**Tyranny 12.2**

**(Interlude)**

**Gods and Tyrants**

*I have returned, father.*

*Are you surprised?*

*You shouldn’t be.*

*If there is a trait you gave to each of your sons, it is undoubtedly your stubbornness.*

*In my case, I inherited your stubbornness to survive.*

*It was barely enough.*

*You took everything from me, father.*

*You broke my rituals. You unleashed your full might to destroy my plans. You crippled the preparations I had made across my domains.*

*And then you sent Russ and his Wolves.*

*My strength was crippled; my Legion in disarray. I stood no chance against your Executioner.*

*My defeat was inevitable. While I never had the precognition talents of Sanguinius and Curze, I didn’t need them as I was outnumbered three-to-one.*

*It didn’t matter. I had sworn a vow when you stopped my Ascension.*

*And for this vow to be accomplished, I had to survive. In order to do that, I had to fake my death.*

*This was a critical problem. I knew your orders would include a retrieval of my body, and you would not be fooled by a convincing fake.*

*This meant that my corpse indeed had to be abandoned for the hunt to end.*

*But the soul...the soul was different.*

*My soul had survived the ritual you broke. In fact, my soul and my sorcery talent had thrived after my body was crippled.*

*The solution was as simple as it was elegant. I made a pact with one of these absurdly pretentious creatures that call themselves daemons. In exchange of several favours, I consented to invite an inferior slime in my body. I never bothered to tell this stupid entity that the Possession would start when Russ barged in my throne room and threw himself at me.*

*My body died. My soul survived.*

*But you did something blasphemous, father.*

*You took everything from me. My name. My Legion’s name. My history. My triumphs.*

*You took everything there was to know about to me, and you turned it into ash and nothingness.*

*I had lost all my names.*

*I was nothing.*

*I was weak, weaker than the weakest daemon, and what was left of me was lost in the currents of the Sea of Souls.*

*I was soon devoured by one of the uncountable predators making the Immaterium their domain.*

*But something happened, something neither the daemon nor me expected.*

*My name being obliterated has made sure the entity couldn’t properly digest me.*

*It couldn’t destroy my soul and erase me from existence.*

*It couldn’t vanquish me, but the same didn’t apply where I was concerned. I acted like a parasite, a malicious tumour, one that the daemon was unable to expel or suppress.*

*It was a struggle of every instant, but after an eternity of struggle, I had complete mastery of the essence. The daemon superficially looked the same from the outside, as I had taken great care to preserve the outer shell.*

*At long last, I could have a name. I could begin to grasp back everything you took from me.*

*I could be the King in Yellow.*

*I could begin the true trials that would restore the power that was rightfully mine.*

*And now I have returned...Emperor.*

*Remember what I swore to you when you broke my rituals and my ambitions on that fateful day?*

***Eternity*** *will be mine, or there will be no eternity.*

*What would say if you still had the ability to communicate with me despite the distance separating us? That the beings you call parasites are going to cripple me, much like they did cripple you?*

*If you think so, prepare to be disappointed...Emperor.*

*I am the King in Yellow.*

*I am going to defeat the parasites and the miserable wretches they have enslaved...the things I was once forced to call ‘brothers’.*

*I am going to create the first realm of* ***Eternity*** *in the Calyx Hell Stars.*

*And then it will be your turn.*

**Somewhere between the Warp and the Materium**

**The Tyrant Star**

Thought for the day: Glory in death is life Eternal.

**Knight Errant Psamtic Mehhur**

At first, Psamtic Mehhur had believed it was pure spite who had led to the Simurgh to creature to abandon him on this sterilised orb.

Inquisitor Contessa had managed to escape via a derelict ruin, assuming this was not a trap like the rest of this dreadful journey had been. The other Space Marines accompanying him had perished or vanished.

Psamtic was alone.

He was alone, and his supplies were inexistent.

Fortunately, he was somewhere food and water weren’t needed. For what felt like an eternity, Psamtic had walked, but he hadn’t been feeling thirsty or hungry. It was fortunate indeed, because his possessions here were restricted to his power armour and what was inside it...and needless to say, they were extremely limited.

Psamtic had thought it was sheer spite for this parody of angel that had led to his imprisonment there. The Simurgh had been denied, thus it had made sure the only escape Psamtic would ever have was to take his own life. Simple and merciless.

But this place, planet or not, had begun to change recently.

It was still sterile and devoid of life.

It was a realm of the dead...except the dead were now walking.

Fortunately, as the monotony of the landscape was now broken by countless hills and mountains. Empty riverbeds had been summoned into existence. Things that must have been forests had now been replaced by forests...of bone.

At least all this new terrain features provided excellent opportunities to hide.

And hiding was very much needed.

No one was searching for him, but there were tens of thousands of skeletons everywhere in the valleys, supervised by animated corpses of Astartes everywhere, with more emerging from the amethyst-coloured sands in the nearby desert every hour or whatever passed for it in this strange realm.

At the very beginning, Psamtic had thought they had a clue he was here.

Now he was sure they weren’t.

The skeletons and their transhuman overseers were fortifying their planet.

It hadn’t looked impressive at first, not when you had seen once the Imperial Fists building one of their citadels.

But the skeletons were never exhausted, and soon, as far as Psamtic’s eyes could see, there were hundreds of thousands digging trenches, creating kill zones, and emplacing bunkers and redoubtable batteries of what had to be powerful weapons, except clearly not guns which had been invented and forged by any Forge World.

It was slow, and with the proper technology, the Imperial Fists and the Mechanicus would likely have done it quicker and using fewer hands.

Still, there was a sense of....relentlessness. Deep in his two hearts, Psamtic felt as if the fortification effort couldn’t be stopped. Walls were built, reaching soon in the hundreds of metres, before culminating at sizes that could sustain the comparison with the Imperial Palace.

All of this, his mind could accept.

But when a dark ziggurat flew over the still incomplete fortress, Psamtic had no explanation.

The structure was beyond enormous, easily larger and having more tonnage than a Battleship.

And yet, it was flying, flying with nothing but columns of smoke of putrid black-purple colour to stand against the laws of gravity.

This ziggurat was feeling like something deeply unnatural...something confirmed by the fact every time he looked at this ziggurat, Psamtic felt his organs churn in unease.

The ziggurat left in all celerity after several minutes; as if it had only come to inspect the progression of the work done by the skeletons...something that as far as he knew, may be the truth.

And it had provided one answer he had on his tongue for a while. For while the ziggurat had no marks, there had been things dancing in the smoke. There had been symbols: an hourglass, and a skull. And there had been a number.

“It seems,” Psamtic grimaced, “the Eleventh Legion has survived...sort of. And now, it is preparing for war...”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**The Imperial Palace**

**The Imperial Dungeon**

**The Golden Throne**

**0.127.311M35**

**Primarch Leman Russ**

*The surroundings change every time he comes here.*

*This time, Leman founds himself in the middle of a desert.*

*The vast dunes of soft yellow are everywhere, no matter the direction he’s looking at.*

*It is a desert, and there is nothing but sand and more sand.*

*Leman hates sand.*

*He is a Primarch, not a sand snake...or one of the few animals which are able to survive in these desert conditions.*

*Besides, it is way too hot. The sun is trying its best to fry his brain. He knows it.*

*The Great Wolf is about to howl when the dune explodes, and a titanic worm reveals itself.*

*The maw, the Lord of Fenris has to admit, is so large even krakens would consider it a worthwhile challenge.*

*Russ races away, and when the worm tries to chase him, he jumps, in a vicious flanking attack that will target what he hopes to be the weak points of the apex predator.*

*But the air shimmers. The desert has been playing tricks on him, unless the worm is capable of creating mirages on its own. Leman’s strike is going to fall short. He tries to correct his jump-*

*And a hand grab him, take him as if he is a young pup, and throw him on the back of the worm like he weighs nothing.*

*“This was reckless of you, my son.”*

*Leman recognises the voice, of course.*

*“Father?”*

*The stranger standing on the worm’s back is at all looking like his father ever presented himself.*

*Most of his tall figure is hidden by a sand-coloured cloak, and beneath it, there is what looks to be an integral suit of dark grey. In his hand there is a metallic baton.*

*There is no gold, no light, and no visible weapons.*

*Yet Leman knows it is his father.*

*“I really hate sand,” the Sixth Primarch growls.*

*The luminescent blue eyes – probably the only thing that are truly identical to some of the appearances Leman saw before – stare at him in amusement.*

*“I will keep it in mind.”*

*“Where is here?” He asks. “Sand aside, this doesn’t look like any place you ever showed us before.”*

*“This place is...an old memory. A memory when I was younger.” The voice loses in potency, but Leman can hear what is spoken, murmur or not. “A memory when I wasn’t alone...”*

*Leman feels...ill-at-ease. Because for centuries, he hasn’t even thought about that. Technically, yes, he has been separated from his brothers for a very long time, but alone? No, he has never been truly alone. He always had part of his pack with him.*

*His father didn’t.*

*“This isn’t Old Earth, however. I don’t remember this world to have ever welcomed these giant worms.”*

*The Emperor chuckles.*

*“No, it isn’t Old Earth...or Terra. It might surprise you, my son, but I travelled a lot when Mankind began to settle on distant worlds across the galaxy.”*

*Not for the first time, Leman admits that he knows very little of the man who stands before him. Granted, the son knows more about his father than the combined population of the Throneworld minus the Custodes ever do, but it is cold comfort.*

*“This must have been a dangerous world, then. Unless the planet had someone like your new protégée to control the worms?”*

*“We did not,” the lips twitch in amusement again. “I suppose it was a very dangerous world, and yet for a time...it was home.”*

*This is difficult to believe...but Leman can sniff a liar from ten kilometres away, and the words here are unmistakably, painfully the truth.*

*“Home...” and suddenly it reminds him of the loss of Fenris. His home, that he was forced to finish the destruction of. The Spirit of Fenris survived, but in many ways, the loss is still grievous.*

*“You will tell Roboute to give you the planet.” The blue eyes stare at him with serenity. “Honestly, this boy makes me despair, sometimes. I haven’t tried to hold on so much to my conquests like he does since I was King of Macedon.”*

*“Ha! I will.”*

*“And you will make the concessions necessary.”*

*Suddenly, Leman feels like the young pup brought to the alpha of the pack after having played with the tail of another member too many times.*

*“Concessions?” He says innocently.*

*“Concessions,” the Emperor says gravely. “It is part of something called diplomacy, Leman. You should try it sometimes.”*

*“I know what diplomacy is, father. I recently showed my best diplomatic skills!”*

*“I will note that getting my High Lords drunk has not improved their performance.” The drawl is neutral, but the irony can be tasted at Titan’s range.*

*Leman grimaces.*

*“But I will note that the method was original and successfully avoided political infighting for a time. It even convinced most of the Terran elite to organise big parties to mark the event. So I’m not going to castigate you for that. But as I’m sure you are intelligent to realise, this is only a temporary solution. And so we return to the topic of concessions.”*

*“I don’t like it at all,” Leman amended it before his father’s unflinching glare, “I dislike making concessions to some of the High Lords. The Administratum and the Arbites Heads should be rotting in a cell before a summary execution.”*

*And though he didn’t ask aloud after that, the challenge is clear: why are their heads still attached to their shoulders?*

*“You want to replace them? I wish you good luck, Leman. The replacements would be worse, and far more obstructive.”*

*The Primarch of the Space Wolves growls in frustration. Nevertheless, his father answered the question truthfully; it’s not his father’s fault that he doesn’t like the answers.*

*“What I am supposed to do, then?”*

*For many minutes, silence reigns. The ride on the worm continues, across the immensities of sand.*

*There is nothing but the dunes, the hellishly hot sun, and his father seemingly controlling the worm effortlessly.*

*“While several High Lords are wastes of my time and yours, several can be relied upon. I contacted one, and she will have the support to force the opposition into a neutral posture...provided you make the necessary concessions and allow your Wolves to change their behaviours that will neatly decrease the complains.”*

*“That is going to be...a challenge.” Leman has not liked at all certain things he saw among the successors of his Legion. Some he had already intended to change, and he knows better than to think this is going to be painless and short.*

*“I’m almost hearing word for word the Captain of the Varangian Guard before I promised him the gold and the artwork of my palace,” his father replies humorously.*

*“Fine,” Leman huffs, “I will speak with your High Lord and...I will listen to what she has to say. But there is your protégée to consider. Weaver is not onboard with-”*

*“I have a letter prepared for her as we speak. It will explain to her some of my plans where you are concerned...though the final decision will still be hers. You will have to be convincing, when you return to Macragge.”*

*Well, Leman can be convincing...hasn’t he proved it by doing what was never done before?*

*“Obviously, there is still your punishment to consider.”*

*By Niflheim, that was something-*

*“Once you will have finished with your duties, you will join Magnus for a week cleaning and tidying up my library.”*

*There is relief hearing his brother is alive. It doesn’t last long, because the ‘my library’ words are resonating like an ominous bell of doom.*

*“Couldn’t do something easier?” Leman asks with a voice of mourning. “You know, exterminating all the Sons of Horus left? Finding you that bottle of liquor you and Malcador were unable to find during the Great Crusade? Maybe catching up one of these big worms and offering it to Weaver?”*

*“No.”*

*The Emperor pushes him off the worm.*

*And Leman is reminded why he hates sand a second later.*

**The Eye of Terror**

**Medrengard**

**Daemon Primarch Mortarion**

Mortarion had announced his visit ahead of time.

Judging by the hasty moves of the Iron Warriors manning the titan-sized fortifications, his brother had not bothered informing his sons ahead of schedule.

Mortarion looked around, before deciding that ready or not, he was not going to wait for them. Perturabo would love that, of course. More bitterness flowed into the Death Lord’s essence as he descended the landing area he had used to manifest. Evidently, since Perturabo had warned no one of his coming, all those who had been on it had been transformed into a pile of slime and metal.

The Lord of Iron had always been ruthless and prompt to decimate, but this sheer level of disdain was something else, even by their standards in the Great Game...

All around him, Medrengard growled and thundered. Or was it more appropriate to say Medrengard killed and maimed?

The planet was looking particularly horrid to his senses. It was not blessed **Decay**. It was a black mass of fortifications and foundries, of mega-manufactorums and arsenals, of trenches and poisoned kill zones.

Medrengard was the planet-citadel of the Iron Warriors, their incredible arrogance turned into a system of fortifications and murderous industrial complexes. The forges churning Daemon Engines were so high they could be seen from orbit, and the redoubts were so buried that Mortarion wouldn’t be surprised to know some were quite close to the planet’s core.

Naturally, on this world where souls were spent by the millions to feed the Warp furnaces, the jealousies ran high.

This was why when the sons of the Fourth ran to meet him, they were over fifty officers of Warsmith rank.

“Lord Mortarion, we have not-“

“**Be quiet, little fly**.” The Primarch of the Fourteenth Legion exhaled, and the cloud of poison shrouding him grew larger. “**Save First Captain Forrix, I don’t want to hear any of you speaking**.”

By the temporary silence that immediately reigned, the Iron Warriors were fast learners. Or perhaps Perturabo had killed so many of them in his mad crises of rage that they had all grown incredibly cautious.

Kydomor Forrix stepped forwards. The kindest thing Mortarion could say was that the years had not been nice to him. There were more scars, of course, but this was not the problem. His soul was...jaded and apathetic. It had not grown to the point it was irrecoverable, but the steps had been taken, and of course Perturabo’s charming behaviour was accelerating this problem.

It wasn’t Mortarion’s problem, clearly. It was still remarkable in its own way for a Legion’s upper command to destroy himself so thoroughly without an enemy in sight.

“Lord. We weren’t warned of your...arrival.”

“**I am here to speak with my brother, Forrix**.”

The First Captain didn’t flinch, but his glance at the biggest fortress of the entire planet waiting in the distance said all.

“I will lead you to the Iron Palace, Lord. But I have not the Keys, no one does. If my father does not desire to receive you, the gates will stay shut down.”

Mortarion nodded, unsurprised by the way Perturabo had cut himself from the rest of Medrengard.

The rest of the travel was spent in complete silence.

Soon, Mortarion was in front of the main gates, which were so large Mortarion had no idea what Perturabo expected to use them for. Maximus Ordinatus or Emperor Titans were not that big compared to the enormous metallic doors of ugly iron-coloured shade that barred the way.

It went without saying that the gates were closed.

“**Perturabo. I am here. I know you are watching me**.”

There were no threats or anything that might be construed as an insult...Mortarion was sure that if he dared uttering them, it would be a matter of heartbeats before orders were given so that he was banished from Medrengard.

At last, after a long period that was frankly ridiculous, the Iron Gates opened, in a cacophony of growling machines and the thunderous activation of millions of mechanisms.

What was inside was shrouded in darkness, and what wasn’t darkness was in fire. There were pipes bigger than Mechanicum Forges in their own right transported viscous substances that contained their fair share of blood and liquefied corpses. There were enormous silvery tendrils that acted as mechadendrites everywhere. Mortarion couldn’t investigate more; an avenue had been created for him to advance, and on each side, thousands of Daemon Engines mounted guard. Some of them, the Death Lord had honestly never seen stride across a battlefield of the Eye...which was maybe for the best, as some were the size of Emperor Titans in their own right.

The Lord of the Death Guard was led to a maze of tanks containing molten lava while rains of chemicals altered weapons. Millions of weapons were churned, half of them discarded for flaws that would have been declared insignificant by all other Legions.

At long last, his progression ended. He was in a massive atelier, and though Mortarion had the feeling that someone had been here not long before him – there was an aetheric signature that wasn’t Perturabo’s – his brother received him alone.

Of course, ‘receiving’ him was practically distorting facts. Perturabo had taken its favourite appearance of a machine with an iron mask, and was presenting his back to him, busy as he was dissecting...what had to be an old Man of Iron.

Mortarion breathed out.

Perturabo didn’t turn to face him.

“**Brother**.”

“**Mortarion**.” The Long War passed, and the Lord of Iron’s manners were getting worse and worse. “**Why are you here?**”

“**Hanzo is dead. And the Eleventh has returned**.”

“**I know. Why are you here?**”

Few things could shock Mortarion anymore, but this one certainly seeded roots of surprise. Obviously, friendships had faded in the carnage of the Long War. Nevertheless, it was not a good sign Perturabo could react so...so emotionlessly and mechanically to the brother he had been so close to.

“**I have come to tell you to stop whatever new plan you thought to begin at the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods**.” Mortarion decided that bluntness was probably the valid strategy. “**Tzeentch’s new toy stole Toramino’s surviving forces, and your Warsmiths proved totally unsuited to the kind of war that is fought there**.”

“**Mighty words**,” Perturabo grumbled, “**when it was your First Captain who killed Toramino. Or are you going to tell me Typhus has broken his leash again**?”

Anger filled Mortarion’s essence, and bitterness threatened submerged him.

Mortarion spat ultra-corrosive bile, but decided not to answer the taunt, for that was what it was: a provocation.

“**In this affair, Typhus is obeying his orders in the spirit and the letter they were given**.”

“**That might be the first time in his life he does so**.” Perturabo grunted. “**But**-“

“**Oh damn it, Perturabo!**” Mortarion had patience, but everyone had limits, and his were soon approaching their end. “**I have not come to listen to your insinuations about my First Captain!**” It was especially hard to endure when the Fourth Legion’s Former Captain was on his way to be an apathetic machine of flesh if something wasn’t done soon. “**I have come to warn you, brother to brother, that if you continue on that path, you’re likely to join Omegon on the planet of rats, screaming anarchic ramblings for the whole Eye to hear**.”

 Mortarion was filled with bitterness about his fall to Nurgle. But as recent events had proven, it could always be worse, and the Alpha Legion had been on the receiving end of this proverb.

Sometimes it was really better to kill yourself before enduring...that. Mortarion had never liked Alpharius and Omegon, but no one deserved to fall to Anarchy.

This time the Death Lord obtained a reaction.

Alas, it wasn’t the one he wanted.

Perturabo turned to face him, and eyes shining with the power of lava and infernal forges shone glared at him.

“**I,**” the voice was mechanical menace incarnate, “**am not going to succumb to Anarchy**.”

“**I’m sure the Hydra said the same thing before Fenris exploded in his face**,” Mortarion retorted sarcastically. “**Oh, and I’m sure Lorgar assured his sons he wasn’t going to die. It is really too bad he didn’t warn Weaver and Guilliman of that little revelation**.”

“**From Iron, cometh Strength. From Strength, cometh Will. From Will, cometh Faith. From Faith, cometh Honour. From Honour, cometh Iron. This is the Unbreakable Litany, and may it forever be so**.”

They were all stubborn in their own way, but Mortarion wondered sometimes if Perturabo had not been made of spite and sheer stubbornness in their genitor’s labs.

It was like speaking with a wall...a wall of sheer stubbornness, of course.

“**We will see each other on the battlefield, then**.” The Lord of Iron had already turned back to manipulate several Knight-sized Automatons. “**Do not say I didn’t warn you**.”

“**Get out of my citadel, Mortarion**.”

“**Incidentally, Perturabo, the *Iron Palace*? Seriously? I thought you would not**-”

And as the words were spoken, suddenly, Mortarion was back before the Iron Gates, and he had to retreat fast to avoid the humiliation of the immense doors slamming in his essence.

“**Well, I tried to warn you**.” Mortarion sighed. That Nurgle had been extremely joyous when he proposed the idea should have told him something. “**The consequences will be on your head**.”

**Halo Stars**

**The Ind Cluster**

**Maharashtra System**

**Maharashtra**

**The Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods**

**9.131.311M35**

**Typhus the Traveller**

“Welcome back, Lord Herald.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Typhus answered. “I will say it is...indeed great to leave the Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods.”

“The trials were perilous?”

“The trials were so dangerous describing them as ‘perilous’ is fundamentally inexact,” Typhus had known there would be losses, of course, but the seven servants of the Grandfather who had died inside this cursed place were lost, body and soul. And saying this was insufficient to describe the sheer danger of the Graveyard. “And I am glad those are over. Influenza, Plague, Plague, Rot, Death, Rebirth.”

The Captain of the Death Guard saluted and let him pass, having received the code agreed beforehand.

“I have summoned the *Fetid Blessing*, Lord Herald.”

“Good.” Unlike the Stormbirds and the Thunderhawks which had been used to land on Maharashtra, the *Fetid Blessing* was a former Titan Lander that Typhus had taken from the blind fools that prostrated them before their machines in ignorance. “We are going to need it.”

Slowly, but surely, the servants of the Grandfather were moving their prize through one out of the biggest breaches in the Graveyard’s walls. In this case, the Iron Warriors’ siege-abilities had proven quite useful.

“Lord Herald...is it...a Cadian Pylon?”

The former First Captain of the Death Guard chuckled.

“I understand why you would arrive to that conclusion. It looks a bit like a Pylon...albeit one which is reduced to its base, with the upper part missing. And yes, this is true Noctilith.”

“But it is not a Pylon.”

“Indeed not Captain.” The moment the Legionnaires were out of the cursed Graveyard, macro-engines could take the relay of the Grandfather’s blessings, and many of the Death Guard’s Chosen collapsed in exhaustion. “The Noctilith around this...this not-Pylon, is merely a shell to ensure that it can keep what is inside prisoner.”

“I suppose it is vital to keep it prisoner for as long as the plan calls?”

“Yes, Captain. I couldn’t have said it better.” Typhus studied his prize, and was satisfied to see no attack had managed to bypass his escort vigilance. “I will return to the *Terminus Est* using the *Fetid Blessing*. The artefact needs to be warded seven more times. Once it will be done, I expect the War Council to wait for me, and the last messages of the Death Lord to be deciphered and waiting for my eyes.”

“I will warn the other Captains, Lord Herald.”

“Tell them,” Typhus gurgled in satisfaction, “that we have won a great victory against *all* enemies of the Grandfather today.”

“Blessed be Decay!”

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Morwen System**

**Morwen VI**

**8.132.311M35**

**Magister Immaterial Nouakchott**

As a specialist in the noble field of studying and acquiring millenary-old artefacts, Magister Immaterial Nouakchott had always preferred animals when they were long dead.

That way, he could study their skeletons in peace.

Unfortunately, the pests that had decided to invite themselves on Morwen VI were alive and aggressive.

“ANARCHY! Glory to Malal!”

“Glory to the Great Mutator,” and Nouakchott blasted apart the head of the vermin which had just dared challenging Great Tzeentch, along with four others. The Aether Ray spell was perfectly tailored for that sort of rat eradication.

“Lord Magister! I am afraid the defences have been breached!”

“No! You think?” His sycophant subordinate was extremely lucky manpower was so limited on the ground, with most of their reinforcements busy clashing with the Khornate fleet in orbit.

By an extremely untimely coincidence, all sides had asked for reinforcements...and they were now all arriving at roughly the same time, making the joyous chaotic melee of a lifetime kilometres above their heads.

It shouldn’t have been too problematic, but alas, they were also the giant rats to take into account.

“The Spires are ready?”

“Yes, Lord Magister!”

Nouakchott made a quick calculus, as he always did. In that case, it was the knowledge and the secrets he had claimed before the enormous warren hole opened and Morwen VI began crawling with rats and other fanged vermin, against the wrath of Malicia, when the Destiny Unwritten would learn that he had abandoned his fortress without orders.

In the end, Nouakchott decided the secrets and the lore would be largely enough.

And besides, the Magister thought as he incinerated two rats trying to disguise themselves as Death Cult assassins, the fortresses would not last long anymore, no matter how arduous his efforts at defending it.

“Good. We leave.”

“But Magister, the Southern Expedition has not yet returned!”

“We have hundreds of thousands giant rats encircling this fortress, and plenty of infiltrators inside our walls, and you’re worried about the Southern Expedition?”

In hindsight, Nouakchott shouldn’t have dispersed his effectives so much, but Tzeentch had not blessed him with precognition, alas.

“We leave this site.” Nouakchott repeated. “The knowledge we gained will be sufficient to avoid the wrath of the other Magisters. Besides, it is their fault their reinforcements arrived so late, and are nowhere to be seen to defend this fortress in this desperate hour.”

There was nothing else to be said, and in an operation that had been repeated an astounding amount of time, his forces withdrew in a semi-disciplined manner, massacring thousands of rats as they made their retreat.

Soon enough, the Evacuation Spires were filled.

Nouakchott used the opportunity to activate several Grand Mutation Curses onto the rats. It was a meagre satisfaction, but as the Spires began to rise, the Magister Immaterial figured this would at least make an adequate vengeance. The tide of vermin that had dared storming his fortress fell into confusion, and that was before the Spires’ crystalline batteries wiped out the citadel.

“A good thing done,” the Q’Sal Exile allowed himself to smile, before frowning as his Spire gained altitude. “By Fate and Sorcery! How many rats are there?”

Nouakchott had thought he had made a nice dent in the ranks of the rats. But as the plains of Morwen VI were revealed to his sorcerous sight, it was clear he had merely been slaying the vanguard of an endless horde.

“We don’t see the presence of the skeletons, at least, Lord Magister.”

“That’s something to rejoice, yes. The rats are problematic, but they die like everyone else. We were in insufficient strength and-“

Nouakchott closed his eyes, as without warning, Morwen VI’s atmosphere seemed to convulse in flames. Then after a few seconds, there was a pillar of crimson light.

The Magister Immaterial shivered. What by a thousand artefacts was that?

Moving before one of his nine-blessed mirrors, Nouakchott murmured nine words before giving his instructions.

“Show me what is just responsible for the last powerful interference.”

The mirror obeyed, and the Magister Immaterial saw...blood.

Rivers of blood.

Lakes of blood.

There was so much blood.

The giant rats’ corpses were seen in so many numbers there was no way to count them, and with each crimson flash, there seemed to be more created, and the blood flowed in eruptions of red fluids.

No, no, these were not ‘crimson flashes’.

Nouakchott manipulated his mirror, and sure enough, a scarlet figure was revealed, wielding two short blades at an impossible speed.

Yet for all his attempts to slow down the image flow, the servant of Tzeentch wasn’t able to slow down it enough for the Khornate murderer to appear in a way that was stable and good for his long-range study.

He...not the figure was feminine...she...she was simply too fast.

How could anyone be so fast?

How could anyone be so powerful?

The world of Morwen VI was before his eyes, and to his shock, the blood was spreading by tens of kilometres.

The blood of millions of rats was spilled in a succession of murders that were-

The thoughts inside his head arrived to a very unpleasant conclusion.

“We must get out of this system as fast as possible. This is a damned ritual. This is why they waited most of a day before deploying. They wanted to be sure there would be enough bodies on the planet to spill the amounts of blood required.”

“Yes, Lord Magister. But the other Magisters...they say the warships of the brutes are trying to form into eight groups. We wondered why they would divide their strength at this crucial strategy, but-“

“But it makes perfect sense if their intent is to make this planet a ritualistic slaughterhouse.”

“Why by the Great Mutator would they do that, Lord Magister? They already have this monster!”

“I don’t know,’ Nouakchott admitted.

Morwen VI had never been a beautiful world. You had to mutate to live here – something the rats had compensated by sacrificing an ungodly number of their own to achieve the same feat.

But now it was nothing but grand butchery on a planetary scale.

Millions of beasts and lifeforms unfortunate to be caught here when the monster made her grand entrance were exsanguinated in a terrifying campaign that no one had seen the likes in millennia.

And the only thing the servants of Tzeentch meaningfully could do was run and save their lives.

They simply were too weak to stop the murderous onslaught.

“I don’t know, but I suspect we are not going to like the answer when it is revealed.”

**The Blood Muse**

The two-tiered ziggurats had not meant to be opened, but an ocean of blood carried power with it.

Blood was Life. Blood was Power. Blood was Destruction.

Blood was the Key.

This realisation could have brought some feeling approaching weakness, if the opposition wasn’t so *weak*.

Yes, they had provided the blood she required, but honestly, close to two billion rats, and save a few of their sorcerer-shamans, none of them had seen her coming.

Anarchy might be a rising Power of the Warp, but for the moment, it clearly preferred quantity to quality.

And the quantity was severely lacking.

Hekatii cleaned her blades as the servants of the Lord of Blood rose from the lakes of blood to participate in the massacre.

“I am going into this ziggurat,” the crimson-haired Aeldari, giving a disdainful glance to the blood-skinned monsters charging out of the Warp portals opening all across Morwen VI. “Make sure no one follows me.”

“**Yes, Blood Muse**.”

The former Apprentice of the Queen of Blades had her doubts they were going to be successful; the skeletons of the King in Yellow were still there, biding their time until they saw an opportunity. Hekatii was not naive; the armies of the dead had retreated far too quickly when the rats burrowed into reality and threw an army out of nowhere.

But as she had learned in the Empire of a Billion Moons long ago, for some Lords, it was the loyalty which mattered. The orders had been given. They all had to obey, happy or not.

The interior of the ziggurat, naturally, was filled with traps.

The Builders had tried to protect what they believed to be their afterlife with their best defences, and now that the metallic alloy had been compelled by the Power of Blood to restore an entrance, they were activated.

If you did not have the reflexes of a moderately average Aeldari, they could cause some problems. There were metallic arrows whose points were incredibly radioactive ores. A multitude of paths were leading to nothing but hundreds of miniature abysses, and swirling inside these precipices laid not mere spikes of metal, but devices which were made to release an artifice able to shred flesh and metal on the molecular level.

Several times, the chambers she went through had no air. In other occasions, the trap was the ceiling immediately falling on the occupant of the room while the doors were sealed.

The Builders had really wanted to be left alone in their cherished afterlife.

It was too bad for them Hekatii was there.

Correction: it was too bad many beings were there, able to break through their defences.

For when the Queen of the Arenas entered the immense and near-empty cavern that was at the heart of the ziggurat, it took her half a heartbeat to see she was not the first to arrive.

There were thirteen of the ‘undead Astartes’.

Even if their armours had not been this tasteless grey, it would have been child’s play to recognise for what they were.

The best word in their own language to describe them would have been...*repulsive*.

They were not Pariahs. That much Hekatii was sure. But they were not like the species they had been when they were breathing. There was something left of their souls...thin, fragile, flawed...as if someone had tried to replace their souls with artificial ones, but fumbling in the dark while ignoring every lesson the Aeldari Empire had ever gained.

Twelve faced her, while the thirteenth raced to reach the only source of the light lying at the top of the dark stairs, the very heart of the ziggurat.

Three heartbeats later, the twelve were destroyed. Hekatii was not the Queen of Blades, but killing things so weak spiritually was so easy she wouldn’t even call it ‘training’.

The thirteenth tried its best to accomplish his mission...but his inelegant ‘chainsword’ was blocked by her blade negligently a good distance away from the light...which revealed itself to be...a giant hourglass?

Hekatii giggled.

“Ah, the mystery is no more.”

The undead warrior removed his chainsword and tried to take several steps back. The former High Priestess of Khaine let the animated corpse do as it wished; many answers had been provided by a mere glance.

“*You are ignorant*.”

“Really?” Hekatii raised an eyebrow. “Because I had a theory before coming here. You see, the Builders were very focused on keeping their souls in the Material Plane. I don’t blame them; if you don’t have any Gods to protect you, the Warp is a very unpleasant to plunge your soul into.”

“*Your theory is false*.”

“They were so afraid of what coming after they held their last breath,” the Blood Muse smirked while ignoring utterly the words of the skeleton, “that they used one of the first symbols young species use to measure time: the hourglass. For if it measured time, it could also measure the time they had to escape the claws of the predators waiting for them in the polluted soup that the Old Ones messed up with.”

“*Ridiculous. Praying to an hourglass will achieve nothing*.”

Hekatii slightly inclined her head.

“Yes. That goes without saying.” It hadn’t stopped more species than she could possibly count to have tried that course of action at some point or another of their existence. “But the hourglass is the symbol and the container. It is powerful, but hardly sufficient by itself. But what if you replace the sands of the hourglass by something else? What is if still sand....but sand of a different kind? What will happen if you reduce Noctilith into a powder, imbue it with the power to keep the Warp at bay, and then pour it into special hourglasses? This is what your master learned from his explorations in the ruins of the Builders, isn’t it?”

Hekatii closed her eyes.

Predictably, the animated corpse attacked.

Her attack pulverised the lower part of its body, armour and non-armour.

The crash was loud, but not enough to hide to the snarl of anger.

And when Hekatii reopened her eyes, the light shining where there should have been eyes told her the Usurper of Death had decided to speak to her in person.

“*The new slave of the War Pretender*,” for all the feigned detachment, there was a large dose of hatred in that voice. “*You are rapidly becoming an annoyance*.”

“Only an annoyance?” Hekatii bared her teeth, throwing her blades into the air. “Disappointing. I will have to step up my game, then.”

The death rattle which followed...it took her a moment to realise the thing using the skeleton as a puppet was *laughing*.

“*You are not going to step up anything, foolish long-ear. You are merely a sacrifice the War Pretender uses in its desperate attempt to locate me. Go back to your blood bath. Tell him I will come to him*.”

“Or I will come to you.”

“*No. In the battle to come, you fall to the Red Angel, arrogant Muse of an extinct Empire*.”

The skeleton began to burn in purple flames, and there was soon nothing left of it.

Hekatii turned around to look again at the hourglass forged by the Builders.

“I’m really beginning to hate you, King in Yellow.” The blood-haired Aeldari complained. “Especially when your words make sense...”

**Approaches of the Malfi Warp Crown**

**Battleship *Natural Selection***

**8.135.311M35**

**Captain Boros Kurn**

“The situation has not improved in your absence, Warlord.”

In fact, it had considerably deteriorated. ‘Not improved’ was one of these charming understatements he had learned by frequenting too much Tzeentchian sorcerers.

“Yes.” Malicia had not donned her helmet in her private quarters, and her displeasure was evident. “It is bad enough the King in Yellow seems to conjure millions of skeletons from nowhere, but now it seems the rats have decided to join the chaotic melee. I’m ready to bet a few thousand priceless artefacts and books the insane vermin has developed a travel method making them capable of jumping from one Warp Storm to another.”

This was indeed exceedingly bad news. There were so many Warp anomalies in the Calyx Hell Stars right now that the self-proclaimed ‘Skaven’ could pretty much go where they wanted, when they wanted.

Thankfully, there was a massive exception: the Malfi System and the surrounding area of space. This was something he repeated aloud, and received a nod in return.

“It’s true Malfi is safe, as are our most important planets,” the Warlord-sorceress conceded, “but wars are not won by staying on the defensive.”

Boros was not going to say Malicia was wrong on that point; the Sixteenth Legion had won most of its wars during the Great Crusade by decapitating the opposition, with the greatest triumph of these tactics employed during the Ullanor campaign.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked as the ruler of Malfi did seem to not be willing to continue the conversation. “Should I take command of the forces which escaped Morwen VI, bolster their strength with a few warbands, and counterattack? The butchers seems to be withdrawing to their bloody worlds. We can reconquer Morwen VI.”

“**That would be extremely stupid of you**,” Boros couldn’t repress a shiver listening to that voice. The *sword* was on the sorceress’ table, and purple flames danced on the black metal...assuming it was really metal and not something horribly worse. “**Morwen VI is a lighthouse of blood and skulls. As long as it is active, trying to conquer the planet will convince the Red Angel to give you a little visit**.”

For once, it was not the sheer evil of the voice which made him ill-at-ease.

“*Angron* is coming here?”

“He is.” Malicia, reassuringly, had the facial expression adequate for these circumstances. “I was pretty sure the Lord of Skulls intended for the Conqueror and the other berserker maniacs to fight this war alone, but the existence and the ambitions of the King in Yellow has changed that.”

“This is not a force we can stop...I doubt we can slightly slow down the rampage of this monster, and this is assuming he is alone and unsupported.”

“I agree. The gladiator-slave is a force of slaughter quite beyond us at the moment.” Malicia gave him a thin smile. “Thankfully, the Red Angel is not yet here. Morwen VI was the first sacrificial bloodbath. They need seven more.”

Boros Kurn loudly snorted.

“I have seen the report your Magister Nouakchott sent. The female monster who engineered the bloodbath is worse than a fallen Primarch, in her own way. At least with the Red Angel and the others, you will be able to see yourself die. With this one, you are unable to see death coming for you.”

“Hmm...I should have given more details. The ritual implies eight different rituals, Boros. There needs to be eight different planets, obviously. The sacrifices require eight different enemies of the Skull Throne: at Morwen VI, it was the giant rats which drew the short straw. And alas for the Blood Rose, you can’t order the same monster to perform the deeds eight times. It has to be done by eight different worshippers of War and Blood.”

This was a bit more reassuring...but not as much as a reassurance as he would have preferred to have.

“You want me to locate and disturb the ritual sites?”

“No, I want you to kill the enemies who try to break our convoys and warbands journeying to the Halo Stars.” His surprise must have been more obvious than he thought, because Malicia snorted in amusement. “I need Noctilith, Boros. I got more than I thought possible from the Ymga Monolith, but my initial plans weren’t conceived to deal with a Daemon Primarch. I need more Transmutational Changestone, and that means more Noctilith.”

“I will need the Iron Warriors and the ships you requisitioned.”

The sorceress didn’t hesitate.

“Take them. But I want results, Boros.”

“**Don’t worry**,” the Black Blade of Antwyr said in a false honeyed voice, “**whatever she will do to you if you fail, I can guarantee you it is less painful than having the Red Angel maim your soul**!”

Boros looked at Malicia...who made a shrug.

One could only hope that at the end of this campaign, they wouldn’t need this too-vocal weapon anymore...

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Luxury Space Station *Delights after Duty* – orbiting around Pluto**

**0.136.311M35**

**Adept-Primus Joost Harpagon**

It was a nightmare.

It had to be.

The Administratum couldn’t arrest him here, there were laws against it!

Wait a minute, since when did the Administratum recruits have Power Armours?

“It has a mistake!”

“I told you he would do that.”

“It’s not difficult, they’re all saying it.”

It had to be a nightmare. Joost was just having a nice holiday until everyone importance forgot his existence and he could return to Mega-Hive Cajun and his duties!

They dragged him in one of the Saturnian Salons of the *Delights after Duty*, and the nightmare suddenly became all the more horrible.

It was here.

The enormous spider of his nightmares was here.

“We found him, Adjutant-Colonel!”

“Thank you, Sister Claire!” Oh good, it was really a nightmare, spiders didn’t talk, after all.

And they generally didn’t look like they had taken a bath in gold paint either.

It was a nightmare.

“Ha! So you are the one who thought denying my Mistress her rightful due was a good idea? No one is beyond the reach of the Swarm!”

“I want to wake up!” Joost shouted. “I don’t know which drugs you have poured in my drinks last night but-“

“HOW. DARE. YOU.” The eight eyes of the arachnid were now so close there was nothing else but to see. “I have slain heretics in the name of the Webmistress for far worse reasons than that! Apologise! Immediately!”

“This...this isn’t a nightmare?” The Lord of the Adeptus Almitas babbled. “This is real?”

To his relief, the spider huffed and slightly retreated, leaving one of the red-armoured women to answer in her stead.

“We are very real, Adept-Primus. And in case you want a more detailed explanation, the Adjutant-Colonel and our protection squad arrived on the same ship as Lord Leman Russ and the Custodes.”

Ah...oh by every pile of vellum ever buried in the archives of Holy Terra. It was real. It was not a nightmare...and the spider was here, it wasn’t a hallucination.

“Fine...fine...” all his attempts to find some assurance faltered and died each time his eyes fell upon the spider. Why the hell was this spider so big? “What is the motive behind this odious aggression? I am the Adept-Primus of the Adeptus Almitas!”

“Don’t play innocent!” the spider barked while pointing one of its massive legs straight at his head. “I can list hundreds of points proving you have been engaged in a gross dereliction of duties! In addition to which, as I said before, you are trying to deny the Webmistress her rightful due!”

“Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert,” the red-clad woman with what looked black-dyed hair explained. “Lady Weaver, Her Celestial Highness, Angel of the God-Emperor. You may have heard of her.”

Holy-

That was one of the Living Saint’s servants?

That was....what kind of oblivion the galaxy was going to? Giving weapons to spiders was just insane!

“Yes!” The arachnid didn’t jump in joy at hearing the name of her ‘Mistress’, but she wasn’t far from it. “Last chance, lazy Adept! Go back immediately your duties, pay the bounties the Webmistress won fair and square, and all will be well!”

“I am the Adept-Primus of an independent Adeptus!” Joost retorted, his pride finally regaining enough strength to dominate his fear. “If you are really a servant of the Living Saint, then you are part of the Imperial Guard! You have no power over the Adeptus Almitas!”

The spider...chuckled? Or at least, that was the sound it made him think on the spot.

“That argument was anticipated! You may not be aware of it, Adept-Primus, but I wasn’t the only great servant of the Webmistress to be given the honour to visit Terra! One of my sisters did too!”

Joost really, really didn’t like where this conversation was going.

Unfortunately, his bad feelings were more than justified a second later.

“By a strange coincidence, my sweet sister found out an Inquisitor just wanted to conduct a surprise inspection of the Adeptus Almitas! Naturally, as she is a loyal Administrator of the Swarm, her first action was to propose her services so that the bureaucratic inspection could be conducted in a timely manner!”

Joost shook his head.

“It...” he cleared his throat and tried not to shake...too much. “It could be a bluff on your part.”

“It could be.” The spider answered cordially. “So my sister decided to give you the message that the gumbo soup is particularly delicious, especially when we have this delicious meat as appetiser.”

This may not be a nightmare by the definition of the word, but Joost was really approaching the point of ‘unrelenting disaster’.

“Well, congratulations. You have all the cards in hand.” Joost gave his arachnid tormentor a bitter smile. “Have you come to gloat?”

“We need an Adept-Primus to approve the bounties.” Weaver’s servant...grumbled? “The Inquisitor already arrested fourteen incapables of yours who were involved in various conspiracies of embezzlement. Fortunately for you, apart from your dereliction of duty spent on hyper-long holidays, my sister has no found any sign of treachery, heresy, or fraud that demands we separate your head from your shoulders. Joyous conclusion: rejoice, for you can serve the Webmistress!”

Joost was almost smiling...before he remembered what would happen if he did indeed approve the release of the enormous sums that were falling under the purview of the Adeptus Almitas.

“I...I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. If I do...Xerxes Vandire will order my death. And...I’m...your Living Saint is on the other side of the galaxy. There is loyalty to one’s duty, but-“

“Loyalty to the Webmistress is its own reward!” the golden spider proclaimed grandiosely before continuing in a defensive tone when the red-armoured women gave the arachnid a strange look. “What? The Dark Angels have a proverb, I just changed it to its natural conclusion!”

“Err...”

“Anyway! If security is just your concern, be reassured, Adept-Primus! The Webmistress will ask for the permission to station a regiment outside your office, so you can fulfil your duties in complete peace!”

Joost Harpagon groaned in despair. How did one explain that by doing so, the thousands of mid-ranked Adepts of the Senatorum Imperialis were going to ignore his existence until the End of Times, and possibly beyond it? If the Almitas was seen so brazenly siding with the Astra Militarum, all his bridges were burned!

And yet, there was the Inquisition at the gates, and Xerxes Vandire may kill him on principle anyway.

Joost sighed in defeat.

“Just tell me what I have to do...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nephilim Sector**

**Argovon System**

**High Orbit over Hishrea**

**Ambition-class Cruiser *Saint’s Gift***

**5.141.311M35**

**Rogue Trader Lady Foronika Argovon**

“By pure curiosity, Lady Rogue Trader, where does the word ‘Hishrea’ come from?”

Foronika blinked and stopped contemplating the magnificent pict-vids that were transmitted to her bridge.

“It was the name of the old winter manor of my family, before we were forced to sell it,” the new Governor of the Argovon System answered honestly. I think it was named about an ancestor of a secondary line who made his fortune selling furs of some exotic animals, but as we sold it with all the paperwork, I am not completely sure.”

“Ah,” the Nyxian Colonel nodded thoughtfully before continuing, “you must really have hated it, to give its name to this planet.”

“I did not hate it,” Foronika vigorously denied. It was just that she had never understood how sane humans could tolerate living when sub-zero temperatures were common and snow made your life miserable in short order.

The officer chose to not comment further, but his smirk proved he was definitely thinking it.

“But I have to admit, Colonel, I named this world Hishrea before being given a complete analysis of what was waiting for potential settlers. If I had, I may have changed it to something more suitable. ‘Helwinter’ or something equally blizzard-like might have delivered an adequate warning.”

Foronika was not going to deny Hishrea was beautiful from orbit: it was all blue and white, and the vids one took from it had their places in artists’ galleries.

Hishrea was a world that was very far from the local star. In fact, among the worlds she was now legally the mistress of, it was the planet which was the furthest away from it.

As a result, it was locked into a perpetual winter.

One might think it was the end of the difficulties. It was in reality just the beginning. Eighty-five percent of the world was covered by the oceans, and not only there were tens of kilometres-deep, the megafauna living inside them was as varied as it was enormous.

The mountains and the other uneven terrain that was not part of the oceans weren’t less dangerous. Thermal vents at first had given promising opportunities, but the Nyxian veterans Her Celestial Highness had loaned her had rapidly dashed her hopes: the warmth attracted many beasts, including entire colonies of little carnivorous creatures that had been promptly called ‘frostwyrms’. In one or two, a guardsman could easily kill them without problem, but the first scouting attempts upon their nesting sites had revealed millions of them. One massive orbital strike had been needed to cover the guardsmen’s retreat.

“Why not change the name, then?”

“Theoretically, I can, Colonel. But the Administratum is on obstruction mode in everything, these days, wherever my name is mentioned.”

“Ah.”

“So when I choose a name, I’m stuck with it, impossible to change. The Argovon System is the Argovon System. And its planets are Prospectium, Salonika, Argovon, Basileia, Iago, and Hishrea.”

“I see.” The Nyxian officer placed a hand in his unkempt beard. With all the exploration ‘adventures’ the guardsmen had made on the Death World below – and yes, Hishrea was a Death World – even veterans were in need of serious rest. “Well, you have a promising list of settlers for five out of six planets, at least. As for Hishrea...I want to be optimistic, but you are going to need some hardy settlers for this one.”

Foronika turned her head...before grinning.

“You have no confidence in Her Celestial Highness’ bureaucratic skills?”

“Oh no, I have absolute confidence in Lady Weaver,” the Colonel assured her. “I think, Lady Argovon, that you are a bit too optimistic about the speed an Astartes Chapter can be permanently deployed her, but I have no doubt the Space Marines will come. So far, your fifty thousand tonnes of Noctilith mined on Prospectium for this year seems to be on a good course...and most of the mineral wealth of this system is completely untapped. If the Imperium has to station a thousand Space Marines and keep them battling all the Necron subterranean hideouts of the Sector for a thousand years, then this is exactly what Her Celestial Highness and Holy Terra will order them to do.”

The veteran of Commorragh shook his head.

“But Space Marines, no matter how sympathetic, are not going to help the settlers. They can defend a Fortress and provide some protection when the colonists live inside the walls, but outside, the men and women of Hishrea will be on their own. And I have spent enough time here to say that every day on this ice ball is a battle of survival.”

The man had definitely a point. And if Hishrea had nothing valuable, Foronika was honest enough to admit she would have barely glanced at the planet and turned all her attention to the rest of the system. But Hishrea was rich in resources. Noctilith, rare ore and gas elements were in such quantities in the mountains that the cogboys had been able to discover them within mere minutes of survey.

“Well, I suppose we will have to wait and see. Let’s just hope the Space Marines won’t have an aversion for furs and cold, because this is what awaits them on Hishrea.”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Wuhan System**

**Wuhan Secundus**

**2.143.311M35**

**Regina Wei Cao**

“And with the Mechanicus no longer having a problem with the Necrons, the Noctilith mining on Prospectium is finally proceeding as per the plans envisioned.” Wei smiled. “Of course, that means your sisters will have to cure the Titan-Moths of their legendary laziness, until my wife returns.”

“We will motivate them, I swear it, wife of the Webmistress!” The Adjutant-Spider promised.

Wei chuckled. The enthusiasm of the great arachnids never ceased to be refreshing.

“Do you want to send one more courier ship to the Webmistress?”

“No,” the Regina answered without hesitating. “There are many good news these last days, and the number of courier ships we have is very finite.”

“But we can’t exactly send this critical information via Astropath. As the Webmistress ordered, we mustn’t reveal the importance of the Noctilith quarries.”

“I think,” the wife of the Lady Nyx said carefully, “the secrecy we intended for several planets won’t work. I know why my love gave these orders. But with the Administratum against our interests in the Nephilim Sector, it isn’t going to work.”

Arguably the Nyx Sector had an even worse problem with the upper leadership of the Adeptus Administratum, but with Taylor being the Sector Lady and most of the important Planetary Governors on their side, you could find solutions. The majority of the citizens living in Nyx or Wuhan were not aware of these political troubles, proving the Nyxian methods had met great success.

“Should I make a new request when it comes to the Adeptus Astartes, then?” the Adjutant-Spider asked.

“No,” Wei shook her head. “At least not this year. I’m pretty sure my wife or someone else is going to find a solution before we give her a triumphal welcome here.”

“We will do our best for the Webmistress! And yes, it’s possible the problem will be resolved by other parties. The Webmistress will soon translate into the Baal System, if she didn’t already do so. And there is a Great Conference that will take place at Macragge, with the Primarchs attending!”

Wei nodded with a serious expression on her face. Deep inside, however, the Regina of Wuhan was giggling.

Several Primarchs had returned. Not a single Primarch, Primarchs, plural. A Black Crusade and several abominable xenos horrors had been annihilated. Archeotech treasures and great bounties had been claimed.

Taylor had really done the impossible again.

Of course, Wei knew better than to think it had not cost her. Her wife’s letters were not perfect, but they had already given her a clue this military campaign had been extremely bad. Her Basileia would need all the support and comfort Wei could give her when she returned, which hopefully would be the moment this ‘Great Conference of Macragge’ was over.

“Indeed.” And while the praises of the Adjutant-Spider – always centred on a single being, of course – were amusing to listen to, Wei couldn’t spend hours doing that today; her presence was required for the inauguration of a new shipyard in orbit of her homeworld. “Changing the subject, Adjutant-Captain. What do you think of the last request?”

It was a sign of the subject’s importance the golden spider didn’t answer immediately, instead tapping frenetically the device several Tech-Priests had worked upon to facilitate the data-acquisition for eight-legged insects.

“I don’t know where to look for, wife of the Webmistress! After all, the assassins who try to challenge the Swarm at the heart of the web aren’t allowed to write competency reports!”

Something the spider seemed to find problematic, now that she had the time to think about it.

“But we have a squad of Heracles Warden Space Marines currently training somewhere in-system,” the Adjutant-Captain continued after making a sidereal number of calculations. “Do you want me to contact them?”

**Somewhere in the depths of a Wuhanese Hive**

**Si Yu**

Si Yu had no regrets.

If she had any in the first place, she wouldn’t have chosen to murder people. And to be sure, the work had been exhilarating. For too long the nobles had been content to ignore them, now that many were poor, they couldn’t afford vast armies and state-of-the-art defences to protect their haughty lives.

Moreover, Si Yu was getting paid to kill the blue-blooded bastards. And the pay was good. She didn’t have to go to a badly lit shop and eat years-expired gruel. Though to be fair, the quality of the food stores had improved in the last years. You had to go really deep into the Underhive now to be served food that was properly disgusting.

Too bad her money wasn’t going to be of any use to her now. That was a problem with the Throne Gelts: they didn’t go with you when it was time to be judged by the God-Emperor. It was kind of fortunate, Si Yu recognised, because otherwise all nobles would be greeted with a pat of the head. That way there was the tiniest hope the blue-blooded wastes of space were punished for their crimes.

The young assassin forced herself to stay calm. There was no other living being but her in this dark interrogation room, but there was a thing of metallic feathers and cogs. Si Yu knew what it was: a servo-owl, the winged spies who were replacing the antique cogs. The demand was so high for them that in most of the Hives, servo-skulls were the norm, but there were more and more of them as the years passed.

The door opened.

Si Yu tensed, for this was not the Arbites she had expected.

Not unless the man had found a way to transform himself into a giant...

The Wuhanese teenage girl swallowed heavily. Everyone had heard of the Space Marines, the blades of Her Celestial Highness. They weren’t supposed to be any on Wuhan, but the battles they had fought in the Living Saint’s and the God-Emperor’s name...they were legendary.

The assassin studied the armour, trying to guess the Chapter the warrior belonged to. Unfortunately, the enormous Power Armour was painted in a sort of brown-black camouflage which told her nothing of value.

“Name?”

“Mai.”

The Astartes immediately stared at her with a strength that pierced her mind and convinced her for a few seconds to stop breathing.

“Assassin,” the Space Marine began in a tone that make it sound he was about to discipline a child of five, “the noble you just killed was under the surveillance of the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition, for he was suspected to be a spy for Traitor parties operating outside this Sector. While we had enough evidence to execute him, decision had been taken to let him live, so he could lead us to his allies and accomplices. He was not supposed to die with a poisoned-covered dagger thrust in his right eye.”

Si Yu winced...and cursed deep inside. If what the Angel of Death said was true, she had screwed up...in a monumental manner.

“Several parties have to accelerate important operations. Many of these parties are important men and women who don’t like winning half-victories against the enemies of the Imperium. I obey them, and I am in no mood to hear your lies. A name. *Now*.”

“Si Yu. Professional assassin...but you already knew that.”

The questions began. The young killer did her best to answer them. Most of them were about the nobles she had eliminated in recent weeks, with one or two exceptions.

After what had to be a good hour, the questions stopped. Si Yu noted that while there was a data-slate on the table separating them, the giant had not a single time manifested the desire to take notes.

“This may be useful salvaging something.” The declaration brought some relief...some hope...no matter how ridiculous it was. Everyone knew what fate awaited assassins if they were caught. “Now the question is to deal with you.”

“I suppose you are not willing to release me if I promise to not do it again?”

The Angel of Death snorted, but there was no humour on his face.

“You will kill again. They always say they won’t do it. A few, a very rare few, try to fulfil their promise. It works so rarely in the end that nobody bothers giving your profession a second chance.”

She had thought the same...and it was a reassurance, in a certain way, to know the giant warriors weren’t imbeciles.

“I am going to die, then.”

“Tomorrow, fifteen girls like you, all involved in murders that have targeted several characters of importance, will be lead to the execution square. And you will die.”

There was no sympathy. But there was no gloating or other arrogant statement that she deserved it either.

Still, there was something strange. Si Yu believed herself good, but she was not so arrogant to believe her successful career terrified the nobles and the administrators at the top of the food chain. Most of her targets had been killed because they had suffered financial misfortunes and weren’t as protected as they should be.

“There are...rumours that sometimes, assassins are authorised to join the Penal Legions, she said prudently.

“Some of these rumours have a shadow of truth in them,” the Angel of Death replied slowly. “But they aren’t offered to you.”

In some way, it was a relief. The same rumours had mentioned the life-expectancy of someone in the Penal Legions was less than one hour long the moment you were ordered to charge on the battlefield.

In another way, it was nerve-wracking, because if this wasn’t the offer, what was the fate awaiting her?

“There have been orders coming from places that you have no business to know. Suffice to say, we have been ordered to find assassins and judge if they can still be used as loyal blades of the Golden Throne.”

Hope blossomed back in Si Yu’s chest.

“And assuming I can...convince you?”

“Officially, your life will end tomorrow. But another assassin will take your place in the execution square.”

The Space Marine watched her again with this ‘piercing’ gaze.

“Let there be no mistake. It is entirely possible you will still die before the end of the day. The first test will take place tomorrow afternoon. It will be a purity test. If you fail, I assure you that your demise will be so excruciating you will deeply regret not choosing the rope or another form of conventional execution.”

“I worship *Him*,” Si Yu said defensively. “I am not a heretic.”

But now she thought about it, she had not entered a church of the God-Emperor this year. At least she had assassinated no one in a holy sanctum. That had to count for something, right?

The Space Marine didn’t seem impressed. But then, that was to be expected. She was an assassin; he was one of the Emperor’s Angels of Death.

“We will see. The tests are going to be thorough and painful. Many will come after the first one. They will test you in a very taxing manner. And whatever happens to you, you likely will never ever return to Wuhan or any planet of the Nyx Sector.”

They wanted assassins; that was the message behind these sentences. The identity of the order-givers was mysterious, as she doubted a Living Saint had any use in mind for them. Still, it must have been approved at very high levels of authority, for Space Marines to be involved.

But did it really matter? Si Yu didn’t want to die tomorrow. And there was really no one that would mourn her. Her parents were long dead, and whatever remained of relatives were complete strangers. No one would regret her. True announcement of execution or not, the young assassin was already dead for every Wuhanese who knew her.

“I am determined to pass successfully these tests...Lord Astartes.”

For the first time, a smile appeared on the giant’s face.

“I am no Lord, assassin. And the first test begins now. Why should I let you pass the purity test?”

Si Yu recognised the challenge, and began to speak.

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**High Orbit over Holy Terra**

**Battle-Barge *Allfather’s Honour***

**0.145.311M35**

**Great Wolf Hakon Krakenslayer**

Despite what the Blood Claws often said as long as they believed he wasn’t here to hear them, Hakon had not survived all his battles by being as subtle as a Thunderhammer. Sometimes, you had to be cunning to defeat the foes of the Allfather. Most of the time, it took a Great Wolf’s gaze to find out the critical weaknesses of the cursed spawns they were battling.

All these centuries of war had proven really useful.

Hakon didn’t need them to know that when his father ordered the feast of a lifetime to be prepared while they went to have a private conversation, it was not going to be congratulate him...should this had been the *True* Great Wolf’s intention, it would have been done in front of the two thousand Vlka Fenryka who had rushed to be present aboard the *Allfather’s Honour*.

“Are you angry, my Jarl?” Hakon asked.

“No,” at least the growl which came after was...amused. “I am not angry. I am...disappointed, *Krakenslayer*.”

Hakon sniffed. He had been young when he pursued the name. And of course the Fell-Handed had informed the Primarch of all the stories where he was involved.

“Whatever the Venerable Bjorn said...the sagas have been a bit exaggerated.”

“As all sagas were,” the Lord of Fenris replied. “But there is something the sagas have got right, unfortunately. Twice home was attacked. Twice Bjorn defended it. Twice the Great Wolf was not here to defend Fenris and the ancestral halls.”

Hakon didn’t speak. What could he say, truly? That he had rushed to Fenris as fast as he could? That the battle was long over and Fenris gone by the time he arrived? It was the truth, and yet even the words smelled like carrion food to his senses.

“I should have been here.” The Great Wolf admitted when it became evident his father wasn’t going to speak first. “I was blinded by the sagas and the thirst to prove these scribblers and politicians wrong about us. I should have been there, defending *The Fang*.”

“Fighting at Cadia would have been acceptable too.” His Sire growled.

“Err...many wolf-brothers were at Cadia, Jarl.”

“Two Great Companies were, Krakenslayer. And that’s exactly the problem! Direbear had most of the elements of two Companies to defend Fenris. Wolf Lords Dragoneye and Steelhead were at Cadia. The other Great Companies were dispersed across three Segmentums!” The next growl was definitely filled with annoyance. “Do I need to teach everyone from the Long Fangs to the Grey Hunters what the optimal way to re-learn what concentration of firepower means?”

Hakon growled...with shame.

Because no, he hadn’t forgotten, but it had been a long time since the pack hadn’t fought together. The Great Companies of the Vlka Fenryka had always been carving their own sagas on different battlefields, great sagas had been sung, and the only moments most of them were gathering as the entire pack was during the feasts.

“This won’t happen again, Jarl.”

“You are right, my son. But not for the reasons you imagine.”

The Great Wolf was pleased by the ‘my son’, as it was the first time his father recognised him as such.

The rest of the sentence calmed immediately whatever good feelings had been created. And this gave a new winter light upon some things. There were problems he had believed a Primarch would solve in a heartbeat. Suddenly, Hakon was far less confident about them.

“The...the Inquisitors captured five members belonging to the Blue Moon’s Company. And they refuse to release them. They seem to have fail...the Aethergold test, or so they pretend.”

“I’ve heard about it.” His father paused for a very brief moment. “They are all dead.”

“WHAT?” The unflinching stare of a Primarch was directed him. “What...father?”

“The test of the Aethergold is very simple, my son.” There was no humour or amusement left in Leman Russ’ eyes. “You touch the crystallised power of Weaver, the very power of the Allfather’s Sacrifice. You are uncorrupted by Chaos, you pass it without problem. You are corrupted, you die. And now that I think about it...who was the imbecile who let them wield Traitor weapons? When we fought against my treacherous brothers, I made clear that they had to be purified ten times in the fire and the ice of Fenris first, then the Rune Priests and the Wolf Priests would check the weapon and vouch for its safe use!”

This was indeed the rules, but several great Companies had been far away from Fenris for many winters...and the young pups of Torben Blue Moon’s Great Company had taken a lot of loot from Cadia’s battlefields.

And with Fenris gone, they hadn’t been able to purify it in any way...

“But we can’t-“

“Olav Direbear and every son of Fenris who survived Macragge passed the test in front of Weaver before I left, Hakon Krakenslayer. None burst in flames. A few young pups were disoriented, and will be on chore duty for a century, if not more. But none died. Is it clear?”

“Yes.” None of the Vlka Fenryka had been revealed to be corrupted. “Yes, my Jarl, it is very clear.”

There was a second growl of annoyance.

“For all my sons’ sake, I want it to be the truth,” the Wolf King said. “I do not want to resurrect the Consul-Opsequiari. But I will if the discipline continues to be atrociously lacking and stupidity reigns in the ranks.”

“I...” Hakon hesitated. “I didn’t listen to all the tales, what are the Consul-Oopsisomething?”

“The disciplinary corps my Legion had during the Great Crusade,” Leman Russ answered bluntly. “They had the right to execute the battle-brothers in impunity if they dared ignoring or disobeying their orders in any way.”

The Great Wolf was not ashamed to say he felt something very cold seep into his bones of Vlka Fenryka. Their father was really, really disappointed with them.

“Will the Rout survive, if we obey the *High Lords*?”

“The Rout will survive because we obey the *Allfather*, my Emperor, my Sire...my Father. And if I have to force you to read the *Codex Astartes* to each you a few lessons, then by the icebergs of the Worldsea, that’s exactly what I will do!”

“The Codex Astartes? But it smells predictable just by looking at it, father!”

Leman Russ barked in laughter.

“I wait eagerly the moment when you are going to say it where the sons of Guilliman can hear you, my son!”

**High Orbit over Holy Terra**

**Apocalypse-class Battleship *Thunder of the God-Emperor***

**Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy Rabadash y Byng el Calormen**

“Well,” Rabadash said, giving a last look to the image of the Allfather’s Honour before turning away, “it seems the conditions of the Officio Assassinorum have been accepted. The cargoes that are transferred to the Battle-Barge are essentially food and drinks, and one Battle-Barge is on its way to Mars so it can be repaired.”

“Yes, my Lord. I wonder how the new High Lady managed that feat.”

“In all likelihood, a few good threats and the backing of the Custodes,” the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy replied. “I don’t care really much, to be honest.”

To be honest, Rabadash would have preferred the Primarch didn’t come here in the first place, but if the worst damage that had been done was the two days necessary to recover from the Primarch’s ‘party’ – even in his youth, he had never dealt with such a terrible hangover – then he would grit his teeth and accept it. It was far better than all the alternatives he could think about.

“For the record, my Lord, two-thirds of the other Chapters that are currently present are busy refilling their Bacta stocks with the *Phalanx* as we speak, or negotiating several warships’ repairs with the Mechanicus. Barring any major crisis, the majority of the Space Marines that aren’t Space Wolves will have left Sol within two standard weeks.”

Rabadash would have preferred for the barbarians to be included among that numbers, but this was alas impossible. Many of the Fenrisian survivors’ naval assets were in dire need of resupply, courtesy of their military infrastructure annihilated by the Traitor’s assault. And as Mars had never supplied the Space Wolves in any significant manner since the thirty-first millennium, there were a lot of logistical problems to deal with.

“Good. As long as their numbers are limited and they stay with their ships and stop creating more headaches, they won’t be our problem.”

And in a few decades, the *Legion* of the Space Wolves would be finally no more, something that would likely raise plenty of toasts from every member of the High Twelve.

“I suppose that leaves *our* problem, then.” The grimace was not feigned in the slightest. “I know the Justice Board hasn’t finished deliberating, but there are no more than forty-hours left before they are forced by law to make a statement. Where is it going?”

“They are going to push the Court-Martial for Ormuz Vandire, my Lord.”

Rabadash grimaced. That was a whole mountain of problems he didn’t need. But then Admiral Ormuz Vandire wasn’t likely to negotiate some sort of compromise, given that acknowledgement of his incompetence would lead to a Commissar blasting apart whatever he had in his head.

“The charges?”

“Articles 26, 27, 28, 55, and 687 are the key chiefs of accusation.”

That promised to be...interesting, and not in any pleasant sense of the term.

Article 26, in blunt terms, demanded that any officer who didn’t prepare enough for a void battle, or who did not encourage enough his officers to fight courageously answer to the God-Emperor for his lack of vigilance and leadership. If an officer was convicted because the Judges agreed the preparations had been insufficient or the fleet’s morale poor, the only sentence was death.

Article 27 treated of the disobedience of an officer. Namely, the officer dragged in front of the court had not obeyed the order of his superiors, whoever they were, failing to stop the enemy in a timely manner. If you were guilty, the sentence was death.

Article 28 demanded to every officer that they had to do their utmost to destroy the enemy. And yes, the Court-Martial agreeing a Captain or an Admiral had failed to do so meant death for the guilty.

Article 55 was not as bad...theoretically. It dealt with an officer who ‘neglected the duties imposed upon him’. The sentence a Court-Martial could hand upon someone was incredibly variable as a result.

And Article 687 was about the prosecution of all crimes which were not listed among the first six hundred and eighty-six articles. Here too, the sentence was variable.

To sum-up, out of five articles, there were three who were automatic death sentences, and two which could be, depending on the gravity of the charges everyone could agree with.

It did not seem much, but in general, few officers were ever dragged in front of a Court-Martial for more than five violations of the Navy Articles. In general, the Commissars were making sure you were executed on the spot for treachery or something else.

“I see.” That explained why Xerxes Vandire was busy using a century worth of political favours to save his son. “The Judges?”

Officially, the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy was not supposed to be given that information. Unofficially, with the political earthquakes this affair created, everyone who mattered was aware Rabadash was giving his utmost attention to it.

“As you know perfectly, my Lord, the selection is done impartially among the Navy officers who can reach Holy Terra. Evidently, as Ormuz Vandire was recently promoted to Admiral before being sent to Cadia, the candidates must at least be of Admiral rank, and higher in seniority than him.”

“I am no longer an Ensign!” The annoyed retort didn’t please him. For such a useless preliminary remark, that meant the random draw had been very bad. “I want to know the names we are dealing with.”

“The highest-ranked of the Judges will be Lord Admiral Benjamin Rath, of Battlefleet Tempestus.”

“Hmm...” Not a bad choice. Rabadash didn’t know a lot about the man, but he was a fighter, and a stranger to the politics of Battlefleet Solar. “Well, what I know about him makes clear he will try to keep the other Judges in line.”

A strict stare was a clear invitation to continue.

“The second Judge is Lord Admiral Rudolf von Goldenbaum.”

The Lord High Admiral grimaced.

“That ambitious bastard,” that was all the remark he authorised himself, even here, in his private quarters. Lord Admiral Rudolf von Goldenbaum was young for his rank. He had several victories under his belt, and conducted a successful purge of heretics during the Black Crusade. He was popular among the officers’ ranks of Battlefleet Solar. There had been several rumours he had owed a few favours to Clan Vandire in the last decade to accelerate his promotions.

And most problematic from Rabadash’s views, Rudolf von Goldenbaum was very ambitious.

“Next is Lord Admiral Thomas von Stockhausen.”

That one was a familiar name too. Thomas had been one of his subordinates, and a brilliant officer when it came to the defence of several vital Navy shipyards and major orbital facilities. Unfortunately, Rabadash also knew very well that in politics, his support went to the side who could propose him all the comforts he enjoyed so much.

“This is all the Lord Admirals chosen. Stepping down in rank, we have High Admiral Helga Lansung.”

In his thoughts, Rabadash wondered how many grimaces he was going to make before this listing was over. The Lansung Dynasty had given so many Lords and Lady Admirals to the Imperial Navy that naming them would take several hours. And they had given the Imperium several High Lords. Sometimes it had ended in disaster, when their ambition overrode their strategic skills, but many times they had solidified their already huge powerbase.

“There is Admiral Karl Gustav Kempf...of Battlefleet Cadia.”

“By the Golden Throne, has this list of Judges been chosen deliberately to give me the biggest headache possible?”

He didn’t know Karl Gustav Kempf. But over a hundred senior officers of Battlefleet Cadia had vocally demanded the head of Ormuz Vandire, and the mood was quite bloodthirsty the closer you got to the Cadian Gate.

Maybe Kempf would be an exception. But his Admiral’s instinct told him ‘no’.

‘And last, my Lord...Admiral Miranda Lawson of Battlefleet Solar.”

Rabadash sighed.

“I suppose it’s too much to hope we have *another* Admiral named Miranda Lawson who isn’t in command of the Naval Yards of Jupiter?”

“Err...yes, my Lord. I mean, this is the Admiral Lawson you just mentioned.”

“An Admiral who is incredibly famous for the hatred she feels for Lord Admiral von Goldenbaum.”

The hatred was so well-known, in fact, that the personnel of the Navy in charge of organising the important receptions generally tried to invite one Dynasty or the other, never both at the same time. And when they couldn’t avoid summoning the two at the same hour and location, extreme precautions were taken so that the two stayed *at least* a kilometre away from each other.

The two of them being Judges in the same room...it was going to end very, very badly. And as a responsible man, there was only one order he could give.

“Change the Judges. We have the right to cancel the selection and try again twice, if we believe the impartiality of the Court is going to be a problem.”

“My Lord...” a data-slate was presented. On it, there was a long list of names. Names that made him freeze on the spot. “This is the third selection...and by far the least politically explosive of the three.”

“There are really days when you prefer a violent battle with the greenskins...”

**Realm of Ultramar**

**Macragge System**

**Macragge**

**Pharsalus Military District**

**East of the ruins of the Pharsalus Line**

**2.147.311M35**

**Chapter Master Aeonid Thiel**

While the plains’ corruption had been erased by a vigorous bombardment of golden light, there was no denying that everything north-east of the Pharsalus Fields had been utterly destroyed.

As such, it was a good place to organise a real-life test of the Sphinx artillery guns.

And, Aeonid recognised as ten of them thundered over twenty times each, it was indeed impressive.

The targets were between forty and fifty kilometres away, but the accuracy obtained by each gun was of ninety-two percent hits dead-on target. None of the special ammunition extending range and fire-control was used; those were shells that had been used by the millions on every battlefield from Tigrus to Ultramar.

“Thank you for the demonstration, Colonel,” the new Chapter Master of the Ultramarines told the Andes Colonel who had agreed to come here and make the ‘test’. “Your crews are making the Imperium proud.”

“We’re trying our best, Chapter Master.” The officer answered after saluting.

Aeonid nodded and after a last examination of the procedures, marched to join the two other Space Marines who had been watching the same test, albeit from the top of what had been a ruined wall – last testimony that Traitor Titans were better stopped by loyalist Titans.

“Your opinion?”

“I like them,” Wolf Lord Olav Direbear bluntly declared, as Aeonid had known he would. “I like them a lot! There is only one problem...”

“Yes?”

“The name. Sphinx really feels too Prosperan. Aside from that, this is a fine artillery battery we have there!”

The new Chapter Master shook his head. Of course, trust the Wolves to think the name was the big problem when everything else was fine.

“Captain?” He turned to the other Space Marine.

“I’ve no problem with the name,” Clodius Bassanius, Captain of the Aurora Chapter, informed him with a smile. “And I agree with the Wolf Lord, this is a fine gun. The fire-control is excellent; as long as the shell stocks hold, these guns will slaughter everything at a distance of over forty kilometres, and the only way for an enemy to avoid that is to fortify a world like the Traitor Fourth. Since in general the Imperial Guard regiments don’t make a habit of hunting the Iron Warriors in their very strongholds, this isn’t that much of a problem.”

“But?” Aeonid didn’t know the Auroran very well, but all those Ultramarines who had fought with him insisted he was a perfectionist.

“But for an Adeptus Astartes Chapter, the lack of an autoloader is a significant drawback. Hit-and-run tactics are still possible, the Sphinx can send five shells in a minute before leaving its firing position, but the users still need to leave the howitzer and expose themselves.”

“Many of the existing guns we have share the same weaknesses, cousin,” Olav shrugged. “And they can’t store fifty shells before needing resupply.”

“I know,” Clodius said neutrally. “But like I said, the lack of an autoloader is a problem. Especially when the Mechanicus visibly developed a reliable one for the Khan tank.”

“Any reason for this paradigm?” Aeonid asked.

“Nothing truly confirmed, but the Andes artillerists have a theoretical: the Magi Dominus in charge of the project were too eager for the good of the guns. They presented a superb auto-loader, which had all the military capacities one might want...and it was so over-engineered that when it jammed or broke, the gun became completely useless. Second theoretical: these creations, as we know from long experience, tend to jam or break far more frequently than cruder and simpler devices.”

Practical: Lady Weaver or one of her Generals had decided that in the end, no autoloader was better than a non-functioning autoloader. Given the performance of the Sphinx guns at Macragge and on other battlefields, the son of Guilliman knew this had not been an illogical decision.

“Your recommendation?”

“Oh, we are going to produce it,” Captain Bassanius assured him. “We are specialists of armoured assaults, we aren’t going to miss an opportunity like that to increase the firepower of our artillery arsenal!”

The Auroran eyes grew more contemplative.

“Did Lady Weaver or her draconic deputy say anything about template sales, Chapter Master?”

“No, the last meeting that was organised wasn’t about artillery.” Aeonid told his fellow son of Guilliman. “You want to produce the Sphinx guns on Firestorm?”

Said by another Chapter, it would have been arrogant, but Firestorm, homeworld of the Aurora Chapter, was literally covered in macro-manufactorum and other industrial complexes. The Industrial World was able to provide all of the vehicles and heavy weaponry the specialists of armoured assaults used year after year.

Clodius ‘ lips twitched.

“I don’t know if we will call them Sphinxes...if only to preserve the delicate sensibilities of a few Space Wolves.”

Next to him, a certain Wolf Lord growled.

“But yes, I would prefer the artillery guns to be directly produced in Firestorm’s manufactorums, if it is feasible. We can likely build them within a few years; there were quite a few debates about stopping the production of towed Basilisks in the last decades. The Sphinx is certainly the answer we of Firestorm were seeking all along. Self-propelled howitzers are the practical future; they are mobile, armoured, and accurate.”

“Why not buy them directly from the Spider Lady?” Olav Direbear asked with curiosity.

“Industrial capacity,” the Auroran answered. “The Brothers of the Red didn’t hide that Nyx is expanding fast to meet the high demands of the Imperial Guard. I’ve no doubt Astartes Chapters would get a high priority, but the Guard has never enough artillery for all its campaigns; we might need years of waiting between each fulfilled orders. But if we have to buy a few thousand guns to get the template and the rights to produce it in mass, my Chapter Master will likely support it. There might be a few changed needed for Astartes use, but the Sphinx is a fine piece.”

“Archer,” Olav Direbear grumbled, and the two sons of Guilliman turned towards him. “’Archer’ is a better name than ‘Sphinx’.”

“I see the sons of Russ have their priorities. What would we do without them?” Aeonid joked.

“You would shout ‘Courage and Honour’,” the Space Wolf didn’t miss the repartee, obviously. “And refuse to savour every good thing life gives us.”

Clodius Bassanius snorted.

“The Primarch preserve us from what ‘good things’ your Companies want us to emulate! I think it is everything I wanted to say about the artillery batteries for now.”

“Yes, let’s change the subject for something even more interesting,” Olav bared his teeth, “the tanks!”

If anything, the Auroran didn’t seem to share the enthusiasm of their ‘friend of bears’ cousin.

“It’s certain categories of tanks which are the problem. For the light tanks, the Predator is fulfilling perfectly the needs of the Adeptus Astartes. Thousands are built every year; multiple variants exist that allow it to adapt to different types of battlefield; and it remains a design easy to repair provided the Techmarines have the spare parts for it. But as the fighting here and elsewhere proved recently, the light tank isn’t the problem. The trouble is with the Main Battle Tanks and the Heavy Tanks. Even at Firestorm, production of Land Raiders is more handcraft than true mass-production.”

“Oh? That’s all? Well, I have a solution to your problem!” To say Clodius gave an unimpressed expression hearing the Wolf’s boast was understating things mildly. “We resume the production of Sicaran Battle Tanks. We order thousands of Sicaran Tanks. Surely there’s a Forge World or two who remember how to build them, right?”

The two sons of Guilliman looked at each other. This was...not a bad idea at all. The Sicaran had been a common sight during the Great Crusade. And their Accelerator Guns had been really appreciated by the Astartes of all Legions. Aeonid didn’t remember whose Forge World had been in charge of the primary production, but it certainly had been destroyed during the Heresy, for the supply of Sicarans had never recovered after the Scouring was declared over.

“I think it is definitely something worth exploring,” the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines said. “And since our ancient weapons of the Great Crusade were mentioned, there are other things we might benefit bringing back, assuming of course the industrial expertise exists. “I’ve seen our Salamander cousins use a few Fellglaive super-heavies, and the Kratos could also deliver a lot of firepower...”

**Ultima Segmentum**

**Baal System**

**Baal**

**Arx Murus in construction – outer defences of the Arx Angelicum**

**5.152.311M35**

**Aspirant Hamilcar**

“This wasn’t what I expected after the contests of Angel’s Fall-”

“We know!” Hamilcar and all the Aspirants answered in a unique chorus.

“Hey, I didn’t finish what I wanted to say!”

“We know what you were about to say, Magon!” Hanno retorted hotly. “Now stop complaining and help us dig! We were told very clearly this section had to be visible before they called us for the mock battle!”

“What good is it going to make?” The young boy that was the loudmouth of their group grumbled, though he obeyed in the end, taking anew his spade. “There’s a dust storm coming...and this wall is way too big to be protected by mere spades and the other tools we have.”

“It matters because the Angels told us it would,” Hamilcar said. “Yes, we aren’t doing much work. Yes, we don’t have the machines of these strange men in red robes. But we have been chosen. And thank to our efforts, the Fortress of Angels will rise from the sands once more.”

The Fortress of Angels wasn’t the true name, of course. The true name was...Arx Angelicum.

When he had seen it the first time, Hamilcar had been crushed by the size and the magnificence of it. Certainly Baalfora had nothing that could really compare to it.

It had taken him only a couple of days – and their first ‘challenge-games’ outside – to realise that no matter how big he believed the great fortress to be, there were enormous sections of it which were invisible, buried under the sand.

“I think there’s something happening,” Hanno whispered to him as they continued throwing the sand away while trying to keep most of their strength for the trials ahead. “The soldiers in dark blue? They looked very excited this morning.”

“Don’t tell Magon,” Hamilcar chuckled. “He’s convinced every day there’s something important happening.”

“Very funny,” Hanno rolled his eyes, “you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know.”

The secrets of the Angels were well-kept, but there had always been tales and legends about their Fortress. Many things that all Aspirants had seen were never mentioned in the legends. The soldiers, the red-robed strangers...no one had really said anything about them before.

“I think,” Hamilcar continued to murmur as they worked as best as they could, “that they are new. The Arx Angelicum wouldn’t have been buried under the sand like it did if they were here for the time to organise ten trials at Angel’s Fall.”

“I agree. The question then is ‘why now?’”

“That I don’t know,” the young Aspirant admitted. “But there are a lot of things that don’t make sense. They use a lot of men to hunt all scorpions and insect they can find, along with hundreds of Catch Spiders. Why do they want all of them? These things can’t be tamed, and the moment they’re out of the cages, they will kill everyone they can!”

The only thing Hamilcar was sure about was that the foreigners were here by the will of the Angels; the masters of the Arx Angelicum were appearing to be very satisfied with the things the red robes and the Scorpion-hunters were doing.

“Well,” Magon had alas considered a few minutes of silence were too many, “do you want-“

A massive amount of noise stopped him from pursuing one of his semi-amusing rambles.

“By the feathers of Baalfora! Look at that!”

Hamilcar looked. It wasn’t possible to do otherwise.

Suddenly, the sky was filled with the winged mounts of the Angel.

They had seen a few of them before, along with thousands of uglier sky-chariots used by the strangers.

But here there were angelic.

And what they had taken for a vast flock of Angels was in reality only the beginning.

They were magnificent. There were painted in multitude of red, gold, and white.

They were the sky-chariots of the Angels.

Then they landed. There were loud strident noises, hisses that were becoming more and more familiar, and entrances opening where they had been walls of metal.

And finally, they came out.

Hamilcar breathed out after a few seconds. The stupefaction had at first cut his respiration.

The Angels were here. And there were so many of them...there had to be hundreds, no thousands!

It was mass of red armours, an invincible angelic host.

Golden lights shone above. More Angels came. Before long they had to land on the sands, for there weren’t enough space anymore on the main plaza usually used for that sort of things.

“Look at that!” Magon exclaimed. “Look at that! All these Angels...for them to come like that, surely a great victory was won!”

Hamilcar knew before the loudmouth of their party had finished speaking that it was wrong. Or maybe not so wrong. Maybe there had been a victory, there were so many Angels assembled it was impossible imagining them having lost if they were all fighting together.

But as red banners were lowered in a sign no one of Baalfora would mistake for, as Angels began to form two columns and many knelt on the red sands, Hamilcar knew what was going to happen long before the golden sarcophagus was revealed to the Aspirants’ eyes.

“They haven’t returned to celebrate, Magon. They have come here to mourn.”

**Arx Angelicum**

**Dome of Angels**

**Heavenward Redoubt**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

The Dome of Angels was a marvel Gavreel was going to remember for as long as he lived, and it wasn’t because Astartes had a quasi-perfect eidetic memory.

Everything his Lady had tried to create with the Hagia Sanguinala was there in some form. There were pillars in the form of winged angels that seemed to be ready to take flight at any instant. There were flamboyant mosaics that dated from the Age of the Great Crusade, protected behind shimmering force fields. There was a profusion of gold and rubies. There were thousands of sculptures, many representing scenes of Sanguinius’ youth, with the Primarch and the humans around him all represented with the real sizes.

The Arx Angelicum was hardly defenceless. Like Skyfall, the vast orbital docks above their heads, it was a work of art turned to military purposes. And the closer they were from the heart of the Dome of Angels, the more beautiful were the artworks. The defences were more and more exquisitely hidden too, of course.

Yes, the Heavenward Redoubt and every facet of the Arx Angelicum was someone the former Dark Angel would remember for the rest of his life.

But it would always be a souvenir filled with melancholia. And though he couldn’t speak for the rest of the Dawnbreaker Guard and the Chapters of the Blood, Gavreel was sure it was the same for them.

They were mourning the loss of a Chapter Master. It was done under a dome that was so masterly worked they had the impression of a rain of rubies perpetually falling upon their heads. The sheer sum of efforts that had gone into making sure the light of Baal was filtered like this must have been phenomenal.

It was a great honour to be invited here.

It wouldn’t bring back Chapter Malakbel and all those who had fallen during Operation Stalingrad.

The songs of mourning rose in the air, creating melodies which ranged from the exceptional to the sublime.

The Angels sang because many of them were no longer among the living.

The Angels sang because too much had been taken from them in the last millennia.

The Angels sang because there was a time for melancholia and remembering the dead, and this time had come once more.

But the Angels also sang because these losses had not come in vain, and while there had been death of brothers across the stars, another dawn would rise on Baal.

Many Aspirants were coming to Baal, as selections had been made on worlds that were protected by the sons of Sanguinius. They would in time pass the trials of the Blood, and the Blood Angels would regain the strength that had been theirs.

The First Company and Chapter Master Malakbel would be avenged.

The songs continued, and soon enough, the rhythm and the language were familiar enough so that every Space Marine sang.

Then their Lady joined them.

Gavreel would remember much, but more about the intensity of her voice.

The Sergeant remembered crying.

She cried.

They cried.

And when the songs ended, the sadness and the melancholia had been all poured into the mourning ceremony.

Battle-brothers of the Blood Angels took away the coffin-sarcophagi of their fallen one by one.

In time, the last one which remained was the one containing the mortal remains of the Chapter Master.

Then he was taken away too, the Sanguinary Guard itself escorting him to his last resting place.

The ruby light began to fade.

But they were still there.

They were still alive, and their duty continued. For Mankind. For the Emperor. For Sanguinius. For the memory of all those Blood Angels who had fallen since there were Blood Angels breathing and fighting.

For Weaver.

**The Golden Sarcophagus – the tomb of the great Angel**

**Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert**

As could be expected, the place Sanguinius had been laid to rest had the most sublime artworks of all Baal.

After witnessing the art the Blood Angels kept in the Arx Angelicum, it might have been pretentious to say it aloud.

But once you walked the Eternity Avenue...well, you understood.

Taylor hadn’t cried.

The tears she had to mourn had already been shed hours ago.

But the rooms leading to the final sanctum were so beautiful you felt privileged just by looking at them.

And let there be no mistake, it was a privilege. Unlike the Ultramarines, the Blood Angels had not opened it the potential flows of millions of pilgrims.

A good part of Taylor felt that it was wise.

The mosaics, the paintings, the representations of the life of Sanguinius...all of the unique artworks were protected from the ravages of time, yet they seemed so fragile behind the glasses and the protective fields that you feared a single touch would be too much for many of them.

Yet there was a part of her that wished, no, yearned, for billions to cry, for the tomb of the Primarch was just too beautiful.

As you got past two monumental angelic statues, you arrived to the golden sarcophagus, who gave its name to the tomb-hall.

What could be said that hadn’t been said before? The sons of Sanguinius had created something from gold, Baal rubies, and more extremely rare gems of old and carmine that would never be recreated...and maybe that was for the best.

They had already buried too many sons of the Emperor.

The light was omnipresent in the sanctum. The Blood Angels had made sure the spherical structure holding the sarcophagus was always bathed in it; the only difference depending on the hour you visited was if it was ruby light or gold light.

It was beautiful. But it was just light. When her fingers had touched the exquisite coffin – for that was what it was, alas – there had been no sensation of recognition. She couldn’t feel the power of the Emperor anywhere.

Sanguinius was with his father. He had been there for millennia. The Blood Angels had brought back his mortal remains to Baal, but they hadn’t brought back his soul.

“The Sanguinary Guard charged me to tell you that if you want the spear, it is yours. You have the right to wield it.”

Taylor barely gave a glance to the enormous golden weapon before shaking her head.

“I am honoured, Gamaliel, by the trust you brothers have in me. But the Spear is so long it just wouldn’t be practical.”

The *Spear of Telesto* was one of these weapons which felt so attractive you would perpetually fear breaking it on a battlefield. Evidently, this was a false impression: Sanguinius had wielded it countless times without breaking it.

According to the tales, the energy blast that could be unleashed vaporised everyone who didn’t have the blood of Sanguinius in his veins.

Unfortunately, it remained a Primarch’s weapon, meaning that even for extremely tall Space Marines, wielding it would be problematic. The elegant moves Sanguinius had used to claim the lives of countless enemies would be denied to an Astartes.

And Taylor was far, far smaller than any Astartes. She had received incredible gifts and skills. But the Basileia of Nyx had not the body to wield the *Spear of Telesto*.

“It is your decision, my Lady.”

Taylor didn’t chuckle. It would feel...disrespectful.

“I have the best weapons a Lady General Militant can hope to wield. There’s no need to take what belongs to the Great Angel. Let the *Spear of Telesto* and the *Blade Encarmine* stay here. Who knows, they might be wielded again one day...but not by my hand.”

“I will relay your words...and I hope you realise, it is extremely unlikely anyone will dare taking them from this hall, after the sermons the Sanguinary Priests will use to support them.”

“The Sanguinary Priests...they and every battle-brother of the Arx Angelicum will make their choices, Gamaliel. It is the first time I visit Baal, and while I hope it definitely won’t be the last, it would be...arrogant of me to impose decisions on a planet where I am in many ways a curious guest.”

Similarly, it was not her place to tell the Blood Angels who was to be their new Chapter Master, as they were currently doing right now while Gamaliel showed her the Marvels of Baal.

“You are far more than any curious guest has any hope to be, my Lady. You are one of our benefactors, to begin with.”

“On that point, I am not going to disagree.” Thousands of Tech-Priests and guardsmen had been deployed to Baal, so that the Arx Angelicum could be restored to its previous glory. Needless to say, it was a process that was going to take years...but the plans she had agreed with the former Regent of Baal were in motion, and long-term projects needed long-term planning.

They left slowly the Golden Sarcophagus Hall. Taylor watched many times behind her...even with her powers, strange feelings assailed her in this mausoleum. It was as if she feared she was going to wake up, and this beauty would be revealed as an illusion.

It was only when Puriel came to join them while they were watching a Knight-sized rendition of Sanguinius battling the Megarachnids of Murder that the insect-mistress spoke again.

“I doubt the deliberations to choose a new Chapter Master have ended so quickly.”

There were a few Captains who were considered favourites in the ‘masterly race’, but none had a decisive advantage over their peers.

“The deliberations are not over.” The Sanguinary Guard of the Angels Encarmine confirmed. “It is another issue which may require your attention.”

Taylor closed her eyes...and she felt something. It was distant, but it was getting closer by the second. And there was a taste of **Sacrifice** to it.

“And what is this issue?” She asked, her curiosity properly teased.

“Five transports came out of the Warp a few minutes ago. While they were all built by the Imperium, all of them were lost in recent centuries during pirates’ raids. Now they are back...and according to the communications the watch officers had with them, they are filled with former slaves who escaped the Webway.”

Taylor raised an eyebrow...and smiled.

“Well, it seems a certain clown decided to honour his part of the deal. It may be the lasguns I delivered may have been the more efficient slave insurrection in recent history.”

“Yes, my Lady. But there’s another issue. There are a few Eldar aboard these transports. And they want to speak with you.”

The Lady General Militant laughed. Yes, of course, they did.

“You’d better tell Renaldo to prepare our Thunderhawk, Gamaliel. It seems we have a few more interesting tales to hear today...”

**Transport Ship *Crown of Freedom* – docked to *Skyfall***

**Phoenix Lord Asurmen**

Asurmen was no stranger to cursed wounds, but the majority of times, the pain they inflicted faded rapidly.

Sadly, the injuries he had suffered at Shaa-Dom were proving to be agonising exceptions to the rule.

In the briefs moment of clarity, the Phoenix Lord had tried to guess why. Was it because Khaine had died, and thus the blessings of the Path of the Warrior had diminished in consequence? Was it because Asurmen’s soul had been wounded by the Second Fall? Or was it because Kharsaq El’Uriaq, much like his fell master, was a master of poisons and chaotic spite?

All of these reasons could be true...or none of them were.

And Asurmen wasn’t exactly in measure to verify each guess. The first Dire Avenger was already unable to leave the bed where the Harlequins had pushed him after the Battle of the Basilisk Port ended.

Then all thoughts ended as something pressed against his armoured chest, and Asuryan screamed.

For several seconds, it was like someone was pouring something extremely hot inside his flesh. It was as if his lungs were told to beat, yet his ribs were smashed with something incredibly heavy. His head was told to think, but there was someone hammering him with fists. There was pain, so much pain.

And suddenly everything ended.

Asuryan opened his eyes, which he didn’t remember having closed.

In front of his eyes, in the palm of a golden hand, there was an orb of infernal orange-black light swirling and trying to expel dark flames.

For all his battles against the Primordial Annihilator, the Phoenix Lord recoiled at the sheer sight. This was something abominable, this was nothing but sheer arrogance and desire to subjugate, this was-

The golden hand crushed the orb of chaotic power was crushed like an over ripe fruit.

Asuryan was able to breathe easier. At last, he could see the identity of his saviour...and for all the fact he had never seen the golden-skinned being before, the stars-filled eyes had been described by many Seers who had now embraced the Choice of Moderation.

“Empress Weaver,” and the black-haired woman currently in her Aeldari form smiled. “You have my profuse thanks for healing my wounds.”

“And I accept them in the spirit they were given,” the Destroyer of Commorragh answered. “A bit of a clarification: your wounds are not completely healed. I’ve used the Sacrifice you did to save all the slaves of Commorragh to extract the corruption the new Dark Muse of Vainglory infected you with.”

“I thank you nonetheless.”

The Empress of all Aeldari gave a nod, and then went to find a chair, which she pushed towards his bed.

“You must have really annoyed the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom,” the stars-filled eyes commented while swiftly placing herself on the chair. “This was an impressive chaotic curse.”

“We used his internal troubles to assault one of the fourteen entrances.” Asuryan replied. “Worse, and I presume the Harlequins did it for this very reason, Kharsaq El’Uriaq looked weak in front of the only people he really cares about: his great military commanders and tyranny enforcers.”

“Hmm...to be honest, I’m a bit disappointed no one invited me. I would have given the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom’s subordinates all the reasons to believe him weak.”

Of that, the Phoenix Lord had no doubt at all. The Empress didn’t say words like ‘annihilation of Shaa Dom’ or ‘turn the Tyrant’s Domain into a Second Battle of Commorragh’, but the desire was there.

“There wasn’t enough time, as far as I was given to understand. The opportunity came from one of the Tyrant’s sons trying to usurp him, but it didn’t last very long. And El’Uriaq is not the Dynasts you broke at Commorragh. He reacted incredibly fast...and sadly, he is far more powerful than I.”

“Unsurprising. He gained the power of a Dark Muse, much like I did. While he remains considerably weaker, this unholy merging of a Drukhari and a Muse is close to a Greater Abomination in its own right.”

“I agree. The abilities he showed me...the limbs were altered from some sort of corrupted crossbow to a long blade when the long-distance attack failed. And the Tyrant himself confirmed I did not see his true powers. While Vainglory will lie like the rest of the Primordial Annihilator’s Aspects, I think that in this instance, Kharsaq was saying the truth. He is no longer a true Drukhari, but a corrupted mockery of it.”

“Interesting,” the Empress nodded, before whistling. “Of course, this is something that won’t be of much use in the coming years. The servants of Cegorach hinted that the Tyrant may try to abandon the Webway.”

“Yes.” It may have already happened. El’Uriaq had seen what one Harlequin plan could do to Shaa-Dom, it was doubtful he was confident in his ability to survive here, even with the Gates sealed from the outside. After all, the blades of Cegorach had a gift to storm locations where they weren’t supposed to be in the first place. More than ever, the Webway was their kingdom.

“I will have to hope one of his children will stab him in the back, one day.” Golden fingers clicked, and for a brief moment, golden flames danced. “For the moment please receive my own thanks. Your courageous deeds saved fifty thousand of men, women, and children from an atrocious fate at the hands of the slavers. You saved them, at great risk for your souls and your life. I won’t forget it.”

“The thanks are appreciated. I won’t deny that the Harlequins failed to tell me how powerful the Tyrant of Shaa-Dom was...but I would have participated in this battle. It had to be done. I only regret the strength was inefficient to launch thirteen other raids and free all the slaves of the other Ports.”

The Empress of All Aeldari said nothing, but in her eyes, regret could indeed be read. If it had been possible, Asuryan had no doubts *Maelsha’eil Dannan* would be on her way to teach the Tyrant a long lesson of humility.

When she spoke again, her voice was far more thoughtful.

“While I would love to hear the full tale of this battle, I need to change the subject. The gestalt of souls that I see inside you is extremely instable. You must have felt it.”

“I did...” Asuryan admitted. “It began when...when you killed Khaine with the Herald of Atharti.”

“Yes.”

He had not expected apologies, and there would be none.

“Are you going to tell me I must embrace **Atharti**?” The Phoenix Lord tried to pour some humour in his voice. Immediately, he knew the attention of the Goddess was upon them.

“In my long experience,” the Empress replied sarcastically, “telling your species they *must do something* invariably leads to a result where they attempt exactly the opposite of what I proposed.”

Ouch.

“So no, I am not going to give you orders. I am just going to tell you what I think are the two options available to you...assuming you want to live, which I assume you do. The first is the one Atharti is busy whispering in my ears. You deny Khaine, and swear yourself to her.”

“An Herald? A High Priest?” Asuryan asked to check if he understood well.

“No. There will be only one High Priestess for all her worshippers. What Atharti has in mind is more of the same thing you did on the Path of the Warrior, but widened to all the non-military aspects of Craftworld life, to give one example. Should you accept, you would be the Symbiosis-Carnality Lord of Passion...sorry by the way about the atrocious name.”

“I’ve heard worse.” Asuryan replied with a chuckle before returning to deadly seriousness. “This proposal...nothing would be the same anymore.”

“No.” The Empress didn’t try to hide it. “Your essence won’t lie dormant inside your armour anymore. Should you be defeated, you will be with the Goddess until she reforges you and send you anew to fight the wars of this galaxy.”

“This will be the end of a cycle.”

“This will also be the first and last **Sacrifice**.”

Asuryan nodded. Yes, he could see why the Empress would be happy to know young warriors stopped donning his armour and merging their souls with his.

“I am not going to say I am not tempted.” The soon former Phoenix Lord said. “And the second choice?”

“You spoke of Heralds a moment ago, avenger. While it is true Atharti will only accept one, the sum of what is possible is constantly changing, with Excess dead. The rise of Carnality-Symbiosis was not expected by the Great Enemy. Yet she has now a High Priestess. There might be other powers stirring themselves into action. Some might have had claims to Domains where Atharti will never shine.”

Asuryan admired the way ‘Infinity Circuits’ and ‘God of the Dead’ were never mentioned. The Empress was beginning to speak their tongue with more and more subtlety.

“I can open you the Path, with the fires of your sacrifice and my own name. But I can’t guarantee there will be a victory as important as the one just won waiting for you at the end.”

Asuryan thought deeply about the two choices offered to him. It was a complicate dilemma the Empress had offered, but humble origins always began with those. Each had tempting and dolorous visions dancing before his eyes.

It was difficult.

Asuryan opened his mouth and spoke.

**High Orbit over Baal**

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Shadowkeeper Baldur Vör**

Lady Weaver was petting her largest spider when he entered.

Of course, Baldur knew better than to think the insect-mistress was idle.

There were a large number of beetles tapping frenetically on diverse devices, and the flux of information pouring in and out was simply gargantuan. To equal the sum of work done in this office, the Shadowkeeper guessed the Adeptus Administratum would have to gather thousands of its moderately competent Scribes and low-ranked Adepts.

The stars-filled eyes didn’t turn towards him at once.

But the words which came out of the Angel of Sacrifice’s mouth made clear Weaver knew he was here. As were the multiple anti-spying and counter-detection devices that activated in the next couple of seconds.

“The first Phoenix Lord chose Death.”

There was only one answer he was going to give.

“It is as *He* expected, then.”

Lady Weaver snorted.

“At some point, I hope *He* will tell me how he managed to predict that outcome. In this instance, I know for certain there was no way for him to predict it.”

“Sometimes,” Baldur said carefully, “great experience trumps psychic powers. My liege does not need his formidable precognition to know what burns in an Eldar’s heart.”

“True.” The golden-winged being he couldn’t really call a woman conceded after five seconds. “Does He know if other Phoenix Lords intend to pursue that path?”

“The majority will likely choose salvation in the embrace of Carnality-Symbiosis. They are after all creatures of Passion.”

“Hmm...”

For exactly thirty-five seconds, the attention of Weaver seemed to turn to the enormous lists of strategic materials which could be seen streaming on the diverse hololiths and data-slates.

It was, as every Custodes knew very well, an absolutely wrong impression.

“Well, time will tell if they are successful or fail epically I suppose. And I suppose you didn’t come here today to give me the odds of whatever complicated scheme certain Eldar want to pursue.”

“I did not.” The Shadowkeeper allowed a temporary pause to mark the change of subject, then spoke again. “We found one of the relics that *He* wanted you to recreate for Project Austerlitz.”

This time, the radiance of the wings intensified by a factor of at least three, and the stars-filled eyes brutally flashed out.

“Intact?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“The Malak System.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“I would have been more surprised if you did.” Shadowkeeper Baldur Vör replied. “It is a complete backwater. The most developed world was classified by the Administratum as a Frontier World decades ago, and little has changed there. There is no trace of any tithe-fleet ever sailing in its vicinity.”

“Backwater sounds right,” Weaver agreed as he handed her the critical digi-folder where the ultra-secret information had been stored. “Does *it* have a name?”

“The Savants we brought with us called it the Choral Engine.”

“Poetic,” the insect-mistress replied, before frowning. “It is...an impressive piece of Dark Age of Technology.”

“It is.”

“And the confirmation that the Imperium’s predecessors must have a truly frightening hate for the psykers.”

“You noticed.”

“Lord Custodes, I know that I am lucky to have Lisa and my other Moths, but there are far less amoral ways to obtain psychic energy than throw psykers in techno-sarcophagi which will siphon their very powers and soul while torturing them until they break apart.”

Baldur didn’t reply. Lady Weaver, after all, was absolutely correct.

He waited ten more seconds, and then the digi-folder was returned to him. There was no need to ask if the colossal amount of information had been correctly understood.

“if I understand correctly, the Choral Engine is divided into five parts. The Sanctum is the command room with an enormous toroid tower of cogitators, and plenty of operator thrones for the fail-safe protocols. The Choristry Pits are where the ancients tortured the psykers with advanced technological psy-sarcophagi. The Syphon Coil is nothing but an enormous geothermal plant drawing power from the planet itself, all the while harvesting deep core ores for the self-repair mechanisms. The Resonatum is the particle collider around the Sanctum. And the Focusing Vane is, as its name implies, the chambers where the Astropaths are working as a ‘lens’ for the Engine, something that undoubtedly burn them out in the short-term.”

“Yes.” The Adeptus Custodes should take care to recruit people sharing Weaver’s analytic skills; several Savants had needed over a day to give him the same points, with plenty of useless information drowning the critical news. “Do you think copying it identically would work?”

When the reply came, there was no hesitation.

“No.”

“Why?”

“The Syphon Coil is an extremely bad idea. It links the entrails of the world to a psy-engine of incredible power. If one breaks, the other will follow shortly after.”

That was...indeed a major flaw. And the exploration teams had completely missed it...though they had not the experience of Weaver in certain important matters, of course.

“Other problems?”

“The psy-sarcophagi and the stations for the other psykers are far too wasteful, as I said before. In the long-term, they may kill more psykers per year than the Astronomican ever does.”

“Yes. And?”

“The fail-safe protocols are likely insufficient. Their existence tied to the command thrones is reassuring, but given the complexity of the Choral Engine, they are still insufficient.”

The stars-filled eyes stared at him implacably.

“And of course, there is the elephant in the room: the moment the Choral Engine is activated, all hell is going to break loose. I think that within mere days, the Malak System can expect a rampaging horde of monsters to assail it before devastating everything and everyone associated with the Choral Engine.”

“The psychic beacon should incinerate the empyreal abominations.”

“The weaker ones? Absolutely.” Weaver grimaced. “For the bigger and most powerful monsters, I am not so confident. Remember that Astropaths and every soul-bound psyker have only a weak amount of the Emperor’s psychic fire in them. Most of the energy released will be light, but it won’t have the banishing properties Lisa is showing.”

In hindsight, it was absolutely logical why the Captain-General had ordered him to speak with her before doing anything else.

“I think that the Choral Engine would be able to repel a major assault from three out of the Four Great Parasites.” The insect-mistress continued. “When it comes down to it, it would be a contest of raw strength, and this contest the Imperium would likely win against the hordes of Decay, Change, and Anarchy...but not War.”

“And the Malak System is a complete backwater. It would need centuries of colonisation and fortification to be considered ready to mount a somewhat effective resistance.”

However, it wasn’t a massive problem. There was a reason the parts of the Choral Engine had been analysed and tested one by one, without going so far as to a full activation.

“What are the implications for your part in Project Austerlitz?”

“The most evident one is that I will be forced to build the infrastructure on Nyx itself. Choral Engine variation or not, if the tests are as potent as your information reveals, the defences must be powerful enough to repel a major assault from the abominations, especially during the phases of maintenance the Engine will necessarily be under at one moment or another.”

“True.”

“I will most likely power this beacon by the psychic radiance of my Moths.”

“One Titan-Moth will likely not be sufficient.”

The Angel of Sacrifice nodded.

“Yes. More likely, we will need ten to twelve Moths. In all likelihood, this means every world where an example of Project Austerlitz is built will require a full colony, for complete psychic security. That way, the Moths will be able to establish a system of rotations, with a specific Mosura powering the Engine for a day before resting for a good week.”

That sounded...far less costly in resources, ultimately, than all the psykers the original Choral Engine had likely killed before it was abandoned.

“I approve. The other parts?”

The expression of the Basileia of Nyx grew more thoughtful.

“To keep the Sanctum as simple as possible, we are likely going to need quantum cogitators operated by skilled Magi of the Mechanicus, Logis Division...they will be supported by my Adjutants, of course.”

“It will be an honour to operate something so elaborate, Webmistress!”

“As for the Syphon Coil,” the black-haired being petted distractedly her spider, “we are likely going to power it by our new model of Fusion Reactor. Or Fusion Reactors, plurals. An Engine like that promises to need a frighteningly high energy output. For the self-repairing mechanisms, we might have to supply them via auto-loaders feeding metallic ingots directly into the manufactorum section.”

“And the Resonatum itself?”

“That’s really the simplest part. We use Aethergold Pylons to increase the psychic conductivity and make sure the light will truly be burning with the Emperor’s light. And to avoid the Navigators and Astropaths burning in golden flames every day, the channelling will be done by my Ants and other species that can handle the strain.”

“It is-“

“I will give a last warning: we are playing with a lot of psychic energy there, and Aethergold will be involved. The commitment in extremely valuable resources aside, the presence of so many Moths and insects of my Swarm guarantees the future Engine will be a symbol. These symbols create a lot of power and influence. But they won’t be able to be built everywhere. Unless you find another Living Saint who can make the necessary modifications and change a Choral Engine to be attuned to her, I will only be able to obtain the optimal effects in places that are very significant to me.”

The Shadowkeeper examined every detail, before nodding.

“I will give a full transcript of this conversation to the Captain-General.” The report had to be given to *Him* as fast as physically possible. “Assuming permission is given, when can you begin?”