**Black Crusade 10.1**

**The Last Dawn**

*I know you are here, Corax.*

*The shadows hide you, but I feel your hatred and my sons told me of the raven feathers you left behind after your massacres.*

*This is pathetic, brother.*

*Are you unable to remember the black sands of Isstvan V?*

*You nearly very well killed me there, I won’t deny it, but by the fault of Curze, you failed.*

*It’s ironic, isn’t it? The Primarch who believed destiny was impossible to change saved my life and changed the outcome of the battle. One death must be paid with one death; if Ferrus and I had died in the battle of the Drop Site Massacre, the bargain I passed with the Gods would have been sealed and the doom of our arrogant sire assured. Instead the Night Haunter intervened, all the while pretending he was the weapon the Emperor wanted him to be. Truly Konrad lived his life and went to his death blind, ignorant, and stupid.*

*But for all his failures, the Lord of the Night acted.*

*And you have failed.*

*You failed again when you followed me and my Legion into the Eye. By breaking your chains and releasing your true self, you finally were able to gain skills which would allow you to stand as my equal. One might almost say it was your second chance.*

*But your attempt on my life was not successful, and now my moment of vulnerability has passed.*

*Twice the Pantheon was surprised by your resourcefulness. I hope you enjoyed this luck; you won’t get a third chance.*

*Now we are going to play by my rules. The most devoted and powerful of my sons have completed the ritual of Holy Sacrament. Eight Dark Apostles and eight thousand eight hundred eighty-eight Astartes used their daemonancy skills and lore to create a ritual barrier which will prevent you from stepping into my presence. And you can’t move against my Apostles before removing the Legionnaires, who have all been dispersed and rendered unremarkable to your senses of raven.*

*You can’t kill an entire Legion, Corax. You are more powerful than several millennia ago, but your power is not that great and there are rules you must respect, as long as you continue to stay loyal to this decaying corpse on the Golden Throne of Terra.*

*You could have made a formidable Champion of the Pantheon, but you refuse their blessings and patronage, even as your Legion is mutilated and pathetically weak.*

*Like the rest of our deluded brothers, you fail to understand that Mankind’s survival demands we bow to the will of the Gods.*

*Only by embracing the Primordial Truth can we thrive and reconquer an Imperium where all believers will be able to rule under Their eyes.*

*You won’t stop me.*

*I am going to break the armies and fleets assembled at Cadia, burn this empire of lies and falsehoods, and take the Noctilith of the Ymga Monolith to transform it into Octarite.*

*The rats of Anarchy are going to pay their war effort with their souls and lives. Weaver will be cast down, deprived of her light, and tortured by the Pantheon for the rest of eternity. Your legacy and the one of our eight blind brothers will be destroyed and forgotten, dust under our armoured boots.*

*I am going to open the Cicatrix Maledictum and extinguish the light. I am going to free Excess from Khorne’s Prison, kill this pathetic horned shard, and usher the era of Undivided Chaos.*

*I am Lorgar, the Word Bearer. So I have promised, so it shall be.*

*Let the Galaxy Burn.*

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“*It is certainly a guarantee today at the end of your first year, the first question on your exam crystal-slate will be when the Noctilith Wars began. If you don’t want to receive a zero and fail your historical class – and likely be expelled for evidently having learned nothing of importance during twelve standard months – you will answer 188.310M25, as Operation Stalingrad and the 5th Black Crusade began, separated by an entire galaxy. Should the question of ‘how’ be asked, it is of course going to take longer for you to reply, I’m afraid. And no, ‘because all heretics hate Her Celestial Highness’ isn’t going to amuse your teachers. If you stay coherent and logical, your first point must be to write of the martyrdom of the* Will of Eternity *at Commorragh, and how the creation of Aethergold strengthened the foundations of the Imperium in these difficult times. Don’t forget the decade preceding Operation Stalingrad however; the actions of the Imperial Guard and many other successes can’t be understood without relying on proper logistical preparation and war training...*” Attributed to Star Marshal Alexander Macharius, 669M41.

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**13th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**KOR PHAERON**

'**THE DARK CARDINAL'**

**‘THE BLACK CARDINAL’**

**DAEMON-SUMMONER**

**TRAITORIS MAJORIS**

**AUGMENTED TRANSHUMAN**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**THIS ABOMINATION IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**WARNING: THE TRAITOR IS COWARDLY IN THE EXTREME AND HAS BEEN NOTED TO FLEE AS SOON AS EVENTS TURN AGAINST HIM**

**REWARD: 1 QUADRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 SECTOR OVERLORDSHIP, TITLE OF 'PURIFIER OF CALTH' AWARDED, GRAND RELIGIOUS OVATION, NUMEROUS LAND HOLDINGS IN THE REALM OF ULTRAMAR, 5 DEFENCE STATIONS, ETC...**

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“*Great undertakings demand faith, determination, and sacrifice. Never forget that*.” These words were attributed to the Primarch Lorgar of the Word Bearers, Great Crusade-era.

“*Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt*.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

**The Eye of Terror**

**High Orbit over Sicarus**

**Abyss-class Super-Battleship *Trisagion***

Thought for the day: Know your destination before you set out.

**Dark Apostle Paristur**

Paristur was speaking with Kor Phaeron about the latest failures to obtain more Octarite for blessed purposes when the rats decided to strike.

His pacts only gave him one second of warning before the daemonic communication devices allowing them to communicate with the major command centres over Sicarus began to scream at once.

Once the first series of shrieking and shouting was over, what replaced them was perhaps worse.

“The Basilica is overrun! Masters! WE NEED REINFORCEMENTS NOW!”

“They have gotten inside! They have gotten inside! Repel them by the Pantheon!”

“How did the rats manage to breach these gates? ARRGH!”

“This station has been claimed by the mighty-mighty servants of Malal! Praise Anarchy brute-things!”

Kor Phaeron uttered one word and the device which had relayed these heretical words was immediately destroyed in a blast of sorcery.

Unfortunately, more and more voices resonated, all giving tales of disaster and defeat.

“They have taken the Blood Dome! They have taken the redoubt! By the truth of the Great Architect! This is an infestation!”

“We do not have enough ammunition to repel them! I need more cannons, or failing that, orbital lances fired on the Bloodied Plains!”

“My slaves are dying of a bubonic plague! Presence of the plague-rats confirmed!”

“The bells are tolling and my mortal troops are unable to stand its maddening effects! Request a Host deployment immediately!”

Past the initial moment of stupefaction, the Word Bearers rushed to their sections and began to coordinate the efforts of the armies on the ground to eradicate this onslaught of heresy and rats.

But as the lieutenants of Kor Phaeron updated the hololithic-daemonic maps, Paristur could only grimace.

The situation was absolutely awful.

“Angra Mainyu is going to be underwhelmed in short order if we don’t land one of the Great Hosts on Sicarus.” This admission brought him little joy, but the first massive summonings had only brought a few minutes for the –too rare – Word Bearers and the millions of mortals ordered to protect the sacred temples.

“Yes. Of course, Angra believed *Erebus* had dealt with the rodent problem.”

The name was uttered with undisguised hatred, but Paristur didn’t comment upon it. It was very justified in this case.

The Keeper of the Faith of the Seventeenth Legion snorted after speaking.

“If this is total victory is like, I don’t want to see what his next ‘exploits’ will be.”

“It is obvious Erebus screwed up,” Paristur didn’t add ‘again’, but he was sure Kor Phaeron heard it nonetheless. “The rats weren’t vanquished; they merely waited for our vigilance to falter and our forces to be redeployed for the Black Crusade before striking.”

The reports of routs and utter destruction visited upon Nurglite churches arrived mere seconds later, informing the two members of the Dark Council that the rodents had somehow built thousands of tunnelling machines, some as imposing and destructive as conventional Ordinatuses.

“I’m ready to bet the great ‘Hand of Destiny’ didn’t even bother sending his lackeys deep into the under-temples the moment he had crushed the vermin on the surface.”

“I’m not going to bet against that,” Paristur bitterly replied. Ekodas had told them over and over again how difficult it was to hunt the self-proclaimed ‘Skaven’ and their leadership in the subterranean galleries, and somehow, Erebus had successfully demolished their military strength in a single campaign?

No, it was exactly as he had feared: the furry heretics had multiplied until the tunnels were unable to hide their monstrous numbers, repaired their armaments, invented new devices an Ork would find too dangerous to use, and unleashed everything when the Sicarus garrison was too weak to hold their vermin tide.

“We need to land our troops and stabilise the situation.”

Kor Phaeron’s face showed how enthusiastic the idea greeted in his mind, but he didn’t disagree. Between losing Sicarus entirely and delaying for a campaign the beginning of the Black Crusade, the choice wasn’t difficult. The latter was a mere delay. The former would be the first step before they lost the entire system, for the heretical rodents would not miss the occasion to attack shipyards and their bases in the asteroid belts.

“Very well, I will go ahead and-“

“**You will do nothing of the sort, my son**.”

The Dark Apostle began to bow as he heard the first voice. As the order was completely uttered, the Empyrean screamed as an enormous fleet materialised one hundred thousand kilometres on the starboard side of the *Trisagion*.

If they hadn’t been preparing already a worthy armada for their offensive against the Cadian Gate and beyond, Paristur would have felt awe at the sheer military might represented here. The feeling nonetheless blossomed into his heart, but for a different reason.

At the heart of this fleet, standing side by side, were two juggernauts of the void, starships bigger than the infamous Gloriana hulls.

One bore no similarities with any warship built on the orders of the Seventeenth Legion. It was a gigantic pyramid shining in blessed blue sorcery. The name identifier *Tizca’s Revenge* was not really necessary; Paristur like all other Apostles could recognise the style of Prospero and no one but Magnus the Red would ever have the will and the skill to create something like that.

The second flagship, on the other hand, was a modified Abyss-class Super-Battleship. But where the Trisagion was instantly recognisable with its trident-shaped mass, this colossal temple to the Primordial Truth had been restructured to look like a Gloriana, albeit one with a gigantic prow cannon. Paristur didn’t need much deep thinking to know it was likely the gift of Kelbor-Hal to their father.

The name flashed in black and red, in daemonic and technological transmissions, and the Legion roared in approval.

The *Word Bearer*.

Their surroundings disappeared into the darkness, and under the blessed acclamations of the Neverborn, Paristur appeared into a room where he had never been before, accompanied by Kor Phaeron and seven other Dark Apostles of high rank.

Their father was already there, of course. Magnus the Red, Cyclops and favourite of Tzeentch, arrived nine heartbeats later in a pillar of blue-gold lightning.

They weren’t alone, as an eight-pointed pentacle in brass and fire daemonic runes was carved by invisible hands under their feet. Against the walls and over their heads, Champions of the Seventeenth Legion blessed by the Gods with Daemonhood were waiting fangs bared and elongate carmine wings. These were the Gal Vorbak of the first generation, there couldn’t be any doubt about it, drawn back from the domains of the Gods to serve again. Given how Erebus was whispering wards of protection and the glares they threw him, the rumours of how many had be betrayed by the Vile One were most likely exact.

For once, Paristur ignored it. There were more important things at hand.

“Father. Allow me to deploy my Host in support of Mainyu and I will restore our rule to Sicarus.”

“**I have no doubt you will my son...for a time**.”

“Father?”

“**I** **underestimated how hurtful and corrupting the rats could be to my plans**,” the illuminated Primarch admitted. “**But I have since thread on many paths and tried to gaze at many futures. There is no permanent victory against this plague of tails and furs. There won’t be any as long as the fourth throne is empty. You might pile up the corpses of these heretics on mountains and drown the world in their unholy blood, they will somehow find a way to come back. It is in their nature to grasp what is not theirs to take**.”

“**In other words, what my esteemed brother is trying to say**,” Magnus said in a semi-polite, semi-ironic tone, “**is that you can likely hold Sicarus and stalemate the expansion efforts of your enemies imbued by Anarchy for a millennium or two...as long as you abandon the idea of starting the war against the Imperium**.”

The darkness vacillated, before everything vanished, and Paristur and the other Dark Apostles found themselves floating in high orbit above the homeworld they had settled after Horus’ death.

“**Nsvrrbthn! Bwons’ntos! Nsttsrm’on’mtoeneuaanht’hqn**!”

No Word Bearer had ever heard these words uttered aloud, but even without knowing their meaning, Paristur understood what they represented as the presence of the Three Gods turned towards them.

A large section of the Eye flashed a crimson red, and in the distance there was a tall, dark figure on a throne of skulls. Blood rains began to fall upon the planets, and the Bloodthirsters on the plains of carnage raised their axes and assembled.

A tear sundered reality before spitting out several Silver Towers of the Thousand Sons and multicoloured lightning. Hordes of Screamers and Flamers erupted and began to spread secrets and lies from the nine hundred and ninety-nine canticles of Change. The tear grew and grew, before it became an ever-mutating avian form carrying a tall sceptre.

Previously untouched, the third part of Sicarus celestial possessions gave away to an ocean of blessed rot and decay, a garden of diseases where the Grandfather lit His cauldron and prepared new concoctions to test on the planets where His touch would be gladly welcomed.

“**You know I am your servant**,” his Primarch began. “**You know what I aim to do**.”

The Chaos Marine felt the divine pressure rose to dangerous levels, and Paristur felt the runes on his armour beginning to disintegrate and the blessings decaying, twisting, or bleeding. He didn’t twitch or make a single gesture. The smallest offence, the smallest gesture, would undoubtedly lead to an eternity as a Chaos Spawn.

There was silence. And then the laughter of Tzeentch echoed, followed by Khorne’s rumbling and a song of soul-gardening from Nurgle.

“**You have our attention, Lorgar the Urizen. Speak**.”

The weight of Three Gods fell upon their sire, and despite knowing the sheer power of their father, Paristur felt awe as Lorgar didn’t even flinch while Erebus and several others were already trembling with exhaustion.

“**This Anarchy began with Sacrifice**.” The Minister of Chaos Absolute said. “**I will return the favour with Sacrifice. Let me erase the defeat of Commorragh. The blood, the souls, and the hope of the Anathema will be delivered on your altars. Places of worship of false idols will be yours to rule over. The Cicatrix will allow you to invade the Imperium and create your own realms in the very fabric or reality**.”

“**And in exchange**?”

“**Excess must be freed. There must be Undivided Chaos once more**.”

The laughter of the Gods was heard.

Ultimately, it was Nurgle who spoke back.

“**You have your pact, Lorgar the Urizen. Offer your Sacrifice**.”

Their Primarch raised his fists over his head.

And Sicarus began to burn.

**Sicarus/Skavenblight**

**Cathedral of the Maleficent Song**

**High Arch-Warlord Scrachit Barbbuster the Unstoppable**

“One small step for me-me, one giant leap for Malal!” Scrachit shouted while the former slave-things raised the flag of Clan Verminus in his great-large mighty glory. “I rename this place...err...Cathedral of the Barbbuster Anarchy! Praise Malal!”

“Respectfully Arch-Warlord,” one his impolite minions had the temerity to not appreciate-like his genius and to fail to applause-cheer like the others. “Wouldn’t it be better-greater if we renamed this church-location the Cathedral of Verminus Anarchy?”

“I thought we would call it the Cathedral of Skyre Anarchy!” an engineer shouted before shutting his mouth in a hurry-hurry, as bayonets were pointed against his throat. “No! Verminus Anarchy, my mistake!”

“But ‘Cathedral of the Mighty Verminus Horde’ sounds far-far better, Mighty Warlord!”

“Enough!” Scrachit Barbbuster decided to stop this mutiny before things went even more out of control with his plans. “This is my-my great decision, and don’t forget-contest it! I am the voice of the Council of Eleven, yes-yes! And it is my-my leadership which has seen-led us to great-superb triumph! Praise Malal!”

“Your flanking attack was ill-timed and the....Malal save me!”

The treacherous underling-thing had come-scurried to close to the ogre-thing when trying to plan a dagger in his back, yes-yes! The High-Warlord heard his screams of agony and ignored them-them.

“Now that the formalities-entertainment is done-done, we must press on,” the supreme leader of Clan Verminus spoke and all basked in his-his magnificence. “I must-must have picts of my glorious self standing upon corpses of brute-things, and vid-vid of myself directing the fire of the Warp Grinders.”

Not that-that he was going to mount upon one-one when they were firing, no-no! Scrachit had watched-watched and more had been lost-destroyed with their own warpstone reactors than from enemy fire-fire!

“Another incredible invention of Clan Skyre!” an engineer of said clan exclaimed. “Praise Malal!”

“Yes, yes Praise Malal! Today-today Anarchy conquers all on Skavenblight, tomorrow the galaxy! Death to the False Gods, Glory to the Skaven Race!”

In truth-truth, the slaves and daemon-things had not been that-that difficult to beat-defeat this-this time, oh no! The plan of playing dead-dead for a few cycles of reproduction had led-gained excellent results! Truly he was a master of strategy and war!

“Before I begin my great-great propaganda campaign to overthrow the Council and declare myself Anarchy Emperor of Skavenblight, where are we-we with the Spaceports! Faster we take them-them, easier it will be to send young tails-tails in orbit!”

“Resistance is heavy-heavy, oh mighty High Arch-Warlord!” A Stormclaw assured him, while a Horror-Lord of Clan Moulder threw the remains of a brute-thing into red armour into a vat of green jelly-things. “But the walls have been breached-broken! Our victory-triumph is inevitable!”

“Excellent-excellent!” The Unstoppable Skaven caressed his whiskers before adjusting his splendid-pretty red uniform. “We are going to-“

Red, green, and blue lightning struck the spire of the cathedrals they had just-just conquered.

Scrachit Barbbuster felt his jaw-jaw dropping. This wasn’t-wasn’t possible! Clan Treecherik had assured him-him that the wards of the brute-things would hold for a few thousands heartbeats after their great-great victory!

The spires were going to-

The Warlord looked at the spires and he grew even more-more perplexed. The spires weren’t falling. What was this saying of the man-things? Ah yes! It was a bluff-bluff!

“False alert-alert, my proud-proud soldiers!” The Verminus Council member laughed. “The brute-things have lost-lost! Now they are trying to launch-fire fireworks in the hope-hope we will scurry-scurry! But we won’t! We are the heralds-champions of Anarchy! Praise Malal!”

Fire poured from the heavens, a three-coloured fire of red, blue, and green. It missed him largely-greatly, but plenty of his Stormclaws were hit by it-it.

More lightning followed, and a great-great storm rose from the other cathedrals, but what caused Scrachit to widen-widen his eyes was while plenty of his Verminus assault forces were dead, as many were frozen, trapped in some sorcery-trap!

“SKAVENS!” He screeched, the familiar musk of fear soaking his senses. “SCURRY BACK TO THE ARMY WARRENS! THE BRUTE-THINGS ARE ATTACKING US-US WITH A RITUAL! DO NOT-NOT STAY THERE!”

There was rage-rage. There was sorcery-sorcery. There was rot-rot everywhere. Time...time was slowing-slowing. Why? Why? He had done-done everything for the glory of Anarchy and Malal!

“MALAL!” The High Arch-Warlord begged. “MOST ANARCHIC LORD! SAVE YOUR GREATEST SERVANT!”

“MALAL!”

“MALAL! MALAL SAVE US!”

A new blast of blue clouded everything, and a couple of heartbeat later, Scrachit Barbbuster felt nothing at all.

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**85th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**ALIVE ONLY – UNLESS YOU FIGURES HOW TO END HIM PERMANENTLY**

**LUCIUS**

**‘THE ETERNAL TRAITOR’**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**ABOMINATION**

**EXTREMIS-ALPHA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA CORRUPTING THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF BETA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS ACCEPTABLE TO NEUTRALISE THE THREAT**

**DO NOT FEEL SATISFACTION AND PRAY THE GOD-EMPEROR FOR PROTECTION**

**DO NOT OFFER HIM A CHANCE TO DUEL**

**REWARD: 26 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 PARADISE WORLD, 1 STARFORT, OVATION OF THE IMPERIUM, ETC...**

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**87th MOST WANTED BEING OF THE IMPERIUM OF MANKIND**

**DEAD ONLY**

**MOTHAC**

'**APOSTLE OF TORMENT'**

**CHAOS SORCERER**

**TRAITOR ASTARTES**

**EXTREMIS TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS DIABOLIS**

**EXCOMMUNICATE TRAITORIS**

**EXTREMIS-BETA PHYSICAL THREAT**

**EXTREMIS-OMEGA MORAL THREAT**

**ENDANGERMENT OF ALPHA-CLASS MILITARUM ASSETS AND BELOW ACCEPTABLE TO ELIMINATE THE THREAT**

**DO NOT ALLOW LOYAL MEN AND WOMEN TO BE CAPTURED**

**THE HERETIC LOVES TO TARGET IN PRIORITY ASTROPATHS AND NAVIGATORS**

**THE MONSTER IS TO BE KILLED AND DISPOSED OF WITH THE HOLIEST WEAPONS AVAILABLE**

**REWARD: 25 TRILLION THRONE GELTS, 1 HIVE WORLD, 10 PALACES OFFERED BY THE NAVIS NOBILITE, ASTROPATH SUPPORT OF THE ADEPTUS ASTRA TELEPATHICA, PROTECTION OFFERED BY OVER A HUNDRED SECURITY COMPANIES, ETC...**

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**Outer Sicarus System**

**Battle-Barge *Perfect Legion***

**Lord Commander Lucius the Eternal**

If he had to give a honest opinion about the Word Bearers before the Fall of Commorragh – which he would never had done, he wasn’t that stupid – Lucius would have said the sons of Lorgar were very funny Astartes-monks, with all their religious things and insistence to convert their slaves to ‘Undivided Chaos’.

Oh, the Lord Commander of the Emperor’s Children had no doubt the Gods enjoyed the souls of the slaves which were sacrificed onto the altars, and if they didn’t, their Neverborn allies certainly enjoyed the free meal.

But the moment you gained enough survival experience into the Eye, you knew the Gods didn’t truly care about the liturgy and the words. They cared about actions. They wanted blood, carnage, sorcery, obscene depravity, lethal plagues, virulent poxes, and mountains of living corpses. In one word, they wanted war.

This was one of the many, many reasons plenty of Captains like himself had largely seen the Word Bearers as religious simpletons parodying the Ecclesiarchy holding sway over the ignorant masses of the False Imperium outside the eye.

Before today, Lucius acknowledged, he hadn’t realised how *frightening* that truly was.

“The Shipyards of the Truth are dismantled as we speak.”

“We have numerous impacts on the Illumination docks, Lord Commander.”

“Mechanicum forces are slaying the slaves by the hundreds of thousands! Tell them to stop!”

Lucius licked the blood on his blade, and found little comfort or satisfaction with the act. Much like every time he had done it since his patron had abandoned them.

“Damn you, Weaver.” The infamous traitor of Isstvan III hissed.

And sure enough, he utterly loathed the woman who had created this unpredictable changes sweeping across the galaxy.

But right now, it wasn’t Weaver he truly wanted to blame. Not when madness and folly appeared to be ruling the day.

The Sicarus System was in the process of being thoroughly sacked. If there was one other word which described the situation, Lucius didn’t know which it was.

Thousands of years of industrial-daemonic investments were going up in explosions or were dragged in chains towards the hulls of the Word Bearer’s fleet supply train. Asteroids older than the Long War imploded or were thrown into the maw of Sota-Nul’s harvesters. Shipyards were mangled or disintegrated. Overseers who had been the wardens of the facilities were thrown onto the altars where they had led countless slaves.

Lucius had seen thousands of worlds die as he was present during and after the Great Crusade. Yet there was something...visceral and horrifying occurring here.

What they had done to Sicarus itself was bad enough. The world was still there, but it was immobile...silent...frozen...out of reach, and made so by the will of the Gods. Lorgar had done what even other Daemon Primarchs would balk at: he had offered his chief powerbase in sacrifice to his patrons, abandoned his last forces on the planet, and unleashed what could be best described as a sorcerous stasis on an unimaginable scale. And it would remain that way until the Black Crusade ended, one way or another.

“Lord Commander, Dark Apostle Mothac demands to speak to you.”

Lucius gritted his sharp teeth, and impaled a daemonic servitor with the Laer Blade. ‘Demands’. Before Commorragh, no one save the Naga and Slaanesh demanded anything of him, and the Goddess had been more content to watch the spectacle. Now? Everyone and their cyber-mastiff was treating him with contempt and like he was a minor warlord under their armoured boots. Rallying six capital ships – including this old Battle-Barge – and close to six hundred Astartes, few of them of the Old Legion, was ignored. The only strength that made his enemies pause were the Knights of House Devine they had managed to save on the former worlds of their Empire.

“Open up the communication.”

The device which activated was redder than pink and more Bloodletter’s head than blessed by decadence, but it did the job as the familiar shape of a Dark Apostle in elaborate spiked armour appeared. The smell of blood and sorcery permeated the air.

“Lord Commander Lucius.” The Apostle of Torment began bluntly. “You will accelerate your preparations, or I will find another ‘Lord Commander’ to begin your warband.”

“My slaves and cultists are expediting the preparations as fast as possible,” the fallen Emperor’s Children Space Marine snarled. “But you are asking for the impossible!”

“No, the impossible happens because your forces were busy violating, raping, and doing whatever they usually practise in their orgies despite being ordered to do real work!” The son of Lorgar hotly retorted. “I will be as clear as possible, ‘Eternal’. The forces in your zone are to leave their bases within the next thousand heartbeats. If you refuse my order, I will cut your legs and impale your living body on the prow of your flagship to motivate the others and your serpentine master. Am I clear?”

“You are insane. What point there is-”

“This is a Black Crusade, Lucius!” The Word Bearer shouted. “It demands conviction, devotion, and sacrifice! Did you really think the Gods were going not to demand a price for the abyssal catastrophe engineered by Slaanesh’s defeat? Did you really think answering the challenge of the False Emperor would be all dungeon torture and sadistic orgies?”

A maelstrom of psychic energy was born on the edge of the system, and Lucius realised with horror it was the damned light of the Astronomican unleashed against endless waves of darkness, the Gods striking back against their sworn enemy.

“There is power in symbols, and in old times, conquerors burned their own sea-faring ships behind them to leave no choice to their warriors,” Mothac continued in a somewhat calmer tone. “We can’t do that of course, but symbolically, it is the same thing. Sicarus and everything we build are made barren, the threat of the rats negated at the price of our own garrisons and last assets.”

More asteroids exploded as darkness grew and more ships deployed around his warband.

“Even I know this is a double-edged sword.”

If the Black Crusade won, the threat represented by Anarchy would be completely suppressed, possibly forever. But if they lost...

“Alea jacta est.” Mothac answered in High Gothic. “By the will of Blessed Lorgar, we will win, or perish in the undertaking. Now move your forces into position, or I will begin this Black Crusade by destroying your warband! Oh, and our lateness has earned you a seat among the 8th Great Host of Erebus! Don’t thank me, Lucius!”

For a few seconds, Lucius truly understood why the False Emperor had tried to proscribe religion...there was no ‘logical’ discussion to be had with fanatics like this one. But under the guns of eight Battleships, there was only one answer he could give.

“Compliance. The *Perfect Legion* and its escorts are taking position.”

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*Among the many iconic weapons whose renown was made by Operation Stalingrad, the Astartes Power Armour Mark IX bearing the name of said operation has always received its fair share of popularity. Millennia later, it is a rare holo-vid film on the events having marked the galaxy which will not show Space Marines parading and fighting with the Nyx-created protection.*

*And yet, despite the – justified – acclamations it received for the exploits it allowed the Adeptus Astartes to write in golden letters against terrible opponents, the Mark IX ‘Stalingrad’ is one of those weapons whose life expectancy didn’t last much beyond the formal end of the war, except maybe in the classified operations of the Deathwatch (which remain still inaccessible despite the countless pleas of the Historian Corps). In overall numbers, less than sixty thousand of these power armours were ever produced, the worlds of Nyx, Mars, and Ryza accounting for ninety-nine percent of this model.*

*The question one has to ask is, why this – relative – failure?*

*The first reason, one acknowledged in an open session of the Martian Parliament in 320M35, was that the Mark IX was by its rushed development naturally imperfect. The Adeptus Mechanicus was incredibly conscious of the lethal threat represented by Necron warriors, and considered – rightfully – that an imperfect armour surpassing the Mark VII was better than the kind of casualties a Mark VII-equipped Astartes force would take trying to dislodge a Necron stronghold.*

*Priorities changed as a result, and the ‘optimal recommendations’ were decreased dramatically. The goal was not to solve the flaws remarked upon the Mark VII save the most vital. It was to build a machine which would give a chance to the Space Marines to wreck untold devastation upon xenos and other enemies. The ion shield equipping the armours was therefore reduced both in energy resistance and protection area, giving it the output to endure the fire of thirty-plus Necron infantry weapons before failing for five minutes. An armoured collar was added over the helmet’s respirator, addressing the vulnerability of the joints. The lower chest armour received two new additional layers of protections in lighter ceramite alloys, something the Nyx Mechanicus openly thanked the Chapter of the Salamanders for.*

*Obviously, the Mark IX ‘Stalingrad’, for all its imperfection, still made the Mark VII completely obsolete as the moment it was unveiled in 305M35. A Space Marine equipped with one could brave a level of enemy fire bearers of the Aquila Power Armour couldn’t. This wasn’t enough for the Nyx Mechanicus and the Fabricator-General. It is highly likely the research and the tests to develop the famous Mark X began well before Operation Stalingrad, and accelerated after it, giving birth to a new power armour which would go to equip the majority of the Space Marine Chapters.*

From *Iconic Weapons and Materials of Operation Stalingrad*, by Julia Scribonius, Ultramar Rose Editions, 310M41.

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**Ultima Segmentum**

**Nyx Sector**

**Neptunia Reach Sub-Sector**

**Nyx System**

**Nyx**

**Hive Athena**

**3.008.310M35**

**Sergeant Gavreel Forcas**

“Well?”

“It works fine,” Gavreel grumbled.

“So glad of you to finally admit it,” Vulkan N’Varr told him with this indulgent smile all Salamanders seemed to learn before they reached the equivalent of ten standard years.

Unfortunately, there were dozens of other Space Marines present, and not all were so prompt to limit themselves to a ‘I told you so’.

“YOU HEARD THAT? THE TRADITIONALIST HAS FINALLY ACCEPTED THE MARK IX! THE END OF THE GALAXY IS AT HAND!”

“Pierre, not so loud,” Cabrero of the Soul Drinkers complained. “The illogical conservatism of our cousin aside-“

“Ahem!”

“Come on cousin,” Midas of the Golden Sons intervened, “You have to realise that with his skills, the ion shield is less useful than it was for us!”

“I refuse to engage a debate with an Astartes which is parading so much gold and auramite we will see him coming a kilometre away,” Gavreel commented.

“Of course not, you are not enough dashing to look the part.”

“As amusing as it is to hear you bicker...” Gamaliel said, bringing the conversation to an end. “Our Lady is coming. Is everyone here?”

“We are,” Kratos answered for everyone.

“WE ARE.”

Mere seconds later, the Basileia entered the room, with T’klis Rubix and Diamantis in tow.

Dozens of fists were struck against their armours in salute.

“I see everyone has donned the Mark IX Power Armour...especially you Gavreel.” The former Dark Angel sighed. He had a feeling he had not seen even the mid-point duration of these jokes, if even their Lady was involved with them.

“I DO NOT HAVE THE MARK IX.”

“Of course not,” Taylor Hebert rolled her eyes, “our Mechanicus Magi have done their best, but they had the modifications of the Quetzalcoatl Dragon Armours to implement these last years, plus the Mark IX development, plus various things which cost millions of Throne of Gelts.”

The golden-winged Basileia sighed as Pierre gave an imploring expression...as far as a Dreadnought could make one.

“However,” the ruler of Nyx sighed, “the Tech-Priests are ready to test giving you a ion shield if you are ready to spend a few days at *Terra Cimmeria* before our departure. I have to warn you though: there’s a high chance it will decrease further your mobility on the battlefield.”

Since the Dreadnoughts were hardly the fastest forces of the Adeptus Astartes – a reason the White Scars were using them more as fortress protectors and teachers than as indispensable frontline assets – this was not something Weaver would say lightly.

“I AM GOING TO TRY THE MODIFICATIONS.” The Heracles Warden Dreadnought said at last, not that there had been much doubt he would refuse. When it came down to it, Pierre was an Astartes, and staying far from the battlefield was not in his nature.

“Good.”

“Not to press upon a point you already know, my Lady,” Chaplain Verdugo of the Star Leopards declared, “but these modifications will be sorely needed. The doctrine of the Codex Astartes for the ‘classical’ Dreadnoughts demands they be more resistant and protected than the average battle-brother.”

“I know,” the insect-controlling parahuman declared, passing a hand in her black hair, and adjusting the red cloak her wife had placed over her golden power armour. “And I see the logic of it. Alas, I have not an unlimited number of elite Tech-Priests available to work upon difficult and valuable projects, and the fierce warriors of Chogoris,” her black eyes gave an amused look to an unrepentant Stormseer Uriyangkhadai, “were particularly insistent the Einherjar-class Dragon Armour was the utmost priority.”

“It is a formidable weapon for our Venerable Ancients,” the White Scars said without a trace of apology in his tone.

Gavreel nodded with many others, reflecting that when the Tech-Priests would figure how to safely transfer the occupants of the ‘old designs’ of Dreadnoughts to the Einherjar draconic mounts, the Castraferrum and the other patterns of land-grounded Dreadnoughts were likely going to go extinct, at least among the ranks of the Khan.

“And one wonders why you’re a favourite of Dragon.” The Basileia said with a good dose of humour in her voice. “Anyway, I have not assembled all of you here today to speak of Dreadnoughts and Dragon Armours. We have confirmation the Battleship of the Queen of Blades has entered the Nyx Sector, and is escorted on its way there. So after my working day, we are all going to the Arena of Blades.”

All levity left the room. During the last twelve years, each and every one member of the Dawnbreaker Guard had trained and trained to become faster and deadlier. No one was ready to bet it was likely going to do anything to the monster of the ancient times known as the Queen of Blades if it decided to fight them seriously.

“I’d certainly hoped she would not answer in time,” the Basileia confessed to them, “but she is here. And she isn’t alone. There are other starships of Eldar classes requesting access to the Arena, though those are of the Craftworld classes.”

“This is...inconvenient,” Kratos remarked, as predictable as ever. “But surely we can blast them apart, right?”

“No.” The golden-winged woman who had overseen from afar the construction of the Arena reluctantly disagreed. “Not as long as they have champions to throw into this arena, anyway.”

“I do not like this, My Lady.” Gamaliel told her frankly. “The Arena of Blades is far from any vital industrial asset, but allowing the Endbringer in your presence is already a tremendous risk.”

“I know. I don’t like it, and if we hadn’t far more pressing things to care about, I would joyously push for a gigantic Eldar hunt across the galaxy. The fewer of these long-ears are around, the better for Mankind. I can assure you I did not forget whose race sneered at us and declared us brutish primates while they at the same time refuse to admit that they almost provoked the end of the galaxy by creating Slaanesh.”

Luminous flies danced around their fingertips, the ones they had trained as pointing markers when training as snipers.

“But I signed several accords, and I won’t break my word first. If they behave, I will allow them to fight, and speak their piece if they’re not dead at the end of the ‘spectacle’.”

The smile of Taylor Hebert returned.

“Before that, however, I have a last war council with nine Battle Group Commanders to preside. And I want you with me there.”

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

Over a decade ago, being surrounded by men and women having centuries more of experience than her on the frontlines would have made her nervous. Of course, more than a decade ago she hadn’t met so many Chapter Masters that she had truly lost count of them, thousands of guardsmen officers ranking between Brigadier-General and General, entire groups of Admirals of the Imperial Navy, Rogue Traders by the scores, and Archmagi of the Adeptus Mechanicus by the dozens.

Then again, a decade ago or now, Taylor knew she had the unfair advantage – compared to a ‘normal’ Lady General, that is – to have other high-ranked commanders of the Imperium come before her in position of weakness. Being recognised as a Living Saint would ever have its multitude of perks, including in military politics.

It was really important when her interlocutors had the weight of millenary-old traditions and victories to support their position.

“I suppose the Princeps Senioris won our little contest, then.”

“Princeps Maximus,” she replied politely after sipping half of a glass of water. “There was no contest, I can promise you. I assigned the Battle-Maniples of your respective Legios to the Battle Groups which, in my humble opinion, were the most suited to exploit your strengths and negate your weaknesses.”

The black-haired parahuman gave an ironic smile to the black-skinned colossus representing Legio Ignatum. Whoever thought the Princeps of a Titan Legio were frail creatures hiding into an amniotic tank had obviously never met Princeps Maximus Cyrus.

“You will not pretend, I hope, to have gained the tactical flexibility of Legio Astorum since the last war game we organised?”

The Martian-trained Princeps quickly shook his head in denegation.

“I admit my efforts to convince my fellow Princeps to share his secrets have lamentably failed. But since my predecessors didn’t have much luck with it, I know the Fabricator-General is unlikely to fire me tomorrow.” Cyrus drank the contents of his glass in two seconds, and unless she was mistaken, it seemed his preference was inclined towards strong wine. “Perhaps if your Celestial Highness made discreet inquiries...”

The Basileia snorted.

“Nice try, Princeps Maximus. But since you asked politely, I will tell you that for all my popularity among the noble Archmagi of the Adeptus Mechanicus, there are many secrets locked behind adamantium gates, and some of them can’t be opened, not even when they call you ‘Chosen of the Omnissiah’.”

And honestly, after the generous contributions of the Lucius Mechanicus to the order of battle of Operation Stalingrad, including but not limited to the support of Legio Astorum, the Aegis-class Battlecruisers, and other vital pieces of machinery, including one now integrated to the *Angel’s Tear* protecting her life, asking for more could be considered tech-gluttony.

Lucius was allowed to protect the secret which allowed them to make Legio Astorum a teleportation-capable assembly of Titans...for now. In the long-term, both Dragon and she had not renounced at the idea of spreading the knowledge among the Mechanicus as a whole. Entire Crusades had been won since the dawn of the Imperium by the formidable capabilities of the ‘Warp Runners’; if three or four Titan Legios were able to gain this capability, the Traitors would never know what hit them.

But as said previously, the Tech-Priests of Lucius protected extremely tightly their most valuable secrets.

“Ah, my Battle Group commander is joining me.” Cyrus said with good humour. Taylor didn’t raise an eyebrow; she had seen Gastaph Hediatrix stopping his conversation with General Perry Tereyev of Battle Group Bagration a full minute ago, and he had already politely declined conversing with other Magi on his walk.

“I deliberately asked for another Princeps to be in charge, you know,” the Voice of Mars among the Nyx Mechanicus drily replied before his metallic tone became nearly filled with despair. “But alas, I was overruled.”

“Your confidence is extraordinary,” the Princeps Maxima placed his hand on his chest with a wounded expression. “Is Legio Ignatum not worthy of being recognised as the foremost Legio defending the honour of Her Celestial Highness?”

“The competition is fierce,” Hediatrix didn’t miss a heartbeat before answering. “Legio Defensor, unless I am gravely mistaken, is worshipping the Lady Basileia. And I would be very surprised if the Legio Venator wasn’t steering in this direction too.”

Taylor almost snorted at that. By a curious turn of events which made her wonder how much the Emperor planned behind the scenes, the Legio Venator had been created on a Forge World where arachnid mega-fauna was the alpha life-form before humanity landed. Two guesses how they had reacted that she could master spiders wherever they were in range of her power...

“Letting aside levity, the percentage probability of the ‘Carrhes variant’ being necessary as calculated by the Logis has risen significantly this last year,” the Archmagos Prime commanding Battle group Berezina told her very seriously. “The Orks are not yet routing, but the Ymga Monolith has recently activated plenty of new macro-Gauss capital weapons to massacre them, and if our Necron enemies are able to do that...”

“The scenario of the metallic xenos having restored some measure of FTL travel capability increases in likelihood,” Taylor finished. It wasn’t exactly a new debate. Her nine Battle Group Commanders had exchanged their point of views several times, but for once, were far from unanimous in their replies. But then, aside from engaging the Ymga Monolith and discovering it the hard way, they wouldn’t have a definite answer. “I hope your Battle Group is ready if the Necrons fall into the nice trap you are busy preparing for them.”

“We won’t fail you, Chosen of the Omnissiah.”

“Legio Ignatum will teach the xenos the wrath of Legio Ignatum.”

“Thank you, gentlemen.” Alas, as fascinating as the conversation was, she couldn’t continue speaking for them for long, there were plenty of other important human and transhuman vying for her attention. “Now I’m afraid I have to leave you, High Marshal Barbarossa isn’t the most patient of the Space Marines...”

**Armoured Train *Celestial Lightning* – on its way to the Giraffe Spaceport**

**Chapter Master Agiel Izaz**

“I thank you again for granting my battle-brothers and the Blood Angels the opportunity to fight again by your side.”

It was reassuring to receive that familiar smile in return.

“Chapter Master, don’t be ridiculous.” The Basileia said. “You recruit your aspirants from Nyx. You are equipped with the guns and the tanks coming out of the Nyxian Forges and manufactorums. If I didn’t decide to include you among my Battle Group, people would wonder if there was a problem of loyalty among your ranks.”

Evidently, seen that way...

“Perhaps,” he conceded, “but I thank you for the honour nonetheless.”

The young woman huffed, but the smile didn’t leave her lips.

“Anyway, how did the last naval fleet exercise go? I was too busy speaking with my Guard’s chief of staff and the other superior officers of the Army Groups yesterday. I will analyse the post-exercise data once I am on the *Enterprise*.”

Agiel let Chapter Master Malakbel, his friend and superior of the Blood Angels, answer this one.

“The fleet coordinated well, and all ships were able to stay in formation for the ten hours the exercise lasted. There was no issue from the *Covenant of Baal* or the *Opera Exitium*, and if the *Eternal Crusader* or the *Flamewrought* had issues, our cousins of the Black Templars and Salamanders have not chosen to share them.”

“Hmm. No problems with the Angels Vermilion? I know there were concerns, since they only recently ended their isolation.”

“No,” the tall Astartes wearing the traditional golden armour only the Lord of Baal had the right to do, “I won’t deny they are still mock battles to train onto to improve, but in a way the fact they came only with Strike Cruisers helped. We were – and still are – rotating them aboard the larger ships. This way not only we renewed the bonds of Blood, we form a far more coherent and formidable assault force. I suspect the Salamanders are doing the same with their brothers of the Magma Spiders, and so are the Black Templars.”

There were other Space Marines Chapters, Agiel knew, who wouldn’t have reacted with a smile and approval to this common training and new doctrine.

But since most of those had ‘Ultramarines’ somewhere in their gene-legacy, the protestations weren’t voice, and certainly not in this train.

“Good. Now as for the question of leadership. I apologise in advance for the Brothers of the Red, but it will be Chapter Malakbel who will have command of the companies of the Blood included in the order of battle of Battle Group Volga. You will be his second of command, however.”

Agiel nodded. He did not even feel disappointment, to say the truth, and Malakbel only greeted it by another polite smile.

“I thank you for the honour, obviously,” the golden Chapter Master of the Blood Angels replied. “May I know your reasoning, my Lady?”

“Your Blood Angels having the greatest contingent of Astartes – at least of the Blood – in this Battle Group with four full Companies was of course an important factor. That your Legate-class Heavy Battleship is more powerful and more suited for playing the role of flagship doesn’t hurt. But what is really the deciding factor is how respected you are by Chapter Master Ta’Phor Hezonn and High Marshal Barbarossa.”

“I wasn’t able to place them under a single Astartes hierarchy,” the older Astartes commented with his good nature.

The mistress of all insects snorted.

“If I wanted a miracle of this magnitude, Chapter Master, I would have directly asked Terra. You and I know very well that for all certain idiotic claims, I respect the independence of the Chapters fighting by my side.”

That and the Black Templars and the Salamanders had not come with insignificant contingents. It was difficult to know how many Black Templars were currently assembled in the shipyards and squadrons of Nyx, but the High Marshal had delivered ‘four Crusades’, and given the assets placed at the disposal of Operation Stalingrad, there was a high likelihood the number of two thousand Astartes was not unrealistic.

Expecting the heirs of Sigismund to be completely subordinate to a thousand Space Marines of the Blood – four companies of the Blood Angels, three of the Brothers of the Red, and three of the Angels Vermillion were present – was not infeasible, but it was something the golden-winged commander had decided to not use her influence upon.

“Any other concerns?”

“A minor one. We have an increasing number of simulations where our Furioso Dreadnoughts are falling too much behind the spear of assault forces. In two cases, the gap between vanguard and rearguard was so important the cogitators ruled a Necron force would have been able to separate us from our fierce Venerable Ancients.”

Taylor Hebert didn’t look surprised.

“You aren’t the first one to remark upon it today.” The grand commander of Operation Stalingrad inclined her head. “I suppose these simulations happen whenever there aren’t Guard forces in position to play the role of junction.”

“Indeed.” Malakbel replied, sounding very pleased.

“We will have to give you mechanised support then,” the Basileia shrugged. “It’s not like I or anyone in the Battle Group thought you would be able to land on the Ymga Monolith by yourself.”

Any other operation, Agiel would have protested and voiced this was underestimating the striking impact of an Astartes invasion. Not so much here and now. Like every Space Marine commander, he had been allowed to see what had happened to the Second Legion landing zones. The Chapter Master of the Brothers of the Red had watched wordlessly as what happened when overconfident Marines descended upon a Necron battlestation in a flawless Bellicosa-pattern approach.

‘Slaughter’ was maybe the most generous way to describe it. The Second Legion had discovered the hard way that Necron warriors and Necron constructs could come from everywhere, walls or no walls, ceilings or no ceilings, pillars or no pillars. That the fight had lasted close to one hour was a testament to the ferocity of a Legion cornered could unleash, but it certainly wasn’t an example to emulate.

“But what is the most important is that the fleet can manoeuvre together flawlessly. It is the very cornerstone of the Operation we are about to launch.”

“I think I can promise in every commander’s name,” Malakbel said very seriously, “that you aren’t going to be disappointed.”

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*The year of 310M35 would see thousands of ancient ships re-emerge from relative obscurity to fight the cataclysmic battles where the fate of trillions of souls was decided. Of course, many of them couldn’t be considered new designs. For all the repairs it had benefitted from the Artisans of Mars, the Gloriana* Flamewrought *was hardly a new warship. The same could said about Arks Mechanicus, Apocalypse-class battleships, or Astartes Battle-Barges. The Hoplite-class Destroyer had been service for more than fifty standard years now; its presence into an Imperial order of Battle was raising few eyebrows from naval commanders.*

*There were starships were the judgment wasn’t so clear-cut. The Venus-class Cruiser was an improved variant of the Lunar-class whose future appeared compromised before the Fall of Commorragh; after it, the Fabricator-General of Mars and the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy’s opposition to the project vanished and full production was authorised in 298M35 outside of Mars. Nyx and Ryza would be the first Forge Worlds to be granted the authorisation for their construction outside of the Ring of Iron. As a result, thirty-six Venus Cruisers, all Nyx-built, were integrated in Battle Group Volga at the beginning of Operation Stalingrad, with a classified number being placed in the reserves. Some of these capital ships’ presence was definitely confirmed during the Atlantis purges, but that Operation Stalingrad was their first major military campaign was difficult to argue against.*

*On the other hand, the variants of the well-spread Lunar-class were hardly something new in the Imperial Navy. Between the different ‘flights’ of Lunar and the variants, it was often joked the popular warship had as many patterns as they were Sectors in the Imperium. It was an exaggeration no doubt, but one which emphasized how this Cruiser was anything but the herald of a doctrinal change.*

*The situation was completely different where the Aegis-class Battlecruisers and the Warrior-class Destroyers were concerned. These two classes, or any variant of it, didn’t exist before the Fall of Commorragh – Her Celestial Highness had recovered the templates which would allow the core of their doctrinal requirements to flourish in the devastation unleashed against the Dark City.*

*Normally, this would have made impossible the commissioning of any ship relying on these priceless technological schematics, but the favour of the Mechanicus towards Lady General Taylor Hebert and the threat represented by the Ymga Monolith and other heretical forces crippled the political opposition before it could really force more than a few objections.*

*But if things were handled in the councils of war, the Tech-Priests and shipbuilders were nonetheless forced to find hasty alternatives for both classes. The original schematics of the Aegis-class were never put into production; there simply wasn’t enough time to build the hulls to the quality levels demanded by Archmagos Prime Arithmancia Sultan. Instead, the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Imperial Navy requisitioned twenty-four Mars-class Battlecruisers out of mothball, before proceeding to remove each and every offensive armament of the warships as the first phase of modifications. That there was barely a whisper of protest was quite indicative of the fear the Reaper batteries of the Ymga Monolith had spread throughout the ranks of the Imperial Navy’s officers.*

*The Warrior-class Destroyers faced different problems. Having hulls of Destroyers, time was not the great limiter it was for the bigger Aegis. But it remained a serious constraint. Neither the Adeptus Mechanicus nor any Imperial loyal fleet had ever built a ship integrating an electromagnetic cannon in living memory, and the prototypes of the class were barely completed in 306M35. That the Mechanicus Council successfully delivered one hundred and forty-four in active service before Operation Stalingrad in these circumstances was a triumph of industry, artisan craftsmanship, and military planning. Numerous titles and promotions would be handed by the Parliament of Mars after Stalingrad for this exploit integrally realised in the Nyx System.*

From *Iconic Weapons and Materials of Operation Stalingrad*, by Julia Scribonius, Ultramar Rose Editions, 310M41.

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***Ferrus’ Revenge* Shipyards**

**Basileia Taylor Hebert**

As usual, her arrival on Ferrus’ Revenge was greeted by an impressive clamour coming from tens of thousands of hands applauding, uncountable voices cheering, and the crowd this clamour belonged to.

As expected, she spent the next hour giving ‘unofficial audiences’, kissing babies, giving their blessings to new couples, and congratulating PDF recruits and newly enlisted SDF personnel for their participation to the defence of the Nyx System. It was a delay on her way to the *Enterprise*’s dock, but it was a necessary one; with how little time she spent in Hive Athena these days in preparation of the coming campaign, meeting the Nyxians like she did was the best way to gauge the civilian and military’s mood.

And besides, it wasn’t exactly like only shipyards’ workers and market merchants were taking the opportunity to talk to her, as proved by the presence of Archmagos Arithmancia Sultan herself when she left behind thousands of pilgrims behind her.

“I heard no major problems occurred during the latest fleet exercise,” the black-haired parahuman began once the salutations were done. “Are we on schedule?”

“We are,” the Mistress of Ships proclaimed, her mechadendrites ever in movement. “It took us over three hundred hours, but the *Megara* at last performed on the level of the other Aegis sister-ships. The blessed Psy-tech Field was recorded at a most impressive ninety-four percent for twenty-four minutes without incident, and the communion with the Aegis squadron will be at ninety-three percent.”

“Outstanding,” the Basileia complimented the female Archmagos. “Where was the problem, in the end?”

“Much as it shame me to admit it, when we received the first Battlecruisers out of mothball, two hulls of out of twenty-four presented alterations most common with warships repaired in the shipyards of Metalica. Previous problems meant the *Petersburg* had already potential altered machine parts removed and replaced, but the *Megara* didn’t have these problems, and thus was allowed to proceed further along its commissioning without challenge. I think that if we had proceeded to more twelfth-blessed verifications, we would have caught the problem sooner, but we were trying to be as close to the schedule as possible...”

Taylor had worked and listened to Arithmancia Sultan enough time to know this was not an implicit criticism; this was just the basic truth. Any warship – or civilian ship, honestly – commissioned too quickly was risking encountering this kind of problems if the Admirals supervising the shipyards were stupid enough to demand the impossible of the Tech-Priests.

Unfortunately, she and Arithmancia Sultan had agreed upon a construction schedule which came very close to it.

Alas, there was no alternative – at least not one which wouldn’t cost the forces of Operation Stalingrad years of delay. After watching once the sheer firepower used by the Szarekhan Necrons to annihilate the Second Legion, the Battlefleet Volga needed the Heimdall template installed aboard the Aegis-class Battlecruisers. Not having them increased the possibility of the first major engagement turning up into a one-sided butchery, and it wouldn’t be the humans doing the killing this time.

“I know you have done your utmost.” The supreme commander of the ten Battle Groups assembled between Nyx and Triplex Phall reassured her. “The Warrior-class Destroyers?”

“The forty-eight of your personal Battle Group have all passed the fleet exercises with flying colours. So do the other forty-eight sent to Battle Group Berezina. As agreed during our last meeting, twenty-four have been placed into the Reserve Fleet. The other twenty-four have been sent to Battle Group Dnieper like you desired. Coupled with the Hoplites, I have no doubt our new Destroyers are going to be the bane of many Necron ships.”

“And I am sure plenty of officers will come to thank you after the operation,” the owner of the *Enterprise* nodded. “While the Hoplites decimate the Monolith’s heavy starfighter cover, the Warriors are going to shred the armour of their Cruisers.”

Best of all, it wasn’t something the Necrons could anticipate. The Railgun template had only been recovered at Commorragh, and the numerous prototypes had begun to be tested after Trazyn dealt with Orikan. So unless the perfidious ‘Diviner’ had warned his fellow genocidal partners of everything which might or might not happen in the future, the surprise should still be maintained. The Second Legion had not deployed any electromagnetic weapons during their final stand, and the Orks had not shown them any either.

“A much satisfying outcome for these enemies of the Omnissiah,” Arithmancia approved. “I have more good news. The modifications of the Moth Super-Carrier *Aethergold* are completed. You can transfer your singing companion when you want.”

“I am going to wait until I return from the Arena for that.” Taylor answered slowly. “I don’t want to do everything at the last minute, but the longest Lisa stays unable to move, the more her food requests are going to be...significant.”

Her Moth-Diva would also find uncountable ways to bring her escort of Templar Sisters and Tech-Priests to tears. Best to leave her in her Dome for as long as possible, where she stayed – relatively – well-behaved.

“A last point I think has not yet been brought to your attention. One hour ago, the Ark Mechanicus *Zar-Quaesitor* translated out of the Warp.”

Taylor blinked. Any Ark Mechanicus was always welcome, but the Mechanicus orders of battle for the ten Battle Groups didn’t include this one, and all fleet exercises were completed. Adding more elements was always going to be a headache.

“Archmagos Belisarius Cawl has returned.” Her Mistress of Ships and Shipyards informed her when it was obvious she failed to react in the expected manner.

“Ah.” Honestly, how many Arks Mechanicus had Cawl in his service? The reason she hadn’t connected the dots was because after seeing the *Iron Revenant*, the parahuman hadn’t believed an Archmagos could own two of these gigantic starships. Hediatrix was a very senior Archmagos of Mars, and he had the El Dorado. The same was true about many other high-ranked figures of the Mechanicus.

Her conversation with the Archmagos ended a couple of minutes later, and the Dawnbreaker Guard and she pressed on, direction the *Enterprise* – across a cheering crowd, it went without saying.

There were barely two hundred metres from her personal Thunderhawk when one person she had really not anticipated meeting today intercepted her group.

“Lord Commissar Zuhev,” if there was something reassuring, it was that her senior officer of the Commissariat had barely changed these last years. The Atlantis Purges had been such a lightning-fast affair he had no time to gain new scars, and though he accepted a rejuvenation treatment, it had been a light one, barely enough to return to the vitality he had during the Fall of Commorragh. “Have there been any problems with the Commissariat?”

“No, everything is proceeding as per the schedule I gave you,” the austere and threatening-looking man told her. “But there have been recently...unforeseen developments.”

“I was made aware Cawl is back.”

Zuhev...grimaced. Interesting, apparently whatever he wanted to tell her, Cawl played no part in it.

“I hope he’s not going to play with more moons.”

“I will confiscate his Ark Mechanicus if he thinks about it.” The insect-mistress promised. “But you were seen about interesting developments?”

“Ah yes,” Zuhev took two steps to the left, revealing in full the woman half-hidden behind him. “Your Celestial Highness, may I present Lady Foronika Argovon, Rogue Trader, operating until recently in the Nephilim Sector. She has some information I believe you need to be informed immediately.”

Apparently, it had been too much to hope for a few hours of free time aboard the *Enterprise*...

**Battleship *Enterprise***

**Rogue Trader Foronika Argovon**

Foronika felt completely insignificant as she was politely invited to sit on the red couch. The moment she had been given permission to walk aboard the massive Battleship called the *Enterprise*, it was scenes after scenes of bronze and gold, silver mechanical cogs and painted walls. It was like being in a museum, except the various stations and the uniformed personnel everywhere made it clear it was a true warship. If she had had any inclination to preserve otherwise, the moment you looked at an artwork, you noticed immediately there was something to protect it from fire or damage, be it a stasis field, a fire extinguisher station – the big red letters ‘ANTI-FIRE FOAM’ were a clue – or something else.

It was galling to recognise it, but not only the *Enterprise* had more wealth in one compartment than her entire *Dice of Topaz*, it could eat it in a few minutes before lunch, AND it was far better protected internally than her own ship was armoured.

But what was the more striking was the Living Saint. She was so luminous, so pure, that Foronika felt really unworthy to be welcomed in her presence. The Rogue Trader of the impoverished Argovon line had always known she wasn’t a beautiful woman; her own cousins had not been shy in telling her every flaw they found in her appearance. That she was too small, barely managing a lowly one metre and fifty centimetres. That her acne spots that for some reason had never vanished after their appearance in her teenage years disfigured her. Her nose was too sharp, her mouth too uneven, and her lips hardly beautiful. Minor consolation, her near-empty resources meant she had not compensated this by trying to gain weight, but then again she wasn’t able to really afford clothes befitting of a Rogue Trader; from boots to coat, she wore black. That way she didn’t look like a beggar, but she hardly looked like a dashing Rogue Trader either.

In comparison, the Living Saint was a true angel. She was tall. She was beautiful. She was illuminating the entire room with her magnificent golden wings, projecting a divine aura blessed by the God-Emperor Himself. And if half of the rumours Foronika had heard were true, Her Celestial Highness had accomplished more exploits three or four hundred Rogue Traders did in their lifetimes.

Given all of these facts, it immensely surprised her she had been introduced so fast in Her presence.

“Where do you want me to begin, your Celestial Highness?” she found enough courage to timidly ask.

“I think the beginning is always necessary,” the golden-winged woman told her gently. “Do you want some refreshment? You look incredibly exhausted.”

It had to be some kind of dream, because the fruity tonic she was given was far better than everything she had tasted in a decade, and the tiredness was hitting her bones and her muscles less and less.

“It began with the Hour of the Emperor’s Wrath, your Celestial Highness. The Nephilim Sector has important Warp trail which allows ships to travel quickly towards Segmentum Solar, but plenty of systems and unexplored regions were wracked by Warp Storms. Since I had some...arrangement with a shipyard of Nephilim I wouldn’t find elsewhere, I was trying to access – with little success – several stars until the Warp Storms all vanished. Not losing any time, I activated my Warp Drives and translated to one of the most promising systems I had managed to guess the location of, and it was there. So I claimed it for the Imperium.”

“Well,” the ruler of the Nyx System said, “congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you.” Foronika cleared her throat. “But this was once I left to reveal my discovery that the problems began. I was made aware that two people named ‘the Monsters of Lomorr’ had seriously damaged a tithe-fleet of the Adeptus Administratum and killed the tithe-master. Your name was mentioned in rumours, in general associated with the fact the dead Adept was a member of the Vandire Clan.”

The poor Rogue Trader didn’t know what she had expected, but the Living Saint rolling her eyes, showing an exasperated expression, and mumbling something between her teeth were not it.

“These...these ‘Monsters of Lomorr...their names weren’t ‘Leet’ and ‘Borek’, by happenstance?”

“Err...yes, yes, they were. Do you know them...your Celestial Highness?”

The beautiful woman sighed.

“Yes. I have the great misfortune of knowing them. And the moment I can catch one, we are going to have a little discussion about the vagueness of their Astropathic communications. Amongst other things. They had told me they had killed someone named Mephistopheles Vandire; they had been terribly shady about everything else. But since we didn’t find a Lomorr System near the Maelstrom or in any Mechanicus database...”

A Space Marine poured a ruby-coloured liquid in the glass of the Living Saint, her own glass was replenished, and for a few seconds they sipped their drinks in silence.

“I suppose the Administratum threw a fit over it, and there are going to be violent complications. But I don’t know how it is a problem for you.”

“The two Rogue Traders sponsored by Mephistopheles Vandire fled as fast as they could when their patron died,” Foronika explained. “They took the liberty from emptying the coffers before departing, though. So the local Administratum is really need to present something good for their superiors, and a newly system ready to be colonised would their life-saver.”

“Ah. But you discovered it, so they want you to transfer certain colonisation and trade rights to them...in perpetuity, I imagine?”

“Exactly,” Foronika agreed, the warmth of the tonic a welcome help in her throat. “This is obviously highly illegal, but the Nephilim courts are theirs, and I’m hardly an influential Rogue Trader.”

In fact, if she didn’t manage to push forwards her claim on this newly discovered system, it was likely that in a decade there wouldn’t be an Argovon Rogue Trader. She had loved her parents, but their disappearance with the penultimate ship of their dynasty had left her a mountain of unpaid debts and the *Dice of Topaz*, which was itself in need of massive repairs and space parts’ replacement.

“I see.” The black-haired Saint with a sympathetic smile. “But why come to me specifically? I mean, I feel a bit responsible for having given a ship to Borek and Leet. I should have sent an Astartes company or two to keep them on the path of order, and the Administratum plotting is characteristic of what happens once you get rid of a Vandire. I think he was pilfering into the Sector’s coffers well before his Rogue Traders took to steal precious metals and other resources. Still, rumour or no rumour, Nyx isn’t exactly next door to Nephilim.”

“Because some of the rumours about you I learned from an Explorator Tech-Priest from Stygies VIII. He was hardly...err...the best source of information, but he affirmed he had been there at Nyx and certain edicts approved by the Adeptus Mechanicus.”

“I’m afraid you will have to be more precise. I used the Adeptus Mechanicus to enforce many edicts during the last twelve years.”

Foronika drew from her pocket the black rock – darker than obsidian, to be accurate – that she had show to the Commissar.

One of the Space Marines present hissed, and the Living Saint’s visage also turned from polite to incredibly attentive.

“Noctilith,” the name passed her lips, the same the near-heretek had mentioned. “Gamaliel, if you would?”

A tall golden Space Marine, armoured like an angel and more beautiful than most propaganda vids, advanced and placed a strange device against the night-coloured stone as she continued to hold it.

“This is Noctilith indeed, my Lady,” the confirmation arrived five seconds later. “The purity is a bit inferior to the one the Mechanicus refine at Alamo, but it’s still over ninety percent. And judging the form and the list of impurities, it wasn’t gathered on a volcanic Death World.”

“It wasn’t.” She mustered her courage to not feel...too intimidated by the gigantic Angel of Death. “There many of these rocks on the surface of every planet of the system I discovered.”

“How many planets?”

“Six.”

“Six,” an angelic version of the same Space Marine, but clad in white and gold, repeated with what had to be a slightly ironic voice. “And to say the Mechanicus is still trying to find one where the deposits don’t run out in a few months...”

Foronika felt incredulity. It was that rare? Of course, the Space Marine had hardly any reason to lie about that...

The Saint rose from her couch and delicately took the Noctilith stone from her hand. The moment her fingers touched it, it was like veins of gold were revealed inside it. It was...beautiful. It couldn’t have lasted more than a few seconds, but when it was over, it was like a new lighthouse had been created to help the Living Saint.

“Aethergold,” the golden-winged woman explained. “Noctilith imbued with the power of the God-Emperor. The bane of the darkness and the heretics. Wherever it shines, hope continues to exist and the monsters flee.”

The formerly black stone was placed in her hand, and aside from a brief feeling of warmth, the only sensation was a sort of...dancing song playing in her head.

“Congratulations, you passed the test.”

“Err...thank you?”

The Living Saint chuckled.

“While it can have unpredictable effects, Aethergold isn’t doing that much to men and women who are untainted and loyal to the Golden Throne. The corrupt and the untrue...well, let’s just say that if you were one, we wouldn’t be holding this kind of conversation.”

Foronika couldn’t be gladder that she had always followed the advice of her mother and never forgotten the ancient words written on the vellum of the Warrant of Trade. Though her mother mustn’t have ever thought about a situation like this one...

“Err...you want it back? The Aethergold, I mean?”

“Keep it,” the Living Saint waved her hand. “Think of it as an insurance on my part, since you’re going to become a very wealthy woman.”

“You will support my claims on the Argo-...err the system I discovered?”

“Yes, yes I believe I will.” One of the red-clad Space Marines handed her a data-slate. “I will even repair your ship, the *Dice of Topaz*, and send a Mechanicus flotilla to secure the system and protect your assets while I’m waging my wars...though I have one request.”

“And this is?”

“Please don’t call the discovered system ‘Argovon’. I have nothing against the name, but calling an important system with your own identity is in general not the most humble thing ever done. The name of your ship could be a good choice.”

The Living Saint read something on her data-slate before giving it back to the Space Marine.

“But it is a request, feel free to disregard it if you want. Do you have brought more Noctilith with you?”

“Yes, your Celestial Highness. One ton.”

“I will buy it for ten billion Throne Gelts.”

Foronika felt weak again. This was...she was going to be able to repay all her debts and then some! She was...

“Gamaliel, please call the Magi Biologis for a full medical check-up, this poor Rogue Trader don’t seem in good health...”