Though I will warn you, I will bring most of the other members of my staff to listen to your presentation. And we may organise a few war games to see which ideas function better.”

“I would expect nothing less.” To be sure, it would be a challenge, but if he didn’t succeed there, it would mean his doctrinal methods were in need of readjustment anyway. “It is all I was ready to criticise and comment upon for now.”

“Good.” Several Tech-Priests answered a command he had not seen, and a galactic map of the Imperium materialised on the hololith, one accompanied by countless figures which represented available regiments.

“As I’m sure General Groener and other officers have informed you, I have begun the first stages of preparations to remove the threat represented by the Ymga Monolith and the Necrons owning it. Given the situation and my past actions, Orks and the damned forces of the Ruinous Powers are likely to be included in the opposition.”

A button was pushed, and three planets were selected above the thousands of dots indicating Guard recruitment worlds.

“I am already preparing to create a new Army Group for the Nyx Sector. Given the high rate of volunteers at Nyx and Wuhan, it will be primarily men from these two worlds, though each planet has willingly agreed to contribute with a few elite regiments. I estimate I will be able to field between 120 and 150 million guardsmen in ten years.”

“It is a respectable force,” the Vostroyan General acknowledged, passing a hand in his long brown beard. “And I suppose Indiga is logical, since you expect a lot of xenos. How many did they promise you?”

“Army Group Indiga will be twenty million-strong.”

“Hum...” he had to ask to a few red robes to show him the correct data and it was while not optimal, not disappointing either. “They could have given you a few million more, but I suppose they have received other demands. I am not convinced by your third choice, however.”

“Krieg landed on my lap because of politics,” Lady Weaver readily admitted. “I have absolutely zero confidence in their prowess for arms, which is why entire barracks on different planets of the Nyx Sector are busy being built and Commissars and training officers are going to give them a remedial course they will remember for the rest of their lives.”

Nikolai was internally divided. On the one hand, it was...politics. And Krieg guardsmen had an infamously terrible reputation, though the Vostroyan General hadn’t been so lucky to verify this infamy with his own eyes. On the other hand, Krieg had still willingly given Her Celestial Highness the respectable number of fifty million guardsmen. And the standard order of battle of tanks, artillery, and equipment was nothing to sneeze at either.

“I reserve myself the right to shoot the Krieger commander myself if he try something as stupid as to try to open ‘trade negotiations’ with the enemy.”

The Saint coughed politely before smiling.

“And I won’t stop you,” was the comforting answer. “As for the other Army Groups, my staff and I were busy searching the best candidates before your arrival. I would have loved a Cadian Army Group, but...”

Nikolai made a noise of sympathy. Yes, with the number of Cadians summoned home for what promised to be a defining war at the Gate, obtaining a regiment of Shock Troopers – or a regiment of Cadians, period – was generating bureaucratic wars and required to expend enormous amount of influence. Obtaining an Army Group of them was maybe not impossible, but Nikolai would prefer swimming naked in the Vostroyan Southern Polar Sea for one hour rather than pay all the favours which would come with it.

“How many Army Groups did you want in the first place?”

“Ten,” the General whistled. “And yes, I feel they are going to be absolutely necessary. You will be shown data in the next days which will show you exactly why.”

“In this case...” Nikolai cleared his throat. “I would be completely lacking in my duties if I didn’t inform you there is for sure an important tithe year coming on Vostroya within the next five years. Many of our unbroken regiments are coming back home to be rebuilt back to strength, and several notable Crusades also involving millions of Vostroyan guardsmen have recently ended. I don’t think receiving the complete tithe is possible, but forming an Army Group with them and other units of our Sector should be possible.”

“How many?”

General Rokossovsky stared at the radiance of the Living Saint for several seconds. It would of course cost him several favours, but then it wasn’t a small operation, and this would repay a small part of the debt Vostroya owed the God-Emperor.

“I can promise twenty million guardsmen, with at least a core of fifteen million Firstborn Vostroyan soldiers.”

“I have no objection to the Vostroyan forces joining us,” and immediately around the room, a small army of red robes went active, canting unintelligible things and activating data-projectors. “Other suggestions, General?”

“Given the homeworld of the famous Major-General Schwarz, I would have expected you to attempt a Catachan tithe,” in fact, Nikolai suspected she did, but better verifying.

“I did,” the Basileia of Nyx admitted. “But the tithe time was already passed, and I only was able to add one more regiment to the one already present here. It goes without saying it is not enough to create an Army Group.”

No, it wasn’t. Too bad, because the Catachan Jungle Fighters were tough bastards and made sure that victorious or defeated, the enemy would cry in their beds for hundreds of nights. Unless you were an Ork. These bloody crazy xenos thought it was fun to tangle with a Catachan warrior.

There were ‘Guard elite planets’ which were available for tithes, according to the latest rumours, but which unfortunately would be of little utility against the level of enemies the Living Saint expected to face. The Elysian Drop Troops...well, Vostroyans were not too fond of these glory hounds, but here sending them against an opposition possessing devastating anti-air batteries would see them shredded. If you didn’t want an airborne preliminary assault, you didn’t send Elysians. He would not support sending Mordian troops into a warzone where they would stand in line and be massacred regiment by regiment.

“I was also thinking about Ventrillia.”

Nikolai gave his superior a humorous look.

“They certainly can be valuable assets on a battlefield...the problem is that while their courage isn’t in doubt, they attract other ‘blue-blooded’ and ‘aristocratic’ regiments like flies on a...well, expect to see a lot of Munitorum requests if you manage to obtain them. And you will have dozens of Rogue Traders rushing here. All willing to smile at you while you reimburse the considerable debts they now owe to Ventrillian share-holders.”

“If they fight well, I can stomach a lot of side-effects. Other suggestions?”

Nikolai Rokossovsky had a few more, but he didn’t know how close they were in a tithing cycle or how many Army Groups could become available. The Bifröst Huscarls were tough – not as tough as Vostroyans, but then few regiments were – and proponents of armoured and heavy infantry regiments. Faeburn could be a judicious choice; their men and women weren’t Cadians, but they were trained to high standards.

“I would advise contacting Lord Militant von Oberstein for more information about the Army Groups and the military tithes which can be granted without removing too many men from the defences of Obscurus, Lady General.” Nikolai advised. “And while staying vague for the idiots of the rear-lines, we must find a catchy name for the Operation you want to muster these Army Groups for.”

“For the moment, this is ‘the Hunt for the Monolith’.”

The veteran Vostroyan coughed in embarrassment. It wasn’t the worst name he had ever heard...but it was hardly the best either.

“I would advise to...find another name. For morale purposes,” he added quickly.

“I am not going to call it Operation Oblivion,” the Saint retorted. “I think it would result immediately in a morale decrease across all Army Groups. No, what I need is something catchy but which doesn’t say anything about our intentions. General? What was the name of the province you were born on Vostroya?”

The new chief of staff shrugged and answered.

“I was born in Administrative Zone Volga, sub-Industrial hub Stalingrad.”

It was difficult to guess what the Living Saint was thinking, but if Nikolai Rokossovsky had not thought it was nearly impossible, he would swear Lady Weaver had heard the name before.

“Then it will be Operation Stalingrad.”

Well, at least it was more martial than ‘Hunt for the Monolith’...

**Hive Athena**

**3.410.298M35**

**Regina-Consort Wei Cao**

“You see? Your decoration tastes considerably improve when you’re taking free days.”

Wei was a very mature woman, so she did not tell her Basileia ‘I told you so’.

“And now,” the Planetary Governor of Wuhan continued, “using the dictatorial powers your naive soul was too relieved to give me, I decree you will cease to work once in every seven days.”

“Your tyranny really knows no bounds,” her ‘victim’ whispered.

“I know,” Wei chuckled, caressing the black hair of her paramour.

She didn’t tell her openly how worried she had been after her return from her meeting with the Necrons. On the outside, Taylor may have fooled a lot of people who didn’t know her, but the frenetic days where she had plunged herself into mountains of paperwork and countless reunions had proved that she was definitely not fine.

To be honest, the Wuhanese noble was also sleeping far worse now that she knew what kind of Necron horrors could wake up at any moment without warning. But for all her understanding of the dangers caused by avalanches of bureaucracy, her days remained far shorter and less stressful than those of her lover. And while Wei continued religiously her physical exercises every morning, she wasn’t sparing with Space Marines or lifting weights as heavy as two or three groxes.

“Now what do we have here...another marble fountain?”

“Sculpted in Indigan marble no less,” the insect-mistress feigned a convincing sneer for a few seconds. “Some artists both inside and outside the Dawnbreaker Guard requested materials for their talents not to rust, and well...”

Wei giggled.

“It is your attempt to give the middle finger to the Ultramarines, isn’t it?”

“Now, now, my dear Consort. Would I really do something that...spiteful?”

The Regina-Consort gave one of her most splendid smiles to the Living Saint.

“Taylor, you try very hard not to let grudges govern your private and official life, but sometimes, you’re really combining the best and the worst of politicians. I know you purchased grapes’ genetic material from several sources to support the budding wine economy of Nyx. Now there’s the marble...one which I may add cost easily twice more expensive than the one Ultramar sells, and the servants of the Ultramarines pretty much outright rob everyone in every transaction they can.”

“Okay, maybe it is a way to avenge one of my grudges...” The Basileia grumbled some unintelligible words afterwards, and Wei thought they sounded like ‘I will make a fortune on their backs’.

Wei was a gracious Regina, so she didn’t comment on how the ‘maybe’ was insincere.

“Okay, now that you are not anxious about using your prestige to commission more artwork, I was thinking about proposing a new contest for the new mosaic I have in mind for Level Fifteen...”

They descended towards the last steps and entered the garden where they took refuge so often when she managed to...convince her paramour there was such a thing as overworking.

Today, though, she immediately realised something was different. And since her observation skills were far better than a decade ago, she had no problem realising what was missing. There was no Space Marine in sight. In fact, there was no one save the two of them...and the insect-bodyguards.

Wei was about to open her mouth when the miniature firework illuminated the garden, and instantly a small army of spiders and beetles accompanied by crabs and other curious specimens surged into the main alley where they were walking.

And they were all carrying instruments of music, that they begun to play in movement a joyous melody. Acting on this pre-ordered signal, other spiders pushed golden levers and activated the water animations of the fountains.

Hololithic animations of gold and silver were switched on, and soon the garden was a gigantic marvel of light and sounds.

And soon, it was like the fountains weren’t running with water, but with chocolate! And insects wearing very impressive imitations of butler clothes escorted them to the heart of the garden where a Baalite Scorpion awaited, a platter of platinum in its pincers.

The box on it seemed absolutely tiny for such a gigantic amount of precious metal, but Wei almost stopped breathing when it was opened and revealed an auramite ring to which was crimped a jewel which was not so much a ruby than a living embodiment of fire and blood into a stone prepared by mortal hands.

“Will you marry me, Wei?”

One question. A single answer possible.

“Yes, my love.”

**Somewhere in the Webway**

**Seer Maea Teallysis**

Before she saw one Harlequin or even heard the shadow of their laughter, Maea knew instinctively their fault.

This Webway tunnel was one of the most secure between Malan’tai and Ulthwé. There was no way she could be lost or face any danger whatsoever unless she chose deliberately to leave it. And in addition to this, she would likely need to do a lot of detours and cross many, many Gates before arriving to more dangerous sections.

The Webway was a shadow of its former glory and the destruction of Commorragh had delivered catastrophic destruction on some of its largest arteries, but the millions of years-old paths were still beyond the imagination of most Asuryani. As such, the sections the Rangers and other Aspect Warriors of Malan’tai patrolled and controlled were in truth likely bigger than a Craftworld.

All of this to say there should be absolutely no way for her to be in danger before she had made a thousand steps.

And yet she was, in a Webway tunnel she didn’t recognise at all, and in front of a monster her blade and skills had no hope to beat.

The young Seer swallowed heavily.

“By Isha, I blame Cegorach.”

The half-naked super-predator looked at her like she was an inferior insect before smirking.

“Ah, another victim of our dear clown’s little jokes.” The monster gave her one more glance before turning around and presented her naked back to her. “You are far from your home, baby Seer.”

To any person not her teachers, Maea would have lashed out. She was making enormous progress in reading the threads of fate and her cryogenic abilities had increased massively this last micro-cycle.

Against the owner of this voice though, lashing out would likely result in her receiving a dagger in her eye before she realised what happened. And there was also the minor threat of the five Wyches lazily waiting nearby.

“So I’ve gathered, oh Queen of Blades. Which is the closest Craftworld I can reach from here? Ulthwé or Alaitoc?”

“Lugganath is the closest Craftworld, Seer,” a black-haired Wych intervened, pointing at her a tunnel where runes which had once been notable with Biel-Tan.

“Thank you,” Maea took a step forwards...and immediately stopped as the Queen of Blades purred behind her.

The dagger pointed at her throat was also another ‘invitation’ to not do anything...unwise.

Maea felt a feeling very close to complete panic spread throughout her body.

“You were sent here by Cegorach.”

Maea swallowed.

“That’s what-“

“He marked your life-thread and likely activated at least briefly his Core Gate in the Black Library to send you here. The Laughing God has begun to activate it now that She-Who-Thirsts is no more, but one thing I know for sure is that he isn’t wasteful. Who are you?”

“Maea Teallysis, Seer of Malan’tai...”

“And what mission did the ringmaster give you?” The crimson-haired Aeldari asked in an almost bored tone.

“To recover a Cronesword from Solemnace.”

The female Asuryani had expected many reactions, many of them ending with her death.

The Queen of Blades just exploded in laughter.

“Oh that’s very good, especially coming from him! You and what army?”

Her expression must have betrayed that she had no military support whatsoever, because the muscled Queen of the Arenas laughed harder.

“I’m in a good mood today, so I am going to reveal you one of the old secrets of the Aeldari, baby Seer,” the ancient monster murmured in her ear. “Exactly fourteen Aeldari managed to enter Solemnace galleries for a few heartbeats and escape afterwards in all history, and one of them is me. No one, no one has managed to recover the prize he or she wanted when he launched the invasion. And all the times, the army-sized invaders were defeated and captured, becoming another addition in the collections of the Necron master-thief. You see, Solemnace is a planet-sized museum, and psychic tracking skills don’t work correctly there. You will have to search the galleries one by one, and believe me, the arch-thief isn’t going to give you a lifetime to find what you’re seeking. Abandon your quest. Even if you were as powerful as I am, finding Solemnace to start with is a nontrivial challenge.”

Maea would have nodded in acceptance...except of course she had still this dagger under her throat. Fortunately, it was released seconds later.

“The Harlequins in general try to give easier missions which do not result in the suicide of the ‘heroes’...”

“But it is such a splendid tale!”

Queen of Blades, Wyches, and Seer eyes turned to an old pillar several feet away. And sure enough, there was a Harlequin perched atop it.

Donned in vibrant gold and red, his colours identified him as a Great Harlequin of the Masque of the Laughing Circus.

“It is utter stupidity,” the Queen of Blades retorted to Cegorach’s servant. “We have thrown enough expendable and non-expendable assets since the dawn of the Empire into Solemnace to not enrich the thief’s collection now that we’re nearly extinct.”

There was a flash and Maea realised the Queen of Blades had thrown negligently her dagger at the top of the pillar. The Great Harlequin had managed to dodge...barely.

“Now bring back this baby Seer to Malan’tai and stop importunate me. I have other priorities than serving as amusement for His Masques.”

“And what if I told you the Dark Throne of the C’Tan has been activated and Weaver will fight a war against it.”

For the first time, the crimson-haired predator seemed vaguely interested.

“I would tell my dear Empress certainly knows how to choose her enemies.” Lelith Hesperax, also known as Aenaria Eldanesh, purred dangerously. Maea internally groaned. At least she had a good idea how these ridiculous and humiliating rumours had spread across the Webway! “I’d better check the completion of my new arena otherwise I-“

“The Stormlord is certainly going to be woken up, and our species will not last much longer if servants of the Silent King are unleashed upon this galaxy. Oblivion comes, Aenaria Eldanesh.”

“What happened to ‘let’s wait a few thousand cycles before making a bigger mess than Commorragh’?” the mistress of the arenas and leader of the Cult of Blades complained loudly. “I still don’t see why I should be involved in your masquerade.”

“Your arena will be completed before Weaver departs.”

“That’s excellent news...and I’m not enjoying the insinuation, *Harlequin*.”

As a new dagger danced between the fingers of the Aeldari, the voice of Cegorach’s servant was much more...conciliatory.

“Trazyn the thief will be there! And there might be opportunity for heirloom and artefact’s trade negotiations.”

The dagger stopped moving.

“And what do I have to do to ensure this...comedy of yours come to fruition?” the Malan’tai Asuryani wasn’t an expert in threats, but she could recognise one, especially as the crimson hair of Hesperax were revealing a lot of blades attached to them...

“Take Maea Teallysis as your apprentice and present her into the Arena before you dance.”

The monster laughed again, but this time it was a cold, hungry sound, one devoid of humour.

“Very funny. I don’t train weaklings.”

“Cegorach remembers-“

The dagger didn’t miss this time, and stabbed the Harlequin’s in his left arm.

Another dagger materialised in the Queen’s hand.

“**Where** **is the Champion who believed she could mend the galaxy with her sword**?”

This time Maea was sure no mortal voice had spoken. The question had seemed to come from the very depths of the Webway.

“She has grown tired of fixing the messes and being ignored when she tried to reason the imbeciles of the Phoenix Court, Cegorach. She is old now. And she knows there isn’t anything that can mend this universe.” The glance she gave Maea was really, really not friendly. “My last student betrayed me during the First Fall, oh Laughing God. And you want her following in these footsteps? A weak descendant of our species, with an incomplete education in the psychic arts, and so desperately blind to the art of the sword? Usually, your jokes are a bit better than that, dear ‘Master of the Webway’.”

“**There is a debt to be repaid. Train her until your new arena is completed**.”

The influence of the God disappeared, and the Harlequin went missing as fast as he had appeared.

The insults which went out of the Queen of Blades’ mouth were rather impressive and imaginative.

“This is going to be one of those cycles, isn’t it?” the crimson-haired Aeldari murmured after running – momentarily – out of curses.

“Now.” Two eyes darker than night stared again at the young Seer. “What I am going to do with you?”

**Ultima Sector**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Hive Athena**

**3.432.298M35**

**Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach**

The end of the galaxy was at hand. No other explanation was reasonable to describe what was happening before his very eyes.

Tech-Priests had stopped moving their mechadendrites and let them fall upon their stations or whatever was nearby. Navy officers were standing aghast.

Even Space Marines were standing with expression of disbeliefs on their faces, at least those who had not donned their helmets...but the young Rogue Trader was ready to bet the helmeted ones were in a similar state.

Leet was leaving his audience with Lady Weaver...and it had **not** ended in a series of shout, screams or loud and violent vociferation!

By the Golden Throne, what was happening?

“Why are you all so quiet?” The Basileia seemed to have realised how silent the audience room had become.

“You did not scream at Leet, my Lady.”

“Really?” The golden-winged mistress of spiders shrugged. “Yes, you’re right. But he didn’t give me any reason to and his new idea of a *Battlefleet Nyx* video game was acceptable by his standards. He only asked more ‘ultra-beer’ to be stocked for his departure, and I’m rather sure it wasn’t for his personal cellar. I’m not going to scream for the sake of it.”

Lady Weaver watched Mechanicus and Navy representatives with a thin smile.

“I’m afraid that if you expected most of this audience to result in a shouting match, you are doomed to be disappointed, gentlemen and gentlewomen. Now I think your new duties are waiting for you. Everyone saves Rogue Trader Bach and his retinue, leave the room.”

The order obviously didn’t apply to the Basileia’s Space Marines and the guardsmen of the Fay 20th who stood against the walls. One uninformed might have wondered if such a numerous number of protectors was necessary given the presence of two hundred-plus ‘war insects’, but the audience room was more an audience throne hall with all the alcoves and sub-rooms it entailed, and they had been a series of assassinations this morning, the first in a few days.

Incidentally, assassins and the order-givers had all been arrested by now, six hours after the deed, and all were going to enjoy the legendary courtesy of the Nyx penitentiary system.

“Your Celestial Highness,” Juliana and Adriana had, like he had expected, advanced directly without him introducing them. Well, at least something was going according to his plan. “We are-“

“The twin daughters of Lord High Admiral von Lohengramm of Kar Duniash, I know.” The Victor of Commorragh gave them a very unimpressed look. “Your presence has been known to me far before I returned from Wuhan.”

And as the insect mistress had evidently prepared for this moment, three bees flew into the room, each landing before one of them and handing them a voluminous file.

Wolfgang opened him...and almost burst into laughter, as these were holo-picts and other ‘visual evidence’ of the twins presenting him their new sexy lingerie in various...compromising positions.

“How did you obtain it?” Wolfgang tried to stay serious, but he had to admit his voice was progressively failing. “You weren’t even in this star system...”

“Wolfgang, I am Lady Nyx. There are millions of souls who seek my favour by delivering me information they feel I have to know...”

The blonde-haired holder of a Warrant of Trade didn’t accept this explanation.

“No, to have such a massive file and all the evidence within it, you must have convinced the senior Tech-Priest of my ship to release you the information.”

That his crew could know Julia and Adriana had been aboard the Pavian Victory, he could accept it. But neither he nor the twins were walking half-naked in public. And the tech-security in his quarters was of the higher-level, courtesy of the Nyx Mechanicus...a Mechanicus which wouldn’t refuse anything to the ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’.

“Well, at least it will us save time, your Celestial Highness,” Julia recovered from the surprise in record time. “You know why we’re here. We want to go with Rogue Trader Wolfgang Bach in his expedition in the Eastern Fringe and beyond.”

“And the answer is no.” The woman ruling over the Hive World said. “Anything else?”

Wolfgang presented a calm expression to the Dawnbreaker Guard, but deep inside, he was laughing at the gaping expressions of the twins. After their initial night, the two had accepted bit by bit that he could say ‘no’ and ‘hell, no’ to them, but in their Navy duties, it wasn’t exactly the case. The officer commanding their squadron had a strong tendency to roll over for them.

“Err...we can appeal to our father?”

“Excellent idea!” Damn it, when the insect mistress bared her teeth like that, she was really scary. “I will insist to send all the evidence you have in your hands by the first courier ship to Kar Duniash. I am sure Lord High Admiral von Lohengramm will be absolutely delighted to know what sort of activities his daughters have been up in his free time.”

“This is blackmail!”

The smile, if anything, became larger and one step removed from giggling.

“Why yes, I suppose it is,” Lady Weaver said in a pious tone that fooled absolutely no one. “Not, mind you, that I really need it. I have exchanged more than three dozen Astropathic messages with your father, Lieutenant-Commanders, and our areas of cooperation are far more important than whatever dance you’re doing in your bedrooms.”

Julia’s face was reddening, and Adriana was going the same way.

“You could give us what we want.” It was more plea than arrogance speaking in these words.

“I could,” the Basileia readily admitted. “But as I’m sure you are already aware, risking your Cobra-class Destroyers into the dangerous regions of space the Bach-led expedition will venture into is nothing more than an elaborate suicide. Many of the cosmic and living dangers plaguing this region would break the void shields of a Destroyer easily.”

“But you-“

Two spiders were suddenly on them, launching what looked like lassos of silk, and smaller ones fell from the sailing, throwing inoffensive projectiles right over their mouths.

“I hate being interrupted when I’m making a point.” The reproach was spoken in good humour, but Wolfgang knew there was a very hard foundation underneath. “As I was saying, gentlewomen, your ships are insufficient to participate in this journey. Now there are a few Light Cruisers which could be detached in some months, though it would require to delay for weeks an expedition of that magnitude, something I’m always reluctant to do given how short on time we are and how much it annoys my Mistress of Ships. It also would require either to transfer two Lieutenant-Commanders from Destroyer command to the role of second or third-in-command on a Light Cruiser, which is as I’m sure you will recognise, is a lot of paperwork.

Julia managed by a considerable effort of will to spit out the silk out of her mouth.

“Or you could give us command of the Light Cruiser.”

The Basileia chuckled.

“Well, let it not be said you don’t lack ambition. Wolfgang, do you believe they are ready to be promoted to Commander rank?”

There was only a single answer he could give to that. Lady Taylor Hebert was testing him, and though he enjoyed the relationships he had with the twins very much, he wasn’t going to lie for them, not when the query came from a Living Saint.

“No, they don’t.”

The insect mistress nodded in approval, and Wolfgang knew for sure it had been a test...one he had passed. And the gaping expressions of Julia and Adriana were absolutely worthy of more picts, just as the silk bindings were removed by the spiders.

“Julia and Adriana von Lohengramm. From the reports available to me, you ended up respectively seventh and tenth of your promotions at Kar Duniash, and unlike too many blue-blooded Admiral sons and daughters, your father honestly seems to have believed you would succeed or fail on your own merits. So these ranks are worthy of commendation. However, your practical experience in the years which came after graduation is rather limited. Leaving aside the fact the Sector you were assigned to at first really had few enemies to eliminate, nepotism played a role in your rapid ascension.”

The voice of the Basileia went more thoughtful.

“I’ve conferred with Admiral Müller, and he agrees that while you hold promise, you lack the years of battle-experience you should have earned as normal Lieutenants. If you had been at Commorragh with us, I would have a better idea how you react under fire, but you weren’t. And sending you right in the void with Wolfgang where the entire structure is either Mechanicus or Rogue Trader-aligned is guaranteed to be either a splendid success or a crushing disaster, with plenty of officers betting on the latter. So I’m not going to do that.”

“And what *are* your intentions, your Celestial Highness?” Adriana asked warily.

“Well, you will finish your service and patrols aboard your Destroyers in the Nyx Sector until the end of the year,” Lady Weaver told them as it was the most normal thing after what they had spoken. “And then Lord Admiral Neidhart Müller may require some devoted assistants to organise tedious fleet exercises, ship commissioning, inspections from ships transferred from mothball, and a million other things a Lord Admiral needs bright and eager young minds for while he devotes himself to more important subjects.”

The golden-winged ruler shrugged.

“*If* your Navy superiors confirm you are indeed ready for the burden and duties of captainship after the coming decade, I will approve giving you a Light Cruiser or whatever warship is suited for your style of command. I might even consider including you in whatever operations Wolfgang Bach will participate into assuming he returns in time for Operation Stalingrad.”

Just like that, Wolfgang knew the Living Saint had them, for in their eyes burned the flames of determination willing to destroy any challenge coming in their way.

“Prove yourself, or don’t, the choice is yours,” the Basileia murmured something, and a Space Marine delivered her a fourth folder which looked absolutely identical to the three which had been presented to them.

“Sooo...” Lady Taylor Hebert smirked, showing them an image where they were in a position where there was no doubt who was doing what to whom. “When is the marriage?”

Julia and Adriana went redder than the fruits of Ruby’s Harvest in less than three seconds.

“That was evil, your Celestial Highness.”

“Nonsense, it was payback.”

What was it with all these scary women? Where was the God-Emperor when you needed him?

**Battleship *Hornet***

**3.458.298M35**

**Judge Missy Byron**

“Dragon?”

“Yes, Missy?”

“Don’t you think the Custodes lack some...originality in how they decorate their ships?”

“Why do you say that?” the Tinker asked innocently...before bursting into laughter.

The reason of their hilarity was completely evident when one saw the bridge of the Battleship. Walls, ceiling, hololiths, auspex stations, and secondary monitoring stations had one point in common. They were painted in bright gold.

No, she wasn’t joking. And the rest of the ship had a similar coloration.

“I recognise this poor ship could benefit from a change of decoration,” Dragon acknowledged once they had stopped their crisis of hilarity. “There’s nothing wrong with a dominant colour, but here it’s...taking to an extreme, I will admit.”

“I think people will begin to fear the colour of yellow if they stay on the *Hornet* for too long,” Missy grimaced. “Seriously, what possessed the Terran decorators to go that far? Are the Custodes satisfied only by an overabundance of gold?”

Obviously, she had confirmation the trio of Watchers were present in Hive Athena, otherwise she wouldn’t dare criticising the decisions of these humourless transhumans.

“I’m more worried about the spartan living conditions for the crew, to be honest,” Dragon showed a grim expression she rarely maintained for long and not even trying to make a pun from ‘spartan’. “This Falchion-class Battleship has been built with extremely advanced technology, that much I won’t say anything against. Every battery is fully automated, the internal circuits and the alloys are several percent of efficiency ahead of what the El Dorado and the other highly advanced warships Mars sent to support us can boast. But it’s a ship which was built for Custodes’ living standards, and they are far below what Navy officers and under-officers are used to in the Sector. If we deploy the ship with this absence of comfort, we risk a mutiny before the *Hornet* reaches a Mandeville Point.”

“True, the beds, the furniture...there are a lot we will need to change.” Missy gave an ironic look to her fellow parahuman. “Are you sure you want me to begin the re-decoration efforts? After, you are the one who will take this warship into battle first.”

“Unless my memory is failing me, you are going to use the *Hornet* as flagship to conduct a second inspection of the Suebi Sub-Sector in a few years.”

“Yes, but I doubt this time we will have the bad luck to be caught into a military engagement,” the Shaker woman replied. “And I don’t want to move my stuff every time I transfer custody of the Battleship to you.”

“Lazy attitude,” the Mistress of Dragons commented.

“Have you seen the paperwork necessary to move a large bed through the customs?”

Missy wanted to obtain a murmur of commiseration. She didn’t get it from the Tinker.

“Why would you try to move a class-A bed into these quarters? You do not sleep with anyone-“

“I am really well aware of my lack of boyfriends, thank you very much,” Missy stuck out her tongue. “But I won’t renounce. I will find someone. After all, Taylor and Dennis did, and you are all spending lovely nights studying stuff with your Tigrus girlfriend.”

“Excuse me?” Dragon growled. “I am doing important work!”

“There’s only Leet and myself who have no love relationship,” the former member of the Wards continued, feigning to not have heard the Tinker’s retort. “And since no one in his right mind will date Leet...”

“Perhaps,” Dragon said sarcastically, “you should not have tried to flatten a fortress with one mountain in a single attack. I think it scared a little bit the suitors.”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol Sector**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**0.500.298M35**

**Solar Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

At least his brother wasn’t breaking the furniture of his quarters this time. The God-Emperor knew it had cost billions of whatever Imperial currency he was aware of to erase the damage and refurbish it to something equalling its former glory.

Evidently, the rare non-Vandire men and women invited in this inner sanctum of the Master of Administratum mustn’t be aware of the sheer amount of destruction Xerxes would unleash when he was ‘upset’.

“Damn Weaver.”

Nicephorus waited until his brother looked straight in his direction to give an answer.

“I suppose my suggestion to stop antagonising her and cancel our support to increase the tithes of the Nyx Sector isn’t going to find any favour in your heart?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” The outburst was suppressed mere seconds after it manifested, but the eyes of his brother continued to glare ferociously. “The so-called ‘Saint’ is challenging us. Stepping back at that point would be an admission of guilt and this bastard of Oberstein wants to take Utrecht’s place among the High Twelve. Do you want the High Lord we can rely upon to be replaced by a man who would shoot us in the back if he felt he could get away with it.”

“No, of course not,” the youngest man of the two Adepts answered before sighing.

Huang Utrecht, in Nicephorus’ humble opinion, would have been at his place if he was a lesser Secretary Minister or one of the many minor Adepts the High Procurators used as their advisors.

By manipulations most non-bureaucrats would have found illogical, stupid, and perhaps slightly treasonous, Huang Utrecht had managed to survive the cut-throat dealings of his Adeptus and rise to the High Seat of Chancellor of the Estate Imperium.

Was it a prestigious position? No. Did it give the aforementioned High Lord any military troops to command? No. Could it manifest its independence towards the Master of the Adeptus Administratum? Nicephorus wasn’t aware of one such scenario happening in the thirty-fifth millennium. Would Huang Utrecht survive if his brother was removed from his High Seat? The answer was unquestionably a ‘no’.

Clan Utrecht and Clan Vandire were thus tied together, for the best and for the worst.

Sometimes, the Solar Guardian of Records – third in the Office of Records of the Adeptus Administratum, and firmly aware, he was unlikely to get one more promotion in his lifetime – wished his Clan’s allies were something more than benevolent nullities.

“No, I don’t want Oberstein as a member of the High Twelve,” Nicephorus continued. “The man scares me when he speaks in public, and he causes us enough problems as a Secundus member.”

The Lord Commander Militant of the Imperial Guard was arguably the most powerful member of the Secundus ranks, really. The only one who could truly contest this was the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes, but for all their immense prestige, the Watchers of the Throne rarely involved themselves in the day-to-day ruling, and there were never more than ten thousand of them in active service. The supreme commander of the Imperial Guard had billions of men on Terra under his personal authority, and could call upon trillions more if he felt threatened by someone.

If someone wanted to crush militarily another High Lord, only the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum and the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy had the assets to mount a credible opposition.

“On the other hand,” the two hundred and thirty-seven years-old man said, “Weaver has been astute enough to cut the Administratum from her ‘Bacta’ and ‘Aethergold’. Oberstein will support her unless she makes a gigantic mistake the like that leaves him no choice but disavow her, and the same is true for Fabricator-General Xaerophrys Esvikom. Gutenberg is more politically pragmatic, but the contracts my agents have heard the rumour of will solidify a coalition of about seventy percent of the greatest Chartist Fleets of the Imperium. The Mistress of the Astronomican can be counted to vote for her whatever will happen. The Lord Inquisitor will leave his seat before the year’s end, but I doubt his replacement will be anything but extremely supportive of the woman providing them miraculous healing and anti-corruption artefacts. And of course the Arch-Cardinal Terran will vote like the Ecclesiarch wants him to, and for now the Ecclesiarch is ready to give out trillions of Ducats, Crowns, and Gelts to support ‘his’ Living Saint. That’s one Secundus and five Primus that are definitely against us on this question, and I don’t think it is going to get better.”

It might not seem much, but when the person they were talking about had not even been the shadow of a rumour twenty years ago, the ascension of ‘Her Celestial Highness Taylor Hebert, Lady Weaver and Peer of Terra’ was absolutely phenomenal.

Nicephorus had tried to see if there were previous figures which had shown similar levels of precociousness, but the answer was negative, at least for the 34th and the 35th millennium. There were military officers who had risen higher, accumulated larger fortunes, and whose name was associated with xenos genocides and total military victories, but there were few of them, and in general they had been three centuries-old or more when they had finally reached these lofty summits.

Weaver, on the contrary, was extremely young, and if she managed to acquire a seat on the Senatorum Imperialis within the next decades, her influence would be felt for a long, long time to come on Holy Terra.

“This still leaves seven seats. We can punish her politically at her first military defeat. The reassessment of the Nyxian tithes is just my first plan. There are over forty legalese procedures which are being discussed in Arbites and Administratum departments to crush her.”

Nicephorus didn’t like the implications at all. First, because he had only heard about two of said procedures before today. ‘Forty-plus’ was an important number and his spies had failed him in that regard, or been outright bribed by those of his brother’s. Then there was the significant issue these procedures were hardly cheap. On Terra, only one thing was certain: whatever you did, it was going to cost you a staggering price, from the air you breathed to what was to be done for your funerals.

But above all, it assumed Weaver was going to be defeated any time soon. If she emerged victorious once more – and Nicephorus wasn’t ready to bet against a woman apparently blessed by the God-Emperor who thought invading Commorragh was a nice way to spend her time – the Adepts in charge of these procedures would be the first to turn against them and fine them for losing their time.

Those who won would be acclaimed, it was as simple as that.

“And the High Lord Admiral is on our side. He has finally accepted to Ormuz a major command at the Cadian Gate.”

Sometimes, his brother had a very different conception than most people of what he meant by having one High Lord ‘on your side’. High Lord Admiral Rabadash y Byng el Calormen was on his own side, nothing more, nothing less. When the Fabricator-General had announced the first brand-new Gloriana Battleship to be built after the God-Emperor’s Ascension would begin in 300M35, the High Lord of the Imperial Navy was on the cogboys’ side. When his brother had promised him to build four Battleships of the Sector in the shipyards of Zion for under-the-market prices, Rabadash was on Clan Vandire’s side.

If Ormuz failed to score a victory or lost, their ‘ally’ wouldn’t be anything of the sort.

“And I think we can count on the Officio Assassinorum’s support for the next years.”

That was frankly not something he wanted to hear so early in the morning.

“Brother, what did you promise him?”

“Our vote when he will ask to deploy his next Execution Force.”

Oh, by the Golden Throne.

“I thought it was in our best interest to avoid a gathering of his pet monsters?”

It wasn’t even an insult; many Imperial Assassins were only slightly less abominable and awful than the things they were ordered to put to death.

“It is in the best interest of Clan Vandire.”

Nicephorus had a powerful feeling it wasn’t, but saying otherwise would not convince the Master of Administratum to change his mind...

**The Eastern Fringe**

**Approaches of the Svalbard Sector**

**Ymga Monolith Quarantine Zone**

**The Throne of Oblivion**

**9.500.298M35**

**Overlord Sobekhotep the Dust-Maker**

“TRRRRAAAAAZZZYYYYYYNNNN!”

Sobekhotep was trying to master the fury boiling in his engrams and the rest of his body. It was getting harder every time.

In fact, the Dust-Maker Overlord hadn’t known he could be *that* angry since the biotransference.

It was so bad he was even beginning to think the Aeldari were right, at least where the fifteenth-damned thief-secessionist was concerned.

“What sort of punishment is so horrendously long and complicated it can account for the sabotage of an inestimable Replicator Forge?” The Szarekhan commander snarled to his second.

“Overlord? The thief-secessionist didn’t-“

“I KNOW WHAT HE DID ROYAL WARDEN!” The regent of the Thorne exploded before trying to calm himself.

It was extremely difficult.

The thief-secessionist had indeed not sabotaged the replication technology imagined by the infallible Silent King, all praise his name. He had done far worse.

The moment a ship entered after meeting several conditions – the most important being the number of non-metallic lifeforms in the vicinity – the third Replicator Forge had begun to replicate the Nihilakh thief-secessionist by the millions.

No one had ever thought it was possible. Crews aboard warships which entered the Replicator Forge teleported out before the process began, and two crews teleported back when the replication ended. That was because the hyper-advanced technology was suffering many...inconvenient mishaps when it tried to duplicate Necron engrams and memories.

In the best of cases, the ‘copies’ were completely insane and eager to try to kill the ‘original’.

But since the first ‘sabotaged’ replication had created about two million Trazyn duplicates, it had been anything but a problem for the thief-secessionist, who was most likely half a galaxy away by now.

Two million copies of a thief who had fought during the War in Heaven created in a single instant, fake duplicates utterly insane, each convinced they were the original, and trying to kill as much of their neighbours and the other Necrons anywhere near them before falling.

It had been a disaster. Replicator Forge Number Three was going to need years of repairs to function even at a minimal efficiency, and for many, many long battles, he had to order the Crypteks to stop the replication process on the other two Forges and see if there was a similar sub-protocol which was able to detonate in their faces.

To his relief, the answer had been no. To his lack of relief, there had been other ‘surprises’, which could have easily added more damage.

They had killed the copies in the end. So a ‘Trazyn Apocalypse’ was not anymore on the potential list of things he had to concern himself with.

Sobekhotep shuddered and decided to purge his engrams at the first opportunity – which would be when the thief-secessionist was dead at his feet.

“I hate Trazyn. I loathe him with every part of my body.” The Szarekhan Overlord articulated his worlds deliberately in a slow manner. “I want him to suffer a million agonies. I want that when the galaxy dies, his screams will still be heard by the darkness.”

“Your orders will be accomplished, whatever the cost,” Royal Warden Sihathor the Impaler replied. “But the battle doesn’t go well.”

Overlord Sobekhotep wished he could simply blast away the Royal Warden and fly in pursuit of the being he now loathed far more than the Krorks and their degenerate descendants.

But it wouldn’t change the reality.

The battle, as Sihathor had remarked, was not going well at all.

It was far from a defeat. The Throne of Oblivion was completely intact, with the minor exception of its Star-eater Drive. The ‘Orks’ had only been able to breach three times their shields, and each time it had been by ramming attempts. Each time, none had survived the next seconds. The Reaper batteries had transformed them into ashes and insignificant debris.

Their escort fleet hadn’t been so lucky. A Necron fleet was fighting against the greenskin vermin, but it wasn’t the one which had begun this long battle. It was another Sautekh fleet which had reinforced them...one more fleet, because not counting the ‘replicated’ Battleships, the current Necron losses were of thirty-two Battleships, eighty Cruisers, three hundred and two Escorts, and approximately twenty thousand Attack Craft – though for these ones, it was difficult to make the difference between ‘original’ and ‘replicated’ units. And of course the Solar Harvester was a ruin that was beyond anyone’s capability, even a Szarekhan Cryptek, to repair.

Of course they had killed over twenty billion greenskin vermin and six hundred ugly contraptions they had the gall to call ‘Battleships’, plus thousands upon thousands of ramshackle hulls, but that wasn’t the point. There always were more of them coming to throw themselves in front of the Throne’s heaviest guns.

By the Triarch rule, how was it possible that the galaxy was infested by so many of these beasts that other species had somehow survived while the Dynasties were sleeping?

“We have to get out of here,” Sobekhotep reluctantly said after analysing the numbers. Yes, as it stood they were going to win this contest, unless the greenskins found four hundred trillion more reinforcements. But every year they gave to the Nerushlatset Dynasty and Trazyn was one year the secessionists would use to disappear into the void between the stars, and if this battle lasted too long, it would be a monumental chore to find them without Orikan predictions. “We will win this battle. I have no doubt about this. But our mission is not to proceed to the complete extermination of this vermin. And the Sautekh Phaeron is going to complain a lot if we break too many of his phalanxes and fleets, mandate or no mandate from the Silent King.”

“The problem is the Star-eater Drive,” Sihathor bowed in apology. “I have send as many Crypteks as I dare not assisting the other ones in the awakening crypts and the Replicator Forges, and there is some progress, but-“

“But it is still staying too long.” Sobekhotep looked at the tactical map of what had become a cemetery of wrecked starships. Thank the Silent King for the anti-empyrean effect, otherwise there would already be massive intrusions of abominations into the reality. Too much green blood had been spilled. Too many weapons had shredded the edges of reality. “The Sautekh commanders should be able to handle the greenskin vermin far better than they do.”

“Assuredly, Overlord,” Sihathor agreed readily. “Five were disabled when tried to deal personally with this beast proclaiming itself in its barbaric tongue ‘Metal-Defiler’, three were barely sentient after their awakening and if anything they have gotten worse. And two are convinced they are Gods reborn, and demand special honour ceremonies before they even stepped on the battlefield.”

And to say Sobekhotep had rejoiced when the Sautekh phalanxes and fleets had emerged in perfect condition from the Dolmen Gates. As it stood, the Sautekh nobility – or at least the forces of Rithcarin, that the Dust-Maker had commandeered for Szarekhan purposes – were seriously mentally imbalanced.

“It’s time to stop throwing good phalanxes after bad ones. They have taken too many casualties. The Rithcarin forces won’t give us victory.”

“We wouldn’t be able to continue using them eternally anyway, my Overlord. I think we have expended over fifty-five percent of their assets in the last...brutal skirmishes.”

By the putrescent breath of the Nightbringer, the infantry boarding forces’ losses had been that bad? He had honestly not realised...

“In this case, my order to change strategy is even more necessary than I thought.” The Szarekhan Overlord admitted. “Contact the Tomb-World of Gidrim.”

It was a more talented and powerful commander than he wanted to wake up, but one couldn’t complain about mediocrity if your subordinates were imbeciles.

“It is time to wake up Overlord Zahndrekh.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**3.500.298M35**

**Chancellor Friar Achelieux**

Friar had been pleasantly surprised by the fact nearly no one had protested the inclusion of Navigators and psykers in the marriage ceremony and festivities of the Planetary Governor.

Of course, given what the Basileia had done to the last person to talk back to her on what she considered ‘biased and ridiculous superstition’, it was maybe not totally surprising.

Plus there were so many peoples in every Hive feasting, partying, and celebrating that he somehow doubted the majority of men and women remembered Navigators existed at this instant, never mind being close to them.

“But I suppose everyone needs a moment of happiness, eh?” the Achelieux Navigator told the Titan-Moth who was feigning to sleep next to him.

This was – as far as he knew – the second gigantic insect to be born on Lady Taylor Hebert’s order, and the less one could say was that it was the antithesis of the famous ‘Lisa’.

Perhaps it was due to the vastly different circumstances of birth, or perhaps it was because the large flying insect was a male and not a female, but the behaviour of the two precious Aethergold-creators immensely differed. Lisa loved basking in the attention of the Nyxian crowds and the thousands of pilgrims.

However, the male Titan-Moth – that for some reason Lady Weaver had named ‘Alec’ – was seemingly laziness incarnate. It was smaller in height and wingspan than Lisa, but it was the lethargic behaviour which struck those meeting this curious gigantic specimen.

At least the children loved him; they could caress and convince their parents to take holo-picts of them in front of ‘the moth of Her Celestial Highness’. Lisa was far more...food-oriented, and did not dally in single location if she had the choice. Therefore for today, she had been requisitioned to transport entire containers of plushies for the children of Nyx.

The Titan-Moth opened his mouth and for a second Friar wondered if the insect could manifest the deep intelligence his species had begun to be renowned for...but no, it was just Alec opening his maw to swallow the fruits his handlers were throwing him. The shining moth had not even tried to turn his head by ten degrees in one direction or another.

Like he had said before, this was a very lazy being.

“Will he live inside Lisa’s Dome?” Friar asked the Templar Sororitas – a Palatine, if he wasn’t mistaken.

“Oh no,” the young woman answered quickly with a chuckle. “The two of them really don’t tolerate each other’s presence well. We tried that two days ago, and Lisa constantly tried to rile him up by throwing him orbs of holy power and water, and Alec tried to steal her food in retaliation the moment she had her back turned. For now, each will have their own Domes. Her Celestial Highness approved yesterday. Why so much interest though, Chancellor?”

“The presence of these Moths is...appeasing and relaxing to those of my profession and everyone risking his sanity against the dangers of the unknown,” the aged three-eyed man replied diplomatically. “Thus I take great care to be informed about any game-changing development involving these insects.”

The Basileia had not advised it, but the veil protecting the humans from the horrors of the Warp was getting stronger. As such, the nightmares and the awful feelings of creatures screaming for your soul and the rest of your being were progressively denied, and the training of the new members of House Achelieux was reaping the benefits. Since their return from Commorragh, there had been no suicide or any death that was not due to old age, and the level of mutation was in significant decrease. Add these facts to the reality Nyx was a minor beacon into the Warp – a very small one, there was no comparison to the holy fire of the Astronomican – and Nyx was becoming a very, very attractive destination for Navigators and people possessing psychic gifts..

The female warrior of the Ecclesiarchy was clearly unconvinced, though.

“I have seen psykers be on the receiving end of heart attacks when Lisa used her most powerful blasting aura.” The Palatine objected.

“Many of them are old or unable to resist the purifying blast of the lively Titan-Moth, yes,” Friar conceded, “in this regard, I think Alex here will be far better to heal them by his presence. He is far less likely to throw golden orbs left and right.”

“Maybe,” ah well, he had not been trying to rally a Templar Sororitas to his views, “but I think above all dragging him back to his Dome is going to be difficult. I don’t even want to know how many hours it would take us to convince him to fly to the Hagia Sanguinala.”

Friar commiserated for several seconds with the young woman – who had dyed her hair black recently, he had noticed – and went back into the green avenues of Floor 46. Years ago, it had been the location of the Menelaus Palatine Palace, but now it had most of its obscene level of decorations, and be replaced by an atmosphere of nature, music the Fay 20th loved to introduce newcomers to, and grand artistic projects the Blood Angels and their Successors presented to their adoring public. Protected by ancient and new technology, mosaics, paintings and sculptures were created there, and it was quite logical, as the Tech-Priests said, that the main reception of the marriage was holding there.

The Hagia Sanguinala would have been favoured if it was completed, but as it stood, tens of thousands of workers continuously working to finish this marvel, it could not hold a ceremony of this magnitude and Hive Athena was the centre of the Sector for one more extraordinary event.

Rumours abounded that the Imperial Fists had once thought about a marriage ceremony, and planned for a succession of parades with exacting military precision. The tale may have had a core of truth, because the decorations, the ceremonies, and the festivities had a strong ‘angelic’ tune today, meaning the sons of Sanguinius’ opinion of a holy day had won out over those of their cousins.

Though arguably, they weren’t the only Astartes to be popular. The Salamanders and their brothers of the Magma Spiders had organised a beetle race where young children rode the insects, and a few Techmarines made with them mock smith-contests behind transparent armaglass walls.

None could hold a candle to the two women waiting on small thrones at the heart of the thousands of Nyxians and foreigners coming to wish happiness to the new couple.

Wei Cao had decided to worn a simple silver dress today, in a style that was both very simple and dignified.

The Living Saint had chosen a splendid red gown, the colour of Blood Angels’ armours or as a perfect complement to the Baal Ruby she wore around her neck, no one said.

And even hundreds of metres away from them, Friar could see the two were very much in love, and gained strength from each other’s presence.

They were happy, and by the God-Emperor, they deserved it.

After all, it wasn’t often two Cardinals officiated the wedding when you were undeserving, right?

Choirs specially brought here for the day began to sing again, and Friar felt, despite knowing from experience how dark the galaxy could be, a rekindled golden fire in his heart.

Hope was not dead. Happiness could still exist if one stayed true, vigilant, and loyal.

And Lady Weaver would be there to lead them to a new age.

**The Eye of Terror**

**Approaches of the Worshippers’ Belt – outer Sicarus ‘System’**

**Abyss-class Super-Battleship *Trisagion***

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

In the long millennia humanity had managed to escape the gravity well of its homeworld, it had invented extremely impressive ways to communicate across the stars, both on an inert-system and an interstellar range.

In fact, it was not exactly a wrong premise to assume that in this domain of competence, humanity had invented thousands of shining new devices...and discovered rapidly that most were exploding in the face of the inventors after one or two attempts.

Still, there were reliable interstellar methods of communication. Using Astropaths in choirs like the Imperium did was one of the more well-known these days.

What the majority of these ignorant souls ignored was that Astropaths and the other human communications didn’t work inside a Warp Storm.

Or rather Astropaths could send their psychic messages...and die horribly as the servants of the Gods devoured their souls. The masters of the Great Ocean loved these delicious delicacies.

Anyway using a normal method of communication was a fool’s dream in any Warp Storm, and in the Eye of Terror, the greatest Empyreal realm ever created in living memory, most ‘unnatural’ methods failed too.

Fortunately, the Seventeenth Legion and their Primarch had long made extremely advanced innovations in this field, merging the ancient technology of Mars with the blessings of the Pantheon, doused on regular and bloody sacrifices.

The grand ritual circle he had contributed to make was in many ways the apex of this long and costly research. It could link across the realm of the Gods no less than eight hundred and eighty-eight participants across eight hundred and eighty-eight systems.

Of course, it had the minor drawback you needed to sacrifice the souls of enemies who had not recognised the greatness of the Pantheon, meaning a raid near Medusa had been necessary to acquire tens of thousands of imbeciles still believing the False Emperor would save them.

Not all had been expended for this ritual, obviously. There were other...interesting uses you could subject such narrow-blinded fools.

“Jslojv tgohjpknjdyjpn reqjjtntrqon!” Kor Phaeron finished proclaiming his incantation, and the eight-pointed star at the centre of the ritual room burned the colour of blood before becoming inert once more. Some imbeciles might believe it was synonym with failure, but for all the Dark Cardinal’s unpleasant behaviour, he remained the Keeper of the Faith of the Legion, and a master in this art.

The members of the Dark Council who were present – all five of them – took position.

“**My sons and my nephews**!” the voice of their Primarch boomed in the darkness. “**Attend me**!”

And one by one, they appeared, lone figures materialised by the most powerful of sorceries as the air grew thick with bloodlust, flies of the Grandfather buzzed, and feathers belonging to no bird fell from the ceiling.

The walls contorted and began to bleed. Mouths and bodies opened on the carpets.

Grand Apostle Ekodas and Dark Apostle Mothac were the first to emerge from the blood pools, as they were on Sicarus, mere millions of kilometres away. Vorrjuk Kraal was the third. In distance, he was easily the most distant of the ‘guests’, but his ties to the Seventeenth Legion gene-line gave him priority before the rest of the warlords the ritual opened communication with.

The next figures weren’t Word Bearers, however.

First to flash in were the vanquished of Commorragh. Fazar’nzlath’hesh the Pale Naga slithered from a decaying purple lighting, his mutilated face covered by a mask of screaming flayed souls. By his side was Lucius the Eternal, who had after several raids once more proclaimed himself Champion of Perfection and Lord Commander of the Emperor’s Children.

Four hedonists followed behind the defeated False-Primarch, but they were unimportant, and besides, it wasn’t really like they were counting on the discarded remnants of the Third to win a war.

The Iron Warriors came next. Perturabo was still sulking into his fortress of brass and iron, and so only warbands had come to continue the Long War. But there were large warbands, consumed by the desire to lay low the fortifications of the unbelievers, and more important, they had great experience fighting the sons of Dorn. There were three of them, and their names were Warsmith Depedreter of the Metal Claw warband, Warsmith Arukal of the Anathraxis Warhost, and Warsmith Charyx of the Steel Brethren warband. They were blunt and humourless, they held no decorations save their metallic emblems and the skulls of their enemies on spikes. They were siege-masters and corpse-grinders, those who had sworn to drown worlds into the fires of Daemon Engines.

Flies, and a powerful smell of decay announced the arrival of the sons of Mortarion, the slow but ineluctable Death Guard. Seven warbands had answered the summon of Blessed Lorgar, though the most powerful were unquestionably Captain Pustulor of the Hand of Filth warband, Lord of Contagion Felthius of the Tainted Cohort, and Vermithrus the Blighted, Daemon Prince of Nurgle, master of the Favoured Sons. They were the heralds of plague and decay, the chosen of Nurgle, and by their deeds and mere presence, Hives crumbled to ruin, billions died before their scythes fell, and pandemics raged uncontrolled. They were sworn to Grandfather Nurgle, and nothing could stop their march.

Night came on a section of the hall, and from it the Night Lords stepped through, preceded by bat-like creatures which were not bats, not daemons, but an interesting merging of the two. They had come in numbers these pirates, more than thirty warband commanders, truly quantity above quality in this aspect. Some did command only a single capital warship, while others ruled over flotillas or small squadrons. Thus one could argue not unreasonably only one mattered: their Lord and Master, Terror Lord Krieg Acerbus, that many recognised as the Heir of Konrad Curze, the Black Duke, First of the Dark Princes. His was a very imposing armour and his aura shone with the power of desecration and fear. This one was dangerous, and not far from gaining the final blessing of the Gods.

Paristur was unable to tell when the Alpha Legion appeared, as usual. One moment they weren’t here, he knew for sure, but the next they were here, awaiting patiently their gazes. Much like the Iron Warriors, they had only sent three commanders, disregarding the ‘numbers mentality’ of the Night Lords. Their power armours were decorated with mysterious emeralds and sapphires, and their helmets had been sculpted by the powers of the Warp into hydra-themed protections. Snakes and scales covered them, and long blue-green cloaks were strapped to their shoulders. The three of them were – maybe - Lord Arkos of the Faithless warband, Warlord Vykus Skayle of the Daggerfangs warband, and – supposedly - Harrowmaster Phocron of the Armoured Serpents. Lies and more lies surrounded them, their goals hazy and vague, their vengeance for complicated motives dying and being birthed again in the Eye.

The World Eaters warbands arrived in a river of blood, their chainaxes and chainswords drenched in gore, and their armours all crimson to diverse degrees. It was difficult to believe that their armours had been mainly white in the beginning; now all remained was the crimson of blood, and the black of dried substances. Unlike other Legion leaders, Paristur didn’t know the majority of the eight names of those berserkers. The champions of the Blood God rose and fell quite quickly in the Eye. Murder-King Skchalick of the self-proclaimed ‘Lord Skchalick’s Elite’ and Slaughter King Kraagon Gorefist of Gladiator Group 138 were – probably – the longest-serving warband leaders.

The Thousand Sons arrived after the servants of Khorne. If the World Eaters had become the symbol of bloody destruction and sheer savagery, the surviving sons of Prospero were now perfect servants of Tzeentch, their blue-gold armours coursing with the energies of the Great Ocean, and their staffs and weapons glimmering of untold power. They were nine of them, some quite infamous like Sorcerer-Lord Obsidral of the Sect of the Red Echo and Sorcerer-Lord Amyr Vassek Suhk of the Crystal Harbingers warband. They were the sons of the Crimson King, the last of their kind after the Rubric of Ahriman turned to dust so many of them in their own armours.

There were no Black Legion commanders to materialise, for Abaddon had refused to entertain any messenger, and Drach’nyen had devoured the soul of the last ambassador who had been too insistent. But not all lost sons of the Sacrificed King had refused to heed the Word Bearers’ call, and the most formidable rival of the Despoiler marched in. His name was Drecarth the Sightless, and he was the Legion Master of the Sons of the Eye, the most powerful warband of the Sixteenth Legion to continue to don the colours Horus had chosen for them. Formidable warriors and boasting a company worth of Terminators to protect their commander, they were a magnificent host, taking anything in the writings of the fallen Warmaster who might help them accomplish their vengeance upon the Imperium and the False Emperor.

And finally, the last figures arrived in dark lightning and the sound of tortured engines. Unlike most warlords and warband commanders present, there was not even the pretence of a human form. The first immense sorcerous apparition looked exactly like one had tried to merge an Imperator Titan with a Tech-Priest...and likely achieved it, given the thousands of mechadendrites and dark energy that Paristur could feel even across the limited communication ritual. The other was a merging between a mechanical spider, monstrous mutations, and a mask which looked like a horse but the eyes burned with the fires of the Warp.

“**Fabricator-General Kelbor-Hal. Hell Forge-Mistress Sota-Nul**,” their Primarch saluted them when their turn came, and Paristur did his best to not show any stupefaction hearing that. Those *things* were the former Lord of Mars and his favourite apprentice?

And without any more ceremony, the war council began.

“**We are gathered, because the False Emperor attempts to blind us with his Light of Falsehoods again**,” Blessed Lorgar began. “**We are gathered because the False Emperor has not admitted his defeat and still rages against the Gods, failing to realise his defeat was consumed when he was bound onto the Beacon of Pain and became a corpse. The Tyrant thinks the Fall of Commorragh has been a turning point and that there is a victory for him and his obedient slaves. This kind of naivety is disgusting and must be proven wrong as soon as possible. Whatever dreams the deluded Priests of his corpse-worship entertain, they will be broken. Thus the Pantheon has decreed; thus it will always be**.”

The Primarch of the Seventeenth Legion grew in size and power before their eyes, and infernal flames danced in his hands.

“**There was a plan. One which would birth the beginning of the hand for the False Imperium they built on the planets they usurped from us. It is a succession of wars which will tear the galaxy in two and user a new era where the Legions will reign supreme. This plan is still possible. Vengeance can still be ours. And blessings given to the Despoiler can be yours if the greatest victory striking the dawn of Chaos is won**.”

“**I love vengeance**,” the Pale Naga hissed. “**Tell us more**.”

“**There is a battlestation in the Eastern Fringe**,” the Ascended Primarch revealed, “**where an old foolish race has stored its reserves of the substance called Noctilith. Properly consecrated to the Pantheon, it will break the veil separating living from the Warp, and begin to plunge hundreds of thousands of stars into the greatest era of strife of your lives. We will at last topple the False Emperor from his throne**.”

Lorgar smiled to the serpentine creature.

“**The Death of a Champion and False Saint of the False Emperor would of course be a mighty holy deed contributing to empower this ritual**.”

“Excellent,” Lucius the Eternal snarled, half of the words uttered after it lost in his long tongue.

“Not excellent,” Drecarth the Sightless countered. “The Eastern Fringe is on the other side of the galaxy. Our warbands are strong, but not strong enough to fight two-thirds of the False Emperor’s Battlefleets before we arrive to fight the decisive engagement. By logistical consumption alone, it is a guarantee we will be on bleeding legs before even reaching the Maelstrom.”

“**We can resupply in every Warp Storm we come across**,” Vermithrus the Blighted laughed.

“Not enough,” Harrowmaster Phocron disagreed. “A minor fleet may been able to satisfy itself with the ammunition production of several Hell-Forges, but not a force like the one it is suggested we gather together.

“**Should Webway connection be achieved**,” Kelbor-Hal’s arrogant voice thundered, a perfect chorus of inhuman screams, “**our Hell-Forges will be able to supply you**.”

Every warlord and Dark Apostle was not stupid enough to think such ‘generous help’ would be free.

“Vain hope,” Warsmith Charyx declared for the Iron Warriors. “After the blast of destruction caused by the Fall of Commorragh, the Webway is more unstable than ever. I would not have led my warband on the Despoiler’s command there before that fiasco, and I won’t do so now.”

“**The Webway is indeed too dangerous to risk a significant number of Legionnaires into its depths**,” Lorgar recognised. “**Fortunately, my plan does not involve it. I prefer to pursue a more...blessed path. Some of you may be familiar with it. It is called the Tear of Nightmares**.”

Paristur was familiar with it, yes. It was the gigantic Warp breach Horus had opened into the Sol System as his opening move of the Great Siege. It was the stratagem which had allowed him to win weeks, possibly months of travel instead of wasting his warships and other assets against the defences built by Rogal Dorn.

It was also an extremely difficult ritual, both in the symbols which had to be sacrificed to the Gods, the numbers of the False Emperor’s slaves to be placed upon the altars, and more.

“No offence, Lord Lorgar,” when Krieg Acerbus smiled, it was so disturbing to watch that the Dark Apostle would prefer he didn’t. “But while your knowledge and power is great, the Tear of Nightmares was only opened because the Gods granted this power to Horus himself, empowered not only by them but by the oaths the Nine True Legions swore to him. Alone, you might come close, but you will not be able to succeed.”

Lorgar decreased notably in size and the flames diminished in intensity.

But when Paristur watched his ascended face, their gene-sire was smiling.

“**Then it is a good thing I am not alone, no**?”

The flash of blue of another participant being summoned was overwhelming, and the Dark Apostles knew well before they saw him of who was coming through.

There were few sorcerers capable to cause psychic storms of that power by their mere presence, even among the Greater Servants of the Pantheon.

“**I have watched the Crucible of Oblivion, and decided it must be mastered**.”

Magnus was here. The Crimson King, the Master of Prospero, had come. No wonder nine Sorcerer-Lords’ warbands had agreed to their invitation. Their Ascended Primarch had answered positively the offer of alliance.

And Paristur knew at this moment victory was going to be theirs.

“**Let us begin**,” Lorgar proclaimed, “**the preparations for the Fifth Black Crusade**!”

“DEATH TO THE FALSE EMPEROR!”

**Author’s note**: Next will the Interlude, Monsters and Nightmares.

We haven’t reached the second escalation cycle, but it is coming. Oh yes, it is coming...soon.