This is not a teaser – 24 January 2023

**Tyranny 12.1**

**Blood Bath**

*We won.*

*The Ymga Monolith has been destroyed. Macragge is safe. The Black Crusade and the Seventeenth Traitor Legion are no more.*

*But by everything that is good in this galaxy, we paid for it in blood and tears.*

*Eleven Battleships. Three Battle-Barges. Two Grand Cruisers. Six Battlecruisers. Three War Barques. Forty-five Cruisers of all types. Eleven Strike Cruisers. Seventy-one Light Cruisers. One hundred and three Destroyers. One hundred and twenty-four Frigates. One hundred and ninety-six Corvettes. Four thousand three hundred and fifty-one Interceptors. And three thousand eight hundred and four Bombers.*

*And that is just the losses of the order of battle of Operation Stalingrad, my order of battle.*

*Nor does it mention that hundreds of other warships have been battered into impotence, and will need years of repairs, if they can be repaired at all.*

*We won. And the most terrible of all? If I was thrown into the past, and given the opportunity to change the outcome of this war, I wouldn’t.*

*We couldn’t afford to let the Szarekhan Dynasty use its Replicator Forges until their armada was ten times the size of the forces we mustered to end it. We couldn’t afford to let this alien pyramid to get anywhere near the Samarkand Quadrant or any human-inhabited world.*

*It would have been a nightmare made flesh.*

*We defeated the Necrons. We vanquished the Traitor Marines. And we exterminated the Tyranids’ vanguard.*

*And the price, while much smaller than my staff’s pessimistic assumptions, was still bad enough.*

*Nine million three hundred thousand guardsmen mustered for Operation Stalingrad have been killed, wounded so badly Bacta can’t only mitigate the damage, or been declared missing in the multiple battles we fought.*

*For the Skitarii, this number is just above fourteen million, and most of them were killed in action, for they took an insane percentage of fatalities for the Imperium at Mandragora.*

*The knowledge it could have been worse is not much of a consolation in the end.*

*I lost three members of the Dawnbreaker Guard. The Imperium lost many veteran Astartes. The twenty-five specialists lost trying to steal a Replicator Forge were only the beginning.*

*Overall, preliminary numbers are between all Chapters having contributed to Operation Stalingrad, we lost eight thousand and two hundred seventy-four Space Marines. These numbers include the awful sacrifice the Invaders made to stop the super-cannon of the Ymga Monolith from decimating our ground forces on Mandragora...but they do not include the permanent losses of the Ultramarines and their Successors. Only the Howling Griffons and the Silver Skulls, who acted in my name, are counted for Operation Stalingrad’s butcher bill.*

*Over seventy Titans and two hundred and twenty Knights have been crippled or wiped out.*

*We won.*

*Three hundred and sixty-five Cairn-class or equivalent Necron Battleships have been destroyed. More than two thousand Escorts of varying size joined them in death. Many Protocol Artefacts from the Szarekhan Dynasty have been recovered.*

*The true losses of the Szarekhan and Sautekh Dynasty will probably be never known, but the minimal estimate most of my Adjutant-Spiders and the Logis Tech-Priests agree upon is of seventy million Necron warriors rendered permanently inoperable, along with one million war machines, and forty billion Canoptek units.*

*It is a minimum. Some figures estimate the true Necron losses are closer to fifty billion infantry warriors, with a proportional increase for the Necrodermis-made armour and the Canoptek swarms. Many C’Tan Shards have been torn asunder and cast back into whatever hellish dimension they spawned from, with only one managing to escape.*

*Once again, we will probably never know the true extent of their losses, no matter how much Phaeron Zahndrekh wishes us to. The Howling Griffons and several task forces of the Blood were often confronted by fanatical defensive behaviour during their independent duties away from the main thrust of Operation Stalingrad, and several Necron fortresses have only been neutralised after the planet they were built around was destroyed.*

*The only things that have been confirmed beyond doubt are the capture of Replicator Forge Alpha, and the formal surrender of the heavily damaged Golden Crown now that the forces of the Sautekh have ritually laid down their arms.*

*The losses of the Traitor Seventeenth Legion are easier to calculate. We killed approximately thirty thousand Word Bearers at Macragge. According to the data coming from the Wolves and other sources, the estimates Lorgar began this Black Crusade with two hundred and eight thousand Chaos Space Marines, two Super-Battleships, and one hundred and eight Battleships, most of them of the cursed Infernus design.*

*The overwhelming majority are busy explaining their failures to their fell masters now. And I doubt the abominations are very pleased.*

*Losing an entire Astartes Legion along with most of the Gore Crows, the dreaded Chaos Titans of Legio Vulturum, must sting fiercely. And between the lesser ships lost at Cadia and all the Traitor regiments of the Volscani Cataphracts, the hosts of the Lost and Damned have been severely weakened. The Master of Shadows being defeated and permanently killed will just add insult to the injury.*

*We haven’t properly estimated the losses of the Orks and the Tyranids yet. They are in the billions, and they make the idea of counting the Necron losses positively easy by comparison.*

*We won.*

*I think...I hope all the sacrifices will be worth it.*

*They will be worth it.*

*And now I am going to sleep.*

*Return to the abyss, old horrors.*

*This galaxy is not yours, and if Mankind has something to say about it, it never will be.*

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Sophano System**

**Gloriana Battleship *Conqueror***

**Temporal Anomaly – approximate dating is 310M35**

Thought for the day: Blood is the key.

**Warlord Lotara Sarrin, the Blood Rose**

The xenos had been ruthless and embraced the power of the Warp.

When they had landed on this world after a long exile across the stars, the six-limbed beings’ first decision had been to massacre the species who had preceded them there, before enslaving the survivors so they mined the mineral bounty in their stead.

But they had committed a huge mistake.

Those xenos had been the eighth living species to settle in this very system, and their arrival here had been due to Khorne’s answering their prayers.

As a result, when the green-skinned aliens had continued to worship the Four indifferently, they had angered mightily the Blood God.

And so, the moment she had returned from Macragge, Lotara had been ordered to enforce the punishment.

The *Conqueror* along with seven lesser capital ships had charged to these stellar coordinates, and the one-sided massacre had begun.

It had been glorious.

By then, the six-limbed xenos had believed there was nothing for them to fear in this region of space, and their ships had been empty in high orbit, when they had not been crash-landed on the surface to form the foundations of proper cities.

Since Lotara had brought eight hundred and eighty-eight Space Marines with her, supported by tens of thousands of mortal warriors, the outcome had never been in doubt.

Eight gigantic mountains of skulls had been gathered from the tens of millions of dead aliens – if there was something notable about this vermin, it had been how fast they could breed – and rivers of blood had flowed, satisfying the will of her Lord and Master.

The altar had been built on top of the greatest of those skull mountains, and there Lotara had placed a massive Haematia crystal as tall as she was.

Then the Khornate expeditionary force had withdrawn to the *Conqueror* and the other ships, and not a moment too soon: between the Haematia and the dedicated act of butchery, the planet – which she had not even bothered discovering the name of – was swallowed by the Warp.

For eight hours, there was nothing to do but waiting. The followers of the God of War being what they were, boredom was extinguished by an absurd number of deadly duels in the arenas aboard the Conqueror and the other ships.

Lotara didn’t participate, though she savoured with the *Conqueror* every blood spilled in the arenas and the corridor.

And after eight hours, like the commanding officer of the *Conqueror* had known it would, the Warp Storm which had devoured the planet returned its ‘prey’.

It was...impressive.

“It looks like Hell,” the Astartes officer next to her grunted.

Lotara gave him an amused glance. Of all the Space Marines who had rallied her banner the most recently, Kossolax, former Sergeant of the World Eaters Legion, was undoubtedly one of the most interesting recruits.

And not just because that when the Blood Rose had announced she was searching for volunteers so that it could be assessed if the Butcher Nails could be removed from Astartes’ skulls safely, the warrior had been the first to step forwards.

Kossolax had been one of the eight who survived, out of sixty-four who endured the arduous and horribly painful procedure blessed by Khorne.

Since then, Lotara had already promoted him twice.

“It looks like Terra,” the mistress of the *Conqueror* corrected, “Terra at the end of the Great Siege, of course.”

“Terra never had oceans of boiling blood.” Kossolax remarked. “And the land wasn’t surrounded by flames. How in the name of the Skull Throne is this world able to remain outside of the Warp?”

That was, admittedly, a very good question.

“The Haematia,” Lotara Sarrin answered conversationally before rising from her command seat. “It does not have the...sheer flexibility of the Tzeentchian Noctilith, but do not underestimate the power of our Lord. Anyway. I am returning to the world below. Choose seven of your brothers to accompany me.”

There was not a significant pull from Khorne, but the urge in her heart was clear.

“That will be...where will we land in the first place?”

“Why,” Lotara smiled, “we will land on the Spaceport, of course.”

It did not take long to descent. And the closer they came to the surface, the more Kossolax’s assertion this planet looked like hell proved true.

The landscape was a tortured maze of red-black mountains resisting the onslaught of the oceans of blood. The mountains of skulls her forces had made were now spread everywhere in smaller piles, proud icons dedicated to the Blood God.

This was a world of red, dark, and ivory. The red was for the blood, as well as the flames of the Empyrean. The black was for the soil of the planet burned by the fires. And the ivory was for the skulls of the fallen.

Everywhere on this planet, it was obvious, countless wars were waged. The lower their Thunderhawk descended, the louder the battle-cries and the tumult of battles were rising.

The urge to join them grew stronger, and Lotara was thankful that Kossolax had chosen seven newly created Astartes to accompany them. If her escort had Butcher Nails, it was very likely the Blood Rose would have been forced to kill them before she walked on this planet for the second time.

“For us, it was eight hours,” Kossolax said as they went through the bloody clouds and the Spaceport finally came into view, “but for this planet, it looks like it lasted for far longer.”

“Yes.” You couldn’t argue otherwise, not when the ‘Spaceport’ was the size of a proper Hive, and its enormous black towers where enormous anti-aerial xenos weapons were emplaced had to be over a kilometre in height. “It is an interesting choice of decoration, to say the least.”

Lotara would have thought skulls would have been used, but while they figured prominently into the style of this Spaceport, the structure seemed like a colossal clockwork mechanism, one of varying shades of obsidian.

“Do not kill unless I give you the order,” she ordered as her personal Thunderhawk’s hatch opened.

“They would be mad to provoke you. The *Conqueror* is in orbit, ready to slaughter them.”

“Perhaps, but you are smart enough to know that some warriors of the Blood God are not noted to think before they attack.”

To this, Kossolax was forced to grunt and nod.

As she descended the ramp, World Eaters on her heels, the surprises began.

Lotara had expected xenos, as she had said previously. It was not hard to: there hadn’t been a single human before the first planetary massacre, and if there had been after, it was because certain warriors had continued their rampage while everyone returned to the warships.

Thus yes, xenos had been expected.

The xenos, in front of her, however, Lotara had only seen in some of the dreams she had when resting inside the *Conqueror*.

Their skin must have been a vibrant blue at some point, but most of the colour seemed to have been stolen away, and it was more and more tending towards a deathly white.

Their bodies, which were smaller than the average human, were covered by black armours with red stripes. Demonic helmets were placed in their hands, allowing her to see that the Rune of the Blood God had been painted ritually on each forehead.

As for their weapons, they seemed to favour guns...modern-looking guns, which seemed to have recently received long and very twisted bayonets.

“I have heard of you.” The Blood Rose began, noting that for all the sheer power of bloodlust coursing in the air, the xenos warriors had managed to adopt a respectable military formation to greet her arrival. “You were those who were torn from another reality during the Rise of Anarchy. You were taken by the Blood God to be reshaped in true warriors.”

“We were the T’au Empire,” the commander of the xenos rasped. “We were the warriors striving to defend and expand it. We were the Fire Caste.”

“But no longer.” Lotara said simply. If they had continued to deny the will of the Blood God, they wouldn’t be here and now.

“But no longer,” the pale blue-skinned xenos bared his teeth, revealing he has partaken into a meal of flesh recently. “We are...*the Blood Caste*. No longer will we listen to the lies of the Ethereals! No longer will we deny the pleasure of eviscerating the enemies we fight! No longer will we speak of this idiocy called the Greater Good! Our code is the Bloodshido, for there is honour in fighting a war to the very end!”

“Very good,” the leader of the Khornate forces among the Calyx Hell Stars approved, “and how many of you are ready to spill blood in the Blood God’s name?”

“Only eight thousand for the first wave,” the xenos replied, “but there will be more, provided the proper accommodations are made.”

“Then prepare your troops. The transport ships will bring you to the stars within eight hours.”

Lotara was not going to delude herself into thinking eight thousand of those warriors she saw assembling in front of her were going to hold their ground against veteran Chaos Marines, but a core of eight thousand armoured, disciplined troops was a significant contribution, especially if they could form the foundation for a proper army-sized force.

“The Blood Caste,” Kossolax commented when they left the xenos behind them as Lotara marched away from the landing platform. “An interesting name...I suppose they will be a level above the useless Bolter-fodder we are so often forced to use.”

“No protest about the fact the Blood Caste is a xenos army?”

The World Eater officer tried to laugh...which resulted in a horrible sound.

“Please, Warlord. We have broken every oath and every rule we ever swore to enforce. We are serving the Blood God. What is fighting side by side with xenos...as long as they know their proper place?”

This brutal pragmatism was why Lotara valued Kossolax so much...though she also had to be constantly wary of him too, for his ambitions went far beyond remaining a mere Captain.

“Yes. As long as they remain in their proper place.”

There was a train waiting for them outside of the Spaceport. It was an ugly and vicious thing, a black construct whose power manifested in veins of blood. It looked like it had been forged inside a volcano. It was empty. The Blood Rose and the World Eaters entered it.

Within eight seconds, it began to move, and at a speed that was quite prodigious.

Lotara felt it immediately; this machine was propelled by the power of **Blood**. There was a constant geyser of blood fuelled by tortured souls under this train.

They moved away from the Spaceport quite quickly, though not so fast as to not notice the gigantic hulls in construction around it. One of them, while clearly incomplete, would be an enormous Battleship once the shipbuilding effort.

Lotara didn’t recognise the species’ styles. That it would be armoured and dedicated to the Blood God was unquestionable, but the rest...

The planet defiled rapidly after that. There were countless lakes, some of blood, some of pure darkness where great ships sailed over. There were mountains, some of them from skulls alone, others from twisting and shivering masses of flesh.

There was blood. There was blood everywhere. There were cascades of blood pouring over scarred plains, and many armies fighting and dying to enlarge ever more the rivers coming out of the battlefields.

There were blood rains. There were statues of frozen blood.

The train began to decrease its speed as they passed before a forest of impaled xenos.

This time, they were indeed the green, slimy covered, six-limbed beings that Lotara had personally led the slaughter of.

Curiously, the spikes there too looked like they had been made of blood.

Less curious was the fact that all of the aliens had their souls bound to their corpses, and that slowly but surely, their corpses were forced to descend onto the spikes impaling them.

The torment was excruciatingly painful; and the punishment was eternal.

When the train stopped, the Temple was waiting for them.

It was so high it didn’t seem it could have been built by mere mortals.

Its shape was one of an eight-pointed star, with dark towers rising to reach the blood clouds at each of the ‘point’.

Rivers of blood flowed on each side of the highway leading to it.

The species this temple did belong to was not in doubt, however. The statues marking the various twists of the blood cascades and fountains were clearly recognisable.

“Eldar,” Kossolax affirmed with non-hidden disgust. “Only those bastards could sculpt themselves and look so arrogant without trying.”

Lotara chuckled...before a voice that was hers and yet wasn’t went through her lips.

“**Kaelari**,” the Blood Rose spoke. “**Their true name is Kaelari. They are and will be the Aeldari of the Blood**.”

Eight or so steps later, the first ones were revealed in the flesh.

They looked a lot like the Eldar that had been fought and killed during the Great Crusade...if you didn’t count the very black skin and the burning red eyes. Their bodies also seemed more muscled and built for power instead of skin, though they remained well inferior to the large body of an Astartes Legionnaire.

“The Salamanders aren’t going to be very happy at this shameless imitation.”

“By the Throne of Skulls, please don’t try to insult them that way,” Lotara warned Kossolax before adding a second later, “even if it is true.”

The interior of the Temple, much like the planet outside, was the scene of some vicious fighting...though it seemed the Kaelari had decided not to fight each other but to bleed while trying to compete in various insane obstacle courses.

Spikes were falling by the thousands upon some dancing warriors. Monsters presenting the shape of giant monkeys were trying to rip apart the whip-armed ‘Champions’.

There was no need to wonder what happened to those who lost.

The exsanguinations and the impalements were performed in full view of everyone, and no, they didn’t wait for the victim to die to begin.

Blood flowed everywhere, and Lotara felt both repulsed and yet...excited by the display.

Blood was flowing, and the stronger survived and thrived.

They had no guide, but there was no need to.

The main avenue might twist, lead them to stairs made of skulls, force them to take bridges made of flesh, it lead theme ever higher, and fast.

In what felt like mere minutes, they were already at the very least a kilometre above the ground, and the climb was not over.

The scent of the blood gained new levels of intensity, and a red veil began to dominate, before coalescing in scenes of battle and execution.

There were far fewer Kaelari now, and the ones they met were all donning black armours where extravagant gemstones had been added...but not on the breastplate. There, only the Rune of Khorne was visible.

Lotara began to feel the power of the Temple’s owner.

The presence was...the captain of the *Conqueror* did not know how to perceive it.

It seemed like a combination of amusement, relief, hatred, loathing, and...lust?

The last gates before them opened slowly.

Interestingly, those were entirely golden, and the scenes carved upon them...Lotara recognised what was there.

The shadow of the humiliating wound the Vile One had given her echoed in her very soul, but Lotara couldn’t deny that yes, the giant spiders that had been carved into the golden metal were the same as the ones she had fought recently.

She advanced. She was immediately forced to stop.

For the ‘room’ the avenue had led her to was no grand throne of the imperialistic kind, no strategium worthy of a Warmaster, and no arena like there were so many aboard the *Conqueror*.

It was an immense pool of blood.

Lotara for a second asked herself how much blood must have been shed to fill it...before deciding this was pointless to ask herself the question.

More interestingly, the black-skinned Kaelari present on the rare pillars standing above the red liquid were all naked and female, wearing some jewels, medallions, and golden rings...and they were not standing. No, they were all in a position of supplication.

“What?” Kossolax growled, obviously his self-control fraying, “is this place?”

“Isn’t it evident?” The words arrived like a sublime music, yet one which was drowning in murderous pleasure, “this is my private bath.”

The owner of the voice emerged from the depths of the blood...the blood bath.

Her skin was absolutely flawless and devoid of scars...and unlike the Kaelari servants prostrating themselves, it was a white shining colour that deserved a name of its own.

The contrast could not be vivid between this pearly white and the long red hair, that seemed to have taken the very shade of blood they were bathed into.

The hair was fire-blood, and so were the lips...the mark of Khorne above the intimate parts...and the red eyes which were a sea of blood themselves, with no iris visible.

She was a creature of white and red, standing with everything below her knees into a pool of blood.

And Lotara did not need Khorne to tell her that this xenos was a monster.

“So you are the young mortal I am supposed listening to.” The same musical voice echoed again from the blood-coloured lips. “You don’t look so impressive...especially compared to my Empress.”

Lotara rolled her eyes. While she had never thought Weaver would be mentioned within this hall, the captain of the Conqueror could recognise a challenge when she heard one.

“Where I am coming from, it is good to begin by the presentations. I am Lotara Sarrin, captain of the *Conqueror*. Who are you?”

The mouth of the red-haired Eldar slight opened, revealing a series of perfect white fangs...plus two bigger ones on the upper dentition, which gave her a predatory smile.

“I am Hekatii, the Blood Muse.” The xenos presented herself while looking at her like she was or not a prey worthy of her attention. “Once High Priestess of Khaine, once Priestess of Slaanesh...now I was enslaved by the Blood God.”

Lotara was not impressed.

“Oh yes, I have looked at your Temple. How reluctant you are to serve the Throne of Skulls.”

The female monster that was no normal Eldar hissed in displeasure.

“I say the truth, *Mon-keigh*.”

That hadn’t taken long...the arrogant monster must have had the word upon her tongue the moment Lotara entered the room.

“We are all slaves here.” Hekatii continued. “Do not mistake the reception I created for your arrival for gratitude. You did not free me from my prison. You are not my former Mistress or my Empress. You are weak.”

“And yet I can give you orders.”

The musical-sounding hiss which followed proved her guess was completely right.

“For now,” Hekatii glared at her, and around her eyes, blood-coloured psychic power began to swirl. That made Lotara instantly wary, and for good reason. True, all Kaelari had certainly the potential to be psykers, but Hekatii was evidently an extremely powerful one. “Since we are both enslaved by the same brutish God, I will give you a blunt promise. You fail, I make you bleed for many circles, all the while taking command of your forces.”

“Warlord,” Kossolax grunted. “Why aren’t we getting rid of that-“

“Don’t be foolish,” Lotara said in a conversational voice, knowing that the monster was going to hear everything, whisper or not, “this Muse of Blood is far more powerful than I am.”

“Indeed,” in the blink of an eye, blood erupted, before engulfing the arrogant former High Priestess of Slaanesh. When her eyes could watch her again, Hekatii’s white skin had disappeared behind an armour that was the colour of blood...no, not the colour of blood.

The armour was *made* of blood. Lotara just knew it.

No wonder Khorne had wanted this arrogant xenos in His service.

Only her head had not had a set of armour conjured over it; this could be done at any moment, though Lotara was sure of it.

“Now that you have warned me of the consequences of failure,” the captain of the *Conqueror* spoke slowly but decisively. “Tell me what are your intentions concerning this planet and the fleet you’re building yourself here.”

A sliver of non-identified emotion passed in the blood pits that were Hekatii’s red eyes...and quickly disappeared.

“I have renamed this planet Clar Karond,” the female that was the uncontested leader of the Kaelari began. “I intend for this system to be the main shipbuilding hub for all Kaelari who swear allegiance to me, the Succubus Queen of this Domain. As you yourself have felt, Warlord, the power of the Haematia crystal allow this planet to exist on the other side of the Veil despite being strongly imbued with the power of our God. Regarding the warships, I have several proposals...”

**Calyx Hell Stars**

**Malfi Warp Crown**

**Malfi System**

**Recondium**

**Temporal Anomaly – approximate dating is 310M35**

**Warlord Malicia, the Unwritten Destiny**

Everyone expected her to go back to Malfi.

Naturally, this meant Malicia had to shatter their expectations...and force every plotter having prepared an assassination attempt to change its plans in a hurry.

Sometimes, the female parahuman wished the daemonic promises which promised her to show the horrified expressions were a bit truthful. It would be extremely cathartic watching those who pretended to be her allies reveal expressions of utter astonishment.

But alas, the promises were lies.

And there were other reasons to not immediately return to Malfi.

Kairos Fateweaver had been singularly helpful, but ‘Graveyard of a Thousand False Gods’ meant nothing to her, or any of the Magisters that couldn’t lie to her aboard her flagship.

Malicia needed critical information.

And where better to find it than the greatest library of the Malfi System?

It was only as the fortified gate of the library opened that Malicia knew the surprise was going to cut both ways.

The enormous snake which was revealed to her eyes was a slight clue in that direction, for anyone who wondered.

Yes, her words weren’t the result of a sorcerous hallucination.

There was really a huge white snake going through the library gate...and in height, the beast was half of a Knight’s.

The snake was albino, by the way, as its red pupils made clear. And it was used as a transport by the ‘welcoming committee’.

That was...original.

And it also meant that the mutants who had controlled the One True Archive had at the very least lost their hold on this planet, because the last time she checked before leaving for the Tyrant Star, Malicia was reasonably sure there had been no blue-skinned xenos on Recondium.

And the entire delegation consisted of aliens, the Tzeentchian sorceress had no doubt about that.

Yes, there were some visible mutations, but most of them consisted of a third eye on the forehead.

The vivid blue skin, the hooves, and the flat face? Those were too consistent to be mutations.

Malicia noted they were all clad in what appeared to be white robes when you stayed far away, but were really white scales, snake moults converted into clothing. The blue-skinned aliens were bare-headed and there was no armour to cover their hooves. In fact, they wore little but this snake-altered attire.

“None of you are the Prime Librarian.” She began, choosing deliberately not to waste her time with twenty questions. “I assume you are in control of the One True Library, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. My questions will be simple. Have you heard of the Treaty of Ambition and Proper Betrayals? And if the answer is yes, are you ready to swear on the nine hundred and ninety-nine secret names of the Architect of Fate to abide by it?”

The tallest member of the delegation stepped forwards. His snake robes, unlike the other, had received some slight blue decorations to go with the white original colour.

“The answers are yes, and yes, Majestryx.”

Malicia blinked at the curious choice to address her. Assuredly, yes, this was one of her many titles, though not one of the most popular.

Oh, well. The precautions got first priority. And the first priority in this instance was drawing a shard of Transmutational Changestone out of her pocket and levitating it over the delegation’s head.

“Then swear.”

“I, Ambassador Por’O Elsy’Eir Kais Shan’al, Elder of the Scribe Caste, swear to enforce the Treaty of Ambition and Proper Betrayals. I recognise the Herald of Tzeentch Malicia as the legitimate ruler of Malfi and everything under the Malfi Warp Crown. We pledge tribute and assistance, by the nine hundred and ninety-nine secret names of the Lord of All Knowledge, the Architect of Fate, and the Master of Paradoxes.”

Malicia recited her own part, and the pact was sealed.

Now for the questions the female parahuman had on her tongue...

“You are the species which was torn from its own reality recently. You are the Tau.”

“We are the T’au Empire,” the Ambassador said with no expression at all, though his violent emotions were there, under the surface. “Or what is left of it, now that we are dispersed. We diplomats, merchants, administrators, and investigators, were spirited here. We were the Water Caste, and we were shown...t*he truth*.”

The ‘truth’ certainly had everything to do with the third eye which had grown upon their blue heads; two or three members of the delegation did not have it, and by the way they shivered...it must not be a very pleasant experience.

Oh well...their relationship with Tzeentch was their problem, not hers.

“But you changed the name of your Caste.”

“We had...visions. Before and after we were teleported on this world.” To note, the Low Gothic of the T’au Ambassador was flawless.

“Did you change the name of this planet too?” It was a fair assumption to make, really...

“The Scribe Caste did. This Sept is now called Fe’saan.”

“Fe’saan,” Malicia repeated slowly. It sounded like...a ridiculous bird name to her ears. But who was she to judge? “This will be recorded in the halls of Malfi. I assume my messengers will be able to consider ‘Scribe Caste’ your warband name?”

“You can, Majestryx. We are at your service.”

Great. There was now another set of silver-tongued flatterers in the Warp Crown...like they weren’t already millions of them.

“I will take you to your word, Ambassador.” The sorceress wasn’t going to repeat his full name, not when she was sure she would mangle it beyond recognition. “I came here for information.”

The list of ‘requests’ she had intended to give to the Prime Librarian flew in the Ambassador’s hands.

“If it is in the Great Library of Fe’saan, our Por’la librarians will find it.” The Ambassador’s tongue flickered out of its mouth, revealing that yes, Tzeentch had changed that too. The appendage was too long and too...similar to snakes. Besides, it was also imbued with a Warp curse. “For the Greater Change!”

Minutes later, after a lot of ‘reassurances’ that confirmed that yes, all those T’au were silver-tongued diplomats, Malicia was invited inside the One True Library...which had been considerably modified.

The space between the shelves was considerably wider now, which was a necessity, as giant and not-so-giant snakes were used like one used aircars on Imperial worlds.

The words of ‘For the Greater Change!’ were repeated everywhere, being both religious prayer and philosophy of life.

What it did mean? It seemed to mean...everything. It justified several the torture sessions of several ‘reluctant’ aliens, who were ‘told the errors of their ways’ by pouring snake venom over their eyes.

Sorcery was practised openly in the libraries. It was done for mundane tasks...or for vital ones. Some particularly ruthless T’au ‘diplomats’ were assassinating their rivals by slamming books of metal onto the skulls of their rivals. Others were creating new generation of the ‘Scribe Caste’ by...some heavily modified eggs transformed by sorcery.

There was no assassination attempt upon her. No doubt some of the xenos had considered the idea, but the presence of Ax’senaea by her side was evidently scaring away even the most ambitious individuals.

After two hours of elegant and tiring chatter, the words Malicia wanted to hear were uttered by the Ambassador.

“The Por’la librarians have found what you seek. This way, Majestryx.”

The T’au delegation was joined by other members who looked far more like taciturn librarians, and they rapidly descended the levels until they arrived in some sort of small basement.

Judging by how dusty the archives looked, the books stored there had been here for a while...and the T’au ‘Scribe Caste’ had certainly used some form of sorcery to find the correct section, for there was no archival system whatsoever in view.

“The Graveyard of the Thousand False Gods,” the blue-skinned Ambassador introduced her to a T’au that seemed old and fragile...but had also nine eyes on his head, evident sign Tzeentch had blessed him greatly...or had decided to make an example of him...or her...when it came down to it, Malicia acknowledged she wasn’t able to make the female and the male of that species. “Yes, yes, Greater Change be praised! It is one of the many names of the Ind Cluster, the Northern Altar, the Failed Cradle...”

The list went on, and the names, while interesting, were ones Malicia had never heard before today.

There was one certainty, however.

“This...this cluster is not anywhere near the Calyx Hell Stars.”

“No, it is not, Majestryx! It is not that far from here, it is deep north, as the Light falters and the old darkness remains supreme.”

This was *not* welcome news. Deep north of Calyx, there was only the Halo Stars and their many horrors.

The pages of the voluminous books on the pages were turning at a fantastical rate, and it seemed impossible the old T’au librarian seemed to be able to assimilate the information within the pages...yet somehow, Malicia was sure the blue-skinned alien was doing exactly that.

“How is this that I’ve never heard of this place? Famous or infamous, there should be...rumours about the Ind Cluster.”

“The Anathema,” the being manipulated the books croaked, “the False Emperor burned the Cluster! Those who believed themselves Faithful rejected him and called for the Gods to save them! But they didn’t worship One above the other Three!”

“And so the Emperor killed them all.” Malicia finished, completely unsurprised.

Yes, that explained seriously why the Ind Cluster was not even a footnote left. Servants of Chaos or not, few things could survive the might of an Expeditionary Fleet of the Great Crusade’s Era, and if the Emperor was leading this one in person, the outcome must have been particularly one-sided and unpleasant.

Terminally unpleasant.

“There must be only ruins all over this Cluster of worlds now.” Four thousand years later with everyone having forgotten it save in a few dusty, magically-preserved books. “Assuming the Imperium left ruins in the first place and didn’t destroy the planets with a few Exterminatus Cyclonic Torpedoes.”

“Quite inexact,” the alien librarian giggled, “on the world of Maharashtra...the power of the Gods was strong enough to keep the False Emperor at bay! Praise Greater Change! The Usurper, the False God, could not land on the planet.”

“Really?” Given the sheer power of the one who still held the Golden Throne to this day, Malicia doubted a lot that a thousand or even nine thousand sorcerers could do something like that. “The planet is still intact, then?”

This brought a real grimace, the first time she saw a Tau doing so.

“The planet...is intact. But the Tyrant of Terra...used a poison that killed all sorcerers and those who embraced the truth! Still, even in death, they denied him! The slaves of the False Emperor, the deniers of the Most Glorious Truth of Greater Change...they cannot set foot on the blessed world!”

Malicia didn’t roll her eyes, but inside her head, she laughed.

This was no victory. This was just a stupid, desperate gambit that had resulted in the deaths of each cultist and sorcerer who had tried to stand against one of the most powerful beings of that galaxy.

It was a being that was undoubtedly responsible for the erasure of an entire Cluster from the galactic maps.

And Tzeentch and the other Gods had let him get away with it...until circumstances forced their hands.

Yeah, that was not a victory. It was just dancing in the middle of a graveyard.

But with this graveyard remained ruins, and Kairos Fateweaver wouldn’t have mentioned it if there was nothing useful left.

“What is the name of the planet, and how can I reach it?”

“This is the Blessed Altar World of Maharashtra, Majestryx. And you will find it ninety-nine light-years from...”

**Segmentum Solar**

**Sol System**

**Holy Terra**

**Merica**

**Mega-Hive Cajun**

**Secondary Headquarters of the Adeptus Almitas**

**0.646.310M35**

**Adept-Primus Joost Harpagon**

Joost finished eating his sausages and his steamed rice with a sound of contentment.

The Adept-Primus had never been disappointed by the work of the cooks he had hired a decade or so ago, but today they had really surpassed themselves.

“My compliments to the chef,” Joost said to his head butler, fondly remembering the culinary delights that had assaulted his tongue. “My tongue and my stomach await eagerly how their imagination will elevate the art of cooking to new heights in the next years!”

“Thank you, Sir!”

The grey-haired servant saluted, and quickly left the room with the other members of the high-class service, and needless to say, the majority of the plates were empty by now.

“I wondered why you moved to Cajun, Joost.” One of his colleagues and current invitees for this evening’s ‘dinner work’ chuckled. “Now I wonder no more. This cooking is really worthy of one of the big ‘Master Chef’ that are the jewel of the Imperial Palace.”

“Our dear Adept-Primus has attracted superb cooks in his service,” agreed another Adept of the Adeptus Administratum.

“I wish I could take credit for it,” Joost said modestly, “but I can’t. The souls who have elevated this ‘Cajun cooking’ to an art form were already there, only waiting for a chance to create nirvana for our tongues and palates.”

“True, true. And so far from the Palace, you are the one who enjoys it every day!”

Joost raised his glass in a mock salute, trying hard not to wince. The truth was, the reason why he had decided to incur the extremely costly expense of moving his de facto primary headquarters – de jure, everyone’s primary headquarters was the Imperial Palace, by tradition and by law – had nothing to do with Cajun cooking, though it had been a significant morale-booster for him when he discovered this food tradition.

No, the fact he had moved away from the heart of Imperial power to this relatively unimportant Mega-Hive was due to the political nightmares generated by Commorragh.

No, it was not glorious, and it had more or less annihilated every chance the Adeptus Almitas may ever obtain a Secundus seat before the next two centuries were over, but at least Joost was alive, and nobody had sent assassins after him.

The good point about living on Holy Terra, was that there were so many people living on it that the old proverb ‘out of sight, out of mind’ was verified a thousand times per year effortlessly.

“I hear many good things about the soup...what is it called?”

“Gumbo,” Joost answered. “And I think ‘plenty of good things’ is understating things, my dear colleague. Alas, this soup requires particular ingredients that are so rare and so delicious we reserve it for a single holy week of celebrations.”

“The Sanguinala,” the other Adept correctly deduced.

“Indeed,” Joost smiled. “And when-“

The doors of the dinner hall opened abruptly, and Joost frowned, the pleasure of dining and receiving compliments about his servants’ cooking performance significantly decreasing, to be replaced by annoyance. He had ordered to not be disturbed, save by events of extreme importance.

To make matters worse, the man who had stormed inside was a mere Adept-Quartus of the Almitas, someone that should have never been authorised to step into-

“Lord Adept! Lord Adept! The Imperial Palace has just received...extraordinary news...the Living Saint has annihilated the Black Crusade!”

Joost often divided the news he received every day in two categories: good and bad.

The third category, that he had labelled ‘nightmare’ inside his head, had been limited to a single episode of his life, and it was Commorragh and all the torments this disgusting name had created for the Adeptus Almitas.

“The Living Saint. Weaver. The Arch-Arsonist of Commorragh.”

“Yes, Lord Adept!”

“Please tell me that she didn’t kill anyone among the Top One Hundred Bounties.”

The Adept-Quartus, a bearded youngster who had not celebrated his fortieth birthday, cleared his throat loudly, and it was as if a massive hole was beginning to open under his very feet.

“Err...I apologise, Lord Adept, but the elimination of the Vile One has already been confirmed-“

“THE VILE ONE? BUT THAT’S THE NUMBER EIGHT!” Too late Joost realised how badly he had reacted in front of his ‘guests’, several of which were high-ranked Adepts themselves...and then a couple of seconds he decided it didn’t matter.

Nothing really mattered, because it was the nightmare of Commorragh returning to haunt him.

No, it was worse!

Vandire. Vandire was going to kill him if he signed away one more bounty.

And the Living Saint....the Imperial Guard had a large presence, and its regiments had never been shy showing their support for her on the Throneworld, some by storming the Almitas precincts for the most ridiculous reasons and in the middle of the night!

“Err...yes, Lord Adept...it is the number eight...with a bounty of...five quadrillion Throne Gelts...and a Sector Overlordship? Wow, that must be nice, to get that sort of rewards!”

Joost Harpagon didn’t feel as if the Imperial Palace was about to fall upon his shoulders, but he wasn’t far from that point. It had to be a nightmare. He was going to wake up. It was merely an indigestion brought by the delicious Cajun food.

“I should have listened to my wise grandmother and retired to a Saturn paradise orbital station after Commorragh! Why didn’t have the courage to challenge the grox in the High Seat?” Joost groaned in despair.

Seconds later, the Adept-Primus realised this might not be the wisest comment he had ever made, especially when the Adepts present in the room were all – in theory – the loyal subordinates of one Xerxes Vandire...

**Holy Terra**

**The Imperial Palace**

**Inner Sanctum**

**The Renaissance Council Room**

**0.676.310M35**

**Chancellor of the Imperial Council Leonardo Melchior**

When his old mentor Samson Pitt had given him the Grand Sea of the Chancellor, Leonardo had had no idea that six months later, he would have a front seat to one of the momentous events of this millennium...nah, of the entire history of the Imperium.

It had been something like fourteen years since the Battle of Commorragh, after all. What were the odds something equally significant would happen in his lifetime?

Clearly, the God-Emperor and his Living Saint were not much concerned about the odds.

And Terra had reacted exuberantly to the news coming from the Eastern Fringe. A massive defeat handed to the forces of the Arch-Enemy would have seen a major effort from the different propaganda services of each Adeptus.

But the Traitors had not just been handed a massive defeat. They had been obliterated, along with billions of xenos.

And no matter how careful the operational security, the whispers had begun to grow until it was officially confirmed the Primate Roboute Guilliman had been resurrected, and two of his brothers had literally returned from the dead.

Even the Imperial Palace, usually sheltered from the madness of the wars raging on the frontiers of the Imperium, had succumbed to the joyful madness of celebrations.

Walking in the halls these days was taking three times as much time as it used to, for the parties and the excited conversations were everywhere. Religious masses celebrating the valiant martyrs who had won the near-miraculous battles were everywhere, and the number of military parades was beyond counting.

The Bell of Lost Souls had been ordered to toll for the fallen, beginning its litany for the legendary exploit of the Invaders Chapter, and many more bell tolls had followed since then.

It was...victory.

Leonardo wanted to say the High Twelve were immune to this atmosphere of miracles and raucous celebrations...after all, ten out of twelve were holding their seats fourteen years ago.

But they were not.

Thousands of Tech-Priests had been noticed singing incomprehensible hymns for the ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’, and while the Fabricator-General of Mars was more dignified, the Chancellor had seen the enormous Martian High Lord drink an absurd quantity of liquor right after landing on Terra.

The same could be applied to each of the other members of the High Twelve.

And the less said about the rest of the Senatorum Imperialis...well, the better.

“This emergency session of the High Council is now opened,” Leonardo said, and predictably, the Arch-Cardinal Terran immediately jumped from his seat.

“We must,” the white-robed representative of the Ecclesiarch exclaimed, “reward Her Celestial Highness with a Triumph! Nothing else with suffice for the extraordinary exploits accomplished under her command!”

His mentor had long mentioned how before Commorragh, the holders of the Ecclesiarchy seat were rotated every year, sometimes every six months. Therefore it had been a shock for most observers that, after Commorragh, Salomon Rovere had not been replaced.

But with a ring embellished with a beetle-shaped on one of his fingers, and a necklace in the form of a spider, this survival had long ceased to be a surprise by 310M35.

So no, it was not a surprise the Arch-Cardinal Terran was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the Living Saint.

“I agree,” Fabricator-General Xaerophrys Esvikom canted in a voice that sounded less mechanical than usual. “The Chosen of the Omnissiah deserves a Triumph.”

“The Navis Nobilite support this move,” Jakov Balevolio, the new Paternal Envoy of the Navigators after his predecessor died in his sleep, shook his head in an uncharacteristically vigorous gesture.

“The abrupt demise of so many Traitors will guarantee a progressive return to an excellent trade situation.” Aliénor Guttenberg smiled. “The Chartist Captains are in favour of a Triumph.”

The Lord High Admiral cleared his throat a second after.

“If we do not give a Triumph to Lady Weaver for this successful campaign, we won’t be able to give a Triumph to anyone else without sounding like massive hypocrites,” Rabadash y Byng el Calormen admitted out loud. “The Imperial Navy votes for a Triumph.”

“We won’t be to organise a Triumph...immediately.” Felipe de Rivera, clearly, was not so enthusiastic. “I...we will need to let the tempers calm otherwise it will be chaos. But the Adeptus Astra Telepathica...is in favour.”

“The Triumph must happen,” the threatening figure of the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum was...impossible to read, really. “That way everyone will know what happens to those who oppose Him. No Traitor is beyond his reach.”

“Many of the darkest places of this galaxy have been illuminated by the Astronomican, and the attrition of the psykers is at an all-time low,” Pocahontas Valetta spoke, like her fellow female High Lord of the Chartists, with a large smile on her face. “The Astronomican votes for the Triumph, and it is my personal opinion it must be grandiose.”

“Have you all lost your minds?” The Grand Provost Marshal of the Adeptus Arbites had reddened with every voice voting positively, and now the seemingly young-looking man exploded in anger. “Do you realise what you’re doing? This is not Justice, this is-“

The High Lord facing him drew a priceless handkerchief and agitated it.

“Yes, High Lord Brezhnev? What is this, if not Justice?”

Leonardo did his best not to shiver. The tone was...pleasant. The appearance was unthreatening: powdered silver wig on his head, a lot of cosmetics on his face, and a superb attire of green noble clothes that could have been used to go to a ball.

But the words came from Lord Inquisitor Leyden Harmenszoon von Rijn, and for all his refined clothes and looks, the man was not to be underestimated.

When Lord Berlin Chimera had officially abandoned his seat, there had been a series of short-serving Inquisitors, none of them who made a lasting impression or tried to push for some notable decrees and policies.

The arrival of Leyden Harmenszoon von Rijn had been a massive upheaval, accompanied by the execution of three members of the Senatorum Imperialis.

The appearance was very much the complete opposite of Lord Berlin Chimera. But while the high and tall Inquisitor holding the seat at the time of Commorragh had been rumoured to be from Malleus, Leyden Harmenszoon von Rijn had revealed from the very beginning he was a high-ranked figure of the very recently-founded Ordo Hereticus.

“The Triumph is agreed,” Xerxes Vandire said in a hurry. “The Grand Provost was just...astonished, like we all were.”

“Yes,” Tudor Brezhnev stammered. “That was...what I was trying to say...Lord Inquisitor.”

“Hmm...the Holy Ordos is in favour of a Triumph.”

The representative of the Holy Inquisition slowly removed himself from the enormous throne-seat that he had commissioned for an extravagant price. His handkerchief touched for a second his left cheek.

No one in the room was stupid to break this moment of silence.

“I have been able to exchange many messages of critical importance with Macragge.” Lord Leyden revealed. “There are several measures that will need to be adopted. First of all, the title of Warmaster will be abolished, here and now.”

“You’re joking!” Grand Master Hunter for the first time in living memory seemed aghast. “The title and the duties-“

“Have been claimed by Traitors and the Despoiler has been acting behind the scenes to corrupt it beyond redemption.” Leyden Harmenszoon von Rijn said imperiously in a tone that was as warm as the Fenrisian oceans had been. “I don’t care how you handle it. Abolish some privileges, diminish the authority in several aspects. But the name has to go. Am I clear?”

“Crystal clear,” Aliénor Gutenberg replied levelly. “I suppose the Inquisition is supportive of the...negotiations that have occurred between Her Celestial Highness and the Dark Angels?”

“Yes. The Inquisition will support...the negotiations. And the Holy Ordos will deal with the sons of the Lion if they try to back out of the agreement.”

“The return of the Avenging Son?” It said quite something that Huang Utrecht was only speaking only now. His irrelevance in most affairs of utmost appearance has skyrocketed after Commorragh, and this tendency was accelerating, not decreasing, since Cadia had come under attack.

“The Thirteenth Primarch is not fully recovered, and informs this Council his first priority is to erase the scars marring the planets of his realm. It is expected it will take years to restore Macragge to its legendary glory. Until that state of affairs change, the Holy Ordos see no point about any conversation involving the Avenging Son. Unlike another Primarch.”

“What do you mean...my Lord?” Jakov Balevolio asked warily. “I mean...we all thought the...the other sons of the Emperor would stay with their brother. Forgive me for my assumption, but we all thought the Space Wolves’ survivors were going to settle in Ultramar until we decide their punishment...that way they will stop antagonising every authority of Solar and Obscurus they come across, while avoiding a headache with Ultima.”

“This is logical...but it isn’t going to happen like you want.” The impeccably-dressed Lord Inquisitor grabbed a golden cane that looked like the baton of an orchestra’s choirmaster. “The Sixth Primarch has, at last, accomplished the mission the God-Emperor gave him. He is coming here.”

“The Primarch Leman Russ is coming here?” Rabadash y Byng el Calormen was not yet panicking, but the emotions in eyes showed he was very, very close to that point.

Not that Leonardo Melchior blamed him for it. The information come completely unexpected, and it was...a violent shock.

“Yes. Thus my Lords I would suggest you to not make hasty suggestions where the punishment of the Space Wolves is concerned.”

The sound of the cane striking the marble of the Renaissance Council Room felt louder than a thousand tolls of the Bell of Lost of Souls.

“But it is just a suggestion...my Lords.”

**Holy Terra**

**Europa**

**Fort Aquitania**

**0.681.310M35**

**Lord Militant Commander Paul von Oberstein**

There were ten ranks of seats among the Senatorum Imperialis. The closer you were from the High Twelve of the Primus, the longer you needed to get an appointment.

It was not an absolute rule, but Paul von Oberstein found it quite difficult to find exceptions to it.

And as Lord Militant Commander of the Imperial Guard, a Secundus seat, the veteran officer of the Lucifer Blacks was quite aware that in some cases, there were people who had asked to have an appointment with him for *decades*.

Paul would love to say it was because they weren’t relevant where the current military campaigns were concerned, but it wasn’t the case.

The sad reality was that Paul was only a mere mortal, and even with a staff the size of an Army Group, there was only a limited numbers of men and women he could meet face-to-face in a single day, especially when considering his other obligations, which often included long speeches in front of senior figures of the Astra Militarum and defending his budget against the bottomless appetite of the Terran bureaucrats.

But the point was, no High Lord entered his office without appointment. It didn’t matter if someone was a Decius nonentity of Xerxes Vandire, you didn’t barge in without warning. Period.

Unfortunately, as Paul von Oberstein had discovered minutes ago, there were after all notable exceptions to *that* rule he would be able to commit to his memory.

Because when the Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes invited himself in your personal quarters and asked ‘for a moment of your time’, what was a mere Lord Militant Commander to do?

“The Emperor,” began Anubis Excelsor once the very curt courtesies were expedited, “desires to know the rank which you will promote Lady Taylor Hebert to.”

It was a...surprising question. First and foremost, the fact the highest-ranked Custodes – the best of his knowledge, Custodes never gave the intricacies of their hierarchy to non-Custodes these days – had come in person to ask this seemingly trivial question.

“Lady General Militant,” Paul replied after several seconds of silence, but more because he wanted to grasp the political implications of this visit than any indication on his part. “Yes, this is only a promotion of one rank. But this is the highest field rank I can give her. Giving her the title of Lady Commander would mean replacing one of the five current holders, and keeping her away from the battlefields for the rest of her career...which would be definitely non-productive. And a promotion of three ranks means giving her my job.”

There might have been a few more meteoritic ascensions than the one of Lady General Taylor Hebert had made in Imperial History, but there could be counted on one hand, and probably with some spare fingers.

Paul von Oberstein shrugged dramatically.

“I don’t doubt she would likely do a better job than I am, managing the bureaucracy and all other vellum-associated duties,” as could be expected; he had a big sleepy mastiff, and Weaver had an army of big spiders hunting the Administratum Adepts and the vile paperwork. “But so far, Lady Taylor Hebert has shown no sign she would accept replacing me. The title of Warmaster is officially discarded for good. As long as there isn’t a consensus among the High Twelve to officially proclaim field ranks above Lady General Militant, my hands are tied.”

“And Lord Solar? Or in this case, Lady Solar?”

It was really frustrating to read a Custodes’ facial expression at the best of times...and the Captain-General was not making it easy.

“Some might believe the ranks are interchangeable, but they are not. While the ‘Lord Solar’ rank has far more prestige behind it, as none of the holders have yet to turn Traitor, they don’t carry as much authority and ability to suppress internal problems as the old title does. And besides...I intended to propose it for Ender Trevayne.”

“If you do, many of the High Twelve will urge him to return to Obscurus and Cadia as fast as a warship can sail from Ultramar to the Gates of the Eye.”

“I know.” The dark-haired Lord Commander Militant admitted to the golden-armoured giant. “And since we can afford to be honest, I don’t like how many resources we are concentrating around Cadia and the other Redoubts for the next decade. The Black Crusade is over. There are other campaigns that could benefit from several hundreds of regiments each. The Calyx Expanse, for example.”

“No,” the Captain-General immediately countered. “Not the Calyx Expanse. Your forces would be slaughtered in short order, or worse, turned against the oaths they swore. There is not enough Aethergold on this world or in the entirety of Segmentum Solar to spare for them. Before sending a Crusade to this pit of Traitors, certain conditions have to be met. Some of them, that you are allowed to know, necessitate Aethergold in large quantities.”

Well, that answered the question why so many Navy Admirals had suddenly all declined the honour of leading their Battlefleets in that direction. In all likelihood, the Lord High Admiral must have received the same ‘a moment of your time’ appointment.

That didn’t answer many questions he had. The scarcity of Aethergold, after all, wasn’t going to change tomorrow. Yes, his ‘most productive subordinate’ – and Living Saint – had recovered a lot of Noctilith, but Macragge’s was not next door to Terra, and even if it was, everyone wanted Aethergold. In many ways, Paul was more optimistic concerning the sizeable deposits of the Nephilim Sector, even if they required Space Marine and Guard combined operations to eradicate xenos opposition.

The best case, in his humble opinion, was that the Imperium’s offensive campaigns were going to lack a large reserve of Aethergold for the next decade. In the most optimistic scenario he could conjure, five years.

And barring a miracle, there was nothing the Guard or the Imperium as a whole could do to decrease the delays. Noctilith mining was barely in its infancy on several secret sites...and when it came to it, there was only one Living Saint to transform the valuable Noctilith into priceless Aethergold.

“Lady General Militant Taylor Hebert and Lord Solar Ender Trevayne?” Paul asked, as if the part about the Calyx Expanse had not been voiced at all.

“These promotions are...acceptable,” the Captain-General spoke, before adding a few words that gave the Lucifer Black officer an unpleasant feeling of foreboding, “for the time being.”

And on this, the Custodes left his office.

Paul von Oberstein waited for several seconds before sighing.

“Well, at least I know why I love people asking for an appointment months in advance now...”

**Terra**

**Old Muscovy**

**Hive Volgograd**

**The Rogue Trader Museum**

**0.684.310M35**

**Solar Guardian of Records Nicephorus Vandire**

There were planets of the Imperium, Nicephorus knew, that had tens of thousands of churches and cathedrals.

There were also planets that had tens of thousands of museums. Generally, those were Paradise Worlds, since their tithe to the Adeptus Terra was mainly coming from the ‘cultural fees’ they took from the bored nobility and the highly wealthy ‘pilgrims’ that came every year to visit their collections.

And then there were worlds which had the museums *and* the cathedrals in countless numbers.

Holy Terra was in this category. It had large, middle-sized, and small museums. It had monumental Basilicas, great temples, and Spire-sized churches. It had everything when it came to the cultural and the religious, and many more things besides that.

It was the Throneworld, the Cradle where Mankind had evolved before conquering the stars.

Holy Terra had everything.

And naturally it was an immemorial tradition that the High Lords of Terra were the benefactors and the patrons of several of those places where the culture of previous ages was exhibited.

The Rogue Trader Museum, needless to say, wasn’t among the most prestigious locations owned by Clan Vandire.

To say the truth, it was a rather miserable and eminently forgettable museum. While there were plenty of great and renowned centres proclaiming the exploits of famous Rogue Trader Houses on Holy Terra, they wouldn’t be found on Hive Volgograd.

No, this museum had been founded by House Gotha some millennia ago. No doubt the Rogue Traders of that line had estimated the propaganda benefits would outweigh the trillions of Crowns and Throne Gelts necessary to buy real estate on Holy Terra.

But this had been in late M32. And if House Gotha was alive today...well, to be honest, Nicephorus was pretty sure they were not. They might be. By pure curiosity, he had done some research, and discovered that a late Lord Gotha had, for some reason long lost to Adepts like him, decided to abandon the family palace of Volgograd and sail into the unknown somewhere in the fourth century of the 34th millennium.

And they had never returned.

The Warrant of Trade and the most valuable objects, of course, had left with House Gotha. But if there was some point where the rumours about Rogue Traders were perfectly exact, it was that there were bloody, unrepentant *thieves*.

Even with the best pieces missing, there was a profusion of xenos skulls, antiquated maps of planets interesting no one, shiny but cheap gemstones, primitive bronze weapons, and other ‘trophies’ that House Gotha had judged ‘worthy’ to be presented in this museum when they were the masters of Volgograd in all but name.

And no, Nicephorus didn’t know why they had chosen Volgograd of all the Hives available to them in the multitude of those existing on Holy Terra. The name itself was useless and not relevant to anything concerning their affairs in these dark days.

There was only one certainty.

Since his brother was busy smashing several old collections with a mace, the ‘Rogue Trader Museum’ was going to stay closed for...an extended period of time.

“SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE!”

Glass and a lot of materials Nicephorus had no wish to study were pulverised on the museum’s floor. Splinters of bones from long-extinct creatures were thrown everywhere as the skulls they were part of were ferociously thrown against the walls.

Maps were torn to shreds.

Nicephorus grimaced inwardly. When he had told his brother the rampages in the wings of the Imperial Palace had to cease for they cost too much in reparations, the Solar Guardian hadn’t thought Xerxes would interpret it as ‘do it elsewhere, and in a location where there isn’t anything too valuable’.

“SHE COULDN’T WIN THAT BATTLE! BY THE SPIRES OF ZION, SHE WAS HALF A GALAXY AWAY! HOW WAS SHE ABLE TO WIN THAT CRUSADE? EVEN THE TRAITORS SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER! IMBECILES! DID THE ZEALOT BASTARDS HAVE MARSHMALLOW INSTEAD OF BRAINS?”

The destruction which followed was...very significant.

Most of the old spears were broken, and when they weren’t, they were literally used to smash things that had yet to be destroyed.

It was really looking more and more like a storm had devastated this part of the museum...but no, it was only Xerxes’ fury.

Nicephorus huffed, turned his head away, and waited.

Predictably, after several minutes, Xerxes stopped, partly because the objects that were still in pristine condition were nowhere to be seen, and partly because he was exhausted by this rampage that had been chained since the news of the ‘Cataclysm of Macragge’ had arrived.

“What she did...it is impossible.” This time, fortunately, the heat in the words was much diminished.

“Unfortunately, Xerxes, *she*,” Nicephorus wasn’t going to utter her name, he wasn’t that suicidal or masochist, “has a gift to accomplish the impossible every time she goes to war.”

The High Lord of the Administratum grunted like a stubborn grox.

“You are going to tell me ‘I told you so’, aren’t you?”

“Do you want me to?” Nicephorus answered while raising his eyebrows, making silently his opinion clear.

“No. Yes.” The fists of Xerxes tightened. “I don’t know! It was supposed to work! Even with everything she could muster, that wasn’t supposed to be enough firepower to win!”

“But it didn’t.”

Fortunately, his neutral tone didn’t trigger a new enraged storm of destruction.

“Yes. Give me the bad news.”

“The Bristol Group broke the alliance and decided to...move decisively to Segmentum Obscurus, shall we say?”

“I know that. The Head Bastard told me in person the battlefields of Obscurus were less dangerous than a continuation of our alliance!”

“Well, he’s not the only one.” Nicephorus continued. “We have lost four of our bigger Chartist supporters, the service of three Navigator Houses, fifty Telepathica contracts, and the few Mechanicus Radicals we work with have decided to triple their prices...since they know Mars is not going to be in any hurry to send us Tech-Priests.”

A mutilated tapestry of House Gotha comically fell from the walls, before falling into a small pool of green paint. Xerxes ignored the noise.

“And?”

“Samarkand and its Zaibatsu are raising a ruckus.” Nicephorus admitted. “Some of them were sufficiently clever to know the tithes’ increase we destined to their Quadrant was for Nyx only, but now that *she* is victorious, suddenly they are smelling blood. Several of our most visible agents at Samarkand have been assassinated in the last ten days.”

“I was assured they didn’t like *her*.”

“They still don’t like her very much,” Nicephorus conceded. “As far as I understand, she insists in redistributing a lot of wealth to the plebeians, and her negotiation tactics...don’t show a great of concern for the interests of Samarkand. But everyone loves a victor, Xerxes. The mere reality that she has spoken with several Primarchs and saved the home system of the Ultramarines...this is something Clan Vandire can’t give them. Not now, and certainly not in a thousand years. And worse...we tried to increase the tithes. She didn’t. It doesn’t take a genius to know which way they are going to jump.”

“And we may speak of the Nyx Quadrant before this century is over.” Xerxes spat on a tribal wooden shield that he had trampled relentlessly minutes ago. “Fine. What else?”

“The various accusations we pushed against her are returning at us like a crazy demolition engine,” the Solar Guardian of Records told grimly, “many of our solicitors were told bluntly they were lucky they hadn’t enough evidence to try them as heretics. Most of the cases are dismissed, sometimes with the vellum they were crouched onto burned in front of them.”

In terms of resources, they had lost very little. In terms of influence, the impact was already devastating, and promised to be something absolutely egregiously bad in the long-term.

Everyone was certain they had tried to stab a Living Saint in the back while she was facing the hordes of the Arch-Enemy....and to be fair, that was exactly what had happened.

No matter the opinion many Clans and Houses of Terra held for the Victor of Macragge behind closed doors, they would support her in public.

It was the ‘right thing’ to do for the masses of the Throneworld...and they had never loved Clan Vandire in the first place.

“Who stands with us?”

The answer was short.

“The Arbites and the Navy in Segmentum Solar. For all her military triumphs, she hasn’t been able to change that. So far.”

“So far?”

“Xerxes, your son, my nephew, is going to be court-martialled this year. The prospects of avoiding it were going to be slim enough before the news from Macragge arrived. With the return of several Primarchs,” and what a shock it had been to read the first official communiqués, “it is going to happen, no matter how many Navy officers we can rally to our cause.”

“I have acquired a lot of blackmail on this slimy serpent calling himself the Lord High Admiral. And if I have enough officers, I can transform the Court into something that will destroy what’s left of his political career.”

“Maybe,” Nicephorus winced as his brother glared. “Yes, you can pressure the Lord High Admiral. But you were present at the Council. A Primarch is coming. And since Macragge is on the other side of the galaxy, I am ready to bet everything I own that several Space Marines’ Companies that Ormuz insulted at Cadia will be there for his arrival. Rabadash will have to choose between your blackmail and the wrath of many Space Marines, plus the presence of a Primarch. Don’t begin something that will convince a Primarch we must be eliminated, please.”

The legends were old, but each and every one of them insisted it was never a good idea to antagonise the sons of the God-Emperor...especially when the Master of Mankind was not them to protect you.

“And what do you suggest, then?”

“There will be a Court-Martial, we can’t stop that.” Nicephorus shook his head. “But no one will be able to say anything if Ormuz is declared innocent by his peers at the conclusion of the Court-Martial.”

“Weren’t you the one who complained that it was going to get too expensive?”

“Yes, I did. But since the political survival of Clan Vandire is now tied to this Court-Martial,” and maybe the simple survival, given how things were unfolding, “I think this is a price we are going to have to pay...though if you want to retire from your High Seat and win a few favours that way-“

“We have suffered some reverses, but the game is not over!” Xerxes growled. “Do not suggest things like that in presence, even if your intent is to humour me!”